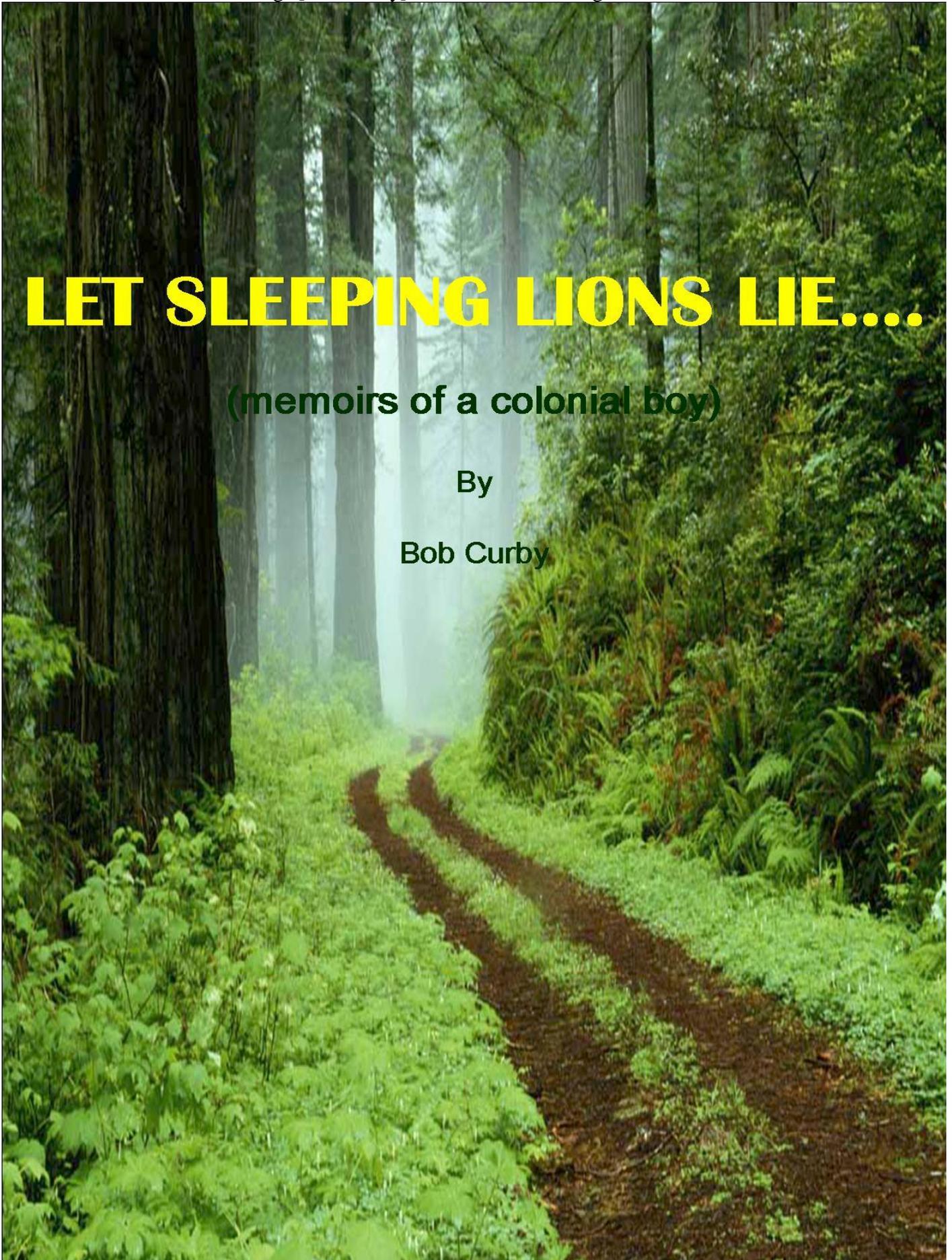


LET SLEEPING LIONS LIE....

(memoirs of a colonial boy)

By

Bob Curby



(Let not memories of the past awaken, for like a roaring lion, awakened prematurely they will surely be.... haunting, ever persistent and frightening.)

A true life drama, events that really happened.

Chapter 1

The assegai made a slight whistling sound as it passed by my cheek, grazing it slightly before its honed blade bit deep into the tree by which I was standing. Raising my hand to feel the warm blood oozing from the fresh abrasion, I made as if to move away but was held fast to the tree by my shirt collar. Before me were five or six men, one of which was running toward me with another spear held at waist level, its blade pointing straight at my body. I recognised it's bearer as the same man I'd seen earlier in the bar at Kalomo, a South African of Afrikaner stock with a face that looked like it was made out of dried leather.

Why had this group decided to follow me out into the bush and now threaten my life?

I looked at them as they advanced. They were a surly bunch with an obvious intent of killing me, right there, right then.

The South African spoke first.

"Hey Boetie, this is for all the trouble your father has caused me..."

He cursed as he violently thrust the long thin blade of the spear at my stomach. I grabbed at it in a frantic effort to prevent it from slicing into me, the sharp blade cut deep into my hands and blood began to run down my fingers. It dripped onto the earth beneath my feet. I couldn't remember ever being so scared in my life. I was convinced that it would end in death, my death. My fingers were beginning to lose their grip and I could feel the blade beginning to slide towards my stomach. The man had a sardonic grin on his face and was totally committed to plunging the steel blade deep into my body. He adjusted his grip and pulled the assegai back to make another thrust. I knew that I would not be able to hold out against another thrust. I wriggled and twisted, trying to break free from the spear holding me to the tree behind me. I knew that if I could just tear my shirt I could at least parry a little, but no, it was too strong.

Then suddenly a shot rang out and the men faltered. They were clearly startled. There was some shouting and leather-face dropped the spear as they all fled into the forest.

A friend, seeing the men follow me out into the darkness, was swift on their heels, his rifle in his hands.

He had saved my life that night. I fail to remember now just which one of my friends that was, but if you ever read this book, you know who you are and I am eternally grateful to you.

That was more than forty years ago. Now greying at the temples with slight laughter lines around my twinkling eyes, I sat looking out at the evening sun dipping behind the Cornish landscape. I turned and looked at myself in the mirror.

"So, where are you now eh?" I asked myself.

There was a hint of a smile on my lips, and any observer might have thought I had seen something amusing out in the gardens of Western Castle Hotel. They would not have imagined that I was thinking back to a conversation I had had earlier that day, in the local branch of a high street bank. There a young woman had expressed the thought that I had a South African accent.

"You've got a bit of an accent - are you Australian, or is it South African?" she asked

"Neither actually," I replied, "I grew up in Zambia in fact, I did go to South Africa to work but I was invited to leave after less than two years."

"I knew there was something in your accent. I had a friend from South Africa."

"Yes, there are similarities - but I prefer not to be called a South African, not after the way the jack-booted police threw me out of the country in 1968!"

"What, they threw you out?"

"As I said, I was invited to leave."

"You were invited to leave...you mean, thrown out - what did you do to warrant that?" she asked in almost disbelief, and her eyes grew wide as I told her my story and the reason for my unplanned departure from the troubled country back in 1967.

"Wow, that is some story, you should write that down and let people read it!"

I smiled and said "Some day maybe."

"Let me be the first to read it, - please!"

"Well, that I can't guarantee, we'll wait and see eh?." (I'm sorry you weren't the first to read it.)

We had been discussing South Africa in the '60s and I explained some of the things that I had seen and even the way I was treated because I was English. I made it clear that I knew there were

many people who had much to say about the apparent inequality of man within that regime's political operations, but I'd always tried to be neutral, impartial, and during the discussion remained so. I was smiling to myself, because the young woman had suggested I write a book about my expulsion. If only she had known the half of it. I seldom talked about my childhood in Africa, and for good reason, I was trying to forget a large amount of it. There had been good times and unfortunately some very bad times. I had managed to push all the bad times into deep recesses in my mind and if anyone prodded and poked about in those recesses, the bad memories arose like a rudely awakened lion, snarling and growling. The expression let sleeping dogs lie means not stirring up past experiences that might actually make things worse for us. Apply that analogy to a lion and the consequences might be worse for the arouser. The conversation had come about during an business visit I was leading in her office and over the final cup of coffee before I returned to the hotel. As someone whose job took me far and wide, I spoke to many people in my travels, which had become a routine yet essential part of my working life. I could be in Wales one week and Norwich the next, or maybe Los Angeles, Istanbul or even Rome; but at the time of the discussion I was in the much visited Cornish Riviera, and was quite looking forward to two or three days of business in the welcoming area.

As I washed and prepared to join fellow hotel guests in the dining room I smiled again and nodded as I thought about that young lady's suggestion of getting my past anecdotes down on paper for others to read. No - one talking to me, with my soft Southern African accent, would be able to guess the multitude of happenings in my life, or how I came to be there in that friendly hotel. Most people who talk to me and hear my accent are surprised to know that I am an Englishman, born in Norwich, though they nod knowingly when I then explain that I was taken abroad by my parents in 1950, to South Africa and then northwards to the Rhodesias, to the area known as the 'Copperbelt' in what is now Zambia, close to the Congo border. I felt a slight chill pass over me and I shuddered for a few seconds. Was it because there was a cool breeze as the evening sun slipped below the rim of the hills above the hotel, or rather was it because I remembered one particular night when I was arrested near Johannesburg? A voice floating into my day dreaming pushed the images of childhood Africa aside.

"May I take your order Sir?" The waitress brought me back to the present. She was chatty, and trying to be friendly, she said, "It was such a nice afternoon; I had a lovely walk in the woods. It is so beautiful up there this time of the year." She gestured out of the window towards the slope where the sheep were standing and I followed with my eyes, noting the tree line above the fields, towards the top of the hill, a common topographical feature in Cornwall. I nodded and agreed that it looked attractive, and added that there was something about Cornish countryside that always appealed to me. I took the menu from her small slightly tanned hands and smiled back without any comment as I opened it to see what tasty treats there may be available.

After a brief examination of it I picked some items from the menu, a fruit 'coulis' to start, a portion of roast leg of lamb with new potatoes and seasonal vegetables and said I'd see the sweet menu later. She said they were a good choice, and left me staring once again at the tree clad hillside. I felt that I should be more hospitable to the other guests and to her, so decided for the time being to tuck away the thoughts and memories until another time, but couldn't do so for long. Memories being what they are, my thoughts returned to the conversation that had started it all, the South African connection and what led to my 'invitation to leave' the country. The young woman I'd spoken to earlier in the day had expressed surprise, shock and excitement all at the same time as I unfolded the final events that led to my expulsion. I allowed my thoughts to return to the incidents that led to my arrest in my Pretoria residence.

I remembered vividly that night in June 1967, not long after the Israeli '6 Day War', I had been driving my Volkswagen Beetle back from an evening event in northern Johannesburg when I came upon an incident in one of the main streets.

Two very large white policemen were beating a black man against one of the walls with what looked like large wooden clubs. I knew that it was not a good idea to stop or even let them know I had observed the event, so I continued to drive down the road, all the while looking at this awful beating through my rear view mirror. It was not a pleasant sight. After about 500 metres, I saw a figure ahead of me, running at top speed, another black man, his footsteps echoing off the walls. Quickly I drew alongside, threw open the passenger door, and gestured to the man to get in. "Get

in!" I called, urging him to jump into my car.

"No!" replied the man, and kept running.

Once again I called out at him, louder, with more urgency in my voice, "Listen, I have seen what those apes are doing to your friend, they know you're running and I can guarantee that they have called up for another patrol to find you - GET IN man!" I stopped the car alongside the kerb and he hesitated and then looked in all directions as he drew to a standstill, his chest heaving with the effort of gulping in air.

"Why do you stop, why do you want me in your car - you also Police?"

"Hey, no, I'm English, I don't agree with the policies of this government and not in beating someone up for virtually no reason. Now, if you want to escape the same thing happening to you, get in NOW!"

The man needed no further bidding and almost dived into the car. I accelerated away and put some distance between us and the brutal beating taking place.

I introduced myself, "I'm Bob."

"I'm Isak," the man replied and we shook hands across the gear lever.

"So why has this happened Isak? Why are the police beating up your friend? What have you done – are you thieves?" I was suddenly worried that I might be helping a criminal escape.

"Joshua and I are dock loaders at the big steel yard, we had a very important order come in this afternoon, and the boss ordered us to finish loading the two trucks, even though it was late."

"So how is that a problem?"

"He knows that we, black people, are not allowed in the white man's areas after dark, but he told us to carry on loading. If the police catch us after dark they beat us to remind us that we should be home and not in the white man's area."

"That is unbelievable. Does this happen often then?"

"In all factories, yes, but the white boss usually sends the black men home in one of the works trucks or gets a permit that allows them out after the sun goes down."

"So; what about your boss? What did he do for you then?"

"Oh he was too worried about getting his fat arse . . . oh sorry . . . back home to his bitch wife!"

"So, you left work knowing that you were out of curfew?"

"Yes."

"I suppose you had no choice?"

"No, we have families at home, we decided to run as fast as we could, it should have taken only us about an hour to get to a safe area." I nodded I acknowledged their predicament. It was inevitable that disaster would strike, and it did, within 10 minutes of their leaving the factory. Isak was lucky that the two policemen had decided to attack his companion first, enabling him to run away. At least my arrival on the scene meant Isak would get home safe to his family and his bed. I tried to smile in a re-assuring way but he looked at me with concern.

"You know, the Police will have seen you stopping and getting me into your car - they will catch you next." He was very agitated and his fingers were fumbling with his shirt buttons. "Here they call any white man who helps us 'Kaffir Lover' did you know that?"

I shrugged, stuck out my tongue and blew a very noisy raspberry. We both laughed, and for a few minutes drove on in silence. I looked across at Isak, probably around twenty five or six, quite muscular and with a kind of tufty beard on his chin. His shirt was ringing wet with sweat and he still breathed heavily. I looked back at the road and increased speed.

Soon, the City was far behind, and in the distance were the twinkling lights of Soweto. As we dropped down from one of the hills, Isak gestured for me to stop.

"Stop here - I can walk on from here, there is no danger now - but for you, there will be. From this point on you will just be another white man in black man's territory, without me in the car, you will not get out alive."

I nodded as I thought this through, and then dropped the man, turned around in the road, and returned to my flat in Pretoria, arriving about 1.30 a.m. After a refreshing shower and a quick drink, I flopped into bed, the night's events quickly diminishing as sleep closed in on my tired body. In the swirling mists of memory, a voice drew me back like the mythological Sirens.

"Would you like to see the sweet menu, or is it just coffee, Sir?" It was the waitress again; I looked at her smiling face, so fresh and young, so much of her life ahead of her, I remembered that age

so well. It was a pleasure to stay in a hotel where the staff treated the guests like friends, yet maintained a professional stance. This young woman had achieved that well. I smiled back at her as she stood in the glow of the dying daylight her napkin over her arm and her notepad and pen at the ready. I didn't want anything more than a nice cup of ground coffee.

"Er - just coffee I think thank you - I'll take it out by the pool please." I replied, and stood up. The pool was just outside the restaurant door, and in two strides I was alongside it. I picked a table where I could still continue to watch my fellow guests in the dining area, and enjoyed another few moments studying their faces. It never ceased to amaze me just how much can be learned from observing people around me. Every person I meet and get the chance to observe, hones my own personality and builds my inter-personal skills. Where I sat would offer me a good view of the restaurant and the lights would make their faces clearer whilst at the same time tending to blind them from seeing me watching them.

The coffee arrived, and I sipped it while staring at the rippling water in the small swimming pool, the lights from the bar signs moving and dancing in reverse lettering. I laughed as I said the names of the two lagers backwards. I lifted my gaze, and made a brief sweep of the faces behind the windows in the restaurant. There was the retired civil servant with his soon to retire wife who was a head teacher. The bald headed lecher I had christened Bony was finishing his bread and butter pudding and sweating profusely as he glanced at the waitress bending down to retrieve a knife she had dropped. Then there was the electronics engineer from the Midlands, with his wife and son, down for a week in the sun. Right alongside them was the middle aged spinster from the Mid-West USA, complete with lilac rinse and dripping with diamonds. She had been so impressed by the countryside around the hotel, she was telling all the guests about it. I had expressed interest and listened to her descriptions, with many sounds of encouragement, even though I'd visited the area so many times I almost knew it in my sleep.

She smiled and waved at me as she tapped her lips with her table napkin. "Oh crap!" I thought. "She's going to come out here now." I stood up, stretched, yawned and grunted goodnight to the others sitting alongside the pool, and headed for the gate to the walkway. It was only about ten paces to the end of the swimming pool patio from where I sat, and I covered it quickly.

Glancing back briefly, I saw the figure of the woman emerging from the dining room, her face showing her disappointment as she stared at my departing back. I heard a sound from her lips, possibly a call to me, but I'd turned the corner and was soon heading back to my room. It took just two minutes from the poolside to climb the short stair case and be outside my door. In a couple of strides I was inside and heard it click shut on the self-locking catch.

Moving over to the window, I looked back out at the pool below, at the frustrated woman who was still peering at where my back had disappeared behind the corner of the dining room. I laughed as I turned back round, kicked off my shoes and moved across to the large double bed. I sat down for a few minutes and looked out of the window again from this different vantage point. I could see over the top of the dining room to the hillside beyond, it was getting dark now and the sheep had moved down to where they could still see a little to keep on eating the lush green grass. I sighed and turned away from the window, it was the end of another day and soon I would have to think about writing up the report from the visit. I lay back on the bed, propped up against the soft pillows, turned on the television and began watching some drama programme that was half way through. It was about a locksmith in a remote Devon village, a South African who had just been arrested by the police on suspicion of murder. A West Indian villager had been found dead, with the horn of a Sable Antelope through his chest. Naturally it had to be the South African. "Give me strength!" I retorted as I flicked the off switch with contempt and lay staring at the ceiling for several moments. I hated presumptive stereotyping. As I stared up at the creamy ceiling my thoughts began to return to that night when I'd dropped that man at the edge of Soweto and returned to my flat in Pretoria. I remembered getting into bed and falling asleep. Some time must have passed because I was really deeply asleep, so much so that what happened next seemed to me to be a bad dream. The door burst open, two very large men, human mountains, grabbed me and lifted me like a child. I protested loudly, "Hey! What's going on? I am a British Citizen. Who are you? Where are you taking me? Please stop a second, let me get some clothes..."

There was no response from the two men as they bundled me outside and into the back of a large van. I banged on the side of the van and shouted, but there was no response. This was clearly a

police action, and I later learned that the locals had been pre-warned not to react or attempt to interfere. The police had told my neighbours and even some of my close associates at work, that I was involved in espionage and responsible for one of the bomb attacks in the Transvaal recently. Thus at about four o'clock in the morning on June 15th 1967, a date now imbedded in my mind, South African police arrested me on faked charges. This was a terrible experience for anyone, let alone a nineteen year old who only wanted to help a man out of compassion. Terrible as it had been, I had managed to suppress it until the conversation earlier in the day during that business meeting in Newquay, when it had all come back so clearly.

I vividly recalled the journey in that van, after a few minutes of erratic driving, twisting and turning, throwing me from one side of the van to another, the vehicle stopped and, I heard doors slammed at the front and then silence.

"Hey! Help! Anyone...help!" I yelled, as I banged on the side and jumped up and down. Urine cascaded down on me from a roof vent and a voice with a thick South African accent echoed round the van "Hey, shut up and sit down, you shout again like that and I'll piss on you again, o.k.?"

"Who are you guys!? I need to pee too, please, let me out."

"The van has four corners, take your pick!"

After what must have been three or four hours, it began to get hot in the van and I knew it must be well beyond sun up. What was it going to be like by midday? I called out that this was inhumane; that I needed to drink and that I had a right to be interviewed by a British representative. There was no response. I attempted to swallow but the sides of my throat stuck together and rasped like rough sandpaper. I gasped at the increasing level of heat in the van. I was scared that I would just die of exhaustion and dehydration without even a trial.

"Hey I'm dying of thirst, anyone out there please help!"

"Englishman - stand in the middle of the van..."

I did so, and a liquid poured down onto my face, I instinctively jumped out of the way and shielded my mouth, remembering the earlier urine. The liquid stopped falling.

"That's your ration for now; I hope you managed to catch some." I heard laughter and someone jump off the top of the van. I managed to lick a few drops of lukewarm foul tasting water from my hands and then lay down on the floor. There were some pinholes in the floor and I could get some fresh air by sucking on them.

I lost consciousness for some time, and then awoke with a start; the van was on the move. I wasn't able to stand and was rolling from side to side, trying desperately to get a hold onto something as I rolled in my own excrement. Then the van stopped again, doors slammed, and silence once again reigned. It didn't feel so hot now - maybe they had parked it in the shade. I tried calling out again, saying I was thirsty again and getting hungry. There was again, no response. I stood up and leant forwards until I felt the wall of the van, and pulled myself up against it. Then, sliding carefully around the van I felt each wall in turn; one was warmer than the others; that meant that the sun was on that side, so the van was facing south. Based on the way most right hand drive vehicles normally park, that would make the pavement on the same side as the sun, assuming it was in a street. Could I use that to my advantage? I pressed an ear to the side of the van and trying to listen for footsteps. I heard nothing, but I did notice a small pinhole there too, and tried to see through it, to no avail, it was too small. Then I remembered something from my school days - the pinhole camera! In my pyjama shirt pocket was a white handkerchief, I took it out, stretched it tight and held it between my eyes and the pinhole.

Moving it back and forth, I eventually obtained a focussed image - albeit upside down. I made out a building of some kind, some trees and then a large expanse of what appeared to be tarmac.

Then the van shook violently and there was a thundering noise that nearly deafened me.

Desperately I hung onto the makeshift imager, and jumped as the huge inverted image of a passenger jet moved across the handkerchief. The airport. The van was at Jan Smuts airport, South Africa's main international airport. They had driven me from Pretoria back to Johannesburg, no wonder I'd been rolling about. I knew I would be a sight, and must've smelled like a sewer, though my own nose had somehow become accustomed to the smell in the van. It was seven thirty in the evening on June 18th 1967 when the doors were finally opened at the back of the van. During all this time I had had nothing to eat, and drunk only what little water I could catch as it was

poured in through the vent. As I imagined, I looked, and smelt, terrible. Squinting and almost falling out of the van into the bright sunlight, I noticed a very well dressed man standing two or three metres or away, upwind no doubt. The man introduced himself as the British High Commissioner and was holding out my passport and an airline ticket.

"Here is a one-way ticket to London, as High Commissioner for Her Majesty's Government, I grant you safe and free passage out of South Africa."

"The.., wha-, just... I'm not..." I was so angry I couldn't form any coherent sentences.

"Now then my good man - let's not have any fuss, the authorities here will not pursue their charges against you if you leave quietly now."

"Charges?...ph.... Ach... I mean.... Why London, I mean...?"

"You are being deported back to the United Kingdom, consider yourself very lucky!"

I threw up my hands in horror! Britain! My family were all in Zambia - what was I going to do in Britain!?

"Where are my clothes and stuff?"

"This will do for now."

I was handed a small holdall, in which there was a change of clothes, shaver, and shoes. I was told that all other belongings were already packed and ready to be shipped.

"Oh please - don't send me to London - I have no-one there, my family are all in Zambia, I can't go to Britain!"

After some consultation with two other official looking men, the man returned.

"O.K. I have persuaded them to re-book you on a flight north, you're going to Zambia."

I was relieved to hear that!

"You have one hour - get cleaned up and changed; don't try to run and hide, it wouldn't be smart!"

"Would you blame me?"

"No, but they are armed."

"Just what am I being deported for?"

"No fuss young man, no fuss! Just accept this for what it is, ask no more questions here."

Later, I was able to gain from someone who knew, that I was accused of sedition and of attempts to undermine the authority of the South African government by mercenary activities. Helping a fellow man escape an unjustified beating; if that's undermining authority, then so be it! I felt angry and yet justified somehow. These thoughts were echoing through my mind as I lay on the bed in the hotel. I blinked and realised I had tears in my eyes; I looked at my watch, it was past midnight and I had much to do the following day and I hadn't typed up my report. I rolled off the bed and looked out of the hotel window at the swimming pool below. There was an eerie stillness now over the Cornish hillside opposite; the sheep had long made their way to shelter. I yawned and stretched, thinking back on that incident had made my brain weary. I thought really hard about writing a book. Then I laughed, who'd want to read that rubbish, after all it was history now? I found it difficult to believe that anyone would want to read about the turmoil in Africa before the final fall of the last white government, after all my story was not one of anguish and imprisonment like some. However, you are reading this, so somebody must be interested. I could only tell anecdotes of my own life and the intrigue of my father's clandestine operations. I turned away from the window and took a shower, prepared for bed and lay on top of the sheets. It was so hot; I wished the hotel had air conditioning! It was almost as hot as a midsummer's day in Livingstone, Southern Zambia - but perhaps not so humid. This made me think about the time the family had lived in Livingstone, when my father worked for one of the offices in the centre of the town. I couldn't recall what the office was called, but I knew now that the name was a front anyway. My father had something to do with information collecting for one of the British intelligence services, I didn't know which, I still don't know which one, but then, who cares? I recalled that there was a lot of unrest and controversy between central African states and South Africa. I also recalled that it was in Livingstone that I was put onto the final aircraft to fly to Lusaka after that deportation from South Africa. I remembered thinking how crazy it was that the South African Airways jet had to land at Victoria Falls airport in Zimbabwe, from which point I had to get a coach to Livingstone airport, some 19 miles away, because the SAA jet was not allowed to fly over Zambia due to the policies of the South African government. Then I was flown from Livingstone to Lusaka, where my parents were waiting in the new International Terminal. It was a happy homecoming even though

under forced circumstances, the tragedy of life for many was far worse than my 36 hour imprisonment in a van.

On top of the sheets I closed my eyes and slowly drifted into a restless slumber, images swirling and curiously merging in my head, I had an image of a black sheep I had rescued from a sheep shearer in a police uniform, whilst flying over a waterfall, and of waitresses trying to pour me cups of coffee through a hole while I was inside a cupboard.

Chapter 2

It had been a long day; I was a little tired as I turned the corner into the car park at the Western Castle Hotel. I had been in St Austell all day on observation and it had been hot. Although I had equipped myself with plenty of water and the car was air-conditioned, I couldn't keep the engine running all that time. Some of the time I had spent out of the car walking a discreet distance behind my target and noting their stopping points. Now it was time to have a refreshing shower, change and enjoy once again the fine cuisine of the hotel restaurant.

For a few minutes as I approached my door, I reflected on the recollections I had experienced the night before, of the swift departure from South Africa and the journey back to Lusaka in Zambia. I wondered what I would be doing if I was still there. Would I still be the bank clerk I'd started out as, but then, no, I'd already changed from that early job to one of negotiator for a Chinese land survey company before I'd been sent to South Africa.

I thought of many things I could have done and many roads I could have taken. I shrugged; after all, I had no personal axes to grind and having no particular direction, had returned to Zambia after my expulsion from South Africa. We had then been expelled from Zambia and returned to England. This had enabled me to build a new life, I had found a lovely girl, Sara, married her, raised children, and was now settled in my ways. Sara was a manager in a busy hotel a mile or so from our house and she would always quiz me about the hotel and its service and so-on. As I closed the door of the room and went towards the stairs I thought about my past again. My life in the 21st century was far removed from the events that changed me from a boy into a man almost overnight. Having had the memory vault opened, so to speak, some of those events were also beginning to make their way to the surface of my mind; almost anything could spark a journey back into the past, to some happy or unpleasant event. I dumped my stuff down in the room, whipped off my tie and washed my face, ready for dinner. I made my way once again down to the hotel's well turned out dining room. In doing so I passed by the main car park. A dark green Landrover with all kinds of add-ons caught my eye. It was a Series II; I'd seen many of those out in the 'bush' and it sent my mind racing and I began to relive an event back in 1966, when I was eighteen years old, hot blooded, outspoken and always looking for trouble. I recalled that this was not long after Ian Smith had declared Southern Rhodesia as unilaterally independent, and cut off the only supply route into Zambia from the South. This was during the time I was working for a branch of a mainstream bank in the Northern Province of Zambia within the area known as the 'Copperbelt'. I had been there about six months and was as usual making quite a noise in public about the difficulty in obtaining supplies of petrol. One night in a bar near Chilalabombwe, emboldened by a few pints of Castle Beer, I had once again given vent to my feelings on the subject. As I turned toward the other drinkers in the bar I was approached by a very fit looking man, with something of the military about him. I eyed him up and down; he had very well cut clothes and his bare arms showed rippling muscles. A small scar below his left eye told of a past skirmish and his eyes sparkled with life and alertness. He called himself simply 'Mitch'. Later I learned that he was Lt Col. Harry Mitchell, a mercenary hired by many different armies in those tumultuous years. Mitch was about thirty five years old with a short military style hair-cut and his well cut clothes and shoes were impeccable, showing the years of discipline with which he had worked. His tanned face had a severe look about it and yet there was a slight hint of what could be described as a cheeky smile elusively fleeting around his lips. His left hand carried a tattooed snake entwined around his fingers and wrist and his right hand was out stretched towards me. I looked at it. Why was this hand thrust out towards me? What did this tough soldier want with me? A fight maybe? I hoped not. I would most certainly be the loser. Mitch smiled; he could see the hesitation in my eyes.

"I'd like to shake the hand of a young man who reminds me of my own youth"

I looked down at the hand again and thrust out my own. We shook and looking hard at me, Mitch gave a slight flick of one wrist and told me "I've been paid by people who are not going to let this country grind to a halt for the want of fuel. Now as some of you know, I am a soldier. Some might use the words 'soldier of fortune', others 'mercenary', but whatever you call me, I get the job done. The Zambian government has asked me to use my men to secure safe passage of fuel into Zambia from Zaire to North, and also from Tanzania in the extreme north east. This has brought

me into this bar tonight."

"So what are you going to do?" I was hooked on my own pet subject.

"I am going to send trained drivers across the northern border into the Congo, to bring back fuel. I need people like you, now, today!" He swung his hand around the room, following it with his eyes. The young men shifted slightly, dropping their eyes in embarrassment. I had proved to be the exception and regarded the others with a mixture of disdain and disbelief. As an eighteen-year-old with a desire for adventure, I was easily recruited to the band of 'drivers'.

"So what's in it for me if I join you?"

"You can take home enough fuel to run a family car for a month, free, that's got to be better than cash in hand."

"I'm up for that!" I said positively, still wincing from the crushing blow Mitch had dealt my fingers. Even though I was a fit rugby player, this man was far stronger than me. Mitch looked around the room at the others, who now dropped their gaze again, and then brought his piercing black eyes back fully to mine. His eyes were blazing as he looked at me, a talkative outspoken teenager.

"It isn't going to be a little jolly over the border, a bit of fun, bring back a bit of petrol - this is danger man, real danger! There are bands of robbers on both sides of the border, eager to steal whatever they can, at gunpoint and ready to kill. Can you handle that kind of danger?"

"S'my middle name" I laughed and stood to attention with mock salute, "Show me where to go . . . I'm not afraid of anything!"

The others all laughed, relieved that the pressure had been taken off them, for the moment.

"Report to this address next Monday, O.K.!? " Mitch didn't join in the laughter; he just turned and quickly walked out of the bar.

I looked down at the piece of paper Mitch had handed me and nodded to the disappearing back, "O.K. - I'm in!"

On the Monday, I walked hesitantly up the driveway of the suburban house with its wide veranda and banana groves making it impossible to see if the front door was open or closed. I glanced around me as I walked, the sparse but green lawn gave me no clues, there were no vehicles or garden workers to help me either. What was this place, just someone's house? Who's? There was no clue as to the ownership or what to expect. It was a colonial style bungalow with a wide verandah over which the roof of the house extended, increasing the shade.

I stepped up onto the veranda and into the shade, now I could see the front door. It was open. As I stepped towards it the twin barrels of a shotgun appeared in the black opening, just visible in a shaft of sunlight.

"Business?" The voice was flat and commanding.

"Mitch told me to come!" I replied with boldness and not showing the fear that had welled up inside.

"Inside!" the flat voice commanded.

Stepping inside I was pulled quickly by the arm through a curtain and found myself in a room full of men, young and old, some smoking, some lounging, some standing. In the centre of the room stood Mitch, now in full battle dress, his eyes turned toward me, the young newcomer.

"Good, the men are all here, now we can begin training!"

I was given two weeks 'training' which mostly consisted of fetching and carrying for everyone else. Then one day I was greeted by a toothy grin as Mitch entered my room. He handed me a dark beret and, "for your protection should the worst happen", an old ex-army Lee Enfield .303 rifle was thrust into my hand.

"You know how to use that?"

I looked down at the rifle, and wished I had been allowed to bring one of my own instead but nodded. "Yes, I have my own rifles back at my folks' place."

The keys to a battered Landrover were tossed at my feet. The brief? Go into the Congo, get as many of the fifty gallon drums on the back of the Landrover filled with Petrol (of any grade) and get it back to Zambia as quickly as I could without getting attacked by freelance bands of black-marketeers.

"How and where do we get this petrol?" I had asked as I reached down to pick up the keys.

Mitch rolled his eyes, "By whatever method needed - beg, steal, borrow or buy, what do you think? We have several suppliers there who are willing to sell the fuel they have stolen themselves, for a

little profit. There are also little stores, the bush 'corner shops' we know so well, who have a sideline of supply, some of these have stolen the fuel from me; in those cases we shall just take it back. I will tell you where to get it at the time."

"OK, I understand that, but why do I need the rifle?" As someone who preferred not to carry a weapon for combat, though not a pacifist, I would not take up arms deliberately. I remembered what it felt like to shoot a man. I had done just that when I was a few years younger. I remembered that sickening feeling in the pit of the stomach. I remembered the violent retching before the very soul comes to accept the enormity of the act committed. I remembered the panic as I realised this was the ultimate criminal offence. I shivered as I remembered that day.

"In case those who see the drums decide to help themselves, shoot over their heads - make 'em think you mean business! In fact you DO mean business - don't you?"

"Er, well yes, I suppose I do!"

"Well. Just have it there, in case - You may be glad of it when the time comes."

I was satisfied and made my way outside to the Landrover. It had been camouflaged and had also been stripped of many of the extra bits so that the weight of the fuel drums could be accommodated. There were six drums in the pick up area at the back, a total of 1500 litres capability. I climbed into the cab and familiarised myself with the controls. I was joined in the passenger seat by a member of the Bemba tribe, nomads that regularly wander in and out of Zambia, and neighbouring Zaire, so that any challenges could be met by someone who spoke the various dialects, I only spoke Bemba out of the possible five dialects we might encounter. I could therefore converse fluently with my companion and issue any instructions needed without fear of misunderstandings. I much preferred this to trying to simplify English so as not to confuse.

Together we looked at the map of Zambia and the Congo (Zaire), a piece of Zaire pokes down into Zambia like a long scraggy finger, so that it comes very close to Chilalabombwe. It was there that a main road runs across the border, part of the original Great North Road, into the town of Kusumbalese, on up to Lumbumbashi and eventually, after splitting off into three main roads, on into Rwanda and on up eventually to Cairo. We would not even be going beyond Kusumbalese. I jumped back down out of the cab and went back into the house. Mitch was standing with his hands on his hips, looking a little impatiently in my direction.

"Is it to your satisfaction?" Mitch asked with a sarcastic smile.

"Perfect."

"OK, we'll do some real training, follow me."

For two nights I was 'trained' by Mitch to do the petrol dash over the border, then at three a.m. on August 17th 1966, I crossed the border into the Congo. My training had included driving fast without lights along dusty roads; that training begun to pay off as we rushed headlong towards a small village west of Kusumbalese. The Landrover even had the brake warning light bulbs removed so they wouldn't light up when the vehicle braked. My target was a petrol storage unit behind a garage/filling station at the edge of the town. I had been briefed that the owner was not co-operative, that he had in fact stolen the fuel himself from the Zaire government and therefore Mitch was not going to pay for the fuel, he was leaving it up to the Zambian government to compensate Kinshasa for their loss. No doubt there would be some sort of reward out for the recovery of it, but they would not see that. The fuel was not legally the property of the person who currently had it, and that was the crux of the matter. I was to just help myself to as much as I could pump, and leave, quickly. This didn't sound like a very bright idea at the time and I'd voiced my opinion on it to Mitch.

"I'm not that happy about helping myself in the middle of the night - sounds like robbery a bit."

"You can give me the keys back now then and piss off home, but if you say one word, just one, you'll be dead! If you do leave, you had better not be around anywhere that I might run into you."

"I'll go, just not happy about it that's all."

"O.K. listen - my men are all out around the border, they'll be your fall-back team. - - Now piss off if you're going!"

"Sorry, I was thinking out loud, a little scared you know!"

"Scared! By the time you start filling those drums scared will have a different meaning. You don't know what it means to be scared. Your heart will be thumping, your guts will get all knotted up, and you'll physically shit yourself. Now, it's time to move. Here are your maps and stuff, stick them on

that clip board and clip it behind the sun visor; see you in the morning. Go on, you'll be o.k.!" Mitch broke into a grin and waved us out to the Landrover. We were fuel thieving mercenaries. How would that sound on my next job application? I looked at the papers. The information sheets included details of the terrain and Mitch had explained that village is at the bottom of a gentle slope, and I should approach in silence. We drove up the long ridge from Chilalabombwe to the border in silence. The border crossing was smooth with no challenges; no-one cares at that time of night. Once over the border the main road runs straight as a die northwards. According to our map, we needed to head at an oblique angle, to the north-west. I swung the wheel and left the highway about 800 metres into Zaire. There was no jungle yet, just that low scrubland interspersed with the tall grass that is so common in Central Africa. There was no moon and as the Landrover plunged into the bush it was if a velvet glove had been pulled over my eyes. I wished I was a cat. We pressed on, me driving like a blind madman, and my companion willing us on, praying that nothing would make us crash. After driving somewhat recklessly at high speed through unlit bushveldt without lights, we approached the village. I cut the engine and coasted slowly down the slope until the Landrover was outside the fuel store behind a small garage and motor workshop. We sat motionless in the cab for a few minutes. There was a glimmer of light from a solitary street light about 100 metres away, casting long shadows and partially illuminating the front of the fuel store. I gestured to Zeb, my accomplice to get out and I too slipped out of the cab, leaving the door open. There was no bulb in the interior light, so the cab remained in darkness. We walked across to the pumps. There was no domestic electricity in this village and the pumps were not powered in any way. Filling the drums of petrol necessitated hand pumping from the storage tank below. Grasping the upright pump handle, I pulled it down; it made a gurgling sound as the chamber pushed out its air. I then pushed it back up with more gurgling as the amber fluid was sucked into the glass chamber, only to pull it down again, each stroke delivering just a few litres of fuel. It seemed to take forever. Every second that passed brought risk of discovery. I felt my heart thumping in my chest. My guts began to knot. Somewhere a dog barked and a screech owl cried out. I nearly dropped the pump nozzle, and I did shit my pants. Every second I was waiting for a voice to challenge me out of the darkness. My pulse was racing. My eyes were wide as I frantically pumped. My accomplice, Zeb, was muttering to himself. He quickly screwed down the stoppers into the lids of the full drums. He knew that any second could be one second too long. At any moment we could find ourselves looking at the end of a gun. He'd been there before! He didn't like it one bit. He was scared of being caught. He too had shit himself. Discovery could be just a moment away. Should that happen, I had been told I was to put up my hands, admit it was a 'fair cop' and then Mitch would 'bust' us out later. {A week later when one 'driver' was discovered pumping the fuel, he and his companion were shot on the spot, without discussion!} Having filled the six drums, I considered that the weight was probably too much for the Landrover. I was right. I had instructions to continue rolling down the last few hundred metres of the slope until we left the northern end of the village, then to start the engine by placing the gear-shift into second gear and 'bump starting' it. I knew that I then had to drive about half a mile and turn right into another road, which would travel at an angle away from the village, and eventually back to the main road near the border. It seemed forever before the Landrover started to roll down the slope, and ages before the engine burst unto life.

The sound of the Rover vee-eight engine was like a Jumbo Jet in the stillness of that night, even though the mufflers had been specially modified so as to give maximum noise suppression. I felt the fear creep up into my throat. Having the over-muffler fitted reduced power at the same degree that it cut the noise, and I was sure we'd not get away. The huge three and a half litre engine seemed to falter a little, and then, like a faithful 'Sherpa' in Kathmandu, just seemed to get into stride. All the while I was waiting for the sound of shots or even an engine bursting into life. Nothing happened, no lights came on. No-one was following. I stamped hard on the accelerator pedal and with a slight rush of loose gravel from under the wheels; the Landrover plunged into dense Congo jungle. The moon was now rising above the horizon, but offered little comfort under the trees. For several minutes we followed a track almost by instinct in the dense darkness. Then all of a sudden, we burst out of the trees into a moonlit clearing and I hit the brakes, skidding the Landrover to a standstill, all the while wrestling frantically to keep it from keeling over with the weight. Right in front of us and blocking our path, were six shadowy men pointing automatic

weapons at the Landrover, one had a grenade launcher and another was holding a portable anti-tank rocket launcher. All six of them were clad in black jungle night attire with full face scarves, so that only a slit for their eyes was visible. They stood in a slightly curved line, motionless, their weapons trained on either me, Zeb or the front of the vehicle. My heart missed a beat. I almost froze in terror. This was not what I'd had planned. I didn't want to die, not out here in the jungle. Not now. Who was going to break the news to my mum and dad that I had died out in a Congolese clearing at the hands of what looked like Ninjas?

What were we going to do...? How was it possible that these men could be standing there, on our pre-set escape route, between us and the border? I wanted to call out, but was frozen to the spot. "Get out of the vehicle" commanded one of the men in Bemba, the local dialect I understood. We got out and placed our hands on our heads.

"Name?" snapped another of the men as he gestured at me with the end of his rifle.

"Michael Mouse" I replied, and bit on the rifle butt that was thrust at my mouth.

Putting his face close to mine he demanded "This is your last chance. Give us your names and tell us why you are here, on this road. Quickly."

Zeb rattled off some quick sentences. I caught only the gist of the words. He was telling them who we were, why we were there and emphasising the need for us get back on the move quickly. The leader of the group said only one word and all the men suddenly stepped back, huddled together for a moment, and then, with a gesture which implied "you'd better be who you claim to be, and don't be here when we come back", melted into the jungle. It was just as if they had never been there!

"So.....?" I asked with my hands upturned and shoulders in a hunch as I looked at Zeb for an explanation. I'd not recalled being quite so scared in his life, and now I'd wet myself as well and smelled like a sewer. Zeb looked at me for a moment and then said softly, "Mitch's people - his elite squad, they are angry now because they hadn't been told about us. We nearly died here man; they were going to take us out. Lucky I knew one of them." He had confirmed to the others that we were also Mitch's people. "It's not good to stay here. Maybe we should get moving again, please." He hastily drew a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket and lit one to calm his nerves. He offered me one, I declined, I just wanted to get moving too. As I started up the Landrover again and shoved the gear stick forward, I couldn't help thinking what nice people I'd now brought into my circle of friends. I pressed the accelerator pedal hard to the floor and as the four-wheel drive bit into the earth, the Landrover lurched a little and one of the drums moved, hitting the bar that runs along the top of the pick-up. The lid, which Zeb hadn't screwed down properly in his haste, popped off and petrol was splashing all over the deck.

"Damn." I cursed as I once again slammed on the brakes. More petrol splashed out as the drum reeled around.

"Zeb, while I stand guard with this rifle - get into the back and find that stopper and screw it down, and throw that cigarette well away first!"

"Yes Rob."

Zeb leaped out, his eyes wide with fear, urine trickling down his legs as he ran round to the back. As he climbed in, there was a sudden burst of gunfire from the bush nearby and there followed five metallic thuds as bullets hit the side of the Landrover. Zeb fell into the back and crawled around on the floor with his backside in the air, looking for the stopper.

"Get your arse down Zeb!"

Although I hadn't wanted to, I was going to have to use that rifle, at least until Zeb could find that stopper. I swung out through the window and stood on the top of the cab. I checked the rifle mechanism and magazine, it only held a maximum of five bullets. It was full, and I had ten more in my pocket. There was another burst of gunfire, and this time I saw the flashes. I raised the old Lee Enfield and took careful aim, and fired five rounds in slow deliberate succession, pulling back the manual eject and cocking mechanism each time. Each shot was carefully placed within the area of the flashes. The response was another hail of bullets, this time wild, whistling over my head and missing us by several metres. I crouched as I fed another five cartridges into the magazine. It seemed like an eternity. Then, as I stood up once again, I saw two figures crouching low, emerging from the bush and running slightly at an angle towards us. I raised the rifle and took aim at the leading figure.

"Akomo!" A shout came from the bush to my left and very rapid automatic fire followed. I looked back at the two figures, who were now sprawled motionless on the ground. I looked again towards the bush on my left, and saw one of the men we had encountered earlier raise his hand and turn back into the bush. I was grateful that the six men that had nearly killed us both only minutes earlier had stayed around.

"Zeb, you OK?"

"Yes, I found the stopper too; I have screwed it back on."

"Good get down here now, let's move!"

Zeb needed no further encouragement and fairly fell into the cab as I gunned the engine once more and we rocketed into the bush. Three times more as we hurtled towards the border and the main road we heard gunfire and felt the thuds of bullets hitting somewhere on the Landrover. If one of them was to hit the petrol, we wouldn't stand a chance. The two guards at the border post were startled into life by a Landrover with Lusaka plates hurtling past their window at top speed, and they barely got a chance to think about it before it disappeared down the road to Chilalabombwe.

"I don't think I will do this again."

"Me neither."

The two of us were just glad to get back alive. I wasn't cut out for this and reflected for a few minutes on how my mum and dad might have reacted had they known what I had just been involved in. They were over 800 kilometres away, down near Lusaka, tucked up in their beds, unaware that their son, the bank clerk, had just 'stolen' 1500 litres of fuel from a Zaire garage and ran the gauntlet of border robbers to get it back. I sighed with relief and patted Zeb on the shoulder. Zeb gave a wide toothy grin. AS I watched that grin it faded into a pair of lovely red lips slightly parted into a smile, in a soft face surrounded by glistening short auburn hair. The waitress was there before me, dragging me back from my excursion into the past.

"Good evening Sir, did you have a good day?" – her voice brought me back once again to the present. She smiled again and handed me the maroon folder containing the day's menus.

"Yes, thank you, I'm a bit tired now but really hungry - what's the Chef's choice tonight?"

"Well, I think he's pretty pleased with his Melon Rosette starter, and there is a really tasty Salmon grill tonight, with a generous salad on the side."

"That sounds wonderful - I'll go with that."

I looked around the room at the other guests, they were quite a mixture of people, from business people just like me, to holiday makers from the North and even tourists from overseas places. I always enjoyed trying to imagine what part of the country or of the world my fellow guests had come from, what they did for a living and why they chose that occupation. I wrote notes and took little bets with myself on these and then compared how close I'd been later when I learned the truth. Sometimes I was surprised to learn I was miles out in my guesses, which always taught me that first impressions do not always tell the truth. In a few moments the waitress returned with my starter, and caught my gaze out of the window.

"You'd enjoy a walk up there, really, I go up there most afternoons, I could show you the best walk if you like"...She had a lovely smile and had I been a bit younger and not married to the beautiful Sara, I'd have taken that offer up without hesitation. However, I just smiled as my eyes briefly flicked across from hers to her body. She was slim, Latin looking with a blouse that was a little smaller than her well rounded breasts would have preferred.

"Thanks", I said, "It sounds like a wonderful idea, if I wasn't working I might take you up on that, but I shall not be back tomorrow until after dark."

"Never mind," she beamed back, "your main course will be ready in a few minutes, enjoy your starter." I watched her wiggle her way back to the kitchen door. She obviously enjoyed flirting with the guests. Sara would have had a little talk with her had she been the girl's manager, but then she did make me feel very welcome and contented, and that was her job. I looked across at one of the other guests, the man I'd christened Bony, possibly another businessman on stop over. The man grinned and made a rude gesture at the departing back of the waitress. That gave me no doubt as to how that man viewed waitresses. I laughed as I recalled how on one occasion Sara was helping out in the Restaurant and an inebriated rugby player had put his hand up her skirt as she was serving the soup, only to end up wearing a bowlful of piping hot soup in his lap. The

businessman grinned again, thinking I was responding to his gesture. He made another gesture which confirmed his lecherous intent. The waitress wasn't there to see it, I was glad of that. At that moment she returned with my salmon grill and placed it before me, she bent very close to me. I could smell the delicate perfume she had chosen, I could see the lecherous 'Bony' leering at her rising skirt hem as she leaned over to add my salad and a portion of fries to the table.

"Table 15 - by the door. . ." I started to say.

"What? -- no you mean table 20, the lecher you mean?"

"You've worked him out already then?"

"Oh yes!"

"O.K. well don't be alarmed I'm going to do something that may trigger a heart attack".....

With that I reached up to her neck and pulled her head down quickly so that it looked as if I kissed her, she played along with the right reactions.

She giggled and smartly turned and headed for the kitchen. 'Bony' was all flushed and was drinking his ice water in huge gulps.

"That'll keep him going for a bit" I grinned as I tucked into my salmon grill, while 'Bony' mopped his brow with his handkerchief and loosened the button on his collar. I looked out of the window as I chewed the delicious salmon, recalling my earlier encounter with the Landrover that had triggered my journey into the past. I found it strange how vividly I could recall such events, nearly forty years on. I looked down at my hands, my palms were sweating. I was reliving the fear once again.

Sometimes I felt that things from my past were best left there, but there was more to come.

Chapter 3

Having put behind me the flashback to the fuel run into Zaire, I had now made my way north, over the border to the lowlands of Scotland. After a journey of about four hours I'd arrived at my usual quaint bed and breakfast house and having tossed my bags onto the bed, sat down with a fresh cup of tea by the window. As I sipped, I began thinking about simba, Swahili for lion, throughout my formative years I had seen these majestic cats play, hunt, fight and die and always had a deep respect for them. I could still see, in my mind's eye, a vivid picture of a lion making a kill, one that I would never forget. I gazed out of my window at the green soft grass in the field, and wondered how the local cattle, the 'Belted Galloways', would fare if one of the tawny predators was to set up camp in the fields around the Annan valley. I thought again of that age old expression 'let sleeping dogs lie'; and that it equally applies to the big cat - the lion. Lions, or Simba, in many of the African dialects, are ferocious and extremely powerful. Often one of these majestic beasts gets injured and cannot chase regular prey, so it turns to 'soft targets', humans, dogs, small animals, ground nesting birds and so-on, all of which would not be able to hurt it any more nor add any pain to the injuries it had already suffered. I had seen the results of a localised attack by a man-eater. It wasn't pleasant. I recalled the dramatization of the terrible man-eaters of Tsavo up in East Africa. Fortunately, that was a rarity and most lions I experienced were healthy and capable of a normal hunt and kill activity. I could almost picture one standing there out in the long green grass of the field to the south of the house. My eyes wandered around and up to the distant Chapelcross nuclear power station with its 'curvy' cooling towers making small clouds over the area. As my eyes followed the skyline I looked to the north. There was that town that no-one south of Carlisle had heard of, until PanAm Boeing 747 flight PA103, known as 'Clipper Maid of the Seas', exploded at 31,000 feet and crashed down there on the evening of December 21st 1988. That town was the small border town of Lockerbie now quietly nestling like a backwater since the M74 was built to take the main stream of North bound traffic away from it. All that remained to remind people of that fateful day twelve years in the past, was a small cemetery with a stone of remembrance. New houses replaced those demolished in the accident, and by now, the gardens and trees there had become established enough for the scar to have healed. Many locals were still traumatised by the event. Many had moved away. I reflected on the tragedy for a minute or two and looked at my map briefly. I'd have to drive up that way the next day, as my business would take me to the A7, fifteen miles the other side of Lockerbie, and then up half way to Edinburgh to Galashiels. I thought how serene the scene was before my eyes. I felt saddened at the fact that half the fields I'd seen on my journey up had been empty, a legacy of the recently raging foot and mouth disease. Death and its sickly smell was still hanging in the air. Not unlike the smell of a freshly killed antelope out in the savannah. A smell that no-one wants to have meet their nostrils. When simba, the lion, kills, the smell of death is a strong reminder of its power. I remembered the first time I had seen a kill, in the Kafue Game Reserve, when I was about ten years old. I was one of a party of school children who had been sent out to study wild animal husbandry and ecological dependency, something that became a regular feature of my life and affectionately referred to as 'Summer Camp'. I had learned how the food chain was so delicate that the eradication of one of man's pests at the beginning of the chain, might mean that at the other end, predators like the lion or leopard would be coming into the occupied home areas and taking dogs, cats, chickens or other livestock. Fortunately there was an abundance of food for them in the Game Reserve. I and my school friends, all between ten and twelve years of age, had travelled by bus across the wide Kafue river near the area known as 'The Hook', because the river looks like a cuphook from the air at this point and a chain-drive pontoon ferry takes cars or trucks across the river. At the end of a day's journey we arrived at Luafupa Camp on the Zambezi upper reaches. The camp was well stocked with food and essentials for survival in the animals' domain. It wasn't fenced, so it was necessary that the huts were of sound structure and locked securely for the night. Having dumped our things in the hut allocated to us, I and my two best mates David and Ray rushed out to the cook's little square hut to see what was on the menu. David was six months older than me, also of English parents, his father was a quantity surveyor with a large construction company and his mother was a legal secretary. Ray was of English stock, but his parents were both born in the south, in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. His father was an inspector in the police and his mother was a primary school teacher. He lived up to

his name, a real ray of sunshine. Together we examined the cook's list of goodies for the meal, chose ours and rushed off to explore the perimeter of the camp, remembering the warden's warnings that anything can come into the camp and could be watching us as we walked. Lion tracks had been seen only fifty metres from the car park where the Landrover was kept. Lion - that's what we all wanted to see. Thus, having indicated on my form that I wanted to observe these big cats, including their hunting habits, I found myself up on a platform in one of the trees alongside a main water hole with another friend, Joe, and one of the Game Wardens. Animals came down to the water as long as there was enough light to see, and when the moon was up, this might be all through the night. At about six in the morning, as the night began to recede and the sun was just below the horizon, it became possible to make out the shape of animals. I had looked down at the water's edge and saw about forty or fifty 'Puku', a localised antelope breed about the same size as the more well known Springbok, but heavier. Some were drinking others keeping watch, their tails rapidly wagging with their tension. The game warden that was with us on the platform tapped a couple of times on the wood and pointed off to the right. I was about to ask what he was pointing at when the man tapped his lips and shook his head. He made a circular motion with his hand, embracing the area to the right, round behind them, and round to the area in front of the platform.

I understood that he was saying he had spotted a simba off to the right, and that the predator was going to circle round to the other side, so that it could get close to its prey and be downwind of them. Listen as I may, all I could hear was the soft purring sound Puku make while they are refilling their small water sacs inside the neck cavity. The warden indicated that it was a lioness and she had moved behind them and was on her way to the other side of the water hole. I watched the small deer drink, listened for the first bark of danger, for the panic and run that would happen just a second before the lioness hit. The deer were oblivious. To them it was a quiet evening drink before they settled for the night. They were nervous as always and kept sniffing the air. Suddenly I saw the lioness burst from the undergrowth and appeared to throw itself into a sea of deer. The expected panic burst forth, and animals ran in all directions. As the dust settled, there we could see that the lioness had made a kill, a young antelope was down and the her mouth was clamped across the deer's throat. I was a little upset, I had just been admiring that deer, thinking what a magnificent example it was, and now as it kicked its last, I almost wished I had made a sound that might have saved it. Even so, the lioness would have got one of them, and if she hadn't, one of the other lionesses would have. Having seen this attack, I realised how swift and silent simba is, and why the name is given to other ruthless animals and even people, such as an elite military force in the north, and to assassins in some African countries. There was no remorse, no mercy, no thought of the ones left behind to mourn when this tawny big cat chose the meal for its family. I had come across the Simba soldiers and didn't forget that encounter either. They had killed several tribesmen in a village near my home without provocation and with no remorse. It reminded me of how some in the position of power and authority behave towards those who cannot defend themselves against their merciless onslaught. This too had been a subject of much controversy in my past. I was a bit of a philosopher at times and always looked for the reasons behind things that happened.

I recalled one event in my life that showed just how this human trait of merciless behaviour develops. My mind moved forward in time to when I was nineteen, and briefly living in South Africa before that fateful day of deportation. I recalled that I was based in Pretoria and had taken a job with an agency as a mini-bus driver and was taking a group of tourists through the Kruger National Park in the Eastern Transvaal area. These tourists were mostly from the United States and had paid very large sums of money to see 'big game' close up whilst in the safety of a protective vehicle. I drove a specially fitted out mini-bus, which not only had reinforced steel side panels, but also more glass, toughened to withstand minor attacks by small animals. Even a brief rhino charge would only inflict minor damage, though I doubted whether the min-bus would withstand a prolonged onslaught by the toughest animal in the high savannah.

The second night into the game reserve, we once again made our overnight stop in Punda Milia, one of the secure camps specially constructed to provide almost 4 star quality along with safety and security away from predators and big animals like elephants and rhino. All the camps had chalets constructed from dried clay blocks, plastered with mud and painted white before topping

off with a dense blanket of thatch made from the bamboo-like 'elephant' grass that grows in the open savannah. The entire camp was surrounded by a four metre high fence, with another three metre high fence of steel mesh within that perimeter. A diesel generator provided power to the perimeter lights and to all the buildings and sung its melancholy night song.

As the sun was setting, a glorious pink and orange glow had spread across the acacia peppered savannah, and there was a smell of charcoal mixed with the perfume of the early opening night flowers. I sniffed in this delightful odour and my eyes soaked up the view. I moved on down to the inner perimeter fence and started walking in a southerly direction towards the gates.

Occasionally as one of the many nomadic tribes finds itself near one of these camps, they would be allowed to enter and camp at the 'waste' end of the secure compound. These were noble people of the Xhosa or Ndebele stock, relatives of the Masai in Kenya, and cousins of the Zulu. The night of this story brought small group of twenty or so nomads who had set up a makeshift camp in the southern end of the compound, just within the circle of light. The main gates were then closed and the perimeter lights powered up and cast an eerie glow all around.

I had parked up the mini-bus and made sure my party were all allocated chalets and knew where the dining room was, before I decided to walk the perimeter. This was one of my favourite pastimes as I travelled through the reserves, and that night I expected to catch sight of jackals and hyenas or maybe a cheetah or leopard patrolling the outside of the camp. After the first glow of sunset, comes night, that time in Africa when the sun drops like a stone and night drops like a velvet curtain. I watched the globe descend and listened to the crickets start up.

I approached the area occupied by the nomads; I noticed that they had quite neatly built small tent-like dwellings out of animal skins, had lit a fire and were preparing to eat a simple meal of meat and a porridge made of maize (corn) flour (affectionately called 'mealie meal' or 'sadza' and known in Europe as 'Polenta'). I paused for a second or two and gazed at their noble faces, their platted hair; noting how there was no hint of shame or embarrassment on the part of the young woman who were naked from the waist up, their breasts glistening in the glow of the perimeter lights as they busied themselves with the evening meal. One of the men looked up at me, and spoke to another in one of the main languages, Xhosa. He showed concern. I realised he had said to be careful as a stranger was approaching so I spoke in the same language. The man seemed both pleased and surprised. I held out my hand, pointed to my chest and said "Rob - Ungubani igama lako?" (What is your name)

"Siyabonga" he replied, a name that I knew meant 'we give praise', showing him to be God-fearing, or at least his parents were.

"Kunjani?" (how are you)

"Ndiphilile. Nawe?" (I'm fine. And you?)

"Ndiphilile."

Siyabonga gestured to me to come over, offered me a seat and indicated that I should take the plate that he was holding.

"Ba-ya-kuutya ukuutya ngezaandla" (more or less - 'sorry you have to eat with your fingers')

Now, this was HIS own meal, just a couple of pieces of meat and some maize meal. He wanted me to eat it and was holding the plate out towards me. I didn't want to take it yet I knew that to refuse would insult the man and his family, and even though I had a three course meal waiting for me in the dining room, I sat, bowed his head while the headman said a simple thank you to God, and ate the very humble meal. After eating it I simply said, "Enkosi" (thank you). The man was clearly pleased that he had been able to show hospitality.

I looked at him for a minute, then, being slightly radical, I suddenly had the brilliant idea! I could reciprocate! I gestured for the man to follow me, which Siyabonga did with a questioning look. As we reached the camp, I took him by the arm and led him to the dining room, where, without any hesitation, took him inside, sat him down and called the waiter. The waiter, a portly man in his late twenties, had an air of superiority about him, probably because he had a good job. I was unprepared for what happened next. The waiter screamed abuse at the 'uninvited' guest in a very poor version of Swahili.

"Mbedu kidogo nguruwe! (disgusting little pig!) Hobe! (get out!)"

He then grabbed Siyabonga by the arm and dragged him to the door, all time beating him with a short stick he miraculously produced from his tunic. I bellowed so loudly that the whole dining

room stopped.

"Enyi! (You!) Stop right there!"

The waiter stopped in his tracks and, still holding the nomad's arm, turned to face me. I demanded to know just what he thought he was doing. The waiter referred to 'riff raff' and 'scum' and turned to resume his expulsion of the man. I again stopped him in his tracks. I turned to the restaurant diners and explained how this man had done me the greatest honour by inviting him to sit with his family and enjoy the meal; as a result he himself had gone without. I explained that the waiter was trying to make himself appear superior by this abusive attack on the nomad, who was in fact of a far superior race of people than that of the waiter. I pointed out that I, or rather the tour company, had paid for a meal, and as I had already eaten, I was giving my meal to this noble man. I asked if anyone objected to my doing so, and if yes, would they say so now. No-one spoke, I waited, the waiter stood, the nomad stood, all in silence. The manager of the dining room sidled up to me, and whispered that this was not a good idea, saying that "these people need to learn their place". I repeated the manager's words, very loudly, and pointed to his party from the USA, many of which were not what the South African government at that time would consider to be white. I asked the manager if that statement included 'these people'. The manager shifted uneasily and declined to answer, so I provided my own answer to the question, "You would not feel this way about Siyabonga, a noble Xhosa gentleman if he had paid the same sort of money that our guests here tonight have paid. However, my dinner is paid for and so that kind of covers it I reckon - so, I give it to Siyabonga!"

With that I retrieved the man's wrist from the waiter's hand and sat him down in a chair, I spoke softly to the man in his own dialect, reassuring him and making sure that he would not bolt as soon as I walked away. Then I went to the waiter, removed his hat from his head and untied his white tunic pinafore put these on myself and went into the kitchen. There I spoke to the chef and together we made up a plate of chicken, rice, vegetables and mashed potato. I picked up a small bottle of red wine as I left the kitchen, placed the plate before the man, opened the bottle and filled the glass that was before him. I then thanked the man for his honest treatment of a stranger, asked him to enjoy the meal, and sat with him while he ate. The rest of the guests returned to eating their meals and the manager stood by, hopping from one foot to the other in agitation. The waiter stormed into the kitchen and stayed there until I left.

That was the last time I drove for the agency, the next morning a relief driver arrived and asked me to hand over the keys of the mini-bus. I was left to make my own way out of the camp, no-one wanted me to stay one second longer than necessary. Thus, at 6:30 a.m., whilst my party were enjoying their breakfast, I was escorted to the main gate, and within two minutes was standing outside, breathing in the heavy mist and looking at the many animals moving across the savannah below the small hill upon which the camp was sited. I shrugged, turned up my collar against the damp morning air and started to walk towards the western horizon; after all, it was only 90 miles to Pretoria. Elephants, cheetah and lions were all in this area, but who cares? After all, I loved them; they were bound to recognise this in me, animals having a peculiar sense of awareness of individual personality. I'd only taken about three steps, when my arm was tugged; I stopped, and turned to see the face of Siyabonga the nomadic tribesman. The man greeted me in the traditional manner, which I reciprocated, and smiled bravely. He then made a tutting sound, pointed skywards and then to the earth under our feet. He drew a circle and walked around it, casting down ashes and small bones on the ground. I had heard about their strange rituals, and didn't want to be part of one, and the man must have sensed that because he didn't draw the circle round me in the usual way, but rather around a sack of flour instead. His family appeared, touched my hand and three of them walked with me, one each side and one behind while I followed the headman. This again was a great honour, for they were making sure that I would not be attacked by any animal, they would get the attack first. I walked along with them for the entire day. Then Siyabonga pointed to a small shape ahead in the late afternoon sun. It was a bus. Several people were lining up to board it. I thanked the family, patted Siyabonga on the arm, hugged him and kissed his three half naked wives. Then I turned and sprinted for the bus which was about to pull away. The driver caught sight of me running towards the bus and re-opened the doors to let me climb aboard. After paying the driver for the two hour journey to Pretoria, I sat down and looked out of the window at the four figures standing a few hundred metres off. I waved and they waved

back. The bus turned in the road and headed down the track towards the National Highway, seventeen miles away. It would still take two hours to Pretoria once we had joined that highway. I looked towards Punda Milia, now so far in the distance that its white chalets just became part of the greyish green backdrop to the savannah scene. I wondered what sort of conversations the guests had over breakfast.

I later learned that the mini-bus had refused to start that morning. Even more incredible was the report that the waiter had fallen down a pit and was fatally bitten by a 'black mamba' snake, and the manager of the restaurant had become ill with a fever, later diagnosed as cholera. Strange coincidence? Maybe - but if not.... I still wonder if that circle in the sand and the chants with ash and bone was responsible or not. Even forty years on, I have no other answer. I was staring down at the rising dust from the wheels of the bus, like early morning mist. The mists of the past slowly cleared from my mind and I realised I had been day dreaming again about those glorious days in Africa. Before me, the landlady stood, and placed a plate in front of me.

"Enjoy your meal."

My attention quickly focussed on the Scottish borders once again as the landlady helped me to return to the present; and I enjoyed one of the best meals I'd eaten for some time. The melt-in-the-mouth Scottish beef against my palate, I once again looked out at the green fields outside; it was really a delight to be in South West Scotland in the summer. I made a mental note to return again as soon as I could. Business planning being done back at head office meant I had no idea where I may have to go from week to week; I only had the next week's observation jobs in my diary. I had a busy day ahead, and so to bed, thinking about the good things I had experienced in my life and contemplating the unfortunates of the world. No dreams troubled my sleep; I was too tired after the long drive from my home in the South.

Chapter 4

The alarm jangled in my ears and I sat up, rubbed my eyes and looked about me, it took several seconds before I remembered where I was. I leaped out of bed and headed for the bathroom. This was going to be a busy day. After breakfast, I headed off towards Lochmaben to make the connection with the A74 at Lockerbie. I knew I'd have to pass through Lockerbie and out the other side, in the direction of Langholm. I liked this journey as it passed through some of the beautiful lowland borders, and was often bursting with animals, wild and domestic, from lowland thick pelted sheep to huge Aberdeen Angus long horned cattle and even some deer. As I passed through woodland up beyond Lockerbie, something caught my eye, just a slight flash of light in the trees. I thought I had seen something unusual though I could scarcely believe it. I could've sworn that tucked in amongst the trees was a jet fighter. I wasn't one hundred percent sure, so I stopped, turned around, went back to where I had seen it and drew up alongside the road near to the spot I had seen the aircraft.

Yes, there really was a jet fighter sitting almost wingless in a small fenced area within the trees. The engines had been sealed and the tail burner capped as is usually done with jet aircraft in storage and the last part of each wing had been removed – possibly to make transportation easier. Just what was it doing here? I hadn't time now to look any longer upon the redundant flying machine, so I turned around and continued the journey, making a mental note to stop and look again on the return trip. At Langholm I turned north towards Edinburgh on the A7, a sign told me that Edinburgh was 70 miles away. I wasn't intending to go there this time; my journey was only going to be another 20 miles, to Hawick. A few hours later and I found myself doing the same journey in reverse, criss-crossing the river Teviot at several places. I forgot about the jet aircraft until I was approaching Lockerbie, and then it was too late anyway. From the hilltop I looked down on the little town, the new houses to the south giving the only indication that something happened here in the past. Twenty minutes later I was back having a shower and looking forward to my evening meal. My thoughts once again were on the many strange happenings of my youth. I thought about that jet aircraft, and having an inventive imagination I wove an intriguing story about it. I laughed, and then I remembered one of the nights back in the time I was a teenager in Zambia, a strange series of events unfolded into what became a most horrific situation. I had been visiting friends on one of the neighbouring Lechwe farms in the Makeni area, the Zambezi flood plains to the west of Lusaka, and now was returning at about eleven o'clock in the evening. All was quiet, the sound of my twin cylinder motorcycle echoed off trees and occasional buildings as I traversed the gravelled back roads. The sky was dark, but full of stars, and there was only the hint of a rising moon. It was this that made me suddenly look up at the sky as I approached the turn off to the homestead. Ahead of me and at an elevation of about thirty degrees, was a bright light, with a bluish trail following behind it. It made me stop, and I raised my goggles to see more clearly, but I had no idea what it was. It appeared to be stationary, but was getting bigger. It was in fact coming towards me. Suddenly it appeared to wobble and then falter, and dropped below the horizon. Shortly after, there was a muffled bang, and a flash of light lit up the sky. Was it a UFO? That was the first thought that came into my mind. I wanted to find out. Quickly I got back under way and headed for the spot I had seen it go below the horizon. Makeni is very flat, there are no hills, and logic dictates that nothing can actually go below the horizon, unless it is so far away that it disappears below the curvature of the earth. For something to be that visible and then drop below the horizon would make it 80 kilometres, fifty miles, away and very, very BIG! After about twelve kilometres or eight miles I ran out of road. I stopped, switched off the engine, removed my helmet and listened. Only silence met my ears, there was no fire, nothing to indicate anything had happened when I was at the homestead entrance just sixteen kilometres, ten miles, back. Now I felt compelled to find out what it was I had seen if only to clear my now much befuddled mind. I restarted the bike and with full beam set on, began to ride through the eight foot high 'elephant grass', I knew that I could have a serious accident if there was anything in the grass, such as a tractor, or a drainage ditch. I only could hope that I would see the danger before I got to it. My imagination raced through the possibilities of being pounced on by a huge member of the cat family, or hitting a dozing elephant. After another ten minutes or so, I emerged from the grass onto a tarred road which ran at right angles to my line of direction. I swung the bike in a slow but full

circle, the headlamp beam showed that this road, like most, was straight as an arrow and disappeared into the black gloom in either direction. Once again I switched off, leaving the headlamp on, powered by the battery, and listened. I could now hear some distant sounds almost straight ahead, but slightly to the right. Was this a power unit from one of the farms, a late night tractor ploughing the field, a farmer coming home late, or was it something else? I couldn't quite determine the type of sound or its origin. I thought for a second and remembered that this road ran south to the Kafue River, and north to the western edge of the city of Lusaka. I also remembered that there was another gravel track that turned off this road about 1500 metres to the north, and it headed west, the direction I was trying to go. I decided to head for that turning and continue on towards whatever it was that disappeared. So engrossed was I in this search that I had neglected to check the fuel tank, and I was going to run out of fuel within a few kilometres. It was now getting on towards midnight. I turned off down the track and had gone about a kilometre when, sure enough, the engine began to splutter. I cursed! Stopping quickly I whipped off the fuel filler cap, peering inside I could just see the bottom of the tank, it was empty! Now I felt very angry with myself. The tank held four gallons, around eighteen litres, and would take me over two hundred and sixty kilometres, and I had a fifty litre drum of fuel at the farm, which was now nearly twenty eight kilometres behind me. I am never the sort who panics easily, but I knew the dangers of being out in the 'bush' unprotected. I knew I needed to save the battery so I set the light to parking level just to give enough light to see where I was going. For several minutes I pushed the bike, working up a sweat, in the compelling direction. It was then I remembered the quarry, yes, the track lead to a quarry, I'd been there in the daylight. I felt a tingle of excitement as I remembered this huge hole in the ground. It was only a few hundred metres more and I knew that at the bottom there were several workmen's huts one of which might be open and I could take shelter.

I pushed on, the hairs on my neck standing up, partly with the cold, partly with the anticipation of finding this UFO and partly with fear, the fear of being a tasty morsel for a pride of lions. Nevertheless, I pressed on and sure enough, I saw the black sea-like expanse before me stretching out. It was the vast hole caused by the excavation of tons of sand and gravel, the disused quarry. Makeni quarry had been the source of sand for the construction industry for 20 years; it was roughly 8 or 9 hundred metres wide, nearly 17 hundred metres long, and around 30 metres deep with an almost flat bottom. It had been closed now for about 10 years, and the sides were quite grassy. I pushed on towards the expanse and soon reached the rim, where the track descended, but I stopped short and for a second my breath almost stopped. For at the bottom of the quarry, some twenty five or so metres, below me, was an aircraft, but nothing like anything I'd seen before, and it had been on fire, though was now just smoking. The body was not cylindrical like most aircraft, but more flattened with the sides of the fuselage extending outwards to a sort of crease. It was black, not from the smoke, but painted matt black. Two spotlights shone on its black surface from somewhere across the expanse from me. It was half instinct and half fear of the night creatures around me that made me decide to go on down. I began to descend the slope when suddenly a bright light shone in my face and a voice came out of light.

"Stand still!"

I realised that this is what I had seen, and why it had dropped below the horizon, but who was this now talking to me, and where was that light coming from? I realised that there was another vehicle of some kind on the opposite side of the quarry, the distant sounds I had heard would have been vehicles with the lights attached. This particular one had its mounted spotlight pointing straight at me and was blinding me so that I had to stop.

I slowly allowed the motorcycle to settle on its side, and placed the helmet on its now cold engine. Then I raised both hands and waited. It seemed hours, yet was in fact only a few minutes, before someone appeared very close to me, a man dressed in a black jump suit without any markings. He didn't speak, but gestured to me to turn around so that the light was now on my back. There was a soft thud and I felt my knees buckle. The sky whirled around me and closed in like a black velvet blanket. I woke with a start, and tried to sit up, someone in a white coat shook their head and a hand was placed on my chest.

"No don't try to get up, you need to lie down" the figure said.

Other white coated figures appeared.

"He's coming round," someone remarked

Another spoke to me and said, "You're lucky to be alive, riding off that cliff like that!"

A third voice joined in and said, "If the river authority's night patrol hadn't been around you might have died and it would be weeks before they'd find your body, assuming the crocs hadn't eaten it." I was dazed, puzzled.

"Riding off a cliff? River patrol? What are you talking about? What happened to the aircraft?"

They looked at each other blankly and said "There was no aircraft from what we've heard."

"Oh yes there was, in the bottom of the Makeni quarry!"

Again one of the voices sternly told me that there was no aircraft. It went to say "You were no where near Makeni quarry, you crashed off the Kafue escarpment onto the river bank below, 30 kilometres south of Lusaka and you're now in Lusaka General Hospital." He turned to the others in the group and addressed them, "You see, this young man has had concussion, he has a tendency to hallucinate, please keep an eye on him and try to get him to rest and forget the silly idea of aircraft in quarries."

Later, when I was living in England, I saw that aircraft, in a picture, it was the Lockheed SR-71 'Blackbird', a stealth bomber, and it should not have been where I saw it! I was sure that high speed tests were being conducted over the African continent because it was vast and full of superstitious people who would not know what they were looking at. I was sure that the man in the jump suit was either a pilot or at least someone connected with the aircraft. That would have meant that they probably were from the USA, though I couldn't remember if the man had an accent. Anyone to whom I tell this tale now will always say that the fall and my love of aircraft coupled with my keenness on science fiction had conjured up this image of an aircraft in a quarry. The vehicles must have been British from the nearby military establishment at Kafue Hook. Then I thought about the 'official version' of what happened that night. Strange that my bike was unharmed from a sixty foot fall, and I had no broken bones either, coupled with the fact that after being kept in hospital for two weeks I had been released without any further comment or discussion. There was no questioning by any of the staff as to why I had been admitted in the first place, let alone kept there for two weeks. Non-one can tell me why I had such a long stay when I was unhurt, not even concussed, I had just been simply knocked out skilfully, by someone who knew what he was doing. I was not going to let the matter rest so I deliberately returned to the quarry site, only to find that the track had become a ploughed field, and the huge hole in the ground was now filled in and a barn built in what would have been the middle of the expanse. I questioned a farmer who was sitting on a tractor nearby and was told the barn had been there for twenty years and that he had just turned over last year's tobacco stalks ready for a maize crop. I asked if he was doing well as a farmer, and the man said that he was scraping by like everyone else. I nodded knowingly, saying that my neighbours were all farmers and they were all struggling. I remarked how envious they would be of his brand new John Deere tractor, and left, knowing full well that this man had not farmed in his life before, he didn't know that tobacco won't grow in the semi swamplands of Makeni, and maize doesn't do too well either. Most farmers grow bananas, cassava, yams and keep cattle or Lechwe, like all our neighbours. The man was employed by some agency to cover up the top secret landing of what at the time would have been a UFO, albeit one from Earth.

As I rode away, I glanced back at the barn and could see the sun reflecting off the shiny new nails that had been used to knock down the corrugated iron roof. I smiled and muttered to myself, "you would have thought that the cover up men would have at least built the barn with OLD materials, got a farmer who knew his business and sat him on an OLD tractor – or did they really think that the locals were that gullible?" I later asked many neighbours if they had seen any earth moving equipment or lorries loaded with earth coming to and from the quarry, I gained no satisfactory answers in spite of the filling of the hole being a mammoth task. They had clearly been warned, or paid, off. However I knew that a Blackbird had come down near my home, and even if no-one believes it, the fact remains a fact. I smiled to myself as I thought about Makeni and the quarry. I could still see that aircraft in my mind's eye, but it was fading.

"Good evening Sir, would you like to see the menu?" A smiling Scots lass was holding out the menu folder for me to take. I was returned to the present as I had so often been, by the arrival of a waitress. I looked through the list on the menu and ordered my meal and then looked around the dining room, there were only a couple of people eating with me, and as I looked past them I

realised that the cloudy day had been superseded by a glorious evening with bright sunshine bursting through the windows. There was not a cloud in sight. It heralded that tomorrow could be a nice day. How does the saying go –?

“Red sky at night, shepherd's delight..?” or something like that.

I looked across to the other side of the dining room, I hadn't taken it all in the night before, but now I could see what a homely place this was. I learned from the manager that the hotel was built in the seventeenth century to care for the coaches that were going to Stranraer where there was a health resort, and on up to Ayr and Kilmarnock and eventually, Glasgow. I ran my eyes over the well polished woodwork; the panelling and the carved architraves as well as the oak beams gave clear evidence of the age of the building. The meal was advertised as ‘home made’ and it certainly was delicious, I didn't know when I had last eaten a steak and kidney pudding like the one I'd devoured earlier, and now the waitress had placed before me a jam roly-poly! As I tucked into this sweet sticky desert my gaze fell upon a painting on the wall, it was one of David Shepherd's Bull Elephants. I asked the waitress if there was anything she could tell me about it. She shrugged and said she'd ask the manager. I stared at the painting for several minutes. It reminded me of the time I'd met David Shepherd, though the famous artist would never remember the encounter with an eleven year old boy during one of the days he was out in the Kafue Game Reserve in Zambia. I was introduced to a man who had been taking photographs of elephants and hippopotami and this gentle man had described how fascinated he was by these huge creatures and that he would love to paint them. He then had laughed and remarked that they never stand still long enough for him to do this, so he had hit on the idea of taking a photograph first and then painting at leisure. I looked at the painting and thought how clear and precise the elephant was, standing in the clearing with a shaft of light falling on its huge back. “It's just like a photo”, I thought, and then laughed as it dawned on me that this was painted from one of those photographs! What a skilled artist and a brilliant photographer David Shepherd had proved to be. At that moment the manager arrived and when asked about the picture told me that he had seen the painting in a sale and had been struck by the mood and effect of it. I asked if it was an original, to which the manager admitted he didn't know, and together we moved over to the picture. The manager took it down from the wall and turned it over, there was nothing written on the back. He handed to me and I took it over to a bright light and, putting on my glasses, examined the painting through its glass. I handed it back to the manager, assuring him it was an original and advising him to hold onto it as there were many copies of that particular painting in circulation, but the original may one day be worth something. He was quite shocked to know it was a Shepherd original.

“Thank you for pointing that out, I would never have known. I just love beautiful paintings.

"My brother-in-law is a well known local artist, but he doesn't paint animals or people."

"Oh really? What's his name?"

"Bill Standing."

"Oh, I've heard of him - lives over near Moffat doesn't he?"

"That's right, have you seen much of his work?"

"No can't say I have - what is his work like?"

"Well his paintings have a similar effect on the people that look deeply into them. A feeling of peace and tranquillity comes over them, especially the paintings that are night scenes."

"I might have seen one or two - like a moon over a snowy field, but no sign of life, yeah?"

"That does sound like one of Bill's, the gallery isn't very far away, maybe you'd like to visit it."

"I really am busy, but that does sound like a trip I should make"

"Here's the address, enjoy your visit."

I stood up as I handed the piece of paper to my host and made my way out of the dining area. He tucked it away in his breast pocket and headed in the opposite direction. Soon I was in my room, finishing off the day's business and reflecting still upon that aircraft up the road towards Langholm. The next time I was to make that journey I decided I was going to stop and look at it, and take a camera this time. Somehow I couldn't get it out of my mind; there was something odd about a General Dynamics F-111 USAF “Aardvark” strategic bomber and tactical fighter being in a Scottish pine forest, miles from any airbase or even a runway of any kind, yet it was there, and hadn't crashed. I would be back!

Chapter 5

I stood looking out of the window from my room on the 44th floor of the Venetian Hotel, positioned very close to the junction of South Las Vegas Boulevard and Sands Ave, Las Vegas Gambling City, Nevada. It was January, 2000, yet it was hot. I was amazed by the fact that flying in, the Nevada mountains were covered in snow, yet the desert in which Las Vegas sits was generating temperatures in the upper 20s Celsius during the day, peaking at as high as 30 by mid afternoon. I looked out towards the Wynne Golf Complex, and then across to the New Frontier Hotel and Casino. Right next to my side of the hotel was the huge pirate ship with cannons firing on all decks. It belonged to "Treasure Island" at the Mirage Hotel and Casino.

"I hope that perishing thing stops it's banging and flashing when it's time to get to bed!" I thought out loud. I needn't have worried, as I found out later, all the external attractions at Las Vegas shut down at midnight, leaving just the casinos and shows inside keeping the crowds happy. I couldn't help marvelling at what a jewel Las Vegas is, nestling in the hot barren sands surrounding it. I felt very strange not being a gambler, and equally strange as the only British person on the board of the international organisation on which I was then serving in the capacity of the representing director for Southern Europe. It meant regular meetings in various locations across the U.S.A. - Las Vegas, Chicago, Nashville, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Atlanta, Boston, New Orleans, Seattle and occasionally Montreal or Toronto in Canada. I found it odd standing up and addressing thirty board members who had far greater business knowledge in the field than I'd gained, yet it seemed that there was something about the way that I put forward ideas that appealed to them. We all had to take our turn in each of the meetings, and soon the day had flown by, interspersed with lots of cool drinks and a buffet lunch. So, a full day's meetings over, I'd enjoyed walking over to the South Lounge on the 30th floor. There I'd sat sipping a cool beer and watching the setting sun as it slipped down below the airport and the pyramid shaped hotel Luxor with its full-size Sphinx and Cleopatra's Needle. Back in my room I turned and looked around. It was larger than most hotel rooms. In fact this spacious suite was more like an apartment, made up of four separate rooms, including a sitting room with a three-piece suite in leather set in three sides of a square embracing the small table in the centre of the room. The decor was 17th Century Italian, just as would be expected in a hotel called 'The Venetian'. Earlier in the day, whilst avoiding the huge Casino on the ground floor, I had walked through the enormous shopping mall within the hotel, over the Bridge of Sighs, and into St Marks' Square. There I found jugglers, troubadours and opera singers all dressed in authentic 16th or 17th Century Italian costume. I glanced down at a Gondola passing by, the Gondolier dressed in the proper attire of black trousers, striped long sleeved shirt and a hat with a twisted tassel at the back. The Gondolier was singing 'O Sole Mio' in a very clear and strong tenor voice, the sound of which echoed off the walls and the high painted ceiling. I found the ceiling amazing; it was designed as a technological feat, to the observer standing in St Marks' Square it looked like the sky with moving clouds and the pink glow of the sun reflecting off the clouds and the edges of the sky. This could be taken to be early morning or late evening.

My eyes fell upon a young woman dressed as either a fairy or an angel, posing with tourists. She smiled and hugged them close, her golden hair gently moving in the very slight breeze that was traversing 'St Marks' Square'.

"Adrienne" I thought, "She looks like Adrienne!"

I moved closer to where she was standing, she would not yet be twenty, with a model figure. She was tastefully made up and had very white teeth. With every new approach by a tourist, she flashed those white teeth in a beaming smile as if they were the first person she'd seen, or maybe a close friend. She greeted them and warmly invited them to join her on the steps of the bridge.

"A lesson for some I've seen, in customer relations, and what professionalism!" thought I as I once again considered how much she reminded me of Adrienne, the young girl who lived 'next door' in Makeni - her house being some 8 - 9 hundred metres from my house, most of the farm houses being this sort of distance, never usually much closer than the length of a football pitch - and I had been able to wave and share a few words over the boundary fence roughly half way between us. I was at one time absolutely besotted by her; I would watch her as she rode around the area behind her house on the beautiful Arab gelding, her blonde hair blowing in the wind. She was a year or

two older than me, but I didn't care, I never saw any sign of a boyfriend at any time. I, like many teenagers of my age, had fantasies about this beautiful girl. My dreams, if ever spoken about in public, would have, back then in the 60's, got me arrested! Once, her father had set up a portable swimming pool on the back lawn close to the fence line, and she came out of the house while I was sitting up on the 'anthill' that held our water tank, playing my trumpet as I did some afternoons. From this vantage point a few metres inside my own fence line I could clearly see her though she would not be fully aware that I was sitting there so very close to our boundaries, even if she had heard the sound of my trumpet. There was a folded white cloth screen on her patio, and she stepped behind it in the dying afternoon sun. I could see a little more than just her silhouette as she took off her clothes and put on her bikini swimsuit. The pink well rounded body barely hidden by the thin cotton in that bright sunlight. It was probably the only time in my life that I was totally at a loss for words. Emotions ran high, hormones went into overdrive and I was forced to place the bell end of the trumpet over my shorts to hide more than my embarrassment. She was totally unaware of how much she had set my emotions aflame and gracefully walked across to the pool, bent over to remove her sandals, another move that caused me to take a deep breath, and in a matter of seconds, disappeared beneath the water. I walked, somewhat awkwardly to the house, where my mother asked me if I was alright.

"You look a little flushed, too long in the sun, I think" She said

"No, Mum, I'm o.k., just need to put the trumpet away," I replied, diving for my room.

I emerged a few moments later in a pair of jeans and my long jacket.

"Going somewhere?" my Mum asked

"Only back up the anthill" I replied, picking up a small case as I went to the door.

"So what are you taking with you now?" she asked

"Binoculars"

"Why"

"There's a bird having a bath over towards the Hartnell's, I want watch her,... er . . . it."

With that, I had sprinted back to the anthill, positioned myself with my back to the cool water tank and placed the binoculars to my eyes. Ah, there she was, standing beside the pool now, gently towelling her hair. She moved her right foot a little more away from the left, and leaned forward to shake her hair down, the bikini top allowing me to see the rounded shape of her developing breasts. She moved slightly and was obscured by one of the large lemon trees on the boundary of our properties. In frustration, I leaned to the left, and before I knew it, I was tumbling down the side of the anthill, finishing up with the binoculars hitting me very hard on the breast bone. I lay winded on the ground, gasping half in excitement and half in pain. I never wanted someone so much as I did Adrienne, yet I never had the courage to ask her for anything more than the time of day. Ah well, so many memories of Adrienne, so far out of my reach, I'd been devastated when she had tragically died after a fall from her horse, a tragedy that I relive every time I hear the song "Honey", by Bobby Goldsboro. I was unable to cope for a while, mood swings, lack of concentration, snapping at people I loved and generally getting into trouble at school. I hadn't realised how much my heart had yearned for her until she died. Even as a 'macho' teenage boy, leather-clad motorcyclist and all, I cried, long and hard, often long into the night for weeks after the funeral. Too late I realised I loved her.

"My dear, dear Adrienne" I said quietly as I looked at this young woman in Las Vegas. Then, to break the mood, I laughed, if she had been here now, she'd have been older than me, not some sprightly young woman about to burst out of her teens and into her twenties. She caught my eye at this point. The blonde hair was tossed briefly and the white smile flashed in my direction.

"Would you like to have your picture taken with a Venetian?"

"I wouldn't mind more than my picture. . . "

"Ooh naughty, and you a distinguished businessman too!"

"We're the worst!"

"So I have been finding out! Naughty, naughty, does your wife know you're here . . . ?"

"I come from Mars . . . "

"Don't ALL men . . . ?"

She placed her hands on my shoulders and stood next to me, so that one arm was across the back of my neck. I placed my arm across her back with my hand on her hip.

"Now you make sure that hand stays on that hip!" she warned "My husband's the photographer!" "Now, would I have any other motives. . ." I said in a mock hurt voice as I squeezed her waist. She pulled herself a little closer to me. The delicate fragrance of her perfume filled my nostrils. Something stirred inside me. I was too old for this. However, some do say 'you're never too old'. I smiled at the camera waited for the flash, and prepared to move away, but she retained her pose. "That's wasn't any good," she said, gently massaging my neck with her left hand while her right hand gently stroked the hand that held her waist.

"Er, um, o.k.. . ." was all I could get out.

I smiled again and the camera flashed again. Then someone came to speak to the photographer, and in that instant, she placed her mouth full upon mine, kissed me and whispered, "I'll still be here at closing time, Gerry has to get home and develop the pictures. ." Her hand squeezed my arm as she said this, and she looked at me from eye to eye as if searching my very soul. She really was very beautiful, a true angel, complete with wings.

"O.K., right, that's nice. ." I could see she wasn't joking either, but I had only joked with her earlier, though her uncanny resemblance to Adrienne had stirred old feelings and I was a little choked as I released her waist and stepped away. There may even have been a tear in my eye. I realised how much I had been in love with Adrienne, and she never knew. My heart once again bore the pain of the day she died. I turned my head away from this angelic representation of a lost love. I paid the photographer and gave him my room number for the delivery.

I never did know if the angelic Adrienne look-alike was still there at closing time, whether she had said that to every man, or whether she had waited just for me. At around 7:30 p.m., I, along with the rest of the board, was on my way to Caesar's Palace for dinner and the evening show of the water carnival called 'O'. The fact that I was with the other members of the board didn't stop me reviving a host of fantasies from the distant past though. During the evening meal, the two ladies either side of me wondered why I wasn't as talkative as usual - and I couldn't really tell them, they just would not have understood. My emotions were running amok, creating havoc with my power of reason. I wanted to run around outside like a headless chicken and scream. I'm glad I didn't. How could I explain in just a few sentences the love I had for Adrienne, the loss I had felt when she died and how that loss had been brought back so vividly by the afternoon's photo shoot on the 'Bridge of Sighs'? They all went to gamble away their money at the casino and I asked the 'limo' driver to get me back to the Venetian, which he did without a word. So it was that I returned to my room and fell into bed and was soon asleep amid dreams of blonde haired angels swimming in canals whilst Gondoliers punted by with horses as passengers. Golden-haired angels were caressing my neck and forehead and slowly taking my clothes off whilst I lay on a bridge over a canal; I awoke several times, convinced that some of the dreams were true, and turned the light on only to be disappointed that they weren't. At breakfast one of the women asked me who'd been with me all night. When I protested that I had not been with anyone, she laughed and winked and said "That ain't what yer face is a sayin'."

I was contented to leave it at that and let them believe what they liked - they could compare notes with each other and soon realise it wasn't one of them. They might begin to speculate and give the other women long glances. There were a lot of women there to choose from; they outnumbered the men in the breakfast room more than ten to one. I looked around the room at the different women sitting there enjoying their meals, from sprightly nubile ones in their mid-20's to 'well-filled' graceful ones approaching retirement. There was one other man, a media representative from the local TV station. I smiled as I thought how strange it is sometimes that a person can be the only one of their sex in a group. Though in this case, there were another five or six men out of the total of thirty Board members of which I was the Southern Europe delegate. However, I recalled the day I started working in a call centre in my area, I was the only man out of 250 staff, a very strange but not unpleasant experience. The girls just carried on as normal as if I wasn't there, often showing each other things they had bought, shoes, skirts, dresses, or some other piece of apparel. One even lifted her skirt to show another the knickers she had bought and was totally oblivious to me sitting nearby in my chair trying to write with a sandwich and munch on my pen. I sighed as I thought of those days, how when I had asked where the Gents' toilet was I had just received blank looks from everyone - of course, how would the girls know? Someone suggested it might be downstairs, well, it wasn't. For a few months until a few more men joined, I had to use the ground

floor toilet set aside for those with walking impairment as it was the only one that had its own door and so no risk of embarrassing anyone. Ah well that was a long time back and I had moved on from that office and onto different arenas. I smiled again as I gulped down the last mouthful from the coffee cup and bid my table companions a temporary farewell. We'd all be back together in 30 minutes anyway.

I considered what to do next as I left the breakfast room, and decided that I might as well head straight to the conference room in the exotic "Sands" conference and events centre attached to the Venetian Hotel. A full day was ahead, with many agenda items to consider, and I had set about my preparation for the items I would be presenting. Just before the meeting came to order the Chairman approached me and asked me to take the podium first and open the meeting. I was surprised, but rose to the task, and was given a rapturous applause, much to my embarrassment. Then the Chairman presented me with an accolade for outstanding service on behalf of my area of responsibility. I protested, saying that I was not deserving of such an honour, but the Board, being the warm-hearted people of the U.S. would have nothing of it and kept standing and clapping until the Chairman asked them to settle for the day's business. Back in my Buckinghamshire home, I had been telling Sara all about The Venetian and my week, including the Adrienne look-alike. "Who's Adrienne?" she had asked.

"Oh, just a girl that used to live next door in Makeni - if she'd not died tragically she'd be in her fifties now."

"And you fancied her?"

"You don't know how much!"

"Knowing you, oh yes, I think I do!"

"Well, there she was, a beautiful blonde, figure like a 'Coke' bottle, rode a white gelding. . ." I was digging a large hole now.

"So, was this other young girl blonde, with a figure like . . ." she broke off as I jumped in quickly

"Well, yes but, hang on, she was not yet twenty, her husband was the photographer, I mean . . ."

"Am I accusing you of anything . . . ?"

"Well, no, but I . . ." I broke off

"So where's the photo then?"

"I'll get it if you really want to see it . . ."

"I want . . ."

So, I fished out the photo and passed it Sara.

"I see . . ."

"No, I think you only think you see!" I retorted.

"She looks pretty well attached to you!"

"Every photo of every person that came there is the same...I saw other examples . . it was a bit of fun!"

"Is that what you call it?"

"C'mon, I don't even know her name, I had the photo taken, I walked on, I went to dinner and a show with the others, never saw her again . . . don't even know her name...." I was repeating myself.

Sara was laughing now.

"If I didn't know you better I would say that you just gave me the classic male CONFESSIO!"

"I can't win can I?"

"No!"

We both laughed and Sara continued getting dressed to go to work as she was on the late shift that day.

"Sorry love, I know you've only just got back, but I've got to go - see you just after eleven tonight." I kissed her and gave her a hug. "That's o.k. - I'll just sit here and look at this photo and think of Adrienne!"

After a mock fist in my face, Sara left and I sat on the leather settee, my eyes closed while thought of what to do for the rest of the evening. I reflected on how settled my life had become, compared to my childhood, when my father worked for the British Government on assignment in Central Africa. I grinned as I recalled some of the strange events of that childhood and how at the time I had accepted the explanations offered, often just being excited at moving house yet again,

especially in the middle of the night. I felt a slight chill pass over me and I shuddered for a few seconds. Was it because there was a cool breeze as the evening sun slipped below the rim of the fence behind the house, or rather was it because I remembered one particular night when I was 6 years old and living with my family in the heartland of Central Africa? Our dwelling was a little block-built white-washed chalet-style homestead rented from a farmer and deep in a remote farming area, close to one of the borders with the Belgian Congo (Zaire) and the nearest neighbour was over two miles away. The event burst forth like an erupting volcano, shattering what had been a peaceful night. It was about two o'clock in the morning and pitch black on what had been a moonless night. Suddenly I felt strong arms about me and I was swept off my bed, complete with sheets, and swiftly carried out into the darkness. I was terrified and unable to move or speak. Who was this? Why had they snatched me off the bed? What if they were going to make me their slave, or even worse, kill me after doing something terrible to me? I tried to wriggle free, but failed. In a few seconds my eyes became accustomed to the gloom and I saw a dozen or so man-shaped silhouettes standing out against the beginnings of a moonrise. I remembered thinking how large these men appeared to be. I called for my parents. Where were they? The strong arms tightened and a soft voice told me to be quiet, and to hold on. It was M'kende, one of the men who tilled the earth in a nearby farm, and occasionally earned a little extra by doing my father's garden. I sighed with relief. I trusted this huge man, I played with his son Bukaleme, so I did as I was bid, and hung on for dear life. The man broke into a lumbering run and I was looking back over his large and muscular shoulder. I saw a thin rod-shaped object half way down one of the silhouettes suddenly light up like a small lightning bolt. Something noisily burst through the air, and a split second later, the home I had just been rushed out of erupted in flame and smoke. A loud bang, followed by a rush of air, almost sent me and my human transport headlong. M'kende grunted, and pressed on at a trot. Later I was told that he had been struck by some flying debris and was sent back to his village to recuperate. The terrorists had fired an anti-tank missile directly into our house and then turned and raked the area with automatic weapons. If it hadn't been for swift thinking, none of us would have been alive. That night, out in the darkness, my father had sat down beside me on an old log, put his arm around my shoulders in re-assurance and offered a few well chosen words of comfort. He put on a brave face even though he was both angry and frightened himself. He wasn't surprised by the attack; in fact, he had been expecting it for some time.

"This is a tragic night, Robbie", he said as he looked deep into my wide eyes, "I'm sorry that you have had to have this happen to you tonight."

"Daddy, why, why did those men break our house?"

"Well, they were bad men. Men who had something against me or maybe against someone I work for - I don't know."

"Mummy! Where's Mummy. . ." I anxiously looked about me.

"Here I am," and in two strides she was there and swept me up into her arms.

Years later, back in England and on his deathbed, my father told me the truth about that night and many others, how guerrilla forces equipped with rocket firing rifles had destroyed the house and in fact M'kende had been shot in the back as he ran, and died after he had made sure that I was safe. It was tragic to think that this peaceful hard working man had lost his life saving us. I had gone to the village to see Bukaleme and offer some words of condolence, clutching a few small gifts for the family left behind. I had received an unwelcome reception; even Bukaleme didn't want to talk to me. My gifts lay untouched on the ground where I had dropped them.

That night my father had told me in a round about way that it might have been because of his connections at that time; he offered no further explanation until his deathbed when the breath was ebbing from his body. It wouldn't have mattered if he had told me about the Foreign Office and his work, I, the six-year-old boy wouldn't have understood anyway. What angered me most as I recalled the event, was the fact that the very government my father was working for had supplied the arms that these guerrillas used. I remembered just how helpless I had felt at knowing that the man that gave his life to save me was from the same village as those that sent the "arrows of death" into our house because they saw M'kende as a traitor for saving the family considered to be their enemies. This brave man had come to the house with one of his friends, and whilst the other man led my parents to safety, he had dived into the back of the house to get me out, in the

nick of time. I still felt angry at the loss of friendship with Bukaleme and the cold shoulder I got from the villagers. As a 6 year old boy it had cut deep and the scar was a long way off healing even now. I shuddered again - it was time to close the window and think about the present, perhaps what I might eat for dinner. A beer, a curry and a film sounded like a good idea. Thus Sara returned to find me asleep, sprawled on the settee, dried congealed remains of a curry on the plate on the floor, and three empty lager bottles lying on their sides, each pointing at me like an accusing finger. She didn't wake me, but went into the kitchen, put on the kettle, then returned to the living room and slowly cleared up my mess. The clink of the bottles woke me.

"Eh?! - oh it's you . . . fell asleep . . . oh sorry, my stuff everywhere, what time is it?"

"Hello love." she bent and kissed my foul smelling mouth, "It's quarter to twelve - cup of tea?"

"Y-e-s p - l - ease," I said in the midst of a yawn, "Phew I'm tired, Vegas to L.A. then L.A. to London and the drive home - don't remember there being any night in there - it was just getting dark when we took off, it seemed to stay like a twilight until suddenly it was light again just five hours into the flight - weird!"

"Really? I've never been any distance on a plane - I wouldn't know!"

"I'll take you one of the long distance ones in the future!"

"I take that as a promise then . . . ?"

"Yes, why not - I am a Board member, so why shouldn't my wife come along - you'd have to look after yourself during the day though whilst we wade through the boring stuff."

"Maybe I could go in search of a look-alike of Trevor, who lived next door to me in Hemel. . ."

"D'you want a smack or something . . . ?"

"I'll settle for the 'or something'. . ."

Sara was on the early shift the next morning and I wasn't due out until the evening, so I'd had a bit of a lie in and emerged from the bedroom having just got dressed about eleven thirty. I made myself a drink and wandered out into the back garden to see how things were since last week. I sat briefly on the low wall and sipped on the coffee, thinking about the events of the week and how I now had to get things back into perspective for the week ahead. I was at a strange point in my life where I could almost decide on a day by day basis what I was going to do with myself. I was just sitting on the wall considering whether to go out to the shops, go for a walk or get the stuff ready for my week's work ahead. A sound in the distance caught my attention, it wasn't the usual traffic, nor was it a lawn mower. It sounded familiar somehow, but it wasn't a bus or a delivery van. I walked out of the front of the house and reckoned that the sound was a tractor, strange, considering that I was in a heavy residential area, miles from any farms. I, being the curious one, had to go and investigate. Sara always remarked that one day my 'nose' would get me into trouble. After strolling along one of the paths that traverse the housing estate, I came to a recreation ground, and sure enough, there it was, a tractor. Not just any tractor, but an old 'Fergie' younger but not unlike the one my father had bought for our use in Makeni. I watched the driver travelling up and down across and back, a mower in tow. Ah, that's why it was there. I smiled for a bit as I remembered with fondness the first time I'd sat on the 'Fergie'. It was grey, had a steel seat with no cushion and pushing the gear lever hard over activated the starter motor. How any designer could have imagined that anyone's backside was the shape of that steel seat I never could fathom out. On my first venture, my Dad had got the tractor running and told me to push down on the left hand pedal, push the throttle lever up two clicks, put the gear lever into position 1, and slowly release the left hand pedal. However, he never said anything about the right hand pedal, the brake pedal, and I had let the left one go a little quicker than I should. I turned to speak to my Dad, only to see him, over my shoulder, getting up off the ground 30 metres behind as I hurtled towards the 2 metre high 'elephant grass'. I turned the wheel hard and the tractor almost fell over as it made a 270 degree turn. My Dad was running towards me, his hands cupped around his mouth.

"Push the right pedal down and stamp hard on the left one" he shouted, but he really meant it to be the other way round, and so I gently pushed down on the brake pedal, whilst stamping hard on the clutch pedal. The latter, having little resistance caused me to sprain my ankle as my foot jarred into the steel floor. Only slight pressure on the brake pedal meant that the tractor wasn't stopping. "Press harder with your right foot - you've got to get enough pressure in the hydraulics to activate the shoes."

"Might as well have said 'pressure in the hieroglyphics' for all that means to me!" I muttered, "Shoes, what's he on about, hasn't got any feet."

I hurtled towards the cow shed just waiting for the disaster that was about to happen. My hand caught the throttle lever and returned it to zero, thus the engine was no longer pulling with the same gusto. "Aha!" I thought, "the reverse of how I got moving, so put my foot on the left pedal and move the gear lever to the central or neutral position and" within a few feet, the tractor stopped. I was smiling as I recalled that scary but amusing event in my childhood when I became aware of a shadow across my legs. A man was standing a few feet away from me.

"Got a light mate?"

"Er . . no, sorry . . ." I stuttered, being brought back to the present by the driver of the lawn-mowing tractor, "I don't smoke, sorry!"

"Oh, ok, I'll wait for someone else to come along."

"Fair old tractor you've got there, is it a Ferguson?"

"Yes, yes, but it's not mine, it belongs to the boss, he subcontracts it, with me as the driver, to the council."

"What year is it, just for interest sake..?"

"Dunno mate, it's got an old number plate that's all I know"

I looked at the plate, just a number followed by three letters. So it had to be pre-1962 or it would have been three letters, one or two numbers, followed by 'A', 'B' 'C' etc.

"Can I have a look?"

"Sure"

I looked at the engine block and the cylinder head, they both carried numbers, but nothing to give away its age. I thanked the man and sat down on a bench to watch him start up and carry on mowing. I listened to the engine, watched the greyish green shape moving back and forth and soon I was back in Makeni, sitting on that awful seat whilst my Dad and our helper Matchstick coupled on the plough unit.

"Test hydraulics" my Dad called, so I pulled on the lever that raises and lowers the plough unit. Up and down went the complex of three angled dishes, interspersed with three plough-shares and at the end, a steel ten-spoked wheel.

"Check"

"O.K. - off you go then, but remember, this has three dishes that means if you go too deep, the tractor will rear up like a horse, and you will fall on the plough-shares. "

"O.K. Dad, I will let it out slowly!"

My first attempt at ploughing was nerve racking to say the least. First I was too shallow, then I was too deep, then I couldn't get the lines straight, and finally, I couldn't turn round at the end of the furrow. As it ploughed on I had imagined ending up ploughing the road, next door's front lawn, Old Man Spintz's banana trees, and whatever else got in the way. The only course of action was to drop the plough unit down a further one inch. The tractor was stopped by the digging in of the metal dishes. I laughed as the front of tractor reared up like a horse, and then promptly fell off the back of it right in front of the huge steel dishes. Fortunately, the engine stalled and the tractor stopped, front wheels in the air with me lying looking up at the greasy power take-off unit at the back. That was a steep learning curve, but soon I was steadily ploughing the field. Once fully turned and harrowed we would plant an Alfalfa and ryegrass mixture for Rosie, the Jersey cow, to eat fresh, and to be made into hay for bedding and feeding in later months. The smell of the new mown grass in the recreation ground kept that daydream alive until I was aware of a woman's voice above the distant sound of the tractor as he turned at the end of the field. I looked up at the young woman standing where the man had earlier stood.

"Is it o.k. if I sit here?"

I must've looked a little surprised for the young woman continued, "If you're keeping it for someone, I'll find another bench - " she looked around for another bench. There wasn't one within line of sight.

"I'm sorry, I was deep in thought, of course, you're welcome to share the bench." I smiled and gestured at the bench with an open-palmed sweep.

"Thank you, I like to take a break outside and eat my lunch."

"Outside of where?" I asked, looking at the rows of houses behind us.

"The clinic over there" she said gesturing with what looked like a ham sandwich. She would have been about thirty, very neatly dressed, modest, and quite attractive. She had little lines around the corners of her eyes and her mouth; I figured she must enjoy a laugh. She tossed her brown hair a little, as if the fringe was in her eyes, though it wasn't, and looked at me with quite large green eyes. I found them strangely attractive, not quite like the deep pools that Sara sported, but there was definitely something about them.

"So what do you do in the clinic," I asked, trying to steer away from looking deeper into those eyes.

"I am a forensic technician," she replied, taking another bite out of the sandwich.

"Forensic?!" I said with some amazement, "I thought that the clinic dealt with communicable diseases."

"Well yes, but we also have facilities for the testing of DNA samples, so I am there to do those and assist the Home Office Pathologist or Police when an unknown substance is found at a crime scene."

"How fascinating! I'm not going to ask you for any details, I'm sure there is a confidentiality issue if not a security one - I respect that - however, what sort of stuff ends up in front of you?"

"Well, as you say, I can't tell you anything, but I could say that if you were to name something, I've probably seen it!"

"I bet there are some things you'd rather you hadn't seen in that case!"

"There most definitely are!"

We laughed and she took a bottle out of her back pack, removed the lid and took a long drink from it. Then she paused for a second and turned the bottle toward me.

"I'm sorry, can I offer you a drink?"

"Oh no, please, don't worry, I'm a few minutes from home - just popped out to watch the tractor - no you get on and enjoy your lunch!"

I watched her take another long drink from the bottle, then she replaced the lid and the bottle returned to the bag.

"Well, I must get back," she said, "thank you for adding a bit of interest in my break"

"Thank you for sharing my bench."

With that she left and I watched her walk in quite a sensuous manner through the archway that led to the courtyard behind the houses. I turned my gaze away, I wasn't looking for any changes in my life, Sara was everything to me. I stood up, stretched, and made my way back to the house. As I came through the door, I noticed that the light on the answer machine was flashing. I pressed the button; it was Sara, asking if I was out gallivanting or asleep. She went on to remind me that I was going to the shops to get some bottled water for a picnic at the weekend.

"Damn - forgot that, will have to go now!" I thought as I felt for my car keys.

It was something I'd been thinking about whilst sitting on the wall; I needed to get some other bits and pieces from the shops anyway. The drive to the shops was only a few minutes and after parking I went into the superstore and soon came back out with the various items we needed. I lingered by a travel agent store and casually browsed the holidays on offer. Sun and sand in Bali, Skiing in St Tropez, Mountaineering in the Tyrol, Water sports in the Caribbean and so-on. My planned trip out the next day to North Wales somehow didn't seem quite as attractive, but then, I had to work. It would, however, bring something quite unplanned into my life, a very frightening recollection of the most horrific day of my life.

Chapter 6

I rolled out of the very comfortable king-size bed and headed for the bathroom, flicking the light switch as I did so. It was just 6 a.m. on a beautiful September morning in 2001, and I had another day of talking, watching and analyzing ahead of me. When I had checked into the Bulkley Hotel it was dark and I hadn't taken in much of the surroundings, now it was getting quite light and I almost couldn't resist the urge to peak out of the curtains to see what was around, but I remained firm in my earlier resolve not to look until I was ready to fully open the curtains. I stepped into the small room, closed the door and had my shower. The hotel stands near a Lifeboat Station on the coast in North Wales and looks out across very treacherous waters. There are caves nearby and I wished I wasn't working – I'd love to get down there and have a nose around. As I showered, the idea of the nearby caves made me take another journey back into my years in the wilds of Central Africa. The memories became vivid to me as I relived the day that had to be the worst day of my life, trapped deep into some caves. I was about 16 and had my first motorcycle, well a scooter at least, an Italian one, 125cc with four gears. I had ridden over to see a couple of school friends on a Sunday morning and they had told me of a trip planned for the afternoon, down nearby potholes. I returned home, told my parents I was going to town, but then returned to my friends and set off to the east, to the Mulawanani caves. I reflected on this as I rinsed off the soap, why did I mislead my parents, why didn't I tell them where I was going? That lie nearly cost me my life; that's why I didn't tell them. They wouldn't have let me go. I was still thinking about this as I shaved and dressed. That was a bad day. I did some stupid things in my life – but this one took number one slot. My friends were equally stupid. Just then I had a phone call, I glanced at my watch, it showed 6:10 a.m. It was Reception with my wake up call, booked for 6, a bit late, but never mind as I was already up and dressed. I made my way down the stairs to the restaurant for breakfast. The smell of coffee, toast, smoked fish and bacon, mixed and wafting, met my nostrils. Mmm, breakfast was going to be good. I parked my thoughts about the caves to give it my undivided attention. Leaving the hotel, I glanced towards the red sandstone cliffs and the dark blotches down near the water-line. I laughed; the cliffs looked like they had a leering smile. I strode quickly to my small silver car, and was soon driving on the main road, and preparing mentally for the day's work. I automatically glanced in the rear view mirror, noted the cars that were following, and repeated this every time I changed direction or took a different road. This had been my standard procedure for several years, taking care that I was not followed for that could mean one of several things, from just a coincidence to someone who knew my routine and had a commission to put me out of action. Today, there was nothing to alarm me, and soon I was turning into the secure unit at Holyhead, my place of work for that day. My job involved sensitive and risky matters that would seriously jeopardise national security if mishandled. It exhausted me, but I enjoyed it. As the work day ended, I reversed the procedure and returned to my hotel, always recalling any cars that had followed me in the morning. If the same car appeared on my return journey, I would suddenly pull into a lay-by and stop, then turn around and go back to the beginning of the journey. On the journey out that morning, after the third change of road, I had noted that a maroon coloured small car of German manufacture had followed me and had turned right when I turned left. Now it was there again, following me about 100 metres behind. I held my speed and position on the road, noted that a sign advised of a lay-by 200 metres ahead. As it approached I didn't indicate that I was going to stop, and when less than 20 metres from the small parking space, I slowed a little, and then dipped into the lay-by when it was almost too late to stop. The following car continued on. I made the U-turn and retraced my route, stopped there for several minutes, and then drove round the block to return to my chosen route. No car followed me, and no-one joined on later either. I looked at myself in the rear-view mirror.

"You ARE your Dad, d'you know that!?"

I laughed and parked up in the hotel car park. In a few minutes I was back in my room, preparing for a shower and the evening ahead. Wrapped in a towel, I allowed my gaze to slowly traverse the scene outside, and remembered the caves. I recalled that I had been thinking about the Mulawanani caves in Zambia. I have my own recollections of what happened that day coupled with the details of what happened up on the surface recounted to me by my friend Paul whilst I was being checked over by medics. That Sunday afternoon had started out as a mini-adventure

for a few teenagers; I had met up with Paul, three close friends and some others I didn't know. I mainly went along because Paul had a sister Dilly, and I fancied her. She was my pillion passenger as we rode on our motorbikes to the shallow hills. I felt a little excited, not by the prospect of going into the caves, but rather by the embrace of Dilly's arms about my waist as she strove to remain on the back of the bike. It took us about half an hour to get to the caves, or potholes more accurately, for they went almost straight down. I deliberately drove a little recklessly and took corners very tightly, so that Dilly would hold on even tighter, sometimes I would brake a little harder so that her whole body was forced hard against my back. I would rather have done that all day than go down the pothole. The picture of the lovely Dilly and that bike ride was still lingering in my mind when I sat down at my table in the restaurant.

"We have a fine range of fresh fish tonight sir." The waitress interrupted my trip to the caves.

"Thank you, I'll look at the list - anything in particular you recommend?"

"The pan fried Tuna is very good, the chef has his own special sauce for that, and it comes with a rocket salad and Dauphinoise potatoes."

"That'll do nicely - I'll have the soup to start."

"Very good sir."

She was soon through the doors to the kitchen. I looked around the dining room, I was the only one in, but then it was only six thirty. It was tastefully decorated and had fresh flowers on every table. I looked out of the window. Ah, the caves...ah yes, now we teenagers were on our way to the Mulawanani caves on our bikes, Dilly warmly cuddled up behind me. I remembered that with a touch of sadness. We parked up, locked our bikes and prepared to descend into the caves. Dilly shivered and instinctively clung to my arm, I liked that. She was only fifteen, and I was sixteen, but she could easily have passed for seventeen. I smiled encouragingly and squeezed her hand.

"You'll be O.K., don't worry!"

"Will you look after me?"

"You can be sure!"

"Hiya Dilly, c'mon don't hang about!"

I scowled as Carlos; an almost eighteen-year-old part Spanish boy grabbed Dilly's hand and dragged her off to the dark mass that was the mouth of the cave labyrinth. She laughed and ran with him, forgetting almost immediately her last words to me. I in turn went to call out, but changed my mind as my heart dropped and I sighed as I plodded along after them to the edge of the hole. Once inside the cave mouth there was very little light, just a shaft of sunlight on one wall; then a few feet more and it was very dark. We had tied our main rope to a stump at the top and made the steep descent one at a time, I was almost last, followed by Pete. Our friend Paul was at the bottom of the shaft, about a dozen or so metres down from the top and he handed torches to those dropping off the rope as we reached him.

"You'll need these; there are spare batteries in the handle, but even so, use sparingly - just when we need to, o.k.?"

I dropped off the rope and held out my hand.

"There's only one torch left Rob, and as Pete is taking up the rear I want him to take it, you stick with Carlos and Dilly and you'll be fine." I grunted a reply. No-one could see my face which was just as well, I looked like thunder. I wanted to be the one with Dilly, holding her hand, having her squeeze me when she became frightened, not Carlos. I hardly knew Carlos, but suddenly, I hated him. To make matters worse, I wasn't going to have a torch. No torch. What if I needed to cross a narrow ledge or something and had to rely on reflected light from in front or behind. I was in two minds to go back and go home, but Pete tapped my shoulder and shone the torch at my feet. He pointed to the second rope tied to a rock outcrop.

"Off you go, follow Dilly."

I followed and the waitress was in front of me, hang on, there was no waitress down there, I was dragged back to the present again.

"Your soup sir, and the chef asks how you would like the Tuna steak, he usually sears it on a griddle and then pan fries for a few minutes a side, it's quite well done."

"That is just how I like it; that will be fine, thanks." I broke a piece of my roll and took a sip of soup as my mind returned once again to the cave expedition of 1965.

The floor descended at roughly a seventy five degree angle, and was full of holes where the

limestone had been washed away, leaving harder igneous rock behind and occasionally there were outcrops of rock that needed to be negotiated. About 100 metres down in levelled off to a gentle slope that no longer required the rope. Paul tied off the end round one of the smaller outcrops and placed a small fluorescent tag on the end of it so that even without torches we could find it to return to the surface. He then gently made his way along the slope with the rest of us in tow. He stopped on a flat area and called back, "Hey everyone, come here slowly, you need to see this."

As we all caught up and stopped beside him, he swung his powerful hunting lantern so that its beam sprayed across the expanse before us. It looked like a black hole, an abyss perhaps. Not one of us wanted to take another step without checking it out. Paul reached down and picked up a stone about the size of a golf ball and threw it out into the middle of his light beam. Everyone expected to hear a muffled thud somewhere below, but instead there was a splash, and the black expanse became a shimmering light display as the ripples broke its surface. A lake, it was water.

"It's a lake!" I said

"Yes, and what's more, it an acid lake, watch - " and he drew out of his pocket a small bag, took something from it and tossed it into the lake. A reaction similar to that of bicarbonate of soda in water started immediately and we could see the bubbles fizzing and popping.

"What was that?" I asked

"One of my marbles"

"Glass?"

"No, real marble, calcium carbonate - that's hydrochloric acid, like we have in our stomachs."

"Aha bat's guano - more likely to contain nitric acid," piped up Pete, the chemistry wizard amongst us, "concentrated nitrates and nitrites from their droppings added to filtered rain water, and their pee, nitric acid."

"Whatever acid it is, it's not nice!" Dilly added her piece.

"Go on dip your toe and see!" Carlos laughed as he pushed her a little forward.

"Don't be stupid man!" I retorted angrily, "You look after Dilly, don't play stupid games with her and that stuff, o.k.?"

"O-o-oo-ooweh!" Teased Carlos back, and I wanted to push his cocky face into that lake, but contented myself with adding, "Just you be careful."

"C'mon everyone, this way" called Paul and set off on a ledge that skirted the lake.

For several more minutes we moved on downwards and eastwards, stopping now and then so that Paul could consult the commercial map of the caves he had brought along, then off again, turning into side tunnels occasionally. We must have been well over a mile, maybe more, into the labyrinth when Paul suddenly stopped again. He couldn't go any further because the waitress was in his way. I was back in the present and the waitress was once again beside my table with pad and pencil in hand.

"How was the soup sir?" The waitress was before me again and I realised I'd eaten the bowl of soup and its accompanying roll mechanically. I couldn't remember what it tasted like or what it had been, so engrossed was I in the vivid memory.

"It was delicious, thank the chef."

"Your main course will be a couple of minutes," the waitress remarked as she collected the plates and spoon. I smiled and nodded, and immediately returned to the darkness of the cave, where the group had all stopped behind Paul.

"What's up?" someone asked.

Paul didn't answer; he was looking down at the floor of the cave. As the rest of us caught up, we too looked into the circle of light from the lamp. On the floor of the cave were four bodies, humans, partly decomposed. One had no arms, another had one leg missing, and one was headless.

Dilly threw up immediately.

"Go back! Go back, NOW!" Paul commanded.

Everyone turned around and swiftly headed back down the tunnel, it was hard going as it was a still quite an incline as well as narrow. Someone started running, others, scared and approaching panic, did likewise. Pete flew past me like he was on roller skates - he didn't want to be rear guard anymore! I stumbled and placed my hands on the floor to steady myself, it was sticky, felt like oil. I smelled my hands. They stank. It was congealing blood. I heard the steps of the others ahead of

me, fainter than they should be. I had no torch. It was very dark. I ran on, hoping to catch them, my imagination conjuring up all kinds of pursuing monsters. Suddenly, in the pitch darkness I ran into one of the igneous rock outcrops protruding from the sidewall, banging my temple with some force. Down I went like a bag of sand, flat out onto the smelly wet floor of the cave. As I lay there gasping, a waitress with a plate in hand smiled and stopped in front of me, once again my daydream was halted, this time by the arrival of my main course.

"Your Tuna sir, the vegetables are just coming, my colleague has them. Is there anything else you'd like?"

"Yes, a small jug of tap water please, with ice."

"Certainly sir, enjoy your meal."

Unconsciously I was rubbing the side of my head, as if I could still feel the pain from that collision with the rock over forty years previous. How long I lay on the ground I didn't know, but when I regained awareness of my position there was silence. No voices, no steps, no-one running back to find out where I was. In fact, I didn't know it then but Paul related later that my friends never stopped until they were up and out into the sunshine. To say that I was scared would be an understatement of fact. I was terrified. All kinds of thoughts were racing through my head. What if the bodies were people, who, just like us, were exploring the caves and then got attacked by some cave-dwelling flesh eater? What if it was stalking me right now?

I put out my hand to feel for the wall. It pressed upon something warm and very furry. I yelled out involuntarily, and a thousand bats suddenly took off, flying about my head and shrieking and squeaking their way up the tunnel. I was a little relieved to know that it was just a bat. Feeling my way down the tunnel, I came to a very small cave. I didn't remember this one. I made my way round its walls, carefully feeling the floor with my foot, listening for any hissing sound which would alert me to the fact that my shoe leather contacted acid. There were at least six tunnels out of the cave, some on the level, others ascending. I tried one that went up, it led nowhere. There was still no sign of the others. I called out periodically just in case they were nearby. I had no response. After passing through and testing out several caves without success, I realised that I was now lost, underground, in the dark with the possibility of attack by some awful cave-dwelling monster. Resisting the urge to scream and run blindly, I looked at the luminous face of my watch. Two hours had passed. I knew that up above it would be dark in another two, then perhaps a further two would pass and my Dad would be ringing round my friends to try and find out why I wasn't home yet. I decided to find a small cave with only two tunnels and sit with my back to a wall and wait. It took another fifteen minutes before I achieved that objective. Now at least I could feel a little safer, I don't know why I imagined that, but only having two tunnels instead of six somehow reduced the odds. I learned later from Paul that it took about twenty minutes for the others to emerge from the caves, and another ten minutes before a thousand bats emerged. It was this spectacular sign that somehow told them I was still down there, and still alive. Paul gave me the gist of what went on above ground while I was blundering around in the dark, the conversation and events are more or less as he related them.

"I think we should go back and look for Rob!" Dilly said

"Don't be crazy! You saw those bodies, they got him too by now...."

"You're a coward Carlos, well if YOU won't go, I WILL!" Dilly started to climb down the rope.

"Wait Dilly" called Paul, "That's not the best way, if he is alive down there, he must have taken a wrong tunnel, there are hundreds of them - we should get the emergency services I think".

With that Pete was on his bike and on the throttle. In just a few minutes he was out of sight and his engine noise just a distant sound.

"Would you like something from the sweet trolley?" Once again I was dragged back to the present; I was sweating and took more of the ice water.

"No thanks; I have just coffee please."

The restaurant had filled up, at least twenty tables were in use and there was quite a lot of chatter. I had been oblivious to this, so vivid was my recollection of that terrible day at Mulawanani. I remembered once again how my friend Paul recounted everything that had happened whilst I was lost in the darkness of a deep cave. After they had discovered I wasn't with them, Pete had ridden off to alert the Police and Rescue services from a phone in a farm a few miles away. An hour passed without any change in the situation, the others had begun to wonder if Pete had just got

scared and gone home. Suddenly Paul jumped up, he could hear Pete's bike, and in less than five minutes he was back with them, closely followed by a dark blue Landrover with 'Rescue Services' emblazoned on each door.

"Leave it to us, we'll find him, you should get off home now, your parents will be wondering where you are."

"We'll stay" replied Dilly, realising that she loved me, that the strange feeling she had when I was around was more than just because I'd been a friend of the family for a long time. She was in love. Now she began to cry. Carlos put his arm around her shoulders.

"Get away from me you creep!"

"Dilly, I . . ."

"You, you would have left him, I hate you!"

"Aw c'mon, it's just the dark and the fright getting to you..."

"You don't understand do you numpty? My sister LOVES Rob, she's worried sick about him!"

"Oh, er, I" Carlos walked off a few yards, looking back at Dilly as she cried into her brother's chest.

Another hour passed. It was getting dark. Two of the rescue team came back up to the surface, and in answer to Paul's enquiring look, shook their heads. They collected some more gear and went back down. The controller in the Landrover was talking briefly on the radio. He then climbed out of the cab and made his way over to Paul and the others.

"Where did you say you came across those bodies...can you show me on the survey map?"

"Yes...er..Here" Paul tapped the map and the man took it from him and wrote down the co-ordinates on a sheet of paper.

"Thanks, that'll save them a lot of time down there."

He returned to the cab and spoke again on the radio.

Dilly looked at Paul, and across at Pete and Carlos, then over to Mike, another of the party. No-one spoke, no-one wanted to voice their fears. They didn't want to believe they had lost me. How would they tell their parents about this, even worse, who would tell mine? Paul had almost cried as he told me this later on. Meanwhile, back down in the caves, I shivered, I was getting cold, the air was foul and I wanted to pee. So what the heck, I stood up and peed. After all, the bats do it all the time. As the sound of trickling pee faded away I thought I heard something. It was just a faint sound somewhere in the distance. I wasn't sure if I had actually heard it or just imagined I had. I moved to the nearest tunnel.

"HEY! HELLO! IN HERE! HELLO, IS THERE SOMEONE THERE?"

Silence greeted me. I strained my ears, but nothing was heard. I moved across to the other tunnel.

"HEY! HEY! HELLO! HELLO! CAN YOU HEAR ME!? HELLO, HELLO, IS THERE ANYONE THERE?"

Again I was greeted with silence. It did occur to me right then that if there was some carnivorous cave-dweller I had just advertised where I was. The thought of this sent me into panic. I gasped and clutched at the walls, I began to feel that the cave was getting smaller by the second and I would be crushed. This, coupled with the fear of a vicious blood thirsty attack from the darkness, was a test of my sanity. I was told later that in the tunnel just beyond the lake, Murray, Senior Search & Rescue Officer had stopped, he raised his hand for a second.

"Did you hear something?"

"No, nothing" replied one of the others.

"I can't quite say what, but I thought I heard a voice in the distance."

"Wind," said the man just behind him.

Just at that moment the radio crackled into life.

"Search Leader, do you receive Control...over"

It was their commander, up top, in the cab of the Landrover.

"Receiving Control, go ahead....over" replied Murray

"Proceed to map reference Golf Alpha 32367 Echo Tango - look for four bodies, be warned there is some decomposition, and stay alert, we don't know how they died."

"Roger, received and understood."

The men had then trudged on.

I had heard this crackling radio in the distance, and that was what prompted me to shout out, but my voice was too muffled by the twists and turns within the tunnels. Twenty minutes more went by. Back up on the surface Dilly was becoming very emotional. "Oh why did we run off and leave him. You never gave me a torch, now look..." she pointed accusingly at Paul and sobbed, tears streaming down her soft skin.

"Dilly..." Paul began to say something, but then was lost for words. What could he say?

The commander got out of the Landrover and walked over to the cave entrance. Paul started to move towards him. He raised his hand to indicate that Paul should stop and stay where he was. A head appeared at the top and one of the rescuers quickly climbed out. He spoke intensely with the commander for a few minutes and then they both began to pull on the rope. A rhythmic sound made them look up into the sky over the top of the Landrover. In the distance there was a small dot, growing larger and the sound of an engine could be heard. An air-ambulance had been called, and would land in a few minutes. The waiting teenagers all looked back at the entrance to the cave as a small cage appeared with something strapped to it wrapped in black plastic. One of the bodies was being brought out. The commander was holding a mask over his face and the other man was gasping a little as he gulped in fresh air. Together they removed the wrapped body and laid it on the ground. My friends had apparently become very emotional at this stage, they wanted to know, was this me or not, the suspense was almost too much for them. Paul told me how he'd had to hang onto Dilly to stop her rushing to see for herself. The cage was lowered down again. The commander walked over towards Paul, motioned him to meet him half way and at the same time indicating the others should stay where they were. As they met, the commander looked grave and Paul's heart was in his mouth.

"You said there were four bodies in that cave, is that right?"

"Yes, we saw four bodies."

"Well, we found five - now I don't want to jump to conclusions, just to prepare you for the worst."

"Thank you for telling me, I would rather the others didn't get that information until it's necessary."

"I agree, I'll keep you posted - how old was, er, is your friend Rob?"

"Seventeen I think"

"How tall, what build?"

"About five seven, 130 kilos, quite muscular around the chest and upper arms, runners legs," He laughed a little, "rugby player you see..."

"OK - I'll be in touch."

He swiftly returned to the entrance to help Murray haul up the next body. The helicopter landed and two men in anti-contamination suits jumped out and retrieved the first body, quickly transporting it to the underbelly of the large craft.

"What did he say? Have they found Rob . . . he's not....?" Dilly's eyes were wide as she grasped Paul's arm.

"No, these are the bodies we found, it's not Rob"

Meanwhile back down in the caves I looked again at my watch. I'd been underground now for four hours. The sun must be quite low, if not already set. No-one had come back. I figured it was time to just get up and go, either way I couldn't stay down any longer. I stood up, stretched and tried to picture in my mind the number of turns I had made. I'd briefly seen the survey map when we were up top, but I worked out quickly that I was now in a cave that hadn't been mapped before.

"Damn!" I cursed not having a torch. I would have been happier too if I had something metallic too hit against the walls. This would serve the twofold purpose of attracting my rescuers and marking the walls for future surveys. However, I didn't have anything more than the ignition key for my bike, so that was that.

I counted from one to twelve, each time turning through a part of a circle. On the count of twelve I stepped forward, hands out in front of me. I met the wall; I turned to my left, felt along the wall until I met the opening that I knew as one of the tunnels. I walked into it and kept on walking, hand on the wall all the time. Occasionally I met a soft body, followed by a squeak as the bat wriggled away from my touch. Occasionally I swore as I hacked my knuckles on a really sharp piece of rock. I determined that I would just carry on until I got out, or died.

Up top my friends had watched as a fourth body was emerging from the entrance and the commander approached Paul again.

"There are three men and two women, the youngest man is over twenty five - your friend isn't one of them. We will take a dog down once the bodies are taken away - but, the smell down there is - well, you know, you were there. The dog may not pick up a trail."

"Whatever you do, we're grateful for your help. Shall we come down too?"

"No, one lost kid I can handle, five, no!" then, catching sight of Paul's face, "Thanks, and don't worry, we'll find him, alive I'm sure!"

Dilly was looking intently at Paul, her eyes flicking from his left eye to his right and back again, trying to guess what was happening. Paul put his arm around her.

"Dilly -" he sighed. She sobbed.

"Dilly," he began again, "They didn't bring up Rob - so he's still alive down there."

"Oh Rob!" was all she could manage.

Back down in the cave I was getting close to panic. "Damn!" I cursed as I tripped over yet another rock. This was getting monotonous!

I heard a sound off to my right. I was sure a voice called out "ROB!" They must have heard me say 'damn'.

"HEY! HELLO! THIS IS ROB!" I yelled, and kept doing that every twenty seconds or so, all the time walking along my tunnel.

"ROB....ROB....ROB!"

This time it was distinct, clear, I was getting closer. Then I saw the faint glow of a light.

They had found me!

Paul told me how back on the surface the commander's radio crackled.

"Rescue Control from Search Leader, do you copy Over"

He had leaped to his feet as the commander snapped up the microphone.

"Control to Search Leader, receiving, go ahead."

"Control. We have the missing teenager, no damage, I repeat, no damage...over"

"Search Leader, return with missing person, and thank you . . . out"

He stepped out of the cab and walked towards Paul and the other waiting teenagers.

Dilly's hand went to her mouth. Paul gulped. Carlos shifted his feet. The others just stood and looked.

The commander stood in front of them for a few seconds, looking from one to the other.

He held out his hand to Dilly. Almost mesmerised, she took his hand, all the time her eyes searching his face. His mouth broke into a grin.

"We've got him. He's fine! Will be topside in ten minutes!"

Dilly burst into tears again, this time in relief.

Paul told me that the commander smiled, he thought that perhaps he too was relieved, to have found a dead seventeen-year-old schoolboy would not have made his day any better; even worse as I was in fact only sixteen. Having to recover bodies several days old must have been bad enough, but he no doubt was relieved not to have to cope with the distress of these young friends if the outcome hadn't been good. As we approached the surface the helicopter was pulling away with its rancid cargo; the Police would be on the scene soon to seal off the cave and forensic pathologists would be examining everything within a one-mile radius. Murray hauled himself out of the cave entrance, reached down and pulled me up and out into the light.

"ROB!" Dilly almost screamed out as she rushed at me, a dirty figure squinting and blinking in the dying sunlight. In two strides she was with me, her arms around my neck, her lips upon mine and then all over my face. "Oh Rob, my darling, I thought I'd lost you forever, oh please don't ever do that to me again...."

"Dilly?" I said in almost disbelief between her kisses.

She stopped for a second, looked a little embarrassed, and then continued, "Well I care!"

"She does more than care!" retorted Carlos, "The girl LOVES YOU man, though I can't think why!"

"Butt out!" Paul added.

At the end of it all there had been no long-term harm done. Although down below I had been scared, and the others up top worried and equally scared, no-one was hurt. That's what mattered most. It was well after seven by the time I got home. A very angry father greeted me. My mother had clearly been worried; the lines on her face told the story. However, I came clean, admitted that he had lied about going into town and told them what happened down the cave. They were very

angry, but it was short lived and soon turned to relief that I was safe. The next day the Lusaka Chronicle carried the headline "Bodies found in local caves - Police suspect a death pact". I had read the article with interest; apparently two men and their wives had signed a death pact, gone down into the caves and seen it through. Police were investigating the connection with the fifth body. I recalled now that there never was ever any further mention of the case in the local papers. The vivid picture of the bodies in the torch light was dancing in front of my eyes and I blinked and shook my head a little to try and clear that awful image. The clatter of the waitress collecting my cup and saucer finally drew me back to the present. I was relieved that the image was gone, faded away and I was looking at a lovely vase of flowers.

Dinner over, I stood up, tears in my eyes as I thought of Dilly and how I had moved on and hardly given her a thought - heartless man! Still, it was young love, and may never have blossomed anyway. I was sure she'd found the man she deserved and was happily married somewhere. With that thought in my mind I quickly walked to my room and closed the door behind me. I stood for a few seconds in the darkness, not bothering to turn the light on. Even in what we call 'darkness' there is still light, unlike the real darkness of a deep cave. I realised I had become quite philosophical about it all and smiled in the semi-dark room. Then, flicking the lights on, I strode to the bathroom stripped off and took a shower, I felt exhausted by the recollection of such a traumatic experience in my youth. That really had been the worst day of my life. I was almost asleep before I hit the bed. No dreams traversed my brain; it had had enough for the time being. I don't recall any time when I slept as soundly as I did that last night in the Bulkley. Not a dream, not an image invaded my mind, so exhausted was I then. The next morning after breakfast I checked out and as I drove away from Beaumaris, I took a final look at the black patches that were the caves, and drove to Llandudno for the day's business. At about 4:30, the week's work over I then drove home to the lovely Sara and sanctuary for the weekend. My next week's schedule had been prepared back at the office, I'd receive it as soon as I logged onto the mainframe remotely. I had no idea what the next week would bring, nor of the turmoil and anguish that would follow. Who did? I was just going about my business, as were so many others, blissfully unaware of the events ahead that would change so many lives forever. A globally catastrophic event was to follow.

Chapter 7

I was weary from my long drive to Swansea. The M4 has no real interest to a traveller, and once over the Severn Bridge and wanting to get to Swansea, I found it a tedious journey. I was glad to arrive at the Marriott hotel down by the harbour and to get my things out of the car. It took only a few minutes to check in and I was soon up on the 7th floor. I looked out of my room at the harbour below and sipped the hot chocolate I had made a few minutes earlier and wondered what would be the outcome of my visit to this bustling city; would I get everything done in time? I had only booked into the hotel for one night as I was off to Cardiff the next evening and would have to check out after breakfast. I watched the last glow of the September sun slip below the horizon, my thoughts were with my eldest son who had left for the USA the previous day to start his twenty one day holiday. I was thinking that he would be flying from Heathrow to either New York or Boston with United Airlines, and then on to Los Angeles, before finally landing in Honolulu, Hawaii. I could not help envying him out there in the hot sun, scuba diving in the Pacific, surfing and going to 'Luau' parties in the evening. I held that thought as I flopped onto the bed and was soon asleep. Morning came and I was soon out of the hotel; placed my luggage into the car, and walked into the Town Centre. It was a warm sunny morning, about 8:30 a.m., September 11th, 2001, and I was looking forward to the day's business ahead. Lots of people were in the town centre all nodding and smiling. Not one of them would ever forget that day, a date that the world has come to know like no other date in history!

I finished the operation early and thus walked away from the city centre at just after 2:00 p.m. that day; there was a lot of activity around one of the very big buildings nearby, sirens were sounding and police cars were speeding across the city centre. People came pouring out of the building. My mobile phone buzzed as it vibrated, I glanced down. The text message was from my office, it said "Get away from any large Government Buildings and out of City area." "Government building - Bomb Threat!" I thought to myself and hastened to my car outside the hotel – I wanted to get out of Swansea before it ground to a halt. In a few moments I was driving out towards the M4 motorway and flicked on the radio. At that moment, the sky fell in on me, the news that a United Airlines aircraft from Boston, bound for Los Angeles had crashed into the World Trade Centre hit me like a sledgehammer. I couldn't stop, I was by now on the M4, heading for Cardiff. Quickly I reached out to my mobile phone in its dashboard holster, and against safety rules, I pressed the '1' key to autodial home. Using the handsfree option I heard the ringtone through my car stereo; the microphone was on my sun visor. There was nobody at home and all I heard was my own voice on the answering machine, telling me no-one was in. I spoke slowly, trying not to let my emotions effect my voice, "Hi, it's me; I have just heard the terrible news that an aircraft has hit the World Trade Centre. Don't know if it was an accident or not. Please find out Joe's flight number on UA and confirm that he wasn't on that one – ring me back in half an hour".

I terminated the call and I concentrated hard on driving to my next hotel in Cardiff, which seemed to take forever. It was just twenty five minutes later that, after checking, in I rushed to the room and immediately turned on the television. I switched on my laptop, connected to the telephone port and sent an e-mail to my son's friend in New Jersey asking for information. Before my eyes I saw the horror that millions were now seeing unfold on the TV screens. There had been a second aircraft hit while I was driving up, and I watched now, live as the two huge towers collapsed. I did the same, in a heap on the floor, sobbing at the shock of the tragedy. I lay face down, screwing up the shag pile rug into my face, my breath came in gasps between huge sobs. What if Joe was on UA271, he was a young man, looking forward to a wedding in the next year, with all of his life ahead of him? I could not at that time even think about what we would do if he was one of the passengers on that aircraft. As I watched the horror continue, a feeling of dread and despair began to engulf me. I began to think about all the little things he did as a child that made him our Joe, and how proud he'd been when he first rode a bicycle. I thought about how many times we had watched our favourite football team win, and the trips to the Formula One Grands Prix. I remembered too the harsh words I had spoken to him just the day before he left, I had regretted them the minute I said them, it hurt to think I may never get a chance to say I'm sorry. A sudden 'blip' sound from the laptop alerted me to an e-mail arriving. Immediately I struggled to my feet. I leaped to the table and clicked onto the 'inbox', it was from Joe, my son. He was already in Hawaii

and had woken up to this tragedy. He wanted to assure the family of his safety and had rushed to a cyber café to log onto the Internet. He went on to explain that he had not flown via Boston or New York, but direct from London to Los Angeles, and had been in his hotel for nearly eighteen hours already. There is no way to describe the feeling knowing that someone you thought may have gone forever is safe. I was still sobbing, I couldn't work out whether this was relief, or still shock. Just seeing his words there on the screen, knowing that he was safe was almost euphoric; whilst I felt such compassion for those whose relatives were on the two aircraft or in the buildings, I could not help a leap for joy.

Then the phone rang, it was Sara, she was beside herself, said that the airlines were not releasing any information. I quickly assured her that Joe was o.k. and safely in his hotel in Hawaii. Although there was a brief silence on the other end of the line, I knew she was so happy to hear that. There was a slight shake in her voice as she spoke again, "I wish he hadn't gone! I won't be happy until I know he's home!"

"I know, sweetheart", I replied, "We are amongst the lucky ones – there could be as many as 7,000 people in those buildings, not to mention those on the aircraft. You know, we have some of our own people on the 110th floor, oh what a tragedy."

We talked for a few minutes more, and then I rang my office and spoke with one or two there who were equally stunned even though they had only heard the very basic details. I later learned that the building in Swansea that had hit the panic button was indeed a government building, possibly the DVLA, who had obviously been advised to evacuate just in case there was an escalation within the UK mainland. Nothing I had experienced in my past could equate to this global tragedy that had struck at the very heart of New York, the biggest city on the North American continent. I had many friends in that city, some of whom were fire fighters who I later learned had lost their lives in that tragedy. As I looked at the unfolding events on the television, I knew that this was going to start a huge retaliatory ripple as it was becoming firmly established that these were no accidents but part of a deliberate attempt to hit the USA where it hurts.

"Whoever is behind this is going to regret that they ever thought of it" I said to myself, and seconds later the US President, George W Bush, said almost the same words, but referred strongly to the 'act of terrorism'. It was compulsive viewing, I could not switch off the television, and I fell asleep with it on, waking up at odd times during the night and absorbing more of the unfolding news.

Although tired, I set off to do the day's business I was sent to do in Cardiff, and like many, had to try and put the tragedy in perspective and get on with the business at hand. That night I slept very badly, disturbed by nightmares and flash backs to events of my more recent past. Seeing such an act of terrorism awakened visions in my mind.

It brought back memories I had tried, with some success, to bury in my memory, until now. During the night I awoke with a start, in a heavy sweat, vivid images played about me as if seeing them on a huge screen, of windows exploding and flying glass going everywhere. I was remembering a bomb in Bristol, alleged to have been planted by a member of the IRA. It was early evening and I was at that time working for a government department, and on training at one of the buildings in the city centre. My lodgings were in Clifton, and I was walking back there when I stopped to look at a three-piece suite in a shop window, it was leather and a very solid construction. I wanted one just like that, and had promised Sara that one day soon I'd be able to afford one. I sighed and walked on up the steep pavement. No more than thirty or forty paces had passed under my feet when the bomb exploded, throwing me to the ground and showering me with debris, including pieces of leather from the suite. I remember getting up from the ground, and stumbling off into the darkness. How I managed to arrive at my lodgings I cannot say, but I was dazed and traumatised when I got there, and nearly naked. Later the Police were calling for eye-witnesses and I gave what little help I could, which at least established the exact time of the detonation. However, there was no car or van parked anywhere in the road so I couldn't give much help in that direction. I had mentally buried that event and got on with my life. Now it came back to haunt me with a vengeance. On more than one occasion after that day in Bristol, I had been in London and either just left, or not yet arrived at, the location of a bombing. I remembered the shock of driving through the traffic in Knightsbridge when Harrods, a well known West End shop, had been bombed, and I was then close enough to feel the rush of air, see the shop front blow out and hear the deafening sound. Yet again I recalled the terror of being blown backwards down the stairs by hot air from the

Mulberry Bush bomb as I was making my way out of New Street Station in Birmingham. I had just journeyed up from Banbury on the train and the last thing I expected was to be part of the bomb attack. I fell down a flight of stairs and lay for some time in a semi-conscious state. No-one came to my aid, they had far more serious injuries to cope with six metres above me at street level. As I looked back at these events I reached a crescendo of emotion. My eyes were wide and my nostrils flaring; air was being gulped in and blown out by my heaving chest. I looked down at my palms, they were sweating, I could feel my heart thumping and the adrenalin flowing. It took all my inner strength not to jump out of the window and run yelling across the lawn of the hotel. I sat up, looked at my watch, it was 2:00 a.m. on September 13th, 2001 and I was not feeling very happy with the world around me. After turning on the television, I filled and switched on the kettle and flicked to a news channel. The newscasters appeared as if revelling in the boost to their ratings, trying to appear shocked and horrified and speak solemnly about the unfolding events. There was a representative of the US Senate revealing who intelligence sources thought was behind it all, and producing pictures of him and others who they were sure were pilots etc. I listened with interest as facts were given, explanations and findings offered and theories expounded. I wrote in my diary that early morning "The suspect is a man who attended University at Oxford, England, he was then trained and funded by the West and sent to a country with boundaries on the USSR, Afghanistan, to help push the communist elements back out of the area and set up a working pro-West government. I perceive that if this man DID mastermind this tragedy, then he did not stay in that country to watch it unfold. Anyone in his position would have packed their bags on September 10th and, using the wealth the USA says he has, flown to somewhere like one of the many islands in the Maldives and gone to ground. I doubt he is in any of the countries nearby either." I noted the time as 06:20 a.m. A few weeks later I would look back at that diary note, when the US bombers had devastated every area that the wanted man could be in Afghanistan, a statement to the press admitted that he wasn't there, and the US spokesman was not able to suggest where he might be; I would then think back to my diary note and wonder if they would ever catch the suspect. I began philosophising on the human nature and decisions of mankind. In a world full of turmoil when logic does not seem to dictate any direction, politicians and others in power seem to make decisions that the man in the street cannot fully grasp. Sadly, the man in the street sometimes can see the error of the direction being taken by the ones in power, but yet has no way of preventing the inevitable. In my philosophical way this certainly appeared to be one of those instances. As I contemplated the events of September 11th 2001 I wondered how it seemed so logical to me that the course of action being taken by those seeking revenge for the attack was going to end in heartache and fruitless achievement. I had a logical mind and working as I had done for many years in an analytical arena, I could see what would have been effective and less costly to all sides involved. I had mentioned my thoughts to one or two people and received a warning to keep those thoughts to myself. I thought back to my teen years when I had on several occasions seen a better route to the satisfactory conclusion of delicate problems and had almost predicted the disaster that had befallen the ones taking the route I mentally condemned. No, I was not a prophet or a soothsayer, a predictor of doom, but rather just someone who thinks on his feet and seems to make good judgements on critical matters when it's needed. As I reflected on the events of the previous 36 hours or so, I sat staring out of my hotel at the wide bay before me and thought about the way I would choose if I was making the decisions. Well, bombing a country would not have been my first choice, nor would granting authority to the one time rebel guerrillas be my option. I knew that my instinct would involve a little more thought, preparation and use of military intelligence, all the while saying nothing to the press or any media. Oh certainly, statements would be of the nature that would serve to assure the populace that a "net was being woven", but admitting that no clues were yet found to establish the perpetrator of the terrorist acts. I knew that just as it was initially reported that the intelligence services had no idea terrorist organisations were planning the tragic attacks, so the suspects should not be aware that anyone had the slightest idea that they even existed, until it was too late to prevent themselves from being caught. Learning later that many in intelligence positions knew about the pending attack I wondered why they had not gone down this route inside of the 'bull in a china shop' approach. I sighed, it was all too late now for anyone to think that way or go down the 'softly softly' route, and I was just a face in a crowd, saddened by the events that had happened and the events that followed. It occurred to

me then that this may have been masterminded by someone in the US, just like the Kennedy assassination and the attacks on Afghanistan and others might be just a diversion to keep the world from thinking about that possibility. I turned, took the last sip of the coffee I had made, and got back into bed and was soon asleep again. When I would look back, within just a few months, my instincts would prove to be right about the alleged mastermind as the bombing and overthrowing of the government of a country deemed to be hiding the suspect also achieved nothing. Morning came and I checked out before heading up into the 'valleys' to conduct the business of the day. It was fine weather with very warm sunshine, didn't seem in the least like early autumn. I managed to put out of my mind the events of the last few days, and had put my analytical mind once more into the job I was paid to do. As the day's business concluded, I said my farewells and returned to my car, without any thoughts on the world events. I drove home to be with my wife and daughter, and logged into the Internet to see what my son had to say. For a short while we had a conversation over the 'net' and then I went to bed as Joe was about to set off for a day's diving. Sara was still working, not returning home until about midnight from the hotel she worked at, when I placed my head on the pillow, glad to be back home once more. Like many people around the globe, the past few days would be in my mind for a long time, my dreams came and went as I tossed about and eventually kicked off the bedclothes, so that when Sara came in I was once again awake and feeling cold. I got up and joined her in the kitchen for a hot drink. She too had been listening to the hotel guests all talking about the past few days and the horror of terrorism. Neither of us wanted to talk about it, just to hold each other and be thankful for our own position.

Chapter 8

6:00 a.m., early October, I awoke from my sleep to the sound of the chirping alarm of my mobile telephone. I looked out of the window across a city that was just beginning to wake up too, Exeter. I was just able to make out the hills of Dartmoor to the West as the sun began to send its warm fingers across the Devonshire countryside. I caught sight of two dogs gambolling and rolling about in a nearby park, and I could just hear the sounds of a helicopter somewhere out of my vision. The steady "boop-boop-boop-boop" sound from the blades cutting the air reminded me a little of the drums I had heard so many times during my childhood. I was waiting for the kettle to boil and I sat and stared at its orange lamp while my mind began to meander into the recesses of memory. I recalled one Friday night in the Northern Province of Northern Rhodesia, before it became Zambia, when I was playing with some coloured modelling clay on the kitchen table before bed-time. My parents were at a friend's house just a few hundred yards away, and my two sisters were listening to a radio programme in the lounge. Hilda, my elder sister, came into the kitchen and was about to tell me I should go to bed, when we both heard the drums. "Bubbada-bubbada-bub-bub-bubba-bubba-bubbada-bub-bub" is what it sounded like to us. My eyes grew wide and I wanted to know what was happening; I ran to the window and looked over towards the outhouse where our gardener/housekeeper lived. There were no lights, so I opened the door and stepped out onto the rear concrete apron of the house.

My sister called after me, "Robbie, don't go out there, please!" she pleaded, "Please come back in, now, PLEASE!"

Ideas were already forming in my fertile imagination as to what I was hearing and I was rapidly deciding what needed to be done. In a few strides I was at the door of our gardener's hut; he was a man from the local tribe, whose village was only about ten miles away. I reached out to knock on the door and it swung open at my touch. I called out the man's name, several times, but there was no answer. Instead, all that I could hear were the drums, they were very close by, followed by an answering set of beats from some distance away. Impetuous as I was, I decided to find the nearest drums. I had to locate them first so I waited until they started again, established the direction, and set off. I followed the sound, ignoring the ever weakening pleas from my sister to return to the house, until I was almost deafened by the constant drumming. I had no torch and was strangely aware of my surroundings even though the moon was barely above the horizon. The drums suddenly stopped, and an answer came from another set way off to my right. I stopped and waited. No further drum beats sounded and I stood motionless, my eyes trying to penetrate the semi-darkness around me. The distant drums beat again, and yet again, the nearby ones did not respond. I became aware of a soft, almost indiscernible breathing. I was standing right near the drummer. Did the drummer detect me? Was he hoping that I would walk on and not notice him? Was he afraid? Worse still, was he someone I should be afraid of, someone who might harm me? Thoughts raced through my active mind, questions bouncing off the inside of my very soul. I decided that there was only one course of action. I cupped my hands around my mouth, drew a deep breath and then let out the most frightening howl, that of a hyena.

"YIP-YIP-YOOO-YOOO-WEH-WEH-WEH", I yelled and then stamped my feet and thrashed about. Very close to me there was the sound of someone falling down, cursing, scrambling along on hands and knees and then rapid running footsteps retreating. I was breathless, I turned to make my way back; and then my face met something, warm, soft and smooth. Two hands came down upon my shoulders. I had turned round and walked into someone standing behind me. I struggled and kicked out, there was a curse from a male voice above my head, and then a gentle calling out of my name, "Master Robbie, Master Robbie, do not kick, I try to help you only" It was the gardener, and I was relieved at first, and then angry.

"Where were you? You were not in your house, and how did you know where I was?" I demanded. The gardener, who was called Resson (apparently his mother meant LESSON), explained that he had been on his way back when he had been distracted by the drums. I wasn't happy with the answer, I may have only been ten years old, but I wasn't stupid, and I told Resson how I felt.

"I came from your house after I had found the door open, and reached this spot whilst following the sound of the drums. I want to know what you have to do with them."

"Not me, Master Robbie, I hear them too."

Once again I did not get the answer I hoped for. I told Resson that we should go back now and talk tomorrow, I turned and walked towards the house, with Resson following. The drums in the distance beat out again, but there was no reply from the nearby one, only a string of words from Resson. I stopped, I turned round and facing Resson, said in the same dialect "You call the wild, you make the song, the message of the woods is yours"

Resson immediately dropped onto his knees so that he was closer to my height. He placed his hand on the ground and with the other pointing to the sky, he spoke again in his home dialect, the words of which I understood as "Man lives because the wind carries the life, the man that comes brings the death with him, I must leave this place".

"What is meant by the man that comes?" I asked

"Must not ask, nobody can stop the death."

"What death, Resson, you tell me now!?"

"I must go, he is coming."

With that Resson stood up and ran off into the darkness. I suddenly felt very alone, very small, and very afraid. I realised that I was nearly half a mile into the high savannah grass, I could not see over the top of it. "No wonder they call it Elephant Grass!" I said, "Need a damned elephant to see where you are heading!"

I knew there was a path, because I had come down it, but now there appeared to be several, heading in different directions. I looked up at the moon, turned around and looked for the Southern Cross; I had a chart up on the ceiling of my bedroom. Now if only I could remember which way round it should be. I screwed my eyes up, trying to recall the chart. Suddenly it came to me, if I was looking AT the Southern Cross, I was facing south, the moon was new and it was still rising, so that confirmed the East.

The very dark black sky must be to the West and therefore North was behind me. I knew that there was no savannah to the South of the house, and the rest of the houses were to the West of ours, so I must have walked either North or East. I concentrated hard for a few moments, where was the gardener's hut in relation to ours? To the South, and I had turned to the left on leaving it, at which time I was facing the house. Yes, I was convinced then that I had walked east. I wrongly decided that home must be in the direction of the moon, and began to walk along the thin line that was all that made up the path. After ten minutes I broke out of the grass, just as I had expected, only, no welcoming lights met my eyes. In the ever brightening moonlight I could see a line of trees ahead, and what looked like a black hole to the right.

"Malende Lake!" I retorted, "and Musape Forest - oh crap! I've walked in the opposite direction! Of course! The moon rose in the East, I should have walked west!"

It was now approaching ten o'clock in the evening and I should have been in bed ready to go to sleep long before this. My parents would return home in less than half an hour and I knew I had to get back before they did or the consequences would be worse than the worst thing I could think of right at that moment. The terror of being lost in the middle of Africa at night was still with me when something jolted me back to the present. Bang! Bang! A car back-fired and I jumped, I looked at my watch, "Damn - I've been day dreaming again!" I chastised myself as I rushed to the bathroom to shave and wash before breakfast. "I'll have to forego the coffee - no time now!" I quickly dressed and soon was in the breakfast room selecting my breakfast from the hot buffet bar. As I munched on the toast and sipped the coffee, I looked around at the other guests. There was the elderly couple who had told me they were visiting Exeter for the first time and were looking forward to seeing their grandchildren who lived just a couple of miles away. A couple of tables away two business men were discussing sales targets and how they would approach this company and that company, and what they would highlight as the good points that gave their product the edge over the competitors. I smiled, in my job we had been taught to think carefully about just what should not be said within hearing of strangers. Working in an area of some secrecy and risk, if I had been advising them I would have had a great time. My gaze passed them by and fell upon a young woman who was just finishing her breakfast a few tables further on. She was very attractive and reminded me of someone, but I couldn't call to mind who. I later found out she was a West Country TV news reader, and that explained why she looked familiar. I looked at my watch, and decided I had time to enjoy a fresh cup of coffee before I set off to the business of the day. This was going to be quiet, easy day, only a small observation job was needed and I would care for that in two or

three stages in around four hours. As I sipped on another cup of coffee, I remembered what it was I had been thinking about in the room, and I recalled how frightening that night was. I didn't know that at the time I was staring at the forest ahead of me, a leopard was watching me from the trees. Fortunately these beautiful cats are not usually prone to attacking man unless he gets in their way or appears to be a threat. Usually their fear of man will keep them in hiding and if they attack it is because they feel trapped. I found out when my father took me back that way in the daylight that I had walked to within a hundred metres of the leopard, which was about the limit of safety. The spoor could be seen clearly in the fine dust at the edge of the trees. At least I had been bright enough to know that it was unwise to enter the 'jungle' undergrowth at night, and that I needed to go the other way. I had turned around, walked back into the grass and then ran like the wind until I burst out of the grass again on the other side, to the welcoming lights of the house security system. The man referred to by the drums turned out to be a visitor from Angola, he came and recruited young men from the villages nearby, most of them never returned home, dying out in the war torn fields as the terrorist factions tried to overthrow the Angola government. Resson and his fellow villagers had tried to stop the recruitment, some of them had disappeared, Resson was frightened off, to the extent that he denied everything when questioned much later, even insisting that the drums were just one of my imaginary things. I knew that this wasn't so, and Hilda had heard it too, but then we were children, so who would listen?

"Excuse me Sir," a waitress dragged me back into the present, "would you like some more toast?" "No thanks, I've got to go in a few moments, thanks anyway", I replied, and stood up. This would be just another day to take care of in my busy schedule. I passed by the reception desk to drop my key in, before heading for my car under the pine trees that edge the car park. A young woman emerged a hundred metres or so behind me, she was holding a mobile phone to her ear. As I started my car and headed out towards Exeter Airport, I noted that her car was roughly a hundred metres or so behind mine. I passed under an overpass and noted a man standing against the railings with a mobile phone to his ear. A glance in my mirror revealed him gesturing to the car that followed me from the hotel car park. She had been stupid enough to flash.

"OK, so we have a tail," I muttered as I looked for a suitable lay-by, saw a marker sign saying one was 400 yards away and slowed sufficiently so that the car would catch me just about the time I reached it. The driver, the young woman, must have realised that I had slowed, and she did the same, convincing me of her intentions to follow me, but not before she had taken 60 metres out of the gap. Then, when I was less than 10 metres from the lay-by, I suddenly pulled into it, only breaking as I reached the kerb within it. She braked and then thought better of it and drove on for 4 or 5 hundred metres before pulling to the side of the road, causing a lorry that had been behind her to hoot and swerve. At that moment, the road near me was clear in both directions and I swung the car round and headed back to the hotel at the maximum safe speed. After entering the car park, I merely swung around the safety island near the entrance door, and exited again. Twenty metres down the road, in now progressively heavier traffic, I passed the young woman going the opposite way. Not wishing to pass under the bridge, I made a left turn and followed one of the back roads towards Honiton and then towards the airport. At a set of traffic lights, I observed all passersby and vehicles and sent a text message to my base office. A few miles further on I reached a truck stop and saw two black four-wheel drive vehicles within the hard standing. They both moved out as I passed by. Backup. I sped on.

My head of section told me later that they had managed to 'accidentally' cut a young woman driver up on a roundabout and had insisted she be seen by a medic, "in case she had whiplash or something." He had laughed. I never found these incidents amusing. Nor was the next observation I was sent on.

Chapter 9

Washington, no, not D.C. - Tyne & Wear, is strange town, more like a huge dormitory with its housing estates and little industry. I was looking towards it from my third floor hotel room, at the blinking lights of the pedestrian crossing markers, and the ever changing traffic lights. I had just made the long journey up the M1 and A1(M) to the north-eastern corner of England. It was quite a few weeks since I had discussed my South African episode with my colleague in Cornwall, and I had been making notes in my diary every day when I had flashes of remembrance from my teen years. "I must get all this down into print sometime" I thought as I pulled the curtains across the big window. I flicked on the television and joined in the middle of an episode of a US TV series about a crack commando unit going in to rescue someone who had been 'sold out' by his employers in the government and was now imprisoned by the regime of a third world country.

"Bit like Dad" I muttered, remembering what my father had told me on his deathbed. When we had all returned to England I remembered my dad telling all of us that he was a school teacher in reality. But on his deathbed he had confessed that he was also an observer and target coordinator for the overseas division of a security department. As such he obtained and passed on valuable information to head office for further action. There was a lot of activity in the country by both USA and China, the former as administrators of the American Library, and the latter as technicians on a rail project. Dad had been the one to send back information on what they were really doing. When push came to shove, the department responsible for co-ordinating the communications, had pulled the plug on my dad's backup and supply chain and attempted to quietly dispose of him. They did this by letting people who might have a grudge against them know who he was and where he lived. This was extremely low down and unnecessary. I had become very angry at my father's bedside and wanted to go and gain retribution. He told me that would be futile, the decisions had probably been made by an about to retire desk jockey covering his own arse and probably all his tracks too. None of it would be recorded anywhere. Even his part in things was doubtless erased. I wanted to kick someone, I just didn't know who. Seeing that programme had brought these thoughts flooding back and I thought about them all through dinner. I was still thinking about this as I went for a stroll after leaving the dining room. I had been outraged to hear how my father had been treated, after his clandestine activities on behalf of his homeland, England, he had been forced to leave Zambia and not allowed to take anything with him. He had lost his home, his bank balance and his self-respect and no-one with the power to help back in England had even acknowledged his existence. Whilst still in the employ of the government, he had been arrested and sent to prison, but in his case, there was no crack commando team to rescue him. He was endeavouring to lead a normal life and look after his family, having bought a large piece of land out in the Makeni area near Lusaka. We were attempting, as did several others, to prevent the extinction of the Lechwe, both the Red and Black, a local antelope. Then one night without warning, Police arrived and took my father away. The next time we saw him was thirty days later when we were all on the way out of the country. The house was gone, the bank balance emptied and a lot of our personal things shared out amongst the 'officials' who impounded the house. My father was given criminal status by the authorities and we were escorted to the border. I too had a job as did my mother; we were not allowed to communicate with our employers. As far as they were concerned, we disappeared. I wondered for a long time what had gone on and why my passport was stamped 'Permanent Exit'. Now, the anger again was welling up inside me. I made several gestures as the air around me in my anger. I kicked a tin can into the gutter and muttered under my breath. Still, my father was dead now and it was nothing to do with me, all very much in the past.

"Sold out! That's what he was, when the political climate changed, Dad went from a key tool in the hands of the Federal Government, to an embarrassing nuisance! Sold out, scrapped, not even a 'thank you...'" I shouted out and once again made strong gestures at the air. I realised I had several people staring at me as I had been gesturing wildly and babbling about injustices and being sold out. I must have appeared like someone demented. So engrossed in this I didn't notice that I had walked quite a distance, and could see the tall hotel building up beside the A1(M) slip road. I discovered that Washington has got a town centre after all, not very big, but all in one complex. All the usual shops were there, fast food outlets and a couple of bars. I decided to have

a drink as it seemed appropriate to do so at the time. I chose a pub that the owners, despite its very modern construction, had tastefully decorated in an attempt to capture the ambiance of an 'olde worlde' pub, having mock oak beams and rough plaster with what looked like real beer pumps. I had a couple of pints and then decided it was time to call it a day, thanked the publican and left. I started to walk back to the hotel and remembered security procedure, keeping all passers-by at a safe distance and giving extra attention to anyone loitering even if to light a cigarette. I headed up the same road I had walked down and then turned away and went across to another hotel, walked into the entrance and stopped by the leaflet rack, watching the door. I spoke briefly to the receptionist, asked about the bar, walked into it and then out through the exit door back onto the street. I walked twenty paces in the wrong direction then turned on my heel and walked the right way. No-one darted into a doorway or stopped to tie their shoelace. Happy that things were ok, I continued back to the hotel. Back in the hotel room I stood and looked out towards the end of the A1(M) and could just make out the 'Angel of the North' as it stood proudly looking back towards me. I thought for a while about my present situation and how I should really be thinking about spending more time with Sara. The thought prompted me to reach for the 'phone and punching in my home number, waited for her voice in the earpiece.

"Hello"

"Hi darling, it's me, I've booked in and eaten – how's things there?"

"Oh good, glad to hear you're safe, I heard earlier there was a bad accident up that way, I'm o.k. – missing you!"

"Yes, I'm missing you too – just had to hear your voice."

"Is the hotel o.k.?"

Knowing that Sara worked in a hotel, I had to tell her about each hotel I visited and she could identify with what I was describing. I described the very plain room, the bland dining room with its equally bland food and told her I'd been down the road for a drink earlier. She wanted to know how I had been greeted by the reception staff, had they done this, had they done that. Patiently I always gave her all the details she needed to satisfy herself that she still worked for the best hotel when it came to customer service and food quality. For a few minutes longer we exchanged the happenings of the day and then with a blown kiss and a reminder of the love we shared, the call was over and I headed for the bathroom in preparation for the night. I had one visit to make in Washington and then had to move up to Newcastle, back to Gateshead and then home again. I lay back against the pillow and slowly drifted off to an unbroken night's sleep, exhausted by the anger and frustration of my father's demise. At breakfast, I looked around the room. There had been a coach in the night before, full of European tourists, I had heard several accents and languages in the corridor. There was no sign of any of them yet. I looked at my watch; it was seven forty two, which might explain the absence of the visitors. Two other suited men were in the dining room enjoying whatever they had collected from the breakfast buffet bar. I hit them both with my 'flash glance' a technique I used to get a mental picture of people without staring at them. I immediately named one of them 'Mr Blob' because he was large, very pink and his round face was dominated by a very round large nose. I named the other 'Ferret' because he had a weasel – like face, with a hair-piece the colour of ferret's fur. I made my way to the breakfast bar, obtained a dish, filled it with a mixture of stewed fruits, collected a glass of grapefruit juice, and walked between Mr Blob and the Ferret, giving them each another 'flash-glance' as I did. I sat, as was my custom, with my back to the top wall, facing the dining room entrance. Mr Blob looked my way.

"Morning" I said and nodded

Mr Blob reciprocated. The Ferret did not move at all.

"Stuffed Ferret" I muttered under my breath.

I worked out that Mr Blob had a cholesterol problem; he had chosen just fresh fruit and a low fat yoghurt and was covering his brown toast with a spread, low fat, high in poly-unsaturated fats. The Ferret didn't care about his cholesterol; he had eaten a full English breakfast, prior to which he had eaten porridge oats with cream and syrup, and was now ladling blackcurrant jam onto his third or fourth piece of toast. His yellowed fingers told me that he also was a heavy smoker.

"That's why he looks slim in spite of the food he's eating." I mused. I remembered reading somewhere an allegation that tobacco product manufacturers are paying the processed food manufacturers huge sums of money to include additives that promote weight gain, thus, smokers

look the right size whereas non-smokers looked overweight and bulgy. I couldn't believe that report, but then again, there was some reason why non-smokers are often heavier than smokers. Eating my breakfast I considered what I should do about the book I wanted to write.

"I'm not a bad judge of people, I have a reasonable imagination and lots of childhood experience – but how do I get this all in the right sequence, with the right words so that people will enjoy reading it?"

I decided that I would right down everything that came into my head, even if it was just a word or two, like 'memory joggers'. Today, on my table napkin I wrote 'Mr Blob' and 'The Ferret' that was all I needed to later be able to describe this small anecdote of the day. That's how this chapter came to exist.

"Next week I'll be on the South Coast – I bet that'll generate some more memories!"

I stood up and made my way back to the room to get my case before setting off. A glint of light from the car park caught my eye, it reminded me of something and I quickly added another note to the table napkin. I sat in the car for several minutes watching the hotel entrance and the cars that left the car park. The observation I was to take care of that day had a high security level and there was an element of urgency in obtaining information that the office could use. I could not afford to take chances nor to have some amateur mess up the job for me by bouncing in at the wrong moment. When I was sure that no-one within my vision was going to cause me a problem, I started the engine and slowly eased forward, watching all the time.

The three days went without major events, I reported back as usual and at around 5:30 p.m. on the Thursday I headed back home, giving me the whole of Friday to write up my reports from the notes I had made. I guess I was tired, I forgot the security protocol and made three mistakes. Pulling into a service area on the M1 just south of Leeds, my first mistake was to park right in front of the amenities instead of far away in an area where I could watch the motorists coming and going. Thus I didn't see the silver Ford slip into a space behind me. Secondly, I got out and walked straight to the doorway without a glance in any direction, without the stop and retrace action we usually do, like we've forgotten something. Thirdly, I went straight into the toilets and was relieving myself when two men entered the block. The first one stood beside me and began doing as I was, but the second stood near the door with his hands clasped together in his lap. Alarm bells began to ring in my head. I cursed. I had been so stupid. In my jacket pocket was a small LED torch about 25mm round and 70mm long. I slowly placed my hand into my pocket and grasped it. Then, without waiting to zip up, I stuck it into the ribs of the man standing beside me.

"I sussed you two out as soon as you entered the toilet, sloppy, very sloppy. Now turn slowly," and to the other man, "You, you over by the door, into the first cubicle, NOW. I want to hear the lock click, DO IT!" and then to the first man, "You, into the second cubicle, and I want to hear that lock too."

I zipped up and almost ran out of the toilet block. I was in the car in a matter of seconds and after a full circle tour of the car park, headed back down the slip road onto the M1.

No cars appeared to be following me for the sake of any action, just joining the motorway as they should. I maintained correct speed and kept an eye out for anything unusual, including every car that joined the motorway. Soon I was home, kissed Sara and sat down to a cup of tea. I powered up the laptop and went on-line. An email popped up headed "Well done!" which I opened with curiosity. It was from my boss, it said simply:

"Well done in embarrassing your two back-up boys, they were sloppy, they deserved it!"

I laughed long and hard at that, Sara looked at me quizzically, but I couldn't tell her why I was laughing. One day perhaps.

Chapter 10

I stood and looked out of the hotel window and my gaze traversed the waterside of the Solent round to what I took to be the old walls of Southampton. Looking down on the car park I could see my car glinting in the summer sun. I reflected on how glad I was to have air-conditioning in this car with the summer temperatures getting up into the high 20's, often into the lower 30's by early afternoon. I glanced at my watch and noted that it was a little before six o'clock yet the sun was still high in the sky. How different the sunrise and sunset times are between the summer and the winter. I had found that difficult to cope with when I first returned to England from Africa. I smiled as I recalled my young boyhood days and how similar each day was, month in, month out. I remembered being in Congo Zaire, formerly the Belgian Congo, where the sun rises at 6:00 a.m. and sets at 6:00 p.m. every day all through the year. Added to this strange 'equal day', at midday the sun is directly overhead and shadows are mere circles round everything. This phenomenon occurs because of the fact that Zaire is one of the countries that is on the Equator and the sun traverses the Equator from sunrise in the East to sunset in the West, in a straight line, always. The tilting of the Earth seems to have no effect in the way it does in countries further away from the Equator. I had worked briefly with a British company based in the Orient who needed to increase business in the Equatorial Region of Africa, so it was that I came to be standing looking down on the magnificent Stanley Falls, positioned right on the Equator, with one foot in the northern hemisphere and one in the southern. I was minding my own business and admiring the view – when suddenly I heard a faint sound and turning, gasped to see that I was facing a small band of armed men, bandits from over the border in Uganda, just three hundred miles or so to the East. As I came to terms with the fact that I could die there, standing in the rising mists of the thundering waterfall, my mind began racing through all the actions left undone, the words left unsaid and promises I was about to break. Back in Zambia 1,500 miles to the South, was my home, my mum and dad – who had said on my departure a few days previous – “Be careful Rob, come back safe please, won't you!”

I had laughed; said nothing was going to happen to ME. After all, who'd be interested in a negotiator for a mining exploration company based in the Orient!? Now I was preparing to eat those words. The leader of the bandits, (who I realised were 'Simbas' – lion-like assassins and mercenaries), prodded me in the stomach with his automatic rifle and waved the barrel in the direction I was to go. He was a surly character, with shaven head, heavy brow and unusually thick lips. He spoke in Chichewa, and then Chitonga, two common East African dialects. I knew a little Chitonga but virtually no Chichewa at that time, so I responded as best I could in a local dialect of Swahili. This only invoked a string of abuse and the rifle butt was slammed down hard on my foot. The bandit leader then repeated his question, so I tried French, again invoking the same reaction. Now I was angry! I stamped both feet hard and shouted in very poor German at the man, who was visibly shaken by this reaction! He raised the rifle to his shoulder and placed the barrel against my chest. Then he repeated the question again, this time in a very broken German dialect. I gasped with relief; I thanked God for the German occupancy of East Africa! I understood now what the man was asking. He was demanding to be taken to my farm and then to be given food and money. I thought for a few moments, looked down at the barrel of the gun and decided I just had to rely on English and so began –

“Sir, - I am not French, Belgian, or German, I do not live in this country as I figure you do not either, I have no farm near here----“

I saw the man stiffen and the finger tighten on the trigger so continued quickly “—but I can help you with food – plenty – do you understand English?”

The bandit leader lowered the rifle, he stood and looked hard at me for several minutes, and then he raised his hand and began to speak in reasonably good English. “English I speak, yes you right, I not from Zaire, I—WE—are from Uganda – but we control this area, now that white farmers mostly gone”

“O.K., so you control the area – why do you not just take food from the people in this area then?”

“We came to do this – you were here so we ask! Now YOU help with food!”

He propped himself up on the rifle and gestured at the rest of the band who now applauded and laughed. I thought for a few seconds – how was I going to get out of this one!? I had a helicopter

up the ravine in which I had some beers, a few packets of crisps and a couple of bread rolls – hardly a meal for a hungry group like this. The rest of the mining survey team that had accompanied me were a good half a mile away. If I told the Simbas I had the helicopter they'd just kill me and attempt to take it, on the other hand, if I didn't go to it, I had nothing to give them! The situation was diffused for the moment but I knew that my life was worth nothing to these bandits and my body would never be found. I looked over at the long drop of the falls and then slowly allowed my eyes to traverse the group before me, looking into the eyes of each as I did so. Several of them dropped their gaze and I knew my chances had improved. I slowly opened my jacket. Hands went down to guns, the leader raised the rifle.

"No worry – I am getting something for you from my jacket – no guns or knives in here o.k.?" – I reached into my pocket and between the thumb and fore-finger I withdrew a small wad of notes.

"Are dollars o.k. for you?"

"GIVE!"

I handed the folded notes to the man. There were around eighty US dollars in the fold, this was more than the man would see in a month as a full-time regular soldier. As he wasn't one, it was probably more than they all saw in a month. The man's eyes bulged.

"You give ALL this?!"

"Yes, it's all I have – but it's yours, take it – go, buy food and feed your families."

"If you have all this, what else you got? How you come here. Where your car?"

"Shit!" I thought, "This is what I feared. So I just took it calmly and replied in the best way I could.

"I have nothing else on me, unless you want this Timex watch? I came here with a mining crew, ten of them." (I lied, there were only three), "They are all down in the valley, I just came up here to look at the falls. They have weapons and it would be shame for some of us to get shot when you already have my \$80." I have to confess that I was very scared, this might have turned very nasty and there could be a lot of dead or injured people as a result. I stood motionless with arms partly outstretched and palms upward, a gesture of peace, I hoped. For several seconds nothing happened, then the leader muttered something in his own dialect to the others. Although I didn't understand what he'd said, I knew that when they all said "Ey." They were agreeing with what he had said, now it was a matter of finding out what he'd asked them. He regarded me through eyes like slits for a few seconds and then lowered the rifle. I nearly fell down with relief.

"You tell no-one you hear! – if anyone knows you give us money and we let you go – we then come and kill you o.k.!"

"I will not tell anyone I saw you." Well, not until I got away that is.

"You leave now, we go!"

Then, almost as silently as they had appeared, the 'Simbas' melted back into the bush and I was left contemplating my future in the rising mist of the waterfall.

Later as I lifted the 'chopper' out of the ravine with the team on board and flew back to the hotel in the town, I had time to take stock of just how lucky I'd been. I knew it wasn't the fact I had the money that saved my life, but rather my calm and honest attitude, coupled with my ability to diffuse volatile situations. I smiled now as I thought how those qualities were needed in my present job. I raised my un-seeing eyes from the car park where I had been staring blankly while I day dreamed, and looked towards the water. One of the Isle of Wight ferries was just returning to its berth. That morning I had used the high speed hover ferry from Southampton to Ryde, it had taken just nine minutes to make the crossing. I watched the docking ferry, a much larger vessel than the hover craft, and as I looked down from my eighth floor room, it dropped its bow ramp and a stream of cars poured out of its open 'mouth', like bees out of a hive. I laughed as cars, bicycles, and pedestrians all streamed away. It wasn't long before another stream of cars, bicycles and people began to make their way into the open mouth of the ferry. I looked down at my watch. It was almost exactly six o'clock; this was the last one out. I remembered suddenly that I hadn't showered yet, and, turning away from the window, I made my way towards the bathroom to set that matter straight. I was looking forward to my dinner, it had been a long day and I had an extensive report to write before I settled down to sleep. I thought about the consequences of not doing the report, or not dialling in to the main office server and sending an e-mail to the team to let them know that I had achieved the objective for the day. Whilst it wouldn't be a major disaster, the special activities I was involved in day by day could run on into an issue effecting National

Security, which had become evident after September 11, 2001. I logged in and sent the encrypted e-mail with the basic details. I would return to the report later. I strolled out of the room and took the lift to the ground floor, and then made my way to the dining room. I noted that the décor was the same as the last hotel of this particular chain, and the waiting staff wore the same uniform clothing style. There was a strong smell of something spicy, either a curry or maybe chilli-con-carne – I'd have to wait and see. I selected a table tucked away in the back corner and sat facing the door so that I could enjoy my favourite pastime of observing my fellow guests. A waitress handed me the menu, I smiled at her and thanked her and her pretty face smiled back.

"One good mark for putting the guest at ease...." I thought to myself, running through the quick checks Sara always does when visiting other hotels. The waitress had up until then looked quite sombre, but now, smiling, she went on to hand a menu to another guest who had just sat down. He never looked at her or thanked her. The sombre expression returned, but for a brief second I caught her eye, nodded towards my fellow guest's back, winked, shook my head and made a 'thumbs down' sign. The smile returned.

"Let's see if we can keep it that way..." I challenged under my breath.

Somehow I seemed to get better service than the other guests, and my meal was ready quicker. I later spoke to the restaurant manager and thanked her for my meal. She was taken aback but then smiled and thanked me for bothering to say so. This was something I'd appreciated when I was the one providing a service. Back in the room I began typing the report, it was going to take until midnight to complete it, but as I had already reported in with my findings, it didn't matter if it got there late. I couldn't let my thoughts take me back to the distant past of my African life, not now, this report was too important, so I soldiered on until it was complete and then flopped back onto the bed and slept soundly until the alarm woke me to yet another glorious day. I didn't know at that time that I only had a few more weeks in the job, that my employers had already put the plans in motion to shut down the operation in which I was involved. Nor did I know just what events ahead would change some aspects of my life completely and that I would be involved in an environment that very few of the general public and even many of the high-ranking civil servants had no knowledge of at all. As I made my way home I thought how far away the land of the 'Simbas' now seemed.

"Must go back there some day," I promised myself, "and take Sara – she'd enjoy that."

I had many times suggested that we take an extended holiday back to my childhood stamping grounds, but Sara, having heard some of the stories, said she had no desire to go anywhere near the place. I chuckled as I recalled her recoiling in disgust as I talked of some of the large insects and spiders that wandered around in the house by day and night and the enormous Nile Monitors that occasionally wandered into the cow sheds looking for food and scaring the daylights out of the twelve year old cow herder. Oh, and then there was the time I lifted the lid of the outside toilet only to find I was about to pee on a small python curled up inside it! NO, getting Sara to visit Africa was definitely a non-starter. It would take a lot of coaxing and begging to get her to even get on the aircraft. The drive up the M3 is boring and I sat at cruise speed, observing the other motorists. I found it strange that apart from the trucks I was the only one being overtaken by everyone else, and yet my cruise control was holding me at 72 mph. At least doing this meant that anyone who wanted to follow me had to do the same and would be conspicuous by the fact that they too were being overtaken by everyone else. My mirrors were clear. Twice I had seen vehicles joining but they had quickly sped up and overtaken me. I watched every overhead bridge or overpass, where there was a figure standing I slipped behind a truck until I had passed the spot and then quickly overtook it and took up position in front of it. Paranoid some may say, but a person with a sighted rifle can take out the driver of a vehicle so easily from a bridge. My boss, Dora, had sent me through an e-mail to say that I should be very careful over the next few jobs, the person involved was known to try and prevent us from doing our jobs, by whatever methods he saw fit. She told me that I should be in the Derbyshire dales for the next week and close to one of his operations. I had that on my mind all through the weekend, Sara could see I was pre-occupied and didn't ask, she knew better.

Chapter 11

I stood quietly examining a finely cut Privet topiary in the shape of a squirrel. Looking across at the well kept lawn, its green grass cut diagonally in stripes, my gaze came to rest on the boughs of an enormous Cedar tree, nodding and waving in the wind. Being deep in the Derbyshire dales, the hotel was built out of traditional local stone. Looking back at the main house, grey and pink mottled stone almost glowing as the low-angled yet bright sun warmly reflected across the small lake that skirted the western edge of the lawn, I bent down, picked a small, perfectly formed and beautiful daisy; evidence that spring was truly there. A car slowly made its way up the driveway and I watched it from my chosen spot alongside the topiary. The doors opened and two men in suits and dark glasses stepped out and went into the hotel. I frowned and stepped to the right so that the squirrel was between them and me. I could see them at reception, the receptionist nodded and pointed to the lawn. They looked straight at me, I froze, their eyes behind the black lenses searching as if for my soul. They turned and walked out of the door as if to walk in my direction, then appeared to change their minds, and headed once again for the hotel door, but suddenly turned and walked out onto the lawn. I glanced about me, there was something about their manner that alerted me, and I needed to hide. A large shrub in full leaf seemed the best option, and as I crouched inside it, the two men passed by within a few feet; I heard their conversation. What I heard disturbed me greatly. These two men were looking for me and they knew why I was at the hotel. More than that, they knew who my contacts were and what my purpose was. I knew I had to contact HQ, but how to do it without revealing my position? I pulled my mobile phone out of my pocket, and set it to silent. I quickly typed in a text message to Dora, my boss, waited for the vibration to acknowledge she'd received it and only then did I cautiously slip out of the shrub. The two men were just entering the hotel again. I followed at a safe distance and watched them approach the receptionist again. Just then my phone vibrated, I had received a text message. It was Dora, with instructions to do nothing and wait for further details. As I drew closer to the door, I saw the receptionist shaking her head. One of the men became agitated and I could hear his voice from outside. She called for the Duty Manager who appeared in a doorway over to the left, both men turned to make whatever case they had to make for gaining information or access to my room. In that brief moment, I managed to get inside the hotel and slipped behind two pillars at an angle from the main reception area. The Duty Manager also shook his head and his gesture indicated there was no compromise on the matter. The two men were clearly angry as they left and the tyre noise confirmed their feelings as the car sped away. I waited a little while longer than most people would, to be sure they hadn't stopped the car and sneaked back, before I stepped out into the Reception area and walked over to the desk.

"242 please"

"Certainly Sir – er – some men were looking for you earlier"

"Yes, thank you, I saw them."

"They wanted to be let into your room, said they were friends wanting to surprise you. We couldn't agree to that"

"You did the right thing, they are not my friends, and they are not police, they have no business with me."

"Oh, do you know who they were?"

"No, and I don't owe anyone any money, nor am I a criminal – so you have nothing to fear. I am just a businessman."

"Oh, we never thought for one moment . . ." she trailed off, not knowing what to say next and as I turned to go, she smiled again and quietly said to my departing back, "We think you're quite nice really . . ."

In the lift I typed a message into my phone so that I could send it as soon as I stepped out into the corridor, where the signal would be restored. It included descriptions of the men and the car, along with its registration details. I stepped out of the lift and pressed the send button. The message was delivered in a few seconds, and I was unlocking my door when the reply came.

"Get Out, NOW! Do not delay; send mssg back when checked out"

I gathered the few things I had left in the bathroom and my night clothes, stuffed them back into my bag and returned to the lift. Once on the ground floor I quickly made my way to Reception and

asked to see the manager, urgently. The receptionist could see that I meant what I said and called for the Duty Manager.

"Is something wrong, Sir?" he asked

"No, everything's fine here, I'm very happy with the way you and your staff handled the visitors earlier, however, my company has called me urgently to another location, so I need to check out now. We will pay for tomorrow as well so please do not relet my room until the day after – just in case I come back tomorrow."

"Very good sir, in that case, we will send the bill to the company today."

"No, you don't have my company details, I am to pay you now, in cash, no invoice is to be printed until my check out day – then it is to be sent to this P.O. box," I handed the manager a piece of paper.

"That's fine Sir, Juliet, please check the gentleman out, but use the 'HOLD' option for 242, o.k."

"Very good Mr Anderson."

I paid the bill and collected my case, walked out to the car park and sent the text message to Dora. I reached my car and checked the strands of hair I had carefully placed across the gaps in the doors and bonnet/boot lid, they were intact. I clipped a small mirror onto a short tube and plugged the other end into the socket cut into my toecap. Moving my foot about enabled me to see that the underside of the car was as it should be. Satisfied that I wasn't about to be 'hit', I opened the door, and whilst standing outside the car, placed the keys into the ignition and turned the switch slowly through to the start position. I activated the starter and stood back from the car. It was idling normally, I smelled the exhaust, and there was no tell-tale chemical smell. I placed my hand under the seat, there was no pressure switch. Now I was sure. I sat in the seat and closed the door. My phone buzzed and I looked down to see that Dora had replied.

"Go to Town Centre, park in Library car park, in or near Bay 16. Look for red Ford Focus with the number 3 and letter K in registration. When it leaves, follow it."

I drove down to the Library and parked in the bay next to number 16, which was occupied by a white Citroen C3. In a few moments a red Ford Focus appeared and slowed down in front of me and then headed for the exit, I followed. In about thirty minutes the car I was following drew up in front of our new hotel, The Crown, small but very well equipped. I parked up alongside the red Focus and stepped out to collect my cases from the boot. My colleague did the same and for a few seconds neither of us spoke. Then the other man looked at me and, using code names, advised me that this was a cover, not a hotel but in fact a secure house. I was slightly relieved to know that all proper security measures would now be in place.

"Who were the gorillas I saw back in the other hotel?" I asked

"I'm sorry CR passed no information back to me on that --" CR was the familiar name for the Control Room back at the office.

"I thought they may have briefed you; no matter, they got the ripples though when I gave them detailed descriptions!" I laughed as I thought of the mad scramble back in Dora's office.

"Glad you find it amusing," my minder grunted back

"Well, Fox," said I, using the given code name for my colleague, who actually had the boring name of John Smith, "It's like this, I do this job day in and day out fifty weeks a year, I run into bad people and I mix with good – I've never had to run before!"

"Well, Beagle (my code name), all I'm saying is, leave it alone, let's get checked in and forget today, o.k.?"

"Checked in? Why, this isn't a hotel is it?"

"Beagle! You're one of the brightest in the team – what's the place SUPPOSED TO BE?"

"Well, yeah, but didn't consider that checking in was a necessity!"

"Look, there are members of the general public Here, vetted of course, to give it more authenticity, so we HAVE to check in, get it!?"

"Like you say, my Foxy fellow, I am bright – don't patronise me, I'll break your arm!"

"Many have tried . . ."

"... But, until now, you haven't come up against me!"

"Is this a private fight or can anyone join in?" another man had joined us as we approached the reception desk. I regarded him briefly, and then in a sudden movement had the man in a half-nelson head lock.

“Grubby, you old git, where the hell did you spring from!?”

Fox’s mouth dropped open; he instinctively rubbed his arm as if I had already broken it. He hadn’t realised how fast I could move, even for someone in mid fifties.

“Do you two know each other?” he asked as I let go of ‘Grubby’ George Miller, a retired member of my old team.

“That’s an understatement!” Grubby laughed, “This man was on my wing back in ’78 you know, couldn’t have got the job done without him!”

“Where was that?” asked Fox

“Now who’s not thinking?!” I replied.

We stepped forward and went through the formalities of checking in. Having set a time for a later chat with Grubby, (so called, not because he was dirty but, because he was the one that always dug deep for things, grubbing around in all kinds of places), we turned and made for the stairs. Once in my room I took time to think about the events of the day.

“We must maintain security no matter what. My task is not over yet,” I thought to myself as I stripped off and took a lukewarm shower, dressed, and then made my way down to the restaurant.

There were 15 people already in the restaurant. I did my usual quick sweep of the other ‘guests’ and then slowly retook the scene, table by table. I noted the following – table 1, 2 couples with Yorkshire accents, one doing most of the talking, I bet myself that this man was a salesman, the other man occasionally asked questions, I bet myself that he was a buyer, the women were their wives, but then maybe they weren’t, maybe they were PA’s or colleagues – or something else; Table 2 – one man, jeans T-shirt, neat beard, sipping soup with the bowl tipped away from him, his napkin placed precisely upon his lap. He gently tore small pieces off his bread roll and placed a piece in his mouth before taking a sip of soup, a sign of good breeding, perfect manners – I bet that he was a Financial Director or Auditor; Table 3 – 2 men, smart casual, one Latin-looking, the other ginger-haired, both well tanned – which was unusual for a person with ginger hair, I listened, their speech and manner soon convinced me they were contractors of some type. I caught words like “vents”, “ducts”, “fans”, “heat exchangers”, and I bet myself that they were heating and ventilating engineers.

Table 4 – couple 50 plus, well dressed – him in suit and tie, she in gown and pearls, there was no key fob on the table like all the others had, this meant that possibly they were not residents – in for special meal possibly?, I guessed it was their anniversary, or, maybe she wasn’t his wife . . . ;

Table 5 – a couple in their forties and young girl in early teens, with western Scots accents, possibly South West Glasgow, they were talking excitedly about Alton Towers and Matlock Bath, it wasn’t difficult to work out that they were down for a break from Glasgow, and seeing the sights;

Table 6 – 3 women in their 30’s, smart casual, quite attractive. I listened, they spoke so low that their speech was faint, but I detected southern England accents and caught the words “Franchise”, “Network”, “Downtime”, “Upload”, “Designer”, “Java”, “Reciprocity”, “cross-migration”, and turned away in disgust, it was business talk, possibly they were on a training course. I reckoned that they came from South Buckinghamshire or Hertfordshire. I noted just how freely they discussed matters relating to their own Company’s safety and security. The nearest woman caught sight of me, and then there was a bit of muttering between them, followed by laughter. She stood up, and I could see that she was slim, quite attractive, with short bobbed chestnut brown hair, wearing a blue halter-neck top, black slightly-flared trousers, and red nail varnish. She glanced back at the others as she walked across to me.

“Are you waiting for someone?” she asked

“Yes”

“Male?”

“Yes”

“Then you can both join us – yeah?”

“No, I don’t think so, but thanks for asking”

“Spoil sport – why not? Are you a couple?”

“No, colleagues”

I wished Sara was there to help re-enforce the “No”.

Then my colleague ‘Fox’ arrived. Now he WAS a good-looking man, 8 years or so younger than me, and I told him about the woman. Fox laughed, went over to the women, said a few words and

immediately there was a shriek of laughter, followed by a lot of giggles. I heard one of them say "OK"

Fox returned to the table.

"What was so funny?" I asked

"I told them I was Fox and you were Beagle – it set them off a treat!"

"Then I told them we had business to discuss and wanted to do that while we ate – alone"

"Good!"

"But, then, I arranged for us to meet them in the bar for a drink later!

"Oh, you pillock, no!"

"Just one drink, that's all"

"No." I frowned, this was not my style, and I now felt trapped.

"Look we've got to meet your friend, what was his name, Grubby?"

"Only I have to meet him, and I didn't want any women involved."

"No need to get involved, you know they enjoy just a quick one in the sack, tomorrow they'll not even look at you, no involvement, just a night of fun!"

"Fox, you do not know me, you have no idea and I don't appreciate this one bit!"

"Hate women then – you're not gay are you?"

"I LOVE women, they are all gorgeous creatures, I'm married to one of them – no not one of THEM over there, a woman I mean, a beautiful, caring and loyal wife!"

"Then she'll understand!"

"I'm not going to put her in the position of having to understand – o.k.?"

"Suit yourself, but they'll still join us in the bar!"

"Humph!"

I sat in silence for a few minutes, looking at the menu. In the background, music was playing; I absent-mindedly hummed along with songs like "Heartbeat", "Venus in Blue Jeans", "Suspicious Minds", "Leader of the Pack" – all 60's music. This triggered thoughts in my mind taking me back to my teenage years again, to the days in Pretoria, in the Transvaal Province of South Africa, before the incidents that resulted in my expulsion. I thought now about the lucrative little sideline I and my friends had developed with the Alhambra Theatre in Cape Town playing music sessions in between the cinema shows. 600 Rand (about £300 then) a day for the four, sometimes five of us, was still a good day's pay! That was until we were 'discovered' by a talent scout for a major recording company. This seemed like a great idea at the time, each of us had 'dollar' signs in our eyes and the imagined glamour of being pop stars drove us forward. We had been playing covers of all the current hits as soon as they came on the radio or in the shops. This made us very popular with the local people as we belted out songs like "Leaving on a Jet Plane", "Matthew and Son", "I can Hear The Grass Grow", "Black is Black", "24 Hours from Tulsa" and many others, to screaming teenagers. The recording company offered us a really big deal, and we fell for it, hook line and huge lead sinker! So off we went to the bright lights of Johannesburg.

Hours and hours of recordings producing miles and miles of tapes became the order of the day. I had the feeling we were being exploited as each day we were paid a 'session fee'. All the songs we were performing were covers, so we wouldn't get any royalties. As I finished a gruelling drum session on the cover of 'Diamonds' by Jet Harris & Tony Meehan, I threw down the sticks in disgust. My friends knew I hated exploiters with a passion, and when I got passionate about something, things happened! I stood up and went to the door of the studio sound stage, opened it and entered the control room.

"Get Lipstein down here, now!"

"Er, that's not going to be possible, He's away, back in London" the recording manager was backing up to the wall as he saw my shoulders hunch, he knew what that meant. Twenty seconds later he was skidding across the floor as I twisted him away from the wall and flung him at the door as if he was a rag doll.

"I don't care if he's with a harem of beautiful women in Timbuktu – get on the phone!"

I looked down at the tape with the name "Dynamics" in bold print.

"So that's what he's selling us as is it, some obscure name – who thought of the Dynamics – did he?" I was boiling now, "Do you know where I heard the tapes we made last week, eh? Eh?" I shouted at the man who was crawling backwards on the floor. "Well I'll tell you!" I continued, "In a

SUPERMARKET – we have been playing in the Alhambra, the best theatre in Cape Town, and Minster Records puts us in a F*^!@ing SUPERMARKET!”

“May I take your orders now gentlemen?”

I was sweating and my eyes blazing as the waiter stood before me

“Are you o.k., sir?” he asked gingerly, just in case I was upset with him or the hotel.

“He’s fine, aren’t you Beagle!” Fox said before I could speak, “Get him a jug of ice water please he’s a bit hot I think!”

“Certainly Sir” the relieved waiter replied and scuttled off

“Since when did I appoint you to speak for me!” I demanded, and then relented a little and continued with “I’m sorry, the women, the music, something from the past – got to me a bit, I should say thanks for ordering the ice water.”

“Hey – we’ve all been there man!”

“Now you’re being patronising – don’t!”

“Sorry mate.” Fox looked down at the menu again.

My mind returned to the South African recording contract, or rather, the end of it, for at the moment I had been dragged back to the present, I was about to recall throwing the engineer’s chair through the plate glass sound-proof window and departing from the studio – forever. I recalled how we really had become so popular that the recording company made up a story that I (or at least my stage name) had died in a car crash to cover up the fact that they had lost me.

So it was that I joined my sister who was singing under the name of Valerie in an exclusive club in Pretoria, and her husband – the third one – was playing lead guitar and went under the name of Antonio, because (as he put it), he looked Italian. I joined the band as second drummer, bass guitarist and second vocalist, often singing harmony with my sister. One of the evenings, we were sitting out several of the numbers, a common arrangement which suited everyone as we all got paid the same money and usually each of us only worked for half the night. This was the night that a young woman about my age, Yolande, was also sitting at the table. My brother-in-law had been chatting her up all evening. My sister then asked me to intervene.

“How can I do that?” I had asked

“She is writing down her address and phone number on that cigarette packet – he’s about to go on – you chat to her for a bit – I know she likes you. Then, find out what he’s promised her etc. and take it from there – and pocket that cigarette packet!”

“Well, o.k., I’ll ask her to dance or a drink or something”

I went round the other side of the table and stood by Yolande. Being 15 years younger than my brother-in-law and a rugby player was very much in my favour.

“Like a dance Yolande?”

“Oh YES, please, I’m bored with sitting here now!”

She stood up and I stood aside whilst drawing her chair back with my right hand. Then, placing my left hand lightly on her shoulder to guide her away from the table, I scooped up the empty packet and placed it into my trouser pocket.

We made our way to the dance floor and wiggled about as was the common dance routine of the day, a sort of toned down rock & roll ‘shuffle’ After a few numbers, she said she was hot.

“Let’s go outside for a bit of air,” I suggested, intent on keeping her away from the table until I had sorted the issue out.

“Oh thanks, yes, I really need some.”

We pushed our way through the crowds and out into the fresh air, and went a short distance away from the door.

“Phew! That’s better!” I dabbed at my forehead with my hankie, “that’s the downside of dancing in Africa even in so-called ‘winter’ of June!”

“Yes, I’m going to take my top off I think” and with that Yolande removed her top, standing in the half light in just a slim bra, “You don’t mind do you?” she continued in that way that women do, when they know they’ve just floored you!

I was almost speechless. “Er, ah, well, no, not if, I mean if you’re comfortable”

She giggled.

“What’s funny?”

“Beagle my man – you definitely need this ice water –“Fox stamped all over the delightful image I had in my head and thrust a tall glass into my hand.

“Thanks, I think!” replied I as I downed the half pint of ice water in one gulp.

“The waiter’s on his way over to take our orders.”

“O.K. Foxy, let’s see, I’ll start with soup and then the lamb – tell him please, I’ve got to find the loo.” I stood up and headed for the toilet area. I still had that vivid image of Yolande in my mind, and I recalled again that night as I walked into the toilet.

“Your face!” she laughed, “Oh, your face....”

“What’s wrong with my face?” asked I, preparing to find a mirror in case I had dirty smudges, then I twigged, “Oh, right – well – if a young lady takes her top off just like that, well, I mean....”

“Young lady, where – oh hee Hee” she giggled again, “Haven’t you seen this before then – I thought you rugby boys were, well, you know - - -“

She was looking at me with her very dark, almost black eyes, and her jet black hair that cascaded gently down onto her shoulders was just gently moving in the breeze.

I rebuilt my composure, the words ‘time and place’ leaped into my thought patterns. I placed my hands on her shoulders.

“Yolande, sweet girl, listen, I’ve got to be back on stage in ten minutes, before that I need to touch up the ‘war paint’ a little – so I’d like to continue our discussion later, is that o.k.?”

She looked at me as if I was slightly mad.

“Well, of course – “she said.

“You’re beautiful stood here in the half-light, and I am keen to spend more time with you – but later...”

“Oh, yes, yes o.k.!” she was much brighter now.

I had remembered that making a girl feel I didn’t fancy her was a bad idea, much better for her to think I did, even if I didn’t – though I had to admit, she was a stunner!

“Just tell me, though, before we go back in – my brother-in-law – ‘Antonio’ to you – why did he want your address?”

“Your BROTHER-IN-LAW? The snake, wait until....”

“No, sweetheart, my SISTER will deal with him....”

“He told me he was not attached, he is nice, and I know he’s a lot older, but . . .”

“Heard it so many times – he’s a real womaniser, my sister get’s a rough time with him!”

“Well, he was going to come over tomorrow night and bring that guitar, what’s it called, a ‘Cresh’ or something?”

“Oh, you mean the GRETSCHE, it’s an American three pickup electric, made in Nashville, Tennessee – you’ve seen it on stage – the red one – why was he going to bring it out to your house?”

“I play a bit, and I have a small amplifier, but only an acoustic guitar with a cheap pick up insert.”

“Ah, o.k. – forget about it for now – I’ll talk to you at the end, about eleven we stop – don’t go, yeah?”

“GO, and miss you on stage! – the thought!”

“Me on stage is not what I meant...”

“Oh and after, yes, I will be here”

“Great – but don’t come back to our table – the swine will just get under my skin with you there and I’ll have to hit him, and I don’t want to do that!”

“You’ve walked across the entire restaurant like a ZOMBIE, man – what did you take in that toilet!?”

“Eh – oh sorry Fox, I have a lot on my mind!”

“Look, don’t worry about those guys that showed up at the ‘Royal Oak’ earlier – HQ have got that in hand....”

“Forgotten that already, no, you wouldn’t understand so I won’t bore you...”

“Try me.”

“Some other time Fox, not now – let’s eat!”

For several minutes neither of us spoke as we enjoyed the meal, the music constantly reminding me of that distant past that haunts my soul from day to day. I allowed a brief lapse back into the ‘incident’ with Yolande, recalling what happened the few days after our meeting.

As arranged after we had talked at the end of the evening, I took the 1959 Gretsch 'SILVER JET' down to Yolande's lodgings. She had a small room on the ground floor of a big house, with its own door into the garden. She let me in this way 'to stop the landlord asking silly questions' she had put it, and I had sat down on the bed beside her and let her hold the near \$3000 electric guitar. I recalled how she was like a little child that had an ice-cream for the first time.

"How are you going to play that through your amplifier without the landlord wondering about it?" I had asked.

"Easy, I told me earlier today that my cousin had lent me a guitar to play and I would be practising a little tonight and tomorrow"

"Tomorrow?"

"You aren't going to take it away without me having a chance, are you?"

"Er, well, it isn't mine, I do have mine with me – it's in the car outside – not a Gretsch, mine's also an American one, Fender Stratocaster, not in the league of this one – I can't really leave this one with you..."

"Then, you have to stay with it!"

The next morning I had really bad feelings. At six a.m. I had got up from the settee I was sleeping on, looked over at Yolande lying asleep in her bed and had mixed feelings in my heart. I had been the perfect gentleman and slept on the settee – but I was sure it wasn't what she had in mind when insisting I stayed the night.. My male instincts said one thing, my upbringing another! This wasn't the first time I'd been in this situation either and I still regretted the last time.

It had been such fun, Yolande running through several brilliantly executed routines on the Gretsch, me accompanying on the Fender. Now, in the early morning mist I stood out in the garden in just my trousers, having discarded my shirt during the night when it got really hot. I heard a slight sound and looked back to see Yolande gesturing at me to get back in side.

"My landlord's room looks out that way!" she gasped

"So, we never did anything dishonourable...."

I caught a hint of disappointment in her eyes.

I took her gently in my arms and kissed her forehead.

"Sweetheart, you and I have known each other twenty four hours – something good may come from this – it may not – but whatever, you will know that I really enjoyed being here!"

"Did you, did you really . . . ?"

I had left shortly after that, taking the Gretsch, but leaving behind the Fender 'to be sure I come back again' – the next night I had been arrested and my expulsion from South Africa had followed. As I sat opposite Fox and held the look of serene sweetness in Yolande's face in my mind's eye, I wondered just what she thought, whether she still had the Fender and was hoping I'd come back.

"What – after 40 years, what a stupid thought!" I muttered to myself.

"Penny for them" said Fox, clicking his fingers in front of my eyes.

I shifted, a little embarrassed, "No, not now, don't want to talk – another time!"

"The waiter wants to know if you'd like a sweet."

I smiled, a sweet, oh yes, she was that alright, and then, holding that smile I said "No, no thanks, just coffee."

"Coffee for two then please"

"Very good sir, I'll take it through to the lounge bar for you."

This prompted us to stand up and go through to the bar.

The three women were already seated in the bar area and had started on another round of drinks as we arrived.

"Here – over Here you two gorgeous hunks...." One of them called.

I looked around to see if Robert Redford and Brad Pitt had walked in, then laughed and went to sit down on a seat opposite the three of them on an empty settee.

"Here" said the brunette, patting the seat next to her.

Fox was at the bar getting the drinks, so I sat where I was told to – you can't argue with a women, even if you win, you lose. The drinks arrived and I gestured briefly to Fox to say I was going to drink this one and leave. Fox's cryptic gesture indicated that he thought I was mad – here was sex on a plate! How could I refuse the offer? The brunette, who told me her name was Anne, involved me in all of her conversations, and kept touching the back of my neck or the inside of one of my

thighs. I felt trapped because, like any red-blooded male, this was doing exactly what she wanted it to do – and I was not happy to let it progress on to the next level. It made me recall the very first time I had what could rightly be described as a sexual encounter.

I was still living in Cape Town, playing at the Alhambra weekday lunch times, and had met a girl called Jaylee whilst at a 'bush' party. She hadn't got a lift home; so Alan, a mate and organist, and I, had driven her back to her parents' home.

"Thank you for bringing me home – what are you doing tomorrow?" she had asked

"Well, I hadn't thought just yet, I was going to a bit of surfing at Muizenberg...."

"Come here first, please, my parents are away for a few days and I've got no-one nearby or any transport – I shall be miserable..."

I had agreed and after lunch, drove out to the 'flats' as that part of the peninsula is called, to Jaylee's house. She was waiting, dressed in a 'shift' dress, with an 'Alice' band in her auburn hair. She looked heavenly. My heart lifted at the sight of her.

"Got your swimming things?"

"Yes – in my bag – is there somewhere to change?"

"No, not where I go."

"Oh well, I'll change in the car."

She climbed into the front seat and we set off. It was about ten minutes to Muizenberg (which means 'Mouse on Mountain' in Afrikaans – so-called because when standing on the beach and looking at the mountain backdrop, it looks as if a huge mouse has stuck its head out of the side of the mountain – ears and all). On the short journey Jaylee had chattered like a chimpanzee, mostly about girlie things which I had switched off to, interjecting words like 'really', 'uh-huh', 'OK', or 'That's nice', where appropriate. Then we arrived at the beach and I leaped out, went to the 'nose' of the Beetle and lifted it so that I could get out my wet suit and other necessary items. Through the gap at the bottom of the lifted lid, I saw Jaylee begin changing. She didn't use a towel like most people would, but just removed her dress in one swift movement – I gasped a little – she was completely naked! The dress was all she had been wearing! I coughed and dropped my eyes, ferreting deep into the recesses of the Beetle's front storage area. When I stood up again she was just tying to the side a very small and barely decent strip of cloth that posed as a bikini top. Then she stepped out of the car, stretched and kicked a little sand.

"C'mon big boy, I'll race you to the water." With that she took off and raced down the beach.

I looked after her, shrugged and turned round to lift my surf-board off the top of the Beetle. Having done that, I removed my clothes, revealing a tee-shirt and swimming shorts, and donned my wet suit and gloves. Then, picking up my towel, I strolled down the beach. Jaylee was already in the water, splashing about and throwing seaweed at a little dog that was darting back and forth at the water's edge, its owner motionlessly gawping at Jaylee.

"Put your tongue back!" said I as I patted the man on his shoulder. The latter shook his head as if coming out of a trance.

"Er, she's, er, . "He coughed

"Yes, she is, VERY...." replied I, and the man collected his dog, fell over a small rock, and scampered away in embarrassment to his large and angry looking wife a few yards further down the beach. It was a great afternoon, surfing, lying in the sun, swimming, and Jaylee was great company, bubbly, and full of life. To me she was like a fresh spring breeze. My life had been so drab since leaving home in Zambia and my break-up with Nicki just a few weeks back had been devastating. Our last talk had been of marriage and then I discovered that she was only using me to get out of her parents home, she couldn't wait for me, I take time to do things, and so went off with the next door neighbour. What hurt I most in this encounter, was that we had both remained virgins, not allowing ourselves to be in a situation where we might break our own decision to wait until the wedding night to explore each other's bodies and sexuality, yet she had jumped into bed and had sex with her neighbour after just one afternoon at a beach party. All this had been a heavy weight in my heart, I had tried to drown myself out in False Bay, a mile out from Muizenberg, and had failed – I was too good a swimmer. In any case, I didn't really WANT to take my life, just make a gesture. So Jaylee had pushed all that into the background, and as we lay side by side with our backs absorbing the hot African sun, it did seem that the wounds would heal. After a while, the sun was getting weaker and very close to the horizon.

“Hey babe!” I said as I sat up. “As you’ve got nobody to cook you any food . . .”

“What makes you think I can’t cook!.....” she demanded as she too sat up.

“Listen honey, before you judge my remark – I’m not suggesting that you can’t cook, just that, well, there’s no-one at home is there ---“I was cut off as her lips met mine and we both fell back on the towels.

“So, what have you got in mind my love?” she asked as I gasped for breath.

“Er, I have an account at the Cape Town Savoy Grill – thought you might like to get something to eat there . . .”

“The Savoy Grill! I can’t go there!”

“Why not?!”

“Look at me, look closely!”

“You’re gorgeous, so don’t they allow gorgeous women there or something . . .?”

She giggled, “No, not that, look closer!”

“What am I looking for?”

“My eyes!”

“That’s not hard – I fell in them earlier . . .”

“Yes, but they SLANT”

“Yes, so wha... OH I SEE!”

“Yes, I’m MALAY, a NON-WHITE, I’m not allowed in the Savoy Grill!”

“Well, that’s ridiculous!”

“You try and tell the police that – they’ll arrest both of us! – they may do that any way!”

“Why?”

“You’ve been here on the beach with me all day, having sex with a non-white is an offence....”

“But I haven’t had sex...”

“Try telling them that...”

“Let’s go!”

“Where?”

“Get changed first, then I’ll think what I am going to do next!”

We returned to the Beetle, I sat in the 'nose' changing within my huge bath sheet, Jaylee chose to stand at the back of the Beetle and change in full view of any passing stranger – of which there were none, fortunately. Back on the road I had an idea.

“Right, put these on!” I said handing Jaylee my dark glasses.

“What for . . . Oh I SEE!” She giggled.

Twenty minutes later we drove into the main streets of the bustling City of Cape Town. It was now dark, as the sun dropped quickly below the horizon, and I pulled up alongside a window with a small grill in the glass. I pressed a button. After a crackle a voice came out of the speaker.

“Yes, *how may I Help?*”

“We’d like double cheeseburgers with large chips, two tubs of coleslaw, and chocolate milkshakes please.”

“*Coming right up – please move forward to our delivery window at the front of the building.*”

“What a great idea!” laughed Jaylee as she squeezed my left thigh. I felt a surge within me, and reached down to grasp the hand. I brought it up to my mouth. It was small and childlike and soft as I kissed it.

“They don’t call me the ‘Prof’ for nothing!” I laughed, “Right – when we’ve got this we going to eat in the restaurant with the best view in the city!”

“Where’s that, but, I . . .”

“Shut up silly – DEVIL’S PEAK!”

“Oh, wow! That’s fantastic! I’ve never been up there!”

“You’ll love it!”

“Can I take these glasses off now?”

“Yes, it’s too dark for anyone looking in to make any connections.”

I turned the car up Kloof Street and as we passed a large building with blazing lights, loud music and young people all over the steps and porch area I pointed at it and said “That’s where I live, it’s what they call a residential hotel – you know, like flats but with a dining room and lounge that

everybody uses together.”

Jaylee was silent.

“Hey, I know your parents are struggling – and I understand why – someday this will all change, you’ll see!”

“It still doesn’t make this any better . . . You live in a hotel, I live in a shanty on the Cape Flats, you play in a band at the Alhambra and have an account at the Savoy, my dad cleans trains and my mum washes clothes.....”

“So what are you saying..?”

“It’s a fantasy world”

“Sweetheart – we’re going to stop in a moment, it’s been a great day, there’s a wonderful view just round that bend – and this is no fantasy!”

With that, I brought the Beetle to a halt, backed up to the hard standing against the rock face, opened the door and went to the ‘nose’ and took out a blanket.

I opened the passenger door and held out my hand. Jaylee took it and I escorted her to the opposite side of the car park area, a metre or so from the cliff edge. I placed the blanket on the hard rock. It was warm, there was no wind, and no cloud and I sat down beside her and opened up the large bag from the take away. Over 900 metres below us stretched the lights of Cape Town, and in the distance, the other side of Table Bay, where the exclusive holiday hotels were all blinking and twinkling. We laughed, talked, ate and drank our chocolate milkshakes. Then I cleared up the mess, placed everything into the bag and walked off to find a bin to dispose of it. As I returned, Jaylee was standing near the edge, looking out over the City. I came up behind her and wrapped my arms about her.

“You watch out my love – I don’t want you falling over that edge!” I scolded.

“No chance of that.” She replied as she took my right hand and placed it firmly in the area between her upper thighs. She moved a little sensuously.

A shockwave went through me as my fingers felt her nakedness underneath the dress, and I remembered the beach. She twisted her head back and placed her mouth on mine, open and her tongue was searching for mine. I froze. I was inexperienced in this; I’d never been that close even to Nicki, I just didn’t know what to do. I muttered something and released her so that I could tie my shoe-lace. I turned towards the blanket and thought that it should be folded up now – anything to avoid the inevitable. I thought of Jaylee as sweet and innocent and didn’t want to be the one to take that away – no matter how much she seemed willing to do this. I turned back to say that they should consider going back down and there she stood in the half light, with her dress in her hand, her hair falling down over her naked shoulders. An angel, so beautiful – and she wanted me. I couldn’t tell her how scared I was, how I didn’t know what to do. I just picked up the blanket, folded it and put it into the Beetle. I heard the door open and she had got back into the car. I walked to the driver’s door, shutting the bonnet as I did so. I couldn’t see her face in the passenger area of the car. I opened the door and the interior light came on. She was sitting motionless on the seat, her dress clutched in her lap, her breasts glistening in the twinkling lights. She said nothing. I sat beside her and briefly looked at her face. Her eyes never moved. Still she said nothing.

“Hey Beagle, c’mon, you’re not being very friendly....”

It was Anne, she was tugging at my shirt and leering at me through the smoke haze – what a different picture this was to the one I had just been dragged away from.

I reached down, raised the pint glass and, with one movement, the pint of beer was gone. I stood up, Anne still trying to open my shirt buttons. Said a few words and moved towards the door. Anne called after me – “Hang on darlin’ – I’ll just get my bag.... What room number..?”

“365.” Fox replied, “Better make it quick – someone else might get there before you....”

In the lift I thought back to Jaylee. Sitting in the front seat of the Beetle, silent, staring straight ahead. I started the engine, the air-cooled motor ticked over at just a few hundred RPM and I kept the interior light on as I looked again at Jaylee.

“Put your dress on and do up your seatbelt, please, sweetheart.”

“DON’T SWEETHEART ME!”

She roughly pulled on her dress and slammed the seatbelt harness into the holder between the seats. I sighed; I was unable to understand women!

In the lift I smiled – that was 40 years ago, and I STILL didn't understand them! Jaylee was looking at me now as I engaged the gear and turned the car towards the exit of the parking area.

"It's because I'm Malay, because I'm not classed as a white, and you're a rich white who doesn't want to lose his place...."

"Oh Jaylee...." I started to say and placed my hand on hers.

"Don't!" she flung my hand off.

"That's got nothing to do with anything! Earlier I said you're beautiful and I meant it!"

She said nothing. A few minutes later we were driving along the main highway towards the 'flats'. I suddenly turned the Beetle off the highway and onto Bleuberg Strand, a long white beach, almost exactly opposite Table Mountain thirty miles or so away across the huge Table Bay. This was the resort area, the twinkling hotels we had seen from the parking lot on Devil's Peak. The Beetle came to a standstill with its wheels on the edge of the white sand. I got out and went and stood by the sea, listening to the waves, watching them burst into frothing foam and receding once again. My mind was in turmoil, my heart pounding, how I wanted her, how it hurt inside. I wrestled with my conscience, the feelings I had developed for Jaylee were growing by the minute. I kicked angrily at a small rock and it rolled down into the water. There was a slight sound behind me. I turned slowly; there was Jaylee, tears streaming down her face, standing just a foot away from me. I grasped both arms and pulled her close. Her face came up to meet mine and we kissed for a long, long time. The sound of seagulls made me sit up, it was dawn. Was that a dream? Then, the small warm body beside me in the blanket moved, and I knew it wasn't.

The lift doors parted and I stepped out into the hallway on the third floor. I was really mixed up, my heart was saying "you did it then – why not now?" my brain was saying "you are married, to Sara, you have principles, stick to them...."

I kicked open the door of the room, stepped in and kicked it shut behind me. I could hear the sounds of raucous laughter as Fox followed me upstairs with two of the women. I snorted in disgust and went into the bathroom. I stripped off, looked at my slightly flabby naked body in the mirror, laughed, and got into the shower. A few minutes later I flopped naked on bed. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. I ignored it.

"Oh Beagle...." Came a soft cooing call.

I ignored it, though my heart was pounding, I was full of mixed feelings, but I knew I must maintain fidelity. There was a burst of persistent knocking, getting stronger and stronger with even more pleas through the door. I grabbed my robe, stepped out onto the balcony and slid the door across behind me. I breathed in the sweet fresh night air of the dales. No, there was not going to be another Jaylee, not tonight.

Then I remembered – I'd forgotten about 'Grubby'. I called his room on the internal phone.

"Grubby? Hi, have you been briefed on the mission?"

"Yes, I'm all set – is your colleague coming?"

"Not in the way you mean," I chuckled, "No, he's just a minder while I'm here."

"Oh, OK, well, I've ordered breakfast for first light by room service, I suggest you do the same."

"I will, I'll see you in the morning."

A click ended our brief call.

Chapter 12

There was a strange eeriness at two o'clock in the morning out in the countryside. I wasn't able to sleep; it was too quiet at the Brick Kiln, the three star hotel in West Yorkshire I had moved on to after the 'safe house' in the Dales. I had a second floor room with a small balcony looking out across the fields in the direction of Skipton. Not only was it too quiet, it was also humid and muggy and something was bothering me. The previous afternoon I'd been into Skipton and carried out a small operation for the 'business' with 'Grubby'. This had meant pretending to be someone that I wasn't and convincing a woman in the local branch that I had just come from a holiday in France. This had been a deliberate act of entrapment as I persuaded the woman to break company instructions and operate outside the official security rules. It had been an emotional strain and I knew that she would go to pieces when the phone call from HQ came through telling her she was suspended. This was one element of the job I didn't enjoy, I always advocated being truthful and up-front about matters but in the business we had to constantly convince people we were something other than reality. I allowed my eyes to traverse the fields outside my window in that unseeing way people do when they're thinking about the events just prior to the moment. I must've subconsciously picked up something in that scan, for then I began to focus on the area at the end of the left hand fence line. There were horses in the field, a beautiful bay gelding, a larger roan, and a black Arab, glistening in the moonlight. No, it wasn't them, it was something else. Spotting something moving in undergrowth was common pastime when I was a young man in Africa, those skills stayed with me. Just a slight movement, a flash of something was enough for me to lock onto. Recalling that made me think about a time in 1960 when I was 12 years old. In Livingstone, a border town in South West Zambia, where thousands of years of shifting sands had deposited tons of the Kalahari Desert, I spent many days after school in the game park, down beside the Zambezi River. White sand glowed bright in the sunlight where the river had washed the silica crystals clean. I liked that part of Africa, to this day it holds a special place in my heart. The Livingstone Game Park (now Called Mosi-Oa-Tunya Reserve) was one place in which I enjoyed after-school activities, school finishing at around 1:00 p.m. in most African states because it was too hot to hold classes in the afternoon. One afternoon around three o'clock, I was waiting outside the main gate for the duty warden to collect me for couple of hours of animal stock counting. As was my custom, I looked around, from the river to the main gate; it always had small game wondering what was on the other side of the fence as they tried in vain to get through the mesh. Thus, I was looking intently into the undergrowth, motionless, for I had seen something sinister! I couldn't be sure, but there was something there, not a small deer, not even one of the dog family. It too had stopped moving, watching me as I was watching it. Suddenly, and with only the slightest warning growl a large male Leopard charged me, straight out of the undergrowth. I stood motionless, unable to move out of fear, the charge would only be twenty or thirty seconds, then the huge cat would knock me on my back, its teeth in my throat. I closed my eyes. A sharp crack broke the silence. It was one of the Rangers, he'd used a knock out dart to bring the Leopard down, just twenty paces from its deadly leap at my throat! The question in my mind was why? Why had this lovely creature attacked me without provocation? Together the Ranger and I examined it and after he removed the dart we could see the reason. In the upper left shoulder was a small wound, beginning to fester. It must have been in a lot of pain.

"Poachers!" I said, cursing their existence, "Now I understand, he was in pain, and a human caused it, he came here because he could smell humans, poor boy!"

"I get the vet", the Ranger said and called on his radio.

"Mulungu base, Mulungu Base, this Ranger 27 calling, how do you read? Over"

"Ranger 27, your signal is 5-9, go ahead, over."

"Mulungu – we need a vet down at the Game Park main entrance, we have a leopard down with a bad wound, over"

"Roger Ranger 27, message understood, we will contact the vet and get him down to you as quick as we can, over."

"Thank you Mulungu, Ranger 27 out and clear"

The vet came, properly anaesthetised the animal and worked on the wound, the bullet had passed through a fleshy part, missing the shoulder blade. That was lucky, the poachers used the 'Firenza',

a large bore rifle capable of killing almost anything, had the bullet hit the shoulder blade, the leopard would have been on three legs. Three days later, the Ranger called me and told me that the leopard had been transported across to the Kafue Game Reserve where once it had regained its strength it would be released. I was pleased to hear that, in the end, no long term harm done. I was still alive and notching up more visits to the area. I glanced down at my watch; the time was now three a.m. I'd stood and relived the episode with the leopard for an hour. Still, I had a feeling about the hedge in that field. I could see it a little clearer now as the beginnings of the summer dawn were slowly increasing the visibility. Then my suspicions were confirmed. There WAS something in that hedge. Slowly, and with cautious glances about, a fox emerged, skirted the field and disappeared into the other hedge on the opposite side, it was looking for rabbits. I sighed, nothing to worry about.

"Silly git! Getting the jitters over a fox!" I laughed, threw myself back onto the bed and managed to recover the rest of the night's sleep. Dreams of skulking shadowy figures dancing in the hedge flooded my mind. The morning brought another assignment for 'Grubby' and I across in Lancashire, at a nuclear research establishment north of Preston, and Grubby supplied all the needed details of the assignment. It was a long day. Most of the time, owing to my qualifications with uranium and plutonium reprocessing, my cover was to check out the fast-breeder reactors installed in the test area. The difficulty always with investigative sciences is anonymity. Sometimes I felt very alone, not even being able to tell my wife that I was involved in investigations at very high level for commercial insurance fraud often made me want to quit. However, this assignment was necessary because of the risk to human life if the perpetrator pursued his idiotic course. It was necessary to view all of the operations obliquely so in order to move locations within the site it had been arranged for me to have another small job in the loading area. Doing that took all my energy in the hot and humid weather. At the end of it, I needed to shower and prepare for dinner. As I stood under the lukewarm stream of water, feeling refreshed after the heat of the day, my thoughts went back to day's work, receiving instructions to meet Grubby and then to execute those instructions had not been easy – and there was a bad taste in my mouth as I considered it's consequences – someone high up in that site was going to get a really unpleasant surprise when they were arrested and indicted. On the other hand, they had jeopardised the lives of fifty others by their stupidity. I resolved there and then not to get too involved in it, I had done my part and was now out of it. I dressed in clean clothes, casual but smart and headed for the dining room. The food in the Brick Kiln was excellent, far above its three star rating. As I made my way to dining area, I decided to have a bar meal this time as I didn't have the time to sit in the restaurant, I needed an early night. The following day was going to be a big one. I had seen the 'for your eyes only' envelope and read its contents. To order my bar meal I needed to go to reception. The 'blonde' oriental receptionist made me think back to Jaylee as I stood waiting for my turn to speak to her. How disappointed I had been in Jaylee, even now in my latter years, I still shifted uneasily as I recalled that night we had spent together. Jaylee, the 'sweet innocent little Malay' had been hired by my friends to seek me out and play out the charade on the beach and up on Devil's Peak that had culminated in the night on Bleuberg Strand. It was a few days after the fateful evening that I was making my way down to the docks to start a new evening 'job' as a driver for a private car hire company that I saw her, along with a dozen or so other Malay girls. They were meeting the sailors off a recently berthed US Navy aircraft carrier, she was a hooker. I was staggered. My 'friends' wanted to help me lose my virginity, Jaylee was an excellent choice, she certainly did that very well, for hundreds of people no doubt. She had completely fooled me. I cursed as I thought back to how I felt about her, how that evening had been and how it developed. It had certainly taught me more than one lesson about some women. I was really glad that all we had done that night was lie and watch the stars until we fell asleep. Seeing her with the sailors had shown me that she may have had more than one communicable disease to pass on to me. Appearing so sweet and lovely and 'untouched' had completely fooled me. I swore I'd never take any woman at face value ever again. It accounted for the cautious way I had been with Yolande. I had switched off and become very wary of women and avoiding similar situations for several years. I became known as 'iron man' because I seemed to have no emotions and couldn't be moved from my solid stance against any kind of strong friendship with women, not even giving a friendly peck on the cheek or a goodbye hug. Everyone was at arm's length, or beyond. Even in our early courting

days I wouldn't hold Sara's hand when we were out walking. On one occasion we were in a dark area on an uneven footpath, I offered my umbrella for her to hold on and follow me rather than hold her hand. I recalled just how much she must have cared about me in those early days; most girls would have left me alone, thinking me very odd. My exterior façade of a flint-like serious man couldn't be farther from the truth, for I am quite sensitive, kind and gentle inside. Many who could discern that quality were willing to forgive the hard exterior and take on the friendship I so needed. I put on this façade to protect myself from getting hurt again, a fiancée that jilted me and a hooker that misled me brought a great deal of pain into my heart. Even as I stood waiting to speak to the receptionist I could still feel the pain inside.

"Good evening sir, how may I help you?" The Receptionist ended my agony and forced me to return to the present, I ordered my bar meal and indicated where I was going to be seated.

"Thank you sir, I'll get that through to the kitchen straight away." She smiled, such a smile, with twinkling eyes, this young woman knew about customer relations and making people feel welcome. She would go far, I was sure of that.

"Thank YOU, I appreciate your help."

"You're welcome."

For a few seconds in that face, that smile, I saw Jaylee, but that was just a fleeting moment. I thought how odd it is when a person's thoughts all come together and make sense. So much water under the bridge, so much time and a lot of love had changed my attitude. I was grateful to the beautiful Sara who had stuck with my eccentric ways for over thirty years; she had taught me the meaning of love and taken the burning out of the past. She had watched me change from someone who her friends had thought was rude, such as when I made my exit quickly from parties with barely a goodbye, to someone who now makes the point of hugging and kissing all of them, warmly shaking the hands of the men too. What a change, yet even as I thought about it I mused upon the fact that the closer I get to someone and the more I like them the harder it is to hug and kiss them. There must be some psychological explanation; I didn't really want to explore that. I found a small table in the corner of the lounge, facing the door as usual, and sat, watching the guests as they came and went, my thoughts far from Jaylee and that night on the sands at Bleuberg Strand. My bar meal of lamb chops, onion mash and fresh vegetables arrived along with my chosen pint, I thanked the young man who had brought it and took my time about eating it, savouring the delicious lamb between sips of cool dark bitter. My mind always hovering close to the past, it didn't need much to trigger a flood of memories. As I gazed out of the window at the Yorkshire landscape, I looked at a flat topped hill in the middle distance. From my seat it was not dissimilar to Table Mountain in Cape Town. At the time of my encounter with Jaylee I had been living at the residential hotel in Kloof Street, Cape Town, shortly before I moved up to Johannesburg. My room was on the south west side of the house that was annexed to the hotel and a few hundred metres higher up the street. Looking out of my bedroom window I was met with the huge monolith known as Table Mountain, about 1.5 kilometres away. I could see the cable cars going up and down twice an hour. Kloof Street ran from the main city area of Cape Town at almost sea level and rose sharply in less than two kilometres up to the 'kloof' or 'split' where Table Mountain met Lions Head at roughly 500 metres above the sea. I had been told many times that following it up and then turning towards the mountain, I would be able to walk almost all the way to the top. I had laughed at this idea and accused those suggesting it of trying to kill me off. However, one day I had been persuaded to try this along with a group of friends who had done it before. They had maps with a full key, path markers and safe routing, so I decided to make the climb. We drove up in a friend's mini-bus and parked in a public picnic area in the 'kloof' and set off at a steady pace, easy at first, but soon were feeling the steepness of the incline. After about half an hour we reached a huge rock, to one side of which was a sheer drop of over 700 metres and the other side was loose shale, dense gorse and trees. Tom, the leader of the group, told us not to worry.

"This is the only hard bit, see this chain?" he tugged on a stout steel chain hanging down the rock, "Well, you grab it tight and swing out to the left, this rock is round and there is a wide ledge the other side – I will go now and fling the chain back..." With that he swung out over the precipice and disappeared.

A few seconds later the chain returned with a jangling sound and the next one of the party followed suit. Then I was invited to go. I shuddered as I remembered it, in recent times, following the trauma of 9/11, I had not been able to cope with heights, but back then in Cape Town, no such phobia existed. I grasped the chain, swung to the left, felt the exhilaration of my feet dangling down over nothing, and then the reassuring firmness of the ledge and the helping hands of my friends. They passed me back behind them so that they could help the next one to safety. "Wonderful!" I had gasped and clambered up into a cleft in the rocks above the ledge. Soon we were all safely onto the ledge and it was time for the final push to the top. It took another hour to reach the Tabletop café situated on almost completely flat rock. Once the mountain would have been 2000 metres high, but something had taken the top half off leaving it like a flat table and contributing to the name Table Mountain. All over the top in shallow depressions there were pools of clear drinkable water. I walked over to the northern edge and looked down; there was Cape Town, 1000 metres below, looking like a perfectly crafted model. I looked out across the bay to Bleuberg Strand, past Robben Island, with its walled prison holding Nelson Mandela. Over to the left was Lion's Head considerably lower than the 'table' and seeming very odd from that vantage point when usually it towers over the high rise hotels at Seapoint on the Atlantic side of the City. We spent an hour or so enjoying the fresh air and the tea and cakes from the café and then Tom, as leader of the group, pointed out that it was approaching the time of day when the tablecloth is on the table. This phenomenon is similar to cloud that forms on the Rock of Gibraltar, the Levanter. It occurs when dew-carrying air is forced up the southern side of the table and then hits the 1000 metre point, becomes dense cloud and streams off the northern side over the City, looking like a large white table cloth. This happens almost every day in mid-afternoon, just about the time we were finishing our teas. I decided that going back that way would be boring, with only the chain to excite me, so, in spite of the pleas not to be stupid, I bade my friends farewell and headed for a ravine I had seen to the South, towards Devil's Peak. I found it in less than ten minutes and began the descent. The ravine ran down at a steep angle and was full of shale. As soon as I stepped onto this, it began moving and I descended the entire length of the ravine, around 150 metres, without another step, as if on a surf board. The ravine levelled out onto a flat area with a slight slope. I looked back up at the café with its balcony jutting out over the precipice with the cable car terminal beside it. The cloud was just forming, I looked again towards the way I needed to go, there was still over 800 metres to the upper road that passed by the other cable car terminal. I started to walk on down the gentle slope. Suddenly the cloud poured down off the table top and enveloped the entire northern side of the mountain. I walked on, feeling about gingerly with my feet and hands. After a dozen or so paces I could hear the cable car in the cloud making its half-hourly run, the descending one would pass its rising twin just below my position. I felt a rock in front of me, and decided to sit astride it and wait for the cloud to pass, which it usually does fairly quickly. Thus I sat, waiting patiently for the dense cloud to clear, the cable car sound was getting louder. Then, as suddenly as it had enveloped me, the cloud began to disperse, and I looked down from my rocky perch. Below me was an almost 800 metre sheer drop, I had been just one step away from eternity. If I had tried to soldier on in the cloud, I would have died there that day. As the cloud thinned rapidly sunshine returned and I waved to the ascending cable car, one or two waved back. I clambered back off the rock and went more to the right, finding another steep ravine with more shale. Thus began my second episode of sliding, until I hit hard ground and then was forced to keep the momentum by running. My rapid descent continued with me often falling, crashing through young pine trees, and eventually pitching headlong into the shallow ditch beside the upper lateral road. I looked back up at the giant monolith. "Whoa whoa that was some descent!" I cried. The others would have just about passed round the rock and chain by now, and I had just 600 metres to walk home. I sniffed at myself and laughed at the dank smell of pine oil. "I smell like a bottle of disinfectant!" In twenty minutes I was back at 103 Kloof Street and taking a shower. Then I dressed and made my way to the communal dining area and was already tucking into my food when the others finally got back, hot, sticky and dying of thirst. Thinking about that day long ago I realised how fool-hardy that run down Table Mountain had been. I sighed and got on with the task of demolishing the bar meal. Later, as I lay on my bed, all thoughts of Jaylee long past, I was soon asleep, my dreams carrying images of Table Mountain and that speedy descent until the alarm woke me suddenly and it was early morning. I had booked

an early breakfast at 5:30 am as I'd arranged to meet Grubby at six. Together we drove to Rochdale and took a train to Manchester Piccadilly. Neither of us spoke during this first part of the journey, we had received our instructions in an envelope eight hours earlier and there was little to discuss. Neither felt like talking about breakfast, the weather or our hotels. After a short train ride to Manchester airport, we boarded a flight to Istanbul, only then did we start to talk, just small talk. Talking about the assignment was always taboo.

"Good night?" Grubby asked

"Sound, only woke up when the alarm went – didn't feel like getting up though! Just as well I had booked room service for 5:30, or maybe I wouldn't have got up."

"Know what you mean, the early daylight helps though."

"This is the only flight HQ could get us on, early isn't it?!"

"Oh well, we'll be back earlier than usual at least"

"Guess so, how about a coffee?" I caught the eye of a flight attendant.

"Yes sir -?"

"Will you be serving coffee on the flight?"

"Yes we will sir, in about ten minutes; lunch will be served just before we land."

"That sounds fine to me – could we have some water in the meantime please?"

"Certainly," and he went off to get two plastic bottles and cups from the drinks locker.

On the ground at Istanbul, we hailed a taxi and in ten minutes or so were in the Grand Hotel Gülsoy at Sezadebasi, a couple of blocks away from the University. As we entered the hotel and met the concierge in the lobby, he had an envelope in his hand with the name 'Beagle' written on it. I made myself known to him and received the envelope. In the lift I opened it, inside was a note which simply said "meeting at Imroz meyhane (pub/bar) in Ismetiye Cadesi, 15:30." The assignment was on and brought forward by nearly four hours. We were going to have a more flexible schedule for our return home the next day. We decided to deposit our luggage and go down for a cool drink before we needed to go out to the meeting with our clients and provide them with whatever was necessary to fulfil their needs. They had reported to our controller that they suspected a senior member of their staff of 'losing' expensive equipment and subsequently claiming the loss from the company insurance to acquire the replacement. Apart from that we had no information until we met with the clients. After depositing our luggage in our respective rooms we took the lift back down to the ground floor and went through to the bar. As we passed by a leaflet stand, I grabbed a handful as I usually did and Grubby raised his eyebrows, as he usually did.

"Information gathering, old man." I said as I stuffed them into my pocket.

"Thought that was my job."

"Then you have the leaflets." I held them out to him.

"I don't need them."

"OK, so tell me what you know about Istanbul."

"Istanbul, once known as Byzantium in Roman times, and later as Constantinople, sits astride the Bosphorus, a narrow strait dividing East from West, and a gateway to the Black Sea." he began.

"That much I know" I replied, "Go on –"

"Well, it goes back a long way well before the beginning of the Greek Empire when it was called Byzantium."

"I'm listening –"

"I'm running out of ideas apart from the fact that it isn't the capital today."

"Well, let me read from the leaflet - The mid 400's AD was a time of enormous upheaval in the empire. Barbarians conquered the western Roman Empire while the Eastern, also called the Byzantine Empire, kept Constantinople as its capital. Later, the Ottoman Turks lead by Sultan Mehmet II conquered Constantinople in 1453. Renamed Istanbul, it became the third and last capital of the Ottoman Empire. By the mid 1500's, Istanbul, with a population of almost half a million, was a major cultural, political, and commercial centre. During WWI Istanbul was occupied by the allies."

"That's interesting."

"Yes it is, a bit of cultural background never hurts anyone."

"So is that it then?"

“No, there’s more...”

Grubby sighed, rolled his eyes and said, “Go on...”

“When the Republic of Turkey was born in 1923 after the War of Independence, Kemal Ataturk moved the capital to the city of Ankara. But Istanbul has continued to expand dramatically; today its population is approximately 15 million and increases at an estimated 700,000 immigrants per year. Industry has expanded even as tourism has grown. It continues to be a city that creates its own history at the intersection where both Continents meet – and yes, THAT is it!”

“Phew, my head’s reeling!”

Drinks over we returned to our rooms to freshen up and look like businessmen. Then we met back in front of reception, and, leaving our keys and passports with the receptionist, we set off down the narrow street that ran beside the hotel. I grinned at Grubby, we both liked this sort of assignment, it was more consultancy than hands on.

“This should suit an old woman like you, Grubby, nice cushy little advice session.”

He grinned and made a mock punch at my arm as we rounded a corner behind the hotel and down a narrow alleyway. This was a back route to the wider Ismetiye Cadesi, and as we walked down it we passed through one of many “small street markets. Suddenly, out of another side street came a car and we just managed to step aside from the path of the car as it missed us by inches. We both fell into a fruit stall as it screeched to a halt. Then two men emerged from doorways and another three from the car. All had guns at the ready. Grubby and I stood up slowly with our hands in the air.

“You will walk towards us, slowly now, we are Police!”

We were arrested. For what? We were amazed, we hadn’t expected this, hit men paid by the fraudsters was one thing we always had in mind, but not arrest. Mistaken identity came to mind as I stood facing the menacing group of men. “What is the meaning of this?” demanded Grubby, “Look, we are British businessmen on out for a stroll before dinner....”

“Shut up and get in the car, you are under arrest!”

“For what, may I ask?” I demanded with wild gestures, then on seeing the nearest man fingering the trigger, raised both hands again, slowly.

“No talking, now – get in the car!”

We reluctantly got into the car and it sped away. For few moments we were concerned for our lives, but then I noticed something on the jacket of one of the men. I gestured by moving my eyes so that Grubby followed them, when he saw the small badge, he nodded. The badge was worn by the Turkish Secret Police; now we knew who had picked us up. We relaxed a little; they weren’t known for shooting visitors to the city unless they were enemies of the country. The car turned this way and that, and eventually came to a standstill near a small doorway; we were bundled through it and made to sit in two chairs that were placed before us. Our hands were then tied and something clicked as our hands were pressed against the back. This wasn’t normal diplomatic police routine. The fat one that seemed to be in charge spoke first, “So what is it that brings you to Istanbul?” he demanded

“We told you once already, business, OUR business!”

I received a severe blow to my right cheekbone for that remark.

“Ow!” I retaliated, and tried to ease the pain in the cheek by rubbing it against my upper arm. “Who are you, I demand your name, rank and senior officer’s name?”

“You do not ask questions!”

“Oh yes I do!”

Another smack on the cheek bone.

“Who were you going to meet, where was the meeting place?”

Two more hard blows to my head forced me to wince and gulp as I struggled for air.

For about 20 minutes we were subjected to intense interrogation and had mind probes pinned through the skin on each side of our heads and connected to a large laptop computer. The men shouted small commands at the two of us, repeating the same questions again and again, all the while watching the monitor screen. The buzzing sensation in our heads was almost unbearable. I wondered who had sold them this technology. I was sure that we were going to suffer some long term side effects.

“What are you doing to our minds?” I demanded.

“Shut up and answer the questions, then you can go!”

“How can I shut up, and answer questions?!”

“I beat you hard in a minute, you think you’re smart!”

These definitely were not procedures I would consider to be usual for routine questioning, even by secret police. Something about the way they carried them out made me uneasy and I suspected that they were not who they appeared to be. Then it became obvious to both of us, these were fake police; they had not once referred to Police procedures nor had they formally charged me or Grubby with anything. It seemed that they were looking for information and hoped that their scare tactics would work on us. How wrong they were! We could never be made to tell anything about our work, not even if the softest sweetest feminine charmer were to try and get it – would be more fun, but no more productive than any other method. Suddenly the door burst open and more police came in, this time they were real police, and swarmed all over the kidnappers, rounded up all five and handcuffed them. The final gesture was to free us by releasing the handcuffs that held us to the backs of the chairs.

“Sorry for your troubles, Sir, we hope that this mis-informed group of men have not spoiled your enjoyment of our great City.”

“Well, just a little bit maybe—“ I laughed and Grubby added “We don’t feel we’ve been welcomed to a city unless some of the local people snatch us off the street and beat us...”

“Sorry, sorry, oh, so sorry!”

“Look, it’s not your fault – you have done the right thing by releasing us, the matter is over now. However, we are puzzled, who are these men, why did they grab us and how did you know that we were here?”

“We think they are attached to a local Mafia family, I think you are dressed too well, they will always look for people who are not just tourists.”

“Well, they wanted something from us, not money, look at that equipment, why did they attach these things to us?”

“Sir, we will interrogate them and find out, but right now I apologise once again for your inconvenience.”

“You still haven’t answered my question, how did you know we were kidnapped and brought here?”

“One of our plain clothes officers was watching a market trader that we suspect is engaged in criminal activities when you were snatched. He radioed in with the license plate of the car, it brought us here. We will charge them with impersonating police officers for a start, we can’t be happy about tourists thinking they have had a bad time with our police!”

“Well, we aren’t exactly tourists, we are here on business.”

“Can we take you somewhere, back to your hotel maybe...?”

“Well, we were going to meet someone in a bar on Ismetiye Cadesi. Maybe you could drop us there?”

“It is the least we could do to restore your confidence in Turkish Police.”

Thus, the Police car sped down to the ‘meyhane’ called Imroz and there we met our clients who had waited patiently for us to arrive. The two men were older than us, wearing very expensive suits and gold jewellery. We felt slightly under-dressed, but were glad we had at least put on our best suits. One of the men stood up and approached us.

“You OK?” he asked with a slight raise of his right eyebrow as he extended his hand. “I am Hans-Fritz Gruber of the Swiss National Supply Company. I head up the Turkish operations.”

I took and shook it and then as he turned towards Grubby I replied, “Fine! Sorry for the slight delay.” I ran my fingers through my ruffled hair, conscious that we must have looked a little dishevelled.

“That’s OK, this is my colleague Ahmet, we were just about to order something to eat – shall I get something for you as well?”

“Yes, please do – anything you’d eat will be fine by us.”

“OK – see that door there – “ he gestured to a dark brown door over to his left, “go through it and then take the second door to the left – it’s the room we’ve booked. I’ve checked it for bugs.” He said that with the air of someone saying he just checked the wanted ads for a second hand bicycle. We headed down to the room with his colleague Ahmet, made ourselves comfortable and

engaged in small talk. The first man, Gruber, came in, followed by a waiter who placed several large platters of food in the middle of the table and a stack of white clean dinner plates at the end. Placing knives and forks alongside them, he accepted a small tip and left. We began to serve ourselves and eat the food, which appeared to be some lamb or goat dish with spinach and potatoes. The meeting progressed in spite of the delay. There was a lot of information exchanged, the men told us that over a period of three years they had obtained a serious record with their insurers and premiums were nearly trebled. Their senior executive in charge of procurement had mis-appropriated equipment to the value of over two million US dollars and although the company had been compensated by either cash or replacement, they were very unhappy about the whole situation. The discussion ended and a firm agreement was reached. Using my 'smartphone' I typed out a document which I would later send to HQ giving all the details. Our advice to the clients would be sent from our controller based upon the information I included in the document. The meeting concluded, we returned to the Grand Hotel Gülsoy at Sezadebasi. By now the night was very dark and black. It didn't take much for me to fall into a deep, relaxed sleep, awakened only by the buzz of my portable alarm clock. For a brief moment, I thought the electronic probes were back in my head. I dropped my feet to the floor and stood up. Forty minutes later I was all ready to go, grabbed my bag and left the room, heading for the breakfast room. I needed a good breakfast before the flight home. I met Grubby, who also was ready to go and we were soon sitting by the table that had been chosen for us that morning. Breakfast over, we headed for the airport, boarded a flight to Manchester and soon were on our way back. The flight was uneventful and we thought about the events of the previous day; I got out a book which I read while Grubby dozed. Soon we were advised that we were making our descent and I woke Grubby so that he could fasten his seatbelt and prepare for the landing after which, we retraced our train journeys to Rochdale where we took the car back to the hotels, I dropped Grubby off before I went back to Skipton and the Brick Kiln. I turned on my laptop, transferred the document from my Smartphone and connected to the hotel's data line. After sending the document to the office, I shut down the laptop, took a quick shower and fell into bed. I endured a night of extreme restlessness waking regularly and crying out before realising that I wasn't being interrogated any more. In the early morning I woke with start, it was not yet dawn. I decided to get up anyway and went to take a shower, after which, dressed in a white towelling robe and stepped onto the balcony to look out at the early morning mist over the Dales. In the distance I could see a number of sheep and in the paddock near my room, there were the horses. The sky was tinged pink as the sun began to make its presence known. I decided that I should get dressed and, having done so, went for a walk for half an hour in the crisp Yorkshire air. Even though it was midsummer, there was still a bite to the early morning air. I felt hungry all of a sudden and headed back to the hotel by the quickest route. "Good morning Sir" said the concierge and handed me a copy of the Daily Mail and an envelope marked "beagle", inside of which was a note from HQ with the simple message, "Document received, mission accomplished, return to base." I did as I was told and after breakfast, checked out, then took the A59 across to M6, and joined the southbound carriageway. I noticed that I was followed onto the slip road by black Jaguar, so I just cruised on the M6 at 55mph, the Jaguar did the same. I continued on down the M6 with the Jaguar holding station fifty metres or so behind me. As I approached Hilton Park services I suddenly, without indication, darted off down the slip road and into the car park. The Jaguar also left the motorway and came to a standstill two rows behind me and to my left. I could not see the driver. No-one got out. I figured I had nothing to lose and so I went into the shop, bought a few items and then went to the restaurant area and bought coffee. When I thought I'd stopped long enough, I went back outside. The Jaguar was still in the same place. I smiled at the consoling thought that I had drunk coffee and he hadn't, unless he'd brought his flask. Not needing fuel I still decided to top up anyway and drove into the filling station. So did the Jaguar. I got out and placed the filler unit into the tank. The door of the Jaguar opened slightly and I saw the driver. The man gestured to the cashier that he was in need of assistance, and they spoke over the intercom system. Then a young man emerged and filled the Jaguar's tank with petrol and the driver paid him through the window. However, I had seen enough of the driver to describe him and so I sent details of the description and the car in a text message. Clearly this was one of the people employed by someone we were investigating, or had already investigated, and his intent would be to prevent me from continuing to do my job. I didn't want to consider just

how he intended to do that, or what it might involve. I just wanted to make sure that HQ knew he was on my tail. I received a reply after about a minute, it said "will intercept next junction, remain as if not aware." I re-joined the M6, as did the Jaguar, again about fifty metres behind. I maintained the agreed 55 mph, and the Jaguar did likewise, holding position as before. At the next junction, down the slip road came two Range Rovers, the drivers skilfully calculating where they should enter the traffic. One came out behind me and was positioned to the left of the Jaguar. The second one was able to slip out and take up position just behind the Jaguar. I received a message – "accelerate", and I did as I was bid.

The Range Rovers were joined by two Mercedes saloons; one positioned itself alongside the Jaguar, whilst the other took up station at the front. This would allow the Range Rover to move onto the hard shoulder if the Jaguar driver decided to go that way. Together they held the Jaguar in a box formation at 55 mph. I had reached and maintained 80 mph, putting distance between my car and the box trap that contained the Jaguar. The motorway took a long curve to the right, followed by another to the left, by the time I cleared these bends, the Jaguar was out of sight. A message advised me to leave the motorway at the next junction and then rejoin it when the Jaguar had passed. When I reached the junction and headed up the slip road, I was not seen by the Jaguar, it was now 3 kilometres behind. I stopped once I was clear of motorway restrictions, and waited.

The escorts broke formation and freed the Jaguar which sped off, past the junction where I was waiting. Once the Jaguar passed by at increasing speed, I rejoined and once again maintained 55 mph. The Range Rovers & Mercedes left the motorway at the next junction, their job was done. Soon I was at Junction 15 and left the M6, onto the A50 to cut across the country and join the M1 near Derby. The Jaguar was nowhere to be seen. I was unconcerned. When investigating serious insurance fraud, corrupt business men will resort to many methods to prevent our reports seeing light of day. I was used to this sort of action, and glad to still be alive. Thus, with any possible danger passed, I arrived home and typed up my report. My lovely wife Sara came in from the laundry room.

"How was your week?" she asked as she placed her arm around my neck. I smiled, kissed her and placed my arm around her waist.

"Boring, same old routine, you know" I replied with a mock yawn.

I smiled as I recalled the events of the previous 36 hours. Dear Sara, so little she knew, for her own safety. I looked into the bright blue pools that were her eyes. I took her into my arms. Yes, the mission was fully accomplished. Then with a jangling intrusion I received a telephone call from my boss saying that suddenly, and without warning, the whole operation was closing at the year end, but that the good news was I was offered redeployment in another area where my expertise would be put to greater use. This would also involve travel and even more close proximity work, but I felt it was as well to take this step and at least stay in gainful employment. I looked down at Sara, at least she would be happy if she knew I was going to be in a less risky job, but I couldn't tell her that, not yet. She smiled up at me and knew better than to ask. A sweet kiss was on her lips and I took it.

Chapter 13

It was another glorious day; a whole year had passed by during which time I had gone through the trauma of my redeployment, spent some time on seminars hosted by top level recruitment coaches endeavouring to pull the best of the bunch together as a team. I had undergone a training period for what on paper seemed a straightforward job, but in fact turned out to extremely taxing and stressful owing mainly to the responsibility resting on my shoulders for the safety of the people around me. Thus Sara and I were together on this occasion, most unusual as my job precluded her from even the remotest involvement with what I was doing, to the extent that even at that very moment in time, she was not aware of what I actually did for a living.

“Oh No!” I thought to myself, “I’m turning into my father!”

It was just as well that she didn’t know what I did for it could endanger my life and jeopardise our future together. I had left her at the hotel after breakfast and returned around four o’clock to find her sitting on the patio in front of their ground floor room. I took her in my arms and tenderly kissed her smiling lips. She smiled up at my face, knowing that she couldn’t ask what kind of a day I had had because I’d only smile and say something silly like “Well, I could tell you – but then I’d have to kill you...”

She knew that I had accomplished what I had set out to do for the day because I had an air of confidence and seemed to be quite pleased with myself. She turned and went into the room, filled the small kettle and switched it on whilst I sat down at the patio table and looked out across the small harbour.

“Lovely day isn’t it?” I said, looking up into the cloudless sky

“Yes, I’ve got a bit of a tan already, very warm around lunch time”

“What have you been doing with yourself then?”

“Well, I had a walk, then came back for a dip in the pool and after lunch it was so hot I had a little nap, then came out to read my book here on the patio – and then you came back.”

“Glad you had a few days off to join me this time – sorry I had to go off and leave you all day?”

“Never mind, we can have a walk after dinner, it’ll be light until after 9, there’s a lovely beach out there beyond the harbour entrance.”

I looked down the lawn, past the outdoor swimming pool to the harbour. The tide was in and the water was gently lapping just below the jetty. It was an interesting safe harbour, more fresh water than salt, where the river Avon flows out from Christchurch into the Solent. There was a small island just a little way out from the jetty on which many different waterfowl seemed to have sought safe haven for their nests. I stood up, went into the room and collected my cameras, a small pocket digital, a well-used but reliable single-lens reflex with a zoom lens, and my video camera with its power zoom. Sara tutted, she hated it when I looked like an American tourist with cameras everywhere, I stuck out my tongue and she pretended to hit me.

“The kettle’s about to boil ---“

“Yeah, I know, -- I’ve got to take a few pictures first – be back in a moment, honest!”

“Yeah, right!”

Sara knew that tea often got very cold before I got round to drinking it. I took video footage of my walk down the lawn to the jetty. Then using the digital camera I took shots of the jetty, the island, the harbour and beyond, the river mouth and several boats. Switching to my 300mm Zoom on the SLR, I took a couple of shots of the birds on the island but then concentrated on a small boat making its way from the seaward end of the harbour towards a house opposite me. I took two or three photos and then turned to head back to Sara. I hoped the photos would be clear enough when I returned to the office. I briefly glanced down into the water below and was amazed to see very large fish just near the wall. I watched as they twisted and made a sort of flipping movement at the wall, possibly trying to dislodge seaweed or its tiny inhabitants as a morsel. I worked out that they were Sea Bass, probably about three to four kilos, just about a metre in length, and there were probably enough of them to feed the hotel residents everyday for a month! In a few strides I was making my way back up the lawn, again running my video camera as I did so, and into the frame came Sara, holding up a cup.

“Ah, tea!” I exclaimed as I waved back and hurried on up the patio. We sat and enjoyed the view, sipping on the refreshing brew. I smiled and looked across at Sara.

"I have an idea, let's eat later and go off for a walk in a few minutes, that way we haven't got to worry about getting back before dark"

"Good idea" she replied, "What time shall I book a table for then?"

"Make it about eight, that'll be late enough I think"

She went inside to ring the restaurant to reserve the table, and then we set off, having put away the big cameras and strapping the digital camera onto my belt in its carry pouch.

We walked and talked enjoying the sunshine and the coarse golden sand, stopping now and then to admire the Needles or some other coastal feature of the Isle of Wight, or to get an ice cream.

The beach went a long way, possibly six or eight miles, in a long curve to a small headland, beyond which I had worked out Lymington and eventually the wide Southampton Water must reside. When I calculated we had almost walked for half the time we had allotted in order to get back for dinner, I performed an 'about face' like a soldier, swinging Sara round with me and said – "Time to go the other way now."

She laughed, "You are daft, you know!"

We again laughed and chatted as we headed back along the beach. It was really great to be together instead of rushing back and forth, passing each other like ships in the night, me off to some part of the country for a few days, her getting up at the crack of dawn to go to work, leaving me asleep, or me going out as she was coming in. After a quick shower and change we made their way down to the dining room, the waitress greeted us with a friendly smile and handed us each a menu.

"Can we sit by the window please?" I asked

"Certainly sir, madam, please follow me" and she took us to a table set for two alongside the large window, enabling us to look out down the lawn and across the harbour.

Sara looked around the room and giggled, she nudged me – "Look around; I think we're the YOUNGEST people here!"

I looked around and nodded – "I think you're right!"

We both chuckled for a few minutes as we were into our fifties! I looked at the way the dining room was set out and admired the artistic endeavours by the management as they adhered to the corporate image, but yet were able to add the touch of the seafarer by subtle additions of pictures, small models of boats, braiding and even a small ship's wheel. As we tucked into our starters, I pursued my usual pastime of examining each of my fellow guests and trying to imagine what they did for a living (or in most cases, had done!). At the next table was a tall man with a soft Oxford accent, I figured he could have been an Academic, maybe still was if he was one of the Oxford 'dons' – opposite him was a petite and quite attractive woman, possibly a few years younger than him. She referred to lots of people by name, and it appeared that most of her conversation was about their grown up children and the grandchildren. I could smell a delicate fragrance, one of the fairly expensive well known brands of perfume, each time she gestured and her arm came in my direction. On her hand were many rings of gold, several set with diamonds – or at least they looked like diamonds – but I had already decided she wasn't the sort of pretentious person to wear cubic zirconia if she couldn't afford the real thing. The man was wearing a gold watch on a gold bracelet and as he then gestured towards the window, I noted that it was one of the expensive Swiss ones. They had obviously worked hard for their money and were now enjoying its fruits. I allowed my gaze to move on beyond this couple to a foursome at the next table. What a contrast, these four, two men and two women were speaking quite loudly, the men breaking into guffaws and the women shrieks as something amusing was said. They had finished their meal and were now smoking and finishing off their wine and beers. I always found it offensive when anyone decided to light up as soon as they had finished eating without considering whether the other guests might not wish to eat their meal along with the smoke. I listened to part of their conversation, their accents were from somewhere in the Midlands, not that that in itself was anything to go by, but one of the men kept using a phrase that stirred something in my memory. "It's not what you say, but the way you say it" - who was it that used to say that? I stared up at the ceiling for a few minutes, racking my brains, my brow furrowed.

"Hey – I'm sitting here twiddling my thumbs!"

"Sorry darling – you know how I like to have a bet with myself about the other guests – what do you think of those four over there?"

“Uncouth lot!” she retorted

“Hmm, maybe, but where are they from?”

“I don’t know, can’t even hear what they’re saying.”

“Well, I reckon the one man is from around Coventry, the other is from Nuneaton possibly, and the two women are related and come from around Bromsgrove”

“Oh yeah – you make up some stories!”

“I listened in a bit – got most of that from some of the things they said! – one of the reasons why I always say ‘do not discuss anything private or sensitive when in a public area’ you never know who’s listening.”

“Oh you – you can never stop working!”

“Like that statement for example – that can tell a keen listener more than I’d want them to know!”

“Oh, sorry, only teasing you.”

“Well, never mind, the main course looks like it’s on its way – I’m looking forward to my Sea Bass!”

“Mmmm – here comes my Chicken and spicy potato bake!”

I looked down in disbelief at the fish on my plate, I had a whole side, a complete fillet, the only problem was, it was only about seven inches long and about two inches wide! The whole fish couldn’t have been more than a baby!

“Look at this – is this all they could catch? I saw some fish six times this size just out there – call this a decent portion of Sea Bass?!”

“Shhhh!” hissed Sara, looking about in embarrassment, “Don’t make a fuss, it still looks very nice!”

We tucked into their meal, followed by a delicious crumble and ice cream and then freshly ground coffee. It still wasn’t dark when we left the dining room, so we targeted the patio and sat down to watch the lights coming on all across the harbour and around the lawn. I stared out at the small boats and the wide mouth of the river and as has often been the case, my mind wandered back in time to my days of young manhood in Africa. This hotel on the river mouth reminded me of one that is situated on the confluence of the Zambezi with its largest tributary, the Kafue. I

remembered one occasion when I had reason to visit it and recalled that it had long stretches of beach. Yes beach, fine white sand stretching for several miles along the banks. This part of the Zambezi is near the Caprivi Strip, a narrow piece of Namibia that wedges itself in between Zambia and Zimbabwe, and brings with it large portions of the Namib Desert, depositing this white sand in the river – hence the beaches. I remembered taking a trip across a very wide, deep part of the Zambezi, landing in a remote fishing village in the North Eastern Caprivi Strip. I noticed as we crossed that there were large areas of what appeared to be some kind of floating weed, sometimes making it difficult for the boat to make any headway. I later learned that they were in fact Water Hyacinth, a pest-like weed, clogging up hydro-electric systems, causing dams where dams shouldn’t be, and stopping fishermen from rowing out into the deep water. I thought how ironic it was that I had recently bought some of these ‘weeds’ to put in my garden pond.

“Hope they don’t choke up the pond like they do the Zambezi!”

“Pardon?”

“Oh, sorry love – talking to myself again!”

I drifted back to the Zambezi with Sara looking quizzically at me. I thought of the Sea Bass and remembered the fish I and my friends used to catch in the Zambezi, we used to call them ‘bream’, but they weren’t bream like those found in European cold waters, rather these were Zambezi Cichlids called Tilapia, which are tropical fish. It wasn’t unusual to catch one that weighed as much as five kilos, though most were in the one to three kilo range. Over here these would need a VERY BIG fish tank and would fetch hundreds of pounds if sold. I chuckled, thinking about what value a meal for me and my mates must have been as we tucked into a few deep fried battered Tilapia!

“Do you want a coffee?”

Sara’s voice dragged me back into the present once more; I smiled, took her hand and kissed it.

“Yes please, that would be great.”

I watched her walk back into the room; she still had a very sensuous figure that belied her age. She disappeared behind the curtains and I turned back towards the harbour. I reached into the room and grasped my video camera, it had a very ‘low lux’ capability, which meant it could almost see in the dark, a bit like a cat. I raised it to my eye and looked into the harbour area. Even the small amount of light was more than enough for me to see quite clearly what was going on, if

anything. I swung the camera round slowly and noticed that the small boat I seen earlier was now tied up to a small jetty in front of the house opposite their hotel. I depressed the record button and slowly activated the power zoom sweeping the camera slightly upwards as I did so. In the viewfinder I could now see two figures silhouetted in the window of a small cabin alongside the house. They appeared to be facing each other across a table upon which there appeared to be a pile, or stack of something I couldn't quite make out.

"Coffee."

Sara was back and sat down beside me.

I pressed the stop button.

"You can't possibly be videoing anything in the dark, surely!?"

"It's got good night vision you know! – but you're right there's nothing worth videoing out there now"

I felt concerned that I might put Sara in danger bringing her along with me, but then this job needed good cover, and what was better than her being along. No-one would imagine that a middle-aged couple on holiday were anything but that. I thought back to the meal and that small fillet of Sea Bass I'd been served. The menu boasted that they caught the fish fresh locally every day.

"Those ten pounders were so close I could've yanked them in onto the jetty myself!" I chortled,

"How come the local fishermen only caught tiddlers?"

"Maybe they're not as good at catching things as you are, dear---"

I looked hard at Sara, she had no idea what my job was, she was grinning at me like a Cheshire cat, and stuck out her tongue.

"Are you looking for trouble?"

"Nothing YOU could----"

I grabbed one of her feet and started tickling it, she screamed and tried to pull it away and we both fell laughing onto the grass beside the small patio. Several astonished faces were peering out of nearby rooms and we got up, composed ourselves and returned to the chairs and sat down demurely. For a few seconds we looked at each other and then we burst into laughter, laughing hard and long until our sides hurt, me pointing to the other windows, at myself, at her, and at the lawn, unable to speak for laughing. Sara grabbed my hand and we went on into the room still chuckling, closed the patio door and the curtains. I was glad I'd brought Sara along with me this time.

Chapter 13

It was about four o'clock and the first grey fingers of dawn light were slowly stretching out across the harbour when I quietly slipped out bed. I gently drew back the curtain about a foot and raised my video camera once again in the direction of the harbour. I zoomed in on the spot where the small boat had been moored. It was gone. I swung a little way either side, there was no sign of it anywhere.

"Damn!" I hissed under my breath, "Now I'll have to call for a trace!"

I picked up my mobile 'phone, set it to silent, and slowly tapped out a text message, sent it to a colleague I knew would have his 'phone switched on. That colleague would forward it to the next person who needed to be advised. On a surveillance job where serious commercial insurance fraud is involved, it is not considered 'best practise' to let the person being watched slip away. I climbed back into bed alongside Sara, she moved slightly and turned over and I made no further movement so as not to wake her, she was such a light sleeper. I lay on my back staring up at the plain white ceiling. I began to think about that boat, where it might have gone and whether it was worthwhile asking for help from the Coastguard. Still that was up to the office now that I had sent in the message with its registration details. I stared blankly at that ceiling, my mind was full of thoughts about boats and illegal operations using them and it wasn't long before I once again drifted back to an occasion in my young manhood when I had been associated with a security operation on the Zambian border. I recalled the ugly concrete boats used by the border patrols. I smiled, whenever I mention these it provokes a reaction – "CONCRETE BOATS!" people usually exclaim, and follow it up with remarks like "Naah!", or "You're 'avin' me on aintcha?", or "Really?" Yes, these were concrete boats. I had first seen one being fitted out at Mupila on the Kafue River. It was roughly ten metres long, about four metres wide, and had a draft of about two and a half metres. It appeared to have a steel girder which served the two-fold purpose of joining to halves together and providing a steel spine from the top of the bows, down along the keel to the tiller/rudder lock in the stern. The concrete was a mixture of fine grit, nylon fibre and waterproof cement. Once set in the mould it was plastered with a waterproof skin, sprayed with several layers of grey cellulose paint and then further re-enforced with a fine copper mesh – after all copper was cheap in Zambia. This boat displaced about twenty tons of water and sat quite low in the water. It was very stable as long as there was not too much superstructure. I remembered the one I saw was being fitted out with two diesel engines and a flat wooden deck, upon which was fitted a small cabin, large enough for two men to stand up in, their legs being below the deck, and the rest from the waist up being in the cabin. Two machine guns were mounted on the deck either side of the cabin. When I asked questions about the boat I had been shooed away. However, I had managed to learn that the steel girder was specifically fitted to destroy smaller boats if they failed to respond to the command to stop. I later witnessed these boats in action along the Zambezi; they would travel up and down the river where smugglers and illegal immigrants were known to cross. They would head towards any boat they saw travelling across the water and call out with hailing equipment for the boat to stop and await their inspection. Naturally, honest travellers would stop; those with something to hide would try to run for the Namibia or Angola shores. The two big diesels would be given full throttle and a minute or so later the smugglers would be retrieved from the wreckage of their boat along with their illegal cargo. One brave smuggler decided to open fire on the fast approaching motor boat, which was about as successful as shooting at an elephant with a pea-shooter! He too was glad he had learned to swim as a child. I had been told that there was a vulnerable point about the cruisers, they had little or no flexibility and were slow in turning round. On the odd occasion that one of them did try to make a fast turn, the concrete cracked under the stress and it was only seconds before it disappeared below the surface leaving the crew to contemplate their future in very deep water full of crocodiles and hippopotami. Sara stirred and moved about for a few minutes, breathing slightly shallower and I turned towards her, she was still asleep but now facing me. I watched her sleeping, her soft blonde hair gently caressing the uppermost ear as she lay on her side. Yes, it was good that she had managed to get a break; she had been so tired lately. I allowed my gaze to once again swing around the room to the partly open curtains and I noted that daylight was getting really strong and that it soon would be fully light. I could see the river now and it was such a gentle river too, seemed to be content with being

pushed back when the tide came in and then allowed to trickle out after it went out again. At its widest when the tide was in it would have been about two hundred metres and probably around five or six metres deep. Yet, once the tide was gone, it seemed to drop to a mere two metres or so wide and scarcely a metre deep. It struck me just how different most rivers I have seen in the UK are from the mighty Zambezi. Just a few miles upstream from the famous Victoria Falls, on the Zambia/Zimbabwe border it is over 1500 metres wide and its depth exceeds 10 metres when in full flood after the rains have fallen. The river flows down at over ten knots as it approaches the falls where it then plunges 180 metres to the gorge below at a rate of around three quarters of a million litres per second. I had been mesmerised by the sight of these falls, the thunderous roar of the water, constant in my ears, and the water travelling over the uneven bed equally constant yet always changing in shape as it cascaded over the rocks at the beginning of the cliff edge. I first saw the falls when I was 12 years old and had learned that this vast chasm was the result of a fissure that travels right through the Eastern part of Africa, called the Great Rift Valley. I had craned my neck to look down to the bottom of the falls, but the spray prevented me from seeing beyond about 60 metres. I had then looked skyward at the rising spray, up and up it went higher and higher into the sky, before falling again to drench me and the plant-life around and about. There was constancy about the spray cloud too, although it was always moving, it seemed like a huge cloud standing over the falls. It was claimed that this cloud of spray ascended over 3000 metres, around two miles high. From my bedroom in Livingstone, over seven miles away, I could tell when the rain-fed flood waters had reached the falls in mid November, because the spray cloud could be clearly seen out of my window. No wonder the tribal people of old called these falls 'Mosi-Oa-Tunya' (The smoke that thunders) – I considered that to be a very appropriate name, much better than the one given by Dr Livingstone, after his Queen at that time, Victoria Falls. Tragedy had struck many times at this 'Wonder of the World', often at the peak of the hottest and driest weather when there had been no rain for nine months, during late October. The river became very low, and parts of the waterfall ceased to have any water cascading down, the majority thundering over the lowest part of the falls, on the Zimbabwean end, some five metres lower than the rest of the cliff edge. Here the water continued to roar at an alarming rate over what was commonly called 'Devil's Cataract'. At times like these people picked their way carefully across the trickles of water, stepping from rock to rock, out to the middle of the river where, right on the brink of the main falls' precipice, there was a pool into which the water trickled. This was affectionately called 'The Armchair' owing to its features. During the high water season it would not be visible, just one of the rocky structures causing a slight eddy in the water as it charged over the edge. When in low water state however, only a few litres per minute trickled down into the twenty metre wide pool, leaving again by a small 'tear' in the outer rim of the 'chair', to cascade down the rock face in similar manner to another well known waterfall 'The Mare's Tail'. Many people who traversed the slippery rocks to this pool enjoyed an afternoon of delightful, safe swimming in the lukewarm water and returned safely at the end of the day. I shuddered as I remembered the instances where some were not so lucky. Every year at least one person would lose their footing and plunge to their death on the rocks 180 metres below. Often it was just lack of concentration, perhaps becoming so relaxed in the pool that they forgot where it was. I had stood and read the notice fixed to trees all around the falls where warnings are given concerning walking across the falls or swimming in any of the pools. Tragically, the most unpredictable danger was that of the returning flood following the rains. Water surge was not dependent upon it raining in South West Zambia, but rather, in the upper reaches, in the Congo Basin, some eight or nine hundred miles away. When the flood came, anyone in the vicinity of the falls would hear it approaching, it would be a miniature 'tsunami', a wave of water rushing at 25 – 30 miles an hour, or 40 – 50 Kilometres per hour, up to 4 metres high, full of debris, trees, dead animals, remains of boats, and so on. I remembered one tragic afternoon when a family had been swimming in the 'Armchair' and heard the sound of the approaching flood, scrambled out of the pool and tried desperately to pick their way across the rocks, only to be swept violently over the precipice and were gone in an instant. Their bodies were never recovered. So swift and violent was its arrival that even large animals like elephants and hippopotami were unable to save themselves when it arrived. Many carcasses were seen floating bloated in the river downstream of the falls a day or so after the arrival of the full flood waters. I sighed, looked back out of the window, how little this river seemed by comparison. I

yawned, stretched and slipped out of bed again, trying not to wake Sara as I did so. After a brief visit to the bathroom I switched on the kettle and carefully laid out two cups and saucers, tea was a welcome start for both of us to any day. I knew I still had a lot to do yet. We were going to have to check out of this delightful hotel and move up the coast to Lymington so I could observe the Isle of Wight ferries. I looked anxiously at Sara, it was great to have her here with me, but I was concerned for her in view of the people involved in setting up the multi-million pound scam to defraud the commercial insurer. If there was any back-tracking she might be at risk. So far my cover had been excellent, better than when alone. I hadn't wanted to involve her but she wanted and needed a break. Still, she had arranged the hotels and only knew that I had work on the South Coast. She had picked the one at Lymington for its facilities, planning to use these whilst I was off at work. She had planned to have a sauna, a facial, take a fitness trail, and then relax by the pool with her book. I leant over and kissed her cheek.

"Cup of tea love" I whispered in her upturned ear

Sara opened her deep blue eyes and for a second did not focus, then yawned, smiled and said, "That's nice – thank you"

"Breakfast in 20 minutes – o.k.?"

"Can we make it 30...?"

"Oh, go on then!"

I laughed as she attempted to hit me and deliberately missed, then I stiffened for a second as my gaze went past her out of the window to the river.

"What is it?" Sara asked swinging round and looking intently at the window

"Er, nothing, just thought I saw someone worrying the birds on the island – must've been mistaken."

By now I had turned to face the window, I looked back towards the other side of the river mouth, at the small cabin. I had seen a glint, a mere flash of light in the early morning sun, enough to alert me to the presence of something shiny.

"Er - I think I'll just take a couple of quick shots while you're showering..." I called to Sara as she made for the en-suite.

"You can't go outside dressed like that!" she retorted

"Course not - I'm going to take them from in here, I'll just open the window to get the glass out of the lens or I'll find it focussing on my reflection!"

"O.K. - but do get dressed, after all you're the one champing at the bit to get to breakfast!"

"No worries, - I'll be ready when you are, doesn't take me half as long as it does you....."

"Cheek!"

With that Sara dived into the bathroom and as soon as I heard the click of the door-lock, I reached out for the video camera and flicked it on, setting the power zoom to maximum. With my eye to the eye-piece I adjusted the zoom until I had the right depth of field. I could see the two pints of milk on the doorstep, and just about read the dairy's name if my hand-shake didn't make it so fuzzy. Scanning the windows gave me no clue to the flashes of light, and then I saw what had caught my eye; a piece of tinfoil about 10 cm square, stuck onto a twig near the door. I knew the origin of the foil and it confirmed some of my suspicions. The words on the foil that I could read were the name of an accelerant, the sort of material that an arsonist would use to set a large fire, and guarantee that it burned. Pity they'd slipped away before first light. Still I'd reported in and knew one of my colleagues would now be tracking.

"Are you dressed yet?"

"Er, I'm...just...putting...my...trousers...on," I called in a way I hoped Sara would believe.

However, she was standing behind me, watching me lie through my teeth, my eye still to the eyepiece of the camera.

"Funny looks like you're looking through the camera to me...put down the camera and get dressed!"

I laughed and sheepishly returned the camera to its case and pulled on the said trousers. As Sara stood in her robe, towelling her golden locks dry, I slipped on my socks and then my shoes and stood up, looking at her in an impish way.

"Right let's go then - oh, aren't you ready yet...?"

"Won't be five minutes now cheeky monkey!"

"Well that's all you've got..."

"You go then, I'll join you down there in a jiffy"

"No, we'll go together, I'll wait for you - but don't rush, breakfast is served up to 9:30."

By now Sara was dressed and running her hair drier and brush over her hair. I had five minutes to waste, I considered looking at the harbour again, but put that aside. I decided just to watch her 'making pretty' not that she needed much. The last time I had 'killed time' while watching her dress was in Evissa (Ibiza). We had spent a week with close friends one summer. It had been a really hot summer too and even though the Balearics are known for their warm rain free days - even in winter - the locals had said this was the hottest they had known. I smiled as I remembered us visiting Salinas, near the town of San José - (which I was sure was in California, but there it was, large as life just south of the town of Evissa, in the south of the Island). Salinas is, as its name suggests, the centre of commercial salt extraction from the Mediterranean. I remembered the coach tour that had taken us down to Salinas and the guide had explained how the salt is extracted, by evaporation. Owing to the fact that the humidity on the island averages between 28 and 33 percent, evaporation is much higher than even on the Spanish mainland. A pump lifts sea water up from the bay and pumps it into a large field with built up shallow walls, forming a pan-like container. The guide said it was better to explain from the finished product backwards, so started by showing us a field that was white like snow. At one end a bull-dozer was pushing the salt into piles from which a bucket digger was scooping it up into large trailers all parked along the track. The guide explained that as soon as they could move all of this salt out of the field, they would pump the thick brine from the field next door into this one, after which, they would pump the not so thick brine from the next field down into the one just emptied. This would be the process until they emptied the field near the sea, and then the pump would be started, so as to fill that field. I had learned that as much as 80% of the sea salt used in Europe originates in Salinas, and, once the bull-dozer gets down to the sand and starts to get it mixed in with the salt, well they have a buyer for that too - the U.K. where it is used in winter to grit the roads.

"What a fascinating, useless piece of information!" Sara had snorted when I related it to her on the coach. She was not in slightest bit impressed, she didn't even take salt. I smiled to myself as I remembered her reaction. My thoughts were once again interrupted.

"Would you like some more toast..?"

The waitress was standing beside the table where we had been enjoying our breakfast.

"Yes please" replied Sara, nudging me, "I must apologise for my husband he's often only here in body... don't know where he goes though!"

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that - a stroke was it -?"

"No, it WAS NOT!" I chirped up, "I'm perfectly fine, just a deep thinker, that's all!"

"Er - oh - sorry - I'll just get you some more toast..."

"Tch, tch Rob - you flustered the poor girl!"

"Well fancy making her think that I wasn't all there!"

"Well you aren't sometimes, and you certainly weren't here for the last twenty minutes! You even walked down the corridor with me like a zombie!"

"I was in Ibiza."

"There you are then! What about Ibiza?"

"Do you remember Salinas and the salt pans?"

"Sounds like a kids adventure film - and now" she put on an announcer's voice, "We're proud to present 'Salinas and the Salt Pans' - that boring place," she said back in her normal voice, "What about it..?" She rolled her eyes heavenward for an instant.

"Well, I was thinking about the flamingos, do you remember, standing in that brine with their heads upside down, scooping up brine shrimps and gradually turning pink as we watched?"

"Yes, that was a funny experience - and do you remember how the salt dried round their ankles in a ring, so that they looked like they were wearing their own brand of jewellery!?"

"Yes, and they couldn't fly until they broke those anklets off either!"

I then took a large gulp of coffee and once again my thoughts wandered, this time to the flamingos in the natural salt pans in East Africa, recalling the occasion that I was working for the exploration company and taking a tour around the Ngorogoro Crater and the Serengeti game conservation area. I had been observing the flamingos as they attempted to walk about with their ankle -

bracelets getting larger with almost every step. Then a radio call had alerted me to a security issue and I had run to the 4-wheel drive and rushed off to the vicinity of the incident. I arrived at a small village that was surrounded by a man-made barrier of thick thorn bushes. Quite a commotion was in progress as I drew up. A ranger approached and explained that the village had been attacked by armed men who were now heading north with most of the villagers' possessions, and he had called out on the emergency channel for anyone nearby to help.

"Do you have any means of calling the security forces?" I asked.

"No sir," the ranger had replied, shaking his head and wringing his hands.

"OK, I have another radio that will reach them, in the truck." I called the Commander-in-Chief of the protection forces 75 kilometres to the north, and within two hours the robbers had been apprehended. I laughed as I remembered being carried shoulder high all round the village, despite protesting loudly that all I'd done was to make a 'phone call'!

"ROB!"

It was Sara.

"Yes, my love..."

"Are you going to sit there staring blankly at the wall with a silly grin on your face while the staff try to clear and reset the tables round you!?"

"Er - no - sorry, let's get our stuff packed up and go for a last stroll round the harbour before we check out and drive on up the coast."

"Sounds fine to me.."

The walk round the harbour was very enjoyable and I noted down odd things we saw. "For the descriptions of the pictures I've taken" I said by way of explanation. Sara sighed and shook her head. I had noted down the details of two particular boats we had passed, including the harbour-master's registration details on the paper slip attached to the bows. I had also noted the registration details of two cars parked near the harbour walk. I'd call those in later, I was sure there was a connection between them.

Chapter 14

I was standing in the patch of woodland, close to the channel that marks the entrance to Lymington harbour and the ferry port. Out in the Solent, I could just make out without any binoculars two white boats with blue markings, the Lymington-Yarmouth Isle of Wight ferries, passing each other out in the main stream. I looked about me and noted how flat the land was and as the tide was out, how small the channel was that the ferries had to steer through. I watched a couple of small sailing boats slip out of the harbour and begin tacking in the wind. Then I looked down at the dark brown mud below me - "I wonder if Sara's started her facial yet..." I chortled as I imagined someone from the rather classy sauna sneaking down here to get a bucket of mud and then charge a fortune to slap it on her face!

I fished out my mobile phone and sent off a quick text message. A few seconds later, I got my reply and walked on through the woods to meet the sender, a very attractive young woman, smartly dressed in floral skirt and purple blouse. She was Angela, one of my colleagues and we had to compare notes and talk over strategies for the next few days. One of the guests from the hotel was also out for a stroll and came very close to us. We pretended to have just met on a casual walk and began talking about how nice it was in Lymington in July. Then, after he was out of earshot, we darted into a hedged alcove and sat on the wooden bench we found there.

"Thanks for coming Angela, has all the other stuff I sent got through?"

"Yes, the team has been upgraded to amber this morning, we just need your continued surveillance and confirmation."

"Well, I'm reasonably certain that the perpetrators of this fraud and still unaware of my presence and they are well on in their preparations. At least one of them is here, not in this hotel, but here, in Lymington."

"Keep us posted won't you."

"Sure Angie, when I have the whole picture, I'll send you a message again."

The preparations being made by a well known arsonist looked like there was going to be a fire somewhere, probably in a very expensive warehouse. Our team needed to know just where and when.

The meeting over, I strolled back towards the hotel, a Jacobean manor house that was now a time share complex, with individual rooms, or rather, apartments, set in a square alongside the leisure centre with its heated pool. These rooms were the guest areas as the main house was entirely time share, and so it was to our own particular room that I headed, situated alongside the leisure centre with its long glass wall, behind which was a half-Olympic size heated pool, visible from our rear window. I slid open the glass patio door and stepped inside, placed my equipment carefully away and put on the kettle. Sara wasn't in the room, I guessed she's be enjoying the sun somewhere so I went to the rear window and looked out towards the leisure centre. I could see her with her book, beside the pool. She was reading a novel by a well known writer who specialises in historical novels that take place in Africa, whose books I also enjoyed reading when I had the time. I recognised the cover of one of my favourite titles and nodded in approval.

I sat down at the desk and made a few notes into the palm computer that I always carried with me. The events of the day so far had been disturbing, careful assessment and a detailed analysis were needed, and produced swiftly. I had advised Angela that some of the team should act on this without delay. I sat back and closed my eyes, this was just like the time I had been working with a survey team in the Great Rift Valley, many of the scenarios and events were uncannily similar. I decided that I wouldn't dwell on that too long as I needed a clear mind to think out the scenario of the day.

After making more notes into the palm top I sent another quick text message. I felt a little more relaxed now that I had done that, stood up, put away the work materials for another time and placed my case beside the bedside table. Sitting on the bed and looked at myself in the mirror for a few moments and smiled, I definitely didn't look like anyone more than a middle-aged holiday maker. I looked down at my feet and realised that I'd taken one shoe off. I began looking around, "now where's the other shoe...." I asked myself as I did so.

"Funny," I thought, "that question takes me back 40 years, to the strange sink holes in the north of Zambia. 'Where's the other shoe?' Was a question that had puzzled a few of the police as they looked down at a body they had fished out of a water-filled sink hole."

I began to think about that strange incident and the vivid pictures flooded back into my brain. These huge holes, possibly connected to the ancient formation of the Great Rift Valley I'd been thinking of earlier, were thought to be 'bottomless' but were filled with water up to 100 metres from the top in many cases. Near Kitwe, one is a popular tourist attraction, commonly called the 'Sunken Lake' even though it isn't a lake that has sunk, but rather a sink hole that has filled with water. There are five or six of these holes in that part of Africa, though the closest two, the one near Kitwe and the one outside Ndola, are still at least 20 miles apart. It is now known that they are connected by some subterranean river, but at the time I had heard that phrase, it was only conjecture. I remembered that there had been a well publicised investigation surrounding the disappearance of a local business-man. His car had been found parked five miles south of Kitwe, near the sunken lake. After days of fruitless searching it had been assumed that I had been abducted by Congolese guerrillas, until several weeks later a body was discovered floating in the water in one of the sink holes near Chilalabombwe, about 50 miles north of Kitwe.

Forensic evidence proved that it was that of the missing business-man. The assumption that he had been abducted was still popular, but now it was felt that maybe he had died on the way to the border and had been dumped in the lake. That theory was confounded somewhat by the discovery that he only had one shoe on. "Now, where's the other shoe..." someone had asked.

Finding the other shoe was considered important as it could lead them to the abductors. An investigator then pointed out that when they had been searching around the Sunken Lake at Kitwe, they had found a shoe and taken it away. Forensic investigation confirmed that it was his. This shoe had been found just about 2 metres above the water. Divers who had gone in at that time had reported strong currents and depths beyond their diving capability. Being concerned about the matter, some of the best minds on the phenomena of sink holes were invited in to consider the link between the shoe and the body.

I was studying geology at the time and had been invited to join in the investigations because of my work around the movements of the earth, in particular, the Great Rift Valley. I had jumped at the chance. I was out at the sunken lake with some other students and together we had come up with an idea. We obtained a sack and filled it with about 80kg of a material that would at first take the sack down, but then, through chemical reaction, would be lighter and the sack would float, like a bloated human body. We carefully carried the sack down to the water and tossed it in. At first it seemed that the experiment was going to fail as the sack didn't sink, but stayed about a metre under water, slowly going round the edge of the lake. However, after a few hours it seemed to make its way towards the centre of the lake, and then, was gone!

Two weeks later, we received a message from the other investigators to go to another of the sink-hole lakes 33 miles away from the Sunken Lake at Kitwe. We excitedly made the short journey up to the site - and sure enough, there was our sack! They were definitely linked together somehow, though at what depth no-one had yet determined. So now that mystery was solved, the business-man possibly had gone to the Kitwe site, lost his shoe and his footing, and fallen in only to be sucked down by what was now known to be a low velocity whirlpool, drowned, and eventually subterraneously washed across to Chilalabombwe. I remembered standing looking down at the Sunken Lake in bright sunlight and being able to see the water in motion. Almost mechanically I had exited the guest room, slid the door shut and locked it, and walked across the flagstones to where Sara was lounging. My eyes were still 'seeing' the sink hole as I stopped beside her.

"Had a good day...?" Sara's voice floated up to me from the sink hole...

"Er - hello darling, yes, didn't want to disturb your reading..." I replied, putting my arm around her shoulders and kissing her neck.

"So, you decided to plonk down the 'body' to keep me company while you went off somewhere else again..."

"Sorry, have got a lot to think about..."

"I'm only teasing -" she leaned her head on his shoulder and looked up into my eyes - "If the job's bugging you, maybe it's time to leave eh?"

"Sara, I wasn't thinking about work, I was thinking of stuff back in Zambia..." I broke off as I realised that I was digging a hole for myself.

"Oh, I see, you WERE only day dreaming then...!"

"Well, yes, and er, no, you see, ever since I was told I should get my childhood/young manhood down on paper and write a book -- I've been doing this -- going back and reliving it. Then when I have a clear vision of the occurrence, I write it down quickly - so I can incorporate it somewhere in the book, later."

"Hmmm!"

"It's great fun!"

"For you maybe -- pity I can't go with you --"

"You will - when the book's published and earns the money --"

"Oh look - there's another one!"

"Eh - another what?"

"Didn't you see it? Don't tell me you missed it!"

"Missed what for goodness sake?"

"That little pink pig that was flying by the window a few moments ago --"

"Oh, you --" with that I bodily picked her up and ran headlong, straight into the swimming pool. She screamed, beat me with her fists, but even if I wanted to stop, the momentum was in control and in we went! When we surfaced, spluttering and coughing, Sara still clutching a now very wet book, the Leisure Centre manager was heading our way.

"Are you o.k. sir, madam -- did you slip?"

"No, he did it deliberately," replied Sara, "look at me!"

"Sir, we don't allow outdoor clothing within the pool area, please change if you wish to come into the area, or wish to swim!" He reached down and helped Sara out of the pool. I waded to the steps and hauled myself out, water running from all the hemmed areas of my clothes.

"Sorry, impulse, you know -- full moon and all that..."

"O.K. sir, please be careful, outdoor clothes take in a lot of water, become heavy and can drag you under."

"He's an idiot -- but I love him all the same--" Sara took my hand and looked hard at me. She had those eyes that are like those 'sink holes' I had been thinking about, bottomless - dragging me in and I was powerless to resist. I looked back and as usual fell headlong into those deep blue pools.

"I'm sorry, my love, don't know what came over me --"

There was a glint, a twinkle, in my eyes as I said it, and there was a hint of a smile on her lips as she heard it.

"We don't allow outdoor clothing in the pool -- " she mimicked the manager as his back disappeared through the door at the end of the pool and we both burst out laughing.

"C'mon, let's get out of these wet clothes -- "

"Ooh, that sounds exciting...!"

"Oi - behave yourself, I mean let's get dried off and into fresh clothes -- "

"Ha, Ha, - what else...?"

"Come on!"

She grabbed my hand and we ran back to the door of the room, which was more like a small flat than a hotel room. The rooms were in blocks of eight around a courtyard, four at ground level and four above, each having patio doors opening either onto a hard flagstone patio or a wooden platform supported by large wooden poles. We learned from the brochure that the rooms were built as an annexe to a converted mansion house (the main hotel), when it began to be leased on a time - share basis, in order to take in 'passing trade'.

Quickly we showered and changed and made our way to the main building for our evening meal. No-one looking at us as we entered the dining room and sat down could have imagined that we had just behaved in that childish way.

"Ooh, this is gorgeous!" exclaimed Sara in delight as she tasted her starter of Belgian duck pate, crispy bread and tossed salad.

"Yes, mine's good too," replied I popping a second deep-fried battered mushroom into my mouth.

The background music was gentle and conducive to the enjoyment of a good meal. It varied from the musical 'West Side Story', to songs from 'South Pacific'. I picked up on this and remembered where that had been filmed.

"Hey - recognise this music? - From 'South Pacific' - remember what they told us on Ibiza?"

"Oh yes, wasn't it filmed there?"

"Yeah, in that gorgeous bay at Portinax"

"Do you remember how that looked in the moonlight? - you could almost imagine the actors standing there saying their lines - - "

"Yeah, but I reckon the film unit must have brought in extra palm trees for the film - 'coz there weren't many there, seeing as most of the trees there were pine!"

I reflected on how the island seemed to be made of lava rock, and recalled how I was told it never rains there, in fact on our arrival we had been told that not a drop of rain had fallen in five years. When I asked locals how the plants grew, I was told that there is always heavy dew especially when there is a sea mist. I got up early one morning to see if this was true, went out onto the balcony in the hotel to find it was very wet, the towel I had left out to dry was wetter than when I had placed it over the rail. In spite of no rain falling for five years, it decided to rain during the week that we were there. I remembered how odd it had been to see the drops falling past my eyes, but not reaching the ground. So hot and dry was the climate that the rain evaporated before it hit the lava rock. Even the few drops that did make it to the ground, just evaporated on the hot rock. I had stood in amazement at this phenomenon.

"Do you remember the rain - how it fell but yet nothing was wet?"

"Yes, that was the oddest experience I ever had!"

Our main courses arrived and we began to set about disposing of them in silent enjoyment. The lamb was cooked perfectly and just fell off the bones, I nodded in approval.

"Nice?" asked Sara

"More than just nice - remarkable!"

"Mmm, this chicken Kiev is the best I've ever had!"

"Good - glad you booked this hotel?"

"Most definitely – have to come again!"

As we silently munched on, I returned to thinking about the trip to Ibiza. During our coach tour I had noticed a lot of cacti growing - which was no surprise - some of which were exceptional specimens. Amongst these were Mesembryanthemum, better known to me as "Livingstone Daisy", I was used to seeing these in and around Livingstone in South West Zambia, especially in the areas where the Namib desert had thrown its sand across the border from Caprivi into Zambia. I had gathered some of these and taken them back to our house in Livingstone where I had subsequently planted them in a sunny position. I became very interested in cacti around that time and was always on the lookout for good ones. I had collected many fine specimens of many varieties and genus, from succulents through to full blown cacti. I recalled having a really special one, of the genus 'Stapeliad' which had flowers like star-fish, about 20 centimetres across. The only bad point about this plant was it attracted blow-flies! The flower smelled like rotten meat! The waitress was standing beside our table and brought my thoughts back to the present.

"Would you like to see the sweet trolley --?"

"Oh yes please, it's not often we do "replied Sara rubbing her hands in anticipation, "but let's make an exception..."

"I agree, let's see what you have on offer please --"

The sweet trolley was trundled over and we spent a few moments choosing our sweet to finish off what had been a really superb meal. It had been a good day, with a really great ending. We decided to forego coffee and take advantage of the warm evening to stroll around the huge grounds of this hotel and country club complex. The next day was to bring more developments in my surveillance of the would-be insurance fraudsters.

Chapter 15

Breakfast over, I had moved on down to the end of the hotel's long lawn and was standing at the perimeter fence. The tide was in and the water was lapping close to my feet. I looked at all the boats moored in the small outer harbour of Lymington, mostly sailing dinghies or ketches. I grasped the mesh of the fence as I looked out across the water, then looked down at my hands. This fence was of the construction commonly called 'diamond mesh' - I hadn't seen this type of fence for some time. It made me think about the fences that surround the small reserve alongside the Zambezi, a few miles south of Livingstone, the Mosi-Oa-Tunya Game Park. We used to call the fence type jackal fencing. As a junior warden at 13 years of age, and a member of the local wildlife conservation club, I had been given the task of patrolling the fences, noting large holes, and wiring up small holes that I found. This Game Park was around 1,000 acres, and the fence was heavy duty diamond mesh. No predators were to be found within the park, the fences being erected to keep them separate from the many kinds of deer, antelope, bovines, and giraffe that lived in the park. It was therefore of utmost importance that the fences remained in better than just good repair. I had to walk the fences along with local rangers who were also to carry a rifle in case there was anything untoward. It was a very enjoyable two hours or so at the end of my school day. As I clung to this fence in Lymington, I remembered one such occasion when, along with my assigned protector for the day, Isaac, I was about half way round the perimeter, almost opposite the main gate. The road inside the park twists and turns around hairpin bends almost touching itself so that is always only just a few yards of thick bush in between each road loop. This was carefully designed to enable the motorists to get up close to the animals wherever they were standing or lying. As I looked back towards the gate, I noted that it was quiet today; only one car was kicking up a bit of dust as it slowly crept along the dusty road. I smiled; I could imagine its occupants craning their necks, their eyes locked onto the passing bush-veldt, hoping to see an animal close up, cameras at the ready. It was heading away from us at the time; soon it would make a sharp left turn, come back towards us before making a sharp right turn and running by us just a few yards away.

I looked back at the fence. Isaac and I were rattling each 2 metre section of the fence as we passed it, to make sure it was still fixed firmly to its upright posts. We entered a fairly thick clump of small acacia trees, young ones about three metres high, taking care to avoid the huge twin thorns found at three or four centimetre intervals along the branches. Giraffe love these; I could never fathom out how they could curl soft fleshy tongues around these branches and rip off the thorns and small leaves without seeming to suffer any ill. They would then crunch them up with relish in the same manner that we might eat potato chips. I figured that they must have tongues like tanned leather. I was still thinking about this as we stepped out of the clump. Isaac put his hand on my shoulder to stop me, but made no sound. I turned my head so that I could look in the direction that he was looking. I couldn't help stepping back a shade with surprise. What I saw gave me quick a start. Three full grown Cape Buffalo stood just twenty metres or so away, looking straight at us, nostrils flared and their breath coming in short snorts. Their huge horns spread out nearly a metre either side of their heads, from a mass of horny bone spreading right across the forehead. I took in a short, sharp breath. These were known to be the meanest of all creatures in Africa and on top of that, they did not fear anything, especially man. Isaac only had a light rifle, enough to scare off jackal or hyena, but no match for the thick skin and hard bone of the buffalo. Even if he had a buffalo gun, he couldn't take down all three at once. What were we going to do? The lead buffalo, a young bull just getting up to full weight, began pawing the ground, his snorts getting shorter and closer together. I knew this action meant that the buffalo were building their adrenaline, ready for an attack. It was no use pointing the rifle and shouting, which usually gets rhino or elephant to move away. These beasts would attack and kill, almost for the fun of it. As things stood, it seemed this was going to be the day we were to die. Seldom had anyone withstood the attack of a buffalo, they cannot be outrun on foot. Once they got up close they would gore the human, ripping open the rib cage and as the dying person crumpled down to the ground, they would then trample and gore the body until little recognisable as a human was left. Only the vultures and jackals would be interested in the bloody mess left on the ground. This was the fate facing me and my terrified companion Isaac. It was no good backing up into the Acacia thicket;

buffalo have no fear of the thorns either. I closed my eyes, I thought of many good things as I started to say my final prayer and prepare for the worst. My prayer would include a request that I die quickly and that my family didn't have to see the awful result of the attack. The terror within me was like a fire, it threatened to consume me, sweat fell like rain from my brow, I felt urine trickling down from within my shorts. Isaac smelled like it was more than urine that had left his quaking body. Suddenly there was a hoot and a lot of voices in a foreign language nearby. This startled the buffalo who turned and galloped away to the left. As the dust from their retreat cleared, we could see a small multi-purpose vehicle on the road, fifty metres away, out of the windows of which stared many oriental faces. One or two were pointing at the two frightened humans backed up to the fence and talking excitedly to each other in what I later discovered was Japanese. Isaac raised his hand to the driver and called out - "Wait, please, we come to you --"

The two of us then walked with very wobbly legs towards the MPV and Isaac asked if they had room for the two of us. The driver quickly spoke to the passengers who, nodding and gesturing, squashed up to make room for their new passengers. Isaac and I did not need a second bidding and clambered up into the back of the vehicle next to a couple of babies in carry-seats. They smelled like their nappies were due, we fitted in quite well.

"Why you stand out there in danger place?" one of the men asked, "We get good pictures!"

"We check fences" replied Isaac, expressionless.

"Where your vehicle?"

"No vehicle, we walk, all way round"

"You WALK, ALL WAY LOUND!?" asked a woman, eyes big and wide in disbelief.

"Yes, it is vital that we check the fences carefully and make sure there are no holes." I added my bit, to the surprise of the Japanese tourists who had taken me for the usual timid teenager. "If not, predators get in, and even the dangerous buffalo could be at risk"

"Ple - da - tors? What is ple-da-tor?" another woman asked.

"I mean animals that kill other animals for food - like lion, leopard, hyena, cheetah and so on."

"No lion here?" They seemed disappointed

"No, but plenty in Kafue Game Reserve - just a two hundred kilometres away to the north..."

Everyone was silent for the few minutes it took the car to make its way round the last stretch of the perimeter fence before turning in to the exit gate. Isaac and I looked hard at the fence as we passed by each section, looking for obvious holes and noting down the location on a grid where we thought we had seen something. The vehicle stopped at the exit gate and we got out. As the driver engaged the gear to make their exit, we wished the tourists a pleasant holiday and thanked them again. A full report was going to be needed by the Senior Warden, and also by my headmaster as the school sponsored the scheme. Later, after a review of the incident, foot patrols were stopped and the fence patrol was carried out by Landrover patrols outside the perimeter, checking for holes as they slowly moved past each section. Thus there could never be a repeat of the terrifying events that had concluded my walk about with Isaac.

While I was still holding the memory of that scary day a 'blip' sound warned me that I had received a text message. I shivered. I had been standing quite still gripping that fence for several minutes and had cooled down in the early morning breeze. I put aside my memories of the past and quickly read the text message. My colleague Angela had some information and had given me a meeting point. In a few minutes I met with her, close to the path that runs down to the water near the ferry port. We waited a minute whilst a jogger passed by. Angela was ten years or so younger than me, a real professional when it came to the job. Her slim attractive body and flowing auburn hair belied the cold-as-steel professional underneath. She told me that the information I had provided had given the team almost all they needed, but there was a need to find out more information in the area. That of photographing the person buying or moving any of the materials they would have to use - and this would be my task for the day. Angela left quickly and as quietly as she had arrived, and soon disappeared from my sight.

I made my way to Lymington town by means of the Otter Path. All day I took what seemed to be casual photographs, jotting down odd notes here and there. Passers-by, if they gave me a second glance, would be quite happy that I was a keen tourist, interested in historic buildings. I took a short break and stepped into a small but yet roomy coffee shop and took a seat in the window giving me full view of the quaint but busy harbour. It was time for a sandwich and a cup of fresh

coffee. Ah, the smell, I loved the smell of ground coffee being brewed or filtered. I took my snack and sat down at a table with my back to the wall, facing the door, so that I could observe my fellow diners and enjoy their little quirks and mannerisms. Out of the large window I could see a playground where lots of children were running, screaming with delight, climbing, jumping, sliding and gleefully lining up to take their turns on a zip-line. This tensioned steel cable was about 8 metres in length and dropped about a metre in its run and the children would sit on a small bar; down they'd go, jump off at the bottom and after pulling the seat back up to the top, do it all over again. I smiled as I watched them; I wondered how they would have enjoyed the longest zip-line in the world. I was thinking of the one I had been persuaded to allow myself to be sent down when a young man of just 16. Stretched across the gorge downstream from the Victoria Falls, this zip-line was the most frightening 'attraction' for tourists in the area, long since dismantled. I had been conned by my best friends into having a go, and so, there I was, allowing myself to be strapped into a harness and dangled a few feet below the Victoria Falls bridge around 190 metres above the water far below in the gorge. Here the rushing waters of the Zambezi, reduced in width to just about a hundred metres, angrily swirled and frothed. Without warning the chain holding back the wheel mechanism on the cable was released. A few seconds later I was hurtling at frightening speed towards the rock face 280 metres away from the bridge. I yelled all the way, I was terrified. I imagined that the end of the cable was tied to a post or something in the face of the gorge wall. I couldn't see anyone there or anything mechanical to arrest my high-speed fall. I calculated that I would be approaching 90 miles per hour, over 160 kilometres per hour when I completed the 280 metre run.

"I'm going to die - " I gasped, wondering how this could be allowed to continue - looking for signs of blood on the rocks ahead. "Oh, no, maybe the harness disengages and drops me into the water - that'll still be a drop of 100 metres - far too much to survive - and then there's the crocodiles...!" My thumping heart was right up in my mouth, I felt a tightening in my chest and thought it was going to give out, when all of a sudden, there was a slowing and I sensed that I was going upwards at a shallow angle. After a few seconds a hook locked onto the harness and hands were eagerly grabbing at me in readiness for the pull onto a platform. What a relief! I looked back and saw that the cable was tensioned below me by a device fixed into the rock face, but at that point there was a steel rod that turned upwards towards the top of the gorge at an angle of 45 degrees. The device was designed to transfer the 'zipper' to the rod at the point of their junction. The speed of the drop and the angle of the ascent would mean that the harness runners would click into a hook at a very low speed, just a metre from the exit platform. "What a wonderful, awful, frightening and inhuman idea!" I cried, glad to be alive! "I must do that again - NEVER!" - I never did. I was still sweating from recalling that ride as I swallowed the last of my coffee in the harbour-side tea room in Lymington. Lunch done, I rose from the chair, thanked the proprietor of the coffee shop as was my custom, and continued with the task in hand. Two cars had interested me, so as I now photographed two interesting fishing boats in the harbour, I made sure that these two cars were in the foreground. I wandered by a hardware shop, stopped and walked back, decided to have a look inside, and found much of the same materials as in the larger ones near home. I swept the whole of the shop in a swift glance, seeming not to notice the man making purchases at the counter. I then walked back out into the street and took a few little memento photos of the shop, just as the man emerged, and then took another of the shop next door also. Then, as I walked slowly back down the Otter Path past the ferry port, I took some more photos of the otter pool, the ferry, the cars waiting to embark, the cars disembarking and the foot-passengers too. In a few minutes I was back in the hotel grounds. Angela was once again waiting for me. She motioned me to follow her quietly, which I did without any acknowledgement. She stopped by a small wooden bench near a narrow stream that fed the landscaped pools in the hotel grounds. She sat, and I stood a few metres back, against the hedge line, facing her.

"So, Rob, what movements have you got to report?" she began.

"Angie, it looks like it is all falling into place. In here are all the photos you need." I said, handing her a small digital storage card. "These notes will give you that last bit of the detail you asked for earlier." I handed here my notebook.

"O.K. - now the team are still in condition amber, and, when this goes down, they will change to red on my directive. I don't want your visibility to be noticed or compromised - you will move to Alpha location tomorrow is that clear?"

"Got it - no problem, we had already planned to check out here tomorrow and move on to the hotel near the Alpha site - no worries, I won't be anywhere near!"

She stood up, brushed a few bits of flaked paint from her skirt and turned away from my position.

"Wire in the full report and photos, from Alpha, anyway, o.k.?" her parting words almost being lost as she slipped into the wooded area. I turned and strode off in the opposite direction towards the hotel guest area, where he found Sara sitting reading her slightly fatter and creased but dried-out book on the patio part of our assigned area.

"Still readable then --- " I called

"Yes, no thanks to your foolishness!" she laughed

"Oh well, that's good! I notice you're not anywhere near the pool today - afraid of a repeat--?"

"Well there's no knowing with you is there -- ?"

"So, how far have you got then?"

"This one's quite intriguing; it's set near that ancient city claimed to be part of the settlement built by King Solomon when he was mining copper, gold, silver and precious stones for the holy temple being built in Jerusalem."

"Oh, you mean Zimbabwe - which the country is now named after..?"

"Yes, that's right"

"Been there."

"You - you've been EVERYWHERE! I can't understand why you're not a hundred years old!"

"How d'you know I'm not...!?"

"Because you're too much of a big kid...!"

"The pool's not too far to run to -- !"

"I'll scream!"

"You did last time - fat lot of good it did you --!"

I bent down quickly and kissed her smiling lips.

"C'mon, let's go and have a nice cup of tea and a couple of tea-cakes!"

Sara looked at her watch, it was just after 4, and so she nodded, stood up and placed the chair and book inside the room. Then, after sliding the door shut and locking it, she linked her arm in my and we strode off to the lounge to order a tray of afternoon tea.

Chapter 16

I stood in the courtyard outside the guest rooms while Sara was taking a shower before dinner. I looked up at the cloudless sky and felt the warmth of the sun on my back. This had been another fine day, but now rain was a necessity and I hoped my garden back home in Buckinghamshire was not too dry. Down near the water, at the end of the long lawn, someone was fishing with a rod.

"I wonder what they expect to catch there --?" I thought as I watched the figure swing back and cast out into the channel "Bass? - no too muddy, Carp? - no, too brackish, -- bet they'd love to fish in the Zambezi!"

I thought of the many times I'd been rod fishing off the banks of the Zambezi. Sometimes I'd caught nothing all day, other times I'd landed several large Tilapia, often I'd hook a Vundoo - the weird lilac coloured purple spotted catfish that squeaked when pulled from the water. Being a catfish, the Vundoo would swallow the baited hook without even closing its mouth, so that the hook was then in its gut, not its mouth when it bit into the flesh with its barbed end. The fish would then thrash about, roll over and over, shoot in and out of tree roots, thus making it impossible to land it and put it out of its misery. All the fisherman could do was to cut the line and leave the fish to live or die, whatever the consequence was going to be.

I then remembered Tiger Fish. Oh what a fish! This was a fast-moving predatory fish not unlike a barracuda in habit, and looking like a slightly larger version of the Piranha fish of the Amazon basin. Tiger Fish did not attack and eat living animals like the Piranha. They did have, however, razor sharp teeth, and would swim into shoals of smaller fish with mouths wide, crunching down on wiggling bodies every so often.

If hooked a Tiger would simply bite through the nylon line and swim free, hook still in the mouth. I knew that if fishing for Tiger Fish it was necessary to have a steel tracer line at least 10 centimetres in length between the nylon line and the hook. A 'gaff' was necessary to remove the hook from its lodging place in the mouth, and a spring-loaded dilator large enough to hold open a mouth up to 8 centimetres across. Without these essentials it was a case of not catching and landing one, or landing one but then losing a finger trying to get the hook out.

"I bet no-one's hooked a crocodile!" I said out loud.

A guest passing by gave me a very funny look!

I looked over at the room, Sara was drying her hair, I smiled and waved my hand, she waved back. I decided I should log in the laptop and send an e-mail to the team saying that everything was on target and that I would be at Alpha the following evening. I stepped into the room and slid the door shut.

"I'm going to power up the lap top, log in and send an e-mail"

"Oh that's your work for the day then?"

"I have been working all day – can you confirm that the hotel we go to next is near Southampton?"

"So, you've actually done some work today then? Yes, it's near Southampton, in the Botley area.

Is this email all you've got to do then?"

"What else?"

"I heard you'd been strolling about like you're on holiday!"

"Good, that's what I like to hear!"

"You -- you...!" She laughed, but didn't really know what to say.

As the laptop booted up, I thought back to the exclamation I had made outside. It would have been about 1960, on the Zambian bank of the Zambezi, near Livingstone, eight miles or so upstream from the Falls. I had decided I wanted to catch a big Tiger Fish, so I baited my hook with a piece of raw beef about 2cm across. I don't know to this day whether I had hooked a Tiger Fish first or not! However, when I tried to reel in the catch it quickly became very obvious that this was something bigger! I kept pulling and reeling in. My line was of 25Kg breaking strain with 20cm of steel trace, and my rod was capable of handling 100Kg. The water was very clear with a white sandy beach sloping gently out from the bank to around 22 metres out. After a long struggle, it became apparent that there was something being dragged up that white sandy slope, I thought it was a log, except for the fact it was fighting all the time. Soon I could see what was on the end of my line, - it was a young crocodile about a metre in length, probably weighing about 15 kilos or so. I did not

want to land this 'fish'! There was no way I was going to try and get the hook out of that mouth, so I cut the line and watched the crocodile as it slowly turned away. I figured that, either I had hooked a big Tiger and then the crocodile had taken the Tiger, or, the croc was really hungry and just a morsel of beef was enough to get it to bite. Either way, I had a croc on my line; there was no doubt of that fact. However, being an imaginative 12 year old boy, no-one believed me, there were no photos or eye-witnesses. Nevertheless it didn't alter the fact that I HAD hooked a crocodile - and would have landed it!

"Are you going to send that e-mail or day-dream all evening again?" - Sara nagged with her arms gently around my neck.

"Oh, you know me -- brain's always in gear, always on the go - I was watching someone fishing down there at the end of the lawn, reminded me of when I used to fish in the Zambezi."

"Why don't you do a bit of fishing then --"

"Here? - no, it's no fun in this country, the fish aren't interesting and if you catch anything, you have to throw it back -- to me that's not the idea of fishing! -- Dad always said 'If you aren't going to eat it - don't catch it' - and that's my philosophy also..."

"Well, it was only a suggestion -- didn't expect to get a lecture on the subject!"

"Sorry love, hobby horse of mine! - you know, fishing for sport"

"O.K., you're forgiven - now send that e-mail or whatever you were going to do - and let's go and eat!!"

I dialled up, sent an encrypted e-mail and logged out again. I shut down the laptop, closed it and returned it to its carrying case. I joined Sara by the door.

"Got the key?"

"Here," she replied dangling it from her fingers.

I smiled, gave her a hug and stepped out into the courtyard. I turned to face her and waited as she slid the large door closed and turned the key in the lock. I felt the need to talk to her seriously as we would be going home soon, after our brief stay in the hotel near 'Alpha', probably another in the group somewhere near the Botley area of Southampton. I had seen an e-mail that had indicated I might have a problem in the very near future. This would be something we would have to deal with together. "Sara, - we need to talk - " I started to say as we began to enjoy our starters. "I'm not sure I want to - - " she replied "- someone said they'd seen you. With a younger woman...!"

"Oh no, no darling, no - it's not that, not that at all!" I interrupted, grasping her trembling hand as her lips also began to tremble. "No my sweet love, she is my colleague, in fact, my supervisor! She wouldn't give me a second look - you have no worries there! No - this is something else. You remember that last year I had that redeployment under threat of redundancy?"

"Er..yes.."

"Well, I think the firm's going to do it again!"

"Again! But .."

"Well, nothing said yet, but I had an e-mail, just like the last one, saying I must be in the Main Office on Monday for a special meeting."

"Oh yes - then what?" She was getting a little excitable now. "We'll get through it o.k., won't we - after all last time they re-deployed you into this job didn't they - I'm sure it'll be o.k.!"

Nothing more was said about the matter as we munched through our delicious meal in silence. We retired to our room with only small talk passing between us. We both had a restless night, and really only began to talk more animatedly when we were in the car on the way to Southampton. The journey up through the New Forest was delightful and we enjoyed the drive.

"So, what do you think your plans will be?" Sara eventually asked, her hand on my knee as I negotiated some of the heavily forested winding roads in our estate car. We talked at some length about what would happen and how we would cope. I tried to make light of what could have been a serious financial blow.

"Well, as you said, last time they re-deployed me - and that screwed up my life, terminating my 'networking' relationships with my European and US friends - and this job was, in their opinion, a fair substitute. This time they will not make that offer I'm sure, and they will invite me to go - but I have plans!" I watched a dark saloon car in the mirror as I spoke.

"What plans?"

"Well, if they ask me to go, they'll have to pay me two weeks salary for every year I have worked for the firm, either in lieu of notice, or keep me on salary for that period - and I have worked in total for eight years now." The dark car was still there, the same distance away. The road we were on was not the main route to Southampton and people usually used it only when they wanted a quiet drive in the country. Maybe this driver just wanted a drive in the country. Sara was still working on the redundancy situation, oblivious to the car or my anxiety. This would be the first time I had a 'shadow' following me while Sara was in the car and vulnerable.

"Eight . . . that's sixteen weeks - full pay? Then what?"

"Well as I say, either they'll pay that up front along with the redundancy payment, and I go immediately the redundancy is confirmed - or, they'll ask me to work my notice. That's dodgy when redundancy is the reason for termination - because if I work as normal right up to the end, then my job isn't actually 'redundant' and it becomes a dismissal, which I could take to the Department of Employment as a complaint for 'constructive dismissal'..." That all rolled off my tongue as my eyes tried in vain to see the driver of the car behind, but he was a professional, holding back just enough to make the sky reflect of the windscreen..

"I was with you, but now you've lost me, getting too complicated - "

"Sorry, I think, or at least I'm confident that it will not be that way. What will happen is this - they'll pull the plug on the operation, close down the department, send me home where I'll sit on full pay for the duration..."

"That's crazy - "

"Anyway - there's not a lot of point in talking about it beyond that - got to wait and see what happens on Monday." The dark car remained just out of my normal vision. I was convinced it wasn't a hit man, there had been many perfect spots to carry out an assassination but the driver of the car did not waver.

"Yes, let's park it for a while and enjoy the day."

"Hey, look, there's a sign for Beaulieu, shall we go and see the house and maybe the Motor Museum?" I was glad to find an opportunity to either force that driver's hand, or get him to join us.

"Oh, yes let's!"

I turned slowly into the car park at the rear of a local garage. The dark car, a Renault Laguna, did the same. I started to drive round the inner road.

"There's one" called Sara, pointing to a parking space I was driving past. "why didn't you drive into it?" she almost demanded.

I accelerated suddenly and in a few seconds was the one doing the following as we caught up with the Laguna from behind. The driver physically reacted to the sudden appearance of my car behind him.

"Now why did you do that, stop pushing him – he'll get out and punch you, you'll see."

"I just felt like it" I replied, backing into a parking space. Now I could see the car negotiating the bend in the inner road. The driver must've seen us at the time we saw him. I tapped on Sara's wrists the familiar words in morse code: "Something up." The only morse she understood. She tapped back the only other word she knew, "what?"

I gestured with my eyes at the Renault Laguna. She looked and it stopped, briefly, for just a fleeting moment, and then swiftly left the car park.

"Sorry my love – I get jumpy when cars follow us."

"Don't they HAVE to follow us – otherwise they'd be driving in a field?"

"No, I don't mean it in that way – I mean they were deliberately behind us, for the last ten miles, and then they came in here too."

"Yes, but if there are no spaces, they'd be obliged to drive a round until they found one."

"There's one there, so why do you suppose they left?"

"I think you watch too much television – come on, let's go to the house now, please!"

"I laughed as I got out; glad she hadn't seen anything sinister about the car. I sent a text out with the details of the car.

"Who are you sending messages to now?"

"Joe – just to tell him we're visiting Beaulieu."

"Oh, right."

The reply was, "Nothing on file." Perhaps it had just been a coincidence. This was one part of the job I had always hated, the ducking and diving, always afraid that a car or van would have the man with the bullet that would end my life. When I started in the job I had no idea that commercial insurance fraud was that big or that people would kill to prevent discovery. I had been a bit naive in that respect. We walked hand in hand onto the estate towards the famous motor museum. The rest of the day was spent enjoying the attractions within Beaulieu and we then made our way to the hotel Sara had booked for us without any further concerns over following vehicles. As we passed by the building I knew as 'Alpha', I wondered what the next day would bring.

Chapter 17

I sat by the window, looking out at the Leisure Centre attached to the hotel, a coach was just disgorging a gaggle of somewhat overweight women bound for the next keep-fit or weight loss session. I looked back at Sara who, after dropping her case by the foot of the bed, had flopped on it and was now asleep. The lack of sleep the previous night and the fresh air whilst walking round Beaulieu had taken its toll. There was still a bit to do, I had to send in the report, from the company's secure site, known simply as 'Location Alpha', now just about seven minutes away. I scribbled a note and stuck it to the mirror. "GONE TO SECURE LOG-IN SITE TO SEND FULL REPORT - BACK IN 20. XX LOVE ROB"

I made my way down to the ground floor and out of the hotel front door as a wedding was in full swing.

"Hmmm, so that's why we can't use the restaurant this evening," I thought as I eased my way through swaying people with half-full glasses in their hands. They regarded me with some contempt, how could I dare to book into a hotel they had bought for the night! One even remarked about it and laughed as he referred to me in a way that any other time he would have thought twice about whilst sober. I smiled as I pushed on, after all THEY weren't even paying for this special day, they were only guests of the bride and groom, who had. I reached the car, accrued out my usual checks. I had waited a minute with the engine running as I watched a couple of cars manoeuvring and parking in the available spaces, before I moved slowly forward and out into the road. I watched my mirrors as I took the slip road up to the urban feeder road about a mile from the hotel. No-one seemed to be following. There was nobody standing on any of the over-bridges either. I was happy to continue the journey. As I drove down the main dual-carriageway towards Southampton, I could see a large letter "A" on a building to the right. "If only people knew -" I laughed as I turned towards it. The "A" was in fact the first letter of the name of a company, but only the "A" can be seen from the approach road. "ALPHA!" I exclaimed and laughed again. I went round the roundabout twice, like someone who's lost their way and missed the exit. There were no embarrassed motorists trying to look like they weren't following me. I quickly turned into the site car park and stopped close to the main entrance. I approached the building, having lifted the laptop case out of the boot of the car and swung it onto my shoulder. I walked to the door and pressed a button labelled "Command". A small screen lit up and a computer voice instructed me to place my forefinger on the panel and speak my name. I quickly complied and was soon inside the building. A security officer slowly approached me.

"Good evening Sir. May I check your pass please?"

"Certainly" I reached into my pocket and pulled out a laminated 'key card' which I handed to the man.

"Thank you Sir, please carry on" the man said as he passed the card back to me.

"Thanks" I replied as I returned it to my pocket.

I walked into one of the offices, powered up the laptop and once fully running, plugged in the modem cable to the telephone port. Then using a secure sequential dial-up, and a special 'token' I logged into the company mainframe and dumped my report and pictures to the directory labelled with the name of a company I had been told to use. The rest was up to the 'heavy mob', I had done my bit and nailed the would-be fraudsters, now the team would be there for the arrest. My job was done. I couldn't help letting out a sigh of relief. I logged off, shut down and closed up the laptop, returned it to its case and headed for the door.

"Good night" I called

"Good night Sir" the security officer called back.

In less than six minutes I was locking the car and weaving my way through the thoroughly inebriated wedding guests and then up the stairs to our room. As I entered it, Sara sat up with a start, face slightly lopsided from lying on one side for so long.

"Where are you going...?" she asked sleepily

"Not going anywhere sweetheart, coming back!" I replied, nodding toward the note on the mirror, "had a good sleep?"

"Oh, o.k. so, where have you been then...?"

"Boring work stuff - went to log into the mainframe and dump all the reports etc."

"Oh, yes, I remember you saying you'd have to do that - so what's the time then?"

"Just after five thirty, we can't eat here because of the wedding party, I'm getting peckish."

"Five thirty?! I'm all disorientated, for a second I thought it was morning. So where shall we eat then?"

"Well, on my little excursion, I saw a local restaurant that's one of the chain of restaurants we use from time to time, nice location, plenty of parking and lots of seats inside and out - so, get changed and we'll go."

"Sounds good, going to have a shower then."

Sara rolled off the bed and opened her case to select the clothes she was to change in, grabbed a bath towel off the heated rail and went into the bathroom. Half an hour later, we were walking hand in hand from the car to the entrance of the restaurant. Once inside we were greeted by a cheerful young waitress and Sara asked for non-smoking for two, and was pleasantly surprised to be told that the whole restaurant was now non-smoking. The waitress led us to a small square table and offered us a menu each. I smiled as I took mine. How different this was from the last one of the group that we visited after which I felt the need to write and let the head office know about the appalling customer service. Then I remembered that they had sent us a voucher and fished it out of my wallet, ah yes, it was still valid. The waitress came to take our order and I mentioned the voucher, she told me that I should just present it when making payment. We both then made our selections and ordered the soft drink we always enjoyed when eating out. I made a note to write to the head office and commend them for this restaurant, just to show I wasn't a moaner looking for a 'freebie'. We enjoyed the meal very much and commended the manager on the quality. She was clearly pleased. It was good just to relax and put aside the stress of the job. We talked about the day, Beaulieu, the New Forest horses, the walk round Lyndhurst and so on. We realised that we both were really whacked out and so I suggested we take coffee in the room and get our heads down. Sara saw that as an excellent idea, and soon we were finishing off our coffee back in the hotel, and then, in spite of the row being made by the wedding party, were settling down for our night's sleep. The bed was warm and comfortable and I sighed again as I placed my head on the pillow. It seemed as if I put my head down, and then sat up again without sleeping in between. It was only the fact that it was very light outside that gave away the truth of the matter; night had passed and it was time for breakfast and the long journey home.

"Wakey, wakey!" I whispered in Sara's ear

"Mmmm - s'not fair, I've only just got to sleep.."

"That's what I thought, but it is nine o'clock already!"

"Eh - ?" she sat up and looked her watch "It is, but it seems like I just put my head on the pillow!"

"Yeah, nice to sleep that deeply - and we don't have to rush, let's get dressed and packed up, have breakfast and take a leisurely drive home.

"Yeah, sounds good, I'm off to the bathroom."

Soon, we had demolished a fine breakfast, checked out and were now driving up the main road towards the M27. Sunday morning at 10:30 is very quiet, even the motorway had sparse traffic. I had decided that we wouldn't take the M3 north, but rather would take the old routes, up to Salisbury, on to Newbury, then Oxford and eventually home. I never let the relaxation of the day affect my vigilance, watching every car and every pedestrian we passed. Sara was looking at the National Trust directory and pointed out that there was a house and gardens coming up that we could visit. I readily agreed; there was no rush. As we turned off the main trunk road, I noticed that there was a sign for a trout farm and thought that it would be a great idea to buy a couple for later. "I wonder what size the trout are that we sell" I thought, "a couple of three to four hundred grams with good flesh would be about right." I wondered how they catch them, in the conventional way, or just wade in with a big net. Rod would be fun, giving the fish a fighting chance at least. This caused me to think back to the heady days as a boy, fishing in the Zambezi or the Kafue rivers. I smiled at the thought of these mild fighters and the efforts to land them compared to the Vundoos, Tiger Fish and the Barbelled Catfish. The latter, when adult was known to pull its would-be captor into the water. I remembered one very special occasion fishing about twelve miles upstream from the 'Falls' along a particularly beautiful part of the Zambezi. I was with my dad and had lost patience with the fish not biting; my dad had told me to just leave the line in the water, sit down on

the bank, and just wait while admiring the view. "Who cares if the fish don't bite?" he had said with a smile, "Look at this scenery, the peace and glorious sunshine."

However, I didn't want to just sit - I wanted to fish, so I walked away, round the other side of some huge boulders and cast my hook into the water. As I slowly reeled in the spinner for the next cast, I had a feeling that something or someone was behind me. It had been just the merest whisper of a sound, yet enough to make me turn around, slowly so as not to startle anything. What met my eyes made me jump! There, standing less than ten metres away, all of three metres from his big feet to the top of his enormous head, was the biggest bull elephant I had so far seen in my short life - and I'd seen a few! The majestic creature stood, trunk down with just the merest movement of his huge ears. I looked at it in awe, me a boy not yet twelve years old; it was like the biblical story of David & Goliath. The tusks on this beautiful specimen were over a metre in length and nearly 100mm in diameter. They curved upwards and slightly inwards, ideal for uprooting small trees and digging for salt in the soft sandstone. Equally they could do some damage when wielded in anger. For at least two minutes we regarded each other, neither moving, then I felt I should try to get across to the huge creature that I wasn't a threat to him - but how? I had heard of reports of elephants thrashing people to death against a tree, I was beginning to feel a little panicky; the only way out was where he was standing unless I took my chances with the crocodiles. Then I had a somewhat silly idea - I'd just tell him and then he'd know - but what language will he understand? Bemba? Nyanja? Lozi? Barotse? Tonga? - maybe he was from the South and understood Shona, Sindabele, or maybe Matabele! What a daft series of silly thoughts I had! Still I looked straight at the elephant and said "N'dlovu!" which was just 'elephant' in many dialects. Naturally, there was no response by the huge grey beast. I stepped forward slightly, the five ton elephant shifted his weight and his left foot trembled a little. I didn't miss this. I loved animals, knew our habits and most of their reactions. The elephant was scared - he didn't know what to do - this was not a man, it was a small human and he sensed that I was vulnerable. This confused and scared him, big as he was! Scared elephants are more dangerous than bold ones. I had to re-assure him, and quickly.

"Hey boy! Don't be scared." I figured English would be no different but at least I could get the right feeling into my voice. I looked at the eyes of my strange companion on this small piece of river bank. They looked sad and there was no anger in them. I made sure my speech was soft and calm, re-assuring. I knew that it worked with dogs, so why not elephants.

"At least you're not a rogue," I said quietly, "You're thirsty, aren't you - you just want to get into the water!"

I kept my eyes on the elephant's and slowly lowered my fishing rod, laying it flat on the ground. Then I slowly went down onto my knees, then onto all fours, and stepped sideways, one, two steps and looked back at the motionless elephant. If that huge creature was capable of looking astonished, I was sure that it would be now. The elephant raised his trunk slowly and brought the tip to within 50mm of my face. I dropped my gaze, and my head. I had to show him I accepted he was the king of this riverbank and I was just a humble child. What happened next was totally unexpected. I felt a slight tap on my shoulder - "Not now Dad, don't move a muscle - - -" I started to say as I slowly raised my head - but, my Dad wasn't there! It was the elephant that had tapped me on my shoulder! He wanted me to look up. I raised my eyes and the elephant began swaying from side to side, and swinging his trunk back and forth - a 'bull salute' - a tribute only to older wiser bulls! I had seen this first hand when older bulls recognise and give way to younger 'teenage' ones ready to take over the roles in the herd. They sometimes also did this to young bull calves, to teach them the dance. This elephant was telling me he accepted me into his herd! "Hey, I'm an elephant!" I softly whispered and begun to sway myself.

The bull trumpeted in delight! This was crazy, this just doesn't happen, I should have been running for my life, I should have been trampled on for my obstruction of his pathway. Yet, there he was, playing games with me. I then rotated in a full circle - the calves do this to show the older elephants that they are submissive to them. I then stepped several steps again to the right and put my forehead to the ground, another sign of submission. Once again the bull moved, reached out and tapped me - this time when I looked up, he flicked his trunk upwards three times.

"You want me to stand up?" I asked incredulously. I sat up, then slowly stood up and leaned tight back against one of the boulders. The bull trumpeted again and in 3 steps was at the water's edge,

one more step and he was into the river. He stopped, turned his head and flicked his trunk from side to side at the level of his forehead. I was astonished! The elephant was waving goodbye! I raised one hand and waved like a child does when it's waving to friends or family. The huge bull gave a short sharp trumpet and in two more strides he was wading out from the bank, filling his trunk with water and squirting it over his back. I giggled with delight, what a fantastic experience, from the animal that man fears most after the big cats and the terrifying Cape Buffalo. The elephant heard the giggle and directed one of the trunk-loads of water straight at me, drenching me from head to toe in one shot. Then it rumbled and shook for a minute or so. The elephant was laughing - he was amused by the drenching he had just given me. Waving again, I picked up my rod and backed away slowly, once out of sight I ran all the way back to my dad.

"Fell in, eh?" Dad asked

"Er - no, an elephant gave me a bath - didn't you hear it trumpeting?"

"No, I don't recall hearing anything - you don't half make up some stories - c'mon, let's get you home and into dry clothes!"

"But Dad, - really - -"

"Come on - into the car - -"

Even much later in life, in my twenties, when I would mention this episode to friends and visitors, I would see out of the corner of my eye, my dad winking and nodding in my direction. He would never accept that there could be this interchange between an animal and me. Strange, for he proudly told many of his friends that he had a mini 'Tarzan' for a son and related how I was able to almost talk to the animals sometimes. I guessed he just couldn't believe it because if he did he would have to realise just how easily I could have been killed. Sara's lovely voice broke the spell of the elephant drama just at that moment.

"Oh look, there's a loo - can I just pop in there before we go on up to the house?"

"Oh, yes, of course, I think I'll pop in the gents too.."

"So, a long hard look at the trout in the stream and - off you went. Catching Tiger Fish again were you. . .?"

"Well, I was fishing, but I was saying hello again to my big elephant in the Zambezi. . ."

"The pink one you mean?" she said, grinning

"Now hang on - don't you get like Dad - it really DID happen just the way I told you!"

"O.K. love, O.K. . ."

"Humouring me again are you, yeah, I know . . ."

We disappeared into the toilets and the matter was closed - for the time being at least. I knew that it would come again, as did many of my childhood memories. Sara loved to hear them really - or at least that was what I told myself anyway. We enjoyed our leisurely journey home and nothing disturbed our peace, that is, not until we arrived home and I picked up the envelope that was waiting on the mat.

Chapter 18

I couldn't help being nervous as I joined the rest of my team on that Monday morning, the first time I had been into the office itself for several weeks. The envelope I found on the mat had been hand written and said 'delivered by hand' across the top. The slip of paper inside was written by Geri, the section manager. It simply said, "Rob, come into the office on Monday please. I've e-mailed you as well but this is just to be sure you know. Geri." Intrigued, I had got up earlier than I normally would to go into the office just a couple of miles from the house and was in the door just after 8:30. Even my colleague from North of the Border had flown in. A senior manager came down to where we were all standing and handed each of us a brown envelope on which a label bearing individual names had been stuck. Someone else was also moving through the group handing out white envelopes. My immediate team all got brown ones. The senior operative, Angie, who had met me in the hotel grounds on Thursday was clutching a white one as was Geri, our immediate section manager and many other senior managers. Everyone began to slowly open their envelopes. I looked at Geri; she was crying and had begun mopping her eyes.

"I'm sorry, so sorry - -" was all she could repeat over and over. Her wet eyes ran over each of our faces in turn. Without looking away from her eyes, I slit the top of the envelope with a finger and pulled out a single sheet of folded paper. Her eyes were flicking from one to the other. She knew what was on the paper. I allowed my eyes to drop to the plain A4 sheet; I read the simple one line message - "ROOM 424, 9:30" was all that it said.

Between little sobs, my manager asked "Where..?"

"Room 424," we all answered almost as one - "And you. . .?"

"The Atrium"

I looked at my colleagues.

"We're OUT" I said with hardly any emotion.

"Looks like it," a young female colleague replied.

We were right.

An hour or so later I walked into the hotel where Sara worked and stood before her at the Reception desk.

She looked up.

"Well, as of now, I'm a free man!"

"A FREE man?"

"Yes, the job is over, the plug was pulled at 9:30 this morning"

"So - -?"

"I go home and twiddle my thumbs for the next 16 weeks!"

"Then what?"

"Then, they pay me a lump sum, the redundancy payment, and I go and do something else!"

"Like what?"

"I don't know at this moment, I have a few weeks to figure something out!"

"Are you o.k. about it?"

"Sure, not the first time is it - got a reprieve last time when they re-deployed me into this job. . . disappointed me actually, I would have been happy to have the money and move on three years ago. . ."

"Well, it's not the end of the world is it?"

"No, but it's a bit traumatic anyway - I think Geri, my boss, was more upset than I am! Angie is still in her job, it's all of us in the field that have been cut."

"So, what are you going to do now?"

"I'm going home."

"See you later then. . ."

Later in the evening, I sat down beside Sara and put my arm around her - she looked at my face, reading my eyes and measuring my expressions.

"And . . .?" she questioned

"Time to tell you what's what . . ."

"Then you'll have to kill me . . ."

"Ha, Ha, no - couldn't care less now!"

"So . . .?"

"Well, all those trips, all those seemingly innocent photographs and videos, the clandestine meetings with strange women in hotel grounds. I'm sure you'd like to know what it was all about?"

"Are you sure you want to tell me?"

"Well, it can't do any harm now - the whole operation's shut down so my telling you can't put anyone at risk"

"At risk?"

"Yes, it could have done, before today!"

"Go on then - not boring is it . . .?"

"Well, it might be - but I want to tell you anyway, you've always been so good and not asked or questioned anything. You're a real star!"

"O.K. Mr Bond - go ahead."

"Oh dear, I see you are expecting more than the actuality."

"Just lightening up the moment – silly," she squeezed my hand

I stroked her neck with my thumb and took a breath.

"Right, o.k., here it is - my job was . . . wait for it . . . A commercial insurance fraud investigator. . . now you know!"

"Oh, that's it, that's all . . .?"

"Don't sound so disappointed! Commercial claims can run into millions you know, and if the claimants were committing fraud and they knew I was on to them they could easily have arranged for me to disappear, never to appear again - and you too if they'd got wind of it while we were in Lymington"

"Lymington - Oh yes - well, I'd never have known. . ."

"Shows how good I am doesn't it!?"

"So what was it all about then?"

"Well, you might as well know because the fraudsters have been nicked now anyway. While we were at Avonmouth, I was watching two men, one of whom was the owner of a large 'bonded' warehouse - you know, where liquor is held until the tax has been paid - holding over a million quid's worth of whiskey, brandy, gin and vodka along with liqueurs. The other guy was a well known, but never caught, arsonist"

"Go on, I'm still with you . . ."

"I was able to confirm their meetings together, then we moved to Lymington where I confirmed that the arsonist was purchasing the supplies needed to create and set incendiary devices. Then, Angie, the woman that I met in the hotel grounds, took the team to the warehouse and watched/filmed him setting them up while we were enjoying our leisurely drive home yesterday. The police, bomb disposal and fire brigade were called to play their part. The man was nicked coming out and then made to call the owner and confirm that the devices were active. The bomb disposal people went in and neutralised the fire bombs.

Then, the fire brigade sprayed water all over the roof etc. and called the owner to say that it was well ablaze. Still with me?"

"Yes, I think so"

"The team waited for the man to call in and say that his warehouse was on fire and to file his claim, which he did and we nicked him for attempting to extort money by making a fraudulent claim!"

"Ah, but that's because you didn't let the warehouse burn - if it had, his claim wouldn't have been fraudulent. Isn't that called 'entrapment'?"

"Ah, I've left the best until last - you see, the warehouse was full of empty bottles! He'd moved all the bonded stock somewhere else- so yes, fraudulent claim, theft, evasion of alcohol tax and VAT - what else. . .?"

"Wonderful! Wonderful! I like it!"

"Yes, the job has its moments - or should I say, HAD"

"So, all those times, those places - Cornwall, Scotland, Liverpool - you were chasing up insurance fraud!?"

"No, that was my previous job; my first job – and only job it turns out – in this new role, was the one I just told you about! There was going to be a real juicy one just before the plug was pulled

involving someone fairly high up in a government contract operation. That will still carry on and may make ripples affecting even the national security of this country – but it's nothing to do with me now."

"Oh so the other job was taking you all over and doing something equally important, but not quite the same – is that right?"

"That's it, one hundred percent right!"

"So are you going to tell me what that one was all about?"

"All in good time, right now I'm trying to take on board what's happening here and now."

"So, what are you going to do with your time now?"

"Well, when I was in Cornwall once, I told a young woman in the team about how I came to be escorted out of South Africa in 1967. She convinced me to write a book about it all, so I might do that. . ."

"No-one would be interested in your stories. . ."

"Well, that's what I said to her, but her eyes were so big after I told her just that one story - I'm convinced she would read it - so why wouldn't others. . .?"

"Well, we have to live in the meantime!"

"That's O.K., I'm going to do some work - but on MY terms, we'll have about 25 grand to play about with you know!"

"Really, how come?"

"Well, I'm going to put in for early retirement during my notice period, to run from my next birthday - which will be a month after the redundancy notice expires."

"Now you've lost me!"

"Well, I will be 55 in March, so that means I can take early retirement - as well as redundancy pay"

"Isn't that dishonest?"

"No, it's mine anyway - just asking for it sooner. I'll get a lump sum on my 55th, and a few hundred a month as a pension to cushion against things later on."

"What will you do?"

"I think I'm going to try and get fit – I put on a bit of weight living in hotels four days out of every seven for the last three years - so, I'm going to go to work for a season in some manual job. I rather fancy a wild animal place - you know Lions, Elephants, Giraffe etc. - you know me and animals, I'm a regular Dr Doolittle!"

"Yes, just don't know how they understand you, even the kids get fascinated when you stop and talk to animals"

"So, I'll apply to get in when they start the season"

"If they'll give you a look in . . ."

"Why, because I'm an old git? - Lot's of life in this body yet!"

"Well, hard work never hurt anyone!"

"Still, that's a little way off - so let's get up to bed and get some sleep"

"You want to sleep then . . .?"

"Why - what did you have in mind -?"

Sara gave me a little smack and made for the stairs, I chased after her and she only just made it through the bathroom door as my hand was closing in on her soft round buttock.

Chapter 19

I awoke in a sweat; it was a hot night, almost unbearable even though I was still naked under the sheets. I got out of bed carefully, so as not to wake Sara; and parted the curtains to look out. All was still, not even a breeze fluttered the leaves in the trees, lit up by the yellow light of the street lamps. I looked down at the fish pond, its waterfall cascading down the man-made rapids. I glanced over to the pool tucked in the corner of the wide lawn. The breeze was making small waves on the surface. In the silvery moonlight I saw the flashes of light on the water as it weaved about. It looked like a long snake weaving to and fro. Snake, water? Now there was a memory! How old would I have been? About 13 I reckoned. On the North Western edge of the town of Livingstone there is a reservoir on the hill top which, when it's full, overflows down a long chute into the channel below. The channel then winds its way down the hill and along the valley floor to join one of the tributaries of the Kafue River. It was in that very same channel, whilst knee deep in water and clad only in shorts and T-shirt, I walked, or rather, waded, barefoot one afternoon after school. Rounding a bend I came upon a frightening sight. Sitting on the surface of the water, gently weaving its tail to and fro and with its hood fully extended, was a black and white banded Spitting-Cobra! In an instant I found myself up on the bank, one and a half metres up above the water, looking down on a bewildered Cobra. To this day I have never been able to repeat that feat, jumping out of a ditch full of water and successfully landing on a bank that just moments earlier had been at shoulder height. That would be about a metre and a half jump from a standing position in water, without a run-up, almost Olympian, I thought. I thoughtfully stroked my chin as I looked back towards Sara, the moonlight falling across her body as she lay with the sheets pulled down to waist level. She was so beautiful in that light, skin so milky white, I was so glad we'd met and married some thirty years ago.

"Thirty years!" I whispered, "Wow, and yet, most of the exciting things in my life took place during the previous 25 years - in fact between my 3rd and 18th birthdays!"

I smiled and watched her for a moment, then added, "And yet, none of that equates to the fun, joys, good times and bad times we've enjoyed together my sweet love."

Sara moved a little and shifted her head; she looked like a Greek goddess. The lights and the moon light played upon her body which took on a mottled effect. To me, it was like she was wearing a Leopard skin. The sight of her dappled body triggered another memory in my storehouse of the past. I recalled one occasion when I was on my way with about 8 other boys to the 'Summer Camp' in the Kafue Game Reserve. Living as I did in Makeni, west of Lusaka towards Kafue Hook, I was last to be picked up by the bus after I had dragged my kit down to the main road about 40 kilometres from Kafue Hook where the ferry would take us across the river. Kafue Hook is where the widening Kafue river turns through almost a hundred and twenty degrees and then sharply makes a ninety degree turn back in the original direction, so that from the air it looks like a large hook. Just before the 'Hook and its ferry there was a motel typical of those 'middle of nowhere' hotels scattered across the region. As always, the Bedford 25 seater bus stopped there for fuel and everyone piled out to use the one outdoor toilet - a hole in the ground with a raised surround on which a toilet seat was fixed, enclosed in a corrugated iron clad 'box', the door of which wouldn't close.

Having taken my turn, I ran to the hotel and slipped inside to see Charlie, the man who ran the place, the last stop before the wild Kafue Game Reserve.

"Hi, Mr Lossie" I called "How're the Leopard cubs?"

"Rob! Hello my boy! C'mon through and have a look - they're a lot bigger than when you last saw them - -!"

He led me through the back of the lounge/bar and kitchen to a small annexe. When he opened the door I exclaimed "WOW!, they HAVE grown!"

The Leopard cubs were the size of a small house cat the last time I'd seen them at just 10 weeks of age. Charlie'd had to shoot their mother because she was attacking his goats, and then realised why, it was to feed them. He had rescued the cubs and hand fed them for the first few weeks. Now they were quite chunky and about the size of a small dog, like a Bull-Terrier or a Springer Spaniel perhaps.

"Almost grown up!" Charlie said

"Can I - - - ?"

"Course you can - go on. . ."

Needing no second bid, I bent down and made funny noises, rolled on my back and waved my hands and feet in the air.

Charlie laughed. The cubs leaped on me in delight and I cuddled two of them whilst a third chewed on my shoe. The fourth one, a male, decided that biting my head was a good idea. Together we rolled about, all growling, kicking and biting – with me doing my share of the action. Charlie shook his head and sighed.

"Rob, no-one can play with those cats like you do without the risk of getting seriously hurt, yet, you haven't got even the slightest scratch! How do you do it!?"

"I talk their language - they know I'm not their enemy - their claws are in - see -!"

"Oi, c'mon we're waiting for you!" the camp leader called through the kitchen door.

I rolled, stood up, then bent down again and tickled each one behind the ears, and said goodbye.

"Thanks Mr Lossie," I said as I ran back to the bus.

"You're welcome, any time, young man, any time." Charlie said as the bus got into gear and started to roll.

A mile down the road and we rolled onto the 'ferry' which was a single vehicle pontoon pulled across by chains - or rather 'walking engines' mounted on the deck either side of the pontoon, which pulled the chains through themselves and made the ferry move. Once across the river we were in the realm of the Barotse and Lozi a nomadic people who virtually lived on the water - all their dwellings were built on stilts in the Zambezi and Kafue flood plains. During the 9 months of the year when there is no rain, there was just a slight dampness in the soil and the marsh grass grew thick, the tribesmen wore what looked like snow-shoes so as not to sink in the mud. Once the floods came the flood plains were under at least 2 metres of water, as it was in fact at the time I was remembering, 'Summer Camp' being in midsummer in December. The tribesmen could be seen moving to and fro in their home-made canoes of 'dugouts', so-called because they were literally 'dug out' tree trunks. As the bus rolled off the ferry, a young Lozi woman, probably in her twenties, came forward and greeted the driver.

"She's very beautiful" thought I, wishing I was 10 years older, "I wonder who she is. .?"

I was soon to find out, for she boarded the bus and as I had no-one beside me, she opted to sit down next to me.

"Muzuhile cwani" said I

"Muzuhile cwani" she said back to me, in surprise.

I extended my hand, " Rob, from Makeni -"

She laughed, took my hand briefly, shook it and replied, "Princess Nakatinde, from Barotseland - welcome to my country!"

We chatted all the way to Mupila where she left the bus and it departed with its special cargo, in the direction of the main offices for the Game Reserve. Little did I know how our conversation had affected the young Princess, and just how impressed she was at the depth of perception displayed by a young man. So much so that later when she became the full ruling Queen of Barotseland and taking over the reins from Kalu-Mate, her father, she would send for me to see if I could help her make important decisions, such as who should represent the Lozi people in the soon to be formed, new national government of Zambia. However, seen we were to disembark at our camp. It wasn't long before I and two other boys were in our hut, eagerly unpacking the clothes so carefully ironed and folded that morning by their mothers, and screwing them up before stuffing them into rudimentary drawers by the beds. This would be 'home' for the next six weeks. I loved our summer camp out in the Kafue Game Reserve, there was so much to learn, so much to see and do. How my own children in England had envied my growing up period - why, all they had was the occasional week in an 'outward bound' activity centre in Wales, if they were lucky. About a week into the summer camp, I was woken up by a strange sound. In each hut, beside each bed was a glass-less window with a fibre-glass shutter on the outside and a steel mesh on the inside. As it had been hot, the shutters had been locked back on the outside wall so that only the mesh was between each boy and the African night. The sound that I had heard made me turn over to face the mesh - only to come face to face with Hyena, its half opened mouth and undulating tongue seeming larger than life. Just eight inches and a fine wire mesh separated us. No, no-one can say

for sure who was most scared or who yelled first, but I yelled and fell out of the opposite side of the bed at the same time as the hyena yelled and fled as fast as its stubby legs could carry it. In less than a minute the flood lights were on and the Warden was in the hut demanding to know what was going on, and asking each one if they were o.k. One of the African wardens came in and told the Warden of the hyena. He was a little perturbed because the camp had a fence on three sides with the wide river making a fourth boundary.

"There must be a hole in the fence - we must check it thoroughly tomorrow!"

Everyone settled down and had the rest of the night without further disturbance. My memories of the summer camp made me smile as I looked out at that scene of moonlit water that has sent me off thinking about my experience with the snake in the water channel. I shivered; I was getting a little cool now, standing naked by the window. I stretched and yawned and gently climbed back into the bed alongside Sara.

"Must remember to get down on paper all the summer camp episodes - coo - they could fill a book on their own!" (my second book is called Wild Grass).

I slowly drifted off to sleep, only to be jangled awake again by the alarm in what seemed to be 5 minutes - though it was in actuality over three hours. I showered and went downstairs, Sara was just leaving for work, all smart in her corporate suit.

"Early today then?" I asked

"Yes, sorry - -"

"Why sorry - you're the one that's still got a job, I feel funny sitting at home today - oh well, see you after three then."

"Yes, bye love"

After a brief hug and a kiss, she was gone, and I heard the diesel engine fire up and stood and listened until its rattle became muffled by distance.

"So, my lad, what's the agenda for today" I asked myself

I decided that a good breakfast and a mug of coffee was a good start and set about preparing it - a feast fit for a king! Sara would be tutting and warning of cholesterol and heart attacks and I'd feel guilty - then I felt guilty anyway, having thought about it. I decided to eat 'al fresco' and carried the tray out into the garden, it was cool but the early morning sun was getting stronger by the minute. As I slowly munched thoughtfully on the sumptuous feast of eggs and bacon with sausages, tomato and mushrooms - I remembered the breakfasts out in summer camp. How delightful they smelled in that crisp morning air as the cook rustled up eggs and bacon just as we were brushing our teeth. Ah, they were fun times, and a great privilege for me as a youngster - nothing could ever take that away from me, nothing could ever match it in the lives of young boys growing up here in England. A large fly hovered over my plate and I waved it away, threatening it with rapid mortification in the most brutal manner should it return. This fly made me think of the dreadful flies in Africa - the TSE-TSE, carrier of Trypanosomiasis or 'sleeping sickness'; the PU-TSE a flesh eater that lays its eggs on clean damp washing hanging on the line, so that if worn without ironing, the eggs will hatch and the grubs eat their way into the flesh of the wearer; The HIPPO FLY, a huge blood-sucker that attaches itself to the side of a hippopotamus and feeds off its blood through a sharp proboscis that can drill through 25mm of hide to find the vein or artery - a human bitten by one of these is like having an injection with a sharpened knitting needle! Not to leave out the ever droning or rather, whining, mosquito, carrier of either malaria or yellow fever. I recalled encounters with all of these at some time or another, and found myself unconsciously rubbing areas where I remembered the attacks. Even as I enter my twilight years, I still have bouts of what can only be described as malaria, even though it must be over 35 years since I was last bitten by a carrier of the disease. If I suffer from a bad dose of influenza, in a weakened state, the dormant malaria virus seems to wake up and make its attack evident in high temperatures, hallucinations and delirium. Of those flies the one I could never forget was the TSE-TSE fly, especially my first encounter with them. These disease carrying blood-suckers have a very painful bite and attack in swarms. They are capable of flying at 40 MPH so it is impossible to outrun them on foot. On the first encounter I and about six other boys were on 'summer camp' and were being driven from the camp to the M'Lingwe gorge to study baboons and ant-eaters. The Warden drove the Landrover at 38 MPH deliberately because (as he said later)- "I wanted you to get firsthand experience of the TSE-TSE in a safe area, here they are not carriers of 'sleeping sickness', so that you will

recognise them, know what they can do and their attack methods. It might just save you in an infested area sometime in the future!"

"Fine consolation AFTER the event!" remarked I as one of the Assistants was applying tincture to my many bites.

In the back of the open topped Landrover, it had been terrifying as swarms of these large black flies about 1 cm in length enveloped each of us in a black cloak and then rapidly attached themselves to any exposed area of flesh. I had been told by the Assistant caring for my bites that I had over a hundred of them all over my body.

"I'm surprised there's any blood left in my body after those evil little vampires had all been sucking away in unison!" I had retorted in anger.

I remember that I had not slept very well that night, the bites itched and there was no air. The outer shutter near me was open again to let in a little cool air, or rather a change of air as it didn't seem to get much cooler even though it was night. All of a sudden at about 3 a.m. there was an awful noise just away to the right. I couldn't see anything even though I craned my neck as far as I could to the left of the window. Then suddenly, into view came two Hippopotami, large young bulls, locked in battle, moving left and right, back and forth. At one time I had a very large rear end within feet of my bed.

"Hope they don't come right through the wall - -" I hissed between clenched teeth.

By now, the other boys were awake, wide-eyed and gripping favoured 'comforters' or their pillow in anxiety and fear. Suddenly, two shots rang out and the Hippo broke off their private war, and fled back to the river, and in two plopping sounds they had disappeared beneath the swirling waters.

The Warden followed them to the water's edge, and fired a third shot into the air. He turned through a wide arc, looking each way as he did so, and went back to my hut once he was sure that they wouldn't return. That was a scary night and I enjoyed recalling it as I finished off my breakfast. "Ah well - can't sit here all day - I've got to work out a plan of action" I reminded myself as I stood up and straightened the table and carried the breakfast things on the tray back into the kitchen. "I think I'll get some notes down on paper today - so many memories, such fun!"

I laughed a little as I took the stairs two at a time up to my office overlooking the Koi pond. I hauled the company laptop out its case and flicked the power switch. It would take a few minutes to boot up so I dug out my own laptop and my wad of notes while it was clicking and beeping its way through the start up files.

Chapter 20

I had logged in the company laptop, turned on the mobile phone and was sitting in the living room with my own laptop, ready to start writing my book. Being still technically employed by the firm, it was necessary to log in - even though there was unlikely to be anything for me. I was on what was commonly referred to as 'garden leave'. For several minutes I stared at the wall, my mind was as blank as it was. I just didn't know where to start. What was my life all about? I remembered the notebook I had carried about with me for weeks, during the time before 9/11 and in all those hotels. There was a lot of anecdotal scribble in it. I shuddered, writing some of those notes had brought back unpleasant scary moments, bad feelings and had given me nightmares. It was like coming upon a sleeping lion in a clearing and then regretting the fact that you had woken it up because asleep it just looked like a big pussycat, but awake and angry it was going to use teeth and claw to exact revenge. I started to write into a word processing package the following words - "LET SLEEPING LIONS LIE . . ."

Well, I had a title anyway! I'd chosen this because of the proverbial saying 'Let sleeping dogs lie' - because anyone waking a sleeping dog, risked getting bitten by a startled upset dog! I was thinking that to 'wake up' the forgotten past of my childhood, might just lead to someone getting 'bitten'. Just like that sleeping lion, the Simba, my childhood memories at first seemed quite innocent and yet, once written down, began to burn like a fire. I recount here why I chose that title and how this book came to be written. In the chronology I have chosen for this list of memories, the real time aspect of starting to write the book, came after I had faced redundancy and so it fits right here. I knew I had to build on the things I had written do and was quite excited about it. My mind was in gear. I began to see clearly the way to go. Reaching forward, I grabbed the folder I had brought down stairs containing my notebook and the many scraps of paper that I had accumulated over the last year or so, the memories of Africa and my childhood. I thought again of my Dad and the important job he had held working for the British Government on secondment to the Federal Government in the ten years from 1953 to 1963, and the last 4 years on secondment to the new Zambian Government. I recalled the years when we were in N'Dola and my Dad set off to work every day at 7 o'clock, returning just after 4 in the afternoon. Everyone thought he was a General Foreman with a large construction company - so did I and my mother and sisters. However, when my Dad had told me the truth just before he died in Cornwall, I had been amazed. My Dad was one of many operatives of the British Government based in Central Africa reporting directly to the Governor of Northern Rhodesia. He was responsible for providing the Intelligence Service field operatives with accurate and up to date information, especially in respect of possible Eastern Bloc insurgents always seeking to gain a foothold in pro-Western emerging African nations. It was because of this element of his job that the family had to move house so many times during that period. I looked back now and realised that I had been so close to danger so often without being aware of it at all. My Dad would keep it that way so that I could enjoy the freedom of growing up un-impeded by anything. I now began to sweat as I thought how often I wandered around on my own, into the dense bush, the long grass and into rivers and streams. If my Dad's cover was not as good as it had been, I could have been abducted at any time and then held for ransom, only to be killed when the abductors got what they wanted.

"Whew!" I thought as I thumbed through my notes. "I am really glad to have had my life, but all the more so now that I know how much in danger I was day by day!"

I found one of my notes about a fun day out we had all enjoyed as a family and sat back with eyes closed to enjoy it again. I would have been about six or seven years old and my Dad had told the family we were going on a special picnic. The journey took about two and a half hours from the house in N'Dola to something called the 'Hippo Pool'. Driving though an area with small rivers winding across a wide plain, with elephants slowly moving across the marshy ground to a tree lined mud flat was sheer delight. As the car moved from the bright sunlight into the heavy shade of many palm trees all close together, I remembered seeing men in dug-out canoes paddling across one of the rivers in the distance. The palm trees gave way to heavier deciduous trees forming the beginnings of a jungle. This was no surprise as we were just a few miles away from the Congo border. A little way into this dense tree forest and there was very little sunlight, it was like early morning instead of mid-day. Suddenly we burst out into bright sunlight and before and below us

was a huge pool of water, not a lake, a pool about a hundred metres across, almost circular, with river channels connecting at various points. From the road, as it traversed a long bridge we all could see that water was flowing across the pool from two of these connections, and out through another three. All across the pool were black or brown rocks a few metres apart. At least that's what I thought, until one of the 'rocks' wiggled its ears and I realised that they were Hippos.

"Dad, Mum, look, there are a million Hippos in that pool!"

I was always one for exaggerating figures!

"Yeah, MILLIONS," replied my Mum, laughing, "All of twenty at least!"

"That," my Dad began, "is where we're going, it's the Hippo Pool!"

He steered the car down a rough track to a flat area in between some trees. It didn't take long for my sisters and me to be out of the car but before we could rush off to explore my Dad called out to us "Watch out, we're a hundred miles from anywhere, there are all kinds of animals around, maybe even hostile tribesmen. Do not wander off please. Now, we each need to carry something from our picnic things down there by the water's edge and we can get it all ready to eat. No-one's to go anywhere without one of the adults, is that clear?"

We all nodded, somewhat disappointed, but we knew Dad was right.

A blanket was spread on top of a rubberised sheet on the ground and my Dad unfolded four large chairs and a stool. He explained that no-one was to sit on the ground, and reached down for a few seconds before bringing his hand back up, covered in flesh eating red ants! He quickly despatched them with the almost boiling hot water from the flask, allowing it to just sweep them off without hardly touching his skin, he winced a couple of times as scalding water caught his skin.

"Listen, if anyone gets a load of these on them, they must get them off quickly, these Driver Ants attack in swarms and they have a unique communication system so that not one of them bites until they are all in position, and then they bite in unison. At that point it is too late for the victim, a thousand poison glands and mandibles all in unison. Many a drunk has fallen off his bicycle and been eaten alive by these ants"

"Now you tell us!" Mum had said, lifting her feet up off the blanket

"They won't come onto the blanket, the smell of the rubber masks our body odours and they don't know we're here."

"I still don't like it Arthur!"

"Well, go and sit in the car then Molly!"

"No, I'll just keep my feet up!"

"O.K., but you'll be alright - now kids, if you do get ants on you, see that white foam over there past those trees? - well, those are boiling hot springs, the water is coming out of the ground from an underground lake just above a volcanic rift. Make sure you go down about six metres or so, where it will be cooler and you won't get scalded, then get into the water, the ants will float off."

"Thanks Dad - this is a wonderful place" my oldest Sister, Dawn, said with a hint of sarcasm.

"Glad you like it, now, the best place to swim -" he looked at the surprise that flashed up into our expressions and continued - oh yes, you CAN swim here, is where those hot springs meet the pool."

"What about crocodiles Dad?" I had asked.

"There aren't any here - too many heavy footed hippos! Only one croc has been seen here by students about eighteen months ago."

"Well if the hippos attack the crocs, how will they just let us swim in the water?"

"Crocs eat baby hippos and they even attack weak old hippos. There is no love lost between those aquatic creatures. The hippo is the most dangerous animal in Africa and is responsible for more human deaths than the big cats or buffalo." Dad waved his hand as I went to interrupt him. "Just a minute you'll see what I'm getting to. You may note that there are no baby hippos in sight. This is the in-between year, they won't calve until next year. Most of the recorded deaths by hippos were in the season of newly born calves, they were just protecting their young. Now, the hippo doesn't like too much exercise and prefers the easy life. You go and stay in that warm patch of water, I guarantee that they won't come over to you."

"O.K. Dad, can we eat now please and then go and swim?"

"No, you might get cramp - go swim for half an hour or so, then come back and eat"

Delighted to get the chance to swim, the three of us stripped down to our swimsuits - now we knew why Mum had told us to put them on - and went the few yards to the pool edge. The hippos regarded us with curiosity and one or two slipped below the surface, only to pop back up a few metres closer. The three of us splashed about and played in the lukewarm water and soon the half-hour was up and Mum was calling us for lunch. Sandwiches, sausages, pork slices, fruit, packets of crisps and cans of soda pop - a feast indeed, followed up by thickly iced fruit cake. I felt my mouth watering as I remembered again that wonderful day out. I started to type it into the laptop, but somehow it didn't seem very inspiring. "I know" I thought, "I'll keep it for a bit later in the book; I'll type other experiences in prior to it and slot it in where it seems to fit. After all if this book has any chronological sense, I have to start with the day that I had the conversation about being thrown out of South Africa and the notes I had made as I remembered that awful time. I decided that the chronology would dictate that the point I was at was probably twenty chapters or so into the book, and not the beginning of the story. I nodded as if to agree with myself and gave it a chapter number somewhere about the middle of the book and then started chapter one. There was a lot more to write before the busy days of my childhood were fully committed to paper. Then there was a knock at the door and my concentration was disturbed. The package handed to me by the postal delivery service contained information from the office about a specialist course I had asked for. That course used up most of the autumn and soon winter was setting in, and still I was on 'garden leave.'

Chapter 21

I sat down and reflected on recent developments. It was going to be a strange winter, being at home for a change. I thought about last winter, how I had made that journey up to Arbroath on December 22nd, and was in Edinburgh on Xmas eve. The snow was falling heavily and I wondered if I would make the journey home o.k. After some deliberation I had decided to take the A7 and not try to cut across to the top of the M75 and head down to the M6, figuring that once I got over the border the snow would be less of a problem. I was really glad I had chosen that route, stopping right on the border, parking next to a huge piece of granite carved on one side "SCOTLAND" and on the other "ENGLAND". Looking back to the North East at the low mountains of the Tweed Valley and beyond, I could see the heavy snow fall. I collected my digital camera from the back of the car and took several shots of this beautiful scene. As I sat and looked at the pictures, the sunlight on the snow, the pine trees, I recalled that breathtaking sight. "I must go back some time - and there's that fighter jet on the Lockerbie to Langholm road - I've got to know what it's doing there!" I sighed as I replaced the photos in their dust sleeves and walked over to the living room. I picked up the local paper and scanned lazily through the job ads - no point in looking at them though - I had sixteen weeks of full pay to enjoy, at home, and taking a job would negate that and the redundancy payment. I began making notes on the palm top about possible plans of action for the future. I knew that once the money stopped I would have to be ready to move on, even though a lump sum would be in the bank. What was next? I looked briefly at the e-mails in my in-box on the laptop; there was one from someone in Human Resources asking if I would like to attend a development course arranged for anyone facing redundancy with the firm. I replied quickly, saying that I would like to take up the option. Later I received a reply telling me that this would take place in the last few weeks of the year. I looked forward to that. So, I spent the months of October, November and December revising my background, honing my skills and taking stock of my capabilities. Then, when invited to the development workshop I went, armed with all my 'arsenal' of skills. During the week of the workshop I prepared and re-wrote (several times) a new CV, and in a one-to-one with the Consultant assigned to the group, I was told - "You are capable of and certainly able to do just about anything you put your mind to, anything you like!"

"Well, I'm always willing to try anything!"

"According to our tests, your IQ is rising above 170 and you seem to be one of the few people, around 1 in 1000 that has equal manual and mental skill capabilities. You could have gone into scientific research as a young man and you would by now most likely be one of the UK top scientists..."

"No, wouldn't have enjoyed doing that at all! I have to be doing something that I enjoy"

"I'm sure that if you were in scientific research that matched your attention span and fed your enthusiasm, you'd be happy as a pig in shit."

"Sure, that's easy to say - but I enjoyed myself immensely working with the game reserves in Africa, I loved the animals - yet whenever I tried to get jobs here in zoos or the 'Safari' parks, no-one wanted to know"

"Well, I still say that you can, and should do whatever you want - we would have no problem in placing you in a job!"

"What even though I'm 55 in March?"

"So? I'm 60!"

"Well, I've decided, I am going to work for a zoo or safari park, even if it's only as a cleaner - I must get back to seeing and touching the animals!"

Later when I e-mailed the group and the Consultant saying that I had joined a local animal park, they all expressed different opinions but wished me every success. Thus it was that I found myself along with a group of young men and women early on a March morning, walking round the facilities of the animal park and getting acquainted with everything. This was going to be FUN! The money wasn't much, I had been used to earning as much in a day as I was earning now in a week, but who cares! My new boss was a young woman who seemed dedicated to her job and she was keen to get the team together as quickly as possible. Sara was pleased that I had some direction in life - she didn't understand though that this was just a fun job, doing something I really enjoyed

for the hell of it! I told everyone at the park that I wasn't there for the money and that I enjoyed hard work, so was willing to do whatever was asked of me.

On quiet days when visitor levels were down, minor maintenance was carried out and sometimes we would change areas of work to prevent boredom, as getting bored or lax in the job might put someone's life at risk. On one quiet day I was sitting in a shed whilst it poured with rain, just spending the time cleaning down tools, and chatting to my work-mate for the day. I talked about my past in Africa from time to time, and on this occasion I told the young man about my father's quest for conservation in Makeni, Zambia, where we started breeding the Red Lechwe as they were dwindling in number. This interested the young man as the park had some of these fine antelope and he had seen them. I told him about the occasion in my life when I shot someone. The young man was wide-eyed as I told of the incident – when I was about 15 and was standing on an anthill near the perimeter of our Lechwe ranch. I caught sight of someone about 600 metres or so the other side of the fence. This man was carrying a large sack and had a hunting rifle in his hand. I called out to the man, "Stop, do not come any closer, this is a protected area, these animals are a protected species, you must not hunt here!"

The man regarded me with disdain, dropped his sack and stood still for a few moments. I had by this time raised the .22 rifle I was carrying so that it was pointing at the man's chest. Normally a .22 would inflict a small wound and not seriously endanger anyone, not at that distance anyway. However, I had the BSA .22 'Hornet' which had a barrel 18cm longer than the standard rifle. I also had 'Muzo' .22 bullets, developed for long range shooting. I looked down at the small case in my left hand. The cartridge box was labelled in black on yellow: "WARNING! DANGEROUS UP TO THREE MILES, FATAL UP TO ONE MILE!" I slipped one of the nearly 35mm long cartridges into the breech and pulled the bolt back and forward again, listening to the click as the magazine closed over the brass casing. The man, seeing the rifle in my hand, laughed and raised his rifle, a .45 calibre 'Firenza' of Italian manufacture, known to shatter the shoulder blade of an antelope at a greater distance than we were apart. My finger hovered over the trigger as he sneered at me.

"You put down your rifle and go away little boy; I got things to do here!" He raised the rifle as he spoke and rested it on the crook of his left arm, pointing it vaguely in my direction.

"No, you un-cock that Firenza and turn around, I will count to three. . .one . . two . ." by now I had my eye to the telescopic sight on the top of the 'Hornet' and before 'three' I saw the man's finger tighten on the trigger, so I squeezed mine and almost in the same second, dropped onto my knees. There was a strange sound as both rifles fired almost together, I was aware of the bullet whistling through the air where my head had been. As I fell almost face first into the dust, I looked back at the poacher.

"Damn," I thought, "I missed - now I will have to re-load to shoot again, whilst his has a magazine of 7 shots!" I began to drag myself up onto my knees, spitting dirt out as I did so. My left eye was smarting and watering from something that had made its way in. I fumbled for another cartridge and dropped the box into the dust as I did so. Fortunately I had managed to extract one before it fell. With trembling fingers, I ejected the spent case and inserted the new one, slamming the bolt home as I raise the rifle again. The man had not moved. He stood looking in my direction, rifle still pointing at my position. He stood motionless for another twenty or thirty seconds, then slowly the rifle began to descend and he suddenly fell forward, tumbling as his body used the rifle like a vaulting pole. He lay motionless on the ground. I stood up and raised the sight to my eye; I could see the man's back. The exit wound was a large hole, about 8cm in diameter. I lowered the rifle and was violently sick. I threw down the rifle; I looked again at the man. What had I done? I sat down in a dazed stupor, my head in my hands. I was going to go to prison for sure; I had taken a man's life! I began to sweat and shake, the reality of the moment surged in on me like a black cloud. Tears poured from my eyes and my shoulders heaved as I sobbed out loud. Just then I heard an engine and looked up. I saw the Chevy my Dad drove speeding towards the anthill. In a few moments, my Dad was rushing towards me and when close enough demanded - "I heard two shots, what's going . . ." then he caught sight of the poacher on his face the other side of the fence ". . . you fool! That's a poacher!"

"I know Dad - he was going to shoot me!"

"Yes, that's what I mean - don't tangle with them - if this gets out, his friends will be back to get revenge!"

"Well, why should it get out - have you called the Police?"

"No, but someone might have"

"Like who?"

"Old Man Spintz - he's only over there about a mile away!"

"Yeah, but we often shoot, snakes, cane rats, rabbits, and so - on, why should he care..?"

"He's not stupid. Just as I did, he would know that one of the shots was a poacher's rifle, no-one else uses the Firenza around here."

"So what are we going to do now then?"

There was a rustling from the tall savannah grass alongside the hill and Moses M'Binge, a local ranger stepped out. Dad sighed and his hands went to his head. I froze where I stood as the ranger climbed the anthill and stood beside me. I couldn't look at him and I avoided looking over towards the dead poacher. I knew that this could mean a long drawn out police enquiry and possibly my parents' expulsion from the country whilst I would be locked up for sure. There were still tears on my cheeks as the ranger placed his hand on my shoulder. He looked across at my dad and what he said surprised us both.

"Matchstick is coming with the trailer, together we will load the body on it and drive to the other side of Makeni, near the Hook – there we will dump it in the bush."

"That's not honest - you must know a legal way of doing this!"

"Poachers, human though our may be, are scum, no-one here supports them, the Government will imprison them if our catch them, and we will shoot them just like you thought you did. No this is the best way, I will clear up any red tape - but you must now promise me NEVER to do this again!"

I heard the words and one phrase kept ringing in my ears – “.... Just like you thought you did..... THOUGHT you did....” I had to speak up.

“What do you mean just like I thought I did, I did, I saw the bullet's exit hole....?”

“Your bullet is in his thigh, it shattered the bone I'm sure and that's why he didn't move. I think you'll find that my bullet was the one that went through his heart.”

“You can't be serious! I never miss!”

“Not when you're standing and taking proper aim maybe, but you fired as you ducked, and you did.”

“I still can't accept that, you're very kind, you're trying to keep the blame away from me, I know – I shot him, that's that, oh dear I am so worried!”

“In a moment when Matchstick gets here, we can go and see if that's true or not. I want you promise that you won't challenge a poacher to a duel again!”

“I'll promise that, if you can get the poachers to promise they won't try again while I'm here, then I won't shoot them!”

“Well, we do patrol regularly, we had been on this man's trail for several hours, I was going to arrest him when you decided to play cowboys and Indians with him and I had to get him before he got you – which he most certainly would have done.”

Matchstick arrived and we all walked over to the fence. There was a gate about fifty metres southerly of our position, so we went down and opened it. Soon we stood alongside the body of the poacher. Matchstick reached down and pulled him off the broken rifle and flipped him on to his back. His right leg twisted strangely and there was a dark red stain where the blood had soaked the leg of his trousers. The ranger reached down and, with his knife, ripped open the bloody trouser leg. A small hole could be seen in the thigh about 60mm down from the groin.

“See, your bullet my young fighter, there, in his thigh. The bone is smashed, and the bullet passed back out and is in the ground over there somewhere.”

I was staggered but relieved, I was sure I had killed that man, I was still so very sad that this had happened, I vowed that day that I would never point a rifle at another man ever again. I repeated this out loud to my fellow worker at the safari park as we cleaned the tools in the shed. I nodded and smiled at him as he sat staring at me in awe.

"You, you shot a man when you were 15!" he said.

"Yes, not proud of it, but tell me, what do you think you would have done? It's not a likely situation here is it, but imagine that you grew up in the bush, as we called it, and had reared many young Lechwe from birth. What would you do if you saw a poacher intent on shooting them?"

"Yeah, I probably would've done the same, man, that must have been some time you had - when I was 15 I was dossing about with my mates, just waiting to get out of school."

"That's why I came here - so that I could not only lose a bit of weight, but also have some fun by being close to the animals, to recapture some of that joy I had as a teenager."

"I want to work here permanently"

"Well, I hope you get your wish, if I was your age, I'd jump at the chance to work permanently in a park like this!"

"Well at least we don't get poachers here!"

"Ha Ha, no - but security is still essential here, there are people with warped minds out there with funny ideas of opening gates so that lions can 'visit' the antelope!"

"Hmm, yes, we do have guards at night. They don't do much shooting – only rabbits. How much shooting did you do then?"

"Oh, only things that were pests or vermin, never any of the beautiful antelope or anything that wasn't a danger to me or my family - though I did have fun with neighbours' water tanks!"

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, for example, one afternoon after I came from school, I stood up on one of the many anthills on the estate - these can be up to four metres in height - and, using the telescopic sight, I lined up a neighbour's water tank, and fired. I saw a faint puff as the bullet hit - remember they could kill up to a mile - then a spout of water shot out of the tank, shortly after I saw another, from the exit hole - the bullet went all the way through both sides, 3mm thick galvanised steel!"

"What happened after that then?"

"Well, the farmer came out, scratched his head and looked all around, but couldn't fathom out how he'd got two holes, when he never heard anything"

"He never heard anything?"

"No, you'd only hear the shot from my rifle if there was no wind, no traffic, no-one working or playing a radio and you were outside! Unlike the poacher's Firenze which sounded like a stick of dynamite going off!"

"Did he ever know it was you?"

"Don't think so - I'd have had my backside kicked all the way from Makeni to Lusaka if he had!"

The rattle of the door to the big tool shed heralded the arrival of the boss.

"So, is everything clean and put away in here?" she asked, looking around the shed, "The rain has eased off, so if the visitors start moving about I'll need you guys outside, o.k.?"

"Sure, we're done in here."

For the rest of the day we smiled at, welcomed, said goodbye to, answered the questions of, and gave directions to hundreds of animal lovers who chose that day to visit us. I glanced back briefly as I headed to the exit gate, I loved this place! The journey home was brief, just a few miles through delightful wooded hills and up through urban housing to my house and Sara my wife. In a few strides I was in the porch and opened the door. Sara was standing waiting. I kissed her as I usually did on arriving home.

"Good day?" she asked

"Fantastic, as usual, I'm so glad I decided to go there - you thought they wouldn't take me didn't you?"

"Well, you aren't as young and sprightly as most of them"

"Yeah, but it's more than just fitness, it's how you deal with people and how animals react to you that matters"

"O.K. Dr Doolittle - I forgot how you talk to the animals!"

"Well the animals I spent most of today talking to were human!"

Sara was placing two plates of Chicken Risotto, something she made very well, on the large dining table and handed me a cup of tea. We enjoyed our meal and flopped down in the leather chairs to watch a programme on TV before bed. The next day Sara would be on early shift at the Hotel, and I, as usual, would be up and out as the sun was beginning to warm the countryside. I enjoyed the drive through bluebell carpeted woods to this tiny animal haven deep in rural woods, my place of work for the spring and summer.

Chapter 22

I stood by the gate that divided the visitor parking and recreation area from the main animal reserve. I had looked at the group of what I thought were antelope, but then learned that they were 'bovidae' i.e. members of the cattle family. They were beautiful animals, near extinction because their hides had been in demand in the 60's to make 'bongo drums', so called because these animals were in fact called 'Bongos'. I walked over to their fence.

"Akumo, sha-amikwe, N'di - mookwa, eyo-kanama" I softly called to them.

One of my colleagues nearby stopped picking up the paper and lollypop sticks and came over to me.

"What language was that, what did you say?"

"No language, just sounds that animal react to - watch -" I said, and continued to call softly

"Akawende, yokamoola, sha-akwe, amikawelloo"

The largest of the animals, a full grown cow, looked at me, and then she slowly began to walk towards me. She was a beautiful roan colour with cream coloured stripes across her rump and had magnificent twisted horns extending upwards for about half a metre.

"Back off from the fence Rob - these have been known to gore even the keepers" my colleague pleaded, stepping back herself and pointing at the notice that clearly said that no-one should approach within the outer marker wire.

"Sorry, didn't want to scare you, yes we must obey the rules, but, she isn't going to hurt me and she'll be upset and confused if I back off now!" With that I extended my hand to the mesh of the fence. The big animal stopped about a foot from her side of the fence and looked at me.

"Akama, akama" I said and she stepped forward and a long tongue came out to lick my hand.

"Muko, millewa hamashi-wooku" I softly cooed.

"AAW, AAWW-OOOMMM!" was the sound that emitted from the throat of the cow.

Then, out from behind one of the trees, came her calf, just little knobs where his horns would later grow. He almost bounded up to his mother's front legs and also thrust out his tongue to lick my hand.

"Ushi, ushi-o-kwamma" I cooed, and tickled the calf between the two knobs on his head.

I stood together with these animals for some time. Then my concentration on this enjoyable pass-time was lessened and I realised there were clicking sounds behind me. On turning round, I was amazed to see a crowd of twenty or thirty visitors all enjoying my interaction with the bovine animals, snapping away with many cameras.

"Ladies and Gentlemen - I must stress that these animals are dangerous, please do not attempt what I have just done, for your own safety. Children, much as you'd like to pet these beautiful creatures, you must stay with your Mums and Dads and not come inside this wire here o.k.?"

They all looked disappointed but nodded as they realised that what I said made sense.

"Sir, was that Swahili you were speaking to them?" A young girl asked.

"No, it was just sounds I have learned to use that seem to get a response from animals like these."

"Can you teach me, please?"

"Much as I'd love to, I can't, it's something that has to come from the heart, animals are sensitive to whether humans are genuine or not - but don't despair - IF you love animals, you will learn to make your own sounds soon enough!"

The crowd attracted others and soon I realised I must move them on.

"Well, that's the Bongo show for the day - may I suggest you all visit the Elephant House and enjoy the hands on experience with our largest inhabitants" I called with some authority in my voice and the crowd brightened up, enthusiasm built and they eagerly followed the signs for the Elephants. I went back to standing by the gate; it was nearly time for my relief to come and let me take a lunch break. Later in the week someone wrote in and commended the park for the keeper who talked to the animals. Everyone laughed and some raised eyebrows, but no-one linked it to me. There were more fun days to record in my notes and some of them I am pleased to include in this brief group of anecdotes from my slightly complex and diverse past.

Chapter 23

It was about three thirty in the afternoon and the safari park was in full swing with cars weaving their way through the animal enclosures like one long multi-coloured snake. As was the custom, we had all completed our clean-up chores from the previous day, had breakfast and taken up our assignments before the ten o'clock opening. I had been assigned to the outer leisure area. I stared out of the little cabin that was positioned alongside the boating lake. My job for the day was to observe the three attractions at the northern end of the picnic and leisure area of the Park. I had a radio and was in contact with the duty manager and the general manager. All attractions talked on the same frequency, making it easier to keep everyone in the picture constantly, something that is essential in an area where wild predatory animals exist alongside humans and potential prey. I had the duty of making sure that if I had to I could shut down the attractions and get visitors to a safe area in the event of a predator escaping - a rare situation. In fact it was more likely that my dead mother would win the lottery than a lion or tiger get out into the 'human' area. Although I was looking at the sparkling waters, my eyes weren't really seeing anything. Even though my colleagues were sitting on the small jetty right in front me, watching the huge swan pedal boats with their passengers pedalling furiously and trying to either dodge the next swan or crash into it depending upon their age and mentality, I was staring through them. My unseeing eyes were focussing on a distant memory of the past yet again, one that had left its scar in my life and even though I'd rather forget the past, wouldn't let me.

It was 1966 and I'd just passed my A levels. As did many young men at that time, I joined a company that was an Anglo-American joint venture at a mine called Rhokana Deep, reputed to be the deepest copper mine in the world. My entry in the staff roster said 'trainee mining engineer'. My programme was to learn all aspects of mining from the clawing dirt rock face, to non-destructive testing of the 99.7% pure copper, at the end of which I would then specialise in the area I was found to be best at. I secretly hoped it would be in the laboratories as I had passed GCE A level Physics with distinction and loved working with metals and their conductivity. The course I had taken to achieve that distinction had included some work with rare metals and radioactive metals such as Radium, Uranium and Plutonium. These names echoed around in my head and seemed to mingle with my own name in a strange yet forceful way, making me shake my head to snap out of the historic vision before me.

"Hey Rob! Stick the kettle on mate; I'm coming in for tea in a few mins!"

It was Moola, one of my team, coming across from the zip-line attraction to have a break. His cheery voice had broken into my day dream and I blinked a bit to refocus on the approaching young man. He was about twenty or twenty five and a native of Ascension Island far out in the mid-Atlantic, a lovely warm brown colour with a wide toothy grin.

"O.K. Moola – it's on" I called back as flicked the switch on the kettle and picked up a small piece of copper wire that I had been unconsciously twisting into a sort of spring. It made my thoughts return to the copper mine.

I could never forget what possibly became the most traumatic event in my life; the day I collapsed four and a half miles down a mine. I had been taken down to the main seam rock face, about 7,000 metres below the surface, along with ten other trainees. We were taken up to the end of the tunnel where the face-workers had just finished drilling holes at twenty centimetre intervals and blasting technicians were now carefully inserting sticks of explosive, one into each hole. The foreman accompanying us pointed up to the huge pipes on each side of the tunnel.

"See those –" he began, "they are connected to a series of pumps all the way up the shaft, the pressure has to be maintained at normal levels by these pumps, not only providing us with fresh air, but also making sure that we don't suffer any serious consequences as a result of the air pressure this far down."

"What do they do to maintain the pressure at normal levels then – and what is normal?" one of the team asked.

"1 bar is normal - you may hear weather reports giving barometric pressure as around 1000 millibars - that is 1 bar. So, the pressure without them would be between 5 and 7 bars or maybe higher, and it might cause blood vessels to burst or rupture. The pumps bring down fresh air and then pump away at a higher volume, the carbon dioxide laden dirty air; this causes the pressure to

drop to a safe level." He gestured with his arm as he ushered us away from the rock-face, "Now we must move back and into the safety shaft while the explosive is detonated."

He led us back into a lateral shaft and closed a heavy wooden door over its entrance. In a few seconds we were joined by the men who had been placing the explosives into the holes. One of them was feeding out wire from a large reel as he walked backwards into the shaft. He closed and secured the door after pushing a plug into a socket in the side of the reel and went over to a panel on the wall. He was sweating profusely and covered in dust. He pressed a red button labelled "20-RPT" and a large red light came on above his head. A claxon sounded three times and he spoke into a microphone –

"Fire in the Hole! Fire in the Hole! Clear walkways, clear walkways, twenty seconds, standby - - - ten seconds, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four - - " A click behind me made me jump, the kettle had boiled.

"Has that kettle boiled yet?"

I was really rattled, my mind so vividly reliving the moment.

"Yes, Moola, cups are over there mate." I gestured towards the small table on which there were half a dozen mugs, a bottle of milk and a bowl of sugar.

"Thanks, my man, you want some?"

"Please - milk, no sugar"

"Ugh, how can you drink it without sugar?!"

"Easy, haven't taken sugar since 1975 - some time I'll tell you why . . ."

Moola didn't take up that 'hook', he had already heard some of my stories and knew there'd be some sinister reason why I didn't take sugar and wasn't prepared to find himself hating the substance that he loved so much. He spooned three heaps into his cup. I looked away in disgust; I couldn't accept it in my drinks, not even strong black coffee when I felt inclined to drink it. I coughed slightly and the pain at the top of my windpipe reminded me of my earlier reminiscence down the deep copper mine. As Moola stood down a cup beside me and sat back with his feet on the table, I allowed my mind to return to that awful day in 1966. I recalled that I had been listening to the count-down and wondering what all the switches were that the blasting technician had set. The countdown held the clue as to the label on the master button, "20" for the number of seconds, and "RPT" for "rapid percussion terminal", and as the operator called out "one---zero-- Fire in The Hole" the detonations started. Each stick of dynamite exploded milliseconds before the next so that the blasting lasted just a few seconds, during which some fifty detonations had occurred. The door shook heavily with the blast, dust forced its way through the cracks and the noise was incredible even though the heavy door was closed and secured. As the sound was dying away, I felt a very strange sensation. I couldn't explain when asked later just what it was I felt, only that it was the last sensation my conscious mind had recorded until I felt cool air on my cheek and looked up at the face of a pretty young nurse.

"Where am I?" I asked

"The Infirmary" she replied

"Why?"

"Accident at the face, don't worry, you're all out, no-one's badly hurt"

I looked about me; every bed was occupied with my colleagues and friends. Two beds away from me the curtains were pulled around so that I couldn't see who was there. The bed immediately next to me was occupied by "Stringer" one of my fellow trainees, he didn't look well. Both eyes were surrounded by dark black rings; his ears had large plugs of cotton wool in them. He turned towards me and blood began to ooze through the cotton wool, and out of the corners of his eyes. His mouth opened but no words came. The nurse quickly pulled the curtains round his bed. I went to say something but was suddenly overcome by a violent coughing fit, so violent in fact that I turned on my side and grasped the pillow in agony. I felt strange, and couldn't get my breath. I waved my hand in the air. In moments the nurse pulled my curtain round the bed, and she bent over to look at me closely. She stepped out of the curtain and I heard her speak to the doctor at my friend's bedside. "421 has relapsed, I think he's flooding again, can you come please".

I was losing consciousness as I thought to myself "Relapse, flooding, what's going on . . . " It all went very dark. The sensation of that moment in the infirmary brought on a mild panic attack as I

stared at the boating lake and I realised my hands were shaking, spilling the tea from the cup Moola had put in front of me.

"Number 8 has got a list to one side, shall we call it in?"

I was once again jerked away from my thoughts as Katy, one of the team who had been sitting on the jetty stood in front of me.

"Sorry, what was that?"

"I said, one of the Swans has got a bad list - must be taking in water - shall we call it in?"

"Yes, get it back in and I'll radio Mick down at maintenance to come up with the winch - must've got a crack - why the kids think they're made to crash into each other I don't know!"

"O.K. we'll get it done - any chance of relief for a short break . . . ?"

"Of course darling - I'll come out as soon as you've got No. 8 in - O.K.?"

"Thanks."

I watched her pick her way back to the gate that allowed her to return to the jetty. She was twenty three and five feet tall, her slim figure and blonde pony-tail hiding the fact that she held a high category level in Tai-Kwando and could probably kick a man twice her size to death! We had enjoyed a quick bout one day, I using my class II Kung-Fu, and she her Tai-Kwando. She had 'downed' me three times. I rubbed my left shoulder, it still had the bruises. Sara had told me I was a "silly old git" for trying to take Katy on, and we'd both had a good laugh about it. No. 8 was returning to the jetty, so I picked up the radio and called for Mick. At first there was no answer and I was about to call again when one of the lion keepers decided to advise the bear enclosure that a lioness was close to their fence. I waited for the cross-talk to finish and was going to make a second call, but Mick's voice came out of the speaker asking me to go ahead. I had a quick discussion about the holed swan boat and Mick agreed to be there in a few minutes with the winch. 'Bears' talked with 'Lions' again for a few minutes, and the radio was again quiet. I clipped the radio to my belt and strode quickly to the jetty. I gestured toward the cabin.

"Off you go then, Katy, take fifteen, it's quiet today. I've got the radio, but you'll have to be my 'eyes'. I can't see the Chinese hat or the zip line from here - if you see anything that needs me or duty manager - wave at me, please, O.K.?"

"O.K. - no problem - Moola's got his feet on the table, so I'll have to sit your side of it anyway."

"Cheers, see you later."

I knew I couldn't allow my mind to drift too far now that I was with Jack, a teenager, and responsible for lives of people who could drown if they fell out of their swan or walked off the end of the jetty. I sat quietly for the fifteen minutes Katy was away, then, on her return, sent Jack off for a break. I spent the next fifteen minutes discussing with Katy the reflections off the water, the ducks, the distant clatter of the Chinese Hat and the fact that Jack wasn't looking out of the window even though he had been asked to do so. I stood up, smiled briefly at Katy and returned to the cabin.

"Jack - get your backside out of that chair and back on the jetty - and when I ask you to keep a lookout for any problems I expect you to do so - please remember that next time, o.k.?"

Jack heaved his larger than should be frame out of the chair with a sigh and a mutter.

"K"

"Thanks mate - never mind - only a couple of hours to go."

I patted him on his shoulder as he went. He didn't look back. He took his place alongside Katy and in seconds was once again catatonic.

I laughed, coughed again, and held my chest as the pain once again reminded me of that day in 1966.

After two weeks in the infirmary I was released and one of the employee representatives invited me to attend a formal inquiry. With some trepidation, a great deal of pain in my chest, and a sad feeling in my heart, I made my way to the education centre.

Phil, the deputy to the Personnel Manager for the site, was waiting along with seven others of my trainee colleagues. No-one spoke as Phil ushered me in.

"Right that's everyone," he said.

"No it isn't!" I snorted, "Where's Stringer, and Josh, and Morley and...."

"All that are coming are here!" Phil snapped, but then immediately smiled, "Listen, they're still not well enough to join us"

"What the hell happened to us...?"

"All in good time, we're coming to that!"

I sat down with the others. It was a long drawn out meeting, representatives of all the unions were present, all departmental managers, their deputies and two senior executives were present. Engineers and electricians responsible for plant maintenance were also there. I recalled now how they had all had their piece to say, and how I had sat there looking from one to another as they spoke. The conclusion of the meeting was the bombshell statement by the chairman of the meeting to all eight trainees that in the company's opinion we were not going to be suitable to be trained as mining engineers. What had actually happened was just what we had been discussing at the rock face. I once again felt the anger rising as I remembered the sweeping under the carpet of the event and the documented reason for my dismissal being my failure to make the grade. I felt the sweat of my hands on the black casing of the radio and swapped it to the other hand after wiping it with kitchen towel from the tea cupboard.

"Swans, come in, Swans do you copy?"

The crackle of the radio dragged me back to the present once again.

"Swans receiving, go ahead control"

I was holding the radio as my eyes swept a long arc from the left to the right. Was there a problem? All I could see were people enjoying themselves; little children running excitedly from one parent to the other, and down to the lakeside to throw something to the ducks; people sitting or lying on the grass; and the Macaws on the perches over towards the marine life centre.

"Standby, message from Hugh Montriallio"

"Standing by"

Hugh Montriallio was the Senior Executive of the whole umbrella company, and was based in an office in Hertford.

"Rob, you and Tim are to receive an award for outstanding customer service from the Chairman's office, following a visit by the Sheikh Abdul Mustafa-Bin-Zuleman of the Emirates last week. The two of you will need to come dressed in best suits tomorrow for escort to the Sheikh's hotel in Mayfair for the luncheon and presentation. I can't raise Tim as he's on the quad-bike out in the bracken somewhere and reception isn't too good - can you try and catch him before we all leave tonight."

I didn't know what to say. An award! For what, doing what I always did, being polite and helping elderly and little ones on and off railway carriages, rides or the boats.

"Er - roger on that, and - er, thank you"

I held the radio in my right hand and stared at it. There was silence everywhere - everyone had heard the message of course. Then all of a sudden I physically heard cheering from all the various areas, some using the radio and blocking each other's signals as they did so, others just cupping their hands and shouting out.

"Lions to Swans - good on yer mate!"

"Bears to Swans - well done"

"Tigers to Swans - got Tim here, he's speechless - ha ha!"

"Swans to EVERYONE - SHUT UP!"

More crackling and cheering, then silence and responsible attention to the dangerous animals around them was restored. I put down the radio and stood to look at my colleagues on the jetty, they would have heard the cheering and wondered what was going on. I waved at Katy and she looked towards me, I gestured that she should come over, which she did straight away.

"Did you hear that cheering?" she asked, "What's going on?"

"Someone has been given a special award and accolades for services to a special visitor and his family - it's just been on the radio"

"Who?"

"I can't tell you at the moment - but you'll find out tomorrow...?"

"Aw, o.k."

Katy returned to the jetty. I thought about this award for a few minutes, and then parked it so that I could write up my report in the diary for the day. Having completed that I remembered what I was thinking about when the radio message came in, the mine accident. The angry recollection of the

sweeping under the carpet of the accident four and a half miles down. As the foreman had said, I recalled -

"..... the pressure has to be maintained at normal levels by these pumps, not only providing us with fresh air, but also making sure that we don't suffer any serious consequences as a result of the air pressure this far down....."

That was exactly what HAD happened. The blasting had caused a fuse to jump out at level 16, 6,000 feet above us, and everything on that circuit stopped, including the air pumps.

In just twenty seconds the pressure went from 1.2 BAR to 6.7 BAR. This was similar to ascending to the surface in the sea from 300 metres down in 20 seconds. Everyone at that level had passed out. I was one of the lucky ones; I had suffered a rupture of the capillaries in the trachea just above the fork that then becomes the two bronchial tubes taking air down to the lungs. As I had been lying on my left side, the left lung had filled up with blood before they could get me out and, in the infirmary, on my back, the right had begun to flood with blood also. Drastic and emergency action had saved my life and it took several minutes to pump the blood out of the lungs and flush them out with saline solution whilst ventilating all the time.

However, once the rupture had sealed, the life-threatening danger was over. Things were not so good for Stringer. He had suffered a rupture to a main artery to the brain, blood filled his cranial cavity, putting pressure on the brain and secondary ruptures had occurred behind the eyes and in the ears. He was a long time in hospital and after six months had to learn to do most things all over again, including walking. Each one of us had a severe injury, enough to require a lengthy rehabilitation. I found out on my return to the UK in 1968 that I had scar tissue on the trachea where the ruptures had been. I was told that this scar tissue had no hairs on the surface like the rest of the trachea walls. A doctor explained that these hairs or 'cillae' are there to push dust-laden mucus back up the trachea to the throat where it is usually swallowed and destroyed by the stomach acid. In my case, this doesn't happen; the mucus just keeps going down, into the lungs making me have to cough hard every so often. As I thought of this I coughed and cleared some of the mucus.

I looked at my watch. Twenty minutes to closure. I waved at the two on the jetty making a circular motion which they understood was to get the last couple of boats in and close down. They were pleased to get that signal, and one of the boats was already returning to them, the other soon followed. I sighed, thought about that accident and how the records had been erased back at the mine, so that when I had tried to pursue a compensation case back in the UK in 1969, it had failed because no-one could produce evidence to support the fact that the accident occurred. Today I continue to cough and when people look at me quizzically, or make comments about my cough, I sometimes say -

"Sorry, it's a four and a half mile cough" - which means absolutely nothing to them, but if they're interested I'm happy to explain.

I shut the door on the cabin, radioed the control centre to advise that all boats were chained up and the lock on the gate had been set. I and my two colleagues for that day went to join the others at the assembly point near the education centre, from where they would then go to their cars and leave the park. After enduring many pats on the back Tim and I fought our respective ways back to our cars and beat a hasty departure, looking forward to the next day and its excitement of luncheon and the award.

Chapter 22

Sitting on the quayside in a small Cornish fishing village, I was far removed from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. I liked it down there, it was so peaceful and quiet; the air was fresh and the smells delightful. I looked across at Sara, she was enjoying just relaxing in the sun. We had decided to take a break away and get a little bit of a holiday together, something she needed more than me as my day to day 'work' at the animal park was just like a holiday. In fact I had to tear myself away to take the break. Not far up the coast there is a china clay production company. We could see some of the heaps of discarded low quality clay. This reminded me of when my Dad had first moved us all out to Makeni, when the land was still untouched by anything other than the nomads and the passing antelope.

Dad had wanted to build his own house – literally from footings to roof. Every weekend we would go out there and dig until all the foundation trenches were complete, and then on one Saturday, the concrete was delivered and poured. Dad had been digging about in various places before we'd settled on the site we finally chose to build on. Thus, in one of the exploratory digs, he had discovered very white clay, a low quality china clay with a slight tendency towards blue clay. Often this clay contains diamonds – but not so this time, though it did contain a semi-precious stone called 'Blue John' which I had taken delight in extracting and washing. My Dad had only one reason for digging out the clay – he wanted to make his own bricks.

Hired hands were brought in to laboriously make bricks by pressing the clay into steel moulds that Dad had specially made for the purpose. After a few weeks, the stack of bricks – which had been carefully stacked so that coal dust could be poured between them – was four metres high and covered an area five metres square. It was estimated that some 40,000 bricks were in the stack. I watched as my Dad and the hired hands 'plastered' the sides with heavy black clay from a different part of the land. Then when it was ready, bundles of burning grass were thrust into each of the openings left between rows of bricks at strategic points along the bottom layer. For three days the 'kiln' burned and it was still too hot to open up for another two days. Then, slowly the outer black clay, now cracked and hard, was flaked off and Dad reached inside, grasped a brick and pulled it out. It was a fine solid brick and a pale pink to russet colour. "Wonderful!" he had exclaimed, and we began to remove and re-stack the bricks in piles of 1,000 all around the footings.

It took me and my Dad along with a skilled bricklayer friend, two weekends to build the bungalow up to truss level. Another weekend later, and the roof was being fitted whilst the glass was going in. Dad was hanging doors while the rest of us were painting and decorating the inside. Then, it was ready and we moved in. My warm feeling as I remembered with fondness our home near Makeni was being eroded by a voice. It was the voice of an angel, calling to me from the waters of the sea, it kept repeating my name almost with every wave break. Then I realised it was an angel called Sara. She had been calling me for several minutes and was now silently staring at me. She was patiently waiting for my return.

"That's a big yacht out there isn't it?" Sara said suddenly, as I returned to the present, looked in the direction her finger was pointing and saw the three-masted boat.

"Yes, might even be a small schooner or a ketch"

"A who or a what?"

"Boats bigger than yachts."

"Well, it's a big yacht, to me!"

"I suppose the QE2 would be a big yacht to you . . ."

"Well the Britannia was . . ."

"Was what?"

"A big motor yacht!"

"O.K. fair enough – but in sailing its different – anyway, it is bigger than we usually see so well spotted!" I stood up and brushed off the sand that always collects "Fancy a bite?"

"What here!?" Sara squealed, protecting her neck with her hands.

"LUNCH I mean!"

I grabbed her and picked her up off the ground and made as if to bite her neck, at which she shrieked and pulled my hair. We were like two kids as usual – who'd have thought we were in our

fifties! We moved off to a small seaside fish bar to enjoy fish and chips, with green peas on the side, served with a delicious tartare sauce and an ice cold chocolate milkshake.

As we quietly munched on the almost perfectly cooked batter, I overheard someone speaking a few tables away and realised that they were from the US. I had 'kinda gotten used to' hearing the expressions used by our US 'cousins' from my frequent visits to the States in the capacity of Director for Southern Europe. However, I allowed my mind to go a longer way back, to my last few years at school where I had been taught English by a teacher from Connecticut in the US. We had a lot of teachers, and other key roles, from the USA. We often wondered if there was any connection with the fact that Zambia, as an independent nation, had been offered help by the Chinese government in building a railway to Tanzania and as a result a few thousand Chinese workers along with soldiers to guard their interests appeared in the country. A few weeks later the 'American Library' opened up in Lusaka, and seemed to have a lot more staff than the English library. It was about then that I had passed my GCE exams in English up to 'A' level. That meant there wasn't anything wrong with the teacher – but, I'd often had confusing situations arise in England following the use of American terms instead of English ones. It had become a classic family joke that I thought of flapjacks in the same way that people in the States do – as small thick pancakes, not unlike those called 'Scotch Pancakes' in Britain. We had an embarrassing situation a few weeks into my arrival in England with my parents, on a visit to a family we had become friendly with. When asked if I would like some flapjacks, I had enthusiastically accepted the invitation. I recalled how disappointed I had been by the rectangular pieces of rock that tasted like cold porridge oats soaked in syrup.

"These aren't flapjacks!" I had whispered to my Dad

"What are they then?"

"They're oatmeal cookies!"

"So what are flapjacks then?"

"We're nice thick pancakes about 100mm across and are served hot with cream and maple syrup!"

"That's your American teacher again, isn't it? These ARE what the English call flapjacks!"

"Well, THEY can keep them!"

I smiled as I remembered many a discussion on terminology, such as why we call the instrument on a kitchen sink that allows the water to be run or stopped accordingly, a TAP? I found out the answer relates to the bung with a 'T' piece in it, hollowed out, that is tapped into a wine barrel or beer barrel and when the 'T' piece is twisted, the liquid runs out. Tapped in, TAP. I asked in return why my teacher calls the same instrument a FAWCETT? This is so-called because a gentleman of Scottish origin invented it. I smiled as I considered that this probably took place in around 1800 in some obscure mining town in the middle of Montana or Nevada.

"Well," I had replied, "Tapped bungs have been in use in English beer barrels since the year I don't know when – probably 11th century! I guess, oops – I mean I THINK, that that makes the English term a little OLDER!"

I visualised the difference between the parts of a CAR or AUTOMOBILE and wondered how EITHER side of the Atlantic came up with the words used such as – 'bumper'; 'bonnet'; 'boot'; 'wings' and 'Number Plate' which contains often as many letters as it does numbers; 'fender'; 'hood'; 'trunk' – now that might make sense as first cars had a literal wooden or wicker trunk on the back. I assumed that CAR was a shortened version of carriage, as first cars were called 'horseless carriages', however, I could only wonder if automobile was a French or German derivation of the same origin – as it was something that moved (mobile) by itself (auto)? I remember some of the discussions I had with my teacher and also with some of the business people I recently rubbed shoulders with during my visits to the US. I smiled as thought about some of the reactions we experienced. In recent times we have become used to the US term 'ass' – which is the same as British people's slightly more vulgar 'arse'. I chuckled as I remember being told by my teacher 'Your ass is mine!' – a common US expression for 'you're in trouble now!' My reply to that had been, 'I don't have an ass, we have a couple of cows though.'

Today if a British person was told by an US visitor 'I'm gonna blow you off on Saturday' they might react in a very odd way. In my school days the only meaning for blow off was to pass wind. The US visitor would in fact have meant 'I've got to cancel our meeting on Saturday.'

I laughed out loud and everyone looked at me, but I was still thinking about those wonderful occasions, like the time my teacher asked if I could act like a bum for a school play. 'Act like a bum?' I asked with one eyebrow raised, 'You mean bend over and ...?' He looked at me so intensely and added, 'I mean like a hobo, or how do you call them – a tramp.' I got the message but was tempted to develop on from that word and ask him if he wanted me to act like a prostitute, but that would have only fuelled a fight.

Oh dear and what about the time I was told there was a pint of lager in the can for me and I reacted immediately by expressing my dismay, "In the CAN?" I was thinking in US English – where of course the can is a toilet. My dad had laughed quite a while over that and told all his friends time and time again about it to my embarrassment. My teacher came to visit one evening to talk about my football skills (Rugby in fact – but then that's football to those in the US) – my dad asked him if he's like some cider, which he accepted eagerly. There was a surprised expression on his face as he took a large gulp of my dad's strong cider. To someone in the US cider is apple juice. He had not expected what they call HARD Cider. We talked at some length about what play I would expedite and decided that I would play in the front line up. My dad was delighted, "My son's going to be a hooker!" he exclaimed.

"Oh no!" the teacher and I responded together, "no, a forward!" A hooker is a woman of very little repute in the US, we were both horrified to think I would be called that. What a gas, oh sorry, that's US English for 'laugh', and that's just what dad did, and then said he really fancied a fag. That caused my teacher to gasp and choke on the last mouthful of his cider. I quickly came to my dad's rescue, "Dad, a fag to Mr Hilary is, er, well a young boy that's er..." I was floundering, no-one readily talked about homosexuality in those days, so I just finished by saying, "well it isn't an expression you want to use to an American." I waited until my teacher had left and then explained that fag was a degrading expression and showed contempt, it certainly wasn't a cigarette. He raised an eyebrow, and nothing more was said.

I smiled again as I recalled so many occasions where the differences between us had caused initial shock and then laughter as the realisation had set in. I had been staring up at the ceiling to avoid staring at the group of Americans on the other table and as I lowered my eyes, Sara was looking hard at me and she forced my return to the present.

"Hey – your tea's getting cold!"

"Sorry love – adding thoughts to my manuscript again – pass me a napkin I need to jot down some notes!"

Sara looked heavenward as she passed across a white paper napkin and I jotted down some key words to remind me of my thoughts this lunch time. Then, we stood up and hand-in-hand, strolled back towards the main picnic area to enjoy the rest of the afternoon; Sara to read a little while I, as usual, would wander off into my past. The car park had just one car in it besides ours and the river that flowed through the fields to the sea was a short distance away. We made our way across the car park to the field beyond, to the bank of the river. We settled down for the rest of the afternoon. I lay on my back in the soft lush green grass taking in the smells of the summer fields with just the sound of the sea in the distance.

Chapter 23

It was glorious lying there on that grassy bank, soaking up the sun. It seemed a shame to go home. I decided to stay a few minutes longer, after all we were on holiday.

I looked up into the cloudless sky, it was deep blue and I developed the sensation of floating upwards into that blue, as if I could just float away from the earth like a balloon. Even as a child I loved to lie back and look into the deep blue sky, it mesmerised me and watched birds soaring and hovering above me. One of my favourite pastimes was to look at the clouds and try to make something out of their shapes, a dragon, a dog, a man with a gun, or a bus, but this time the sky was cloudless except for the vapour trails left by high flying passenger jets. That was my second love, flying, ever since I had hovered over game or a remote river settlement in Africa, I had loved flying. I was thinking about that last time I flew myself up into the Congo, when into my field of vision came a high flying passenger jet, its four vapour trails streaming out behind it and gradually thinning out into wispy clouds. I squinted a little as I tried to focus on it. The type of aircraft was impossible to guess at that height, suffice to say it was a big one, having four jet engines.

"I wonder how high that is" I thought, "Thirty thousand? Forty thousand?"

It was barely discernable. If it hadn't been for the four vapour trails, I wouldn't have known that there was one there at all.

"I wonder how many people there are on board, where are they all going? What are they going to do when they get there? Are they on long haul, stop over, connecting flights? Are they having lunch right now?" I thought on for several minutes considering possibilities; the jet could be going here, or there, then figured that it couldn't be bound for the US or it would have gone the opposite way, north up the main flight lane 'Amber One'. Perhaps it was taking people off on an exotic Caribbean holiday or down to Rio. I really missed all the long haul flying that had been a regular part of my life during the days of board meetings and conferences in the US. It was '911' that had stopped all that, I didn't want to fly for quite a while after the terrorist attack. I still loved aircraft and whenever possible, I went as close as was legally allowed, to watch the enormous beasts launch into the air. It never ceased to amaze me how something the enormity of a Boeing 747 could even get off the ground. 747's, I decided, proved the 'Bumblebee theory of flight'. They made me think about one particular flight when I was on my way to the board seminar at Las Vegas, I was flying with British Airways by 747 to Los Angeles(LAX) and then on to Las Vegas on an internal flight by All American Airlines. The BA 747 was brand new, and had only made one flight, from Seattle to Heathrow to be commissioned and prepared for its first commercial passenger flight, and I was on it. I remembered this flight in particular, not because any significant incidents occurred, but rather because of the newness of the aircraft. It had that clean fresh 'new' smell like a new car has, and everything was crisp with no signs of wear. As I looked up at the four vapour trails from my lush green bed of meadow grass, I imagined myself on that 747 to LA. I had chosen to travel economy class, not being one to waste money, even though my status as a board member allowed me to travel business class or even first class. During the flight I felt the urge to see what it was like in the first class lounge, up in the nose of the big 'jumbo', having only ever seen them depicted in a studio set where the action supposedly took place on a 747. I waited until one of the many flight attendants came near and then quietly attracted her attention.

"Excuse me," I began, and she stopped, smiled and waited for me to continue. She was very attractive and quite young, but nevertheless well trained and efficient in her duties as all of the attendants had been.

"Yes sir, how may I be of assistance?" she asked

"I wonder if you can help me. . .?" I began, not knowing the best way to put my request to her. She smiled, patiently encouraging me to ask.

"Well, if you tell me what you need, I'll see what we can do to help . . .?"

"Well, I've never seen what it's like up in the first class lounge below the pilots' cabin, I wonder – would it be possible to visit it sometime during the flight?"

{This was a couple of years before 9/11, it would have been a straight NO after the terrorist attacks}. The flight attendant smiled and gestured slightly with her head towards the seats at the front, over her left shoulder.

“Well that depends on the first class passengers, if there’s anyone up there having drinks or tea then I’m afraid it may not be possible – “ she caught sight of the look of disappointment on my face and continued “—but I will go and have a look in a few minutes, and see what I can do.”

“Thanks, I really appreciate that.”

I settled back in my seat and watched the in-flight film on my personal monitor, I’d seen it before but it was something to alleviate the boredom of a nine hour flight. According to the information screen, we had turned southwards and begun the journey down the spine of the Rocky Mountains and crossed the Canadian border into US airspace. Just then the flight attendant returned and smiling, she said, “There’s one gentleman in the lounge, he’s doing some work on a laptop – I asked if he’d mind you visiting the lounge and he has agreed for you to do so.”

“Oh, thank you – now?”

“Yes of course – please follow me . . . “

I did so, without hesitation. In a few moments we were at the bottom of the small spiral staircase that lead up to the lounge from the main cabin area, she gestured in a sweeping motion that I should make my way up, and I began my ascent, thanking her once again as I did so.

“You can have about 20 minutes or so up there, after which we will serve the first class tea, and you would be wise to return to your seat for your own tea.”

“Thanks, I do appreciate this.”

In a few moments I popped my head up through the opening in the floor of the lounge; it was unlike anything I seen on any aircraft. Lush thick carpet, curtains, potted plants, small downlighters and what looked like wooden tables with leather chairs. There was the man with his laptop open on one of the tables, its cable plugged into what must have been a satellite phone link. We nodded at each other but neither spoke. I walked straight to the nose of the 747, where the lounge is at its narrowest and most angular. I was disappointed that there was no porthole directly in the nose, but there was one either side of it, which, because of the acute angle made it possible to see quite well ahead of the aircraft. I looked back at the lounge and estimated I would be about 10 to 12 metres in front of the pilots – that was a strange sensation. Running round the forward wall of the lounge was a leather-clad bench-type settee. I knelt on it as I looked out of the windows, first the starboard, then the port, down at the Rockies 20,000 feet or so below. It was like looking at the landscape of a toy train layout and I grinned as I imagined a model train running round the mountains and through tunnels. I saw a lake, nothing like the size of the Great Lakes we had flown over earlier, but large enough to take several minutes to pass over. I could see a boat of some kind making a wash as it sailed across.

The mountains were heavy with snow, it was January, and I caught sight of some tiny black dots making what looked like a perforation down the side of one of the mountains and guessed that we were skiers. We would be passing over the resort of Aspen on the way, so I expected to see skiers. I smiled as I thought perhaps someone down there was looking up and wondering where we were going. After about 15 minutes, the flight attendant that had kindly allowed me to visit the lounge appeared through the stair well.

“I’m sorry sir, we are going to serve afternoon tea for first class in the lounge in a few minutes – they probably wouldn’t object, but it would be prudent not to give someone the opportunity to do so – besides, I’m sure you’re ready for your tea too..”

“Oh, thank you. Thank you so much for allowing me to come up here; it was a great experience, such a wonderful view, unaffected by the haze of the jet engines or turbulent air.” I made my way towards the stair well, and as I passed the man on the laptop, I said “thank you for allowing me to visit the lounge, I appreciate that.”

“You’re welcome” the man replied as he began to close down his laptop.

I descended the ladder behind the flight attendant; I had noticed she had the name ‘Lucy’ on her badge. “Thank you again, Lucy, - yes I do think I’m ready for a cup of tea right now.”

“You very welcome sir, enjoy your tea.”

I thought “Ah, tea, always very welcome, a life-saver sometimes.” I smiled as I thought how this brew had been a mainstay of the British Empire ever since the sailors had brought it back to England all that time ago. “They’ll be having their tea about now I reckon.” I muttered as, squinting at the vapour trails above me, I watched the high flying jet turn slightly towards the south west. I turned on my side and propped myself up on one elbow, the jumbo having left my line of vision,

and looked across the narrow river we were lying beside; the sun glinting off the water which was just moving with only a trace of a ripple. It was like a mirror, the sky, the trees, the grass and reeds all reflected in upside down images. The weird upside down cows played tricks with my already active imagination. My eyes flicked back and forth as I scanned the herd of cows in the field on the opposite side of the river. What a mixture they were, I couldn't name the breeds; that is if there were any from specific breeds there in the field. They were all colours, pure black, black and white, tan, cream, grey, dark brown and combinations of these. The mixture made it look more like an artist's impression of a herd of cows on the river bank rather than the real thing. I realised that they were bullocks mostly and a fair sized herd, twenty or thirty at least. One of them, a cream coloured bullock, having just spread its front legs to get down to the water and take a drink, now looked directly at us. It opened its mouth and made that "Mmmmmmmerrh" sound that cows do. I grinned as I thought how strange it is that we humans think that cows say 'moo'. I cupped my hands around my mouth and made the same sound back. The animal was momentarily taken aback, not expecting to hear that from a human. I laughed – perhaps I had sworn at it. I looked back up at the dwindling wisps of cloud that had formed from the vapour trail of the jumbo and noted that it was impossible now to link them with the aircraft. My love of flying had taken root the very first time I flew as a boy, back in Zambia, whilst it was still Northern Rhodesia – now that WAS some flight to remember. I would have been about ten years old and my mother had decided to take me away for a holiday, to Lake Nyasa (now Lake Malawi). The resort of Mapunta Mahle was on the Malawi side of the Lake, the eastern shore being in Tanzania. The flight was from N'dola to Lilongwe and then on by road to Mapunta Mahle. The aircraft was a Douglas DC3, or Dakota, affectionately known as a 'Dak'. This twin-engined WWII aircraft was the mainstay of many early airlines within the African continent in the 50's and 60's. I recalled with a large amount of affection, how the Dak sat on the runway, nose in the air, tail down on a very small wheel, and how the aisle sloped at an angle of around least 20 degrees off horizontal, so that passengers had to hold on while making their way down to the seats. Then, once everyone was seated, the 'no smoking' and 'fasten seatbelt' signs came on and the Dak made its run, rumbling and droning down the runway at what today would be almost taxiing speed. Suddenly the tail came up and the cabin was level, a second or so later, the Dak was airborne. I had been told that pilots knew it was ready to take off when the tail came up – I didn't know how true that was, but it was a reasonable idea anyway. It was a strange sensation nevertheless, running along the runway as the Dak gathered speed -- 30, 40, 50, 60, 70 or maybe 80 mph, whilst looking up a slope. Once in the air in a level cabin, everything seemed so different. The DC3 was not pressurised and I remembered that we flew at 8,000 to 10,000 feet and I had a lot of pain in my ears. The problem became much worse as the Dak approached the border and passed over a mountain range, the aircraft was now only about 3,000 feet above the tops of the mountains between which were deep valleys, causing changes in air density. This air density difference causes the aircraft to drop a few hundred feet suddenly. Combined with the lack of pressure this meant that when the aircraft finally landed, I was deaf, I could see people's mouths moving, but I could hear nothing at all. It was horrifying to me as a ten year old, people did not seem to recognise that I had a problem; even my mother was scolding me and gesturing at me. I tried to tell everyone that I couldn't hear, and got myself quite upset. Eventually, a member of the ground staff at the airport came over and spoke to my mum, advising her to take me to the infirmary for a check up before we got onto the bus. The deafness lasted three days, but I had been assured that there was no long term damage, and encouraged to suck lots of boiled sweets – that had cheered me up at least. Fond memories, even if it had been a little painful. There was so much to do and so much to see on that holiday, I could write a book just on that alone. I sighed and shifted a little on the thick grass bed. Sara was looking quizzically at me.

"Penny for them!" She tapped me on my elbow.

Sara had dragged me back to the river bank and the present. Whilst I was dreaming of the Dak, she had gone back to the car and got the flask and cups and brought them back to where I was and had sat down on the grass beside me. She was aware that I was off somewhere again and so had offered me a penny for my thoughts.

"Sorry love, yes, I was daydreaming again, there's so much I enjoyed as child, you know, unless I stop and write this down I'm bound to forget it!"

“You, you’ll never forget! So where were you – your favourite elephant by the river...?”

“No, strange as that may seem, and seeing as a river would be a good prompt for that – but no, I had been watching a jumbo, you know a 747, or something similar flying up high and it ended up with me thinking about my first experience in the air, flying to Lake Nyasa as a child, and I was there – you know...”

“Yeah, I know – well here’s a nice cup of tea”

“Oh that’s just what I need, thanks!”

We sat and sipped the tea and looked at the tranquil scene before us, so far from the hustle and bustle we had been used to. The herd had moved off now seeking shade as the sun grew stronger, and the river reflected only the greenery on its banks and the occasional bird traversing the deep blue sky reflected in its mirror-like surface.

“What’s that glinting over there in the trees?” Sara asked, pointing towards the trees the other side of the field, where the herd had gone.

I looked towards the trees. I couldn’t see anything glinting at all.

“Where?” I asked looking hard and moving my head about in case it was just the angle that was different.

“It’s gone now, but there was something glinting and moving along within the trees.”

“What did you think it might be?”

“I don’t know – what’s over there?”

“Might be a road, maybe it was a car or a truck or something – do you want to drive round that way and see?”

“No, just curious, that’s all”

“Oh, it is catching after all! Wow, my wife’s finally curious!”

Sara hit me across my upper arm, I reached out and grabbed her hand, yanked it hard and we both fell over in the grass.

“Get off!” Sara laughed as she pushed me onto a thistle.

“Ow! Come here you little. . . .” – but Sara was up and running. I didn’t feel like giving chase, so flopped back down and then looked at my watch.

“Hey, it’s time we got moving – I planned for us to have dinner up near Exeter on the way home – come on let’s clear up and go!”

“Is this a trick so that you can grab me . . .?” Sara asked, still keeping her distance.

“Since when did I need or use a trick?”

“O.K. – but I’m watching you!”

Together we gathered up the cups and flask and walked hand in hand back to the car.

“So, what are we going to do for the rest of the week?”

“Oh don’t you worry my sweet love, I have something planned,” I replied, “Wait and see...”

The journey back up through the Cotswolds was enjoyable and, after a really tasty fish and chip supper, we fell into bed contented with the day.

Chapter 24

Dawn broke about five in the morning, or rather it slowly began to manifest itself from just after four and by five it was daylight. Glorious sunshine was bathing the countryside and bursting through the gaps in the curtains like little golden fingers seeking to grab one of us and shake us awake. I leaned over and kissed the closed eyelids of the beautiful face alongside me.

“Sara – wake up!”

“Eh - - what? What time is it, why are you yelling at me – is the house on fire?”

“No – but you asked yesterday what we are going to do for the rest of the week! Up you get, pack a few things, we’re going to Scotland!”

“Why, you haven’t got to go to work up there anymore . . .” she looked at the clock in disbelief. I placed my hand around her soft neck and kissed her nose. She giggled a wrinkled it, I thought she was going to sneeze. I pointed at the holdall down beside the bed.

“I know – but I fancy a visit, it’s all arranged – I know a great place just off the A75 near Dumfries – it’ll be a fun time.” I was out of the bed and talking with one leg in my trousers and one hand holding my cordless shaver. Sara, swung her legs out and stretched, yawning and then shivered as the yawn ended. It wasn’t cold, just one of those things about early morning yawns. She turned her head in my direction and looked quizzically at me as I balance on one leg while shaving.

“How long is that going to take?”

“What shaving? About 2 minutes....?”

“Do you want a thick ear, you know what I mean!?”

“Well, I used to do it in four hours without stopping if there were no hold-ups – we can take it a bit more gently – stop half way and have lunch, then use the afternoon to either detour into the Lakes or visit Shap Fell, so long as we get there to check in by about five – it’ll be fine. That’s why I’m up now, a let’s get north of Birmingham before there’s too much traffic.”

I knew Sara always liked to drive the first stint, she much preferred being a passenger for the second part of the journey. She always got too comfortable and sleepy as a passenger and that didn’t compute well with being an alert driver. Her question was not a surprise, and my reply in the form of a question was a formality, I already knew the answer.

“Are we sharing the driving?”

“Yes, which stint would you like?”

Her reply was as expected and I moved across to give her a hug as she answered.

“Can I drive first? You know I’ll nod off if you drive first.”

“Course you can!” I kissed her forehead and set off downstairs with a view to rustling up a light breakfast whilst she headed for the shower. Breakfast over and Sara at the wheel, I settled into the passenger seat while she made our way to the M1 to start the journey north. I closed my eyes. There was no danger of me becoming too dozy to drive later. I wasn’t going to sleep; I was going to revisit some of the things I enjoyed most from my past. In my mind’s eye I saw that forest glade just off the Langholm road, East of Lockerbie and in a small enclosure, a jet fighter, now perhaps I could finally find out why it was there! I recalled some of the bizarre ideas that had come into my head when I first saw it. I remember thinking ‘Perhaps it’s a foreign terrorist just waiting to use it to attack some vital or strategic target’ – oh dear, that wasn’t a good thought! That idea had circulated round the millions of synapses in my brain long before the 9//11 Twin Towers tragedy and following that I took stock and decided it was better not dwell on that idea anymore. What else had crossed my mind? I had considered that maybe an aging ex-RAF pilot, grounded by age and disability; seeking to prove something to his ex-employers and the World, was going in to make a final show in a suicide attack on a Middle East target?

“Don’t be silly!” I’d thought, “He’d be shot down before he left UK airspace! That is assuming he’d get fuel for it!”

“I know!” I mused, “It’s an enthusiast, bought it in an on-line auction and now is going to do it up and re-sell it to the highest bidder!” Whatever it was, I wanted to see it again. I loved aircraft and getting close to any of them was a bonus. The helicopter I occasionally flew in only marginally reduced my cravings for these wonders of technology that defy one of the most powerful natural laws, gravity. I constantly marvelled at the jet engine and how the smelly diesel-like kerosene could end up blasting out of the rear of a jet engine at a force strong enough to blow a family car

on its side. My mind wandered, as it did at times like that, to first time I experienced jet fighters, these ones were known as 'Venom' jets, the noise they made as they flew around the horizon was almost unbearable, yet in the early 60's these were the 'state of the art' fighting machines. I had a close friend Hamil and together we were out in the bushveldt playing some game or the other when a squadron of these, assigned to the RRAF, took off from a nearby airfield. Hamil fell into a ditch and I remembered running away from the sound as fast as I could, and falling down as the jets passed over my head. Later on there had been an open day at the airfield and an Air Show and I, along with a group of my friends, suddenly became an aircraft 'anorak', enthusiastically spotting this one and that one, trading spots and stamps or photos. I remembered with some fondness the Lockheed P1-B Lightnings that flew in with the USAF accompanied by the Super Sabres or F100's as they had been coded. The F100 had come into its own during the Korean War and some of the fuselages we saw had marks on the which our young imaginations determined were bullet marks. Beside these sleek and elegant but muscular machines the Venoms were like the twin winged 'Tiger Moth' must have been compared to the first single fixed wing planes 50 years earlier. In competition with the F100's in our young hearts were the De Havilland 'Vampires' with their twin tails, powerful strike attack fighter jets with an equally dynamic noise. Ah yes, there had been much to occupy young minds. I smiled as I recalled those happy times, it had been an exciting period in my life. My mind was good at not only retaining such vivid memories, but recalling them in such detail. While intensely involved in my memories I was staring blankly out through the windscreen, a half-smile on my lips as the grey tarmac flashed by under the car, mile after mile. I had not seen any of it while my brain was producing images of my past loves, the jet fighters.

"Services coming up, Knutsford," said Sara, breaking into my ramblings.

"And Knutsford to you too!" I replied as I allowed the roaring Vampires and Venoms to depart from my thoughts.

"It's just after 11:30 – do you want to stop here, or go on up a bit"

"Go on to Lancaster – that'll be a better break off point"

"OK Lancaster Services it'll be then – you may return to your state of semi-consciousness now."

She tapped me gently on the arm as she teased. I grinned and make a mock show of instantly falling asleep like the cartoon grandfather in that kids-cum-adult cult series about a family of four living in one of the USA's many towns called Springfield. Then, I turned my head and gave her a wink – something she always liked. "Actually I was thinking about the first time I saw jet planes, and how much technology has moved on since then." This was not a subject that Sara jumped at the chance to discuss. She pulled a face, "Oh, ho-hum," making a mock yawn and patting her mouth with her hand. She hated technology, not as though she were ignorant of it, she could use it as well as anyone else, she just found some of it gimmicky. That thought sent me off again into the world my 'other life' of the past had created. I had always been one for gimmicks and gadgets. I bought so many different things just for the technological gimmick they had on board, such as radios with lights that flashed according to the power of the radio station, or motor-cycles with electric starters, flashing indicators and merged two-tone horns. In the mid-sixties motorcycles were functional machines, solid, upright, fast and windy, and frequently too heavy. I had been around a few 'bikes, and remembered my first ever being a 125cc Vespa Scooter with a 4-speed twist-grip gearbox. Running on a two-stroke mixture it putted and burbled like a lawn mower, but did 55 MPH for a return of around 70 MPG. From the Vespa my mind began to focus in on what later had been my 'new motorbike', that is new in 1965. It was a Honda Benley, a motorbike streets ahead of my other dream machine, a BSA Gold Star. That relatively small Honda by comparison, would achieve nearly 100 miles to each 4.9 litre tank of petrol, accelerate from 0 – 60 mph in under 9 seconds, and hit a top speed of just short of 100mph.

"No big deal!" my friend had commented when told these statistics, "Apart from the fuel economy, your Beezer will beat it hands down!" He hated the Japanese, his father had been a prisoner of war under their cruel guards in Malaya. I didn't want a confrontation on that aspect, and whilst I agreed with part of his expression, I had to defend my decision to buy this 'bike. As I always did in these circumstances, I drew myself up to my full height, took a deep breath and launched into my reply.

“Except for one small difference – the BSA is 650cc and the Benley is only 125cc! In spite of that apparent handicap, the 0-60 is better, I reckon the BSA is probably 11 seconds, and even though it hits 120mph, the Benley will hit 100mph and back to Zero before the BSA gets there.” He had pulled a face and accepted my argument. It was a superior, albeit lighter, manufacture and it had those ‘extra bits’ like indicators and things, and that was final, but I tossed one small extra in to finish the argument. “And, it has twin up-swept chrome exhausts!”

I had great fun with the high – revving twin cylinder Honda, not many had come into the country in 1965, and back in England the Japanese motorcycles had not begun their attack on the British bikes. Most of my friends had British bikes, and some had Italian, so it was a bit different from theirs. My uncle had flown out to visit my Dad and always extolling the virtues of the Vincent and Nortons, sneered at my Japanese lightweight and said the Honda would never catch on ‘back home’. How funny that seemed in on that day in 2003 as I heard a faint sound and saw the silver machine out of the corner of my eye. I smiled as I watched the latest marque of this very same Japanese manufacturer, probably around 1000cc, pass us by quietly on the M6. I watched other Japanese bikes go by, Yamaha, Kawasaki, and Suzuki beautifully engineered power on wheels. “So where is the Vincent now? Only in the National Motorcycle Museum near the NEC I think” I said out loud, “Along with the BSA, and NORTON and all the other great bikes of the past – but what technology now in these super-bikes!”

“Who’s Vincent?”

Sara tapped my on the arm, just to make sure I was in the present and focussed.

“Lancaster Services in 5 miles – o.k. to pull in still?”

“Yes my love, good driving, well done!”

“As if you would know, dozing and day-dreaming!”

“Hmmm, yes but nice!”

“So was it the Tiger Fish, the Elephant, or Victoria Falls this time?”

“Actually it was Honda, BSA and, as you noted, Vincent!”

“Eh? What’s that got to do with your past?”

“Oh, something you didn’t know then – listen and learn – “ and for the next five miles I told her all about my many bikes, the transition from British to Japanese and how I felt about them. I had never had a serious discussion about motorcycles with Sara, she hated them, so this had been a refreshing interlude. I started small, talking about a moped I had as a teenager and I then dropped into the conversation that I had actually raced them.

“Well, that’s new to me – I remember you had a bike when we were courting, and you crashed on it...”

“Yeah and you gave me an ultimatum – either the bike went or you did! Coo, I loved that bike. . . “

“So, what are you saying?”

“Obviously – I must have loved YOU more!”

“Was that a BSA then - ?”

“No it was an AJS 250 twin, two-stroke, an odd bike, the engine was two 125cc lawnmower engines built into one unit.”

“Getting technical! Mind blurring...”

I carried on regardless. “But the icing on the cake was the Honda, she was beautiful.”

“She, so your bike was female?”

“All of them were!”

“Ha, so even as a teenager you liked to have a throbbing female between your knees.”

“Sara! I cannot believe you just said that!”

“Neither can I actually!”

By then I had totally lost my train of thought. We were approaching the slip road for Lancaster service area so I shelved the discussion. Sara steered the car through the main car park towards the bank of disabled parking spaces. Although we didn’t qualify to park in the special bays, the others nearby were often wider and we did need to swing the doors wide. “Here we are -- that’s handy” Sara said as she slipped the car into a space right near the pavement and we got out with a view to enjoying a little refreshment and then to change over drivers. I liked Lancaster service area, it had a holiday feel probably because of its proximity to the southern lakes and Morecombe Bay. We tucked into a steak and kidney pie and chips, washed down by a Latte – I recalled that

we used to call that milky coffee once upon a time. After the usual wash and brush up, Sara slipped into the passenger seat while I adjusted the seat and mirrors to suit me. The afternoon's journey up through the Lakes was very enjoyable and we stopped occasionally to take pictures, soon it was five o'clock and we were 2 miles from Dumfries. I drew the car to a halt in the car park beside the Ferryman's Arms.

"Here we are then; just enough time to have a shower and change, dinner will be at seven." The sun was glistening on the tiles of the little homestead as we walked up the neatly laid flagstone path. We both stopped and took in the absolutely delightful view all around us. I opened the door for Sara and then picked up our cases and followed her through. She hesitated slightly, most people do the first time, at the unexpected private house appearance of this quaint pub with rooms. I laughed. "Sweetheart, you think you've stepped into someone's living room by mistake, don't you?"

"Well, yes, are you sure that was the right door?"

I pointed to the small table with the leaflets laid out and the sign that said "NO SMOKING" over the doorway. "Yes, this is the right place, I've been here before – and yes, it is someone's living room, the great couple that own and run this place."

"O.K. You can do all the check – in bit as I had nothing to do with the booking!"

I laughed at that and she looked a bit hurt, so, with my arm round her I apologised and explained the laugh was quite simply because there wasn't a check-in procedure, not in that little place. She smiled and apologised in turn, she always was quick to apologise, saying that she was so used to the hotel, it just came automatically.

"Can I have nose round then?"

"Sure – but don't go trying to compare this one with yours – it hasn't even got one star – it's just a pub with a few rooms – o.k.?"

The owner and landlady were Mr and Mrs McWilliams, farmers and hard workers all their lives. The rooms at the back were usually occupied by regular and seasonal farm workers who went to bed at 7.30 after dinner and were up at 5, and out before 6. I hadn't told Sara then that there was only one guest room, and we were in it. After we had met Mrs McWilliams and she'd gushed all over us as she usually did, we made our way to the room. I went over to the window and looked out. We were at the back of the pub – I'd been in the room a few times before, it was uncanny how feelings came back when in such circumstances. I recalled that it was here I had looked out at the 'Belted Galloways' and wondered how they'd cope if there was a loose lion in their field. I recalled also that the food was very good. Mr McWilliams was very proud of his organic produce and the milk from his cows. Creamy yogurt and bright yellow butter were always available in abundance. I squinted a little as I looked out to the far distance, although in the direction of Lockerbie, I couldn't see that far. "That jet plane's out there!" I said.

"What jet plane – there must be stacks of them out there – after all, didn't you tell me this is er – Amber One is that right, the main flight path which is why that PanAm 747 was up there over Lockerbie when it got blown up?"

"No I don't mean it's FLYING, I mean on the ground, out there in the pine woods beyond Lockerbie! There's an ex-USAF jet fighter just sitting there doing nothing."

Sara came over and felt my brow. "Are you feeling o.k. – have you just seen the 'bogey man' or something? Or is this just another of your daydreams?"

"Didn't I tell you about it – a jet fighter, on the ground, in an enclosure, in the pine trees just off the Lockerbie to Langholm road?"

"No"

"Well, tomorrow I'll show you!"

I lay back on the bed, reading a book I'd picked up off the guests' table in the lounge.

"What's that you've got there?" Sara asked as she prepared to go in the shower.

"It's a book about a lad who is desperate to make a name for myself as a stunt rider – you wouldn't believe the things he tries!"

"Like what?"

"Like, jumping over a double-decker bus on a motor bike, using a car transporter as a ramp!"

"Nice story, right up your street I'm sure!"

“Yes, it’s right up my street – but it’s not fiction, the guy exists! He even tried to jump a deep river gorge with a rocket powered bike once.”

With that Sara pulled a face and went into the bathroom.

I returned to the book. It was fascinating to read of the number of times this stunt rider nearly killed himself. He tried just about everything possible with a bike, including trying to jump a long row of double decker buses inside Wembley Stadium and nearly dying in the attempt. I was led by my active mind into thinking about riding bikes in the rain, and on the ice; I thought back to a few weeks earlier when I had been sitting avoiding the torrential rain in the railway shed inside the wild animal park. We couldn’t take the train out because of the rain and the area manager had suggested we clean and grease up the carriages and anything else that needed maintenance. My young co-worker Darren had been talking about his car and how he’d once had a motorbike but preferred the car in this sort of weather. The conversation had flipped from car to bike and back again. He said how different it felt to have bike powered instead of having to pedal it, and how much harder the fall was off a powered bike. “I thought falling off my push-bike was bad enough until I fell off a motorbike.”

“Well strange as it seems, because push-bikes stand higher, the fall off a motorbike is worse for a number of reasons, one being its weight.”

“I never had more than a graze falling off the push-bike, but had cuts everywhere after I fell off my motorbike.”

Hearing him say that brought to mind one of my own tumbles from a bike and I turned my head towards him and asked “Have you ever had a real crash on a bike? I don’t mean falling off as we have been saying up until now, I mean crash, bang, wallop!” I was building the stage for one of my anecdotes from the past. If it had been a mouse trap, the snap would have been heard that second.

“Yeah, I skidded in the ice once, right down there by the main road; I was coming here to do a weekend job while still at school.”

“Oh, moped was it then?”

“Yeah 50cc pedal and go.”

“Horrible little pigs on the ice!”

“Grazed my leg all the way down. My mum was really upset, but, hey, the girls all fussed round me.” It was time to get onto my story.

“Can you guess how many times I’ve crashed?” He looked at me. I could see the anticipation building. He’d been down this road before, so much so that he knew what the next reply had to be.

“No – but you’re going to tell me I know - -“ I did precisely that.

“Over thirty times!”

“Thirty! Bloody hell! That’s more than a racing bike rider has. . . .”

“Well, not quite as many as they do – but a lot anyway – I was a bit reckless as a lad – but then I was in Africa, not here with all the cars and lorries around – most of my crashes were into ditches, empty rubbish bins, the odd pedestrian, cyclists not looking out when they turned, the front of a harvester, even a pool of slurry, or when I was dirt track racing – Motocross I think you call it - and so – on – not major ones. That is, except for one I can remember . . . a really bad one...” I looked at him, he had settled back onto a pile of sacks, story mode, he was ready. He took a long breath before he fed me the next prompt.

“What happened then?” He was a little excited, his breathing rate was a little higher; I knew he was hooked.

I closed my eyes and let my mind go back to that day so that I could relate the accident as it had happened. Then I opened them again and took a breath before speaking, looking straight at Darren.

“Well, it was one summer evening out in Africa, I had been visiting Amy, another of the girls in my life at the time, and was about six miles from home. There was no need to take the main roads between the farms out in Makeni, in those days there were many farm tracks and roads cut through by contractors and quarry operators. Thus I was on the BSA Gold Star, running at between 50 and 60 mph on one of the well driven tracks. Between Amy’s farm and ours, there was a railway line that linked the cement works near Lusaka to one of the many Limestone quarries in the area. At the point that I would cross it, the line was in a cutting about 10 feet deep with a small,

ramped, wooden bridge over the top that railway carriages just missed by a merest proverbial gnat's whisker. I loved to take that bridge at the highest speed I could safely reach and leap a few feet in the air before landing on the opposite side of the cutting."

I stopped and looked at Darren, his eyes had widened, I knew he was trying to imagine it, I carried on.

"That day, something was different. As I approached the turn just before the bridge, I had an uneasy feeling. I don't know what had spooked me. I couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, there was no train in sight. Then I realised what my eyes and brain had already seen and assimilated, though my conscious thought had not – there was no bridge. I rushed headlong past a warning sign telling me that the bridge was down for repair – it was too late. I was 50 metres from the bridge doing over 60 mph! Still, I figured that I'd jumped the cutting before, even if it was using the ramp up the bridge to give the lift – I'd just have to go for it! Out of the corner of my eye I caught a movement." I stopped again to take a sip of water from my bottle while looking at Darren. He was slowly wringing his hands and his eyes had slightly glazed look. He was there with me, he could see that cutting with no bridge. He was anxious for me to go on, to finish the story. I did just that.

"At the same instant that I arrived at the cutting, so did a high-sided box van, the railway workmen on their way home using the railway track as the roads were bad and a lot longer. They were just passing through the cutting. I had no time to brake. The front wheel went into the 14 foot high aluminium sided van as if it were a knife into butter. I dropped my head behind the small shield and tucked my elbows in as the alloy peeled back off its supports ahead of me. Thankfully the van was empty, and a split second later, I repeated the action the other side of the van and burst out onto the dusty track."

Darren was gasping, his breath coming in short bursts. He could see the crash as clearly as if he had been an observer right there on that day. I knew I had to finish the story.

"The bike dropped from beneath me like a stone and I realised that the front wheel was totally wrecked, the forks were bent and I was now free falling into open air for several feet. I landed heavily, breaking both legs and lay twisting in pain as the workmen scrambled up the sides of the cutting to see what was going on. My arms were all lacerated by the sharp edges of the alloy and my helmet had two deep grooves across one side, saving me from a major head injury. The blood was everywhere, oozing through my leathers at several places and turning the sandy track a chocolate colour around me. " Darren's eyes were closed, he gulped, I was sure he was going to burst into tears, I had to finish it, couldn't stop the story there.

"The workmen were sure I was dead. One of them used the railway telephone and called for assistance. I vaguely heard the man's voice floating in and out like a short wave radio station. I had caught the words 'Bad.... Smashed up dead.... Right. Get the body to hospital anyway.....'

By then another of the workmen had reached me.

I moved one arm slowly. I didn't want them to do anything to make matters worse for me.

'I'm not dead!' I protested, 'This body's tough you know! I think I've busted something though, I can't move! Please don't try to lift or move me, let the ambulance men do that.' The workmen were looking from me to the huge hole in the side of the van, to my wreck of a bike, and back to me, shaking their heads in disbelief."

I looked at Darren as he sat there in the engineering shed. He was looking at me also in disbelief.

"Really? You went right through the van?"

"That's what they tell me – I only remember dropping my head and then seeing the ground coming up!"

"Must've been a thin metal!"

"Must've been – and I'm glad it was! That had been a scary few moments I can tell you"

Darren nodded, exhausted by the activity of his brain following me through the accident. I was still thinking about it when I heard the water noise stop, meaning that Sara had turned off the shower. I thought I should get ready for dinner myself and turned towards the door, waiting for her to appear.

"So what's this chap's name then?" Sara said as she came back from the bathroom. She was referring to the book I had been reading when she went for the shower.

“Evil Knievel or something like that I think....”

“That doesn’t sound like a real name. . . .”

“Well, the author says that this is a biography of the guy, so I’m not going to argue!”

“Motorbikes, jumping ravines and buses – are you sure that’s not about you?”

“No my sweet, my life is tame compared to this guy!”

Sara came and sat down beside me as she towelled her curly blonde hair. She smelled lovely, better than I did, so it was my turn to head for the shower. She looked up at me as I stood up.

“So where are we going tomorrow, exactly?”

“Langholm, via Lockerbie – there’s a craft shop there you might be interested in.”

“There’s something else, you said”

“Yes, the jet plane – that’s just an aside”

I smiled and turned away into the bathroom, an aside indeed!

Chapter 25

I woke Sara with a little kiss on the forehead. It was a glorious sunny morning and the birds were in full song.

“C’mon beautiful – they serve a lovely full Scottish breakfast here. Don’t call it a full English will you!”

“Oh, can’t I just stay here, it’s so warm and c-o-m-f-y...a..n..d....” her voice trailed off as she attempted to slip back into sleep.

“Sara! It is after nine – come on, up you get, just chuck some jeans and a top on, never mind your face and hair – they won’t worry here”

“Maybe they won’t – but I will!”

She dragged herself out of the bed and made for the bathroom while I finished up my own dressing. A few minutes past and she emerged dressed and sat on the bed to add a little of the necessary touches to hair and face. Then we both stepped out of the room, clicking it shut behind us.

“Got the key?” she asked looking down at my hands.

“Key? – here?” I laughed, “No, there’s no key, we’re the only guests, the rest of the people are family and work around here.”

“It only has ONE guest room?”

“Yep, that’s right!”

“Still don’t like leaving it unlocked. . . .”

“You’ll get used to it!”

We entered the dining room and were immediately fussed over by the family cat, rubbing herself against our legs whilst precociously flicking her tail up our thighs. The landlady called out a cheery good morning and ushered us to the only set table.

“I hope we haven’t made you late?” Sara smiled

“Och no!” she replied and went into the kitchen to fetch toast and coffee.

“We’re the only one’s eating” Sara whispered

“That’s because the workers all got up at six and ate breakfast before seven”

“Why didn’t you tell me that last night?”

“Why – you’d only fret about it and lie awake in case you overslept!”

“Well, we DID!”

“No we didn’t – I told the landlady we were on holiday, that I wasn’t on business this time, and she said she serves breakfast up until ten – so we’re well in still!”

“O.K. – but I feel embarrassed!”

The landlady returned with our coffee and toast, asked if we’d like to have porridge before our cooked breakfast, we declined and she looked a little disappointed.

“Your breakfasts are a delight Mrs McWilliams, and as much as we love real Scots porridge – we want to give our best attention to the full breakfast—” I offered as an appeasement. It worked, with a smile Mrs McWilliams turned back to the kitchen door to get started on the cooking. I helped Sara to coffee and she spread some of the local butter on the warm toast. She looked at me with those eyes that could make me do anything she wanted. I took her hand and kissed it. “This will be the best breakfast you have ever eaten in any establishment.”

“Really, well, I have to say the coffee’s fresh and the toast just right.”

“Mrs Mac is almost as good a cook as you, you will tell her how much you enjoy this, won’t you?”

Sara chuckled as she withdrew her hand to pick up the piece of toast. Mrs McWilliams appeared at that moment with two plates filled with so much food it was impossible to see even a millimetre of plate.

“My goodness!” Sara exclaimed as she looked at the plate, and then remembering what I had said she continued, “This looks like an absolute delight, thank you for such a delicious breakfast.” She smiled as she stuck her fork into a sausage.

I winked at Mrs Mac, “She’s a wonderful cook, aren’t you Mrs Mac, I always enjoy my food here.”

“Och, away with ye,” she said as she bustled back towards the kitchen, beaming with delight. We didn’t say another word as we demolished that huge plateful. Breakfast over, Sara and I returned to the room to freshen up and gather the few things we’d need for the day. Then it was out to the

car and off up the lane towards Lockerbie. The journey took about twenty minutes, across the flat flood plains of the river Nith that flows through Dumfries and up into the woods that herald the beginnings of the town of Lockerbie. The small cemetery reminds travellers that there was a tragedy here in the past, and then over the busy M74 and into the town itself. I negotiated the attractive streets and followed the signs for Langholm. Out of town and slowly turning this way and that the road climbs up out of the valley mists onto a plateau of pine trees. Soon, where the road runs straight for several miles, my adrenalin was pumping, I could see the clump of trees on the right half a mile or so ahead. I kept my speed steady, not wanting to get too excited. It was a good two years since I'd been on this road and now finally, I was going to solve the mystery of the jet plane in the trees. I slowed up a few hundred metres before the clump.

"What's up?" Sara asked

"We're approaching the place where the jet plane is!"

"Where?"

"In those trees up ahead, on the right."

I pulled up and jumped out, fairly running headlong to the opening in the tree line. There was nothing there!

"Where's this jet then?" Sara asked, looking this way and that.

"It was.... It was – right here – I don't understand . . ." I was standing pointing at a clearing in the trees.

"Really, how many beers had you had?"

"I was driving to Hawick that day, at 7:30 in the morning – I hadn't had a drink for over forty two hours!"

"So, where has it gone – flown away then?"

"Maybe it has!"

I walked up to a wooden gate and saw a notice that warned that trespassers were not welcome. Over to my right, behind some more trees, I could see a small house or large shed.

"I have to find out!" I said un-latching the five bar gate.

"Rob! It says PRIVATE – doesn't that usually mean KEEP OUT?"

"Yes – but - - - " I didn't have anything to add to the 'but' and walked on anyway.

Suddenly, I stopped. Sara stopped also. She looked at me. I was looking down, my gaze fixed firmly on the ground. I crouched down and put on my reading glasses. I stood up and looked triumphantly at her. "I KNEW IT!" I bellowed

"Knew WHAT!?" Sara quizzed

"Look – the TRACKS – these were made by wide soft wheels, and look, over here a good 2 or 3 metres away, the OTHER wheel was – just about the right distance for the position of the wheels on a jet fighter, wouldn't you say . . .?"

"I wouldn't say anything"

"Now, look here – this is where the nose wheel sat, it is equidistant from the other two and about two and a half metres forward of us, and look – " I bent down and picked something up off the ground. It looked like a piece of red nylon ribbon.

"What's that – a child's ribbon?"

"No, it's one of the 'check tabs' that engineers put on various parts of an aircraft. The pilot or flight engineer has to physically pick each one off to show that he has also checked these components."

"Proving?"

"That the jet WAS here!"

"So, where is it now?"

"I don't know – but one day I'm going to find out – that's for sure!"

"I don't understand all this, why would there have been a jet fighter here? Where's the nearest airfield?"

"My darling, near airfield or not has no bearing on this, the damned thing was here, and now it isn't – that's so frustrating!"

"Ok, Rob, calm down, it isn't that important. It's just an old jet fighter after all...."

"I want to know more, I will come back again, and I will find out!"

Chapter 26

It had been a gloriously hot day, almost cloudless and I parked up as usual and made my way to the front door, stopping to pet next door's cat as I did so. I unlatched the door and opened it, Sara was there waiting and I took her in my arms, kissed her and asked if she had had a good day. "No, not really, I had a manic day! Everyone wanted to check out at the same time, the phone kept ringing and then some guests arrived to have a 'show round' as they were planning a wedding later!"

"Oh dear, well, never mind, the day's over now, time to relax and enjoy the evening together." I headed towards the kitchen, intending to flush my flask and wash my sandwich box. Sara followed and indicated that she would put the kettle on, but then she stopped and placed her hand on my arm.

"Oh, I forgot – Tom called, he says that he has a new radio for the car that you can have if you go down."

Tom was Jo's younger brother, our second son, a brilliant motor technician who helped keep our cars on the road. I had been complaining that my radio was playing up and Tom had said he might be able to lay his hands on a better one. Apparently he had.

"Oh, good, I'll just dump my stuff and go and see him then."

I continued on through to the kitchen and dropped down my back-pack containing the remains of my lunch at the animal park, and returned to the door. I gave Sara a quick kiss and returned to the car with a bit of a skip.

"New radio – that'll be a treat!" I grinned as I put the key into the lock.

Sara watched me from the kitchen window and waved as I turned the corner; I waved back and then was out of sight. That was the last thing I remember doing. As I cannot recall what happened and therefore have nothing to write here, Sara takes up the story at this point.

I turned the dinner down to low and started to take the washing out of the machine, the kettle clicked as it came to the boil. No sense in making tea now that Rob had gone back out to get his radio from Tom. It'd keep.

"Wish I'd waited until he'd been in a bit at least, before telling him about the radio, then he wouldn't have dashed off again so quickly!" I scolded myself, "Ah well, I suppose I won't see him for another hour or so now, they're bound to get stuck into fitting the radio before he comes home – hope the dinner doesn't overcook!"

I took the washing outside and hung each item carefully on the rotary line, it was still very warm and sunny and I hoped they would dry before bed-time.

Then I went back to the living room and sat down on the settee, picking up my knitting as I did so, and turned on the TV to watch the local news. I wasn't that interested in the news, it was more for company. I had time to kill, so knitting was more the time filler than the television. I was knitting another pair of multi-coloured socks for Bob, to keep his feet warm while he was outside in the animal park.

Half an hour passed by and the news was over, so I flicked off the TV, I have never been one for watching it for the sake of it. Then the telephone rang and I jumped up to answer it. "I bet he's forgotten something or needs some money to pay Tom."

"Hello Mum, it's Tom – is Dad coming down or not – only we need to lock up?"

"You mean he isn't there?" I was puzzled, it was only a few minutes to Tom's garage.

"No, - let me look outside – no definitely not here."

"But, he left here 30, maybe 40 minutes ago – it's only five minutes to you isn't it?"

"Well, that would be about right I guess... you don't think he went to the flat do you?"

"No, I'm sure he knew that you were still at work – anyway, he would've discovered that you weren't there and come back - - hang on, doorbell's going – I'll call you back."

I went to the door and opened it quizzically. A police officer was standing there holding something in his hand. He was holding it out towards me. I recognised it as a wallet. He smiled kindly.

"I'm sorry to ask you this, but do you recognise this wallet?"

I took it from the officer and looked at it again briefly. It was the one I had given Rob on one of our anniversaries. He was always losing money out of his back pocket, now it seemed he'd dropped the wallet.

"Yes, it's my husband's - - where did you find it? He didn't drop it did he, he's always losing stuff from his back pocket." I realised I was babbling on a bit, and stopped. The police officer grimaced a little, he was trying to form the answer in the right way I suppose.

"I'm afraid it was on him when we pulled me from the wreckage – he's been involved in a very serious road accident, and has been taken to the A & E – I'm here with WPC Gill to take you there."

I could not speak, my legs buckled and I held onto the doorpost.

"An accident, how..? Where...? Is... is he...?" I didn't want to ask the question.

"Ma-am, he is alive, but I have no update on his condition apart from the fact that it is very serious – please, come with us, we will go straight there."

"I must phone my sons and my daughters, they will want to know. . . "

"If you have the numbers, please give them to WPC Gill, she will be only too pleased to call them while we make the journey to A & E."

"Give me a moment, please."

I pushed the door so that it was just ajar and turned away into the living room, tears welling up in my eyes. I began to do mechanical things like locking the back door, turning off the cooker, switching lights on, and then picked up the address book and after briefly stopping to try and tidy my face up a little, I opened the door again, coat in hand.

"I'm ready now." I said and followed the police officers to the waiting car.

"This is WPC Gill, she'll make those calls for you," he told me kindly, and then to his companion, "Please call the rest of the family so that they are aware of what has happened."

As the police car made its way through the traffic, the police officer had the decency not to pass by the remains of Rob's car, just one mile from the house, and so the journey took a little longer than it would otherwise have done. Later I was glad of that, it was not recognisable as a car at all, looking rather like scrap metal that had fallen off a skip truck. For most of the journey the WPC was calling the family members. Then there was a spell of silence when just the purring of the engine could be heard with occasional crackle from the personal radio sets each had on their pocket.

"How. . . , er, how did the accident happen . . . do you know?"

"No, I haven't got that information at this time, I'm sorry. We have come from the local station, we haven't been briefed on the accident, but I'm sure there'll be someone to tell you what want to know."

"So, how - - er, what... I mean – look, please tell me something!" I demanded, I couldn't just sit in silence while the man I loved was lying in intensive care, and not know why.

"From what we were told, your husband's car was struck on the offside – that's the side he was sitting in – by a 40 ton truck at the crossroads; the car was carried 100 metres down the road before the truck stopped. The fire & rescue service used cutting equipment to get to your husband. I'm sorry. . . "

I sobbed again, taking out some tissues from my handbag. The young WPC put her arm around my shoulders, I could see that she too had a slight wetness in her eyes – she'd seen too much of this already in her short career. I felt so desperate, I just didn't know what to say, what to think. I just wanted to get to Rob. Forty minutes later the police car stopped outside A & E and the three of us went in. There, waiting for me, were Jo and Tom, red faced and puffy-eyed, the three of us hugged each other together and our shoulders moved in silent sobs. The police officers discretely moved away to the lobby area and one of them called in to their HQ to say that we were at the hospital and asked for an attending officer to join us. A few minutes later, the two girls, Susan, the eldest of our children, and Angelique, the youngest of all the children, came rushing in to the lobby calling out excitedly in their anxiety, "My Daddy, where's my Daddy . . . ?"

We all rushed towards them and a five-figure group hug took place for over five minutes. Then Susan spoke up – "So, what's happened, why aren't we being taken to see Dad . . . Mum, what's going on?!"

"It's serious Sue, he was hit by a juggernaut, they had to cut him out . . . "

"Oh Mum" Sue fell on my neck and together we hugged and cried, while the other three hugged each other in silence.

Just then a woman in a white coat appeared. Spoke briefly to the police officer who gestured in my direction. She came quickly across to us. Her face was very serious.

“What.....? is he ...?” I began

The doctor put her hand on my arm and looked at us all briefly.

“You can come through now; he’s in the intensive care unit.”

“Intensive care!” Jo remarked, “That’s a good sign, he’s still alive then!”

We all followed the doctor down the long corridors until we reached a small room where two nurses were just finishing tidying up around Rob.

I gasped. He looked awful, I had prepared myself for the worst, but even so, the sight of his broken body shook me, I was staggered. The four young men and women, our children, behind me, equally gasped at the sight. Poor Angelique, just twenty, fell down and had to be helped up and onto a chair by a nurse. I stepped forward and grasped his hand the only part that wasn’t wrapped up and attached to tubes and monitors. I looked at Rob’s face, wracked in pain, the man I loved and who had shared so many wonderful years of my life was in need of me more now than ever in our past years together. He was badly injured, the monitors showed a very low and weak pulse, faltering, and the ventilator was steadily whooshing behind him. It was hard to take, but I had to face it, Rob was dying.

“Oh Rob.....” I said

His eyes flickered and then opened.

“Hello sweetheart, “he said, “I’ve done it well and truly this time!” He winced as even speaking had brought on severe pains. His eyes closed again.

I looked at the doctor. She looked back at me, placed her hand on my shoulder and slowly shook her head.

“What . . .? What are you trying to say . . . ?”

The doctor gestured at the four ‘children’ and said “Why don’t you say hello to your Dad, while I talk to your Mum?”

With that she took me outside and looking me straight in the eyes, said “I can’t say this any other way – only his constitution is keeping him alive. There is so much internal injury, all the ribs were crushed, the lungs are barely able to support his breathing needs, and a machine can’t help. To operate would be fruitless. All we can do is keep the pain level down with drugs and hope that he remains comfortable for the time being . . .”

“Please, give me the bottom line, now!” I demanded, not really wanting to hear, but needing to.

“He isn’t going to survive, I’m sorry, it may only be minutes, it may be hours, but not more than a few . . . I’m so sorry!”

“Sorry! Why aren’t you doing something – he’s strong, fit, the monitor shows his heart’s doing well – why can’t you operate!?”

“The top thoracic surgeon is on his way here by helicopter, but we don’t think he’ll get here in time – we can only hope. Even then, Mr Humber told us over the phone once he had heard what the scanner and X-rays revealed that there is too much damage.”

I felt a moment of hopeless panic, he could die while I was talking to the doctor.

“I must get back to him!”

I turned and ran back into the room. Susan was holding Rob’s hand, her face red and puffy, her eyes matched her face. The other three were standing, stunned, unspeaking. I once again hugged each in turn. I took the hand from Susan and bent down to Rob’s pain-wracked face. I placed my lips on his and kissed him for several long seconds. Then as I withdrew my mouth, I whispered, “I love you Rob – we all love you! Please don’t leave us, please hold on darling! We need you, we love you darling. You can fight, do it now, the surgeon’s on his way, just hang on until he gets here, please.”

Rob’s eyes flickered again and opened.

“I – I love you too – I love you Susan, and Jo, and – uh --- Tom, and my – uh -- little Angelique – love – y-o-u”

His grip on my hand tightened as he turned back to look once again into my eyes, eyes that he said had bewitched him so many times and dragged him in. He closed his eyes again. There was no movement, just shallow breathing, a sort of bubbly sound as the blood in the lungs was disturbed by the air-flow.

I turned and let Susan sit down with Rob for a few minutes while I went and spoke once again to the duty doctor. I was not going to give up, Rob was not going to die, not there in that bed.

"Is there anything we can do.... Anything that might help?" I pleaded

"I'm sorry, there is nothing more anyone can do until Mr Humber arrives, the pain-killers have kicked in now and that's why he's quieter. His brain and heart are good and undamaged, that's the only good part of this, we can only hope."

I returned to the bedside as Susan was giving up her place to Angelique who had recovered a little from her fainting fit. She took Rob's hand.

"Daddy, my Daddy – it's Angie – speak to me Daddy – I love you!"

Rob's eyes flickered again and opened briefly. He looked at Angie and the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Hey... what's up poppet?! Don't cry – ," he wheezed and grimaced for a second, then squeezed her hand as he spoke again in a rasping voice, "I'm just hurting a little bit, that's all!"

"Oh Daddy"

"Sweetheart, come here," he raised his arm and she laid her head on his chest, just like she used to do as a little girl, "Now, listen – what can you hear?"

"Your heart, it's going boomp – ba, boomp –ba" she said, just like she used to say when she was little.

"Yes and it isn't stopping yet!"

He looked at the rest of us briefly, the pain in his neck and chest making him wince as he did so, "Look at the monitor ... look!" he said, "What's my heart rate?"

We looked at the monitor, it had been showing 62 beats when we came in, now it was reading 81 beats. It was steady, there was no hesitant faltering beat like there had been earlier.

"81 beats Dad," Tom said

"Yes, that's what I thought – I feel stronger!"

The pain-killers and tranquilizers were doing their job, but we knew that wasn't going to last. In a few minutes it could all change again, for the worst. We all felt so hopeless. I paced the floor between Rob and the door, and kept looking down the corridor. It was empty. Then I turned back to Rob, looked closely at his face, he was trying to smile, but I could see that was just a mask, a brave but pointless mask.

There was a low cough. A distinguished looking man in his early 60's appeared in the doorway.

"Now then, what have you been up to eh?" the man said. Mr Humber, the thoracic surgeon. "Right then let's get you down to theatre – sister – get him on the move please, straight away."

Rob lifted his arm to release Angelique and the nurses swung the bed around so that feet-first it was heading for the door. He waved bravely at our ashen faces as we stood back, and we watched as the bed, monitor and drip all together, disappeared rapidly down the corridor.

The next four hours were the longest four hours of our lives. At around ten p.m., the nurse came and found us in the main waiting room.

"Would you come this way please."

"What's happening, how is he.....?" we almost said in unison

"It's not for me to say I'm afraid, Mr Humber and Matron will answer all your questions."

With that she ushered us through a door into a small room with five or six chairs and a small desk.

Mr Humber was standing with his hands clasped behind him, looking out of the window. The matron was standing by the desk with some notes in her hand. She gestured towards the chairs.

"Please, have a seat."

"What . . .?" I began, but the Matron's hand was up and she gestured towards Mr Humber. We sat.

For what seemed an eternity, the surgeon continued to look out of the window. Then he slowly turned around and looked kindly at the red faces of each of us in turn with our puffy eyes and my runny make up.

"This is not the best day of my life..." he began, and Angie began to cry. "No please, don't get upset, I know how difficult it must be for you. The operations I had to carry out taxed my skills to the limit. It's up to him now, and maybe God too."

"You mean . . . ?" I started to speak again.

"Yes, he's alive and all the internal damage has been taken care of"

“Oh thank you, thank you” I broke in, grabbing Angelique as I did.

“Hold on – the situation is only marginally better – now he has to maintain that strong constitution himself. I have assigned my best intensive care team to him for the next 6 to 8 hours. If he survives that long, he’ll probably live to be a hundred!”

He smiled and nodded briefly at each of us, and left the room.

The Matron then sat down on the remaining chair.

“You all must be starving – would you like something to eat!?”

We all realised just how right she was, but yet somehow it didn’t seem right to eat.

Jo spoke up and seemed to voice what we all felt, we nodded in agreement.

“Thank you, that’s kind of you, but I can’t eat while my Dad is lying there fighting for his life!”

The nurse was kind, she understood exactly what we were going through, she had seen it a hundred times before. She nodded to acknowledge our feelings, but she gestured towards a door a little way down the corridor.

“Well, at least try and get a little rest, there is a room next door with some large settees in it, go in there and just relax, sleep a little if you can – if there’s any change, I’ll come and fetch you.”

We thanked the kind woman and made our way into the room next door. It had four large settees and a small folding bed. We each flopped down and lay staring at the ceiling, determined not to go to sleep until we knew Rob’s condition. I decided that I would lie there until the others had fallen asleep and then go down to intensive care and ask to be with him – if he died, I wanted to be there, not to be told after the event. I cried a little. What was I going to do, how could I go on without him if he died? For nearly 30 years he’d been there for me, we’d had so many good times together, our four children, now adults, loved him dearly. They’d be devastated. I decided it was time to pray. I woke with a start; a nurse was gently tugging at my elbow. She put a finger to her lips and gestured at the others who were all asleep. “Follow me”, she whispered.

Out in the corridor, the door shut behind us, she spoke again, “He’s asking for you”

I looked at my watch, it was 8 a.m.! We’d slept a good 9 hours! I was startled, the last thing I remembered was starting that prayer – I don’t remember finishing it.

“You mean – he’s going to be o.k.?”

“Yes, that’s what we think, no – better than that, we’re SURE!”

“I’m going to wake the others – can we all go to see him?”

“Yes, but don’t crowd or excite him too much, he is still in a lot of pain”

I turned and opened the door. I hesitated. The others needed to come too. I cleared my throat and called just like I used to when they were all little and it was time for school, “Sue, Jo, Tom, Angie – WAKE UP! Come on, up you get!”

The four woke up, rubbed their eyes for a second, and then remembered where they were.

I let them come to full alertness and then I gestured towards the door.

“Your Dad is awake and wants to see us!”

They all immediately scrambled to their feet. They looked like they’d slept in a field, but for once they didn’t care about their appearance.

We followed the nurse down to the after-surgery Intensive Care Unit and she ushered us into the room.

Rob was wired up like a puppet and machines were flashing and beeping.

He was awake and looked at us with a sad but calm face, the distortion by pain of the night before had gone now. He had a sort of disinterested expression and regarded us all with an air of surprise, as if he had no idea who we were.

“Who are you?” he asked looking blankly at us.

“Oh no,” I thought, “he’s lost his memory!”

Then we could see there was a twinkle in his eye, “Come here and give me a hug you lot – you look worse than I do!”

We all moved to the bed and hugged whatever bit of him we could that wasn’t attached to something.

“I told you it’ll take more than a little accident to put me down!”

“Little accident!? Don’t you recall any of it – you were hit by a juggernaut, fully laden! 16 wheels, 40 tons, the works!”

“Really? - all I remember was driving away from home. Wait, I do have a vague recollection that I stopped at the lights with my indicator on to turn right – you know Tom, on the main road towards your place. – Then in my mirror I saw a car coming up behind me, full of kids I think, it didn’t stop – just slammed straight into the back of me.....but after that.....”

“It must’ve punted you out into the road then – that’s how you got in the way of the juggernaut!” said Jo.

“I don’t remember anything until I woke up here in pain and you all arrived.”

Life was beginning to return to Rob, I sat back and let the four kids hug their dad. He will continue the story from that moment on.

I looked at Sara, her blue eyes were focussed on mine, I reached out past Angie and took her hand, kissed it and said “I could murder a cup of tea!”

We all laughed together. I had made a mistake in thinking some of the people I had investigated in my earlier jobs would not bother as I retired and got older. That car clearly was skilfully handled, like a cue ball in pool, to punt me out without the occupants getting any damage. I had failed to watch my back. I nearly paid with my life. Now as I limp about and occasionally feel the pains return, I feel grateful for being alive and I vow not to waste what’s left of my life, and that’s why I wrote this book. There will be others. (I have started ‘Wild Grass’ – a sequel to this).