

Random Chapters

Prologue

Cape Town South Africa February 1960

The distinguished guest rose gracefully from his seat on the green leather benches and strode to the podium. He carried about him an air of dignified self assurance, characteristic of his lifetime in offices of influence and power.

His surroundings in the ornate oak-paneled hall, the crystal chandeliers, heavy satin drapes and soft thick carpeting, symbolized the prosperity and solidity of a long-standing colonial heritage.

This was the eighth country that this man had visited in ten days, and his keen blue eyes betrayed his fatigue. His features were handsome though ageing and a gaunt pallor was barely concealed behind the flush of colour from recent unaccustomed exposure to the harsh African sun. During his mission he had been met with reverence, and he had encountered hostility. He was on a hugely challenging assignment and his encounters had left him both enlightened and disturbed.

Experience told him that his message today would not rest

easily with the present audience. Thirty-three years of tough political engagement had, three years previously, brought him at last to the ultimate reward, the office of Prime Minister of Great Britain. In this role, he was now charged with the thankless task of attempting to unbundle the empire that had been created through centuries of colonization.

He turned at the lectern and drew a sheath of notes from the inner pocket of his Saville Row suit. Glancing up, he took stock of his auditors and saw before him an assembly of battle-hardened politicians. These bulky men in their dark double-breasted suits were the sons of Afrikaners who had, six decades earlier, fought the British with Musket and cannon on the battle fields of the Boer war. This was their new field of battle and they were alert, on the defensive.

The speaker was a tall man with immaculately trimmed, wavy grey hair and a fine pencil-line moustache. His mere presence spoke volumes. It spoke of gravity and earnest. It left little doubt in the minds of the waiting audience that he was accustomed to being listened to and taken seriously.

‘Honourable members of this House, members of the press and all African members of the Commonwealth,’ he began, ‘I thank you for this opportunity to present my government’s greetings.’

The words were spoken in a clear and resounding timbre.

Then he raised his voice to a well-rehearsed pitch and continued in a tone of unmistakable authority:

‘Since the end of the war, the world has seen the awakening of a national consciousness in people and nations, who for centuries have lived within the borders of their own land as servants and dependants of some or other foreign colonial power. Fifteen years ago, this stirring of awareness spread through Asia and since then, many countries on other continents . . . countries of different races, beliefs and civilizations have pressed their claim to an independent national life and self-governance with demands for an end to colonial rule.’

The speaker paused for effect, glancing with stern appraisal at his audience of South African politicians. Among them, he saw expressions of naked contempt. As far as the majority of those parliamentarians were concerned, they had already claimed their independence from the British Crown. They had already seized their right to sovereignty and self rule. The ardent belief was that God himself had delivered this to them in the South African general election of 1948 when the pro-British, Commonwealth Unionists had been toppled by the Afrikaaner at the polls.

‘Today,’ continued the speaker, ‘the same thing is happening in Africa, and the most striking of all the impressions that I have

formed since leaving London, is the strength and resilience of the African National Consciousness. In different places it takes different forms, but it is happening everywhere and it is obvious to me and my government that this awakening of pride and spirit cannot be ignored.’

His powerful voice came across firm and clear through the public address system. It was a full sitting in Cape Town of both Houses of Parliament in the Union of South Africa. For the moment he held sway, but a quiet undercurrent of murmuring from the ruling party benches indicated irredeemably that this august gathering reserved its own views. They would not be ignored either.

The speaker paused again, and then raised his voice for dramatic impact:

‘The wind of change is blowing through this continent of Africa, ladies and gentlemen, and whether we like it or not the growth of black national consciousness and their right to self determination is a political fact . . . an irreversible fact that our national policies, now and in the future, must take account of.’

He paused once more and stared in deliberate challenge at the upturned faces of his audience.

“As fellow members of the Commonwealth” he proceeded, “it is our earnest desire to give South Africa and the Southern

African region our fullest support and encouragement, but frankly there are some aspects of your legislation, the policies of Apartheid and racial segregation which make it impossible for us to do so.’

Harold Macmillan resumed his seat alongside his host, Prime Minister Dr Hendrik Verwoerd. The murmur, which had become a hostile drone, erupted into a hubbub of defiance. Macmillan’s and Verwoerd’s eyes did not meet but in a hushed tone, Verwoerd spoke to his distinguished guest:

“Sir, we will never surrender our sovereignty.” he said. “We fought far too hard and sacrificed far too much to achieve it, and we will fight and sacrifice to keep it. Take that message back to London with you.”

It was clear that the words of the leader of Great Britain had re-opened old wounds. More, his words had struck against a people’s sense of destiny and conviction. He had fired a warning shot against a bastion of stone and touched a political nerve so profoundly painful as to be intolerable. His warning would be ignored.

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Dar 'e Salam. Tanganyika

May 1960

In a dingy community hall on the outskirts of the city an assembly of delegates had drawn together, representing nationalist liberation movements from seven African countries. The man they had gathered to hear had recently returned from Moscow, where he had undergone extensive military and political training.

The crowded hall was furnished with folding metal chairs set out on a chipped wooden floor. The paint on the walls was stained and faded and the windows were bare and grimy. The space was weakly illuminated by a few naked light bulbs that hung from a sagging ceiling on frayed electric wires.

The speaker was a bespectacled man of medium build. He was immaculately dressed in an expensive navy-blue business suit and a starched white shirt, ornamented with a red tie and a white silk handkerchief that flowed like a bouquet from his breast pocket.

The audience listened to his booming voice as if mesmerised, captivated by his charismatic power and eloquence.

‘For four centuries,’ he declaimed, ‘our African continent has been targeted as a pillaging ground for colonizing forces from Europe. The Portuguese, the French, Dutch, Belgians, Germans,

Italians and the British have all laid claim to our land. They enslaved our people. They carved up Africa into borders of their own expedience. They built citadels of white privilege and wealth at the expense of our freedom, which was stolen from us by their greed and exploitation. They have cast us aside in our own land as objects of irritation when we have tried to reason with them on the subject of justice for our people.

‘Now the time has come to fight back! . . . We will reclaim our continent! Progressively, we—the Black Consciousness activists, the Peoples’ National Revolutionary movements—have intensified our struggle. We now challenge the legitimacy of the colonizers. We are pressing our justifiable demand for self determination and the rehabilitation of our freedom!

The speaker paused and stared at his audience as if defying them to challenge him. The hall was hushed, but the energy was palpable.

‘Comrades,’ he continued, ‘we are not alone! There is an international groundswell of support. A new international philosophy is calling for Freedom for Africa and the People of Africa! This is even now gathering momentum in the minds of fair-thinking sympathisers. It has support among the foreign sponsors of liberation, and in corridors of power on the global

political stage. The grip of white supremacy in Africa is slipping! It is loosening under the pressure of our heroic Revolutionary forces and our struggle can no longer be ignored.’

He spoke for over an hour, and his words goaded his audience, inciting them in a fever, kindled with anger, bloodlust and patriotic devotion.

‘The struggle for the liberation of our continent must not falter,’ he exhorted them. ‘We must not slumber nor grow complacent! The struggle will continue and our victory is certain!’

Timing the climax with the assurance of a showman, his ebony forehead glistening with perspiration, the speaker raised a clenched fist high above his head. Switching to fluent Swahili, he bellowed:

‘Mzungu Aende Ulaya! Mwafrika Apate Uhuru! Let the European go back to Europe! Let the African regain his Independence!’

Then he concluded his speech in English: ‘Our strength is our survival. Our will is akin to an ever intensifying storm that will soon overwhelm the trespassers and blow them away like clouds in the wind!’

A roar of applause went up in a crescendo of frenzied approval. The school teacher turned political militant raised both

arms in acknowledgement of his audience. He turned from the lectern to resume his place among the VIPs on the stage behind him. Applauding, they rose from their seats in unison and each in turn embraced the orator, honouring their brother in arms.

Chapter 1

1980

Johannesburg, South Africa

The nightclub was crowded with youthful revelers.

At 31 years of age Andrew Mason should have felt out of place here, but he was beyond caring. The liquor that he had consumed in steady measure since early that morning, after a humiliating interview, had mellowed his inhibitions. He tramped determinedly to the bar and ordered another drink.

He raised himself onto a stool with his back to the bar, his elbows resting on the counter top for support. Sipping at his drink, he surveyed the gyrating teenagers who moved like phantoms under the coloured stroboscopic lighting. The music blared so loudly that he was sure nobody would notice if the place were targeted by a mortar attack. It would be a catastrophe if fire broke out. But he would be the only one to have thought of that. These merrymakers were untouchable. Disaster of any kind was the last thing in the minds of this mass of young humanity. Mason was a man of few words, but his rugged features, vigilant eyes and solid frame spoke volumes. Drunk or sober, this was not a man you'd want to be at odds with. But therein lay

a contradiction. There was vulnerability about him, a tangible sadness that diminished the ruthlessness of the image and reflected a portrait of sorrow and loneliness.

His periodic binges were born of a desire to rid himself of the demons that haunted him. Half a decade fighting for survival in a war he'd made his own, coupled with personal tragedy, had moulded him in a way that few would comprehend, and the emotional scars he carried as a result were deep and painful.

Few men would understand or even believe the experiences Andy Mason had endured and his silent manner discouraged enquiry.

Absorbed in his private world, he sensed rather than saw the woman. She had sidled up to a seat a few metres away, and when he lifted his head he saw that he was being targeted by a seductive smile.

Andy guessed that she was in her late twenties or early

Thirties also out of her age group among the crowd of youngsters who gyrated on the dance floor or clung to each other on the dark periphery. Her clothing suggested elegance and good taste and she wore it with the ease of practiced self-assurance.

She wore a black cotton tunic with a high collar, cut suggestively to expose a magnetizing cleavage between a pair of firm breasts.

Her skirt was short, and had ridden high on her crossed legs—long and shapely legs, he noted. She was well groomed. Her

make-up was simple but sophisticated and there was a waft of a soft and enticing perfume—a musky fragrance that tingled in Andy’s nostrils and was of a quality that did not come cheap.

Mason was not so drunk as to miss the invitation and it occurred to him that it had been too long since he had enjoyed the company of a woman.

He grinned at her, gesturing first toward the blaring music and then to his ears. Raising his eyebrows, his head tilted slightly, he shrugged apologetically. He sat there frowning, not looking at the woman for a few moments, and then he raised his head as if surprised by a sudden flash of inspiration. He clicked his fingers dramatically, leaving his index finger momentarily poised upward. Eyeing her shrewdly, he took a pen and paper from his pocket and scribbled a note which he passed to the woman.

‘You’re gorgeous,’ said the note.

She read it and chuckled delightedly, and then she scribbled on the paper and passed the note back.

‘You’re drunk,’ it said. Andy grinned, scribbled again and passed the paper back along the counter.

‘We’ve barely met and already you know me so well. I’m impressed.’

The woman laughed heartily and got up from her stool to sit

on the one beside Andy. He put his head close to hers and yelled, 'If it's a conversation you're wanting you'd be wasting your time in this place!'

'What?' she yelled back.

'See what I mean?' he returned with his mouth close to her ear. She was still smiling: a genuine glowing smile that lit up her eyes and radiated sex appeal.

'Didn't get that!' she yelled. 'Would you like to go somewhere else?'

Andy shrugged and pursed his lips, rolling his head backwards as if undecided and needing to think about it, and then he leant across and took her hand.

When he woke, he was in his apartment with a throbbing booze-induced headache. His mouth was as dry and rough as an emery board. His eyes felt swollen, as if they bulged from their sockets. The sensation was one that he detested but it wasn't unfamiliar; he'd woken up feeling that way too often recently. He turned over sleepily and cast an arm across the bed, expecting to feel the touch of soft eager flesh. Instead, his reach flopped against an empty sheet. After a moment of contemplation he raised his aching head and stared through bloodshot eyes at the vacant spot where he had expected the woman to be. She was

gone.

He instinctively turned and looked at the dresser where he'd left his wallet and watch. They were also gone.

'Bitch,' he muttered, and his head flopped back on the pillow. He tried to remember how much had been in the wallet when he'd entered the nightclub the previous evening, but he was more annoyed by his own stupidity than having been robbed of the money. The watch was a not a valuable piece but the loss of it irritated him as much as the foolishness of falling victim to such an obvious con.

'Maybe I should go looking for the slut,' he muttered. 'Get the stuff back from her? Mmm?' He reflected for a moment. Then— 'Nah! Not a good idea; there's probably a pimp behind this, with a bunch of brawny thugs at his side.' That didn't bother him as much as where it would end up. 'Probably in a police cell.' He pulled a face. 'It's not worth going down that road. The hell with it! Forget the bitch. I'll get over it.'

He rose naked from the bed and staggered from the bedroom to the lounge where he'd left the half drunk bottle of spirits. It was still there on the coffee table and he strode over and eagerly poured a double measure into a tumbler.

Warm relief soaked through his veins as he gulped at the drink. Picking up the bottle, he returned to the bedroom and sat

down heavily on the side of the bed trying to piece together the events of the night. All he could remember was being enthralled by the woman and the prospect of getting laid—and then?

That it had never happened.

He didn't know if she'd drugged him or if it was just the booze, but—either way—she'd caught him off guard and clearly had her plans worked out in advance.

'And it cost me around five hundred bucks and my watch,' he muttered.

He sighed deeply and his shoulders sagged under the weight of humiliation. The relief brought on by the shot of liquor quickly subsided, giving way to despair and remorse.

It was a trick he would never have fallen for six months earlier. Then, he would have seen the warning signs. He would have been suspicious of the seductive smile and the unsolicited come-on. He would have scoured the room to see where her minders had positioned themselves and would have played her at her own game—let her think that she had him and then leave her to deal with her own resentment and vexation. In his present state of mind he'd fallen blindly into her trap and paid the price

He stood up unsteadily and caught his reflection in the mirror. The image did nothing to improve his self-esteem. His hair was unkempt and his unshaven face looked unwashed. His

eyes were glazed and seemed to hemorrhage from behind both retinas.

‘Look at you,’ he muttered with disgust. After a moment, he added: ‘Loser.’

He lurched across to the tall French window and embraced the splendor of the panoramic view that the apartment afforded him.

The sun had not yet broken above the horizon, but it was heralded by a soft golden glow in the east. The light reflected scarlet off small puffy clouds that floated idly in the vast blue sky. It promised to be a beautiful day.

Staring out at the pre-dawn light, marveling at the spectacle, he was assailed by memories of a thousand sunrises in a different place, under different circumstances In another life.

He slumped back on the bed as he mulled over the many images of an existence that he’d left behind, a place in his mind where conflicting ghosts lived on—ghosts of happiness and torment.

He drifted away into a reverie, capturing all too clearly the fateful events that had mapped out his life, moulding his destiny.

Chapter 2

January 1963

Imposing wrought iron gates to the school stood wide open and the stream of family cars, transporting pupils to start their new term, flowed through unimpeded.

The carefully tended sports fields were green and fresh beneath a misty haze cast by irrigation sprinklers and the spray refracted the sharp morning light into dancing rainbows.

A long driveway, lined by giant oaks, led between the fields and up a slope to a stately stone edifice. This, the main building, was like a handsome fortress, a great paternal protector that kept vigil across the grounds. The driveway ended beneath this citadel around a circle that embraced a fishpond set into a rockery shrouded in creeping Ivy. In its centre, a bronze fountain made in the image of an angel in flight with water streaming from its wings formed the focal point of the circle and from here, a sweeping flight of stone steps led up to the formal entrance, a broad stone archway. Rising above the entrance over the centre of the great facade, was a domed clock tower with a huge timepiece displaying black Roman numerals against a mottled white face. In every sense the setting was like an English public school, one of those ancient establishments for the sons of English gentry—but these surroundings were ten thousand kilometres

remote from England; situated in sunlit South Africa, close to the small town of Pietersburg on the road-and-rail route to Rhodesia.

For half a century the school had served as a seedbed of privilege and excellence, the shaping of thousands of white Southern African boys. Here was the breeding ground for future politicians, business leaders and industrialists, national cricket and rugby heroes, the ruling caste of white South Africa.

The hallways and cloisters echoed with banter of returning pupils. Boys, shouting greetings to their friends, while in the car park, subdued farewells to parents and siblings marked the end of the long Christmas holidays.

Amidst the bustle of activity, Andrew Mason got down from the back seat of his father's Austin Princess and retrieved his bags from the trunk. He put them down on the verge beside the car and turned to his parents.

'You've done us proud, son,' said his father. He squeezed Andy's hand in a firm grip and clapped him on the shoulder.

'Keep up the good work son. The education you're getting here is important—it'll stand you in good stead for the years to come.

Who knows what the future will bring?'

Andy pulled a face at the well-worn clichés. He'd heard more than enough about the 'uncertain future' and 'the advance of

communism in Africa and the black puppet politicians who promoted it'. This was a hobby horse of his father's generation. Conversations with family friends and acquaintances invariably drifted towards the 'approaching onslaught of black power and anarchy'. And every single parent who spoke at Founders' Day or Prize giving said 'Keep up the good work. It'll stand you in good stead.'

'I'm only fifteen, dad! Give me a chance! I'll cover the basics before we're overrun. But who knows? I might end up as a civil rights lawyer and champion the cause of black liberty.'

His father shoved him away in mock disgust. 'Talk like that and you'll get arrested, young man,' he scolded, but he grinned fondly at his son.

Andy reached out to his mother who was weeping discreetly into her handkerchief. This too was a regular feature at the start of a new term.

'Cheer up mom,' he said. 'It's only three months until Easter and time flies. Remember, I'm here to be educated, not executed.' She hugged him tightly and kissed him. 'Look after yourself, my love I miss you terribly.' Then she turned and got back into the car. Andy raised his hand in farewell, retrieved his bags and headed toward the third form hostel.

Andy Mason walked with an air of confidence. At fifteen he

was just edging over the latter stages of puberty. He was a tall and well-built adolescent with thick sandy brown hair, trimmed short-back-and-sides in keeping with school regulations. He had clear hazel eyes and prominent dimples in both cheeks when he smiled. He was a popular and active student with good reason to be confident. His parents were caring and supportive; he produced excellent results in the classroom as well as on the sports field. He captained his age-group in rugby and cricket, and he held the schools under-sixteen 1,500 and 3,000 metre track records. He had made many good friends at school and it was generally expected that he would be in the running for Head Boy in his senior year.

As he strode along the roadway in the bright morning sunlight, he was unaware of the Chev Impala with Northern Rhodesian license plates close behind him. The loud, unexpected blast of the car's horn caused him to instinctively leap away onto the sidewalk. He spun around with his heart racing from the sudden fright to identify the source of the intrusion and in the passenger seat of the car, consumed with laughter, sat Alec Bradford

‘Nerves, Mason! Nerves!’ he called out laughing through the open window as the car drifted slowly passed him. ‘You should try moving that fast off the starting blocks, champ! You’d be

unbeatable.’

‘You should try to be more careful about who you scare the bejesus out of, Bradford,’ retorted Andy. ‘You’re short of friends as it is.’

The Chev pulled to the verge ahead of Andy and three occupants emerged.

One was a tall and ruggedly handsome man who could only have been Alec’s father. He had the same wavy blonde hair, though shot through with whitening streaks, and his alert blue eyes gave an impression of perpetual amusement. He wore an open-necked khaki shirt and short pants, with socks pulled neatly up to his knees, and a pair of veldskoen shoes. His resemblance to Alec was remarkable and it wasn’t difficult to picture him at the same age like an identical twin.

Next was Alec’s mother. She got out from the back seat of the car, a plump cheerful-looking woman, deeply tanned and freckled. Her auburn hair was tied in a bun at the top of her head and she wore a light knee-length sleeveless cotton dress with a floral design and cowhide sandals. She walked briskly up to Andy and embraced him in a demonstrative hug. She kissed him warmly on the cheek.

The third was Alec himself, grinning impudently at his friend.

Alec and Andy had met on their first day at the school. They'd stood together in the registration line in the imposing corridor outside the bursar's office, both feeling anxious and way out of their depth. The walls were lined with row upon row of daunting framed black-and-white photographs—decades of sports teams and school achievers who seemed to look down on the new boys and challenge them. Making a new friend was a relief.

'I'm Alec Bradford' said the other boy, extending his hand.

'Hi. I'm Andrew Mason.'

'Where are you from?'

'Jo'burg. And you?'

'I'm from Ndola in Northern Rhodesia.'

'Wow,' said Andy. 'You're a long way from home! That's on the Copper Belt, isn't it?'

'Just south of the Belgian Congo.' Affirmed Alec.

'Where the mercenaries are fighting?' Andy had heard many news broadcasts about the troubles in the Congo although they meant little to him. But here was someone close to the action.

Alec frowned. 'All we know is when the refugees come across the border. My dad says they're rich colonials who've lost all their money because of the independence war and they leave most of their stuff behind. They come through on tractors and old trucks. But they don't stay long. Ndola's on the doorstep, but it's okay.'

‘Gosh. What does your dad do?’

‘He manages a mine. We live there. We’re in the sticks, about fifteen miles from town. But it’s okay, its fun. There’s a club with a golf course and tennis courts and a swimming pool. We go hunting in the bush and fishing when my dad’s free.’

‘Why don’t you go to school there?’

‘There aren’t any,’ replied Alec ‘No decent schools. All the mine kids get sent to school in Southern Rhodesia or here. Except the black kids from the compounds. They don’t go to school at all—or some get taught by missionaries. They sit under trees for their classes.’

That had been two years ago, and since then Andy and Alec had become close friends. But Andy hadn’t yet met Alec’s parents.

‘So this is Andy, is it?’ Alec’s mother released Andy from her embrace and stood back to inspect him. ‘We’ve heard all about you for so long. It’s nice to meet you at last. I’m Jean.’

‘I’m Jed’ said the man, extending his hand. Andy smiled. The Bradfords were reassuring in their easy familiarity.

‘Hi,’ he said laughing. ‘And I’m very nearly Alec’s ex-friend. He’s a total delinquent. How were the hols?’

‘Brilliant,’ said Alec. ‘We had four amazing weeks in Lorencio Marques. I swear that place should have pearly gates on the approach roads. It’s paradise.’

They took Alec's bags from the trunk of the car and Jed drew a wad of notes from his pocket and shoved them into the breast pocket of Alec's blazer.

'Don't spend it all at once,' he said. 'There might not be more where that came from.' Then he turned to Andy:

'You must come up and visit us. It's long overdue.'

The epic three-day train journey from Pietersburg to Ndola had meant that Alec was often a guest at Andy's home in Johannesburg during the short school breaks in April and September. Andy was invited to visit the Bradfords in return, but nothing had yet come of it.

'We'll organize it with your parents,' said Jean. 'We'd love to have you as our guest.'

'Thank you. I'd like that. It'll be an adventure.'

'Well,' said Jed, 'we've got a hell of a long drive ahead of us. We'd better get moving. I want to reach Salisbury before dark. I don't want to drive at night with all the wild game on the road.'

They said goodbye and the two boys strode off to their hostel.

Chapter 5

Rhodesia 1979

The laboured rasp of Stuart's breathing sounded like the dregs of a milkshake being repeatedly sucked from the bottom of a glass through a straw. The sound was unmistakable, Stuart had taken a lung shot and was breathing through his own blood. Twenty meters farther ahead, Rob had gone down and the manner of his falling indicated that he was dead, — probably without ever knowing what had happened. Sergeant Andrew Mason had taken cover thirty meters away and, in the time he'd been lying there, somewhere close to an hour, he had become immobilized in the grip of rising horror, in the face of an unfolding catastrophe.

Mason could hear movement close by, just ahead of where he lay. The unseen peril was drawing closer, but the darkness was absolute and for what he could see he may as well have been blind.

All he could be sure of was that the slow, soft disturbance of dead leaves and twigs only meters away was not Vern. The fear had slowly crept through him, and it was now a consuming wave

of terror. It welled up from his groin, through his tightened guts and chest, and into his throat where it threatened to explode in an anguished scream.

It was five years since Mason had left South Africa to join the Rhodesian army, and in this African theatre of war he'd faced down death in scores of engagements. It was death, in fact, that had driven him from South Africa to Rhodesia—the tragic demise of two people whom he'd loved. He had faced the grim reaper with something very near to flippancy, a confidence born of anger and a desire for retribution. He'd been commended and decorated for his conduct under fire, and he had the emotional ability to endure danger and fear. But this was different. Never before had he been so vulnerable. He was trapped, hunted, and alone in a hostile and foreign country, facing unknown odds in the dark, with no immediate possibility of support or escape. The emotional control was utterly gone. He had broken out in a sweat that soaked his shirt and denim fatigues, and he trembled as if he'd been lifted from an icy sea and dumped naked onto a cold windy beach. He had involuntarily pissed and shat himself, and the stench assailed his senses and the remnants of his dignity.

There was absolute certainty in Mason's mind that this night he would die; and he was so unprepared for it. A thousand

thoughts and images, events and people, raced through his mind. So much left incomplete, so many thoughts unspoken, so many dreams and desires cut short, like pages left permanently and unalterably blank between the covers of a half written book. The present reality held him helpless and his fear blended with a deep sense of profound sadness as he pondered sudden and final oblivion.

And then, through the rush of images and the gripping panic, there came on him a sudden and overwhelming will to survive. It was like the cracking of a whip, and it brought him back to the situation.

‘It mustn’t happen!’ he thought. ‘Not now, not here, not like this! Focus, Mason! Focus!’

Drawing on every last resource of character, on his training and experience, and on the thought of all that he held precious, he fought to recover control of his mind and body. He pushed the fear back down, and out of his consciousness.

‘Get on top of it! Control it! Think, and stay alive.’

Mason didn’t know how far away Vern had been when, a little over an hour ago, they’d walked into the ambush. Nor did he know if Vern had survived the attack.

It was an overcast and moonless night and they had been making their way to a vantage point. Suddenly out of the silent

darkness, the gates of hell had been thrown open with muzzle flashes that split the blackness in a hail of green tracer, like a storm of lethal fireflies that lit up the bush with the radiance of a pyrotechnics display.

In the blaze of tracer illumination Mason had seen his two comrades go down. He had instinctively loosed off a burst in the direction of the muzzle flashes and then gone to ground, rolling away on the hard rough surface of the hillside. He'd fired from the hip and he was pretty certain as he rolled for cover that he'd achieved nothing other than to expose his position. He'd drawn fire but it had gone high and wide, smashing through the foliage above him.

To move would be suicide. He could sense the enemy's presence. How many? He had no idea. But he did know that they had a rough idea of his location, and they'd be aware that they'd inflicted casualties. Now they were hunting, looking for survivors and closing in. He, Mason, seemed to be their focus. They seemed to be ignoring Stuart despite the fact that even in the pitch darkness his position could be pinpointed by the gurgle from his bleeding lungs. The hideous noise and Stuart's soft groaning were unmistakable. He was near his end. Mason tried to focus instead on the tiny sounds that told of an invisible stalker—who was no more than eight or nine meters away, up ahead and to his right.

All of a sudden there was a flash and a single gunshot from where Stuart lay mortally wounded and the harsh bubbling noise abruptly ceased. Mason just made out the muted sound of a figure—the killer, surely—retreating through the bush, in the general direction of the place where the ambush party had first opened fire. But it wasn't over yet. Another person was still moving, ever so softly—the stalker whom Mason had sensed to the right of his position. The abrupt end of Stuart's life tested the limits of Mason's sanity, but he had to keep cool. He had to stay focused.

Doc Morrison's face, and his words, came into Mason's mind. Doc Morrison, combat psychologist attached to the SAS, had given them motivational lectures during their training in enemy tactics and combat discipline.

'There will be times,' he had said casually, in a conversational tone, while he paced the lecture room. 'When conditions or circumstances will strike fear in your hearts. That's nothing to be ashamed of. Anyone who denies being afraid under fire or in a tight situation is a liar.'

'Chaps,' he had said, 'fear is an emotion—a condition of the mind like love, jealousy, anger or hate. Like any other emotion it can be controlled. And it must be controlled. If you don't learn to control it, it will control you, and that will lead to panic.'

He then raised his voice an octave to emphasise his next words and bring an element of drama into the subject: '*Panic*, gentlemen, breeds panic. It spreads like an odour. Once it's upon you it will spiral out of control and you will begin to behave irrationally, and that will affect all those around you. If you do that in a combat situation, you will not only endanger yourself, but everybody else as well. Then, you or your friends and maybe all of you, will die.

'Now it may be noble and patriotic to die for your cause and country but, believe me, you will be of far greater use to the war effort by staying alive and helping the guys on the other side make the sacrifice.

'Always remember that they are more afraid of you than you are of them. To coin a phrase, the thing that you should fear the most is fear itself.'

This op was supposed to have been a simple intelligence gathering reconnaissance patrol. Mason's four-man callsign had been tasked with setting up an observation post in these hills in western Zambia. The hills overlooked an area where a recent concentration of Zipra guerrillas indicated that the enemy was establishing a transit base. Such a base was typically used to re-equip, feed, and brief parties of infiltrators en route from their

training facilities further north to the Rhodesian border. The suspected layout and general activities of the base had warranted an in-depth intelligence report, and this required first-hand research from a patrol on the ground.

* * *

Andy had been having breakfast in the mess tent at their forward base camp, with the usual morning banter and horseplay among the NCOs, when an orderly had come across to him: ‘Sergeant Mason,’ he said, ‘Sunray wants you in the Ops Room.’

On operations or in forward base ‘Sunray’ was used in reference to the officer in command. In this case it was Major Dawson. Greg Dawson.

Andy finished his coffee, picked up his rifle and slung his chest webbing with spare magazines loosely over his shoulder.

‘It’s back to the war I guess,’ he said with a casual grin as he rose from the table. ‘Let’s just hope we don’t all get culled.’

He strode down the lines of tents towards the Ops Room, swopping greetings with the troops. He wore an old khaki T-shirt, faded green shorts and veldskoen shoes without socks, and his webbing hung loose against his broad back. His tee-shirt was already wet with perspiration. Thermals rose off the Zambezi

and the humidity was oppressive, even at this early hour, but he strode with a spring in his step.

Andy was just back from two weeks of leave which he'd spent in the intoxicating company of Alyson Carstens. Part of the time was at Lake Kariba and part of it on her parents' farm of citrus and tobacco. Golden Acres was the name of the farm, and for him she was the golden girl. She wasn't a conventional beauty but she was curiously striking. In fact, she oozed sex appeal—and for eighteen months Andy had dated, mated and laughed with her during periods of reprieve from the war.

They had met in the Winged Stagger, the legendary NCOs' Mess at SAS Squadron Command in Salisbury. He wasn't sure if it was love, but he knew without a doubt that he was passionately in lust; and two weeks of Allison's company had left him light headed. The effect she had on him—a new vitality and warmth—was delicious.

They'd parted just the day before, and through the warmth he felt a twinge of pain. She had cried when he left her apartment to report for duty at SAS headquarters. He'd flown in a Dakota supply aircraft from Salisbury to the Air Force base at Wankie, and on by helicopter to this improvised forward base on the banks of the Zambezi River, and all the while she'd been in his thoughts. *I guess it must be love*—this thought struck him

through the easy glow of pleasure.

Andy walked into the Ops Room. Dawson was sitting on an upturned ammunition box in front of a large fold-down chart table, plotting positions on a map. On the wall was another much bigger map, in 1:500, 000 scale, of southern and central Zambia.

‘Good morning, sir,’ said Andy, placing his rifle into the rack at the door and slinging the magazine pouches from it. ‘You’re looking for me?’

‘Yeah. Hi Andy. Welcome back.’ Dawson smiled. ‘I hope your wallowing in luxury hasn’t blunted your soldiering skills.’

Andy laughed. ‘It may have blunted my enthusiasm to be nasty to anyone, sir. It was like the Garden of Eden.’

‘Well, you may need to eat an apple or something.’ replied Dawson with a grin. ‘Look—we’ve got a job for you. It’s a walk-in op, about seven to ten days. Will you get a team together? Be back here by 11h00 for briefing.’

‘Right, sir. Any special skills needed?’

‘Nothing that you can’t all handle. It’s just a “look-see” job.’