

What You Don't Know About Me
by
Peter Crawley

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Mrs Joan Morley
(nee Cooper)
my aunt
a diamond in her own right

Love knows every colour: hate only darkness.

Preface

Writing this novella in twenty-seven days proved an engaging challenge and whenever I tired, I was given to think of two extraordinary women, who probably understand what it is like to be exhausted and yet to have no alternative other than to carry on.

The first of these is Jess Webster, Co-Founder of Forge For Humanity, a charitable organisation based in Athens. FORGE FOR HUMANITY supports single male refugees and asylum seekers, the great majority of whom are left to slip through the net provided by organisations which prioritise more traditionally vulnerable groups. Because of their first-hand experience, extensive research, and formidable network of contacts, Forge has designed a solid program that covers the needs of single men and provides them with the necessary tools to develop ambition and advance towards independence.

<https://www.forgeforhumanity.org>

The second is Cathy Buckle, author of African Tears, Beyond Tears and many other books and letters featuring eye-witness accounts of life in Zimbabwe. She writes as an ordinary woman - clearly, she is anything but - living in a small town in a country she loves. Her journals are all at once painful and inspiring to read. www.cathybuckle.co.zw

Chapter I

“What are you doing out with us, Simon?” Though his mask slightly muffles his words, the police officer didn’t turn to look as he asked.

“Thought it might fill the odd line. You know, how the rest of the country’s running scared of the virus, while you knights of the road are out here risking life and limb.”

“You hear that, Dave?”

“What’s that, Steve?”

This time, he inclined his head slowly towards his left shoulder. “Our passenger, here, thinks we’re the new knights of the road.” Cold blue light, made colder by the lack of siren, reflected in stroboscopic flashes off the central reservation.

“Better that than the Dukes of Hazard, I guess,” Dave muttered. The driver wasn’t to be distracted though; he was focussed on encouraging the driver hogging the outside lane to notice his presence and get out of his way.

“No.” The officer named Steve fiddled with his mask. “What I mean is, why tonight? Shouldn’t you be tucked up in bed with your bird like everyone else.”

Simon shifted in his seat; his thighs cramping from legs bent for too long. “No one else seems to be. Easter Friday, lockdown and er,” he glanced at his phone, “2.30 am and there’s still a few about.”

“24/7,” Steve nodded, “but this is pretty quiet. The section of the motorway between the M23 and the M4, slip-roads close together, freight from the channel; always enough traffic, even at this time in the morning. So why the night shift over a day one?”

The driver remained silent, his concentration hanging like a heady scent.

“Carries more weight, doesn’t it?” Simon replied, lifting his mask off his face so that the officer in the front can hear him without having to turn. From his seat he could just make out the speedometer. He breathed in sharply and took hold of the handle above his window; the *Jesus handle*, the boys called it. “If I was to write an op-ed about what you

guys get up to on an average night, people probably wouldn't bother to give it more than a glance. But Easter weekend, when most have the family about them, they like to be reminded someone is out there looking after them. That, and what with the restrictions, I wanted to tell them that even if they're tempted to be out and about, you guys are here to keep them in line. I mean, who looks after you good people?"

"An op-ed?" Steve asked. "Watch this one, Dave; he hasn't got a clue we're here. When eventually he moves over, I'll give him the finger."

"Yes, opinion and editorial. You see, I'm freelance. Not tied to any particular paper. That way I can provide an opinion rather than have the editor provide one for me."

"Give over, Simon. You don't report the news; all you do is sell us your take it. Some of the cobblers you lot have been coming out with lately; talk about get behind the country! I don't know. My dad has a mate who's a journalist: used to bang on with this line about politicians... Oh, yes, I've got it. How do you know when a politician is lying?"

Simon chuckled. "When his lips are moving."

Officer Steve glanced over his shoulder and widened his eyes. "These days the same applies, except that the joke's no longer about politicians, it's about journalists."

The Mercedes, the only car in the outside lane for a quarter of a mile, swerved into the centre lane.

Dave gunned the unmarked Audi and they floated up alongside.

Steve glared, lifted his right hand and pointed at his eyes with his index finger.

The driver winced and mouthed the word *sorry*.

"Yes, mate. I bet you are." He glanced over his shoulder. "But you guys, Simon, you seem to make it up as you go along."

He looks over the rim of his mask at the policeman. "I guess I'll just have to take that on the chin, eh?"

"Yes, mate, like we all have to."

Dave pressed; the Audi surged even faster.

The motorway curved in a slight crest round to the left and they glided towards the inside lane.

“What are we off to?”

“Bloke called in to say he’s heard some banging in the back of his truck and doesn’t want to open up.”

“Banging?”

“Yes,” Steve sighed. “Probably picked up a clandestine and the poor bugger has had enough.”

“Clandestine?”

“Clandestine immigrant. Usually happens back at Cobham services. They break into the back of the big trucks in France and hide ‘till they’re sure they’re in the UK. When they think they’re safe, they make a noise loud enough for the driver to hear and he pulls over at the first opportunity. Clacket Lane’s too soon; Cobham’s a better bet. The Vietnamese are the funniest... I mean, if any of it’s funny, which it isn’t. They stand and bow and nod and clasp their hands in prayer. “UK? UK? UK?” they ask. And when we tell them they’ve made it; they’re all smiles. Ever so grateful. Humble bunch.”

The engine breathed easier and Simon relaxed. They cruised up the slip-road to junction 11. “What do you do with them?” He hung on tighter as the Audi swept round the left-hand lane onto the dual carriageway.

“Oh,” Steve sighed, “we hand them over to Border Force. Most of them have SIM cards. No phones, just cards. They’ll get someone to lend them a phone so they can get in touch with their handler.”

“It’s that simple?”

“No, not for all of them.” He paused, then, “Just up a bit, Dave. Here we are.”

–

“Where’ve you come from, mate?” Dave asked. He seemed much taller with his cap on, too. Steve stayed in the car checking the details of the truck. Simon, uncomfortable in a high-vis vest a size too small, stood and watched.

“Farm the other side of Tonbridge.” The truck driver was short, bald-headed and his expression suggested the evening had dumped his mood somewhere between fed-up and exasperated.

“Stop on the way?”

“Broke down at Clacket Lane. Had to call out a mechanic. Cost me four hours by the time he’d pitched up and fixed it. Should’ve been home by now.” The man scratched his ear and grimaced.

“What’ve you got in the back?”

“Everything. Eggs, dairy, vegetables. Supply a hotel over in Slough.”

Steve appeared and nodded.

The truck driver sighed with relief.

“Right then, let’s see what all the noise is about,” Dave said.

“Open up for us mate?”

The driver led them round the back and pulled open the door.

Dave has parked behind the truck so that the Audi’s headlights shine directly into the cavern of the cool truck.

A tide of yellowish liquid oozed and dribbled out before them.

“Oh, bloody hell,” the driver mumbled.

A dark figure sat on a crate, his eyes shining bright through the gloom, his clothes spattered with eggs and milk.

“And what have we got here?” Dave asked, the merest hint of a smile playing across his lips.

Steve sniggered, “Looks like an omelette to me. At a stretch, Eggs Florentine?”

The driver rubbed his furrowed brow. “Doesn’t look like there’s much point in me going on now, does it? Blimey, I suppose they’re all gonna’ blame me, eh? What about you fellas? I didn’t know this one was there? Honest. Really, I didn’t. Must have nipped in the back while I was held up at Clacket.”

“Didn’t think to lock it?” Dave frowned, then lay his consoling hand on the man’s stooped shoulders. “It’ll have to go in the paperwork, but I reckon you’ve had enough of it for one night. Strange to find one in a chill truck, though; they usually go for the soft-siders. Must’ve been desperate, eh?”

Officer Dave turned and waved the figure in the back of the truck to come forward. “Come on then. No sense in sitting there any longer; I should think you’re cold enough as it is.”

Simon and the driver watched as the figure stood slowly, stretched and stumbled towards them. The two traffic cops busied themselves with latex gloves.

“Not in much of a hurry, is he?” Simon murmured.

“Not much point in him hurrying anywhere for now,” Steve replied. “It’s all about plain, boring, bloody process from here on. Hurry up and wait, as they used to say.”

Simon made to help the figure down from the back of the truck.

The youth was tall, slender without giving the appearance he was malnourished, and dark-skinned, his expression curiously aggressive for one just rescued from freezing to death.

“Stand back please, Simon. Let us handle this.” Steve eased him out of the way.

“Sorry, just trying to help.”

“Sure you are, Simon. I get that. But if you want to help, best make sure you stay away from the road: the last thing I need is for you to get run over on our watch and besides, you don’t have gloves and most of these clandestines have scabies or worse. You don’t want to go passing that on to your missus.”

“Don’t think I’ve got one to pass much onto at the moment.” He shuffled and stamped his feet. The early hours, the night spent cooped up in the back of the Audi, the watching, listening and scribbling of notes while Dave and Steve cleared debris from a carriageway, dealt with road traffic collisions or stopped a vehicle for a misdemeanour, suddenly caught up with him. “Nearly did have one: a wife, I mean. Another story for another time.”

Steve glanced at him. “We’ve all got those, mate. No offence meant.”

“None taken.”

—

A car came to a sliding, grating stop in the lay-by behind them and they turned to watch as a woman clambered out and staggered into the darkness of the verge. Their attention distracted, the youth slipped away and dashed across the road between the oncoming traffic.

“Oh, no!” Steve sighed.

Dave stood back and chuckled. “After you, mate.”

Steve hesitated. A car passed, horn blaring, lights flashing. Then he sprinted across the road, leapt the Armco barrier and disappeared into the night.

“Christ! The stuff you guys have to put up with,” Simon muttered, loud enough for the other two men to hear. “Why him?”

“That’s what he always says. ‘Bit of a whippet though Steve. Better at dodging the traffic.”

“Do they always run like that, the clandestines?”

“Not often. Probably a fight or flight reflex, I suppose. Doesn’t matter whether they’re Sub-Saharan, Syrian or Afghan, most of them have been running since they hit Europe and most of them have suffered some pretty grim treatment from other uniforms. The Italians and the French can be a humourless bunch when they get going. Don’t worry, Steve will bring him back in one piece.” Dave turned to the truck driver, then glanced back. “Look, do me a favour, Simon, go and see if that woman is okay. This bloke,” he pointed at the driver with the cap of his biro, “needs to get on.”

Simon wondered for a moment exactly what he was supposed to do; stroll off into the dark calling out, “Excuse me? Hello? Can I help?” And with what intention? Perhaps the woman had been caught short and needed a moment’s privacy: simple as that.

He walked over behind the Audi and tried to adjust his eyes to the alternating light, one moment inky black, the next neon blue. A lorry thundered past. He waited, looked and listened. Nothing.

Then a rustling noise and the woman was standing before him, clinging vaguely upright to the branches of a bush.

“Are you all right?” he asked, for the want of a more intelligent question.

The woman had shoulder-length flame-red hair and wore a beige raincoat, discoloured down the front. “Yes, I’m fine, thank you.” She shook her head, as though trying to flick her hair away from her face, and followed up with a wipe of her cheeks.

They stood and studied each other. Simon awkward; the woman swaying.

“Are you a policeman?”

“No, I’m not,” Simon replied, his tone lacking any reproach.

“Really? Then, what are you doing with the police?”

“As it happens, I’m a journalist. Just sitting in with them on a shift. Look, are you sure you are all right? Don’t take this the wrong way, but you look a little shaky to me. Can I help you back to your car?”

The woman stepped back and lost her footing. She staggered and wobbled, but managed to hold onto the bush. “Yes. I mean no. No, I’m not all right and yes, if you could give me a hand, I’d appreciate it. Seem to be a bit dizzy.”

Simon checked the rough grass at his feet and moved towards her. He extended his right arm and she lurched towards it, very nearly knocking him over. “Steady.”

She reeked of alcohol and vomit and Simon had to turn his face away to catch his breath.

“I hope you’re not a policeman or I’m completely in the shit.”

“Well, let’s get you in the car and then we’ll talk about it. No–,” he steered her towards the passenger door, “I think that might be enough driving for one evening.”

He opened the door and parked her in the seat.

“Christ, I feel awful. Sorry, I think I’m going to be...

As she was, Simon stood back and left her.

At the back of the truck, Steve stood, holding onto the youth.

“What’s your name, son?”

The lad studied the ground.

“Come on. Don’t make this any more difficult than you have already. What’s your name?”

“Daniel,” he mumbled, his accent clipped and possibly African or even South African.

“Daniel what?”

“Daniel. Daniel.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “And what’s your date of birth, Daniel?” He glanced at his partner and grinned. “I bet I can guess.”

“My date of birth is the 4th of April 2004.”

“Now, there’s a surprise! Who’d have believed it? Big lad like you?”

The young Daniel returned his gaze to the ground. "Yes-." Then he raised his head to stare provocatively at his captor, "I am sixteen."

Steve snorted. "Yes, and I'm thirty."

"No, you're not, your forty," Dave piped up, shaking his head in amusement.

"Yeah, but I look ten years younger."

"What's so amusing about his date of birth?" Simon asked.

Dave turned, his manner very suddenly business-like. "Simple. All the fours; it's easy for them to remember. Now, what's up with the woman. Alright, is she?"

Absorbed by the comedy, Simon hesitated; he hadn't thought what to tell the two policemen and so grabbed a little too eagerly at his options. "She's, er, she's just a bit upset."

"Upset, eh?" Dave leaned in closer.

Steve watched, a wry smile playing on his lips. "Sort of sick in the bushes upset?"

"Er, had a row with her partner. Pressures of family, that sort of thing."

"Well, when you're done playing agony aunt, perhaps you'd ask her if she's all right to drive. We can't have the highways and byways of Surrey littered with the evidence of man's, or make that woman's, emotional fragility, now can we?"

"No, Dave, I guess we can't. Wouldn't look good on your report sheet." Simon chewed his lip for a moment. "Anyway, she won't be driving."

"And why not?"

Simon rushed to fill the hole he'd put his foot in. "Because she's too upset. I offered to drive her the rest of the way home and told her you'd follow and pick me up."

Dave hooked his thumbs through his high-vis jacket and studied Simon the way a microbiologist might study a fungus. "My, that is a long sentence! And there I was labouring under the misapprehension that you journos were supposed to be efficient with your communications. All right, then, where exactly does this woman live?"

Bang to rights, Simon didn't bother to dig any further. "No idea. And before you go asking, I do have an any car insurance policy."

“Well, that’s a blessed relief. Saves either me or Steve having to accompany her in her vehicle. Right, off you go and try not to break the speed limit on your way to wherever this mystery lady lives. I hope she’s worth it.”

“What are you going to do with... with this fellow?”

Dave turned and surveyed their catch. “Being as young Daniel here is sixteen and therefore a minor, we are unable to hand him over to the Border Force; so, we will be taking him back to the nick and hanging about until a representative of social services pitches up to take charge of him.”

“And then?”

Dave sighed, as though all the ills of the world had been heaped on his more than ample shoulders. “And then he’ll very probably be found hostel accommodation, which he will immediately skip and some low-life will sign him up to ferry drugs about for a County Lines gang.”

The youth watched and listened intently. He knew they were mapping his future, but he also knew that now that he had declared his age, there was no other route for him to pursue.

“That bleak?”

“Yes, Simon. That bleak. Now, go and see to your new date: looks to me she’s about to leave without you and if she does that, then her future will no longer be yours to consider.”

He turned.

The woman was doing her best to clamber from the passenger seat, her actions uncoordinated and extravagant.

“Yes, of course. You’ll be following me then.”

Dave exhaled, as if to suggest he’d run out of patience. “Right behind you, Simon. And for both our sakes, let’s hope she doesn’t live in the arse end of nowhere.”

–

“What’s your name?” Her voice is contralto and yet, probably due to her recent convulsions, appealingly hoarse. “Or perhaps I should call you Galahad. You are, after all, my knight in shining armour. What did you tell the police?”

"I told them you'd had a domestic and were too distressed to drive."

"Did they believe you?"

"Not for a minute, so let's make this quick."

"Didn't they want to know what I was doing, breaking the lockdown?"

"Fortunately for you, no. Where do you live?" Simon buzzed the window down to allow in some sterile air.

"London."

"Then, where are we going?"

"Not far." She leaned over and fiddled with the satnav. "My uncle's house. Or what was my uncle's house."

A disembodied voice told him the route was being calculated, then "Follow the road for seven miles."

"Windlesham," she tried to say.

Simon sighed with relief: 15 minutes and Surrey; the lads wouldn't have to cross borders. He glanced in the mirror, they'd turned their blue lights off, and then at his passenger; the road down past the hospital was lit with street lamps. She was pale yet pretty, if in a slightly hard, plain-featured way.

The silence extended and he did his best to keep his speed even and drive her BMW in as smooth a fashion as the potholes permitted.

"You didn't tell me your name."

He glanced at her once more. "Simon."

"Simon," she repeated. "Nice name; don't meet many Simons these days. I'm Shona." She shifts in her seat.

"How are you feeling, Shona?"

"Like death warmed up. Look Simon, I'm... grateful. If you hadn't—"

"Don't worry about it. Pleased to be able to help."

The headlights of the Audi burnt cold and bright in the rear-view mirror, and apart from one downhill curve, which made her roll against his shoulder, the road up over Longcross was straight.

"You must be wondering..."

"Not really," he replied. "You're having a bad day; we all have them."

“Bad day. Bad night. Yes, you could say that. Too much booze and too much emotion. Just one too many fucking awful cocktails.” She shifted again.

“Not far now.” His reassurance fell on deaf ears.

He was instructed to turn left at the roundabout and the boys followed on behind as if towed on a cord.

“I thought all the pubs and restaurants were closed.”

“If only the bloody supermarkets were.” She breathed in deep as the car negotiated the dip in the road, and then yawned. “Straight on at the next.”

“Who was that man the police have arrested?”

“Boy, you mean. I don’t know. Said his name was Daniel. The guys think he’s a clandestine, an immigrant. Found him in the back of that chill truck. Why?”

“Oh, nothing. There was something about him; something that reminded me of someone. Maybe it was the way he looked at me. Probably I’m feeling the same as he is right now.”

“And how do you feel? Apart from pretty wretched, I mean.”

She swept back her hair. “Don’t know really. Remorseful. Vulnerable. Cast adrift, I suppose.”

Simon started to ask her why, but the instructor in the dash informed him he had reached his destination.

“It’s here, on the right. Gates. Electric. You’ve got the key fob.”

“No, I haven’t. There’s nothing on the end of these keys.”

“Oh, shit,” she moaned. “Must be on my set of house keys, which I’ve left behind.”

“Never mind. What’s the code?”

“Oh, Christ! Er, One, nine, three, zero. Yes, that’s it. Shouldn’t forget his birth date, now should I?”

He punched the numbers into the keypad. “Tau. Beautiful name for a house.”

A curved brick wall flanked substantial white metal gates graced with monogrammed shields beneath roaring lions.

“Tau. Yes. Lion.”

A tarmacked drive weaved between rhododendron before opening out to reveal a substantial property, square and unmistakably

Georgian, with tall sash windows and a columned portico. The police car followed on behind.

“Mm. He does all right, your uncle.”

“Did, Simon, did. He died about an hour ago. It’s why I had to come.”

Chapter II

There was much to do; there had to be. Wasn't there always a lot to do when somebody died?

The television on the kitchen island didn't offer much help.

The virus was cutting a swathe through the country, 6,000 or more deaths over the last week; Bill Gates, supposedly the richest man on the planet, couldn't buy a cure; and the Prime Minister was supposed to be coming out of hospital in a couple of days, though not before the carrion hunters at the BBC had picked his carcass clean.

A vision of crows pecking at roadkill came to mind. Roadkill? She wondered what Tristan was doing.

"May you live in interesting times, Shona." They were the last words he'd spoken to her; the last words before he'd frowned inwardly, patted her shoulder and abandoned her to lurk, like an unwanted smell, outside the Lamb in Leadenhall Market. Shona hadn't known the saying and had thought he was trying to be amusing – something that didn't come naturally to one so serious – and so she'd waited, preferring to believe he'd gone off to buy her an Easter egg. She couldn't call him to find out where he was, because her phone had died – forgetting to charge it was one of her habits that irritated him, or so he'd made a point of telling her – and twenty minutes later his absence had begun to worry her. After an hour of trying to convince herself otherwise, Shona had resigned herself to the unpalatable truth that he wasn't coming back. The moment she'd entered her flat, she'd rushed to locate her book of Chinese sayings. "Ironic? A curse? Well, fuck you, Tristan!"

Still, it hadn't been the nicest way to get dumped – if there ever had been a nice way – and it wasn't as though he'd been the first to find her... difficult. Was that her, defined and encapsulated in one word? Difficult?

She made up her mind not to revisit her memories of Tristan; there were times when he'd been nice to her, just not many.

Shona wandered about the house, steering clear of her uncle's bedroom, while she waited for the undertakers to come and take what was left of him away. Emaciated, another word that described a person

so unambiguously. Cancer, another; a disease that had consumed him until there was nothing more than a skeletal frame left to address.

In the drawing room, Shona stood before the drinks cabinet and debated mixing a cocktail to silence the echoes of her remorse. Soapstone figurines and bushmen's wood carvings graced mahogany tables; cowhide shields, crossed-spears and clubs called knobkerries decorated the walls; and above them stuffed heads of big game, wildebeest, lion and leopard, stared down from their mounts; all of them trophies of lives committed to exploring the Dark Continent. And now, like all the dead animals, Uncle Charles was dead, too. A drawing room it certainly was; one could hardly call it a living room.

She knew she hadn't been to visit him as often as she should and since nobody was supposed to be going anywhere without a good cause, or more particularly to avoid visiting those at risk, she hadn't. She had, though, left explicit instructions with the agency staff that if they thought he was close to... to dying, they should call. And call they had; they'd done exactly as she'd asked. The problem was, she'd been alone in her apartment in Kensington. Alone, except for alcohol – too much of it and too regularly – and the vodka had become her friend. What was it Tristan had once said? “An alcoholic alone is an alcoholic in the worst possible company.” Well, she'd tried, but since she'd been furloughed and any form of social life had ground to a halt, there had been little other comfort on offer.

After the phone call from the night nurse informing her Uncle Charles had passed on, some irresistible urge had swept her downstairs to the garage. How she'd made it as far as Chertsey without hitting another car was a minor miracle and God knows what she would have done if that chap Simon hadn't come to her rescue? A second minor miracle, perhaps.

“I guess one should be grateful for such timely mercies.”

Back in the kitchen, Shona considered for a moment making something to eat. It was the sensible option: she knew it. And she feared that if her complexion didn't improve and the undertakers arrived, they might mistake her for the corpse and carry her off to the mortuary instead of her uncle.

Sitting at the island, contemplating bacon and eggs, Shona tried to take stock of the situation.

One, given the current state of affairs, there was little likelihood of a funeral anytime soon. Two, there was no point in contacting Uncle Charles' solicitors, as they wouldn't be in a hurry to hold a reading of the will. Three, probate could wait and, knowing Uncle Charles, he'd probably seen to all that. And four, even though she was furloughed on 80 per cent of her meagre salary, she had access to a not-inconsiderable emergency fund: yes, Uncle Charles had anticipated that as well. She could settle any outstanding bills and accounts, even and including the invoices from the nursing agency.

No, money wasn't an issue. Never had been for Uncle Charles. All he'd ever lacked was an abundance of red blood cells.

The paramedics had been and gone by the time Simon had deposited her at the door, and both the nursing staff had treated her with a tenderness she felt she didn't deserve. And as she'd hastily and clumsily discarded her coat, they'd hovered to ask if she would like one of them to stay over to keep her company. Embarrassed by her appearance and cowed by her burgeoning alcoholic remorse, she had declined their offer and later regretted doing so. Why she found it so hard to accept the charity of strangers, Shona had never been able to understand.

Before they had left, though, they had handed her a blue folder. "Your uncle left instructions in our notes that we were to give this to you when the inevitable happened."

Inevitable. Another fixed, inescapably definitive word.

She opened the file and read the first page. "Christ, Uncle Charles, it reads like a novel." Contents, chapters, all set out in order of significance. Even a glossary of legal terms in the final pages. Shona searched through the list of many friends and associates she was supposed to call: Mrs Watson, his housekeeper; apart from herself, the closest thing her uncle had to family.

Never married, Shona had spent her time at Tau thinking him homosexual and had once broached the subject to Mrs Watson. Her categorical denial had made Shona wonder whether there might have been something going on between them, until the woman had

continued, "You should have more to concern yourself with than wondering about your uncle's peccadillos, young lady." The rebuke had stung and Shona had never mentioned the subject again.

That conversation had, though, taken place nineteen years before, not long after she had landed on his doorstep.

Telephone calls: there was a list of thirty! Thirty telephone calls no one wanted to receive, especially over a holiday weekend, and Mrs Watson's the most challenging: she might be tempted to mix a Bloody Mary before she started.

And as she looked at the phone on the wall, she thought of the knight in shining armour who had come to her rescue in the early hours. If it hadn't been for him, she'd have been dragged off to the police station probably to spend the night there. Of all the deserving on the list, Simon's name was absent. She fished a pen from a mug on the sideboard and rectified the error. Thank God, he'd had the foresight to leave her his card.

A journalist. Had he told her he would be busy making sure his article was ready by lunchtime? Maybe it was a bit early. After his night out with the police, he'd probably be tucked up in bed. No time like the present, though. Carpe diem, seize the day! Wasn't that one of Uncle Charles' favourite sayings?

So, what was stopping her?

The speaker for the entry phone at the gates buzzed.

Shona reached over and pressed the button. "Yes?"

A man, baritone, solemn and slow. "Price and Sons, ma'am."

"Yes?" Her tone suggested she was none the wiser.

A cough. "Er, undertakers, ma'am."

Chapter III

Four months later.

Rows of Edwardian terraces. Some streets and pavements lit, others not. Miniature front gardens, no grass, only here and there motorcycles covered and chained down. Cars, dewy, glistening, shoehorned between other cars less dewy. Red brick walls, white pebbledash, impenetrable shadows; a building site secured, boarded up, only not sufficiently secure to prevent trespassers.

"You're late." Accusing. Unforgiving. Unarguable. "Got the Ps?" Not so much a question, more a demand.

The second youth slipped his hand into the pocket of his tracksuit. He pulled out a small bundle of notes and handed them over. "Sorry, man. They made me wait."

"Should've called me. S'what I gave you the burner for."

The youth, his face stark in the light of the streetlamp, screwed up his face in apology. "That phone don't work, man and there's no one about, so I stick out like a dog's nuts. It takes time to—"

"Don't give me that white-boy crap, man. You ain't from round here and you ain't never gonna be. Listen bro, you get caught and I don't know you. Nobody knows you. You don't exist, remember: you're gone." The man in shadow paused: money was being counted; paper flicked against paper. "You got a thing for her."

"Who?"

"That Des: the last place you dropped off."

The youth grinned, his teeth shining bright. "Man, she is—" An arm snaked out of the shadow and latched itself onto his hoodie.

"Yeah, she ain't exactly butters, is she? But then, not my type and certainly not for you either. If 'er old man catches you hanging round 'er, he'll be seriously vexed. Might as well slit your own throat and mine. That's why you're late, ah: you spent too long lusting over a bone you got no chance of eating. Don't deny it; she called me. Says you went all misty-eyed on 'er. Says you tried to pull the nature boy act, the Mowgli act, the fresh out the jungle never been tamed act. Might've

worked for you on the streets of Rome or Paris, or wherever else you stopped off on your way here, but Thornton Heath? Croydon? We ain't that daft, you know: we've seen it and heard it all before."

"Can I have my money?"

The arm snaked back into the shadow. "Give me one good reason?"

The young man stared and waited. He blinked a couple of times, a hesitation of sorts. "Because I deliver your toys to the right people whenever you ask, I don't get no beef from the jakes and I don't jack from you. And because I'm no pagan. That's four: that's enough."

"Didn't I tell you not to use all that rap crap? For a start, I've already told you what'll happen if you get nicked. And if you do steal off me, I'll cut your face with this shank." A blade glinted from the shadow. "As far as working for other people is concerned, you're free to do that if you want, just don't come down my ends."

"Can I have my money? We've been standing here too long." He lounged against the wall and looked around the building site.

"I'll say this for you, African boy, you've got the looks. Some women might think you're attractive; some men, too, for that matter. You remind me of me when I look in the mirror. A little light, maybe; a couple of years ago, maybe; but not far away." Now, he stepped out from the shadow: he is like the youth, if slightly darker; about the same medium height and slender in frame: not underfed or malnourished, just lean of build. He smiled and put his arm round the youth's shoulder.

"You are my mule, man. You are nothing more than a donkey; and a donkey has no value... Nobody's going to take you in and give you a place to live on their farm. Tell me, is your name really Daniel or is that just who you want to be?"

"It is the name my father gave me." And the youth realised it was the first time he had set eyes on the man who had been supplying him with errands. He corrected himself; for he had thought him a man and had now discovered they were about the same age. "What is your name?" he asked. "I have told you everything about me, about where I come from and how the police found me when I got here. You have told me nothing. Who are you?"

One of the four other men with whom Daniel shared the room, had told him to go and meet the man. He'd told Daniel that if he waited in the building site, the man, this young man, would come and pay him to deliver some food: he had not, then, understood the street slang for cannabis. Getting to know the maze of narrow streets and alleys and the quieter, more complex routes had taken him many days; but once he'd understood where he was being sent, planning became easier and avoiding the police more so, particularly as many of the guard-rails posted to prohibit traffic also worked to deny the police cars access.

The young man, his hand still on Daniel's arm, smiled. "Who I am is not important."

Daniel could feel the warmth from his palm through the fabric of his hoodie. "You need to pay me my money."

The young man's smile broadened. "Yes, Daniel, I do; you are so right. But first, I think you need to show me some gratitude. A little kindness is all I ask; a small token of your appreciation." He leaned forward, rested his free hand on Daniel's and stared deeply into his eyes.

Daniel fidgeted, uncomfortably. "Just give me my money. Don't think I am not grateful, I am; but we had a deal and now you are asking to change that deal?"

The young man bridled and inclined his head, considering. "Perhaps. I wouldn't look at it that way."

"You wouldn't?" Daniel snapped. He set his face with a stony expression. "Then perhaps you need to think about how long this virus thing will go on for, man. There are policemen everywhere. Without me, you have no way of delivering your stuff and if you can't deliver, others will be quick to deliver in your place. Think about that before you go asking too many favours."

"I am not being unreasonable. In fact, I think I am being most generous. There are many others who would like an opportunity to earn this money." He took a blue note from his pocket and waved it front of Daniel's eyes. "It won't take long. Just a few minutes. What is that among friends, a few minutes, a little kindness? For, we are friends, aren't we?" He stared at Daniel's lips. "You have a beautiful mouth. Has

anyone ever told you that?" He stroked his hand and began pulling him into the shadow.

"No, I won't. I don't do that."

"Daniel, we are friends. Come. Come with me."

"No." He struggled and turned to run away.

The hand on his arm gripped him, pulling him nearer. Daniel struggled harder. Suddenly, he found himself on his knees. He got up. He stood his ground. He fought and felt a terrible blow on the left of his head and went down a second time.

"No, Daniel, stop struggling. You know this is only fair. Keep still."

A memory flashed before him: a similar dark alley, but in another country; a heavy, unpleasant man who promised him so much money he could not resist; a man who smelt of stale sweat and stale cigarettes and stale alcohol, and tasted... A storm he had kept contained for so long rose within him and burst into his limbs, carrying with it a strength Daniel had never before encountered.

He punched and kicked and grunted and groaned and, as they fell from shadow into light, Daniel saw the knife shining bright against the sky.

Chapter IV

"Simon?"

"It is. Who's that?" He rubbed his eyes and glanced at the phone.

"Brian Carver."

"Sorry, didn't recognise the number. Haven't heard from you for a while; to what do I owe the pleasure?" Carver? Brian Carver?

"Enjoyed your piece on the traffic boys down in Surrey. Made them look almost human."

"Nice to know someone read it." Carver. Got it, Detective Inspector Brian Carver: tall, lean and sharp-featured; patronising, too. What on earth could he want?

"Look I know we didn't part on the best of terms after that last business up at Old Street, but... By the way, how is that lovely girlfriend of yours? Soraya? Wasn't that her name?"

"I don't know and you're right, that is her name."

"Shame. Pretty girl. Exotic in a secret-of-the-souk kind of way."

Simon reigned in his irritation. "Thank you, Brian. We haven't cut the ties completely. Just taking a break."

"Oh, sorry. No offence."

Steve in the unmarked patrol car had said something similar. Was that some form of esoteric humour restricted to coppers? Had he forgotten that the ribbing shared by those in uniform was really a form of recognition, like a Freemason's handshake or gangster' crip. The Marines he'd met through that business up at Old Street, as Carver had so delicately put it, had gloried in their exchange of caustic jibes; for them, no subject however sensitive was off limits. Simon supposed it must be the same for policemen. Perhaps he was still in the club. "None taken, Brian. What can I do for you?"

"Not much, Simon. It's more about what I can do for you. Last time round we... didn't see it all eye-to-eye, did we? And, as I said, I liked your piece on the traffic boys and realised we hadn't spoken in a couple of years. Couldn't believe it was that long. Anyway, I spoke to your old editor. Told me you'd gone freelance. Said he'd rather you hadn't. Wanted you to stay on the team."

There was a point coming; just not any time soon.

"Nice bloke, Barnesy; old school. Gave you my number, I suppose. Go on, I'm all ears."

"Well, I asked him what you were up to and he said you'd be busy doing some homework for a piece he'd suggested you write, is that true?"

"Do I need a lawyer to answer that one, Brian?"

The detective inspector chuckled. "No, Simon, not this time. It's just that I'm now Trident and Area Crime Command and—"

"I'm doing a piece on knife crime, not gangs."

"Yes, your man Barnes said it was about knife crime. Well, as you probably know, there's a lot of discussion about 'stop and search' just now—" Carver coughed and cleared his throat.

"As there should be, Brian. It's emotive, especially among the BAME communities. And you know how often Section 60 is misused. It's supposed to be based on intelligence."

"Based on good reason, I think you mean. But, never mind all that, I haven't bothered you at eight o'clock in the morning to argue semantics: my point is I think I may be able to help you with your homework."

Simon sat up in bed, grabbed a notebook off his bedside table and then decided the recalcitrant child was better employed than the eager beaver. Carver was after something; something only a journalist could supply. What was it Carver had once told him? Quid pro quo. You scratch my back and... He sighed, loudly and obviously. "You think I need help? There's more than enough stats available on knife crime: 2018, more fatal stabbings in England and Wales than since the end of the War; homicides up 2 percent and crimes involving knives up 7 per cent."

"Agreed, Simon. It makes for grim reading." The detective paused. "Look, I just thought you might appreciate a first-hand perspective."

"Go on."

"Last night a young lad was murdered in Thornton Heath."

"Stabbing?" More statement than question.

"Yes, only not that simple." The detective paused again; a theatrical hesitation intended to convey to Simon that he had considered

long and hard before granting the journo access to his investigation. Of course, Carver had always been going to; if he hadn't, he wouldn't have called.

Simon's curiosity was, though, pricked. "Thornton Heath, you said?" He listened hard into his phone. Talking in the background. Footsteps. A car door slams. An engine races. The rasping susurrations of rubber on tarmac.

"I did."

"You're on your way then?" Again, more statement than question.

"Homicide and Serious Crime are on their way, too, so if you get there before me, tread lightly. I'll text you the street name."

—

For once, there was no lorry wedged beneath the low bridge at the Bedford Arms and traffic was light. Simon turned on the radio and tried to make sense of a discussion between a psychologist and a teacher's union representative. One maintained it was in children's best interests to go to school; the other maintained it was in the best interests of the teacher not to have to mix with children. However, they both agreed the government was at fault; though neither had the first clue as to any form of solution. That was how it was and had been for too long: dissenting voices, crystal balls and adult behaviour often falling far below the standards most parents set for their adolescents.

"You miserable sod," he muttered, wondering self-consciously if the radio had heard him and mistaken his observation for criticism. It was true, though; he had noticed over the recent weeks just how fractious he had become: fractious, short-tempered, snappy, chippy, surly and plain testy. Even the rather simple digital process of documenting his work now challenged him far more than its planning, and thinking clearly had become a form of physical trial.

Was it the virus?

People were saying they found it difficult to achieve even the most mundane of tasks during a period in which there couldn't be less standing in their way.

Or was it Soraya?

The dog-walkers of Tooting Common lifted his spirits.

Was it Soraya, or was it him?

He still had no idea of where they had gone wrong. They had been so happy, comfortably easy with and yet gently motivated for each other: the plans had been in place – okay, he had to admit he hadn't hurried them along quite as much as she would have liked, but there was no doubt in his mind that their wedding was going to take place. Then the virus had come along: its presence like that of an unruly page boy who stumbles in and kicks over the wedding cake. Not unnaturally, the ceremony was put on hold, delayed, postponed, perhaps in the manner of sports events. Perhaps that was when it had started.

Balham, too far from where her parents lived in Tower Hamlets. "The wrong side of the river," she had declared as though he was a sub-species of Londoner. "If you'd kept your flat in Haberdasher Street, this wouldn't be happening." "It wasn't mine to start with," he'd replied, recognising that she had already made up her mind. That was how she was: impetuous, hard-shelled, determined. And he'd known it; even her father, Joseph, had told him Soraya was not for turning. That had been late March, when the government first announced the coming restrictions. There were, of course, considerations: her father was not the healthiest of individuals and no one yet knew how the virus affected those from the Middle East; the news leaking from Iran certainly suggested her father and mother were wise to safeguard. And her sister Maia; she required more attention than most other children; of that there was no doubt. It was simply that she had given him over for her parents with a seemingly indecent haste and, once north of the river she'd avoided and deflected every time he'd suggested she come and spend a few days with him. After a while, he'd just stopped asking.

Somehow, and he wished he understood how, their separation had lengthened the psychological distance between them and he'd become aware of their many differences. Perhaps now, he had become too much a by-stander, a spectator, a season ticket holder with no game to watch.

Streatham High Road was not yet awake. Norbury the same. Shops dormant, pavements deserted, traffic light after traffic light impeding the progress of builders, plumbers and electricians.

An ambulance flashes past, dragging him from his maudlin and reminding him of the woman he had rescued from the clutches of the road traffic police. Later, as he'd sat in the back of the unmarked Audi and tried to keep his distance from the clandestine, he'd realised he hadn't acted in a proper or professional manner. Making it possible for a drunk to hang onto her licence was neither the most responsible nor intelligent behaviour. What if she was an alcoholic so attached to her poison that she'd gone out the next morning and mown down a child? What if, when he'd shovelled her into her BMW, she was already fleeing the scene?

Leaving the woman behind in the cavernous, uninviting pile in Windlesham had provoked a cloying remorse and he'd wished the night to end sooner than later. It hadn't. The police officers had insisted on driving to an all-night McDonald's in Ashford and once there, Steve had asked him if he wanted something to eat. For the want of filling the unforgiving moment, he'd asked for a burger and reached into his pocket. "No, my shout," the copper had said, grinning, "I'm going to get something for our friend here, too; doesn't look as though he's seen a square meal in days." The clandestine had stared disbelieving at the offering and then wolfed it down, along with chips and a milkshake.

"Expenses?" Simon had asked.

"Not likely," Steve had chuckled.

Simon hadn't been able to contain his surprise: "You mean you're subbing him a meal? Out of your own pocket?"

"Sure, why not. Wouldn't you?"

Simon had felt humbled by the policeman's generosity and shamed by his own apparent lack of compassion, so he'd tried to strike up a conversation with the clandestine. "Where are you from, Daniel?"

"Zimbabwe."

"The land of prayer and sacrifice, is that right?"

"Yes."

"That house we dropped the woman off at back there... The name of it, Tau, is that lion in Zimbabwean?"

"No, *tau* is lion in Tswana, the language they speak in Botswana. In my language, a lion is *shumba*." And with that, the young man had hunched his shoulders and turned to look out his window.

In pointing out Simon's ignorance, the young man had embarrassed him still further. Had he forgotten how proud immigrants were of their homeland? Soraya's family, too, had fled their homeland and yet all these years later they still spoke proudly of Iraq.

The voice of guilt whispered in his ear as he remembered he was supposed to be having dinner with the woman, Shona, the next evening.

She had called, albeit a good while later than some might have considered polite, and insisted it was the least she could do in return for his kindness. And she'd refused to take no for an answer, telling him he need not worry about driving; he could stay in one of the many spare rooms. No, her invitation didn't amount to anything more than an offer of convenience; she had no ulterior motive other than the house needed some life and his would do fine.

Thornton Heath, a common urban topography, congruous in design and yet indifferent in ambience: a side-road beyond a side road, identical in appearance but for the police tape keeping the nosey at bay.

A burly constable stands, immutable. "Can I help you, sir?"

"Yes, thank you. DI Carver, is he here?"

"I believe so. And you are, sir?"

"Peckham, Simon Peckham. He asked me to meet him."

"Very good, sir. Wait here, please, I'll go and find him."

Beyond the tape, white-suited Scene Of Crime Officers studied the ground around a white tent erected at the entrance to a building site. The constable approached a group of three plain-clothed, masked officers, who were deep in conversation with a fourth uniformed officer. At the constable's behest, one of them turned and nodded.

The drive from Balham had taken him longer than expected; but remembering how Officer Dave had handled the unmarked Audi in heavy traffic on the motorway, he decided it probably didn't take Carver long to get anywhere.

"Simon, good to see you again. You haven't changed; still look younger than some of my officers." He coughed in his mask, leaned and offered his elbow.

Simon smiled, awkwardly, and held up his.

"Yes, I know," Carver mumbled. "These new protocols. Times we live in, eh?"

“What have you got?”

The detective took a step back and grinned. “No, that’s all right, Simon, I’m fine, too. Good of you to ask. Right, well, as you can see the SOCOs are doing their thing, so we can’t get much closer.” He glanced at the piece of paper in his right hand. “Young male, black. Probably been lying there for six hours or more.”

“Known to you?”

Carver sighed. “No and neither is there anything in his pockets to give us a clue.”

“How young?”

“Twenty, give or take. Cause of death looks like a knife wound: one perfectly placed stab, if my guess is correct. Clearly, judging by the rest of his abrasions and bruising, he didn’t go quietly into the night. Whoever killed him is unlikely to have gotten away without injury.” The detective, though, wears a troubled expression for one whose every day is filled with images of gang violence.

“There’s something else, isn’t there?” Simon asked. “It’s why you’ve asked me to come down here.”

Carver straightened up, as would a funeral celebrant tasked with reading the eulogy for a deceased no one cared to know. “In part; the rest I’ll get to in a minute. The strange thing here is that whoever stabbed this fellow through his heart, wasn’t content with murdering him. The SOCOs tell me the murderer then smashed his victim’s face so hard against the pavement, we’re going to have to identify him through his DNA: his face is gone. It’s such a strange thing to do. You see the gangs don’t usually resort to this kind of act. Usually, they behave like the Russians, in as much as if your enemy has committed a crime that warrants execution, execute him and leave your calling card. Leave no one in any doubt it’s you: that way, everyone runs scared of you. The gangs are like that. They want other gangs to think they’re the toughest, meanest gang on the block, so no one will have the courage to challenge them. That’s why the knife is so revered; it sends signals.”

“So, you don’t think this is drug or gang-related?”

Carver shook his head. “No, I’m positive it’s both drugs and gangs. There’s no mutilation to suggest a sexual motive.”

“An argument with a supplier, perhaps?”

“Perhaps. Or with a mule. These guys, the local dealers, have had a hard time of it lately; they’re short of cash. The lockdown made any County Lines movement of drugs impossible; their mules stood out a mile simply because they were the only passengers standing at the station. Cars the same. Most cars, not just rental cars, were conspicuous by their presence alone, and if you got stopped carrying Class As, you’d be straight up for four years minimum. It’s a bit like the housing market. Usual level of activity one minute and the next, along comes a lockdown and everything grinds to a halt. A few weeks later, lockdown over, it’s not just business as normal; every junkie’s begging for a hit and every kid’s desperate to go out and get happy. What we end up with is a bubble that is expanding so fast it must soon burst. Perhaps our fellow here is a victim of that bubble.”

“Is this why you’ve asked me here, Brian? You want me to pen a piece about how ‘stop and search’ must be allowed to continue, because every kid standing at Platform 1 is a mule for County Lines. Or would you prefer me to open the eyes of the masses to the fact that in order to keep the peace, guys like you have to spend your days loitering beneath grey skies on grey pavements in grey towns.”

That had made Carver bristle and the moment the words had left Simon’s lips; he had recognised his insult. “That wasn’t fair of me. Don’t know where that came from, I apologise.”

“Forget it,” the detective said, his tone measured, conciliatory. “If I’d remembered you were this militant, I’d have rung some other hack. No, what I’m saying is the pavement over there is not so grey right now; it’s a curiously sticky shade of red, and people need to read about what’s going on instead of wiping their arses with the newspaper because some other idiot is hoarding all the loo paper. We need ‘stop and search’, otherwise we’ve no way of interrupting the distribution of drugs and stopping young men like our victim here from ending up in a pool of blood on a grey pavement.” He paused for a moment, drew breath and coughed; his list nearly ticked off. “You may also like to include in your article that as soon as we’ve got a formal identification, one of our Family Liaison Officers will face the unpleasant task of going round some mother’s house to deliver the death knock. I’ll let you know when

that happens. Don't release his name until I've given you permission, eh?"

"Is that it?"

"Yes." Carver coughs again and takes off his mask to blow his nose. "Yes, that's it except for the fact that I've got a bloody cold, but who'd want to read about that, eh?" He turned, ducked under the tape and marched back towards the white tent and white-suited SOCOs.

Chapter V

She watched him get out of his silver Volkswagen and was intrigued that he'd remembered the code for the gates. He was, she was also relieved to notice, just as she remembered him: tall, broad-shouldered, fair-haired and, as if his armour required further polishing, better looking and even younger than she remembered. That both pleased her and unsettled her, and she wondered if her reaction was born of a want to seduce him. She coloured at the thought and swung back the heavy oak door.

"Hi," a pause, "Shona."

"Yes," a pause she judged to be similar in duration, "Simon."

He laughed. She laughed in return.

Shona rolled her eyes. "God! Quick, come in, let's have a drink before I die of embarrassment." She stood back and waved him inside. He was wearing stone chinos and a blue-striped shirt, the cuffs folded back.

"No reason why you should."

"Oh, come on, Simon, I must have looked like the wreck of the Hesperus; I'm surprised you came."

"You didn't give me much of an alternative."

"Ah, mm, yes. Sorry. I can get a bit bossy at times. Best ignore me when I do."

"I'm kidding. It's a pleasure and—"

"You had nothing better to do?"

He chuckled. "No absolutely not. I was about to say how much of a pleasure and a welcome change it is to get out of London for an evening."

"When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life." Shona smiled, pleased with herself for recalling the quote.

"For there is in London all that life can afford." He glanced at her, returning her smile. "Johnson, yes. And he was right in so many ways. Trouble is, with all these restrictions, the place is beginning to feel claustrophobic; it's like the walls draw in a little closer every day; like

fun is being rationed and it's rude to be seen consuming more than your fair share."

"Well, there hasn't been any rationing here. You can't ration something that doesn't exist. Come on, through here. We really ought to be outside, but if you don't have any objection, we'll eat in the kitchen as the dining room is grand enough to host a ball and I wouldn't want you getting lost to some phantom waltz."

She led him to the left of the wide, sweeping stairs.

"It certainly is quite a size for one. No other guests joining us for dinner? Since your phone call, I've had this image fixed in my mind: carriages, footmen, a master of ceremonies requesting my name." Simon paused to run his hand along the bannister, the reddish-brown wood streaked with black and beautifully turned. He looks up through the well of the stairs. "That's quite a work of art. Some joinery."

"Zambezi Redwood. Heartwood, they call it. This was originally my great, great-grandfather's house. My grandfather knocked the old place down and rebuilt it in this Georgian style. Managed to retain much of the wood, thank God. I didn't know the old house; seen some of the photos."

She waited, allowing him time to appreciate the garnet carpet, the yellow metal runners, the wood panelling. And lining the stairs, portraits of moustachioed grandees in khaki shorts, sporting bush hats, rifles by their side and hunting dogs casually distracted by the glassy-eyed antelope draped just so at their feet. "Glorious and perfectly ghastly," she said.

His lips almost, but not quite, pursed; perhaps an instinctive reaction to a disapproval that had flashed through his mind.

"Yesterday's triumphs?"

"Absolutely, Simon. But should such triumphs warrant celebration? I sometimes wonder if pride and shame shouldn't go hand in hand."

"Can't re-write history."

"If only one could. What would you like to drink?" He followed her into the kitchen, a functional and yet modern design totally at odds with the archetypal opulence of the hall.

He chose a beer.

Shona quietly congratulated herself for having covered the possibility. "We're having fish; I should have asked. Not allergic, are you?"

They talked easily – the day's news: the irony of a fatal train crash in Scotland when there was so much death being meted out by the virus, the A-level fiasco manufactured by ministers who must once have gone to school, and Trump, for when wasn't he news? Much to her relief, her indiscretion wasn't mentioned.

Simon changed from beer to wine: a Montrachet, from the cellar and one the label stated was ready for drinking. He ceased his hovering, lounged on a bar chair and asked her if she knew how many journalists, editors and then computer journalists it took to change a lightbulb.

"Oh God, of course! You're a journalist and I'm sitting here talking about news. Sorry, how stupid of me." Shona stayed on gin and tonic. The brand of gin, she explained, was not important as long as the tonic contained sufficient quinine.

"Not stupid at all. There's nothing most journos like to talk about more than journalism. Personally, I try to avoid the subject. Given what's going on right now and the way people see us, I think we may have slipped to the bottom of the food chain. So how many?"

"How many what?"

"Journalists does it take to change a lightbulb?"

Shona grinned and covered her face with her hands: she'd heard the joke and trawled her memory for the answer. "One, because you guys are only supposed to report the facts, you're not supposed to change them."

"Bravo." He laughed and feigned to clap.

She refilled his glass. "And editors?"

He sipped. "Two. One to change the bulb and the other to point out that he shouldn't have taken so long and that there were ten less complex ways he could have done it."

"And the computer journalists?"

"Three." He waited to see if she could work out why. When she shook her head, he said, "One to report it as a brilliant initiative, a second to condemn it out of hand and the third to report it as a diabolical plot dreamt up by the government."

Shona laughed and not, she realised, out of any polite reward for his humour. On the contrary, her laughter was free and unfettered, as though she had forgotten how to laugh and his casual breeziness, his uncomplicated honesty, had prompted her to remember both how to and how good it felt. She had not laughed so openly for as long as she could remember. The pain of Tristan's rejection, the regret fostered by her absence from Uncle Charles's bedside through his last hours and the distress induced by her subsequent fall from grace, had forced her to seal her light-heartedness in a strongbox, which she had buried deep in the soil of her pneuma. To rediscover that the box was neither buried out of her reach nor sealed so securely she could not open it, revitalized her.

When they'd eaten, she suggested they go out into the garden. The air was warm, the sky clear and the light only just beginning to fade: they had time yet, she said.

A few days before, a fire had swept across the common and advanced almost to the fence, some 50 metres from the house; the birch, pine and oak stood blackened, the landscape desolate, the smell lingered on the air. "I was lucky," she said. "For a while, I thought I might lose the house."

They strolled and he asked her to tell him about the plants, some of which struck him as foreign and exotic. "Not that I make it a point of queueing for the Chelsea Flower Show, you understand."

Sugarbushes, with long narrow leaves and white flowers; tall ginger, upright starfish, and vivid flame and fire lilies; magenta sea figs, yellow Hottentot figs and an orchid that resembled a white-feathered egret in flight, all native, she explained, to southern Africa. "A number of sundews, too. Carnivorous. They can last for up to fifty years. You noticed the African connection?"

"Hard not to. If it was any warmer, I'd quite easily imagine I been transported to the veld."

"And you'd be right, Simon. Uncle Charles' forebears made their fortunes in Botswana."

"Diamonds?"

"Not exclusively. More copper, gold and soda ash."

"Sodium carbonate?"

“Exactly. Detergents, cooking, glass, water-softening, brick-making, the list is endless. One of those natural resources we’d find it hard to live without. Strange, don’t you think, we use soap every day and yet people only remember gold and diamonds?”

“You live here alone, Shona?”

Now that he stood side on to her, she took a moment to study his profile: his nose slender and straight, and his face full without suggesting he carried excess weight; his forehead broad, like his shoulders, and open in a welcoming manner, not rectangular and flat like a stone wall. His physique, like his looks, was balanced; his hips slender, his waist more so. There was no doubt in her mind he was younger, but how much younger she could not fathom: twenty-five perhaps good for thirty.

“Yes,” was all she could think of to say and very suddenly Shona thought she’d sounded like a prisoner moaning about the length of her time yet to be served. “I mean, no. I have a flat in Kensington, only... Well, I’m furloughed just now and what you said was true: being in London on my own was a bit like being locked up with your jailer. Once I’d settled back in here, I couldn’t find a good enough reason to go back. Seems a bit ridiculous me bouncing around in someone else’s mansion, but now that Uncle Charles has gone, it’s mine and I thought by staying here I might get to like it, perhaps even grow to love it again. You see, I’ve spent a fair chunk of my life here.”

Her tone betrayed a wistful longing and as she heard herself speak, she understood that she was perhaps being too honest with Simon: she’d let her guard down, let him see her bare and unprotected; and she’d spoken of a disappointment she’d never in a month of Sundays have disclosed to Tristan. Then again, Simon had already glimpsed her at her most vulnerable and he hadn’t taken advantage of her: he hadn’t sought to judge her in the way Tristan had never been able to resist. Not even for her high crime, if being emotional, drunk and in charge of a car was indeed a high crime... Yes, she decided, it probably was high enough. Not even once had Simon come close to reprimanding her for her aberration, and yet, in some bizarre, masochistic way, she wished he would.

“No children? I mean your uncle?”

“No. My father and Uncle Charles were the only two from my grandparents and I am an only child.”

“Your parents, where are they?”

Shona had known he was going to ask and it was only natural that he should. She sighed; that wistful longing again. “They died when I was young, just after I came here. Uncle Charles was my guardian.”

“They died before you came here from where?”

“From Chinhoyi in Zimbabwe.”

–

She delivered the piece of information as though she’d answered a question in a quiz and was now keen to move on to the next.

Simon heard the message loud and clear, so decided not to pry. However, the way she’d responded to his question left him parked in a conversational cul-de-sac and he was, momentarily, lost for something to say.

“Your glass is dry. Mine, too,” she said. “Shall we go in? I think that may be the best of the day. Because the garden faces north, once the sun slips below the trees it cools quickly. That’s probably the only drawback of this place, the lack of evening light.”

As she opened a bottle of Sauternes, then sniffed and squeezed the cork before pouring, Simon grew increasingly aware of her isolation. He recognised his reaction was prompted by her admission that she was the only child of deceased parents, and now that her uncle was gone, she was left living alone in a cavernous house papered with haunting memories.

Simon watched her assemble a plate of cheese and biscuits; precise in her placement, ensuring neither of the pieces came into contact with another; she was choosy in her choice of biscuits, too; and when she had located two modest, crystal glasses, she washed, dried and held them up to the light to ensure they were clean. Her uncle, he decided, must have fashioned her so.

Shona was attractive, her cheekbones though shallow, were high and jewelled with freckles; and her lips curved gently in a broad cupid’s bow. Her eyes were cirrus blue and had he not known she was British,

and with her forebears seemingly first generation southern African hunters and explorers, he might have guessed her Dutch.

Simon liked the way she set to a task and only thought it finished when she stood back and pronounced herself happy with it. He took it as a compliment that she should go to such trouble for him. He also liked the way she dressed: a cream shirt and black jeans; no pearls, no earrings, no flash, especially when there was a good chance her uncle would have spoiled her with a treasure trove of the same.

He scolded himself for being both unfair and presumptuous, that was the wealth of the house talking, not him; for he found her pleasingly down-to-earth. There was no doubt she was the older; but by how much, he wasn't concerned.

"Look," she said, placing the plate of cheese on the island. "I think I need to say something."

"No, you don't. You don't need to."

"I'd like to. Please."

He raised his eyebrows in mock surprise and smiled to make sure she understood he was being playful. "If you'd like to, that's different; it's your house." Simon took a sip of the dessert wine. "You really don't need to, though."

"No, I must. I've been wanting to ever since you walked in here."

Simon held up his hand to stop her. "Enough, already." He started to chuckle. "Look, a wise man makes haste to forgive, because he knows the true value of time."

"Don't tell me." She pointed at him, daring him not to speak. "Samuel Johnson again?"

"It's okay. I get it. You've no need to apologise. I think we've moved on."

Now, Shona started to chuckle; a light giggly chuckle that accelerated into a full-blown laugh and soon enough an eye-watering, stomach-aching eruption of unbounded joy.

Simon laughed along with her until it began to dawn on him that her joy had sprung from an alternative source of amusement.

They were laughing together and yet separately.

He slowed first and found himself a mute witness to her hysteria.

“Sorry,” she said, and then all but collapsed into a second, more convulsive fit of giggles. “Sorry. No, really I am.” Shona laughed again and clutched her stomach.

He blushed. “That’s what I thought you were going to say, but you weren’t, were you? You weren’t going to ask my forgiveness; you were going to ask something completely different.”

She rested her forearms on the island as tears streamed down her face; she spoke to the floor for fear of bursting into laughter if she looked at him. “No. No.” She shook her head. “I was going to ask you if you had a partner or if you were married. I don’t know why that’s so funny; it just is. Sorry.” Gradually, oh so gradually, the winds of her delight blew out.

Shona left the room.

Simon could hear her blowing her nose in the hall. He grinned and chuckled a brief, ironic and self-deprecating chortle, and by the time she’d finished and come back into the kitchen, he was composed and Shona very nearly so. “That wasn’t very bright of me, was it?” he said

“No, it wasn’t like that. I’m sorry, it was my fault. Only that we seemed to be having a good time and I didn’t want the fun to stop by mentioning my lousy behaviour. Of course, I’m grateful, very grateful. And I’d have been for the high jump if those policemen had caught me; I’ve already had a ban for drinking and driving, and what with a few other... Well, if you hadn’t been there, I’ve no idea how far down the greasy pole of shit-awful luck I might have slid.” Shona went to sip her wine then, changing her mind, she walked round the island, laid her free hand on his shoulder and kissed his cheek.”

Solidarity or consolation, he couldn’t decide.

“Thank you, Simon,” she whispered, before retreating immediately beyond the island to collect her glass. “Well, have you? Got a partner?” She very nearly surrendered to laughter again.

“Yes. And no.” He considered for a couple of seconds. “Actually, right now, I think that ought to be no and yes. Do you?”

“No. Categorically. Why the confusion? Is it that you know and your partner doesn’t? Or, is it the other way round?”

“I think your guess may be as good as mine, Shona. We haven’t shared any time together since March.”

“What’s your partner’s, or rather your not-so-sure partner’s, name?”

“Soraya.”

Shona stayed silent and then said, “Beautiful name. Is she as beautiful as her name suggests?”

He stared back at her, unsure of why she was being so particular. What did it matter to her what Soraya’s name was? “This wine is delicious, thank you, but I could do with a brandy. Do you have any?”

She approached him again and this time, though she didn’t kiss him, she looked deeply, sympathetically into his eyes, and smiled knowingly. “Simon, I’m sorry, I don’t have any in the kitchen, but if you’d like to follow me through to the cellar, you can choose whatever you think suits your mood. Uncle Charles, you and brandy. I’ll be lucky to get a look in.”

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An hour or two, a couple or three brandies and a score of enervating music later, and they had both lost track of time. The decompression of being able to behave as though fun was longer rationed, both relieved and released them, and conversation gushed like a torrent burst from the dam of their frustrations.

Shona sat next to him on the sofa in the snug and toyed with the rim of her glass.

“You took your time about calling.” He was watching her face, concerned that his careless state had allowed him to let slip words that might have been better left unsaid.

Shona smiled and swept her hair back. “I know, I shouldn’t have done.”

“Why did you leave it so long?”

“Oh, call it an irrational fear of making a fool of myself. Or maybe I wasn’t sure how to or didn’t want to revisit the scene of my crime. Perhaps I needed to permit my embarrassment time to dilute. I don’t know. I’m glad I did, though; I’ve enjoyed our evening.” She looked into his brown eyes and was warmed by the easy manner in which he stared

back at her. Their connection was strong and calm and undemanding and stirringly mutual.

He leaned slowly towards her; his slow, confident movement, his intention to kiss her, undisguised.

“Yes, Simon. I would like to. In fact—” She ignored her glass and instead took his and sipped the last of his brandy. “In fact, right at this moment, there is nothing I’d rather do.”

He reached for her free hand.

“But I won’t. I could, but I won’t.” She smiled, a faintly reluctant look that told him her refusal was anything but what she truly desired. “I’ve had far too much to drink, even if you haven’t, and the last thing I need is to wake up in the morning and question whether it was the alcohol that....” Shona sat back, glanced at the ceiling and then leaned back towards him again. She was close to him, so close each was aware of the other’s heartbeat. “If we went to bed and either or both of us ended up disappointed, I think it would hurt me too much. I know that sounds selfish and I know I’ve been... flirting with you. I’ve led you on and I apologise for allowing myself to run away with my idea of *us*, when your idea of *us* maybe something different. The thing is, I don’t want to risk the possibility of either of us having to deal with that hurt. I’d like to see you again and I wouldn’t want the cloud of that hurt to drive us apart. Am I making sense?”

Simon lifted his hand and touched her lip with his index finger. “Sense? You’re asking the wrong person; I don’t think I know what makes sense these days. Are you telling me what I need to hear, though? Absolutely!”

“I’m sorry, Simon.”

“I’m not, Shona. Really, I’m not. And I think you may be thinking for both of us. Now,” he stands up, wavers and quickly sits back down, “Perhaps, you should show me to my safari tent. What have I got, the roaring lion suite, snarling cheetah? And I hope you’ve beaten the bed for spiders.” He chuckles. “I can’t bear spiders: really, I can’t.”

Chapter VI

The shirt had been white. Now, it was a mottled shade of blue. And every other item of washing Shona had dragged out of the machine, appeared impregnated with some white fibrous material.

“What the—?”

A tissue.

“Oh, what are you, brain dead or what?”

So, she’d sped down to the small store in the Virginia Water parade to catch it before it closed. In her haste, she neglected to take her mask: in consequence, she’d had to wander the aisles with a handkerchief clasped firmly over her mouth. “Sorry.”

The cashier stared back at her, nonplussed, waiting.

Shona slid her debit card into the reader.

“No, madam. That is your John Lewis card. This is not John Lewis.”

When she got back to the car, Shona dumped the baking soda and bleach on the passenger seat and, closing the door, leant against it to catch her breath. There was, she reminded herself, no point in hurrying; the shirt was blue, the tissue dispersed, the damage was done.

She felt a slight sheen of sweat at her brow, shrugged off her denim jacket and thought for moment about removing her shirt, before realising she wore only a sports bra underneath.

“Pay attention, Shona.” She rolled her eyes and slumped back against the car door. “And you forgot the dried chillies and ginger, what the hell’s up with you?”

Negotiating the righthand turn at the top of the hill, the baking soda rolled across the passenger seat and as she reached to grab it, she very nearly steered right off the road.

The baking soda; it brought to her mind an image of Simon, standing in the garden as she explained the foundations of her uncle’s wealth.

The morning after their dinner, she’d waited patiently in the kitchen for him to appear, all the while wondering whether she should go and wake him with a cup of tea. But then, did he drink tea or would

he prefer coffee? And if he did, depending on which one, would he want milk, sugar or both? Or maybe Alka-Seltzer? As with the evening before, her choices had confused her. And when she'd looked up from the kettle, suddenly he was there.

"How long have you been watching me?"

"Not long."

"Would you..."

"A glass of water, I think."

"Breakfast? What do you like? I have wholemeal toast, granola, yoghurt. Bacon and eggs?"

"Just water, if that's all right with you; the brandy... it doesn't want to let go of me." Simon had rubbed his eyes and then his face.

Not knowing how else to react, Shona had stood her ground and fiddled with the kettle. "My fault. Sorry. Shouldn't have... It's just that now Uncle Charles has gone, there's no one left to drink the brandy. I suppose I should send the lot to auction. The strange thing is, when he'd fly into one of his tempers, I used to hide in the cellar. I'd crouch behind the crates, look at all the wine and think how wonderful it was to have all those dusty old bottles: I used to think of them as part of my history. I could relate to them. Still do, as a matter of fact. It's--"

"Shona?" Simon had smiled an easy-going, assuasive smile. "Slow down. Stop talking, please. The brandy was amazing and allowing me to drink so much of it wasn't your fault." He'd walked over to her and taken her in his arms, softly, gently.

"Sorry. I mean I... I'm not much good at this." She'd rested her face against his chest and breathed in his smell: though his shirt spoke to her of the late night and brandy, he'd showered and used the soap she'd put out for him. It was only after she'd raided the scullery that Shona had realised it was the soap her uncle used. The scent brought him back to her; brought that time back to her; that first time when he met her at the airport and she'd felt so alone in the world and she'd run to him and buried herself in his being, in his security, in his warmth; that time when she'd wanted so desperately to tell him how much she loved him even though she hardly knew him.

Simon had hugged her, kissed the top of her head, just like Uncle Charles had, and said, "I can't say I know quite how to react, either, so

let's not give it too much thought. I enjoyed last night: I haven't laughed like that in a long time."

And that had been just over a week ago, the last time she'd seen him. They'd spoken on the phone a couple of times, though their conversation had not really gone anywhere. He'd been reserved or perhaps withdrawn; like Tristan when he'd had enough of her talking. Yet Simon was not at all like Tristan, thank God. Tristan's problem was with her, whereas Simon's problem was with himself.

The air-conditioning in the car can't have been working! She glanced at the clock, 10:30. The sun was out, but not exactly melting the tarmac. Shona programmed the temperature to minimum and tapped the fan button repeatedly until a blast of arctic air cooled her face.

Or was it that Simon's problem was with his partner? Soraya. Yes, Soraya, that was her name. "Wow! How can I be expected to compete with a name like that?"

Approaching the gate, she slowed the car and felt for the key fob. As she turned in, she noticed a young man, elbows on knees, head in hands, sitting against the curved wall.

She buzzed down the window. "Excuse me? Are you all right?"

At first, he didn't react, as though he hadn't either seen or heard the car.

Shona waited.

The boy, the youth or young man, it was difficult to know with his hands covering his head, remained motionless. He wore blue tracksuit bottoms and a black hoodie. His hair was dark almost to black, tightly-curved and trimmed short, and his complexion a rich dark caramel.

Thinking the youth asleep, she got out of the car, stepped towards him and considered poking him with her foot. "Excuse me, I asked if you were all right."

He startled awake and looked up, squinting into the sun. "Yes, I'm all right. Thank you."

His gaze was slow and indifferent, as though he was accustomed both to being spoken to and at the same time ignored, as though he had given in to a crippling hebetude. He didn't appear to present any form of threat to her; if anything, he appeared to be partially sedated, so

Shona knelt down, tried to attract his attention, and when she'd got it, tried to maintain eye contact with him.

"You don't look it, kid. What's your name?" On closer inspection, his clothes were smudged and the cloth at his elbows worn through.

"My name is Daniel." He looked down and rested his head against his fists.

"Well, Daniel, what are you doing here? Do I know you?"

"No, but I know you." Daniel did not, though, look up as he replied, "I thought you would never come. Where have you been?" He spoke slowly, emphasizing his consonants and stretching out his vowels.

Shona blinked and frowned. "You know me? Know me from where?"

"You were there, when the police found me in the back of that truck. By the side of the big road. It was very late at night." Now he looked up, presenting his face to her, expecting her to retrieve her memory of him. "There were two policemen and another man. The policeman thought you had been drinking; I heard them talking. They were going to arrest you, but the other man persuaded them not to."

The smooth almost egg-shaped curve of his cheek bones, the flare of his nostrils and the fullness of his lips did not immediately draw any recognisable image from the index of faces stored in her mind: the incident, on the other hand, was still garishly vivid. "Oh yes, I remember. Can't say I recall what you looked like. Were you the young man the police found in the back of that lorry? Weren't you all covered in eggs and milk?"

"Yes, the policeman said I was an omelette. He was not amusing, but he was very kind."

"But that must have been about four months ago, something like that. May have been a bit longer. So why are you sitting here like this? Are you waiting for someone?"

"Yes, I have been waiting for you."

"Sorry? What do you mean, waiting for me? How do you know me? And how did you know where I live?" Shona stood up and stepped back.

Thinking she might be about to leave, Daniel looked up at her. "The policemen said the other man was being very kind to you. He drove you to this house, Tau, and the policemen collected him; that is how I know where you live."

He got to his feet, one by one unfolding his limbs and placing his hands flat against the wall, made use of its rigidity. His breathing was laboured and now and then his face creased with discomfort.

Shona watched and waited. Uncle Charles had lifted himself out of a chair with identical, awkward and staggered movements the last time she'd seen him; the last time he'd stood upright before taking to his bed. The image was yet another she could not wipe from her memory. An overwhelming sadness flooded through her body and pooled in her stomach. That the boy needed help was all too apparent, but what could she do?

"Is there someone you would like me to phone, Daniel? Someone I can call to come and pick you up? You look like you've been... Well, I don't know what you look like, but you look dreadful."

"Yes, I can give you a number. I don't have a phone. First, can I ask you for some food and a drink of water. I haven't eaten for too long and I am very thirsty."

Later in the evening, Shona would look at him and wonder why she'd behaved as she did next. The trouble was... Or perhaps dilemma or quandary were more appropriate ways of defining her predicament. The trouble was she didn't have the heart to turn the young man away and yet couldn't understand why she should feel so charitable towards him.

Was it his mention of the night Simon had come to her rescue? Did she still carry a weight of guilt sufficiently heavy to make her feel she owed someone something she couldn't clearly identify? Was it that Simon had told her of the policeman's charity: how they had taken the young man to MacDonald's and paid for his food out of their own pocket? Was it her recollection of the man who had given her a home struggling out of his chair that last time? Or was there something familiar about this young man; some deep-seated nostalgia she had many years ago suppressed and which was now spiralling up through the well of her sadness? Whatever *it* was, she seemed to be reacting

over-emotionally to even the smallest challenge since Simon's visit? She liked him, even wanted him, and yet worried that he was just one more knot on an endless string of men she'd wanted, but could never have.

There were too many questions and only one answer Shona knew she would be able to live with. Besides, she perceived no threat in him, rather she felt pity; for he appeared more vulnerable than a child half his age.

"Daniel?"

"Yes?"

"Get yourself in the car. You'd better come up to the house and I'll get you something to eat. You can use the house phone." She stepped forward and bent down to pick up his small drawstring bag of belongings.

—

Once in the house, she led Daniel through to the kitchen and told him to sit at the island while she made him a sandwich. She poured him a glass of water, sat opposite him and watched him eat.

He consumed the sandwich so immediately she made him a second, which again he ate without drawing breath.

Shona studied him, his torn and muddied clothes, the abrasion on his forehead, which she had not until now noticed, and the scraped and raw flesh beneath the hole worn through the knees of his tracksuit bottoms. She wondered where he had slept the night before, wondered if he had slept at all he looked so tired, and she wondered what else she should be doing for him.

"You need to wash, Daniel. And you need something else to wear. I'd offer to wash your clothes, if I didn't think they'd fall apart in the machine." She appraised him, estimating his height and weight, or lack of it: he was an inch or two shorter than her and as Uncle Charles' form had shrunk over the past two years, she thought there might be an item or two that would fit. "If you wait here, I'll pop upstairs and see if I can't lay my hands on a shirt and a pair of trousers. There's a toilet through there, some soap and a towel. I'll be back in a minute."

He wiped his lips with the back of his hand and looked back at her, his expression questioning. "I must thank you for the food and the water. I was starving and so, so thirsty. May I ask your name?"

His pronunciation and accent were even more markedly African now that she had time to listen. But which Africa? South? Not Nigerian, she was certain: he didn't omit consonants or interleave vowels. No, his diction and lucidity called to mind the way the Bishop, Desmond Tutu, spoke; although not perhaps in such a precise manner. If anything, Daniel's accent was less sophisticated and his pronunciation occasionally lapsed into a more standard English.

The intimacy of his question unsettled her and she hesitated before answering. "Shona. My name is Shona."

"It is a nice name, your name." And for the first time, he smiled.

"Right! Well, you stay here, help yourself to more food and I'll go and see what I've got."

Much to her relief, when she returned, he was sitting exactly where she'd left him. The only difference as far as she could see was the absence of the rest of the loaf of bread.

"You said I could help myself."

"I did, didn't I? And I meant it. Plenty more bread in the freezer. Now," she lay a couple of pairs of trousers, slacks Uncle Charles would have called them, and a T-shirt and jersey out on the kitchen worktop, "try these on: they've got to be an improvement on what you're almost wearing. Take them in the toilet, leave your old clothes on the floor and change."

As he did so, Shona sat, or rather collapsed, down on one of the solid-wooden bar chairs and noticed for the second time since hauling herself out of bed that her brow was moist with sweat. She felt drained of energy and her limbs heavy and haltingly slow to respond. "What the hell's the matter with you? Come on girl, get a grip."

Daniel reappeared, his grin wider.

Shona returned his grin, with her own, albeit forced smile. "That looks better. You look almost human. Now, about that phone call." She pointed to the wall beside his stool. "There's the phone."

A little hesitantly, Daniel lifted it from its mount, tapped in a sequence of numbers and held the phone tight up to his ear.

Daniel waited. Shona waited.

He listened. Shona could not; her mind had begun to wander down paths she had not walked for a long while. A steep, dark tunnel; steps fashioned from great stones; a rich powder blue sky high above, as if glimpsed from inside a tall chimney; cobalt-blue water before her and about her feet, tiny iridescent white fish.

Someone was speaking. Oh yes, Daniel, he was on the telephone.

She tried hard to concentrate, turning her head and leaning towards him, but couldn't make out the voice of the person he was talking to. An elephant had parked itself on her chest and her mouth felt unpleasantly dusty.

He glanced at her and then returned his attention to the phone. "What do mean, you cannot? I have nowhere else to go. Last night I slept in the shelter where people wait for the bus. A man came. He bothered me. He kept talking to me. He wanted me to go home with him. I cannot go through that again. I must come back, I must." He listened for a while longer before interrupting whoever was talking. "No, I said I would come back. You can't do that. Just because I am not there-. You have no right to give my bed away. What do you mean, I have my allowance? No, six pounds will not buy a night in a hotel and anyway, it is all gone, I have no money." Once more he listened, patiently, and when he decided he'd listened for long enough he tried to interrupt and was not permitted to. "No. No. Don't go; I haven't finished." Daniel held the phone away from his ear and peered into it, his face a mask of disbelief.

Shona looked out through the window into the garden. The shadows had lengthened, the light would soon be gone. "Don't tell me, Daniel, they've let your place at the hostel to someone else and now you have no bed to go back to. Pretty stupid of you to skip the hostel in the first place, don't you think?"

Daniel hung up the phone and turned his attention to Shona. "I told them I would only be gone one day. I got lost, that is why I had to sleep at the bus stop. That man, he was a bad man. I was taken to meet men like this in Paris: they paid money. The same people arranged for me to come here; they told me men like this did not live in Britain."

"I expect you were told a great many lies about what life is like here." Shona shook her head, not so much in denial, more out of sympathy. "I expect they told you whatever you wanted to hear as long as you paid them to get you across the channel."

He began to pull off the jersey she had given him.

"What are you doing, Daniel?"

"I must give you back these clothes. You are very kind, but I cannot keep them. I will put on my old clothes and go." As he dragged his left arm out from the sleeve, he exposed a bad cut on the back of his upper arm.

"Daniel! Your arm. Why didn't you say?"

He hunched his shoulder and glanced at the cut. "It is not bleeding now; it is okay. I'm sorry, your jersey is stained. I would like to pay for the cleaning, but I have no money right now. I thank you for the food. You have been very charitable. I will go now." He carried on pulling the jersey, slowly, gingerly over his head.

"No, Daniel you won't. You can't. I won't allow you to. You can take off the jersey and I will see to your arm; I have some antiseptic cream and a bandage in the first aid drawer. I just hope that doesn't need stitching or we'll be going to A&E." Shona groaned. Her head thumped, her throat ached and to breathe air into her lungs, she had to make a conscious effort to expand her ribcage. "On second thoughts, that might not be such a bad idea."

The young man was not sure what he was supposed to be doing. Was she telling him to remove his top and go, or remove his top and stay? "You need to go to hospital?"

"No. Oh, this is crazy." Shona squeezed her eyes shut and banged her forehead with the palm of her hand. Beyond the kitchen, before the back door, there was a bedroom and bathroom. Uncle Charles had had the rooms converted from the old laundry for the overnight nursing staff. The young man would be able to access the kitchen and she would be able to lock the doors from the kitchen into the hall and the dining room.

"Look Daniel, I think you should shower before I have a look at that cut, and then I think you should stay here tonight. There's a room

with a bedroom and bathroom down here. You'll be perfectly safe. And what's more," she muttered below her shallow breath, "so will I."

—

By the time Shona made it to her bedroom on the first floor, her energy reserves were all but depleted and getting undressed was beyond her. In the bathroom, a splash of water saw to her face, a show of her toothbrush satisfied her teeth and the simple act of rising from the toilet floored her. She crept into bed and sleep came quickly.

During the night, Shona dreamt wild and vivid fantasies, certain at one point that a young man was sitting at the foot of her bed. Daniel? Was it Daniel? No, she had locked the doors, it couldn't be him. It was someone like him; someone like him and yet not him. This boy was younger, leaner, his smile easier, more generous and his brown eyes beguiling, promising, leading, encouraging. His soft hands caressed her; feelings she had never felt, sensations she had never imagined and trust she had never given. He was hers and she was his. Shona untangled the tethers of her restraint, stepped over to the edge and dived deep into the blue waters of her memory.

When she woke, Daniel was sitting before her, but not at the foot of her bed. He was sitting in a chair to the side and he wasn't up, he was sideways. Shona tried to think why and how he should be seated at such an angle. Surely, she was sitting up. Then, no, she had her head on her pillow; he was sitting, she was lying.

She should be alarmed, she knew it. "What are you doing there?"

"I am watching you."

Her mouth felt dry, her tongue like paper. "You can't be, I locked the door." Even to Shona, her voice sounded feeble.

"Yes, you did lock the door. There were keys on hooks in a box by the back door. I tried them all before I found the right one for the kitchen door." His expression, much like that of the figure who had sat at the end of her bed, was filled with concern.

"You shouldn't have come up here."

"Yes, I know."

"So why did you?" She went to lift her head from her pillow, but for some strange reason her neck muscles refused to comply with her wishes.

“Because it is very close to midday and I was concerned for what might have happened to you. Last night you did not look well and some of the things you said I would not have expected you to say.”

“Like what?”

Daniel smiled, pleasantly. “Like asking me to stay in your house. Who but a white person not thinking correctly would invite a perfect stranger, a perfect black stranger, into their house? A woman living alone and a man she did not know, a man she had met on the street? Such trust is not normal.”

“Mm. Midday, you said?”

“Yes, I have been sitting here for a long time. I have brought you a drink of water.”

Shona rolled lazily onto her side, dragged her legs up and eased herself into sitting up. Self-consciously aware that she was still wearing her shirt and knickers from the evening before, she deliberately made a play of pulling the sheet up to cover her chest.

“Thank you.” She reached for the glass and drank it in a series of long slow sips. “Normal behaviour. Taking in a stranger. Yes, I can see how it would look that way to most people. The thing is, Daniel, I’m not most people.”

“I know this; it is obvious even to me. Most people don’t live in a house like this house. Yet it is not only this house and your compassion that told me you were not well. When you bandaged my arm, you wrapped the bandage so tight you made my arm dead. And when you were close to me, I could feel your heat: you are unwell, Shona.” Daniel stood up and moved to her bedside.

If she’d possessed the power to object, she would have done; as it was, all she could manage was to sway back away from him.

He reached out and placed the back of his right hand against her forehead. “You have a fever. Not high, but a fever.” He looked down at her, and realising that his proximity was unnerving her, moved away and sat back in the chair. “How do you feel?”

“I don’t really know, Daniel. I have no energy and breathing is not as easy as it should be.”

“Would you like me to call a doctor? If you give me the number, I can make a call. People told me that is how it is here: if you want something, you only have to ask.”

“The same people who took your money and arranged for you to get into the country?”

He did not need to answer her question; the sarcasm in her tone betrayed her rhetorical objective.

“Shona,” Daniel leant forward in his chair, clasping his hands together and frowning his brow to let her know he was about to be serious, “I believe you have this virus everyone talks about. You know, people are still dying from it. They say there is no medicine for it and that in hospital they attach you to a machine which helps you to breathe. Shona, your breathing sounds very bad.”

“It’s like I have an obstruction in my chest.”

“You have been coughing in your sleep, a dry cough, and you have been talking, strange, mixed up talk. You are a strange woman, Shona.” He surveyed the room, a theatrical gesture to affirm an assessment he would have had time to make while watching her sleep. “And you live in a strange house. I have never seen so many dead animals” He pointed to the head of a waterbuck on the wall opposite her bed. “Look! In the bedroom? You must admit, Shona, this is not usual.”

The effort involved in sitting up and talking began to take its toll on her and her voice sounded low and dry and ineffectual. “That *dhumukwa* has been keeping watch over me for nearly twenty years, Daniel. He is my guardian; he drives away my nightmares.”

“Well, Shona, you could have chosen a more noble animal to protect you. Now, you are tired. I think it best for you to sleep more.” He went into her bathroom and refilled her glass. “I will come back in a while to see how you are. Don’t worry, I have looked all through the kitchen: there is enough food. I will make soup.”

After he had left her room, a host of anxieties pierced then surged through the membrane of her fatigue, the sharpest of them being that she had left a young man she did not know from Adam alone to do as he wanted. And not just any young man, a young immigrant, a... what had she heard the policemen call him, a clandestine? A young man not long

arrived in Britain, evidently penniless and now at liberty to sack her uncle's house for any item of value.

She fought against the forces dragging her to sleep, opened her eyes wide and saw the face of the waterbuck as though it was no more than a few inches from her own face; its long spiral, ringed horns sloping backwards and up, the white markings above its eyes and around its nose and mouth. The *dhumukwa* would protect her.

Dhumukwa! Why had she used the old language for the waterbuck when she had not thought to use it for so long?

—

Softly, Daniel closed the door to her bedroom and let go of the handle.

The landing was long enough and broad enough for a game of football, and the paintings the size of advertising posters. He leant against the bannister and looked down and then up. What, he wondered, did these people need all this space for? And why did they need their portraits to be twice their size? Did they not enjoy presence enough?

He walked for a few minutes, both upstairs and down, opened doors and peered into rooms grand and austere. He ran his hands through velvet curtains, over gold taps and along marble tiles. He sat in chairs of turned oak and soft cushions, and lay on a four-poster bed as wide as a river.

Downstairs, beyond the drawing room, he found a library. Tall, glass-fronted bookcases filled with leatherbound books of every size and colour, a wing-backed leather chair and broad footstool before a tile-lined fireplace; red carpet, dark wood, the faintest hint of cigar smoke on the air.

Daniel marvelled and admired. "How many books can one man read?"

His stomach grumbled. Soup. He had promised her soup and he had seen cold chicken in the fridge.

Chapter VII

"Hello, Simon."

"Brian, good morning. Got a moment?" He was sitting in his living room at the small round table that doubled for dining and working.

"For you, Simon? Of course."

"I've tried a couple of times. Your phone's been switched off. How are you? Only, you looked a little under the weather."

"Heavy cold, that's all. Trouble is, with things as they are, one cough and everyone runs a mile. Had to take a couple of sickies just to be safe."

"Been tested?"

"Yes. Haven't had the results back yet. I'm sure they'll be clear. What can I do for you?"

Simon was surprised that Detective Inspector Carver had to ask, given that they'd met only a week or so before. "You said you'd ring me when you'd confirmed the identity of the body."

"I did?" He paused, either distracted or thinking. "Oh, yes, you're quite right, I did, didn't I?"

"Thought you looked a little off colour."

"Yes, sorry, Simon. No, can't confirm it yet."

"Anyone missing a son locally?"

"Nope. As you would expect, we've done a bit of door to door. Nothing. Couple of people said they might have seen a couple of guys who might have been up to no good. Nothing remotely useful, though. And if it was drugs related, these guys very rarely meet in the same place more than once. They're not that stupid. Local boys found a scooter parked in a street round the corner. Neighbours said it turned up the night of the murder."

Simon was busy making notes. "What about a PM?"

"No, no Post-mortem just yet. The death's been reported, but the Coroner won't give us permission until we've run all the angles on identification."

"What about forensics?"

“Two DNAs found at the scene, checked them both against our information, even the RAG database; nothing, no matches.”

Simon trawled his mind. “Oh yes, your Red, Amber Green system for levels of risk or harm. Sorry, was just thinking how colourless it sounds: a traffic light system for defining both victim and offender, as though they all exist under one umbrella.”

“Gang Violence Matrix. Sure, it does sound a bit sterile. But if we’re going to identify those at risk and those who harm, we need that bank of information to help us prioritise.”

“Dental?”

“Well, forensics were going to try for dental records, but the SOCOs are still searching for the rest of his teeth. Look, Simon, I’m not sure there’s much more to learn here. Until we can find a match for one of the DNA samples, we’re screwed. How’s that article coming?”

“Coming along, Brian. Coming along.” He put his phone down on the table and sat staring at it. Carver’s trail had run dry and the voice of cynicism murmured in Simon’s ear that perhaps no one cared whose mother the body belonged to.

Forensics? Simon had asked and the moment the word was out of his mouth, his thoughts had turned to Soraya. Forensic psychology, her degree course at the University of East London, working with young offenders. It was her passion, giving those less fortunate a second chance just as her family were given theirs. He wondered how her studies were going, wondered how well her father had recovered from the virus, and wondered why she hadn’t returned his call of three days before.

Chapter VIII

The contents of a soup pot bubbled and popped from the hob, and the remains of roughly-sliced vegetables and picked-clean chicken bones littered a chopping board.

Daniel glanced at the clock and turned the dial on the hob to off. On a tray by the table, he had set out a plate loaded with two slices of bread, a knife, spoon, butter and several sheets of kitchen towel. He filled a large glass of water, placed it beside the bread and taking a bowl ladled the steaming soup into it.

The stairs proved quite a challenge and the door to her bedroom demanded some careful negotiation.

Shona was awake, though if he had not seen her eyes follow him to the dresser, where he placed the tray, he might have believed her dead, such was the lack of colour in her face. Slowly, she sat up.

"I have brought you soup, bread and butter, and water." He stood and bowed in perfect parody of a waiter.

"Daniel?" Her throat dry, her breathing shallow, she coughed, though only in the manner of a judge clearing his throat. Shona did not have the strength to lift her hand to cover her mouth. "Daniel, can you pass me the water?"

He did so, waited and when she had emptied it, took it from her. He laid the back of his free hand against her forehead: she did not object. "Your temperature is not as high as it was yesterday; that is good."

"It doesn't feel good. I think I may be dying." Shona managed a half-smile, but even that tired her.

"I think you may be. You certainly look as though you might. However, I believe you will be here for a good while." Daniel grinned; he didn't want her to mistake his humour for anything other than what it was. He indicated with a smooth nod of his head and a raised eyebrow. "Your waterbuck looks out for you; you are safe for now. What can I do for you?"

"You can open the curtains for me: I've no idea whether it's four o'clock in the afternoon or four o'clock in the morning."

“After that...” She furrowed her brow, she was perplexed or perhaps challenged by a thought.

“What is the matter?”

“I’m embarrassed; that’s what the matter is. I need to go to the bathroom, Daniel, and I don’t think I possess the wherewithal to make it on my own: I’m concerned I’m going to fall flat on my face and have to crawl.”

He stood by her bed and offered her his arm.

One at a time, Shona swung her legs out from beneath the duvet. She pulled herself up and swayed for a few seconds, before walking unsteadily to the bathroom door. She turned her face to him and frowned. “Thank you, I think I can manage from here. And I need a shower and a change of bed clothes, too. Christ! I feel like an aged grandmother.”

Daniel opened the door for her. “I will wait outside this door. That way, at least I will be able to hear you when you hit the floor.”

“Okay. I get it. Maybe a shower isn’t such a good idea.”

“Take your time; the soup is too hot to drink for the moment.” He closed the door behind her and looked around the bedroom for the house phone. Surrounded by an array of porcelain trinket boxes, the vintage black rotary-dial telephone took pride of place on an occasional table by the window. Daniel walked quickly over and unplugged the cable from the terminal below the curtain.

When she came out of the bathroom, she looked and smelt refreshed, and her hair was brushed.

In her absence, Daniel had tidied her bed. He hovered near her as she tottered like a wooden-legged old woman to a chest of drawers.

Shona opened the top two drawers, fished out a T-shirt and pyjama bottoms and waving him away, tottered back to the bed. “I think you can leave me to sort the rest.” She looked towards the door.

“Perhaps you’d give me a couple of minutes.”

Daniel waited until a muted call told him she was ready.

He laid the tray beside her on the bed, the soup still steaming. “Can you feed yourself?”

“Yes, thank you.” The tone of her reply betrayed her malaise; just now, she did not possess the strength to be anything more or less than grateful.

“Would you like me to go?”

“No, Daniel.” Shona frowned, wrinkling her cheeks and nose.

Daniel laughed and sat down in the chair opposite her.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. Your face. The way you look when you are not sure of something. Tell me, what is it that puzzles you?”

She leant her head back against the pillow and turned her eyes slowly up to the ceiling, as if she hoped the key to her puzzle would be set out in raised letters large enough for her to read. It wasn’t, the ceiling was flat and white and of no help whatsoever, so she turned her face to him.

“What is strange, Daniel,” Shona paused to ease some air down into her lungs. “What is strange is that this time yesterday I didn’t know you and yet now, here you are...” She paused again, inhaled, exhaled and inhaled again, a slow, methodical progress that brooked no interruption and allowed for no haste. “...here you are in my bedroom, offering to feed me food you have cooked.” She bridled her lips in discomfort. “If that isn’t strange...”

“Would you like to know what I think?”

Shona closed her eyes for a moment and concentrated on her shallow breathing. “Yes, I would. Please?”

“I think you should stop talking and I think you should eat. I think talking makes you tired and you cannot be other than tired if you do not eat.” He stood up from his chair, walked over to the bed and perched on the edge. The soup was still too hot for her to eat, so he picked up the bowl, blew on it and then offered a spoonful up to her lips. “Try it. If it is not nice, say so, I won’t be offended.”

Her eyes, serious, calculating, fixed upon his face. “What is it?”

He grinned, the thought that she could not free her trust, amusing him. “It is chicken soup. I think you will like it. Look. Watch.” Daniel put the spoon to his lips and sipped. “It is not poison.” He placed the spoon back in the bowl, lifted the tray and stood back. “Sit up and take the tray on your lap; I believe you have the strength to feed yourself.”

When she had emptied the bowl, Shona leant back again. "I'm sorry, I couldn't really taste it or smell it. Apart from the chicken, that is, I can see you used that and the carrot, cabbage, tomato and potato—"

"And okra. I found it in the vegetable drawer of your fridge." He frowned and inclined his head. "You cannot taste the chilli?"

"No."

"Not the peanut butter?"

"No. Oh, don't worry Daniel; I'm not criticising your cooking. It's this," she exhaled and inhaled again, and attempted to hold the air down in her lungs, "it's this bloody virus. No taste or smell. Haven't had either for a few days. I should have known." She paused. "I see you've found my uncle's wardrobe."

"I hope you did not mind?"

"No, of course not. They'll only end up in the charity shop. Saves me a trip."

His attitude appeared to her almost reverential as he rose from the chair and returned the tray to the dresser.

"And enough with pretending to be the perfect waiter, please; I mean it. Whatever or whoever you are, Daniel, you're not my servant." Shona gasped, drew breath and gathered herself for more questions. "And that's another thing I can't get straight in my head. How come you're such a good nurse?"

Embarrassed by both her compliment and her familiarity, and heartened that she had noticed how proficient he was at caring for her, he smiled self-consciously and looked down at his feet. "When I got to Paris, a family took me in and I worked as their houseboy. At first, they allowed me to clean the house and wash the dishes; for this, they let me sleep in their garage. After a few weeks, they gave me a room inside; it was no bigger than a cupboard, but it was warmer and I used the bathroom."

"Did they pay you?"

"No."

"Sounds to me more like modern slavery than charity."

"They were from Nigeria. They were not Christian."

"What happened? Why did you leave them?"

"These people, they were always very busy, always working, and they had two children: a boy of nine and a girl of eight. They had a woman who used to come and sit with the children in the evening, and one day she could not come because she was ill. They asked me to look after their children when they went out. But it did not work well and I had to leave." Daniel looked up and when he saw she was watching him closely, in perhaps the way a teacher would scrutinise a child suspected the child of lying, he looked away and down again.

To Shona, his avoidance spoke to her not so much of feelings of embarrassment; rather his avoidance signalled a more moral dilemma, like that of shame or guilt, and his reaction only served to increase her curiosity.

"Did you fall out over money? If they trusted you to look after their children, surely, they must have paid you?"

"It became difficult." He thinned his generous lips and rubbed his face with his hands.

"How difficult?"

"As I said, Shona, the situation became very difficult."

"I can see that it's not easy for you to talk about it, Daniel, but you are staying in my house and I need to know if I can trust you."

He raised his head and looked hard and very directly at her, flame flickering in his eyes. "You trust me to make chicken soup and you trust me to be in your bedroom, like they trusted me to be with their children, yet you question my integrity?"

His raw anger, the way the muscles in his arms tensed and twitched, frightened her. "I'm sorry, Daniel. I really am. I didn't mean to." Shona waited, both to catch her breath and to allow the friction in the room to cool. "I'm sorry it was so upsetting."

He returned his gaze to the floor. "These people practised a very strange religion. They worshipped Gods I have never heard of and they treated their daughter very badly: they thought she had a demon inside her, so they starved and beat her. I liked this young boy and girl, so I told a neighbour and he told the police." Daniel looked up and winced as though he had trodden on a sharp stone. "When the police came, the parents claimed I had assaulted the children." He closed his eyes, so that she could not see the incident he was reliving. "They claimed I had

assaulted the boy sexually. Again, I had to run away. Who were the police going to believe? People with the correct papers or me with no identification except a piece of paper the Red Cross gave me when I landed in Italy."

"I'm sorry, Daniel. I shouldn't have pressed you to remember something so awful."

He scoffed, though not at her sympathy; rather his scoff was directed at a world which did not want him and in which he found no place. "Yes, Shona. I am sorry, too."

Chapter IX

Simon lay in bed and thought of what the coming day would bring. Soraya had not yet returned his call and, as with every call she didn't return, he resolved not to call her again until she'd called him back.

The day before, in the West End, he had interviewed the proprietor of a chain of coffee shops: they were, as every hack knew, popular news. The more generous side to Simon's nature liked to think it was because the baristas were often zero hours contract and therefore when the government shut the cafés down, the public were concerned for them. The less generous side to him knew better: it was simply that the public had become so married to their coffee, they couldn't live without it. Habit over empathy, possibly; needs over conscience, probably.

At the entrance to the tube station, a young kid, smooth dark skin and delicate features, had been stopped by the police. "Come off it, son," Simon had heard the sergeant say, "this is the third time we've caught you begging round here and still you haven't supplied us with any identification."

Simon had lingered and fiddled with his phone. The kid had stood silent, guilty as charged.

The sergeant had stood and rocked back and forth on his feet. "I dunno," he'd said, removing his cap and scratching his balding head, "if we take you in, you're only going to skip the hostel and turn up here again next week. Go on, hop it."

On the tube, on the way back to Balham, Simon was reminded of his night out with the traffic cops. He'd asked the driver, Dave, what would happen to the young clandestine they'd found in the back of the truck and Dave had told him social services would pick the kid up and find him accommodation in a hostel, which he would very probably skip and within a few days end up working as a drug mule.

As he'd sat and watched the stations rattle by, Simon had wondered how many clandestines like Daniel vanished into the endless web of streets that criss-crossed the city. And what was it Carver had

said when they'd met in Thornton Heath? Something along the lines of the body in the building site probably being that of a clandestine, in which case they might never know his identity. And that had given him an idea for a piece.

He made tea and sat down at his laptop to list the hostels near where they'd picked up the lad who'd told them his name was Daniel. There were eleven district councils in Surrey and the Staines Police Station was located in Runnymede. He was about to start, when he recalled the social worker who'd come to collect Daniel telling them he was going to take the lad to a hostel near Epsom, as it was the only one that wasn't full. Epsom and Ewell District Council used several, though only three were assisted; and because Daniel had stated he was a minor, he would have to be taken to one of those.

An hour and two phone calls later, Simon was in his car and crawling down the A24, through Morden to North Cheam and then Stoneleigh. The hostel, a bland four-storey block, stood round the corner from the shops.

Simon got out of the car and walked over to the entrance of the hostel.

A tall, heavy-set man wearing a coffee-stained T-shirt stood behind a Perspex screen, shuffling papers into layers of trays. "The answers no: what's the question?" He neither looked up nor acknowledged the presence of his visitor.

"I would have thought that was all computerised these days." Simon thought about leaning on the counter in a casual, chummy way, but noticed the dirt and other unidentifiable deposits and changed his mind.

"As I said," the man's tone betrayed a stark world-weariness, "no." He looked up, appraised his visitor and on noticing the smarter-than-his-usual-guest's attire, added. "I like to keep paper copies and get signatures, assuming my guests can both remember and write their names, which many of them can't half the time. What can I do for you, Mr...?"

"Peckham, Simon. You're a busy man, Mr...?"

"Don't bother; you'll never pronounce it, nobody can. And yes, as you can see, I am busy. If you want a bed, I'm full. If you want me to

have a look at other hostels, they're full, too. However, you're not in search of a place to hang your hat, are you, Mr Peckham? You're looking for someone; in which case you already know the answer's no." He flicked the last of the papers into the top tray and folded his ample arms: victory was his.

"Name of Daniel. Clandestine. Late teenager. Sub-Saharan. Would have been brought here from Staines Police Station by social services on Easter weekend."

The man studied him. "Mr Peckham, I get so many of your sort in here I should sell tickets. But because I haven't met you before, let me tell you how it is--"

Simon raised his hand to stop the man mid-lecture. "One, you have to waste too much of your valuable time turning away the aggrieved to whom many of your residents owe money. Two, the reason why your residents are here in the first place is because they have no money. And three, you can't for any reason abuse either the data protection act or your guest's identities. Have I saved you the breath?"

"You have." The man rubs his bottom lip, intrigued. "Journalist?"

Simon smiled in appreciation. "Perfect."

"A story on clandestine children?"

"In a way. Haven't worked out the angles just yet, but I would like to track this lad down. I was with the cops who picked him up: you might have seen my piece in the Sunday glossy." At the very least, the man hadn't told him to sling his hook and Simon detected the first glimmerings of recognition in his eyes. "Thinking of putting together a piece about how the councils are tailoring their social services to meet the needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children: how if it wasn't for hostels like yours, these kids would fall prey to abuse."

"Peckham? Oh, yes. I think I recall the article."

Simon waited for the pennies to drop into place.

"And you want to trace this lad because you were there when he was first picked up. Sort of follow him on his journey?" The gatekeeper to the hostel was beginning to imagine his place on the red carpet.

"Absolutely. The article needs to have continuity; it's more personal; it makes the lad more real. If I can't write him that way, he just disappears into the statistics in the same way he disappears off the

radar. Look, why don't you give me your name and a contact number, I won't let anyone know you've given me any information about this lad Daniel – you know, confidentiality, won't reveal my source, reporter's privilege, all that – and if I need some first-hand information for the article, I know where to come. Of course, if you want me to quote you as a source, I'd be happy to."

The manager had been right about one thing: his name was unpronounceable and he'd had to write it down on a piece of paper to save Simon any confusion. Polish, he explained.

Daniel Matope, the information on his screen showed, had been at the hostel on Easter Saturday and for the following three nights after which, he'd done a bunk. Officer Dave had been right. However, with the carrot of seeing his name in print dangled before him, though not, absolutely not, as a source of Daniel's whereabouts, the hostel manager had grown increasingly cooperative. He'd checked the database for other hostels in the boroughs of Epsom and Ewell and, when he'd drawn a blank, checked those in the adjacent boroughs of Elmbridge, Mole Valley and Reigate & Banstead. Nothing. Daniel had, as predicted, dropped off the Surrey radar.

"What about the London boroughs?"

"I don't have access to those."

Simon, separated by the protective shield and therefore unable to see the information on the man's screen, understood that he was unlikely to find other hostel managers as complicit. "You mean there's no way of knowing whether the lad has been staying at a hostel, what, five or ten miles from here."

"Exactly, Mr Peckham. Different system: don't have access."

"Don't you know anyone in the London boroughs who might help? I mean you know who I am; you know I'm not some aggrieved claimant or private dick who's after the lad for any ulterior motive. If I can find him, who knows, I might even be able to get him into foster care or better."

The manager bridled his mouth, rubbed his sweaty paws through his thinning hair and wiped them on his jeans.

Something. A brief flash of light. A cloak withdrawn from a lantern and then immediately replaced. Simon glimpsed it; he was

certain. "You know, it's quite a burden you and your peers have to shoulder; the general public have no perception of the stresses and strains it places on you. All they hear about is how the lack of funding affects the social care team's performance, not the huge toll it takes on you both physically and mentally. It's about time they learned this job is about people, not simply about funding."

"Monkeys and pea..."

Simon moved close to the Perspex. "Sorry, I didn't quite catch that."

"I said, monkeys and peanuts. If you pay peanuts, you end up with monkeys. Now, I've got a bit on my plate, so if you don't mind..."

"Sure, I know. You've been more than helpful. Just one last question though: are you sure you don't know anyone like yourself in the London Boroughs? Someone who might help me track this lad down before he ends up drifting in the underworld."

The manager minimized the programs on his screen, swivelled in his chair and studied Simon. He winced again and for a second time he followed up with a rub of his hair and a wipe on his jeans.

That lantern again. The signal.

"Look, Mr Peckham, whenever users access this kind of information, they have to login with their own passwords. And every now and then the powers that be like to know who is accessing what and why. In the London boroughs it's no different to Surrey, so one has to tread very carefully." He paused, evidently chewing some course over in his mind. "Look, I do have a friend in the Croydon Immigration and Asylum Support Team. If you like, I'll have a word this evening and let you know. Can't promise and it'll be a favour I'll owe someone, which means it'll be a favour you owe me. Why am I going to do this?" He didn't wait for a reply. "Because you have been sensible enough not to offer me any money in return for my help, which others are usually all too quick to do, and because lads like Daniel need all the help they can get. And that includes yours. So, give me your card and I'll be in touch tomorrow evening. Can't do it before then because it's not wise for me to phone her while she's at her desk, if you get where I'm coming from?"

Chapter X

"Is that the right time?"

"Yes, Shona, you have slept through the evening and night. You got out of bed only once. To go to the bathroom."

"You saw me?"

"Yes, you did not notice I was here. You were sleep walking and for a while I think perhaps you were asleep on the toilet. I was pleased when you came back."

She tried to sit up and when she began to lose the will, Daniel got up and helped her, plumping-up her pillows and straightening her bedclothes.

"I will open the curtains and the windows." Daniel paused and when she didn't object, he did so. "It is a nice morning. How do you feel, Shona? I think you should eat some breakfast."

"Feel?" She considered the word for a moment, pursing her lips and staring at the ceiling. "I don't think I have sufficient energy to know how I feel. I could manage something; something simple, granola or cereal with oat milk. A cup of coffee would be wonderful. Instant will do."

He smiled. "Don't worry, I know how to use a cafetiere. They use them everywhere now, even in my home country."

Shona watched him as his smile broadened to expose more and brighter teeth than any person had a right to. His tone was ironic, self-mocking and, in a subtle and delightfully gracious way, accusing. "I'm sorry, Daniel, I didn't mean to sound patronising. Have you eaten?"

"Yes, thank you." He stood up. "Do you need help in getting to the bathroom, Shona?"

Now it was her turn to smile, though in a lazy, reluctant way. "I think I can make it, thank you. You might not hurry coming back with the breakfast though; I might have to stop for a rest before I start back."

By the time he returned with the tray, she had washed, changed and done her best to change her sheets. The first two challenges had taken far longer and had drawn a far greater effort than normal, yet she

had persevered and completed them; the third had proved a task too far and midway through she'd collapsed into the chair.

"I know how to make a bed, Shona," was all he'd said as he put the tray down on the dresser.

Now sitting in her newly made bed, she plodded through her granola, her tastebuds incapable of distinguishing the flavours of nuts from honey, her body grateful for the intake of calories.

Daniel sat silently and patiently and watched her.

Shona pushed the tray away and wiped her lips with the paper towel.

He had raided Uncle Charles' wardrobe again and though baggy, he was beginning to shrug off the aura of the dispossessed. The abrasions to his face had now relaxed their anger and lost their inflammation, and he appeared more at ease with his surroundings.

"How is your arm, Daniel? Have you checked under the bandage? Does it need redressing? I can do that if you bring me the medical kit."

"My arm is fine, thank you." He lifted it up in case she had forgotten what his arm looked like. "I have replaced the dressing; it is no longer so painful."

There followed a period of silence broken only by the birdsong from the garden. For a reason she could not fathom, Shona was not unhappy with their lack of conversation and she was aware that he seemed equally at ease in the atmosphere of calm. He sat, his eyes closed, his expression tranquil, and breathed long and slow, an elemental physical activity she envied him.

"I think it's about time you told me a little about yourself, Daniel. Outside of what you told me yesterday, I still know nothing about you." Shona breathed short, shallow breaths in through her nose and out, slowly, gradually and evenly out through her mouth. She sensed the urge to cough every time she did so and her lungs felt heavily congested, yet all she could manage was a peremptory clearing of her throat. "Don't worry, I'm not going to throw you out whatever you tell me, so you might as well tell me the truth. Who are you running away from, Daniel?"

"Running?" For a second time in twenty-four hours, his eyes flashed with fire, a split-second flare quickly brought under control. "I

am not running away from anyone, Shona. Life is confusing, isn't it? People think we are always running because they see pictures on television of dead bodies washed up on beaches; they see little boats filled with people of a foreign skin colour; they see these boats intercepted by police or border guards or Red Cross and they think, these people must be running away from something otherwise why would they risk their lives." Daniel all at once frowned and smiled, and his look suggested he found her question both insulting and yet perfectly natural. "I am not running away, Shona; I am running towards. Towards a better life. The kind of life you enjoy." He watched her, clearly waiting for his concept to take purchase.

"I did not mean to offend you, Daniel. But if life was so terrible in the country in which you were born, then surely in leaving it you are escaping it? Where were you born?"

"Eight thousand miles away, in a different world."

"South Africa?"

"No, Zimbabwe."

Shona sat up a little straighter in bed, made to ask him a further question, hesitated and thought better of it. "That is an incredible journey, Daniel. By boat or by land?"

"By the land."

"How long did it take you?"

"Two years. Two continents and fourteen countries. Journeys are long and difficult without money, and people who know how to make it possible for you to get from one country to another charge a lot of money."

"What was the most difficult part of your journey? I mean, I'm not naïve enough to think any of it was easy, but some of it must have been tougher than others."

"It is strange. You would think Niger or Libya would have been difficult and dangerous, and they were, but Italy and France were the most difficult. At first, when I arrived in Italy, the authorities were very caring: they fed us and clothed us and then, suddenly, they didn't want us. They took us north and told us to go to France or Switzerland or Austria; they told us we would be looked after better in these countries. In France, it was the same as Italy; they didn't want us either; they said

'go to England, they will look after you' and they looked the other way when we met the people smugglers. They were men from Eastern Europe; bad men, not charitable men."

Shona narrowed her eyes and looked up at the ceiling, searching for a disturbance in the well of her memory. "Bad men, not charitable men. Yes, I have met such men, a long time ago. Tell me, Daniel, where were you born? In what part of Zimbabwe?"

He stared at her, inquiring, wondering, perhaps even calculating.

"Do you know Zimbabwe, Shona? Is that why you are called by this name? From Mashonaland?"

There was some inflection, some negative intonation or prosody, in the way he asked his question and the manner in which he was so obviously hanging on her reply that unnerved her. Shona didn't know exactly why or how his question provoked this reaction in her, but she decided to deflect rather than answer honestly. "I think my name is Irish or Scottish."

"What does it mean, Shona?"

"God is gracious, or so my parents told me."

Again, he stared at her as if he was trying to decide about her, as if he was weighing up whether he should believe her.

"So, if your name has nothing to do with Mashona, why do you have the heads of all these dead animals on your walls?"

"My uncle knew Botswana; he lived there for many years. My great grandfathers lived there a hundred or more years ago; my uncle more recently."

Daniel bridled his mouth in appreciation. "Your family has done well. They have grown prosperous from another man's land, from another man's labours."

Though its message was clear, his statement lacked the full-blown rancour she would have expected. "Their history, not mine."

"Not your father's?"

"No, Daniel. You see, this wonderful country, Britain, has some dreadful customs and one of them compels some parents to leave all their earthly belongings to their firstborn male child. Primogeniture, they call it. Ancient traditions. Antediluvian obligations. Most countries,

most peoples, have them. It's all part of the rich tapestry of one's history."

"So, your parents had no money. Is that why you came to live with your uncle?"

"No, Daniel. I came to live with my uncle because I have no other family to live with. I guess you could say I am an orphan, like you." Shona intended to leave the barb in her comparison; she wanted him to know that her uncle's wealth, now her wealth, was nothing compared to the pain of abandonment. "Thank you for breakfast, Daniel. I'm very grateful."

He smiled, politely, charmingly, though his was not a smile that started out from his heart. "Can I bring you anything from the kitchen?"

"No, thank you. I have to sleep now." Shona paused. "Oh, what day is it? I seem to have lost track of the days."

"It is Wednesday."

"In that case, can you do me a kindness, Daniel. The rubbish needs to be out tonight, can you take the bags and put them in the bins outside the gate? The button for the gate is by the front door, but you might want to take my car keys with you; the gates close pretty fast; the fob is on the ring. Oh, and a lady might call round, Mrs Watson; my uncle's old housekeeper."

"Your uncle's servant?"

"I guess you could call her a servant. And yet I sometimes wonder if my uncle didn't do more for her than she did for him. She's a lost soul now he's not here. Please tell her I'll call her. Oh, and tomorrow her husband comes to garden. He'll need paying: fifty pounds. There's money in my purse. My bag is on the hall table. Sorry, Daniel, I'm really tired now."

Chapter XI

The route down across Tooting Bec Common, through Streatham South and Norbury was exactly as he remembered it from ten days previously: the traffic was still slow, many of the shops still closed and the sky a continuous flat enamel grey.

Much to his surprise, the manager of the hostel had phoned him with the address of a hostel on the London Road in Thornton Heath. The location hadn't surprised him. What had surprised him, though, was that the manager had phoned; for experience had taught him that when a source promised to call him back, they rarely did.

It was, though, a surprise when he discovered the hostel was a hotel, and a three-star hotel at that, a couple of hundred metres up the road from Croydon University Hospital. The car park was empty, so he pulled in and walked over to reception. White wire-mesh grills prevented access to the lawns and the foyer resembled that of a bank.

A shadow appeared beyond the counter. "Yes?"

"Yes, good morning. I'd like a room."

"Sorry, we are full."

Simon feigned a deep and despairing disappointment. He shrugged his shoulders. "The car park's empty, you can't be full."

"People at work. We are full."

"Okay, what about the same day next week?"

Eyes blinked back. "We are full, sorry."

"You wouldn't mind checking for me, would you? Only I'm supposed to meet a friend of mine here."

"Sorry, we are full."

"His name's Daniel. Daniel Matope, perhaps he's here." Simon was well aware that the lad was no longer staying at the hotel, the manager of the hostel had told him Daniel hadn't been there since the morning Carver had called him to their meet.

"Sorry—"

"Don't tell me: he's not and you're full."

Simon waited in the car and watched the entrance to the hotel. Through the next hour, no one came out to ask him to move on and the

only people to emerge from the door were a couple and their young children.

–

Beulah Road lay only a mile and half to the north on the other side of the railway line. Dubbed the Wild West and one of three wards in the area to be named a priority for officers battling knife crime, the area was regarded by many as a no-go for the police.

The previous year, Simon had written an op-ed for a broadsheet focussing on the many challenges faced by neighbourhoods like Beulah Road. Unsurprisingly, his piece had not been well-received by either residents or local police, and his mailbox had rapidly swelled with emails branding him a cynic, a liar and, though he trusted some but by no means all of his fellow men, a misanthrope. One message, though, had bucked the trend: a Bert Entwistle, had written, with his address included, telling him it was about time someone wasn't afraid to call a spade a bloody shovel, and if he was ever in the area, he'd be happy to put the kettle on.

Simon knocked on the door of the flat above the kebab shop and was unsurprised when Bert turned out to be a senior pensioner.

The fellow looked him up and down and asked his name. "Yes, I remember you. Come in. Close the door, there's a good fella. I suppose you've come for that cup of tea, have you?"

"No milk, no sugar, thank you, Bert."

"Have a seat. I'll be with you in a minute."

The living room, though tidy and furnished in what the less generous might call 'utility style' and the more generous Arts and Crafts, extolled the virtues of deep fat frying, garlic and curry.

"Hope that's all right."

The mug steamed a warning. Bert, three-day stubble, collarless striped shirt and grey trousers supported by bright red braces, sat down. A near-empty bottle of Scotch on the sideboard told its own tale.

"Now, what can I do for you? I don't suppose for one minute you've come all this way to sample the delights of Beulah Road."

“No, Bert, I haven’t. Though I have been meaning to drop by and thank you for your very positive response to my article.”

Entwistle scoffed. “You spoke the truth, son. Told it like it was. If there were more like you, places like this wouldn’t exist because the politicians wouldn’t be able to ignore them. Go on then what’s the question? That’s what you journalists do, isn’t it, ask questions?”

Simon cleared his throat and wondered when the tea would be cool enough to drink. “Ten days ago, the police found a body in a street the other side of Norbury Brook, you may have read about it.”

“I did. What about it?”

“Well, Bert, you seem to have a pretty good handle on the state of affairs round here, I wondered if, perhaps, you’d heard anything, any whispers. Not the kind of hard talk the police would be interested in, more hearsay, rumour, word on the street, that kind of thing.”

“And what makes you think I’d be the kind of bloke who went around listening to scuttlebutt?”

“I’m not suggesting for a minute you’d be the kind to deal in rumour, Bert, far from it. It’s just that you said in your email that you owned a number of local properties which you rented out; shops, take-aways, dry-cleaners. If I remember correctly, you wrote that you were ‘fed up to the back teeth’ with gangs of kids dealing drugs, behaving aggressively and frightening off your tenant’s customers. Putting two and two together, I thought that if anyone knew what was going on around here, it would be you. Please tell me if I’ve got the wrong end of the stick.”

Bert Entwistle grinned and scratched his stubble. “Crafty, aren’t you, Mr Peckham?”

“Simon.”

“Yes, Simon. All right, I’ll give you my version of what’s going on. I’m not saying it’s gospel, mind; it’s more an incorporation of lots of little pieces of information I receive from my tenants. You see, they all like to chip on the rent and they all like to give their own excuses. Except they’re the same excuses, aren’t they? Just told using different words, that’s all. Now, drink up before it gets cold, eh?”

He did as he was ordered, though his tea was so stewed and therefore strong that it caused him to shiver. Simon glanced at his watch. "What do you hear about this murder, Bert?"

"All right, I get that you haven't got all day, so bear with me. What you have to understand is that the coppers know most of the bad boys in this area. Most of them have been in trouble sometime or other, so they're the first port of call when an assault or theft or knife crime occurs. They're kids mostly, on the wrong and downward trail, for sure, but mostly kids." Now, Bert leant forwards as though needing to pass on a coded message in a crowded room.

Though Simon found the performance amusingly theatrical, he had no other alternative than to mimic his host's conspiratorial pose.

"Then there's this new kid on the block. Appeared not long after your column. You see, after you wrote that, the coppers round here had to react. Couldn't stand about and get laughed at, could they? So, they put the squeeze on a few of the local hoodlums; shut them down for a bit and while they were being careful, this new fella fills the void. He's clean, see. No one knows where he came from; police don't know him, because he ain't got no previous; and the usual suspects won't touch him because they can't match his level of violence."

"What else do you know about him, Bert?"

"They say he's medium height and medium build, could be either side of twenty and speaks a bit African, if you know what I mean?"

"He's sub-Saharan rather than Arab or East African, is that what you mean?"

Bert sat back, the need for secrecy suspended. "Exactly."

"And people think he's arrived here in the last year or so, which is why the police have no record of him?"

"Yes, Mr Peckham. Apparently, he's made the right connections and impressed the right people. And not only that, this kid is shrewd: they say he has his own distribution network; uses other immigrants he recruits from the hostels, pays them cash after the job's done and doesn't let them collect payment from the users. That's how he controls them, see; keeps them tight on the money. He's clever, this one, sharp as a razor and anyone who gets on the wrong side of him usually ends up with the scars to prove it."

Entwistle's assessment was forensic for a man who didn't listen to scuttlebutt.

"Do they have a name for him?"

"Sort of, Mr Peckham, and that's what's so strange. The name they use for him is not normal, it's Shaka."

"That's a handshake, isn't it? Gang thing."

"No, Mr Peckham, Shaka was a Zulu King."

Chapter XII

Mrs Watson did appear, just as Daniel was walking back up the drive.

She stopped, lowered her window and looked up, bothered if not alarmed. "Excuse me, if you don't mind my asking, who are you and what are you doing here?"

Daniel did mind; he'd walked down and put the rubbish bags in their appropriate bins exactly as Shona had asked him, a task he imagined this old servant woman usually attended to. Didn't that entitle him to be where he was? "I am staying here. My name is Daniel."

"And where is Shona?" Her tone was tremulous, quavering.

He offered her his most disarming smile. "She is in bed."

The lady's face creased with concern. "But it's four o'clock in the afternoon, why is she still in bed?"

He loomed over the small woman in the small car. "She is not well."

"Not well? What do you mean, not well? How not well?"

Shona had warned him the lady was lonely, but she had not mentioned Mrs Watson could be rude, too. She reminded him of an inquisitive bird. "Shona has the virus, the Covid virus. I am looking after her."

The woman shrank away from him and raised her window so that only a slender gap remained. "Oh, poor her."

The virus, a curse that both drove people apart and at the same time drew them together. On first meeting they were strangers and now, with one spoken word, they were comrades, united in the face of a common enemy. Daniel assumed a compassionate expression. "Yes, she is not well."

"How bad?"

"Her breathing is not good and she is very tired. I think she will recover in a day or so."

"Are you a nurse?"

There seemed little point in answering her question and even he wasn't sure exactly what he was: servant, companion, rubbish distributor, guardian, custodian or nurse, so he said, "Yes."

The little lady studied his face and his clothes, quite possibly recognising the sweater and trousers he had 'borrowed' from her now-deceased employer's wardrobe. "Good," she said, through the gap, "you people are so good at nursing. Don't know what we'd do without you." She rubbed an itch at her nose and inspected her hand. Mrs Watson grimaced. "Get's in the way doesn't it? Wretched inconvenience. The virus, I mean. We usually have a chat over tea on Wednesdays and I've brought biscuits." She lowered her window, reached across to the passenger seat and picked up a plate wrapped in clingfilm. "Here, give her these, please. Fresh out of the oven this morning. Her favourites: shortbreads. Oh, and tell her I might try and call her later."

The window slid up, she wrestled with the steering wheel and executed a multipoint turn in the driveway. As she was driving off, she very suddenly stopped and called to him. "Daniel?"

He waited for her to reverse back to him. She didn't; she simply called him once more.

"Yes?"

Mrs Watson lowered the window an inch and offered her mouth up to it. "My husband comes on a Thursday to tend the garden. I'll tell him not to bother."

Daniel didn't bother to hide his confusion. "I don't think you can get the virus from plants and Shona has given me the money for your husband. He can come."

"No, that's all right. I know he won't. My husband is a little older. Best not risk it. Give Shona my love. Tell her I hope it passes. Bye."

—

Shona was reclining in bed in exactly the same pose he had left her four hours before; legs out straight, arms splayed by her side and her head resting back on her pillow. She opened her eyes and lifted her head, expecting to see him sitting, watching her; and when she saw he wasn't there, she was curiously disappointed. There was something

about Daniel she could not put her finger on, some minor disquiet or flimsy misgiving she couldn't either properly identify or adequately articulate. She wanted to trust him, or perhaps place her trust in him, but try as she might, Shona found she couldn't.

Daniel came into her bedroom. He carried a tray of tea and shortbreads.

She turned her head towards him. "Was that Mrs Watson I heard you talking to?"

"Yes. I understand now that I made a mistake earlier when I suggested she was your uncle's servant. There can be no doubt, he was hers."

"Was she all right? I know how much our Wednesday afternoon teas mean to her. No wonder Uncle Charles developed such selective hearing."

"She has brought you these shortbreads. She said to tell you they are straight from the oven this morning. She will try to call you later."

"Don't worry, Daniel, she won't. When she says she will try, she means she won't. You told her I was ill?"

He grinned, mischievously. "Yes, and she ran away faster than a chicken at dinner time." He put the tray down beside her on the bed.

"Have a shortbread, Daniel, but mind your teeth."

They sat in silence while they munched and chewed their way through Mrs Watson's gifts, and when they had cleared the plate, Shona brushed herself down of crumbs and sat up straighter.

"Before you came here, Daniel, did you live all your life in Zimbabwe?"

At her question, he lowered his head and frowned, as if he doubted her motive for asking. "Yes."

On noticing his reaction, she said, "Only, my uncle told me he went to Zimbabwe; would have been after independence and long before you were born; sometime in the late seventies or early eighties." Shona paused to order her breathing back under control. "He wasn't the hunter, like his father and grandfather. Kept the house like this out of some misplaced sense of loyalty, I suppose. Could be a bit superstitious, Uncle Charles. Probably didn't dare sell it off in case my grandfather's ghost reappeared and asked him to return all the money he'd left him."

Her attempt at humour fell flat, so she waited while her lungs refilled with oxygen. "He used to tell me stories about the people; I remember he said most of them spoke English, which was handy because there were so many dialects. What is your—," she was about to say native tongue, but managed to strangle the words before they came out, "—mother tongue, Daniel?"

"Ndebele, though people like to call it Matabele; it is a more comfortable word for a European mouth to pronounce."

"That's in the north, isn't it?"

Now, his face took on the texture of an inanimate mask, defensive, robust and impenetrable. "No, Matabeleland is in the south and south-west."

"Oh, yes. It's only that I remember him saying something else, another name."

"He may have said Kalanga, which is spoken in the border area, or perhaps Tswana, which is the common language of Botswana. Ndebele is a form of Zulu: it is a noble tongue."

"I'm sure it is, Daniel. I remember Uncle Charles talking about a canoe safari on the Zambezi; about how dangerous the hippo could be. Are there any game reserves where you were brought up?"

His mask remained in place, robust and passive, like a thicket too dense to see through and too deep and high to see around. Shona wondered if he suspected she was toying with him.

"The Zambezi river is in the north-west; it is part of the border between Zimbabwe and Zambia. I was born near the village of Figtree. There was a reserve not far away: the Matobo, people would go to watch the eagle and the hippo. There was an animal sanctuary, but that was in Chipangali, on the other side of Bulawayo."

"Chipangali?" Shona played with the name, imagining a Noah's Ark of animals being fed, watered and cared for in a safe and secure environment. "The name, Chipangali, it sounds very beautiful, was it?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you leave?"

Daniel stood up and walked to the window and, leaning against the sill, looked out at the garden so that he would not have to look at her. "Why does any person leave their home, Shona?" He waited for her

reply and when she didn't offer one, answered his own question. "There was very little food, there was very little clean water. In fact, there was very little of anything. My father had left, and me and my brothers would sit by the road and wait for the trucks to come by. The roads were in a bad way – potholes, bumps, rocks – and when the lorries came by, carrying sugar cane or tobacco leaves or wood, some would fall off and we would collect them until we had enough to sell in the market. In the days when there was no harvest, we had nothing to sell, so my mother would go to Bulawayo and sell herself. When I left, I was one less mouth for her to feed."

"I'm sorry," she said, "that must have been terrible for a child to witness." Shona turned her head to watch him.

"Yes, it was." His tone hardened; his shoulders tensed. "No child should have to suffer like this. And no mother should have to pay for food with her body. This is why I vowed never to be poor again. This is another reason why I left." He paused and exhaled, loudly. "Now I must make us food. Is chicken and rice acceptable? I can prepare more vegetables. You have enough."

"With peanut butter?" she asked. "That is a dish from your home, isn't it? I realise it now. My uncle used to make the same for me."

Daniel stood up straight, stretched his back and as he left the room, did not look at her.

Chapter XIII

"Brian?"

"Yes, Simon. How are you?"

"All good with me. What about you? Get your test results back?"

"Yes." Judging by his abrupt response, Detective Inspector Carver was not having a good day.

"Positive then, was it?"

"Yes. What about you? Had any symptoms? That day we met in Thornton Heath I must have been spreading it like butter on toast."

"No. Been fine." Simon was about to say he hadn't shown any symptoms and then wondered if he was asymptomatic. And if he was and he had still been seeing Soraya, he could have passed it on to her and she could have passed it on to her family. Perhaps Soraya had been right all along and he had misinterpreted her desire to protect her family as a personal rejection. The glow of embarrassment warmed his cheeks. And what about Shona? He should warn her. Simon ran swiftly through a calendar of days and dates. No, not warn her; it would be too late for that. Ask though, he should at least call her to find out how she was. The glow in his cheeks reignited, as guilt was heaped on the embers of his embarrassment.

"You still there, Peckham?"

"Yes, sorry. Just a thought, that's all. So, you're back hard at it, are you?"

"No, wish I was. One more day of isolation at home."

"Thought you sounded a little stressed."

"Yes, Simon, and that's only the half of it. Strange times we live in. You learn a bit about yourself when you have time on your hands: things you thought you were proficient at, you find out you're bloody useless at, like my son's maths. Give me the streets of London any day." Carver stopped talking, obviously weighing up which of the two challenges he would rather meet. "No, on second thoughts homework over homicide; not much of a competition, is it? Now, what can I do for you? Finished that piece you promised?"

"I don't recall that particular promise, Brian. No, what I've got might have more meat to it than that. How have you got on with that body in Thornton Heath?"

"Who? Clint?"

"Clint. So you've identified him?"

"No, we haven't. It's only that for the moment, to us, he's known as Clint, as in Eastwood." He paused, as in waiting.

Simon wracks his brain: lights blind and dim, then, "The man with no name?"

"My, we are on the ball this morning. Yes, strange as it may seem, we've got doodly-squat. As yet, no one has stepped forward to claim either a missing son, boyfriend or husband. DNA came back. Zip! No matches anywhere. Appeals in the local papers: no response. And we can't go posting photos of his mashed-up face for fear of frightening the good and sensitive folk of Croydon. This one is a total mystery, so if you've got any ideas, let's have them?"

"Brian, have you heard of a guy operating in the Thornton Heath area goes by the moniker of Shaka?"

The silence tells Simon the detective has, and again the silence is very evidently filled with Carver deciding what, if anything, he can disclose.

Foot firmly in the door, Simon carries on before he is asked to remove it. "It's just that this one seems a bit special. I gather no one knows much about him other than he's extremely violent and he uses clandestines as mules. What's the—"

"Story? I'm not sure I know how to answer that without sounding rather uninformed, a state of ignorance no detective likes to admit to. The issue here is that we've no idea whether this Shaka is a ghost, by which I mean a figment of someone's imagination. Think of it this way, through the Gang Violence Matrix we have access to a considerable database of intelligence. We've got names and addresses of gang members who haven't got the first clue they're on our radar; we nick them when we believe the time is right and we leave them when we think they're going to lead us to better things. It's not a board game; it's smart policing. There are some among us, and I'm one of them, who think this ghost is an invention designed to throw us off the trail. It's

brilliant: we commit all our resources to trailing a man who doesn't exist, while the usual suspects get on with their nasty little business."

"Keyser Söze."

"Sorry?"

"The Usual Suspects. The movie. Keyser Söze. It was the name of the crime boss the conman Verbal Kint wound his story around, only the guy was a ghost; he never existed. Sorry, please, go on."

"Well, I don't think this Shaka exists either. The local boys say he does, but I have my doubts. It's all a little contrived. Shaka. I thought Shaka was one of those thumb and little finger signs that meant you were cool. Seems I'm wrong. Apparently, he was a Zulu chief."

"He was, Brian, late eighteenth, early nineteenth century. And not so much a chief, this guy was king and a fairly violent king at that: the story goes he locked the mother of his rival in a house with a pack of hyenas. Rough justice, but he got people's attention." Simon paused, now it was his turn to decide how much of his own information he wanted to disclose.

"I don't know, Simon, The Usual Suspects and Zulu? Thought you'd be more of a Superman versus Batman kind of guy. Me, I'm not convinced: it all sounds a little too fancy. The problem we have is that if you go splashing this Shaka all over the papers and he turns out to be real, we're going to end up with egg all over our faces. So, until we can establish that he's flesh and blood and not all smoke and mirrors, I'd prefer it if you kept him to yourself."

Simon ignores his request. "Got to admit it's clever, dressing yourself up as some ruthless warrior returned from the history books."

"Yes, it is, but... Simon, much as I enjoy talking to you, you haven't rung me up just for me to read you a ghost story, have you?"

"No, Brian, I haven't. Let me ask you one more question and then I'll leave you to your maths homework."

"Spare me. Go on then."

"Have you checked the hostels and hotels for any missing asylum seekers or clandestine immigrants?"

"Simon, do you have any idea how many illegal immigrants come into the country each year? They reckon there's anywhere between 800,000 and 1,200,000 already in the country and nearly 25,000 held in

detention. Border Force do not have the capacity and we do not have the resources to track down, let alone keep an eye on, every Johnny-cum-lately who jumps out the back of a lorry at Dover."

"Nice line, Brian, and that's why I asked the question. I know you can't track them all down, but I'm concerned the body in Thornton Heath might be that of a clandestine I came into contact with when I was out with the Surrey traffic boys. They picked him up and I've traced him to a hostel in Stoneleigh, near Epsom, and subsequently to a hotel on the London Road in Thornton Heath, which he left the morning of the murder. He hasn't been seen since."

"How old was he?"

"Sixteen going on twenty."

"Was he registered as a minor?"

"Yes, Staines Police Station, Easter weekend."

Brian Carver sighed loudly down the phone. "Then Staines nick is where the trail starts and the Thornton Heath hotel is where it finishes. We don't DNA minors. They sometimes get it done to prove their father or uncle is a British citizen, but other than that there's neither cause nor reason and we've no jurisdiction when it comes to clandestine immigrant minors; try social services."

"I have. Drew a blank there, too."

"Now you know how it feels to chase ghosts."

"Brian?"

"Simon, please make this the final, last one? Please?"

"Well, Brian, it's just that all ghosts have history; it's why they're ghosts. Have you run the name Shaka or the DNA samples through Interpol in France? Even if he is a ghost, he must have come from somewhere."

Chapter XIV

Light and dreamy her sleep, Shona revisited the cobalt-blue pools and the tall chimney that lead up to the powder-blue sky. This night, though, she was not alone as she made her way down the huge stone steps: there was someone else with her, a boy, a friend. No, more than a friend. Shona knew him and knew him as well as she knew anybody, even her parents. This boy had been by her side for as long as she could remember; he was a brother to her and yet he was not, or could not have been, for he was black and both her parents white. He was family, of that though she was sure. And in the way some dreams have of allowing you to take part and even manipulate the course of events, Shona grew aware that she was embarked on a journey with this boy. The cobalt-blue waters, the powder-blue sky and a boy lying beside her, touching, feeling, discovering. Could life ever be so sweet?

The calling of her past, this romantic recollection, if recollection it was and not wilful fantasy, slowly evaporated. Other voices were drying the film of remembrance from the screen of her reverie.

Shona opened her eyes. Darkness, except for the fluorescent digits from her radio-alarm. Three o'clock in the morning. How could there be voices?

The night was still, the atmosphere cool and the conversation drifted in through her bedroom window. She strained to listen. Hushed tones, soft murmurings. Daniel was talking.

Daniel. What was she to do about Daniel?

His behaviour the evening before had grown increasingly unsympathetic and at one stage had verged on contempt. He had brought her dinner on her tray: chicken and rice, with peanut butter; good, though nowhere near as delicious as before. And in a similar manner to the way he plonked the tray beside her on her bed, he had assembled the ingredients in her bowl with no real thought or care: there was chicken, rice and peanut butter, all component parts included, yet thrown together. She had mentioned it in a casually amusing way and he had rounded on her, telling her he was not her servant; never had been and never would be. "Those days are over," he had snarled.

Snarled. He had snarled. Snarled was the only word that came close to describing his tone, and his aggression had frightened her and she no longer felt safe alone with him in the house. Her questions had changed him, changed him as though they had reminded him of how poorly life had treated him and now he was intent on taking back what life owed him.

Shona dragged her dressing gown from the foot of the bed and shuffled as elegantly as her tired legs would permit, over to the window.

Fifty metres away, just at the turn where the drive disappeared into the forest of rhododendron, Daniel was leaning against the door of a car, talking to whoever was inside. The solar lights lining the drive showed the car to be dark-coloured and its windows shaded. She had not been able to make out the registration number nor properly hear the conversation, but what had troubled her was that this apparently penniless, clandestine child immigrant was standing in her uncle's drive, deep in discussion with a person in an expensive car. Daniel, it had very suddenly become clear to her, was not the young man she'd seen standing in the back of the truck, covered in eggs and milk. This one was pretending to be that young man and though she had been tired and drunk, she now realised he was not the same person. The Daniel she had seen that night had seemed anxious, afraid, traumatized; and this young man leaning against the car appeared composed and confident.

She'd looked round, as if a voice from the dark might tell her what she should do next. Shona felt her way to the table of trinket boxes. She reached for the house phone and knocked one of the porcelain boxes off the table. It fell and cracked with a light tinkling sound, the carpet muffling further noise.

Shona stepped back from the window and froze, stock still.

The conversation beyond the window ceased. Daniel stood up, looked over at the house and waited for a few seconds, before leaning down again.

She gathered the pieces in her hand and put them in her pocket. Sitting back on her heels she'd felt for the phone, lifted it and before holding it up tight to her ear, placed her hand over the receiver. Nothing, no dial tone. Shona replaced it, softly, then felt along the telephone cable to the terminal at the wall. The cable was unplugged.

Shona went to plug it back in and then realised if she did so, he would notice, so she left it where it was and stood up.

The men were still talking.

As swiftly as her weakened limbs would permit, she padded across the bedroom to a chest of drawers and laid the pieces of porcelain out on the floor beside it. Rising unsteadily, she realised the only route open to her was to go downstairs and retrieve her phone. "Damn you, Tristan." She whispered. The battery would be flat: she'd need the charger. Where to charge it though? The bathroom, it was the only room in which he'd left her alone. There was a plug, and an adapter in the drawer. All she needed was her phone and cable.

There were two main obstacles, she decided as she wavered at the top of the stairs. One: what would she say if Daniel came in and found her in the kitchen? Two: did she have the strength in her legs to get down and back up without needing a rest? Since she'd taken to her bed, Shona had recognised the need to rest between going to and returning from the toilet: getting down and back up the stairs in one go, was that too much of an ask?

She took one last look out of the window, saw that Daniel was still talking and padded out of her room and down the broad staircase. The bannister was solid and reassuring, and the carpet thick, which muted her progress. The darkness, too, came to her aid: she knew the house and knew it so well she could walk through any part of it with her eyes shut.

The front door was open and as she crept past, the light from the motion sensor above it changed colour from yellow to blue. Shona turned, glanced out the door and hurried by. As she entered the kitchen, the same happened and by the additional light thrown from the digital timer on the oven and that of the internet hub, she saw the mess he'd left on the island. Food lay half-eaten, packets half-open and dirty pots and pans littered every other surface. Shona grabbed her phone and cable, swayed on her feet, reached out for the island to steady herself and staggered out into the hall.

Getting down had proved relatively easy, but halfway back up she almost fainted and had to sit down for a moment to draw breath. As she did so, she heard the car start and pull away.

Shona turned round onto her front and began to crawl up the rest of the stairs. She could hear his footsteps on the drive and as she made it into her bedroom and eased the door shut, Daniel came into the hallway below.

—

Daniel, if she'd wondered, she was correct in thinking of him as Daniel, had come into her room a dozen or so minutes later and stood by her bed, evidently checking to see that she was asleep.

Shona had not been, though how she'd managed to lie so quiet and still with a heart beating as fast and as loudly as hers had been a mystery to her. For a further twenty minutes, she had lain silently and continued listening; and when she was certain he'd left the room, she took her phone into the bathroom and plugged the cable into the adapter.

At first light, she returned, slowly, and turned the phone on to check the battery.

But who should she call? The police?

She slipped it into the drawer and returned to bed.

If she called the police, what should she say? "I invited this man into my house, he's been nursing me and now I'm feeling better I don't want him anymore: oh, and I think he may be lying about his identity?" Or perhaps, "This man is an illegal immigrant, please take him away." One, if not both, sounded in her head ridiculous and several others that came to mind equally so.

Shona drifted back into a light and disturbed sleep: something, some thought, prevented her from surrendering completely to her fatigue.

Her phone. She'd put it in the drawer, but in deciding who to call and what to say, she'd forgotten to turn it off.

Shona hauled herself upright and began to get out of bed just as she heard Daniel outside her room.

When the door opened, Shona thought and hoped he might have been bringing her breakfast, but when she saw that he carried a silver

photo frame in place of the tray and that his expression was filled with thunder, she realised breakfast was going to have to wait.

He prowled around the room for a minute, opening and rummaging through drawers and looking beneath. He examined the pieces of porcelain on the carpet and stared at her.

“Sleepwalking,” she said, rubbing her eyes. “I must have knocked it off when I got up to go to the bathroom. Shame, it was one of my favourites. What’s wrong, Daniel, you look upset”

He walked directly over to her bed and again stared at her. His glare was so intense that for a moment she thought he was going to assault her. Instead, he threw the silver frame down on her lap, the photo face up.

Shona did not need to look at the picture; immediately she’d seen the frame she knew the image and understood that he must have been looking through the drawers in the drawing room, because that’s where she’d put it the day after Uncle Charles had died. It wasn’t that she disliked the photo; it was that she loved it too much.

Daniel scowled down at her, his lips thinning as though he was about to spit at her. “This is you with your mother in Africa.”

What was the point in denial? She, with her mother’s eyes, her high cheekbones and freckles, her flame-red shoulder-length hair, her beautiful cupid’s bow of lips. Shona could have passed for many a mother’s daughter, but in that photo, with her mother’s arms sloped over her shoulders, she could not have belonged to anyone else. The blue lake, the red leaves of the Msasa tree, the baby elephant watching them...

She raised her face and presented him with a vaguely triumphant smile: she had deceived him; she wasn’t as gullible as he thought.

“Where is it?” His tone softened a degree or two.

“Near Kariba, a couple of hours from where we lived.”

“You lied to me, Shona.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “No, Daniel, I did not. You did not ask me where I lived when I was young. I told you my uncle visited Zimbabwe, I told you I was an orphan: I did not have to lie.” Thinking of her parents, how they had lived, how much they had loved her and how they had died, kindled greater flames of defiance.

Daniel must have noticed the change in her, for he retreated from the bed and sat down in the chair. "Tell me about them, your parents. Where did they live, Shona?"

"I will, Daniel, if that is your name. I will tell you, but first, get me a glass of water? I'm too tired to get out of bed this morning... This wretched bloody virus, it exhausts me and my mouth is so dry and my breath so short, I'm not sure I can talk for long."

The will to please, his aptitude for nursing, returned and he got up, collected her glass from her bedside table and refilled it. His scowl, though lessened in intensity, remained.

Shona congratulated herself for having the foresight to hide her phone in the drawer of the vanity unit. She sat up straighter. "My parents owned a farm in Mashonaland West. Not a big farm: 1,500 acres, maybe more. I was young, remember, and everywhere in Africa looks vast when you're young."

"So, your parents were like your uncle, they lived off the land their ancestors stole from our people."

Now, it was her turn to glare, her flames reigniting, flaring and then settling to glow like gently smouldering embers. "No, you're wrong. In fact, Daniel, you couldn't be more wrong. You remember me telling you how my uncle inherited this house and all of my grandfather's money? You remember me telling you how my father received nothing?"

He nodded.

"Well, I wasn't lying then either. However, not long after Zimbabwe declared independence, my uncle lent my father the money to buy a farm near Chinhoyi." Shona paused, waiting for her breathing to stabilise and watching for her information to lodge in Daniel's brain. "Yes, that's right, *after* independence. My father bought his farm from Mugabe's government: he paid for the land as most people who buy farms and homes, with money he borrowed and later repaid. That is how it is done throughout the world and that was how it was done in your world until twenty years ago."

"My world?" He bridled his lips: she was speaking about a world he neither wanted nor wanted to be a part of. "Twenty years ago, I was born. Are you saying what has happened is my fault?"

“No, Daniel, what happened was not your fault. You are no more to blame than I am. No, what happened was the fault of Mugabe and his cronies.” Shona paused again, her eyes searching his face for a clue, for a sign as to where she would best begin.

“Mugabe,” he said, “took back the land your ancestors stole from us.”

“Daniel, I just told you my father did not steal his land from you or your brothers: my father bought his land from Mugabe and nineteen years ago, Mugabe stole it from him. Daniel, did you not tell me you left your homeland because your mother could not afford to feed you? Do you know who made that happen?”

When he did not or could not answer her question, Shona wondered whether her attempt to educate him might serve only to encourage him to vent his frustrations out on her. Wasn't that what had happened when her parents had tried to educate the War Veterans who came to occupy the farm? When her father told them they were not farmers and that they had neither the tools nor the knowledge to tend the land and that the land would only fail beneath their feet: hadn't they then become angry and later violent? It was the more craven side of human nature, resorting to violence to get one's way; and she thought she glimpsed that same cowardice lurking behind Daniel's eyes.

To her surprise, he asked her a question she had not expected. “What was your farm like?”

Shona closed her eyes and tried to locate an album of images she had long ago hidden. Yet, find them she did and slowly she shook off the dust.

“Our farm was like many others. The house wasn't much compared to some, a bungalow it would be called here, and we were always short of money so my father was forever putting off rebuilding. My parents farmed tobacco, maize, soybeans; they kept a breeding herd, a sizeable flock of sheep and grew gum trees for paper.” Shona paused, took a sip of water and breathed her shallow breath. “My father had built a dam for irrigation and put up fences to keep the cattle from wandering. He housed his farmworkers and supplied them with electricity and water; my mother took them to town, to the shops and the doctor when they needed attention; my parents made sure their

children could attend school, the same school I attended in Chinhoyi. The farm was a beautiful place, Daniel, the Msasa trees, the flame lilies, the grass paddock where the bull would stand watch over his heifers."

"Your farm was very different to the village of Figtree. My childhood was very hard, I could not wait to leave. You make yours sound like you wish you were still living there."

Shona considered what he said and smiled. "In some ways."

"Did you leave behind a boyfriend? Is that why you look like you are in a dream when you talk about your parents' farm?"

"No, Daniel, I am remembering my parents."

"Now, you are lying to me, Shona. Or perhaps you are lying to yourself. Perhaps you don't want to remember."

His accusation that she was dishonest, angered her in just the same way her father's accusation had that last day at the farm, that last day before her father had piled her into the Land Rover, taken her to Harare airport and shepherded her onto the first of a succession of flights that would eventually deliver her into the care of her uncle. Now, the horror of her father's accusation, her lie in denial and her behaviour at the airport, when the last words she spoke to her father were words spoken in anger, came rushing back to her. She hadn't even said goodbye.

"Oh no, Daniel I remember that part of it all too well. Most of us," she glanced at him so that he would know what she was about to tell him applied as much to him as it did to her, "have memories which if we had the choice, we would prefer not to keep; days we would rather forget than remember. I am sure you must have done things you regret, Daniel. We all have, it's what makes us human, to err. An animal makes a mistake, it dies: we make a mistake, we have to live with the knowledge of it. I suppose it's how we learn." Shona stopped talking while she dragged some much-needed oxygen into her lungs. "But yes, you are right, I had a boyfriend, if that is the right way to describe Richard. He is one of my better memories."

"How did you know him? Was he the son of another farmer?"

"No, he wasn't; he was the son of my father's foreman."

"A white boy, eh?"

"No, Daniel, Richard was like you, except he was sweet and polite and thoughtful and fun to be with. We were the same age and we had

grown up together, so it was only natural we should be friends. We would ride our bicycles around the farm, go exploring, take picnics and sit under the bean tree to watch the storks come and go. There was never any pressure between us to be more than friends until my sixteenth birthday. He said he wanted to take me to a special place to celebrate my birthday, so we cycled to the caves just beyond Chinhoyi and swam in the..."

Her mouth dried and her throat itched. Shona coughed to clear her throat and found herself gasping for air; gasping for air and remembering. The tunnel, the steps down through the rocks, the cobalt-blue waters and the powder-blue sky, the tiny white fish and Richard looking at her in a way every girl hopes a boy will one day look at her. The beautiful memories had been there all along, it was just that she had suppressed them because they were too closely associated with the ugliness of her departure.

"The caves at Chinhoyi," she said. "was where we ceased being friends and became something stronger, something far more beautiful."

"Is this Richard still your boyfriend?"

"In a way, I don't think he has ever left me. Maybe that's why I've never been able to hang onto a boyfriend for long. Maybe it's that I've never found anyone to love me the way he did. Richard's love for me and my love for him was unconditional." She sips and fixes him with the critical gaze of a portrait painter examining his muse. "You remind me of him, you know. You can be sweet and thoughtful and polite; you have been to me. Yet there is an uncompromising side to you, isn't there, Daniel? You want to make the world pay for your pain and that's no reason to live; that's only a reason for dying."

He glowered at her. "What happened to this fool of a boy?"

It wasn't that he referred to Richard as a fool, because he was not. He was bright and intelligent and worked hard at school; and by now he would be like her, no longer young. It was the manner in which Daniel spat out his name, as though he had in some way betrayed his tribe by going with a white girl: that outraged her.

She raised her head and looked down her nose at him, baiting him, goading him. "What are you intending to do, Daniel? You can't stay here for ever. In a day or so, I'll be better and you'll have to go. Whoever

you fought with before you turned up at my gate must have forgotten about you by now, so why don't you call the man you met last night and ask him to come and collect you? You don't need me anymore. If you leave, I'll just quietly forget about you,"

He ignored her, his face twitching with irritation. "I asked you what happened to this fool of a boy you were with? Tell me."

"In any case, you're not that kid I saw covered in eggs and milk in the back of that truck. I realised that last night. I may have been drunk, but you're not the Daniel I saw. He was a frightened young man and you are an old man in a young man's body. You're shrewd unscrupulous. You've used me just like I imagine you use everyone." Shona paused, knowing she had made him angry and intent on making him more so. "Go on, tell me your real name or tell me I'm wrong."

His face cracked into a smile, leering, venal and cruel. He could see her game; he'd played it before. She had riled him and in so doing, he admired her; she had spirit. "I will tell you my name, Shona, when you tell me what happened between you and that boy."

"Richard," she said. "You can say his name; I've told you. I can't say yours, because you haven't told me, in just the same way you haven't told me what happened to Daniel. You must know him. How else would you have known where to come? How else would you have known Daniel was found covered in eggs and milk, and that I was drunk and that someone drove me to this house and then left in a police car? Where is Daniel now?"

He got up from his chair and walked slowly over to the side of the bed, where he towered over her. He balled his fists. "What happened? Tell me, or I will make it so you cannot get out of the bed for the rest of your life."

Shona was past caring and silently pleased that she had forced him to the edge of his temper. Though hers was a minor and in all likelihood Pyrrhic victory, the satisfaction of knowing she could gain some superiority over him heartened her. She relaxed her shoulders and conjured half a smile.

"Okay, all right, I'll tell you. When we returned from the caves, there was a crowd at our gate: War Veterans. Do you know who War Veterans were? No? Well, they were men who were supposed to have

fought for Zimbabwe's independence, except that many of them weren't nearly old enough to have fought. They were Zanu PF supporters whose votes Mugabe had bought with promises of land, our land. They had come to reclaim what Mugabe had told them was rightfully theirs, only in our case it wasn't theirs because, like others both black and white, my father had bought his land from the government.

"The crowd were aggressive: my father called the police; they said they were powerless to intervene. My mother was scared, our workers were scared and I was scared. My father was not scared, though, he told me he was angry with me because I had been with Richard. He said I had no business being with him and that he was going to send me away to live in England with his brother. I hated him for it, but I was sixteen and at that age one is powerless to argue with one's father. He put me on an aeroplane, I left, I've never been back and I've no idea what happened to Richard. Does that answer your question? Are you happy now that you understand my sorrow? Does that make you feel stronger?"

"So, Shona, your father was a racist after all." He gloated. "I knew it. All white men are racist." He beamed, triumphantly at her. "I have always known this."

She shook her head and chuckled. "Oh no, how wrong you are and how wrong I was." Shona threw her head back and scoffed in his face, "Now, show me you are a man of substance. Stop hiding behind Daniel and tell me your real name?"

He stood back from her bed, his threat of violence for the moment suspended, and smiled that leering, venal and cruel smile. "You are brave, Shona. Or perhaps you are stupid, I cannot make up my mind which. Whatever you are, there is no harm in you knowing my name. I am Shaka. I am a king and kings do not need to hide. I--"

A phone was ringing. A distant, muffled and yet cheerful ringing, but a ringing nevertheless.

He turned from her and went into the bathroom.

Shona strained to listen and looked towards the door. However, before she could begin to move, she heard the drawer slide open and then shut. Her phone rang louder and clearer.

He came out the bathroom, walked swiftly over and handed her the phone. "Answer this, now. If you say anything that makes this person suspicious, I will make you swallow it."

Chapter XV

Simon had phoned Soraya and almost apologised, though why he should have felt the need to, he hadn't the first clue. Wasn't their love just one more casualty of the virus? Hadn't the microorganism invaded and divided their relationship in much the same way a malicious software program corrupts data? They'd lost their record of each other, simple as that. And if he'd met up with her in the days after his meeting with Carver and passed her and her family the virus, he would never have been able to forgive himself. Her refusal to see him had saved him from that enduring misery. He understood that now.

In recalling his feelings for Soraya, he completely forgot about Shona and it wasn't until late morning that he remembered to call her.

"Hi, Shona, how are you?"

"Simon?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, I..." He pulled the phone away from his ear and frowned at it: there was no reason why he should apologise to her, too. They'd spoken after their evening together and he'd thanked her, so why was he apologising? "I mean, how are you, Shona?"

"Been better actually, Simon. I've got the bloody virus. Stuck at home. Just my luck, eh? Outside of the supermarket, I haven't seen a soul and still I get it."

"Oh no, Shona! You have seen a soul, you saw me and I've just found out that the day before I came down for dinner, I was in the company of someone who had it. I may be the person who passed it on to you. What can I say? I'm so sorry."

"Don't worry, S—" she broke into a fit of short, dry coughs. "I could have picked it up at the supermarket; kept forgetting my mask. Not to worry. How have you been?"

"I'm fine, thank you. Working on a few things. Not much. Tell me, when did you go down with it? How long after I saw you?"

"Oh, 'bout a week."

He listened hard to hear her, as her tone lacked strength and seemed several octaves lower than he remembered. Simon imagined her lying alone and neglected in the grand house, a scene quite possibly of

his making. "Have you got anyone there to look after you? Would you like me to come down and do some shopping or whatever?"

She hesitated, whether through catching her voice or distraction, he wasn't sure.

"I'm, no, I'm fine, thank you. I have Daniel here. He's turned out to be a very capable nurse."

Daniel? She said Daniel as though she expected him to know who she was referring to. During their evening together, she hadn't mentioned the names of any of her friends, something that had suggested to him that she was inherently lonely, and... Daniel. Yes, of course.

"You mean the clandestine the cops picked up that night? The Sub-Saharan guy we found covered in eggs in the back of the truck?"

"Yes, exactly. He's really rather wonderful."

Simon turned the information round in his mind. Daniel Matope, the very man he had been searching for. "That's a bit weird, Shona. How did he find his way to you? I've been on his trail for a week or so. Thought he'd disappeared. Guess I know why now."

"Oh, long story. Not sure I've got the lungs for it. Fortunately, Daniel does all the talking for me. Except that," she hesitated again, clearing her throat, "I was just telling him about the green pools at Chinhoyi. I used to swim there; near where I was brought up in Zimbabwe. Do you remember me telling you about them?"

"Yes, of course. You totally sold it to me. Made me want to visit the place. Might wait until it sorts itself out, but it's on my bucket list." Simon paused, something she said didn't sit right: she had told him about Chinhoyi, but not the pools. "Well, as long as you've got someone to look after you. Must seem strange having a nurse you'd met like that. Don't worry, I won't go reporting him to Border Force." He paused again. "In fact, I'd like to have a chat with him. Ask him if he'd be happy with that and bell me when you're feeling better. On second thoughts, if you need me to do anything for you, please let me know. Just how lousy do you feel? They say it knocks the stuffing out of you."

"Lousy, Simon. Absolutely washed-out, drained and brain dead. Look, I'll give you a call when I'm feeling a little more like talking, is that all right?"

“Sure, Shona. Call me whenever. I was going to say ‘take care’, but I guess that’s why you’ve got Daniel there. Bye, Shona.”

“Bye, Simon. You take care of yourself, please.”

Chapter XVI

Shaka grabbed the phone from her and hurled it against the wall, where it smashed to pieces.

"You think you are smart." He glared down at her and slapped her on the side of her face, the blow knocking her over against her pillow.

Shona covered her face with her hands, steeling herself, expecting a second blow. Her cheeks stung and tears filled her eyes.

"I should kill you right now," he screamed. "Don't you realise I could snap your neck like a twig." He did not move back from the side of her bed; rather he towered over her, as though waiting for her to give him another excuse to beat her. "I could make you suffer unimaginable pain. I could make you beg for mercy and wish you had never been born."

She dropped her hand from her face and stared back up at him. "Why don't you? If beating a woman makes you the warrior you think you are, then there's nothing I can do to stop you." Shona began to cough; the effort of shouting dried her throat and emptied her lungs of the oxygen. "What's stopping you? I can't."

"There is no one to stop me. I can do what I like with you."

"Like the men who murdered my parents to take back land a fool had told them was theirs? Is that what your life is all about, Shaka king? Is that what is so important to you, taking back what you think life owes you?"

By saying his name, she had acknowledged both his status and provided him with some form of legitimacy, and he calmed and sat back down in the chair. "So, your parents died at the hands of my brothers; that is the real reason why you came here to live in the lap of your uncle's luxury. I thought your father sent you away because of your love for this Richard. Because you loved a black man."

Shona rubbed her face and then wiped her eyes on the bedsheet. "So did I, Shaka. So did I."

He waited for her, watched the turmoil in her and revelled in his power over her. "Tell me, please. Explain to me why you endure such pain. Explain to me how my brothers made you suffer."

“You want to know how my parents suffered? How I have suffered? You want to torture me with my memories?” They were questions Shona had asked herself many times. Why had life turned on her? What wrong could her parents have done that justified their end?

She fought to control her breathing and when she had regained some rhythm, some balance in the way she could fill her lungs without needing to cough, she raised her face and looked defiantly back at him. “For too long I suffered under the belief that my father had sent me away because I did something most every young girl does. It was a monkey I could not shake from my back; a hyena that followed me wherever I went, no matter how fast or how far I ran. Only when I blackmailed my uncle did he eventually tell me the truth.”

“Blackmail?”

“Yes, Shaka, blackmail. I can see by your reaction you are pleased to learn that even a woman like me is capable of the kind of subterfuge you would stoop to. I told my uncle I would leave him and he would never see me again if he wasn’t straight with me. You see, it seemed too much of a coincidence that my father had sent me away just before he and my mother died. I felt it in my heart and yet my guilt would not allow me to believe it, so I looked through newspaper archives, trawled the internet, and gathered enough information to give me the confidence to confront him.”

Shaka sat and listened so attentively that Shona imagined herself reading a bedtime story to a child. In a way, she was and she disliked herself for feeling so.

“I left Zimbabwe at the very beginning of August and a few days later a minister from the government and our local MP from Zanu PF, Mugabe’s party, toured the area around Chinhoyi, encouraging people to occupy more farms. A farmer in Kweke had been murdered by War Veterans, which made the situation very tense, and the next day some farmers in our area rallied to rescue another whose house was being attacked. The police then arrested a dozen of our farmers who had nothing to do with the confrontation, including some who had gone to the police station simply to find out what was going on. The day after that, government loyalists began assaulting white people on the streets of the town, and the next day the Veterans went on the rampage,

burning down farms, houses and outbuildings, stealing anything they could carry and beating anyone who attempted to stop them. Pro-government newspapers even reported that it was the farmers who had looted their own farms and many families decided that because they were no longer safe, they had to leave.”

She took her glass from her bedside table and gestured for him to refill it, which he did. When she had sipped and gathered her breath she went on, starkly aware that it was the recollection that was tightening her throat as much as the wretched virus.

“I found out through the newspaper archive that on the same day the Veterans went on the rampage, my parents farm was attacked and the farmhouse burnt down with...” She coughed again and fought back her tears. “... with them inside.”

Shona allowed the silence to extend, both to give herself time to recover from recounting the traumatic events and to encourage him to absorb the horror of them.

“Throughout the many years before I found out what had happened to my parents, I carried the guilt of knowing I had spoken my last words to them in hate and not love. Since I found out, I have had to live with the guilt of leaving my parents to die believing I hated them. No daughter should have to live with that. Now, if that is not reward enough for your vengeful soul, then truly, Shaka, you are lost and will never be found.”

“Death is never so simple,” he said. “It is never the end of a story, it is usually the beginning; for if a mother dies at the hand of others, the children must have their revenge.” His face slackened or softened into a pretence of sympathy.

Shona would not allow herself to believe he felt in any way sorry for her, not after the little-boy-lost act he’d put on for her when she’d found him at the gate. She wanted to hurt him in the same way she’d wanted to make someone pay for her parents’ death, perhaps in the same way she wanted to make him pay for forcing her to remember.

“You had a father,” he said. “And he was a good father.”

“My father could be a little strict, though I don’t think even now I understand just how headstrong I was; I can’t have been easy for him. My mother?” Shona smiled, as much at herself as at Shaka. “What you

said about your mother reminded me of her: my mother was tough, all wives of farmers in Zimbabwe had to be tough, but my mother was never tough with me. Like your mother, mine would have sold her love to protect me and in a way she did."

He returned her smile, though by the manner in which he raised his face and bridled his lips, his was clearly a smile of satisfaction or gratification gained from her suffering. "We have much in common, you and I. We are both orphans of our world."

"No, Shaka, you are wrong. The world may have made you an orphan, but I was made an orphan by people like you."

Chapter XVII

Simon tossed and turned, and every time he drifted near the precipice of sleep, the hand of doubt dragged him back awake to leave him staring at the ceiling.

He got up and wandered around his flat, made tea, turned the television on. News reports reiterated the growing number of deaths, growing numbers of redundancies and only a suspension of evictions would save those behind on their rent from adding to the numbers of homeless. Simon drank his tea, turned the television off and returned to bed, thankful that he had his own bed in his own flat.

The prospect for those like Daniel the clandestine immigrant were bleak in the extreme, and yet he was relieved Shona had someone to care for her through a virus he felt certain he had transmitted to her. He sat up and reached for his phone.

What had she said? She had been talking to Daniel about the green pools of Chinhoyi. He tried to recall their alcohol fuelled conversations. Chinhoyi: yes, she had told him that was the name of the town near where she grew up; but no, he was equally sure she had not mentioned anything about green pools. He Googled 'Chinhoyi' and 'pools', and waited. Several lines of information came up: caves, limestone, near the town, the main cave of which contained a pool of cobalt-blue, the Sleeping Pool or Chirorodziva, the Pool of the Fallen.

Cobalt-blue, not green. Simon got back out of bed and opened his laptop. When it brightened into life, he Googled the same information. Every link described the pools as cobalt-blue rather than green, and the Pool of the Fallen was a cave into which the Angonni tribe had thrown their victims.

Was she trying to tell him something?

He thought of the youth from the cold truck, Daniel Matope, and how he had disappeared the same day the body of a similar youth was discovered in Thornton Heath. Simon had convinced himself that the body was Daniel's and if it was, then who was the youth at Shona's?

He dialled her number: it did not ring, the message informing him the phone was switched off. However, it was late, so it wouldn't be

unreasonable that her phone was switched off. What had she told him? She was always running out of battery and if he wanted to get hold of her, he should use the house phone, because he would always get her on that. Somewhere, he had the number of her house phone, but where?

It took him a few minutes before he found it among a pile of papers. He wondered again if he should call; it was, he glanced at the screen on his phone, ten-thirty, not so late. Was he seeing demons? Being ridiculous?

He dialled the number. It rang: he waited. The phone rang on; and still he waited.

The shiver of a chill ran up his back. She was ill, she was at home and she had definitely told him he would always get hold of her on the house phone.

Simon slammed shut his laptop and threw on his clothes.

–

A handful of van drivers hurrying home, Uber drivers lazing in the middle-lane and a late commuter or two: the A3 wasn't deserted and yet Simon had to concentrate to keep his speed below the limit. The roads were dry, the visibility unhindered and as soon as he cleared the Hook underpass, he pushed the accelerator pedal to the floor.

The satnav informed him the distance was thirty-two miles and the journey would take fifty-six minutes, which was fifty-six minutes too long. The merry-go-round of lights was in his favour as he swept round the curve above the motorway and he charged down onto the open reaches of the M25.

He kept to the nearside, hoping he would avoid attention.

Traffic was light, too, and he recalled his night on patrol with the two officers from Surrey Police, their commitment and their competence, hours of boredom interrupted by moments of swift and sometimes horridly startling action. And no sooner had he thought of them than a vehicle flashing blue lights filled his rear-view mirror.

"Oh, not now. Really? I can't have been going that fast." He glanced at the speedometer. "Ah." He swore, slowed, indicated and pulled over. Had he brought his licence with him?

The kaleidoscope of flashing lights had pulled up ten or so metres behind him.

He opened the door, his heart thumping, his hands shaking.

“Stay in the car, please sir.”

He shut it, his heart still thumping, his hands still shaking.

A hi-vis-vested police officer appeared beside his passenger door.

He buzzed down the window.

The policeman squatted and... smiled. “In a hurry this evening, are we, Mr Peckham?”

“I, er... Oh, Christ! It’s you, Officer Steve.”

He tipped his cap and grinned. “All right, Simon? How’s your love-life?”

“Look, I know I was hurrying; I just didn’t realise I was hurrying quite that much.”

“Well, you were and you weren’t, Simon. It’s more that you clipped the end of the lights at the junction onto the slip-road and then hit the afterburners: 80 mph. So, what’s the hurry?”

Simon grimaced and sucked his teeth. “Mind if I asked you to get in for a moment?”

The policeman’s jacket and vest filled the passenger side, the clipboard and pen in his lap. “What’s up, mate, you look all flustered?”

“Probably because, believe it or not, I’ve never been stopped before and now is not a good time. Would you do me a favour and just write me out the ticket, I really am in a bit of a hurry.”

Officer Steve raised an eyebrow. “Figured that much. But I’ll ask again: what’s your hurry, business or pleasure?”

“Does it matter?”

The policeman grinned, cheekily. “Might do. Try me.”

Cars flashed past, the blue lights behind flashed bright. Everyone else was in the hurry Simon needed to be.

“Remember that night I was out with you at Easter?”

“Unforgettable. You rescued that bird, we followed you to her house and then we took our chum for a McDonald’s. All a bit of an adventure for you, eh? Did you... I mean, with that bird, did you?”

“Did I what?” Simon asked, ill-concealing his impatience.

“Er, well, you know?” He winked.

"No, I didn't, but it's why I'm here and why I'm in a such a hurry. You remember that clandestine we picked up?"

"You mean the omelette lad? The one in the back—"

"Yes, that one, well..."

Simon briefed the officer on what he thought was going on at Shona's house and made a point of including his meeting and conversations with DI Carver.

"Hobnobbing with DIs now are we?" The policeman maintained his grin, albeit now watered down to display a hint of concern. "Carver? Wasn't he the one you were involved with in that business up in town?"

"Yes, he's now on Trident."

"Mm, gangs, eh?"

"Exactly. And I think one of them is pretending to be the omelette lad and is holed up with that woman we picked up. I know it sounds a bit crazy and I don't have any proof until I get there, but if what I think's going on is right, the woman is in grave danger."

"So, where do you think our omelette lad has got to?"

Simon paused and rubbed his hands against the steering wheel. "I think the young man at her house murdered him."

The officer grinned again and threw his head back, chuckling. "I've got to admit, mate, that's a fabulous story. But then that's what you're good at, eh? Making things up. As you can imagine, we get to hear some fabulous tales. People think up all sorts of shit to get out of a ticket, you'd be amazed. D'you know, the other night—"

"Steve, please, just do me the favour and write out the ticket. If you don't believe me, call DI Carver. I'm not sure where he's based, but I'm sure you will be able to get hold of him through the Met."

"Okay, calm down, calm down."

"Sorry, Steve, I just need to know this woman's okay and I can't do that until I get to her house. So please, do what you have to do and let me go?"

The policeman raised his eyebrows and slipped his pen under the spring on the clipboard. "Simon, I've never known anyone surrender that quickly; you must be worried. Go on, get on with you. I wasn't going to nick you anyway. Thought it might be a bit of fun, but you're not in the mood, are you?"

“No. And thanks for not giving me a ticket.”

“I think we can do better than that. Once we’re on the motorway, we’ll pass you and you can follow us up to Junction 11. When you turn off up the slip-road, we’ll be carrying on, so after that try and watch your speed, please? Wouldn’t want to have to scrape what’s left of you up off the tarmac. Take it easy.”

Chapter XVIII

Her jailer had made her dinner, though he hadn't taken either time or care in his preparation: cheese sandwich, no butter, and water.

"Lucky to get the cheese," she'd said, "thanks."

He'd glared at her. "Where is the safe?"

"What safe?"

"The safe where your uncle would keep his money. The safe where *you* keep his money."

"My uncle is dead, Shaka. And no one keeps cash any longer because people like you break into their homes and steal it."

He'd smiled at her insult. "A man like your uncle, with business in Botswana, would never be poor for diamonds."

"He wasn't. But as I told you, my uncle is dead and the only jewellery I own I keep in London. Why would I keep diamonds here when I have no one to wear them for? Besides, you've already looked through my room; I've watched you when you thought I was asleep, so don't bother denying it."

"Then you will show me your safe. Where is it?"

"Oh, I'm sure you'll find it, Shaka; you're not that stupid."

Shona had wondered if her second insult was one too many, for his back tightened and his arms tensed as he moved towards her. Then, much to her surprise and relief, he'd reined in his anger, smiled once more and left her room.

Now, she heard Shaka going from room to room, clearly searching for not only the safe, but also anything of value that he could take with him, if leaving was his intention.

She wondered if Simon had picked up on her coded message: it was all she'd been able to drum up what with Shaka standing over. Either he would remember their conversation or he wouldn't; there would be no in between. She had to plan for the worst, try to play Shaka for as long as she could and resist the temptation to taunt him.

He stormed into her room. "Get out of bed. Come and show me the safe. If you do not, I will cut your face."

So, she did. Shona got up, put on her dressing gown and steadied herself. The thick, redwood bannister once more supported her down the stairs and though she maintained the façade of tiredness for her captor's sake, she noticed she no longer felt either quite so tired or short of breath.

She led him through the drawing room into the library and over to one of the glass cabinets lined with books. At first glance, the books looked like any other red leatherbound volumes until Shona slipped her hand under the lowest shelf and pressed a button. A section of false book splines swung out to reveal the grey metal face of a safe.

Shaka smiled in appreciation. "A clever man, your uncle. I like people who are clever in this way. Open it."

Shona reminded herself not to antagonise him, twisted the dial back and forth, and pulled the door open.

A half-dozen or so small boxes lay neatly-stacked inside.

He reached in, removed two and placed them on the sill of the cabinet.

"Watches," she said. "My uncle liked watches. He had one for every day of the week and a couple to spare." She glanced at Shaka and perceived the gleam of avarice in his eyes. "Some of them are valuable; others not so. There is a Rolex he used to tell me was worth £10,000 and another he used when flying which might make a bit of money. Apart from this house and his clothes, they are all I have to remember him by. The clothes are no use to me, they look better on you, and the house I will sell; the watches I was going to hang on to. They don't really matter, I suppose; I mean, who wears a watch these days? Take your time. Look at them. Enjoy them. I'm going back to bed before I fall down."

Shona left him sitting in her uncle's old wing-backed leather chair, his eyes wide with fascination as he removed each watch from its box and examined it as though it was a rare and precious jewel.

As she left, he said, "I am leaving early in the morning; a man is coming to collect me." He did not follow her.

Shona walked through the drawing room, lingering to wonder what she would do with her uncle's collection of stuffed heads. Glazed but bright eyes watched, the souls of long dead animals speaking to her. Surely, no one would want them; they were monuments to a history

most people would rather rewrite. She looked at the Matabele shield crossed with a pair of knobkerries.

What had he told her? “The Matabele are really the Ndebele. Their name comes from the term *thebele*, which means *the people who hide behind cowhide shields*. The knobkerrie, a hardwood shaft with a bulbous head, was used as a fighting club: *Knop* meaning ball and *kerrie*, a walking stick.” She looked at the creased leather chair beneath the shield: he had told her that right there, in that very chair, not long after she’d arrived at the house, all those years ago.

It was late and the silence deafening.

Shona lingered. “Who said dead animals don’t speak?”

Chapter XIX

The digital clock on the dashboard read near to midnight and the closer he got to the house, the more the question of what he was going to do when he got there began to bother him. If it was the Daniel he remembered from his night out with the two traffic cops, then there was no real issue and he would simply check on Shona and go home. That was the end he hoped for. If it turned out to be the ghost, Shaka, then... he had no idea what to do. The Royal Marine, Billy Martin, had kept him safe in that business up at Old Street. What he wouldn't pay to have him in the passenger seat right now?

He pulled up outside the gate and punched the code in the entry panel. Just as he remembered from that first night, the drive was lit by solar lamps and the garden the same. There was no way he would have been able to approach the house without being seen, so he parked right out front on the apron a few paces from the front door.

The house itself looked eerily quiet. A bedroom window on the first floor was drawn open but, other than that, the place looked empty. He walked over, rang the doorbell and stepped back to wait.

Nothing, not the slightest response.

Simon stepped back up to the door and rang again. The bell may not have been the loudest, but with the absolute lack of any other noise, he reckoned you would hear it down at the gate. Even though the stars were out in abundance, the night air was perfectly warm; however, an unpleasant shivering in his shoulders betrayed his nervousness and he found the need to flex his arms. Shona was somewhere inside, he was sure of it; it was what she had told him, she was stuck at home.

He rang once more and then stepped back to peer in through the dining room window. Nothing, no movement, nothing.

He walked slowly backwards to the car, staring up at the windows, hoping to see a nightlight or some greater clue as to where she was.

There was someone standing in the half-shadow at the open window on the first floor, he was certain of it. He looked up. It was Shona. She was wearing bedclothes and pointing with both hands at

him. Why was she pointing in such a strange way, pointing and at the same time offering her hands to him?

Simon stood and watched her, his face a picture of confusion as he tried to make out what she was trying to tell him.

Shona moved closer to the open window and appeared to fall against the sill, thrusting her hands out to him. They were bound with cord and her mouth was gagged with cloth. She was frantically trying to warn him, but of what?

The front door swung back and he was confronted by a young man dressed in old man's clothes. "Can I help you?"

Simon, taken slightly by surprise and unsure of how he was supposed to react to seeing Shona gagged and bound upstairs, said, "Yes, do you mind telling me who you are?"

The young man grinned unpleasantly. "Yes, I am Daniel."

"Daniel? Daniel who? What's your full name?"

"What has my full name got to do with you, my friend? Who wants to know and why is it so important?" He held onto the door with one hand, keeping it only half-open, suggesting that whatever the outcome of their chat, he wouldn't be allowing Simon inside.

"Well, my name is Simon, Simon Peckham and I'm a friend of Shona's. I gather she's not well and I've come to see how she is. Now, what's your name again?"

"My name is Daniel and I am nursing Shona while she is unwell. She is in good hands. You may go now."

Simon feigned a sudden recognition. "Ah, Daniel. You must be the young man she met with the police the night her uncle died."

"Yes, that is right."

"Oh, if only it was." He allowed his temper to come to the boil, allowed the muscles in his neck and his arms to tense, and said, "You're not that Daniel and I'm the only one here who would know what he looked like. I sat in the back of the police car with Daniel, shared a meal with him and sat with him in the nick while we waited for social services to come and pick him up. You're not that Daniel. Now get out of my way."

They both moved at the same instant towards each other. Shaka from the top of the shallow steps and Simon up from below. They

thundered into one another and tumbled sideways onto the hard ground, punching and kneeing, grabbing at each other's arms and butting with their heads. Simon grabbed a handful of flesh at Shaka's cheek and gripped tight and pulled. He screamed in pain, turned his head and bit Simon's hand, before rolling back away from him.

They stood, faced off, each sizing the other up, looking for a weakness, watching for a sign that might tell them which way was best to go. They punched some more and kicked and wrestled, and the more Simon grew tired, the more Shaka grinned: to him their contest was a game, a game he wanted his opponent to know he could end whenever he felt inclined to.

Simon, his left foot forward, punched with his right, a tired punch, poorly aimed, and Shaka simply swayed out of reach and, realising Simon was off-balance, wrenched him closer, smashing down hard on his neck and throwing him to the ground.

Shaka stood back, reached into his pocket and drew the knife.

They paused. Simon heaved air down into his lungs in the hope his limbs would gain some strength, some power. He saw the blade gleaming bright and silver. He tried to get to his feet, but was knocked back down. He scrambled to get up, but again Shaka rocked back on his feet and kicked him in the side of his head, flooring him. He tried to rise again, urged his body to react, to object, to move. He raised his head, his left arm, tried to roll onto his side. He could see the house standing tall before him. He looked for Shona at the window, but the window stared back, offering no help. Then the compact weight of a body landed on his chest, knocking the air out of him, pinning his arms to the ground and disabling him.

"You fight well," Shaka hissed. "For one of your kind, you are a warrior, like me. I am honoured to kill you. Say your prayers and hope they will be answered, for this is your end and your beginning." With both hands clutching his knife, he raised the blade high above his head and revelled in his moment of glory.

Simon looked back, stared death in the face and saw its ugliness, saw its cowardice and... He saw a figure standing ghostlike behind Shaka, a woman with cloth covering her mouth, her wrists tied with cord and a long wooden club in her hands.

“Beginning?” He spat bloody saliva back, tasting the thin metal of it’s liquid in his mouth. “No, Shaka, for your kind there is only an end.”

Shona raised her knobkerrie in the same perfect arc he had raised his knife, and in that moment they were one, Shona and Shaka; the same ferocity of hatred in both their eyes, the same will to prevail and the same desire to kill stark and dreadful and plain.

Shaka saw the distraction in Simon’s eyes and half-turned as Shona, summoning every ounce of her remaining strength, swung the wooden club down against the top of his head.

For a second after the loud crack of hardwood on bone, there was silence as Shaka looked down at Simon with a quizzical frown. Then slowly, he toppled over forwards and came to rest in an ungainly slump, blood spurting from the top of his skull.

Shona stood childlike, holding the knobkerrie in her bound hands, a gentle horror of realisation emerging in her eyes and seeping into her expression.

Simon pushed Shaka’s body off to the side.

Footsteps. Someone was coming and it wasn’t Shona; she was frozen, rooted to the spot and now staring at the club in her hands, as though wondering how it had got there.

No, not someone coming; more than one, and running. He turned onto his side. Two men, yellow fluorescent men wearing black face masks, were rushing towards them.

“Simon?” It was Officer Steve. “Simon, can you hear me? Don’t move, son. What’s the woman’s name, Simon?”

“Shona,” he mumbled through his bloodied mouth. “Her name is Shona.” He looked up at the stars and saw they were impossibly bright. They were laughing and their happiness made him chuckle.

“Shona?” the policeman called. “Put down the club, please. Drop it. There’s a good girl. You’re all right. No one is going to hurt you. Here, you can let it go; it’s all right; it’s over now.”

Epilogue

Simon sat on the step and watched the coloured lights of the emergency vehicles dance around the garden. He hurt, everywhere: his ribs his hands, his face, his neck; everywhere. A masked paramedic stood waiting patiently for him to allow her access; however, he was intent on making her wait until he'd finished the glass of Uncle Charles' most excellent brandy. He watched two other masked paramedics attending to Shona in the back of the ambulance. Her eyes were bright yet dull, like those of a woman hypnotized or those of the animals on the walls of the drawing room. He wondered if she would ever recover from any of the many traumas life had delivered her. None of them had been of her making, just as Daniel had designed none of his, and... Simon looked down at the lifeless form covered by the bloodied sheet... the same probably applied to Shaka, though he found it impossible to feel any sympathy for someone who had tried to kill him.

As though there weren't enough police cars littering the drive, another raced up the drive and slid to a halt. A man got out – he wore a suit, which set him apart from all the other uniforms – and briefly addressed the two traffic policemen.

Steve and Dave had spent the last half an hour apologising to Simon for their late arrival. After they had waved him up the slip-road off the motorway, they had, as he'd suggested, phoned DI Carver and asked him if the line the journalist had spun them contained any thread of truth. When the detective had told them there was no way on God's earth they were to let Simon anywhere near the house, they'd come as quick as they could. Steve had frowned at his colleague, "which was pretty bloody too quick, if you ask me." Only the gate! They didn't have the code and it was high, like the fencing, so it took them a while to gain access. "Sorry, mate."

Simon had smiled, spat a gob of brandy-tinged-blood into the flowerbed and winked. "No problem, guys. Just try not to be so long next time."

The man in the suit was Detective Inspector Brain Carver. "Simon, am I glad to see you?"

"I don't know, Brian, are you? Need some help with your maths homework? Is that why you've come down here in the middle of the night? Well, just so as you know, maths is not one of my stronger subjects either."

"No, Simon, though I have been doing some of the homework I should have done before. Homework you suggested, as I recall. Don't you think you should let Florence Nightingale here have a look at you, you're covered in blood?"

"Not mine," he points at the body, "his. I gather you've worked out who our ghost is?"

Carver rubbed his eyes, as though he was still trying to wake up. "Not really, no. We still have no idea of his true identity and neither do the boys in Paris. All they do know is he's wanted for the murder of two Nigerian nationals. They tell me his DNA was all over the crime scene. Good thing for her," he nodded over at the ambulance, "you were here."

Simon shook his head very, very slowly, then looked over at the cowed figure. "In a strange way, Brian, I wish that was true; I really do." He took a slug of the brandy and rolled the sharp-but-smooth liquid around in his mouth. It stung. He swallowed. "What about the body in Thornton Heath? Do you know if it is the guy we picked up?"

Now it was Carver's turn to shake his head. "Your clandestine? No, sorry, we know nothing about him and we've no means of identification."

"Clandestine," Simon muttered, glancing up at the detective, "and no means of identification. I guess that means we'll never know."

Acknowledgement

Catherine Buckle's extraordinary and terrifying accounts of her family's treatment at the hands of the Mugabe regime, *African Tears* and *Beyond Tears*, provided an invaluable insight into the occupation of farms by the War Veterans. Had these gross and widespread violations of human rights have taken place in a western democracy, the world would have taken greater notice and the press would still be shouting it loud from the rooftops. However, Zimbabwe would appear no longer to be news; rape and murder in a country few would seem to care about is dismissed as so much TIA, *This Is Africa*. Today, the Zimbabwean government is just as responsible for the rape and murder of its citizens as it is for the rape and pillage of its economy. I could not have written this novella without first reading her accounts. Peter Darby provided me with insights into policing, though the poetic license employed is mine and certainly not his. Other than that, Google has been my companion.

About The Author Peter Crawley Peter Crawley was born in Chiswick in 1956, and educated at Cranleigh School and the Goethe Institut in Freiburg-im-Breisgau, Germany. Peter spent much of his youth in Germany, Austria, France and Corsica, and after a short period in the army, worked in Stuttgart as a translator and on luxury yachts in and around the Mediterranean. He went on to run his own business dealing in high-end cars in London's West End for thirty years. Peter is a former transatlantic yachtsman and historic motor-racing driver and has recently published six novels under the Matador imprint: *Mazzeri* and *Ontreto*, with Richard Ross as the central character, *Boarding House Reach*, a character-driven multi-POV story set in Norfolk, *The Truth In Fiction*, a collection of short stories, *The Wind Between Two Worlds* (London) and *Constant Tides* (Sicily). His author website address is www.peter-crawley.com