

The Ponzí Men

**A Crime Thriller
featuring John McBride**

by David Chilcott,

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Author's Note

The South African country of Maswatiland does not exist, except in the author's mind. It is not intended to resemble any existing state or country.

Chapter 1

John McBride was roused from his sleep by the insistent ringing of the phone. He searched the bedside table with his hand, not opening his eyes until he had picked up the handset. He stared blearily at the luminous digits on the clock. Six o'clock. Too early to be anything other than bad news. Maybe his mother, maybe the police, or the hotel was burning down. He could smell no smoke.

"Hello Mr McBride, it's the concierge here. I have two gentlemen who want to come up to see you."

"From where?"

"The police, Sir. Shall I bring them up straight away?"

McBride grunted, and replaced the handset, rolled out of bed. He went to the bathroom, took the bathrobe off the peg, shrugging it on, tying the belt. He padded back into the bedroom, by which time there was a knock on the door.

He still thought it was about his mother. A car crash, or a stroke. She was in hospital. Or dead, even.

He pulled back the night chain, opened the door. Two plainclothes men outside, the porter in his smart uniform standing to the rear of them.

"Come in," said McBride. The plain clothes didn't disguise them. They plodded heavily into the room, and the concierge went away, pulling the door closed behind him. McBride gestured to the group of chairs set round a coffee table at the end of the room opposite the bed.

"Is it bad news?" Of course not. They send uniformed men for that.

The younger man raised his eyebrows, then said: "Oh, I see. No, it's not about a relative. Nothing like that. I'm Detective Constable Wilson, this is Detective Sergeant Carr. If you could just sit down, we'll tell you why we have come."

"At six o'clock in the morning?" said McBride, but in a friendlier fashion, now that he knew it wasn't about his mother. He sat down. So did the policemen. Wilson pulled a notebook from his suit jacket.

Wilson had his pencil poised. It was Sergeant Carr who asked the question.

“Can you tell me where you were at six o’clock last night?”

“Of course. Here I got in about five o’clock, had a shower and got changed. Went down to the bar about seven thirty, ate in the restaurant.”

“Who would know where you were at six o’clock?”

“Well, the doorman downstairs. If he can remember, there were quite a few people arriving with luggage. Do you want to tell me where this conversation is going?”

The policemen looked at one another. Carr scratched his bald head.

“Get dressed, Sir. You are coming with us to the station for more questioning.”

“You’ll have to wait there. I’m getting a shower first.”

He locked the bathroom door after him. He heard one of them opening the curtains in the bedroom. Then he turned on the shower. He shaved while he stood under the water.

He came out of the bathroom, a towel round his waist, and started to dress. As he did so, he looked across the room. The police were still seated, Wilson scribbling in his notebook. He glanced through the window; a sunny day, not a cloud in the sky. He put on his socks and shoes. He was wearing chinos and a white shirt. He put his wallet and change in the pockets. His car keys were with the concierge, in case he needed his car bringing from the multi-storey car park.

Today he supposed the police would give him a lift.

“Okay, I’m ready to go. I haven’t had breakfast yet. Are we going to be long?”

Carr said: “If we are, Mr McBride, we’ll feed you.”

The policemen had both risen, moved to the door. McBride stood watching them. The policemen turned to see why he wasn’t following.

“You said you’d tell me what has happened. When you do, I’ll come with you.”

“Sorry, Sir,” said Carr. “Somebody was shot last night. On the street, not far from here. Rifle bullet. From an upstairs window of an empty property.”

They went through the door into the corridor, Carr first, McBride second and Wilson bringing up the rear. *It would be no problem getting away from them. But in the short term not necessary.*

They went down the stairs single file, even though the staircase was wide enough for them to walk three abreast. They walked through the lobby, and as they passed the concierge desk, one of the porters said: “Good morning Mr McBride,” as though it was an everyday occasion to be arrested. *No, not arrested. Nobody had charged him. Helping police with their enquiries. A grim sentence that indicated guilt.*

The police car, an unmarked Ford Mondeo in black was sitting in the drop-off lane immediately outside the hotel entrance. They went down a flight of steps. Carr blipped the car to open the doors, and the indicators winked back. Wilson opened the back door and put his hand on the top of McBride’s head to push him down into the car, presumably to make sure he didn’t contact the door frame. But who else did that? Not chauffeurs, not taxi drivers, no-one. It was a police thing, to show they were in charge. The street, normally packed with pedestrians, was empty at six thirty in the morning. Wilson went round the car, opened the back door, and sat alongside him. Only then did Carr get into the driver’s seat. He drove fast, under the city walls, turning down the one-way system. McBride knew where

the police station was, he had been in the city for five days already, painting in the centre. He could have walked there faster than the car could get there. He leaned back in his seat and relaxed.

The police station was modern, large flight of steps up to the lobby, divided by an iron fence in the centre, presumably up one side, and down the other. Except no-one was using the one-way system. They went through the automatic doors into the lobby, still adopting single file. Carr nodded at the reception staff, went down a wide corridor, stopped at a door marked *Interrogation Room 6*. He knocked briefly and opened the door at the same time. Wilson didn't enter the room, took up a stand-easy stance beside it.

The room had gloss paint on the walls, a sickly green, white ceiling with many strip lights. Two of them buzzed continually. A table stood in the centre of the room, five chairs around it. The windows were frosted glass, and standing in front of them facing into the room, was a man in his late fifties, smart suit, dark tie, white shirt.

"John McBride, Sir." Carr turned to McBride. "This is Detective Inspector Taylor."

"Sit down, Mr McBride," said the inspector. McBride sat at his side of the table, the inspector sat opposite. He had a green file in front of him. Carr walked round and sat beside him. There was a tape recorder on the table, and a laptop.

The inspector turned to Carr. "Get someone over to the hotel and search the room before the staff start cleaning it." Carr stood up. There was a phone on the window sill. He spoke into it, quietly.

"Well, Mr. McBride, in case you're innocent, you won't know why you are here."

"Nobody is telling me anything, so far. When asked I said I was in my hotel yesterday from five in the afternoon until I was removed this morning. Then they told me a man had been shot. Now it's your turn." McBride stared into the man's eyes.

"Fair enough. You haven't seen any television last night? A news programme?"

McBride shook his head.

"At six o'clock last night a man was leaving his office when he was shot dead. In Northgate Street, about a hundred yards from the station."

"Why do you think I did it?"

"We don't, but you were in the SAS. The man was a financial consultant. And you did lose some money. Quite a considerable sum. In some sort of Ponzi scheme, people are alleging. We've had some complaints of fraud, passed them to London. We've been very busy in the last twelve hours or so." He paused, and seemed to be running a scenario through his mind. He rubbed his eyes. "Several of us haven't been to bed. We found the file of investors of a financial scheme. *Land Investors of South Africa*. Your name was on it. You invested one hundred thousand pounds. Nobody has seen any of the promised annual payments. Except for the first year, that is. As you know, for the past five years, nobody has seen any money at all. That makes people angry. A man like you steeped in the army ways might take it into his head to shoot the man who introduced you to the scheme, eh?"

"That wouldn't be my style. That is anarchy."

"I'm pleased to hear it. We checked the list against names of hotel guests in the city. Yours was the only match."

“Not surprising. A killer wouldn’t register in his own name surely?”

“You *would* be surprised, Sir. Criminals aren’t usually endowed with intelligence.”

“I bet there are some local names on your investor’s list.”

“We have people following them up. So far we’ve found people too old to climb a set of stairs, never mind aim a rifle and run away afterwards.” He was quiet for a moment. McBride could hear voices in the corridor. Not angry or panicked conversation. Joking remarks mostly directed at Wilson, who stood outside, he supposed.

Taylor seemed to make up his mind, opened the laptop, punched some buttons, turned the computer to face McBride.

“These are CCTV images.” McBride saw a busy street of pedestrians, not many vehicles as part of the pedestrian only area. The pictures were intermittent. So the pedestrians moved jerkily. On the right of the screen was a shop, converted to an office. Across the window in gold leaf, he could read *Financial Consultants*.

A man in a dark suit appeared as a door opened. The next frame showed the man falling backwards, his shirt blooming suddenly with blood. His legs crumpled and he fell on the pavement, face down. McBride could see a trickle of blood running down to the gutter. People stopped and looked. Eventually a man stooped by the body feeling his neck for a pulse. He used a mobile phone. Somebody produced an overcoat, which was draped over the body.

Taylor had moved round to McBride’s side of the table, looking at the computer screen over his shoulder. He reached across and tapped a key.

“This is from a CCTV on the other side of the road. Same time frame.”

There was an empty shop near the camera, a large projecting sign. *Lease for sale*. The upper floor sash window was open, a yawning darkness. People on the pavement jerkily walking. Then looking towards their right, outside of the frame.

Taylor leaned over, fast forwarded. A man appeared from an alleyway next to the empty shop. Dark shirt, dark trousers. A big man joining the pedestrians, above average height, muscular.

“See that man, the gunman we think. That could be you, yes?” Taylor touched his shoulder.

“No, it isn’t. I’ve just remembered. My agent phoned me at the hotel last night. Must have been about six. He dialed the hotel landline.”

McBride’s mind was working fast. He recognized the man on the CCTV. His old friend Dusty Miller. The stupid man.

The inspector said “Do you have a phone number with you of this agent? What’s his name?”

“Smith, Ian Smith. Hang on, I have his business card in my pocket.” He pulled out his wallet, extracted the card, passed it to Taylor.

The policeman studied it. “Shall we phone him and ask him if he phoned you?”

“You don’t need to ask me. He won’t be pleased about the time. He works late, rises late.”

“Well, at least he should be in,” said Taylor mildly. He took out a cell phone, put one finger on the business card, as he pressed buttons with the other hand.

The phone rang for a long time, and then McBride could hear an angry voice even at this distance from the phone.

"I'm sorry to bother you at this time, Sir. I have a Mr John McBride with me. My name is Detective Inspector Taylor, Cheshire Police. Can you confirm your name?" McBride heard Ian Smith speak. Taylor said: "Yes of course Mr McBride is all right. If you can just confirm that you phoned him at his hotel yesterday, and approximately at what time?"

McBride heard a long speech coming tinnily over the phone. At least he seemed to have remembered phoning.

Taylor was able eventually to switch off his phone, and put it back in his pocket.

"He does go on a bit, doesn't he, Mr McBride?"

McBride nodded.

"Well he says he needed to speak to you urgently at about six o'clock yesterday evening, and remembered you would be in your hotel at that time. So, yes, that seems to clear you."

"Thank you," said McBride. "So I'm free to go?"

"Yes, but leave your address and phone number in case we need to contact you again."

McBride pulled out his wallet again, and gave Taylor one of his own business cards. Taylor scrutinized it. "Oh, you are that John McBride. DC Wilson is just outside, I'll ask him to run you back to your hotel."

Chapter 2

McBride ran up the steps to the hotel. The commissionaire in his top hat and fancy uniform opened the lobby door.

"Good Morning Mr McBride."

McBride smiled and nodded. He went straight across the lobby, turned left into the restaurant.

He ordered a full English breakfast, his mind full of the killing. Dusty Miller. He had served with him in the SAS Regiment, kept in touch since, albeit sporadically since Dusty hadn't settled to civilian life, and spent most of his time in the world's trouble spots working as a mercenary. Well paid, but dangerous. He must be staying with his sister in Manchester, McBride supposed. They needed to meet.

Back in his room, he grabbed his cell phone which was still on the bedside table. Went over to the window where he knew the reception was best. He dialed Dusty's number. When the phone was answered McBride spoke.

"Dusty, it's John McBride. I assume you are at your sister's in Manchester. Can I come and see you? Not today because I must work, but tomorrow morning?"

"How did you know I was in Manchester?"

"I saw a picture of you running out of a building in Chester. But the police don't know it was you."

"Christ, did you get pulled in? You must have, unless it was on the television."

"Yes, and no. It wasn't a clever thing to do."

"I was angry."

"I'll be round tomorrow about ten-thirty. At you sister's, unless you want to meet somewhere else."

"No, my sister's will be okay. We can sit in the sun in the garden."

The rest of the day, McBride painted. The call from Ian Smith was about a commission which happened to be in Chester. Since he was already there, could he possible fit it in? He had already told the client that McBride would be round today to make a start. That was Ian Smith. Impetuous, a slave driver, a drunk too.

But he had put McBride's paintings on the map. The result was that McBride sold every painting as soon as he had done it. Or rather, Ian Smith sold them through his UK galleries, and wholesaled them round the world.

He looked in his wallet for the address. It was actually ten miles from Chester, but never mind.

Next morning, he checked out of the hotel. The concierge had already sent for his car to be driven round, and it was waiting on the slip road. The porter carried his case and painting gear. McBride got into the car, fiddled with the satnav, entered the post code of Dusty's sister, and he was off. The time eight thirty, and another beautiful morning. The traffic was heavy but most of it was entering the city, not leaving it. McBride made good time, until he got off the M60.

Nevertheless, it was only ten minutes before ten when he was pottering along the suburban street, prewar detached houses built on large plots. He noticed that a few houses were recently built in the gardens of the originals. A good way to make some money, and reduce the gardener's bill at the same time.

The satnav announced that he had reached his destination, and looking around, McBride spotted the house number, and swung into the large sweeping driveway.

Dusty was waiting at the door, standing on the porch. McBride got out of the car and greeted him.

"You're looking good." Miller was tanned, and the scars of previous wars had healed and faded on his face. He was lean and muscled.

"You, too," said Miller. "For an artist who has it too easy." He led the way into the house, shouting to his sister who came out of a room and into the hall.

"Hello again," she smiled. "Dusty tells me you're going to have a discussion in the garden, so I'll be out with tea and biscuits soon."

Again Dusty led the way, through a door out of the back of the house. McBride was impressed. The lawns swept away to a stand of mature trees. A summerhouse stood off to one side of the lawn surrounded by a large flower bed.

Dusty led the way to the summerhouse, and in front was a garden table and chairs.

"Here will do," said Dusty. He pointed to a chair and McBride sat down. Dusty sat at the opposite side of the table.

"How long is your leave?"

"About another week and I'm due back. Hey, I didn't tell you. I got another job. Brigadier, no less. Head of the army, small independent state, bordering on South Africa. It's not all that grand, an army of only two hundred.

A kingdom. I knew the king when he was in England being educated. Well, he was a prince then. But his father died, and now he's a king."

“Promotion and a permanent job. Sounds good.”

“It is, so far.”

McBride saw Dusty’s sister approaching, bearing a large tray. He stood up, and took the tray from her. She sat with them for a while, drinking a cup of tea then she excused herself, claiming unfinished housework. She walked away up the path, still a very trim figure, a mother of three in her early forties. McBride felt a pang of lust, turned his eyes back to the table which was suddenly besieged by a squadron of sparrows aiming at the crumb-filled plates.

“Okay, Dusty. Why did you shoot Johnson? And are you clear, no fingerprints?”

“Christ, McBride, give me some credit. I used an old Lee Enfield which I know was used by the IRA, back in the day. I cleaned it down and left it in the shop. I wore gloves. If they had picked me up at the time, there was a minimal risk of powder contamination. Any how I got clean away.”

“True, the CCTV pictures were a mess.”

“And you know why I shot Johnson. That investment was my pension fund.”

“You should never invest what you can’t afford to lose. But I was pissed off as well. You know they got away with 30 million quid, less a nominal amount they paid back in dividends.”

“And I’m going after Markham. He’s taken the bulk of the cash. Lives like a multimillionaire, so it’s said.”

“Well, he is a multimillionaire. Though he pinched the cash, it’s not his. But you can’t just go around killing people. It’s murder. You can’t be judge and jury.”

“Like the government does, eh?”

“Look,” McBride said, “Dusty, governments are different, wars are just a chess game, and we’re the chessmen. Regarding Johnson and Markham, killing them is too easy for them. They are alive one minute, dead the next. Don’t know it’s happened. It’s far too good for them. I’ll help to punish Markham, but if we play it right we can dupe him and get at least your investment back, and maybe a bit more to repay the widows and orphans. But he’s not in the country, now.”

“McBride, I know where he is and so do you. In South Africa. Daren’t come back, he would get arrested, or lynched. And guess where I live now – South Africa! Marvelous isn’t it.”

McBride knew he wasn’t suggesting going after Markham to help Dusty get his money back. Well, only so far. The big pull for McBride was the adventure that he still lusted for even ten years after leaving the SAS Regiment. The art world was different. In itself beguiling, every painting he did was an adventure of a different kind. He could happily absorb himself in art for a year, even a couple of years, and then he was missing the raw adventure in the real world, chasing and fighting, pitching his wits against adversaries, people needing to be taught a lesson.

Dusty said: “Well, okay. So how do we screw some money out of the Markham guy?”

“We don’t go hell for leather chasing him and attacking him face to face. A guy like that must have so many enemies that he’ll be on the lookout all the time. Probably got bodyguards. Nowhere near as good as us, of course.” Dusty smiled.

McBride went on. “We should spend some time getting together a dossier on him, what he does, where he spends his time and who with. I can do some work on the internet, and speak to a few ex-colleagues who might know Markham. In

the meantime, you're on the ground in Africa, might be able to strike up an acquaintanceship.

"You said you're head of an army in a small kingdom? And a friend of the king? What's the name of the country?"

"Maswatiland. It adjoins South Africa. The king's a Zulu. Population one million, give or take. Mostly Bantus and Zulus, with a reasonable smattering of Indians, migrated down from troubles further north. The British offered them citizenship in the UK, and lots of them took it. But for others, Africa is home to them. As I said, I knew the king from schooldays. We both served in the cadet force at school."

"Do they have any embassies in other countries?"

"Just in Jo'burg. Very fancy townhouse with our flag flying over it."

"So, they must have embassy functions. Get the king to put Markham on the guest list. Then speak to him at a function, you in your brigadier uniform, should impress him. Then introduce him to the king. That will impress him even more. Tell the king what we're doing, get him on our side, and he might learn even more than we can."

"Good idea," said Dusty. McBride could tell he was impressed.

It was nearly lunchtime when Dusty showed McBride out to the front of the house, down the side garden to reach his car.

"Say goodbye to your sister," said McBride, sorry that he wasn't going to see her before leaving. "And for goodness sake keep in touch."

As he drove off, McBride was back in artist mode, composing his next painting in his head. The Welsh mountains from the Dee estuary, snow on the mountain tops in the pure white of the paper, the sun sparkling across estuary, the pathway white paper, with a broad brushstroke flat across the tops of the rough paper to accurately indicate the flecked waves. A large painting, with yachts skimming over the water. The yachts would come from McBride's imagination, set across the water to complete the composition. If it was good enough, his agent might make a one thousand print run.

Chapter 3

It was the end of the week before John McBride got home. He pulled his painting gear out of his car, and dumped it in his studio, went back for his suitcase.

The next thing he did was make himself a cup of tea. He was taking this weekend off. Painting was actually hard work. So that he wouldn't be pestered by his agent, McBride got in a pre-emptive strike, and phoned him.

The phone was picked up straight away, unusual for Ian Smith. Must be at his desk, counting his vast wealth.

"Ian, it's John McBride. I've finished the paintings of Chester and the Dee, including the commission you slipped in. I could let you have them on Monday, or I could fed-ex them, whichever."

“Bring them over on Monday, and I’ll treat you out for dinner. You can stay at my house overnight. I’m certainly interested in hearing about your brush with the police. You attract trouble, I often think.”

“You’re wrong. I attract excitement, because that’s what I miss from my service days. If I hadn’t met you, I would still be in the army. Probably a full Colonel at least, by now.”

“And considerably poorer. You might have been laid off. I hear the army’s a lot smaller these days.”

McBride sighed. “True,” he said. “I’ll be with you about lunchtime. Then you can buy me lunch as well.”

Smith’s mean streak came to the fore. “No, you buy lunch, I buy dinner.”

McBride washed, changed and shaved, and went off down the road to his local gastro pub. However busy it was, Gerry the landlord always found him a table, spent a few minutes with him over a drink, and a gossip. In pride of place on the end wall of the room was an original watercolour by McBride that he had given to the landlord, a striking painting of the pub itself.

McBride’s meal appeared on the table, and Gerry stood up to move around the room continuing his job of host. As McBride ate, people entering and leaving stopped to greet him, lots of locals that acknowledged the area’s best artist.

As soon as he got back to his house, McBride sat down at his desk with his laptop, and set out to learn more about Robert Matthew Markham, Financial Consultant, and Ponzi Man. As McBride googled the name, a page full of references came up. All but one of them was about the same man. Aged forty-eight, with a trail of dissolved and struck off companies, and blogs about Ponzi schemes.

As far as McBride could find, Markham lived in a Jo’burg district, Standton. It was a white locality, mainly gated communities employing private police forces. McBride knew that since the cessation of apartheid the white population had shrunk by over half a million due to migration. The rise in crime had been the cause of migration. McBride made notes. There were private blogs, naming Markham as a crook. Oddly, Markham had responded to these accusations, in turn pointing out that the writer of the blog was the crook, not him. These responses had been carried out in a friendly fashion, with no spite returned. McBride had to admire the man’s laid back demeanour.

McBride attention was drawn to an item: *Land Investors of South Africa*. It was a news item from *The Daily Telegraph*, dated three days before.

Harry Johnson of Financial Consultants Cheshire Investments Limited announced that they had agreed with the FCA to transfer Land Investors Of South Africa to the trusteeship of Smitt and Company, Johannesburg. This has been brought about by Cheshire Investments no longer meeting capital requirements.

McBride couldn’t believe it. The FCA had just allowed the fund to be moved out of its jurisdiction. There could be no legal way of getting any cash back for investors.

He noted the solicitor's name, and then traced them on Google. The name was familiar. Where had he seen it? He went back to the Markham pages. Yes, there it was. Smitt solicitors happened to be Markham's own solicitors. Worse and worse. Markham was running rings round the British government. He deserved everything that McBride and Miller could do to him.

McBride looked through his scribbled notes, crossed some bits out, added other phrases. Then he sent an urgent email to Dusty Miller.

Dusty Miller read the email as it came in. He was just leaving his flat above the Mess adjacent to the Royal Palace. He had a dinner appointment with the king. Dusty was in his dress uniform, a bit more flamboyant than a British Army dress uniform, but to be expected in a king's private army in Africa.

The two sentries outside the palace jumped to attention, and Dusty smiled and returned their salute while waiting for them to open the gates. There must have been some communication between gates and palace, for as Dusty marched forward to the palace doors, they opened and a captain stood to one side, saluting. Dusty strode through the doors and into a huge entrance hall. The king himself was walking up to him, hand held out.

"Dusty! I hope you had a pleasant leave. How are things in England? I envy you your stay there."

King Maswati the Fourth was a tall Zulu, not as tall as Dusty who was six foot four, but certainly over six feet. The Zulus comprised most of the Government positions, but the Bantus, the other populous race, controlled the civil service, and the races both felt equal. Commerce was mainly in the hands of Indians, who had been drifting southwards through the continent as they met expulsion from Uganda in the seventies. They now comprised about seven percent of Maswatiland's population.

The king led the way into a small room off the hall. There was a large table set with only two places. On a side table there were bottles of wine and aperitifs. A uniformed servant stood by the table, smiling respectfully.

"What will you have to drink, eh, Dusty? A glass of Gordon's Gin and Schweppes's Tonic, that's our tippie, eh?" Before Dusty had time to concur, the servant placed two slim jim glasses on the side table, scooped ice cubes until they were both full, sloshed gin into them from a large bottle of Export Gordon's, and stood two bottles of tonic water beside them. The king picked up one of the glasses.

"Here's mud in you eye," he said and took a huge draft. Dusty picked up the other glass, and took a huge drink. "And to you," he said.

The king moved to the dining table, gestured Dusty to the chair on his right, and sat down. He rang a small bell on the table. Immediately a door at the other side of the room opened, and an elderly man wheeled a serving trolley to the table. He served portions of ripe melon.

"Next course is roast beef and Yorkshire pudding," said the king. "The best meal in the world." Dusty thought the king had a limited experience of the Western world. Or indeed anywhere else on the planet. The main course, when it came, astonished Dusty. The beef was magnificent, cooked rare, pink in the centre of each slice, roast potatoes cooked in goose fat. Sprouts and cabbage, and large portions of Yorkshire pudding, crisp and properly risen.

“My word,” said Dusty, “you are right. Your chefs have indeed excelled themselves.”

“So,” said the king, “what did you do in England?” Miller had a sudden vision of Johnson’s face in the sights of his rifle, but decided that was not for telling. “Well, I stayed with my sister and her husband. In Cheshire, just outside Manchester. And I saw my old friend John McBride. You haven’t met him, have you?”

“If you’re talking about John McBride the artist, then no, unfortunately. But I admire his work.”

“I was thinking of inviting him to Africa,” said Miller. “He expressed an interest. Mentioned safari parks, and wild animal paintings.”

“Gosh, that would be interesting. Ask him to come at my expense. Anything that gives the safari parks a boost is added income to the country.”

Miller rotated his glass, watching the red wine revolve up the sides. Should he, or shouldn’t he?

“There was another reason for wanting to come here.”

“Yes? Are you going to tell me?”

“I don’t think it would interest you, Majesty.”

“Don’t be silly. Try telling me.”

Miller took a large breath. “There’s con man living in South Africa who’s stolen both our savings. Not just our savings, dozens of peoples. Total of thirty million pounds sterling. Got the investment fund re-registered in South Africa. Even duped the British government.”

The king had a quick brain. “And you’re hoping to dupe him back, retrieve some of the money.”

Miller said; “That was the idea, but we haven’t worked it out yet. Just as I was setting out from my flat to meet you, I got an email from McBride. He pulled out a paper from his inside tunic pocket. “You may care to read it.”

The king pulled on a pair of reading glasses, was quiet while he read through it. He laid the paper on the table. “Dusty, let me help you both. This would be spiffing fun. We could take him for everything, a greedy man like that.”

Chapter 4

It was five to twelve when McBride drew his car up to Ian Smith’s country house. Georgian, at the end of a sweeping drive. Smith had heard the car and was opening the front door.

“Bang on time,” said Smith. “Stay there, and let me put a jacket on.” Five minutes later he was in McBride’s car, and they swept down the drive, McBride following Smith’s directions. Two miles later and they pulled into the car park of the Green Man, a well known gastro pub.

Ian Smith bounced into the bar, full of bon homme. “Good Morning Landlord,” he shouted, and McBride winced behind his back. He needn’t have bothered. Mine host was as pleased to see Ian, and several other customers shouted their greetings. McBride felt unhappy at what he guessed would become a giant boozing

session stretching through the afternoon. But he needn't have worried. The landlord got them seated at a table. Ian chose chicken with potato cakes, McBride duck and noodles. Ian chose the wine, a bottle of Sancerre. McBride had one small glass, and Smith quickly dispatched the remainder.

"So, fun with the police in Chester? And they just pulled you out of the hotel? Tell me more." McBride quickly recounted the whole story, and how once Smith had vouched that he had phoned McBride at the hotel at the critical time, he was off the hook.

"And, of course, you didn't do it?" asked Smith, hoping maybe that McBride had lived up to his gung ho reputation.

"Of course not, if I was going to kill the fellow, I would have chosen a subtler way to do it."

"Ah, you didn't like him, then?"

"Well the guy stole a hundred grand, and even more from my friend Dusty Miller. You remember him? We all had dinner one night at that hotel in your village. Though I can't remember much about it."

"Oh yes, I remember. He was an SAS friend. Tall guy with facial scars, and a constitution for alcohol that drank me under the table."

"I didn't think he was that good. Anyway, Dusty is working in a South African country, and we decided that the dead man's colleague needs punishing, perhaps we can con some money back from him. The man's living in South Africa now. I said I would go over there to help him, and to pay my way I would paint some wild animal watercolours in the safari parks. Good idea, do you think?"

"What conning someone, or painting animals? We could sell whatever you decide to paint, so yes, go with it. Who is going to fund your tour?"

"I did a painting of the Dee estuary last week, yachts on the water, Welsh mountains in the background. Even I think it is a breakthrough painting. Imperial size. I suggest we do a limited edition of a thousand."

"Well, I haven't seen it yet. But no, you're good, but not well known enough yet, to support an issue of that size. Say five hundred, and if it's as good as you say, then yes. Signed edition of course. You know how long it will take to sign five hundred? About half a week, I reckon."

"I thought you'd pay me maybe twenty quid a print royalty?"

"Yes, okay."

"Then I'll use the money to pay the airfare and accommodation in Africa. You'll buy all the wildlife paintings?"

"Of course."

McBride thought that this was a bit too easy. He should have asked more for the print royalty. He knew his fame was growing, though that was in part due to Smith's patronage. Better not push his luck too fast.

"One proviso." Smith emptied the last glass of wine. "When you get back, you tell me how you beat the guy who conned you both."

Later, back at Smith's house McBride carried his portmanteau of paintings into the house, Smith bringing McBride's overnight bag. They went to Smith's study, almost a small gallery. With two huge desks, and large easels to view unmounted paintings.

“The Dee estuary one first,” commanded Smith.

McBride opened the portmanteau, took a painting out, put it on the easel.

Seeing it again for the first time since he had painted it, McBride realized it was even better than he had thought. It overpowered Smith, thought McBride as he watched Smith’s expression. Smith was silent for a few minutes, then he said: “Wow!” in a low voice.

“You like it?” asked McBride.

“I don’t like it, I love it. We’ll keep it to five hundred. I was tempted to up the print run, but no. But I’ll give you twenty-five royalty on each of five hundred. We can price it accordingly. Very well done, young McBride. My faith in you has paid dividends.”

McBride was transported back to the moment Smith had appeared at his shoulder when he was painting in the Dales. “I like your style, I’ll sell all your output if you like.” And he had been true to his word.

Smith stood in front of the Dee Estuary painting for several minutes more, and then wrenched himself away. “Show me the others, John. Don’t forget the commission.”

McBride went over to the other easel, putting one painting after another on the easel, replacing them only after Ian Smith had given a nod. When the commission painting came up, Smith said: “I got you four thousand for that, John, and it’s worth every penny. Two thousand for me, two thousand for you. Out of that I have to frame, of course, and deliver.” And, thought McBride, there was the publicity, PR on tap, the private showings, the gallery exhibitions, articles in all the world’s press. Yes, the man was worth it. In ten years, he had heaved McBride up there with the best. And McBride thought he was good, but might not have made it without Smith.

“As for the Chester series, I think I’ll run a small select showing, inviting previous clients. I guess we can shift eight of the ten within a month. Maybe more.”

Smith called his secretary through, got her to list the new paintings, giving McBride a copy. Then she produced his statement of account with paintings sold, and a large cheque. McBride put the papers carefully in his inside pocket.

“Bring a note book with you John, we’re going into the garden to discuss your future output. Helen here will organize some tea and cakes. You must think I do nothing but eat and drink.” McBride smiled and didn’t comment. He followed Smith down a corridor, and out on to the terrace overlooking the superb garden sloping down to the boundary ha-ha, beyond which the Cheshire countryside rolled into a blue haze. Helen brought a tray of tea things, cups, saucers, teapot, milk sugar. And a plate of mixed shortcake biscuits.

Smith served the tea, accompanying his activities with non-stop questions and suggestions. “Well, the next thing you do is the safari park thing. What ten, twenty paintings can you manage there?”

McBride, nodded, his mouth full of biscuit.

“I’ve been thinking about the next leap forward, John.” Smith peered intently at him. “America. I mean, the United States. Vast market. I’ve only got one person that has cracked that market, but I do think you could be the next one. You’d have to be committed, though, for two reasons. One,” he counted on the fingers of

his hand, “I will have to pour money in to back you. You can’t go after it half cock, or we’ll fail. Secondly, it could commit your time for up to twelve months, and you would still have to keep some of your present work output, or everybody would forget you. Understand what I’m saying?”

“You’re saying it will be hard graft. Would it be worth it? We’re both not doing so badly. My accountant is still surprised I earn as much as he does. So he says.”

“It’s whether you want to go to the next level, which would take you into the super-rich. Once you get there, maybe a year’s supreme sacrifice, and you can name your own price on anything you paint. At that stage, the output will be less of a problem. If you turn out less, the value of each painting goes up.”

“I worry that I won’t have the fun I have now, more or less painting what I want to. Having less commitment and still getting enough income. But I won’t dismiss it out of hand. Let me ponder over it while I’m in Africa, and I promise I’ll let you have an answer when I get back.”

“That’s fair enough. But remember it could put you up there with Turner, say.”

That night McBride emailed Dusty Miller, told him that he was ready to visit South Africa as soon as he was required, but he would need to earn some money doing wildlife paintings in the safari parks.

Chapter 5

Much to McBride’s surprise, when he was packing to leave next morning amongst his emails was a reply from Dusty Miller. He wondered why such a quick reply. Surely Dusty wasn’t backing out.

Hi John, Things are moving fast here. We’ve learned a lot about Markham, my employer has lots of spies, I’ve discovered, and has lots of ideas. I think you ought to get over here fastest. The King wants you to take some accommodation at the Palace as his guest. You could do worse, so I agreed on your behalf. Soon as you get here we can put our heads together and string the conman along. Advise your flight details soonest. Fly into Jo’burg on KLM. The King will have you met by limo, and driven straight to his Palace. Waiting your urgent reply. Dusty

McBride lugged his case downstairs, and left it in the entrance hall. By the time he reached the dining room Smith was sitting at the table leafing through the morning paper.

“Good morning John, it’s a beautiful day out. Not that I’ve been far, just on to the terrace.”

“I’ve just had an email from Dusty Miller, he wants me in Africa soon as I can get there. He wants me to fly into Jo’burg, where I will be met by one the king’s men and driven straight to his palace.”

“You get the adventures I always crave. What country is it again?”

"I don't think I ever told you. It's Maswatiland. Small kingdom of about one million population, one boundary common to South Africa. Mostly Zulu and Bantu population. There are a couple of nature reserves, so it is popular with tourists. Dusty told me that the king was educated in England. Now Dusty runs his army, minuscule as it is."

"Taken to the palace, you say? Does that mean you are staying with the king?"

"Seems so, according to the email. I'm leaving this morning, get home and sort a few things out, book a flight, get your cheque in the bank, grab some lightweight clothing and be off the next day."

"I hardly see you these days."

"You shouldn't be such a slave driver."

"Rubbish! And remember, John, think about the United States, It would be such a waste if you don't develop your full potential."

McBride smiled and gave Smith a slap on the back. "I'll consider it. I said I would."

McBride got home at lunchtime. The first job he did was to book a KLM flight online from Manchester via Amsterdam to Jo'burg. He had vowed to travel Business class on the basis of if you've got it, flaunt it. But when he saw the price difference he was tempted to fly economy, but ticked business class, and four thousand and odd pounds vanished from his bank account. At least he had a higher baggage allowance, which he needed with his art gear. It would be an early start, the connecting plane from Manchester left at 0700 hours. He decided to stay at an airport hotel that night, and booked that next. Then he emailed Dusty gave his flight details as requested.

He got a quick snack at his local, and deposited Smith's cheque at his bank. Then it was back to pack, and off to Manchester and his hotel. He packed his Lomax Diana camera and instant print back. He had bought it some months ago, but never used it. He knew that he would never paint fast enough to truly capture the animals in the safari park without some cheating. He would set up his easel, and when he got animals in shot take instant photos. Then he would paint the view, using the photos to jog his memory as he painted them.

Having a business class ticket got him into the executive lounge at Manchester, and was sipping coffee while he waited for the plane. He got a quick connection at Amsterdam, and aboard the A380 Airbus with time to spare. Whether his luggage was aboard with him, he wouldn't find out until they arrived at Jo'burg.

He remembered that KLM had a dodgy record with luggage. Probably most airlines did. The travel time was eleven hours and fifty minutes, with only a one hour time difference from Amsterdam. He was pleased about that. The advantage of travelling down the longitude lines rather than across the latitudes. He slept for a long time, with his seat converted to a bed. Mealtimes and reading filled in some more time. He walked up and down the aisles for exercise and eventually the captain announced that they were on the descent for Jo'burg.

It was dark now of course, and he could see the large cluster of lights that was the sprawl of the combined city. They landed within three minutes of schedule and

taxied up to a landing pier. As a business class passenger, McBride was one of the first to leave the plane. He quickly got through immigration, and down to the baggage carousels. After a considerable wait, he spotted his luggage, and grabbed as it passed him. It was all present and intact. He loaded a baggage trolley and pushed through the green lane in customs, and out to the landside. There were quite a few people crowding near the gate waiting for passengers, and McBride spotted his name on a card being held high by a chauffeur in uniform with a peaked hat. When he spotted McBride waving at him, his thick lipped face broke into a grin, showing white teeth accentuated by the swarthy skin.

The chauffeur shook him by the hand, introduced himself as Mapoza.

He led the way outside into a crisp fine evening. There was a white Range Rover, parked right outside, the only car on the triple yellow lines. On the front of the bonnet was a flag, and McBride noticed the CD plates. Parking with impunity. Would you expect less from a king, even of a small time kingdom?

The chauffeur went to open the rear door, but McBride shook his head, and pointed to the front passenger seat. Mapoza nodded, and McBride was installed in the front passenger seat. Mapoza went to the rear to supervise the packing of the luggage, and then they were off.

“How long is the journey to the palace?” asked McBride, not knowing how good the man’s English might be.

Mapoza looked at his wristwatch. “At this time of night, Sir, maybe four hours.” McBride looked round the interior of the Range Rover as they edged out of the airport, joining the lanes of vehicles leaving. This car was seriously top spec. McBride sank into the plush white leather seat, his head comfortable against the restraint. Polished wood inserts covered the dash, and doors. When Mapoza accelerated on to the N12, McBride was pushed back into his seat by the force. But the chauffeur was a top driver, and never once gave McBride any cause for worry. After about three hours, the road narrowed slightly, with warning verge-side signs ‘border crossing’ repeated, and red lights further up the road. The verge sign now said ‘prepare to stop’. The Range Rover eased up to about forty miles per hour. There were two border patrolmen, and they stepped back from the road, and waved the car through. The chauffeur held up his hand in greeting, and accelerated through the border consisting of a wooden building on each side of the road. The road was now marked as MR1.

McBride expected the road quality to deteriorate once in Maswatiland, but the same excellent road surface continued. He remembered the sign that passports had to be shown. Obviously it didn’t apply to the king’s guests. A sign to the left indicated Mawabane, and the Range Rover swung on to the diversion, slowing rapidly as it approached the town. Quickly looming up ahead was a wide square, one side filled with the palace, floodlit. Soldiers paced in front behind wrought iron gates.

Mapoza flashed the Range Rover headlights, and swung to the entrance gates. They were immediately opened by two soldiers, and Mapoza drove through without stopping, pulling up to the right of the main entrance, outside an only slightly less imposing entrance with double doors. Mapoza climbed out of the car, went round to McBride’s door and opened it.

“Welcome to the palace. This entrance leads to the guest suites only. You are in Suite 3. He walked forward, and opened the double doors into the building, a young man in a leather apron was on his way out. Mapoza spoke some words in a language McBride didn’t know. “He will fetch your luggage from the car,” said Mapoza. Breakfast will be served in your suite at eight o’clock, and you will have an audience with the king at ten o’clock. Somebody will collect you from your room. Goodnight.” Mapoza, pushed open the door of suite three, handed him a set of keys, and was gone.

McBride walked through into an entrance hall. By trying the doors in turn he discovered a sitting room with a table and four chairs, and a three piece suite of easy chairs. The next door was a comprehensive bathroom, and the third door opened into a bedroom complete with a king-size bed. McBride smiled. Of course it would be. Shattered by his long haul flight, he took a shower, and crawled into bed. He noticed the way that his luggage had arrived in the hallway.

Chapter 6

McBride woke to the sound of a door bell. By the time he had realized where he was, there was a soft rap on the bedroom door and a black middle-aged servant was wheeling a food trolley into the room.

“Would you like breakfast in bed, or in the dining room, Sir?”

“In the dining room please,”

McBride got out of bed, grabbed a robe from the back of the bedroom door and followed the trolley and waiter out of the bedroom. As McBride entered the dining room, the servant was already laying out the dishes, and McBride sat down. A large glass of tomato juice stood in front of him, and a coffee pot and milk jug was placed on the table.

“Fresh Melon,” said the servant, placing another dish from the trolley.

“Toast”, and finally, “special Maswatiland menu, sour milk porridge.”

McBride smelled the porridge, took a spoonful, pulled a face and pushed the dish to the farthest side of the table.

Long before ten o’clock, McBride had sorted his luggage, shaved, dressed in what he thought might be suitable wear to meet the king. A smart casual jacket, lightweight dark blue, with dark brown trousers and slip on leather shoes by Barker. He recalled that Dusty had told him the king was educated in England. He assumed he would be rich and wear the latest English fashions.

He was in the dining room standing and looking through the window at the square outside the palace now swirling with traffic. At the far side of the square, stalls were being set up. He heard a knock on the outside door, and then the door opened, and his old friend Dusty Miller strode in, dressed in his regular officer khaki uniform. “Hello, old man,” he said. “Are we looking after you all right?”

“Good to see you,” grinned McBride, shaking his hand. “The service so far is first class.”

“Come on now, and meet the king. We are going to have a conference on this Markham fellow.”

He led the way through a couple of corridors, and down a set of wide stairs to the ground floor. He stopped by a door, and rapped softly, and then entered. McBride followed. Across the room a woman, dressed in smart office wear, sat at a desk behind a computer. She looked up and smiled at Dusty Miller.

“You’re here for your appointment?”

Dusty nodded, and she picked up an old fashioned desk telephone handset, spoke into it briefly.

“You can go in now, Brigadier.”

Dusty pulled back the door into the next room. The king rose from his desk and came across the room. McBride saw a tall man, maybe nearly six feet, young, only late thirties, handsome negroid features, close cropped hair. He was wearing a grey lightweight suit, undoubtedly tailored in London, white shirt and blue plain tie. He had on Barker dark tan loafers.

The king reached out his hand to McBride. “I am delighted to meet you, Mr McBride. Welcome to my country.”

McBride grasped his hand, and gave a slight bow of the head. “I am delighted to meet you, your majesty.”

The king led the way to a conference table at the far side of the room.

“Let us sit down and start work straight away about what I call the Markham affair.” He gave McBride a slight wink.

The three of them pulled up their chairs, and the king passed pads of plain paper, and also a précis of what had been discussed previously. “I will just give Mr McBride a few moments to read the notes so that he is up-to-date on where we have got to.”

McBride quickly scanned the typewritten sheet. It was well-written. Starting with the problem: How to extract cash from a crook who had stolen some thirty million pounds from investors. Markham’s background – McBride had done this research online himself, so skipped this section.

Next they had brainstormed suggestions, it looked like to McBride:

Temporary cash loan, repaid double.

Chance to live outside South Africa, but in close touch.

Kidnap and ransom.

Other apparently money making opportunities.

When he had finished reading, McBride saw the king was waiting for his comments.

“Chance to live outside South Africa? What does that mean.?”

“Our Mr Markham is having security problems. There is a lot of crime targeting the white population. Since the end of apartheid nearly half a million whites have emigrated. For a rich white the problem is acute. Mostly, they live in gated communities. Even so, these communities are regularly raided by lorry-loads of heavily armed criminals. We just thought that as part of a scam, we could offer safe refuge in Maswatiland.”

“Surely, Markham could just come and live here, buy a property.”

"It doesn't work like that," said Dusty. "Immigration is strictly controlled. Otherwise we would be inundated by a wave of South Africans moving in. So a Maswatiland passport is invaluable."

"That should be a tie-in to some money loan." McBride had thought of something, but was reluctant to voice his thoughts to the king. The king was quick to pick up on the hesitation.

"You just had an idea, but then you are frightened of offending me. Come on, spill the beans." He beamed, knowingly using an outdated idiom.

"We could say that you had a relative that was planning a coup, overthrowing you. This character would need a temporary loan to hire an air strike, and mercenaries on the ground. Once the coup was successful, your man would be able to repay the loan out of treasury funds. And award a passport as a bonus."

There was silence round the table, and McBride was fearful that he had offended the king. He looked round at the other two. They were both beaming widely. "By God, yes, that would work," the king exploded, rising from his chair in excitement. "I could play the part of my brother, disguise myself." He turned to the table from the other end of the office. "I don't have a brother, actually. We could make one up, plant stories on the web, couldn't we, Dusty?"

"I suppose so... I don't see the profit here. We use the money to fake a coup. That would cost what we have just taken from Markham?"

McBride said: "Oh no, Dusty. You are missing something here."

The king said: "You need to think outside the box, Brigadier. Right Mr McBride, we need to work fast. We have already sent an invitation to Markham to attend an embassy function in Jo'burg."

"The Maswatiland embassy?"

"Of course."

"How many embassies do you have?"

The king's eyes twinkled. "Just the one. South Africa is an important neighbour. Now we have to work fast. The function is to welcome you, Mr McBride to the area to paint the wildlife. I shall be there as my fictional brother, so I must practise my disguise, and we have to scatter the world wide web with disinformation."

"He may not attend, even though he has an invitation," Dusty pointed out.

"Then we try something else. I think the plan is sound. It is just about presenting the bait in the right way," said McBride.

"Next is to get your paints out, Mr McBride, and start painting the animals." The king squared off the papers in front of him and stood up. "Thank you both for attending. I hope we can dine together tonight. Tomorrow, Mr McBride you must leave early and visit, I suggest, the nearest reserve. It is only one and a half hours away. I will lend you my chauffeur, the one who brought you from the airport. Book in to the motel there, and you will have two days of painting. At the end of that time you will have how many paintings?"

"Maybe six. It depends."

"Then stay another day. That will make nine."

"We shall need them framing. Is that possible?"

"Of course it is. We may be lowly natives, but there are shops in this kraal. One of the shops is a very regarded picture framer. I will introduce you."

Chapter 7

Robert Markham stepped clumsily out of the car. His left foot was in a plaster cast. He put his weight on his stick, and levered himself upright. His chauffeur, a large man, more of a bodyguard, knew better than to assist him.

“Be ready to collect me when I phone you,” said Markham, as he made for the hotel lobby.

Inside in the bar on the ground floor was Markham’s solicitor an Afro-Indian called Malik Kadakia, owner of a twelve strong commercial practice based in Jo’burg. Every Tuesday morning he met his client Robert Markham in this bar. He knew that Markham believed he was cheating his solicitor into obtaining free professional advice. Markham did not know that his solicitor loaded all his bills to cover this service.

Markham hobbled into the bar, looked across at the window table, and there was Kadakia, sitting with a coffee and the hotel copy of *The Daily Telegraph*.

Markham gestured to the barman, and made his way to the solicitor’s table.

“Did you fall over something?” asked the solicitor, looking up from the newspaper.

“Worse than that. My house was attacked last night. About a dozen natives in a truck. Some of them stayed outside my house shooting to keep the guards at bay. The rest of them tied me up to a chair in the study, tried to torture me to give them the safe code. When they found out it was on a timer, they strapped some explosives to the safe, and left me there. That was a difficult time I can tell you. When the safe blew, a bookcase was dislodged, fell on my ankle and broke it. I lay there in a snowstorm of paper. They looked into the room, and then got out in a hurry.”

“They went without stealing anything?”

“The paper snowstorm was half a million dollar notes, blown to fuck. It was a green snowstorm.”

Kadakia smirked. “Perhaps it is time to leave the country.”

“I would if I could find a safer place. One where people weren’t looking for me.”

“That reminds me,” said the solicitor, gesturing to the newspaper in his hand. “I have just been reading that your colleague in England has been shot dead. In Chester, I believe.”

The barman came across with a whisky on the rocks. Markham picked the glass up, and drained it in one gulp. He gestured to the barman for a refill.

“That serves the man right for not watching out for himself. Also for living too close to his marks. I’ve not been to bed last night. I spent most of the time at the hospital having my bone reset.” He waved in the direction of his ankle. “I really ought to have something to eat. Perhaps bacon, eggs, toast.” He waved again at the barman, who sent a boy over with the whisky. He told the boy what he wanted to eat, glanced at Kadakia with raised eyebrows.

“I have eaten already this morning, thank you.”

Markham's breakfast came, the smell of it making his mouth water. He put his hand into his pocket for a handkerchief to wipe his brow, felt an unfamiliar card tucked into his top pocket. Pulled it out. It was the Maswatiland embassy invitation. He pushed it over the table at Kadakia, who was again immersed in the newspaper.

"Have you ever had one of these?" asked Markham.

Kadakia looked up at Markham, then down at the table following Markham's pointing finger. He picked up the card. Read it aloud.

*The Johannesburg Ambassador of Maswatiland
Cordially invites*

Mr Robert M Markham

*To a reception to welcome the artist John McBride
24th August 7.00pm
RSVP*

Underneath was the address for the RSVP.

"Are you going?" asked the solicitor. "That would be some place to live, eh? Maswatiland. Peaceful, perfect veld country, land cheap, houses too. But you need a Maswatiland passport, and you would never get one of those, they don't hand them on a platter."

"I'd never even thought of living there until you mentioned it today." Markham was shoveling egg and bacon into his mouth, grabbing for the toast and forcing that in as well. "Didn't realize how hungry I was."

Kadakia looked away in disgust, turned to his newspaper again. "On a different note, how are the companies going?"

Markham shrugged. "Nothing new that you don't know. Not much money coming in from big tenants ripping me off. We should start a new round of lawsuits."

Kadakia looked at him mildly. "When you pay me for the last round of writs."

Markham suddenly found that he was in a hurry, staring at his watch, getting his phone out, speed dialing his chauffeur. "We're late, get the car round now." Scraping the last of the egg and bacon from the plate.

Out in front of the hotel in his car, sitting next to his bodyguard, Markham relaxed with his plaster-clad leg stretched in to the foot well. "Do you remember where the estate company has its offices, the company that runs where I live?"

Besides being a chauffeur and bodyguard, the man had a fair knowledge of Jo'burg. "That would be the Standton First estate company, yes?"

"Yes, that's the one. Drive there." He added, "Please."

Twenty minutes later, Markham's BMW series 7 was edging up to the reception area of the estate company.

Markham limped up to the reception desk. Gave the girl his card.

"Regretfully, I am in my house in your gated and guarded estate last night, and despite all your armed guards protecting me, my house is broken into by a mass of

criminals waving weapons and shooting up the area. They break my leg,” – he gestured down at his plaster cast, “...and tie me up, blow up my safe, and get away scot free. All this time I see not a one of your fabulous armed guards.”

All the time, Markham had been speaking in a low tone, so that the receptionist had to lean forward to hear him. Suddenly he raised his voice:

“This is not good enough. I pay for a gated community. I expect to get just that!”

The girl cowered, began to splutter platitudes. Markham cut her off, said

“Get me your Managing Director, NOW!”

The girl worked the phones, not daring to meet Markham’s eye. Then she said: “He is coming down now.”

Markham turned round, his back to the desk, leaning on it with his elbows. He surveyed the reception area, saw a suited man hurry out of a door.

“Come on, I haven’t got all day,” he shouted. The manager bustled him into a side office, pulled out a chair.

“I am sorry that there has been an incident last night. I have been there this morning to see you, but you weren’t there.”

Markham’s ire was once more raised. “Of course I wasn’t there. The house is a wreck. What I want you to do is to give me the keys to another house on the estate. But, listen carefully. Do not tell the guards which house I am in.”

“You suspect my guards of treachery?”

“Yes, of course I do. Until I can relocate from your so-called safe estate, I don’t want any information about me passing to the guards. Is that understood?”

Otherwise I shall sue you for the present disaster. In fact, I may do that anyway.

Please give me the keys to another house on the estate, now. At once.”

The manager picked up the phone, spoke a few words and instantly the receptionist came in holding a set of keys.

Chapter 8

It was eight the following morning and McBride was just emerging from the shower. The bell on his outside door was ringing. Wearing his bathrobe, he opened the door to see Mapoza, the king’s chauffeur grinning at him.

“Mr McBride, Sir, the king tells me I have to take you to the safari park this morning, where you are going to paint the animals. This is correct Sir?”

“It certainly is, although I haven’t had my breakfast yet.”

“That is okay, Sir, I could be packing your luggage...”

“Yes, sure. You’ll know what I will need for three days in the bush, yes?”

“I could hazard a guess. But you will have to choose your art gear.”

“Of course. That’s still packed and ready to go.” The doorbell rang again, and Mapoza opened it to welcome in the manservant with the breakfast trolley.

Mapoza said: “Get your breakfast. I’ll leave some clothes on your bed, and pack what you’ll need and take them down to the Range Rover. When you’re ready, I will be waiting in the car.”

When McBride went down to the courtyard, Mapoza was not in the car, but sitting cross legged on the ground, in the sun, talking to the manservant who had served breakfast. They were playing some complicated looking game with pebbles, and scratching marks with a stick in the dust.

McBride opened the hatchback of the Range Rover, and slung in his art equipment. "Ready to go," he called, and climbed into the front passenger seat.

Mapoza was beside him in seconds, firing up the engine, swinging the car in a tight circle and driving down to the main gates which were already being swung open by the sentries.

This was the first glimpse of Maswatiland in daylight, apart from the view from his apartment window, and he enjoyed the ride through Mawabane. The traffic in the main square was approximately obeying international driving standards. At least they were all driving in the same direction on the same side of the road, unless overtaking, which was alarming to experience. Horns were used when this occurred. The vehicles were by no means old, although they all bore dents. McBride reckoned the standard of living was probably higher than that of South Africa. Although the roads in the town were well-paved, dust blew around, giving a hazy appearance. The weather was sunny, although not too hot at this altitude – about 1,500 metres above sea level. Mapoza drove fast, travelling in a series of curves as he avoided pedestrians who wandered aimlessly across the road.

They were very quickly out of the central area and into the suburbs, at first rows of brick houses, then traditional round huts with thatched roofs, and finally some shacks with tin roofs and walls made from packing cases. Finally they were on a tarmac good quality road at first climbing, and then dropping again for miles into a valley, where McBride could see a fairly substantial river flowing through a forest. And then they were into grasslands. He gradually dozed off, and woke with a start when Mapoza spoke.

"We shall reach the safari park in about fifteen minutes, Sir. I am not allowed to take the car any further than the entrance. You are booked into two camps. The first one is called Waterhole Camp, and consists of tents around a restaurant and bar. It overlooks a waterhole. The whole camp is surrounded by an electric fence for security, but it does not hinder the view. A safari bus makes regular journeys between here and the camp."

Mapoza was now swinging off the road and under a large arch which read *Maswati Mara Safari Reserve*. Several cars were parked on a gravelled area, and across from this was a two storey administration block with café and toilet facilities. Mapoza parked the car and carried McBride's luggage across to the reception area in the building. He went to the counter, and handed an envelope to the girl behind it. As she slid the letter from the envelope, McBride saw the royal crest, and the girl almost stood to attention as she read it.

"Mr McBride, welcome to the safari park. Unfortunately Waterhole Camp consists of tents only. Perhaps you would like to reselect your choice?"

McBride was amused. "No, I have come here to be on safari, and I think a tent would be a fine experience. It is not the first time I have slept in a tent." He thought of his army service. She pulled a form from under the desk, filled it in, reversed it so that it was facing McBride.

“Can you please read and sign this? It is to protect the park, if anything happens to you.”

“Such as being eaten alive?” said McBride, and signed the paper.

“The minibus will leave in five minutes, the driver will load your luggage. Your tent number is five. You are there for two nights, and then you will catch the minibus to the next camp which is by the river. It is called River No 1 camp. There you have a traditional native house. That will be number three, and you are there for one night. After that you catch the bus back to this reception centre.”

Mapoza had been listening. “I will pick you up when you return to the visitor centre, and I will be here at noon. If you are happy with the arrangements, I will leave now. Have a good holiday.”

He gave an American style salute and a cheerful grin, and walked in the direction of the Range Rover. McBride could see the minibus driver walking across the car park in the direction of the reception centre. The door opened as Mapoza left, and he held the door for the bus driver.

“Mr McBride? The bus is ready to leave. Shall we go? I will carry your luggage.” Extreme efficiency in Maswatiland, thought McBride.

The minibus had seats for twelve passengers, but McBride was alone with the driver, so he sat at the front. The driver had a shot gun clipped to the roof over his head, in a convenient position to retrieve it. There was an army style riot grille over the front windows. The bus drove out onto an earth track. Old ruts had been filled in, but it wasn't smooth. For that reason the driver kept his speed down. McBride had plenty of time to search for game. On his left, a treeless plain stretched as far as some low mountains. As he looked, McBride saw animals moving.

“Those are impala,” said the driver. “They move as a herd. That way they are protected by each other against attack. There will be about fifty animals in the herd.” McBride was suddenly aware of how many birds were in the trees nearer to the track, and so brightly coloured.

McBride gestured to the windscreen grille. “Does the minibus get attacked?”

“You mean the grille we have. That's just in case of rogue elephants. Never been attacked yet, but it is theoretically possible. Occasionally lions attack vehicles, but only if the windows are open. They're not stupid. They prefer the odds of catching other animals such as the impala over there.” He nodded to the left.

The minibus tackled a slight incline, and then they were travelling downhill and McBride could see the camp, a fairly dense clump of trees, with a thatched building in the centre, and tents all around.

“The building is a restaurant and bar. There's a camp fire lit every night near the tents. An electrical fence surrounds the camp. You can watch the animals at the waterhole. Have a word with the ranger at the camp, he'll tell you the best times to see lions, for example.”

By now, the minibus had stopped at the gate in the fence and the driver got out to open it. He drove the bus through and parked at the back of the restaurant. After closing the gate, he carried McBride's luggage to tent five, and left him to go back and unload some stores he had brought for the restaurant.

McBride was eager to get to his painting, rather than unpack. He chose a good position near the wire, not far from his tent. He set up the easel, and using a special clamp he had, he mounted the camera complete with the film back. He had

a full cassette of paper, twenty shots. He clipped an imperial sheet of NOT Bockingford 300 pound paper to the board. He prepared his paint palette, and then used a 2B pencil to sketch out the waterhole. The farthest end was covered in scrub, and some larger trees. At McBride's end of the pool, animals could wade in, but opposite there were steep mud banks. Altogether, depending where the animals positioned themselves, the composition was good. If he needed to adjust the position of the animals in the painting, well he hoped he had captured them on camera so that would be possible.

He scanned the area, but there were no animals in sight. He got out his palette and began to block in the sky, with the mountains faint blue with distance. He got the local trees overhanging the pool, adding in some reflections, but leaving the 'golden point' where he hoped an animal would appear for the perfect picture. The brightness of the colours here, near the equator made a pleasant change from painting in northern Europe. He sensed someone at his shoulder, smelled tobacco smoke, and turned. A wrinkled black man with a grey bush of hair was examining the painting.

"Hello there, you must be Mr McBride. I'm the ranger in residence here. You haven't wasted any time. All you're waiting for is animals. Bit late this morning for the cats. You need to be up at first light, and there's a lion with two cubs drink here, if they've been hunting overnight. That would make a good picture. The sun coming up brings their fur to life, a lovely sepia tone. And the reflections in the pool are something else."

"You sound like a painter yourself," McBride said

"No such luck, but I appreciate the beauty of the park."

"I've got a camera that produces prints, in case I haven't time to paint them."

"In the morning they're not in a hurry. You should have the time, seeing you paint fast. I've been watching you a while. You were too busy to see me."

"I've been a painter a long time now. You get confident and watercolour is the right medium to paint quickly. If you don't paint like that, the result looks forced and dull."

The ranger, dropped his cigarette end on the ground and carefully stepped on it to make sure it was out.

"So it's lions in the morning. This afternoon could be giraffes, or certainly bison. That will keep you busy. How many paintings are you hoping to finish?"

"My target is three a day. Should be possible?"

"Sure, you've got twelve hours of daylight this time of year. And not too many tourists, being a bit early in the season. Too many people around get some of the animals a bit frisky. Here come the giraffes now. There's a bit of luck."

McBride saw the giraffes, maybe a dozen approaching from behind him. He stood patiently alongside the ranger as they approached, with his finger on the camera button. They approached the pool so that they could wade straight in. McBride was assessing the odds of getting a composed painting. Not too good if they all went into the pool together. Then he had a bit of luck, Two giraffes were in the pool, their long necks dipping down, legs straddled, but the rest of the group were making for the trees for something to eat. McBride pressed the button, got the two giraffes drinking, re-aimed the camera to catch the giraffes with their tongues stripping leaves from the upper branches. The paper feed started with a

low whirr, and two instant prints emerged from the back plate. McBride got hold of the prints, pulled the strips to start the development. When they were ready, he slipped both prints under a clip on the board.

The ranger nodded. "That's real good," he said in a low voice.

But McBride was too busy to answer. With his pencil he was sketching the giraffes in the pool, moving their images slightly to improve the composition, and quickly mixing paint and laying it loosely on the pencil marks, adding the same colours into the water area for the reflections. The giraffes posed unaware, but hardly moving, and already McBride was getting some shadow in, giving a three dimensional look to the animals. He used some shadow to reduce the reflection strength, then using a number six brush filled the pattern on the skin, and adding flecks of colour. Within fifteen minutes he had painted the two giraffes without referring to the photograph. He spent a few minutes completing the trees, but didn't attempt to paint the giraffes at that end. He completed the background to tone in behind the giraffes and the painting was done.

"That's really great, mate. It shows why you're famous."

McBride gave a disparaging shrug. "It's just my job."

No more animals approached the pool before dusk, so McBride finished his second painting of the four giraffes in his photo who were dining on the trees.

Four animals was an even number, not comfortable viewing for the human brain, which prefers an odd number, for some psychological reason. So McBride only painted the three animals. He moved his easel further along the pool, to give a different viewpoint, still a good composition. When he had finished he realized that he was hot and thirsty, packed the two finished paintings in his portmanteau, stowed his easel in the tent and went to find a drink.

The bar area was dark to his eyes as he stepped under the thatched porch.

The ranger was standing behind the counter.

"What are you drinking, Mr McBride?" he said, leaning a hand on a beer pump handle.

"A pint of lager would go down a treat." The ranger drew the pint himself. The only other staff member in sight was a boy restocking the bar, putting bottles into the refrigerated cabinets from crates he carried from somewhere out back.

"So you're one painting down already?"

"What?" McBride was caught thinking of other things. "Oh, I see. That's no problem. I just have to paint four tomorrow. I've done that before."

The boy finished restocking and carried the empty crates away. Within minutes he was over in the restaurant area, setting cutlery on the tables. A couple drifted in and sat along the bar. McBride drained his glass and went to look for the washroom.

Chapter 9

The Maswatiland Jo'burg Embassy was a Victorian six bedroom house in a terrace of identical houses. Two other of the houses had also been converted into embassies. Another was an investment bank. Altogether they gave the street some class.

McBride was in the salon where the reception was to be held. His paintings, and some easels borrowed from the frame dealer had been stacked in the back of the Range Rover for the journey. The framer had put two of the paintings in pale oak frames with white mounts. The remainder, eight of them, had not been framed, but had been mounted, and these would sit on the easels. The two framed paintings had already been hung side by side on one wall. McBride was standing back, ensuring that they were level. Mapoza, the king's chauffeur and by now McBride's handyman, was erecting the easels.

The king came into the room.

"What do you think, Mr McBride?"

McBride looked across. The king was wearing a wig, hair straightened and greying. He had a grey moustache, and was wearing a pale grey western suit. He looked rakish, a slightly dodgy character.

"Excellent. Nothing like the king. You look like your slightly criminal brother would. If you had a brother, of course."

"Have you not looked on the internet lately? I am my half-brother according to Wikipedia."

McBride knew that Brigadier Miller was not to be present tonight. The pretender to the throne would not be mixing with the military he would shortly be overthrowing. More staff were entering, bringing trestle tables, lining them against the far wall from the exhibition, cladding them with tablecloths. Bringing dishes of finger buffet items, and on one end, glasses and bottles. The show was about to begin. The ambassador entered, dark suit and tie. Medals worn below his breast pocket. *Medals*, wondered McBride, is he *ex-military*, too? Or perhaps an *Olympics star*?

The ambassador stationed himself near the door, just as the chimes from the front door rang out. A servant led the first guests in, presented them to the ambassador. The king, in his disguise, was presented next and then McBride. The guests made straight to the buffet, and McBride stood near the paintings. On a small desk there was a visitor's book. McBride's aim was to collect names of guests. These could then be emailed by Ian Smith in a push for sales. If someone wanted to make a purchase today, they were to indicate the fact in the visitor book.

The first half an hour passed quickly for McBride. He chatted with most of the guests as they looked at the paintings. There were three possible sales. The room was comfortably full, still room to circulate. A lot of people knew each other. The Jo'burg elite, McBride reckoned. A comfortable buzz of conversation.

A loud male voice attracted McBride's attention. Over by the entrance, a tall overweight man in a black suit, a plaster cast protruding from one trouser leg. In the opposite hand, a stout walking stick. He was fifty or a little older, red faced. He walked over to get himself a drink. Or even two thought McBride. Undoubtedly Markham, lured in by greed.

McBride was talking to a couple who were looking at his painting of the lioness with two cubs, drinking in the early morning light at the waterhole. A hand touched his shoulder to attract his attention, and swinging round, McBride came face to face with Markham.

"Sorry to disturb you," Markham slurped at his whisky. "I just wanted to meet you. Haven't got long, you know. Meeting in an hour downtown. Robert Markham's the name."

McBride shook the offered hand. The couple had drifted off, looking offended. Couldn't be helped.

"This your first time in South Africa, Mr McBride?"

"Yes it is, actually."

"Shitty country, I can tell you. Better during apartheid than it is now. Masses of poverty, whites as well as blacks. Hundreds of thousands of people living below the poverty line. White Afrikaners living in squalor here in Coronation Park. Old caravans, huts built of packing cases, tents, you name it. No sanitation. If you can afford it you live in the gated communities. Private guards, you know. Then a truck full of armed criminals break through the barriers, robbing and shooting."

McBride raised his eyebrows. What was the man ranting about?

Markham didn't stop, seemed unable to stop. "Happened to me last week."

He pointed at the plaster on his leg. "Robbed. They blew up the safe."

He looked at the paintings for a few seconds. "Of course I'd leave the country if there was somewhere better in Africa. Maswatiland sounds interesting. Is that where you painted these animals?"

"Yes, it was actually. The king invited me."

Markham pointed with his empty glass. "That the king?"

"No, that's his brother." The king, who had been covertly watching the conversation, edged over. "Let me introduce him. You address him as Sir, though he is a prince." The king shook hands with Markham, trying to look interested.

"I was just saying to this young artist fella, living in South Africa is terrible. I hear Maswatiland has a higher standard of living."

"That's true," said the king. "We are lucky to have tin and copper in profusion, and, of course, tourism. We have no less than three safari reserves. The climate is good, mainly Highveld."

"So I could move there? I talked to my solicitor the other day, and he said to live there, you needed a Maswatiland passport."

"That is true. The king does not issue passports to foreigners." He stared at Markham. "Except in exceptional circumstances."

"So that is it?"

"If you were very rich, and I'm talking in the hundreds of millions, it may be possible to discuss the matter further. Not here, of course," he said, looking round in what he imagined was a furtive manner. "You would have to meet me in my hotel, here in Jo'burg. I am there for a couple of days." McBride thought that the king was overacting, but Markham appeared not to notice. The king went on, "I'm staying at The Four Seasons. Ask for the Prince of Maswatiland at the desk. Can you be there tomorrow at two o'clock?"

Markham looked like the cat that had got the cream. "Yes, Sir, I would be pleased to meet you then."

“So he swallowed the bait,” said the king, watching Markham limping out of the door, the cast banging against the floor.

“Yes, so far.” McBride stood next to the king. “He’s not as stupid as he tries to make out. And I guess, though he should be rich, given the scams he’s run, he’s not exactly cash-rich.”

“You mean you might not get the brigadier’s cash back. And yours, too, of course.” The king looked worried. Dressed as his dodgy brother, the expression clashed.

“Remember only one thing. The hook is the chance to get a passport. That is what drives him.” He looked at the king, remembered who he was, and said: “That’s my opinion, Sir.”

Chapter 10

The telephone rang in the king’s suite at The Four Seasons Hotel. The king automatically looked at his watch. Two o’clock. Prompt, if it was Markham. The staff sergeant, in his best uniform picked up the phone, spoke three words and put the receiver down again. He turned to the king. “Markham, Sir. I told them to send him up.”

The king had selected the staff sergeant to be present based, firstly on his physique in case it came to blows, and secondly on his discreetness. The man had his revolver on his belt. It was loaded, on the king’s direction. He didn’t know what was going on, why the king was dressed like an actor in a play. It was not his business.

The doorbell rang, and the king gestured to the sergeant to answer the door. Markham bounced in.

“To see the prince, young man.” His voice booming out into the apartment, and the man himself propelling his gammy leg in a series of arcs through the lobby and into the sitting area of the suite, where the king, dressed as the prince, was standing in front of the fireplace. Set with a real fire competing with the air conditioning.

The king forced a smile and shook his hand. “I thought we would sit here and have an informal chat,” he said, pointing to the sofas drawn at right angles, with a coffee table in the angle. Markham limped to the nearest sofa, and the king occupied the other one.

“Would you care for a drink?”

“Whisky, please.”

The sergeant stood to attention at the door.

The king said: “Could you pour us some drinks, Staff? One whisky, and one mineral water.”

When the drinks were served, the king asked the sergeant to stand in the corridor outside the apartment. The conversation should not be overheard.

“Well, Mr Markham, you say you are a very rich man?”

“Correct.” Markham at his most confident, firmly into scam mode.

“What I have to say must never be revealed. It is to be kept in complete confidence, you understand?”

“Of course. And, I might say, your money would only be invested in the safest ways, and of course you could withdraw it on demand.”

“What are you talking about?” The prince looking bewildered.

“I thought you wanted to invest into one of my trust funds?”

“How did you get that idea?”

For the first time probably in his life, Markham was lost for words, opening and closing his mouth without issuing any sound.

“I’ll explain, I am going to undertake a venture, and to finance it I need to borrow ten million pounds sterling for about a week, ten days at the maximum. Then I will repay thirteen million. That isn’t bad, is it? Thirty percent per week. Where else would you get that rate, eh?”

Markham was back on track. “What security could you offer? Property, jewelry, shares?”

“I was merely giving my word to repay you. And also as a further, what do you call it – a sweetener, I would offer you a Maswatiland passport.”

Markham tried again. “Tell me what you are going to do with the money, Sir.”

“There’s an old joke says, if I told you I would have to kill you.” Markham smiled weakly. “However, you will have to believe that, if you tell anybody else.” He paused for dramatic effect, then, “I am going to take over the country from my brother. In other words carry out a military coup.”

Markham’s eyes stood out, his mouth open.

The king carried on the conversation, since Markham had offered no input. “It will be quite easy. With the money I borrow, I hire a few jets, bomb the army barracks, and I hire at the same time a hundred or two mercenaries, and there are always plenty of those. We capture or kill most of the king’s army, he will capitulate. We will also take over the TV station and announce our coup. The money we owe you will come from the treasury, which I can assure you has adequate funds. The passport you want, I will personally sign.”

Markham’s face was redder than ever, and sweat beads trickled down from his receding hairline. How could he possibly agree to such a dodgy deal?

“I’m not really sure that a country you aren’t in charge of can act as surety for a loan, with respect, Sir...”

“There will be no uprising from the population. I’m family, the people don’t mind which of us rules them, as long as we keep it in the family, man.”

“I was conjecturing what would happen if the coup fails. In that case, my money has gone.” It wasn’t his money, but it had been held by him for a long time, so it was the same thing. So reasoned Markham. On the other hand, he held property that he was getting no return on. Perhaps he could sell some to the banks at a knockdown price. That was like giving nothing away.

“Well, what do you say? Do I go somewhere else? Tell me, man.” The king was getting agitated, lost in his play-acting.

“Give me until tomorrow morning, Sir. I promise to consider the request.”

“Ten o’clock tomorrow morning then. If the answer is in the affirmative, I will give you a bank account number in the Bahamas where you can make the

transfer. You can telephone me here at The Four Seasons. My staff sergeant is on the door, he will show you out.” And the king stood up and left the room.

Markham stood in the lobby of the hotel and speeddialed his solicitor.

“I need to come and see you right away, Malik. Something very urgent.”

“Always is,” grumbled Kadakia. “I suppose I can slot you in at five o’clock.”

Markham looked at his watch still only three o’clock. Twenty minutes, tops to the solicitor’s office. Time to have a drink here, catch up with the newspapers. He phoned his chauffeur, told him to be at The Four Seasons at four fifteen.

He wandered through to the ground floor bar, pulled a London newspaper from the rack, The Times and sat down in a table at the window. On the front page, at the bottom was a report of the inquest of Johnson, Markham’s late partner. Markham felt no remorse at the passing of the man. Serves him right. One thing being the front man, but stupid to remain so when the shit had hit the fan. The newspaper reported the inquest in detail. The coroner’s verdict had been murder by person or persons unknown. Markham suddenly thought that it could have been the pair of them coming out of that doorway, and each meeting a bullet. Except that Markham had been careful not to set foot back in England for three years. And probably could never go back again. Unless he had plastic surgery, and changed his name. What was the point of that? It was cold and mostly raining. Funny that nobody had been arrested. He recalled meeting McBride the previous evening. That name was familiar. Not in connection with the art world. Markham had no interest in art. He must get hold of the investors’ list from the solicitor. Maybe he was an investor. If so, then he could be dangerous.

Markham suddenly woke. The newspaper had fallen on the floor. The glass in front of him was empty. His chauffeur was standing beside him.

“Oh, sorry. Must have dozed off. We need to go to my solicitors.” He looked at his watch. “We need to be there at five o’clock.”

“That will be no problem if we go now.”

The traffic was bad at this time of the day, but the chauffeur pulled the car in front of the solicitors with five minutes to spare.

“I’ll phone you when I’ve finished,” said Markham struggling with his cast and cane.

Markham was not kept waiting in reception, but shown straight through to Kadakia’s office.

“This is very urgent, Malik, or I wouldn’t have interrupted your busy day.” Markham at his slimiest. “Let me tell you what I have been requested. To lend ten million pounds sterling for one week at thirty percent interest.” He went on to tell his solicitor the whole story. After all, if you can’t trust your solicitor not to keep a secret, who can you trust?

Kadakia leant back in his chair, his mahogany face smiling at Markham.

“Of course, you do not have ten million pounds in cash.”

“There is the hotel complex.” This was the mainstay of The African Land Trust. Of course there was an infrequent dribble of rent from that source, but needs must.

“That is in a separate company, your name on a lot of the shares. Two directors, our nominal director and Mr Johnson. The late Mr Johnson.”

“Don’t bother about that at the moment, the bank won’t know. Pretend we don’t know.”

“So, I take it that you want to pledge the hotel company in return for a loan of ten million pounds? Yes, that could work. If there is no repayment the bank will be left holding the hotel property. No comeback to you. You would lose the shares, of course.”

“I am expecting that we will be repaid with profits.”

Kadokia’s eyes twinkled. “If I wasn’t your solicitor, I would be tempted to say that it sounds like one of your scams. Since I am your solicitor, I won’t say that. Are you out of your mind to fall for this trick, chucking ten million pounds away, even if it’s not technically your money?”

“It’s my decision. I am going with it. How long would it take to get the loan secured, and the money into an offshore account?”

“About three days. I won’t be able to start today. Phone me when you get the account number.”

Markham started to rise out of his chair to go. “By the way, I need a copy of the list of limited partners, South African Property Fund.”

“Ask the receptionist, she’ll run off a copy for you.”

Once in the car, Markham ran his eye down the list of one hundred and ten names, and spotted that of John McBride, shareholding one hundred thousand pounds. He tapped the list against his cheek, while thinking hard. There was another man invested around the same time. He had some connection with Africa. Hard as he thought, the name refused to come to him.

Chapter 11

John McBride was in his apartment, in the living room with Dusty Miller. He heard the door bell, and then the door opening, and the king coming into the room. Beaming at them both.

“The bait has been taken. I have given Markham the account number. He says the money will be there in three days. I can’t believe the guy could be so stupid. The chance of a passport was what clinched it.”

Dusty smiled. “We’ve got work to do. When does the coup take place. Or not take place?”

“We’ll need a week to get things ready, I would think,” said McBride.

“The king sat down on the sofa. “I’ve got a house, near the border. I used to live in it before I acceded the throne. There’s a caretaker living there. We could make out it was my brother’s house. Invite Markham there for a meal when the coup takes place, to celebrate afterwards. My brother’s wife could be played by my secretary, she’s into amateur dramatics. We could use my chauffeur to get you all there, then he could act as waiter. We could take the palace chef to prepare the meal. John here, works the sound effects, and then nips out of the back door, dirties himself up, tears his shirt, and stumbles in through the front door.”

Dusty look puzzled. “What for? I’ve lost the plot.”

McBride said: "To announce the death of the prince in the battle. To comfort his wife. And to tell Markham he's lost his cash."

"I'm pleased I don't have to tell him," said Dusty. "But will I be there?"

"Better not," said the king, "You're supposed to be on our side. Markham would expect you to be away fighting."

"The next thing is for someone to go into Jo'burg. There's professional sound effects companies that work for the film industry. We will need to hire a tape that includes planes flying overhead, distant gun fire and so on, probably lasting about three hours, and a deck to playback with plenty of hi-fi speakers.

Can I leave that to you, Dusty?"

McBride looked on, marvelling that he was in on a conference with a country's king, discussing his own make-belief coup.

Dusty Miller spoke on the phone with a sound effects company, outlining what they needed. The company's sales manager reckoned they could splice up a performance to suit, using stock material. He would need the rest of the day to prepare a compilation. Could Dusty visit first thing tomorrow? He certainly could.

Late the following afternoon, Dusty's army truck turned into the palace gates. McBride came out of his apartment to see what he had brought back.

Dusty was enthusiastic. "This gear is fantastic, and the tape is absolutely spot on. It would fool me, and I've been in a lot of real situations, lots more than you have, John."

"Only because you've been in the military a lot longer. Is there any chance of trying it out here?"

"I could get some squaddies to lug the gear up to your apartment. You're right we ought to try it out. We'll set it up in your bedroom, and sit in the living room, listening. Give me an hour."

"I'll let your guys in, then."

The bedroom looked a bit of a mess an hour or so later, wires draped from the play deck, which itself was on top of the dressing table, to several speaker units placed as Dusty had been advised by the sound men. McBride went to sit in the living room, not being interested in the technicalities.

He was suddenly transported to a war zone. First the jet fighters, and bombers. Then gunfire in the distance. Rifle fire nearer at hand. The crump of exploding bombs in the distance. Dusty came through the door grinning.

"Realistic, eh?"

"I think it will impress Markham. I hope you aren't going to run the whole tape this afternoon."

"No, but I need to teach you to work the rig, so you'd better come and learn. If it breaks down, we've wasted the whole scam."

The payment cleared into the Bahamas account within three days, as promised. The king spoke to Markham, and told him the coup would be in ten days' time. He needed time to get the planes and the ground forces.

McBride used the time to do more painting. He wasn't used to idling his time away. Besides, Dusty Miller had a job to do, supervising the troops, who not only did ceremonial duties in the capital, but served at the customs points at all road crossings on the border. The total force was two hundred soldiers.

McBride went once more for three days on safari, and was building up a nice collection of African paintings. The evenings in the capital were sometimes spent with Dusty dining out in town. On occasions they dined with the king in his residence.

The day of the scam came, and in the morning the actors gathered in the palace forecourt near the Range Rover. McBride was there, of course. The girl who was to play the prince's wife, was introduced as Sophie. She was, McBride estimated, in her mid-thirties, pretty and slim. Mapoza was there to drive them, and finally a young Englishman, Paul, who was the king's chef, excited to be let out of the kitchen and going on an adventure.

McBride elected to sit in the back of the car with Sophie next to him, and Paul next to the driver. Not because he was attracted to Sophie, although he was, but because he needed to coach her on what to say to Markham. More importantly how she should react to his questions. The whole evening was make or break depending on how she played it.

"You've played a lot of parts in a drama group?"

She smiled. "Five years I've belonged to the group. We put on two productions every year in the professional theatre here in Mawabane. We play seven nights each time. Of course I don't play the big parts all the time, but yes, I am considered good."

Her English was excellent and she spoke confidently. McBride said, "You are playing the wife, effectively of the king, who himself was playing the part of his fictitious brother. You should feel loyal to this brother, and worried that he is carrying out a coup tonight, in case he is killed, or badly injured. Even more worried that he won't win. But of course, you are shielding this last thought from Markham."

"Markham is a big bully. He is a lout. But you must be polite to him, because your husband wants you to be. You know that Mapoza is acting as the waiter during the meal. If there is any trouble with Markham, ask Mapoza to stand inside the dining room. You won't see me until I burst in the door, and tell you that your husband has been killed. Think how you will play the reaction to that news. Will you faint? Or just go pale, and say something like 'Oh no!' and start weeping?"

Sophie was really engaged with the emotions she was going to use, and what subjects she wanted to discuss during dinner. She was soon deeply involved in conversation with McBride.

He said, "I don't think we will have any problems that you won't be able to cope with. Well done. Just remember the background you have lived for five years at the house. Your husband expected to be crowned king when your father-in-law died. Your husband is actually half-brother to the king. Different mothers you see."

They were still bringing up points when the Range Rover pulled up at the back of the house. Paul needed to unload some kitchen equipment, and also the food he

was to cook. The caretaker, an old man in his seventies came out to welcome them. He was going out this evening with some of his cronies.

By six o'clock that evening, all was ready. The table was set. Crystal glasses sparkled in the electric light. Outside it was already dark. Sophie had changed into an evening gown, pearl necklace round her throat. Mapoza, now the waiter, was dressed in black trousers and white shirt, black tie. Paul was in the kitchen doing the king's favourite dish, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. After all, Markham was English, what was there not to like?

Markham had been invited for seven o'clock, and arrived at ten past. McBride had already disappeared into a rear room, where the sound equipment was ready. Mapoza answered the door, performed the introduction to the princess, played by Sophie. Markham behaved in his usual bumptious manner, but to Mapoza, he appeared nervous. And he had reason to be. Ten million pounds at stake.

Markham lifted Sophie's hand and kissed it. Sophie looked at his bald patch as he stooped, and Mapoza saw her suppress a giggle.

"Has your husband gone off to war yet?"

"Of course, to get there just after dark. The planes are coming soon, to bomb the barracks."

"Shall we hear anything from here?" said Markham.

"We are only twenty miles from Mawabane, so yes. And the planes are taking off from Jo'burg, so they will pass over."

Almost as if in reply there came the faint noise of jets, growing ever louder, and going overhead, so that the crystal on the table jangled. Mapoza edged out of the room, and told McBride that the sound was turned up a little too high. McBride fiddled with the play deck. Mapoza bobbed his head back through the dining room door. The sound was more realistic.

Markham hadn't apparently noticed anything amiss, and was excitedly talking to Sophie as they both sat in armchairs sipping aperitifs. Or in Markham's case slurping.

Markham said: "I was in the army, you know," although he wasn't. Lying was something he didn't realize he was doing. "Oh, yes, in the Middle East, Iraq you know."

Sophie had a wicked glint in her eye. "Oh, in Iraq? My husband was attached to the British Army, and served there too. I bet you must have met him."

Markham started back-peddalling. "The army was strung out from north to south, you know. I did meet your husband at the embassy in Jo'burg. Thought he looked familiar. Must have seen him in the Mess, maybe."

"Odd he didn't recognize you, in that case."

"Well, it was along time ago, what, over twelve years now."

McBride's sound system had arrived at the bomb dropping stage, and there were distant explosions, and some artillery fire.

"The attack seems to have started, quite a show, I bet." Now Markham sounded like a Colonel Blimp.

"Yes," said Sophie. "Would you like to sit at the table, now?"

Mapoza had brought a tureen through, which he placed on the table, and ladled soup into two bowls. Sophie went to the table first, and then turned to show Markham where she wanted him to sit.

He said, "Perhaps we should go outside, and see some of the action. Planes in the sky, explosions on the horizon."

Sophie controlled her panic. "That wouldn't be a good idea," she said.

Markham looked at her. "Why wouldn't it?"

She pulled herself together. "You wouldn't see anything, there's a ridge of hills in the way. Come on, the soup will get cold."

Glutton that he was, Markham was easily diverted by his appetite. He quickly bent over his bowl and began to slop down the contents. Sophie crossed her fingers under the table.

Mapoza, who had heard Markham's remark about going outside, quickly took away the soup bowls the moment Markham had finished, and returned quickly with two plates of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. He returned a moment later with the vegetables, and performed silver service. He then poured red wine into their glasses, and stood close so that he could replenish Markham's glass as soon as he took a drink. The result was that Markham became amorous with the effects of the alcohol.

"Does the prince leave you alone a lot of the time?" Markham asked. He smirked.

"No, of course not. No more than any husband leaves his wife. Husbands have jobs to do, to earn money." Sophie decided to play the old-fashioned type of wife. "It is the woman's place to look after the family's welfare."

Markham leered. "And a man's sexual appetite as well."

Mapoza heard the smack as Sophie lashed out, striking Markham across the face. He had gone too far, and retreated.

"I apologise Madam, that was uncalled for." He emptied his wine glass in one swig, looked to see where Mapoza was.

Mapoza was reporting to McBride.

"It might be time to wind down the fighting, and prepare for your entrance, Mr McBride. Markham is at the stage where he might be about to attempt rape."

"Okay, I'll gently lower the noise levels, then nip round to the front door. Stay with Sophie in case you have to sort him out."

McBride ran out of the back door, knelt briefly in a flowerbed, and daubed his face and shirt with soil, ruffled his hair, paused momentarily at the front door to start heavy breathing, then knocked only once, and then burst through the door. As he entered the dining room, Markham was standing near the table, napkin in one hand, frozen with his mouth open looking in McBride's direction.

"The prince has been killed in the fighting." He went over to Sophie and put an arm round her shoulder.

She started to cry. McBride glanced at Markham, and saw his face darken in anger.

Markham said, "That has just cost me ten million pounds. I am leaving."

He turned and walked quickly to the door, and McBride heard the door slam behind him.

Chapter 12

It was pitch black outside the house, and Markham stood for a moment on the doorstep, letting his eyes adjust. He turned in the direction of Mawabane. There were no lights in the sky. He looked down the drive from the house, and could just make out the dark shape of the BMW.

He walked up to the car quietly and wrenched open the driver's door. Bo woke with a muffled scream.

"Christ man, you'll give me a heart attack, creeping up like that."

Markham closed the door, walked round the back of the car, got in the front passenger seat.

"What a fuck up, Bo,"

"The menu no good?"

"The battle, that's what I'm talking about. The coup that took place tonight and failed."

"What coup was this? Nobody told me about no coup. Here, you mean? Mawasatiland?"

"Yes. The prince was going to attack Mawabane. Then he got killed. You hear those planes bombing? I paid for those, and an army. It was a fuckup."

"I didn't hear nothing."

"Because you were unconscious, sleeping like a baby, until I woke you."

"No, I wasn't. I was reading this magazine here. I didn't fall asleep until just before you woke me."

Markham stared at him. "Put the radio on, Bo. You can tune in to Maswatiland State radio, or whatever it's called?"

"It's called Radio Maswatiland. It's number seven or maybe eight. Here, let me switch it on." He pressed buttons, and classical music came from the speakers."

"Is there a news programme?"

"Yes, this one. Every hour on the hour." He looked at his wristwatch. "In about four minutes. Enjoy some proper music in the meantime."

"I might need a pistol." Bo looked at Markham.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Maybe kill somebody who has tricked me."

"Then, no, you can't have mine."

"Extra bonus, two hundred pounds?"

"Oh well, now you're talking." He snapped down the glove compartment lid, pulled a small pistol out, point two-two calibre, handed it to Markham, butt first.

"It's a bit small, but better than nothing."

"You just got to get up close, is what." The music faded out, and a presenter was speaking.

"Listen." Markham strained forward.

The announcer said: "*This is Radio Maswatiland on 63FM. News at nine o'clock. The king is tonight attending the recital at the Mawabane National Theatre,*

accompanied by his wife. Other news: an incident took place across the border to the south when two cars crashed after attempting to run the border post. Three arrests were made, and the prisoners will attend court tomorrow. The weather tomorrow, sunny with high cloud, eighteen to twenty degrees. Next news at ten o'clock."

Markham felt physically sick. Conned. There had been no attempted coup. He wrenched open the door, and jumped out.

"Bring the car up to the house. I'll be ahead of you. Keep the engine running."

He ran up to the house, moving pretty fast now that he had discarded his ankle plaster. He had the gun in his hand. He continued up the steps, and through the front door, leaving it swinging behind him. He let off two shots into the ceiling.

"Come out, you con men!" shouting at the top of his voice. Went through the dining room, and into an ante room. Speakers, and sound equipment, a play deck, audio tape on large reels. He stopped briefly to examine it, threw what appeared to be the main switch. The reels turned slowly, the noise from the speakers gushed out sounds of gunfire.

Markham was incensed beyond speech. Over the sounds from the tapes he heard urgent movements from the further reaches of the building. He wrenched open the door on the farther side of the room, to catch sight of somebody exiting the next room at speed.

He paused to think. They would be outside the back of the house. They must have at least one vehicle, he surmised. If he tried to chase them on foot, they would climb into a vehicle and he would lose them. He turned and retraced his way to the front door, racing down the steps, shouting at Bo.

"Quick, we need to be at the back of the house." Whilst he was shouting he was climbing into the BMW. Bo started to reverse from the house at the same time, swinging the wheel to miss the steps, and screeched into the shrubbery down the side of the building. Markham, strapping himself in at the same time lowering the passenger window, winced as the branches scraped the sides of the vehicle. He was tempted to blast Bo about wrecking his car, but restrained himself. To catch McBride and his buddies was paramount. What was the cost of a BMW compared to ten million pounds sterling?

"How many bullets in here?" waving the pistol in front of Bo.

"Six before you started shooting. And don't wave it at me, or I might get angry."

"Any spares in the car?"

"Another magazine in the glove compartment. Six in it."

Markham scabbled his hand inside the glove compartment, pulling out service books and guides, throwing them over his shoulder, then found the magazine, slipped it into his jacket pocket. The car rocked over the uneven ground, and then burst out of the bushes. In front of them, a Range Rover, all doors and hatchback open, people loading the back. He recognized Sophie, now in jeans and T-shirt. But still looking good for it. McBride was there as well. And the waiter, still in uniform. There was a fourth man, probably the cook. At the sound of the BMW crashing out of the undergrowth, the people around the Range Rover were pinned in the BMW headlights, now on full beam.

Markham leaned out of his open window, aimed at McBride and pulled the trigger. He heard the bullet hit the car with a ping. Damn, missed. He took aim again but the BMW was rocking over the bumpy ground.

At the sound of the bullet, the tableau before Markham broke into frantic movement, everyone leaping for the open doors of the Range Rover, which gunned its engine and headed down the paved track. Bo accelerated to follow it. Markham kept his head out of the window and fired a couple more times, aiming at the windows. He realized that the bullets were unlikely to pierce the chunky tyres.

Chapter 13

The front door slammed behind Markham and he was gone. Sophie dried her eyes on her handkerchief, and laughed.

“End of the show,” she said. “I must get changed into my normal clothes. It will only take me five minutes.”

McBride said to Mapoza: “Give me a hand to clear down the table. We need to get out of here. I’m sure Markham will be back before long. This was a lousy scam, thinking it over.”

“In what way?” Mapoza was working on the table, stacking crockery on a large tray.

“Think about it when we are on the road. I’ll just tell Paul to hurry up and clear the kitchen.” He went through to the back of the house.

“We’re out of here in five minutes, Paul,” he shouted, “gather your gear ready to leave.” And McBride decided there wasn’t time to pack all the sound equipment. They could send someone back the next day.

They were loading the Range Rover, all of them in the kitchen and yard when the gunshots were fired. Obviously gunshots, but fired from a small pistol. Markham’s voice boomed at them from somewhere inside the house. They all piled out of the kitchen door. Sounds of cannon fire followed them. Markham had switched on the sound effects. McBride and the rest of them started to load the equipment piled round the car. There was a sound of a car revving furiously, and the crashing of branches, and Markham’s BMW emerged from the side of the house.

A bullet pinged off the side of the Range Rover, and they dived through its doors. Mapoza had the car moving before the doors were slammed.

McBride was in the front passenger seat. He looked round to make sure Sophie and Paul were safely in the rear seats. As Mapoza raced down the drive closely followed by the BMW, McBride said: “Now you know why it was a lousy scam.”

“Don’t worry Mr. McBride, we’ll soon shake the BMW. When we go off-road. Trust me.”

The Range Rover slewed onto the main road, Mapoza relying on darkness to mean there were no vehicles approaching. McBride held his breath. Mapoza accelerated, but so did the BMW. There was no doubt in McBride’s mind that the

performance of the BMW would keep up with and even pass the Range Rover. It could run them off the road. And that was where Mapoza had said they were going without any help.

The bonnet of the BMW was close to the Range Rover, bullets bouncing off the bodywork. Mapoza touched the brakes and was rewarded by a crunch from behind as the BMW driver was too close to react. The car fell back, and McBride tried to see what damage had been caused. Not the headlights. They still dazzled him on full beam, making it impossible to see the car's bodywork.

Mapoza was slowing now, looking for the left turn, the farm track he had talked about. Unexpectedly, he was heaving the wheel left, and the Range Rover was lurching on the unmade track. McBride looked back again. The BMW had been slow to react, it was reversing up the road. Mapoza had probably gained a lead of two minutes. But they could probably do even better, now the Range Rover was veering off the unmade track and on to grassland, Mapoza putting the shift into four wheel drive. McBride looked back again, and saw the BMW racing up the track, skidding and bouncing along.

Mapoza seemed confident in driving in open country, away to their right was an area of fairly dense bush, but he was keeping maybe quarter of a mile to the left of it. The BMW was leaving the track now to follow them, but making heavy weather of the terrain.

Mapoza suddenly put the headlamps on full beam, and switched the fog lamps on, too. He cut the speed back slightly, and the car lurched down a slope, and through a ford, water spraying out on both sides. The auto wipers started up, Then they were driving up a slight incline, and Mapoza hit the throttle down to the floor. The car accelerated fast, and turned hard right to go down behind the trees on the right.

The BMW turned right, too, realizing they could cut off the Range Rover , reducing the distance they had to travel to intersect the Range Rover's path.

"Got him," said Mapoza. "He's fallen for it. That stream we crossed has two metre high banks downstream. Watch him crash."

The BMW was moving at speed now, lurching and bucking through the undulating surface. Although its headlamps were on full beam, the stream wasn't visible as both banks were of equal height. It just appeared as uninterrupted grass land.

Bo spotted the stream when he was about seven or eight metres away. Even then he wasn't sure what was in front of him. He jammed on the brakes, and turned at ninety degrees to avoid the dark ribbon ahead. His front wheel hit the edge of the bank, and there was no way of stopping the large BMW majestically falling through the air, landing on the driver's side, and then continually rolling until it was standing on its roof.

Bo was still conscious, surrounded by exploded airbags, the cabin reeking of explosive charge and dust. He hit the power off, aware of possible fire. He heard Markham swear.

"Fuck. My arm's broken. I can't move it. Jesus!"

"Apart from that, no pain? Can you get out of the door?"

"I don't know, can you?"

Mapoza brought the Range Rover to a stop, got out. He saw the headlight shining into the sky. And then they went off. Nothing but darkness. No sound, and he could see nothing moving. Mapoza was suddenly aware that McBride was standing next to him.

“You don’t think they’re dead?”

“Unlikely. Cars today are built to avoid killing the occupants. The airbags should have saved them. But they won’t be driving anywhere.”

Whilst they watched the dark landscape, the trees off to their left now, and the sky paler with the luminescence of the moon’s light, first one figure, and shortly afterwards, another stood against the sky.

“Well, they’re out of danger in case the car catches fire. Should we phone the police do you think?”

Mapoza said: “Your decision, Mr McBride. Although I don’t think they would do that if it was you.”

“We will. Can you explain where they crashed exactly?”

“Yes, I’ll make the call, Mr McBride.”

Chapter 14

John McBride sat in the shade at an outdoor café table. It was in the square directly opposite the palace. Noisy, but extremely good coffee. Sometimes, Dusty walked across and joined him, but not yet today. He flicked through the pages of the Masawate Observer, published every morning. At the bottom of the front page was a report of an off-road car crash, a BMW that had crashed in a creek only last night. Two people had been in the car and were taken to hospital, but released later.

McBride looked idly round the square, searching for Markham with a gun in his hand. The man wouldn’t rest until McBride was dead, of that he was sure. And McBride was the only man that Markham knew was involved in the scam.

But once he was back in England, he would be safer. Safer because he knew Markham daren’t set foot in his own country again. Only relatively safer, because Markham could pay for an assassin. The problem wouldn’t go away as long as Markham lived.

He looked down again at the newspaper, when he heard somebody sit down next to him. He reached out to grab his arm, his gun arm if he was right-handed.

“Steady on John, you’re twitchy this morning.” It was Dusty Miller, dressed in civvies.

“Dead right. Look at this paper. Markham taken to hospital last night. That would be in Mawabane, and he’s been released. I thought it was him for a moment. I’m his only suspect.”

“He wouldn’t try anything in the square, thousands of witnesses, broad daylight.”

"You don't know how furious he was last night. The man's crazy at the best of times. He would kill first, think second."

A waiter was standing by Dusty, pad in hand. Dusty looked up at him.

"Double espresso, please." He raised his eyebrows at McBride.

"No thanks, I only just got one." McBride flicked through the pages of the newspaper, then folded it and laid it on the table.

Dusty said "Are you going to kill him?"

"Who?"

"Robert Markham, of course."

"I can't see any alternative" said McBride. "If I want to live without looking over my shoulder forever."

"You told me that you couldn't be judge and jury. You've soon changed your mind."

McBride sighed. "I haven't changed my mind. Markham will kill me, unless I get him first. That's the bottom line." He heard his phone ring, pulled it out of his pocket, frowned at the screen. "International. What bets it's my agent?" He pressed the button. "McBride. Oh, hello Ian. I thought it might be you. You saw the painting images I sent? Together with the list of people interested in buying?"

He listened for a long time, Ian being garrulous. "Yes, what do you want me to do, bring the paintings back to England, or I could leave them with the framer. Probably he could handle the sales and everything."

McBride pulled his wallet out, put it on the table, flicked it open with one hand, pulled out a business card. "Yes the guy's name is Kwami. That's his first name. You'd never get your tongue round his last name, I can't." He read out the telephone number. He listened again.

"Yes, the two frames were top quality. And reasonably priced. Yes, okay, I'll drop them off at his shop, tell him you will phone. That's great. Coming home? I might stay for another week or so, do a few more animal paintings. And I've got something I have to resolve."

Whilst he had been talking, he was watching the pedestrians. Lots of civil servants in smart suits, holding brief cases. Women shoppers in brightly coloured dresses, some of them carrying their packages on their heads. And tourists with cameras, pouring off a tour bus parked further along the kerb.

McBride said: "Can I ask you a favour, Dusty?"

"Sure. Ask away."

"I thought of spending a week painting in the Kruger National Park. Would you fancy coming along to act as bodyguard? In view of the circumstances. Markham has never met you. That's if you can get a week's leave."

"The king will agree. Ever since you promised him a painting you are his favourite guy. You think Markham won't find you in the Kruger? Mind, you could be right. Anything active won't float his boat."

"I do want him to know. Flush him out, so that we can dispose of him. Let me carry on living my life. If you book in my name, and tip off the Observer here," he pointed at the newspaper on the table, it should get picked up by the South African press. I know they like to publicize wellknown people visiting the park."

"So, what sort of accommodation? You've got a choice of hotels, chalets, tents, caravans, even."

“Cross out the last two. Either of the first two. No, make it a chalet. That will make us seem vulnerable, I guess.”

“Which campsite? You’ve got a choice of about twenty, at least. It’s coming on to winter here, so I would say that knocks out the sites in the north. That’s Highveld, so it gets pretty nippy after the holiday season. And that’s what it is, end of season. It’s good in a way, because there won’t be a lot of people about.”

“Is there a lot of security?” asked McBride.

“The Kruger have their own security force. But mostly they are looking for poachers. And, of course, they vet staff for honesty, especially the ones handling money.”

“Could you get guns through the entrances?”

“Certainly hand guns. Elephant guns might be a bit dodgy, they would ask questions. I don’t think they search vehicles.”

“I was thinking we might hire a car, maybe a four by four.”

Miller pointed across the square, to the left of the palace. “There’s a big travel agent shop there. We could pick up some literature, even book there if we find anything suitable.”

“Sounds good to me. Let’s go.” McBride put his hand in the air to call the waiter.

Ten minutes later the two men were sitting on comfy chairs in front of a large desk. A smartly dressed young man sat with his hands steepled in front of him, listening intently as McBride laid out their plans to visit the Kruger National Park. Adding that he was planning to do a lot of photography and painting of big game.

The young man sprang into action, went across the office, and returned with a pile of literature. He unfolded a large map of the park, and turned it so that the two men could read it. He pointed at the map whilst he was talking.

“You’re quite right to discount the north, it’s Highveld mostly, and getting chilly this time of year. They can even get snow on the ground in winter. The park is two hundred miles north to south, but only about forty miles wide. In the southern tip here,” he pointed, with his finger touching the map, “the best camp is Berg-en-Dal, here in hilly country. It’s in the area where you can spot the big five as they call the lions, tigers, elephants, rhinos and buffalo. I think I got that right. Anyway the most popular animals.”

McBride said: “We really want a cottage, bungalow, or whatever. Self-catering, but in case we didn’t feel like slumming it, are there restaurants and such on site?”

The young man brought out a booklet from the pile on his desk.

“Here you are. A booklet on Berg-en-Dal. There are restaurants and shops, swimming pools, even, on the campsite. There are bungalows and some of them are right on the perimeter fence. You can watch the animals and birds from your bungalow. They mostly have three single beds, showers but no bath, kitchen of course. Price about five hundred pounds sterling for the week. You are expected to bring a vehicle with you, so there’s parking for your vehicle at the bungalow. You aren’t allowed out of the camp at night, because they close the gates. The times cover the hours of darkness. Closing the gates is to stop animals straying into the

camp without being spotted by the armed guard. When do you want to book for?" A man trained in sales techniques, thought McBride, spotting the sales closure.

"A couple of days' time, if that's possible. We'll hire a car and drive down. How long would that take?"

"It's about two hundred and fifty miles, give or take. If you started at say seven in the morning, you would be there midday or just after. You have to check in at the park gate, and its about eight miles in the park to the campsite. Don't dawdle. You have to get there before the camp closes."

"Okay," said McBride, and pulled out his wallet. "Get cracking and book us in. You can do the car hire if possible. We need a Range Rover, ideally. We'd start out from here, and Mr Miller here can drop me off at Jo'berg on the way back, then drive back here, where he lives."

The travel agent spent some time on the phone, while the two men read up on the Kruger Park, from the pile of literature.

Chapter 15

Markham and his driver Bo were driven by ambulance to the hospital in Mawabane. The accident and emergency department doctor checked them over.

Bo was cleared as fit, no broken bones or cuts. He was driving, of course, and somewhat braced for the crash, sudden that it was. And he didn't have his arm out the car window. That was Markham's problem. He had snapped the ulna when his arm caught on something when the car turned over. Bo had been in a cocoon of airbags.

Bo hung around the hotel cafeteria until Markham came out of the department, his left arm in plaster, a sling round his neck. By this time it was three o'clock in the morning. The hospital arranged a couple of rooms at a local hotel, and they picked up a cab at the hospital entrance. All the way to the hotel Markham moaned about that artist McBride, and how he wouldn't be alive for long. Bo wondered if he would be expected to kill him.

At the hotel Bo phoned the insurance company and reported the car crash. He was in the process of hiring a car. He told them the name of the garage that the crashed car had been taken to. The insurance company said they would pick up the tab for the hire car. Markham had already gone to his bedroom.

It was eleven o'clock the next morning that they came down, both looking haggard with lack of sleep. They were eating a late breakfast when their rental car was delivered, another BMW. But only a five series. That gave Markham something else to moan about, but Bo shut his ears to the man.

After breakfast they set off to drive back to Jo'burg. There was the post to deal with, and some phone messages. Markham settled down in his study to deal with them. Money was slow to come in, because South Africa was still in the grips of a downturn that had lasted nearly five years. Most tenants, both business and private, had not even paid any interest charges on loans, never mind the rents.

Markham would have to mortgage further property in order to pay his living costs. And he had lost his biggest property to the banks. Damn McBride.

The next day was a Tuesday, and Markham reminded his chauffeur that he wanted to meet his solicitor as usual. Bo brought the car round at prompt ten o'clock, and at ten-thirty Markham was stepping out of the car outside the hotel. The commissionaire saluted him, but Markham ignored him. He walked through to the bar, and the little Indian was sitting at his usual table, coffee in front of him, and reading a newspaper.

Markham lumbered up to him. "What a bloody awful life," he greeted Malik Kadakia.

"Goodness gracious, you have broken more bones." He pointed at Markham's sling.

"Car crash," Markham said shortly. "And you were right, the loan was a scam. The money won't be repaid. I know that now."

"As I predicted." But Kadakia said it under his breath. No need to upset his client further.

Markham was looking round for the barman to place an order. He started to wave. A young man in a white coat appeared at the table, note pad in his hand.

"A black coffee as quick as you can. And a full breakfast, bacon and eggs, toast."

When the waiter left Kadakia was immersed in his newspaper again.

"I sometimes think you don't read newspapers except here in the hotel," Markham said.

"Correct, at home I watch television, particularly the business news."

Markham noticed that this morning he was reading the popular South African morning paper Daily Sun.

"I have to find that artist McBride. He was behind the scam you know. I need to find him before he returns to England."

"No problem. He's visiting the Kruger Park. It says so in the newspaper," he flicked through the pages, searching. "Yes here." He turned the paper flat on the table so that Markham could read the small article. "The park has a big publicity machine, always reporting on various important people visiting the park."

"I wouldn't call him important. A tin-pot jumped-up artist who stole my money."

"Maybe so, but at least you know where he will be. It even tells you the camp he is staying at. If you kill him, for god's sake make it look like it's an accident, or you may be in serious trouble. If you do get into that sort of trouble, you will need a criminal lawyer, I am only a commercial lawyer. Please bear that in mind."

The young man returned with Markham's coffee, and also with his breakfast, against his express instructions that the coffee preceded the meal.

The service here was going to pot. They must consider a change of venue. It made him even angrier.

"I've never been to the Kruger Park. Do people stay in tents, and shit in the woods?"

Kadakia, who had returned to his perusal of the newspaper looked up.

“It is illegal to shit in the woods, I understand, unless you bury it. But I have never been to the park. They have hotels and chalets if you prefer not to live in a tent. Also ablution blocks, to avoid what you mentioned.” Kadakia was a bit of a prude.

Markham was gulping his breakfast down, eating with a fork in his right hand. He hadn't bothered to cut up the bacon. Now he speared a rasher, and bundled the whole of it into his mouth. Kadakia looked at him, folding the hotel newspaper.

“I have to go now to see a client. Will you phone my secretary and make an appointment for you to see me? We need to discuss how to clear your outstanding debts with us.”

He strode out of the bar, leaving Markham with bacon sticking out of his mouth.

Outside in the BMW 5 series, Markham was talking to Bo.

“Tomorrow, we'll go down to Kruger Park. I have found out where McBride is staying, which camp. We'll have a talk about it back at my house. This operation can earn you a big bonus.”

Bo pulled the car out into the midday traffic. “I'm not going to kill McBride,” he said.

“No you are not. I've had a rethink. I may as well try to get some of my money back. That's more sensible. So I'll kidnap him, and ransom him back.”

“Tell me what my bonus is, and I'll consider it.”

Markham thought for a while. Bo effortlessly weaved the car through the traffic.

“Well, how about a cut of the ransom, say twenty percent?”

“How much is the ransom going to be?”

Markham considered. Should he tell the truth, or lie. No, he needed Bo. He told the truth. “Well I lent ten million, but I would accept seven million back to get some quick result. Pounds sterling.”

Bo whistled. “Twenty percent? That's like one and a half million. I can retire.”

“I don't want you to retire. It's slightly less than that. Also we might have to compromise to get the deal done. But it is a lot of money.”

“Of course, what if we don't get the ransom?”

“That's the chance you take.” Markham was firm on that point. He was taking a chance, too. “Look, wait until we get back to the house.”

Markham leaned back in his seat, staring out of the window, but his mind was working on the problem.

Chapter 16

John McBride was oddly excited about the Kruger Park trip. The chance to be painting again, the success of his previous animal pictures, the confidence that here was another talent he had mastered. More than that, he was baiting the trap that hopefully would bring in Markham. He saw that Dusty, too, seemed excited to

be on the move. He was driving with confident ease, pushing the four wheel drive car along at a steady sixty miles an hour.

They pulled into the border control. The soldier came across to the car, saw Dusty in the driver's seat, gave a smart salute.

"Good morning, Sir. Please proceed. Have a good day." And they were moving off into South Africa.

They drove steadily all day, with only one rest stop where they ate a quick snack. They were fighting time, as they had to make the Malelane Gate before it closed at six pm. They made it with an hour and a half to spare. McBride was unsure what the security aspects would be like. On his previous visits to game parks, which had been in Maswatiland, there had been no security at all. He went into the reception with Dusty. They had all the documentation from the travel agent, although they knew they had to pay the conservation fee. This is over forty dollars a day for each person. McBride knew that South Africans paid something like 75 cents a day, but that seemed fair enough. They both had pistols with them, but had hidden them in the car, in case they were expected to go through a metal detector. They were asked to fill in forms which asked questions about such things as explosives and guns. They both lied. Their travel agency documents were stamped, and they were told they needed an exit permit which could be obtained at their final camp. They were free to enter the park, and returned to their vehicle.

It was only eight miles to the Berg-en-Del camp, but the cars in front were not in a hurry, and were stopping every time any animal was spotted so the going was slow, and the seven miles took them nearly an hour. It was dusk before they turned into the camp, and a guard was waiting to close the gate for the night. Not to keep the tourists in, but to keep dangerous animals out.

The reception office was still open, and they booked in. They were given a map of the camp, and the clerk penciled a ring round their bungalow, number seven. The map gave details of the swimming pool location and a central restaurant. McBride noticed a viewing area just outside the camp, by a river dam.

They took their car up to the bungalow, put their luggage inside, had a quick wash, and headed down to the restaurant. It was a moonlit night, and several lamps illuminated the main paths. Mosquitos buzzed.

"Good job we had the malaria tablets," said McBride.

"I never get bitten for some reason, but I still take the tablets."

The restaurant probably had seating for over a hundred, but was less than half full. McBride scanned the other customers carefully, looking for Markham who would probably be accompanied by the chauffeur. If he still had his arm in plaster, that would make him stand out. McBride was disappointed, but the fact Markham was not in the restaurant didn't mean he wasn't at the camp. If he was a clever assailant, he would have arranged for someone at the reception to inform him when McBride arrived. Money would have changed hands, probably with a promise of more to come.

The service was terribly slow, and if McBride hadn't been extremely hungry, he would probably have suggested leaving. But the food, when it came, was quite good. It was late when they left to go back to their bungalow, and there were few people about.

“Do you realize,” said McBride, “That one reason Markham wasn’t dining is because he’s in the bungalow, waiting to kill us?”

“Using the key that his contact in the reception gave him.”

“You think I’m just winding you up?”

“Not necessarily. We’ll act in SAS fashion when we approach the building.”

“Using stun grenades, lobbed through the windows.”

“I knew I’d forgotten to pack something,” said Dusty.

They were approaching the bungalow now, so they stopped the conversation, moving behind their hire car, so that they could view the bungalow for signs of occupation.

“We need the handguns,” said McBride in a whisper. Dusty dug in his pocket, produced the key and zapper.

“Use the key, not the zapper. Less commotion that way.” Miller turned the key, then opened the car’s front door, reached up and dowsed the automatic interior lights. Next he pushed the front door carefully closed, noiselessly. He opened a back door, reached under the front seats. When he had got the hire car, he had stitched black cloth hammocks to stow the guns in. It wouldn’t have fooled anyone who carried out a thorough search, but a perfunctory search at the Kruger Park, had there been one, would probably not have revealed the weapons.

Dusty handed one of the pistols to McBride, pocketing the other one.

“You stay at the door while I make a quick circuit of the building. Give me two or three minutes.” Then McBride was disappearing into the darkness, leaving Miller standing close by the doorway, his back to the timber wall.

McBride found there was an earth path round the structure. The chance of making a noise that might be heard inside was lessened by the nightlife of Africa. The howls of hyenas annoyed McBride, and he thought he may spend a week not sleeping, unless he could find some earplugs. There were strange noises closer to the bungalow. Rustling noises came from the bushes, and then a noise of somebody on the roof of the bungalow. McBride froze, his pistol in his hand. Footsteps on the thatched roof moved his way, and then in front of him, merely three feet away, a small hand reached forward. A child? Too small for a man. Suddenly McBride smiled to himself in embarrassment. It was a monkey, trying to find a way into the building. “Boo,” said McBride, and waved his arms. The monkey turned tail and sped over the roof the way he had come.

All the windows of the bungalow were in darkness, though McBride ducked below each of them in case anyone was looking out. He arrived back, and Miller was still standing in the same position, though he turned his head to indicate that he had heard McBride. He was a good man, Miller. No-one else McBride knew would have heard him coming.

McBride positioned himself on the other side of the door, spoke in a whisper.

“Okay, Dusty unlock it, and we both do a roll through, me first.”

Dusty reached out, inserted the key, turned it, slammed the door back, and it all happened within seconds. McBride dived through, hitting the floor with his shoulder, pistol held high, rolling quickly forward so that Dusty wouldn’t land on him. He heard him swear as he landed hard, and then he reached for the light flicked it on, and rose to his feet. There was no-one in the living room, which was directly behind the front door.

“Secure the building,” shouted Miller, dashing for the bedroom. McBride dived through the other door, which was the kitchen. The house was now a blaze of light, every room lit up. Markham and his cronies were not in evidence.

They both returned to the living room, pistols being returned to their pockets.

“Never a dull moment,” said McBride. “You fancy a drink? I’ve a bottle of whisky in my luggage.”

When McBride turned in, he stowed his pistol under the pillow, and hoped that Miller had done the same.

Chapter 17

McBride woke early, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, dug in his hold all for the floppy straw panama. He assembled his art gear. Next, he put the kettle on and made strong tea. A bowl of oranges sat on the dresser in the kitchen. Local produce, presumably. He picked one up and started skinning it, just as Dusty Miller walked in, rubbing his eyes and yawning. He was already dressed.

“Lack of sleep?” said MacBride.

“Kept listening for a forced entry. I did sleep, but kept waking. There’s a lot of animal noises. There was something running round the roof. After a lot of investigation found it was a monkey. Slept better after that.”

“You’ve been too long as a senior officer. Forgetting what it’s like on the front line.”

Miller said a rude word, and went across to pour himself a cup of tea.

“I need more than tea and an orange for breakfast”

“If we go down to the restaurant, the morning will have gone before we even get served.”

“There’s a café as well, I saw it on the way back last night. We could give it a try. If not buy something from the shop.”

It was only seven o’clock, and the café was quite empty. They were served immediately. They both had bacon and egg, toast and coffee. Dusty leaned back in his chair, drinking his third cup of coffee.

“You won’t be pissed off if I don’t watch you painting, will you? I thought I might have a couple of hours’ swimming. I need the exercise.”

“Suits me. We could meet up for lunch, if you like. About one o’clock.”

“Sure. Back at the bungalow.” They both got up and left the café.

The information leaflet said that many animals passed along the track on the perimeter to the camp. It could be a good place to start. Tomorrow he would walk down to the dam. He had his camera with him and the instant back to produce paper prints. A couple of shots when an animal appeared, and he could compose the painting when they had passed by. Meantime, when he had his paints and palette ready, he clipped a fresh sheet of paper to his board, took out a pencil, and had his first good look at the scenery. He moved his rig along, then looked again. He moved sideways without his easel, seeking the perfect view. After

a while he moved back to where he had left the easel, deciding that was the spot to paint.

He was lost in sketching out the composition, and didn't hear her walk up to him. It wasn't until he stood back to assess how it looked on paper, that she spoke. He turned at the sound of her voice. She was standing on his left, just back a pace from him, so that she wouldn't obstruct his view.

"Hello. I hope you don't mind me watching you painting?"

If he had a pound for every time he heard that phrase, he would be even richer. The girl was stunningly beautiful. Brunette, but her hair was tinged with auburn. She was slightly tanned, stood only six inches shorter than McBride, so that made her a tall girl. Aged perhaps early thirties, willowy, not a pound of surplus weight. Full lips, and white teeth, a grin that was infectious. McBride fell in love again.

"How could I resist a pretty English girl? At least you sound English. Are you?"

"Yes, from Lincolnshire. You are John McBride, aren't you? I recognize you from photographs."

"Yes. Are you a painter?"

"Amateur. I belong a local art group, but I'm not very good, I'm afraid. At the moment I paint in watercolour, but I'm thinking of trying pastels. One of our members is quite good at pastels."

Whilst McBride was chatting, he was continuing to draw, and now he had the scene sketched in pencil. He picked up a number 16 brush, and dipped it into his water jar, transferring water to the palette, then mixing paint for the sky. Cobalt blue, just the one colour to be laid on the paper directly. He had a nice thick mixture, and dipped his brush into the liquid, transferring the paint along the top of the paper very quickly. Because the board was at a fairly steep angle, the paint pooled along the bottom of the stripe. Quickly McBride added more clean water to the palette, so diluting the paint. Then he filled the brush with this diluted mixture and trailed his brush lower down, picking up the surplus paint from the first stripe. When he reached the other side of the painting, the girl could see that the join was invisible, but that the sky was getting lighter the lower it got. McBride had stopped talking, concentrating on getting the sky to merge, each time diluting the paint on the palette, so once he reached the horizon, the colour was about fifty percent lighter than at the top of his painting.

He sighed and laid the brush down, taking a break from the concentration. At the same time several impala were coming across the grassland, approaching the campsite perimeter. They were grazing, so their progress was slow. McBride started shooting off pictures with his camera. Fast but very selective, choosing good composition.

"There's never a dull moment, eh?" commented the girl. "You really earn your money the hard way."

"Don't you believe it," joked McBride. "It's not as hard as it looks. And if I make a mess of this painting, I've got plenty more paper with me. Although, over the years, I get less paintings I throw away." He looked at the girl. "It's the first ten years that are the worst." He smiled to show that he was joking. "What's your name?"

"Belinda".

“You can call me John. Surely you haven’t come alone? Is your husband out on safari today?”

“I don’t have a husband any more. He was playing away from home, so I changed the locks, and threw his clothes out in the road. Anyway that’s another story. I was coming on holiday with a friend, but she had an accident in her car and broke her leg. Only a couple of days ago, so I decided to come anyway. I’ve only just arrived. Last night actually.” She stopped speaking to listen to a buzzing noise from the camera. McBride began to tear off the prints as they emerged from the attachment.

“It’s only another version of a polaroid camera. Remember them? No, perhaps you won’t.”

“Course I do! Mind you, I was only a kid. My dad had one..”

McBride was clipping the prints to the top of his painting. He examined them carefully. Just three of them that looked at first sight to be the same. But there were differences that had been deliberately captured on film. He picked up his brush, mixed ultramarine and burnt umber. Dipped his brush in the mixture, made a few strokes on the painting, and the far off hills appeared below the skyline on the board in front of him.

McBride picked up his pencil, and carefully drew several impala grazing in the foreground, one of which had raised his head to scan the area. Ready to give a warning. Twenty minutes later, after a lot of concentrated effort, McBride again put down the brush, and stretched.

“Looks good to me,” said Belinda. “May I have a closer peek?”

McBride stepped back. “Of course. Though it needs some final touches. Maybe another twenty minutes. Then I can sign it off.”

“I really wish that I could paint like that. Then I would never use anything but watercolour.”

“Paint for ten, twenty years and you would be really good. That is what it is about. Same as for golfers. Practice makes perfect, if you have a talent for it, of course.”

McBride rested for five or ten minutes, looking at the scene in front of him. Then he picked a smaller brush, mixed some more paint, painted trunks and branches of the stunted trees amongst the grass. More paint mixing, then adding greens, light and dark to the trees, with swift brush strokes. Finally he mixed cadmium red to the cobalt blue he had started with, and used the dark colour to add shadows of the trees and animals. He looked at his watch.

“I’ve got an appointment at one o’clock,” he said. “I’ll be here again this afternoon.” He looked at Belinda, who was now one of a group of onlookers.

“I may drop by,” she said, smiling at him.

Dusty Miller was already at the bungalow. A cooking smell came from the kitchen when McBride came through the door. Dusty looked out of the kitchen, frying pan in his hand.

“Venison steak okay for lunch?” he said.

“Where did you get them?”

“Down at the store. Together with some vegetables. Did you not know I like cooking?”

“You’re full of surprises, Dusty. I’ll sit down at the table if you’re ready.”

“Coming up now. Did you see Markham while you were painting?”

“No. Did you?”

“There were a few people swimming, but he wasn’t one of them.”

“Perhaps he didn’t take the bait because he didn’t see the publicity about me painting down here. It was quite low key, and I suppose he has got other things to do. I’m sorry about it. It doesn’t matter, because I’m at work, and earning a living. But it has potentially life threatening effects in the future. Such as when an assassin creeps up when I’m not expecting it.”

“Hey, this is day one, John. Give it time. Worry on the day we leave.”

Miller brought the food through from the kitchen, already plated.

Chapter 18

When McBride got back to the perimeter path, there were a few people who could have been waiting for him to turn up, but he would never know. As he re-erected his easel, one or two inched closer. By the time he got out his paints, and had clipped his paper to the board, he had four people behind him, settling in for the long haul. But no Belinda. That disappointed him. He looked out at the grassland. No animals in sight at the moment. A flash of colour caught his eye. It came from a tree close to the fence. He stared in that direction. Then the colour was there again. He saw there were two or three birds in the tree. Bright scarlet on the throat, drab plumage otherwise.

He picked up his camera, enlarged the image, and started to photograph a group. He processed the paper prints, and examined them. Turning to the people behind him, he held the photographs out.

“Does anyone know what this bird is called?”

A stocky man of about sixty said, “That’s a scarlet throat sunbird, mate.” An Australian, by his accent. “That’s common in Australia, too.”

“That’s fine, thank you for the information.” McBride turned back to his drawing board, started sketching the branches of the tree, putting the image of the bird where he had first seen it. He smelled something hauntingly familiar. Belinda, with that pleasant perfume. He turned round, giving her a big smile. She smiled back, and gave him a little hand wave.

“Can you give me time to finish this painting, Belinda?”

“Of course.”

By the time McBride had finished the bird painting, the other onlookers had drifted away. Belinda said, “You are going to pack up for today?”

“I thought we would have a walk round the camp, and perhaps down to the dam. Do you want to?”

“That would be fun. I’ll show you around, and where I think the best views are. You can leave your gear at my bungalow, if you like.”

“If it’s closer, of course I will.”

When they had dispensed with the luggage, they walked over past the pool to the other side of the campsite. Here was the lake and dam, just past the fence, a fantastic sight. McBride was transfixed.

“We’ve got to go there tomorrow. It’s a bit too late today.” He glanced at his watch. Be dark in a couple of hours.”

They both leant against the fence watching a few people walk along the path by the water. The animals were on the other side. Grazing animals, and then they saw the jaws of a crocodile rise out of the water’s edge by some reeds. A large yawn, and then it was gone again.

“Come on where’s the gate? We’ve got to get closer,” said McBride.

She pointed: “It’s down here, not very far.”

When they were through the gate, they sauntered down to the dam, which was further along the perimeter. People were gathered there, because that was where the action was. Hippos by the bank wallowing in mud.

“Good to watch,” said McBride, now up to the barrier built to stop onlookers going any further. “But not really photogenic. There are some things and scenes that you can’t make interesting. The trick is to recognize what not to waste your time with. I’m afraid hippos fall into that category.”

“Yesterday there were elephants down here,” said Belinda. “Now that really was something.”

“Do they come every morning?” McBride was getting excited at the thought of adding elephants to his paintings.

“So a camp ranger was telling us. About an hour after dawn, so you would have to be up early.”

“I will be. With my easel and paints. Will you be here?”

“Of course, if you don’t mind. Can I ask you a personal question?”

McBride nodded.

“Are you here with anyone? Such as your wife or girlfriend?”

“That’s easy. I’m divorced. For a long time now. I was in the army at the time, and being married to a soldier didn’t suit her. And I’m not here with a girl. My best friend is with me, Dusty Miller, an army brigadier. He’s acting as my body guard. Don’t ask about that. And I’m heterosexual.”

Belinda smiled shyly, and didn’t comment.

Later, as they walked back to the campsite she said, “Tomorrow night I could cook a meal back in my bungalow. Would you come? Price of entrance is that you would have to bring a bottle of wine.”

“I’m looking forward to that already.”

Miller was already in the bungalow when McBride got back.

“I saw you going out of the camp with a nice looking bird,” said Miller. He was in an easy chair, with a bottle of beer, drinking straight from the neck. The television was on, lighting up the room; outside it was nearly dark, night falling suddenly as it does in the tropics.

“Belinda is her name. From Lincolnshire in England. I could be on a winner there. She’s invited me to dinner tomorrow night. Hope you don’t mind.”

“I wish you luck. You can’t get too much of that. Take it where you can has always been my advice.”

“What have you been doing all day?” McBride said.

“Went swimming all morning, about forty lengths, and then a rest with a coffee. This afternoon, went to look at some animals. That’s when I spotted you in the distance.”

“Shall we spend an evening in the bar? I think you can eat in there as well.”

“Yes, that’s great. Just let me watch the end of this documentary on the box.”

McBride sat down in the other chair, and watched the programme. He quickly learned that it was filmed here, in Kruger Park. Probably distributed round the camp on a cable link. Still, it was interesting, and he actually saw the elephants at the dam he had visited that afternoon. It was professionally filmed, he could tell. The composition of each frame was spot on. He made a mental note of the position of the various cameras, and reckoned that he would be able to take up similar viewpoints.

They sat up at the bar. Simple meals were served, so they ate. And drank beer.

“Have you spotted Markham?” asked McBride.

“No. But I did call in at the reception and asked if they had a Mr Markham staying. The girl looked on the computer, and said no.”

“So he’s not taken the bait. What a waste.”

Miller looked at him. “Not entirely. I’m getting some exercise, and you’re earning money working. Sounds as if it could be worse.”

“If he doesn’t turn up, I’ll go to Jo’burg, and run an exhibition or something. Right in his face.”

“Give it time. We’ve only been here a couple of days. Markham probably has other things to do, and if he’s been told how long you’re staying, he could still sneak up on you. That would make sense, actually. When you have your guard down.”

“Could be,” McBride took a swig of his beer. “But he doesn’t know about my secret weapon – which is you.”

“On the other hand, Markham might have his own secret weapon – called Belinda.”

“Now that isn’t fair.”

Chapter 19

Markham was just finishing a hearty breakfast, promising himself he would start on a diet the next day, when he heard the BMW pull up outside. Rather he heard Bo’s enthusiastic use of the horn. As if Markham might have become deaf during the night, a loud knocking on the door followed the musical horn recital.

“For God’s sake, I heard you already. Come in for a moment, and you can carry my luggage out while I finish dressing. I hope you’ve got that gun with you.”

“Of course. I bought some more ammunition for it. You just blew the last lot away.”

“Yes. Well McBride got me very angry. Pity I didn’t kill him.”

“You never even got close.”

Markham went off to get his clothes. Bo pissed him off. If they were at the safari park long, he might end up shooting him, as well as McBride.

They drove for about two hours, and Markham got hungry. Bo drove on for a couple of miles and a service area appeared on the roadside.

“This will do,” said Markham.

Bo parked as close to the restaurant as he could. Markham pulled himself out of the car, and was waddling towards the eatery before Bo could even get out of the car himself. When Bo caught up with him, Markham had a tray in his hand and was queuing at the counter.

“Get what you want,” said Markham over his shoulder. “We won’t eat again until we get to the camp.” Bo shrugged in apparent disbelief.

As they sat opposite each other at a small table, Markham stuffing food into his mouth, he said, “We’ll just make a little detour, when we get close to the park. I want to show you a place we might hold McBride while we wait for the ransom.”

“Your plans are fairly advanced then.”

“You have to think ahead, Bo. That’s the secret of my success.”

Markham looked at Bo, whose face was going very red. He looked as though he might be sick. Spoil everything if he had a heart attack.

“It’s about two miles, on the right. A narrow road. It’s tarred at first, but very lumpy, cheap job, then it’s just hardcore. Going uphill, so when the rains come it’s like a waterfall. You can see why it wasn’t a success. The estate, not the road.” Markham fell silent, remembering, the fund, looking to loan out all that money that had poured in from England. Greedy people, looking for returns that should have warned them it was a scam. But Wilson had done a good job. Unfortunately, lending money in South Africa, in current times, the ANC full of corruption, the changeover from apartheid done too quickly, made it impossible for the borrowers to earn a return to repay the loans. Still, not his fault. He’d got solid security, in most cases. Like this one. He held the deeds for the ground.

The car was now bumping over the tarmac, and shortly hit the hardcore, with its channels made by the torrential water flow. The BMW slewed violently, its back wheels failing to make proper purchase.

“Steady on!” said Markham.

“Should have hired a four wheel drive for this off-road stuff. Or at least a front wheel drive,” grumbled Bo, wrestling with the steering wheel. The track was winding up the hillside, a steep drop on the left, and the sheer hill going up on the right. Markham shuddered, the accident the other night in the dark still giving him nightmares.

“Go slowly, there’s a gate just round the corner.”

Markham spoke just in time, and Bo managed to come to a halt before the car ran into the framework gate, covered in galvanized steel mesh. In front of it the track widened into a turning circle. To the right of the gate, the fence was buckled, but not broken. Someone had attacked it with a heavy vehicle. Fortunately the

fence was well-built, over twelve feet high, and topped with razor wire, laid in long lazy coils.

Markham got out of the car, stretching. His left arm was still in the plaster cast. Bo got out of the car, too. It didn't look as though he was driving anywhere soon. But Markham put his hand into his jacket pocket, pulled out a big set of keys, bounced them in his right hand.

"There you are Bo. One of these keys fits the padlocks on the gate. The others fit the houses that are finished."

Bo strolled up to the gate, and looked through the mesh. Markham joined him. The fence stretched as far as the eye could see. Construction of houses had begun at this side of the site. Three show houses, looking out over the valley. Fantastic view, thought Markham. Beyond the finished houses, earth had been scraped to build foundations. The footings were dug, wooden pegs marked the limits. After three or more rows, the construction stopped, and the fence marched on into the bush.

Bo started going through the keys on the bunch. He selected padlock type keys, and tried them. Eventually, one fitted. He pulled the padlock open, tried the next padlock lower down with the same key. It opened, too.

"Bo, drive the car through, and lock the gates after us. Could be people in the bush waiting to gain entrance. Squatters, you know."

Bo appeared to doubt this. Everything was quiet, no movements, and the hillside was steep. The site had been excavated in a huge gouge, and the spoil could be seen spilled over the drop below. Nevertheless he obeyed Markham's instructions, parking the BMW in the first driveway, and then returning to lock the gates.

When Markham had the keys back, he sorted through the Yale keys, and managed to open the front door of the first house. All the first and second fixings had been done. The dry plaster boarding had not been decorated, but internal doors were in. The houses were weatherproofed. Markham thought this would be ideal to hide away McBride while he negotiated the ransom.

"Okay Bo. Now you know the way to this place, you will be able to transport McBride here. You can hide him in the boot, just in case the police should stop you. A very remote chance, of course. You'll be here well before the alarm is raised." Markham saw that Bo was going to raise objections. "Bo, just think of the money. You'll be able to retire."

Bo walked outside and went to the gates, unlocked them. He drove the car out through the gates, parked it on the turning circle, relocked the gates. He climbed into the car, tried to give the keys to Markham.

"No Bo, you keep them for the time being."

"I'm having second thoughts." He started the engine, put the car into gear and moved slowly down the hill. "I've a feeling things could go wrong, badly wrong."

"How could they? You can't back out at this stage."

"I can if I want to."

"And miss out on nearly a million and a half British pounds?"

"There is that," agreed Bo. "But fancy hiding the hostage so near to where he is going to be kidnapped. The police don't like kidnap cases. They put a lot of energy

into solving them, especially in the first few hours. They'll have loads of police in vehicles, and air cover, too."

"Bo, we are twenty-five miles away from the campsite. Do you know how many square miles they would need to search? Hang on, I'm working it out. That's nearly two *thousand* square miles, covering every direction. The campsite being the centre of a circle."

"I agree that's a lot of land, but there won't be that many buildings, we're not near any big towns."

They were still arguing back and forth when the BMW turned into the Malelane Gate. It took them a further hour to get to the camp. At the reception, they both got out of the car and entered the building.

Markham said to the guy who greeted them: "My name's Markham, we've got reservations at the lodge." He pulled paperwork out of his pocket.

"Yes, Sir. Perhaps your man could book in with my girl here." He turned and beckoned a clerk at a desk at the back of the room. "I just wanted to sort out something with you here." He moved down the counter to the end wall. "We talked on the phone about some information," he said and he passed a folded sheet under his hand across the counter. His big hand completely hid the sheet, and Markham slipped it straight into his jacket pocket. Markham's hand came out with two hundred rand notes palmed, and shook the other man's hand.

"Thank you," said Markham, "you have been very helpful."

The receptionist leaned forward, and said in a whisper, "If you need keys, just say. They would be four hundred for a duplicate."

"I am saying. Most useful."

The receptionist went away for a minute or two, and came back with a small brown envelope. "There you are, Sir." And Markham gave him another four notes.

Markham turned round and saw that Bo had completed the registration and was waiting for him. They both strode out of the reception office.

"We take the car and park it at the lodge," explained Bo. Markham climbed into the car. He opened the sheet of paper he had been given.

The note was typed. Only a short message:

McBride is booked into Bungalow 7.

He pulled out the brown envelope, and felt the indentations of a key inside. He slipped it back into his pocket without opening it.

Chapter 20

John McBride walked up to the door of Belinda's bungalow at five minutes past the time she had invited him. It didn't do to be early. And more than five minutes late was rude. So his mother had told him when he was a young boy. She still was a stickler for good manners.

Belinda opened the front door, and smiled broadly at him. She was wearing a dress, more a gown, but it didn't look out of place, even in a safari park. McBride

himself wore smart trousers and a light weight sports jacket, only a shade darker than his nearly white trousers. He had bought an expensive bottle of white dry wine. French, even though the South Africans made a decent wine themselves. For McBride, he had to give Belinda the best. He had asked the store in the camp to gift wrap it, and it was tied with a large red ribbon.

“Come in, you’re just in time, the meal is about ready to serve. I hope it’s to your liking.” She pulled the wrapping from the bottle, studied the label. “How did you know that it is my favourite wine?”

“Just good luck. I bought it on the way here, and it was from the chilled cabinet, so it should be cool enough, but maybe you could pop it into the fridge for a few minutes.”

She went into the kitchen came back with two glasses and a bottle of scotch. “I hope you drink whisky? There’s some ice if you use it, and a jug of water on the side table here.”

“No ice, thanks. I drink it as it comes. No point in spoiling the flavour, eh?”

She sat down on the sofa, and patted the seat next to her. McBride took the seat, and wondered what to talk about. He really knew nothing about her. But he knew that she had nothing to do with Markham, despite what Miller had implied.

She raised her glass, “Here’s to the pair of us,” she said and took a swig from her glass. McBride raised his own glass and took a drink. It was a malt he realized immediately.

“You’re a whisky expert,” he said.

“No, I just buy the ones that my dad used to drink.”

“So what do you do for a living?”

“I’m a farmer. It was my father’s farm before he died. Not a very ladylike job I know.”

“Arable, mixed?”

“You know things. Most people don’t know anything about farms. Since I told you where I lived, I should think you could guess.”

“Arable, growing vegetables or flowers.”

“Vegetables. Five hundred acres. And before you ask, I’ve got a very able manager, that’s why I can get to come on holiday. And we should eat now, if you’re ready.”

She rose and walked into the kitchen which also served as a diner, as did McBride’s kitchen on the camp. The table was set for two, with a couple of candles lit, making the glassware gleam. At each place the starters of melon portions were set out.

As soon as they had eaten the starters, she was up and bustling at the stove, putting a fry pan on the hob. Then she opened the oven, and with an oven cloth in hand put dishes in the centre of the table. She turned back to the hob, and he could smell that it was some sort of fish. She put two large plates on the table, served fillets of fish straight from the pan to plate.

“Help yourself to potatoes and vegetables. I hope you like the fish. It’s river fish, so it didn’t travel far. I had a taste of some last night in the restaurant, and I can vouch for it.”

McBride expected it to taste muddy, as it usually does in England, but instead had an interesting, fresh taste. There were chipped potatoes, and peas.

"I don't think any vegetable but peas go with fish, except maybe asparagus. I couldn't get any of that. Out of season, I suppose." She was tucking in to her food.

McBride got up and went to the unit next to the sink, pulled open the top drawer, removed a corkscrew, got the wine out of the fridge, opened it and poured it into the waiting glasses on the table.

"The layout of your kitchen is identical to ours. That's how I knew where the bottle opener was."

She had cheese on a breadboard on one of the kitchen unit tops. As soon as they had finished the main course she cleared the plates, and put the cheeseboard on the table, and a small plate in front of each of them. They sat talking and drinking McBride's wine. When the wine was finished, she led the way back into the living room.

"Would you like a brandy? I'm going to have one. I'll just get a couple of glasses. There might be something that equates to the real thing." He could hear her searching the kitchen cupboards, doors slamming, and then she re-appeared with a smile. In her hands a couple of glasses for red wine.

"Close but not the real thing. They will do, though." Expertly she filled each glass with a small portion of brandy.

She sat close to McBride on the sofa. Very close, he was pleased to note.

"I'll bet you know where the bedroom is, since your bungalow is the same as mine. So you said." She looked him in the eye, a small smile on her face.

McBride needed no further encouragement. He stood up, held out his hand, so that she could pull herself out of the chair. He put down his glass, and lifted her in both arms, and carried her over the threshold of the bedroom.

"Bravo, Mr McBride," she said.

She went into the en suite bathroom when he put her down. In a few moments she was out, this time dressed only in a sheer night dress. And that was why McBride could see that was all she was dressed in.

McBride flung his clothes off and jumped into bed beside her.

McBride awoke, and for a moment didn't know where he was. He opened his eyes, and the bedside light was on. Belinda had her head on his shoulder, and was asleep. When he moved to get rid of the cramp, she groaned slightly, and reached out an arm to put round him.

"You lovely man," she murmured.

McBride lifted his head to see if there was a clock. There was, a small alarm clock. Three o'clock. He drifted back to sleep. The next time he woke it was eight o'clock. He shook Belinda gently.

"Hey, wake up."

She rubbed her eyes, looked at the clock. "That isn't late."

"I'll treat you to breakfast in the café if you get up now."

"Wow, how can I resist your charms? You've done the loving bit, and now all you need is food."

Chapter 21

Markham unlocked his room in the lodge, and turned to Bo.

“I think we should eat in my room tonight instead of going anywhere. Come about, what,” he looked at his watch, “eight thirty, I’ll organize something to be sent up. That’s plenty of time to get some sleep – you’re going to be busy tonight.”

“Aren’t you going to be busy as well?” Bo looked as though he was expecting the worst.

“You won’t need me, I’ll only get in the way. But we can discuss everything when you come for dinner. On your way, and get some sleep.”

Markham entered his room, and was pleasantly surprised. It was not a suite, but it did have a dining table, as well as a double bed and toilet facilities. He decided he would have a sleep himself. But first he phoned down and ordered dinner after studying the in-room menu. He ordered what he liked and the same for Bo. Bo could either eat it or not.

Markham was awakened by a heavy knock on the door. He looked at his wristwatch. Twenty past eight. He had slept on the bed in his shirt and trousers, shed only his shoes.

He swung his legs to the floor, running his hand through his hair. He padded across the floor in his stocking feet, opened the door. It was Bo. Markham stood to one side, to let him in.

Bo was dressed casually in shirt and jeans, trainers on his feet. Markham pointed to the table, and sat down himself.

“I’ve ordered dinner, it should be here very soon.”

“What are we having?”

“It’s a surprise, Bo.”

Bo slumped in the dining chair. “What about a drink, first?” He pointed at the drinks refrigerator. Markham wondered if he’d already raided the bar in his own room.

“I don’t think it would be a good idea to drink before we do the kidnap. You don’t want to drive off the mountain side.”

Bo made a petulant face, but dropped the subject. Seconds later, there was the sound of a trolley clanking in the corridor, then a rap on the door. Markham nodded at Bo, who got up and went to open the door.

The waiter pulled the cloth off the trolley, and served the food on to the table. The last course he left on the trolley.

Bo said, “What is this?”

“Venison steaks. Probably local. Come on Bo, I know you like steaks.”

Bo took a mouthful. “Yeah, okay.”

Markham sighed and began to eat, too. He would never make out Bo. He was the first to finish his steak, and put his plate on the trolley, lifting the cheese board and placing it on the table. He also put the biscuits on the table.

Bo was eating everything laid before him. He wolfed into the cheese and biscuits. “What time am I doing the kidnap thing?”

“Well, when the guy is in bed. To be sure of that I would go after midnight. There can’t be enough night entertainment in a safari camp that would keep you out of bed at midnight, surely.”

“That would be my thought as well. So I’ll go back to my room and watch the TV film channel. That be okay? Perhaps you could make sure that I’m awake at twelve. Phone my room, will you?”

It was twelve thirty before Bo was creeping down the path from the lodge. He was wearing a windcheater over his shirt, to hide the pistol he had tucked into the back of his trousers. In his trouser pocket was a bottle of liquid and a fresh handkerchief. Around his waist, he had wrapped a considerable length of nylon rope. In his shirt pocket was a pencil torch. In his hand he had the key for Bungalow seven. It was easy to find, he had looked at the plan of the camp-site in his room before he left.

When he arrived at the bungalow it was in the shadows, away from the lamps illuminating the path. He nearly collided with the Range Rover parked near the door. That gave Bo an idea. The car had been reversed up to the bungalow door. He could load the victim and drive straight out. If he could find the car key. Usually people put the keys in the hallway. He suddenly remembered that the camp gates wouldn’t be open until six in the morning, over five hours away. *Shit. He would have to load the man in the car, and then hang around in the bungalow.*

This was becoming a risky venture. He would be reaching the hideout in daylight. There was the chance he could be seen. What had appeared to be a simple job was now spiced with danger. But a reward of over a million pounds must be worth some risk.

Bo silently inserted the key Markham had given him into the bungalow door. He turned it carefully and scarcely heard the tumblers fall. He turned the knob, and the door opened without a squeak. Pulling the torch from his pocket, he quickly flashed it downwards, on and off. To the left, a table. Car keys lying there on the top. Ahead a door, open. To the right a door, closed.

Bo stood in the dark. Put his left hand carefully out, got the car keys from the table and put them in his pocket. He listened for a few minutes, but there was no sound. He took several steps forward, through the open door. His eyes were becoming used to the dark. Once in the room he could make out shapes, illuminated from the moonlight coming through the window. The outline of a TV set, two large easy chairs. Magazines on a coffee table. Across from him, another door. No, two doors, side by side. To his right, yet another door. Bo guessed, for no good reason, that the far doors were bedrooms, the door to his right a bathroom, or a kitchen. Best then, to open the door to his right. Most likely to be empty and therefore to be discounted.

This door creaked as he opened it. He stopped with the door half open, and listened. Still no noise. He poked his head round the door. A window straight ahead gave a little light. Kitchen. He left the door open, and moved back towards the other doors. Which one to open? Bo chose the right of the two doors. This one opened silently, a bedroom. He could see from the window with the curtains not drawn that the bed was unoccupied.

He turned to the last door. He could feel his heart racing. He pulled out the handkerchief and the bottle, uncapped it and sloshed liquid on the cloth. A

pungent smell filled the air. Quickly he pushed the door open, saw the bed, dashed across as the man had turned and was saying drowsily: "John, what time..." Bo held the cloth over the man's face. Eventually he lifted the cloth. Turned the man over to lie on front, but with his head to one side. He replaced the cloth near his nose. He was still breathing. *God, he was a big heavy guy.*

Bo pulled the rope from round his waist, crossed the guy's wrists, and expertly tied his hands together. Since he hadn't brought a knife, he stretched the rope down his back, and then lashed his ankles together. There was not a lot of rope left by then. He put the light on, looking for a gag. The man's clothes were piled on the bedside chair. He reached for the man's shirt, tore it into strips, wrapped them round his head, the cloth between his teeth, knots behind his head.

Bo worked quickly, aiming to get the guy into the car before he came round and started struggling. Next he went out to the car, zapped it open with the key and lifted the hatch up. He returned and, taking a deep breath, got the guy in a fireman's lift. He was taller than Bo, so his feet trailed on the floor, making it even more difficult to carry him. At last he dropped the guy on to the tailgate, and rolled him into the car.

Bo went back into the house, grabbed a blanket off the bed, took it back to the car, draped it over the man, shut the tailgate quietly, relocked the car. Then he sat down in one of the easy chairs to wait for the daylight.

Chapter 22

At five forty-five, Bo roused himself from the arm chair he had been fitfully sleeping in and went through to the kitchen, where he helped himself to a glass of water. Once outside the bungalow he carefully locked the door. He turned to the plants near the bungalow, and urinated.

Ready for the drive to the hideout, he first lifted the tailgate to inspect the prisoner. Dawn was breaking, and he saw the man had wriggled clear of the blanket, but was still trussed up and gagged. He had his eyes open, and gazed at Bo with contempt. Bo didn't care. He reached down and put the blanket back over the prisoner. He looked at his watch. Just coming up to six o'clock. He checked that he had the bunch of keys for the hideout.

He started the Range Rover, and slowly drove down to the camp gate. The gate stood open, a man walking back presumably the one who had opened it. Bo gave him a hand wave, and got one in return. He drove through the gate and speeded up. *As simple as that*, he thought.

The traffic was light at that time in the morning, and he drove at a steady sixty for most of the way, once he was outside the park. He could hear sounds from the back of the car, banging and occasionally a groan. At least the guy was still alive.

As he neared the turn off to the hideaway, he realized that he should phone Markham. He would have to stay to look after the guy, otherwise he would most certainly escape. And they needed food. Once off the main road, he pulled to a stop, and used the cell phone. It rang for a long time before Markham answered.

“Who is it?” Markham mumbled.

“Bo here. Look I’m just outside the hideaway with McBride in the back of the car. I took his car, since it was outside the bungalow. I won’t be able to leave him, or he’s bound to escape. Could you get up here with some food for us both?

This man knows how to handle himself, and he’s bigger than me.”

Markham grumbled a lot, but agreed he’d set off after he had breakfast. It was still only half past seven.

Markham was unable to sleep anymore that morning, so reluctantly he showered and dressed and went down to the café. He chose a seat at the back of the room, and ordered a full breakfast.

Two people walked in, a woman and with her, McBride. Markham felt the blood drain out of his face. If McBride was here, who had Bo kidnapped? The man was an idiot. He pulled the phone out of his pocket and dialed Bo’s number, there was a long wait, and then the operator said we are unable to connect you, please try later. That was awkward, maybe there was no mast in the vicinity of the mountainside estate. He should have thought about it.

He pushed away his plate, his appetite gone. He must go down to the reception office and speak to his contact there. McBride must have a travelling companion he knew nothing about.

He got up, went to pay, and hurried out of the café. As he passed McBride’s table, McBride smiled at him and said “*Good Morning, Mr. Markham.*” It was like some nightmare; perhaps he was about to wake up.

The reception office was quiet at this time in the morning, and with relief, Markham saw his contact at the counter. He beckoned to him, and went to the far side away from the clerks’ desks where they might be overheard.

Markham produced a twenty rand note and put it on the counter. “This is an urgent enquiry,” he spoke in a low voice, “has McBride got a companion with him in Bungalow seven?”

The man moved across to a computer, tapped some keys and came back. He put his hand on the banknote that Markham had left on the counter.

“Yes Sir, a Brigadier Miller, home address is in Maswatiland, care of the palace in Mawabane.”

Markham went straight to the camp shop, bought a carrier bagful of food, and some bottles of water. He returned to the lodge and got into his rental car, the BMW 5 series that had replaced his own car that Bo had wrecked when they chased McBride. It seemed a long time ago, and he idly wondered whether the car had been repaired but that no-one had managed to get in touch with him.

At first he had difficulty driving with his broken arm. Fortunately the car was an automatic, or it would have been impossible. In the event, he leaned left and operated the lever with his right hand to engage drive. If a policeman saw him driving, he might pull him over, but he had to risk it.

He drove slowly even outside the park until he had accustomed himself to driving again. It had been some years since he had taken the wheel. Ever since the bad accident he had been involved in. After that he had employed Bo to do the driving. After this trip he would insist on Bo doing all the driving in future.

He arrived at the turnoff to the estate on the hill side without mishap. But a lot of drivers had blown their horns furiously because he was driving too slowly. *Fuck*

them, he thought. He drove cautiously along the patchy tarmac road and eventually he reached the unpaved track. He slowed down even more, and averted his eyes from the drop on the left, keeping his eyes firmly on the track immediately in front of the car. He felt the back wheels lose traction, and lifted his foot off the accelerator, as he had been taught all those years ago. The car halted. Cautiously he pressed the accelerator and the car slewed out at the back, one rear wheel hanging over the edge of the road. He tried again, but the engine roared and the car didn't move. He pulled on the handbrake, sat there for a few minutes, sweat trickling down his face. He would have to leave the car, walk up to the house. He was trembling with fear now, expecting the car to fall off the road if he moved. But it might do that anyway, falling through space to smash to pieces in the valley, bursting into flames as the petrol ignited. A nasty death that Markham could visualize only too well. He grasped the door handle, pushed the door ajar. Reaching carefully up, he unclipped his seatbelt. He threw himself from the car, landing on his side on the gravel track, clawing at the ground in panic.

He lay there for ten minutes, fearing to move. Then he crawled towards the cliff face of the track against the mountainside. Only then did he rise to his feet, hands grasping at the rocks of the mountainside at his back. He opened his eyes which had been shut for some time, and looked out at the valley, from the blue grey horizon of the veld, and nearer, the trees and shrubs far below his feet. Waves of nausea swept over him and he vomited his breakfast on the track, weeping in distress. His eyes were shut again and he fumbled in his pocket for the cell phone.

He opened his eyes concentrated on the phone, and dialed Bo's number. The wait was long, and he thought he was again out of range. Suddenly the ring tone started, went on for a long time, then Bo spoke.

Markham said: "Bo, I'm on the track, but the car skidded, it's hanging off. Can you come down. I need help. Quick."

"Okay, I'm coming now." The line clicked off.

Markham slid down the wall until he was sitting, pretending he was sitting in the sun in his own garden. But his right hand was clawing at the gravel track. How long he sat there he didn't know, but it seemed like forever. Time had lost all meaning for him. He nodded off, and was jerked awake by the sound of clattering stones. At first he thought the mountainside was giving way. Then he heard Bo's voice.

"That's not too bad. We both got to push the car, get the wheel on the track, otherwise the wheel just spin, cos of the diff."

Markham didn't know what the man was talking about, but it sounded reassuring. Bo opened the driver's door, saw the engine was still running, twisted the steering wheel towards the right of the track.

"Get behind and push like hell," Bo instructed.

"I can't go near the edge. I get dizzy."

Bo got hold of him, pulled him to the car door, still ajar. "Get hold of the wheel and the door, and push there. I'll push from the back. But put some effort into it."

With the two of them pushing, the car started moving. As soon as all four wheels were on the track, Bo bent down and pushed a large piece of rock under one of the wheels.

“Hey man, push the door wide open, and stand right back to let me get in.” He sprinted from the back of the car, threw himself into the driving seat, put his foot on the brake. “Now, if you don’t want to go to the other side of the car, get in the back and we’ll get along back to my prisoner.”

Markham clambered into the back seat, relief flooding through his body.

“That reminds me. You’ve got the wrong man. McBride’s still back at the camp. I’ve seen him.”

Chapter 23

“You know that horrible man, do you?” said Belinda.

“That horrible man is out to kill me,” said McBride, munching toast. “Don’t raise your eyebrows. I’m serious, and it’s a long story. I must get back to the bungalow, and sort my painting gear out for later.”

“Are you painting again this morning?”

“Well, I thought I might go swimming with Dusty Miller. He’s acting as my bodyguard while I’m in danger, so I ought to hang about with him occasionally. He might think he’s redundant and clear off.” McBride smiled to show it was a joke. “I’ll be down at the dam this afternoon if you want to catch up with me.”

She smiled. “Sure do,” she said.

Bungalow seven was locked, which McBride thought strange, since it was half past eight. Unless Miller was at the restaurant. He hadn’t been at the café. He used his key, calling out in case Miller had overslept. There was no response, so McBride tapped on his bedroom door, and pushed it open.

The bed was empty, sheets awry. On the side chair, Miller’s clothes lay as he had taken them off the night before. There was a faint medical smell. McBride couldn’t quite place the smell. He looked round the rest of the house, but no sign of Miller. Something else was odd. He tried to remember. Yes, the hire car wasn’t outside. Had Miller been in a hurry, got up and dashed off in the car, without any clothes on? Perhaps fresh clothes, the others not put away. He went back to the bedroom, pulled open drawers. It told him nothing. As he was pulling open drawers, he had seen something else. Miller had not taken his cell phone. It was on the bedside table.

Whatever the reason, whatever the panic, nobody would forget their cell phone, surely?

McBride made his way to the reception office. One guy manned the counter, somebody he hadn’t seen before.

“I’m staying at Bungalow seven with a colleague, called Miller. He seems to have disappeared. He hasn’t been in here? His car has gone, but I thought the camp was shut at night?”

The man leant on the counter. “The gate opened at six a.m. I opened it myself. Straight after I opened it a Range Rover went out. The guy waved, and I waved back. Don’t know who it was.”

"The car that's missing is a Range Rover. What did the driver look like?"

"I couldn't get a good look. He was black though."

"Nobody else in the car?"

"Not as far as I could see. Remember thinking at the time that he was on his own."

"I need to get hold of the police. I think he has been kidnapped. That is what it looks like."

"It's true there are a lot of kidnaps in South Africa. Here, use this phone dial 10111. You get a call centre for all emergencies."

McBride's call was picked up straight away. "Which emergency service?"

"Police. Somebody has been kidnapped, and a car stolen, too. I'm at Berg-en-Dal in the Kruger National Park. The man that has been kidnapped is Brigadier Miller. He was supposed to be guarding me."

At this stage, the woman transferred the call to the police station nearest to the campsite. They told him that they would send a car and an officer straight away. He should remain at the reception centre. The officer would be there within the next halfanhour. McBride was unhappy at the thought of wasting half an hour twiddling his thumbs in the reception. He decided to phone Dusty's employer. The king ought to know about it. It took longer than he thought trying to get hold of the king, who was currently out on a royal appointment somewhere in his realm. McBride left his cell phone number, with a message for the king to phone him at the earliest opportunity. He put his cell phone away in his pocket, and at that moment a man entered the reception area. He had the look of confidence those in any police force in the world had.

The officer was a smartly dressed Zulu. Tall and muscular, but not overweight. "Who wants to report a kidnap?" He pointed at McBride, who was the only person on the customer side of the counter. "Was that you?"

"It was." He told the officer about their hire car being driven out of the gate at six this morning, with only the driver visible. How he had searched the bungalow. The officer pulled out a notebook, and at the same time a junior policeman came in. He had parked the police car so that it didn't block the reception.

"You staying with this man in the bungalow? Whose name was Brigadier Miller. That his rank, or his first name?"

"His rank in the Maswatiland Army. He's a mercenary, British. First name Michael. But he gets called Dusty. Because of his last name. You know, Miller as in flour miller. So anybody named Miller generally gets called Dusty." McBride thought the explanation had gone over the policeman's head. "He was guarding me. I thought somebody was trying to kill me."

"So, why did they take your bodyguard instead of you?" Sharp and to the point. This cop was no slouch.

"Perhaps the guy who took him didn't know what I look like."

"Where were you at the time?"

"I thought we would get to that question. I'm not proud of it, but I was spending the night in a young lady's bungalow." McBride could feel his face redden.

The police officer beamed. "Some people have all the luck, eh? Have you searched the camp?"

"I searched the bungalow. The car was gone. His clothes were there. On a bedside chair. He left his cell phone on the bedside table. I went straight down to the reception in case he had been there. That was where I was told that the car left the campsite at six this morning, driven by a black person. Miller is white."

The officer leaned against the counter and stared at McBride. "How do you know that he wasn't doing the same as you – spending the night with a woman? The car theft might be a coincidence."

"True. I've been a bit panic-stricken. I can tell you who was trying to kill me. He's at the camp with his chauffeur. He's big, overweight, and white. Name is Markham, Robert Markham. So-called financial advisor. You might like to question him. He's staying at the lodge. I saw him at the café this morning."

"You didn't think to ask him about the kidnap?"

"I didn't know about the kidnap, I hadn't been back to the bungalow at that stage."

"The first thing to do is search the camp. The next thing to do is grab your suspect. Third we go to your bungalow, and look for clues. I'll just report back to the station, they can start a kidnap search. Perhaps in a radius of twenty-five miles. Derelict buildings and so on."

"Shouldn't we grab Markham first?"

"Hardly. We don't know that there has been a kidnap. Perhaps Miller is in the pool or in the bar."

"Point taken," said McBride. "Let's get on with it."

They searched the public areas, the swimming pool, the bar, the café, the large restaurant. They finished up in Bungalow seven. McBride slumped in an easy chair in the living room, despondent. The two cops searched noisily in every nook and cranny.

The big Zulu officer, who had said his name was Major Mazombe, and called his side kick Sawu, came into the living room.

"Okay, so he's not in the camp, this man Miller. Let's go and pick up Markham, who you say is in the lodge." They all trooped out of the bungalow, McBride last, and he locked up.

At the lodge, the guy on the desk, probably a porter, since the bookings and records got done down at reception for the whole camp, looked up at three men, all in civilian clothes.

"We want to speak with Mr Markham," said the police major.

"He's in room five, if he's in. His key's not here, but most people don't turn them in at the desk, so who's to know?"

"What about his chauffeur, call him Bo something? What room's he in?" said McBride.

"He's in room six. But I haven't seen him this morning."

The three men tramped upstairs in single file.

Both doors were locked. Nobody responded to knocking on the doors.

Major Mazombe said to Sawu: "Go ask the porter if he's got a pass key. Tell him it will save replacing the doors." Sawu was quickly back with a pass key in his hand.

“Start with Markham’s room,” said the major. He entered first, with his pistol in his hand, a 9mm, McBride thought, which could cause a fatal injury without trying.

The room was empty. Nothing to indicate that Markham was a kidnapper.

Both the policemen searched rapidly through Markham’s belongings, breaking his suitcase lock to gain access. They were the police after all.

McBride remembered something that he had noticed in Miller’s bedroom.

“Did you smell anything odd in Miller’s room? It reminded me of a hospital sort of aroma, very faint.”

The major stopped searching, and stood upright. “No, but you were in the room a long time before us. The smell could have been fading. Do you think he had been drugged to stop him struggling?”

“That was the smell. Ether, or something similar. We did a course on drugs in the army. Like an operating theatre, it smelled.”

“I think it was a long time ago since they used ether. Even in these backwoods. Professional,” mused the major. “You couldn’t buy it in a small town. Maybe in Jo’burg you could.”

They turned over room six. In the waste bin they found an empty cardboard box that had contained cartridges.

The major asked McBride: “If the chauffeur did the kidnap, and he used your Range Rover, well, the one you hired, how did they get here in the first place, Markham and his man? Surely they had a car. And where is it, There’s no car outside the lodge.”

“Can’t help you there,” said McBride. “Surely reception will collect car details of visitors. Better get the details of my rental Range Rover. I think Miller must have the papers, but I don’t know where.”

Chapter 24

Bo’s brow was creased. “What do you mean, he’s not McBride? He was the only man in Bungalow seven.”

“I’m telling you, I saw McBride eating breakfast in the camp soon after eight this morning. You’ve got his friend, a soldier.”

“That’s maybe why he struggles. And, man, he’s big and strong. Are we going to let him go?”

“I don’t think so. He was involved in getting my money. I remember his name now, Miller, or something. I saw his name on a list of people in the South African Trust Scheme. Lent him and McBride and this guy who claimed to be the king’s brother, though I don’t think he was, ten million pounds sterling to finance a military coup. I think we’ll see what the king says. I can see him putting up the cash. After all it was mine in the first place.” *Well, he thought, it had been in my possession for a long time, even if it wasn’t strictly mine.*

The car had reached the fence. Bo had left the gates open, so he drove through and put the car in the double garage, next to a Range Rover. As Markham got out of the car, he nodded at the other car.

“This is McBride’s car?”

“Yes, unless it’s the other man’s.”

“Right, let’s go and talk to this brigadier.”

Bo said: “You close the garage doors, I’ll go and close the gates.”

When Bo came back, Markham was standing in front of the house waiting.

Bo led the way to a door from the garage that led directly into the house. He used a key, and cautiously opened it. There was no sound from the inside. Bo beckoned Markham in and locked the door behind him. He then took out his pistol.

They climbed the stairs, Bo leading. He turned at the top, went into a bedroom, then stood by the door of the en suite.

Bo whispered: “Stand back” and swung the door smartly inwards. He leant forward, his pistol still in his hand, raised ready for use.

Miller was sitting in the far corner. His eyes opened, but he didn’t try to stand.

“Brigadier Miller. Do you remember me?”

Miller nodded, and tried to say something, but it was unintelligible through the gag.

“Cut his gag off, Bo.”

“He shouts something dreadful.”

“Do it.”

Bo handed the pistol to Markham, got a penknife out of his pocket, bent over Miller, cut the rope at the back of his neck. Miller opened and closed his mouth a few times.

“Can I have a drink of water?”

Bo looked at Markham. “Have you brought some?”

“Yes, it’s downstairs in the car. And some food. In a carrier bag behind the front seat.”

Bo left the room.

Markham said to Miller: “Don’t try anything. I shoot first and ask questions after that.”

Bo came back within a few seconds, swinging the carrier bag.

“This won’t feed the three of us for long.”

“We’ll think about that in a moment. Is there any water to the house?”

“No. But there’s a stream not far away, the water looks good to drink.” “Another thing is the bogs. No water, so no using the plumbing. I’ll go outside and dig a hole in the garden. If I can find a spade. Otherwise, it’s a bucket, and throw it off the cliff.”

Markham shuddered. He never liked to talk about human waste problems. Miller just watched them and added nothing to the conversation. Bo dug into the carrier bag, found a bottle of water, unscrewed the cap, put it to Miller’s lips, and tilted the bottle. Miller began to drink greedily, and a lot of water ran down his bare chest. He turned his face aside to indicate he had drunk enough. Even more water ran down his chest, soaked his boxer shorts, which was all he was wearing.

“Okay,” said Markham, “I have to publicize this kidnap, and get hold of this king man. So I’ll be on my cell phone. In the meantime, feed Miller and yourself. Bo, have we got a phone signal up here?”

“Yes, boss. Quite good.”

Markham went downstairs, and out of the house at the back. What was going to be the garden was just a level patch of baked earth with a few skimpy weeds. He leaned against the back door, where there was some shade from the strong sun.

He phoned the operator got phone numbers for the Jo’burg Sun, and also an international number for the king’s palace in Mawabane, Maswatiland.

He phoned *The Sun* first, asked for the newsroom. “What I am going to tell you will be your headline tomorrow, so listen carefully.

“I have kidnapped Brigadier Miller of Maswatiland. The king has duped me out of ten million pounds sterling. When he repays me, I will release the brigadier. The king has three days to pay the ransom, and in the meantime no harm will befall Miller. If no ransom is paid, the brigadier will be killed.”

The reporter said: “I have all that written down. What is your name?”

“You think I’ll fall for that trick. Please credit me with some sense.”

“You sound as if you’re English. Can you confirm that?”

“No comment. If you have no sensible questions I will ring off now.”

“Are you speaking from South Africa?”

“Yes. Goodbye.”

Markham had just thought that they were trying to trace his call, keeping him on the line as long as possible. He heard the sound of a plane. No, it was a helicopter, approaching fast. He looked up, and then pressed his body even tighter against the house wall. In the shade of the eaves, it was unlikely he could be seen from the air. It was a police helicopter. It hovered for what seemed like minutes, but was probably only seconds, then swept away, rising rapidly. The sun glinted off the police insignia on the side of the craft. *Sod it, they were searching already.*

He looked down at the phone, dialed a long number and put the instrument back to his ear. A long wait and then the dialing tone.

A voice in English: “This is the Palace of the King of Maswatiland. What extension do you need?”

“The King’s secretary, please. I have an urgent message.”

The next person to speak was a male voice. “This is the King’s secretary.”

“I have a message for the king. Brigadier Miller has been kidnapped, and is being ransomed for ten million pounds sterling. I will wait for three days, and if the ransom is not paid, then the brigadier will be killed. Expect me to phone again tomorrow and the day after.” Markham clicked the phone off. That was all the telephoning he was going to do today.

He went back into the house, climbed the stairs, went into the master bedroom. On the floor by the window, Miller and Bo sat together. It looked as if they were having a picnic. Food that he had brought had been taken out of the carrier bag and placed on the bare floorboards. Bo had made some attempt at constructing sandwiches. Difficult without any knives, other than Bo’s penknife.

He was feeding Miller by holding the food to his mouth, since Miller was still bound hands and ankles. When Bo wasn't doing that, he was feeding himself. Markham saw that there was very little food left for himself. And it was only early afternoon of day one.

"Are you going out for some more food, Bo? Or shall we scavenge in the bush, or catch animals and cook them?"

"Impossible," said Bo.

"Exactly, it was a rhetorical question. You must think ahead, otherwise you'll spend your life as a savage."

Bo glared at him. "Why didn't you bring more food?"

"Fuck off," said Markham. "Spend a bit of time thinking about getting more food, and drink, too. I can tell you that the police are searching already. They flew round the houses in a helicopter. So, if you go for food by car, they probably have the registration numbers. You'll be taking a risk."

Bo pondered, still chewing. "We could switch the plates. That might fool them for a while."

"The police are no fools, despite common thinking. I don't think that would trick them."

"Then here's a good idea. We'll switch the plates with that old digger that's been abandoned further up the site. I expect it would have plates."

"You'll have to wait until dark, to go out now, if the police are keeping a check by air." He decided to join the other two on the floor before all the food had gone. He sat on the opposite side from Miller, Bo between them both. He reached out and grabbed some bread, and then broke off some cheese from the slab. Miller was munching, making no attempt to speak. Since his capture, he seemed to have turned in on himself. Or he could be hatching an escape plot.

Chapter 25

McBride was back in Bungalow seven, on his cell phone, and speaking to the king, who was returning his call. McBride had explained what had happened, and that the police had visited the camp. They were taking the kidnap seriously, but had told him that the detection rate in this type of crime was not very high. Last year there were over four thousand kidnappings, but the policemen he was talking to were reluctant to give figures for arrests.

"What I am thinking, Sir, is to do some searching myself. After all, I know Markham, and can guess his possible moves. Of course, in our favour, he's not the brightest, as shown by getting Bo to carry out the kidnap itself, when the guy didn't even know what I looked like, so he grabs the wrong person. I also have an idea that the hideaway might well be in one of the properties he manages. I can get that information. You're not in a good position to do anything, Sir. You can't send any troops into South Africa without causing a diplomatic incident."

"I agree with all that, McBride. But it upsets me that I can't help."

"I would suggest, Sir, that you get ten million out of the account we set up, get it into your account ready to pay out if necessary. I will keep in touch to give progress reports. Remember, he's talking about three days, you say. And we could probably get an extension on that. He wants the money more than he wants to kill Dusty Miller. Just remember that. I'll speak to you later."

It was already lunchtime, and he remembered he had agreed that he would meet Belinda at the dam. He also needed a vehicle. She, he guessed, probably had a car. He didn't want to involve her in anything dangerous. Surely driving him to Jo'burg was safe enough?

First he needed to get in touch with Markham's solicitor. As McBride was still a limited partner in the 'investment', surely as solicitor to the scheme, he would give information on what properties Markham had invested. It might be a Ponzi scheme, but solicitors usually stuck to the law. It was what they were about.

He ought to call on Belinda now, otherwise he might not find her without going to the dam, and that was much further than her bungalow. He walked down, and knocked on her door.

She was in, and delighted to see McBride. "This is a pleasure. What can I do for you?" She got hold of his hand and pulled him inside. Once the door was closed she embraced him.

"I've got a problem. Miller has been kidnapped. Last night it happened, when he was in the bungalow alone. I think I was the intended victim. A case of mistaken identities." He told her about the police, who were not optimistic, and the kidnap demand. "I can't just carry on painting, I've got to try and do something. The kidnappers have got our hire car. I need a lift to a solicitor. Have you a car I can borrow?"

"Yes, with a driver."

"That's posh. You've got a chauffeur?"

"The driver is me, Silly."

"It will spoil your holiday driving me around."

She put her arms round him again, gave him a long kiss. "It will add to the excitement. When are we going?"

"Hopefully, this afternoon. I must make a couple of calls first."

"Come through to the living room, and phone from there. Would you like a drink?"

He shook his head, and sat down, pushing buttons. He was phoning Miller's sister in Manchester.

"Dorothy? It's John McBride." She spoke before he could get another word in. "Hang on, Dorothy. I'm in Africa. Mike and I were staying at the Kruger Park. Mike has been kidnapped. Yes, the police are searching, and I am, too. Look, does he keep his papers and documents at your house?" He listened for a time, then said: "Don't panic, you know your brother, and how easily he gets himself out of scrapes. Can you get access to the papers? I'm looking for a file on that investment scheme that went wrong for both of us. That's right, the South African Property Trust. Somewhere in the file it will tell you the name of the solicitor to the scheme. A company in Jo'burg, I think. Have a search through, and I'll phone you in fifteen minutes or so."

He held up crossed fingers at Belinda. "Maybe I will have a drink, after all. Do you have a beer?" She went to the fridge, returned with an uncapped bottle, glistening with condensation on the outside of the bottle. McBride took a swig from the bottle neck, and glanced at his watch. So little time, so much to do, if he was to get Dusty Miller back.

Within twenty minutes, McBride pressed his speed dial, and Dorothy answered so quickly, he guessed she had been waiting.

"John? I've got it in front of me. It's Smitt and Company, in Johannesburg. The solicitor himself is called Malik Kadakia. But there is no telephone number."

"That doesn't matter, I can get hold of that. Thanks a lot. I'll keep you posted."

He phoned the operator, got the number, dialed it, and was speaking to a secretary moments later.

"Mr Kadakia? Yes, he's in his office. I'll see if he will speak to you."

A pause that lasted about three minutes, and then: "Kadakia speaking, what can I do for you Mr McBride?" South African accent with an undertone of Indian.

"Mr Kadakia, I'm a limited partner in the South African Property Trust. Doesn't that mean you are at liberty to inform me of the loans made? I assume you have that information to hand? Perhaps you could email or fax me a copy."

Ten second pause, and then slickly: "You would have to come to my office in person, with your passport. Then you will be able to have a copy. You appreciate that as a solicitor I have a duty to protect Mr Markham and the other limited partners."

"What time do you open in the morning, Mr Kadakia?"

"You are coming here? I see, well we open at nine o'clock."

McBride put his phone back in his pocket. "So far, so good. If we set off this afternoon for Jo'burg, we can stay in the city and be at the solicitor's at nine o'clock, all ready to collect the documents and go."

Belinda said: "Go where?"

"To wherever Markham is holding Dusty Miller."

Kadakia stared thoughtfully at his phone. Markham hadn't been in touch for several days, and now he guessed why. He must have carried out the ridiculous plan to kill McBride? But no, that was McBride on the phone just now. Whatever was going on with his client, it would be as farfetched as most of Markham's plans, and as doomed to failure. To stay ahead of the game, it meant phoning the buffoon.

Markham's phone rang for a long time. Eventually Markham answered.

"Kadakia here, what is going on? McBride was on the phone wanting documents in connection with SAP Trust. I suppose it's about something you're doing."

"Well, you may as well know. Tomorrow it will be on the front page of The Sun. I've kidnapped Brigadier Miller for a ransom of ten million pounds sterling."

"Well, I knew you must have done something stupid, so don't get me involved." He slammed down the phone, angry at Markham's infantile behaviour. It was bringing his lawyer's practice into disrepute. He would dictate a letter of resignation with immediate effect. In that case he wouldn't be able to give McBride any documents.

But then Markham would go on with his plans to kill or ransom McBride, and whatever they called the other fellow. Perhaps he would wait until he had handed the copy documents to McBride.

At three o'clock Belinda drove McBride out of the camp and down the road to the Malelane Gate, and from there to Johannesburg. McBride's hair was blowing in the breeze. It was years since he had been in a sports car with the hood down.

The little Mazda sped along the road, and Belinda was singing cheerfully, a pop song that McBride hadn't heard before.

Chapter 26

Bo took the toolkit from the BMW and walked over to the rusting digger. He bent down and looked at the number plates. Like the rest of the machine the bolts connecting the machine and plates looked welded with rust. He took a large spanner from the toolkit roll, and used it as a hammer dislodging bits of oxidization. Then he took a shifting spanner out. A tool that does not feature often in car toolkits. When he had it adjusted over one of the bolts, he exerted all the pressure he could to lever it. Stubbornly the bolt did not move.

He kicked the digger savagely. Hulking useless machine. He picked up the toolkit and the tools lying on the ground, walked back to the house.

"Job done already?" Markham said.

"No good. Can't get the plates off. It will be dark when I go. I'll risk it."

"Don't like this, Bo. The police spot your plates, and they'll have a list, and both our vehicles will be on the list."

"Don't worry, I won't tell them where you are."

Markham had decided that Bo should go to the service area they had visited on the way to Kruger Park when they had first left Jo'burg. Bo was to buy enough food there to last them three days.

Bo went upstairs, checked on the prisoner, looked at his rope bindings. Came back downstairs, sat in the sun, which was low in the sky now. At dark, he would get out the BMW and go down the hill.

Bo held the BMW in low gear down the track, driving carefully, anticipating the bends where the headlights beamed into space. A difficult journey in the dark. Suddenly he was on the tarmac, and picked up speed. He saw a fair amount of traffic using the main road, and merged without stopping. He was behind an artic which was sticking to the speed limits. Bo didn't mind, didn't want to draw attention to his vehicle. He kept a keen eye behind, and saw a motorbike queue hopping, pulling in behind Bo. The service area, he was sure, was on the opposite side of the road, not more than ten or fifteen miles from the hideaway turnoff, as he remembered. He kept close watch for signs. Quicker than he thought he saw the sign on the left, *service area ahead 2 miles*.

He slowed down, increasing the gap between himself and the car ahead. He could see orange sodium lamps on the right, neon signs flashing. This was it. Bo switched on his right flashers, and pulled out slightly, slowing down. The motorcyclist behind him did the same. The first wave of panic gave Bo stomach cramps.

Once he entered the services, he drove to the back of the car park, outside the glow of the lights. Pulled up on the edge of the tarmac, bonnet pointing to the rough scrub at the end of the site. He could see plastic bags, metal trash before he dowsed the car lights.

The motorcycle chugged up on Bo's right. The man got off the bike, cut the engine. Rapped on the car window next to Bo. He wound down the window. The man leaned in, now with his helmet off.

"Get out of the car. Please, Sir."

Bo opened the door and as he got out casually pulled the pistol out of his pocket as he rose from the seat, held it in his hand down by his trouser leg.

"What is the matter?" He saw now the police signs on the bike. The uniform that the cop was wearing.

"Tell me your car registration number please."

"I don't know it. I'm driving a rental. The documents are in the glove box."

"Your number plate is listed by the police as stop and question. So that is what I am doing. So your name is Robert Markham?"

"No. My name is Bo Manyari. I'm his chauffeur."

"I am going to arrest you in connection with kidnapping Michael Miller."

Bo lifted his arm and pushed the pistol tight against the policeman's chest.

It was done quickly, and the policeman made a grab that missed. Bo pulled the trigger, and the noise was muffled by the proximity of the cop's clothing. As the cop collapsed, Bo put away the pistol, and held him so that he collapsed away from the motorbike.

Bo glanced round the car park. There was no reaction. The few people walking to and from their vehicles carried on as normal. Bo leaned over and checked the man's pulse. He was dead. Quickly he dragged the body well into the trash by the tarmac, hid it behind a bush, covering it with plastic trash. He heaved the motorcycle into the bushes. Stamping on the radio equipment until he saw the instrument lights were extinguished.

He went back to his car, reversed into the car park lights, and left it ready to rejoin the highway. He locked the car, went into the grocery store, did a big shop, wheeled the trolley to the car, piled all the provisions loose into the luggage compartment, and put the trolley back in the rack.

It took him only thirty minutes to get back to the hideaway with no further complications.

When Miller heard the car start and saw from the window that it vanished down the mountain side, he decided it was time to act. He undid the ropes, and put them in the bathroom. He had spent the best part of the day unpicking the knots, and retying them so that he could slip out of them at will. Cautiously he opened the bedroom window. Still dressed only in his boxer shorts, he climbed out and hung by his hands from the sill. That left him about four feet from the ground. He let go, and took the shock with his knees bent. Quickly he was moving across the

back of the house towards the bushy veld that lay at the end of the excavated tract. This was what he had been trained to do in the SAS Regiment. He knew that he would be faster than his two captors in the dark. His only problem was the cold of the night, wearing only boxer shorts, and with bare feet.

Markham heard the car coming back, the gates opening, and went to the front door. The car headlamps swung past him, and the car entered the open garage. He heard the doors close. He went back inside, and found Bo, unpacking the groceries.

Bo decided he wouldn't tell Markham about the police incident. When all the groceries had been stacked in the kitchen of the house, Markham said, "Shall we have some supper?"

"Could do. You go and fetch Miller, and I'll sort the food."

Markham took no notice of the fact that Bo was taking control. Food was his entire interest at the moment. He tramped up the stairs. Miller wasn't in the bedroom. When he opened the en suite bathroom, he saw the ropes.

He took his pistol out, and searched the rest of the upstairs rooms. Then he saw the open window.

He shouted downstairs: "Miller's gone. He's escaped."

"Gone? He's tied up, boss. He can't have gone. Let me find him." And the tramp of feet on the stairs gave Markham the impression that Bo was mad, real mad.

Markham beckoned Bo, and walked through to the bathroom, pointed to the ropes on the floor. Turned and went to the bedroom window, pointed at it.

"Satisfied. I told you, he's gone."

"What a balls up. That's the ransom gone, you stupid fella."

Markham took a grip. "Maybe not. He's run, but he doesn't know where he is. While he's trying to find someone, the king doesn't know we don't have him. He might even die of hypothermia in just those boxer shorts."

"Man," said Bo, "the guy is a soldier. He is trained to do this sort of thing."

"The ransom is supposed to be paid tomorrow. We should phone the king now, to remind him."

Chapter 27

McBride and Belinda sat down for breakfast in the Hilton Hotel. McBride had picked up a newspaper, The Daily Sun, on the way from the lobby. He turned the front of the newspaper to face Belinda.

"My old friend Dusty," he said. He turned the newspaper back and started to scan the article. The headline in sans serif bold type stretched the full width of the paper. *BRIGADIER KIDNAPPED* and under the strapline *MAY CAUSE DIPLOMATIC INCIDENT*. There was a photograph of Dusty in his brigadier uniform, looking suitably solemn. The story reported that the soldier had been kidnapped whilst he was spending his leave at the Kruger Park. He had been taken prisoner overnight,

and police assumed he was taken in his hire car, which was also missing. Two other guests from the same campsite had disappeared, a financier and his chauffeur. Police thought they were suspects and were searching for them. The newspapers gave two car registration numbers and hoped that readers would look out for the cars, and report sightings to the police. The Maswatiland Army were currently leaving the matter in the hands of the South African Police, who they had every confidence in.

When McBride put down the paper and ate his breakfast, Belinda read the report for herself.

Belinda dropped McBride off at the office of Smitt and Company, and aimed to circle the area until McBride phoned to tell her he needed picking up.

McBride went through to the reception area, and felt at once that this was a substantial and up-market lawyer practice. Trust Markham to protect his dodgy business with the best. Behind the reception desk was a white woman in her forties dressed in a smart black dress. She wore black framed spectacles which gave her a sober appearance. When he asked for Mr Kadakia, she smiled up at him, and told him to take a seat. After five minutes, another woman in a black dress came through to the lobby and escorted him along a corridor, tapped on a door, and opened it. She ushered McBride through the door and closed the door behind him. Across a large expanse of thick carpet, was a huge desk in front of a large window. Behind the desk sat a small man, with a smile that showed white teeth.

“Good morning Mr McBride. A very warm welcome to my office, Sir.”

He stood up and stretched his hand out. McBride shook it, and took the chair on the client side of the desk.

“So you are a limited partner of South African Property Trust. If you let me have your passport, kind Sir, I will be able to verify your credentials, not that I am in any doubt, but as a lawyer I have to tread very carefully.” His Indian face creased into more smiles, and he performed a small bow.

McBride handed over his passport, and Kadakia expertly flicked the pages to the photograph and details of the holder. He glanced at the photograph, and then to McBride.

“You don’t mind if I make a scan on my computer? Good, it won’t take a moment.” He placed the passport on a machine, pressed a button, and the machine whirred for a moment. He handed back the document across the desk, and sat back and beamed at McBride.

“That is all very satisfactory.” He picked three sheets of paper from a file laying open in front of him, passed them over the desk. McBride looked at them.

“Those are the properties on which loans are outstanding. In most cases the Trust holds the deeds as security. I very much regret that they are not producing revenue. The worldwide recession is to blame, of course.”

McBride thought *and the incompetence and greed of Markham, who has siphoned millions into his own pocket.* But he didn’t voice his thoughts. Instead he stood up.

“Thank you for seeing me at such short notice.” He made his own way back to the lobby, where he used his cell phone to call Belinda. She told him that she

would be at the office within five minutes, so McBride went outside in the sun, and stood on the street watching the people and the traffic.

Belinda pulled into the drop-off sooner than McBride was expecting. He ran to the car and climbed into the Mazda without opening the door.

“What an athlete,” she said, and he smiled at her.

“I think we should make for the road we came in on yesterday. That’s the N4. When we reach a service area, we’ll stop for coffee, and I want to buy a map, and there’s a map of zip codes, that’s a big ask. If it’s a big service area with a decent bookshop, we should be okay. Then, while we’re dining, we look at the documents and maps.”

“Mr McBride, you have everything under control.”

“I wish,” said McBride, thinking of Miller.

The first services on the N4 leaving Jo’burg is the biggest on the whole road network. It has a huge bookstore and newsagent. Many other shops, too. You could live for the rest of your life there, eating drinking, sleeping, buying clothes. But you wouldn’t be very happy.

They were looking at the maps. There were hundreds of them, and they had to get the services of a member of staff. With his help they soon had a map at about four miles to the inch, showing all roads including minor ones. The assistant had to consult records kept behind the counter, but was able to locate the zip code map. It cost a small fortune, but they really needed it.

They retired to a nearby coffee house, and sat at an outside table drinking coffees and eating pastries, very bad for their figures, as Belinda pointed out, but good for their happiness. McBride scribbled all locations from the deeds on the back of a sheet. By examining the zip code map, they could quickly work out the nearest properties to the Kruger campsite. Two were actually off the N4, one to the west of the Malelane Gate to the Kruger Park and one to the east. The eastern one was nearest, and McBride favoured that one, if only because it was on a road that became less crowded as it went eastward. The one McBride liked was an hotel that had never been completed. He could see the sense in building an hotel fairly near to the Kruger Park. He asked Belinda if she would drive him there. He expected they would be there before nightfall. Belinda readily agreed, caught up in the adventure.

McBride wondered how he would keep her out of danger.

Chapter 28

Belinda and McBride were back on the N4, aiming for the property in the documents he had marked down as a possibility. It was a few miles to the east of the Kruger Park Malelane Gate.

“I think I’ll phone the police, see where they are at with the case. This Inspector Mazombe, I’ve got his card.” He pulled out his wallet, found the business card,

pressed buttons on his cell phone. It took him only three minutes to get hold of the inspector.

“Hello, it’s John McBride here. In connection with the kidnap of Brigadier Miller. Thought I would ask if there are any developments?”

“I can tell you that there was a news item in the *Daily Sun* this morning, and I didn’t leak the story, so presumably it really did come from the kidnapers. Anyway *The Sun* contacted us to confirm. I told them that in return, they could print the car registration plates. They did that, and we’ve had a scattering of reports. All except one report was in one area.”

“Except one?”

“Yeah. That would be some nutter. It happens, always. But the other grouping is interesting. It’s along the N4, not far from the first service area west of the Malelane Gate. We sent a van out to the service area. At the back of the car park we found a police motorcyclist, dead and dumped, and his motorbike with the radio smashed up. Shot, the man was.”

McBride did not get anything further, but the inspector promised he would let McBride know if there were further developments.

Next, McBride tried to contact the king. He got hold of a secretary who promised that they would phone back when he was located. Big palace, and a king who never sat still.

It was getting on for four o’clock when Belinda’s satnav announced *your destination is three hundred yards ahead on the right hand side of the road*. Belinda slowed the car to a crawl, and there on the right was a large three storey building, up a small side road.

“Turn in to the road and stop,” said McBride.

From the roadside, he saw that the building was surrounded by a high mesh fence, and apparently deserted.

“Do you have a torch in the car?”

Belinda said: “You’re lucky. I once broke down on a dark night. The next day, I bought a large torch. I even carry spare batteries.”

“Stay in the car, and lend me the torch. If I’m not back in half an hour, phone the police as an emergency.”

He dropped his cell phone in her lap, reached over for the torch, and got out of the car. As he approached the wire fence he saw that one of the gates was ajar. Could be squatters, or it could be Markham. Both could be dangerous. As he slipped through the gate, he had his pistol tucked in his waistband, easy to reach in an emergency.

The building was without glazing, and as he looked up he saw roosting pigeons flying in and out of the window apertures. He approached the building wall, a vast area with no windows, and then walked along beside it, until he came to a ground floor opening. Cautiously he peered in. Bare concrete floor, spattered with bird droppings, stretching back into darkness where no daylight reached. All quiet at first, then McBride heard voices in the distance. Talking, occasional laughter. It was coming from the building, maybe from an upper floor, maybe from the other side of the ground floor.

He could climb in here, or he could first patrol all round the outside. The latter seemed the safest option, so he chose it. He ducked down and crossed the

opening, another long stretch of wall, and then a succession of window openings, some shuttered with ply board, some with ply board torn down and lying on the ground. A doorway, better secured with heavier timber. At each opening McBride ducked down and listened. He could hear voices, but whether they sounded closer he couldn't decide. He came to a corner, went round it incautiously, and there with his head poking out of a window was an old black man with a mop of grey hair and a wrinkled face. Watching McBride.

"I heard you comin'. You'd never be no good at trackin' animals, I can tell you that." McBride walked up until he was level with him.

"I'm looking for a big man with his left arm in a plaster cast. I think he's kidnapped my friend."

The old man scratched his hair, which was probably insect infested. "Don't know about anyone like that. Ain't had no visitors in a long time. This happen in the last year?"

"In the last day or so."

"Then he ain't here. But you're welcome to come in through the window here, and meet my pals."

McBride peered past the man and saw a group of five or six old men sitting on the floor. There were old mattresses along one wall. Cans of beer stood on the floor.

"No, I don't have time I must get back to the car. If I'm gone too long, my partner will phone the police."

"We're friendly with the police. Help to guard this place, so they leave us alone. Course, before you go a donation to the beer fund wouldn't come amiss."

The old man winked. McBride pulled out a twenty rand note, gave it to him.

"Have a drink on me." He turned and walked back round the building towards the car and Belinda.

He jumped over the car door, and sat in the passenger seat.

"You've been quick. Surely you didn't have time to search the building?"

"No need, there's a crowd of self-appointed watchmen, and nobody's been in there for a year. Apart from them. We picked the wrong building. We need to go back down the N4 and look at choice number two."

"What, tonight? In the dark?" Belinda looked concerned.

"You could go back to the Kruger Park camp, and if you will lend me your car, I'll go alone."

"I can't let you go alone."

"It will be dangerous, whether you come with me or whether you stay in the car. I'll get a cab, if you won't lend me the car. But I've got to find Dusty."

"Why do men always win the argument? In my case that happens. I think I'm just not compatible with men." She pouted.

McBride got out of the car, went round the back to get into the driver's seat. Belinda moved across to the passenger seat, adroitly negotiating the gear shift. When McBride had got back into the car, she put both arms round him, cuddled him to her.

"My word, you get your own way all the time. But I still love you."

McBride drove fast but safely back to the Kruger Park camp, arriving half an hour before the park closed. He saw Belinda to her bungalow, gave her a kiss, and promised to see her the following day.

He then had to drive fast to get out of the park before the gates closed. And he did, just.

McBride had got Belinda back to safety, and now he was too early he reckoned, to snoop round the next option. Markham and his chauffeur would be alert this early in the evening. The best time to arrive would be gone midnight, McBride reckoned.

He remembered the policeman speak of the service area to the west of the park and on the N4. The one where the dead motorcyclist had been found. Maybe he could have dinner there, and then drive to the derelict estate, as it was described in the documents he had collected from the solicitor.

He kept his foot down, but obeyed the speed limits. He didn't want pulling in for speeding. The car was a delight to drive. No wonder Mazda had produced it for so many years with few changes. It seemed no time at all before he saw the lights of the service area on the horizon.

When McBride had dined, he went back to the car. Over dinner he had looked carefully at the map.;found the turn off from the N4 which was only a dotted line on the map, ending with a blob indicating a hamlet. From the contour lines, it was some 750 feet higher than the N4 at that point. He switched on the satnav and programmed it with the new zip code. He drove out of the car park and on to the dark road.

The satnav spoke after only a few miles back in the direction McBride had come two hours earlier. Prepare to turn right in half a mile.

The road, when he came to it, was difficult to spot in the dark. There was no signpost. McBride was helped by a huge artic coming from the opposite direction. In the light from the trucks headlights, he was able to spot the narrow tarmac lane. He turned and in a few hundred yards, the tarmac finished, and hardcore track went on into the distance of his headlamps. There was a flat verge, and he pulled the car off the road. The satnav showed the winning flag on the screen, and distance to go said 2.5 miles. He could walk that in an hour, even uphill. He'd done a lot better than that in the army.

As he turned away from the car to commence his climb up the track, he felt his phone vibrate. He pulled it from his shirt pocket.

"I have the King of Maswatiland on the phone for you," announced a suave male voice. McBride waited. There was a clicking noise.:

"Mr McBride, I've just had this guy Markham on the phone again. He says that he needs the ransom tomorrow morning. What shall I do?"

"Do you have the money transferred, as we agreed, Sir?"

"Yes, it is in my account."

"Then don't do anything until tomorrow morning. He will phone you again then, he needs the money. By tomorrow the game may be over. I'm hoping to find out where he's keeping Dusty Miller tonight. I have to go now, there's no time to be lost."

“Thank you, and good luck. Don’t do anything stupid.” The phone clicked, and he was gone.

Don’t do anything stupid. That was a matter of opinion. Attacking single handed. Yes, you could call that stupid. McBride finally set out to climb the track.

Chapter 29

Dusty Miller did not venture far into the scrub. He found a clear patch of earth behind a bush he thought might hide him from the frantic chase that would take place when the pair realized he had gone. But it wouldn’t be Markham that would chase. It would be Bo. And Bo had taken the car. So he had a bit of time to wait.

It was damn cold in just his boxer shorts now it was dark. He decided he needed exercise after being tied up so long, so he began some energetic press ups, then arm exercises. He went through the whole gamut of army PE. By this time he was perspiring. The next fifteen minutes he spent daubing himself in mud, starting with his face, and then the whole of his body. He didn’t want to stand out in the dark. He laid down on the earth, and fell asleep.

He was awake in an instant when the car arrived back at the house. He got to his feet, and waited. He bet himself it would be fifteen minutes before Bo came to find him. He started counting in his head, ticking the minutes off on his fingers. He had counted fourteen minutes when he heard the door burst open in the distance, and running feet coming his way. He moved carefully into the shadow of his bush and watched.

Bo was a black man, but was wearing light-coloured clothes. Miller had him in his sights from the moment he left the house until the moment he ran past Miller’s bush.

Miller waited until Bo was twenty yards ahead, then followed him. His plan was to follow him for perhaps half a mile, then grab him from behind, a rugby tackle that would bring him down. After that would come the task of relieving him of the gun he was surely carrying.

Miller didn’t have to carry out the plan. Bo, in his hurry, tripped over some prominent tree roots, and went down noisily. He stayed down, groaning. Miller suspected that Bo might have spotted him, and was acting. If so, when Miller approached, a bullet could come his way.

But Miller wasn’t going to be caught out. He circled the area, and came at Bo from the opposite direction, stealthily, taking his time. Bo head was down on his arms, still moaning quietly. Miller came up and stood quite close. He examined his position. Bo’s body was cricked, and he saw what had happened, His foot was trapped by the tree roots, and at an unnatural angle. His ankle might be broken at worst, and sprained at best. He bent down and touched Bo’s shoulders. Bo looked up, surprise in his expression. And anger, too. He lifted his right arm, and Miller saw the pistol glint in the dim light. Miller chopped swiftly at his wrist, and with the other hand took the pistol away. Like taking sweets from a baby. He checked

that the safety was on, then tossed the weapon a few yards away, watching where it fell so that he could recover it later.

“I just need to borrow a few things,” said Miller conversationally. He stooped beside Bo, then suddenly grasped both his arms by the anorak. He pulled and Bo’s body started to slide towards him, to be stopped by the grip of the roots on his ankle. Bo shrieked, and let out a flow of obscenities.

“Tut, tut, such naughty words. Be brave.” While Miller was talking, he had pulled the anorak clear, and was putting it on himself. It wasn’t a bad fit.

“I really need your boots, as well. So I’ll do you a favour. I’ll extract your leg. I doubt you’ll walk on it. So when I go, just stay here. I promise that when I have dealt with your partner in crime, I’ll return, or send the police to bring you.

“If you find you can walk, by all means walk back to the house.”

Whilst he was talking, Miller was checking the man’s ankle. He had done the usual army first aid courses, and he was careful not to aggravate the injury. He removed his boot carefully, and discovered it was probable that a bone was broken. Only an x-ray would confirm it. The boot came off with some difficulty, such was the swelling. Miller thought the boot was probably too big, but he put it on his own foot. By the time he had laced it up, he reckoned it was better than being bare foot. The other boot came off easier, and Miller put this on as well.

Bo was quietly sobbing.

“If you decide to try and walk, be very careful not to put any pressure on your injured foot, or you may never walk again without crutches. Good bye.”

Miller stooped and picked up the pistol. Without a backward glance he set off towards the houses.

McBride had walked up the track at a fair pace, and had not even broken into a sweat. He was fitter than he had realized. He walked across the flat ground scooped out of the hillside. And came to the fence he hadn’t seen from a distance. The darkness was not lit by the moon which hadn’t risen yet. McBride walked the length of the fence starting at the hillside. The fence was tight up against the sheer face. Close inspection showed some handholds in the rock face, but it would be dangerous to climb at night. And maybe in daylight, too. The fence was tall, maybe twelve feet, and topped with razor wire, three coils of it.

As he walked back towards the edge along the fence, he came to the gate. No entry there. Two large padlocks, maybe five tumbler, or even seven. He carried on, and came at last to the end of the fence. It protruded two feet out beyond the drop. McBride looked down, his feet on the very edge. He was not worried by heights. He couldn’t see very much in the dark directly below his feet anyway, but when he lifted his eyes he could see dwellings far below in the valley. That certainly drove home the height from the valley floor. It was as if he was in a plane looking out of the window as the plane came into land, and it had only just started the final approach.

McBride reached up and tested the rigidity of the fence, walked back a pace or two, examined the post. Set in concrete, but how deep did the foundations go? Would they support a twelve stone man swinging round on the end of the fence?

There was one way of finding out. He put both hands on the fence, high up, and with his fingers through the mesh. He lifted his feet, and hung by his arms. The

fence seemed unaffected by the gymnastics. He moved first one hand and then the other, until he was out over space, and there was no more fence to go. The next move was a giant one. He had to put the left hand down the other side of the fence. A big reach, too, or he would have no room for the right hand to go. He paused for a moment. Then mocking his fear, took his right hand off the fence swung himself to the inside of the compound, grabbing urgently with right hand as his left hand was nearly cut to the bone by the thin wire.

Then it was a matter of two more handholds and he was over ground. He dropped off the fence. He felt the ground give and quickly jumped further from the edge, throwing himself flat to the ground. He heard debris bounce it's way downwards, the sounds getting fainter. *It really was a long, long way down.*

From the house, Markham watched from an upstairs window. He saw the man get round the fence in such an enterprising way. At this stage he didn't know who it was. But it couldn't be Bo, or Miller. He continued to watch as the figure stood up, and started to walk slowly towards the house. Markham dashed down the stairs. He picked up a bottle, the only weapon to hand. He went to a downstairs window. The man was still twenty or thirty yards away. Whichever way the man went, Markham would do the opposite.

McBride could see no entrance to the house on this elevation. He decided to go right, away from the drop to search for an entrance. He was up tight against the wall now, edging to the corner. When his whole attention was focused on what was round the corner, with his pistol out now in his right hand, he felt a thrust in his right kidney. Something round and solid.

"Drop your gun, or I will fire," said Markham. Stunned McBride let his pistol drop. As it dropped he realized he had been fooled. Markham bent down and secured McBride's pistol. Markham waved the bottle in his face.

"Okay Mr McBride, what a pleasant surprise." He tossed the empty bottle away. "If you carry on around the corner, there is a door. Open it and go inside. Don't try anything foolish or I will shoot you. I do not have to keep you alive."

Chapter 30

Markham pushed McBride through the door to a room on the ground floor. It was lit by a candle standing on the mantelpiece of the fake fireplace.

"Stand with your face against the wall in front of you. Lean with your hands on the wall above your head. That's right. I will now take pleasure in shooting you. This pleasure has, alas, cost me ten million pounds."

McBride knew his time had undoubtedly come. He could take a chance, fall sideways and hope Markham squeezed the trigger a fraction of a second after this. Then the bullet would miss, and he had only a small window of opportunity to go for Markham's legs before he had changed aim and shot McBride without missing this time. It was a dim hope. Markham must already have screwed up courage to

shoot, and be squeezing the trigger. It was not easy to kill in cold blood. The time was – NOW.

McBride threw himself sideways and hit the floor hard. As he did so he heard the bullet whistle past his ear. And the explosion. That was odd, it sounded like two explosions. Could he hear although he was dead? No-one had ever come back to say. He could feel the hard wooden floor beneath him, and he could move. Therefore he was not dead. He turned his head, looked straight up the wall and there illuminated in candle light was the ragged hole in the plaster where the bullet had entered. He turned further, to see Markham slumped on the floor, face down, blood seeping from his mouth. Further behind, a man was standing. A tall man filthy, covered with dirt. He was wearing an anorak, floral pattern boxer shorts and enormous boots. He had no socks on. In his hand he held a pistol.

“Dusty!” McBride scrambled to his feet. And started to laugh. He could not stop laughing for some time. He was creased up with stomach ache from the glorious laughter that comes from relief at still being alive. That and the comic look of Dusty dressed like some clown. Brigadier indeed!

Dusty looked puzzled. “What are you laughing for? I’ve done the thing you told me not to do. Shoot Markham. Though if I’d done that when you first came to Africa it would have saved us both lots of grief.”

“And you wouldn’t have got your pension money back.” McBride pulled out his phone. “Don’t you think we should contact the police? They’re searching for you.”

“That reminds me,” said Miller. “There’s a guy I left in the scrub about a mile away. Broke his ankle. He was looking for me after I went walk-about. In fact this is his anorak and boots. And his gun, come to that. I think he is Markham’s chauffeur.”

“Let the police find him.” He pulled out the policeman’s business card. He quickly contacted the police inspector. “Hi it’s John McBride again. I’ve found the brigadier. He’s in a house, the zip code is—” McBride thought hard, and then dragged it from his memory and recounted it. The track is a bit hair-raising. If you’ve got the chopper available, it might be best. There’s enough room to land at the entrance to the enclosure. By the time you’re here, we will have found the keys, and have the gate open. We’re in the first house. Markham has unfortunately been killed. He was going to shoot me, and Miller killed him first. Saved my life. The chauffeur is in the scrub about half an hour away, with a broken ankle. I hope you’ll be able to pick him up later. Both Miller and myself are a bit shattered.”

The policeman had several questions, and McBride spent a while enlarging on the events, and how he had tracked down Markham. Eventually he shut the phone.

“He’s promised to be here in about an hour. I don’t suppose there is running water?”

“No” said Dusty, and no electric. For sewage there is a hole in the garden.

I think Bo brought some food back tonight, I’d escaped by then but that was what he went out for. Shall we have a look?”

Dusty led the way, using the candle from the mantelpiece to light the way.

In the kitchen several paper carriers were stacked in a corner. McBride searched through them while Dusty held the candle aloft.

"There's beer here" McBride searched further. "Burgers in boxes, but they'll be cold. I'm so hungry, I don't care."

He pulled two MacDonalD's boxes out, and gave one to Dusty together with a bottle of beer. Dusty took the candle to the window sill, spilled a bit of wax on the surface, and pressed the base of the candle in the pool. The wax set in seconds, securing the candle upright. With his hands free, he took his bottle, and knocked the top down against the edge of the sill, and the cap flew off. He offered the bottle to McBride, and took the other bottle and opened it the same way. They sat on the floor, backs to the window wall, and ate cold burgers and fries, and drank warm beer.

When they had finished McBride said, "That was one of the best meals ever."

"This chauffeur of Markham's brought me here in our rental, if you haven't got that worked out. The little bastard crept into the bungalow, and I thought it was you. He came into my room suddenly, I smelled chloroform, then I was out. By the time I came round I was in the back of the car, tied legs and wrists. They kept me tied up. But while they weren't around I unpicked the ropes and retied them so I could get free. Bo wasn't an expert in kidnapping."

McBride said, "I have to get back to the campsite. I've got the girl's Mazda that I borrowed. I left it down the hill." He looked at his watch. "We should get the gate open. The chopper will be here soon. You know where the keys are?"

"Shit. I bet Bo has got them. I was trying to avoid traipsing back there." Then Miller smiled, and felt in the anorak pockets. He pulled out a bunch of keys.

"I bet the gate keys are on this ring. We ought to get out there and try them."

They got up and Miller put the trash from the meal back in the paper sack. Soldiers are generally tidy, through years of discipline. Together they went out of the house and across to the fence round the estate. Miller went to the gate, started to go through the keys to find a fit for the top padlock. When he found it, he undid the padlock, hung it on the fence. He reached down to the other padlock, used the same key, and it worked again. McBride pulled the gate wide, and used the second padlock through the fence wire to keep the gate open. Just in time, because McBride heard the drone of a helicopter approaching. It had the lights switched on, illuminating the track, which presumably the pilot was following. He reached the open space in front of the fence, and hovered, adjusting the machine until he was happy to let the chopper down. The rotors blew a dust-storm from the dry earth, and both men on the ground turned away and held sleeves to their faces.

Four police in black uniform with Kevlar vests and machine guns leaped from the machine first, followed after a moment by the major. He turned to speak to the pilot, and the engine was turned off, and the rotors droned to a stop, but the pilot stayed with the machine.

The major came across. "Hello McBride, who have we here? The wild man from Borneo?" And he laughed at the sight of Miller's clothes and appearance.

Miller said, "There's no water on site, or I would have showered. Very sorry."

"I'm sorry Brigadier," said the policeman, "I assume you haven't been hurt?"

Miller shook his head.

Together the three men made their way to the house. The armed police formed a cordon round them, machine guns at the ready. McBride led the way into the

house, and to the living room where Markham's body lay in the same position on the floor, face down.

"So what happened here?" The major knelt down, but didn't touch the body. "This is Markham?"

Miller nodded. McBride went for the candle, still in the kitchen, came back with it put it on the mantelpiece.

Miller continued. "I escaped, went into the scrub. The chauffeur came running to find me, and tripped on tree roots and broke his ankle. He's still out there. I came back to find Markham, and crept into the house. There was Markham, with McBride face against the wall about to be executed. Just in time I shot Markham, and McBride dived sideways and missed Markham's bullet."

The major spoke to one of the armed men, and told the posse to get into the scrub and find the chauffeur. "Take the stretcher out of the helicopter, then you can bring him back." He turned back to Miller and McBride. "Do you want a lift back to the campsite?"

McBride said, "No thank you. Our rental is in the garage, and I borrowed a car to get here, so I have to return it. If you need statements we will be at the campsite until at least tomorrow afternoon."

Chapter 31

McBride and Miller went to the garage, and there was their rental, with the keys in the car. McBride got into the driving seat, while Dusty opened the garage door.

They drove out of the garage and the gate in the fence. The chopper was still there on the turning circle. The pilot was out of the machine, smoking a cigarette. He waved to them, and guided them past the chopper, a tight maneuvre. Then they were on the hardcore track down the mountain side, McBride keeping the vehicle tight against the mountain wall. He had the Range Rover in four wheel drive and the car held the track as if it was glued to it. It was a slow drive nevertheless; it was still dark and barely four in the morning. The Kruger Park wouldn't be open for another two hours.

They arrived at the tarmac road, and McBride leaned out of the car window, searching for where he had left the Mazda. He spotted it, and pulled off the road next to it. Miller had fallen asleep while they journeyed down the track, waking when the Range Rover stopped.

"Are you okay to drive, Dusty? Not too tired? I'm going to take the Mazda back to the camp. I thought you might drive the Range Rover, and follow me."

"Yes, no problem. I'm not too tired to drive." He opened the passenger door jumped on to the ground and started round the front of the car. McBride got out, and searched his pocket for the Mazda keys. For a few moments he thought he must have dropped them somewhere, and imagined trying to hotwire the sports car. Then he found them, stuck in the bottom of his trouser pocket.

He reversed the Mazda on to the tarmac, and then moved the car forward, to give room for Miller to get the Rover on the road. Then in convoy they set off.

McBride reckoned they would be at the Malelane Gate in an hour, leaving them some time to wait for it to open. It couldn't be helped.

They were first in the queue when they pulled up outside the reception area, and stood in the early morning dark, listening to the cries of the night animals, each trying to name the animal they heard. Miller won. After all, he had spent more time in Africa than McBride.

"That's fifty rand you owe me," said Dusty. "My God, I'm rich."

McBride handed him a fifty note, and at that point the reception doors opened. They both went to book in.

Since they were first into the park, they weren't delayed by tourists on the road to the camp. They pulled up outside Bungalow seven, and Miller was out first.

"If you don't let me have a shower first, I'll kill you."

McBride tossed him the bungalow keys. "Carry on. I'm just going to return the Mazda. Leave the bungalow door open."

He drove the Mazda to Belinda's bungalow, and blew the horn, a quick toot, aware that many would still be asleep. He was out of the car, hand raised to knock on the door, when it was opened, and Belinda in a nightdress was smiling at him.

She put her arms round him, and kissed him. "I began to think I wouldn't see you again," she said, into his ear.

"You thought this was an elaborate scam to steal your car?" said McBride.

"Don't be silly. And come inside right away. You might be too tired, but it's got to be worth a try."

"Whatever do you mean?" said McBride, lifting her up and carrying her inside.

It was nearly lunch time when McBride made it back to Bungalow seven. He pushed open the front door, and walked into the living room. No Miller. He looked into his bedroom. Miller was in bed, snoring. But at least not muddying.

McBride shouted "Wakey, wakey!"

Dusty woke up and immediately sat up in bed. Military training.

"I'm just going down the pub for something to eat," said McBride. "And drink."

Miller put his feet on the floor. "Sounds good, give me five minutes and I'll come with you."

They walked over to the bar, which was quiet at lunchtimes; Most of the camp inhabitants were out spotting the big five as people called the famous African safari animals. McBride had not only seen them, but got them down on paper and Miller lived in the African continent. They took stools at the bar, and ordered beer and sandwiches.

"Tonight I'll order a hot meal. For the past couple of days I've been living on junk food. That chauffeur has no idea about diet."

"That reminds me, did the police get hold of you this morning? The major said he might want statements from us."

"Good job you asked me. He did phone, before I fell asleep. He's dropping by this afternoon." He looked at his wristwatch. "Should be here in halfanhour Shit, no time for anything, these days."

McBride got off his stool. "I'll go back and attach a note to the door. *McBride and Miller are at the bar.*"

He was back within five minutes, just in time to see the sandwiches being delivered. He sat down on the same stool, reached over for his beer. Raising the glass he said, "Here's to a quiet future and our savings back in the bank."

"I didn't phone the king," said Miller. "Something I must do this afternoon. Are you painting today, John?"

"No I'm taking the afternoon off. I might take a nap."

"Didn't you sleep this morning?"

"Don't ask what I was doing."

"Oh, that."

They finished the sandwiches pretty quickly, and the beer, too. Decided to have another pint, and had just ordered when they heard Major Mazombe. He pushed in beside them at the bar. He accepted the offer of a glass of beer, downed it in one long swig.

"I've had a busy morning. We searched the scrub inch by inch last night. There was no sign of the man with the broken ankle."

Miller looked puzzled. "I don't see how he got far with that ankle," he said. "He was sobbing with pain. Could have been putting it on, I suppose, but the ankle was swollen like a balloon."

The major frowned into his replenished glass of beer. "We even went along the valley floor, in case he'd fallen off the cliff. I didn't even go to bed last night. We were there until long past dawn."

"Did you think to check hospital accident admissions?" said McBride.

"No. How would he have got to hospital?"

"Is Markham's car still at the house? It was in the garage when we left last night. The key was probably in it. We left in our hire car, and the key was in that. If he dragged himself out of the scrub, and hid round the houses, he could have got by your cordon, and drove himself to hospital for attention. I bet the car was an automatic."

"And the break was the left leg. He could have driven an automatic."

The major was thinking. "I can't think of an alternative. I would think he went to a Jo'burg hospital, might still be there if he's in bad shape." He pulled out his cell phone, speed dialed. He spoke for several minutes, eventually put the phone back in his pocket.

"I've got my people phoning all hospitals in the area, asking about admissions with ankle breaks. They're coming back to me when they have some news."

The major, opened his brief case, pulled out a sheaf of papers. "May as well get some statements. Is that okay with you both?" Without waiting for a reply, he spread the sheets on the bar top, and got out a ball point pen. "Let's start with you, Brigadier."

Miller went through his story in full and the major wrote rapidly. When he had finished, he got Miller to sign, put the statement in his brief case. With a fresh piece of paper on the bar, he said, "Now a description of the missing man. You said he was Markham's chauffeur?"

"So I believe. Every time I have seen Markham, Bo has been driving."

"Bo. That's his name?"

"That is the only name I have heard."

"Physical description?"

“Black, maybe Zulu. Certainly big, over six foot. Muscular, but overweight.”

The major grinned. “You’re going to say all blacks look alike, eh?”

Same with you whites.” He laughed again. “Suppose I’ll have to be content with that.”

“You could add: *walks with a limp*.” Miller smiled.

“Right, you next,” said the major to McBride.

“You can sum it up in one sentence. I was looking for Miller, and Markham caught me snooping and was just about to execute me when Miller turned up.”

The major was scribbling rapidly. “Looks like a lot more than I said,” said McBride.

“Just adding how you found where they might be. You’re going to sign it. Cross anything out that you disagree with.”

McBride signed with a flourish.

Chapter 32

Bo heard Miller running away, and stopped groaning. No point in expending energy if there was no-one listening. Cautiously he tried moving his ankle. He grunted involuntarily.

He sat up, and then tried to stand on his good leg. Not a good idea. He couldn’t pull himself erect without trying to use his injured leg. After some exertion he turned on his stomach, and propelled himself slowly using both hands and his good leg, helped by the knee of the damaged leg, his ankle in the air, well clear of the ground. He made quite good progress, as long as he kept to clear ground. This way he zigzagged through the scrub. It took him one and a half hours before he came to the houses, a good deal nearer the edge of the level ground than he thought he would be. In fact if he had travelled another quarter of a mile, he would have fallen off the edge of his little world, and ended up one thousand feet below, undoubtedly dead.

As it was, he was able to lay there watching the helicopter land, and police, accompanied by Miller and another man making for the hideaway. When they had entered the house, Bo pulled himself forward in his now-accustomed gait. And achieved cover beside the nearest and last house in the row. He huddled down in the porch and prepared himself for a long wait.

After a long time, how long Bo didn’t know because he fell asleep, the armed men in black swept into the scrubland walking abreast, poking the bushes with their rifles. After a time they came back, still in line. A man came out of the hideaway, and met them as they came out of the scrub. He could hear snatches of conversation. He saw the leader pointing away towards the edge of the cliff, and the group walking that way, nervously peering over the edge. He was able to see clearly now as dawn was breaking. That would make it getting on for six o’clock. Bo pulled his legs into the porch. He didn’t want them to spot him now. Good job they didn’t have dogs with them.

Suddenly they had made up their mind, and all five people started to jog towards the enclosure gate. Bo heard the helicopter start up and rise in a cloud of dust. When it was about fifty feet in the air, it banked and dropped down below his line of sight along the cliffs.

As he emerged from his hiding place and continued to crawl towards the hideaway, he could still hear the drone of the chopper. He thought it must be searching in the valley.

The door into the last house was open, and Bo crawled in. He made for the dining room, and immediately saw the body. It looked like Markham. Bo crawled further. Yes, it was Markham and the blood from his mouth, now congealed on the plank floor, indicated that he was dead. Bo's only thought at this stage was: *how was he going to get his share of the ransom?* He rested on the floor for a few minutes working out what he was going to do.

Of course, no Markham, meant the ransom would all be his. Ten million pounds. His head swam with the unbelievable figure. But of course he now had no-one to ransom. But he could start over, kidnap the right guy now. It was just about looking on the internet, seeing what this McBride looked like. First he had to get out of here, off the cliff side and find a hospital that would repair his ankle. It should be possible. After all, Markham had sorted his ankle problem out. Bo knew nothing would be sorted out again for Markham.

Bo knew he must get out of here fast. Somebody would be back before long to get the body of Markham. He made for the garage internal door. It was closed, posing another problem for him. He found that keeping his right arm stiff, hand on the floor, and lifting his left arm as high as possible, he could reach the handle where he could relax a little, hanging on the handle. It was now a matter of juggling himself around the opening door. Once in the garage, he saw the BMW was still there. The Range Rover that Bo had driven up here had disappeared. Presumably taken back by Miller.

Bo carried out the door opening routine, and got the BMW driver's door as wide as he could. He scrambled in head first. Then came the contortions to get himself seated correctly. This involved much pain in his ankle, but he could rest it against the floor. He didn't need it for driving. The car was automatic.

The garage exit door was slightly ajar, so he started the BMW with the ignition key that was still in place, and pushed the door open with the front of the bonnet. He drove out into the sunlight, and made for the enclosure gate. This too had been left open, and Bo was out of there, never going back. It could stay open for ever. At the bottom of the track, he turned for Jo'burg. He knew several big hospitals there.

He had got several miles down the road, before he remembered the number plates. But now that Miller was found, maybe the number was off the police list. He hoped so. Once he was in Jo'burg he could ditch the car and be sure of stealing an automatic. Anything else he wouldn't be able to drive.

A traffic cop came up the lane of traffic, hopping in and out. And didn't stop, disappearing into the distance. So his number was off the police list it seemed.

Once in the suburbs, Bo began looking for hospital signs, the ones marked A&E. He was hoping he could get in using his driving license as sufficient ID. It was a risk, he might be on a police list. If he was Markham, then he would be. But

his chauffeur? He wasn't even logged anywhere as being employed by the man. It was a cash transaction, always had been.

He saw a sign, signaled and turned right. Another left, and he saw the building ahead. It was a hospital he hadn't visited before. Not that it made any difference. All the health service was connected by computers. He drove close to the A&E department. He went into a car park. Levered himself out of the car, deliberately leaving the key in the ignition. Someone would take the car. He could always pinch another one, and for a while his number would be okay. As soon as he could he would steal a car from the long-stay airport car park. That didn't get reported for ages if you were lucky. He crawled towards the entrance. Several people were about. Someone bent down, an elderly man.

"Are you all right? Shall I fetch help?"

"I could do with a wheelchair. I've broken my ankle. I'm on my way to the casualty department."

The old man said, "Stay there and I'll fetch a male nurse with a chair." He set off purposefully, and Bo hoped he would be as fit when he got that old.

Bo sat up and watched the way the old man had gone. Within minutes he was back with a uniformed male nurse wheeling a chair. The old man stood back and watched the nurse expertly lift Bo onto the chair.

"Thank you, Sir," called Bo to him as they set off towards the hospital.

"What's the problem, Sir?" asked the nurse.

"Broken ankle, I think."

"We'll soon have you looked at," said the nurse.

The A&E department was not too busy this early in the day. It was the drunks who clogged up the system. On a Saturday night, you could wait six or seven hours on a trolley in the corridor.

This lunchtime, there were doctors chatting to each other, stethoscopes round their necks, telling each other jokes, drinking mugs of coffee. A scattering of patients sat in the reception area, mostly waiting for test results.

Bo was wheeled to a curtained cubicle, and another nurse came in, took details. She took his blood pressure, checked his temperature with an instrument pointed into his ear. Looked into his eyes with a torch. Only then did she look at his ankle, removing his sock. He grunted in pain as she did so.

"The doctor will be along shortly. Just don't move your leg. Can I have your identity card?"

"I don't have it with me. I've mislaid it. But I do have my driving license." He produced it. He knew that they used a different computer programme to check through the police system. It didn't log up the same information, and not so fast either.

The nurse sighed, but went away with his license.

Chapter 33

McBride and Miller left the major still drinking his beer. They had decided to drive back to the palace, rather than stay another night at the camp.

Miller was due back on duty, and had spoken to the king on the phone. McBride decided to accompany him. Basically to thank the king for his hospitality, and to present him with a painting as a parting gift. He made a visit to Belinda, and promised he would get in touch with her when she got back to England.

They piled their luggage into the Range Rover, and had set off by three in the afternoon. That meant they would get three hours of daylight, and most of their journey over. The king had invited them to dine with him.

Meanwhile, Bo had been released from hospital with his ankle in a plaster cast, and a pair of aluminum crutches.

The nurse who had admitted him signed off his papers. "Goodbye Jacob," she said. Bo had looked round instinctively to see who she was addressing, then realized it was him. Jacob Naidoo. It was a long time since he had looked at the false driving license he carried. False to him, but there was a man of that name who had sold him the identification.

"Don't put any weight on that leg until you come back in a fortnight," she said.

Bo was not aiming to return, but said, "Yes, I'll see you again" and swung away on his crutches. He took a taxi to the airport. He would steal an automatic car there.

When Bo got to the Kruger Park in his Lexus 460, he saw the Range Rover coming out of the campsite, and recognized Miller who was driving. The man beside him must be McBride. He managed to turn the car round and follow them. When they turned on to the N4, he knew they were going either to Jo'burg, or maybe back to Maswatiland. He followed not directly behind, but leaving a car or two between his car and theirs. When eventually they turned for the border crossing to Maswatiland, Bo was sure that they would be heading for Mawabane.

He let other cars in front of him, and then the Range Rover was signaling a left turn. He saw a service station, and thought that was a good idea. He had not eaten except for a snack at the hospital while he was waiting for the plaster cast to be put on his leg.

He parked a fair way from Miller's car, and when he entered the café, he made sure to be at the other side of the room. Even so, during the meal, he saw Miller and presumably McBride in conversation, and looking his way. Perhaps he shouldn't have stopped. The trouble was his leg plaster and crutches that gave the game away. He stayed on in the café for half an hour after Miller and his colleague had left. He didn't need to trail them now he knew where they were going.

When he emerged in the sunlight and made for his car, Bo saw that the Range Rover had changed position and was now parked in the row directly behind the Lexus. They were on to him, so he climbed into the car after putting his crutches into the back seat. He started the car, drove out on to the road and continued in the direction of the border crossing.

Miller and McBride were surprised to see the Lexus move away.

"Perhaps it isn't Bo after all. It might be a coincidence, a black man with a plaster cast on his left leg. It isn't a BMW he's driving," said McBride.

"I still say it looks like him. We could phone the major and tip him off."

“And wouldn’t he be delighted when the man turned out to be a rich industrialist, who would give the major a very hard time.”

“Okay, okay. We don’t do anything at all. Even if it is Bo, he wouldn’t dare do anything while we’re both together, and tonight we’ll both be spending the night in the palace. No-one could break in there I’ll bet.”

Miller and McBride reached the palace an hour after sundown, an hour before their dinner with the king. McBride was staying the night in the same apartment as previously, and Miller, of course was in his apartment above the Mess.

“What do you think I should wear?” asked McBride.

“Usually when I dine with the king, unless it’s a formal dinner, the king usually wears a sports jacket, open neck shirt.”

“See you later then.” And McBride made his way to his apartment.

There was a message on the table adjacent to the door. It was typed, and said: *Telephone message from Mr Ian Smith. Would you please phone him when convenient.* It was dated the previous morning. McBride looked at his watch. He would get changed first, and see if he had enough time to phone before dinner.

He showered, shaved for the second time that day, and put on grey trousers, white shirt and a blue blazer. There was still a half hour before he need be down in the hallway waiting for Miller. Even Smith couldn’t make a phone call last that long, could he? Maybe he could, but he would cut him off if necessary, and blame the Maswatiland telephone service. Even though that was unfair.

Ian lifted up the phone after only a couple of minutes.

“John McBride here. You were trying to get hold of me?”

“Hello there. Not too urgent. Just wanted to say that the limited edition I got rushed through, and they’re ready for you to sign. You could visit me when you get back, because I want to see your animal paintings. Then you could sign the limited edition at my house. Don’t want to get them creased or damaged by moving them around too much. What do you say?”

“I’m catching a plane back tomorrow night, be back in Manchester the morning after. If you like, I could come direct from the airport, save me going up to Yorkshire, then coming down again.”

“Capital,” said Ian Smith.

“One proviso, I’ll need to get some clothes laundered. A suitcase full.”

“No problem. My charlady will sort that out as soon as you arrive. How many paintings have you done?”

“Not counting. I would think at least a dozen.”

McBride got down to the entry hall, and there was Dusty Miller, just coming in from outside.

“Hi, couldn’t have timed it better,” said Dusty.

They walked together to the king’s private dining room. The king himself was sitting at the table with a drink. Looked like gin and tonic, which was his usual tittle. He was reading a newspaper.

“Hello there. Welcome back. I got the money transferred, and then we didn’t need the ransom. Jolly good.” He stood up and shook their hands. Put the newspaper on a side table. Went over to pour drinks for them both. Aperitifs.

By the time they started dinner, which was, surprise, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, followed by ice cream with treacle toffee pudding, the king was outlining his idea for putting to good use the money duped out of Markham.

“My idea,” he said, leaning back in his chair, wiping his mouth on his napkin, “is to set up a charitable trust. Firstly we pay back the money you invested in this Ponzischeme. I believe that you, John, lost one hundred thousand pounds, and you Dusty, twice as much. That payment would be for recovering the ten million pounds. Which is a fair commission. No-one could complain about that.”

“Then I co-opt several investors onto the committee. The aim will be to repay a percentage of everybody’s losses, based on need. For example, very rich investors could be persuaded, I hope, to forego their share in favour of poorer pensioners who could ill afford to lose their money. We would list the amounts repaid, and have the accounts audited by one of the big five accounting firms. I hope that they would do it for a token fee. We don’t want to add expense to the allotment of the cash. Whilst we make arrangements for the payments, we could invest the cash in UK government gilts, or something similar. I would hope we have the whole thing wrapped up, and the scheme closed within twelve months. What do you both think about that?”

Miller and McBride, agreed wholeheartedly. They were impressed by the king’s scheme.

Over coffee and brandy they told the king how Miller had escaped, and returned to find Markham, and save McBride’s life.

“So, I did find Miller’s whereabouts, but he had sorted his escape by then. You’ve got a resourceful man there, Sir.” McBride thought he ought to put a good word in for his friend. “Also, I am leaving tomorrow afternoon. I’ll catch the plane from here that links with the Amsterdam flight. Before I go, I wanted to thank you for the hospitality. I wonder whether you will accept one of my animal paintings that I did while I have been in Africa. If I just pop up to my apartment, I bring them down for you to choose.”

“That’s very kind of you. I’ve enjoyed having you visit.”

So McBride dashed upstairs to the apartment, returned with his portmanteau.

“Here we are, Sir.” He unzipped the case. “Where shall we lay them out?”

The king got up and went to the far end of the dining room. There was an extra table against the wall, empty but for a large vase of flowers.

The king looked at Dusty. “If you can just put this vase on the floor, against the wall.” And McBride put his paintings one by one on the table. The king stood by and examined every one, nodding when he wanted to see the next. Half an hour went by. McBride had been mistaken when he told Smith he might have a dozen. He counted twenty-six.

“Put them back, one by one,” said the king. “I know the one I would like, and I will tell you when you reach it.”

The painting he chose was one he had painted in the king’s safari park when he had first arrived. The one with the lioness and her two cubs drinking at the

waterhole. "This painting sums up our country, and I will be proud to hang it here, in the palace."

McBride shook him by the hand, and Dusty got his phone out and photographed them both, with the painting propped against the wall.

Chapter 34

Bo arrived in Mawabane well after dark. The square opposite the palace was well lit, and still swarming with people. He pulled the car alongside the kerb, and got out, pulling his crutches from the back seat. He hobbled along the pavement, looking for an hotel. When he got to a restaurant with tables on the open frontage he saw a hanging sign *Rooms for rent, en suite*.

He walked through into the restaurant area. He saw a counter at the far end. An old cash register stood on it, and further along piles of plates, a tray of crockery. Part of the counter was used as a dumb waiter. He stopped against the cash register, and an old man, smart in bow tie, white shirt and dinner jacket came out of a door to the rear, saw Bo standing there.

"Sir, can I help you?"

"I'm looking for a room, probably only for one night," said Bo.

"Come through, and I will show you the accommodation."

The old man led the way down a short corridor, and out into the open air. They were in an enclosed open court illuminated by wall lights. Moths fluttered round each bulb. On one side of the square were rooms with separate doors and windows. They might have been stables at one time in the past, but had been restored and altered. The man pulled out keys from his pocket, opened one of the doors about half way down the court, switched on lights inside the room, and took Bo inside.

The room contained a double bed, dresser, small TV, wardrobe. A door of led to a bathroom with shower. "How much?" asked Bo.

"Two hundred rand, including breakfast in the café."

"I'll take it," said Bo, and took out two one hundred rand notes. The man gave him the key, and walked back to the café. Bo stripped off his clothes and showered. He had no razor, and his face was stubbly. He dressed again in his clothes, walked back to the café, and out into the square. He took one of the tables on the sidewalk, ordered a coffee. He had a good view of the palace, but it was across the square, and traffic often obscured the view. But he watched for visitors emerging, or even entering through the main gate. He sat there for over two hours, and in all that time he saw no-one using the gates. Inside sentries paraded back and forth, a useless task.

His time was not wasted sitting at the table. As he sat he also thought, planning how to catch McBride. Once he had him, he would tie him up and keep him in the hotel room, gagged. Then he would walk boldly across the road. Enter the palace. Request audience with the king, and announce the kidnapping. Getting to see the

king would, he imagined, be easy. After all, he wasn't important. It was a small tin-pot country.

Eventually, long after midnight, the café closed. The waiter told him they would be locking the doors. He could sit there at the table if he liked, but he would not be able to use his bedroom. When he heard this, Bo stood up, and went to his room, through the now dark café and out into the relatively welllit courtyard.

Once he got into bed he carried on making plans for the next day. Plans that became more unworkable, until he fell asleep at four in the morning.

He woke with a start at seven o'clock, the sun shining across his face through the window. He had forgotten to draw the curtains. He was pleased to be awake. He needed to take his breakfast outside at a café table and resume watching for McBride, of whom he had but a brief glimpse in the service area yesterday. He found an iron in one of the drawers, and an ironing board in the wardrobe. He ironed his suit, and shirt. Rubbed his shoes with a duster he found in another drawer. He dressed and went out for breakfast.

The old man was up and about in the café, and bid him good morning. There were a smattering of customers both inside and outside the café. He chose a convenient table on the sidewalk and sat down. A waiter was quick to serve him. Afterwards, he sat with a cup of coffee and a copy of the local paper which he hardly glanced at. He held it up in front of him, but he was staring over the newspaper at the palace gates.

Chapter 35

Miller looked out of his apartment window which faced out over the square. At seven in the morning, with hardly any pedestrians and road traffic, the cars parked along the other side next to the shops and cafes were clearly visible. One of the cars was a Lexus 460. Bo was in a big Lexus yesterday, and heading in this direction. There were two hotels on that side of the square. One was four star and had a private car park. Then there was the café that Miller often frequented. That had a few rooms to let in the courtyard behind the main building. But no parking facilities. That in itself was not conclusive. The driver could still be at the four star hotel, and never got around to parking his car there. After all, there were no parking restrictions on the square. That day might be coming with the increasing growth of the town, but it was a free for all at the moment.

Miller picked up the local telephone directory, looked up the number of the French café. Asked to speak to the proprietor, who he knew quite well through his use of the premises.

“Hello, I'm the brigadier who comes across for coffee most mornings. I'm interested to know if you have a certain guest staying in your hotel. This is a matter of national security, so I ask you as a servant of the state. The man is black and has a broken ankle. He has a plaster cast on his left leg. He is a big man, may not have any luggage.”

“A man of that description took a room yesterday evening. He paid cash in advance. It was my request. I thought he may not pay otherwise. He is still here, eating breakfast on a table outside.”

“Thank you. I will inform the police.”

Miller made another call, to a colleague who was a police superintendent in the Maswatiland National Police. He explained that he had a suspect kidnapper, wanted in South Africa. He asked if the superintendent could contact a Major Mazombe in Jo’burg, and ask whether they wanted Maswatiland Police to pick the man up?

Miller put the phone down, checked that the Lexus was still there, and hurried round to McBride’s apartment.

McBride was woken at eight o’clock when Miller rang the apartment doorbell.

He went to open the door in his dressing gown, and stood back to admit Dusty.

“Good morning. Come in.”

Dusty entered the hallway. “I came to wake you up. I thought we might go across to the café on the other side of the square for breakfast. Let me buy you one. I’m on duty later today. I arranged for Mapoza to take you to the airport this afternoon. “

“Kind of you, Dusty. Give me a few minutes and I’ll be with you.” He took a quick shower, dressed and they were crossing the square only twenty minutes later.

Miller noticed the car was still there, and as they drew closer, he spotted Bo drinking coffee at the end table on the sidewalk. He said nothing to McBride, not wanting to worry him. It was highly unlikely that the chauffeur had a gun. Miller had taken Bo’s gun in the forest, used it on Markham, and it was still in his pocket. Bo certainly wouldn’t be able to buy one illegally in Mawabane, probably the most law abiding town in the African continent. Before that, he was in hospital getting treatment to his ankle, and after that stealing a car, and yesterday afternoon trailing them here. A busy life, no time to buy guns.

Marcel, the café owner was serving a table outside, came over when he saw Miller approaching, fussed around showing them to a table. It was well away from Bo’s table, but Marcel made an indicating nod in that direction. Miller expected Marcel to put a finger alongside his nose and wink. He was slightly disappointed when Marcel didn’t do that, and grinned to himself. They ordered coffee and croissants, and Marcel bustled off with the order.

“You have a good life here, Dusty. Mornings frittering the time away drinking coffee.”

“You stupid bugger,” Miller smiled. “This is because you are my guest. Otherwise I would be doing paperwork, then overseeing parades. Discussing a million difficult problems with my subordinates, or with the king himself.”

“I hope you are so in touch with things that you have noticed Markham’s chauffeur sitting at a table down the way. And the Lexus parked there, which I am sure he came here in.”

“I am so up-to-date with events that I phoned the proprietor of this café when I saw the Lexus out of my apartment window at seven this morning, ascertained that Bo was staying here, and then phoned the police locally to alert them. And all before I came round to wake you up.”

“Apologies. I shouldn’t have underestimated your superior abilities. So, where are the police, as we speak?”

“Playing it low key. Or maybe still trying to locate Major Mazombe in the South African Police, not fully believing the lowly chief of the Maswatiland National Army.”

“So this is where I play my part, and visit the toilets at the back of the café. If Bo is watching us, he may follow me. An opportunity for him to kidnap me, eh? Do you think he has a gun?”

Miller looked at McBride, thinking that his friend was cleverer than he sometimes appeared. “No, I don’t think he has a gun. The one he did have is at present in my pocket. Do you want me to give you some back up, in case?”

“Won’t be necessary. You’ve already saved my life once this week.” With that McBride rose to his feet, waited a moment or two, then strode off inside the café, making for the toilets at the back.

Without turning to look McBride pushed the Gents toilet door open. Casually he walked over to the urinal stalls, stood facing them. Listening hard. Heard the door push open slowly. Was not surprised when a hand descended on his shoulder. He pushed his elbow violently behind him. It hit something soft, an abdomen, and Bo doubled over, winded. McBride turned quickly, kicked at his good leg, and Bo was on the toilet floor, squirming to get to his feet. McBride stamped on his arms just above the elbows. Bent down, and pulled Bo to his feet, dragged him across to a cubicle, pushed his head in the w.c. bowl and held it there while he pulled the flush.

Bo coughed and choked, and was left gasping for air as the water subsided.

“Don’t ever get in my way again,” said McBride, dusting himself down and exiting the toilet door. He looked for the proprietor, saw him hurrying towards him. The noise must have been heard in the café.

“Have you got a key for this toilet?” asked McBride.

“Why, have you got the big man with the plaster cast on his leg? If you have, the police have just arrived to take him away.” Marcel pointed to the front of the café. Three armed police in flak vests were making their way between the tables.

McBride stood back, leaving them room to get through the door. Glancing between the police, McBride could see Bo still hanging his head over the bowl.

Outside on the street, Miller was still at the table drinking his coffee. McBride casually sat down in his seat, picked up his own coffee cup. Miller looked at him. “Your hair needs combing,” he said.

Chapter 36

McBride got wearily off the plane, and made his way through immigration. It was ten o’clock in the morning, British summer time. He had left Mawabe Airport at three o’clock yesterday afternoon and finally after two changes was in Manchester. A total of twenty-one hours, although only fourteen hours of flying time, the rest in transit lounges bored out of his mind. He had got some sleep on

the leg from Jo'burg to Amsterdam, and there was virtually no time difference, so no jet lag. He would soon recover when he got clear of the terminal.

He got his car from the long-stay park after paying an enormous bill. The drive to his agent's house took less than two hours to the west of Manchester, in the heart of the Cheshire countryside.

McBride parked his car off to the side of the front door of Ian Smith's house. The door was answered by Ian's secretary.

"Hello Mr McBride," she said, "I was told you were coming for a few days. Can I help you with your luggage?" He had only brought out of the car an overnight bag, a case containing laundry, and his portmanteau of African paintings.

"Thank you, Dorothy. Could you take the portmanteau? I'll manage the others."

They had no sooner got into the hall than Ian Smith was bustling in from the back of the house.

"Welcome back to England, John. Hope you had time to paint plenty of pictures in between your adventures?" He was dressed to go out. That meant he had a jacket on. McBride looked at his watch. Lunch time.

"Shall we get a spot of lunch?" said Ian. "We'll just walk down to the pub, eh?"

During lunch, sandwiches and beers at the bar, Smith questioned him closely about the Ponzi men and whether they had recovered the money.

"More than that, we got a whole lot more. It's going to be distributed amongst the other members by a charitable trust, who will take into account people's needs."

"And that was easy, getting the money back?"

"Not exactly. Dusty Miller got kidnapped. I went to get him back, and he saved my life when Markham was going to execute me."

"Sounds like you've had enough excitement for the foreseeable future. It will be all painting from now on."

"That reminds me. I've had some time thinking about the United States.

What about if I paint double the amount I normally do in the next twelve months? That will give me a year to go to the States and still keep up the sales in the UK."

"I'm really, really pleased with that decision. It's all systems go. You won't regret it. Now let's get back to the house. You've got to show me the new paintings, and then get down to signing those prints."

