

# 1

**H**e killed to feed his family, and to make some money to buy clothes for his children and to pay their school fees.

He broke the law because it no longer existed in the country he had proudly served for more than thirty-five years. He had worn the green and khaki uniform of the national parks and wildlife service and he had been as proud and as well turned-out as any soldier on a parade ground, right up to the day he was compulsorily retired, on his fifty-fifth birthday.

He had taken a bullet from a poacher's rifle defending the black rhinos up in the Matusadona on the shores of mighty Lake Kariba. And then the bastard government that he had served for most of his life had taken his job and given it to a wild-eyed city boy from a different tribe, because he was a member of the party. They scared him, these youngsters, so full of hate and intolerance for other tribes, for other political beliefs. He prayed that when the government fell, as surely it must, these boys and girls would see sense again.

The scar still itched sometimes. He scratched it and thought it ironic that now he was the enemy of the state. Now it was him in the ragged trousers, carrying a black-market AK 47. He had become what he had despised for thirty-five years.

A poacher.

He knew this countryside like the wrinkles on the back of his hand, the furrows and clefts of his wife's ample body, the smiles of each of his children. The dry golden grass swayed with the wind that had long since sucked the moisture from every blade and leaf. What the wind had spared, the elephants had devoured, like a plague of seven-tonne locusts, eating everything in their path in their annual contest to survive until the rains came. In the old days they had culled the elephant – slaughtered them by the hundreds to keep the population under control, to spare some vegetation for the other animals, and to feed the poor people of his country. Culling had long ago gone out of fashion, because of the emotions it stirred in people half a world away from Africa, and the government and the party had long since stopped caring about feeding the hungry. Patrick shook his head. The world had gone crazy.

Four months ago he had made his decision to sacrifice his pride, his values, his honour and his honesty. A year into his retirement and he was starving. The pension the government paid him didn't increase fast enough to keep pace with the rampant inflation that was crushing the life out of the economy, like a python squeezing its prey to death. He had no trade – other than scouting for animals and tracking and killing Zambian poachers. The only other skills he'd picked up in the service of his country's wildlife were a basic knowledge of mechanics and, most important of all, tyre mending. How many punctures had he repaired on Land Rover tyres in thirty-five years? Hundreds, for sure, maybe thousands. He had scoured the roadsides and dumping grounds for old inner tubes and two pieces of flat bar to use as tyre levers and bought himself some glue. Patrick Mpofu, senior ranger, holder of a bravery commendation for being wounded in the line of fire, vaunted tracker and scout, had found an old piece of cardboard and nailed it to a tree on the outskirts of the town of Victoria Falls and written the words *Tyre mending*.

His first business venture had proved spectacularly unsuccessful. There was no diesel or petrol in the country, so few people were

driving. No driving, no punctures. Then, on a winter's night, the police had come. With bulldozers.

Patrick and his wife and four children had lived in a nice, albeit basic, house after he had lost his job, but the inflation meant they could not continue to pay the rent. They moved, with hundreds of others, to a shantytown on the outskirts of the Falls and constructed a home out of offcuts of corrugated iron and crumbling asbestos sheeting.

The government called it Operation Murambatsvina – a Shona word for 'drive out trash'. The untidy rows of makeshift homes were a breeding ground for criminals, state television had said. There were criminals living amidst the squalid settlement, of that there was no doubt, for many people had turned to thieving to feed themselves. Most, however, were people like Patrick, displaced from their normal lives because of the shambolic economy and government mismanagement. Some of the people broke the law, but all of them were against the government and for the opposition. To survive, they made household goods out of scrap metal, wove baskets, carved curios out of wood and soapstone, and mended tyres. And they hated the government.

The police, who were supposed to be dedicated to the rule of law and the preservation of peace, had come with the bulldozers and destroyed what passed for Patrick's home. His youngest daughter had broken free of her mother's arms that night and raced back, into the dozer's path, to retrieve a rag doll. The police had apologised afterwards, but that would not bring back a seven year old's leg.

He sniffed the dusty, musty air. Elephant. He had no interest in killing one of them. Of course, there was money to be made in ivory, if you had the right connections, but Patrick knew from his time in the parks service that the poacher made a pittance from shooting an elephant, compared with the fortunes exchanged by the middlemen in the trade in white gold. He was not going to risk his life or a prison sentence, and leave his family destitute so that some wealthy Japanese businessman would have a nice seal with which to ink his letters. Nor would he hunt rhino. To kill a *bejane* would mean giving up his soul as well as his principles. It would make a mockery of the blood he had

spilled, to cut off a horn of matted hair so that a Chinese millionaire could relieve the symptoms of a fever, or a rich Arab could have a new handle for his dagger.

On the low rise, on the far side of the dry pan, he saw a branch move in the opposite direction to which the wind was blowing. His joints were stiff and his knees clicked as he walked, but he had the eyes of a boy, focused with the experience of a lifetime in the bush. He saw the telltale flick of the big ear. Hearing was a kudu's best defence, but its overly large antennae were also its biggest giveaway. It was a bull – alone, by the look of it – and he had hooked one curly horn into the branch of an acacia in order to pull it down to his mouth.

In his mind's eye, Patrick saw a day when his son could wear the uniform of the Zimbabwean Parks and Wildlife Service, when the government's madness had passed, and when his few months as a criminal could be forgotten, even atoned for.

For now, though, he dropped to a crouch and, as he watched the kudu feeding, his thumb slowly, silently, moved the safety catch. He told himself again he was hunting only for the pot, to feed his family. The money he'd make from selling the rest of the carcass would pay another month's school fees, so his son wouldn't have to grow up to be a criminal, like his father.

'Too young for Vietnam, too old for Iraq,' the American sighed.

'You sound like you're upset about it,' Fletcher Reynolds said. He dropped to one knee and pointed to an imprint in the dust the shape of two elongated teardrops, fanning out from the narrowest points into a 'V'. 'Kudu.'

The other man took off his khaki bush hat and mopped his scarlet brow. 'Should have worn this damn hat yesterday. No, it's not so much that I'm *upset*, Fletch, more, I guess . . . unfulfilled.'

Fletcher wouldn't have described war as a fulfilling experience, but he supposed he knew what the overweight, overindulged, overpaid dentist from Chicago was trying to say. They had been discussing

military service – the American's time as a member of the Illinois National Guard, as opposed to Reynolds' four years on operations with the Rhodesian Light Infantry in the late seventies. The two men were of a similar age, and both lived for hunting, but that was where the similarities ended. 'You didn't miss much, Chuck.'

'Yeah, I know. But all the same, as one hunter to another, you'd have to say, Fletch, that there's nothing like the ultimate contest – man versus man.'

'Nothing like surviving an airline crash either, I suppose, but that doesn't make it right, or something you should feel bad about having missed out on. Quiet now, we're closing on him. Looks like a big bull from the size of the spoor.'

The American nodded and seemed to tighten the grip on his Weatherby Safari rifle. Reynolds was grateful for the momentary lull in the banal conversation. Occasionally he met a client he actually liked. All too occasionally. He heard the snapping of branches in the distance. Elephant. Best they steer well away from the herd. The dentist had at least been honest enough to say that buck and zebra were more his league, rather than buffalo or elephant, which could do a man some real damage if things went pear-shaped. Talk of the war didn't usually bother him, but it irked him that the American thought that killing another man was something to aspire to – a rite of passage of which no man should be deprived. What a load of shit.

'Can you see it yet, Fletch?' the dentist whispered.

Mother of God, the man couldn't be quiet for two blessed minutes. He'd tried to tell him, on day one, that his name was Fletcher, not Fletch. He turned and glared at the overdressed, sweating millionaire. He was rewarded with a grimace and a mouthed 'Sorry' from the client. Reynolds forced a smile and winked at him. He couldn't afford to offend the man. He could barely afford to keep the hunting lodge running, in fact, so he needed to send Chuck the dentist home to Chicago with a smile on his face and a kudu's head with a magnificent set of horns. He squinted and peered through the thornbushes towards the low rise this side of the dry pan.

The dentist fidgeted behind him, breathing hard in the African heat and dust. Fletcher reminded himself that he hunted for a living, to feed the two teenage children he saw once a year, to pay their school fees, and to fund the jewellery and fashionable clothes his ex-wife wore to please another man. He shook his head at the absurdity of it all.

The kudu roamed alone. His brothers were dead – one taken by a lion, the other shot. He walked with a limp, his left rear leg having been savaged by a big cat just days earlier. He had escaped the predator and the wound was not bad – it would probably heal well in the dry heat. But even if he did regain full use of it, he would not live long by himself.

He stood as tall as a grown man at the shoulder and his twin horns had three twists each, marking him as a veteran of twenty or more dry seasons like this one. The long shaggy beard that hung beneath his chin and chest had impressed the females once – now it just snagged on the acacia thorns. As impressive in stature and looks as he still undoubtedly was, he was getting older and slower as time wore on. The loss of his brothers meant his continued existence relied on one pair of eyes and ears, rather than three.

Patrick moved as a leopard – low and slow through the waist-high yellow grass. He paused and scooped up a handful of powdery earth and then let it trickle through his fingers, watching the fall of the grains and dust. The wind had changed direction, as he knew it would. He circled the antelope until he was on the rise, level with it, a hundred metres off.

Fletcher Reynolds put a finger to his lips. He couldn't believe they were this close to the prey and the dentist had been about to speak again.

He pointed to the kudu, which was still up on the rise. A warthog was ferreting in the black mud at the edge of the waterhole, its fat little bottom pointing skywards as it rested on its front knees and

searched for tubers. Other than that, there was no other sign of life. Fletcher chewed his lower lip. He knew exactly where they were. He knew this country like the faces of his two estranged children, who now called another man Dad.

As they tracked the kudu he had been acutely aware that they were straying closer and closer to the border of Hwange National Park. The dry pan was in a shallow valley, a natural watercourse that marked the park's boundary, and the kudu had crossed it. Even though he and the dentist were outside the reserve – just – the animal was within it. It was illegal for him to let his client bag this magnificent trophy animal. To make matters worse, the American was leaving the next day. Chuck raised his rifle to his shoulder.

'No!' Reynolds hissed.

'Why not? It's a clear shot.'

Reynolds explained in a whisper.

'Aw, damn it to hell!' the American said.

The kudu's ears twitched and turned like revolving satellite-tracking dishes as it fixed the source of the noise. Startled, it leapt a metre into the air, its short white tail curled over its rump.

Reynolds saw the sun glint on something metallic, shielded his eyes from the momentary dazzle, processed what he realised he had just seen and yelled, 'Down!' He grabbed Chuck Hamley by the collar of his expensive khaki safari shirt and yanked him to one side as the gunshot echoed across the pan.

The bullet zinged through the air a metre to the right of the dentist, leaving a shower of twigs, thorns and leaves in its path and carving a splinter from a tree which embedded itself in the American's cheek, causing him to howl in pain as he dropped to his knees.

Reynolds stood over his client, rifle raised, scanning the bush for another sight of the poacher.

Patrick realised his first shot had missed, so he continued to follow the kudu's arcing bound and squeezed off a second. As he did, he heard a

voice. Fear welled from his stomach to his throat, almost making him gag. He looked past the fleeing antelope to where he thought the voice had come from.

The second shot was close enough for Reynolds to feel the air being displaced as the round passed his left ear. He hadn't been on the receiving end of a bullet for more than twenty-seven years, but his old reflexes kicked in and he dropped face-first to the ground.

Chuck, his face bleeding from the timber dart that hung from his cheek, was getting to his feet beside him.

'Get down!' Reynolds yelled.

The American ignored him. 'Dear Lord, I see him!' He raised the Weatherby to his shoulder, centred the black man in the crosshairs of his telescopic sight and pulled the trigger. Nothing.

The African had seen him now. The dentist locked eyes with the man who had tried to kill him and his professional hunter. He realised that in his haste, he had forgotten to chamber a round. A sudden calmness came over him as he lowered the rifle and worked the bolt. He brought the weapon back to his shoulder and took another sight picture. 'Die,' he whispered.

Reynolds was on his knees now and could see the African. The man looked oddly familiar. He saw the man start to raise his rifle high in the air with one hand. It looked like he wanted to surrender. 'Chuck; wait, man, he's . . .'

The Weatherby boomed. The single shot echoed up the valley. The African was knocked backwards with the force of a stallion's kick. Reynolds was on his feet. 'Jesus Christ,' he panted as he ran forward. 'Stay there, damnit,' he ordered the American.

When he reached the man, the life force was oozing out of him, his breathing shallow and ragged. He looked up, into the sun, and the heavy-breathing white man. 'Mister Reynolds,' he croaked.

Fletcher dropped to one knee and took the man's hand in his. 'Patrick . . . it's you.' He swore under his breath. He had known the old

ranger from his days at Robins Camp in the north of the national park. He had eaten with him, drunk with him, run him into the Falls occasionally on leave. Reynolds knew the government had been getting rid of the older rangers, but he had not given a second thought to what had happened to Patrick after his forced retirement.

‘I . . . tell them I am . . . sorry, *sah*.’

Reynolds was a hard man who hadn't cried in thirty years, not since the loss of his first friend during the war. He felt his throat tighten and the tears well behind his eyes as a series of violent spasms rocked Patrick's body. He heard heavy footsteps behind him. ‘I told you to stay put, Chuck.’

‘Praise be!’ the American bellowed. He hopped from foot to foot, the adrenaline still coursing through his veins. ‘Try and shoot us, you godless heathen, and you'll see what happens. That's right!’ He lashed out with his right boot and delivered a hard, fast kick to the lifeless man's rib cage.

Reynolds was on his feet faster than a striking cobra. He dropped his rifle and grabbed the dentist by the lapels. ‘Shit, man! He was trying to surrender!’

The American met his stare, not flinching, a new hardness to his reedy voice. ‘I just saved our lives, Fletcher. That man was carrying a weapon inside the national park. If the rangers had seen him they would have shot him on sight – that's what you told me.’

‘Yes, the bloody *rangers* could have shot him, but not us. He was probably hunting the same kudu that we were!’ Reynolds let go of his client and ran a hand through his thick mane of silver hair. He had to start thinking.

‘It was self-defence. I never saw a kudu, did you?’

Reynolds bit his lower lip. The Yank was right, damn him. It was their only defence, and it would work. The local cops might try to shake down South African tourists and local whites, but they'd have a hard time locking up a rich American. If needs be, a small ‘favour’ could ensure the desired result. ‘At least let's make sure we get our stories straight.’

Reynolds looked down at the body of Patrick Mpofu, his blood pooling in the dust and dried grass, and wondered how his country had descended so quickly into hell.

The CID detectives from the town of Hwange exuded an air of professionalism but Reynolds reckoned most of it was show. One had a shaved head and mirrored wraparound sunglasses, the other a knock-off Kangol cap on backwards. The Samuel L Jackson and Will Smith dos and accessories were Hollywood, but their cheap, scuffed leather shoes were pure Republic of Zimbabwe.

Chuck's earlier bravado had waned on the trip back to Isilwane Lodge in the Land Rover that Reynolds had radioed for on his walkie-talkie. They'd placed Patrick's body in the old refrigerated railway container Reynolds used to store game meat, among sides of impala and buffalo haunches. Seeing those soulless eyes had reminded him again of the war, and how easy it had been for him to kill, when he had to. He'd given the American a brandy to steady his nerves, then told him to brush his teeth as the police Santana, a Spanish-built Land Rover, raised a dust cloud on the access road. They had quickly gone over their stories once more.

'This man was clearly breaking the law by being in the national park with a weapon. We investigated the scene where the shooting took place and confirmed that he was across the park boundary,' the bald detective said.

'And he fired on us first,' Chuck chimed in, repeating part of his earlier statement.

'So you say, Doctor Hamley,' the designer-cap cop said. 'But I am still concerned that you and Mister Reynolds were so close to the border of the park.'

'And as I said before,' Reynolds interjected, 'we'd given up on finding a good trophy. My concession has suffered severely from poaching and this hunt had turned out to be more of a walk in the bush. I was hoping to show my client some game in the park, even if we couldn't

shoot anything.' Chuck nodded vigorously in agreement. The part about the poaching, at least, was the truth.

It was cool inside the airy, open lounge area. The steeply pitched thatched roof rose cathedral-like above them. The only sound was the ticking of an antique grandfather clock as the police reread their notes and waited, in vain, for the American or the professional hunter to fill the silence. Reynolds looked around his home. He had spent twenty-seven years since the end of the bush war building up his business, developing a rapport with officials who had once fought against him – bribing those who couldn't be sweet-talked or satisfied with permits and paperwork. The business had cost him his marriage. He had weathered drought and fire, political upheavals, invasion by disaffected veterans of the liberation war who coveted the lodge and his apparent wealth, and the country's slide into economic ruin. The truth was that the bottom had fallen out of the hunting business, as most of the well-heeled clients from Europe and America forsook strife-torn Zimbabwe for more stable countries such as Zambia and Tanzania. If the police revoked his hunting licence, or even slapped a fine on him, he would go under in a heartbeat.

The bald detective, outwardly the friendlier of the two, pushed back his heavy mahogany chair. It scraped on the slate tiles. He extended a hand and said, 'Mister Reynolds, thank you for your time. It will be our recommendation that no charges be laid against you or your client. In fact, you have done us a service. These poachers are *ma-tsotsi*.' He turned to the American and translated, 'Criminals. Without the foreign exchange that visitors like yourself bring to this country we would be in great peril.'

Reynolds had to bite his tongue. The government, ably abetted by its police force, had done everything it could to imperil the country economically, politically and socially. A good man was now lying cold and dead in the back of a police vehicle as proof of that fact.

'I am sorry for any inconvenience,' the policeman said to the dentist. 'Please enjoy the rest of your stay in Zimbabwe.'