

# 1

Africa was dying of thirst before her eyes. To keep herself awake, and alert, she watched the birds and the trees through the scope, but it was a depressing view.

*Ficus sycamorus*, the sycamore fig, on the bank of the river, still green, defying the drought, but for how much longer? It was a watercourse in name only, now nothing more than a sandy red scar through the tanned, dry skin of Africa.

*Ziziphus* . . . *Ziziphus* what? She couldn't remember the second part of the Latin name. Buffalo thorn, in English, but she knew it better by the Afrikaans nickname, *wag-'n-bietje*. It was called wait-a-bit because that's what you had to do if you brushed against it: stop and take your time to free yourself of its wicked little barbs. They got under your skin and poisoned you – like Africa. *Ziziphus mucronata*, that was it. Stirling would have been proud of her, although Stirling knew all the Latin names by heart.

She blinked away a drop of sweat, not wanting to risk even the movement of her hand to wipe it from her eyes. The sun was overhead and while the net covering the hide gave her some shade and concealment, it didn't keep the heat out. So well hidden was she that the cheetah hadn't seen her.

The sighting had made her heart pound. It was rare enough to see one in the Moremi Game Reserve or a national park. Who would have thought that in the barren farmlands of Zimbabwe she would see one slinking along the dirt verge of the main road at five in the morning? The cat's coat had shone like spun gold in the first low rays of the sun, the black dots seemed to dazzle her as she studied the cheetah through her binoculars. Later, once the sun was completely up, she saw a pair of steenbok and wondered if the cheetah had been on their scent. Why not cheetahs? she asked herself now that she thought about it. The lands as far as she could see, from left to right and out to the far horizon, had once hosted crops and cattle but were now returning to bush, the scrubby *wag-'n-bietje* reclaiming the earth and providing food and shade for browsers like the little steenbok antelope that took their name from the brick red colour of their coat.

Cheetah struggled in national parks and game reserves, Stirling had told her long ago as they spent an hour one school holiday watching a mother and four cubs perched on a termite mound at the far end of the Xakanaxa air strip.

'Ironically,' he had begun, lapsing easily into the David Attenborough accent that always made her smile, 'the cheetah is most at risk within the protection of a reserve. Here she will face danger at every turn; her life, and the lives of her cubs under daily threat from hyena, lion and wild dog.'

It stood to reason, then, that cheetah could fare well in a place like Zimbabwe. With the bushveld reclaiming the commercial farms that had been abandoned by the so-called veterans of the liberation war who had taken them from the white farmers years ago, wildlife was slowly coming back. It was unlikely there would be lion in the area – perhaps the odd hyena – so if a cheetah had four cubs then all would have a good chance of survival. How odd, she thought, that something good might come of such a tragic chain of events.

The cheetah hadn't noticed her, although she'd been no more than two hundred metres from the road's edge. That was good. The cat had a sprinter's build, with long skinny legs, narrow hips and a deep chest

that held the heart of a hunter. Its long tail twitched and swished as it walked along the gravel verge of the road. Here and there it stopped to scent-mark its territory, with a squirt of urine against a tree or kilometre peg. She watched it for half an hour until it crossed the bridge and carried on over the rise.

‘Good luck,’ she had whispered. One predator to another.

Sonja lowered the binoculars and slowly rolled her shoulders, keeping the blood flowing with an economy of movement. She turned her feet, one at a time, and clenched and unclenched first her calves and then her thighs. She had prepared and moved into the hide after dark, at nine the previous evening, and once she was in place she had moved from the spot where she now lay only twice, to pee. Glancing down at her watch she saw it had been fourteen hours. She would wait as long as it took.

Three days was the longest time she had lain in a hide, but that was in training. It had been cold. No, bloody freezing. And wet, the misting rain collecting on the plastic leaves of the camouflage net and dribbling down on her head, to run down the back of her neck. Three days of peeing in the same patch of dirt and crapping in a plastic bag and wrapping it in tinfoil. They had never let her do it for real, in the field, which had angered her and the other two girls on the course.

*Kigelia Africana*. Sausage tree. Stirling would have said she was picking the easy ones, which was true. She heard a hum.

She swung the binoculars slowly westwards. She had sited herself on the north side of a bend in the main road that ran between Bulawayo and Victoria Falls, facing southwards, so that the sun would pass behind her on its arching journey from dawn to dusk. It meant she wouldn't be staring into the sun, and there was less risk of the light reflecting from her powerful Steiner binoculars, or the scope.

She saw the car coming from the west and took a breath, stilling herself. It was only the fourth vehicle she had seen all morning. Crippling fuel shortages did wonders for traffic control. It was moving fast, down the middle of the road, its tyres straddling the broken white centre line. That was a good sign.

As she focused she saw it was a Mercedes; white, with blue, gold and yellow strips running from stem to stern. Zimbabwe Republic Police. Its lights were flashing and she reckoned, judging by the seconds she counted from the first kilometre peg to the second, that it was clocking about a hundred and fifty.

He was coming.

‘The convoy,’ Martin had said during the briefing, ‘is always preceded by two speeding police cars, who maintain visual distance between each other. Their job is to warn oncoming motorists to get off the road. Everyone who lives in Zimbabwe knows that when they see a patrol car screaming down the middle of the highway they must pull over immediately.’

‘What about tourists, or people who don’t know what’s going on?’ Sonja had asked him.

Martin had nodded, dragged quickly on his Benson and Hedges and exhaled. Sonja’s mouth had almost watered from the craving. ‘If the second car sees an oncoming vehicle still on the road he flashes his lights and drives towards, it, forcing it off the road. If all is clear – and other vehicles have pulled over – he lets the next car in the convoy know that it is safe to proceed.’

The police car flashed past her and she looked west again. The second police car was travelling at the same speed and she focused through its windscreen. She caught a glimpse of the occupants, one smiling and nodding at something the other had said.

Her hand moved to the transmitter and she flicked the safety cover off the switch. The second car passed over the low concrete bridge, over the dry riverbed, and she imagined the stories the officers inside the vehicle – both vehicles – would tell for the rest of their lives about how narrowly they had avoided death.

She knew she shouldn’t have looked at the men’s faces. To personalise the targets – to give them an imagined identity – did no good at all. It was easier when they were further away, but the nature of this job meant she had to get close enough to see the men’s faces, and to read them.

Sonja heard the combined drone of more engines and the whine of rubber on hot tar. The noise reminded her of an approaching swarm of African bees. She counted the vehicles with her naked eye as they came into sight. There was another police pursuit car; then three limousines – two black Mercs and a same-coloured BMW, all armour-plated according to Martin. Behind the limos was yet another cop car, followed by an army *bakkie*, a pick-up with a section of ten paratroopers in the open back. They would be armed, she knew already, with a mix of AK-47s, two RPD belt-fed light machine-guns, and at least one RPG 7 anti-armour weapon. Last in the convoy was a military ambulance.

Sonja pushed a button and the concrete bridge erupted in a cloud of smoke and debris. A split second later she heard the boom, and then felt the shock wave wash over her. The dry yellow grass around her was smoothed for an instant by the hot wind.

Rubber screamed at her from the valley, but at the speed he was travelling there was no way the policeman in the third Mercedes Kompressor could stop in time. The car shot into the smoking void where the bridge had once been and nosedived into the sand.

Twisting, buckling metal screeched in Sonja's ears, but she blocked out the sights and sounds as she moved her cramped body into a sitting position. She hefted the Javelin antitank guided missile launcher onto her shoulder, pressed her eyes to the rubber cups and stared at the screen of the Command Launch Unit, or CLU for short. The drivers of the three limousines had all managed to avoid following the police car into the riverbed or rear-ending each other and were stopped at odd angles on the road at the end of snaking black skids of burned rubber. Gearboxes whined and a horn hooted as the drivers tried to straighten and reverse. Sonja shifted herself until the army *bakkie* was centred and bracketed by the aiming marks on the screen. The vehicle's driver had slewed to the left to avoid slamming into the rear of the police car in front. He was stopped now and the stunned soldiers in the back were rousing themselves. A couple had already jumped clear and were dropping to their bellies, taking up firing positions. The men seemed better trained than Martin had briefed her to expect. Using her thumb Sonja

toggled the switch until 'top attack' was illuminated. She braced herself for the launch and squeezed the trigger.

There was a loud click as the first of the projectile's two motors ignited. The missile left its tube like a thoroughbred leaping from its gate. Sonja's body was rocked and she squeezed her eyes shut to avoid being blindsighted by the ignition of the second-stage motor. The tail of the missile, she knew, would be dropping slowly, about five metres in front of her, but the whoosh she heard told her the main motor had just kicked in. When she opened her eyes again she saw a flying comet of furiously burning exhaust as the missile arced high into the sky then began its downward trajectory.

Javelin is a fire-and-forget weapon and she knew the missile would chase the army pick-up, even if the driver had restarted his engine and begun moving again. She didn't stop to watch the hit – there was no time. She was already removing the spent missile tube and fitting another to the CLU. As she locked it in place she heard the detonation of the warhead. When she surveyed the scene again it was through the monochrome of the screen. It helped, she knew, not to be able to see the blood as she selected another target.

She only had three missiles. Her plan had been to take out the *bakkie* so that its burning wreck would bottle the limousines between it and the destroyed bridge. The road was sunk in an earthen cutting at this point, which was why she had chosen it, so that none of the cars could turn off and escape into the thornbush-studded grasslands. But, by training, instinct or accident, the *bakkie* driver had pulled onto the verge, leaving enough room for the vehicles in front to reverse back past it.

The *bakkie* was ablaze. She moved the sights to the ambulance, which had been lagging a few hundred metres behind the convoy. She had wanted to spare it, so as to at least give a chance of survival to the soldiers and policemen she had already hurt. However, it now looked as though she would have to take it out.

On the screen she saw another vehicle moving. The police car that had been in front of the *bakkie* was reversing at speed. The noise had

come when the driver pulled on his handbrake and swung his wheel. It was a classic counter-ambush move and well executed. The police driver was getting the hell out of there. That was odd.

The policeman floored his accelerator and headed west, but smoke from the burning pick-up was drifting across the road. As he swerved around the wreck he ploughed head on into the ambulance. Sonja winced at the sound of the impact. The cop's eagerness to run away had done her job for her.

She shifted the CLU to the left and surveyed the three limousines.

*Pop, pop, pop.* She heard the tinny reports of AK-47s firing, though she felt no air displaced around her. Way off to her left was a tall knob-thorn tree, *Acacia nigrescens*, and to her right were the crumbling remains of a mud hut, which she imagined might once have been occupied by party faithful or war veterans who had staked a claim on the overgrown farm where she hid. She had dug her hide in open country, using the long golden grass to conceal herself from the road, and a camouflage net laced with the same to hide her from the air in the unlikely event there was a helicopter shadowing the convoy. Sonja banked on the fact that the paratroopers would direct their fire at the tree or the ruins, as these were the most obvious firing positions.

However, when one of the RPDs next opened up, the machine-gunner randomly raked the open ground, rather than aiming for specific landmarks.

Geysers of red earth erupted in front of her, but she maintained her watch on the limousines. A door opened in the lead Merc and a driver in a suit got out and ran from the car, away from her, scrambling up over the earthen bank at the side of the road to disappear into the grass and scrubby thorn trees beyond. Nothing would make him wait a bit.

The second Mercedes began to reverse and, despite the blaring warning of a horn from the BMW, rammed the car behind him. The two drivers then got out and after a moment's yelling they followed the lead of the first man and abandoned their vehicles.

'Shit,' Sonja said.

She scanned right again. An officer was standing, with stupid courage, in the open, shouting orders at his men. One of the RPD gunners was climbing up the embankment, moving in her direction. A fire team of three men ran down the road, away from the carnage, and then crossed. They were going to try and outflank her.

There was no other movement from the three limos. She put the Javelin down and snatched up her binoculars. Although the windows were all heavily tinted, the drivers' doors of all three cars were open. She took a split second to scan each of them.

'Fuckers.'

Sonja took an M26 fragmentation grenade from one of the pouches on the front of her combat vest and pulled the pin. She lifted the remaining spare Javelin tube and laid the grenade underneath it, the weight of the missile keeping the grenade lever down. It was a crude booby trap but she hoped some inexperienced soldier would be unable to resist the temptation of lifting the expensive anti-armour weapon. Awkwardly, she slung the third missile and CLU over her shoulder and snatched up her M4 assault rifle. She crawled through the long grass as machine-gun bullets cracked and thumped through the air over her head.

She had sited her hide just below the brow of a hill and once over the other side she half ran, half stumbled down the grassy slope. At the bottom of the shallow valley, on the far side of the same dry river the bridge had crossed before she blew it up, was her Land Rover, parked under a sausage tree. The vehicle was an old sandy-coloured 110, the precursor of the Defender. It was rated one of the best offroad vehicles in the world and she prayed it lived up to its reputation.

Sonja opened the driver's door, reached in and started the engine.

Major Kenneth Sibanda reached forward and tapped the pilot of the Russian-made Hind helicopter gunship on the shoulder. 'Down there, Land Rover!'

The smoke from the burning *bakkie* had been a beacon to them and

Sibanda had radioed to the lead aircraft of the three Alouettes that he was going to investigate.

After a pause, the pilot of the Alouette radioed back, 'The Comrade President wishes you good luck, and good hunting.'

Sibanda had smiled to himself. It was an honour to be serving the president, the hero of the revolutionary war, even if his leader knew nothing of Sibanda's audacious plan. His heart soared to know the man was safe, on his way to Zimbabwe House in Harare. The day was turning out perfectly. The assassination 'plot' had been foiled and the Comrade President would address the state-owned media that afternoon, explaining how the Movement for Democratic Change had been implicated in an attempt to kill him in order to illegitimately seize power in Zimbabwe. The assassin, the president would announce, pending the successful completion of the last part of the elaborate plan Sibanda had formulated, would have been wounded by security forces, but would confess, on his deathbed, that he had been paid by an MDC middleman to ambush the presidential motorcade. The president would also announce that the Criminal Intelligence Organisation, or CIO, to which Sibanda belonged, had uncovered the plot and had advised the president to fly from Victoria Falls to Harare instead of drive. The president would cement his position, and that of his ZANU-PF party, as the rightful leader of the nation, while the MDC, who were in reality lackeys of the British neo-colonialists, would be undermined. The CIO, and Sibanda, would be hailed as heroes.

The president was an old man, near the end of his life, and Sibanda and a small group of other veterans of the liberation war serving in the military and politburo were concerned about what the future would hold for the party and themselves when the unthinkable happened and the great man passed away. Their plan, now being so flawlessly executed, would cast the opposition as international pariahs for years to come.

'What are our orders, Major?'

'Destroy the vehicle.'

The pilot hesitated. 'Surely, sir, you want to try and take the assassin alive? Perhaps some warning shots or . . .'

‘Destroy the vehicle.’ The story about the assassin confessing, about it being a man rather than a woman, was all part of Sibanda’s plan.

‘Yes, sir.’

The avionics and weaponry on board the Hind were not sophisticated – they dated from the early 1980s – but they were nonetheless deadly. In the swivelling turret under the gunner, who sat in front of and below the pilot, was a multi-barrelled rotating 12.7 millimetre machine-gun, and under the stubby wings on either side of the gunship were air-to-ground rockets housed in pods.

‘Pilot to gunner, select guns and destroy the Land Rover,’ the pilot said.

‘Roger,’ replied the gunner, ‘selecting guns.’

The gunner walked the rounds on to the Land Rover and Sibanda’s heart pounded as he saw the fat projectiles strike home, ripping open the aluminium roof of the four-by-four like a tin opener.

‘It is a strong vehicle, Major,’ the pilot said as their shadow passed over the truck which, despite a cloud of steam gushing from a hole in the bonnet, was still bouncing slowly but surely across the open grassy plain.

‘Use the rockets. Obliterate it.’

‘Yes sir. Gunner, you heard the man,’ the pilot said.

‘Selecting rockets.’

The pilot banked the Hind into a sweeping turn and came up behind the Land Rover again. With no visible or briefed ground-to-air threat, he cut his airspeed and brought the helicopter down, until he was no more than 30 metres above ground level. At this height and speed, and from a distance of no more than two hundred metres from the target, there was little chance of the gunner missing.

‘Firing now.’

The first pair of rockets left their pods and scribed two trails of white smoke across the sky. One landed to the left of the vehicle and the other detonated just behind the moving target. For a moment, the truck was obscured in a cloud of earth, stones and smoke.

‘It’s hit,’ the pilot said, ‘but still moving. Gunner, fire another salvo.’

The vehicle was crabbing badly, its right rear tyre shredded by the blast.

Sibanda had to admit a grudging respect for the assassin. If it was him, though, he would have tried to escape on foot.

Two more rockets rushed away from the Hind and this time the gunner's aim was true. One of the projectiles smashed its way through the glass of the rear door of the Land Rover and detonated inside it. The vehicle ploughed to a halt, ablaze and smoking.

'Set me down,' Sibanda said to the pilot. 'I need to check what's left of the body.'

The Javelin was an anti-armour weapon and had not been designed to take out an aircraft, but Sonja saw no reason not to give it a try, especially as the pilot was now bringing the Hind gunship down to land.

The laser range finder reading on the screen put the helicopter at twelve hundred and forty-three metres from her, well within the missile's killing range.

She had planned for a number of different eventualities, but not the presence of a helicopter gunship. She'd needed a sizeable, convincing and moving target to take the helicopter's attention away from her, which was why she had set the Land Rover's hand throttle to about four kilometres per hour, tied the steering wheel in place and then jumped out of the moving vehicle.

Had the gunner and pilot not been concentrating so intently on the four-by-four they might have spotted the lone figure, or the flattened path she had left. But like typical men they had been too intent on finding something to blow up.

A fire had started in the grass, ignited by burning fuel from the vehicle. Smoke, combined with dust and grass thrown up by the chopper's downwash, had temporarily obscured it from view. This wasn't a problem, however, as the Javelin also boasted an infra-red detection function, designed literally to see through the fog of war. Sonja selected IR on the screen and the glowing image of the Hind, lit up by the heat of its exhaust, materialised from the gloom in front of her eyes. She

selected top attack. Even if it missed the body of the machine the war-head would take the Hind down through its spinning rotors.

'*Fambai Zvakana*, you bastards,' she whispered, bidding the crew goodbye in Shona as she squeezed the trigger.

Kenneth Sibanda had slid open the door of the small cargo compartment in the rear of the Hind and was sitting in the hatch, his legs dangling outside and ready to jump to the ground as soon as the wheels met terra firma. The helicopter bucked.

He still had his headphones on and heard the pilot shout, 'Missile inbound!'

Sibanda looked over his shoulder and saw the smoky track of the weapon, arcing up into the sky. The grass was no more than four metres below him. He ripped the headset off and launched himself out into space.

The Hind started to rise above him as Sibanda hit the ground and executed a parachute landing fall, his feet and knees together and his elbows tucked in beside his body. He rolled as he landed, spreading the impact down one side of his body, and moving clear of the shadow of the helicopter. At that instant the missile screamed down from heaven and smashed its way through a rotor blade, then the metal cowling and into the screaming turbine engine.

Sibanda didn't spare the dying machine a second glance as he pulled himself to his feet and ran.

Pieces of rotor blades, panels and a human limb sailed past him as the Hind exploded and crashed.

The ground on which he ran felt hot through the soles of his shoes, and the grass was black here, already consumed by the fire which the rocket attack on the truck had started. He stumbled towards the now charred hulk of the Land Rover. Its driver's side door had been blown open by the force of the explosion. Sibanda drew the Tokarev pistol from the canvas holster on his belt. He wanted to empty the magazine into the body of the would-be assassin before he reloaded and went looking for whoever had fired the anti-aircraft missile.

Sibanda raised his right hand as he walked and curled his finger around the trigger.

'Empty,' he said out loud, as his eye line followed the barrel of his weapon, sweeping the inside of the burned vehicle. Moving closer he saw a partially burned and melted strand of nylon rope dangling from the steering wheel, and the other end of the severed cord hanging from the brake pedal. It had been lashed. He swore in Shona and looked around him, suddenly feeling very exposed.

Sonja was up and running before the missile had hit its target. Whether it brought down the helicopter or not, she had to get moving.

'Fucking set-up,' she breathed as she returned her attention to the uneven ground in front of her.

The Javelin was much lighter now that her last remaining projectile was gone, but she couldn't dump the CLU and empty tube just yet. It dug painfully into her back and kidneys with each jolting step, but she ignored the discomfort, as she had been trained to do so many years earlier by the SAS instructors.

She held the M4 out in front of her, safety off, and set to semiautomatic. She raised the butt to her shoulder as she approached the pile of branches that covered the Yamaha trail bike. She slowed and circled the hiding place, but saw no sign of any recent approach or departure.

Sonja slung her rifle across her chest, cleared the branches away, climbed on the motorcycle and kick-started it to life. Releasing the clutch she powered off through the grass, savouring the feel of the breeze and turning her mind to the situation at hand. At the same time she kept a wary eye out for ant-bear holes and other hazards in front of her.

The Zimbabwean Air Force, to the best of her recollection, had only two serviceable Hind helicopter gunships, of which just one was regularly in service. Both were based in Harare, on the air base that adjoined the international airport. With the country plagued by critical shortages of petrol, diesel and aviation fuel, nothing drove or flew without a

very good reason these days. She had been told during her briefing on the country that the air force's ageing MiG 21 fighter jets were grounded as there was not enough fuel for them to fly from Thornhill Air Base at Gweru in the centre of the country to Beitbridge on the South African border and back again. How had this helicopter miraculously appeared, then, just minutes after her attack on the convoy?

The president was not in any of the three armoured saloon cars, of that she was sure. The fact that the military escort ignored the limousines, and that only the drivers had run from each car, confirmed her theory. The men in that convoy – or at least those doing the driving – knew they were decoys, even if they suspected the president was sitting in one of the other cars. Each had acted to save himself, with no thought for any passengers. It was she who had been ambushed that day, not the president.

Sonja crested a hill, both wheels airborne for a second. She pulled on the brakes once she was halfway down the reverse slope and stopped next to a mound of grey earth that rose to a peak nearly twice her height. It was a termite mound and, judging by the hole in its side, a disused one. Animals such as cheetah, hyena and ant-bears made their homes in abandoned termite mounds. She dismounted and put the bike on its stand. Without stopping to see if anything was living inside, Sonja unslung the Javelin from her back and tossed it inside the natural cavern. Too bad, she thought, if the Zimbabwean police or army discovered the launcher now. If her suspicions were right, they probably knew all about her and her weaponry already. She walked back up the hill, stooping as she approached the brow, then dropped to her knees and crawled through the grass.

She took the binoculars from the pouch in her vest and scanned the horizon. The twin pyres that marked the graves of the Land Rover and helicopter seemed a long way off, but Sonja knew the gap could be closed in seconds if her pursuers had access to another helicopter.

‘Think,’ she ordered herself.

Exfiltration from this godforsaken country was always going to be the hardest part of the mission. Even if all had gone according to plan, the assassination of a president was news that spread fast. Borders

would be sealed in hours, if not minutes, and all westerners – even women – would come in for extra attention from the police, army, and customs and immigration officials.

Being female was an advantage, and clearly part of Martin Steele's reason for choosing her for this mission. A lone western man might attract the attention of police, but she had passed through several road-blocks in Zimbabwe, easily playing the part of a German nurse. Only once did she have to show her forged letter of introduction from a German development fund.

Sonja pulled the satellite phone from a pouch on her combat vest. She dialled Martin's number. He would be waiting at Francistown Airport, in Botswana, a few hundred kilometres from where she was crouching in the grass.

'Sorted?' he asked.

'No. It's turned to shit here. We've been compromised. There was no package and there was a surprise waiting for me.'

'A surprise?'

'A fucking Hind gunship.'

'Oh.'

'Oh, indeed.'

'Where are you? Should I come get you?'

The grass airstrip, their prearranged meeting place, was on an abandoned farm, about fifty kilometres from where she was, as the crow flew. She could be there in less than an hour, even if she drove cross-country, rather than on the secondary road that linked the property to the main Bulawayo Road. Every fibre of her being wanted to say 'yes, please come get me'. She looked down at her left hand. It was shaking, as the adrenaline began to subside.

'No. Does your contact know about the pick-up location?'

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

'Shit,' she said. 'Then that does it. I'll come by road.'

'Which crossing?'

Sonja thought for a moment. 'Not over the phone. I'll call you when I get there. Got to run.'

She put the phone away and lifted the bike's seat. From the cavity made for a helmet she extracted a rolled-up nylon hiking rucksack. She slid her M4 into the pack and put it on her back. Also in the helmet well were two more hand grenades, which she put in pouches in her vest.

Sonja lowered the seat, got back on and kicked the bike into life again. She revved the throttle hard and rode down the hill, around its base and onto the main road. Speed was of the essence now.

The wind whipped her ponytail behind her as she rode. She watched the speedometer needle climb to a hundred and twenty kilometres an hour. It was good to be moving again. Outside of Victoria Falls was a police checkpoint and veterinary control post. If someone asked to look in her backpack there would be blood spilled. Her vest resembled a photographer's and she was counting on the novelty of being a white woman on a motorcycle being enough for her to distract the police on duty.

'Where are you going?' the male constable asked her when she pulled up.

'The Falls. It's hot today, isn't it?'

'Ah, yes, it is very hot.'

'You are from South Africa?' he asked her.

'I am from Germany.'

'Ah, that is very far. What have you brought me from Germany?' He craned his head theatrically to look at her backpack.

'Goodwill and a sunny disposition.'

The policeman laughed and waved her through. She had been afraid the roadblock would have been alerted of the event happening not eighty kilometres distant, but this was Zimbabwe and few things worked here, least of all communications.

She raced past the Zambezi Lager billboard welcoming her to Victoria Falls, and turned left before entering the tourist town, following the sign to the border post with Botswana at Kazungula. This distance was about seventy kilometres – most of it through the Zambezi National Park which ran along the river of the same name, upstream from the magnificent waterfalls. There was little traffic on the road and she

overtook only a solitary overland tour truck, a converted lorry full of backpackers. The tour vehicles tended to avoid Zimbabwe these days, because of food and fuel shortages, but there were enough attractions in the country still to tempt the odd group of hardier tourists. The view of the Falls was better from the Zimbabwean side than across the chasm from the Zambian side.

She rode hard, not even slowing to watch a bull elephant feeding by the side of the road. A sign said *Kazungula twenty kilometres*. Sonja dared to hope. She looked over her shoulder at the disappearing blue blob of the truck. The sky seemed clear.

Ahead, the midday sun was sucking waves of heat haze from the black tar as she approached the crest of a hill. As she approached the peak she saw a dark shape shimmering through the curtain of hot air. Instinctively she pulled on the brakes, slowing her speed to eighty. She didn't want a head-on with a truck passing a slower vehicle.

The helicopter materialised in front of her, hovering just above the road. It was an Alouette and it had obviously been waiting for her, on the other side of the hill. How long had it been watching her?

The road was in a cutting, with steep banks on either side. It was, ironically, the same type of terrain she had chosen to ambush the convoy. Her enemy had turned her own strategy against her. Behind her was the overland truck, slowly gaining. If she turned she might bring harm into its way.

A man leaned out of the open cargo hatch and Sonja gunned the throttle as she saw an AK-47 barrel.

Rounds ricocheted and slapped into the tarmac on either side of her as she drove straight at the hovering helicopter. She couldn't reach the M4 in her pack and her nine millimetre Glock 17 pistol was stuffed inside her vest. While keeping her right hand on the throttle, she unfastened one of her vest pouches and pulled out a grenade. Lifting it to her mouth she pulled out the pin with her teeth. It was a lot harder than it looked on the old war movies, especially when riding a bike. She spat the pin out; Lee Marvin, eat your heart out. The Alouette descended and it looked like the pilot was going to land on the road.

Sonja relaxed her grip on the grenade and rolled it in her palm, allowing the spring-loaded safety lever to fly clear. She had somewhere between five and seven seconds before it detonated, but she kept it in her hand. As the helicopter came down it turned broadside on, to make a better roadblock and to give the uniformed gunner in the back a clearer shot at her. He opened fire again and Sonja veered off the road. The motorcycle tipped and went into a skid in the dirt. She came off and slid through the gravel, following close behind the bike. Above and beyond the scraping of her skin on the unforgiving ground she felt the burning lance and jarring smack of a bullet hitting her right thigh.

The pilot turned the machine to get a better view.

Sonja came to rest near the bike, her khaki trousers and long-sleeved shirt torn and blood pumping from her leg. She released the fingers of her left hand, as unobtrusively as she could, and flicked the grenade away from her. As she did so she rolled through the dirt until she was pressed hard up against the motorcycle.

‘What’s that?’ the pilot yelled into his intercom.

‘Grenade!’ Sibanda pulled the trigger on the AK, emptying his magazine into the motorcycle as the pilot hauled on his controls and fought to bring the Alouette back up into the sky.

The orb exploded and the machine rocked and bucked.

‘Put her down! Land this bloody thing!’ Sibanda ordered.

‘No way.’

The pilot had been diverted from the president’s flight to collect Sibanda, but he lacked the aggression and bravery of the deceased gunship captain. The young man had initially refused to land on the road for ‘safety reasons’ until Sibanda had waved the barrel of his AK-47 in the man’s general direction. He would see the pilot court-martialled after this was all over.

It was too high for him to jump to the road and he thumped the hatch frame in frustration. ‘Do as I tell you!’ he barked into the intercom.

‘Major, I am in control of this aircraft,’ the pilot said back. ‘We have

taken shrapnel damage and there is now a civilian vehicle on the road below. I am not going to land.'

'Then come around, damn you. I want to see if she is still alive.'

The pilot flew straight and level for a few more seconds, away from the scene of the explosion, ostensibly studying his instruments and experimenting with the controls to satisfy himself there was no serious damage. Sibanda knew the protocols were a mask for cowardice. 'Now, lieutenant!'

The pilot looked back at the rifle pointed at him and pushed the stick over. Sibanda tossed the empty AK-47 on the floor of the helicopter. He had neglected to take a spare magazine from the dead soldier's body by the *bakkie*. He still had his Tokarev, though, and he drew the pistol. It was a fitting weapon to administer the *coup de grâce*. He leaned out of the hatch as the pilot cautiously circled the crashed motorcycle.

Below them, a big blue tour truck headed for the border. Sibanda had seen it slow, but the driver was wisely continuing on past the cycle.

'Where is she?' Sibanda asked out loud. He could see the fallen trail bike, but no sign of the woman.

'She?' said the pilot.

Sibanda ignored the question. 'Follow that truck. She must have jumped on board somehow. Can you radio the border post at Kazungula?'

'I'll try.' The pilot fiddled with a knob and spoke into his headset microphone. 'Ah, it is not working, Major.'

Sibanda wanted to shoot the man, but as he didn't know how to fly, that wasn't an option. 'Fly me to the border, now, you idiot!'

'Sir.'

They circled the site of the crashed motorbike once more, but there was no sign of the assassin. The pilot lowered the nose and proceeded along the black ribbon of tar that sliced through the dry mopane bushveld of the national park. A herd of a dozen kudu took fright at their low passage and bolted across the road, their white tails curled protectively over their rumps as they jumped high to avoid the unseen threat.

The Alouette started vibrating, the tremor growing in a matter of seconds from a hum to a shudder. 'What's that?' Sibanda asked.

‘Oil pressure is dropping.’ The pilot tapped a gauge. ‘I’m putting her down before the engine seizes.’

‘Mother of God!’

Sibanda was out of the aircraft as the wheels touched the ground. If he didn’t get away from that bloody pilot he would kill him, and he was in enough trouble already this day. His dreams of glory were turning into a waking nightmare. There would be no promotion, no more land, no spot on the politburo, and no money if this woman got away and exposed them. To make matters worse, he had deliberately not informed the police or border authorities of the bogus assassination plot. A vehicle was coming towards them, an ageing red *bakkie* with a trailing cloud of black diesel smoke. As the vehicle approached Sibanda walked into the middle of the road and drew his pistol.

The driver was wide-eyed as Sibanda barked, ‘Get out!’

Speechless with fear, the thin man in blue workman’s overalls did as ordered. Sibanda saw the four empty two hundred litre drums in the back. The man was on a fuel run to Botswana to bring back diesel or petrol for the black market. ‘I am commandeering this vehicle.’

The citizen nodded dumbly; the sight of the helicopter in the middle of the road and uniformed men silenced any protest. Sibanda got in, rammed the gearstick into first and sped off. As he crashed through the gears and floored the accelerator, the best he could manage from the worn-out diesel engine was seventy-five.

The tourists were still in shock as their guide and driver, Mike Williams, pulled up at the customs and immigration office at Kazungula. He climbed down from the cab of the overland truck and shook his head. ‘I’m getting too old for this shit.’ He took a deep breath to calm himself. ‘Passports everyone. Now!’

It was odd, he thought, how easily he slipped back into army officer mode when he needed to. Someone had let off a grenade in front of them and a Zimbabwean air force helicopter had very nearly crashed on top of them. He’d thought he’d had his fill of danger on the road.

Outstretched hands passed him the group's travel documents. They seemed as keen as he to put Zimbabwe in the rear-view mirror.

'*Kanjane shamwari*,' Mike said to the immigration man, whom he knew by sight. He shook hands with the man and passed the stack of passports under the barred grille.

'*Kanjane*. You are in a hurry today?'

Mike coughed. 'First beer's waiting for me at the safari lodge.'

The man smiled and began checking, then thumping each passport with his stamp. 'Have a safe journey.'

'I sincerely hope so, mate.'

On the Botswana side of the border-crossing the customs and immigration people made each of the passengers present themselves so their passports could be checked. The group of Australians all knew each other – teachers, parents and senior students from a school in Coffs Harbour – and he'd taken them all the way to Kawalazi in Malawi, to visit a school they were sponsoring. Mike ran a hand through his close-cropped grey hair, then lit a cigarette while he waited outside at the back of the truck. The last of the teachers filed out and Mike ground out his smoke before he was halfway through. On the ground behind the vehicle he saw fresh wet spots. He made a mental note to check for oil leaks when they stopped, but the truck's dodgy gearbox was the least of his concerns at the moment. 'Right! Let's make tracks.'

'Stop!'

Mike turned. An African man in army uniform was ducking under the red and white striped boom gate on the Zimbabwean side of the short stretch of no-man's-land – no more than a hundred metres – between the two border posts. A few of the teachers were gathered in a knot by the truck, watching the man.

'Maggie, Lisa, Claudia . . . get on the truck, quick.' The three women started to board.

'What does that man want with . . . ' began another.

'Don't worry about him – get on board the bloody truck. Now!'

Mike started the engine as the last two teachers were hauling on the chain to raise the steps. He was moving before the door closed and a

girl shrieked from the rear cab as she lost her balance and fell against another student in the aisle between the seats.

He heard shots fired and saw, in his wing mirror, the Botswana customs and immigration people running from their office, then doubling back inside. He didn't know bureaucrats could move that fast. A Botswana Defence Force soldier in camouflage fatigues was pulling on the zipper of his trousers as he stumbled from the blue-painted toilet block behind the border post.

Mike changed up to second gear as he rounded a bend and gratefully put the diplomatic fracas going on behind him out of sight. The big truck lurched and slowed as he worked the gearstick, which gave Sonja Kurtz the chance she'd been praying for, to let go of the chassis and drop to the hot tar of the road. When the vehicle passed over her she rolled into the white powdery sand on the roadside, got up, brushed herself off, then fainted.