

THE MASTER
OF THE
UNEXPECTED

SIDNEY
SHELDON

MASTER
OF THE GAME

THE ULTIMATE BLOCKBUSTER

Sidney Sheldon

Master of the Game

«HarperCollins»

Sheldon S.

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One of Sidney Sheldon's most popular and bestselling titles, published in ebook format for a new generation of fans. Kate Blackwell is one of the richest and most powerful women in the world. She is an enigma, a woman surrounded by a thousand unanswered questions. Her father was a diamond prospector who struck it rich beyond his wildest dreams. Her mother was the daughter of a crooked Afrikaaner merchant. Her conception was itself an act of hate-filled vengeance. At the extravagant celebrations of her ninetieth birthday, there are toasts from a Supreme Court Judge and a telegram from the White House. And for Kate there are ghosts, ghosts of absent friends and of enemies. Ghosts from a life of blackmail and murder. Ghosts from an empire spawned by naked ambition... Sidney Sheldon is one of the most popular storytellers in the world. This is one of his best-loved novels, a compulsively readable thriller, packed with suspense, intrigue and passion. It will recruit a new generation of fans to his writing.

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SIDNEY SHELDON

MASTER OF THE GAME

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DEDICATION

For my brother, Richard the Lion-Hearted

EPIGRAPH

‘And hence one master-passion in the breast, Like Aaron’s serpent, swallows up the rest.’

– ALEXANDER POPE

Essay on Man, Epistle II

‘Diamonds resist blows to such an extent that an iron hammer may be split in two and even the anvil itself may be displaced. This invincible force, which defies Nature’s two most violent forces, iron and fire, can be broken by ram’s blood. But it must be steeped in blood that is fresh and warm and, even so, many blows are needed.’

– PLINY THE ELDER

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Prologue

Kate 1982

The large ballroom was crowded with familiar ghosts come to help celebrate her birthday. Kate Blackwell watched them mingle with the flesh-and-blood people, and in her mind, the scene was a dreamlike fantasy as the visitors from another time and place glided around the dance floor with the unsuspecting guests in black tie and long, shimmering evening gowns. There were one hundred people at the party at Cedar Hill House, in Dark Harbor, Maine. *Not counting the ghosts*, Kate Blackwell thought wryly.

She was a slim petite woman, with a regal bearing that made her appear taller than she was. She had a face that one remembered. A proud bone structure, dawn-grey eyes and a stubborn chin, a blending of her Scottish and Dutch ancestors. She had fine, white hair that once had been a luxuriant black cascade, and against the gracefolds of her ivory velvet dress, her skin had the soft translucence old age sometimes brings.

I don't feel ninety, Kate Blackwell thought. *Where have all the years gone?* She watched the dancing ghosts. *They know. They were there. They were a part of those years, a part of my life.* She saw Banda, his proud black face beaming. And there was her David, dear David, looking tall and young and handsome, the way he looked when she first fell in love with him, and he was smiling at her, and she thought, *Soon, my darling, soon.* And she wished David could have lived to know his great-grandson.

Kate's eyes searched the large room until she saw him. He was standing near the orchestra, watching the musicians. He was a strikingly handsome boy, almost eight years old, fair-haired, dressed in a black velvet jacket and tartan trousers. Robert was a replica of his great-great-grandfather, Jamie McGregor, the man in the painting above the marble fireplace. As though sensing her eyes on him, Robert turned, and Kate beckoned him to her with a wave of her fingers, the perfect twenty-carat diamond her father had scooped up on a sandy beach almost a hundred years ago scintillating in the radiance of the crystal chandelier. Kate watched with pleasure as Robert threaded his way through the dancers.

I am the past, Kate thought. *He is the future. My great-grandson will take over Kruger-Brent, Limited one day.* He reached her side, and she made room for him on the seat beside her.

'Are you having a nice birthday, Gran?'

'Yes. Thank you, Robert.'

'That's a super orchestra. The conductor's really *bad*.'

Kate looked at him in momentary confusion, then her brow cleared. 'Ah. I presume that means he's good.'

Robert grinned at her. 'Right. You sure don't seem ninety.'

Kate Blackwell laughed. 'Just between the two of us, I don't feel it.'

He slipped his hand in hers, and they sat there in a contented silence, the eighty-two-year difference between them giving them a comfortable affinity. Kate turned to watch her granddaughter dancing. She and her husband were without doubt the handsomest couple on the floor.

Robert's mother saw her son and grandmother seated together and she thought, *What an incredible woman. She's ageless. No one would ever guess all she has lived through.*

The music stopped, and the conductor said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, it's my pleasure to present young Master Robert.'

Robert squeezed his great-grandmother's hand, stood up and walked over to the piano. He sat down, his face serious and intent, and then his fingers began to race across the keyboard. He played Scriabin, and it was like the rippling of moonlight on water.

His mother listened and thought, *He's a genius. He'll grow up to be a great musician.* He was no longer her baby. He was going to belong to the world. When Robert finished, the applause was enthusiastic and genuine.

Earlier, dinner had been served outdoors. The large and formal garden had been festively decorated with lanterns and ribbons and balloons. Musicians played from the terrace while butlers and maids hovered over tables, silent and efficient, making sure the Baccarat glasses and Limoges dishes were kept filled. A telegram was read from the President of the United States. A Supreme Court justice toasted Kate.

The governor eulogized her. '... One of the most remarkable women in the history of this nation. Kate Blackwell's endowments to hundreds of charitable causes around the world are legendary. The Blackwell Foundation has contributed to the health and well-being of people in more than fifty countries. To paraphrase the late Sir Winston Churchill, "Never have so many owed so much to one person." I have had the privilege of knowing Kate Blackwell ...'

Bloody hell! Kate thought. *No one knows me. He sounds like he's talking about some saint. What would all these people say if they knew the real Kate Blackwell? Sired by a thief and kidnapped before I was a year old. What would they think if I showed them the bullet scars on my body?*

She turned her head and looked at the man who had once tried to kill her. Kate's eyes moved past him to linger on a figure in the shadows, wearing a veil to conceal her face. Over a distant clap of thunder, Kate heard the governor finish his speech and introduce her. She rose to her feet and looked out at the assembled guests. When she spoke, her voice was firm and strong. 'I've lived longer than any of you. As youngsters today would say, "That's no big deal." But I'm glad I made it to this age, because otherwise I wouldn't be here with all you dear friends. I know some of you have travelled from distant countries to be with me tonight, and you must be tired from your journey. It wouldn't be fair for me to expect everyone to have my energy.' There was a roar of laughter, and they applauded her.

'Thank you for making this such a memorable evening. I shall never forget it. For those of you who wish to retire, your rooms are ready. For the others, there will be dancing in the ballroom.' There was another clap of thunder. 'I suggest we all move indoors before we get caught in one of our famous Maine storms.'

Now the dinner and dancing were over, the guests had retired and Kate was alone with her ghosts. She sat in the library, drifting back into the past, and she suddenly felt depressed. *There's no one left to call me Kate*, she thought. *They've all gone.* Her world had shrunk. Wasn't it Longfellow who said, 'The leaves of memory make a mournful rustle in the dark'? She would be entering the dark soon, but not yet. *I still have to do the most important thing of my life*, Kate thought. *Be patient, David. I'll be with you soon.*

'Gran ...'

Kate opened her eyes. The family had come into the room. She looked at them, one by one, her eyes a pitiless camera, missing nothing. *My family*, Kate thought. *My immortality. A murderer, a grotesque and a psychotic. The Blackwell skeletons. Was this what all the years of hope and pain and suffering had finally come to?*

Her granddaughter stood beside her. 'Are you all right, Gran?'

'I'm a little tired, children. I think I'll go to bed.' She rose to her feet and started towards the stairs, and at that moment there was a violent roar of thunder and the storm broke, the rain rattling against the windows like machine-gun fire. Her family watched as the old woman reached the top of the stairway, a proud, erect figure. There was a blaze of lightning and seconds later a loud clap of thunder. Kate Blackwell turned to look down at them and when she spoke, it was with the accent of her ancestors. 'In South Africa, we used to call this a *donderstorm*.'

The past and present began to merge once again, and she walked down the hallway to her bedroom, surrounded by the familiar, comfortable ghosts.

PART ONE

Chapter One

‘By God, this is a real *donderstorm*!’ Jamie McGregor said. He had grown up amid the wild storms of the Scottish Highlands, but he had never witnessed anything as violent as this. The afternoon sky had been suddenly obliterated by enormous clouds of sand, instantly turning day into night. The dusty sky was lit by flashes of lightning – *weerlig*, the Afrikaners called it – that scorched the air, followed by *donderslag* – thunder. Then the deluge. Sheets of rain that smashed against the army of tents and tin huts and turned the dirt streets of Klipdrift into frenzied streams of mud. The sky was aroar with rolling peals of thunder, one following the other like artillery in some celestial war.

Jamie McGregor quickly stepped aside as a house built of raw brick dissolved into mud, and he wondered whether the town of Klipdrift was going to survive.

Klipdrift was not really a town. It was a sprawling canvas village, a seething mass of tents and huts and wagons crowding the banks of the Vaal River, populated by wild-eyed dreamers drawn to South Africa from all parts of the world by the same obsession: diamonds.

Jamie McGregor was one of the dreamers. He was barely eighteen, a handsome lad, tall and fair-haired, with startlingly light grey eyes. There was an attractive ingenuousness about him, an eagerness to please that was endearing. He had a lighthearted disposition and a soul filled with optimism.

He had travelled almost eight thousand miles from his father’s farm in the Highlands of Scotland to Edinburgh, London, Cape Town and now Klipdrift. He had given up his rights to the share of the farm that he and his brothers tilled with their father, but Jamie McGregor had no regrets. He knew he was going to be rewarded ten thousand times over. He had left the security of the only life he had ever known and had come to this distant, desolate place because he dreamed of being rich. Jamie was not afraid of hard work, but the rewards of tilling the rocky little farm north of Aberdeen were meager. He worked from sunup to sundown, along with his brothers, his sister, Mary, and his mother and father, and they had little to show for it. He had once attended a fair in Edinburgh and had seen the wondrous things of beauty that money could buy. Money was to make your life easy when you were well, and to take care of your needs when you were ailing. Jamie had seen too many friends and neighbours live and die in poverty.

He remembered his excitement when he first heard about the latest diamond strike in South Africa. The biggest diamond in the world had been found there, lying loose in the sand, and the whole area was rumoured to be a great treasure chest waiting to be opened.

He had broken the news to his family after dinner on a Saturday night. They were seated around an uncleared table in the rude, timbered kitchen when Jamie spoke, his voice shy and at the same time proud. ‘I’m going to South Africa to find diamonds. I’ll be on my way next week.’

Five pairs of eyes stared at him as though he were crazy.

‘You’re goin’ chasing after diamonds?’ his father asked. ‘You must be daft, lad. That’s all a fairy tale – a temptation of the devil to keep men from doin’ an honest day’s work.’

‘Why do you nae tell us where you’re gettin’ the money to go?’ his brother Ian asked. ‘It’s halfway ’round the world. You hae no money.’

‘If I had money,’ Jamie retorted, ‘I wouldn’t have to go looking for diamonds, would I? Nobody there has money. I’ll be an equal with all of them. I’ve got brains and a strong back. I’ll not fail.’

His sister, Mary, said, ‘Annie Cord will be disappointed. She expects to be your bride one day, Jamie.’

Jamie adored his sister. She was older than he. Twenty-four, and she looked forty. She had never owned a beautiful thing in her life. *I’ll change that*, Jamie promised himself.

His mother silently picked up the platter that held the remains of the steaming haggis and walked over to the iron sink.

Late that night she came to Jamie's bedside. She gently placed one hand on Jamie's shoulder, and her strength flooded into him. 'You do what you must, Son. I dinna ken if there be diamonds there, but if there be, you'll find them.' She brought out from behind her a worn leather pouch. 'I've put by a few pounds. You needn't say nothin' to the others. God bless you, Jamie.'

When he left for Edinburgh, he had fifty pounds in the pouch.

It was an arduous journey to South Africa, and it took Jamie McGregor almost a year to make it. He got a job as a waiter in a workingman's restaurant in Edinburgh until he added another fifty pounds to the pouch. Then it was on to London. Jamie was awed by the size of the city, the huge crowds, the noise and the large horse-drawn omnibuses that raced along at five miles an hour. There were hansom cabs everywhere, carrying beautiful women in large hats and swirling skirts and dainty little high-button shoes. He watched in wonder as the ladies alighted from the cabs and carriages to shop at Burlington Arcade, a dazzling cornucopia of silver and dishes and dresses and furs and pottery and apothecary shops crammed with mysterious bottles and jars.

Jamie found lodging at a house at 32 Fitzroy Street. It cost ten shillings a week, but it was the cheapest he could find. He spent his days at the docks, seeking a ship that would take him to South Africa, and his evenings seeing the wondrous sights of London town. One evening he caught a glimpse of Edward, the Prince of Wales, entering a restaurant near Covent Garden by the side door, a beautiful young lady on his arm. She wore a large-flowered hat, and Jamie thought how nice it would look on his sister.

Jamie attended a concert at the Crystal Palace, built for The Great Exhibition in 1851. He visited Drury Lane and at intermission sneaked into the Savoy Theatre, where they had installed the first electric lighting in a British public building. Some streets were lighted by electricity, and Jamie heard that it was possible to talk to someone on the other side of town by means of a wonderful new machine, the telephone. Jamie felt that he was looking at the future.

In spite of all the innovations and activity, England was in the midst of a growing economic crisis that winter. The streets were filled with the unemployed and the hungry, and there were mass demonstrations and street fighting. *I've got to get away from here*, Jamie thought. *I came to escape poverty*. The following day, Jamie signed on as a steward on the *Walmer Castle*, bound for Cape Town, South Africa.

The sea journey lasted three weeks, with stops at Madeira and St Helena to take on more coal for fuel. It was a rough, turbulent voyage in the dead of winter, and Jamie was seasick from the moment the ship sailed. But he never lost his cheerfulness, for every day brought him nearer to his treasure chest. As the ship moved towards the equator, the climate changed. Miraculously, winter began to thaw into summer, and as they approached the African coast, the days and nights became hot and steamy.

The *Walmer Castle* arrived in Cape Town at early dawn, moving carefully through the narrow channel that divided the great leper settlement of Robben Island from the mainland, and dropped anchor in Table Bay.

Jamie was on deck before sunrise. He watched, mesmerized, as the early-morning fog lifted and revealed the grand spectacle of Table Mountain looming high over the city. He had arrived.

The moment the ship made fast to the wharf, the decks were overrun by a horde of the strangest-looking people Jamie had ever seen. There were touts for all the different hotels – black men, yellow men, brown men and red men frantically offering to bear away luggage – and small boys running back and forth with newspapers and sweets and fruits for sale. Hansom drivers who were half-castes, Parsis or blacks were yelling their eagerness to be hired. Vendors and men pushing drinking carts called attention to their wares. The air was thick with huge black flies. Sailors and porters hustled and halloed their way through the crowd while passengers vainly tried to keep their luggage together and in sight. It was a babel of voices and noise. People spoke to one another in a language Jamie had never heard.

'Yulle kom van de Kaap, neh?'

'Het julle mine papa zyn wagen gezien?'

'Wat bedui' di?'

'Huistoe!'

He did not understand a word.

Cape Town was utterly unlike anything Jamie had ever seen. No two houses were alike. Next to a large warehouse two or three storeys high, built of bricks or stone, was a small canteen of galvanized iron, then a jeweller's shop with hand-blown plate-glass windows and abutting it a small greengrocer's and next to that a tumble-down tobacconist's.

Jamie was mesmerized by the men, women and children who thronged the streets. He saw a kaffir clad in an old pair of 78th Highland trews and wearing as a coat a sack with slits cut for the arms and head. The kaffir walked behind two Chinese men, hand in hand, who were wearing blue smock frocks, their pigtails carefully coiled up under their conical strat hats. There were stout, red-faced Boer farmers with sun-bleached hair, their wagons loaded with potatoes, corn and leafy vegetables. Men dressed in brown velveteen trousers and coats, with broad-brimmed, soft-felt hats on their heads and long clay pipes in their mouths, strode ahead of their *vraws*, attired in black, with thick black veils and large black-silk poke bonnets. Parsi washerwomen with large bundles of soiled clothes on their heads pushed past soldiers in red coats and helmets. It was a fascinating spectacle.

The first thing Jamie did was to seek out an inexpensive boarding-house recommended to him by a sailor aboard ship. The landlady was a dumpy, ample-bosomed, middle-aged widow.

She looked Jamie over and smiled. *'Zoek yulle goud?'*

He blushed. 'I'm sorry – I don't understand.'

'English, yes? You are here to hunt gold? Diamonds?'

'Diamonds. Yes, ma'am.'

She pulled him inside. 'You will like it here. I have all the convenience for young men like you.'

Jamie wondered whether she was one of them. He hoped not.

'I'm Mrs Venster,' she said coyly, 'but my friends call me "Dee-Dee".' She smiled, revealing a gold tooth in front. 'I have a feeling we are going to be very good friends. Ask of me anything.'

'That's very kind of you,' Jamie said. 'Can you tell me where I can get a map of the city?'

With map in hand, Jamie went exploring. On one side of the city were the landward suburbs of Rondebosch, Claremont and Wynberg, stretching along nine miles of thinning plantations and vineyards. On the other side were the marine suburbs of Sea Point and Green Point. Jamie walked through the rich residential area, down Strand Street and Bree Street, admiring the large, two-storey buildings with their flat roofs and peaked stuccoed fronts – steep terraces rising from the street. He walked until he was finally driven indoors by the flies that seemed to have a personal vendetta against him. They were large and black and attacked in swarms. When Jamie returned to his boardinghouse, he found his room filled with them. They covered the walls and table and bed.

He went to see the landlady. 'Mrs Venster, isn't there anything you can do about the flies in my room? They're –'

She gave a fat, giggling laugh and pinched Jamie's cheek, *'Myn magtig*. You'll get used to them. You'll see.'

The sanitary arrangements in Cape Town were both primitive and inadequate, and when the sun set, an odoriferous vapour covered the city like a noxious blanket. It was unbearable. But Jamie knew that he would bear it. He needed more money before he could leave. 'You can't survive in the diamond fields without money,' he had been warned. 'They'll charge you just for breathin'.'

On his second day in Cape Town, Jamie found a job driving a team of horses for a delivery firm. On the third day he started working in a restaurant after dinner, washing dishes. He lived on the leftover food that he squirrelled away and took back to the boardinghouse, but it tasted strange to him and he longed for his mother's cock-a-leekie and oatcakes and hot, fresh-made baps. He did

not complain, even to himself, as he sacrificed both food and comfort to increase his grubstake. He had made his choice and nothing was going to stop him, not the exhausting labour, nor the foul air he breathed, nor the flies that kept him awake most of the night. He felt desperately lonely. He knew no one in this strange place, and he missed his friends and family. Jamie enjoyed solitude, but loneliness was a constant ache.

At last, the magic day arrived. His pouch held the magnificent sum of two hundred pounds. He was ready. He would leave Cape Town the following morning for the diamond fields.

Reservations for passenger wagons to the diamond fields at Klipdrift were booked by the Inland Transport Company at a small wooden depot near the docks. When Jamie arrived at seven a.m., the depot was already so crowded that he could not get near it. There were hundreds of fortune seekers fighting for seats on the wagons. They had come from as far away as Russia and America, Australia, Germany and England. They shouted in a dozen different tongues, pleading with the besieged ticket sellers to find spaces for them. Jamie watched as a burly Irishman angrily pushed his way out of the office onto the sidewalk, fighting to get through the mob.

‘Excuse me,’ Jamie said. ‘What’s going on in there?’

‘Nothin’,’ the Irishman grunted in disgust. ‘The bloody wagons are all booked up for the next six weeks.’ He saw the look of dismay on Jamie’s face. ‘That’s not the worst of it, lad. The heathen bastards are chargin’ fifty pounds a head.’

It was incredible! ‘There must be another way to get to the diamond fields.’

‘Two ways. You can go Dutch Express, or you can go by foot.’

‘What’s Dutch Express?’

‘Bullock wagon. They travel two miles an hour. By the time you get there, the damned diamonds will all be gone.’

Jamie McGregor had no intention of being delayed until the diamonds were gone. He spent the rest of the morning looking for another means of transportation. Just before noon, he found it. He was passing a livery stable with a sign in front that said MAIL DEPOT. On an impulse, he went inside, where the thinnest man he had ever seen was loading large mail sacks into a dogcart. Jamie watched him a moment.

‘Excuse me,’ Jamie said. ‘Do you carry mail to Klipdrift?’

‘That’s right. Loadin’ up now.’

Jamie felt a sudden surge of hope. ‘Do you take passengers?’

‘Sometimes.’ He looked up and studied Jamie. ‘How old are you?’

An odd question. ‘Eighteen. Why?’

‘We don’t take anyone over twenty-one or twenty-two. You in good health?’

An even odder question. ‘Yes, sir.’

The thin man straightened up. ‘I guess you’re fit. I’m leavin’ in an hour. The fare’s twenty pounds.’

Jamie could not believe his good fortune. ‘That’s wonderful! I’ll get my suitcase and –’

‘No suitcase. All you got room for is one shirt and a toothbrush.’

Jamie took a closer look at the dogcart. It was small and roughly built. The body formed a well in which the mail was stored, and over the well was a narrow, cramped space where a person could sit back to back behind the driver. It was going to be an uncomfortable journey.

‘It’s a deal,’ Jamie said. ‘I’ll fetch my shirt and toothbrush.’

When Jamie returned, the driver was hitching up a horse to the open cart. There were two large young men standing near the cart: one was short and dark, the other was a tall, blond Swede. The men were handing the driver some money.

‘Wait a minute,’ Jamie called to the driver. ‘You said *I* was going.’

‘You’re all goin’,’ the driver said. ‘Hop in.’

‘The *three* of us?’

‘That’s right.’

Jamie had no idea how the driver expected them all to fit in the small cart, but he knew he was going to be on it when it pulled out.

Jamie introduced himself to his two fellow passengers. ‘I’m Jamie McGregor.’

‘Wallach,’ the short, dark man said.

‘Pederson,’ the tall blond replied.

Jamie said, ‘We’re lucky we discovered this, aren’t we? It’s a good thing everybody doesn’t know about it.’

Pederson said, ‘Oh, they know about the post carts, McGregor. There just aren’t that many fit enough or desperate enough to travel in them.’

Before Jamie could ask what he meant, the driver said, ‘Let’s go.’

The three men – Jamie in the middle – squeezed into the seat, crowded against each other, their knees cramped, their backs pressing hard against the wooden back of the driver’s seat. There was no room to move or breathe. *It’s not bad*, Jamie reassured himself.

‘Hold on!’ the driver sang out, and a moment later they were racing through the streets of Cape Town on their way to the diamond fields at Klipdrift.

By bullock wagon, the journey was relatively comfortable. The wagons transporting passengers from Cape Town to the diamond fields were large and roomy, with tent covers to ward off the blazing winter sun. Each wagon accommodated a dozen passengers and was drawn by teams of horses or mules. Refreshments were provided at regular stations, and the journey took ten days.

The mail cart was different. It never stopped, except to change horses and drivers. The pace was a full gallop, over rough roads and fields and rutted trails. There were no springs on the cart, and each bounce was like the blow of a horse’s hoof. Jamie gritted his teeth and thought, *I can stand it until we stop for the night, I’ll eat and get some sleep, and in the morning I’ll be fine*. But when nighttime came, there was a ten-minute halt for a change of horse and driver, and they were off again at a full gallop.

‘When do we stop to eat?’ Jamie asked.

‘We don’t,’ the new driver grunted. ‘We go straight through. We’re carryin’ the mails, mister.’

They raced through the long night, travelling over dusty, bumpy roads by moonlight, the little cart bouncing up the rises, plunging down the valleys, springing over the flats. Every inch of Jamie’s body was battered and bruised from the constant jolting. He was exhausted, but it was impossible to sleep. Every time he started to doze off, he was jarred awake. His body was cramped and miserable and there was no room to stretch. He was starving and motion-sick. He had no idea how many days it would be before his next meal. It was a six-hundred-mile journey, and Jamie McGregor was not sure he was going to live through it. Neither was he sure that he wanted to.

By the end of the second day and night, the misery had turned to agony. Jamie’s travelling companions were in the same sorry state, no longer even able to complain. Jamie understood now why the company insisted that its passengers be young and strong.

When the next dawn came, they entered the Great Karroo, where the real wilderness began. Stretching to infinity, the monstrous veld lay flat and forbidding under a pitiless sun. The passengers were smothered in heat, dust and flies.

Occasionally, through a miasmic haze, Jamie saw groups of men slogging along on foot. There were solitary riders on horseback, and dozens of bullock wagons drawn by eighteen or twenty oxen, handled by drivers and *voorlopers*, with their *sjamboks*, the whips with long leather thongs, crying, ‘Trek! Trek!’ The huge wagons were laden with a thousand pounds of produce and goods, tents and digging equipment and wood-burning stoves, flour and coal and oil lamps. They carried coffee and rice, Russian hemp, sugar and wines, whiskey and boots and Belfast candles, and blankets. They were the lifeline to the fortune seekers at Klipdrift.

It was not until the mail cart crossed the Orange River that there was a change from the deadly monotony of the veld. The scrub gradually became taller and tinged with green. The earth was redder, patches of grass rippled in the breeze, and low thorn trees began to appear.

I'm going to make it, Jamie thought dully. I'm going to make it.

And he could feel hope begin to creep into his tired body.

They had been on the road for four continuous days and nights when they finally arrived at the outskirts of Klipdrift.

Young Jamie McGregor had not known what to expect, but the scene that met his weary, bloodshot eyes was like nothing he ever could have imagined. Klipdrift was a vast panorama of tents and wagons lined up on the main streets and on the shores of the Vaal River. The dirt roadway swarmed with kaffirs, naked except for brightly coloured jackets, and bearded prospectors, butchers, bakers, thieves, teachers. In the centre of Klipdrift, rows of wooden and iron shacks served as shops, canteens, billiard rooms, eating houses, diamond-buying offices and lawyers' rooms. On a corner stood the ramshackle Royal Arch Hotel, a long chain of rooms without windows.

Jamie stepped out of the cart, and promptly fell to the ground, his cramped legs refusing to hold him up. He lay there, his head spinning, until he had strength enough to rise. He stumbled towards the hotel, pushing through the boisterous crowds that thronged the sidewalks and streets. The room they gave him was small, stifling hot and swarming with flies. But it had a cot. Jamie fell onto it, fully dressed, and was asleep instantly. He slept for eighteen hours.

Jamie awoke, his body unbelievably stiff and sore, but his soul filled with exultation. *I am here! I have made it!* Ravenously hungry, he went in search of food. The hotel served none, but there was a small, crowded restaurant across the street, where he devoured fried snook, a large fish resembling pike; carbonaatje, thinly sliced mutton grilled on a spit over a wood fire; a haunch of bok and, for dessert, *koeksister*, a dough deep-fried and soaked in syrup.

Jamie's stomach, so long without food, began to give off alarming symptoms. He decided to let it rest before he continued eating, and turned his attention to his surroundings. At tables all around him, prospectors were feverishly discussing the subject uppermost in everyone's mind: diamonds.

'... There's still a few diamonds left around Hopetown, but the mother lode's at New Rush ...'

'... Kimberley's got a bigger population than Joburg ...'

'... About the find up at Dutoitspan last week? They say there's more diamonds there than a man can carry ...'

'... There's a new strike at Christiana. I'm goin' up there tomorrow.'

So it was true. There were diamonds everywhere! Young Jamie was so excited he could hardly finish his huge mug of coffee. He was staggered by the amount of the bill. Two pounds, three shillings for one meal! *I'll have to be very careful*, he thought, as he walked out onto the crowded, noisy street.

A voice behind him said, 'Still planning to get rich, McGregor?'

Jamie turned. It was Pederson, the Swedish boy who had travelled on the dogcart with him.

'I certainly am,' Jamie said.

'Then let's go where the diamonds are.' He pointed. 'The Vaal River's that way.'

They began to walk.

Klipdrift was in a basin, surrounded by hills, and as far as Jamie could see, everything was barren, without a blade of grass or shrub in sight. Red dust rose thick in the air, making it difficult to breathe. The Vaal River was a quarter of a mile away, and as they got closer to it, the air became cooler. Hundreds of prospectors lined both sides of the riverbank, some of them digging for diamonds, others meshing stones in rocking cradles, still others sorting stones at rickety, makeshift tables. The equipment ranged from scientific earth-washing apparatus to old tub boxes and pails. The men were sunburned, unshaven and roughly dressed in a weird assortment of collarless, coloured and striped flannel shirts, corduroy trousers and rubber boots, riding breeches and laced leggings and

wide-brimmed felt hats or pith helmets. They all wore broad leather belts with pockets for diamonds or money.

Jamie and Pederson walked to the edge of the riverbank and watched a young boy and an older man struggling to remove a huge ironstone boulder so they could get at the gravel around it. Their shirts were soaked with sweat. Nearby, another team loaded gravel onto a cart to be sieved in a cradle. One of the diggers rocked the cradle while another poured buckets of water into it to wash away the silt. The large pebbles were then emptied onto an improvised sorting table, where they were excitedly inspected.

‘It looks easy,’ Jamie grinned.

‘Don’t count on it, McGregor. I’ve been talking to some of the diggers who have been here a while. I think we’ve bought a sack of pups.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Do you know how many diggers there are in these parts, all hoping to get rich? Twenty bloody thousand! And there aren’t enough diamonds to go around, chum. Even if there were, I’m beginning to wonder if it’s worth it. You broil in winter, freeze in summer, get drenched in their damned *donderstormen*, and try to cope with the dust and the flies and the stink. You can’t get a bath or a decent bed, and there are no sanitary arrangements in this damned town. There are drownings in the Vaal River every week. Some are accidental, but I was told that for most of them it’s a way out, the only escape from this hellhole. I don’t know why these people keep hanging on.’

‘I do.’ Jamie looked at the hopeful young boy with the stained shirt. ‘The next shovelful of dirt.’

But as they headed back to town, Jamie had to admit that Pederson had a point. They passed carcasses of slaughtered oxen, sheep and goats left to rot outside the tents, next to wide-open trenches that served as lavatories. The place stank to the heavens. Pederson was watching him. ‘What are you going to do now?’

‘Get some prospecting equipment.’

In the centre of town was a store with a rusted hanging sign that read: SALOMON VAN DER MERWE, GENERAL STORE. A tall black man about Jamie’s age was unloading a wagon in front of the store. He was broad-shouldered and heavily muscled, one of the most handsome men Jamie had ever seen. He had soot-black eyes, an aquiline nose and a proud chin. There was a dignity about him, a quiet aloofness. He lifted a heavy wooden box of rifles to his shoulder and, as he turned, he slipped on a leaf fallen from a crate of cabbage. Jamie instinctively reached out an arm to steady him. The black man did not acknowledge Jamie’s presence. He turned and walked into the store. A Boer prospector hitching up a mule spat and said distastefully, ‘That’s Banda, from the Barolong tribe. Works for Mr van der Merwe. I don’t know why he keeps that uppity black. Those fuckin’ Bantus think they own the earth.’

The store was cool and dark inside, a welcome relief from the hot, bright street, and it was filled with exotic odours. It seemed to Jamie that every inch of space was crammed with merchandise. He walked through the store, marvelling. There were agricultural implements, beer, cans of milk and crocks of butter, cement, fuses and dynamite and gunpowder, crockery, furniture, guns and haberdashery, oil and paint and varnish, bacon and dried fruit, saddlery and harness, sheep-dip and soap, spirits and stationery and paper, sugar and tea and tobacco and snuff and cigars ... A dozen shelves were filled from top to bottom with flannel shirts and blankets, shoes, poke bonnets and saddles. *Whoever owns all this*, Jamie thought, *is a rich man*.

A soft voice behind him said, ‘Can I help you?’

Jamie turned and found himself facing a young girl. He judged she was about fifteen. She had an interesting face, fineboned and heart-shaped, like a valentine, a pert nose and intense green eyes. Her hair was dark and curling. Jamie, looking at her figure, decided she might be closer to sixteen.

‘I’m a prospector,’ Jamie announced. ‘I’m here to buy some equipment.’

‘What is it you need?’

For some reason, Jamie felt he had to impress this girl. 'I – er – you know – the usual.'

She smiled, and there was mischief in her eyes. 'What is the usual, sir?'

'Well ...' He hesitated. 'A shovel.'

'Will that be all?'

Jamie saw that she was teasing him. He grinned and confessed. 'To tell you the truth, I'm new at this. I don't know what I need.'

She smiled at him, and it was the smile of a woman. 'It depends on where you're planning to prospect, Mr –?'

'McGregor. Jamie McGregor.'

'I'm Margaret van der Merwe.' She glanced nervously towards the rear of the store.

'I'm pleased to meet you, Miss van der Merwe.'

'Did you just arrive?'

'Aye. Yesterday. On the post cart.'

'Someone should have warned you about that. Passengers have died on that trip.' There was anger in her eyes.

Jamie grinned. 'I can't blame them. But I'm very much alive, thank you.'

'And going out to hunt for *mooi klippe*.'

'*Mooi klippe*?'

'That's our Dutch word for diamonds. Pretty pebbles.'

'You're Dutch?'

'My family's from Holland.'

'I'm from Scotland.'

'I could tell that.' Her eyes flicked warily towards the back of the store again. 'There are diamonds around, Mr McGregor, but you must be choosy where you look for them. Most of the diggers are running around chasing their own tails. When someone makes a strike, the rest scavenge off the leavings. If you want to get rich, you have to find a strike of your own.'

'How do I do that?'

'My father might be the one to help you with that. He knows everything. He'll be free in an hour.'

'I'll be back,' Jamie assured her. 'Thank you, Miss van der Merwe.'

He went out into the sunshine, filled with a sense of euphoria, his aches and pains forgotten. If Salomon van der Merwe would advise him where to find diamonds, there was no way Jamie could fail. He would have the jump on all of them. He laughed aloud, with the sheer joy of being young and alive and on his way to riches.

Jamie walked down the main street, passing a blacksmith's, a billiard hall and half a dozen saloons. He came to a sign in front of a decrepit-looking hotel and stopped. The sign read:

R-D MILLER, WARM AND COLD BATHS.

OPEN DAILY FROM 6 A.M. TO 8 P.M.,

WITH THE COMFORTS OF A NEAT DRESSING ROOM

Jamie thought, *When did I have my last bath? Well, I took a bucket bath on the boat. That was* – He was suddenly aware of how he must smell. He thought of the weekly tub baths in the kitchen at home, and he could hear his mother's voice calling, 'Be sure to wash down below, Jamie.'

He turned and entered the baths. There were two doors inside, one for women and one for men. Jamie entered the men's section and walked up to the aged attendant. 'How much is a bath?'

'Ten shillings for a cold bath, fifteen for a hot.'

Jamie hesitated. The idea of a hot bath after his long journey was almost irresistible. 'Cold,' he said. He could not afford to throw away his money on luxuries. He had mining equipment to buy.

The attendant handed him a small bar of yellow lye soap and a threadbare hand towel and pointed. 'In there, mate.'

Jamie stepped into a small room that contained nothing except a large galvanized-iron bathtub in the centre and a few pegs on the wall. The attendant began filling the tub from a large wooden bucket.

‘All ready for you, mister. Just hang your clothes on those pegs.’

Jamie waited until the attendant left and then undressed. He looked down at his grime-covered body and put one foot in the tub. The water was cold, as advertised. He gritted his teeth and plunged in, soaping himself furiously from head to foot. When he finally stepped out of the tub, the water was black. He dried himself as best he could with the worn linen towel and started to get dressed. His pants and shirt were stiff with dirt, and he hated to put them back on. He would have to buy a change of clothes, and this reminded him once more of how little money he had. And he was hungry again.

Jamie left the bathhouse and pushed his way down the crowded street to a saloon called the Sundowner. He ordered a beer and lunch. Lamb cutlets with tomatoes, and sausage and potato salad and pickles. While he ate, he listened to the hopeful conversations around him.

‘... I hear they found a stone near Colesberg weighin’ twenty-one carats. Mark you, if there’s *one* diamond up there, there’s plenty more ...’

‘... There’s a new diamond find up in Hebron. I’m thinkin’ of goin’ there ...’

‘You’re a fool. The big diamonds are in the Orange River ...’

At the bar, a bearded customer in a collarless, striped-flannel shirt and corduroy trousers was nursing a shandygaff in a large glass. ‘I got cleaned out in Hebron,’ he confided to the bartender. ‘I need me a grubstake.’

The bartender was a large, fleshy, bald-headed man with a broken, twisted nose and ferret eyes. He laughed. ‘Hell, man, who doesn’t? Why do you think I’m tendin’ bar? As soon as I have enough money, I’m gonna hightail it up the Orange myself.’ He wiped the bar with a dirty rag. ‘But I’ll tell you what you might do, mister. See Salomon van der Merwe. He owns the general store and half the town.

‘What good’ll that do me?’

‘If he likes you, he might stake you.’

The customer looked at him. ‘Yeah? You really think he might?’

‘He’s done it for a few fellows I know of. You put up your labour, he puts up the money. You split fifty-fifty.’

Jamie McGregor’s thoughts leaped ahead. He had been confident that the hundred and twenty pounds he had left would be enough to buy the equipment and food he would need to survive, but the prices in Klipdrift were astonishing. He had noticed in Van der Merwe’s store that a hundred-pound sack of Australian flour cost five pounds. One pound of sugar cost a shilling. A bottle of beer cost five shillings. Biscuits were three shillings a pound, and fresh eggs sold for seven shillings a dozen. At that rate, his money would not last long. *My God*, Jamie thought, *at home we could live for a year on what three meals cost here*. But if he could get the backing of someone really wealthy, like Mr van der Merwe ... Jamie hastily paid for his food and hurried back to the general store.

Salomon van der Merwe was behind the counter, removing the rifles from a wooden crate. He was a small thin man, with a thin, pinched face framed by Dundreary whiskers. He had sandy hair, tiny black eyes, a bulbous nose and pursed lips. *His daughter must take after her mother*, Jamie thought. ‘Excuse me, sir ...’

Van der Merwe looked up. ‘Ja?’

‘Mr van der Merwe? My name is Jamie McGregor, sir, I’m from Scotland. I came here to find diamonds.’

‘Ja? So?’

‘I hear you sometimes back prospectors.’

Van der Merwe grumbled, ‘*Myn magtig!* Who spreads these stories? I help out a few diggers, and everyone thinks I’m Santa Claus.’

‘I’ve saved a hundred and twenty pounds,’ Jamie said earnestly. ‘But I see that it’s not going to buy me much here. I’ll go out to the bush with just a shovel if I have to, but I figure my chances would be a lot better if I had a mule and some proper equipment.’

Van der Merwe was studying him with those small, black eyes. ‘*Wat denk ye?* What makes you think *you* can find diamonds?’

‘I’ve come halfway around the world, Mr van der Merwe, and I’m not going to leave here until I’m rich. If the diamonds are out there, I’ll find them. If you help me, I’ll make us both rich.’

Van der Merwe grunted, turned his back on Jamie and continued unloading the rifles. Jamie stood there awkwardly, not knowing what more to say. When Van der Merwe spoke again, his question caught Jamie off guard. ‘You travel here by bullock wagon, *ja?*’

‘No. Post cart.’

The old man turned to study the boy again. He said, finally, ‘We talk about it.’

They talked about it at dinner that evening in the room in the back of the store that was the Van der Merwe living quarters. It was a small room that served as a kitchen, dining room and sleeping quarters, with a curtain separating two cots. The lower half of the walls was built of mud and stone, and the upper half was faced with cardboard boxes that had once contained provisions. A square hole, where a piece of the wall had been cut out, served as window. In wet weather it could be closed by placing a board in front of it. The dining table consisted of a long plank stretched across two wooden crates. A large box, turned on its side, served as a cupboard. Jamie guessed that Van der Merwe was not a man who parted easily with his money.

Van der Merwe’s daughter moved silently about, preparing dinner. From time to time she cast quick glances at her father, but she never once looked at Jamie. *Why is she so frightened?* Jamie wondered.

When they were seated at the table, Van der Merwe began. ‘Let us have a blessing. We Thank Thee, O Lord, for the bounty we receive at Thy hands. We thank Thee for forgiving us our sins and showing us the path of righteousness and delivering us from life’s temptations. We thank Thee for a long and fruitful life, and for smiting dead all those who offend Thee. Amen.’ And without a breath between, ‘Pass me the meat,’ he said to his daughter.

The dinner was frugal: a small roast pork, three boiled potatoes and a dish of turnip greens. The portions he served to Jamie were small. The two men talked little during the meal, and Margaret did not speak at all.

When they had finished eating, Van der Merwe said, ‘That was fine, Daughter,’ and there was pride in his voice. He turned to Jamie. ‘We get down to business, *ja?*’

‘Yes, sir.’

Van der Merwe picked up a long clay pipe from the top of the wooden cabinet. He filled it with a sweet-smelling tobacco from a small pouch and lighted the pipe. His sharp eyes peered intently at Jamie through the wreaths of smoke.

‘The diggers here at Klipdrift are fools. Too few diamonds, too many diggers. A man could break his back here for a year and have nothing to show for it but *schlenters*.’

‘I – I’m afraid I’m not familiar with that word, sir.’

‘Fool’s diamonds. Worthless. Do you follow me?’

‘I – Yes, sir. I think so. But what’s the answer, sir?’

‘The Griquas.’

Jamie looked at him blankly.

‘They’re an African tribe up north. *They* find diamonds – big ones – and sometimes they bring them to me and I trade them for goods.’ The Dutchman lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. ‘I know where they find them.’

‘But could you nae go after them yourself, Mr van der Merwe?’

Van der Merwe sighed. 'No. I can't leave the store. People would steal me blind. I need someone I can trust to go up there and bring the stones back. When I find the right man, I'll supply him with all the equipment he needs.' He paused to take a long drag on his pipe. 'And I'll tell him where the diamonds are.'

Jamie leaped to his feet, his heart pounding. 'Mr van der Merwe, *I'm* the person you're looking for. Believe me, sir, I'll work night and day.' His voice was charged with excitement. 'I'll bring you back more diamonds than you can count.'

Van der Merwe silently studied him for what seemed to Jamie to be an eternity. When Van der Merwe finally spoke, he said only one word. '*Ja*'

Jamie signed the contract the following morning. It was written in Afrikaans.

'I'll have to explain it to you,' Van der Merwe said. 'It says we're full partners. I put up the capital – you put up the labour. We share everything equally.'

Jamie looked at the contract in Van der Merwe's hand. In the middle of all the incomprehensible foreign words he recognized only a sum: *two pounds*.

Jamie pointed to it. 'What is that for, Mr van der Merwe?'

'It means that in addition to your owning half the diamonds you find, you'll get an extra two pounds for every week you work. Even though I know the diamonds are out there, it's possible you might not find anything, lad. This way you'll at least get something for your labour.'

The man was being more than fair. 'Thank you. Thank you very much, sir.' Jamie could have hugged him.

Van der Merwe said, 'Now let's get you outfitted.'

It took two hours to select the equipment that Jamie would take into the bush with him: a small tent, bedding, cooking utensils, two sieves and a washing cradle, a pick, two shovels, three buckets and one change of socks and underwear. There was an axe and a lantern and paraffin oil, matches and arsenical soap. There were tins of food, biltong, fruit, sugar, coffee and salt. At last everything was in readiness. The black servant, Banda, silently helped Jamie stow everything into backpacks. The huge man never glanced at Jamie and never spoke one word. *He doesn't speak English*, Jamie decided. Margaret was in the store waiting on customers, but if she knew Jamie was there, she gave no indication.

Van der Merwe came over to Jamie. 'Your mule's in front,' he said. 'Banda will help you load up.'

'Thank you, Mr van der Merwe,' Jamie said. 'I –'

Van der Merwe consulted a piece of paper covered with figures 'That will be one hundred and twenty pounds.'

Jamie looked at him blankly. 'W – what? This is part of our deal. We –'

'*Wat bedui'di?*' Van der Merwe's thin face darkened with anger. 'You expect me to *give* you all this, and a fine mule, and make you a partner, and give you two pounds a week on top of *that*? If you're looking for something for nothing, you've come to the wrong place.' He began to unload one of the backpacks.

Jamie said quickly, 'No! Please, Mr van der Merwe. I – I just didn't understand. It's perfectly all right. I have the money right here.' He reached in his pouch and put the last of his savings on the counter.

Van der Merwe hesitated. 'All right,' he said grudgingly. 'Perhaps it was a misunderstanding, neh? This town is full of cheaters. I have to be careful who I do business with.'

'Yes, sir. Of course you do,' Jamie agreed. In his excitement, he had misunderstood the deal. *I'm lucky he's giving me another chance*, Jamie thought.

Van der Merwe reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, wrinkled, hand-drawn map. 'Here is where you'll find the *mooi klippe*. North of here at Magerdam on the northern bank of the Vaal.'

Jamie studied the map, and his heart began to beat faster. 'How many miles is it?'

‘Here we measure distance by time. With the mule, you should make the journey in four or five days. Coming back will be slower because of the weight of the diamonds.’

Jamie grinned. ‘*Ja*.’

When Jamie McGregor stepped back out onto the streets of Klipdrift, he was no longer a tourist. He was a prospector, a digger, on his way to his fortune. Banda had finished loading the supplies onto the back of a frail-looking mule tethered to the hitching post in front of the store.

‘Thanks.’ Jamie smiled.

Banda turned and looked him in the eye, then silently walked away. Jamie unhitched the reins and said to the mule, ‘Let’s go, partner. It’s *mooi klippe* time.’

They headed north.

Jamie pitched camp near a stream at nightfall, unloaded and watered and fed the mule, and fixed himself some beef jerky, dried apricots and coffee. The night was filled with strange noises. He heard the grunts and howls and padding of wild animals moving down to the water. He was unprotected, surrounded by the most dangerous beasts in the world, in a strange, primitive country. He jumped at every sound. At any moment he expected to be attacked by fangs and claws leaping at him from out of the darkness. His mind began to drift. He thought of his snug bed at home and the comfort and safety he had always taken for granted. He slept fitfully, his dreams filled with charging lions and elephants, and large, bearded men trying to take an enormous diamond away from him.

At dawn when Jamie awakened, the mule was dead.

Chapter Two

He could not believe it. He looked for a wound of some kind, thinking it must have been attacked by a wild animal during the night, but there was nothing. The beast had died in its sleep. *Mr van der Merwe will hold me responsible for this*, Jamie thought. *But when I bring him diamonds, it won't matter.*

There was no turning back. He would go on to Magerdam without the mule. He heard a sound in the air and looked up. Giant black vultures were beginning to circle high above. Jamie shuddered. Working as quickly as possible, he rearranged his gear, deciding what he had to leave behind, then stowed everything he could carry into a backpack and started off. When he looked back five minutes later, the enormous vultures had covered the body of the dead animal. All that was visible was one long ear. Jamie quickened his step.

It was December, summer in South Africa, and the trek across the veld under the huge orange sun was a horror. Jamie had started out from Klipdrift with a brisk step and a light heart, but as the minutes turned into hours and the hours into days, his steps got slower and his heart became heavier. As far as the eye could see, the monotonous veld shimmered flat and forbidding under the blazing sun and there seemed no end to the grey, stony, desolate plains.

Jamie made camp whenever he came to a watering hole, and he slept with the eerie, nocturnal sounds of the animals all around him. The sounds no longer bothered him. They were proof that there was life in this barren hell, and they made him feel less lonely. One dawn Jamie came across a pride of lions. He watched from a distance as the lioness moved towards her mate and their cubs, carrying a baby impala in her powerful jaws. She dropped the animal in front of the male and moved away while he fed. A reckless cub leaped forwards and dug his teeth into the impala. With one motion, the male raised a paw and swiped the cub across the face, killing it instantly, then went back to his feeding. When he finished, the rest of the family was permitted to move in for the remains of the feast. Jamie slowly backed away from the scene and continued walking.

It took him almost two weeks to cross the Karroo. More than once he was ready to give up. He was not sure he could finish the journey. *I'm a fool. I should have returned to Klipdrift to ask Mr van der Merwe for another mule. But what if Van der Merwe had called off the deal? No, I did the right thing.*

And so, Jamie kept moving, one step at a time. One day, he saw four figures in the distance, coming towards him. *I'm delirious*, Jamie thought. *It's a mirage.* But the figures came closer, and Jamie's heart began to thud alarmingly. *Men! There is human life here!* He wondered if he had forgotten how to speak. He tried out his voice on the afternoon air, and it sounded as if it belonged to someone long dead. The four men reached him, prospectors returning to Klipdrift, tired and defeated.

'Hello,' Jamie said.

They nodded. One of them said, 'There ain't nothin' ahead, boy. We looked. You're wastin' your time. Go back.'

And they were gone.

Jamie shut his mind to everything but the trackless waste ahead of him. The sun and the black flies were unbearable and there was no place to hide. There were thorn trees, but their branches had been laid to waste by the elephants. Jamie was almost totally blinded by the sun. His fair skin was burned raw, and he was constantly dizzy. Each time he took a breath of air, his lungs seemed to explode. He was no longer walking, he was stumbling, putting one foot in front of the other, mindlessly lurching ahead. One afternoon, with the midday sun beating down on him, he slipped off his backpack and slumped to the ground, too tired to take another step. He closed his eyes and dreamed he was in a giant crucible and the sun was a huge, bright diamond blazing down on him, melting him. He awoke in the middle of the night trembling from the cold. He forced himself to take

a few bites of biltong and a drink of tepid water. He knew he must get up and start moving before the sun rose, while the earth and sky were cool. He tried, but the effort was too great. It would be so easy just to lie there forever and never have to take another step. *I'll just sleep for a little while longer*, Jamie thought. But some voice deep within him told him he would never wake up again. They would find his body there as they had found hundreds of others. He remembered the vultures and thought, *No, not my body – my bones*. Slowly and painfully, he forced himself to his feet. His backpack was so heavy he could not lift it. Jamie started walking again, dragging the pack behind him. He had no recollection of how many times he fell onto the sand and staggered to his feet again. Once he screamed into the predawn sky, 'I'm Jamie McGregor, and I'm going to make it. I'm going to live. Do you hear me, God? I'm going to live ...' Voices were exploding in his head.

You're goin' chasin' diamonds? You must be daft, son. That's a fairy tale – a temptation of the devil to keep men from doin' an honest day's work.

Why do you nae tell us where you're gettin' the money to go? It's halfway 'round the world. You hae no money.

Mr van der Merwe, I'm the person you're looking for. Believe me, sir, I'll work night and day. I'll bring you back more diamonds than you can count.

And he was finished before he had even started. *You have two choices*, Jamie told himself. *You can go on or you can stay here and die ... and die ... and die ...*

The words echoed endlessly in his head. *You can take one more step*, Jamie thought. Come on, Jamie boy. One more step. One more step ...

Two days later Jamie McGregor stumbled into the village of Magerdam. The sunburn had long since become infected and his body oozed blood and sera. Both eyes were swollen almost completely shut. He collapsed in the middle of the street, a pile of crumpled clothes holding him together. When sympathetic diggers tried to relieve him of his backpack, Jamie fought them with what little strength he had left, raving deliriously. 'No! Get away from my diamonds. Get away from my diamonds ...'

He awakened in a small, bare room three days later, naked except for the bandages that covered his body. The first thing he saw when he opened his eyes was a buxom, middle-aged woman seated at the side of his cot.

'Wh – ?' His voice was a croak. He could not get the words out.

'Easy, dear. You've been sick.' She gently lifted his swathed head and gave him a sip of water from a tin cup.

Jamie managed to prop himself up on one elbow. 'Where – ?' He swallowed and tried again. 'Where am I?'

'You're in Magerdam. I'm Alice Jardine. This is my boarding-house. You're going to be fine. You just need a good rest. Now lie back.'

Jamie remembered the strangers who tried to take his backpack away, and he was filled with panic. 'My things, where – ?' He tried to rise from the cot, but the woman's gentle voice stopped him.

'Everything's safe. Not to worry, son.' She pointed to his backpack in a corner of the room.

Jamie lay back on the clean white sheets. *I got here. I made it. Everything is going to be all right now.*

Alice Jardine was a blessing, not only to Jamie McGregor, but to half of Magerdam. In that mining town filled with adventurers, all sharing the same dream, she fed them, nursed them, encouraged them. She was an Englishwoman who had come to South Africa with her husband, when he decided to give up his teaching job in Leeds and join the diamond rush. He had died of fever three weeks after they arrived, but she had decided to stay on. The miners had become the children she never had.

She kept Jamie in bed for four more days, feeding him, changing his bandages and helping him regain his strength. By the fifth day, Jamie was ready to get up.

‘I want you to know how grateful I am to you, Mrs Jardine. I can’t pay you anything. Not yet. But you’ll have a big diamond from me one day soon. That’s a promise from Jamie McGregor.’

She smiled at the intensity of the handsome young boy. He was still twenty pounds too thin, and his grey eyes were filled with the horror he had been through, but there was a strength about him, a determination that was awesome. *He’s different from the others*, Mrs Jardine thought.

Jamie, dressed in his freshly washed clothes, went out to explore the town. It was Klipdrift on a smaller scale. There were the same tents and wagons and dusty streets, the flimsily built shops and the crowds of prospectors. As Jamie passed a saloon, he heard a roar from inside and entered. A noisy crowd had gathered around a red-shirted Irishman.

‘What’s going on?’ Jamie asked.

‘He’s going to wet his find.’

‘He’s what?’

‘He struck it rich today, so he stands treat for the whole saloon. He pays me for as much liquor as a saloon-full of thirsty men can swallow.’

Jamie joined in a conversation with several disgruntled diggers sitting at a round table.

‘Where you from, McGregor?’

‘Scotland.’

‘Well, I don’t know what horseshit they fed you in Scotland, but there ain’t enough diamonds in this fuckin’ country to pay expenses.’

They talked of other camps: Gong Gong, Forlorn Hope, Delports, Poormans Kopje, Sixpenny Rush ...

The diggers all told the same story – of months doing the back-breaking work of moving boulders, digging into the hard soil and squatting over the riverbank sifting the dirt for diamonds. Each day a few diamonds were found; not enough to make a man rich, but enough to keep his dreams alive. The mood of the town was a strange mixture of optimism and pessimism. The optimists were arriving; the pessimists were leaving.

Jamie knew which side he was on.

He approached the red-shirted Irishman, now bleary-eyed with drink, and showed him Van der Merwe’s map.

The man glanced at it and tossed it back to Jamie. ‘Worthless. That whole area’s been picked over. If I was you, I’d try Bad Hope.’

Jamie could not believe it. Van der Merwe’s map was what had brought him there, the lodestar that was going to make him rich.

Another digger said, ‘Head for Colesberg. That’s where they’re findin’ diamonds, son.’

‘Gilfillans Kop – *that’s* the place to dig.’

‘You’ll try Moonlight Rush, if you want my opinion.’

At supper that night, Alice Jardine said, ‘Jamie, one place is as big a gamble as another. Pick your own spot, dig in your pickaxe and pray. That’s all these other *experts* are doing.’

After a night of sleepless self-debate, Jamie decided he would forget Van der Merwe’s map. Against everyone’s advice, he decided to head east, along the Modder River. The following morning Jamie said goodbye to Mrs Jardine and set off.

He walked for three days and two nights, and when he came to a likely-looking spot, he set up his small tent. Huge boulders lay along both sides of the riverbank, and Jamie, using thick branches as levers, laboriously moved them out of the way to get at the gravel that lay beneath.

He dug from dawn until dusk, looking for the yellow clay or the blue diamondiferous soil that would tell him he had found a diamond pipe. But the earth was barren. He dug for a week without finding a single stone. At the end of the week, he moved on.

One day as he walked along, he saw in the distance what looked like a silver house, glowing dazzlingly in the sun. *I’m going blind*, Jamie thought. But as he got closer, he saw that he was

approaching a village, and all the houses seemed to be made of silver. Crowds of Indian men, women and children dressed in rags swarmed through the streets. Jamie stared in amazement. The silver houses glistening in the sun were made of tin jam pots, flattened out, fastened together and nailed over the crude shacks. He walked on, and an hour later, when he looked back, he could still see the glow of the village. It was a sight he never forgot.

Jamie kept moving north. He followed the riverbank where the diamonds might be, digging until his arms refused to lift the heavy pick, then sifting the wet gravel through the hand sieve. When it got dark, he slept as though drugged.

At the end of the second week, he moved upstream again, just north of a small settlement called Paardspan. He stopped near a bend in the river and fixed himself a meal of carbonaatje, grilled on a spit over a wood fire, and hot tea, then sat in front of his tent, looking up at the wheeling stars in the vast sky. He had not seen a human being in two weeks, and an eddy of loneliness washed over him. *What the hell am I doing here?* he wondered. *Sitting in the middle of a blasted wilderness like a bloody fool, killing myself breaking rocks and digging up dirt? I was better off at the farm. Come Saturday, if I don't find a diamond, I'm going home.* He looked up at the uncaring stars and yelled, 'Do you hear me, damn you?' *Oh, Jesus,* he thought, *I'm losing my mind.*

Jamie sat there, idly sifting the sand through his fingers. They closed on a large stone, and he looked at it a moment, then threw it away. He had seen a thousand worthless stones like it in the past weeks. What was it Van der Merwe had called them? *Schlenters*. Yet, there was something about this one that belatedly caught Jamie's attention. He rose, went over to it and picked it up. It was much larger than the other stones and of an odd shape. He rubbed some of the dirt off it against the leg of his trousers and examined it more closely. It *looked* like a diamond. The only thing that made Jamie doubt his senses was the size of it. It was almost as large as a hen's egg. *Oh, God. If it is a diamond ...* He suddenly had difficulty breathing. He grabbed his lantern and began searching the ground around him. In fifteen minutes he had found four more like it. None of them was as large as the first one, but they were large enough to fill him with a wild excitement.

He was up before dawn, digging like a madman, and by noon he had found half a dozen more diamonds. He spent the next week feverishly digging up diamonds and burying them at night in a safe place where no passers-by could find them. There were fresh diamonds every day, and as Jamie watched his fortune pile up, he was filled with an ineffable joy. Only half of this treasure was his, but it was enough to make him rich beyond anything he had ever dared to dream.

At the end of the week, Jamie made a note on his map and staked out his claim by carefully marking the boundaries with his pick. He dug up his hidden treasure, carefully stored it deep down in his backpack and headed back to Magerdam.

The sign outside the small building read: DIAMANT KOOPER.

Jamie walked into the office, a small, airless room, and he was filled with a sudden sense of trepidation. He had heard dozens of stories of prospectors who had found diamonds that had turned out to be worthless stones. *What if I'm wrong? What if –?*

The assayer was seated at a cluttered desk in the tiny office. 'Somethin' I can do for you?'

Jamie took a deep breath. 'Yes, sir. I would like to have these valued, please.'

Under the watchful eye of the assayer, Jamie started laying the stones on his desk. When he was finished, there was a total of twenty-seven and the assayer was gazing at them in astonishment.

'Where – where did you find these?'

'I'll tell you after you tell me whether they're diamonds.'

The assayer picked up the largest stone and examined it with a jeweller's loupe. 'My God!' he said. 'This is the biggest diamond I've ever seen!' And Jamie realized he had been holding his breath. He could have yelled aloud with joy. 'Where –' the man begged, 'where did these come from?'

'Meet me in the canteen in fifteen minutes,' Jamie grinned, 'and I'll tell you.'

Jamie gathered up the diamonds, put them in his pockets and strode out. He headed for the registration office two doors down the street. 'I want to register a claim,' he said. 'In the names of Salomon van der Merwe and Jamie McGregor.'

He had walked through that door a penniless farm boy and walked out a multimillionaire.

The assayer was in the canteen waiting when Jamie McGregor entered. He had obviously spread the news, because when Jamie walked in there was a sudden, respectful hush. There was a single unspoken question on everyone's mind. Jamie walked up to the bar and said to the bartender, 'I'm here to wet my find.' He turned and faced the crowd. 'Paardspan.'

Alice Jardine was having a cup of tea when Jamie walked into the kitchen. Her face lighted up when she saw him. 'Jamie! Oh, thank God you're back safely!' She took in his dishevelled appearance and flushed face. 'It didn't go well, did it? Never you mind. Have a nice cup of tea with me, dear, and you'll feel better.'

Without a word. Jamie reached into his pocket and pulled out a large diamond. He placed it in Mrs Jardine's hand.

'I've kept my promise,' Jamie said.

She stared at the stone for a long time, and her blue eyes became moist. 'No, Jamie. No.' Her voice was very soft. 'I don't want it. Don't you see, child? It would spoil everything ...'

When Jamie McGregor returned to Klipdrift, he did it in style. He traded one of his smaller diamonds for a horse and carriage and made a careful note of what he had spent, so that his partner would not be cheated. The trip back to Klipdrift was easy and comfortable, and when Jamie thought of the hell he had gone through on this same journey, he was filled with a sense of wonder. *That's the difference between the rich and the poor*, he thought. *The poor walk; the rich ride in carriages.*

He gave the horse a small flick of the whip and rode on contentedly through the darkening veld.

Chapter Three

Klipdrift had not changed, but Jamie McGregor had. People stared as he rode into town and stopped in front of Van der Merwe's general store. It was not just the expensive horse and carriage that drew the attention of the passers-by; it was the air of jubilation about the young man. They had seen it before in other prospectors who had struck it rich, and it always filled them with a renewed sense of hope for themselves. They stood back and watched as Jamie jumped out of the carriage.

The same large black man was there. Jamie grinned at him. 'Hello! I'm back.'

Banda tied the reins to a hitching post without comment and went inside the store. Jamie followed him.

Salomon van der Merwe was waiting on a customer. The little Dutchman looked up and smiled, and Jamie knew that somehow Van der Merwe had already heard the news. No one could explain it, but news of a diamond strike flashed across the continent with the speed of light.

When Van der Merwe had finished with the customer, he nodded his head towards the back of the store. 'Come, Mr McGregor.'

Jamie followed him. Van der Merwe's daughter was at the stove, preparing lunch. 'Hello, Margaret.'

She flushed and looked away.

'Well! I hear there is good news.' Van der Merwe beamed. He seated himself at the table and pushed the plate and silverware away, clearing a place in front of him.

'That's right, sir.' Proudly, Jamie took a large leather pouch from his jacket pocket and poured the diamonds on the kitchen table. Van der Merwe stared at them, hypnotized, then picked them up slowly, one by one, savoring each one, saving the largest until last. Then he scooped up the diamonds, put them in a chamois bag and put the bag in a large iron safe in the corner and locked it.

When he spoke, there was a note of deep satisfaction in his voice. 'You've done well, Mr McGregor. Very well, indeed.'

'Thank you, sir. This is only the beginning. There are hundreds more there. I don't even dare think about how much they're worth.'

'And you've staked out the claim properly?'

'Yes, sir.' Jamie reached in his pocket and pulled out the registration slip. 'It's registered in both our names.'

Van der Merwe studied the slip, then put it in his pocket. 'You deserve a bonus. Wait here.' He started towards the doorway that led into the shop. 'Come along, Margaret.'

She followed him meekly, and Jamie thought, *She's like a frightened kitten.*

A few minutes later, Van der Merwe returned, alone. 'Here we are.' He opened a purse and carefully counted out fifty pounds.

Jamie looked at him, puzzled. 'What's this for, sir?'

'For you, son. All of it.'

'I – I don't understand.'

'You've been gone twenty-four weeks. At two pounds a week, that's forty-eight pounds, and I'm giving you an extra two pounds as a bonus.'

Jamie laughed. 'I don't need a bonus. I have my share of the diamonds.'

'Your share of the diamonds?'

'Why, yes, sir. My fifty percent. We're partners.'

Van der Merwe was staring at him. 'Partners? Where did you get that idea?'

'Where did I –?' Jamie looked at the Dutchman in bewilderment. 'We have a contract.'

'That is correct. Have you read it?'

'Well, no, sir. It's in Afrikaans, but you said we were fifty-fifty partners.'

The older man shook his head. 'You misunderstood me, Mr McGregor, I don't need any partners. You were working for me. I outfitted you and sent you to find diamonds for me.'

Jamie could feel a slow rage boiling up within him. 'You gave me nothing. I paid you a hundred and twenty pounds for that equipment.'

The old man shrugged. 'I won't waste my valuable time quibbling. Tell you what I'll do. I'll give you an extra five pounds, and we'll call the whole thing quits. I think that's very generous.'

Jamie exploded in a fury. 'We'll nae call the whole thing quits!' In his anger his Scottish burr came back. 'I'm entitled to half that claim. And I'll get it. I registered it in *both* our names.'

Van der Merwe smiled thinly. 'Then you tried to cheat me. I could have you arrested for that.' He shoved the money into Jamie's hand. 'Now take your wages and get out.'

'I'll fight you!'

'Do you have money for a lawyer? I own them all in these parts, boy.'

This isn't happening to me, Jamie thought. *It's a nightmare.* The agony he had gone through, the weeks and months of the burning desert, the punishing physical labour from sunrise to sunset – it all came flooding back. He had nearly died, and now this man was trying to cheat him out of what was his.

He looked Van der Merwe in the eye. 'I'll not let you get away with this. I'm not going to leave Klipdrift. I'll tell everybody here what you've done. I'm going to get my share of those diamonds.'

Van der Merwe started to turn away from the fury in the pale grey eyes. 'You'd better find a doctor, boy,' he muttered. 'I think the sun has addled your wits.'

In a second, Jamie was towering over Van der Merwe. He pulled the thin figure into the air and held him up to eye level. 'I'm going to make you sorry you ever laid eyes on me.' He dropped Van der Merwe to his feet, flung the money on the table and stormed out.

When Jamie McGregor walked into the Sundowner Saloon, it was almost deserted, for most of the prospectors were on their way to Paardspan. Jamie was filled with anger and despair. *It's incredible,* he thought. *One minute I'm as rich as Croesus, and the next minute I'm dead broke. Van der Merwe is a thief, and I'm going to find a way to punish him. But how?* Van der Merwe was right. Jamie could not even afford a lawyer to fight his case. He was a stranger there, and Van der Merwe was a respected member of the community. The only weapon Jamie had was the truth. He would let everyone in South Africa know what Van der Merwe had done.

Smit, the bartender, greeted him. 'Welcome back. Everything's on the house, Mr McGregor. What would you like?'

'A whiskey.'

Smit poured a double and set it in front of Jamie. Jamie downed it in one gulp. He was not used to drinking, and the hard liquor scorched his throat and stomach.

'Another, please.'

'Comin' up. I've always said the Scots could drink anybody under the table.'

The second drink went down easier. Jamie remembered that it was the bartender who had told a digger to go to Van der Merwe for help. 'Did you know Old Man Van der Merwe is a crook? He's trying to cheat me out of my diamonds.'

Smit was sympathetic. 'What? That's terrible. I'm sorry to hear that.'

'He'll nae get away with it.' Jamie's voice was slurred. 'Half those diamonds are mine. He's a thief, and I'm gonna see that everybody knows it.'

'Careful. Van der Merwe's an important man in this town,' the bartender warned. 'If you're goin' up against him, you'll need help. In fact, I know just the person. He hates Van der Merwe as much as you do.' He looked around to make sure no one could overhear him. 'There's an old barn at the end of the street. I'll arrange everything. Be there at ten o'clock tonight.'

'Thanks,' Jamie said gratefully. 'I won't forget you.'

'Ten o'clock. The old barn.'

The barn was a hastily thrown-together structure built of corrugated tin, off the main street at the edge of town. At ten o'clock Jamie arrived there. It was dark, and he felt his way carefully. He could see no one around. He stepped inside. 'Hello ...'

There was no reply. Jamie went slowly forwards. He could make out the dim shapes of horses moving restlessly in their stalls. Then he heard a sound behind him, and as he started to turn, an iron bar crashed across his shoulder blades, knocking him to the ground. A club thudded against his head, and a giant hand picked him up and held him while fists and boots smashed into his body. The beating seemed to last forever. When the pain became too much to bear and he lost consciousness, cold water was thrown in his face. His eyes fluttered open. He thought he caught a glimpse of Van der Merwe's servant, Banda, and the beating began anew. Jamie could feel his ribs breaking. Something smashed into his leg, and he heard the crunch of bone.

That was when he lost consciousness again.

His body was on fire. Someone was scraping his face with sandpaper, and he vainly tried to lift a hand to protest. He made an effort to open his eyes, but they were swollen shut. Jamie lay there, every fibre of his being screaming with pain, as he tried to remember where he was. He shifted, and the scraping began again. He put out his hand blindly and felt sand. His raw face was lying in hot sand. Slowly, every move an agony, he managed to draw himself up on his knees. He tried to see through his swollen eyes, but he could make out only hazy images. He was somewhere in the middle of the trackless Karroo, naked. It was early morning, but he could feel the sun starting to burn through his body. He felt around blindly for food or a billy can of water. There was nothing. They had left him there for dead. *Salomon van der Merwe. And, of course, Smit, the bartender. Jamie had threatened Van der Merwe, and Van der Merwe had punished him as easily as one punished a small child. But he'll find out I'm no child*, Jamie promised himself. *Not anymore. I'm an avenger. They'll pay. They will pay.* The hatred that coursed through Jamie gave him the strength to sit up. It was a torture for him to breathe. How many ribs had they broken? *I must be careful so they don't puncture my lungs.* Jamie tried to stand up, but fell down with a scream. His right leg was broken and lay at an unnatural angle. He was unable to walk.

But he could crawl.

Jamie McGregor had no idea where he was. They would have taken him to some place off the beaten track, where his body would not be found except by the desert scavengers, the hyenas and secretary birds and vultures. The desert was a vast charnel house. He had seen the bones of men's bodies that had been scavenged, and there had not been a scrap of meat left on the skeleton. Even as Jamie was thinking about it, he heard the rustle of wings above him and the shrill hiss of the vultures. He felt a flood of terror. He was blind. He could not see them. But he could smell them.

He began to crawl.

He made himself concentrate on the pain. His body was aflame with it, and each small movement brought exquisite rivers of agony. If he moved in a certain way, his broken leg would send out stabbing pains. If he shifted his position slightly to favour his leg, he could feel his ribs grinding against each other. He could not stand the torture of lying still; he could not stand the agony of moving.

He kept crawling.

He could hear them circling above, waiting for him with an ancient, timeless patience. His mind started to wander. He was in the cool kirk at Aberdeen, neatly dressed in his Sunday suit, seated between his two brothers. His sister, Mary, and Annie Cord were wearing beautiful white summer dresses, and Annie Cord was looking at him and smiling. Jamie started to get up and go to her, and his brothers held him back and began to pinch him. The pinches became excruciating shafts of pain, and he was crawling through the desert again, naked, his body broken. The cries of the vultures were louder now, impatient.

Jamie tried to force his eyes open, to see how close they were. He could see nothing except vague, shimmering objects that his terrified imagination turned into feral hyenas and jackals. The wind became their hot, fetid breath caressing his face.

He kept crawling, for he knew that the moment he stopped they would be upon him. He was burning with fever and pain and his body was flayed by the hot sand. And still, he could not give up, not as long as Van der Merwe was unpunished – not as long as Van der Merwe was alive.

He lost all awareness of time. He guessed that he had travelled a mile. In truth, he had moved less than ten yards, crawling in a circle. He could not see where he had been or where he was going. He focused his mind on only one thing: Salomon van der Merwe.

He slipped into unconsciousness and was awakened by a shrieking agony beyond bearing. Someone was stabbing at his leg, and it took Jamie a second to remember where he was and what was happening. He pulled one swollen eye open. An enormous hooded black vulture was attacking his leg, savagely tearing at his flesh, eating him alive with its sharp beak. Jamie saw its beady eyes and the dirty ruff around its neck. He smelled the foul odour of the bird as it sat on his body. Jamie tried to scream, but no sound came out. Frantically he jerked himself forwards, and felt the warm flow of blood pouring from his leg. He could see the shadows of the giant birds all around him, moving in for the kill. He knew that the next time he lost consciousness would be the last time. The instant he stopped, the carrion birds would be at his flesh again. He kept crawling. His mind began to wander into delirium. He heard the loud flapping wings of the birds as they moved closer, forming a circle around him. He was too weak now to fight them off; he had no strength left to resist. He stopped moving and lay still on the burning sand.

The giant birds closed in for their feast.

Chapter Four

Saturday was market day in Cape Town and the streets were crowded with shoppers looking for bargains, meeting friends and lovers. Boers and Frenchmen, soldiers in colourful uniforms and English ladies in flounced skirts and ruffled blouses mingled in front of the bazaars set up in the town squares at Braameonstein and Park Town and Burgersdorp. Everything was for sale: furniture, horses and carriages and fresh fruit. One could purchase dresses and chessboards, or meat or books in a dozen different languages. On Saturdays, Cape Town was a noisy, bustling fair.

Banda walked along slowly through the crowd, careful not to make eye contact with the whites. It was too dangerous. The streets were filled with blacks, Indians and coloureds, but the white minority ruled. Banda hated them. This was his land, and the whites were the *uitlanders*. There were many tribes in southern Africa: the Basutos, Zulus, Bechuanas, the Matabele – all of them Bantu. The very word *bantu* came from *abantu* – *the people*. But the Barolongs – Banda's tribe – were the aristocracy. Banda remembered the tales his grandmother told him of the great black kingdom that had once ruled South Africa. *Their* kingdom, *their* country. And now they were enslaved by a handful of white jackals. The whites had pushed them into smaller and smaller territories, until their freedom had been eroded. Now, the only way a black could exist was by *slim*, subservient on the surface, but cunning and clever beneath.

Banda did not know how old he was, for natives had no birth certificates. Their ages were measured by tribal lore: wars and battles, and births and deaths of great chiefs, comets and blizzards and earthquakes, Adam Kok's trek, the death of Chaka and the cattle-killing revolution. But the number of his years made no difference. Banda knew he was the son of a chief, and that he was destined to do something for his people. Once again, the Bantus would rise and rule because of him. The thought of his mission made him walk taller and straighter for a moment, until he felt the eyes of a white man upon him.

Banda hurried east towards the outskirts of town, the district allotted to the blacks. The large homes and attractive shops gradually gave way to tin shacks and lean-tos and huts. He moved down a dirt street, looking over his shoulder to make certain he was not followed. He reached a wooden shack, took one last look around, rapped twice on the door and entered. A thin black woman was seated in a chair in a corner of the room sewing on a dress. Banda nodded to her and then continued on into the bedroom in back.

He looked down at the figure lying on the cot.

Six weeks earlier Jamie McGregor had regained consciousness and found himself on a cot in a strange house. Memory came flooding back. He was in the Karroo again, his body broken, helpless. The vultures ...

Then Banda had walked into the tiny bedroom, and Jamie knew he had come to kill him. Van der Merwe had somehow learned Jamie was still alive and had sent his servant to finish him off.

'Why didn't your master come himself?' Jamie croaked.

'I have no master.'

'Van der Merwe. He didn't send you?'

'No. He would kill us both if he knew.'

None of this made any sense. 'Where am I? I want to know where I am.'

'Cape Town.'

'That's impossible. How did I get here?'

'I brought you.'

Jamie stared into the black eyes for a long moment before he spoke. 'Why?'

'I need you. I want vengeance.'

'What do you –?'

Banda moved closer. 'Not for me. I do not care about me. Van der Merwe raped my sister. She died giving birth to his baby. My sister was eleven years old.'

Jamie lay back, stunned. 'My God!'

'Since the day she died I have been looking for a white man to help me. I found him that night in the barn where I helped beat you up, Mr McGregor. We dumped you in the Karroo. I was ordered to kill you. I told the others you were dead, and I returned to get you as soon as I could. I was almost too late.'

Jamie could not repress a shudder. He could feel again the foul-smelling carrion birds digging into his flesh.

'The birds were already starting to feast. I carried you to the wagon and hid you at the house of my people. One of our doctors taped your ribs and set your leg and tended to your wounds.'

'And after that?'

'A wagonful of my relatives was leaving for Cape Town. We took you with us. You were out of your head most of the time. Each time you fell asleep, I was afraid you were not going to wake up again.'

Jamie looked into the eyes of the man who had almost murdered him. He had to think. He did not trust this man – and yet he had saved his life. Banda wanted to get at Van der Merwe through him. *That can work both ways*, Jamie decided. More than anything in the world, Jamie wanted to make Van der Merwe pay for what he had done to him.

'All right,' Jamie told Banda. 'I'll find a way to pay Van der Merwe back for both of us.'

For the first time, a thin smile appeared on Banda's face. 'Is he going to die?'

'No,' Jamie told him. 'He's going to live.'

Jamie got out of bed that afternoon for the first time, dizzy and weak. His leg still had not completely healed, and he walked with a slight limp. Banda tried to assist him.

'Let go of me. I can make it on my own.'

Banda watched as Jamie carefully moved across the room.

'I'd like a mirror,' Jamie said. *I must look terrible*, he thought. *How long has it been since I've had a shave?*

Banda returned with a hand mirror, and Jamie held it up to his face. He was looking at a total stranger. His hair had turned snow-white. He had a full, unkempt white beard. His nose had been broken and a ridge of bone pushed it to one side. His face had aged twenty years. There were deep ridges along his sunken cheeks and a livid scar across his chin. But the biggest change was in his eyes. They were eyes that had seen too much pain, felt too much, hated too much. He slowly put down the mirror.

'I'm going out for a walk,' Jamie said.

'Sorry, Mr McGregor. That's not possible.'

'Why not?'

'White men do not come to this part of town, just as blacks never go into the white places. My neighbours do not know you are here. We brought you in at night.'

'How do I leave?'

'I will move you out tonight.'

For the first time, Jamie realized how much Banda had risked for him. Embarrassed, Jamie said, 'I have no money, I need a job.'

'I took a job at the shipyard. They are always looking for men.' He took some money from his pocket. 'Here.'

Jamie took the money. 'I'll pay it back.'

'You will pay my sister back,' Banda told him.

It was midnight when Banda led Jamie out of the shack. Jamie looked around. He was in the middle of a shantytown, a jungle of rusty, corrugated iron shacks and lean-tos, made from rotting

planks and torn sacking. The ground, muddy from a recent rain, gave off a rank odour. Jamie wondered how people as proud as Banda could bear spending their lives in a place such as this. 'Isn't there some –?'

'Don't talk, please,' Banda whispered. 'My neighbours are inquisitive.' He led Jamie outside the compound and pointed. 'The centre of town is in that direction. I will see you at the shipyard.'

Jamie checked into the same boardinghouse where he had stayed on his arrival from England. Mrs Venster was behind the desk.

'I'd like a room,' Jamie said.

'Certainly, sir.' She smiled, revealing her gold tooth. 'I'm Mrs Venster.'

'I know.'

'Now how would you know a thing like that?' she asked coyly. 'Have your men friends been tellin' tales out of school?'

'Mrs Venster, don't you remember me? I stayed here last year.'

She took a close look at his scarred face, his broken nose and his white beard, and there was not the slightest sign of recognition. 'I never forget a face, dearie. And I've never seen yours before. But that don't mean we're not going to be good friends, does it? My friends call me "Dee-Dee". What's your name, love?'

And Jamie heard himself saying, 'Travis. Ian Travis.'

The following morning Jamie went to see about work at the shipyard.

The busy foreman said, 'We need strong backs. The problem is you might be a bit old for this kind of work.'

'I'm only nineteen –' Jamie started to say and stopped himself. He remembered that face in the mirror. 'Try me,' he said.

He went to work as a stevedore at nine shillings a day, loading and unloading the ships that came into the harbour. He learned that Banda and the other black stevedores received six shillings a day.

At the first opportunity, Jamie pulled Banda aside and said, 'We have to talk.'

'Not here, Mr McGregor. There's an abandoned warehouse at the end of the docks. I'll meet you there when the shift is over.'

Banda was waiting when Jamie arrived at the deserted warehouse.

'Tell me about Salomon van der Merwe,' Jamie said.

'What to you want to know?'

'Everything.'

Banda spat. 'He came to South Africa from Holland. From stories I heard, his wife was ugly, but wealthy. She died of some sickness and Van der Merwe took her money and went up to Klipdrift and opened his general store. He got rich cheating diggers.'

'The way he cheated me?'

'That's only one of his ways. Diggers who strike it lucky go to him for money to help them work their claim, and before they know it Van der Merwe owns them.'

'Hasn't anyone ever tried to fight back?'

'How can they? The town clerk's on his payroll. The law says that if forty-five days go by without working a claim, it's open. The town clerk tips off Van der Merwe and he grabs it. There's another trick he uses. Claims have to be staked out at each boundary line with pegs pointing straight up in the air. If the pegs fall down, a jumper can claim the property. Well, when Van der Merwe sees a claim he likes, he sends someone around at night, and in the morning the stakes are on the ground.'

'Jesus!'

'He's made a deal with the bartender, Smit. Smit sends likely-looking prospectors to Van der Merwe, and they sign partnership contracts and if they find diamonds, Van der Merwe takes everything for himself. If they become troublesome, he's got a lot of men on his payroll who follow his orders.'

‘I know about that,’ Jamie said grimly. ‘What else?’

‘He’s a religious fanatic. He’s always praying for the souls of sinners.’

‘What about his daughter?’ She had to be involved in this.

‘Miss Margaret? She’s frightened to death of her father. If she even looked at a man, Van der Merwe would kill them both.’

Jamie turned his back and walked over to the door, where he stood looking out at the harbour. He had a lot to think about. ‘We’ll talk again tomorrow.’

It was in Cape Town that Jamie became aware of the enormous schism between the blacks and whites. The blacks had no rights except the few they were given by those in power. They were herded into conclaves that were ghettos and were allowed to leave only to work for the white man.

‘How do you stand it?’ Jamie asked Banda one day.

‘The hungry lion hides its claws. We will change all this someday. The white man accepts the black man because his muscles are needed, but he must also learn to accept his brain. The more he drives us into a corner, the more he fears us because he knows that one day there may be discrimination and humiliation in reverse. He cannot bear the thought of that. But we will survive because of *isiko*.’

‘Who is *isiko*?’

Banda shook his head. ‘Not a *who*. A *what*. It is difficult to explain, Mr McGregor. *Isiko* is our roots. It is the feeling of belonging to a nation that has given its name to the Great Zambezi River. Generations ago my ancestors entered the waters of the Zambezi naked, driving their herds before them. Their weakest members were lost, the prey of the swirling waters or hungry crocodiles, but the survivors emerged from the waters stronger and more virile. When a Bantu dies, *isiko* demands that the members of his family retire to the forest so that the rest of the community will not have to share their distress. *Isiko* is the scorn felt for a slave who cringes, the belief that a man can look anyone in the face, that he is worth no more and no less than any other man. Have you heard of John Tengo Jabavu?’ He pronounced the name with reverence.

‘No.’

‘You will, Mr McGregor,’ Banda promised. ‘You will.’ And Banda changed the subject.

Jamie began to feel a growing admiration for Banda. In the beginning there was a wariness between the two men. Jamie had to learn to trust a man who had almost killed him. And Banda had to learn to trust an age-old enemy – a white man. Unlike most of the blacks Jamie had met, Banda was educated.

‘Where did you go to school?’ Jamie asked.

‘Nowhere. I’ve worked since I was a small boy. My grandmother educated me. She worked for a Boer school-teacher. She learned to read and write so she could teach me to read and write. I owe her everything.’

It was on a late Saturday afternoon after work that Jamie first heard of the Namib Desert in Great Namaqualand. He and Banda were in the deserted warehouse on the docks, sharing an impala stew Banda’s mother had cooked. It was good – a little gamey for Jamie’s taste, but his bowl was soon empty, and he lay back on some old sacks to question Banda.

‘When did you first meet Van der Merwe?’

‘When I was working at the diamond beach on the Namib Desert. He owns the beach with two partners. He had just stolen his share from some poor prospector, and he was down there visiting it.’

‘If Van der Merwe is so rich, why does he still work at his store?’

‘The store is his bait. That’s how he gets new prospectors to come to him. And he grows richer.’

Jamie thought of how easily he himself had been cheated. How trusting that naive young boy had been! He could see Margaret’s oval-shaped face as she said, *My father might be the one to help you*. He had thought she was a child until he had noticed her breasts and – Jamie suddenly jumped to his feet, a smile on his face, and the up-turning of his lips made the livid scar across his chin ripple.

‘Tell me how you happened to go to work for Van der Merwe.’

‘On the day he came to the beach with his daughter – she was about eleven then – I suppose she got bored sitting around and she went into the water and the tide grabbed her. I jumped in and pulled her out. I was a young boy, but I thought Van der Merwe was going to kill me.’

Jamie stared at him. ‘Why?’

‘Because I had my arms around her. Not because I was black, but because I was a *male*. He can’t stand the thought of any man touching his daughter. Someone finally calmed him down and reminded him that I had saved her life. He brought me back to Klipdrift as his servant.’ Banda hesitated a moment, then continued. ‘Two months later, my sister came to visit me.’ His voice was very quiet. ‘She was the same age as Van der Merwe’s daughter.’

There was nothing Jamie could say.

Finally Banda broke the silence. ‘I should have stayed in the Namib Desert. That was an easy job. We’d crawl along the beach picking up diamonds and putting them in little jam tins.’

‘Wait a minute. Are you saying that the diamonds are just lying there, on top of the sand?’

‘That’s what I’m saying, Mr McGregor. But forget what you’re thinking. Nobody can get near that field. It’s on the ocean, and the waves are up to thirty feet high. They don’t even bother guarding the shore. A lot of people have tried to sneak in by sea. They’ve all been killed by the waves or the reefs.’

‘There must be some other way to get in.’

‘No. The Namib Desert runs right down to the ocean’s shore.’

‘What about the entrance to the diamond field?’

‘There’s a guard tower and a barbed-wire fence. Inside the fence are guards with guns and dogs that’ll tear a man to pieces. And they have a new kind of explosive called a land mine. They’re buried all over the field. If you don’t have a map of the land mines, you’ll get blown to bits.’

‘How large is the diamond field?’

‘It runs for about thirty-five miles.’

Thirty-five miles of diamonds just lying on the sand ... ‘My God!’

‘You aren’t the first one to get excited about the diamond fields at the Namib, and you won’t be the last. I’ve picked up what was left of people who tried to come in by boat and got torn apart by the reefs. I’ve seen what those land mines do if a man takes one wrong step, and I’ve watched those dogs rip out a man’s throat. Forget it, Mr McGregor. I’ve been there. There’s no way in and there’s no way out – not alive, that is.’

Jamie was unable to sleep that night. He kept visualizing thirty-five miles of sand sprinkled with enormous diamonds belonging to Van der Merwe. He thought of the sea and the jagged reefs, the dogs hungry to kill, the guards and the land mines. He was not afraid of the danger; he was not afraid of dying. He was only afraid of dying before he repaid Salomon van der Merwe.

On the following Monday Jamie went into a cartographer’s shop and bought a map of Great Namaqualand. There was the beach, off the South Atlantic Ocean between Lüderitz to the north and the Orange River Estuary to the south. The area was marked in red: SPERRGEBIET – Forbidden.

Jamie examined every detail of the area on the map, going over it again and again. There were three thousand miles of ocean flowing from South America to South Africa, with nothing to impede the waves, so that their full fury was spent on the deadly reefs of the South Atlantic shore. Forty miles south, down the coastline, was an open beach. *That must be where the poor bastards launched their boats to sail into the forbidden area*, Jamie decided. Looking at the map, he could understand why the shore was not guarded. The reefs would make a landing impossible.

Jamie turned his attention to the land entrance to the diamond field. According to Banda, the area was fenced in with barbed wire and patrolled twenty-four hours a day by armed guards. At the entrance itself was a manned watch-tower. And even if one did somehow manage to slip past the watchtower into the diamond area, there would be the land mines and guard dogs.

The following day when Jamie met Banda, he asked, 'You said there was a land-mine map of the field?'

'In the Namib Desert? The supervisors have the maps, and they lead the diggers to work. Everybody walks in a single file so no one gets blown up.' His eyes filled with a memory. 'One day my uncle was walking in front of me and he stumbled on a rock and fell on top of a land mine. There wasn't enough left of him to take home to his family.'

Jamie shuddered.

'And then there's the sea *mis*, Mr McGregor. You've never seen a *mis* until you've been in one in the Namib. It rolls in from the ocean and blows all the way across the desert to the mountains and it blots out everything. If you're caught in one of them, you don't dare move. The land-mine maps are not good then because you can't see where you're going. Everybody just sits quietly until the *mis* lifts.'

'How long do they last?'

Banda shrugged. 'Sometimes a few hours, sometimes a few days.'

'Banda, have you ever *seen* a map of those land mines?'

'They're closely guarded.' A worried look crossed his face. 'I'm telling you again, no one can get away with what you're thinking. Once in a while workers will try to smuggle out a diamond. There is a special tree for hanging them. It's a lesson to everybody not to try to steal from the company.'

The whole thing looked impossible. Even if he could manage to get into Van der Merwe's diamond field, there was no way out. Banda was right. He would have to forget about it.

The next day he asked Banda, 'How does Van der Merwe keep the workers from stealing diamonds when they come off their shifts?'

'They're searched. They strip them down mother-naked and then they look up and down every hole they've got. I've seen workers cut gashes in their legs and try to smuggle diamonds out in them. Some drill out their back teeth and stick diamonds up there. They've tried every trick you can think of.' He looked at Jamie and said, 'If you want to live, you'll get that diamond field off your mind.'

Jamie tried. But the idea kept coming back to him, taunting him. Van der Merwe's diamonds just lying on the sand waiting. *Waiting for him.*

The solution came to Jamie that night. He could hardly contain his impatience until he saw Banda. Without preamble, Jamie said, 'Tell me about the boats that have tried to land on the beach.'

'What about them?'

'What kind of boats were they?'

'Every kind you can think of. A schooner. A tugboat. A big motorboat. Sailboat. Four men even tried it in a rowboat. While I worked the field, there were half a dozen tries. The reefs just chewed the boats to pieces. Everybody drowned.'

Jamie took a deep breath. 'Did anyone ever try to get in by raft?'

Banda was staring at him. '*Raft?*'

'Yes.' Jamie's excitement was growing. 'Think about it. No one ever made it to the shore because the bottoms of their boats were torn out by the reefs. But a *raft* will glide right over those reefs and onto the shore. And it can get out the same way.'

Banda looked at him for a long time. When he spoke, there was a different note in his voice. 'You know, Mr McGregor, you might just have an idea there ...'

It started as a game, a possible solution to an unsolvable puzzle. But the more Jamie and Banda discussed it, the more excited they became. What had started as idle conversation began to take concrete shape as a plan of action. Because the diamonds were lying on top of the sand, no equipment would be required. They could build their raft, with a sail, on the free beach forty miles south of the *Sperrgebiet* and sail it in at night, unobserved. There were no land mines along the unguarded shore, and the guards and patrols only operated inland. The two men could roam the beach freely, gathering up all the diamonds they could carry.

‘We can be on our way out before dawn,’ Jamie said, ‘with our pockets full of Van der Merwe’s diamonds.’

‘How do we get out?’

‘The same way we got in. We’ll paddle the raft over the reefs to the open sea, put up the sail and we’re home free.’

Under Jamie’s persuasive arguments, Banda’s doubts began to melt. He tried to poke holes in the plan and every time he came up with an objection, Jamie answered it. The plan *could* work. The beautiful part of it was its simplicity, and the fact that it would require no money. Only a great deal of nerve.

‘All we need is a big bag to put the diamonds in,’ Jamie said. His enthusiasm was infectious.

Banda grinned. ‘Let’s make that *two* big bags.’

The following week they quit their jobs and boarded a bullock wagon to Port Nolloth, the coastal village forty miles south of the forbidden area where they were headed.

At Port Nolloth, they disembarked and looked around. The village was small and primitive, with shanties and tin huts and a few stores, and a pristine white beach that seemed to stretch on forever. There were no reefs here, and the waves lapped gently at the shore. It was a perfect place to launch their raft.

There was no hotel, but the little market rented a room in back to Jamie. Banda found himself a bed in the black quarter of the village.

‘We have to find a place to build our raft in secret,’ Jamie told Banda. ‘We don’t want anyone reporting us to the authorities.’

That afternoon they came across an old, abandoned warehouse.

‘This will be perfect,’ Jamie decided. ‘Let’s get to work on the raft.’

‘Not yet,’ Banda told him. ‘We’ll wait. Buy a bottle of whiskey.’

‘What for?’

‘You’ll see.’

The following morning, Jamie was visited by the district constable, a florid heavy-set man with a large nose covered with the telltale broken veins of a tippler.

‘Mornin’,’ he greeted Jamie. ‘I heard we had a visitor. Thought I’d stop by and say hello. I’m Constable Mundy.’

‘Ian Travis,’ Jamie replied.

‘Headin’ north, Mr Travis?’

‘South. My servant and I are on our way to Cape Town.’

‘Ah. I was in Cape Town once. Too bloody big, too bloody noisy.’

‘I agree. Can I offer you a drink, Constable?’

‘I never drink on duty.’ Constable Mundy paused, making a decision. ‘However, just this once, I might make an exception, I suppose.’

‘Fine.’ Jamie brought out the bottle of whiskey, wondering how Banda could have known. He poured out two fingers into a dirty tooth glass and handed it to the constable.

‘Thank you, Mr Travis. Where’s yours?’

‘I can’t drink,’ Jamie said ruefully. ‘Malaria. That’s why I’m going to Cape Town. To get medical attention. I’m stopping off here a few days to rest. Travelling’s very hard on me.’

Constable Munda was studying him. ‘You look pretty healthy.’

‘You should see me when the chills start.’

The constable’s glass was empty. Jamie filled it.

‘Thank you. Don’t mind if I do.’ He finished the second drink in one swallow and stood up. ‘I’d best be gettin’ along. You said you and your man will be movin’ on in a day or two?’

‘As soon as I’m feeling stronger.’

‘I’ll come back and check on you Friday,’ Constable Mundy said.

That night, Jamie and Banda went to work on the raft in the deserted warehouse.

‘Banda, have you ever built a raft?’

‘Well, to tell you the truth, Mr McGregor, no.’

‘Neither have I.’ The two men stared at each other. ‘How difficult can it be?’

They stole four empty, fifty-gallon wooden oil barrels from behind the market and carried them to the warehouse. When they had them assembled, they spaced them out in a square. Next they gathered four empty crates and placed one over each oil barrel.

Banda looked dubious. ‘It doesn’t look like a raft to me.’

‘We’re not finished yet,’ Jamie assured him.

There was no planking available so they covered the top layer with whatever was at hand: branches from the stinkwood tree, limbs from the Cape beech, large leaves from the marula. They lashed everything down with thick hemp rope, tying each knot with careful precision.

When they were finished, Banda looked it over. ‘It still doesn’t look like a raft.’

‘It will look better when we get the sail up,’ Jamie promised.

They made a mast from a fallen yellowwood tree, and picked up two flat branches for paddles.

‘Now all we need is a sail. We need it fast. I’d like to get out of here tonight. Constable Mundy’s coming back tomorrow.’

It was Banda who found the sail. He came back late that evening with an enormous piece of blue cloth. ‘How’s this, Mr McGregor?’

‘Perfect. Where did you get it?’

Banda grinned. ‘Don’t ask. We’re in enough trouble.’

They rigged up a square sail with a boom below and a yard on top, and at last it was ready.

‘We’ll take off at two in the morning when the village is asleep.’ Jamie told Banda. ‘Better get some rest until then.’

But neither man was able to sleep. Each was filled with the excitement of the adventure that lay ahead.

At two a.m. they met at the warehouse. There was an eagerness in both of them, and an unspoken fear. They were embarking on a journey that would either make them rich or bring them death. There was no middle way.

‘It’s time,’ Jamie announced.

They stepped outside. Nothing was stirring. The night was still and peaceful, with a vast canopy of blue overhead. A sliver of moon appeared high in the sky. *Good*, Jamie thought. *There won’t be much light to see us by.* Their timetable was complicated by the fact that they had to leave the village at night so no one would be aware of their departure, and arrive at the diamond beach the next night so they could slip into the field and be safely back at sea before dawn.

‘The Benguela current should carry us to the diamond fields sometime in the late afternoon,’ Jamie said. ‘But we can’t go in by daylight. We’ll have to stay out of sight at sea until dark.’

Banda nodded. ‘We can hide out at one of the little islands off the coast.’

‘What islands?’

‘There are dozens of them – Mercury, Ichabod, Plum Pudding ...’

Jamie gave him a strange look. ‘*Plum Pudding?*’

‘There’s also a Roast Beef Island.’

Jamie took out his creased map and consulted it. ‘This doesn’t show any of those.’

‘They’re guano islands. The British harvest the bird droppings for fertilizer.’

‘Anyone live on those islands?’

‘Can’t. The smell’s too bad. In places the guano is a hundred feet thick. The government uses gangs of deserters and prisoners to pick it up. Some of them die on the island and they just leave the bodies there.’

‘That’s where we’ll hide out,’ Jamie decided.

Working quietly, the two men slid open the door to the warehouse and started to lift the raft. It was too heavy to move. They sweated and tugged, but in vain.

‘Wait here,’ Banda said.

He hurried out. Half an hour later, he returned with a large round log. ‘We’ll use this. I’ll pick up one end and you slide the log underneath.’

Jamie marvelled at Banda’s strength as the black man picked up one end of the raft. Quickly, Jamie shoved the log under it. Together they lifted the back end of the raft and it moved easily down the log. When the log had rolled out from under the back end, they repeated the procedure. It was strenuous work, and by the time they got to the beach they were both soaked in perspiration. The operation had taken much longer than Jamie had anticipated. It was almost dawn now. They had to be away before the villagers discovered them and reported what they were doing. Quickly, Jamie attached the sail and checked to make sure everything was working properly. He had a nagging feeling he was forgetting something. He suddenly realized what was bothering him and laughed aloud.

Banda watched him, puzzled. ‘Something funny?’

‘Before, when I went looking for diamonds I had a ton of equipment. Now all I’m carrying is a compass. It seems too easy.’

Banda said quietly, ‘I don’t think that’s going to be our problem, Mr McGregor.’

‘It’s time you called me Jamie.’

Banda shook his head in wonder. ‘You *really* come from a faraway country.’ He grinned, showing even white teeth. ‘What the hell – they can hang me only once.’ He tasted the name on his lips, then said it aloud. ‘Jamie.’

‘Let’s go get those diamonds.’

They pushed the raft off the sand into the shallow water and both men leaped aboard and started paddling. It took them a few minutes to get adjusted to the pitching and yawing of their strange craft. It was like riding a bobbing cork, but it was going to work. The raft was responding perfectly, moving north with the swift current. Jamie raised the sail and headed out to sea. By the time the villagers awoke, the raft was well over the horizon.

‘We’ve done it!’ Jamie said.

Banda shook his head. ‘It’s not over yet.’ He trailed a hand in the cold Benguela current. ‘It’s just beginning.’

They sailed on, due north past Alexander Bay and the mouth of the Orange River, seeing no signs of life except for flocks of Cape cormorants heading home, and a flight of colourful greater flamingos. Although there were tins of beef and cold rice, and fruit and two canteens of water aboard, they were too nervous to eat. Jamie refused to let his imagination linger on the dangers that lay ahead, but Banda could not help it. He had been there. He was remembering the brutal guards with guns and the dogs and the terrible flesh-tearing land mines, and he wondered how he had ever allowed himself to be talked into this insane venture. He looked over at the Scotsman and thought, *He is the bigger fool. If I die, I die for my baby sister. What does he die for?*

At noon the sharks came. There were half a dozen of them, their fins cutting through the water as they sped towards the raft.

‘Black-fin sharks,’ Banda announced. ‘They’re man-eaters.’

Jamie watched the fins skimming closer to the raft. ‘What do we do?’

Banda swallowed nervously. ‘Truthfully, Jamie, this is my very first experience of this nature.’

The back of a shark nudged the raft, and it almost capsized. The two men grabbed the mast for support. Jamie picked up a paddle and shoved it at a shark, and an instant later the paddle was bitten in two. The sharks surrounded the raft now, swimming in lazy circles, their enormous bodies rubbing up close against the small craft. Each nudge tilted the raft at a precarious angle. It was going to capsize at any moment.

‘We’ve got to get rid of them before they sink us.’

‘Get rid of them with what?’ Banda asked.

‘Hand me a tin of beef.’

‘You must be joking. A tin of beef won’t satisfy them. They want *us*!’

There was another jolt, and the raft heeled over.

‘The beef!’ Jamie yelled. ‘Get it!’

A second later Banda placed a tin in Jamie’s hand. The raft lurched sickeningly.

‘Open it halfway. Hurry!’

Banda pulled out his pocketknife and pried the top of the can half open. Jamie took it from him. He felt the sharp, broken edges of the metal with his finger.

‘Hold tight!’ Jamie warned.

He knelt down at the edge of the raft and waited. Almost immediately, a shark approached the raft, its huge mouth wide open, revealing long rows of evil, grinning teeth. Jamie went for the eyes. With all his strength, he reached out with both hands and scraped the edge of the broken metal against the eye of the shark, ripping it open. The shark lifted its great body, and for an instant the raft stood on end. The water around them was suddenly stained red. There was a giant thrashing as the sharks moved in on the wounded member of the school. The raft was forgotten. Jamie and Banda watched the great sharks tearing at their helpless victim as the raft sailed further and further away until finally the sharks were out of sight.

Banda took a deep breath and said softly, ‘One day I’m going to tell my grandchildren about this. Do you think they’ll believe me?’

And they laughed until the tears streamed down their faces.

Late that afternoon, Jamie checked his pocket watch. ‘We should be off the diamond beach around midnight. Sunrise is at six-fifteen. That means we’ll have four hours to pick up the diamonds and two hours to get back to sea and out of sight. Will four hours be enough, Banda?’

‘A hundred men couldn’t live long enough to spend what you can pick up on that beach in four hours.’ *I just hope we live long enough to pick them up ...*

They sailed steadily north for the rest of that day, carried by the wind and the tide. Towards evening a small island loomed ahead of them. It looked to be no more than two hundred yards in circumference. As they approached the island, the acrid smell of ammonia grew strong, bringing tears to their eyes. Jamie could understand why no one lived here. The stench was overpowering. But it would make a perfect place for them to hide until nightfall. Jamie adjusted the sail, and the small raft bumped against the rocky shore of the low-lying island. Banda made the raft fast, and the two men stepped ashore. The entire island was covered with what appeared to be millions of birds; cormorants, pelicans, gannets, penguins and flamingos. The thick air was so noisome that it was impossible to breathe. They took half a dozen steps and were thigh deep in guano.

‘Let’s get back to the raft,’ Jamie gasped.

Without a word, Banda followed him.

As they turned to retreat, a flock of pelicans took to the air, revealing an open space on the ground. Lying there were three men. There was no telling how long they had been dead. Their corpses had been perfectly preserved by the ammonia in the air, and their hair had turned a bright red.

A minute later Jamie and Banda were back on the raft, headed out to sea.

They lay off the coast, sail lowered, waiting.

‘We’ll stay out here until midnight. Then we go in.’

They sat together in silence, each in his own way preparing for whatever lay ahead. The sun was low on the western horizon, painting the dying sky with the wild colours of a mad artist. Then suddenly they were blanketed in darkness.

They waited for two more hours, and Jamie hoisted the sail. The raft began to move east towards the unseen shore. Overhead, clouds parted and a thin wash of moonlight paled down. The raft picked up speed. In the distance the two men could begin to see the faint smudge of the coast. The wind

blew stronger, snapping at the sail, pushing the raft towards the shore at an ever-increasing speed. Soon, they could make out the outline of the land, a gigantic parapet of rock. Even from that distance it was possible to see and hear the enormous whitecaps that exploded like thunder over the reefs. It was a terrifying sight from afar, and Jamie wondered what it would be like up close.

He found himself whispering. 'You're sure the beach side isn't guarded?'

Banda did not answer. He pointed to the reefs ahead. Jamie knew what he meant. The reefs were more deadly than any trap man could devise. They were the guardians of the sea, and they never relaxed, never slept. They lay there, patiently waiting for their prey to come to them. *Well, Jamie thought, we're going to outsmart you. We're going to float over you.*

The raft had carried them that far. It would carry them the rest of the way. The shore was racing towards them now, and they began to feel the heavy swell of the giant combers. Banda was holding tightly to the mast.

'We're moving pretty fast.'

'Don't worry,' Jamie reassured him. 'When we get closer, I'll lower the sail. That will cut our speed. We'll slide over the reefs nice and easy.'

The momentum of the wind and the waves was picking up, hurtling the raft towards the deadly reefs. Jamie quickly estimated the remaining distance and decided the waves would carry them in to shore without the help of the sail. Hurriedly, he lowered it. Their momentum did not even slow. The raft was completely in the grip of the huge waves now, out of control, hurled forwards from one giant crest to the next. The raft was rocking so violently that the men had to cling to it with both hands. Jamie had expected the entrance to be difficult, but he was totally unprepared for the fury of the seething maelstrom they faced. The reefs loomed in front of them with startling clarity. They could see the waves rushing in against the jagged rocks and exploded into huge, angry geysers. The entire success of the plan depended on bringing the raft over the reefs intact so that they could use it for their escape. Without it, they were dead men.

They were bearing down on the reefs now, propelled by the terrifying power of the waves. The roar of the wind was deafening. The raft was suddenly lifted high in the air by an enormous wave and flung towards the rocks.

'Hold on, Banda!' Jamie shouted. 'We're going in!'

The giant breaker picked up the raft like a matchstick and started to carry it towards shore, over the reef. Both men were hanging on for their lives, fighting the violent bucking motion that threatened to sweep them into the water. Jamie glanced down and caught a glimpse of the razor-sharp reefs below them. In another moment they would be sailing over them, safe in the haven of the shore.

At that instant there was a sudden, tearing wrench as a reef caught one of the barrels underneath the raft and ripped it away. The raft gave a sharp lurch, and another barrel was torn away, and then another. The wind and the pounding waves and the hungry reef were playing with the raft like a toy, tossing it backwards and forwards, spinning it wildly in the air. Jamie and Banda felt the thin wood begin to split beneath their feet.

'Jump!' Jamie yelled.

He dived over the side of the raft, and a giant wave picked him up and shot him towards the beach at the speed of a catapult. He was caught in the grip of an element that was powerful beyond belief. He had no control over what was happening. He was a part of the wave. It was over him and under him and inside him. His body was twisting and turning and his lungs were bursting. Lights began to explode in his head. Jamie thought, *I'm drowning*. And his body was thrown up onto the sandy shore. Jamie lay there gasping, fighting for breath, filling his lungs with the cool, fresh sea air. His chest and legs were scraped raw from the sand, and his clothes were in shreds. Slowly, he sat up and looked around for Banda. He was crouching ten yards away, vomiting seawater. Jamie got to his feet and staggered over to him.

'You all right?'

Banda nodded. He took a deep, shuddering breath and looked up at Jamie. 'I can't swim.'

Jamie helped him to his feet. The two men turned to look at the reef. There was not a sign of their raft. It had been torn to pieces in the wild ocean. They had gotten into the diamond field.

There was no way to get out.

Chapter Five

Behind them was the raging ocean. Ahead was unbroken desert from the sea to the foothills of the distant, rugged, purple mountains of the Richterveld escarpment, a world of kloofs and canyons and twisted peaks, lit by the pale moon. At the foot of the mountains was the Hexenkessel Valley – ‘the witch’s cauldron’ – a bleak wind trap. It was a primeval, desolate landscape that went back to the beginning of time itself. The only clue that man had ever set foot in this place was a crudely printed sign pounded into the sand. By the light of the moon, they read:

VERBODE GEBIED SPERRGEBIET

Forbidden.

There was no escape towards the sea. The only direction left open to them was the Namib Desert.

‘We’ll have to try to cross it and take our chances,’ Jamie said.

Banda shook his head. ‘The guards will shoot us on sight or hang us. Even if we were lucky enough to slip by the guards and dogs, there’s no way to get by the land mines. We’re dead men.’ There was no fear in him, only a resigned acceptance of his fate.

Jamie looked at Banda and felt a sense of deep regret. He had brought the black man into this, and not once had Banda complained. Even now, knowing there was no escape for them, he did not utter one word of reproach.

Jamie turned to look at the wall of angry waves smashing at the shore, and he thought it was a miracle that they had gotten as far as they had. It was two a.m., four hours before dawn and discovery, and they were both still in one piece. *I’ll be damned if I’m ready to give up*, Jamie thought.

‘Let’s go to work, Banda.’

Banda blinked. ‘Doing what?’

‘We came here to get diamonds, didn’t we? Let’s get them.’

Banda stared at the wild-eyed man with his white hair plastered to his skull and his sopping trousers hanging in shreds around his legs. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘You said they’re going to kill us on sight, right? Well, they might as well kill us rich as poor. A miracle got us in here. Maybe a miracle will get us out. And if we do get out, I damned well don’t plan to leave empty-handed.’

‘You’re crazy,’ Banda said softly.

‘Or we wouldn’t be here,’ Jamie reminded him.

Banda shrugged. ‘What the hell. I have nothing else to do until they find us.’

Jamie stripped off his tattered shirt, and Banda understood and did the same.

‘Now. Where are all these big diamonds that you’ve been talking about?’

‘They’re everywhere,’ Banda promised. And he added, ‘Like the guards and the dogs.’

‘We’ll worry about them later. When do they come down to the beach?’

‘When it gets light.’

Jamie thought for a moment. ‘Is there a part of the beach where they *don’t* come? Someplace we could hide?’

‘There’s no part of this beach they don’t come to, and there’s no place you could hide a fly.’

Jamie slapped Banda on the shoulder. ‘Right, then. Let’s go.’

Jamie watched as Banda got down on his hands and knees and began slowly crawling along the beach, his fingers sifting sand as he moved. In less than two minutes, he stopped and held up a stone, ‘I found one!’

Jamie lowered himself to the sand and began moving. The first two stones he found were small. The third must have weighed over fifteen carats. He sat there looking at it for a long moment. It was

incredible to him that such a fortune could be picked up so easily. And it all belonged to Salomon van der Merwe and his partners. Jamie kept moving.

In the next three hours, the two men collected more than forty diamonds ranging from two carats to thirty carats. The sky in the east was beginning to lighten. It was the time Jamie had planned to leave, to jump back on the raft, sail over the reefs and make their escape. It was useless to think about that now.

‘It will be dawn soon,’ Jamie said. ‘Let’s see how many more diamonds we can find.’

‘We’re not going to live to spend any of *this*. You want to die *very* rich, don’t you?’

‘I don’t want to die at all.’

They resumed their search, mindlessly scooping up diamond after diamond, and it was as though a madness had taken possession of them. Their piles of diamonds increased, until sixty diamonds worth a king’s ransom lay in their torn shirts.

‘Do you want me to carry these?’ Banda asked.

‘No. We can both –’ And then Jamie realized what was on Banda’s mind. The one caught in actual possession of the diamonds would die more slowly and painfully.

‘I’ll take them,’ Jamie said. He dumped the diamonds into the rag that was left of his shirt, and carefully tied it in a knot. The horizon was light grey now, and the east was becoming stained with the colours of the rising sun.

What next? That was the question! What was the answer? They could stand there and die, or they could move inland towards the desert and die.

‘Let’s move.’

Jamie and Banda slowly began walking away from the sea, side by side.

‘Where do the land mines start?’

‘About a hundred yards up ahead.’ In the far distance, they heard a dog bark. ‘I don’t think we’re going to have to worry about the land mines. The dogs are heading this way. The morning shift is coming to work.’

‘How soon before they reach us?’

‘Fifteen minutes. Maybe ten.’

It was almost full dawn now. What had been vague, shimmering patterns turned into small sand dunes and distant mountains. There was no place to hide.

‘How many guards are on a shift?’

Banda thought for a moment. ‘About ten.’

‘Ten guards aren’t many for a beach this big.’

‘*One* guard is plenty. They’ve got guns and dogs. The guards aren’t blind, and we’re not invisible.’

The sound of the barking was closer now. Jamie said, ‘Banda I’m sorry. I should never have gotten you into this.’

‘You didn’t’

And Jamie understood what he meant.

They could hear voices calling in the distance.

Jamie and Banda reached a small dune. ‘What if we buried ourselves in the sand?’

‘That has been tried. The dogs would find us and rip our throats out. I want my death to be quick. I’m going to let them see me, then start running. That way they’ll shoot me. I – I don’t want the dogs to get me.’

Jamie gripped Banda’s arm. ‘We may die, but I’ll be damned if we’re going to *run* to our deaths. Let’s make them work for it.’

They could begin to distinguish words in the distance. ‘Keep moving, you lazy bastards,’ a voice was yelling. ‘Follow me ... stay in line ... You’ve all had a good night’s sleep ... Now let’s get some work done ...’

In spite of his brave words, Jamie found he was retreating from the voice. He turned to look at the sea again. *Was drowning an easier way to die?* He watched the reefs tearing viciously at the demon waves breaking over them and he suddenly saw something else, something beyond the waves. He could not understand what it was. 'Banda, look ...'

Far out at sea an impenetrable grey wall was moving towards them, blown by the powerful westerly winds.

'It's the sea *mis*!' Banda exclaimed. 'It comes in two or three times a week.'

While they were talking, the *mis* moved closer, like a gigantic grey curtain sweeping across the horizon, blotting out the sky.

The voices had moved closer, too. '*Den dousant!* Damn this *mis*! Another slowdown. The bosses ain't gonna like this ...'

'We've got a chance!' Jamie said. He was whispering now.

'What chance?'

'The *mis*! They won't be able to see us.'

'That's no help. It's going to lift sometime, and when it does we're still going to be right here. If the guards can't move through the land mines, neither can we. You try to cross this desert in the *mis* and you won't go ten yards before you're blown to pieces. You're looking for one of your miracles.'

'You're damned right I am,' Jamie said.

The sky was darkening overhead. The *mis* was closer, covering the sea, ready to swallow up the shore. It had an eerie, menacing look about it as it rolled towards them, but Jamie thought exultantly. *It's going to save us!*

A voice suddenly called out, 'Hey! You two! What the hell are you doin' there?'

Jamie and Banda turned. At the top of a dune about a hundred yards away was a uniformed guard carrying a rifle. Jamie looked back at the shore. The *mis* was closing in fast.

'You! You two! Come here,' the guard yelled. He lifted his rifle.

Jamie raised his hands. 'I twisted my foot,' he called out. 'I can't walk.'

'Stay where you are,' the guard ordered. 'I'm comin' to get you.' He lowered his rifle and started moving towards them. A quick look back showed that the *mis* had reached the edge of the shore, and was coming in swiftly.

'Run!' Jamie whispered. He turned and raced towards the beach. Banda running close behind him.

'Stop!'

A second later they heard the sharp crack of a rifle, and the sand ahead of them exploded. They kept running, racing to meet the great dark wall of the fog. There was another rifle shot, closer this time, and another, and the next moment the two men were in total darkness. The sea *mis* licked at them, chilling them, smothering them. It was like being buried in cotton. It was impossible to see anything.

The voices were muffled now and distant, bouncing off the *mis* and coming from all directions. They could hear other voices calling to one another.

'Kruger! ... It's Brent ... Can you hear me?'

'I hear you, Kruger ...'

'There're two of them,' the first voice yelled. 'A white man and a black. They're on the beach. Spread your men out. *Skiet hom!* Shoot to kill.'

'Hang on to me,' Jamie whispered.

Banda gripped his arm. 'Where are you going?'

'We're getting out of here.'

Jamie brought his compass up to his face. He could barely see it. He turned until the compass was pointing east. 'This way ...'

‘Wait! We can’t walk. Even if we don’t bump into a guard or a dog, we’re going to set off a land mine.’

‘You said there are a hundred yards before the mines start. Let’s get away from the beach.’

They started moving towards the desert, slowly and unsteadily, blind men in an unknown land. Jamie paced off the yards. Whenever they stumbled in the soft sand, they picked themselves up and kept moving. Jamie stopped to check the compass every few feet. When he estimated they had travelled almost a hundred yards, he stopped.

‘This should be about where the land mines start. Is there any pattern to the way they’re placed? Anything you can think of that could help us?’

‘Prayer,’ Banda answered. ‘Nobody’s ever gotten past those land mines, Jamie. They’re scattered all over the field, buried about six inches down. We’re going to have to stay here until the *mis* lifts and give ourselves up.’

Jamie listened to the cotton-wrapped voices ricocheting around them.

‘Kruger! Keep in voice contact ...’

‘Right, Brent ...’

‘Kruger ...’

‘Brent ...’

Disembodied voices calling to each other in the blinding fog. Jamie’s mind was racing, desperately exploring every possible avenue of escape. If they stayed where they were, they would be killed the instant the *mis* lifted. If they tried moving through the field of mines, they would be blown to bits.

‘Have you ever seen the land mines?’ Jamie whispered.

‘I helped bury some of them.’

‘What sets them off?’

‘A man’s weight. Anything over eighty pounds will explode them. That way they don’t kill the dogs.’

Jamie took a deep breath. ‘Banda, I may have a way for us to get out of here. It might not work. Do you want to gamble with me?’

‘What have you got in mind?’

‘We’re going to cross the mine fields on our bellies. That way we’ll distribute our weight across the sand.’

‘Oh, Jesus!’

‘What do you think?’

‘I think I was crazy for ever leaving Cape Town.’

‘Are you with me?’ He could barely make out Banda’s face next to him.

‘You don’t leave a man a lot of choice, do you?’

‘Come on then.’

Jamie carefully stretched himself out flat on the sand. Banda looked at him a moment, took a deep breath and joined him. Slowly the two men began crawling across the sand, towards the minefield.

‘When you move,’ Jamie whispered, ‘don’t press down with your hands or your legs. Use your whole body.’

There was no reply. Banda was busy concentrating on staying alive.

They were in a smothering, grey vacuum that made it impossible to see anything. At any instant they could bump into a guard, a dog or one of the land mines. Jamie forced all this out of his mind. Their progress was painfully slow. Both men were shirtless, and the sand scraped against their stomachs as they inched forwards. Jamie was aware of how overwhelming the odds were against them. Even if by some chance they did succeed in crossing the desert without getting shot or blown up, they

would be confronted by the barbed-wire fence and the armed guards at the watchtower at the entrance. And there was no telling how long the *mis* would last. It could lift at any second, exposing them.

They kept crawling, mindlessly sliding forwards until they lost all track of time. The inches became feet, and the feet became yards, and the yards became miles. They had no idea how long they had been travelling. They were forced to keep their heads close to the ground, and their eyes and ears and noses became filled with sand. Breathing was an effort.

In the distance was the constant echo of the guards' voices. *'Kruger ... Brent ... Kruger ... Brent ...'*

The two men stopped to rest and check the compass every few minutes, then moved on, beginning their endless crawl again. There was an almost overwhelming temptation to move faster, but that would mean pressing down harder, and Jamie could visualize the metal fragments exploding under him and ripping into his belly. He kept the pace slow. From time to time they could hear other voices around them, but the words were muffled by the fog and it was impossible to tell where they were coming from. *It's a big desert.* Jamie thought hopefully. *We're not going to stumble into anyone.*

Out of nowhere, a large, furry shape leaped at him. It happened so swiftly that Jamie was caught off guard. He felt the huge Alsatian's teeth sinking into his arm. He dropped the bundle of diamonds and tried to pry open the dog's jaw, but he had only one free hand and it was impossible. He felt the warm blood running down his arm. The dog was sinking its teeth in harder now, silent and deadly. Jamie felt himself begin to faint. He heard a dull thud, and then another, and the dog's jaw loosened and its eyes glazed over. Through the mist of pain, Jamie saw Banda smashing the sack of diamonds against the dog's skull. The dog whimpered once and lay still.

'You all right?' Banda breathed anxiously.

Jamie could not speak. He lay there, waiting for the waves of pain to recede. Banda ripped off a piece of his trousers and tied a strip tightly around Jamie's arm to stop the bleeding.

'We've got to keep moving,' Banda warned. 'If there's one of them around, there are more.'

Jamie nodded. Slowly he slid his body forwards, fighting against the terrible throbbing in his arm.

He remembered nothing of the rest of the trek. He was semi-conscious, an automaton. Something outside him directed his movements. *Arms forwards, pull ... Arms forwards, pull ... Arms forwards, pull ...* It was endless, an odyssey of agony. It was Banda who followed the compass now, and when Jamie started to crawl in the wrong direction Banda gently turned him around. They were surrounded by guards and dogs and land mines and only the *mis* kept them safe. They kept moving, crawling for their lives, until the time came when neither man had the strength to move another inch.

They slept.

When Jamie opened his eyes, something had changed. He lay there on the sand, his body stiff and aching, trying to remember where he was. He could see Banda asleep six feet away, and it all came flooding in. The raft crashing on the reefs ... the sea *mis* ... But something was wrong. Jamie sat up, trying to figure out what it was. And his stomach lurched. *He could see Banda! That was what was wrong. The mis was lifting.* Jamie heard voices nearby. He peered through the thin mists of the dissipating fog. They had crawled near the entrance to the diamond field. There was the high guard tower and the barbed-wire fence Banda had described. A crowd of about sixty black workers was moving away from the diamond field towards the gate. They had finished their shift and the next shift was coming in. Jamie got on his knees and crawled over to Banda and shook him. Banda sat up, instantly awake. His eyes turned to the watchtower and the gate.

'Damn!' he said incredulously. 'We almost made it.'

'We *did* make it! Give me those diamonds!'

Banda handed him the folded shirt. 'What do you -?'

'Follow me.'

‘Those guards with the guns at the gate,’ Banda said in a low voice, ‘they’ll know we don’t belong here.’

‘That’s what I’m counting on,’ Jamie told him.

The two men moved towards the guards, drifting between the line of departing workers and the line of arriving workers who were yelling at one another, exchanging good-natured catcalls.

‘You fellas gonna work your asses off, man. We got a nice sleep in the *mis* ...’

‘How did you arrange for the *mis*, you lucky bastards....?’

‘God listens to me. He ain’t gonna listen to you. You’re bad ...’

Jamie and Banda reached the gate. Two huge armed guards stood inside, herding the departing workers over to the small tin hut where they would be thoroughly searched. *They strip them down mother-naked and then they look up and down every hole they’ve got.* Jamie clutched the tattered shirt in his hand more tightly. He pushed through the line of workers and walked up to a guard. ‘Excuse me, sir,’ Jamie said. ‘Who do we see about a job here?’

Banda was staring at him, petrified.

The guard turned to face Jamie. ‘What the hell are you doin’ inside the fence?’

‘We came in to look for work. I heard there was an opening for a guard, and my servant can dig. I thought –’

The guard eyed the two ragged, disreputable-looking figures. ‘Get the hell back outside!’

‘We don’t want to go outside,’ Jamie protested. ‘We need jobs, and I was told –’

‘This is a restricted area, mister. Didn’t you see the signs? Now get the hell out. Both of you!’ He pointed to a large bullock wagon outside the fence, filling with the workers who had finished their shift. ‘That wagon’ll take you to Port Nolloth. If you want a job, you have to apply at the company office there.’

‘Oh. Thank you, sir,’ Jamie said. He beckoned to Banda, and the two men moved out through the gate to freedom.

The guard glared after them. ‘Stupid idiots.’

Ten minutes later, Jamie and Banda were on their way to Port Nolloth. They were carrying with them diamonds worth half a million pounds.

Chapter Six

The expensive carriage rolled down the dusty main street of Klipdrift, drawn by two beautiful matched bays. At the reins was a slender, athletic-looking man with snow-white hair, a white beard and moustache. He was dressed in a fashionable tailored grey suit and ruffled shirt, and in his black cravat was a diamond stickpin. He wore a grey top hat, and on his little finger was a large, sparkling diamond ring. He appeared to be a stranger to the town, but he was not.

Klipdrift had changed considerably since Jamie McGregor had left it a year earlier. It was 1884, and it had grown from a camp to a township. The railway had been completed from Cape Town to Hopetown, with a branch running to Klipdrift, and this had created a whole new wave of immigrants. The town was even more crowded than Jamie remembered, but the people seemed different. There were still many prospectors, but there were also men in business suits and well-dressed matrons walking in and out of stores. Klipdrift had acquired a patina of respectability.

Jamie passed three new dance halls and half a dozen new saloons. He drove by a recently built church and barbershop, and a large hotel called the Grand. He stopped in front of a bank and alighted from the carriage, carelessly tossing the reins to a native boy.

‘Water them.’

Jamie entered the bank and said to the manager in a loud voice, ‘I wish to deposit one hundred thousand pounds in your bank.’

The word spread quickly, as Jamie had known it would, and by the time he left the bank and entered the Sundowner Saloon, he was the centre of interest. The interior of the saloon had not changed. It was crowded, and curious eyes followed Jamie as he walked up to the bar. Smit nodded deferentially. ‘What would you like, sir?’ There was no recognition on the bartender’s face.

‘Whiskey. The best you have.’

‘Yes, sir.’ He poured the drink. ‘You’re new in town?’

‘Yes.’

‘Just passin’ through, are you?’

‘No. I’ve heard this is a good town for a man looking for investments.’

The bartender’s eyes lighted up. ‘You couldn’t find better! A man with a hundred – A man with money can do real well for himself. Matter of fact, I might be of some service to you, sir.’

‘Really? How is that?’

Smit leaned forwards, his tone conspiratorial. ‘I know a man who runs this town. He’s chairman of the Borough Council and head of the Citizen’s Committee. He’s the most important man in this part of the country. Name of Salomon van der Merwe.’

Jamie took a sip of his drink. ‘Never heard of him.’

‘He owns that big general store across the street. He can put you on to some good deals. It’d be worth your while to meet him.’

Jamie McGregor took another sip of his drink. ‘Have him come over here.’

The bartender glanced at the large diamond ring on Jamie’s finger, and at his diamond stickpin. ‘Yes, sir. Can I tell him your name?’

‘Travis. Ian Travis.’

‘Right, Mr Travis. I’m sure Mr van der Merwe will want to meet you.’ He poured out another drink. ‘Have this while you’re waitin’. It’s on the house.’

Jamie sat at the bar sipping the whiskey, aware that everyone in the saloon was watching him. Men had departed from Klipdrift wealthy, but no one of such obvious wealth had ever arrived there before. It was something new in their experience.

Fifteen minutes later, the bartender was back, accompanied by Salomon van der Merwe.

Van der Merwe walked up to the bearded, white-haired stranger, held out his hand and smiled. 'Mr Travis, I'm Salomon van der Merwe.'

'Ian Travis.'

Jamie waited for a flicker of recognition, a sign that Van der Merwe found something familiar about him. There was nothing. *But then, why should there be?* Jamie thought. There was nothing left of that naïve, idealistic, eighteen-year-old boy he had been. Smit obsequiously led the two men to a corner table.

As soon as they were seated, Van der Merwe said, 'I understand you're looking for some investments in Klipdrift, Mr Travis.'

'Possibly.'

'I might be able to be of some service. One has to be careful. There are many immoral people around.'

Jamie looked at him and said, 'I'm sure there are.'

It was unreal, sitting there carrying on a polite conversation with the man who had cheated him out of a fortune and then tried to murder him. His hatred for Van der Merwe had consumed him for the last year, his thirst for vengeance was all that had sustained him, kept him alive. And now Van der Merwe was about to feel that vengeance.

'If you don't mind my asking, Mr Travis, how much money were you planning on investing?'

'Oh, around a hundred thousand pounds to begin with,' Jamie said carelessly. He watched Van der Merwe wet his lips. 'Then perhaps three or four hundred thousand more.'

'Er – you should be able to do very well with that, very well, indeed. With the right guidance, of course,' he added quickly. 'Do you have any idea what you might want to invest in?'

'I thought I'd look around and see what opportunities there were.'

'That's very wise of you.' Van der Merwe nodded sagely. 'Perhaps you would like to come to dinner tonight and we can discuss it? My daughter's an excellent cook. It would be an honour to have you.'

Jamie smiled. 'I'd enjoy that, Mr van der Merwe.' *You have no idea how much I'd enjoy that,* he thought.

It had started.

The journey from the diamond fields of Namib to Cape Town had been uneventful. Jamie and Banda had hiked inland to a small village where a doctor treated Jamie's arm, and they had gotten a lift on a wagon bound for Cape Town. It was a long, difficult ride, but they were oblivious to the discomfort. At Cape Town, Jamie checked into the ornate Royal Hotel on Plein Street – 'Patronized by HRH, the Duke of Edinburgh' – and was escorted to the Royal Suite.

'I want you to send up the best barber in town,' Jamie told the manager. 'Then I want a tailor and a bootmaker up here.'

'At once, sir,' the manager said.

It's wonderful what money can do, Jamie thought.

The bath in the Royal Suite was heaven. Jamie lay back in the hot water, soaking the tiredness out of his body, thinking back over the past incredible weeks. Had it been only weeks since he and Banda had built that raft? It seemed like years. Jamie thought about the raft sailing them to the *Sperrgebiet*, and the sharks, and the demon waves and the reefs tearing the raft to pieces. The sea *mis* and the crawling over the land mines, and the huge dog on top of him ... The eerie, muffled cries that would ring in his ears forever: *Kruger ... Brent ... Kruger ... Brent ...*

But most of all, he thought of Banda. His friend.

When they had reached Cape Town, Jamie had urged, 'Stay with me.'

Banda smiled, showing his beautiful white teeth. 'Life's too dull with you, Jamie. I have to go somewhere and find a little excitement.'

'What will you do now?'

‘Well, thanks to you and your wonderful plan about how easy it is to float a raft over the reef, I’m going to buy a farm, find a wife and have a lot of children.’

‘All right. Let’s go to the *diamant kooper* so I can give you your share of the diamonds.’

‘No,’ Banda said. ‘I don’t want it.’

Jamie frowned. ‘What are you talking about? Half the diamonds are yours. You’re a millionaire.’

‘No. Look at my skin, Jamie. If I became a millionaire, my life would not be worth a ticky.’

‘You can hide some of the diamonds away. You can –’

‘All I need is enough to buy a morgen of farmland and two oxen to trade for a wife. Two or three little diamonds will get me everything I’ll ever want. The rest are yours.’

‘That’s impossible. You can’t give me your share.’

‘Yes, I can, Jamie. Because you’re going to give me Salomon van der Merwe.’

Jamie looked at Banda for a long moment. ‘I promise.’

‘Then I’ll say good-bye, my friend.’

The two men clasped hands.

‘We’ll meet again,’ Banda said. ‘Next time think of something *really* exciting for us to do.’

Banda walked away with three small diamonds carefully tucked in his pocket.

Jamie sent off a bank draught amounting to twenty thousand pounds to his parents, bought the finest carriage and team he could find and headed back to Klipdrift.

The time had come for revenge.

That evening when Jamie McGregor entered Van der Merwe’s store, he was gripped by a sensation so unpleasant and so violent that he had to pause to regain control of himself.

Van der Merwe hurried out of the back of the shop, and when he saw who it was, his face lighted up in a big smile. ‘Mr Travis!’ he said. ‘Welcome.’

‘Thank you, mister – er – sorry, I don’t remember your name ...’

‘Van der Merwe. Salomon van der Merwe. Don’t apologize. Dutch names are difficult to remember. Dinner is ready. Margaret!’ he called as he led Jamie into the back room. Nothing had changed. Margaret was standing at the stove over a frying pan, her back to them.

‘Margaret, this is our guest I spoke of – Mr Travis.’

Margaret turned. ‘How do you do?’

There was not a flicker of recognition.

‘I’m pleased to meet you,’ Jamie nodded.

The customer bell rang and Van der Merwe said, ‘Excuse me, I’ll be right back. Please make yourself at home, Mr Travis.’ He hurried out.

Margaret carried a steaming bowl of vegetables and meat over to the table, and as she hurried to take the bread from the oven Jamie stood there, silently looking at her. She had blossomed in the year since he had seen her. She had become a woman, with a smouldering sexuality that had been lacking before.

‘Your father tells me you’re an excellent cook.’

Margaret blushed. ‘I – I hope so, sir.’

‘It’s been a long time since I’ve tasted home cooking. I’m looking forward to this.’ Jamie took a large butter dish from Margaret and placed it on the table for her. Margaret was so surprised she almost dropped the plate in her hands. She had never heard of a man who helped in woman’s work. She lifted her startled eyes to his face. A broken nose and a scar spoiled what would otherwise have been a too-handsome face. His eyes were light grey and shone with intelligence and a burning intensity. His white hair told her that he was not a young man, and yet there was something very youthful about him. He was tall and strong and – Margaret turned away, embarrassed by his gaze.

Van der Merwe hurried back into the room, rubbing his hands. ‘I’ve closed the shop,’ he said. ‘Let’s sit down and have a fine dinner.’

Jamie was given the place of honour at the table. ‘We’ll say grace,’ Van der Merwe said.

They closed their eyes. Margaret slyly opened hers again, so that she could continue her scrutiny of the elegant stranger while her father's voice droned on. 'We are all sinners in your eyes, O Lord, and must be punished. Give us the strength to bear our hardships on this earth, so that we may enjoy the fruits of heaven when we are called. Thank you, Lord, for helping those of us who deserve to prosper. Amen.'

Salomon van der Merwe began serving. This time the portions he served Jamie were more than generous. They talked as they ate. 'Is this your first time out this way, Mr Travis?'

'Yes,' Jamie said. 'First time.'

'You didn't bring Mrs Travis along, I understand.'

'There is no Mrs Travis. I haven't found anyone who'd have me.' Jamie smiled.

What fool of a woman would refuse him? Margaret wondered. She lowered her eyes, afraid the stranger might read her wicked thoughts.

'Klipdrift is a town of great opportunity, Mr Travis. *Great opportunity.*'

'I'm willing to be shown.' He looked at Margaret, and she blushed.

'If it isn't too personal, Mr Travis, may I ask how you acquired your fortune?'

Margaret was embarrassed by her father's blunt questions, but the stranger did not seem to mind.

'I inherited it from my father,' James said easily.

'Ah, but I'm sure you've had a lot of business experience.'

'Very little, I'm afraid. I need a lot of guidance.'

Van der Merwe brightened. 'It's fate that we met, Mr Travis. I have some very profitable connections. Very profitable, indeed. I can almost guarantee that I can double your money for you in just a few months.' He leaned over and patted Jamie's arm. 'I have a feeling this is a big day for both of us.'

Jamie just smiled.

'I suppose you're staying at the Grand Hotel?'

'That's right.'

'It's criminally expensive. But I suppose to a man of your means.' He beamed at Jamie.

Jamie said, 'I'm told the countryside around here is interesting. Would it be an imposition to ask you to let your daughter show me around a bit tomorrow?'

Margaret felt her heart stop for a second.

Van der Merwe frowned. 'I don't know. She -'

It was an iron-clad rule of Salomon van der Merwe's never to permit any man to be alone with his daughter. In the case of Mr Travis, however, he decided there would be no harm in making an exception. With so much at stake, he did not want to appear inhospitable. 'I can spare Margaret from the store for a short time. You will show our guest around, Margaret?'

'If you wish, Father,' she said quietly.

'That's settled then.' Jamie smiled. 'Shall we say ten o'clock in the morning?'

After the tall, elegantly dressed guest left, Margaret cleared away the table and washed the dishes, in a complete daze. *He must think I'm an idiot.* She went over and over in her mind everything she had contributed to the conversation. Nothing. She had been completely tongue-tied. Why was that? Hadn't she waited on hundreds of men in the store without becoming a stupid fool? Of course they had not looked at her the way Ian Travis had. *Men all have the devil in them, Margaret. I'll not let them corrupt your innocence.* Her father's voice echoed in her mind. Could that be it? The weakness and trembling she had felt when the stranger had looked at her? Was he corrupting her innocence? The thought of it sent a delicious thrill through her body. She looked down at the plate she had dried three times and sat down at the table. She wished her mother were still alive.

Her mother would have understood. Margaret loved her father, but sometimes she had the oppressive feeling that she was his prisoner. It worried her that he never allowed a man to come near

her. *I'll never get married*, Margaret thought. *Not until he dies*. Her rebellious thoughts filled her with guilt, and she hurriedly left the room and went into the store, where her father sat behind a desk, working on his accounts.

'Good night, Father.'

Van der Merwe took off his gold-framed spectacles and rubbed his eyes before he raised his arms to embrace his daughter good night. Margaret did not know why she pulled away.

Alone in the curtained-off alcove that served as her bedroom, Margaret studied her face in the small, round mirror that hung on the wall. She had no illusions about her looks. She was not pretty. She was interesting-looking. Nice eyes. High cheekbones. A good figure. She drew nearer to the mirror. What had Ian Travis seen when he looked at her? She began getting undressed. And Ian Travis was in the room with her, watching her, his eyes burning into her. She stepped out of her muslin drawers and camisole and stood naked before him. Her hands slowly caressed the swell of her breasts and felt her hardening nipples. Her fingers slid down across her flat belly and his hands became entwined with hers, moving slowly downward. They were between her legs now, gently touching, stroking, rubbing, harder now, faster and faster until she was caught up in a frantic whirlpool of sensation that finally exploded inside her and she gasped his name and fell to the bed.

They rode out in Jamie's carriage, and he was amazed once more at the changes that had taken place. Where before there had been only a sea of tents, now there were substantial-looking houses, constructed of timber with roofs of corrugated iron or thatch.

'Klipdrift seems very prosperous,' Jamie said as they rode along the main street.

'I suppose it would be interesting for a newcomer,' Margaret said. And she thought, *I've hated it until now*.

They left the town and drove out towards the mining camps along the Vaal River. The seasonal rains had turned the countryside into an enormous, colourful garden, filled with the luxuriant bush Karroo, and the spreading Rhenoster bush and heaths and diosmas plants that could be found nowhere else in the world. As they drove past a group of prospectors, Jamie asked, 'Have there been any big diamond finds lately?'

'Oh, yes, a few. Every time the news gets out, hundreds of new diggers come pouring in. Most of them leave poor and heartbroken. Margaret felt she had to warn him of the danger here. 'Father would not like to hear me say this, but I think it's a terrible business, Mr Travis.'

'For some, probably,' Jamie agreed. 'For some.'

'Do you plan to stay on a while?'

'Yes.'

Margaret felt her heart singing. 'Good.' Then added quickly, 'Father will be pleased.'

They drove around all morning, and from time to time they stopped and Jamie chatted with prospectors. Many of them recognized Margaret and spoke respectfully. There was a warmth to her and an easy friendliness that she did not reveal when she was around her father.

As they drove on, Jamie said, 'Everyone seems to know you.'

She blushed. 'That's because they do business with Father. He supplies most of the diggers.'

Jamie made no comment. He was keenly interested in what he was seeing. The railroad had made an enormous difference. A new combine called De Beers, named after the farmer in whose field the first diamond discovery was made, had bought out its chief rival, a colourful entrepreneur named Barney Barnato, and De Beers was busily consolidating the hundreds of small claims into one organization. Gold had been discovered recently, not far from Kimberley, along with manganese and zinc. Jamie was convinced this was only the beginning, that South Africa was a treasure-house of minerals. There were incredible opportunities here for a man with foresight.

When Jamie and Margaret returned, it was late afternoon. Jamie stopped the carriage in front of Van der Merwe's store and said, 'I would be honoured if you and your father would be my guests at dinner tonight.'

Margaret glowed. 'I'll ask Father. I do so hope he'll say yes. Thank you for a lovely day, Mr Travis.'

And she fled.

The three of them had dinner in the large, square dining room of the new Grand Hotel.

The room was crowded, and Van der Merwe grumbled, 'I don't see how these people can afford to eat here.'

Jamie picked up a menu and glanced at it. A steak cost one pound four shillings, a potato was four shillings and a piece of apple pie ten shillings.

'They're robbers!' Van der Merwe complained. 'A few meals here and a man could eat himself into the poorhouse.'

Jamie wondered what it would take to put Salomon van der Merwe in the poorhouse. He intended to find out. They ordered, and Jamie noticed that Van der Merwe ordered the most expensive items on the menu. Margaret ordered a clear soup. She was too excited to eat. She looked at her hands, remembered what they had done the night before and felt guilty.

'I can afford dinner,' Jamie teased her. 'Order anything you like.'

She blushed. 'Thank you, but I'm – I'm not really very hungry.'

Van der Merwe noticed the blush and looked sharply from Margaret to Jamie. 'My daughter is a rare girl, a rare girl, Mr Travis.'

Jamie nodded. 'I couldn't agree with you more, Mr van der Merwe.'

His words made Margaret so happy that when their dinner was served, she could not even eat the soup. The affect Ian Travis had on her was incredible. She read hidden meanings into his every word and gesture. If he smiled at her, it meant he liked her a lot; if he frowned, it meant he hated her. Margaret's feelings were an emotional thermometer that kept going up and down.

'Did you see anything of interest today?' Van der Merwe asked Jamie.

'No, nothing special,' Jamie said casually.

Van der Merwe leaned forwards. 'Mark my words, sir, this is going to be the fastest-growing area in the world. A man would be smart to invest here now. The new railway's going to turn this place into a second Cape Town.'

'I don't know,' Jamie said dubiously. 'I've heard of too many boomtowns like this going bust. I'm not interested in putting my money into a ghost town.'

'Not Klipdrift,' Van der Merwe assured him. 'They're finding more diamonds all the time. And gold.'

Jamie shrugged. 'How long will that last?'

'Well, nobody can be sure of that, of course, but –'

'Exactly.'

'Don't make any hasty decisions,' Van der Merwe urged. 'I wouldn't like to see you lose out on a great opportunity.'

Jamie thought that over, 'Perhaps I am being hasty. Margaret, could you show me around again tomorrow?'

Van der Merwe opened his mouth to object, then closed it. He remembered the words of Mr Thorenson, the banker: *He walked in here and deposited a hundred thousand pounds, cool as you please, Salomon, and he said there'd be a lot more comin'.*

Greed got the better of Van der Merwe. 'Of course she could.'

The following morning, Margaret put on her Sunday dress, ready to meet Jamie. When her father walked in and saw her, his face turned red. 'Do you want the man to think you're some kind of fallen woman – dressin' up to attract him? This is business, girl. Take that off and put on your workin' clothes.'

'But, Papa –'

'Do as I say!'

She did not argue with him. 'Yes, Papa.'

Van der Merwe watched Margaret and Jamie drive away twenty minutes later. He wondered if he could be making a mistake.

This time Jamie headed the carriage in the opposite direction. There were exciting signs of new developments and building everywhere. *If the mineral discoveries keep up*, Jamie thought – and there was every reason to believe they would – *there is more money to be made here in real estate than in diamonds or gold. Klipdrift will need more banks, hotels, saloons, shops, brothels ...* The list was endless. So were the opportunities.

Jamie was conscious of Margaret staring at him. 'Is something wrong?' he asked.

'Oh, no,' she said, and quickly looked away.

Jamie studied her now, and noticed the radiance about her. Margaret was aware of his closeness, his maleness. He sensed her feelings. She was a woman without a man.

At noon Jamie drove off the main road down to a wooded area near a stream and stopped under a large baobab tree. He had had the hotel pack a picnic lunch. Margaret put down a tablecloth, unpacked the basket and spread out the food. There was cold roast lamb, fried chicken, yellow saffron rice, quince jam and tangerines and peaches and *soetekoekjes*, almond-topped spice cookies.

'This is a banquet!' Margaret exclaimed. 'I'm afraid I don't deserve all this, Mr Travis.'

'You deserve much more,' Jamie assured her.

Margaret turned away, busying herself with the food.

Jamie took her face between his hands. 'Margaret ... look at me.'

'Oh! Please. I –' She was trembling.

'Look at me.'

Slowly she lifted her head and looked into his eyes. He pulled her into his arms, and his lips found hers and he held her close, pressing his body against hers.

After a few moments she struggled free, shook her head and said, 'Oh, my God. We mustn't. Oh, we mustn't. We'll go to hell.'

'Heaven.'

'I'm afraid.'

'There's nothing to be afraid of. Do you see my eyes? They can look right inside you. And you know what I see, don't you? You want me to make love to you. And I'm going to. And there's nothing to fear, because you belong to me. You know that, don't you? You belong to me, Margaret. You say it. I belong to Ian. Go on. I – belong – to – Ian.'

'I belong – to Ian.'

His lips were on hers again, and he began to undo the hooks on the back of her bodice. In a moment she stood naked in the soft breeze, and he lowered her gently down to the ground. And the tremulous passage from girlhood to womanhood became an exciting, soaring experience that made Margaret feel more alive than she had ever felt in her life. *I'll remember this moment forever*, she thought. The bed of leaves and the warm caressing breeze on her naked skin, the shadow of the baobab tree that dappled their bodies. They made love again, and it was even more wonderful. She thought, *No woman could ever love anyone as much as I love this man*.

When they were spent, Jamie held her in his strong arms, and she wished she could be there forever. She looked up at him and whispered, 'What are you thinking?'

He grinned and whispered back, 'That I'm bloody starving.'

She laughed, and they rose and had their lunch under the shelter of the trees. Afterwards they swam and lay down to let the hot sun dry them. Jamie took Margaret again, and she thought, *I want this day to go on forever*.

That evening, Jamie and Van der Merwe were seated at a corner table at the Sundowner. 'You were right,' Jamie announced. 'The possibilities here may be greater than I thought.'

Van der Merwe beamed. 'I knew you were too clever a man not to see that, Mr Travis.'

‘What exactly would you advise me to do?’ Jamie asked.

Van der Merwe glanced around and lowered his voice. ‘Just today I got some information on a big new diamond strike north of Pniel. There are ten claims still available. We can divide them up between us. I’ll put up fifty thousand pounds for five claims, and you put up fifty thousand pounds for the other five. There are diamonds there by the bushel. We can make millions overnight. What do you think?’

Jamie knew exactly what he thought. Van der Merwe would keep the claims that were profitable and Jamie would end up with the others. In addition, Jamie would have been willing to bet his life that Van der Merwe was not putting up one shilling.

‘It sounds interesting,’ Jamie said. ‘How many prospectors are involved?’

‘Only two.’

‘Why does it take so much money?’ he asked innocently.

‘Ah, that’s an intelligent question.’ He leaned forwards in his chair. ‘You see, they know the value of their claim, but they don’t have the money to operate it. That’s where you and I come in. We give them one hundred thousand pounds and let them keep twenty percent of their fields.

He slipped the twenty percent in so smoothly that it almost went by unnoticed. Jamie was certain the prospectors would be cheated of their diamonds and their money. It would all flow to Van der Merwe.

‘We’ll have to move fast,’ Van der Merwe warned. ‘As soon as word of this leaks out –’

‘Let’s not lose it,’ Jamie urged.

Van der Merwe smiled. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll have the contracts drawn up right away.’

In Afrikaans, Jamie thought.

‘Now, there are a few other deals I find very interesting, Ian.’

Because it was important to keep his new partner happy, Van der Merwe no longer objected when Jamie asked that Margaret show him around the countryside. Margaret was more in love with Jamie every day. He was the last thing she thought of when she went to bed at night, and the first thing she thought of when she opened her eyes in the morning. Jamie had loosed a sensuality in her that she had not even known existed. It was as though she had suddenly discovered what her body was for, and all the things she had been taught to be ashamed of became glorious gifts to bring pleasure to Jamie. And to herself. Love was a wonderful new country to be explored. A sensual land of hidden valleys and exciting dales and glens and rivers of honey. She could not get enough of it.

In the vast sweep of the countryside, it was easy to find isolated places where they could make love, and each time for Margaret was as exciting as the first time.

The old guilt about her father haunted her. Salomon van der Merwe was an elder of the Dutch Reformed Church, and Margaret knew if he ever found out what she was doing, there would be no forgiveness. Even in the rough frontier community where they lived, where men took their pleasures where they found them, there would be no understanding. There were only two kinds of women in the world – nice girls and whores – and a nice girl did not let a man touch her unless she was married to him. So she would be labelled a whore. *It’s so unfair*, she thought. *The giving and taking of love is too beautiful to be evil*. But her growing concern finally made Margaret bring up the subject of marriage.

They were driving along the Vaal River when Margaret spoke. ‘Ian, you know how much I –’ She did not know how to go on. ‘That is, you and I –’ In desperation she blurted out, ‘How do you feel about marriage?’

Jamie laughed. ‘I’m all for it, Margaret. I’m all for it.’

She joined him in his laughter. It was the happiest moment of her life.

On Sunday morning, Salomon van der Merwe invited Jamie to accompany him and Margaret to church. The Nederduits Hervormde Kerk was a large, impressive building done in bastard Gothic, with the pulpit at one end and a huge organ at the other. When they walked in the door, Van der Merwe was greeted with great respect.

‘I helped build this church,’ he told Jamie proudly. ‘I’m a deacon here.’

The service was brimstone and hellfire, and Van der Merwe sat there, rapt, nodding eagerly, accepting the minister’s every word.

He’s God’s man on Sunday, Jamie thought, and the rest of the week he belongs to the devil.

Van der Merwe had placed himself between the two young people, but Margaret was conscious of Jamie’s nearness all through the service. *It’s a good thing – she smiled nervously to herself – that the minister doesn’t know what I’m thinking about.*

That evening, Jamie went to visit the Sundowner Saloon. Smit was behind the bar serving drinks. His face brightened when he saw Jamie.

‘Good evenin’, Mr Travis. What will you have, sir? The usual?’

‘Not tonight, Smit. I want to talk to you. In the back room.’

‘Certainly, sir.’ Smit scented money to be made. He turned to his assistant. ‘Mind the bar.’

The back room of the Sundowner was no more than a closet, but it afforded privacy. It contained a round table with four chairs, and in the centre of the table was a lantern. Smit lit it.

‘Sit down,’ Jamie said.

Smit took a chair. ‘Yes, sir. How can I help you?’

‘It’s you I’ve come to help, Smit.’

Smit beamed. ‘Really, sir?’

‘Yes.’ Jamie took out a long, thin cigar and lighted it. ‘I’ve decided to let you live.’

An uncertain look flickered over Smit’s face. ‘I – I don’t understand, Mr Travis.’

‘Not Travis. The name is McGregor. Jamie McGregor. Remember? A year ago you set me up to be killed. At the barn. For Van der Merwe.’

Smit was frowning now, suddenly wary. ‘I don’t know what –’

‘Shut up and listen to me.’ Jamie’s voice was like whiplash.

Jamie could see the wheels turning in Smit’s mind. He was trying to reconcile the face of the white-haired man in front of him with the eager youth of a year before.

‘I’m still alive, and I’m rich – rich enough to hire men to burn this place down and you with it. Are you with me so far, Smit?’

Smit started to protest his ignorance, but he looked into Jamie McGregor’s eyes and saw the danger there. Smit said cautiously. ‘Yes, sir ...’

‘Van der Merwe pays you to send prospectors to him so he can cheat them out of what they find. That’s an interesting little partnership. How much does he pay you?’

There was a silence. Smit was caught between two powerful forces. He did not know which way to jump.

‘How much?’

‘Two percent,’ he said reluctantly.

‘I’ll give you five. From now on when a likely prospect comes in, you’ll send him to me. I’ll finance him. The difference is that he’ll get his fair share and you’ll get yours. Did you really think Van der Merwe was paying you two percent of what he made? You’re a fool.’

Smit nodded. ‘Right, Mr Trav – Mr McGregor. I understand.’

Jamie rose to his feet. ‘Not completely.’ He leaned over the table. ‘You’re thinking of going to Van der Merwe and telling him about our little conversation. That way, you can collect from both of us. There’s only one problem with that, Smit.’ His voice dropped to a whisper. ‘If you do, you’re a dead man.’

Chapter Seven

Jamie was getting dressed when he heard a tentative knock at the door. He listened, and it was repeated. He walked over to the door and opened it. Margaret stood there.

‘Come in, Maggie,’ Jamie said. ‘Is something wrong?’ It was the first time she had come to his hotel room. She stepped inside, but now that she was face to face with him, she found it difficult to speak. She had lain awake all night, wondering how to tell him the news. She was afraid he might never want to see her again.

She looked into his eyes. ‘Ian, I’m going to have your baby.’

His face was so still that Margaret was terrified that she had lost him. And suddenly his expression changed to such joy that all her doubts were instantly wiped out. He grabbed her arms and said, ‘That’s wonderful, Maggie! Wonderful! Have you told your father?’

Margaret pulled back in alarm. ‘Oh, no! He –’ She walked over to the Victoria green-plush sofa and sat down. ‘You don’t know Father. He – he would never understand.’

Jamie was hurriedly putting on his shirt. ‘Come on, we’re going to tell him together.’

‘Are you sure everything will be all right, Ian?’

‘I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.’

Salomon van der Merwe was measuring out strips of biltong for a prospector when Jamie and Margaret strode into the shop. ‘Ah, Ian! I’ll be with you in a moment.’ He hurriedly finished with the customer and walked over to Jamie. ‘And how is everything this fine day?’ Van der Merwe asked.

‘It couldn’t be better,’ Jamie said happily. ‘Your Maggie’s going to have a baby.’

There was a sudden stillness in the air. ‘I – I don’t understand,’ Van der Merwe stuttered.

‘It’s very simple. I’ve gotten her pregnant.’

The colour drained from Van der Merwe’s face. He turned wildly from one to the other. ‘This – this isn’t true?’ A maelstrom of conflicting emotions whirled through Salomon van der Merwe’s head. The terrible shock of his precious daughter losing her virginity ... getting pregnant ... He would be the laughing stock of the town. But Ian Travis was a very wealthy man. And if they got married quickly ...

Van der Merwe turned to Jamie. ‘You’ll get married immediately, of course.’

Jamie looked at him in surprise. ‘*Married?* You’d allow Maggie to marry a stupid bairn who let you cheat him out of what belonged to him?’

Van der Merwe’s head was spinning. ‘What are you talking about, Ian? I never –’

‘My name’s not Ian,’ Jamie said harshly. ‘I’m Jamie McGregor. Dinna you recognize me?’ He saw the bewildered expression on Van der Merwe’s face. ‘Nae, a course you don’t. That boy is dead. You killed him. But I’m not a man to hold a grudge, Van der Merwe. So I’m giving you a gift. My seed in your daughter’s belly.’

And Jamie turned and walked out, leaving the two of them staring after him, stunned.

Margaret had listened in shocked disbelief. He could not mean what he had just said. *He loved her!* He –

Salomon van der Merwe turned on his daughter, in the throes of a terrible rage. ‘You whore!’ he screamed. ‘*Whore! Get out! Get out of here!*’

Margaret stood stock-still, unable to grasp the meaning of the awful thing that was happening. Ian blamed her for something her father had done. Ian thought she was part of something bad. *Who was Jamie McGregor? Who –?*

‘Go!’ Van der Merwe hit her hard across the face. ‘I never want to see you again as long as I live.’

Margaret stood there, rooted, her heart pounding, gasping for breath. Her father’s face was that of a madman. She turned and fled from the store, not looking back.

Salomon van der Merwe stood there watching her go, gripped by despair. He had seen what happened to other men's daughters who had disgraced themselves. They had been forced to stand up in church and be publicly pilloried and then exiled from the community. It was proper and fitting punishment, exactly what they deserved. But his Margaret had been given a decent, God-fearing upbringing. *How could she have betrayed him like this?* Van der Merwe visualized his daughter's naked body, coupling with that man, writhing in heat like animals, and he began to have an erection.

He put a Closed sign on the front door of the store and lay on his bed without the strength or the will to move. When word got around town, he would become an object of derision. He would be either pitied or blamed for his daughter's depravity. Either way, it would be unbearable. He had to make certain no one learned about it. He would send the whore out of his sight forever. He knelt and prayed: *O, God! How could you do this to me, your loyal servant? Why have you forsaken me? Let her die, O Lord. Let them both die ...*

The Sundowners Saloon was crowded with noon trade when Jamie entered. He walked over to the bar and turned to face the room. 'Your attention, please!' The conversation tapered off into silence. 'Drinks on the house for everybody.'

'What is it?' Smit asked. 'A new strike?'

Jamie laughed. 'In a way, my friend. Salomon van der Merwe's unmarried daughter is pregnant. Mr van der Merwe wants everybody to help him celebrate.'

Smit whispered, 'Oh, Jesus!'

'Jesus had nothing to do with it. Just Jamie McGregor.'

Within an hour, everyone in Klipdrift had heard the news. How Ian Travis was really Jamie McGregor, and how he had gotten Van der Merwe's daughter pregnant. Margaret van der Merwe had fooled the whole town.

'She doesn't look like the kind, does she?'

'Still waters run deep, they say.'

'I wonder how many other men in this town have dipped their wick in that well?'

'She's a shapely girl. I could use a piece of that myself.'

'Why don't you ask her? She's givin' it away.'

And the men laughed.

When Salomon van der Merwe left his store that afternoon, he had come to terms with the dreadful catastrophe that had befallen him. He would send Margaret to Cape Town on the next coach. She could have her bastard there, and there was no need for anyone in Klipdrift to know his shame. Van der Merwe stepped out into the street, hugging his secret, a smile pasted on his lips.

'Afternoon, Mr van der Merwe. I hear you might be stockin' some extra baby clothes.'

'Good day, Salomon. Hear you're gonna get a little helper for your store soon.'

'Hello there, Salomon. I hear a bird watcher just spotted a new species out near the Vaal River. Yes, sir, a stork!'

Salomon van der Merwe turned and blindly stumbled back into his shop, bolting the door behind him.

At the Sundowner Saloon, Jamie was having a whiskey, listening to the flood of gossip around him. It was the biggest scandal Klipdrift had ever had, and the pleasure of the townspeople took in it was intense. *I wish, Jamie thought, that Banda were here with me to enjoy this.* This was payment for what Salomon van der Merwe had done to Banda's sister, what he had done to Jamie and to – how many others? But this was only part payment for all the things Salomon van der Merwe had done, just the beginning. Jamie's vengeance would not be complete until Van der Merwe had been totally destroyed. As for Margaret, he had no sympathy for her. She was in on it. What had she said the first day they met? *My father might be the one to help you. He knows everything.* She was a Van der Merwe too, and Jamie would destroy both of them.

Smit walked over to where Jamie was sitting. 'Kin I talk to you a minute, Mr McGregor?'

‘What is it?’

Smit cleared his throat self-consciously. ‘I know a couple of prospectors who have ten claims up near Pniel. They’re producin’ diamonds, but these fellas don’t have the money to get the proper equipment to work their claim. They’re looking’ for a partner. I thought you might be interested.’

Jamie studied him. ‘These are the men you talked to Van der Merwe about, right?’

Smit nodded, surprised. ‘Yes, sir. But I been thinkin’ over your proposition. I’d rather do business with you.’

Jamie pulled out a long, thin cigar, and Smit hastened to light it. ‘Keep talking.’

Smit did.

In the beginning, prostitution in Klipdrift was on a haphazard basis. The prostitutes were mostly black women, working in sleazy, back-street brothels. The first white prostitutes to arrive in town were part-time barmaids. But as diamond strikes increased and the town prospered, more white prostitutes appeared.

There were now half a dozen sporting houses on the outskirts of Klipdrift, wooden railway huts with tin roofs. The one exception was Madam Agnes’s, a respectable-looking two-storey frame structure on Bree Street, off Loop Street, the main thoroughfare, where the wives of the townspeople would not be offended by having to pass in front of it. It was patronized by the husbands of those wives, and by any strangers in town who could afford it. It was expensive, but the women were young and uninhibited, and gave good value for the money. Drinks were served in a reasonably well-decorated drawing room, and it was a rule of Madam Agnes’s that no customer was ever rushed or short-changed. Madam Agnes herself was a cheerful, robust redhead in her mid-thirties. She had worked at a brothel in London and been attracted to South Africa by the tales of easy money to be picked up in a mining town like Klipdrift. She had saved enough to open her own establishment, and business had flourished from the beginning.

Madam Agnes prided herself on her understanding of men, but Jamie McGregor was a puzzle to her. He visited often, spent money freely and was always pleasant to the women, but he seemed withdrawn, remote and untouchable. His eyes were what fascinated Agnes. They were pale, bottomless pools, cold. Unlike the other patrons of her house, he never spoke about himself or his past. Madam Agnes had heard hours earlier that Jamie McGregor had deliberately gotten Salomon van der Merwe’s daughter pregnant and then refused to marry her. *The bastard!* Madam Agnes thought. But she had to admit that he was an attractive bastard. She watched Jamie now as he walked down the red-carpeted stairs, politely said good night and left.

When Jamie arrived back at his hotel, Margaret was in his room, staring out of the window. She turned as Jamie walked in.

‘Hello, Jamie.’ Her voice was atremble.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I had to talk to you.’

‘We have nothing to talk about.’

‘I know why you’re doing this. You hate my father.’ Margaret moved closer to him. ‘But you have to know that whatever it was he did to you, I knew nothing about. Please – I beg of you – believe that. Don’t hate me. I love you too much.’

Jamie looked at her coldly. ‘That’s *your* problem, isn’t it?’

‘Please don’t look at me like that. You love me, too ...’

He was not listening. He was again taking the terrible journey to Paardspan where he had almost died ... and moving the boulders on the riverbanks until he was ready to drop ... and finally, miraculously, finding the diamonds ... Handing them to Van der Merwe and hearing Van der Merwe’s voice saying, *You misunderstood me, boy. I don’t need any partners. You’re working for me.... I’m giving you twenty-four hours to get out of town.* And then the savage beating ... He was smelling the vultures again, feeling their sharp beaks tear into his flesh ...

As though from a distance, he heard Margaret's voice. 'Don't you remember? I – belong – to – you ... I love you.'

He shook himself out of his reverie and looked at her. *Love*. He no longer had any idea what the word meant. Van der Merwe had burned every emotion out of him except hate. He lived on that. It was his elixir, his lifeblood. It was what had kept him alive when he fought the sharks and crossed the reef, and crawled over the mines at the diamond fields of the Namib Desert. Poets wrote about love, and singers sang about it, and perhaps it was real, perhaps it existed. But love was for other men. Not for Jamie McGregor.

'You're Salomon van der Merwe's daughter. You're carrying his grandchild in your belly. Get out.'

There was nowhere for Margaret to go. She loved her father, and she needed his forgiveness, but she knew he would never – could never – forgive her. He would make her life a living hell. But she had no choice. She had to go to someone.

Margaret left the hotel and walked towards her father's store. She felt that everyone she passed was staring at her. Some of the men smiled insinuatingly, and she held her head high and walked on. When she reached the store, she hesitated, then stepped inside. The store was deserted. Her father came out from the back.

'Father ...'

'*You!*' The contempt in his voice was a physical slap. He moved closer, and she could smell the whiskey on his breath. 'I want you to get out of this town. Now. Tonight. You're never to come near here again. Do you hear me? Never!' He pulled some bills from his pocket and threw them on the floor. 'Take them and get out.'

'I'm carrying your grandchild.'

'You're carrying the devil's child!' He moved closer to her, and his hands were knotted into fists. 'Every time people see you strutting around like a whore, they'll think of my shame. When you're gone, they'll forget it.'

She looked at him for a long, lost moment, then turned and blindly stumbled out the door.

'The money, whore!' he yelled. 'You forgot the money!'

There was a cheap boardinghouse at the outskirts of town, and Margaret made her way to it, her mind in a turmoil. When she reached it, she went looking for Mrs Owens, the landlady. Mrs Owens was a plump, pleasant-faced woman in her fifties, whose husband had brought her to Klipdrift and abandoned her. A lesser woman would have crumbled, but Mrs Owens was a survivor. She had seen a good many people in trouble in this town, but never anyone in more trouble than the seventeen-year-old girl who stood before her now.

'You wanted to see me?'

'Yes. I was wondering if – if perhaps you had a job for me here.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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