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A NOVEL

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atmosphere press

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Published by Atmosphere Press

Cover design by Matthew Fielder

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In memory of MaryAnne Rogers,

formidable mother of my favourite nomad

CHAPTER ONE

Present day
Fish River Canyon
Namibia

The sharp bite so typical of a morning in the African desert wasn't quite gone yet, and the sun sat just high enough to give the stark, boulder-strewn canyon a raw, fresh beauty. Werner huddled deeper into his fleece jacket in an effort to cover more of the exposed skin around his face and neck. Soon the silent world around him would start to wake up and slowly turn into a tranquil, sunlit African day that would normally make him relax into a slightly otherworldly feeling that all was well with his world.

It was almost too breathtakingly beautiful to take in, so how was it possible that he was feeling irritation in this serene, spectacular place? Because much as it pained him, he'd had to admit to himself that that was exactly what he was feeling. In a way, he was disrespecting the canyon with his state of mind. Instead of peace and stillness, he couldn't shake his annoyance with the way things had played out so far.

Two days ago, they'd descended steeply from the canyon rim to be met by this chill-inspiring beauty. He'd loved it, felt overwhelmed by it and was humbled by it, but now, on day three of what was supposed to be a five-day hike, he was wishing for it to be over. So much research and planning had gone into this trip. He'd had to secure permits more than a year in advance, he'd chosen and invited his fellow hikers carefully, he'd mapped out each day, and now he was letting someone ruin it for him. The feeling, in general, wasn't a good one, but what he suspected it said about his generosity as a person wasn't so great either.

On night one, the five of them had reached Wild Fig Bend without a problem. Charl, his best friend of more than twenty-five years, was fit and strong; Ben and Anna were a couple and in good shape, but the heavy pack that Lee, Charl's girlfriend of six months, had from the start insisted she could handle, despite their efforts to convince her otherwise, had now claimed her as its victim. Surprise, surprise.

Had it not been for her injury and Charl's overreaction to his girlfriend's swollen ankle, this would have been the experience of a lifetime. Last night, their second in the canyon, as they camped at Sulphur Springs, he'd seen her grimace when she dipped her feet into the warm water. Her shrill laughter of the first night was gone, and he suspected that she was already struggling. And then today, an hour into their hike, she'd slipped as they were crossing a particularly rocky stretch of the trail. After a quick stop to assess and address the damage—a twisted ankle—their progress had been slow. Charl was fussing and Lee was milking it for all its worth. Of course, it could have happened to anyone, but for some reason he couldn't bring himself to feel sorry for her. Maybe it was her exaggerated helplessness, or her apparent compulsion to draw attention to herself, or simply because he couldn't quite believe that his best friend, normally so sane and easy-going,

had chosen such an unlikely partner. Whatever the reason, he didn't like her behaviour or what it was doing to the mood of the group. What's more, he had a faintly unpleasant feeling that she'd sensed his dislike of her at about the same moment he'd admitted it to himself. He turned his gaze away from the canyon walls and watched her hobbled approach towards him and the rest of the group.

Two and a half more days. And they were between emergency exits. They'd camped at around the 23km mark the previous night, and the next emergency exit was only at 65km. There was no way they'd get there today. At best, they would get to the 49km mark, after which there was a shortcut that would bring her to the next emergency exit more quickly.

"You doing okay?" he asked despite himself.

Lee pulled a face and sat down on a rock a metre away. "I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

He couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic, but when he looked at her profile, he could see the strain on her face, the tightly pulled muscles under her skin—evidence of what had to be pain and exhaustion. Was he being an arse to her? Was he letting his past influence him too much?

"Have some water."

She turned her head slowly, considered the bottle of water in his outstretched hand, and then pointed to the bottle strapped to her rucksack.

Okay, so she'd received the message and was sending one of her own.

Charl came over to check on her, and Werner moved away to where the other two were standing.

"Look," Anna said. He followed her gaze and saw a sizeable grey and white bird sitting about twenty metres away on a dry branch. "See the black patch where the body and wing meet?"

"Yeah."

"It's a black-shouldered kite."

"Doesn't seem to be too bothered by us."

They watched the bird for a few more minutes before it flew away. Anna glanced back at Charl and Lee. Werner caught her eye.

"It's a shame, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"Especially, you know, after—"

"The first one?" Werner said. Charl had barely survived his disastrous first marriage to a pathologically clingy woman, and certainly no one wanted to see him go through that again.

"Maybe he'll see the light after this."

He, too, looked back again to see Charl cupping Lee's chin. No, he didn't think so. But at least he wasn't the only one who wasn't crazy about the new woman in Charl's life. He turned to Ben. "Do you think you can take on some of her weight in your pack?"

"Yes, sure, makes sense to do that."

"Okay, if you, Charl and I can each take some of her stuff, she should be able to move more easily. We have to try to make it to about 48 or 49km today. It's a long haul, but there's a decent shortcut after that to the emergency exit, and we can try to get a ride for her from there."

"Isn't that still about 10km to the nearest road that carries traffic?" Anna asked.

Werner raised his eyebrows. "That's a bridge for a later crossing."

Their plan met with little resistance from Lee, and for the next several hours, they made their way through thick sand and rocks. Charl had become very quiet and the group's enthusiasm appeared to have evaporated into the dry Namibian sky. Dinner was a subdued affair despite them consuming the last of their whisky supplies.



Werner woke up to find both Charl and Lee with their packs on their backs, ready to start. The other two were still asleep.

Charl came over as Werner disentangled himself from his sleeping bag. “There’s coffee ready for you guys. I think we’ll hit the trail given our current pace. Good to get a head start.” He sounded apologetic.

“Okay. Makes sense. How’s the pain this morning?” What a Judas he was for faking concern when he felt little.

“It’s all right. I think she’ll make it, at least to the emergency exit.”

“Good. Slow and steady, hey, mate.”

“No other way, is there?”

Charl sounded like he was miles away. Werner knew it was best to let him be.

“Be careful. We’ll catch up.”

Lee gave a quick, half-hearted wave from the edge of the campsite, and he watched them for a few minutes. This was unlike him. And unlike Charl. They were close, and this long-awaited hike was bringing distance between them. Charl knew him so well, and he’d been there for him through so much of his family’s disastrous history. He owed him the support even if he didn’t think Lee was the right woman for his friend.

The morning’s hike was easy, and they caught up with Charl and Lee a little over an hour later. It was clear that Lee was in pain, but at her pace, it would be at least another two hours until the last of the trail’s two emergency exits, so they’d have to find a way to get her there. He looked at her makeshift walking stick. It was too short and slowed her down more than anything else. While the others took a break and some more photographs, he went looking for a usable one. It wasn’t enough, but he had to do better. When the time came to leave, he pointed to her rucksack.

“Let’s divide the remainder of your pack between the rest of us.”

She gave him a mournful look. “That’s not necessary.”

Charl knelt in front of her. “Sweetheart, we know you’re strong, but right now you have to let us help you make this easier.”

“I feel so helpless,” she said with a trembling lip.

“This isn’t your fault, Lee,” Werner said. “It could’ve happened to any of us, and you would’ve done the same for us.” He caught the slight raise of Anna’s eyebrow and the twitch of her lip. Ben looked away and started opening his already bursting rucksack again.

They only got close to the emergency exit by mid-afternoon. Charl and Lee were probably half an hour behind them, but he thought they’d make it, which was great, but he was unsure of whether there would be someone to take Lee to Ai-Ais while the rest of them completed the final part of the hike. They might all be forced to camp overnight to make sure she wasn’t left stranded.

Werner was feeling the extra weight of his pack and had, without noticing, sped up to get it over with. He was nearing the emergency exit ahead of the others, lost in thought, running through the options on how to get Lee to safety.

“Good afternoon!”

Surprised, he looked up to see a ranger in uniform approach him on foot.

“Afternoon. What a surprise, but I’m certainly happy to see you. We have an injured person in our party, and we weren’t sure we’d find someone to help us get her out of here so late in the day.” He stretched his steps and, when he reached the man, stuck out his hand. “Werner Barnard.”

The ranger shook his hand. “Actually, Mr Barnard, I’m just as happy to see you because I was looking for you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, I’m here to pick you up.”

“But why? The rest of us want to finish the hike.” As he

said the words, he realised how nonsensical they were. There was no way the ranger could have known about Lee.

"Normally I'd let you, but we've received an urgent request from your grandfather to come get you. We don't typically do this, but you'll have to come with me."

The ranger was making no sense. Werner glanced back to watch Anna and Ben approaching.

"Your grandfather has had a medical emergency, I'm afraid, and you have to get to him as soon as possible."

Werner's blood ran cold in his veins. "What kind of an emergency?"

The ranger looked down, suddenly apologetic. "I'm sorry, Mr Barnard, I don't have the details. All I know is that his condition is serious and that one of your company's planes is here to take you back to South Africa immediately."

The others dropped their backpacks next to Werner's and greeted the ranger.

"What's happened? Everything okay, bud?" Ben asked.

"Um, it seems I have to get back to South Africa immediately. We'll give Lee a lift to Ai-Ais and then I'll fly home. That leaves three of you to finish the rest of the hike tomorrow or maybe the next day, if you wanted to take it slowly." He turned to the ranger. "Three is enough, isn't it?"

"Is everyone else in your party uninjured?'

"Yes."

"That's all right, then." He sat down on a rock. Now that he'd delivered his urgent message, he seemed in no rush any longer.

"Why do you have to get back so suddenly?" Anna asked.

"My grandpa…"

"Oupa Fred?" All his friends knew his grandfather. How could they not? And all of them used the affectionate term "oupa", the Afrikaans word for grandfather, when talking about and to him.

"He's had some kind of medical emergency, and I have to get back." Werner could feel his grip on the moment slip. The urgency of getting to Oupa Fred moved all rational thought aside. He glanced back along the trail again. Still no sign of Charl and Lee.

"I'm going to go get them," he said and set off at a brisk pace. Ben appeared beside him, out of breath and also without his pack. They needed to get Lee to the ranger's vehicle as quickly as possible.

Werner spotted them where they were resting on a rock, laughing and chatting. He cursed under his breath, knowing he couldn't blame Lee for keeping him from the most important person in his world, but his panic wouldn't let him react rationally.

Ben touched his shoulder. "Slow down, let's do this calmly. It'll be the most efficient."

"What's up, guys?" Charl called out to them.

Werner started to speak, but Ben cut him off before his emotions could spill over into the still afternoon. "There's a ranger waiting at the emergency exit. He'll get you out, Lee. And we have to move fast because Werner has to get home in a hurry. Oupa Fred's in hospital."

To their credit, both Charl and Lee immediately got to their feet and asked no questions. Werner and Ben each picked up a rucksack. "Charl, if you can help Lee, we'll be able to move more quickly."

Half an hour later, after a quick repacking of the rucksacks to distribute supplies for the remaining hikers, they were in the ranger's Land Rover. Charl gave Lee a kiss and Werner a quick hug, and then they were driving off. Werner looked back, but his friends had already disappeared in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER TWO

Present day
Offices of the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights
Arusha, Tanzania

"Ma'am? I need to interrupt you for a moment."

"Come in, Thabo." Ruth Masisi looked up from her paperwork and watched her assistant walk towards her desk, his young brow furrowed. She'd become fond of him over the last few years, and if it hadn't been for the fact that she would be limiting his future by tethering him to her for longer, she would have opted to keep him with her for what would undoubtedly be a challenging next chapter in her career at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

"Ma'am, we need to send these documents regarding your personal background off to the ICC by the end of the month. We don't have much time to complete them."

"I'm aware of it."

"Then why—?"

"—haven't I filled in anything?" She sighed at the prospect

of digging up details from her past. “I think you know why.”

Thabo dropped his eyes to the forms in his hands again. He did know. Had known since his second year in her office, when she’d confided in him after a gruelling case that had involved an orphan suing the government of Tanzania for a rape that had happened while the victim was a ward of the state. It had been one of the last of many very late nights, and they’d sat discussing the emotional scars that orphaned children, abused by corrupt state-run orphanages, would carry with them for the rest of their lives. There had come an unusual moment of quiet reflection, and she’d told him. The secret that she’d carried with her for half her life. He didn’t know everything, but he knew enough to understand why she was hesitating now.

“Forgive me for speaking out of turn, Ma’am, but this is the twenty-first century, even here in Africa. I really don’t think you’ll be crucified for that any more. There might be one or two hateful, vitriolic reactions, but those will pass. Your reputation speaks for itself.”

She smiled at the mixture of indignation and loyalty. She didn’t think she’d possessed such conviction when she was his age. “You are kind, but we both know you’re just saying that.”

“Well,” he said and sat down across from her the way he did when he was settling in to make a case, “let’s say the reaction is a big one. You can explain what happened. For goodness sake, you were so young. And what else were you supposed to do? Most people would have sympathy for you. Even though I know you’d never want that,” he added hastily.

He was on a roll now. She had to stop him before he convinced her. “I’ve built a career on my integrity. If I tell the world what happened thirty years ago, there is a distinct possibility that I will be crucified *and* lose everything I’ve fought for. A loss like that could reach far beyond my life. It might also affect all the victims we’ve represented.”

“Could we convince the ICC to keep it to themselves?”

It was endearing how he always used "we" when he referred to problems that were hers. "What do you think?"

He pulled a face and sighed. "I guess not."

Soon all this would be over, and he would return to South Africa and be snatched up by a prestigious law firm. She hoped he wouldn't forget all the things they'd done and the code of ethics they'd used to guide them through some very complicated issues. The realities of life in Africa meant that the law was bent more often than not. But bending and abusing lay uncomfortably close to one another, and it took a strong moral compass to distinguish between the two.

"Even if they wanted to, even if they understood and accepted all that had happened when I was a young woman, they would have no choice but to disclose it. *Their* reputation and effectiveness depend on honesty. And since I can't explain the final details of what happened, it'll simply create unnecessary, unresolvable chaos."

"What are we going to do then? We can't postpone forever."

"Have you heard anything from old Mr Barnard?"

Thabo shook his head. "Nothing since you went down to see him."

"In that case, give me those papers. I'll start on them."

He got up and handed her the papers reluctantly. "Is there anything else I can do?"

"No, thank you, I don't think so." He remained standing in front of her desk, unwilling to leave her with the papers she was required to fill with details of her past. She bent her head to signal that the conversation was over and that he needed to leave. He didn't move.

She looked up at him. "Actually, Thabo, will you bring our Monday flight to Johannesburg forward to Friday? You can spend some time with your family, and I'll fly from there to Cape Town again to see if another visit to Mr Barnard might be of value." Perhaps she could still find some answers before

having to disclose her past. She was doubtful, however. It had taken her more than a decade to track down Fred Barnard, and despite her best efforts and repeated visits, she was still none the wiser. He'd been unfailingly courteous but had told her nothing. Had denied all knowledge of her past, one that she believed had crossed his more than three decades ago. Now, however, she had a deadline. Perhaps he would be sympathetic to that. One last shot at unravelling the past would probably be worthwhile.

Thabo smiled and nodded. "An excellent idea, Ma'am."



When she was alone again, Ruth surveyed the office she'd occupied for the last eight years. It wasn't attractive or even comfortable and was fitted out in the typical African government style of linoleum floors and dark wood shelves. She'd brought in a few rugs and vases and paintings from home, but it was still a government office. And why did all African government buildings smell the same? Somewhere between clean and antiseptic. It made her think that the whole continent had a contract with the same cleaning products supplier. Maybe the ICC buildings would smell different. More worldly, perhaps.

Despite the smell, though, she'd been happy here. She'd felt safe, in control of her world and, more importantly, valuable. Only a month ago, she'd posed with her fellow judges for her final official photograph in front of the building, thinking about how lucky she'd been to have the opportunity to put on the black robes. Her own country had signed but not ratified the protocol that had created the Court in 2004, which would have made her ineligible as a Botswanan national. However, there was a clause that allowed for outstanding candidates to be considered, and countries that

had ratified the protocol were allowed to nominate one candidate who wasn't a national. It had been South Africa, the country where she'd studied and worked for many years, that had nominated her. Perhaps someone had nurtured the hope that Botswana would ratify once one of their own was a judge for the Court. Whatever the reason, she'd been honoured to accept, and she'd loved this job more than any other. When she'd been re-elected, she'd had no hesitation about continuing. Representing simple people against powerful government institutions had made her feel like she was somehow atoning for her weaknesses in the past. Their work was rarely easy and had become more and more difficult as even more African member states dragged their heels on ratifying the protocol that had created the Court in the first place, or worse, refused to respect its rulings.

And now she was heading to the ICC in The Hague. In theory, anyway. Why hadn't she disclosed her past to them the minute she was nominated? Partly because she'd felt she couldn't disclose something about which she didn't know the full details, yes, but if she was honest with herself, she also got carried away when the nomination had come. She'd wanted the job. Some African countries had already threatened to withdraw from the International Criminal Court because they regarded it as an instrument of neo-colonialism, while others complained that the ICC took on too many cases from Africa while the fat cats of the first world remained untouchable. To have an African judge in a prominent role could only be good, no matter the angle from which one looked at it. And it would give her the opportunity of a lifetime.

Fred Barnard held the key to a past she didn't fully know but was morally bound to disclose in order to secure that opportunity. When she'd finally found him, after years of digging, all while studying, doing her law articles and simply surviving, she'd approached him to try to uncover the full

truth. She was convinced that he was in possession of crucial information, so all she had to do was put together the part she knew with the part he knew. And right now, she couldn't allow herself to think too much about the danger in actually achieving that.