

Bait

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Extract

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Chapter One

As a boy, George Malewe had gutted thousands of fish for the white men who came to catch game off the coast of Mombasa. But, as he plunged the blade of his favourite teak-handled filleting knife into the soft underbelly and eased it upwards through the stomach wall with a smooth, practised sawing movement, it struck him that he had never before gutted a white man.

A man, George concluded, was not so different from a large karambesi or marlin. The guts spilled out on to the cockpit deck with the same moist splash. And the pool of blood that hissed between his bare toes had the same warm tacky consistency as that of a big game fish.

Admittedly, there was more of it. It would take him a lot longer to swab down the deck and hose the entrails out through the scuppers in the stern of the boat when he was done.

And, George reflected, he had never before gutted a game fish that had been bound to the fighting chair with fishing line.

Nor one that screamed as he eviscerated it.

‘George – move your arse, will you?’

He jumped suddenly at the harsh voice from above. 'Yes, Boss.'

The scrawny African moved to one side, so that instead of hunkering between the bound man's knees he now leaned against the outside of his immobilised left thigh.

'Smile!'

George turned and looked up into the lens of a camera pointing down at him from the flying bridge. He knew all about cameras, and this one was top of the range. Very expensive. He beamed, revealing a decimated set of yellow teeth beneath the peak of his New York Yankees baseball cap.

The Boss Man holding the expensive camera pulled away from the eyepiece with a snarl of annoyance.

'Not you, you stupid *kaffir*. *Him*. You get on with your work.'

George's face fell and he turned silently back to the gaping abdomen of the man who sat bound by his wrists, forearms, ankles, upper thighs and knees to the steel struts of the fighting chair.

'Come on, Dennis!' the Boss Man said cheerfully. 'Say cheese!' Again he snorted with annoyance. 'George – lift up his head, will you?'

George went behind the fighting chair and wrenched the bound man's head off his chest by a hank of silvery hair.

'Up a bit, up a bit . . .'

From his position on the tarpaulin-covered flying bridge, overlooking the cockpit and the stern of the boat, the Boss Man wobbled on his feet slightly as he adjusted the focus on his camera.

'He don't look too clever, does he, George?'

George glanced down at the grey upturned face.

The mouth hung slackly and the open eyes had rolled upwards.

‘He look dead to me, Boss.’

‘Mmm.’

The Boss Man put down the camera and clambered gingerly down a set of iron ladders connecting the superstructure to the cockpit. He was thickset and the way he staggered drunkenly as the boat pitched and rolled on the swell indicated that he was no sailor.

But then George had known that anyway. The skip-pers who worked these fishing grounds for a livelihood knew every inch of the reef, knew precisely where the snag-toothed coral lay near enough to the surface to rip the bowels out of a thirty-foot twin-engined game-fisher like *Martha B* as easy as tearing paper.

The Boss Man didn’t have a clue.

George did; but then you didn’t crew fishing boats from the age of eleven without learning how to navigate into open sea, how to read the currents and how to anticipate the waves that could pick you up and smash you into matchsticks.

That was why he was here.

That and the five hundred dollars the Boss Man had promised him for navigating *Martha B* through the reef, gutting the white man in the chair and asking no questions.

George felt a flutter of excitement as he thought about the money. Five hundred dollars was a fortune in a country where the average monthly wage was less than ten. With five hundred dollars, he could *be* someone. There would be no more scraping a living on the streets of Mombasa, no more stealing from white tourists just to put food on the table for Agnes and little Benjamin. With five hundred dollars, he

could set himself up in business, be one of the smartly dressed *tausi* like Mr Kili who drove around in expensive cars and could order things done simply by snapping his fingers.

‘Yep. He’s dead all right,’ the Boss Man said, a hint of disappointment in his voice. ‘Cut the line, George.’

Five hundred dollars.

Gutting the white man had not been as hard as George had imagined. Once the Boss Man had smashed him over the head with the metal claw of the grappling hook, the rest had been relatively straightforward. In fact, he had quite enjoyed it. It certainly beat stealing wallets, cameras and cell phones. Of course, George had been puzzled as to who this white man was, and what he had done to deserve such a fate. But the Boss Man seemed to know him, so that was OK.

Ask no questions.

As the last of the fishing line was cut from the dead man’s wrists, George looked at his face and shuddered.

‘Right. Get him to the back of the boat.’

The Boss Man was back on the flying bridge now, issuing his orders against the increasingly excited cawking of the seagulls circling overhead.

George manhandled the body out of the fighting chair to the stern rail.

‘OK. Get rid of him.’

The body splashed into the ocean. It floated face-up for a moment, but only until the empty abdominal cavity filled with water and sent it swiftly beneath the surface.

‘Right,’ the Boss Man said. ‘Now get that shit cleared up.’

As he got to work with the hosepipe and the stiff brush, George reflected that the body would not last long in these waters. The blood and entrails siphoning from the scuppers would soon attract a hammerhead or a bull shark, and tuna or sailfish would consume what was left.

As he worked he hummed a tune, 'Wana Baraka', which was a traditional folk song he used to sing with his mother in the shanty church of Likoni when he was a boy. It was about how those who pray will always be blessed, because Jesus himself said so. Nowadays George sang it to his own son, Benjamin, and just the thought of his little boy brought a broad smile of joy to his face. There were not many things in George's wretched life that he was proud of, but Benjamin was one. Today was his third birthday, and five hundred dollars would buy him a present he would never forget.

But, suddenly, George's beatific expression turned to one of puzzlement. Putting his hand to the peak of his cap, he stared out across the grey water towards the western horizon. A boat was approaching, low in the water, and, judging by the cascades of spray it threw up as it smashed against the swell, it was travelling fast.

George looked up to the flying bridge, but the Boss Man was hunched over, fiddling with something under the steering console.

'Boss!'

'What is it, George?'

'Boat coming.'

The Boss Man appeared at the rail, squinting through his sunglasses at the rapidly approaching vessel. He smiled. 'Right on the money,' he said, and turned back to the wheel again. 'Get on with your work.'

As he swabbed the deck, George watched the other boat out of the corner of his eye until it drew near enough for him to identify it as a high-powered speedboat, the kind he sometimes saw moored near the rich tourist resorts at Kikambala, Bamburi and Watamu. There was a white man at the wheel, hunched down behind the Perspex windshield. George did not recognise him. As the boat drew alongside *Martha B*, the man tossed a mooring rope across. George took the rope and secured it to one of the deck cleats.

‘Right, Georgie-boy,’ said the Boss Man, ‘I’m afraid this is where I’m going to have to bid you *kwaheri*.’

George watched him negotiate the whitewashed iron ladder on the side of the boat. The expensive camera was now secured in a padded shoulder bag slung across his broad back. The Boss Man tottered unsteadily on the leading rail before sitting down and easing himself into the bobbing speedboat. He turned and smiled at the bemused crewman.

‘Hope you don’t mind – but I’m sure you know how to drive, don’t you, George? It’ll be a little treat for you. And you know that bloody reef like the back of your hand.’

George nodded dumbly.

‘Nearly forgot.’ The Boss Man rummaged in the pocket of his shorts and flung George a ten-dollar bill. ‘You’ll get the rest back on dry land.’ He grinned. ‘Then you can buy me a beer, eh? Maybe some girls. Lots of pretty *manyanga* for Georgie-boy, eh?’

Then the Boss Man said something to the man in the speedboat, and the craft’s mighty engines coughed into life. George watched as it moved away from *Martha B* in a lazy arc, and saw its stern bite into the churning water as the turbos kicked in and

fired it towards the distant mainland.

George shrugged. *Five hundred dollars and no questions asked.* He stared at the ten-dollar bill in his hand, then put it under his cap and shinned up the ladder to the flying bridge. He'd been on the flying bridge of one of these game boats before, of course. But always at the shoulder of the skipper. Bait boys weren't allowed near the wheel or the controls, not unless they were trusted.

When he'd been a bait boy, George reflected bitterly, he'd never been trusted.

He had watched though. He knew how to steer, how to ease forward the throttles and make the engines throb – and, although he wasn't sure how the compass worked, he knew every last inlet of the coast. George settled himself in the cushioned pilot's chair and sighed contentedly.

Five hundred dollars. Yes, he would soon be like Mr Kili in Mombasa. Maybe one day he would have his own boat. Yes, that would be good. Little Benjamin would like that.

He reached forward and jabbed the starter button.

A mile away now, the Boss Man winced in his seat in the rear of the scudding speedboat as *Martha B* disintegrated in a ball of flame. Splinters of wood and debris rose on the back of an oily black mushroom cloud, drifted lazily in the air, then fell back to the ocean in a cascade of tiny splashes. Eventually the smoke dissipated into a single thin swathe high above the surface, then vanished altogether. Of the boat, there was no sign.

'*Kwaheri*, George,' the Boss Man muttered as the powerful boat swung round and headed south. '*Kwaheri*.'

Chapter Two

Ever since the elections of late 2007 and the damn-near civil war that followed, Ernies had been scarce in this part of Kenya. Too many killings. *Too much heavy shit going down*. But scarce did not mean extinct – and thankfully there were always a few gunslingers determined to prove that tribesmen with machetes and cops with batons and semi-automatics couldn't spoil *their* fun.

‘Aw – sonofabitch! I’ve done it *again*!’

Up on the flying bridge of *Yellowfin*, Jake Moore sighed and killed the thirty-footer’s twin engines and tried to remember that in these troubled times the Ernies and their money were just about all that kept his boat – and his livelihood – afloat.

‘Mr Jake! Mr Jake!’

‘OK, Sammy,’ he said, wearily swinging his legs from the dashboard and easing himself out of his chair. ‘I heard.’

His accent marked him out as an Englishman, and the faint north-east twang betrayed his Northumbrian roots. He certainly had the rugged look of a Cheviot hill farmer – and there were those who said he had the cussedness too. It was a comparison that always

amused him, because Jake had never been to the Cheviots in his life. He belonged to the sea. And no matter how many times he tried to escape its grip, he always found himself coming back.

Down in the cockpit, Sammy the bait boy had clambered barefoot on to the stern rail and was peering out at the ocean. Behind him, strapped into the fighting chair, the overweight Ernie in the shop-new bush hat scratched the back of his neck, leaving livid white marks on the red raw skin. He spun round and smiled stupidly as Jake came down the ladder.

‘It slipped out of my hands,’ he said sheepishly. ‘Sorry, man.’

There was a guffaw from the shade of the cabin awning beneath the bridge, where two more Ernies sat in deck chairs and tinked their beer bottles together.

‘That piece of kit has got to be worth twelve hundred bucks *at least*,’ one of them announced. ‘You’re a goddamn liability, Ted.’

‘I’m real sorry, Jake,’ the Ernie in the chair repeated.

‘Not to worry,’ Jake said evenly, thinking only of the hundred bucks an hour these bozos were each paying for the privilege of dropping his fishing rods in the ocean. ‘You see it, Sam?’

‘I see it, Mr Jake,’ the boy said, his eyes never leaving the water as he stripped off his sun-bleached T-shirt.

‘OK.’

He nodded to Sammy. Without hesitation, the boy launched himself from the back of the boat and arrowed into the fizzling remains of its wake. The Ernies under the awning levered themselves from

their deck chairs and lumbered unsteadily to the stern rail, beers clutched to their bare chests.

‘This I *got* to see,’ one of them said, resting a broad buttock on the gunwale. The four men watched as Sammy moved smoothly and rapidly through the water, tacking left and then right like a porpoise to take account of the swell.

The Ernie in the fighting chair shook his head in admiration. ‘I’ll be damned. You train him to do that?’

‘I guess it’s just a talent he was born with, Ted,’ Jake said.

The Ernie, gawping out at the ocean, did not register the sarcasm in his voice.

Fifty yards out, Sammy suddenly disappeared under the water. When he resurfaced a few moments later, a twelve-foot fishing rod was clasped in his hand and a huge smile split his face.

‘Sonofabitch!’ exclaimed Ted. He said something else, but the whooping and high-fives of his buddies drowned out his words.

Jake permitted himself a self-satisfied smile as Sammy returned to the boat. He reached down and retrieved the rod, then hauled the bait boy over the rail and into the cockpit.

‘You oughtta get that kid on TV!’ one of the Ernies exclaimed. ‘I know a guy who’s pretty high up in CBS. You’re talking big money contracts, man—’

‘Sammy’s not for sale, pal,’ Jake said, clambering back up to the flying bridge.

Although he had to admit the money would come in mighty handy.

The sun was setting by the time Jake cracked open his

first Tusker of the day. The Ernies, lobster red and worse the wear for drink, had been deposited at their hotel marina, and Sammy, having cleared up after them, had dived overboard at Jalawi Inlet to swim back to the shack on the edge of the jungle he shared with his mother and younger brother. Now, as he steered *Yellowfin* through the narrowing channel of Flamingo Creek towards the boatyard a mile upriver, Jake took a long luxurious pull on the ice-cold beer. The first mouthful tasted of the sea salt caked on his lips, and he wished – as he always wished at this time of the day – that he still smoked. Packets of nicotine gum were no substitute for the harsh impact of Marlboro smoke on the back of the throat. Once the pharmaceuticals companies could replicate that sensation, tobacco's days would be truly numbered.

After anchoring the boat, he jumped into a motor launch moored in the shallows. He ramped up the outboard and directed the craft towards a row of bare lightbulbs strung along the length of the jetty. The jetty led to the workshop, a large breezeblock and corrugated-iron structure on the south bank of the river. From one corner of the building came the low thrum of a generator. In another corner, barely insulated by three large panes of clear plastic, was the office of Britannia Fishing Trips Ltd. Inside, looking for something in a pile of dog-eared papers stacked on a battered metal filing cabinet behind the desk, was Jake's business partner.

'Evening, Harry,' Jake said.

Harry Philliskirk grunted and wafted a hand in greeting, but did not turn.

'What have you lost?'

'I can't remember,' Harry said. 'But I will when I find it.'

‘Good luck,’ Jake said.

As far as he could see, it was a miracle that Harry could ever find anything in his self-imposed chaos of paperwork. But Harry – as Harry kept reminding him – had a *system*. ‘Don’t ask me to explain it, old man,’ he would say, ‘but it works.’

He was forty-two years old, but age meant nothing to the tall Londoner with the crisp Home Counties accent. As far as Harry was concerned, he simply *existed* – and, if you wanted to demarcate that existence into years, that was your concern. In any case, Harry was one of those people who defied any sort of pigeonholing. He stood six feet four inches in his sandals – Harry rarely wore shoes – and the shapeless clothes that hung from it exaggerated his spare frame. His usual choice of attire was a grubby vest and ancient army camouflage pants, a combination which was not helped by the grimy lime-green I RAN THE 1ST LONDON MARATHON baseball cap that he had worn with pride for over a quarter of a century. Unruly sprigs of greying greasy hair sprouted from under the cap, framing a narrow, almost morose face dominated by a large bony nose.

‘There you are, you see!’ Harry exclaimed triumphantly. ‘Always trust in the system!’

He waved a piece of paper between his forefinger and thumb like Chamberlain returning from Munich.

‘What is it?’

‘An invoice for seventeen thousand dollars’ worth of diesel fuel.’

Jake felt a knot tighten in his stomach. ‘What about it?’

‘I told the Arab that we had paid it. He said we hadn’t. This would appear to prove that he was right and I was wrong.’

‘Oh shit.’

‘Hmm,’ Harry said. He sat down on the corner of the desk and stared out of the office’s single exterior window at the twinkling lights of the smart new marina complex that had been built on the other side of the creek. ‘Still – not to worry.’

‘We don’t even have seventeen *hundred* dollars, Harry,’ Jake reminded him.

‘No.’ Harry grinned, wagging his finger. ‘But we’ve got the Arab’s fuel.’

‘Yes. And the Arab has got associates with guns.’

‘Don’t you worry about the Arab, old boy,’ Harry said. ‘Business will pick up. I can feel it in my water.’

Jake drained his beer and tossed the bottle through the office door and into an old oil drum in the workshop. ‘Jesus Christ, Harry.’

He went to the window. Through the thickening gloom, it was still possible to make out the crisp modern angles of the brick and smoked-glass boat-houses, clubs and diving schools which had sprung up seemingly overnight on the opposite bank. Their own premises were like an outhouse by comparison. Jake could imagine the blazered clubmen and their wives staring across from the veranda of the Flamingo Creek Yacht Club and wondering when the developers’ bulldozers were scheduled to obliterate the squalor that gave such a sour taste to their gin and tonics.

‘How were the Ernies?’ Harry asked breezily. ‘They were from Detroit, weren’t they?’

It was Harry who had coined the term ‘Ernies’ to describe the pale-skinned tourists who came to Kenya in search of big fish. Jake didn’t pretend to know about literature, but Harry assured him that

every one of them, whether from the USA or the Ukraine, imagined themselves to be Ernest Hemingway, and that every puny baitfish they heaved aboard would have become a two-hundred-pound marlin by the time they returned home. Jake wasn't about to argue. Harry was an educated man. As long as the Ernies paid, Jake didn't care what he called them.

He reached into a pocket of his shorts and dropped a wad of bills on the desk. 'They paid up in full and in cash.'

Harry rubbed his hands and placed the cash in a tin box. 'God bless America.'

He put the box in a floor safe, then stood and rubbed the base of his crackling spine. Jake watched him closely. Ever since he'd got back, there'd been something about his partner that didn't seem quite right. The good humour and the bravado were in place, but then those were Harry's default settings. Jake had known Harry long enough to tell when he was hiding something.

'What is it, Harry?'

'Eh?'

'Out with it.'

There was a moment when Harry debated keeping up the pretence, but then it passed and his long face fell into an expression of weary resignation. 'Oh, Christ, Jake. I was hoping you might have already heard.'

'*Harry . . .*' Any number of apocalyptic scenarios suddenly flashed across Jake's mind. Had there been a bombing? Was the country about to erupt into bloodshed once again? Had the government in Nairobi imposed martial law and ordered all foreign nationals to get the hell out?

Harry slumped down behind his desk and removed his cap. 'It's Dennis Bentley.'

Jake almost laughed with relief. 'Dennis? What about him?'

Harry nodded in the direction of a ship-to-shore wireless positioned by the door. 'It's been on the radio all day.'

Jake scowled. 'Well, since *Yellowfin*'s radio is still in bits, you can assume I'm in the dark. What's happened to Dennis, Harry?'

'Well, that rather does seem to be the point, old man.' Harry shrugged. 'Nobody appears to know.'

Chapter Three

From the elevated third tee of Monte Julia golf course, Norrie Barclay could see for more than thirty miles beyond the scalped, arid foothills of the Serr de Ronda mountains to the hazy blue smudge of the Mediterranean sea. On a clear day, it was possible to see even further to the jutting black tooth of Gibraltar nearly fifty miles to the south.

Norrie couldn't care less. The only view that concerned him was down into the steep-sided ravine that separated the tee from the handkerchief-sized green 219 yards away. This unforgiving bastard had already swallowed three top-of-the-range Titleists and wrecked his scorecard. Anyone else would have cut their losses and walked away – but not Norrie Barclay. There was the small matter of pride to consider. After careful deliberation, he selected a six iron from his golf bag, removed another gleaming Titleist from the ball sleeve and approached the tee-box.

‘Come on, Norrie! This time!’

Norrie turned and smiled grimly at his playing partner lounging in the shade of the golf buggy.

‘I'm going to whip its arse, mate,’ he said confidently.

His playing partner swigged from a bottle of San Miguel he had plucked from an ice-box attached to the back of the buggy. He was slim built, and Norrie guessed maybe in his early thirties. He wore pressed slacks and a maroon golf shirt. Norrie Barclay knew him as Whitestone, but what he didn't know was that Whitestone had many names.

'Here's to fourth time lucky,' Whitestone said, and raised the bottle in a toast.

Arrogant prick, Norrie thought as he dug the point of his tee into the bone-hard earth. Just because his guest had fluked a drive to within five feet of the pin he thought he was Tiger fucking Woods. But just as quickly Norrie reprimanded himself. There was no need to be like that. All in all Whitestone was a decent bloke. Strange fellow, admittedly. A bit *intense* at times – and even now Norrie still couldn't place that accent of his. Was it European? Was there a touch of Kraut in there? It was hard to tell. Anyway, it didn't matter where he was from. What mattered was they'd done some good business since he'd flown in this morning. They could do with a few more like him on the Costa. And, it had to be said, Whitestone's merchandise was top class. Everyone thought so – which was why Norrie was making a healthy little earner for himself by reselling Whitestone's goods to his associates in the Balkans. All right, it wasn't strictly kosher business protocol, but you got nowhere in this world unless you were prepared to bend a few rules.

'Nice and easy, Norrie,' Whitestone said.

Norrie took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. *Backswing, hold, downswing ... Thwapp!* The contact was fat and healthy and echoed satisfyingly from the steep sides of the ravine.

'You're the man!'

With mounting excitement, Norrie shaded his eyes from the sun and attempted to get a bead on his ball. There! A speck of iridescent white against the blue sky, soaring high and handsome and on a perfect trajectory. Christ – maybe he *was* the man! The ball pitched ten yards on to the green, bounced once and then—

‘Hold up! Hold up!’ Norrie wailed. ‘*Nooo!*’

The ball bit into the turf and spun backwards, gathering speed as it approached the lip of the ravine. For a moment it seemed as if it might catch on the unruly tuft of marron grass that fringed the green, but instead the ball bobbled once and dropped over the edge, bouncing crazily on the rocky outcrops as it plunged into the abyss.

‘Bad luck, Norrie,’ said Whitestone, as he stepped from the buggy and made his way to the tee-box.

Norrie leaned on his golf club like a bent old man. ‘I do not fucking believe what I have just seen. I *never* get backspin. *Never!*’

‘Of course, it could be worse,’ Whitestone said.

‘I don’t see how.’ Norrie shrugged, staring balefully down into the crevasse.

In a single fluid movement that would have graced anybody’s golf game, Whitestone swung a Big Bertha War Bird with nine-degree loft into the side of Norrie’s head. Norrie staggered across the tee-box, blood pumping from a two-inch gash, then fell on his backside on the artificial grass.

‘What did I tell you about business etiquette, Norrie?’ Whitestone said calmly, the club resting on his shoulder like a parasol. ‘About doing deals behind my back with *my* merchandise?’

‘*Wha—*’ Norrie said, his eyes spinning in their sockets.