



*Wings
of
Gold*

NEVILLE SHERRIFF

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Chapter 1

The warmth of that March day in 1865 was the first sign of another long English winter coming to an end. As the sun broke through the clouds, dappling the farm lands with light, James Quenton removed his shirt to let the rays touch his bare skin.

He was dark for an Englishman. The years spent working the fields at his father's side had added to his natural duskiness, intensifying his brooding good looks and hardening his strong body so that he looked older than his nineteen years. His eyes, too, were a dark brown, set wide apart under a broad brow. He was of average height, broad-shouldered, with a hard, flat stomach.

James stopped working and raised his arms to ease his tired muscles. The year was well under way, but so far offered no more promise than those which had preceded it. It had always been that way, starting with the despair which had gradually become a feature of his father's character. The land would never be theirs, and the endless labour only benefited the man who owned it while the tenant farmers continued to live in poverty. James sighed, reached for the pitchfork and struggled with the large stack of hay.

Now that he was older he came to realise it was that same despair which had made his father prone to violence – often beating his son when there was nothing else to strike out at. The land felt nothing and the landlord was beyond reach. At fifteen the boy had turned into a man, strong enough to resist and fight back, so the beating ceased. The only other outlet for his father's frustration was himself, and that inner target, as much as his sudden illness, had sent him to an early grave four years ago, leaving James the sole supporter of the family. The narrow strip of land he worked as a tenant farmer provided barely enough to feed and clothe his mother and younger brother and sister; there was little left which allowed them to raise their standard of living.

As far as James was concerned, it had been the tenant farmer's way of life which had killed his father, and he feared it would one day do the same to him. He could not change the system he had inherited; that was beyond his power. Power, he thought bitterly, it always came down to that. It made him determined to escape the endless routine and futile hopes of a tenant farmer. Perhaps that was why he subconsciously resisted forming close bonds with his neighbours, as if their acceptance of that way of life would taint him or sway him from his goal of finding something better. Bennett was the only person he could call a friend, and he lived some hours' walk away. As a result they saw each other only once or twice a month. If their contact became more regular, that relationship, too, might change.

James frequently had to fight the resentment he felt towards those who depended on him; he could not just leave and abandon his responsibilities towards his family. Perhaps one day, when his brother Timmy was old enough to take over his role – but by then it might be too late.

He was sweating by the time he stacked the last bundle of hay, and glanced longingly at the cool water of the river. But it was already late afternoon with plenty of chores to be done around the home. He hoped Timmy had already chopped some kindling for the fire;

the younger boy was habitually lazy.

Wiping off the worst of the sweat on to his shirt, he pulled the grimy garment over his shoulders. As he bent to collect the small cloth bundle which had contained a simple lunch, he heard the approach of a galloping horse.

He straightened and squinted into the fading sun, cursing when he recognised Clinton Amersforth, the landlord's son. His presence on the farm both intrigued and unsettled James, for Clinton had long ago demonstrated he had little interest either in the estate or the people who toiled on the land.

As the horse drew to a brutal halt he was forced to move swiftly aside. 'Master Clinton,' he said and bobbed his head respectfully at the brawny youth. The horse kept moving, forcing him to turn with it as it snorted nervously around him. Clinton watched him with a superior grin on his thick lips.

'I have work to do,' said James, blinking his eyes against the dust thrown up by the milling of the horse's hoofs. He felt his natural dislike of the horseman blend with his mounting anger at the unnecessary display of arrogance. Clinton, looking down at him from the loftiness of his saddle, emphasised his elevated station in life. Like his father, Morgan Amersforth, he had a reputation of being a bully, often striking a tenant with his horsewhip for no reason.

'You have work to do?' echoed Clinton with a laugh that emerged as a snort. 'That makes a change, Quenton! I hear you spend most of your time in the village tavern – especially with the innkeeper's daughter!' He lashed out with his riding crop, but James moved quickly back. Clinton scowled when the whip slashed at empty air.

James glared back at him. Clinton's reference to the innkeeper's daughter told him what had prompted the visit, for Bennett had warned him of the youth's advances towards Lydia. The thought of the brutish landlord's son with gentle and petite Lydia curled his anger into a tight knot within his stomach.

'What I do with my own time is my concern,' he called out, stepping back as the horse turned and brushed past him.

Clinton laughed harshly. 'Not any longer, peasant – not if it involves Lydia, do you hear? Stay away from her from now on!'

James knew he should remain silent and let Clinton think he had scared him off, yet he could not stop himself. 'I think I'll wait till Lydia tells me that herself,' he replied. 'She knows a gentleman is not born, but bred – you and I are proof of that.'

There was a narrowing of Clinton's eyes an instant before the big man leaped from the saddle and struck out with his riding crop. The blow caught James on his forearm, but stepping back he was off balance and fell to the ground as the older and bigger man's fist smashed into the side of his head.

He lay stunned, shaking his head to clear the loud buzzing in his ears. With eyes watering from the force of the blow, he was barely conscious enough to see Clinton advancing towards him as he struggled to his feet, trying to ready himself for the next attack. Whatever happened now, Clinton would make sure the Quentons were evicted from the farm; there was no reason to endure the beating which he obviously planned on meting out.

Although James weighed considerably less than his opponent, he had had more than his share of fights. He shook his head again and hoped he would be able to withstand the next onslaught.

'I'm going to cut your peasant cock off!' snarled Clinton as the setting sun glinted on the knife in his hand. He lashed out, but James stepped back nimbly. When he lunged forward again, it was obvious he had little experience with the blade. James waited for the next wild thrust.

As it came he stepped aside, clamped his hand around Clinton's wrist and kicked him savagely in the crotch. The young man grunted as he sank down on to his knees. James slammed his knee up into Clinton's face, but it seemed to have little effect apart from bloodying his nose.

The next moment, Clinton pulled his knife hand free with such force that James was jerked forward to fall against his opponent. A huge hand gripped his throat; meaty fingers closed on him with awesome strength, crushing muscles and sinews and cutting off his breath.

James struggled desperately, using both hands to keep the knife at bay. A rising panic gripped him as he felt the overwhelming strength of the other man. It was as if the fingers clamped around his throat were tearing through the skin. One moment he was lifted off his feet and the next flung to the ground, pinioned there by Clinton's great mass.

His head spun from lack of air. Powerless to fight the big man off him, he knew he had only seconds in which to act before he lost consciousness and the knife was plunged into him. He released one hand from Clinton's wrist and struck out at the bloody face above him, jabbing his fingers into his opponent's eyes.

The young man jerked back with an agonised cry. James used the momentary respite to wriggle his body out from under him, but was too weak to pull entirely free. He clung desperately to Clinton's wrist when the other man fell back across his chest.

There was a loud grunt from above him. At the same time, he felt the warm stickiness of blood spill out across his hand. The fingers around his throat started to relax, and a long gasping sigh escaped from the man sprawled across him.

James lay still, trying to regain his breath. The bright red bloodstain, which had spread up to his wrist, made him grimace as he pushed the inert body from him. The knife was still clutched in the dead youth's hand, and his lips were pulled back in a sneer of death. A thin trickle of blood ran from the corner of one eye where James's fingers had pierced it.

A nearby willow tree provided support as James leaned against it, his legs trembling from the effect of the fight. He looked out across the fields, but there was no one in sight. Not that it would make any difference if there was a witness to what had happened: when Morgan Amersforth discovered his son's body in that area he would automatically accuse James. No one would believe Clinton's death was an accident; the murderer of Morgan Amersforth's son would be hanged without trial.

It was a while before his strength returned. There was not much time to act as he knew a search would be mounted when Clinton failed to reappear at the manor house by nightfall. The corpse would have to be hidden before he could place sufficient distance between himself and the farm.

He dragged the heavy body some distance along the river bank before concealing it in a clump of reeds. Realising that the appearance of the riderless horse would only accelerate the call for a search, he tied its reins to a branch of the willow to prevent the animal returning home.

Although the rapidly approaching night had cooled the air, a layer of sweat coated his skin as he started the long run home. A prickle of loneliness struck him when he spotted

the thin plume of smoke rising from the little hovel. It might be the last time he saw the place where he was born – that, as well as his family.

His mother walked out of the cottage just as he came to a breathless halt. 'Son?' she cried as she saw the blood on his shirt.

'It's Clinton Amersforth,' he said quickly. 'He's dead – I killed him. We had a fight ... he fell onto his own knife – it was an accident, Mother!'

'Clinton's dead? Oh, James ... They'll hang you for sure!' The frail woman flung her arms about his neck and held him tightly. He felt her body tremble before she pulled away and stared up at him with eyes filled with frightened tears. 'You must run – go now!'

'I can't! What about you ... the children ... ?'

Her voice, shrill with panic, was a frantic shout. 'It'll be you Lord Amersforth wants punished,' she said, crying hysterically now. 'We'll be all right, son. Run, James – you'll be as good as dead if Morgan Amersforth catches you!'

She pushed him into the hut, glancing over her shoulder as if fearing the avengers of Clinton's death were already upon them. The children watched with anxious eyes as she helped him fling a few essentials into a cloth bag.

He hugged each of them in turn. 'Timmy ... Rosie,' he whispered, then took the bag from his mother and moved outside. There were dark, threatening clouds sweeping in across the moors as he turned back to her and took her into his arms.

She gave a moan of anguish. 'Run as far as you can, James,' she said. 'Even England won't be big enough to hide you.'

She pushed him away from her in the direction of the moors, but her fingers still clutched his shirt, as if she could not bear their parting. 'Go!' she pleaded. 'Go *now!*'

He pulled her back into his arms. 'Goodbye, Mother – forgive me!' He saw the smaller children peer fearfully out of the door. Giving his mother one last look, he turned and ran into the approaching night.

It was two hours before he stopped to rest for the first time, falling in exhaustion to the ground. His lungs burned in his chest. Even his ears throbbed from the strain of listening for the sounds of the men, horses and dogs that would inevitably pursue him. Warily he forced himself to his feet and stumbled on again.

Although the uneven ground and the moonless night slowed his progress, James knew the moors well enough to keep direction, but it was still another hour before he reached the tiny farmhouse he had been heading for. A dog barked as he approached the house. 'Be still, Patch,' he whispered, and the dog's threatening growl changed to a low whimper of greeting as the animal recognised the familiar scent. The mongrel sheepdog dashed ahead as he stepped closer.

The door swung open, revealing a slim man framed against the dim light spilling out through the doorway. 'Who's there?'

'It's James,' came the whispered reply. 'Bennett ... come here.' His friend frowned, then stepped out and shut the door behind him. 'I need help ... I'm in trouble, Bennett.'

The other youth laughed. 'Which girl is it now?'

'It's much worse than that. Much worse.' James quickly related the events of that afternoon.

Bennett said, 'They'll hang you for this, James. Where'll you go? What'll you do?' 'London. I can hide out there for a short while. Then on to America, perhaps.' His mother was right; England would be too small for him. Morgan Amersforth was a powerful man

and his vengeance would be strong and relentless. 'I need rest, Bennett,' he added, 'Can I use your shed?'

There was a moment's hesitation before the other replied, 'Of course, but—'

'I'll be gone long before daybreak. Just a few hours' sleep, that's all. You can tell your father I'm on my way to the Patterson farm to buy a cow.'

Bennett reached out and touched James's shoulder. 'Go on ahead,' he said. 'I'll bring a lantern.'

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When Bennett entered the shed, James used the dim light to inspect the contents of his bag. It contained a few slices of dry bread, a single change of clothing and his only jacket. The garment's elbows were all but worn through. The only other item was a small cloth purse which clinked as he tossed it to the ground. James's eyes filled with tears of shame, realising that his mother had given him most of their meagre savings, money which in a week or two should have been spent on the purchase of a milk cow. He swallowed, placed a few of the coins in the inside of his coat pocket, then dropped the balance back into the purse. He handed it to Bennett, who was watching him curiously. 'I need another favour, my friend,' he said, the words sticking in his throat.

Bennett nodded. 'If I can do it, I will.'

'Your father is what – a senior tenant on this farm?'

'A foreman, so to speak.'

'Tomorrow, after I've gone, tell him the truth about my coming here. He'll hear about it soon enough, anyway.'

'He'd agree to my hiding you even if he knew right now.'

'I know,' said James and briefly touched his friend's arm. 'That's why I want you to give him that money. He's to try to use his influence to get my mother and the children placed on your farm. She can work in the landlord's house perhaps, or in the fields if she has to. Young Timmy can help too. Is the old Drake cottage still empty?' he asked, thinking of the small house which had been vacated by another tenant farmer some months ago.

'It is. I'm sure my father can arrange it. He's always been close to your kin.'

They talked a while longer, two old friends who knew they would probably not see each other again. 'I envy you in a way,' Bennett said. 'At least you're your own man now, starting life afresh.'

'Yes.' For James, though, there was little joy in the moment, as the oppressive guilt at abandoning his family sank in.

After a while, as James's eyes started to close, Bennett stood up and covered him with his coat. 'Farewell, my friend,' he said softly. 'God be with you.'

But James was already asleep.

*

It was the first time James had been to London, and the size and bustling activity of the city simultaneously scared and excited him. The glances of strangers constantly unnerved him as he imagined them to be Morgan Amersforth's men.

He managed to find cheap lodgings with relative ease, using most of his small supply of coins to pay for a few days' rent in advance. The next day he plied the harbour area, seeking work on a ship which would take him from England. He had no idea where he

wanted to go or what he would do except that he favoured America. When he stumbled homewards after dark on his third day in London, he'd been unsuccessful long enough to accept anything that came his way.

Instead of going straight back to the tiny room which provided temporary refuge, James was drawn by the noise and laughter emanating from a nearby tavern. He dug inside his pocket, fingered the few remaining coins and, with a shrug of his shoulders, pushed open the doors and was immediately enveloped by the throng of humanity inside.

His first ale did little to dispel the mood of despair which had settled on him. He ordered another, ignoring the feeling of guilt at this extravagance. A huge man in seaman's dress standing beside him gave him a gap-toothed grin and said, 'You'll need quite a bit of this weak swill if you want to get that grim expression off your face – you look like you're drinking cat's piss!' He laughed loudly, a harsh bellow in keeping with his bulk.

James looked up. 'The ale's fine,' he replied, mistrusting the big man's interest in him. Like everyone else in the pub, he looked rough and ready, someone who would think nothing of parting a young man from his money. He tried to shift away but bumped into an equally tough-looking character behind him. The man flashed him a sidelong glance before concentrating on his drink again.

The seaman seemed unaware of James's discomfort as he squinted against the smoke from his pipe and said, 'You've worries then, have you?'

'Some.' Deciding that the big man meant him no harm, James told about his search for work, adding that he had to leave England. He did not give reasons for this, nor did the man ask for any.

'You look like a strong one,' the seaman said. 'So, for the price of an ale, I'll take you to my captain. He's over there, at that table.'

James stared through the blue haze of smoke at a group of half-drunk men hunched around a table laden with jugs and empty bottles. 'Is there a position aboard your ship?' he asked.

'Aye. A few of the men came down sick and we had to leave them at the Cape. You could get work till we get there, but after that you'd be on your own.'

'The Cape?'

The seaman laughed. 'Aye, the Cape Colony. Otherwise known as the Cape of Good Hope.'

James rubbed his jaw. 'Lord knows,' he said, 'I need some hope right now!'

The sailor laughed and held up two fingers at the bartender. He waited till James paid for the drinks, raised his jug and said, 'To the Cape of Good Hope.'

James raised his own ale. The Cape – it was as welcome a destination as any other.

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Chapter 2

Far below the mountain guardian of Cape Town, the city streets, which had bustled with Cape carts, hansom cabs and loaded wagons pulled by spans of oxen, were already wreathed in shade. A solitary double-decker tram, drawn by two horses, made its way up Adderley Street.

James Quenton sat on the edge of an upturned crate and stared up at Table Mountain, watching the late afternoon sunlight cling to the craggy cliffs, tickling the shadowed crevices as it turned relentlessly westwards.

The harbour, too, was tranquil. Earlier that day there had been a flurry of activity, belying the shadow of a trade recession under which Cape Town laboured that autumn. Now, only a few workers criss-crossed the water-front expanse, their elongated shadows jerking in short sharp movements beside them.

Coaches, which had milled about in the docks collecting passengers from the newly arrived ships, were gone now. Only the ships remained, tightly packed rows of scraggy rigging stripped of canvas, their tall masts scratching at a blue sky tinged with indigo. The sea seemed to reach right into the city itself: boats were moored within a few yards of the three-storied custom house.

The changing day softened the harshness of the whitewashed buildings, cushioning the shrill cries of seagulls mingling with the calls of street vendors on the motionless air. From further along the docks came the strident clamour of metal striking metal, breaking the soporific spell that enveloped James. He shivered as the autumn sun retreated around the face of the mountain. The advancing shadows heightened his sense of loneliness, and he looked out to sea as if he could gain comfort from the knowledge that England lay somewhere beyond the misty horizon.

He shifted on the crate and told himself he had to put England from his mind. The Cape Colony was his home now, his future; there was precious little from his past to help him build a new life.

When he stood up, he almost bumped into an old man standing close behind him, watching him with interested eyes. 'Didn't mean to startle you,' the stranger said. 'Just arrived in the Colony, have you?'

James nodded. 'The English ship that came in this afternoon. I worked my way here.'

The old man smiled at him with eyes that were a dark, piercing blue. 'It's a terrible feeling, isn't it, suddenly realising you're on your own in a strange land?'

The accuracy with which the stranger had summed up his misgivings startled James. 'You've been in the same situation yourself, have you?'

'Most people out here have, lad,' the old man replied. 'This is a new land, remember.' He stepped back, moving with an awkward limp.

'Do you work on the docks?'

'You could say that.' He tapped his thigh and added, 'Was a time when I unloaded ships like the one you sailed in on. `But . . .' He touched his leg again. 'Now I take care of a warehouse, that one over there.' He pointed to a massive barn-like structure with a corrugated iron roof. 'The name's Pat Stanton,' he said and pushed out a gnarled hand.

James took it in his own. 'James Quenton.'

A light smile played on Pat Stanton's lips. 'James,' he repeated, as if trying the name on his tongue. 'A grand name for a seaman, I must say. Not Jim?' The twinkle in his eye dispelled James's fear that he was being mocked.

'My mother hoped the name would symbolise a better life for me,' he explained, smiling back at the old man. 'I'm inclined to like the thought – as well as the name.'

'Ah, so it's ambition you're having then! Nought wrong with that, lad.' He laughed softly, a chortle which pulled his eyes into tiny slits. 'So, you'll be looking for a place to sleep?'

'I'd better be getting a move on. My crewmates gave me the names of some inns.'

'But you've been cooped up with your fellow Jacks long enough, I'd dare say.' Pat's eyes twinkled with amusement.

'You're right about that! I was thinking I'd take a look around ... try to find some place where there's little chance of meeting up with any of them.' He glanced at the lights which had started to glow in the city and added, 'I might have left it too late, though.'

'There'll be time for that tomorrow. I can offer you a bunk for the night. It's no inn, but at least the old place is dry and not too cold.'

James glanced at the warehouse. 'I couldn't just—'

'Of course you could! I put together a fair meal, and I'd welcome the company. Grab hold of your bag, lad.' Before James could object any further, Pat moved off in his ungainly shuffle.

The interior of the warehouse was dark with a stale, cloying smell, reminding James of a ship's hold. Pat struggled with an oil lamp, and at last it glowed dully, revealing a cosy corner which he had arranged for himself.

'When I said I could give you a bunk for the night, I was perhaps stretching things a bit.' He waved his arm at the humble quarters. There was a crude wooden cot which looked as though it had been constructed from scrap pieces of timber; next to the bed an empty crate served as a table for the oil lamp, a tin plate and a book yellowed with age. James leaned closer and saw it was a Bible.

Pat Stanton noticed the look, and smiled. 'Don't look so concerned – I'm no religious fanatic. It brings me a bit of comfort, that's all.' He stood with his hands on his hips and thoughtfully surveyed his domain. 'As for your bunk, there're plenty of soft goods around that will serve just fine. But first we'll fix something to eat.'

By the time their simple meal was ready, five mangy-looking cats had appeared on the scene. James was amused to see Pat care for the animals first, talking in a gentle tone while he dished up food for the two of them.

He was relieved when Pat showed no inclination to pry into his reasons for leaving England, asking only how he came to end up in the Colony. 'A chance meeting in London,' he explained. 'The Cape seemed like an interesting place to get to.'

Pat kicked gently at one of the cats, which rolled on to its back before his feet. 'You haven't jumped ship, have you, lad?' he asked softly.

James shook his head. 'They offered me a position to here. After that I would be on my own.'

'It's as good a destination as any, James. Who knows – it might be your destiny as well!'

Later, after they had washed and dried their plates, they sipped a brew of strong coffee, talking about the Colony and the chances of work. 'You picked a bad time to arrive,' Pat said. 'There's not much going for a young man of your calibre.'

'Calibre? Right now my only ambition is to stay alive. But farming is the only thing I know.'

They sat in silence for a while, the only sound the light slurps as they sipped the steaming brew. Then Pat said, 'You could try to get work on one of the wine estates, although they're more inclined to hire Hottentots. They pay them less.'

'I thought I'd try for something here in the city.'

'Why bother? You said it yourself – all you know is farming. It'd be a waste of time. I take it you don't have much money to keep you going?'

'Only my seaman's wages and that's not much. I have to find work in the next day or two.'

Pat was lost in thought for a moment. 'There is something, but—'

'But what? I'll take anything!'

'It'll be hard, backbreaking work,' Pat said. 'And the money won't be much – especially in your case.'

James gave him a curious look. 'What do you mean, in *my* case?'

'You're young, and it'll take time for your muscles to adjust to the kind of labour I'm talking about. Also, the man who'll hire you will know you're desperate for work. But the main reason will be because it'll take time to strengthen your body.'

'I'm pretty strong!' objected James. 'I've been working the fields since I was a child!'

'I can see that, lad. But this will require more than strength.'

'Just what kind of work is it?'

'Building roads. In the Karoo. It's like working in hell, James. Nothing but sun, sand and dust. The earth is hard and dry, and you'll work with pick and shovel from early morning till sunset. You'll get to hate the heat and the land and the men you work with. There'll be no women, little to drink, and you'll share a tent with many other men. After a while you won't know which you hate more – them or the work.'

James laughed nervously. 'Sounds as though you're trying to talk me out of it. I thought they used convicts for that kind of thing?'

'They usually do, but right now they use what are called "distressed men", men without work. There's a depression on, remember? But believe me, you won't get treated much better than a convict.'

'You think you could get me placed there?'

'I know the foreman, and you can tell him I recommended you. He's a hard bastard, though,' he added.

'I'll go and see him.' At least it was a start, something to keep him going for a few months.

'Better get you fixed up with something to sleep on,' Pat said and stood up.

It was some time before he returned from the rear of the warehouse, his arms piled high with large black and white feathers. James watched curiously as he spread the feathers on the hard floor. 'As good a mattress as any,' the old man said. 'You can use one of my blankets.'

'What feathers are they?' asked James as he knelt to feel the soft down. 'They're beautiful!'

'Ostrich feathers, lad. A major export of the Cape. Seen them before?'

'No, but I know what an ostrich is.'

'Do you now? How do you think these feathers got here?'

'I suppose the birds were hunted. How else? Hell, I don't know!'

The old man smirked with superior knowledge. 'What if I told you these feathers came from tame ostriches – from farms?'

'Tame? Like cattle?'

'Oh, they still hunt wild birds, but more and more of them are being kept on farms. That means more than one crop of feathers from a bird. Makes sense, doesn't it?'

'I'd always thought of them as wild creatures.'

'So did most people. They thought the farming thing wouldn't work. It's been tried in Algeria where it failed. They said the birds were too timid to breed in confinement, that the feathers wouldn't match the quality of those taken from wild ostriches. They're being proved wrong.'

James touched the soft down again. 'A farm bird,' he whispered in disbelief.

'There are still problems,' Pat said quickly. 'The birds are prone to disease when they're grouped together. And they break their limbs when they run against the fences. But it *is* working. You'll see some of the farms if you get to work on the roads. Most of them are in the Little Karoo.'

'Is this the only country where this is being done?'

Pat shrugged. 'The only measure of success is taking place here, but they're sure to try elsewhere. I know that in North Africa they keep the birds in individual cages. They actually pluck them bare every four months or so, whereas out here the feathers are clipped. Most people talk of it as plucking, though.'

'You seem to know quite a bit about it.'

'I talk to the feather buyers who export the crops. Believe me, those dumb-looking birds are going to make many men rich before long. Just you wait and see!'

James could not help touching his feather mattress again. When he finally lay down and closed his eyes, he felt as if he were resting on a bed fit for a king.

Chapter 3

The air was laden with the salt smell of the sea when James left the warehouse the next morning. Pat Stanton had given him a rough handwritten note vouching for their acquaintance. 'The man you have to see,' he said, 'is Gert Denker, a Dutchman who's not to be trifled with. Don't even hold his eyes for too long, and don't answer back – not if you want the work.'

The place James sought was not far from the gates of Alfred Dock, on the slopes of Green Point. It was a cluster of rough wooden huts, identified by a crudely made sign announcing that it belonged to Kenrick Construction.

He headed for the biggest of the huts, linked to a smaller one by a broad plank cat-walk a few feet above the muddy ground. The inside was dark and smelled of damp wood. There was no furniture apart from a tiny desk tucked in a corner. His heavy boots thudded dully on the plank floor, and he felt the boards move beneath his feet.

The man seated behind the desk matched the small size of the unit, making James suspect that it could not be Denker. The clerk looked up, annoyed at the interruption. 'What do you want?'

James stepped closer and removed his cloth cap. 'I was told to ask for Mr Denker,' he said. 'About work. I—'

'You from England?' the clerk interrupted. He was in his late fifties, almost completely bald, his brow creased in what seemed to be a permanent scowl.

'Yes,' replied James, deciding to treat the dour individual in the same manner as Pat had prescribed for Denker.

The clerk looked him up and down with obvious disapproval. 'Won't last two days out there,' he said with a sneer. 'You want to think again about seeing Denker?'

James decided it was best not to reply. He stayed in front of the desk, twirling his cap between his fingers.

The other man sighed and started scrawling on one of the papers on his desk. He looked up sharply, as if surprised to find the young man still there. He glared at him before jerking his thumb at the door behind him. It looked as though it had been cut into the wall as an afterthought.

The cat-walk sagged dangerously as James made his way across. The door to the other hut was open, and just inside someone was rummaging through a duffel bag. James tapped on the wall, coughed lightly, and waited for the man to become aware of his presence.

'Mr Denker?' he said as the other man continued to search the contents of the bag, piled high with clothes. There was a clink of glass from deep inside.

Denker turned and glanced over his shoulder, then fiddled inside the bag again. James stared down at the broad and powerful shoulders which strained at the fabric of the man's shirt. 'Mr Denker?' he repeated when the other man continued to ignore him.

This time the Dutchman swung around to face him, while remaining on his knees in front of the bag. 'Say what you want to say,' he growled. 'I'm busy.'

'I'm told you have openings for men. On the road works.'

Denker gave him an appraising look, then laughed harshly. 'For men, yes – not boys.'

His response made James flush with anger, but he managed to bite back the retort which sprang to his lips. 'I've worked on a farm all my life,' he said calmly. 'I'm not afraid of hard work.'

'This is not England, farm boy. You just arrived?' He spoke English without the guttural accent James had heard in other Dutchmen, but his speech somehow sounded harsher to the ear.

James nodded and fumbled in his pocket for the note Pat had given him. 'Pat Stanton told me to give you this,' he said, proffering the wrinkled slip of paper.

Denker rose to his feet, causing James to take an involuntary step backwards in amazement at the sheer size of the man. His short neck rested on huge, hulking shoulders, while his barrel chest fell away to a hard, flat stomach. His trousers were tight-fitting, revealing massive thighs. He's like a bull, thought James, wondering how many men had been broken by those huge, powerful hands.

The note was plucked roughly from his hand. When Denker stepped away to study it, the floorboards trembled dangerously. 'You read it,' he snapped, thrusting the note back. A sneer tugged at the corner of his thin lips.

James reddened as he stared angrily down at the paper. Despite Pat's warning, he was unable to keep his anger and shame from showing on his face when he raised his eyes to Denker's. 'I can't read,' he said in a low voice. The note trembled in his fingers. He wondered how Denker had guessed.

'You English,' came the scornful growl. 'And you think you can rule the world!' He snatched the note back and let it flutter to the mud-stained floor. 'You come here thinking this country will make you rich. You think it will open its arms to you, yet you can't even read what another man writes of you.' He turned his back contemptuously, and for one wild moment James was tempted to jerk him around and smash his fist into the smirking face. Damn him! Denker was conveniently forgetting he was himself an immigrant.

He managed to control his rage and stood seething in silence, letting the Dutchman enjoy the power he had over him.

'The only reason I'd take you on,' said Denker, without looking at him, 'is because we're short of men and I don't have the time to find anyone better. But understand one thing,' he added ominously as he swung round. 'The first sign of trouble from you – any kind of trouble or laziness – and I'll break you in two. Don't think I can't do it.'

Pat's warning flashed through James's mind again, making him lower his eyes. 'I'm a hard worker,' was all he said.

Denker gave him a sudden shove. It was a mere flick of his hand, but it sent him reeling backwards. He grabbed at the door-jamb to stop himself from falling. Glancing quickly at Denker in a mixture of fear and surprise, he realised the rough gesture was nothing more than the foreman's indication that he should cross the cat-walk again. 'Sign the contract in the other office,' said Denker. 'We leave at first light tomorrow.'

The big man followed him back across the flimsy structure, making the cat-walk sway precariously under their combined weight. 'What time should I report?' James asked across his shoulder. There was no protective rail along the cat-walk, so he spread out his arms to help maintain his balance.

'You'd better see you're here by nightfall. You'll sleep in the yard along with the other men. And don't bring any liquor with you,' Denker warned. 'If I so much as smell the stuff

on your breath, I'll throw you back on the streets. You understand?'

'I understand,' James replied softly.

Denker mumbled some instructions to the surly clerk, then turned and said, 'You tell Pat Stanton I don't need him as a recruiting officer. Especially not for young boys.' He turned on his heel and stomped from the hut. The trembling of the cat-walk could be felt through the floor even after the door had swung shut.

'Sigh here,' the clerk said, shaking his head as if doubting Denker's judgement in hiring the youth.

James stood with the pen in his hand and felt the blood creep into his cheeks again. But the clerk made no comment when he reached for the contract to scribble across the space he had indicated. The fact that he had signed something he could not read disturbed James, and he vowed that, too, would change in the future.

The doubts about his commitment flooded through him as he strolled back to the harbour. Yet it was too late now; somehow he would have to make it through the days and months that lay ahead. Then he could decide on his future.

Moments later, when it started to rain, he hoped it was not symbolic of what lay in store for him.

*

An icy wind rushed in from the sea when James returned to the Kenrick offices just before nightfall. He pulled up the collar of his short seaman's coat, relieved it was no longer raining.

He hesitated when he reached the hut he had entered that morning, and turned to stare back at the docks. His farewell to Pat Stanton had been brief but warm, and he knew he would miss the old man despite the brevity of their acquaintance.

'No good delaying it any longer,' he said aloud and, taking a deep breath, walked up the few steps to the door of the hut. It was locked. Standing forlornly as the wind tugged at his collar, he heard voices coming from behind the hut and stepped down to go around the side.

The downpour earlier that afternoon had turned the ground into a squelching mess which sucked at his boots as he ducked under the cat-walk and entered the circular yard formed by the huts. Two wagons were parked there, loaded with supplies for the construction site in the Karoo. At the far side of the yard a man tended the teams of mules. Fifteen men crowded around the warmth of a large fire glowing brightly in the gathering dusk. They glanced at James as he came closer, then resumed their various conversations. They were all considerably older than him, and now he realised why Denker had passed so many scathing remarks about his youthfulness. It was obvious that most of the men had worked on the roads before.

He looked around for the big foreman, expecting to find him there and checking that all the men had reported for work. There was no sign of him.

'Try to find a place out of the wind and under cover,' the man tending the mules said. 'There's more rain on the way.'

James smiled his thanks and studied the encampment. The best spots had already been taken. The space beneath the two wagons was filled with the men's gear, leaving him few choices of suitable sleeping places. He opted for a spot near one of the huts, silently

cursing Denker for not allowing them to sleep inside.

Propping his gear against the wall, he stepped over to the fire. The men let him move in, although no one introduced himself or made any effort to include him in conversation. He sensed they were not being deliberately rude; it was just that they had been there before and he had no right as yet to share their common experience. It suited him in a way, for he often found he was less alone by himself than in the company of strangers.

As the muleteer had predicted, it started to rain again a few minutes later, a soft drizzle which quickly soaked through the men's clothing. They scrambled for the shelter of the wagons, clambering in between the wheels where their gear was stacked. James stared at the exposed spot where his own bag lay; it provided no shelter at all. He decided he might as well stay near the fire for as long as it lasted.

'Hey,' one of the men called out from beneath a wagon, 'there's a little space left over here. At least you'll get your head out of the rain.'

James smiled into the dark, ran for his bag and crawled under the wagon. As the man had said, there was precious little space for him. He felt the fresh mud form around his legs as the rain increased in intensity.

Someone cursed when a trickle of water broke through the floorboards of the wagon and ran down the neck of his shirt.

'It's good to be home again,' someone else remarked wryly.

'Denker's darlings,' added another, and the men laughed at the discomfort, which was once more a familiar thing.

His own silent smile spread, till at last he laughed along with them, feeling the first form of acceptance Pat had said he would sorely need in the times ahead.

*

Pitifully few words were exchanged before the wagons reached the parched expanses of the Little Karoo. Once they had crossed the Cogmans Kloof pass leading through the Langeberg Mountains, a range jealously protecting the watered regions of the coast, the men fell silent as the sun flashed angrily from early morning till its retreat at night.

Although the slow journey was as arduous as Pat had warned, when they stopped at night James seemed to have more energy left than the others. He knew Denker sensed this, so he purposely avoided the foreman, not letting his remarks provoke him. To his relief Denker rode ahead of them each day, sometimes leaving the creaking wagons far behind as he spurred his horse across the plains.

The landscape mesmerised James: flat-topped hills dotted the prairie, their dolerite sills proclaiming the remains of a geological system of far greater eminence. He could sense the age of the earth, its timelessness matched only by the complete silence which enveloped the veld.

The days and nights dragged on, weakening the men with extremes of heat and cold. When the sun sank over the hills, the chill of approaching winter streaked in vengefully, grasping the tired men till the next dawn.

They passed herds of springbok which fled with stiff-legged jumps as the wagons rolled closer. By day flocks of wild ostriches watched curiously, by night, grunting and roaring like lions calling, while the jackals sang their melancholy tunes to the moon. Yet nothing could disturb the silence, the stillness, the peace. It brought a measure of relief to James's fears

of what awaited him.

At last they saw the camp for the first time, four rows of dust-streaked tents set in a haphazard line cleared through the Karoo scrub. The sight was as dismal as the veld surrounding it, even though the faraway mountain ranges shimmered hazily with illusory softness. 'Home, sweet home,' someone muttered, but the remark drew no response from the others.

They climbed wearily down from the wagons, Denker immediately shouting at them to unload the supplies. 'You're lucky,' he said as they started to drag the heavy boxes from the wagons, 'it's too late to get you lot out to the construction point. Use the afternoon to get your breath back, 'cause tomorrow you pitch in with the other men.' He strode off after warning them to stay out of the tents till the labourers returned to camp.

'Where *are* the others?' James asked a man with a dirty white apron strung around his ample waist. The cook turned his bleary eyes on him after checking that the other new arrivals were stacking the supplies where he wanted them.

'They're working on the road about six miles away,' he said, scratching idly at his nose. 'We only shift camp when it gets to around ten.'

James glanced at the two wagons. 'Will there be enough room for all the men? Or are there more wagons?'

The cook gave a loud guffaw and slapped his hips. 'You don't ride on any wagon, you young fool!' he said through peals of loud laughter. 'You walk to work – and back!'

'What about lunch?'

'That gets taken out by wagon. You eat breakfast before you leave in the morning.' He laughed again and added, 'Before you ask about supper, let me tell you that by the time you get back, you won't be interested in anything but sleep. For the first few weeks at least. Not food, not liquor – not even women!' He laughed harshly.

'Seems to be little chance of the latter around here,' replied James.

The cook wiped his eyes. 'Sure as hell not,' he said. 'It's Mother Fist and her Five Daughters from now on. After three months you get to ride to Cape Town on the supply wagon. One week off to slake your thirst and have the real thing, then it's back to Mother for another three months.'

James was about to comment, thought better of it, and said instead, 'Are we at least allowed water while we work?'

'There's water. But take my advice ... don't stop for too many drinks or make your breaks too long, else Denker will have your hide.'

'Seems he enjoys that kind of thing.'

'Don't you ever forget that, boy. There are some tough men in this gang, but none who can handle Denker. If he so much as suspects you think you could take him on, he'd call you. He enjoys breaking bones.' He wagged a warning finger beneath the young man's nose before he turned away to waddle across to the rows of blackened pots heating on the fires.

James joined the line of men carrying supplies from the wagons. More than once he saw them glance at the enticing shade of the empty tents, but the threat implicit in Denker's order proved an all too effective deterrent.

The sun had ceased its cruel assault when the labourers finally returned to the camp. They came marching in against the fading light, a large cloud of dust trailing them as they dragged their tired feet the last few yards. They looked thin and sunburnt. Despite the weariness that showed on their dust-streaked faces, they shouted their greetings at those they recognised among the newcomers. One by one, James's fellow travellers joined their old comrades and were led to empty berths in the tents. At last he alone remained standing in the dusk.

'Don't worry – you won't spend the night out in the cold,' came a voice from behind him. He spun around to stare at a very tall older-looking man. The stranger rubbed a wet cloth across his naked chest and shoulders in an attempt to remove the worst of the day's dust. He smiled, his teeth white against his dark skin. 'There's a spot in my tent,' he said, 'where the night wind blows in. Care to stop it up for us?'

'Sounds fine to me.' James stuck out his hand. 'James Quenton.'

'Amos.' The other man's grip was firm, his fingers and palm covered in hard calluses. 'Grab your bag and follow me.'

James fell in behind him, relieved to find some sort of welcome to the new life he'd now entered. He noticed the rippling muscles on Amos's back and wondered what his own body would look like after a few months.

Their tent was the last in the fourth row. Amos ducked in first, then quickly introduced the young man to the others lying on their groundsheets, using the brief respite to rest before supper. Apart from a few nods and muttered greetings, they paid little attention to the newcomer.

Amos helped him spread out the groundsheet and blanket he had drawn from the company store on the morning of his departure. 'Try to keep them as clean as you can,' he warned. 'There's little enough water to wash *yourself* in, let alone bedding.'

When Amos had made his way to his side of the tent, James felt the thin material which offered scant protection from the heat and cold. A pinch of fear twitched his stomach when he thought of the day to come. He glanced at Amos and, as though the older man sensed what was going through his mind, he gave a reassuring nod before dosing his eyes and lying back against his bedroll.

'You're going to make it,' James whispered to himself as he followed suit, resting his head against his bag. 'You've got to – there's no other choice.'

He fell in with the group of men when they scrambled from the tent a few moments later, summoned to supper by means of a small-sized slave bell standing beside the cook's tent. There was a rush for the queue already forming outside the kitchen.

James relaxed with them, as an easy banter flowed along the line of waiting men, wanting to, having to belong.

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Chapter 4

With dry dust spiralling up the funnel of wind, the miniature tornado swept the arid earth, dragging with it any loose brush and small pebbles as it screeched on angrily. It hissed and hummed its way towards the group of men sweating in the afternoon heat, as though intent upon adding its fury to the already trying circumstances of their labour.

'Another one,' muttered James. He stopped digging and turned his back on the advancing dust devil, the sharp rays of the sun striking his face as he waited.

His skin was as bronzed as any of the men's now, almost impervious to the stinging heat. But still the sweat poured from him and dripped to the desiccated ground, darkening the loose dirt for an instant before the specks of moisture were sucked away by the torrid air.

A wild whine signified the whirlwind's approach. By now the others had seen it too, and the stained cloths they wore around their necks were already lifted into position. James followed suit, tugging the bandanna tightly across his mouth and nose, shutting his eyes just as the dust tower flailed the air around them, increasing the sweltering heat as it spat out its wrath at the cowering men.

Specks of dust struck the exposed parts of his body, worming their way into every hollow, clinging to the sweat in his armpits, his hair and eyes.

The funnel seemed to hover over them before it passed on, with the ensuing silence broken only by the coughing and cursing of men as they slowly returned to their work.

'You should be used to it by now,' said Amos. He rubbed his hand vigorously through his thinning hair in an effort to dislodge the worst of the dust.

'I doubt whether I ever will be,' replied James, already digging again. Three months had passed quickly: as his body grew stronger the pain on rising in the early morning light had lessened. He could work as hard as any of the men now, and he knew they respected him for it.

The stark memory of those first days and weeks when he stumbled back to camp, his hands raw and bleeding, his skin an angry red flush from the sun, still haunted him. It had been Amos who had nursed his wounds and helped him to his feet on those mornings when his strained muscles threatened to snap. When they had trudged the long cold miles to the construction point, it was Amos who had stayed beside him, comforting him with his presence and an occasional smile. At last the ache had left his muscles, and dry calluses covered the distressed skin of his palms.

Remembering, he turned and smiled at Amos, preoccupied as he swung his pick at the unyielding earth. 'I'm going for a drink of water,' James said, and made his way to where three barrels stood exposed to the blistering heat.

There, as well, the whirlwind had made its presence felt. The water was covered with a layer of fine dust. He gently scooped it up with a mug and threw it to the ground.

'Hey!' Even without looking up, he knew the gravelly voice was Denker's. The big man came striding over to him. 'What do you think you're doing, puppy?' He pushed the young man roughly aside. 'Wasting water, are you?' He stared down at the rapidly evaporating specks of moisture, then struck out in a lightning-fast movement. It was a backhand blow

which caught James on the shoulder. He staggered back, his entire arm numb from the force of it.

'I was scooping off the dust,' he explained, fighting the impulse to hold his arm which had started to throb now.

'Shut up, puppy. You're off to Cape Town tomorrow, so now you don't give a damn about the others, do you?' Denker swung around, hands on hips, and called out to the men. 'You see what the puppy's done? He's thrown sand in your water!' He grinned maliciously, then kicked the barrel over. The water spread only a few inches before it seeped into the parched ground. 'Now there's less for all of you,' he shouted. 'Take it up with the pup if you want to.' He gave James a hard look before sauntering off.

James felt the men's eyes on him, but knew their glances were not accusing. They had seen how Denker taunted him from the start, trying to break his spirit, anger him into a fight. If they accused him of anything, it was for not standing up to the big man. Yet that, too, they could understand and accept.

He watched the foreman swagger past the lines of men, knowing the time would come eventually when he would be forced to give the Dutchman the satisfaction of fighting him.

Their work had reached a point almost four miles from the camp, and as the men walked back that evening they could feel the first hint of approaching spring in the August air. As they walked, their boots collected dust, which constantly drifted across the red veld and was tinged by the lazy rays of the sun, an immense blob on the horizon. The veld itself was soft now, its menace gone with the retiring day. The silence which enveloped it was broken only by the crunching tread of marching men.

'It'll be windy in Cape Town this time of year,' Amos said, 'but that'll make no difference to what a man and a woman can get up to.' The men walking close to them laughed at James's obvious embarrassment.

'I can give you the name of a whore who'll keep you inside all week,' someone said. 'The only problem is it'll take another week to get you back on your feet. You'd be useless to Denker when she's through with you!' Their laughter rang out on the still air.

'Let the boy alone,' said Amos, giving James's shoulder an affectionate slap. 'I'm sure the ladies will line up for his favours.'

James smiled to himself. He had turned twenty that June, yet they still called him a boy. It did not rankle with him, for he knew he had earned their respect through his hard work and lack of complaint. It was only when Denker spoke to him as though he were a child that he felt a hot flush of resentment.

For once their supper was ready when they arrived at the camp. It allowed the men some time to spend together instead of crawling into bed as usual. They built a huge fire and sat around talking of what the lucky few leaving for Cape Town the next day would do during their stay there.

'A hot bath,' one of them said excitedly. 'That's the first thing I'll do – even if it takes half my pay!'

'To hell with the bath,' someone else cried. 'Those whores like a bit of earth on a man. A bath would be a waste!' There was a general nodding of heads at this.

Their laughter echoed across the scrubland, but they fell silent when Denker suddenly appeared in their midst. He sneered at them, enjoying the effect he had on them. Glancing around the circle of men, he said, 'So, everyone's all excited about Cape Town, huh? One would swear all of you were going!' He laughed at his own remark, but the men did not

respond. Their eyes remained fixed on the fire, each of them hoping he would not be the one Denker singled out for special treatment.

They had no need to feel threatened; the foreman had already selected his victim. His mouth was a tight line as he stepped around the fire to stand in front of James. He kicked the ground at the young man's feet, sending a spray of soil against his trousers. James raised his head and held Denker's taunting gaze.

'The pup reckons it's his time for visiting the ladies,' Denker said to the group without taking his eyes from James's face. 'It will be a waste, puppy, if you fuck the way you work ... Do you also stop every five minutes for a drink of water?'

He bellowed with laughter. Some of the men, those who feared him the most, laughed with him. 'Or have you never had it before, pup?' he continued, his huge hands resting on his hips.

James managed to smile up at the big man, but his eyes were cold and hard. 'Oh, I've had it before,' he said calmly, 'and I didn't have to pay for it either. Have you ever had that, Denker?'

There was a sudden hush around the fire. The only sound was the crackling of the flames leaping high into the air, their shadows creating movement where there was none. Amos laid a restraining hand on his friend's arm. 'Leave it there, lad,' he whispered, but James could tell from the flush on Denker's face that he had already gone too far.

The foreman's fists were clenched with rage. 'You hear that?' he said to the men. 'You hear the pup call me?' His thick neck pulled tightly into his shoulders and he glared down at James.

He stepped back quickly to scoop a burning log from the fire with the toe of his boot. He kicked it straight at James, sending a shower of sparks flying on to him and the men seated near by. They scattered when he reeled away, falling on his back. The surprise was still in his eyes when Denker stepped forward to haul him roughly to his feet.

The Dutchman held him easily with one hand while he sent his balled fist smashing into his face. Even through the sudden blinding pain, James felt a tooth crack under the impact. Hot blood gushed from his broken mouth. A moment later, there was a merciless blow to his stomach. He grunted as the breath left his body, and his legs twitched up from the ground while Denker still held him in his grip.

The foreman released him at that moment. He fell down in a crumpled heap, writhing in agony while he tried to regain his breath and focus on what was happening to him.

He heard Denker's voice as if from a distance, taunting him again. Pain racked his bruised ribs, but he turned slowly and pushed himself to his feet. At least one blow, he told himself – something that would hurt the big bastard!

He never got the chance. All he saw was the shift of Denker's boots before a searing pain leaped from his groin to the pit of his stomach as a vicious kick struck his crotch. The sound of the blow was like a fleshy slap on the still night air. The watching men cringed in sympathy when James screamed and fell back in the dust.

'Go to Cape Town, pup,' said Denker, although James could not hear him above the pain roaring through him. 'Go and see how much you're worth with swollen balls!' He spat down on the fallen man.

James rolled over on to his back, his legs curled tightly against his chest. He saw Amos move towards Denker, his face a tight ball of anger. 'No,' he croaked, but Amos did not hear.

Someone else stopped Amos, pulling the lean figure back before he could grab hold of Denker. It was Thomas, one of those who had come from Cape Town with James. 'Leave him to me,' he said softly. 'I've been wanting the bastard for some time now.'

The men stirred with anticipation, for Thomas had the reputation of being a skilled fighter. They watched as he called out to Denker, challenging him. Quickly they formed themselves into a large circle within which the two men could fight. All except Amos had forgotten the injured James who still lay inert on the ground.

Thomas was as tall as Denker, although the foreman was older and outweighed his challenger by more than twenty pounds. Yet Thomas's body was hard and sinewy, and he was tough and fit. His eyes held no fear when Denker turned to wait for him.

The two men leaped at each other as if reacting to some unspoken command. They exchanged a brief flurry of blows before they drew apart to circle each other more warily.

Thomas moved in again. He was very fast, so that even though Denker shifted away his fist shot out twice in rapid succession, piercing through the Dutchman's guard. The blows did not carry Thomas's full weight and strength, but they contained enough force to split Denker's lips.

The fact that Thomas had struck first did more damage than his fist. The circle of men cheered, the sound making Denker's eyes blaze angrily. 'That the best you can do?' he sneered, although he approached Thomas with greater caution now.

The continued shouts of support for Thomas goaded Denker into sudden action. His opponent was still positioned close to him, making it easy for Denker to stomp down with his foot, trapping the younger man's with his own. He lunged up, clamped his hands around Thomas's neck, and jerked the challenger's head forward to meet his own forehead.

The thump of the head butt was sickening, the blow smashing Thomas's nose under the impact. Denker butted again, his own face filled with the other man's blood. Thomas went down heavily as Denker suddenly released his hold on him.

Denker smiled as he wiped the blood from his face. It smeared across his skin, giving him a grotesque appearance in the flickering firelight. 'Get up!' he snarled.

James watched from across the fire, the pain still spurting through his groin. 'Stop them, Amos,' he groaned. 'Denker will kill him.'

Amos shook his head. 'No, Denker won't let it go that far. And this has nothing to do with you or me. It's between the two of them. It's been coming for a long time.'

Thomas pushed himself to his feet, his breath rasping through the shattered remains of his nose. His legs were wobbly when he finally stood upright, but there was plenty of fight left in his eyes. He resumed his stance and circled Denker again, keeping a wary distance from the destructive power of the foreman's hands.

Denker threw out an exploratory blow, but Thomas had recovered sufficiently to avoid it with relative ease. He retaliated with a fast jab of his own, rocking Denker's head back on his shoulders. There was a loud guffaw from the men, the sound of it enraging Denker.

They watched as Denker swayed, then stepped back to regain his balance. 'Finish him, Thomas!' they cried. 'Go in now!'

Thomas moved in hungrily – as Denker knew he would. The foreman staggered back as if he was about to go down, then spread his legs firmly on the ground. As Thomas swung his fist, Denker lunged forward and flung both arms around his torso, pulling him close in a bone-crushing hug.

They stood locked for a brief moment in an eerie embrace, their sweat-covered bodies glistening in the firelight, mated from head to toe in a gruesome illusion of a lovers' dance.

An animal-like cry broke from Denker's shattered lips as he drew back his head to butt down with all the force he could muster. Thomas's own cry of pain was drowned by the sound of the next butt. And the next.

Denker broke the embrace suddenly. Thomas started to fall like a broken, lifeless doll. Just before he slumped to the ground, Denker reached out and pulled him up by the hair. His fist sank into the unconscious man's ribs, striking again and again, till the watching men could stand it no longer and pulled him away from Thomas.

'Go with the puppy!' shouted Denker, although the unconscious man could not hear him. 'Go back to the city – you're of no use to me here!' He shrugged off the restraining hands and stumbled off towards his tent, wiping his hand across the wounds on his face as he pushed through the circle of stunned men. They waited till the tent flap swung down behind him before they rushed to Thomas's side.

'One day,' James said softly, his voice shaking with anger and hatred as he stared at Denker's tent, 'someone will kill him. I hope I get the chance.'

'Don't even think of it,' said Amos as he helped him to his feet. 'Just stay out of his way from now on.' He placed his arm about James's shoulders and led him slowly to their tent. He laid him gently on his bedroll, then went to the supply tent for an oil lamp which the men were not permitted to keep in their own tents. It was already alight when he returned, and he studied James's broken mouth in the dim light.

'You got off a lot lighter than Thomas,' he said. 'Crushed lips and a broken tooth. Plus some bruised ribs and swollen balls!' He smiled and said, 'Use the time in Cape Town to recover. You and Thomas can look after each other.'

James tried to smile, but the effort sent a fresh stab of pain up the side of his face. 'At least,' he said thickly, 'I won't feel as bad as Thomas when he comes around. Is he badly hurt?'

Amos gave a brief smile. 'I think Thomas has been hurt before. He's a tough lad – he'll pull through. I reckon he'll be a mite uncomfortable on the trip, though.' He reached across to his own bed and unrolled his blanket, then spread it across James. 'Try and get some sleep. The wagon leaves at midday only, so Denker will expect to see you on the job tomorrow morning.'

James reached down and gingerly touched his swollen testicles. They felt twice their normal size. He withdrew his hand, promising himself that one day he would take revenge on Denker.

When at last he fell asleep, it was amidst a haze of pain and hatred.

*

Thomas never reached Cape Town.

He died on the second day of their journey to Cape Town, his lungs filling with blood from a puncture caused by his shattered ribs and the jolting of the wagon.

His could have been a lonely grave on the desolate veld, dug barely deep enough to escape the keen sense of smell of predators, for there were things to be done in Cape Town and the men were anxious to be on their way. They would have been satisfied with a hurried prayer and a moment of respectful silence.

'We will bury Thomas properly,' James said firmly. He glanced around the bleak terrain before pointing to a narrow ravine formed by the base of two irregularly shaped hills. 'Over there,' he said, 'in the shade. A man can rest there.' No one argued with him, for they saw the bitter anger on the young man's face.

'Don't blame yourself,' one of them said. 'Thomas didn't die fighting for you. Fighting was his way and I don't think he'd have been too surprised to know that it was the end of him.'

'I know, but it's a waste.' The men nodded, not comprehending the full meaning of his words. He spoke not only of the unnecessary death, but also of the unaccomplished life of the young man. Thomas was one of the many trapped into the soul-destroying labour from which men dreamed of escape, yet to which they returned each time to grapple with the earth once again. It was a sordid living to which too many men became too easily accustomed, their senses and ambitions dulled by time and the false comradeship shared by those others facing a desolate future. It was a path to despair, and it was *that* waste which angered James. The broken body of Thomas would at least be spared that discovery.

The men walked beside the wagon as the driver led the mules to the ravine. They found it preferable to stagger across the uneven veld than to witness the sight of the rumped corpse bouncing along on its final journey. James was the first to grab a shovel when they arrived at the designated spot.

'Who'll say a prayer?' he asked when the grave was dug deep enough to his satisfaction.

The men glanced uneasily at each other. 'Bayley will,' someone said. 'He's buried people before. His own wife and children.'

They studied the heavy-set man with new eyes. 'On the eastern border,' he said in answer to the unspoken question. He had no need to say more, for each man there knew of the on-going conflict between the settlers and the black tribes.

James smiled sadly. After all this time, they still knew so little about each other. 'We'd appreciate it, Bayley.'

They placed Thomas gently in the grave, covering his face with his sweat-stained felt hat. The loose soil thudded dully on to his body. When they were done, they formed a low mound of tightly packed soil on top of the grave and stacked a small pile of stones at its head. The men stood back, removed their hats and formed a circle. A sudden gust of wind drove through the ravine, stirring up dust which blew across them and causing tears which otherwise they would not have shown.

Bayley squinted at the intense blue sky peeking beyond the rim of the hills. 'O Lord,' he started, cleared his throat, and fell silent. The men watched him, then lowered their gaze to the grave.

'O Lord,' continued Bayley, 'we bring You Thomas the fighter ... I know him by no other name, Lord.'

'Southey,' someone whispered, 'I think.'

The remark did not unsettle Bayley. His voice gained strength when he said, 'Thomas was a young man, Lord, and it is not right that we should bring him here, to seek entry into Your home so early in his life.' He stopped, stared at the grave, then again raised his eyes to the sky.

'But Your ways are strange, Lord, and I think Thomas would have understood, for he lived by the rules of a fighting man.'

'A good fighter was Thomas,' someone muttered.

'Yes, Lord,' said Bayley, 'and Thomas now seeks to fight in Your army. Grant him entry, we beg of You ... forgive him whatever sins he has ... I cannot now recall any which strike me.' The men nodded in agreement.

Bayley cleared his throat before continuing. 'Look after this man, Lord, for he was not a spiteful person. Thomas fought with a smile on his face, not with the wish to destroy others. And forgive the man who—'

'No!'

The men stared at James. 'No forgiveness for Denker,' he repeated. 'End your prayer, Bayley.'

The stocky man seemed disturbed by the request, but he nodded and said, 'You heard that, Lord. We leave it to You to decide. We give You Thomas ...'

'Amen,' said James and put his hat back on his head. 'Let's get going.'

The men seemed relieved it was over. 'Good words, Bayley,' someone said, as they followed James back to the wagon.

He was about to clamber aboard when he spotted two wild ostriches a little distance away. They seemed to be performing a dance, an intricate waltz of majestic beauty on the silent veld. 'Mating dance,' explained Bayley. 'The drab one is the female.'

James watched a while longer, remembering the soft, full feathers which had been his bed on his first night in the country. 'When they dance like that,' he said, 'they cease to be ugly.' The scene was a stark contrast to the repugnance of death they had just witnessed.

'Get a move on, James,' the men complained. 'Cape Town is waiting!'

He jumped on to the back of the wagon. It was time for the living, he thought as he stared at the forlorn mound which marked Thomas's grave. 'And live I shall,' he muttered, hearing the men around him talk of what they would do with their week in Cape Town. They had already pushed Thomas from their minds, yet James clung to the sight of the grave long after the wagon had rolled around the next hill. He would keep the vision with him as a reminder of the trap from which he had to escape.

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Chapter 5

The August wind curled in from the Atlantic Ocean to sweep across the bay, slashing at the city and its inhabitants before beating furiously against the slopes of Table Mountain. The air was filled with dust, reminding James and the others of the open Karoo plains.

Their wagon rolled into the yard between the huts of Kenrick Construction. The men grabbed their sling bags and jumped down thankfully, eager to shed the shackles of their hated life.

The clerk whom James had seen on his first visit to the offices stepped out of the main hut to scowl at the men, his hands on his hips in pathetic emulation of his boss. 'You be sure to be back here on Saturday,' he warned them, 'else Mr Denker will take care of you.' He stepped hurriedly back when one of the men spat at his feet.

James went up to him, enjoying the flicker of fear he saw in the clerk's eyes as he climbed the few short steps leading to the hut. He threw a brown cotton bag at the man's feet and said, 'There'll be one less man reporting on Saturday – your boss saw to that.' He nudged the bag closer. 'That belonged to Thomas. Denker beat him so badly he died on the way here.'

The clerk stared down at the bag, appearing to draw back from the dismal reminder of a man who had once stood proud and tall. 'Pick it up,' James growled and kicked the bag towards him.

'What must I do with it?' the clerk whined, yet he did as he was told, holding the bag gingerly between his ink-stained fingers.

'Find out if Thomas had any family. Everything he owned is in that bag.' The clerk seemed about to argue, then shut his mouth, went inside and placed the bag beside his desk. James followed him.

'When you find someone,' he said, 'and I'll check with you before we go back,' he added in a threatening tone, 'don't tell them how Thomas died. Say he got sick or something.' The clerk nodded.

It was James who bullied the clerk into paying the men their accumulated wages without further delay, waiting till they were all satisfied before he took his turn. No one queried his assumption of leadership; since they had buried Thomas on the lonely plains, he had stood slightly apart from them, lost in his own thoughts, distancing himself from their increasing excitement as the wagon rolled ever closer to Cape Town.

What had occupied James's thoughts for most of the journey was not Thomas and what had happened, but the emptiness the young man had left behind. Would the others still remember him after a few weeks? Perhaps, but then it would be fleetingly, when the men spoke of the great fight. In between, they would be too busy with their own kind of survival, fighting the depression which always threatened to overwhelm one as the seemingly endless struggle with the earth went on day after day. They would carve at the ground, hating the dust and the heat and the sting of the sun. The nights; too, would become a hated thing, a too-short respite for tired, tortured bodies, a brief interlude before facing their labour again. And always the sun, the blasted sun.

After only three months, he knew the men well enough to recognise the trap they had

woven for themselves. They all spoke of the day they would be free from people like Denker, the day they would become their own men with a farm and family to care for. The talk would go on night after night, till a man was due for his week's break in Cape Town. Then the excitement of pending freedom would oust all other thoughts from his mind, shifting his dreams to some future spot. The long days would somehow become less punishing, with the short nights being counted off in impatient anticipation. At the end of it all, they returned to take up their tools once again, to renew their ties with the family of men which was their harsh reality. It was only the older ones, men like Amos, who had ceased their dreaming and surrendered to their own kind of acceptance. It was a fate which James was now determined to avoid.

The men in the hut were chatting excitedly, their pockets filled with money which should have been destined for the attainment of their dreams, but which would now be greedily wasted on alluring freedom. One of them watched James count his wages, then said, 'You going to report the fight to the authorities?'

He shook his head as they fled the hut and stepped eagerly into the street. He declined the invitation to accompany them when someone suggested a visit to a house known for its friendly and talented ladies.

'I have to see an old friend,' he explained, smiling as the men jostled and teased him. There was no need to add that his plans did not include women.

Their excited chatter faded into the distance as he headed in the direction of the harbour.

*

Pat Stanton was at the back of the warehouse when James entered it. An African labourer led him between rows of goods stacked almost to the roof.

The old man was perched at the top of a rickety ladder as he stared down at his visitor in the dim light. Sudden recognition brought a wide grin to his face. 'Will you look at him?' he exclaimed. 'I meet a boy, and he visits me a man. James Quenton – I had a feeling I'd be seeing more of you!' He stepped down gingerly and shook his hand. 'Come,' he said, placing an arm around his shoulders, 'let's get into the sunlight so I can take a proper look at you.' Pat gave his bulging biceps a hard squeeze. 'Well, it seems you've become accustomed to the work.'

'I hate it, Pat, as you said I would. I've seen what it does to the souls of men, and I won't let it do the same to me. That's why I came to you. I want your help.'

Pat's eyes were thoughtful when he turned away to study the heaving ocean. 'No ships today,' he said softly, his words whipped away by the wind. 'They're out there in the bay, hoping the gale will abate. I think they'll have a long wait.' He led James back inside the shelter of the warehouse.

'What help can I give you, lad?' he asked after he had shut the door behind them. His short laugh was harsh when he added, 'I helped you into work you hate – hope I can do better this time.'

'When I spent that night here, you spoke to me about ostriches, Pat. You said-'

'You see any out your way?' the old man interrupted. 'The price of feathers just went up again. More and more farmers are turning to ostriches now. Their plumes will be worth their weight in gold one day, mark my words.'

'I hope you're right, Pat, because I want my share of that gold. That's why I need your help.'

The old man studied the floor as a fresh smile tugged at the corners of his eyes. 'You want me to introduce you to the feather buyers I told you about, is that it?'

James nodded. 'I want to learn all there is to know, so I think they'd be a good place to start. There're plenty of ostrich farms out where we're working. I want to visit them as well.'

'I'm sure one of the buyers could give you a letter of introduction, but you'll need more than that in the end.'

'I know. One has to have capital to get started, but I'll get that. Somehow I'll get that.'

'I'm sure you will, lad. With your looks, you could even marry it!'

James laughed with him. 'I might just do that,' he said. 'You'll introduce me, then? To one of the buyers?'

'Aye, that I can do. But where'll you find the time to visit the farmers?'

'We don't work nights. And the only good thing about that bastard Dutchman is he doesn't allow any work on Sundays. It's probably the only thing in the Bible that Denker lives up to.'

Pat eased himself to his feet. 'You're going back at the end of the week?'

'I have to. My contract doesn't expire until the end of December.'

'And then?'

'I won't be signing up again. I'll not let Denker hold sway over any more time in my life.'

Pat reached out and lightly touched his arm. 'There'll always be Denkers in this world, James – or are you planning to escape them all?'

'With the help of ostriches I might. I intend to be my own man, and I want to do it now, before someone like Denker breaks me. With money and power behind me, the likes of him will never get close enough.'

The old man smiled. 'You'll stay the night?'

'I'd be grateful.'

'Good. Now go get cleaned up. You'll have to look respectable when we meet the feather buyers tomorrow. Most of them are Jewish gentlemen, and they won't take kindly to a money-hungry young man with dirt behind his ears!'

James rubbed a finger across the grime of the journey. 'When I'm clean, will you let me sleep on those ostrich feathers again?'

'It's the least I can do for a future feather baron,' replied Pat as he started for the back of the warehouse.

*

The feather buyers were amused by the young man's ambition, yet that did not stop them from sharing their knowledge with him. Theirs was a new industry, one in which they regarded themselves as much pioneers as the farmers who bred the source of the wealth now flowing into the colony.

As such they were proud to flaunt the depth of their knowledge, but after a while they came to appreciate the keen insight James displayed. His incisive questions soon changed their amusement to respect and their informal discussions to serious lectures. Most of them operated from Grahamstown, travelling the vast distance to the ostrich farms of the

Little Karoo to gather their wares for export. However, Cape Town was still the place they visited at regular intervals, being the gateway to the international markets which kept their activities thriving.

One of them, an elderly man named Morris Sivrosky, took a particular interest in the apprentice, as they all referred to James. He visited Sivrosky three times, lured back by the promise of an introduction to a farmer in the Karoo, not far from where he worked on the road.

He returned to the old man's office on his last day in Cape Town. 'Jan Steenkamp,' said Sivrosky, 'is the only person I can think of with the patience to answer all your questions – you're worse than a young child!' He handed James a brief note he had written for the farmer. 'Give Steenkamp my compliments, and tell him to make a note of your name.'

'Why?' James stared blankly at the letter, once again regretting his lack of education.

'Because, my young friend, I've seen your kind before, and you usually get what you want. I've a feeling we'll do business one day.'

James smiled at him. 'We no doubt shall.' He thanked Sivrosky and hastened back to the docks to take his leave of Pat Stanton before reporting at the offices of Kenrick Construction.

Morris Sivrosky was thoughtful when the door closed behind the young man. He recalled what he had said to the youngster about seeing his kind before. The only problem, thought Sivrosky, was that they were not always *good* men. Time would tell, he decided, time would tell.

*

James was at Jan Steenkamp's farm almost every night, sometimes creeping back to his tent in the early hours of the morning. Amos was amazed at how he managed to keep going during the day, kept on his feet by the burning desire to escape the constraints of the drudgery which the others had come to accept. It was as though his goal helped him to cope with the arduous conditions.

Jan Steenkamp, a burly man in his forties, welcomed James and his enthusiasm. In a fledgling industry with almost unlimited potential, there was no need to guard against newcomers and their thirst for knowledge or desire to share in the growing wealth. Steenkamp opened his home and his mind to the youngster, filling him with facts till at last he found James asking questions even he could not answer.

At last the road construction moved so far ahead as to make it impossible for James to continue with his nocturnal missions, limiting his visits to Sundays. It no longer mattered; he had acquired most of the knowledge he needed, so that now Steenkamp could take him into the fields by day to teach him the practical implementation of his lessons.

On one such Sunday late in November, he appeared at the farm before first light, as instructed. The farmer gave neither a reason nor an explanation for the request. When James knocked on the farmhouse door, he was handed a mug of steaming coffee. 'Come,' was all that Steenkamp said as James finished the hot brew.

The farmer led him past a small paddock with high stone walls where some of the young ostrich chicks were being kept, through a fenced-off field where a hen, anxious about the safety of her offspring, advanced in a rapid, shuffling movement, hissing her anger as she gave a menacing flutter of her wings. James was relieved that Steenkamp

carried a branch of thorn bush with him; he had learned that an ostrich, ever mindful of its eyes, would retreat when the thorns were thrust towards its face. It was about the only suitable defence a man had.

He was even more relieved that the more aggressive cock was still positioned atop the eggs in its nest, using its darker colours for camouflage while the remaining night still clung to the land. The hen would relieve him soon, her dull brown feathers harmonising with the bleakness of the daytime surroundings. And so they would rotate duty during the incubation period of the eggs.

The hen had stopped some distance away from them, although she still hissed and fluttered her wings. Steenkamp glanced at the bird. 'I'm sure the males are pleased the hens can make no other sound but hiss. Imagine if our women were the same!' James smiled with him, thinking of the stout Mrs Steenkamp who seemed to be very much in command of her Jan.

'Where are you taking me, Jan?' he asked as he followed the big man over a stone wall into another field which he knew stretched as far as the eye could see.

'Why do you English ask so many questions?' replied Steenkamp. 'Wait, and you'll see.'

Steenkamp kept close to the wall as he led them into the field. After a few minutes, he halted beneath a clump of thorn bush and sat down. He indicated that James should do the same.

The two men sat in silence in the growing Karoo morning, the farmer smug with his secret as he stoked a foul-smelling pipe, the younger man amused and impatient at what awaited him. The only sounds were the occasional booming grunts of the ostriches: two short bellows, followed by a third, longer roar.

'Am I allowed to talk?' asked James after a while.

'Talk? You mean you want to ask questions, don't you?' He chuckled and sucked at his obstinate pipe. 'Ja, you can talk if you want to.'

'This field ...' James started, waving his hand at the empty expanse. 'Aren't you worried your ostriches will wander off and never come back?' He knew that a twenty-mile walk was a mere-stroll for a full-grown ostrich, especially when feeding. They would peck as they moved onwards, never stopping for long.

'They'll come back,' Steenkamp replied confidently. 'They get used to the bone meal I feed them. Besides, there are the nests and the chicks to return to.'

'But I've seen chicks with the older birds when they go out in the fields. Don't they get lost?'

Steenkamp shook his head. 'The males take them with them in a sort of nursery school. They look after them. I've even seen the entire flock return along with my sheep in the evenings. Good herders, those birds.'

The farmer reached out and gripped his arm. 'What is it?' whispered James.

Steenkamp grinned in the gathering light. 'Won't be long now,' he said. 'I can hear Klaas and the others.'

James cocked his head to one side and heard it too, the voices of the coloured labourers as they started to prepare for the day. 'Just what have you got planned for me, Jan?'

The farmer chuckled as he stuffed the still-glowing pipe into his shirt pocket. 'It's time for your final lesson, my impatient young friend.'

My *final* lesson? There's so much I still have to learn!

'Yes,' said Steenkamp, 'but there's not much more I can teach you. The rest you will

learn when you start your own farm. It is the only way.'

'And this final lesson, then? What is that going to be?'

Steenkamp gave a strange smile before he laid a hand gently on James's shoulder. 'It is one the ostriches themselves will give you,' he said, his expression serious now. 'It is perhaps the one thing your many questions never touched upon.'

James stared at the growing ring of light as the sun, still gentle in its touch, reached out across the expanse of the field. He said nothing as he waited for Steenkamp to continue.

'You have learned fast,' the farmer said, 'very fast. Because you're young and eager to start off on your own. But not once, James, not once did you ever ask about the birds themselves. It was always about how you could use them to your own end, what you needed to know about them in order to make the money you so desperately seek. You must learn to love them, for they'll become your family which will grow with you. We'll all continue to learn about them and from them, so that further prosperity will come. But the ostrich himself has a right to share in that prosperity. Love them, James, for what they will still give you.'

James stared at Steenkamp's earnest face, thinking that he had never seen the good-natured farmer as serious. For the first time he wondered whether he was capable of love. When last had he given any thought to his mother and what had become of her? Perhaps he was so anxious to escape the kind of life his father had been trapped into that he was incapable of loving anything but his own dreams.

Steenkamp's hand on his arm brought him back to the noises coming from the adjoining paddock. 'Soon,' the farmer said. They could hear the voices of the labourers clearly now, and James knew they were herding the group of ostrich chicks towards the field. Steenkamp kept birds of more or less the same age in separate paddocks, each year selecting special males and females for breeding purposes. Those pairs were then penned in smaller camps.

'The dance of the fallen angels,' muttered Steenkamp.

'The what?'

'The fallen angels. It's a name given by those who believe the ostrich is a degenerate, a running bird that lost the art of flying by using its legs rather than its wings.' He reached for his pipe and stuck it, unlit, into his mouth. 'Now you'll see them dance, a magnificent dance of pure ecstasy. Love them for this, James, if for nothing else.'

James knelt down, his body filled with a sense of anticipation. He had already seen the beautiful ballet of mature birds in courtship, as well as the wild antics of young chicks, scarcely able to stand, yet instinctively emulating their elders. It was obvious Steenkamp regarded what was about to happen as something special.

They heard the scraping of the gate linking the paddock to the field. The next moment there was a flurry of movement and a swishing sound as a hundred or more young ostriches fled through the aperture to head for the open field. They moved in a tight pack, yet spreading all the while like an impi of Zulu whose movement was one of cohesive tactic. There was no leadership in the case of the chicks, merely a mass of light brown, mottled colour moving at a great pace out of captivity, running towards what only they knew they were after.

They stopped suddenly after a few hundred yards, as though some mass instinct had decided they could no longer postpone their moment of celebration. There was still a flutter of brown movement towards the back of the pack as they formed into their tight

concentration again.

James held his breath, his heart thumping within his chest.

He watched, his eyes stretched for fear he would miss something. As if by some unspoken command, the young birds raised their wings. There was a moment's hesitation, slight and insignificant in the scheme of the day, before the dance of the fallen angels began.

The gathering of birds started to move, a motion so erratic it could only be called hysterical. Or ecstatic. They whirled with their young wings aloft, spinning madly, dizzily, till some started to fall to the ground from giddiness.

My God, thought James, they're worshipping the new day! Or was it life itself? On and on the dancing went, birds falling, struggling upright to continue their frenzy, only to fall down again. The two men watched the mêlée amid a growing cloud of dust; James with a new insight, Steenkamp as one who would never tire of the sight.

Some adult birds had also roamed closer now, and they too joined in, albeit with a greater measure of dignity. Theirs was a synchronised waltzing movement, an impressive display of mature, dazzling plumage.

'Damn!' said Steenkamp suddenly, jumping swiftly to his feet. James felt the magic slip from the moment. He followed the farmer as he ran out towards the flock.

The birds scattered at the approach of the men. They moved a short distance away, where they seemed to settle into a semblance of normality; the dance of the fallen angels was done for the day.

'What is it?' cried James as he watched Steenkamp stoop into the dust which still floated above the ground. Then he saw it: a young bird lay struggling in the dirt.

'Broken leg,' the farmer explained, and James saw the bird's agony reflected on Steenkamp's face. 'Damn! This is the third one this week.' He picked the chick up in his arms and handed it over to one of the labourers who had run closer.

'Can it be mended?'

The farmer shook his head. 'Most of the birds I've lost have been through accidents. Usually broken legs. You saw the crazy things fall to the ground when they get dizzy. Sometimes they break their legs on the fences or something. I've only lost five or so through natural causes.'

It was clear that Steenkamp was upset at the loss of another ostrich. For a moment James wondered whether it was the potential loss of profit which disturbed him, or whether it was the love he had spoken of earlier. The answer came when Steenkamp turned to him and said, 'That chick will not have died in vain, James, if you felt something of what I spoke of earlier. To love life so much that you will risk injury and death, just to dance, deserves love in return.' He placed a heavy hand on the young man's shoulder and started to lead him back to the house.

'The bird will not die in vain, Jan,' he replied, feeling the hand tighten on his shoulder.

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Chapter 6

It was a day like any other.

Overhead the gathering clouds cajoled the cruel December afternoon with a vague promise of relief as the men fought with the dry, clinging dust. They glanced expectantly at the darkening sky, praying anxiously for the moisture to crack from the heavens. They knew it would not come; too many days of promise had fallen prey to the powerful spite of the sun. Yet they watched, seeing the clouds flee to a distant horizon where other men waited, watching too, at once hopeful and doubting.

James slammed the tip of his pick into the defiant earth and felt the tool grip there, challenging his tortured muscles to a further bout in the fight for supremacy.

'Your contract comes up next month.' Amos's voice was as welcome a relief as the brief shade provided by the desperate clouds. 'You going to sign up again?'

James let the pick fall to the ground and wiped a grimy arm across his forehead. 'No,' he replied, blinking his eyes against the sting of his sweat, 'I'll be leaving with the next wagon.'

'What'll you do, lad? You need more time before starting your plans.'

James's laugh was bitter. 'Time? I've seen what too much time does to men. That's truer here than most places.' He gripped the shaft of the pick, then let it fall to the ground again. 'It's not just idle talk, Amos – I'll find the money I need in Cape Town. Somehow I'll find it. I'll have no more of Denker lording it over me.'

Amos studied his friend, impressed as always by the determination in his voice. He recalled the night, almost four months ago, when James had returned from Cape Town, his face flushed with excitement after meeting the feather buyers.

The young man's goal had not come as much of a surprise to Amos, for he had known of his fascination with the ostriches. All of them had spoken of the new industry, of the riches to be gained from what had been once a wild creature of the plains. Yet it was a wealth which belonged to others, a richness far beyond the means and dreams of road workers. 'I wish you luck, lad, but think about it one last time. If you go, Denker will never have you back.'

'Denker will never see me again, Amos – that's all I need to think about.' He saw Amos suddenly grab his shovel and knew without turning that Denker stood behind them.

'Less talk, pup,' the big man growled. 'I don't know why I haven't booted you out of here before now.'

'Perhaps you've grown fond of me, Denker.'

The foreman threw back his head and let out a loud laugh which quickly changed into a spiteful grin when he kicked James harshly on the ankle. 'You've a short memory, pup,' he snarled. 'The only reason you're not spitting blood right now is 'cause I like a fight to be worth while.'

Even though he knew he was risking a beating, Amos could not stop himself saying, 'Like Thomas?'

For a moment it seemed Denker would do just that, then he shrugged his massive shoulders and spat on the sand. 'And you're too old to be any fun,' he said, turning back to

James. 'My man in the office sent me a note. Said you didn't want the fight reported. Trying to curry favour with me, Quenton?'

It was the first time they had heard Denker make any reference to Thomas's death. When he was told the news on the return of the wagon from Cape Town, he had shrugged and said, 'You bring a replacement along?'

James glared at him now and said, 'The only reason there was no reporting of Thomas's death was because someone else, not the authorities, should have the pleasure of taking care of you one day.'

Denker lashed out and kicked him again, on the shin this time. 'It'll never be you, pup.'

'Pups grow up to be dogs, Denker,' he said through gritted teeth.

'There are ways of taming dogs,' came the menacing reply, although there was a flicker – of what, James could not tell – in the foreman's eyes before he turned and walked off.

'Take care,' whispered Amos as he stooped to his task. 'He'll try to take you once he learns you're not renewing your contract.'

James nodded but did not reply. He had already said everything there was to say about Denker. He looked up quickly when Amos touched his arm, expecting to see Denker heading for them again. But Amos's gaze was fixed on the horizon, where a thin plume of dust tickled the empty blue sky. 'Another dust storm?'

'No, it's company. No sluggish wagon either.'

The other men had also ceased working. Company was rare, usually limited to the occasional farmer passing by, but they would drive at a modest pace, accustomed to the heat and the endless landscape.

The dust cloud moved steadily closer, although Amos judged it to be a good half-hour's ride away. The men resumed their work, stopping every now and then to check on the travellers' progress. There was no longer any doubt that the wagon was heading in their direction.

After a while, a smaller column of dust pulled away from the bigger cloud. It was not long before a loaded wagon, drawn by four horses, drew to a halt near the labourers. Two men jumped down from the driver's bench.

Denker moved rapidly closer and shook their hands briefly, his broad forehead creased with concern.

'I should have guessed,' muttered Amos and spat into the dust. 'The old man's come to check on progress for himself.'

James's glance was quizzical. 'What are you going on about?'

'Sir Anthony Kenrick, the bastard who owns this company ... the man who grows rich on our labour. He's probably on his way to Grahamstown.'

The new arrivals stood talking with Denker, youngish men clad in ordinary working clothes. 'No, not one of them,' said Amos when James looked their way. 'They're the old man's advance party, probably checking with Denker as to where they should set up camp.'

Denker spun round just then. 'Bring your tools,' he shouted. 'You as well,' he added, pointing to three other men standing near by.

They were sent to a spot about a half-mile from their own camp, where for a while there was frantic activity as they cleared the ground of scrub and large stones. It was some time before the rest of Sir Anthony's convoy arrived, the first a small buggy drawn by two of the most beautiful horses James had ever seen, and the other a light wagon carrying further supplies. The buggy's canvas top had once been white but was now streaked brown by layers of dust. The driver sat high up, partly protected by a canvas strip which extended over his seat. Behind him, comfortably ensconced in leather seats, sat Sir Anthony Kenrick. James had no chance to get a good look at him before he and the others were ordered to unload the second wagon.

He helped lift the large canvas roll of Sir Anthony's tent, staring in disbelief at its size as it was spread out on the ground. It was bigger than the one that he shared with his fellow workers.

Together with Amos he dragged the roll of canvas to the appointed space beneath the thorn trees. They had to pass the buggy where Sir Anthony sat, as though he preferred the stifling heat beneath the canvas canopy to the direct sunlight beyond it. James could not stop himself from staring; he wanted to get a good look at this man of wealth and power, the kind of man he intended to become one day. Sir Anthony returned his gaze, a mild curiosity in his eyes as if amused by the young labourer's open interest in him.

While the rest of the men busied themselves with getting the tent erected, James and Amos dug a trench for a toilet. They sited it at a respectable distance from the tent, behind a natural rise in the ground.

'What else can you tell me about him?' asked James as he loosened the earth with his pick.

Amos shrugged. 'I can only tell you what I've heard.'

'Tell.'

'He's in his fifties. Owns this construction company and a few other ventures besides. Lives in a big mansion in Cape Town.'

'How did he make his money?'

'So that's what interests you!' said Amos and laughed. 'I've no idea how he made his money, James. He probably inherited it, but he's used it wisely. I'm told he's a shrewd investor, that he's not afraid to take chances. Perhaps he's just one of those bastards who are able to make money easily.'

James stared at the tent where Sir Anthony was making himself comfortable. 'And like all men with money,' he said softly, 'he always wants more of it.'

They worked on in silence, although James's eyes kept returning to the white tent where Sir Anthony rested.

*

There were few men seated around the fire that night. The harsh December heat had sapped their energy, and most had crawled into their tents after an inadequate supper.

James lingered beside the leaping flames, occasionally joining in the conversation of the others, although his thoughts lay elsewhere. He stood up after a while, bade the men good-night, and headed for the last row of tents. Before reaching his own, he veered off into the dark veld, as though he was going to relieve himself. In case anyone was watching, he went through the necessary motions and scrutinised the camp till he was

satisfied that things had settled down for the night.

There was little moonlight as he made his way cautiously across the uneven veld, moving in a wide circle around the camp. Every now and then he stopped to listen and watch Denker's tent for signs of activity.

He stopped for the last time when he was a hundred yards from the group of three tents that made up the camp of Sir Anthony and his entourage. Three men sat huddled around a fire between the two smaller tents, the low drone of their voices carrying dully to him. He sank onto his haunches to wait.

A lamp glowed dimly inside Sir Anthony's tent, and once or twice James saw a flicker of movement as someone passed between the lamp and the canvas. There was a constant trembling within his stomach now, for he was risking everything by being there. Yet tonight was his only chance: he had learned that Sir Anthony would be leaving for Grahamstown the next day.

Another movement, in the veld this time, made him lower himself to the ground. A figure appeared beside the fire. Even at that distance there was no mistaking the burly form of Denker. The skin on James's neck prickled with fear, till he saw the firelight gleam on the bottle in the foreman's hand. He knew then that Denker was not searching for him.

The men stood up in welcome, Denker's gravelly voice carrying clearly on the Karoo night air. They stood talking for a few moments before they all trooped off towards one of the tents. James stayed where he was till he heard the clink of glass and the sound of their laughter, signs that they were settling down to enjoy Denker's offering.

He smiled into the night; it was the first time he had reason to thank the foreman for anything.

*

Sir Anthony yawned and glanced at the pocket watch lying on the camp table beside his stretcher. He told himself he was getting too old for these long journeys. As well as too fat, he thought, studying his massive girth as he settled down onto the stretcher. He closed the large accounts book he had been scrutinising and placed it inside a trunk containing other business documents.

His annual journey to the frontiers of the expanding country had always been an enjoyable experience for him. It was a chance to escape the confines of Cape Town's social life, the irritations caused by his wife and daughter, and the clamour for attention by the young men jockeying for position in his companies. Apart from that, his travels allowed him to check for himself his many business ventures, to establish new ones as the country opened up, and to satisfy a lust for adventure that still thrived within him.

Sir Anthony had great faith in the new country. He liked to think his vision – and his money – played a role in shaping it. It saddened him, therefore, to realise that this year's journey might be his last, that soon he would have to depend on his sycophantic young men to undertake them on his behalf.

He sighed as he recalled earlier years when he had ventured out on horseback alone, his saddle-bags filled with ready cash for the many opportunities he discovered on his way, relying on his wits and brute strength to protect and advance himself. Nowadays, he took his protection and comforts with him – lawyers to administer the purchase of land and

property were summoned when needed. Sir Anthony thought ruefully that his young men would no doubt be taking the lawyers with them in years to come.

He reached for a cigar, then changed his mind; he needed rest more than a good smoke. A long and tiring journey lay ahead the next day before they reached Oudtshoorn, *en route* to Grahamstown. It was his first visit to the town. He hoped that Abraham Isaacs, the lawyer he had summoned from George, the closest town of reasonable size, would already be there, and that he had performed the necessary investigations. Sir Anthony was convinced that the ostrich industry would continue to flourish and Oudtshoorn develop along with it. That would mean rocketing land values – as well as a tidy profit for those who bought at present prices. He had instructed Isaacs to search for the best properties and gauge the owners' willingness to sell.

The sudden rustle of the tent flap startled him. His fright quickly changed to annoyance when he saw the young man's head pop through the opening. 'What do you think you're doing here?' he growled, heaving himself to his feet. What were his retainers up to? They should never have allowed one of the labourers to get into the camp! 'How dare you!' he snapped in angry defiance, deciding he would take care of the intruder himself.

James was right inside now. He held out his palms in a plea. 'I don't mean you any harm, Sir Anthony,' he started. 'Please ... I need to talk to you – don't alert your men! Just a few minutes ... please.'

Sir Anthony stopped. Something in the youngster's voice quelled the outrage he felt at the disturbance. He had been approached by labourers before, usually to complain about wages or their treatment, yet no one had ever risked dismissal by sneaking into his tent at night. 'You're the young one,' he said, remembering the way James had stared at him on his arrival that afternoon. There had been a gleam in the young man's eyes – not the usual flame of resentment – which told him this was no ordinary labourer. He felt a sense of curiosity replace his earlier indignation, so that he was quite relaxed as he settled back on to the stretcher. 'What is it you wish to discuss with me? It must be important if you're prepared to risk Denker's wrath to come here. It'd better be no tale of woe!'

'I have a business proposition for you,' James blurted out. 'One that'll make us both rich men.'

Sir Anthony's vast stomach started to shake with laughter. 'Rich? I am already rich, you young fool!'

'One can never be rich enough,' countered James.

'Go on.' Sir Anthony listened in silence while James spoke of the ostrich industry and the money-making opportunity it offered. Sir Anthony let him talk without interruption, comparing what was being said to what he himself knew about the farming activities. He could not help being impressed when James told of how he had spent his leave in Cape Town, and of his further education on Steenkamp's farm. Nor could he deny that the young man had acquired a wealth of knowledge.

'The demand is steadily growing,' continued James, 'but so are the number of breeders. The ones who get in now will be the ones who make the most of the boom when it comes.'

'The boom? You think prices will continue to rise?'

'I do. More and more markets are being opened up throughout the world. Prices will double within ten years.' Sir Anthony stroked his greying whiskers and studied his uninvited guest. 'This is all very interesting,' he said slowly, 'but you haven't spelled out

your proposition. Where do you fit into all this – more importantly, where do I?

'You provide the capital for a farming venture.'

'Ah! And you?'

'The knowledge and the labour. I'll work day and night if I have to, but I must have the capital to get started.'

'Hmm. How much?'

James took a deep breath. 'We'd need around ten hectares of land to start off with – we can lease that – at least three pairs of breeding birds, some outhouses and sundry equipment. Plus some capital to keep the venture going till we show a profit. Around five thousand pounds in total, I'd say.' He swallowed loudly and waited.

Sir Anthony did not bat an eyelid. 'Around five thousand, you'd say?'

'That should be enough to start off with.'

'Bloody hell – your propositions don't come cheap, do they, boy?'

'Wealth seldom does,' James replied softly, sounding as though he knew all about such things. 'It'll take about a year before we show any return, so the bigger we start, the bigger the rewards will be.'

'You're mighty free with your "we", aren't you? It's *my* money you're talking about.'

'It means nothing without my labour.'

His response made the older man raise one eyebrow.

'And just how do you propose to divide these returns you so confidently predict?'

'Sixty per cent for you, forty for me.'

The older man's snort reverberated round the tent. 'You're a brash young man – why should I risk my money with you? There're many experienced farmers I could invest in.'

James gave a slow smile. 'Because I would work harder than any of them. They've already made their money – I still hunger for mine.'

Sir Anthony's mind raced. Invest in ostriches? He had already decided on buying up land, so why not take it a step further? He juggled the risks in his mind, for he did not part easily with his money – especially to strange young men with ideas beyond their station. Yet he had gambled before and always come out ahead. Very often it had involved a great deal more than five thousand pounds. Besides, there was something about the youngster which intrigued him.

'The division is ninety per cent for me, ten for you,' he said at last, 'and don't even try to argue. I'll be keeping you alive for a full year while you look after my investment.' He did not miss the satisfied gleam that sprang into James's eyes. He'll do, thought Sir Anthony, satisfied he had made the right decision.

James eagerly thrust out his hand. 'We're partners then?'

Sir Anthony kept his own tightly behind his back. 'I don't *have* partners, young man,' he said stiffly. 'And before you get any further ideas about my money, let me assure you I'll have a very capable lawyer looking after my affairs. He'll take care of any financial transactions that need to be made. You understand?'

'Of course, Sir Anthony. There's one other thing, though.'

'And what would that be?'

'We have to situate our venture in Oudtshoorn. The soil is rich and loamy – ideal for ostriches – with the right kind of pebbles for them to swallow. Irrigation is-'

'Young man, if I suspected you were thinking of any place but Oudtshoorn, we wouldn't have this ... partnership, as you call it. Don't for one moment think I'd have let you talk me

into this if I wasn't already well informed on the breeding of ostriches.'

James smiled disarmingly. 'When do you want me to start?'

'You already have. Your first task is to get to sleep right away, and to let me have mine. We leave for Oudtshoorn at dawn.'

'I'll be ready.'

'You'll ride on one of the supply wagons. Good-night, young – what the devil is your name?'

'Quenton. James Quenton.'

'Very well, James Quenton, consider yourself in business. Now let me get my rest.' He started to rise, eager to strip off his clothes, then realised that James had made no move to leave. 'Was there something else?' he asked gruffly. 'Perhaps another thousand pounds you failed to mention?'

'No, I was thinking about Denker. When shall I tell him about this new ... arrangement?'

Sir Anthony sighed. 'I'll inform him in the morning. Now go!' James reached for the entrance flap. 'Good-night, Sir Anthony.'

'Good-night, Quenton,' the other replied, relieved the youngster had not called him 'partner'.

*

The dawn was accompanied by a warm berg wind which bode ill for the workers that day. They had all taken their farewell of James before hurrying off, eager to get their march to the work point over before the summer sun added its torment to the wind. Few knew the reason for his leaving, only that he was escaping their lot.

Amos stayed at his side, at once sad and happy for his friend. 'Make your dream come true,' he said softly. 'Do it for us all, lad.'

James stared back, recalling his first days at the camp when Amos had been there to care for him. 'I won't forget you, Amos,' he said thickly. 'When I'm settled and things are going well, I'll send for you.'

Amos smiled sadly. 'There are times when I think I was born on this god-forsaken road, that I've never known any other life. I'm content to die here, lad. Your future is your own, not to be shared with people from the past.'

'I'll come for you – I swear!'

There was a gentle shake of the other man's head. The urgent wind tugged at his hair as he smiled again before turning to make his way towards the men readying themselves for the long walk.

James watched him go, a tall, gentle man who had overcome the ugly battle of bitterness. He wanted to run after him, to beg him to come away with him, but a heavy hand fell on his shoulder and spun him round.

'So, the pup is skulking off with the master, is he?' There was a mad rage on Denker's face.

James shook off his hand and stepped away from the big man. 'You've no say over me any more, so leave me be.'

'Leave you be? You think you've escaped me now, pup, but you'd better keep looking over your shoulder, 'cause I'll be there again some day.' He stepped closer, crowding his bulk against the smaller man. 'You came here with your pretty face and your woman's

hands, and now you think you're a man? Just because you've fancy ideas about yourself?' The spittle of his bitter rage stung James's face.

'Quenton!' The sound of Sir Anthony's voice stopped Denker. 'Your master calls, puppy,' he said, spitting on the ground before he turned away.

James started for the wagons, then stopped and faced Denker again. 'I'll see to it that you're finished here,' he said softly. 'Very soon, Denker – that's a promise.'

'You'll never be finished with me, Quenton. That's a promise too.' They stared at each other with a hatred that struck through the wind.

'I was about to leave without you, boy,' muttered Sir Anthony as James passed by his buggy on his way to the nearest of the two supply wagons. 'Saying farewell to Denker?'

'Just talking about the future.'

The small convoy rolled out of the camp a few moments later, passing the rows of tents which had been James's home for the past eight months. He did not turn to look, nor did he glance back.

They went past the men, who had already progressed half a mile from the camp. There were a few raised hands, a silent farewell as they faced their own new day. It was only Amos who smiled and gave a slow nod of encouragement.

James raised his own hand, but the column of men was already swallowed up by the dust of the wagons as they moved on towards Oudtshoorn and the future.

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Chapter 7

The river rolled and bubbled through the green lushness of the Congo valley, the light sound of its flow muted by the afternoon breeze idly stirring the branches of the old willow trees.

James sat in the shade and watched a glorious spectacle of courtship play its timeless role. The previous day he had seen the ostrich male make his selection from the available females, driving at the herd in a magnificent display of plumage, his proud roar booming out time and again as he flapped his wings to lure prospective mates from the rest of the troop.

He knew the cock well; it was one of the first ostriches he had purchased, an enormous creature with a dense, even crop of feathers – his prime breeding bird. He called the male *Ratitae*, the Latin name for flightless birds.

The April afternoon seemed to hold its breath as the two birds, the cock and its chosen hen, grazed in the secluded spot. They moved in unison, their bodies swaying lightly as if in rhythm with the weeping willows, their long necks reaching for the ground in synchronous feeding, as though that were the only thing on their minds.

James held his breath for fear the slightest sound would cause the birds to sense his presence only yards away from their foreplay. He need not have been concerned; the two lovers were oblivious to all but the ever-increasing precision of their movements. There was little feeding, but that was of no consequence; what mattered most was that they achieve an absolute synchronisation of movement. If they failed in that, the preliminaries to love would be abandoned.

On this occasion, love flourished. The ballet of sexual tension reached a peak when the cock demonstrated the power of his desire by flapping each wing in turn. Moments later he flung himself to the ground to stir up the dust with mighty beats of his wings, his neck twisting with clicking sounds from side to side in rapid spiral movements while the hen circled him. Her own response was one of appeasement, head lowered, beak opening and shutting, tail pointing downwards to the watching earth.

James's pulse increased as the moment reached its zenith of tension. The dull roar of the cock filled his ears and he smelled the dust raised by their dance of passion. At any moment now the courtship would make way for consummation.

It happened seconds later. The cock rose to his feet, the final signal for procreation to commence. The hen reacted instantly, sinking to the ground, ready to play her part as the cock mounted her with a last roar of triumph, his wings still flapping in disciplined precision.

James moved stealthily away, granting the ostriches their moment of passion in privacy while they planted the first true seeds of his future, leaving the willows and the restless river as the only witnesses to its making.

The crude wooden hut which served as his dwelling seemed suddenly a stark contrast to the refined beauty he had observed at the river. He stared at the roughly hewn logs, longing for the day when the birds' feathers brought in enough profit to lift him from his humble status. It would take more than one crop before there was any worthwhile money,

but he consoled himself with the thought that the hut was better than one of Denker's tents.

The memory of the Dutch foreman brought a familiar tightness to his chest. It was more than three months since he had left the camp on Sir Anthony's supply wagon, yet ugly visions of his time under Denker's rule still haunted him in his sleep.

He moved to the paddock fence only a few yards from the door of the hut, which he had purposely built close to the enclosure in order to be near his birds. There were eight of them, two cocks and six hens. James remembered Steenkamp's warning that the ostrich would opt for polygamy if the cocks were outnumbered, and that it could lead to chaos on the nests. Although the principal hen would allow others to share the nest, there would be too many eggs, so that the male would be unable to cope with them all. The father-to-be would be incapable of leaving a portion of the clutch to die to care better for the rest, so there would be the danger that none of the eggs might hatch.

James had nevertheless opted for more hens, especially as two of them had not yet reached sexual maturity. Studying them now, he wished he could fill the paddocks with birds in preparation for the higher feather prices he knew would come. Despite Sir Anthony's agreement to sponsor the scheme, the older man had insisted on a wary start, forcing James to curb his impatience.

Finding the right land for their venture had been relatively easy – at least as far as he was concerned. The depression and the drought had ruined many farmers, making large patches of once-fertile land available at reasonable prices. He had rejected the first few Sir Anthony and his lawyer, Abraham Isaacs, suggested. 'I want to be alongside the river,' he insisted. 'There may come a time when we will need easy irrigation.'

The site he finally decided on was almost ten miles outside Oudtshoorn itself at the start of the Cango valley. It lay cupped in the gently sloping valley and was bordered by the Grobbelaars River. Beyond the river the landscape underwent a violent change, pushing upwards to form a series of steep and jagged cliffs. To the north, the Swartberg Mountains loomed large and majestic.

Sir Anthony had disagreed with his choice. 'We should be buying land,' he argued. 'What you want is not for sale.'

'Then we lease it,' James countered, knowing that the old man would buy up other parcels anyway. 'This is where we start farming.'

At least Sir Anthony had not interfered in his choice of ostriches. His benefactor left town two days later, with a final reminder that his lawyer, Abraham Isaacs, was now establishing himself in Oudtshoorn and would maintain a wary eye on developments. 'And on the money,' he had added before commencing the next stage of his journey to Grahamstown.

James had spent less on setting up their enterprise than originally envisaged, and now the thought of the sum saved turned his gaze back to the ostriches in the field. He needed more birds – especially now that the breeding season was under way.

A burst of laughter drew his attention. The three Xhosa who worked for him came strolling from the river bank. Thousands of famished Xhosa had streamed into the Colony as a result of the cattle-killing in 1857, wanting nothing more than to trade their labour for food. Believing a visionary who prophesied that after killing all their herds a new prosperity and freedom from the hated English would follow, the Xhosa nation had systematically gone about destroying what had always been their symbol of individual wealth. They were

still paying the price years later.

James sighed, pushed himself from the fence and started for the hut. Glancing once more at the river where the two mating birds now grazed contentedly, he went inside.

*

In 1866 there were just over eighty birds spread throughout the Cape Colony, with Oudtshoorn possessing less than other towns such as Riversdale at the fringe of the semi-arid region called the Little Karoo. Yet it was Oudtshoorn's potential as a breeding area that drew James and Sir Anthony to choose it as the site for their venture.

Situated at the base of the mighty Swartberg Mountains range, it was watered by both the Olifants and Grobbelaars Rivers, although the long drought of the preceding years had reduced their flow to little more than a trickle. The soil was rich and loamy, with an abundance of suitable pebbles to aid the ostriches' digestion. A warm, dry climate offered an almost ideal environment for raising birds with quality feathers.

It was a rural town that James entered on an April morning, a place buffeted by years of drought and depression. It was a town known primarily for its brandy, fruit, wheat and tobacco, although the advent of the domesticated ostrich was rapidly changing that.

Abraham Isaacs, the lawyer, had a tiny office on High Street, a far cry from the much larger premises he had occupied with his partners in George, the established town at the foot of the Outeniqua Mountains some forty miles from Oudtshoorn.

Isaacs had known Sir Anthony long enough to realise the spry old man had a good nose for business, so he had not hesitated in committing his time to investigate the opportunities Oudtshoorn offered. He had even put some of his own money into the ostrich venture, although he had not yet informed James of this. Isaacs was not a man to leave things to others, so he had sold his shares in the George office to his partners and established himself in Oudtshoorn.

He was not too surprised when James entered his office that morning. 'Mr Quenton,' he said with a smile, 'come in, come in!'

When James had seated himself in the single chair across the desk, Isaacs removed his glasses and rubbed his tired eyes. 'It's more money you want, I take it?' he said abruptly, leaning his elbows on the desk. He was a small man, but he'd dealt with all types during his career, and the frustration he saw on the muscular man's face did not unsettle him. 'A young man in so much of a hurry for things to happen,' he went on. 'Always a pitiful sight.'

'I need more birds,' James replied, as though he had not heard the lawyer.

'Of course! More birds, then more labour, and finally more land. When will you stop wanting, James Quenton?'

'When I possess my own ostrich venture, when I'm no longer obliged to consult you on anything.' Isaacs smiled down at the desk top.

'The land is lying idle,' continued James. 'The birds are starting to breed, and there's space for at least four more fenced fields.'

'And the labour to fence these fields and look after the additional birds?'

'One extra man is all we need. I've saved on the original estimate,' he added. 'We could use some of that for purchasing breeding birds and materials. The additional investment would amount to little.'

Isaacs was thoughtful. 'I can only convey your request to Sir Anthony,' he said at last.

'It will be up to him to decide.'

'It'll be too late – it'll take weeks for the message to reach Cape Town! *You* have to make the decision.'

'I?'

'Yes! You're Sir Anthony's adviser – he left you in charge of his investments. If not, then why the hell am I coming to you for every penny?' He lowered his voice and said, 'Why don't you come out to the farm, see for yourself what I've got planned? I've marked out the areas where the other paddocks should be.'

'The farm has changed since I last saw it?'

'No, but—'

'Then there is no need for a personal visit, is there?'

'You'll trust my judgement?'

'I'll think about it.'

James jumped to his feet. 'I have ostriches to tend to,' he snapped. He turned when he reached the door. 'When you make your decision,' he said, 'bear in mind that any additional investment right now will hasten the healthy return on all investments made so far. That would put money into your pocket a lot sooner than you'd hoped for.'

Isaacs slammed his spectacles down on the desk, glanced quickly at them to see whether they were still in one piece and then glared up at James. 'How did you know?'

'About your share? Mr Isaacs, I find it interesting that you should pay so much attention to another man's money – even if Sir Anthony is a major client of yours. That can mean only one thing.'

The sudden smirk seemed out of place on Isaacs's face. 'Most of us have a touch of the gambler in us, young Quenton. Now why don't you go look after our ostriches while I think some more, huh?'

James raised a hand in mock salute. 'Good-day, Mr Isaacs.'

'Good-day – oh, by the way, I've sent someone out to the farm to see you. Perhaps you should talk to him.'

'Who?'

'Just a labourer. He says he's good at fencing paddocks.' The door closed on James's satisfied grin.

*

When he rode up to the hut there was a tall African standing beside the fence, his arms folded sternly while he ignored the acrimonious glances of the Xhosa labouring in the paddock.

James let him wait while he tethered his horse – an unplanned expense to which Sir Anthony had agreed – and washed the worst of the dust from his face and hair. Then he strolled slowly over to the fence.

The African raised his arm, palm outwards, then let it fall back to his side. James gave a brief nod. 'You speak English?'

'Indeed. The missionaries spent time with me.'

Not the other way round, thought James, but managed to bite back his smile. 'Are you the man Mr Isaacs sent to see me?' He studied the African, admiring his muscled body and spread of shoulder. He was about thirty, James decided, thinking that Denker would have

been pleased to have such a powerful body labour for him.

'Indeed. I know this ostrich business.'

'Which is more than I can say for your friends over there.' He indicated the labourers in the paddock.

For a moment it seemed as though the black man would strike him. He stiffened, glanced with enraged eyes at the Xhosa, then spat in their direction. 'I am Zulu!' he cried, thumping his muscled chest. 'Those are Xhosa dogs – cattle killers! Their women have such small buttocks one must raise them up to enter their tiny mounds. The penis of the men is as small as a piccaninny's toy assegai. Their—'

'You're a Zulu?' asked James to stem the flow of insults, wondering at the same time where the missionaries had gone wrong.

'Indeed.' He had folded his arms again.

'You're a long way from home, aren't you?' Even as he spoke, he realised the African would be affronted again, for the Zulu nation had long since made their influence felt beyond their native region of Natal. It was the first time, though, that he had seen one as far west as the Karoo.

'The Zulu's home is anywhere he wants it to be,' came the even reply.

'Indeed,' quipped James and smiled.

They studied each other for a few moments. 'You say you know about ostriches?'

'The Zulu has hunted them for centuries. Their feathers adorn the head-dress of the impi warriors. Then, too, I have worked on the farms. The birds and I are both creatures of God.'

A Christian Zulu, mused James, wondering how much he could trust the big African's claim to experience. Yet he knew the man could not be worse than the Xhosa, who seemed to lack a natural aptitude for dealing with the large birds. 'You have a name?' he asked.

'Indeed. I am known as Mthembeni.'

'What?'

The Zulu rolled his eyes heavenwards. 'You may call me whatever is easy on your tongue. Anything but Kaffir.'

James smiled, knowing how the Africans hated the term. Another word sprang into his mind, one he had heard some Dutch children use to describe African men. The word was used affectionately, almost the way one referred to a nanny. 'I will call you Outa,' he announced.

The Zulu shrugged his broad shoulders. 'A name is a name in the eyes of God,' he said. 'You may call me Outa.'

'When can you start?' He hoped he was not about to employ a self-ordained preacher.

'I already have,' came the reply. 'I am about to build the shelters over there.' He pointed to a spot near the fence.

'Shelters? What shelters?'

Outa shook his head, as if despairing at James's lack of knowledge. 'You have seen the birds rutting?'

'Breeding, yes.'

'Then it is the will of God that the eggs will bear. The eggs will need protection, so we will need to build shelters. So high.' He indicated a height of about eight feet.

'I will gather reeds for the roof.' Without waiting for James's response, he bounded over

the fence, heading with loping strides for the river.

James knew then that the African had not lied about his experience with ostriches. The V-shaped shelters were the one thing he had forgotten to erect.

'Outa!' he called out to the departing figure.

The tall Zulu turned slowly, a small smile playing on his thick lips at the sound of his new name.

'I don't want to hear about God all day long, do you understand? You can keep what He has planned to yourself.'

'You are a heathen?'

'No, I'm not a bloody heathen, damn you! I just don't want Him thrust down my throat all the time.'

The Zulu grinned broadly, his white teeth almost as dazzling a display as an ostrich's plumage. 'I am just a little bitty Christian,' he called back, 'but one can never be too careful when choosing a master. No more talk of God!' The two men smiled at each other.

James asked, 'What does it mean, whatever you said your name was?'

Outa's smile widened, yet there was a seriousness in his eyes when he replied, 'Mthembeni ... One you can trust.' He smiled again before turning away.

The Xhosa were watching the newcomer with hate-filled eyes, making James wonder if he had bought himself a parcel of trouble. Still, Outa promised to be an entertaining addendum to his lonely life.

Mthembeni ... one you can trust. Time would tell, he decided.

*

The Xhosa were gone by the end of April, one of them carried off by his comrades after suffering a fearful beating at the hands of Outa.

'What do we do now?' demanded James, trying hard to disguise the pleasure he felt at their leaving. Outa seemed unconcerned. 'What were they,' he asked, 'but three jackals eating our food? We will do the work ourselves.' James shook his head at the tribal disdain the proud Zulu displayed for the Xhosa.

Two weeks later the fences of the new paddocks were in position so that they were able to take delivery of a further ten ostriches. 'You see?' said Outa with obvious satisfaction. 'We have no need of the Xhosa.'

The late autumn air was alive with the sounds and sights of mating. Noting this, Outa discussed his concern with his employer beside their fire one night. 'The birds rut,' he started, 'and at night I sneak to the Xhosa women to plunge my fleshy assegai deep inside their flesh. But you – you stay by your birds at all times. You do not like rutting?'

James glared at him across the flames. 'It seems you have found some use for the Xhosa after all,' he snapped. 'Someone must stay here to look after the farm.'

'I can stay. I do not have to rut every night. I have the will – praise God – but I do not have to every night.'

'You're not my caretaker,' said James, smiling gently at the black man. There were available women in town, of course, many who had displayed more than a passing interest in him. Perhaps Outa was right; it was more than a year, anyway, since he had pushed one of the women passengers aboard ship up against the hard wood of a cabin wall, taking his brief moment of relief before her husband returned from visiting the ship's

officers. Their time together was nothing more than snatched intervals of hurried passion, always filled with the fear of discovery and punishment. She had left the ship in Cape Town without even a farewell glance at him.

'Tell me a story,' he said suddenly, gruffly, feeling his body stir at the fading memory. Night after night he and Outa had shared the fire, telling each other tales from their past, sometimes talking about their beloved ostriches.

'What kind of story?'

'One about ostriches.'

Outa was lost in thought for a while. Then he looked up with a smirk on his lips. 'You know of the Bushmen?' he asked, shifting closer to the flames.

'Of course.' The little brown men who had roamed and been chased from most parts of Africa had ruled the Karoo as well. The coming of the white man had ended that, so that only their paintings adorned the caves which had once been their homes.

'The Bushmen tell the tale,' Outa started, 'of the ostrich when it moved down from the northern parts. They saw the birds for the first time when they reached a land of great water, the place they call Okavango, many miles north of here.'

'I have heard of it,' said James, settling back to hear what Outa had to say that night.

'They watched the ostriches for many days and nights, till someone asked, "Why does this great bird not fly?" It was many months before they thought up an answer for this.'

'The ostrich has never flown!'

The interjection made Outa glare. 'It is *my* story.'

'Sorry.'

'Indeed.' He let the silence demonstrate his annoyance at the interruption before he went on. 'The Bushmen decided,' he said slowly, enjoying James's frustration at the time it took him to get to the point of the tale, 'that the ostrich was the only animal to possess the secret of fire.'

'Fire?'

'Yes! The secret of fire!'

'And that's the, tale?'

Outa shut his eyes. Again there was a lengthy silence. 'So,' he started, flashing James a warning look, 'the ostrich feared that other creatures would steal the secret from him. And so he hid the secret under his wing, where they would not think to look for it.'

'And that is why he dare not fly?' James chipped in. 'Because the secret would drop from beneath his wings?'

'Indeed!' The Zulu was beaming with the successful telling of his tale.

'Is this true, Outa?'

'It is what the Bushmen tell,' he replied. 'But who can believe what brown men say?'

James pushed himself to his feet. 'Outa,' he said, 'I'm going to take your advice and go into town tomorrow night. I've had enough of your stories.'

'Indeed. Indeed.'

*

James was rudely awakened on a mild and sunny May morning by Outa's hysterical banging on the hut's door. He leaped from his bunk, thinking that some tragedy had

befallen them during the night. His fears were allayed by the smiling face that greeted him as he stumbled from the hut.

'We have eggs!' bellowed Outa. 'Come see!' He led the way to the paddocks where the hens which had mated were kept. An egg, its shell glossy and pitted, showed beneath a protective hen. James was relieved Outa had displayed the foresight to herd the males into an adjoining paddock before waking him. The agitated birds fluttered their rage from across the fence.

'There lies our future,' he said, hugging Outa in his excitement. 'I wonder how many others have started laying.' The birds should lay an egg every other day till their clutch of about fifteen was complete. James did a quick calculation based on the incubation period of forty-two days. 'We'll have our first chicks in the middle of July,' he said. 'It won't be too long before the paddocks are filled with baby ostriches. Then we're on our way!'

The Zulu's brow was creased in concern. 'What's wrong?'

'There will be too many eggs, too few cocks,' Outa replied as he searched through the other nests. 'We shall have to watch closely.'

'That we shall, but not tonight. Tonight I go to town, and you can bury your fleshy assegai as many times as you wish!'

Outa still looked unhappy. 'Why go to town,' he asked, 'when the women come to you?'

James ignored him and started back for the hut. He had met a number of women in Outdshoorn, and most of them were intrigued by the good-looking Englishman who was rumoured to be more interested in ostriches than women.

They were determined to change that, and consequently he soon had a supply of willing ladies. Some of them were married, although that in no way deterred him. It amused him how prepared they were to meet him, sometimes riding out to the farm in the afternoons, going with him to the river bank, to the spot where his ostriches had held their dance of passion. He had even been with them in their own homes, where they risked everything while their husbands were in the fields or in town.

James was not attached to any of them. They were merely a convenience, a fun-filled diversion from his daily chores. When he was done with them, he hurried back to his true loves. Outa often warned him that sooner or later some irate husband would deal him a punch more lethal than the kick of an ostrich.

During that afternoon he had gone into the paddocks, wanting to gaze at the freshly laid eggs once more. Afterwards, he cursed Outa for not warning him the cocks had been released back into the field in preparation for their turn on the nests that night.

The first he knew of their presence was the booming roar of rage as a cock, his prize specimen, rushed at him with awesome speed, its wings fluttering with menace.

James ran. He heard the cloven feet behind him pound ever closer in a deathly rush of aggression. Through his blurred vision he saw Outa making for the fence, a branch of thorn bush in his hand. 'Down!' called Outa. 'Get down – oh, sweet Jesus!'

James dived for the earth and lay there with his arms protecting his head. The cock was upon him, trampling on his exposed back. He felt his shirt tear and the blood flow warmly across his skin.

'Shoo, you sinner, shoo!' Outa was there, fighting with his thorn bush thrust out at the bird's eyes. James felt the weight lift from him as the cock retreated, the threat of damage to its eyes overcoming its need to kill the menace to its unborn chicks.

'Get up!' Outa hissed. 'Run for the fence.' James raised his bruised and battered body

and limped to safety. Outa followed closely, keeping a wary eye on the big bird, for he knew they were clever enough to find ways around the thorn and repeat their attack.

'You are lucky,' he said when he had James spread out on the ground beside the hut, 'that I was at hand to save you.'

James was in too much agony to blame him for what had happened. 'When an ostrich attacks,' Outa continued his lecture, 'one must always lie flat. He can only kick forwards, and when he does that, he will tear you apart with that long toenail of his. On the ground he can only hurt you, but that is better than being dead.' He let James suffer a little longer before he started dressing his wounds, continuing to tell him about the ostrich's evil temper. It was the last thing James wanted to hear.

'That cantankerous old bird,' he muttered when Outa was unnecessarily rough. 'Once his chicks are born, I will personally pluck all his feathers and make stew of him!'

'Indeed! Whatever you decide to do with him, he has done enough to keep you at home tonight. Your little white spear will stay in its sheath.'

James glared at him.

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