

# The Bearer

By David L Nightingale Copyright © December 2014 All Rights Reserved

First Edition

[www.dorsetauthor.co.uk](http://www.dorsetauthor.co.uk)

Warning, this text contains some strong language, including expletives. Colloquial words are used to characterise the speech often used routinely. Such speech is not condoned by the author, however for fiction to reflect reality it is often necessary to use such words. "Ouch, oh, dear, oh dear, sugar, I have just spilled the beans." Just does not cut it. Some of the language spelling is to try and capture the rustic nature of country folk. Note: Some spelling reflects colloquial speech.

## Chapter 1

"So how was the big trip?" The question was directed to the main man.

Richard the leader was back from a trekking holiday in an African valley. In his inimitable way he was extolling with the great flamboyance and passion the positive benefits of his experience at the team meeting. The timing was impeccable, upper management had had yet another motivator with the latest buzzwords giving talks throughout the corporate divisions. In this atmosphere there was an enthusiastic reaction from managers keen to impress those at senior levels. You could imagine them writing a book on how to show the upper echelons that the concepts they were pushing, had been assimilated.

"We could do our own trip, big yes?" said an enthusiastic minion eager to make a name for himself.

"Fantastic, why don't we lunch at the pub and I'll tell you more about it." said Richard, like a volcano about to erupt, he could hardly contain himself.

"Excellent." Echoed through the group.

At the Duck and Whistle, the team were huddled around Richard's tablet, as he conducted the orchestra of pictures.

"Wow check out the local talent." Andy's stare was almost comic.

"Very remote location, natives stick to traditional customs," said Richard, trying to keep a professional dignity. He knew if upper management got the wrong impression, the idea would collapse. So he carefully used just

enough bait to press the buttons of his team without over cooking the visual feast.

"Hey when are we going?" asked Tim, sensing Andy's immature manner did not get a positive reaction from Richard.

"Yea head office was talking about team building exercises, that dance team sure know a few exercises." Andy was quick witted.

"Would you chaps be up for it then?"

"Are you serious Richard?" said Roger.

"Why not, they are always telling us how we need to challenge ourselves," said Richard.

"Do you think they'd let us all go at the same time, you being the boss of this office, and the three of us all line managers?"

"I will check, we have a nice quiet period coming up three months from now." Richard said, with a nod to the others.

"Oh, yes." Roger's mind clicked, "The restructuring? With our work being handed over to the Indian office, and a refocused expansion into those other markets, headed by us."

"Africa was a new part of the expansion plan, wasn't it?" said Tim.

"Right," said Richard, "Good point, understanding culture can be a key clue to success in market penetration."

Several days later, Richard's in depth report, with contributions from all his team, had been digested. His attention to detail, and his individual contributions from his team in a most professional presentation had sold the idea.

"Guess what, head office think it is a great idea." Richard said with some glee. "They have our offices down for refurbishment, so they are only too keen to shut down for a month or so while the work is being done."

## Chapter 2

It was a week later, Richard was concerned about the costs. They needed to find two more to go with them.

"I can't believe that no one else in our office wanted to come, are they crazy?" said Andy, in a somewhat insensitive way. Other people within the office had family commitments or other issues that caused them to develop an aversion to Andy's brusque manner.

"Hey four is okay?" asked Roger, trying to rebalance the atmosphere, and distract from his protégé's lack of tacked.

"Yes but it does make the price per person rather steep," said Richard. "The higher ups will be very closely monitoring every move we make. How we budget the trip and keep a tight reign on costs may be key. We must consider post restructuring reviews. This is not just a jolly, they will be expecting us to document the whole exercise. Diaries, schedules, costings, information gathering, you name it."

"I could ask one of my clients, Harry does a bit of hiking," said Tim.

The team began planning in earnest. Tim got off to a flying start. He called Harry which set a train in motion. Harry knew Tim but more as an acquaintance, the mate you go down the pub for a drink with. Harry knew someone very well, someone reliable. Not that he did not trust Tim, but Harry had known John since college, when they had done plenty of activities, like chasing women up mountains, or as John, used to put it, "Hauling the ladies over the rocks!"

"Hi John, how are you doing?" Harry made the call.

"Okay I suppose," said John.

"Problems?"

"Yes, broke up with Vera." John sounded dejected.

"She wasn't really your type, not a hiker, which reminds me, a mate of mine is going with a group to Africa, his boss has been on some trip wants to go again. They could do with some extra folks, and asked me."

"What kind of trip?" John's tone noticeably went up beat.

"The boss went up this valley, bit of trek through to some lake jungle, but easy going stuff. Nice scenery," said Harry, "It might be about a month away, but fairly cheap once we are there. Think about it let me know?"

Richard's team was being prepared, their leader, knew his group had to excel. The weekends were targeted for activities to get the team in the right frame of mind. Targeting outdoor trade shows and exhibitions became somewhat of an obsession. This weekend they were once again touring the stands.

"Hey Richard neat idea coming to this show," said Andy.

The outdoor trade show was one mighty big exhibition of all the latest kit.

"Fantastic place to get all the gear," said Tim.

Back at the hotel, they compared the kit they had bought. The more gadget minded of them were like boys with toys, and a degree of competition had set in.

"Oh, I thought about getting one of those, got one of these instead," said Andy, looking at one of Tim's items. It was almost as though they had to buy things, even if they did not need them, to show that they were investing totally in this team building mission.

"That is so neat," said Roger, complementing Andy, making Tim feel like he had made a bad choice.

### Chapter 3

The teams experience going through airport security was quite a challenge. Richard was of the opinion that he did not want to put their expensive kit in the hold for some baggage handler to steal. However trying to take anything on a plane these days seemed to be near impossible. As a backup plan, Richard, had anticipated the Gestapo, and sent most of the supplies via a reliable carrier. It was a good job too, Richard's ex-wife with whom he was on good terms, had travelled with them to the airport. She was able to take the prohibited items with her, hopefully she could ship these in time for the beginning of the expeditions move. They were to be based for several days in a village outside the main town. Richard had thought this would give them time to acclimatize and work through any bugs, also to collect and prepare supplies, along with getting the natives onside.

At the end of the dancing the men retired to their hut for the night. A man soon appeared.

"I lead you tomorrow, it arranged," said the guide. "Me Kombi"

"OK, said Richard, "Say those women dancing, the one that did the solo at the end, we heard her speaking English pretty good to a tourist, then she disappeared."

"She speak good English, French good too, she like speak lot with tourist, she like practice keep good."

"We think it would be good to have someone who can speak good English, it is a long trip, your English is not so good my friend."

"You want I arrange?"

"Good man, you arrange, thank you Kombi," said Richard, handing him a rather large denomination banknote.

The guide grinned, he liked these kind of tourists, oh yes, he would arrange. "OK boss," he said and continued, "Me have twenty good men, carry you things, you much things, I see when we unload from truck, driver say he think twenty."

"Twenty?" Richard, was thinking of the financial implications, although it would still be peanuts.

The guide looked at him, with a kind of do you want my advice or not? Or put another way, who has the unenviable task of guiding and baby sitting a lot of European tourists who have trouble spelling the word jungle, let alone going into one.

"Okay," nodded Richard, he had thought about all their clobber, and where they were going, and what the hell it was only money.

In the morning after a good breakfast the Englishmen all stood near their baggage, twenty bearers ready to carry, the only person missing was the guide.

"Where's he got to?" said Roger becoming impatient.

"He'll be here," said Richard confident.

Andy shrugged, as he was beaten to it by Tim, who spotted the guide walking towards them with Laetitia. She did not look happy and it was not because the white-men were leering at her near naked body. The area was somewhat remote, and tribal customs were still very much in play. It helped that the locals knew the tourists wanted to come to a region where the people were still authentic, and that their local customs were valued. Nearer the coast, and in the towns and what passed for cities, the tourists got a very fake idea of native culture.

The guide apologised for the delay, "Sorry, this is Laetitia," he said introducing her to them. "She not happy, she no understand why you want her to come? Women stay in village, only travel to get water, or food grown around village."

"We need you please they don't speak much English and you speak great English, French and two native languages," said Richard turning on the charm, pointing to the guide and the bearers.

"You have done this kind of trip before?" said Laetitia, with some concern.

"Oh yea you'll be safe with us, twenty seven men to protect you." Richard was convinced but she did not seem to share his optimism.

"You are outdoor types?" she asked, yet to be convinced.

"Oh yea (they sit outdoors in the pub beer garden opposite their office) all the time," said Andy with a smirk.

"Please," said Richard with a stern glare at Andy, he turned back to look at Laetitia, "Besides, his cooking is appalling," he grinned pointing at Roger.

"She smiled, You want me to prepare food as well?" In the native culture women's roles were well defined and this was a requirement she could comprehend.

"Of course," said Richard.

"Okay, I will go," Laetitia was still reluctant, but she knew the guide was experienced, and it was near the end of the tourist season, so she would not miss much dancing. Not to mention the good money she was being offered to come, and the chance of speaking English for many weeks was very appealing to her sense of learning. The country had been a French colony so although tourists came and went, the chances to speak a lot of English were limited.

"Oh man she's a native goddess," said Andy.

"Yea gorgeous hips, slim body, and did you catch that rack?" said Tim.

"Loaded man, those are some big (cold shower) hooters," said Andy, on a subject that Tim and Andy could

both call a truce and agree with.

“Did you get her dancing (yesterday evening) on video?” said Tim in a whisper.

(They first see her dancing for the tourists when they arrive at the village.)

“You bet, any of you others get a full HD card?” said Andy, a bit too loudly.

“Sure, and I sent my first one home with that fellow who brought us here, didn't want to lose it in the jungle.”

Tim was pleased with his own forward thinking.

“Hey coming to Africa was a great idea, and I'd like to explore her jungle,” said Andy.

“Yea, and climb those mountains,” said Roger chiming in.

“Will you three keep your voices down,” Richard's tone left them in no uncertain sense that he was becoming frustrated. “Just keep your thoughts to yourselves, okay. We are going to be in their hands, deep in the jungle, we need her on our side. Besides if we show her disrespect, who knows what those twenty bearers might do to us. I don't want to wake up and find the guide, her and the bearers gone. So do you want them to leave us stranded?”

The three of his managers shook their heads.

Richard was feeling unsettled, “It all started with a trekking holiday.” He thought quietly to himself, about how people have a great time and later try to recreate events that happened in the past. Just like movie sequels, many are better than those that precede them, with the right director, crew and cast. However with this sequel Richard was having some serious doubts about his new cast.

Leader of the six pack, as the African guide called them behind their backs in his native tongue, to his friends, would not listen to reason. Playing down any issues, with the reassurance that they had some great equipment all the latest kit.

The jungle was extremely dense, the guide and his team decided having repeatedly warned the leader that they were not happy, to do the only thing left. They would all slope off undercover of darkness. He felt a bit sorry for Laetitia, but she was too near the tents to wake without disturbing the six pack. Besides he reasoned, her father was French, so he did not entirely trust her not to blow the whistle to those Europeans.

They awoke to the woman's voice, “The men have gone,” she said to Richard. She had felt cold and woke to find the camp-fire nearly out, after putting on some more fuel, it became apparent that the natives had fled.

“Bunch of superstitious twats,” said Andy.

“Well we've been in this jungle now for over two weeks, I say we go on, sod them, who needs them,” said Richard, now in a defiant mood. It was not the cast that had let him down after all. They seemed to be working well together, no it was his crew, with one exception.

“What about the equipment, we can't carry that lot?” Harry said looking rather troubled.

“We stash what we can do without, cover it up. Then pick up more supplies from the stash on our return,” said Tim, “What do you think boss?”

“Agreed,” Richard was pleased with the idea.

“No, sorry you might but there are only six of us now, and no guide,” said the voice of reason. John had done too many treks to take what he thought was a reckless attitude.

“We've got the woman,” said Roger.

Laetitia looked at John, “He is right, I am not a guide.”

“Harry?” said John, looking to his friend for an ally.

“Well, those four want to go on, I don't fancy going back even if you are with me, besides he's been here before. So lets go on.” Harry's mind was focused on those movies where they had the best chance if they stuck together.

“Well said,” said Richard, his mind was on keeping the team together, focused and reaching their objective. John, shrugged his shoulders. Reluctantly he had no choice but to stay with the others, they were several days out from the village where they had been based. The jungle was dense and full of predators.

“You should only take food water and weapons, bare essentials,” said Laetitia. She was worried, she thought back to when Richard had told her how safe she would be with twenty seven men to protect her.

“Lady you stick to languages, we'll decide what we take,” said the leader, Richard was determined to maintain his command.

Laetitia noticed John frown, and a slight shake of the head as the others went back to their tents, he thought, “Daft sod, this is no paint-ball exercise, you are not in the office now Richard?” and he did think of a less complementary name for the boss.

John tried to pay Laetitia a discrete visit. “In the morning I would appreciate your advice on what to take in my pack.”

“Listen to Jonny boy, oh miss Africa, help me help me.” The others laughed like hyaenas.

“Hey Jonny boy, real men, those of us who've got some balls, don't need to ask some bit of native pussy what we need.” Richard was full of bravado. He was an alpha male, who always did well, and had so few set backs he could sometimes have too much hubris.

“He's just trying to chat her up, dirty bastard,” said Andy, trying to score some points.

“No wonder he does not want to go, wants to get his grubby hands on her titties, while we conquer the jungle.” Tim was now trying to out compete Andy.

“Old yellow belly, Mr woosie, wants his mummy, he wouldn't know what to do with a massive pair of boobs other than suck on them,” said Roger, adding his thoughts to the chorus.

The team had moved on, but did not make much progress, they had spent rather a lot of time during the morning in a disorganised frantic frenzy. Arguments had broken out as to what should be stashed, and where, the advice from the seasoned trekker, John, and native wisdom from Laetitia had been completely ignored.

During the trek, Richard had taken the lead, Roger had followed behind, Andy sticking close to his uncle. Tim trudged behind Andy. Harry being friends with Tim stuck close to his man on the inside of Richards team. John and Laetitia were relegated to bringing up the rear.

As they ascended a densely forested ridge, the weather began closing in. Richard calculated the time to dusk and decided to make camp for the night. With the rain, again pouring down in shed loads, John ventured to find out a bit more about Laetitia, he asked her to tell them about how she spoke so well.

Laetitia explained her story to him as they sat huddled in the shelter. Her father had been a French doctor, her mother had been trained as a nurse at the mission hospital. She learned French and English from him, her mother also spoke French but it was not her native tongue, she taught Laetitia the local native language, and the other native language used in the area near the mission hospital. The hospital had been near the border, so often they had refugees to treat. The bordering country was an ethnic melting pot, tribes, war lords and government troops regularly clashing with each other. When things got too bad, the French government pulled

out all its citizens. My father did not want to leave, he was dedicated to his work, this is what attracted my mother too him. He along with the other natives that had been running the hospital, moved across to this side of the country. Luckily our government troops managed to contain the incursions and this area has remained relatively peaceful.

For Richard the morning was a disaster, Tim was losing points. Harry had gotten bitten by a snake while going to take a dump. Richard looking for reasons, blamed the slow start the previous day on John and Laetitia, he was convinced that those two were deliberately fermenting dissent in the team. Undaunted at reaching the objective, he made the decision that Harry could not be moved, and Laetitia needed to care for him, someone that new Harry well would need to stay to provide protection and help to Laetitia and the wounded man. John was the obvious choice.

“Have they got completely lost?” asked Harry? “Are they coming back a different route?”

“Have they met with misfortune, maybe a similar snake bite to Harry and are having to wait for the victim to recover.” John thought to himself, looking at his friend.

“Are they back already,” said Laetitia. “Is the route back blocked or impossible, could they be going across country to a town on the far side of the jungle and maybe fly back to town in which we started, in which case they could be months.”

John looked at her, “We are a long way from people then?”

She nodded, “If they kept going in the direction they were headed, a very long way.”

In another part of the jungle the four men were pushing on with great intensity, it had been several days since they left the others, and had reached with great applaud what Richard said was there objective. A giant rock stack that that stood in a gully, near a river. After camping their for the night they had started the return journey.

“With the wind in the right direction, away from them, dense tree cover, thinking on the trees that are planted to screen traffic noise from housing by major roads, and the nearby shrieking and squawking of monkeys and birds. We may not have heard those three come to some sticky end, maybe pounced upon by big cats, or ambushed by unfriendly natives,” said Richard.

“We did come back past where they were and there was no sign of them right?” said Tim, trying to reassure himself that they had not abandoned his mate Harry.

“Yes Tim,” said Richard, his authoritative and confident tone, would leave no one in any doubt.

The team marched as one, Richard's success gave them high moral.

The other three had remained put, for two reasons. Harry needed time to recover, and the team was expected to return via the same route. It made sense to journey back to base together. However as the days went by and Harry was well recovered, John considered moving back to the previous camp where the supplies were stashed.

“With just three of us it will take longer to get back from here than it did to get here,” said John.

“Why? asked Harry.

“You are not so fit, with the damage from the snake venom, the jungle trail we cut will have grown back over.”

Laetitia interjected, “We will need to track where we have come, we will not only need to have our senses alert for danger, but for signs where machete cuts have been made in trees and vines.”

It took them some time even to get back to the clearing where the reserve supplies had been stashed. John, and Laetitia both looked around while Harry remained alert for danger.

"This is the right place?" said John, he seemed very uncertain, and unsure of his senses.

Laetitia nodded, "In the weeks we have been up the trail there has been a lot of growth, but this is the place al-right."

"So where are the supplies?" John looked perplexed. It seemed like finding the needle in the proverbial haystack.

"Can't you find them?" said Harry,

"Nop," said John, looking even more worried. "Laetitia do you think those bearers might have doubled back and grabbed the supplies once we had moved on."

She shook her head, "No, no way, the guide leader might have run out on us, but he and the others were no thieves. If you want to work with tourists you need a good reputation, the companies that normally hire such people are very careful about who they select. They want repeat business, and ripping off tourists is one way to loose that. Besides, the guides and bearers want the regular work, not to mention the local villagers who also benefit. But I do know this something was bothering them, and unlike you, the guide and his friends would have no need of such stuff to survive in the wild."

With this thought in mind, the three of them decided to press on, rather than waste time. They were very relieved to reach the pass that lead down through some hills as the land gave way to more open country, and the village where they started.

John asked Laetitia to question the natives, had they seen the bearers and the guide?

The responses were all negative, in fact, many of the locals whose sons had gone as bearers were showing signs of distinct anger that these three had come back with no knowledge of them. When they explained that the bearers had all turned tail and run, many of the parents became enraged and refused to believe it. The guide had such a good reputation, that many of the locals smelled foul play. The only thing that saved John and Harry, was when Laetitia showed them the scars from the snake bit, and explained how the three of them had been left behind. She told them John was Harry's friend, he stayed to guard them, while she nursed the sick man. This they could believe, and they chose to imagine that the guide and bearers must have gone on with the other four white men.

"Don't John," Laetitia said to him, "We should go my family's hut, you must stay there, don't leave the hut without one of us."

Harry looked at John, both men realised they could be in some danger from the locals. Feelings were running high.

It was not long before the hard pressed underpaid police arrived, hampered by interference both from village elders and local government officials, their enquires seemed very superficial. The villagers wanted justice, the police had no desire or the resources to venture into the jungle to search for the lost men, and the officials wanted to keep a lid on it. Even if this area no longer wanted the tourists, the rest of the country was desperate for them and the men at the top new that one bit of bad news could easily blight the whole country. Many of the villagers were shocked, they felt neglected and salt was well and truly rubbed into the wounds by the VIP treatment given to the two surviving white men. The state tourist board was given the funds to ensure that these men would tell how well they were treated after their jungle ordeal. In the news reports no mention was given to the loss of so many native men, the press only reported the sad loss of the brave Englishmen.

When John and Harry arrived back in England they went along with the accepted story. They both feared telling of the native desertion would only stir up an hornets nest. John had got a grasp of the native sentiment,



and realised the ramifications, not just for the country, Laetitia was already feeling the heat, he knew when they left the officials and police would go leaving her alone with the angry locals.

## Chapter 4

It was some months later, Laetitia's father was very ill, her mother was becoming increasingly worried. Not so much for her husband as a nurse she was well able to look after him, but for her daughter. The guide was related to many of the bearers, and the question of what happened to them all was still a mystery. One that every day stirred a pot of rumours and spiced with hate for foreigners. Although quaint local customs were great for the tourists, they were a double edged sword. The missions may have converted many, but this region still clung to the older, darker and some might say more sinister superstitions. Whenever something bad occurred, it drew those affected to seek solutions from the shamans, powerful men who the local leaders drew power from, but in return had to bow to the spiritual demands. Laetitia's mother knew too well that the village elder and those around him, would not dare go against the shamans pronouncements, for fear of themselves being accused.

There were no more tourists coming until next season, in a way a good thing, both for the safety of the tourists, and there was no need to remind and reinforce the locals memories of those six white men who had doomed their sons. It would be almost a month before the driver came again. His trips were less frequent at this time of year because of the bad weather conditions and lack of tourists. Her mother feared that, even had he have come, they might not have let Laetitia leave. She was becoming the focus, with no one else from the expedition left, the two white men gone home, the whispers were growing louder. It was tonight or not at all.

Her mother had prepared a small pack, some food a blanket and a knife, wrapped in strong cloth.

"You must go," she whispered.

Laetitia understood. She also knew that like ripples from a stone dropped in a pond that all the surrounding villages were in on the conspiracy. Over the days up to this point she had known she may have to leave. Once quietly clear of the village, she made her way towards the mountains. To the east lay the dense and dangerous jungle, in the north a river which came down from the lake that drained from the jungle, it was a long way to reach it, there were few crossing, all of which would be guarded once they realised she'd gone. Going west to the coast was both a long way and worse, full of villages. Her tribe would soon hunt her down, the chances of getting to the coast were slim to none with so many after her.

The mountains in the south were a natural border between her country and the neighbouring one. Long considered impassable, there were no roads or even tracks through them. They climbed steeply, with little vegetation, few animals and rough terrain, only appealing to adventurous climbers. Those crazy Europeans, Americans and the occasional Kiwis and Australians. Even the tourist guides and bearers keen for tourist money would not go there. They soon reverted to telling the whites that carrying was women's work.

She had been on two of these trips, luckily so she knew how to get to what passed for a trail. Not that it went anywhere, which was why it was such a good route to take. It was slow progress, there was almost no moonlight, the reason why her mother suggested going that night, less chance of being seen. She had to keep going, it had taken her a good few hours to reach the base of the mountains. On the first part of the climb the track was relatively easy, the danger came from being seen. It was important to clear the first bend in the track, like the curve of a scorpions tail, the sting taking her into a narrow valley between two towering columns

of rock.

The light of dawn was just beginning to glimmer on the horizon, she had rounded the bend but wanted to keep going. Some way ahead, near the end of the rock columns was what one climber had called lazy rock. A giant slab, canted over, the top leaning against an even bigger upright slab. Like two drunks, one leaning against the other for support. Between them was a crevice, not big but enough to shelter in. Out of sight, while she rested.

It was some time ago when she had first been chosen to carry a load for the climbers. The women had lined up on parade hoping to be selected, the money was good. A rather arrogant American had chosen her.

"This one's mine you carry for me." He grinned.

His intentions became clear when they reached their first base camp.

Shoving money at her, he grabbed her right arm, trying to pull her towards his tent.

"Save your energy for the mountains," said a tall thin faced man.

"Fuck you Roy, who's paying for this expedition? If I want her fucking mountains, I'll fucking take the black bitch."

The thin man grabbed the man's wrist of the hand that held her arm in a vice like grip. Roy could see she was in pain. "You're hurting her, let her go."

"Roland are you figuring to carry all our kit up single handed?"

"Butt out Zack, I'm the one paying for this trip, like my daddy, I get what I want, and what I can't buy I take."

"Look at the other women Roland, they're frightened."

"Fuck them, this woman is mine."

Two of the other climbers were now watching with interest.

Zack looked at Roy, "Do you know what Roland's father is like Roy?"

Roy smiled, "What does he mean Roland?"

Roland released Laetitia, "I was only fooling around, tell them, it was a joke."

"Sure Roland, no hard feelings," said Zack, "We all need to be friends climbing these mountains, and we need all our gear."

Roland smiled, "Zack why are you so damn smart?"

He then looked at Roy, "And gentleman Roy, so damn polite."

"Guess that's why they work for your daddy Roland," chipped in one of the other climbers.

Roland disappeared into his tent, the others, prepared for the night.

Roy could not speak much to the other ladies, he wanted to reassure them. This was when he discovered Laetitia's linguistic skills.

He sensed she was keen to talk and even more to listen; the night was young

"Why did you come here?"

"Roland, or more like because of his uncle. Now he is the black sheep of the family."

"Black sheep?" Laetitia looked puzzled.

"Most of the family are into making money, and can be mighty ruthless at getting it. Rowland's uncle is a gentleman, the only thing he is interested in is history, military history. You could say it is an obsession. When Roland wants ideas for these trips, he gets uncle talking."

"I have heard no stories of military in this region, it is so remote?"

"The clue is on the other side of these mountains, I don't know the full story, but somewhere there is a hole, and Roland plans to find it." Roy shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't understand, there are no passes through these mountains?" Laetitia, struggled with the Europeans,

she was a native, how would they know something the natives did not? "How could your people know what we do not?"

"No, well your people may not, but apparently an old mine on the other side of these mountains followed a seam, the miners broke through to this side, the hole on this side was never found. Roland thinks it may be under some scree that has slipped down over the hole from above."

"How does he know," said Laetitia.

"When you have his daddy's money and influence you can access some pretty detailed satellite photos."

"Wouldn't it be easier to find the mine on the other side?"

"Roland is running the show, he said according to his uncle only two men returned from a major expedition trying to do just that.." said Roy, with raised eyebrows.

Laetitia's thoughts of that first encounter with the climbers gave way to sleep. The quiet of the mountains was in contrast to that of her village.

One of the village women came to visit her mother, on the pretext of ascertaining how Laetitia's father was. Her mother was prepared, she knew what was coming, and had contemplated saying Laetitia had gone for water. This would not be believed, the stream was so regularly visited by the locals they'd know if she was there.

"Where's your daughter?"

"That's what we'd like to know?" she said showing concern which was not difficult, worried both by the health of her husband and her daughters safety.

The woman tried to console her, and she may well have been genuine, when she said, "Don't worry we'll help you find her."

When this news reached the village elder the woman was questioned. Laetitia's mother had to give some kind of plausible explanation that would draw them in a different direction. She guessed maybe she'd gone for medical supplies for her sick father.

"At night, in secret?" The village elder showed disbelief.

"He is very sick," her mother pleaded.

The villagers were gathering. "Has anyone seen her go?" said the village elder.

While her French father through his help in healing the sick had attained an almost untouchable status, along with his nurse wife, their daughter was not so lucky. Blessed as she was with great beauty, there were many who let jealousy guide their hate. Laetitia's seeming desire to always be around the tourists, only lead to more innuendo and to many her language skills and fondness for foreigners gave her an air of a snob. There were many envious, who believed she needed taking down a peg or two.

Her disappearance was the spark that ignited a human bushfire in the land, the flames of anger spread rapidly through the region. Like a nest of angry ants who have been disturbed, the men of the villages were forming search parties, scurrying around in all directions. The first task to try and find her or at least her tracks.

Laetitia was still tired, rested for just an hour, she cautiously peered from her hiding place. The coast was clear. If anyone was following they would be able to move much faster in daylight, and the men could move mighty quick when they were hunting quarry.

The mountains were not particularly high, but they were maze like. Getting lost in the jungle might sound worse but for a native there was always food to be had in the jungle. If you got lost here you'd soon starve, and

with all the peaks looking similar it was very easy to become disorientated. Little wonder then the reluctance of the men to enter this barren land. For her, the further into the mountains she went the safer she felt.

Luckily for her, Roland did not give up easily, failing to find the hole on the first expedition, some months later he mounted a second. She nearly did not go because of her previous bad experience. This time however Roland had wised up, realising she was very useful to have along, communicating with the other women was a whole lot easier, adding to the efficiency of the operation.

On both trips the Americans had left subtle clues to the trail, which unless you knew what you were looking for could easily be missed. In towns and cities we often say take a left by the church head up to the cinema and the car park is opposite on the right. We don't, graffiti artists excepted, generally make marks along the route. Many of the rocks the climbers named after famous landmarks which they resembled. Of course if you'd never been to America it would be meaningless even if you knew the list of landmarks to look for. The ground was hard, no tree branches to get broken as clues of someone's passing, and the further you go in the more possible routes that could be taken. Laetitia pondered upon the other women who had carried the climbers loads. Trying to gauge if any of them would have the knowledge of the terrain that she had. Because of Roland's indiscretion, the first group of women did not want to go again, she reasoned they would have probably been preoccupied with other thoughts and probably would have forgotten the route, besides she was only following the first route up to a point, where the second expedition took a new route. Women were not generally involved in travelling like the men, so they were much less experienced, there was only one woman, she feared. The others had been reluctant, but this one although very shy, showed interest in a place she'd never been before.

It was near sun down when Laetitia finally reached her goal. The climbers had used a flat area in the dip in a long ridge that they had edged up the side of. There was not much shelter, but with good weather and her warm blanket she huddled up behind a rock for the night.

In the villages below there was no let up in the activity. The elders frustrated with the lack of progress, called a meeting of the men.

"Could she have crossed the river?" Asked one man.

"No, no way first thing this morning we sent runners, all the crossings are being watched, she could have not moved that fast in one night."

"Maybe she went into the jungle?"

There was a general nodding of heads at this suggestion.

After a pause this garnered a contemptuous reply, "What without her white men?"

"She must have gone towards the towns, towards the coast."

"Then why have we not seen her, there are many villages and it is a long way, she cannot travel by daylight so she would still have to be around, surely we would have found her. Where can you hide around here?"

He was right, the land was fairly open, there were trees, but because of the human habitation of the area, cattle and grassland dominated. It was also generally flat land, with few rolling hills.

"So maybe the jungle, or those mountains?"

"Huh, there is nothing there, no where to go, no passes," said one of the wise elders, scoffing in the direction of the mountains.

"We know she has not gone across the river, and we know she is not heading to the coast." Shouted one of the respected hunters.

"Do we?" said the senior elder.

"As good as," agreed another.

"She could be hiding?" This comment got some amused looks.

"We have had everyone out looking, all the surrounding villages even those many days walk from here, where can she hide?"

One of the elders spoke, "It is most likely that she is hiding, but not here. To hide she could either go through the pass to the jungle or into the mountains. If you had the choice how many of you would go into the mountains?"

He looked at the sea of heads, negative, one man spoke, "What would she eat in the mountains, you would not last long up there."

The elder spoke, how many of you would choose the jungle, there was much agreement. Another spoke, "She would have plenty to eat and easy to hide. Where can you hide in those barren mountains, how can you keep warm with no wood for a fire?"

The elder spoke, "So shall we keep watch on the river, and the villages towards the coast and watch the mountains, and send a group of our best hunters, through the pass to the jungle, it will not take them long to find signs that she has gone there."

"You speak wisely," said another elder, "if we find no tracks then we know she must be in the mountains."

With the agreement of other elders, the rest of the men fell into line, the plan was accepted.

Refreshed from a peaceful nights sleep Laetitia set off early at first light, she made very good progress, unlike the expedition that had had to search for a route, she already had their route ready made. By midday she had already reached the place where the climbers set up their first base camp.

The hunters were not so pleased, they had spent all morning searching for tracks, evidence of her having gone into the jungle. This should have been easy, tourists with the exception of the six Englishmen never went into this jungle, the trekking groups confining themselves to the relatively easy valley over near the lake. Even the locals did not go very deep into this jungle, it was so dense.

The hunters gathered around for a midday meal.

"Nothing, we are wasting our time," said the hunt leader.

"We need to think like her beloved Europeans," said his right hand man.

"To catch your prey you need to know how it thinks," said the hunt leader, "You are wise my friend."

"Yes, yes, those Englishmen were crazy, but didn't she go to the mountains with the American climbers?"

"They came twice didn't they?"

Many of the hunters were nodding in quiet agreement.

"They were not stupid, they went without guides, and they all came back. As we are skilled hunters, so they were skilled climbers." The hunt leader was reasoning with very astute logic.

They sat thinking for some time, then one of the burst out. "I tried to think like a woman."

At which point they all burst out laughing.

"No, no, listen, she knows we will go into the jungle, and she knows we let the women carry in the mountains because we don't like to go there. So where would she be safest?"

"You are right, we would quickly hunt her down even in this jungle, she would know she could not get to the river in one nights travelling and that the crossings would be watched. It is also a long way to the coast with many villages, she is smart, she has gone to the one place where no one goes, the mountains."

"My daughter went on the last trip, she said Laetitia spent a lot of time talking to the Americans, she said Laetitia, drinks knowledge as a thirsty man drinks water."

"Your daughter is quiet, but she sees much."

"Could she lead us?"

"Maybe, it was a long time ago over one year has passed."

In the afternoon the village was a buzz with activity. The hunters had returned, the man's daughter had agreed to try, though she confessed she may not be able to find the trail.

"No worry we can just track her," said a confident hunter

The quiet woman shook her head. "You are not in the jungle, you will find no footprints."

"Then the sooner we go the better, if we move fast we may catch sight of her, there are no trees to hide behind."

The echo startled Laetitia, she had settled down that afternoon in the first climbers base camp location. The route to the second base camp was arduous and she had decided against trying to make it before sundown. Her good progress seem to melt away, the loud voice echoed a second time, she knew who it was and he was egging the others on. From the echo she also knew they'd reached the lazy rock.. Her heart pounded, tranquillity gave way to terror. There was still plenty of daylight left, if she waited, at the speed they were going they could easily make the distinctive gap in the ridge, and if they had who she guessed with them, that woman would at least know the place, it was very distinctive. While they remained on that side of the ridge she had a chance.

Gathering her bundle and her strength, she started on the trek to the next base camp which had taken the climbers another day to reach. She could make no mistakes, her mind wandered back to Roy, the hours he'd spent describing the landmarks. A smile came to her face, she was no where near the second base camp, but she had just squeeze between at the intersection of Fifth Avenue and West 34th Street and the Empire State building. Now there was a steep climb she would be visible to anyone on the gap in the ridge until she went around the pillar like a tall building and onto gun-sight ridge. By the time she reached gun sight ridge the light was beginning to fade. It would get dark quickly and although the second base camp location was within sight, it was too far off to risk it. Looking for somewhere to bed down on the ridge she moved up to the gun sight. Two small rocks jutted up at the end of the ridge, from base camp two looking along the ridge, it looked just like the name the Americans had given it. Close up however the two rocks were further apart along the ridge. She had settled in huddled up in a crevice with the blanket, darkness had fallen upon the mountains. Almost asleep; tired from the exertion she was startled by another echo. The same voice boomed out again, in her native language.

"Here?"

Laetitia knew him well, he had a renowned reputation as a great hunter, quiet and stealthy, he also had a great reputation for loudly letting everyone know of his successes. Laetitia tied the long piece of string her mother had used to ensure the bundle was secure, to the blanket, she then moved around the rock, holding the other end of the string, and moved slowly to peer over the top of the ridge. She grinned, thinking, "Like fish out of water." The hunters had their usual camp fire going, old habits are hard to break. The light from the fire, was where she thought, the gap in the ridge. When reality set in she realised, just how close they were, she had done less than a days travelling to get to gun sight ridge. Carefully following the string she got back to the crevice and the warmth of the blanket.

As dawn broke she started out for base camp two, knowing that she would have to get well away from it to avoid being seen, the third base camp was the last of the route shared by both expeditions.

"Which way?"

There was a pause. Laetitia strained to hear what was being said.

"Are you sure?"

The voices seemed faint echoes.

When Laetitia heard this she had passed base camp two and was winding her way through the meat grinder. A gully twisted down through an otherwise solid chunk of rock, it was a difficult passage, the official name, Roland's name, having money in mind was turnstile alley. She thought Zack's analogy to a meat grinder was more appropriate. This was another very distinctive part of the trail which she knew if they found, the woman would remember. Out on the other side, into a small valley that wound downward some way. This did give a considerable degree of cover. The distance to the third camp was quite a way, much of the going was easy, and on the expeditions, they had used camp two to deposit a store of stuff for the route back, which lightened the load.

"Down there?" The hunter's voice was still loud but sounded less confident. "Mark it."

The hunter's use of fire may not have been such a daft idea, they had taken blackened charred pieces of wood from it and were marking the way on the rocks as they went.

"Why are you worried?" said one of the hunters as he struggled through a gap following behind the leader.

"It might rain."

"So?"

"Our marks could get washed away, and your daughter seems a little less sure of the way, I don't fancy getting lost."

Meanwhile Laetitia was well out of sight, at the other end of the small valley she was attempting to get through the cheese grater, a long straight passage, with sloping sides down to a narrow gap where you could easily get your foot wedged, the sides were rough hence its apt name. The metre drop at the other end did not help either. She was relieved to get through and back on an easy trail up to a flat area below a ridge, she still had some hours before dark, with the climbers' tents this was a good position, but with hunters on your tail and no tent, going on was a better option.

On the second expedition the climbers had used a rope to help the women up the devil's stairs as it was called. The rock face mostly smooth, had this one jagged outcrop, which led to the top of an escarpment.

She had moved along a fair way, before crouching down, the track had been hidden from view by bow-saw ridge, the escarpment was edged with a line of jagged rocks that reminded the Americans of a saw blade. There was this one place where there was a gap, Roy had pointed out that you could see camp three from the gap. It was lucky she remembered this, because the hunters were not that far behind and had made it to camp three.

She managed to keep below the ridge, from between a crack in two rocks she could just glimpse them. They were exhausted, they had been pushing on a cracking pace, the woman was laid down on the flat ground. Most of the men, about a dozen of them were slumped against rocks, a few also lay flat on the hard ground.

Laetitia had about twenty minutes of light left before sundown. She was exposed on the escarpment if they started early in the morning they might even see her there. She began to run, not fast, but enough to get her to where the escarpment met with a wall of rock, this time she had to negotiate a precarious way down from the steep side of the escarpment. There were only minutes of light left when she reached the bottom, but she could not stop, there was a shallow slope around the bottom of the cliff leading away from the escarpment, below the rock that abutted it. The frightening memory she had was of the sheer cliff at the edge of the gentle

slope. One of the climbers on the second expedition had dislodged a stone on the slope, it went over the edge, the sound from the thud as it hit the ground below was a long time coming. They were all roped together, there were anchor points in the rock, with such support, they had all made it safely. She had no such support, and was clinging, now in the dark, to the cliff face. It took over an hour of slowly edging and feeling her way to get around to the ledge, where she decided to stay for the night.

“This is crazy, down there?”

“There must be another way?”

The men had reached the end of the escarpment quickly, but were not keen on going down the edge near the wall of rock.

Their voices were raised, the leader, could be heard trying to convince them, his voice boomed loud as usual.

Laetitia, was not that far away from them, in reality had they been able to hop over the rock wall they would have been almost upon her. After clambering up off the rock ledge, the slope had given way to various flat ledges, some short many long that skirted this side of the rock wall. All had significant sheer drops. The worst was a narrow ledge which led to a wide gap which sloped upwards. Laetitia was relieved to get through it and into a small valley. The going was easy, it wound around for some way until opening out which as Roy had put it like the Nile delta. Zack named it the giants hand print, Laetitia had just gone from the valley, his arm and was now faced with five ways to go. She remembered how Rowland had asked Zack which hand? Zack had reasoned that as the smallest exit was on the left it must be his left hand. They had joked that he must be a dodgy giant, because he was obviously left handed. This had not pleased one of the other climbers who was left handed. At the time, Rowland had unrolled a big satellite photo on which he had traced the route.

Laetitia went up the index finger, which then zagged right then zigged left before bit of a wiggle to a right curve and straight on to base camp four. This was the last camp. Laetitia looked around, she knew that they had left it a bit quick when the weather took a turn for the worse. They had been very meticulous in cleaning up at the other camps, maybe not here. All she could find where a few karribinas, a scrap of rope that had been cut from a longer piece where it had become frayed, and in a crack, a lighter. She remembered now one of the other climbers had sat there, checking the ropes, with his big hands he probably could not get the lighter out, and when the call to make a move back he probably did not worry, it was only a cheap throwaway lighter. She managed to fish it out, cut the frayed end of of her short piece of rope, and sealed the rope heating it with the lighter.

Time to move, she knew the hunters could not be far behind. Now she just needed to get out of sight, the women had not gone past base four. So the woman with the hunters would be no use to them. On the expedition some of the men would venture to explore while some stayed at the base camp as a backup team. The climbers, were keen on Laetitia and as her English was so good, they would sometimes, when they felt like taking a nap, give the radio to her, and at times she even got to talk to the climbers who were away from base, making notes of where they were. Laetitia had loved the climbers colourful descriptions of the routes, especially the landmarks. She set off on the route of the last journey the expedition made, the one that Roland was sure had the weather been okay, would have gotten them to the mine hole.

After struggling up a rock face, which with her large breasts was not easy, she decided to rest at the top. Snuggling up behind some rocks, she could hear the hunters.

“Where next?”

The woman shook her head. From base camp four unlike the others, there was no obvious route.



"She does not know."

"Why not?" shouted the leader, "we still have plenty of time before it gets dark."

"We did not go further, only the climbers, the women stayed here." She shouted back, the normally shy lady was getting rather stressed out.

"You must have seen which way they went?"

"Sometimes, but they went lots of different ways with ropes and climbing equipment."

The men shrugged, staring first at the woman then at the daunting rocks that surrounded them.

Laetitia was well out of sight of the camp, so she decided to move on a bit further, the further the better.

The men began arguing, "We don't have climbing equipment."

"Neither does she," said the leader.

"How do you know?"

"Yes, she was mighty friendly with them, how do you know she does not have some?"

"Why would she?"

"They may have given her some as a leaving gift."

The leader gave a dismissive laugh.

The arguments echoed around the mountains as raised voices became louder and louder.

"We don't even know if she is in the mountains, we have seen nothing, no signs, nothing."

After several hours Laetitia, finally stopped at Aladdin's cave. Looking up there was a sizeable opening the hard part was figuring out how to get to it before dark. There was a cold wind, at at this altitude especially at night it could get bitterly cold. This according to the climbers was where Roland had a baby. She remembered it well because the expression had at first confused her, how could a man have a baby? After some laughter from the men, they explained what it meant, and Rowland's disappointment that it was just a natural cave and not his beloved hole.

After several goes she managed to get in, and realised why it was Aladdin's cave. Roland having tried various routes had decided that this one was the right way to his hole, to avoid carrying so much stuff they'd designated this useful shelter as a depot. When they received the bad weather report in the morning, they did the sensible thing and moved off the mountains as quickly as possible. Laetitia liked to play with words, she thought to herself, "Oh what a nice supplies." Two bundles of rope a backpack containing climbing gear, a first aid kit, some food rations and importantly a water flask. Up until now she had been drinking from the many mountain streams. In another bag, were some dry cloths, they were not a very good fit, but nice and warm, the colour was a bit of an issue to. Bright yellow, great for being rescued not so good when you are being pursued.

The hunters had been arguing the whole time, and were still at base camp four, which as the crow flies was not that far away.

"We must go back in the morning." One of the more cautious men was worried, they had left hurriedly in pursuit and were not well equipped for the mountains.

"She is nearby I know it," the leader growled, he was not going back, he was going on instinct.

"Look my daughter said the climbers left in a hurry, only when they got off the mountains did she realise why."

"Why?"

"The weather a big storm, they had the gear for it, we don't and we've eaten over half of our food, and we're

cold." This man was also quietly concerned for his daughter who was not as tough as the hunters, and he could see the strain in her. Not helped by the leader's fury.

"We will find her," the hunter leading the group was not used to failure.

"We don't even know if she is here." said yet another of about a dozen men, clearly a quarter had issues with continuing.

"I am leading this group, the elders gave me that task, if I say we stay we stay."

"I am taking my daughter off this damn mountain tomorrow morning."

"You can't she's the only one who knows the route." This galvanized the men, the last thing they needed was to get lost going back home.

"She is my daughter and I am not going to risk staying here, this is not the jungle we can not get wood for a fire or hunt for food."

Two factions were emerging, those who would follow orders and had unquestioning faith in the best hunter in the region, and those who understood the potential danger from the weather, lack of food and warmth, now they were in the majority.

In the morning Laetitia had a big decision to make, should she move and risk being seen or maybe heard if she cause a rock to fall. Or stay in the shelter which if they came this route would be easily found.

She was ready to move but held off.

The leader was doing his best screaming at the others who were leaving. There were too many of them for him and the few loyal men to use force.

Laetitia had travelled the previous part of the route so she knew where the route was visible from other parts and she had also been there before. She thought about what the Englishman, John had told her about pheasant shoots. How beaters would drive the birds forward. Then in panic they would fly out into the open, and into the hunters guns. She sat there musing over her thoughts, it came to her, something her mother told her, the troubles which caused them to leave for a safer part of the country, had sparked the question. Her mother had told her of a proverb which told how the wise man concealed himself when he sensed trouble, but those less wise would suffer. On one side she put the leader of the English group, and the leader of the hunters. On the wise side she put the American climbers. Even though the storm was days away and their leader was keen to find his goal, they had the sense to take shelter. John the reluctant one in the English expedition, and those hunters turning back, had this sense. Now maybe she should stay in the cave.

At the climbers camp four, most of the native hunters and the woman had left. The leader had told his remaining men not to worry, they could follow the markings they'd made. He had three men left, they wanted to get going, the feeling was they had wasted too much time, the arguments yesterday, and this morning had annoyed them intensely.

"If we hadn't have wasted all the time arguing with so many of us we could have split up and found her. She can't be far away, his daughter said the climbers went from here with ropes," said the leader's right hand man. The leader nodded in agreement, "I'm looking at this lot and trying to work out which would be easier for her." He pointed at some of the towering rock faces, pointing at them, "No way."

The others nodded.

"Over there, that looks possible," said one of them pointing to the rocks on the route she had taken.

"That looks more like it, down that way," said the leader.

"Looks like it descends into a valley?"

“Exactly, there may not be a pass through the mountains, but the fact that we've not seen her.” He paused. “Hey smart, you think she is using the mountains to work a route around the villages and get to the coast?” “Well if we can't survive up here I'm damn sure she can't.” The leader was regaining his edge. “So we follow the route down that she would be able to do.”

The leader grinned at the man. The small group's moral was rising.

The four men slowly made the difficult descent across the rocks and down into a long winding valley.

Laetitia, removed the yellow climbing cloths, and covered herself in the old grey blanket, which blended well with the rocks. Peeking out from her cover, she watched for the men. It was some hours before she saw them way in the distance, clambering up through a gap in some rocks, and disappearing from view. She continued to watch, to make sure they did not come back, and also they are hunters, she would not have put it past them to pretend to have some of the men go back. These hunters were smart, with those men seemingly gone and the others seemingly returning back to the village, maybe they wanted to flush her out. She had seen animals, break cover when they no longer feared danger, only to be snared in a trap. She wondered, were these men speaking loudly for a reason, when hunting you'd usually stay quiet, this fitted the pheasant beaters methods.

She remained on watch for the rest of the day until sun down. With a good nights sleep she was well prepared to tackle the journey ahead. She tied the short length of rope onto the backpack, which was now full of most of the things from the cave, both ropes, food, water bottle, first aid, kit, some of the climbing kit, her blanket and remaining food. It was cold outside, even with the sun shining, having taken a good look around, and listening intently she could not detect any sign of the hunters. She wore the yellow trousers, but for now at least, tied the jacket around her waist. If she did need to duck down quickly, the less yellow the better.

Assuming she was travelling the correct route, it seemed pretty easy. With the exception of a few rocky obstacles, which doubled as the guiding landmarks, the route skirted below three peaks, and around to the ridge they called the golden gate bridge. It dropped down between two of the mountain peaks, the third and fourth peak. Opposite this was a dangerous escarpment, she guessed the valley on the other more gentle sloping side was the valley she had seen the hunters leave.

She had a nagging question, this route seemed too easy, why hadn't the climbers reached what they termed the golden gate bridge? She could see in the distance almost below the centre was a patch of loose scree, down in the bottom of the gap between the two peaks. It was only when she followed the route around, below the third peak, that she remembered. Oh, yes, the Hoover dam. Another ridge, between the towering near vertical sides of the mountains formed a natural dam. A large lake lay between the ridge and the ridge known as the golden gate bridge. She also now understood, why the climbers may have tried other routes before deciding this had to be the one.

Laetitia clambered up the ridge, a tiny waterfall from a point along the ridge, dropped down to a small stream that trickled away. From the top it looked hopeless, the water was both deep and very cold, the sheer cliff face below the towering third peak held no prospect of a route. She sat for a moment, thinking, trying to recall conversations she'd had with the climbers. Surely they would not have come along this route if there was no way to reach the scree which Roland was so sure it was covering the exit hole from the mine.

It was a long rough ridge, and she decided to carefully pick her way along the top to the base of the other towering peak.

The hunters were retracing their steps. Every route they tried, was either blocked or not passable without

some rope to descend the many precipitous drops. One of them had slipped on some scree and nearly went over the edge. As the leader came up back through the gap into the valley, he looked up and too the right. He indicated to the others to be quiet.

Whispering what's that over there, a big grin on his face

The others patted him on the back. They watched as a little yellow spot moved along a distant ridge.

The leader whispered to the men, "You know you pointed out that area where she could of gone up."

The man nodded, and grinned back at him. With all the stealth and speed they could muster they worked their way back towards the climbers camp four site.

Laetitia, was so preoccupied with finding a way across the water, she had no idea the men had seen her. By the time the men had begun moving again, she had reached the end of the ridge near the fourth peak. It was not so sheer as it looked, there were a series of large boulders that lined the edge of the water. In some places she went from the top of one to the top of another, others she edged over to the slope down from the mountain, and edged along carefully. By the time she reached the other side of the water, it was very shallow. She walked from there the short way up to the scree that covered much of the lower reaches of the golden gate ridge. The light was going fast, so she sat down in a sheltered part of the scree where it seemed to dip inwards a bit.

The hunters had stopped off at the cave for the night. The relative comfort caused them to oversleep, that and the considerable exertion of the previous days.

In the morning Laetitia took another look around, then back at where she had been the night before. She clambered up the scree to the middle of the indentation, the slope above was less steep. Pulling away some of the scree she found a rough edge, shifting scree below it she noticed a gap. She kept going, Now she was really pleased it was not a big gap, but the scree on the inside opened up wider and wider below the roof of the opening. Taking off her backpack, she slid down into the hole pulling it after her. For some reason she decided to look back, crawling up scree to look out of the small gap.

Her heart nearly leapt out of her body, it was pounding so hard and so fast. The hunters were just coming around below the base of the third mountain peak. In no time they were heading towards the ridge. They weren't even stopping, it was as though they new exactly where they were going.

Even if she could cover the hole they'd probably find it anyway.

She thought to move down the mine, but she had no light. But she did, quickly covering the hole as best she could from the inside, she slipped back down, to the floor of the mine working. With the backpack on, she flicked the lighter, she could see the narrow working that followed the seam. Moving quickly she followed it, deeper and deeper.

She stopped, and let the lighter go out. It was getting a bit hot, but the main reason she wanted to listen.

"Where did she go?"

"Up there," shouted the leader.

"What about the rock face at the top that runs below the ridge. All of this must have come down from it."

"So that's why the Americans called it after the golden gate suspension bridge, the line of cliff below the top of the ridge must look like the thick bundle of cables that Roy explained span from each of the supports." she

thought as she listened.

“There must be a way said the leader, we saw her get to the end of the other ridge by the water.”

“Maybe she went down from there?”

“Then why go on top of the ridge, it would have been easier to go down into the valley below it.”

“The other side over near those boulders looks the easiest way up from here.”

With that the voices faded into the distance.

She reignited the lighter wishing she had a candle. She had not gone far when she felt something touch her foot, it was not a piece of rock, it moved to easily. Crouching down, she could see a rusty old piece of metal. On closer inspection it looked a bit like a mug with a handle, much of the white enamel had fallen off. It was an old miners candle holder, someone must have dropped it, maybe if they were with others they left it, who knows. She looked around nearby, could there be a candle. Scanning diagonally across from where she had found it, there was something, against the opposite wall. It was not much, which is probably why it was left. Just half an inch of candle, placing it the holder and lighting it. She felt so relieved.

As she carefully, picked her way along the narrow passage, which often sloped to one side and was very narrow in places, she began to wonder. Would the hunters find a way up to the top of the ridge, if they did could they easily get down to the mine entrance from there. If they did not find a way would they take another look, would they find the hole into the mine, and if they did would they have any light to try following her.

The passage seem to go on forever, she had been going for probably several hours and the candle was getting close to exhaustion.

The hunters had climbed up the slope to the base of the cliff face that ran below the top.

“How, where?”

“Maybe she did have climbing gear, there was an almost empty bag in the cave, it had a few bits of metal in it.”

“It might explain where she got those yellow cloths.”

“You think she could climb up there?” said the leader with some incredulity.

“We know she spent a lot of time with those climbers, who knows what they taught her.”

“Shit,” said one of the men, thinking there was no way he was going up there.

“There's no other way, she could not have gone up that mountain face over there it is too sheer, he pointed to the third mountain peak, and the one behind us is no picnic.”

The leader sat down, the men followed suit. They all felt miserable. Their anger was now more on those who had left them.

“Do you realise how close she must have been when we were first at the climbers fourth camp site  
If that other lot had not have spent so much time arguing we would have found her, probably up in that cave,”  
said the leader's right hand man.

“What next?” One of the others looked hopefully at the leader.

“I need to think,” said the leader.

While the men stayed quiet, Laetitia continued further along the mine working. The candle finally sputtered out before a narrow gap. She tied the candle holder with a piece of string to a belt loop on the trousers, and went back to using the lighter. She was a little spooked, by a hollow to one side, it was not very deep, there were what looked like the rusty remains of some dropped tools, the wooden handles must have long since turned to

dust. The last thing she need was to scream.

She decided to take a break and sit in the hollow, at least if the men were following and had no lights they may not spot her, huddled up as she was, against the face of the workings. Although she had had a good rest the previous day, she felt mentally drained. The stress of seeing the men, and wandering down a dark hole where who knows what could be lurking, had put her nerves on edge.

The leader turned to his men, "Maybe the shaman would know the answer."

"It might explain a few things."

"Twenty one men don't just vanish into thin air, even in that jungle, they were experienced men."

"Yes and look where we've been drawn."

The looks they were giving each other were not the usual confident faces, but ones filled with dread.

The leader looked at them again, "Yes and how did she get out of the village without anyone noticing, and how can she live up here where it's so cold?"

"And no food."

"We haven't got much food left," said one of the men his concern obvious. "Maybe the others were right to go back."

"If they got back," said another, "those white men said our people had left them to go back."

Now fear gripped the hunters, "How long until it gets dark, it's cold here, what say we go back to the cave. Tomorrow we will head back down the mountain."

They all agreed.

When Laetitia awoke she had no idea what time it was. Had the men followed her, had they gone past in the dark. Now she froze with fear, her ears strained for sounds. Nothing except the occasional drip from the water that seeped into the mine workings. She moved on, very slowly and very cautiously. Hours passed and still the seemingly endless passage continued. She stopped closed her eyes and opened them again. Was there a glimmer of light. As she move onwards the daylight grew stronger. The entrance to the mine became visible as did something on the mine floor. Bones, human bones, a broken arm the radius and ulnar clearly fractured, and a broken leg the tibula of what she guessed was the right leg was smashed. There was something down by the body, a dusty piece of metal. She cleaned it, the small brass plate had an inscription, Colonel Rodney Wellings of the 5<sup>th</sup> Light regiment. Nearby in dusty heap she spotted something, a couple of rusted buckles indicated that perhaps once it was some kind of bag. In amongst it was a silk handkerchief, wrapped tightly around a small notebook, in remarkably good condition.

Laetitia sat down by the Colonel and began reading his notebook.

*Today we set off along the old miners trail the men are all in good spirits.*

*Tuesday*

*Jungle track is proving a bit more difficult than we supposed. With no miners using it, the jungle has reclaimed much. We are having some trouble keeping to the route.*

*Wednesday*

*Lost Private Williams, very boggy, lad went off to take a leak. Strayed too far. Men tried to get to him but he had gone under before they could get there. Sargent advised to keep them in line.*

*Thursday*

*Private Smith bitten by snake, we've made camp, medic has put some iodine on the wound.  
Long day men got restless.*

*Friday*

*Men feeling low, Smith died overnight. Sargent is marching them hard, keep their minds off things.*

*Saturday*

*Reached the swamp. Miners bridges across have collapsed. Got the men working on chopping down trees, and making temporary structures, Captain Winch and his men doing splendid job, glad we brought some first class engineers.*

*Sunday*

*The lords day, men need good rest.*

*Monday*

*Moved on a bit, but making slow progress, building second bridge.*

*Tuesday*

*Private Carter, horribly wounded while tree cutting. Medic put iodine on wound, said he should be sent back.  
Men make stretcher, two men to carry Carter, one with rifle for protection.*

*Wednesday*

*Moving on slowly, now six men short, not good. Morale needs a boost.*

*Thursday*

*Sargent has to restore order, some of the men getting disorderly. Jungle getting worse.*

*Friday*

*Higgins is very sick, medic giving him quinine bark, thinks it is malaria. We have stopped.*

*Saturday*

*Higgins dead, had to give men a talk to stir their spirits*

*Sunday*

*We should rest, but men want to keep moving.*

*Monday*

*Still no end to this jungle*

*Tuesday*

*Men excited Captain Winch has spotted the mountains*

*Wednesday*

*Finally out of the jungle. Make camp at bottom of track up to mine.*

*Thursday*

*March up the narrow track all day, finally get to the mine entrance as the sun is going down. Men in good cheer.*

*Friday*

*The lads are keen to go down the mine workings. Send Captain Winch and his men to check they are passable. Captain returns with good news. They got to the opening on the other side of the mountain. Bless me if there ain't an lake there.*

*Saturday*

*The lads are happy, we set up camp by the lake shore. Easy day. Captain Winch checking to find a way across the lake. Lads suggest making a boat from some of the trees in the jungle. Others not so keen at hauling wood up the track. Given it took a day to get up the damn mountain, tend to agree.*

*Sunday*

*Bible readings and games for the lads.*

*Monday*

*Captain Winch suggests a route along the far side by the boulders along the lake's edge.*

*Tuesday*

*Am in bad shape, fell trying to get along those boulders. Broken arm and leg. Captain Winch now in charge of expedition to find pass through mountains.*

*Wednesday*

*Winch has lost a man over some damn edge. Two others badly injured can't be moved. Winch returns to them. Has four fit men. Three men here with me in mine entrance.*

*Thursday*

*Winch sends man with message. One of the injured men has died. Thinks with some explosives he could blow hole in ridge on far side of lake and drain it to make track through.*

*Friday*

*One of the men here in the mine is sick, medic thinks it is another case of malaria. No word from Winch.*

*Saturday*

*Terrible storm. No word from Winch.*

*Sunday*

*Winch returns. Other injured man died in the night. Another man lost trying to negotiate a ridge under some cliff.*

*Monday*

*Winch has three fit men. Corporal Minton succumbs to Malaria. Medic and Sargent still okay, Captain Winch wants to go back for help, and bring more men and dynamite. Believes pass is possible, but need bigger team*



*with more equipment. Sargent and Medic happy to stay with me.*

*Sunday*

*Men rest*

*Monday*

*Winch and his men make back for regimental headquarters.*

*Then the day entries ran out, just a note that the supplies are nearly exhausted and Captain Winch has been gone more than a month.*

*Wednesday*

*We gave it a few more days, but no sign of reinforcements. Sargent has been watching the jungle like a hawk.*

*Thursday*

*Medic concerned at my condition. Give order to Sargent and Medic to leave for HQ.*

After that there were no more entries. Laetitia, did remember Roy telling her that only two men had returned trying from a previous expedition on this side, maybe these were the two, was this what Roland's uncle had told him?

There was no sign that the hunters had followed her. She sat back leaning against the rock, next to the old colonel. Amazing how words can span the centuries, she was probably the first person to read his words since he wrote them. Could he ever have imagined that a native would be learning of the English soldiers exploits. She listened for some time, occasionally looking down the mine workings for the glow of a light, always expecting the hunters to pounce from the dark and take her by surprise. She thought about moving outside the mine for the night, just in case, but it was raining, and there was a cold wind. Struggling to stay awake, she dozed off.

In the morning, there was still no sign of the hunters, time to explore this entrance area of the mine. She had noticed, some stones, piled up along one edge, it did not look random. Removing some she found the remnants of some wooden boxes. Wrapped in some now rather degraded cloth, were some very well greased rifles. In the remains of another box, some powder and shot. There was a little tin box, battered, but not too badly corroded, in it was some dry lint, and some flints. She also found some rather battered eating utensils,, most of which were too badly corroded to use. There was not much else, some bits of metal too long corroded to know what they might of once been part of.

Laetitia looked at the little tin box, "Could this be what they call a tinderbox?"

She looked at the Colonel, "Am I right Colonel?" She whispered

A sense of fear engulfed her, so alone, not even her enemies around, she could not go back, and having read the Colonel's notes, trepidation best described her feelings at the prospect of going forward down the track to the jungle on this side of the mountains.

She began developing a relationship with the Colonel.

Telling him all about her events in the jungle, so he would understand, how she sympathised with his journey. Like a rabbit caught in the headlights, she just could not move.

In the afternoon, she took one of the rifles, unwrapped the remnants of cloth from it and after wiping off some of the grease tried to learn its operation. This was no modern weapon, it had Baker inscribed on it and a long rod under the barrel.

“Like this Colonel?”

“No?”

She fiddled a bit more.

“Have I got it?”

She looked at his skull.

“You're a good man Colonel, thank you.”

She put a small amount of powder down the barrel and shot ball. There was plenty.

Should she try to fire it? Would it attract the hunters? Would it attract whatever is around these parts?

But then if she did not, how would she learn how to use it, she may need to defend herself.

She stayed well back from the entrance of the mine. She knelt on the ground, fired, and ended up flat on her back. The old rifle had quite a kick which having never fired one before she was not prepared for.

Trying again this time laying down, resting the gun on the back pack, with the blanket for padding on her shoulder, and a bit less powder.

“Better, much better.”

“Did you hear that?”

The hunters had made good progress and had reached the climbers third camp site. They all listened, minutes went by and still nothing. Then again, they heard it.

“A shot,” said the leader, sounds a long way from here.

“Hunters?”

“Could be.”

The men found a place to rest for the night.

Laetitia was pleased, her confidence boosted. She would try again later, best not to attract too much attention, she now knew how the thing operated. That night she dreamt of Roy and the climbers returning to find the hole, finding her, and upon hearing of her troubles, they took her far from here to safety.

In the morning it was back to reality, her food was almost gone, including the climbers rations.

“What would you do Colonel?”

She waited for his reply, then, “Sorry to interrupt you Colonel but I was wondering, why do you Europeans keep coming here, in this remote part of the world?”

Her father had become rather cynical in his old age, he warned her that not all men's motives were honourable, and many would use deception in the search for riches. She remembered when she had first begun talking to the tourists, he sat her down for a father to daughter talk. *“Laetitia, just because men say they are here to see the wildlife, or enjoy the quaint native culture, don't believe them. Of course many are, but some are looking for resources, others to have a good time.”* He explained what that meant, and she was not sure which was worse. The pleasure tourist went home, but if news went back and a big corporation moved in, they would stay for many years.

Right now though a corporate helicopter looking for riches would be most welcome, if she got a ride to somewhere nice. Looking outside the mine entrance, Baker rifle, loaded and ready, there was a track leading away to the right, to the left, strewn down the side of the mountain, were tonnes of rock. It was as though the

mine entrance had been sick. The workings had produced a lot of spoil, which the men dumped there. The track down looked to be very easy, a gentle slope that eased its way down winding around a few rocky outcrops, and down through small barren, rock strewn valleys. Looking back behind and above the mine, the mountains looked formidable, towering walls of rock.

In England, two men were sitting outside an English country pub.

"So why did you want to see me John?"

John, pushed a folded newspaper across the beer table. "Have you seen this?"

Harry stared down at the headline. "Ah, he pause, you don't think that could have had something to do with it do you?"

"Well, how else do you explain the disappearance of so many men? If wild animals attacked you might expect at least a few survivors." John was putting the puzzle together.

"Hmm, could be, those natives did seem very edgy and it wasn't like they hadn't taken tourists into jungles before." Harry was beginning to follow his reasoning.

"Exactly." said John.

"But if they knew about this why didn't they just say?" Harry asked.

"Maybe they did not know, maybe they just had a feeling, like you get if someone is watch you secretly."

"You somehow sense it," said Harry.

"Yes," said John, nodding.

"That news will hit their tourist industry, remember how nice they were to us."

"Like we were royalty," said John, recalling the red carpet treatment.

"Exactly." said Harry, "So what's the cause of the conflict does it say?"

"This is a newspaper," said John, with a grin.

"Oh, yes tomorrow it will be something more important like a movie star to sponsor a new brand of hairspray."

"Harry you are becoming as cynical as me my old friend," he paused, "I wonder how that poor woman is doing?"

"Laetitia?" said Harry.

"Yes, have to keep her in perspective," said John with a look at his old friend that said plenty.

"Wives!" said Harry, weighing the anchor of reality.

"Yes, if we want a quiet life Harry, we have to," he pause, "Well you know. Though I guess in my current situation."

"I know what you mean, I did have to be a bit selective in choosing which expedition photos to show the family, god how she gets so jealous." Harry laughed. "I'm banned from leaving Europe now."

"Why?" John asked tongue in cheek.

"I'm not having you going on any more of those trips to Africa, bla bla bla," said Harry.

John laughed, "Not much we can do then?"

"Na, shame, and its not like there is a proper address, besides if we sent money some corrupt official would probably nab it."

"Hows the new car?"

Their conversation drifted.

In the United States, Roland called Zack into his office.

"Looks like the plans will have to be delayed again."

"Another big project then?"

"No, the State Department has warned US citizens not to go there." said Roland.

"Why?" asked Zack.

"Trouble brewing."

"I thought that little country was pretty stable." Zack's information sifting analytical mind, was focusing in on the data he had accumulated.

"It is, it's the damn fools around it that ain't." Rowland was not best pleased, he looked decidedly frustrated "We were so close that last time."

"We had to go when we did Zack, some of those rock-faces would be lethal when wet. You remember that rock fall?"

"Agreed, but you were so spot on with that location, shame about the weather. I'll let Roy and the others know." Zack began to leave.

"Zack, look I know I was a, with that woman, but she was one god damn sexy bitch, and well if the shit is hitting the fan out there. Well does Roy know how to contact her, I hate to think of some bastards doing something bad to her, even if she is a black." Roland's outward motive of concern was concealing his real reason. On the second mission he had realised just how valuable she was. Her handling of the communications, her thirst for knowledge and retention of it, not to mention her common sense. Zack looked at him, "Keep that thought quite from your father, but hey I'll ask Roy, thanks."

Laetitia readied the rifle, startled by a bang. The sky was clear, so it could not have been a storm. She scanned around, now crouching down. Another loud bang, in the distance she could see smoke rising, way across on the far side of the jungle. Hastily she retreated into the mine entrance and lay flat with the rifle at the ready.

She waited another couple of days eking out her rations.

The hunter and his three companions, had walked down past the lazy rock onward between the rock columns and around the corner for the last part of the decent to the village and beyond. They stopped, falling down flat on the ground. The village was on fire thick smoke poured into air from the burning huts. Other villages were also in a similar state, in the distance towards the coast they could hear and occasionally see exchanges of gunfire.

"It is our troops fighting back, see," said the Leader.

"But who had done this and why?"

"I don't know, and we had better stay up here for now," cautioned the leader.

"We must go and fight them," said one of his two loyal followers, with spirited defiance.

"With what?" said the leader, getting a nod of agreement from his right hand man.

"But we have no food left?"

"Well I don't think we will find much down there do you?" said the leader, "Look at all the bodies."

From this distance it was not easy but you could just make out the remains of bodies strewn around outside the burning huts.

They waited and watched, suddenly the leader went very quiet.

"When I say we move, very quietly," he whispered.

"Where?"

"Back up the track."

"Are you nuts?"

"Look down there."

"Shit."

"And try to rub out the markings as we go, we don't want them following," said the leader.

As they slid from their position, some heavily armed men were coming closer up the track. Luckily they weren't paying too much attention.

Now the hunters became the hunted.

The four hunters could not outrun these men. So they found a place to hide, and listened as the leader of the soldiers encouraged his men. "This is our land now, and we will rid it of all others, kill any we find hiding up here."

"But they say this is the land of evil spirits, which is why it is so barren, they say men will be eaten by hungry giants that live in the mountains."

Others nodded

"We won't be long, there can't be many of them escaped, we took them by surprise." said the military leader, a Captain, eager to make his name.

A few hours later the soldiers returned, passing the hunters hiding place, they descended back down to the villages.

"You three stay here," said the hunters leader.

"Where are you going?" whispered one of his men.

"To see if we can get off these mountains."

He kept well hidden from the troops, watching them, when they reached the bottom of the track, the leader posted some men to guard the way up. He heard him say, we don't want anyone taking us by surprise.

The leader of the hunters, returned to his men, and told them of the situation.

"We will die up here, we we," one of his men was loosing it.

"No, no, we just need to think," said the leader.

The others looked at their leader, with no hope he seemed to be their only hope.

"Are you crazy, if we stay in these mountains we will either starve or freeze to death and if we go down their we will be shot, did you see the weapons they had." The man who had earlier wanted to take on the soldiers was now clearly moved by the fear of what seemed a no win scenario.

The third man nodded in agreement.

The leader looked at the three of them, "Maybe in a day or two our troops will recover our lands, have you thought of that. We have water and we have shelter, it is not so cold here, up higher yes, but here is okay."

His wise words rallied his men's spirits.

"Is it the ones who attacked our country before?"

"No, they were from the north of our country, these have come from the east."

"How can you tell?"

"Their language." The leader was very sure of his facts.

"Maybe they came through the jungle?"

The leader nodded in agreement.

One of the men turned to the leader, "Maybe the Englishmen and our people found a military base in the jungle. You said, the military leader of those men told of how they took us by surprise."

The leader stared at him, "Yes, yes, now it all makes sense, how could over twenty men just disappear in that jungle?"

"And the woman, how is it that she and the other Englishmen survived?"

"One of the Englishmen was hurt, they remained behind, they did not find the enemy so they survived." The leaders right hand man, suggested.

"We are a bunch of idiots, all the time chasing her. Her father is a doctor, her mother a nurse, why would their daughter want to harm anyone?" The leader put his head in his hands.

"It is good that we did though, we would be dead too, if we had been down there." said his right hand man.

Across the Atlantic, somewhere in a secret undisclosed location, deep in a forest two out of place black limousines drew up next to each other. Some suits got out of both. Two men in their sixties, walked towards each other.

"Hello Robert."

"Sam."

"What's this about?" asked Sam.

"My boy has been exploring that region, my company is poised to extract minerals and now its all fucked up. Have your boys been playing games Sam?"

"The CIA is not involved in this one Bob."

"Hell you ain't." Robert was not convinced.

"We did not see this one coming, no sir," said Sam.

"I am well connected, very well connected," said Robert, with some gravity to his tone.

"Yes Bob, you are," said Sam, remaining very calm.

"Sam don't bullshit me, those are our resources, we want them, that means we need a US friendly government and a stable region. That's your job."

"Bob, I know, I spoke with the President earlier, and with some more important people, like yourself Bob."

"I know who you spoke to and I know what you said to them, that is why I called this meeting. I want regular updates." Robert was, not a man you messed with.

"Yes sir, you will get them, and those minerals." Sam, had worked too long in covert operations, not to know how the world really worked and who to be nice too.

"Good," he offered his hand. The two men shook and went back to their cars, the limos drove away and that was that.

Another day had passed, and that night Laetitia did not sleep well. Although the fighting seemed to be on the far side of the jungle, which by the Colonels accounts would be at least two if not three weeks away on foot. There was always the unexpected, refugees were not always friendly, as she knew from her parents time at the mission in the north. Desperate people were very likely to risk the dangers of the jungle to avoid warring factions, and some of these may themselves be loosing warring factions in retreat.

In the morning the hunters leader was trying to keep his mind and those of his men off their current predicament.

"Why would they invade our country, our farmland is poor, all we have is a bit of tourism and these barren mountains?" He said.

"It is not for our land, the country to the east has plenty, you are right, it would not be easy to get an army through that jungle they must have some important reason," said one of his men.

"It would take a lot of planning, lots of supplies."

"They may have even known about the two English and the woman, letting them come back with bad news would frighten others from going into the jungle." The leader was getting the picture.

"They are much bigger country than ours, but even so they are a poor country and weapons cost a lot of money, this is a big invasion." The right hand man was also evaluating the situation. "Our troops will beat them, they are well trained by the French."

"Exactly," said the leader, now you are getting somewhere.

"What do you mean?"

"Independent country, that's what they tell us," he shook his head.

"He means our countries are owned and controlled from abroad." The right hand man explained.

"Yes and maybe we have something that two rivals are fighting over, and they are using our people to do the fighting."

“What?”

“I don't know,” said the leader, “I'm a hunter not a secret agent!”

“Our country is friendly with the French, and the country to the south is friendly with the English.”

“Yes we know that, we were once their colonies.”

“Okay so who is the other country friendly with?”

They all shook their heads.

“The leader,” said, we are hunters in a remote part of the country, we know so little. He shook his head.

The debate rumbled on for some time, eventually the leader went off to check the situation below. He came back, not unsurprised, with the news that there was still a raging battle going on towards the coast, and the guards were still at the bottom of the track.

“Could we go south to the coast through the mountains, like you thought she was doing?”

“Without food?”

The men nodded.

“Quick back under the rock.” The leader, expressed urgency.

“Why?”

“Do it.”

There was an engine noise getting closer and closer.

“A plane?”

“Sounds like one.”

“Look up there.”

The men peered through cracks, at the light plane, in military colours that was flying around in the mountains.

“What are they doing?”

“Looking for something maybe?” said the leader, see how they are circling and flying back and forth.

Laetitia, had started the morning picking up rocks from the nearest spoil heap. She scattered some loosely around the entrance the rest she piled up in a similar fashion to the hole at the other end of the mine. When she had finished and gotten back through the narrow opening at the top, she felt a lot safer. She was even more pleased to have done it, when she saw a military plane fly over, it looked as though it was on a reconnaissance mission, spending a lot of time circling. With her newly created rock fall, she hoped they might not notice that it was a mine entrance. Not that the entrance was very wide, barely a metre across at the widest point.

All she lacked was food, it was then that she had what seemed like a really stupid idea.

Might there be fish in the lake?

If she went fishing in daylight, that plane or whoever it was looking for might find her.

She spoke to the Colonel again, “I bet you're a fisherman Colonel, could I use some string on the end of the rifle and sit on some of those rocks, and make a hook out of some of the bits of climbing metal. That would work, now would fish be active at night? Light, I would need a light. I don't have a light, and a light would attract attention.”

She sat staring at the Colonel, “help me please Colonel you're a military man, seems there are a lot of unfriendly natives around, could do with some help here.”

Throughout the rest of the day the plane, would come and go. Towards the afternoon, a second plane joined the first, it had two engines the first one she saw only had one. It too was in military colours.

The hunters had also noticed the second plane.

"They are hunting, like birds of prey," said the leader

The others made agreeing noises.

"But what for?"

"Us?"

"No, why would they go to so much trouble to fly two military planes to find four hunters armed with bows and spears?" The leader was trying to think, why, what are they looking for.

"What about those few bits of vegetation over there in the cracks." The man pointed towards it.

"That stuff would give a goat a hard time." Said the leader laughing. "Try it if you want to get sick."

From the darkness of the mine Laetitia peered out of the small opening. A man, a white man was coming up the track, for a moment he stopped. He then looked around, walked over to the spoil heap and started moving some stones. He removed something from his back pack, placed it in the heap then replaced the stones over it. He looked around, staring up at the towering rock face, shook his head and went back down the track.

She knew his face. It was Richard, but he had come up from the jungle on this side of the mountain. Could the two jungles be connect? What was he doing? He was now some considerable distance back down the track. Just about to break cover and run after him, she paused. Why did he take off his backpack and throw it over the other side of that big rock? Voices, men, armed men, heavily armed men. When he started climbing some rocks on the far side, she realised why he'd removed and hidden his backpack in such a hurry. She could see he was trying for the ridge at the top.

He nearly made it, she could watch no longer. Her heart pounded, her hands grasped her mouth in a desperate endeavour to suppress a scream. The burst of heavy gunfire ripped him to shreds. As quietly as possible she picked up her backpack, rifle, and blanket and withdrew deeper into the mine. The soldiers let out a cheer, what they said was too distant to make out.

Laetitia frightened, stayed all night deep in the mine. In the morning taking just the rifle she edged towards the entrance, it was quiet, the blocked mine entrance was as it was, her stones still in place. Peering again through the gap, there was nothing, just the man's headless body and a trail of blood, pointing like a red finger down the track. It took a whole morning of watching, waiting and listening before venturing over towards the rock. She dispensed with the yellow climbing cloths, her skin was much better camouflage. Keen to get her hands on the backpack, keeping very low, reasoning if she could not see beyond the edge of the track then it was likely no one could see her. The pack was wedged out of sight, it took some time to get it free, it was in a very awkward position.

For now she left whatever was in the spoil, and returned into the mine, to examine the contents of the bag. It did contain a significant bundle of rations, she was not keen on western processed foods, preferring the local fruits and vegetables, but it would do. There was also a pack of batteries and a mini maglite, which took her a while to figure out how to turn it on. She found by accident, when looking for a way to change the batteries that by twisting the bulb housing the beam illuminated. She was then fascinated by a tin with all sorts of bits and pieces in it, including some fishing line and hooks. In the bottom of the bag wrapped in camouflage sheeting, was a mess tin, a small stove, fuel and a really big knife, her first thoughts, when comparing it with her little knife were, Trust a man to have such a big one. There were some small plastic containers with matches in them, something that looked like a door key without the teeth, attached to it was a bit of a saw blade, not very practical for cutting a tree, but it must be useful, what was it for? Lastly there was a strange looking long thing, it looked like a musical instrument with a mouth piece at one end, another puzzle.



Her thoughts went to the man's body, she had no choice but to leave it there. If the soldiers returned everything must be as it was.

On the other side of the mountains, the hunters began moving. The leader had suggested trying to keep to their side of the mountains and see if they could find some way through to the coast. As the fighting was still a long way in that direction, it seemed they had little choice. The aircraft were no longer flying over the mountains and the leader thought therefore whatever or whoever had been out there had been found.

Two of the hunters started talking while their leader paused to look for the next way onwards.

"If we are going to fight these invaders, how will we pay for weapons?"

"Our government will provide them."

"How will they pay for the weapons?"

"From the money they get from tourists."

"There are no tourists and there will be no tourists for a long time to come."

"Then they will borrow the money."

"And how will they pay it back?"

The other man paused to think.

"How? Our country is but poor farmland, barren mountains and a bit of jungle."

The man was still thinking, "I don't know."

The men moved on.

## Chapter 5

Via a secure channel in the United States.

"Robert."

"Sam."

"Your update sir." said Sam.

"Go ahead," said Robert eager for useful information.

"The French have been persuaded to send military aid, they're not keen to get involved with men on the ground."

"French elections?" Robert kept up with politics.

"Indeed, not good timing, reports are that the northern state with sufficient supplies will hold. In the south it is not so good."

"Won't the Brits do the same for their former colony?" Robert enquired.

"Negative, they say the state is not suitable." Sam knew more than he was letting on.

"Not suitable?"

"It's fucked sir." said Sam.

"Chaos?" Robert was searching for a better answer.

"Worse, their man has gone silent again. He was probing the jungle, based on some fragmentary British and French intelligence reports, and went ghost."

"Sam, what the hell is ghost?" Robert did not like, what he called, covert bullshit.

"They lost comms with him when he first went in, contact with hostiles forced him to lay low for several months, the region was ultra hot." said Sam.

“Anything else?”

“Nop, that's all so far, the rest you can read in the press.”

Several days later Roy sat in the office, reading the latest news. The big morale booster was the escape of four hunters from the war torn region. They did not say how the men had escaped the genocidal slaughter, but these were smart men. Roy had an idea how they evaded the invading military. Roy closed the web-page and went back to the project data. Yet his mind would not focus on the important task. His thoughts wandered to Zack's earlier question regarding having contact information for Laetitia.

“Roy turned to Rowland, I have to take some vacation right now?”

“This is important work you are doing,” said Rowland.

“I know,” said Roy, with a distracted look.

“Well you are a damn good worker, okay, you take a break.” Roland, had a hunch, if he was right Roy was a great guy.

Within hours, Roy was on a flight to Paris.

His friends there had wangled him a ride on one of the few humanitarian aid planes departing for the former French colony.

Upon arrival it did not take him long to locate the hunters, they had become celebrities, giving the people hope. Still recovering from their ordeal, they could not resist Roy's generous offer of a meal at his hotel.

“How did you escape?” said Roy, with the feelings of a kid on Christmas eve.

“With our skills.” The leader was proud of his and his men's achievements.

“Through the mountains?” whispered Roy.

“Our military told us not to say anything.”

“Okay, I won't say but, I will pay well for you to take me your route, to the pass up from the village into the mountains.”

“Are you crazy?” The leader, could not believe what this American was asking him.

“Maybe but I have an idea that there is a woman out there and I mean to find her.”

The men shook their heads.

“I know where she will be, a safe place, I know it, well away from the fighting.”

It took a lot of persuading but the men agreed, they had not seen the woman when they left but they thought he might be right.

It took many days, finally Roy was standing with the men in-front of the scree that covered the slope below the ridge.

“We were so close to finding the rear entrance to the mine last time we came here,” he paused, then started moving some of the stones.

“Here, here.” Roy was getting excited.

The men soon had a hole into the mine workings

Once all the men were inside, Roy told them to cover it so that the enemy military would not find it.

It was not long at all before they found Laetitia, tired and hungry but otherwise well,

“Be careful of the Colonel,” he's my friend, she said, wondering if she was hallucinating, Roy's appearance seemed surreal.

“He's dead,” said Roy. Rowland had told him of his uncle's tale about the brave Colonel of the British expedition.

“He's been helping me.”

Roy looked at her like she'd lost her marbles.

"He does not understand," he's a white man. "We do," said the leader of the hunters, his men nodding in agreement.

"Hey Roy are you okay, you've been staring out of that window for over an hour?" Roland, grinned at him.

"Yea, yea, sure thanks."

"Thinking hard about that project, good man," said Roland giving him a pat on the back, "Shame we won't be going hunting for that mine this year. Even the French are having problems getting people in, seems the government is really edgy about letting any foreigners visit."

In the mine entrance Laetitia was contemplating moving on. She felt as safe there as she was likely to be anywhere else. The nearby jungle she reasoned was probably full of soldiers, and going back she would face the anger of the villagers. At least where she was she could with vigilance go and sit by the lake. Outside the mine all was quiet, she decided to remove some of the stones blocking the entrance and venture over to the spoil, keeping low, to remain out of sight to any humans below.

Her mission was swiftly accomplished, once safely back inside the mine, her stones once again blocking the entrance, she sat in the gloom, and examined the contents of the pack. There was one of those video cameras so popular with the tourists, a small camera, a little short-wave radio, some small flat pieces of plastic with some metal tabs at one end, and a strange looking sealed box, and what looked like a phone, but it was quite big. There was a thing that rolled out, it looked very dark and metallic, with a cable coming from one end.

It was then that the thought occurred to her, what if those soldiers returned? Suppose they realised he had a backpack? She grabbed the back pack and began to think, she needed to put something in it, he would hardly have carried an empty bag. One of the camouflage sheets was badly torn, that could go in, and she had no need of either of the cameras especially as neither seemed to work. She decided to keep the pieces of plastic with the metal tabs, they were so small, maybe they could be traded with some tourists? The big phone, did not work either, so she put that in with the metallic sheet with the wires, as she did so she noticed that the connector on it, fitted one on the base of the phone, she tried it, the metallic sheet unrolled onto her lap. Looking down, she noticed that it was damaged, so why waste time. Now what else, the short-wave radio was similar to one her parents had, it might be useful to get the news of what was happening. The box, she could not fathom a way into it, somehow it seemed important. The other things she had from the backpack also seemed useful, it would just have to do.

With the backpack, and its meagre contents ready, she once again ventured outside, replacing it in its position behind the big rock. Quickly retreating to the mine, and resealing the entrance. She rested for an hour or so, when she woke she thought it a pity that Richard's, body still had his watch on it, it would have been useful to have. Then in the dappled light that filtered through the peep-holes in the stones that barricaded the entrance, her attention moved over to the little radio. Voices, picking it up, startled, it was off, she put the pieces from the pack, in her own backpack far back in the mine, then returned to check what was happening outside.

The voices were now much louder, and very close. Soldiers stood pointing at the Richard's headless body. The other men with them were not Africans, and they did not look like Europeans either. After an exchange of words the soldiers began looking around. It was not long before one of them found the backpack, she heard him shout loudly, "Is this what you are looking for?" One of the non natives shouted back, but she could not understand what he said, only the gesture beckoning the soldier to bring it over.

The men looked inside, at first it seemed from their gestures they were pleased as they crouched down examining the contents. Then one of them shook his head. The African soldier asked, "What you want it is not there?" The foreigners looked at him, and then the other soldiers, then as though a firework had gone off the men started to fan out looking around. The African soldier, shouted at the leader of the foreigners, "He could not have had time to hide it, we were so close behind him, he must have left it in the jungle somewhere."

The men were getting frighteningly close to the stones in front of the mine, one of the soldiers was already lifting up stones on the spoil heap. "Besides shouted the African soldier, he must have had more equipment than that, it looks like he lightened his load before the climb up this mountain." Laetitia, had moved back away from the mine entrance, one of the foreigners had started lifting up stones from lower down in her pile. She heard some of the stones, slide, then all went very quiet.

The silence continued for around ten minutes but it seemed much longer. Outside, one of the soldiers had spotted some movement further down the trail. The soldiers and the foreigners had stopped looking and taken up defensive positions. Some more time passed before finally an exchange of gunfire. All went silent again. Laetitia, peered through a crack, careful not to step on any stones. The men were still on the defensive their attackers tried to put a sniper in position, he was beaten back. One of the foreigners was calling on a radio. The attackers seemed tenacious, over some hours, they picked off more and more of the native soldiers who accompanied the foreigners.

The appearance of a ground attack plane, evened up the balance, after some rockets that shook the mountains, and a few strafing runs, the attackers were beating a hasty retreat down the mountain and back into the jungle. Some twenty minutes later the air resonated with a powerful beat. Laetitia knew what a helicopter was, but she had never seen one like this. The big military helicopter came around the corner like a dragonfly in hot pursuit of some prey. With nowhere to land, like a spider it dangled down a thread, one by one the men were hauled aboard, taking the backpack with them.

Then the silence returned. Laetitia retrieved the little radio from the stash in her backpack. Taking it near the cave entrance and with the volume on Min, she turned it on to listen. Nothing, after fiddling with the tuning, she finally picked up a station. She did not want to chance the better reception conditions outside the mine entrance. Remembering what her father had told her, she tried again after dark, this time, the voices were clear, and the signal did not keep fading to static as it had earlier.

They say ignorance is bliss, information is certainly a powerful thing, words can change the lives of men (and women). As they also say forewarned is forearmed, when you are all alone, it can also be further isolating, and bad news is often very depressing. As Laetitia's father would often say, it makes you wonder why they print so much of it, and being a doctor, he had a shrewd idea of the outcome.

Laetitia now knew she had much more to fear than the angry villagers. It made her wonder who next would come up the mountain, and from which side? She did not have to wait long, in the early morning she witnessed arrival the soldiers who had been driven back by the air attack. They had come up the trail undercover of darkness. They were a mix of regular troops and men equipped with a variety of weapons, no doubt some were captured from the enemy. Their interest seemed focused, partly on scavenging the dead bodies from the previous days fighting, and a passing interest in the headless body of the white man.

"He must have been trying to escape from them, look at the blood on those rocks up there." The soldier was pointing to the place where Richard reached when he was shredded by the bullets.

"We should not stay here long, if the planes come again."

The other soldier agreed and the men turned back down the track. As they went, one of the men threw to the ground one of the weapons he had recovered earlier.

In a plush modern office somewhere in London, some smart suited men were sitting around a large conference table. A man stood at the head of the table, a projector presented an image on a screen in-front of them.

"Gentlemen." said the presenter, "Our objective: Recover that box."

The man paused as the projector focused on the screen.

"What we know:

Assuming it is working it will emit a ten second coded pulse, once per hour. You will need to be within a one mile range to stand any chance of picking up the signal."

He looked around the room, then continued.

"We know our man's last position, of course this may not be where the box is but it is the best we can do. We cannot take his route through the jungle from the north, it is too hot. Crawling with enemy military operations."

The slide on the screen changed.

"From the satellite photos we are unlikely to be able to get through the mountains from the north. Two American expeditions failed to find Colonel Rodney Wellings route through the mine, although the second expedition was thought to have got pretty close."

A rugged looking fellow, spoke, "Excuse me sir could we do it with some climbing?"

"There are hostile aircraft patrolling, you'd be sitting ducks, not to mention drawing attention to our presence."

The screen again changed showing a map.

"The southern state is in chaos and the only route would be from the coast through the jungle. It was difficult enough in the Colonel's day. Even with a track laid through it he lost men. Now it is most likely a live fire zone."

The presenter paused.

"Ideas gentlemen?"

"Could we wait until the hostiles are driven back, either in the south or in the north?"

The presenter shook his head.

"No, we know others are searching for the box, our man said there were orientals with the men following him."

"Chinese, sir?"

"Maybe, one thing for the security of our financial system we must get it back soon." said the presenter.

"Air drop sir, lay low, and air extraction?"

"If we can get the Royal Navy to get us in this the best option. The tricky part is going to be getting you back out. We can't send much into the area at the moment, so the extraction chopper will be on its own."

## Chapter 6

Somewhere in the heart of England, an elderly gentleman sat in a small panelled room of a stately home.

Sitting opposite, was a young woman.

“There have been many accidents, people who have stepped out of line, others who seemingly have a great career and family, mysteriously commit suicide. Men of science who have secrets to be silenced. In the past there were many intrigues, many conspiracies. The naïve public just put things down to coincidence, incompetent government and fate.” The man paused. “It is time for you to know, your parents met with, shall we say misfortune. As a baby you were hidden.”

“Why?”

“You have a direct line of descent from Henry VII and this is well known. Unlike many others who are often older, with a much lesser claim, you pose a real threat. You have far more right than any other royal line. And some of those lineages are quite creative!” The gentleman gave her a genial wink.

“But I have no desire to take up such a claim.”

“Neither did a great many others when a time of change occurred.” This man knew his history.

“But the Royal family are so loved, and they are just figureheads.”

“If you think parliament rules you are delusional. Disraeli spoke of powers unseen, that could at the last moment upset the plans of great men including Kings. Others in more recent history have told of things that can barely be whispered of, even by powerful industrialists.”

“I don't understand?” The young lady was inexperienced, and a little confused. She just wanted a quiet life, why all this fuss. Surely if she did not upset anyone she had nothing to fear.

“There have and always will be a great and powerful families. It is they who have given kings their power. Warwick the king maker, being a classic. It is they who have fought and schemed to put monarchs and governments favourable to them, and who they can control, into power.” He pointed to some heraldry that adorned the walls. “It does not matter what you want, they do not care. If you could be used by others, willing or not you are a threat. Many of the great royal houses have been terminated. The last Czar of Russia was resisting certain financial forces, it is interesting to realise who funded the Bolsheviks, and Marx to write his manifesto.”

He continued to try and enlighten her, in his mind he saw a delicate flower, and a storm on the horizon that would not have a care for her delicate petals in its path.

“Throughout history greed and succession of the inexperienced have pushed more and higher taxes, regulations and restrictions. At some point the people will tolerate no more. Those in government, the figureheads become the focus for anger. Those pulling the strings will remain hidden in the shadows, ready to put the next puppet into play. The danger to them comes from others who offer an alternative puppet. Leaders are expendable, and leaders who become strong and do not do what is expected can expect to be eliminated. Abraham Lincoln, did not do as expected and borrow money from the bankers and very high interest rates to fight the civil war, remember what happened to him. He is just one of many, Andrew Jackson was lucky the assassins' pistols misfired.”

“That is why I've had to be hidden?” she almost laughed at him. She knew he meant well but what he was saying, well to her he seemed like a silly paranoid old man.

“Yes. The loyalty of a people in a country is like water in a kettle, apply too much power for too long and it will

evaporate.”

“Why would that happen?”

Undaunted he continued.

“Throughout history monarchs have fallen, or had their power curtailed because of money, or more often the lack of it. The methods they have used to get it, are what usually ferments a fiery brew. The whole reason for parliament is to raise money for the state. Back in history it was only called when the king needed money. Democracy is an illusion given to people so they have the power to negotiate a fair deal with the state. In reality it matters not which party is in power, policy will continue with enough window dressing to give the appearance of change.”

“Money?” She was trying to keep up with him, and pick out some kind of summary understanding of what he was getting at.

“In the olden days, people put their gold in banks for safe keeping. The bank gave them a promissory note. These could be redeemed and the gold retrieved. Much as you put your coat in a cloakroom and they give you a ticket. If one day the cloakroom attendant said they'd come off the coat stand and gave you a ticket in exchange for your ticket? When the central bank came off the gold standard it was the biggest gold heist in history. Decades later this stolen property has been sold off. Most of the people are so ignorant they don't even know. They don't realise that when the bank lends them a loan it is another deception. Under the fractional reserve system they are actually borrowing money created out of thin air.”

“Really? Was he away with the fairies? Could what he was saying be true?” The young lady had her own concept of what happens to people when they get old, especially their mental faculties.

“Yes, imagine the power that gives the bankers.”

“What has government and the financial system got to do with the stability of the current Royal position?”

“Wealth is power, because it allows those with it to buy influence. If the system of wealth falls then those who derive their current power from it also fall. Throughout history bankers and royalty have worked together, The people do not always provide enough when you need it.” He looked over the top of his well worn spectacles.

“So if money in the form of notes is no longer based on something of value such as gold, just as it is created out of thin air so it can vanish into thin air? Peoples hard earned savings can vanish with inflation, and earnings with deflation Control of what is legal tender rests with the state.” she said, hoping she was getting the point.

“Exactly you understand, and control of the top of the state downward is necessary. In reality most money is just numbers in a computer which is why they keep pushing to do away with cash and cheques. In fact the system is now so dependant on computers it is frightening. The people who run the system are control freaks, they love to consolidate and centralize power.”

“Which is why there are fewer and fewer banks and building societies, and a push to do more and more financial activities online, and hence the promotion of the internet to fit this.” Her mind now began to fit together the push for all these smart gadgets.

He nodded in agreement. "To control this vast complex system there is a highly secure master system. Few have access to it, for security purposes, electronic hardware keys have been developed. There is a master key, it has gone missing. That is why we may be approaching turbulent times."

"If you are a hotel owner and the master key went missing it would be of very grave concern. Surely though you could change the locks."

"For a hotel, yes, inconvenient, but relatively simple. For a global financial system, no. Certainly not immediately. These systems take years to implement, and they are still trying to get countries whose banking systems are not in-line with our own to integrate into the system."

"So they need to keep control of both the head of state and the key to the vault. To get the whole world into one system they need stability."

"In simple terms yes. The key has gone missing. We know they are planning to recover it, one of their agents found it, but they lost contact with him."

"How do you know this?"

"The state is not the only one with an efficient intelligence service. To stay in power or to challenge those in power great families have always used their intelligence."

"So if you have me and could get the box?"

"We need to get the box before they do. The global economy is fragile, centralized systems are. Food is increasingly controlled by big corporations, especially patented GMO crops. All part of the system of consolidating power." He said, with a wry look.

"I always thought it was funny when they said they were developing GMO crops to feed the starving millions." She grinned back at him.

"Giant for profit corporations spending vast fortunes to develop food for people who are on less than a few dollars a day!" He laughed, "You'd have to be incredibly naïve to believe the marketing bovine excrement (bullshit)."

"Aren't your people just as bad though?" she said, feeling like a pawn in a great game.

"Since the seventeenth century these others have been creatively engineering the lineage of succession. They are very adept at fermenting change, most ruthlessly. Circumstances can be created, advisers well placed. You can bring a monarch like Charles I down, replace him with worse, and the people will clamour for the leader you give them. The current families are the most ruthless we have ever known. Yet to the public they remain largely unknown, and when they do appear, it is in a good light. They control the media, which is why everyone knows it is those corrupt third world leaders to blame."

"The international banking system and their corporate cousins are just there to help?" She questioned.

"Oh yes, help themselves. Be under no illusions the families we are part of can be devious, cunning and



ruthless, but in my experience they do have somewhat more empathy for humanity.”

“Which is why they are not in power?”

He nodded. “That is why you must now go into your rooms and be quiet. I have a meeting with some friends.”

It was not long before a rough old four by four pulled up in the drive of the ancient house. Two men decanted and made for the front door of the house. They were shown through quietly into the small room where the old man had talked to the young woman.

“Is this area clean?”

“There are some areas in the house they have bugged, we leave them, best they don't know we know. Here we are okay, but best not to raise our voices.”

“They are planing a Royal Navy helicopter drop to put people on the ground in this area. The man pointed to the map.”

“Do we have a plan?” The old man stared intently at the two younger men, in anticipation.

“This state is not affected, there are plenty of flights to there.” The gentleman knew the area from past experiences.

“It seems a bit faraway from the zone?”

“We have a man with a plane, he will drop our men in at night into the mountains, here.” The man pointed to the area near the lake at the rear of the mine. “With moonlight on the lake it will make an ideal landing target.”

“Wrong side of the mountains.” The old man, looked at them as though they had not quite thought this through.

“Yes, but a Colonel Rodney Wellings led an expedition there. The Captain of the engineers attached to the expedition died. The medic was entrusted with the papers, he and the Sargent were the only two to survive. When the idea of further expeditions was dropped, including sending men to recover the injured Colonel. The medic, somewhat incensed at abandoning his commanding officer withheld the papers. To cut a long story short, we now have them.”

Now the old gentleman smiled, “So you know exactly where the mine entrances are?”

“Oh, yes,” said the older of the two visitors.

“When do our people leave?” The old man enquired with a keen stare.

“They already have, I know we should have checked with you first, but it will be a couple of days before the Royal Navy have their ship in position.”

“Accepted, and the drop plane might be delayed if there is bad weather.” The old fellow, had done his fair share of airborne operations.

“Precisely what we thought.”

## Chapter 7

Laetitia was woken by the noise of a light plane.

Above the lake keeping clear of the mountain peaks, a brave pilot, and equally brave men ready to jump were circling. It was not long before the sound of the plane was fading in to the distance.

The men landed along the shoreline between the waters edge and the beginning of the scree at the bottom of the slope below the ridge. Quickly recovering their parachutes, they buried them deep under the scree. Then following the information, it was not long before they had cleared a way into the rear entrance of the mine.

“Best put that scree to block the hole, we don't want to give the game away to the Navy Helicopter.”

After making good the entrance they slowly picked their way down the mine working.

“Don't move, I have a gun,” announced Laetitia. She had the mini maglite strapped to the gun, and could clearly see the two men.

“We are English, we mean you no harm.”

“Are you friends of Richard?” Laetitia was in need of answers.

“No,” said Joe, thinking he was too honest.  
Pete looked at him.

“Then why are you here?” She was frightened, these men had found her too easily, and she knew she could not reload the Baker rifle fast enough to get both of them, assuming she could even get one.

“There is a box, a very important box. The man you know as Richard was working for some ruthless people, we can tell you more later.” Joe, knew they had little time.

“Who?” Laetitia was not budging.

“Look lady there are two major rival power bases in the world. One controls banking, the media, big pharma, petrochemicals, and the military. The other is more conventional, industrialists and landowners, conventional farmers, the organic movement.” said Joe.

“Do you have a way out?” said Laetitia, keen to get to safety.

“Yes,” said Joe, “Lady, that box is a problem, if you have it please give it to us and fast.”

Pete was getting anxious, “We have to put that box in this case.”

"Why?" she said.

"Block the signal." Pete looked worried.

Joe explained, "It is a kind of electronic key. When it is not in the system it is not energised, so it emits a distress signal. In the system when it receives the correct code it emits a system synchronising key signal that gives the operator immensity power. It is the unique master key. You must not tell about this for your own safety. If the other side got here first, they'd shot first and ask questions later, even if you were still alive, knowing what the box looks like and that it is important would be enough to make them consider you dangerous and therefore expendable."

She thought about Richard and what those men had done to him. The box, was down by her backpack.

Keeping the Baker rifle on them, she kicked it over to them. "Do it but no tricks."

While Pete encased the box, Laetitia continued to ask questions.

"Why can't they just make another box key?"

Joe looked towards the light. Where to begin he thought.

"They are ruthless and paranoid, the genius who created the key could have produced another. This was a threat so they, well, had him commit suicide."

She remembered all the planes that had flown over and the two armed factions.

"These are very bad men." She paused, then continued, "So why doesn't the system stop working without it?"

"The system will run without the key, but to do some crucial activities they need it. Without it there is great potential for a system breakdown." Joe paused, "It is there to stop others from cheating the system, with electronic systems there is plenty of potential for people messing with it."

"My father told me some French history, he said that letters of state were sealed with wax, and there was an imprint from the Royal seal, if the seal went missing it was a major problem, so is it like that?"

"In a way yes."

"So this war?" she said.

"Blamed on corrupt third world rulers and tribal rivalries as usual. The reality is somewhat different." Joe was beginning to win her trust.

"All the slaughter for a box?" Laetitia was disgusted with the the men that would cause this carnage.

"No," Joe hesitated, this was very complex, "The box is the key to the world financial systems. That is a lot of power. These top people loose no sleep over such genocide. Don't get me wrong there are a lot of well meaning western folk who genuinely come to Africa to help. Often they are used by corporations to test products on the unsuspecting and to them expendable natives. If they die, well it is just third world conditions what do you expect. This war is over something someone in the west wants, but not the box."

"My father told me that some medicines are tested here, he was very annoyed at how my people were treated. He said like guinea pigs?"

"Small furry animals, cute, in south America they eat them, other places they use them in experiments." Joe nodded.

"I'm Joe, this nervous fellow here is Pete. Nice to meet you."

"I'm Laetitia, nice to meet you both," she said, lowering the rifle.

"That's a bit ancient," said Pete, taking a closer look.

"My friend the Colonel gave it to me." She pointed to his skeleton.

"Ah, please to meet you too, Colonel Rodney Wellings. We are her because your medic was very upset that the army would not come back for you." said Joe.

This little gesture, really broke the ice, Laetitia felt these men had a link to her beloved companion, showing him respect. She liked that, and that they knew him and his men.

"You might want to read his notes, they are wrapped in the silk handkerchief."

Joe sat down, "We could do with a rest."

"Not too long," said Pete. "We don't know how long that Royal Navy helicopter will be bringing the others."

"We will leave by helicopter?" Laetitia started to bubble with enthusiasm.

"No way, they are the system, they are the ones who protect those in power, the same men who think nothing of testing drugs on Africans, the same men who would destroy your land with open cast mines because it would be cheaper than digging into the rock like the miners who worked here did." said Pete, he was studying the satellite photos.

"So how will we leave?" Laetitia both relieved and anxious at the same time.

"That's what I'm trying to work out, we can't go south into that jungle, that's for sure. Our plan, he chuckled is to go through the mountains, to the coast, when I say coast, there is a small inlet here." He pointed, "Where the mountain range meets the sea. It is very isolated miles from either state."

"I know a way from here, to a pass down to my village, you would not want to go that far, I think from the radio, that it has been destroyed by the invaders."

"They are genocidal, Laetitia, those villages were massacred." Pete showed genuine sorrow for her people.

"Have a thought for her feelings Pete," said Joe, his sentiment well meaning.

"Sorry," said Pete, thinking he had put his foot in it.

"Thanks, my father could not have escaped, he was very ill, and my mother would not have left him even if he ordered her." She realised they did not understand how much she knew, and that what was shocking to a western woman, was though terrible, a part of life in many parts of the continent.

"Can you show me the route please, Laetitia," asked Pete. Of the two men he was the navigation expert.

"Yes," she began tracing it with her finger pointing out the climber's base sites, the cave and other places you could hide. She told them about the enemy aircraft.

"Is the other entrance blocked then?" Asked Joe.

"Yes, I blocked it with stones from the spoil heap. It was lucky I did, there have been some unwelcome visitors outside."

"Do they know you're here."

"No, only once did a white non European man start lifting some of the stones lower down when they were looking for something."

"The box?" said Joe, looking at Pete, then back at Laetitia.

"Yes, I think so, Richard had hidden it in a pouch with some other things in the spoil heap. I recovered it and his backpack, before the soldiers returned with the white men. I put the back pack where he had thrown it. They took it on the second visit with the white men."

"How come you know him?" asked Joe.

"I was taken along on an expedition into the jungle to the east of my village. They wanted me because the guide and the bearers did not speak good English, and they did not speak good French."

"So how come you know the climbers route?" enquired Pete.

"The men of the villages are hunters, they know the jungle, the bleak mountains frighten them, Carrying is women's work, the men will do it in the jungle for money, but up here, no." She shook her head.

"Why did they come here?" Another question from Pete.

"One of them was very rich, he had an Uncle who was keen on history. They were looking for the rear entrance to the mine, where you came in."

"Did they find it?" asked Joe. His mind was now adding another party to the possible ones that might soon be visiting.

"Nearly, they had to turn back because of approaching bad weather." Laetitia paused. "How did you find it so easily?"

"The Colonel's medic, kept Captain Winch's papers, he was to say the least annoyed by the military's lack of concern for the Colonel." said Joe.

"So so they were ruthless even then." Her face glazed over with dismay.

"Oh, yes," Joe agreed with her.

"We should make ready to leave, you'd best come with us. The others may not have found the mine entrance, but those coming in the Navy helicopter will be well briefed. The Americans aren't the only ones who use enhanced interrogation techniques, contrary to popular myth." Pete had a very serious look about him. He was

a thin wiry type, strong, but very nervy.

Joe was solid and confident. "You'd best try on one of our spare set of cloths. We'd best take those though, no sense in leaving any clues for our friends. He pointed to the climbing kit. Might take the Colonels, notes, we don't want to give them any help. Best leave the brass name tag."

When Laetitia first heard the men approaching down the mine, she had removed her yellow climbing cloths and hidden them behind the back pack. It was easier to hide in a dark mine that way. So she did her bit to pack up any clues.

They were ready to go, it was just a few hours to dawn. Pete stopped he walked to the stones blocking the mine entrance. "Lets go, but listen again before we go out the other entrance."

It did not take them long to get to the other end of the mine. Pete froze. They stopped behind him.

He turned to them, should not be long, that helicopter has no air support they won't be any longer than they absolutely have to. We must move the scree to get out now, the noise might echo down the mine and alert them to our presence the noise of the helicopter will cover us.

"We could get outside and hide under my grey blanket."

"Okay," said Joe. Once outside, they covered the hole back up.

The thumping sound of the helicopter rotor blades was good and steady.

"It would be best over there near the rocks along that side of the lake."

"Quick," said Pete.

Huddled between a big rock and the slope from the towering mountain peak above, they waited under the blanket.

The noise from the rotor blades changed, it increased, then the sound faded into the distance.

Laetitia lead the men around to the cave.

The first thing the men who had come down from the helicopter did was to check Richard's body.

"Our man al-right sir."

"Any signal?"

"Negative."

"He may have hidden it at his last call point before leaving the jungle. We'll go down the track and take a look."

While they went down the track. Laetitia, Pete and Joe decided to take a chance and move on in daylight. With Laetitia's rock grey blanket for camouflage they decided it was for the best. Much safer to go through the mountains in daylight.

Some days later, they were sitting hidden in some rocks, the descent down to the inlet had been tricky, but with the two spare lengths of rope that Laetitia had recovered from the American climbers stash, they had enough line to do it safely.

“So now we wait for a boat?” She looked at her two new companions.

“Yep,” said Joe.

“Joe, why do these people treat us differently, I mean testing stuff on us?”

“They do just as bad if not worse to us,” said Pete, interjecting.

“Lady these people dump toxic waste on people in the west.”

“Why do governments allow it?” she looked at them bemused.

“They are the government, or rather they control it. Besides take fluoride, now that makes people docile, why would any government not want it in toothpaste, and if they can get it in the water supply as well. Of course to protect children's teeth, what a joke, it damages teeth. Not that our western diet is conducive to dental health, but there are plenty who follow a healthy diet, they have fillings and you're not going to tell me they all have weak teeth!” Pete could be very cynical.

Intermittently they had little chats, mostly though they slept with one staying awake to watch the inlet.

As the light began to fade, Pete woke them, “It's here.”

This was the first time she had seen him really excited. Yet she could see nothing, no boat. Pete, there's nothing there.

Joe pointed, “Look Laetitia, look over there.”

All she could see was what looked like a large stick drafting through the water.

“It's a stick?”

“No, it's our ticket home.”

The men stood up, and after a few seconds the mini sub surfaced. The hatch opened, a bearded man peered out of it.

“Three of you, they said there were only two.” The old sailor rubbed his bearded chin.

“And our gear, is that a problem, we can't leave anything behind, no evidence we've been here?”

“The gear I can stash in the external kit bay. The sub is only made for three men, he paused, come on, let's give it a try.” The old sailor was, old school, improvisation and ingenuity were in his genes.

It was a very tight, very uncomfortable squeeze but they were all in, only their pilot had the luxury of his own seat, Laetitia and her two companions were locked together like a Chinese puzzle.

"Oops, back up," said the pilot of the mini sub.

"Problems," Pete asked with a somewhat nervous note.

"Quiet please," he whispered, "One of Her Majesties bathtubs crossing our route ahead."

He left it a good hour, a very painful hour for his passengers.

"Why are we waiting so long?" whispered Joe, who was close to his ear.

"They have sonar, it's amazing what sounds they can pick up."

Under way again they continued towards the research vessel.

"Can we talk whispered?" Joe.

"Whispering only," said the pilot.

"Okay, why is it taking so long?"

"This is a research sub, designed to take a lot of rough punishment in very deep water. Speed is not necessary, depth is."

"If they start lobbing depth charges at us we should be okay then?" said Pete.

"Depends how deep the sea bed is me old sunshine. Pretty shallow around these parts, dangerous getting in, the mountain range does not stop at the coastline where you'd think it does."

"You look worried skipper?" Said Joe.

"No sign of the ship, and we are nearly out of batteries, so we'd be hard pressed to dive for cover."

"Shit," said Pete, starting to fret.

"We'll wait here for a bit, this is our designated pick-up location."

"Might she have moved, with all the action, Naval vessels around?"

"Maybe," the skipper was diligently scanning the horizon for signs of the vessel. "Keep your ears open my friends, and keep quiet, listen for any rhythmical sounds."

"Engines?"

"That and turbulence from the prop blades."

The wait was both tedious and nail biting, they had come so far, now this grinding tense suspense.

"Skipper, sound."

"Yep, got it," he turned the periscope, "ah, coming up behind us."

"Ours?"

"Yep, she's a cat, will ride right over us, and suck us up into her cargo hold. Now you folks are going to have to ride back to England in this tub. Only the Captain and me are in on this. The cargo hold will remain locked for the rest of the journey, so you can get out, but don't speak. Only whisper when you are sat inside the sub. If you hear anything or see an orange or green light over the cargo door, you get straight into the sub and close the hatch. There is a toilet at the back of the cargo hold, use it, but quietly. We'll use the sub again when we get near blighty."

"Okay skipper." Joe gave the seasoned old sea farer a nod and a wink.

When the sub was safely inside the cargo hold, and the skipper had left them in the sub. Laetitia moved into



the pilots seat. She looked back at the two men. "One thing puzzles me," she said, "you two came here by plane?"

"Yes," said Joe.

"So won't it look suspicious if you don't return by plane?" She paused, "I mean, if you are seen back in England but they have no record of you coming back through customs?"

"Yes, if there were no record of us coming back." said Pete with a grin.

"The beauty of a system run by computers a Pete?" Joe looked at him.

"Yes Joe, and some folks get rather upset when some of their fellow geniuses start shuffling off, all kinda suspiciously like. Pete was grinning like a Cheshire cat."

"Silly question, couldn't you two have been put ashore somewhere in the African country you flew into?"

"Not unless they suddenly developed a coastline," said Pete, in a very frivolous manner. "Understood. Ideally it would have been the safest option, Send the gear back in the ship, and us back via the route we came in. However to get there we would at best have a long land journey across Africa, plenty of chance to be seen and questions asked as to how we got were we got? Also when we get back to England, someone has to take all the gear back to a certain gentleman's home. The less people involved the better."

The men were rather glad they'd brought Laetitia back. The long trip up from Africa to England, was not as they'd expected so boring. In between sleeping they'd ask her about Africa, her encounters with tourists were apt to be very amusing, especially the perceptions of them from a native perspective.

## Chapter 8

Many days passed, until one day. The sub skipper, gave them the nod.

"Budge up again folks. Captain has stopped the ship for a bit. Has the rest of the crew distracted, and don't ask."

The sub once again journeyed into the ocean. This time though thankfully it was a short journey. It drew along by a rather nice yacht, on the side out of sight of the research ship. The sail, was down, she was in international waters, just bobbing on the gentle waves. The skipper lost no time in surfacing and unloading the cargo.

"I say skipper, they never said a fine lady would be coming aboard?"

"'Twas a tight squeeze in this tub, my old friend."

"I bet it was." The gentleman, gave his old pal a wry grin.

The skipper of the boat helped them aboard, the skipper of the sub, handing up the gear.

"Best be getting back," said the bearded skipper.

"Jolly good old chap, you take care." The gentleman was pleased as punch.

The mini sub headed back for home.

"Inside, quick as you can folks."

Laetitia, was impressed, "Wow, it is like a home in here."

"Yes my dear, glad you like it." The gentleman was delighted at her command of English, and the compliment.

"Now you chaps, look like you could do with a drink. Anything for the lady," he said looking towards Laetitia.

"A glass of water please," she smiled.

"Water," the man seemed taken aback, "Well never did understand you ladies, water it is."

He began dealing with the drinks.

"Oh, what perishing bad show, do excuse me. My word what bad manners, how thoughtless of me, we've not been introduced. I'm Captain Jeremy Anderson."

"Laetitia," she said smiling. "This is Joe, and Pete," she said pointing.

"Well, jolly good show. And what will you chaps have?"

"Beer?" Said Pete.

"Right you are Pete," he looked towards the other man, "Joe isn't it what will you have old man?"

"Beer please?"

"Excellent, and I'll have a tot of rum."

Captain Jeremy proved to be a right character, he had Laetitia in fits of laughter. His dry sense of humour and gentlemanly ways captured her idea of the quintessential Englishman. The trip to the little isolated cove on one of England's many miles of coastline was nothing if not amusing.

"Well nice to meet you chaps, mums the word. Now we'll have to get you ashore without Nanny state making a fuss. Little inflatable boat on the back, have dropped anchor, just need to wait for the sun to go down. When you leave the beach don't go up the main track, over to the left is a footpath that comes down onto the beach. Follow it. There should be an old car, parked behind an rickety shed, where the footpath enters into a lane. Keys, there is a field gate hundred yards up the lane. One of you chaps, go and check behind the left gate post, should find an old coke can. Key in it. Got that?"

"Yes thank you very much Captain," said Joe.

"Cheers mate," said Pete.

"Thank you very much sir," said Laetitia.

"Any time my dear any time." The old sea dog gave her a wry smile.

It was a push getting the four of them and their backpacks into the little dingy, but the Captain did not want to make two journeys.

Once ashore, they followed his instructions. Finding the old Land Rover was not difficult, Joe did take a bit of a while to locate the can with the key in it.

"Laetitia, sorry, you will have to keep your head down in the back".

"Blanket?" She said with a smile

"Yes love," said Joe, "Technically you're an illegal immigrant. Questions would be asked, and it could blow the whole operation."

"Best stick to all the minor roads, B roads where necessary, A roads if we really have to." said Pete.

Joe nodded, "The last thing we need is to be stopped in one of those police checks."

"Where are you going, where have you been, what is the purpose of the journey, do you mind if we check the vehicle, do you mind stepping out of the vehicle, we need to search your vehicle." said Pete, doing a sarcastic impression of plod's standard script.

"Mind your own business," said Joe with a grin.

"We should not joke," said Pete.

"I know, it would be just our luck to be within a mile of matey's place and some point scoring over officious officer stops us for having the wrong colour paint work!"

"Happened to you too then Joe?" Asked Pete.

"Oh, yes been there done that got the tee-shirt," Joe chuckled, "Fly across continents, jump out of planes, trek for days in hostile territory through dangerous mountains, climb down a cliff. Sub, ship, yacht, drive, and...."

"Don't bare thinking about does it?" said Pete, "Left here or you'll be having us down a major road."

It took most of the night. Trying to travel only on minor roads was not easy, a few times Pete's navigation went astray, or was it Joe turning at the wrong junction?

As the old vehicle bumped along the track into the back of the stately home, the dawn chorus was on full blast. Great oak trees towered either side of the track, they passed plenty of parkland, some fine woodland, finally reaching the stable yard.

The main man had heard them, he was an early riser.

"Nice to see you chaps, keep it quiet when we go in the house, some of the rooms in this old place have been bugged by Nanny state."

"Stay down for a moment Laetitia," said Joe canting his head to the back of the vehicle, he turned towards the boss.

"Sorry boss, we have a damsel in distress. Her family were killed in the fighting, her father was French, she found the box, and helped us get through the mountains. No way were we leaving her in that hell hole."

"Good man, and you Pete, damn decent thing to do, damn decent."

"We won't stop, best if we get going," said Joe.

"Yes, yes very wise, leave the kit with me, and," he gestured with his right hand, pointing towards the back of the vehicle.

"Laetitia," said Pete quietly.

"Yes, yes, quickly my dear, if you get out, bring your stuff."

Laetitia, offered to carry the other two back packs.

"Which one has it?"

"Mine," said Joe "Has a tear in the top flap."

"Ah, right okay, Laetitia, my dear you take Pete's bag and your own, I'll bring this one." He turned to the men,

"Thanks chaps, jolly good work, catch up with you later."

"No worries sir," said Pete.

"Nice one boss," said Joe.

With the Land Rover trundling down the lane and out of sight. The old gentleman was quick to get Laetitia inside and up into the small panelled room.

I know it seems awfully rude but would you mind, staying here just for one moment.

Laetitia, nodded her head and smiled.

## Chapter 9

He took both Pete's and Joe's bags, it was some time before he returned. Bearing a cup of tea, "Thought you might like a cup of tea, long journey you must be very tired."

She began to cry.

"Oh, dear, I'm meant no offence my dear." The old gentleman did not know which way to look.

"Thank you so much," she said, "you are so kind, you are a man like my father. He was .." She could not hold back the tears, they came in floods.

When she had calmed down a bit, he ventured a suggestion, "There's someone I'd like you to meet. All hush hush, I know you're very upset, but we must not let those nasty folks who bugged my home hear, hmm."

She nodded.

"Okay, you come quietly and follow me please."

She had no idea where they went, only that he brought her into a fine room,.

A very elegant young woman approached her.

"This young lady has been of great assistance to us, poor thing has lost her parents, dreadful show. Would you mind awfully if she stays with you here for a while, her," he paused, "her entry into this country was a tad old fashion."

"No silly passports?"

"No, no," he smiled.

"I'll look after her," Laetitia was still tearful, the young English lady gestured for her to sit on the sofa, "Please."

"Do you mind if I leave you two, urgent business to attend to."

The women nodded, and he turned tail and was soon gone.

The two of them sat, on the Sofa.

"They call me Rosie, it's not my real name but for reasons," the young woman said.

"Laetitia," said Laetitia, she was staring at Rosie's long red hair, "Is, is it?" she pointed.

"My hair?" said Rosie.

"Is your hair, that colour, I know some tourists coloured their hair."

"Yes, it is my natural colour."

It was some days later, the old gentleman returned to the rooms where Rosie and Laetitia were staying.

"Laetitia," he said as he strolled in, "my dear girl, you met the Colonel?"

"Yes."

"How was he?"

"He helped me," she said with a smile and fondness in her heart for the old soldier.

"I don't doubt it, fine fellow, well liked by his men."

"He had a broken arm and leg, his bones were still all there though."

"Poor chap," said the gentleman, "Damn good to have his notebook, and the silk handkerchief. Given to him by his wife, never went anywhere without it."

"There was a brass name tag, we left it so if the other found him, they would not be suspicious."

"The notebook was written by his hand, that means so much more to me than a name tag."

"Was he a relative?"

"Yes, how perceptive of you," he looked at Rosie, "and how are you my dear?"

"Well thank you sir."

"You two getting along al-right?"

"Yes," said the two women almost together, which had them all smiling.

“Good.” he said.

“Please may I ask a question?” said Laetitia.

“Yes of course,” he replied in his jovial manner.

“I know it is a sensitive subject, is it okay, I don't mean to be rude.” She was hesitant.

He gave her a look of puzzlement.

“Well about it, if Rosie,” Laetitia was treading on eggshells.

“Yes, yes we have no secrets from Rosie.”

“So what will you do with the key?” asked Laetitia.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? All this war, my people dead, and you will do nothing?” She got a bit emotional, “Sorry.”

“Perfectly understandable,” he paused, “Silly question but, do you know what they've been doing to the people of Africa?”

“Who?” Laetitia wondered.

“There are two main power factions, we are the larger but less powerful, the others are at the top the bankers, big pharma, oil, military and media. They use the excuse of overpopulation, yet in Europe because of falling birth rates native populations are in decline, so there is no need to eliminate people, even in the third world. Population levels can be reduced and it can be done without harming anyone.”

He paused to let that sink in, then continued.

“The war was about resources, it weakens your people, they and the other nations have to pay for the weapons some how, ultimately your resources are traded in for debt. These people love it, they make profit from the war, reduce the population, and get control of valuable minerals. This just so coincided with the key going missing. While the build up to the war was in progress, a French genius met with an unfortunate end. Few knew about it, but when you get to such a high level, you have few peers. Such people tend to follow each others careers. To some the death may have seemed suspicious, and the key went missing, the key the genius had developed.”

He waited for her, she nodded. He continued.

“We don't know for sure, but we have an idea that it left Europe with a French tourist, a very clever French tourist. He never returned, but some say he went into the jungle. It would be a good place to hide such a key.”

“Ah, that explains why Richard was so intent on continuing on even when the guide and bearers had deserted. He was no tourist, and he had been before to the valley tourists usually visit.”

“He was probably there to check if the Frenchman had left it in that jungle.”

“It all makes sense now, except why you will do nothing?”

“This key is crucial to the security of their system, without it certain critical parts of the system can't be accessed. Normal everyday activity is not affected by this, however for those at the top controlling the world's financial system they sometimes need to, how shall we say, cheat a little to keep it running. Obviously they need the security to stop others tampering, but if they can't fiddle the books themselves.”

“The books?” Laetitia did not understand what books had to do with finance.

“It is an accounting term, financial numbers were written in books, they are now in computer systems.”

“Ah, so they loose control.”

“Yes, now they can recreate the system up to a point, but some data is only accessible with the key, so even if they duplicate the system, there will be some substantial financial disruption. The money system is based on creating money through debt, to keep this Ponzi scheme going takes some doing.”

"Ponzi scheme?" Again Laetitia looked puzzled.

"The first lot of debt is paid off from money generated when the next larger lot of debt is created and so on. It is a pyramid scheme. Every so often they crash it, and the banks end up with more and more assets, greater control of corporations, farms, etc. They usually follow this with a war, it takes peoples minds of the financial system."

"So your people...."

"Old school aristocracy and industrialists mostly, the association is very loose, they." He thought for a moment, "The other side that is, are very good at infiltrating any organisation."

"So who were those foreigners I saw with the invading troops who shot Richard?"

"From the description, and who they were with, at a guess probably North Koreans or Chinese."

## Chapter 10

In a sumptuous office somewhere in the City of London, some men were not looking so happy. Voices were becoming raised, there was a lot of anger, red faces and a certain amount of fear.

"Our man had the damn thing, you send in half a dozen men, you tell me they're the best we have and they can't find it?"

"Yes sir, well no sir."

"Our man was being pursued, if he dropped it into one of the jungle swamps, it is very swampy sir, then we may never find it."

"If it's in the bloody soup, we must be able to pick up the signal."

"Assuming it is still working, and according to our technical people, water is very good at blocking radio signals, depends how deep that swamp is sir."

"Drain the bloody thing."

"It's a war zone out there sir, with all due respect it is hardly practical, the men risked their lives as it was."

"We can get more men, that's what they're paid to do."

"Okay, go go."

A few hours later another man entered the office room.

"Sit down, bloody balls up. The idiots can't find it. How is the work going?"

"Sir, we are doing everything we can and more, we have to be careful not to reveal what we are up to, if we do," before the man could finish, the other man interjected.

"Financial meltdown if they loose confidence in the system."

"Sir."

"So put bluntly the upgraded system as we shall call it?"

"We are offering very good money sir, but the calibre of the people we are attracting, they're just about up to the job, but this is no ordinary system. We also have to be so careful at vetting people, and letting on who and why when hiring."

"I know," the grey haired man sat, for some moments thinking.

"Those chaps we sent in, they thought the key could have been lost in a jungle swamp. You knew our man."

"Richard sir?"

"Yes," he paused, "how likely, given he was being chased?"

"Doubt it, he was damn good. If he had hidden it I doubt he'd have left it down in the jungle. In the mountains maybe."

"Why?"

"Easier to pick up the signal sir, and less likely to end up in the drink."

"They told me they found his body and did a thorough search of all the areas he could have accessed, including a ridge which it seems he was either climbing up or going back down.

So either someone else found it, or it has stopped transmitting," he paused, "They did say his body was headless, they also said it had been stripped of any worthwhile items, wristwatch that sort of thing. An AK47 damaged by a bullet, was found dumped part way down the track leading off the mountain."

"Could be some of the insurgents found it, we do know the Chinese are involved in trade deals with that country. Their intelligence systems are easily equal to ours."

"Let us assume that it has been taken, we have the Chinese, anyone else?"

"Need you ask sir?"

"Yes there are certain losers who don't know when to quit. Would they have the organisation to retrieve it?"

"Would you like me to check sir?"

"Yes."

The following day the two men once again met.

"Interesting sir, these two men flew out two days before our team went in."

That country is way inland.

"Yes sir, but we do know they are friends with the old boy."

"Not that idiot?"

"That's the one sir."

"What was the pretext of these chaps visit?"

"Business, which does seem reasonable given who they work for."

"Anything else?"

"Yes, this research vessel was seen in the area." He said handing a picture to the grey haired man

"So?"

"Well it was scheduled to return from the South Atlantic, so nothing suspicious there, but it does have a mini sub."

"So?"

"Well it would be one way to pick-up a small team sent to recover something. Specification on the sub, is rather a slow beast though."

"Nothing much else, there are other tourists and business travellers into the area around the same time. So far no links back to anyone of any significance."

"I'm so glad we have electronically tagged passports."

"Sir, makes it so much easier to follow what people are up to, keep track on our enemies."

"They can also keep track on us more easily too sir."

He nodded, "Keep me informed."

In the stately home, an old bearded fellow stood talking to the master of the house.

"Sir, I just thought you ought to know, 'twas in morning early, car parked down the track sir, funny because it had them blacked out windows."

"Did they see you old chap?"

"No sir, don't reckon they did, I were in them woods see," he paused, "where was I?"

"Car."

"Oh, yes, 'twas blacked out windows made me suspicious and 'twas a new car, black, one of those big uns, sir."

"Any sign of movement?"

"No sir, no sayin they'd not left it sir, cos you couldn't see in, blacked out windows you see sir."

"Good man, thanks awfully, keep you eyes peeled, and get yourself a drink."

"Oh, thank you sir," said the old gardener, pleased with the note.

In the city office the grey haired man was talking to another man

"How are our friends progressing with more global restrictions on the internet?"

"Well a little help to some of our geeky friends might nudge things along a bit."

"Another cyber terrorist attack?"

"These things happen sir!"

"It would give the media something to talk about."

"Indeed, some of those irresponsible bloggers and alternative news outlets would no doubt join the fray."

"Not our outrageous conspiracy theory friends?"

"Yes sir."

"Hmm, if they said the wrong thing at the wrong time they could panic the stock market."

"Like we do sir?"

"Yes, but when we want it to happen not because some loud mouthed talk show host has some leaked information to tell the world."

"People could get the wrong idea sir."

"If they don't listen to our media outlets they could."

"Wouldn't want that sir."

"Go too it."

No sooner had he left and the intercom went.

"Sir, I have Bob to see you."

Robert walked on in, "Hi there old buddy."

"I hear you have problems Bob?"

"Damn war, still they'll want to sell us plenty of land to pay off their war debts."

The two men laughed.

"How is life in America?"

"Better now my favourite Congressman retired, the new one does what he's told." He paused, "Most of the time."



"Your boy, Roland, he's been out to those mountains hasn't he?"

"Sure has, on climbing holidays," the big American said with a nod.

"Of course, he wouldn't go looking for minerals in Africa?"

"Why what use would that be? Do you know what he told me before I flew out?"

"No?"

"He said dad, we have no need of expensive mining equipment." so I said, "Why son?" He's a smart boy, he said, "We can surface mine shell casings."

The two men laughed.

"Plenty of Top Brass in Africa Bob."

Bob continued, "Still ain't it great for us, metal prices are up. Hey and no damn locals to object to our activities. Your youngest still saving the planet?"

"Yes and doing great for the carbon credits market."

"Nice little earner, does that count as insider trading?"

"Not if we do it Bob. Did he find the old mine out there?"

"No. He reckoned they got near it but there were a lot of fallen rocks in that area."

"Probably inaccessible then?"

"Without equipment yea. You seem kinda interested?"

"Military friend."

"Oh, on the Colonel's trail, hey my brother is the man he'd need to speak to."

"What do you say to a meal at my club?"

"Great, thought you'd never ask." Bob gave him a good old boy nod.

At the stately home the old gentleman returned. "Ladies sorry to interrupt, Rosie you know the drill."

"We have visitors?"

"Yes the kind we don't know where they are or what they're up to. Laetitia my dear, I was talking to Joe, he says you'd been in that confounded mine for several weeks, you'd been chased by your own people because of what happened in the jungle?"

"Yes."

"Oh, dear and now you're having to hide again, of course poor Rosie, hardly gets out."

"It is much nicer here than in the mine, and no disrespect to the Colonel, but he was not very talkative." Laetitia smiled at the kind gentleman.

"Probably his military training, I'm sure he wouldn't mind you saying that, not at all. Oh, now that reminds me. It would be a bit awkward if they found you here all unofficial. If they realised where you came from it could give the game away. Of course there is some danger in getting official paperwork, but these things get lost don't they? Anyway, you said your father was French?"

"Yes."

"So do you know his family details?"

"I do, shall I write them down."

"Yes," he said, with a hint of hurrying things along.

Rosie handed her a pen and paper.

"Excellent my dear, this could take some time, an old pal of mine in France, we must be careful though."

"Thank you very much."

"You are most welcome my dear. I must dash, got to keep a watch for these blighter's. In a big new vehicle with blacked out windows, good man the gardener, very observant fellow."

Some weeks later a worried man came into the city office.

"Sir."

"Problem?" asked the grey haired man.

"We need to do a bit of absorption, if we don't they might pick up some blips on the market."

"Can we use a workaround?"

"Yes, we have done it before, but that can be picked up too."

"I know, okay do your best."

"Thank you sir."

The man rushed off, leaving the grey haired man, looking somewhat distraught.

Half an hour later the man he spoke with before about the system entered the office.

"You sent for me sir?"

"The upgraded system, how soon can we go live?"

"Months sir," the man ventured with a somewhat wet bureaucratic tone.

"Months, we can't wait that long." The grey haired man was tense, he did not like not being in control.

"It is extremely complex sir, even when it is ready it will need extensive simulation tests. If you went live otherwise, you might have no financial system."

"Yes, yes I know. I need an exact date?"

"Programming computers sir, its...." the man was cut short.

"Its," said the grey haired man, losing his usual calm demeanour.

"There are a lot of variables, software bugs, errors in data, all sorts of things, we can give you an estimate, but not an exact date."

"Push them."

"Sir, if I push them they may well pack up and leave, besides, people might start wondering what the urgency is all about, these are smart people, they talk down the pub."

The grey haired man leant back in his chair, stared out of the window and sighed.

"Yes, go," he waved the man away, rather obviously annoyed.

Over an hour passed before the next man arrived, it was the man he questioned previously about the success of the mission to find the box.

"Any luck?"

"No sir, we've followed up all the leads, the most likely suspects the two who went to Africa a few days before our chaps, both have stories that stack up. The research ship was on a scheduled return, nothing out of order there. We have had people watching the old boy's stately home, but nothing, just the regular visitors, gardener, house cleaner, we listened to hours of some god damn boring meeting, some village fête committee meeting he chairs in the dining room."

"So either the jungle or the Chinese likely have it? I had a visit from Bob, his boy reckoned with the amount of rock falls in the area the mine was probably inaccessible without equipment. Keep me informed."

"Will do sir. That all?"

"For now."

The man left, sensing the grey haired man was not in a social mood.

Over a month passed, there was nothing much happening, the war was still raging, a few financial glitches which for some reason were not reported by the mainstream media? In the stately home a rather joyful elderly

gentleman was visiting his ladies.

“I shall call you my ladies in waiting,” he chuckled, “Laetitia rather good news. Please read this, try and learn it, and as much about the area as possible. Oh, seems you now know my old friend, and he came up with the splendid idea, that visiting a stately home in England would do you the world of good, and what better place than with his old pal, my good self. Your French passport, and all the other gubbins my dear.”

“Thank you,” Laetitia could not resist giving him a hug and a peck on the cheek.

“Well, I really must rescue more damsels,” he smiled.

Rosie burst into a fit of the giggles.

“Laetitia dear, please call me Uncle Tom.”

“Thank you Uncle Tom.”

## Chapter 11

It took nearly a year before the first big financial crack appeared, it was carefully managed, as a householder might move a heavy sideboard into place before showing prospective investors around the property. The war was rumbling on all be it with some success at repelling the invaders in the French supported northern state. Something the newly elected French government was quick to capitalise on. Robert the American had taken over a French mining company, no guesses why. Our grey haired man in his city office was getting even more infuriated at delays in what was known as the new upgraded system. His meetings with a select group of heads of other powerful families were no cause for celebration. They were dependant on his family for their positions.

The system had taken many many years to put in place, trying to replace it quickly was proving more difficult than anyone anticipated. With so many dependant upon it, they were all helping to patch things together, some creative people were engaged in keeping everything smelling of roses. However some of the bolder players on the outer rim of the edge of this power base were starting to prepare for the worse. At first this was tolerated, but as more began following suit, something had to be done.

In the city office the grey haired man was talking to the man who had been responsible for sending the recovery team to Africa.

“Look we have these people, they are doing some silly things that are drawing too much attention, to the few issues we have had with the financial system. You know how financial people get all jittery when they see others doing certain things. If it goes to far, I don't need to explain do I?”

“No sir, this system serves us very well, they are being very naughty, and we need to deal with it as a matter of national security.”

“Thank you.”

The man felt he had a chance to redeem his prospects after failing to find the box.

A few nights later, there was a serious break in. One of the worlds leading business men died while confronting intruders. The headlines were full of it. In the following weeks he was found to have been doing some very dodgy dealings. The investigation seemed to suggest some others were involved and that this was linked to the murder. A series of police raids rounded up some very top people in the financial world. Some of whom also came to plausible sticky ends. Not to mention the spate of suicides.

At the stately home Joe had come around to visit, Uncle Tom

“Cracks seem to be starting, boss.”

“Joe you are correct, and they can't shut down the system for even a moment. Just plaster over the cracks and step on the roaches that try to escape through them,”

They sat talking for many hours before Joe made his way home.

Uncle Tom again visited his ladies.

“Rosie, the news is getting worse, I fear soon if things happen the way they might that those in the shadows will try to keep their people in play at the top level. The politicians will of course be thrown to the wolves.”

“Only you know I'm here and Laetitia. But she is here, so am I in any danger?” Asked Rosie.

“Not at the moment, just be prepared.”

Laetitia was puzzled, “I don't understand, why would Rosie feel threatened?”

“Laetitia, I am an old man, I can't run. You know things, you are smart like Rosie. Will you promise me you'll try and help her if you can when the time comes?”

“Of course Uncle Tom, I would anyway, but yes if I can I promise I will. So why is she in danger?”

“Well some men have how shall we say, been dealt with, they stepped out of line. They saw the cracks. If it gets worse then those who depend upon the system will either try to protect it or try to escape from it. This will create tension, those protecting the system will become more and more ruthless. Anyone who could offer an alternative, and especially in the top leadership, would be a major threat. They would need to be eliminated.” He took a breath, his manner becoming more serious.

“These people know as a baby Rosie escaped her parents fate, but they have no idea where she is. However they can narrow the list, by focusing on people such as myself, someone with a degree of power and position, who is not sympathetic to their cause.”

“Why Rosie?”

“Because she has a direct line of decent from Henry VII. There is a saying history is written by the winners, lineages have also been, shall we say manipulated. The original records were discovered some while ago, and more than one reliable source to back them up. They have been dated and copied, some eminent friends who know about such things, have sought to safeguard these documents. Rosie has no desire to rule, but these people don't care.”

“So she could tell them as they say until she is blue in the face?” Laetitia said trying to improve her

understanding and also command of the English language.

“Quite so, quite so.”

“So they may try to kill Rosie and they have already killed others. Why not give them the key, to stop this?” Laetitia, still knew she had a lot to learn about the ways of so called civilized societies.

“What of the Indian farmers whose GMO crops failed to deliver as expected. Their debts driving them by the thousands to commit suicide? That is what comes from the system that needs the key. Even men of influence and power can do little to change the system, because ultimately those who control the system, control the money. As they say he who pays the piper calls the tune, and they are the ones calling the tune globally. We have very few chances to bring their destructive system down. Plants are modified to create pesticides, bees are dying all around the world, pests are increasingly resistant to pesticides, we even have super bugs resistant to antibiotics, what these people won't do for power, control and money. I better not get started, oh my dear Laetitia, if only you knew the half of it. I'm sorry I do go on a bit, most people you see they're just not interested. Not in the slightest, no,” the elderly gentleman shook his head, “Like sheep, sheep.”

“I know what happens to sheep, sir,” said Laetitia, “and I bet they don't believe the nice farmer would let them come to any harm either.”

“Ah, now, yes, well said my dear, I expect if you could speak sheep, they'd either not listen or say you were crazy, after all he does feed them in winter and keep them cool in summer.” He laughed. “Well no peace for the wicked, I must get on, things to do. You two take care of each other, my ladies in waiting,” he said chuckling as he strolled off out of the room.

Laetitia turned to Rosie, “Please tell me about your family.”

“Well, you'll probably wish you'd not asked, I'll give you a brief overview first, Uncle Tom says I should write a book on it.” Rosie thought for a moment about how to begin.

“This property is in trust for me, when Uncle Tom finds me, he is still making enquiries. He says it is best that way. The property was once owned by Thomas Tudor, the young son of Henry VII. When Elizabeth died the line of decent continued through the female line via Margaret. It should have gone through Thomas. We don't know if he was just overlooked, or if because of powerful forces, they chose to favour otherwise.”

“Percy Granton was a minor noble, he was chosen to be Thomas Tudor's protector. It may even be he who hid this line from history, maybe to save the offspring from the many ruthless forces abroad at the time. Thomas was an extremely weakly child, he virtually never left the house. He was not expected to make it to adulthood, and certainly never made it to court. Well he did come of age to marry. His wife had three children, a boy, a daughter, and the second and last son, Harold. An unusual name, his wife was a descendant from the house of Godwin. About a year after this, Thomas died. His guardian, Percy was now charged with the care of the children, as such he married the wife of Thomas, and they took his surname. The older son and daughter, never reached adulthood. Harold did, he was tutored by Percy, and tutored very well. Percy was a very clever man by all accounts. He was very skilled at serving his masters well, while yet in public at least appearing distant enough from them to avoid being embroiled in any intrigues. He also was able to keep his ambitions in check. Thus Harold and all the male descendants who followed up to my father John Granton, successfully maintained the family line and fortunes. During the eighteenth century, the Granton family and the Wellings

family became friends through military service.

“Hence the Colonel,” Laetitia interjected.

“That’s right, well the Wellings are a very honourable family, as you may have noticed from Uncle Tom. They never forgot all the help that they received from the Granton family. So when my father and mother met with misfortune, some of Uncle Tom’s family whisked me to safety.”

“So the rolls of service have in a way switched, and Uncle Tom has in a way become to you what Percy Granton was to Harold Tudor.”

“Yes,” said Rosie with a smile. “In those days the danger came from religious and political intrigue, these days it is from corporate intrigue, at the heart of it though, now as then, it is just powerful families flexing their muscles to become dominant.”

“Like a lion who takes a lioness for his mate, and kills any cubs that may have been from his rival?”

“Sort of, yes.”

In the city office the grey haired man was getting one of his updates.

“How is SmartCorn and SmartRice doing?”

“Ah, well all those financially challenged farmers giving up lead to some nice food shortages. Great news for us, with our allegedly higher yield crops to feed the starving.”

“We really must put more pressure on tightening up the internet, did you see the bit about the dead birds?”

“When the mice eat the crops, often they either die or get eaten by these birds, of course then the birds die. We’ve been spinning it as another virus.”

“Ah, so if people?”

“Yes when they start dropping, we can make a fortune selling a vaccine, we are way ahead sir.” The man replied with a cheerful smile.

“Good, and who is eating all the corn and rice?”

“Mostly the ones breeding like flies sir.”

After this man left, the grey haired man sent a message.

Somewhere in the London docklands, a man was proving a tad uncooperative.

“Just had a message through, young fellow, gives me a bit more negotiating power with you.”

The younger man looked perplexed. “Look my boss says, I don’t have a job, then he says to come here there’s a great job for me and to ask for you. But I know he has hired someone to take my place. So what the fuck is going on?”

“As I said we want you to use your skills to find a way around the security of a major financial system.” The smooth talking suave man in the suit, was not having his usual easy ride. He was talking to an engineering mind.

“Fuck off, as I have said I ain’t getting involved in anything dodgy.”

“This is legitimate,” said the man with a smile that would look great on a politician or magazine cover.

“Bullshit.”

“We run the system, look here are my credentials. This whole system is owned and controlled by my

employers.”

“Why the fuck do you need me?” The young geek, had heard to many stories to trust, this penguin.

“Because a code system was stolen.” Which was as much as he was allowed to elaborate.

“Why?”

“We don't know.”

“Bullshit, you fuck someone and someone fucked you.” The geek was used to computer logic and he could smell some dodgy code a mile off.

“Maybe.”

“You rich bastards are all the fucking same, and when I've done this you'll try and fuck me.”

“We won't,” was not convincing this code genius.

“Fucking crap, you are full of shit, we got birds dying, bees dying because some fat corporate bastard wants to fucking sell some toxic crap, and you bastards, what the fuck do you do. Oh, fucking lets protect people from bad things on the internet, we need more controls. You shits just want to stop us knowing how bad you are screwing us and the fucking planet.”

“This chap has the diplomatic skills of a Rotweiler,” thought the suave man. “Look, I just deal with a financial system.”

“That screws us with debt.” The geek was as blunt as a brick.

“Well maybe if you helped out it would not be so bad.”

“Yea, right, you just want me because I'm smarter than the average geek. If I fucking find a way in your crappy system then I become a threat, and we all know what happens to threats, fucking get eliminated.” The young fellow was well up on how the system works.

“You are obviously one of those conspiracy theory nuts aren't you Mr Gordon, hmm?”

“Yea, that's fucking right.”

Mr Gordon was really getting fed up with this smart arse who he knew could not program his way out of a paper bag, yet was probably earning far more than even a mediocre geek.

“We could always find someone abroad to do the job, plenty of people in India.”

“You need me because I'm the fucking best there is and you know it.” Gordon knew his own reputation in the industry.

“I'm trying to be nice to you Mr Gordon, we are making you a generous offer, it is a small fortune.”

“Okay, I'll do a deal, you double the money, let me work remotely from wherever I chose on the planet and world wide or the deal is off, you lift all restrictions on the internet.”

“We are a financial institution we don't have any say in how the internet is run.”

“More fucking bullshit, this is the world fucking financial system, if this is fucked so is the fucking rest, you want my help you make sure it is open and stays open wide open.”

“I will ask, okay, and not a word of this outside these four walls.” The suave man was clearly feeling stressed at having to deal with such an impolite “know it all” from what he considered a much lower class.

“I will fucking tell who I fucking like, that way if something happens to me, get it, ass hole.”

“You will be required to sign a non-disclosure agreement.”

“Then you can go fuck yourself, dick head.” He began to leave.

“Please, please, one moment Mr Gordon, what about your father? Don't be so hasty.”

“What the fuck?”

“Sit down please, let me put your proposals to my superiors.”

“What the fuck did you mean about my father?”

I need to make a call, the man left the room. He then put a call through to the grey haired man in the City office.

"Sir he wants double the money, to work remotely from anywhere in the world, and all internet restrictions lifted world wide. The only lever we have is his father."

"The money is no problem, our American friends can find a CIA babysitter. Internet, no. What do you think, can he do it?"

"Yes, our intelligence report suggest he will crack it as easily as we might crack an egg. He is very hostile to our system, he won't sign a non-disclosure agreement, and at one keystroke he could take the lot down."

"We have the backup core."

"Which he could also get into." Replied the suave man.

"Do we need him? I had a chat to another friend, doesn't the main core synchronise to the backup?" The grey haired man was running through the technical details in his head.

"Yes."

"So why can't we make the changes we need to the system via the synchronising process. Then switch over to the backup system and reverse the process."

"We have already looked at that sir, the packets are encrypted and then sent across the link randomised. Both cores need the key to gain full access."

"Anyone else we can use?" The grey haired man was seriously worried by Mr Gordon's attitude.

"Not in his league. We now have some of the best on the planet working on the new upgrade, but they are no match for his skills. As you know sir, even the upgrade system will need the key, to access certain critical data in the core."

"Go back in, keep him there, tell him the first two conditions we will agree to." It was not long after during some heated exchanges that the two men were joined by two more men. Both wearing suits and dark glasses.

"Mr Gordon?"

"Yes," he was taken by surprise at their entry.

They showed him their credentials. They had a very intimidating presence.

"This is a matter of national security, we suggest you cooperate."

"What happened to a free bloody country?" Mr Gordon was still trying to stick to his bold, "Don't tread on me," stance.

"When national security is at stake, sir."

"Oh fucking yea, from each according to his ability, to each according to his need, you bunch of commie



bastards.”

“We could make you sir.” said the other man, taking his turn.

“No you fucking can't, screw you arshole, where the fuck do they get you fucking dick heads.”

“You do realise who you are talking to?” said the second man, as though each had interlocking lines.

“Yea, a couple of fucking thugs in suits, who if this system goes down will need to find some other bastards to work for.”

“Mr Gordon,” the first man said, “now there is no need to get angry at everyone is there? All we want is for you to do some software work, for which you will be paid very handsomely.”

“Yea, then these bastards or their free-loading friends will come along and steal it back in fucking taxes and give it away to some rich lazy shits, and some scraps to some poor lazy fuck.”

“Mr Gordon, the government helps a lot of people, you really do have some very negative thoughts.” said the suave man.

“Okay, Mr Positive, you fucking arrange with these MI5 tarts of yours to have a similar word to the government. If this is a free country then I have the fucking choice to support the bunch of shits or not, you fucking shits have tax havens while us poor fuckers have to pay. Look at my fucking dad work himself near to death, fuck all help he gets. Some fucking lazy shit down the road, gets fucking loads, an ain't done a days fucking work. You lot are so full of crap.”

“You better watch your language sonny,” said the second operative.

“Oh, sorry Mr Blond, I was under the delusion that we had freedom of speech in this country? One also thought we fought to be a free people in two world wars. Obviously one should obey ones masters and be a good slave, work hard for the money they create out of thin air, shouldn't one?”

“You have a bit of an attitude problem don't you?” said MI5 man one.

“One minute you want me to do your thinking for you, next minute you are telling me you don't like me thinking. You are the one with the problem mate.”

“We can make life very unpleasant for you.” said the second operative taking his turn.

“Yea, and if I don't sort this system, there's a few million people in this country going to make life very unpleasant for you and your boyfriend Mr Blond, so go fuck yourself.”

“There are some countries where you'd be dead by now with your attitude.” The first man glared at him, turning on the menace.

“And why Mr Braincell Blond, am I not in this country? Could it be that a lot of good fucking people with attitude problems told a bunch of tyrannical twats to go piss off.”

“So are you going to help us?” The suave man, was getting into the rhythm taking his queue to speak.

“Mr Nice, you fucking give me the money in advance tax free, and whatever else I want, plus the freedom to go wherever I please, plus some movement on freeing up the internet, plus get these two shits and their friends to back off and I might.”

“We are concerned you might sabotage the system.” The suave man, realised his Freudian slip.

“Wow, you don't say, now what a good idea, Mr Nice.”

“We would want some guarantee from yourself not to misuse the access we give you.”

“Fuck you are in the deep shit man.”

“This is no joke,” said one of the security agents.

“You lot couldn't run a bath, you balls up and you have to come to me to dig you out of your own fucking cock-up.” He paused, “Fucking chimpanzees down at the Zoo could run the planet better than you retards.”

“If we meet your terms, with the exception of the internet, will you help?” The suave man was desperately trying maintain his cool exterior. His inner sense detecting that, they were going to get somewhere, eventually.

“No movement on the internet no fucking deal.”

“Okay, gentleman, thanks,” said Mr Nice, “I'll deal with it.”

The men slipped away silently.

It was some time later, the grey haired man was not pleased at the resulting stalemate.

“Find someone else,” he barked.

“Sir, it won't be easy.”

“Do it.”

“Yes sir.”

With things getting more critical at the top, it was a stroke of luck, that sent a very interesting curriculum vitae to a department in Whitehall. Mr Nice was soon made aware of the applicant. The grey haired man in the city was well pleased with the news.

“She looks very good on paper.” Mr Nice smiled with some confidence.

“When do you see her?”

"This afternoon." He continued with a pertinent question. "Sir, if she fixes it, then what?"

"Same policy as before, we can't have people with that much inside knowledge roaming the streets, once the system is secure, this time with a backup key, eliminate her."

"Yes sir."

A few hours later a rather timid lady in her mid twenties was ushered in to the office of the man Mr Gordon referred to as Mr Nice.

"Hello Miss, well lucky for you a friend told us about your application and though they did not have a position we do."

"Thank you sir."

Mr Nice was visibly pleased with her very pleasant attitude.

"It is quite good money and of course a very responsible job, high security."

"I did do a bit of work in bank sir."

"Excellent, would you like to see the contract?" Wow he thought, "I don't even need my suave charm with this one. Like a lamb to the slaughter."

"Thank you," she said, spending a lot of time perusing the contract, which seemed quite reasonable.

## Chapter 12

They lost no time in showing Anna into the secure facility, and her new work desk. Several days later, the grey haired man was glad of an update.

"Progress?"

"Excellent sir, she has found a back-door, it does not get her into some of the features and data we need but we have been able to transfer about eighty percent of what we could not access before."

"Give her a bonus, what are we paying her by the way?"

"Forty a year sir." The suave man knew how cheap she had been bought.

"So if she works lets say to make it look good a couple of months, plus say five hundred bonus for this excellent work. He laughed, and to think what we were going to pay that other bastard, millions." The grey haired man, was grinning. "You have her monitored?"

"Your friends at MI5 sir and some of our own people." Mr Nice replied with his usual suave delivery.

"Good, best call the MI5 chaps off before she has an accident."

“Understood sir.”

Some weeks later it was not quite such a great picture.

“I don't understand,” said Mr Nice.

“It's the encryption sir, there is something different, non standard, as though someone has created a completely new type of structure. I have the last part of the data, there was another back door into that area, but it is all encrypted. It's so frustrating.” Anna was, worried not just about the technical hitch. She wondered how it would look to future employers if she got a bad result because she could not do this job.

He came back later. “We have set up a link to some very powerful code breaking tools in another location. There is now an icon on your screen which should allow you to access it. Try that.”

“Thank you sir.” Wow she thought, it was a bit of luck he seemed to be on her side.

Some days later he returned, having heard no more news

“Any luck?”

She shook her head. “No sir, I don't know what you hooked me up to, it was mind-blowingly powerful, I've run all the options, nothing.”

“Who wrote this part of the system?”

“Sadly the poor fellow lost the plot, so we can't ask him.”

“Ah, what were his interests?” Anna needed some kind of key that might help her get inside the previous coders head. She like most programmers, knew that even if a programmer had left plenty of comment lines, it could still be a fun challenge to work out how millions of lines of code in thousands of modules all worked together.

“Why?”

She thought the man was asking a bit of a silly question, “It might give us a clue, sometimes people use familiar things as seeds.”

He felt completely lost, “Seeds?”

Software has a habit of growing, but like a plant it has to start from a beginning and generally follows recognizable patterns as it grows. Encryption often uses a seed for the encryption algorithm.”

He felt none the wiser, other than he needed to find out what the original programmer was into. “I'll find out.”

That evening Anna arrived home, had some food, as she was about to go upstairs. “You'll get square eyes, it's not good for you spending so much time on the computer, especially as you do it all day.”

“Yes mum.”

“No need to take that tone with your mother, she's only thinking of your welfare.” Her father sounded stern, but she knew when he was speaking with a slightly flippant undertone.

“If I didn't spend so much time on it I would not have this job, and it's good pay, they gave me a five-hundred pound bonus.”

“Her father laughed, is that all?”

“Dad,” she said, giving him one of her looks.

“Your working in a high security banking centre, that's nothing to them. They've got you too cheap if you ask me.”

“Yes, dad,” she looked at her parents, “Permission to go to my room?”

“Please?” Her father gave her a disapproving look.

“Please Mummy and Daddy may I go to my room?”

They all burst into laughter.

Anna, sat on the computer, it was not long before she was hooked up to WidgetHead.

The text started to bounce the bytes.

“Hey, I have a great new job, been there a few weeks. Banking system.” MissAByte

“Got you on hot code, snap, crack all and shop?” WidgetHead

“Vsecure, not allowed to share with crowd.” MissAByte

“Nice guy in suit, lisp protocol.” WidgetHead

“Yes?” MissAByte

“Thai with Oak, brown and smoke, stripe, stripe.” WidgetHead

“Yes?” MissAByte

“Meet me.” WidgetHead

“Yes?” MissAByte

It was not long before Anna was on her way out.

“Going out, you hardly every go out. No, no dear, is it one of these internet dates?”

“No mum, just an old friend.”

There was a Cinema not too far away. As she went there she got the distinct feeling she was being watched.

The movie had not started, so she could see exactly who she needed to sit next too. WidgetHead was easy to spot, yet surprisingly he could blend in a crowd and disappear.

“MissAByte?”

“Yes, Widget Head.”

“Yes, followed?”

“It felt like it.”

“Anyone sitting near us?”

“No.”

“You work there don't you,” he said, showing her what looked like a picture of a teddy bear, but actually had the site address hidden in the image.

“Shit, yes.”

“Those fucking bastards, wanted me to crack some shit, a key went missing, only one. Will keep conversation short. Don't want them to see us together. They even got two MI5 thugs to put the frighteners on me. My demands too high. They in deep shit, the Frenchman, genius, made electronic encryption key system to unlock parts of the core. So they could fiddle the numbers, keep things running smooth. They fucked him, bastards, key went missing. They got fucked. When you're done you will know too fucking much. Pretend to look at your ticket. Then leave, tell them you asked about the movie and this is not the one can you change ticket, that way if you were seen talking to me you just asked about the plot. Go.”

“Thanks.”

Anna, left, doing as he said and watched one of the other movies.

When she returned home her mum could sense as only mums can that something was not right.

“Good film dear?”

“Okay.”

“Has something happened?”

“Just tired mum, work, sitting through a movie.”

You have a weekend off, you've been overworking, they will just have to put up with it. You're the most important thing, not the job.”

“Thanks mum.”

The following day the grey haired man was given an update from the man who ran the failed box recovery mission.

“She went to see a film last night, went into one film, then went out and changed the ticket.”

“Anything unusual?”

“It's not her usual routine. A woman going to see a film on her own?”

“She watched it alone?”

“Yes.”

At work Mr Nice was taken aback.

“Anna, when you've done, you can have a whole month off, but this is really important. Please.”

She thought about what WidgetHead had said, he did seem to know a lot, but it seemed like such a great place to work, good pay, nice people, some folks could get a bit paranoid.

“Sure, okay.”

A week later the updated system, was duplicated and with a few minor issues, took over from the old system. Anna had produced two software based coded keys, to unlock the core of the system. Officially that was, and she had put a little safeguard into the system. WidgetHead was discretely delivered a key and knew of the little safeguard. Anna, had her own key, and her own back-doors into the system.

A month went by before Mr Nice asked if she wanted to take some time off. She agreed and this was duly reported to his superior, our grey haired friend.

## **Chapter 13**

In the stately home Uncle Tom paid a visit to his ladies.

“Ladies, some good news and some bad news. It seems as though the blighter's have put some new system in, good news from that is they probably won't be so worried about finding you my dear,” he said, pointing to Rosie.

It was not quite so peaceful at Anna's home. A gas explosion had torn through the house during the night. There were no survivors.

WidgetHead or Mr Gordon, was finding it difficult, to even get an interview, he had an idea why. Fed up he had gone fishing, an out of the way spot. He needed to clear his head.

"Fucking gas explosion," he said sitting by the bank, the rod resting on a stand, the line drifting down stream. "Psst, psst, the sound came from behind, somewhere in the long rushes of the grass, don't look around, they might be watching you."

"MissAByte?"

"Anna."

"Mike, Mike Gordon," hey he whispered I thought you were dead in that gas explosion.

"I hope they do, bastards." she replied.

"The news said it was a faulty boiler." Mike recalled the news report.

"Bullshit," she said.

"You're sounding more fucking like me now." He could sense the fury in her voice. "You were right Mike fucking right." She paused, "Two months from now you could be in danger."

"Why?"

"My little feature will kick in if I'm not there to stop it, if you know what I mean."

"Ah, nice big fucking bug," Mike was pleased that there would be a sting in the tail.

"Before the only problem they had was accessing parts of the core, this time the mother fuckers will have a digital gas explosion. My mum and dad," she started crying.

"I know how you feel, lost me mum a couple of years back, my dad died a couple of days before the bastards, blew your home to bits. Not the same though, natural causes, easier to handle. What's the plan?"

"Don't know." She was clearly very nervous, a distinct tremble in her voice.

"You got somewhere to hide?" He was thinking fast.

"Near here, for a day or two."

"Okay, I can still move around, will get some gear together for both of us. Will come back here two days from now and do a bit more fishing. Weather is supposed to be good all week."

"Thanks."

A couple of days later, Mike was there as promised. He dropped a key behind himself, still sitting fishing.

"Van, rough old thing, in Tinkers Lane, you know it?"

"Yes."

"Get in the back, will start packing up here in about ten minutes."

"Okay, thanks Mike."

Once the van was rattling along the road, Mike shouted.

"Okay in the back there?"

"Yes thanks, love your van."

"Not mine, well don't want to make it easy for those bastards."

"Not stolen?"

"No, old mate of mine, collects old vans, kinda does them up for fun. Sells a few to travellers. Nice little earner."

"Where are we heading?"

"Country place up in the north of England, loads of little country lanes, plenty of places to blend with nature."

"You seem a lot more mellow now, not swearing so much?"

"I, I, they just get me fucking pissed off, sorry, just like if you hit your hammer with a thumb." He grinned.

Anna, laughed.

Some months had gone by, and the grey haired man was again speaking with Mr Nice

"Bugs?"

"Yes sir, glitches."

"Can any of the other programmers sort it?"

"No sir, they, well we kept them compartmentalized they are pretty clueless."

"Get that Gordon bastard."

"Already thought of that sir, seems after his father died he left the area. No one knows..." He was interrupted by the grey haired man.

"You keep on that system, I'll worry about Gordon."

A day later in the grey haired man's office, another man was giving him some information

"We've checked all his contacts, Seems he borrowed a van from a mate, we have the details. No idea where he's gone, but we do have a police report, they noted a rough old van meeting the description up north parked down a lane."

"Excellent, bring him in."

"Yes, sir."

Anna and Mike were on their way back to the van from a hike up into the woods.

"Mike, down," she whispered tugging him.

"What?" he said crouching.

"Down there," she pointed to a well concealed big black four by four with blacked out windows.

"Shit," he pulled out some small binoculars.

Handed them to her, look down to the left of the van, behind the big tree and those bushes.

"I see them." We had better go back into the woods.

The two of them did their best to hide.

"What now?" Asked Anna

"We can't stay out here."

Anna was looking around, "Over there, down in the dip on the other side of the valley."

"Stately fucking home, yea but they'll probably go there and check."

"True, but there must be loads more places to hid down there than squatting behind trees, if they get a helicopter with heat sensing cameras." Anna was glad she had swapped movie tickets.

"Shit, yea, those fuckers will have that kinda crap."

"Sir, I seed that vehicle again, 'twas over by Mrs Higgins place, in the old lane, what leads up to the Marshall's place. Mrs Higgins, told me there was some blokes in suits watchin an old van. Most suspicious."

"Well done my man, well done." Uncle Tom passed the man a note.

"Tis not all sir, my Cousin arry, ee seed a young couple up in the woods. Now got im thinkin see sir, the lady, she looked like that woman they said was blown up with er mum and dad in that gas explosion."

"Give your friend this, excellent, you're a good man."

"Thank e sir."

After letting his ladies know, Uncle Tom kept a discrete watch. He did not have to wait long, the young couple left the woods, hugging the field hedge to conceal themselves from the location where their van was. Swiftly they made it to the stables and slid into the first empty one they could find.

"They were coming up towards the woods, did you see them." Anna whispered, much calmer.

"Fuck, bastards." Mike could hardly speak, he wondered how they had been tracked down so soon.

A moment later, they were both startled

"Excuse me, are you by any chance the poor young lady, who was, blown up, oops I mean in the news,



dreadful gas business.”

“You must be mistaken sir,” Anna, stared at the elderly gent peering over the stable door.

“Wait here one moment,” Uncle Tom shouted to his gardener, “Your cousin was mistaken, it was not her, make sure he knows, there's a couple of drinks in it for you both.”

The gardener gave him the nod.

“Now, you two are probably in some danger from some chaps in a big ugly black vehicle, yes?”

“How the fuck?” Mike was getting more and more wound up.

“No time young fellow, well they'll have no trouble finding you in these stables, you'd better come with me. Nasty business.”

Anna looked at Mike, they both looked at the old gentleman.

“Quickly now, oh and no sound until I say, Okay.”

They nodded.

He took them into the panelled room.

“Take a seat. He indicated to be quiet and spoke softly. “Now they have got some rooms in this house bugged. We leave them there, don't want them rumbling. I do so enjoy having village committee meetings, they go on for hours, terribly boring you know.” He chuckled. “Now young lady, they mentioned you had worked in banking, and were a promising young programmer. And according to our most accurate press you young man were a wayward geek, who had an attitude problem and had stolen a van.”

“How do you know that?” asked Anna.

“Ah, well as an old fuddy duddy, with nothing better to do, one keeps up with things.”

“You mentioned the bastards had bugged this gaff of yours?”

“Young fellow, Michael isn't it?”

“Mike.”

“Sorry, Mike, man in my position, well they like to know what I'm up to, even now I'm retired. If they're telling me your young lady is dead and you are a dodgy character, I don't believe it, not at all.”

“I was working on this very special core program which coordinates the world financial system.” Said Anna.

“And you fixed it, so now you know too much, you are a threat?” Uncle Tom, suggested.

“And threats are fucking eliminated, mate,” exclaimed Mike, growing to like the old fellow by the minute.

“Yes well with those nasty types skulking around we can't leave you here, if they were to search the house, very powerful men behind them.”

“Bastards threatened me with some MI5 heavies, I wouldn't play ball with them, Anna and me, chatted on an anonymous thread. The rest is fucking history.”

“Well, you've lost me a bit there, but please do follow me, quietly as you can some of the floor boards creak, those listening are no doubt good at counting foot falls.”

“We could take our shoes off,” said Anna, removing hers and nudging Mike.

“Okay but mind you don't slip on the wood flooring.”

He led them through a bit of a labyrinthine maze, now you stay in that room for the time being, and keep quiet, there's toilet things over there. He gestured. Then was off again.

A day later, a couple of police officers arrived.

“Sir Wellings?”

"Yes."

Sorry to trouble you sir, but it seems a young gentleman, I use the term loosely sir, well he may be up to no good. The stolen van has been found, but we do have to search the local properties." He showed Sir Wellings the search warrant.

"Why of course, do come in, would you chaps, like some tea?"

"Wouldn't mind at all, thank you,"

"Very kind of you, thank you sir."

The two officers, politely looked around the house, coming back into the living room.

"I'm so glad you are back, tea, not nice cold."

"Thank you sir, said one of the officers," taking a cup.

"Any luck finding the blighter?"

"No sir."

"Dreadful business, stealing a van, bad show."

"Indeed sir."

The officers, politely left and Uncle Tom, put the television on, rather louder than he needed, but well he was getting old.

The grey haired man, was champing at the bit for a result.

"Did the police find anything?"

"No sir."

"No surprise there then." he then tried another tack. "Bugs?"

"Nothing sir."

"With this van stealer in the area, a break-in wouldn't be out of place would it?"

"No sir, and we could do with another look around Sir Wellings place."

"Agreed, that young fellow couldn't have gotten far."

There was a sound coming from outside the small window in the ladies bedchamber. The window, was a little open. First one man struggled in, then the second. As the first man turned to help him, there was a bang, the second man slumped against the nearby wall, and slid to the floor. The first man crouched low. Hidden behind the bed headboard, working under the sheets to dampen any sound, Laetitia reloaded the old Baker rifle. She peered through the gap between the mattress and the bottom of the headboard. She could see the dark outline of the crouched man, hidden in the corner below the window. He was looking around the gloomy room, listening and had a pistol in his right hand. A second shot, and he fell with a thud to the floor.

Moments later, Uncle Tom entered the room.

As he switched on the light he glanced down at the two men below the window.

"My word," he paused peering down at the bodies, "are you okay ladies?"

"Yes Uncle," replied Rosie.

Laetitia was still a bit stunned from what she had done.

"Laetitia, my dear?"

"What have I done?"

"One of these blighter's had a gun, they were up to no good, either after the missing young fellow or trying for Rosie. You did splendidly my dear, and by the look of the spanner in the other chaps belt, I think we might have found Anna's gas fitter."

“Anna?”

“Young lady; she worked on a solution to the missing key, her parents house and they, poor things were blown up officially by a faulty gas appliance.”

“If they find these bodies?”

“They won't my gardener is very good at planting things. They won't find a thing, and if you ever need help and can't find me, you ask him.”

“Thank you Uncle Tom,” said Rosie

“Thanks,” said Laetitia, still rather shaken

“My dear, did you get them with that old rifle?”

“Yes sir,” she said, in her mind, whoever this Anna was, if they killed her parents then Laetitia consoled herself that she had paid them back.

“The Colonel would be damn proud of you my girl, damn proud,” he paused, “So am I. I asked you to help protect Rosie, you have. If these blighter's had run and told of you both here, I'm sure it wouldn't have taken them long to work things out.”

“Thank you, Uncle Tom.” Laetitia was glad of his support for her action.

## Chapter 14

Uncle Tom would have called in Pete and Joe to move his guests while his premises was getting so much attention. However his sources had indicated that the authorities had taken considerable interests in their movements and though monitoring of them had been scaled back, he could put them at no further risk. His nautical acquaintances had also felt some probing of their movements.

Uncle Tom, had only one option left, with the surveillance of his home getting his guest away even with help would be risky. Keeping them in the house or anywhere on the property though was at risk from further intrusions. He decided to put Plan B into operation.

“You cunning devil, why didn't you tell me?” asked the grey haired man.

“It was not supposed to go live until next year sir, and even now it is not fully tested, there are still features they need to add, but the core is in place.”

“What about people problems, key players?” He grinned at the other man.

“No problems sir, we have used a highly modular approach both in the systems and programmers. There is no one person with enough knowledge to have a clue what they have been working on. Even if some of them talk to each other, there is a veritable labyrinthine of corporate fronts and specifications that would make it like trying to complete a million piece jigsaw.” The man who had failed to locate the key, was pleased with his analogy, and very pleased he was back in favour with the big man.

It was some weeks later, the rather innovative hiding place was no five star residence and Uncle Tom's guests were eager to move to more comfortable lodgings.

“Any news Uncle Tom?” said Rosie.

“No,” said Uncle Tom, shaking his head, “I don't understand it, no financial meltdown. Quite the opposite the digital banking system seems to be digging its claws deeper into every niche in society.”

She looked at Mike and Anna, “You did say the system had some kind of delayed bugs in it?”

“Oh, yes,” said Anna, “Maybe they fixed them?”

Mike chimed in. “Probably found another solution, they have no shortage of money to throw at programmers.

There are more than enough naïve chumps willing to toe the corporate line.”  
“I fell for their money and charm,” said Anna, nodding in agreement with Mike's analysis.

In the US another team was also stuck in a rut.

“Any news on Laetitia?” asked Rowland.

“No,” said Roy, “The situation out there is still chaotic, even with the UN peace keepers going in.”

“My dad has an information source, missionaries, or that is what his CIA pal calls them.” Roland winked at Roy. “They say the area we need to control is still held by hostiles.”

“So how the hell did this all start anyway?”

“Ha, something a damn site more important to our side than minerals that's for sure.” Rowland, shrugged. In reality he had only limited info from his wheeling and dealing father who moved in much higher circles, where keeping your council went with the territory.

Roughly a week later an Uncle Tom had good news for Anna and Mike.

“I've found an out of the way location in Slovakia for you two. You'll get new ID and I hope you are as good with the Slovak language as you are with those computer ones? It is vital you blend in. Okay?”

“Thank you,” said Anna.

“Brilliant mate, you're one cool dude,” said Mike, “No disrespect but being cooped up here is doing my head in.”

Uncle Tom swiftly moved them back to the main house. His man took over from there. In the vehicle Mike turned to Anna and whispered. “This is like one of those bloody war films from World War Two.” She wanted to laugh, he could see that, but she whispered, “Shut up, or we will end up in Gestapo headquarters. You...” He struggled to maintain his right to silence.

Some days later Uncle Tom was visiting Laetitia and Rosie, he was rather flustered.

“What's wrong Uncle Tom?” said Rosie, she could see the old man was far more nervy than she had ever seen him.

“Bloody invertebrates with giant proboscis, sticking them in where they are not wanted.”

Laetitia gave him a very puzzled look.

“This is a listed building dear,” he sighed, “It may be a ruse, but more than likely it is some invertebrate justifying his salary.”

“I don't understand?” Laetitia was still none the wiser.

Rosie looked at her. “Uncle Tom thinks of bureaucrats as insect pests.”

“Oh,” Laetitia, smiled at them.

“The little blighters every so often infest this place. It is what is known as a grade one listed building. They have to do checks on the fabric of the building that sort of thing. It usually means, anything from a day or two, to some weeks if they find an issue. Like bloody cockroaches, except for you can't call in the pest control.”

“So they might wonder what you are up to, with us hiding down here?” Laetitia was getting a picture in her mind of the problem they faced.

“Very astute my dear.” He paused, then continued. “It gets worse, usually Rosie can go to one of the other safe houses, a home of one of her guardians, like me.”

“Ah, but this is not possible?”

“No.”

“Why Uncle,” said Rosie looking rather worried.

“Well my first choice, he has some of those black invertebrates with nasty pincers at the front end giving him a hard time.”

“Uncle Willy?”

"Yes, good man, every so often they try to take him down with some devious plot." Uncle Tom, huffed, "Poor old Uncle Cyril, cancer finally got him dear. Should have told you the other day, but with all that has been going on."

Rosie looked very sad, "Poor Uncle Cyril, not your fault, and I can't even go to his funeral can I."

"No, sorry."

"Uncle Hamish?" Rosie said clinging to the hope she could go to his castle, "It is the one place where I can get to go outside a bit."

"He has his reasons."

"Who else?" said Rosie, full of disappear.

"Look I have to arrange help for Uncle Willy, with luck we can beat the invertebrates off. With the infestation here and Uncle Hamish indisposed, there is no one else."

"Pete and Joe?"

He shook his head, "They don't have the resources, their homes are not like mine." He turned and gave Laetitia a long hard stare, "My dear, you are Rosie's only hope."

"But Uncle Tom all I have in the world is the Colonel's Baker rifle." She looked perplexed.

"It will be dangerous, but please let me explain my plan."

Rosie interrupted him, "Why can't we continue to hide down here?"

"What if they found this place with you two in it?"

"Why would they?"

"One of my old club members has been living in a similar house since his childhood. He knows the place like the back of his hand." Uncle Tom sighed. "A team with all the latest survey kit uncovered a room, the family had lived in that house for generations. No idea it was there, these days they have all sorts of clever stuff. It was years since this house was last inspected, back then they did not have these new gadgets. He described it in detail, I'm sorry but we don't have the luxury of time to get into all the nitty gritty."

## Chapter 15

Uncle Tom's gardener trundled along with his old truck full of tree and bush trimmings. The winding road lead down to a bumpy farm track.

"Back it in there me old fruit." The cheerful farmer gestured.

It was several days later when the French farmer took delivery of the second hand bailer from his English friend. He wheeled it into the quaint old barn. Standing for some time, rubbing his chin and admiring his new toy. Closing the barn doors he strolled off on his usual routine, a nice meal, and a game of boules with his chums.

The light was fading as the farmer returned home, via the barn. Once inside, he gave a Morse code series of taps on the outside of the machine. Had anyone seen him, they would have thought he was testing its metal.

"You can come out now," he said in French, as he carefully removed some of the outer casing.

"Thank you," replied Laetitia also in French. An echo followed as Rosie appeared with the same greeting.

The farmer was thinking wow, what a day. He had a new machine, he had won at boules, and now two of the most beautiful women he had ever seen, were standing before him in his old barn.

"You tell Uncle Tom, he is a very selfish man."

"Oh," said Rosie with a grin.

"He has been keeping you two lovely ladies all to himself," he said, trying to keep a straight face, "Surely he

knows that it is the job of Frenchmen to look after the ladies?" The farmer threw his hands in the air.

After a little more joviality, the farmer got to the serious business.

"Okay, so Laetitia, you are the magnificent lady who has experience in the mountains, yes?"

She nodded.

"You have that French passport and ID, yes?"

She again nodded.

"Good," he said, turning to Rosie, "You go with this lady to my cabin it is difficult to get to, high up in the mountain." He gave the kind of nod and look that only a Frenchman can master, without saying a word, yet she knew that he was asking if she understood.

"Yes," she replied with her mastery of the French accent.

"Ah, you sound like you come from this region, that is good." He paused, "So many English are terrible at our language, even if they know the words, I think they struggle to pronounce them properly, you know this?"

Rosie smiled at him, "Yes sir, my teacher explained as much."

"Ah," he said, admiring them both. "It is a crime, that I must send you away and I only just met you."

"The cabin; could someone else come there?" Laetitia was concerned, having had unwanted visitors in her mountains. Something which she explained to him.

He was thoughtful, recognising her wisdom and experience. "Uncle Tom, he has made a very wise choice, that you should help Rosie is very good." He mused for a bit, "Hmm, maybe. But really the best route is from this farm, so perhaps some climber's might get lost. It is a strong cabin, you keep it locked, stay out of sight, you will have plenty to eat."

"What about the winter?" said Laetitia, recalling what her father had told her about France.

"Ah, I hope Uncle Tom will have you back before then."

"Will you have to return us in that?" Rosie pointed at the bailer with a less than enthusiastic frown.

"Oh, my new toy, I keep. Besides it is foolish to use the same trick more than once, no?"

For Rosie the months on the mountain were sheer joy. For Laetitia though they cause her to relive some old nightmares. When the French farmer brought news that Rosie could return to Uncle Tom, Laetitia was very happy, not just to see him, she would be reunited with the Baker rifle.

"I am sorry," said the farmer, realising how upset Laetitia was. "It is very difficult to get people in and out and there is only room for one person."

"I have a passport, why can't I go via a legitimate route?"

"You can't just wander up to Uncle Tom's front door," the Frenchman was struggling to think, "You know they watch him?"

"Yes?"

"Well what reason would some French woman have to visit him?" he paused, "You must also realise that it could lead them back to me, and for Rosie there is such a problem to find safe places for her to stay, hmm?" Laetitia knew he meant well, she could comprehend the reasoning. It was the feeling she was having, she got to know so many people, but like the morning mist, they were soon gone. How she longed for somewhere to call home and people like mountains, not mist.

"So can I stay here?"

"For a little longer, but you must stay hidden." He explained further the plan for her.

For Laetitia the city was a nightmare, she kept getting lost. The traffic was so bad, and sometimes she felt overwhelmed by the mass of people, and buildings the like of which she could never have imagined. Though she did not want to seem ungrateful, the little apartment was, well she could not quite find the words, but we might understand if someone said the Feng Shui was not right. The couple who ran the shop where she

worked were so nice, but the monotony of the work, how she missed those tourists, the variety, she was feeling homesick.

Her father's side of the family was the main reason she kept getting lost. Her quest, was a trail from where they had lived to where they now resided. Each time she would venture out to some suburb, where she felt it was more disorientating. Unlike the mountains where there were obvious landmarks, in the suburbs to her the streets all looked alike, central planning could really remove character from an area. Those subtle differences in the less planned districts, where each properly had its own distinctive character, in such places she found it much easier.

Pierre was a charming man, his wife Cecile was the quintessential Frenchwoman, elegant, polite and efficient. Pierre was Laetitia's uncle, her father was his older brother. As the months rolled on, Laetitia's frequent visits to her relatives became more and more absorbing, as she was introduced to a whole array of people. She felt like a visiting dignitary, sometimes with all their enthusiasm it could be a bit overwhelming. Though Pierre had not followed in his brother's footsteps, Laetitia's father had inspired cousin Claude to chase a career in medicine.

"How do you like the winter?" Claude was amused by Laetitia's reaction. No words needed.

"Oh, I understand," he said, "I have an escape plan."

"Really?" She had heard that kind of talk before, though she did not let on too much about events in Africa.

"Yes," he said with great enthusiasm, "You have heard, the UN has everything under control, things are so good now."

She was puzzled for a moment, "You mean in my mother's country?"

He nodded frantically, with a big smile followed by many positive, "Yes, yes." which in French has its own unique melody. He continued to monopolize her attention with a passionate explanation of a medical mission he had signed up with. He was so enthralled to meet the great man's daughter, and to be able to go to the land where her father had worked with such great respect.

For Laetitia his offer was tempting, the French winter and the boredom of her mundane routine days in the shop. Though she spent every moment of her spare time learning, she found the clockwork lifestyle and the interruptions to her studies intensely infuriating. However having escaped from her homeland where she had so many bad memories.

## Chapter 16

"You know this town Laetitia?" said Claude, as he watched the truck in-front, and the settlement appearing in the distance.

"Yes, it was where my parents lived for a while until we had to leave to avoid the fighting when they came over the boarder from the north. That was when I was a child."

"Ah, the mission hospital, yes?"

"Yes."

"So this was not where the fighting was this time?" Claude was in need of reassurance, his romantic and somewhat idealistic illusions were being slowly shattered as day by day he experienced more of the country.

"I don't know, we lived to the south of here, down in the south east corner near the mountains. It seemed safe."

"Why?"

"The mountains are a formidable barrier, to the east the jungle is so dense it seemed unlikely anyone would come through it."

"But they did," said Claude, "I am right?"

"Yes."

"Couldn't those who attacked your father's mission hospital have chased your people to the mountains?"

"Rivers and the Lake, Claude." She drew him a sketch, it looked very crude as the bumps in the road made drawing very imprecise.

"Ah, yes, now I understand, this lake drains from the jungle, into rivers that feed the coast, so it is a natural barrier, and a corridor of farmland goes to the coast?"

"Yes."

"So this side, we will have the lake and rivers between us and those who attacked through the jungle from the east?"

"The same jungle is on this side too, Claude."

"Oh!" He said. Laetitia could see he was a little worried. "Ah, but we will be okay, the UN have everything under control, no?"

Laetitia smiled at him. Having seen the state of the country and knowing what they had been told before leaving France she could understand why he might be having second thoughts.

The run down hotel made Laetitia wish for her apartment in Paris. Everything was chaotic, the UN troops here were not the well disciplined Europeans who they had seen guarding the country's airport upon arrival. These were Africans, though they weren't too bad, she stuck close to Claude. Her ears pricked, listening to the soldiers conversations whenever the opportunity arose. When they spoke French she could comprehend, but often when it was nationals from just one nation, they would revert to their native tongue, confounding her attempts to pick up useful information.

It had been a long day, Claude and Laetitia had wandered back to the hotel, the hospital was only a few hundred yards down the street. Claude was clearly not impressed by the food they were given.

"Not up to French standards, is it Claude?"

"Mon dieu!" he said, "I think my stomach will never recover."

Laetitia giggled, "There does not seem very much for us to do?"

"I know, it is like you say, because of the fighting, so many people left, and the military have their own people."

Claude shook his head. "We have more than twenty people in our team, but we treat today, how many, huh? Three, three." He paused, "All week, we treat, maybe a dozen, and you say most of those have travelled from the northern state, they are not even your people." He shook his head. "Crazy." Another pause, "There are parts of the world, maybe even your country where they are desperate for our help, and what do we do, huh? What do we do, I give up. You know I have patients in Paris, I could be helping them."

Laetitia could see he was very frustrated. "Where are the others, most of the time, they don't seem to be with us?"

"They don't tell me," he said shrugging, "Oh, sometimes they say they treat people who live in the jungle."

"What?" Laetitia found this hard to believe.

Several days later they were as usual, sitting in the hotel, when Laetitia turned to see some familiar faces.

"This is the hotel?" It was Harry, followed by some other men and she could see John, hauling some luggage off the truck.

"Claude, I know these men, they were with me when the others, went missing."

"The ones with that fellow, what was his name?"

"Richard."

"Yes, yes, I remember." Claude looked at the new arrivals with some circumspection.



Harry had gone to help John with the luggage, as the two men returned towards the Hotel, John turned to Harry. "Fantastic, Laetitia she has survived," he said as everything else left his mind, and he total focused on the woman of his dreams.

The two men were draw as if by gravity, stopping by Laetitia and her companion. They exchanged pleasantries, followed by.....

"So why are you here?" Laetitia was curious, it was in her nature.

"Richard's company wanted to search for him and the others, with the UN being here, well they thought it was a great time to mount a search." said Harry with some enthusiasm. John could see that Laetitia was with Claude so he did not disclose his real motives.

"Harry values my support, and well I don't have a job right now, and Richard's boss is paying both of us to be here so.." he pause to catch his breath, "And you two?"

"I am a doctor, Laetitia's father was my inspiration, we are cousins."

"So you're tending the sick, cool," said John, a little animated.

"Who are they?" Laetitia said, discreetly glancing towards the others playing hunt the luggage by the truck.

"Richard's boss has assembled a rescue team," said Harry.

"It's like being on mastermind." said John.

"Mastermind?" Laetitia was perplexed.

"Television program where they bombard the contestants with lots of questions." Harry explained, "You have to be quick and concise."

"Why all the questions," asked Claude, he had noticed the demeanour of some of those in the team.

"We guess to help them find Richard, Tim and the others." Harry smiled.

That evening Claude caught a quiet moment with Laetitia.

"You have grey hairs, like my father," she teased him.

"I know," he said, then whispered, "Those men, you know what I noticed?"

"The men with Harry and John?" She said for confirmation.

"Yes."

"What did you notice, I was absorbed with seeing my old acquaintances, I..."

"I know, I understand it was emotional for you. But for me, those men, they reminded me of many of the people we came with. The way they were so, so, ah how to say it. So possessive about their things, and they seemed well. You know I was, well I am not so happy it is not quite how shall we say, as nice as they told us, no?"

"No."

"But those with us did not seem to care, like." he paused, "As though they were used to it, yes?"

She nodded, "And you think those with my friends also, seemed the same?"

He nodded back, "Yes."

"This is the wrong end of the jungle anyway, we were down in the south east, why would they search up in the north east?"

"I have a bad feeling, you know." He stared at the floor for a moment watching an insect crawling through a crack, he turned back to look her in the eyes. "Maybe we should leave, maybe your friends too?"

Laetitia, mused what he had said, she thought back to what she had learned from Uncle Tom and his guests, to things that had happened and to her father's ever present wisdom.

"My father would leave, I think you are right," she said, for a moment she was silent, "Claude, you are like and animal that can sense a storm coming. I wish I knew what some of those UN soldiers were saying when they speak their native tongue."

When Claude tentatively broached the subject with the chief of the medical team, the response was both negative to his thought of pulling out, and positive in playing down his obvious insecurity. Claude did not let on

that Laetitia agreed with him, or that they had spoken with Harry and John about going back. Harry unfortunately was his usual self, sticking with the herd, John on the other hand, realising how Richard's team had ignored the warnings on the previous trip, was keen on Claude's suggestion. Again for Laetitia's safety Claude had insisted on her keeping quiet.

"If you'd have let me speak with them?"

"It would have made no difference, my boss, he would not listen. You know Harry from old, and you know how John stands by him." Claude shook his head, "If the people who are running both teams know too much about you, or think that is you putting ideas in our heads. You think I can call a gendarme?" He was serious in one way, but could not help grinning. "You know Richard is dead, you know there was more than one group of people that found him, they must know."

"I should tell Harry this."

"No." Claude kept his voice down, but his tone was firm. "Do you know if he might not also work for the same people as Richard?"

"But John?"

"Yes, he is a nice guy, I can tell he is someone you could rely on, maybe he is, how to say." Claude thought for a moment, "Someone we'd be glad to have with us on our journey, but."

Fate has a funny way of working, you can be in some foreign parts and meet someone from your home town. The following day there was an influx of people from the north, the news that there was a good French doctor had prompted some more folks to make the long arduous trek. "You've got another patient," said one of the few medical team members working in the town.

Some UN soldiers carried John in on a stretcher, depositing the Englishman into the doctor's care, they swiftly departed.

"Oh, what happened my friend?" Claude looked at the wound.

"They said it was some kind of surprise left by the retreating insurgents as they fled back east."

"Your arm, it is going to need a lot of stitches, I think you have lost a lot of blood, no?"

"Yes."

That evening Claude explained to Laetitia the details of what he had heard from John.

"How safe are we here?" Claude looked at her. "I can use the pretext of us having to get John back to the coast for better treatment facilities, but he has lost plenty of blood, it will be a day or two before we can move him, and they might not let us go?"

"This town is on a bend in the river, but that did not help much the last time."

"Yes, but they came from the North, this time all we have from the north are civilians looking for medical care."

Several days later, John was still in hospital, the wound was looking better, but his drained state, gave Claude the pretext he needed. Playing up his English patient's condition, he approached the medical mission chief.

"Why, you have plenty of people, why can't one of them take my place, I will be away for maybe one week, there and back?"

"Claude, he is not that bad, we need you here," said the Chief, and he was well away of how uneasy Claude was, also his likely-hood that he would not come back.

In the hotel room that evening Laetitia was eager to hear what he could not speak of when they were in the hospital.

"No," he said, "They say they can't spare anyone from those who go off into the jungle."

"Why are they going into the jungle anyway?"

"I don't know, it makes no sense, why you would send a large medical team into the jungle."

Laetitia, was very thoughtful, "And why are there no European UN troops here, given that there are plenty of

Europeans, our so called French medical mission, and the English team to heroically search for a corporate sales executive, lost on a team building exercise.”

Claude's expression was priceless as he reacted to the last part of her speech.

“Look, this newspaper, I found it in the hotel lobby.” Laetitia handed him, the rather tattered paper.

After absorbing the situation further, Claude in a restless state, approach Laetitia. He whispered, “Look, don't put yourself in danger, but you know this country better than I do, can you think of a way we can leave, I don't know how.” He took a deep breath. “I have been thinking, with all the UN troops around, and I don't trust them, okay here at the hotel and in the hospital, but out there.” He shook his head.

“On foot?”

“If we try to get a vehicle do you think my chief or someone might notice.”

She nodded, “Yes.”

They were not the only visitors to this part of Africa.

“What the fuck,” said Roland, and he was in one of his I want my way and I'm not getting any cooperation moods.

“This is where we are sir,” said the tough guy, the man Roland's father had assigned to command the team.

“The fucking mountains are fucking that way you dumb ass,” screamed Roland, pointing south.

“Yea, we know, SIR.”

“What the fuck did we bring all the fucking climbing gear and all this fucking mountain kit for if we ain't in the fucking mountains?” Roland was furious. “My team are climber's, what the fuck are the bastards you've brought along, mister?”

“Need to know, and you don't need to know SIR.”

“You fucking know who my father is?”

“Yes sir, he sent us sir, so shut up, keep up and don't fuck up our mission, SIR. Or you might upset your father SIR.” The man in command was not in military uniform, nor were his men, but Zack sensed it first, this was a well trained, well oiled machine.

“Roy, Roland,” he whispered, “Why didn't they let us bring any of our usual climbing buddies, like the last two visits to this country?”

“We've been stitch up, fucking bastards,” said Roland, still angry as hell.

“We need to keep cool.” Roy, the group's voice of reason, was like the safety valve on Roland's boiler. Though Roland would often come close to firing him, Roland was wise enough to realise Roy was a valuable asset, a calming influence. He also trusted Zack, he was smart, damn smart.

While the rest of the US team rode in new Jeeps, Roland's trio had been relegated to a rough old truck, small by US standards The rear was piled high with stuff because of Zack's reasoning that they had no idea what the real situation was on the ground, Roland had spared no expense bringing along plenty of kit.

As they tried to keep up with the other team, anything Roland, Roy and Zack said was muffled by the engine noise.

“Why the fuck are we going at such a cracking pace?” Roland said, giving a nod to Roy who was driving.

“In a rush to claim mineral rights?” Roy's tone was cynical.

Zack laughed, “Yea right, you ever hear of anyone finding anything useful in this tiny corner of Africa?”

“Nop.” Roland, was well clued up when it came to mineral geology.

“Me neither,” said Roy, “Wow, this track is a nightmare.” He had just swerved, and was steering like a mad man, the ruts, holes, bumps and rapidly deteriorating road surface were seriously challenging him.

“I wish the fuck they'd slow down.” Roland stared ahead as the gap between their vehicle and the convoy had

opened up.

"I can't push this tub any faster boss. If I do we'll be walking."

"If you do we'll be shaken to bits," said Zack.

Roland knew Zack was right, "You do the best you can Roy, I don't fancy walking out in this shit hole, look at those burnt out villages. Fuck there, look." He pointed to the bony remains of bodies killed in the carnage of the incursions.

"Why don't we have any UN troops with us?" Roy asked.

Roland thought for a moment, "Zack?"

"Roy has a good point, given who your father is, and given this is a team from the US, home of the UN in New York, he could easily have pulled the right strings."

"So why the fuck did daddy, send me with that arrogant piece of shit and his fucking steroid men?"

"You noticed then?" Roy smirked.

"Those fuck heads have been pumping more than a bit of iron, morons." Roland was impressed by tough outdoor sports, and by intelligent folks, but these knuckle heads. "Do either of you two have any idea where in the hell we are?"

"Nop," said Roy, "Mr Shit-head just ordered us to follow."

"No map, no sat nav." Zack looked at the other two. "You remember when we stopped at the last town, the one swarming with peace keepers."

"The town with no people?" Roy said with a very cynical tone.

"Yep," said Roland, "Mr Shit head ordered everyone in for a briefing, right. We had the navigation kit then right."

"The bastard confiscated it." said Zack. "You think someone's using us for cover?"

"Uhu," said Roland. "You saw the company press release."

"So is it wise to keep following them?" Roy wondered.

"How much fuel have we got?" said Zack.

"Assuming it really is fuel in those tanks back there, more than enough to get us back to the coast." said Roy.

"Roland?"

"Ease of the gas, this track is really screwed up, they must know that, and they sure as hell know this vehicle is a piece of crap."

"You think, they might slow down, maybe come back for us?" It was a good thought from Roy.

Roland shook his head. "I doubt it. Let the gap widen, see what they do."

Some hours later there was a significant gap, Roland had been weighing up the odds.

"How long till sunset?"

"Three or four hours boss," said Roy.

"It would be cooler at night right?" said Roland.

"I don't fancy making camp in these parts," said Zack, an air of caution in his voice.

"Their vehicles are faster than ours, and they are better equipped, but they seem to have an urgent objective right?" Roland looked at his companions. "So the engine will run better in the cool night air, we could take it in turns to drive through the night at a slower pace?"

"Sounds better than trying to chase their tail," said Roy, sounding relieved at pursuing the steroid men.

"We haven't seen any hostiles, only UN troops, though most of them around these parts seem to be African nationals." said Zack.

"Your point?" Roland asked.

"I wouldn't trust them, if we aren't with the steroid men."

"We don't really know much at all do we," said Roy, "If our lot are out here playing who knows what chances are others are to."

Roland turned to Zack, "Has anyone tampered with our special delivery?"

"Nop," he said, "Kept that baby real close, and well camouflaged. We still have compasses, they did not take them."

"Roy, how would you like a new AR15?" Roy slowed the pace a little more, "Special delivery huh?" He smiled. "Now that changes the odds, we don't need to rely on the steroid men, not that we would want to anyway."

"Zack, Kel Tec C16 okay for you," Roland grinned.

Zack nodded, "I bet you've got an Uzi?" Roland beamed back at him, and gave the hand signal to turn it around. The convoy had dipped below a ridge, and Roland saw the opportunity.

Without backup they had been taking it easy, with no way to repair the truck, and no roadside assistance on call, slow was very prudent. It was getting close to dusk, they had been travelling now for several days, and someone was watching them.

"Laetitia, down there," said Claude pointing to the old truck.

John handed her his monocular, "Here, use this, who is it?"

"I don't believe it," she said, "But in a way, I do believe it."

"What?" said Claude and John almost in unison.

"I'm sure it is the American climbers."

"But we are no where near the mountains" said John, "Why would they be out here?"

"Looks like they have plenty of gear, they do have some climbing kit, on the back of the truck, look." She handed the monocular back to John.

"Oh, yea, hey Claude." He handed it to the Frenchman.

"Perhaps they are lost?" he paused, "Could we reach them, they appear to be following the track, you know them, and they do have a truck load of supplies."

"We would be better off than out here on foot." said John, agreeing with Claude's analysis.

Laetitia looked at the lye of the land. "Down there, but we will have to move quickly."

"Roland," Zack said nudging him.

"What," he said shaking his head, "What you wake me for pal."

Zack slowed the vehicle, Roy also came around from his slumber.

"Roy, look who it is."

Zack stopped the vehicle near the multinational trio.

"We shouldn't stop," said Roland, "If they have seen us so might others."

Roy gestured to them, as they approached, "We'll talk later, get in the back of the truck quick and mind the stuff, we might need it, and it is all we got."

The truck rolled forward again.

"Why are you going this way?" Laetitia asked, leaning through the open window at the back of the drivers cab. It was Roy who replied, "It was the way we came, we figured as we have no map, we would follow the track back, but avoid the town. We don't exactly trust those UN troops."

"Rwanda?" said Claude.

"Oh, no Roy, we got ourselves one of those darn conspiracy theory nut jobs?" Roland said in a drool.

"French one at that," said Zack.

Roy continued, "So what do you think Laetitia?"

As the old truck bumped along the trail, the six of them exchanged their thoughts.

Towards the end of the following day, Roy was in the driving seat. He veered violently off the track, and cut the engine. Making the sign with his fingers to keep quiet. Roy wrote a note and passed it around. Zack nodded,

and with a sign from Roland, he snuck out of the vehicle.

Moving with great stealth he worked his way back up to the what passed for the road around these parts. It didn't take him long to figure out why Roy had taken evasive action. When he got back to the dip where the truck was hidden, he said nothing, but indicated to let the hand brake off, pointing to follow the gully.

"They weren't UN troops were they Zack?" said Roy.

"Nop, and they weren't our steroid men either."

"Is there another track that goes south," Roland was looking to Laetitia for an answer.

"On this side of the River that is the only highway."

"If we follow this gully Laetitia?" said Zack.

"It is one of many that lead down to the river basin."

"And on the other side?" Roland enquired.

"Farmland all the way down to the coast, if we can find a bridge to cross." She paused for thought. "On this side of the river it is hilly, there is cover, but on that side between the river and the mountains it is very flat, we would be very exposed."

John, looked at her, "You never said how you got to France."

"I found a way through the mountains to the sea."

"Ah, so if we can cross the river preferably with our supplies, those mountains of yours can be pretty harsh."

Roland looked at her again, "And if we can make it across open farmland, would it be shorter to get to the coast, or to the mountains?"

"We are still a long way from the coast, see there," she pointed to a feature in the landscape, "That is a tribal boundary. My people mostly live in the south east of the country, but like a wedge of cheese, a few made their homes up in the hills of the north east, on the other side of the lake."

"So we haven't got far," remarked Claude, a bit despondently.

"The track from the town where we were in the north east corner, is very windy because of all the hills, people chose the flattest route. When you have to walk and only have animals to pull your loads."

"Right," said Zack, he had gotten the picture. "So our steroid men, where would they have reached if they kept going along the track?"

"On this side of the country; into the foothills and the dense jungle beyond." Zack looked around, "You said there was some so called French medical team poking around, and the Brits had their own bunch."

"Yes," she said, "Maybe the soldiers back there are yet someone else's idea of tourists."

"Oh, boy," said Roland, "Okay lets cut the noise, just follow this gully, keep our wits about us, everyone be alert. No chit chat, listen, keep watch, because we have no fucking way of calling in the marines, right?"

They all got his message.

It took a while of negotiating some truck unfriendly terrain before they caught sight of the river.

"Please stop." Laetitia spoke softly, but with a firm tone.

Roland went to try and keep her and everyone silent.

Roy whispered, "Let her speak."

"I've been thinking, we were told the country was all peaceful. The UN was in control. But all three teams, French, British and your American group, were all to the north of the river. When we landed at the airport, it is near the capital of our country, which is to the north of the river, on the coast. To the south of here is a bridge."

"Just what we need," said Claude without thinking.

"Just what those troops might be guarding." Zack said with some insight.

"The hill country would also give them some cover," said Roland.

Laetitia nodded.

"Maybe we should head back towards the UN troops and where we came from, that ghost town."

John's idea was accepted.

"Well, if the UN controls most of this side, there's got to be a reason why they aren't over there. Which probably means all the bridges are hot." Zack again had a valid analysis which went down well with Roland.

With great care and caution they made their way back up river until they found a suitable track back up from the river basin to pick up the main track between the coast and the town in the north east.

"Careful," cautioned Zack, "I don't think we should just waltz right on up to the front door."

Claude remembered this view, "You remember when we were following the truck in-front, when we first came here?"

Laetitia nodded. The town was still some way in the distance. "It will be dark soon."

"This old truck could do with a rest, we could hole up for the night." Roy looked at the others.

Roland, wasn't arguing.

Claude had drawn the short straw for the early morning part of the watch, he did not need to wake the others, the sound was unmistakable.

"They're pulling out." Roland was looking skyward towards the thumping sound of the twin rotors.

"Not heading for the town though." Observed Zack.

"Perhaps they are bringing in supplies?" Claude said.

"Nop, the fuckers are pulling out," insisted Roland.

"How can you be so sure?" asked Claude.

"Look where they're landing, I bet the town is steaming hot. What do you think Zack?"

"Roland I ain't arguing with you on this one, boss."

"Now we are stranded, we should have stayed with them." said Claude, looking at John and Laetitia.

"Hey you did the right thing leaving those shits," said Roland, "We did the same. Go figure why when my fucking father, is so fucking rich it makes your head spin, we end up in this old truck taking orders from Mr Shit-head and his bunch of steroid men. Huh?" Roland had a good memory, he just had to say it, "Claude, why in the heck do you think they didn't want you taking John boy, back to the coast, huh?" He paused for a moment to let it sink in, "Why did those bastards take away our sat nav, maps, and hog all the comms? Huh, you tell me."

"But if your father..." Claude was cut short.

"He's a fucking psychopathic, mean son of a bitch, an I ain't his only son."

"Yes, but."

"Claude, my friend you are a doctor right?"

"Yes, of course."

"Okay my friend, let me say it plain and simple, you give a shit about people, you are here because you're one hell of a great son of a bitch. John boy, he's here because you give a shit. Man, you're a fucking saint my friend. It ain't no wonder you don't see what is going on here." Roland was watching the helicopters as he lectured Claude. "You see this man," he said pointing at Roy while half watching the choppers, "He can be a right pain in the royal ass, but man he, he's my rock. You understand, cause I can be one fucking piece a crap, ask your lady, she knows what an ugly piece a work I can be. See him, Zack, he's like my fucking spare brain man, Smart, fucking smart."

"Laetitia, which way do you suggest we head, because by my reckoning when they pull out the mother fuckers in these parts are gona go ape, and I don't plan on us being in their way."

Roy looked at Roland, he knew this mood, his boss was in what he described as volcano mode, and you did not want to be around if he blew.

"This far east, to the bottom end of the lake, if we can get across, then on to the mountains, where you've been before."

Claude looked at her, "Why not go north, where those people came from."

Roland looked at them both. "What folks?"

"Some people who heard that there was a doctor, they travelled to the hospital for treatment, from the country to the north."

Laetitia was shaking her head, "It's a good thought, but they had to come along the tracks in the hill country along the border, it is a long way, and if the UN is leaving, the roads will be a target for any hostile forces."

"Surely so will the roads to the mountains?"

"We could not find a way my friend," said Roland, "The hostiles won't be so worried about the mountain side of the country."

"How will we get this old truck across the lake?" Roy said, "We might be stuck for some time, I don't think it would be good to ditch the supplies."

"You are right, there is not much in the mountains to sustain us. There used to be an old raft ferry, if it is still there."

They set off towards the lake, with sporadic gunfire in the distance and the thumping beat as the helicopter extraction team pulled out the remaining forces from the area.

It was nearly nightfall, when they reached the vicinity of the ferry. Roland taking charge sent Laetitia with Zack to scout the area. Claude was not pleased, but Roland asked him how much combat experience he had, the answer settled it. Claude was very relieved when they both returned safely.

"Well?" said Roland. Hopeful.

"If we unload the truck, get most of us across on the ferry first, that way if it sinks we still have our supplies, also the truck is going to make a noise when we start it, and even at night they might see its silhouette. When the first lot go across we can keep everything low."

Phase one: Roy, Laetitia, Claude and John and all the kit went across. Rickety old ferry needed a lot of TLC but they did not have time. Roy took point with his AR15, Claude and John looked after their end of the ferry. Laetitia, laid low and kept watch near the supplies.

Phase two: Zack manoeuvred the Truck onto the raft, with some guidance from Roland, who was also on point with his Uzi. The raft canted to one side, as Roland watched from the rear of the truck, the others on the opposite shore operated the rope system, making grindingly slow progress.

"Fucking come on." said Roland, feeling like the cherry on top a fairy cake.

Zack was somewhat distracted by the notion that the tyres on the truck were floating better than the raft. At least half the raft had a surface covering of lake water.

Phase three: Zack almost lost the truck, struggling to persuade it to leave the raft. The wet surface and the incline onto the bank, pushed the truck near to its limits. Once on the bank, the others rushed to load up the supplies.

"We got everything?" said Roland sounding like he was in a panic.

"Yes," said Roy as he clambered onto the back of the truck. "Move."

John's arm was clearly not happy with the rough journey. Zack suggested he sit up front. Roland, seconded that, suggesting as Roy had the AR15 he could be tail gunner.

"Thanks a bunch, you know the statistics for tail gunners," said Roy.



"No but I bet you do Roy," joked Roland.

As they bumped along the rough track up from the lakeside, Roy nodded to Laetitia.

"Friends of your?"

"I don't think so."

"Boss, there is sign of movement on the opposite side of the lake."

"Laetitia, how far from here to the mountains." Roland's mind was trying to calculate ahead.

"It would take us about ten days of walking with some days for rest in villages."

"Oh, fuck that is really useful." Roland could not cope with the data.

"How far might you walk per day?" said Roy.

"Without much to carry, thirty kilometres."

"What's that in miles?" Roland barked.

Claude came to the rescue, "Nearly two hundred."

"Twenty fucking miles a day, fuck, out here, you people are some fit mother fuckers." Roland had a way with words. "The rate we are going, the state of these roads, and keeping the revs down, noise, Roy do you think ten hours to those mountains?"

"Yep."

Since leaving the lake around noon that day, they had made slow progress, it was nearly dusk, and the mountains were still a long way off.

"We can drive through the night, like before."

"Roland we are now in hostile territory, we don't know what is around the next corner." said Zack.

"Well, there's someone on our tail that's for sure."

"Roy, what do you see?"

"Dust rising in the line of this track."

"Must be moving fast." said Zack.

"Yep." said Roy, "Maybe our friendly steroid men if we are lucky."

"Keep going Zack." Commanded Roland.

Several hours passed, they had pushed it on the better parts of the track. Claude had take over driving, dodging plenty of remnants in the devastated area. They had to stop, the fuel was getting to close to empty. Zack did the work, then hopped back up on the rear of the truck. Roland was acting nose gunner, Zack and Roy in the tail.

"Say either of you two have a weapon?" Roland, kind of knew it was a stupid question, but he lived in hope. John looked at Claude, who was preoccupied with keeping the truck on the track. "Hey, this is not like in Paris you know, no road signs, no street lights."

John, looked back at Roland, "Uh, no."

"No fucking second amendment hey?" Roland shook his head, "Why the fuck do they send folks to hell holes without guns? Fucking morons."

Another hour or so and the truck was starting to labour.

"We seem to be going up, Laetitia?" Claude needed feedback.

"Keep going you will soon pass my village, I will tell you when to turn off this track."

As the truck bumped along, they could now faintly hear the sound of engines behind them, occasionally Roy would point to the beams of headlights.

"How much further." Roland was getting worried, he could not see what was going on behind, but he could hear the engines.

“Soon.” said Laetitia, “We will pass, some rocks at the side of the road, a little way along from their we turn left. The track up the mountain.”

“If we take the truck up, won't it give them a clue as to where we have gone?” Claude remarked.

“Even if we went on foot it wouldn't take them long to find the truck and work it out.” said Roy, “Then they would have vehicles and we would be on foot. Even if the truck is a slow old beast, she's still faster than walking.”

The poor old truck was little faster than walking as it laboured up the mountain track.

“It won't go much further the track is getting too narrow.” Claude was looking distinctly nervous as he edged upwards.

“If we can use the truck to block their path it might hold them up a bit.” Roy was watching them, “They're stopping.”

“Can you see why?” asked Roland.

“Nop, maybe their trucks are too big for the narrow track.” said Roy.

“You want me to wedge it between these rocks?” Claude was running out of road.

“Yep.” said Roland. “Everyone prepare to bail out fast. Laetitia you know these mountains better than anyone, please take the lead my dear. Zack, go with her. John, Claude, Load up, Roy, you and me load up and cover the rear.”

## Chapter 16

The group passed through the two towering rocks without even noticing. It was still dark, the sky was cloudy and it was only a few days past a new moon. Laetitia knew after passing the Lazy Rock, the going was more difficult. All of them were carrying heavy loads. At dusk they edged up the long ridge to the flat area which had been the first base camp.

Taking short rest periods they reached gun-sight ridge, totally exhausted.

“How much further?” Claude was feeling the strain.

“We really need to get beyond bow-saw ridge, but that's a day or two away. If we could get through turnstile alley or the meat grinder....”

“To the second base camp?” asked Roy.

“Yes.”

“We'd have the edge after that.” said Zack.

“Tactically or literally?” said Roy.

“Ah,” said Zack, pausing to think, “Oh, after the cheese grater and the devils stairs, beyond the end of the escarpment where we had to edge around that slope?”

“Satan's slide?” Roy said.

“Where Will nearly put his foot in it.” said Zack giving a big yawn.

Roland, John, Laetitia, Claude and Zack had all nodded off. The small group had, best they could sheltered out of sight nestled in the rocks. Roy, kept awake for a bit, then nodded off, woke, nodded off, repeating the cycle. None of them had any real idea what was going on nearby.

The soldiers had no idea who they were chasing, neither did their local commander. They had stopped at the bottom of the mountain trail, awaiting orders.

"Robert, it worked and that piece in the media about your son seems to have done the trick."

"And the mining rights?"

The grey haired man looked at him, "Bob, they are all yours, the Indonesian government was most co-operative."

Back in Africa the troops were getting restless.

"Why do we wait?" said one of the soldiers, "We could have killed them, why did we stop?"

The others carried on with the card game.

A while later their officer came over.

"We are to stay here."

"Why?"

"We are to guard the bottom of this trail." He said.

"Why?"

The officer shrugged.

"Why are they leaving?" The soldier glanced towards the other trucks.

"They are needed elsewhere." He looked at the men, "Make camp, and post some sentries."

The best part of four days later, the six pack had reached Aladdin's cave.

"Are they following?"

"Claude why do you keep asking that?" Laetitia was shaking her head.

Zack chimed in, "Even if they were, we could hold out for weeks up here, we have plenty of food, plenty of ammo, and plenty of mountain kit."

Roland sat thinking, "I like this cave, do you think we could get pizza delivery?"

"Didn't the Mayor ban that, too much fat or something?" Roy said.

"Oh, yea," said Roland, "Say do you think he could raise the fines for military vehicles parked at the bottom of mountain trails?"

"No," said Zack, "But I bet he'd ban us from having guns."

Claude and Laetitia were not following the gist of the banter.

John, looked at them, "Don't worry it's some kind of American bonding ritual."

Zack and Roy, took it upon themselves to rearrange the supplies.

"So, we now have things we need to carry." Zack announced to the others pointing at the back packs.

"Things that might be useful, so we store them in Aladdin's cave." Roy added, pointing to the pile screened behind some rocks at the back of the cave.

"And supplies that we should take with us if we decide to move in a hurry." Zack announced.

"And for those of use without psychic powers, what's in what?"

Roy looked at Zack, Zack looked at Roland.

"We can't carry all the food with us all the time, but if we need to move in a hurry, we should take it."

"Agreed." said Roland, "Go on."

"There is a lot of climbing gear that we probably won't need, no disrespect but John's arm is a limiting factor."

"And I am a doctor, I don't like heights," Claude added.

"Then for each of us we have a back pack with some essentials, food, warm clothing, a small amount of climbing rope, tools appropriate to each persons skills, where we don't have enough for each person to have the same, for example compasses. We pair people up, so that each pair complement each other." Zack looked around, waiting for comments.

Roland was the first to speak. "Of all of us, Zack is the most experienced mountaineer, I guess each climber should be paired with a non climber?"

"Seems logical?" said Roy.

"Mind if I make some suggestions?" Roland scanned the others, looking for expressive signals.

"Laetitia, knows these mountains better than any of us, if we are to get out of here, we need to look after her really well, Zack is the best, you okay with that?"

"Yep."

"Doc, I admire you man, when I get hot headed Roy calms me down. If we did get stuck, I reckon you're the next best thing. Okay?"

"We are going to split up then?" Claude was worried.

"No." Roland realised he needed to elaborate. "Claude, we will all try and stick together, but you've heard of base camps?"

"Yes."

"So you understand the concept that you have backup, you don't all move at once, it is not like going for a drink with your buddies. But it is." He paused, "Because my friend when we move we each have a buddy. Lets say there was a rock fall, we got cut off from the rest of the team."

"I think I understand, okay so I'm your buddy, yes?"

"You got it. Roy, you okay with John?"

"Sure, no worries." Roy did not express it but having a buddy who had an arm injury was not his ideal choice.

While an inclement weather front moved across the mountain range, all they could do was rest. As it began to clear, Roland turned his attention to planning their next move.

"We've been here several days now, no sign of any hostiles, and we're munching through our rations." He looked at Laetitia. "Which way?"

"I only know two." she looked towards him, he gestured to continue, "Okay, first most obviously through the mountains to the coast. It is tough, not too difficult, we would need some rope, to get down to the sea."

"Sound good."

"Yes but we don't have a boat." She continued. "The second involves visiting the Colonel's residence. This is also not good because it leads to treacherous jungle which may be infested with troops."

"So why go there?"

"We might find some useful things, the Colonel may have some more rifles to spare."

The team huddled up still waiting for the weather to clear.

Roy got to know John better, he was beginning to be thankful for Roland's choice. John was not a climber but he was a seriously experienced hiker. His knowledge and practical skills, along with the personal items he was carrying, gave Roy a lot more confidence.

Claude on the other hand was fretting. "We are not going to make it out of here, I have seen those films, one by one members of the team die, oh."

Roland stared at him, "Claude."

"Yes."

"If we get sick do we have a doctor?"

"Of course, unless I..." his voice was full of nervous tension.

"You have the best fucking local guide in the fucking country, you are fucking doctor. John is an outdoor guy with a shit load of experience." Roland had been listening to Roy and John. He continued, "And you are with three fucking climbers, oh and we have three guns, which being American we know what the fuck to do with, and this ain't a fucking movie where some dumb ass retards go into the the jungle with shit load a cameras and no fucking weapons."

"Okay." Claude nodded, "I get it, you are right. But, well, if we go to the coast we have no boat, if we go to see

this Colonel," Claude made some hand gestures, "What I mean, we, there is jungle full of danger."

"We got here through a fucking war zone, remember we picked you up in our truck?"

The two of them set the others off in giggle. Roy was trying to keep the noise down, worried that the cave was acting like an echo chamber and would broadcast to the war zone.

"Hey Roy," said Roland, "Don't you start, so what if those mother fuckers hear us, do them good to listen to the local broadcast from voice of America."

After a while things settled down, the following day the weather had improved enough to make a short journey possible. Roland suggested they check out the Colonel, a bit of reconnoitring, they would still have the coast option.

"What about the food, there is no guarantee we will be able to get back to Aladdin's cave?" Roy asked.

"If we take it with us and we had a problem at the Colonel's place, we might lose it." said Zack.

"Take enough to get to the coast, plus what we've got in our packs. Leave the rest, hide it with the climbing gear." Roland's choice was accepted.

When they got to the mine entrance by the lake, Roland took the lead, scouting it out. They waited just inside the entrance.

"Okay the other end is like you described, blocked by the rocks." said Roland looking at Laetitia. "Block this end, there's a cutting part way down we can stash some of the food there, if we do have to haul arse back to the lake we won't need to carry it too far."

"Then why not leave it here?" said Claude.

"If we have been followed and someone moves the stones, we don't want them getting our food, or give them any clues."

In a strange way Laetitia was pleased to be back with the Colonel.

"I've brought some friends to see you Colonel," she said pointing to each of them as she introduced her companions."

Zack, looked at Claude, "It's a good job your not one of those fluffy head doctors."

"Oh," said Claude, "It's quite alright, she is part French, no need to worry."

Laetitia carefully removed some stones, and pulled out another Baker rifle, she offered it to John.

"Thanks but." He pointed to his arm.

She then offered it to Claude, who shook his head. She shrugged her shoulders, "Just one for me then Colonel." After sorting out some powder and shot, she replaced the stones covering the remaining stash.

Zack looked at her cleaning the rifle. "Can you use that thing?"

"Yes." she sounded very confident.

"Wow. Cool." Zack was quietly impressed, "How did you learn?"

"The Colonel taught me." She glanced towards her friend.

Zack smiled. "Great. Well he'd be the man to ask, an old soldier."

John was peeping through the tiny holes between the rocks blocking the jungle side of the mine entrance.

"Anything?" Roy whispered.

He shook his head, "No sounds, other than jungle noises, no movement."

Roy moved back into the mine, towards Laetitia. "How far down to the jungle?"

"About a day, according to the Colonel."

"I'm serious." Roy thought the whole Colonel thing was getting silly, he had heard Zack playing along. "He's

been fucking dead for how long?"

"Roy, he wrote in his diary, it took the men a day to get up the track to the mine entrance."

"Where's the diary?"

"In England."

"How the fuck did it get there?" Roy was puzzled.

"I took it with me."

He nodded. "Okay."

"Why do you ask?"

"About the diary?" Roy looked puzzled.

"No about how far it is to the jungle."

"One, if there are hostiles, it is useful to know how long it would take them to get up here. Two, if we did need to hunt for food, knowing how long it is to get to the jungle and back is good for practical reasons. Three, heck I can't think of three."

Roland chimed in. "Three, could we haul some materials up here to make a boat to use at the coast?"

Laetitia shook her head. "Carrying a boat for many days through these mountains, no."

"What about in pieces?" said Roland.

"Like in kit form?"

"Yep."

She shook her head. "The terrain to the coast is as bad as it was getting to here."

"What about resources at the coast, anything we could build a boat from there?" said Zack.

"There is a towering sheer cliff at the end of these mountains, only one small gully that afforded anything like an easy route down, even then there was a sheer drop to the sea below. You could not see the gully from the sea, it goes down at an angle."

"So the rocks are pretty barren?"

"Yes."

"What's the country like to the south of the jungle, former British colony ain't it?" said Roland.

"It's a much bigger country, but full of different warring tribal factions, the dictator is crazy." said Roy.

"If we had some comms," said Zack, "That bastard, Mr Shit head."

"Even if we did. The USS Liberty had comms, didn't help them though." said Roy.

"You think if they knew where we were they'd as likely bomb the crap out of us." said Roland.

"Yep." said Roy. "Benghazi."

Roland nodded, and Zack seconded with a wink.

"Laetitia, where did your pleasure cruise come from?" Zack wondered how he'd missed asking this question.

"The Colonel's people arranged it." She replied.

"Hey doc, does the Colonel look okay? I mean you know about people, does he look alive?" Roland had the Colonel in a fixed stare.

"He could be a bit anaemic, lack of iron in the blood, it would account for his pale colour. Also people with this condition can feel very tired, they may not feel like doing much. Besides he is quite old, people do tend to slow down with age. He is injured Roland, did you not notice this?"

"I don't have your medical expertise, my friend."

“Seriously, what some more climbers?” said Zack.

“No.” she shook her head. Trying to think how to explain, without causing problems for Uncle Tom.

“Hikers, tourists like John?” said Roy.

“I’m not quite sure but they did need a guide though the mountains.”

“Ah, right.” Exclaimed Roland.

Except for John who was still on watch, the others all grinned at Laetitia in the dim light that filtered to the back of the cave from the south facing entrance to the mine, as the strong equatorial sunlight bounced around through the gaps in the rocks.

“Not much chance of some more friendly tourists dropping by?” said Roland.

There were a few raised eyebrows.

## Chapter 17

In the evening after checking and double checking Zack crawled through the tiniest opening they could make in the rocks blocking the entrance. Roy, his AR15 at the ready, kept Zack covered, as he moved around checking what remained of the dead soldiers' bodies that had now laid for months in the open. Laetitia had told them how one of the soldiers had started moving rocks from the entrance, so when Zack returned, he added some extra rubble to the pile, then crawled back in and they sealed the hole up.

“Anything?” Roland asked,

“No.” said Zack, “I checked the bodies, nothing useful. There was an old discarded AK47, a bullet must have hit the receiver, it was all jammed up. I left everything exactly as I found it. Had a careful look down the track, looks pretty rough and overgrown further down. The mountain range on this side is much more inaccessible, the sides are near vertical.”

“Any signs of human activity?” said Roy.

“No, no sounds of gunfire, talking, machinery, tools, or entertainment.”

Claude looked at him, “Entertainment?” Claude's idea of entertainment was very civilized, very French.

Zack, looked at Claude, “Natives playing music, dancing, drums, that kind of thing.”

“So what are your thoughts Zack?” Roland was keen for his insight.

“Well we are certainly not safe going back the way we came, we know it will be crawling with troops. Over this side: The jungle down there looks formidable, and from what Laetitia has told us of the Colonel's journey through it, without the proper gear, we'd be as foolish as trying to climb mountains without the right equipment and training. Even if we get through the jungle there is a mad dictator and warring factions. Half of us are experienced mountaineers, John is a serious hiker so he at least has the right kind of knowledge and experience to draw from. Laetitia is on her own territory and she has been in these mountains before, we know she is good. Claude, well he's been learning from us he's a smart guy. Claude would you rather deal with mountains that we have been in before, or unknown jungle?”

“With your mountains, I have been in the French mountains, but I have never been in a jungle.”

“So we go to the coast through the mountains then Zack?” It seemed to Roland the only logical choice left.

“I wish you had those satellite photos of these mountains Roland.”

“Why Zack?”

“What's the other alternative to the coast?”

Laetitia thought for a moment. “Richard, the headless body out there, he started off with John and myself and the others, in the Jungle to the east of the village, on the north side of the range.”

Zack looked at her, “So how did he get over this side?”

"He came up from the jungle."

"You're sure?" asked Roland.

"I watched him come up the track."

Zack looked at her. "So if we go east we might find a gap in the range, and end up deep in the jungle?"

"Richard must have come through the jungle, the soldiers followed him up, they weren't far behind him. They didn't seem to know about the mine. Richard tried to climb up the rocks onto the mountain side to get away from them."

"Yea, I saw where he was, the way the rocks and the mountain are aligned you might imagine the path continues up further. There is a narrow ledge, goes up at a steep angle, I doubt you'd get to it, but with all the rocks strewn around, some inexperienced person could mistake it for a pass across the mountains."

"Modern military wouldn't bother, they'd use helicopters."

"They did, some soldiers were picked up by a big military helicopter."

"Which soldiers?" Roland was curious.

"The ones that had chased Richard and were themselves attacked, a sniper picked off some of the Africans who were with the orientals."

"Helicopters aren't cheap to run, your Richard was up to something, another foreign power wanted what he'd got. Their people strayed into this country. The local warlord, tried driving them out. They called for a helicopter extraction." said Roland.

Roy and Zack both agreed.

"Where did the chopper land?" said Zack.

"Chopper." Laetitia needed clarification.

"Helicopter."

"It didn't they were hauled in one by one, I think the correct English, they were winched aboard."

"Yep, that makes sense." said Zack. "The invaders came in via your jungle to the east right?"

"The coast is looking like our only option." said Roland.

"Can I say something?" John had left his post.

Roland, turned to Claude, "Doc would you mind taking the watch."

"Of course," he paused, "Why do we only watch this entrance?"

"It is a long way to the other entrance, and if anyone did come down from that way we would hear them long before they arrived."

Claude nodded, and moved to position.

"John."

"Is there any cover near the coast where we could shelter in bad weather?"

"Not that I know of." said Laetitia.

"Okay, so here we have water, shelter, security is pretty good, with the weapons we have we could hold off a bigger force, correct me if I'm wrong."

"Your point?"

"If we move we have no boat and probably no shelter, or a best it is likely not a comfortable as this."

Zack looked at John, "Okay, but if we sit tight, what do we do for food?"

"Might there be fish in the lake?" Laetitia suggested.

"Raw fish, for how long before we eat each other?"

"You are joking?" said Roy.

"No I'm serious, there are a lot of first hand accounts out there, folks can get pretty desperate."

Roy knew Zack had a good point, he'd read plenty too.

"Can we get down to dry land at the other end of these mountains, there must be towns along the coast?"

"Roland if the UN has pulled out, this little country could be in some very unfriendly hands." said Roy.

"Laetitia, I know I sound like a nut job, but can you ask the Colonel's opinion, because we are going around in



circles and our options don't look too good." Roland's morale was at a low ebb.

"In his day the British controlled the area, they had guns, the natives did not, and the miners had made a reasonably passable trail through the jungle, his two men got out that way. He would not recommend we try it, and sitting here has not been good for his health, you heard Claude's diagnosis. We should go the same way I went before, he'll try and arrange something at the coast."

"Okay, so Zack and Laetitia you two seem to want to try for the coast." said Roland, "John's for staying. Claude?"

"We have no boat, I think John is right, perhaps we can some find some food without going too far from here, maybe enough. I have relatives they will want to search for us."

John, chimed in, "Richard's boss paid for us to come here and look for Richard, he might pay others to come and look for us too."

"Roy?"

"Since we have weapons and food is our only need, your father might decide to look for you? There are people a lot more powerful than him, he may have had to let Mr Shit head be in command? Besides they'll know we know this area and that it will be our safest option, you father's seen the satellite images and he knows our previous expeditions."

"So you would stay here?" said Roland. Roy gave him the nod. "Looks like the majority are for waiting here. We have three interested parties that may try to search for us."

Zack looked at Laetitia, "Roland you buddied us two, if Laetitia is up for it, do you mind if we try? I kinda figure if we succeed you'll have fourth chance of rescue."

## Chapter 18

Zack had been quite quiet for the first few days after they left the others. During the evening they made camp.

"This is a good route."

"Thanks." she said, "You thinking about the others?"

"Yep." He looked at her. "The three of us always stick together, we've always got back okay."

"You want to go back?"

He shook his head, "No, I want to reconnoitre what is on both sides of this mountain at the coast."

"Farmland and a few small coastal towns on my side."

"Which might have boats, and on the other side?"

"I don't know."

Zack wanted to see the small cove that Laetitia had used before. They did not descend, but the location was a good fix on the landscape. "If we get separated we head back here, worst case we know our way back to the Colonel's place from here."

Though Zack did not say a lot, he did spend time teaching Laetitia climber's lingo and skills.

"Do you think they will search for us?"

"Roland's father won't"

"Why?"

"I've met the bastard, don't ask, let's say he would never want to meet you in a million years. I don't reckon John's lot will do anything, do you?"

"No, they weren't searching in the right area to find Richard." She looked a bit sad, "I don't think Claude's medical group were there to treat the natives, I don't think they wanted us to leave, so I doubt they'd want to find us."

Laetitia watched him carefully tending his Kel Tec C16. "Do you like guns, in Africa they slaughter so many people."

"Not in Switzerland lady." He grinned.

"Why?"

"They've pretty much all got one, so no bastards invade the Swiss. You know what, Yamamoto said?"

"No?" she said, not really having a clue who Yamamoto was.

"If the Japs invaded the mainland USA there would be a rifle behind every blade of grass. Mexico has strict gun laws, lotta good Mexicans die because a lotta bad Mexicans don't obey the gun laws."

He grinned, "You got one of these they think twice about messing with you. They got one of these and you ain't you have to do what you're told, you know where that leads."

"So if we all had guns?"

"We'd all be damn nice an polite, like them Swiss folks." He winked at her, "They've got some nice mountains too."

"You've climbed there?"

"Oh, yea."

Several days later they were peering down along the coastline of Laetitia's land.

"There are boats down there," said Laetitia, "Look Zack."

"Yea, and look over there." He pointed to activity around what looked like barracks. "They your folks?"

"No."

"Even if they were, I can't figure an easy way down, these mountains are something else."

"Try the other side?"

They took several days retracing their route and several more getting to the other side. Looking south was no picnic. In the far distance there looked like a coastal settlement, in between jungle.

"Shit, miles and miles of jungle." Zack was also scanning the mountainside, "Even worse to get down from this side."

She nodded, "Back to the cove?"

By the time they got back to the cove, the rations were getting thin, Zack was going through their options.

"We're low on rations, even if we went back to the Colonel's place, the others would be equally low on rations. We only have enough food to get us back there, or possibly down to the hot zone, maybe steal a boat? Have you been down there before?"

"No, it is a different tribe along the coast, and being very poor people don't travel much." She had been observant with Zack, "You always seem very calm, very..."

"Focused?"

"Yes," he said, "Why waste energy?"

"Claude is a very nice man, but he worries."

"People fear the unknown, that's why I stay focused, try to gain experience and knowledge, at least be better prepared."

"So coming here we have been gaining experience of the mountains and knowledge of possible options?"

"Yep," he said, grinning, "Better than sitting on our arses, I reckon."

"So do you think we should go down there?"

"Nop, not with that barracks where it is." He paused, "The country to the east, do they have a coastline?"

"No," she said as the penny dropped, "Ah, now they do?"

"Uhu, this is their corridor to the coast."

"So a brave American like you with that gun of yours is not going to liberate our land?"

"No oil," he chuckled, "And no minerals worth fighting over."

"So why did the UN let this happen?"

"Who knows, I wouldn't trust the UN, they don't want us to have guns, and what did they do to stop your

people being massacred?”

“Nothing, the Colonel's given me more protection than they have.”

Zack laughed.

The two of them made their way back to the Colonel's place, several weeks had passed, so Zack was very cautious on the approach. They sat watched and listened for some while before advancing to the back entrance of the mine.

“Too quiet.” he whispered in her ear.

Laetitia covered Zack's rear. With great stealth he picked his way slowly through the workings towards the mine entrance.

“Laetitia, go block the rear entrance.” She lost no time in doing as he requested.

Zack noticed the crawl hole had been unblocked, then re-covered. When she came back, he showed her.

“So you think they've gone out this way?”

“The rear entrance was not disturbed, since we went through weeks ago. I checked the stone pattern, just as I left it.”

“No sign of them outside?”

“Not from here.” He pointed at the crevice in the rocks, “Take a look for yourself.”

“Did they leave anything, any note?”

The two of them looked around the mine.

“Nothing,” said Zack, “Just the Colonel, you'd never know they'd been here.”

“Isn't that what climbers try to do, like you before.”

“Clean up, yes, but they must have guessed we or a rescue party might have come here. It makes no sense, Roy would leave some thing, maybe not obvious, because hostiles might find it, but...”

Laetitia carefully pulled the stones away from the Baker rifle stash. “Nothing here other than the rifles.”

“Cover it back up.” Zack looked pensive.

“Could they have been captured, and the hostiles did not want to leave evidence?”

“No shell casings, not one, and I know Roland and I know Roy, we went climbing in South America. Roland is a risk taker, we climb places people don't go.”

“Like here?”

“Yep,” he said, “Well one time we went to the Columbian mountains, great place to get kidnapped.”

“You were kidnapped?”

“We'd been climbing for the best part of a week, breaking up camp to go back home, anyway some idiots decided to try. Word had gotten around Roland's daddy was very rich.” He laughed, “Roland had our special delivery, cured their lead deficiency.”

“Special delivery?”

“Roland does not bother about local laws, wherever we go, he gets us a special delivery, one of these for me, AR15 for Roy and Uzi for himself. Like he says if we can take it home, great, if not who gives a shit.”

“What if Roland and Roy, with their guns went hunting and were killed, Claude and John could be taken easily?”

Zack shook his head, “Roland split us into pairs remember.”

“Yes.”

“Well he would not risk all the fire-power in one group.” Zack got that focused look. “We could waste a lot of time wondering, best to focus on what we need to do. We don't have enough people rotate a lookout. It's too late to move on. How about we put some more stone in the hole, leave the good Colonel on guard, we move to the other entrance and head for Aladdin's cave in the morning? Unless you want to go through that jungle?”

“No, Aladdin's cave sounds good.”

The following evening they were back in Aladdin's cave.

“Doesn't look like its been disturbed.” Zack was removing rocks that covered the stash. “Food is still here.”

“Why didn't they come back for it?”

Zack shook his head.

They sat huddled in the back of the cave for the night.

“Tell me about the countries around this area, something I bet Roy would know.”

“To the north, another former French colony with disparate tribes, their conflicts spilling into our country in the north east caused my family to move south. South you know about. To the east way beyond the jungle a mineral rich country.”

“Wow, hold on, the same one those troops came from?”

“Yes.”

“That figures, and to the south east corner on the map?”

“I don't know the terrain, there is another poor country, I think.”

“So why didn't they go south of the mountains?”

“From what the Colonel said the jungle is very swampy.”

## Chapter 19

With Zack in the lead they picked their way through the mountain range to the east. It took them nearly five days to traverse the formidable mountains. Until they were confronted by more mountains, and a green strip that separated the end of their mountains from the next range.

“Richard must have gone through there, worked his way through the jungle and up to the old mine.”

Zack understood, she had been enlightening him, without giving away Uncle Tom's secrets. Zack was scanning the terrain ahead. He pointed to the left, a thin break in the tree canopy straggled its way west. No words were needed, it was not on their places to visit list.

In the opposite mountain range Zack spotted some badly camouflaged lookout posts, mostly on the northern side, though there was one down near the jungle at a pinch point in the green ribbon between the two ranges.

“What do you think?” she whispered.

“We move to the south of the pinch point, hopefully we can cross in a day. I don't want to be in the jungle at night. We need to stay well out of sight of those lookouts. Stick to hand signals from now on, no talking, we are going into a hot zone.”

By the evening they had made it to the base of the southern side of their mountain range. Zack found a ledge well out of sight, high enough to be out of trouble, near enough to the jungle to make a good start the following morning.

The jungle route was proving slow and precarious, they had to make use of fallen trees, at times using ropes. That was until they came to slightly higher ground. Zack moved his right arm waving it around behind him, then lowering his hand. Laetitia crouched out of sight behind him. Filtering out the background jungle sounds they could both hear voices. Growing louder, Zack eased back tucking himself in with Laetitia, they huddled under a mass of tangled undergrowth.

The voices were almost on-top of them, various shouts, unmistakable military sounding orders. They could hear men poking around, it sounded as though even more were pouring in, as new voices added to the fray. Hours went by, on one very frightening occasion, Laetitia felt her heart pounding so hard she thought they must hear it. Zack though had frozen, still calm, the stock of his Charlie 16 folded, the handy rifle close to his chest and ready for action. The two soldiers were no more than a few metres away, one of them pointed to the swamp, said something and they moved on continuing to search along the edge of the swampland. As darkness fell, the voices receded into the distance. Zack indicated to stay put.

They moved off at first light, the going much easier, though the jungle was very dense the ground underfoot was firm, well mostly! By evening they had made it up into a rocky outcrop. The following evening with some climbing, Zack set up their first base camp.

“Why didn't we move through the jungle at night?”

“They probably still have lookouts at night, our lights would have given away our position, also at night a lot of predators come out to play. Besides it might have been a ruse.”

“A ruse?”

“Make it seem like they had left for the night, expecting us to try to use cover of darkness, sprung a trap for us.”

“You think they were looking for us?”

“We spotted their positions, they might have seen us during our decent.”

Zack made the signal to sign only. He gently pushed Laetitia out of sight and tucked himself behind a rock. Some stones tumbled down from above, small bits of scree. The same voices were chattering away, one man barked something, possibly orders.

All went quiet for a bit. They heard some vehicles draw up and stop, plenty of talking. A rope slew down some distance from their position. More noises, eventually they heard the tell tail signs of someone abseiling downward. Zack pulled back out of sight. There was a lot of shouting, the abseiler, moved again, followed by some more shouts.

Wedged into a crevice, Laetitia and Zack couldn't see much, they were well hidden, but Laetitia noticed something in the jungle, she pointed. They caught glimpses of movement, and it seemed like soldiers moving towards their first location. The rock outcrop, from where they had ascended.

In the jungle the soldier at the front, was pointing out to those behind the broken foliage, and the occasional imprint from the strangers boots.

“Two people,” he said.

“You are sure?” said his commander, “Only two?”

“Yes.” The men continued to follow the trail.

When they reached the rock outcrop, the officer got on the radio.

Near one of the vehicles on the mountain track, a man indicated to his superior.

“The trail stops at the rocks, only two people sir.”

The company commander called over another officer. There was a heated exchange, some calls to HQ and apart from pulling the reconnaissance climber back up. There was no movement. Just waiting.

Over an hour later the distinctive sound of a military helicopter grew ever more menacing. Zack and Laetitia huddled as low as possible, Zack pulling out a piece of grey tarp, which he anchored down as tight as he could get with some nuts wedged tight and rope pulled so tight you'd have thought nothing could move it. The tarp stretched taught over their position, all they could do was hope. The helicopter moved around the rock face above them, it would hover still then move about a bit.

Eventually the helicopter left, but the troops did not. Above and below the soldiers made camp for the night.

## Chapter 20

In the morning, without going into the detail, Zack and Laetitia both needed a change of underwear, you can only hold things in so long. Both were feeling uncomfortable, the cramped conditions and endless waiting only made it worse.

Mid afternoon, the troops were still present. Suddenly there was shouting from the ground troops in the jungle. Gunfire rattling through the trees, shots also rang out from above as those below called for support from above.

"No, they have us surrounded, we are cut off, we might be able to make it back around the base of the mountains, can you cover us?" said the officer in the jungle.

His men were engaged in a fierce fire-fight, every so often a bullet would hit the rocks, bits of stone would fly off that were every bit as dangerous as the bullets. The men in the jungle slowly pulled back suffering heavy casualties.

The attackers turned their attention to the men on the mountain. Snipers in the jungle started picking off exposed men. Pulling his remaining men back into cover, the commander radioed HQ. He only had a small company, his vehicles were taking hits. HQ order him to withdraw.

Zack shook his head, signalling to Laetitia that they must continue to wait. The jungle would probably be hot for some time, and they had no idea where the other troops were. Dawn the following morning after checking, Zack and Laetitia moved. It was hard at first, they had really stiffened up, both lacking circulation and both keen to change.

"We have to keep moving he whispered."

Zack was setting a cracking pace. Only briefly stopping to see if there was anything useful on the dead soldiers bodies that had fallen by the edge of the track. Clearing the mountain track he kept on pushing upwards. Laetitia was finding it tough going, she was not naturally suited to Zack's style of climbing.

"Please Zack."

"I know, nearly there I've spotted a good place for the night."

Though not quite Aladdin's cave, it was still very acceptable, and out of sight of any snooping helicopters. They both got changed, using a mountain stream to clean up, and rest for the night.

"Sorry about yesterday's race for the top. The encounter was too close for my liking, I wanted to get us high up above the mountain track."

"Do you think they were looking for us?"

"Probably, why?"

"Well, you did keep us well hidden, and Richard got to the Colonel's place from this end. I just wondered if Roland and the others might have come this way?"

"No," said Zack, shaking his head, "With an experienced hiker like John, I reckon they would have tried the old mine trail."

"Wouldn't that be dangerous, and why did they do it after we'd left them?"

"Maybe, I don't know, change of plans. Roland did have his Uzi, and Roy is a crack shot, John to find the trail, Claude to patch them up. Besides the mad dictator's lot speak English, and Roland's got plenty of money to buy his way out."

Laetitia pointed out things they could eat. "It will be best to conserve the few rations we have left."

"Just in-case we get holed up again."

"Yes." she said with a broad smile.

"I'll figure out some traps to catch animals."

"Why not use your gun?" She asked.

"We could fly a balloon too!" Zack's sarcastic comment was in good humour.

"Ah, yes these mountains are not quite so unpopulated and desolate."

"Nop, and just because those troops are most likely less well trained and disciplined, we should not underestimate them."

"But I have one of the Colonel's rifles." She winked at him with a wry grin.

"Oh well, if we only meet half the army we should be okay."

They trekked for over a week. The going was slow at times, either because of the presence of others, sometimes soldiers. Or because of the terrain, it was often safer to go the tough route rather than around where they might have an undesirable meeting. Some of the tree lined slopes could be deceptive and treacherous, at the bottom of the slope there were usually cliffs. The going underfoot could be loose, either scree or organic matter, sometimes both.

As they stared out over the jungle below, the realization that they were running out of mountain was becoming obvious.

Laetitia looked at Zack. "Do you have anyone to worry about?" She had noticed the ring."

"She'll be going spare, not much I can do. Besides if I worry I might make a mistake, and a mistake out here, well?"

Laetitia talked to him for a while about his wife, listening intently.

"You?" He said returning the thought.

"The Colonel."

He laughed. "He's one lucky old man."

She smiled, "No, I am serious. I worry someone will disturb him."

"Sure, like the idiots that destroy archaeological artefacts because it does not fit with their world view."

She nodded. It was not long before the two of them fell asleep.

In the USA Robert, Roland's father was grandstanding his sponsorship deal. The three women were consoling each other before the opening speech for their new charity. The idea was to provide support for those with missing loved ones. Civilians lost abroad, was the opening title.

As they pushed on going west through the dense jungle, Zack made the signal to get down. Laetitia knew the routine. They both tucked themselves together in a very dense patch of vegetation.

"So you have supplied the weapons we requested, and the training?" The voice was distinctly African English. "My men here will provide that when your new camp is ready." Zack recognised Mr Shit-head's voice. "Is the area secure?"

"We still have a problem." The African did not sound pleased.

"Foreigners?"

"We think they were hiding in the mountains by the coast."

"Well lets go find the bastards," said one of the steroid men.

"They moved to those mountains, you see over there?"

"So we smoke em out." said Mr Shit-head.

"Your men will help us?"

"Sure," said Mr Shit-head, "Sure, we don't want them fucking up the deal."

There was a pause in the speech.

“You will be bringing in your people to start operations.”

“We can't do that until we deal with the problem. How many?”

“Maybe half dozen, we chased them into the mountains by the coast.”

“Why the fuck didn't you finish them.” Mr Shit-head sounded unimpressed.

“Because we had more important issues like fighting to hold the corridor. You know we did not have the equipment our people were short of supplies.” The African sounded indignant, Laetitia imagined that he was frustrated by the lack of understanding many foreigners would show for Africans and the situations they faced.

When the meeting had dispersed, after waiting to be sure the coast was clear, Zack and Laetitia continued their journey west. It was months before they finally reached friendly countries. Zack though cautioned against giving their real identities or where they had come from.

“Why not?” Laetitia did not comprehend his reasoning.

“Because if those bastards are still searching for us, they've probably got connections. If they have people here that find out where we are...”

“The will, how do you say, eliminate the problem?”

“Yep.”

Zack did an excellent job of concealing their weapons. Unless someone who knew what they were looking for did a very thorough search, it was unlikely they would be found.

“So where now?”

“Bus or whatever we can get to take us south, to South Africa, look up an old buddy of mine.”

## Chapter 21

Zack was noticeably relieved to see his old friends shack, still standing just as he remembered. With a spring in his step he strode up to the door and gave one hell of a knock.

“Hey long time no see old buddy.” said Eddy “hard” Wood. “Who's this?” He said looking at Laetitia.

“The best guide in Africa, tell you more inside.” Zack said cutting the sentence to be brief.

After some initial hospitality, Zack explained why they needed to keep their presence under wraps.

“Nothing changes, those bastards are always up to some evil crap.” Eddy did not look at all surprised at anything they told him. “Who's the Colonel you both mentioned?”

“Colonel Rodney Wellings of the 5<sup>th</sup> Light regiment.” said Laetitia.

Eddy wandered off and was gone for quite some time. “This him?” He asked presenting them with the print of an old military portrait.

“Wow,” said Laetitia, with a beaming smile, “I think so, do you know about him?”

“Where to begin?” he paused, “The Baker rifle 1800 – 1837 dates the Colonel's post 1807 Cape activities.”

The Mad Dictator warmly greeted Roland's group.

“Thank you, sir. Very grateful your men came to our rescue.” Roland was not quite sure how to deal with the Mad Dictator.



“Mr Roland, we are so sorry we did not drive the others off sooner. We are so fed up with them. They use our tribal differences to stir up trouble. We are always having to drive their troops out of our country. We know it is the western powers behind them, one in particular. They were hunting you, why?”

“We think they used us as cover to get some others in, John here wonders if the UN were only there to provide help in achieving some western special forces to get where they needed.” said Roland.

“Ah, and you are a doctor?” The Mad Dictator gave a serious look at Claude.

“Yes, my group was very large for so few patients and most of them seem to go off into the jungle. When I wanted to leave with John and my relative, they said no.”

The Mad Dictator, listened to them, probing with questions, always very polite.

Later in their accommodation.

“What did you think of him?” John asked the others.

“Seemed like a shrewd fellow.” said Roland.

“Well I guess if you don't like someone you'd try to give him a bad image?” said Roy.

“It did not seem to be so, no?” said Claude.

“Well if he's managing to keep that lot out of his country and hold disparate groups together he's got to be reasonably smart about it.” Roland looked at his friends, their facial expressions were all in agreement.

“Oh, but I worry about Laetitia and Zack.” Claude was genuinely concerned.

“From what our new friend just told us, they've headed deeper inland over those mountains.” Roland was recalling the details. “Claude don't worry, Laetitia and Zack are two of the best.”

The End ....or is it?

Please let me know by emailing [more at dorsetauthor.co.uk](mailto:more@dorsetauthor.co.uk) with the story title in the subject line. Thank you.

*“Knowledge, no batteries required. Knowledge is lighter than gadgets.” David L Nightingale*