

Chapter 1

EDINBURGH 2005

ANN

The plane hurtles along the runway and tilts into the sky. A middle-aged woman with her head twisted to the window, her invisible shield pulled up between herself and the passenger next to her, says a silent goodbye to the steel grey sea below. In minutes they are banking across the shoreline at Cramond, where the tide is out and the causeway to the small island, spiked on one side by concrete pylons, marches into the Forth. Often she has walked here and stopped to admire the old stone houses, whose roofs of clay pantiles can burn ochre and orange when light streams out from behind a cloud or in the evenings when the sun is sliding low. Sometimes she walked back along the River Almond, past the yacht club where modest sailing boats bobbed on their moorings, to the quietness and solitude of Dalmeny Woods. Edinburgh. Ironic that she should end up in the city where her mother... and here she bites her lip... her mother trained as a nurse during the war. It has been her home for many years.

Mother. Parents. Simple words which until a few weeks ago evoked a reaction no more complex than quiet loss, but now in unexpected moments they ambush her. Since the letter arrived, the edges of the pain have softened somewhat so that it's less of a knife stab and more

of a soft punch in the stomach. Of course the letter is folded safely at the bottom of her rucksack; she carries it everywhere. Crumpled, cried-on pages which will be taken out, spread smoothly, and read again because she is still trying to squeeze another drop of meaning from words in blue biro, or from an image of four people in a hot, war-torn country, each of them ten years younger than she is now. Now, all she can see is a silence as big as the sky and a secret as deep as the ocean below. Metaphors are easier than facts because the truth is missing. So much is missing and missed out.

A seasoned traveller to conferences, she, like others, has developed a technique of tuning out the intrusive, nerve-jangling input of the journey from the moment the revolving doors spin her into the airport terminal, through the inevitable inch-by-inch sighing queues of holiday makers who remove their shoes and belts and pass through the security archway, to the final tedious wait in the departure lounge. Already invisible because she is middle-aged, she can make others invisible too so that she wastes no energy reacting to sun-bedded sixty year olds in white gypsy skirts or lardy blokes with tattoos or businessmen who shout their egos into mobile phones. She knows she is critical – at least as much of herself as of others – and a very private person who flinches if her personal space is invaded. And so she creates a protective glass bubble and doesn't break out until she is past the Exit sign of her destination. On her forehead, she writes Do Not Disturb so that the woman sitting beside her is frightened away from relating her life story, and the man will not begin his tedious chat-up line. She knows she looks passable – for a woman who is forty-something. The gym is her battleground against a body that is succumbing to gravity and she paints over the grey in her hair with a box of liquid amber. Childless, she only has herself to take care of. Now, for extra insulation against chit-chat, she puts on headphones – those huge Bose ones that make her look like an insect – and buries her face in a book.

Thus protected, she can turn her gaze inwards and push away instructions about life jackets and close her eyes to jangling images on tiny screens repeated a hundred times down the entire length of the plane. She rests her head against the window and drifts. It is a long flight. Seventeen hours. The white noise of the engines and the dull stomp stomp of feet up and down the aisle soon lull her to sleep but even here, thirty five thousand feet above the ground, the same recurring dream comes back to her. In a clearing in woodland, a woman hands a baby to another woman. One is black and one is white and they mischievously exchange roles each time she dreams so there is no knowing which one will carry away the child.

There is only one small photograph from that period and this too she carries with her. Four blurred figures standing in front of a white building almost burnt out in the photograph by the brightness of the light, maybe a club or an army mess. The first man, in his khaki uniform, is tanned a conker brown. Next to him, a woman, golden skinned, golden haired, has arranged herself self-consciously for the camera. She wears a poppy-strewn frock with a wide belt circling her small waist. Next to her, a tall, sandy-haired man in civvies smiles wryly. The other woman stares straight at the lens with indifference. One couple look like any army officer and his wife posing in some hot part of the world where colonial supremacy is taken for granted. The other two avoid easy classification.

About their time in Nairobi, Ann's parents told her little. When she asked them about their past, they said that Harry had been in the Intelligence Corps during the Mau Mau uprising and that they had left soon after things turned nasty. Harry always made an impassioned plea for the dispossessed Kikuyu people; much later she understood his viewpoint and agreed wholeheartedly with his opinions. She read the novels of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, written in Kiswahili and only recently translated into English. She read the dark flipside of the official white version of that period in David Anderson's *Histories of*

the Hanged. Ann knew where she stood: with Harry and Marjorie on the side of the tribes who had walked the red soil since the beginning of time. A few years ago, she had helped organise a retrospective exhibition of Marjorie's paintings of Masai warriors in a trendy London art gallery because, with the truth about that time in Kenya filtering into the British consciousness, East African art was coveted and interesting. The media discovered her and her hoard of inherited paintings. She found herself talking on the radio and on television about a woman from her past. At that point there was no emotional connection. She could talk about history and art and politics. Facts.

That African past had faded into an English present where she grew up in a pleasant and undisturbed suburb in the south of England and attended a single-sex grammar school in High Wycombe. After a year travelling – not to Africa but to France, to learn about the joys of food and to polish her accent – she took a degree in English at Sussex university. For her doctoral thesis she wrote about vanishing dialects and so set in motion a fascination and obsession with speech that has remained with her throughout her life. If she hears a voice with a strong accent, she can pinpoint its birthplace to within a radius of twenty miles. Like a magpie, she still darts across the country with her tape recorder to pick up a snippet of speech here and an anecdote there before the old and wonderful words and phrases disappear forever into the common denominator of media-washed Estuary English.

Yes, Africa faded into the background but it was never quite erased, so when the letter came all she had to do was blow on the embers to bring back the fire and light. There never was an if about making this journey. With her gift for language, she is already at an advantage because she knows not to say 'Jambo' to the people she will meet and pass on the streets of Nairobi, having read it's a crass tourist gaffe, like saying 'Top o' the morning' to someone who lives in Dublin. Apparently she must say 'Sasa?' and expect the reply 'Fit!'

If she manages this, along with the other phrases of Kiswahili she has been practicing before setting off, and asks for nyama choma and Tusker lagers in the cafes and restaurants frequented by the locals, she might not draw attention to herself. She might be mistaken for one of their own, which in a way she is. Not born and bred, but conceived in the Green City of the Sun. Something she hardly knows herself yet.

Her ears are popping. When she opens her eyes, sore and dirt dry, she sees a red half-disc of sun rising above a sugar almond horizon, and smiles. An African horizon, she says to herself, where tonight this same sun will skitter down the sky and vanish. Harry told her about the sunsets. There will be no lingering Scottish dusk nor the grey half-light that makes you miss, however hard you stare and stare, the exact second when day turns into night. Her heart is beating hard as the plane drops, circles, circles again and makes its final descent into Jomo Kenyatta Airport. Her eyes fill with tears and spill down her cheeks. As the plane hits the tarmac she is ice cold and shivering. While other passengers, as tired and crumpled and red-eyed as herself, jump up the moment the plane taxis to a halt to press open the lockers and heave down their hand luggage and poke urgent fingers into keyboards, and then stand for ten minutes, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes until the cabin doors are opened, Ann stays in her seat and keeps her wet face averted, pressed against the window. Here she stays until everyone else has left the plane. A steward touches her shoulder. Yes, she nods, I am fine. She wipes away the tears with the back of her hand, shrugs her rucksack on to one shoulder, and walks towards the exit.

Breaking the glass of her bubble, she emerges from the airport into an onslaught of heat and noise and chaos. It is exactly what she expected. A taxi driver is bribing a police officer after jumping the queue, and cars speed in and out of the airport breaking every rule in the book.

WHITE LIES

In the back seat of a cab, already so hot that the back of her legs stick to the plastic, she speeds towards the brutal, elemental, pulsing, contradictory heart of Nairobi. The drive from the airport takes her past her first acacias, a purple jacaranda, a red hibiscus smothering the building it decorates, bleached yellow grass. She acknowledges a landscape of extremes and violent colours. The muted palettes of England and Scotland fade into a fast-retreating background.

Her plan, if something as vague as a sense of longing and rootlessness can be called a plan, is to walk in the footsteps of ghosts who were here fifty years ago when blood was spilt across this savagely beautiful country. Two couples. One guerrilla war. A child who was christened Ann.