

PROLOGUE

The desert south of Klipdam Farm, German South West Africa, 1906

The red sand drank his blood, gulped it as fast as it flowed so that once the lions had devoured his flesh and the hyenas had ground his bones in their jaws there would be no evidence that he had ever been here, ever lived at all.

The land would bury what little was left of him until no trace remained, just crisp, wind-carved ripples on the surface of the dune. He tried to speak but his tongue was swollen, his lips cracked. The words wouldn't come. Maybe he made a sound, maybe not.

'Claire . . .'

Cyril Blake crawled, hand over hand, and the coarse grains filled his shirt, found their way into his mouth, his trousers, his wound, everywhere. The sand burned his palms. In agony he made it to the knife-edge top of the dune, but when he looked beyond it there was no salvation in sight, just an empty vista with some hardy game. He slithered over like an adder and half slid, half rolled down the leaside.

Behind him he heard the whinny of a horse, then the shouted command of an officer in German.

He had survived through the long night and the cold had replaced the pain of the wound in his gut with teeth-chattering hallucinations. No one would have believed him, if he had ever made it home to Australia, that an African desert could be the coldest place he had ever been.

Now the heat of the day assaulted him and the flies mobbed the hole in his belly.

Blake blinked sand from his eyes. Below him the dry riverbed he had followed to reach this place the day before stretched away to the border and South Africa, just a few dunes distant, but impossibly far in the state he was in. He had once cursed that place, hated it with every fibre of his existence, and had later told himself he would never leave it. It had drawn him in, bewitched him, intoxicated and entrapped him in the same way the smoke from the Chinamen's dens held in thrall the sunken-eyed whores and miners who chased the dragon.

Africa.

Oryx, gemsbok the Boers called them, dotted the valley, nibbling at brittle grass that drained the paltry moisture from the bed. But these handsome beasts were put to the gallop by fifty horses that trotted in confusion, still tied nose-to-tail, along the dying watercourse. He had brought the horses to German South West Africa at Claire's request, to help the rebellion. He had failed in his mission and now he would never see her again. He hoped someone would have the decency to free the horses so that they would not have to face the horrors of war. Perhaps the man who had shot him would come back for the horses; he had left Blake to die while he rode to Klipdam, no doubt to claim the bounty on Blake's head.

Blake managed half a smile at the memory of the woman and was rewarded with the parting of more skin on his lips and the stinging of the sweat that tortured the newly exposed flesh. He remembered the taste of Claire's mouth, like nectar.

A shadow brought a moment's respite from the sun and he looked up to see a man standing over him.

'Claire . . .'

'Shut up,' said the German officer.

Blake tried to roll, but the movement sent pain shooting through his body. Momentum and displaced sand took over and he slid a little further and ended up on his back, blinking into the sun.

'Don't speak her name.' He spoke near-perfect English. Peter Kohl was a good man, he knew, a doctor. Like Blake, the officer had been talked into donning a uniform because of a need to defend an empire, to vanquish an evil foe that had dared to rise up against the crown.

Utter nonsense.

Blake knew why the officer had come. It was to make sure the bloody job had been done, properly, because the Germans were like that. Everything had to be orderly, by the book, complete and tied up in a bow, even assassinations. Du Preez – he was the one who had fired the bullet that had felled him – followed no such regulations. Du Preez had left Blake to bleed and burn slowly to death under the sun because that's what the man thought he deserved.

'Claire . . .' he coughed.

'Enough!' Spittle flecked Peter's mouth and his face turned a deeper shade of red than even the sun had been able to burn him. The doctor took a breath, stilled the tremor in the hand that held the Roth-Sauer 7.65-millimetre pistol. He composed himself, cleared his throat and spoke in a loud, clear voice. 'Cyril Blake, you are guilty of espionage and aiding the Nama people and the criminal Jakob Morengo in his armed rebellion against the lawful government of German South West Africa.'

'Just . . . just tell me, Peter,' Blake said.

The officer blinked and Blake wondered if this man, who might have been treating a sick child or tending to a broken arm if he wasn't standing there in his sweat-stained Landespolizei uniform and his scuffed cavalry boots, was crying.

‘She is,’ his voice quavered, though he spoke loudly, ‘dead.’
Blake closed his eyes. ‘How?’

‘She drowned. It was because of you that she was on the boat. She waited for you, Blake, then she left. You dishonoured my wife and made her a spy against her own people.’

Blake felt his own tears trying to come, but perhaps it was because his body was so dehydrated that his eyes remained dry. His head was reeling. He wouldn’t even be allowed the relief of a moment’s grief.

‘You . . . you saw what was happening to innocent people, women and children, on Shark Island, on the railway line *your* people are constructing. You call yourself a doctor and yet still you wear that uniform?’

Peter looked away. If Blake had had the strength, if he wasn’t almost dead, he would have tried to get the jump on him, but it was impossible.

‘You haven’t come to patch me up and take me to prison in Keetmanshoop, have you, Peter?’ Blake said.

‘No,’ Dr Peter Kohl said, loudly enough for his voice to carry across the dunes to the waiting German soldiers, ‘I have come to kill you.’

The doctor took careful aim and fired his pistol.