

## STRIKE OF THE BLACK MAMBA



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For Hantie, Elmarie and Tjaart

Thanks for all your love and support



# Chapter 1

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**Monday, 10 April, 11:30 Eastern Time (Daylight Saving Time).  
Wilmington, North Carolina, USA:**

The big king mackerel darted in like a lightning bolt to snatch the bait. Ken Palmer felt the telltale tug on the line of his fishing rod before the mackerel took off on a reel-ripping run, dragging the line out to sea. As the reel started to sing, Ken sprang into action and set the hook with two light jerks of the rod.

“Fish on!” yelled Ken to warn his fellow anglers on the pier. With the rod bending like it wanted to break any minute, Ken started to reel in, but the mackerel decided that it was not going to land up on some human’s plate and it fought back fiercely. Ken had to give the fish more line and subsequently it became a real battle between him and the mackerel. The mackerel continued speeding deeper into the ocean and it seemed like the fish would take all his line out to sea, but Ken repeatedly reeled the line in, keeping the fish in check.

After twenty minutes of wrestling with the king mackerel, Ken’s muscular shoulders ached and his arms felt as heavy as two bars of lead, but he continued the struggle with the ferocious fish. Eventually Ken started to gain some ground, bringing the fish closer and closer to the pier. Finally, after another five minutes of strenuous labor, he managed to land the magnificent silver fish on the pier.

It was a cool and slightly clouded morning in Wilmington, situated on North Carolina’s Cape Fear coast. Ken Palmer was a tall, lean, and broad-shouldered man of about forty, with a square jaw, a suntanned

complexion and wrinkles around the corners of his brown eyes. He was dressed casually in a pair of jeans and a red T-shirt.

Ken started to put new bait onto his line. He was in a good mood and he attempted to whistle a tune while the cool breeze brushed through his closely cropped light brown hair. Working for oneself has its advantages. He had given himself a few days off and decided to do some fishing. But, if only he had an inkling of an idea what was happening at that exact moment nearly 15,000 kilometers away in South Africa, he would not have been so content with himself.

**Monday, 10 April, 18:42. The South African Air Force Test Flight and Development Centre near Bredasdorp on the Western Cape coast:**

A westerly wind of 20 knots blew gusts of dust around the airstrip when Colonel Phillip Botha walked towards the lonely F/A-18 Hornet fighter aircraft waiting out on the tarmac. He clutched his flight helmet tightly under his left arm and there was a grim expression on his face as his thoughts centered on the thing that he was about to do that night.

Phillip Botha was of medium height, in his early forties, with blue eyes and closely cropped black hair with some grey flecks. He carried his body erect in typical military fashion and walked with a purposeful-looking gait.

The setting sun shed a long shadow ahead of him, almost touching the aircraft, although he was still some distance away from it. The sun's last rays accentuated the sleek, graceful design of the aircraft with its V-shaped tail plane, and it cast shades of gold onto the metal-grey fuselage. Phillip was oblivious to the scene of splendor since his mind was focused on the task that lay ahead.

Phillip stopped in front of the aircraft and greeted the four members of the ground crew standing next to it. He hoped that they would not be able to notice the anxiety building up inside him.

Phillip cracked a joke that he had carefully and repeatedly rehearsed an hour before to ensure that it would sound as natural as he could manage. To Phillip's relief it worked and after the laughter had subsided, one of the men stepped forward and presented Phillip with the aircraft's logbook. Phillip accepted the logbook and inspected it carefully, taking slightly longer than normally, since it helped to settle his nerves.

After he was sure all the required inspections had been carried out, Phillip signed the logbook and handed it back to the same man. Phillip walked around the aircraft to check for loose locknuts, loose inspection panels and any sign of fuel or hydraulic fluid leaks. Satisfied that

everything was in order, he slid his helmet onto his head, climbed up the ladder leading to the cockpit and squeezed into the bucket seat. He fastened the straps connecting him to his parachute pack and ejector seat and connected the leads to his oxygen mask, radio and G-suit.

After taking a deep breath, Phillip closed the aircraft's canopy. He swiftly performed the complex pre-start procedures and pressed the starter button. The starter motor kicked in with a sudden whoosh of sound and the two turbofan motors started up with a whine and then emitted a loud roar. Phillip continued to perform the pre-taxi procedures and he mentally completed the checklist.

Phillip increased thrust and taxied the aircraft onto the runway where he applied maximum braking to bring the aircraft to a standstill. He called the control tower on his radio and requested permission for take-off. After receiving his take-off clearance from the control tower, he pushed the throttle forward to accelerate the motors to military rated thrust. He checked that the digital RPM readout displayed 100 percent for both engines and that they functioned correctly. He moved the flight controls and made a visual check to the outside of the aircraft to ensure that the control surfaces actually moved in conjunction with the controls.

Phillip advanced the throttles to maximum afterburner and checked on the digital display that Afterburner Stage Six was engaged. The afterburners ignited with a long flame from both engines and a thunderous roar. The aircraft's nose lifted distinctly as it fought against the brakes, like a dog straining on a leash, eager to chase after a cat walking by.

As Phillip released the brakes, he was immediately pressed backwards in his seat when the F/A-18 Hornet rushed along the runway. The runway markings seemed to shorten and marker signboards flashed past him as the aircraft started to accelerate. His trained eyes carefully watched the digital airspeed indicator in the heads-up display right in front of him. At 150 knots the aircraft started to lift up and as he gently pulled back on the stick, Phillip sensed how the wings jiggled faintly as the main wheels left the tarmac.

At 210 knots Phillip raised the undercarriage and the wheels thumped into position. Raising the nose at a 27-degree angle, the F/A-18 Hornet climbed into the darkening sky. Breaking the bonds of gravity with what seemed like hardly any effort, the aircraft shot upwards with thundering engines. A smile formed on Phillip's lips, since he always enjoyed the exhilaration of the tremendous acceleration.

A few seconds later, at 10,000 meters, Phillip disengaged the after-burners and leveled off at a speed of 460 knots. Phillip noticed the Indian Ocean sliding in underneath his aircraft. He turned the aircraft to his right to follow a westerly course over the ocean. He allowed himself one glance at the landscape of the Western Cape Province below the right-hand side of his aircraft. He always used to admire how the rivers would show up as silvery snakes on the dark landscape at this time of day.

After twelve minutes, when he reached the border of the Indian and the Atlantic Oceans about thirty kilometers south of the Cape of Good Hope, he slowly turned the aircraft to point into a northerly direction. The aircraft still flew over the ocean, but this time it was over the Atlantic Ocean.

Phillip continued to fly north for another twelve minutes and then he spoke into his microphone.

“Base, this is Foxtrot One-Four-One. I have a Mayday! I have a fire on board ... I cannot contain it!”

There was about two seconds of silence before the reply came on the radio receiver.

“Foxtrot One-Four-One, eject! I repeat: eject immediately!”

Phillip switched off the radio and started to make a steep nose-dive towards the ocean’s surface. All his concentration was aimed at the airspeed and altitude indicators in the head’s-up display. At an altitude of 450 meters, a female voice suddenly called out: “Altitude!” It was the F/A-18 Hornet’s automatic female voice warning system, dubbed *Bitching Betty* by American pilots. Phillip responded and started to pull out of the dive. At a bare 40 meters above the ocean surface he leveled the aircraft out.

Phillip kept flying in a northerly direction, proceeding at 400 knots and skimming the surface of the Atlantic Ocean. He held the aircraft’s altitude at 40 meters above sea level to avoid detection by ground-based radar stations. Phillip made sure that the wings were level before he invoked the aircraft’s autopilot mode to steer to a pre-programmed waypoint whilst maintaining the current altitude and speed.

The world was getting darker outside the aircraft and Phillip decided to put on his night vision goggles. He switched the internal cockpit lighting system over to night-vision mode to accommodate the light magnification factor of the night vision goggles. The world outside showed up an eerie, incandescent green.

After half-an-hour’s flying, Phillip disengaged the autopilot and started to make a slow turn towards his right until he pointed in an

easterly direction. He passed over the southwestern Coastline of Namibia exactly seventy-five minutes after take-off. He made small adjustments to his steering course by watching the second waypoint in his heads-up display that he had programmed into the F/A-18 Hornet's computer earlier that day and then he put the aircraft into autopilot mode once again.

The night was very dark and below him were virtually no light sources, since he was flying over a very scarcely populated area. He was still skimming over the ground at a bare 40 meters. The area over which he was flying was very flat, and he knew it intimately from previous times, so he had no fear of suddenly crashing into some unknown obstruction.

**Monday, 10 April, 19:52. A Kalahari farm, South Africa:**

Jakob Vogelstruis, a farm worker of San (or Bushman as it used to be known) descent, sat on a foldout canvas chair outside his small house on a Kalahari farm in the northwest of South Africa, close to the borders with Namibia and Botswana and warmed his hands to the fire burning brightly from a camelthorn tree's log. Next to him sat his wife Sara on a similar chair and stirred the maize porridge cooking in a large pot next to the fire on some of its coals. Their small brick house was situated near one of the large farm's outposts where water was supplied to the sheep from a borehole and a wind pump. The farm was situated in a very arid region, referred to as the Kalahari Desert, which covers some parts of South Africa, Namibia and Botswana. Jakob's daily duties included looking after the water supply, watching the sheep and checking the fence in his large encampment for any signs of breaks, since jackal and other wild animals like lynx and hyena could quickly discover the break and get to the sheep.

"Listen, Jakob, I'm hearing a strange sound," said Sara.

Jakob cocked his head to catch the sound, but his hearing wasn't too good any more. "I can only hear the sounds of the night. Where is it coming from?"

"It's from that side, the west."

Suddenly, a loud, ear-piercing, whooshing sound came out of the sky. They both looked up and saw a dark object against the night sky moving right over their heads in an easterly direction. One moment it was there, the next it was gone, and it was as quiet as before. Jakob stiffly got up from the ground, since he had fallen from the chair due to the blast from the shock wave he had received. Never in his sixty years on this planet had he ever had such an experience. He had always lived

in this area, since the day of his birth, and had never been to a big city. The only man-made flying objects he had ever seen were a few small propeller-driven airplanes and passenger jets 10,000 meters up in the sky.

Jakob looked at his wife. She sat on the ground where she had been thrown by the shock wave, clutching both upper arms with her hands. The wooden spoon that she had used to stir the porridge with was stuck into the sand because it had slipped out of her hands due to the fright she had received.

“Jakob,” she said with a thin voice, “Do you think it is the second coming of the Lord?” The Vogelstruis’ were very religious people.

Jakob picked up his chair and tried to regain his composure. “No, but I think we should ask Mister Van Niekerk tomorrow when he comes around.”

**Monday, 10 April, 19:57. Another Kalahari farm, South Africa:**

Piet Meulman merrily pedaled his bicycle on a dirt road about 40 kilometers east of Jakob Vogelstruis’ house towards the farm where he lived. He had just visited his friend Abram on a neighboring farm to take reception of his bottle of cheap sweet white wine, commonly referred to as *Vaaljapie*. He smiled as he felt the weight of the bottle in a knapsack on his back. Abram was lucky enough to visit the nearest town three times a week with his boss to help delivering eggs to a grocery store. Since Piet could only get to town twice a month, he had an arrangement with Abram to buy him a bottle of wine at least twice a week. Piet would visit Abram after his working day on the farm and pay him for the wine.

Without warning, a deafening whooshing noise filled the sky above his head. The physical blast effect from the shock wave threw Piet from his bicycle and he fell face down onto the sand. He picked up his head and was just in time to see a dark object in the night sky very close to the ground, moving like greased lightning.

Just as quickly as the object came, it was gone. Piet lifted his body from the sand and just sat there in the road, too confused and dumbfounded to do anything else. Eventually, after about two minutes of deep reflection, he wiped the sand from his face, then reached into his knapsack and pulled out the bottle of wine. For a moment he stared appreciatively at the unbroken bottle that he held in both hands, then opened the screw cap and took a deep swig from the sweet intoxicating liquid.

**Monday, 10 April, 20:01. Phillip Botha’s aircraft:**

Phillip started to decrease the aircraft's speed, looking out for the marking lights of the makeshift landing strip where he was supposed to touch down. Eventually, after a few seconds, he noticed a row of lights on the ground, placed directly in his flight path. He decreased speed further until he reached 200 knots. He climbed to a height of 150 meters and saw another row of lights pass below him. Ahead of him he could make out more lights.

As he got closer to the new set of lights, he could make out that they were arranged in two long parallel rows, indicating a landing zone for him. There were also four bright spotlights illuminating the makeshift runway, placed strategically next to each row of runway lights. Two spotlights were placed at one end of the landing zone and the other two were placed towards the middle of the runway. He circled the landing zone once, and then came in towards the end where the spotlights were placed.

Lining up his aircraft with the two rows of runway lights, Phillip reduced the throttles and applied the speed brake. He lowered the undercarriage and applied full flaps. The ground below him was lit up far ahead of him by the set of four spotlights. He adjusted the throttles to idle, released the speed brake and proceeded to lower the aircraft, carefully watching the airspeed indicator and altimeter. After the aircraft's rear wheels had touched the ground, he put the nose wheel firmly down on the ground and applied the brakes until the aircraft rolled to a standstill. He applied the parking brake, reduced the engine RPM to idle and shut down the engines.

Phillip opened the canopy and proceeded to unfasten his harness. He pulled the flight helmet off his head and inhaled the cool, sweet, night air, still blended with dust caused by the touchdown on the flat surface that was mixed with salt and sand. There was the sound of a vehicle approaching the aircraft and Phillip saw the vehicle's headlights closing in on him from his right-hand side.

**Tuesday, 11 April, 17:20 Eastern Time (Daylight Saving Time).  
Ken Palmer's house in Wilmington, North Carolina, USA:**

Ken Palmer drove his Jeep Cherokee onto the paving leading to the garage next to his house. He pressed a button on his remote control to open the automatic garage door and parked the Jeep inside the garage.

The house was medium-sized, built in a ranch style, and painted a sandy color outside. Ken unloaded his fishing rod from the Jeep's roof and hung it on brackets fixed to the garage wall. He unloaded the knapsack containing his fishing tackle and placed it on the garage's

floor. He closed the garage door and entered the house through an inside door that connected the garage to the dining room.

“No fish today,” Ken mentioned grumbly to a parrot in a cage on a table next to the door through which he entered the house. He went into the main bedroom’s on-suite bathroom and took a shower. After the shower he dried himself and dressed into a tracksuit. He fixed himself a whiskey and soda, sat down in a deep lounge chair and switched on the TV set in the lounge.

An attractive woman presenter with short blonde hair appeared on the television screen with a microphone in her hand. She was standing on a pier in some harbor, with a backdrop of water and ships, the strong breeze managing to move her short hair to and fro.

The sight of her on the television screen caused Ken’s mind to wander back a number of months. He remembered the deep sky-blue eyes, the animated laugh that seemed to appear so easily, the laughing wrinkles materializing around her eyes, suggesting that her age was somewhat over thirty. He also recollected her sharp mind and how she could bewitch an interviewee with her charm and then suddenly take the wind out of his sails with a question or remark that he never saw coming. Before becoming too sentimental, Ken removed the thoughts from his mind and concentrated on the scene displayed on the large television set.

“... and members of the well-known international environmental organization, *Greenwoods*, as well as other local environmental groups are assembling here in Cape Town in anticipation of the Japanese plutonium-carrying vessel which is due to sail around the Cape of Good Hope in four day’s time. Here with me is Jean Le Blanc who leads the *Greenwoods* mission all the way from France.”

The television presenter turned towards the Frenchman with the long curly hair dancing in the wind. “Jean, tell us why you are here in Cape Town.”

“Well, as you have said, we are waiting for the plutonium-carrying ship,” Jean answered with a slight French accent. “We feel that this ship’s cargo could present a grave danger to the environment and human life, should anything happen to it.”

“What is the purpose of this cargo of plutonium, Jean?”

“The Japanese government decided during the oil crisis of the 1970’s that it wanted to be as self sufficient as possible in its own energy needs and nuclear power seemed to be a logical alternative to petroleum. However, uranium was expensive at that time, and so Japan decided to build ordinary nuclear power reactors and fast breeder reactors. Fast

breeder reactors use plutonium to produce electricity and could theoretically produce more plutonium as a waste by-product than the amount of plutonium they originally consumed. Currently, Japan is building a nuclear fuel cycle facility to extract plutonium from conventional nuclear reactor wastes. In the meantime, since 1992, Japan has been sending reactor waste to France and England for reprocessing. They planned to ship the extracted plutonium back to Japan in as many shipments as required over the next twenty years. They try to keep the sea route for each shipment a secret before the time, but we usually manage to discover the route before the shipment starts.”

“So why have you only started to create a public awareness after so many years?”

“We were always active in creating public awareness since the first shipment, although not so much in your country. But we have felt at this stage that things are going too far, and we decided to step up our awareness campaign.”

“How are they shipping this cargo of plutonium?”

“The British freighter *Atlantic Merlin* carries fuel rods of highly radioactive nuclear waste packed inside fuel assemblies, which in turn are packed into 28 heavy-weight transport casks or containers. Each fuel rod is filled with MOX pellets. MOX stands for Mixed Oxide, because it contains a mixture of plutonium and uranium oxides. This shipment will deliver about 220 kilograms of plutonium and around 5 tons of uranium to Japan. There is another ship, the *Daihyousha Maru*, which is a 6,500 ton cruiser operated by the Japanese coast guard that will escort the *Atlantic Merlin* for most of its trip. This cruiser is equipped with light cannons and machine-guns, but is not equipped to withstand a missile attack.”

“Why did you mention the fact that the cruiser is not able to withstand a missile attack? Why would somebody possibly want to attack this ship and why is it necessary to protect the plutonium shipment?”

“You must understand that, although this plutonium is not classed as weapons-grade plutonium, the US government has stated that it can be used in the manufacture of nuclear weapons. In fact, the amount of plutonium in this shipment can be used to make about 45 nuclear bombs. Therefore, it can be of great value to terrorists or rogue nations wishing to obtain plutonium for their nuclear weapons programs. I must also stress that this isn't the only reason that we are protesting against this nuclear shipment. The other danger is that of an accident occurring during the journey, which would present a grave danger to the environ-

ment and human life, as I have already mentioned. This cargo contains a more than 30 million curies of radioactivity.”

The camera focused on Karen Visser’s face and she mentioned that an interview prepared by one of their United Kingdom correspondents would be televised to report on the safety factors of the nuclear shipment. The person being interviewed was Alexander Gill, a spokesperson for *Transatmar*, the British company responsible for the nuclear shipment to Japan.

The scene changed and the television screen pictured a man in his mid-fifties with brown-grey hair sitting behind a clean desk in a sparsely furnished office. The title “Alexander Gill: spokesperson for *Transatmar*” was flashed at the bottom of the screen.

Alexander Gill looked straight into the camera and said: “Let me first state that these nuclear shipments to Japan are done with the full approval of the British, French and Japanese authorities. Whilst a company in France does the reprocessing of the nuclear waste, we do the transportation of the nuclear material to Japan.

“In order to ensure the safe transportation of this nuclear material, we first of all carefully select a route that avoids areas of natural disaster or civil disorder and to ensure the security of the cargo and the transport vessels. Secondly, the ships do not make any scheduled port calls en route.

“We furthermore ensure the safety of the ship carrying the nuclear cargo. This transport vessel is accompanied by an armed Japanese cruiser manned by highly experienced Japanese coast guard personnel. The transport vessel also has a team of the Civic Nuclear Constabulary, or CNC, on board. The CNC is a UK governmental authority that is specially trained to protect nuclear facilities and materials. These highly experienced and trained armed escorts operate independently of the crew and they are responsible for maintaining constant surveillance and protection of the nuclear cargo.

“The transport vessel is furthermore equipped with reliable communications systems that use advanced technology independent of standard navigation communications equipment. Every two hours, a secure transmission is sent out automatically from the transport vessel to the operations centre in the UK, containing information on the location of the transport vessel and the status of the cargo. These communications systems also provide for separate and secure communications between the on-board escorts and the operations centre, independent of the crew of the transport vessel.”

Alexander Gill took a deep breath and continued: “Other safety measures on the transport vessel include a double bottom and double hull structure for minimizing damage, and for safety in case of an accident, a modern radar and anti-collision system to protect the ship from collisions or grounding. There are also duplicated navigation, communication, electrical and cooling systems, a comprehensive fire fighting system, emergency sources of electrical power, and satellite navigation and tracking systems.

“The nuclear fuel transport casks exceed international safety standards for transportation of such material and are fixed in the hold of the ship.

“Measures have also been taken to hamper any attempted removal of the nuclear fuel at sea, such as making the cargo bay hatch removal mechanisms, as well as the on-board derrick or cranes, inoperable. The cargo bay covers are also welded in place at strategic points to further impede the opening of the cargo bays by unauthorized persons. The steel transport casks, which weigh about 100 tons each, are locked and sealed in order to prevent access to the nuclear fuel by unauthorized persons.”

After the interview with Alexander Gill, Karen Visser came into view again and she started with a fresh news item.

“Meanwhile, there is still no sign of the South African Air Force pilot whose aircraft crashed into the ocean off the Western Cape coast last night. Search aircraft and vessels are still combing the area, but no trace of wreckage of the fighter aircraft has yet been found. The name of the pilot has been released. He is Colonel Phillip Botha, a test pilot of the Test Flight and Development Centre at Bredasdorp, in the Western Cape. A spokesman for the Air Force said that Colonel Botha left no relatives behind. His wife and only child were tragically killed in an armed hijacking of their motor vehicle barely a month ago. The cause of the aircraft accident is not yet known. Apparently the aircraft involved in the crash was a F/A-18 Hornet from the USA, which was being evaluated by the South African Air Force. The South African Air Force is currently busy to evaluate aircraft from a number of different countries since they want to replace some of their aging aircraft. The Air Force spokesman declined to comment if the crash would negatively effect the evaluation of the American aircraft. The Air Force is investigating the matter and will release details of the crash as soon as they have more information available.”

The presenter paused briefly. “This is Karen Visser for INN in Cape Town, South Africa”.

The television screen showed a news desk with a man continuing to read other news items. Ken sipped his drink and changed the channel to a football game.

The sound of the telephone ringing woke Ken out of his deep thoughts. He turned down the television's sound and picked up the telephone on the table next to him. "Palmer," he answered.

"Hi Ken," the voice in the receiver replied. "It's Brad Johnson. How are you?"

"Long time, no hear!" Ken replied "I'm well and you?"

"Couldn't be better... still at the old job. Listen, I need to talk to you, but in person. Can I take you to lunch tomorrow or so?"

"Yeah, sure, tomorrow will be fine," Ken said somewhat hesitantly. He wasn't sure what his ex-colleague might want to discuss that could not be said over the telephone.

"OK, so where is your favorite eating-spot?" Brad enquired.

"For lunch it's probably Noah's Cottage, next to the Cape Fear River." Ken explained the directions to Brad and they made an appointment for 13:00 the next day.

### **Wednesday, 12 April, 06:20. Donald Morse's hideout on a farm in South Africa:**

Phillip Botha stood with a steaming mug of coffee in his hand and watched how the sunrise colored the bank of clouds in the east with a yellow tint. He always enjoyed this part of the day in the African veldt, far removed from any civilization. His thoughts drifted to his annual hunting trip to his brother's game farm in the bush veldt of the Limpopo Province in the north of South Africa. There he would also get up early, just before sunrise, and set out into the veldt on foot with his .308 hunting rifle slung over his shoulder. However, most of the time he would enjoy the solitary walking trips more than the actual hunting part.

Phillip was jerked out of his thoughts by someone calling his name. He looked around to a man standing close to a gas cylinder placed on the ground. The gas cylinder had a metal tube connected on top of it that came to about waist-height. A large disc-shaped frying pan was mounted on top of the tube.

"Let's start breakfast, shall we?" asked the man. "The *skottelskaar* is ready." The *skottelskaar* referred to a disc plough that farmers had used many years ago in South Africa to fry their food when sleeping in the veldt, but now referred to the large disc-shaped frying pan connected to the gas cylinder, which had a similar shape to that of the disc plough.

“OK, Otto,” said Phillip and walked up to the man. He placed his coffee mug on top of a folding table next to the gas cylinder.

They took some sausages from a plate on the table and placed them carefully into the frying pan where the hot oil immediately started to sizzle. While they were waiting to turn the sausages over, Phillip took a sip from his coffee and surveyed the area around him. They were standing in front of a large aircraft hangar that looked like a steel barn, close to the edge of a large dry salt lake, the same place where he had landed his aircraft on Tuesday night. The veldt around them consisted of flat sand dunes overgrown with some grass, small shrubs and sparsely distributed thorn trees.

The aircraft hangar’s main door was open and inside the hangar three men clad in khaki overalls worked on his F/A-18 Hornet aircraft. Inside the hangar were also a large Super Puma helicopter, a small Hughes OH-6A Cayuse helicopter, a small refueling truck and a tractor, used to pull the helicopters and the F/A-18 Hornet in and out of the hangar. The Hughes OH-6A Cayuse helicopter was mounted on a large flat trolley with plenty of small wheels, since the Hughes helicopter did not have its own wheels, but ski landing gear and had to be moved in and out of the hanger by means of the trolley.

Phillip heard the sound of a vehicle arriving. He looked up and saw a silver two-door Mitsubishi Pajero 4x4 vehicle coming to a standstill next to the hangar in a cloud of dust. A man got out from behind the wheel and walked towards them. He was of medium build, in his early forties, with neatly trimmed black hair graying at the temples and a set of piercing blue eyes.

“Good morning, gents,” he greeted jovially, “any chance of some coffee?”

“Yes, let me get you a mug, Donald,” the man called Otto answered and turned to a coffee pot standing on a small gas cylinder next to the table. “The water’s still hot,” he added.

“It looks like it’s going to be a nice sunny day ... as always,” Donald said to Phillip.

“Yes, I just love this climate, although a bit of rain is always welcome. You know, I believe there’s no better place on earth than the African veldt. You Yanks might think differently about this, but I can’t imagine living someplace else than under the African skies.”

“Actually, I totally agree with you. As you know, I’ve been in Africa a few times before, and each time I went back to the States, it always seems like something’s calling on me to come back here.” Donald put his

hand on Phillip's shoulder. "One of these days, Phillip, you're going to own your own piece of African veldt."

Phillip looked into Donald's eyes and smiled. "You can't imagine how excited that makes me feel."

"You'll be glad to know that things are running smoothly. We've received all the weapons taken from the army bases during the course of the night. Everything went as planned."

After they had finished their coffee, Donald said to Phillip: "Let's go and take a look at the plane."

"Don't be too long," Otto called. "Breakfast will be ready in a minute."

After greeting the three men working on the aircraft, Donald asked: "How is she?"

"Fuelled up and armed," the one man answered.

"I'm nearly finished with the new emblems," another man added. He was standing on a stepladder and was busy painting a large Jolly Roger symbol on the fuselage of the aircraft.

Donald pointed to the skull and crossbones on the side of the aircraft. "This was my idea," he said with a grin to Phillip. "How do you like it?"

Phillip grinned back at him "I just love it..."

# Chapter 2

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## **Wednesday, 12 April, 13:15. Noah's Cottage Restaurant in Wilmington, North Carolina, USA:**

Ken and Brad discussed the old times during their lunch, when both of them had worked for the FBI as Special Agents. Brad was still with the FBI, assigned to the head office in Washington DC. He was a middle-aged man with dark brown hair thinning out at the top and grey temples. He was dressed in a black suit with a white shirt and a black tie with thin white and maroon diagonal stripes.

“So what are you doing with yourself these days?” enquired Brad.

“I’m using my law degree and interest in computers and the Internet to consult companies on issues from computer security to software copyrights. From this I make enough money to take a number of breaks during the year, which I use for fishing and writing about my consulting work.”

After lunch Brad drank coffee and in an un-American fashion, Ken had a cup of black tea. An uncomfortable silence existed for a minute or two.

Ken broke the ice. “Well, I suppose you didn’t come all the way up here to see how I’m doing these days?”

“No, you’re right. I’ve actually got a little proposition for you. I suppose you’ve heard that Donald Morse escaped from prison about eighteen months ago. There just wasn’t any trace of him since then. But now he suddenly popped out as from nowhere. We ... uhm ...”

“And you would like me to go and bring him in again?” Ken completed the sentence for Brad.

“Yes, you couldn’t have put it better.”

“I didn’t resign from the FBI nearly two years ago just to go back again. I’m finished with the Bureau! I know you’re only following orders, trying to recruit me again. But I’ve done my share. I’ve got a new life now. It might not seem like much, but I’m enjoying myself. “

“I understand your feelings, Ken. But I would just like you to know where Morse has surfaced all of a sudden...”

“Well, where?”

“In South Africa.”

“That will not help change my mind. You know I’ve got bad memories of that place.”

“Well, I thought you might like to see your girlfriend again.”

“It’s over between us. After I got wounded in that armed robbery while I was on assignment in South Africa, I swore never to go back there again. There are just too many violent crimes after the new government got into power. When I got out of hospital, I asked Karen to marry me and come and live in the States with me. But she refused to leave South Africa. She said she still loved the place, had a good job, that she had family there, and wasn’t ready to leave.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that.” Brad looked genuinely sorry, although it might also have been for the fact that he knew his trump card had now just been rendered worthless.

“You know, I’m still in love with her, but I’m not going back there, not even if it will give me a chance to see her again,” added Ken.

“OK, I can see I’m not going to convince you,” said Brad. “You know where to get hold of me should you decide to change your mind.”

After a brief period of silence, Brad spoke again. “Could you give me some background on Donald Morse?”

“Donald completed a graduate degree in electrical engineering at the University of Arizona,” replied Ken. “He then worked for the Stanlock Missile and Space Corporation for a short while before starting his own arms manufacturing business with the aid of his father’s money and a loan. Not only did he manufacture arms, but he also acted as middleman for international arms deals, selling arms from other companies for a hefty profit to international customers.

“He came into contact with the South Africans in 1985 or 1986 and supplied them with missile technology and other weapons. He also spent time in partnership with their own state-owned arms manufacturing industry to develop certain weapons for their defense force. All of this was done in spite of a UN arms embargo against South Africa. He made millions of dollars and led a lavish lifestyle between 1986 and 1990. He

had several million-dollar houses, his own golf course and even owned a savings bank. He had one large yacht, a private jet and a small fleet of cargo ships.

“He was indicted in 1991 for transgression of the arms embargo, conspiracy, securities fraud, violations of the Arms Export Control Act and the Anti-Apartheid Act, money-laundering and filing false tax returns. He was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment without the option of parole.

“In his defense he said that he had helped the South Africans in the global fight against the threat of communism, a cause supported by America. He reckoned that America had withdrawn its support for the fight against communism in South Africa due to international pressure to denounce apartheid and to isolate South Africa economically from the rest of the world. He maintained that America had stabbed South Africa, and himself, in the back, by reversing their policies. In any case, that did not help him at all, and he went to jail.

“He became ever-increasingly disgruntled with the American system and started to show signs of far-right political views. He then escaped in 2000 and that was where I came in to help to catch him and get him behind bars again.”

**Thursday, 13 April, 18:10. Ken Palmer’s house:**

Ken Palmer sat stretched out in a lounge chair and watched the television news from INN. When the focus switched to a report from Karen Visser from South Africa, he picked up the remote control and turned the sound volume up.

“...a spate of robberies has occurred at various military bases through the course of the night. At the moment, we are standing next to the armory of the Tempe military base close to Bloemfontein, the capital of the Free State province. With us we have Lieutenant Colonel Abel Themba, the commanding officer of 44 Parachute Brigade.”

Karen looked at the colonel standing next to her. “Colonel Themba, can you tell us what happened here last night?” she asked and held the microphone close to the military officer’s lips.

“Last night some thieves broke into the weapons store and stole a number of weapons. They also stole a military transport vehicle, which was discovered early this morning about twenty kilometers from here. Unfortunately the truck was empty.”

“Colonel, is it possible to tell us what kind of weapons were stolen and the number of weapons that are missing?”

“We are updating the inventory of the weapons to determine what has gone missing. A large number of weapons have to be counted. At this

stage I cannot divulge any information about the kind of weapons nor the numbers of how many were taken.”

“Was any ammunition stolen, colonel?”

“Yes, we believe so. But again we have to do an inventory to determine what is missing.”

“Do you suspect an inside job?”

“At this stage I cannot comment on that. The military police and the police are investigating the theft. I can assure you that we will leave no stone unturned in order to find the perpetrators and to recover the stolen weapons.”

“Thank you, colonel Themba.”

The camera focused on Karen’s face and she continued: “We have information that similar robberies have occurred at another four military bases during the course of the night. In a statement released by the South African Defense Force, they have acknowledged that the robberies had taken place, but declined any further comment on the matter until such time that more information became available. This is Karen Visser for INN in Bloemfontein, South Africa.”

Using the remote control, Ken switched the television set off and got up out of his chair. He walked to his notebook computer placed on a desk in one corner of the room and switched it on. He went into the kitchen and made himself a cup of black tea. When he returned to the computer, it had already completed its start-up procedures and loaded the operating system. After seating himself in front of the computer, Ken took the mouse and clicked on an icon on the screen to open up his e-mail program. He scanned through the items in his inbox and read a few business-related e-mails.

After this, Ken spotted an e-mail message from an old friend and colleague of his, Charles Wood. The e-mail message discussed some UFO reports that Charles wanted Ken to look at. Since he had seen what he believed to be a UFO in his early teens, Charles always had a passion for this topic. The ridicule of his colleagues and friends had only strengthened his obsession with the subject and he left no stone unturned to convince his friends that UFO’s did in fact exist. The reason why this particular e-mail caught Ken’s attention was that it mentioned two UFO sighting reports from South Africa that had been taken from a newspaper report the previous day.

The report stated that there were two sightings on Monday night at approximately 19:30 in the Northern Cape Province, close to the borders with Namibia and Botswana. Farm workers who had been outside at the time had reported both sightings. The first sighting had happened about

forty kilometers west of the next one. In both cases the farm workers had reported a very loud whooshing sound and a large low-flying object moving very fast from west to east. In both cases, the object had moved directly overhead and it had moved too fast in the darkness to determine its shape. Furthermore, in both incidents the witnesses had been flung to the ground by an unseen force.

Ken mused for a short while over the report, wondering if it couldn't possibly have been an aircraft that the people had seen. Shaking his head, he muttered to himself: "A lot of strange things happening in that country lately..."

**Friday, 14 April, 01:20. The Atlantic Ocean, 160 kilometers west of Lüderitz on the Namibian coast:**

Theodor Bartlett gazed intently at the three blips on the radar screen on the bridge of the *Ocean Rover*. Theodor looked every bit the general idea of what a ship's captain should look like. He sported a full grizzly beard on his craggy face and wore a black and white cap with unknown insignia.

He looked up at the sailor manning the helm. "Jenkins, decrease speed to five knots, we don't want to get too close yet," he ordered the helmsman.

"Five knots, captain," Jenkins replied as he obeyed the order. Although Theodor was not the captain of a military vessel, nor a vessel in a recognized merchant fleet, he still insisted to be called "captain" by everyone on his ship.

The *Ocean Rover* was a Panamanian-registered 3000-ton ex-oilrig supply vessel with a high foredeck and a flat afterdeck the size of about three tennis courts. The ship's bridge was crammed with state-of-the-art electronics communications systems and both surface and air radar systems.

A green Super Puma helicopter perched on the *Ocean Rover's* afterdeck. Inside the helicopter two pilots and twenty-two men clad in dark camouflage combat uniforms sat strapped into their seats and waited patiently.

"What are you picking up now, Randall?" Theodor asked a man sitting behind a console containing a computer screen.

"I'm receiving incoming signals from all three radars, captain."

"So they know about us," Theodor said to no one in particular. He walked up to another man sitting behind a small box fitted with an array of buttons and knobs and a computer screen. The man had a set of earphones on his head that was connected to the small electronic device

in front of him. Theodor touched him on the shoulder and the man turned around with a quizzing expression on his face. Theodor indicated that he wanted to speak to the man.

“Have you picked up anything, Peters?” enquired Theodor after the man had taken the earphones off his head.

“Yes, captain, I’ve picked up radio transmissions from all three vessels. We know which frequencies they use.”

“Great,” said Theodor, “now we just have to be patient for another twenty minutes.”

### **Friday, 14 April, 01:22. Phillip Botha’s aircraft:**

The F/A-18 Hornet crossed the Namibian coast and for a very brief moment Phillip had a glimpse through his night-vision goggles of the waves breaking against the beach. The autopilot was switched on and the aircraft barely skimmed the surface of the Atlantic Ocean.

Phillip glanced at the radar screen to his right. On the left side of the screen he could make out three little green blocks grouped close together. A bit further to the right he spotted another little green block. He knew that the first two blocks on the left were the British plutonium-carrying cargo ship, the 7,000-ton *Atlantic Merlin*, and its Japanese military escort, the 6,500 ton cruiser *Daihyousha Maru*. The third ship in the group had to be the *Blue Dolphin*, the *Greenwoods* ship trailing the first two ships. He also knew that the ship on the right-hand side of the radar display was the *Ocean Rover*.

Phillip glanced at the heading tape in the aircraft’s HUD to make sure that he was still on an interception course for the first two ships on the left of his radar screen. As it had always been with him, just before the battle was about to commence, the familiar calmness was setting in, boosting his self-confidence for the task that lay ahead.

### **Friday, 14 April, 01:37. The bridge of the *Ocean Rover*:**

The man named Peters looked up from his screen towards Theodor Bartlett. “Captain, the *Atlantic Merlin*’s automatic position heading and speed reports have just been transmitted to England.”

Theodor looked up from the radar screen. “Right, gentlemen, the time has arrived. We have two hours until the next automatic transmission is due. Activate the Radar and radio jamming. Hit the buttons now!”

Two men sitting behind built-in consoles containing electronic buttons, dials and display monitors, moved their hands simultaneously and pressed some buttons and turned some dials on the consoles in front of

them. Everyone on the bridge was frozen for the next minute, waiting in silence.

“OK, Randall, how does it look?” Theodor asked the man behind the Radar Warning Receiver.

“No more incoming radars from the ships, captain. I’m picking up a signal from the aircraft, though.”

“Excellent!” Theodor walked to the man with the headphones on and touched his shoulder. “OK, Peters, tell us what you heard,” Theodor ordered after the man had lifted the headphones off his ears.

“All radio comms from both vessels have ceased, captain. Also, I couldn’t pick up any satellite phone or fax comms. I’ve also checked the VLF range. Nothing there.”

“This is it, gents!” Theodor barked. “Jenkins, full speed ahead! Anderson, tell the chopper to stand by for take-off!”

### **Friday, 14 April, 01:37. The bridge of the *Daihyousha Maru*:**

Lieutenant Yasuo Imoto stared out of the windscreen into the darkness. It was just another night watch on their long journey home. Conditions were calm and clear and everything was running smoothly. A short while ago, they had picked up a radar blip of another ship coming up behind the *Greenwoods* ship trailing them, but so far the unknown ship had kept its distance and there was no need for concern yet.

Yasuo’s thoughts drifted to his girlfriend in the city of Yokohama. They were alone in her small apartment and he was just about to kiss her full red lips when he was jerked out of his reverie by a shout from the surface radar operator.

“Lieutenant, the surface radar is on the blink!”

Just as Yasuo wheeled around a call came over the ship’s intercom system.

“Radio room to bridge. We have lost all radio communications.”

“What the hell is going on?” shouted Yasuo to no one in particular. “Is the power down or something?”

Before Yasuo could get an answer to his question, the surface to air radar operator spoke up: “Lieutenant, the surface to air radar is also not operating properly.”

The long hours of training started to direct the confused state of Yasuo’s mind to take control of the situation at hand.

“Go and wake up the technical support team,” he ordered a Seaman on the bridge. The Seaman immediately left the bridge on a trot.

The intercom crackled. “Incoming aircraft from the east,” the Seaman manning one of the outlook posts on the ship reported.

Yasuo's mind switched to overdrive. They had been prepared before the trip that there might be a possibility of a terrorist attack on the Atlantic Merlin, but the likelihood of that ever happening in real life seemed very remote. Given the current circumstances, his only deduction could be that such an attack was very imminent. The only problem was that the *Daihyousha Maru's* defense systems were now rendered useless, except for one possibility...

"Bring me the Stinger!" he bawled at another Seaman on the bridge. Yasuo stormed towards the door leading to the stairs, threw the door open and raced down the staircase leading to the ship's deck. The Seaman who had received the order first had to get the Stinger Surface-To-Air portable missile launcher, together with a missile round from the gun safe on the bridge.

On the deck, Yasuo could hear the engines of the F/A-18 Hornet aircraft as Phillip decreased speed to get a better view of the two ships. He turned around and spotted the light emitting from the aircraft's twin tailpipes.

The Seaman carrying the Stinger came to a halt next to him. Yasuo grabbed the grip stock assembly from him and with slightly trembling hands he inserted a battery coolant unit into its receptacle at the bottom of the grip stock. The battery coolant unit was used to energize the weapon's electrical circuits by means of a battery and to cool the infrared detector in the missile's seeker prior to launch. The grip stock was formed like a pistol grip and was used to fire the missile.

Feeling his heart pounding in his chest, Yasuo grabbed the missile round from the Seaman and fumbled to latch it onto the grip stock. Yasuo swore at his own clumsiness. He thought that it was all good and well to perform these procedures during training, but when the real thing eventually came your way, it was a different story altogether. Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity, the missile round was latched to the grip stock. The missile round consisted of a one-and-a-half meter long tube, with the stinger missile contained inside. Lastly, he mounted the night sight onto the missile round. He switched the night sight on and lifted the Stinger onto his right shoulder so that the long blowpipe extended over his shoulder to his rear. He activated the battery coolant unit by clicking the safety and actuator device on the grip stock in place and releasing it.

Yasuo firmly grabbed the pistol grip with his right hand and balanced the lower front part in his left hand. He pressed his eyes against the eyepieces of the night sight and proceeded to acquire the aircraft in the sight. The infrared capabilities of the night sight gave him a clear view of

the F/A-18 Hornet. Given the precarious circumstances that the ship and its crew were in, Yasuo decided to fire at the unknown aircraft. The only reason for the failure of the ship's radar and communications had to be that the ship was under attack. This meant that someone was after the nuclear cargo on the *Atlantic Merlin* and the *Daihyousha Maru*'s purpose on the trip was to protect the nuclear cargo. That was exactly what Lieutenant Yasuo Imoto intended to do.

As the aircraft started to move away from the ship, Yasuo aligned it in the Stinger's sight. The slow rolling of the ship's deck under his feet made his task difficult, but he managed to track the aircraft for a long enough period to allow the infrared detector to detect the heat emissions from the aircraft's engines. After hearing the infrared acquisition signal, he squeezed the firing trigger. A tongue of flame emitted from the launcher tube as the Stinger fired and the missile was pelted out of the tube by the launcher's ejection motor. At a safe distance of about nine meters from the launcher, the missile's rocket motor ignited and it sent the missile darting towards the aircraft at nearly twice the speed of sound.

**Friday, 14 April, 01:39. Phillip Botha's aircraft:**

Phillip Botha decided it was time to gain some height to get a better view of the situation. He gently pulled back on the stick and leveled the aircraft off at 500 meters above sea level at a speed of 200 knots. He passed over the two ships and managed to identify them both by using the aircraft's Forward Looking Infra-Red (FLIR) camera.

Phillip heard a short beep in his earphones, the tone of which indicated that the aircraft's Radar Warning Receiver (RWR) has tracked an incoming missile. Phillip's reaction was instantaneous, since years of training and combat experience taught him that there wasn't any time to waste trying to think about how to handle the situation when a Surface-To-Air missile (SAM) had been launched at such a close distance from the aircraft. He immediately knew that the missile must have come from a hand-held launcher, since the RWR had not given him any prior warning of a SAM radar source tracking his aircraft. Phillip pressed a button twice in rapid succession to launch two flares and threw the aircraft into a hard right 90-degree turn to the right. Both flares immediately ignited with bright flashes.

The speeding missile's infrared tracking system now had to distinguish between the heat signal from the aircraft's engines and that from the two flares. These flares were designed to be fiery hot materials that would mimic the infrared signature of the aircraft's engines. Although

the Stinger missile also employs a unique image scanning technique enabling it to discriminate amongst targets, flares, and background clutter, the mere fact that Phillip had reacted so quickly and had managed to turn the aircraft away from the path of the incoming missile, ensured that the missile decided to go for one of the flares.

A tense few seconds passed for Phillip as he continued the body-slamming G-force turn. When the sky lit up as the missile exploded against the flare, Phillip knew that he was safe for the moment, but he had to act fast before they could fire another missile.

Phillip decreased altitude to 40 meters above sea level and turned left to move away from the ship. He increased the aircraft's speed to 300 knots and waited until his aircraft was ten nautical miles from the two ships. He turned the aircraft in a sharp 180-degree turn to head back towards the ships. Phillip made sure of his altitude and checked on the radar screen that his aircraft was on the correct heading. After leveling the wings, he put the aircraft in autopilot mode.

**Friday, 14 April, 01:40. The afterdeck of the *Ocean Rover*:**

The *Ocean Rover* came to a stop. Four men standing next to the Super Puma helicopter on the afterdeck started to untie the mooring straps fastening the main rotor blades and the helicopter itself to the ship's deck and also released the wheel latches. The four men rushed out of range of the long main rotors. The helicopter's engine started with a whining sound and the rotor blades slowly came up to speed. After a few seconds the helicopter lifted off from the *Ocean Rover's* afterdeck and proceeded in the direction of the Atlantic Merlin.

**Friday, 14 April, 01:41. The deck of the *Daihyousha Maru*:**

Lieutenant Yasuo Imoto ordered the Seaman standing next to him to get more missiles from the gun safe on the bridge and to tell the bridge to sound the attack warning alert. The aircraft had disappeared from sight, but he was sure it was going to turn back to launch its attack.

At that moment, he felt a sickening ball tighten in the pit of his stomach. In the past few moments, everything had happened at such a pace that he had no time to think ahead. Although he had never experienced a situation such as this in reality, what he did know was that the aircraft most probably had one or more anti-ship missiles dangling from its wings. What he also knew was that most of this kind of missile could be fired by means of radar control, which meant that the pilot didn't have to have visual contact with the target ship. Another disconcerting thought was that it would be of no use for the ship to try and maneuver to a