

PROLOGUE

It was the distant blast of the whistle that woke her.

Straight from deep sleep to instant awareness, her eyes wide and her heart palpitating with apprehension. The sweat was cold on her ebony skin.

Was it the sound of a whistle? Had she dreamed it like so many times before? There was no sound from outside now apart from the incessant cicadas and the riverside bullfrogs.

She relaxed back on the moth-eaten pillow of the hotel bed and stared up at the ceiling fan that hadn't turned for ten years.

Of course it had been the dream. The same one that had haunted her since she was twelve years old. When the Renamo *bandidos* had come to her village with their guns and their pangas. And, of course, their whistles.

Pale predawn light washed the stark plaster walls and she could now see him more clearly on the bed beside her. Sleeping like a baby, curled up in a tangle of thin sheet, blissfully unaware of anything.

If it had been a whistle he would have heard. And if it had been he would know what to do. He always knew what to do. He would protect her as he always did. Five years ago he hadn't been there when the bandits came. But now he was and she was safe.

Tentatively she reached out to touch him, afraid that she would wake him and he would snap at her. Her fingertips glanced the tousled fair curls of his beard. She loved his beard and his hair. Most white men she had

known before Mike Branagh had been of Portuguese blood. They tended to be short with swarthy complexions and black hair. So it had been a shock when her family came to Gutala with the other refugees and she saw him for the first time.

He had been standing outside this very hotel, the only one in the town. The only place suitable for a white man to work. Two adjoining rooms: this bedroom and a second which served as an office.

As a twelve year old she remembered clutching her mother's hand, staring up at this towering stranger with his tanned face and the sun shining on his short golden beard and hair. An angel, she had thought, sucking on her thumb. Like the pictures in the tattered Children's Bible that was her mother's prized possession.

It had not occurred to her that angels don't wear denims and bush shirts; to her childish mind he had seemed nothing less than godlike as he laughed and joked with the nervous refugees. He had brought a smile to their faces for the first time in weeks while he handed out sacks of mealie and blankets.

Her eyes travelled to the upright chair by his bedside. The bottle of Jameson was almost empty. Last night, after making love, it had been half-full.

Even angels have bad dreams, she thought, and gently kissed his cheek. He stirred. Yes, just like her he had bad dreams. Sometimes she would wake and find him standing by the window. Staring out into his past and drinking slowly and steadily until some unwanted memory died.

Maraika sat bolt upright.

It was no mistake. A single whistle trilled, then another. More whistle blasts answered from a different place.

Momentarily she was paralysed, feeling the sudden thudding in her chest. 'Mikey! Mikey!' she hissed urgently.

There was no response. She shook him briskly, but he merely tried languorously to put his arm around her.

More whistles. Closer. Then a solitary gunshot.

Mike Branagh was awake.

‘Oh, God, Mikey!’

He screwed his eyes against the light. ‘What was that?’ She stared at him, not wanting to believe her own words: ‘*Bandidos*. I think it is *bandidos*.’

A stutter of gunfire ripped through the still dawn air like the sound of tearing calico.

Branagh was on his feet, naked and swaying slightly to keep his balance as he padded to the window. He cursed the pulsing ache that threatened to burst his skull in two.

The hazy light hurt his eyes as he tried to focus through the torn gauze of the mosquito gate. From this corner room on the second floor of the hotel there was a clear view down the main street of Gutala. The wide ribbon of ochre earth separated the Portuguese-style town centre buildings on either side. Farther down, the dilapidated Mediterranean stucco architecture gave way to the reed and wattle compounds of the civilian population.

It was from here that the gunfire and the screams came. And then the people.

Branagh could hardly believe what he was seeing as the first of Gutala’s inhabitants burst onto the dusty track, running and screeching in their terror. Some naked, some half-dressed, they came in a growing torrent. Young men, old women hobbling on sticks, mothers clutching their children. Others carried whatever few possessions they could snatch. They streamed down the road seeking safety in the town centre where there was a detail of Frelimo government troops.

He switched his attention to the dirt square beneath his window. Facing him was the shuttered and pockmarked headquarters of Embamo, the state-owned company which administered the district’s banana plantations. On

the west side stood the crumbling façade of the long-closed row of shops which served as a billet for the small government garrison.

The first of the soldiers emerged now. Dressed in a torn vest and camouflage fatigue trousers, he stumbled through the accumulated rubbish on the sidewalk and stared down the street at the clamorous tidal wave of humanity rushing towards him. He had no gun.

Branagh drew back and threw open the mosquito gate; the glass in the window had long gone. '*Bandidos!*' he yelled down. The soldier turned, his mouth agape. '*Bandidos* for Christ's sake, man! Wake up your bloody detail! Get your weapons!'

As Branagh's voice was drowned out by the rising cacophony of screams and shouts, punctuated by gunshots and whistle blasts, the soldier at last appeared to comprehend. He ran back into the shop doorway and returned with four companions. They all appeared disorientated, half-asleep, two of them just wearing sports shorts. But at least they carried rifles.

They stood watching as the people scurried past, calling out to demand what was happening. No one had a mind to stop and explain. The detail of soldiers began a heated debate on the sidewalk.

Branagh shook his head; he could guess what the outcome would be. He knew full well that part of the detail was supposed to spend each night in the sandbagged observation post on the hotel roof; it offered a commanding view of all approaches to the square. But he also knew that they never did for fear of being trapped there in the event of a Renamo attack.

One of the soldiers began pulling off his fatigue trousers, another tossed aside his forage cap. And as the first surge of terrified civilians passed, the soldiers joined the stragglers in their hurried exodus to the surrounding bush.

Smoke began rising from the outlying compounds as

huts were put to the torch. Now the earthen street was clear except for a few confused, crying toddlers who had become parted from their parents.

Then Branagh saw them.

The column of bandits strutted into view on the main street most of them with smart new uniforms and boots that glinted in the rising sun. They were led by a big officer who moved with a slow, elephantine gait. He blasted on the silver whistle in his mouth and the column immediately responded by separating into three sections. One charged into the compounds to the right and another to the left in a search for booty, while the rest advanced inexorably towards the square.

Branagh slammed the mosquito gate shut and turned into the room. Maraika hadn't moved, sitting at the bed-head with her long legs drawn up to her chin, clutching the sheet as though it would give her some protection.

He tossed across the yellow dress he had bought for her in the Mozambique capital of Maputo. 'Put that on. They'll be here in a minute.'

'It is the *bandidos*?'

He grabbed his trousers from the bed and pulled them on. 'Well it's not a bloody carnival – although no one told that to the Frelimo troops down there.'

'Are they shooting the *bandidos*?' she asked earnestly as she pulled the dress over her head.

'Are they hell!'

He glanced round the room, trying to size up the situation. They would have no time to get downstairs before the first of the bandits reached the lobby. And there was no escaping from the window that fronted the square.

He moved to the side window. That offered a little more hope as any descent would be partly obscured by a protruding neon sign that hadn't shown a flicker of life for a decade.

'Start tying the bedsheets together,' he ordered.

'I don't understand, Mikey.'

‘Like a rope, corner to corner,’ he snapped. ‘We’ll climb out.’ Sometimes her lack of worldliness could drive him mad. He flung open the wardrobe doors and extracted the stack of spare sheets. As he began knotting them, he again glanced out the window.

The bandits were fanning out across the square. Half a dozen women cowered on the sidewalk by the shops, having retrieved their wandering infants. He saw a bandit raise his rifle. Saw the muzzle flash. Then several of the bandits rushed at the mothers. Reflected sunlight on the bayonets shone and blinded him. The screams were piercing.

Maraika’s mouth dropped and she stopped what she was doing. He snatched the sheets from her and knotted them to the ones he had tied. ‘Get the side window open, quickly!’

As she rushed to obey he dragged the bed across the room until it was jammed fast beneath the sill. He secured one end of the sheet rope to a leg of the bed, and fed the other out of the window and down the outside wall.

Maraika’s eyes were wide with horror. ‘I can’t do that, Mikey! I will fall.’

‘No you won’t. Just hold on tight. It’s hardly thirty feet. And keep quiet. If you start screaming one of the bastards will hear you.’

She stared at the window, summoning her courage. If Mikey said she could do it, then she could. He always knew what to do.

There was a sudden crash of splintering timber from downstairs. He guessed it was the heavy front doors because the entire building seemed to shake. Gunshots followed, the sound echoing up through the stairwell.

A dog barked in the next room.

Branagh and the girl stared at each other. ‘Benjy,’ she said.

‘Christ, I’d forgotten he was here.’

‘Get him, Mikey.’

‘Of course.’ He pushed her towards the window. ‘Now out you go. When you reach the ground keep down. Go to the kitchen area at the back. Hide until I join you.’

He glimpsed the worn hole in her pants as she hiked up her dress, climbed the sill and gingerly lowered herself down hand over hand. Satisfied she could do it, he ran to the adjoining door which opened into the room he rented as an office.

Maraika’s younger brother was standing on tiptoe, peering out of the window in awe at the events happening in the square.

At his feet the boy’s scruffy three-legged mongrel was scampering in an agitated circle. The animal had once been foolish enough to stand in the middle of the street barking at an oncoming Frelimo truck which, not unexpectedly, had defective brakes. The dog had large watery eyes and a twist to its lips that gave the impression it was smiling at some private joke. It was smiling now as it approached Branagh, trembling with restrained enthusiasm, unsure whether to be pleased to see him or scared of the noise outside.

‘Come away from the window,’ Branagh called.

Benjamin looked at him. ‘They are the *bandidos*?’

Branagh nodded. ‘We must go.’

‘They look like soldiers.’

‘C’mon, Benjy, now.’

‘Our soldiers ran away.’

Branagh took the eleven-year-old boy by the arm. As he did so he heard heavy footsteps thumping up the stairs, then the sound of doors being kicked open. There was a sudden rattle of gunfire from outside. A stray shell shattered the last remaining pane of glass in the office window, and they both ducked.

He pushed the boy through into the bedroom.

‘Where is Maraika?’ Benjamin looked around, astonished, as though witnessing some conjuring trick.

‘Out the window, where you’re going. Quick now,

down the sheets. Hold tight. Sure I'll be right behind you.' He lifted the boy onto the sill.

'I must take Dog.'

Branagh smiled tersely. 'You can't take Dog. You'll fall.'

'You bring Dog.'

'Even I need two hands, Benjy. Dog will be safe here. We'll get him later.'

Unhappily the boy swung his legs out and began to lower himself down.

The footsteps in the corridor were nearing fast and Branagh followed the boy hurriedly. His last sight was of the bemused dog barking, its head tilted to one side in curiosity as to why it was being abandoned.

Through the broken tubing of the neon sign he could see the milling group of bandits in the square. He prayed that they were too preoccupied to notice him. He was halfway down when the rotten material of the sheet began to give. He heard it rip and felt the friction scrape of the wall against his knuckles as the sheet tore. Then he was airborne.

He hit the hard earth, landing awkwardly in a pile of garbage. A sprained ankle was the least of his worries; thankfully he was now hidden from the bandits in the square by a corrugated-iron compound fence that abutted the hotel.

Ignoring the sparks of pain in his foot he hobbled after Benjamin who was already making his way to the rear of the building. In the yard was the open-air kitchen that served the hotel, blackened pots of burnt maize porridge still steaming on the charcoal embers. The wattle huts of the staff were deserted, except for Maraika who appeared anxiously from one of them.

'We hide here?' she asked.

Branagh shook his head. 'That smell of food will attract them.'

'There is the log-store,' Benjamin suggested.

It was a woven eucalyptus structure standing some thirty metres outside the kitchen compound. Inside the collected brushwood was piled on a raised slatted floor which allowed air to circulate. A good place to hide.

‘Follow me,’ he said. ‘Watch how I move and copy. Keep your bottom down.’

Dropping to all fours he began a fast leopard crawl across the intervening stretch of scrub, using a slight indentation in the ground for cover. Maraika followed with a poor imitation of his movements and he waited nervously for a bandit to raise the alarm. None came. Benjamin’s effort was much more accomplished.

Once they were together Branagh found a way to squeeze under the pontoons into a dark area with just enough headroom to sit. It allowed a good view of the square through the narrow gaps of the weave. Outside, the killing appeared to have stopped and the bandits were starting to concentrate on the systematic searching and looting of every building in sight.

At one point two Renamo bandits approached the log-store, opened the door and inspected the stacks of tinder with disinterest. Food or medical supplies were what they really sought. Besides which their comrades had found some cans of beer in the *cantina* and the bandits were more keen to drink that than to search for hiding villagers.

As they went away laughing, Maraika whispered: ‘I wish you had a gun. Like Senhor da Gruta.’

Branagh said: ‘One gun against that lot wouldn’t do us much good.’

‘You could kill some of them.’

‘Then they would kill us.’

In the darkness of the store her eyes were bright and white as she looked at him curiously, thinking on his words. ‘You were a soldier once.’

‘A long time ago.’

‘If you had a gun you would know what to do. Senhor da Gruta has a gun and he has never been a soldier.’

Branagh smiled. 'Jorge would be more danger to himself than the *bandidos*.'

As luck would have it for Jorge, the da Gruta family was away in Portugal to attend the funeral of Jorge's father, Dom Pedro. Branagh had never met the grand old nobleman, but he had heard plenty about him. How his unbroken lineage could be traced back five hundred years to aristocratic forebears who had dared to venture beyond Portugal's Cape St Vincent. In their fleet of fast caravelles the da Grutas had explored all the way from Angola to the Cape of Good Hope, to here in Mozambique in South-East Africa, and beyond to Macao, Java and the fabulous riches of the Spice Islands.

Those voyages were to mark the beginnings of the da Gruta dynasty and a commercial empire that once girdled half the globe, including the vast banana and cotton plantations around Gutala.

But in the end it all went wrong. Centuries of poor management, lavish spending and gambling debts saw the business empire break up and fortunes dwindle until only the Gutala estate was left. Dom Pedro apparently did what he could to halt the slide when he inherited the title after the Second World War, later sending his son Jorge to manage the estate personally.

Poor Jorge. He'd just got the estate in order when the 1974 coup d'état in Portugal toppled the fascist regime of Marcelo Caetano. The ripple effects were to be felt throughout the country's empire. With inflation rampant the Portuguese peasant economy had been collapsing under the weight of fighting colonials with 150,000 conscripts in Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique. Within a year Lisbon had abandoned the colony to the Frelimo liberation movement which had been fighting for ten years.

Portuguese landowners and businessmen fled in their thousands almost overnight. The uncertainty and upheaval of the period placed a crippling strain on the da

Grutas' already diminished resources. It was almost a relief to Jorge when Frelimo adopted its Marxist policy and nationalised the run-down estate, renaming it Embamo, the Mozambique Banana Company.

With all the little remaining family wealth tied up in Mozambique, Jorge and his wife had no option but to accept Frelimo's offer for them to manage the plantations they had once owned.

Now Jorge had the unenviable task of burying his father, selling off the dilapidated family estate in Portugal to meet death duties and to inherit a worthless title. An inglorious end.

But at least he hadn't had to witness this Renamo attack. One had to be thankful for small mercies.

Benjamin had been watching silently through the walls. Suddenly he turned: 'They are setting fire to the school now, Senhor Mike.'

Branagh had a sinking feeling as he looked out. It had taken local villagers a year to build the school with their bare hands under his supervision. It was Gutala's show-piece. Soon there would be nothing left. 'When the *bandidos* have gone we'll build another one. Bigger and better.'

The boy looked dubious. 'There will be no people here.'

'They'll come back.'

'You will stay?'

'I'll stay, Benjy.'

'And we will still read the stories about Jesus every Sunday? Like before?'

Branagh ruffled the coarse black hair of the boy's head. 'Just like before.'

Christ, Branagh thought, what must be going through the child's mind. Women and toddlers shot on the street, his entire world going up in flames, not yet knowing what had happened to the rest of his family – and all he's worried about is Bible stories at Sunday school.

Branagh had run the class every week for years. He'd started it when there was no school at Gutala, as a way of teaching the children to read. It had proved very popular, even with the parents. The country's predominantly Catholic religion had not been encouraged by the Marxist government and a lot of the people had clearly missed it.

Benjamin was fascinated by the stories of the miracles, particularly the one about the loaves and fishes. That probably came of being permanently hungry.

'He's very fond of you, Mikey,' Maraika had told him once. 'He tells me he wants to be like you when he grows into a man.'

Even now Branagh remembered his reply. 'Poor little sod.'

At the time Maraika had not heard. 'He enjoys Sunday school. He likes to learn. He says maybe he wants to be a priest one day – but he has never met a priest. When you first tell Bible stories he thought you were a priest. He wants to wear a crucifix like yours.'

In the darkness of the log-store Branagh found himself absently fingering the gold cross and chain at his throat. For a moment he wasn't there, perspiring even in the darkness with the hot African sun rising to its full strength outside. He was four thousand miles and a lifetime away on the dank mean streets of Belfast.

Under his breath he said: 'Maybe if he met a real priest he wouldn't want to be one.'

It was during that momentary lapse of concentration that it happened.

'Dog!' Benjamin shrieked.

Branagh heard the barking and turned his head to see the three-legged mongrel standing his ground defiantly against a group of laughing guerrillas in the square. Then he saw the pistol being drawn. Heard the short, sharp report of the single shot.

The barking stopped and the laughter renewed.

And Benjamin was gone. Branagh grabbed for him

but it was too late. The boy squeezed deftly between the pontoons and was out through the door before Branagh could get to his feet.

Maraika saw the youngster race across the hard earth of the square with rising horror. Her mouth fell open as she watched him run straight to the dead dog, drop to his knees and hug the limp body to his chest.

Her scream was stillborn, gagged as Branagh's hand closed swiftly over her mouth. He pulled her roughly to him.

'Quiet!' he hissed. 'There's nothing you can do!'

Her big eyes stared at him wildly above the mask formed by his hand, but he held her fast until he felt her trembling anguish subside.

Benjamin had left his dog and was now beating his small fists against the chest of the bandit with the pistol. The man and his colleagues laughed heartily at the display of innocent courage. But after a few moments they became bored with the ineffectual attack, seized the boy by the arms, and marched him out of sight.

'What can we do?' Maraika whispered.

Branagh felt the nausea rise from the pit of his stomach. 'Nothing, girl. There's nothing we can do. Just wait.'

She looked at the crucifix around his neck. 'And pray?'

It was dusk before the Renamo bandits melted back into the bush. They disappeared just minutes before an armed convoy of Frelimo government troops arrived to begin an unenthusiastic sweep of the township. There was no attempt at hot pursuit; everyone knew the night belonged to the bandits.

By the flickering light of bonfires the corpses were laid out in the square. One hundred and three of them.

With a subdued Maraika at his side, Branagh walked along the rows. There were men, women and children. Some had died by the bullet, others by the panga.

Benjamin was not among them.

As the inhabitants began drifting back from the bush

the word was that some sixty able-bodied townspeople, men and women, had been *raptado* – abducted to act as porters to carry away the spoils of Gutala.

They learned that Maraika's home village of Tumbo, ten miles to the south, had also been sacked by the bandits. Her parents and sister had escaped, but her youngest brother Jaime, just nine years old, was also missing.

All night long the fires burned, casting fitful, macabre shadows around the walls of the square, silhouetting the tableau of mourners who came to identify their dead.

Branagh sat alone on the hotel verandah by the light of a hurricane lamp. He could just hear the inconsolable sobbing of Maraika from his room above as sleep eluded her.

And like her he could not shake the thoughts of the two young brothers from his mind. Such gentle, happy kids, despite their deprivation in this country which seemed to know no end of suffering.

He had not seen much of little Jaime, who had spent most of the time with his parents in Tumbo village. But he had come to know Benjamin well, as the boy was often left in the care of his older sister – too boisterous for the ageing Matusis to handle. That same energy was welcomed by Branagh who found Benjamin a willing helper when distributing aid sacks or on the various building projects around the district. Or perhaps the true incentive was the chance to ride in Branagh's Land-Rover, which he seized at every opportunity.

Despite the sorrow of the day an involuntary half-smile came to Branagh's face. He had grown very fond of the boy. Although he had never married, he had often wondered what it would be like to have a son. Perhaps in Benjamin he had discovered the answer. The two of them would spend hours together in the safe bush around the village while Branagh taught him the fieldcraft he himself had learned so many years before.

Benjamin had become an excellent tracker – his

eyesight that much sharper than his teacher's – and it frequently resulted in a vastly appreciated addition to the family cooking pot. They would borrow an ancient rifle from the local militia and Branagh would teach him how to use it safely.

Once the boy had asked him why he would never handle the gun except to explain how it worked. He had simply smiled and said: 'It's a long story.'

His memory of those words and the expression of curiosity in the boy's eyes lingered with him now as slowly and steadily he drank his way through the bottle of whiskey until his burning anger was quelled.

Never again, he murmured to himself. Never ever again.

Silently he watched the moon and the stars and a giant moth battering itself against the lamp.

He fingered the small gold crucifix at his throat. It had always so fascinated Benjamin that he had resolved to make the boy a present of it for his next birthday.

Branagh had no use for it. Perhaps he never really had.