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They had almost reached the gates of the farm when Natalie heard the sharp wail. At first she thought it was the cry of a bird, but as she listened it subsided into a gurgling sob, soft and all too human. She glanced around but could see nothing. At the foot of the slope, her uncle turned his horse and waved impatiently. Natalie held up her hand. She was about to move forward when she heard it again, to her left.

Turning in her saddle, she scanned the undergrowth and the low brush. She nudged the horse closer to the thicket and the granite boulders, peering into the shadows. The irritation was clear in her uncle's posture as he turned his horse and began to make his way back up the slope.

'What is it?'

'I heard a cry.'

Natalie slipped down off the horse.

'It was probably a bird.'

'No,' she said. 'It wasn't a bird.'

'What kind of a cry?'

Natalie didn't have to answer as the thin wail rose again, insistent and clear above the noise of the cicadas and rock thrush.

'Up there.'

They had set out early from the farm, before the sun had

risen and it had just begun to get light as they started the climb up the long, slow hill back home again. All around, Natalie could hear the sound of the morning: the squeak of the boulder chaff, the reeling martins. They had ascended from woodland and ahead, at the crest of the kopje, three large boulders were balanced one on top of the other, as if placed there by some giant. They pulled their horses up side-by-side and gazed at them in silence.

‘Drew’s Kopje,’ Roy, her uncle said, motioning with his hand. ‘Named after your great-uncle.’

Natalie nodded. She was about to move the horse forward, but her uncle held out his hand and stopped her. The early morning air was cold and slightly damp from the night. It had been colder than Natalie had anticipated. The breath of the horses lingered in the air.

‘Wait,’ her uncle said.

The horses were content to stand there, lowering their heads to feed on the coarse tufty grass. Natalie cast a quick sidelong glance at Roy, a stern man in his late fifties. His hair was short and greying; his face tanned deeply, like leather. There was not a spare inch of flesh on him. He was a man of few words and Natalie felt uncomfortable in his presence. Looking at him now, in the early morning light, she could see almost no resemblance to her mother, a soft-featured, gentle, bookish woman.

‘See?’

The light was changing, almost as if the brush around them had begun to glow from some internal energy. A moment later the top boulder flamed, brilliantly illuminated. Within minutes, the three rocks were consumed, glistening in the light of the rising sun.

‘Incredible,’ Natalie breathed.

Her uncle nodded, nudging his horse forward along a narrow path that cut up the side of the hill around the glowing stones.

‘The natives used to consider this a sacred place. Home to

their ancestral spirits.’

The farm at the bottom of the hill, which they were circling back towards, was at the end of the Mazowe Valley in northern Zimbabwe. It was fertile land, though its careful cultivation had begun to look a little dilapidated. As they drove in on the road from Harare, Natalie had noted the number of farms that had fallen into disrepair; agricultural machinery rusted gently, unused, in the blistering sun. Here and there, on these farms, elderly men worked small patches of the red soil with primitive implements, pausing, briefly from their labour to watch as the wheels of the Land Rover sang past on the hot tarmac.

There were other farms, though, large, neatly trimmed estates; evidence that commercial farming was continuing. Large citrus orchards stretched away into the distance and up near Bindura a copper mine scarred the beauty. The Drew farm was at the far end of the valley. Steep hills rose around it, granite capped, frilled with lush, dark vegetation. The main farmhouse was large and airy, with oak panelled walls, and a large veranda from which you could look out not only across the farm, but along the road to Bindura, and the surrounding countryside.

As they rode up over the back of Drew’s Kopje, Natalie saw the large Jacaranda that marked the gateway to the farm. In the early morning sunlight, its blue flowers glowed hazily. It was hard to gaze out across the landscape and not be moved by the large cerulean expanse of sky, the granite kopjes, the purple hills in the distance, the thin line of smoke rising from the thatched roofed village huts, the elegant Jacaranda carpeting the dirt with its blossom. Natalie hesitated a moment, letting her uncle draw ahead. She stopped the horse on the crown of the hill and breathed in deeply.

The air was alive with the sound of insects and birds. Yet at the same time it seemed silent. There was not, she realised, the sound of a single engine. No car. No plane. She listened intently. Nothing but the sounds of nature. Natalie wasn’t

sure she had ever experienced this pure absence of noise before. Even the previous night, as she sat on the veranda of her cottage and listened to the bellow of bullfrogs, there had been the sound of the generator, and somewhere in the main house the low, muffled, melancholy of American country music on the radio.

There was something primordial about this peacefulness. Something deeply moving. She exhaled slowly, breathing out all the pain and the darkness.

It was then, as she rode down towards the farm, trailing her uncle, that she heard the sound of crying.

‘Where did it come from?’ her uncle asked, pulling his horse round and riding back up to Natalie.

‘Up there.’

Natalie pushed through the branches, the thorns scratching at the red uncovered skin on her forearms and scrambled up onto the boulders. The baby lay on the top, nestled within the smooth indentation on its surface, swaddled loosely in a dirty rag. It could have been no more than a few weeks old. She dropped down onto her knees beside the little bundle, her heart thumping. She half reached out to touch the exposed plump cheek, but stopped herself. The baby looked up at her, its eyes a dark brown, tinged with blue. Her fingers fluttered across her belly.

‘Anything up there?’

‘Yes,’ she called back down to her uncle. She paused, breathless.

The baby was silent, fascinated by her; the small eyes following her every move. As it breathed out, small bubbles burst on its lips. Dribble trickled down its cheek, settling in the shell of its ear. Mucus frothed freshly from its wide nostrils. The small, dark forehead was smooth, though the skin flaked a little, and beneath its eyes stark creases gave it a look of world-weary knowingness. She listened to the sound of its breaths, shallow, light as the whispers of wind in the dry grass. Her uncle’s head appeared close behind her.

‘What is it?’

‘A child,’ Natalie said. ‘A baby.’

‘Pass it down.’

She had never held a child before. She wasn’t sure how to pick it up. Gently pushing her fingers under the body, she levered it into her hands. The baby watched her. It felt so light, almost no weight at all. She cradled it in the crook of her arm and touched its cheek with her right hand; the baby gazed up at her, deep into her eyes with the wisdom of ages and she felt her heart turn. A bubble rose from the core of her being and a pressure built behind her eyes. Her throat constricted and her eyes began to glaze. Suddenly she felt tears streaming down her cheeks and the bubble tight and hard in her throat.

‘Pass it to me,’ her uncle said.

His voice was gentle and though he must have seen the tears he did not mention them. Natalie passed the baby across the hot stone to her uncle, who took it naturally and, holding it high, turned and worked his way back through the bush towards the waiting horses.

‘Do you think the mother is around somewhere?’ Natalie asked.

She had brushed the tears from her face with the cuff of her shirt, but still she avoided meeting her uncle’s eyes.

‘Can you see anyone?’ her uncle answered matter-of-factly.

‘No.’

‘Anyone there?’ her uncle called, his voice echoing from the boulders and down the cleft they had arisen from, bouncing from one kopje to another. The insects sang. Birds fluttered away, startled, from the tops of the trees, and something scurried in the undergrowth a few feet away.

‘If it had been left there the birds would have had it before the morning was out,’ Roy said. ‘That or an animal. It wouldn’t last long.’

‘Who do you think left it there?’

‘It looks fairly new-born.’

‘But why?’

Her uncle shrugged. ‘Perhaps they couldn’t afford to raise it.’

‘And just left it to die?’

When she had mounted her horse, she took the baby from Roy, holding it tight. The baby began to cry and she loosened it a little, holding it nervously. She tried speaking to it, but she didn’t know what to say.

‘You’ll be okay with it?’ her uncle asked.

She nodded, taking the track slowly. As they passed beneath the Jacaranda it showered them with blue flowers so that when they arrived on the farm, they were confettied with delicate petals, Natalie with the baby lulled to sleep.

Her aunt Kristine’s face, when she saw them, was a mixture of laughter and concern.