

# Out of the Frying Pan



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———— JANET E. GREEN ————

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*This book is dedicated to my sons,*

*Shaun and Jamie.*



# 1

## *Nairobi, Westgate Shopping Mall*

Sharba was in one of the toilet cubicles in the ladies' room at the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi when she first heard what sounded like muffled explosions outside. Idly wondering what was happening, she emerged and went to wash her hands before moving to face a mirror where she started to fix her hair and makeup. Behind her, in the mirror's reflection, she saw a beautifully dressed African lady of about thirty years of age come out of one of the other toilet cubicles and approach the basins. It was at that moment a huge explosion reverberated through the room making everything vibrate. Startled, Sharba turned to the African lady who also looked confused. Before either of them spoke, a harsh staccato of rifle shots rang out and echoed around the room. They sounded very close.

'Oh my goodness, there must be a robbery in progress,' the African lady spluttered, her eyes looking round and frightened. 'Maybe we should stay in here until things quieten down because those shots seemed to be just outside the door!' Her lips trembled as it dawned on her how very close they were to the danger. 'Let's get to the back of this room and then we can dodge into one of the cubicles if we hear anyone coming,' she suggested, as the need for self-preservation kicked in.

Both women rushed to the back of the room and stood against the wall, listening to the noise outside. There was another huge explosion and more rifle shots, then terrified screams and panicky

yells pierced the atmosphere. It was the screams and yells that made the most impact on the two scared women. They conveyed a picture of the utmost horror being witnessed by the people who uttered the calls of distress. Icy chills shot up Sharba's spine as the piercing intonations of terror impinged upon her ears and jarred her very soul. Although they could see nothing from where they were standing, the drama of what was going on outside seemed to infiltrate the ladies room and Sharba felt the tension rise as they cowered in the half light against the back wall.

'It's got to be more than a simple robbery,' Sharba said rather shakily. 'It sounds more like a war!'

Things didn't quieten down and the two young ladies became more and more apprehensive as the time went on. The smell of cordite permeated the room and everything shook as further explosions occurred.

'I can't bear not knowing what's going on,' whispered Sharba at last. The uncertainty of their predicament was torture and she felt she just had to try and get a better idea of what was happening. 'I'm going to go to the door and have a peek.'

'Be careful,' said the African lady, who was obviously too scared to move.

Sharba went cautiously to the door and eased it open a crack so that she could peep out. 'Oh my goodness,' she whispered as she witnessed a horrific scene.

'What is it? What's going on?' the African lady asked unsteadily; she was still flattened against the far wall looking absolutely terrified.

'There're people with rifles,' Sharba said, her voice cracking with fear. 'They look like jihadi fighters.'

'It must be a terrorist attack!' The African lady's face was a mask of horror. 'Don't let them see you!' she urged in a whisper.

Sharba stayed by the door for a few more moments, horrified by the scene unrolling before her eyes. She could see two men with rifles, and they seemed to almost causally throw grenades in all directions and then use their rifles to pick off the terrified people fleeing from the carnage as the grenades exploded. There were women and children among the men, all all running for their lives. Some of them were bleeding from gunshot or shrapnel



wounds and many of them were screaming. Another jihadi appeared on the scene and joined in the shooting and Sharba noticed the grin on his face as his finger gripped the trigger. She closed the door and retreated to the far wall next to the African lady.

‘We’re in real trouble,’ she whispered shakily. ‘They’re killing everyone they can and if they come in here, they’ll kill us as well because there’s no way of escape except through the main door.’

‘I don’t want to die!’ The African lady’s voice began to rise with panic. ‘I only came to the mall to buy my mother-in-law a birthday present; I didn’t come here to be killed! I have a little girl; she’s only three and she needs a mother!’

‘It’s okay,’ said Sharba. She could see the African lady was getting hysterical and she needed her to calm down if they were to have any chance of escape. Somehow the other woman’s panic was helping her to keep her own terror in check.

‘My name’s Sharnique; what’s your name?’ Sharba had been known by that name for some years now, so it seemed natural to introduce herself that way.

‘Angela.’

‘Okay, Angela, let’s keep calm and we’ll make a plan to escape. At the moment, the jihadi fighters are close by, so we’ll stay here and hide in the toilets if we hear them coming in. We need to be very quiet—and we’d better turn off the ringtone on our mobile phones because we don’t want them ringing and drawing attention to us. When things quieten down a bit and it feels safer, we’ll leave here and try and find a way out of the building. Are you alone or did you come to the mall with someone?’

‘I’m alone; Wanjiku, my daughter, stayed with her father while I came here. Are you also alone?’

‘No, my partner went to Nakumatt supermarket and we arranged to meet in the Java Coffee Shop in about fifteen minutes.’

Sharba wondered briefly if Oliver was okay. She felt sure that he must be, because he was the sort that always managed to wriggle out of trouble no matter how bad things were.

‘I’m going to take another peek,’ Sharba told Angela after a while when things had quietened down a bit. ‘If I think it’s all clear, I’ll give you a wave and we’ll make a break for it together.’

Sharba went to the door again and opened it a crack. She could see bodies on the floor and pools of blood which had also splattered up the walls in places, but the jihadis seemed to have moved on for the time being. For a moment, the sight of violent death and the smell of the blood brought back unwelcome memories from the past that Sharba had banished from her mind for many years. She felt her resolve wavering momentarily, but then she impatiently pushed the memories out of her head and turned to Angela.

'Come on,' Sharba waved to her, and the African lady came rather hesitantly. 'Now just follow me,' Sharba instructed. 'Don't look at anything or it'll upset you. I'll run from place to place where we can take cover if they come back, and we'll try and make our way out of the mall.'

Sharba sensed Angela hesitating as soon as she saw the carnage, so she grabbed her hand and pulled her along as she made for a counter behind which they could duck if a jihadi appeared. Pausing there for a second, she moved on, darting from one place to another while detouring around bodies and trying not to step in the pools of slippery blood. They had only gone a short distance from the ladies' room when they were brought up short by a hissing noise. Looking in the direction from which it came, Sharba saw a brown arm beckoning to them from out of what looked like a cupboard. She made her way towards it pulling Angela behind her.

'Come, come...we can all squeeze in,' said a voice when they got to the arm. The door opened wider and Sharba could see it was a dimly lit broom cupboard and a small Asian woman was urging them to join her inside. The Asian lady shut the door when they had all squeezed in.

'You mustn't move around outside or you'll attract the jihadis' attention and they'll come back and start searching for survivors to shoot,' she told them, her tone urgent.

Sharba noticed that the Asian lady looked about fifty and her black hair was shot through with threads of white. Her face was tense and pale, but she was in control of her emotions and her rather severe expression indicated she would not tolerate any foolishness.

‘We wanted to find a way of escape out of the mall,’ said Sharba.

‘No! That’s much too dangerous! You’ll bring them back, and those who’ve been able to evade them will be shot! Just wait here for the security services to regain order.’ The Asian lady then pressed her lips together in a way that signified that the subject of escape was not up for discussion.

It was stuffy and hot in the dim cupboard and Sharba, who was the closest to the door, opened it a crack and peeked out. She could just see the entrance to the toilet block from which they had come and suddenly she stiffened as she saw a jihadi appear and open the door to the ladies’ room. She heard him shout something and then there was a long burst of rifle fire. She shuddered as she quickly closed the cupboard door because she realised that the man had not bothered to check if anyone was in the toilet cubicles. Instead, he had instead fired into each and every one of them, and had she and Angela been in there still they would have been killed.

‘Are you all right?’ whispered the Asian lady, noticing Sharba’s face. ‘Put your head between your knees if you’re feeling faint.’

‘No, I’m okay,’ said Sharba. ‘It’s just that I’ve seen one of those bastards shoot up the toilets where we were hiding a few minutes ago.’

‘Yes, well you’re safe here for the time being,’ said the Asian lady. ‘My name’s Myia. I own the flower shop.’

Sharba and Angela introduced themselves and then they sat in silence for a while. After a bit Angela got her mobile phone out to call her husband. It was then that Sharba realised that she had left her own mobile phone next to the basins in the ladies’ room. She had put it there when she had turned off the ringtone and forgotten to pick it up when they had left.

‘If you’re going to use your phone, keep you voice down and make sure the ringtone is turned off as well,’ Myia instructed Angela.

When Angela’s husband answered her call, she told him in hushed tones what had happened. But as she related to him the events that had occurred, she became more and more agitated, her voice starting to rise to a frantic wheezy whisper and tears splashing down her cheeks.

‘Quiet now!’ said Myia sternly.

Angela ended her call quickly. ‘My husband is very worried and he says I must stay where I am until we get rescued,’ she told the other two ladies with a sniff.

‘Quite right!’ said Myia.

But Sharba wanted to try and get away from the mall, away from the violence and the blood and the atmosphere of malevolent hatred that seemed to seep into their hidey-hole. As well as everything else, she was experiencing claustrophobia in the hot cupboard, and could feel the perspiration breaking out on her face when she thought of what would happen if they were discovered in this small space. They’d be trapped like rats in a barrel and not even have the chance of running for their lives. However, the other two convinced her that she would be endangering them all if she made a run for it, so she sat quietly trying to control her emotions.

‘Earlier, one of those men was shouting, “Muslims, get out of here!”’ Myia told them. ‘He was letting go the ones who could prove they were Muslim. When he went away, I saw a Muslim woman take off her niqab and tear it into strips which she handed to the women around her to wear as Islamic-style headscarves. She is a good woman, very brave.’

‘Maybe we should try and make ourselves look more Islamic,’ suggested Angela. ‘I bought three lovely scarves for my mother-in-law, so maybe if we wear them Islamic style we’ll be less of a target.’ She dug in her bag and brought out the scarves.

The three women put the scarves around their heads in an Islamic fashion, hoping it might just help them to evade being singled out as infidels.

‘You need to hide your eyes,’ Myia told Sharba. ‘They have an oriental look about them that’s a dead giveaway. Have you got any sunglasses?’

‘No, I’m afraid I left them in the hotel,’ said Sharba.

‘Well, have mine then,’ said Myia. She got them out of her bag and gave them to Sharba. They had very ornate frames which were heart-shaped and surrounded by flowers, not the sort of sunglasses Sharba would ever choose to wear, but this was not a time to be fussy and when she put them on they not only hid her

eyes but also half covered her face.

'I heard one of the jihadis asking a man to name the mother of the prophet; the man claimed to be a Muslim and he was asked that question to prove it. But he hesitated before answering and so the jihadi shot him!' Myia told the other two women.

'Do any of us know anything about the Koran?' Sharba asked the others, but they both shook their heads. 'Well if we're asked, we'd better just make something up quickly,' she said. 'I bet those murdering bastards don't know much about the Koran, either!'

They sat cramped on the floor of the cupboard listening to the noise of shots and explosions going off in other parts of the building. Surely the security forces should have come and intervened by now, Sharba thought. But she couldn't discern any different patterns to the shots going off which would indicate that there was a battle between two sides. Then she wondered where Oliver was, and she found her thoughts drifting back to Australia where they had first met.

# 2

## *Holidaying in Australia*

Oliver had first spotted Sharba, or Sharnique as she called herself then, when he had been on holiday in Australia. He had booked a daytrip to the Pinnacles Desert and had noticed her immediately as she climbed aboard the coach that would take them there from Perth. She appeared to be travelling on her own, as was he, and she had on red shorts and a white sun-top covered with a loose blouse. The cloth hat on her head matched her shorts. Her figure was superb, but no better than dozens of girls he'd come across in Australia. It was her exquisite face that first attracted his attention.

There was definitely an oriental look to her almond-shaped, sparkling black eyes, but her hair fell in soft black ringlets and her complexion was rosy and touched with colour rather than being the rather sallow tint of someone from the east. Her full, sensuous lips parted in a smile of thanks as she sat down next to another woman who moved her bag to show the seat next to her was vacant, and Oliver noticed that the girl's teeth were very white and that she had rather endearing dimples in her cheeks. She was obviously of mixed race, but it appeared that she had been gifted with the very best aspects of each of the ethnic groups in her makeup.

Oliver had got to the stage in his life where he was actively looking for a woman to make his wife. His mother, who was now deceased, had taught him to live an organised life. She had impressed upon him that he should embark on a career of his choice and establish himself properly before he even thought

about marriage. Then she had cautioned him to look for someone special, someone who would enhance his life and help him to achieve his dreams.

‘You only have one life,’ his mother had told him. ‘And you need to make sure that the woman you choose looks up to you—you must be the centre of her life and she must do everything possible to please you and make your life happy.’

‘Is that even possible?’ Oliver had asked doubtfully. ‘Most women I know have their own agendas!’

‘Of course they do; that’s human nature. But you must be sure to pick a woman who’s malleable, so that you can mould her into a wife that will suit you. You’re the one who matters Oliver, you must never forget that!’

Oliver thought his mother’s words were wise, but he also had some ideas about the woman he would choose to be his wife. He had decided that she must be so beautiful that every man who saw her would be envious of him, and when he first set eyes on Sharba, he knew that she was the woman that he wanted because she was absolutely perfect. Covertly, he feasted his eyes on her for a while and the more he looked, the more he wanted her for his own. His mother had also taught him that if there was anything he wanted in life, he should go out and get it—no matter what it took.

‘There’s always a way,’ she had told him. ‘You just need to be persistent and never give up and then you’ll always get what you want in the end. Sometimes you’ll need to employ methods that are not conventional, but that’s all right. What’s important is that you achieve your objective!’

And now Oliver knew that he wanted the beautiful woman who had caught his eye. It was the right time to find a wife, as he had established himself as a very successful architect—a career which enabled him to live a very comfortable life. He had his own house and plenty of money in the bank, so now was definitely the time to get the perfect partner for life. Luckily, he had some good tools in his box for getting what he wanted; he was handsome and could be very charming. He was well-spoken, educated, and knowledgeable on many subjects. He also was full of confidence and was sure that any girl would be happy to link up with someone

who had money and a big house. Then it would just be a matter of moulding her into the woman that he required to make his life perfect.

Oliver decided that he would introduce himself to the beautiful lady that he had been admiring when they got to their first destination, Caversham Wildlife Park, and then take things from there. Already in his mind he had an unerring conviction that he and this girl were destined to be together. He had never felt like this before and, although it was a strange feeling, he couldn't deny that it was there, and he knew he must act on it and make the woman who had captivated him his own.

In keeping with his mother's guidance, Oliver had always pursued the things he desired with single-minded determination, not giving up until he had what he wanted. Now his eyes took on a rapacious glint as he scrutinised the woman who had attracted his attention. She was not wearing a wedding ring and she was travelling alone—which surely meant that she was single. This was a relief to Oliver, because the one thing he would never do was to make a play for a married woman. He decided that he would befriend this beautiful lady at the first opportunity that he had, and then slowly but surely draw her in until she felt at one with him.

When they arrived at Caversham Wildlife Park, Oliver allowed the girl to disembark first and then followed her. She, along with the others, was looking forward to feeding the kangaroos and he fell in alongside her as she offered a handful of food to one of the willing recipients who knew only too well that visitors meant food!

'Oh, you're absolutely gorgeous!' The girl laughed delightedly as the kangaroo nibbled the food out of her hand. 'I wish I could take you home with me; you're such a cutie!' She was so intent on feeding the kangaroos she was taken unawares when a gust of wind blew her hat off. It was Oliver's chance to swing into action and he deftly retrieved the hat, and, dusting it down first, he gave it back to her.

'Oh, thank you.'

'It's a pleasure,' Oliver said laughing. 'I'm guessing from your accent you've come all the way from England?'



‘Quite right,’ she replied, giving him a dazzling smile. ‘And I’m guessing from your accent you come from England as well!’

They introduced themselves to each other. Sharba told him her name was Sharnique Wellby and he said he was Oliver Naughton.

The rest of the coach party was made up of Americans, so it seemed natural for the two single Brits to pair up for the day. Sharba noticed that Oliver had a strong masculine face and he looked fit and healthy. His honey-blond hair hung to his shoulders and his greenish eyes were direct and penetrating under very dark straight eyebrows. His expression sometimes appeared almost arrogant, but somehow this added to his attraction.

Oliver made sure he sat next to Sharba on the coach when they moved on, and they chatted together easily as they headed for their next destination. Oliver needed to find out as much as he could about her, but he had to do it in such a way that she didn’t realise she was being hunted. He told her he was an architect and this was the first time he had been to Australia. She told him she had been saving for this trip since she was eighteen and it had taken her two years to get enough money together. Now she was back-packing around Australia on a shoestring, with the intention of seeing and experiencing all that she could of the country before her holiday came to an end.

‘And you’re doing this all alone?’ Oliver asked.

‘Absolutely,’ Sharba answered a little defensively. ‘How about you?’

‘I’m doing the same,’ Oliver replied, but his answer wasn’t strictly truthful. Although he was having a holiday in Australia, he wasn’t back-packing and it wasn’t on a shoestring. He was staying in expensive hotels rather than in back-packer accommodation and his budget wasn’t restricted in any way. But he didn’t want to tell Sharba that at this stage, because he sensed in her an independent spirit and decided that she would be drawn to him more readily if she felt they were more or less on the same level.

Sharba was quite happy to holiday in Australia alone, but during the barbeque that they enjoyed on the beach when they next stopped, she realised she was having more fun sharing this day with Oliver than if she had been alone. He was very good company, he made her laugh, and there was no denying that he

was stunningly good looking.

Oliver discovered that the girl he was so drawn to was an intelligent young woman who had very definite opinions of her own, but she made it clear from the start that she was not looking for commitment. However, he sensed she enjoyed his company and he decided he would just have to work on her gently until she changed her mind.

After their beach barbeque, they were taken on to the Pinnacles, where rocks rose mysteriously from the desert casting ghostly shadows on the ground. Both Sharba and Oliver thought it was a beautiful place in a different and unique way, but there were myriads of flies that tormented them the moment they stepped off the coach.

‘My God, I wish I’d brought some bug-repellent,’ said Oliver, brushing them away from his face, but Sharba didn’t seem too concerned about them. ‘Aren’t they driving you mad as well?’ Oliver was surprised that Sharba didn’t seem worried by them.

‘They’re only flies,’ she laughed. Just then one of the Americans approached Sharba and asked if she would be kind enough to take a group photo of the Americans with the Pinnacles in the background.

‘Of course,’ agreed Sharba, taking the man’s camera. ‘Where do I press?’

Sharba took three photos of the smiling group and then handed the camera back.

‘Thank you so much,’ the American beamed at Sharba. ‘Would you like me to take one of the two of you with your camera?’

Sharba and Oliver stood among the rocks with Oliver’s arm draped over her shoulders. ‘We look like an old married couple,’ Sharba laughed when they looked at the photo. Oliver laughed as well—if only Sharba had known what was in his mind!

On the last part of their daytrip, they were taken to the sand dunes where they could go sand-surfing. The golden sand was warm under their feet as they climbed to the top of the dune where the boards were laid out.

‘Have you ever done anything like this before?’ Sharba asked Oliver.

‘No—well, I’ve done some water-skiing, but nothing like this.’

'I haven't either, not even water-skiing.'

Some of the Americans had done it before and they were quick to get on the boards and go hurtling down the dunes. Some sat on the boards, others lay on them and went down headfirst, while the ones who were really experienced among them stood on their boards as if they were surfing the waves.

'I'm going to sit on my board because that looks the best way for a beginner.' Sharba got on her board and pushed herself off. It was exhilarating to sail down the dune with her hair being whipped up by the wind; it made her whoop in delight.

Oliver was not far behind her, but somehow he managed to upend his board as he got to the bottom of the dune and tumbled off in a shower of sand.

'Are you okay?' Sharba couldn't prevent herself laughing at his undignified landing. She helped him brush the sand off his back as he laughed with her.

Again and again, they trudged up the dune so that they could experience the thrill of surfing down it again. Sharba tried it headfirst and told Oliver to do it as well as it was even more exhilarating than just sitting on the board, but Oliver was happy just to sit. Very soon, they were both very sweaty and the sand that stuck to their moist bodies made them look sugar coated.

'That was so much fun,' Sharba said enthusiastically while trying to brush the sand away when the time came for them to board their coach again for their return trip to Perth. 'But I'm really going to enjoy my shower tonight!'

'Where're you staying in Perth?' Oliver asked Sharba.

'Rosebank Guest House,' she replied. 'It's lovely there and only a ten-minute walk to the centre of Perth. I've booked in for a few nights because there's quite a lot to do around Perth, then I'll be on my way again.'

'Do you think they might have room for me?' Oliver asked. 'I've been staying with an old friend that I've known for ages in Perth, but he's married now, and I have a feeling that his missus thinks I've overstayed my welcome. I need to move so that I don't cause any friction between Pete and Anna.'

It was a complete lie. Pete and Anna didn't exist, and Oliver had actually been staying at Pan Pacific Perth, but he didn't think

this would impress Sharba. Already he had ascertained that wealth and good living didn't inspire this lovely young woman in the slightest, and he decided it would be better to pretend that he was more or less in the same league as she when it came to finances. Moving into the hostel in which she was staying would be a good strategy, he decided, since he was determined to get close to her.

'I should think there's room,' said Sharba. 'It didn't seem full to me.'

The next morning Sharba wasn't surprised to see Oliver arriving with a battered old backpack. Unbeknown to her, he had ditched his expensive suitcases and bought a second-hand backpack in which to put his things, so that he looked like an authentic backpacker. She was surprised, however, at how pleased she felt to see him again. Travelling alone hadn't worried her—she was a bit of a loner at heart—but things had been so much fun the previous day and she had really enjoyed the good company Oliver had provided.

Over the next few days, they went to the Perth Zoo, the Aviation Heritage Museum and on Horse Riding Trail Rides. Oliver noted the way Sharba threw herself passionately into everything she did, taking maximum enjoyment from every activity. She was obviously a girl who was determined to make the most of every minute of her life and Oliver was gratified that she had embraced him as her holiday companion, but the more he got to know her, the more convinced he became that he wanted her for life.

The problem was, this beautiful girl on whom he had set his heart was treating their relationship as a holiday affair. Oliver played along with her. He didn't want to scare her off by becoming too intense and he hoped that, with time, he would be able to make her change her mind. He found her to be so generous in so many ways, but when it came to disclosing information about her life outside Australia, she was positively unforthcoming. Oliver wanted them to share their pasts, their upbringings and their circumstances, as it would be the first step to drawing them closer together, but she just wanted to live for the moment and didn't seem particularly interested in his past life.

Sharba was surprised how much she was enjoying Oliver's

companionship. He was totally charming and such fun to be with. They seemed to laugh the days away and when he suggested that they hire a car so that they could do things together, just the two of them, she agreed.

‘It makes sense, because we can go further afield and do things in our own good time and more cheaply,’ Oliver said.

In the close intimate space of the car, Oliver tried again gently to prise some more information out of Sharba about her background, and she did tell him one or two things which made him realise why she seemed such a self-contained and independent young lady.

‘I spent much of my young life in a boarding school,’ she told him. ‘Then shortly after I had finished my education, my parents died in a horrific motor accident, so I’ve had to become self-reliant and now I find I don’t need to depend on anyone except myself.’ After telling him that, she made it clear that she didn’t want to talk about her past anymore.

However, in time, Oliver did find out that she was working as a receptionist in a doctor’s surgery in Oxford and had been told that the surgery would keep her job open for her until she returned. But the house-share arrangement that she had enjoyed with three other girls would no longer exist when she returned to England as one of the girls was getting married, another was moving to Spain and the youngest had decided to move back to her parents’ home.

‘Where will you live then?’ Oliver wanted to know.

‘Oh, I expect I’ll find another house-share,’ Sharba said airily. ‘I’ll worry about that when the time comes; right now, I just want to have fun.’

Of her future plans she would say nothing more than she would be saving hard for another holiday as soon as she got back, because she had got the travel bug and wanted to see as much of the world as possible while she was still young and healthy.

Oliver considered telling Sharba that he was really quite wealthy and that they could travel the world together straightaway if she liked, but he hesitated because she was such an independent girl and he didn’t think she would like to be supported or have to be reliant on another person. He decided to bide his time and try and win her over slowly.

As the golden days of adventure and laughter trickled away, Oliver knew his infatuation had turned to deep love. The thought of losing this beautiful lady after this holiday was over was intolerable. She was everything he wanted in a woman and more. She was beautiful, funny and intelligent, and their sex life was incredible. Her only fault was that she was too independent, and although he knew she was attracted to him and enjoyed his company, it was obvious she wanted to remain unfettered.

Sharba did enjoy Oliver's company enormously at the beginning of their affair, and to start off with it seemed to her that he wanted the same things that she did—a good time without strings. Then one Sunday, Oliver surprised her by getting up early and telling her he was going to Mass. She had noticed that he wore a gold cross around his neck which he often caressed, but many people wore crosses for decoration rather than for religious purposes, so since he had not come across as someone who had a faith she thought it was just an adornment.

'I never realised you were a Christian,' Sharba said to Oliver when he got back.

Oliver observed her with eyes that seemed to glitter with fervour. 'There's a lot you don't know about me,' he said loftily.

All that day he seemed different to Sharba. He seemed remote and preoccupied, but that night he was more intense than he had ever been, and when they had sex he took her with a fierce passion that surprised her. However, the next day he reverted to being the man she knew. She didn't really care whether he was religious or not; it was none of her business.

They had terrific fun together as they laughed their way around Australia and Oliver got a real kick out of the envious looks he received when he had Sharba on his arm. However, he felt more and more frustrated that he had failed to make the beautiful girl fall head-over-heels in love with him, but he was far from giving up.

Sharba sensed a subtle change in their relationship as the days went past. Oliver seemed to become more needy and the loose and free quality of their relationship changed imperceptibly. It wasn't a change that Sharba welcomed and gradually she became aware that Oliver seemed to be becoming more and more possessive of

her. She was sure she could see a covetous glint in his eyes when he looked at her. It concerned her.

Also, on the Sundays Oliver decided to go to Mass, his mood seemed to change and he became aloof and distant. It seemed to Sharba that he became almost resentful of her. Then in the evening when they had sex, he seemed practically to assault her, she felt it was virtually akin to rape and it didn't seem normal to her.

Oliver must have had issues in his past, Sharba thought. His cheery devil-may-care attitude to life must be a front. But she didn't really want to delve into his past any more than she wanted him to probe into hers. Her mother had warned her that men could be complicated—and from experience she knew that they could be brutal as well, so now she decided it was time to move on.

'I have to return to England next week,' Sharba told Oliver, feeling glad that she hadn't mentioned her departure date to him before.

'That's a bit sudden, isn't it?' he replied, his voice suddenly harsh.

'Not really, it's the date that's always been booked for my return,' she told him calmly.

'Well, I'll return to England as well, if that's the case,' he said decisively.

'You don't have to do that, Oliver,' said Sharba. She knew that he was on a more elastic timetable than her and hadn't been planning on returning for some time yet.

'I think Australia will lose its sparkle when you depart,' said Oliver kissing her in what she now felt was a far too possessive way. 'Actually, it's time I got back as well. We'll definitely keep in contact when we get back to Blighty, won't we?'

# 3

## *Escape Attempt*

Sharba's wandering thoughts of the time she had spent with Oliver in Australia were suddenly curtailed when she saw a movement through the crack in the door. An African man in a security uniform with a pistol in his hand had come within her field of her vision, and he was moving quietly from one place to another. He was alone and his eyes darted all around as he looked for jihadis. Sharba pushed the door open a little more and waved her hand. The man saw it immediately and came to the door which Sharba opened wider as he approached.

'How many of you are in there?' the man whispered.

'There're three of us,' replied Sharba.

'If you come with me, I'll try and take you to a fire-escape so you can get to safety.'

'Where're the rest of the security forces?' Myia demanded.

'I'm sorry, madam, there's only me; I'm Jacob and I work as a security guard for the Watergate Centre. The security forces seemed to be ... delayed. So I have come myself to help people.'

'Will it be safe for us to come out?' Angela asked.

'I can't guarantee you anything,' answered Jacob honestly. 'But I'll do my best to get you to safety. Al-Shabaab could come back here at any time and if they find you, they won't hesitate to kill you, so your best chance is to come with me.'

Both Angela and Myia hung back, too frightened to take a gamble with the lone security guard. They thought that it would only be a matter of time before the security forces stormed the mall and made it safe for them to come out, so they declined



to go with him. But Sharba disagreed with them; she was only too delighted to be given the opportunity to get out of the claustrophobic cupboard and take her chances with Jacob.

‘Good luck,’ she whispered to the other two as she shut the door to the cupboard before following the security guard.

Sharba could feel her nerves jangling as she shadowed Jacob. He dodged from cover to cover and stopped every few seconds to listen for the approach of jihadis. Everywhere there were dead people who lay in untidy and undignified heaps, and the metallic smell of blood invaded her nostrils and made her think of things that she had tried to banish from her mind for ever. With an effort she pushed them away and firmly concentrated on Jacob’s shiny, bald head that bobbed ahead of her.

They hadn’t gone far when Jacob pushed her behind a counter and gestured to her to keep quiet as he crouched down with her. There were people approaching. Sharba felt terrified and she had to control her breathing as her heart hammered in her chest. They would be hidden from the approaching men, but their cover was scanty and although Jacob had a pistol Sharba, was only too aware it would be no match for an automatic rifle—or a grenade! She held her breath as two jihadi men, walking side by side, approached. They were eating chocolate as they laughed together and strolled past without noticing the couple crouching behind the counter. Sharba let out her breath as the men walked out of sight, but Jacob made them stay where they were until he was sure the jihadis were not coming back before they slipped out of hiding and continued dodging from cover to cover as they made their way towards freedom.

Sharba was glad to notice that they appeared to be heading for the Java Coffee Shop, because she somehow had an idea that Oliver would be there. Suddenly they heard a stifled cry and the security man deviated towards the sound. They found an African woman crumpled on the floor behind a huge freezer. She was obviously badly injured with a gunshot wound and blood was seeping out of her clothing around her midriff. She was cradling a child of about a year old in her arms and desperately trying to placate him so that he didn’t make a noise.

‘Come, mama, I’ll help you,’ whispered Jacob. He bent to help

the woman up and her relief at being rescued was obvious in her face. But she grimaced as Jacob helped her to her feet and Sharba knew she must be in great pain.

'I'll carry your baby,' said Sharba smiling encouragingly at the woman, and she scooped up the child who was covered with his mother's blood but appeared to be unharmed himself, and they continued on their way to the Java Coffee Shop. The baby was silent now as he gazed with big innocent eyes at the strange face of the lady carrying him. He was oblivious to the fact that he was now smearing his mother's blood all over her blouse.

Their progress was slower now since the woman couldn't move very fast and Sharba could see by her twisted face that every step was excruciatingly painful for her. Fleetinglly, she wondered if they shouldn't be giving her first aid, but Jacob obviously thought that their first priority was to get out of the mall.



When the mall had come under attack, Oliver was still in Nakumatt supermarket. He heard the noise of gunfire and then suddenly he saw two gunmen appear who started picking their targets. Without consciously thinking about what he was doing, he ducked behind some shelves in an aisle and, bent double to avoid being seen above the shelves, he ran towards the exit of the shop while shots and screams echoed around him. He felt quite surprised to find he hadn't been hit as he emerged from the shop and ran towards the Java Coffee Shop where he had arranged to meet Sharba.

She wasn't there when he arrived, but there were a number of people there who had run away from the terrorists, some of them wounded. It was a chaotic scene and Oliver tried to remember where the toilets were, because that was where Sharba had been headed when he'd last seen her.

'Don't go that way,' said an Indian man, clutching at Oliver's arm and preventing him from running towards the toilets. 'Two of the fighters are up there and they're slaughtering everyone they see—it's a blood bath!' His eyes were round with horror and the hand that grasped Oliver was made strong by his terror.

'But my girlfriend's up there...' Oliver tried to shake the man's hand off his arm.

'You can't help her if you get yourself killed,' retorted the man, pulling Oliver back to the Java Coffee Shop. 'Come, I know a way out of the mall, and the best thing you can do is get out safely and then the security forces will get everyone else out when they organise a rescue plan.'

The last thing that Oliver wanted to do was leave the building while his girlfriend was still in danger. She meant absolutely everything to him, and he wasn't going to let this little Indian man persuade him to leave without her. He tried to pull away from him again, but suddenly there was a burst of rifle fire that came out of the ladies' toilets. A moment later a jihadi, flourishing a rifle, came out of the door.

'Quick!' The Indian man pulled at Oliver again, and this time self-preservation kicked in as he ran with him towards the fire escape. 'You're doing the right thing,' the Indian panted. 'If you get yourself killed, you'll be no good to your girlfriend or anyone else!'

When they got to the bottom of the fire, escape the Indian turned and grinned at Oliver. 'I think we've made it,' he said. 'Come on, let's find somewhere where we can wait for the security forces to free the rest of the hostages.'

They discovered that the Hindu community were already setting up a place in the Oshwal Centre, where families and survivors could wait for their friends and loved ones to emerge from the mall.

'I'm so sorry your girlfriend is still in the mall,' he said when they had caught their breath. 'This is a very bad business; nothing like this has happened before in Kenya. I'm Fauji, by the way.'

Oliver introduced himself and noticed for the first time that the Indian was not a young man. He was probably in his early fifties and his hair was shot through with grey. His white shirt was soaked in perspiration caused by fear and exertion, and his face still showed signs of the anxiety he was suffering. It was a friendly face and he looked kindly at Oliver.

'We can wait here together,' said Fauji. 'My cousins, Tika and Waida, are also still in the mall, but I'm sure the security forces will soon catch the jihadis and everyone will be able to get out.'

While they waited, Oliver told Fauji that he and his girlfriend

had flown out to Kenya for a holiday. They had stayed in the Sankara Hotel the previous night and were due to fly to the Masai Mara later that day.

‘We only popped into the Westgate Mall to get some batteries for our torch and some shaving cream,’ Oliver said. ‘My girlfriend went to the ladies’ while I went to do the shopping—and then the attack started.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Fauji. ‘Tourism is very important in this country, so when something like this happens, it’s bad for everyone.’

For the rest of the day Oliver waited in hope that Sharba would emerge. He hated himself for escaping without her and his guts twisted with anguish as he tried to imagine what she might be going through. He kept on trying to ring her on her mobile but got no response.

‘Something very bad must have happened to her if she isn’t answering her mobile,’ he told Fauji miserably.

‘No, not necessarily,’ said Fauji optimistically. ‘She might have switched it off so that it didn’t draw her to the jihad’s attention by ringing.’

From time to time, hostages managed to escape from the mall and trickled out. Oliver carefully scrutinised them all, but Sharba wasn’t among them. Just as it was getting dark, Fauji let out a shout of delight. He had spotted his cousins and he ran to meet them. They were looking traumatised and spoke of the carnage in the mall in hushed voices, but both appeared to be unhurt.

‘Oliver, I’m going to take my cousins home,’ Fauji told him. ‘Why don’t you come with us? You can ring the British High Commission and ask them to let you know immediately when your partner escapes.’

‘But I should be here for her when she gets out,’ answered Oliver anxiously.

‘There’s nothing you can do at the moment and this isn’t a time for you to be on your own,’ said Fauji kindly. ‘Come home with me, have some rest and a meal, and then I’ll bring you back here and stay with you.’

Oliver felt touched at Fauji’s kindness, but it took a while to convince him that it would be all right if he left for a while. They

first dropped the cousins off at their house and then Fauji drove to his family home in Westlands where Oliver met his wife, Daly. She was a plump little woman who had put her greying hair into a bun. Anxiety was still etched into the lines on her face even though she was very relieved that her husband and his cousins were now safely home and unharmed. When Fauji explained that Oliver's girlfriend was still in the mall, she became very concerned for him.

'You must definitely stay with us until she's found,' Daly insisted. 'We have a big house with four bedrooms, three of which are now empty since the children have grown up and left. This is a very difficult time for you, and we would like to help you in any way we can.' Her dark eyes swam with emotion because she was a compassionate woman and she hated to see the pain in Oliver's face.

The Indian couple were so kind and supportive that Oliver was persuaded to stay with them. After they had had a meal, Fauji drove him back to the hotel to collect their things and, more importantly, to check that Sharba hadn't somehow made it back there. There had been no call to his mobile from her, but that didn't mean she hadn't gone back to the hotel, Oliver mused. She could be extremely traumatised and not thinking straight.

When he got back to their hotel room, he found it exactly as they had left it that morning when they had decided to pop down to the Westgate mall to buy a couple of things in Nakumatt and have a spot of lunch. They had only booked into the hotel for one night, but Sharba had unpacked her case and hung her clothes in the wardrobe. She had put her spongebag and makeup in the bathroom and, as far as Oliver could tell, everything was as they'd left it earlier. It somehow seemed surreal that her clothes, so fundamental to his beautiful girlfriend, still hung serenely in the wardrobe as though nothing dramatic had happened that day. She must still be in the mall, Oliver thought, and his stomach twisted with the fear that something dreadful had happened to her.

After leaving instructions with reception as to where Sharba would find him should she return, Oliver packed up their things and checked out. After putting the suitcases in Fauji's car, they drove back to the Oshwal Centre in the hope that Sharba would

have made it out of the mall, and to find out the latest on the rescue attempt. Unfortunately, there was no sign of Sharba when they got there and Fauji went off to try and get some clarification on the situation.

‘It’s not good news,’ Fauji told Oliver when he got back to him. ‘As far as I can gather, the attempt by the security forces to flush out the attackers and rescue the hostages is in chaos. Apparently Kenya’s equivalent of a Swat team was sent in. They’re trained for hostage and siege situations and they went in to try and pin down the attackers inside Nakumatt. Then the army arrived, but for some reason the authorities had not established a clear command-of-control structure, and there was no radio communications between army and police units. One of the recce group was killed by friendly fire when the army mistook him as an armed suspect and then all units were pulled out of the mall. So now chaos continues to reign while the security forces are arguing among themselves.’ Fauji looked disgusted.

‘So does that mean there’s no-one trying to rescue the hostages?’ Oliver was incredulous.

I gather there’re a few people attempting to rescue them,’ responded Fauji. ‘Someone told me a handful of Kenyan officers, an off-duty British soldier, some security guards and an Israeli security agent have entered the mall to try and help the hostages.’

Oliver was horrified at the lack of a cohesive rescue plan by the security forces and he wanted to go back into the mall himself to see if he could find Sharba, but Fauji wouldn’t let him go.

‘You have no weapon,’ Fauji pointed out. ‘You have no experience in this sort of situation. You’d most likely become another casualty and then you’d be no good to anyone!’

Fauji and Oliver stayed at the centre for most of the night and then when back to Fauji’s home for a few hours of sleep. Later that day, Oliver rang the British High Commission just in case Sharba had been in contact with them, but she had not.

Daly tried to comfort Oliver. He was tired and distressed but she did not let him give up hope. ‘I’ve been speaking to Tika and Waida,’ she said. ‘They explained to me that there’re people hiding all over the mall. Some of them are managing to get out, but the majority have hunkered down and will stay put until they’re sure

the jihadis have been rounded up. I'm sure your girlfriend will be among their number; she wouldn't want to risk getting shot making a break for it before the security forces made things safe.' She didn't add that Tika had also said there were many people who had been murdered; she didn't want Oliver to give up hope.

Oliver was grateful for her compassion and showed her a photo of Sharba that he had on his mobile phone.

'She's a very distinctive looking girl, very beautiful,' remarked Daly studying the photo. Then she had an idea. 'Why don't we get this photo printed off and then you could show it to other survivors and people working at the centre and ask them if they've seen her?' It seemed like a very good idea to Oliver and they immediately set about downloading the photo and printing it on small leaflets.

At about four in the afternoon, they went back to the mall. Things still seemed to be in chaos, but then they saw some white military men working in teams of three entering the building carrying specialist rifles and Fauji found out that they were Israeli commandos. This gave Oliver hope that people who knew what they were doing was at last helping the hostages.

They showed the photograph of Sharba to all who would look at it—charity workers, those who were waiting for news of their own loved ones, medics and the escaped hostages who were still trickling out from time to time looking very traumatised—but always there was a shake of the head. All through that night Oliver waited, hoping against hope that Sharba would come out of the mall.

In the grey light of the early morning when Oliver was at a very low ebb and feeling sure the worst had happened, two shocked women, an Asian and an African, came out arm in arm, escorted by an Israeli. He gave the women a salute when he was sure they were going to be given assistance at the centre and then disappeared back to the mall.

'Aren't you going to show the photo to them?' Fauji asked.

Oliver shook his head. 'It's no good,' he said brokenly. 'I know she's dead.'

Fauji picked up a leaflet and took it to the women. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'But one of our friends is still missing and we wondered if

perhaps you have seen her?’

The two women glanced listlessly at the picture on the leaflet. Both were traumatised and exhausted and didn’t want the hassle of helping anyone else, but suddenly the African woman seemed to focus on the photo and she let out an exclamation of surprise.

‘She was with us!’

The Asian woman now looked at the picture more closely. ‘Yes,’ she agreed. ‘Her name was Sharnique and she hid with us in a cupboard for a while and then she went with a security guard who said he’d try and get her out of the mall.’

‘Do you know what happened to her after that?’ Oliver asked hopefully. He had rushed up when he saw that the women appeared to recognise his girlfriend.

‘No,’ replied the African lady. ‘We told her to stay with us because it would be safer, but she wouldn’t. That was hours ago—no, days ago even—and if she hasn’t come out yet, I fear she hasn’t made it.’

Oliver felt completely deflated, but at least he knew that she hadn’t died up until the time she had been with these two ladies. It seemed unlikely, but maybe her luck had held after she had left them.



It was not quite seven o’clock the next morning when the first huge blast shattered the entire Westlands district, followed by bursts of gunfire.

‘What the hell’s going on now?’ Oliver demanded.

No one seemed to know and Oliver and Fauji, red-eyed and exhausted, waited, hoping for some explanation. Just after one o’clock there were four more large blasts and a column of black smoke rose into the sky. Rumour had it that the attackers had at last been killed—but still there was no sign of Sharba.

‘I think we should go home now and get some rest,’ said Fauji quietly. Oliver nodded. He had for hours doubted that Sharba would be found alive and it was only Fauji that had kept him from giving up all hope. Now he felt he must accept the fact that she was dead, but before he did that he needed to rest—to sleep—and then he would face the awful prospect of never seeing her alive again.



He and Fauji returned to collapse on their beds, completely exhausted. They slept for hours and were eventually roused by Daly who wanted them to come and look at some shaky amateur footage that was being shown on television. It was of the back of the Westgate Shopping Mall, showing a vast crater in the rear third of the building where it was said an RPG-7 anti-tank shell had been fired in an attempt to distract a sniper during an operation to rescue survivors from the mall.

Once more, Oliver and Fauji went back to the mall. They could hear explosions and gunfire going on inside and it was said the troops were mopping up and rescuing the last of the hostages. Oliver didn't dare to hope Sharba would be found alive, but still they stayed all day until ten o'clock that evening when President Kenyatta declared that the operation was over. The last spark of Oliver's hope was extinguished by the president's announcement and wordlessly he allowed Fauji drive him back to Westlands. He felt completely broken.

Oliver stayed with Fauji and Daly for another week, hoping that Sharba's body would be found in the ruins of the mall, but it was not. The British High Commission informed him that only three bodies had been recovered from the rubble caused by shells fired into that part of the mall, but others were missing and it was assumed that they had been completely obliterated by the blast. It wasn't easy for him, but Oliver had to accept that Sharba's body was one that was never going to be found. Oliver was a broken man, but he managed to pull himself together with the kind help of Fauji and Daly and he booked himself a ticket back to England. When he left, he promised that he would keep in contact with his friends. He would never forget how kind they had been to him in his time of need.