



WAKE

A THRILLER

UP

DEAD

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chapter 1

THE NIGHT THEY WERE HIJACKED, ROXY PALMER AND HER HUSBAND, Joe, ate dinner with an African cannibal and his Ukrainian whore.

The African, languidly elegant in a hand-tailored silk suit, was blue-black with tribal scars on his cheeks. He spoke beautiful French-accented English, and he could have recited the Cape Town phone book and made it sound poetic. The whore had yellow braids, the dark roots cross-hatching her skull like sutures on a cadaver. She didn't say much, spent most of the meal hating Roxy for her naturally blonde hair and perfect American teeth.

When the cannibal paused his monologue to eat or drink, Joe Palmer tried to fill in. After the francophone eloquence, South African Joe sounded like a truck driven without a clutch.

They were at Blues in Camps Bay, overlooking the ocean, and even though they sat down to eat at nearly nine, the last of the golden light still washed the beach and the slopes of Table

Mountain. Cape Town is twinned with Nice on the French Riviera, and on a night like this Roxy could see why.

She spaced out during the meal. Picked at some rock cod, drank one more glass of Cape white wine than she normally allowed herself, and let the rhythm of the African's voice carry her without listening to his words. A necessary skill she had acquired in her years with Joe. But something nagged at her, a shard of memory that pierced her hard-won detachment.

Then she remembered.

The man sitting opposite her, taking delicate bites of duck l'orange, had been caught on a news camera during one of his central African country's endless civil wars. He'd cut the heart out of a living enemy, pulled the still-beating organ from the man's chest, and taken it straight to his mouth and eaten it. Grinned at the camera while he chewed.

No French accent was going to smooth that image away. Roxy lay down her knife and fork and sipped her wine, staring out at the moon rising over the waves. Then Joe gave her the look, invisible to anyone else, and she knew that the men needed a few minutes to talk business. Weapons or mercenaries. Or both.

Roxy stood. "Let's go to the bathroom."

"I don't need," the whore said, clearly new to this part of the game.

The cannibal elbowed her beneath her plastic tits. "Go and piss." Coming from his mouth it sounded almost like a benediction: *Go in peace*.

The bottle blonde battled brutally tight Diesel knockoffs and six-inch heels and dragged herself to her feet. Roxy moved through the tables of Cape Town's rich, tanned, and mostly white diners. The Ukrainian teetered after her. All eyes were on Roxy. She could still do that—draw the looks—even though thirty was a memory.

They walked into the tiled and scented bathroom, Michael Bolton dribbling from the ceiling speakers. Roxy went into a

stall, shut the door and sat down. She didn't need to pee, but she needed a minute on her own. Just to keep herself cool and in the moment, as they say.

When she came out, the woman was doing a line at the basins. "You want?"

Roxy shook her head as she rinsed her hands. She hadn't touched blow in years.

"Where do you meet him?" Sniffing, wiping her nostrils, looking at Roxy in the mirror. "Your husband?"

"In a place pretty much like this." Roxy dried her hands and did one of those meaningless things that women do to their hair in front of bathroom mirrors.

The whore tried a smile, revealing pre-Glasnost dentistry. "Maybe I too get lucky. If you can, so I can."

"Sure." Roxy said.

Thought, *Like fucking hell, Chernobyl-mouth*. But was she so different from this woman? True, she'd never hooked, but her years as a model had been filled with rich men who had paid for her time and affection in other ways.

Just as Joe did now.

She left those thoughts in the bathroom.

DISCO DE LILLY'S curse was that he was just too drop-dead gorgeous. Everybody told him so, from when he was a kid right up to today. His beauty, as beauty can, had opened doors for him. But it had also caused him no end of fucken trouble.

As he sat in the passenger seat of the stolen Nissan, his butt muscles unconsciously clenched at the memory of that first night in Pollsmoor Prison. An ordeal that had left him torn and terrified until he'd found his protector. Then his eighteen-month stretch had entered a different dimension of hell.

"Wanna catch up?" Godwynn MacIntosh held out the small glass pipe, still bubbling from the heat of his lighter flame.

Disco took a hit, held the meth in his lungs, then coughed out a billow of smoke. He needed it to settle his nerves, put the image of prison out of his mind, and help him focus on the job.

Godwynn grabbed the pipe back, and as he inhaled the last of the meth it made the *tik-tik* sound that gave the drug its local name. Where Disco was tall and slender, Godwynn was chunky and squat. And dark. Not something to be proud of on the color-conscious Cape Flats, where the birth of a dark child was no reason to break out the box wine and party.

Buzzing now, Disco entertained himself with the thought that if he and Godwynn were coffees, he'd be a cappuccino and Goddy a double espresso.

He laughed.

"Ja? What's so fucken funny?" Goddy asked.

Disco shook his head, eyes fixed on the Benz parked three cars in front of the Nissan, on the curve. Goddy had come to Disco's backyard hut two hours earlier. Told him Manson, head of the Paradise Park Americans gang—Goddy's boss—had said he better not fucken come back if he wasn't driving a Mercedes-Benz 500 SLC. This year's model.

So they had headed over to Camps Bay with its sidewalk bars and rip-off restaurants. The fancy cars were drawn to the beachfront strip like ticks to a stray dog's asshole.

Goddy was sitting up straighter. "Check this out."

Disco watched the couple approaching the Benz. The man, big, flabby, and white, was dressed in black pants and a light shirt—no tie—suit coat draped over his left arm. The woman was blonde, and there was something in her walk like those skinny girls on the Fashion Channel. Except she wasn't skinny; she was built good.

"Think he's packing?" Goddy asked.

Disco saw the man's fat squeezed into his tight shirt like a sausage. No place for a gun. He shook his head. Goddy ducked

under the dash, fiddling with the wires hanging loose from the steering column, trying to get the Nissan started.

Disco watched as the big man tossed a coin to the car guard. The Benz's alarm chirped, and the turn signals flashed yellow for a second. The man held the passenger door open for the blonde, who slid in with a nice show of leg in the streetlight. He chucked his coat onto the rear seat of the Benz. The coat had covered the small silver case he carried in his left hand. The whitey popped the trunk and threw the case inside, shut the lid, got into the car, and fired up the V8.

"The sardines is opening the can," Disco said as the Benz's roof slid back, revealing the two heads: one blonde, one dark.

The Nissan coughed into life, and Goddy came back up from under the dash. "Can't they make it no easier?"

The Benz slid out into Victoria Road. Goddy allowed another car to pass, and then he followed. Disco felt the tik in his veins and the Colt tucked snug against his washboard belly.

Time to go to work.

"YOU COULD OF made a bit more of a fucken effort, Roxanne," Joe said. The flat accent still grated on her ear after five years in Cape Town.

Roxy said nothing.

"Christ, I wish you'd get over it. I mean, for fuck sake, how much bloody longer . . . ?" He was driving too fast, as always. Overtaking a car on a blind curve near Glen Beach.

She held her tongue. Knew it pissed him off when she ignored him. Waited for the rage that stalked Joe like a shadow.

But he only shook his head and muttered, "Ah, what the fuck . . ."

Roxy guessed he'd made a sweet deal with the African and was riding the glow, not wanting to sour his good mood. She watched his hands on the wheel of the Mercedes. Beautiful

hands. If you didn't see the man they were attached to, you would think they were the hands of a pianist or a surgeon. Not an overweight bruiser who sold death for a living.

The night was hot and windless as they drove up the lower slopes of Lion's Head, toward Bantry Bay, Table Mountain a flat black cutout against the moonlit sky. The next few minutes passed in silence. She watched the moon paint the ocean silver, and she could see the V-shaped wake of a cruise ship as it left Robben Island behind on its way to open water.

For a stupid moment she caught herself imagining she was on that boat.

"I'M TAKING THE driver, okay?" Goddy kept the taillights of the Benz in sight as they wound their way up to the houses of the rich.

"Ja. Cool."

Disco thought of the blonde in the car ahead, the dress falling away from her legs as the white fuck opened the door for her. Pity they weren't going to be able to take her with them.

Then he thought of prison and turned to Goddy. "Hey, brother, you not gonna fucken shoot them, okay?"

The Benz slowed, signals flashing.

Goddy slowed, too. "Chill," he said. "Only if I got to."

JOE'S HAND MOVED on the steering column, and she heard the muted ticking of the turn signal. He stopped the car in their driveway, pressing the clicker on the key chain to open the high gates. Nothing happened. He tried again, the car idling, headlights hot on the wooden gates that refused to move.

"Bloody motor's still playing up." He reached for the door handle.

As Joe lifted himself out of the car, the dark man came out of the shadows, the gun an extension of his arm. Roxy heard her door opening, and she felt something cold against her cheek and a rough hand on her shoulder. Tugging her.

"Get out. Fucken move it!"

The second man, waving a gun, dragged Roxy from the car, her dress riding high on her thighs. She saw his face in the spill of streetlight. Saw he was as beautiful as a Calvin model. Her right shoe snagged and stayed in the car as the man pulled at her. She stumbled to the ground, grazing her knees on the brick paving, telling herself: *This isn't happening. This is stuff you read about in the papers, stuff that happens to other people.* She could see Joe grappling with the man on the driver's side. Macho Joe.

A shot, deafening in the still night.

Time ramped.

The men were in the Mercedes, and it was reversing away and speeding off, fishtailing. For a second all she could think was that they had her shoe, her Manolo Blahnik. The pair given to her by the designer himself after a show in Milan. Then she saw Joe lying on the driveway on his back, arms flung wide like he was tanning by the pool. Roxy stood, hobbling on her one heel. Kicked the shoe off and ran to him.

"Joe!"

She knelt beside him. There was enough light from the carriage lamps flanking the gates to see he was bleeding from the right leg, above the knee. But he was moving, trying to get up.

"Fucken bastards." Joe gripped his wounded leg with his left hand, using his right arm for balance as he struggled to his knees.

Something lay on the bricks next to Joe, something that gleamed oily and black in the light. A gun. Dropped in the struggle. Before Roxy allowed herself to think, her hands found

the pistol and lifted it. Joe's eyes tracked the movement, staring up at her as she stood, her hair a halo against the streetlight. She pointed the gun at him, amazed that her hands weren't even shaking.

He produced a very Joe-like half laugh. "Roxy?"

She shot him right between the eyes.

chapter 2

BILLY AFRIKA KNEW HE WAS HOME WHEN THE TRIBAL WOMAN SET off the metal detector at Johannesburg airport.

He'd hitched a ride on a Brit cargo plane from Baghdad to Dubai. Then flown Emirates to O. R. Tambo in Jo'burg, a flight crammed with South Africans returning from shopping sprees in the duty-free desert paradise. They wandered the aisles of the airbus like zombies, still feverish from days of burning plastic.

Billy was in domestic departures for his late-night connection to Cape Town. A lean brown man, midthirties, wiry hair buzz-cut to his scalp. Watching the world through the green eyes inherited from a German father he'd never known.

He stood behind the tribal woman as they went through security. She was barefoot, wrapped in an embroidered blanket, braided hair heavy with beads, her legs and arms thick with wire bangles. Didn't make the metal detector happy.

As Billy lifted his duffel bag from the conveyor belt, he saw the woman being led off to be body searched. Later he glimpsed

her talking Zulu into the latest Nokia, standing against a backdrop of floodlit Boeings.

He had been maintaining since he'd flown out of Baghdad. Focused his mind on his immediate mission, letting his anger fuel him. By the time he was seated on the 737 he was feeling closer to his normal, controlled self than he had in a week.

Until Abdul leaned down and told him to fasten his seat belt. Of course it wasn't fucken Abdul, just some Muslim flight attendant from Cape Town with a black mustache and bad breath.

But sweat pricked Billy's forehead, and he caught his hands clutching the armrests as he felt the percussive whump of the explosion smashing into the left side of the BMW, piercing the armor plating and decapitating the Iraqi driver, sending his head into Billy Afrika's lap. Abdul had looked up at him, mouth twisted in a smile, like he was about to crack funny about Sunni women and desert donkeys. The force of the blast buckled the chassis of the BMW, bending Billy's door open and allowing a partial target: him.

A round smacked his Kevlar vest. The lead car was lost in smoke, but he could see the third car pulled over, the men inside laying down covering fire. He batted Abdul's head away and took a quick look into the rear, checking on the asset, the VIP he was meant to be protecting: the Swede or the Dane or whatever he was. He wasn't. He lay smeared across the seat. A closed-coffin case.

Billy kicked the door open and went out firing the Czech submachine gun, specially modified for close-quarters work. A ricochet bounced off his helmet, leaving his ears ringing. He sprinted to the car behind and almost made it when the second explosion lifted and tumbled him, tearing off his helmet, flak jacket, and boots, before flinging him to the ground.

When he opened his eyes four hours later, in the Twenty-eighth Combat Support Hospital, he was looking at the peeling

pink nose of the albino Afrikaner Danny Lombard, the whitest man he had ever seen.

"There's good news, and there's bad news," Lombard said.

"What's the good news?"

"Your ball bag is still there."

"And the bad news?"

"Your ass has been fired."

"Why?"

"Somebody gotta take the blame for losing the asset. Not gonna be one of the Yanks."

Billy shrugged. The movement made his head throb. "I'll talk to the recruiting people back home." He saw the albino's face. "What?"

It got worse.

The South Africans had been recruited by a security broker in Cape Town who had hooked them up with an American outfit in Iraq, Clearwater Tactical. Clearwater paid the broker, who paid them, deposited the money in their bank accounts back home each month. Or was supposed to. But they were each thirty thousand down, and the broker wasn't taking calls.

Multiply thirty thousand dollars by seven, and you got the reason Billy was risking his ass in Iraq. Two hundred and ten thousand rand. When he'd been a cop in South Africa, it had taken him over three years to earn that kind of money.

Billy thought of the man buried out on the windswept Cape Flats, and the promise he'd made him. Felt things starting to seep through the crumbling wall he'd built around himself these last two years.

He'd checked himself out of the hospital with a couple of bruises and a killer headache. He was going home. Back to Cape Town.

The 737 hurled itself off the runway and into the night sky. Billy Afrika knew what he had to do. And who he had to see.

The broker. Joe Palmer.

* * *

ASIDE FROM THE surprisingly small entry wounds in his forehead and leg, Joe looked pretty much the way he always looked first thing in the morning: white and unhealthy and butt naked. His flabby gut sagged, and his penis drooped sadly toward his hairy thigh. His left eye was closed. The right eye stared up at Roxy, heavy-lidded, lazy. Like he was winking at her. A tag dangled from the big toe of his left foot. Roxy noticed that he badly needed a pedicure.

"Jesus, can't you cover him at least?" Dick Richardson, Joe's lawyer, stood at Roxy's side by the freezer drawer.

The morgue attendant, a young brown man in a stained white coat, shrugged.

"And why the hell aren't we in a viewing room?" asked Dick.

"Viewing rooms is full."

Roxy was still numb after the events of the night, and anyway, she'd seen Joe looking worse. The attendant watched her like she was edible, waiting for her to speak.

"Yes. This is my husband."

He made a note on a clipboard and shoved the drawer closed.

"Hell of a business," Dick said as he took her arm and led her away. "This bloody city is out of control."

He held open a door the color of clotted cream and let her walk out into the corridor.

A bedlam of bodies on gurneys, cops, harried morgue officials trying to deal with the deluge of the dead and the grieving families they had left behind. Industrial-strength disinfectant fought a losing battle against the sweet smell of human flesh gone bad.

Dick moved in to take her arm again, but she edged away from him. He had graying sandy hair, and yachtsman's wrinkles fanned out from his pale eyes. Cultivated a passing resemblance to a younger Robert Redford.

"Sorry you had to go through this. I asked the police if I couldn't do it, but they insisted you identify Joe."

"It's okay."

They stopped at an office, where Roxy had to sign for Joe's personal effects. An asthmatic woman with faded yellow skin wheezed as she dumped a bulging plastic bag onto the counter. The woman removed each item for Roxy to identify. Joe's shoes, socks, underwear, suit pants, belt, and bloodstained white shirt. His wallet was there, with his driver's license and credit cards, but the wad of cash she'd glimpsed the night before when he'd paid for the meal was missing. As were his wedding band, cell phone, and the Patek Philippe watch she'd bought him for his last birthday.

Bought with his money, but still.

Roxy didn't bother to query the missing items. If the living were targets in this city, then why not the dead? She signed the form, and the woman sucked on an inhaler and crammed the clothes back into the bag. Roxy took the bag and followed Dick out into the corridor.

"There were things missing, weren't there?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I don't care."

"In this place you're lucky if they only steal your phone or your money. Last week they sawed the foot off some poor bastard who died in a car accident." This got her attention. "Probably sold it for *muti*." Coming out as *moo-tee* in his nasal accent. "Witchcraft, you know? Bloody savages."

He held another door open, and they were out in the brightness of the Cape Town morning, the hard African sun showing all the blemishes of the Salt River morgue and the shabby buildings around it, out on the fringes of the city.

Roxy slipped on her sunglasses. As they walked toward Dick's Range Rover his cell phone warbled, and he mouthed an apology and took the call. Roxy stood and looked up at Table Mountain, looming above the squalid buildings, a soft white

cloud boiling over the flat top like spume as the wind drove in from the south.

It was still early, just gone eight in the morning. She hadn't slept the night before, lay on the bed in the spare room—unable to face the bedroom that still smelled of Joe—staring out into the dark, until the sun touched the rocky face of Lion's Head. Lying awake when Dick called her at seven, told her the police wanted her to formally identify Joe so they could start the autopsy. Dig the bullets out of him.

Roxy walked over to a trash can on the sidewalk. Junk overflowed onto the pavement, so she set the plastic bag on top of the mound of garbage beside the can. A homeless couple lurched out of a nearby doorway and hurried toward the trash, leaning like sailors on a storm-swept deck. She turned back to the car. Dick was still talking into his phone, his free hand patting down the sandy hair that lifted in the wind.

Roxy heard shouting and looked back. The couple fought over the bag. The man tore Joe's shirt out of the woman's hands and unballled it, holding it up against his chest, the cloth flapping like a bloody flag of defeat.

Roxy saw Joe's body surrounded by cops and emergency teams, flashing lights washing the road red and blue. And she saw herself, wrapped in a paramedic's blanket, telling her story. There had been two men. No, she never really got a look at them. It had all happened too fast. One of them shot Joe twice, and they fled into the night in the Mercedes.

Carefully editing out how, after she had fired that shot, she had thrown the gun over the cliff, into the scrub far below. Manufacturing widow's tears as she watched the paramedics sliding Joe's body into the morgue van like they were taking out the trash.

She was still shocked at how easy it had been, how light the gun had felt in her hands, how the recoil had flowed effortlessly up her arms and into her shoulders. How the lies had flowed from her tongue.