

CHAPTER ONE

South Africa 1970s

As the 747 hiccupped through a pocket of turbulence, Frank Turner's white-knuckled fingers tightened round the armrests in the same vice-like grip he used on the dentist's chair. The cigarette clamped between his teeth was the latest in the chain he'd begun eighteen hours earlier on Liverpool's Lime Street station.

The cloudless blue sky abruptly turned to brown earth as the plane banked sharply for its final landing approach. Frank risked movement to turn and peer impatiently down the aisle. The toilet door remained firmly closed. As his head swung back his cigarette narrowly escaped contact with the crotch of the brisk airhostess who was hurrying the passengers into their safety belts. "Please extinguish your cigarette and fasten your safety belt, sir," she said, nimbly avoiding the glowing cigarette tip, her bright smile now of a lower wattage after fourteen hours in the air.

Cowed by authority, Frank smiled submissively, but sneaked a few last drags while she strapped in the florid-faced woman in front whose frequent trips to the toilet equated with her having walked the six thousand miles from England to South Africa. He stubbed out his cigarette and fastened his safety belt. The landing was the part he didn't care for. Fraught with tension, anxiety clenched his buttocks, jaw and fists.

He cast further furious glances towards the toilet, willing the door to open. When it remained closed he addressed the figure slouched sulkily in the window seat.

"Trust your bloody mother. It would be just like her to be caught with her knickers down if we crash."

There was no response from fifteen-year-old Gerry, except for the barely perceptible quiver of his Mohican haircut. He'd never wanted to come in the first place, and nothing less than the promise of a motorbike was going to bring him round.

Glaring at the silent form of his son, Frank forced down the anger that surged anew at the sight of his hair. Although, thanks to his mother's vigorous washing the once rainbow purple, green and yellow stripes were now a paler, muted hue, it had failed to return it to its original mouse, and nothing short of a wig could do anything for the lavatory-brush style.

"I'm talking to you, cloth ears," Frank snapped, prodding Gerry in the ribs.

The only response was a scowl and muttered, "I 'eard you."

Before the row developed into a shouting match the toilet door swung open and Mavis Turner limped down the aisle, the agony of her swollen ankles reflected in her suffering face. She squeezed past Frank, wincing as her new shoes caught the bunion her mother had threatened her with since the winkle-pickers of her teens.

"About time. What the hell have you been doing in there?" Frank demanded.

"What d'you think I've been doing - quilting a bloody bedspread?" Mavis snapped.

Frank looked at her sharply, but refrained from uttering the smart retort that hovered on his lips, martyring himself for the sake of peace.

With growing irritation, he watched while she ferreted in her cavernous handbag for her pills. There were anti-diarrhoea for anywhere that wasn't the mainland of England (you couldn't trust foreign water). She'd even taken them on a day trip to the Isle of Man, quashing his sneering protests with a reminder that diarrhoea made the contraceptive pill ineffective - and that would be his corns cut for a month.

"Damn it," she muttered, discovering the tranquillisers welded to some ancient fluff-coated wine gums that had lain buried in the subterranean depths of her bag.

The doctor had prescribed the pills for her nerves. Mavis had never wanted to leave Liverpool, never mind emigrate - and to Africa of all places. Well, I mean, all that jungle - and bare-breasted women (that alone had made her suspicious of Frank's motives).

"Will you stop digging in that bag and fasten your safety belt," Frank hissed through clenched teeth. She snapped the belt-buckle shut. Durban's Louis Botha airport was coming into view and the cabin staff were taking their places ready for landing.

Frank's hands were clammy from both fear of the landing, and of the future. But it wouldn't do to let on to Mavis and Gerry. After all, it had been his idea to emigrate.

He'd answered the advert seeking contract boilermakers without telling the family, optimistic of their favourable response. But the news that they'd be moving to South Africa for five years had stunned them into a gob-smacked silence.

When Mavis had recovered from the shock she let it be known that she had no intention of leaving her Mam and Dad, and her sister Teresa, and the familiar if rather boring security of her job as a packer in a biscuit factory. When Frank pointed out the marauding gangs of teenage savages who polluted their council estate, and the likelihood of Gerry joining up with them, she'd replied tweezer-lipped, "Better the devil you know."

"But Mave, Bernie at work - his cousin's mate is doin' great in Johannesburg. House with a swimming pool and everything," Frank had pleaded. But weeks of crying protests and recriminations had culminated in Frank's conjugal rights being severely curtailed.

Gerry hadn't been thrilled at the prospect of going abroad either. He wanted to work in the local garage fixing cars, or go on the dole, and couldn't see further than being old enough, and earning enough, to go down the pub with the rest of the lads.

However, with Frank's contract signed, there was no going back. As their departure drew nearer, Mavis suddenly experienced an elevated status amongst her fellow factory workers. She was 'the one what was going abroad to live,' - a local celebrity, and one up on her Teresa who fancied herself a cut above the rest because her Clive worked as the manager of the local supermarket. For a while Mavis enjoyed her temporary fame and stopped bickering about the move.

Gerry had remained sullen and morose. His final act of defiance was the punk hairstyle two days before their departure. He wasn't going to go to no South African school - and no school would take him with a hairstyle like that! The only rainbow at the end of his unpromising horizon was his Gran's promise that the sunshine would clear up his teenage spots.

With a throaty roar the plane swept down the runway. Frank was at last able to expel the air he'd held in bursting lungs ever since the ground had begun rushing up to meet him. As the plane taxied towards the airport building his ashen face resumed a little of its normal ruddy hue.

Mavis, anxious to record her first impression of this new country, clicked an ancient box Brownie at vast expanses of grass and a few distant buildings, which could have been anywhere.

"Well, here we are then," she announced, as if it were the Woodside ferry coming in to dock. "Didn't knock down no elephants on the runway either."

Frank gave her a withering look, unable as yet to trust his voice.

Seat belts snapped open and long before the plane had come safely to a standstill an advance guard of incorrigible passengers began retrieving hand luggage from overhead lockers.

Seasoned travellers were already up and jostling for a position in the aisles before Frank had prised his white-knuckled fingers from the arm rests. Trapped in his seat, he watched the bleary-eyed and blank-faced passengers shuffle towards the exits.

Mavis, who'd nursed a fear of ending up at the wrong destination ever since as a ten-year-old she'd missed her stop on her way to her Gran's and finished up a tearful wreck at the bus terminus, prodded Frank to push his way into the queue, fearful that the plane would take-off again with them still aboard.

"Give over will yer," Frank protested as Mavis urged him to his feet. "We'll just have to wait our turn."

Gerry hunched sourly in his seat, trying to distance himself from his parents' whispered bickering.

Finally it was just the Turners, and a stout lady at the rear who'd found herself over the limit with her booty of duty-free and was trying to coerce the elderly fellow passenger she'd imprisoned in the window seat to take half of it through customs for her.

Finally they were stepping past the stiff-jawed smile of the hostess and into the steamy furnace-like heat of a Durban summer. This was it - Africa. The buildings shimmered in the bright sunlight. The Turners clattered down the steps on unsteady legs, weighed down by cumbersome overnight bags. The thin straps of Mavis's sandals cut painfully into ankles that were twice their normal size. There was a chocolaty stain on the pocket of Frank's fawn trousers, where unnoticed, he'd dropped a triangle of Toblerone, pressed on him as a last minute gift by his mother-in-law who'd been spurred to a guilty fondness at the thought of not seeing him again for the next five years.

Frank shrugged on the padded anorak he'd been grateful for on the cold draughty platform of Lime Street station. A paralysing wind had whistled round his kidneys as the family stood with stamping feet and swimming eyes repeating last minute instructions to Mavis's parents about draining the anti-freeze, and writing every week, and checking the Ernie Bonds. But as they neared the terminal building, the sweat was trickling uncomfortably down his back.

"Bloody hot, isn't it," he muttered as they shuffled into the cramped arrivals hall.

"You'd be hot sitting in a fridge with that jacket on. For heaven's sake, take it off."

Frank lowered the overnight bag - that he'd smoked himself to a hacking cough to get with his Embassy coupons - and dropped it next to the bag of duty-free cigarettes. Struggling to extricate himself from the heavy jacket, he yelled to Gerry. "Hey, get yourself over here and give us a hand, will yer." Gerry trudged sullenly over, noticing with embarrassment the sweaty damp patch on the back of his father's shirt and hoping he wouldn't lift his arms to reveal under-arm stains.

Confused as to the meaning of 'aankoms' and 'bagasie' Frank was unsure where they were supposed to be heading. Seeing a line of passengers clutching familiar British passports, they tagged on to the end. But Mavis, still fearful of finding herself back aboard the plane and on her way to who knows where, excused herself to the woman in front. "Hey, luv, are we in the right queue for British immigrants?" Mavis's voice was pitched to carry above throbbing biscuit packing machines and several people turned in her direction.

"I don't think so," said the wilting perm doubtfully. "We're permanent residents. Perhaps you'd better try that one." She flapped her passport vaguely at the next line.

They joined the zombie-like queue, shuffling forward, bags shoved along by a helping foot. Gerry stood slump-shouldered, idly fingering the yellowing eruptions on his chin.

Frank handed the passports to the uniformed figure, whose stern face made him feel like a criminal for failing to reveal the mole on his bum. With weary boredom the man glanced at the passports, acknowledging Gerry by the fractional raising of a shrubby eyebrow. He mumbled something unintelligible that had to be repeated twice before it had Mavis rummaging in her bag for immigration forms. The bored expression set into tedium as Mavis began elaborate apologies for delaying the rest of the queue, which was backing up behind them.

Finally they passed in a sheep-like herd to the baggage area, where they had to dodge the practised elbows retrieving suitcases that threatened to disappear on a second circuit.

First to appear was Gerry's battered haversack, bought for a school trip to the Lake District and conspicuous by the fluorescent yellow stripes insisted on by the schoolmaster who'd been haunted by the fear of losing his class down a ravine. Next came the scratched vinyl job that was Mavis's suitcase. It was second-hand from her Teresa because Clive, who could get anything cheap if it was for himself but immediately lost all his contacts if it was for anyone else, had bought her a new one.

Sandwiched next to them was the family heirloom that was Frank's heavy leather case, the same one they'd used on their honeymoon, and for all annual migrations to British holiday resorts since. It boasted faded stickers of Ilfracombe and Beachy Head.

"I could do with putting me feet up, and a good cuppa," Mavis lamented as they were confronted by yet another queue, this time for customs. Careful that the uniformed figures couldn't overhear, she confided, "I've got a couple of tea-bags in me handbag in case they haven't got no decent stuff here."

A vinegar-faced custom's officer moved the searchlight of his attention to Gerry, as if he suspected him of smuggling an infectious disease, and instructed him to open his haversack.

Frank, now that he was on terra firma, found his bravado beginning to re-emerge. Looking pointedly at his son's hair, he declared in a loud carrying voice, "There's quarantine for parrots, yer know."

Gerry scowled as a few people tittered, his face reddening in embarrassment, which made him look guilty when the officer asked whether he had any Playboy magazines or banned books.

Mavis was shocked. "We don't have none of that in our house." Frank backed her up by looking suitably affronted. The officer made a show of searching their suitcases before passing on to a more promising suspect, a stout lady who was trying too hard to look innocent.

"Wagons ho," cried Frank, wheeling the trolley towards the exit doors. They swished open to reveal a crowd of anxious relatives pressed against the barriers, craning their necks like ferrets round a rabbit hole. Faces peered expectantly at the Turners, and then sank back in disappointment. From amongst the jostling crowd there was no one who rushed forward to greet them.

"You said the firm was sending a bloke to meet us," Mavis complained, now desperate for a cup of tea and a sit down.

"They are. He'll be here in a minute," Frank assured her. "Wait here while I see if there're any messages."

She sank into the hard plastic seat and slipped off her shoes to ease her bunion. Next to her, a heavy-set man in shorts and long socks patted his wife's hand reassuringly, muttering comforting words in an unknown language. A family of Indians, the women in colourful saris, jabbered last-minute instructions to a skinny youth who spoke so rapidly that Mavis wasn't sure whether it was another foreign tongue. A black couple laughed loudly, a cocooned baby snoozing undisturbed on its mother's back.

The public address system suddenly sprang to life to announce something Mavis couldn't understand, even when repeated in English.

She was all at once overwhelmed by the foreignness of it all. She couldn't go up to a stranger and ask where the ladies was, or start up a friendly conversation the way she did at home. They mightn't know what she was on about. She felt a sudden yearning for the warmth and security of familiarity, of her mother telling her, "Sit down love and have a rest while I go and put the kettle on." Her trembling mouth turned down as the first prickling of homesickness squeezed at the back of her eyes. They never should've come; she'd known it all along.