

ONE

On that sunny afternoon when the soldiers came, Maria Andanu Okrie was lounging on a deck chair in the rose garden. Above her a giant white sunshade blocked out the intense heat and glare of the African sun. She was aware of warmth, and the tangy taste of lemonade on her lips, and the flutter of the tassels that fringed the sunshade as they swayed in the occasional breaths of air.

In the farthest corner of the garden her mother was bent double as she dead-headed the faded flowers in the border. A wide-brimmed straw hat protected her head and neck, and she paused occasionally to tuck in wayward strands of red hair that fell over her eyes. Multicoloured petals – pinks and oranges and yellows – were strewn about her feet, like confetti from a giant’s wedding.

It was a moment of peace and harmony such as Maria had not known since her father went into hiding three weeks before. Their world had been filled with uncertainty before, but after that day it had been plunged into fear.

Each day since his disappearance Maria and her mother, Angela, waited anxiously for news of him. They dreaded every ring of the phone, every knock at the door, certain that it was someone from her father’s opposition group coming to tell them that he had been captured and executed in the current regime’s favourite manner – a bullet through the head. They rarely left the house, reluctant to venture into the city, frightened that they might be attacked because of Angela’s

white skin. And though neither of them spoke of it, there was a more terrible reason why they avoided the city streets.

What would they do if they rounded a corner and found his body lying in the gutter; his prematurely grey hair and ebony skin caked with blood? They had never actually seen a body in the streets, but they had seen them on television and in newspaper photographs – bodies discarded by the military like sacks of garbage, a brutal public warning to anyone who opposed the regime.

Her mother abhorred violence, had been all but physically sick when she saw the rioting and massacre on television: young and old, male and female alike, lying dead or mutilated in the city streets, or being dragged away, screaming, by the soldiers and thrown into lorries, their fate uncertain. She had supported her husband, Robert Samuel Okrie, in his stance against the government of Malanga on the understanding that he would not be a party to violence.

Maria saw her mother rise and stretch, one hand rubbing the small of her back to ‘ease out the knots’, as she always said. She turned to her daughter and gave her a reassuring smile.

There was a sound of breaking glass and splintering wood. It was so out of place in the tranquillity of the garden that for a moment it didn’t register with Maria or her mother as belonging to their world at all. Then the unmistakable thud of booted feet came running through the house. Running towards them. There were other sounds too, sounds that Maria couldn’t identify until later when she saw the havoc that had been wreaked by the soldiers in their frenzied assault on the Okrie home: her mother’s antique lace curtains shredded to ribbons, her careful flower arrangements – a desperate

attempt at maintaining normality – trampled, vases smashed, dining chairs and furniture hurled through windows.

The French doors that led out from the kitchen to the garden were half shut and as the first of the soldiers burst through, he shattered the glass panels with the butt of his rifle, shards of crystal falling like deadly rain among Angela's roses. Others followed him, screaming abuse at the sight of their quarry, their eyes feverish and hate-filled. Two of them grabbed Maria's mother by the arms, twisting them behind her back until she gasped with pain. Another knocked the hat from her head with a swiping blow, then caught her long red hair in his clenched fist and drew it back, exposing her white throat.

Brutal hands hauled Maria to her feet and forced her head back until she was looking full into the blue Malangan sky. In that one terrible moment, Maria knew they were going to die. The soldiers were going to cut their throats. One stood over her, spittle on his lips, a drug-induced craziness in his eyes. A cloying smell filled her nostrils – the stench of fear and sweat and the sweet smell of something she couldn't identify, an aftershave perhaps. She closed her eyes and tried to recapture her mother's smile, the last smile before their world collapsed. She would cling to this for her very life, until the knife blade struck and her blood gushed out.

Then she was flung across the garden as if she was a lifeless animal pelt. She lay crumpled on the baked earth, her eyes closed, the good dark smell of the earth under her face mingling with the faintest perfume of roses. Perhaps they were going to shoot her instead. She tensed her body for the bullet.

No bullet came. No rifle crack or rattle of machine gun. She kept her eyes closed. Her father had told her that they got a

kick from seeing a prisoner's fear. Maybe they were waiting until she looked up?

'Maria!'

Her mother's desperate cry brought her to her knees and she turned around, eyes open now. Somehow, Angela had managed to break free of her captor's grip and was straining towards her daughter, one foot poised in mid air, her face a mask of concern and fear. Her blue eyes were steely with determination.

There was a blur of movement and her face imploded as the gun butt smashed home, breaking her nose and jaw, reducing flesh to raw, red pulp. She made no sound, although what was left of her mouth hung open in a terrible, silent scream.

Maria threw back her head and howled like a wounded animal, no longer caring that her neck was exposed to the knife. She screamed until a soldier stooped down and struck her viciously across the face with the back of his hand.

The scream died in her throat as the shock knocked all the breath from her body. As she lay, gasping and stricken on the ground, she heard a warning shout and saw a man emerge from the house. It was Jonah Kegale, one of the most feared of the Malangan secret police, unmistakable in his trademark wrap-around black glasses. He was waving his arms frantically and shouting: 'No. No!'

But it was too late. The stutter of an automatic rifle cut across his words and Maria watched in horror as her mother's chest exploded. Maria screamed. A soldier's boot made contact with the side of her head and she fell into darkness.