

Prologue

A bird circles above, like a spoon slowly stirring the strawberry sky. It screeches once, twice. The sound bounces off the trees and Elodie feels it somewhere deep inside so that she wonders if she is screeching too. She knows she should move but she cannot take her eyes off the bird, circling clockwise, scrolling up her minutes as the sun sinks towards the ground. She wonders how long she's been lying here. She tries to remember but she's like a drunk trying to piece together a jigsaw night.

Start at the beginning, she thinks, and the voice she hears is her father's. Go right back to the beginning and list the facts as you know them. She closes her eyes.

Her name is Elodie Harptree. She is in the heart of Africa. She left the capital this morning, on the back of a motorbike, to come upcountry. But why?

She opens her eyes. The bird is still circling, each languid turn leeching a little more light from the limpid sky. The air around her is like a living thing, pulsing and clicking, chirruping and crackling. She can hear the river too, a subtle splash-splash to her right. In the distance, someone shouts and Elodie realises she will never know why, and it doesn't matter. The worst has happened, and she is free-falling.

Aristide. Suddenly, the name is on her lips. She was coming to find Aristide. And now she remembers. Gunshots ringing out, the motorbike sliding and tipping over onto its side, Aristide's face looming over her as she lay in a heap, pain radiating from her side. He was saying something but she couldn't hear him because her ears were still ringing from the noise of the guns and the howl of pain coming from somewhere deep inside.

That's right: she came to get Aristide but instead he ran off into the bush and now she will never find him again. Elodie closes her eyes because the bird has gone and there is nothing else to see and nothing else to do.

High in the flame-flecked sky, the bird watches the drama unfold. It spirals placidly, enjoying the ebb-and-flow of the sun-streaked air beneath its wings.

It watches the motorbike putter up the empty road, its tyres making heavy weather of the fresh mud. It sees the two-legged figures step out from the trees and wave the magic sticks that make the air quiver. The bird wheels higher because it is scared of these sticks. It sees the motorbike skid and fall. The forked figures run forward, the magic sticks roar and then the figures run into the bush again. All except one, who picks up the motorbike and speeds up the road, the put-put of the engine pulsing like a drumbeat.

The bird circles lower. There are two bodies, like lead-weighted shadows on the red earth. One is not moving but the eyes of the other are open and, for a second, the bird fancies they are looking straight into its own. The sensation is unsettling, like glimpsing a fish under water. The bird wheels away and soars higher. It pays to be careful now that more and more people have magic sticks. It spins to the right, following the river, where it can see hippos surfacing like bad omens. It is time to move on. It veers away, higher into the darkling sky.

Chapter 1 Elodie

“Is this your first time?”

Elodie jumps. She had drifted off, gazing into the all-smothering clouds and marvelling that they looked exactly the same as the ones she used to stare at as a girl, lying behind the rhododendron bushes at the end of her garden.

She rubs her neck and turns to look at the speaker.

“Yes,” she says. “First time in Africa, actually.”

“Ah, you are a virgin of the continent,” he says, a half-smile curling his

lips. He is handsome, in an unkempt sort of way. Thick brown hair, a little too long at the back, dark, heavy-lashed eyes and a thin, walnut-brown face that suggests he certainly isn’t a virgin, of the continent or of anything else.

“And you are French.”

She makes sure it’s not a question and he inclines his head, mock- humble.

“*Mais oui*,” he says, stretching out his hand. “Thierry Foucault.” “Elodie. Elodie Harptree.”

“And you are most certainly English.”

Elodie bristles at his tone but she forces herself to smile and makes a

show of re-opening her book. There’s still at least 40 minutes of the flight to go and this guy sounds like trouble. Her mother would say she’s expecting the worst, as usual. Elodie would agree and then wait to be proven right. As Dana always says, Elodie has 99 problems but self-doubt isn’t one of them. She always sounds slightly pitying but Elodie forgives her because you can’t stay angry with someone who looks like Anne Hathaway but talks like a roadman off an east London estate.

Elodie says she was born confident. But it isn’t true and Dana, who has been her best friend since they bonded over their disdain for a particularly disgusting chicken pie served up one blustery September lunch time during their first year in secondary school, knows it all too well. Hence the annoyingly compassionate tone.

The truth is that as a child Elodie treated the world as an unwrapped Christmas present. But when she was 16, her father’s heart stopped

suddenly as he ran up the steps into the marble-and-glass tower that housed his office, his engines powering down between one step and the next. All those late-night phone calls, last-gasp currency hedges and contentious valuations had carved deep fissures into his arteries until they could no longer hold their shape. The coroner said that Patrick Harptree had the heart of an 80-year-old. Like a whipped dog, Elodie never forgot the lesson. Bad things do happen, the worst is always just around the corner, and the only thing you can rely on is yourself. Dana gave her a shoulder to cry on and kept her worries to herself when her friend went back into the world with her head lifted too high and her washed-hard eyes fixed on the future with a baleful glare.

Elodie didn’t seek comfort at home either. There was no room there for her grief because the expensive house with its now-still treadmill and silent phone was already brimful of her mother’s anguish. Elodie sat behind the rhododendron bushes in the back garden as night fell, drinking and smoking and watching swallows write secret messages on the blackboard sky. She learned to accept that no one was coming to find her and she resolved to never need finding by anyone again.

When she left school, she ditched her original idea of becoming a doctor -- the body was not to be trusted, the body would let you down -- and decided to focus on the mind. She liked the therapist she had been assigned after her father died -- a porcelain-faced blonde with kind, blue eyes that welled up too easily. Miss Buckworth told Elodie that time would heal if she opened herself to the love of others and the possibility of a future. Elodie didn't believe her but she could see how her technique might help others -- weaker people who had not resolved to rely only on themselves and thus remove the danger of further grief and loss. She accepted that she had been hurt this time because she had not prepared herself well enough and she appreciated Miss Buckworth's efforts and, more than that, she understood the concepts behind her advice on visualisations, mindfulness, and exercise. Even if these techniques didn't quite work for her, Elodie decided she would be well-placed to give others the same advice. Lemonade from some very bitter lemons. And so she eventually went to Manchester University to study psychology while Dana, who had watched her friend's collapse and cold rebirth and could still see a carefree 12-year-old inside, moved to the same city to study fashion design and keep an eye

on her friend. Elodie, who believed she was happy learning the ins-and-outs of human emotions, was grateful to have her friend around, although she would never have told her as much.

The Frenchman is staring at her, like a scientist peering through a microscope.

"So, what brings you here?" he says. "Unless you prefer not to talk? Some people do not like to talk on planes. I am usually this way but I was curious because you looked so excited and then you were falling asleep and I didn't want you to miss the view. We will break through the clouds very soon."

His English is almost flawless but his accent is pronounced. She thinks it might be deliberate. She hates affectation and there is an arrogance in his sexy smile but he's right: she is a virgin of the continent. Maybe he can teach her some things before she lands in a country that she didn't even know existed before the whole Martin saga.

“I don’t mind talking,” Elodie lies. “I’m a clinical psychologist and I’m going to work with former child soldiers, help them overcome their trauma and get their lives back. I’m with Care Circle, the British charity.”

She pauses a beat because this is usually where the gushing praise comes in. Thierry arches an eyebrow instead.

“Ah, another young woman on a crusade to save the world. *Charmante.*”

What an ass! Elodie knows she should let it go but that’s just not in her nature. Dana says she looks for trouble. Elodie retorts that it’s just because she doesn’t like things sneaking up on her and trouble has a tendency to do that.

“It’s not like that at all. I’m not as inexperienced as you seem to think. I’ve worked with juvenile offenders, asylum seekers and all sorts in the UK but I wanted a change, to come to a place where I could make a real difference, somewhere challenging.”

The best lies always stick closely to the truth, isn’t that what they say? It’s all true. Or partly true, at least. And it’s not like she’s going to spill the beans on the whole Martin thing to a complete stranger like some kind of liquored-up, loud American.

“If you like a challenge,” Thierry says, lingering just a fraction too long on the word, “then you’ll be happy here. One difference, if I can be so bold, is that in the UK, they talk tough. Here, the kids are not just talking tough; most of them have done it all. They’ve killed, stolen, looted, and probably raped. But this, of course, you know. And I suppose what works in your country will almost certainly work here, *n’est-ce pas?*”

Elodie bristles again but now she’s even more interested in this pretty boy. He seems to know a thing or two. Maybe he’s not the sordid sex tourist/sleazy French businessman she originally thought. Still, his tone is borderline insulting and reminds her of her cognitive psychology professor, a mottled pear of a man whose mouse-brown toupée slid lower and lower as his lecture droned to its anti-climactic end. He also liked to use the sarcastic non-question question to humiliate his students. She didn’t like it then and she doesn’t like it now.

“Of course, you have to adapt to the specific cultural context,” she says in what Dana calls her “suffer-no-fools” voice. “But I think children are children, wherever they grow up. I imagine they will respond as others do to the usual therapies for PTSD and other mental traumas.”

“What kind of therapies?”

“Drawing, role play, breathing exercises, meditation and a lot of talking. The idea is to restore their self-esteem and revive their hopes for the future. What’s so funny?”

“Sorry. I was not laughing *at* you. It’s just amusing to hear such a ... such an optimistic perspective. Sorry, I’m not expressing myself very well.” As Elodie opens her mouth, he raises a hand and takes a deep breath.

She hates to obey him but there’s something about those eyes. Maybe he doesn’t suffer fools easily either. Her interest is piqued again. She thinks of Martin for a second, but only as a reminder that she’s very far from Kansas now and this Frenchman is the polar opposite of the second man who broke her heart.

“You see these children as victims. Of course, many of them will have been forced to do what they did. But, and perhaps this is something hard for someone like you to imagine, but some are happy with who they became. All their lives, they have been forced to obey circumstances beyond their control and now, they can shape their own destinies. It is a powerful feeling. I wonder if breathing exercises will really make a difference.”

Elodie stifles an irritated sigh. Maybe this French guy is more like Martin than she first thought. Another man making assumptions without

knowing the first thing about her. That was not entirely fair to Martin. He did spend two years getting to know her, learning to love her, she thought. But in the end, he decided she wasn’t worthy of love. Or at least that’s how it felt. Of course, he blamed her, said she didn’t let him in but she’d let him in further than anyone else. What more could he possibly want?

Thierry is staring again. It’s time to lead this conversation into a cul-de-sac. A polite question about work should do it, Elodie thinks. He can talk for a minute and then she’ll dive back into her book.

“Do you work in the aid sector too?”

Even as she says it, Elodie wonders, for the umpteenth time, if ‘aid sector’ is really the best term but it’s what she was advised to use. Nobody was comfortable with ‘aid industry’ or ‘aid business’, for obvious reasons. Elodie feels ‘aid sector’ still sounds too mercantile. Retail sector. Agricultural sector. Weapons sector.

“*Mon Dieu, non!* I hope I do not look like an aid worker. Otherwise, I will have to burn these clothes,” Thierry says, eyes widening with mock horror. “No, I am a ... well, I suppose the best translation is a security consultant.”

Suddenly, the plane shudders. Elodie’s hands slam down on the armrests, her knuckles flaring white. She’s a nervous passenger because if the worst can happen, and it certainly has before, how much worse will it be at 30,000 feet?

“It’s just turbulence because we are going through the clouds,” Thierry says, lightly touching her hand. She pulls away but not before she notices how cool and hard his hand feels on hers. Like a shell on the soft body of a turtle.

Thierry raises his hands in a gesture of mock surrender. Elodie suppresses another sigh -- perhaps he means well -- and fiddles with her seat belt. Her cul-de-sac is proving circuitous and she hates that he’s seen her fear.

“Don’t worry. These planes are very safe. Too many important people on board to allow for any mistakes,” he says.

The plane steadies.

“What do you mean?” Elodie says, grateful for the distraction. “Is there a big conference going on? A UN meeting?”

It galls her to think that she might have missed something. She’s been so diligent, checking the online news daily to stay on top of the latest developments and that’s no mean feat given that there’s barely any coverage of this place in the English media. She was forced to brave the serpentine sentences of the abstruse French press to find any news. She bought neon flashcards and carefully printed out the names of the myriad rebel groups and militias until the corkboard in her bedroom looked like a

rainbow. She was genuinely surprised to learn how complex the issues were, and embarrassed that she had not considered this possibility before.

Thierry guffaws. In other circumstances, Elodie might describe his laugh as sexy.

“I thought you were joking! *Que c’est marrant!* Dear Elodie, I have another piece of advice for you and this might be the most useful tip I give you.”

Elodie bristles at the implication that their exchanges have been so one-way.

“The most *unimportant* people in this situation, by far, are the people who work for the UN. They might have a few thousand poorly paid Black peacekeepers here, pretending to help the French army, but in terms of knowing what’s going on, they might as well be sitting on their backsides in New York. No, the UN is not important. Try putting UN in front of anything and you’ll see what I mean.”

He smiles at his own joke.

“Well, if not the UN, who are the important people on this plane?” Elodie asks testily. “I mean, apart from the pilot. Are you important?”

Thierry waves his hand dismissively.

“I am nobody, just a consultant. I am just trying to help the ... what do you people call them now? *Si*, the beneficiaries? Is that right?”

Elodie inclines her head. She hates the term but he’s right: that *is* what they call the people they help. People who benefit. Recipients. The term neatly avoids apportioning blame for the initial catastrophe that caused them to need that help. She tunes back in.

“Of course, I don’t help them directly. I help those who are supposed to be helping them, people like you. Or maybe your boss. But in the round, I’m the same as you. It’s just that my skill set is different.”

The wiry curl of his body suggests that if he ever told her what that skill set is, he’d have to kill her.

The air hostess -- a tall blonde of the genus that always makes Elodie feel small and dirty -- comes by with the drinks trolley. Her bored pout morphs into a wide beam when Thierry orders a whiskey in French and says something apparently funny about the wine. The hostess tinkles a laugh through perfect teeth. She turns to Elodie and the smile disappears when she asks for a mineral water in English. She doesn't offer Elodie ice or lemon so Elodie raises her voice and asks for both, enunciating the English words extra carefully. One of her father's favourite sayings was, "If you don't ask, you don't get." Sometimes, she wonders if she picks fights just to hear that voice echo in her head again.

For a long moment, the air hostess stands with the bottle of water and plastic glass held out towards Elodie, her smile frozen. Eventually, she retracts her arm, whispering something to Thierry as she bends again over the trolley to slot a single ice cube into Elodie's cup. He raises an eyebrow and bends his head to hide his smile. The air hostess gives him a last, lingering look and moves on.

"To answer your question about the important people," Thierry says, swirling the whiskey over a generous serving of ice cubes, "We are going into a war zone, *non*? It may not be a very exciting war, or a very big war, but it is a substantial conflict. Wars, of any size, are hungry beasts. Someone must sell guns, someone must build roads to get the guns to the fighters, someone must provide vehicles and then also the fighters have something to sell: gold, other minerals, timber, or the stuff they have looted. So now you need buyers and you need the middlemen who bring all the pieces together. And remember, this is not normal business that you can arrange over the phone or by email. If you want the war dollars, you need to show up. And I haven't yet talked about the peacekeepers. They need food, drinks, generators, air conditioners, alcohol, cigarettes, porn. It's a huge industry and most of the people on this plane are coming to make money, whatever they say. Everyone, even the NGOs."

Elodie forces what she hopes is a wry smile but she's annoyed and mainly because Thierry is weaving close to the truth. She tries to squash the tiny voice in her head that's whispering, 'Finding yourself, is it? A pretty clichéd ulterior motive, Elodie.' She knows it's not fair. Or rather not

entirely truthful. Perhaps there is an element of that. She remembers Martin, leaning up against the kitchen counter, the hair he wore slick and tidy for his lectures ruffled in what she used to call his sexy professor look,

his brow furrowed. He'd taken off his glasses and was waving them around as he did when teaching. But she didn't like the lesson he was trying to give her.

“The problem is you just don't know who you are or who you want to be. And if you can't know that, how am I supposed to know? How am I supposed to know someone who won't let any light in?” he asked.

She can't even remember what the row was about. Something trivial and it just escalated. Was he asking about their future again? He knew she didn't want to talk about having a family. She had no desire to create a life only to smash it to pieces by leaving a child high and dry, alone in a world they didn't ask to be born into.

“I love you, Elodie. But you do make it difficult. You're playing your life too safe. You're so terrified of being hurt, you won't take any risks and it's breaking us apart.”

And indeed it did. And so here she is, on a plane high above Africa, heading to a country she'd barely heard of six months ago. Not just to find herself, no. She couldn't accept that. She was prepared to acknowledge something of an ulterior motive but only to herself, only in a tiny whisper that no one, not Martin, not Dana and certainly not this arrogant Frenchman, would ever hear.

“You sound like you've been out here for a while.”

Thierry takes a long sip of his drink.

“‘A while’. I like that expression. It's so vague. Yes, I've been doing this for ... a while.”

If he wasn't quite so annoying, Elodie would like to ask Thierry more

questions. For example, she'd like to know how dangerous it is in the capital Bangui these days. It's supposed to be relatively peaceful but when it makes the news, it's always ‘volatile’. Or ‘bullet-scarred’.

She's saved by the view.

“*Voilà! Regardez.* See, we're below the clouds.”

Elodie whips her head around. No wonder Thierry could tell it was her

first time. But she doesn't care because the view is breathtaking. Broccoli-headed trees poke out of a sea of intense green. A silver-plated river snakes

through hillocks and forests. Ochre-coloured clearings are speckled with dark brown dots huddled in messy circles. Orphaned clouds cast forlorn shadows.

"I wonder if they have more words for green than we do," she whispers, half to herself. Thierry laughs softly. He's leaning towards her and she's surprised to find she doesn't really mind. He smells of something spicy; adventure, maybe. She shakes her head. She hasn't come all this way to behave like a teenager. That *would* be clichéd. She focuses on the view below, her new home.

"It's like another world. No, it's like the first ever world. Some kind of Eden," she says.

"You are very amusing," Thierry says. "But somehow, you are right. It does look like a new world, a perfect world. From up here at least."

In the cockpit, Philippe Courtois lets out a sigh of relief. There's the airport, at last. He stretches his back and rolls his shoulders. He's felt every minute of this flight. He rubs his hand across his wet forehead.

"Are you completely well?" asks Diadié, the Senegalese co-pilot, in his clipped, over-precise French. "Do you want me to take over?"

"No, no, it's fine. Nearly there now," Philippe says. "I'll take her down and then I might leave you to do the final checks and shutdown. Is that okay?"

He tries to smile but instead grimaces as a shiver ripples through his body.

"Let's get this done," he sighs, pushing the handle to lower the landing gear.

Afterwards, when questioned by the air safety panel back in Paris, Philippe Courtois said he hadn't realised quite how sick he was. Which was true. The worst that could be said was that he underestimated the

effect of the malaria he didn't even know he had. Arrogance, perhaps, but no malicious intent or real incompetence.

Nonetheless, he knew he deserved the scrutiny. People had died, people had been maimed, and it was, ultimately, his fault. Or the fault of the mosquito that bit him. Or the idiot officials who allowed poor people to build their shacks just metres from the runway.

Philippe Courtois was acquitted but he never flew long-haul again and one day, after five years hopping from French airports to Spain, Italy and Greece, he took early retirement and moved to a small cabin in the woods of the Cévennes where he spent his time painting landscapes, drinking pastis and trying to forget that unlucky morning in a country that no one talked about anymore.