



Hopping on a flight from Houston, Texas, to Johannesburg, with his weapons locked in his luggage, he landed in South Africa in record time without a wink of sleep. Arriving at two in the morning, he got a room and crashed until rays of blinding sunshine made it impossible to sleep.

Over breakfast, he strategized his entrance into Swazi. Being armed, he didn't want to be detained at security checkpoints crossing the border. His commander gave him the name of a contact at the US Embassy, and he placed a call to the person.

"Office of Jeanne Malone, this is Helen. How may I help you?" A friendly voice greeted him.

"Helen, this is Austin Bendale, my former commander sent an email to your office letting the ambassador know of my arrival. I need help getting into Eswatini, or Swaziland as it was formerly called, without being detained or my weapons confiscated." He hoped he was talking to the right person and wouldn't be passed from one office to another.

"The email has been received, but the ambassador had an

early meeting today and won't be in her office until eleven. Could you call me back later?" Other phones were ringing in the background, and he heard people speaking in different languages.

"Could I come to the embassy and speak with you in person? I'd like to leave South Africa as soon as possible."

"Yes, it would be fine. Arrive at eleven thirty. I will assist you."

"Helen, I appreciate this. My friend's in trouble, and time is critical." He gave a generous tip to the waitress since he occupied the space for an hour. "I'll see you soon." He ended the call and wrote down the address of the embassy.

Preparing for his assignment, he spent the next hour at the table studying the maps of South Africa and Swaziland, familiarizing himself with the lay of the land. He honed in on the Hilton Inn where Jocelyn was staying and followed the route to the orphanage, Noah's Boat.

Ready to start this rescue, Austin left the hotel. A line of taxis waited for tourists in front. Austin raised his arm, and one moved forward to assist him. "US Embassy on the corner of MR and Cultural Center Drive." He slung his duffle bag into the backseat and followed it into the cab with his backpack over his shoulder.

"Yes. Twenty minutes." He watched Austin in his review mirror. When he nodded his head, the driver joined the traffic flow as the meter clicked, calculating his cab fare. Roads in South Africa were as good as he traveled in the States. Modern buildings, working street lights, and orderly traffic flow didn't resemble the Africa he'd seen in other countries on the continent.

When the taxi came to a stop in front of the embassy, he paid the driver and made his way to the gate with his duffle and backpack in tow. After surrendering his handgun and showing his passport, he explained his reason for visiting the

ambassador. The embassy was a stately blocked building with pillars holding up a large porch and beautiful hanging flower baskets. After passing through security, Helen met him as he retrieved his handgun.

“Ambassador Malone has arrived and wants to speak with you. Please follow me.” Her shoes tapped against the clay tiles as if the rubber had been worn off of her heel, and the nail was bare against the terrazzo floor. Her hair was in a bun so tight it caused her eyes to look slanted. Wearing a jacket over a straight skirt, she gave off a business-only vibe though her smile was friendly on her ebony skin.

Flowy curtains on the windows moved with the slight breeze. Taking a seat at a small desk, she punched a button on an antique-looking phone. Surprisingly, the old device still worked. He was soon summoned into the ambassador’s office.

“Thank you for seeing me, Ambassador Malone. I know you’re busy.” Austin extended his hand and greeted the lady dressed in a pantsuit with a matching blazer, giving off the importance of her position.

“Please, have a seat.” She got comfortable in her desk chair. “Your former commanding officer sings your praises. I understand you recently left the Navy and started a company that assists Americans in foreign countries. We need more brave men stepping into danger to help US citizens in peril.

Helen stepped into the room to give the ambassador a message.

“Thank you, Helen. Ask him to wait. We won’t be much longer.”

Helen left the office.

“Your driver has arrived. I’m sure you’re trained for situations like this. But your friend has chosen a perilous time to visit Eswatini, or Swaziland, as it was called before the king changed it. The chaos is out of hand and escalating. It seems organized in a strategic pattern and a specific time frame. I’ll

help get you in and out of the country safely. Where is she right now?" She met Austin's eyes.

"She's staying at the Hilton Inn in Mbabane. The office she's working at is in the building housing an orphanage named Noah's Boat."

"Yes, I know the place. Yeboah is in charge, yes?"

"That's correct." Austin paused. "I think he's the one who invited my friend to come and do research for the grants she's writing for his humanitarian projects." Austin didn't like the look on the ambassador's face. "Is there a problem?"

"No, but I have a feeling everything isn't as it appears in Swazi. It's ruled by the last dictator on the continent, but there's something else going on that's escalating the uprisings. Keep your eyes open and be careful. My driver can get you to the border and help you gain entrance into the country. You can take a taxi from that point. It's not far. Ring my phone and I'll send my driver to meet you when you bring her out." She stood behind her desk.

"This is generous of you. I didn't expect to use your vehicle for this mission."

"We must keep our Americans safe. I'm glad to help, Mr. Bendale. Helen will take care of the details. Keep us apprised of your progress."

He shook her hand. "You have been very kind." He pivoted and left her office.

"Follow me." Helen led him to a parking lot at the rear of the building. She spoke to the driver and introduced Austin. "He will take you where you need to go. Proceed with caution." She returned to the building, her heels clicking with every step.

"I'm Edward, your escort for the afternoon." He pointed to a sedan.

After putting his bags into the car, Austin got comfortable in the backseat. "Thanks, Edward. How long of a drive is it?"

"A bit over three hours to the east."

Enjoying the smooth streets and the luxurious air-conditioned vehicle, Austin rested his eyes during the drive. Things would drastically change once he walked into unfamiliar territory resembling a war zone. He'd been there before, and it was no picnic.

Before breakfast, wearing another short-sleeved sundress and sandals, Jocelyn met with Yeboah. Sifiso stood and held her chair. She ordered an orange soda and took a seat near an open window. With her hair up in a messy bun, the breeze felt great on her skin.

"Thank you, Sifiso. And good morning gentlemen. Are the monkeys in the garden today?" She held the curtains back to look for them.

"I haven't seen any. Maybe they will come later in the day." Sifiso took his seat across from Yeboah.

Jocelyn reached for her notebook and opened to the map they were using. "Yeboah, I thought through our last meeting, I have some questions. Can we discuss the locations of the feeding programs you're requesting? These projects need to have a shipping container on the property to utilize for food storage."

Yeboah studied the map. "Would you like me to mark the locations of the orphanages we have in the country? It would give you a more complete picture of our projects."

"Yes, please. If we can do some of our work close to the homes, it would benefit the orphans too." She watched Yeboah placing marks on her map.

Putting the pen down, Yeboah asked, "Could the food be distributed near the wells too? Those areas are in the slums where starvation and disease from contaminated water prevail."

“That increases the number of feeding programs considerably. Let me count the cost and factor in the container expense. I’ll work on this and report back. If we send containers full of supplies to these specific locations, we should purchase the shipping containers and use them at each site. Shipping is pricey, and storing the food is crucial. Do you see a less expensive way to do this?” She sat back and waited for Yeboah to respond.

Rubbing his clean-shaven chin, he hesitated. “I think this suggestion is a wonderful plan. But how do we restock the containers once the supplies are depleted?” He took a drink of water from one of the bottles placed on the table. “Our roads are treacherous in some areas. Lorries cannot pass to all locations.”

“Smaller vehicles would have to be used. This is another area to consider. I’ll research some options and come to your office after lunch if Sifiso could give me a ride in the van? I want to see Emmy again.” She sat back and finished the orange soda she’d ordered with breakfast.

“Please use caution as you travel. I’ve been speaking to some of the rioters. But they cannot be persuaded to stop until they have been heard. I pray it settles soon. These oppressed people do not need more troubles.” Yeboah took a final sip of his tea.

“I agree. Why doesn’t the king do something to stop the violence? It’s destroying his country.” She wiped the condensation off of her soda bottle. “Do you have a military presence to step in and bring order?”

“Our king has sent a portion of the army to quell the chaos. They, along with the riot police, have had minimal success. The king instructed them to brutally suppress the protests with gunfire and tear gas. But, as soon as they disperse the crowds, the rioters meet in another location and start again.” He paused. “Years of being hungry have led to these protests. It is

difficult to see your child dying of starvation while the king's fifteen wives drive around in expensive cars flaunting their wealth."

Sifiso clenched his fists. "It makes me angry. I know he uses the money meant for our families to spoil his wives. This hurts the homeless and hungry, the sick, and the dying. Those who are still strong are igniting the riots."

"It's hard to comprehend." She focused on Yeboah. "Sir, how can we be sure the funds these grants generate will go to these specific needs and not be confiscated by the king?" She leaned forward, awaiting his response.

"Sending funds through the orphanage account puts the control in my hands. I network with other ministry-run orphanages and churches with good leaders. If one of these feeding programs or wells is in their area, I will give them the financial support to run the project. But I must be diligent to only give them currency in small portions because handling money makes them a target for robbery and tempts them to keep it for their personal needs. Diligent accountability keeps them honest as we work together for the needs of these people."

"Your rewards will be great, Yeboah." She raised her soda bottle as if in a toast.

"I'm counting on that." He smiled as he stood. Sifiso followed suit, pushing his boss's chair in.

"Do you have time to eat breakfast?" Jocelyn stood.

"No, but thank you for the invitation. We must leave. Yeboah has a busy agenda pressing him today." Sifiso placed money on the table.

"Thank you for the time. I'll work on the questions you've raised and see you this afternoon for my appointment. It's at two, correct, Sifiso?"

"Yes, do be very cautious." Sifiso pushed in his chair. "I'll be here to pick you at one thirty."

“This afternoon I’ll come early to spend time with Emmy.”

Yeboah shook her hand and gave a wave of greeting as per their custom.

“Blessings on your labor.” Sifiso followed him out.

As they walked away, Jocelyn’s mind was spinning. The needs seem to be multiplying like eating a piece of fatty goat among the Massai—it kept getting bigger and bigger the more one chewed. She took a deep breath and blew it out before trying to organize the many aspects of this humanitarian minefield.