PART ONE

SALISBURY, RHODESIA

APRIL 1976

ONE

JENNY

What does a woman do when her son goes to war?

'Where did I put my car keys? I had them a minute ago. Oh dear, sorry about this. I'm so absent-minded.' If only. Jenny felt under the cushions, plumped them up, gazed vacantly at the drinks cabinet, the bookcase, the coffee table. To be absent-minded. Not to have to think or to know. Sorry people, my mind is AWOL today.

When Bruce was called up a year ago she had coped with his departure. No. It wasn't just coping. It was liberation. An intense and secret respite from all that was destroying her. But her son? Nothing had prepared her for this. She had told herself that it would all be over by the time Sean left school. He was only eighteen, far too young to go to war. The futility. The utter futility of it all. She made herself focus on the mundane task of finding her keys, delaying his departure.

'C'mon, Ma. We're gonna be late.'

He was lounging against the doorjamb, shoulders nearly filling the frame, hair bristling up the sides of his head beneath his cocky brown beret. His camouflage uniform was crisp and new, his trousers tucked into polished boots. Brutus the Doberman sat in front of him, glossy and mean. He was a guard dog, chosen by Bruce and Sean to keep her safe. Jenny hated the dog and would have liked to get rid of it.

She shrugged and shook her head, gazing helplessly around

the room. Sean strode over, easy on the eye, pleasing her in spite of it all. He was tall, built like his father, his muscular body not yet turning to flab as Bruce's had done.

What might happen to this boy, her son, her little one? What would Sean look like when he was fighting in the bush, afraid and alone, his uniform shabby with the sweat and the grime of the fighting, stained with the blood of his wounds – or the blood of his victims?

The newspapers were full of terrorist atrocities and the bravery of the Rhodesian army. Rhodesians were fighting a war against communism and terrorism, and they kept telling themselves that they were winning. Perhaps it was simpler if you could accept the propaganda. Other women stoically sent their menfolk to do battle on the borders, believing the war was nearly over even as the fighting escalated, and the terrorists kept coming.

Was it true that the Rhodesian army also committed atrocities and blamed them on the terrorists? There were rumours in the overseas press that some of the missionaries who had been murdered by terrorists had in fact been victims of the security forces. It was punishment for colluding with the enemy, because they gave food and medical treatment to the men who came in the night with dark threats about what would happen if their demands were ignored. Wanting only to provide for the needs of the communities they served, the missionaries were caught in the crossfire and sometimes it was impossible to tell which side had fired the deadly bullet or inflicted the mortal wound.

Bruce rarely talked about the fighting when he came home but sometimes he cried out in his sleep. Jenny tried not to brood on conversations overheard when he was talking to friends from the army, and the horror lurking beneath their jokes and their bragging. She knew what her husband was capable of when his fury was unleashed. She knew what he could do in the privacy of his own home. What might he do in the camaraderie of war?

Sean rummaged in her handbag. Tissues, cigarette packet, plastic Tampax holder, lipstick, loose change – all identifiable by their slight familiar sounds until the jangle of her keys betrayed her.

'Jeez, Ma. They're here. Your keys are in your handbag.' There was a whine of petulance in his voice. He held the keys out, jangling them in irritation, his blue eyes cold and scornful. She smiled and patted her hair in a habitual, timeworn gesture as she crossed the threadbare carpet towards him.

'Sorry. I thought I'd looked in there.'

It would be so easy to reach out and trace the outline of his jaw, to feel the smoothness of his shaven chin beneath her fingertips, to hold him tight and beg him not to go, to weep and wail and rage at the fate that had brought them both to this place and this moment.

'Thanks.' She allowed a swift brush of her hand against his.

The crackle of his excitement in the air was like an unspoken threat. He was defying her to violate the heroics of his departure with tears and tenderness.

'I think Beatrice wants to say goodbye to you. She's in the kitchen.'

Resentment flickered across his face. Sean was like his father. He thought Jenny was too familiar with the servants, particularly with Beatrice, dangerously blurring the boundaries which kept everything in its proper place.

But Sean ought to take his leave of the woman who had been more of a mother to him than Jenny ever was. The thought dislodged something inside her, like a pebble rattling down through the empty spaces where love might have been.

Beatrice had been there, five months pregnant, standing in the driveway with Anna clinging to the hem of her pink cotton uniform, the day Jenny brought Sean home from hospital. Bruce had helped Jenny from the car, his elaborate show of tenderness masking the fear and confusion between them. Beatrice had

watched them with that dispassionate knowing gaze, the mask that servants wear as a cover for seeing and knowing too much.

Jenny had wanted to hold the baby in her bandaged arms, but the caesarean formed a hot fist in her belly. She handed him over and watched him mewling and snuffling against Beatrice's ripe round body. Might some healing maternal instinct eventually erase the memories of the past week and allow her to love that puckered little creature?

'Mummy. Mummy home.' Anna ran up and wrapped her arms around Jenny's legs. Jenny longed to pick her up but pain was gnawing through her, so she stood helpless with her arms by her side, clumsy in their bandages, while her little girl rubbed against her knees and welcomed her home.

Beatrice had come into their lives when Jenny was three months pregnant with Sean and threatening to miscarry. The doctor had told her she must get help with looking after Anna. Despite her protests Bruce's grandmother had paid for them to employ a maid. Jenny had watched in apathy and desolation as Anna slowly bonded with this mother substitute, as Beatrice's large, quilted body began to squeeze Jenny out of the only safe and loving space that she had ever known.

It had been different with the new baby. From the beginning she had been happy to let Beatrice look after Sean. The space of her survival had shrunk to a rocky outcrop in her soul, barely capable of sustaining one life let alone of accommodating all the demands of a newborn child. Beatrice would know what to do. African women had an instinct for mothering.

Four months later, Beatrice had given birth to a son called Maxwell. She had returned to work the next day with her baby on her back, after Jenny had pleaded with Bruce not to send her away. For the first few years of their lives, the two boys had been like twin brothers. Now, eighteen years old and ready to fight a war against Beatrice's kin, Sean sulked and resented her claims upon him.

Beatrice was standing at the kitchen sink, hands immersed in greasy water. Washing up liquid hadn't been the same since sanctions started. Nothing had. Biscuits, soap powder, clothes, cars. It gave some people a sense of solidarity, this isolation. They liked being pitted against the world, brave pioneers once again fighting to defend their families and their territory. Jenny felt alienated by their uncompromising perseverance. She had no loyalties worth dying for, no beliefs worth the sacrifice of a son. Does any mother, deep down?

'Beatrice, Sean is going now. He has come to say goodbye to you.'

Beatrice wiped her podgy hands on her apron, scowling. She went to stand in front of Sean, tssking and shaking her head. Brutus stood protectively beside him, growling and curling his lip. Sean gripped his studded leather collar as if to restrain him. There was something menacing about the gesture.

'It is no good, this war. Why these men fighting, fighting? Eh, eh, it's no good. Why you go fighting wars?'

'Terrorists, Beatrice. I must go to fight the terrorists so that Rhodesia will be a safe country for your children and my children.'

'Eh, eh, but why these terrorists want fighting? Rhodesia is good country. We are not needing these men fighting. If they killing you, then what your mummy do?'

'Hush, Beatrice, don't talk like that,' said Jenny, though in truth she was grateful for the easy banter that allowed Beatrice to mention the unmentionable. Did she have a cause worth dying for, worth Maxwell, her only son, dying for?

Beatrice lifted her apron and wiped her face with it. A bluebottle fly droned about her head. She glanced at it and her eyes seemed to bulge as if she was afraid of it. She had been behaving strangely in recent weeks. What was troubling her?

'Use the fly spray, Beatrice,' Jenny said. 'It's there on the windowsill behind you.'

Beatrice looked terror-stricken. 'It's alright, madam. It will fly out of the window soon.'

Jenny shrugged. There was no understanding the mysterious fears and superstitions of the African.

Beatrice took Sean's hand between her own, ignoring Brutus snarling beside him. Her skin was glossy with Vaseline and her fingernails were pink.

'You be good boy. You not getting killed. Your daddy, he coming back from army soon. You coming back soon too, you hear? Beatrice, she is looking after you from that time you were piccanin like Maxwell. Now you big boy. Maxwell big boy. Eh, eh, these terrorists are no good. They are bringing plenty, plenty trouble to this place. Better you do good fighting, win war quickly, then you come back, Beatrice make you plenty cakes, you hear?'

Sean grinned uncomfortably and extricated his hand. 'Don't worry, Beats. I'll be back.'

When Maxwell was ten, Bruce had insisted that he go back to Beatrice's village. He had said that he did not want his son playing with the house girl's piccanin. Sean had never expressed any interest in what became of Maxwell after that. Why had that never troubled Jenny until now, when it was too late, much too late, to change anything?

Sean picked up his kitbag in the hallway and heaved it over his shoulder. He pushed open the wooden door which led out to the back veranda and the long gravel driveway.

The old Mercedes had been chosen for reliability, not for glamour. Sean slung his kitbag into the boot, then he called to Jonas as he climbed into the driver's seat. Like his father, he automatically assumed that he would drive, even though it was Jenny's car.

'Hey, Jonas, open the gates.'

The tyres crunched on the gravel and Jonas ran ahead of them, the soles of his Bata takkies flapping loose around his toes.

'Beatrice is a dear old thing, isn't she?' said Jenny, because it felt better to be inane than to be silent.

'She's too familiar. You let her take too many liberties. You always have.'

'That's what your father says.'

Behind them Jonas closed the gate with a metallic clang.

'Sean?'

'Don't go soft on me, Ma.'

'No, I won't. I just wanted to say – we could always leave if it gets too much – I mean, the war and things – if you can't stand any more – we don't have to stay here. You don't have to fight.'

'Pa's fighting.'

The tree-lined avenue stretched ahead. The verges were still green after the rains, and the jacarandas stretched leafy fronds to touch one another beneath a pale sky. An old African wobbled on his bike. Sean gave a blast on the horn and pulled out to avoid him.

'Stupid hout,' he said. Then he added querulously, 'You ought to be proud of us. Me and Pa are risking our lives to fight for our country. My mates and me, our future's here. We're not gonna gap it and let the commies take over.'

Maybe silence was preferable. It sat between them, thick and impenetrable, until he turned off and she saw the army lorries waiting ahead of them, their cargoes of young men strutting too confidently around the car park with their brightly dressed girlfriends flitting among them.

'I'll stop here,' he said, pulling up alongside the kerb.

She embarrassed him. He did not want her saying goodbye in front of his friends. He was already opening the door. She leaned over and quickly kissed his cheek, leaving a smudge of lipstick.

'Oh dear, I've put lipstick on your face.' She reached out to wipe it off. He flinched and ducked away.

'Don't worry about it, Ma,' he said, rubbing furiously with his big stubby fingers.

The door creaked heavily on its hinges and he unfolded his body and adjusted the slant of his beret. Jenny heard a tip tapping of heels on the pavement. It reminded her of walking in Inyanga when the children were little. A wooden footbridge. The Three Billy Goats Gruff. How did the story go? Bruce was the troll, she remembered that much.

Waiting under the bridge as Anna skips across. Trip trap trip trap she sings, a skinny little girl in pink shorts with knobbly, suntanned legs. Trip trap trip trap went the heels on the pavement. Trip trap trip trap go Anna's little girl legs with her plastic sandals slapping the wood. *Be careful. Be careful. The troll is waiting to get you.*

'Hi, Sean.' Sue stood on tiptoe and kissed him. Of course. Jenny should have realized she would be there. The girl's sleek auburn hair was parted in the middle, framing her jackal face, with the cunning sparkle in her eyes telling Sean that he was a hero already.

'Hello, Sue,' said Jenny.

'Hiya, Mrs Pretorius.'

Sue was wearing a red roll neck top that moulded itself around her breasts, emphasizing their impertinence. Once, Jenny had found a used condom in the car after Sean had borrowed it. Ever since, she had felt uncomfortable with Sue.

'Howzit, doll?' said Sean.

'Okay, babe,' she said, smiling brightly up at him.

Jenny slid over into the driver's seat, trying not to cry, and waited while he took his kitbag out of the boot. He bent down to the open window.

'Look after yourself, son,' she said.

'You too, Ma. Tell the old man I said hi.'

'Yes, I will. Seems a shame they couldn't have called you up a couple of weeks later. You could have seen him then. He'll be home next week.' Her heart sank at the thought of Bruce's return.

'That's the way it is in war, Ma.' He sounded pleased.

'Well then, I'll say goodbye now.'

'Okay. Cheers then.' He lifted his hand in a casual wave, and then as if on second thoughts he bent down and kissed her cheek. She watched him sauntering away with Sue trip trapping along beside him, their arms entwined and her neat backside wiggling in black bell-bottoms. Trip trap trip trap. Be careful. Here comes the troll.

She lit a cigarette and reversed to get back onto the main road. When she looked again they had merged in with the other youngsters, Sue's red top acting as a beacon in a heaving sea of khaki.

TWO

BEATRICE

Beatrice plunged her arms into the greasy washing up water and tried to ignore the yammer of her grandmother's voice inside her head. Since UDI, washing up liquid was not so good. Jam. Biscuits. Everything was bad these days. And now Mbuya, her grandmother, was coming to her after many years.

Eh, eh, first she had been coming as a fly when the madam and Sean were here, and now she looked like a vulture, squatting there on the kitchen table and not wearing anything except a kaross around her hips so that her withered breasts were hanging down on her belly.

For many weeks she had been visiting Beatrice like this, shouting and screeching inside her head, sitting on the bed when Beatrice was sleeping, coming into the kitchen when Beatrice was working.

It was not good. Beatrice was a Christian. She remembered what that minister at the church was telling them when he was preaching:

'My people, you must not worship your ancestors. That is devil worship. The devil is sending those evil spirits, and that is why the terrorists are making war against good people. It is the devil who is causing this war. He wants to steal your country and give it to wicked men. Good Christian people must fight the terrorists. Jesus wants you to fight the terrorists. You must not let the devil win.'

That was what that minister was saying when master was away and madam let Beatrice go to church instead of working on Sunday. That minister was Shona like Beatrice. He had been to university. Eh, eh. He was very clever. Better to listen to that minister and not listen to Mbuya.

But now Mbuya was talking, talking, and her voice was making crackles like dry twigs being thrown in a fire. That minister, he was talking in English because he had been to university, but Mbuya was talking in Shona. She would not talk in the white man's words.

'That boy's ancestors stole our land,' said Mbuya. 'They killed our people. That boy is going to kill our sons, but he is finished. He will not kill many before, phwoom, he will be finished.'

Go away, you bad woman. You are from the devil. Those words were coming inside Beatrice's head from that preacher, but she was afraid because Mbuya could see what she was thinking as if she had spoken.

Better to think about Maxwell instead, but it made pain in her heart because she did not know where Maxwell was. Last time he was coming to see her Maxwell was drunk. He was asking for money because he was living in the township and he had no work.

But Grace, her firstborn, was good, living in Beatrice's village there in the tribal trust land near Fort Victoria with her three children. Grace's husband was working for a tobacco farmer and Grace looked after the chickens and the goats and Beatrice's cattle. She grew mealies in the kraal and sometimes she went to help on the farm to pick the tobacco. Beatrice wished she could go back to live in her village. She was happy when she was thinking of Grace.

Mbuya was rocking from foot to foot and laughing so loud that Beatrice's head felt as if it has been struck by a panga and was splitting open.

'So, the white woman's slave is dreaming of her village,' cackled Mbuya. 'But why should you live in a grass hut when that

white woman lives in this big house? You are not brave like your ancestors, otherwise you would fight. I was cousin to Nehanda. When she fought the white men who came to steal our land, I was there. She would have won, she would have defeated them but they had powerful friends in England, in South Africa. Their friends came to help them with guns and they killed Nehanda. They put her in their prison and they hanged her. Tssss.'

Mbuya hissed and the noise was like that which came from the master's wireless. There were other voices in the hissing, a few words here, a few words there, but Beatrice could not understand them. It was as if many ancestors were speaking at the same time, like when the master turns that knob and the wireless was talking, talking, talking with hundreds of voices. Then Mbuya's voice came clearly again.

'But she is not dead. Nehanda. She lives. They will learn, these white men. Nehanda has come back. This time, they cannot destroy Nehanda. This time, they will lose.'

Then silence. Beatrice stood with her hands in the sink. She could no longer see Mbuya. Perhaps Mbuya had gone. Maybe she would not come back.

Eh, eh, the water was warm on her arms and she was very tired. It would be good to go to sleep on the mat on the floor in her hut and to smell the chickens and the goats and the smoke from the fire, and to forget about the madam's house and the bed in the kia that screeched like monkeys when she moved and the war and the white men who killed Nehanda.

Mbuya's voice returned, not harsh now but warm, warm like the water in the sink. Eeeh, it was very beautiful now, Mbuya's voice. It was the voice of a girl. She was standing close beside Beatrice, normal size now, so that she could whisper in Beatrice's ear.

'In those days when Nehanda was fighting, my skin was like the ripe eggplant. Every night I rubbed and pulled my secret parts to make them soft and good for my husband to touch and

to make me strong for giving birth. We were not ashamed. These missionaries, they told us stories about the devil. I was wearing my kaross and they told me, "You, girl, put on these clothes. Hide your breasts. It is not good to show your body like this." Ah, but I knew they were liars. The missionaries were telling us to be good but sometimes, at night, other white men came to us, sometimes three or even four men in one night, and they laughed at what the missionaries were telling us.

'They were all liars. They said they wanted to save our souls for their white God, but they wanted to take our land for their white queen. That is what Nehanda told me.

'Life was good before the white men came. Our land was green and our cows were fat. Our men did not drink so much. Not like now. They were afraid of their mothers. That was good. This white boy is not afraid of his mother. He is too cheeky to her.'

'Maxwell is afraid of me,' said Beatrice.

'No, my daughter's daughter. That is not true. Maxwell is not afraid of you, and now he is no longer afraid of your madam's white son.'

Fear came sliding like a snake into Beatrice's heart. 'What do you mean?'

Mbuya screeched. 'You will see.'

'Sean and Maxwell are good friends,' said Beatrice. 'They have been playing together since Maxwell was born.'

'You are deceiving yourself, my granddaughter, because you are afraid of the truth. They have not played together since that white boy's father told you to send Maxwell back to your village. That day, the white boy told Maxwell, "I am not playing with kaffirs any more." Since then, they have not been friends. You have not forgotten that day. You cried like the rain in December. Don't tell me you have forgotten that day. They called it UDI. Ha! We will show them the meaning of independence when they are all dead.'

Go away! You are from the devil! I am not listening to this bad talk! No, no. Beatrice must not think such words. Mbuya might see. Mbuya was frightening her and making her heart beat like a big drum, but Mbuya wouldn't stop talking.

'Why did the white boy go to school, when Maxwell at eight had to go back to the village to look after the cows? Why didn't that woman send Maxwell to school? Those white men tell us education is very good, you go to school, you learn to read, you become clever like the white men. Then standard two and phwoom, finished. Maxwell must stay in the village with the cows and the women or he must become a garden boy for white people. Hah.'

Beatrice wanted to tell Mbuya, it is not my madam's fault. My madam is a good woman. She gives me extra money and she helps me. The madam is married to a bad man. It's the master's fault, not the madam's fault, that Maxwell was sent away. But Mbuya would be very angry if she defended the madam, so she kept quiet.

'Maxwell is a brave man. He is not like his mother. He is not afraid to kill the white people. He will take back our land from them,' said Mbuya.

Beatrice was cold, like stepping into the shower in July. A hand was squeezing her throat so that she could not breathe. Was it Mbuya's hand? She looked around but there was nothing, not even a fly or a cockroach that might be Mbuya.

She clattered a plate onto the draining board and looked up to see madam's car coming up the driveway. Jonas was running to open the gate. I must not think about what Mbuya said. Mbuya was trying to frighten me. It is not true. Maxwell is a good boy. Maxwell would not kill people. That was what she was telling herself as she went to switch on the kettle. Madam would be sad that Sean was going to war. Better making her nice cup of tea when she is coming inside.