

THE HARBINGER

A Novel  
by  
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## Chapter 1

Ian Elgin treaded through fog toward the brooding arches of Port Elizabeth's King George train station.

At this late hour, the archaic building was bathed in a sullen glow, oozing melancholy and loneliness. Elgin hunched his shoulders and buried his hands into the deep pockets of his silk suit; the last thing he wanted to do now was draw attention to himself.

Behind him, he heard the car door slam, the kind of resentful explosion that says far more than angry words ever can. But he didn't look back. Delaney would still be watching, and it was best, he told himself, to ignore her when she was in this state. So maybe it was his fault, but admitting it wouldn't change a thing.

Off to his left, the clash of steel wheels resounded from the train yard. A foghorn split the night, a rush of sound so stark and full it sent a chill down Elgin's spine. With an effort, he picked up his pace—sluggish steps that belied his anticipation of the rendezvous that lay ahead.

The meeting with Delaney hadn't gone well. The restaurant and the wine had only provided a public forum for arguing. Delaney knew something was wrong, but even drunk he couldn't bring himself to tell her. Who would believe it?

Darkness opened a gateway to the past, and Elgin realized he could hardly recall the beginning himself anymore. . . .

It was seven years now since he had gotten himself into this goddamn mess with Cecil Leistner, the minister of justice, and those bloody gold mines. Seven years that had

passed in a flurry of illegal arms shipments and surreptitious labor deals. Seven years. Elgin shook his head as if the passing of those years was more fantasy than fact.

He couldn't help but wonder how the whole thing had gotten this far. It had seemed incredible at the time, still did, but not impossible, not the way the third member of their triad, Jan Koster, had explained it.

Even now, Elgin wasn't certain whether to call Koster a bloody genius or a raving lunatic. The Deputy Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy Affairs; it was an absurd title. Yet, between the three of them, they were on the verge of sending the country into a tailspin. . . .

Purposely, Elgin trudged past the concourse that led to the main terminal. A sudden gust swept fallen leaves across the pavement. He glanced over his shoulder. Delaney's car was still in the lot, but swirls of fog blocked his view of her. No, *lady, I'm not that smashed*. He never used the main entrance. Instead, he turned south on a narrow walk that fronted the depot. At the side entrance, he paused, found himself hesitating.

An image assaulted him, the object of this late-night tryst, and it left him weak and excited. He could imagine the sight of her, the fragrance and the taste, hear her cries. It was all so foreign to the lovemaking he and his wife shared, or had shared way back when, that he found himself craving it like an addict craves his next fix.

Moreover, he was honest enough to admit that the shoddiness of the station itself and the vulgarity of its transients lent an earthy element to their rendezvous, an element that was now essential for him. It's this thing with the mines, he told himself. As the day drew nearer, their escapades grew more lurid. The motel room in Summerstrand had given way to the restricted beaches up north. Then it was the balcony overlooking the

speakeasy and its drunken crowd. And for the past three months now, here at the station. .

. The sound of approaching footsteps, growing louder in the fog and closing in on him, pushed Elgin inside.

The shoeshine stand outside the Men's Club was deserted, and he was grateful. He heard laughter coming from the information booth along the west wall. As usual, the creep from the ticket counter watched his every move.

Hesitation surrendered fully now to the burden of discretion, and he moved on. The lady at the newsstand smiled hopefully, but he would forgo the paper this time. He had cigars enough, and idle chitchat did not appeal to him tonight.

At last, the one-dimensional cutout of a black female stared down at him from above the lounge door. NET SWARTES. BLACKS ONLY. He paused at the water fountain, buying time and watching for the perfect moment. This was always the hardest part, the most uncomfortable part. But it was always the picture of her legs spread wide across the mattress that spurred him past this temporal barrier, and tonight the image was especially vivid. He pushed aside the curtain.

The sitting room beyond was dim and deserted, and he pressed against the wall like a common criminal catching his breath. He saw the chiffon scarf hanging on the coat rack, limp and forlorn, and a surge of unexpected wrath swept over him. She'd left it. How could she leave it in this place, for God's sake? Here, among the riffraff and rabble. Why it hadn't been stolen was beyond him.

Then he glanced at his watch and found to his dismay that he was late. Damn late. Had she come and gone already? That would explain the scarf.

He hurried past the door into the locker room.

“Sylvia.” There was no answer. He felt a draft, chilly and damp, and noticed the broken window above the last bank of lockers. He paused, conscious of the tapping of his own heart and the warning shout of the foghorn as it rode the wind into the corners of the room and deeper yet into the recesses of his own brain. “Sylvia?”

Why was he sweating? He struggled out of his suit coat and walked unsteadily into the sleep room behind the last lockers. He didn’t bother with the light; he knew the room now like his own bedroom. Perfume hung in the air, a thin veil that caused him to inhale greedily. It wasn’t her perfume, but the stirring he felt didn’t bother with distinction.

Suddenly, he paused again, alert to a sound that he couldn’t identify. The muffled *clang* of a locker closing? Or the muted *streak* of a shower-stall door? He wasn’t certain, wasn’t certain his dulled faculties weren’t playing tricks on him. Slowly, as a hunter might stalk a buck at the edge of a clearing, he hung his coat across a chair and crept back to the doorway.

“Sylvia?” He nudged into the faint light, wiping a bead of moisture from his forehead. “Hey, lady, quit screwing around, will you?”

He heard the rustle of the wind outside, a branch slapping at a wall nearby. But there was another sound, one closer, and he peered through the gloom toward the showers. He stepped back out of the light, straining to hear. Then the water pipes overhead rumbled, and air filled his lungs with relief.

He hastened back into the sitting room.

There he bought a can of pop from the Coke machine and absently flipped through the pages of a yellowing magazine. Finally, he returned, almost unwilling, to the

lockers. Then, pacing, drinking in the air, and sipping the pop, Elgin started to best the effects of alcohol. With near sobriety came a distorted renewal of confidence. Laughter. She'd never leave, he told himself. She would wait all damn night if she had to. He was her ticket out of the shantytown jungle that waited, like a bad dream, outside these dingy walls. No, something must have delayed her. There could be no other explanation.

Meandering led to the washbasins and showers adjacent to the lockers. Elgin flipped the light switch. Fluorescent tubes sputtered and buzzed. And then he heard it again, the same tinny noise as before. He stared down the long line of shower stalls. Opaque glass doors hid all but one stall.

“Is that you, kiddo?”

The pop can collapsed in Elgin's clammy grip.

He forced himself to move; halting steps led him reluctantly toward the showers. With quick stabs, he opened each door one at a time. Each stall was empty. Relieved, he moved quickly back to the washbasins. He splashed cold water on his face, ran his fingers roughly -through his hair. Discarding the pop can, he returned to the main room and checked his watch again.

His nerve ends tingled. He swiped aggressively at an opened locker door.

Pacing, he crossed behind the second bank of lockers. And there, in the grimy reflection of a broken mirror, he saw the man, a stocking cap covering his head and tan gloves hiding his hands, standing less than a meter behind him.

The first blow caught Elgin just below the neck, a fierce strike that spun him around in a daze. In that moment, a singular thought flashed through his mind. *The letter. I should never have sent that bloody letter.*

The second blow sent Elgin sprawling across the floor. Stunned, he watched helplessly as his attacker lunged toward him, curious that the man now held an umbrella in his hands, like a sword.

There was an instant of pain, and the last thing Ian Elgin heard was the bellow of the foghorn, a faint cry in the distance.