

Part One

"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view."
— **Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird***

Chapter 1

Sunday, 7 July 1985, 3:30 a.m.

Out past the headland, the Gulf lay flat and still under a cloudless sky. It was the dry season, cool after midnight, bone-dry inland, and clear enough to see stars right down to the horizon.

The killer walked along the beach, the sound of shells and glass crunching under his boots. He didn't look at the stars. He forced himself to stay calm. Focus on the task ahead.

The moon lit the beach in pale silver, picking out the broken glass and bleached driftwood.

Locals called it Stubby Beach, not because of its shape, but because of the bottle shards embedded in nearly every patch of sand.

The Jabiru Hotel sat a few hundred metres back, lit up and rowdy earlier, now quiet.

He carried no torch. He didn't need one. He knew the track well enough, and anyway the moon gave him all the light he needed.

His pace slowed. Every footfall became measured.

A rifle rested in one hand, barrel down. A canvas backpack pulled against his shoulder. Inside it, the knife sat wrapped in an old towel.

He cut through the long grass where the sand gave way to scrub, moving up a slight incline where a thin line of mangrove met red dirt.

The smell hit first — piss, sweat, cheap wine, and the wispy smoke of a dying fire. Just ahead, half-hidden in the long grass, three men slept around a ring of blackened rocks. The embers no longer held a flame, just red eyes staring out from under their own ash. Empty goon sacks lay scattered about. Crushed beer cans were everywhere.

He crouched. Waited. Watched.

The first man lay on his side, facing the fire, one arm crooked under his head. His shirt was unbuttoned, stained, belly poking out under the faded tattoo of a snake curling around a naked woman. The man snored wetly through open lips, the sound catching in his throat every few breaths.

He moved in, slow deliberate steps, barely rustling a blade of grass. Stepping over a crushed cardboard goon cask, careful not to crunch it, he knelt behind the man. Close now. He could smell the sour breath.

From the canvas backpack came the knife. Long. Black-handled. It had an edge like broken glass.

He took a deep breath and held it.

It was now or never.

With one hand he gripped the man's forehead and tilted the head back, positioning the man so the cut would send the spray into the dirt away from both of them. The other hand drew the blade in a single, fast, deep arc across the exposed throat. A hot rush of blood fanned out sideways. There was a muffled grunt, a choking bubble, then stillness.

He held on just long enough for the brain to stop fighting.

Pausing for a moment, he listened as the silence settled in again.

There was no time for satisfaction. Not yet. There was still work to do.

He wiped the blade on the dead man's jeans and stood.

He looked down at the second man with nothing but contempt.

He was younger, wiry and shirtless. Lying there curled around a rolled-up towel like it was a lover. His chest rose and fell rhythmically. He hadn't even stirred.

Beside the fire sat exactly what he needed. It was a large ironstone rock. Blackened on one side. Probably dragged there by one of them to sit on, while they drank and laughed and forgot about all the lives they had damaged.

His arms strained as he lifted it.

Staggering slightly, he stood above the sleeping man's head. He brought it down.

CRACK!

The sound was like a dropped watermelon. The man's skull gave way with a sickening crunch. Blood began to pool around what was left of his head.

Too loud.

The third man stirred. Sat up halfway, bleary-eyed. And then, in a strong French accent, said...

"What the fuck is going on?"

But he already had the rifle up. A click and BOOM.

The shot cracked across the beach and out over the Gulf.

The man's head snapped back as the bullet tore through his face.

For a moment everything rang.

The echo was swallowed by the night and the sound of the incoming tide.

He knew that a single gunshot on Stubby Beach was never going to get anyone out of bed.

Even so, he couldn't make himself move.

At last his rising fear was cut off when somewhere nearby a curlew let out a long, mournful wail.

Only then did he reach into the canvas backpack. His fingers found the folded sheet of paper.

With quiet deliberation, he opened the younger man's mouth and pushed the paper deep between tongue and palate.

He stood, then drove the toe of his boot hard into the dead man's stomach. Once. Hard enough to move the body.

Then crouching back down whispered, "You're done mate."

Three dead men. Three different endings. It hadn't gone quite as he had imagined it.

But still there had been no panic. No rush.

Eventually, quietly, he turned and slipped into the long grass, leaving nothing behind but death, silence and smoke.