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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Agents of the State**

Written by Mike Nicol

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AGENTS of  
the STATE

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*For Kate, one day*

*For Tamzon and Anthony, now*

# PART ONE

## A NECESSARY KILL

# 1

They met on the parking deck of the tampon towers. As ordered. Out in the open. Late afternoon. Cape Town city sweating below in heat and humidity. Heat coming off the mountain as from a furnace, pulsing.

Three men told the western tower's parking lot, top floor, third bay. Told, today, Sunday, 18:30. Told the car: a Honda Civic. Keys on the visor. Guns in the boot. Told the target. Told wear beach clothes, t-shirts, shorts, nothing fancy. Told the target's locus.

All this conveyed individually in the morning by phone. Told don't introduce yourselves. No names, no recoil. Told afterwards bring the car back. Keys on the visor. Guns in the boot. Go home separately.

Joey Curtains got there first. Joey Curtains was cautious. Being cautious kept you alive.

Had a friend drop him off in the street below, strolled up casually through the complex, went behind the apartment blocks to approach off the mountain in case there was surveillance. Found a place in shade where he could check out the scene. The car was there. Couple of other cars on the deck. During the hours he watched, people coming and going from their apartments in the towers, no one noticing him. People with beach towels, squash rackets, gym bags, shopping carriers. An ordinary Sunday afternoon.

Took him an hour before he noticed another watcher: five floors up at an open window, someone with binoculars. Couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. The surveillance though, very thorough.

Except from where he sat he reckoned the watcher hadn't spotted him.

Joey Curtains smiled. 'Ja, my bru,' he said to himself, 'you is on the nail without fail.'

Quarter past six a short man arrived, dressed to order. Went straight to the car, checked for the keys, looked in the boot. Went over to the parapet, stood smoking, gazing down on the city. A perspiration sheen to his shaved head. An older man, thick set, maybe in his early fifties, probably a war veteran in the eyes of Joey Curtains.

Joey Curtains watched the watcher. The person up there on the fifth floor taking it all in, the binocs focused on the short man.

Couple of minutes later another man popped out of the stairwell. Jaunty. Springy. This one about Joey's height, tallish, same wiry build. Same age, late twenties. Sort of guy looked like he could run a long way. Joey Curtains could run a long way. This one also dressed to order, sporting a peak cap.

The two men greeted one another, stood now beside the car waiting. Joey Curtains let the clock tick to five minutes after six thirty, watching the watcher at the window, scanning everywhere. Probably starting to worry, probably poeeping himself. The men at the car now antsy, the short one checking the time on his cellphone. The two of them deciding, let's go.

Joey Curtains sauntered out.

'My champs,' he said in Xhosa, going through the whole how are you, I am well greeting. Switched to English, 'Sorry for the time, my brothers, Sunday slowness.' He patted the car. 'Nice car. Fast car, hey? Reliable. Not like those Golfs they usually got for us. At last they give us proper tools.' The men grunted at him. Strict protocol: keep the talk to the job, no names.

He glanced from one man to the other. 'Where's the hardware?'

The older one got a bag out of the boot. Said in Xhosa, it was past time they went. Said he would be driving.

'Hey, champ,' said Joey Curtains, 'English or Afrikaans, please, man.'

The driver said, 'You're late, my friend. Where is your discipline?'

Joey Curtains said, 'African time, my bru. So what's a few minutes?'

The other man made a crack in Xhosa about coloureds always being full of shit, called coloureds bushies. Joey Curtains let it go, pretending he didn't understand. Laughed with the men as if he shared the joke.

Bushie, hey, they better be thankful they got a bushie with them. The only brains in the car.

He opened the back door, left-hand side. Before he got in, glanced up at the watcher in the window, waved. The person up there taking a step back out of the line of sight.

The driver noticed, said, 'Who's that?'

'Someone checking we're on the job,' said Joey Curtains. 'You got to watch out, champ. Keep your eyes open. Check your back. You know what they say, mos, man who looks back sees the ghosts. Old Chinese proverb I heard from a Chinaman. One day the Chinks shot him in the heart cos he was looking the wrong way.' Joey Curtains laughed. 'Sometimes you can't win.'

The two men didn't laugh. The driver cursed in his language, the jaunty one half-turned to Joey Curtains said, 'Enough, my brother.'

Joey Curtains shrugged, settled on the back seat, wiped sweat off his face. 'Some air-con, please, man, wind it up.'

The men looked at him.

'What? Hey, what?'

The jaunty one drew two fingers across his lips.

'Ag, my brothers ...' Joey Curtains let it go there, thinking, of all the hitters he could be teamed with, had to be two serious



darkies. Serious like Aquarius. Not. Whatta joyride it was going to be.

They drove out of the Disa Towers, down Derry into Mill Street.

Joey Curtains said, 'Some more air-con, come'n man, it's fry city in here.' At the traffic lights with Hatfield, Joey Curtains unzipped the bag with the guns. Whistled. 'Very nice. Very nice. Revolvers, hey. Taurus. Nice little snubnose, The Judge, they call it.' He picked one up. 'Someone doesn't want to risk a pistol jam. Going to make a loud noise without silencers.' He spun the cylinder. 'Probably what they wants, lots of confusion. Close work with this little barrel.' He passed the gun between the seats to the jaunty man. The driver freaked.

'What you doing? What you doing? Everyone can see here. Keep them in the bag. No, no, no.' Smacking the steering wheel with each beat. Going into a string of Xhosa that had the jaunty one sniggering. He took the gun though.

'Better check it,' said Joey. 'Sometimes they put in blanks jus for fun. I've known it. Happened to my chommie. He's got this job, a home job, he pulls off two – pop, pop – but the target's still staring at him. Shit scared. Pissing himself. But sitting there in his comfy chair in his comfy lounge alive and well, staring at my chommie. He has to pull off two more. Okay, they do the job. But, listen, hey, listen, the fifth one's a blank also. Six-shot chamber, they packed in only five, only two for real. My chommie he gets back, he's spitting like a cobra. He can't speak, his words come out in a hiss. Everybody jokes with him, says, don't take it serious, was just for a laugh. Job like that you only need one time. My chommie doesn't see the joke. He smacks this armoury captain, bliksems him right over a counter. Oke has to have two pins put in his jaw. True story. Really. Honest to God. Really. So, you see, what I do now, I check every time, leave nothing to chance, nothing to nobody. Know what I mean?'

'Bullshit,' said the jaunty one. 'That's bullshit.'

'True story, my brother. True story,' said Joey Curtains. Caught the driver's eyes in the rear-view mirror staring at him.

'Enough. Okay, enough.' The driver's eyes bulging with anger. 'We are not to talk.'

'Alright, Chief, just saying, just saying.' Joey Curtains dug an envelope from the bag, slipped out three colour photographs of the target. 'Was wondering how we supposed to pick out the target?' He studied the photographs. 'Mr Handsome. Not someone you can miss.' He tapped the jaunty man on the shoulder. 'Better get an eyeful, champ, don't want to shoot the wrong man. They put that in your file you never get promotion.'

While the jaunty man looked at the photographs, Joey Curtains checked his gun. Everything in place, all the chambers filled with the real deal. Five hollowpoints. He placed the revolver back in the bag. The time now: 18:50. The service would have started.

The driver turned off Orange into Queen Victoria, found a parking space outside the French embassy.

Joey Curtains looked around. Nice part of town, this corner. Reminded him of his childhood. Coming here with his granny to play in the Company's Garden on Sundays. Feed the fish breadcrumbs. Throw peanuts to the squirrels. Sometimes have a Coke float at the café. Coming in on the train, walking up Adderley Street, touching the Slave Lodge like his granny said. Why we got to do that, Granny? Because bad things happened here, Joey. Don't forget. Yeah, bad things still happening.

'Hey, my champs,' said Joey Curtains pushing away the memories, 'how about some music?'

The jaunty man pressed buttons on the radio, up came Cape Talk's golden oldies: Aretha Franklin's 'Say a Little Prayer' playing.

'Every time you listen on a Sunday they play this,' said Joey

Curtains. 'Like the DJ's hot for Aretha. Must be really old he can remember so far back.'

'No talking,' said the driver. He pulled out his cellphone, keyed an SMS.

Joey Curtains sat back. Aretha morphed into Petula Clark into Roberta Flack 'The First Time Ever ...' He picked up the photograph, leant forward to wave it between the two men. Said, 'Champs, the first time ever I saw this face ...'

The jaunty one snorted.

The driver said, 'Where's your respect?'

Joey Curtains wasn't sure if he meant Roberta or the man in the photograph.

'Nice song. Very soulful.'

## 2

Kaiser Vula placed himself on the aisle in the seventh pew from the holy end. Liked St George's cathedral, the late sun at the stained-glass windows. The organ grinding out some Bachish tune. People coming in for evening service, some in their best, some like they'd nipped off the beach in flip-flops and t-shirts. Everyone shuffling around, heads bowed. Kids whispering. The robed guys tending candles, laying out the communion stuff on the white lace.

Kaiser Vula eased up off his knees. Anglicans had this thing about being on their knees, the cushions as hard as the floor. Something to do with penance. Not a lesson he'd taken on board. Some medieval thing whiteys got hooked into, couldn't let go even in the modern world. As he recalled from his choirboy days.

Sat back, had to reach round to shift the pistol digging into

his hip. A little 9mm Ruger centrefire, seven plus one, with a blued finish. Ten-centimetre barrel, a grip that disappeared into his fist. He had it in his fist, Kaiser Vula's finger almost filled the trigger guard. Big man, Kaiser Vula. Big man who liked the little Ruger. You put a load from the Ruger on the money, you could relax. No one was going to tell you I'll be back.

Kaiser Vula laid those big hands in his lap. Hot hands, his palms moist. An evening too hot for a jacket. What could you do? Didn't want to get the worshippers jazzed at the sight of some hardware, no matter the beauty of that hardware. So you had to wear a jacket. He exhaled a stream of air at his hands, felt the cool.

Ah, man, sticky humid February.

The other reason he liked the cathedral was Kaiser Vula remembered those student days of running battles with the cops through the city's streets, ducking into the cathedral to hide from the Boere. Lying among the pews, hardly daring to breathe. Crying from the teargas. Heady stuff, those Struggle days.

Turned his head. To his right, across the aisle, three rows up, the colonel with his family. Wife, two sons, a daughter, the children sitting demure between mom and dad. Young kids, ranged maybe three to ten, well behaved, private-schooled. A perfect family.

Like his own. Many similarities: the military rank, except he was a major, the trappings of wellbeing, the wife, three children, except he had only one son. A penchant for golf on Wednesday afternoons. A taste for whisky. Expensive single-malt whisky. At the thought Kaiser Vula could feel the smoothness of an Islay in his mouth, even smell the fumes, thick, peaty.

He shook his head to dislodge the craving. Looked again at the family, dressed smart-casual, as his would be for church. The colonel in a white open-necked shirt, the two boys in blue golf

shirts. Mother and daughter wearing dresses. A pretty picture. Expensive frocks. Not Woolworths. Something designer.

One thing about the colonel, he didn't do brands. Kept his profile down, no bling, no ostentation. His wife too. Unusual trait to Kaiser Vula's way of thinking. Colonels out of uniform, if you could get them out of uniform, more inclined to the stereotype: heavy watches, gold chains, top fashion clothing. Their women too. Young women usually. Not like Colonel Abel Kolingba and his family. Mrs Kolingba in her forties. Good-looking woman, did a lot of gym work and jogging. Kept herself trim. Name of Cynthia. A brainy type, he remembered from the file, degrees from French universities, into gazing at the heavens, not that she'd done much of that in recent years. Kept in touch with other astronomers despite everything. A linguist too, her own language, Sango, French, English, German. Difficult situation for a woman like that.

You looked at them you'd think executive family, maybe riding on black economic empowerment, owned a high-end SUV, lived in some gated estate down the peninsula, wife did book clubs, family had holidays at Sun City. You'd be right, according to the file, except for the bit about the executive. Instead you'd read Colonel Kolingba was planning a palace coup. Take his country out of its violent chaos.

Kaiser Vula was up on the file. Had no opinions on the colonel. No opinions on his politics. Kaiser Vula did what he was told. A good soldier. A good major. Only thing, Kaiser Vula never wore a uniform.

In the row behind the Kolingbas two security. Pumped-up steroid types in black suits, had to be overheating. Their shirt armpits soggy. Probably the sweat running down their spines. Those suits the pits. Kaiser Vula knew. He'd done a stint in the goon squads. Two decades back when everyone came home to the new country. He glanced round at another bodyguard

standing at the back. Knew there were two more outside on the pavement. All of them wired up. The colonel one cautious man. With good reason.

In his trouser pocket, Kaiser Vula's cellphone vibrated: an sms. No need to read it. He knew what it said: Everything in place.

Good.

Right on time.

Good.

Out of the vestry came the bishop in his purple vestments, smiling. Raised his hands, the congregation standing. A short beseech for mercy on high, the first hymn. One Kaiser Vula dimly recalled.

Behold the sun, that seem'd but now  
Enthroned overhead  
Beginneth to decline below  
The globe whereon we tread:  
And he whom yet we look upon  
With comfort and delight  
Will quite depart from hence anon,  
And leave us to the night.

The major sang through to the end of the second verse, closed the hymnal, stepped out of the pew. A man opposite, his mouth filled with song, looked at him. A glance of disinterest that Kaiser Vula didn't acknowledge. Nodded more than bowed quickly towards the altar, then, eyes hooded, shoulders bent, strode down the aisle. Could feel the goons watching him. Made no eye contact, sloped outside into the evening heat, fumbling to bring his cellphone to his ear. Knew the bodyguards posted on the cathedral steps would be tracking him. Wonderful ruse, the cellphone. Paused near them, said loudly, anxiously

into the phone. 'I'm coming. I'll see you at the hospital.' Hurried away up Wale Street.

To his car, parked a block higher, other side of the road, a more or less clear line of sight through the palm trees to the cathedral entrance. Kaiser Vula took off his jacket, laid it along the Golf's back seat. Closed the door, opened the driver's, stood looking down at the church. The two security men outside, beneath the trees, beyond them people leaving the Company's Garden, slow Sunday traffic passing the Slave Lodge on the curve into Wale. All fine.

The sun had left the high buildings. Behind them the mountain face would be in shadow. The city quiet, tourists at the pavement cafés, people relieved at the end of the day's heat, relaxing in the twilight. Out on the western rim, the sun would bulge a moment as if it truly sank into the sea.

### 3

Kaiser Vula slid behind the steering wheel, hitched his slacks where they were tight across his knees. Breathed in the smell of new car: polish, leather, cleanliness warm in his nostrils. From his belt brought out the Ruger, placed it in the cubbyhole. Clipped his cellphone into the hands-free holder. From under the seat pulled a small pair of Bushnell birding binoculars. Adjusted the focus, paid attention to the two guards. They leant against the cathedral wall, smoking, gazing at the drift of pedestrians making for the station. Bored. As Vula'd been as a bodyguard. The sheer tedium. Then the need to be alert. To see everything. To react to what was out of place. To recognise what was wrong.

Nothing was wrong. Everything was as it should be. In the