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'YOU WANT to what?' Chris's tone held that special mix of sympathy and condescension people reserve for half-wits. I told him again. He laughed. 'Man, you're nuts. Mandela is one of the most famous people in the world. His security will be in the hands of pros, a crack squad of highly trained guys. What the hell is an Australian civilian going to teach them?'

'I'll teach them Kontakt.'

'Look, Kontakt is great for platoons of goons like you've got here. But what could you teach professionals they don't already know? Why go to South Africa if you don't have a job waiting? You don't know anyone there. So how on earth are you going to sell your program?'

The latter questions had been preoccupying me for weeks. I'd called the South African consulate asking for a list of the country's police stations and been told, none too politely, to shove off. After a bit of thought I decided if I could get my foot in the door at one station maybe I could leverage what I wanted. I dialled the international operator, asked for and received the number of the Soweto police station.

I needed a story and after a day or so came up with one. I called Soweto, asking for the commander of the station, telling him I was an Australian journalist doing a story on how tough the South

African front-line cops had it in comparison to their soft Australian counterparts. After a few minutes the commander warmed to the story and a day later faxed me the complete classified list of every police station, prison and military outfit in South Africa. I put together a mailing campaign outlining the benefits of Kontakt and sent brochures and covering letters off to more than seven hundred addresses.

Eight weeks later I'd received the grand total of two replies, both informing me with thinly veiled hostility that South African instructors were the best in the world, and anyway, no foreigner could ever be involved in the security of South Africa's politicians.

It was all the encouragement I needed. Two contacts had turned me down — which meant that seven hundred and ten hadn't. The fact that they didn't immediately grasp the value of Kontakt wasn't enough to put me off. I *knew* it worked.

I gave notice to Sandy Warnock, who wasn't happy. I did nothing to soften his mood; I didn't want to feel that if things didn't work out I could come back to the job in PNG. This, I decided, was a time for burning my bridges.

I flew back to Australia, to Bairnsdale, to tell my family my plans. They weren't encouraging: having just got myself out of debt, why would I risk everything going to South Africa? I admitted I had enough to keep me going for a couple of months, maybe three. My brother laughed and said he'd see me back inside a month, in a tone of voice exactly like Chris's.

I landed at Johannesburg International and hitchhiked the fifty kilometres to Pretoria, immediately noticing from the cab of the truck how much I liked the look and feel of the country; it was more than the cloudless blue sky that appealed to me, there was a vibrancy, an expectation that something exciting was just a few heartbeats away.

With my list of addresses I walked into one of Pretoria's police stations and asked to see the commander. The man who emerged was a big Afrikaner: irritated and scowling, the archetypal apartheid cop. I offered my hand to shake his. He looked at me as if I had leprosy.

Folding his arms tightly across his chest, he grumbled something in a language I'd never heard before. It sounded a bit like German, maybe Dutch.

'G'day,' I said. 'I've travelled from Australia to teach a new unarmed combat program to South African security specialists.' The cop grunted. The action seemed to cause him pain.

'Actually, I've really been inspired by the example of Nelson Mandela. The guy spends twenty-seven years in prison, comes out, becomes the most powerful man in the country and he's got the courage *not* to seek revenge. Isn't that incredible?'

The cop, starting to turn an intriguing shade of purple, seemed disinclined to agree with me.

'Anyway, what I'd really like to do is train the bodyguards of Nelson Mandela and in the process make them better bodyguards. I've spent years developing my program and for anyone who isn't arrogant or complacent it really will improve their skill level.'

I waited for a response from the cop. There was none — apart from a complete cessation of breathing on his part.

After what seemed an age, the cop exploded into life. In heavily accented English he raged, 'You can't teach us anything. We're the best in the world. What would some Australian know about our country? We are the best in the world. And we don't have any money to pay you for training and even if we did we wouldn't pay you because we are the best in the world.' In among the ranting I kept catching the word *voetsek*. I had no idea what it meant except that clearly it wasn't complimentary. The commander told me to get out.

It wasn't a promising start, though it turned out to be typical of my next two months in South Africa. I crisscrossed the country, visiting police, prison and military units at which my reception was almost invariably the same; it was as if someone had written the script. I heard the word *rooinek* often and learnt it meant foreigner. It made me smile. In Korea they'd called me *meguk* and in Japan *gaijin*. I didn't know what they'd called me in PNG; with several hundred

languages it could have been a lot of things. But there were worse things than being called a foreigner, and anyway, I was a foreigner.

But it wasn't helping. My experience so far had been one of fierce resistance, xenophobia and raw racism: white, black and brown. And I was running out of money. After nine weeks of nothing I reckoned I had funds for about one more week, ten days at most. And I hadn't had a sniff of interest. Though I'd left my number everywhere, the mobile phone I'd purchased when I arrived in the country had only rung once — and that was when I'd called myself from a payphone to make sure the thing was actually working.

I was staying in a sleazy motel in Cape Town when it rang a second time. I was so shocked I fumbled it, nearly dropped it and was flustered when I answered, 'Hello.'

The voice at the other end was anything but flustered. 'This is Warrant Officer Albertus Wessels here. I've heard about your unarmed combat training program. I want to set up a demonstration.'

Again, I almost dropped the phone. Trying to sound cool and businesslike I said, 'Okay, where?'

'Soweto. The commander there will listen to you and if he likes what you have to say, he'll arrange a demo. That okay with you?'

'Sure. When?'

'Day after tomorrow. If they like it in Soweto we'll maybe try it elsewhere. But no promises, mind. It'll have to be good.'

I wrote down the details. 'Will you be there?'

'No, but I'll get a report.' The line went dead.

I gazed at the phone. I liked the sound of Albertus Wessels. No bureaucratic bumbling with this guy. He was prepared to give Kontakt a shot. Now it was down to me. I was a little worried about returning to Soweto after being practically thrown out the first time. I didn't recognise the name Wessels had told me and hoped the guy was the boss instead of some minion. I also hoped it wasn't the officer out of whom I'd coned the list of stations.

The guy I saw was the District Commander, the highest rank I'd so far managed to see. He listened quietly to my presentation before

asking for a demo, which he set up with two of his instructors. They were both big, and good kickboxers, but their practice was inhibited by their training in the dojo; they followed set moves which made them predictable and relatively easy to handle. Wessels called me the following day.

‘Soweto liked your demo,’ he said. ‘You’d better come up here so we can talk face to face.’ Wessels was at a station in the far north of the Transvaal. By that stage I’d been living on oranges and biltong for a week; I spent the last of my money on the bus fare.

I took to Wessels from the outset. He was genuinely friendly and from his questions showed he was keen to learn about Kontakt. But the main thing I liked about him was his quiet air of confidence; this guy had seen a lot of combat in Angola; he was a veteran with extensive operational experience who didn’t feel the need to impress anyone. He spoke quietly and acted modestly. And from the way the District Commander in Soweto had talked about him, I had a notion Wessels’ reputation was respected throughout the force.

The guy was also a miracle worker. After a day together and a lot of phone calls he managed to get funding for a trial course of Kontakt. He also gave me my first introduction to South African hospitality, inviting me to stay with his family for the duration of the course.

Twenty guys stood before me on the first morning. By mid-morning three had dropped out — Kontakt was too tough for them. Two more dropped out in the afternoon and the following day I dismissed another three who were little more than oxygen thieves. Twelve people finished the course, out of which I intended awarding certificates to three — one of whom was Albertus Wessels.

Sitting behind his desk in his office Wessels chuckled. ‘You know, here in South Africa everyone who finishes a police course gets a certificate. You’re going to have nine very unhappy policemen out there.’

‘I expect I will, but I want this certificate to have real value. I don’t want it in the hands of a bunch of slugs. If that happens, Kontakt will

be considered second-rate. I want to create *quality* ambassadors for this course, not quantity.'

'Show me the list,' Wessels said.

I pushed it across the desk. Wessels pointed to a name. 'Why didn't he pass?'

'He didn't come up to the appropriate standard.'

'And what about him?' Wessels jabbed another name.

'He's very fit and very fast but he's also very closed-minded; doesn't want to try anything new.'

Wessels laughed. 'Well, he's a national martial arts champion. And the other one is a Brigadier's son. Both these guys are legends in their own lunchtimes. I'm going to enjoy seeing their reactions when you tell them they didn't make it.'

Both men were visibly shocked and plain bloody angry. After the awards ceremony they cornered me and told me I was a bastard and that I'd never teach in South Africa again. I repeated what they'd said to Wessels who smiled.

'Well, I don't know about the first part, but they're wrong about the second. I'm setting up another course for two weeks time.'

'That's great. By the way, what does *bliksem rooinek* mean?'

Wessels laughed. 'It means a foreigner who's in need of a good thrashing.'

My policy of encouraging perceived value, of creating an elite coterie of Kontakt certificate holders, paid off almost immediately. Those who received certificates returned to their units to talk up the program with pride and enthusiasm. Some of those who failed asked to return for a subsequent course. The certificate and what it symbolised became valuable, its value enhanced by its scarcity, its scarcity a function of the enormous effort required to obtain it. Word spread quickly that only the very best possessed a Kontakt certificate, and even I was amazed at the exponential growth of my program.

Six months later, living in a small, pleasant apartment in Pretoria, I had delivered training to instructors from the South African Army,

Navy, Police, Prison Service, Special Task Force, Drug Unit, Internal Stability Unit, SWAT teams VIP Protection Unit and, best of all, to instructors of the Presidential Protection Unit of Nelson Mandela.

Along the way I'd made some good friends; Albertus Wessels was now Wessie, a close friend as well as supporter. We had become neighbours after Wessie had been promoted to Captain in the Police National Training HQ in Pretoria. Another supporter was Wessie's boss, Senior Superintendent Fred Blaauw, along with Sergeant Fryk Strydom of the Special Task Force. All of them had skill and they each had insights to offer about Kontakt, which I took on board and applied. And, as always, feedback from the front line also helped refine the program, making it even better.

A couple of months after moving to Pretoria I travelled down to the Free State to run a two-week course for about sixty police instructors. The course was to be run in a soccer stadium in the heart of the local township. The stadium, built at the height of apartheid, was enormous, rising like an ocean liner out of a sea of tin shanties. It was redolent of the communist era of Eastern Europe, when dictators would build huge and enormously expensive cultural centres in the midst of squalor.

Consulting with the local superintendent, I learnt that by seven in the morning the temperature would be in the mid-thirties and by nine, 43°C. I decided we should escape the worst of the heat by starting training at three forty-five am.

At five-fifteen on the first morning, just as dawn was breaking, a group of men and women shuffled into the stadium and positioned themselves on one of the terraces. After ninety minutes of hard training I wondered if we were to have an audience. One of the guys told me this was the local gospel choir come to practice.

They began as the men and I turned back to our training. It was heart-lifting. It went beyond words and was as much a feeling as it was a sound, a low rumble of African harmonies. When they sang their own traditional songs their voices were deep and hauntingly beautiful, and when they launched into some classic hymns they

sang with a joyous sense of celebration and exuberance. It was a privilege to listen to them.

One song stayed with me for the rest of the day. It began with a mournful cry from a lone baritone, calling something that seemed as timeless as Africa itself. The cry went on for many heartbeats and then, suddenly, it stopped. What felt like an age passed and the silence seemed filled with expectation rather than nothingness. Another sound began, but so soft it was hard to tell if it really was a sound. Slowly a beat grew, one voice ... then another. At some point, it was difficult to tell just when, there were many voices ... a great many. Each was strong and proud and independent, yet each one was so obviously an indivisible part of those around it. Together the voices radiated power and dignity and purpose. I felt the skin on the back of my neck prickle and a sensation of unity echo around the shadows of the empty stands as the African sun blossomed over the horizon.

They came again on the following dawn but on the third morning failed to show. I was disappointed and mentioned it to one of the senior officers on the course. The guy was surprised. 'I thought you wouldn't like all that bloody noise and monkey chatter — I told the *kaffirs* to bugger off.'

That afternoon I went into the township looking for members of the choir and was pointed in the direction of a mountain of a man who was one of the singers. I told him it had been a mistake to send the choir away and that I wanted them to come back the following morning.

Which they did, and every day thereafter, and the amazing thing I noticed was how positively everyone on the course responded to the singing and to the atmosphere it generated. So much so that when the course finished, there was a real bond among men who, themselves a microcosm of South Africa, Afrikaners, English-speaking white South Africans, Indians, Coloureds, Zulus and Xhosas, had all been deeply connected by Kontakt and the haunting singing of the choir.

Back in Pretoria there was more good news. For months I'd been

mainly training the trainers, who had gone out into the field as ambassadors of Kontakt. They were good guys and I was confident they had the professionalism not to cut corners when they trained their people. But, with the best will in the world, with the training at one remove I knew subtleties could be lost. It seemed someone else knew that too as, immediately on my return, I was told I'd be training Nelson Mandela's bodyguards directly.

I had realised my dream.

For security reasons, the training had to be conducted within the bounds of the Presidential Estate, which made finding the right venue something of a problem. I finally selected the lawn of the President's gardens as my training site. Sometimes, in the middle of training, I would see the glossily polished Presidential Mercedes sweeping past in the sunshine on its way in or out of the estate.

One morning it stopped and out of the corner of my eye I saw the rear window glide down; Nelson Mandela, Nobel Laureate and President of the Republic of South Africa, was watching me training his bodyguards. I couldn't help myself; as opposed as I was to show and exhibition I turned on the juice, putting the guys through their paces with a vengeance. Mandela watched for at least ten minutes, and I was hoping all the while that he was impressed.

When I glanced covertly at the limo I was shocked to see Mandela beckoning me over. I straightened up. 'Excuse me, guys,' I said nonchalantly, 'the President wants to talk to me.' I moved towards the car and was about three metres away when Mandela jabbed a bony finger through the open window.

'You, Australian,' he said in that instantly recognisable voice, 'be careful of my flower beds.'

The Mercedes whispered away.