

The Contract

“Yes, I will,” she said softly. “I know, one day, I will.”

She was sitting on the terrace next to the pool, looking out over the acres of lawn meeting the pine-fringed lake, grey-green in the early evening. The pool’s filter gurgled like an asthmatic frog. Several couples dotted the lawns and terrace. Desultory conversation was like the tranquil murmur of bees, briefly hanging in the air then dying again.

This is why I’m here, she thought, enjoying my solitude, away from all responsibilities. She took out a long, white cigarette from an elegant pack, struck a match, stared at the flame for a long second, lit the cigarette and took a deep, satisfying draw.

“Yes, I will,” Amanda Courtney repeated to herself. “One day I will most certainly end my life and know this incredible peace.”

A Hadedas Ibis flew across the lake, its raucous yet plaintive cry calling out to its mate – *wha-wha-wha-dee-dah*. The answering call came from deep within the pines. Fleeting she envied the birds. And she thought of Bernard, her husband, a man she had loved passionately from the moment they first met. Despite the ugly rumours since his mysterious disappearance three years ago, he was still the only man she’d ever truly loved. The familiar pain washed through her when she thought of him, wondering where he was, *if* he was. The pain was not physical – it was something that sucked at her soul.

That was how long ago, she thought? 1976. Twenty-five years! Good Heavens, what’s bringing this all back to me now? Was it the Hadedas? A flock had just flown over, broadcasting to the world their homebound intentions. Or is it my preoccupation with death? This preoccupation was caused by the realisation that she now had enough money to live for only another six months.

Having gone over her options coldly and logically, Amanda had come to the conclusion that there was only one way out. She’d always sworn she’d never become a toothless old hag, rummaging in dustbins for the next meal – she’d live in style until her death. Nor would she be a burden to anyone. She could live another 20, even 30, years but without an income, she couldn’t. She made her decision.

Amanda couldn’t believe she’d come to this point in her life – after all her success, all her careful planning.

She’d had a tough life surviving, alone: her parents’ murder in Kenya at the hands of the Mau Mau when she was a mere 16; Bernard’s disappearance and the scandal that had hit the headlines; the near-fatal accident which had seen her hospitalised for eight months and all but ruined her 20 months ago.

Yet again she racked her brains for an alternative solution. She wanted another five years to see out the last of her dogs’ lives. But being an independent, white, female, PR consultant in the new South Africa was no longer an option. Her major client had gone under owing her R40 000. One by one her other clients were deserting her because she wasn’t BEE. She wondered how, as a one-woman show, she could possibly *be* BEE? Through the grapevine she’d also learned that she was considered ‘too white’ and, at 57, ‘too old’. She’d tried several other avenues, unsuccessfully. Ever since the accident – being hit by a drunken driver – she’d been living off her capital.

The ‘too old’ amused her. Nelson Mandela became president of the country at 76. Picasso worked into his late 80s. Alistair Cooke wrote and broadcast *Letter from America* well into his 90s.

Amanda felt a pulse-beat of hope. Writing. Maybe that's the answer. Her public relations qualifications included journalism. As a hobby she'd written short stories, tongue-in-cheek political articles, and even turned her personal dramas into a humorous book, *The Abandoned Woman*. The manuscript was still out there with a couple of publishers who hadn't bothered to respond.

Suddenly Amanda Courtney had a macabre brainwave. From today I shall keep a diary, which I'll call *Countdown to Death*, chronicling my thoughts until my suicide. I'll give sole rights to the first publisher who'll accept the idea. The public won't be able to resist it. The royalties will help some deserving charities.

She wondered what Bernard would think. Would he be appalled at her lack of courage to go on? Or would his newshound's love of a scoop admire the audacity? Remembering his integrity, Amanda thought he'd want her to fight. However, if he actually did have anything to do with that scandal, maybe he'd be ruthless enough to go for the scoop.

It didn't take Amanda long to find a publisher. Although shocked at the thought that this vibrant woman was coldly deciding to end her life, he knew he had a winner on his hands. There'd been one snag to finalising the contract: what if she came into money and lived another 10 or more years? Amanda knew no-one from whom she could inherit; she never bought lottery tickets, and didn't believe in miracles. She was adamant that six months was the limit – and signed the contract.

The scandal was in March 1973. Amanda was in Johannesburg, keynote speaker at a PR seminar. Bernard's late-night calls on both Sunday and Monday stirred all the passion of young lovers, even after 10 years of marriage. Inexplicably, there was no call on Tuesday. Probably because I'm on the flight back tomorrow, Amanda thought.

The urgent burr-burr of the telephone jangled her awake. She thought it must be Bernard.

"Amanda!" the voice was strident.

"Yes, Michael, what is it?" she asked her Two IC. She was now fully awake and alarmed.

"Is Bernard with you?"

"Of course not. Why on earth would you think so?"

"He's missing. And the company's account has been emptied."

"Don't be ridiculous, Michael. The company account can't be empty. And surely you don't think Bernard would ever have anything to do with missing money! By the way, how do you know it's missing? It's only ..." she looked at her travel alarm, "... 6.30 a.m. And Bernard's probably been called away on an urgent assignment. Have you phoned Reuters? Or Agence France Presse?"

"Firstly, when the bank couldn't get hold of you, they contacted me. Secondly, Reuters are being cagey. Agence France Presse knows nothing."

Amanda felt an enormous relief. "There, then. That's it. Reuters have sent him to cover something that's still probably top secret. And obviously the bank has made a mistake. Listen, Michael, don't panic. I'll be back in a couple of hours and will sort it out."

Amanda refused to believe Michael Phillips. There was obviously a mistake. But back in Cape Town, the impossible was confirmed. Bernard had gone, without calling her, without leaving a note, without asking someone else to contact her. And her company bank account was empty.

Despite the marvellous Gauteng spring weather and feeling vibrantly alive, Amanda's mood was that of a condemned person. Typically, whenever she was down, she hid behind a clown face and her innate humour seemed sharper than ever. Invariably her most desperate circumstances met with mirth, which is what had given her the idea for *The Abandoned Woman*.

When her friend Sue phoned in a rage and said she was ready to murder, Amanda's reaction was: "Fantastic, you want to kill – I'm suicidal – come over now. Your victim awaits you!"

She took to answering the phone chirpily with: This is the Hosepipe in the Car Club."

When asked what she was doing, she'd reply nonchalantly: "Planning my demise". Of course no-one believed she was serious.

Occasionally someone would not find it funny. "Okay," she'd say, "try this for laughs. Knock, knock."

"Who's there?"

"Sue."

"Sue who?"

"Suicide."

When her friend Phil phoned and asked if she was still interested in going to China with him in a year's time, she was all enthusiasm. "Absolutely! But you can take me in a matchbox." Her laughter was infectious.

"You mean I can introduce you as my friend who's snuffed it?"

"There's an idea ... find an antique snuff box. After all, I've been told I'm too antiquated to work."

Often, after these ridiculous calls, Amanda would put the phone down and almost suffocate with grief. Rusty, the Bull Mastiff would come to her, put his massive head on her knees in comfort and Amanda would bury her face in the folds of his neck and weep. Six months, five months, four ... That's all I have left.

Gabriel Brambilla, head of WordsWorth Publishing, decided to go home. He'd had enough. He was walking through the general office when a telephone rang on one of the desks. Who could be phoning at this time? He looked at his watch - it was 10.37 p.m. On a Friday night in London almost everyone was out celebrating the end of the working week. He picked up the phone. Wrong number.

He noticed a manuscript on the desk, folio 4 on top. Obviously the reader had left in a hurry. Out of habit he scanned the page. Two words drew him as if they were in neon: Bernard Courtney. He felt his heart start to pump a little faster. What was there about this name? Why did he feel excited yet apprehensive? He turned to the first page: *The Abandoned Woman* by Amanda Courtney. He started reading.

From the time Amanda mentioned meeting her husband, Gabriel Brambilla felt disturbed: again and again he had this sense of *déjà vu*. Could this Amanda Courtney tell him who he was?

The tall, lean, greying man with a dramatic scar running from his forehead across to his right cheekbone, could remember nothing of his life before he came out of a coma in a Paris hospital in 1974. He was told that he'd been wounded in a bomb blast during the military coup in Madagascar a year earlier. He didn't know why he was there - or where he

came from. Nobody could place his country of origin since he was fluent – and accentless – in French, English, Dutch, and Malayan.

From her book, he painted an accurate picture of Amanda Courtney: tall and athletic, with sun-streaked light brown hair and, oddly, one grey and one brown eye. When she described some of the events while married to Bernard Courtney, he felt he'd been there. It was also interesting that Bernard was the son of an English father and Dutch mother, and had lived in Indonesia where Malayan was the national language. Amanda's husband, Bernard, was an international freelance journalist who had gone to Madagascar in 1973 on the tip-off of a communist coup and hadn't been heard of since.

The coincidences were falling into place like a sorted deck of cards. Could he be Bernard Courtney? He'd taken the name Gabriel Brambilla from the two people who'd found him unconscious next to a bombed-out building on the outskirts of Antananarivo – Gabriel Duby and Jacques Brambilla. Obviously thinking him dead, someone had stripped him: there was no identification.

Amanda had learned from Reuters that they had sent Bernard to Madagascar. They, too, had heard nothing further. And, like Amanda, Reuters did not believe he'd stolen her money – or that he'd run off with another woman, a myth inevitably created by gossip.

After Bernard's disappearance Amanda had had to start again from scratch. With the business account stripped and little in their joint banking account, any profits having gone into her business and the house they'd just built, there was no money to pay the staff or meet the other overheads. Debtors would take up to 90 days to pay – and what they owed was about equal to the creditors' bills. While the bank had the house as security, there was still a large bond on it. The bank would give her a small overdraft until the house was sold. There was no option but to close the business and face the future alone: no money, no business, no home, no husband.

Amanda's *Countdown to Death* diary was a roller-coaster of emotions. There were days when her depression sank to such depths she'd have had to climb a mountain to see a sunrise. On these occasions, death loomed like a menacing black monster whose shadow alone could annihilate her.

There were other days when life was wonderful. Days when she thrilled to the sight of the dogs playing, the wild garden birds scrapping over the food she put out for them, a host of butterflies fluttering gently over the Japanese irises which looked as if a hundred angels had dropped millions of little white kisses on her lawn. Even when she was writing this into her diary, she didn't get depressed. She simply wasn't going to think of the future, of the end approaching inexorably.

Then there were times when the political situation and lawlessness in South Africa and world-wide events generally made her so angry, she couldn't wait for oblivion.

She never again mentioned suicide to her friends and wore her usual optimism whenever with them. They knew nothing of her contract. While work came in spurts, the money earned was always absorbed by normal, and often unplanned, living expenses: a new alternator, vet bills, appliances breaking down or needing replacing. Her capital continued to dwindle. With two months' money left, she started thinking of 'how'.

In one sitting Gabriel Brambilla had read through the manuscript of *The Abandoned Woman*. He took it home with him to read again – as a source of information, of clues. While he didn't remember being in Madagascar, he knew he had been. Now, as Amanda

Courtney mentioned the coup only as it related to her missing husband, he would have vivid newsreel-type flashes fleshing out the reality. Amanda, the woman, became more and more real. He started hearing conversations in his mind, with her voice having a unique and exciting timbre. Her laughter was a gentle gurgle that would well up and break out into a fountain of tinkling sound. He could imagine gestures he'd not seen in any other woman. He could imagine making love to her. He became more and more convinced that he and Bernard Courtney were one and the same.

Assumptions, of course, are dangerous. He'd had amnesia for 28 years. There could be one of a million explanations for his reaction to Amanda Courtney's book. At 65 years of age he wasn't about to rush off to Africa to find a maybe lost love, a wife. And there was that extraordinary business of the missing money. Gabriel Brambilla knew he had to tread very carefully. He turned to his doctor for help. She, in turn, suggested a psychiatrist, Mark Soggot.

Soggot took Gabriel back to the time he left the Paris hospital. "Tell me what happened from then – the essence, not the detail."

"Right. Thanks to Jacques Brambilla's connections, the French embassy gave me temporary papers and put me through tests, which showed that I had a natural flair for writing. One day I saw a gang of skinheads beat someone up, did a piece on it, and sent it to Agence France Presse. They were impressed and took me on."

"Why did you leave France?"

"I always felt more at home in London – and for a roving reporter it doesn't matter where you live. Paris was simply a base anyway."

"According to this Amanda Courtney, her husband had been based in London: if you were Bernard Courtney surely someone in the Fourth Estate would have recognised you. The fraternity is quite close, I believe."

"Come to think of it, there were a few occasions when some guy would look at me as if he knew me, then shake his head as if to say 'No, it can't be.' Obviously this scar has altered my appearance considerably."

"What about relationships? Since Madagascar you've been married, but it didn't last long. What happened?"

"I blame myself. It's as if I was constantly expecting entirely different reactions from my wife. She accused me of always measuring her up against someone else – and finding her wanting."

"Were you?"

"Certainly not consciously. I couldn't think of any other woman I'd been close to. In fact, I was always trying to prove my loyalty to her. It was because she hated my travelling that I gave up journalism and started WordsWorth Publishing." The questioning went on for some weeks. Hypnosis now being an accepted part of psychiatry, Gabriel was put under and taken back to his earlier years. Fragments of a life in South Africa started coming back. Fragments of marriage to Amanda came to the surface. But they couldn't be sure if this was genuine or the influence of her book.

In the meantime, Gabriel had instructed his staff to activate the preliminaries to publishing that book – market research, analysing competitive titles, getting provisional costings – all of which take time. The final decision would depend on these results.

The thought of being Bernard Courtney haunted Gabriel Brambilla. While carrying on in his predictably dynamic way, this possibility was never far from his mind. He deliberately

split his mind into two: one the total businessman, the other exploring every nuance of another life. Would there ever be closure?

One night, reading the day's newspapers before going to bed, his attention was caught by a small item and a photograph. I know that face, he thought. Even the name felt familiar. Unable to make a connection, he went to bed. In the early hours of the morning he was suddenly wide-awake. I know who I am!

At a more civilised hour, he phoned his psychiatrist. "Mark, I know who I am – and I have the answer to the missing money. When can I see you?"

An hour later he was in Mark's consulting rooms. Without preliminaries he put the folded newspaper onto the desk in front of his psychiatrist. Mark read the headline: **South African found guilty of fraud**. He read the caption to the photograph: *Phillip Michaels convicted of embezzling £47,582.00*. He looked up at Gabriel. "So?"

"That," Gabriel responded, "is not Phillip Michaels. That is Michael Phillips, Amanda's Two IC. And he's obviously the person who emptied Amanda's business account. I don't know how, but it fits. It's all come back to me. I got an urgent call from Reuters to go to Madagascar. Amanda was at a seminar in Johannesburg and I couldn't contact her. I asked Michael to please get hold of her and tell her I'd been called away on an urgent assignment and would be in touch as soon as I could. Obviously my departure was the perfect cover. He could empty the account, not give Amanda the message, and the world would put two and two together and come up with me as the bastard! Mark, I **am** Bernard Courtney. Now ... where do I go from here? By the way, the news also came through yesterday that Amanda's book is worth publishing."

Amanda Courtney was whacked. Even the dogs were lethargic, yawning while stretching languidly instead of giving her their usual exuberant welcome.

Thankfully they couldn't know that tomorrow was their last day with her. After that they'd be in new homes, but with people they knew. Tomorrow was D-Day. Death Day.

She didn't know why she bothered emptying her post box. There were the usual half-dozen estate agents' leaflets, home repair services, a couple of accounts, a letter. A letter? In the age of e-Mails, who wrote? Amanda opened the house, put the kettle on, and sorted the mail.

When she slit open the expensive envelope, the letterhead mocked her: WordsWorth Publishing. Another rejection, she thought. Ah well, it doesn't matter anymore. Soon the public will have *Countdown to Death*.

It wasn't a rejection. It was from the MD, Gabriel Brambilla, telling her that his company had decided to publish *The Abandoned Woman* and he would be in Johannesburg on the 26th. He would like to meet her, give her an advance cheque for £10 000 and get her to sign a contract. He also believed he had news of her missing husband, Bernard Courtney.

Amanda sank into the nearest chair. My book is being published, she thought. I'm getting £10 000. That's what? A hundred and something thousand Rands? At last I'm going to know what happened to Bernard. And it's all too late. The 26th is the day after tomorrow – and tomorrow's D-Day.

Oh God, why did I ever sign that contract? Maybe there's a way out. I must check the fine print. I cannot die. Not now. But keeping a contract is a matter of honour, her dad had instilled in her. "Oh dear God," she said out loud, "help me, please."

Bernard Courtney, alias Gabriel Brambilla, was sipping a sundowner on the veranda of the Westcliff Hotel, marvelling at the jungle of trees that made Johannesburg the world's largest man-made forest. His emotions were chaotic at the thought of meeting Amanda the next morning. It was like going through storm turbulence in a light aircraft.

"Brambilla," the familiar voice of Harry Green, Bernard's arch business rival and good friend, boomed across the veranda. "What a pleasant surprise." As he joined Bernard, he added, with an expression of a journo with the scoop of the century, "You won't believe why I'm here!" After ordering a drink there was an odd silence.

"Well, are you going to tell me or not?" Bernard goaded.

Harry looked a little uncomfortable. "Oh, hell, why not? It's too late for you to scoop anything. Six months ago I was approached by a woman ..." He related the story of how it came about that he would be publishing *Countdown to Death*.

Bernard was both fascinated and appalled that someone could reach such depths of despair – and that his friend could be a party to it. "And you're actually going along with it?" he asked, shocked.

"Keep your fur on, old boy, that's why I'm here. Midnight tomorrow is the deadline. Tomorrow morning I intend seeing her and persuading her not to do it. We always planned to turn her diary into fiction, with a trumped-up ending, and under a pseudonym. She'll make a packet!

"Why have you left it so late?"

"The book is brilliant, Gabriel. You have never read such raw emotion. Nobody has ever been so inside the mind of a suicide. Without the pressure, she'd never have exposed her very soul to the world."

"Who is it, Harry? Or can't you tell?"

"Well, you'll know pretty soon, anyway. It's a woman called Amanda Courtney."

Bernard Courtney, whom Harry knew as Gabriel Brambilla, choked and his face looked like a death-mask. "It can't be ..." he almost whispered. Then shouted: "It can't be, Harry, Amanda Courtney is my wife, Harry. My wife. We have to go to her **now**."

Looking at Harry Green's expression, he continued more calmly. "No, I haven't flipped, Harry, let me tell you why **I'm** here ..."

Amanda was sitting on her patio, watching the storm build up. She loved the Highveld storms, but the dogs were terrified. Soon she must move inside. The sudden buzz of the intercom startled her. She was expecting nobody. Hearing Harry Green announce himself startled her more than ever. Then a wild hope flew through her: maybe he's come to call it off. He had a distinguished man in tow whom he introduced as Gabriel Brambilla. What on earth was **he** doing here? Somehow, he looked vaguely familiar.

As she showed them into the sitting-room, the storm broke. 'Brambilla' was looking at her with an expression she'd known from only one other man. "Mands," he said, "I've come home."

"Bernard!" her colour drained. Still in shock, she reached out to close the security gate. As her wedding ring made contact with the metal the lightning struck. There was a blinding flash that filled the room momentarily and Amanda Courtney collapsed. Her death was instant.