

TRANSITION
TRILOGY

BOOK ONE

SIDETRACKED

JOHN T PETERS

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Also, by
John T Peters

Destroyed Trust
Africa Beckons

Author Website

<http://www.johntpeters.uk>

Book cover by:
Jane Korunoski

CHAPTER ONE

*Scientists say it takes 66 days to change your life.
I believe that sometimes it only takes a second.
There are moments in our lives that can alter our
directions forever.
You will know when it happens to you.
Sometimes it starts with a smile from a stranger or a
kind word.
Sometimes it is a missed turn that diverts you to an
unexpected place.*

My life-changing moment came one sunny winter morning while standing outside the post office where I worked, trying to absorb the heat that was on offer from the winter sun before the daily rush.

The post office was set about ten metres off the main road and surrounded by a tall hedge. Behind the post office were the telephone exchange and the technician's carrier room. The postboxes, made of metal built into the sidewall of the building, on its veranda, linked to the main road by a separate footpath and entrance gate.

As I enjoyed my early morning cigarette while standing near the private post boxes, the most beautiful girl I had ever seen appeared through the gate in the hedge. She seemed to glide up the path approaching the individual post boxes, dressed in

snug-fitting jeans that accentuated her well-shaped hips and legs. Not being courageous and scarred of rejections, I was stunned by her beauty and left completely dumbstruck; I could only mumble, 'Good morning'.

If only I had a bit more inner strength, I would have handled this meeting more confidently.

She turned towards me and cheerfully greeted me in a soft, melodious voice. I felt as if her eyes melted me on the spot, and I could only stare open-mouthed, admiring the way her curly light brown hair framed her smooth, sculpted face. Her inviting ripe lips parted, showing a set of even white teeth. I looked at her and knew as sure as the sun would rise tomorrow that I loved her more than anything I had ever seen or imagined on earth or hoped for anywhere else.

She must have realised the effect she had on me, and her lovely, large brown eyes flickered over me; I knew that she had carefully weighed me up.

The meeting left me speechless. Having never experienced such a feeling in the presence of a girl before, I found it a bit unsettling. At that moment, I knew I had never seen anything more beautiful in my life. I felt intoxicated, merely thinking about her and tingled all over with excitement, reflecting that this must be love, Or close enough to it.

I finished my cigarette in a daze, wondering from where such a beautiful girl could have appeared. I returned to my duties inside but was not able to

concentrate on what I was doing. My colleagues started to correct me.

Jabulani, the mail delivery person, complained, 'Inkosi, you are putting these letters in the wrong streets. The people in town will say that Jabulani is a bad delivery boy if they get the wrong mail.'

I replied, a bit defensively, 'You have such few letters to deliver that we should not have to sort them for you in street order.'

There were only a few letters for delivery as most farmers and businesses rented private boxes. We sorted the local mail in alphabetical order, and they then collected it from Jabulani at the post office. He seemed to know everyone in town. We all suspected that he charged the residents for looking after their mail.

I remained in a state of shock for the rest of the day, cursing myself for not even checking the post box number she had opened.

Well, here I am, James Hammond, in the year 1970, a city boy with little experience of the opposite sex and only one previous girlfriend at school. Now employed by the post office in the village of Lusikisiki, I was infatuated with this lovely girl whose name and address I did not know. I was only aware I was smitten. She could have been a ghost for all I knew.

The staff at the post office was Mr Visagie, the postmaster, and me. Two African clerks Cedric and

Paul, and Jabulani, who was our mail delivery person. Two ladies operated the telephone exchange: the elderly Mrs Umpleby and a young girl called Mary, the daughter of the local magistrate. A telephone technician also supported us with faults and new installations; Alan Stern also stayed in the local hotel.

Being an elderly lady, Mrs Umpleby was incredibly set in her ways and lived on her own in a cottage near the post office. There was a rumour that the police feared for the life of any intruder that attempted to rob Mrs Umpleby. It was alleged she kept a fully loaded sawn-off shotgun in bed with her. It was common speculation in the bar as to what damage it would cause if she fired the weapon in the confined space of her bedroom. She also refused to work after 5 pm, which caused a big problem as the exchange stayed open until 11 pm. One could not expect Mary to work until 11 pm every day; she was reluctant to work after 7 pm.

People of the village were also against the girls working in the evening. Ostensibly this was for safety reasons. However, it was common knowledge that they eavesdropped on all conversations, especially when quiet and bored. It was then up to Alan and me to man the exchange between 7 pm and 11 pm in the evenings. As Alan's work was primarily on farm lines out of town, he could not be relied upon to return in time to help regularly.

The overtime was welcome for doing exceedingly little. Alan and I had an arrangement with the hotel to

send our meals and whatever drinks we required to the exchange. It also gave us ample opportunity to make free telephone calls to friends and family.

The village name Lusikisiki stems from the natural sound caused by the wind blowing through the dry reeds in the marshes below the village. A chief's kraal believed to have occupied the site of the present town before the Europeans came, and even then, it was called Lusikisiki.

The white settlement had its origin in 1894. Mpondoland then annexed to the Cape Colony when a magistrate took up residence there. In 1950, the district had 110,000 inhabitants and was subject to the Paramount Chief of Eastern Mpondoland, who had his Great Place at Qaukeni near the village. Mpondoland is now part of the Transkei, which is the homeland of the Xhosa people. About 350 whites resided in the town and on nearby farms.

Lusikisiki is a small farming village surrounded by a feast of natural wonders and waterfalls. The town itself consisted of a post office, a bank, two general stores, a liquor store, a wholesaler serving all the trading stores, a courthouse, a police station, two churches (one being the Catholic church with a convent), and, obviously, the Royal Hotel.

Single men such as me manned many of the businesses. Most of us lived in the hotel, except for the police, who had their living quarters attached to the

police station. However, they also spent most of their off-duty hours in the hotel bar.

The term 'hotel' is probably an overstatement. It consisted of a single-story white building with a red-painted corrugated iron roof and about nine or ten bedrooms, a shared bathroom, a lounge, a dining room, and a public bar. It had a lovely wide veranda overlooking grass lawns, with tables and chairs facing the main road. Travellers on their way to Port St John's often stopped there to relax with a cup of tea and sandwiches or an ice-cold beer. Savouring the sunshine and the crisp fresh air, only spoiled by the occasional arrival of the maroon coloured government bus, polluting the surroundings with toxic diesel fumes.

Breakfast in the hotel, served at 7 am sharp, was an incredibly active and noisy scene. Every person without a hangover loudly discussed the previous night's activities, such as darts and the various card games, who was cheating who, and what money was outstanding to whom.

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