

TRACES IN THE DEW



DEWALD BRINK
AND
BRAAM LE ROUX

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SUMMARY

On a moonlit night in the rugged South African Lowveld, a cruel massacre shocks the wilderness, not of humans but helpless cattle driven to their deaths over a cliff. As vultures gather, another predator lurks in the shadows, a fearless government agent investigating rampant fraud in the region's gold trade. Armed with a revolver and unmatched courage, he navigates a web of danger and deceit.

When his life collides with Lettie Joubert, a fiery redhead managing her family's troubled farm, suspicion and hostility give way to a partnership forged in peril. As Lettie defends her land against treacherous villains with ambitions beyond mere cattle theft, the two are drawn into a deadly conspiracy that reaches into the heart of Pilgrims Rest, a gold mining boomtown teeming with secrets.

Set against a backdrop of sweeping landscapes, ruthless criminals, and the era's untamed lawlessness, *Traces in the Dew* is a gripping tale of bravery, betrayal, and an unlikely bond. As the agent and Lettie prepare for a climactic confrontation with their relentless adversaries, readers are taken on a journey of intrigue and romance amidst the chaos.

Will justice prevail in the wilderness, or will the villains' greed devour everything in its path?

EXTRACT

“Van Graan, I’m waiting for an apology.”

Mouton Lategan now turns to Van Graan.

“I think it would be best to do what the devil wants, Mr. Van Graan,” he says. “Let’s get out of here...” “Do what he wants? Never! The filth will still find out who he has been dealing with here...”

Van Graan stood turned slightly towards Len. Twice Len’s revolver flashed, and one of the bullets tore a hole in the cravat around his neck. Van Graan’s hand flew to his throat. He was pale in the face as he stared at Len.

“Van Graan, I’m waiting for an apology.”

Van Graan lowered his eyes to the ground. He ground his teeth. Then he said gruffly,

“Fine, I take back my words.” He looked up at Len again. “And what else do you want?”

“That’s all I want at the moment, Van Graan. But remember that you should tread a little more carefully in the future when you deal with me. And that goes for you too, Lategan. This is the last time I’m warning you. You can go.”

He waited until the two had climbed onto their horses and ridden away. Then he also climbed on and rode back in the direction from which he had come.

4. TRACES IN THE DEW

CHAPTER 1

Unease suddenly grabs her when she no longer sees the twenty or so black and white cows where they should be. Hastily, she urges her horse on and rides through the trees so that she can see from the height. But they are not grazing there either, and they are certainly not closer to the house.

The bushes around her are dead silent and look strangely empty because she had definitely expected to find the cows here between the bushes where they graze every day. After all, there is lovely grazing long sweet grass between the sparse trees, so why would they have wandered off? It is the best grazing on the whole farm, and that is precisely why it was chosen for the herd of young cows and heifers. These are her cows, which her father bought at her urgent insistence, because she believes that it is best to buy full-blooded animals when you buy.

Perhaps that is why the unease is suddenly eating at her heart. Tears suddenly well up in her eyes. Could there possibly have been cattle thieves here today? Would they have been so brazen as to come and carry out a raid in broad daylight, and only a mile and a half from the house? It is unbelievable to her... Besides, at twelve o'clock that day the heifers were all still there. Piet Lategan, her father's foreman, had told her so himself. No, they must be somewhere here between the trees, a little strayed from their usual grazing place.

She rides further.

Her unease increases when she sees that the sun is not very far from setting. She is now in such a hurry that she rides with her legs wide apart, and she tucks her long skirt under her legs. When she left the house, she was sitting neatly across the saddle, as is befitting a woman in this year, 1884.

She had just hastily put on her wide black leather riding leggings because she expected that she might have to get off her horse to help some of the small calves out of the thickets, and in the past she had already experienced what it means to walk through the grass and thorns of these Lowveld plains with stockings and a long skirt.

Quickly and at a gallop, she rides between the trees, ducking low here

and there so as not to be scratched by a branch, and weaves with the horse between the thickets of another small rise. When she is up there, she can see far between the sparse trees. The faint rays of the late afternoon sun strike her golden-red hair and create a bright glow on her slightly sweaty face. Her hair is simply tied back at her neck with an old ribbon, and her sleeves are still rolled up as she was working at the soap pot under the big old wait-a-bit tree at the house.

When she was just busy at the soap pot, it suddenly occurred to her that Piet Lategan had not yet returned from the town, and he had asked her that if he did not return in time, she should just quickly ride and round up the cows, because the other two men, Duvenhage and Botha, were going to sleep that night with the other cattle near the Devil's Bridge in the hope of bewildering or catching the cattle thieves who had become so brazen lately.

Lettie now suddenly wonders why Piet Lategan had to decide to go to town in the middle of the day. He had said it was to go and get medicine, but couldn't it have waited until there was another opportunity to go to town? With resentment, she thinks of the many times that her father's foreman, Lategan, had done things that she did not like or that made the work here on the farm more difficult rather than easier.

There are already so many difficulties here...

A year or two ago her father bought this farm, and then they moved here with all their cattle and belongings. It was partly at the insistence of people who knew them well in this area, including the old magistrate, Mr. Willem van Graan. She, Lettie, was herself full of fire and enthusiasm. Land was exceptionally cheap here in the wilderness, and it is clear that it is some of the best grazing land in the whole country.

In the beginning, everything went smoothly. There was only one difficulty for Lettie, and that was that her elderly father had started giving himself over completely to drink. In the town of Pilgrimsrust, where there was nothing but hustle and bustle after the great gold discoveries there, drink almost set the tone. Her father was fond of company, and he had run into many old friends who had moved there from other parts, with the result that his love for strong drink was now beginning to get completely the upper hand over him. He hardly pays any attention to the farming anymore, and that is why she, Lettie, is so

busy these days. Her father imagines that he is rich because he made some money with gold claims that he and a friend had staked on the alluvial diggings. But he has already spent almost all of that money on drink and gambling ventures.

She gets off her horse and walks to the top of the rough hill. Now she can see for a few miles in the surrounding area. But there is no sign of the cattle, which she would have seen very clearly between the trees because of their bright white and black hides. Even if they were all lying somewhere in the long grass, she would have seen them from here, and it is unlikely that that would have happened, because in any case there would have been a few calves running around there.

Her unease now grows into dismay, and she only thinks of going back to her horse and hurrying back home... but then it occurs to her that there is no one at home at the moment who can provide her with any help. There is only her mother and the old house servant. The two men who, besides Piet Lategan, are in her father's service, are currently, probably, almost seven miles from the house, in the rough gorge area where the so-called Devil's Bridge is located. The old boss is one of the farmers who, due to sore experiences in the past, does not believe in using the raw, black natives of this world for farm work.

She holds her hands above her eyes to ward off the rays of the sun, which is already very close to the back of the high ridge on the west side. She stares attentively in that direction.

She sees nothing there on the long slope either. She just wants to climb off the rock, but when she looks there again, because it suddenly seemed to her as if she had noticed something moving there, right on top of the back of the ridge. It is almost three miles away, and under normal circumstances she would not have been able to see any figure or animal there, but the movement she saw is completely against the skyline right below the sun, which will disappear there in about half an hour or so.

For quite a while, she gazes in that direction. Then she suddenly takes a sharp breath. A cry of surprise escapes her lips, and she involuntarily utters a curse word. There on the ridge she now sees very clearly men riding on horseback, and some distance in front of them are other moving figures, and she is immediately convinced that those animals

are her full-blooded cows and heifers.

For a moment, she feels icy cold and paralyzed with fright, but the next moment a fiery rage shoots through her, and then she jumps and runs carelessly between the thickets and over the rocks to her horse. In a flash, she is in the saddle, and without hesitating for a moment, she sends the horse down the slope straight in the direction of that ridge. Her horse thunders down the slope and opens out over the plain.

Lettie's eyes are fixed ahead of her to look for holes and dangerous places. Her teeth are clenched together.

No one on this farm has any reason to drive the cows up that slope. Those cows must sleep in the kraal at the house at night, and in the stable if it is very cold. What else but the cows could it be that she saw moving ahead of the horsemen? It suddenly occurs to her that she doesn't even have a weapon with her at all. But even the thought that she might be dealing with unscrupulous robbers does not stop her. If only she can see where they are going and what they look like.

The cool breeze of the approaching evening blows against her cheeks, which are now red with excitement. Her horse seems to realize that his mistress is in a hurry, and carefully, as is his custom, but also fleet-footed, he weaves his way through the long grass and between the trees. The sun's rays are beginning to fall faint and horizontally over the grasslands. Down in the valley, the tamboekie grass is very high, and Lettie feels a little anxious to rush through it like that, because wild animals can easily hide there. But the thought of those beautiful full-blooded animals, the envy of the farmers for miles around, drives her relentlessly onward.

When they take the slope of the ridge, there is less long grass, but now they have to deal with stones and bushes that block their way from time to time and force them to go around. However, Lettie does not allow the horse to slow down for a moment. The sweat eventually breaks out on his skin, and he almost becomes nervous from her urging and tugging at the reins.

The robbers must have come and driven the cows away a good two hours ago to be able to move that far by now, she thinks. Where on earth would they have come from, and how would they have known that the cows were unguarded?

She can't help but harbor a degree of suspicion against Piet Lategan. But it may also be that the robbers were hiding somewhere and saw that Piet had gone to town and then decided to take their chance while Piet was away.

Finally, Lettie is at the top of the hill. She holds the horse in for a moment and looks around quickly. However, she cannot see the cattle or the horsemen anywhere, but the ridge on the other side slopes down sharply and is very ruggedly overgrown with trees and also unusually rocky.

She wonders in which direction they would have gone. To the left there below is a whole wilderness of cliffs and ravines through which the Bosbokspruit (Bushbuck Stream) runs after making a dizzyingly high waterfall. This rocky ridge slopes down towards the Bosbokspruit. If she continues straight on, she will come out very close to the place where that waterfall plunges down. She immediately swings away, because it is not possible for anyone on earth to move cattle through those rough, impassable ravines. It is like a deep tear in the earth, and from this side, one cannot get in there at all.

For a moment she wondered if the robbers might think that they would be able to get in there and perhaps move the cattle there. However, she came to the conclusion that it is unlikely that they would be so stupid as to want to flee with cattle at night over terrain that they have not even explored yet, and if they have explored the terrain, they would know that it is completely impossible to get close to the waterfall and move through those rough ravines. So, they most likely swung right somewhere down here, along the Bosbokspruit, and moved until they reached a place where they would easily be able to cross the mountains. However, Lettie does not swing away immediately, because she knows that there is a place here, not far from the waterfall, where she will be able to weave through the high rocks with the horse and cross the stream. Then, on that side, where it is less rough and rocky, she will race as fast as she can along the bank of the stream until she comes face to face with the robbers.

She rides down the slope, and soon the sun is below the horizon for her, although it is still shining on the ridge top.

The Bosbokspruit is about half a mile from her when she rides out on

top of a high rock slab and stops there to look around.

Her muscles suddenly contract when she sees a few black and white cattle among the trees below, not very far from her.

She turns her horse around with the intention of riding back from the rock slab and then down the slope. But at that moment, two shots crack one after the other at an angle from her.

The bullets hit the rock slab here near her, and graze away singing. Lettie turns her horse around, which is prancing around quite startled, and looks in the direction from where the shots came. It is a high, rocky thicket on the left. However, she does not see any moving figure there. Determined, she kicks her horse in the ribs to make him ride down the slope, but the next moment there is another shot, and then a twig from a tree flies off just near her head.

Lettie stops. Her heart is pounding in her throat. For the first time in her life, she has come virtually face to face with the unscrupulous cattle thieves.

What should she do? They are apparently shooting at her with intent.

What on earth will she be able to achieve alone against them?

“You thieves, you villains!” she shouts towards that rough hill. She suddenly decides to ride there, but then another shot cracks, and her horse jumps violently to one side, almost throwing her off his back. She has to struggle and cling just to stay in the saddle, because the horse is jumping around wildly.

Lettie sees that the bullet caught him glancingly on the neck and then plowed through his mane. Blood is already running from his neck. Then she suddenly decides that it would be madness for her to continue like this any longer. The only salvation is to rush home as fast as possible in the hope that Piet Lategan has already arrived.

She turns the horse around, rides quickly to the right, up the slope and behind a clump of rough bushes. She keeps these bushes between her and that dangerous thicket as she rides diagonally back up the slope. Her horse is urged on as quickly as possible. He stumbles and slides and pushes forward, and it doesn't take long before she is completely out of range.

A whole argument now suddenly breaks out among the men there behind the overgrown hill.

A young, well-built man with a straw hat on and a collar and bow tie, who had already taken off his jacket earlier and thrown it over the saddle, comes riding quickly between the rocks to the giant of a fellow who had shot at the girl with his revolver. He jumps off his horse.

“What the hell is all the shooting for, Mouton? Couldn’t you have left her alone? She would never have seen us here!”

“She saw the cattle, and she would definitely have ridden there and returned them,” replies Mouton Lategan.

“Nonsense! You went off the deep end again. And it looks like you shot the girl’s horse. Were you planning to shoot her dead?”

A third man who has also dismounted from his horse stands listening to the two of them arguing. The neatly dressed man, a very broad and well-built young fellow, shoots fire from his eyes as he looks at the giant of a man in front of him, who is wearing a heavy revolver bandolier and a revolver around his hips. The big-built fellow, however, looks completely unconcerned, almost sarcastic. He pushes his hat back and wipes the sweat from his forehead. With a slight grin, he says.

“If I had hit her, wouldn’t that have made it a little easier for you to get your hands on her farm?”

“You curse! And then you stand there making jokes about it, you could have shot that girl dead! I feel like breaking every bone in your body!”

“Gee, I thought I was doing a good thing. And now Mr. Van Graan is carrying on like this!” says the big fellow a little embarrassed. “But don’t think that I would have hit her. I never make a mistake with a revolver, never.”

“Well, I’m warning you now, Lategan, that if I find out that you might have hurt that girl, I’ll break every bone in your body.”

“Don’t be so sure you’ll manage it, Mr. Van Graan,” says Mouton Lategan, now with a note of annoyance in his voice.

CHAPTER 2

Zacharias van Graan suddenly comes striding angrily closer.

“Well, damn it, I’ll show you now that I can do it!” He takes a few long steps to right in front of the big-built fellow. Mouton Lategan steps back half startled, because he knows the ferocity of this man when he starts using his fists. As quick as lightning, he pulls the revolver from the pouch at his side.

“Mr. Van Graan, you mustn’t go too far!” he says threateningly. The small eyes in his unfeeling face flicker ominously.

The third person, a lean, older man, comes walking closer.

“Mr. Van Graan, you are the boss of this lot,” he says in a calm but reproving tone. “But you shouldn’t get so damned upset. Mouton here thought he was doing what was best. It was the same kind of thing with me the other day there at Lydenburg. Then you wanted to crush me with your fists. You are too fond of those two fists of yours, Mr. Van Graan. One day they will get you into trouble.”

The young man looks in amazement from one to the other with narrowed eyes.

“What is going on here?” he asks with an ominous sound in his voice.

“Do the two of you want to rebel against me?”

He is a bit afraid of these two fellows, because they are two of the most dangerous men in the Lowveld when things escalate into a shooting, while he, Van Graan, has never been able to get the hang of handling any firearm quickly and accurately. He has always relied more on his fists and his booming voice and dominating attitude, as well as on his considerable financial ability, and this combination has taken him quite far in life, if one takes into account that he grew up as a transport rider’s son and for a while earned his daily bread by participating in fist fights in Middelburg, Pretoria and Kimberley.

“If you dare to rebel!” he says mockingly. “Then I will at least be rid of the something to do the brainwork for both of you as well as myself!”

“Oh, no, Mr. Van Graan,” says the older man amicably. “It’s not that bad, just a bit of straight talking. I just thought that my old friend, Mouton, here certainly didn’t mean to shoot at the girl, Mr. Van Graan. And he of course doesn’t know so well what has happened here in the

past two months or so,” he adds with an embarrassed little laugh, winking at Mouton. “He certainly doesn’t know that Miss Joubert has become your fiancée in the time that he’s been snooping around down there in the bush! I don’t think you knew that, did you, Mouton?”

“Well, if he doesn’t know it, it’s high time that he realized it now,” says Van Graan with a challenging and proud lifting of his chin. “I intend to marry that girl that you just nearly shot dead, Lategan.”

Lategan scratches his head and says slightly disconsolately.

“Well, I didn’t think things were quite like that. I thought it was just the farm that you were after, Mr. Van Graan.”

“The farm and the girl, the farm and the girl, Mouton!” says the old man in a good-natured tone. “And he will of course get her too,” he continues flatteringly, “because I have not yet come across a man who manages so well to get everything he wants in life, if it isn’t this volatile young friend of ours,” says the old man in an attempt to get the young man in a good mood.

“In any case, there is work ahead,” he continues after a while. “The beautiful full-blooded heifers and cows of Mr. Van Graan’s fiancée must be driven over the cliff here.”

The two seem to be waiting for an order from Van Graan, who seems to be deep in thought for a few moments.

“You guys have completely screwed things up,” says Van Graan, however, still annoyed. “We don’t dare risk driving the cattle over the cliffs here now. You don’t know that girl like I do. She won’t give up easily, and she might come back, and then she’ll find out what’s going on here in the gorge.”

“Does it look like you’re starting to go soft, Mr. Van Graan?” comes the good-natured teasing from Mouton Lategan. “Does it look like you no longer feel like driving the cows over the cliffs? But, of course, if it’s one’s fiancée’s stuff.”

“I don’t need your sarcasm, Lategan,” replies Van Graan bitterly. “There are completely different considerations that make me think that it would not be advisable to let the cattle perish at the moment. It’s things that you pumpkin heads are naturally unable to grasp immediately.”

“But, Mr. Van Graan, we can’t risk taking these full-blooded cattle

through to the others either. Everyone who sees them will know that they are the old man's and his daughter's things," the older man objects. "I have no intention of viewing the cattle as booty at all. You know very well that I am not interested in a few cattle, but rather in the farm of old Karel Joubert, and you also know why. The cattle must be destroyed, but I'm just wondering how now. The girl saw us here, and she will most certainly come sniffing around here. I fear that she might somehow find out that we made the stuff perish here, and then she might get it into her head to want to know why we did it, and perhaps she can also come up with a plan to get down there into the gorge to go and look at the cattle. It is possible if one has a whole lot of long ropes, and you know that it can become a dangerous game for our plans."

"Well, what then?" wants to know Mouton Lategan.

Van Graan climbs onto a high rock and looks attentively around the area. When he gets down, he says.

"Mouton, look, tell me, you know this world here a bit, right? Well, I have a plan. Look, Sam and I will wait here, and you then drive the cattle up along the stream. The moon will come up soon, so you will be able to do it easily. Drive them up about two miles. You know, the stream forms such wide slabs of rock there. Then let them walk higher up on those rock slabs for a distance. Then let them run up a bank again, so that their tracks are clearly visible there.

And then, on the other side, when you get to a rocky part again, you drive them back into the stream. Then let them turn around and come back here. But people who follow the tracks must not see the tracks that come back. Do you understand? We can't do anything else now, the stuff must be destroyed. The best way is to drive them over the cliffs here at the waterfall after all. But I don't want too much attention focused on the gorge down here at the moment."

"Okay," says Lategan. "But if I'm alone, the cattle might, when I drive them back, struggle to get out of the stream bed and make unnecessary tracks."

"Well, yes, maybe you're right," says Van Graan. "I think the best thing will be if I go with you. Sam, you stay here and keep an eye on things in case searchers come, so that you can warn us."

The two of them do not delay any longer but climb onto their horses,