

BELOVED TRAITOR



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SUMMARY

In the wild, untamed days of the Transvaal Lowveld, where revolvers and rifles dictated law, Len van Staden, a fearless government agent, embarks on a dangerous mission to uncover the truth behind a web of gun smuggling and betrayal. The story begins with a grim discovery by Len. The tools of a cunning criminal operation near a river teeming with predators. Determined to bring justice, he navigates a treacherous world filled with ruthless enemies, untamed landscapes, and moral dilemmas.

At the heart of the story is Lettie Basson, a spirited young woman caught between the life she chose with her husband, Koos, and unresolved feelings for Len, her former love. As danger closes in and secrets unravel, Lettie must confront the growing tension between loyalty and doubt, especially as Koos' actions and alliances cast a shadow over their lives. Meanwhile, Lood du Plooy, an arrogant and influential figure, becomes a menacing force, further complicating matters as he vies for power and control, crossing paths with Len in a volatile showdown.

The narrative plunges into themes of justice, corruption, and personal redemption. As Len closes in on the criminals, he faces moral choices that test his courage and integrity. With gripping action, heartfelt moments, and a vivid backdrop of South Africa's wilderness, *Beloved Traitor* is a tale of resilience, love, and the relentless pursuit of justice in a time when survival often meant standing against all odds. Will Len prevail in his quest for justice, or will the untamed lawlessness of the Lowveld claim yet another victim?

EXTRACT

Van Staden's trained ears heard something like the crack of a revolver in the distance. He listens attentively now, and he can also see that his fox has sensed or heard something. But he hears no further sounds, and after a few moments he rides on carefully to a rock on a small rise. His eyes scan the world below him.

Suddenly his muscles stiffen again. He has seen a movement. His eagle eyes are focused on the spot for a long time. Then he sees it again. He takes out his binoculars to see better what is going on. No six hundred steps in front of him, he sees two sneaking figures, about fifty steps or more apart. He sees them for only a fraction of a moment. Len cannot understand it. It looks like two men sneaking up on each other. But just before he can examine them properly with his binoculars, they both disappear behind a patch of trees and a pile of rocks. They are riderless men, and Len cannot see horses anywhere nearby. He wonders what it means.

5. BELOVED TRAITOR

CHAPTER 1

Lettie's heart beats in her throat, and her hands tremble as she locks the door. She realizes how her hands are shaking when she almost drops the lamp as she picks it up from the kitchen table and walks to the living room with it.

Why does she feel so uneasy tonight? It is not the first time that Koos has left her alone in the big house like this. She knew that it was one of his men, Van Niekerk, knocking at the back door, but for a moment she was so paralyzed by fright, caused by his sudden, loud knocking, that she could not open the door and take the letters from him.

She now walks with the letters through to the living room. There is one from her father and mother, and one in a handwriting that seems completely strange to her. But when she now, under the light of the lamp, looks at it attentively, her heart suddenly begins to beat excitedly. It is Len's handwriting, that Len van Staden! She puts the lamp down on the table, with the heavy green tablecloth over it, and hastily tears open Len van Staden's letter. It is only a short, hastily written note. "Dear Koos and Lettie, I am writing in haste just to let you know that I will probably be in your area this week. I am actually coming to that region on official work, but I will surely have a chance to chat with you about the "good old days." I still owe you a congratulation on your marriage. Greetings. Len van Staden."

Lettie stares at the letter in her hands. There is a blush of excitement on her cheeks, because this news from Len, that he is coming to visit, is the last thing on earth she ever expected. In fact, she has already wondered if Len might be dead. Six months ago, he disappeared from her life like a pin, after she had thought of him day and night, with the firm expectation in her heart that he would one day appear and ask her to be his wife. But he never came.

And he sent no word of what had become of him after he had taken those villains he had caught on her parents' farm to Lydenburg to appear before the landdrost. She heard that he had gone to Pretoria. But he did not leave by post coach, but on horseback, and consequently, she could not believe that his journey was so far. She expected him to show

up any day, with his engaging smile, and to have tales to tell of new adventures that he had experienced as a special police agent.

But he did not come. And Koos Basson was on her parents' farm every day - Koos, who, when they still lived on the Highveld, had been her playmate. Previously there was an understanding between her and Koos, although she was actually just a schoolgirl then. And Koos tactfully rekindled the dying embers of the fire from the past. Her father strongly supported Koos in his effort to win her heart and her hand because, secretly, he had probably always regarded Len as a bit of an adventurer and a loose cannon, despite his inexpressible gratitude towards him.

The weeks of Len's silent absence turned into months, and eventually, she succumbed to the increasing pressure.

Lettie knows that her father heaved a sigh of relief when she decided to marry Koos Basson.

And now this note from Len arrives!

A hesitant smile appears at the corners of Lettie's mouth. It is a smile in which almost a hint of fear can be detected. She wonders what fate might have in store for her.

For a long time, she sits motionless, staring at the rainy darkness outside. Her thoughts wander far away. Where would Koos be tonight? Why does she feel uneasy about Koos's activities lately?

She finally pushes away, with a sigh, the strange thoughts that come into her heart, tears open the letter from her parents and reads it, and then she goes to her bedroom.

But she cannot sleep.

Two hours later, when it is almost midnight, she is still awake. Her heart suddenly rejoices with relief and happiness when she hears Koos's characteristic knock on the back door.

"Good evening, darling," he greets as he kisses her. He is soaked from the rain and looks tired, and immediately she is deeply sorry for the bitter thoughts about him that had been in her heart for a while. He was probably just out with the cows in the mountains, as he had said that afternoon, to finish that kraal that he had made for them as protection against pests.

"Any news?" Koos asks as she takes the plate of lukewarm food out of

the oven and serves it to him.

“Guess who is coming to visit? You’ll never guess - your old school friend, Len van Staden!”

“Oh no! Not old Len!” Koos exclaims in surprise. “Well, that’s a pleasant surprise, you know! Where did you get that?”

Lettie gives him the letter to read.

Koos and Len had supposedly been in school together, and for more than a year, before Len’s parents moved to the Pretoria district, they had been bosom friends and they even had a few adventures in which they had helped each other hand and foot. Koos had eagerly told her about these adventures after he had learned that she had had dealings with Len van Staden.

An hour later Lettie is fast asleep, now more satisfied and at ease. Koos Basson, however, cannot rest for some reason, despite his tiredness.

The morning breeze blows fresh against Lettie’s cheeks, caresses her well-groomed skin gently. Her blue eyes look around her, and she breathes in the morning air deeply. The Bushveld air is fragrant, it is as if it makes new life-lust bubble in her veins.

The buggy bumps over the uneven road, winds through the bushes and here it throws a wide turn around a rocky hill. Koos Basson looks aloof, almost worried, as he sits upright next to her, with the reins in his hands. Since they left the house this morning, he has spoken very little. Lettie wonders what is bothering him. Lately, he is sometimes so inexplicably surly towards her.

She glances sideways at Basson, with his broad shoulders, his attractive, clean-shaven face. He is wearing khaki clothes, and his rolled-down shirtsleeves hide hairy, robust arms. Around his hips hangs his revolver bandolier, without which he almost never goes on a journey lately.

“Koos,” Lettie breaks the silence. “You look terribly grumpy this morning, as if the dogs have taken your food.”

“What else can you expect? We were chasing a couple of lost cows with newborn calves all night. I can tell you one thing, if I hadn’t gone out with two men last night in search of the cows in calf that had gone astray, we would have lost some of our best shorthorns. Come on, Rubie! The damn horse is so skittish that it just wants to fly out of the road,” comes the answer from Koos Basson, while he pushes up a bit

the heavy revolver on his right side, which hangs low on his hip.

“But, Koos, you could have come back earlier. What kind of overnighing is that in the field when it’s raining? You could have left it to the other two to bring the cows and calves to the kraal,” Lettie protests.

Koos Basson just shrugs his shoulders and looks ahead with his green-grey eyes. A hundred paces in front of them in the road, the muscular brown stallion, Koos Basson’s riding horse, is prancing with the overseer brown man on his back. The animal is also full of life this morning. It is an old habit of Basson to always carry his riding horse along when he goes to town. He always needs him, and besides, the brown man, Moos, cannot ride with them in the cart, and in the town he always needs him to carry the necessary things to the cart.

The environment they are now entering is becoming more and more wooded. When they descend a small rise and drive between two huge boulders, they are on the land of Lettie’s uncle, Thys Viljoen. It is a rough piece of land here, full of hills and ridges, deep ravines. It has always been a pleasure for Lettie Basson to come and visit here on her uncle’s farm.

“Are we not going to stop by uncle Thys, Koos?” Lettie asks.

“We can, but I’m already tired of the old man’s big talk. It’s always the same old tune that he plays out, how he can do everything better than anyone else, how he outsmarted the cattle thieves, how many newborn calves he has gotten, and that his men are the best and most awake in the entire area.”

Lettie looks at Basson in surprise. He himself seems to immediately regret his resentful outburst and smiles apologetically at her then. Basson now notices, for the first time this morning, how beautiful his wife looks. She looks enchantingly attractive as she sits here next to him with her blood-red cheeks and the sparkle of disapproval in her eyes.

“Shame on you, Koos! He is such a good old soul. I have also thought that he must have super-men working for him because uncle Koos’ cattle are constantly attacked by cattle thieves, here in the thickets and ravines, where they can very easily get away with the animals, but he always gets his cattle back. But that is no reason for you to be so bitter

towards him. Perhaps the old man is just too proud to admit his loss!" Koos shrugs his shoulders again.

"Well, as long as you chat with the old windbag, I want to go and take a look at his new shorthorns."

"Sies, Koos, don't talk about an old person so disrespectfully. Remember, he's my uncle!" Lettie scolds him again.

Basson laughs, and gives his wife such a playful squeeze.

"Well, okay, darling."

The horses come to a halt in front of a large farmhouse.

Uncle Thys, who became a widower two years ago, is already sitting on the front porch, looking out over the mountainous world. He has a curved-stem pipe in his mouth. He stands up laboriously, because he is no longer a young man, and lately, he often complains about all sorts of ailments.

"My world! Koos, Lettie! My world! Jonas, Jonas, come and unharness, my old boy!" uncle Thys shouts from afar. He walks closer, Koos Basson helps Lettie off, "Lettie, child, but you look good, it seems to me old Koos knows his work!" And he laughs loudly as if he has just made a good joke. He takes Lettie by her shoulders and presses a kiss on her cheek. The stubble beard stands wildly on the old man's face.

A grown black boy is already on hand to help unharness the horses, but Koos stops him.

"No, Jonas, we'll be riding again soon. You can just stand in front of the horses, they are full of life this morning."

"Oh no, what's the rush, Koos? You're always in and out like a wind. Come to the porch, young man, and let the black man unharness," says uncle Thys.

"No, Uncle, we are on our way to Silver Streams. We have to push on, because we must try to get back tonight," Lettie interjects.

Koos Basson signals Moos, his brown man, to tie the horse to the veranda post.

"I will need the riding horse soon, Moos," he lets it be heard. Uncle Thys has shouted towards the kitchen for three cups of coffee. His eyes fall on the robust Koos Basson as he climbs up the porch steps. Uncle Thys thinks again what he has always thought of Koos Basson, he would not like to walk under those strong arms. And those flashing

green-grey eyes of the fellow! One can almost say there is something cruel lurking in them.

“Come on, uncle Thys, I just drove here to go and see your shorthorns, I hear you have done so well with the excellent animals,” Koos Basson flatters.

“Kosie, now you’re talking. They are the most beautiful animals in the whole Lowveld, and then I lost them last night, old man,” says uncle Thys loudly.

Koos Basson bites his lips. A slight shock goes through him. Lettie leans forward.

“Don’t tell me the cattle thieves were busy again?” she asks, taken aback.

“Yes, the scum, but, as always, your uncle got all his shorthorns back, I drill my men, old child. They are too much for these robbers. There are just a few stragglers left.”

Suddenly unrest has arisen in Lettie, gnawing unrest, but she cannot explain why it has risen so suddenly in her. She looks up at her husband who is leaning against the veranda. His words sound almost too unconcerned as he says.

“I’m sorry to hear that, uncle Thys, but you shouldn’t complain. You have suffered no loss, and there are other farmers who have.”

“Yes, they are sleeping farmers, old Kosie,” uncle Thys Viljoen lets out loudly, “sleeping, I tell you.”

“Well, uncle, I’m going to ride down to the shorthorns. You’re surely not coming along,” Koos announces.

Lettie still looks half-amazed at Koos. Strange thoughts are wrestling within her. Is she imagining it, or is her husband trying to avoid her gaze? He has already turned his back on them and stepped down the porch steps again.

“Kosie, you know where I keep my shorthorns... there near the river at the tortoise hills. I’ll chat with Lettie for a bit. I don’t see her often enough,” uncle Thys Viljoen shouts after him.

The old man talks about the splendour of his shorthorns, about his beautiful stragglers and his milk cows, but Lettie does not hear everything he says. Her thoughts wander away. She thinks of the arrival of Len van Staden here, and of the activities of the cattle thieves around

here. Then she thinks again about how Len had actually tracked down the cattle thieves, the cattle murderers, on her father's farm at the time and handed them over to the law. She wonders what the purpose of Len's visit to this area is. As far as she knows, he is still a special police agent.

"Yes, you see, old child, I always warn my men, be on your guard, and do as I say," and uncle Thys slurps the warm coffee from the saucer.

She peers into the distance, sees how her husband on his horse disappears between the bushes far from the house, her eyes graze over the landscape. From where she sits, she can see the large river, far away, meandering through wild thickets here and there, shining in the sunlight.

Koos Basson rides his horse up a small rise. In the distance, he hears the lowing of cattle. At the crest of the hill, he stops again. Far below him in a basin, uncle Thys Viljoen's magnificent cattle, of which he is so proud, are grazing.

But Koos Basson's gaze wanders away from the cattle. He peers in the direction of the wide river, and the rough ridges and almost impassable thickets along the bank. It is a good three miles from here. On the other side of the river lies the mysterious thickets and wilderness of Hippo Island. To his left are the blue mountains, with their round, smooth granite backs, with deep gates carved in them, just like giant elephants standing silently next to each other against the blue sky. Basson takes out his binoculars and surveys the world.

With a prickling of anxiety within him, he turns his horse around after a while and makes his way back to the farmhouse. However, just as he enters the first bushes, he suddenly hears the thunder of horses' hooves. It sounds behind him. Impulsively he just wants to ride faster, but he reins himself in.

The clip-clop of the horses' hooves comes closer right at him, but Basson rides on at a trot.

Suddenly one of uncle Thys Viljoen's men bursts out of the bushes behind him. He quickly jerks his horse, so that the animal kicks with its front legs in the air.

"Hey!" shouts the bearded cattle herder of uncle Thys.

Basson quickly turns in his saddle. The man is no more than twenty

paces behind him, and lets his horse trot closer, but the next moment he gives a shout of surprise.

“My mapstieks, Mr. Basson, I almost thought it was someone else, I almost thought it was a trespasser! Good day, Mr. Basson, and how are you...”

“Fairly well, thank you, Paul. We came to visit uncle Thys a bit, and I took the opportunity to wander around a bit, I saw shorthorn cattle in the basin. Fine stuff, Paul.”

“Magnificent,” says Paul with pride, and his chest swells, as if Koos’ words contain a personal compliment for him. “But almost the cattle robbers...”

“Uncle Thys tells me you had visitors again,” Koos interrupts him with a calm voice. “It is no wonder that you chase after every strange rider on the farm and almost scare them away with your aggressiveness!”

Paul laughs self-consciously.

“Do you have any suspicion who these unsuccessful cattle thieves are?” asks Basson.

“I was very close to two of the wretches last night. If the moon had been a little fuller, I would have recognized them,” Paul tells eagerly as they ride on.

A facial muscle twitches at the corner of Koos Basson’s mouth. There is a moment of silence.

“But the devils escaped again. They shook me off at one of the gates in the Olifants mountains. But I confused them well. What’s the strangest thing is, the one at the back was carrying two rifles over his shoulder. That was strange to me, and on top of that, one of them lost another rifle. I picked it up.”

“Lost a rifle! Then he must have been in a real hurry, hey?” laughs Basson.

“You can be sure he was!” the fellow says boastfully.

“And the rifle that was lost?”

“Uncle Thys has it, uncle Thys says it’s a Portuguese rifle. I bet in the end, we’ll find out that it is those damn thick-skinned people who move across the border and come and bother with our stuff.”

“Yes, that’s quite possible,” Basson admits. He rides on after a while, eventually breaks into a gallop and is back at the house within half an

hour.

“Aha, there you are, Koos,” calls uncle Thys from the porch, and he lifts himself out of the chair. Lettie is also ready to go on, she adjusts her bonnet on her head. Her gold-coloured hair sticks out curly under the bonnet.

“How do the bugs look to you, Koos?” asks uncle Thys.

“Just excellent,” Basson answers, springs nimbly out of the saddle and signals for Moos to take the animal. “And from the ox to the donkey, I have just heard from Paul that one of the thieves left such a nice present for uncle. You didn’t tell me.”

“You mean what... oh, I see, the Portuguese rifle. Yes,” and uncle Thys laughs heartily. “Let me quickly show you the thing, it’s quite a nice thing, brand new, but our people don’t use those things. It makes me already think that it is not our people who are doing this thieving.” And with those words, he goes inside to come out a few moments later with the rifle.

Koos Basson examines the rifle, of which he has seen and handled many before, seemingly attentively. He will always feel uneasy if this rifle should remain in the possession of uncle Thys. He looks up with a forced smile.

“Uncle Thys now has so many rifles, how about throwing a little alms our way every now and then?”

“If you want it, just take it, old boy, my world. I’ll never use the thing anyway,” comes it kindly from Lettie’s uncle.

Koos thanks him, and he and Lettie say goodbye to ride on. Basson is pensive and aloof again as they ride. Lettie also becomes engrossed in her thoughts after a while - thoughts that sometimes bring bittersweet nostalgia for things that are forever gone for her, into her heart.

“Not so far away anymore, Lettie,” Basson breaks the silence. “We only have seven miles to go.”

Lettie does not answer, because her eyes have been fixed on the lowlands below them since they started riding along the ridge. She frowns her eyebrows and looks at a movement that she notices down there to the right of the old drift under a solitary wild fig tree.

The cart descends the lowlands and her gaze remains directed at that place. It was as if she saw a man hanging there on a tree branch!

The cart makes a wide turn and now rides downhill, away from the old drift. They will soon pass through the new drift, half a mile to the right of the wild fig tree, through the stream, the last drift before they reach Silver Streams. For a moment, the rippling, shining water of the stream attracts her attention - a silver stream that flows down to the Olifants mountains to join numerous mountain streams there, turn right and flow into the great river, which is the border of Hippo Island.

The sun is warm and the trembling air mirages down there almost blind her, but she squints her eyes and then she sees the people clearly there at the wild fig tree. She picks up the binoculars that are on the seat between her and Koos, and quickly brings them to her eyes. For several seconds she adjusts them. The red blush suddenly leaves her cheeks, a nausea overcomes her. She gives a distressed cry.

“Koos! What is going on there!”

Koos pulls the reins in quickly and the horses come to a standstill. He snatches the binoculars out of his wife’s hands. Lettie looks at him and sees how the wrinkles along the corners of his mouth deepen, he presses his lips together.

“Low murderers! Villains! They are busy hanging a man! He is not dead yet. Did you see that he is still kicking and carrying on? Lawless villains.”

Koos Basson takes out the whip and gives the horses a few nasty lashes and shouts hoarsely at them. They race down the dangerous slope. The cart shakes back and forth. Occasionally it looks like it is going to overturn. Lettie holds on for all she is worth. She can now already see with her naked eyes how the man is swinging there on the tree. The four men who had crowded around the tree, the victim’s executioners, have already left, already mounted their horses and rode away quickly.

Lettie hides her face in her hands.

Basson grinds his teeth. He cannot ride fast enough for his liking. He had only seen it for a moment just now, recognized the man there on the tree.

It is Willy MacMaster, a well-known “rough character” of Silver Streams. The horses brake out of the road, so quickly Koos Basson comes to a standstill, close to the drift. He climbs down hastily and shouts.