

Extract from

Barefoot Target

by

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Chapter 1 The Goat Run

"Well, here at the London Olympics it's a glorious evening! Inside our commentary box it's a little muggy, but for the runners in the women's 10,000 metres conditions are perfect for fast times. In fact, conditions are perfect for a possible new world record.

"Now ... I'm keeping an eye on Miriam Aman, who is the youngest ever competitor in this event. With little experience outside her own country, the world will be watching to see how this gutsy girl copes following her terrifying ordeal in getting to these games. In today's papers they are calling her 'The Barefoot Butterflied'.

"It's an impressive line-up: two from the U.S., two Britons, two Russians, three Kenyans, two Ethiopians, an Eritrean, an Algerian, an Australian and a Mexican.

"Yes ...I can just see them coming through the athletes' tunnel and onto the track now.

"Miriam Aman has drawn the outside lane ... it's not the best place for an inexperienced runner, but it must be more than she ever hoped for a couple of weeks ago.

"What a roar! YES! Just listen to this! YES! The crowd's on its feet! This tiny athlete has brought the crowd to its feet. ... I'm not sure whether you can hear me or not ... I'm having to shout above the roar ... she's getting a massively warm welcome ... and she deserves it ... She's waving at the crowd! What a smile!

"... such a wonderful moment ...

" ... now ... the starter's hand is up.

"The runners are settling down. The stadium has gone silent. They are under starter's orders ... it's the moment ...

"... and now, the women's Olympic ten thousand metres final..."

Silence.

The sun slipped into its sky space. Pale beetles, with translucent shells, scuttled everywhere. Heavy, lazy air sat about.

A voice smashed across the silence. It boomed, "Miriam! Miriam get out here. Now!"

Miriam leapt from her bed. She leapt over her sleeping sister, April. She scrambled through the opening of their hut, stumbled over a stone and toppled onto the baked earth. Still half asleep, the first light rays stung her eyes. Wincing, she wiped the back of her hand across both eyes.

"Where are they? Where are they?" thundered the voice.

The voice came from the lone figure standing in the middle of the village compound. The sun was directly behind the person's head and was blinding, so only a shadowy outline hung there, but Miriam knew the voice only too well.

"Where are they?" thundered Rameses Jagger, the village Headman. His arms were windmill blades, swirling in great agitation. "Where are they?" He was blasting like a rocket on take-off. "Where're all my goats?" His eyes were straining to get out of their sockets, bloodshot and bulbous. "Get after them! Get after them!"

Miriam scrambled to her feet. No goats. Miriam ran in and out of all the village huts. Not a single goat to be seen. She ran to the compound gate. It hung there lazily, wide open.

Miriam sprinted. Her bare feet covered the ground. Her head twisted left and right as she ran, eyes scanning the hills. There they were! Moving dots, spaced out across the hill slopes in a wide circle like numbers round a clock face. There they were - Rameses Jagger's goats. She would have to run for her life. Miriam flew over the ground.

It had been two years since her father had died; two years since she had had to leave school and work to feed the family. One day, Rameses Jagger had said to Miriam, "Your father's mind has left us behind; he's gone to another world. Who's going to be the man in your family now?"

Miriam had listened to Rameses Jagger with frightened eyes.

"It has to be *you*, Miriam. There's only you."

She knew exactly what Rameses Jagger had meant. She would have to leave school and start work.

The very first time she had noticed that her father was ill was when he began confusing her with April. Then it got worse. One moment he would be tapping the goats into order with his long stick, and the next he would be wandering off into the hills, looking for angels. Towards the end of his life he had sat in the same place for days, hiding under an old cloth, humming, muttering, and hurling rocks at any one that came near.

Miriam leapt after the goats, over shrubs and hummocks and stones. At last! Diving to the left, sprinting right, she grabbed the nearest goat by its beard, then another. She prodded and poked them into order with her stick, driving them over to the next hill, whistling and collecting goats as she went. Then she drove them into a hillside compound. Her mouth was dry from all the whistling.

Miriam's eyes were glazed because of pushing herself so hard. She stood for five minutes, panting, drawing breath. She could smell herself. She even smelt like a goat. She was stinking already and the sun was hardly up.

Not far away something was moving, like a pencil scribbling over paper. Miriam knew immediately which one it was. The old matriarch nanny moved like that. She was exploring at a steady gait, just rolling along, her udders slopping from side to side. Miriam grabbed, but the nanny blasted out and hissed and spat and put her head down and tried to toss Miriam out of the way. Miriam had barely the energy left to pull her back to the hill compound.

It took ages.

By now Miriam's mouth was parched and sticky. She had had neither food nor water that morning. Her body was drying out like old goat bones.

She herded the goats back to the village.

"Three of my goats are still missing," informed Rameses Jagger, standing taller than ever.

Miriam desperately needed water. "Please..."

But Rameses stood in front of the well with his arms folded. "No."

She took off again.

Even though Miriam scanned the hills three times over, she couldn't see the three missing goats. She squatted on the hill slope contemplating. There was only one place left to look. She headed for the pit, running hard. Maybe there.

The ground immediately dropped away. At last! There they were - a nanny and two kids. But what were they belly-aching about? They weren't feeding, but jumping crazy, like they'd just eaten over-ripe marula fruit and were drunk; except there were no marula trees here. Weird! What was going on?

Miriam skidded down the slope.

She stopped dead.

The bottom of the pit was moving.

Her eyes flashed left and right, trying to make it out ... and then ...

Snakes.

Young boas, blending into the ground, loads of them, were all slithering in and out so that you couldn't tell one from the other, freaking-out the goats; twisting, squirming, curling.

The kids were stamping their small hooves. Miriam knew there was only one way. She shuddered. Then, after stumbling through the wriggling mass, grabbed the nanny goat's beard and wrestled the creature back up the slope.

The kids should be following. Why weren't they following? Instead, they continued leaping and bleating. Then one of them slipped and toppled sideways. The distraught nanny wrenched herself away from Miriam and clattered back into pit. She kicked and stamped with her calloused feet and snakes began flying like squibs.

Miriam legged it down the slope again and snatched up a kid, then back up the slope. She couldn't let it go; if she did it would run back down to its mother.

Miriam cursed!

Streams of perspiration were now running down Miriam's back and legs. Even if she had to run all the way back to the corral, dump the kid, and then return for the other two, she would do it. The kid was

kicking and let out a high pitched bleat – straight into Miriam's ear. Miriam overbalanced and crashed backwards. The kid escaped and galloped back down to its mother.

Miriam cursed and slithered down to the pit again. She tried to grab the nanny goat, but the furious animal put her head down and charged with her bony head, straight into Miriam's stomach.

Thump!

"Ou....!" The air flew out of her lungs.

Miriam couldn't move.

And the nanny charged again.

Thump!

Miriam yelled and crumpled.

Her body began surfing on top of the wriggling mass.

She struggled away on all fours and flopped on the side of the pit to catch her breath. She was getting nowhere. It was a losing battle.

"Hey! I'll help you."

A small voice reached Miriam. She looked towards the top of the pit, shielding her eyes from the stinging sun.

There stood April ... sunny April, who had hobbled all this way on her stump legs.

Miriam brought the kids up, one at a time, for April to hang on to. The nanny goat followed, grumbling and butting Miriam all the way to the top.

"It's good the snakes were so little," said April.

Miriam's stomach was hurting. Her legs were tight and she could no longer feel the ground beneath her bare toes. She had no energy to speak to April.

April came hobbling along behind with the smallest kid.

Whirling about in Miriam's head was the question of how the goats got free. How?

Back at the village compound, Miriam flopped onto the earth, worn silent.

Rameses Jagger set a bucket of sweet water beside her.

Just as Miriam lifted her head from the bucket she saw a flash of orange. What was that? She was sure that she had just seen someone slip behind one of the huts - a swirl of orange on the back of someone. Was it Farah? Farah had a shirt with a swirl on the back. No, it couldn't be. He would be half way to school by now.

Chuckling to himself, Rameses Jagger said to Miriam, "Those long legs take you fast, girl." He kept nodding, looking thoughtful. "Didn't think I'd see you back until sunset; that's how long I thought it would take you." He scratched his unshaven jaw vigorously.

Miriam just nodded.

"Go and eat." Rameses Jagger shoved Miriam forward.

That night Miriam decided to sleep outside with the goats.

She rolled up her sleeping mat and carried it down to the goats' corral. She would sleep right in the middle, hidden from view, surrounded by the animals.

Insects were singing as she curled next to the warmth of an old nanny.

In the first flush of dawn Miriam awoke. There was a sound and it wasn't goats. She raised her head to see above the goats – and saw a grey figure, and a hand with a knife slice into the rope that held the gate.

Miriam grabbed a rock and threw it hard but it missed.

She ran towards the figure.

The figure swung around.

Farah stood with knife in hand. He slowly stretched out his arm, pointing the knife directly at Miriam.

Miriam grabbed a second rock, a bigger rock, and hurled it at Farah. But again he jumped aside. Miriam was so filled with fury that she lost all fear of the knife. She leapt forward and kicked out with her

right leg; the knife spun out of Farah's hand. It landed at Miriam's feet. She snatched it up, but ... what to do next? She pointed it straight at him.

Yes, she knew why he had let the goats out. The previous week he had cornered her and when she had fought him off he had thrown her to the ground and tried to hold her down. But she had known where to kick him.

Miriam took a step nearer to Farah.

Farah's face suddenly changed.

From behind her, a massive crack ripped out, and the single tail of a whip came between herself and Farah.

"You think you can use that knife?" Rameses Jagger shouted angrily.

Miriam dropped it. She spat at Farah, glaring furiously. "He did it," she snapped. "He cut the gate open."

Rameses Jagger paced up and down cracking his whip on the ground. "You did, huh?" He circled Farah. "Why, huh? To get her into trouble, is that it?"

Farah remained tight lipped.

Rameses Jagger started nodding. "Right, you two," he barked, "whatever problem you two have with each other you're gonna sort it out right now. And here's what you're gonna do. Fight."

Miriam's head shot towards Rameses Jagger in disbelief.

"Start!" yelled Rameses.

Miriam went rigid. Would or wouldn't Farah attack her? Miriam didn't dare take her eyes off him just in case he launched an assault. It would please him to do that. She was almost exploding for holding her breath so long.

"Start!" yelled Rameses Jagger again. "Let's see what you can do. All this anger. There'll soon be fire coming out of your nostrils." He was shouting at the top of his voice. "Come on! Come on! Let's put an end to this stupid nonsense between you. I want to see a fight! A good fight sorts things out ... just like wolves, so everyone knows their place."

Rameses Jagger squatted on the ground. "Come on! Cowards! I'm waiting for the entertainment."

Farah looked jumpy. He began belching.

Miriam felt so weak that even the swish of a donkey's tail could've knocked her over.

"Fight!"

"*Rameses!*" There stood the wife of Rameses Jagger with her hands on her hips and a look of fury.

Rameses Jagger scrambled to his feet.

Farah fled.

Miriam tied up the compound gate. She could hear Ramses Jagger getting a scolding.

Crickets were exploding into chirrup-chorus when Miriam went to check on the goats that night.

Rameses Jagger came out to join her. "How're your legs?" he growled.

"Okay."

"You always run like the wind. How'd you do that?"

Miriam just shrugged.

"This morning you had your hands on Farah's knife! What were you planning to do with it?"

Rameses Jagger's eyebrows lifted higher into his forehead. "Were you going to use it?"

"I don't know."

"What is it with you and Farah?"

"Farah hates school. He wants to be a goat boy. He wants my job."

"... and ... "

"He's always bothering me ... trying to grab me ..." She kicked into the dust.

Rameses Jagger chortled. "Maybe he likes you."

"I don't like him."

"You don't look so pretty when you're angry. I don't want you to be looking like that on Friday."

Miriam shot him a suspicious glance.

"On Friday I have a friend coming. I think he's going to be very interested in you."

Oh no! It was happening. They were planning to get her married off! Rameses Jagger wanted her to look pretty for a husband. Why hadn't her mother said anything about this?

"You'll like him. People call him the man with the smiling legs."

Miriam spent the next two days in silent misery. Her mother and April kept talking to her, but Miriam didn't hear what they were saying.

"Are you sick, girl?"

But Miriam didn't reply.

Rameses Jagger's friend had an easy, smiling face. His skin was shiny and his curls sat neatly on his head, glistening with oil. He wore a smart tracksuit that had never seen the dust of a goat corral.

Rameses Jagger said, "This is Moses Olo Apollo."

Miriam started. She clutched her chest with both hands as soon as she heard the name. It couldn't be! Yes, it was the same face. Yes, she had seen this man before, on the television which Rameses Jagger kept switched on at all times in the corner of his warehouse. The television was old and had grainy pictures, but she recognized his face. Always smiling. Moses Olo Apollo had an Olympic gold medal. Someone said he had two, but perhaps he had three. He was the most famous man she had ever heard of, after David Beckham.

"You can run, eh?" Moses Olo Apollo smiled eagerly. "I came here specially to see you run."

"Me?"

He nodded, grinning mischievously.

She hesitated a few seconds, taking in what he had said. She gave an enormous smile. She had got it wrong ... there was no husband.

"You like running, eh?"

Immediately, Miriam's feet sprang into action ...

"Come back!" called out Moses Olo Apollo. "Why are you in such a hurry? I want to run with you."

He looked down at Miriam's bare feet. "Where are your shoes?"

Rameses Jagger laughed. "Shoes? She never bothers."

"Come," said Moses Olo Apollo, and he led the way to his car, opened the boot and showed Miriam a pile of running shoes. "Take your pick. Try them on."

Miriam looked down at the fat, black running shoes on the end of her legs. It felt like balancing on a rock. She sneered down at her feet, but Moses Olo Apollo made a suggestion. "Please try running in them ... just try. If you don't like them, then you can throw them off."

Miriam ran ahead. Moses Olo Apollo was just one step behind her. Then Moses Olo Apollo edged forward, so Miriam increased her pace. Every time Miriam managed to up her pace Moses Olo Apollo crept forward a little more.

Because the shoes made her run awkwardly, they were holding her back. They were keeping her ankles stiff and clamping her toes. If Moses Olo Apollo wanted to see her run she would have to do it without shoes. She kicked them off.

The man was running easily, just gliding up the hill slopes - smooth like a cheetah. Miriam caught him up.

Moses Olo Apollo stopped. "Good! Now, take me over those hills... right over there. Show me what kind of a mountain goat you are."

Along winding goat paths, down gulleys, across moving scree, zigzagging and climbing up boulder strewn slopes, Miriam felt light as a feather.

Rameses Jagger and Miriam's mother stood waiting.

"Well? How did she do?" asked Rameses Jagger, impatiently.

"You were right. This girl can run!" He turned to Miriam. "You know, every year we have a running competition up in Mokolee. Runners come from all over the country to take part: fat, thin, old and young. You must come."

"But I can't, I have the goats to look after... "

"Someone else can look after the goats," said Moses Olo Apollo.

Miriam glanced over at Rameses Jagger, embarrassed. She needed his permission. She didn't know how to answer.

"It was my old friend Rameses who *ordered* me to come and see you. He told me to get down here at once, because I have a girl here who's a barefoot flyer."