Last Gangster of the Old School

A Novel

Mia Arderne

ARDMIA001

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PART 1

STUNTMAN DEVESH

INTERPOL’S MOST WANTED PERSONS:

NAME: ‘STUNTMAN DEVESH’

GENDER: MALE

AGE: 35

HEIGHT: 1,91 m

HAIR COLOUR: BLACK

CRIME: THEFT, FRAUD

CRIME CIRCUMSTANCES:

IT IS ALLEGED THAT THE ACCUSED IS A STUNT-DRIVER FOR HIGH STAKES INSURANCE FRAUD SCHEMES AND CROSS-BORDER DIAMOND SMUGGLING.

Chapter One

Smile on his dial, tar in his lungs and shoulders in surrender. That was how Devesh Desai greeted each day’s arrival. By sunrise, he was awake, standing
ready for the day’s abuse. He held his tongue tight between his teeth and let the curses drip into the corners of his mouth.

Devesh, the Abandoned. Devesh, the Ill-fated. Devesh, of all reckless abandon, dangling his life on his sleeve, was tired. Once a black sheep, always a black sheep. And fuck the white sheep. You can’t see the shit in my wool, thought Devesh.

He knew one thing. There was one thing that kept him fired-up and hard. A single nugget of thrill-seeker’s wisdom:

We live based on the huge assumption that we’ll be alive tomorrow. And this is a mistake.

Devesh poured the coffee down his throat and read the obituaries. Scanning through the names of the recently dead always had a calming effect on Devesh.

Dorothy Oliviera dies at 89, adoption advocate raised 19 children.

Dr. D Koopman, influential surgeon general dies at 96.

President Hugo Chavez, hero to Venezuela’s poor, is dead.

He brushed his fingertips over the wide scar on his face and tried to ignore the beeping of his Nokia Classic. His second phone. The dirty phone. Only one man ever called him on that phone. And Devesh would finish his cigarette before he touched that phone. The dirty phone frustrated him. He wished he didn’t need it as much as he did. He wished to crack the screen under his heel and toss it into his big black bin. The Nokia Classic beeped again. He edged his scabbing hand towards his pocket and stilled the vibration of the beeping portal that dictated his life. Leave me alone. I flourish when left alone.
The Boss. The Boss. The Boss. He crushed the cigarette in his ashtray and took the dirty phone out his pocket. The message was an address:

*Mr R. Towfie. 17 Queens Road, Constantia. Collection of a red Mustang.*

A red Mustang? Now this could be worthwhile. He stepped into the shower. The hot water massaged his bruises and softened his scabs. Devesh hulked nearly two meters tall barefoot; his head almost touched the showerhead. Steam and warm water is the refuge of the injured. Devesh had always wanted to shower and smoke at the same time. Better yet, shower, smoke and drink his coffee at the same time. Steam, caffeine and nicotine simultaneously enjoyed – wouldn’t that be a treat.

Clean and shaven, he drove on a street of Saturday drivers. Saturday drivers were always the most annoying because of the way Saturday drivers cruised. It made Devesh edgy the way Saturday drivers cruised, one behind the other, in their spiralling ant-line sinking deeper into the sand, ever so slowly, making him crawl.

Devesh arrived in the suburbs of Constantia at a lovely house. Big, velvety green lawn. Letterbox with number 17 nailed onto it in gold-painted metal. Wide windows. Wide shutters. White security gate. *What a wholesome patch of suburban bliss,* thought Devesh, looking at the luscious lives of the decent people. Why did this Mr Towfie need his services? Behind the white security gate, was the 2011 Ford Mustang Premium Coupe blushing scarlet in its prime, bought cash and insured. Devesh itched to get his hands on it. He pressed the button on the security gate and looked into the little camera surveying him. He smiled and folded his hands neatly at his balls.

*Hi, I’m Devesh and I’ll be your stuntman for the day.*
‘Devesh Desai here to see Mr Towfie.’

The gate slid open, slowly, mechanically. Classy. The convenience that comes with legitimate money. A short, well-dressed man wearing an orange tie opened the front door. Mr Towfie’s tie looked like a long orange tongue. A long orange tongue lapping at Mr Towfie’s chest, about to coil itself around Mr Towfie’s neck and throttle him to death. Any minute now.

Devesh had a pronounced dislike of ties. They made him uneasy. Their decency was too imposing. They struck a cord that set off an avalanche of irritation in his skull. What an eyesore.

_Hi Mr Towfie, I am an eating, shitting, fucking, spitting, licking, sucking, pissing, drinking, sweating, swearing, smoking, thieving, crying living human being. And I’m ok with that. And if you and your long orange tongue-tie aren’t ok with the fact you are exactly that too. You need help. Not me._

The man looked like he’d breathed too much conditioned air in his lifetime. The tallest hair on Mr Towfie’s head did not make the height of Devesh’s nipple. He stooped to shake his hand, staring at the orange tie, wary of getting too close to it.

Mr Towfie’s house was spotless, complete with ornamentation, tasteful art, granite surfaces and expensive toys. What a waste of cash. This man had kids and a wife. Devesh tried to guess what had gone wrong. A soured business deal, blackmail, lawsuit? The empty television stand in Mr Towfie’s polished lounge spoke of debt. The extension cords still lay loose on the surface. Gambler?

The orange tongue curled itself around the Mustang’s keys and extended them to Devesh who closed the set of keys in his big palm, enjoying the feel of the metal in
his hand. A mournful look deepened the creases between Mr Towfie’s brows and the long orange tongue-tie shrivelled up at the thought of losing its Mustang.

Devesh nodded at him. *I’ll take good care of her, Mr Towfie.* The orange tie remained in the doorway as Devesh drove away in the blushing Mustang Coupe. Devesh resisted the urge to rev the V8 as he pulled away. He was not a disrespectful person. He was not a man without courtesy. He would rev the car later. He watched the orange tongue tighten around Mr Towfie’s balls in the rear-view mirror as the speedometer climbed:

*Yes, Mr Towfie, I am the writhing dregs clinging to the soles of your feet, feeding off the dirt accumulated as you walk. I see you, all of you. And I can honestly come to you now, all bullshit aside and say: Your tie is too orange. Your game is trash. And I’ve come to sweep it all up.*

Once he reached the N1 highway, the smile poured into his cheeks and dripped down his chin. He watched the needle move in a state of beatific calm. Devesh was a monk behind the wheel. Devesh was a thug behind the wheel. Devesh was a symphony conductor of pistons. He swerved in and out of the fast lane, overtaking and cutting through traffic, choosing his best line through each corner. If life hadn’t dealt him such a shit hand, he would’ve been an F1 rockstar by now, travelling at un-human speeds, drowning in trophies, pussy and champagne. *Eating life’s caviar without a fork and drinking life’s vintage wine from a plastic straw.*

The red Mustang blazed into the sprawling wine farms of Durbanville Hills. Rolling fields stretched out on either side of a long canopied road snaking through the endless vines. A tranquil, sunny nesting place to the rich white suburban Afrikaans. Devesh was alone. *How I flourish when left alone.*
Devesh took extra care to pollute the silence with the Mustang’s roar. He pulled back the reigns, steered the car up each hill’s rise and stormed down each steep dropping road. He sped around each bend, circling each hill freely until he approached the tallest one with the most spectacular view.

Here, he stopped at the foot of the hill and let the car idle, marvelling at the spill of green in the valley before him. He lit a Camel and smoked it to the filter. The nicotine seeped into the upholstery of the car’s interior yet unmarred by the stench of cigarette smoke. Devesh tossed the filter out the window, exhaled slowly and began the climb in fourth to maximize power.

He upped the velocity as he climbed to compensate for the incline of the peak. With each inch that Devesh climbed, he knew there was something pivotal left in him. As he mounted the hill, feeling the pending drop in his back, he knew it. He had always known it was still there. Deep down there, wavering. A flicker of a giant. *There may be love left here if you listen at the precise frequency, under the right light level, with an exacting ear.*

He reached the optimum speed possible and held it constant, knuckles blue on the leather wheel, staring at the gaping valley ahead saturated in light. With fevered eyes, he saw the drop and he knew he would survive. He *had* to survive. *Stuntman Devesh will not die in obscurity.*

Locking the wheel, Devesh swung the Mustang off the road and sailed off the edge. The car soared for a soundless, weightless eternity in the still Durbanville air. Watching his glorious descent into the lush green blur, Devesh breathed. A very short, very hitched exhalation. *Does anyone still believe that, if you just breathe slowly, everything will be okay?*
As the car sunk into a valley of vines below, Devesh took his hands off the wheel and rested his bulging inked arms behind his head. The view beneath him was nothing shy of an abyss. Oblivion yawned below. Bright and beckoning. And even as Devesh’s body stiffened, repelling the prospect, his spirit was already there.

Devesh lived his life based on one huge assumption that he would not be alive tomorrow.

The wheels crushed into the vines, the Mustang crunched the branches in its powerful jaws and the green below spilled into the windows. The side impact airbags burst their starchy cushions into his face and chest before the pressure propelled him up and over them through the shattered windscreen. The impact sent Devesh toppling down the hill like a figurine.

Devesh emerged crawling and wounded from the wreck seconds later, covered in leaves and dirt. Eyes wide, mouth full of blood, his smile a crescent moon.
Chapter Two

Bevan, the tow-truck driver, had an oval-shaped scar on his skull where his hair had never grown back. It looked like an off-centre bald patch. He lit two cigarettes and passed one to Devesh. Breathless, Devesh muttered his thanks from the passenger’s seat and dragged the smoke so deep into his black lungs he could feel it burning in his bruised rib. He breathed into the pain and let it take hold of him. He exhaled as his limbs relaxed into the pang. He was a puddle of mush in the passenger’s seat, staring at Bevan’s hairless oval-shaped scar. That oval scar had always set Devesh at ease. Bevan was a calm and measured driver, as most truck drivers are. Devesh gazed into the oval as it drove slowly and steadily over the bumps, sympathetic to Devesh’s whiplash.

When they arrived at the Boss’s yard, it was full and loud. But Devesh’s eardrums were shattered and the ringing in his temples overpowered the rough laughter erupting from many alcohol-soaked bellies. He could still hear the massive sound of the Mustang hitting the ground below. The hairless oval took him by the waist and helped him out of his seat. It was payday. The two men picked their way through a labyrinth of stripped car parts inside the illegal establishment. The regulars held glasses of brandy and reclined on loose car seats scattered in the yard. When the oval let go of Devesh’s waist and started walking away, Devesh’s head spun. He needed to sit down. He took his place at the bar surrounded by the familiar furniture of carburettors, broken fenders and shattered glass.

Devesh watched the oval scar as it called the Boss to come and evaluate the damage and weigh up the valuable parts of the American classic before the insurance
assessor was called in. Devesh sat clutching his collarbone, trying to spot at least one hair sprouting from Bevan’s oval scar, but he couldn’t. The barman brought him a brandy. With a trembling hand, Devesh poured the syrup down his throat and felt it warm his lacerated skin. He had begun to hate this place.

The Boss’s shiny scalp appeared in the crowd – unlike Bevan’s oval patch of baldness, the Boss was not scarred or hairless in patches. His entire head was bare and shiny. The Boss was bald with intent. And, walking next to the Boss’s shiny scalp was the orange tongue. The orange tongue looked less shrivelled up now as he analysed his wrecked Mustang in the driveway. The car was totalled. Devesh had done his job well. The Boss’s shiny scalp smiled at him, indicating that Devesh would have his attention in a second. Patiently, Devesh sipped his brandy and waited for his compensation. I did not die in obscurity. He breathed slowly, knowing everything was okay. More than okay. Everything’s fucking aces. The brandy slid down his throat.

The police knew about the yard. They checked it frequently. But the Boss was one meticulous man. That much Devesh had come to know over the years. He had his property secured under layers of reinforced double-steeled gates. He handled the police officers with decorum every time. The Boss was well rehearsed in their procedures. And, as much as Devesh had come to hate the yard, he knew it was safe from the cops. The Boss blinded them all with the sheen of his scalp. It was always the same routine:

Officer stands at the door.

Boss struggles to find his keys.
Employees quickly hide the drugs.

Suddenly, the Boss remembers where his keys are.

Employees quickly hide the illicit plasmas.

Boss goes to fetch his keys.

Employees quickly hide the jewellery.

Boss smiles and says, ‘Please come in, Officers.’

Officers come in, reeling from the sheen of Boss’s shiny head, and everything’s fucking aces.

The Boss’s personal office was something of a phenomenon. Secured with triple-steeled gates, three Alsatians and a wall of screens corresponding to fifteen cameras fitted in different corners of his property. The Boss always knew the police were coming before they entered his street. There was one camera as you come in, one as you reach the second gate, three at the bar, two inside the walk-in freezer complete with illegally sold booze, one in the stranded caravan of junkies, one at the door before the Boss’s personal office, three surrounding his adjacent house, two surveying the customers in the yard and one in the outside toilet. And those were only the cameras of which Devesh was aware. He was certain there were more.

Now, Devesh watched the Boss’s potbelly jiggle as he spoke to the long orange tie. He assured the orange tie that everything was under control. Insurance would pay out and the amount would be split between them. Devesh would get his cut as well. The orange tongue lapped up the Boss’s words, licking and coiling itself gratefully around the Boss’s shiny scalp. Devesh sipped his second brandy in silence.
The drink was finally taking the edge off the pain. Devesh wasn’t much of a drinker, but brandy was ideal after a crash.

The thick gold chain on the Boss’s chest heaved with his fat as he laughed. The man was putting on weight as he aged. Devesh had always imagined his age would mellow him, detract from the gravitas of the Boss. But it only compounded it. His weight seemed to anchor his menace. The ripples of raucous belly laughter solidified his authority. His head shone all the brighter when things were going well. But Devesh knew that the Boss was losing his edge, even as he saw the bulge in his pocket. The Desert Eagle pistol.

Devesh saw Bevan’s hairless oval walking back his way and Bevan took a seat next to Devesh. They both stared at the Boss’s head.

‘Man’s making money like dust,’ Devesh remarked, peering inside the house. There were tiles and mirrors everywhere. A R145 000 fridge. Fridge. The Boss owned another three houses on the same street. Eventually, he would own the whole street. Bevan nodded,

‘Pulled out a Hummer for himself the other day,’ said Bevan, stroking his hairless scar, ‘Paid for it cash.’

‘I see he slapped on a pair of 22’s,’ Devesh looked at the Hummer in the corner of the yard. Horrific thing it was. Clunky. Classless, god-awful vehicle.

‘Paid for them cash too,’ said the oval.

‘Chrome 22’s,’ Devesh added, tilting his aching neck to get a better look at the wheels on the monstrosity.

‘Driven in specially from Nelspruit.’
‘Musta cost him about six and a half for the rims alone.’

‘All cash,’ the oval downed his drink.

The throb in Devesh’s ribs pounded through the brandy. He wondered if it was internal bleeding. He had no medical aid and he wasn’t about to waste his pay on hospital bills. He should’ve worn more padding. He’ll remember next time.

The Boss gestured for Devesh to follow him. Devesh left the comfort of Bevan’s oval scar and followed the Boss’s shiny scalp into his office. His chain was thick enough to kill someone with one whack. The Boss didn’t even need the gun bulging in his pocket. Devesh had seen him do it: take the chain off his neck, slide it over his scalp and slam the thick gold whip across a man’s head, into his temple, dead.

The Boss’s loyal junkies were servants to his every whim. They moved the crates, toolboxes and fenders out of the Boss’s path to make way for him to roll in on his tricked out wheelchair. He rolled along as Devesh followed him into a tiny transit room behind the bar. The room smelt of metal. Car parts hung like corpses from the ceiling. He walked past them into the Boss’s personal office followed by three Alsatians and an entourage of junkies until the Boss shut his triple-steeled gate and told everyone, except for Devesh, to fuck off.

The opulence inside the Boss’s personal office jarred with the yard outside. The wooden floor was polished to a sheen. Devesh watched the Boss wheeling himself behind his mahogany desk where he angled his wheelchair towards a wall covered in screens that looked out on every inch of his establishment. Three crystal
decanters stood elegantly on the table, one of scotch, one of port and one of cognac. Behind the decanters was a solid block of stacked cash.

Above the Boss’s shiny head was a chandelier the size of an umbrella, its crystal teardrops hung above the decanters. Locked up in the glass cabinet behind him were rows of guns, some modern, others dating back to the First World War, neatly placed next to each other at precise intervals on shelves. The Boss leaned back in his wheelchair, framed by the cabinet of guns, and crossed his arms on his belly. His voice dripped with slime as it emerged from a well of phlegm.

‘How’s the family?’

Devesh stared at his double-chin and nodded although he hadn’t seen a single relative in years,

‘All very well.’

‘Good,’ came the tsunami of phlegm, ‘May I pour for you?’

One does not refuse a drink from the Boss. Devesh nodded and the Boss poured him a cognac, knowing that Devesh despised both whiskey and wine. He passed Devesh a small rounded glass with a curved lip that pronounced the meniscus of the R2000 oak-matured blend. The Boss only bought the best alcohol.

Devesh took the drink and the Boss didn’t say another word. He whistled over two of his junkie servants from outside to pack the stacks of money on his desk into two sling bags. The Boss poured himself a scotch and watched them fill the bags. Devesh didn’t look at the money as they packed it. He did not want it to appear that he was counting it. Always take the word of the Boss.
Devesh stared into the screen which displayed a dimly lit caravan housing a few infected-looking men that stared into the ether in silence. The junkies. The Boss kept them under constant surveillance. Junkies should be kept under constant surveillance. For a second, Devesh thought he saw his cousin on the screen among the emaciated addicts. But it wasn’t him. One of them was fucking a prostitute against the wall. Devesh turned away from the screen and then looked at it again. The caravan had deteriorated since Devesh had been inside it over eight years ago. The stained mattresses underneath the arses of the junkies had grown more holes in the fabric where the stuffing was bursting out. The Boss had a rule about his junkies: they were to consume only in the safety of the yard. It kept things contained. He had even provided privacy for them by the tattered makeshift curtains of the caravan.

Many a night, in Devesh’s earlier years, he had carried his cousin out of that caravan, torso over his shoulder, vomit streaming down his back as he pulled that bastard piece of shit, Junaid, away from the bulb and straw. Junaid Jafda. His cousin wouldn’t be able to sleep for days. Then he’d inevitably crash on that broken mattress for the same number of days he’d been wired. There were times Devesh had been convinced Junaid was dead as he lay there, immovable. The Boss had eventually kicked his cousin out the yard permanently as Junaid refused to leave. Devesh never saw Junaid anymore.

Now that the Boss was in a wheelchair, his head’s shininess had become more prominent as one could see the scalp in its fuller glory. Devesh had to fight the urge to stare at it. He wondered how long the Boss would be confined to the wheelchair. He didn’t want to ask if the damage was permanent. The Boss was getting old and, sooner or later, a younger, fitter equally ruthless motherfucker with a similar aptitude for brutality would take over. The wheelchair situation was not helping his cause.
The Boss slid the two bags of cash to Devesh across the mahogany table. Devesh stood up to take one in each hand. As the weight transferred to his arms, Devesh stifled a pained cry. The bag of cash pulled on his fresh shoulder injury and tugged on the torn ligaments of his collarbone. He wanted to drop it. Instead, he transferred both bags to his other arm and thanked the Boss.

Together, they left the office back through the transit room with Devesh maintaining the speed of the Boss’s wheelchair. He ducked to avoid walking into the fender hanging from the ceiling. The entourage of Alsatians and junkies followed the Boss as he rolled back into the yard. Devesh had seen those dogs in action. Mercenaries. He’d seen them rip a man apart before his eyes. At the click of the Boss’s fat fingers, a different limb would find its way into each dog’s snout. The Boss regularly starved them. They were ready to be unleashed on cue.

Devesh glanced at the Boss’s new chrome rims again as he walked out. He couldn’t wait to get home. He passed the red Mustang he had just wrecked and wondered how much the orange tie would get from the insurance company in relation to his cut. Always a pity to wreck such a beautiful vehicle. He didn’t mind destroying the Nissans and Toyotas, but the American classics always felt like a waste. Poor orange tongue must have been desperate.

Usually, Devesh drove the cars into a tree or a barrier. Always avoid contact with another vehicle. That just raised problems with the insurance and the police. The fewer people involved, the better. This time he’d chosen a hill because a beautiful car deserved a dignified death. But Devesh had underestimated the whiplash. It was worse this time. Or maybe he was just getting old. He got into his Polo – driven to the yard for him by the oval scar – and drove home.
A single bare light-bulb dangled above Devesh’s head of jet-black hair. Blood trickled lightly down one ear and onto his black stubble. The bulb’s glare illuminated towering stacks of cash spread out on his long wooden table. Cigarette smoke floated like smog above the money. Devesh sat in a vest with his arms, tattooed from wrist to shoulder, resting on the table between the piles of cash.

His forearms were grazed deep enough to form gaps in the ink of the tattooed serpent on his skin. He would have to touch up on his ink. Before he began counting the money, Devesh took out his tattoo machine. Thin needles for the lines, thick needles for the shading. He pierced the top layer of skin on his arm and etched in the gaps in the design, dropping the ink into the missing places on his arm. His left elbow ached as he stretched his arm out to finish up the fractured serpent tattoo. It was split in two after the crash.

When he was done, he grabbed a thick brick of R200 notes from the large heap that hadn’t been counted. His fingers were seared from scraping the tar. They burned as he bundled a bunch of five R200 notes together. He cracked his knuckles one by one and sealed the cash in a paperclip. One grand.

His other bicep, wrapped in the design of an inked V8 engine, created the illusion that there were no veins under his skin, but rather pipes, levers and cylinders. He’d had done it himself with the help of a mirror. He didn’t trust another person permanently inking his skin. He stretched his arm out again to reach for the lighter on
the far side of the table. The movement sent a shooting pain into his shoulder as he
brought a cigarette to his scowling lips. The tar hit his blackened lungs and the
nicotine fired his brain like a car starting in extreme cold weather. He adjusted his
position to ease his bruised hip.

With a hand covered in cuts, he bundled together ten similar piles of cash,
placing each one above the previous. He ran his hand through his matted black hair
and felt that it was full of tiny shards of glass.

Drawn on the soft skin between Devesh’s first two fingers was a tiny tattoo
of a naked woman, her legs spread onto his palm as if she was perched on his hand.
The tattoo resembled a woman he once knew.

Ten paper-clipped piles of cash form a brick. One elastic band binds the
brick, totalling ten grand. The cigarette ash hit the floor and his lungs released their
poison. A string of seven aces in red ink on his wrist shone garish and synthetic under
the bulb. He stretched out a stiff leg and piled up the bricks. Ten bricks constitute a
stack, totalling a hundred grand.

Again, he clicked each knuckle in turn, ran his thumb over the spread-
legged woman between his fingers and stretched out his sliced up hand. He proceeded
to count ten stacks of bricked cash. He placed each stack above the previous. Ten
stacks constitute a tower. And one tower is a million.

Pile (paperclip)  = 1 Grand
Brick (elastic band)  = 10 Grand
Stack  = 100 Grand
Junaid had taught him how to count cash. Great method. Devesh had finished counting for the night. He cleared the stacks of money off the table and packed them into his fireproof safe next to his unlicensed Taurus 9mm. With a hard flick of the palm, he shut the metal door and bolted it, entering in the security code. He switched off the bare light bulb and limped off to bed with a throbbing pain in his side.

He could still feel the impact in his bones of the Mustang hitting the ground. Usually, he would open the door of the car and roll out before the crash. But the drop hadn’t allowed for it. The sound of the windscreen smashing into the vines was still ringing loudly in his ears. Perfectly timed. He was almost unscathed, Devesh smiled. He eased himself onto the soft mattress as towering R200 notes flashed before his eyelids. It had been a successful day. Tomorrow would be another.
Swallowing three painkillers with a second cup of coffee steaming in his hand, Devesh read the obituaries. Martin Roland, Roland & Bester Advertising, CEO, 1967-2013. He carefully put on yesterday’s jeans, trying not to push too hard on any bruises. He threw a white wife-beater over his shoulders. Joseph S Thorpe, Chinatown Developer, entrepreneur and civic leader, 1943-2013. He didn’t bother with cologne. No one ever got close enough to Devesh for him to make the effort. Brigadier Henry Malan, died in service of the SAPS, 1962-2013.

Devesh was a man without a woman. And a man without a woman provides for a car. In Devesh’s case, a Pontiac Firebird. He limped to his garage where the love of his life lay waiting for his attention. He looked her in the eye, Well, hello Beautiful. The muted headlights stared daggers back at him, wanton and moaning. Why have you neglected me? she scowled.

I’ll take care of you later, love. The stacks of piling cash still crowded his mind. He gazed at her contours. I’ll spend it all on you. R8000 for each piston. R16 000 for the Nitrous Oxide. That’s 400 horse power at the touch of a button. Plus 400 horse power from the engine itself.

That’s 800 horse power for my lady. New hand-threaded upholstery to adorn her. And we’ll have dinner together on Signal Hill and watch the stars over the city. When I’m done with her, she’ll be worth R800 000 to R1.5 mil. Easily. But it doesn’t matter. I will never part with her. I will die in her arms of old age or from not tightening her wheel-nuts properly. We will be eternal.
The Pontiac smiled her shining metallic smile, her plump bumper-bottom lip looked inviting and Devesh burnt to make her scream. *All in good time.* He sat on a loose tyre that served as a couch to ease his sore bones and admired her gleaming in the sun as he soaked his thoughts in caffeine.

*One day, baby, I'll take out that cigar we've been saving in your ashtray. And I'll get inside you and we'll light that fatty as we reverse out of this shithole and disappear into the horizon. We'll watch this dump smoulder in your rear-view and be gone forever.*

Devesh dusted off his sign that advertised the services of his unregistered panel-beating (and everything in between) company. *Auto Repair & Tuning* had been giving SARS the slip for close on five years now. He moved the mobile sign to the front of his garage:

Mechanical Restoration

Upholstery Work

Specialist Tuning

Aesthetic Enhancements

Performance Modifications

Body Customisation

Devesh hadn’t been making enough money from the chop shop. He wondered if he should reopen his tattoo parlour. But he was reluctant. The tattoo parlour was a people’s business and he didn’t feel up to the interaction. Devesh had grown
accustomed to isolation and he wasn’t about to give it up that easily. He felt at home around vehicles.

He lifted up the front wheels of the Pontiac with a lever pump until she was a little higher off the ground than a ruler. When jacking up a car, Devesh knew, he was supposed to put in the stands underneath for safety and take the jack out before working beneath the body. But he never did. Devesh worked under his vehicles propped up by only a jack – and that was it. He never went through the trouble of putting stands underneath a car. He trusted his cars.

Her wheels stood off the ground like a horse in mid-heel. Devesh reclined on his creeper, a low-wheeled mechanism with a little head pillow used to roll smoothly under the car. The creeper was a dull shade of blue faded from years of acidic sweat and oil. He slid underneath her and removed her under-body. He always enjoyed having her on top of him. He got to work on her oil-filter.

Devesh was covered in the sticky black fluids of his love when a car swerved up to his driveway and screeched to a halt, sparking up yesterday’s headache. He knew it was a woman driver. And he knew exactly which maniacal female it was too. Lucille. His neck hurt through the painkillers as he slid out from underneath the Pontiac. Devesh shook his head and a mass of black strands covered in oil fell onto his face. Is it necessary to screech like that?

He knew it was a BMW before he looked up. The low growl of the easy modern engine. Definitely a three series. The door swung open and a lady stepped elegantly out of the car in a flowing blouse and a skirt that clung to her thighs. Devesh’s eyes remained fixed on the BMW now standing in his driveway. An M3. What a useless piece of German ergonomics. The M3 Convertible. Created specially
for men who want to look richer than they actually are. Devesh spat on the ground. The car’s existence offended him.

The woman flicked her hair as she walked up to the driveway. Lucille Lockhart. Her sunglasses reflected the light. Her cheeks looked like porcelain. Devesh’s eyes scanned the car’s interior. *Not a bad aesthetic if you wanna drive a piece of shit.* The woman’s skirt rode up her thigh as she walked towards him. Devesh’s gaze dropped down to survey the rims. When he thought about the things he could do to that vehicle… Lower the springs, tint the windows, give it a bigger turbo and another exhaust – we might just have a passable vehicle at the end of the day… The woman looked sleek in the scorching heat. The air-con must be in peak condition. All the new BMW’s came standard with a built-in superiority complex flowing through their micro-filters.

Devesh cleared his throat and wiped his hands on his jeans, ready to greet her. The lady walked right past him and hoisted herself up onto the bonnet of his beloved Pontiac. Devesh’s heart raced, he felt a strong urge to stop her from sitting on his car. He tensed up, frustrated by her brash manner. He had never quite gotten used to Lucille’s abrasiveness. But he could see the lower half of her perky arse as her skirt hitched up against the Pontiac. Her lingerie was black, like the BMW M3 she had parked in his driveway. She lowered herself down into a classy recline on the Pontiac’s bonnet, one knee lifted into a triangle, one stiletto resting on the Pontiac’s brand new paint job.

He prayed she wouldn’t scratch the car with her heel, but he didn’t say anything. Her other leg hung over the number plate. She lit a cigarette as she lay down and blew the smoke up into the sky. Her hair rested in a halo on the car and her
hand stroked the metal and clutched the curves sliding up to the windscreen. This was Devesh’s version of lesbianism. His gaze floated past her red lips to his smiling Pontiac and then back to her lips. She sucked on her cigarette,

‘I have a car for you.’ Lucille Lockhart’s voice was a choir of whispering angels.

Devesh stretched out his hands and crunched all ten knuckles in one go,

‘How long ago did you steal it?’

‘Last night.’

He scanned the woman from her stylish hair to her high heels. Hustler bitch. Apart from the Boss’s vast and colourful collection of prostitutes, she was his only female employee. A thief par excellence.

No one expects to be robbed by a white girl.

Devesh wiped the sweat off his face, smudging an oil stain across his cheek into the dent of his old scar. He scratched his head and took out a box of Camel Filters while fiddling in his pocket for a lighter. He was still on edge as he watched Lucille lying on his Pontiac. He liked her. But he liked his car more. When he found the lighter, he tried to light his smoke but the lighter was out of gas. He walked to the Pontiac and looked down at the woman lying on his car. Her hand appeared at his mouth with a flame.

‘You want cash or gems for the BM?’ he asked her.

‘Gems are always lighter,’ she said.
Devesh reluctantly turned away from his car and fetched his client book from inside to write down the details of Lucille and her new shitty BMW. He may not be a legitimate businessman, but he kept his records updated. Lucille’s name appeared in the book more than once. She was still lying on his car with her hands tucked under her head when Devesh walked back outside with his client book. He tried to find the most courteous words to get her off his car, but he could see the slant of her hips exposed by her silk shirt and all he could manage to say was,

‘Nice blouse.’

Lucille smiled at the compliment,

‘Stole it off a girl whose ribs stuck so far out her chest, I was tempted to pack them into a Spur takeaway box and eat them with some barbeque sauce.’

Devesh stared at her. Lucille was one fucked-up brand of female.

‘She didn’t know the meaning of aplomb so I wrote her off as asinine and robbed her blind. Also, I’m not wild about blondes. They tend to think the fucking light shines out their hair.’

The ash from her cigarette dropped onto the bonnet. Devesh cringed. He didn’t know the meaning of aplomb either, but he didn’t want to appear stupid to Lucille so he left it,

‘You robbed a blonde girl?’

‘Coloured girl who dyed her curls. Bottle-blonde. I couldn’t resist.’

‘You’re very cheery today,’ said Devesh, fixated on the spot of ash on his car. He believed all cheery people to be disingenuous.
‘It’s a lovely day.’ Lucille said, stroking her thigh. What was she doing? He had work to do. He wished she would get off his Pontiac.

‘You want a lift home? I wanna be back before the game starts.’

‘What game?’

‘Arsenal versus Liverpool.’

Lucille sighed as she blew out plumes of smoke,

‘Guys watch football because they feel smart saying confederations, don’t they? That must be it.’

‘Yip, that’s it.’

Lucille lifted herself off the car to the great relief of Devesh. Beyond the Pontiac was a workshop full of muscle cars. A finned Plymouth Superbird, ’59 Cadillac Eldorado, Mustang Shelby, 1960 Plymouth Fury, 1996 Viper, 1957 Chevy Bel Air Convertible and a ’56 Ford Thunderbird.

Devesh spat in the eye of the Greenpeace hippies telling him to get a Prius. None of his cars were roadworthy or licensed except for the Polo. He graciously opened the passenger door for Lucille. There was no air-con and no radio. Devesh rolled down the window so Lucille would have fresh air as he drove her to Parow.

‘You’re still such an aggressive driver,’ he said to her as they sped past a Mercedes C200. Every time Devesh saw someone driving a Mercedes C200, he wanted to syphon their petrol into his Polo. He needed it more than them.

‘What do you mean I’m an aggressive driver?’ Lucille asked.
‘Way you screeched into my driveway. It’s not good for the car. Learn to relax. Be a Barry White-style porn-star driver. That’s how you drive an expensive car.’

Devesh demonstrated,

‘One hand on the wheel, an elbow out the window and an entjie in your hand. Smoothly.’

He assumed the position. Lucille smirked. He pulled up at her house, trying not to stare at her breasts so clearly outlined through her blouse.

‘I’ll pick you up tomorrow then and we’ll get the gems.’

Lucille hesitated to leave the Polo. For an instant, she looked vulnerable, expecting something from him. Devesh didn’t know what. He took her face in the palm of his oil-stained hand and kissed her on the cheek. She left the car. Devesh drove away with a smile plastered on his face.

He stopped at a scrapyard and picked up a rolled, legally written-off M3 he could use to replace the important parts of the stolen BMW. It wasn’t difficult to find. The BMW M3 was a popular car. It represented a particular brand of generic wealth.

He got to work immediately on legalizing the car in his garage, with his big LCD screen playing the Arsenal game in his workshop. He parked both the legal (scrapyard) M3 and the illegal (stolen) M3 in his garage and considered the process ahead. Lucille’s perfume was still on his hand. Distracting. He wiped it off on his jeans.

The 2005 M3 Convertible was an older model, which meant there was no data-dot system on it. The car was not as easy to track as the newer models. It was
possible to transform and he could do all the work himself. Again, he wiped the perfume off on his jeans. Focus. Tear your mind off that smouldering distraction and work.

1. Swop the engine if it’s still salvageable.
2. Give it a legal engine number.
4. Replace all six chassis numbers.
5. Cut and switch the plates to match the new engine number.
6. Cut and switch the firewall to legalize the tag underneath the bonnet.
8. Window tints.
9. Add a performance chip and a free-flow exhaust for speed across the border.

The sixth step was the hardest part. Cutting and welding a firewall was a gruelling process. Intensive manual labour. He wiped his hand on his jeans a third time. But with new matching, legal numbers, no one will recognise it as a stolen car.

Devesh didn’t feel like the task, but he didn’t want to disappoint Lucille. He would much rather be working on his Pontiac. So he would make quick work of the BMW. Transfer the number plate and the license disk straight from the scrapyard M3 and transform the jail-sentence parked in his garage into a legitimate vehicle, ready to take its place on the black market.
Arsenal was losing and Devesh was in the middle of switching the engine when he heard his neighbour pull up in the driveway next door. *Shit. Has so much time already passed?* Devesh locked up the workshop quickly, hiding the stolen BMW behind lock, key and security code. He wiped the oil off on his jeans and poured himself a brandy. Best to appear absolutely calm. Then he walked outside to greet his neighbour who had just stepped out of his police Mazda. Devesh glanced at his garage. The stolen BM was as good as invisible in his garage. His neighbour had come home early. Devesh would have to learn to be more careful. He hadn’t even locked the door while he was working.

Sgt Lyle Bekink walked up the driveway in uniform. Always so hefty with his steps, like the whole of the South African Police Force followed him home. Devesh supposed it did. He always had to be on his guard around Lyle. Black boots, blue trousers and a police services badge proudly stitched into his shirt. Navy blue uniform shining royal and superior in the sun.

Devesh felt the sudden desire to tell Lyle about Lucille and the BMW. He wanted to introduce him to her. He wanted to know what he thought of her. In fact, he felt quite sure that Lyle would like her and that they’d get along. He wanted to include Lyle on everything and share his quiet joys and his looming fears with his friend, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t share it with anyone. He was fundamentally alone. Devesh poured the sergeant a brandy, unable to contain his smile. Devesh enjoyed the company of Sgt Lyle Bekink. He was a good guy. One of the best men Devesh had ever known.

‘Devesh.’
The sergeant took the brandy and looked at Devesh with unquestioned acceptance of all that he was. Smiling, Devesh picked up his own glass, happy to be in the company of a friend, bursting to tell him about Lucille, restraining himself.

‘Can a man smile so wide, huh? Tell me it’s not a kindt that has your piel on a string, my broe.’

Bekink knew him well. Yes, he was enamoured, but no, his dick wasn’t dancing on the fucking puppet-strings of a woman. Devesh grinned. Yes, it’s a woman and I think I may be in love. For a second, Devesh considered telling him everything. Lyle would never rat him out. Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad decision to tell him.

‘Don’t be taatie, I’m on the skarrel ek sê. Skaars time for kinners. But, now that you mention it, there is this goose I wanna dala. How’s things at the station?’

Devesh truly believed that Lyle Bekink would be more successful as a criminal. In fact, Bekink would make a great criminal. Pity about his choice of career. In another world, they would’ve made a fine team.

‘Ag, I’m just kak moeg, Devesh,’ Bekink gulped his brandy, ‘Long fucking day, I tell you. A BMW 3 Series was now just reported stolen and the Captain is drukking on my nommer to find the stukkie skelm who jepped the thing. The man’s jas. We not gonna find the car, but I need a promotion, ek sê, Jade’s permy dikbek cause there’s no kroon.’

Devesh swallowed hard on his brandy. He couldn’t hide the scowl from his face. Lyle was on the case. Lyle Bekink was on the stolen BMW M3 case. And the fucking car was in his garage right now. In under a minute, Lyle had gone from a friend to a
direct threat. They were on opposite sides of the line. And Devesh had been on the verge of incriminating himself. He took another sip.

‘A 3 Series, huh?’

‘Aweh.’

‘What colour?’

‘Black 3M…’

Devesh felt his temperature drop. He couldn’t tell Lyle anything. He couldn’t share his excitement. He couldn’t divulge a single event in his life. Devesh felt extremely alone. It was the very same car. He couldn’t believe it. He had modified his fair share of stolen cars, but he had never had Lyle investigating them.

Lucille Lockhart. She just had a way with these things; where she walked, shit followed. The woman had a penchant for leaving a buffet of problems in her wake. She must’ve stolen from someone of a high profile, or else Lyle wouldn’t be on the case at all. Now, he was stuck with a stolen BMW in his garage and a cop living next door, looking for the damned thing. He would have to be careful. Devesh trusted Lyle. Lyle Bekink wasn’t a typically officious pig, but he did his job.

Lyle Bekink had turned a blind eye to Devesh’s lifestyle often enough. Lyle knew that he wasn’t a down-the-line individual and Lyle never asked too many questions. They had managed to strike up a friendship that transcended the boundaries of cop and criminal. But those walls were stretching higher and higher these days. Lyle had an idea of what Devesh was and Devesh knew exactly what Lyle was, but it simply wasn’t something on which either of them dwelled. That being said, Devesh
wasn’t sure how Lyle would react if he witnessed Devesh in the act, waist deep in a stolen vehicle – and the very one he was searching for at that.

Yes, he would definitely have to be careful. More careful than usual. Lyle couldn’t find out about this. Devesh couldn’t afford to put himself at risk and he also didn’t want to put Lyle in a compromising position. The sergeant couldn’t afford to lose his job. Devesh couldn’t afford to lose his money. Fiddling with the garage keys in his pocket, Devesh felt increasingly conscious of the BMW in his garage.

‘So tell me about this cherry. When am I gonna meet her?’

*If only it was that simple.* He would like nothing more but the circumstances were too severe. How did the sergeant pick up that there was a woman? Lyle always seemed to know these things as if it was written on Devesh’s face that Lucille had stormed into his calm, efficient world once again and up-turned everything. Devesh had to concede, the sergeant had some intuition.

‘Dunno.’

‘White lady?’

‘How d’you know?’

‘You mos smaak your white kinners.’

Devesh stretched out his aching leg. He did like the white girls. The sergeant looked at him suspiciously. Devesh hated it when Lyle looked at him with suspicion. What was he thinking?

‘What happened to you?’ Bekink was staring at his leg.

‘My leg’s in its poes.’ said Devesh, drinking two painkillers with his brandy.
The sergeant raised his eyebrow. *For fuck sakes, Bekink, don’t ask. Do not ask.*

‘You not still involved with that skollie from the yaardt, nê? Weet jy, you and that waterslamse stukkie kak of a cousin you have, the two of you, is net kaksoek. Don’t make me worry about you, my broe. I thought you klaar with the skelms.’

Devesh sighed his relief. Yes. He was done with his cousin. Lyle had arrested his cousin more than once. An image of Junaid Jafda flashed in Devesh’s mind. Junaid Jafda before the drugs. Well-dressed, clothed by mommy, fed by mommy, hair spiked with gel, living off daddy’s trust fund. No, Devesh didn’t see Junaid anymore.

Devesh remembered his first meal with the Jafdas after his parents’ death. Apple tea and samoosas with his cousin. They were eleven. He remembered Junaid’s first car. His Supra, which Junaid wrecked. And then his second car, the Skyline, which he also wrecked. When Devesh had managed to fix the mess of a Nissan Skyline left behind by his cousin, Junaid gave the car to him. His dad simply got him another one. They were seventeen.

Junaid had taught him how to drive. Junaid had taught him how to race. A wealthy Muslim boy with a big-shot father, Junaid was too rich to ever be seen working on his own cars. Devesh got his leftovers and brought his salvageable cars back to life. Junaid had introduced Devesh to the Boss when they were eighteen. Ten years later, they didn’t speak at all. He was done with his cousin.

‘Naai man, I’m done with that. Just getting old,’ Devesh paused, ‘Tripped over a tyre yesterday and fucked up my hip.’

Sgt Lyle Bekink didn’t look convinced. But he didn’t ask any more questions either. Maybe he was too tired. Maybe he just didn’t want to hear it. Either way, Devesh was
glad he didn’t rock the status quo. Now was not a good time. He watched his neighbour down his drink.

‘So kykie, are we suiping tonight or what? Jade’s befok with me again.’

Bekink had a tumultuous relationship. His fiancé was celebrity-standard hot, but stupid as hell. Devesh had never liked her. She had a very shallow appeal.

‘Again?’ asked Devesh.

‘Ja.’ Lyle sighed.

‘I can’t, bra. Got a engine to macguiver by tonight still.’

Lyle nodded and made his way out of Devesh’s garage to go and face his fiancé. Thank God. Devesh waved him off, feeling slightly concerned by his friend’s spiralling alcohol problem, but relieved to have him out of the house for now. Lyle drank too much. All cops drank too much.

As soon as Lyle Bekink disappeared into his own house, Devesh locked his front door and returned to the stolen M3 in his workshop among the muscle cars. He had work to do. Five minutes in the garage and he forgot about Lyle completely. Devesh took out his third phone (the one for the ladies) and typed out a message to Lucille. Amazingly, her perfume was still on his hand. He checked his grammar twice before sending the message,

I’ll pick you up at 5a.m. tomorrow morning.

Ten minutes later, she confirmed with an,

I’ll be ready.
Chapter Four

With droopy, bloodshot eyes and hanging shoulders, Devesh shaved. Junaid had taught him how to shave. He had worked right through the night. At 5A.M., Devesh pulled up at Lucille’s house in a metallic grey, black-windowed BMW stripped of all its identifiably illegal parts. It was as good as a new car.

He hadn’t managed to scrub all the oil off his arms in his morning shower. He hoped that he looked presentable as he opened the passenger’s seat door for Lucille. She entered a car reeking of nicotine and Brut cologne.

‘So where we going?’

He exhaled his Camel Filter fumes and answered without looking at her,

‘Namibia.’

Devesh’s left palm stung as it rested on the steering wheel. There were three fresh stitches in it from last night. He noticed Lucille staring at his hand. He had sewn the stitches himself and he thought he’d done quite a stellar job of it. Now, he felt self-conscious about his sloppy handiwork.

‘Bolt on the heat-slide was too tight. Pulled it and it came loose too fast – cut into my finger. That’s all.’

He wished she would stop looking at his hand. Devesh left Parow thinking about his first love, Mishka Abrahams. She used to wonder about his injuries with the same unspoken concern in her eyes. But Mishka was nothing like Lucille Lockhart. Mishka was a woman of a different calibre. Finely designed like an Italian classic.
Mishka was the woman who could have pulled him together and given him purpose. She had fragility and power unrivalled by any other.

As they drove out of Cape Town, Devesh was reminded of his first trip to Namibia. He had gone alone in his Nissan Skyline with a built-in hidden compartment to hold the diamonds under the lining of the seat. It was his first job for the Boss. Devesh had been in his twenties. His cousin, Junaid, was dating Mishka at the time, driving a Porsche and rolling in sandpits of cocaine. But that was long before Junaid had downgraded to the bulb and Devesh had downgraded to a Polo and Mishka had downgraded to a call-centre job.

Lucille was falling asleep in the passenger’s seat, her eyelashes fluttered and dropped like black wings over her eyes. Lucille was tough, thought Devesh. Lucille needed no protecting. Lucille was one unbreakable menace of a female. Devesh lowered her seat back so she could sleep comfortably. She must have been working late last night too. Doing what, he didn’t know. He didn’t ask. He didn’t want to seem too interested.

The sky was still dark as they reached the highway and Devesh thought about his Pontiac Firebird lying in wait for him at home. He had neglected her. He wanted to upgrade her brakes and suspension. The faster she drove, the faster she would need to stop. He wanted to redo her interior. Buy her the finest material. If he’d had the skill, Devesh would have sewn the texture into her seats himself. He would import a new dashboard counter from the USA. She would need a new roof lining and a new roof light to illuminate her beauty every time he was inside her. He would fit brackets into her boot. Run pipes through her body and connect them to the dashboard. She
would bleed nitrous. He would restore her 16-valve heart until he felt her V8 pulsing again. He would modify her gearbox, control her with his fingertips.

But the trans-break was Devesh’s personal favourite. The trans-break locked the car in first gear and reverse at the same time, transferring the power immediately from her engine to her back wheels so that her fifty-ton, five-meter-long body lifted up. Front wheels clean off the ground, launching forward like a horse under a whip. Devesh felt himself getting hard. He longed to be encased in metal. He had to stop thinking about her before Lucille woke up.

As if she’d heard him thinking, Lucille stirred and her eyelashes lifted, black wings giving flight to those eyes. She smiled at him. Devesh immediately abandoned all thoughts of his Pontiac, feeling a bit embarrassed. Lucille lit a cigarette and started singing. Her voice chilled his spine. Her smoke filled his head. Her thighs distracted his focus from the road. The M3 drifted absently towards the curb and Devesh swung the car back on track just before it collided with the barrier. The solemnity returned to his eyes and his permanent scowl returned to his face. How could he let himself be distracted by this woman? That could’ve gone horribly wrong. He cleared his throat and cracked his knuckles, holding the steering wheel straight with one knee.

‘You have a nice voice,’ he said.

‘You should come watch me sing one Friday. Celebrate the end of a hard week.’

Every week was a hard week. Friday comes around at the end of every week and everybody suddenly wants to celebrate… Celebrate what? Being a cog in a machine? Being a slave to your salary? Friday wasn’t an achievement for Devesh. Devesh had
nothing to celebrate. Friday’s weren’t for him. Fridays were for slaves. He looked at Lucille putting her feet up on the dashboard,

‘I don’t go to clubs.’

‘So how would you rather spend your Friday?’

Devesh’s scowl remained intact as he spoke. He was unfamiliar with the appeal of celebrations,

‘Having supernatural copulations in the back of a Datsun on Mars,’ he relished in the thought, ‘Gravity-defying sex.’

Lucille burst out laughing as a light blush spread across her face. Devesh drank in her laugh, her voice and her image. He had to hand it to her: the woman had the world by the balls, and for a fleeting second, Devesh felt completely out of his depth. He longed to be back in his comfort zone in the yard surrounded by shiny heads, oval scars and orange tongues.

They stopped at the petrol station in Springbok where they bought coffee, takeaway food and a newspaper. Lucille read the headlines and Devesh read the obituaries. Mervin Isobel dies at 87, co-founder of Isobel Savings and Loans. He ate like a starving man. He hadn’t gotten nearly enough sleep. Lucille would have to take over the driving. He was reluctant to ask her. She was a shitty driver. But when he looked her way, she had already taken the keys. Patrick Parkes dies at 79, rescuer of exotic and performing animals. Lucille took the wheel and Devesh gazed out the window, trying not to criticize her driving.
Lucille and Devesh didn’t speak much. Lucille marvelled at the scenery as she drove and Devesh was lost in memory. The landscape changed as they approached Namibia. The sand was white with red patches, like blotches of blood had dropped from the height of the Kalahari moon. There was no radio signal and the plants looked like odd found objects placed at random on the sides of the road. They were entering a different world.

Devesh was in a pastel petal-wrapped sleep when Lucille tapped him on the shoulder. They were at the border where armed police stood waiting in their human wall against the entry and exit of illegal people, firearms, drugs, vehicles and diamonds. Devesh took the wheel, lit a cigarette and greeted the officers, confident that they wouldn’t recognise the BMW as a stolen car.

Passports stamped.

Boot searched.

Cubby searched.

Pockets searched.

Car vin number validated.

All covered.

All cleared.

Over the border.

Sand.

Up the skeleton coast, the sand began to lose its red blotches to a solid sickly yellowing that resembled the colour of skin. The sea breezes slammed into the car and
Devesh clutched the wheel to steady it. The Namibian wind had blown many a Cape-Townian driver clean off the road. It was the kind of wind that blew the paint off cars. The road was covered in sand, not a patch of tar in sight. Devesh felt the wheels sliding, and tried not to blink, pre-empting a collision with wild horses galloping into the metal. He dreaded the night-drive back.

Devesh stopped the car at Kolmanskop, wiped the sweat off his brow and then wiped that sweat on the dashboard. Exhausted and starved, he climbed out of the BMW into a desert swimming in smouldering heat. He looked up at the sea of sunshine above him, and felt it drenching the salt from his skin. This was his world. One day, he would retire to Namibia. He looked back and saw nothing but sand dunes and more sand dunes surrounding the tiniest town. Barefoot, he led Lucille onto a street of silk shimmering in the drowsing, dizzying, choking air.

Namibia, promised land of thieves.

Devesh procured his Taurus from the plastic compartment under the seat – just in case anything should go wrong on the search to find Seth. Seth, the Namibian. Seth, the Elusive. Seth, shimmering in diamonds and sand. With no food in their bellies and no speech in their mouths, Devesh and Lucille walked the dunes. The space was too vast to allow for noise or appetite. Cloaked in heat, he climbed the sand tirelessly, sweating out the city.

‘What are we looking for?’ asked Lucille.

‘The boat,’ Devesh answered.

‘What’s at the boat?’ Lucille wrinkled her forehead.

‘Seth.’
‘Seth-who?’

‘Seth, the Namibian.’

Devesh kept walking until he saw an old boat in the distance. He kept his eye on the wooden structure, wrecked and wedged between the hills of sand. It looked closer than it was. The walk had drained him of hydration, but Devesh remained focussed on the boat as it got bigger and clearer in the wavy air. The desert turned all his thoughts into sand. He denied the existence of his fatigue.

As he walked, it became apparent that the texture of the ground had changed. Devesh noticed that it didn’t feel like sand anymore. He was treading on something softer and moist. He was reluctant to look down at what lay beneath the soles of his feet, but the curiosity conquered his dread. Slowly, Devesh looked down and saw that the colour hadn’t changed. It was the same deep yellow shade as the dunes ahead and the dunes behind, but it wasn’t sand at all. He’d been walking on fleshy blades of grass camouflaged to the same hue of the desert sand. Devesh bent down to touch what felt like a soft hairy skin on a huge flesh mountain. The ground seemed to breathe through blades of flesh.

Staring at the ground, Devesh couldn’t quite bring himself to say it aloud, especially in front of Lucille, but what it looked like – as he stared at the hectares ahead of him – the shape and the texture – it was really unmistakeable that it looked like a massive blonde pussy. He shook the thought from his mind. Maybe he just hadn’t been laid in too long. Maybe the heat was too incapacitating. Maybe he just needed to rest. Maybe he just needed some water.

But the ground was pulling him in, soft and warm, he bent down to touch it. The blades of grass were a bed of skin under his fingertips and Devesh lay down on
the flesh mountain to rest, stare up at the sun and give Lucille a chance to catch her breath. Lucille lay down too. It was her first time in Namibia and the dunes fascinated her, filling her with energy. Devesh lay absolutely still, capitalizing on the break from walking, trying to focus on the deal that lay ahead.

But Lucille was without a care. She rolled down the dunes in the blades of desert grass. She writhed back and forth, scrambled up the dunes and then tumbled back down on the desert’s hairy skin like a child, tunnelling herself into the heated flesh of the ground, making snow angels on the clit of the desert, taking it all in.

Devesh watched her as he felt the ground tremble. He was inclined to tell her to stop and keep still, but the words wouldn’t leave his mouth. The ground was starting to shudder. Devesh had just opened his mouth to warn her when the earth moved beneath him. A burst of warm liquid gushed out from the sand, through the skin of the grass and flooded the sweltering wanton desert, covering them both in sticky liquid as the ground gave way. Devesh fell into a valley of warm water sucking him in like a whirlpool between two contracting walls of sand, convulsing with the flux of the tide until the climax subsided into peace.

Devesh found himself floating in what had become a still body of warm liquid. He let it immerse him. He scaled the surface for Lucille who was idly wading her way through it back to the sand. Devesh swam back to the solid sand as well, where he sat next to Lucille and watched the wooden boat now afloat in the middle of the lake.

They were two impassive hearts in a field of flesh. Neither said a word. Devesh noticed a flickering in the boat. There was someone in there, but it didn’t look like Seth. Devesh didn’t want to alarm Lucille, so he decided not to bring this up. He
could hear her panting at his side, recovering from what was a slightly unnerving experience. It was too hot and too soon to spark a cause for alarm. But the boat was approaching.

Devesh brushed his matted hair aside and tried to light a soaked cigarette with a powerless lighter. Lucille stood up. Devesh shook the lighter and held a broken cigarette up to the sun. Lucille started walking away. Devesh tried again to produce a flame, but nothing emerged. He tossed it away and checked to see if the figure had emerged from the boat. It had.

Twenty meters of moist sand separated Lucille from the figure that had emerged from the boat. His face was a fold of dry wrinkles. A broken straw hat flapped over his eye, a stick of biltong hung from his lower lip and a big globular droplet of sweat dangled off his bare chin. It lingered and lingered and then dropped without a splash onto the sand. Behind him, the countless dunes stretched on for miles like a still-shot of a sandy ocean in high tide. The boatman didn’t have a drop of water clinging to his clothes. He held up a Stubnose .38 Special Rossi to a speechless Lucille who stood frozen with her feet in the sand.

Devesh dropped the lighter and stepped in front of her, pulling his Taurus from his wet denim jeans. A Brazilian replica of the Glock, with its serial number filed off. He prayed that the water hadn’t disabled it. Devesh held the gun at his hip, just high enough to shoot the boatman in his balls. The angle secured enough leverage to make any man think twice. But Devesh was unable to see his expression with the sun glaring at him over the boatman’s right shoulder. The rays flared out against the
contour of his neck and into Devesh’s eyes. The collection of wrinkles had the upper hand with the sun at his back. Devesh’s vision was a wash of light.

The two men faced each other without a sound. The stretch of sand between them seemed to contract. Both guns held steady until the boatman slowly lifted his free hand to move the broken straw flap from his eye and reveal what looked like a crumpled up brown paper bag. He squinted through the sun’s rays at Devesh until recognition broke his unflinching, wrinkled mess of a face,

‘Stuntman, brother-man! Wat maaaaaak jy?!’

The relief came in waves as Devesh recognised his long lost partner in smuggling. Seth had aged terribly, his face had retreated with the years, into his wrinkled skin. The papery fold of his features broke into a smile and his body moved into an easy walk towards Devesh as he lowered his .38. He slapped Devesh on his back and put his arm around him flashing a glance at Lucille,

‘Who’s the whitey?’

Devesh grinned, happy to see that the Namibian was still alive and grateful for Lucille’s safety. The lipstick had washed clean off Lucille’s lips.

‘Trusted assistant of mine, Lucille.’ Devesh introduced them, ‘Seth. What the fuck was that?’

‘Just taking my boat for a drive on the waves. Let’s walk and talk, pleased to meet you whitey – Stuntman, let us get ourselves a Jacky Basson.’

Devesh could barely see Seth’s eyes between his wrinkles; only two flashes of blue assured him that it was actually him. Seth was a Baster, half Namaqualander and half German. His sun-scorched Namibian skin folded over his light European blue
eyes, a hybrid reminder of the colonisers and their rape of the Namibian land and women.

They walked away from the body of warm water, which dried up into the sand as quickly as it had appeared, leaving Seth’s boat wedged between the dunes again.
Chapter Five

The diamond.

At the Oranjemund Mine, one lucky diamond was flushed through the suction pipe in a flux of seawater until it reached the blockage. Stacked and claustrophobic in a cluster of stones, salt and dirt, it sat and waited for the recovery fitter to unhinge the pipe and dislodge it from the blockage. The diamond never returned to the designated pipe that stretched to the sifting section. This diamond never saw the conveyer belt or the sorting tables. It hoped to be cut, polished and shining on the ring finger of a rich, cherished and bought woman. It wished to be boasted on the wings of some old ideal of romance. It wished to escape Namibia, where it was just another currency.

The lucky diamond was relieved from the blockage and rolled on the skin of the palm of the recovery fitter. From the recovery fitter’s palm, it was dipped into his toolbox. And from the hard bottom of the toolbox, it found itself rolled into a bundle of soft toilet paper. When it saw the light of day again, it hardly got a chance to breathe before it was dropped into a cylinder of acid, procured from an illicit pharmaceuticals company, cleaned and then placed into a ball of crumpled newspaper, bandaged in elastic, taken out to the desert sands and handed from the pocket of Seth, the fitter, to the fingertips of Devesh Desai, the smuggler.

The lucky diamond now slid and floated around in the saliva of Devesh’s mouth in a simple, but effective procedure called the tongue-tip test. Devesh moved the diamond over and under his tongue, spat it out and inspected it on the table. Not a drop of spit clung to the stone. It was real.
'Klippines,’ Sethrick called them, speaking through a slit in his folds of skin, insignificant little pebbles. Seth’s wrinkles enjoyed a Jackie Basson and Appletiser, thirsty and dry, hoping for some hydration to replenish the deepening crinkles. Devesh, drinking a Jackie Basson and Appletiser himself, inspected the diamond for a few more minutes before saying anything.

Lucille slipped her thigh onto Seth’s lap, her bum-cheek skating the edges of his .38 Rossi in his pocket as she stared out at the desert still dripping in beauty. She touched Sethrick’s straw hat and took the stick of biltong from his mouth into hers. The Namibian’s wrinkles crushed into a smile as his hand gripped her skin. Lucille’s dress rode up as she sat on the diamond-seller’s lap.

Feeling increasingly uncomfortable, Devesh watched the two of them in his periphery as he inspected the diamonds. Looking at Lucille, he decided on the spot where he would dissolve into her skin and leave his mark. Resenting the wrinkled mess in front of him, he imagined a knife in Seth’s eye-socket and the folding skin dropping to the ground, releasing Lucille. He wanted her drinking from a chalice, draped in silk and robed in gold, dripping in diamonds.

They had sealed the diamond deal. The BMW’s wheels sunk deeper into the Namib sand as the wind blew outside the bar. Devesh slipped two diamonds into his pocket.

Lucille stood up from Seth’s lap and walked to the empty dance floor, swaying her hips to an old beat. She lit a cigarette in the non-smoking bar in what was too arid a wasteland to risk a fire caused by a drunken customer. Dancing under the looming non-smoking sign, she exhaled and smiled at Seth.
Devesh told her to stop smoking, but he was speaking to a bottle of red. Lucille was swimming somewhere in the fluid yielded by fermented grapes, wading her way deeper into the taste, feeling the bitter warmth on the back of her tongue, entirely uninterested in the J&B and Appeltiser topping up the glasses of Seth and Devesh.

Devesh spoke on, substantiating his rationale to a bottle of red. The bottle didn’t answer. She was going to cause a fire. The smoke alarm went off and the fire hazard sprinklers started pouring from the roof of the bar. Everyone vacated the building. Devesh handed the M3’s keys to the face of folding wrinkles and Seth disappeared into the sand with the car. Lucille strolled to the bar and took all the money from the till, stuffing the notes into her bra, giving herself a full C cup. She stood alone now on the dance floor swaying her head from side to side, drenched in the sprinklers with a bosom full of cash. Smiling at Devesh with a twinkle in her eye, a flourish in her wrist and a cigarette in her mouth, she asked, ‘Why’s it raining in here?’

Devesh took Lucille by the waist and left the bar with Lucille leaning on his arm, struggling in her heels. He carried her to the motel, placed her on the bed and took off her shoes. Sheets of Namibian dollars fell from her dress as she turned onto her side to sleep. The thief slept in a bed of money.

Devesh sat on the puffy off-white couch on the other side of the room, clutching the package of gems in his palm. He didn’t want to sleep next to her. Not because he was scared of temptation. But because he knew it was only a desperate man who made love to a drunken woman.
Devesh lay awake on the couch thinking about Mishka. Soft-spoken, conservative, petite, pretty little Mishka. The last time he had seen her, she had pitched up at his door one sunny afternoon in tears, beaten black and blue. Her sweet face pulpy, her movements so pained he cringed just looking at her. Junaid Jafda. Devesh was not judgemental of any kind of criminal, no matter how brutal. It was none of his business. It didn’t concern him. He had his own set of principles. And he would probably have forgiven his cousin’s transgression if it hadn’t been Mishka.

She told him she’d gone to the police and reported Junaid. But the courts were backlogged and Junaid was rich. The Jafdas knew the Brigadier personally and the case would never come to light. A flood of tears pooled out of the tiny girl and onto his table. Junaid knew she’d gone to the police and Junaid was going to kill her. He was going to find her and kill her. The pipe had changed him. Made a monster of him. Junaid was Dajjal. And she didn’t want to die… Another flood of tears. There was little justice in the Cape Town courts for Mishka Abrahams.

Devesh had made Mishka some tea and given her the card of a good lawyer. He told her he would pay for all her consultations. He hadn’t been able to console her any other way. He didn’t hug her. He didn’t touch her. He left her with a promise that Junaid wouldn’t touch her again. She thanked him, stopped crying, drank the tea and left without taking the lawyer’s card. Devesh never saw her again.

Ever since that day, Devesh checked the obituaries regularly. He woke up before Lucille, made himself coffee and read the Namibian obituaries. He rewrapped the two 5 carat diamonds after checking them again. No flaws, no spots, no cracks, no dirt. Seth’s wrinkled skin and blue eyes were already far-gone, heading for the Angolan border in the BMW M3 when Lucille woke up,
‘So,’ she yawned, ‘How are we getting home?’

They waited for the sun to settle before walking into a parking lot full of cars just before the border. The wind rippled through Lucille’s thin flowing top and ballooned in Devesh’s tracksuit pants and over-sized vest. He still reeked of Jacky Basson. Devesh hated the after-taste of whiskey. He only drank it because it was customary. They stood like statues in the heat as the sun drank the water from their blood. The walk had been long. Lucille stared at the cars unable to take another step. Looking at her, Devesh wished he’d planned better. He gestured to the parking lot,

‘Choose one,’ he said, tossing a cigarette.

He smiled his wide, dirty smile, teeth full of desert sand. Lucille gazed at the soft colours of the sun-bleached vehicles in front of her. She pointed to a faded blue Corolla Millennium. It reminded her of her father. Devesh grinned at her choice. She was making it too easy.

He hurled the backpack off his back and took out a screwdriver. He walked towards the light blue Toyota with the screwdriver in his hand like a killer before a stabbing. He slid the screwdriver down next to the strip of rubber separating the door from the glass window and ripped the strip of rubber off with his unstitched-up hand. While he tore the rubber from the car, Lucille took the screwdriver from him and slid it down further until she reached the locking mechanism that controls the door handle.

She jerked the mechanism up with a strong yank at the screwdriver and the door unlocked. The plastic knob on the inside of the car popped up accordingly and Devesh opened the driver’s door, unlocked the passenger’s door from the inside and held it open for Lucille. She got in next to him. There was something unnerving about
Lucille with a screwdriver in her hand. She looked too natural holding dangerous tools.

Devesh ran his fingers along the steering wheel and swiped the screwdriver to expose the ignition barrel. Lucille passed him the side-cutter. He took it and clipped all four wires. Lucille calmly checked to see if anyone was watching. Security guards, shoppers, but there was no one.

Devesh frayed the wires, comfortable that Lucille was keeping guard. He cupped three of them in the palm of his hand and wound them together, merging them with his fingertips. Lucille lit two cigarettes and passed one to Devesh. And this is where the magic happens. Devesh picked up the forth wire still hanging loose. He passed it to Lucille and she touched the loose wire to the three wound up wires in Devesh’s hand. The engine jerked into life and they both smiled.

Devesh chucked all the tools on the back seat, took off his sweaty vest and put his foot on the pedal, grinning. Lucille rested her head on his bare shoulder as they sped out of the parking lot in the blue Toyota Millenium, wondering how they were going to get past border control with a stolen vehicle that hadn’t been modified and disguised. Devesh felt Lucille’s trepidation leak through the heat of her skin.

‘Car hasn’t been flagged yet. We’ll be okay for now.’
Chapter Six

‘Take the wheel.’

‘What?’

The wind howled in Lucille’s eardrums and the road was unlit. Namibia’s darkness had fallen dead and damp on her skin and it seemed to impose on all her senses. She was blinder, number and deafer since the sun went down. She must have heard him wrong.

‘Put your foot on the pedal. Maintain my speed. And take the wheel.’

She felt her hands stiffen under her thighs on the passenger’s seat. He couldn’t be serious.

‘What?’

The bumper was mere centimetres away from the back of a truck. Devesh had increased the Toyota’s speed to that of the truck in front of them, and decided to tailgate the driver. Lucille felt too tired to ask why. Where this guy’s stamina came from, she didn’t know. All the car’s windows were rolled down and the warm night air rushed in as they sped forward, a lick away from the truck’s arse.

One slight lapse in judgement and they would collide. Lucille’s night vision was not great. And there was not a patch of black tar in sight. The wind had left a layer of sand on the road, eliminating any grip left in the tyres. The galloping shadows of wild horses stretched and danced in her peripheral vision.

‘The wheel, love. Take it.’
Devesh’s voice was calm. Like he was asking her to pass the coffee. The WP Transport truck was lit up by the headlights only. The truck was a subcontractor to Namibia’s largest meat processor, Meatco. Four abattoirs moving beef to various world markets including South Africa. It was headed across the border. And it was huge. Testament to Namibia’s flourishing meat industry. Three lengthy yellow crates full of canned meat en route to South Africa. Each crate towered taller than the average sized person.

Devesh looked at the side of the truck and saw the tapering blue icon with the lettering WP painted just above it. *This was the truck.* It would pass right through border control, unsearched. And border control was less than half an hour away. They didn’t have much time. Lucille was still staring at him blankly. He looked at her with one raised eyebrow. Absolutely no stress in his solemn eyes. Just the plain acceptance of his fate and the capacity to enjoy the ride.

Lucille slowly placed her hand on the steering wheel and held it straight. As soon as he was sure she had it, Devesh opened the driver’s door and shifted to the edge of his seat. Lucille slid her thigh over the gearbox and onto his seat. Devesh moved his foot off the pedal slowly and let her take over the speed.

‘You need to maintain the following distance, okay?’ he shouted above the roar of the wind.

A blast of sandy air scalded her ears. *What following distance?* – she thought. The car was a fingernail away from the truck. She couldn’t do it. There was no way she could maintain that. But Devesh didn’t give her a chance to protest. As soon as her hands were securely on the wheel, he climbed out the door of the moving Toyota and monkey-crawled his way onto the bonnet. The wind blew his jet-black hair
straight back. Lucille kept the wheel steady with Devesh balancing on the hood of the car. She tried not to panic as she watched his silhouette crouching down ahead of the windshield in the glare of the truck’s backlights. He lifted his arms and reached for the truck as he steadied his footing on the curve of the car’s hood. Devesh dug in his heels and edged forward, ready to pounce.

Lucille wanted to close her eyes but she kept them wide open staring at the miniscule distance between the bonnet and the truck, straining to see around Devesh’s lurching body to gauge the proximity. The dim headlights showed a hunched torso swaying unsteadily in front of her. Just as she was convinced he was going to fall, the silhouette launched forward off the car. The next thing she saw were his limbs clutching onto the big yellow crate on the back of the truck. Feet gripping the back bumper, two bulging tattooed arms stretched and spread to their capacity, clinging to the corners of the crate. His back, now more clearly visible, was crunched into a mass of clenched stressed muscle that couldn’t possibly maintain its hold.

Lucille felt her hand start to quiver. The sweat poured down her face. He was going to fall. She kept focussed on the bumper, making sure she was close enough for him to fall back onto the Toyota if he needed to, while still keeping far enough to prevent a collision. She glanced up and noticed his hands creeping up to the top of the crate. Devesh hauled himself up with his arms alone. Bulging tattoos gleamed in the headlights as he swung himself onto the plateau of the crate. He steadied himself on top, resuming his crouching stance and securing his balance. He turned around to face Lucille from the top of the truck. She glanced up again. The wind was now blowing his hair into his face.
Devesh’s arms were extended at each side to balance him. He rose slowly from his crouch and Lucille saw the hulking figure unfold gradually into a man standing above the moving truck. Shirtless in jeans, mastering his balance. Two rows of cut muscle clenched above the denim riding low on his hips. He angled his body to the left, compensating for the speed, the curb and the wind, smiling at her. Fucking smiling at her. A wide, dirty, arrogant rockstar smile you could only smile from the top of a moving truck. Baggy jeans rippled in the wind as the ripped, inked, shredded, dripping body steadied itself under the velocity with extended arms, palms facing up to her, dirty smile fixed above his jaw, like he did this kind of shit every day.

She looked away from him and focussed on the fingernail’s leeway between the car and the truck before she lost her nerve and risked a crash. Crazy fucking Bollywood thug. Lucille felt her right hand start to spasm from the pressure of her grip. When she looked up again, Devesh had disappeared behind two massive yellow crates. She couldn’t see him. Had he fallen? Was he still on the truck? She clutched the wheel through her spasming palm and glanced to the side of the road, expecting to see a rolling tattooed corpse. She saw nothing. There were no road lights. She probably wouldn’t see him even if he had fallen. She had no choice but to keep on driving. Three minutes passed by. Where the fuck was he?

Devesh slipped between the two crates and edged his way around the third. He roped the package of diamonds onto the truck between the crates. Two minutes later, he re-emerged atop the truck. He lowered himself onto its bumper.

Relief washed over Lucille and then panic struck again as she realised she would have to edge closer to the truck. She did, resuming the centimetre space between the two vehicles, maintaining the speed and steering at a constant and
accurate flow. Devesh found his footing and swung himself back onto the bonnet with a thud. She opened the driver’s seat door from the inside and moved to the edge of the seat as Devesh climbed back inside. She held onto the wheel, keeping her foot on the pedal until Devesh caught his breath and took over. Five minutes later, he was driving again as if nothing had happened,

‘Great precision driving,’ he smiled.

They hit the border.

Passports stamped.

Boot searched.

Cubby searched.

Pockets searched.

Vin number validated.

All covered. All cleared.

The stolen car hadn’t been flagged yet. Devesh showed the cops at the border control his stolen passport, which belonged to his cousin, Junaid Jafda aged 35. They looked alike. He drove back over the border, still trailing the truck, which had cruised through border control without undergoing the routine check.

Forty-five minutes later, the truck pulled into a Shell garage, tailed by Lucille and Devesh. Lucille got out of the car feeling dizzy. She bought herself some coffee and a pie. Empty as she was, she wasn’t able to eat it.

Devesh waited for the truck driver to pay the petrol attendant. He watched the driver park his truck in the designated parking bay once the attendant had filled the
tank. He followed him with his eyes as the driver walked inside the supermarket to buy supplies. Devesh hoisted himself back onto the truck in the dark with his side cutter in his hand and released the bound package of diamonds. He stuffed it into his jeans pocket, jumped off and whistled as he walked to the adjoining café to meet Lucille.

Lucille looked pale under the synthetic yellow light of the café. She ran her hands through her short black hair and stared daggers through Devesh. Devesh was unsure what he’d done wrong. He had not meant to upset her. It had to be done. If they’d found the diamonds in the car at the border, they would both be in jail.

‘I want to go home.’

He looked back at her calmly,

‘That’s where we’re headed.’

‘You’re insane,’ she hissed.

Devesh had never seen her so upset. He didn’t know how to placate her. He kept silent.

‘You’re fucking insane and I want to go home.’

He looked at the untouched pie in front of her. He extended his hand to Lucille. Devesh wasn’t offended or surprised. Not insulted or defensive. Just compliant. Holding her hand, they walked back to the faded blue Toyota and Devesh wiped the steering wheel and dashboard with his shirt. No fingerprints. Then he locked the car and threw the keys into a big black bin outside the café.

‘What are you doing?’
Lucille peered inside the bin, exacting the best method to extract the keys from the bin without causing too much of a stir. The bin was deep. She was short. Devesh lit a cigarette and watched her for a while, trying to think of a way to calm her down, feeling a bit disappointed that she didn’t trust him,

‘Have I ever let you down?’

‘No.’

He leaned against a street lamp, grateful for the mild air, trying to curb his emotion for the little woman panicking in the glow of the street lamp,

‘The Toyota will be flagged within the next few hours. The police will be alerted and the car might be spotted before we reach Cape Town. I would take that risk if you weren’t with me. But you are, and I don’t have the tools on me to change the car’s numbers. So we abandon ship.’

Lucille maintained her composure. Devesh lit her a cigarette and passed it to her.

‘I’m not coping with this,’ she whispered.

Devesh exhaled the cigarette smoke and looked her in the eye. Her skin was flawless. Her eyes were huge. The tough, maniacal woman he knew was not there anymore. He couldn’t articulate his thoughts. Words were not his forte. Devesh was a man of machines. The petrol station café music could be heard from outside. A soppy popular Tears for Fears ballad played softly in the background. Well, this was the opportunity presenting itself, thought Devesh. Here it was. This was his chance. If he let it slip by, it may never come around again. This was the opportunity to denounce all his decisions and resolutions and say, fuck it. I want to be with you. If you fall, we fall.

He couldn’t manage a word of it.
Chapter Seven

A day later, back in Cape Town, Lucille sat on Devesh’s bed as he towered over her, handing her one of the two 5 carat diamonds. She brushed her fingertips over his tattoos, wondering what they meant. She didn’t want to go home anymore. She curled her fingers into the top of his denim jeans and tilted her head up to face him. Her thick black eyelashes covered him and all she could see through them were slits of white light. She wished she didn’t have to go.

He lifted her up by her hips like he was bringing a bowl of milk to his mouth. His big palms cupped her bum-cheeks, bringing her thighs up to rest on his shoulders, her ankles gripped his shoulder-blades. Stubble wet, hands sliding up to support her waist in mid-air. Lucille’s back arched at a curve so perfect, her nipples almost touched the ceiling. Devesh stood and ate. She closed her thighs around his face.

When he was done, a big red love-bite burned on her inner thigh.

The two diamonds split paths when Lucille left Devesh’s house that day and Devesh was left alone to face the day’s abuse. Smile on his dial, tar in his lungs and shoulders in surrender. That was how Devesh greeted Lucille’s departure. By sunset, he was fully awake, standing ready for his compensation. He held his tongue tight between his teeth and let the curses drip into the corners of his mouth as he stood before the Boss.

On the mahogany table of the Boss’s personal office, next to three decanters of port, scotch and cognac, Devesh’s diamond lay unwrapped, reflecting the light of
the crystal chandelier. The Boss opened an aluminium case and added it to his collection of gems, the biggest of which was an Angolan blue diamond the size of a dove’s egg.

‘Currency, Devesh. It’s all about currency,’ said the Boss.

Devesh was still thinking about Lucille, hoping the Boss would not delve into one of his monologues about the eighties,

‘South Africa’s currency is vehicles. Namibia’s currency is diamonds. Eastern Europe’s currency is women. I trade in all three. And one day, I want you to take over. You see, Devesh, my seventh grandchild was born yesterday.’

‘Congratulations Boss,’ said Devesh, knowing that the Boss was not the kind of man who ever retired. It was going to be one of those monologues.

‘You know, Devesh, I remember that day in 1989. Terrible time. A year of rot. It was the 17th of May when they necklaced your parents. Your mother especially, was so passionate about the cause… And let me tell you, Tashneem was one beautiful woman. Strong. Striking in her conviction.’

Devesh didn’t like the way the Boss spoke his mother’s name. He wasn’t sure why. Maybe it was because he hadn’t heard it spoken for so long. Devesh wanted to leave. He resented the Boss for bringing up his parents.

‘And she said to me, Devesh, that very day, she said to me, “Jerome!” she said, “Jerome, my boy, my son, is going to live in a better time.” And she meant it when she said it, you know, because she knew one thing, Devesh, that she, Tashneem Desai, would make it so.’
The Boss poured himself a scotch. Devesh remained respectfully silent. He hated it when the Boss became too familiar with him.

‘Your father drove a Cadillac and carried a Smith and Wesson revolver,’ the Boss smiled with strong nostalgia, ‘In the eighties, we were all united. We were involved; we were on fire. Now, I’m just a casual observer, watching the conflict, laughing myself into a stupor.’

The Boss lit a Rothmans Blue. Devesh rarely saw him smoke these days. His shiny head seemed to have dulled a bit since Devesh had last seen him.

‘When people fight, I clap. I’ve always applauded passion. But that day in 1989, Devesh, I carried you. I took you from your home in my arms, en die lirre wiet, you were so small. Back then, I knew you would become a fine man. Handsome and tough, unbreakable nes Sajal. I drove you to Mrs Jafda, onthou jy?’

The Boss was starting to enjoy the memory. Devesh nodded. He remembered it all.

The Boss took a crystal ashtray out of his drawer and ashed his Rothmans Blue.

‘Even with all my sons and all their sons, I consider you my best. Blood or not. So when I say to you, Devesh, that I want you to take over – I’m old, I’m moeg. – I mean it.’

Devesh walked out of the Boss’s office with twelve bricks of cash in his pockets, drained by the memory of his parents so glibly recalled by the Boss. The money felt heavy on his thighs. Two grand in the top left pocket, two grand in the top right pocket, another two grand in each of the back pockets, as well as two bricks of cash in each of his lower side pockets hanging just below his knees. Twelve grand in total on his person, in cash. And people think baggy jeans are just a fashion statement.
Today was one beautiful day, thought Devesh as he took out his box of Camel Filters out from between the cash in his back pocket when he got home. He lit one and looked up at the sun. One beautiful fucking day. He cracked his knuckles and looked at the twenty-inch rims the colour of gunmetal lying in the dusty corner of his garage. A case of Black Label stood in the other, dustier corner of his garage. He popped a bottle top on his cement step and poured the beer down his throat as he sat on a tyre, spreading the newspaper and reading the obituaries. He was glad to be away from the Boss, back home in his garage, reading the paper.

There was something savage about a person’s life being reduced to a single line, thought Devesh, as he read the obituaries. A life diminished to small black and white lettering on thin, cheap paper.

Devesh was twelve the first time he read the newspaper. Mrs Jafda had saved the Cape Argus, which listed his parents’ names under the death-list. He still had their obituary, although he never looked at it anymore. Devesh knew that, eventually, it would be his name in the paper.

Colleen Petersen, clinical psychotherapist, 1949-2013

Arlene Stevenson, art teacher at Belgravia High, 1974-2013

Khaya Mpisane, elevator operator at Twelve Apostles, 1961-2013

Devesh turned the page and dragged on his cigarette.

Mishka Abrahams, call-centre operator, 1986-2013

Devesh stopped reading and stared at the name. He stared at dates and stared at the name. The beer poured from the Black Label bottle and onto his shoes. His cigarette fell to the ground.
He was so shaken from his disbelief that he didn’t pre-empt the sonic crack of a bullet exceeding the sound barrier. The flight noise swished by Devesh’s ear so close he felt its wind lift the hair on his left temple. He clutched his head with both his arms and dropped to the floor, but the bullet had already passed him. Devesh waited for another shot. It didn’t come. He waited some more. Silence. The newspaper lay on the floor. Devesh didn’t move. When he finally felt sure it was safe, he got up with his Taurus in his hand and looked around, shaking from the shock. The street was empty. Warm and momentarily deaf, Devesh shuddered in the lingering noise of the bullet and turned to look behind him.

What he saw was a single small crater in the cement wall of his garage. He looked down from the crater in the wall and saw the .22 bullet lying on the ground. Devesh picked it up with a trembling hand. Whoever had fired it was a poor shot with a shitty weapon. A half-decent gunman would’ve killed him – he was in open view. The bullet was tiny. Someone had tried to kill him. With a .22? Pathetic. You don’t kill someone with a fucking .22. Had Devesh not been so shocked, he would’ve laughed at the bullet in his hand.

But there was no doubt in Devesh’s mind that the person behind the gun would try again. He dropped the bullet back on the ground, wondering who had tried to kill him. He closed up his garage and got into his car, scaling the street for anyone in sight. There was no one. Devesh knew there were only three things to do now: Get the nitrous. Find Junaid. And get the fuck out of Bellville.

A NOS cylinder is a long metallic blue bottle of about four kilograms. Nitrous Oxide gas is only fit for medical anaesthetic use for a finite period of time. After that,
motor-enthusiasts like Devesh buy it and use it for vehicle installation. It was a process Devesh liked to call the redistribution of gas.

Devesh sourced his nitrous from a local hospital where Nurse Bridgette stood waiting for him with the first few buttons of her stiff white hospital shirt undone. As Devesh sped into the ER still shaking from the attack on his life, she applied a fresh layer of lipstick. Devesh idled his Polo behind an ambulance in the emergency bay and watched two men carrying in a man – who looked decidedly dead – on a stretcher. Devesh shuddered. That could have been him.

Nurse Bridgette walked up to his Polo with her hand on her hip, strutting the sexiest walk she could muster in her shapeless uniform. Her other hand wheeled a hospital trolley with two cylinders of Nitrous Oxide on it. Devesh kissed her on her cheek and she helped him stack the cylinders into his boot. He handed her a wad of cash, put his big arms around her and pulled her cheek to his chest, suddenly overwhelmed with emotion. Grateful to be alive.

‘How’re the kids?’

‘Getting too big,’ she smiled.

Her smile warmed Devesh’s heart. Nurse Bridgette had been in love with Devesh since his school days before he dropped out. He had always pretended not to notice her affections but he knew they were there. She was the closest thing to a sister and a mother Devesh had ever known, and that kind of intimacy would be incestuous.

‘I need another favour,’ said Devesh.

‘Anything, my liefie.’
Nurse Bridgette beamed at him. Devesh looked back at her, all solemnity, wishing she would stop smiling.

‘I need a DNA sample switched.’

‘Where?’

‘The morgue.’

‘When?’

‘I’ll let you know.’

Nurse Bridgette frowned, scratched her nose and then smiled at him again,

‘I’m on it, sweetie, you just let me know when. And you look after yourself okay? You look awful.’

He hugged her goodbye, wondering if it would be the last time he’d ever see her. He drove off with the nitrous in his boot to find one Junaid Jafda before leaving Bellville for good. Devesh had decided, once and for all, that he was done with this kind of life. He was not ready to die.

It takes a special kind of person to get banned from a yaardt in Delft; Junaid was of that breed. And when someone gets banned from the yaardt in Delft, there’s really only one place they can go: the yaardt in Ravensmead.

Devesh walked into the dirty toilet where his cousin lay past out with his head in the toilet bowl. The smell was paralysing. Toilet paper clung to the walls. The floor was soaked in urine. The basin drain was clogged up with vomit and the toilet seat was stained and wet with shit, which was sliding off Junaid’s limp arms. *Fuck it,*
thought Devesh, lighting a cigarette to disguise one vulgar smell with another, *I’m gonna do this.* The tik had made his cousin delirious and thin. The *thing* that Devesh plucked out from the toilet bowl was a skeleton.

Some people have elegant existences. Most people have messy existences. Junaid was the messiest existence Devesh had ever known. Carrying his cousin in his arms, he drove back home.

Custom intake, nitrous nozzles, six forged aluminium pistons, a gas tank, two brackets and a junkie hostage later, Devesh was almost ready. He fitted a steel plate between the carburettor and the intake, a steel pipe to shoot petrol into the nitrous, and solenoids to control the spray. He fitted a control button to the dashboard of his Polo. The car was ready. He would escape this shithole, even if it meant leaving his Pontiac behind. But not before he got to work on Junaid Jafda.

He fixed a small compressor to his tattoo gun and walked towards a gagged and bound Junaid, trembling and sweating in a chair in Devesh’s back room. Whether it was from the fear or from the drug-withdrawal, Devesh was not sure. He began with Junaid’s left hand. He pried the first two of his fingers apart and put the needle to his cousin’s skin. Junaid wriggled and wriggled, making it impossible for Devesh to draw accurately, so Devesh took his Taurus 9mm and knocked Junaid out with the barrel. Then, carefully with a thin needle, he inked an identical image of a naked woman with spread legs perched on Junaid’s hand, sitting between his fingers.

By the time he had finished inking and bandaging the image, Junaid had woken up in a dry guttural scream that barely escaped his mouth in a muffled buzz against the cloth tied around his face. Again, Devesh took out his Taurus 9mm and knocked him out. He began composing the serpent on his arm. It was precise work.
Devesh found it therapeutic. He had always had a knack for drawing. And what a perfect canvas life had presented him with. He etched the detail on Junaid’s arm in complete mirror symmetry to his own tattoo before shading it in with the thicker needle. He might need to buy more ink.

Devesh cooked up some two minute noodles – even added a few olives, filled up a glass with tap water and laid the meal down in front of Junaid. He released him from the chair, keeping his arms and legs bound, and ripped off the gag before leaving the house to buy more ink.

When he returned, Junaid had only eaten half of the noodles and knocked over the glass of water. The room reeked of shit. The kind of shit you know is light brown and fluid. Devesh brought him another glass of water and forced it down his throat while holding his nose closed. When Junaid had gulped down the last drop, Devesh took out his Taurus and knocked him out again. He began shading in the rose and the aces. When he had completed his masterpiece, he bandaged up the inked area of skin and left Junaid to soak in his own shit.

When Devesh woke up the next morning and opened the door to the back room, the stench seemed to have multiplied. Junaid was rotting. He closed the door and went to fetch a cloth, which he rubbed and drenched in Vicks Vapour Rub. He tied it over his own nose before re-entering the room. Devesh had saved the best for last. The V8 engine tattoo. This, he could draw from memory.

At exactly eleven o’clock that night, Devesh heard his killer approaching. He watched his murderer walk slowly towards his house. *Come*, he said, *come, I’m ready for you.*
PART 2

SERGEANT LYLE BEKINK

SOUTH AFRICAN POLICE SERVICES PROFILE:

NAME: LYLE BEKINK
RANK: SERGEANT
DIVISION: ORGANISED CRIME
STATION: BELLVILLE
FUNCTIONS: GENERAL INVESTIGATIONS AND INSPECTIONS, VISIBLE POLICING AND DETECTIVE SERVICES.

Chapter Eight

‘LICENSE AND REGISTRATION,’

The words sailed out of Sgt Bekink’s mouth like a chant. A sentence so ingrained in his routine, his articulation was effortless. The words bounced off the closed window of a black BMW. He waited for the driver to co-operate. The suave corporate driver pressed a button and the window sunk down into the car. The command boomed into the vehicle,

‘LICENSE AND REGISTRATION please sir,’
Sgt Bekink scanned the driver. A businessman. A whiskey-drinking, high-rolling, six-figure-bracket-income-earning motherfucker. Lyle smiled at him, a lingering, condescending smile. It wasn’t often that he got to punish a high-flier for breaking the law. He loved pulling over expensive cars,

‘I see you were doing some swerving on the road there, sir. Going 160 in a 100 zone. I will have to write you a fine and you will be breathalysed.’

Sgt Bekink took out a pen and jotted down the man’s number plate CA 387... He hadn’t finished writing it when he noticed three hundred-rand notes flopping from the businessman’s fingers. Lyle pretended to ignore the money. The corporate continued going through his wallet with his free hand, adding more notes to the pile,

‘My license is in here somewhere, Officer.’

The man rummaged through the layers of cash in his wallet. He added another hundred-rand note to the pile in his hand, and wagged the floppy notes in Lyle’s face. One of those nights then, huh? Pretending not to notice, Lyle waited for the license. But it didn’t appear. The businessman fixed him with a cold, dissecting stare,

‘Do you drink, Officer?’

‘Occasionally. Sir, your LICENSE AND REGISTRATION now please.’

The driver seemed not to hear him,

‘Because I have an unopened bottle of premium scotch worth R1000 here under my seat,’
The businessman slid the bottle out. Johnny Walker Platinum. 18 year old blend. Sgt Bekink wasn’t much of a whiskey-drinker. But the bottle alone cost more than eight of his choice bottles of brandy. The luxury of it was undeniable. He surrendered,

‘Give me the R600 and the scotch. And you can go.’

The driver handed him the bottle through the window and placed the notes in Sgt Bekink’s palm. Then he fixed him with another cold stare and smiled a very slight smile. His smile made Lyle feel uneasy. The driver was completely unthreatened by his authority. He wasn’t merely flashing the usual *money-will-buy-me-out-of-anything* grin of arrogance. There was something distinctly inhuman about this man.

‘Well, you best be on your way then,’ said Sgt Bekink.

‘Take care, Officer.’

With that, the businessman drove off in his black BMW M3 at a reduced speed. Lyle stashed the bottle of whiskey underneath his car seat and put the money in his wallet. *A successful evening*, he nodded to himself. CEO-types like him were exactly why Lyle liked pulling over expensive vehicles.

The man had been especially well spoken for a darkie, Lyle thought. The BEE quota kids were taking over. He tore the half-written fine off the book and tossed it out the window. There was definitely something off about that man. Lyle dismissed it and turned up the Marvin Gaye on his sound system. He drove off, happy he would never have to see the icy black corporate man again. When Lyle got home, he slid the BEE whiskey to the back of his cabinet, saving it for a special occasion. He preferred brandy anyway.
Lyle woke up refreshed and ready for the day. His fiancé, Jade, was still fast asleep. He got out of bed delicately so as not to wake her, and tiptoed out of the room. He put on the kettle and took out two mugs. Jade’s favourite one with the flowers printed on it, and a normal one for himself. He slipped a teabag into her mug, added two spoons of sugar, poured in the hot water and squeezed the teabag until all its aromas had seeped in. He took the teabag out the mug and threw it into the bin. Then he chucked some coffee in the other mug and added a single shot of brandy for himself.

*Now is the time*, thought Lyle. Early morning. Up before her. Sunlight streaming through the windows. Lyle tiptoed through the carpeted lounge, and slipped his Marvin Gaye’s *Greatest Hits* CD into the player. The sound travelled through to the bedroom. He took a big sip of his brandy coffee and skipped to the seventh song on the CD, *Let’s get it oooooon*. He clicked his fingers as the first line oozed through the speakers.

*I’ve been really tryyyyy-iiing, baby....*

Lyle tapped the rhythm on the soft carpet with his bare feet, comfortable in his old T-shirt and silk boxer shorts. He took another gulp of his brandy coffee, bobbed his head and smiled to himself as he hummed. Now was the time. Before she woke up. He turned up the volume,

*Ooooooh! Come on. Let’s get it on... Aaaaaaaaaah, baby! Let’s get it on...*

Slowly, he strolled, digging his heels into the carpet, inserting little dance moves after every fourth step. He twirled with his coffee in his one hand and her tea in the other. The music boomed through the house and a huge smile settled into his face. As he stepped in through the bedroom door, he sang in the sexiest baritone he
could master. A mug in each hand and sex in his eyes, Marvin Gaye’s words pouring from his diaphragm,

*So come on, come on, come on, come on, come on baaaaby, stop beating ’round the bush...*

Jade stirred. She opened her eyes and grinned at him as he placed her steaming tea on her bedside table. He kissed her cheek. She shook her head sleepily, watching him and smiling. Lyle took a couple of steps back to give her the perfect view of him. He rolled his shoulders back as he launched into the chorus with a half-smile. His left hand slowly lifted up his old T-shirt as he ground his hips forward, oblivious to his beer-belly jiggling over his boxers. And then he sang it to her – with the sweetest depth of emotion, looking her up and down, Lyle shook his thighs so that his manhood wiggled conspicuously through the silk shorts and his stomach fat swayed. He licked his lips and broke into a wide-open, devoted smile as he walked towards the bed.

Jade burst out laughing and melted at the hilarious sight in front of her. Lyle wiggled it a little more. He gyrated his hips as he got closer to her. Then he swept her out from under the covers, lifted her in his arms and sang into her ear with all his intensity and sincerity. The sum of the undiscovered performer within him. Surprisingly on-key,

*Let’s get in oooooooon!*

She was on her period. And Lyle honestly didn’t give a fuck. He would pull the string out with his teeth. Her legs were wrapped around him and she was giggling. He knew this was his shot. He laid her down, still swaying to the beat and examining her body with deep appreciation, marvelling at her elegant curves. All of Lyle smiled.
Heart, gut and dick. *Jassis*, but he loved this woman. He shifted down between her thighs, gave it a kiss and stared at her with his droopiest bedroom eyes,

‘Haal die proppie uit?’
Chapter Nine

Sgt Lyle Bekink was about to leave the police headquarters that morning when he received yet another case-file. He’d done his work for the day and he was ready to hit the pub. Sighing the sigh of the over-worked, he glanced at the latest car theft case and put it away for tomorrow morning.

**Time of Crime:** Saturday, between 5 A.M. and 9 A.M

**Registration Number:** CA 387 983

**Place of Crime:** Sea Point, Cape Town

**Last seen:** Place of residence, Sea Point

**Colour:** Black

**Model:** BMW M3

Strange. He’d seen a similar black BMW on Friday night. He wondered if it was the same car. The BEE corporate’s strange cold stare flashed back into his mind. Nah, it couldn’t be the same car. That driver wasn’t a thief. He looked way too put-together, and he certainly wasn’t the kind of man who would ever leave his precious vehicle out of sight.

Lyle’s phone claimed his attention. *Jade calling.* Lyle didn’t answer. He had come to work *on a Sunday* with the sole reason of avoiding her. She had pissed him
off properly this time. Lyle had spent a beautiful day with her only to switch on the TV last night and see her half-fucking-naked on the screen. Slut. He couldn’t even think about her. He left his Blackberry on the desk and continued packing up. He left the station, got into his Mazda and drove. The stolen BMW could wait.

He ditched the idea of going to the pub. He would drink at home – it was cheaper. The air-con in his Mazda was broken and he sweated in his uniform with all four windows rolled down. Ray-Bans on. First button undone. When he pulled into his driveway, Devesh was already walking outside. He must have heard his car. But the smile on this man’s face! At least someone was happy. Devesh had clearly had a better day than himself. Lyle hadn’t seen his neighbour this happy in a long while. Must be a woman.

Devesh had been Lyle’s neighbour for almost three years. Lyle remembered the first time he saw him. The big Indian man had pulled up to the driveway of his new house with all his possessions in a growling beige Buick. Car the size of a ship. Everything Devesh owned could fit into that car. The odd thing was that there was no furniture inside it. Hardly any clothing. No creature comforts. No ornaments. What took up the bulk of the space in that Buick were other car-parts. Made up 80% of Devesh’s possessions. Assets, he called them. The inside of that Buick had looked liked Devesh filled his car with all he could steal from a scrapyard. He remembered how threatening Devesh had looked the first time he saw him get out of that Buick. Huge, rough-looking motherfucker. All bulging muscle, tattoos and un-trimmed stubble. A bear of a man. Lyle had been a bit scared of him. But upon meeting him for the first time, Devesh’s hard face broke into a wide smile. Devesh had immediately offered Lyle a brandy and a cigarette, gaining his favour off the bat.
Not much had changed since then, Lyle thought as he saw Devesh pouring him a drink while he walked up the driveway. He had long since sold the Buick, and in its place, stood a Pontiac Firebird. Lyle walked towards the red American car glinting in the sun, and burst out laughing at Devesh’s smile. It was an unmistakeable smile. A man only ever smiled like that for one reason: The promise of pussy.

It was about time his friend found himself a lady. About time Devesh got himself covered in sweat with a woman on top of him – rather than dripping in diesel fuel with a car on top of him. It would make for a healthy change.

‘Devesh,’

Lyle took the drink, grateful for the ice-cold brandy he’d been pleading for the whole scorching fucking day. He gulped down half the glass before he continued,

‘Can a man smile so wide, huh? Tell me it’s not a kindt that has your piel on a string, my broe.’

Looking at the rather ridiculous grin on his neighbour’s face, Lyle’s mood was suddenly much lighter. Lyle smiled to himself, gulping down. Nothing like a cold drink after work. Devesh was still beaming, with a cigarette between his teeth. The man was in love. *Devesh in love*, he thought. He wasn’t sure what to say: Congratulations or good luck? Condolences? Lyle didn’t know. He anticipated Devesh’s flat-out denial.

‘Don’t be taatie, I’m on the skarrel ek sê. Skaars time for kinners. But, now that you mention it, there is this goose I wanna dala. How’s things at the station?’

Things at the station could not be more savagely shit than they already were. Lyle had applied for a promotion and gotten turned down. Again. Now, he was demotivated.
He hated his job, his colleagues, his superiors, the fucking building he worked in, the crappy coffee they drank from the machine. He was sick of it all.

‘Ag, I’m just kak moeg, Devesh,’

Lyle drained his brandy. Devesh poured him another. That’s what he liked about Devesh, he ruminated, Devesh didn’t wait for him to ask, no, he just poured another drink. Devesh understood Lyle. Lyle never needed to ask. Devesh simply knew when he needed another drink. No judgment. Just the simple mutual acceptance that life is kak and we need to drink, so let’s do it together.

‘Long fucking day, I tell you. A BMW 3 Series was now just reported stolen and the captain is drukking on my nommer to find the stukkie skelm who jepped the thing. The man’s jas. We not gonna find the car, but I need a promotion, ek sê, Jade’s permy dikbek cause there’s no kroon.’

Lyle desperately needed a promotion. How many more times would he have to apply and get turned down before he finally got one? Was he not a good enough sergeant? No ways. He was good at what he did. Lyle knew he was good at what he did. He would get there eventually. He just hoped it would come sooner.

‘A 3 Series, huh?’ asked Devesh.

‘Aweh.’

‘What colour?’

‘Black M3.’

Lyle was sticky and dehydrated. All he wanted to do was drink. He suddenly wished he had a pool. He had always wanted a pool. Now, he was becoming increasingly
aware of the fact he may never be able to afford one. How much does it cost to build a pool anyway? He looked at Devesh. Devesh’s big smile had faded.

‘So tell me about this cherry. When am I gonna meet her?’

‘Dunno.’

‘White lady?’

Lyle didn’t understand Devesh’s thing for white women. Last girl he dated was a skinny blonde bitch – with no ass. Lyle could not wrap his head around it. How could any brown man want a woman with no ass? Why deprive yourself of the ass? The guy didn’t know what he was missing. Troubled as his own relationship with his fiancé was, the ass made it all worthwhile, every time.

Devesh in love was dangerous. How someone so tough and practical could be such an idiot when it came to women… Not all women. But when Devesh fell, he crashed like an 80-floor skyscraper and Lyle was worried. This wasn’t just pussy. No, it was more. That smile was too wide. This was that heavy shit. The kind of shit that could destroy a good man like Devesh permanently. But Lyle tried not to be too cynical about love. They finished their glasses and Lyle watched Devesh stretching out his leg. Devesh looked like he was in pain.

‘What happened to you?’

‘My leg’s in its poes.’

Lyle wondered, for a second, how deep Devesh’s world went. What exactly he had done to fuck up his leg like that – it wasn’t that Lyle wanted details. He just liked to believe that Devesh was safe, that he wasn’t doing anything too stupid. That he
wasn’t digging himself into a hole he couldn’t get out of. He thought about that lowlife, Junaid. There were constant complaints about Junaid coming in to the station.

‘You not still involved with that skollie from the yaardt, nê? Weet jy, you and that waterslamse stukkie kak of a cousin you have, the two of you, is net kaksoek. Don’t make me worry about you, my broe. I thought you klaar with the skelms.’

‘Naai man, I’m done with that. Just getting old. Tripped over a tyre yesterday and fucked up my hip.’

Bullshit. There was no way Devesh tripped over a tyre and fucked up his hip – like that. Lyle downed his drink. No – he didn’t want to know. Whatever it was, he felt sure that Devesh had it under control. Lyle hoped he had it under control. He liked Devesh and he didn’t want to see the man behind bars. But ask no questions, hear no lies. He shook his empty glass,

‘So kykie, are we suiping tonight or what?’

But Devesh couldn’t drink tonight. He had to work. Lyle sighed. He didn’t want to go home. Lyle envied Devesh’s newfound love. The romance was still fresh. The lust was still pressing. The dick was still hard. Lyle didn’t want to see Jade. All he wanted to do tonight was drink. And seeing as Devesh wasn’t going to drink with him, he would *suip* solo. No issue.

Lyle walked across the driveway to his own house. He swung open the door, chucked his keys on the table and took out his bottle of brandy. As he closed his booze cabinet and turned around, he knew something was wrong. He stared at a pair of black stiletto boots lying on the floor of the living room. They had been tossed there carelessly. Jade never left her shoes lying on the floor. She was very particular
about them. She always put them away neatly. She cherished her shoes, preserved them, tried to make them last as long as possible. She saw them as lifelong investments. She would never throw her stiletto boots on the floor and just leave them there. She loved those shoes more than she loved him. Lyle stepped over them carefully, puzzled.

He glanced at the table and saw a cup of half-finished cold tea with the teabag still in the cup. Jade never left the teabag in the cup. She always squeezed it thoroughly and then took it out before drinking it. It annoyed her when he made her tea and left the teabag in the cup. Why would she have left the teabag in her own cup of tea? Lyle walked past the table.

As he made his way into the kitchen, he noticed a pie packet in the bin, along with a small piece of discarded pie recently tossed in. The bin’s lid was still open. It looked like chicken and mushroom. One of those pies you buy at the garage. Jade never bought take-away food. She would never be seen eating a pie. And on top of that, she was on a severe diet. For the past week, Lyle had only seen her eat Cup-a-Soup with a teaspoon. He stared at the plate on the kitchen table. It was full of crumbs. She had eaten it – or most of it. And then tossed the last small piece in the bin. Lyle couldn’t understand what he was seeing. It wasn’t that these things were absurd: the scattered stilettos, the teabag in the cup, the pie... It was just very uncharacteristic of his fiancé.

Their crystal vase was gone. Jade’s mother had given it to them when they first moved in together. Lyle had never liked the vase – it was given to the house begrudgingly. Jade’s mother had never approved of him or their relationship. Yet, the bitch insisted they take the bloody vase. So they did. And now it was gone.
He scanned the living area and the kitchen for anything else that seemed off. He found that his scale model Pontiac GTO was missing. It used to stand on the shelf. Devesh had given it to him for his birthday last year.

He walked into the passage leading to the bedroom, hoping to find Jade. But before he reached the door, she came stumbling out. Lyle couldn’t decide whether she looked scared and shaken up or whether she had just woken up from a nightmare with smudged make-up. Her eyes were wet and shining. And she wasn’t wearing the teardrop amethyst chain he gave her. She always wore it. Her chest looked bare without it. Her mascara was smudged into her temples. Her eye shadow had seeped into her cheeks from crying. And she had no earrings on. Jade always wore earrings. She only ever took them off when she went to bed.

Jade collapsed into his arms, melting into him, completely vulnerable, tears streaming down her face.

‘What happened?’ Lyle was shocked, temporarily forgetting about that half-naked advertisement of her he’d seen. He had never seen Jade look quite so undone.

Jade didn’t answer. Her shoulders heaved as she sobbed. Lyle tried to steady her in his arms. She looked bare and plain without her make-up and without her usual jewellery. She didn’t seem herself at all minus the many layers of foundation plastered on her face. Without the sparkling accessories adorning her limbs, she looked... radiant. Expressive and naked, pouring with emotion. She just appeared so much more... human. Lyle held her in stunned silence as the sleeping, neglected flesh in his pants rose like a temple. Suddenly, there she was. The woman he had fallen in love with. Entirely unlike the fake bitch he had seen her become over the years.
Sloppy make-up, messy hair and streaming eyes, Lyle was transfixed. She still looked good. Jade was wearing her denim shorts – the one that made her pert ass pop. She was wearing that tank top that elongated her torso and those wedge heels that gave her dancer’s calves.

Between sobs, Lyle made out something about a robbery. Through the muffled sounds of her sniffs and irregular breaths, he discerned that they had stolen her amethyst necklace and various other items of her favourite jewellery and clothing. And her Brazilian shoes – at the mention of which, she burst into a full-on second wind of wailing.

All Lyle could think about was fucking her.

Apparently, she had left the house to buy something to drink and when she came back, the whole place was upside down,

‘Door standing wide open,’ Jade sobbed, wiping the mascara deeper into her face, ‘My favourite dresses gone,’ she scrunched up her nose, ‘Mommy’s vase...’

She rattled off all the stolen objects as Lyle tried to console her and curb his thoughts from the sexual. It was the first time she’d needed him in ages. As he gazed at her, he couldn’t remember when last she had wanted him this close to her.

‘My chain, your GTO...’ she continued in a shaky voice.

He held her head and let her cry into his chest. He had been quite fond of that model GTO. But he didn’t care. He was in awe of the fact that Jade actually wanted his consolation.

When she calmed down a bit, Lyle made her some tea. He took care to squeeze all the flavour out of the teabag before removing it. If she hadn’t been such a
sight for sore eyes, he might have asked her how she could have been so stupid as to leave the door unlocked. The whole thing could’ve been prevented if she had just used her common sense. But it wasn’t necessary. She already knew. And he would remind her later to always lock the door. Something awful could have happened to her. But Lyle would give her the safety lecture later, when all this had blown over. He could hardly contain his smile. She was okay. And she wanted him.

He just couldn’t get his head around the way she looked. A definite mess. And yet, somehow, underneath it all, it was as if she had just discovered something wonderful. Her hair seemed shinier even though it was un-brushed. Her skin glowed despite the lack of make-up. Lyle couldn’t understand it. Jade’s body seemed to be bursting with hidden joy. Her eyes gleamed bright through the tears. Maybe it was just the shock, the after-effect of it all. Maybe the robbery had woken her up. But Lyle sensed something more. She looked like she was trying to suppress a smile. Not a malicious smile. But a genuine, open smile at life’s wonder – and yet it was a smile she couldn’t show him. A smile she couldn’t smile. He hadn’t seen her look this way in years. Was it just the drama of it all that had her looking so alive? It never occurred to Lyle that she might be hiding something more sinister.

Jade’s clothes lay scattered all over the bedroom floor, haphazardly tossed into piles. Lyle figured she had thrown them there to search through what was gone and what she still had. Judging by the sheer quantity of material in the room, Lyle guessed they couldn’t have taken too much. Only one thing really gnawed at him about the whole situation: The teardrop amethyst necklace. She always wore it. How could they have taken it if she was wearing it at the time, if she was at the shop while they were breaking in? Unless she took it off before she left the house. But that seemed unlike her.
Lyle let it slide. He didn’t want to bring it up now in the state that Jade was in. Better to just leave it. She gazed at him, pleading for his understanding.

‘It’s not you, Jadie,’ Lyle assured her, stroking her hair and passing her the tea,

‘It’s the crime in this city. It’s getting worse every day. A woman can’t even be safe in her own house anymore without these naaiers trying to break in,’

Lyle grunted. He still felt like pouring himself that drink, but he refrained. There were more important matters at hand. He needed to sort this out. He needed to make more money. He couldn’t have Jade living in danger like this. Lyle felt as if he’d failed her. She sipped her tea,

‘I’m just so glad you’re here now,’ she said, her voice hoarse from crying.

‘Why didn’t you call me immediately after it happened?’ Lyle asked, sounding harsher than he intended.

‘Oh, you know, didn’t wanna bother you at work –‘

‘Jadie, this is a robbery. We need to report it immediately.’

Jade sighed. She didn’t want to leave the house now. Neither did he. But it had to be done. He picked his keys up off the table,

‘Let’s go.’

‘Right now?’

‘Right now. You have to tell them exactly how the house looked when you came back. Everything you can remember. Don’t worry, I’ll help you through it. We’ll go straight to Jacque – won’t have to stand in a queue. I’ll find these guys, Jade.

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The fuckers. Just imagine if you were inside the house when they broke in? They could’ve hurt you, Jadie, I don’t even want to think about what they could’ve done…”

‘I know.’

‘I just don’t want anything to happen to you.’

‘I know,’

Jade put her hand over his hand as he shifted into first gear. She was safe now. With him. He’d sort this out. He had the entire police force and all its resources to help him find them. And if they didn’t find them, he would do it himself. Devesh would help him. And then they would fuck those guys up. Properly.

Lyle called his partner to come to the station. Jacque Viljoen. He knew that Jacque would come. Jacque was just that kind of guy. Anything for a friend. And Jacque had enough sway to cut through the red tape and make this quick. When Jacque arrived, Lyle listened to Jade describe how everything looked when she got back – everything she could remember. Her report was stilted and certain things didn’t add up. Lyle knew it. And so did Jacque. When Jacque glanced at him to indicate his reservations about Jade’s sequence of events, Lyle dismissed it with a subtle shake of his head. Jade was obviously still a bit scattered. It was understandable that she couldn’t give a completely coherent account. It was to be expected from a delicate soul such as hers. She wasn’t accustomed to crime.

When they got home from the police station, they were both exhausted. As the couple walked up the driveway, Lyle noticed Devesh’s Pontiac standing outside. Devesh never left his Pontiac outside. He was probably just up late, thought Lyle, with a huge sense of fatigue. Jade walked straight back into the bedroom to clear up
the mess while Lyle poured himself that brandy he’d been longing for the whole day.

One brandy turned into a solid sixteen. Lyle wasn’t certain of Jade’s story. Her
quivering lip. Her mascara tears. The missing Amethyst chain. Her glowing clavicle –
bare.
Chapter Ten

Monday morning. 1116 police stations stirred as the sprawling regional SAPS offices roused to deliver their services. Each building was identical to the last, holding at least one jaded cop discreetly pouring a double shot into his morning coffee. Klipdrift. 7:15. Every day.

The instant coffee machine was invisible that morning. If Lyle didn’t know it was there lurking behind the mass of blue uniforms, he would’ve assumed it didn’t exist. The caffeine queue was always longer on Mondays. Sleep-deprived and impatient, he pushed his way through his colleagues who shot sideways glances his way. Yes, I know I reek of brandy. No, I do not care.

Lyle stood in the corner of the personnel kitchen, waiting his turn in silence. It was too early for the kind of morning chatter going on in the queue. The light was too harsh. The buzzing of the photocopy machines were too loud. The noise of the queue annoyed him. It always annoyed him. Get your coffee and go. That was all Lyle asked. But no. They’d rather stand around unrushed, explaining – in great detail – their weekends’ events to anyone who’d listen. Congesting the space. Pissing him off. Keeping him from his fucking morning coffee. Agitated as he was, Lyle understood: Procrastination is a cop’s only luxury.

It had all become second nature to him. Like the fifteen seconds he took to brush his teeth. The twenty minute drive to the office. Same time. Same place. Every day. Unquestioned. A set number of minutes dedicated to a pre-designated task. Hollow time. Regulated. Like a sunken cost. The motion of the queue was imbedded
in his muscle memory. In fact, Lyle couldn’t imagine walking straight to the coffee machine and putting the caffeine to his lips without the long line bustling with small talk.

When Lyle got to the front, he filled his cup and made a sharp left for the toilet. As always, he went into the far right cubicle and shut the door. He slipped his little brandy flask out from his inside pocket and imbued the cheap coffee with a generous splash of Klipdrift. Then he made his way to his desk and continued to ignore his colleagues. The clunking sound of official police stamps grew steadier and louder and Lyle cringed every time a docket was dated or a birth certificate was stamped. The sound was torturous, sending a throbbing wave from his forehead through to the back of his neck.

‘Bekink!’

Jacque walked up to him before he had a chance to sit down. Out of all the cops, Jacque was the most loved by civilians. They looked into his bright blue eyes under his mass of dirty blonde curls, and felt safe. Chiselled jaw-line, open features, broad chest and the heart of a puppy. The golden boy. Jacque walked into a room and women dropped their panties. He walked into a crime scene and people fell over their feet to provide information. Many a traumatised lady had fallen into his arms, seeking consolation after witnessing something awful. Jacque was the face of justice that people preferred to see. He was what you envisioned when you thought of a hero. The guy could have walked straight out of a DC comic. Lyle had taken to him immediately. It was just impossible not to like the guy – even though he’d always been slightly envious of him. Jacque handed him a file without mentioning last night’s event with Jade. Jacque could tell that Lyle didn’t want to speak about it,
‘BMW M3 still missing.’

‘Is it flagged?’ Lyle was irritated.

‘On all our systems throughout the country.’

‘So…?’

‘Some recent sightings to check out.’

Lyle scanned the description again:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time of Crime:</th>
<th>Saturday, between 5 A.M. and 9 A.M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Registration Number:</td>
<td>CA 387 983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Crime:</td>
<td>Sea Point, Cape Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last seen:</td>
<td>Place of residence, Sea Point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colour:</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model:</td>
<td>BMW M3 2005 Convertible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Features:</td>
<td>Black leather seats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>300 horsepower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 litre 6-cylinder engine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘Guy’s called in – five times today already – demanding we check this place, then that place…,’
Jacque looked happy. He was having a happy Monday morning. Lyle shook his head.

‘You telling me the owner’s trying to find his own car?’ asked Lyle.

‘Correct.’

Jacque leaned against the wall, nonchalant, sipping his morning coffee. Jacque didn’t need a splash of brandy to get him through the day. Lyle grunted and looked at all the luxury amenities.

**Auto Climate Control** – *too cool to sweat.*

**Cruise Control** – *too lazy to drive manual.*

**Keyless Entry** – *won’t bend to open the door.*

**Navigation** – *no sense of direction.*

**Heated Lumbar seats** – *God forbid his ass should get cold.*

**Adjustable leather-wrapped steering wheel** – *cow-skin beneath his fingertips.*

**ABS** – *naturally.*

**Traction Control** – *too shitty a driver to manage a curb at high speed.*

‘Guy’s paid for all the customisation extras,’

Jacque pointed out, confirming what Lyle was already thinking: *This car belonged to one rich, lazy motherfucker.* He already didn’t feel much sympathy for the man. Lyle carried on reading imaginary words, out loud this time,
'Specially built for the pussies who need a video screen to help them park,' Lyle said scathingly.

Jacque burst out laughing, spraying Lyle with coffee. Lyle smiled for the first time that morning.

‘Good to know there’s still some humour left in you, Bekink.’

The BMW had been stolen in central Cape Town. No tracker device. They would have to conduct a search or two, purely as protocol, to shut the owner up. No way in hell they were gonna find the thing. Way too many of them on the road right now. The car was probably getting a brand new paint-job somewhere in Ravensmead as they spoke, complete with some vinyls on the fenders while the engine was getting ripped out. Poor bastard.

Lyle sat down at his cramped wooden table as Jacque walked away, leaving the file on his desk. Lyle’s belly bulged over his belt as he bent forward. He would have to join a gym. Get a contract. Incur another expense. His desk was scattered with documents pleading for a paperweight. A framed photograph of Jade beamed tall above the pages. Her pair of plump lips smiled at him as she modelled her marvellously-cut black bikini for the camera. He had been holding the camera that day. She’d been smitten. Wanting to fuck him every two hours.

Lyle’s chair sunk perfectly around the contours of his buttocks as he slid into its mould, content. *Good morning Bellville.* He slammed his coffee mug onto a pile of unassembled documents, splashing a rain of caffeine and brandy onto the paper-storm. He let out a loud yawn and stroked his aching spine. Jade had tossed and turned with no end last night after the robbery. Grabbing the duvet, knocking him in the ribs, re-adjusting her position, waking up every half an hour with dark rings under
her eyes. Despite the copious amount of brandy in his blood, Lyle hadn’t gotten much sleep. And, of course, he was the one who had to wake up at half-past fucking-six to get to work on time while she slept in until ten every morning.

He sipped the remedy of hot coffee and brandy as his heavy shoulders eased into a subdued droop. His eyelids dropped involuntarily in the warm office air. The room buzzed with familiar complaints. His muscles were sore. He cringed as he listened to the snippets of conversation from his colleagues coming down off their weekend highs. Their shrill voices sliced into his hangover like a blade into jelly. Lyle took off his spectacles and let his head roll down as he stretched his neck. Reluctantly, his eyes met with the formidable clutter and Lyle noticed something very unusual. Neatly stacked on top of the overlapping papers, was a big brown envelope bulging at him. The clear black letters read:

**LYLE BEKINK**

Lyle’s stomach turned. His sweet brandy coffee curdled in his belly and his eyes darted around the room, searching the faces of his colleagues. They were preoccupied. Consumed in their conversations. Jacque was leaning his elbow on the desk of a mildly attractive new constable. No one had seen the envelope on his desk. It wasn’t an official paper. Lyle didn’t know how it had gotten there. His sleepy thoughts perked up. What was that bulge in the envelope? Could it be...? – Fuck, it sure looked like it. He strained his eyes to see through the brown parchment, but it was too thick. What else could it be, but that? That glorious rectangular bulge we all want to see at the bottom of any envelope? It was too familiar in shape. Lyle scanned the perimeter of the room once again and assured himself that nobody was looking his
way. He lifted the flap while keeping his eyes on his colleagues. He stuck two fingers into the belly of the envelope and then he felt it. The layers of cash inside.

Lyle exhaled slowly. He closed the flap again and flipped the parcel onto his lap so it was out of sight, beneath his desk. Away from the bored eyes of the demotivated constables and warrant officers, glued to their seats, sipping shitty coffee, stuck doing admin. He ran his fingers over the envelope. Pregnant with money. He would need to decide on his first step in dealing with this little surprise. There should be some kind of note here. Some information accompanying the parcel. Lyle lowered his eyes to his lap and delicately opened the flap again. He recognised the burnt yellow hue between his hands. R200 notes. All of them.

With his middle finger plunged in between the folds, he searched for something more, a letter of explanation, a folded document, anything. And then he found it. A little square piece of paper. Slightly smaller than the rectangular width of the money. Slightly rougher than the texture of the R200 notes. He took the little page out of the envelope and put it onto his desk, still keeping the parcel of cash on his lap. Lyle moved the little piece of paper to the bottom of his desk, just underneath his chin. He placed his coffee mug on the tip of the page so that no one but himself could see it. With burning eyes, Lyle read the two lines of typed information, which accompanied the stack of money on his lap:

**DROP THE SUBLIME STONES CASE**

**THE OTHER R450 000 TO FOLLOW**

Lyle sank into a blissful paralysis deep in his comfortable chair and clenched his buttocks. He bit his lip in shaky pleasure and mouthed a long and soundless Fuuuuuuuuuuuucckk! He had been bribed before. Many times. People were scared of jail.
It was all an expected by-product of being a cop. Routine. Like the morning coffee queue. The twenty minute drive. The splash of brandy at 7:15. Brushing your teeth. Every cop had been bribed. Bribes were common, of course, for only one reason: *They worked so well.*

Lyle had accepted his fair share of bribes. Speeding motorists, all apologetic, flashing a couple of R100 notes at him through the car window. Drunken rich kids swerving in their daddy’s Mercs, petrified of a holding cell and their parents finding out, begging him to take their allowance money instead, pleading for him not to say anything. Students buying their dagga bankies, caught in the act, handing over the weed and emptying out their baggy pockets in return for his silence. No one wants a criminal record.

For years, wayward citizens had been supplying Lyle with some extra pocket money, the occasional joint or a confiscated bottle of wine. This had never been an issue for him. Never before had he hesitated to take the money and let it go. If the crime wasn’t severe, he would accept the bribe with a scowl and a stern warning to the reckless soul – *not to do it again.* No real harm ever came of it. It was, after all, a mutually beneficial practice. A regular occurrence for the cop and an easy way out for the – mostly decent – citizen transgressing. But this? This was different.

With his hands on the paper, his sleeping mind awoke. Lyle’s instincts kicked in. He shifted his glasses over his small brown eyes and analysed every face that looked at him for more than a second. *Nah. No one knows about this envelope.* Acutely aware of his central position in the open-plan office, Lyle slipped the envelope into his pocket. He downed his mix of shitty coffee and cheap brandy and reread the note.
He focussed on the last line: **R450 000 to follow**. Meaning there was already R50 000 in the envelope. Ten percent up front. Could it be? Could R50 000 fit in an envelope? He supposed it could – if it was exclusively R200 notes. Lyle scrolled down to the calculator function on his phone. R50 000. Divided by R200... would amount to 250 notes, meaning there should be two hundred and fifty sheets of money in here. That could easily fit in the envelope. In fact, the volume of that bulge looked exactly right for the amount he’d worked out, a mere ten percent of what was still to come if he took the money and did what they asked.

Never had Lyle been offered this amount of illicit cash before. Sublime Stones had a monopoly on the diamonds in Southern Africa. They’d suffered a series of robberies, insider jobs and stolen merchandise. The diamond smugglers were high rollers. And if they were stealing from Sublime Stones, they weren’t fucking around. These guys didn’t commit crimes that paid anywhere below the six figure bracket. Ever. This was petty cash to whoever dropped the envelope on his desk.

It was all way too easy. The Sublime Stones case file lay peacefully stashed in a drawer in the Brigadier’s office cabinet, not twenty metres away from the grasp of Lyle’s itching palm. The Brigadier’s door was open and Lyle could see the cabinet from where he was sitting. The grey metal drawer. He could walk out with it right now. No problem. Maybe wait for lunch first, to be sure that the Brigadier wouldn’t be in for while. Then step out and throw the file into the bin outside. Done. Maybe not **that** bin though. Maybe he’ll take it on a little stroll further down the road, away from the station, and throw it into one of the bins there. Just in case some over-enthusiastic official demands a search for it. Fuck it, maybe he’ll just take the file home with him and throw it in his own big black bin. The garbage truck will come get it on Thursday
and then it will be gone forever. Or maybe he’ll just burn the thing. Ja. Burn it. Safer. No trace, no trail, just ash. Lyle smiled his small, nervous smile.

Brimming with ill intent, he leaned forward to get a closer look into the Brigadier’s office, to see if he was in. He strained his neck to see the cabinet. And as if management had read his mind, the Brigadier walked out of his office straight into Lyle’s gaze. Lyle looked away immediately as the Brigadier stomped his way in between the desks. He was a short, stocky, officious little man with a booming voice that loved its own sound and thrived on the feel of authority. Slowly, Lyle reclined back into his seat and made himself look busy.

A trail of aftershave followed the Brigadier as he strolled around the room, smiling at his underpaid team, honing his act for an audience of inferiors: We’re-all-in-this-together-gents....to-maintain-some-justice....-in-this-godforsaken-suburb....bullshit bullshit, more bullshit. Nobody bought it. But all of them pretended to buy it. They nodded in deference as the Brigadier tried to look jaded, just like everyone else, despite his five-figure pay-check. A month. The poes.

Lyle suppressed his pulsing desire to spit at the man. He clenched his itching palm and tore his gaze away from the grey metal drawer encasing the Sublime Stones file. He smiled broadly at the Brigadier: a full-on, tooth-baring, high-cheeked, happy-employee million-bucks smile: Fuck you sir, he thought as the Brigadier nodded back – the slightest nod – in affirmation of Lyle’s existence.

As soon as the overpaid poes passed his desk, Lyle looked back at the grey metal drawer, ignoring the Brigadier’s speech. He was congratulating the team, as a whole, on the R360 000’s worth of tik confiscated off the streets this weekend passed. Keep up the good work bullshit bullshit kak kak etc... GREY. METAL. DRAWER.
Lyle could hardly contain himself. But he knew that this wasn’t the right time. Not now. Not in full view of the Brigadier. If he was gonna do this, he would be smart about it. Better wait until lunch. Put it in his bag. Take care of it later, at home.

Right now, the baas was in his face and he had to go and look for some rich dick’s BMW. When the Brigadier finally shut up, Lyle and Jacque got to work. They drove in convoy and then split up as the radio dispatcher sent them two different ways. Lyle knew the search was futile. The number plate would have been ripped off by now. And, if it was the usual local car-thieves that Lyle suspected it was, the car would be deep in the Northern Suburbs by now anyway, busy being re-registered. So when the dry voice crackled through the dispatcher and sent him to the CBD to survey a black BMW spotted outside Woodstock, Lyle just sighed. Ok then. He put in his Barry White CD and sang along, envisioning his life R500 000 richer and wishing he had a sub in his police Mazda. Ten minutes later, he hit traffic. He switched on the blue lights, hit the siren and cut effortlessly through the highway congestion, smiling as the cars gave way for him.
Chapter Eleven

8:15 that evening, Lyle got a call. The owner of the BMW 3M called into the station. He had found the car himself. *On his own.* And he wants to drop the search for the thief. Lyle couldn’t believe it. Jacque was probably already on his way home by now. Lyle was fuming. He had known the search was stupid, but this was too much. The *hours* he’d spent trailing and analysing every black BMW spotted, could have been spent doing something else. Something better.

Anybody can handle a stolen vehicle investigation. Anybody can handle a basic crime scene. Lyle was better than this kind of donkeywork. He had the competency to investigate more complex cases and he knew it.

The futility of the BMW M3 search had triggered Lyle’s frustration. He couldn’t understand it. How had the man found his own stolen vehicle without the help of the police? That kind of thing very rarely happened. It baffled him. Did the man know the thief personally? Was he blackmailed by the thief? Did he feel sorry for the thief? Lyle found the whole situation very suspicious. Why would he not want the thief who stole his car to be prosecuted? Lyle had no patience for people who wasted the time of the police force. He would get to the bottom of the BMW-owner’s story.

He popped into Sea Point police station and made a quick copy of the vehicle owner’s original statement. He chucked the document in his boot next to the big brown R50 000 envelope.
Lyle drove home from Cape Town Central at over 140km an hour, pissed off that he was stuck in a job that bored him to tears, zipping through all the side routes and back roads in the city he had come to know so well. He switched on the car radio to hear the news. There was an accident on the N1 right before the new billboard of Jade – in lingerie. She would probably love that. He turned off the radio.

Lyle drove to Bellville station to fetch the Sublime Stones file and burn it. Tonight, just do the deed and be done with it, he thought. And then wait for the other R450 000 to appear. There was so much he could do with that cash. Pay off his house. Improve his house. Maybe even put a deposit down on a new place. Take a holiday. Somewhere overseas. Italy. Jade would love that. They both needed it.

But, even as he imagined the cash, the risks played themselves out in his mind. If he got caught, he would be fired. He’d be shunned by the police force. And he wouldn’t be allowed to return. Then what would he do? He would probably end up working nightshifts as a bouncer at some nightclub for teenagers. Or worse: a security guard at a shopping complex. With that thought, Lyle made a U-turn and drove back home. Maybe he had taken enough bribes. Maybe it was time to stop now. Jade still wanted kids. He couldn’t afford to get fired right now. Lyle breathed out slowly.

He couldn’t risk his chances of a promotion. The Captain was considering him for a higher rank on the Organised Crime team and that was a big step. It takes a processed thinker to work as a superior on those cases. It takes an experienced policeman. An analytical mind. All qualities that he possessed. Higher-ranking officers work with informants, not witnesses. The nature of his work would change. It wouldn’t be the usual: find the witness, get the statement, open the docket, arrest the
chap – same old bullshit. He could be working with intelligence officers and recorded conspiracies, exposing syndicates – rather than accepting bribes from them.

All-in-all, Lyle wanted to move up in the world. He was on the verge of marriage, thinking about starting a family. But a coloured non-commissioned officer, trying to move up in the ranks, was automatically fucked. Lyle knew why his promotion hadn’t come yet. The demographic stats for commissioned officers were common knowledge. They spoke for themselves:

57% Black

28% White

10% Coloured

5% Indian

70% Male

30% Female

Still, they were trying to increase the female and black percentage while decreasing the white percentage, leaving the coloured police officer neglected in the middle. Again. He wasn’t black enough and he didn’t have a poes. That simple.

Race politics in the police force had always been shitty and Lyle doubted it was ever going to change. Fuck BEE. If they won’t give him the promotion, he would take the syndicate bribe and improve his life without them. It was becoming increasingly difficult to walk the straight and narrow.

Lyle Bekink had always considered himself a proud coloured man. Proud of his roots and proud of his culture. Even though that culture was largely limited to
excessive drinking, old American R&B, poorly spoken English, modified vehicles and consistent loudness except when eating. However, like most people who are defined by a group identity, Lyle did not see it that way.

He slipped in his Billy Paul CD and sang his frustration with the windows shut and the volume up, vindicated by the pigment of his skin. Moving to its rhythm, snapping his fingers, tapping the steering wheel, revelling in his exclusivity… Enjoying the fact that no white man could ever move like him. Struggling and yet imperious.

Lyle resented his life: twelve hours a day for a measly salary, chasing petty criminals from one side of Cape Town to the other. Never getting any recognition. When he’d started out, Lyle had enjoyed the feel of authority – even if it was mild authority – coupled with the sense of maintaining some order. The opportunity to save lives – the heroism of it all – had appealed to him. He thought he would be someone people respected. But mostly, people just resented him. The civilians in his area condemned the police as a threat, rather than regarding them as enforcers of safety.

Now faced with his dilemma, Lyle knew that the legitimate road forward was tedious and unrewarding. He could ignore the bribe and fight this battle the legitimate way. Apply for a promotion again and think of the long-term benefits: a better paycheck, less strenuous work hours, a position which actually compelled him to use his brain. He could be something more than a uniform following instructions. These things were on the cards for him – albeit a long and biased process away.

He needed more time to weigh things up, he thought. He wasn’t sure how much leeway he had to let this kind of high-stakes bribe linger. How much time would they give him to decide? He needed more time. The grey metal drawer wasn’t
going anywhere. For now, he had the fifty grand to play with. To slowly lure him further down the path of easy money. And that path was starting to look more and more appealing.

Lyle was almost home. He felt shattered from driving and thinking. He took the envelope of money and the police statement out of the boot. Lyle put the envelope in his safe along with his service pistol. He placed the document with the car-owner’s statement on the table. He would read it later. Jade had her usual makeup on this time but her hair was different. She looked at Lyle, waiting for a comment. But Lyle didn’t say anything. He didn’t comment on her appearance. He didn’t care right now.

‘What do you think of the hairstyle?’

He shrugged and answered without looking,

‘Mm. Nice.’

Jade went to the bedroom. Lyle was glad she’d left him alone with his thoughts. Before he had a chance to let them simmer, she shouted from the bedroom,

‘Lyle!’

‘Yes honey?’

‘Were you listening to the news on the radio on your way home? Did you hear about that guy who crashed his car on the N1? – Just before the Decadent Dames billboard of me? It was on the radio just now... It happened last night, right by that billboard with me –’

Lyle sighed and cut her off mid-speech.
‘- With you in the red lingerie... Ja ja, I know the one you’re talking about. But that’s not what I heard on the radio now on my way home.’

Jade was taller than Lyle as she walked back into the living room in her tiny dress and heels, with her long toned thighs dancing slightly as she spoke. Her head full of curls bounced as she emphasised her point. Lyle wished she would go away.

‘What do you mean? They said it was on the N1 as you come into Cape Town, which is exactly where the billboard is.’

‘Ja Jadie, but just because he happened to crash at that intersection, doesn’t mean he crashed because he was looking at you in your underwear. They said that there may have been another car involved. They’re looking into foul play and all that. So don’t get too excited.’

Jade threw her hands up and tried to look shocked.

‘I’m not getting excited! It’s a terrible thing that happened to the poor man. Shame man! How can you even think that I would be excited about something like that? I was just saying, you know.’

‘Ja Jadie.’

Lyle sighed. What did she expect? Should he be happy that male drivers were totalling their cars at the sight of her half-naked on a billboard? He had things to think about. He started reading the BMW-owner’s police statement:

On 30 October 2013, my black BMW M3 was stolen, between 5a.m. and 9a.m, from the driveway of my house in Sea Point, Stevenson Street, house number 64.
My BMW M3 was not broken into, as the thief was in possession of the car’s keys. She had slept at my place of residence the previous night and taken my car keys while I was sleeping. I am not familiar with the background of this woman and I do not know her name. In addition to my vehicle, she also stole various other items from my household including an iPhone 4, a white iPod 30GB, a Macbook Pro and four bottles of wine ranging in price from R90 to R370.

Suspect Description: White female

- Short black hair
- Approximately five foot
- No piercings or tattoos

Vehicle Owner: Mr. Denver Downes

Case Number: 10338/2013

Officer: Const. Sipho Malindi

Lyle’s eyebrows had stayed raised throughout his reading of the statement. And even as he put down the document, they did not return to their usual spot on his face,

‘Jadie! Just come listen to this kak!’

Jade emerged from the bedroom and Lyle read the statement to her, trying to contain his laughter while she grew increasingly uncomfortable with each word,

‘This bitch fucked him and then stole his phone, laptop, iPod and his CAR!’

Lyle roared with raucous glee,
‘What an idiot! What a dumb naai!’

Jade shuffled uncomfortably. She didn’t say anything. Lyle poured himself a triple shot with coke, dropped in five ice-blocks and fell onto the dirty pink sofa in the living room, enjoying the misfortune of the man. Jade went to bed. She didn’t share his mirth. They had grown apart. He kicked off his boots. The carpet felt hard beneath his feet.

An hour later, Lyle had sunk a good few centimetres deeper into the sofa. He hated that sofa. He hadn’t picked it out himself. He would never have chosen it. It was tasteless – even for Jade. Regardless, he dug his buttocks into the puffiest cushion and enjoyed his Klipdrift. Lyle had no desire to move from the spot.

He played his Lou Rawls as the soothing liquid rippled through him. Glass after glass, Lyle patiently waited for his moment of bliss. He sang wildly off-key. Every ten minutes, he refilled his glass until he lost his patience, gripped the bottle and clutched it to his lips, eliminating the act of pouring. As he sat on the hideous pink couch with his shoulders hunched forward, Lyle realised that pouring a drink was only a pleasure to do if you were drinking with someone else. Drinking alone, there was no need for that kind of etiquette. Drunkenness is never clumsy when you’re alone. It’s a smooth, warm, spinning cocoon inviting you in. Gracefully, he tilted his glass in an imaginary cheers to Lou Rawls Lady Love.

Then he swung the bottle to his mouth so fast it knocked his lip blue. He didn’t feel it. He heard the metallic clanging sound of the bottleneck smashing against his tooth. But it didn’t hurt. He swallowed a hefty sip. With each puddle of liquid pooling in his mouth and draining down his throat, Lyle wished the moment would
come sooner. He wished the next mouthful would be the one to drown out his latent frustration and wipe the shit from his eyes.

Usually, on the shittiest of days, he would drop onto the bed and simply dissolve into Jade. He would channel his stress into affection and lose himself in her sleep-warmed skin. But it wasn’t that simple anymore. The bitterness cut too deep. He couldn’t lie down next to his fiancé. Not now. He wanted to take her narrow little neck in his hands, press down on her throat with his thumb and smash her into the floor. Ja. Not a good idea to walk in there now, he concluded. Not the way he was feeling.

*Lady Love, your love is peaceful like the Summer’s breeze*

Lyle remembered a time when she used to run to him and jump into his arms. She would fling herself onto him when he came home from work, as if his absence had drained her and she was trying to drink herself full of him. That was then when his biceps were still steel and she still possessed an ounce of innocence.

*Now it’s not easy to keep love going smooth...*

With clumsy hands, Lyle dipped the almost empty bottle into his mouth, knocking the bruise on his lip a deeper shade of navy blue. She used to love it when he was in uniform. That was always her favourite. It used to turn her on like a fucking light switch. She would wrap herself around him like a stripper pole, smudging her lipstick all over his shirt. But those days of passion had come and gone.

*Myyyy laaadyyyy loooooovvee, you’ve got the love I need so stay around...*
Lyle missed ripping off her G-strings. She used to like that. Now, she got upset with him if he dared. Told him to take it off gently and not to break it. They were expensive...

So glaaaad I found my lady love...

He should probably have known it was too good to last. She was too beautiful for him. She had always been. Lyle liked to believe that if everything else fell apart, they would be left standing. A united front against a world dripping with shit. Unconditional. But there was no denying it wasn’t like that. Maybe it had never been like that. He bobbed his head to the Motown beat.

He should’ve predicted that her modelling career would take off like a concord on a windless night. But he couldn’t have foreseen this kind of shit. He couldn’t have imagined the advertisement she had starred in. Tastefully done. Everyone said it was so tastefully done.

When come it came to risqué shoots and stills, tastefully done meant only one thing: Yes, it’s trashy and semi-pornographic but the photographer is famous, the venue is gorgeous and the clothing is designer brand expensive, so it’s okay. Now he had to see the fucking ad on TV every time he switched the damn thing on.

In the ad, the lights were invitingly dim on her skin. A mysterious aesthetic – very professionally shot. Tastefully done. With a topless male model, caramel-skinned shredded motherfucker. The kind of guy who, Lyle imagined, moisturized his every muscle after he worked out about fifteen times a week while staring at his pecks in the mirror. The caramel man stood opposite her, close enough for his breath to absorb into Jade’s skin. Their bodies composing a beautiful silhouette. Well choreographed. Tastefully done. Slight, slight spaces expanding and then
disappearing between their immaculate physiques as they drew closer together. Tastefully close. She wore thin white lace lingerie as she tempted him in the dim light. Come hither. No words. Body speak only. All implied. Tasteful. Flashing provocative wanton gazes at him as he drew closer, then away, then closer, then away. Then he takes her chin in his hand, her waist in his other perfectly sculpted arm. Taste. Her breast soft on his chest, his thigh hairs lightly licking her skin, touching her tender, surrendering hips. Groins millimetres apart. So fucking tasteful. And then the lights cut out. Boom.

The ad probably had sales soaring by now. For whatever generic bloody perfume it was filmed. Provocative. Real fucking nice, if it wasn’t his goddam woman half naked on national TV with some other fucker’s hands all over her body. And her weak words of comfort remain unchanged: It’s only work, baby. That’s all.

Fuck that. He took another sip. The golden liquid drained down the sides of his tongue and burned the back of his throat. Lyle rested his head on the sofa and slipped into the velvet numbness. His mind was flooded with the porous light of drunken hope. Lyle swelled – gloriously – from an average cop and an average-looking fiancé, into a man clouded in bliss. A man who would take the R500 000.
Chapter Twelve

When Sergeant Lyle Bekink woke up that morning, he felt as if he’d slept a maximum of two hours. He rolled over and looked at his model fiancé before getting up. All shit aside, she was beautiful when she was sleeping. He noticed that his belly was hanging over his boxer shorts. He couldn’t help observing the slight jiggle in his flesh as he walked into the dirty kitchen. He should really join a gym. He didn’t want to lose his edge, especially the way things had been going. He stretched his back, rubbed his tummy and yawned.

He made himself a mug of instant coffee and doused it with the usual shot of brandy. Maybe, he’d sign up with a gym tomorrow. Lyle brushed his teeth for a set fifteen seconds. He felt fatigue tugging at the strings of his resolve. Everything he did seemed slightly slower to him. By the time he opened the front door to leave, he realised he was already late for work. Lyle rushed to his Mazda and hardly glanced at the Pontiac still parked outside his neighbour’s house. He would’ve driven right past it if the glinting sheen of its red paint hadn’t stuck in his peripheral vision. As Lyle opened his Mazda’s door, he stopped. The Pontiac was still parked outside. This was unlike Devesh. Devesh simply did not let his Pontiac sleep outside.

He frowned at the sight. Lyle decided to go and check up on him. He was already late but he hadn’t seen his friend in days. Where the fuck had he been? Lyle walked towards his neighbour’s house. He sleepily traced the lines of the muscle car. There was something off about the angle at which it slanted down. Lyle traced its exterior down to the ground where the front of the car touched the cement. That was when he noticed there was something lying on the other side of the car, the side that
faced away from Lyle’s house. Something was wedged there between the right side of
the Pontiac, and the adjacent wall. The shape of the object looked absurdly familiar.
But it couldn’t possibly be what Lyle momentarily imagined it was. He shook off the
thought. Probably just something Devesh forgot outside when he was working.

Lyle walked closer to the Pontiac, and then around it. As he drew closer to the
object he had spotted from a distance, he felt a strong nagging instinct telling him not
to look down. Every intuition in Lyle’s police-trained gut told him that he did not
want to look down right now. Ignoring his intuition, Lyle slowly lowered his eyes to
meet the object on the cement and took in the sight before him. It bulged, like it was
trying to swell its way out from under the wheel of the car. It glared, full of synthetic
colours. Like a toy. A labyrinth of bluish veins sprawled across its mosaic of shades.
The images on its surface were distorted. Swollen, stretched and warped across the
red-brown skin like a canvas wrapped too tightly. And beneath the colours, something
was moving.

Just underneath the thin, stretched layer of skin, was an odd swirling motion.
Something was pushing against the skin, whirling underneath the surface. Lyle let his
eyes travel along the bulge until he saw it. Them. The outskirts of squirming pale
yellow maggots clustered around the edge, near of the metal of the car. They were
coming from underneath the Pontiac. Lyle didn’t register what it was immediately.
They were five long tapering tubes at the end of the bulge– bloated like little flesh
balloons. Fingers.

Panic poured into his body and Lyle struggled to breathe. He had to get
Devesh out of there. He had to get this car off him so that Devesh could breathe. And
he had to do it now. Before it was too late. Lyle suddenly felt extremely weak in his
limbs, as if his strength had drained out of his muscles. He pulled on the metal bumper of the car, frantically, trying to force the strength back into his arms, determined to lift the car.

Where was the fucking jack? It had to be here somewhere. Lyle glanced around the driveway. No jack. And then, at the rear wheel, he saw it, lying on its side underneath the Pontiac. It had been bent. As Lyle crouched down to take a closer look underneath the car, a choking vacuum of foul air filled his lungs and congealed in the pit of his gut. He saw the torso. Clearly. Centimetres away from his eyes. It was under the chassis, still intact. And as the slope of the driveway steepened upward, and the slant of the Pontiac angled downwards, the torso had been squeezed and tapered with increasing force. The car had fallen onto it, concentrating its weight near the top. Lyle traced the body’s length upwards until he saw a rough severance at the top. He followed the mushy crimson tear all the way across to the front of the car, past the broken headlights, looking frantically for a neckline and a head.

In the arching gap where the front wheel should’ve been, he saw it. Devesh’s stubble, his chin and the left corner of his lips blending into a mess of mashed blood and crushed bone. The rest of his face was under the metal.

The right metal panel of the car had severed his limb clean off. As Lyle backed away from the jack, gasping for fresh air, he looked again at the object he now recognised as a forearm lying stretched out before him, disembodied. Painfully familiar. Hairy and tattooed. The bloated muscles. The arm bulged with maggots swirling beneath its skin. It was full of motion and brilliantly inked colour, winding veins and trails of ants, surveyed by a cloud of hovering flies.
Lyle examined the swollen oil-stained palm facing upwards towards him in complete surrender. He saw the spanner that lay close to it, as if it had only just fallen from the limp bloated fingers. Lyle felt sick. The kind of sick that he couldn’t contain. Seconds ticked by as he stared at the arm, motionless. He couldn’t bring himself to look underneath the car again. He shifted his gaze further down past the jack at the rear wheel. And there, almost concealed in the shrubs of the driveway’s outer edge, was a single blue Addidas sneaker. Its saturated azure glared in the sunlight.

A strip of denim stuck out at a distance lower than the forearm, at an impossibly twisted angle. Lyle hadn’t seen it until then. Between the shoe and the dismembered tattooed arm, was a dried puddle of crimson. The blood had sunk into the dusty parched cement, hidden by the Pontiac. It formed a stark contrast on the light grey driveway. Lyle stared at the stain, finally realising he couldn’t get Devesh out from under the car. Devesh was in pieces.

When the Bellville police arrived at the house half an hour later and the familiar faces of the force swarmed around him, the expression on Lyle’s face had not altered. He’d walked over to his Mazda, thrown up on the side of the road and slid down onto the gravel with his back still against his car. The phone was still in his hand from the call he made to the headquarters. His eyes were still fixed on the Pontiac as his colleagues cornered off the scene. He heard Jade crying, but the sound was remote. He refused to go inside. He refused to move. He refused to speak. He heard the questions of the investigating officers. He knew their voices but didn’t care to place them. He saw them as tiny distant images – the way you see things when you look through the wrong side of a telescope. He felt their hands helping him up as blurry navy blue uniforms shifted across his vision.
Still, his eyes stayed on the Pontiac. One thought crowded his mind: *He had to get Devesh out of there.* The officers tried to help Lyle back into the house, but as soon as they got him onto his feet and off the gravel, Lyle snapped out of his vacant stare. His silent lagging dream-state crumbled and he screamed at them, arms flailing, to get Devesh out from under that car. *He can’t breathe.* Lyle hissed. *Get him out. Now. You fucken idiots! Kry hom uit!* Lyle ploughed his way towards the crime scene, elbowing officers out of his path, determined to save his friend’s life, swearing at his colleagues for not doing their jobs. It took all four cops to restrain him and drag him away from the car, into the house. They led him to the pink couch where he eventually collapsed, his energy spent, defeated. Forced to accept that Devesh could not be saved.

Lyle needed a drink but he couldn’t move. He needed someone to pour the drink for him. But there was no Devesh to pour him a double brandy and coke. He had wanted to speak to Devesh last night. Ask him to help him find Jade’s robbers – off the books. Just the two of them dealing out some street justice. He had wanted to find out the latest news about Devesh’s new lady friend. He didn’t even know her name. He had wanted to catch up over some brandy like old times. It had been too long...

Lyle’s partner Jacque, walked up to him with a bottle of Klipdrift. Jacque opened the bottle and placed it silently in Lyle’s hands, sympathetic to his current state and well aware of his addiction. Jacque urged him to drink for the shock. Lyle poured the clean spirit into his throat and almost threw up again. He held the alcohol down with all his resolve. And then put the bottle between his thighs, unable to hold it. Unable to lift himself off the tattered pink sofa and face the world.
Chapter Thirteen

Seven hours later, Lyle hadn’t moved from the pink couch except to use the toilet. He hadn’t spoken so much as a grunt or a nod. The Captain gave him the week off. Jade had prepared various meals and snacks for him, but all he would accept was brandy. At around six o’clock that evening, his blood was near alcohol-poisonous and he finally fell asleep. He stopped drinking only because he’d finished every drop in the house. Should he have carried on for only a few moments more, his body would have gone into convulsions and he would have needed his stomach pumped.

He woke up feeling mercilessly sick. For the first few moments of consciousness, Lyle remembered nothing of the previous day. Then, slowly, he realised why he had fallen asleep on the couch. He saw three empty bottles of brandy on the floor. And he remembered what had happened. He remembered what he’d seen. Lyle went to the toilet and caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. The whites of his eyes were stained yellow. Sgt Bekink was a man on the cusp of liver failure.

Lyle waited for the sun to come up so that the shops could open their doors and he could buy more brandy. He stared at a single space on the wall until the light hit it and he could buy his booze. He ate a few spoonfuls of the sugary mess Jade had prepared for him. The sweet pulp restored him and saved his blood sugar from reaching a hazardous low.

When Lyle took a step outside the house and saw the Pontiac Firebird gleaming in the unforgiving sun, Lyle crumbled. Devesh was no longer underneath it. They had removed his body. The pieces of his mashed body. Lyle didn’t want to think
about how they’d done it. How much of Devesh’s body had made it to the morgue. How much of
the remainder of Devesh had gotten swept up into a bucket. How much of his pulped flesh they
had mopped up off the cement and thrown into the trash or flushed down a drain. He had seen
the pieces. And he had seen the mush. It would have been impossible to retrieve it all.

No matter how Lyle looked at it, there was a portion of Devesh lying in a bin somewhere or
floating in some drain. The thought broke him: *Just how easily we shift from human into wastage.*
How would they put him back together in the coffin? It would be impossible. He would have to
be cremated. The pieces left of Devesh could probably fit into a large jar. Lyle got into his Mazda
to buy more brandy.

He pulled up at the liquor store and stood in a two-man queue behind a wino. The wino
reeked something terrible – he hadn’t washed in weeks. He smelt like sweat, piss, Voyager
*entjies* and *papsak* white wine. Lyle judged him at first sight, the same way he judged all
beggars, knowing that most of them were junkies that just made his work harder. The wino bought
a Namaqualand *papsak* with a two deep pocketful’s of bronze and silver coins. Lyle bought
three bottles of Klipdrift with three hundred-rand notes. He walked back to his car with a bottle
under each arm and one in his left hand.

He saw the wino again as he drove past him and Lyle realised he had no right to judge
him. The man stood there derelict, pelted by life, needing nothing more than his drink. He probably
smelt as bad as the vagrant and they were both there at 8 A.M. in a dirty cheap liquor store
for the same reason.

As Lyle drove off, he concluded that he couldn’t go back home. He couldn’t face
the Pontiac and the absence of Devesh. He also realized he had no place else to
turn. Usually, when Lyle’s impulse to drink spiked, he would go to Devesh. Without him, there was nowhere. It was 8:05 A.M. – too early to go to the pub. It wouldn’t even be open. And that was his only alternative. A grown man feeling so lost was pathetic and he knew it. In a shattered attempt at regaining some agency, Lyle drove to work.

He still smelt stale from the stagnant night he’d endured and reeked of a brandy distillery. The fumes wafted into the office as he walked in. It was only when the harsh light of the office hit him that Lyle realised he couldn’t walk straight. The buzzing of the photocopy machine seemed softer than usual.

The night’s alcohol was still flowing in his veins, involuntarily setting his balance off-kilter even though his mind was functioning as if sober. He had just about reached his desk when Jacque came over to him, put a hand on his shoulder and told him, in very hushed tones, that he needed to go home. Now, Jacque insisted. He demanded that he would drive Lyle home immediately. Lyle needed to rest, sleep it off... Take the time to deal with what happened... Lyle wasn’t listening.

‘You can’t come into office like this,’ said Jacque, genuine concern in his big blue eyes, ‘– if the Captain walks in here now, there’s gonna be big shit...’

Jacque was plainly worried – more concerned about Lyle’s job than he was. Jacque took his arm in a steady grip, ready to help him to his car and drive him home, there for him. The tenderness and sincerity of the gesture almost opened up the floodgates of grief and Lyle choked down his tears. Jacque wasn’t about to let him anywhere near the wheel, but Lyle was not going to leave just yet. He couldn’t leave. He had nowhere to go. He could see that Jacque was not pleased he had driven himself there in the first place. But what else could he have done? He knew the
speech that was coming his way: the man-to-man pull-your-shit-together speech that would incur as soon as he got into that car. Lyle knew that Jacque was coming from a good place. But he didn’t care. He just needed some time away from it all.

‘Half an hour – fuck it, fifteen minutes, Jacque, I can’t go home -’

Lyle’s voice cracked and he dropped his head into his hands, refusing to leave his desk. When Lyle sat down firm, he was impossible to move. Jacque knew he wouldn’t budge, and wasn’t about to force him.

‘Ten minutes, Bekink. Then I’m drivin’ you home – or wherever you wanna go, café, hotel, airport, pub – fuck it, wherever. But you can’t stay here like this. They fire you and then what? I’m stuck with these idiots, alone? No. Fuck that, you can’t just...’

Jacque rambled on and Lyle stopped listening. As if he could afford to stay in a hotel right now. Despite his frustration, he was glad Jacque was there. If he hadn’t been there, this little visit to the office would probably have turned out to be a disaster. Jacque was looking out for him – checking that the Brigadier didn’t suddenly decide to appear and fire him for being drunk at the station. But Lyle already knew the stupidity of his actions. Lyle stared down at his desk. He had been staring at it for close on five minutes already, fighting back the tears. And, until now, he hadn’t seen what was right in front of him.

When it registered what he was looking at, the grief suddenly lost its gravity. Another big brown envelope lay blatantly on his desk. There was no bulge in this one. Again, the letters of his name were cleared printed in black, addressed to him. It was unopened. Lyle’s heartbeat slowed and the exploding grief in his chest deserted him for a second.
He checked to see if Jacque had noticed the envelope, but Jacque wasn’t looking at Lyle or his desk. He was looking around, making sure the Captain was nowhere in sight, trying to see whether the Brigadier was in his office, too busy freaking out on Lyle’s behalf, trying to prevent him from losing his job. Lyle guessed he had a point. Quickly, Lyle picked up a bunch of documents, including the big brown envelope, and smoothed them into a pile with the envelope hidden in the middle of the stack.

‘What you doin’ now?’ Jacque was breathless.

‘Ready to go.’ Lyle forced a smile.

‘With all that paperwork?’

‘Best keep myself occupied, right?’

Lyle blinked away the moisture that had accumulated in his eyes. They got into the car, Lyle climbed into the passenger’s seat with his stack of papers under his arm. Jacque started the car and Lyle braced himself. In times of great pressure, stress or anger, Jacque reverted to his mother-tongue. Boertjie Afrikaans. And as soon as he pulled away from the station, it all tumbled out:


Lyle was touched. He appreciated Jacque’s capacity to give a fuck. And, truth be told, he did need someone to speak to about the shit he’d seen. A couple of brandies and a patient ear. But not now. He had to see what was in that envelope. He had a bad feeling about it. A sense of urgency that he couldn’t explain. He couldn’t tell Jacque about the bribe. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Jacque. He did. He knew that if he told him, Jacque wouldn’t breathe a word of it to anyone. But Lyle felt a sense of doom about the envelope. He had no desire to share that feeling or involve anyone else in it.

Why had the envelope arrived now? The day after Devesh’s death. Why was it all happening now – at the same time? It bothered him. It was all a huge mind-fuck. Too much in a short space of time. He needed to read what was inside it. And he didn’t want Jacque to be there when he did. As much as Lyle hated the prospect of facing this alone, he was unwilling to share his anxiety. It wasn’t Jacque’s problem.

‘Môre aand miskien?’

‘Okay.’

Jacque dropped Lyle at home. Tomorrow they would drink. He would drown his sorrows properly; speak his grief to the only person who cared enough to listen. But now, he was dying to open the envelope. Lyle waved Jacque off. He went inside and didn’t look at the Pontiac as he passed it by. He sat down on the ugly pink couch
and opened the thing. There was no money inside. Only a typed note, in the same font as before, on the same small-sized piece of paper:

**READY TO DROP THE SUBLIME STONES CASE NOW?**

Lyle froze. His heart raced and his small eyes combed every shadow, every corner of his house, inspecting the perimeters of every window. Where were they? Who were they? The anger shook his body until the tiny piece of paper ripped in two in his hands. They killed Devesh. Whoever the fuck they were. They did it.

Somehow, he’d known it all along. He knew it couldn’t have been an accident. He wondered if they’d found any fingerprints on the jack back at the station. And on the Pontiac itself. They were probably still busy with the car. But Lyle expected that everybody thought the same thing: a freak accident; the jack slipped. That was all there was to it. Very sad. Very unfortunate. But he knew better. He had always known better: Someone had done this. It hadn’t just happened and it wasn’t a fucking mistake. Someone killed Devesh. He’d thought it all along.

Three possibilities played themselves out in Lyle’s mind: Devesh’s boss and his dodgy associates finally turned on him, cut up his body, stashed it under the car and made it look like an accident. Or, he was lying under the car, about to get up from under it, when someone jerked the jack out from underneath the car. Or, the jack wasn’t placed properly underneath the vehicle. Lyle dismissed the latter option.

He stared at the note in front of him. Was this a warning letter? A threat? Were they punishing him for not taking the bribe immediately? These guys had
wanted the paperwork destroyed by now and he hadn’t done it yet. He had had too much on his mind. He was still weighing up his options. When it came down to it, he probably would have destroyed the Sublime Stones file and taken the money anyway. And then, a new pain arose in Devesh’s chest. It was his fault. He shouldn’t have hesitated. He should’ve known better. Lyle didn’t put this kind of shit past the syndicates. Ruthless fuckers. He’d seen enough cases to know what they’re capable of. And he knew, deep inside buried under all the grief, he’d known all along, that Devesh would never have made such a puerile mistake: Neglecting to properly secure the jack? Never. Devesh was a pro.

Lyle thought back to the scene of Devesh’s death. If the jack had simply yielded, the body wouldn’t have been in pieces. Devesh would still be alive if the car had merely fallen back onto its tyres, Lyle mused. Then again, if all four tyres had been removed, he would’ve been mashed and invisible underneath it. This murder was not professionally planned. If it had been, he would not have stumbled across the arm sticking out. Lyle walked to the cupboard to go and fetch his brandy. Unless... He stopped. Unless both front wheels were removed, and the rear wheels were still attached. That would put the car at the precise angle necessary to fall at a diagonal slant to the cement driveway, and chop off his head.

Lyle walked to the sink, put his mouth to the tap and started drinking, flooding his gut with water. Expelling the alcohol from his system. He had to think straight. This could all have been prevented if he’d just taken the bribe in the first place. Devesh would still be alive if he hadn’t been so stupid. Lyle drank close to two litres of water to ensure he didn’t smell like alcohol. Then he took a long steady stream of piss. And then went back to the basin and drank some more water. He had to go back to the office. And he had to look decent – inconspicuous, if he wanted to take the
Sublime Stones file unnoticed. He couldn’t walk in there looking and smelling like a wreck. He would wait until lunchtime. When they all stopped paying attention and went outside for smokes, started chewing on their sandwiches, left the office to buy KFC. Called their wives. Checked Facebook. That was the perfect time. The only time to do it. Lyle brushed his teeth for 30 seconds, showered and scrubbed himself. Dowsed his face in aftershave and put on clean clothing. Slicked his short hair and waited for one o’clock before leaving the house.

Lyle walked into Bellville Station a new man. His act refined, looking sleek and smelling good. He passed Jacque on the way in and his colleague couldn’t believe the transformation. Lyle explained that he’d forgotten a list of e-mails that he wanted to take a look at while he was off. Jacque nodded and patted him on the back. They were still on for the pub tomorrow night. Lyle walked in, looking like he had it all together. The bulk of Bellville’s cops migrated out for a smoke and a bite to eat. He nodded to them decently.

Lyle took a few steps further into the cluster and heard the top dogs down the corridor: the Brigadiers were having a meeting with the General. Sounded like a tea-party in there the way they were laughing, voices booming and screeching like hyenas over fresh fruit platters, cold meats and sugary Rooibos tea. The General was in the building. Lyle was as good as invisible. The Brigadier always shrunk in the presence of the General. General enters and Brigadier starts running around looking for wet wipes cause he’s eating finger foods with his hands and Brigadier would be damned if the General didn’t have hygienic excellence in his division.

Lyle listened for a few more seconds to the Brigadier laughing too loudly at the General’s jokes. This was his chance. They were in the tea-room and the
Brigadier’s office was vacant. Lyle pretended to look for the e-mails on his desk and went through a couple of documents on the trays of paper in the corner. He opened a couple of cabinets – looking like he was engaged in legitimate police administration. After he had pretended to look in another four places, he took his gap and went into the Brigadier’s office. Most of the staff were out and those who weren’t, were not vaguely interested in what he was doing. Lyle went straight for the grey metal drawer. He flipped through the stack until his hands curled around the thick Sublime Stones file in a matter of seconds. With fingers like lightning, he slipped the file in between his lists of e-mails and other random papers he’d collected to pull off the farce.

When his colleagues came back from their lunch break, Lyle greeted them all. They asked him how he was doing. He assured them that he was okay, dealing with things at his own pace. They told him to take it easy. Regards to Jade. She looks really hot in that ad, hey? Nudge, wink, nudge. Lyle nodded appreciatively, accepting their condolences and their awkward, over-compensatory small talk.

He felt that he’d showed enough face. Satisfied with his act, he was ready to head home. But at that moment, the General walked out of the cluster in his black blazer embroidered with the insignia of the South African National Defence Force. Navy blue tie, formal grey pants, direct access to the Head Office, the man had more sway than Lyle could imagine. Lyle stood back with the stack of papers in his hand. Body at attention, eyes lowered in respect, not intruding on his space. You do not address the General unless that latitude has been granted.

The General was an intimidating man. Soft-spoken with a steel gaze that commanded respect. The kind of man who looks through you and sees your castles of bullshit before you’ve even spoken a word. Lyle held his breath as the General
towered into the office. The man was a celebrity. Only when the General passed him, did Lyle exhale and wipe the sweat from his forehead. The General didn’t clear his throat. He didn’t ask for the attention of the cops returning to the office. He simply stood there and everyone went quiet. The General was about to speak,

‘I believe that this unit exists for a purpose.’

He straightened his tie before continuing. The General was a man truly devoted to combating organised crime. The unit respected him, not just because of his rank as they did with the Brigadier, but also because of his reputation. He had taken down syndicates almost single-handedly.

‘The Organised Crime Unit should not exist as a structure, but as a project-driven team. A team driven by a purpose, and that purpose moves… It moves constantly. Jerome Golding is our purpose right now. We know he is the man behind the diamond and vehicle saga ravaging Cape Town at the moment. And yet, we haven’t been able to link a single crime to this man.’

The General paused.

‘Never fight the enemy as if you think the enemy doesn’t evolve like you do. They evolve. The enemy must survive through adapting and countering what we do. In order to know us, they must infiltrate us. And they will try and compromise you. It’s part of the game. The syndicate we’re dealing with is a multi-millionaire empire. They have their fingers in every pie. We must have our fingers in every pie. They move diamonds, drugs, luxury vehicles and property. Do you think there’s any salary that will match that? There’s no salary. We will catch them. And we’ll catch them by their greed.’
Chapter Fourteen

When Lyle got home with the file, Jade wasn’t there. A recently cooked meal stood on the kitchen counter. Lyle found an old lighter in the drawer. He went into the backyard to light the flame. The Sublime Stones case was a recent one. It wouldn’t have been loaded onto the database yet. Not with the division’s administrative sloppiness being as it was. Right there and then, Lyle understood the urgency of the note in the envelope. They needed him to destroy the case record before it got digitized. In Bellville, only half the dockets and case files get digitized anyway because of lazy police work and inadequate resources. But this was a high profile case. They couldn’t take the chance. The smugglers wanted the paperwork gone before it got onto the system.

Now that Lyle understood it, he resented it even more. He hated thefuckers behind it. With the lighter still aflame in his hand, he swore he would find the man responsible for Devesh’s death. Then he took the flame to the file and watched it smoulder. He trampled what was left of it and then swept away the ash.

The deed was done. They had to leave him alone now. Lyle went back inside and stared at the note again, not moving, waiting for something to happen. Nothing did. He dished himself the first decent meal he’d had in two days. It wasn’t bad, well spiced, the way Jade always did it, but the chicken stuck in his throat as the food went down. It cramped in his stomach like it was trying to slice its way out of there. When the cramps died, he felt a lot better. Lyle slept for nine hours straight. In the bed and not on the couch. Alone. Peaceful. Oblivion.
When he woke up, Jade was home. She took his hand in hers and led him outside. She had that look on her face, *we’re going out*. Lyle succumbed. He needed to get out of the house anyway. Jade drove as Lyle sat in the passenger’s seat of her Toyota Yaris. They went to a little late-night café in Bellville Central where she ordered herself a café latté and he had a glass of Amarula. Jade looked him deep in his eyes, sick of him ignoring her. Her expression was one of desperation and injury,

‘Baby, *speak* to me.’

Lyle couldn’t. He dropped his head onto her shoulder and breathed in her perfume. He could feel that Jade was about to cry. He really didn’t want her to cry. She was trying to pull him apart, trying to get inside his head, but he wasn’t going to let her. He had to do something to reassure her. Lyle sighed and said,

‘If I had nine seconds left to live, I’d call you.’

Jade was taken aback and the tears started to roll. Shit, thought Lyle, he’d failed. She was crying. He felt defeated by her tears. And then suddenly, she smiled, through the tears, amazed at the words that had just come out of his mouth. Lyle grinned at her smile.

‘Really?’ she asked, plump lips still smiling through her tears.

‘Yes.’

Lyle realised that his wallet was empty from the three bottles of Klipdrift he’d bought this morning. There was an ATM just next door. He kissed Jade, excused himself for a second, and took out his card. He slipped it into the machine and drew R500. He put the money in his wallet and glanced at the receipt. R450 000 had been deposited into his account. No more than an hour ago. How the fuck did they have his bank details?
Lyle knew all too well that it was standard integrity testing for police officers’ bank accounts to be scanned regularly. He had to get that money out of his account now. Six o’clock the next morning, Lyle sped through his tooth-brushing routine. He drove his Mazda in silence. No Marvin Gaye played as he snaked through the morning traffic to get to the bank before the queues started spilling out the glass doors.

The Southeaster swooped by his ears as he entered the sliding doors of the building. He was early enough not to have to wait long. Lyle swiftly picked up a deposit slip and walked to the teller. He would transfer the R450 000 into Jade’s savings account. She was clueless when it came to money, never checked her savings balance – largely because she never checked the post. Working with money had never been Jade’s forte. Lyle took care of both their finances.

The teller was wearing too much foundation – just like Jade. Expect, she still looked shit – even with the bulk of her face concealed. She had lip-liner on, and hadn’t even bothered to blend it into the shade of her lipstick. But her puffy cheeks and soft, gullible eyes redeemed her. Lyle smiled at her pleasantly, widely, focussing exclusively on the lady, really making her feel noticed. He handed her the deposit slip, complete with Jade’s bank details and the amount of R450 000.

Then he put on his best gentleman’s gaze and enquired if it would be at all possible for her to check the details of the R450 000 deposit in his own account before transferring it into Jade’s account. The teller complied with grace, charmed by Lyle’s politeness. A warm feeling spread through his chest – he had forgotten that was still capable of having that affect on women. Fuck it – maybe all wasn’t lost.
The teller returned to him with the phone number of the depositor. She apologised for her incompetency in finding his or her name and title. Lyle thanked her profusely for her effort and left the bank with the cell-number of his depositor on a pale yellow posted, written shyly in the teller’s tidy handwriting. The chubby, foundation-wearing lady smiled as she watched him leave.

Lyle typed the number into his phone before he left the parking lot. He made the call while driving. One of the most convenient things about being a cop was that you never got stopped for driving while speaking on your phone. You were always assumed to taking an urgent call. Lyle waited for the call to connect. It took longer than usual. Lyle wondered where in the world he was calling to. The number was not a South African one. And the extended connection time confirmed that he was calling to a foreign place. This call would probably cost him a fortune, Lyle sighed.

It rang seven times and the voice that eventually answered did not greet. No hello. No how are you? The cold, menacingly low voice on the other side of the line had dispensed with all familiarity. It was clear, however, that the man behind the voice already knew exactly who he was speaking to,

‘Sgt Bekink. I’ve been expecting your call.’

The man obviously had his cell-phone number. How had he gotten it? Lyle tried to sound firm and authoritative,

‘Who are you?’

‘I’m anonymous,’ replied the voice, baritone, educated and professional. A rounded, refined accent. An accent Lyle didn’t recognise and couldn’t place. Lyle tried to guess the race of this man, but it was impossible to tell,
‘I just wanted to tell you that we have been watching the way you work. And we are impressed,’ the man paused, ‘We expect to be conducting a cogent alliance of reciprocity with you in the future.’

Then there was silence on the other end of the line. He was waiting for a response, but Lyle’s mind was blank. He tried in vain to elect his response. But it escaped him. Once again, Lyle’s hesitation proved to be his downfall, and the man accepted his silence as agreement,

‘We value your assistance and you will continue to be rewarded. Good day to you Sgt Bekink.’

With that, the man hung up and Lyle almost smashed into the Mercedes in front of him. Why had he hesitated? Had he been so completely swept up with the man’s professional flair that he’d forgotten how to speak? Had he felt intimidated? Stupid? Probably. He simply had not anticipated such polished decorum from a criminal. As much as Lyle wanted to deny it, he couldn’t. He was impressed. Still resentful and scared, but impressed. What was that accent? Definitely not South African. Not American or British either. Lyle couldn’t figure it out. Up until now, he had suspected that the money was sent by Jerome Golding. Cape Town Kingpin and boss to Devesh. Now, he wasn’t sure. The call dismantled all his theories.
Chapter Fifteen

Lyle took the R-300 freeway through to Delft. The time had come to confront the man he had suspected was behind all of this. Devesh’s Boss. No point in talking to some disembodied voice over a phone. He would to go as close as he could to the source. As Lyle drove, he knew there was a chance he might never walk out of the place alive. Lyle had been to the yaardt before, in uniform with a search warrant and two other cops. The place was notorious for the shadiest, hardest, hustling lowlifes his side of the Cape. And he was going there as a civilian. No uniform, no back-up. Just man-to-man.

It was three o’clock on a Thursday afternoon and the place was already packed. The street was parked full of cars, sparkling white Hummers, Porsches, Mustangs and even one Ferrari – all in one of Cape Town’s poorest suburbs. As Lyle walked in with his civilian’s clothing, he saw red-eyed cameras wherever he looked. Despite the shitty area, the surveillance was top-notch. Lyle prayed that Jerome Golding wouldn’t recognise him from his last inspection of the place. It had been a very long time ago when Lyle had stood at the door with those two officers, and he looked very different in plain clothes. He’d also gained a lot of weight since then. He couldn’t have people recognising him as a cop. Not if he planned on getting any real information from this shithole.

It was deafening inside at the bar. Lyle couldn’t keep his thoughts straight. The brandy was flowing and it was taking the full capacity of his self-control not to order a glass. The regulars were laughing themselves stupid, swearing in words Lyle hadn’t heard since his father died. They were slamming down drinks, threatening to
fuck up fellow drinkers and clinking glasses so hard Lyle braced himself for the glasses to smash and splinter into pieces. They didn’t.

The place was a goldmine of illegal activity. Lyle noticed a junkyard full of fenders, broken window screens, bent and warped metal, detached steering wheels, displaced engines, mags ripped from the wheels of modified cars – those actually wouldn’t look bad at all on his Mazda… Lyle expelled the thought as soon as it entered his head. The narcotics were apparent. You didn’t see them directly. But you knew they were there when you stared into the zombie faces following you with their eyes.

A tow truck driver pulled up into the yard, hauling in the remains of a brutalised vehicle, chucking the valuable metal into the junkyard. The driver walked with a severe limp. He had an oval scar on the back of his head and blood trickling down his left arm, bruising all the way down his neck. Despite his injuries, the tow-truck driver worked relentlessly, fetching the remaining parts and chucking them into the yard. He worked as if he didn’t even notice he was bleeding.

Lyle saw Jerome Golding’s shiny head scaling through the vicinity. He was relieved to see that the kingpin hadn’t noticed him sitting there. Lyle wasn’t there in his capacity as a policeman, which meant there was only one way to approach Golding. You approach him as the Boss. Real respectful. Be nice. Always better to be on the safe side of his particular calibre of gangster. Lyle stole another look at the kingpin. At the fuller sight of him, Lyle abandoned his resolve and bought himself a double brandy. As a cop, he hated the man. As Devesh’s friend, he mistrusted the man. As a normal civilian, he was just piss-fucking-terrified of him.
As Lyle picked his double brandy up off the counter, the Boss turned towards him and started wheeling his way in Lyle’s direction. Lyle’s palms started sweating. Had he recognised him? Lyle was alone. Out of his element. If the kingpin snapped, he would be fucked – service pistol on his hip or not – this guy could destroy him if he wanted to. The Boss’s two gold chains swayed back and forth, hitting his chest in the rhythm of his wheelchair’s fluctuating pace. Lyle couldn’t understand how they weren’t hurting him banging on his chest like that.

The Boss’s entourage of four junkies and three Alsatians followed him as he moved towards Lyle, stopping a metre away from him. Lyle stood up and extended his hand. The Boss didn’t take it. His dogs circled and sniffed Lyle like a fresh piece of meat; they were waiting for the signal to devour. Lyle felt embarrassed to have to look down at the Boss on his chair. But the kingpin was not fazed. He crossed his thick arms on his boep belly and tilted his luminous head up at Lyle,

‘You looking for me?’

Lyle nodded, trying to match the man’s unshakeable expression. Lyle now completely understood why people feared Jerome Golding. The Boss lit himself a Rothman’s Blue. Lyle stared at his bald, reflective head. He was so overweight that his fat had spread to his head. Lyle was not thin himself, but he appeared meagre next to the man’s immense presence. His head fat distracted Lyle. All this cash and this man was smoking Rothmans fucking Blue? Lyle didn’t understand it. He stared at the deadpan face in front of him, tying to ignore the biggest Alsatian baring his teeth with a low smouldering growl. The Boss jerked the dog back by his collar. The animal whimpered and retreated behind the Boss, who was still waiting for Lyle’s response. No sign of impatience. Just the passionless gaze of a man who was very, very tired.
Lyle tried to imagine that he was interrogating a suspect in a holding cell. He tried to project his police persona onto the Boss. But his tone fell flat and the words tumbled clumsily off his tongue,

‘What... do you know about Devesh?’

The kingpin’s shoulders were the first to react – they shivered as if he was getting cold. Then they started heaving, hauling his heavy head back and forth in a bizarre prelude to his guttural, bubbling emphysema laugh, which reverberated through the yaardt. The venomous wheeze seized everyone’s attention. The Boss’s large blubbery face collapsed into itself and became a laughing jiggling ball of skin. His mouth gaped huge as he roared with amusement at Lyle’s question. But the eruption lasted less than a minute before his face returned to its default neutrality.

‘Yes, my man – I know Devesh.’

His accent was typically South African. This wasn’t the man he’d spoken with on the phone. The Boss put out his Rothman’s Blue after only two puffs and stared at Lyle. Impassive. Giving nothing away. That imploding smile had vanished from his face as quickly as it had come. That gaping roaring mouth was now curling into a weary scowl. The sound of his laughter left a vacuum of silence in its wake. And Lyle suddenly felt like he was wasting the man’s time – and this was not the man whose time you wanted to waste. All eyes were on him and he couldn’t bring himself to say anything.

‘I know Devesh, Sgt Bekink,’ The Boss repeated, nodding slowly.

The Boss had recognised him! Lyle tried to hide his surprise. The Boss’s black eyes bored through Lyle’s appearance. He paused to scratch his bald head,
‘You’ve been doing good work, Sergeant. My guys will be delivering a 40-inch plasma to your house within the month. See it as a bonus. I trust you received your compensation?’

He knew. It was him. It wasn’t the same man he’d spoken to over the phone, but still, he was the man behind the money. The man behind the big brown envelopes and the bank transfer. He was the man at the head of it all, the man responsible for Devesh’s death. Lyle struggled to keep calm. There was nothing stopping the kingpin from killing him on the spot should he get pissed off and Lyle hadn’t come prepared. The Boss was becoming annoyed by Lyle’s lack of responsiveness, as if he couldn’t understand how Lyle had no gratitude for the money.

The fucker killed his neighbour, he wasn’t about to thank him. Lyle was ready to get up and leave. He had confirmed his suspicions and now, he would need to involve the police if he wanted vengeance. The Boss had too much power and too much protection. Lyle wasn’t going to get himself killed here. As Lyle got up, the Boss said something that Lyle was almost sure he misheard,

‘How is Devesh?’

Lyle couldn’t hide the angry confusion from his face. Within seconds, his confusion turned to fury. Was this man fucking with him? Was he fucking serious? Was he mocking him? Lyle felt himself glaring at the Boss, turning red, despite the danger of his situation. He scowled at the kingpin who simply sat back, expecting an answer. Still neutral. But something didn’t fit.

Through all the man’s gravitas and intimidation, Lyle picked up something incongruent in his voice. It was in the way the Boss had asked him that impossible question. His manner had been conversational, genuine and interested. There was an
honesty in his tone. He wasn’t fucking with Lyle at all. And then it clicked. The Boss was **protective** over Devesh. This man didn’t know. He genuinely didn’t know. How **could he possibly** not know? Lyle’s anger faded. He stared into the opaque pupils before him, trying to gauge the Boss’s reaction,

‘Devesh died a few days ago.’

The Boss’s face remained almost exactly the same, expect for his mouth. The blubber around his lips seemed to droop as his mouth tightened, transforming his face into that of a man fifteen years older. Lyle had initially taken the Boss to be in his mid-fifties. But as he looked at him now, the kingpin looked easily seventy. He didn’t say another word to Lyle or anyone else for a while. Then he whistled two of his workers over to come and pack a stack of money-bricks into a large bag. Lyle had no idea what he was doing, but something told him to stay put.

The Boss waved the barman over too. Seeing the gesture, the barman jumped up off his stool and immediately brought his Boss a double scotch. No ice. The kingpin’s face sagged heavily now as he lit a smoke and stuck it into the blubber. There was definite emotion in his expression now, but Lyle couldn’t figure out what it was. It wasn’t grief. It was something harder-edged. His gestures towards his employees had become firmer. He was almost violent in his demand for a scotch and in the way he suddenly shoved the junkies and the Alsatians out of his way. And then Lyle figured it out. It was fury. It was **betrayal**. The kingpin crossed himself: Father, Son, Holy Spirit – in quick succession. He mumbled something in Afrikaans under his breath. Lyle didn’t catch it but it sounded like a curse. Once the junkies had finished packing the bag with cash, the Boss handed it to Lyle,

‘For the funeral.’
With that, he thanked Lyle for having come to see him, for having told him what he had, and wheeled off back inside the house followed by his the three homicidal dogs and his four limping addicts. He didn’t come out again.

Lyle didn’t know what to think. The man seemed genuinely struck by the news. Maybe he was bluffing. Lyle knew that it was a possibility that Jerome Golding’s reaction was all an act. But he doubted it was fake. It hadn’t looked fake to him. And Golding had no reason to fake his surprise. He was a lot more powerful than Lyle. He had Lyle squashed under his left thumb. He had guaranteed Lyle’s silence and his compliance with half a million rand, and even if he wanted to, Lyle couldn’t go to the police. He had no evidence and he had accepted a half-million rand bribe from him. Surely, Golding knew that.

It didn’t add up. This man had loved Devesh. The look in his eyes had been the stricken expression of a man who had just lost a son. He didn’t kill Devesh. He didn’t even know Devesh had been murdered. The fury in the kingpin’s face had resembled the injured rage of someone who had just been betrayed.

If he was the man behind the bribe and he didn’t know about the murder, then who the fuck killed Devesh? Was there a traitor in the kingpin’s syndicate? Lyle left the yaardt with the moneybag slung over his shoulder, satisfied that Golding had nothing to do with Devesh’s death. Lyle was so engrossed in thought, he didn’t pre-empt the thick metal chain hanging low over the exit as it pounded his head. The clanging sound it made was audible on Lyle’s skull. He winced in pain. *Fuck, he should be watching where he’s going.* Lyle held his head, breathing through his teeth as he walked quickly to his car. He couldn’t wait to get out of there.
Lyle drove home from Delft with a severe pain in his head. His under-arms and back were soaked with sweat and his heartbeat still hadn’t resumed its normal pace. He had always wondered what Devesh was doing in that place. Lyle had refrained from asking him. Lyle had always reasoned that there were bigger criminals in the world. And Devesh was a good guy who couldn’t have done any serious harm. The silence regarding Devesh’s day job had always been a natural, comfortable silence.

Now Lyle wished he had asked him. A vivid memory of Devesh with a gash in his head and cuts all over his arms, moving slowly, barely able to straighten his leg, flashed in Lyle’s memory. He remembered Devesh’s pathetic explanation the last time he’d seen him before he died: *getting old, tripped over a tyre*. Lyle started to piece it together. Three years of inexplicable injuries were suddenly not so inexplicable, thought Lyle, remembering the tow-truck driver in the yard. Golding was suspected not only for drug peddling and diamond smuggling, but also for vehicle insurance fraud schemes and a host of other crimes.

Devesh wrecked the cars for insurance pay-outs in conjunction with the limping tow-truck driver. That was how he made his money. Lyle shook his head. It all slid together so well. In fact, he couldn’t imagine Devesh making money in any other way. The lifestyle fitted his friend’s demeanour perfectly.

*Jesus*, thought Lyle. If *that* was the nature of Devesh’s work, he could just as easily been killed by an angry client, a fraud deal gone sour, a rival stunt-driver – the possibilities were endless. And *that* yaardt was just one of many interlinking drug-running, fraudster shitholes in the Western Cape.
Chapter Sixteen

Lyle walked into the pub at seven. He had deliberately arrived an hour earlier because he needed to clear his head before he saw Jacque. A double brandy to calm his nerves, and he would be fine. After the day he’d had, he needed a head start. Lyle insisted on lots of ice. He settled into the bar stool and let the booze spark its magic. The syrupy drink had just started trickling down his throat, when he saw something strange sitting alone in the furthest corner of the pub. The bar was desolate except for that one odd presence in the corner. Even the barman had retreated after shoving the brandy into Lyle’s hands.

All Lyle could see of the shadowy figure in corner, was the top of her head peeping out above an opened newspaper. The newspaper was spread to its breadth in her hands. And below the rim of the paper, two legs were elegantly crossed, the colour of condensed milk, ending in a pair of velvet red heels. The contours of her thighs were subtle, immaculate. Small enough for him to clasp firmly in his hand. The rest of her body and face were hidden behind the black and white print of The Voice. A single plume of smoke streamed from the middle of the newspaper up into the ether. He imagined the smoke pouring from her lips. The stemmed glass of red wine on the counter before her was untouched. Like she was waiting for it to mature another year.

Lyle stared at the wispy black hair and those café latté legs. Then he fixated on the block of newspaper print covering everything in between, imagining what was behind it. He followed the plume of smoke sailing above the head of black hair. The line of smoke was in perfect symmetry with the fold of the newspaper. On the far
sides of the paper, he noticed her fingers. Thin fingers. Long red nails. Matching her velvet heels. Her fingers firmly re-gripped the huge square of newspaper on either side. One of her velvet heels – the front one that she’d crossed over – gracefully tapped the air in time with the soft music.

Lyle shook his gaze off her, realising that he’d been staring. He looked back down at his drink and took another sip, musing on the newspaper with legs, fingers, hair, velvet red heels and a plume of smoke. He looked again – just once. Yes, that’s exactly what it looked like from his angle. It was uncanny. He struggled to keep himself from staring at it again. He turned his back to her so that he wouldn’t be distracted, and thought about all the paperwork he’d have to filter through if he intended finding Devesh’s killer.

Now that he had new information on the case, it looked all the more daunting. Lyle wasn’t even sure that the case was an official case anymore. He would have to discuss it with Jacque when he got here after work. Jacque would be able to give him more perspective.

He wondered if the lady behind the newspaper could see him in her peripheral vision. Lyle felt like he could exist only in the world of her peripheral vision, forever, and that would be okay.

She hadn’t so much as taken a peep over that newspaper to see who was in the pub. Yet Lyle couldn’t shake the feeling that she had noticed him there. But it was probably wishful thinking. Lyle knew he was nothing remarkable to look at.

He had showered and put on fresh clothes since his encounter with Golding, and he didn’t look too bad now. He hoped that himself and Jacque could check up on some diamond and vehicle syndicate leads later. Only once he’d told Jacque
everything, of course. He had made the decision soon after he’d come from back from the yaardt. He had washed off all the stale sweat that had poured down his back under the heat of Jerome Golding’s glare. And now Lyle looked decent. Now, he hoped the newspaper lady would catch just a glimpse of him. All he wanted to be was a tiny speck in the corner of her eye. But she hadn’t shifted an inch since he’d walked in. Must be a very interesting article she was reading in *The Voice*. He often read *The Voice* himself.

Lyle cleared his throat loudly, hoping to win her attention. Nothing. Although she seemed to sink even further into her newspaper when she heard the sound. The plume of smoke above the paper seemed to be thickening – as if she’d started smoking faster. He wondered why she was here on her own. And what was on her mind. As they sat and drank on opposite sides of the bar, they were united in their solitude. They shared something crucial and unspoken. Both of them had hoped to be somewhere better by now. Or so Lyle assumed. And yet, there they sat, drinking, disillusioned by life, having failed in some vital way. Because only people who’d failed in vital way, ended up in this place so early on a Thursday.

He was so caught up in his self-pity that he didn’t see the lady put down her newspaper and speak to the barman. He didn’t see her pick up her drink, crush her cigarette and leave her seat. He didn’t even notice her proceed towards him until she stood just behind Lyle’s turned back and spoke, looking into her untouched drink, addressing her words to him,

‘Tragic day, isn’t it?’
Like she’d read his mind. Lyle was speechless. Not in his most hopeful projections of what she looked like behind that newspaper, had he imagined this. Porcelain skin, soft black hair, blood red lips, delicate shape. High class.

Transfixed on the woman, Lyle had to agree. It was a tragic day. What the fuck was she doing here? Delicacy at its finest in the roughest hole. It made no sense. He couldn’t think of a reply. He couldn’t believe she was talking to him. He nodded, yes – it had been a tragic day indeed. He didn’t know what to say. She’d summed it up completely. And by the time Lyle opened his mouth to say something, she already seemed distracted from him.

Suddenly, a man’s voice blared through the mic, 1 2 3 – too much feedback, down down, 1 2, ok testing 1 1 2. It was loud – loud enough to eliminate the possibility of further conversation between them, Lyle thought, disappointed. He watched the man setting up his equipment, flashing glances at the delicate lady who had just downed her wine in under two minutes. He was impressed. No one ever drank wine – red wine – that fast. He watched her order another glass and return to her newspaper.

A few more people had spilled into the bar since he’d been there. Jacque walked in through the door. He was early too. Lyle greeted his colleague and tried not to look at the lady again. But as Jacque ordered himself a drink, Lyle couldn’t help noticing the touch of black lace peeping out above her blouse. It was distracting. She was distracting. And right now, he couldn’t afford to be distracted. The lady spread her newspaper and lifted it up so that it covered everything between the tip of her head and the start of her thighs again.
Jacque asked him how he was holding up and Lyle lied, telling him he was okay. Lyle knew there wasn’t time for small talk. He couldn’t avoid the issue anymore. He couldn’t just sit and drink away his sorrows with his colleague. The issues plaguing him were too pressing so he spat it out.

‘I have some information that could assist in the case.’

Jacque raised his bushy blonde eyebrow at Lyle sympathetically,

‘Broer, there is no case. Leave it alone.’

‘No. You don’t understand. It wasn’t an accident. The jack was either dropped deliberately on him – as he was getting up. Makes sense given the incline of the driveway and the angle of the –’

‘Lyle –’ Jacque interrupted, shaking his head.

‘Wait, or his body was cut up prior to the car falling – the jack used to cover up the murder. And I was in Delft today – spoke to Golding –’

‘Lyle –’ Jacque persisted.

‘And he didn’t do it, Jacque. But, there is something else I have to tell you –’

‘Lyle. Stop.’

‘But –’

‘Broer, I don’t want to hear it.’

Lyle closed his mouth and looked into the clear blue eyes, genuinely hurt by Jacque’s refusal to hear him out.
‘Look, I’m telling you, Bekink. Just leave it. You gonna cause kak. There’s been talk at the station – and I shouldn’t tell you. But I’m going to anyway.’

Jacque paused and took a long deep breath. And then a long deep sip of his brandy,

‘I’ll tell you as long as you promise to leave this whole thing behind.’

‘Ok,’ said Lyle, with no such intention.

Jacque looked at him like he was expecting Lyle’s affirmation before he carried on. Lyle wasn’t about to give it to him,

‘What talk at the station?’

‘They’re going to write off Devesh’s... passing, as an accident,’ Jacque sighed.

‘What? His body was in fucking pieces!’

‘It wasn’t, Lyle. It was crushed – two... pieces, at most.’

Lyle went silent. That was one image he really didn’t want to rehash. He changed the subject,

‘That’s why you have to hear what I have to say.’

‘Lyle, when they were still looking into the case as a homicide...’ he paused and drank, ‘How do I say this,’ Jacque bowed his head, ‘You were mentioned.’

Lyle stared at him, confused,

‘Whatchu mean?’

‘As a suspect, Bekink, you were mentioned.’
Lyle could not believe what he was hearing. He had no response. Jacque looked ashamed as he continued speaking,

‘I told them it was bullshit. Bekink, I told them they’d lost their minds. But they insisted –’

‘Who insisted?’

‘You know I’m not at liberty to talk about -’

‘Captain?’

Jacque just sighed. Lyle already knew the answer. It was the fucking Captain.

‘Look, he said he was just going by the book. You were the last person to see Devesh. You live next door so there was opportunity... You know the drill. But they don’t have motive. They have no fucking motive for you, Bekink. No fingerprints. So they dropped it. Wrote it off as an accident.’

Lyle didn’t say anything.

‘I walked out of the building. The cunt threatened to give me a warning... Anyway, what I’m saying to you is that you have to leave it alone now. You might be implicated. Called in as a suspect. You might lose your job – or worse.’

Lyle was still dumbfounded.

‘I know this is the last thing you needed to hear. But I thought it was best you know.’

Lyle wanted to thank him. Jacque was under no obligation to tell him. But he did anyway. Still, Lyle couldn’t bring himself to speak. The fuckers. Jacque was right. If he went to them now with any information, they’d probably just use it as evidence
against him. He would have to find Devesh’s murderer on his own. Enforce justice.
On his own. Lyle felt disgusted as he sat there. He wanted to burn his badge.

‘I’m sorry, broer. Listen, fuck them. De Lange is a stukkie scum with a badge and a gun. Fuck him and what he thinks.’

The Captain was a piece of shit. But it didn’t make it any easier to accept what he was hearing. He didn’t deserve this. The pub had suddenly filled up and Lyle had to raise his voice for Jacque to hear him,

‘I’m gonna find the fucker who killed him, Jacque. Mark my words. I’ll do it on my own.’

Jacque ran his hands through his thick blonde hair and sighed,

‘Not a good idea, Bekink.’

The pub was buzzing with old men and young women. Jacque ordered them both another round and the pair got a pool table and started a game. Everyone in Open Legs Pub was staring at Jacque Viljoen. The women flashed him hot looks as if they were picturing him naked. The men scouted him out with suspicious eyes, feeling threatened.

Lyle cursed the police force over and over again. Jacque agreed with him. The brandy was taking longer than usual to cast its spell and Lyle had never felt more impatient. The idea of facing the mystery of Devesh’s death alone was too much to bear. He drank fast, begging the brandy to destroy his reality. The crowd around them seemed to be waiting for something. They’d gathered around the karaoke stand, leaving the pool tables to Lyle and Jacque as they discussed the idiots they worked
with. And the power-tripping naaiers they worked under. Their conversation was cut short by the blaring voice of that annoyingly loud karaoke host,

‘Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen, and welcome to Open Legs on this Thursday night. We have something very special in store for you tonight, something I know you’ve all missed. Something that will take you back, Ladies and Gentlemen, and we haven’t had her here at Open Legs for a while. So please sit back, order another round, brandy’s going at R16 a double. So enjoy our special. And experience the wonder, Ladies and Gentlemen, of the woman we’ve all come to see tonight, Miss Lockhart!’

A round of applause ensued and Lyle and Jacque left the pool table to see what was behind all the commotion. But there was nobody standing in front. The people seemed to be clapping for an empty stage. Then Lyle saw the spotlight fall on the newspaper in the corner of the pub. The bright light fell on the surface of the newspaper and revealed her silhouette behind it. Only the coffee crème legs and jet black hair and a single plume of smoke could be seen around its edges. The rest of her outline was shrouded in mystery.

Slowly, she rose from the bar stool and lowered the newspaper. She smiled at her audience and strolled towards the cigarette machine with the cigarette smoking itself in her hand. There was a swivel in her step, a red tinge on her cheeks and a tease in her smile. The lights cut out and when they came back on, the tiny woman flickered in their glow. The newspaper had disappeared. She eased her elbow onto the cigarette machine as her left hip popped to one side and her eyes gazed exclusively at Lyle. The popped hip bounced ever so slightly, making him wish he was standing
opposite her, feeling her rhythm on his groin. He could almost feel it just by watching her.

The opening chords cut through the applause. The smoke from her long cigarette streamed in thick, liquidy waves into his gaping mouth. It clouded the pub in its haze. He traced the outline of her lips as the white smoke poured out of them and covered him, drowning her from his vision. He strained his eyes to see her more clearly again. Through the smoke, she lifted up her pale thin arms, quieting the crowd with a tender husky whisper,

‘I am going to make you cry tonight.’

Lyle didn’t need much to make him cry. He stood there vulnerable, waiting for her to ruin him. The men went wild. The women were transfixed. They must all have heard her sing before. She exhaled, lifting her wrist off the cigarette machine to hold the microphone in both hands. A Dionne Warwick classic emanated wistfully from her slight, feminine frame in soothing velvet tones that complimented Lyle’s brandy better than any coke ever could.

‘They told me love don’t last forever. Now I understand. To think that only yesterday, you held me in your hand...’

The crowd sang with her. They knew every word. They sang with intensity, tightly wrinkled foreheads, eyebrows curved upwards in agony, lips curled downwards, heavy with emotion. Everyone remembering their own lost worlds. Lyle was consumed by her. He sang in spite of himself, guided by her overriding voice. And so was Jacque. Inhibition had deserted the two cops as the ballad flooded the crowd with sadness. They embraced it with open arms. Welcoming the release. They were two jaded policemen singing from the bottom of their lungs.
The lady’s image swirled in the smoke under Lyle’s swaying gaze. She poured out her soul to him like he was the only man in the world. And Lyle remembered a better time. For that moment, he was convinced it still existed – as long as she was there. He worshipped her.

Lyle tilted back his glass and let the liquid pool in his mouth. The ice cooled his heated blood. And slowly, everyone around him danced to a slower beat. The world around him started to mellow into a thick soft comforting texture. The sound filled his ears and the sky seemed to bleed out onto the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She was promising him that there was still beauty in this mess.

He felt assured. He remembered Devesh’s wide relishing smile. And the tears streamed down his face. He knew his friend would be avenged. In his liquid world, all was possible. Perfume floated in his head. He would do it. He would kill the man who killed his friend. The air thickened into a sultry blanket and Lyle felt consoled. The woman’s voice resonated through the space, shook the floor beneath his feet and swirled the brandy in his stomach.

Lyle looked down at his redemption for the evening. There it was. Pulped, condensed and distilled into his glass. The tragedy of the chords shredded his soul and the dark sugared brandy rose up to his nostrils. He took a sip and let it dissolve into his tongue and work its way down. The booze was finally working. The woman’s creamy skin was everywhere he looked. Lyle sunk into the sand of booze and music.

The DJ upped the tempo of the ballad to a sensual swing cabaret, shaking Lyle from his daze. Slowly, the woman popped the first button of her thin black blouse, teasing him, easing him, pleasing him into that sweet spot. One button at a time. Tenderly, huskily she called him to join her. The tempo shifted as the crowd moved in
unison. She threw her blouse aside. Lyle’s dick pulsed as he stared, completely still in
the moving crowd, breathless at the sight of her basking in the spotlight in her ruby
red corset. A new melody unravelled from her matching red lips. She ran her hands
down her torso and the crowd squealed with pleasure, their tears completely dried up
and their smiles impossibly wide. Lyle had stopped singing. She pulled down the
corner of her skirt. When Lyle felt that he couldn’t take the anticipation a second
longer, the lights cut out and she disappeared. Like a thief in the night.

With the glass still warm in his clutch, Lyle stared at the space that had held
her just a second ago. He stood firm and abandoned on the spot. Like a neglected
erection.

She was gone. Lyle felt naked and indestructible. He felt both cheated and
happy. He sipped his brandy and smouldered in what was left of the woman’s
presence. He swam in the memory of her. He still heard her voice when the shitty
club music started to play.
When Lyle got home, away from the noise of the smoky fantasy, reality dawned on him sooner than it should’ve. Jacque’s words started ringing in his mind. He needed another drink before he could get to bed. Suspension with possible dismissal. Likely unemployment. Probable pending trial. Status as a suspect. These were the consequences of doing the right thing. Of going to the station with the information he had. These were the joys facing him should he approach the police force with his knowledge. Let alone disclosing the details of the bribe: that would be suspension with immediate dismissal. Just for being an honest man about his moment of weakness. A cop threatened, manipulated and hounded by criminals he was powerless against. It was unfair. Lyle crawled his way onto the pink couch, trying to contain his premature headache in his hands, unable to believe that he was standing man-alone in this mess.

Jade was gone. It was 2 a.m. and she wasn’t home. She was probably sleeping out. He didn’t care. He’d suspected for while now that she’d been having an affair. Lyle stood up off the couch and tried to walk. He walked with his knees bent so as not to cave in and lose his balance. His back and shoulders were hunched in drunken defeat as he made his way to the alcohol cabinet. Lyle sat down on the carpet in front of the cupboard and opened the little door. There was still some brandy left. But at the sight of it, his stomach ached and protested against the cloying sweetness of the drink. Tomorrow morning’s nausea was approaching early and brandy was not going to do it for Lyle. Behind the Klipdrift bottle and the stack of tall glasses, Lyle noticed a slim dark shape he didn’t recognise. It had been stashed away behind everything. He took
the brandy and the glasses out and placed them down on the carpet to get a better look at it. Then, he saw the label. *Johnny Walker Platinum. 18 year old blend.* The icy black corporate man. He curled his fingers around the tall slim bottle and took it out.

*Scotch* – as the black corporate in the BMW had called it. Far as Lyle knew, Johnny Walker was an American brand. He opened the whiskey, fished out a tumbler from his collection of glasses and went to the freezer to chuck some ice blocks in the fat little glass. He needed water. And whiskey tasted like water. The wide, short glass sat uncomfortably in his hand, but the whiskey was palatable. Definitely palatable. Lyle wished he had a cigar. A defeated man with expensive whiskey and a cigar seemed fitting. Instead, he only had the R1000 bottle of whiskey given to him as a bribe from a man who looked like a black, white collar criminal.

The way he had stared at him from the window of his black BMW that night – so unafraid of the consequences. *Smiling at him.* The corporate had been more interested in Lyle himself, than in dodging his impending fine. That stare of his had never quite left Lyle’s mind. It had been like the man was analysing him. Testing him. Evaluating his price. R400. R500. R600? R600 plus a bottle of whiskey?

Two days after he’d seen the corporate in his black BMW, a black BMW went missing. And a few days after that, he found the first envelope on his desk. Lyle recalled Devesh’s change in mood when he’d mentioned the missing black BMW M3. He put the whiskey down on the carpet for a second.

Lyle could’ve kicked himself for not thinking of it before: he got up, fetched his police flashlight, and walked to Devesh’s house. The place had never officially been declared a crime scene. Lyle still knew how to get in round the backyard. He hauled himself up over the fence and tried the back door. It was locked. He smashed
the window in with a well-trained strike from his heavy flashlight, and climbed into Devesh’s house.

The place was black. Lyle followed the beam of light from his torch. First he shone it down at his feet. He was standing in a dirty kitchen among shards of broken glass. Then he shone it around the living area. Everything still looked exactly the same. He half expected Devesh to walk in from the garage, turn on the light and greet him with a brandy. But the place was silent. The light switch was next to the stove but Lyle didn’t want to draw attention to the house. He focussed the flashlight in the middle of the unfurnished room Devesh had once called a lounge. A wooden table, one chair and a dangling light bulb with no light-shade hanging low from the roof.

He pictured Devesh sitting on it, his skin illuminated by the bulb’s unshielded glare, laughing his cynical laugh and cursing him for drinking too fast. Lyle felt weak and sick all over again. He shone the light in another direction, suddenly wishing he’d brought the bottle of whiskey with him. As his circle of light scanned the walls, Lyle noticed a couple of oil-stained pistons lying next to the front door. They had stained the floor. Even if Devesh had still been alive, he wouldn’t have cared to remove them. Decorating was never his thing.

The torchlight fell on the ashtray on the table. It still contained about seven cigarette butts. Camel Filter. Lyle moved towards the ashtray and noticed that a few of the cigarette butts had red lipstick stains on their edges. Must have been from the woman he had fallen in love with. Never got the chance to meet this new love of his life. Lyle wondered where she was now. He inhaled deeply and then let out all his air. The whole house still smelt like Devesh: Brut cologne, stale nicotine and brake fluid.
Lyle held back the emotion burning in his chest. He focussed his thoughts before entering Devesh’s bedroom. He had to go in there for one purpose. It was important. Too important to get choked up with grief. He shone the torch down the corridor to his bedroom. The bed was unmade. Curtains still shut. A few items of clothing scattered on the floor. Lyle walked in and, on the counter, he saw it. The client book. He picked it up. This was all he needed. He could go now. But somehow, Lyle couldn’t bring himself to leave.

He shone the torch light through the rest of the room. It was even more sparse than the lounge. A single framed photo of the dead parents Devesh had never really known, a cheap poster of an old Cadillac and a small bedroom bin next to his bed. He let the light fall onto the bin. Toilet paper stained with diesel from where he’d probably wiped his hands clean. Two empty crushed boxes of Camel Filter. And something else – shiny and transparent... Lyle bent forward slightly to get a closer look. It was a used condom.

_The fucker actually got laid!_ Lyle smiled. His friend had gotten some action before he left this earth. At least that was something. Lyle felt glad at the thought. And then heartbroken that he couldn’t slap him on the back one last time and say _fucking finally!_ He left the room and carved his way back out of the house following his light beam. He climbed back out the window and returned to his own house with Devesh’s client book in his hand.

When he got inside, his own lights were still on and the brightness seemed invasive after Devesh’s house. Lyle picked up his whiskey tumbler off the carpet and finished the glass. Very palatable. A decent drink if that’s what you like. He poured himself another and then opened the client book. He paged until the writing stopped
and then paged back until the last recorded client. The last person to have spoken to Devesh. His killer.

The lounge lights started flickering unevenly, immersing the house in bouts of darkness and sudden spurts of light. Fuck. Lyle sighed loudly to himself. At first, he thought it was another episode of South Africa’s rolling blackouts. Then he realized he hadn’t bought electricity in ages. The house was running out. Lyle got up and ran to the kitchen before the whole house became submerged in the blackness of 3 a.m. He opened the forth kitchen drawer, where Jade kept her scented candles. He grabbed all of them and returned to the lounge. He lit the candles as he waited for the flickering, flashing light to die out; feeling like the last person in an abandoned 90’s disco party.

When the flickering eventually stopped, everything felt more quiet in the house. The night wind howled outside. But inside, the silences overlapped. Lyle took one of the fifteen candles he’d lit and walked to his room to fetch his stack of police paperwork: Diamond syndicate notes, lists of e-mails, photo-copied case files. He brought them all into the lounge and put them between the candles, next to his whiskey. He sprawled over the stacks of documents, creating a makeshift desk on the carpet. There had to be a link here somewhere. He started with the last written page of Devesh’s client book:

Vehicle: BMW M3
Scrap car: R50 000
Rims: R20 000
Tints: R2000
Paint: R2000
Expenditure: R74 000
Client: Lucille

Lucille who? That fucking black BMW again. It was all linked to that car. The last page had no client address. No phone number. Just a woman’s name. Lucille. A white girl’s name. Lyle remembered the condom in Devesh’s bedroom bin. The lipstick stains on the cigarette butts. Devesh’s killer was a woman.

Again, he thought about the black BMW – the black BMW that was stolen by a woman. The idea tasted very familiar. Lyle scrambled through the documents spread out on his carpet. He flipped through them, crumpling the irrelevant pages as he went. He carried on looking until he found the case file of the stolen BMW he’d been tracing the previous week. He scanned through the report:

30 October...black BMW M3 stolen... Sea Point, Stevenson Street, house number 64... not broken into...thief was in possession of keys... slept at my place of residence... do not know her name... stole various other items...

For a second, Lyle stared at the candle wax that had dropped onto the stack of papers. He skipped through the rest of the document to find the important part,
Suspect Description: White female

Short black hair

Approximately five foot

No piercings or tattoos

She was definitely Devesh’s type, thought Lyle. The thief must have been the same woman he’d been raving about before he died. Just as Lyle thought he’d figured it out, another thought crossed his mind: The corporate in the BMW who had bribed him. And that ice-cold stare of his. That smile. The black BMW he drove. Also a three series. Could he have been the thief? No, he was the original owner of the car. Lyle had pulled him over before the BMW was reported stolen. He had reported the theft. Could he have been the killer? There was something he didn’t trust about that man.

One thing was certain: It was either Lucille, the thief or the BEE corporate BMW driver. Or one of Jerome Golding’s guys. One of them was the killer. Lyle jotted down the Sea Point address of the original BMW-owner. There was only one way to find out.
Lyle’s eyelids felt thick from the alcohol. He drove without music. His service pistol lay comfortably on his hip. The N1 was clear and well lit. Barely another car on the road. It was just past 4 a.m. when he approached Cape Town’s city bowl. He could see the Decadent Dames billboard of his fiancé in nothing but white lace ahead of him getting bigger and bigger as he drove. He kept the image in his peripheral vision and his eyes on the road.

Far behind him, Lyle could make out the headlights of a single car. The rest of the lane was empty for as far as he could see and that single car was coming on at one hell of a speed. He ignored it. *Let the reckless fucker pass me*, he thought, as he drove on, keeping his speed at a consistent 120km/h. The car drew closer and closer until it was tailing him. Lyle looked into his rear-view mirror and saw it was a supercar. The black Bugatti slowed down to Lyle’s speed as it approached him. He couldn’t see the driver. Before he had a chance to get a better look, the car swerved into the lane next to him, driving parallel to him, maintaining his speed. Lyle sped up to 160. The Bugatti easily held his pace.

*Naaier!* Lyle shouted, as he rolled down his window. But before he had the chance to utter another obscenity at the driver, the black Bugatti swerved into him, setting the Mazda spinning head first across the lanes into the left barrier.

Complete release never comes by choice. It only happens given the acute lack of choice. And in that moment of complete helplessness, Lyle Bekink saw freedom.
As he felt himself being flung from the driver’s seat and into the arching space beneath the roof, he was weightless. He saw his hands floating from the steering wheel. Everything was soundless, timeless and serene. There was no hope of control. No desire for control, because he knew that control was impossible. He was left unto fate. And when you are truly left unto fate, you find freedom at its purest. Lyle acquiesced. He gave up.

Until the knock. The knock slammed him into the barrier, crushing his bones into the car door and obliterating his spell of yielding pre-death peace.

Curled around the bent metal that used to be his car door, in the corner of the passenger’s seat, Lyle lay in foetal position until the paramedics dragged him out of his Mazda’s remains. They didn’t understand how much he wanted to die. He couldn’t see. He couldn’t speak. And yet, there they were, trying to make him fully conscious again, trying to get him to speak to them, shifting him onto a stretcher, strapping down his limbs, shoving an oxygen mask onto his mouth, shining lights into his eyes, refusing him the open-palmed silence of non-existence.

They ploughed him with questions as they pushed up his eyelids, flashing his cracked Blackberry into his blurred vision. *Who must we call? Who must we call?* They knew he was going to die. Lyle’s voice emerged like dust from cracking cement. *Jade.* He felt a hand placing his phone at his ear and he heard her voice. He couldn’t hear what she was saying. And he couldn’t speak. Only one promise kept him alive for a mere moment,

*If I had nine seconds left to live, I’d call you.*

The ambulance sped off down the N1. Lyle never felt the shard of glass stuck in his temple. He never felt the broken ribs and the bruised muscles, the cracked
cranium or the failing liver. He didn’t see the handful of gold-toothed tow-truck drivers who pulled up at the scene, ready to prey on the ill-fated. The last thing he remembered was the metallic taste from chewing on blood and tiny pieces of glass and tooth enamel.

The Mazda looked like a modern art installation. The Cape Town CBD police arrived at the scene some fifteen minutes later and dismissed it as a drunken driving accident when the hospital found alcohol in his blood before sending his body off to the morgue.
PART 3

GODDESS CARLA-JADE

SHEER MODELS MAIN BOARD

NAME: CARLA-JADE DE HART

HEIGHT: 172cm

BUST: 88cm

WAIST: 65cm

HIPS: 91cm

HAIR COLOUR: LIGHT BROWN

EYE COLOUR: BROWN

Chapter Nineteen

The green-eyed catwalk anorexics strolled down Long Street like a string of well-groomed prostitutes. Their high heels scraping the pavements, long conditioned hair tangling in the Southeaster, portfolios under their arms tweaked to persuade each prospective company to please pick me. Desperation congealing in their shimmering eyes while their practiced self-assurance smoothed back their shoulders. Bodies sliced slender. Cheek bones high. Buttocks tight. Torsos long. A complete absence of body-hair.
The models scaled through the side roads to find their next summer casting. Ready to be judged and dismissed. To have every limb subjected to another German art director’s critical eye. Ready to stand in a room with two-hundred women squashed up against each other in a three hour long queue. To have numbers slapped on their chests while they wait to be ranked and evaluated.

The conversations are always the same:

Model A: *You look so good.*

Model B: *No, you look so good.*

Model A: *Wow, but no, you really look so good.*

Model B: *I love the way your bones prop you up.*

Model A: *Oh thanks, honey,*

Repeat indefinitely. And then go to the back of the line.

‘Name please.’

‘Carla-Jade.’

‘Carla...,’ the woman at the front of the line wrote down her name.

‘Carla-Jade.’

Jade smiled at her. *Get it right, you stupid bitch.* She watched the woman write down her full name on the sticker.

‘Carla-Jade.’

‘Yes.’
‘Take a seat.’

There was no place to sit in the packed studio on Castle Street. Jade took her number, 279, stuck it onto her shirt and joined the line spilling out of the building. It was peak season and the women surrounding her were from all over the globe, chasing the sun and starving for their next pay-check. Brazilian, British, American, French, German and, of course, the local models ranging from stick-thin boeremeisies to elegant Nubian queens.

Jade maintained her confident poise and applied her sticky gloss to her lips. She smacked them together to maximize the shine and pasted on her smile like an extra layer of lipstick. There were too many airbrushed people circling her radar. Models so accustomed to having their blemishes digitally erased, they’d started to believe they were truly flawless; that God had taken the liberty of airbrushing out the lines in their skin, the wrinkles in their brains and the texture in their characters. Get out of here with your vogue cheekbones. My head is buzzing. Jade hadn’t eaten the whole day.

Jade twirled her hair and nodded at the blank-smiling, unthinking, salad-eating women who towered around her. She settled into the sardine-packed, stilettoed space and logged into Facebook, twisting her hair around her finger. Her account was bombarded with new friend requests. 149 of them from this week alone. Her Facebook friend list had climbed steadily since the Decadent Dames Billboard of her in lingerie was erected on the N1. Great exposure. From 1878 to 2027 friends in under a week. It wasn’t that Jade measured her popularity by Facebook. She didn’t. She wasn’t yet famous. But it was an indicator. She may even have to start a fan-page
soon, she thought. As she browsed down her homepage, she saw that an acquaintance of hers had posted pictures of herself from when she was 2-years old. Jade sighed.

*Don’t post pictures of yourself when you were 2-years old. Nobody cares how you looked when you were 2-years old. Just send it straight to the guy you’re tryna ball and do us all a favour.*

When Jade left Castle Street four hours later, she wasn’t sure if she had secured the casting. She wasn’t convinced that she’d made the cut. She could usually see it in the director’s eyes. She could usually tell when they loved her. This time, she just didn’t know. Her feet were sore, her legs were aching, even her shoulders were tight and knotted from standing in that queue, trying to maintain a superior beauty.

Jade drove home, opened the front door, and there sat her fiancé, Lyle, ready. Waiting. Wagging his expectant dick at her after her long day. Like it was her sole purpose to stroke it. She put her bag down, took off her Steven Madden heels and put on different, more comfortable Brazilian heels, ignoring him. She had a wax appointment at three. Lyle could wait a bit longer. A girl can’t even have a couple of hairs on her pussy these days without being called 70’s.

Jade left the house again, oblivious to Lyle. She stopped at the ATM to draw some cash and all the petrol attendants stared at her. As she waited for her money and her receipt, she struck a pose in her retro polka-dot dress and Brazilian heels, getting off on their drooling stares and gaping mouths. Acting like she didn’t notice it.

She loved her heels. Jade never went anywhere without heels. It was a matter of style. She believed that a lady should look her best every day. She would look good – no matter where she was – no matter what time of day. It was important to her. If her heels were too high for the hours ahead, she would put gel pads in the soles of her
shoes so that she could strut around in them for longer. Jade made a point of wearing high heels wherever she went. On principle. Even to *braais.*

She swung her arse as she left the ATM, flaunting her pert little toned behind at the petrol attendants and the parked cars waiting to put in fuel. All the while, Jade felt her anxiety building. *She had to get that role.* Her last gig had been the *Decadent Dames* billboard. And as high-end as that shoot was, Jade hadn’t gotten any work since then. She needed to keep up appearances. She needed to keep her game afloat. She needed more shoots. More money. More exposure. Better clothing. More status in the industry.

Jade had to land something big. And soon. She was already 24 years old and her career lifespan was limited. Thirty is where models go to die.

After her pampering session, Jade walked to her Yaris in the cool evening air and checked her phone. Nothing. They hadn’t called. Jade couldn’t believe it. What had she done wrong? What was she lacking? She would have to step up the severity of her diet, increase her jogging hours. She got home and removed her makeup. She would have to buy more makeup remover. Today, she would give her skin a rest. No makeup, just her best rejuvenating skin cream, eye-cream, lip-cream and anti-wrinkle cream. Just let it breathe for tonight and tomorrow. She ignored Lyle, and went to bed. Bed was where Jade remained until deep into the next morning when the sunlight filled the room and Lyle had left to work.

The cars were piling onto the roads and most people were already in their offices. Jade couldn’t get out of bed. She logged into Facebook and watched her list of friend requests continue to climb. That was encouraging, at least. She hauled herself up and put together a breakfast of tea and headache pills to soothe her hunger.
pains. She didn’t shower. She didn’t brush her teeth. She didn’t leave the house. She took her tea and her pills straight back to bed with her and stayed under the covers until she got too warm. Then she threw the covers off again, until she got too cold. And then she folded them over herself again. This routine continued for hours.

Jade scouted out a string of women on Facebook who were doing better than she was. Models who were hotter. Models who had the market at their feet. She analysed the arches of their eyebrows, the circumferences of their thighs, their hips to waist proportions, the width of their arms, the thickness of their lips, the breadth of their eyes, until she’d had her fill. Then she got up to check her reflection for a single redeeming factor in her own body. She couldn’t find one.

She stared into her full-length mirror and watched her initial appearance melt away. Her skin spread to raise the arch of her eyebrows. The circumferences of her thighs contracted to a narrower perimeter. The flesh at her waist fell away and the widths of her arms were carved thin and tapered down. Her lips swelled into a lush thickness and the breadth of her eyes stretched to a smouldering glare. That was her projection – and she saw it clearly. She would get there.

She didn’t play any music. She denied herself food and made another cup of tea. Jade flipped through her portfolio of professional photographs before going back onto Facebook and accepting the list of friend requests for the day. She still hadn’t heard back from the client since the casting. She didn’t brush her wild curly hair. She couldn’t finish her second cup of tea. By 2:13 in the afternoon, Jade still hadn’t showered or gotten dressed. She still hadn’t eaten. She still hadn’t done anything productive and she was fast losing hope. She rubbed her large breasts upwards, hoping they would regain some perkiness.
Finally at 2:19, she got a call.

Long after her agent had hung up, Jade still held the phone tight against her ear. Slowly, she put it back down on the bed and got up. She got it! This was the shoot she’d waited for her entire life. National TV. The new face of the biggest diamond company in South Africa. And the advert was going to be aired throughout the country. Provocative. Semi-nude, dim lighting. Just her and a huge rock on her finger. Jade made herself lunch. One sachet of Cup-a-Soup and two litres of water. She had to be in peak physical shape for this. Lace and diamonds. Jade smiled.

Her agent said that a representative of Sublime Stones had personally requested her to be the new face of their company. The casting had just been a formality. The man phoned into the agency and personally told them to name their price for her. They wanted her to be their new face. No one else would do. This was unprecedented. Clients usually worked directly with the modelling agencies and there was always a protocol to follow. In all Jade’s modelling years, this had never happened to her. Name your price, they’d said. Sublime Stones was not going to hold a call-back casting as originally planned. They’d decided that they wanted her. Her face and her body representing their diamond campaign. This gig would set her career on fire.

Smiling her big cheese of a smile, Jade threw off her oversized sleeping top.

She blasted away the silence with some Nicki Minaj and got dressed. Ready to face the world. She vigorously brushed her teeth while singing Monster with a mouth full of sweet mint toothpaste. She rapped along in the shower while she lathered herself in luxurious body wash with the big pink sponge Lyle bought her. She dabbed herself dry with a huge fluffy red towel and fished out a wet clump of her hair from the
shower drain. She moisturized her body from temple to toe and slipped her shiny black thong between her bum cheeks.

Then she sat down and crossed her legs. That was when she saw the thigh flesh of her left leg lapping over her crossed right leg. Disgusting.

Jade opened her new set of fake eyelashes and pasted them on her eyelids. She picked up her GHD and ironed out her curls. She put on her Steve Maddens. She wiped her cheeks with a warm cloth and applied the foundation. She couldn’t leave the house without makeup. This was her big break and she would show the world what she’s made of. She painted on her face.

Jade looked again at the overlapping thigh flesh and sighed. She had slipped up and eaten a fried chicken patty two days ago. The whole one. She could still feel it in the pit of her stomach, taunting her. Making its way down to her legs, up to her arms, across to her hips. She wished she hadn’t eaten it. She wouldn’t eat for the rest of the day.

She noticed the slight droop in her breasts. The droop was always evident when she wasn’t wearing a bra, especially when she relaxed her shoulders. Disgusting.

Her lips were disproportionate. The bottom lip was thicker than the top. And the top lip especially was not puffy enough. It was lacking. Inadequate. Her wrists and ankles could be smaller. The melting mirror was regaining true form – and the truth of her body was unbearable to Jade.
She had exactly two days to shape up before the Sublime Stones shoot. Jade knew she could shed weight like a snake sheds skin. She just had to be disciplined about it.
Chapter Twenty

Swamps of sweat leaked between the chubby folds of flesh on the bodies of top-heavy church women. Wearing their Sunday best, they tried to hide their pounds of rolling skin underneath their floral blouses. Floral blouses which they all bought at some or other Foschini Sale. But Jade saw through them all. She saw the layers of fat underneath the pink and yellow blossoms. She saw their cankles squashed into cheap bulky heels. Pews upon pews of failed Herbex women, finding hope in Jesus who loved them despite their ugly, bulging physiques. Good thing God had been good to her.

Our Father, who art in Heaven,

They began the chant and Jade could smell them. She smelt the swamps of leaking sweat between their fat folds. She smelt their failed attempts at layering on cheap perfume to disguise it. She took it all in. The cloying stench rose with the priest’s suffocating incense and filled Jade’s head.

Hallowed by Thy Name,

She tried to join the prayer. Her lips moved, but no sound emerged from them. Her vision was clouded by mountains of fat. Landscapes of rolling, folding flesh and stretched skin struggling to hold the mass, threatening to tear under the weight. The pink and yellow floral prints merged and dissolved into blotches. And a ringing started up in her ears. It got louder and increased in pitch.

Thy Kingdom come,
A fever climbed up her body, spiking her temperature. Jade’s hand felt too heavy to lift. Her arms went limp and she couldn’t fan herself off. The sweat poured down her back and her head dropped, too heavy for her neck to hold. The mountains of fat were smothering her as they closed in. She was getting too hot. The air was stifling. She needed to get out, but she couldn’t move.

*Thy will be done,*

Jade tried to grip the pew in front of her to keep her balance, but the air left her lungs. Blackness edged into her peripherals. And she couldn’t see where the pew was anymore. She felt her body tip forward. She was unable to stop herself.

*On Earth...*

Unconsciousness descended and her limbs finally gave way underneath her as she fell into a soft blubbery floor of female fat. Immersed in flesh, she heard nothing, saw nothing and thought nothing more.

When Jade woke up, two bony arms were trying to lift her onto her feet. A small hand wiped the sweat off her forehead. She felt a thumb pressing up her eyelids, forcing them open. Jade’s blotchy vision gave way to two huge dark eyes looming over her. The eyes seemed to be pasted on skin so pale and flawless, Jade thought she was being stared at by a porcelain doll. The hand stroked her hair. The ringing in her ears grew duller. When she regained her normal hearing, she heard the gasps punctuating a gaping silence. She looked up beyond the huge doll eyes staring at her and saw bright beams of light spilling through the stained glass windows. She was still in the church.
The woman standing over her was holding her head. She helped Jade up and supported her as she led her out of the church. Jade’s shaky feet dragged across the church floor, feeling the edge of the wooden slab slide beneath her socks, giving way to the hard rectangular bricks outside. And before she knew it, she was curled up in a ball on the comfortable passenger’s seat of a BMW with the aircon on full blast. A pie, a Coke and a chocolate bar made their way onto her lap.

The pie felt warm on her thigh. It was waiting for her on her lap. She put her hand on it, feeling like a little girl. The last time Jade had been in possession of a takeaway pie, she’d been in primary school. Jade looked down. Next to the pie, she saw the sparkly, purple wrapping of a Cadbury chocolate slab. Beautiful packaging, she thought. Shiny. There was no way she was going to eat it.

Jade mumbled a *thank you* to the woman driving the car. The sound of her own cracked voice shocked her. She sounded frail. Her consonants were barely threaded to her vowels. She couldn’t believe the broken *thank you* she had just uttered. She couldn’t believe that such a feeble sound had emerged from her mouth. She wondered if the woman had even heard her.

The woman didn’t respond, so Jade guessed not. She saw the woman glance at her from beneath her eyelashes as she took the Coke from her lap and opened it with one hand, keeping her eyes on the road. She held the opened can out to Jade. Still not a word. Jade took the can and shook her head meekly. Too much sugar. She hated Coke. She never drank sodas. And Coke was the absolute worst of the lot. Jade put the opened can between her legs. No way she was gonna drink it. The woman’s eyes kept on the road. She increased the speed and turned up the air-con. Her driver’s seat was pulled close to the steering wheel to adjust for her height. The woman was tiny.
*Where do you live?*

Her words sailed into Jade’s ears. They poured into her head and swirled down into the wells of her eardrums. The lady’s voice sounded like a hundred women of varying personalities, all speaking in sync, on cue and in key. It balanced a delicate and impossible harmony.

Jade let the words settle and linger. She waited for them to disappear completely before contaminating the silence with her own voice. She hazily recalled the directions to her house. The lady clearly knew the area because she sped forward at over 100km an hour, taking short-cuts and reaching the house sooner than Jade had anticipated. She helped Jade out of the BMW, carrying her stilettos. The woman was surprisingly strong for her size. A tiny, bony, petite sliver of femininity. Everything Jade had always wanted to be.

Jade had never been happier to see her front door. She scratched in her bag for the key and when she found it, she could barely manage to turn it forcefully enough to unlock the door. Her hands were trembling and limp. The lady took the key from her hand and unlocked the door, opening it for her. When they got inside, Jade collapsed onto the couch. Energy spent. Minerals depleted. The little nutrition she’d stored in her blood from the sachet of instant soup had sweated out of her body before she fainted. She wanted to thank the lady and see her out. But she needed to rest before she could speak or stand. Jade heard the kettle rumbling in the kitchen and the lady’s strange, sweet voice humming a tune that trailed through into the lounge, like the echo of a hundred women whispering.

Jade didn’t know the song, but she liked it. It was soothing. She imagined that the tune was what people called a lullaby, although Jade had never heard one. She
couldn’t hear the words and she didn’t want to. She only hoped the song would not end. She heard the teaspoon knocking the inside of a mug to the slow beat of the lullaby. The lady was making her tea. Jade smiled and closed her eyes. Exactly what she needed. The woman emerged from the kitchen with a heated pie on a plate and a fresh cup of tea. She had the decorum of a chef. The way she carried the plate and the cup, Jade was sure she’d been a waitress for years. The woman spoke again and Jade heard a room full of women all trapped in her tone.

Jade shifted into a more upright position on the couch and adjusted her hair. The lady clearly wanted her to eat something. Her big eyes and her face of pale skin were angled at Jade, expectant. The woman looked like a cat. Jade had never trusted cats. They can see in the dark. Still, she was beautiful to look at. Unnervingly beautiful. The sight of her made Jade feel inadequate and drawn to her at the same time. Jade cleared her throat and composed herself.

‘I can’t eat. Got a show tonight.’

Again, Jade’s voice sounded shallow and threadbare in comparison. Jade took the tea and plate from the cordially outstretched hand. She put the pie down on the table and sipped the tea. Her body was so grateful to receive the warm sugar that Jade didn’t even bother to take the teabag out of the cup. The lady watched her for a while, saying nothing. Jade enjoyed the attention of her dark wild eyes. She had never been watched like this before. With such interest. With such scrutiny. Not even by modelling scouts, photographers and ad directors. The lady gazed at her as if she was some strange object to behold. Jade liked it. She enjoyed being looked at.

Finally, here was someone who fully appreciated her. And not only her exterior. The woman was evaluating Jade’s mystique. Jade had never before realised
that she had *any* mystique. But the lady was so mysterious that her interest meant that Jade too had to be *mysterious* in some way too. The woman ran her narrow fingers through Jade’s curls and Jade tilted her head into the woman’s palm. There was something endlessly comfortable about the palm of her hand. Jade wished she would hum that tune again.

She didn’t. She only asked where the show was. Jade wished she would speak more words. But her questions were always clipped short. Small sentences. *Where do you live? Where is the show?* Jade let her eyes fall on the liquidy creamy skin and the massive dark eyes. She wished she had such big eyes herself. Such unblemished skin. Such natural grace. Such easy elegance.

‘Tiger-Tiger.’

Jade’s voice had regained some of its volume. It now sounded crass and jarring after the lady’s strange, effortless timbre.

‘It’s a lingerie runway show,’ she continued. Jade explained how they were going to build a runway through the middle of the club. How the place was going to be full. How the models would walk above the crowd as they cheered. Runway shows were great exposure for models, and she was looking forward to it. She couldn’t ruin it all by eating a pie now... The woman got up to leave.

‘Please don’t go yet.’

The woman stopped.

Jade led her to her room and the woman followed. She wanted her to stay a while. Such a lovely lady. Jade tried to unbutton her blouse, but her hands were
unsteady. All she wanted to do was to put on something more comfortable; something that wasn’t clammy or drenched in sweat, but her body wouldn’t allow it. Her hands conspired against her. Weak and shaky, Jade was frustrated. Her skin tingled from exertion and fatigue. She had never felt more helpless. The tears streamed down her face and she collapsed into the fortress of pillows, tired and ashamed. Wishing she had half the resolve of the woman who simply stood in her doorway watching her struggle.

Then Jade felt her curls being brushed out of her face. The buttons of her blouse loosened and the pressure on her chest eased. Her bra strap popped. The material slipped off her shoulders. And a big T-shirt was thrust over her head. Her necklace lightly slipped off her neck. All the pillows disappeared off her bed. Her earrings were gently unhooked from her earlobes. The tight jeans peeled off her legs. And finally she was free. She heaved one huge sigh of relief and stared gratefully at the woman, whose face had disappeared completely underneath Jade’s oversized T-shirt. It all happened too fast for Jade to control.

Warm thighs, tangled hair, curling toes, palms on breasts, ripping silk, swelling clit, tongue in slit, multiple, multiple, multiple orgasm.

Jade fell asleep with her soaking wet silk black thong lying broken next to her pillow. She thought she heard the front door close. But the sound was too far away and Jade was exhausted.
When Jade woke up, her mascara had sealed her eyelids shut. She rubbed her eyes and smudged her black eye-shadow onto her fingers. She glanced at the clock and realised she’d missed the Lingerie Runway Show. Her legs felt like jelly as she walked over to the microwave and heated up the untouched pie on the counter. She was starving.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the glass door of the microwave and smiled. She looked beautiful. Vogue beautiful. Jade felt happy with her appearance for the first time in months. She would eat that pie. And she wouldn’t feel bad about it. She was restored. The woman was gone and Jade wasn’t surprised. She couldn’t really have expected her to stay forever. And it didn’t matter, she thought, still staring at her reflection in the microwave glass. That woman had been really beneficial to her skin. Who would’ve guessed? It wasn’t new a face-cream that she’d needed after all.

Jade felt as if she’d been attended to. Well-sated. Something Lyle didn’t know how to do anymore. Something Jade wasn’t sure he ever knew how to do. She took the pie out of the microwave. The meaty steam coming off it filled her nostrils and made her drool. She was going to enjoy this pie. She didn’t feel bad about eating the pie as she ate it. She didn’t feel bad about cheating on Lyle either. In fact, Jade had hardly moved the entire time she’d been with that woman. She had just lay there. She hadn’t initiated anything. Besides, it was Lyle’s own fault. She had been so frustrated lately and he made no effort to satisfy her. But she had never questioned it. She’d always been told that koekies smell like frozen fish.

Clearly that woman didn’t think so. Jade hadn’t felt so good in months. And she was in too great a mood to care about him right now. She played Chris Brown and
did her happy dance, hips jerking to the baseline as she remembered the woman. What was her name again?

She ate a quarter of the pie and felt infinitely better than she had the whole week. The solid food filled her up quickly and she couldn’t finish it. She threw the leftovers in the bin and danced her way back to her room. She got dressed to the beat of the music.

*Yellow model chick, yellow bottle sipping, yellow Lamborghini, yellow top missing...*

She slipped on her favourite denim shorts. She pulled her tank top over her head and buckled on her wedge heels. She twirled her hair and put on some lip gloss as she looked for her amethyst chain. Jade paused. Where was her amethyst chain? She carried on twirling her hair and applied another layer of lip gloss. Chris Brown rapped on, but Jade stopped dancing.

She looked around the room. She scratched among her jewellery and then remembered the way the lady had gently unclipped it as she had undressed her. Maybe the woman had put it on her dressing table. She approached the counter full of makeup. Not there.

Maybe the cupboard? Jade swung open all three of her big wooden cupboards and scanned the shelves. But the teardrop amethyst chain wasn’t there either. She went through every shelf until she noticed a gap in one of her rows of high heels. Her Brazilian stilettos were gone.

Suddenly, Jade was gripped by an unthinkable possibility. What if she had misplaced them? Those heels had cost her a fortune! And she had hardly worn them yet. She looked down at the floor. She looked under all the pillows. She looked under
her bed. Behind the door. And then another thought struck her. Where were all the
clothes she’d chucked on the floor?

Jade checked her cupboards again, throwing bunches of clothing aside trying
to find her heels, her chain and the missing dresses that she’d left on the floor earlier
that day. They were nowhere. Jade sat down. The realisation almost threw her off-
balance.

The woman must’ve taken it. She must’ve taken it all.

Shit.

Her gold earrings.

Jade scratched through her jewellery drawers one more time, hoping she
would find them dangling there, like they always did, next to the amethyst chain. She
prayed that the woman had just packed them away again. Jade’s manicured nails
scraped the bottom of her drawer. Nothing. She finally accepted that they were gone.
And if they were gone, what else was gone?

She counted seven missing dresses, at least five missing blouses, maybe more,
the Brazilian heels, the amethyst chain and the golden earrings. Jade stood defeated
among the piles of clothing in her room. How could she have been so stupid? The
meaty oil of the pie congealed in her stomach, nauseating her. Poisonous to her.

She wore that chain every day. Lyle had given it to her. He would want to
know what happened to it. Jade walked into the lounge to escape the messy room. She
needed space. She needed to think. She couldn’t tell him what had really happened.
He could never find out about the woman. How on earth would she explain this?
As Jade paced up and down the living room, she noticed a few more things missing from the house. The crystal vase she’d gotten from her mother, Lyle’s scale model Pontiac GTO from Devesh… She felt the pie sitting solid and cold in her stomach. Lyle would be home soon. She put on more lip gloss. She twirled her hair until a few strands fell out. She cursed herself for being so trusting.

Still, Jade couldn’t deny that, physically, she felt marvellous. Renewed. A different woman. She allowed her mind to briefly remember the woman, her hands, her mouth… And then she quickly shook away the thought. It was no good. It was too good.

Before she had time to properly think things through, she heard Lyle turning the key to open the door. Jade immediately retreated to her bedroom and lay down. She buried her face in the pillow. The only pillow left on the bed. She heard Lyle’s keys fall on the table. She curled up into a ball. She heard him opening the alcohol counter. And then, for a while, she heard nothing. She waited. There were a few faint sounds coming from the kitchen, but nothing distinguishable. She waited some more. Not a sound from her fiancé. What was he doing in there?

Jade couldn’t handle it anymore. She swung open the door and saw him standing in the passage looking confused. She burst into tears and collapsed into his arms, sobbing. Lyle held her and asked, completely bewildered,

‘What happened?’

Jade had perfected her look of vulnerability for the camera. It was an expression they always asked for at shoots. Look sultry. Look confused. Look sad. Look happy. Look vulnerable. She gave herself over to the role as if it was the highest paying ad she’d
ever have to do. She felt the tears well up in her eyes and stream down, on cue, as she let out a long high-pitched cry,

‘My chain,’”

She heaved, burrowing her wet face into his neck and making sure he could feel her tears on his skin.

‘And my clothes and my jewellery...’

She sniffed and gasped stilted breaths into his chest,

‘All... gone.’

Then Jade made a decent attempt to look like she was composing herself before launching into an explanation,

‘I... I just popped out to buy some Coke... And then, when I came back in – the door was standing wide open...’

She wiped her eyes between sniffs and buried her hands in her curls, shaking her head like she couldn’t believe it,

‘Mommy’s vase, your GTO... The whole place was upside down...’

Jade burst into tears again. Lyle tried to console her. Jade gestured to the empty spot on the counter where the model car used to stand. Lyle nodded. He seemed to believe her. Jade took the act down just a notch.

‘I’m so sorry, Lyle, I left the door unlocked – you know I always forget things like that...’
Lyle moved her curls out of her face. He led her to the couch and made her some tea. He passed it to her with the teabag removed. Jade gazed at him, pleading for his affection, his understanding, his devotion, his faith in her. He nodded,

‘It’s not you, Jadie.’ he assured her, stoking her hair. ‘It’s the crime in this city… blah blah blah.’

Jade looked at the Police Services badge on his chest. Even though her story was bullshit, she still felt safe with him. She smiled a measured smile, making sure it wasn’t too wide. She sipped her tea and gazed at him like he was her hero.

‘I’m just so glad you’re here now.’

‘Jadie, this is a robbery. We need to report it immediately.’

She sighed at the thought. Really? Lyle picked his keys up off the table,

‘Let’s go.’

‘Right now?’

‘Right now = ’ blah blah blah crime and justice. Jade wished he would shut up.

She tried not to smile too much. She had quite enjoyed what her robber had done to her. Before taking all her stuff, that is. Now her little soldier-of-justice wanted to go and report the crime. What the hell was she going to say? She would have to think of something, and fast. She would come up with the full story in the car on the way there. They got in and Lyle drove. She put her hand on his hand as he shifted gears.

‘I just don’t want anything to happen to you,’ he said.
‘I know.’

When they got to the station, Jade looked Officer Jacque straight in the eye. She’d always liked him. He was her favourite of all Lyle’s colleagues. A very handsome guy. Lovely blue eyes. Jade effortlessly spun him the common cliché:

*Got home and everything was upside down.*

*No idea what happened.*

(And then?)

*Looked down the street and saw a couple of guys running away.*

(Describe them.)

*Black.*

*Looked around the house. Noticed some things were missing.*

(Why didn’t you call the police?)

*Traumatised at the time. Couldn’t think straight.*

When Jade returned home with Lyle after filing the police report, they were both exhausted. Jade cleared up her room and Lyle poured himself a brandy. Sixteen brandies later, he joined her in bed. Neither of them slept well.
Chapter Twenty-One

As usual, when Jade woke up, Lyle had already left for work. She turned on the radio and made herself some tea. She let her thoughts drift to the lady who had robbed her. She had mixed feelings: resentment and intrigue. But her reflections were soon distracted by the News headlines. The newsreader reported a fatal accident on the N1 into Cape Town just before the Decadent Dames billboard:

‘A driver is reported dead after a high-impact crash into a barrier just before a billboard on the N1…’

Jade put down her cup of tea and turned up the volume on the radio. She was on that Decadent Dames billboard! She was the woman in lingerie whose image was blown up billboard size on the N1. She was the woman that came into view on drivers’ windscreens as they approached Cape Town’s city bowl. She was the last thing that driver saw before he crashed. She was the last thing that man saw before he died. Jade jumped up, snatched her Blackberry and called her friend,

‘Oh my word, Natalie, did you hear about that driver who crashed his car on the N1 right before that billboard of me?!’

Jade twirled one of her curls between her fingers and stared out of the window, waiting for a response.

‘That massive Decadent Dames billboard where I’m wearing that red lingerie – you know, the one you see as you drive into Cape Town?’

She sipped her sweet tea and listened to her friend’s reaction as she scratched around in her handbag for her lip gloss,
‘Ja, a guy crashed his car into a curb right before that billboard...’

She swallowed a big gulp of sugary tea and tried not to smile.

‘No, I think he’s dead now ja. But he was looking at me! Natalie, he was looking at me when he crashed. I’m telling you that’s why he crashed. Because he looked up and he saw the billboard – must have got distracted or something... and crashed. Cause he was too busy looking at me.’

Jade extended a hand in front of her eyes, stretched out her fingers and tilted her head in admiration of her manicured nails. She wondered about the dead driver. Had he been young or old? Had he been good-looking? Successful?

‘... Anyway, I’m just saying, he was looking at my fine ass when he totalled his car! Ja. I know! Anyway, I’ll speak to you soon. Bye!’

Jade put down her Blackberry, turned the radio back up and switched on the TV. She hoped to see a clear shot of the accident scene. She had caused the death of a man... No, no, no. Her beauty had caused the death of a man. Jade felt a tinge of guilt for smiling so widely. But she really couldn’t help herself. It was the best day of her life. The ultimate affirmation.

She sat with her back to the kitchen so she couldn’t see the food. She couldn’t afford to be tempted right now. Not with the Sublime Stones shoot today. She’d already had a single sachet of powdered soup. And a cup of tea. With sugar. That was all she was allowing herself for today, but she was still hungry. Her head ached. Jade waited for another News update and popped two headache pills. The next bulletin would only come on in an hour. She washed the pills down with water and stared blankly at the TV until Rihanna sang through her phone’s speaker. She answered it
before the mediocre songstress had time to complete her sentence. Natalie must have heard the news:

‘Ja – did you hear? Hmmm. Ja. Look, I’m not saying that I was the reason he crashed. Obviously, I’m not that conceited. But now, just say that I am the reason he crashed... Then that makes me like – a murderer! Kind-of. Don’t you think? If that was the reason that he crashed, now obviously. Anyway, ja Natalie, I just had to tell someone you know? I have to go to a shoot now, but BBM me, né? Ok, bye!’

Jade finished her tea, picked up her big grey bag and swung her arse as she walked to her car. She fancied herself the billboard killer. Death by beauty. Men so distracted by her body, they crashed and perished at the sight of it. She had literally killed someone with her beauty. Jade had never felt more confident.

Jade wore a different necklace to fill the bare space on her chest where the stolen amethyst chain used to hang. She would have to go shopping soon to replace all the clothing that woman stole. Jade knew she should be more pissed off by what had happened yesterday. But she couldn’t. She had no one to tell. Whatever anger she felt towards that woman was left unexpressed. She couldn’t breathe a word of it to anyone. She felt a bit cheated. But she wasn’t upset. The woman may be a thief, but Jade was effectively a murderer. And she did it all just by being gorgeous! Besides, after this shoot, she would have enough cash to replace all the missing items anyway.

Jade turned up the radio, hoping for another report on the N1 accident. She sang along with Lady Gaga at the top of her voice, looking forward to her shoot: The future face of diamonds in South Africa, baby! Goddess Carla-Jade had the world spinning on the tip of her manicured nail and nobody could touch her. She was on top. Boss bitch. Bow down.
The Sublime Stones crew was top-notch. Professionals. The set, the cameramen, the director, the make-up artists, the costume designers – all imported professionals. Experienced. International portfolios. Jade was working with a high-end producer for the biggest diamond company in Southern Africa. She was treated like royalty. Offered snacks and beverages on arrival. Naturally she refused them. She was presented with her own dressing room complete with all the creature comforts. Five make-up artists were assigned to her. One for her eyes, one for her facial skin, one for her lips, one for her hair, one to take care of the shimmer of her body. The lingerie was exquisite. The detail in the lace, the velvet finishing, the bows and the trimmings, the intricacy of the pattern, the superb lines of the cut, the feel of the material to the touch. Phenomenal. All of it.

The aesthetic was to be dark, with flashes of light. A buff, defined, gorgeous man with light eyes and long hair walked in and shook her hand. The scene was to take place just after he gives her the diamond ring. The camera would focus on the diamond on her finger and then on their bodies moving closer together. Slight touches. The idea of giving into temptation. Seduction. The seduction of the diamond.

The moving spaces between their physiques were carefully choreographed and tastefully executed. Her breast moved softly onto his sculpted chest. But Jade didn’t worry – no nipples or privates would show. Just everything but. They wanted the image of her really tempting him. The seductress in lingerie and the diamond. She put on the ring to begin the first take. The diamond wasn’t real. But then, neither were her hair extensions, her eyelashes or her nails.
When Jade got home, she still had her makeup on and her hair was beautifully done up. She looked at Lyle, waiting for him to comment. But Lyle didn’t say anything. He didn’t so much as look at her twice. She couldn’t believe it.

‘What do you think of the hairstyle?’

Lyle shrugged,

‘Mm. Nice.’

He hardly even looked at her anymore! Jade ran to the mirror to make sure she was still the most beautiful woman in the world. She could not accept any less of herself. She looked at her reflection and decided that she looked good. Fabulous, in fact. How could he not say anything? She decided that she wouldn’t tell him about the diamond shoot. She wouldn’t tell him that it would soon be aired on national TV. She wouldn’t tell him anything. He didn’t deserve to know.

‘Lyle!’ she shouted from the bedroom, ‘Lyle!’

‘Yes Jadie?’

‘Were you listening to the news on the radio on your way home? Did you hear about that guy who crashed his car on the N1? – Just before the Decadent Dames billboard of me?! It was on the radio just now... It happened last night, right by that billboard with me –’

Lyle cut her off. Rude.

‘- With you in the red lingerie... Ja ja, I know the one you’re talking about. But that’s not what I heard on the radio now on my way home.’
She walked back into the living room, dancing slightly as she spoke, flipping her curls as she emphasised her point. She wouldn’t let him get her down. Not today. No way. She was on top of her game. She spoke to spite him.

‘What do you mean? They said it was on the N1 as you come into Cape Town, which is exactly where the billboard is.’

‘Ja Jadie, but just because he happened to crash at that intersection, doesn’t mean he crashed because he was looking at you in your underwear. They said that there may have been another car involved. They’re looking into foul play and all that. So don’t get too excited.’

Jade threw her hands up. It wasn’t working. He wasn’t affected at all. A man had died looking at her, and he didn’t even notice her.

‘I’m not getting excited! It’s a terrible thing that happened to the poor man. Shame man! How can you even think that I would be excited about something like that? I was just saying, you know.’

‘Ja Jadie.’

Jade ignored him. She knew the man crashed because of her beauty. And she knew she was going to be a star. Lyle didn’t even see her anymore. Not the way he used to. Not the way that woman had. Not the way the rest of the world soon would. Lyle just looked right through her these days. Why didn’t he see her as the goddess she was? Jade suddenly felt anxious. That old doubt was starting to creep in.

She logged into her agency’s website and scouted out her rivals, negotiating their comparative beauties. She tried to convince herself that she was the most beautiful. She had spent years grooming herself to be the most beautiful. She thought
she had achieved it. She thought she just had it naturally. But given the way Lyle looked right through her today, she just had to check. He hadn’t been making his usual comments lately. What the fuck was wrong with him?

She scanned through pictures of her competition, torturing herself. She chastised herself when she realised that she may not actually be the most beautiful. Browsing the model website, she came across another woman with nicer, fuller lips than hers. And that was the trigger. Goddess Carla-Jade fell apart.

*She has better lips than mine. Look at those lips! Blow-job lips! Even I want to stick my dick in those lips – and I don’t even have one!*


Jade knew she had better hair than Zoë though, so maybe she was still more beautiful on the whole? Pity her eyes weren’t blue – or green like Zoë’s – because brown eyes are just so bland, so common. Pity she didn’t have bigger eyes. Big eyes make you look more vulnerable and innocent. She would be more beautiful if her eyes were bigger – wider perhaps, with longer lashes. She would have to lose weight too. Zoë was naturally very slender. Jade would have to catch up.

She clicked to the next page. Caelyn Simmons. Perky boobs, creamy skin, short Halle Berry-style hair. Wispy, very feminine appearance. Always looked so delicate. Jade wished her frame was also so delicate. She wished she had that fragile, feminine “please save me” look that Caelyn had. Such a nice person though. Caelyn
was so fucking sweet, Jade struggled to hate her. Caelyn was always nice to her when she bumped into her at castings. Always smiling and keen to chat. But Caelyn was a hoe. Slept with at least three guys Jade knew. Two of them in the same agency. Slut.

*Fuck you,* Jade shook her head, thinking of Zoë and Caelyn: the bitch and the slut. *Fuck the both of yous.*


Jade would have to work with her assets. Play to her strengths. *I know I have gorgeous legs. Maybe that will compensate.* She looked down at her thighs and just beneath her panty line, barely covered by her skirt, she noticed a single stretch-mark. Jade burst into tears. Genuine tears. Her career was at an end. What was she going to do?

She curled herself into a ball on her bed and smelt the mysterious lady’s perfume on her sheets. She burrowed her nose into the pillow and took in the scent. She smiled, remembering how the woman had glided her tongue down her hips. She remembered the feel of the woman’s soft hand between her thighs. Screw Lyle. Screw the models. Secretly, she knew she was beautiful. So beautiful a man had wrecked his car and died before her picture.

Almost everything in Jade’s room was pink. She had even had her walls painted a special shade of pink, called Baker-Miller pink. It was a particular shade of
pink used as an appetite suppressant for prisoners to make them less aggressive. The pink was rumoured to have a side effect of hunger reduction. Jade had jumped at the opportunity when she first heard of it: a colour that serves as an appetite suppressant.

Lyle called her from the living room,

‘Jadie! Just come listen to this kak!’

Hoping to hear more news about the N1 crash, Jade got up from the bed and looked at Lyle expectantly. He started reading something. It sounded like the usual boring police shit. But Lyle was struggling to contain his laughter. Jade only heard the main points, getting restless as he continued:

...black BMW M3 was stolen... from the driveway of my house in Sea Point... was not broken into... the thief was in possession of... keys... had slept at my place... taken my car keys while I was sleeping... I do not know her name... she also stole various other items... a Macbook Pro... four bottles of wine ranging in price... White female... short black hair... approximately five foot...

Before Lyle had finished reading, he burst out laughing,

‘This bitch fucked him and then stole his phone, laptop, iPod and his CAR!’

Lyle’s crass rippling laughter filled the room. Jade felt empty.

‘What an idiot! What a dumb naai!’

Jade shuffled uncomfortably. She didn’t say anything. Lyle poured himself a triple shot with coke, dropped in five ice-blocks. It was that woman. It must have been her! That was the exact same method she’d used on Jade. The woman was an experienced thief. Cars and laptops – never mind clothing and jewellery. This was what she did – all the time. Jade realised she had been nothing special. She was just another victim.
She felt hurt. And worried. What if Lyle somehow linked this woman to her robbery? What if he found the woman and questioned her? Jade’s head spun. She went to bed ignoring her fiancé, who continued drinking in the living room as usual. Jade dreamt of mountains of fat closing in on her. She woke up in a cold sweat and struggled to fall asleep again.
Chapter Twenty-Two

The editor of Cosmopolitan Magazine died today. The woman who told Jade how to dress in order to stay in fashion, was gone. The woman who told Jade how to style her hair every day, the woman who instructed Jade on the correct way to apply her makeup, the woman who pointed out ten things wrong with her relationship, the woman who told her how to make a marriage work, the woman who told her which men are attractive and which men are not, the woman who notated her concept of feminine and masculine beauty, the woman who gave her 27 sex-tips every month and made her second guess her own sensuality, was gone.

RIP.

Devesh Desai died the same day.

Jade put on some gloss and twirled her hair. When she looked at her hand, a few strands of curls lay loose in her palm. Her hair had been falling out. She’d started noticing clumps of it clogging up the drain in her shower. It was okay though, she had too much hair anyway and it could use some taming. Perhaps her hair would become more manageable now. She wondered if the dye had affected the growth of her hair.

Kate Loxton stared back at her from the mirror with her perfectly proportioned white girl figure and her natural golden blonde locks, taunting her with her big blue eyes. Telling her that she could never have hair of such vibrant colour, she could never have eyes of such a piercing hue, she would never have the elegance that Kate had, with her long cigarettes and her SLK. She would never possess that light, effortless mermaid beauty.
Jade wondered who would be employed as the next editor of Cosmopolitan Magazine. She waxed her legs and clipped her nails. Two of them had chipped and broken off recently. One nail had broken while she was in bed with that woman. The other one had broken while she was making tea – she’d just scraped her nail a bit too hard against the cupboard – and it broke. Her nails were getting brittle. She added a new coat of nail-hardening polish. She conditioned her hair and moisturized her skin, which was drier than usual. Must be the change of season. Her lips were dry too, still disproportionate, top lip still too thin.

Zoë Brown’s blow-job lips pouted at her from the mirror, accentuating her high cheekbones. Her lips were more luscious than marshmallows, the kind you want between your teeth. Zoë’s caramel skin filled the mirror. And her thick black curls invaded Jade’s sight. She couldn’t compare to Zoë Brown. Zoë Brown’s face melted into the smaller, delicate features of Caelyn Simmons. Her perky boobs popped out of the mirror. Jade felt her own breasts, they seemed to have drooped even more since she last checked. She turned away from the mirror, feeling anxious.

Jade walked into the lounge and stared at her mute fiancé drinking on the pink couch in his police uniform, face crumpled with grief, shoulders hunched in pain. Lyle had been drinking relentlessly since this morning and Jade had given up trying to console him. She put her arms around him and he didn’t move. She tried speaking about what happened, but he didn’t answer. She held his head to her chest, but he didn’t cry. He didn’t acknowledge her at all. She tried to make him see that Devesh’s death was an accident. She tried to rationalise it for him. These things happen. It will be okay. He didn’t look at her.
Jade had never been very close to Devesh herself, but her fiancé was a mess and it was her duty to take care of him. She had tried everything. She’d even cooked food – the one thing she’d forbidden herself to do – she did for him. She tortured herself by putting together a delicious meal that she knew she couldn’t eat. She put herself in the way of temptation for him. And he didn’t even touch the food she made. The lounge reeked of stale defeat. Lyle refused to go to work or move from the couch. He smelt crusty. She put a plate of warm pasta next to the couch, kissed him on his stinking mouth and left the house.

Someone still had to bring home the money. So, wearing her best dress, Jade went to the next modelling shoot scheduled for her. It wasn’t as well-paying as the Sublime Stones diamond shoot, but it was something. The shoot was for KFC. KFC was launching their new dessert. An ice-cream special called Krushers. In all flavours.

When she walked into the studio, the cameras were already set up. Jade was late. Having to cook for Lyle before the shoot had set her off-schedule. The director flashed her a disdainful look and she immediately changed into a tiny glittering outfit, tailored for her body. She greeted the director’s scowl with a smile. She was ready for this.

*Ok, get comfortable.*

Jade felt the light on her skin, heating her up. Her body tingled. She had the best job in the world.

*You ready? Great.*

The make-up artists touched her up on set, put base on her cheeks and forehead, pink lipstick on her lips and sunset-toned eye-shadow that dissolved into her skin. They
teased out her curls to make them look wilder. The set assistant positioned a big strawberry on the contour of her neck and crushed it. Jade followed the director’s voice.

    Now let it trickle down your neck. Good. Good. Tilt your head a bit further up... Yes. Perfect. Can we get another strawberry?

Jade threw her hair back. The strawberry pieces slid down her neck and the juice dripped down to her breasts.

    Now the ice-cream. Just take a big bite – there we go – it’s already melted so just let it drip down your mouth – Beautiful! –Could we just wipe that bit on the side so that we have one solid white line dripping down – Perfect! Now smile...

Jade smiled her radiant smile.

    Okay, stop smiling – we’re going for more sensual here. Open those lips a bit. Serious and sexy, serious and sexy... Lock your eyes on the lens. More sultry...

Jade’s lips parted on cue, she revelled in it, white melted ice-cream dripped from her mouth.

    Another take like that with the chocolate and the cinnamon strips please. Clean up the strawberries and let’s go. Okay, now the fan’s going to splash the milk onto you okay? It’s going to be a bit cold, but you have to look like you loving the feeling okay? Taste the milk, lick your lips... Just touch up the hair there on the right? Get the milk ready. Put on the fan. Right. Ready? And lean your head back – lick your lips. Good. Great. That’s a take.
After the shoot, Jade decided to have a cocktail on the beach in celebration of the diamond ad, which was now airing on national TV. She couldn’t celebrate with Lyle. She couldn’t even share the news with him. It wasn’t the time for celebration. It was the time for mourning. Devesh was dead. Lyle was grieving. And she was famous.

She ordered herself a big pink strawberry Daiquiri and looked out onto the beach. She watched the sunset on the water while sipping the drink, and began to feel more and more ill. Her skin was still sticky from all the strawberries that the set assistants had crushed on her during the shoot. Strawberry pieces were stuck in her hair, the strawberry juice was clammy on her body, on her face, the taste was still in her mouth. The last thing she wanted to taste right now was more strawberry. Why had she ordered a strawberry Daiquiri? Jade was disgusted by the sweet pink taste in her cheeks. If pink could have a taste, it would be strawberry flavour. And strawberry was her favourite flavour. In smoothies, in cocktails – even in milkshakes and sweets – when she still used to consume milkshakes and sweets. Now, she hated it. And she knew she would probably always hate it after this day. The taste of strawberries would never be the same for her again. She loathed the taste of pink. The taste of unshared, repressed joy.

Jade felt dizzy as she got up. She left her cocktail on the counter, paid the bill and tipped the waitress. Before she walked out of the cocktail bar, she took a long look back at the tall pink drink standing alone and abandoned on the table. What a failed attempt at a solo celebration.

She walked through the door and into the wind. She crossed the road, strutted over the grass and made her way onto the beach. She walked over the dry sand and
onto the spongy sand and then into the water, carrying her high-heeled sandals in her hand. The ice cold water started to numb the muscles on the arches of her feet. She stood in the chilly water until she couldn’t feel her toes. Then she waded back out onto the dry, soft, warm fluffy sand. Jade loved the beach. She always wore her bikini underneath her clothes when she came to this side of town. Sea Point. The sea shore. Where everyone likes to party. Where the rich folks live.

She took off her dress so she could feel the sand on her skin as she sunk her knees in and lay down. She spread herself out and let the sweeping sand course through her hair as she lay flat on her stomach, alone on the shore. The wind was strong, but the sun scorched right through it, onto her skin. Her lips, her cheeks, her palms, her thighs, the soles of her feet and her back enjoyed the lashes of sand as she closed her eyes and gave herself over to the sound of the waves. The wind in her ears lulled her to sleep.

When she opened her eyes again, the wind had carried away her sandals and blown her dress into the ocean. She shifted back onto her feet sleepily in the wind and dug her heels into the sand to get her balance back. She looked around for her dress and her sandals but they were nowhere in sight. The wind had picked up. Now that she stood up, the sand stung her shins with the velocity of the wind. All around her, the sand whirled high in the current, blurring her vision. She couldn’t see her clothes and shoes anywhere. She turned around to survey the radius around her spot, searching the shore for any scrap of colour in the sand, hoping it would be her dress or one of her sandals. She walked to the right, towards the water. Nothing. She walked back to the spot where she had slept and looked again. Then she walked to the left, towards the road. Still nothing. The dress was gone. So were the sandals. Lost in the ocean.
Eventually, Jade gave up. She strutted back to her car in nothing but her bikini, barefoot. She walked over the grass as the passers-by stared at her body. Her feet touched the warm evening tar on the pedestrian crossing and she felt the painted stripes smooth on the soles of her feet. Warm rough tar, then a smooth painted stripe, then the warm rough tar, then a smooth painted stripe. She looked ahead as she walked, ignoring the stares. She didn’t care about them right now. She knew she looked good. But that wasn’t the point.

She’d bought that dress at a vintage sale years ago. She would never find another one like it. And those sandals were a limited YDE edition. She would never find a pair like that again, not for that price anyway. Fuck, she’d liked those shoes and she had loved that dress. A one-of-a-kind, quality dress. A truly unique garment. Timeless in style. Gone.

Jade couldn’t afford to lose anymore clothes. She was agitated. Little grains of sand clung to her lip gloss and she could taste the salt. There were wet bunches of sand wedged under her freshly painted nails. She could feel it as she twirled her wildly teased curls between her fingers. Her hair, of course, was also full of sand and salt.

She just wanted to go home. Jade cruised past Table Mountain in her bikini, looking up at the mountain as she drove, all lit up by synthetic lighting. All those lights just there to light up Table Mountain at night – their sole purpose. She would never be one of those lights. She wanted to be the mountain.
Chapter Twenty-Three

The *Decadent Dames* billboard of model Carla-Jade de Hart was 9 meters wide and 4 metres high. Thirty meters away from the looming billboard, on the wide road below, a truck driver gathered up the pieces of Lyle Bekink’s smashed police Mazda. He cleared the wrecked car from the road so that the N1 traffic could pass through smoothly.

Lyle was already dead by the time Jade got to the hospital. Maybe she would’ve had a chance to say goodbye if she hadn’t bothered to put on her stilettos before leaving the house. Either way, they were buckled up now and looking great as she walked into the hospital ward. After filling out some paperwork for the nurses, she took a last look at her fiancé. The worst thing about his death was that he couldn’t see her. She was wearing her best stilettos and she looked good. And he couldn’t see her. He would never see her again. She would never see him looking at her again. He would never admire her again.

Now, Jade sat in front of her laptop in her room of Baker-Miller pink, scrolling down Lyle’s Facebook page, wearing Lyle’s clothes and drinking Lyle’s brandy on an empty stomach, crying. No matter which way she looked at it, her fiancé had crashed before the image of her. He drove while under the influence, saw the billboard en route to his destination, smashed his car into the curb and died. And it was all her fault. She had killed him.

Jade informed no one of Lyle’s death because she was ashamed. The only thing she could think about was the huge *Decadent Dames* billboard she’d passed en
route to the hospital. And the truck driver below it picking up the pieces of Lyle’s car before towing it off the road. It was her fault. That stupid billboard. It killed him. Just like it killed that other driver.

The nurse at the hospital had put Lyle’s death down to drunken driving. *These accidents are common... Tragic the number of patients that die as a result of drunken driving on our roads...* But Jade knew that she was wrong about Lyle. The alcohol wasn’t the cause. Lyle drove drunk all the time and he had never crashed before. He was a good driver. Experienced, cautious, alert. Lyle could drive the N1 in his sleep with half a bottle of Klipdrift in his belly. He crashed because of the billboard. Everything pointed to it.

Jade wiped her cheeks and licked the tears off her lips before applying her lip gloss. She still had on her stilettos. She twirled her hair as she cried and read through all the Facebook statuses Lyle had ever made. She looked through all the pictures of him that were ever tagged. The only things she had left of him were his clothes and his digital profile. Jade looked at her wrists as she scrolled down the web-page. Her wrists were thin. Thinner than normal. Thinner than Kate Loxton’s. So was the rest of her body. Her cheekbones were finally more pronounced than Zoë Brown’s. Jade had lost almost half of her body mass. She had finally reached her goal. She looked almost exactly the way she’d always wanted to look, and Lyle wasn’t even there to see it.

With every status of Lyle’s that she read, Jade imagined him saying it out loud. She heard his voice behind the words. Lyle Bekink *is missing his Jadie already!*

*Lyle Bekink is just tired...*

*Lyle Bekink had such a relaxing day...thank you baba;-) love you so much!!!*
Lyle Bekink doesn’t know what to do anymore...

Lyle Bekink is feelin the fatigue ryt nw 😔

Lyle Bekink is wondering what he did right to deserve a girl like you...i love you babes!

Lyle Bekink is wondering what the hell he did wrong??????

...

Go Stormers! WP – Jou lekka ding! 😊The boys are doing me proud

Happy 5 years today with the Love of my Life <3

There aren’t enough hours in the day. Need caffeine

Such a long day. Exhausted. SMH.

...

Jade sprawled over Lyle’s Facebook timeline. A dead man’s account. She reminisced on his state of mind with each status from when he opened the account; his thoughts behind all the words. She remembered every event and every party she went to with him. She scrolled through the album of her 21st birthday when they were both a lot younger. The money and vanity pumped into Coloured 21st birthdays constitute a phenomenon profound.

She had looked happy. Like a goddess – except for her arms. Her arms didn’t look good in that dress. Lyle was beaming and kissing her in almost every picture. Clean-shaven, looking twenty years younger than he did yesterday. She read all his comments on how beautiful she looked.
All Jade had ever wanted at 21 years was to be the main dancer in a big rapper’s music video, wearing a bikini and high heels.

By the time Jade finished reading through five years of Lyle’s Facebook status updates, she was done crying. She was dehydrated and her joints were sore. The muscles in her hand felt weak and inside her palm was a clump of curls from the constant twirling and twisting of her hair. She had eaten nothing in three days and yet she felt bloated, and cold. Jade got up to put on a jersey, but as she stood up, a spell of dizziness sent her reeling until she sat back down. Then she got up again slowly and went to her room to put on more clothing. One of her nails had chipped from clicking relentlessly on the mouse to see the next picture of Lyle and scrolling down anxiously to read what was on his mind.

She looked in the mirror and marvelled at her cheekbones. She finally had that *Vogue* appeal. The weight loss had changed her face for the better. Except for her skin, which was dry and pallid. And her lips – which seemed to have lost their pinkness. Her lips had paled into the shade of her skin.

Jade sat on the toilet seat to pee. She hadn’t taken a shit in a week. Nothing to excrete other than liquids. She wiped herself and looked into the toilet bowl. Her urine had darkened in colour and her abdominal muscles were starting to ache.

Then Jade did what she always did when she faced a crisis. She turned on the TV. She skipped between her three favourite shows: *Jersey Shore, America’s Next Top Model* and *The Big Bang Theory*. She put on some more lip gloss and kept her eyes glued to the screen as she stroked the long heels of her stilettos.

After a few hours of viewing, she went outside and took out the post. Jade still had on her stilettos. She had completely forgotten how high they were because she
hadn’t walked for so many hours. She decided to keep them on as she walked back inside with a pile of letters in her hand. All of them were addressed to her. All of them were from SARS. She opened one of them which read that she was due to pay tax on a R450 000 deposit in her account. It was obviously a mistake. They must have confused her with someone else of a similar name. She threw the letters in the bin, poured herself some more of Lyle’s brandy and popped four painkillers for the ache in her temples and in her stomach. Her phone rang regularly with calls from her agency, from Natalie, from her mom and from various other numbers. She didn’t answer.

Her phone alerted her that she had a thread of e-mails from SARS, but she didn’t read them. Reading required too much rational power. She didn’t leave the house. She felt too listless to drive.

After a while, Jade stopped understanding *The Big Bang Theory*. The humour was lost on her and she no longer grasped the dialogue. So she switched over to *Jersey Shore* and watched re-runs while applying fresh layers of lip gloss to her mouth.

After watching a full season of *Jersey Shore*, Jade was still staring at the screen. The storm outside scrambled the signal and Jade’s lip gloss was finally finished. She opened the empty little cylinder that used to contain her lip gloss and ran it across her parched lips incessantly while gazing at the snowing screen thinking it was still Jersey Shore. She brought Lyle’s brandy to her lips and shuddered at the burn in her throat as she constructed images inside the snowing TV screen.

Even with a thick jersey on, Jade was freezing. She rolled up her sleeves and tried to rub her arms warm with her cold hands. Suddenly Jade stopped. Beneath her
hands, she felt hair – all over her arms. She tore her eyes away from the snowing screen and looked at her skin. The hair on her arms had thickened. Where her skin had always been smooth and relatively hairless, there was a thin coat of soft, downy hair. Her heart fluttered.

She ran her hands over her face and froze. Hair. The same soft, downy hair that was on her arms, was on her face too. Her cheeks. Jade’s bones ached through her skin as she bundled herself up in front of the TV and took another swig of the brandy. In the snowing screen, she saw the familiar mountains and hills of skin and fat. Except this time, the blubbery fleschscape was sprouting hair – lots of hair on every rolling field of fat.

She felt her heart beating faster and her body shivering. Her limbs were all skin and bone, yet her stomach still felt bloated. She hadn’t lost enough weight. Her muscles were weak and she needed to pee again. But Jade knew that if she got up now, she would fall over. She heard Lyle’s voice ringing in her ears:

‘Ja Jadie, but just because he happened to crash at that intersection, doesn’t mean he crashed because he was looking at you in your underwear. They said that there may have been another car involved. They’re looking into foul play and all that. So don’t get too excited.’

Foul play, she thought, staring at the mountains of hairy fat, running her empty lip gloss cylinder over her lips. Maybe, just maybe, it wasn’t her fault. Jade’s phone continued to ring with calls and messages from SARS and from Natalie. But Jade couldn’t move her hand and answer it. Foul play. It occurred to her that her fiancé may have been murdered. Despite the thought that now may be a good time to answer the phone, it wasn’t enough motivation for Jade to move her hand.
The brandy and painkillers swam down Jade’s oesophagus and dissolved into her stomach juices. The white powder inside the painkiller capsule broke through the capsule wall and released itself into her stomach lining, perforating an untreated peptic ulcer. With no food in Jade’s stomach, the ulcer burnt through her stomach lining, allowing the brandy, the powder from the pill and her digestive juices to leech into her abdominal cavity and kill her.

A few days later, Natalie found her dead in front of a snowing TV screen, covered in soft downy hair. Paramedics said she died of malnutrition. The sudden hair growth was a protective mechanism used to keep the body warm in the final stages of mineral deficiency.
Dusk swelled over the Garden of Eden, bleeding the sun of its warmth. The bounty of the Lord streamed down the vines and dripped off the leaves, onto the skin of the woman without shame. Bare in the garden, she walked, hair cascading past her breasts, a dance of light in her eyes, unconfined by the notion of obedience, she reclined at the foot of the tree. Her movements massaged the air and the air moved with her. The space surrounding her shuddered its delight. And from the darkening canopy above, there gazed a great creature in the branches – a serpent of magnificent
size with a body thicker than her thigh. Down the bark he slithered on his belly without a sound, unnoticed by the woman until she flinched at the moist and scaly skin brushing past her neck. The serpent inflicted no pain as he locked her in his coils, flooding her mind in a warm haze as he tightened them. Paralysed by his grip, the woman pondered resistance with her contours wrapped in his ventral scales. The snake propelled his length around her waist, loosely twisting around one thigh and then the other. In this manner, he continued coiling around her every limb until she pondered no more.

Massaging every muscle with careful simultaneity, the serpent softened the woman’s body and she respired. At the deflation of her chest, the serpent’s head curled around the curve of her neck, down the valley between her breasts, into the dip of her navel and along the slant of her hips. At the first flick of his tongue, her eyes widened and her lips parted. The garden was filled with the sound of innocence decaying.

Maddened by her taste below, the serpent pushed in his exalted split-tongue: one half deep inside and the other half gliding against the surface.

Her nails pierced his skin, penetrating the crevices between his scales and the serpent hissed in pain. A soundless scream emerged from the woman’s empty lungs. And when she steadied, exhausted in his lax coils, what was she to do but eat the apple from the tree?

If only to replenish the fluids lost.
Satisfied, Lucille’s father closed the bible and put it back on the shelf. He tucked her into bed, kissed her on the forehead and whispered,

‘Sweet screams.’

On the other, poorer, non-white side of town, a thirty-year old Jerome Golding surveyed his gun collection. Jerome Golding’s guns were not neatly stacked upon a shelf, as he did not own a big enough shelf. Nor were they hung in any particular order for display on a wall, as he couldn’t afford such an installation either. They weren’t even tidily packed into a case. Jerome Golding couldn’t afford that kind of luxury. His guns lay piled up in a dirty crate in a shed.

He took each one in hand before deciding on his weapon of choice for the day. Gently lifting up his dusty Colt Rossi, he evaluated its accuracy and efficiency. While the gun was both accurate and efficient, Golding felt it did not have enough character. He put it aside and picked up his Glock 17, so small it could fit into a lady’s handbag. Clearly, it didn’t have enough weight for the occasion.

His Glock 22 was bigger, still light, the best of the Glock range which he treasured as one of the best handguns, made from plastic, easy to wield, with only the top barrel made of metal. It was a good option to have in the back pocket. He put the Glock 22 aside and picked up the Stubnose. A shitty gun, for close range only. Not as accurate as he needed it to be, but reliable nonetheless; fewer bullets, never jams. He placed it on the ground and lifted his Smith and Wesson up to his eyes. Much more firepower, faster to realign, quicker to reload, but just too big. He put it down and, when he saw the last gun at the bottom of his dusty crate, he knew it was the one. The
gun that would define the rest of his life: A 9-inch barrel, biggest calibre handgun, the Desert Eagle .45 pistol.

It was a sunny Monday afternoon that followed and Jerome Golding walked into Spur Restaurant with his Desert Eagle tucked into his underwear. He wore a waistcoat over his only white shirt and a pen in his pocket as the sun shone down on his big head of hair. There was only one thing that Jerome Golding wanted on that sunny Monday afternoon, and that was a big juicy Spur steak.

‘Table for one, please.’

The young, freckled waitress at the door couldn’t have been more than 21 years old. She shot him a scathing look and stood square in the doorway with a blossoming blonde perm. A perm so large it rivaled Jerome’s afro and concealed Spur’s interior from his view. All he could see was the little Pacman machine in the corner of the restaurant. Her eyes were fixed upon his afro – the shape of a globe. Her hand settled firmly onto her narrow hip.

‘We will not serve you at this restaurant.’

Jerome Golding raised his bushy eyebrows and smiled,

‘Excuse me, miss?’

‘Our right of admission is reserved for Whites only.’

Jerome Golding bowed his head as he dug into his bellbottom pants, scratching at his crotch in full view of the waitress. The lithe little thing gasped at his vulgar digging on what she could only imagine was a thick black penis bulging out of his jeans. Fearing that the crazed man would whip it out before her very eyes, she edged back into the confines of Spur. Jerome Golding tugged once at the piece of metal in his
underwear and slipped out the loaded Desert Eagle .45 complete with a silencer. He took care to point it directly at her left nipple, which he’d so admired when she refused to welcome him in.

‘Let’s start again, shall we? I want a 500 gram steak. Medium to rare. And a double brandy and coke. Klipdrift, if you don’t awfully mind, miss.’

The waitress stepped aside, speechless, and Jerome Golding proceeded to enter the restaurant’s wooden floors with the pistol in his hand.

Spur’s red-faced manager was still daydreaming about his demure daughter when he noticed Jerome Golding in the doorway wielding a gun. He stared at the Desert Eagle and muttered a verse under his breath,

‘For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.’

The manager of Spur was a man of God. The image of his little Lucille’s pale skin dissolved quickly from his mind and he descended from the upstairs section of the restaurant, repeating the verse. At the sight of Jerome Golding, he walked calmly to the entrance of Spur, looking Golding in the eye and curling his fat fingers around the thin waist of the trembling waitress. He whispered:

‘Lisa, call the police, will you?’

Lithe, blonde Lisa hurried to the phone as the manager stood chest to inflated chest with Jerome Golding, reciting scripture in his mind, ‘The wicked is driven away in his wickedness: but the righteous hath hope in his death.’ He took a deep breath of Holy Spirit and, with a mind full of scripture, he confronted the man with the gun,

‘Get off my property immediately, you kaffir cunt.’
Jerome Golding tilted his head in calm surprise,

‘Well, that’s no way to treat a prospective customer, is it sir?’

Lisa’s long red nails trembled as she tried to dial the police on the big circular phone dial in the restaurant’s reception area. Her nails had always been too long to efficiently dial a number on this bloody phone. She resented not having clipped them the previous night. She picked up a pen and stuck it into the dial, moving it 360 degrees for each digit as steadily and as quickly as she could.

Jerome Golding spat on the floor, lifted his gun and promptly shot the red-faced manager once in the pulsing vein in his right temple and again just above the temple. The second bullet’s exit wound pierced through the parietal bone and secured the kill. The image of his daughter swirled in the manager’s head for the last time in the dragging microsecond before the first bullet plunged through his brain. ‘And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul. Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ He did not flinch.

Golding stepped swiftly aside as the manager fell to the wooden floor and his blood eased into the parallel cracks of Spur Restaurant. Golding wiped a few beads of blood off his forehead and into his absorbent afro. He stepped over the manager’s sprawled out body as the customers screamed and scrambled underneath their tables. The slack-jawed chefs slapped a steak on the grill.

Lisa stopped dialing the police.

‘Now, I remember ordering a 500 gram steak. Medium to rare. And a double brandy and coke. Klipdrift. I’ll escort myself to a table.’
Jerome Golding tucked his Desert Eagle back into his underwear, took his seat in the middle of the all-white restaurant, and lit up a Rothman’s Blue. Ten minutes later, his meal was served. He ate, smoked and drank in peace. He wiped his mouth and his goatee with a wet-wipe when he was done. He paid his bill in full and tipped Lisa handsomely before walking out. He stepped elegantly over the manager’s body and drove off into the sunshine in an Alfetta without a number plate.

Little Lucille stood alone outside her school for hours waiting for her dead dad to pick her up.
Chapter Twenty-Five

The ground was wet and the air was fresh when the Boss reshuffled his Desert Eagle pistol into a more comfortable position in his underwear. His fluffy pink slippers descended from his cozy Ferrari 360 Modena, bought with mothers’ tears. The soft padded soles of his slippers absorbed the moisture of the tar as he got out of his Italian car. His toes ached from the gout he’d had the misfortune of suffering and the skin under his feet soaked through with each step as his thick thighs trudged slowly up the driveway to Lucille’s house. He no longer had the swiftness of his youth. With the Desert Eagle warming the soft shaft of his penis, he remembered the freckled, blonde waitress decades ago, as he rang the bell.

Lucille opened the door and saw the black Ferrari. She had been expecting him. She stared at the massive bald man in pink slippers. He wore a loose shirt over tracksuit pants. There was a bulge to the right of his crotch under the soft material, which Lucille knew was a pistol stuck into his underwear. What a bulge it was. The sight of the pistol used to make Lucille feel uneasy. She feared that he would whip it out on a whim and shoot whoever rubbed him the wrong way. But she soon came to realize that the Boss’s Desert Eagle was merely a security measure for a man who had amassed many enemies. He seldom used the gun. So, when Lucille’s eyes fell on the bugling weapon near the Boss’s crotch, she simply smiled and gestured for him to come inside.

‘How are you, Miss Lockhart?’

‘Feeling as cold and soulless as modern art right now.’
‘I have something to cheer you up.’

They had agreed to meet at her house because she could not stand that disgusting establishment he called a business. The Boss had obliged. A woman such as herself should not be seen in such a place as his. Despite his savage reputation, he had always treated her with impeccable gallantry. The Boss considered himself the last gangster of the old school. He still had a measure of decency ingrained in his manner. It was nine in the morning and Lucille offered him whiskey or tea. The Boss opted for tea.

‘How much sugar?’

‘Four and nine sixteenths,’ came the Boss’s usual answer.

Lucille fixed him a cup with four – and just over a half – teaspoons of brown sugar. She stared at his bald, dome-like head. Shiny and brown. She knew that if he ever grew his hair, it would be grey. She often wondered if that was why he kept it shaven. She could not imagine the man with any hair.

‘Cheer me up then.’

‘I need the bank details of a Lyle Bekink. SAPS Sergeant. Address, 18 School Street, Bellville South. You will be well compensated.’

Lucille stirred her coffee.

‘I assume you’ll need it as soon as possible.’

‘Quite right.’

‘Consider it done.’

Lucille and the Boss finished their warm beverages over a light discussion of the country’s politics. The Boss laughed hard at the dismal situation, a laugh so old and
dry that his parched lips cracked. He licked them roughly and touched his goatee. Lucille was reminded of the first time she met the Boss on a quest to find the man who had killed her father. He had aged since then.

The Boss put his teacup down on the table, bemoaned the loss of the PAC ideals, and made his departure. Lucille watched his pink slippers make their way over the wet tar back to his Modena. Their meetings were always so brief. She thought about the Boss’s old world. A world without SMS, before the invention of the breathalyzer test. When drunken drivers owned the roads and the world was their smoking section. A world in which the abbreviation, LOL, did not exist. Where folk’s balls were not confined to Friday nights. Where the masses still had something to fight for.

Aaaah, the glorious 80’s.

The streets of Bellville South were dirtier than Rihanna’s nipple as Lucille made her way to 18 School Street and beheld the sight of SAPS Sergeant, Lyle Bekink and his fiancé in the doorway, seeing her man off to work. Sgt Bekink was an average-looking chap. His face had the morose droop of the demotivated SAPS classic, who worked hours that were too long, in an unsatisfying job with a false sense of authority. He would be easy to seduce.

But Lucille had no stomach for him. He was so obviously a bore of the worst kind. She was distracted by his fiancé. A delicacy among women. The vapid kind of exteriorly exquisite vessel that marked her generation. Nonetheless, the girl had a spark. She had a bedazzling self-possessed beauty that Lucille couldn’t resist. A beauty incompatible with the beer-bellied cop that shared her bed. Sgt Bekink’s fiancé
was at that perfect age. She had a specific power that only women between the ages of 18 and 25 possess. A combination of youth and beauty that yields an influence exclusive to that age.

The Boss had sent her to Sgt Bekink for a reason. He always sent women to do this kind of work. He believed women to be better equipped to extract delicate information from downtrodden men. Lucille was to get to know this Lyle Bekink, become his confidant, lure him in, make herself a guest in his private space and steal his personal details. She was to knead the soft, knotted tissue of his battered ego and extract what she needed. It wouldn’t be difficult. She’d done that kind of tedious shit before. But Lucille had a better plan. She could bypass the sergeant directly and get to work on his charming fiancé.

Lucille had the city of Cape Town mapped out in her mind, complete with all its sub-cultures, and she’d robbed the best of them. She held Cape Town’s finest in the palm of her hand. High-heeled glamour sluts, young executives, BEE-opportunists, high-flying artists, old money hipsters, Botoxed cougars, pompous marketers, Maserati-driving retirees. Her wake of wealthy and beautiful victims stretched longer than the N1 highway. She’d stroked the egos of vacant cocktail-sipping fashionistas, seduced the unsuspecting Long Street partiers, intrigued De Waterkants’s flamboyant triangle of kink. She’d mastered them all. But in her personal playground of the Mother City, Bellville was her favourite. No pretense.

In the shallow pool of over-compensating, sleek-collared arses Lucille had come to know and rob – Bellville was the exception. She knew she would enjoy this job.
Chapter Twenty-Six

It was Sunday. And Sunday brought its own world of morning coffee, silence, solitude and the feeling that the week has abandoned you. Lucille felt desolate. She put on a long silk shirt, a fur coat and a string of pearls – all stolen from the same old lady – and went to mass in the Bellville Catholic Church.

Of course, when she got there, she didn’t feel the Holy Spirit coursing through her veins. She didn’t feel a pang of pain as she stared at the crucifix. Lucille sat in a thick mist of cheap Catholic incense waiting for her victim. She had never used the church as a venue for her work before. But now that she sat in the sweet stench of it all, she couldn’t believe she’d never thought of it before. It was perfect. Built as if designed for her purpose.

Rich beams of emerald and ruby light streamed through the elaborate stained glass windows. Chandeliers hung like crystal teardrops above the faithful congregation as ancient hymns with haunting cadences evoked that good old 16th century guilt. They really had it spot-on, the Catholics, with their cathedrals, their bejewelled shrines custom crafted in the art of sparking catharsis. A haven for the vulnerable and the misguided. Lucille couldn’t have chosen a better location.

She sang the Ave Maria in perfect pitch and stared at the porcelain statue of the naked man who had never possessed any supernatural qualities. The tears burnt in her eyes and the soaring melody scratched at her skin. She was so far removed from all of this ritualistic bullshit. Far removed from the smiling blind bliss onto which these holy people clung. Lucille was insulated from the warmth of their lovely
illusion. *Through my fault. Through my fault. Through my most grievous fault.* She blinked her eyes back into focus. She had a job to do.

Bathed in chandelier light, the abstinent priest on the podium *proclaimed the mystery of our faith.* The congregation stood to receive the blessing. And it was purifying – for everyone else in the church. Lucille fidgeted with the hymn book as the priest spoke. His words bounced off her eyelashes and fell to the wooden floor. She wished she was allowed to smoke in church.

Morality, Lucille thought, is an etiquette taught to us from childhood. It holds about as much truth as the custom of being polite. She played with her lighter. When the conditions get harsh and reality becomes stark, we see our true colours. Lucille bowed her head. Put that priest in abject poverty and watch him steal to eat. The congregation rose to recite the Virgin’s Prayer. Lucille mumbled along, waiting for her victim to enter the building.

_Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you, but why not with me?_

_Blessed art Thou amongst women, while cursed is me._

_And blessed is the fruit of Thy womb Jesus, whom I never see._

_Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,_

_Now and every hour of our lives, we plea._

Lucille unclasped her hands and lifted her head from the deferential bow. When she opened her eyes, she saw her victim walk in. Saint Peter dropped his keys.
The archangels fell to the ground. The Virgin Mary felt a wetness between her thighs. The cloth-covered loins of the man on the cross were moved by a porcelain erection. The priest paused in the middle of his sermon to moisten his dry mouth.

The congregation stopped shuffling as the woman’s resounding steps echoed through the church. Black leather stilettos hammered the wooden floor as she walked into the mass with elongated thighs and bouncing curls. Unashamedly late, she entered the house of God looking ready to fuck. Standing in the need of prayer.

Lucille watched her victim genuflect and sit down in the pew in front of her. She was even more radiant than when she kissed her SAPS fiancé goodbye. She had come alone, as Lucille knew she would. Dressed provocatively to compensate for her spiralling self-image, as Lucille assumed she would.

Peace be with you – the church-goers turned to one another and offered each other the sign of peace. Each enlightened person, filled with the spirit, shaking the hand of the body next to them. The model turned around and leaned over to touch Lucille’s hand in an act of communal love. Lucille gracefully took her palm in both of hers and ran her fingers up her wrist. And peace be with you, beautiful.

She saw the model’s glamorous world shatter, she felt the girl’s long spine shiver in the heat. Lucille kept her hand in both of hers, before bowing her head and bending down to kiss the model’s perfectly manicured hand, making sure that the full imprint of her lips lingered on her skin for the rest of the service.

The priest regained his composure and carried on preaching. Lucille knew the reason that the Catholic Church didn’t allow female priests. Men are more pious. Naturally closer to God than women. They have a tool that points up to the heavens.
when they get excited. Lucille accepted it without question. The woman’s equivalent points down below to be sniffed by the devil himself.

Under every woman’s skirt is a slit facing downwards, calling to God’s nemesis, through the wooden floor, all the way down to the fiery pit, carrying their scent to the hairy nose of Satan himself.

No, women cannot be priests.

*The body of Christ.*

- *with cheese?*

Again, the congregation rose and Lucille joined them in the recital of the Lord’s Prayer while her eyes remained open and fixed on the model in front of her. The girl was sweating profusely.

*Our Father, who art in Heaven,*

*Hallowed by Thy Name,*

*Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done,*

*On Earth…*

Before Lucille could finish the next line of the prayer, the model dropped to the floor. The girl was making it too easy. Disregarding the shocked parishioners, Lucille climbed over the pew and held her up, wiping the sweat from her forehead. The priest stopped preaching and the hallowed silence was filled with gasps. Lucille
could feel the woman’s ribs through her shirt. She must not have eaten. She held the
head of curls in her hands until the model regained some consciousness. Lucille
looked up at the priest and smiled her reassurance. She would take care of this. No
need to worry. She patiently took off the girl’s stilettos and helped her out of the
church.

Lucille helped the model into the passenger’s seat of her stolen BMW. She
reclined the seat for her so that the model could lie down comfortably and catch her
breath. Lucille turned up the air-con and drove to the nearest shop. She walked
through the only two shelves in the shop: creams, bread, tampons, sodas, newspapers,
aspirin, sweets, batteries, perfume, tobacco, chocolates and sim cards all next to each
other. The man at the till was listening to Lotus FM and lighting incense. He smiled at
her as she placed a Coke, a pie and a chocolate on the counter. She asked him where
he was from and he said Jordan. In conjunction with the coke, pie and chocolate,
Lucille also bought herself some counterfeit perfume from the Syrian. Why? Because
he looked like Jesus. And she asked herself: What would Syrian Jesus do? And He
said unto her: Buy yourself some counterfeit Giorgio Armani for R35. She did. And it
was good.

When she returned to the car, the model seemed more awake. Lucille passed
her the pie and opened the Coke for her. The model shook her head meekly. She
wasn’t going to eat the pie. Lucille carried on driving, increasing the speed and
pulling the driver’s seat closer to the steering wheel – the car was too big for her, she
wasn’t used to it yet.

‘Where do you live?’
The model managed to provide her with some hazy directions, but Lucille already knew the way. She had already been there. She drove over 100km an hour, shifting gears with the tip of her middle finger, enjoying the efficiency of the BMW. She reached the house minutes later.

The model couldn’t seem to unlock the door. What a poor thing, Lucille smiled. She took the key from her and unlocked the door, letting the girl into her own house. The tall woman collapsed onto the couch upon entry.

The house was bigger than Lucille had imagined. She left the model on the couch and found the kitchen where she put on the kettle to make some sweet tea. Lucille hummed as she scratched through the drawers for the teaspoons, cups, sugar and teabags, wondering if it was worth taking some of the cutlery. She flipped a spoon over in her hand. Poor quality. No silverware. No china.

_Summertime, and the living is eeeeeeazzzy…_ Lucille noticed a crystal vase on the living room table. Easily R7000. She stirred three spoons of sugar into the tea and analysed a scale model Pontiac GTO above the microwave. Collector’s item. R700 to R1500. _Your daddy’s rich, and your mother’s goooood-looking…_ It took her under a minute to waltz quickly through the house and find Sgt Lyle Bekink’s study. She would need more time to dig up his paperwork. Lucille heard a faint groan above her humming. The model. She would have to get back to her soon. But only after she found something to eat. Lucille was quite hungry herself.

She searched the fridge and cupboards for food and found nothing. No bread, no fruit, no noodles. The only thing she saw in the kitchen that looked edible was a stack of about 100 sachets of different flavoured Cup-a-Soup. Tomato, chicken,
mushroom, chicken-and-mushroom, butternut, summer vegetable, onion and herb – all in powder form. Simply add water.

A rueful laugh escaped Lucille’s mouth. Cup-a-Soup? The girl must have enough money to buy herself whatever fat-free gourmet meal she desired, but she chose to live on Cup-a-Soup? Lucille shook her head. She warmed up the pie that the model hadn’t touched. She put it on a plate, walked back to the living room and handed it to her along with the tea, scanning the lounge for valuable items.

‘I can’t eat. Got a show tonight.’

The model had the most lifeless eyes Lucille had ever seen. Her face was drained of colour and her cheekbones protruded from under her skin.

‘Where?’

The girl shifted into a more upright position on the couch and adjusted her hair as she sipped the tea like a sad, tired, under-fed sex goddess.

‘Tiger-Tiger.’

Lucille raised her eyebrows. Tiger-Tiger was Claremont’s white-trash-can. A shit-hole packed with rich drunken students trying to impress each other, dancing to generic music next to toilet bowls full of vomit and overpriced drinks…

‘It’s a lingerie runway show,’ the model said with a shy laugh.

_How embarrassing_, thought Lucille. One should always laugh freely, like a thug with a smoking gun. Feminine giggles are overrated. This woman chuckled like a little girl who’d just grown tits.
This girl was preparing to walk up and down Tiger-Tiger on a makeshift runway in her panty and her bra – and she thinks she’s some kind of fashion icon? Lucille repressed her laugh. She was a professional after all. She would not, and could not, burst out laughing at the model. She would have to save her amusement for when she was done with the job. It was getting easier and easier to take full advantage of the situation. Lucille would not simply steal the bank details as she’d been instructed. She would take everything of value that she could manage to carry from the house.

Lucille smiled sweetly and ran her fingers through the girl’s curly hair before getting up and turning to leave. She walked to the front door, counting down the seconds it would take before the woman asked her to stay. Lucille walked slowly, but decisively, anticipating her reaction in 5, 4, 3, 2,

‘Please don’t go yet.’

Lucille stopped and turned to face her with a melt-in-my-mouth concession. *Candy from a baby.*

The model’s room was a thief’s paradise. Pillars of Cosmopolitan magazines towered through the space. Three large wooden wardrobes served as portals to an endless array of stylish clothing. Shelves upon shelves of stilettos were tidily stacked behind their doors. Glimmering rows of earrings, bracelets and necklaces adorned her walls. Collections of makeup and hair products were abundant on every surface. There were mirrors on every wall. The piles of clothes on the floor marked the model’s many outfit changes before she settled on the perfect one for the day. The bed had over fifteen pastel coloured pillows and cushions arranged on it.
The princess reclined in her glittering, pink, cushy room, finally in her comfort zone. Lucille swallowed her disgust. If what you wear defines you, then you have piss-poor identity. The girl now sat on her fort of lilac and dirty pink cushions, cradling a bunch of teddy bears. Lucille was stunned by the sheer quantity of expensive shit in the room. The walls were a horrid shade of pink. The colour agitated Lucille. She struggled to focus on the model whose manicured hands were shaking as she tried to unbutton her blouse. Lucille watched her struggle for a while before intervening. She saw the girl was on the verge of tears and she allowed them to well up and burn sufficiently before stepping in. She watched as the model fell onto the mattress. She waited for the tears to stream down her eyes, and then she went in for the kill.

1. Strip the pure silk blouse off the shoulders. R300.
2. Throw the pillows off the bed. None saleable. Console her.
6. Rip the string from the firm gym-toned cheeks. Throw it to the floor. Seduce her.
For a second, Lucille lost herself between the breasts. Huge breasts. She could never imagine having such huge breasts. Lucille guessed that huge tits made life easier, although she’d never needed them. And come forty-five, her own breasts would not droop, because they were small. Gravity will take longer to touch them. The woman’s ribs stuck out of her chest and Lucille was reminded of the Spur ribs special. Suddenly, she had a craving for barbeque sauce.

She allowed herself to enjoy the woman until the model imploded into a little ball, slipping all her limbs inwards like a tortoise retreating into its shell, and fell asleep. Lucille looked at her face. The prominent cheekbones. The eye-sockets. The nose-cartilage. Beautifully sculpted bone beneath a thin layer of skin. Such a fine line between a bare human skull and a face fit for Vogue.

Lucille always found herself seduced by the pathos of her own crimes. She left the model sleeping and went into Sgt Lyle Bekink’s study:

Tax filing

Promotion forms

Car theft statements

SAPS files

Bank documents

Investment account

Current account
Lucille slipped out the Investment and Current Account pages and folded them into her pocket. She replaced all the files to the places she’d found them and then returned to the model’s room. The rest of the spoils were hers. Quietly, she gathered the scattered clothes. She chose seven designer dresses and five blouses, the amethyst chain, the Brazilian stilettos and the gold earrings before leaving the bedroom without a sound.

With the pile of clothes and jewellery under her arm, she scanned the rest of the house and picked up the crystal vase and the scale model Pontiac collectable on her way to the door. She shut it carefully behind her and walked to the car. She put her pile on the back seat of her stolen BMW and drove away.

Job done. Phone the Boss. Deliver bank details. Upload stolen items on Gumtree. Come back this way to the chop shop. Sell the BM to Devesh Desai. Enjoy compensation. And retire for the week.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Earlier in 1984

Jerome Golding pulled up at the Ravensmead petrol station at midnight in his Alfetta. Beneath the driver’s seat of his Alfetta were two empty bottles of Klipdrift brandy that he’d finished during the week. He got out of his car wearing silk boxer shorts with his Desert Eagle tucked in to the left of his crotch. He looked up at the blazing stars, ran his hands through his afro and touched his goatee. He took the two bottles out from underneath the driver’s seat.

Jerome Golding lifted the petrol pump and manually filled his car before topping up the two empty Klipdrift bottles with petrol. He closed the bottles firmly once they were full, stroked the labels and placed them upright on the passenger’s seat. With a screwdriver, he removed the number plate from his car and chucked it in the boot. He slipped on his gloves, rested his hands on his steering wheel and drove through to Constantia.

Constantia was home to two members of the Tricameral Parliament, both members profiting off the farce of the New Deal. Golding had committed both of their addresses to memory. When he reached the house of the first collaborator in Constantia, he opened one of the two petrol-filled Klipdrift bottles. The strong, distinct smell of fuel wafted up to his nostrils and filled the car’s interior. He stuck a small piece of cloth inside the bottle. He took care to place it specifically so that one end of the cloth was submerged in petrol and the other end of the material dangled out of the bottle.
Jerome Golding lit the cloth before throwing the bottle through the window of the house, and then sped off to find the residence of the second collaborator. The lights were still on in this house and he had no time to linger. Quickly, he stuck another piece of cloth in the second bottle. One end submerged in petrol, the other dangling out of the bottle. He lit it and threw the second bottle through the opened window of the second collaborator.

He drove away smoking a Rothmans Blue, envisioning their opulent lounge suites on fire and their faces scorched and flaky with charcoal.

When Lucille got home from school, her father was in the lounge. She liked the lounge. It was always warm in the lounge. The couches were maroon and the carpet was soft. She loved lying down on the carpet. But today, she must have looked so sad that her dad gave her a very long hug. *Come give daddy a nice long hug,* he said. He was big and fat and his hug always hugged all of her.

Her head just about reached the bulge of his belly and she rested there, in the haven of his warm tummy flesh as he hugged him – safety. Then, slowly, in the middle of the nice long hug, he put his big hands on both of her sides. They felt like cushions as he moved her pants down a little. Very slowly, as he did everything, still in the middle of the hug, he put his finger in between her legs underneath her panty, without pushing too hard, and there he left it for a while. For the while of the nice long hug.

Lucille didn’t say anything. She stared down at the soft carpet, looking at all the patterns. The carpet seemed to stretch on and on. Huge and soft and maroon, to match the couches. She loved the carpet. Before he went back to his room, he kissed
her on the lips. But Lucille didn’t like the way he kissed her these days. He always left some spit on her mouth and it felt gooey. The carpet felt warm and even softer than usual as Lucille lay down on it, dazed in childhood ambivalence, feeling a feeling she couldn’t name. And all she could smell was petrol.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Lucille still felt that feeling that she couldn’t name back then. Except, now she could name it. The Ickyness. Lucille’s life was marked by an incurable ickyness. All her life, she had felt icky. It was an ickyness that she never overcame. Lucille had not felt pure in all her life, even when she had been pure.

She had been back from Namibia for two days when she received a text from the Boss. And as she read it, she resented it. It was not something that she wanted to do. It wasn’t an instruction that she wanted to follow. It certainly was not something she would do for anyone else. But the Boss, she would do it for him. She was indebted to him. She had been indebted to him since the age of eight.

Dispense with Devesh Desai.

Effect of immediate.

Jerome.

That night, Lucille pulled up two houses away from Devesh’s house with a sick feeling in her stomach. As she peered up his driveway, she saw that the garage light was still on. He was working on his Pontiac. All she could see were his blue Addidas sneakers underneath the car. She was hit by a wave of nausea. The conversations, the sex, the sand dunes, the devilish grin of a thug atop a moving truck
with a fistful of diamonds. It all flashed through her mind and Lucille froze. She remained on the spot in the shadows and looked at him.

There he was, working on his car, ready for her, making it easy for her. She would have to do this fast. Lucille took a second. He hadn’t seen her. She still had time to compose herself. She did the routine that always calmed her down before a hit:

Don’t panic. Drop those shoulders. Slow your breathing. And ask yourself: So what’s it gonna be, sunshine? You or him?

All is fair in love and war, and this was simply business. Lucille sighed softly. Throwing away Devesh would be like throwing away a cigarette. She lifted the smoke to her lips and dragged the last tobacco from it until she was sucking on a filter. Then she tossed the cigarette to the ground, crushed it into the bricks with her heel and rolled it in its own ash to make sure she’d killed it properly. She was ready. She silently scaled her way around the Pontiac, keeping to the dark areas. A mass of sleek black hair and the sharp colour of his tattoos filled her mind. Quickly. She had to do this quickly.

It was all so easily done. One push and it would be over. No hassle. She psyched herself up. Softly and quickly, she moved closer to the car and put her high heel against the jack holding up the Pontiac, without looking at Devesh. She did not want to see him. She did not want to see him die. She knew the consequences of doing it. She wondered if Devesh could see her heels from underneath the car like she could see his sneakers. There was no time. She wondered if Devesh had heard her approaching. He must not have, because he hadn’t shifted from his position under the Pontiac.
As she did it, she hoped he would notice her. She hoped he would stop her. She was still deep in thought, considering the prospects and hoping for an intervention when she tapped the jack slightly too hard. With the pressure of the heel, the jack shifted. It jerked and gave way from its position under the car, dislodging the Pontiac as it fell onto its side. She had done it in under a second. It had felt like forever.

Lucille hadn’t realised the reduced weight of the car without an engine and an interior. The massive sound of the body of the car falling could’ve deafened God himself. Lucille jumped aside and, as the dust settled around the fallen Pontiac in the driveway, she glanced down at Devesh’s body squishing out of the car like a half-finished tube of toothpaste, limbs bulging out from under the metal, head chopped off by the neck. She couldn’t look. He hadn’t even screamed. It must have been too quick.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

It descended on Lucille that she will never hear him speak again. She felt her skin go cold. Her hands shook. She suddenly longed for him to talk to her. To calm her down. Without looking at the body, she imagined his lax mouth opening again and telling her that it was okay. The thought of him forever silent and gone was devastating. She had to get out of here. With numb hands, she drove home, high heel on the pedal. The same heel that left Devesh dead under the Pontiac. She sped off, screeching around each corner, breaking erratically as Devesh’s voice spilled into her head,
You must learn to relax. Be a Barry White-style porn-star driver. That’s how you drive an expensive car... One hand on the wheel, an elbow out the window and an entjie in your hand. Smoothly.

The tears welled up in her eyes. She didn’t mean to kill him. Lucille thought about going to visit the Boss.

The Boss wasn’t home. He was on Tobacco Road. There were thirty-one houses on Delft’s Tobacco Road. Of those thirty-one houses, the Boss owned five. He’d started from number 1 and systematically worked his way up, hounding the residents of each house to sell him their plot. At market price, of course. The Boss was only one house away from owning the whole street. One house away from buying Tobacco Road.

But one lady, the lady living on 31 Tobacco Road, refused to sell. The Boss rarely encountered this problem. People knew who he was. They feared him; they cooperated. But this lady would not comply. She stood square in her doorway and refused to part with her house. The Boss nodded. Ok lady. Don’t sell your house to me.

The first thing that happens when a bullet hits the body is the breaking of the skin. This is closely followed by a deceleration in the projectile of the bullet as it passes through the soft tissue underneath the skin. Once it reaches bone, organ or artery, the velocity of the bullet is transferred into the body as kinetic energy. This creates a pressure wave, which forces the tissue out of its path and ruptures the blood vessels in the proximity of the bullet, causing the extravagant squirting effect we have all witnessed in movies.
So when Jerome Golding shot the woman who lived on 31 Tobacco Road three times, this is more or less what happened:

The Boss pulled out his gun and she flung her arm across her body to protect herself. The first bullet from the Desert Eagle penetrated through her bicep, leaving an exit wound on the other side of her arm, and thrusting into her abdomen at decelerated pressure. This was not enough to puncture the pancreas but just enough to release it into an influx of its own secretions.

The second bullet followed within seconds of the first and the woman on 31 Tobacco Road was now unable to hold up her arm, let alone fling it across her body in self-defence. When the second bullet soared at her, her wounded arm had just started to descend into a flailing position at her side. The Boss watched it tear through the flailing forearm, cutting cleanly through muscle tissue and imbedding itself in her large intestine, causing her to shit herself and collapse into a ball on the floor, clutching her stomach with her one unwounded arm.

The Boss pulled the trigger the third time, aiming it higher on the body and lower in the angle to compensate for her crouching position on the floor. Without a spare arm to protect her vital organs, the third bullet fractured her ribs into a host of sharp bone endings, which pierced the tissue encasing the chest. The pain left her sprawled out on the floor of her house with one sharp splinter of bone punctuating her heart.

The woman on 31 Tobacco Road was no longer a sales problem. Her three kids were orphaned and the murder was written off as an act of gang-related violence. The Boss bought her house the next day. At market price. He now owned Tobacco Road.
Back in Parow, Lucille walked to the shop to buy cigarettes. She only had one left and she needed more. Everything looks more bearable through a haze of cigarette smoke. *What did I do? With the slip of a heel.* She knew the Boss was a heartless bastard, but Devesh didn’t deserve to die. She wouldn’t cry. She’d traded in her tear-ducts for another set of balls a long time ago. She wasn’t about to fall apart now. But she did need another fucking box of cigarettes. There was no question about that. On her way to the shop, she encountered a girl with jagged blonde hair lashing at her face in the wind. She was crying like a baby on the pavement, so frantic she could barely speak,

‘Do… you… know… where… the… convent church… is?’

Lucille pointed down the road.

‘Two lefts and a right. You can see the tip of the cathedral in the distance.’

The girl wiped her eyes only for more tears to roll down,

‘I… need redemption.’

Lucille lit her last cigarette and replied,

‘You’re looking for the birds of the sea.’

The girl stopped crying long enough to ask,

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means you’re never going to find what you’re looking for.’
The girl looked lost. Her earrings shimmered through her blonde hair. Poor little rich girl syndrome all over her face. Lucille found her to be pathetic.

‘I found a pair of earrings in the street,’ she said between sniffs, ‘And so I put them on, see?’

Lucille was not sure where she was going with this. The girl moved her blonde hair behind her ears to show Lucille the earrings.

‘Pretty.’

‘That’s what I thought too! So I put them on, but then I realised that they must be cursed…’ The tears started rolling again. ‘Cursed earrings!’

The girl was sobbing now and Lucille was getting fidgety. She had cigarettes to buy and a murder to come to terms with. She didn’t have time for this. But the girl continued, oblivious to her impatience.

‘I just feel like it’s all coming to an end,’ she started to wail, ‘Cause these earrings are cursed.’

Lucille’s patience had run out.

‘Why would you think the earrings are cursed?’

‘Because they *have* to be cursed, or else they wouldn’t have been thrown away *in a pair!* Two whole earrings dropped together on the same place! It just doesn’t make sense.’

‘Probably just fell off someone’s ears.’

Lucille started to walk away. Blondie started getting angry,
'No! Who drops a *pair* of earrings? People drop *one* earring by mistake. Or throw away both earrings *if one breaks*. But both of these are fine, see?'

She tugged her hair behind her ears again to show Lucille that both earrings were in mint condition,

'It simply doesn’t make sense. Unless they’re cursed!'

The wailing continued. Lucille left the girl and walked away decisively. She had almost reached the end of the street when she heard a scream and the screech of a car. When Lucille turned around, the girl was lying dead on the road.

She carried on walking and bought a box of cigarettes.
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Lucille woke up with shoulder pains the morning after the murder. She didn’t know what she was carrying in her dreams. To her dread, when she stirred into full morning consciousness, she couldn’t understand any language. Lucille put on the TV and listened to the emanating sounds. She was well accustomed to the intonation of what was being spoken on screen. The register of the conversations and the sliding, fluctuating pitch of the voices, were all very familiar to her. The nuances were recognisable. She heard many familiar sounds. But an influx of sound was all it was, and she couldn’t comprehend any of it.

She turned off the TV, made some coffee and picked up the most recent newspaper in the house. The words looked like wavering lines, the headlines were nothing more than blotches of thick sprawling ink and she couldn’t make out what they meant. It wasn’t until she got to the last page that she recognised a single written word. **Obituaries.** She was hit by a severe pang of pining for Devesh. Slowly, her linguistic memory returned.

*Ronald Cunningham, furniture designer and brother, 1947-2013*

*Jack Carter, esteemed nature conservationist; father of two, 1973-2013*

*Devesh Desai, panel-beater, 1978-2013*

Lucille was so lost in his name on the page that she didn’t even notice the ash from her cigarette falling down into her coffee as she smoked. She continued drinking it, feeling the warmth in her stomach reaching a fevered temperature.
She had come to develop a pronounced loathing of the world she inhabited. She disliked leaving her house. But today, her jiggling bangles were blocking out the noise of the world and she felt at peace. She left her house to buy a bottle of wine, but when Lucille started her car, she realised that she was running low on petrol. The cost of petrol had gone up by 81 cents per litre. It was now going on R11 a litre and Lucille couldn’t believe how much it cost her to fill her tank. Times were tough. As she drove away from the garage to the bottle store, she was stopped by a red robot, where a haggard man with bald patches on his head took the opportunity to walk up to her car window and ask her for money. She gave him a coin. The beggars are entrepreneurs. They sell you your conscience for fifty cents. Where would we be without them?

When Lucille got back home, she was greeted by a baby cockroach as she opened the door. She sidestepped the insect and dashed to her bathroom where she grabbed a cylinder of sweet-smelling female body spray. She skulked back to the location of the baby cockroach trapped behind the door and gassed it with her finger on the spray can. The baby cockroach circled the enclosed area, trying to find a way out. But there was none. The insect started moving slower and slower, its arched winged back fluttered as it walked with increased effort until it remained on a single spot, heaving slightly audible heaves in a hunching crouch against the door. Lucille carried on spraying as the insect struggled to breathe; she sprayed until the aluminium can was empty and the tapered ribbon-like body of the baby cockroach had almost heaved itself into a ball with a single tiny leg scraping sadly against the door. It heaved one last time and went completely still.

The fragility of life suddenly struck Lucille and she feared for herself. Like the most basic of women, she feared living untouched, aging unloved and dying
unmourned. Lucille sat and smoked in the sweet-smelling dust of the baby cockroach’s death. *You are your only refuge. Get used to it.* She looked to her side, at the dead insect and dragged hard on her smoke. *My impassive heart and my blazing cigarette look down on my past with distaste.*

Her spells of depression were becoming longer, deeper and more regular. The Ickyness was taking over. Her anxiety attacks came with violent power these days. The Ickyness was consuming her.

As she sat on the floor, she looked up at the chair. Calm, sturdy, inanimate. She wished she was that chair. An object that can be sat on, with arms for convenience, legs for leverage and a back for support – designed for a function – to sit on. But then, humans too have arms, legs, a back and they can be sat on, yet that doesn’t make them chairs.

Well, that only means there is a problem with her definition. Yes, she too, has arms, legs, a back and someone could sit on her, but she was not *designed* for that function… and yet often, often, she had been treated that way so she wondered, she paused. Lucille’s face dropped, all as her complexity melted in an overwhelming dejection, she realised, *But I am a chair! My only purpose is that of a chair.*

Lucille was overtired and the menaces that lurked behind her peripheral vision came out to play as soon as darkness fell. Sleep-deprived and wired, she stayed up late into the night in a state of desperate fatigue that brought on a familiar edginess. A sick, paranoiac worry that saturated her body with nausea. The Ickyness had conquered her.
As she did every night, Lucille undressed and inspected herself before getting into the bath. For the last couple of nights, she had noticed that the love-bite Devesh left on her inner-thigh from that evening in Namibia, was still there. That love-bite had been there for almost a week now and it hadn’t diminished in size. It was red, and hot to the touch. In fact, Lucille could have sworn it had gotten bigger since she’d returned from Namibia. At first, this didn’t bother her. She had convinced herself that she was just being impatient.

However, every day since she’d gotten back from the trip with Devesh, Lucille would take a bath and check to see if the love-bite had started fading. Everyday, she expected it to get smaller and smaller as love-bites do, but this one didn’t. It never seemed to fade. And now, it was expanding.

The love-bite expanded in one solid colour pouring deeper into her, little by little each day. What started out as a little red mark had darkened in shade and started spreading, wider and wider in its surface area, until it covered the circumference of her left thigh, enclosing her upper leg in shades of crimson.

Naturally, Lucille had been too preoccupied to bother with this phenomenon. It only became a point of slight concern when the colour started edging up towards her hip, slowly engulfing her left hip until it reached her panty-line. Then it spilled over onto her stomach. But not only was the colour spreading upwards, it was also pouring down her thigh.

All this, Lucille could take in her stride. It was only when the love-bite crawled over her stomach and started clouding the bottom curves of her breasts in dappled scarlet, that she really started to worry.
And it didn’t stop there. The viscous red mark climbed up further, past her nipples, up and around the contours of her breasts and was currently creeping up into her neck. Any further, and she wouldn’t be able to leave the house. It was the Ickyness.

She was becoming covered by this thing. This heat. This red, spreading, spilling, climbing, growing, pouring, creeping suffocating mark was starting to spark a debilitating fever. Starting to take over her whole body. She couldn’t leave her house until it subsided.

But what if it didn’t subside? What if it never subsided? Lucille leaned naked against the wall and put her hand to her forehead. What would she do? Maybe she should call the doctor. No, it didn’t seem like a medical emergency. A psychologist? No, she wasn’t imagining it. A priest? Maybe.

Maybe later. She opened a bottle of wine and ran a hot bath. She slipped into the water with a glass, a bottle of red wine and a box of smokes. Alcohol had started tasting like water. Cigarettes and oxygen had become interchangeable.

Everything is good in moderation. And if everything is good in moderation, then so is moderation itself. Lucille downed the glass and poured another.

These days, there is instant relief for everything. When people are sick, they take pills that make them better. When people are fat, they take pills that make them smaller. When people are sad, they take pills that make them happy. When people are stressed, they take pills that make them calm. When people can’t sleep, they take
sleeping pills. When people don’t want children, they take contraceptive pills. When people are in pain, they take painkillers. When people want to forget, they drink.

The warmth of the water had just eased into her red skin when the lightning knocked the electricity out. The light flickered and then died, leaving the space around her black. She lay in the dark, unperturbed even though it was too dark for her to see the soap or the taps, or her smokes or her glass of wine. But it didn’t matter. She found them by sheer force of habit. With no light, she gradually became accustomed to the gloom until eventually, she could see in the dark and it became her new light.

Staring through the big window opposite the bath, she watched the white flashes of close-range lightning just miss her house. Her bony wrist moved the cigarette to her mouth. She didn’t want to get out. But the thought wouldn’t go away. She was lying in warm water, watching the lightning, through a big window. There was probably danger in there somewhere. Five more minutes, she told herself. Without shifting position, Lucille ashed her cigarette into the basin next to the bath and watched the smoke floating in the dark. It was the calmest sight she’d seen for a while.

Lucille pondered as she lay in awe of the storm, *if it strikes, I’m going to die.* She knew she should probably get out of the bath and reduce the risk. But she didn’t want to. It was too warm to get out just yet. *Another five minutes,* she decided and sunk deeper into the hot water, watching the electricity in the sky and the smoke patterns from her cigarette.

The blackness was only broken by erratic lightning, which bathed the room in clear white light for under a second and then left Lucille in a renewed darkness. But
each time the lightning struck, for that second she could see clearly and she saw that
the redness had crept up a little further on her body. Spilling into her arms, the scarlet
mark was dripping down her wrists, into her palms and spreading onto each finger.

The water had turned ice cold before Lucille hauled herself out of the bath.
She must have lay in there for nearly two hours. To lie and purr in the sweat and
stench of your sin is to be human. Wrinkled and nauseated, she wrapped a towel
around herself and walked into a room full of ghosts that were all Devesh.

Lucille stared at her broken heel on the floor. The shoe she used to kill Devesh
was not reparable. The heel was cracked through the middle, hanging on by a sliver of
plastic. She would have to throw it away. The smell of Brut cologne, stale Camel
Filter smoke and brake fluid filled her room. Devesh was here. She needed to get out
of here.
Chapter Thirty

She pulled out her car and drove to the pub. Ten minutes later, she walked elegantly through the familiar double doors of Open Legs. The dim lighting of the bar made her less self-conscious of the redness that had engulfed her body. Nobody seemed to notice it. Nobody even looked twice. The pub brought her back to a different time in her life. She sat at the bar, crossing her legs and spreading the newspaper that lay on the bar counter. She lit a cigarette with her cheap neon lighter. Her eyes glazed over the grim headlines. The pub would fill up by nine and the folds of the city would sweat out her usual addicts. But for now, the pool tables lay bare and lit, gaping to be had. Lucille flipped over the page of *The Voice* and admired the gold-rimmed Ray Bans of a convicted murderer in the photograph between the printed words.

As she lowered the newspaper to turn the page, Lucille saw Sgt Lyle Bekink sitting at the other end of the bar. She lifted the newspaper quickly to hide her face. The man was a cop after all. If there was any chance he even suspected that she did what she’d done, it would be the end of her. Lucille imagined the metal bars shut in front of her, a single window of sunlight, a rigid routine in a cell for the rest of her life. She shook away the thoughts. Her record was clear. The cop had no idea. She could not afford to show him any fear. He might just smell it off her. She would have to keep him on the periphery. Cops always set her on edge. She avoided eye contact and tried to remain calm. She would not let him unnerve her. She sunk into the scenery.
The cop ordered another brandy, ‘With lots of ice please, né?’ Lucille didn’t take her eyes off *The Voice*. He was edging nearer to her, encroaching on her space. He kept looking at her. Why was he looking at her? Did he know? There was no way he could know. She puffed her smoke at double the pace to keep the anxiety at bay.

The barman was a tall, scrawny white boy with blonde spikes and double dimples. Bright blue underwear stuck out above his hanging jeans that Lucille imagined could only be held up by his over-eager dick. Gavin. Lucille knew Gavin from the days when she used to come to the bar with a handful of coins and lay them out on the counter for one brandy special.

When Gavin saw her, his dimples sunk deep into his cheeks and he bought her a stemmed glass of red wine. Lucille flicked her long red nails on the glass of red wine and tapped the air with her velvet, red heel. She crushed her cigarette and left her seat. Confront your enemy, keep him close. She stood directly behind Sgt Lyle Bekink and stared down into her wine,

‘Tragic day, isn’t it?’

Sgt Bekink reacted perfectly. Stunned. At a loss for a reply, barely managing a nod. Lucille walked back to her chair, smiling. He was no threat at all. He didn’t know who she was.

The big karaoke screen in the middle of the pub silently played 80’s videos as the sound technician tested the mic *1 2 3 – too much feedback, down down, 1 2, okay testing, 1 1 2* – the mic that Lucille was now reluctant to hold to her lips.

As the bodies started spilling in, Lucille felt the wine spark her civility into existence. By quarter past nine, she will have them eating out of her hand. The
middle-aged coloured wolves were on the loose, flashing their cards and scouting out the drunken women. Open Legs was a place of 45 year-old men with 24 year-old girlfriends.

Out the corner of her eye, she watched the cop. His friend had arrived. Another, more handsome cop, and they were playing pool, getting drunk on cheap brandy in Voortrekker Road’s shithole. What a fine police force we have in this city. All pool-sticks and cigarettes. Cops and criminals come to Open Legs for the same reason. They are united by brandy so sweet, it evaporates in their stomachs, droops their eyelids, subdues their troubled minds and numbs their failed lives.

Beneath her thick eyelashes, she surveyed the vacuum cleaner, the duster, the pan, the brushes and the brooms in a foundry cider bucket behind a cloth intended to conceal them. Heavy duty tape covered the window cracks and black burglar bars were fixed to the walls. Open Legs was but an oasis in a desert of desperation.

The karaoke host raised his eyebrow at Lucille and she knew that was her cue. All Lucille had ever wanted to do was to write a song that everyone feels all the time. She never did.

‘Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen, and welcome to Open Legs on this Thursday night. We have something very special in store for you tonight, something I know you’ve all missed. Something that will take you back, Ladies and Gentlemen, and we haven’t had her here at Open Legs for a while. So please sit back, order another round, brandy’s going at R16 a double, so please enjoy our special. And experience the wonder, Ladies and Gentlemen, of the woman we’ve all been dying to see tonight, Miss Lockhart!’
A round of applause followed. Lucille rose from her bar stool, put down the newspaper and walked towards the cigarette machine. The lights went out and when they came back on, she felt herself transform into a goddess under the spotlight. Elbow resting on the machine, left hip popped to the side, eyes gazing at every man in the audience. She dragged on her cigarette, parting her lips to baptise the crowd in her second-hand smoke.

The crowd sang along in collective nostalgia. She flawed them all, flooding their minds with memories of a simpler time, effortlessly making grown men cry. Lucille understood emotion.

Without a drain for their wells of forgotten pain, people would go mad. She simply catered for a need.

But tonight, she was not only catering for their needs. She was catering for her own. She sang a tribute to Devesh. And she extracted the cop’s worship. She promised him that all we can do to redeem ourselves in this world, is love. She tried to believe it.

She sang to a hundred eyelids half closed in bliss and fifty pairs of lips locked in embrace. She promised them all that the world still dripped with beauty. She tried really hard to convince herself of the same thing.

At the bar, the money stacked up. Gavin could barely keep up with the orders. Adults were reduced to sobbing children, drinking as they would at their mothers’ breasts. Ordering glass after glass of dronk verdriet that their wallets couldn’t afford. The tills at the bar couldn’t hold the piling cash. And then Lucille delivered her final blow: the sensual cabaret switch. A flicker of joy at the end of the saddest ballad.
Slowly, Lucille popped one button at a time of her thin black blouse, toying with her crowd. She fed off their anticipation and the sweet melody unravelled from her lips until she wasn’t singing anymore. She was channelling something.

The lights went out on cue, before eye met skin, and she sank once again into the scenery of the pub. She disappeared behind the newspaper like she’d never been there. But this time, her reading was interrupted by a flustered, raging businessman. He was drunk. She wanted to slurp up all his drunkenness for herself. Leave him dry and sober because she needed it more. She needed his drunkenness more than he did. His tie was undone. His eyes were red as if he’d been crying. It took a while before it clicked that this was the poor sod she’d stolen the BMW from.

‘The police are looking for you.’

Lucille looked at him. And he looked at Lyle. Sgt Lyle Bekink was looking at both of them from across the pub. They waited, both Lucille and the dishevelled corporate waited for the cop to snap back into reality and walk over to arrest her. But he didn’t. It was as if he didn’t even see them there. Sgt Bekink stared right through them as if he was desperately trying to find something else.

‘The police are drunk,’ came Lucille’s response.
PART 5

BUSINESSMAN DENVER DOWNES

SUBLIME STONES FINANCIAL DIRECTOR'S BOARD

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<th>NAME:</th>
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<td>CORPORATE FINANCE CONSULTANT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QUALIFICATIONS:</td>
<td>PGDA, B.BusSci, MComm IN FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT, CA(SA)</td>
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<td>EXPERIENCE:</td>
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Chapter Thirty-One

Denver Downes dreamed of hedge funds. Quite literally, his dreams consisted of towering numerical columns, which balanced themselves delicately in his subconscious, adding and subtracting figures of their own accord. At 5:30 a.m., his alarm ringtone swept into his dreams and toppled the hedge fund pillars into a mess of flailing, scattered numbers, which tumbled down and disintegrated, destroying his dream and jerking him into the morning.

Denver Downes did not lie in bed for a few minutes before he got up. He worked from 7am to 10pm every weekday and most weekends, and there was no time
for reflection anywhere in his schedule. He got straight onto his feet, smoothed back his dreadlocks and checked News 24 on his iPhone 4 while making a pot of filter coffee in his Russell Hobbs coffee machine. He loved his coffee machine. It stood perfectly in between his stove and his blender. And if ever, it was slightly too far on the side of the blender, or too far on the side of the stove, Denver Downes would move it back to the middle, where it belonged.

Each morning, he filled his coffee machine to the same line indicating the precise level where the water should reach. He then used the toilet for the exact amount of time he’d set the water to boil. When he returned to the machine, his coffee was always fresh, because he had timed it that way – in accordance with his morning routine – and Denver’s timing was never off. He poured the filter coffee into his largest mug and watched ten minutes of the morning news on his huge screen while drinking his coffee black. He got to work at five to seven, every day. He greeted the receptionist with a smile and worked his fifteen-hour day in an air-conditioned office without ever complaining.

Sublime Stones was good to him. The company provided employees with a quality meal for lunch and dinner, as well as snacks throughout the day. Muffins: bran, blueberry and chocolate – just to keep them going before the next meal. And, on Fridays, after the noon meeting, they would even enjoy some champagne in the workplace to celebrate the end of a good week and hard work in the spirit of the team. Denver Downes enjoyed his job. He enjoyed flirting with his female colleagues, fraternising with his male colleagues, networking with his clients, getting drunk with the managers and getting paid more than he knew what to do with. But most of all, he loved the office politics. He knew just how to exploit them.
Sublime Stones was situated in the middle of a block of investment banking offices in central Cape Town. His morning drive in his prized black BMW included a view of a bleeding sunrise over Table Mountain. Denver loved the scenic aesthetic of the city’s shore. To Denver Downes, Cape Town was beautiful. Possibly one of the most beautiful places in the world. But that was only because Denver Downes lived in a very specific, very microcosmic, very wealthy, cosmopolitan part of Cape Town. His favourite place was Camps Bay, five minutes from his bachelor flat, where he would stare at the ocean, drinking scotch on the beach with an associate or two after work.

Denver’s travels had taught him that franchised office blocks have the same semblance all over the world. A swarm of shirts, ties, blazers, Apple Macs, coffee nooks, clouds of business talk and a little smoking corner – slowly diminishing because all the employees want to get fitter and retire younger. Denver Downes loved everything about it. He loved the lifestyle, he loved the jargon, he loved the luxury, he loved the conversations, he loved weighing up McKinsey against Goldman Sachs against Investec. He loved pretending to be annoyed by administrative and managerial banalities. He loved watching the stock market climb and crawl. He loved the sheer, unrivalled status of it all. He loved not having to struggle. He loved the respect commanded by a man in a suit. He loved the comfortable exclusivity to which he had such unbridled access.

Denver was genuinely compelled by his job – and with good reason. He was a virtuoso with numbers and predictions, a born businessman, an adept entrepreneur who played the game with expert panache. He had worked his way up, all on his own, by sharp alacrity and God-given capacity. Denver Downes was nobody’s fool. On the
surface, he was as clean as they come. He liked it that way. And so it was surprising, even to himself, that he associated with such a character as Jerome Golding.

Being that as it may, Denver got to work at seven with Golding on his mind. He negotiated a new investment into his hedge fund and he scanned over the financial statements of Sublime Stones, looking for new ways to infiltrate their operations. As he analysed the consolidated income statement and balance sheet, he noticed a steady decline in net profit, which was consistent with the current state of the industry. It was the perfect time to strike. And, without thinking twice, he called Jerome Golding to arrange a meeting in the near future, with a blueberry muffin moistening in his left cheek.

On some days, like today, when Denver ended work early, he pumped iron at the gym for an hour, where he worked on his ‘lats’, ‘traps’ and ‘pecs’. Following gym, he took a slow drive home to Camps Bay as he admired the sunset on the shimmering water and the lovely, toned wives jogging along the shoreline. Cape Town’s crème de la crème. The wonder of it all, he thought. How well composed, utterly refined and splendidly sophisticated this habitat of his was, in all its natural beauty.

Natural beauty – like the beauty of Camps Bay, Bantry Bay, Hout Bay and Betty’s Bay – was reserved and tended to, for the rich, the successful, the old money and, of course, the new money, such as himself.

The road was tranquil and his ABS was efficient. His bank account was swelling and his career was soaring. Life was platinum. But Denver Downes had not yet finished work for the day. He had one more task to do. Compliments of Jerome
Golding, he had a cop to test, stationed just outside Sea Point, off the main road. And so that’s where Denver drove, committed to the untethered charisma of one Jerome Golding and his unequivocally rewarding system of compensation.

Denver touched the bottle of Johnny Walker Premium 18-year old blend under his seat before swerving conspicuously in front of the policeman parked on the grassy shore, awaiting drunken drivers. While Denver was completely sober, the task seemed challenging. How to drive like you’re drunk? At first, the cop didn’t notice him swerving, so Denver sped up and weaved through the lanes, stalling and starting as he went, anticipating better results. The reaction ensued perfectly according to plan. Blue lights and a siren. Pull over. With pleasure.

‘LICENSE AND REGISTRATION,’

Denver read the lips of the sergeant through the closed window. Coloured guy, big belly, superiority complex, condescension beaming on his face, bored to high hell with his day job. Yip. This was the guy. Denver purposefully took his time to open the window. The cop was agitated, just as Golding had predicted he would be. The command boomed into Denver’s vehicle a second time,

‘LICENSE AND REGISTRATION please sir,’

The sergeant gave him the classic cop look of imperial disdain and spoke with dried-out, committed-to-memory, practiced phrases of authority,

‘I see you were doing some swerving on the road there, sir. Going 160 in a 100 zone. I will have to write you a fine and you will be breathalysed.’

The sergeant took out a pen and started writing out a slip. Denver flipped through his wallet and slowly took out R600 note by note, which he simply held out the window
of the BMW, waiting for a reaction, pretending to search for the license he was already looking at,

‘My license is in here somewhere, Officer.’

When Denver had finished rummaging through his wallet, he fixed the sergeant with his most earnest stare and asked him a question he already knew the answer to,

‘Do you drink, Officer?’

‘Occasionally. Sir, your LICENSE AND REGISTRATION now please.’

Denver ignored him and gestured to the bottle,

‘Because I have an unopened bottle of premium scotch worth R1000 here under my seat,’

He watched the cop’s expression change. Golding was right. Although Denver refused to call him by his title, Golding wasn’t the Boss for no reason. The cop was definitely an alcoholic. Denver waited for the concession he knew was coming,

‘Give me the R600 and the scotch. And you can go.’

Denver handed him the bottle through the window and placed the notes in the policeman’s palm, smiling courteously. It was all about decorum. Denver Downes was nothing if not professional.

‘Well, you best be on your way then,’ said the sergeant.

‘Take care, Officer.’

With that, Denver drove off in his black BMW M3 at a reduced speed. On his way home, he called that persuasive associate of his,
'Your sergeant is corruptible. You’re good to go.’

Denver stepped into his flat at 9p.m. – home early – and undid his tie. R750 silk. He hung it up neatly in his cupboard before looking at his reflection. He smiled at himself in his R3000 full-length mirror. Denver Downes was the poster child for the BEE corporate high-flier. He possessed the charm and appeal of a good-looking man. He had the kind of jawline that people trusted. He applied a layer of luxury Men’s Exfoliating Cleanser to his perfectly symmetrical face. Green eyes on dark skin – a striking contrast. It shattered peoples’ paradigms. He grinned. The saponaria extract scratched away the dead skin cells and the excess sebum, leaving his flawless skin smooth and fresh.

While he waited for the exfoliator to set, Denver made himself a steak in his AMC cookware – with rosemary, mushrooms, coriander and olive oil. Rare. He took his meal to his bedroom where he watched an episode of Suits on his 50 inch HD flat-screen TV. A R15 000, professionally fitted monitor, coordinated in absolute symmetry, between the walls of his bedroom, with a surround-sound system adjusted to his ideal volume. Not shyly soft, not bulbously loud, as he ate his impeccably seasoned meal.

Denver had always considered himself a man of quality, a lover of quality, in fact. He only drank wine that opened with a corkscrew. Never the cheaper bottles that you lightly turn open with your fingertips. And as far as whiskey went, it was Jameson. Never J&B. Or Maybe Jack Daniels Honey if he was feeling merry. After Suits, Denver did his e-filing for the month and breezed through the exercise routine section of Men’s Health. He scanned through the style trends of Gentlemen’s
Quarterly and then hit his favourite lounge on the Camps Bay Promenade. As is customary for most employed people on a Friday night, Denver allowed himself to get blind drunk and divulged his life-story to a complete stranger.

The stranger was a sophisticated woman in a tailored burgundy dress who sat at the bar reading the *Mail & Guardian*. Classy newspaper. She smoked as she read and spoke to no one. The article she was reading, Denver observed from a distance, was on modern hypnotherapy. He tried to see her eyes, but they never left the newspaper. There were two ways to approach this situation: Make a witty comment about hypnosis or buy her a drink. But what did she drink? Denver saw the untouched glass of wine before the lady. She looked gloomy with her fine features fixated on the paper. She looked like she needed him to cheer her up.

Cocktail, he thought. Definitely a cocktail. Denver ordered a Mojito for the woman and a whiskey for himself. He requested that the barman deliver it to her compliments of him – the gentleman over there in the suit. And then it happened: She finally lifted her eyes from the newspaper. Large dark pools of sex and sympathy.

She was only too pleased to listen to him after receiving that cocktail. He knew he had sparked her interest by the way her words rolled off her tongue in brisk response to everything he said. There was something destabilizing about her voice. Her voice didn’t suit her. It seemed to be someone else’s voice. The lady was speaking with someone else’s voice. A stolen voice.

Denver made sure to flash his silver Tag Heuer watch, R45000, as he spewed facts about the corporate world in language he guessed was impressive to her because she looked at him, dazed by his every sentence. He had her right where he wanted her.
It was a sure thing. By the end of the night, he took her hand and they walked to his black BMW and went home together.

Swelling shaft, blushing receptacle, fabled black phallus, white trash pussy.

Aching monochromatic sepia.

Unzip, rip, clit, slit, multiple, multiple, multiple.

The next morning, Denver felt his mouth twist into a smile even before his eyelids lifted to the new day. The morning sun seeped through his blinds. He licked his lips and he could still taste her. The hairs on his thighs were still sticky with satisfaction. What a perfect night. Pity he couldn’t remember most of it. His body was still warm with pleasure. But where was the body that had fallen asleep next to him? He burrowed his head in the pillow and handed himself over to second sleep. She’d be back soon.

When he woke up again, he glanced at the clock and an hour had passed. Yip. She was gone. He felt a slight sting of dejection. Everybody’s somebody’s fool. But she could’ve had the courtesy to say goodbye, at least. He stretched out his limbs alone in his bed. He needed some warm water on his skin. But not yet. He was too comfortable to get up and shower. He would bask it in for a while. Wallow in the fact that he was her fool. A deeply, warmly satisfied fool. But a fool nonetheless. He’d really felt a connection with that woman – what was her name again?

His fingers searched the bedside table for his iPhone 4, but it wasn’t there. He would look for it later. With parched tongue and imploding skull, Denver glanced at
the clock again and it stared back in triumph, ticking on, measuring the time he was wasting. Maybe she’ll still come back. He scanned the room for his iPad to read the headlines, but it was nowhere in sight. He didn’t feel like getting up to look for the thing. His eyes fell back on the clock and it claimed his stare for a full five minutes.

Suddenly, he realised that there was a possibility she might have taken it. iPad, R7922. iPhone 4, R9695. He shut his eyes and clenched his triceps. *I’m such a fucking idiot.* Wimpering at his hazy realisation, he followed the minute hand on the clock. Will she come back? Will she return? No. She won’t.

He tried to retrace his steps. He tried to remember the evening in sequence, but it was just too hard. He kept getting side-tracked by haphazard flashbacks of her straddling him and her thighs tensing up as he got her there. Incomparable. He had to remain objective. He put the image of out his head and noticed two cigarettes on the windowsill. He didn’t smoke. Why were there two cigarettes on the windowsill?

Denver wondered if she had pictured him in this state and left them there to get him through the morning. Outraged at the thought, he took one of the cigarettes and lit it. Just to calm down. Immediately, he recalled the smoke floating from her lips up past her arched back to the pink zenith of her nipple. A fool’s paradise. He wanted to slip her into a glass of wine, pour her into his mouth, curl his tongue around her, drink her up and drown her.

He curled his lips at the bitter taste of the cigarette, coughed and continued puffing. To get to his Russell Hobbs coffee machine, he needed to cross the floor on which her lingerie lay scattered. Her silk panty was inside out. The lacy triangle that nestled her most sublime area was facing him. Taunting him. He would have to get up off his sheets that she’d smudged with her perfume. How unfair.
Denver’s heart-rate increased steadily. The truth was taking its time to settle into his body. He took things slowly. He got up and placed each foot delicately between the deposits of lace and silk on his floor. Without touching her traces, he made his way to his coffee machine. He put it on and listened to it’s rumbling. He scooped up a filter full of expensive roasted ground coffee from his stainless steel tin and watched them free fall into the machine. He took his favourite bone china mug from the cupboard above his head. The warmth of the steam rose up to his cheek. He plunged a teaspoon into the sugar bowl, fetching a sparkling white heap. He touched his tongue to the tip and a layer of sweet crystals dissolved in his mouth.

Denver glanced at his antique mahogany coffee-table. R12300. He noticed that his Apple Mac was missing. A MacBook Pro with 13-inch Retina display. R15999. All his work was stored on there. His stomach turned, he lost his appetite for the coffee as he scrambled to find the pair of pants he wore last night. It wasn’t on the floor where she’d ripped it off. His wallet was in that pocket. So were his car keys.

Pacing his racing thoughts, he knew she already had access to his accounts via his Mac. His hands started shaking. He would have to regain some perspective before he tackled this. There’s nothing quite as comforting as Merlot on an empty stomach. Trying hard to keep his head, Denver walked towards his white oak wine rack. R2340. He noticed that it was askew. Three bottles had been removed. No, four. And the bitch took the vintage.

Fuck.

Maybe something even stronger then. He opened his corner cupboard and took out his one and only bottle of cognac. She wouldn’t have known to look here. Plonking three ice blocks into the Bisquit, he already felt consoled as he poured the
pale gold liquid down his throat. Reality could be kept at bay a little while longer. He lit the second cigarette she’d left on the windowsill without coughing this time, and stroked the cold metal of his Beretta .22 lying peacefully next to his bottle of Bisquit.

She had strolled in all fresh, smelling of success. She must’ve come to the pub freshly showered. Cream and perfume on clean skin. Damp hair on pink cheeks. Marshmallow lips still warm from the steam. All crevices soaped, perfumed and moisturized. She had had him at a disadvantage. His memory dropped like ice in the pit of his stomach as he vividly recalled her image: the sex-swept hair flowing down her pale neck. Airbrushed by god. The woman with the stolen voice.

Was he so charmed by her? Was it her dark decadent mystery? Was he just stupidly drunk? Had she drugged him?! Denver stared down into his cognac with distaste. He noticed a rose in a tall glass on his kitchen counter. He never put flowers in his house. Why would she leave him a rose? The audacity of the bitch. He marvelled at the deep red folds of crimson velvet giving way to a concealed opening. He put his mouth around the rose and felt its softness on his lips. He crunched the petals under his teeth, chewing the fresh red rose, taking in its aroma, biting into the flesh, he recalled eating her pussy the previous night. He licked his lips. Denver discarded the stem, got dressed, put the Beretta in his pocket and set out to kill her.

He walked straight past the gap in front of his house where his black BMW used to stand. She had taken his car. Denver slammed his fist into the wall and then cradled his hand in his stomach, wishing he hadn’t done that.
Chapter Thirty-Two

On Monday morning, Denver Downes un-bandaged his bruised right hand and vowed never to hit a wall again. The muscles and tendons in his right arm ached all the way up to his shoulder. It was already 6A.M. He poured himself filter coffee with his left hand, stirred the water with his left hand, wiped his arse with his left hand and checked News 24 on his new iPhone 5 with his left hand. Denver slipped on his Armani suit, he straightened his Viyella silk tie and slid into his brand new Bugatti. Bugatti, yes, because he could afford it. He had always wanted a supercar, but Denver had never wanted to appear too flashy. Now, he wanted just that. He needed the world to know just how rich he actually was. Besides, the Bugatti had eased the pain of the weekend. It made it all worthwhile. If he had to replace the BMW, he thought, he would step up from the BMW. And the supercar was a major step-up. Denver was exited about the Bugatti. With it, came a whole new persona. He arrived at his meeting just before seven.

In a fluorescent lit, air-conditioned boardroom with closed blinds, Denver listened to the CEO of Sublime Stones rant about sustainability and the current fluctuations in the industry. Denver already knew everything he was saying. The CEO was one dull old white man – as are most CEOs of old, lucrative companies. Denver knew he would be more efficient at this man’s job. And he was on his way there. His colour stood in his favour. One of the partners, wearing a fat tie on his wide collared shirt, mentioned a statistic referring to the Belgian economy, and something in Denver Downes snapped.
They hadn’t stopped talking for over two hours now and Denver felt a terrible irritation. It was a strong urge to hurt someone or throw something. It took Denver a while to realize that what he was experiencing was his first ever nicotine craving. The meeting hadn’t paused for a smoke break. And even if they had, Denver didn’t have cigarettes on him. Never in his life had he needed a cigarette, and now, because of that thieving woman leaving two on his windowsill, he was addicted. Because of some damaged sociopath in need of psychological aid.

Denver twitched his foot as he watched the management team overeating the finger foods as they listened to the CEO. It seemed impossible that the CEO was still spewing out shit about company trends. He spoke and spoke until Denver could no longer take the waiting. Just as he was about to get up and leave the meeting, Denver saw the CEO’s lips start moving faster with every word, his lips started swelling with the rapidity of his speech and the words keep on coming faster and faster like an auctioneer and then suddenly – the CEO’s mouth closed up and dropped off. Just dropped to the floor – quite naturally, no blood – like plastic. When Denver looked up again, the CEO of Sublime Stones had no mouth. Just eyes, a nose and skin closed up to the chin.

Denver left the meeting, bundled up all his Sublime Stones statements and ran them through the shredder in his personal office. This was privileged information. No one else could see these documents. He found the sound of the shredder calming, so systematic and final. He liked the grrrrr and click of it destroying the documents. He had the information memorised. He would recite it to Jerome Golding.
Upon leaving Sublime Stones, Denver bought his first ever box of cigarettes. He decided on Marlboro Lights. Then he drove to Jerome Golding’s residence, smoking in his new Bugatti with a cigarette sitting awkwardly between his fingers. He parked the car and locked it before walking into Golding’s transit room past all the junkies, in his Armani suit. Nobody stopped him. They all knew who he was.

Golding looked up from his screen and twiddled his toes inside his puffy pink slippers. With scotch in his one hand and a Rothmans Blue in the other, he crossed his legs, unashamed of his pink slippers and examined Denver’s suit with a tilted head,

‘Gucci?’

‘Armani.’

‘New car?’

‘Bitch stole my BM.’

Golding stood up to take his hand and the full gravity of the man’s weight and presence startled him. He had healed. He no longer needed that awful wheelchair. For a second, Denver couldn’t tell whether Golding was pissed off or amused. Jerome Golding hadn’t shaved his head for a few days and his grey scalp stubble was starting to show. The man was getting old. He blew a plume of sickening Rothman’s smoke into Denver’s face and settled his feet into the soles of the pink fluff, which seemed to alleviate his mass when he stood in them,

‘How do you know it was a woman who stole your BMW, Mr Downes?’

It wasn’t a woman. It was a sociopathic bitch that had stolen his BMW. Denver hesitated to tell Golding the truth. He looked a fool in the situation and it was not something he was keen to share – with anyone, let alone his main associate. But
something assured him that this may well be the kind of thing that Golding will understand. He looked down at his pink slippers and decided to take his chances. As a general rule, Denver never confided in anyone he didn’t know for over a decade. He had known Jerome Golding for just over a decade.

‘I fucked her the night before. Tiny, feisty little bitch. I woke up, my valuables were gone.’

To Denver’s amazement, Jerome Golding seemed completely unsurprised. He didn’t mock him or even ask how it happened. He just shrugged and nodded a slow, almost solemn nod as if he understood something Denver had missed entirely.

‘Lucille,’ said Golding, ‘Sounds like Lucille.’

Golding knew this bitch? Dammit, he should’ve guessed as much.

‘Who?’

‘Lucille Lockhart. She’s one of mine.’

Denver didn’t appreciate how close this whole thing was edging towards his humiliation. He should never have said anything about it. But Golding continued in the most comforting tone possible of such a man,

‘She’s an associate, like you. She’s good at what she does.’

Golding was trying to ease the tension, trying to dismiss it with a flick of his cigarette. It wasn’t working. He poured Denver a scotch and passed it to him without asking if he wanted it or not. Denver took the glass from him and took a long sip. Golding spoke again,
‘I do believe that, if you truly wanted your BMW back, you would be driving it as we speak, now wouldn’t you Mr Downes?’

Golding’s hissing toneless laugh shook his belly and rattled the chains on his chest. He was right and Denver knew it. Denver could have found her by now if he’d really wanted to. He could’ve found her, confronted her and demanded that she return what she stole, gun to temple. But he hadn’t done a thing about it. And, up until this moment, he still wasn’t sure exactly why not.

‘Seems to me, you got yourself an upgrade. You’re better off without the BMW.’

Denver grunted at that remark. Yes, it was true. He was much better suited to a supercar. But the problem wasn’t that the BMW was gone. It was the principle. A man does not allow himself to be blindsided by a thief – a female fucking thief. There and then, Denver decided he would go and confront this Lucille Lockhart after all. She would not go unpunished.

‘What does she do for you, this Lucille Lockhart?’ asked Denver.

‘Hits, robberies, information. She’s versatile.’

Jerome Golding’s expression was vague now. Denver could not discern what it meant. It was either fondness or mockery – both possibilities made him uncomfortable. Versatile indeed, thought Denver. He cleared his throat, sipped his scotch and changed the subject to a more pressing matter,

‘This sergeant of yours – Bekink, was it? Did he take the bribe yet? Is the file destroyed yet?’

Golding lit up another Rothmans Blue,
'Bekink needs more time.'

'More time?' Denver asked in as courteous a manner as he could master.

'Yes, more time.'

'You mean he hasn’t agreed?’ Denver persisted.

'The cash is in his account but he hasn’t destroyed the file yet, no.'

Denver shook his head. Golding was losing his edge, playing it too fast and loose. The cop clearly couldn’t be trusted. Denver picked his words carefully so as to propose them gently to Golding, as a consultation,

'You best hurry him along then.'

Golding yawned,

'He will do it. No need to pressure the man.'

Denver would have to take on a stronger tone with Golding. He would have to tread carefully, but not too carefully. Dangerous men are threatened by resolve but they are also annoyed by trepidation. It was always such a fine line with Golding,

'How do you know he hasn’t tracked the transfer and gone to the authorities?’

'He needs the cash.'

Denver felt himself tip slightly off that fine line he’d been walking with Golding,

'Threaten him, Jerome, intimidate him. Do what you do. Kill his wife. Stab his brother. You need to hurry this up. He needs to know the stakes here. I have a reputation to uphold which I’m not willing to risk.'
Immediately, Denver wished he hadn’t said it. Golding had a way of making you feel like an insolent brat before a good caning. You don’t tell Jerome Golding what to do. But it was too late. The words were spilt. He braced himself for Golding’s reaction. Jerome Golding only dragged on his Rothmans Blue, squeezed the cigarette tightly between his forefinger and this thumb and stared intently at Denver. Not angry, just surprised. An odd, jaded fatigue set into Golding’s face and the big man sighed.

‘Eksie lus vir doodmaak vandaggie.’

I don’t feel like killing today? Was that it? He wasn’t up to the task? Denver couldn’t believe it. He didn’t feel like killing today? Denver knew he wasn’t going to change Golding’s mind. He would have to take matters into his own hands. Golding continued his thought,

‘I have my eye on the cop. His neighbour is one of mine,’ he explained.

‘His neighbour?’ asked Denver.

‘Devesh Desai. Very close friend to the cop and trusted associate of mine.’

Denver considered this. A close friend of the cop. He didn’t like the sound of any of this. You cannot trust a man who claims too many affiliations. Especially with the cops involved. There were too many variables here. Bekink, Bekink’s neighbour and the police force. Plus a lingering bribe and a Sublime Stones case file that could expose them all – still standing. Golding was being sloppy. He was aging poorly in his choice of industry. Denver would have to intervene here. He had a reputation as a corporate man and if Golding wasn’t going to scare this cop into submission, he would do it himself. He had more to lose than Golding. Denver had no criminal record. He kept clean and well off the charts. He wasn’t a lowlife thug with
connections in the penal system. He was a successful businessman and he couldn’t afford to go to jail or tarnish his name and lose his license.

‘You should let Bekink know the severity of the situation.’

‘I’ve got it under control, Mr Downes,’ Golding drained his scotch and poured another for the both of them.

‘I need more assurance than “you’ve got it all under control”.’

Denver’s request was not unreasonable. He was simply asking for some validation that he would not end up gang-raped in a cell in Brandvlei. Golding moved his shoulders forward and looked at Denver closely, like he was trying to determine if anything about him had changed over their ten years of partnership,

‘Do you really? You’ve worked with me for almost a decade now,’ said Golding.

Golding hadn’t raised his voice a decibel, but Denver could tell his impatience was mounting. It was all in his eyebrows. Denver knew he should shut up, but he couldn’t help himself.

‘Yes, but – ’

‘Do I ever fuck up?’

Golding’s voice was dead calm. His eyebrows were twitching but his face was unchanging. Denver conceded his point. He looked down, unable to respond.

‘Do I ever fuck up?’

‘No.’
'So don’t get so hot under your Armani collar, Mr Downes.'

With that, Golding got up and unzipped his jeans as he walked to the toilet inside the house. Denver eyed Golding’s cell-phone, which he’d left on the table. He looked down the passage to see that Golding had closed the toilet door. This was his chance. He had to act quickly. Golding was busy. The office was the only room in the building that wasn’t under surveillance. Denver glanced at the screens, making sure no one was coming his way. He snatched the cell-phone, breezed down Jerome Golding’s list of contacts until he found Lucille’s name. Ms Lockhart. He typed swiftly and decisively, impersonating Golding’s cold professional tone in his head as he typed the words. Denver deleted the message from the phone straight after he’d sent it to Lucille’s number.

Dispense with Devesh Desai.

Effect of immediate.

Jerome.

Denver’s logic was simple. Kill the neighbour and scare the cop into accepting the bribe. It’s what Jerome would’ve done ten years ago. As Golding walked back through the door, zipping his jeans up, Denver’s hand had just placed the phone back on the table. When Golding looked up from his zipper, Denver was sitting square in the chair and the phone was back on the spot where Golding had left it. The big bald man hadn’t noticed a thing. Denver watched him take a little satin pouch out of his pocket. Golding passed it to him.
‘Your cut,’ he said.

‘The Sublime Stones heist?’ Denver asked, already knowing the answer.

‘A good 35% of it.’

Denver slipped the satin pouch into the inner blazer pocket of his Armani suit. The satin pouch felt cold in his pocket. The tiny stones inside it could mean the end of his freedom or the beginning of it.

‘My boys have loaded the rest of the cash into your car.’

‘The rest?’

‘A bonus to cover your risk factors.’

Bevan appeared out of the darkness of the office and handed Denver the keys to his Bugatti. He’d finished packing the cash into the car. Denver hadn’t even noticed Bevan take the keys. Come to think of it, Denver hadn’t noticed him there at all. How long had he been standing there? Bevan was always such an invisible presence.

Denver left the yard, feeling unsure that he could rely on Lucille to obey the message he’d sent. Did that little woman really have the balls to kill a man? He wasn’t sure. He drove to Bellville, to Sgt Bekink’s address, just to see this Devesh Desai and weigh up the variables. Next Bekink’s house, Denver saw a big Indian man sitting in his garage, reading the newspaper. The man had tattoos from his wrist up to his shoulder on both arms. Devesh Desai. Unmistakeable hustler. He was huge. Denver started doubting his message to Lucille from Golding’s phone. Even if she wanted to obey the message, he was not convinced she could kill what he saw in front of him. The man looked indestructible.
He seemed completely engrossed in his newspaper. This was Denver’s shot. Kill the man, instil the fear of god in Bekink, force him into compliance and maintain his own status as reputable corporate high-flier. Denver took his .22 Beretta from his cubbyhole and aimed it at Devesh Desai.

Denver Downes was not really a man of guns. He had never shot anyone before. But he knew that the Beretta was a soft gun – not much noise, and the .22 was the smallest bullet, so it didn’t cause a big bloody mess. The .22 might not leave the body at all after entry – it was more likely to tumble around in the brain, causing more internal damage. This idea had always appealed to Denver. He was understated in his violence. Efficient and understated. But not experienced. In any other situation, Golding would have had this taken care of. He had plenty of hitmen. But Denver had no choice here. Time was of the essence and Golding was becoming senile. This neighbour, Devesh Desai, was nothing more than a dispensable liability.

He squinted as he held up the gun. Denver secured it as steadily as he could in his hands; he angled it as accurately as he could, keeping his eye on the target. And then he pulled the trigger. As he saw Devesh Desai fall, he drove away. But as Denver replayed the image, it occurred to him that Devesh hadn’t fallen at the right time. He’d jumped down well after the shot, diving off his tyre, newspaper flying. And he had jumped, not fallen. Devesh was still alive. He had missed.
Chapter Thirty-Three

A nagging paranoia distracted Denver from his work the next day. The blueberry muffins just didn’t taste the same. He needed to know that Devesh Desai was dead, that the cop had destroyed the file, that he was safe. He didn’t feel safe. He had to find Lucille Lockhart. With the muffin sitting and softening in his right cheek, he cut a couple quarter million rand deals during breakfast. He washed it down with strong coffee. Lunch was butter chicken and baked potato. Before he touched it, he planned a new diversification of investments plan for Sublime Stones. Then he wolfed down the meal. The workday was still long. The air-conditioning was drying out his skin. He would have to buy a new, stronger moisturizer. He stared at the impressionist painting on the wall and took another muffin. He ate because he was nervous. By the evening, he had consulted on a quarter billion rand property scheme. Then he left the office early, skipped his hour-long workout, and took his usual drive home to Camps Bay along the shore in his new Bugatti, bemoaning the loss of order in his life.

He would find this woman and put the matter to rest. But where would he find Lucille Lockhart? One of Jerome’s? She could be anywhere from here to the Northern suburbs. Probably in a bar, looking for another victim to rob. He would start in Cape Town and work his way down. He had reported his BMW stolen, but the police had turned up nothing. There was no tracker on his BMW. But Denver had learnt from this mistake. There was a tracker on his Bugatti – a tracker that lowered the car insurance premium. Denver didn’t bother making himself a steak or changing out of his work clothes. He left his flat and proceeded to visit every popular pub in Cape Town’s CBD.
In his new Bugatti, he drove up Long Street and onto Kloof, he walked through the crowds of rich trendy kids in retro clothing, and asked for Lucille Lockhart at every bar. No one knew her name. The vagueness of his description surprised him. He couldn’t articulate what she looked like. Short? Pale? He scanned the bars himself. By eight, he found himself in Rondebosch, packed with University students, where he ordered a whiskey and saw no trace of her. He went on to Woodstock and Observatory – full of hippies – and he pushed through, determined to find someone who had seen her. His description became more vivid as he searched: A woman. Petite. White. Black hair – wispy. Pink cheeks. Big eyes – brown, I think. Have you seen her?

He was met by the same reaction every time. Bartenders, drinkers, club managers alike all smiled at him and said there were dozens of women that fitted his description, who passed through their doors. Her name didn’t ring any bells. Denver started to wonder if it was her real name. He didn’t give up. He continued his search to include Sea Point and Green Point – lots of queers – none that knew her name. Staring at the sea from the promenade where he’d originally met her with a Jameson in his hand, it finally occurred to Denver that he had been searching in all the wrong places. A car thief would not risk frequenting the same area in which she’d stolen the car. He left the view of the shore, filled the Bugatti up with petrol and drove into the Northern Suburbs. Home to hustlers, thieves and common criminals.

Voortrekker Road was long, with bars on either side. The way you would imagine Long Street, except the drinks were cheaper, the people were allowed to smoke inside the pubs, and there were no clubs. The customers were poorer, they all dressed badly and danced more freely. The décor was non-existent, and so was the entry fee for most places. There were no high-end boutique clothing shops between
the pubs like on Long Street. Instead, there were many car dealerships and china stores. It all felt so unfamiliar. The road covered all regions from Elsies River to Bellville. Dusk was deepening, and the further down the road he went, the more he started to fear – for his car, for his wallet, for his safety, for his life.

Denver ordered a new drink at every bar, getting steadily more drunk as his .22 Beretta itched in his pocket. He realised he should probably keep his wits about him, but he didn’t want to face this place sober. Endless rooms of pool tables and karaoke screens lay before him, hidden behind badly painted doors on a pavement speckled with prostitutes and lowlifes, hunched over bins, asking him for money, drinking in the gutter, beckoning to him in a language he didn’t understand. Voortrekker Road was not as well lit as Long Street. It didn’t have that light, loud buzz of happy, open drunkenness. Voortrekker Road felt damper and quieter. But the quietness was loaded with whispering and watching. In the shadows of the side streets was an underworld he could feel encroaching as the night drew up against him. He didn’t like this place one bit.

Every bar he walked into was charged with an unfamiliar tension. Gold-toothed smiles widened at his arrival and followed him as he walked. Men with exacting eyes surveyed his silver Tag Heuer watch, they anticipated his every move, analysing his drink of choice, checking to see in which pocket he put his wallet. For the first time in his life, Denver felt white – or what he imagined a white man would feel like in this situation. Judged on his superior class. He was the only man wearing a suit in this place. He felt self-conscious. He moved his dreadlocks into his face, hoping to hide his expression. He undid his collar. Black, he thought, I’m Black. You don’t scare me. But Denver knew he stood out. It wasn’t his colour at all. It was his manner. These people sniffed out wealth.
He looked around the bar failing to notice that he was the only customer
drinking whiskey. He scanned every woman – they flashed smiles at him and started
drawing closer, hoping for a drink, touching his hair, trying to get into his pants. None
of them was that sociopath, Lucille. He left the pub and went back to his Bugatti,
relieved that all the windows and tyres were intact and the car was still there. He
wished he hadn’t driven here in his new Bugatti. A prostitute followed him to his car.
He heard the click-clack of her plastic white heels. He saw her thickly made-up face
speaking to him from behind his closed window. He ignored her. Toothless men with
twisted smiles were watching his car.

He carried on down Voortrekker’s spatter of dodgy pubs until he saw one that
looked particularly full. The drunkard in the doorway eyed him. He watched Denver
as he walked towards the entrance. He stretched his back and pushed out his belly,
yawning mists of bad breath into the night air,

‘My broe, don’t you have a rand for me?’

Denver acted like he didn’t hear him and walked inside. The drunkard smiled,
splitting open tiny pools of pus in his lips. Denver did not lose his resolve. The pub
swallowed him up as he stepped inside a place filled with thick smoke and moving
people, body heat, dim light, old music and cheap booze. Denver froze between the
swirling bodies as the saddest melody he had ever heard filled his mind and crumbled
his anger. It unclenched his fists and weakened his resolve as tears welled up in his
eyes and clouded his vision. The pathos of the song was unexpected. He had not
anticipated hearing anything so beautiful in a place like this.

A whirl of smoke clasped him in a haze so dreamy and liquidy, everything
was trying to suck it in. Denver floated on the smog to the bar. He neglected to wipe
his eyes before ordering a whiskey. The barman stared at him, incredulous, sympathetic, he smiled at Denver with dimples so large they looked like craters in his skin,

‘We have a brandy special I’d recommend for you.’

Denver barely managed a nod as the man behind the bar fixed him a brandy and slipped it into his hands,

‘On the house.’

Denver put the glass to his lips and tasted the sweet, cheap, cloying, sugary shit that was on special. The brandy encouraged his tears. The brandy was syrup dripping thickly into his gut, soothing his mind into a million overlapping visions. The music swept through him. The woman’s voice plunged him into an unending velvet floor. He sank and sank into the softness, a dumb, cushy, easy softness. Brandy. He ordered another.

The happy drinkers sang along with their sweat-and-booze-moist shirts and their dragging Northern Suburbs, flat crass Afrikaans accents. Denver felt strangely more at home now. He strained his bloodshot eyes to see through the liquidy smoke. Behind all the swirling, jazzing, rhythmically syncing bodies, he finally saw her. The smoke poured from her red lips into every crevice of every drinker, engulfing them in nostalgia, into that deep warm sadness they’d spent their lives trying to ignore. Her audience worshipped her. Denver’s mouth opened but not a word came out. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. It was her.

He would wait until she’d finished performing. He watched the strands of dark hair falling over her eyes, the lines of pain burrowing into her forehead, the fire of her
cigarette wielding patterns from her fingertips. He gave himself over to the voice that resonated from her lips and waited for her to finish.

When she did, she sat down at the bar, ordered a glass of wine, lit another cigarette and disappeared behind a newspaper while the crowd roared with applause. Behind a newspaper, he saw two pale thin legs in red heels sticking out, crossed, beneath the newspaper. A plume of thick smoke sailed above it. She was alone in the corner now. No one approached her. Denver was fixated on the limbs that stuck out from the edges of the newspaper. He knew he should call the police. He had found her. He should alert them – now. But he couldn’t.

Then he saw something that completely threw him off-guard. On the other side of the pub, Sgt Lyle Bekink stood with his brandy, talking to what Denver imagined was a fellow cop. Neither of them was in uniform. Bekink was here – in the same vicinity as Lucille. Not doing anything. Denver was at a loss. Bekink didn’t seem to notice him at all. He clearly wasn’t on duty.

Lucille didn’t turn around to meet Denver’s gaze. She sipped on her glass and dragged on her cigarette, unaware of him. She rolled her head back and exhaled the smoke. And only when the last of the secondary smoke left her lips, did she turn to face him. Her mouth parted slightly at the sight of him, her large eyes glittered in the dim light. Her perfume filled his mind. He cleared his throat and hauled back his logic towards himself through an ocean of smoke,

‘The police are looking for you.’

She stared at him like she had no idea who he was. Not a flicker of fear or recognition. She smoked. And smoked. And smoked. She glanced at Sgt Bekink and returned to reading her newspaper.
‘The police are drunk.’

‘I could call the headquarters right now and tell them who you are. Return what you stole from me and I won’t.’

The thieving singer slowly nodded her compliance as she realised he was being serious. She folded her newspaper and said,

‘Follow me.’

Together they walked out, each getting into their cars. Lucille greeted the security guard, the bouncer and the beggar on her way out before getting into her vehicle. Denver followed the woman’s Datsun down a side street next to the pub. She’d clearly dispensed with his BMW already. He kept up with her easily in his Bugatti. But, driving behind her, he realised that, beyond the Main Road, he didn’t know these streets. The further she drove, the more he had no idea where he was or how to get back onto the Main Road.

But she drove slowly, allowing him to tail her. It was just as well, because the streets were an unlit maze to him. Denver felt confident following her car. But when they reached the second stop street, the Datsun pulled away fast, screeching as it swung around the right corner. He followed her, easily keeping the speed around the corner, but when he reached the next street, the Datsun was gone. Melted into the night. She had dodged him and he had no idea how to find her. The streets got darker as he drove on. The potholes deepened, damaging his new tyres. There was no point trying to find his way home now. He would trawl through these streets until he saw her Datsun in a driveway. It was well past 1 A.M. but Denver was relentless. He rolled down his window and scanned every house and every block of flats for her car. There was nothing.
He was on the verge of giving up when he heard a faint sound. He followed the sound until the air was full of music sweeping through the suburban streets. It was a woman’s voice. A voice that resembled the one he’d just heard. It emulated the haunting tune of the pub. He followed the sound and it led him deeper into the unlit area. It grew louder and louder until he reached a house with a light burning in the window. He stopped the Bugatti and got out. He peered through the window but saw no woman in the house. All he could see was a room full of speakers and cables. Every kind of speaker, stacked on top of each other at random. Huge speakers, bass speakers, small, treble, cheap, full-range, mid-range, broken, blown, old, new, cheap and expensive. Hundreds of them. Speaker cabinets upon speaker cabinets were scattered everywhere complete with amps and cabling filling all the space inside the room.

Where was she?

Denver tried to open the front door of the house, but it was locked. He tried to kick it in, but it wouldn’t budge. He picked up a rock from the garden of the house next door and smashed in the window. He climbed through it, cutting his knee on the glass before he fell onto the floor in his clumsy tipsy anger. His fall was so graceless it almost flung his Beretta from his pocket. Inside the house, the music was loud, distractingly loud. Grace Jones’s voice oozed from the biggest speaker he’d ever seen, right in the middle of the room. The sound was crisp and pulsating with reverb.

Sitting on top of the biggest speaker, naked with a cigarette, was the woman he was looking for. But Denver’s vision was blurred from his fall, he’d hit his temple on the window ledge and his eyes only rendered a smudge of red lipstick and a pale
small smudge of flesh. He would not let her entice him. He tried to speak but he
couldn’t be heard above the loud music. *She must be able to see that he’s trying to
speak to her*, he thought. Surely, she can see his lips moving? Denver’s blood heated
in frustration, he loosened his collar and tried to speak louder. But the woman simply
carried on smoking, gazing down at him from the massive speaker in the middle of
the room.

Denver started climbing over the obstacle-course of speakers to get to her,
when another song blasted from a different speaker, over the Grace Jones. A
distortion guitar shattered the harmony and clashed with the melody. Janis Joplin
screamed from another speaker even louder than Grace Jones still singing from the
first speaker. And then things escalated: Tom Waits’ raspy voice competed with a
shrieking Aretha Franklin, on top of the Joplin-Jones’ duet of chaos. Ray Charles
wept in from the right corner as Coltrane’s saxophone pierced through it all from the
left. Above the clashing tunes, Otis Redding began crying from the depths of his
depression just a couple of decibels above the rest of the music only to be met by an
anguished Regina Spektor. Even louder than this, the blues piano riffs of Nina Simone
juxtaposed with what Denver could only imagine was Nat King Cole. He was losing
track. It was all just too loud and he couldn’t think. Pleading for silence, he looked at
her, but the polyrhythmic mess continued steadily with every speaker in the room
playing something different at increasing volumes. Stunned and frustrated, he stood in
a prison of discordant soul-shattering noise. The woman on top of the speaker seemed
still and unaffected.

Denver couldn’t move. The effect on him was paralyzing. He opened his
mouth to reason with her, but he couldn’t hear himself above the noise. She seemed to
be enjoying the layers of music. *FUCK!* A string of curse words spluttered from his
mouth and pulsed in his temples, but his scream was a whisper in the noise. His ears rung in immense pain.

He wanted to take a lighter and set one of the speaker cables on fire. He wanted to watch the flame jumping from one cable to the next, setting every speaker alight until it reached her. He imagined the place burning in successive explosions. He imagined her falling through the door, her calm face becoming desperate as she ran towards him, scorched and crying. He imagined taking one of her cigarettes and lighting it on her flaming hair.

But still she sat calmly watching him, naked and splendid in the sound. Denver scanned the room for a power switch. He noticed a multi-plug outlet not far from where he was standing. He bent down and switched it off, deadening the sound instantly. A heavy ringing post-silence whine sunk into the room. The Beretta in his pocket now burned at this thigh. He climbed over the haphazardly placed speakers, picking out his way to her, stumbling over the cables and knocking speakers out of his way until he reached the biggest speaker. He stood before it, looking up at her. A goddess on her throne.

He reached for his gun. She leaned forward, bending down to him from on top of the speaker. He looked up at her pale chin curving up to her red lips. She took his face in her bony fingers and put her lips to his. Denver melted with his memory of their last encounter. He lifted her off the speaker by her waist and she wrapped her bare thighs around him, dissolving him until they fell asleep in a puddle of sweat between two midrange speakers.
When he awoke, she was perched on the biggest speaker again. Still naked, with a cigarette hanging between her lips and his Beretta .22 in her right hand, pointed straight at him from the top of the biggest speaker in the room.

Staring up the spine of a speaker, Denver’s eyes met with the barrel of his own gun pointed down at him, well angled. He imagined that if she fired, the bullet would pass through the barrel and hit him in the middle of his nose – which would be comical if he wasn’t on the wrong side. What kind of man gets killed by his own weapon? The gunmetal on her pale skin was stark and menacing. Her bony wrist balanced the light mass of the gun with ease. If it hadn’t been a Beretta, her little Somalian-photo-meme-emaciated arm would’ve cracked under the weight. But her hand was steady. Denver rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He wasn’t going to get the BMW back. He wasn’t going to get the estimated R 500 000 in goods and funds she’d stolen from him. Not when she had him on his knees like this. Denver got up and walked to her, placing himself directly in the line of fire with easy steps and a head buzzing with strategy. He even managed a little smile.

‘I know you killed Devesh Desai,’ Denver bluffed.

Lucille Lockhart pulled back the slide of the barrel with her free hand. Denver raised his hands and broadened his grin as he walked towards to the gun. There was a flash of pain in her eyes. She had killed him.

‘As I understand it, Ms Lockhart, you’re in a bit of a bind. You’ve murdered the neighbour of a very meticulous policeman. A policeman who will not give up until he’s found his friend’s killer.’
Lucille did not lower the gun.

‘Allow me to offer my assistance,’ Denver put on his business face, ‘Sergeant Lyle Bekink poses a mutual threat to us in his meddling. He hasn’t figured it out yet. But he will. And that means, for you, a life sentence in jail for homicide. For me, a minimum of ten years for corporate crime. So I’ve set about a solution to minimize the risk factors for both of us.’

Lucille still didn’t lower the gun.

‘You could shoot me, Ms Lockhart, but you’d still be faced with the problem of the scorned policeman you’ve left behind. Now, we can dispose of the sergeant together. And strike up some mutual peace of mind.’

Lucille finally lowered the gun.

‘I only have one condition, very reasonable. Nothing you can’t handle. You return what you’ve stolen to me.’

Lucille put down the gun and put out her cigarette. She slipped her hand beneath the roof of the big speaker on which she sat and peeled off the tape inside it to release a pouch, which she handed to Denver. It was a drawstring pouch the size of teabag made from cheap black velvet.

‘It’s worth about 300-grand. It’s all I have,’ Lucille conceded.

Denver felt the diamond through the material. He put it in his pocket and extended his hand to her,

‘Shall we?’
He helped her down off the speaker, reclaimed his Beretta, and the two of them left Lucille’s house of speakers in Denver’s Bugatti.

‘Where will we find him?’ asked Lucille as she marvelled at the car’s interior.

‘He’s already left the pub. We’ll start from Bellville and move down the N1.’

Lyle was not at his house. Denver didn’t see his Mazda in the driveway in Bellville South. It was past 4 AM and the cop wasn’t at home. They blazed down the highway, clear and well lit, in the Bugatti, looking for the SAPS cars. There was barely another car on the road as Lucille and Denver approached Cape Town’s city bowl.

And then, as the Decadent Dames billboard loomed into view, they saw him, the only car in the distance of the empty lane. Denver sped up and raced towards the Mazda, intimidating the cop with a speed his car could never reach. The Mazda cruised on as Denver closed in on him. Just as he reached the position to overtake the Mazda, Denver swerved into the lane next to him and drove parallel to the cop, maintaining his speed. Denver saw the cop roll down his window and shout something. But before he had the chance to hear it, he swerved the Bugatti into the Mazda, setting it spinning head-first across the lanes into the left barrier. Lucille and Denver drove off, leaving the cop car smoking.

‘You sure he’s dead?’ asked Lucille.

‘Pretty sure.’
Chapter Thirty-Four

Jerome Golding sat smoking behind his three crystal decanters of quality alcohol in his pink, fluffy slippers. He looked like a grandfather. Denver waited for Golding to speak first as he had called the meeting. Denver wanted to gauge whether or not Golding knew that Bekink was dead. But there was no rage, so Denver guessed not. Golding looked at Denver suspiciously, examining him before picking up on their last conversation.

‘I need Sgt Bekink to be protected. You don’t touch a hair on his head. Otherwise we don’t have access to their information. Without Sgt Bekink, we have no future connection to the police. So don’t lay a hand on this man. I pride myself in spotting vulnerability. And Sgt Lyle Bekink is a young man, single, struggling financially – it stands to reason that he will be an asset to us.’

Denver didn’t respond immediately. He processed the words. Golding didn’t know yet, but he was definitely paranoid. His wrinkles were deeper; his lips curled further back than usual. Golding was stressed out. Denver resisted the urge to smile. Golding seemed to be grieving. The old gangster was flailing and Denver knew why. He’d found out about Devesh. It took him long enough, thought Denver, and now the Boss was trying to figure out who killed his favourite employee. Golding suspected him, but he wasn’t sure. That was why he’d called him here. If Golding had been sure, Denver would be dead.
‘I can’t take that risk, Jerome. Bekink may have taken the money, but he hasn’t destroyed the file. We have to terminate the cop. Threaten him. Scare him out his wits. Cut him off before he finds us.’

Denver knew that Golding wouldn’t agree. But the conversation was empty; he had already taken care of it. He couldn’t wait for the old man to recognise the risk. He had too much at stake. Golding inspected his face for a twitch or a blink. Denver kept it wooden.

‘We will not touch Bekink.’ said Golding, ‘Update me on matters your side.’

‘We have an attaché on all the mines. Trans-Ex, NamaquaSands, De Beers and Sublime Stones. And it has come to my knowledge that Sublime Stones has decided to open up a new field. I am alerting you now because it will be opened three hours from now. And you have exactly one day to attack before they block the whole unit off with concrete.’

Golding was satisfied with the information. He let Denver out the door without mentioning Devesh. Denver smiled as he shook Golding’s hand and drove home in his supercar. Golding knew something was amiss, but he couldn’t place his finger on it. For the time being, Denver knew he was safe. Lucille was safe. And more money was on the way.

When Denver got home, Lucille was sitting in his kitchen, gazing at the clean tiles of his floor. She pooled spoonfuls of honey onto her toast as she thought about Devesh. She hadn’t contacted the Boss since his death. And the Boss hadn’t contacted her either. She wasn’t sure she wanted to talk to the Boss anyway. She had lingered in
a state of inertia since Lyle Bekink’s death, feeling like she was underwater. Denver looked happy, clear of mind, as he strolled into the house. She couldn’t relate.

Denver prepared the Russell Hobbs coffee machine. It felt strange having a woman in his house for a reason other than casual sex. She was messing honey all over his white counter in a daze, but he would put up with it because Lucille and himself were comrades in an important sense. They were bound by something terrible and defining, and Denver loved it. He had never felt so close to a woman before. He loved her.

Black filter coffee for him and a creamy cappuccino for his lady. He assumed she drank cappuccino. She looked like she did. Maybe the sugar and caffeine would wake her up. He would bring her out of this daze eventually. Denver still had his corporate reputation intact. He straightened his tie. He was still a decent man. He could handle this. He would take on the guilt for both them. Guilt glided right off him anyway. He had no time for it. He watched Lucille pooling absurd amounts of honey onto her toast, absently expanding the gold puddle on his clean surface. She had moved the toaster out of its designated place and destroyed his kitchen symmetry. He stared at her in adoration.

Denver took out the black drawstring pouch of cheap velvet and held it out to her, over the toast. She took it and opened it. It was the same diamond she’d given him as compensation for what she’d stolen. He’d had the diamond embedded in a gold ring. Denver was a tower of limitless patience. He waited for her answer. Lucille put the ring back inside the teabag pouch and resumed the pooling of her honey onto her toast like she hadn’t seen it. If she didn’t take it now, that would be okay. He
could wait. She had no one else, no place else to go, no one who would understand like he did. They were inevitable. Their silences shared a mutual weight.

‘Marry me and you’ll never go hungry or sober again.’

Lucille stroked the velvet pouch. Somehow she’d missed the pouch more than the diamond. She could leave him, pawn the diamond and start over once she’d figured this out,

‘Okay.’

Denver felt the joy of ultimate compliance he had been waiting for from Lucille for so many years – months, okay maybe just days, but it felt like the fulfilment of years. He had been anxious she’d say no. He had always wanted a partner who shared his mentality. And her quick acceptance of the ring saved him some time. Denver stared at the clock, calculating how long he had left to finish his coffee before making his way to the airport. Lucille licked the spoon clean and dropped her elbow into the honey. *That* was what they needed, thought Denver – a honeymoon, he smiled,

‘You wanna come with me?’

Lucille hadn’t touched her toast. She picked up a cigarette and dropped it on the toast with her trembling fingers,

‘What?’

Denver leaned forward and plunged his tongue into the sweetness of her mouth. She ran her hands through his hair, streaking it with honey and dirtying his tie.

‘Come with me.’
The Sublime Stones Annual Dinner was held in Gauteng and Denver booked himself and Lucille in business class on the next flight into Johannesburg. Cape Town will never be California and Johannesburg will never be New York, but if Denver had to make a comparison to his favourite country in the world, he would draw those two parallels. He wore his best suit. The purpose of the Sublime Stones Annual Dinner was to host an event where all the international branches could be represented in one informal space so they may interact with each other and network with the foreign buyers, both old and new.

Denver had never taken a partner with him before, even through the invite always included a plus one. And now, with Lucille by his side, holding her boarding pass and looking aloof, he wondered if it was a good idea. He had no doubt that she could be sophisticated if she wanted to. But she was unpredictable and he could only hope that she would play along.

During the flight, Denver worked on his Mac and Lucille stared out the window, sipping wine. He wondered if she’d ever been on a plane before. She certainly looked awestruck. He didn’t ask her. She didn’t want to speak. When they arrived, the couple was escorted to a beautiful five star game lodge. Tomorrow, he would take her on a tour of the reserve in all its wonder. They would go and see the animals.

But tonight was the Sublime Stones Annual Dinner. It was to take place in the main hall, draped and decorated with centrepieces and candles, and soft background music. Lucille put on a black lace dress and Brazilian stilettos that looked two sizes too big for her. Denver, in his grey Armani suit, decided not to comment on the shoes.
Apart from the shoes, she looked the part. She was designed for high class, black tie, corporate elitism. She just didn’t know it yet.

The couple entered the Sublime Stones Annual Dinner hall arm-in-arm. Denver was pleased to see that Lucille was wearing the diamond ring. Only, she’d put it on her thumb because it was too loose around her ring finger. He hadn’t sized it too well at the jeweller’s as he’d been in a hurry and hadn’t realized just how bony her fingers were. Nonetheless, it was on her hand, and this made him a happy man.

As they walked through the doors of the Sublime Stones Annual Dinner Hall, Lucille found herself surrounded by company ambassadors, wealthy collectors, financial analysts, CEO’s and auctioneers. The sight of suits and cocktail dresses swishing across the wooden floor made her nauseous. The scent of overpriced cologne in the hall was heavy, lingering after every businessman, chokingly pungent as it wafted by in clouds trying to conceal the stench of their slime. One of Denver’s acquaintances greeted her with a sterile smile and the cold synthetic air of a confident high-income earner,

‘Pleased to meet you, Mrs Downes,’ he said, gently taking her hand.

Lucille felt very displeased at being called Mrs Downes. She wasn’t quite ready for that name, and she didn’t like the look of the man, or the way he took her hand. Did he imagine he had some kind of charm?

‘Oh, I’m sorry – you didn’t register on my radar as a person worth speaking to. Have we met?’

Denver immediately interjected, graciously, with one arm around Lucille, he smiled at the acquaintance,
‘She’s charming, isn’t she? Excuse us.’

He steered Lucille away from the crowd by her hip, poured her a glass of wine and told her that she looked beautiful. Denver swallowed his annoyance at her indiscretion. He liked her enough to put up with it. She was vulnerable; she needed support. Lucille spilt some of her wine on the bar counter. Denver asked the barman to wipe it up so that she wouldn’t stain her sleeve when she rested her arm on the bar. How could he possibly tell her? They were bound by sin. They had to stay together.

*When God made me,* thought Denver, *he took a piece of your soul, dropped it at random in the world and said, ‘Now find your way back’.*

He left her at the open bar and started networking, leaving Lucille to converse with some of Johannesburg’s top investors. He was not going to babysit her. What was the worst she could do?

Lucille lit a cigarette indoors, knowing that she was the only one doing so. With a glass and a cigarette, she was finally in her element. Her civility sparked up and her hostility took a backseat. She was now in the mood for a party. She was ready for some oblivion. She struck up a poised posture and smiled as she straightened the tie of some CEO, while stroking his hair in front of his wife, capitalising on his discomfort to secure the best position to pickpocket the corporate slave while enthralling him in conversation,

‘I once spent the whole day with these bikers I’d never met,’

Lucille started her story, making eye contact with both the CEO and his wife. She had moved on to the wife now, cupping her dangling pearl earring in her hand, smiling at her as if she’d known the woman for years. The woman looked uncomfortable, but
didn’t protest. Her bag had no zip – just one of those magnetised seals. Easy to work with.

‘And the biggest, oldest biker there, said to me: “Have some of my laughing brandy, dear,” So I took the cup and drank it, while they all laughed their heads off at me, especially the oldest one. And I wondered why…’

Lucille paused to sip her wine and drag on her cigarette. The CEO and his wife stared at her, waiting.

‘So I drank and drank, but as I finished the brandy, wouldn’t you believe it, I found his false teeth at the bottom of the cup.’

She CEO’s wife’s eyes went wide.

‘So, I straightened up. I took the false teeth out of the cup and they laughed even harder as I held it in my hand.’

The CEO himself seemed confused and mesmerized, but grateful for the distraction she provided, eager to hear the punch line of her story,

‘Yes, so I take his false teeth out of the cup. I put them in my mouth, I fit them nice and snugly into my gums,’ Lucille smiled, ‘And I smile a great big false teeth smile at them and I say, “Come on you cunts, what kind of pussy do you take me for!”’

The CEO, his wife and the surrounding businessmen who’d listened in roared with laughter. Lucille had them eating out of her hand. She put her arm around the CEO as he howled, tapping her on the back, very good, that’s very good. She took the wallet. The women giggled pleasantly, happy for the break in formality. Lucille
couldn’t get close enough to her bag, but she managed to unclip the platinum bracelet and slip it into her own bag.

A host of suits now surrounded her, waiting to hear more stories. One of the bow-tied hosts brought her another crystal glass of vintage merlot on a sleek circular tray. Lucille liked being on the receiving end of service. She could get used to this. Denver watched her in amazement. Later that night, he secured a lucrative deal with the very CEO Lucille had stolen from.

The moon was full when Denver and Lucille left the dinner. Their second meal stood waiting on their return accompanied by two bottles of French champagne on the queen-sized bed in their lodge. Denver had had it arranged. When you’re planning a romantic night for someone, Denver believed, everything should to be aligned for ardour. The menu was a platter full of aphrodisiacs. The oysters made up the rim of the platter, like a circle of little grey vaginas. Denver fed her by the hand, but she didn’t seem to like the taste. Even as she allowed him to slip them into her mouth, elegantly as she could, it was plain that she wasn’t a fan of the oysters. Oysters contain a substantial amount of zinc, which is good for stamina. But that was just the start. Inside the rim of oysters was the inner rim of hot peppers, enough to set her heart racing and her blood rushing. Denver couldn’t resist it anymore, he had to ask,

‘So, how’d you meet the Boss?’

Lucille took the peppers herself. She seemed more at ease with them than with the oysters.
‘I wanted to meet the man who killed my father.’

‘What? Why?’ Denver hadn’t expected that answer.

She washed the peppers down with champagne. She drank the champagne from the bottle. Denver followed Lucille’s lead and he smiled at this gesture. It was, indeed, one of the best feelings in the world, drinking champagne from the bottle.

‘To shake his hand,’ she answered bluntly.

End of subject. She drained the bottle and popped the second one. Denver sleeked back his dreadlocks. He couldn’t bring himself to say it out loud, but she really was white trash. He didn’t ask about it anymore. He could see she wasn’t ready to reveal the rest. He had time though. He gestured to the third aphrodisiac. In the middle of the platter, there was a painted bowl, full to the brim with a dark grey paste that Lucille had never seen before. Denver smiled at her confusion at what it was.

The rhino horn consists of fibrous tissue, high in calcium and potassium, invigorating to the senses, the use of which lightens the body and incurs a robustness of soul. It is known to expel anxiety and clear the vision, dissolve phlegm, dispel evil spirits and banish melancholia. Much like diamonds, the rarity of the rhino horn hones its worth, and that worth only increases with its slow annihilation.

It had cost Denver a small fortune to obtain but it was the perfect antidote for Lucille. Ground up into a paste with water, Denver held up the mixture in all its bounty and served it to her. Lucille picked up a pepper and dipped it in the paste. Denver followed her initiative. She didn’t ask what it was. He could see she didn’t know what it was. But he liked the way she used it as a dip. They finished the paste in silence, eating every last clump of it.
Lucille’s breathing started to slow and Denver’s vision became saturated with colour. The categorical rooms sectioning out his mind, blurred into one. The truth of the world seeped into the lodge through the wood, through his Armani suit and Denver stumbled and fell head first into a well of revelation.

‘It’s all about the attitude,’ he declared,

‘I’d rather go out at a million then get rejected at twenty thousand. That’s how you deal with rich people, you know? You see what’s in front of you and you make a price. That’s how I got where I did.’

Lucille was silent. The world danced around her. She felt like singing. But she sat absolutely still. She could tell that Denver was about to have some great moment of realisation. But what was it exactly? What was behind this guy? So far, he’d left her cold. Cold to the point where she didn’t want to dance with the world anymore. He looked so amiable it was unnerving, even to Lucille. This man didn’t look like he could kill anyone. Maybe that was his gift. Denver continued,

‘When you’re three years old, you ask why? When you’re thirty, you ask when? Same shit, just a different question. When you’re three, you say it’s my toy. When you’re thirty, you say it’s my money. Same shit, different currency. The more things change the more they stay the same.’

Lucille was now distracted by the leopard print on the curtains of the lodge. The intricacy of the patterns reminded her of that old carpet on the floor of her father’s house. The Ickyness was returning. Denver didn’t notice as he let all grips on him slip. His moment of truth blossomed in full glory now,
‘You think you’re hustling in this world, but you’re just a rat on a wheel. Running on that treadmill, moving no ground, mindlessly staying on the same spot. It’s all about marketing at the end of the day. They say, you need Jesus. I say, Jesus needs me.’
Chapter Thirty-Five

Denver Downes stared at the dry green plains ahead with the sun in his eyes. His shirt stuck to his armpits, mosquitos buzzed in his ears and there was sand on his seat. He felt dirty and he could feel the grains under the linen of his pants, which was becoming more scratchy and starchy under his arse with every bump over which they rode. He really was not a nature person. Far in the distance, he saw three still yellow bumps above the ground. One of them twitched. He was about to point them out to Lucille when the game-ranger beat him to the chase,

‘And there, to the far right, we have two females and a male, resting after their feed. Let’s go and get a closer look.’

Denver was exited, although he didn’t express it. He pressed his toes into the bottoms of his shoes. He should probably have worn sneakers for this. But he only ever wore sneakers when he went to the gym and he’d forgotten to pack them in. They were getting closer. The bumps were getting bigger and developing detail and shading. He watched the dry grassy blur swishing by the side of the car and felt his muscles tensing up. Suddenly, Denver felt invincible. He forgot about the presence of Lucille and the game-ranger, and gazed ahead, burning to get closer, as close as they possibly could.

The game-ranger offered him binoculars, but Denver refused them. He wanted to see it all in real proximity. As they drew closer to the lifeless beasts lying before them in the sun, Denver felt like a new man. He realised that his power exceeded his confines. Denver Downes was unleashed. He was better than his job, better than his
schemes, better than Sublime Stones, better than his suit, better than his income, better than Jerome Golding, better even than that lovely piece of white trash sitting next to him. Denver Downes had – for the first time in his life – transcended the human construct. More importantly, Denver Downes actually recognised that there was a human construct. He was ready to break out of the mould.

The alpha male yawned, flashing his canines and shaking his deep yellow mane before throwing himself back down, collapsing onto the grass, with his mane covering his closed eyes.

‘And there you go, this is as close as we can get by car.’

Neither Denver nor Lucille responded to the game-ranger immediately. A mosquito rested on Denver’s lower neck muscle just below his collar. She wandered around for a while on his neck, looking for the area with the most accessible blood vessels. Then she pierced her sheath into his skin and drew blood. Denver didn’t flinch. He didn’t even notice the bite. He stared at the alpha male and then looked at the game-ranger.

‘Sure we can’t get any closer?’ said Denver.

‘I’m afraid if I drove any closer, the lions will move away. The sound of the engine would startle them.’

‘And if I were to take a few steps out of the car?’

‘That is not something I’d usually recommend, but perhaps – ’

‘Just a few steps, I’ll stay close.’

Denver pulled on the car handle slowly, staring at the beast. He glanced back at the game-ranger.
‘I must urge you not to move fast and to stay near the car.’

That was all the affirmation Denver needed. He stepped out of the car and started walking on the dry green plain toward the lions. Just two steps. He glanced back again. The game-ranger nodded at him. He was doing fine. He was safe. He could go a little further.

Lucille watched the alpha male get up slowly from his recline as he saw Denver walking towards it. Lucille looked at Denver’s dreadlocks and then looked at the lion’s mane, and thought to herself,

*I want a mane of big fluffy curls to express my lion’s heart. Tragically, I was born with the wrong kind of hair.*

Denver edged another tiny step towards the lion and the beast rose from his recline. Denver marvelled at the creature. It was him confronting the lion. *Well,* thought Denver, *that’s just my everyday life.* Transfixed, Denver took the next step. His eyes quickly darted back to the game-ranger, who nodded again. Yes, he was fine.

As Denver took his fourth step away from the car, the game-ranger started up the car with his foot on the pedal; he mechanically closed all the windows and locked the doors as he sped away, leaving Denver to the lions.

The Boss, thought Lucille looking back at Denver, the Boss wanted him dead. She looked at the game-ranger, the hard lack of empathy on his face as he drove. A man of duty. A man who follows instruction. The game-ranger was one of his too.

Up until this point, Denver had been in a bit of a daydream. Up until he’d heard the car pull away. When Denver saw the car drive away, his instincts told him
to chase after the car. They would stop. They would stop for him – surely. But, as he
stared into the pair of glowing amber eyes and the dark, thick, luxurious mane which
ran onto the beast’s body along his abdomen, only meters away, Denver knew that
running was not such a good idea.

He looked straight into the big round pupils – the darkening shades above
them resembled a human scowl, but the wide black triangle of its wet nose composed
a more menacing face. The wet nose was twitching, sniffing him at a distance,
grimacing. Do not run. Do not run. Do not run. Denver held his ground and breathed
steadily.

Holding eye contact, Denver slowly moved his hand to the .22 Beretta in his
pocket. Denver was a lousy shot and he knew it now. He knew his chances were slim.
He had missed a clear shot before. The Beretta .22 versus the Lion. He couldn’t have
chosen a more pathetic gun for the situation he found himself in. But the .22 was all
he had.

The lion stood facing him about thirty meters away and Denver’s hand was
unsteady at his side. His aim was shoddy and his gun did not have much power. He
would have to play this safe. He would have to wait for the animal to come closer. He
drew the gun from his pocket, keeping it at his side, making no rapid movements.

The furry ears swivelled as the beast walked. The approach was painfully
slow. Denver watched the shifting bulges of muscle and bone in the animal’s back
and shoulders as it edged closer and closer. He waited for the right distance, gun in
hand. He would have to be efficient. When the lion had halved the space between
them, Denver lifted the gun, keeping his eyes fixed, readying himself. How many .22
bullets would it take to kill a lion? A lot. Probably all he had. Maybe more.
As Denver lifted his hand, the lion roared a castle of sound that could be heard eight kilometres away, raising a cloud of dust in its wake between himself and Denver, who dropped the gun in his shock. The canines, more than five centimetres long, looked like glistening white scissor blades.

Shuddering, Denver bent down slowly, holding all his weight in his thighs, and picked up the gun, still keeping his eyes on the lion, but the movement was too sudden. Denver over-balanced and the creature pounced, taller than Denver in full jump. All Denver could see as he picked up the gun, was the golden hair of the animal’s bearded stomach soaring towards him, bounding forward, front claws ready to grasp his shoulders, face tilted to attack his throat. Denver pointed the gun upwards and shot blindly, riddling the abdomen in full flight, with constant shots – two in the stomach and two in the neck, two through the mane, one in the thigh.

As the lion fell onto him, Denver saw the tassel at the tip of his tail hit the ground. But the animal wasn’t dead. With half his body underneath the lion, Denver felt it stir, trying to lift itself up. Denver’s vision was blurred from the impact. He aimed the bullet up to where he thought the head was and shot at close range until the magazine was empty.

The internal damage did the job in the end. The bullets tumbled through the lion’s vital organs as none of them had enough power to escape the body. There were no exit wounds. The shots wreaked havoc inside the brain of the beast and killed him before he could kill Denver.

Minutes later, Denver was retrieved by the game reserve owner. Denver was in shock. Refusing the sweet tea offered by the game reserve owner, he staggered out of the reserve in his rented car and headed to the airport shaking with his hand on the
gear lever, completely covered in sweat. His shirt was ripped and stained with grass and sand. There were cuts all over his body from the fall. The bruises had not set in yet. He would have to change his clothes before he boarded the plane. Denver would have to flee the country. Jerome Golding had finally figured it out.

Two hours later, in a new shirt, Denver stood at the door of the Platinum Lounge in OR Tambo Airport. He had cleaned his shoes and his pants in the bathroom, washed his face and his upper body too before putting on a clean shirt, showered himself in cologne and straightened out his expression. But Denver still felt a mess. He was greeted by the Platinum Lounge receptionist,

‘Flying more than usual these days, Mr Downes?’

The lounge receptionist smiled at Denver. She always greeted him by name due to his frequent flying. Her makeup was subtly blended into her skin, highlighting her eyes. Her eyebrows were arched at an unnatural angle. Despite all the well-mannered, flirtatious exchanges they’d had, Denver hardly noticed her,

‘Yes.’

He was in no mood for conversation and so his usual routine with the female airport hostess was replaced with abruptness. He showed her his ticket and walked into the opulent Platinum Lounge of OR Tambo Airport without saying anything more.

‘See you next week, Mr Downes. Have a safe flight.’

As Denver walked away, the phone at the lounge reception starting ringing and the receptionist picked it up. She didn’t respond to the person on the other end of the line until Denver was completely out of earshot,
'Mr Golding, yes sir… Yes, sir, Mr Downes has just checked in… Yes… According to his ticket, he will be heading to Heathrow in the next two hours… It’s my pleasure Mr Golding. Goodbye.’

Denver Downes stood before the Platinum Lounge’s collection of expensive alcohol on offer as refreshments. *Yes please, a drink. God yes, fucking, please.* He poured himself a triple whiskey. And standing there, with the glass in his hand, Denver knew he was going to die.

He remembered the first time he met Jerome Golding. It had been in this very lounge when the kingpin had walked up to him, wearing a silver suit and a matching silver chain. The big man had sat down beside him with two glasses of cognac, Remy Martin in one hand and Van Ryn in the other. He had picked them up and put them to his lips one at a time, trying to decide which was the better blend. Then he had turned to Denver, placing both glasses back on the table, saying,

‘I am looking to strategically improve your processes, Mr Downes.’

Back then, the first thing Denver noticed was how the man drank his cognac. He heated it up in the palm of his hand before putting it to his lips. A keen discerner of quality. It was that very fine detail that had struck Denver and won his interest. Denver remembered staring at his big, jewelled hand, wondering how this man knew his name and exactly what he did. Whatever it was, Denver knew, in that instant, that he wanted to be a part of it.

Then, like now, Denver was drinking scotch on ice in a tumbler, which he only sipped after his ice-blocks started floating. Patient. A long-term investor.
The big, silver-suited man had passed Denver a genuine Cuban Cohiba and left him with his card. A beautifully embossed card that contained no information other than the name, Jerome Golding, and a contact number. Denver had thought nothing of it until he’d gotten home that night and eventually smoked the cigar. He had smoked about half of it when he noticed a clot in the tobacco. He continued puffing and puffing and ashing and ashing, trying to smoke through the clot to get back to the good tobacco. He dragged hard on the cigar until eventually, he ashed a diamond into the ashtray. Denver sifted through the ash, picked it up from the ashtray and stared at it, awestruck, with the diamond in his hand as he finished the cigar. He called Jerome Golding the next day to start their business venture together.

That was how Denver met the Boss. That was ten years ago. And in those ten years, Denver had come to know exactly how Jerome Golding treated his employees. Those who were loyal were rewarded in their choice of currency – drugs, money, property, cars, gems – to the point of extreme excess. But those who were disloyal… Denver started sweating at the thought. He took his cologne out of his pocket and splashed it on his neck to cool down.

In Denver’s suit pocket was a handkerchief enclosing six diamonds – his cut of the Sublime Stones heist. He would arrive in London and immediately sell them to Gideon, a black-market master diamond cutter in Camden Town. Gideon would make quick work of the diamonds. Denver would take the money and start up anew somewhere in the UK, outside the grip of Jerome Golding. There were enough companies that would hire him. He had a dazzling résumé and an outstanding portfolio. It had been a mistake to get involved with Golding in the first place.
Denver took the handkerchief out of his pocket, clutching the diamonds inside it as he downed his scotch. Holding the handkerchief tight in his palm, he left the Platinum Lounge. Denver bypassed the queue with his Platinum card as he approached customs. As he walked towards the Priority Boarding checkpoint, he started coughing loudly and sneezing into his handkerchief, rubbing his eyes red, making sure he looked contaminated with contagious influenza. He put his bag through the routine check, showed his passport and allowed himself to be searched, all the while sneezing balls of mucus into his handkerchief. The official frisked him as quickly as he could and let Denver go without touching his dirty handkerchief. It was a trick he’d learnt from Golding. Everybody’s scared of a sick man.

Once he’d gotten through the metal detectors – which cannot detect diamonds – Denver put the handkerchief back in his pocket and stopped coughing and sneezing. He would repeat the procedure in Heathrow. Denver travelled first class to London, as did the Boss on the very next flight.
PART 6

THE BOSS

Chapter Thirty-Six

A few provinces away, the Boss sat in his office drinking cognac with his hand on his crystal decanter, screaming at Bevan. Chaos was rife in the yard. The Alsatians were tearing each other apart. The junkies were beating each other to a pulp. Alcohol was spilling, unaccounted for. Drugs were consumed unpaid for. The establishment had become completely out of control since the Boss had become completely out of control.

‘I said throw him to the lions!’

‘We did, Boss, but he shot them. Had a gun on him, Boss. We didn’t know, Boss.’

The Boss got up from his chair and opened his glass cabinet of guns, running his fingers over the rows of weapons, deciding on which one was best suited for what he needed to do. Eagle. Hollow-point bullets.

‘Tell me again, Bevan, what you saw when Mr Downes was last here.’

‘Boss, I was gonna give him the Bugatti keys when I saw it, Boss. He was holding your phone, Boss.’

The Boss heaved, putting his Eagle next to the crystal decanter.
'And what, Bevan, was he doing with my phone?'

'I don’t know, Boss.'

The Boss lifted another three guns from his cabinet and locked it up again, eyes goring into a whimpering Bevan.

'And you didn’t – say – a – fucking – thing, Bevan, to me, did you?'

'No Boss, but Boss I didn’t –'

The Boss ripped his thick chain off his neck and flung it into Bevan’s ribs with all his mass behind it. Bevan cowered and edged back. Again the Boss whipped the chain into his ribs as one of the Alsatians howled in his office. The Boss tossed the chain to the floor and left Bevan to the dog.

Then he loaded his Desert Eagle with hollow-point bullets and packed in his silencer. Hollow-point bullets work a bit differently to normal bullets. The difference is rather brilliant: Normal round-nose bullets have the traditional copper full metal jacket which leaves an exit wound about the same size as the entry wound. But the hollow-point bullet has a concave depression cut into the copper tip. This allows the lead underneath the copper to split into fragments upon impact, causing compounded damage. The concave tip expands to almost three times its original size, in a mushrooming lead flower that explodes the flesh upon exiting it.

The corporate rogue had gone ahead and killed Devesh. Possibly Bekink too. But definitely Devesh. The grief that had stained the Boss’s face before was gone now. It its stead, was a familiar hard edge that sent the Boss’s junkies and Alsatians running from him as he left his office. As he entered the yard, they swarmed towards a Harley Davidson parked in the yard and got to work grinding out the engine of the
motorbike and packing it full of diamonds. The Boss watched them carefully as they welded it closed again. The Boss had the bike shipped to Velesta. He arranged to have it coincide with the time of his arrival, compensating for his detour. He would have to travel via London.

Jerome Golding knew exactly where his little commercial pawn was headed. He got off at Camden Town tube station and pulled his sleeves over his hands. London shrunk Golding into a little ball of a man in a black coat with a cigarette. The ground was littered with bottles and wrappers and cigarette butts like a tapestry of waste on the pavement. The ubiquitous bodies moved at double the pace of Cape Town’s residents and triple the pace of Bellville’s residents. The shops and buildings were bright and cramped, each structure trying to elbow its way over the next.

Jerome breathed in the icy air; it chilled his old bones and aggravated his gout. He bought a takeaway coffee on Buck Street and walked into Camden Market. He walked as fast as his aching feet could carry his heavy body through the maze of stalls. He walked by walls plastered in old pictures of Marilyn Monroe. He walked underneath a dozen black hats dangling from the ceiling on transparent strings, giving the impression that the customers wore hats that hovered a few centimetres above their heads. He walked past rows upon rows of vintage clothing rails and shelves and shelves of Doctor Martin shoes. He didn’t stop to look at anything. Jerome’s hand was in his coat pocket on his Desert Eagle and his eyes were searching for one thing only in this consumerist mess of retro junk.

A Punk sporting a ruler-long bright blue Mohawk bumped into his shoulder. Jerome scowled at the delinquent kid and then returned his attention to the search. He
rounded the corner and saw a flash of a dreadlock disappearing into an alleyway. Jerome picked up his pace and followed the swishing trail of dreadlocks deeper into the passage. The tip of the last dreadlock faded into another side alleyway of piercers, tattoo-artists, tongue-splitters, fire-dancers and women hanging from hooks, Jerome paused – women hanging from hooks by their skin and nipples. Focus. As he got nearer, he saw that the dreadlock wasn’t Denver’s. It was a Goth – a white man with dreadlocks flowing down past his bum. The Goth had earlobe holes so big Jerome could stick three fingers through them. Just another relic of a past counter-culture.

Jerome needed to sit down. He sat down on a bench next a man smoking Hookah from a watermelon, and surveyed the Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Mexican, Cuban, American, Turkish and Indian food stores. Jerome caught his breath as he tried to decide which country to have for lunch. Nothing looked appealing. The anaemic British sun shone weakly on his bald head. Jerome couldn’t for the life of him, remember where in this maze, Gideon’s store was. Camden Market seemed to have tripled in size since his last visit. But the master diamond cutter had to be here somewhere. And if he found Gideon, he would find Denver. One thing about the commercial pawn – he was predictably systematic.

Jerome could hear music emanating from Proud Camden. Nowadays, all the songs he heard sounded like parodies. He stared at the source of the shitty sound. There, standing in a veranda of fairy lights, between a couple of kids who looked like John Lennon’s protégés, was a sex kitten wrapped in a corset with cleavage you could drown in. Bunny ears on her sleek blonde locks, stiletto boots on her feet – and she was walking towards Jerome. The bunny-eared sex kitten had seen him looking at her. She slipped herself onto his lap and started stroking his shiny scalp and whispering in his ear with velvety tones, demanding that he come and see her perform.
It was a Monday afternoon – _does anyone do a full week’s work in this city?_ Her bum was covered in silk, rubbing against Jerome’s crotch. _Well then, what’s a man to do?_ He adjusted the position of his gun so that she could rub herself up against him more comfortably. Then the sex bunny took his hand and led him into Proud Camden, into a burlesque-themed room with a jukebox and a stripper pole where she sang a song that sounded to Jerome like another parody. She sang with a fake microphone in her hand, a stripper pole between her bum cheeks and a huge blow-up banana under her arm. Jerome guessed that this was not the main stage.

With his anger and his focus now cracked, Jerome sat back and watched her perform as he lit a cigarette, disregarding London’s shitty smoking laws. When she was done, Jerome had firmly decided that she was terrible. She would, however, make a great addition to his strip club. He would give her the job, but she was living in the first world, on the Dole Scheme, as a single mother who only works on Thursdays and Fridays as a personal assistant. Yes, _only Thursdays and Fridays_, she confirmed. The welfare state assists in the support of her child, so she doesn’t have to work any other day. _No_, thought Jerome, _this girl had it too good._ Jerome couldn’t buy her. It was a shame.

‘Do you have a light?’ she asked, back on Jerome’s lap now.

‘Of course, dear,’ said Jerome, looking into the shallow blue portals between her rows of thick mascara, lighting her smoke, ‘Do you know where I might find Gideon?’

The sex bunny flipped back one of her huge deviant bunny ears, pointed down yet another alleyway and told Jerome to take two rights.
Jerome followed her directions down a path of neon-dappled couches and psychedelic prints, lit up by lava lamps. He walked past a Buddha swimming between swarms of fish and moons under a painted volcano exploding into a landscape of planets. The air smelt of vanilla tobacco. Jerome found the place sickening. There was too much bass. He was claustrophobic. He quickly hustled his way through the Tai-Dai drapery hastening his pace despite his gout.

As he took the second right, he saw Denver’s dreadlocks flowing down his grey Armani suit. He was standing in front of Gideon’s store, speaking to him. Jerome put an arm around Denver’s neck and pierced his jugular with his Desert Eagle. Denver froze on the spot. Gideon smiled at the appearance of Jerome.

‘Ello Boss.’

He scratched his beard and gestured for Jerome to come inside, with Denver – who was still at gunpoint. Gideon’s jewellery shop looked ordinary inside, exactly the way Jerome remembered it.

‘Would you like some tea, Boss?’ asked Gideon, putting on the kettle.

Gideon was an ex-con, currently on parole for assault. The Brit had never set foot outside the UK. He’d become a drug-runner for the mob at sixteen, moved on to diamonds at eighteen and he’d been honing his technique ever since. Now, Gideon was divorced with two kids, over eight counts of assault and a coke problem. All in all, Gideon had been in and out of prison for over seven years of his life. Jerome was one of the few who still worked with him.

‘Absolutely,’ said Jerome.
Gideon locked the store door and turned the sign to Closed. Then he scratched in a jar of Earl Grey teabags as he lit a Winston cigarette. Jerome’s mouth moved to Denver’s ear just next to the Desert Eagle,

‘Give me the gems, Mr Downes,’ he whispered.

Trembling, Denver took the handkerchief from his pocket and passed it to Jerome who looked at it, disgusted,

‘Gideon!’

‘Yeah, Boss.’

‘Gideon sort this out, will you?’

He handed Gideon the handkerchief of diamonds and mucous. Gideon took them to the sink immediately and cleaned the rocks.

‘Over there, Boss, in that corner, if you don’t mind,’ said Gideon, pointing to the right corner of his store, away from all his equipment.

Jerome moved Denver to the corner furthest away from all of Gideon’s equipment and searched his Armani pockets where he found the .22 Beretta. Jerome hissed with laughter. Denver said nothing. He didn’t dare move. Jerome’s hiss slowly grew into a roar of rumbling mirth at the Beretta .22,

‘Now how, Mr Downes, can I not take you for a poes?’

He threw the Beretta to the ground,

‘You shoot a fat guy with a Beretta .22, Mr Downes, you don’t kill him. You just piss him off.’
Jerome aimed his own, massive .45 at Denver. Gideon shut all his curtains and put Jerome’s tea on the counter of his shop. Jerome aimed the gun high on Denver’s body, about an inch from his chest, deliberately avoiding the heart. Then he took a step closer to Denver, bringing the gun nearer for a closer-range shot. He pulled the trigger and the hollow-point bullet broke through the skin, the tissue and the bone, ensuring multiple pulmonary lacerations as the lead underneath the copper expanded, disabling his lungs and forcing Denver to choke on blood while attempting to breathe. Denver’s back was a mess of an exit wound, a huge crater that squirted blood all over Gideon’s wallpaper.

Jerome knew that Denver didn’t have long to live now. But he was not about to stop. He redirected his aim to the ball of Denver’s shoulder. The impact of the next hollow-point bullet, aimed a left upward angle, dislodged the ball of his shoulder, leaving it dangling at an odd and unnatural distance from the collarbone, for just a second before it dropped clean off, exposing the severed bone, splintered with pieces of lead stuck in it like little black spikes.

The third hollow-point bullet broke through Denver’s sternum and penetrated his heart, allowing copious gushes of rapidly moving blood to escape the heart only to be trapped in the pericardium, which in turn caused a building of pressure between the pericardium and the heart, compressing the pumping and disallowing blood flow to Denver’s organs.

Jerome’s fourth hollow-point bullet was reserved for the face. He adjusted his footing to compensate for Denver’s currently horizontal position. The bullet soared almost directly into the adjacent wall, simply touching the surface of Denver’s smooth, exfoliated face, but with enough velocity to rupture the globe of his left eye,
take off his left ear and blow through his temple, ripping off a piece of his head while sending six dreadlocks flying, still attached to the scalp, against Gideon’s wall. Multiple cerebral contusions.

Denver was dead. But Jerome wasn’t finished. The fifth hollow-point bullet was intended for Denver’s perfectly masculine jawline. Jerome angled it slightly away from his face, at close enough range to ensure airway obstruction, even though his lungs no longer worked.

The remaining two gunshots were randomly fired bullets for the sole purpose of a finishing flair on Denver’s gym-toned body. Gideon’s shop was a mess of organs. The master diamond cutter ex-con sipped his tea,

‘Hollow-point huh? Man musta really had you vexed.’

Jerome and Gideon stood staring at Denver’s scattered dreadlocks soaking in red and brown. Jerome picked up his tea off the shop counter. Gideon picked up his phone and dialled Lennie to dispose of the body. Then the two pairs of hands exchanged parcels, six clean diamonds for Jerome and a roll of 3000 pounds for Gideon’s hospitality. The two men put on their coats and gloves, left the diamond-cutter’s shop together and headed towards Camden High Street for a drink. Jerome lit a Rothamn’s Blue. Gideon lit a Winston. They passed a Subway and walked into The World’s End on the intersection of Camden Town and Kentish Town. They climbed up a spiralling staircase into the giant pub with turquoise paintings all over the walls. Jerome felt like he was in an aquarium. Again the music sounded like parodies of decent music.
It had been a while since Jerome shared a drink with Gideon. On his last visit to the UK, Gideon had been in Her Majesty’s Prison. A huge ugly concrete building where mothers, girlfriends, wives and kids stood in a noisy queue, filling out forms. Jerome had to leave all his possessions in a locker and wait his turn to endure the thoroughly invasive body search, take off his coat and boots before seeing Gideon who looked pretty much the same back then.

Her Majesty’s Prison was nothing like South African’s prisons and Gideon had fared quite well. Not much jail violence. Jerome had expected him to be in worse shape. But he hadn’t even been raped. As it happened, Her Majesty’s Prison was relatively good to its convicts, explained Gideon,

‘Excellent medical and recreational facilities,’ he said, almost remembering it with a kind of fondness, ‘Worst thing about it is the boredom and the withdrawal.’

Prison was like rehab for Gideon and rehab is for quitters. Gideon’s girlfriend had gotten him in prison – called the police when he swung a curtain rail at her on one of his coke binges.

‘Stupid bird. Fucking slag she was, would’ve fucked her up good and proper if I knew where she was now.’

Jerome watched him, amused. He had always been fond of Gideon.

‘Fucking pathetic woman,’ he spat, dropping the “t” in pathetic.

Jerome shared his sentiment. It must have been a massive blow to his pride that Gideon lost control of his woman. He had felt quite certain that Gideon had loved that bit of cockney trash at the time.

‘Always nice to have you in London.’ Gideon smiled.
‘Always a pleasure to be here.’

They shook hands and Jerome caught the tube from Camden station to Heathrow Airport. He had another plane to catch.
Eight hours later in the little Macedonian town of Velesta, the Eastern European mobster stepped out of his chauffeured Lykan, smoking an electronic cigarette. The car looked like it could glide cruise control to the moon. Saudi Arabia’s very first supercar had demonic contortions and an avant-garde presence that suited its owner.

The thickset Albanian who got out of the Lykan made Jerome Golding shudder. This man had no entourage in sight, because his entourage was everywhere. His entourage was everyone. The Albanian sucked on the electronic cigarette between his fingers like a metal cigar. He wore a single platinum chain and gripped Jerome’s hand hard, digging his rings into Jerome’s skin as he welcomed him inside his empire.

‘Golding, I’ve been expecting your visit.’

His voice was firm, baritone, educated and professional. The mobster spoke with great diction in a rounded, refined accent that could place him anywhere in the world. Drakan Bojkut was supreme. The Albanian trafficking kingpin had Jerome crawling between the creases on his fingerprint. Drakan’s sway dwarfed him and Jerome was reduced to a tower of deference.

‘Good to see you, Boss’ said Jerome.

Drakan led Jerome into a nightclub swarming with Moldovan women. Golding walked beside him as they walked passed the pairs of toned thighs wrapped around floor-to-ceiling poles, into a private room. Two naked girls drew closed the velvet curtains. The two naked girls looked hot, supple and lifeless, but nowhere near the
standard of the other strippers in the club. Bojku and Golding sat down at a huge table, prepared for them with a red silk cloth on top of which the feast was set. Golding couldn’t keep the joy from seeping into his wooden face. The women were artfully draped over the table, moulded into carefully composed positions. Golding smiled a very rare smile. In their statuesque poses, they were delicately balanced at provocative angles, each limb intertwined at exact slants to maximize visual effect. A buffet.

The smell was delightful. Golding imagined the women had been drenched in rose petal blood and lotus blossom. They were oiled to a pleasant glean, marinated in rare perfume, simmering in the flavour. Drakan Bojku was a man of flair. They really did things right in this part of the world.

The two women who’d drawn the curtains paled in comparison to the women on the table. They were there to serve the servants. Their inferior looks were the only thing that marred the spectacle. The shorter girl, with a missing nipple, picked up a pot of warm cognac and brought it to the table. She filled both Bojku and Golding’s glasses and then went around the table, inviting each woman to dip her nipples in the liquid. One by one, they leaned forward, allowing the tips of their breasts to touch the hot brim of brandy, let it soak and then lifted their breasts back out of the pot, each one giving a drawn out sigh at the heat.

‘I know it’s a favourite of yours, the cognac,’ said Bojku, his square head tilted at Golding.

Golding nodded, watching the women, eyes sliding down the curves as he chose his stock,

‘I thank you.’
After flavouring each of the girls’ nipples, the shorter girl with the missing nipple, picked up another pot. Cognac of a different vintage, heated at a slightly higher temperature. With this pot, she cupped the liquid in her hands and rubbed it along the women’s thighs, one by one, pouring the warm cognac onto their firm legs, allowing it to soak in decently. She worked patiently, ensuring their thighs were deep-soaked enough to last the evening. Bokju watched her with a critical eye. Golding stared on in grateful anticipation.

Next, she brought out a bowl of peach slices smeared in honey. The second girl helped her this time. Golding noticed that the second, average-looking naked girl was missing her clitoris. A client must have ripped it off in anger or appreciation. In its place was a roughly stitched-up cut that snaked down in between her labia. She held the second bowl of peach slices.

Golding was pleased the Bojku only offered him his best. His crème de la crème, leaving the damaged goods to lesser clients. Bojku always delivered quality, and this was why Golding respected him. It wasn’t just the fear of God that he felt in Bojku’s presence.

The two lifeless helpers with missing pieces of anatomy walked around the table, parting the thighs of each exquisite woman and carefully placing a sliver of honeyed peach in between each pair of legs. They worked slowly under Bojku’s glare. Golding’s body was charged with warm expectation. Bojku waited, flashing glances at his phone as if the girls were taking too long. His thickset body was fidgety, implying that the spectacle was the most pedestrian part of his day.

The last part of the ceremony involved a confetti of cinnamon being carefully sprinkled over the table of women. Golding was suitably impressed at the chosen
ingredients, each one so complementary to the cognac palate. Bojku had always worked with such fine panache. Drakan Bojku slammed the table twice and yelled something in a language Golding didn’t understand and the two girls quickly finished up.

The preparation was complete. The girl without a nipple handed Golding a cigar and the girl minus a clitoris lit it for him. Golding couldn’t help staring at the snaking stitch leading into her vagina. There was an appeal to it. Bojku sucked on his electronically filtered vapour and then rose from his seat, extending a hand to the table,

‘Bon Appétit. I’ll return in an hour.’

While Jerome Golding inspected his stock, the Harley Davidson had made its way by ship and truck through to Velesta. Drakan Bojku returned to his sex empire following by his two helpers, still naked and missing pieces, holding more pots of warmed, vintage cognac. The girls refilled the glasses. And Bojku resumed his seat beside Jerome.

‘To your liking, Golding?’

‘Yes, Boss.’

Jerome pointed out seventeen of the women that he wanted. Bojku nodded, yes, all excellent choices. Then, he got up and shouted so suddenly, Jerome jolted in his seat. The names rolled off his tongue,

‘Emma, Angeles, Natalie, Natalia, Valeria, Yuliana, Nastya, Linsey, Marinela, Anna, Ella, Tanya, Anjali, Cristina, Saanvi, Maria, Sofia, get up and get dressed!’
Immediately, seventeen women rose and left the room, followed by the two lesser-grade women to assist. Jerome was impressed at the efficiency of it all. He hoped he could match it. Where was the Harley? It should be arriving any time now. Jerome felt himself sweating in his seat. Just then, there was a knock on the door of the private room. Bojku shouted in Albanian with that sudden volume that made Jerome jump. There came a mumbled response from outside and he eventually got up to open the door. There was a delivery for Mr Bojku. Jerome heaved a sigh of relief.

The Harley Davidson was rolled into the club by a host of women, each one more beautiful than the previous. Bojku threw a toolbox their way and the women got to work taking the bike apart to excavate the diamonds in the engine. Jerome and Drakan Bojku waited and watched them finish. Jerome was amazed at their proficiency, charmed by the way these girls worked, half naked with power tools, thinking how much of a step-up this was from his junkies. Bojku got up and spat on one of them, yelling again and kicking the slowest one between her buttocks. Jerome guessed he thought they weren’t working fast enough. But really, he didn’t mind waiting.

The collected diamonds were passed to Bojku in a bag. The supreme kingpin looked vaguely satisfied. But Jerome had something more up his sleeve. This was one contact he needed to keep more than vaguely satisfied. From his pocket, he took out seven more, smaller diamonds – the ones procured from Denver and then one more, which he handed over to Bojku in addition to the gems from the bike. From his breast pocket, Jerome had taken out his biggest diamond, the prized Angolan Blue, the size of a dove’s egg.
Drakan Bojku inspected the diamonds for spots, cracks, flaws and size just as Jerome had inspected the girls for nipple and genital damage. The transaction took place with absolutely no involvement of cold cash. The men traded in their home currencies alone. Women and gems. Bojku was so impressed with the Angolan Blue and the sheer generosity of Jerome’s gesture, that he added ten more top grade women to Jerome’s stock, as a measure of reciprocated civility.

Jerome Golding flew back to Cape Town with his merchandise of twenty-seven exquisite and compliant females. None of them had luggage to check in. And Bojku kindly arranged for all of their flights. Back at Cape Town International, Jerome was picked up by three black BMW M3’s driving in convoy to take himself and the women to the *Decadent Dames* Strip Club. As Jerome entered his establishment, he noticed that the billboard of Jade was still up and radiant, advertising his strip club. Of course, it paled in comparison to Bojku’s strip club, but this would set it apart from the other clubs in Cape Town. Jerome smiled, Jade looked lovely up there. She had the perfect face for his enterprise. The model had found her calling.

Jerome left Bevan in charge of the *Decadent Dames* Gentlemen’s Club. He was finally ready to retire and profit off his gigantic self-amassed pension. His career had spanned the fields of property, diamonds, vehicles, drug peddling and sex trading. He was a man at the height of his success and this was how Jerome knew it was time to stop and enjoy the fruits. After all, he was getting old.
Chapter Thirty-Eight

Since Nurse Bridgette had switched the samples at the morgue, Devesh was officially written off as dead. There were no dental records as the teeth were crushed underneath the metal of the Pontiac. But the DNA had been confirmed, thanks to Bridgette Marais – who had taken Devesh’s payment and opened a trust fund for her children.

Of course, nobody ever looked for Junaid Jafda. After Devesh had left his cousin under his Pontiac, wearing his clothing and his shoes, covered in his tattoos with his face under the wheel, the world had become a marginally better place. And now, after hiding out in Nelspruit for months, Devesh Desai had finally finished work on his new Buick. She was complete. He sat in his American muscle car with a cigar hanging from his lips and his new identity document in his pocket. To the world, he was and would always be Junaid Jafda, aged thirty-five. He picked up his Nokia Classic and called the Boss.

‘Who is this?’ the hissing voice demanded.

‘Devesh Desai.’

Silence ensued on the line. Devesh heard the Boss dragging on his Rothmans Blue. He had recognised his voice. Devesh waited for him to process the information.

‘Who did they find under… Junaid.’

It wasn’t a question. Another silence. Devesh decided to break it, to assure the Boss that he was still alive.
'What happened to Lucille?'

'She married Denver Downes.'

Denver Downes? It checked out. Only a man like Denver Downes would miss a clear shot and then send a woman to kill what he wanted dead. She was the only reason he had made the call in the first place. It had plagued Devesh ever since he left Cape Town. Why did she try and kill him? What exactly happened? It didn’t matter. Devesh was coming home. He needed to see her. I want my tongue clenched between the walls of her sweet womanhood, and I will get it, regardless of how long it takes her relationship with that bland accountant to fall through the cracks.

'Where is he?'

'Denver's dead, Devesh. He tried to kill you. He killed Bekink.'

This was a hard blow. Devesh bit the cigar, breaking it in two.

'Do you know he had a clear shot of me? Clear as fucking day. And he missed?'

'Where are you, Devesh?'

Devesh hung up, got into his Buick and cruised down to Cape Town.

Lucille Lockhart’s nails had yellowed and her hair had resumed its natural blonde colour; it had grown longer in the passing months. She had aged. Her cigarette never left her bony fingers. She sat in Open Legs Pub hiding behind a newspaper reading the obituaries,

Carla-Jade de Hart, beloved daughter and fiancé, 1989-2013
Jade’s death didn’t surprise Lucille. She knew why the model had died. She had quite obviously died of being a model. Every time a camera snaps a photograph of you, it takes a small piece of your soul. In most people, a few hundred happy-snappy shots in one lifetime, is insignificant, leaving their souls relatively intact. But Jade was a model. That meant that everyday, there were at least several thousand photographs taken of her at every angle. The poor girl must have been running hazardously low on soul when she died. It was a wonder she lived so long at all. Of course, it did do a great deal by way of explaining her vacant, vapid, dreary character.

Lucille put down the newspaper. Her eyes were opaque and her features were stricken with grief as she sang to an imaginary Devesh in an empty pub. She wore white lace and pearls. But the lace was torn and the pearls were yellow, like her nails and her hair and her skin. Her voice resonated through the pub as she sang *Unchained Melody* exclusively to Devesh whom she imagined sitting at the bar, watching her sing. She gestured to him, gazed at him and dedicated every word to him. In reality, she had no audience.

Upon reaching Cape Town, Devesh launched into the city with his beast of a car, front wheels off the ground, heading straight to Open Legs Pub. Devesh was finally free. He parked his Buick Riviera on Voortrekker Road and walked into the music of the *Unchained Melody*. Lucille sang as he entered the pub, oblivious to him, still singing to an empty chair. Devesh walked to the empty chair that she seemed to be performing for, and sat down.

Lucille stopped singing, the opaque layer dissolved from her eyes; she dropped the microphone and ran to him.
Jerome Golding had his feet up in pink slippers on his mahogany table. In his yard, stood his collection of cars. A BMW 635CI, a blue Mustang, a Chevrolet Lumina, a Hummer, a Maserati, an Audi R8, two Porsches and a Land Rover EVO. His tea was always warm. His gout had started to subside. Retirement was being kind to him and Devesh was alive. Everything was perfect.

Until the SAPS stumbled upon a missing Sublime Stones case file.

What Golding had failed to realize was that the Organized Crime Unit had developed a Duplicate Process whereby all prominent dockets were copied once, certified and kept locked up with access only to the General as per national standards. The Sublime Stones case was sent off to court and Golding was charged with a list of offences he didn’t bother to read. The certified docket now lay in storage inside Cape Town’s Magistrates’ Court for the duration of the trial. So, when Lucille and Devesh appeared at the Boss’s office, they had one more job to do.

‘The only advantage here, Boss, is that the courts aren’t as well secured as the police stations. The courts don’t have the same security infrastructure,’ said Devesh.

‘So we steal the case file,’ said Lucille.

‘No way we’ll pull that off. The files are locked up. We have to think bigger,’ said Devesh.

Jerome Golding watched Lucille and Devesh deliberating, trying to save him. He was touched by their loyalty. But he also knew that if he goes down, so do they. And they knew it too. That case file would destroy them all.

‘We burn it down,’ said Devesh.
‘How? The Cape Town Magistrate’s Court is huge. We’ll never get a fire big enough,’ Lucille sighed.

‘There are ways. Slow flammable agents, we could use polyester fine stopper, at least thirty sachets between the two of us, carry them in in duffel bags and spread them throughout the building. They burn slowly – would give us enough time to get out. Or we could use flame-throwers, pressurized kerosene in gas canisters would do it, I have ski-masks in my workshop – ’

Lucille cut Devesh off,

‘We would still be faced with the problem of the sprinklers. The fire alarm would go off and counter the whole operation.’

‘Fuck, you’re right. Unless…’

‘Unless what?’

‘Unless we pre-empt all that. We fill the water tank reservoir with petrol before we start the fire. So when the fire alarm sets off the sprinklers, instead of water raining down, it’ll be petrol.’

‘Which will aggravate the fire,’

‘Demolish the place.’

Jerome Golding smiled. It was brilliant. The Cape Town Magistrate’s Court still worked on the old system – one huge 40 000 litre water tank in case of a fire. Being a government building, they didn’t have enough capital for the conversion to the new system of gas tanks, which annihilate oxygen in order to put out a fire.
There was only one certified case file remaining that could put Jerome Golding, Lucille Lockhart and Devesh Desai away, and that case file was locked in the chambers – unreachable in any other way. The plan would commence immediately. Lucille would go in dressed as a corporate lawyer and Devesh would go in dressed as a plumber, wheeling in litres of petrol in his drum. Golding, of course, could not be seen anywhere near the courts. Golding sourced the government labour uniform and drums from his City of Cape Town connection, who insisted on remaining anonymous, for a reasonable fee.

The next morning, Lucille Lockhart strolled into the courts with a fake identity document and a fabricated appointment. She searched the building for the chambers, which she couldn’t access, and found the room closest to the dockets, where it would be ideal to start the fire. Devesh wheeled in his petrol, drum by drum, in a City of Cape Town uniform, unperturbed by anyone because nobody in law feels the need to speak to the help. With all his tools on his person, he dislodged the pipe connecting the series of sprinklers to the water tank and drained the water into the empty drums provided by the state. This took hours.

Lucille came by to inform him of the location of the rooms they were to target. One to the right of the chambers and one to the left. Both rooms had curtains and wooden tables, enough material to start a small fire. No need for flame-throwers or polyester fine stopper. A match would do the trick.

Once the water reservoir was drained, Devesh connected the pipe to his petrol drum and pumped the fuel into the tank, drum by drum until the 40 000 litres of space was filled with highly flammable fuel. This also took hours. By the time he had
finished refilling the tank and closed it back up, sealing it and reconnecting it to the sprinkler system, the courts were about to close. Most of the building had been vacated, except for a few judges finishing off their work for the day.

The next part was the riskiest. Devesh and Lucille split ways, Devesh to the room left of the chambers and Lucille to the room on the right of the chambers. At 16:15 exactly, they struck their flames simultaneously, setting the curtains alight in the respective rooms, causing two small fires, and rushed out of the building before the fire alarm picked up the smoke and set off the sprinklers of petrol.

The flaming curtains were immediately sensed by the fire hazard alarm and exacerbated by the resulting petrol rain, into tall walls of fire, which spread onto the wooden furniture and blazed into the rest of the building. The flames licked the walls, climbed up the railings and crawled down the passages, raging into the courtrooms, feeding on all the wood and drinking in the streams of petrol. As the fire became more aggravated, so the pressure of the sprinklers increased and the petrol rained down in even heavier gushes, until the whole building was engulfed in flame. Not an inch of the court was left unburned. Flaming judges came flailing out of the courts, choking and coughing, faces scorched and hair alight.

At this point, Lucille and Denver were on the N1 highway, watching the cloud of smoke from the road. The fire spread so quickly that, by the time the Fire Brigade arrived to hose down what was left of the Cape Town Magistrate’s Court, the fire had already spread onto the adjoining buildings on Parade Street.

Devesh didn’t read the obituaries as he opened the newspaper the next morning with Lucille in his arms. He stopped at the first page.
Cape Town Magistrates’ Court burned to the ground, leaving Parade Street choking on petrol fumes

He smiled and stroked her hair. The couple hopped in the Buick and cruised off to Namibia. Lucille liked the desert. It was the only place hot and dry enough to destroy the Ickyness. It was the only place where the two of them could relax now. Two impassive hearts in a field of flesh. The raging voice of urgency in Devesh’s mind finally gave itself over to the sweetest release.

I have pockets full of sublime energy. There’s poetry in my coffee. There’s a ballad in my gun. And my tongue is clenched between the walls of her sweet sweet sound. Regardless of the bland folk who live to pay their lives, I refuse to fall between the cracks of their debt to life itself.