

# Far from the Trees

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# **Far From the Trees**

*By Linda Cilliers*

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Dedicated with deep love and gratitude to  
the three-legged family,  
my beloved mother,  
and all the women of our line on whose solid shoulders we stand



## **Chapter One: Pork Hide, Crocodiles and Old Men Dying**

There's no scoring a pig's hide with a blunt knife. No way in hell. You need a good quality instrument and a firm and steady hand to penetrate the tough surface, slicing almost all the way down through the fat, barely nudging the pink flesh underneath, taking care not to cut too deeply and draw blood. Then you have to run your butcher's blade the length of the skin, all the while following piggy's God-given contours. Done well, it's a work of art.

"A piece of piss," said Matingane. A smile of satisfaction spread across her face. "Has the water boiled yet, Trixie? And please see whether you can find some cloves in the spice drawer."

Beatrix was following her mother's sure-handed surgery as she prepared for the big dinner. Having been summoned to help with the cooking, she was now merely swinging her legs from her perch on the kitchen counter, knowing full well that help, in this kitchen, was a misnomer. In her mother's lexicon it meant standing around doing nothing. Ganie rarely tolerated interference when cooking, though she was always grateful for the company.

"Come on, we don't have all day. They'll be here in two hours and I still have to get to the shops," she said. She was planning to get the roast into the oven and the vegetables ready, then do some much-needed liquor shopping before her family arrived for the next day's funeral. Her nerves were shot. Her Uncle Jorrie had died peacefully at his home in Somerset West four days earlier and her sister and two

brothers were due to arrive in Cape Town for the funeral. The week's intense emotions had taken their toll and Ganie felt disorientated. Her own father had died a year before, and she now realised that she felt a greater sense of loss at Uncle Jorrie's death than she had at her father's.

"And pour me a whisky while you're at it," she added.

"I don't know why you ask me to help when you don't give me anything to do except hand you stuff," grumbled Beatrix. She hopped off the kitchen counter in one fluid movement and tugged at the spice drawer, which groaned under the weight of many years of collecting spices, herbs and other flavouring agents, fresh and stale.

"Whatever. Just get the kettle boiling again."

Ideally, cuts should be made about a thumb's width apart and the skin treated with boiling water and coarse salt for the crunchiest bite-sized strips of crackling. Taste has to be painted on with something deliciously sticky, like a mixture of berry jus, even apricot jam, mustard and soy sauce. At least, that was Ganie's experience, and her experience in matters of the palate was extensive.

"Here we go," said Beatrix, but jumped at the high-pitched shriek that came from her mother, followed by a string of profanities.

"What happened?"

"Fuck my sainted bloody aunt! Ouch!" Ganie muttered past her left thumb, which was lodged in her mouth. With her right she groped around for the roller towel. "I knew I should have sharpened the goddamn thing."

Her blood tasted noxiously red on her tongue, which pried against the flap of skin where the knife had found a ready target when it missed its original mark.

"Open the cold tap, already." She ran the cold water over her bleeding thumb for a while, then wrapped a thick wad of roller towel around it.

"Oh sweet Jaysus, I'm never going to be ready in time."

"Relax, Ganie, for crying in a bucket. They're just family. Nobody expects everything to be perfect. Especially not in these circumstances."

But Beatrix knew her mother would not listen. She looked at her. In spite of everything she was proud of her. In spite of the long nights—the opera nights—the nights of long wakefulness. Today, her mother looked good, even if she was stressed beyond belief. She'd grown her hair and stopped dyeing it. No longer the auburn of

her youth and the Annie Lennox of her ridiculous years, Beatrix's mother had let her hair go grey.

"Gracefully, my dear. I'm ageing gracefully. I made an honest woman of myself, even if no-one else will. Eventually you have an adult for a parent," Ganie had told Beatrix.

And it was true. Ganie did not look her age, Beatrix had to admit. Her mother was slim and the grey hair, wild and woolly as it was, made a certain statement. It also worked with the green eyes and lanky stature. Her face was finely featured and relatively unwrinkled. Her friends' mothers did not look like that. Not in a million years.

"How can you say that?"

Ganie brought Beatrix back to the present.

"You never, ever serve up shit food. It's just ... it's just ... not done." Ganie was particular about preparing her joints—as she was about preparing any food. When it came to food, her ideas were specific and when cooking, she became a woman possessed.

"Yeah, but at this rate you're going to be serving up bugger all. Here, take some more Rescues." Beatrix held out a shot of single malt along with two more Rescue Remedy tablets.

Ganie looked at the offering in her daughter's hand. These would be the fourth and fifth pills in as many hours.

"Ah, what the hell." She grabbed them and gulped them down with the whisky. "You see, Trix, you need to treat your ingredients with respect. Good food needs love and salt. Not love and salt and blood."

Ganie truly believed her ingredients spoke to her. They whispered suggestions to her on how they would best nourish and please the palate.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. The integrity of the ingredient and all that," said Beatrix, having heard her mother on the subject for as long as she could remember. "Give me that knife. Let me sharpen it before we have another calamity."

"I just don't get people who will slap a perfectly fine steak of rump into an over-oiled, under-fired pan and broil it to the leathery consistency of an old boot. I won't even waste good stomach space by eating such crap, let alone serve it up! I'd sooner order pizza and I don't even like pizza," Ganie continued. This was her favourite

topic. “But this little piggy over here ... this is the finest-grade pork money could buy in Cape Town today.”

She also had little time for people who spent perfectly good money on crappy cuts and then lobbed them into the stewing pot with not a thought spared for the end eater. With adequate care and attention, even the cheapest cut could be coaxed into succulent tastiness, achieving modest distinction despite a humble beginning. Some of her greatest cooking successes had resulted from such Cinderella products. But, as a rule and provided she was not broke, Ganie avoided inferior ingredients. Each item of fresh produce was lovingly selected, handpicked from the rest of the bunch, while in her mind’s eye she saw how it would be best served, both in the preparation and the presentation.

Then, of course, there was the matter of love and salt. Lacking either, a meal was rendered as soulless as a cup of milky tea or weak coffee made from chicory. A travesty. A sin against the soul. An insult to the constituent that germinated into life and grew to beautiful readiness for sacrifice on the altar of human sustenance and indulgence.

“The least we can do,” she said, “is dignify our food with love and a sprinkling of salt.”

Beatrix rolled her eyes.

“Yowzer, Ganie, if you talked less that bloody pig would have been in the oven already?”

Ganie slapped the surface of the pork affectionately with her good hand.

“If you honour the ingredient, Trix, it follows that you’re honouring the soul. Take the San, for instance. They can teach you a thing or two about food. I tell you, Trix, never, ever trust a person who shows no respect for the humble potato.” She felt the same about the audacious tomato, the melancholy onion, the temperate fish fillet and, proudest of all, the stalwart lamb chop.

The inherent nature of each ingredient dictated its preferred treatment in the subtlest of ways. And Ganie communed with her foodstuffs as she sliced the tomato, diced the onion, peeled the potato for its fifteen minutes under the grill. She’d go to great lengths to find surprising new techniques to enhance the natural flavour an individual ingredient offered its eater. In this way, she meditated her food ready,

almost prayerfully giving thanks for earth's bounty. Her two daughters thought she was totally nuts.

"You can never take food for granted, no matter how humble the meal."

For Ganie, cookingness was next to godliness. With this approach—more than an attitude, really, slightly less than a well-rounded religion—she was known for her fine table. Rarely would guests pass up a dinner invitation from Matingane Blignault. In honouring the food she cooked, she believed she honoured those being fed. Many a time she would forego her own meals, preferring instead to watch her guests devour theirs. Watching them systematically annihilate what she'd prepared nourished her like the very meal itself might have. It warmed her belly like a heavy port and never failed to make her happy, if only for a moment.

But today, the ingredients were intractable. "Sweet mother of Jesus, why did I offer to cook dinner for everyone? We could have gone out instead," she cursed. "How in the name of the pope am I going to get everything ready?"

Suddenly exhausted, she felt paralysed, overwhelmed by events. She picked up the knife to resume her cutting and slicing, but her heart was no longer in it. Her eyes filled with tears, blurring her target until all she could see was a solid expanse of pork hide, distorting and elongating until its shape resembled that of a crocodile.

"We will ... get ... this ... right," she said through clenched teeth, as she forced the knife into the white hide again. "I shall not be ... defeated by ... a fucking ... pig."

"Get a grip, Ganie. It's just a piece of meat." Beatrix had a fair idea of what to expect from the evening. Vintage Blignault—a cacophony of forceful opinions, misunderstandings, disagreements, debates, arguments, maybe a sprinkling of wit and laughter thrown in here and there.

Ganie's shoulders sagged and she started to sob. "Oh, Beatrix, it could ... it should ... all have been so different. It's all over now. They're gone—both brothers. With nothing resolved. Now there will never be any answers."

She pulled the freshly sharpened knife from the pork rind, and plunged it down with force, burying it deep inside the flesh, as if stabbing a pitiful old man lying in a lonely hospital bed, waiting to die. As if helping him take that giant leap over to the other side. She was not present when Uncle Jorrie died, but she had witnessed the last minutes of her father's life on earth.

Through her tears, she saw the crocodile-shaped pork joint grow the head of a man—a head that turned as if on hinges to look at her over his shoulder.

“Don’t worry,” said the crocodile with a man’s head. “It will all be fine in the end. You’ll see.”

Matingane stared down at the pork joint helplessly and sobbed.

<<◇>>

**From:** Ganie Blignault [mailto:ganieb@mweb.co.za]

**Sent:** 16 March 2007 05:52 AM

**To:** lanablig@hotmail.com

**Subject:** He's gone

My dearest Mother

I hope this finds you well. If you get around to reading it, that is. I also hope that, wherever you are, you're not in the grip of an icy winter like the one we're having in Cape Town this year. If ice were salt, I tell you, I'd have turned into a stony pillar by now, like Lot's wife. Maybe it's all the long nights of thinking—all the memories that keep yapping at my heels—that ice me up so terribly! But for you, Ma? For you I wish sunshine every day in a land filled with flowers—blooms deliciously scented and soft to the touch. After all the years of heartache, wherever your travels might take you, I imagine your heart soaring with joy as you wake up every day.

I thought long and hard before writing, since I didn't want to upset you all over again—we did, after all, agree to give each other a break. And you deserve it. But then again, some things need telling. Some events are just too important to hang about in the air, untold. What I need to tell you is one such thing. I have to get it off my chest. Of course, it's always a bolstering thought knowing that there is someone

bearing witness to our experiences and the things that befall us—also those terrible things that happened to us many years ago but keep lingering into the present. You, Mother, are immeasurably more than my life’s witness. For that reason, I have to confide in you specifically and my telling has to be as honest as is within my power to be. It entails some confessing, too.

Here is the thing: Pa has died, Ma. Isak Blignault is no longer of this world. He finally shuffled off his mortal coil. Deceased. Passed away. Bought the farm. Kicked the bucket. As dead as a freaking doornail. Of course, it was his own fault—no surprises there. Yet this fact makes little difference to the reality of the experience of death. I experienced no surplus of emotion when it happened and maybe my indifference will find its own retribution one day. All the same, what good are tears of insincerity? You know I am not one for hypocrisy, for crocodile tears. Hell, no. I’m not prepared to make a show of things just to make others feel okay. If those who attended his funeral choose to think I’m a heartless bitch, then so be it. Fuck them, actually.

All four of us were there. Ingrid, Herman, Jake and I stood there watching and waiting—you could say supervising—as he took his last feeble gasps of air. The machine he was hooked up to counted down the last thirty minutes or so. Did you know that those machines can actually tell you how long it will take, give or take a minute? Technology in action is a wondrous thing to behold, even for me, an old techno vet. The countdown may have taken longer, but I got there with only minutes to spare. In fact, neither Herman nor I was going to join the proceedings, but his conscience got to him and he gave in after a while. I’m made of sterner stuff and stuck to my guns. Sitting downstairs in the coffee shop, Herman called me on the cell phone, saying it was wrong for me to sit chatting with virtual strangers while death was upon us, and that I’d better do the right thing and get my arse into the ICU. Yep, can you believe it? Herman said that. As if he, of all people, suddenly developed a sentimental gene or respect for death or anything else. But I suppose you can never predict people’s reactions when they’re in extremis.

So there we stood by that old bastard’s bed, patience personified, the four of us—in single file, one last time—but this time we had valid enough reason to believe that he was in fact giving up the ghost. Permanently. A nurse stayed with us throughout (a black man, can you believe it? Pa must be turning in his grave). Those nurses must

know when time is running out and I suspect they are forced by protocol to be on standby to note down the exact time of death.

We watched the machine counting down the last few minutes, then a minute, then thirty seconds, all the way down to zero. I must have zoned out at some stage, because by the time we got to ten seconds, I imagined myself preparing to fire a rocket off into space like a Nasa scientist at Cape Canaveral. The absurdity of it all struck me as being hilarious and, I'm ashamed to say, I burst out laughing! The harder I tried to get into the gravity of the moment, to bring my thoughts and demeanour in line with the momentousness of the occasion, the funnier I found the scene, funniest of all being Pa's soul as I imagined it torpedoing off into an ethereal eternity at the rate of knots—as if, quite unexpectedly, it was shot loose from a giant catapult. In my mind's eye I could see him being caught totally unawares, a look of utter shock on his face, as if to say, "Hey! How did this happen? Take me back!"

The poor nurse seemed bewildered—scandalised, in all probability—but his training obviously came in handy and he seemed to know how to behave in the presence of the recently or about to be bereaved. He reacted only with empathy and concern. He even offered me a little something for my nerves.

Come to think of it, I did in fact shed a tear or two, meagre though I have to admit they were. Of course I'm not impervious to my own father dying, but however much you may wish for it to be so, there is no on and off grief switch to be flicked for the benefit of an audience. Truth be told, the few arid drops that managed to escape from my tear ducts that morning may well have been the product of my laughing fit, or maybe from my desperate attempts to bring my laughter under control. You'd be pleased to know that the others behaved themselves far more decorously, and they didn't pay me much attention. If they noticed, they must have thought it was the stress of it all. They didn't seem angry. In my heart of hearts I know you would also have been able to see the ... um ... lighter side of death. You would have understood.

But here's the thing, Ma. In those moments, mirth or no mirth, I came to understand a thing or two about death. First and foremost—it is so very, very physical. Death has mass and weight and volume. Did you know that, Ma? We're inclined to think about it in such abstract terms. As in, is there life after death? Or, will the soul be reincarnated? Will it go to heaven? Is there even such a thing as a soul, for God's sake? Or a heaven? Or hell? Will I find a gatekeeper at the portals of

the hereafter? Will he, maybe she, read me the riot act, or will I find arms outstretched in welcome? Is my name written down in the book? Will I be reunited with Ouma Monty? And Oupa Sam? He, at least, will surely be smiling again, please God. Would there be any chance of speaking to the Mahatma? Judas Iscariot? David and Jonathan? Mary Magdalene? Edgar Cayce? Rasputin? Catherine de Medici? Oscar Wilde? Tea with Mozart, maybe, or a teensy-weensy little triple with Mama Cass Elliot? A few well-placed questions for Hitler, Stalin and Verwoerd?

But these are mere abstractions of the mind and heart. It's probably just a load of bullshit and a waste of time and precious mortal energy. What the hell! Don't pay me any attention. You have your own ideas about life and death, don't you? But do you know what, Ma? When death came for him, none of these thoughts entered my head. It was as if my mind was far too empty for any conceptual thought (besides the silliness of the rocket, of course!).

What did strike me, however, was the soft, white underbelly of being: The cell—neutron, electron, proton. Subatomic quantum particles of blood, organ and water. I could feel them individually moving throughout my entire being, like when you have the flu and you can feel all the cells of your skin dart around in a frenetic fight for survival, or when you run a fever and you can feel the blood bubble and boil under your skin. That is what death feels like. Alive and very, very busy. There is nothing dead about death, of that I can assure you once and for all.

I could literally feel the atoms and molecules of Pa's mortal existence fall away from one another gradually, shooting off into the distance like stars, moving further and further away from us without complaint or quarrel. Just like that, no effort required. And how the quanta within that which is me began to splash and splutter and flounce to regain some balance in this strange new environment. Thrown from their familiar course, floundering out of orbit, my particles had to come to terms with the sudden disappearance of others on which they had come to rely, whether for good or bad. Without attaching much emotion to it, I could feel death. Like a beast lurking in my teeth and in my hair. On my skin, in the marrow of my spine. In my liver, lungs and colon. In the litres and litres of blood shooting from my heart into my arteries and coursing through my veins, backward and forward, without let up.

And can I tell you something else? It's not as bad as it's cracked up to be. Death is simply the rearranging of parts. That is all. I've discovered that we don't have to fear

death, no matter what the theologians and those fire-and-brimstone preachers would have us believe.

Death has a second characteristic, one of which I became aware when it was all over and I more or less had my laughter under control. Namely this: it is so excruciatingly intimate. As his breathing gradually wound down—like the ringing of an old-fashioned alarm clock that eventually rings softer and softer until it eventually runs out of steam if not silenced—and as each breath grew fractionally more shallow than the previous, it felt as if the breathing of those of us around him—those of us who still had some practical use for oxygen—became proportionately slower and more laboured.

Could it have been only me? I could have sworn we all breathed with greater difficulty as his weakened old body and lungs took in less and less air. When his last breath expired, I'd already skipped three and then the yawning began. From laughing to yawning, I ask you! Maybe laughing belongs to the family of yawning and hiccupping, so maybe I'm not wholly culpable in standing at my father's deathbed laughing. Though I do feel a bit bad about it. Nevertheless, it was as if all the oxygen in that cruel ward had amassed around one old man right then, leaving a terrible paucity of air—altogether too thin and flimsy for our overtaxed lungs.

That last stage of his dying luckily passed quickly. Herman was the first to compose himself. Of course it would be he. Who else? Herman, always with the obligation for decorum. None of us really knew what to do next. Nobody had briefed us on protocol. So he did the best he could, breaking the ice by mumbling, "So that is that, then."

Ingrid responded with a mutter of her own and Jake stuttered without really saying anything, while I still tried to keep a lid on my laughter and yawning. But then the strangest thing happened. As we each tried to locate our vocal cords and slowly put them to work again, none of us could look the others in the eye. It was the oddest awkwardness imaginable. As I turned away from the hospital bed, quite by accident, I caught Herman's eye. I wish I never did—it was too wretched for words. It was as if I'd caught him in the nude. Worse, with his skin flayed and his flesh exposed—my brother with his soul stripped bare. It made me shudder, as if someone had just walked over my grave. The hairs on my arms and the back of my neck stood up.

Realising how vulnerable he was, he jumped around and rushed towards the door. The long walk down the passageways of Milpark Hospital back to the coffee shop, where children and assembled guests had been waiting for hours for the big moment, was self-conscious and uncomfortable. Trying to avoid eye contact and making small talk after the death of one's father is more difficult than you'd imagine. It's a bit like waking up next to a stranger after a night of ill-considered, drunken sex. You wouldn't know the feeling and it's probably inappropriate to make the analogy here, but it is the only one I can think of that comes close to describing the unease. In the sober light of day it is very difficult to look at a stranger whose only knowledge of you is of the most intimate, embarrassing variety. And death is so much more intimate—grander, in fact, and brazen.

As I said, it was largely his own fault, but even I would have wished to save him such a cruel death. The doctors were to blame, too. In fact, they were grossly negligent, if not blatantly unethical. Apparently, he had developed a slight arrhythmia of the heart. Of course, the minute a heart bypass operation was suggested, he jumped at the opportunity and signed the authorisation forms. Just like that—not so much as a phone call to any of us. Shame, he obviously craved the attention.

But those buggered-up old lungs and liver and kidneys were simply not equal to the surgical and anaesthetic onslaught, so he was left with his organs all weakened and fatigued and a heart raring to pump up a storm for another decade, at the very least. Bloody reckless, is all I can say! How can a medical professional recondition an old man's heart—and a sickly old man, at that—so thoroughly and then leave the other, mostly decrepit, organs to fail, one after the other? But, as Herman says, that is that, then. It's all over now.

That was all I wanted to tell you, Ma. I hope you understand that I had to, that I didn't want to burden you, but rather that I wanted to put your mind at ease. He is gone and he's never coming back. It's better that way. For everyone. I'm not angry anymore. And I have no bitterness, either. Goddamn, I'm not even relieved!

No need for you to cut your trip short to come and comfort us. Believe it or not, we're all doing well. In fact, I feel somewhat enriched by the experience and I'm not even being facetious. Why would I be? If birth can enrich a person, why not death?

As I said right from the start, no need to call or write. Just relax and have a good time. I hope there are flowers and the sun shines every day.

With all my love  
Your devoted daughter  
Matingane

PS Maybe a line or two on a postcard?

PPS But don't go out of your way. I just sometimes wonder where you are. I can't deny that I miss you terribly.

<<◇>>

“So, what’s happening tomorrow?” asked Herman, leaning back on Ganie’s generous sofa and running his one hand through his silver-white hair. The four siblings had settled down for drinks before dinner. “I hope they don’t expect me to say anything in church. I’ll be fucked before I do that, I’m telling you. I don’t mind helping carry the coffin, but that’s all.”

Ganie understood his concern, since Herman had always been made aware of his position as the older of only two sons on his father’s side of the family, yet she knew there was little chance of Uncle Jorrie’s two daughters expecting Herman to deliver a eulogy. The pressures on him had never come from anyone other than his father and uncle—to a lesser extent also from their father, Oupa Sam—a burden that weighed down on him heavily.

“Don’t be a dickhead, man. Of course they won’t expect that. In any case, if they did, they would have asked you already. So relax.”

After the initial chaos of her siblings’ arrival, which always sent Ganie’s nerves into orbit, she had calmed down and was now happily sipping her whisky, the afternoon panic a thing of the past. She was as delighted as ever to see them. The roast was in the oven, crackling away obligingly. The vegetables were ready and waiting, warm and cosy under their blanket of tinfoil in the warming drawer. She listened as they talked, loudly and mostly all at the same time.

Ganie was disappointed that none of the spouses or her nephews and nieces had come along for the funeral, but on the other hand it gave her the rare opportunity to speak with her sister and brothers without family politics intruding, as they inevitably

do, like an ominous undertow waiting to roll in with the tide to rip asunder and swallow everybody's good intentions.

She looked at them in turn. Herman, the older of her two brothers, and Jake, the youngest of them all, each trying to talk the other down. Ingrid sat quietly and when she did manage to get a word in edgeways, it would be only after formulating her thoughts with great care and thought. Ganie felt a pang of guilt. There really was nothing to feast or laugh about: Uncle Jorrie was about to be burned in his coffin, her own father dead for barely a year. At the same time, she was pleased that she'd decided to mitigate the occasion with a feast.

"To help us all pass through the ending of one time and into the beginning of the next," she'd told Beatrix earlier while they were making the salad together. Salad-making was a task she happily delegated, provided the slicing and dicing of the ingredients were precise.

Everything had happened so fast during the past week and she was still hazy from the residual effects of the Rescue Remedy and her afternoon Scotch, but Ganie felt strangely happy. Even with the new notch in her thumb. And yes, even with Uncle Jorrie dead and gone.

"Trounced again by a sharp object!" she'd joked after her hallucinatory skirmish with the strangely-headed crocodile and once she had dried her tears with the roller towel Beatrix had handed her. As it was, the sides of her thumbs were so callous from snipping and slicing, not to mention under-calculating overheated ovenware, she could remove a more-or-less blistering casserole from the oven without using gloves, provided she was quick—her other fingers being less fire resistant.

"Hey, Ganie! What's with you? It's not like you to let us have the stage for so long. Not pissed already, are we?" Jake leaned over to prod her in the ribs with both hands. She beat his hands off.

"Fuck off, Jake. And no, I'm not pissed. Speak for yourself."

"How are Kittie and Dana taking it?" asked Ingrid, seeing an opportunity to make herself heard.

"I suppose Kittie's taking it on the rocks and ... um ... Dana on the chin," quipped Jake.

"Don't be an asshole, Jake," said Ingrid, her forehead furrowed. "Uncle Jorrie was a big presence in all our lives."

“Too true,” said Jake. Jorrie had been the older of the two brothers and he’d spent large parts of his life trying to resolve his brother’s problems as Isak blundered through life, embarking upon one irresponsible scheme after the other, taking him and his family further and further down the path of failure and ruin.

“Yep,” said Ganie. “Feels weird with Uncle Jorrie dead. Actually, it’s only now, with him gone, that it feels as if Pa is really gone, too. At the time, I was so confused about how I felt. It didn’t seem real, somehow. It’s odd, but I suppose there’s a sort of symmetry to it—poetic balance, almost.”

When their father died, what Ganie felt didn’t feel like grief. Slight sadness at the tragedy that had been Isak Blignault maybe, and melancholy over a childhood that she wished she could rewrite. But Ganie was a pragmatist and could never dwell on life’s calamities for too long. She soon became enchanted by the future and continued life as if Isak had never even been alive. Besides, as far as she was concerned, she’d said her goodbyes long before her father decided to die. Of course, it was different for her brothers.

“Oh well, I suppose we’ll just have to get used to it. You guys ready for supper?” she said and looked around for her daughter.

“Beatrix, darling! Come on. Won’t you help serve the food?”

## **Chapter Two: Discovering Karma**

“This is one weird fucking funeral,” Jake whispered under his breath.

The late Isak’s side of the family sat towards the right of the narrow isle running down the length of the little chapel. Thus far, no singing had taken place and only one lonely prayer had found its way to heaven, spiralling up like a patchy column of smoke from a forgotten cigarette. The chapel was attached to the large Helderberg church in Somerset West. Judging by the size, the expensive audio-visual equipment in the church hall, not to mention the quaint little chapel attached to it and its reception area, this had to be a very affluent congregation, Ganie thought.

Right in front, to the left, rested the coffin—a humble vessel. Ganie was impressed. Her father’s had been far less austere, a detail she found highly ironic. In life, Dr Jorrie Blignault had been considered successful and well-to-do, his brother a financial failure. Yet in death, the wealthier was being dispatched across the River Styx in a vessel more modest than that of the poorer. She now envied the bald courage of her cousins in choosing this Jewish coffin, an unfussy box hewn from pine and sporting stylish rope handles. Some folk might call it a pauper’s coffin, but in Ganie’s book it was elegance, pure and simple. On top of the coffin behind a framed photograph of her smiling uncle perched one of his trademark caps.

The service passed without Ganie taking in much of what the minister was saying. Something from the Old Testament about a prophet going to visit a potter and the

potter messing up a pot he was making, just like God had made a right royal mess of his human project. At least that was how she understood it. It struck her as being unbelievably rude and inappropriate. Then again, she hadn't been able to concentrate and therefore hadn't listened too closely. Her ears pricked up again when the minister leapfrogged several centuries ahead to the New Testament, making the tenuous link between the new passage and the previous by stating that God then intervened to reshape his wonky creation by sending Jesus to come and fix his wayward flock. That's stretching things a bit, she thought. But again, she was listening with half an ear and could be misunderstanding the preacher. Truth be told, she didn't care what was said in church. The ritual of goodbye was neither here nor there. Her uncle was gone. She was, to all intents and purposes, alone in this world now. Tomorrow her visitors would be gone again. Beatrix would return to her student digs, maybe pop in once or twice a week, visit the fleshpots of Egypt so to speak when money ran low and she needed a decent meal, and Dharma was a thousand miles away tending pigs and painting in her studio on a small-holding outside Graaff Reinet. Alone all over again. Alone yet never lonely, she frequently reassured her daughters. She preferred it that way.

"Better get a grip," she whispered to Jake, but she really meant it for herself. And then it was over.

As she joined the throng of bereaved filing through the chapel doors, Ganie felt a hand grab her by the elbow. She turned around. It was Kittie, her cousin and childhood best friend.

"Hey, cuz, a quick one behind the chapel, what do you say?" Kittie whispered with a wink, nodding her head to the side, her nose crinkled up and one eyebrow raised. It always astonished Ganie how Kittie could raise either eyebrow independently of the other with no visible effort.

"See you there," she whispered back and made her way outside. As she came around the side of the church, Kittie was waiting.

"Quick, cuz," said Kittie. "I'd better get back before Dana comes looking for me, but I'm freaking dying for a smoke."

It was just like the old days. Few words were needed between them. Ganie had anticipated Kittie's request as they exited the chapel. That's what they did. That's what they'd always done. Everybody knew it. Nobody approved of it, but nobody

would dare stop them. Both Ganie and Kittie were on the wrong side of fifty, but turning fifty did not change the habits of a lifetime. It did not, all by itself, bestow a sensible, health-conscious nature. Smoking cigarettes clandestinely was what they did, ever since Kittie was seventeen and Ganie sixteen. It had been Kittie's idea, of course, but once tempted, Ganie was not to be deterred.

They smoked in silence for a while.

"What in the name of God do we do with the ashes now?" Ganie asked, eyes scrunched against the sun. This was the one question that had vexed her from the moment Kittie phoned her with the news of Uncle Jorrie's death. She looked at her cousin. Neither wanted to voice what the other was thinking, ashes being a sensitive issue within the inner circle of the family. The ashes Ganie referred to were not only her Uncle Jorrie's.

"Not now, Ganie," said Kittie. "He's hardly cold yet." She hadn't seen her cousin in more than five years. Inseparable as children, life had taken its own sweet course and the cousins had lived in different parts of the country and neither had tried very hard to stay in touch.

"What really worries me is what I'm going to do," said Kittie. "Without him around, I mean. He's always been there for me. Who will help me now?"

"I know. It's weird to think he's no longer here. The reality hasn't sunk in for me yet. But I can tell you something for nothing, and that is that it's only since your father's death that I can feel my own father being gone. And it's been a goddamn year already! As if his death is the full stop at the end of my father."

The shorter of the two, Kittie looked up at her cousin, fighting back the tears welling up in her eyes. Ganie placed her arm around Kittie's shoulders. She had trouble holding back her own tears. Only now did she notice how stricken and pale Kittie's face looked against her auburn hair, the blue eyes red-rimmed, wet and sunken.

"I suppose I'll just have to rely on Dana's handouts for a while. Ah hell, what am I saying? I have no option now," Kittie said.

"Ja, I've heard your life's gone to shit. You'd better tell me what happened. I've just heard bits and pieces from Dana. One minute you were here, the next Bakkies had swept you off to Mpumalanga and nobody could get hold of you for the longest time."

Kittie forced a little laugh but Ganie could detect no humour in it.

“He took me for everything I had. Every ... single ... thing. The money from selling my house, the payout from when I resigned from the college, my car, my instruments. God, that alone was worth over a hundred grand! He even pawned most of my clothes and Monty’s engagement ring. That was the worst of all. Do you remember it? That beautiful little solitaire that Monty left me in her will. It’s a catastrophe.”

“Oh no, Kitts! You really know how to pick them, don’t you?”

Ganie had known instinctively that Kittie was making the mistake of her life when she got married a third time, but she knew from her own folly with Guy that a woman with her heart set on marriage was not to be stopped. And of course Dana had predicted only tears and her opinion counted, since she was a psychiatrist.

“But I know what you mean,” she continued. “It’s always the loss of the small things that hurt the most. I can still cry about my mother’s pendant that went missing. You know, that pomegranate thingy with garnets inside ... the one Monty gave her before the two of them started hating each other, when my parents got engaged. My mother promised to give it to me the day Monty was six feet under. She’d come to detest the thing, but she didn’t want to do it before that, because you can imagine what Monty would have had to say about her giving away something like that. And then, when Monty eventually got around to dying, it was just gone. Ma couldn’t find it anywhere.”

“Ja, I remember the pendant. It was pretty special,” Kittie said. “If I’d known where the asshole pawned the ring, though, I would have tried to get it back.

“But I can live without a ring. What worries me right now is that he’s after me. If not to kill me, then to scare me into thinking he’s going to kill me. I’ve laid charges of fraud against him and he’s trying everything in the book to make me drop them. He’s even threatened to have some of his old jail mates come and rape the girls. Thank God they’re both in res at Stellenbosch. He doesn’t know exactly where they are and all I can do is pray that it was just a threat.”

Ganie had no idea matters had taken such a serious turn.

“What does Dana say about it all?”

“Well, that’s just it. She doesn’t know about that part. All she knows is that because of my stupidity, I’ve lost everything ... fuck, the better part of a million bucks. And that they’re the ones who will now have to help me get back on my feet.

Dana doesn't know that he's an old crook, that he'd spent time in Pollsmoor some years back. Also for fraud."

"My sweet and sainted aunt! What are you going to do?"

"I don't know, cuz. I really don't know. But I'm broke. I need a job. And a place to stay."

"Well the last one's sorted. It's a no-brainer. You'll just stay with me. And we'll find you a teaching job. That shouldn't be all that difficult. Crikey, if push comes to shove, you can just teach music privately."

"With what instruments, Ganie? I literally have nothing. I'll have to go back to teaching at a school. I fucking hate teaching music to school kids. You know I do."

"Well, whatever. But for now, we'll just convince Dana your chances of finding work are better in Cape Town than in Stellenbosch. And for that reason, you'll be staying with me."

"Thanks, Ganie. I was hoping you'd say that. At Dana's, there will just be more recriminations. She's very angry with me and she wants me to make all sorts of decisions straight away, but it's not that simple. The whole situation is very intrinsic. I need some space to think."

"Intricate. The word is intricate, not intrinsic," Ganie said, grinding her cigarette butt under the sole of her ankle boot and picking it up to shove it back into the box, but she jumped when she heard a voice behind her. "I reckon we'd better get back."

"Ah, so this is where you two are hiding! I thought you were quitting, Kittie!" The disapproval in Dana's voice was unmistakable. "Come on, you two. Everyone's looking for Kittie. You can't stand at the back of the church the whole day smoking cigarettes."

Ganie felt her throat constrict when they entered the chapel foyer again. She just wished the whole business would get to an end. She could think of nowhere worse to be and felt claustrophobic among the people crowding the church foyer, waiting to talk to the family, drinking tea and picking at tastefully presented little finger tarts, scones and quiche.

She looked around to find her siblings and saw Herman standing slightly away from the crowd of mourners. Her Aunt Athena, Kittie's and Dana's mother, was as busy as ever, rushing around, offering people refreshments. Ganie smiled at the activity. Aunt Athena was amazing. At eighty-two—she only owned up to her age

when she turned eighty—she looked like a woman of seventy and was more active than one of sixty. In spite of the loss of her husband, it had been Aunt Athena who took charge of refreshments for the funeral, organising what should be served and who should be responsible for preparing the various items. Ganie shook her head. Aunt Athena was something else altogether. She adored her.

“This is turning into a long fucking day,” she said to Herman as she joined him along the edge of the action, a forced grimace on his face. “Where are Ingrid and Jake?”

“Didn’t you know? They’re the good cousins. They’re mingling. We’re the alternatives.” A smile spread across his face and his eyes, usually so serious, took on a mischievous glint. “I suppose slipping out to the pub for a beer is out of the question?”

Ganie could not help laughing. As a child she had always thought of Herman as Puck. His freckled face, framed by a mop of snow-white hair, always hinted at mischief to come. Black stumps where his top four front teeth should have been—the legacy of antibiotics and an over-eager dentist at the age of three—completed the picture of an imp and was a source of great teasing until his permanent teeth eventually emerged.

As the first boy to be born to this generation of Blignaults, Herman was under much pressure to perform as a child. On his small shoulders rested the dreams and aspirations of a proud father, an ambitious uncle and a righteous grandfather, the three of whose aspirations had been fulfilled, to varying degrees, from utter failure to partial realisation. Uncle Jorrie, in particular, had great plans for Herman.

Herman, however, had ideas of his own. It was the sixties and rebellion was in the air. Making mischief was mandatory and he got up to a lot of it. He deserved his tag as a rascal. While he was every bit as naughty as people believed him to be, Ganie often wondered whether it was not just a case of him living up to the expectation set by the expression in his eyes. She suspected that the look on his face made him seem more rambunctious than he really was and that he played up to it in order not to disappoint. Her theory was that if he’d had the face of an angel, he would have had a different reputation—that others’ definition of him had become the norm by which he defined himself. If people expected him to misbehave, by God, he’d oblige—way beyond expectation. He appeared fearless and, needs be, he would settle scores with

boys much bigger than himself. Having a keen sense of justice, he couldn't stand unfairness and he was even less tolerant of wimps.

He also had the grubbiest feet on the planet, their mother always said. He hated wearing shoes. The bathroom in the evenings was a war zone, as Lana Blignault soaped and scrubbed, Herman complaining loudly, ducking her grasp and squirming under her grip. When she discovered the efficacy of Sunlight soap, sugar and a very firm scrubbing brush, the battles became shorter though no less vocal.

Underneath it all, behind the defiant exterior, behind the resolve of the strong little man who appeared to fear nothing, that unstoppable force of nature, lay hidden the face of the real Herman. The face behind the face, one that Ganie had seen only on rare occasions.

Maybe I'm the only one in the world who can see it, she thought. The boy. The poor and vulnerable little boy, visible only during the most unguarded of moments.

Ganie grinned as she suddenly remembered the incident with the cake. She started to chuckle.

"What's so funny?" asked Herman. Since going to the pub was not an option, he had settled for second best and fetched himself another cup of tea.

"Nothing, really," she said. "I just remembered that time Ma sent you to deliver the cake to old Mrs Du Preez. God, how funny was that! The look on your face that night was priceless. And to think, a chocolate cake may have determined the course of your career!"

Ganie laughed so hard, she flopped down on the bench against the window. Several heads turned, eyebrows raised, to see what the reason for the commotion was.

"Shut up, Ganie!" Herman hissed. "Jesus woman, we're at a funeral. Behave yourself."

Ganie clasped her hand over her mouth and fought her laughter down.

"Sorry, boet. But fuck it, you have to admit that was funny," she whispered.

"I don't even know what you're talking about. What cake?"

"Oh, come on. You can't tell me you don't remember! The one time we stole some change out of Ma's purse. And you were going to buy us sweets after delivering the cake."

"What time? We were always stealing money out of her purse. But I stopped—I at least have a conscience."

“I know, you ape. That’s the whole point.”

Money was always scarce in their home and legitimate sweets a rare treat indeed, which made illegitimate ones all the more irresistible. This time, their mother had baked a cake for a church bazaar. Lana’s chocolate cake was famous in the congregation. Deliciously moist, beautifully iced, the cake had to be delivered to the chairlady of the Christian Women’s Association, who lived only a block away. Herman was to deliver the cake, with strict instructions to be careful, not to run all the way and to make sure it was delivered directly into Mrs Du Preez’s hands and no-one else’s. Before leaving on his errand, he called Ganie into the passage.

“Hey, Ganie,” he whispered while their mother was carefully tapping the last decorative bits of icing onto the cake, placing a few cherries on top to finish it off. “Look here, I scored some money from Ma’s purse. After I drop off the cake, I’ll go get us some Sweetie Pies from Two Eyes.”

Two Eyes was the café closest to where they lived. When Ganie checked, sure enough, Herman had procured a fair haul from their mother’s purse, enough for at least two Sweetie Pies each.

“Gif, eksê, but don’t take all day. I have to go to the library,” Ganie said.

By all accounts, the cargo reached its destination, but to Ganie’s increasing annoyance as she waited for the spoils, Herman failed to return for the rest of the afternoon. Eventually, she gave up and walked to the library. When she returned, neither her brother, nor the chocolates had materialised.

When he finally arrived home, just in time for supper, he stayed well clear of her. During supper, Ganie kicked her brother’s shins several times under the table, but he refused to meet her blazing eyes. Afterwards, without their mother even having to tell him to do so, Herman disappeared into the bathroom, emerging wearing his pyjamas, clean as a whistle from head to toe. Lana’s face registered astonishment, but not wanting to jinx what she might have thought as a change for the better in her son’s attitude towards hygiene, she just shook her head and smiled. Maybe he was growing up. There was nothing Ganie could do without drawing unwanted attention to their raiding their mother’s purse. As far as she was concerned, Herman had clearly gobbled up her share of the spoils during his long afternoon away. She went into her bedroom to sulk. She would get him soon enough.

Much later, once everyone had gone to bed and Ganie had switched off her light for the night, Herman slipped into her room.

“What do you want, you little shithead?” She was over her anger by now, but refused to let him know it. “Where’s my Sweetie Pie? Switch on the light.”

Herman did as he was told, then came to stand next to her bed, staring at the floor. He looked so guilty and miserable, she almost allowed herself to feel sorry for him.

“Ganie, I’m never going to do that again.” She noticed that his pale blue eyes were red-rimmed and brimming with tears. He was having difficulty putting his thoughts into words.

“What happened? You took the money, now where’s my share? Fair’s fair. You probably stuffed yourself and that’s why you didn’t come home.”

“No, Ganie, cross my heart. But a terrible thing happened.”

Ganie didn’t reply. She slid her pillows up against the headboard and leaned back against them as if she was the queen and Herman her subject. She gave him a piercing look, eyebrows raised patronisingly.

“I swear, Ganie, man. I know now that the Bible is true. All of it. Literally. Exactly. It has to be. I know now that God really does punish people when they do bad things. But he punishes them right there and then. Immediately. He doesn’t hang around waiting until they’re grown-up or dead or something so that he can send them to hell.”

Herman was talking very fast, his voice breathless with impatience as he tried to order these complex thoughts into words.

“Well I’ll be ... What the fucking fuck, you little dipshit? What are you babbling on about?” Ganie was stumped. Her brother was the last person she’d expect to come up with ideas on morality and the deeper meaning of life. This was unexpected. She decided to try a different approach.

“Okay, you’re clearly a man from Mars. Where’s Herman and what did you do with him? Let my brother speak.”

“No, Ganie, I’m serious. It’s wrong to steal, especially from your mother. When Ma asked me to take the cake to Mrs Du Preez, she told me to take the long way around, not to take shortcuts through other people’s yards. But why walk around a whole block to get to a place that’s actually two houses away?”

“Ja, ja, get to the point.”

“Well, I was scared to be caught in the neighbours’ yard, but I still cut through the split poles. I ran through their yard and across the street in front of their house. But there was a rock in the street and I hit my toe against it and fell flat on my stomach. The cake went flying and landed upside down in the dust.” His voice was shaking now.

“Just look at my knees,” he added, a lone tear creeping down his cheek.

Ganie softened. What if he lost all control and started to cry openly? She shuddered. That was something Herman would never allow himself to do, least of all in front of either of his sisters.

“And my toe. Look.”

“Gross,” said Ganie, pulling a face when she saw his knees, both still pretty bloody despite his efforts to get himself clean. “And then? What happened? The old duck phoned Ma earlier to thank her for the cake. Where did you find a cake to give her? There sure as hell wasn’t enough money to buy one.”

“No, it was the right cake. The one Ma baked. I managed to get most of the dirt off. Lucky for me, it was a chocolate cake so you couldn’t see the dirt on it. And the bits that broke off, I just squished them all back together again.”

Ganie’s jaw dropped. Then she burst out laughing.

“Gif, my bru! With those grubby paws of yours! We’ll have to make sure Ma doesn’t buy her own cake back at the bazaar. Shame, some poor arsehole’s going to buy it tomorrow and ... eat dirt! Crunch, crunch, crunch! They’ll probably think it’s got nuts in it.”

A reluctant smile spread over Herman’s face. In spite of himself, he gave a nervous little laugh. Ganie curled up on her side, holding her stomach and gasping for air as she bellowed. The vision of some pious church lady buying the cake and feeding it to her prissy, straitlaced little family was too much.

“Imagine them! Chomping away, crunching down on dirt and chocolate cake, spitting out the larger bits ... it’s ... just ... so ... funny!”

Herman became quiet again.

“It is funny, Ganie, but it’s also not so very funny. I swear on the Bible, I will never, ever steal money from Ma’s purse again. I’ll never, ever steal any money from anyone ever again. Never, ever, ever.”

“So what did you do with it? The least you could have done was get us, or me at least, the sweets you’d promised to buy.”

“Are you mad in the head? What do you think would have happened to me then? God would probably have struck me down with lightning. No way. I waited until Ma got into the bath, then I went and put the money back in her purse without anyone seeing.”

Tears now rolled down Herman’s freckled cheeks freely as he picked at the dried blood and bits of skin on his tattered knees. Realising his remorse was heartfelt, Ganie stopped laughing. She wiped her own tears of laughter from her cheeks.

“Shit, you really mean it, don’t you? Come on, boet. It was just an accident,” she said. “It was a coincidence. It could have happened to anybody.”

“No it wasn’t. It was God teaching me a lesson, punishing me for being a thief. If a person is bad, bad things happen to him. If he’s good, then good things will happen.”

That was forty years earlier. And Herman, today an attorney holding millions of his clients’ money in trust accounts, had never wavered from his promise to himself.

“Good God, boet, how can you not remember? I mean, you wouldn’t even accept the music I’d copied for you last year,” Ganie said as she rose from the bench. “You were barely nine years old, my dear brother, and you’d discovered the principle of karma.”

### **Chapter Three: Love is Never Enough**

Death was coming thick and fast these days. For most of her life Ganie had mercifully escaped losing people close to her, the death of her grandparents being the lone exception. Which was fair enough—the old were expected to die sooner or later and how Ganie dealt with it was from a distance. Of course, there was that other terrible death thirty years ago, the one she did not care to think about. Ever. And, of course, Guy dying in '98.

That was the year she formed an intensely intimate relationship with death. The marriage, her second, to Guy had been ill-considered and brief, his dying not entirely undesirable.

Could it be that long ago? Could nearly a decade have passed since that awful year? Ganie always marvelled at the elasticity of time. So much had happened since then—the person she'd become back then seemed entirely unfamiliar to her and the circumstances alien—yet it felt that if she reached behind her, she'd be able to touch those days. But now, with death having become such a frequent visitor, Ganie's nights had become uneasy, her dreams troubled by unfinished business.

“So, what *about* the ashes?” she said. Having begged off cooking dinner, she had brought Kittie to the Brass Bell in Kalk Bay. They had finished their meal and were basking in the afterglow of the sun, watching a full moon rise and the swelling tide as waves crashed ever closer over the retaining walls into the adjacent pool.

“I mean, we now have three lots of the damn stuff. God, you’d swear our family were collectors of human ashes. Nobody’s bothered to take the initiative to get rid of my father’s ashes, so he’s languishing in a little cardboard box in the bottom drawer of my filing cabinet. It’s too peculiar how small that box is. Guy’s ashes filled a box at least twice the size, if not more.”

Ganie took a sip of red wine as she reached for the menu. “Are we having dessert? They make the most delicious crème brûlée here. I highly recommend it.”

It had been three weeks since Uncle Jorrie died. After the tears and chaos that followed the funeral and the endless practical details that had to be taken care of to pick up the pieces of life without Jorrie, Kittie had moved in with Ganie and the two had settled into a hit-and-miss type of routine. Ganie would wake up early in the mornings to see what her Inbox held and read whatever submissions might have arrived from her students. A journalist for most of her life, she had long since given up on the precarious existence of the freelancer and the vagaries of corporate media houses that were becoming more intractable and greedy by the day. During a seemingly endless lull in commissions from her usual editors, she decided to try something different. She tinkered together a website as she waited for work that never seemed to come. She spent many days optimising the site’s content with well-placed key words to make sure it would be picked up by search engines. Then she launched *Writing for Godot*, her online school of fiction. It had been done more as a joke than anything else, but Ganie was in business.

Kittie would rise much later, but by the time she emerged from the spare bedroom, Ganie would be ready for her second cup of coffee for the day. They would have coffee, then Kittie would scour the job ads in the newspapers. She would read a bit and watch some television. In the evenings, Ganie would cook a light supper or they would go out for dinner. Then the two would settle down over a bottle of wine to discuss life in general and death in particular, reviewing their own mortality and purpose in the greater scheme of things. Thus, they managed to deal with their loss and gingerly tested the scary reality of whatever life awaited them.

It worked for them. There were fewer tears now.

“I don’t know what Dana will want to do,” Kittie said. “About the ashes, I mean. And, of course, Oupa Sam’s still imprisoned in that stupid pot on my dad’s bookshelf. I’m not looking forward to clearing out that house.”

“And let’s not forget poor old Monty—all cold and alone in her grave. Gone and forgotten. None of us even live in Port Elizabeth anymore, so there’s nobody to visit her. I don’t think that’s right.”

“Well, it’s too bad. I mean, what can we do now? She’s been dead and buried for twenty years. Her ashes, I mean. Fôkôl we *can* do.”

“I know, but still.” Ganie reached over to take another sip of wine. “It just seems ... I mean, I can’t bear to think of her abandoned like that, even if she deserved it. It’s almost like she’s been ... excommunicated from the family or something.”

“Ja, well, she’s dead. I doubt it’s bothering her. It’s only ashes anyway. She’s probably the angels’ choirmaster up there by now.”

“I know. But it’s still sad,” said Ganie.

Kittie reached for Ganie’s cigarettes on the table, pulled one from the packet with casual ease and lit it, narrowing her eyes as she dragged the smoke into her lungs with gratifying pleasure, head thrown back and tilted slightly to the side. No doubt about it, Ganie thought, Kittie believed she deserved this cigarette.

“I’ll buy you another packet on the way home,” Kittie added with a guilty glance in Ganie’s direction.

“Don’t sweat.” Ganie dismissed the promise, sat back and lit a cigarette of her own, looking out over waves slamming against the side of the tidal pool. These days, she’d simply taken to doubling her cigarette purchases. She poured another glass of wine and took a sip.

“Fuck it,” she said. “You could call me a death-and-funeral veteran these days. You need your event planned? I’m your one-stop shop, the answer to all your coffin assessment, flower, hymn and text selection, eulogy-composing needs.”

Kittie waved her hand.

“Whatever, cuz. Do you remember Monty’s stories about how they travelled by ox wagon from Indwe to Barkley East for nagmaal?”

“Of course I remember,” said Ganie. “How they sewed dresses for months on end for the occasion, baked bread and made biltong and stuff. You can’t believe how much effort was required of the faithful in those days, can you? Getting to a simple church service was just plain hard work. And the days must have been so much longer. I wonder what she would have thought of life today.”

“Thank God she’s not alive to see what’s happened to me!” said Kittie.

“Yeah, I don’t think she’d ever have lived that down. You, the largest jewel in her cute little diamanté crown. The last great musical hope for the family. You were always her favourite, you know.”

“I know. I suppose one always does. I always denied it, in case anyone thought I agreed with her.” Kittie’s one eyebrow shot up. “Can you imagine, though, how different my life would have been if it hadn’t been for Monty and your father?”

“What do you mean? What does my father ... and Monty, for that matter ... have to do with your choices in life? You’re too old to go blaming your fuck-ups on them.”

“I don’t. I’m responsible for a lot that went wrong in my life. Most of it, I guess. But I never really stood a chance, Ganie. Not a snowball’s hope in hell. Think about it—how was anybody going to allow me to sing for a living after the way your father ended up? You know what my father is ... was ... like. And Dana. To them being a singer is like ... .. well ... to them it’s only a small step up from being a tramp or something. They never attached value to art. They couldn’t see how a person could earn a living from it. And after all the trouble with your father, there was no way on God’s earth that they were going to allow me to go down that road. They were not going to let me near a stage. No, I had to become a fucking teacher.”

That made sense, though Ganie had never thought of it like that. She had always reproached Kittie for wasting her talent, accusing her of being too narrow-minded and conformist to take the plunge and perform professionally.

“And now it’s too late,” she said. “What a bloody tragedy. Much as I loved Uncle Jorrie, you should have stood your ground. You should not have allowed him—all your husbands, for that matter—to control you like that.”

Much as music had been a sublime gift in the family, it was also the common thread that ran through a seemingly endless series of dots, and those dots so often represented heartache. They were the punctuation marks in the long sentence of family history. The prose in between was generally dreary, poorly rendered. The dots, on the other hand, were war and grand human conflict, though on family-contained scale. Yet, sometimes, concealed between parentheses, lay the rare, sweet gem, waiting for excavation. Long periods of the prosaic, punctuated by eruptions that caused momentary upheaval, sometimes redirecting entire courses onto a parallel track. In between the semi-colons of argument, the colons of full-scale combat, the mundanity of the prose, Ganie wanted to find something to give reason to it all. The

trick was to find the something. Hell, just to know what type of something she was looking for would help. But it remained elusive, that amorphous gem she sought. Maybe it was a glorious achievement, as yet undefined, even so waiting in the wings for the recognition it craved. She knew it was there, interred and trapped by a pair of brackets. At the age of fifty, though, it remained latent, superscripted by a domination of punctuation, speckled with a hailstorm of ellipses.

Ganie thought again of her father as he lay dying in hospital. The shock when she first saw him had been paralyzing. What had shocked her most was how much he'd resembled his mother in those last days.

"I got such a fright when I saw him before he died," she said. "He wasn't even that old. Fucksakes, seventy-six is a perfectly liveable age these days. But he looked as ancient as Methuselah. And you know what else? He looked exactly like Monty. I was totally spooked. It might as well have been Monty lying there, those big, frightened eyes pleading with me. It was terrible to see death in a person's eyes, Kitts. Especially one who clearly didn't want to die. He was scared. Nothing he could do about it, though. It was as if Monty had already arrived to take him away with her."

"Yeah, it's funny how men can start to resemble women when they get old. Except, after *my* father died he looked exactly like Oupa Sam. At least he went quickly. Your father's death must have been horrible to watch. The way he died, I mean. Even though I came to resent him later on, I always hero-worshipped him. He was so amazingly gifted."

"Gifted in more ways than one, I'd say. His biggest gift was to make other people miserable."

Isak's music, that powerful baritone of his, was the thing Ganie came first to fear, then hate most about her father. That was, as far as she was concerned, at the very root of all the trouble. Watching him in hospital, she had been humbled by the cruel irony of it all.

"I wouldn't wish an ending like that on my worst enemy," she said. "Hell, not even George Bush ... or Robert Mugabe!"

Whatever confused emotions Ganie had felt at her father's passing had little to do with his dying and everything with his living. She'd had difficulty isolating a single emotion—instead there was an incongruous mixture of sadness that felt as if it would abide forever, yet at the same time she felt relieved, even though the big wrong that

had been Isak Blignault would henceforth find neither retribution nor vindication. What wrongs he had wrought would never be righted. All the same, the spectacle of him lying in his hospital bed, desperately trapped, so shrunken, had filled her with compassion. Once so handsome, he finished his days looking like a broken old woman.

“He’d come full circle, poor bastard. Do you know how hard it is to write off a parent, Kitts? To finally, irrevocably, accept that nothing, but nothing, will ever change what that person has done? You can try, as I do sometimes, to rewrite history, you can put a spin on things, but there is nothing on God’s green earth you can do to change what’s happened. Worst of all is when you’re still a little hopeful, and then the creeping realisation dawns that you are impotent, utterly powerless to change a person’s future behaviour. Most of all you feel like a traitor. As a child you think that if you’re good enough, clever enough, adorable enough, the parent you dread would have some epiphany or something and things will change as a reward for your goodness ... because you deserve it.

“And when you realise that is never going to happen, what do you do? You start chasing, Kitts. You chase and chase and chase. Everything. You try assorted gods in all their shapes and sizes. You try psychology. You read incessantly, everything you can possibly lay your hands on about every possible dysfunction in the book. Is he schizophrenic? No, his madness does not encompass hallucination, no matter how paranoid he is. You try metaphysics. You read and read. You try to understand. And when your search fails to bring answers, you just go off your trolley. Sex and drugs and Led Zeppelin.

“In the end, all you achieve is to become defined by your tormentor. Then you become defined by your escape routes, away from him. At times, most scary of all, you become your tormentor. How do you recover from that, Kittie?

“In your last, desperate attempt at survival, you develop Stockholm Syndrome, casting your lot in with him. You take his side in everything, you begin to hate your mother, blaming her because she’s the cause of it all. She has to be. Did he not say so? And you hate yourself for that new betrayal. But what else must you do? And then, after many, many cycles of this, cycles of a truly uncountable chain of devastation, atonement, reparation, forgiveness, elation, devastation, you begin to realise at your deepest core, in your DNA, that your impact doesn’t even register on

the radar. Your very presence, even, is in vain. It's never going to make a difference. The horrible truth dawns on you—that man, your father, the good-looking guy, the clever guy, the talented guy, the witty guy, the women-go-weak-at-the-knees guy—that man, that father whose love and approval you so desperately crave, whom you are yourself so desperate to love—that man is a psychopath.”

Kittie did not interrupt her cousin. As Ganie spoke, she sat silently looking out over the water, sniffing occasionally and wiping her eyes.

“You were cheated, Ganie. All of you. We never knew. Even if we'd known, we'd probably have pretended we didn't. I'm sure some people must have known. And then, to die like that? I just cannot understand it at all. How could the doctors have operated on a man whose health was so clearly not up for surgery? They ought to be sued.”

“I know, but Herman will have none of it.”

Isak Blignault's suffering at the end was profound. The tracheostomy pipe through his throat that enabled his breathing prevented him from uttering a word or taking a sip of water for fear the water would run into his lungs and make him choke and drown, even though his body was in no way dehydrated, thanks to the liquid he received through the drip in his arm.

“He died as thirsty as ever. Maybe he just thought he was thirsty because they wouldn't give him any water to drink. It was awful. And do you know what a disgusting thought I had as I stood there watching him die? I can hardly bring myself to say it. It's just too shameful. I thought, the wages of sin, old man, the wages of sin ...

“He was just an old man, Kittie. A foolish, deluded old man who spent his entire life trying to get rid of a terrible pain by dumping it onto others. And then he died, robbed of both his gifts ... the building blocks of his agony as well as his ecstasy, if you'll pardon the dramatics.”

Isak's gift, his voice, was a double-edged weapon: On one hand an instrument of transcendence, on the other, one of terror. In one minute it would lure and charm like the Lorelei, in the next it would thunder and destroy. When sweet Schubert issued forth, those within listening distance would melt. But the Elf King balanced on a knife's edge. It was a turncoat with the fluid and seamless ability to transpose itself in

an instant into violent, demented obscenity, a shape-shifter wearing harmony and dissonance with equal ease.

Along with the genetics—that physical accident which provided him with such extraordinary physiology—his throat had another, more ominous quality. That was its unquenchable thirst, of which brandy was the preferred slaker. As if the very voice were a beast requiring constant feeding.

At the end he was able neither to sing nor shout nor drink. Incapable of uttering a whisper of remorse—had there been one to offer—or having a drop of water. Parched and silent, he died with both his thirsts on the rampage. The spiritual and the physical, both denied the blue-eyed would-be master of song.

“I tell you this, Kitts, our family was cursed with a terrible curse. We have a pathological problem of music. It’s a misery dressed up in its Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes to lull us into complacent delusion. It’s trouble in drag. God’s so-called gift is nothing more than God’s curse. The curse of music. The joke is on us. You may think, Kittie, that you’re blessed because of being gifted, but you’re mistaken. You’re just goddamned jinxed.”

“Like Monty,” said Kittie and blew her nose.

“Yep, like Monty. Where the trouble all started in the first place.”

“I adored Monty. She had greatness in her, no matter what anyone says, but by God she could be so bloody blatant about her favourites. Didn’t she once even tell him he should never have been born?”

“Not only once, I believe. Apparently she made it quite clear throughout. Put it this way, our dear Monty was nobody’s fool, but what a weird one she was.”

And Monty’s death was equal to the weirdness. Almost as if one day, in her spare time, of which she had a great deal, she just upped and died.

Monty died shortly after New Year and the incident that had turned the Christmas of 1985 into the worst yet in a family accustomed to Christmas disaster. Monty died as she had lived—with extravagance and genius. And to the lasting exasperation of all.

That was the last Christmas before the brass urn holding their Oupa Sam’s cremated remains made its debut on the family stage. That hot potato that trekked intrepidly between brothers, each year kindling new arguments, new theories, new anxiety—all of them mere variations on the same perplexed theme—until it

eventually became hostage to a bookshelf in Jorrie Blignault's study. After Monty died, her ashes were interred in a silver chalice and buried with respect and ceremony in one of the twin gravesites reserved for the couple at Little Walmer Cemetery in Port Elizabeth. However, when her husband of nearly sixty years followed a mere seven months later, his remains found no such rest.

As Christmases came and went, so did the passion around the arguments wax and wane, and while never wholly forgotten, the controversy surrounding Oupa Sam's ashes and the unspeakable pain that had caused it to remain unburied did eventually die down to a large degree.

For Ganie, the brass urn represented all that was wrong with the family. It reminded her of a time when ice had come to settle in her heart, growing rock-solid over time. To all in the family, it was a reminder of a diminutive old woman who held a gargantuan secret for longer anyone would think possible. Ganie often wondered why it was always the women who carried such dreadful secrets, when it was the men who were mostly responsible for their existence in the first place? She wondered if, some day, she would be able to excise some of her own secrets from the cold dungeon of her heart. All she ever seemed to manage was to relocate their positions, dust them off, powder their noses and then, momentarily, believe them to be gone. Frequently, she felt it in her teeth. Where other people generally held the belief that the soul was situated in the vicinity of the heart or even the head, Ganie was resolutely convinced it lurked in the teeth.

And could it be that hell was cold? Like the frost sheet on a can of ice-cold beer? At a very specific point during the festivities on that Christmas day of 1985, Ganie remembered the trapdoor slamming shut—a vice grip every bit as real as the glazed gammon with its pineapple slices and cherries neatly arranged on top, the vintage Cabernet Sauvignon, the roast potatoes and the bread pudding, each of which had by then found its way into a zone of predictable discomfort in her belly. As if, around her heart, little icicles had crystallised and compacted to form a cave, with no way out but to melt the ice.

Years later, she still recalled the moment with lucid clarity, though why the incident should have triggered an emotional reaction that simply would not go away, she couldn't understand. It was as if seeing Monty like that was a sign that worse was to come. Which, of course, it did. A whole coffin-load of it.

When Monty walked through the double doors separating the lounge from the dining room wearing nothing more than her bra and old-lady knickers, which did nothing to hide the hills and valleys, lumps and contusions of her ageing body, a mortified silence descended on the family. The state of her body, which had been ballooning steadily for months as her kidneys gradually laid down arms in surrender under the toxins that were taxing them so, was a shock to all. If her near nudity had been the only blow the family had to contend with, the incident may not have held such menace. But Monty did nothing in half measures. She did things with style. And she entered the dining room singing at the top of her lungs:

“Daaahling I am grow-ing ooooooo-oold, siiiiiil-ver threads a-mong the goooold!”

Her voice, once so pure, was shaky from age and white wine—who knows, maybe even an Ativan or three. One had to give it to Monty, though, she could still hold a tune. Her eyes were bursting with life and mischief, the brown flecks in her yellow-green irises frolicking like a thousand little dervishes. Almost as if it were the rest of the party, not she, who were making idiots of themselves.

The family was speechless as the shock settled in, unsure whether she was drunk, as high as a kite or simply suffering the onset of senility. The other possibility, of course, and Ganie wouldn't have put it past her, was that she was none of those, but had rather decided to have some fun. Play a trick on the family. But, of course, soon afterwards Monty died and nobody ever really got to the bottom of her bizarre behaviour, even given the information they were to receive a short few weeks hence.

Ganie was as grateful as everyone else gathered around that cheerful table for Uncle Jorrie's presence of mind. After a very long stunned moment, he was the first to regain his composure. Bursting into a diffident chuckle, he quickly grabbed the crocheted knee blanket off Monty's special rocking chair and covered her up as well he could before gently ushering her out of the dining room and towards a bedroom. Ganie didn't know for sure, but she was ready to bet on it that he gave her an injection to calm her down.

The others also began to giggle, though half-heartedly, talking about the effects on senility of alcohol and how Monty just seemed to be getting more ornery by the day. Cynical, knowing looks passed between her daughters-in-law.

Oupa Sam never smiled again that day or for the rest of his days. As Monty was being steered to the bedroom, Ganie glanced at her grandfather, whom she loved and

treasured above everyone else in the room. He was silent, his eyes downcast, spectacles misted over and shoulders hunched. He was clutching his bright and happy red Christmas serviette against his mouth, that mouth now so sunken and wrinkled with age. And that was the moment. It was a premonition, of that she was certain. She had become all iced up and alienated, her precarious equilibrium shoved clear off its axis.

Monty was a fascinating character, all right. Beautiful, vibrant and gifted when alive, she had stood no taller than five-foot-one in her socks and wore a size one-and-a-half shoe. She also had an extraordinary behind. In all fairness, the size of it became incongruous only towards the end, when the toll exacted by the alcohol and pharmaceuticals could no longer be contained and the excess water retained seemed to overload that slight frame so grotesquely. Yes, Monty was a rare creature. Ganie thought it ironic that her greatest gifts—the music, the beauty—seemed to have been also the demons that destroyed her. As it did her son many years later.

Monty was taken up in hospital on New Year's Day, slipping in and out of her coma for two whole weeks, Oupa Sam sitting next to her bed, holding her hand and praying almost without letup. Her kidneys had failed finally and her body was becoming more fatally toxic by the hour. But Oupa Sam refused to let go.

On the very last day, the day that Monty died, she became lucid one more time.

“Why won't you let me go?” She asked, tears popping out of her eyes.

“I can't,” he said. “I'm too scared. How can I live in this world if you're not in it? I just ... I just ... I love you too much.”

“Oh, Sam, you have to let go. I can't live like this.” She closed her eyes for a long while and then opened them again.

“Sammy, there's something I have to tell you. Please, you must promise to forgive me, but I can't seem to die with this on my conscience,” she whispered.

“Anything, Monty. You know I'll forgive you anything,” he said.

“It happened when we lived in Indwe,” she began. “Before Isak was born. Remember, you had to go to Cape Town to write your final UNISA exams?”

Sam nodded his head, suddenly terrified of what he was about to hear.

“It was Joop. Remember? Joop Brewis. The doctor who was the locum there for a while. Well ... I ... we ... I fell pregnant. We had to do it, don't you understand? We had to get rid of it. What would the people have said?”

Monty closed her eyes again. It was a long time before she spoke again.

“Please say you’ll forgive me,” she whispered, but Oupa Sam didn’t answer. Then she died.

The old man sat there shattered. He had let go of her cold hand much earlier and now his head rested on the bed next to Monty’s swollen, poisoned body. The tears he shed were the last tears he would ever shed, the light of unshakable faith in God fading forever from his eyes.

That was how Uncle Jorrie found him, Kittie told Ganie later.

And that was how the brass urn holding their grandfather’s ashes came to be held hostage on Uncle Jorrie’s bookshelf—the holder of a betrayal so deep it could find no forgiveness. The last reminder of Monty’s rarefied existence, Oupa Sam’s remains failed to find peace after unearthing a fifty-seven-year-old secret—restless, troubled, agitated.

“And poor old Oupa Sam always wanted to live to be a hundred. That’s the one thing I find difficult to forgive Monty,” Ganie said.

After Monty died, he flatly refused to go home. His things were packed up in his absence and his personal belongings taken to the retirement home where Uncle Jorrie had found him a place after calling in a few favours. He wanted nothing from the house except his clothes—not even his Bible went with him for comfort. Comfort was not something Oupa Sam ever found again during what was left of his life before he died fourteen years short of his goal.

“I went to visit him a few times in the old-age home, you know,” Kittie said. “He spoke very little and he never, ever smiled, no matter how hard I tried to cheer him up. Of course, he never mentioned Monty again, except to make my father promise that he would not have his ashes buried next to hers. I suppose it was too much to expect him to greet eternity with her by his side after a betrayal that was so deep. He’d loved her so very much.”

Sam Blignault’s love for his wife was immeasurable and obvious to all. Whether she loved him back was something the family frequently debated. He could only have hoped that she did, even if it was only with a fraction of the love he held for her.

“He probably believed that he had enough love for the both of them,” said Kittie.

“I suppose,” Ganie replied, “it’s just never enough. No matter how much love you have, it’s just never enough.”

## **Chapter Four: A Year of Weeping**

“Introducing yourself to people as a widow just sounds so much more appealing than having to tell them you’re a divorcee,” Ganie told her friend Jerome once the dust had settled over the funeral in ’98. This was the first of three thoughts that had come to her afterwards. When it came she smiled for the first time in over a week.

“I could definitely get used to it,” she added.

The week Guy died had been a tough one. Being the main attraction at a funeral—in this case, the memorial service that preceded the ritual burning of the body—was new to her. She had attended only one other in her life and that was more than twenty years before. Naturally, it wouldn’t be the last, but she had every intention of keeping her presence at funerals to the barest minimum. When she was younger, she simply told herself she did not agree with the concept of the funeral. Now, she wasn’t so sure anymore. She had always believed that it was just a matter of dispensing with the body—after all, the person once inhabiting that body having long since left the building, so to speak. She still believed this, but she also believed that funerals were for the living, not the dead, and that the people doing the living probably did need some ritual to come to terms with the absence of those doing the dying.

All the same, the days following the death of her second husband and running up to the cremation had been harrowing. By the time of his death—from unnatural causes, as the police put it—they had been separated for two months, although no

divorce proceedings had begun. The circumstances had been just too chaotic and poor Guy far too wasted.

The next important thought that came to Ganie was altogether more disturbing.

“I killed him as surely as had I put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger,” she told Jerome. That much, depending on how you chose to look at it, was surely true. Not that Ganie felt any guilt. How could she? He’d had it coming. He’d done it to himself, she said.

The third thought came only months later, after she’d had time to think things through.

“At least he had the good manners to die,” she said in the pub one night. In retrospect, she should have lowered her voice when she spoke, because several heads turned to look at the person uttering such callousness. Ganie could swear the area around her and Jerome cleared of customers straight after she said it.

“Oh well,” she brushed off the reaction. “Unless you’d known Guy, you wouldn’t understand.”

These were the three enduring observations Ganie had whenever she thought back over the three years in her life that she had known, loved and resented Guy. One, being a widow sure beat being a divorcee. Two, kicking him out of the house, as justified an action as that had been, was the trigger that killed him, as surely as God made little green apples. And three, perish the thought that he might have been impolite enough to stay alive, sticking around to make her life a living hell. His dying was an act of pure courtesy.

Which was not to say that Ganie did not grieve his passing. On the contrary, she cried solidly for a whole year. She cried for him, for them, for all the promise that would now forever be unrequited. She cried for his life and for his death. She cried for his poor body, lying so lifeless and cold on a slab in the morgue—so inanimate, so bloated, so patched in purple. How did the attending doctor describe it, apologetic in trying to soften the blow when she went there to identify the body?

“Lividity impossible to hide on the side he was lying when he died.”

She could see there was no more Guy in that blob of flesh that had once provided the means for him to smile, laugh, crack jokes and, of course, rip and maim with that mordant tongue that could be so alarmingly mean. All that animation now gone.

Ganie had never before had a proper look at a dead body. The image was to stay with her for a long time, making her sweat at night.

“Thank you for dying, Guy,” she whispered to herself often. “Thank you for making the problem go away. But what about me now, asshole?”

Yes, indeed, what about her? In life, Guy had been a large man, both in body and in presence. In death, she could see he would loom titanic.

“I just cannot see another man in your hobnailed Doc Martins,” she told him.

And then cried some more.

She went to see the drug dealer the day after she identified his body, three days before the cremation. She had been to the hovel where Guy got his drugs a few times before when she went to drag him out of there, and she had met Lexington on those occasions. But she wanted Lexington to explain to her what had happened to complete the sketchy picture painted for her by the authorities. It was dangerous. It was 1998, after all. Drug dealers were getting it from all sides. On the one hand, they had to stay one step ahead of the cops, as always—on the other, their places of business were still being torched by vigilantes. Not a good time to be in the dealing business. Call it a slump in trade, although some of that trade had already been taken over by the very organisation that was trying to rid the city of the nefarious and pernicious goings on in the drug dens of Cape Town. By then, the vigilantes, at least some of them, had turned. Maybe they had just been naïve in their efforts.

Nonetheless, Gympie Street is never a good place to be. Ganie had to hand it to them, though—they had their system down pat. On the street corner, a sentry kept watch—a grotesquely disabled young man in a wheelchair parked in the middle of the road, which was pockmarked with potholes and debris, a road that had not seen the business end of a bulldozer in many a long year. She guessed the Public Works Department wasn't exactly falling over its feet to restore that particular part of town to suburban concord. Then, again, the neighbourhood citizens were probably not in any great hurry to have official intervention on their turf in the interests of aesthetics or otherwise.

The sentry allowed her through. It was obviously clear to him that she posed no threat. A nuisance, maybe. Trouble, potentially. But nothing that couldn't be handled. Sometimes it's an advantage to be middle-aged, white and middleclass.

When Ganie approached in her car, she was summarily forced to stop in her tracks or run the risk of running down the sad young man in the wheelchair. She saw a dozen or so youths hot-foot it into the row of semi-detached houses that lined the street. She imagined these were drug houses and shebeens and the youths were off to give punters and dealers the heads-up that somebody was coming calling. Then, one by one, they emerged from the houses again and approached her car, looking her up and down with shrewd, sharp little eyes. Guy had once told her about these youngsters, whose noses for business and uncanny powers of observation were legendary. A cop, even one in plain clothes, was spotted a mile away. Ditto the vigilantes. Not that that would make much of a difference, Ganie thought. There's no arguing with a pipe bomb, even if you're a cripple in a wheelchair.

"I want to see Lexington," she announced to the first youth to reach her car.

"Who are you?" asked the young lieutenant through the car window.

"Don't worry. I'm not here to make trouble. Tell him Guy's wife wants to speak to him. He knows me."

The youth disappeared into the dilapidated doorway again and re-emerged after a while, motioning for Ganie to come in.

"What the hell happened here?" she asked upon entering the rundown house. She looked around her. The place was even more pathetically neglected and threadbare than she remembered. For one, the linoleum that had once covered the bare cement floor had been stripped off.

Through the door to the bedroom to her right, she saw Lexington curled up under a pile of dirty and foul-smelling blankets. His eyes, frightened and haunted, peered over the blankets, which he clasped with both hands under his chin. It was only when Ganie entered the room that she noticed the other man sitting sunken in what appeared to be a cheap two-seater couch, but was in fact the backseat of a car.

"Lexington?" Ganie asked the corpse-like figure under the blankets. "Do you remember me? I'm Guy's wife. Remember? The clothing designer. I came to fetch him here a couple of times."

"Yes, of course. I remember you." The wizened little figure slithered into an upright position.

"He died here on Saturday. What happened? What had he been taking?"

“Nothing, I swear. I’m not dealing anymore. Look at this place. There’s nothing left to deal,” said Lexington. His voice had the gravelly quality of walnuts being grated. The last time she was here, it had been a different Lexington she’d spoken to. One who had kicked his Mandrax habit. The ravages of years of abuse had been all too clearly etched on his face, lined so deeply and in fact very interestingly, it looked like a roadmap drawn in the Kalahari desert, lines criss-crossing the deeply furrowed skin. Now, clearly, Lexington was back on the stuff.

Ganie looked around the room. The man on the car seat shuffled around restlessly.

“Want an *entjie*, bru’?” he asked.

“Sure,” said Lexington as the cigarette changed hands. He turned his face to address Ganie again and his bloodshot eyes darted from side to side, as if he was cornered. He looked embarrassed. “He came here with a friend—from work, he said. But the friend left. Guy wasn’t using, just drinking. Then he went to lie down in the back room. My son and his girlfriend were sleeping there. He went to sleep there also. Then he died.”

“Show me,” said Ganie.

The man on the chair shifted, as if he wanted to put an end to this unlikely interview.

“It’s okay, bru’,” said Lexington, pushing the blankets off him as if they weighed a ton. He got up painfully, shivering. Ganie imagined that he must be coming down from whatever drug he’d been on. Probably Mandrax.

He fastened the button on his denims and adjusted his filthy vest, stained with sweat and what might have been drool and God knows what else. Squeezing past her, he began shuffling out through the bedroom door.

“What happened here?” Ganie wanted to know, as she once more took in the surroundings.

“Ag man, it’s the Pagad, but that was a time ago. Now my wife has left me. She took everything, man. *Alles*. You can see, she even ripped up the carpet. I’ve got bugger all left. *Fôkôl*.” He shook his head at the outrageous unfairness of it all.

Ganie looked at the slight creature moving ahead of her. A life wasted. So many lives wasted.

The bedraggled procession of three filed through the bare living room, the kitchen and into the poky room at the back—the infamous back room, once the place of bliss

for many a crackhead. This was the place where the hard-core drugs had been dispensed and shot up, back in the glory days of Lexington's drug-peddling business. An empty hole now, the room was just sad and dark. A shadowy pit that had consumed and excreted promise and dream with equal vigour.

Ganie could smell it. A cold, clammy, sweet smell hit her as they entered the room. It was much more than the smell of a hundred lost souls, desperate for their next fix. It was the smell of death. It was like entering the cold embrace of death, its claws reaching up around her body, into her nose, through her sinuses, down her windpipe, into her lungs and then coldly threading a lattice around her heart. She shivered.

"Guy," she whispered. "Why like this? Why here?"

"He went to sleep on the bed here," said Lexington. "Then my son's girlfriend woke up and his arm was pinning her down. It was ice cold. She screamed and managed to get out from under it and ran to call me. He died in his sleep."

"Bullshit, Lexington!" Ganie shouted. "Crap. People don't come here for a nap—they come to use. They don't die of heart attacks or old age or something. You bloody well tell me right now what he'd taken."

"Nothing, I swear. At least, not here. I'm not dealing anymore. I have nothing to deal." The drug dealer's tired eyes were pleading with her to let it go. "See, here, this is the blanket he had over him."

She touched the grimy, threadbare maroon bedspread he held out to her and immediately regretted it. It was cold and still damp, giving off that same sickeningly sweet smell. She was fast getting used to it. The damp was Guy's death sweat. A fly kept buzzing around them and wouldn't be shooed away.

"Get me out of here," she snapped, suddenly very aware of the reality that a death had taken place right here, in this sordid hellhole. The sheer physicality of it was pressing down on her. She could feel the residue of Guy's presence here. The air was thick with it, as if he was trying to get a message through to her.

"I swear, Lexington, I'm going to get to the bottom of it and when I do, I'll be back and you'll be fucking sorry."

The diminutive dealer's eyes registered fright, but that may just have been the paranoia of the severely addicted. After all, what could she do to him that could conceivably be worse than the hell he was living already? Still, she felt better for making the threat.

Lexington's goon, his shadow, made a movement, wanting to protect his general, but Lexington held him back.

"*Wag, man.* She's okay. She's just upset."

Ganie walked towards the front door and was about to leave when Lexington called her back.

"He was our friend, you know. He was so sad. He slept here many nights. He'd be sitting on the pavement in the road, just sitting there, staring in front of him for hours. I often sent one of the kids to go and call him inside. Then we'd put him to bed. He always said he was going to start designing clothes again—for your daughter. What's her name again? He always spoke about your daughter. How beautiful she is—how famous he's going to make her."

Ganie had to get out. She ran to the car, where she could breathe again. Then she went home and got on with her year of weeping.

"I did it to him," Ganie told Kittie as they drove home from the Brass Bell. "As surely as if I'd put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger. I did it."

## **Chapter Five: What Would Jesus Do?**

In the dead quiet of the night, the explosion of the gunshot sent adrenaline coursing through Kittie's body. She was paralysed, ears ringing and eyes temporarily blinded, though wide open. The phantom of the scrawny little creep running, running, running still burned on her retina.

"I got him!" she wanted to shout, but her throat was too dry. Now she could see him stumbling, right foot knocking against the left ankle, his Harlemaesque red and white running shoes flashing like strobes. Then he fell.

"I got him," she whispered against her hoarse throat when the triumph of the scream failed. Slowly, her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room. Without recognising it, she discerned an irregularly-shaped shadow against the wall.

"Where the hell am I?" she wondered as she lay paralysed on the bed, her mind still racing to figure out what she was to do with the immobilised Cupido supposedly lying fifteen metres away from her.

This was all wrong. It was too dark. And there was no field. If not on the field, then where was the gun fired? Could she have imagined it?

Slowly she became aware of her surroundings and sighed with relief when she realised she was in Ganie's spare bedroom. She'd been sleeping in this bed for twenty-one nights already. It had been a dream, familiar and disturbing though it was. She hadn't dreamed about shooting Cupido for years. Stupid Cupid.

In the early days after the incident, the dream had been persistent. She is driving along Paarl Main Road in rush-hour traffic. A man on a bicycle peddles to her left, but she pays him no attention. Traffic light after traffic light, the bicycle seems to keep pace with her car. Then he swerves, probably to avoid something in the road, and in trying to avoid colliding with her, his hand reaches out to the bonnet of the dark blue Monza to steady himself. He glances over his shoulders and his startled eyes meet hers.

“You!” she splutters. Shock registers slowly, then fear, then fury. “You ... you ...”

Her reflexes jump into action. With screeching tyres, she accelerates to the left, ramping the pavement, where she stops the car with all the grace of a male tortoise humping its female. She reaches into her handbag. The misery that is Cupido has by now abandoned his bicycle and is sprinting along the pavement. Not even bothering to close the car door, Kittie sets off after him, her little .22 pistol cocked and ready. As he reaches the next block, Cupido seems to falter, undecided about which direction to take next. Then he turns sharply left towards the open field next to the school and scrambles over the waist-high fence. Kittie does not hesitate—kicking off her shoes, she follows.

“Stop, you motherfucker! Stop!” she screams. “If you don’t fucking well stop, I’m shooting!”

But Cupido runs.

And Kittie shoots.

That was how it happened in reality and that was how it replayed itself in her dream. Wounded in his left calf, Cupido was going nowhere. She had caught him single-handedly. She’d caught him and shot him nearly eighteen months after he climbed through the window of her third-floor flat with the intention to rape. Were it not for her quick thinking as she woke up that Sunday night, she believed, she would definitely have been raped, possibly even murdered.

When Cupido Januarie came into Kittie’s flat when she was twenty years old, he had every intention of having some fun before helping himself to what was on offer in the line of material goodies. Stuff he could sell again on the street, or even give to his mommy. It was easy enough to gain access for somebody like him. He was slightly built and a natural gymnast.

He came through the kitchen window after jimmying the bolt with his pocket knife. He then looked around for something bigger and sharper to carry with him as he crept through the flat to find his bearings and take stock. You never knew with these white bitches—some of them could fight like hellcats and although he was strong and wiry for his size, he was not about to take any chances.

Cupido had watched Kittie leaving the Hottentots Holland High School in Somerset West for a whole week—four o'clock on the dot, every afternoon, she'd come out of the schoolyard. Every day he followed her as she walked the three blocks to her flat. A sitting duck for someone like him, he grinned to himself. At her flat, he'd watch her go in and then wait. Sometimes she'd come out again, get in her car and drive away. The car was nothing fancy—just an old Monza—but she had that look of a rich bitch. He would bet her daddy spoiled her rotten. He knew the type—you could see it from the jewellery she wore and the way she walked, as if she owned the whole fôkken world. And oh, she was sexy. Oh man, was she sexy. No taller than him, but those skinny legs as she walked in front of him in her leather mini-skirt! Her auburn hair fell to her shoulders and her face was pale with pretty features, her eyes large and blue. Her nose was too big for the face, but he didn't mind. He liked that. It only made her cuter. Strange. Anything smaller, Cupido thought, would somehow look wrong on that face.

He was impatient to carry out his plan, but forced himself to leave it until the weekend. When she got in her car on the Friday and drove off, he waited and waited, but she didn't return. She'd obviously gone away for the weekend. Probably back to daddy, he thought. That made him angry and frustrated. He'd fôkken well get her, just wait! That bitch was going to get the surprise of her life. He waited the whole weekend, returning to her flat on and off every two or three hours to see whether the blue Monza was back, but it was only after six o'clock on Sunday evening that he saw the car in its parking place under the block of flats. Tonight was the night!

In the kitchen, he found a large carving knife—just the thing to help if she needed any convincing. After checking out the rest of the flat, he went to her bedroom.

When Kittie woke up, Cupido was bent over her, his face barely six inches from hers. She could feel his clammy breath on her face. It smelled of something sweet but not pleasant. She couldn't place it. Instead of panicking, a deathly calm came over her.

“Can I help you?” she asked, her voice steady and polite. This was not what Cupido had expected. Where’s the fright? Where’s the wild panic in the eyes?

“Um ... come on, bitch. We’re going to have some fun, eksê,” he tried, but his voice did not even convince himself.

“Okay,” she said. “But let’s have some coffee first. I’m not my best when I wake up and this is a bit of a surprise. We don’t even know each other yet. And if we’re going to ‘have some fun’, at least let me get myself a bit decent. What’s your name, by the way?”

Cupido was finished. He hadn’t expected this type of reaction. None of the others had ever behaved like that. And although he didn’t trust the bitch for a moment, he wasn’t sure what else to do but go along with her suggestion. He certainly did not want to use the knife so soon. That would spoil all the fun. As he stood back to allow her space to get out of bed, Kittie slowly got up and reached for her dressing gown, which she’d flung over the back of the chair in front of her dressing table.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’m not going to do anything funny. I’m not stupid—you’re the one holding the knife. I just want to put on my dressing gown. We’ll be much more comfortable in the lounge. I have a brand new couch.”

She led him from the bedroom into the kitchen, where she made two cups of instant coffee, Cupido hovering uncomfortably with the knife in his hand, then walked to the lounge where, sitting on the spanking new, crisp white sofa her father had bought her, sipping the hot black coffee, she started to talk. And talk. Her calm exterior in no way reflected the adrenalin-fuelled chain of thoughts that clicked through her head like soldiers marching in a parade. Kittie had summed up the situation well and now she was playing for time.

At first she was the only one talking, but gradually she drew Cupido into her conversation. She spoke about her work. She spoke about the talented children she taught. She spoke about those children who had no talent for music whatsoever, but whose parents insisted they took music lessons. She asked about Cupido’s family and where he went to school. She spoke about God and she spoke about Jesus. And what Jesus would want from a situation like this.

When, after several hours, Cupido became restless, she told him she was calm now and just about ready to do it with him. Before she gave herself to him, however, she would like to read something from the Bible. She was a Christian girl and she did not

believe in sex before marriage. But she would do it if she could read something from the Bible first. And Cupido allowed Kittie to go to her bedroom to fetch the Bible.

Relief washed over Kittie when she realised he had fallen for her bullshit. While talking for her life, the little creep's name had kept running through her head like a refrain: Cupido Januarie, Cupido Januarie. Stupido Cupido. Stupid Cupid. She had to believe that she had the edge in the situation and the only edge she could possibly have was that she was more educated than him. Smarter than him. And telling herself this, the words Stupid Cupid popped into her head.

Reaching her bedroom, she made a dash for her wardrobe with all the speed and stealth she could will into her shaking limbs. Reaching into the shelf where she kept her underwear, she found the key to the miniature safe on the top shelf of the cupboard. She quietly unlocked the safe, took out her firearm and a handful of ammunition, loaded the pistol without dropping a single round, clicked the safety clip to "off" and returned to the lounge, where Cupido Januarie sat waiting for the rewards of his evening's efforts.

"Get the fuck out of my house, you mother-fucking little slug-shit!" she commanded, pointing the gun at her wiry intruder.

Shock took some time to register on his stupefied face. Cupido was dumbstruck. The bitch had been lying all along, playing him for a blêddie fool! Tweegat-fôkken-jakkals bitch! All the hours they spent chatting and here she goes and pulls a fôkken gun on him! And he'd become so relaxed, he wasn't even holding the knife anymore. He could kick himself for allowing the bitch to talk so much. That was what had made him soft—in both places. As she talked, he had begun to realise that tonight's sex would not be the kind he liked best—what he'd had in mind as he climbed through the kitchen window was a pomp of another kind. The kind bitches like her deserved. And now she stood there, pointing a gun at his head and chasing him away.

Kittie stepped aside as Cupido slowly rose from her new white couch. The gun followed him as he walked to the door and it followed him all the way out, down the outside corridor of the block of flats, down the six flights of stairs to the ground and all the way along the parking area into the street. She never fired a shot.

Not then.

"Good shot. Just as well it didn't kill him, though," the burly constable told Kittie after his colleagues had bundled Cupido into the back of the ambulance the day she

shot him on the field adjacent to Hoërskool Gimnasium in Paarl. No matter how deserving of a bullet, you can't just go around shooting and killing people, even those who terrorise you and especially if your retribution comes eighteen months after the crime. And that was before the country's self-defence laws became so stringent.

Despite Kittie giving the police a detailed description of Cupido and an artist's sketch of his face being posted on the walls of police stations throughout the Boland, the police had no success in catching him. They knew his name and where he lived, but Cupido had seemingly disappeared off the face of the earth. His mother was no help—she swore that she had no idea where he was.

Cupido was arrested right there where he lay in the tall, unkempt grass, pleading for mercy, reminding Kittie of their night together, reminding her that she was a child of Jesus and that as a child of Jesus, surely she should forgive him. After all, Jesus would have, Cupido pleaded, crying and pissing in his pants. Kittie just stood there, arms by her sides, staring at him. She felt no compassion. What she really wanted to do was kick him, but she restrained herself. She did not want to antagonise the cops, who could easily have made her life much more difficult in the wake of the shooting.

“Of all the weird coincidences...” she later told Ganie. “That he should be cycling where I was driving, after the cops had been looking for him for a year-and-a-half. I just can't believe it.”

Cupido was sentenced to six years in Victor Verster outside Paarl and Kittie began dreaming about him around the time she imagined he would be released. Psychology 101, really, Dana told her. Obviously her subconscious mind had made a note of the time and was trying to warn her.

“All part of the human self-defence apparatus,” Dana had said.

Kittie was wide awake now. As always, the dream had frightened her, but she told herself that she was in no danger. It all happened long ago and Stupid Cupid belonged to the past. But she knew there would be no further sleep for her tonight. She closed her eyes again, willing herself to relax. She should get up to fetch some water or milk—better yet, detour to the dining room and collect a shot of Ganie's single malt to calm her nerves.

But she stayed in bed, the nagging unease in her gut relentless. Almost as if Cupido was still staring up at her from the grass, pleading, asking her to remember their talk

that night in her flat, reminding her that she had promised to read to him from the Bible.

Kittie turned over to her side and reached out to switch on the lamp next to the bed. If she was going to spend the rest of the night awake, at least she wanted to know how much night there was to kill. The sudden brightness burned her eyes as she fumbled for her cellphone to check the time. Something was wrong. Something over and above the dream. She couldn't put her finger on why but she felt out of sorts, as if the very air around her was breathing, irritating her skin.

The shadow against the wall moved and Kittie's scream shattered the silence. She dived for her pillow.

Ganie jolted awake with a start. Blood rushed to her head, paralysing her legs as adrenalin did the rest. She shot bolt upright. Fuck! What was going on? Who was being murdered? Through the haze of sleep, she tried to order her thoughts, but she forced herself not to make a sound.

The scream had come from Kittie's room. Maybe she'd had a bad dream. But Kittie wasn't a screamer. Or maybe there was someone in the house. But how would they have got in? Why were the dogs not barking? Were they there to burgle or murder?

The phone! Ganie grabbed her cellphone from the bedside table and, pulling the duvet over her head, dialled 1-0-1-1-1. It just rang and rang.

"Come on, motherfuckers. Answer the bloody phone," she muttered.

Another cranium-splitting cry pierced the quiet of the night. She had no option. She had to investigate. She could not leave Kittie to be butchered. Cautiously and shaking ferociously, she pulled the duvet away from her head, eyes darting around the dark room in search of a possible weapon. Whatever peril lurked in the house, she was not about to face it unarmed.

She scanned the dressing table, her only possible source of armour, and cursed her contempt for ornaments.

Her old candlestick! That would do! But she'd first have to get all that jewellery off somehow. Moulded in bronze, the object was heavy enough to inflict considerable damage. Aimed properly and with sufficient force, it would sink a hole into a man's head six centimetres deep. Too bad it was wider at the base than it was tall, but there

was nothing for it now. Ganie would have preferred a weapon with a longer reach, but she'd simply have to do the best she could with what she had.

Not making a sound, she slipped from her bed and crept to the dressing table. She lifted the heavy object and reaching under the duvet to muffle the sound, she upended its cargo onto the bed. Still shaking she crept along the passage towards Kittie's room wearing only the oversized T-shirt in which she slept. As she approached the room she kept her back tightly up against the wall and increased her grip on the candlestick as she held it in front of her with both hands.

There had been no further screaming. The house was deathly silent. As she reached Kittie's room, she heard voices but decided not to hang around to try and make out what was being said. She launched herself at the door with her shoulder and stumbled into the dimly-lit room.

"Run, Kittie, run!" Ganie shouted as she swung the candleholder in wide arcs in front of her. "Run, man! I've got him!"

A strong hand grabbed her left wrist as she swung her arms wildly above her head. She stared into a face of stubble.

"Careful, Ganie. Geez, my girl, you could hurt a man with that ... thing! Mercy me, what is it? That sharp point could make a nasty hole in an ouk's head."

"Bakkies! What the fuck ... get the hell out ... how ... fuck off! Kittie, what's ..."

"Get out of the way, Ganie!" shouted Kittie and Ganie turned around. Kittie was on top of the bed against the wall in the far corner, arms outstretched, both hands clutching a small pistol pointed in the direction of Bakkies.

"I'm sorry man, Ganie. I just wanted to talk to Kittie. But she doesn't want ..."

Bakkies did not finish the sentence. His eyes seemed surprised but in no way frightened and a hint of a smile played around the corners of his mouth.

"Shut the fuck up, Bakkies! I'm going to count to three. And wipe that smile off your face," Kittie hissed. "I swear, if you're not out the front door on the count of three, I will put a bullet in your hairy arse. And if you're not out of the front gate on the next count of three, I'll put a bullet in the other side of that arse. So you have six counts, pal. That's it. And if you make one fucking move before I tell you to, I'll put a bullet in that little chipolata you call a prick. Count yourself lucky I haven't put one between your eyes! We all know I can put people in hospital. Damn baboon with those shifty eyes."

The three of them stood rooted, Ganie and Bakkies both weighing up Kittie's threats and wondering whether she would actually pull the trigger. Kittie in the corner on top of the bed, hunched over the pistol in her hands, Ganie in the opposite corner, eyes like saucers and transfixed on the gun in Kittie's hands as she clutched the candlestick to her chest and Bakkies in the middle of the room, his forearms slightly raised. His eyes darted from Kittie to Ganie and back to Kittie again. Kittie broke the stalemate.

"Ganie, go and open the door so long. When it's open, go to the lounge and let me know you're there." Kittie's voice was steady and low. She had complete control of the situation.

"But Kittie, you're ... We can make it work. I wouldn't hurt ..."

"Don't make me do it, Bakkies!" Kittie was in no mood to discuss relationship issues.

Ganie's legs felt like jelly, but she made her way to the front door and opened it.

"It's open, Kittie!" she called from the lounge.

"Now you!" Kittie stepped off the bed without once allowing the pistol to waiver or lose its target. "Come on, get going. Get your stinking psycho arse out of here. I'm starting to count now ... One ..."

Bakkies made a move, trying to say something, but he thought better of it and turned on his heel, making a dash for the door. After a while, Ganie heard the latch on the front gate click.

Still holding the pistol, Kittie quietly and firmly locked the front door and switched on the light as she entered the lounge. Ganie was half sitting, half lying on the couch where she'd flopped down, her legs no longer capable of holding her up. She was shaking even more than before and felt as if she would never again move in her life.

"Shew, shit a brick! Now that was something," said Kittie, looking at Ganie quivering on the couch, eyes staring straight ahead, legs stiff and straight out in front of her and arms helplessly splayed to the sides, the knuckles of her right hand white as she clutched the candlestick in a feverish grip.

"Gottapatot, cuz ..." Kittie said. "What's with that ... what is it, anyway? Looks like voodoo shit to me. If that thing found its target, old Bakkies would have been minced for sure! Where the hell did you get such a ghoulish of a thing? It looks ... well ... it looks slightly satanic."

She turned around as if searching for something.

“Anyway, I damn well need a drink now. You too.”

Ganie looked at the blackish candleholder in her hand. It was constructed of three chicken feet arranged in a triangle, toes splayed outwards and the legs coming together at the top to form a base about sixteen centimetres high. It had seldom been used for its intended purpose, having served instead as a macabre stand for what little Ganie possessed in the line of jewellery—a Santeria shrine constructed from a collection of nearly forgotten earrings, a couple of necklaces and even the odd bracelet.

“It’s not satanic. It’s a work of art. Why do you always have to see a fucking devil in everything?”

Kittie walked to the liquor cabinet and returned carrying the bottle of whisky and two glasses. She filled each glass halfway and held a glass to Ganie’s lips.

“Here, drink. It will help for the shock.”

She sat down and downed her whisky in one gulp, looking as if she’d just returned from nothing more strenuous than an excursion to Woolworths to shop for winter socks.

Ganie’s speech was slow to return, but the whisky helped, the familiar, pleasing warmth of the alcohol rolling through her insides, dripping like wax off a burning candle.

## **Chapter Six: Treasured Flops and a Hen in Half**

Those had been charmed years. Their hair was a riot of gel and gaudy colour, their outfits as wacky as they were dazzling. The eighties had only just dawned and the ties of friendship that bound Ganie and Chloe were forged in the fires of recently achieved adulthood, marriage and motherhood that came young for both. But within the strictures of domestic order, they did manage to summon enough fodder for a certain amount of creativity and self-expression.

The pair was as impervious to sensible timekeeping as they were to the demands of life in the suburbs. Chloe's marriage withstood her delinquency, Ganie's did not—although placing the blame for the failure of her marriage solely on Ganie's reluctance to comply with convention would be to grossly oversimplify matters. She'd been married to Daniel for a decade, but her heart was no longer in it. Neither was his. What kept them together was the old cliché: children. The relationship had been a shambles for years and, to her shame, Ganie had become indifferent to whether it survived or not. She'd rather it didn't, she told Chloe in a guilty whisper, then sat back, shocked, when Chloe burst into tears at hearing the news.

When Ganie eventually decided to call it a day, she took her children and temporarily moved in with Chloe and her family while planning her next course of action.

“I think I’ll just order in takeaways for dinner,” Chloe would say frequently as the two basked in the warm Durban sun on the deck of the house on the edge of Kloof Gorge, enjoying the view across the glorious valley below and sipping sundowners on ice from serviceable tumblers.

“I really don’t have the energy to cook tonight,” she’d add.

More than likely, Chloe would also not have had the strength for it the night before. Or the night before that. For that brief period in her life, Ganie—confused, depressed and guilty about the separation—had also lost her taste for cooking.

Chloe was an artist, the most fragile kind imaginable. Ganie often speculated that some part of Chloe did not belong to this world at all. Yet, simultaneously and paradoxically, she was a child of the earth. What Ganie admired most was her rock-solid, seemingly unbreakable affinity with all things natural. Chloe had the greenest fingers she’d ever come across, yet the conundrum of a crying baby would mystify her to the point of grim despair. When, years earlier, Chloe and her family had moved into an apartment neighbouring the one in which Ganie lived with Daniel and Dharma in an enormous old Victorian house on Durban’s Berea, it took no longer than two weeks for every nook and cranny to be filled to overflowing with foliage thriving under her loving care. Yet her nine-month-old, a mite of a thing who was allergic to almost everything, weighed little more than the day she was born. Neither Chloe nor Ganie could figure out why the child seemed so stubbornly determined not to thrive.

“If she doesn’t drink at least some milk ... God, just a teaspoon, please ... I’m going to start taking it very personally!” Chloe would cry out on more than one occasion.

Together, Ganie and Chloe muddled along through the early years of their children’s lives.

Yet Chloe’s beloved in-house forest flourished—an ode to verdant splendour. Whole shrubs seemed to clamour for her attention, all wanting to please her by growing green and strong, revelling in each precious word from her adored mouth. And Chloe always obliged, whispering words of encouragement as she picked off dying leaves with care, watering, putting spiders out the window so as not to hurt them or upset the ecosystem. But God help the hapless caterpillar discovered on or near a plant—its demise would be swift and certain at the business end of a pair of scissors. Chloe was a woman full of paradoxes.

Plants aside, Ganie was in awe of her friend's other creations. She considered Chloe's art to be at the cutting edge of modern expression, highly original and inventive. Not for Chloe the mediocrity of ceramic pots and bowls thrown on a potter's wheel. She constructed complex and unusual items by hand. Later on she began to experiment with glass and various metals and Ganie was the lucky beneficiary of what Chloe considered her flops. Such "flops" were treasured by Ganie throughout the years that followed and beyond. When the two families moved away from the big house to separate parts of Durban, through Ganie's divorce from Daniel and her move to Cape Town, throughout the long and lonely years of being the single working mother of two young girls, beyond her second marriage and right into widowhood, Ganie found comfort in those works of art Chloe had passed on to her.

Shortly before Ganie moved to Kloof, Chloe acquired two new additions to the already large menagerie of family pets—a jet-black Bouvier des Flanders named Bovril and a chick named Chicky.

Growing up and playing together, Chicky and Bovril were two peas in a pod.

"Look at them," Chloe would say. "They're the biggest of mates."

"Yeah," Ganie would respond. "Bovril thinks he's a chicken and Chicky believes she's a big old black dog."

Watching them play together was a sheer pleasure. Until Chicky reached the end of her growing and Bovril continued with his—enthusiastically. Bouviers as a rule are big dogs, but even for a Bouvier Bovril was large, his spirit irrepressible, making for all sorts of trouble. Chicky, always a house hen, was no less lively than Bovril but she had a lot more chutzpah.

"Overconfidence in a chicken really is a pain in the arse," Ganie said, sipping a gin and tonic while Chloe nursed her Tequila as they watched the ever-expanding hen jump from floor to chair, chair to table and table to shelf on those bright orange stick legs of hers. Once on a kitchen shelf or the dining room table, she'd wolf down every edible thing within sight and some inedible ones, too. By this time Chicky and Chicky's lust for food was all but impossible to keep under control. She was growing fatter by the day and her friendship with Bovril was beginning to show signs of strain. They still chased each other around, playing and wrestling, but the wisdom of it was questionable on account of Bovril's sheer size and Chicky's sheer obesity.

“If Chicky were a child, I’d have called her a precocious damned brat. If she’d been *my* child, she’d have been ... well ... more hen-like,” Ganie continued as they sat on the deck in the fading sunlight marvelling at the breathtaking valley below. “Maybe I should go back to Greenaway, get him to prescribe something to see me through this time. My nerves are shot and we haven’t even sorted out Daniel’s visiting rights. He’s still okay to give you pills, isn’t he? Greenaway, I mean.”

Chloe had always needed several little helpers to see her through her days and nights—help relax those tautly strung nerves of hers. In the mornings, it would be a couple of little yellow pills, regularly and copiously prescribed by Dr Greenaway, the therapist they had shared in the early years of their friendship. In the evenings, a few shots of Tequila on ice did the trick and before bedtime she would swallow one or several of the triangular white type. Never one for antidepressants and tranquilisers herself, Ganie had eventually tired of Greenaway’s brand of therapy and decided to cope with what troubled her in her own manner, that is, with logic—by reasoning through the endless questions in her head.

A door slammed inside the house and heavy footsteps hurried towards them, shattering their companionable sunset.

“Miss Chloe! Come quick! Bovril, she’s ... it’s Chicky!”

The breathless voice gave out. Chloe’s housekeeper of many years had burst through the French doors leading onto the deck and now leaned against the doorframe, clearly weak from shock. She seemed to be on the verge of hyperventilating.

“Come, Miss Chloe! Come now!”

Chloe leaped to her feet and ran into the kitchen, Ganie hot on her heels.

Chicky was lying on her back on the kitchen floor, out cold and in two parts, bright orange legs stiffly pointing heavenward from the bloated mass that was her body and a luxurious bounty of white feathers, head all but severed from the corpulent body. Chloe fell on her knees beside the hen and bent down to assess the damage.

“The head isn’t off completely,” she said. “Look at the back there.”

She pointed to the hen’s neck. Ganie and Violet bent down to take a closer look, the three heads nearly touching as they huddled together over what appeared to be a very dead Chicky. True enough, at the back of her neck a thin string of ligament seemed to be holding together what was left of the hen’s body and soul.

“In all honesty, Chlo, I don’t want to be funny or anything, but it looks to me like it’s pretty much tickets. That’s no more than a ... what ... strand of skin?” Ganie ventured.

“Oh no, no, no. It’s ... I ... well, I don’t know what it is, but it’s still holding the neck together. Quick, Violet, get me a blanket,” Chloe ordered.

That she could act with such calm composure truly surprised Ganie, who felt the beginnings of panic setting in.

“Fucking Bovril,” Ganie said.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean to hurt her,” Chloe responded.

Violet arrived with the blanket and Chloe delicately lifted both parts of Chicky onto it, taking great care not to disturb the tenuous thread that was holding her together. Clutching her to her bosom like a precious infant, she rushed out to her car.

“Get in, you two,” she ordered the flustered Ganie and Violet. “Ganie, you drive. The keys are in my bag.”

The vet was about to leave for the day as Ganie came to a screeching halt in his driveway, but he allowed the anxious procession in and listened to Chloe’s account of what had happened with great sympathy.

“I’m not sure I can do anything,” he said casting a jaundiced eye down at the inert Chicky on the table. His glance shifted first to Ganie, then to Violet, as if looking for help.

“Sew her back together,” Chloe demanded.

“I’m not sure I can ... er ... or that it will work. The chicken’s head is nearly clean off,” he said, mustering as much compassion as he could.

“She’s not just a chicken, dammit! She’s my Chicky. Please, you have to do it ... at least try,” Chloe insisted.

“Well, let’s give it a whirl, then,” said the vet, sounding less than convinced that the operation might succeed. He’d tended Chloe’s pets for years and had doctored many of them back to health, but this was something he had never been faced with.

Chloe, Ganie and Violet looked on hopefully as he used the finest stitching conceivable to sew Chicky’s head back onto her body. It was a time-consuming process, but eventually he stood back to admire his handiwork.

“There you go,” he said. “Now we’ll just have to wait and see.”

The four of them waited in silence for several minutes. Then Chicky shuddered like a histrionic queen, shook her wealth of feathers and looked around, dazed and bewildered at the strange surroundings, before the vet picked her up and placed her back on her orange legs.

Chicky wobbled on her legs, looking thoroughly tetchy. Where was the food in this joint, after all, she seemed to say?

“It’s okay, Chicky,” said Chloe in a soothing voice. “We’re going straight home and we’ll give you a special meal for supper.”

And that, Ganie realised, established Chicky’s place at the top of the pecking order of domestic hierarchy. Her cheek now became truly insufferable, as if she considered herself super-special on account of her brush with death

“Chicky thinks she’s positively the Lazarus of the poultry world,” Ganie commented as she watched the hen waddle around the house as if she owned it. If she had been a greedy chick before her first death, her gluttony now reached mind-boggling levels of hedonism.

“Perhaps her near-death experience alerted her chicken brain to her mortality and taught her that there is a cap to the days of a chicken’s life,” she continued. “She reckons that if one were going to die on one of these days, one had better hurry up and make the most of those at one’s disposal.”

Before long, Chicky was morbidly obese, wiggling her way from one room to the next, every step an effort. Diets and words of censure helped nought and Chloe eventually gave up, knowing that if Bovril didn’t get Chicky again, heart disease would.

It was around this time, at the height of Chicky’s battle with obesity, that Chloe’s work became popular with the art-buying public. Soon, her work was in such demand that the small studio next to the house from which she’d been working no longer offered enough space to store the large ceramic and glass platters, not to mention various wrought-iron objects and those made from other metals. Chloe needed more space.

Builders arrived with scaffolding and bricks and trowels, even a cement mixer, and construction began on the expanded studio. Using almost all her time to oversee building operations, Chloe was on forced leave for a while.

“Thank God they don’t work weekends,” Chloe sighed one Saturday morning as they sipped Earl Grey tea from delicate porcelain cups. “That bloody noise will drive me crazy yet. And these builders ... they don’t talk to one another like civilised human beings. They’d be right next to each other and scream like whores in a wine shop on payday.”

She looked tired, her eyes bleary. Chloe had by now upped her dosage of yellow pills considerably in her attempt to cope with the construction going on in her backyard.

“Ag, I’m sure it won’t be much longer,” Ganie tried to mollify her.

“Miss Chloe, I’ve fed the animals, but I can’t find Chicky anywhere.” Violet had appeared in the doorway without either of them noticing.

“That bloody hen!” Chloe said. Her patience with her errant chicken had all but run out by now and her delicate state of mind had limited capacity for complications. “I’m sure she’s asleep somewhere, Violet. Have you checked the beds? She’s become so damn lazy.”

“Do you want me to go and look for her?” Ganie asked.

“Bloody chicken! Don’t worry, I’ll go,” Chloe sighed again. “I know all her favourite hiding places.”

Ganie finished her tea and set off after Chloe to find Chicky. The hen was nowhere to be found, inside or out.

“The only other place I can think of ...” Chloe thought out aloud, but cut herself short. “Unless ... unless the builders didn’t lock the door and Chicky got in ...”

The studio, of course, was the next logical place to look, as the bag containing Chicky’s dried mealies was kept under strict lock and key in the studio as Chloe tried to ration her intake.

“They bloody well left the door open!” Chloe exclaimed as the three of them rounded the studio corner. The outbuilding was clad in industrial plastic and scaffolding and as they entered, their eyes took a while to get used to the dim light inside.

“Can’t they even follow the simplest of instructions?” Chloe complained, eyes drawn to slits. “They know they’re supposed to lock it. If I said it once, I said it a thousand times.”

Then Violet screamed.

“Hau!” she yelled. “Miss Chloe ... the cement machine!”

Ganie and Chloe rushed over to the cement mixer that stood in the middle of the room.

From their vantage point were visible only two pitiful, bright orange chicken feet sticking up in the air, cold and stiff, long toes splayed absurdly on top of the round tub of Chicky’s body. Upside down, Chicky’s head was buried in the day-old cement. She was set solidly in mortar. This time, no vet would restore Chicky back to life. She was well and truly dead, her gluttony her undoing in the end. On the surface, in decorative arrangement, lay a few loose dry mealies, permanently set in the rock-hard cement.

“How could she ...” Ganie spluttered, trying her best not to laugh. Next to her Chloe stood speechless, tears running down her face.

“Miss Chloe,” said Violet, the whites of her eyes stark against her black skin. “That chicken, she’s very naughty chicken. That chicken, she’s climb on the cement machine ... here.”

Violet pointed to the rim of the mixer.

“She’s so fat that chicken, she fall down on her face when she’s try to eat the mealies on the cement.”

Ganie followed Violet’s logic. It was difficult to see how the overweight hen would have managed to clamber onto the rim of the mixer, but what happened thereafter was all too clear. Balancing her rotund form precariously on the rim of the bowl, Chicky must have overbalanced in stretching to reach for the mealies blown there by the wind, obviously, and she toppled headlong into the wet cement, where she was now stuck for all eternity.

Ganie had difficulty restraining herself, but considering Chloe’s distress, she realised that this was no time to see the funny side of an upended hen with its head stuck in cement. She turned on her heel and dashed outside, leaving Chloe and Violet to figure out how to retrieve Chicky’s remains as she collapsed on the lawn, heaving with silent laughter.

## Chapter Seven: A Goat Unslaughtered

“She cut the chicken’s body off at the neck with a carving knife, more or less exactly where the vet had sewed it on before, while Violet held Chicky’s body steady,” Ganie told Kittie, who was inspecting the heavy candlestick she now held in her hand. “Then she cut off one of the feet. She made a plaster mould from it and cast six replicas in bronze. That made two candlesticks—one for her and one for me. The rest of the body was buried under a large tree along with the other pets she’d lost. But the head was left in the cement, which the builders had to chisel out of the mixer. It was so hard, nobody could get to Chicky’s head. I used to get sad looking at my chicken feet. It reminded me of that time just after my divorce, when the girls were still so young. Not anymore, though. Now it just amuses me.”

The whisky was working its magic and she was beginning to feel much calmer.

“It did come in very useful tonight, though, I must say. That bloody Bakkies. How in God’s name did he get in?” she wondered aloud. “And why didn’t the dogs bark? Not even as he was leaving. That’s just damn weird.”

Kittie’s cool, artificial to begin with, was slipping. She placed the chicken feet candlestick on the coffee table and leaned back on the couch. Just like it had been with Cupido, aiming the gun at Bakkies had bestowed on her a sense of calm. But the fight component of her instinct for survival was rapidly making way for the increasingly attractive option of flight. The terror she had opted to shelve away to be

dealt with later could no longer be deferred. It washed over her in big waves. Her large, blue eyes shot full of tears.

“He ... he came in through the skylight. You know, the one that’s been banging in the wind? The one you said you should have had fixed last winter? Well, he sat up there on the landing outside the attic and listened to every single thing we talked about in the lounge before going to bed. Then, when we were taking the glasses to the kitchen, he slipped down the passage and hid in my cupboard, apparently. When I woke up, he was kneeling at the end of my bed, staring at me, watching me as I slept. And I had that dream about Cupido again. That’s what woke me up,” said Kittie, her voice barely audible.

Ganie stared straight ahead, her mind a haphazard jumble of thoughts. She took another long sip of whisky.

“We can’t do this, Kittie. We can’t sit around and wait for the freaking cops to do something. I know you said he isn’t violent, but we can’t know that for sure and he’s threatened you physically once before. He could do something terrible at any time. He got in here tonight, didn’t he? He’s desperado now ... his back against the wall, man. He’s not going to jail without a fight. And fuck it, what about that Jakkals character and the other one ... his sidekick from jail? I mean, we can’t watch our backs for the rest of our lives.”

“Rasheed. The other one’s name is Rasheed.” Kittie wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “I don’t know, Ganie. What must I do? He said they’re watching us. They can follow us anywhere. I’m so sorry about this trouble.”

Kittie’s face scrunched as she started to sob in earnest.

“Here, take this,” said Ganie, pulling a messy ball of toilet paper from the pocket of her pyjama top. “Let’s bugger off, Kitts. Let’s go away for a while. Somewhere they won’t look. I can’t see them coming after us. How would they know we’re going anyway? I just don’t think they’re smart enough. Or have the balls. Let’s go until the cops get their shit together at least. Or until we’ve figured out another plan.”

Kittie wasn’t really listening. She’d pulled her legs up and hugged them to her chest, rocking backwards and forwards. What was she going to do? Would she have to pay for the rest of her life for this one mistake? A big mistake, granted, but how was she to know the man she married would turn out to be a criminal and a swindler? Now a stalker, too.

“Here, have another one,” said Ganie and poured more whisky into Kittie’s glass. A thought was beginning to take shape in her head. She had not told Kittie and had no intention of telling her yet, considering her cousin’s religious convictions, but she’d been having a few dreams of her own. One very specific dream, to be exact.

It came within weeks of Isak dying and Ganie caving in to her emotions and writing an email to her mother to tell her of his death. Lana Blignault had been separated from Isak for a long time—having left him in 1992—but she never got around to filing divorce papers. Not necessarily a bad thing, they’d agreed, since being officially married permitted Lana to remain on Isak’s medical aid.

“Let the fuckhead pay for something at least,” Ganie told her mother way back then.

Somehow, Ganie believed, expressing herself in black and white—the only way she truly trusted her thoughts to be valid—about the circumstances of her father’s death must have triggered some deep-seated, maybe even primal emotion, and this in turn must have evoked the memory of uMhlekaazi.

At first, the dream troubled Ganie, but she put it down to the incoherent jumble of emotions that wracked her. It occupied her sleeping hours for many nights following the death, playing out differently each time. It wasn’t exactly unpleasant. Quite the contrary, Ganie looked forward to going to sleep at night. And when she woke up in the mornings, she was filled with an eerie sense of anticipation.

It also made her think again of Fundiswa after so many years. She thought back fondly of the year during which Fundiswa cleaned her house, cooked her meals and helped her take care of the girls.

Then, as suddenly as it had started, the dream stopped after a couple of months, only to return on the eve of Uncle Jorrie’s funeral. This time the dream seemed more colourful, the details more intricate. And this time it contained an emotional component that was far more urgent—it seemed to be calling to her, expecting her to do something important. Of what that could be she had not the foggiest notion. What surprised her was her recollection of every nuance—as if she were really there. As if reality itself had gone on holiday to be replaced by a new super-reality, something realer than real. It left her feeling unfinished somehow, seeking resolution all over again.

And she began to wonder where Fundiswa was. How she was. Whether she'd silenced the commotion braying in her head.

Ganie had missed Fundiswa for the most part after she left in '92, the same year her mother came to stay with her. She missed their talks. What she didn't miss was the Fundiswa who had become so unhinged towards the end. During the last month, Fundiswa had become a mean and spiteful shrew. This was a woman Ganie didn't know at all. At first she put it down to menopause. On her more moderate days Fundiswa agreed. On those days, the old Fundiswa emerged, chatting away companionably as if picking up threads from some earlier, unfinished discussion. Episodes of congeniality alternated with others characterised by vicious threats and spiteful snubs, degenerating into straightforward bullying.

Ganie asked Fundiswa to leave. She had no option, really. First she suggested a long holiday back home. Maybe Fundiswa would regain some sense of balance in Graaff Reinet, where her real home was—a home she loved with her whole heart and talked about all the time, a home on which she spent every spare cent. It broke Ganie's heart that it was also a home she was able to enjoy only rarely, once a year at Christmas.

But Fundiswa refused to go, threatening to send someone to cut Ganie's throat if she kept trying to tell her what to do. Not for a minute did Ganie truly believe these threats would be carried out, but Fundiswa became ever more imaginative in the ways she threatened to bring harm to Ganie, and although Dharma and Beatrix never seemed to be the target of her outbursts, Ganie had no guarantee that they would not at some stage be caught in the crossfire.

In the end, Fundiswa did go home, quietly and of her own accord. That resolved the dilemma for Ganie, but it left her sad and disappointed.

With the benefit of hindsight, Ganie now realised that it was only after the old man's visits that Fundiswa's behaviour became odd. That old sangoma who was putting in such liberal appearances in Ganie's dreams now, eighteen years hence. She remembered it all so very clearly.

Fed up with journalism, Ganie had accepted a job with a Cape Town publishing house at the time. The decision had been a mistake. Her time as managing editor at McAdam and Sturgess was brief, little more than a year, before trouble struck. It was heralded by a single phone call.

The call could not have come at a more inconvenient time. It was ten in the morning and Ganie was in a meeting with a print representative, briefing him on an expensive anthology of South African cartoons that was due to go to print the following week. She was irritated and annoyed. The editing had gone according to schedule, but when the layout process began, Sturgess, the marketing director, was unable to make up his mind about its positioning in the market and therefore what he wanted the cover to look like. And although political change was in the air, publishers had not quite yet grasped the scope of the change that was to follow and were still, as they had for decades, operating with exaggerated caution under the foggy constrictions and claustrophobic atmosphere of the times. Thus they continued to practise wide-ranging self-censorship with blithe submissiveness. Ganie, always travelling against the tide, was disgusted at how afraid they were to rock the boat of authority. This book was bound to be controversial and Sturgess was a coward. A yellow fucking jellyfish, she once exploded to a colleague. That was a mistake, considering how things turned out later.

Ganie had built an additional two weeks' leeway into the schedule, but Sturgess had the besieged art department change it no fewer than four times, leaving her on the back foot, trying to shave off print days here and there. Never a good idea. Tens of thousands of rands went into the production of a book and to skimp on this final process, the most expensive of all, was insane. Now she was forced to call in special favours to try to gain the weeks lost. It was not the first time that had happened. She regularly cursed Sturgess.

"What is it, Fundiswa? I'm really busy," she snapped when she answered the call.

"Ganie, you must come home right now," came Fundiswa's response. "The old man is here and he wants to see you straight away."

"What old man?" Ganie wanted to know. "What do you mean?"

"The ixhego who gave us the muti the other month. uMhlelezi. He's here at the house. He saw you in a dream and he's very upset. He says he couldn't sleep after the dream and he left home with all the people who were coming to work in the city. He wanted to get here early. He says you're in big danger, Ganie. You must come."

Ganie ran her fingers through her hair. What on earth? Her eyes darted to burly Butch who sat across the desk from her, on his lap a folder containing her print quote and schedule, the last words of their conversation hanging in the air, waiting for

completion. Ganie stumbled over her words when she spoke. If she said anything to respond directly to Fundiswa's side of the conversation, Butch would think her a lunatic.

"Okay ... um ... Okay," she spluttered, pretending to think. "Er ... I'll get there as soon as I can. I'm in a meeting now, so just ask him to wait a little while. Make him some tea."

She replaced the receiver.

"That was my domestic. There seems to be a problem at home, Butch. Let's get this over quickly. I'll have to go and see what's going on."

"Hope it's nothing serious," said Butch in his resonant bass, a voice Ganie found almost irresistibly sexy. Sadly, Butch was a happily married man, a fact that did not seem to stop him flirting with her.

"No, I don't think so. We have a ... a ... blocked drain and the plumber is there to fix it. But there seems to be a ... well, I don't know ... a problem with access to the mains, it appears. They can't find the ... um ... the thingy ... whatchimicallit ... the key to the door leading to the servitude lane at the back. I'll have to take them my key."

Ganie was a poor liar. As she spoke, patches of colour crept from her neck up to her face. She could see Butch did not believe a word she said. But of course he was too polite to comment. She rushed through the meeting, eventually agreeing a delivery date that could be achieved with some effort and reshuffling of schedules on the part of the printers. With a bit of luck the launch of the book would not be thrown entirely off course. Grabbing her keys and handbag, she joined Butch as he walked out of the office.

Her irritation shelved for now, Ganie could not help smiling as she wondered what Butch would think if he'd ever had to find out the real reason for that staccato telephone conversation. He would kill himself laughing if he knew that she'd interrupted negotiations on a print job worth over a hundred grand to rush off at the summons of a sangoma. No doubt Butch was one of those people who thought of sangomas as witchdoctors and quacks.

Fundiswa believed in the old man and after what had happened two months before, so did Ganie. How it worked, she did not even want to begin to guess at, but when she

and Fundiswa cooked up their plot to snare Jay, the drop-dead gorgeous art director at McAdam and Sturgess, it had worked.

From the day Ganie walked into the door at the company, she had a crush on him. Fundiswa suggested they consult uMhlekezazi, whose track record “to put medicine to make a certain person fall in love with you”—in this instance it was lust more than love—was exemplary, as far as Ganie could gather from Fundiswa. The affair was brief though explosive. And what did Ganie care if it was all achieved by means of a small piece of bark under her tongue, a sprinkling of pink powder over a pizza, a pungent concoction in her bathwater? The only disappointment had been the brevity of it all. All the same, it had worked. And although she had gone along with Fundiswa’s idea with her tongue firmly in her cheek, Ganie now believed that there had to be something to all that sorcery and bewitchment. Jay had been well and truly bewitched. For three weeks.

When Ganie arrived home, Fundiswa and old Albert were sitting at the kitchen table drinking tea, talking in isiXhosa. Both seemed animated. The old man looked up from the table, where his eyes had been fixed as he spoke with Fundiswa. He now met Ganie’s gaze.

“Usengozini enkulu. Vumani!” he said. Big danger.

“Siyavuma!” Fundiswa responded.

“Ganie, uMhlekezazi Albert says you’re in terrible danger,” Fundiswa repeated. She looked at Ganie intently, her eyes trying to convey something beyond the meaning of the words. Ganie had not the slightest notion what Fundiswa was trying to tell her. She felt cornered and panicked.

“What do you mean?” Ganie looked at the old man in his tattered suit, no doubt his Sunday best. He smelled of woodfire and old-man sweat. No doubt, the expedition from Khayelitsha had involved a considerable amount of walking in between taxi stops.

“Beze ngasemva! They are coming from behind,” he said, his voice low and hoarse, froglike, as if he was suffering an acute case of laryngitis. The whites of his eyes were murky, slightly yellowed, and the lines around his mouth deeply etched, pulling his lips and the corners of his mouth slightly downwards and lending him an air of misery or disapproval. His hair was snow white, its contrast against the darkness of his skin startling.

“Banemela! They have the knife.”

Fundiswa burst forth in isiXhosa, talking rapidly and loudly, as if scolding the old man. Ganie couldn't understand a word she was saying. After listening to the old man's long reply, Fundiswa turned to Ganie.

“He says you have big trouble at work. He sees two people. They carry knives. They're going to ... vvoooooopp!” Funeka swiped her arm in a wide arc that ended behind her back.

“Stab you. Right in the back. You can do this, you can do that, you can try and try ... nothing will help. It all ends bad, bad, bad. Very bad. But uMhlekaazi Albert will give you muti to make it a little bit better,” she said.

“How does he know?” asked Ganie. “I mean, why did he come all the way here? Couldn't he just have phoned?”

She immediately cursed herself for saying something so stupid. Even if the old man had a telephone, it was unlikely that he would have her number, which wasn't listed in the telephone book in any case.

“How did he know where to find us?” Ganie marvelled at how truly bizarre the situation was. She was entertaining an old man in her kitchen—an old man she had never laid eyes on in her life—who was telling her what the future held in store. Admittedly, he was aware of her because of Fundiswa's visit to get the goods for Ganie's little experiment with Jay, but still, she was a stranger to him.

“He says he walked a long, long way. Up and down Main Road. A very strong dream woke him up in the middle of the night. Then, this morning before it was light, he went to my cousin's shack to ask where I worked. She knows the street name but not the number. He caught the taxi and walked all the way from the taxi rank at the station. When I walked to Osman's to buy milk just now, I found him standing outside in the street looking very scared. I said, ‘Molo, madala. What are you doing here?’ Then he told me. He said he knew the answer would come. He was hungry and tired, so I made him some toast and tea.”

“Kahle ... very careful,” the old man broke in, his English limited and laboured.

“He says you came into his dream and he was so worried that he had to come and find you,” Fundiswa continued, talking louder again to make herself heard over the old man's mumbling. Albert's eyes were closed now.

“So, what sort of trouble is it, then?” Ganie wanted to know.

The situation was starting to creep her out. Why would an old man living in Khayelitsha have visions and dreams about a struggling white divorcée living in the suburbs? It all seemed very farfetched. She didn't know what to do. Usually the mistress of her home, she now stood helpless, handbag flung over her shoulder, not knowing whether to sit down or remain standing, whether to invite the old man into the lounge so that they could talk calmly, or wait it out to see what his next move would be.

Ganie need not have worried, because the decision was made for her. The old man stood up and bent down to pick up a canvas bag on the floor. He opened the clasp and rummaged through the bag, not stopping his muttering for a moment.

A scuffed and dented little tin appeared out of the bag, the blue and white of the ancient Nivea logo hardly discernable. He unscrewed the lid and dipped his fingers into the concoction inside. With sharp little darts of his fingers he flicked the dry mixture around the kitchen as he walked around in circles, first to each corner, then to the window sill, the floor around the stove, the fridge and the kitchen table.

“What the fuck's he doing, Fundiswa?” Ganie whispered, thoroughly unnerved.

“He's putting muti for you ... it's protection, you know. With this medicine, nothing can come onto you,” Fundiswa replied, then turned to address uMhlekezi again. “Tata, you must tell us what is wrong.”

The old man's eyes flew open, as if in shock, and his mumbling stopped. When he spoke again, the voice was louder and clearer, the croakiness entirely gone. Fundiswa translated for Ganie.

“Two people are trouble. They want you ... phew! You go.” Fundiswa swiped the back of her hand across her mouth to illustrate. “They are making plans against you right now. Next month you will have no job. But it will be very bad. They do not like you. There will be a big, big fight. uMhlekezi will give you the muti. You must put this muti over your desk at work and over the front of the car. You will still have no job, but these two people will not be able to hurt you more than that. The muti will make you safe.”

Ganie looked from Fundiswa to the old man. That was not what she'd hoped to hear.

“But there's the other big thing the dream told him. This is more important. It's a very big thing. It's the iziNyanya, Ganie. Your ancestors. They are not happy. It is not

right with them. uMhleleazi says you're a black woman with the white skin and you must go *slag* 'n bok to make the iziNyanya happy." Fundiswa's eyes were big. She looked scared, shaking her head from side to side. "Aauu! This is a bad thing, Ganie. They are very angry."

"Jaysus, Mary and Joseph!" Ganie gasped. "This is too weird for me, Fundiswa. Where does he get all this shit?"

"It's not shit, Ganie!" Fundiswa hissed. "If you make the iziNyanya angry, you get terrible trouble!"

The old man stared at Ganie in silence. Then he began talking again in broken English.

"I see the big dream," he started. "Long dream, too long. The woman she's walking on the big sand, by the water. The water that move and move, day and night. The sea. All day, all night ... the sea she moves. No rest. All day, all night ... the woman, she walk. She walk, she walk, she walk. She make the big mark in the sand, but she walk and walk on. Long time, she walk. The wind, she blow, blow, blow after the woman. The woman, she's not notice. The face, she's look in front, not back." Albert gesticulated with his hands to indicate what he meant.

"This woman, she must look for fire in the back. Big, big fire. Too big, that fire ... she's burn at woman's back. The woman, she's not look. Tch... tch... tch..."

"Now, the wind, she come, she blow, blow, blow over the mark in sand. The foot mark. Then the fire, she dies. The big wind, she ride over the dead fire. Uh-uh-uh! Too much of the ash from the fire. The ash, she fill the foot mark. The woman, she put the foot, the wind she bring the ash, put ash in the mark. Phew! The mark, she's go. The woman, she's go also. Like the foot in sand. Like the woman she's never live.

"The woman, she still walk, walk, walk. Then the big water from the sea, she's come. She's come from the woman's back. The woman, she's not see. That water, she's hungry like the lion. She's hungry like the crocodile. She's eat *aaalllll* the sand, she's eat the dead fire in the sand, she's eat the foot mark. The woman she's not do what she must. iziNyanya, she's *veerrry* angry."

Ganie stared at the old man, gaping, uncomprehending. As if in a trance, Albert now switched to isiXhosa again and his voice once more took on its froglike sound. He seemed to no longer care whether he was understood or not, as if speaking to beings unseen by others.

Ganie began to shiver. Her jaw felt stiff—too stiff and tight to move or utter any words. She wasn't sure she understood what he was trying to tell her and she had difficulty making chronological sense of it all. She looked at Fundiswa for help.

“He said he saw you walking on the beach. As you walked along, you left deep, deep footprints in the sand. Big footprints for other people to follow to see where you were going,” she said. “But you only looked in front of you. You didn't look behind you—you didn't listen to the ancestors. All you ever do is look ahead, look ahead, look ahead. Every day. You did not care to see what was going on behind you or following you. And all the time a big fire was burning there, following you as you walked. Then the fire died and a strong wind came up and blew the ash from the dying fire over your footprints ... the wind carried so much ash that it filled up the footprints, leaving the beach flat and again ... as if you never walked there. All because you were too busy and only looked ahead. Then the wind died down and the tide came in. It washed over the place where your footprints were and where the ash filled them. It is like you never walked on the earth.”

What did it all mean? Ganie thought.

“He says you must go to the township and *slag* a goat to honour your ancestors, to make them happy,” said Fundiswa.

“You mean otherwise all my efforts to get ahead will be in vain? Like my ancestors must be happy, otherwise whatever I do will be no good?”

“Yes, just like that,” Fundiswa said.

Ganie never went to the township to slaughter a goat. The third time old Albert arrived at the house demanding she returned from work to talk to him and give him money to get back to Khayelitsha, Fundiswa lost her temper. She laid into him in isiXhosa, so vehemently Ganie became frightened.

“He's a crook, Ganie. He sees this white woman and all he sees is money. You don't need to slag. It's a nonsense,” Fundiswa explained after he had left. The old man never returned and Ganie and Fundiswa never spoke about it again. Ganie also never asked her to go to Khayelitsha to consult a sangoma on her behalf again.

But she'd never forgotten uMhlekaazi Albert's vision. The image of ash blowing in the wind was just too close to home, an uncomfortable reminder of Oupa Sam's ashes—unliberated, resting unquietly and all but forgotten. Her ancestor, trapped and

aggrieved in a brass urn on Uncle Jorrie's shelf. The old man's vision had made her feel personally responsible for Oupa Sam's wellbeing in the afterlife.

By his third and last visit, the trouble at work had come to a head. McAdam and Sturgess had had enough of what they considered Ganie's insubordination and "unorthodox" management style. When they failed to find any wrongdoing on her part as far as her performance was concerned, they used her daughters as the reason for her retrenchment, claiming Ganie was not able to travel as much as was required from the job. That was bullshit and everybody knew it—managing editors were rarely required to travel. Ganie refused to take it lying down and successfully took them to the labour court, where it was determined that Ganie should be reinstated in her position, an option she was reluctant to follow. Instead, her lawyer brokered a severance package that she found more than acceptable. At the end of February 1992, just as he had predicted, Ganie was no longer employed by McAdam and Sturgess. She picked up where she had left off as a freelance journalist one year and two months earlier.

Now uMhlekaazi was back. In her dreams. Her unconscious seemed to have claimed old Albert's vision for itself, reinterpreting the message. She saw herself walking along the beach, but she was walking backwards, so that she could see the footprints she left in the sand. In her one hand she held the urn with Oupa Sam's ashes and with each step she gave, she scattered a fistful of ashes using her free hand. She was liberating Oupa Sam. Ganie enjoyed the dream. With each handful of ashes, she felt herself become lighter, as if gravity was forced to give up some of the pull it exerted on her body. And even though her back was turned on her destination, she had no fear of what waited in the future. Throughout the dream she was overcome by a deep sense of gratitude, as if the strewing of the ashes were liberating her as much as her grandfather.

"So this is what it's all about," she whispers to herself and to the ashes. "This is grace. Soon I will have no weight at all."

And then she would wake up.

Ganie shook herself from her reverie. She'd been miles away, thinking about the past and wondering again what to do with Oupa Sam's ashes. They were still in the lounge, Kittie's small frame still curled into a ball on the couch.

“Kittie, are you okay yet?” she asked. “I really, really think we should take a holiday.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. Why not just get in the car and drive? Maybe to PE. We can visit my friend Jerome. I haven’t seen him in yonks. And we can stop at Jeffrey’s for a few days. Herman would be only too happy to let us stay in his holiday house. Nobody ever seems to go there anymore.”

“Maybe,” came the quivering reply. “I don’t know. What if I hear about one of the jobs I’ve applied for? What about your work? And what if the cops need to ask me questions about the fraud case?”

“Fuck the cops, man. What have they done so far? Zip! Diddly squat! You said so yourself. Meanwhile we’re sitting here like two kiepies—two middle-aged women alone in the house while that asshole Bakkies is having fun harassing us and threatening to sic his goons on us. And if *he* managed to get in so easily, what about them? If we’re to believe what Bakkies told you, they’re nasty pieces of work, more than just thieves and swindlers.”

Ganie looked at her cousin and wondered whether she dared broach the subject of the ashes again. A thought had been brewing in her head for days.

“You know, Kittie, we could make it something really, really special. Something meaningful, so that it won’t only be some happy little camper holiday. We could take both our dads’ ashes and Oupa Sam’s and go and scatter them somewhere. I mean, why not? If we had to leave it to any of the others, our fathers would just sit there in their *kissies* into eternity, like Oupa has for all these years. Let’s do something good. Something big. Let’s unite the family in death. We can come back when the dust has settled a bit here. Not that there’s any predicting when will be ... but still.”

Kittie uncurled her body and sat up, reaching for her glass of whisky.

“I don’t know...” she began.

“Oh, come on. It will be our little odyssey into middle-age. An odyssey of ash.” Ganie chuckled at her own joke. “A rites of passage for the two old cousins. Besides, it would be a great chance to test the Silver Bullet.”

Ganie was proud of her nearly-new Mini Cooper. She’d sworn she would never place herself in debt again for a car, but what the hell, she thought when her last haul of writing students proved the biggest yet. So she went and did it. The car dealer had

bent over backwards to make the transaction sweet and she desperately needed a car after an overweight and arrogant woman from Hout Bay had crashed into hers, turning illegally while talking on her cellphone.

“I suppose,” said Kittie. “But where would we scatter the ashes?”

“Dunno. Where were they happy as a family? Maybe we could drive to Jansenville from PE ...”

“Pullease! Are you nuts? That dried out old prune of a place? I can think of better things to do with my time.”

“True. Stupid idea. But then what about Indwe ... oops no! That would have old Oups turning in his grave ... his potjie, I mean.”

Ganie thought for a while, staring into her whisky glass and drawing deeply on her cigarette.

“There’s always Rhodes, you know. I don’t think I ever heard sad stories about Rhodes,” she said. “And it’s the most gorgeous place—totally unspoiled, as far as I’ve heard. And it’s a beautiful drive. We can even stop in at Graaff Reinet to visit Dharma.”

Kittie seemed to be warming to the idea.

“Oh, come on, Kitts! What do you say?”

“I don’t know.” Kittie still wasn’t convinced. She was also tired. She’d been in turmoil for months and craved stability. She wanted to start working again, set up a home and rebuild her life. Yet, she also wanted to get away as far as she could from Bakkies. Crawl into a corner and forget about the man to whom she’d lost all her possessions, not to mention her self-respect.

“Wasn’t the Rhodes house the one with the ghost?” she asked. “You know, the one that ambushed them when they walked down that super-long passage at night?”

“That’s the one,” Ganie responded.

Kittie’s state of mind was a contradiction of having clear insight into the catastrophe that had befallen her and simultaneously denying all knowledge of it. The scope of Bakkies’s deception was so vast that her conscious mind was unable to fully grasp its extent, opening the door for—necessitating—her subconscious to leap into protection, shielding her from a great deal of that knowledge.

For some months, before she returned to the Cape, Kittie had lived in complete denial, giving Bakkies another chance to make things right. Then another. And

another. And though reality had eventually sunk in, it was often still more than she could absorb. From day to day, her actions were those of an automaton, doing simply what was expected of her. Placing one foot in front of the other, by and large guided by Ganie and the dictates brought about by each new day. Planning beyond this day or the next was not possible. Shock had been delayed because of denial, and post-traumatic stress was inevitable. Dana and Ganie agreed on that point—Dana viewing it from a professional diagnostic point of view and Ganie knowing what to expect from a lifetime of experience.

Maybe Ganie was right, Kittie thought. Maybe they should go away for a while. Maybe the physical scattering of her father's and grandfather's ashes would bring about a symbolic resolution.

"Sort of out with the old and in with the new," she mumbled.

"Exactly!" Ganie agreed. "But shame, man, if we do this thing, what about poor old Monty?"

"Well, there's nothing we can do about that," said Kittie. "She's six foot under—at least her ashes are. Maybe we can stop by and put flowers on her grave. I went there once, but that was before Noah built the ark."

"I've never been. Matter of fact, I don't even know where the cemetery is."

Unlike their mothers and siblings, Ganie and Kittie used to find their eccentric grandmother enormously entertaining. Both of them were rebellious and greedy for life. In Monty, they saw their own twin spirits—free, inquisitive and progressive. And usually in some sort of trouble.

Abruptly, Ganie let out a yelp. She sat up straight and placed her drink on the coffee table. This was important.

"Say, Kitts, wouldn't it be bloody marvellous if we could get Monty out of the ground and scatter her along with the other three? Just imagine ..."

"The whisky is talking, cuz. That's very funny. Fôkking hilarious. Digging up a grave, I ask you. Old Monty will just have to stay put. At least she *has* a grave. At least Oupa did that for her. He always did the right thing."

But the thought wouldn't let go of Ganie. Setting off on a journey to perform the symbolic act of putting the previous generation to rest inspired her. It possessed a definite air of occasion. But closing the circle by reuniting the family in death ... now that was profound.

By dawn, what had begun as an idle thought—a little spark in the pit of her stomach—had turned into a raging obsession. As if, by the physical act of journeying across the breadth of the country to perform this private ritual of her design, she would put to rest all the ghosts of the past.

And make up for a goat that lived to see another day.

## **Chapter Eight: Thieves in the Temple**

Jerome sighed as he leaned back in his chair, running his fingers through his short, curly ginger hair. His head was throbbing and the empty computer screen was a taunting accusation. Words were slow to come today. What could one say about a singer whose contribution to society would have been better served if only he'd stuck to his day job as an administrative officer in the city's traffic department, if the grapevine were to be believed.

"Tenor strikes high C—on D flat," he typed. He stared at this, his fifth attempt, for a long while and then swiftly and forcefully backspaced to delete the words.

"Crap!" he cursed.

He reached for his empty coffee mug and stood up to fetch a refill. This was going to be one hell of a long day, he thought again. He regretted the hours after midnight, when suddenly the conversation had become so riveting, the wit so incisive, the man he'd been talking to for hours so irresistible.

"I really should learn to know better," he berated himself. All these late nights were getting too much. "I'll yet party myself into an early grave."

Jerome's freckled hands were not all too steady as he lifted the kettle to pour the boiling water into his mug, spilling sugar as he added several heaped spoons to the cheap instant coffee sanctioned by the bean counters at Independent Newspapers. When he got back to his desk, the phone was ringing, adding to the indistinguishable din of the newsroom and the persistent drumbeat in his head. Spilling yet more coffee on the sticky surface of his desk, he scratched around the various piles of papers to

find a clear spot on which to place his mug, and fumbled with the receiver as he lifted it.

“Jerome Hunter,” he growled into the receiver, his voice gravely from smoking too many cigarettes the previous night.

“Jem! Guess who? How are you?” said the voice on the other end.

“Goodness me, pet! What a surprise! God, how’ve you been? I feel like death, darling. Death, I tell you.”

“Hangover, doll? Not another one. Who was he?” Ganie wanted to know.

“No, nothing like that. Well, not quite like that. I had to review this recital at the Opera House and it was truly, truly too awful for words. You know I’m much more a Joy Division type of a queen. This guy’s Schubert was passable, in an Eastern Cape sort of a way—at least that part of the programme didn’t cause tinnitus—but by God, somebody ought to have vetoed the Brahms. It was torture, pet. My ears are still ringing. Why me, I ask myself? In this shit hole of a place that’s been forgotten by God since he smote Gomorrah. But tell me about you. How are the house animals?”

If not entirely restored, Jerome was beginning to feel considerably better. Talking to Ganie over the telephone would take care of at least thirty minutes of his working day. He had not seen her since his transfer to Port Elizabeth two years before, and since then there had been none of the adventures the two of them had had in Cape Town. But those goings-on were exactly the reason why his editor decided to have him transferred.

While at *The Argus*, Jerome’s social life had come to rival his professional obligations way beyond interference levels to the point of injury. Had any other journalist in the newsroom arrived so consistently late for work—and on several occasions not at all—he would have been sent packing. But a different set of rules always seemed to apply to Jerome. It wasn’t just his reporting and writing skills, which had garnered a loyal readership and enormous popularity among colleagues—his contacts in the arts and celebrity world had on many occasions over the years given the paper an edge over its rivals that no right-thinking editor would want to jeopardise. Who else had a direct number to David Bowie’s wife, Iman? Who else was on air-kissing terms with Boy George? Who else had shot the breeze in the eighties with Malcolm McClaren, Tony Wilson and the Housemartins? And although his social reach had been somewhat reduced of late, which other South African

journalist would conceivably have swung an invitation to Prince Harry's farewell party in London prior to his departure for a tour of duty in Iraq? Jerome also stored in his prodigious mental database a body of knowledge about the sexual preferences of assorted politicians and sportsmen to make any British tabloid paparazzo green with envy. Nobody knew how he did it, but he had, if not befriended, at least acquainted an array of celebrities that would be the envy of Oprah Winfrey's party planner. Jerome was indispensable and he knew it.

"We're all well, thanks," Ganie said. "Well, I suppose as well as can be expected under the circumstances. I'll have to tell you everything later—too long and complicated to go into it now. But tell me, are you around? I mean, you're not off to interview some socialite taking a bubble bath in the bundu or something, are you? Or jetting off to the South of France for a rendezvous with some hot young Fabio or Enrico? I want to come and visit for a few days."

"Woohoo! I wish, pet! But no, I'm not going anywhere. Sadly. Old Chipmunk here is keeping me on a ridiculously short leash. Those globetrotting days seem to be long gone. When last was I even in Cape Town? When are you coming?"

"Soon, I think, in the next week or so. I'm taking a driving holiday with my cousin, Kittie. Remember her?"

"Oh my! The Voice! My, my, my—we are honoured. She's just fabulous. The three of us are going to have a ball. You just let me know when to expect you. I'll excavate the percale and buff the silver to a sparkle in the meantime."

Ganie could not help chuckling. Oh, it did her heart good to speak to her old friend! His banter always placed her life and problems in perspective again.

"I will. But Jem, there's a little favour I have to ask. A bit off the wall, darling. You'll probably platz, but hear me out before you say anything. It's not as if we're a pair of fairies, is it?"

Ganie heard the sharp intake of breath followed by a high-pitched, unhinged-sounding giggle. She loved to shock him and that familiar manic chuckle had its usual effect on her. She burst out laughing again. She could never resist it.

"Can't wait to hear what it is, pet! Please tell me it's delicious."

Ganie took a deep breath and tried to speak, but suddenly did not know where to begin. How does she explain her desire to rob her grandmother's grave? A twenty-something-year-old grave!

Kittie had finally agreed to the trip, but what Ganie had failed to do was convince her cousin that it was necessary to somehow get hold of Monty's ashes from Little Walmer Cemetery in Port Elizabeth. No matter how hard she tried and how persistently she cajoled, Kittie just waved off the notion, telling Ganie she was being ridiculous. Kittie's protests notwithstanding, Ganie had been convincing herself steadily that it was a task that needed to be done. The more she thought about it, the more certain she was that their odyssey of ashes would be incomplete, entirely meaningless, unless Monty could be united with her family, dead though they all were. Monty had to be restored to those who had accompanied her on her life's path, allowing the family thus to find restitution. Did a soul have to be banished for all eternity to a cold and lonely grave for one brief lapse in judgement?

"Um ... well, you see ..." Ganie began. "Kittie and I ... well, both our fathers have died now. My father died a year or so ago and Kittie's last month. They've both been cremated. We want to scatter their ashes where they grew up. And our grandfather's ashes, too ... but ... well, that's a bit of a long story."

"That's no problem, Ganie. I'm so sorry to hear about your dad and uncle. But of course I'll help you. In any way I can. We can arrange a nice, dignified little ceremony. You just say when and where ..." Jerome began.

"No, no, no! You don't understand," Ganie interrupted. "We're not doing it there. We're just stopping off in PE on our way to Rhodes Village. That's where we'll scatter the ashes. You know, further east, on the Lesotho border, near Barkley East. It ... it's something else. It's my grandmother. I can't leave her behind."

"What do you mean? Heavens, Ganie, if memory serves, your old gran has been in the ground for ... what? Cripes, I don't know, pet. Centuries. She must be all hair and clattering bone in there by now. I don't get it," Jerome said.

"Well, you see, it's like this. Monty ... that's my gran ... she was cremated in the eighties. Then her ashes were buried."

Jerome yelped.

"Oops! Sorry, her bones won't be clattering in that case. But the point is, ash or bone, she's been dead and buried since before Michael Jackson turned white."

"Yes. Dead and buried and cold and alone. Abandoned. Cast aside. In a terrible misery, likely. I can't allow that," said Ganie. "I've got to get her out."

“Wha ... wha ... what ... ever!” Jerome wiped his free hand over his hair and held his forehead, pressing hard on his temples as he covered his eyes. The throbbing was gaining velocity. Behind his eyes raged a fire. What on earth had made him so happy to speak to Ganie again? Nothing is ever uncomplicated with her. He should have known.

“I’m not sure I’m getting this right. You’re not saying what I think you’re saying? Are you? You want to ... um ... *what* exactly?”

“Dig her up ... get her out of her grave. And you’re the only one I can ask to help. Please, Jem. You have to help,” Ganie said.

Without opening his eyes, Jerome shook his head from side to side. What was it he had drunk last night? He couldn’t recall throwing back Tequila at any stage. Nor any other form of hallucinogen.

“I must still be drunk,” Jerome said. He wondered whether a corner could be turned in substance abuse. What if you’ve used up the quota you’d been allocated for your life? And what if, when you’ve had that quota and you continue your evil ways, the effects are the same as withdrawal and you get the DTs? What about acid flashbacks? And he had certainly had his fair share of mind-altering substances.

“Wait, Ganie. You’ve lost me. Are you okay, pet? I mean, have you taken something? You know you can tell me anything. No secrets, remember? You know I’ll understand.”

“I’m stone-fucking-cold sober, Jerome. It’s ten o’ clock in the fricking morning. Yeah, maybe it’s a bit off the wall, but for chrissakes, it can’t be impossible. Nothing’s impossible. A bit strange, I admit. You see, if you can just ask around a bit and find out where the grave is. C’mon, you work in a newsroom. You have access to stuff. And you’re right there. All I need from you is to make a couple of phone calls, maybe go to the cemetery and do a bit of a recce. See whether they have security and stuff. You know, gather some intelligence. I’ll take care of the logistics of the actual operation. Maybe you can also find a couple of strong men to dig. I don’t see how it can be such a big problem. Who cares whether a twenty-year-old grave is dug up anyway? God, nobody will even notice. As long as we’re careful and make sure we’re not seen by anybody.”

“You.” Despite his best efforts to inject some force into his voice Jerome’s protest sounded feeble. “As long as *you’re* not seen by anyone. Count me out on this one,

babe. I think you should give this another think, Ganie. We're not living in a *Boy's Own Manual*. We're not the Hardy Boys or Harry Potter, for pete's sake. Real people don't go digging up graves."

"Well, how else will I get Monty, then, Jem? She's in the ground and I need to get her out. Without Monty there's simply no point to this whole exercise," Ganie said.

Jerome sighed. He should have known. The more he objected, the more stubborn Ganie would become. God, he'd seen it often enough. Give the woman half a reason, even when she was wrong and she'd dig her heels in like buffalo preparing to charge.

"Come on, Jerome. Please just say you'll check out the cemetery and find out where her grave is. I'll take care of everything else."

"Yeah, I've heard that one before. Like you took care of everything when I was left alone with fifty jobs in the biker bar that time," Jerome said, unable to conceal the sting in his voice.

In spite of himself, he cast around in his mind trying to conjure up images of the city's cemeteries.

"Why not just apply to the authorities to have the body legally exhumed? You know, the way normal people would go about something like this."

"Oh, Jem," Ganie sighed. "I thought about that. I even made calls to the municipality, but nobody seems to know how to go about it. It could take months. Years even. We'd probably have to get the whole family to consent. Imagine the rigmarole. I mean, how do you go about it anyway? No, that wouldn't work. Besides, Kittie and I have the time now. In a few months' time, everything will have changed again. You know, I will never, ever be able to live with myself if we don't do this thing. It has to be now. It's ... sort of ... it's a bit of a sacred mission for me. I have to do it, Jem."

"And good luck to you, too, babes! You're nuts. Which cemetery is it, anyway?"

"I think it's the one in Walmer."

"Uh-uh ... then you have a problem. A biggie. Or ... maybe not. The place is shack land these days—squatters everywhere. We ran a story a year or two ago. I think the authorities have been exhuming the bodies from the old graves and reburying them elsewhere. Forest Hill, if I'm not mistaken. I don't know how far they've got, but that's easy enough to find out. Strange they didn't tell you that when you phoned."

“Fucking hell!” Ganie exclaimed. “That’s shocking! You mean they live there, right in between the graves, shitting and pissing on dead people? Good God, I imagine Monty’s turning in her grave. So how did that happen? Where do they ... you know... ablute?”

Ganie’s mind raced as she pictured hundreds of people going about the banalities of their day-to-day business in a graveyard, mothers helping their children get dressed for school in the morning, fathers sitting on headstones at night, smoking, drinking and shooting the breeze, children kicking soccer balls around or playing cricket using those same headstones as stumps by day, clothes being laundered in sink baths, people squatting on the periphery to relieve themselves. The image was awful.

Yet, she thought, the shack development could work in her favour.

“Jeez, Jem, I’d be so grateful if you could find out what’s going on there. I swear, I’ll be grateful for eternity.”

“I think you’re being completely nuts and I don’t want any part in digging up a body illegally. But I’ll find out what the situation is at Little Walmer Cemetery,” said Jerome.

Ganie said goodbye and stared at the receiver as she put the phone down. Of course she had lied to Jerome about phoning the municipality. Her call to him had been the first she’d made. Not once had it even occurred to her to go through official channels to exhume her grandmother’s ashes.

Jerome was right, of course. She should be sensible and do things correctly for once in her life. But that would take time and Ganie did not have time. Come hell or high water, Monty was going to Rhodes.

**From:** Ganie Blignault [mailto:ganieb@mweb.co.za]

**Sent:** 3 April 2007 04:56 AM

**To:** lanablig@hotmail.com

**Subject:** Another one down

My dearest Mother

I should have written sooner. Uncle Jorrie has joined Pa and Oupa Sam and Ouma Monty in the big old, dry old Karoo in the sky. I've been meaning to tell you about it for weeks now, but so much has been happening that I haven't managed to get around to it.

Things have changed quite a bit around here. Most importantly, Kittie has been staying with me since the funeral. That bastard Bakkies has taken her for all she had, but we kind of predicted that that would end in tears, didn't we? What we didn't realise was exactly what a nasty piece of work he really turned out to be. Shame, poor old Kitts. She's in such a state. But at least she's come to her senses and now sees him for what he is.

It's good having her here—we often sit chatting late into the night, talking about the things that have happened in our lives. Like we did tonight again, until we could hear the birds chirp in the trees. I swear there's a big black hole in the middle of the night and if you don't take care, you're likely to fall into it before you know. If you

don't go to bed before that hole opens up, you're a goner. I think it happens somewhere between one and three in the morning, and once in you don't even realise it until the birds start to wake up. So, that's what happened tonight again, but I'm not even sleepy, so before I go to bed, I wanted to write to you quickly.

Uncle Jorrie's funeral went off smoothly enough, though I envy you not being around, what with all these funerals we have to attend these days. You can thank your lucky stars. No matter how much we love the people around us, going to their funerals is not my favourite pastime.

The little chapel where it was held was packed to the rafters, but the average age was ninety in the shade—I felt positively young there. Some of them were wheeled in in wheelchairs and others shuffled in with Zimmer frames. All went well until the minister started in on us, trying to evangelise those ancient mourners. I found that quite distasteful. How can you tell all these old biddies they'd better open the door when Jesus comes knocking, or else! At a funeral, nugal! Can you bloody well believe it? The funeral of an eighty-year-old man! If those people, standing with one foot in the grave, have not set matters right with their maker at this late stage, well—it's not very likely that it's going to happen in time for their departure from this vale of tears, is there? You should be grateful you were away. Your hackles would have risen!

Nonetheless, once the service was over and we'd all finished crying and blowing our noses, it was a good funeral. Maybe it was because we all got to see one another again after so many years—our lot came from Jo'burg and Dana and her family from Canada.

The funeral itself was a simple affair—no fanfare and no frills, just like he would have wanted it. His coffin was a plain pine box, a Jewish coffin, much more handsome than the elaborate, shiny ones undertakers always try to palm off on a person.

The heart attack got him very suddenly, but then again, that was probably a blessing. Uncle Jorrie would have hated lying in a hospital bed counting down the days to his going. I always think of him as being a bit like Chris Barnard in that respect, with little patience or tolerance for age and the indignities visited upon us as we grow old. So, we should be grateful for the swiftness of his departure.

I wrote a little poem for the occasion. One of Kittie's daughters read it during the service. Now that I've looked at it again, I realise it's not what I thought it was,

though it did set people off crying, all right. Nobody said so, but before the funeral I got the feeling that Kittie and Aunt Athena would appreciate a few words from me. And what it lacks in poetic merit is made up for in my heartfelt desire to send him on his way with something of my own. Uncle Jorrie meant a lot to me over the last fifteen years or so. So if it's not up to scratch, well, don't scorn. A proper eulogy would have been preferable, but that's not how it wanted to come out. Maybe people shouldn't try to be creative when they're mourning. Come to think of it, when I wrote it, I was probably thinking of all the people and hopes and expectations I've lost in my life. I've pasted the poem in below so that you can read it for yourself:

### **Bereft**

*Figure kindly, my friend, the purpose of life without purpose.*

*Bereavement divorced me from the human race:*

*Bereft, I find it wearisome to reattach.*

*Bereft, I seek my comrades in that world I cannot see.*

*Bereft, I retain no inclination and some laden words—*

*humility, compassion, forgiveness, love —*

*are indeed bereft of consequence.*

*Bereavement renders me vacant:*

*Once the tears have gone and the pain has done its plunder,*

*it is merely the vessel of sterility.*

*Bereavement requires relearning affects others take for granted:*

*No longer can I conjure a bountiful deluge,*

*it's all cried and done.*

*Voided of tears, there is pain no longer—*

*nor joy, nor solace.*

*At the end, my friend, bereavement is the emotion of no emotion.*

*Above all, bereavement is dull.*

*How do I feel my heart?  
My heart is away, on the nod.  
It led me nowhere, it failed.  
As a concept, the heart is a spiritual failure.  
Please tell me, how do you shock a heart back into life?*

*I can but call on you, my friend, to help me understand.  
But bear in mind, dear friend, the very density of a particular nature.  
Bear in mind, the particularity of a certain type of wit.  
(I mock you not, it's simply the way it is.)  
Is your concealed world this humourless a place?  
Why so quiet here? Your silence so compacts the spirit.  
Had you not specified to navigating the course?*

*But, oh, to look back,  
to look back and tell,  
to tell and understand, the order is so tall.  
What was good, what was bad?  
What was funny, what was not?  
Where is the hope, where the regret?  
Littered all over the place, I tell you, all of it sad.  
Scattered like shrapnel, the colours of the flower season.*

*And no one really remembers—  
likely no one ever noticed  
but me, because I did.  
Because there is nothing else but to remember, to understand:  
For death to come without pique and with decorum.  
To find good humour—  
Oh, my beloved friend!  
To proceed, to proceed.*

As I said, nothing to write home about. When Pa died, I didn't write anything—there was nothing for me to write. I suppose I should feel guilty about the fact that I had something to say at my uncle's death and nothing at my father's. But in all honesty, there's no guilt. When words fail, there is nothing you can do to bring them to the surface and to force them out is just artificial and would be immediately obvious to others. Maybe those words will come one day. If that ever happens, you'll be the first to know.

I hope you're enjoying your travels. There is much more I want to tell, but it will take forever, so I'll be off to bed then.

Much love from

A daughter who misses you terribly,

Matingane

PS: Maybe just a teensy little SMS?

## **Chapter Nine: Breaking the Family Embargo**

“If I was a ghost, this would be just the place I’d choose as a pit stop before moving onto friendlier climes,” said Kittie as Ganie negotiated the twists and turns of the Tradouw Pass.

The morning was still crisp, but the sun was gradually gaining ground on the white chill that had been lord of the craggy cliffs and deep valleys of the Langeberg during the dark hours. Ganie was driving slowly. Much too slowly, she realised. The sudden sharp bends in the road frightened her and she wished Kittie would keep quiet for five consecutive minutes so that she could concentrate and get this meandering mountain drive behind her.

The fear had crept up on her in stages and without warning, because the road was wide for a mountain pass and so far it had been clear of other traffic. But no sooner had she rounded one bend than another would loom in front of her—and another and another—bearing down on her with an unknowable force, coming at her Goliath-like instead of waiting for her to approach and conquer it, rising up like a conscious creature with mischievous intent directed at her personally, teasing her, laughing at her, playing with her—as if the ever-changing mountain face was engaging her in a private game of truth or dare, with Ganie having to guess at the imponderables lying beyond each curve.

Ganie felt hypnotised by the rhythm of the landscape and she had difficulty keeping her eyes open. She blinked several times, scrunching her burning eyes shut and then stretching them wide open again. She shook her head.

“Won’t you grab me some water out of the cooler box, please Kitts?” she asked.

The last thing she wanted to do was let on how drowsy she was becoming or tell Kittie about her increasing anxiety as the mountain face rose steeper and more ominous with each coil of the road. Kittie would most certainly offer to take over the driving, probably insist on it, and Ganie did not have the stomach to ride shotgun in a car driven by her cousin. Not that Kittie was a poor driver, exactly—as far as Ganie knew, she’d been involved in only one serious accident in her life, in a car driven by someone else—but Kittie sometimes took chances that made Ganie’s hair stand on end. When driving, Kittie appeared even more distracted than usual, frequently taking her eyes off the road to look at whomever was in the passenger seat as she spoke. Which was all the time. Ganie was a nervous passenger at the best of times, but with Kittie behind the steering wheel she became a wreck.

Kittie unscrewed the top of the bottle and handed the water to Ganie.

“Just tell me when you get tired, Ganie. I’m happy to take over at any time.”

“No, I’m fine, thanks. I enjoy driving, especially on long trips,” Ganie said. “And this is a long, long way from where that hitchhiker ghost lives, by the way. She haunts that last long stretch of road before you get to Uniondale. Anyway, that’s how I understand the story. When we were kids, a friend of my parents’ swore that she once picked her up. Now, in hindsight, it seems ridiculous. The stupid woman must have been having us on. Anyway, at the time, I just about crapped myself listening to the story.”

Kittie was quiet for a moment.

“Do you think it’s true, though? I mean, do you think the ghost really exists?”

“I’m sure the accident really happened. It was in the seventies. This young couple was engaged and they were driving to the girl’s parents’ home to make plans for their wedding. She was sleeping on the back seat and her fiancé somehow lost control of the car, which skidded off the road and crashed in a ditch or something. I think it was a Beetle. Anyway, the story goes that over Easter—I think the accident happened on Good Friday—she sometimes stands hitchhiking by the side of the road in the dead of night. Then, when somebody stops to pick her up, she gets into the back of the car.

“They say the air in the car turns icy cold when it pulls off again. And then, when the Good Samaritans in the front turn around to speak to her, the woman’s nowhere to

be seen. Sometimes, they say, there are peals of hysterical laughter, either before she disappears or just after.

“It’s stupid, actually. I don’t think I’m going to believe it anymore.”

They had been on the road for more than three hours, but Ganie had been awake for considerably longer, having set the alarm for four in the morning to make sure the food for the journey was freshly prepared and the luggage neatly stacked in the boot of her Mini along with Ganie’s laptop and the gym bag holding the ashes.

Kittie had argued with Ganie about getting up so early. She thought it was madness. Who would want to waste precious sleeping time when you could get your food at any of a hundred One-Stops along the way? They would have to stop to fill up the car in any case, God have mercy. But, Ganie countered, putting a pancaked, greasy and tasteless toasted cheese-and-tomato sandwich into her mouth along with even greasier, flaccid chips and washing it down with coffee that tasted like dishwater was beyond what she could endure. There was no telling what culinary horrors awaited in the small towns along the way, and she was determined at least to kick off their journey on a wholesome note.

“I’d sooner starve,” she’d said.

Leaving Kittie behind to watch TV the day before, Ganie had set about meticulously planning their menu for the road and went out of her way to get the best ingredients for what she’d planned. Instead of settling for bread rolls from her local supermarket, where her purchases included Norwegian smoked salmon, Philadelphia cream cheese, chives, fresh limes, rocket leaves and plump Italian tomatoes, she drove the extra few kilometres in the opposite direction to buy fresh bagels from her favourite Portuguese bakery—a detour well worth the effort, she believed. She went as far as buying pitted olives for Kittie, even though she would never put any such thing in her mouth.

At the bakery, as she ticked off in her head what was still needed, she suddenly had an inspired idea and although this forced her to deviate from her planned route, drove to her favourite biltong shop in Kenilworth, several kilometres further, where she selected a moist piece of beef biltong with just enough fat along the side to add taste, but not so much as to leave one feeling queasy. She instructed the merchant to slice the biltong especially thinly. The biltong was to go into the salad. Why had she never thought of that before?

When the alarm woke her up that morning, she prepared their padkos. Bagels halved, onto which she spooned liberal dollops of cream cheese mixed with finely chopped chives, topping it with salmon and a sprinkling of capers. She placed the bagels in individual parcels of tinfoil, leaving plenty of space around each half to prevent it from getting squashed as she folded the edges of the foil down. The limes were quartered and sealed in a separate Ziplock, to be squeezed over the salmon later.

Then she sliced those gorgeous red tomatoes into a large plastic container, each slice at near-equal thickness, and salted them generously, covering this layer with sliced onions, crumbled feta cheese and a mixture of seeds and nuts—sunflower, pumpkin, sesame, almonds and pine soaked in soya sauce and roasted to sticky perfection. A thick layer of thinly-sliced biltong finished off the salad. A masterpiece if ever she saw one. Fresh rocket leaves could be taken from the packet and added as they later ate. She arranged everything in a cooler box, while in another she placed several bottles of water, vanilla yoghurt and an assortment of bagged sweets. Of course, she over-catered by four times at least.

Satisfied with her efforts, Ganie felt invigorated and woke Kittie up with a cup of piping espresso at five-thirty, and the two set off in high spirits half-an-hour later, a triumph considering Kittie's tardiness in the mornings.

Once convinced of the idea of taking a holiday, Kittie became excited. Though the objective was solemn, their end destination was many days away and their stops along the way—a few days in Jeffrey's Bay, some time in Port Elizabeth with Jerome and a visit to Dharma in Graaff Reinet, before heading for Rhodes—were sure to be as fine a holiday as any.

"I'm getting hungry," Ganie said. "I think we should stop for breakfast as soon as we're over the pass."

Diverting towards Route 62 had been a decision taken on impulse. As they sped along the N2, further and further away from Cape Town through the Boland towards Mossel Bay, the car radio gradually lost signal, picking up a local station broadcasting to the Southern Cape. Passing the turn-off to Swellendam, the announcer mentioned that a festival was planned in the Karoo town of Uniondale that day.

"Hey, Ganie, that's not exactly *out* of our way. Let's go to the Langkloof festival!" Kittie said on the spur of the moment, all the joys and optimism of the beginning of a

holiday spurring her on. “There’s nothing saying we *have* to take the coastal road. We can always do the Garden Route on our way back.”

“Mmmm. You think? Are you sure it’s not too far out of our way?” Ganie wanted to know.

“Yes, man. I often used that road travelling from Stellenbosch to PE when I was going home for varsity holidays. It’s a beautiful drive. And if I’m not mistaken, it’s actually a shorter route. Slow down so you can take the next turn-off.”

Feeling the liberation of their bold journey stir inside her and without giving it another thought, Ganie swerved to the left onto the R324 towards Barrydale and before long found herself being menaced by the dramatic mountains around her.

“Phew! Thank God that’s behind us,” she said as she passed the sign reading: “End of pass. Thank you for your patience.”

“Right then, shall we stop for a bite to eat?”

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“Langkloof festival, my middle-aged Weighless-ravaged arse,” said Kittie as the silver Mini Cooper approached the end of Uniondale’s Main Street, the length of which was deserted, as if the entire town had been abducted and taken somewhere more forgiving. Here and there a lonely child could be seen strolling down the hot road, barefoot and with no apparent purpose. “This looks more like a get-together of local farmers. It’s just a jumped-up freaking agricultural soiree, I bet you.”

Not quite sure where to go, Ganie slowed down even more. In front of them, as the road bent sharply to the left, was a large field, which seemed to be marginally less deserted than the rest of the town. So far, they had passed a relatively respectable township on the right as they turned into the town and driven past a few shops that appeared so sleepy it was hard to tell whether they were open for business or closed. They also passed a police station, a post office and a few guesthouses.

“This place has died and gone to limbo,” Ganie quipped. “Jesus, it’s a Saturday morning and there’s not a breathing living soul around, it seems. Did you notice a bottle store anywhere, Kitts? We have to be sure to get provisions. No telling what time we’ll get to Jaybay and by then the liquor stores might be closed. And I can guarantee you the boere-by-the-sea won’t be selling alcohol on a Sunday.”

“You’re right. We don’t want to sit *droëbek* on our first holiday evening! But no, I haven’t seen anything. Maybe we should ask someone.”

“Ja, well ... if we can find ourselves a live one.”

Ganie parked the car in a clearing on the field where assorted cars and bakkies were lined up under a clump of willow trees on a riverbank. Stalls were dotted in a circle around the field, at the far end of which stood a sizeable tent.

“Well, we’re here now. Might as well relax for a while and see what action Uniondale has to offer,” she said as she got out of the car. She stretched her arms above her head and walked to the back of the car. “Maybe they’ve got some good old Karoo boerewors and mutton we can buy to take to Jaybay.”

Kittie walked away from the car and looked out over the river.

“Jesus, this place is as hot as Hades,” she said. Kittie was loving it all in spite of her initial reluctance to take the trip. She laughed. “And check out the mighty river, Ganie. At least, I suppose this is what passes for a river in these parts.”

“Morning, ladies! I’m guessing you’re not from around here, if your number plate is anything to go by.”

Ganie jumped at the deep voice that boomed behind her. She was standing bent over the open boot of the Mini digging around her suitcase to find her hairbrush and hadn’t seen the man approaching. He was large and his sandy-blond hair, painfully sparse on top, slicked back into a ponytail.

“I’m Karel,” he said, offering Ganie a hand the size of a Christmas gammon. “Karel Nortier.”

“Um ... jis ... Karel. Pleased to meet you. I’m Matingane Blignault,” she said.

She winced as her hand disappeared into the steely grasp of Karel’s giant fist.

“And this is my cousin, Kittie de Bruyn.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Ma’am,” said Karel Nortier as he pumped Kittie’s hand with the zeal of a Pentecostal missionary. “Welcome to the Langkloof festival. Unfortunately most of the best stuff has been sold out by now, but I’ll take you around and introduce you to a few of our townsfolk and farmers, if you’re not in too much of a hurry.”

Ganie felt cornered and wanted to brush the man off, but Kittie smiled sweetly as she looked up at him.

“Thank you, Karel. That would be lovely.”

Karel turned on his heel and strode ahead in the direction of the stalls.

“Follow me,” he said. “I’ll show you how we do things in the Karoo.”

“Don’t go and get all pally with the locals, now, Kittie,” Ganie hissed under her breath. “I don’t feel like getting bogged down by a bunch of Karoo farmers and their wives.”

But Kittie had skipped ahead to keep up with her new friend and either did not hear Ganie or chose to ignore her.

Ganie sighed. Kittie could be so dumb sometimes, her sense of boundaries so flawed. She was like Monty that way. She’d strike up conversations with strangers at the drop of a hat and then sit with the consequences afterwards, when those strangers latched onto her and took advantage of her generous nature.

Instead of following Kittie, Ganie made her own way to the stalls, greeting stall owners politely but keeping her distance. She smiled when eye contact was made, but refused to be drawn into a conversation. The festival seemed to be sparsely attended, with only a handful of people strolling around on the field. Some were sitting on the grass eating pancakes or boerewors rolls, others stood around in groups talking among themselves. But a lot of noise was coming from the tent at the far side of the field, where a party of sorts seemed to be in progress.

Her resolve to remain aloof from the locals faltered the instant she spotted a stall selling meat. In spite of herself, she struck up a conversation with the farmer manning the stall and before she knew it, she’d bought three kilograms of loin chops, a leg of lamb, a rack of lamb, several kilograms of lamb knuckles and a generous length of boerewors.

“Good meat will be my undoing yet,” she said to the farmer with a wink. “Ooh, and those eggs? I’d better get some. We’re on our way to Jeffrey’s Bay for a holiday. Might as well stock up here ... do my bit for local agriculture instead of helping the fat cats get fatter.”

“And they’re free-range, too,” the farmer nodded. He pushed his khaki hat to the back of his head and wiped beads of sweat from his ruddy forehead with a discoloured handkerchief that was already drenched in sweat. “The freshest farm eggs this side of the Swartberg, no doubt about that. Our chickens live healthy lives.”

Ganie bought two dozen eggs, then only realised that her rash purchases might present a problem. She could keep the meat in the freezer at Herman’s house in

Jeffrey's, but there was no way she could lug it through the hot Karoo over many days' travel. And two of them would never be able to eat all that meat in so short a space of time. She looked around uncertainly, not knowing how to carry it all to the car.

"Can I help you carry this, Ma'am?"

A spotty, gangly youth in khaki shorts and shirt had appeared out of nowhere and spoke beside her. Ganie swung around.

"Thanks ... um ..."

"Fransman, Ma'am. I'm Fransman."

"Well thanks, Fransman. That would be great. Will you manage? Here, let me take the eggs."

As the two headed back to the Mini, Ganie heard her name being called.

"Oh, there you are, Ganie. Geez, we've been looking for you everywhere. Oh, my goodness ... what's all this?"

Kittie stopped in her tracks as she took in the mountain of meat Fransman carried. Her one eyebrow shot up.

"Well, you've certainly been busy," she said. "Who the f... who's going to eat all this meat?"

"It's for our holiday. Might as well be prepared, you know," came the tetchy reply. "And we can take some for Jerome."

Ganie was sweating. She was irritated and tired and wanted to get going again. First the mountain pass had rattled her, now they were wasting their time at a farming fete, when they could have been sitting on the deck of Herman's house sipping wine by now. The sun was blazing down on her neck and she wasn't sure she'd be able to fit all the meat she'd bought into the Mini, which for all its sexy chutzpah offered little packing space.

"But crikey, cuz, this is enough meat here for an army. It will go off if we're not careful. I hope Herman's house has a freezer."

"Of course it has a freezer, you klutz. We're not going to the desert, you know."

"Whatever," Kittie said. "But listen, Karel is taking me to the beer tent. Why don't you meet me there once you've got all this ... stuff ... in the car? That tent over there, the big one in the corner. I think we can both do with a drink before we move along. It's so damn hot here."

As if there was any other tent, Ganie thought as Kittie took off again. Ganie could swear she saw Kittie bounce as she followed the ponytailed Karel. With Fransman's help, she packed what meat she could fit into the two cooler boxes and placed the rest at the back of the car under a blanket. At least the car was parked in a shady spot, so she was optimistic that it would keep for an hour or two.

Though large enough, the army tent that served as the town's preferred watering hole for the day had seen better days. The canvas was frayed and threadbare to the point of being transparent. Above the entrance it sported an angled tear the size of a TV screen.

Ganie looked around. Clearly, the Langkloof festival was much better attended than she'd first thought when she saw the listless ragtag of people on the field outside. Inside, the tent was crowded with what seemed to be an entire town's worth of people. The din was ear-splitting. Slowly, making ample use of her elbows, she made her way to the bar area, hoping to find Kittie and the ever-helpful Karel there.

"Hey, Ganie! Over here! Don't bother about going to the bar. We have all the beer we can use at the table," Kittie called. Ganie turned around and saw her cousin and Ponytail Karel at a large table with seven or eight other people.

"So, what's with the name?" asked Karel once Ganie had taken the seat reserved for her at their table. "It's Mat ... what ... Mattie?"

"Matingane," said Ganie. "But don't sweat it. Just call me Ganie. Everybody does."

"Ja, but what does it mean? Sounds a bit ... um ... foreign to me. Actually ... it sounds a bit like a ... um ... like a ... K ... black's name, if you'll pardon my saying so."

"Here, Ganie. Have a beer." Kittie exchanged glances with Ganie as she passed her a large tankard of beer. "See, they have their own keg for the table. You can buy a whole one from the bar and just go and exchange it again when it's finished. Clever, hey? My kind of bar, that's for sure!"

"So, it's ... Ma-tee ... um, come again?" Karel was clearly not letting the subject of Ganie's name drop.

"Mah-teen-ghaan," Ganie repeated slowly. "And yes, you're quite right. It is kind of black. Zulu, as a matter of fact, although I don't think there's actually any such a Zulu name."

“So, Mah-te-ghaan,” Karel repeated. “Interesting.”

Ganie didn't bother to correct him this time. She looked at the people thronging together in the tent, all seemingly talking and laughing at the same time. A young woman wearing tight baby-blue pants and a lacy white top barely equipped to contain her large bosom was shrieking with mirth at a joke cracked by a rotund young man sitting next to her. To show him how much she appreciated his joke, the young woman punched the joker on his biceps, spilling beer all down the front of her blouse and into the cleft between her breasts. The young man greedily eyed the spillage and hooked his finger around the top of the blouse, grinning lecherously.

“What a festive little get-together,” Ganie said, trying to catch Kittie's eye. She wanted to change the direction the conversation was taking. She took several thirsty gulps from her tankard. “Trust you to find the very life and soul of the Karoo, Kitts. I should have known.”

“A Zulu name that is not really a Zulu name, hey?” Karel persisted.

“It's a made-up name,” Kittie said, coming to Ganie's rescue. Kittie knew that her cousin had long ceased to get impatient when explaining her unusual name to others, but she also understood Ganie well enough to know when trouble was about to hit. The way Ganie's eyes bore into Karel was enough indication that she was on the brink of losing her temper. “But it's derived from a very real Zulu name, one I'm sure you know only too well, Karel. It's Dingane.”

While Ganie realised only too well that her unusual name could take some time and practice before people would get the syllables rolling off their tongues with all the consonants and vowels in the correct order, she was highly sensitive to racist innuendo against her namesake. Call Dingane a butcher, call him a fratricidal assassin, call him a low-down, treacherous rogue, but never, ever tag onto him any of the degrading descriptions coined by white people to refer to black people.

“But why? Why would white people give their baby girl ... obviously a pretty little thing, too ... the name of a fat old Zulu? Not exactly an oil painting, either,” Karel said, winking conspiratorially as he spoke and clearing the foam of the beer from the corners of his mouth with his tongue. He rubbed Kittie's shoulders with a beefy hand, an attempt at being playful.

“And not even a good old Zulu, eksê? I'm not a racist or anything, you know. But I mean, Dingane? He was a crook.”

No matter how hard she tried to keep her cool, Ganie was bristling. She wished she'd never introduced herself as Matingane. Using the abbreviation generally prevented the type of surreal conversation she was having with this redneck right now. She'd been through it all before and she could see where the conversation was heading. The fact that Karel had clearly spent the better part of his morning in the beer tent was not helping. She turned to face him and looked him straight in the eyes, searching her mind for the appropriate words to come back at him.

"It's like this ..." Again Kittie stepped in before Ganie could speak. "Ganie was born on the Day of the Covenant, Dingane's Day, as it used to be called. These days it's the Day of Reconciliation, as you probably know. Her mother was the youngest of three daughters, a laatlammetjie, and the family's favourite. Ganie was her first child and her being born on such an important day ... well, the family saw it as significant, somehow. Her father's family, too. In fact, I think it was our Ouma Monty who came up with the name. I don't know, they saw it as a sign from God or something. So they called her after Dingane."

Kittie chuckled, hoping that by introducing a lighter tone into the conversation she could diffuse the annoyance that was building like storm clouds around Ganie.

"It's lucky they changed the name a bit, you know. Otherwise you'd really have been up the creek, wouldn't you?"

A stiff little smile played around Ganie's mouth and small bolts of lightning seemed to flash from her green eyes. Kittie knew that look. It was dangerous. She pitied Karel, should Ganie decide to challenge him. Few people were equal to a tongue-lashing from Ganie. When they were children, she often had to listen to Ganie railing forth against her parents for burdening her with a name like that. Those diatribes were a thing of the past—Ganie no longer seemed to have the energy to fight the tag or even be embarrassed by it. But Kittie knew better than to let the topic run its course. Ganie may have mellowed over time as far as her name was concerned, but from experience Kittie knew she would give Karel enough rope to say something else, luring him into a trap that he would not see coming and then close in for the kill. There was a limit to what she'd allow people to get away with.

Ganie said nothing. She'd become weary of telling people exactly what a big deal it all was to her family and how obsessively she had been made aware of her place in space and time. It had been many years since she was forced to endure the ordeal of

that annual ritual, during which any one of a number of older family members would make her sit down to listen, for the umpteenth time, to the story of the legendary Battle of Blood River. How, they solemnly used to tell her, the Voortrekker Piet Retief and his men had visited the treacherous Dingane to barter a land deal and how the butcher had reneged on the transaction by killing the well-intentioned Retief and his men. And how, with war against the amaZulu becoming inevitable, the Trekkers under the leadership of Retief's successor, Andries Pretorius, then made a covenant with God. They promised that a church would be built in God's honour and that the day of the battle would be commemorated as a Sabbath each and every year, in perpetuity, if only God would give them victory over the savages. Which, being the good God that He was, He duly did on 16 December 1838, leaving the river along which they'd drawn into a laager running red with the blood of the vanquished. Three thousand Zulu lay dead on the banks of the river after that battle—the Voortrekkers suffered not a single fatality. If that was not a sure sign that the Boere were God's special, chosen race—they used to ask, nodding sagely—then what was?

Her name, so grimly marking her origins, set her apart as a child. Ganie hated it. Far from distinguishing her as someone important and special, which surely had to have been her parents' intention, she just grew to see herself as some weird anomaly, someone with no ordinary, acceptable place among her peers. Her name was a pain in the arse, the butt of many jokes and much misunderstanding. As she grew older, she learned simply to avoid giving her full name when introduced to people. Few people these days knew her as anything other than Ganie.

In the end, though, it was that name that determined the direction Ganie's life would take, a delicious irony that she eventually came to enjoy. Its unintended by-product was something her grandparents and great-grandparents could never have foreseen and had they been alive to witness it in the late eighties, they would have wept.

Instead of embracing the Afrikaner folklore surrounding the Battle of Blood River, Ganie became sick to death of the same tired old story, repeated to her with such a sense of occasion year after year. She came to be nauseated by all Afrikaner history, so sickened that she began to read, wherever she could find a scrap of published material, alternative interpretations of it. Learning that the history she'd been fed with

such devotion had, at best, been partisan and frequently far from the truth, she turned against everything the descendants of the good Trekkers stood for.

She began to question the history she was taught at school. She became suspicious of the Afrikaner notion that as a nation they had a unique place in the world as God's chosen people, a position garnered by default when He fell out of love with His first choice of people, the Jews, when they so foolishly failed to acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Messiah. For one thing, it didn't make sense to her that God, if He were as almighty as everyone kept telling her, could make such a spectacular blunder in His choice of favourite. If He'd created everything and was the constant, the all-knowing and all-powerful God everyone said He was, such fickleness just did not make sense. The Afrikaners had to have it wrong, she thought. Besides, it seemed very fishy to her that the only people who seemed to have made this leap of logic were those very Afrikaners themselves. Nobody else seemed to think them all that special.

Ganie was only eleven. Having picked up the incongruity of such a scurrilous trivialisation of history, especially Jewish history, for which she had a deep and abiding respect, she then went on to question the next leap of logic her teachers tried to get her to accept, namely that those not born of Afrikaner extraction—most particularly those born with skins darker than her own—were inferior to those who were. And that, she decided, was a stretch too far. That could not be reconciled with the same God those teachers taught her about. And once the sluice gates of her questioning mind were opened, there was no closing them again.

To the increasing horror of her family, Ganie drifted further and further away from her roots. The last straw came when the Afrikaans poet Breyten Breytenbach was jailed for what her father called "his activities as a communist". Ganie was furious. He and others of his generation had been her heroes. How could they jail him? How could he of all people be wrong? She no longer wanted any part in a system so oppressive, so patriarchal, so chokingly narrow. By the time she finished school, she had become if not a practising communist, a committed socialist and supporter of the struggle that eventually brought democracy to the country. But way back then, she was alone in her beliefs. She hadn't discovered where to find her comrades yet. She was a radical at large.

In the opinion of her family, she was shameless about her outrageous beliefs and had become, to all intents and purposes, a traitor to her heritage.

“I think it’s bloody weird in any case,” the relentless Karel said, calling Ganie back to the present. The corners of his mouth turned down into a cynical sneer. “But who am I to say anything? I’m just a white man in a country run by blacks who want to chase me into the sea. After they’ve taken my farm and my money, of course.”

With that, he turned his back on Ganie and focused his attention on Kittie.

“So, beautiful ... tell me what you do in Cape Town. And what brings a classy lady like you to our little town?”

Ganie felt the blood rushing to her head and for several seconds her eyesight seemed to fail—all she could see was a moving cauldron of red. Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them away. That’s how it was and that’s how it had always been. Set apart.

“It was Beethoven’s birthday, too, you know,” she whispered, too feebly for anyone to hear.

She rose and elbowed her way through the crowd to the bar, where she ordered a double Johnnie Walker on the rocks and quickly sat down on a bar stool before somebody else could beat her to it. Fuck the beer. She’d had enough beer. She would have a whisky and then coax Kittie to the car so that they could leave this sorry town and get started on their holiday. There was no getting through to japies like Karel. People like him were stuck on another planet in another time, and nothing Ganie could say or do would change the way they thought or saw the world.

Lost in thought, Ganie jumped at an ear-piercing shriek above the clatter of voices. She turned around to see what was causing the commotion. Right behind her the ample-breasted blonde who had spilled beer down her top was stretched sideways across two chairs, her right arm supporting the surging hills and valleys of her upper body. Peals of frenzied laughter issued from her mouth, her lacy white top soaked and no longer as pristinely white as before.

“Pietman, I’m telling you, leave me aloooooone!” she yelled, and even though the volume at which the request was issued suggested that she was serious about it, the lilting tone in her voice indicated quite the opposite. The lecherous Pietman hovered over her, swaying a tankard of beer high above her head, drunkenly splashing the liquid onto her long hair, now a matted, sticky mess of beer and hair gel.

“I’m coming to g-e-e-et you!” Pietman crooned in a drunken sing-song voice.

Ganie turned to face the bar again. She took a gulp of whisky. The place was giving her claustrophobia. She wanted to get out of there.

“Not really your kind of scene, is it?” said a heavily accented voice next to her with a chuckle. “You must excuse this crowd. We’re not all like that. The beer tent’s been open since nine this morning. And it shows. It will be a long day.”

Ganie looked at the woman who had appeared next to her at the bar. She was tiny and shockingly thin, her reedy arms and hands making Ganie think of a sparrow.

“Umm ... yes ... I can see. Well, they seem to be having fun,” she said.

“I’m Gretchen Waldheim,” said the woman, but didn’t offer to shake Ganie’s hand. “I run a guesthouse just outside town, but I also do other stuffs. I don’t drink.”

“Hi, Gretchen. I’m Ganie.”

“Interesting name. So what brings you to Uniondale, Ganie?” asked Gretchen. Ganie was relieved that Gretchen did not ask where her name came from.

“Oh, just passing through. My cousin and I are on holiday. We’re on our way to Jeffrey’s Bay.”

“That’s unusual. Most people take the coastal road,” said Gretchen.

“It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. We decided halfway to turn off and travel via Uniondale to visit the festival.”

“Pah! Festival, my boots. This is the farmers’ little show. All the many years it was the farmers’ show, now they call it a festival. They want to be grand these days, like everyone else,” said Gretchen.

“Oh well, I suppose we all want progress. Even Uniondale. So, if you don’t drink, why are you at the bar? Can I buy you a Coke or something?”

“That one behind the counter,” Gretchen tilted her head in the direction of the young bar tender who appeared to be running himself ragged. “Ludwig. He’s my son. He’s the barman in chief today. I just came to ask what time he will finish today. He has my computer to fix ... ah ... not really the computer ... you know, the connection. The wide line isn’t connecting and there is a lot of e-mails I must send this weekend.”

Ganie looked at the lanky Ludwig, whose age she guessed to be late thirties, and felt sorry for him. After a day behind the beer tent bar serving the thirsty population of Uniondale, she wondered how much clarity of thought would remain to establish the cause of his mother’s broadband recalcitrance.

“So, I assume you’re from Germany?” she asked. “Your accent ... How long have you been here?”

Gretchen flicked her wrist at her son, who came trotting up to his mother immediately. When ordering her drink earlier, it had taken Ganie at least fifteen minutes to catch his eye.

“Ja, Muti?”

“Give me the bottle of what this lady’s drinking and bring me a big bottle of sparkling water, please, Ludie. We’re going to sit outside.”

Before Ganie could say anything more, Gretchen was on her feet with a half bottle of Johnny Walker under her one arm and a litre of bottled water under the other.

“Come, my friend, it’s too noisy here to talk. We will sit outside, ja?”

Ganie followed Gretchen outside through the back of the tent, where several tables and chairs stood empty under their umbrellas, the festival goers apparently having better things to enjoy inside the tent.

“So this is better, I think,” said Gretchen. “Make yourself comfortable now.”

She settled down on one of the chairs and poured some whisky into Ganie’s glass and water into her own. The two women sat in the hot sun without talking for a while. Gretchen broke the silence.

“Ja, I’ve been here for many years. I came in 1969. I followed a South African who had ... how shall I say ... visited München and left me ... how shall I say, expecting a baby. Ludwig over there,” and she motioned in the direction of the tent again. “He did not want me or the baby, but I had no money to get back to Germany, so I just stayed. Nearly forty years now.”

Ganie didn’t know what to say. She was taken aback at the amount of personal information the woman was prepared to entrust to a complete stranger. She looked at Gretchen again. She had put her age at roughly that of her own, but she now realised that Gretchen must be at least ten years her senior, maybe more.

As diminutive as she was, Gretchen had a presence that commanded attention. Her hair was sparse, dyed raven black and tied back in a long ponytail. But it was her dark blue eyes, a shade that could most closely be described as Persian indigo, large and piercing, that really caught and held Ganie’s eyes. The colour was like nothing she had ever seen.

“I’m ... sorry,” she said. “I mean, I’m sorry about the bastard leaving you with the baby. I didn’t mean I was sorry about your son.”

“No, no. That’s no problem. I am used to it now. That is why I always tell the story before people ask. When I arrived here, the people in the town did not like me very much.” Gretchen chuckled. “As you can imagine, I was the ‘bad’ girl. Very unpopular. The father ... he was the son of a farmer near Joubertina. But he had a local girl here already. He was a very clever young man and went to München on a special scholarship. There was no space in his future for me. But I don’t complain anymore. I found work in the bank here. I wanted to save money to go home, but you know, with a baby ...”

Ganie could only imagine the horrors Gretchen must have endured in the small-minded Karoo of the sixties and seventies.

“That must have taken some doing. It must have been difficult to adjust to this type of life in those days,” she said. “Well, now you have your guest house and Ludwig seems a very nice young man. I have two daughters myself. The one is at university in Cape Town and the other lives with her boyfriend on a smallholding near Graaff Reinet. I’m hoping to visit her on this trip.”

Despite her reluctance to talk to strangers, Ganie found herself liking Gretchen. She liked her directness, although there was something inscrutable about her, which contradicted her apparent openness. Ganie would bet that Gretchen calculated exactly what and how much she would allow people to know about her.

“Ja, a lot of time has passed,” said Gretchen. “I’m one of them now. Very strange where life will take you. When you think you go one way, life will take you another. Have you had some lunch, by the way?”

Ganie wasn’t hungry but suddenly remembered the mountain of meat baking on the backseat of the Mini.

“Oh my God! I have to get going. I bought a load of meat here and it must be bleeding all over my car,” she said and jumped up. “I have to find my cousin and get going. Thanks for the whisky. I’d love to stay, but I can’t let all that meat go off.”

“Ach, my friend, your cousin is having a good time. Let her enjoy herself a while. If you like, we can put the meat in my freezer at the guesthouse until you leave,” said Gretchen. “Maybe you need a small rest before taking the road again? You are welcome to freshen up at my house too.”

Ganie realised she was exhausted. The thought of a cool shower was irresistible and she needed to rescue her meat. Besides, getting Kittie away from a party she was clearly enjoying would need considerable persuasion.

“That’s very kind of you, Gretchen,” she said. “But I don’t want to impose. I really should get going.”

“Nonsense,” said Gretchen. “It will be a pleasure. Now, where is your car? You can follow me back to the house, no?”

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“That’s cute,” said Ganie as she emerged from the Mini in front of Gretchen’s guesthouse. “The name, I mean. Clever. The Phantom Hitchhiker.”

Gretchen smiled.

“Ah yes, our darling ghost. The name helps to bring visitors, even though it’s a big nonsense.”

“Nonsense? You mean there’s no ghost?” Ganie asked.

Gretchen didn’t respond. Instead, she called over her shoulder.

“Lukas! Come and help us here, *bitte!*”

A black man approached and Gretchen instructed him to take the meat from the backseat and carry it to the kitchen. Arms laden, Lukas obliged and disappeared through the front door of the house.

“Now, let us get your other things inside. I’m sure you will enjoy it to take a shower.”

Ganie walked around to the back of the car, opened the boot and lifted out her small suitcase.

“Ah, let me help you,” said Gretchen and reached into the boot to retrieve the gym bag containing the ashes.

“No,” said Ganie. “That bag can stay ... I don’t need it.”

But she was too late.

Gretchen screamed and leaped back as if bitten by a venomous snake, dropping the gym bag with a clang, her face visibly paled, her eyes riveted on the bag.

“Your journey ... this ... it’s ... not just a holiday,” she said and looked up to meet Ganie’s stunned gaze.

“How ... how did you know?”

Ganie had not mentioned the real nature of her and Kittie’s trip, so how on earth could Gretchen have guessed that the bag held anything out of the ordinary? She had ceremoniously packed the three containers holding ashes into the bag the night before.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “We can leave that in the car. It’s nothing.”

“Not ... nothing!” stammered Gretchen, still visibly shaken. “It’s ... I’m sorry. I should not touch your things. I just wanted to help you carry. I’m sorry. It is not my business.”

With that, Gretchen turned around and rushed into the house.

Ganie stood by the car, puzzled. What in God’s name was going on? How could Gretchen possibly have guessed what was inside the bag? Slowly, she picked up the gym bag and placed it back in the boot. She locked the boot, picked up her case and made her way to the front door.

“I must apologise to you ... it was rude,” said Gretchen as she reached over to pour tea into the exquisite tea cups standing on the tray. “But it was not my intention to be ... how do you say ... pushy. I just wanted to help with your luggage.”

Ganie sat down and took the cup of tea offered. She looked at Gretchen, wanting to ask her why she had reacted to the bag the way she did, but decided to keep quiet. She was feeling considerably fresher and in better humour since emerging from the shower.

“You see, I ... feel things. On my skin. With my hands. I feel things other people do not see. I felt the presence of the departed in the bag,” Gretchen said.

“I don’t mind,” Ganie said. “It doesn’t matter at all. There’s no secret. And your feeling was right. But it’s no big deal. Kittie and I are simply travelling to a place where we can scatter our fathers’ ashes. And our grandfather’s. You see, they have all died and we ... the family haven’t done anything about the ashes, so Kittie and I decided to do that. And along the way we are having a holiday.”

Gretchen’s eyes fixed on Ganie’s.

“It is more than the plain scattering of ashes,” she said. “Your father ... your uncle ... all three men. They travel with you. They are there. With you. And it is your journey more than your cousin’s. You see, your cousin can be happy in her life with very little from outside. She has not so much ... what is the word ... compulsion. You have things you must do. You must ... how to say ... close the chapter. You are the

chain breaker in your family. All the pain that is repeated, over and over, with each generation, you are here to make that end.”

Ganie felt a chill run down her spine. Gretchen had taken her by surprise. She saw herself again walking along a deserted beach, a fire raging to one side and giant waves breaking to the other. She saw her own footprints in the sand.

“I think I know what you mean ...” she started. She fumbled with her teacup and took a deep breath. “You see, many years ago somebody else had a vision about me and that’s part of the reason I’m doing this ... maybe the biggest part ...”

Then she told Gretchen about Albert’s vision. She told Gretchen—a complete stranger—how she wanted to travel back into time to rewrite history, reconstruct all the terrible damage, remould it into something worthy. How, by putting kilometres behind her and travelling forward in geography, she wanted to erase—step by step, kilometre by kilometre—each cloud of gloom brought about by the first and second and third and all subsequent hurts. How she wanted to make amends on behalf of others, wipe clean the individual history of each family member, to modify each of those histories by offering an alternative memory. How, by facing the past and embracing its truth as honestly as she could, she hoped she could make things better for everyone.

When she’d finished talking, Gretchen’s indigo eyes bore through Ganie.

“It is not the painful events of a person’s past that cause the real hurt—it is the prohibition on the telling. You, my friend, have for long been drafted into the chain of silence. It is like a religion ... always the women who keep quiet when they should talk.”

Ganie nodded her head. She understood exactly what Gretchen was trying to get at.

“And now I’m breaking the family embargo,” she said.

## Chapter Ten: Touching the Whale

“How can you listen to Wagner and read the newspaper at the same time?” Ganie asked her father, whose nose was buried in the *Weekend Herald*. Her father’s double standards were shocking. Only an hour earlier, he had taken her to task for reading the horoscopes in that same newspaper, while Mozart’s Coronation Mass was on the stereo. And here he was, deaf to the world, while Siegfried’s Funeral March was threatening to pop her eardrums.

It was the first day of September.

Spring Day of 1970.

Saturday.

The last day of normality in the Blignault household, at least of what passed for normality, in Ganie’s experience.

It was an hour, a day, a week, a month, a year that Ganie could never forget, ever after. It would be with her forever. That was the day everything changed. For the worse.

Of course, Ganie knew from an early age that good and bad were relative. And when life was lived on eggshells, the slide on the continuum from good to bad to very, very—terribly—bad was really only a matter of degree. When things are bad, we don’t seriously expect it to be possible for them to get any worse. But it is. They can.

More often than not they do. Somewhere in her subconscious, Ganie knew this. She had to.

There was such a restless spirit in the air that day. The day itself had the jitters.

“Sorry,” said Isak Blignault. “Were you talking to me?”

“I said, how can you read the newspaper while Wagner’s playing? You told me you cannot read and listen to good music at the same time,” said Ganie.

“I was talking about Mozart. You can’t listen to Mozart and read at the same time. Wagner is different.”

“No, it’s not. I would have thought it’s even more impossible to listen to Wagner and read at the same time,” she said.

“I suppose ...” sighed Isak, folding the newspaper neatly in four and getting up from his armchair. He walked to the window and stared out across the bleak field that lay beyond their front garden. Then he turned to face Ganie again and began to pace up and down, Siegfried’s funeral procession thundering laboriously towards its climax.

“Aren’t you enjoying the music? Why would you buy it if you don’t like it?” Ganie wanted to know, very unsure of how to read her father, who was at the very best of times unpredictable.

The day might have been itchy, but so far it was going beyond expectation. He’d arrived from town earlier that morning carrying seven new LPs. The two of them had made a beeline for the stereo. So far, they’d worked their way through Liszt’s Piano Concerto Number One, then the Coronation Mass, which so nearly brought trouble. Now Fürtwangler was inciting his orchestra to the glorious conclusion of death.

“No, I like it,” said Isak. “It’s just ... I don’t know. I’m restless. *Ek voel of ek ’n kaffertjie doodgemaak het.*”

“What?” Ganie was confused. “What does that mean?”

She was fourteen and had never heard the expression before. And even though she didn’t literally grasp its meaning at first, she worked it out soon enough. She could not believe it. It had to describe the restlessness of a person feeling slightly guilty about something. As if a person had done something wrong, but not so seriously wrong as to warrant a sleepless night. More serious a sin than killing a dog, perhaps, less so than killing an actual person—it was the killing of a person who was not quite important enough to warrant real concern—a person-but-not-a-real-person. If you

came down to it, she thought, there was nothing ambiguous about those words. But to come from her father? He never said things like that. No matter how disgusting he could be, and he could be very disgusting, he never talked like that about blacks. He even had an Indian friend. And a Jewish one. He even believed in reincarnation.

Ganie felt uncomfortable, dirtied by her father's remark, guilty somehow, as if she had said those ugly words herself. She felt that she should at least challenge him on such a heartless statement, but not wanting to set off his temper, she decided to be a good sport and giggled half-heartedly.

"I wonder when the walkers will come past here," said Isak.

The annual Spring Walk on the first of September always saw hundreds of community-spirited folk pass their home, briskly on their way to the finish line. They always watched. It just cracked Ganie up, the way speed walkers motored along, all sweaty vests and bum-rushing shorts, knock-kneed, elbows akimbo, hips rolling spryly on their joints, eyes fixed on the grey tar in front of them.

"Ah ... here comes the first one," said Isak and Ganie jumped from the chair in which she was curled up to join him at the window.

"Maybe we should turn down the stereo," she tried. The loud music embarrassed her. By now it had reached such a pitch that she had to all but shout to make herself heard.

"Absolutely not," said Isak. "The plebs can do with a bit of cultural education."

All Ganie could hope for was that none of her friends were taking part in the walk and would see her standing there with Wagner blaring forth. She would never live it down if she were to get caught listening to such naff music. Then again, standing guard at the window was something she was used to. However much she adored Puccini, Beethoven and Prokofiev, she loved The Doors, Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple equally. Most of all, she loved Bob Dylan, whose lyrics seemed to speak directly to her. As if she should have been the one to have written them.

It was because of this clash in taste that she had to stand at the window when she listened to opera, ready to lunge for the turntable to lift the needle off the record when any of her or her siblings' friends approached. Likewise, when she listened to what she and her friends called groovy music, she'd guard the window with just as much devotion, always on the lookout for her father's car. Isak did not approve of "inferior"

music. That was anything other than classical—or as he insisted on calling it, “serious music”.

Together, Ganie and Isak watched the first walker come past, wearing very short, shiny royal blue shorts and a white vest with a red stripe down the side, elbows resolutely pumping the air and the skinny man’s legs all stringy muscle. Ganie burst out laughing. She could not for all her life understand why it would be necessary to walk funny like that. Did it really speed up the pace?

Before long, walkers of all shapes and sizes were pounding their way past the house to the ominous accompaniment of Richard Wagner. Now and then one would break rhythm to steal a curious glance at the source of the noise, but by now Ganie’s embarrassment had compelled her to move away from the window.

It was more than the music ringing out way across the field and probably to the houses on the other side of it, some two-hundred metres away—Ganie was embarrassed by herself. She felt guilty for not being able to keep a straight face and making fun of people, especially since they could have no idea how stupid they looked.

She was grateful when the last notes of the music faded into silence, trumpets still echoing in her ears, and her mother called the family to the kitchen for lunch.

“Where’s Herman?” Isak demanded.

“I don’t know,” said his wife. “I sent him to the café to buy milk, but that was over an hour ago. He must have been waylaid by the Grotto Street lot.”

“Okay, well, let’s eat then,” said Isak.

Across the spread of boerewors and mash, regular Saturday fare provided Isak was in the mood, Ganie looked at Ingrid as she sat playing morosely with her hair, always the reluctant participant in life. Little Jake, only five years old, was shoving fresh mounds of mash into his mouth followed by clumps of boerewors, while under the table his legs were swinging backwards and forwards. It was simply astonishing how much Jake could fit into his mouth.

And like a change in temperature she could feel the mood of the family realign as they sat around the kitchen table, mostly in silence—the coldness that creeps up on you when on a summer’s day that should to all intents and purposes be pleasant, the heavy clouds high up against the sky, too high to be of consequence to the people below, would unexpectedly billow down towards the earth for no apparent reason

other than a whimsical desire to shed some of the moisture held in their distended bellies. She could feel it creeping onto her skin like the subtle cooling of the breeze as day turned into night and found it odd that nobody else seemed to notice. Then again, why should she be surprised? What was so unusual about a potentially good morning taking on a microscopic shift in mood?

It was bound to happen. Moments of carefree happiness were short-lived and had to be snatched whenever they presented themselves; there was simply no bargaining on them staying around for any length of time. And Ganie knew the happy few hours spent alone with her father had run their course.

The good time was over.

Just then, the kitchen door burst open with a loud clang. Herman stood in the doorway as if frozen into the ground, his cheeks streaked with tears:

“Dippie Dippenaar is dead. They’re all dead. All five of them,” he managed to stammer out.

As one, the family turned to face him. Isak lowered his fork, laden with gravy-soaked mash and boerewors. Having wrestled the salt cellar from Ganie, who was so incorrigibly prone to excess even when it came to salt, Lana dropped it into her lap. Ingrid wiped her hair away from her eyes, one strand still stuck between her lips. And Jakob spat his overloaded mouthful of masticated food back onto his plate. There was dead silence.

“There was a crash on the road to Bloemfontein. They’re dead,” Herman repeated.

When the door flew open, Ganie’s first instinct had been to make a rude and preferably witty comment on her brother’s predictable delinquency, but now she just gaped at him, eyes wide with shock. Dippie was the school’s physical education teacher. The night before, he and four friends set off for Bloemfontein, where the high school’s first rugby team was to play their final match of the season against Grey College. The only reason she was even aware of the trip was because Herman had begged their parents to allow him to go along. Not out of primary school yet, Herman was much too young to have any interest in the match, except for the fact that his best friend’s older brother played for the team and had been invited along. Herman had been desperate to be part of the bigger boys’ action. Because the minibus transporting the team was full to capacity, Herman and his friend would have had to drive with Dippie and the other adults. Isak and Lana had refused Herman’s pleas, more for

reasons of a lack of funds than on grounds of discipline. Because Herman wasn't allowed to go, his friend's parents had decided he would have to stay home, too.

Isak lifted his eyebrows, turned his back on Herman and pushed his chair away from the table. Without saying a word, he left the kitchen. A few minutes later Ganie heard her father's car growl to a start and pull out of the driveway.

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She was drifting in and out of sleep, the strains of Beethoven's one and only violin concerto lapping at her consciousness, playful and serious, angry and kind, all at the same time. She was trying to hold on to her dream, but it kept slipping away from her—as if she was trying to remember something from a very long time ago, maybe even a time before she was born. A time before humans walked the earth. Every now and then her memory would allow her to glimpse part of what she was trying to remember and she would think she could grab hold of it with her hands, pick it up, stroke it, make friends with it. And then it would drop away from her again, back into the vast, dark ocean where she was diving and swimming.

In her dream, Ganie felt as large as the ocean and yet dwarfed by its vastness. She was afraid of it, yet drawn to it. She knew something was there. Something so big, so powerful, it would explain everything, clarify her very reason for breathing. So she kept diving, deeper and deeper.

Ahead of her, in the dark, loomed a shape even darker than the water around her. The shape drew her closer and closer, but as she reached out to touch it, she recoiled with fright. She knew instinctively it meant her no harm, but it was simply too big to touch, no matter how desperately she wanted feel it, how dearly she wanted to absorb some of its vastness. She could see now that it was a whale. She thought it wanted to tell her something, but they shared no language, so she would have to try and read its mind. Maybe touching it would help. Yet she was powerless to do so. She felt too overwhelmed, awe-struck and terrified.

Something pulled at her shoulders, pulling her up, up, up from the deep.

“Ganie darling, wake up.” It was her mother, gently squeezing Ganie's shoulder. “Sweetie, something has happened. I need you to wake up.”

“Wha ... what’s wrong?” asked Ganie, rubbing her eyes and trying to sit up. “Is it morning? It’s not school today. It’s Saturday. No, it’s Sunday.”

“I know, darling. It’s not time to get up yet. It’s still night, but please wake up. I don’t want to wake the others.”

Ganie realised with a start that her mother’s voice was sounding funny. She was crying, sobbing in fact. Slowly she began to recollect the day’s earlier events, the tragic news about Dippie. But why would her mother start crying about Dippie so many hours later? Anyway, Dippie wasn’t exactly friends with the Blignaults.

“Sorry, Ma. I’m sorry about Dippie, but jeez, we didn’t know him all that well,” she tried.

“It’s not Dippie, Ganie. It’s Griff. Uncle Griffin.” With that, Lana bent over, resting her face on her knees and sobbed, shoulders heaving.

“Jissus, Ma. I’m sorry. What happened? But how can that be? You and Pa have been listening to music in the lounge the whole time. I heard it ...”

“I know. The call came just a little while ago. It was a car accident, too. Uncle Griff died in a car accident ... an hour ago. Pa had to rush off to identify the body and I have to go to Auntie Carol. I just wanted to tell you in case the other kids wake up and we’re not here. I have to go now.”

Lana kissed Ganie on the forehead and, still crying, left the room.

Ganie rose from her bed and, in her summer nightgown, without bothering to put her slippers on or a gown, she walked through the house, shrouded in darkness, to the lounge. She rummaged through the pile of LPs lying next to the stereo and found what she was looking for.

Positioning herself on her mother’s old trousseau kist at the window, she pulled her knees up to her chest and listened, for once without fear of being caught out, to Ettore Bastianini as he sang Colline’s famous aria from the final act of *La Bohème*. This night, Colline sounded particularly sad to say goodbye to his trusty old coat.

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“That was the end of the ordinarily bad times and the beginning of the extraordinarily bad times,” Ganie said to Gretchen. “Uncle Griff was my father’s best friend. They drank together. But at least good old Uncle Griff, as unremarkable and

commonplace as he was, had often stopped some of the really bad stuff from happening. We were grateful when he came to visit my father or my father went to see him. After he died, nothing was the same again. For months afterwards, my father rarely got out of bed. As if the grieving was worse for him than even for Uncle Griff's widow and children. At least she did not shrivel herself up from self pity like he did. But all this self-indulgent grieving did not stop him from getting drunk as a skunk and tormenting us from there—right there, from his fucking bed.”

Ganie's throat felt raw. She didn't know how long she had spoken for. There was a quality about the birdlike Gretchen that seemed to encourage her, in spite of herself, to feel free, even compelled, to tell her story.

“Your dream before your mother woke you up. Did you ever dream that again?” asked Gretchen. Ganie was surprised. If anything, she would have expected to be questioned about what happened next.

“Many times. Many, many times. But I'm always too afraid to touch the whale and I haven't had the dream in ... God, I don't know how long,” she said. “It's as if it's a primal memory, one older even than any of the civilisations in the recorded history of this planet. It haunted me for years. It was almost as if it defined my limits or predetermined my actions—or reactions. Sometimes, quite often actually, even these days, I recognise my paralysis in certain situations as the feeling I used to get in the dream. It was the weirdest thing—being drawn to the whale yet pushed away from it at the same time. That whale was really an awesome sight. As if it could see all that I ever was, what I am and all that I'll ever be.”

“I suppose that would be quite scary for a young girl,” Gretchen said.

Ganie looked up and saw Gretchen had her eyes half-closed. She had no idea where her boldness was coming from and, to ease the serious mood she'd introduced by telling the story, she tried to make a joke.

“Maybe it's an ancient memory from Atlantis, or something,” she said. “Maybe I sank with Atlantis.”

“Oh no,” said Gretchen. “That is not it. No Atlantis nonsense. We don't know about Atlantis and no fool on earth ever will. That whale of yours, she is all yours. She is your force and she is more. She is the universal creative force and you nearly touched her. I can recognise it. I have seen it. I know it.

“You fear to touch it? That is so because you are afraid that if you had to contact that knowledge, you will perish. So, you return rather to the dark quietness of the ocean, the denseness, stupidity of the human being. And how very dark that ocean is around us, no? How dark the cloak that humanity hangs around itself. If only we could all touch again that bliss, if only we could unite with our full spirits, the divine that is us and around us. But then, you were indeed blessed. How gracious when we are allowed to glimpse that which is beyond our matrix.

“You are a fortunate woman, my friend, and this journey you take with your cousin, it is going to take you very, very far indeed. Like my journey thirty years ago brought me here. But for me, this is where it stopped. That was my ... what can you say ... my lot in life? I must make peace with it.”

“What happened to you remind me of a short story we studied at school. A German story, actually,” said Ganie. “*Reise nach Goms*, it was called. I can’t remember who wrote it, though. That story gave me nightmares.”

Ganie and Gretchen had moved outside and were now sitting in the cool shade of the wrap-around veranda of the guesthouse, looking out over the valley below. The afternoon light was fading and Ganie was beginning to doubt that she and Kittie would reach their destination that day.

Just as Gretchen never managed to return to Germany, she thought. What if Uniondale exerted an irresistible gravitational pull on unsuspecting strangers? What if, parched and starved—running on empty—the rocks and koppies and soil and drab vegetation wanted to drink up the freshness of newcomers, restore themselves by draining off energy from other locations via those who passed through? As if the earth itself was negatively charged and attracting its opposite, magnetising into staying those who wanted to go.

Gretchen, who was basking in the cool evening breeze with her eyes closed, opened them and Ganie was once again jolted by the purple-blue intensity.

“*Was der Menschen will, das ist sein Schicksal. Das Schicksal ist der Wille des Menschen,*” said Gretchen. What a person wants is his fate. Fate is what you want.

“Fritz Ohrtmann.”

“You know the story? I’ve never met anyone who’s even heard of it.” Ganie was surprised.

Gretchen nodded. Of course she knew the story. Did she not also hope, as the weeks went by during her early years there, that a train would come through town—her train—the transportation that would carry her to where she wanted to be, needed to be?

Just like the newly-wed groom in the story. A young couple leave by train to go and settle in Gomsk, a place the groom's father had told him about throughout his childhood. It was his life's dream to live in the magical, happy city of Gomsk. On the way, the train stops at a little siding and the bride insists they go for a walk. Invigorated by the beauty of the steppe, which lay as a vast expanse in between where they were coming from and where they were going, the wife insists they make love right there and then. They spend so much time out in the field that they miss their train and are forced to spend the night at the hotel. The husband asks the locals what time the train to Gomsk will come through the next day, only to be told that it passes through irregularly, maybe once a week, maybe every two weeks. Even then, there's no telling whether or not it will stop.

Day after day they wait for the train to come, but when it arrives, it either passes straight through without stopping, or something prevents them from getting on it. This happens time and again and the husband becomes increasingly frustrated. In the meantime, the wife embraces life in the little town. She gets pregnant and buys an armchair to make her husband more comfortable. They leave the hotel and move into a room of their own. He takes the job of school teacher in town and they save up enough money to move into an apartment. They become townsfolk. Yet, every time the train rushes past on its way to Gomsk, the place where the man had dreamed to be all his life, he is overcome by despair and loneliness and he falls into a foul temper. He retreats into his study and nobody is allowed to disturb him.

“At first I had hopes that I would return to Germany, but after many weeks and months, then years, I began to accept that this, here, was my *Schicksal*, my destiny. And I'm not unhappy. I have my guesthouse—my retreat, like the husband in the story. And I have Ludie. Now, many people in the district come to me for advice. Not that they like the other people to know about it, but still—they trust me with their secrets.”

Ganie's cell phone rang. It was Kittie. She'd phoned twice earlier, the first time to find out where Ganie was and whether she was okay, and that if Ganie wanted to

leave, Kittie would be ready, though not eager, to cut short her party—she was having the time of her life with Karel and his friends. The second call had been to inform Ganie that the festivities in the beer tent were drawing to a close and that the party was moving to Karel’s game farm a few kilometres out of town, where a spit braai had been planned for later in the evening. But before then, Karel had offered to take her and Ganie on a sightseeing drive around his farm. She tried to persuade Ganie to join them, but Ganie could think of nothing worse than spending another minute in the company of Karel and his friends. She told Kittie she would prefer to relax at The Phantom Hitchhiker.

“So, how was the mini-safari with Ponytail Tarzan, Kitts?” Ganie asked when Kittie phoned the third time. “It’s getting late, you know. It’s only an hour or two to Jeffrey’s, but we don’t know the road and I really, really don’t want to tackle it in the dark.”

“There’s nothing chasing us, is there?” Kittie said, too quickly. Ganie knew what was coming and she was sure Kittie had thought it out very carefully before phoning. “It’s absolutely beautiful here, cuz. They’re just getting ready for the braai now. Why don’t we stay the night and leave tomorrow, man? It’s been a long day and we’re on holiday, after all. I’m sure Karel will drop me off at The Phantom Hitchhiker whenever you want to leave. And the drive was very pleasant, thank you.”

“Just hold on a second, will you?” Ganie turned to Gretchen. “Is it okay if I book in here for the night?” she asked.

“But of course,” Gretchen nodded. “I shall be delighted. No need to book in, also. We are friends now. We will have supper together and talk some more.”

Ganie ended the call. At first, she had been irritated by her cousin’s thoughtlessness, but now she was enjoying the serenity the guesthouse offered. And she loved chatting with Gretchen. It felt to her as if she’d known her all her life.

“Kittie is right,” she said. “There’s nothing chasing us. We can leave tomorrow. There’s only one thing—do you think I can link my laptop up to your broadband so I can check my e-mails? I have to send a couple, too. That is, once Ludwig has it up and running again.”

“Ludie will get it done, you can be sure. Don’t worry,” Gretchen replied. “Now tell me why you think it is so important to get your Grösi out of the ground.”

## **Chapter Eleven: Trouble in drag**

Without moving a muscle, Ganie looked at her father. Moving without moving was a skill she and Ingrid and Herman had mastered out of brutal necessity. She could only hope that little Jake would be spared the need to learn such subterfuge. So far, the three older children had managed to keep their little brother away from the regular fracas that had come to mark the Blignaults' weekends. Ganie wasn't sure for how much longer. Jake kept putting himself in trouble's way. He kept saying he would make their father stop. But he was just a little boy and had no grasp of what he was up against.

The spittle around the corners of Isak's mouth had dried into a white crust. His head was drooping onto the kitchen table, his arms folded over the Bible that lay open in front of him. The passage he had tried to read out earlier was from Isaiah. He had begun to read, but the letters on the page proved too slippery for his inebriated mind. Instead, he had only succeeded in making himself weep. But Ganie knew what her father had wanted to communicate. She knew the passage off by heart.

"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not."

Since the trouble began eighteen hours earlier, Ganie had all but given up hope that the asshole would ever fall asleep. Could she dare to revive her hopes now? He

looked so utterly, drunkenly spent. Isak seemed to have the uncanny ability to anticipate their every move, every scrap of hope that occasionally arose and manifested in a shift in posture. Each time that happened, he would miraculously recover his vigilance and call them to attention in his loud voice.

Too tired, lazy or drunk to be more creative in his punishment, he had commanded the three of them to stand to military attention after he'd arrived home the day before with such anger to spend. To shield him from what was coming, Ganie had hastened to bundle Jake into his bedroom before she joined Ingrid and Herman in their parents' bedroom, from where their father was shouting that he was getting tired of waiting for her. When she got there, he lay sprawled on the bed in his Y-fronts and vest, every now and then reaching for the glass of brandy on the bedside table, lifting his head only slightly to sip from it, occasionally getting his aim wrong and ending up with some of the brandy running down his chin. As soon as the glass was empty, he would order Lana to refill it.

It was Sunday and Ganie had heard the neighbours' car leave for church a short while earlier, so she guessed the time to be around ten o' clock. She was exhausted and thought her legs would buckle under her at any minute. Then again, she reminded herself that she'd had that thought constantly throughout the long night.

It had started off in the bedroom, but as dawn broke at around five that morning Isak instructed his wife to make him scrambled eggs on toast for breakfast. Now they were lined up in a row against the grocery cupboard in the kitchen. Isak was drunk—very, very drunk, drunker Ganie thought than she'd ever seen him. He had been drinking non-stop since sometime during the course of Saturday morning. Yet every time he showed signs of his momentum flagging, he would recover in what seemed to be an instant and become alert again. Their mother dared not intervene. The last time she tried had brought catastrophe. But now, maybe—just maybe—he might have come to the end of his endurance.

"I think he's sleeping," Ganie mouthed to her mother, who was standing behind her husband.

Lana winced and gestured with her hands to quieten Ganie.

"No, wait," she mouthed, her large green eyes wide with fear and humiliation. Along the side of her face a painful bruise had ballooned into the shape and size of an eggplant. He'd instructed Ganie to help clean up her mother's face, which she did

with Savlon and hot water, her only respite in those long hours of torment. Most of Lana's face was covered in lacerations and bruises, and she moved with the greatest difficulty. Ganie was sure some of her ribs were broken.

Isak's head jerked up violently.

"Wha-tch ... fuck ... saying ... whore?" he demanded, but his intoxicated neck, too weak to prop up his head, managed only to wobble.

"There, there, Isak. Don't upset yourself. Come, you're tired. You've had a long night. Let's get you to bed," Lana said.

"Fuck you! Mmm ... not ..." Isak tried to get up, but stumbled and would have fallen to the floor had the table not caught his hips. Rocking back and forth with his hands placed on the table as he tried to build up momentum to get upright, he ranted on, though the words took a long time to be formed.

"Fuck you ... cheap cunt ... ump ... come near me. You think ... don't know ... you're up to? All ... you. I know it ... all ... plots. You think ... mmm ... an idiot? Hmmm ... hmmm? Mmme ... fucking Isak ... fucking Blignnn ... IQ one-si .... fucking-five ... can't ... even count ... high. If it wasn't ... you ... hm ... been world famous. Sss ... on't ... mmm ... fuck ... me. Dumb ... fucks ... not for ... ump ... been ... world ... sss ... best."

With that, he heaved himself up, comically stepped around in a circle to keep the momentum going and to retain what little balance he had, and staggered forward, out through the door into the passage.

Exhausted and distressed though she was, Ganie fought down the urge to laugh as she looked at her father's undignified exit, his yellowing Y-fronts twisted around and hanging down his bony rear in an undignified, loopy bag, as if he'd shat in his pants. She hoped he would shit in his pants and piss in them too. She wished she could stuff shit down that hideous, dry, spittle-coated mouth of his.

She heard him clattering down the passage, knocking over the chair next to the telephone table with a loud bang. Then she heard him kicking open the bathroom door and fumbling with the toilet seat as he tried to lift it. A torrent of urine audibly hit the water in the toilet bowl.

She looked first at Herman, then at Ingrid. Her sister's normally blue eyes had turned an angry shade of grey. It had been that scary colour since the previous afternoon. Ingrid was staring straight ahead, unblinking, her face drained of all colour

and her lips drawn into a taut line. She seemed barely conscious. Her mother tiptoed to the door clutching her one arm against her waist. She stood listening for a while, willing her husband to make his way to the bedroom and pass out.

“Ingrid,” Ganie whispered. “Hey, man, snap out of it. He’s out of the kitchen.”

Ingrid remained silent—stiff and staring. Ganie reached out and gently placed her hand on her sister’s shoulder.

“Hey, Ma. I think Ingrid’s passed out on her feet. Herman, fuck it, man. Don’t just stand there like a kiepie. Come and help me.”

She turned to look at Herman, but he was no longer standing. He had dropped to his haunches and his head was buried between his knees. He looked up at Ganie and tried to speak, but no words came out of his mouth. He reminded her of the injured cat she’d once tried to rescue. The cat had died only an hour after she’d brought it home. Judging by its injuries, Ganie guessed that the cat must have been ravaged by a dog. But it knew it was about to die, of that she was certain. She could see it in its wounded eyes. And that was the look Herman had in his eyes.

“I .... nnn ... hear you ... alking! Sh ... fuck up or ... you m .... me come out ... nnn shut you up ... proper!” Isak’s voice boomed from the bedroom.

“Fuck you,” Ganie whispered to herself, fists balled. “Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.”

She turned back to face Ingrid and not a moment too soon, because Ingrid was sinking to the ground like a rag doll. Ganie jumped to catch her.

“If you ... nnn ... keep quiet rrr ... now ...” Isak tried again. Then all went quiet.

“He’s out,” Lana said. She turned to look at her three eldest children as if sleepwalking. Wincing in pain, she walked to the kitchen sink, shoulders hunched and feet dragging. She poured water into a glass and spooned heaps of sugar into it.

“Here, Ganie. Make her drink this.”

Ganie was sitting on the floor, back against the grocery cupboard, holding her sister’s head in her lap. She took the glass from her mother.

“Here, sis. You just fainted. It’s okay now, man. He’s gone. Drink this. It will make you feel better.”

Ingrid looked up at Ganie.

“He’s crazy. I hate him,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. Then she rolled over, off Ganie’s lap and onto the floor, small squalls of bile dribbling from her

mouth, down her cheeks and past her ears into that luxurious mop of blond curls—as if her reflexes were too shattered to muster a decent heave to vomit properly.

Ganie looked at Ingrid as if she was the one who was mad. Of all the redundancies to express! Of course he was *mad*. Any fool could see that. Of course Ingrid *hated* him. They *all* hated him.

“I think he’s asleep now,” Lana said. “You should go to bed—you haven’t slept at all. We should all try and get some sleep.”

Herman rose to his feet, face streaked with tears and murder in his eyes.

“Fuck you, bitch,” he told his mother and walked away.

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Ganie was hot. Sweating. Like the time she had glandular fever. And even though she was asleep, her body would not stop shaking. She was dreaming, but it was unlike any dream she’d ever had. As if she was perfectly awake and aware, yet observing her dream from a distance. She felt as if she was thinking her dream—not dreaming it—her mind refusing to let go. Over and over, around and around. Like her mother. Around and around the corners of their backyard.

Naked.

Dragged by the hair.

And her father’s voice. Over and over. It would not be silenced in her ears.

“Lana, the whore ... cunt-sucker. Say it, bitch! Say, ‘I am a lezzie whore!’”

Ganie wanted to wake up to sunshine, real honest-to-goodness sunshine, but she knew she dared not—too much horror lurked inside the belly of reality. She was asleep and she was afraid. And so tired.

All that remained then, Ganie thought, was to die. But that she could not do either—if she allowed herself to slip deeper and deeper into sleep until at a certain point, sleep turned into death—beautiful, merciful death—what would happen to little Jake? What would happen to Ingrid? Herman? And what would happen to her mother?

No, she would have to force herself to stay alive.

When he started out on his marathon rage, he'd made Lana face the three of them. He'd done his best to force her to repeat after him: "I am a lezzie whore. I like to suck cunt."

He'd slapped her in the face. He'd punched her in the stomach. But she seemed incapable of saying those words.

Ganie was shocked. She couldn't believe what her father was saying. Her mother? Her mother, the ice queen? She knew her mother never looked at other men. She doubted that her mother even *liked sex*, which you're supposed to like, though what there was to like Ganie couldn't tell since she'd had no experience in that department. And she most certainly could not even dream about her mother being a *lesbian*. The very thought made her want to puke. What was going on in his head? Ganie was used to her father accusing her mother of all sorts of infidelities, but she knew there was no truth to them. Besides the fact that her poor mother wouldn't have the *time* to cheat on him in between going to work, cooking, cleaning, looking after children and running around trying to please *him*, she would be simply too damn *terrified* to put a foot wrong, for crying out loud.

Now he'd come with this new twist to the story: Lana Blignault was a lesbian. All because a colleague from work popped in to borrow a book and then stayed for tea on a Saturday morning. Ganie at first thought it hilarious—that quiet, pious woman who went to church every Sunday and bible study every Wednesday evening! She probably didn't even know women homosexuals existed, let alone that there was a word for it. For a man claiming the intellect of a genius, her father sure was dumb. What the fuck was he thinking?

Lana had wept as she tried to speak those unfamiliar words, if only to get the humiliating ordeal over and give him what he wanted. She was trying everything she could think of to get him to allow them to go to sleep. But she could not say the words he wanted her to say. Of course, that only infuriated Isak more.

Enraged, he ordered her to strip off her clothes. She begged him not to make her do it, but he balled his right hand into a fist and forcefully brought it down on her temple. He lifted his hand to look at his knuckles and seemed surprised, as if the hand did not belong to him. Shaking his head, he waved his hand in the air, waited several seconds, then balled his left hand and hit her on the other side of her head.

"Strip down, you slut!" he shouted.

“Please, Isak. Please, please don’t. Please, I beg you, not in front of the children. I’ll do anything ... anything you want, but don’t make them watch,” Ganie’s mother sobbed. She fell down on her knees and bent over his feet, holding on to his ankles with both hands. Tears stained pink from the blood running into her eyes dripped onto his bare feet in large blobs. He kicked her away as if she were a dirty old rag.

“Stand up, you rubbish. Tell them what you are. They must see their mother for what she is. Take off your clothes! Now!”

He lifted his leg to kick her again, but lost his balance and fell over sideways onto the kitchen sink. Pride hurt, he kicked out sideways, managing only to scrape her shoulder.

“Come, come, come! I’m not talking again.”

He grabbed her by both arms and jerked her up.

“Stand, I say! Now take it off! Let us see for ourselves what all the fuss is about. But what anybody would see in that dried-up old skeleton of an arse of yours beats me.”

He burst out laughing.

“Look here, you three,” he said. “She hasn’t even got an arse! Old flat-arse Lana! Everybody’s got an arse except your mother.”

Lana looked at her children, her eyes pleading with them not to hold this against her. Ganie knew there was nothing further her mother could do. If she tried to run, he’d catch her and make her pay. If she kept refusing, he would turn on the three of them. She could almost read her mother’s mind and she wished she could help her, take her away, take them all away.

Ganie wished they could all be struck by blindness. But blindness did not arrive upon command and, at fourteen, she was no match for a grown man, drunk or not. Most of all, she wished she was strong enough to kill her father right there and then.

With all the power she could muster, she deferred her tears and looked her mother straight in the eye. This was possible only because her father’s back was turned towards her. Hoping she was sending her mother an unspoken message of solidarity, Ganie mouthed a message to her mother.

“Do it.”

In silence, no longer able to stem her tears, she watched her mother fumble with the buttons on her blouse, struggling to undo them. Then she took it off. The rest of

her clothes followed, item by item. When she was standing in her bra and panties, Lana tried once more to plead for mercy, but her begging only made Isak thump her on her chest so hard she staggered backwards and slumped against the wall.

“All ... of ... it!” he hissed. “All.”

Onto each sad piece of clothing that had fallen to the brown and beige linoleum on the kitchen floor fell a portion of Ganie’s soul like slices of chocolate cake shared out to make sure everybody got a piece. Ganie did not think souls were able to grow back the pieces it lost, so looking at her mother standing there, so afraid, so vulnerable, she was convinced that she had only two pieces of her soul left—two skimpy pieces the size of a bra and a pair of panties. Ganie believed she was dying. She could never again be the same person.

She wished she was strong enough to beat her father to death. One by one, she considered the weapons available to her, but nothing in the house seemed lethal enough. Nothing that she would be able to lift, at any rate. And even with the help of Herman and Ingrid, her father would overpower them and things would get much, much worse. She had seen her mother try to stop him and get beaten to the floor for her efforts many times. Right now, nobody in the kitchen had any resistance left.

Once Lana was naked, Isak grabbed her by the neck and pushed her towards the back door.

“Out, dog! Dogs and sluts live outside, not under Isak Blignault’s roof.”

He opened the door, lifted his right leg high in the air and kicked her in the small of her back with such force that she crashed down the stairs into the garden.

“And you? Are you happy now? Are you satisfied with what you’ve made me do? Well, I’ll show you. Let me teach you what happens to people when they try to make a *poes* out of Isak Blignault. Out!”

Slowly, the three started shuffling to the door, but that was not fast enough for their father. He grabbed Ganie by the arm and shoved her out. Herman and Ingrid followed.

“Stand up straight!” he shouted. “Don’t let me catch you standing on one leg like your slapgat mother. All of you ... just like that no-good ... *Slapgat ou maat, gee my jou hand, jou hand. Slapgat ou maat, gee my jou hand.*”

My spineless friend, give me your hand.

He bent over his wife as she lay on the grass, naked, then lifted her head by the hair.

“Should I show you what it is to be a Blignault? Do you want to see what it means to have backbone? I’ll show you ...”

And with that, in his discoloured vest and Y-fronts, he started marching, lifting his knees high, swinging his free arm as he dragged Lana behind him.

“Look at the asshole. He doesn’t even know how to march like a real soldier,” Herman whispered, fortunately too softly for his father to hear.

“Ik-ak-ik-ak-ik-ak-eeeeeyy!” Isak Blignault called, imitating a drill sergeant. Bouncing and scraping over patches of lawn, bare earth and cement, Lana did not utter a sound. He marched and marched. Around and around and around until she was covered in dust and blood.

At first, Ganie tried to look away, but hatred had swelled in her chest until she thought it would burst and she forced herself to watch, so that she could remember. She would get him. She was recording his every motion and his every word. She was recording him thoroughly and meticulously. One day, if she survived this, she would use her memory and she would make him pay for every indignity, every hurt he had ever inflicted on her mother and her brothers and her sister.

Her eyes fixed resolutely in front of her. She avoided looking at Herman and Ingrid, yet at some point she realised that they stood with their backs turned to the tableau playing out in their backyard. She did not know how much they’d seen.

After several laps around the backyard, Isak tired of his game. He was out of breath. Ending his last circuit at the bottom of the stairs where he’d begun, he simply let go of the nearly-unconscious Lara’s head. Almost gently, he nudged her cheek with his toes. Ganie thought it was all over. But she was wrong.

“So, bitch! Nothing to say for yourself?”

Then, with an agonised roar he leaped into the air and came down on her face. And did it again. With both feet, he smashed into her face until no features were discernible for that, too, was covered in blood. Moving to the side, he looked up at them standing at the top of the stairs.

“And you ... cheeky wipgat ... you make that rubbish get up and clean herself,” he told Ganie over his shoulder as he brushed past them on his way into the kitchen to pour himself another brandy and water.

## Chapter Twelve: A Phantom Baptism

The white bakkie with the mismatching light-blue canopy was a shade no longer akin to white. If it were possible for white to fade, it had changed colour to a patchy, grimy shade more fallow than white. A thick layer of dust further confused the issue.

“Hey, bru, enough already. Pass me the fôkken bottel, eksê!” Jakkals’s voice was high-pitched, each sentence ending in a lyrical lilt, and though he sounded harmless enough, those who knew him would recognise the menace in his voice as he spoke.

He was an irritated man as he sat licking the sticky brown monkey-gland sauce off his fingers. Rasheed had been holding on to the two-litre Coke bottle for far too long, hogging it every time it was his turn to take a swig.

“Hokaai, Jakkals, my bru, man. Calm down. I just held it while you were still busy chowing down,” Rasheed said.

It was the ingratiating tone his partner used that irritated Jakkals. Why he’d agreed to do a job with this fôkop of a Slams, he’d never understand. He must have been fôkked in his own head.

Jakkals was choosing to forget that it was Rasheed who came to him with the offer in the first place, not the other way around. Rasheed was the one whom Bakkies had first approached to help him convince his stroppy ex to forget her plans to send him to jail. But Jakkals was accustomed to being in charge and refused to admit that Rasheed had any say at all in the planning of this job. Now he was stuck with him. He’d known

Rasheed vaguely when they were both inside, but Rasheed had been one of *them* and as far as possible, Jakkals avoided mixing with coloureds and blacks. He should have stuck to his guns.

The two unlikely partners sat in the bakkie that was parked along the beachfront in Jeffrey's Bay. They had left Cape Town the previous afternoon with an address in the old part of the town and clear directions to the house, but a less-than-clear idea of what exactly needed to be done once they arrived there.

All Bakkies had told them was to "take care of the two bitches, but not well enough to put them in hospital". The last thing he needed was for Kittie to finger him to the cops, although that lot was so useless, they'd probably do nothing about it, provided no-one was too badly hurt.

Bakkies was banking on Kittie feeling responsible and guilty if that dear bitch of a Ganie was in danger, and he was hoping that would make her change her mind about the fraud case. At the end of the day, he didn't care how the job was done, as long as Jakkals and Rasheed made sure Kittie understood why she was in kak and that worse was to come if she didn't stop her nonsense.

He made his plans the night Kittie chased him away at gunpoint. Imagine that! Chasing him away with her stupid little gun and calling him all those names in front of Ganie. What a cheek. But Kittie would soon enough realise what a big mistake she'd made. What the mean cow didn't realise was that he never left the property after she threw him out. He'd left the house and walked to the front gate, but instead of leaving through the gate, he simply opened and closed it from inside the yard. He then stole back to the house, waited a while and entered exactly the way he'd done earlier, by climbing onto the roof and through the sky light. Stupid bitches! They never even set foot outside the front door to make sure he was gone and he was so quiet going back in that they did not hear him. He'd been so pleased with himself, he nearly laughed out loud. There had been no particular reason why he did it, except to put one over on her. And instead of making his presence known—which would have been a bad idea considering Kittie's gun-slinging ways—he bided his time in warm comfort on the couch upstairs, hoping for an idea to come to him about how he could teach her a lesson and get her to change her mind.

So while the two cousins talked fifty kinds of kak in the lounge, he was on the mezzanine floor listening to their every word—just as he had done earlier. When they

started talking about going to Jeffrey's Bay, he knew immediately what to do. The rest was easy. Getting the address was no problem. Once the two of them had gone back to bed, he went down the spiral staircase leading from the mezzanine floor and crept through the house to the study, where he searched through the papers on Ganie's desk. All he needed was her brother's phone number, which he found in her personal telephone book under B.

Pretending to be a neighbour, one Mr Anton Meyer, he phoned Mr Herman Blignault in Johannesburg to say that he was in receipt of an envelope bearing Blignault's name but his, Meyer's, street address. Would Mr Blignault please supply his correct street address so that he could drop it in his post box? The irony, he said to add flourish to the story, was that it was a letter from the Jeffrey's Bay municipality! Could you believe it? And the two of them had a good laugh about how stupid the municipality must be if they got the addresses of their rate payers wrong. Of course he expected Blignault to suggest he post it to Johannesburg, which he said he would, but in the spirit of good neighbourliness, he asked for the Jeffrey's Bay street address in any case, promising to keep an eye on the property. For good measure, he asked whether Blignault had security at his home and whether he was satisfied with the security company, since he, Meyer, had had such trouble with the company he used. And if there was anything Blignault needed done in Jeffrey's while he was in Johannesburg, he would be only too happy to oblige. Naturally, the phone number he gave Blignault was fake.

Over the following week, Bakkies spent more nights on the mezzanine in Ganie's house until he knew for sure that their plans were definite and when they were planning to leave.

When he spoke to Jakkals and Rasheed, he suggested that they break into the house and rough the two tarts up a bit once they arrived in Jeffrey's Bay—maybe trash the cousin's new Mini Cooper for good measure. Most important of all, he wanted them to make her promise to call off the fraud squad. But in the end no clear plan of action was decided on. Jakkals said he'd decide what to do once he'd checked out the lay of the land, then he stopped a pipe and that was the end of that discussion.

"Fôkkit, I can't sit here the whole fôkken day waiting for those bitches to get here," Jakkals said. "Let's go and check out the house again. Maybe they're there now."

Rasheed did not respond.

Things had not gone according to plan for Jakkals and Rasheed. After spending a cold and uncomfortable Friday night in the bakkie on the N2 near Mossel Bay, where they had gone to look up Jakkals's brother, the mood between the two men was tense. The two women were only expected in Jeffrey's on Saturday and the intention had been to leave a day early and spend the night in Mossel Bay. But when they arrived at the address Jakkals had been given, the door was opened by an old woman in a wheelchair. She had purple hair and claimed to have lived in that flat for the past fifteen years. That sent Jakkals into a rage. It just proved to him for once and for all what a cold-hearted kont his brother was—his whole family, for that matter.

“Fôkken poes!” he shouted as he returned to the bakkie, kicking the door on the driver's side again and again. “He lied to me, the fôkker! I will find him and show him a thing or two, that poes!”

Rasheed had stayed behind in the car to give Jakkals some privacy while he went to announce his unexpected arrival to his brother. As Jakkals ranted on, he leaned back into the corner of his seat, looking as though he was trying to make himself invisible. He had taken a big risk when he agreed to do a job with a man who had such a fearsome reputation in jail.

The thing about Jakkals and the revenge he took on people when he thought they deserved it was not the *what*, it was the *when*. Everybody who knew him in Pollsmoor knew he took no nonsense from anybody and that if you gave him grief, it was going to come back to you in spades, as his brother-in-law and one-time business partner, Cornelius, discovered some ten years earlier.

Cornelius thought he could pull the wool over Jakkals's eyes by hiding a percentage of the profits on a transportation deal the two of them had gone into. The profits were high, the cargo illegal, of course. Jakkals could see immediately that the figures did not tally, but he said nothing, pretending to be none the wiser and for weeks on end allowing Cornelius all the rope he needed to hang himself.

When the next deal came along, he made it easy for Cornelius to skim off some more money. So, too, with the next deal. And the next. Then, when Jakkals agreed to do a small run, more as a favour to a friend than for a big profit, he begged off from being present at the point of delivery on account of having put his back out. This, of course, was an ironically spiteful lie, considering what followed.

On the Saturday night in question, Jakkals slipped out of his bedroom in his mother's house in Brooklyn where he'd been nursing his "injured" back, and waited for Cornelius in the darkened room outside, which Cornelius and his wife rented from his mother-in-law. Both Jakkals's mother and sister were in the house, but neither paid any attention as he quietly padded through the house—it was late and they were engrossed in *Schindler's List* on SABC3.

He had timed it well and was pleased with himself for that—the wait before Cornelius returned to the dark room to hide his stash was no longer than twenty minutes. Jakkals had never been one for firearms, but he was extremely competent with his weapon of choice—an old flick knife, his trusty companion ever since he gave up on school in the early eighties. In the days that followed, months before he was convicted on the charge of attempted murder, Jakkals was kicked out of his mother's house and told to never try and contact any of his family members again. They wanted nothing further to do with him. It had been his brother who physically threw his clothes and all his other possessions out on the front stoep. Cornelius never walked again.

And once, when a youngster, a new fish, stole two cigarettes from Jakkals's stash under his mattress in their overcrowded cell in Pollsmoor, everybody expected the worst. But after making enquiries to establish who the culprit was, Jakkals sat him down and spoke to him as if to a younger brother, explaining that it was not right to steal from a brother in jail, even a white brother. The fish was in for a minor offence and got out again within four months. He returned home to the news that his twin sister had been raped. Bad as this was, there was no reason to link the incident to the cigarette theft in prison. Except for the message scribbled in a spidery red scrawl on the back of an empty thirties pack of Stuyvesant, which the traumatised young woman had been handed after her ordeal. She'd been instructed to give it to her brother once he was released from jail. The message read simply: "*Naaitjie vir 'n entjie, my bra! Nou's ek en jy evens stevens.*"

Not the *what* with Jakkals—the *when*. And he prided himself on the reputation. It made life a lot safer for someone like him, who preferred to operate on his lonesome.

But for all his patience when planning an act of revenge, Jakkals had scant control over his temper and even less regard for those at the receiving end of his rants. And Rasheed knew better than to fôk with Jakkals while he was throwing a tantrum.

Rasheed had the growing feeling that taking this job was possibly the biggest mistake of his life. And getting Jakkals involved made it all much, much worse. His earlier slight dread of Jakkals had evolved with each passing kilometre into naked fear as he slowly realised that his travelling companion was also an unmitigated racist. As much as Jakkals had been forced through circumstance to get along with his coloured brothers in business and in prison, his acceptance of them—he even had some coloured friends—was a surprisingly thin veneer, one that masked a frightening and vindictive hatred of anyone he considered beneath him in the colour stakes. To Rasheed, it was cold comfort that he also harboured a deep resentment against whites who were better off than himself.

No matter how broke he'd been up until the day before, no money could compensate for spending even ten minutes in Jakkals's company. This was a one-way ticket right back into Pollsmoor. Bakkies had better pay up when they got back to Cape Town. If they ever got back, that was, and if Bakkies stuck to what he'd promised, which Rasheed had his doubts about. Bakkies had given him two grand for the trip, with the promise of another three upon their return, provided they concluded their business successfully.

"This is one big fōkop," Rasheed thought while he watched Jakkals wolf down two monkey-gland burgers from Steers. Earlier, during the long, dark hours while they were stranded on the N2 and Jakkals proceeded to drink his way through an entire bottle of brandy, Rasheed had come to a decision. It was like a light switching on in his head, really. He resolved that when he got back home, he would take that job his uncle had offered him at the chop shop. And this time he meant it.

He really should have found a way to pull out of the trip the minute Jakkals had ordered him to move over to the passenger side of the bakkie, insisting that he, Jakkals, was nobody's fōkken handlanger.

But it was too late now. They had driven all the way from Cape Town to JayBay to teach Bakkies's ex a lesson and there was no easy way to back out of it now. The bakkie belonged to Rasheed's uncle, who had lent it to him out of the goodness of his heart. Rasheed needed to get it back to Cape Town, preferably undamaged and halfway clean—the likelihood of that happening appeared to be dwindling by the minute.

After Jakkals tired of kicking the bakkie in Mossel Bay, which had left the door dented and streaked with black marks, he decided that they would continue on their way until he became tired of driving or until they reached their destination, whichever came first.

They didn't get far. Before heading out, Jakkals detoured into the centre of town and stopped at a bottle store to buy several litres of Coke and two bottles of Klipdrift. He poured half the contents of a two-litre bottle of Coke out in the street and refilled it with brandy, and with the bottle clutched between his thighs, he made his way back to the N2—hammering the steering wheel with the palm of his hand, talking to himself, cursing his brother who, in giving him a false address, could not have made it clearer that he wanted nothing to do with Jakkals.

“Ancient fôkken history, my bru', ancient fôkken history,” he growled. “Bygones must be bygones, my bru'. I've done my fôkken time, so what's your fôkken problem, you kontface.”

The diatribe continued for several kilometres, Rasheed opting to keep quiet and do as little as possible to aggravate his companion's anger any further. In between pounding the steering wheel and changing gears up, then down, then up again, revving the bakkie's engine to ear-splitting levels, Jakkals swigged deeply from his brandy-and-Coke mixture.

As he flattened the accelerator while approaching a bend, he lost control of the vehicle and, spinning into a headlong skid, it raced straight into a ditch. The daylight was rapidly fading and before long it was night. Rasheed and Jakkals spent an uncomfortable night in the bakkie. It was only at about nine o'clock the next morning that somebody stopped and helped tow them out of the ditch.

“I say we go and give those old naaitjies a little welcome present,” said Jakkals once he had licked most of the stickiness off his fingers and taken several deep gulps from the Coke bottle. No amount of Coke seemed to quench his thirst today. By the time morning arrived, he'd finished all his brandy and now he was in two minds as to whether to buy some more.

Since Jakkals and Rasheed arrived in town around midday, they had paid several visits to the house and there was still no sign of life. It didn't look as if the women had arrived in Jeffrey's Bay yet, even though Bakkies had been very clear about the time

they could be expected. So, what the fuck was keeping them? Bakkies had phoned to say he'd seen them leave.

"I don't know, my bra. What do you have in mind?" came the timid response from Rasheed.

"Fôkkit, I don't know. Why don't we just go and make ourselves at home? Take a nice, hot bath, watch some TV, have ourselves a little party? Why should we sit here cramped in the bakkie when we can relax in style? Leave a little keepsake for them, too."

"But what if they arrive while we're still in there?"

"Who fôkken cares? We'll hear them coming in, then we just duck out the back. Or make them join the party!"

"Ja, and if they see the bakkie outside and call the cops? I don't want no fôkken boere near me. I'm not fôkken going back inside again, I'm telling you, my bra."

"You're such a pispriel, Rasheed. We don't park the fôkken bakkie on the fôkken premises, you moron. We leave it right here and walk to the house. Or what? Your legs still poespap from last night, eksê? You wearing a fôkken panty, or what? I'm going." With that, Jakkals opened the car door and aimed his crumpled Steers packet at the garbage bin some five metres away. He missed by a mile, but Jakkals just called over his shoulder as he began walking.

"You coming, or what, *eksê*?"

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Kittie was the first to break the silence, which for her hung over the car like a cloud of clandestine cigarette smoke in a locked school toilet.

"So, cuz, whazzup? You going to sulk all the way to the coast?" She wasn't feeling her best. The time in Uniondale had been the most fun she'd had in many months, but it had certainly taken its toll. She'd drunk far too much and slept far too little.

"I'm not sulking. I'm thinking," Ganie responded. Kittie wasn't sure how to read her. When Ganie went quiet, she could never tell whether she was withdrawing because she was angry about something or whether she was genuinely preoccupied. This time, she decided to give her the benefit of the doubt.

“So, Karel told me all about the ghost. He’s seen her, you know,” she tried again, scrutinising her cousin’s face, one eyebrow lifted, for any clues to Ganie’s frame of mind. “Apparently she’s not been seen for a long time now. Karel thinks she’s finally gone to ground, or ... um ... been put to rest. He took me to the spot where she was usually found hitchhiking.”

Kittie was eager to tell Ganie about the previous day’s adventure, but knew it was useless unless she broke her cousin’s reverie. That was Ganie for you. She could be the life and soul of the party—and mostly she was—but then she could just as easily disappear into some hidden cave in her head and be unreachable until such time as she was good and ready to communicate again. Kittie got used to it at an early age. She remembered one day when they were teenagers, a Sunday like many others, when Ganie’s family came to visit her family. Ganie had arrived wearing a pair of cheap sunglasses and refused to take them off throughout the visit, sitting in Kittie’s bedroom, where several other boys and girls were also congregated, listening to music on the new stereo Kittie had been given for her birthday.

Kittie was mortified, since Ganie just sat there, staring ahead of her through those ridiculous wraparound sunglasses with the twinkly blue frames. Ganie was intractable and seemingly on another planet, while her sister and brothers tried their best to make up for her weirdness. Kittie’s friends were nonplussed, but too well brought up to make any comment about the usually gregarious Ganie’s blatant aloofness. When her parents called from downstairs to say they were leaving, Ganie shook her head as if she’d just woken up, looked around the room as if she was surprised to find herself there among strangers. Then she stood up, said goodbye and left.

“So, how was the guesthouse?” Kittie tried a different approach. Maybe she could draw Ganie out about what she had done the previous day. “This ... Gretchen ... she sounds nice. What did you do?”

“Not much. We talked,” Ganie responded eventually. They’d been driving for more than an hour and were now approaching Humansdorp. The day was overcast and it looked like the sky was trying to gather up sufficient moisture and a little courage to open up and shower the dry earth beneath.

“And I had a bit of work to do on the computer—e-mails and stuff,” she said.

“So, what did you talk about? She’s German, isn’t she?” Kittie was cautious not to push Ganie too far.

“Stuff,” Ganie said. “Just stuff.”

Then she fell quiet again and Kittie was at a loss for any further words to coax Ganie out of her silence, but it was Ganie who broke the silence next. Kittie was relieved. It seemed Ganie hadn't been sulking, after all. She spoke as if continuing a conversation that had never been interrupted.

“I don't want to burst your bubble, old cuz, but that hitchhiking ghost is bullshit, by the way. Gretchen told me all about her and I googled her last night. Did you know that there's a town called Uniondale in New York? Not the city, the State of New York. It's also a small town, as far as I can gather. And do you know that there are something like a thousand different variations on that hitchhiking ghost story around the entire world?”

Kittie was grateful for the break in silence and didn't want to say anything that could thrust Ganie back into speechless introspection, even though she bristled at Ganie pooh-poohing the ghost after all the stories Karel had told her. Then again, she'd also learned not to dismiss Ganie's opinions too glibly—the thing about Ganie that was so infuriating was her habit of being more often right than wrong. And even when she was wrong by a mile, she had a way of making things sound as if she was right.

“But what about all those people who have seen her? Karel saw her in the eighties sometime, apparently—when he was a teenager returning to the farm from Oudtshoorn, driving in the car with his father. She always appears on Good Friday. And what about all the stories in the newspapers about people who've seen her? I'm not saying you're wrong, I just wonder how it could be that so many people could be wrong or mistaken or lying.”

“Maybe they all imagine it. Especially in rainy weather. Everybody knows the story, so when you drive along that stretch of road, you kind of expect the ghost to appear. I don't know. Maybe some of them did plain lie about it.”

That didn't seem likely to Kittie. Why would people go to the trouble of making up stories like that? And she believed Karel. He was loud and so confident that you could easily label him arrogant—she could just imagine what words Ganie was bound to come up with to describe him—but she did not doubt his sincerity. A heart of gold he had, and that was a fact.

“Anyway,” Ganie continued, “the Uniondale ghost is one of the best recorded ghost stories in the world and a lot of people have tried to get to the bottom of it. But Gretchen says it’s a load of crap. And she’s psychic. Well, sort of psychic.

“The first time she was seen was in 1973. The accident happened in 1968. But a few years later, another guy saw her. She was dressed in dark pants and a windbreaker or duffel coat or something. This man gave her a lift and she told him where she wanted to be taken to. When he turned to ask her to explain where that was ... whoosh! No girl! He just about shat himself, poor bugger, but he shat himself a lot more later on, I can tell you that for nothing. Then he drove to the Uniondale police station to tell the cops what had happened. The cop on duty obviously thought he was smoking his socks, so the guy left again. He drove off and stopped at the T-junction that takes you out of the town. As he was about to turn onto the open road, he heard the bloodcurdling scream. Inside his car! Apparently he reckoned it must have been how she screamed when the accident actually happened. He high-tailed it back to the cop shop and made the cop inspect the inside of his car. Nothing.

“This time the cop took him a bit more seriously and followed him in the police van. The guy was so shit scared, he’d closed all the windows and locked the car doors. But do you know what happened? Somewhere along the road, one of the back doors opened—while he was driving, mind you—and closed again. He stopped and the cop stopped behind him. The cop had also seen the door open and close again.”

“So, what’s your problem then?” Kittie’s eyes were wide. Karel’s story about the ghost didn’t have the dramatic elements of the story Ganie was telling, which in any case seemed to prove that there must be truth to the tale. “How can you say it’s nonsense if two people saw the same thing happen at exactly the same time? When Karel and his father picked her up, she didn’t say a word, apparently. But when Karel’s father asked where they could drop her, Karel turned around to look at her on the back seat and there was nobody—just a wet patch on the seat where she’d been sitting.”

Ganie pulled at her seatbelt to loosen it, as if she felt strangled by it.

“Dunno, cuz. Dunno. But apparently, through the years—hundreds of years, in fact, thousands, come to think of it—the story of a person, a ghost, needing help by the side of the road has popped up all over the place. Even in Russia, can you believe it? There’s even one in the Bible, this one website said. It’s described in Acts, I think.

“What happened was this—an Ethiopian was sitting on his a wagon by the side of the road somewhere reading his Bible ... um ... I suppose it had to have been his Torah. Then this other guy comes along who says he’s the Apostle Philip. Philip asks the Ethiopian whether he understands what he’s reading, which was, can you believe it, Isaiah 53? The Ethiopian says, no—how can he understand it if nobody’s ever told him what it’s all supposed to mean? So our pal Philip explains the whole messiah business and the story of Jesus and suggests they waste no further time and get the heathen baptised as a matter of urgency. The two trundle down to the river and Philip dunks the Ethiopian like an Ouma Rusk—except, when the Ethiopian’s head emerges from the water again ... whoosh! No Apostle Philip.”

“I didn’t even know there was an Apostle Phi ... Watch out!” Kittie yelled suddenly.

Ganie swerved the Mini to the right, just in time to miss a pedestrian who had wandered into the road. The car veered over to the left and skidded on the gravel, but Ganie managed to bring it under control and came to a screeching halt by the side of the road. They were on the outskirts of Humansdorp.

“What the fuck!” Ganie shouted. “Look at that idiot bitch!”

Behind the car, the woman who had nearly been run over staggered and stumbled.

“It’s eleven in the morning and she’s so drunk she can hardly stand.”

Kittie craned her neck out of the window to get a better glimpse.

“Maybe she’s hurt or something. Maybe she needs help,” she said. “Ahoy there! Pssst! Lady! Are you okay? Do you need help?”

“Leave it Kittie. She’s drunk, man. Can’t you see?” Ganie said as she pulled away slowly.

“Yikes, that was close! I’m shaking.”

Kittie, still with her head out of the window, saw the woman lift her one arm as if to shoo them away. It appeared to take immense effort. Then she stumbled again, comically, and fell flat on her skinny backside, her threadbare dress bunched around her crotch. Head wobbling, she glanced from left to right with a surprised look on her face, like a scene from a Charlie Chaplin movie.

“Shame, Ganie, man. Sis, man. Maybe we should take her somewhere. She’s bound to get run over or raped or robbed.”

“Forget it. I’m not getting involved in any more drunken small-town politics,” was the response.

They drove in silence as Ganie negotiated her way through Humansdorp. As they approached the last stop street before exiting the town, Kittie turned to Ganie.

“That wasn’t very Christian,” she said.

“Well, as we both know, my dear cousin, that’s your department—not mine.” Ganie accelerated as the landscape returned to the dull green vegetation so typical of the Eastern Cape.

“But just imagine,” she said. “If it was night time we may both have been at the receiving end of a blessed baptism from the Apostle Philipina!”

“You evil witch …” Kittie choked on her words. They both burst out laughing and couldn’t stop until they reached Jeffrey’s Bay a few minutes later.

Approaching the old part of town, just around the corner from the street where Herman’s house was, a traffic congestion in the street forced Ganie to slow down.

“Do you think there was an accident?” Ganie asked. The road was blocked off, and Ganie pressed the hooter.

“Come on, arseholes. Get out of the road!” she yelled.

“I think you’d better pull over,” Kittie said.

The street was in chaos. Police cars lined the road and around the corner stood an ambulance and fire engine. A policeman stepped into the road and waved to indicate that Ganie should stop the car.

“Excuse me, madam, but you’re going to have to turn around. We have a situation here,” said a young police officer who had the whitest hair Ganie had ever seen on a young person.

“What’s the problem, officer?” she asked. “I have to get down that street, because that’s where we’re staying. Will I be able to get into the road from the other side?”

“Well, ma’am, that may be a problem. The whole road is blocked off—you’ll have to walk there or wait until we’ve cleared up the mess,” the young officer said.

Ganie and Kittie stood on the pavement beside the Mini. An uneasy feeling was growing at the pit of Ganie’s stomach. This wasn’t looking good. She was starting to feel nauseous.

“Did somebody get hurt?” she wanted to know. “I mean, was there an accident or something?”

“No ma’am,” the young officer replied. “This was no accident. Just an incident in one of the houses. But as far as we can establish, nobody was home, so nobody got hurt. The security company says it’s a holiday house.”

“Which house?” Ganie asked. “What’s the number of the house? We’re on our way to stay at my brother’s place...”

“The surname, ma’am?”

“Blignault ... the surname is Blignault. Whose house was broken into?”

“No break-in, ma’am.” The officer seemed uncomfortable. “Um ... ma’am, can you step over to the van, please? I’ll get the sergeant.”

Ganie dashed over to the police van with Kittie on her heels.

“I have a bad feeling, Kitts. A very, very bad feeling.”

A burly officer of about forty approached.

“I’m Sergeant Goniwe. I’m told you’re related to Mr Herman Blignault, ma’am?” he asked.

“He’s my brother,” Ganie nodded.

“Well ma’am, I’m afraid something has happened.”

“Christ, man! Of course something’s happened. I can see that. A blind person could see it. But what? That’s what I’d like to know, Sergeant.”

“Well, ma’am, we’re not exactly sure. We don’t have this sort of thing happening here too often. We think it was a bomb, ma’am.”

“A ... what?” Ganie was speechless for a moment. It felt as if a fever had taken hold of her.

“A fucking ... a bomb? That can’t be right. Where? Bombs don’t go off in private homes!”

“Well, ma’am, we think ... we’re not sure ... we think it was a pipe bomb thrown through the glass door at the back. They would have had to smash the glass first, though. The investigators will be able to tell us later. It happened a short while ago. Maybe an hour. As I said, we don’t really have that sort of thing happening in these parts. And in the broad daylight too ...”

The look on Sergeant Goniwe’s face seemed to accuse Ganie of some misdeed. It seemed to imply that she—and her family—had brought Sodom and Gomorrah, or at least then the less savoury parts of the Cape Flats, to this wholesome, peace-loving seaside town.

“Bakkies,” whispered Kittie, almost inaudibly.

Ganie was too overwrought to hear, but the sergeant’s senses were honed to pick up any possible clue that could throw light on the situation. His eyes fixed on Kittie.

“I beg your pardon, ma’am? Did you say something? Do you have any idea who could have done such a thing?”

Kittie looked at the sergeant, but shook her head.

“No, of course not,” she said.

“I’m going in to have a look,” Ganie said.

“We’d rather you didn’t right now, ma’am,” the sergeant said. “The investigators are still in there, collecting evidence.”

“But I must know. It’s my brother’s house. How much damage is there?”

“We don’t know that yet, ma’am. But you can go in as soon as the investigators have completed their work. In the meantime, you should call your brother. The security company says they’ve already called, but it’s probably a good idea to phone him anyway. Maybe he’s worried about you.”

Kittie put her arm around Ganie’s shoulders.

“Come on, cuz. Let’s leave them to do their work. We can come back later.”

“Um, ma’am,” said Sergeant Goniwe as Kittie and Ganie turned to go back to the car. “If you can just give me your cell number, I’ll call you as soon as we’re done here.”

Ganie rattled off her cell number and joined Kittie in the Mini. Her mind was a jumble. A bomb. A pipe bomb! In Jeffrey’s Bay! In Herman’s house. It did not seem real.

Kittie’s voice was shaky as she spoke.

“Ganie, this was Bakkies. I’m telling you now, Bakkies did this. And if he didn’t do it himself, which I kind of doubt, because he wouldn’t know how, then he got those other two to do it. I never, ever thought he’d go this far.”

### **Chapter Thirteen: A Roadly Wobble**

The thing about very good whisky is that you have to drink vast amounts of the stuff to even come close to entering hangover territory. And thank God for that, too. Thank God for good old Johnny Walker Black. And Blue and Green and Gold, Ganie remembered with a twinge of guilt. Not to mention the Chivas-fifteen-fucking-year-old-Regal. But that had been much earlier. Before she and Kittie and Jerome had unearthed the various Johnnies from Herman's liquor cabinet—all unopened—and tasted their way up through the Red, Black, Green, Gold and Blue Labels.

“We need a great deal of solace after our bombing ordeal,” Ganie grimly remarked as they reached Gold at around midnight.

She groaned as she turned over in bed and pulled the uncased pillow over her head. She might not have a hangover, but she felt as if she could sleep for another week. There had been no question of putting linen on the beds by the time they finally staggered off in search of horizontal surfaces. One by one, they dropped onto whatever bed presented itself first, all three of them falling asleep in their clothes.

Ganie had hoped to sleep longer, but she wide awake now, as she recalled the previous day's events.

“Good Christ, what a fuck-up,” she thought and tried to reverse the process of waking up by concentrating on happy thoughts. It didn't work. The image of the jagged hole in the glass door leading onto the deck at the back of the house, framed by the charred curtains and blackened furniture was burned into her mind and stubbornly refused to make space for something more pleasant. It was hard to believe that

something like this could have happened to them. And Kittie seemed to be convinced it was the doing of that lowlife Bakkies.

Neither of them wanted to stay at the house the previous night, but there hadn't been much choice—so much needed to be done and by the time Sergeant Goniwe and the blonde young constable had taken statements from Ganie and Kittie and phoned around to find a handyman to interrupt his Sunday afternoon nap to come and board up the shattered door, there seemed little point in finding somewhere else to stay.

Ganie still had difficulty understanding why Kittie had lied to the police at first, saying she had no idea who could have done this. Shock maybe. Or fear. But, Ganie thought with relief, she eventually came to her senses and the two of them had gone to the police station and told Goniwe about her suspicions. Kittie was sure that Bakkies had tried to make good on his promise to stop her from going ahead with the fraud case against him, and proceeded to explain everything to the police.

That was hours after the cops found the bakkie. Not long after Ganie and Kittie arrived on the scene, a guard from the security company arrived with screeching tyres and told Goniwe that one of his men had spotted a suspicious-looking bakkie parked next to the beach, half hidden among the bushes near Supertubes. Goniwe immediately dispatched the young one to go and investigate. Even though they didn't want to disclose any details, the police now seemed to believe that the bakkie, which was immediately towed to the police station, was related to the bombing. Ganie hoped it would help them catch the bombers quickly. She was scared.

She had phoned Herman, who wanted to get on the first flight to Port Elizabeth, then changed his mind and told her to handle the situation, only to change his mind again, saying he would fly in on Tuesday or Wednesday—his workload was too heavy to leave straight away. Ganie fully expected him to change his mind again. But she had lost her taste for Jeffrey's Bay. She wanted to get the hell out of there at the earliest opportunity.

Immediately after calling Herman, she phoned Jerome, who wasted no time in covering the eighty kilometres from PE. He arrived within the hour. She needed the moral support and knew she could rely on him for that.

Of course, it was also a delicious story for him—no doubt filing a story as dramatic as this would go some way towards mollifying his editor and earning him a few credits on the balance sheet of his professional lapses.

Jerome tried to speak to Goniwe, but the sergeant refused to tell him anything at all. He then went knocking on neighbours' doors and struck gold at the house immediately behind Herman's. Mrs van Wyk just happened to be looking out of her kitchen window while she was doing her breakfast dishes when the explosion shattered the late Sunday-morning silence. Sergeant Goniwe could barely hide his irritation with the fact that Jerome had found a witness before his officers did, but dutifully walked over to her and took a statement nonetheless.

Jerome's story was phoned through to the newsroom in no time at all, with a few nice human touches, which always pleased an editor. Mr Van Wyk had taken his children to the nearby shopping centre to buy ice cream and the newspaper when the explosion happened, leaving Mrs Van Wyk to clear up. Unfortunately, she hadn't seen anything that could be of help to the police, she told Jerome. She thought she saw two men, one wearing what she called a "kêpsie" and a white shirt or jacket, but she couldn't be sure. She got such a fright at the blast that she dropped the plate she was washing and it smashed onto the floor. When she looked up again, she saw flames licking the curtains in the house behind hers. Not much for the police to go on, but dramatic stuff for a small town and plenty of juice for a lead story in Monday morning's *Herald*.

Once Kittie had come clean about her suspicions, Goniwe promised to ask the police in Cape Town to track down Bakkies to question him. He politely suggested that Ganie and Kittie would be perfectly safe in the house and that a police patrol van would drive by to check on them regularly throughout the night.

"We've got this bakkie now," he said, barely able to hide his impatience to get going after his long day. "It's got a Cape Town number plate. I'm sure it's connected to the bomb, so we should catch the perpetrators soon."

With that, Goniwe raised his fingers to his cap and left the shaken women to wait for the man to come and repair the door.

"Easy for him to say," said Kittie. "I need a drink."

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“Nou’t jy lekke’ kak aangeja’, my bru. What we going to do? They’ve got the bakkie. The fōkken cops have my uncle’s bakkie, man! What am I going to tell him?” Rasheed was panicked and his voice was high and squeaky.

“Fōk jou oompie, girlie. He’s the least of your worries. The cops are going to trace that bakkie to him and then to us, and if we don’t haul arse out of here, we’re gebraai, eksê. Like a boerie,” Jakkals snapped.

Rasheed wanted to spit in his eye. Ever since they got to Jeffrey’s Bay, Jakkals had taken to calling him girlie and he hated that.

They’d waited and waited for the women to arrive, spending yet another uncomfortable night in the bakkie, but the cousins were nowhere to be seen. That pissed Jakkals off big time and he made Rasheed’s life hell. Rasheed had managed to sweet-talk Jakkals out of breaking into the house and making themselves at home, since the house obviously had a security alarm. No point attracting attention before they even had a chance to do what they’d come to do, he said.

It was much later, when Rasheed discovered what Jakkals had really been planning, that he seriously began to think of ways to put as much distance as possible between him and his now very much unwanted partner. Making a dash for it seemed impossible, though, with Jakkals so firmly in charge of the bakkie. And now the bakkie was gone.

Getting onto the back of the bakkie to escape Jakkals’s annoying chatter and get some sleep, he found it all just lying there, the only thing covering the bits and pieces a dirty and tattered sheet of canvas. Rasheed was pleased when he saw the canvas, thinking it would make a good pillow. And then, when he pulled it away to roll it up, there it was in front of his eyes and for anyone else to see, too—the pipe, the long string of fuse, the two caps, a bankie filled with rusty old nails, a two-litre Coke bottle full of petrol and a pile of shards from a broken brandy bottle.

Rasheed couldn’t believe his eyes. He knew exactly what he was looking at. It was all there. Everything needed to make a pipe bomb. He’d seen enough of those in his lifetime in Bonteheuwel. Rasheed guessed the gunpowder or whatever Jakkals was planning to use as an explosive was inside the bakkie for the sake of safety. It took him a while to stop shaking and gaping. When he did, he jumped off and walked around the side of the vehicle, shouting at Jakkals through the closed window.

“Hey, Jakkals! Wat’s daai onner die canvas, eksê? Wadde fôk you think you doing, man? I’m not going back inside just om jy innie kop genaai issie!”

But Jakkals didn’t even bother to open the window. With his head lolling against the back of the cab, he opened one lazy eye, then the other, raised his eyebrows in mock fright as Rasheed shouted, and laughed with his mouth so wide open Rasheed could see the black rot and patchy fillings in his back teeth. He should have walked then, but he was too worried about the bakkie, so he decided that he’d have to try and talk Jakkals out of bombing whatever he wanted to bomb—which turned out to be the house.

Bakkies had said he wanted to give the aunties a fright, not blow up a house and leave a trail of evidence that could put them right back in jail. Rasheed got back on the bakkie, but he didn’t get much sleep.

And now, here they were, not a hundred metres from a house they’d pipe bombed, sitting behind a row of toilets in a schoolyard, waiting for night to come so that they could get out of here—either back to Cape Town or to PE, where Jakkals said they could lie low for a while before making their way home.

Jakkals had fôkked it all up because of his fôkken temper. He ranted and raved through the night and the whole of Sunday morning about having to wait. He said he refused to wait any longer. He wanted action. Not tonight, not tomorrow, not next week—now. And because of that temper of his, they will in all probability not be paid now. No way was Bakkies going to part with cash if they didn’t even get to warn his bitch. The orders were to hurt her a bit, not blow up a house. And throwing a pipe bomb into a house draws more cops than slapping a woman around a bit. But there’s no talking to that fôkken Jakkals when he got like that.

And he hated the plan Jakkals had dreamed up for their escape. He wanted to steal a car in town as soon as it was dark, then drive to PE. At this stage, all Rasheed could think about was giving Jakkals the slip as soon as possible was, even though he somehow doubted whether that was going to happen. It was even more difficult now than before. Somehow, Jakkals got suspicious and would not trust Rasheed as far as he could throw him. He must have put two and two together and figured out what Rasheed had in mind—he wouldn’t let Rasheed out of his sight, even to go and piss, without wanting to know where he’s going. And Rasheed wasn’t keen on getting to know that famous flick knife better.

After the explosion they'd ducked behind the bushes on the side of the house, then vaulted the next-door neighbour's fence and weaved through the streets towards the shopping centre not far from the house. After what Jakkals considered a safe period of time, staying well out of sight, they'd made their way back to the bakkie where they'd left it hidden behind the bushes, only to see it being hitched onto a tow truck and disappear down the road. Obviously, they hadn't hidden it well enough, Rasheed thought. And if he'd thought they were fôkked before, he now knew it for certain, as surely as the devil's fingers that were closing around his stomach, squeezing it tighter and tighter until its contents wanted to explode out of him and he had to run to the nearest bush to empty his bowels.

"Hey, Rash old girl, what say we go and have a bit more fun before we hit the road tonight?" Jakkals said. "Sommer to make sure those two naaitjies get the message good and proper. Old Bakkies ..." and with that he threw his head back and laughed, too loudly for Rasheed's comfort.

They didn't want to get discovered here. Even though it was a Sunday and nobody was likely to enter the schoolyard, it would be dumb to attract attention. Maybe he was just being paranoid, but the place was crawling with cops earlier and Rasheed couldn't help feeling jumpy.

"Eksê, girl, old Bakkies is going to pay that money with a happy heart, once he hears how good we did. Fuck me! He'll sommer want to pay us double, eksê."

Rasheed did nothing but stare at Jakkals. He didn't know what to say and felt like kicking the kont in the balls. The fôk just didn't get it. The point was to make the bitch aware of why bad things were happening to her. With all the patrol vans up and down in the road, there was no way they would get near the house.

"Wat de fôk, Jakkals? With all those cops around, eksê? We won't get close to her without the boere jumping on our backs, man. I told you the bomb was a kak idea. Now the whole job is fôkked and I tell you old Bakkies isn't going to pay us. No, my bra ..."

"You know, you're a dom fôk, Rasheed. We're not going into the house. We'll wait and then ... you'll see ... just giving the naaitjies a little something for the road," Jakkals said, eyes glinting with malicious delight.

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Ganie reluctantly gave up the struggle to go back to sleep. She might as well get up and get the day and the disaster of Jeffrey's Bay behind her. More sleep wasn't going to happen.

Barefoot, she padded through the ruined lounge to the corner where, in the chaos of the day before, she had carelessly dumped her luggage. She dropped to her haunches and began rummaging around her vanity bag. After a while, she found what she was looking for and walked to the kitchen carrying the stovetop espresso maker and dark-roasted Italian coffee beans she had been at such pains to vacuum seal in a plastic bag before leaving Cape Town. On her very first visit to her brother's holiday house she had learned to bring her own coffee—the only kind in the grocery cupboard was instant. And Ganie would live on tap water for a month before putting her mouth to instant coffee.

Inhaling deeply, she savoured the delicious smell of the coffee percolating through the room while it brewed on the stove. She poured two cups and walked into the room where Jerome was sleeping.

"Hey, Jem. Time to wake up, petland. I've made you some coffee. And brought a regmaker."

"De-vine! Shit, what time is it? I've got to get to work." Jerome's head shot up, his eyes bloodshot and his ginger mop a dishevelled flash of curls.

"It's still early, don't worry. Only gone six o'clock. You have a bit of time," Ganie said.

She sat down on the edge of the bed and sipped her coffee as Jerome pushed himself up against the pillows.

"How's the head? I must say, I'm not feeling bad at all."

"Now that you mention it, doll, I'm feeling just fine. Maybe we just imagined ourselves to be drunk, with all the high drama. If you think about it, we only sampled a little bit of each. Yummy whisky, though. Old Hermie has good taste."

"Oh fuck, he's going to kill me," Ganie groaned. "I'll have to replace it. He doesn't even drink whisky, but he keeps getting bottles as gifts—or winning them at golf. Still, he likes to keep it to show off or something."

Jerome leaned over to reach for his cup. He sat back against his pillows and sipped the coffee.

“Well, darling, do you know what a bottle of Blue costs? Don’t know about you, but I certainly can’t afford it. It’s more than a thousand bucks a pop.”

“Jaysus! Really?” Ganie was stunned. “The whisky was nice, but at ... um ... what, maybe one-fifty bucks a sip? Not *that* nice. Anyway, we’re here taking care of his house after it got bombed. He owes me.”

“Sure, Ganie, love. But would it have been bombed if you weren’t here? I mean, you’re—or rather Kittie is—the reason it was bombed in the first place, not so?”

Ganie looked at Jerome sheepishly.

“I suppose. I didn’t think of it that way.”

“Is Kittie still sleeping?” Jerome asked.

“Yep, old Kitts has never been an early riser. I’ll let her sleep until the insurance people have been to assess the damage. Then we’ll drive through to PE, if that’s still okay with you? To stay at your place, I mean? I don’t want to stay in this godforsaken hellhole a minute longer than I have to.”

“What a question,” Jerome said. “Of course. That was the plan all along, wasn’t it? But I’d better get moving now.”

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Relief washed over Ganie as she pulled away from the filling station where they’d stopped to fill up before driving to Port Elizabeth. The trip was not going according to plan. First the delay in Uniondale, now high drama in Jeffrey’s Bay. She just hoped that this was the end of the disruptions. She and Kittie had things to do, business to take care of. She had planned the trip so carefully and now they seemed encounter one episode of high jinx after the other. She wanted to get to PE, get Monty’s ashes—if that was at all possible—and head for Rhodes. And the quicker the better.

“I’ll just be very happy when we get to Rhodes,” she said. Kittie was quiet next to her. She seemed distracted and nervous. “Don’t worry, Kitts, I’m sure the cops will find them. Anyway, I don’t think they want to actually harm us. I think Bakkies just wants to intimidate you. Besides, they must have high-tailed it out of here after throwing a pipe bomb into a house in the middle of a small town. They’d be fucking stupid if they didn’t.”

Kittie looked away and shook her head. Ganie thought she saw tears in her eyes.

“But we still live in Cape Town. We have to go back there sooner or later. Who’s to say it’s going to stop?”

“Well, I don’t think we should worry about it now,” said Ganie. “By the time we get back, the cops will have caught them, I’ll bet. As for Bakkies ... if it was Bakkies and he put somebody up to it, I’m sure that person will shop him the minute he’s caught. No way is someone going to take the rap on his own.”

“Ja well, you don’t know the goddamn cops the way I know the cops. Throughout this fraud case, I was the one who had to gather all the evidence. The investigator did sweet bugger all, just sat there on his arse shuffling paper. I had to compile the whole bloody dossier, and it’s two inches thick, let me tell you. I have no faith in them anymore. That fraud squad guy did fôkôl to help me. I wouldn’t be surprised if Bakkies got to him and paid him off. Maybe I should just let the whole thing go.”

“No way, Kitts. That asshole stole your whole life. It wouldn’t be right to just drop the whole thing mid ...”

Ganie stopped talking abruptly and slowed the car to a crawl. Then she accelerated and slowed down again.

“Do you hear something funny, Kittie?” she asked.

“No, what do you mean?”

“A weird noise under the car. The steering doesn’t feel right, either. The car feels as if it’s wobbling. Shush ... listen.”

Ganie steered the car onto the shoulder of the road and slowed down some more.

“As a matter of fact, yes. Something seems to be banging against something else. But it sounds like a kind of turning,” Kittie said.

Ganie stopped the car and got out. She walked around it, then got down on her knees to peer underneath the car.

“I can’t see anything. Maybe something came loose and rattled around. Or maybe something just got stuck onto the undercarriage and fell off again,” she said as she started the car again. The drove off slowly, in silence.

“No fuck. This doesn’t feel good, cuz. I’m stopping again. I swear to God, it feels as if the wheels want to fall off. Weird.”

“Now what?” asked Kittie. “We’re at least ten kilometres from Jeffrey’s and seventy from PE. I’m not hitchhiking.”

“Me neither,” responded Ganie. She felt helpless and mystified. “What if you get out, Kittie, and I pull off slowly. Get on your knees to look at the wheels and under the car carefully while it’s moving. Maybe you’ll see something.”

“Okay, let’s try,” said Kittie as she unbuckled her seat belt and stepped out of the car.

“Right, I’m going!” shouted Ganie.

“I don’t know. I can’t see anything,” Kittie shouted when she caught up, out of breath and puffing from her efforts to keep up with the moving car.

“Maybe try the other side,” Ganie said. They repeated the procedure.

“Oh my God! Yes! Both these wheels seem to want to wobble off their fucking nuts!” Kittie shouted.

“Now what do we do?” She climbed back into the car and the two sat in silence.

“How could that happen? How can both wheels want to come off? The car was serviced before we left. In any case, it’s a new car. Surely car wheels aren’t supposed to just rattle loose?” Ganie wondered. She thought for a while.

“You know what? I can’t fix it. Christ, I don’t even know what’s wrong. I’m phoning Sergeant Goniwe. He gave me his card yesterday. Maybe he can phone a mechanic for us or send someone to come and help. We’re not far out of town.”

Ganie reached for her bag. After retrieving the sergeant’s card from the side pocket into which she had stuffed it the day before, she dialled the number.

“It’s ringing,” she said to Kittie, as if she found the fact surprising.

Sergeant Goniwe answered on the second ring. Ganie rattled off their problem, asking whether he would be kind enough to send somebody out to help them.

“He says he’ll send someone,” she informed Kittie as she ended the call. “Now we just wait. Fuck, I’m hungry. We should have made breakfast.”

The two sat in silence, Ganie entertaining wistful fantasies about three kilograms of prime lamb chops lying stacked in Herman’s freezer. In all the confusion, she’d thought it best to leave the meat behind until she knew more clearly how the rest of their trip would unfold. She or Herman, when he arrived from Jo’burg, could always retrieve it later.

Thirty minutes passed before Ganie noticed a police van approaching in the rear-view mirror. It was Sergeant Goniwe himself who stepped out of the van. He was

accompanied by a different constable today, another young one, though not as good-looking as the one the day before.

“Good day, ladies. So, you’re having car trouble, eh?”

“Yes, Sergeant,” Ganie said, stepping out of the Mini. “I’ve never seen anything as weird as this. I can hardly believe it ... our wheels seem to be falling off.”

“Well, have a look, then.”

Goniwe hitched up the legs of his trousers and leaned down on one knee, balancing himself against the bumper of the car with his left hand. With the other, he twiddled the nuts on the left rear tyre. Wiping the sweat off his forehead with his shirtsleeve, he moved on to the next tyre and proceeded to test all the tyres in the same manner. Letting out a long grunt, he slowly rose to his full height, both hands grabbing his back.

“This back of mine ...” he said, turning to face Kittie.

“It seems you really do have an enemy out there, ma’am. All these nuts have been loosened. By hand. With a spanner. Except for one on each tyre, which needs a special spanner to get it off, it seems... obviously to stop them from being stolen. Drive like this for long enough, and ...” He didn’t complete the sentence, but his eyes said it all. If he’d doubted it before, Sergeant Goniwe was now convinced that someone was out to get Kittie.

Kittie swayed on her feet as all the colour drained from her face. Pushing her back up against the side of the Mini as if facing an attacker, she sank to her haunches, dropped her head deep between her knees and covering it with her arms, as if warding off blows.

Ganie made a dash for the driver’s side and leaned through the window to reach for her bag.

“Here, Kitts, some Rescue ... take it. Put it under your tongue,” she said, holding two little pills in front of Kittie’s face. “Come on, cuz. It will help.”

“Constable Jantjies and I can easily tighten these nuts and you’ll be fine to drive,” Sergeant Goniwe said to Ganie. “I take it you’re on your way to PE, like you told me yesterday?”

Ganie nodded.

“I think it would be better to stay here. My guys ... I ... can’t look out for you if you’re somewhere else. But if you insist on going to PE, I suggest you find

somewhere safe to stay. This was no accident. And if it was the bomber ... or bombers ... it could mean they're still around here somewhere."

Sergeant Goniwe turned around and, with one more wipe of his forehead, he walked to the police van, where he started talking on the police radio.

## **Chapter Fourteen: Richer Fish to Fry**

Port Elizabeth International Airport thronged with people and Ganie was goggle-eyed at how everything had changed. She had not been to this airport in more than twenty years and she hardly recognised the place. It also seemed strange that it was as busy as it was on a Tuesday morning. Wasn't PE supposed to be dead? Right now, though, a plane load of pilgrims on haj was arriving back from Mecca. Thousands of people were milling around, craning their necks to spot loved ones and jostling for space in the arrivals hall. She, too, was craning her neck, looking for Herman, willing him to hurry up and come through the doors.

She had left Kittie sleeping at Jerome's place. She was pleasantly surprised at how organised Jerome had become. It seemed the move to PE had done him the world of good. Gone were the stray socks and crumpled T-shirts scattered throughout the living room, as had been the case in Cape Town. Gone were the used glasses and dirty dishes piling up over spilled granules of instant coffee until every surface in the kitchen was covered. Gone, too, were the characteristic little hillocks of compact disks contouring the carpet in Jerome's living space and lying in wait to trip up the unsuspecting visitor.

"We all have to grow up sooner or later, pet," he'd said when he saw Ganie's astonishment.

His home was a small yet pristine townhouse in a new development just adjacent to the old suburb of Walmer, so the drive to the airport had been much shorter than

she'd anticipated. This meant that she had been waiting for more than an hour for Herman's flight to arrive, but it was an hour she'd put to good use, catching up with the mounting number of emails in her inbox. The fact that the airport, which appeared so small when compared with those of Cape Town and Johannesburg, was a wireless hotspot where she could log on came as another pleasant surprise. As soon as she discovered this unexpected bonus, Ganie wasted no time running back to car park to retrieve her laptop from the Mini.

She settled in at a small table in the smoking section of the Wimpy at PE airport. Going to the Wimpy was a guilty little secret—despite her loathing of fast food, a Wimpy breakfast was a favourite of Ganie's. Enjoying the time alone, she booted up her laptop and lost herself in reading and responding to emails. Two of her writing students had submitted assignments, a short story each, and she wrote back to say she was on a short vacation and would read their work and give her critique as soon as she returned to Cape Town. She was writing furiously when Herman's flight was announced, but finished off one last email, clicked the send button, packed up her laptop and drained her second cup of coffee.

Herman had confirmed his flight details the night before. Ganie didn't know whether she was pleased or irritated by his arrival, but eventually decided that it would be better for him to deal with the practical matters of insurance and repair, not to mention Sergeant Goniwe, leaving her free to do what she had really come to do. Provided he did not interfere with her plans. Herman had no inkling of what her real reasons were for taking the trip. And Ganie would prefer to keep it that way. Her brother was not the sentimental type—at best, he would laugh at Ganie's urgent desire to complete this haj of her own, at worst he would try to make her change her mind by reasoning that it was not up to her and Kittie to make such decisions and that if ashes were to be scattered, it should be done collectively by the family. That was a sermon she did not care to hear, but most of all she would not be able to bear his scorn. And God forbid he should hear about her plans to exhume Monty's ashes! He was likely to have a conniption, probably insist she go for psychiatric assessment. Ganie loved spending time with her brother, but she'd never seen any reason why he should know about everything she did.

She spotted the unmistakable silver-blond of Herman's hair among all the other heads in the swarm of people walking into the arrivals hall and Ganie smiled in spite

of herself. He was so predictable. As always, he was dressed impeccably, his clothes understated and pristine as if he had just stepped out of a Fabiani ad.

“Yo, boet! Over here!” she called, still smiling. She walked up to him and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“So, what happened exactly?” he wanted to know on the way from the airport, and Ganie filled him in, leaving out several of the finer points relating to the reason for their trip and steering well clear of any reference to ashes, gravesites and the copious consumption of Johnny Walker whisky.

“The person to get in touch with is Sergeant Goniwe at Jay Bay. I have his number,” she concluded, passing him Goniwe’s card.

“Are you telling me that it’s that loser Kittie’s ex who is responsible for this whole bloody fiasco? Jissus, why can’t she ever just pick a normal man? This is ... what? The third lunatic she married?”

“I know, but go easy on her, Herman. She’s a nervous wreck. We knocked her out with a couple of tranquillisers last night and she was still sleeping when I left, but I’m not so sure whether it’s going to help much. Frankly, I don’t know what to do next. I might have to make her go and see a doctor or something. I think the episode with the car may have been the last straw.”

Ganie pulled up outside Jerome’s place and got out of the car.

“Come in. Let’s relax and chat over a cup of coffee before we decide on our plan of action. I’ll go and wake Kittie up after coffee.”

“I’d like to get there as early as possible. I don’t feel like spending the whole damn day sorting out the mess. You will take me, won’t you?” Herman asked.

Ganie slowly spooned the ground coffee in her trusty espresso maker and placed it on the stove.

“Let’s catch our breaths for a minute before rushing off. In the meantime you can phone the sergeant to find out whether they’ve made any progress in catching the bastards.”

Ganie avoided agreeing to take Herman to Jeffrey’s Bay. She was hoping she could persuade him to take the Mini and go alone. In fact, she had no intention of going back there at all. She’d arranged to meet Jerome later in the day to investigate the likelihood of her finding and salvaging Monty’s ashes. With Herman out of the way, she’d have ample time to make a few enquiries of her own.

“So, how long are you staying, boet? I suppose most of the insurance stuff can be done over the phone from Jo’burg, so it’s really just a matter of having a look to see for yourself what damage there is and sorting out security and stuff. Speak to the cops, of course,” she said.

There was no response from Herman and Ganie realised he had left the kitchen. She heard him talking on his cellphone in the lounge. He must have called Sergeant Goniwe.

The coffee was ready. Ganie lifted the espresso maker from the stove. As she turned to pour the coffee into the cups on the kitchen counter, a voice boomed behind her. Fumbling with the sizzling espresso maker in her hands, she sent the boiling coffee splashing onto the floor.

“Mahtegaaaahnie, my friend! We meet again.”

In the doorway loomed the large figure of Karel Nortier, his needlessly long hair still tied in a ponytail.

“Jaysus-effing-Christ, Karel! Why in the name of God do you creep up on people like that? And what the fuck are you doing here, anyway? How did you get in?”

“Your cousin let me in. She called me in the middle of the night. She couldn’t sleep. I said I’d come through straightaway. She’s very traumatised, you know ...”

“Of course she’s traumatised, man—she’s just escaped two attempts on her life, for fucksakes. How would you feel if the house you’re about to spend a nice holiday in is blown to crap with a pipe bomb? And then, as you’re trying to get away, you discover you were mere minutes away from getting totalled because these arseholes had unscrewed the wheels of your car? You do seem to have a knack for stating the obvious.”

Ganie shook with anger as she bent down to wipe the coffee off the floor with a dish cloth. Her face burned and her eyes stung. This was the last thing she needed right now—Karel-fucking-Ponytail-Nortier. What was Kittie thinking, phoning him of all people in the middle of the night? Too many tranquillisers and wine, no doubt.

“When did you get here?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

“About an hour or so ago. I wanted to leave as soon as Kittie phoned, but after we’d talked for a while, she said she felt calmer, that the pills you’d given her were starting to kick in and that she thought she’d be asleep by the time I arrived. So we decided I’d leave at dawn.”

Ganie was too dumbfounded to say anything. Slowly, she straightened to her full height and looked Karel up and down. We? Since when was there a “we” in Kittie and Karel? And who on God’s blue-and-green planet said shit like “leave at dawn”? As if he was Wyatt Earp planning a dawn raid on some unsuspecting Apaches down at the OK Corral! Or a boere commandant briefing his men on an early-morning attack on Her Majesty’s forces.

“No need to get so upset, Ganie,” Karel said.

Ganie noticed that he had no trouble saying her name now. The bastard had been needling her all along, she was sure of it.

“I know all about Bakkies and what had happened to her,” he continued. “Kittie told me that night in Uniondale. I promised that if she ever needed my help, I’d be there for her. Now you two find yourselves here, in the Eastern Cape ... my world ... and you’re in trouble. Of course I’m going to help.”

Ganie shook her head. As she turned around to make a fresh pot of coffee, Herman returned to the kitchen.

“Um ... we haven’t met. I’m Herman,” he said and stuck out his hand to Karel.

“Sorry,” Ganie said. “Herman, meet Karel. We met Karel in Uniondale on the way here. He’s a farmer. Karel, meet Herman. He’s my brother—Kittie’s cousin.”

The two men shook hands and an awkward silence descended, nobody quite sure what to say.

“Let’s go and drink our coffee out on the veranda,” Ganie said.

In silence, the two men followed her into the lounge and through the French doors opening out onto Jerome’s deck patio. As they settled down to drink their coffee, Herman broke the silence.

“So, what do you farm, Karel?”

“Used to be sheep, but now mainly game. Our farm is a little way out of Uniondale, in the Baviaanskloof. We switched a few years ago, although we still keep some sheep. But farming isn’t what it used to be.”

“Beautiful part of the world, the Baviaanskloof,” Herman said. His eyes darted from Karel to Ganie, and Ganie could see him trying to put the pieces together, sum up the situation and Karel’s place in it. “And Jerome? I take it he’s at work.”

“Yep, he’s at work,” Ganie said.

“And Kittie is sleeping?”

“Yeah ...” Ganie began.

“Nope,” said Karel. “She’s having a bath.”

“Oh?” Ganie was miffed. “Let me go and check on her.”

She got up and left the men alone. Let them talk man stuff. Let them negotiate their way around manly topics. Let them prod and poke, dance around each other until they found a trivial sliver of common ground. Then let them articulate without talking, bait and cast while upholding the sacred principle of non-disclosure. Let them stick to their respective guns of speaking without saying. Let the fuckers stew in their own dickheadedness, she thought.

She went into the bedroom she was sharing with Kittie and sat down on the bed. From the bathroom, she could hear water running and decided to wait for Kittie to finish her shower. She fell over onto her back and covered her eyes with her hand. Fuck! When was she going to get the opportunity put her plans into motion? Increasingly, they seemed to be running the danger of coming to nothing. And what kind of a chaotic holiday was this in any case?

“Hey, cuz. Herman land safely?” Kittie was standing at the foot of the bed, one towel draped around her body, another piled on her head. “Karel arrived this morning from Uniondale. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I know Karel is here. You can’t miss the voice ... or the ponytail.”

“Come on, Ganie. Don’t be like that. I couldn’t sleep, even with the pills. I needed to talk. And once he knew what had happened, I couldn’t stop him. He said he wanted to help.”

“Yes, I know. He mounted the steed at first light.”

“No need to be sarcastic,” Kittie said, looking hurt. “He just wants to help, you know. I don’t know why you hate him so much. He’s really a very decent guy. Fun, too.”

“Whatever,” said Ganie. “Just a pity you didn’t warn me that Sir Lancelot would be joining our little party.

“I think you’re being unreasonable. Actually, no, let me be straight ... you’re just being mean and a damn bitch. Jirre, Ganie, how can you expect things to be the same after we’ve been bombed and everything?”

“I don’t know,” said Ganie. “But it’s our holiday and we have important things to do. Jerome’s made enquiries about Monty’s ...”

“God, give me strength! You’re not still hoping to go through with that whacko plan of yours, are you? Come on, Ganie, it’s ... you’re off the wall. And you know what else? I don’t give a rat’s arse about it anymore. I’m sorry, somebody’s trying to kill me here and you’re thinking of robbing a fôkking grave. Leave the dead in peace, man ... let’s first try to keep the living alive.”

“Okay, I know you think that’s bullshit. But what about the rest of it, Kittie? The ashes? What about Rhodes?” Ganie sat up slowly, her disappointment mounting by the minute. She could see where this was going. And of course Kittie was not really to blame, but she clearly did not feel the same urgency about scattering the ashes, let alone digging up Monty.

“Ashes are just ashes,” Kittie said. “The people who died are long gone. I think ... well, I don’t want to hurt you or insult you or anything, but I think you’re doing this for yourself more than anyone else.”

Ganie bit her tongue—of course she was doing it for herself, but she was doing it for everyone else, too. Yet she had no way of explaining that. She decided not to react.

“All right,” she said instead. “Let’s not bite each other’s heads off. What exactly do you have in mind, then?”

“Not sure. I’ll have to think a bit. Karel knows some people ...”

“What ... people?”

“He says there’s this old connection of his. A friend. He can fix things.”

“Jaysus, Kittie. Have you lost it completely? I shudder to think what sort of ‘connection’ he’s referring to. Probably some *Witwolf* on steroids.” Ganie shook her head. “The cops are on the case, man. I think it’s the craziest idea ever to go and interfere with what they’re doing. For Christ’s sake, get a grip. And you call *me* nuts?”

Kittie sat down on the bed next to Ganie, head bent. She looked defeated and tired.

“I told you, you can’t trust the cops, cuz. It’s a free for all, I’m telling you. They’re not going to catch them. Even with all the evidence I collected against Bakkies, they still say it’s not a sure thing he’ll be convicted. If I’m ever going to get out of this mess, I’m going to have to do it another way—fight fire with fire, so to speak, use his tactics. The law is not going to save my arse.”

Ganie rose slowly and turned to face Kittie.

“So, is there something you’re trying to tell me, Kittie?”

“I’m ... I just ... I don’t think we should carry on. It seems everything is conspiring to wreck our trip. And if you still, after all of this, want to drive all the way to Rhodes ... well, I just don’t think I can go with you, cuz. Please don’t be angry. In fact, I think it would be stupid of me. I have no other choice, if you really think about it. I have to go back to Cape Town ... try and sort out the mess I’m in.”

Ganie rose from the bed. In her gut, she’d known that was what had been coming.

“So be it, then.”

As she reached the bedroom door, she paused as if she’d just thought of something. She turned around.

“Whatever you do, don’t tell Herman what’s really going on. He’ll have a thrombosis and stop us ... stop me, I mean. Seems to me you have richer fish to fry. But I’m not giving up. I’m going to Rhodes, with or without you. And before I do, I’m finding Monty and I’m taking her with me. And you ... you’re going to shut your fucking trap about it.”

“Please don’t be angry with me, Ganie, please man,” Kittie pleaded, but her voice faltered.

As she left the room, Ganie heard Kittie start to cry.

“Pappa would have known what to do,” she heard Kittie say, but she didn’t turn around to console her. She straightened her shoulders and returned to the veranda to see what social progress had been made.

## Chapter Fifteen: A Grave Negotiation

“The thing is, there’s no Little Walmer Cemetery left to talk about, far as I can figure,” said Jerome. He leaned back in his chair and swung his legs onto the cluttered desk in front of him. “People have been squatting there for years. The council has started the process of exhuming all the remains and these are being moved to fresh ... um ... digs.”

When Jerome looked up his eyes were full of mischief and Ganie could not help but laugh.

“That one was a bit obvious, darling,” she said.

“Of course, this could all be good news for you. Your old grandma may well be resettled in a fresh grave by now, or if you’re lucky, she might have been disinterred and waiting to be assigned new lodgings. So maybe no digging is required, even though the process of claiming is apparently one hell of a palaver. I’ve made a couple of calls, and I have a name for you, but good luck. I wouldn’t hold my breath. They have to verify that you really are related to the dead person. What’s more, it takes more than one surviving relative to do the claiming.”

Ganie looked across the cataclysm of paper, dictionaries and coffee mugs that littered Jerome’s desk. Jerome took a sip of his coffee and returned the mug to where it had been balancing on his stomach. Ganie had declined the offer of instant coffee. She’d hoped they could meet somewhere for lunch, but Jerome suggested they stop

off at the newsroom instead, where he had access to the information he'd gathered on his computer. He reached over and clicked his mouse.

"You have to phone a Miss Carolus. She's the city council administrator who is coordinating the transfer of the remains," he said. "I've spoken to her and she knows about you. Do you want to use my phone?"

Ganie shook her head. She dreaded dealing with bureaucracy or any form of authority. Around them, telephones were ringing and being answered, people bustled and talked, and a cleaning woman was dragging around a bucket of murky, soapy water and a mop that had seen better days as she tackled small squares of the floor to clean. *The Herald* newsroom was as frenzied as any of its kind in its race towards the day's deadline, a non-stop chase for the fresh angle to top what had been dished up the day before.

"Where are their offices? Maybe I should just rock up there."

"Wouldn't advise that, doll. Not if you want to hang on to what sanity you have left. You may be in for a long wait. Better to warn her you're coming."

"Can't we drive to the cemetery first?" Ganie asked. "Please, Jem, man. Let's go and have a look around to see whether her grave is still intact or whether she's been ... well, you know ... removed. That way at least we go to Miss Carolus armed with some information."

"I can't see why that would be necessary. They do keep records, you know. Her name should be on the official inventory."

"Still, what if there's a cock-up of sorts? I'd like to see with my own eyes whether Monty is still in her grave or not. I haven't come all this way ... and I'm certainly not going all the way up a fucking mountain to a stupid forgotten village ... carrying the wrong ashes," Ganie insisted.

Unhurried, Jerome lifted his legs off the table, wheeled his chair towards the desk and rested his chin on his hands. Ganie could make him so weary. Why did she have to be so ... well ... Ganie? Had she been anybody else, he would have told her so, but he knew better than to argue with her. She was obstinate and he knew she would not stop until she had her grandmother's ashes in her hands, or until she'd exhausted every possibility to get them.

“Okay,” he said. “I suppose it can’t hurt. Tell you what, give me half-an-hour or so to polish up this story here and I’ll meet you downstairs. We’ll go and see what gran’s grave holds.”

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Little Walmer Cemetery was nothing like Ganie had expected. Despite what Jerome had told her about the squatters in the graveyard, she nevertheless imagined lush trees hanging over serene gravestones with a few shacks dotting the periphery. To her mind, if you decided to invade a graveyard, you’d at least keep a respectable distance from the graves.

The reality proved far from the romanticised picture she held in her mind. What she saw was a sprawl of shacks, shockingly dense in places. How could people live like that, among graves? On top of dead people? How did people become inured against the dead? Any form of the dead? Ganie suddenly felt very old.

“Aren’t they afraid of ghosts?” she whispered, more to herself than to Jerome, who was driving slowly as he looked for a place to park.

Jerome was no less alarmed than Ganie, though his irritation and reluctance to be there overshadowed the shock he’d registered. What did he know about cemeteries in any case?

“Don’t know, pet,” he said. “I suppose if you’re hungry and cold you’re less likely to have time to think about ghosts and spirits.”

“Yeah, but still ... wasn’t there another place to settle? Some other piece of open land? Even if you’re destitute, how do you sleep next to ... no fuck, on top of ... dead bodies? I’d go anywhere else before I settled on a grave. And this isn’t one grave, it’s a whole congregation. Not to be funny, but I’d sooner go and squat on the mayor’s front lawn, frankly.”

She was quiet for a while.

“You know, never mind ghosts and spirits. How sad we people are, all of us. How sad that in our crazy scramble for survival, we have unlearned generations ... centuries ... of belief systems and customs. The real tragedy is that we’re so very quick and eager to unlearn. We can’t wait to shove off the old and don the new. That’s the true tragedy of poor people being forced to invade a graveyard.”

Jerome had brought the car to a stop. In silence they sat and took in the scene. People were going about their Tuesday afternoon business. To one side, a group of teenage boys were kicking a soccer ball around amid animated calls to one another. A cluster of girls stood by, watching and cheering them on. Here and there men and women stood around small fires, others were sitting on the ground.

“What do we do?” Ganie asked. “This complicates things. Now we have to look for Monty’s grave in somebody’s backyard.”

Jerome sighed.

“Ganie,” he began. “You fatigue me. I wish you’d get it into your head ... I’m not part of your plan.”

By now, some graveyard residents had noticed the car and were gesturing towards them. The boys stopped their game of soccer and the girls began to twitter among themselves. Calling over his shoulder to a group of men not far from the car, a middle-aged man approached. He seemed cautious.

“Molweni,” he said, bending down to speak to Jerome through the car window. “You are lost?”

“Molo, tata,” Jerome answered. “No, we’re not lost. This is my friend, Matingane. Her parents called her after Dingane. She came from Cape Town to look for her grandmother here ... in the graveyard.”

“Molo, mama,” the man said, bending lower to see Ganie through the car window.

“Molo, tata,” she said.

“Umakhulu, she lies here?” he asked and Ganie noticed something in his eyes—defiance, embarrassment, discomfort—she couldn’t be sure. Maybe a combination of all three.

“Yebo, tata. She’s been lying here for a long, long time. More than twenty years now.”

“Uh-uh-uh,” the man said, rubbing his hand over his head. “They come here, they take all the dead people. Take them to Forresthill.”

“All of them?” asked Jerome. “I’ve heard they’ve still got quite a few to move.”

The man looked uncomfortable.

“Uh ... me, I don’t know. Maybe,” he said. He seemed reluctant to part with too much information.

Ganie wondered whether the shack dwellers had faced any other people who'd come looking for dead relatives' gravesites.

"Will you let us look for my granny's grave?" asked Ganie. "We don't want to be in your way. I must take her away, you see. I have to make peace with the iziNyanya. The old man in Cape Town, the igqira, he told me to fetch her."

"Haibo!" said the man. "I don't like that business. We just want a place to live with no trouble."

He rubbed his hand over his head again and seemed to weigh up his options.

"You wait here," he said. "I speak to the men."

With that, he rose to his full height and quickly turned to walk away.

"Wait!" Ganie shouted. She opened the door and jumped out of the car. "Wait, please!"

She dashed after the man and touched his elbow.

"I don't know your name," she said as the two stood facing each other. Ganie lowered her eyes and put out her hands to him, bending her knees almost imperceptibly. "I am Matingane, like my friend said. I'm pleased to meet you. But I don't know your name."

The man took her hand.

"I'm Bongani. I speak with the men first. You wait here," he said.

Ganie returned to the car.

"Now we wait, I suppose," she said. She was out of breath and nervous, but there was no going back now.

The teenagers, boys and girls, had gathered a small distance away. They were laughing and pointing at the car, occasionally shouting out something in isiXhosa, no doubt making fun of the two middle-aged whites sitting inside.

"Cripes pet, this is all too much for a middle-aged white queer in Africa," said Jerome. "Shouldn't we just leave it and go? Go through the proper channels?"

"Too late now, Jem. I'm not insulting these people by driving off before he's even had a chance to tell us what they will or will not let us do."

Silence descended again. Jerome's discomfort was tangible. He was sweating and shifting around on his seat.

"All I can say is, thank the Lord above I'm a journo peasant driving a whacked-out old Golf that's more ancient than Father Abraham," he muttered.

“Come on, Jem. Don’t be daft. Do you think they’d have robbed you if you drove a flashy car?”

“You never know, doll. You never know.”

“I wish he’d hurry up already. It’s fucking hot in here.”

They’d been waiting for more than half-an-hour and Ganie was beginning to think that Bongani would never return. Then she saw him crossing the field with a group of men. They seemed animated, talking and arguing among themselves. When they reached the car, they stopped abruptly and fell silent.

“I think we should both get out, Jem,” Ganie said. She opened the door and slowly stepped out of the car.

“Whatever,” Jerome grumbled and followed suit, taking his time in doing so.

“Did you speak to your friends, Bongani?” Ganie began. “Will I be allowed to look for the grave?”

The men began to speak among themselves again. It appeared as if they were not all in agreement about whether to allow Ganie access to the graveyard.

“Maybe is okay. You can look for umakhulu. But first we speak. You come with us to ekhaya.”

A blurred hum rose among the men again and Ganie glanced at Jerome, the reluctant escort cornered into a situation not of his choosing, who was growing more uptight by the minute.

“Thank you, tata. We’d be delighted,” she said. Turning to Jerome, she hissed under her breath, “Come on, Jem, they’re just showing hospitality. Dammit, we should have brought them something.”

Ganie was amazed beyond belief and extremely grateful that they’d come this far. She had been single-minded about the nature of her business, yet of its execution she’d had only the vaguest of notions. Now she was slowly beginning to get the picture. This was to be a negotiated undertaking.

The group of men led the way, Ganie and Jerome following. Behind them trailed the teenagers, hooting and laughing. As they drew closer to the denser part of the settlement, several women joined the procession, while others barely glanced at them, carrying on doing laundry, sweeping the soil in front of their shacks or simply standing around talking.

As they walked deeper into the settlement, Ganie realised with a start that it was even more incohesive than she'd thought at first. This was by no means a happy, cohesive little community. Bongani and his friends spoke isiXhosa, but she heard several people speaking in Afrikaans.

When he reached a corrugated iron shack that seemed bigger and less crudely put together than most of the others, Bongani stopped and indicated that Ganie and Jerome should enter. Bongani's men filed in behind them.

Having only one small makeshift window, the shack was dark inside, but once Ganie's eyes had adjusted to the gloom, she could make out a small fridge to one side, next to which stood a metal table holding a two-plate gas cooker. Ganie guessed this room served both as living quarters and kitchen. A second room, obviously the sleeping quarters, led off from there.

The men positioned themselves in a semi-circle in the middle of the room, facing Ganie and Jerome.

"You can sit now," Bongani said, gesturing towards the opposite wall, where a narrow foam mattress lay on the floor.

"Thank you, tata," Ganie said. "Come, Jem, sit down."

She bent over forward and eased herself down on the mattress. She wished she'd had the foresight to wear something less constricting than her tight jeans. Jerome followed. The men made no move to sit down.

"Now Thumi will make us tea," said Bongani, and another murmur rose from the men. He swung around and glared at them, then returned his gaze to Ganie and Jerome, where they sat cross-legged on the foam mattress.

"Beer," he said. "Beer is better?"

"Tea or beer," said Ganie. "It doesn't matter. We are the visitors. You choose what is best."

Bongani left the shack and Ganie could hear him shout.

"Thumi! Bring the beer for our guests!"

His return seemed to be the signal for everyone to relax. The men squatted down on the floor and began to talk more freely and loudly among themselves.

Bongani began to jabber away to his friends, but Ganie could not understand a word he was saying, except that she heard her name—and the name of Dingane—

mentioned several times during his rapid-fire delivery. One by one the men turned to look at her, and before long they were all laughing uproariously.

It seemed the damned name was good for some things in life, after all! They got it, even if Karel Ponytail didn't.

"We're happy for you, you look for umakhulu," Bongani then said, as he lowered himself onto his haunches. "But it's not so good you look yourself. Is our place now. We look. The inkwenkwe ... they look ... is our place now. Uh-uh-uh, it's hard place this."

He did not take his eyes off Ganie, and she gathered that he was trying to communicate something to her beyond the words spoken. She held his stare, becoming increasingly certain that some serious negotiation would have to take place before anybody was going looking for any graves. She was out of her depth and entirely unsure how to proceed. She could not read from Bongani's eyes what was expected of her.

A young woman entered the shack carrying a plastic bucket, in which were stacked several quarts of Black Label. Eyes lowered, she nodded first in Jerome's direction, then Ganie's, and placed the bucket in the centre of the circle. Performing an almost imperceptible curtsy, she left the shack without saying a word.

"Uh-uh, very, very hard place this," Bongani lilted again, shaking his head as he reached for the bucket.

He took out one of the quarts, cracked the bottle-top off against the table leg and passed the bottle to Ganie. The beer was lukewarm, but she dutifully took a sip.

Up until now, none of the other men had addressed Ganie or Jerome directly. Ganie was afraid to say something wrong, yet she realised that she had to respond in some way, keep the conversation going, rise to Bongani's opening round of barter.

"I'd be very, very grateful if your boys ... your inkwenkwe ... will go and look for my grandmother's grave. That is a big favour you will do for me. You must tell me what I can help you with in return," she said.

"Haibo! Very hard place, this," Bongani repeated. He did not appear eager to make the first offer. He gestured to the other men to help themselves to the beer. This invitation set off a renewed volley of conversation, but the men spoke only to one another, as if Ganie and Jerome were not present.

Ganie passed the bottle of beer to Jerome and turned her head towards him in the hope that she wouldn't be heard when speaking.

"What do you think, Jerome? What's a good opening offer?"

"You decide," Jerome muttered, taking a long swig of beer.

"Is there anything in particular I must bring you, Bongani? Or would it be better if I give you money ... say five-hundred rand?"

"Uh-uh ... very, very hard place." Bongani shook his head and looked straight past her.

The other men appeared disinterested in the negotiations, but Ganie suspected that this was feigned in order to smooth over the proceedings.

"One ... five," Bongani said.

Ganie was startled. She felt Jerome stiffen beside her.

"That's a lot of money just to look for a grave, Bongani," she said. "Maybe my granny isn't here anymore. I can just as easily go to the municipality and find out whether they've taken her from her grave already."

Bongani turned to address his fellow residents in isiXhosa. A barrage of answers followed, all the men speaking at the same time. Then, all at once, they fell quiet again. He turned back to Ganie.

"The men, they say we find the grave now."

To emphasise his point, Bongani forcefully stabbed a gnarled index finger downwards in the air.

"We send the inkwenkwe, the boys, they look. If they find umakhulu, they come and call us. We see if she's still here. If she's not here, you give us small money. If she's here, we take her out of the ground tonight ... you give us big money. One-five."

Ganie thought for a while. If Monty had not been removed yet, what better solution could she have hoped for than to have the shack people dig up the ashes? That would certainly save her what was almost certain to be a tiresome, frustrating and time-consuming official exhumation process.

But what if they took her for a ride?

"That would be very helpful, Bongani. I appreciate your help. But how will I know it's umakhulu? What if she is no longer here? What then? You can bring me anyone and I wouldn't be able to tell the difference."

Bongani conferred with his council again. Another loud exchange followed and Bongani turned back to Ganie.

“We send inkwenkwe now. You write the name. We wait here, we drink the beer. We’re all friends now. Inkwenkwe will call us if they find the grave. We all go look together. We see the grave, she’s empty ... we see the grave, she’s the same. The grave, she’s the same, you go home and come back tomorrow. We dig in the night. You bring the money next morning. You get umakhulu,” he said and sat back, visibly satisfied with his inspired solution.

Ganie thought again. Bongani’s suggestion seemed reasonable.

“What do you think, Jem?” she asked. So far, Jerome had not spoken at all. He’d been sitting quietly, taking deep gulps from the now nearly-empty quart bottle.

He rolled his eyes.

“Seems the only thing you can do, doll. Unless we go and see Miss Carolus.”

“Okay, Bongani, you have a deal. How much if the inkwenkwe find the grave empty?”

Bongani looked past her again. That seems to be Ganie’s cue that it was up to her to suggest a price.

“Two-fifty?” she said. That was an outrageous amount to pay a youth to spend an hour or so running around the settlement looking for a name on a headstone, but Ganie did not want to insult her host. Although she believed he was trying to rip her off, she did feel bad about arriving empty-handed.

“That price, she’s good,” Bongani said and Ganie realised he may have expected her to tell him there would be no deal.

“Good, then. It’s settled. That’s what we’ll do.”

Something else occurred to Ganie.

“There’s just one thing, my brother—even if she’s still here, it’s not a coffin you’ll be digging up. I hope that is not a problem. My grandmother is resting in an urn.”

## Chapter Sixteen: Not Crazy, After All

“It gives new meaning to the concept of urban creep,” Ganie said. “Next thing university faculties will have to start rethinking the town planning syllabus and introduce a module called graveyard creep.”

“All I can say is it gives me the *bloody* creeps,” Jerome retorted as he speared one last baby rosa tomato into his mouth. “Mmmm, that was yummy, pet. I love you, but I’m damned pleased you don’t live here—I’d have to be on a constant diet. As it is I feel like a Bratwurst stuffed into a Vienna sausage casing.”

Their sortie into the cemetery had not deterred Ganie from her resolve to cook a decent dinner that night. She had told Jerome that she was concerned about all the junk food he consumed and that she wanted to make sure that he ate properly—at least once while she was around.

Wistfully picturing the Uniondale meat gone rock solid in the freezer at Jeffrey’s Bay, Ganie became miffed when for love or money she could not find free-range lamb at the local supermarket. Good heavens, what was their problem? They were within spitting distance of sheep country! There really was no reason for not stocking the best the region had to offer.

She spent thirty futile minutes debating the merits of good meat with the butcher behind the meat counter but left unconvinced that he would attempt to mend his short-sighted and miserly ways, or that he’d bought into her argument that his customers would be happy to pay the few rands extra for the much tastier free-range option.

She was further irritated by the absence on the shelf of her brand of mint jelly. All they had was mint sauce, and mint sauce simply did not create quite the texture and taste she was after in her distinctive lamb-and-mint pie. At least the store stocked Basmati rice, although by the time she reached the rice aisle, she had convinced herself that she might have to rethink the dinner menu for the evening.

“So, you actually found Monty’s grave, cuz?”

Kittie had been quiet during dinner, leaving most of the talking to Ganie and Jerome, with Karel asking the odd question as they recounted the afternoon’s events. She was still a nervous wreck and Ganie felt a twinge of guilt about their confrontation that morning.

“You mean,” Kittie continued, “you both saw it with your own eyes? And the grave was still there? It’s almost unbelievable.”

“Yep, all safe and sound.”

Ganie got up to fetch the bottle of wine from the sideboard and topped up all four glasses on the table. She sat down and took a sip of her Merlot.

“Somewhat the worse for wear, I’m afraid, but what can you expect after all these years? You can hardly tell the gravesite from the area around it, though—it’s a bloody mess. The headstone is pretty damaged, too, but we could make out her name on it quite clearly. And under her name, Oupa Sam’s and his birth date, but obviously not his date of death, since his ashes never did get to be buried with her.”

Ganie couldn’t help feeling smug. She was vindicated and she had to consciously resist the temptation to rub Kittie’s nose in the fact that she not only found the grave, but that she was actually well on her way to succeeding in getting Monty’s ashes disinterred with hardly any effort on her part. What was one-and-a-half grand, after all? In a few days or weeks she wouldn’t even miss the money. And Monty would be able to rest in peace.

“You see, Kittie, where there’s a will, there’s a way. If you want something badly enough you will get it.” She could not keep herself from saying something any longer.

“I cannot believe it was so easy,” Kittie said. “It’s almost uncanny.”

“Yep. And the two of you ...” Ganie waved her unused fork at Kittie and Jerome. “... you doubting Thomases should learn that sometimes one has to have the courage of one’s convictions.”

Jerome rolled his eyes.

“Still the same old Ganie—always the gracious loser, but the most appalling winner the world has seen! We’ll allow you to gloat for tonight, okay, pet? You were right, we were wrong. We give you that. You have to admit, though, you were damn lucky. And don’t forget, we don’t have the ashes yet. We still have to go back in the morning to fetch them. There’s still a chance the graveyard folk won’t find the urn or whatever it is. Or that something else happens to it. Anyway, you should have some of your own delicious pie. Otherwise you’ll get drunk.”

“Luck had bugger-all to do with it!” Ganie laughed. She was elated and far too excited to eat. For the first time since they left Cape Town did she feel that things were going her way. This was a sign that she was on the right track, with or without Kittie. She was still hoping Kittie would change her mind about returning to Cape Town, but she decided not to spoil the conviviality around the dinner table by broaching the subject.

She heard a car pulled up outside and a door opening and closing.

“That must be Herman,” she said.

Earlier, as they’d sat down to dinner, Herman called from Jeffrey’s Bay to say he was on his way and would be in PE in about an hour. To make sure he received his fair share, Ganie had dished up a plate of rice and pie for him and set it aside to be warmed up once he arrived. On a side-plate, she had carefully arranged some of the tomato, rocket, watercress and baby spinach salad, dressed with her special seed mix.

“Jem, be a doll and open another bottle of wine, would you? This one is history. I’ll get the door.”

When Ganie returned to the dining room with Herman, Jerome was pouring an extra glass of wine.

“Here you go, Herman. Have some of this fine Merlot,” he said, holding out the glass.

“I’ll pop your dinner in the microwave quickly, boet. We’ve already finished our dinner, but no need to cut short a good dinner party,” Ganie said as she disappeared into the kitchen carrying her brother’s plate, piled high with food.

Herman took off his windbreaker and sat down at the table.

“Now, that was a bloody mission,” he said and held up his wine. “Cheers all. I need this.”

“If you think that was a mission, my mate, you should hear what went down here today,” Karel guffawed. “Your sister went off and had herself a dinkum old bosberaad with the town squatters ... a bo-na fi-des negotiation over a piece of property ... a bit like Piet Retief and the boys calling on old Dingane. Nogal in the cemetery! Only, this time round it was the caller who was named Dingane and she was a white woman!”

Karel found his own joke so funny that he was gasping for breath in between spasms of laughter, which ended only when his mirth turned into a coughing fit. Only once he had the coughing under control did he notice that no-one else was laughing. In fact, the faces around the table looked grim.

Trying to be a good sport, Herman had an uncertain grin on his face, yet he looked utterly puzzled.

Lifting his eyebrows, Karel looked at Kittie. Why was she not laughing? He thought his crack was bloody hilarious!

“Um ... did I say something wrong?” he asked as meek as a puppy, wiping the tears from his cheeks with the back of his beefy hands. He could tell from the fierce look in Kittie’s eyes that he something was definitely wrong.

When he turned to see whether help would be forthcoming from another quarter, Jerome seemed mesmerised by his wine glass, turning it around and around by the stem, eyes resolutely fixed in front of him, as if the wine was about to convey to him a deep secret. But Karel could not help noticing the faint, mischievous smile around his mouth.

“What’s going on here?” Herman asked, turning his gaze to Kittie, who looked pale and stricken as she glared at Karel. “Come on, Kiet-Skiet, let me in on the secret.”

“Oh, it was nothing. She just went with Jerome to do some ... some stuff.”

“What’s so funny, guys?” Ganie asked. She’d heard Kittie’s mumbled words as she returned to the dining room. “Tell me the joke, too. I’m sure the people at the corner café could hear Karel, he was laughing so loudly.”

She looked first at Kittie, then at Jerome. The expressions on their faces made her frown.

“I believe you had a fascinating afternoon, Ganie,” Herman said. His interest was thoroughly piqued.

Ganie glared at Kittie, who raised her one eyebrow and lifted her shoulders helplessly.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know ... wish I did. But from what I can gather, you were playing Trekkers and Zulus with some squatters in a cemetery. Sounds ... well ... bizarre,” Herman said with a laugh. “Actually, let me correct that. It sounds so ... so utterly ... Ganie.”

That was as far as Jerome’s self-control went. Spluttering with his chin lowered at first, he threw his head back and let off squeals of his high-pitched laughter.

Trying to keep a straight face, Kittie looked up at Ganie, whose expression bode ominously ill, but then she, too, could no longer contain herself.

Everybody around the table except Ganie erupted into paroxysms of laughter.

She sat down. She was furious as she watched the others falling around, tears streaming down their faces. Looking at them made her want to laugh too, but she was not going to let Kittie or Jerome get away with this.

When the hysteria had died down, Herman turned to Ganie.

“Okay, sis, tell me what’s going on. It sounds like something I should know about,” he said, gasping for air.

“Since you can’t keep your trap shut, you tell him, Kittie,” Ganie said. She was weary. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

“Hey, cuz, it wasn’t me!” Kittie protested with a wide smile on her face.

“Well, who then?”

“Ag, come on, man, lighten up. What the fuck does it matter anyway?”

And Kittie proceeded to tell Herman the whole story from beginning to end, leaving out nothing. She told him that they were on a mission to Rhodes to scatter the ashes of their grandparents and fathers. She told him why their plan came about in the first place. She told him about Ganie’s old sangoma. She told him about how what she’d thought was a frivolous idea to dig up Monty’s ashes had turned into an obsession with Ganie. She explained in great detail why it was so important for Ganie to complete this journey—how this was her own, personal odyssey.

In spite of herself, Ganie was mesmerised by Kittie’s account. She was dumbfounded. She’d had great difficulty explaining why she was doing what she was doing—even to herself—and why it had become so important to her. She never

wanted anyone to know exactly how she felt about it, because she was afraid it might in fact prove to herself that she'd gone nuts, after all. Yet now, coming from Kittie, having her own story explained back at her—so simply, so beautifully—it suddenly sounded perfect. Not crazy at all.

Nobody spoke when Kittie fell quiet. Everybody was stunned. This was all new to Herman and although Jerome had known what Ganie and Kittie were up to, he'd had no idea what had motivated Ganie to go to the lengths she had.

And although Kittie had explained the reason for their trip to Karel, he'd heard only snippets of the story. He'd thought it best not to pry, especially with Ganie, in whose company he always seemed to say the wrong thing and who clearly had no time for him.

No-one but Kittie had known how deeply driven Ganie was to ritually enact a symbolic conclusion to her own past and that of her family.

As suddenly as she'd burst out laughing, Kittie began to cry.

“And now I'm fucking it all up. I'm letting Ganie down, and she's been so good to me. I feel like I'm torn in opposite directions ... like a useless traitor, a rat leaving the ship. It's just ... I just ... I have to do something about Bakkies.”

Karel got up from his chair and walked around to Kittie. Squatting down beside her, he took her head in his massive palms and, without saying a word, placed it on his shoulder. His big, hairy arms wrapped around her, dwarfing her as he drew her to him—so close she seemed to disappear into his chest.

As if in an epiphany, Ganie understood. Of course Kittie couldn't go on with her. It wouldn't be right. Kittie had the pieces of her life to put back together. They had both thought their destination was a common one. But they had both been dead wrong. Ganie's story was different to Kittie's, even though large parts of them overlapped—the one existing purely to serve the other.

The thing was, Ganie now understood, Kittie's story had ended in Uniondale. Hers had only just begun.

Compassion for Kittie overwhelmed her and her eyes filled with tears.

“I'll go with you, sis.”

Ganie swung around to face her brother.

“Wha ...” she stuttered. “What the fuck?”

“I mean it,” Herman said. “I’ll go with you. I’ll even help you scatter the ashes ... even though you’re a whisky thief.”

He winked at Ganie and smiled.

The expression on Ganie’s face went from disbelief, to annoyance at having been caught out, to awkward embarrassment. To her irritation, she began to blush. She didn’t know which to respond to first—Herman’s unexpected offer to accompany her to Rhodes, or the fact that he’d discovered that she’d been helping herself all too generously from his stash of whisky.

“Look, I’m not a believer or anything, so don’t pee in your pants or anything. But I can understand why you want to do this. So I’ll go with you. Besides, I don’t want you driving all that way alone. Now *that* would be madness.”

With that, Herman sat back and laughed from his belly.

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The knock at the door threatened to wake the dead. Ganie groaned and pulled the pillow over her head.

“Go away,” she moaned. Jerome should get the door. It was his bloody house. What time was it anyway?

But the knocking continued—banging, really.

“Fuck man, this is not my house,” she yelled, sticking her head out from under the covers. The knocking stopped. “Jem! There’s somebody at the door!”

By the silence that met her call, Ganie gathered that Jerome must have left for work already. She realised that it must be later than she’d thought. She was hoping the knocking would wake Herman or Karel, for whom two mattresses had been hastily placed in Jerome’s study the night before. When the banging resumed after what seemed like seconds, she realised nobody else was going to answer the door. Despite the noise, Kittie did not even stir in the bed next to hers.

Ganie sat up and, grimacing with pain, swung her legs over the side of the bed. Her back was killing her after sleeping in three different beds, each more strange and unforgiving than the previous, in as many days. She fumbled around for something to pull on over the T-shirt she’d slept in. Finding nothing suitable, she draped the duvet around her shoulders and shuffled to the front door.

Sergeant Goniwe's fist was raised, ready to knock again as she opened the door.

"Sergeant Goniwe," she said, taken aback. "Good heavens, what are you doing here?"

"Morning, ma'am ... Miss Blignault," Goniwe said, looking out of place and uncomfortable. "I'm sorry to disturb you so early, but we need to talk to Mrs de Bruyn. We've traced the owner of the bakkie we impounded. May I come in?"

Rubbing her eyes with her free hand, Ganie looked at her watch. It was nine o'clock, not at all early for her under normal circumstances.

"Of course ... of course. Sorry. Please come in."

She opened the door wider and stood to one side to allow the sergeant to walk past her.

"Please sit down. Make yourself comfortable. I'll just ... um ... let me see ... um ... shall I make us a cup of coffee?"

"Thanks, ma'am, coffee sounds good. I left very early," the sergeant said as he looked around at the lounge furniture, apparently weighing up his options. The large armchair that didn't match the rest of the furniture evidently appealed to him, and he sat down heavily on the edge of the chair, clearly ill at ease.

"Please make yourself comfortable, Sergeant," Ganie said, still clutching the duvet around her neck. "I'll quickly throw on something and put the coffee on the stove ... and I'll go and call Kittie."

Sergeant Goniwe leaned back in the chair, balancing his police cap on one knee.

"No rush," he said. "I'll wait here so long."

Ganie stumbled through the quiet house, stopping to peek into the study on her way to the bedroom. The bedding on the two mattresses on the floor was rumpled, but there was no sign of either Herman or Karel. Back in the spare bedroom, Kittie still lay wrapped up under the duvet like a beach ball. Ganie gently prodded her cousin's shoulder.

"Kitts, wake up. Sergeant Goniwe's here to see you. I'm making coffee so long."

"Uh-uh," came a muffled groan from the hillock of sleeping body and bedding.

"It's not time to get up yet."

"Of course it is, you klutz. It's nine in the morning, so move it, cuz," Ganie said, not without a certain amount of relish. She was an early riser and couldn't help but be

irritated by Kittie's disinclination to rise in the mornings, though she'd been forced to tolerate it for several weeks now. "Coffee will be ready in five minutes, okay?"

To make sure Kittie knew she meant business, Ganie untangled the duvet around Kittie's feet and folded it back over her legs, leaving her feet exposed. Kittie curled her feet up in an attempt to snare a piece of duvet to pull down. Ganie smiled. That should do it eventually, she thought. She shimmied into her jeans, which had been concertinaed down her legs and left on standby on the floor next to the bed the night before. She pulled a clean sweater over her head and went to the kitchen to make coffee.

When Ganie entered the lounge again, the sergeant was at the window, slightly parting the curtains and staring out. She placed the tray with three cups of steaming coffee on the coffee table.

"Milk and sugar, Sergeant?" she asked, then hollered over her shoulder. "Kittie, get up! The coffee's ready!"

"Um ... thanks. Two sugars, please, and milk."

The sergeant sat down on the mismatched chair again and Ganie handed him his coffee. She sat down on the couch, clasping her own cup with both hands.

"I'm sure Kittie will be here in a minute," she said, taking a small sip, relishing the hot liquid on her tongue.

They waited. The sergeant shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and Ganie concentrated on her coffee.

"Maybe I should go and call her again," she said, but just then Kittie trundled into the lounge, hair spiking in all directions, eyes puffy, and wearing nothing more than a pair of track suit pants and the string top in which she slept.

"Morning, Sergeant," she said, stifling a yawn. "I'm sorry, this is a bit early for me, so pardon my outfit."

Sergeant Goniwe looked embarrassed, but nodded.

"No problem, ma'am. I realise it's early in the day, but I wanted you to know we've traced the owner of the bakkie."

He took a sip of coffee.

"You did?" Kittie asked. "How ... where?"

"It appears you were onto something there, Mrs De Bruyn. That is, if we can link these bits of evidence to your ex-husband. He may very well be acquainted with the

suspects and therefore, we think, involved. We've been in touch with Cape Town and the bakkie belongs to a Mr Abdhuraman Ryklief from Bonteheuwel in the Cape. Ryklief is clean, at least as far as we can tell. He runs a small auto body repair shop there. But he says he lent the bakkie to his sister's son last Friday, one Rasheed Gamaldien. Nobody has seen Rasheed since then."

Kittie sat down, spooned some sugar into her coffee and stirred it. She was not used to such efficiency from the police, especially a sergeant going to the trouble of driving eighty kilometres to report back to the victim of a crime.

"So, what now? How do you track this creep down from here?" she asked, picking up her cup and leaning back on the couch.

"Police work requires patience, ma'am," said Goniwe. "De Bruyn is now wanted for questioning, but Cape Town hasn't been able to locate his whereabouts. We do have another lead, though. Rasheed, so his mother tells us, was last seen in the company of one Jakkals ... Jakkals Fourie, previously from Brooklyn, present address unknown. This Jakkals is true to his name. He's a nasty piece of work. He only recently got out of Pollsmoor, where he did time for attempted murder. He put his brother-in-law in a wheelchair ten years or so ago. I'm not sure whether his intention was to kill at the time, but Fourie is not shy with a knife. The victim has been paralysed ever since.

"Your ex ... De Bruyn ... may have met Fourie and Gamaldien while he did his six months in Pollsmoor for the theft of your father's firearm a while ago. Our investigators are looking into the possibility that this Rasheed is behind the pipe bomb incident and that maybe Jakkals was with him. We're looking for both of these suspects. It's only a matter of time before we find them. All the police stations from PE to Cape Town have been alerted.

"We'll find them, ma'am, no doubt about that. In the meantime, we would appreciate it if you could stay where we can reach you. The investigators will probably need your help when we find De Bruyn."

Goniwe stopped talking and drained what was left of his coffee. Ganie had the impression that this was more than the sergeant was used to saying in one go. A layer of perspiration beaded his forehead.

"But you have no idea where to start looking for Rasheed and Jakkals?" she asked.

“Yes ma’am, we do, actually,” Goniwe said. “We have reason to believe they may be here, in Port Elizabeth. A car was stolen in Jeffrey’s Bay three days ago, on the night of the pipe bomb incident. We think they stole the car to get away. After throwing the bomb into Mr Blignault’s house, these two would have wanted to get away fast, but of course their bakkie was in the possession of the police. Unless they had accomplices in the area, or help from elsewhere, it makes sense that their only means of escape would be to steal a car. That car was found in the early hours of this morning. That is why I came here so early. It was found in Korsten, all smashed up. It’s been taken in and the fingerprint guys are now busy with it. We’re trying to establish whether either of these two have family or friends here.”

A lively rap at the front door broke the silence.

“That’s probably Herman and the Ponytail,” said Ganie. “I wonder where they could have gone so early in the morning.”

“I know how to find Bakkies,” Kittie said to Sergeant Goniwe as Ganie went to open the door. “I’m going back to Cape Town. I’ll have Bakkies de Bruyn for you by the end of the week. That’s a promise.”

## **Chapter Seventeen: A Measly Pawn in a Pauper's Box**

“We take ourselves so seriously, yet our lives so lightly. We're forever guarding against insult and injury, yet the nitty-gritty of our lives we piss up against the wall as if there were no tomorrow. I guess that's something you can see only once the years you have left are likely to be fewer than those you've lived through ... or pissed up against the wall.”

Ganie was driving. Herman had lowered his seat shortly after they passed through Somerset East and was lying back now with his eyes closed. Ganie wasn't sure whether he was asleep or awake. She was thinking aloud.

Their departure for Graaff-Reinet had been delayed by days, since Herman was reluctant to leave before repairs to his damaged house were firmly underway and all the administrative loose ends tied up, as he put it. Ganie resisted his pleas to go to Jeffrey's Bay with him, opting instead to spend the time with Jerome. She'd lost her taste for the place and had no desire to return, especially without Kittie. Although she understood Kittie's reasoning and was getting used to the dramatic turn the trip had taken, she was still disappointed that Kittie would not share the ritual of scattering the ashes. And although, on some vague, metaphysical level, she could see how Herman's accompanying her made sense, she still had difficulty adjusting to the change in plan. She knew it would be only a matter of time before something triggered a disagreement and they started arguing. It always happened—generally for no good

reason at all. She'd resolved not to rise to any of the bait he might throw out. What was more, Herman could be so impatient. How he would endure days of doing not much at all in between hours of driving, she dreaded to contemplate.

"Maybe that's just it ..."

Ganie jumped. Herman's eyes were still closed, but he was clearly wide awake and had been listening to her talking to herself.

"We allow our lives to slip by," he said. "Unnoticed almost, and that's because we can't get over ourselves. Taking yourself seriously is hard work. It takes a lot of time."

Herman sat up, yawned and fumbled with the lever to raise his seat.

"We nearly there? I'm fucking starving."

"Yikes, bro', you sound like my kids did when they were little," Ganie said. "Yep, nearly there. We'll be hitting Graaff-Reinet pretty soon, but I'll have to phone Dharma to get directions. I wonder what her place is like."

Ganie had not seen her eldest daughter in more than a year and as much as she was looking forward to the visit, she was also nervous. Since Dharma moved away from home, the usual up-and-down tensions between them had settled into a comfortable friendship, but Ganie knew that was because of the distance between them—put them in the same space and things could blow up at the drop of a stompie. Both dominant personalities, the clashes between them had increased in frequency and intensity as Dharma grew into adulthood. The stand-off between mother and daughter had had everything to do with territory.

Ganie knew Dharma had long made peace with her parents' divorce, which happened when she was five, but she felt that her daughter had found it difficult to forgive her for getting married to Guy, however brief that had been. She'd considered Guy an out-and-out rotter, but at the time she'd been too young to have any impact on her mother's decision, and that irritated her. This, combined with her exasperation with what she considered to be Ganie's irresponsible patterns of behaviour, often left Ganie feeling hurt and defensive.

"I just hope you're not going to cause kak there, Herman," she said.

"What do you mean, cause kak?" he laughed. "Since when do I cause kak?"

"Only all the time. Stop being a doos. We're going to be there for several days and I really want to have some time to relax. I've seen enough drama in the past few days

to last me a lifetime. I don't need you to pace up and down wanting to 'do' things and making me nervous. Besides, you could do with a bit of relaxing too. By the way, how come you've been able to get away from your office at such short notice?"

"Fuck the office," Herman said. "I don't want to talk about it. They owe me big time and this time they can wait. I'm taking time off ... nothing they can do. You're right, it's about time I did something for myself. Anyway, don't worry, sis. I'll be on my best behaviour."

"That sounds ominous, but you'd better be. And no bleating in my ear when I go looking for Fundiswa either. You offered to come along, now you're bloody well going to have to fall in with the plans as they stand. Not that I don't appreciate the gesture, of course. I'm very grateful that you're coming along. It's just that I don't want you to piss on my parade or hijack my trip, okay?"

"Take it easy, man. You have no idea how much I need to get away. I'm looking forward to the break, even though it came about through no doing of my own. But I'll be good."

Herman was quiet for a moment.

"Provided you behave yourself, too."

"Fuck you," Ganie said, but in the spirit of their earlier promises to each other to keep it light and clean, and in the interests of getting off to a good start, she decided not to take issue with his obvious attempt at getting her to rise to such delicious bait.

"Okay, here we are. Now I just have to negotiate my way up the Main Street, past the church and out the other end. Then I'll call Dhar. Pretty town, this."

Ganie slowed the car to a crawl. She couldn't stop staring as they approached the gothic-looking old Dutch Reformed Church at the far end of the street.

"A bit different from the later models, hey?" Herman said.

"Yeah, I'd say it has the architectural edge. Christ, they should have shot the guy who first came up with the design formula for the later boere churches. It's no wonder people stopped going. Going to those depressing piles of brick was like venturing into hell to have tea with the freaking devil on Sunday."

A Jetta raced up behind them, hooting, then swerved to pull up next to the Mini, slowing down to keep pace with it. The driver waved a fist at Ganie, clearly cursing her for her slow and inattentive driving.

“Ah, fuck you too, pissbag!” she shouted and waved two fingers at the young man behind the steering wheel.

“Keep your eyes on the fucking road, Ganie, and don’t throw zap signs at people. You’ll see your arse one day. And stop swearing for Chrissakes,” Herman said. “It’s really off-putting in a woman of your age. It’s time you realised you’re way past behaving like a rebellious fucking teenage hippie.”

“*You* stop fucking swearing!” Ganie shouted as her foot pressed down on the accelerator and she sped past the church.

At the end of the town she pulled up on the side of the road.

“Fuck you!” she said as if adding a full stop to correspond with her foot stepping on the brake.

“Fuck *you*, man!”

“No, fuck *you*!”

“Who the *fuck* do you think you are?”

“No, who the fuck do you think *you* are?”

“I dunno ... what do you think? Polly Parrot?”

“You wait, arsehole. I’ll get you. What’s your case, anyway? You live your life in Jo’burg like it’s the centre of the fucking universe, then drop out of the sky from nowhere to tell me how to live mine ... as if I’m packed away in a dollhouse in between adverts! Like I sit around year in and year out waiting for my Lord and Master to come and measure my performance. Fuck that for a joke. Anyway, you swear a hell of a lot more than me. And I’ll say anything I fucking well like, okay?”

“Whoa, tiger!”

In that instant, their eyes met. Ganie saw the mischief in Herman’s eyes and the wide grin on his face told her all she needed to know. She began to laugh, even though she still tried to glare him down as he sat smugly in the passenger seat with his arms folded. As usual, he was taunting her on purpose, trying to get a rise from her, and she knew she had fallen into his trap again. If there was going to be peace on this trip, she’d have to make a greater effort to resist the urge to react.

“Anyway, it’s different,” he said.

“What is different? Your swearing? How the fuck is that different? Because you’re a man? Hey? Tell me exactly how it’s different.”

“I don’t know how. It’s just different.”

Herman seemed to tire of his game. He fell silent.

“Anyway, let’s not start fighting two hours into our trip,” he said after a while.

“Use whatever language you fucking well feel like fucking well using. Your indaba, your movie. Just be careful where and how. I don’t feel like more drama and I’m too old to get into fist fights with twenty-year-olds. Fucksakes, phone her already. I’m bloody hungry.”

“Right, let me get directions and see what the plan is.”

Ganie reached for her handbag and pulled out her cell phone.

“Okay, it’s not far at all, only about ten kilometres,” she said as she ended the call.

“But let’s step on it. Dharma has brunch ready and waiting.”

Ganie started the car and pulled onto the road again.

As the silver Mini emerged from the trees lining the strip of dirt road leading up to the farmhouse, an enormous Great Dane came bounding towards the car. Some distance behind it, comically, followed a blue and gold Yorkshire Terrier, yapping as he tried to catch up with the big dog.

The front door opened and Dharma’s compact and well-proportioned frame appeared. Rushing down the veranda steps, she swept the Yorkie up in her arms and called the big dog’s name. Ganie was astonished to see it gallop back to its mistress and sit down next to her like and exceptionally obedient child.

“Oh man, Herman,” she said. “She’s all grown-up.”

Despite the anxiety that had been gnawing at her gut for the past few days, Dharma smiled broadly at her mother and uncle as they emerged from the car.

“About time!” she said as she ran into her mother’s arms. “My fricking burgers are going to be toast if we don’t eat soon.”

She stood back and looked her mother up and down.

“Nice hair, Mom! I’m pleased to see you’ve listened to me and let it grow. You’re quite thin, though.”

She turned around and pecked Herman on the cheek.

“Hi, Herman. Geez, talk about surprises. I believe you guys have had an interesting trip so far. Come inside ... can’t wait to show you my place. We’ll have brunch on the deck at the back. Go on, Napoleon, Clousseau! Go on! You’ll get your turn later.”

Dharma led the way into the house, almost skipping with excitement, and showed Ganie and Herman to their rooms. Ganie could see she was bursting with pride and

she was pleased for her daughter. It had certainly taken long enough—and it was terrifying enough for both of them—for Dharma to leave the nest and she was clearly desperate to hear what her mother thought of her new surroundings.

The large table on the deck outside was set for a festive occasion. Dharma had clearly gone to a great deal of trouble to prepare the meal.

“It’s so beautiful here, Dhar. And you’ve gone to so much trouble, sweetie. This all looks delectable. Good grief, seems you’ve become quite the little homemaker. Don’t you get bored out here?”

“No time to get bored, in between painting and doing things around the house,” Dharma responded. Putting the meal together had taken some ingenuity, considering who she was feeding, but she was pleased with the results, even though her approach to cooking was considerably more robust than her mother’s.

“Come guys, sit down and help yourselves so long. I’ll bring the rest of the stuff from the kitchen.”

When Dharma announced her plans to move to the smallholding in Graaff-Reinet with her boyfriend, who had been offered a partnership in his father’s law firm, Dharma expected strong resistance from Ganie. What she got was quite the opposite—her mother encouraged the move. She’d thought there would be tears and several rational, well-considered arguments as to why such a move would be a supremely bad idea. But her mother surprised her.

“You need to get on with your life, Dhar,” Ganie had said. “And I need to get on with mine. Children can’t live with their mothers forever. Imagine how lame it would be for both of us if you were still here when I’m sixty-five and you’re forty. Talk about two old spinsters! It’s shit to say goodbye, but it has to happen sooner or later. Pity you’re moving so far away, but it’s not as if it’s another planet or anything.”

That took the wind out of Dharma’s sails, to say the least, and it taught her something about her mother. For all her eccentricity and neuroses, Ganie was a pragmatist and an optimist. All her life, especially since her parents’ divorce, Dharma had felt responsible for her mother—she’d felt that unless she took care of her mother, Ganie would fall to pieces. And the thought of moving away had filled her with dread. When Trixie reported back later that Ganie seemed to be coping perfectly well, she felt slightly peeved.

In the first month away, Dharma phoned her mother almost every day. The conversation would develop along lines that were all too predictable:

“Are you sure you’re okay, Mom? Do you look after yourself properly?” she’d ask.

“I’m just fine,” her mother would insist, but Dharma took these reassurances with a large pinch of salt.

“Do you close the doors at night?” she’d try to tease out details.

“Fucksakes Dhar, you know very well I can’t stand a stuffy house”

“But it’s winter. It’s cold there. People keep their doors and windows closed in winter. Don’t you get cold?”

“Winter or summer, rain or shine, I never like a stuffy house. I like fresh air. The door stands open until I go to bed, then I lock it.”

“That’s *dangerous*, Mom. You *have* to keep the doors closed. I get sick with worry about you. What if someone jumps over the wall?”

“Don’t worry, Dharma. I’m very alert and attentive. And the two dogs are my early warning system. I know exactly what’s going on around me by their bark. If anybody is around, I know whether it’s friend or foe ... or neighbours walking their dogs or the postman or a stranger they don’t trust and potentially hate.”

“Mom, you’re being ridic! Do you think a decrepit old Boxer with one foot in the grave and a bouncy little Jack Russell are going to put off a burglar or rapist or murderer if he really wants to get in? You’re not as smart as you think, you know, and criminals aren’t as stupid as you think. They can poison the dogs, feed them a piece of meat or something. What then? I really can’t for you! And what about when you sit there pissing it up with your buddies? How attentive are you then?”

“Really, Dharma, don’t worry. I’m not as much of an airhead as you think.”

“Mom!”

“Okay, I’ll get somebody to come and fit a security gate, then. I promise.”

“Promise, Mom. On your word of honour. Please.”

“I promise.”

These conversations trailed off after some weeks. Ganie never got around to having a security gate fitted. But she did appear to be fine, if Trixie were to be believed. Soon, Dharma focused her attention elsewhere. Fixing up the outbuilding to make place for a studio in which she could paint absorbed all of her time. And once

the studio was ready, she threw herself into her painting. Conversations about her mother's safety became more and more rare.

Of course, Dharma had been correct. That was proved when Bakkies managed, with little difficulty apparently, to get into the house. But Ganie had no intention of letting that cat out of the bag. Then again, she reasoned, Bakkies had been there once before, so the dogs kind of knew him. And Ganie was convinced he'd fed them something to win their trust.

Dharma walked out onto the veranda carrying a large frying pan in which eggs were sizzling away. She placed the pan on a wooden board in the middle of the table and stood back, admiring the feast she'd prepared against the pink rose motif on the white table cloth, straightening this one last time. She leaned over the table and adjusted the small arrangement of yellow roses in the centre of the table for the hundredth time.

"Okay, guys, go for it," she said, straightening up. "Burgers are over there on the warming tray."

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Nobody spoke. On the table stood four vessels arranged in a neat row, no one alike, incongruous against the crisp tablecloth with its pink roses bordered by green stems and leaves.

Ganie was leaning back in her chair, eyes squinted against the glaring sun beating down over the valley. Herman was drumming his fingers on the edge of the table, their muted sound providing a rhythmic accompaniment to the desolate cooing of a lone turtle dove in the distance, and Dharma was resting her arms and chest on the table, chin balanced on her fists, eyeing the items in front of her as if she was lining up a tricky shot on the pool table.

"So this is what it comes to," she said eventually, voice measured and thoughtful. "Four entire lifetimes ... laboured through, lived out ... and reduced to a few pathetic little heaps of rubble. Roughly three-hundred years between the lot of them and this is what they get for their troubles ... burned to ash and stuffed into what the next of kin thought fit. Ridic."

Her meal of homemade beef burgers, twice minced, with fried eggs, crispy bacon, Emmenthaler cheese, freshly picked tomatoes, rocket and onion was over, dirty plates and cutlery cleared from the table. Over coffee, as the conversation turned to matters at hand, Herman for the first time realised that he had not seen with his own eyes the objects of all the fuss.

“Come on, Mom,” Dharma had egged her mother on. “I’ve never seen human ashes ... or even a dead body, for that matter. If you remember, I made myself scarce when you dealt with Guy’s ashes, remember?”

“Yes, let’s have a look, Ganie,” Herman agreed. “Especially Monty’s. If nothing else, it’s mind-boggling to think it managed to survive in the ground for nearly so long ... and, I have to give it to you, that you actually pulled it off. Then again, it is Monty we’re talking about.”

He and Ganie both laughed.

Ganie disappeared into the house to fetch the backpack containing her spoils and, pushing the vase of roses away, she gingerly, reverently, placed the four containers on the table, where they now stood for inspection, out in the open.

“How sad,” Dharma said. “Standing there like little soldiers waiting to go into battle.”

“Not so much soldiers as the last pieces remaining on a chessboard,” Ganie added. “And in order of importance, nopal. Look, Monty’s the Queen in her fancy bronze number ... a bit tarnished and on the bedraggled side, admittedly, but not without a certain ... um ... grunge chic. Oupa is the Bishop in simple brass, as ramrod straight-up-and-down as ever. Quite elegant, though, you have to admit. Uncle Jorrie has to be the Castle in that squat little wooden kist, and ...”

Her voice trailed off, unable to state the obvious. Herman completed his analogy.

“And poor Pa just a measly pawn in a pauper’s cardboard box wrapped in blue tissue paper ... the lowest ranking warrior on the battlefield.”

Herman choked audibly, his eyes suddenly wet. He got up and took a few steps into the garden in an attempt to get his emotions under control.

Nobody spoke for a long time.

“Well,” said Ganie. “That’s a novel way of looking at things. Must say, I haven’t really looked at these ... what do they call them ... cremains. What an ugly word, so hard on the epiglottis. I haven’t paid any attention at all to the actual physical ...

cremains ... since I packed them for the drive. Now ... shit, now it all strikes me as being so ... macabre. Especially when considering how the family hierarchy seems to continue into death.”

Dharma sat up.

“Don’t forget what a fuckwit he was, Ma. Don’t forget what he did to you all ... to Ouma Lana.”

“We never did get around to buying a proper urn for him. Not that I really care, one way or the other. It’s not for the dead that people select coffins and urns. It’s to make themselves feel better, maybe less lonely and bereft, or maybe less guilty about what they did or didn’t do with or to the departed.

“Did you know, Dharma, that when you choose a funerary urn, or whatever the hell you want to call it, you have to carefully consider its size? Well, actually, the undertaker does that, but still, you can’t go and buy a dinky little thing and hope to stuff a Springbok lock forward into it. You have to take into account the weight of the actual body before it is cremated to see whether it will fit. They told me that after your Oupa Isak died. One kilogram of body weight produces about thirty-six cubic centimetres of cremains ... I really hate that word. I think I’ll stick with ashes. When he died, your poor old grandfather could not have weighed more than ... what? I don’t know, maybe forty-five, fifty kilograms? Only a small box’s worth. So this pauperly little box you see in front of you holds about two-hundred-and-fifty or three-hundred cubic centimetres of dead person.”

Ganie seemed unable to stop talking, as if she needed to fill the air around them with sound, as if the sound of her voice could be made to serve as a soft pillow on which Herman could rest his emotions.

In making her plans she had not considered how she would deal with the physical handling of the ashes. She again remembered the intimate discomfort she’d felt the moment her father died—the sheer physicality of it all, how nobody seemed able to look one another in the eye. Herman, pacing up and down in the garden now reminded her of that moment. It was as if contemplating the ashes was an intrusion. The fact that there were others to witness it made it worse. She also thought about the Christmas when Monty came into the lounge singing, wearing only underwear. The glances exchanged between family members that day carried a similar sort of embarrassed intimacy. It was bad enough to see one’s grandmother half naked, but the

same situation witnessed simultaneously by a group of close family members exaggerated the unease exponentially.

Ganie continued her effort to talk the awkwardness away.

“You get all sorts of cremation urns, did you know, Dhar? Wood, ceramic, marble, bronze, silver, you name it. You even get biodegradable ones. You can even get some of the ashes set in jewellery or have them made into ornaments to put above your fireplace, for God’s sake. I tell you, people are weird.”

“Would you like some coffee, Mom?” Dharma tried to redirect the subject.

“Did I ever tell you how Herman and I got the giggles in the undertaker’s waiting room? I don’t know why it must always be so deathly quiet in those places. That hush makes you want to giggle like when you’re a teenager and you can’t stop laughing in church. Well, Dhar, there we were sitting, trying our best to look bereft and solemn ... live up to the occasion, you know ... whispering to each other now and then. Whispering is kind of mandatory in those places. They really seem to discourage you from opening your mouth and talking. Anyway, whispering away, eventually not knowing what to do with ourselves as we waited, I looked down and my eyes fell on Herman’s feet.

“Well, Dhar, I collapsed! Literally. We were sitting on this long, fake-leather kind of bench and I fell flat on my side with my hand over my mouth, trying my best to keep it down, but it was nearly impossible. The receptionist looked up, utterly scandalised that somebody would act so disrespectfully in the presence of death. Herman couldn’t understand what was going on and I was laughing so much, I couldn’t tell him. All I could do was point to his shoes while tears were streaming down my face. Old Herman ... that old uncle of yours who’s so fussy about his clothes, mister pernickety himself, he was wearing shoes that didn’t match! They were both black, but from two different pairs. To visit the undertaker!”

Ganie again laughed helplessly as she recalled the incident and Dharma giggled along.

Hearing the laughter, Herman returned to the table and sat down.

“What’s so funny? I’d also like to hear.”

He closed his eyes and gripped his forehead, running his fingers down his face as if wiping away unwanted thoughts. When he opened his eyes they were red-rimmed, but he smiled at Dharma.

“I suppose it’s too early for a beer?” he said.

“It has to be at least six o’clock now in Cambodia, I’m sure,” Ganie said. “I’ll take a double Johnny with plenty of ice and just a dash of water, thanks Dhar.”

## **Chapter Eighteen: Tea with an Old Friend**

The house was modest yet pristine, bright sunlight bouncing off the white walls so fiercely it felt like an assault on Ganie's eyes. The small garden, such as it was, was well tended despite apparently being on the losing end of a longstanding battle against the arid Karoo. Set back from the street among others just like it—though none as proud—the house stood in stark contrast with the rusty and rickety chain-link fence that demarcated the small yard. The fence was the only aspect to the property that showed signs of neglect.

“This has to be it,” Ganie said as she parked the Mini in front of the house. “It has to be. It has Fundiswa stamped all over it. She was so proud of this brick house of hers. Everything she earned, everything she lived for, went into this little house. My goodness, in those days she hoarded every last bit of furniture and trinket she could lay her hands on.”

“Well, if ever a house sparkled, this is it,” Dharma said, staring at the house. “Like a jewel in a pile of rubble. You need sunglasses to look at it.”

The gate was held in place with a rusty piece of wire twisted around a pole holding up the sagging fence. Ganie untwisted it to open the gate and walked to the front door, Dharma following. She knocked and although she could see the net curtain against the

window to their right move, nobody came to open the door. A group of children was gathering around the Mini.

Ganie lifted her hand to knock again, but before she could do so the door opened and they were met by a woman whom Ganie guessed to be in her mid-thirties. She was beautiful, her complexion the colour of milk chocolate, the cheekbones high and well-defined and the almond-shaped eyes dark and compelling.

“I’m sorry to disturb you without warning,” Ganie said. “My name is Matingane and I’m looking for Fundiswa Siyaya. Is this her house, by any chance?”

The woman opened the door wider and stepped out onto the narrow, uncovered porch that ran the length of the narrow house.

“Fundiswa is my mother-in-law,” she said.

“Oh, what a relief,” Ganie said and put out her hand.

“Matingane,” she repeated. “Fundiswa used to work for me in Cape Town. I’ve been thinking about her so much lately and wondered how she was. My daughter lives here now, so I decided to come and look her up.”

The woman lowered her eyelids and gingerly took Ganie’s fingers, too diffident to close her hand around Ganie’s entirely. Almost imperceptibly, her knees bent slightly.

“I’m Nomhle.”

“I’m so pleased to meet you, Nomhle. You must be Matthew’s wife, then. How is Matthew? I last saw him when he was about sixteen, seventeen years old. Did he finish his degree?”

Nomhle did not respond.

“Oh, I’m being rude,” Ganie said. “This is my daughter, Dharma. She was just an itty-bitty little thing when Fundiswa last saw her.”

Nomhle made no move to invite them inside or to offer to call Fundiswa. She looked bewildered and uncertain about how to deal with her unexpected guests.

“Um ... so does Fundiswa still live here? I really would like to see her again.”

“She lives here,” Nomhle said, recovering her composure slightly.

“Is she at home? Do you think I could see her?”

Nomhle sighed and wiped her hand over her head. She seemed to come to a decision and stepped out of the house onto the porch, closing the door behind her. Ganie began to feel uncomfortable—there was something unusual, silent yet resolute, about the way Nomhle had closed the door.

“Mama Fundiswa, she’s not so good,” said Nomhle, pointing to her head. “She’s sick in the head. One day, she’s right, the next day ... haibo! She’s mad again. Today she knows you, tomorrow you’re nobody. It got very bad this last year. After Matthew ...”

Ganie tilted her head to one side and waited for Nomhle to finish her sentence, but she had fallen silent again.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Ganie said eventually. “I really wanted to see her. Is this a bad day? I can come back another time.”

Nomhle shook her head. She opened her mouth to say something, but thought better of it. A thick murk of sadness hung around her and Ganie was running out of ways to get the conversation to flow.

A voice called from inside, followed by a dull rhythmic thumping. Nomhle’s eyes darted over her shoulder.

“She’s not so good today. She’s calling Matthew.”

“Do you think I could try to speak to her?” Ganie asked. “If it upsets her I will go.”

“It’s bad now, after Matthew died ...” Nomhle said.

“Matthew died?” Ganie was shocked. “I’m so sorry, Nomhle. I’m so very, very sorry. How did that happen?”

She remembered Matthew as a youngster. Fundiswa never let an opportunity pass to talk about her son in those days, reeling off his school marks to anyone who cared to listen.

“That one, Ganie,” she’d say. “That one is going to be rich when he’s big. He’s going to be famous. You watch.”

When the time came for Matthew to go to high school, Fundiswa decided to bring him to Cape Town, where he lived in a shack with Fundiswa’s aunt in Site C of Khayelitsha. And that was where Fundiswa went on weekends, even though the Cape Flats was a tense place to be in 1991. Monday mornings Fundiswa would return to Ganie’s house with tales of how she spent entire nights under her bed, lying in front of Matthew to protect him while all around them shacks were being torched and people attacked in their beds. What was at the root of the trouble, Fundiswa could not or would not say. But sensible people, she insisted, kept to themselves.

“Me, Ganie? I keep my nose clean and zip it up in the mouth,” she often said, swiping her fingers across her mouth to demonstrate. “Better I tell you nothing.”

One Monday Fundiswa arrived ashen faced and depressed. She had spent two nights under the bed and had hardly managed to get any sleep.

“I was so scared, Ganie,” she reported. “So scared. I was so scared I peed in my pants ... with Matthew lying right next to me. What must he think of his mother now? That is not a way to live. I want to go back to Graaff Reinet, but what can I do? The schools here are better for Matthew. He’s going to get a bursary and then he’s going to university. Matthew will look after all of us when he’s an engineer one day, I’m telling you.”

There was nothing Ganie could do to make weekend life in the township easier for Fundiswa. And Fundiswa flatly refused to let the boy come and live with her in Ganie’s house.

“Are you crazy, Ganie?” she remonstrated. “That would never work. He’s not a baby anymore. He’s getting big—he wants to do things with his friends. And what about aunty? At least he’s there to help her. It can’t work. Anyway, he would just get in my way. He must stay at home and study,” she insisted.

The boy sometimes visited his mother in town, but never stayed over. Fundiswa left to go back to Graaff Reinet towards the end of Matthew’s final year at school. His marks were excellent and Fundiswa was certain he would get a bursary to study at UCT. But after she left, Ganie never heard from Fundiswa or Matthew again.

“What happened?” she asked Nomhle, who seemed to be getting increasingly agitated as the thumping inside became more persistent. She moved her weight from one foot to the other, clearly at a loss, but then seemed to make up her mind as to how to handle the situation. She turned and opened the door, tilting her head to invite Ganie and Dharma inside.

“Come in. I have to see what Ma Fundi wants. Then I make some tea.”

Ganie and Dharma followed her. The interior was as spotless as the exterior. In the lounge, a couch and two chairs were meticulously arranged against three walls to form a square. A small tapestry with two lines from the Lord’s Prayer stitched in pastel blue and pink hung against one wall, too high up.

“Give us this day our daily bread  
And forgive us our trespasses.”

Against the facing wall was a print of Tretchikoff’s “Weeping Rose” in a cheap pine frame and faded to virtual monotone from the sun. Under the window stood the

ball-and-claw kist Ganie had given Fundiswa so many years ago. It was covered with a beige crocheted runner, another gift from Ganie, on top of which stood a collection of family photographs.

“Nomhle!” The voice called from the bedroom. “Bring my shoes! I have to go now. I can’t let my son wait so long.”

Nomhle lifted her shoulders and shook her head. She seemed utterly helpless, her eyes pleading for something nameless.

“It’s very bad today,” she said and disappeared down the narrow passage leading off the lounge, leaving Ganie and Dharma standing around uncomfortably. A door opened and closed again, followed by muffled voices.

“This doesn’t look so good, Mom,” Dharma said. “Maybe we should go.”

Ganie shook her head. She was distressed.

“No. I’m not going until I’ve found out what’s going on here. And what happened to Matthew. Fundiswa must be devastated. He was everything to her.”

Nomhle appeared at the door again. She looked exhausted and beaten.

“I’ve put on the kettle. Please sit down. I told her you were here, but she’s not listening to anything today,” she said.

Ganie and Dharma sat down next to each other on the edge of the couch, careful not to disturb the synthetic velvet cloth that had been artfully draped over it. Nomhle went off again and re-emerged carrying a plastic tray with a teapot and three mugs.

“Thank you, Nomhle,” Ganie said. “Do you have children?”

Nomhle looked up and nodded, smiling for the first time since they arrived. The smile brightened her whole being and Ganie was again struck by her beauty.

“One girl—Pindiwe. She’s seven now. She is visiting her other granny, my mother, but she will come home for lunch just now.”

She got up from her chair and walked to the kist, where she picked up a photograph and held it out to Ganie.

“That’s Pindi—with her father. She was six then. The picture was taken on her birthday.”

Ganie studied the photograph.

“She’s so pretty! You can see her father in her. And Matthew! What a handsome man he grew up to be.”

She passed the photograph to Dharma. Not sure how to turn the conversation to the subject of Matthew's death without appearing nosy and insensitive, she picked up her teacup instead and asked about Fundiswa's condition.

"It wasn't so bad before," Nomhle explained. "But now ... I don't know. She thinks I'm hiding Matthew from her. She thinks we all make plans to keep her away from Matthew, then she starts to hit things against the wall, anything she can find. Shoes, pots ... some days she hits the head or the shoulders. If I don't stop her, she leaves the house and walks and walks and walks looking for Matthew. Everybody knows about Ma Fundi now. That's why I hide her shoes. She will not think of leaving the house without her shoes. It is very bad. The welfare says she must go to the hospital ... you know, the place for crazy people ... but it's full. Now we have to wait until there's a place for her."

Ganie felt helpless. After sacrificing years to work so far away from home—working to make that very home—Fundiswa had been robbed of the pleasure of enjoying it.

"And Matthew?" she whispered. "How did that happen?"

Nomhle sighed and her eyes misted over.

"He was coming home from work one Friday, last year. When he got off the train, they waited for him. The gangsters. They stabbed him, first here ..." Nomhle pointed to her chest. "Five times, they stabbed him. They took his wages and ran away. They thought he was dead."

Nomhle's voice was barely audible, her bereavement heartbreaking. She breathed in deeply, shuddering, then squared her shoulders and looked Ganie straight in the eye. When she continued, her voice was cold and scratchy, as if the words she spoke had swirled around in her head for a long time, lying in wait for their chance to be let out into the open.

"He wasn't dead. He crawled home on his stomach, bleeding all the way. Nobody helped him in the street, but it's not so far. Maybe nobody saw him. When he got here, he fell against the fence. He was too weak to get up to open that wire on the gate. When I went out to call Pindi for supper, that's where I found him. Lying in the dust by the gate. I tried to lift him to bring him into the house, but he died there ... on the ground, in my arms. Then Ma Fundi came out and found us there. She never

stopped crying for a long, long time. But I ... nobody wants to see me crying, because I have to look after Ma Fundi. She has no-one else.”

Nomhle’s sadness and bitterness were raw. Ganie realised that Dharma had begun to cry next to her. She reached out and took Dharma’s hand, hoping it would give her some comfort, while feeling herself desperately in need of hanging onto somebody. The thumping from the bedroom had stopped and all that could be heard was the sound of the children calling to one another in the street outside.

The three women sat in silence for some time, then Nomhle spoke again.

“Some days Ma Fundi wakes up and it’s like the old times. She works in the house ... she laughs and scolds me if I don’t clean the floors just right. Hai, that one ... she likes a clean, clean house. Sometimes she tells Pindi stories about when she was a little girl like Pindi, or about living in the big city ... but she doesn’t like to spend so much time with her. I think it hurts Pindi. She cannot understand why her one granny loves her and her other granny doesn’t like her, but I try to tell her it’s because she looks like her father and her granny’s heart is sore for Pindi’s father.

“Then when Ma Fundi is bad again, she thinks it is Pindi who wants to take her father’s place and Ma Fundi doesn’t want Pindi ... she wants Matthew.”

A door opened and closed again and feet could be heard shuffling down the passage. When Ganie looked up, Fundiswa was standing in the doorway, a bright smile plastered on her face.

“Look at this big girl!” she called out, pointing at Dharma. “A beautiful *gladdekop* grownup! Hai, Ganie, she’s grown, that naughty one of yours. How did you find me?”

Ganie glanced at Nomhle, who nodded her head as if to indicate that Ganie should play along. She rose and walked over to Fundiswa.

“My friend! How are you? I’m so happy I found you.”

Ganie did not know what was appropriate under the circumstances, so she avoided making any reference to Matthew. She bent down and threw her arms around the tiny woman, shocked at the sharpness of the bones protruding around Fundiswa’s shoulders. She stood back again and stared at Fundiswa. She had always been tiny, but now she appeared to be squandered to a fritter. Her features were as fine as ever, with her sharp cheekbones and pert little nose lending her an exotic look, but the skin was drawn taught over her face and blotched grey in places. To Ganie, Fundiswa looked terminally ill, yet as ever she carried herself as if she were going to a ball.

“I hope my daughter-in-law looked after you properly while I was getting dressed for my visitors,” she said. Ganie took in her clothing. Fundiswa was wearing no shoes at all and nothing but a nylon petticoat.

“Oh yes she did, thank you,” she said. “Nomhle made us a lovely cup of tea.”

“She’s a naughty one that Nomhle. She thinks I’m dom. But I know what she’s doing. She keeps Matthew in the far place. She tells Matthew I’m dead. That’s why he doesn’t visit his mother.”

Fundiswa sat down, crossed her legs elegantly as if she were Alexis Carrington wearing silk stockings and high heels, and began to chat as if it were the most natural thing in the world to receive friends from Cape Town whom she had not seen for close on twenty years over a cup of tea on a Sunday morning.

**From:** Ganie Blignault [mailto:ganieb@mweb.co.za]

**Sent:** 18 April 2007 11:11 PM

**To:** lanablig@hotmail.com

**Subject:** On the road

Hi there, Ma

I keep writing even though it's like talking to the bloody trees. But I trust you're keeping well, wherever you are. Today was a difficult day and I missed you terribly, but I'll get to that later.

I've told you about all the trouble Kittie and I had in Jeffrey's Bay. Well, the long and the short of it all is that Kittie went back to Cape Town with that new ponytailed boyfriend of hers from Uniondale. But guess what! Herman is with me. Can you believe it? You could have knocked me down with a feather when he offered to drive with me. At first I thought it would be awkward spending so much time with him, and a couple of times we've nearly come to blows, but all in all it's going well. I think he may need this symbolic gesture as much as I do.

We're with Dharma in Graaff Reinet now and I cannot tell you how delighted I am to see that darling child of mine. She's become such a beautiful, competent woman. I wish you could be here with us. You'd be so very proud.

To get back to the day I had—Dharma and I went to the township here to look up Fundiswa, who worked for me back in '91. Remember her? She was working there

when you first came to live with us. The poor, poor woman lost her son a year ago. He was stabbed to death on his way home from work. Ma, it's heartbreaking to see her. She's completely lost the plot. She doesn't seem to be able to accept that her son is dead and she thinks people are conspiring to keep her away from him to be spiteful. It's as if her brain cannot absorb the horror of what has happened to her and has gone into shutdown, a sort of pathology of denial in the extreme. It frightened me beyond belief and there's nobody I can tell exactly how much. But you would understand, I know.

In spite of her condition, which is probably Alzheimer's if you ask me, she was lucid enough to chat to us for quite a while, even though she came through barefoot and wearing a petticoat. Her daughter-in-law hides her shoes away, because she goes AWOL at the drop of a hat to look for her son. It's the saddest thing I've ever seen.

Funny how, as one moves forward in the here and now of one's physical landscape, one can simultaneously move backwards metaphysically into the past with each corresponding step. As if progress is continually being balanced with regress and if you can succeed in maintaining that perfect balance between going forward and going backwards, life will treat you well. It's when one of these is favoured above the other that things go wrong. I wish you were here to tell me what you think of that theory and whether you've ever experienced life in that way.

But let me be off to bed before I get too philosophical. Tomorrow I'm going shopping to get Fundiswa and her family a few little things for their house.

Sleep tight, dear Ma, if it's bedtime where you are.

All my love

Matingane (your daughter, in case you forgot)

PS I hope you've noticed that I've stopped asking you to write or phone or SMS ...

**From:** Ganie Blignault [mailto:ganieb@mweb.co.za]

**Sent:** 18 April 2007 11:20 PM

**To:** lanablig@hotmail.com

**Subject:** Silent treatment

No, man, Mother! Goddammit! That's not how I know you. I know we have an agreement, but gee whiz, Ma, have you not heard a word I've told you about all these things that have happened? I know you deserve the break. I know you're under no obligation to write, but I always expected to be given at least an idea of *where* you are. Here I'm going through hell and a titanic struggle to make peace with things that happened in the past and you're as silent as the freaking grave. Hell, just a nod of acknowledgement from you would be welcome.

Fine then, if that's how you want to play it. I'll shut up and I won't bother you again. Remain silent if it pleases you. Remain silent for as long as you like. Remain silent into all fucking eternity if that boils your coffee.

Goodbye

Matingane

PS Sunshine and flowers, hey? I hope it's ice bloody cold in your neck of the woods.

**From:** Ganie Blignault [mailto:ganieb@mweb.co.za]

**Sent:** 18 April 2007 11:23 PM

**To:** lanablig@hotmail.com

**Subject:** Silent treatment

Sorry, sorry, sorry! Finger trouble!

Oh, my dear Mother, I'm so very sorry about the ugly things I said in my last email. I was angry and sad and I miss you so much. I pressed the "send" button before I could stop myself. Please forgive me. I know you will.

Do you know what I was thinking about earlier tonight? A lot earlier, before my temper got the better of me. I remembered how we used to enjoy dancing to Lucky Dube. That was such fun. Also how you tried to teach me the Foxtrot and how I would keep tripping over my feet—and yours—and how we'd eventually fall down on the couch laughing. I still want to learn that dance. Difficult damn thing.

Those were the good old days, hey?

Be well, dear Mother, and may the sun shine brightly always.

Much love

Ganie

## **Chapter Nineteen: All in a Day's Work**

The landscape had changed several times, but no matter how hard he tried, Rasheed found it almost impossible to take in all the trees and hills and fields as they flew by. It was all going too fast. He so badly wanted to take a last look at the freedom rolling past the moving car, but his mind kept returning to his mother—how her face would crinkle up and how the tears would roll down her cheeks when she found out he was in trouble. Again. Rasheed couldn't bear the picture that had taken on shape in his head and refused to go away.

His waist—the side where the knife went in—was hurting. But then again, so was his shoulders, his arms, his wrists, his legs. His whole body was one dull lump of aching, but the cramping in his right arm was the worst right now, burning nearly as badly as the hole in his body when he lay on the pavement five days earlier.

He wanted to ask the sergeant whether he could move to the other side, but every time he tried to speak, his words would choke up in his throat. Rasheed didn't have the courage for much after all that had happened. Maybe the constable would stop the car somewhere for petrol or to go and take a pee. Then he would ask. The chafing of the handcuff against his right wrist forced him to keep his arm in one position, which was what caused the cramping. He shifted his weight to his left buttock, but that did nothing to relieve his discomfort. Every time the car hit a bump in the road, a sharp

pain would sear up his arm and into his shoulder blades, snaking down his spine. Nobody had said anything for a long time, the sergeant seeming to have dozed off in the passenger seat in front of him and the young constable speaking only when spoken to, his eyes fixed on the road. Rasheed wished he would drive a bit more slowly.

He sighed, his fate inevitable, he knew, and a few short hours away. If he could find Bakkies, he stood a chance, but even then, the chances of him escaping jail time were very, very slim. Going to the cops was the right thing to do because it might buy him some leniency, but there was almost no chance they would let him off entirely. He had given up on being angry at himself for getting Jakkals involved. Now he just felt like a toothless old dog.

After hiding out in the school grounds well into the night on the day Jakkals threw the pipe bomb into the Blignault house, they first made sure there were no cops lurking around before hopping over the fence and making their way down the dark streets of the town. Up and down the quiet streets they crept, staying in the shadows, until they saw the rust bucket of a Citi Golf outside a ramshackle wood-and-iron house that seemed to be falling to pieces in the old part of town.

“Jis, my bru,” Jakkals had whispered when he spotted the car. “We stay away from the new cars, the ones with alarms and tracker and kak. We mos sommer take an old jalopy that no-one will miss till they wipe the sleep from their eyes in the morning. By then, we’re long gone, eksê. History. By the time they wake up, we’re having ourselves a lekke’ jol innie Baai.”

“Ja, jy me’ jou gladde fôkken bek,” Rasheed had mumbled to himself.

They hotwired the Citi Golf and drove out of town without a hitch, Rasheed once again riding shotgun. He was going along with the plan because he feared what Jakkals might do to him if he objected, though he had all but made up his mind—the minute he got a chance, he was out of there. What Jakkals was getting up to was more than he had bargained for and he knew it was just a matter of time before they were caught. This Jakkals was too windgat for his own good.

Rasheed knew Jakkals would talk the minute he felt safe among his connections, boasting about how he built a pipe bomb and more or less destroyed a larney’s house to anyone who would listen while he got drunker and drunker or more and more gerook. And that talking would lead to more talking, and before you knew it, some talking will be done to the cops and that would be that. Back inside he would go. And

Rasheed along with him. Rasheed had seen it all before and he had paid the price for it.

So he had been playing with an idea and making plans ever since they made it into the school grounds. It was dangerous and his chances of staying out of jail were not great, but that was preferable to any of the alternatives he played out in his head. All he wanted was to get away from this mad psycho before the trouble they were in got so deep there would be no getting out.

When they reached Port Elizabeth, Jakkals drove around for a while, cursing, apparently not knowing where to go. Rasheed thought he was completely lost.

“You know where you’re going, bru?”

Rasheed immediately regretted asking, because the question was met with a barrage of abuse, sending him cringing into the corner against the car door again.

“Sorry, sorry, my bru, man. I was just asking ...” he said in an attempt to pacify the strung-out Jakkals. It seemed to work for a while.

“Cool it, doffie, eksê! I know where I’m going. Old Gary’s been waiting for me. Fôk, I can’t wait to see the surprise on his face when he sees old Jakkals. He’s my brother vannie Baai, eksê. This is his town. He came straight back here after he got out and he’s been waiting for me, because he wants me to be his partner in the business. I mos told him I was too busy, but now’s just the right time. Old Gazbo’s going to be so happy to have me here. We’re in the right place, eksê, but it’s so fôkken dark in this kak town, I can’t see where I’m going.”

Jakkals obvious excitement had made him very talkative. After a few more turns, he stopped the car abruptly in front of Chetty’s Fish ’n Chips and told Rasheed to get out. Abandoning the stolen car by the side of the road, he instructed Rasheed to start walking. It had been a long day and night and Rasheed was exhausted, but Jakkals seemed invigorated and ready for more action.

Rasheed shuddered.

Jakkals had not had anything to drink since he finished the second bottle of brandy much earlier in the day, but Rasheed now realised that he have must been carrying something else to keep him going all along. And if something else wasn’t Tik, then his name wasn’t Rasheed. He knew a thing or two about drugs—and about Jakkals.

The thought sent shivers down his spine. Jakkals on liquor was a nightmare—Jakkals on Tik would be something else altogether. Maybe that explained it? Maybe

Jakkals had been on Tik all along? Rasheed preferred not to think about it. He simply had to get away from the lunatic. Walking along the dark streets, he did his best to keep track of the route they were taking.

Turning a third corner, they reached what must have been a hotel in days gone by. Even though it was two o' clock in the morning, hip-hop blared and loud voices could be heard through the broken windows.

"This is the one and only, my bru," Jakkals said. "We go in and if the brother isn't here, I'll phone him."

As it turned out, the brother was not partying at the drinking den this Monday morning and Jakkals had to make his phone call from the public phone in the room that served as a bar. Waiting for him, Rasheed leaned against the wall in the far corner looking scared and awkward. The noise was ear-splitting, even though there could not have been more than ten or twelve men in the place, sitting around on benches and shouting to make themselves heard above the music blaring from the ghetto blaster on the counter top from which drinks were served.

When Jakkals put down the phone he sidled up to the counter and ordered a double brandy and Coke, which he swigged down in two gulps, assuring the man behind the counter that Old Gary was on his way and would take care of the tab. Rasheed could not understand why Jakkals didn't pay for his own drinks, since he had to have some money left from the deposit Bakkies had paid them. Second double in hand, Jakkals returned to Rasheed. He did not offer to get Rasheed anything to drink.

"Old Gary's on his way, my bru," he said with a self-satisfied grin on his face, eyes glinting. "Now we're A for away, eksê. Old Gary will make us vanish like the Flying Dutchman, my bru. Gazbo's my man, eksê."

Rasheed hated Jakkals more than ever in that moment. By the tone of Jakkals's voice and the look on his face, he knew for sure that he would prefer to have as little to do as possible with Old Gary. Jissus, he wanted nothing to do with anybody who was a friend of this mad psycho.

That's it, he thought. His decision was final. Anything was better than another night, another day, another minute in Jakkals's or any of his friends' company. He would get away the minute he saw a gap. He would return to the stolen car—if it was still there—and drive back to Jeffrey's Bay. And then he would hand himself in at the cop shop, car and all. Who knows, maybe the boere will cut him some slack if he gave

them Jakkals and Bakkies. He had never wanted the type of trouble he was in now. This was going to break his mother's heart, he knew, but it was definitely the very last time. He would swear that on the Koran.

Rasheed needn't have worried about Jakkals noticing him slipping away. When Old Gary sauntered in, to all intents and purposes, Rasheed no longer existed for Jakkals. The reunion between the old cellmates was a frenzied one, involving a lot of pushing and shoving, hand slapping, fist bouncing and finger touching. The two stood at the bar counter, arms around each other's shoulders, virtually shouting for joy at the sight of an old mate, as if they were the only ones there.

It's now or never, Rasheed thought, and tried to make himself small as he edged towards the bar entrance. To those present, he might as well have been invisible as he slipped quietly into the hotel foyer and out the front door. After looking around for a brief moment, trying to find his bearings, he headed in the direction from where he and Jakkals had come earlier, concentrating on retracing their exact route, and giving a little whoop when he saw the fish and chips shop.

But in front of the shop, where the car was supposed to be, there was nothing. The parking bay was as empty as the milk jug his mother kept for spare change, which stood on the shelf above the kettle at home.

"Fôkken boere! Fôk! Fôk!" he swore, furiously kicking against the metal rolling door that kept Chetty's Fish 'n Chips safe at night, but managing only to near crush his toes. Then he dropped down onto the pavement and sat crouching with his face in his hands. If ever he had felt the need to cry, this was it. He was so tired, he felt like curling up on the hard cement and going to sleep, and he didn't care who found him. But he told himself to stay calm. Around him, the street was deserted, which was something to be grateful for, at least.

Sitting on the pavement, Rasheed made his second decision that night, but before he could get up to put his plan into action, he felt something cold and sharp brush against the side of his neck. An all too familiar voice spoke as the first blow crashed into his ribcage.

"Fôkken muzzie dog! You think you can make a poes out of old Jakkals, my little bru? You have another fôkken thing coming, jou naai!" Jakkals panted as the kicks and blows rained down on Rasheed.

“Hey, brother, take it easy,” said another voice. It was Gary, who was trying to pull Jakkals off Rasheed. “Leave him alone, bru. What’s he going to do, eksê? Go to the cops? I don’t fôkken think so. He’s in as deep as you, the little kakkerlak. Let him fôkôf if he wants to. The last thing we want now is a body in our way. Sticking around the likes of him will just bring you down, my brother.”

Jakkals seemed to run out of steam. Or maybe he decided that his friend’s advice made sense, because the blows stopped as unexpectedly as they had started.

“You take me for a poes, Gamaldientjie? I’ll teach you a lesson, jou naai!” he said once he got his breath back.

“Fôkken doekkop!” he added as an afterthought.

Then, eyes blinded by blood, Rasheed felt one last, dull blow to his side as he toppled over onto his face.

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Sergeant Albert Goniwe still found it difficult to believe that the bedraggled figure who had been shunted into the charge office the day before by two constables from the Port Elizabeth Korsten branch could be one of the pipe bombers he had been trying to track down for days. This skinny little thing of a man, barely five-foot-five and not weighing more than forty-five kilograms, did not look like he had the true makings of a criminal. Then again, in Goniwe’s experience, the worst of them often looked like they wouldn’t harm a fly. And Rasheed Gamaldien was a criminal, all right. He had served six months of a one-year sentence in Pollsmoor for car theft. Got out early because he was a model prisoner and considered no threat to society—or not much of a threat at any rate. Granted, that had been his one and only crime—at least the only one he got caught for—but Goniwe knew that for a person like that, it was virtually impossible to stay on the straight and narrow. Once a criminal, always a criminal, he believed. And once caught, they always found their way back into the clink, no matter how good their intentions of fitting into the outside world.

All the same, he could not help but feel sorry for Gamaldien. If the story he told was to be believed, the little scumbag got himself in over his head. And Goniwe was inclined to believe him when he said he had been on his way to return the stolen car and hand himself over when he was attacked and stabbed by his accomplice in the

pipe bombing in Jeffrey's Bay. This Jakkals Fourie sounded like some nasty piece of work, a notion confirmed by his colleagues in Cape Town. If the rest of Gamaldien's story checked out, and Goniwe had a feeling it would, and they could nail the man behind it all, the case would be cut and dried—he'd be on his way back to Jeffrey's Bay by Monday. Mrs Kittie de Bruyn was right, after all. She was not just a paranoid ex-wife.

Gamaldien had assured him that he would be able to lead them to Bakkies de Bruyn, who was already facing multiple charges of fraud in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Proving that De Bruyn was the mastermind behind the pipe bomb attack on the house where his ex-wife was due to visit would no doubt add some urgency to the fraud case. It wouldn't hurt Goniwe's career either. He was happy in Jeffrey's Bay, but he'd been there for over five years and was hoping to move onto bigger and better things now. This case might just do the trick. Who knows? He might even get the transfer to Port Elizabeth and God knows the service there needed a bit of shaking up.

The thing that really upset Goniwe was the utter stupidity of the officers at the Korsten station. If they had listened to little Gamaldien when he told them the story in the first place, Fourie, maybe even De Bruyn, might already have been behind bars.

That infuriated Goniwe. He was the type of policeman who believed in following up every lead, no matter how small and even when it came from the likes of Gamaldien. Gamaldien had to beg them, he claimed, to take him to Jeffrey's Bay to hand himself in.

They took him for a vagrant or escaped mental patient making up some wild story. Being injured and covered in blood might have had something to do with their first impression. But even when they handed him over in the Jeffrey's charge office, they acted as if they were humouring him, which further infuriated Goniwe. When Gamaldien tried to tell the PE lot what had happened after they found him lying in the street, injured, some constable decided it was all just drunken rambling from a tramp who got himself stabbed in a street fight. The constable took him off to Livingstone Hospital. If, as Gamaldien claimed, he had not kept on nagging the hospital staff to call the police back, he might very well have slipped through their fingers. Being away from Jakkals, whose company had fuelled in him the courage to run to the cops, he might well have lost his courage to do what he had planned.

So much, Goniwe thought, for alerting all the stations between Port Elizabeth and Cape Town about the bomb incident in his town and for them to keep their eyes open for possible suspects. What would have happened if Gamaldien changed his mind about coming clean while in hospital? They might never have solved this case. And that would have been Korsten's fault—another case unsolved due to their stupidity and bad attitude. Goniwe resolved to take the matter further once he got back from Cape Town.

When Gamaldien hobbled into the station the day before, he said he knew where to find Bakkies Fourie. He said Fourie always hung around some hotel in Salt River.

Well, Goniwe thought as the car sped past Riversdale, they would know soon enough.

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The wine tasted awful and Kittie scrunched up her nose in disgust. She waited a while, then took a second small sip to make sure it wasn't her imagination. This was not the sort of place where one did anything that might be construed as confrontational—or even slightly impolite.

Yep, corked it was—for sure. Not only that. It was almost lukewarm and wholly undrinkable. She turned to the bar again to get the attention of the barman, but by now the crowd, almost all men, stood three deep. Where they all came from so suddenly Kittie could only wonder at. Five minutes earlier, the bar was almost empty. Now, if she wanted another glass of wine, she would have to elbow her way through a whole brandy vat of men.

The young woman leaning against the wall next to her seemed to have difficulty keeping the smile off her face. Kittie had the distinct sense that she'd said something stupid but, for the life of her, she could not think what it could have been. All she did was answer a simple question—in a friendly manner. And ask a question of her own, in an equally friendly manner. She felt spare and embarrassed, terrified that she would panic and make a hash of it all. But she'd resolved not to be afraid. She had sworn to herself that the minute she felt any sense of panic or fear, she would focus her thoughts on her father. He had always made her feel secure. What she was doing was dangerous, she knew, but it had to be done. It was the only way.

All the same, nobody knew where she was. If things went wrong—and there was a very strong possibility they might—there wasn't a soul on the planet who would know where to look for her or come and rescue her. God, she thought, whoever knew that a place like this even existed in this day and age? The Junction Hotel down the road from the Salt River circle, just before the turn-off to Brooklyn was worlds removed from the places of recreation Kittie usually favoured, but this was where Bakkies wanted to meet—where he insisted she met him. Maybe if she'd known beforehand what the place was like, she would have thought twice.

But if that was what it would take to put into action her plan to ambush Bakkies, then this was what it was going to have to be. Full-blooded-stop. Kittie had had enough. She had to get him alone. Once alone, she knew she'd be able to get him to talk. And then she'd nail him. That was the thing about her relationship with Bakkies, even though Ganie tended to pooh-pooh this little fact. He was a crook and a scoundrel through and through—a psychopath, truth be told—but Kittie knew she still had as much of a hold over him as the day they met. Not all men were like Bakkies, of course. Other men, normal men, didn't go around marrying women and stealing all their money and possessions. Normal men had a conscience—integrity. But there was one respect in which all men were alike—they thought with their dicks. In this, Bakkies was no different to any other man.

If her plan worked, Kittie believed her problems would be solved. Well okay, maybe not all of them—she was still as penniless as the day she got wise to Bakkies's swindlesome ways—but for now it would take care of the biggest of her problems. If it didn't ... well, she'd just as soon not think about that possibility.

When she and Karel arrived in Cape Town two days earlier, she'd already had her plan worked out. She kept it to herself, knowing Karel would try to stop her. It was a perilous plan, after all—life-threatening even. Yet, she believed she could make it work. She wasn't about to wait for the police to link the pipe bomb attack to Bakkies and to gather enough evidence to put him behind bars. And even if they managed to get that right, what were the chances he'd be found guilty? And if he was found guilty, how long would it take for the case to go to court? Kittie simply no longer trusted the justice system. Her battle to get Bakkies to court on the fraud charges had taught her that unless she took matters into her own hands, like she had by building

her own fraud case against him step by laborious step, he was unlikely to get what was coming to him.

And a free Bakkies was a dangerous Bakkies. The harassment wouldn't stop.

What she feared most of all was that he would switch aim and set his sights on the children. Both of them should be safe in res at Stellenbosch, but dared she take the chance? She didn't think so. Kittie felt cornered.

As soon as she arrived in Cape Town on Thursday, she called Bakkies's mother on the pretext that she was ready to consider withdrawing the charges against him. She even hinted at the possibility of a reconciliation, something she knew old Marta de Bruyn would fall for. Marta kept pretending to be scandalised by her son's behaviour, but Kittie had come to realise the woman was every bit as dishonest as her son and her outrage an act. She asked Marta to get Bakkies to phone her.

He did. Within the hour.

Just goes to show how vulnerable men could make themselves when they did what they did best, namely think with their dicks, she thought.

And here she was, waiting for that bastard Bakkies de Bruyn in a noisy, smelly and thoroughly unhygienic bar in a part of town she'd never had occasion to visit. Saturday night was clearly a busy one at the Junction Hotel. She almost wished Ganie were there. Ganie would have had fun with this. There were few things she enjoyed more than to see the underbelly of society at work.

Kittie had been standing against the wall next to the bar for half an hour. She'd arrived early to avoid feeling uncomfortable or at a disadvantage when facing off with Bakkies. She also wanted to scout out the place before he arrived. So far, so good.

Until Lola approached her, clearly curious as to what Kittie, who looked nothing like the rest of the Junction clientele, was doing there.

"Are you new? I haven't seen you here before," the woman said, extending her hand. "I'm Lola."

"Hello, Lola." Kittie put on the brightest smile she could muster. "I'm Kittie. Pleased to meet you. You're right, this is my first time—I haven't been here before. I'm waiting to meet somebody."

"I see. It's just ... me and my friends ... we were wondering whether you're also a working girl?" asked Lola.

“Oh, who was wondering?” Kittie replied, looking around to find Lola’s friends. She was pleased to have somebody to talk to. That would make her blend in better.

“Over there,” said Lola. Kittie looked in the direction Lola was pointing and saw four young women sitting in a row on the straight-backed wooden chairs lined up against the wall facing the bar. They were dressed to the nines in outfits that suggested they were on their way to one of those sexy nightclubs Kittie had so enjoyed in the seventies and eighties.

“Are those your friends over there?” she asked. “Gosh, you’re all so pretty, so ... so ... trendy.”

“Ja, those are the girls. We saw you standing here all alone and wondered what a classy lady like you were doing in this dump. So they sent me over to come and ask ... you know ... about working?”

“Yep,” said Kittie, shaking her head to indicate how unfair the world was. “It’s sad but it’s true, hey? I have to work. Who can afford not to these days? Single mom, you know. That’s just the way it is. But I don’t mind. Most of the time I quite enjoy it, actually ... well, when I have work, that is. And you?”

It was at that point that Lola seemed to choke on her drink, spraying the reddish liquid all over her lacy boob tube covered in sequins. Kittie dug around in her large handbag and held out a tissue to Lola, who took it graciously and began dabbing her enormous, now soaked, bosom while avoiding eye contact with Kittie and appearing suddenly speechless.

Kittie was nonplussed and began to have second thoughts about her new friend. She couldn’t see what was so funny. She thought it sweet of the “girls” to try and make her feel comfortable in a strange place, but she could not understand Lola’s reaction when she confirmed that she, too, just like Lola, had to work to keep the wolf from the door. God, didn’t everybody?

“I’m ... I’m going to get another glass of wine from the bar,” Kittie stammered. “And some ice, too. This wine isn’t very good. Can I get you another drink?”

“Thanks,” said Lola. “A double straw rum and Red Bull, please.”

Kittie manoeuvred her way through the men at the bar, ordered the two drinks, added several blocks of ice to her glass and returned to where she had left Lola. But Lola was nowhere to be seen. Kittie turned around to look for her on the chairs against the wall, but only two women remained. Not knowing what to do with the

extra glass in her hand, she approached them and asked whether they knew where Lola had gone, but the two women just snickered behind their hands and ignored her.

Kittie placed Lola's drink on one of the empty chairs and slinked back to her corner. This was not how it was supposed to go—she felt foolish and stupid again.

Slipping her hand into her jacket pocket, she thought of her father and felt reassured again. It was still there. She ran her fingers along the edge of the little device and she counted the buttons:

Stop, Play, Record—one, two, three.

The third was the red button, the one she would press down to record her conversation with Bakkies. She had practised it with her eyes closed and again while keeping it hidden in her pocket. She had practised talking aloud with music blaring and also while flushing the toilet. It worked. Even with ambient sound, her voice came across perfectly clearly when played back.

To find it had been a bit of a problem, though. To Kittie's mind, the logical place to keep a device regularly used for work would be somewhere in the office, but when she went to rummage through Ganie's desk, the Dictaphone was nowhere to be found. In desperation, she phoned Beatrix to ask where her mother kept it. This was a risk, and Kittie just prayed that Beatrix believed her story, but she would never have found the thing otherwise. It's a pity she had to lie to Beatrix about her reason for being back in Cape Town and for needing the Dictaphone, but it couldn't be helped. She'd explain everything and make it up to her when this was all over. Thankfully, it was where Beatrix said it would be—on top of the Scrabble set in the games cabinet in the lounge.

"Matingane Blignault ... you're one weird old duck," Kittie had muttered to herself when she found it.

Wondering whether she was right about being able to coax Bakkies into talking, she moved her hand from her pocket and flattened it against her chest. That, too, was in order—her little .22 pistol, the one her father had given her, the very one that brought Stupid Cupid down, was safely tucked away in the side of her bra. She had decided on wearing jeans with a loose-fitting gingham blouse and denim jacket. If she felt threatened in any way, she would easily be able to reach under her shirt to retrieve the firearm. She would have no qualms about using it.

Kittie wondered what the time was. It felt as if she'd been in the bar for ages. When she reached into her other pocket for her cell phone to check the time, the blood drained from her face and she felt as if she was going to vomit. The phone wasn't there. It was exactly where she'd left it to charge on the kitchen counter in Ganie's house three hours earlier.

If Kittie's plans went wrong, she would have absolutely no means of calling anybody for help.

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The clang of the telephone pierced the silent house, jolting Karel back to the here and now on the sofa in Ganie's living room. Jumping at the unexpected sound, he rushed across the room to answer the phone, in his haste kicking over a side table piled high with books and a Scrabble set. Letter tiles went flying across the floor. He cursed himself for his clumsiness and took a deep breath before picking up the receiver. It could be Kittie phoning to say she was on her way home. She would have to call the landline, since she had left her cell phone on the kitchen counter when she went to visit Ganie's daughter two hours earlier.

Karel had been getting more and more worried as the minutes dragged by for the last hour while he contemplated the possibilities. Something was wrong, but he could not put his finger on it. What he did know was that Kittie should have been home by now. She'd told him that Beatrix had called earlier to ask her to drop off a bag of laundry at her digs in Tamboerskloof, and that she'd be away for an hour—two hours tops. She said she wanted to take Beatrix out for a quick bite to eat at Chef Pons's, to explain to her what had happened in Jeffrey's Bay—that she'd promised Ganie she would do that. But when Karel tried to phone Kittie's cell phone to make sure she was okay, he heard it ringing in the kitchen where it was plugged in to charge the battery.

He didn't want to appear suspicious of her, but Karel was a farmer, a man of instinct, and he knew better than to ignore what his gut told him. Something about Kittie taking off simply did not gel for him. At first he tried to tell himself that he was imagining it, but he could not shake the feeling.

He lifted the receiver.

"Hello ..."

The voice on the other end of the line sounded taken aback.

“Um ... I think I have the wrong number. I’m looking for Kittie de Bruyn.”

“No, no, no ... you have the right number. My name is Karel. I’m visiting ...”

“Kittie didn’t say anything about a visitor when she phoned? Mom neither. Are you a friend of theirs? I just called to find out whether Kittie found the Dictaphone.”

“Er ... sorry, but who am I speaking to?”

“Oh gosh! How rude of me. Sorry. I’m Beatrix, Ganie’s daughter. Is Kittie there? Can I speak to her?”

Karel felt adrenalin surge through his body. He was right! Why would Beatrix phone to speak to Kittie if she was with her?

“But Kittie ... isn’t she’s with you? I mean, she said you two were going out for something to eat?”

“Not that I know of,” said Beatrix. “You’re mistaken ... must have heard wrong or something. Kittie phoned me to ask where my mother kept her Dictaphone. That’s all. Apparently she wanted to dictate a letter to some lawyer? Something like that. I don’t know. Anyway, I just called to ask whether she’s found it. She didn’t say anything about a visitor. Are you sure you ...”

Karel was speechless. Kittie had lied to him deliberately. His mind was racing to try and work out why she would have done that.

“Hello? Hello? Are you still there?” Beatrix asked.

“Er ... yes. Yes, I’m here. I’m sorry, Beatrix, but Kittie’s not here. She told me she was going to see you and that you’d probably go out for dinner, but she should have been home at least an hour ago. Do you have any idea where she could have gone? I’m worried sick now. After all that’s happened, I’m afraid she may have done something stupid.”

“After all what that’s happened? What do you mean? What’s going on there? Is Kittie okay? Where’s my mom?” Beatrix asked. “I’m coming straight over. Don’t go anywhere.”

Karel stood staring at the receiver that had gone silent in his hand. Why would Kittie lie to him? He walked to the window and was still gazing out over the lawn as he tried to work out what to do when there was a knock at the door.

When he opened the door he was mesmerised by the extraordinary beauty of the tall young woman who strode into the house and shook his hand. She’s old ball-

breaker Matingane's daughter all right, he thought, although the resemblance was hard to pinpoint, since their colouring was completely different. But the long-limbed ease of movement was unmistakable, as was the intelligent intensity in the eyes, even though Beatrix had brown eyes while her mother's were green.

"Er ... ah ... Beatrix," he stammered. "Ka ... Karel Nortier. I'm sorry we had to meet each other like ... um ... this. I mean ... without being properly introduced. You know? And ... um ... me being a stranger ... in your mother's house, I mean."

"Look, this wouldn't be the first time Kittie's gone awol," Beatrix said as she walked past him into the lounge and sat down on the sofa. "If Mom's to be believed, old Kittie has done this sort of thing ever since she was a toddler. When she was two or three she once nicked a packet of those farm animal biscuits ... how she reached onto the kitchen counter is anyone's guess ... packed it into one of those little brown suitcases, loaded the lot onto her tricycle and off she went in search of greener grass. Or more sympathetic parents, who knows? Her mother was frantic, my Ouma told us. She found her God knows how much later, stranded apparently, having travelled just two blocks down the road. She sat there on her tricycle at the street corner, not being able to decide whether to turn left or right, too hard-arsed to go back the way she'd come. So relax, park off for a while. She'll be back."

Karel shook his head. That was what he had been thinking for the past two hours, but he couldn't shake the churning in his gut—something was terribly wrong. He'd known Kittie for only a week, but they both agreed that it felt as if they'd known each other all their lives. The past week had bowled him over—with Kittie he shared an intimacy that, for a man like him, seemed nothing short of miraculous. She'd reminded him of something he thought he'd forgotten a long time ago—the ability to trust and to love and not worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow she would still be there. Karel had no intention of letting that slip through his fingers.

But if Kittie could lie to him so easily, had he been wrong about her? Did she take him for a fool? Was she just stringing him along for a bit of fun? Or for protection? Karel was desperately confused.

"I can't believe she would lie to me without very good reason," he said. "I'm telling you something is wrong. She's in danger. I can feel it."

Beatrix looked at him quizzically. It was clear to her that stuff had happened that she knew nothing about.

“What I want to know is what you meant when you said ‘after all that happened’. Is my mother all right? Where do you fit in, exactly?” she asked. “I want to know what the hell is going on. Kittie told me she came back because the headmaster at the school where she’s teaching next term wanted her to start a bit earlier ... to get orientated or something. Now you say she’s gone missing. What about my mom? Where’s my mom? Is she still ...”

“No, no, don’t get the wrong idea. Your mother’s perfectly fine. She’s probably in Graaff Reinet by now. I brought Kittie back because ...”

Karel sighed and sat down. Despite the awkwardness of the situation, he did his best to give Beatrix a rundown of the week’s events without causing too much alarm.

“Yowzer!” Beatrix said when he’d finished. “I see what you mean. Still ... what can we do? We don’t have the foggiest idea where she’s gone. Old Kitts is full of surprises, but I’m sure she’ll turn up any minute now with a good explanation, smiling and laughing and calling for a glass of wine. There’s probably nothing to worry about. Anyway, why don’t you just call her on her cell phone?”

“I already have ... the cell isn’t ... That’s it!”

Karel jumped to his feet and disappeared into the kitchen. He returned holding Kittie’s cell phone in front of him as if it were a trophy he’d won in a race.

“She forgot to take it with her. Right now, I don’t care what anybody says about privacy ... I’m checking her call register.”

## Chapter Twenty: The Precious

The little girl cut a forlorn figure as the Mini came to a stuttering halt in front of the humble house. Her hair was plaited in rows against her head and the dress she wore was as pristine and bright as the white of the house. Her face shone as if it were polished, yet she struck Ganie as being very alone in the world. The girl's large dark eyes were fixed keenly on the car and its occupants.

"You must be Pindiwe," said Ganie as she got out of the car. "Your mother told me all about you."

The girl stared at Ganie and Dharma without saying anything. Her hand moved to her mouth and an index finger disappeared into her mouth. Ganie tried again.

"Shouldn't you be at school, Pindiwe? Or is it school holidays? Look, I've brought you all some presents. For you, for Ma Fundi and for your mother."

Ganie walked around to the back of the Mini and opened the hatch. After their visit to Fundiswa and Nomhle on Sunday, she felt so utterly ineffective in doing anything about Fundiswa's situation that she decided to do the only thing she could think of to make things better—buy gifts. That would not bring relief to Fundiswa's wellbeing, but it could make physical life slightly easier, she explained to Dharma, who joined her on the previous day's wild shopping spree. She bought a kettle and toaster, a pretty teapot and cups with tiny pink and blue flowers, sheets and towels—a house can never have enough towels, she told Dharma—a large glass vase and a microwave oven. The vase was perhaps a bit disingenuous, since couldn't imagine Nomhle

spending money on flowers, but she could not resist it. She knew how much Fundiswa treasured, or at least used to treasure, pretty things.

Household items having been dealt with, she set off to the supermarket and bought a large trolley load of groceries and cleaning products. These would last a good while, she told herself. She hoped Nomhle would not take offence at the excess, but she wanted to give the small family of women something to brighten up their lives. She also loaded into the supermarket trolley exercise books, pencils, pencil crayons, socks, panties, T-shirts and jeans for the girl, hoping the items of clothing would fit her. For Nomhle, she bought a collection of aromatic soaps, sprays, creams and chocolates.

But the real reason for Ganie's rash spree was that she *needed* to go shopping—she needed the distraction. The visit on Sunday had left her devastated for reasons other than Fundiswa's condition, which she suspected was Alzheimer's, the early-onset of which was precipitated by the death of her son. After the sudden about-turn on Sunday, when Fundiswa appeared in the lounge as lucid as she had ever been, they chatted for hours, exchanging stories about the past and the intervening years, though avoiding any reference to Matthew. And Ganie told Fundiswa how she had begun to dream in recent months about uMhlekezi and his prediction. How his words so many years ago had been troubling her and how they had been a large part of the reason she was now in Graaff Reinet, on her way to scatter her family's ashes at Rhodes.

And then Fundiswa had burst out laughing. She laughed from her belly until she had tears in her eyes.

"What's so funny?" Ganie wanted to know. Fundiswa's reaction took her by surprise.

"Ganie, Ganie ... *julle gladdekoppe!*" Fundiswa gasped, wiping tears from her eyes when she got her breath back. "And you ... you're like a baby. You'll believe anything. That old man was a crook, man. The whole Site C knew about him. That's why I chased him away later on. At first I also believed him, but then I realised he was just saying this, saying that, saying anything to make you pay him. He wanted your money, and because you believed him like a child listening to a Bible story you believed him, he came back and back and back. If I didn't throw him out, he would have taken every cent you had."

And she bellowed with laughter again.

“But that can’t be true. What he said was real, Fundiswa,” Ganie remonstrated feebly. “Wasn’t it? I mean, a lot of what he said was so ... so accurate.”

Fundiswa kept giggling and Ganie felt like a fool, a stupid, superstitious white sucker. How could she have allowed herself to be so comprehensively duped? How could she have believed a prophecy that brought her this far, halfway across the country? What was wrong with her that she wished to complete and fulfil the prediction of a charlatan?

“Because of that old phony, I’ve made myself a fucking criminal,” she told Dharma bitterly on the way back to the farm. “Because he took me for easy pickings, I robbed a grave and Herman’s house got pipe bombed. Fucksakes, Kittie and I could have been killed, Dharma! Because I’m so goddamn superstitious and naive, the whole fucking world is turned upside down now.”

“Hey, Mom, don’t be so hard on yourself. I think this trip is important regardless of what happened all those years ago. It’s about more than just what a stupid old sangoma told you. And it’s not only for you, either. I suspect this is important for Herman, too. You weren’t even to know that he would be here with you, so who’s to tell how important this might turn out to be for him? And it’s been very important for Kittie, at least the first part of it ... even though she’s not here. Something good is going to come out of all this, you’ll see,” Dharma tried to console her.

“Ja well, fuck Fundiswa too,” Ganie said. “She brought the asshole into my house and probably fed him information from all the stories I’d told her. She kept the scam going.”

“No, Mom ... well, maybe at first. But she tried to protect you. When she saw it was going too far, she threw him out, remember?”

Much to Herman’s amusement Ganie cursed herself and Fundiswa for the rest of the day and evening. It was only much later, after several whiskies, four rescue remedies and hours of tossing and turning in bed, fighting with pillows that steadfastly refused to be arranged to any configuration of comfort, that Ganie calmed down again, telling herself that maybe this time, just this once, regardless of whether he was a charlatan or not, the old man had a real vision. And maybe the whole of Site-freaking-C was wrong about him, after all—even if Fundiswa had betrayed her and told him about her family’s dilemma with ashes.

Ganie then consciously decided to disregard the likelihood of Fundiswa's involvement at the centre of the scam. If that was so, and she suspected it was, she didn't want to think about it. It would upset her whole applecart of reality. Being duped by someone she considered a dear friend hurt too much. So she decided to give Fundiswa the benefit of the doubt. And accept old Albert's pronouncements at face value. For now. With that thought, Ganie fell into a fitful sleep in the early hours of the morning.

She woke up feeling strangely positive and persuaded Dharma to go with her to buy Fundiswa and Nomhle "a few bits and pieces for the house". She would not interrupt her mission simply because the past suddenly looked a lot different than it had a day earlier.

Now she was again standing in front of the house that shone so heroically white in the sun, bearing her gifts and hoping it could somehow make things better, if not for Fundiswa then at least for Nomhle.

"Okay, Mom, now what? We'd better start carrying the stuff in," Dharma said.

Ganie was slightly surprised at the absence of a crowd of children to greet them this time. She looked towards the front door and for the first time noticed a cluster of people gathered on the steps, staring and pointing at them but making no move to come and greet them. Neither Nomhle nor Fundiswa was anywhere to be seen.

Ganie felt a tug at her jeans and turned around. The little girl in the white dress looked up at her with frightened eyes. Her index finger was still stuck in her mouth, but she removed it to speak.

"Ma Fundi she's dead," she said. "Mama she cried the whole night. Ma Tombi she slept with us, but Mama she did not sleep. Only me. Mama cried and cried. Now all the aunties come to help."

Shock surged through Ganie's body. She felt as if her legs were going to collapse under her. To keep herself from falling, she threw her arms over the Mini as if protecting a child, face thrust against the roof. This was Guy all over again—it was exactly how she felt when she heard about his death. What was it with death these days? It was everywhere, threatening to swallow her back into that special kind of darkness that held her hostage for an entire year. Death seemed to be following her around as if she were a horse and death the trailer she had to drag along behind her. And where had the sunlight gone that made the little house shine so brightly? The

house suddenly seemed so dull and washed out. Everything seemed hazy, as if somebody had turned down the dimmer switch on the lights.

She could hear Dharma's voice from far away, as if she were speaking through water.

"Is your mama inside, Pindi? Please will you take us to her? This is my mama. She was Ma Fundi's friend. Can you see how sad she is to hear that Ma Fundi died?"

Ganie was overwhelmed suddenly by an incongruous sense of gratitude. Where it came from she couldn't tell, but she wanted to weep and hug her daughter for the kind efficiency with which she spoke to the little girl. She was thankful to Dharma for stepping in, exempting her from speaking or trying to think rationally.

As the last bit of strength drained from her body, Ganie slid to the ground.

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The lounge was filled with people dressed in black, all talking at the same time. Ganie was sitting on the couch holding a glass of water. Her face was streaked where rivulets of tears had dried on the dust that had settled over her when she fell down in the road. She was still in shock, but was beginning to feel her sensibilities return to her in stages. Nomhle sat in the chair she seemed to favour, the one against the wall under the "Weeping Rose". On the floor against the opposite wall stood the gifts Ganie had brought, carried in by Dharma and a few of the mourners. Dharma stood facing her mother awkwardly, not sure what to do. In her arms she held little Pindiwe, who seemed to have wrapped her whole body around this strange woman, head burrowed into Dharma's neck.

"It was a big, big truck. He didn't see her in the road. Maybe it was dark ... I don't know the time ..." Nomhle said. She seemed detached, as if reciting a verse from the Bible. "After you left on Sunday, Ma Fundi got very bad again. She was searching, searching for Matthew, but I didn't give her the shoes. Ah-ah. She cried and cried, Ma Fundi, but I did not go to her and I did not give her the shoes. Then it all went quiet. She was sleeping. Then, when I got up yesterday, I went to her room to take her tea, and she was ... phew! Gone. Just gone. With no shoes."

Nomhle had difficulty continuing. She put her hands up to her face, pressing a white cloth against her eyes. It was hard to tell whether she was weeping or not. She

was turned into herself, as if any wailing that may have remained after Matthew's death had now gone from her forever. She rocked back and forth on the chair.

"I searched and searched. Up and down the streets. Ma Fundi was gone," she whispered. One of the township matrons stepped in front of her as if to protect her.

"Haibo, ntombazane, no more talking," she said. "Nomhle, you must go and lie down. The doctor, she gave you the pills. You take the pills. You rest. I'll speak to the ladies now. Hai! Thandi, you make some tea. Strong tea ... sisi here needs the strong tea."

A few of the women led Nomhle out of the lounge to her bedroom and the matron turned to Ganie.

"The reason is bad, bad, bad for Nomhle," she said. "It happened long way from here, on the big road. The big road to die Baai. My friend Fundiswa, she was wearing only the *onderrok* ... no shoes. When the lorry hit Ma Fundi, the wood on the lorry, she took the head off the body ... Off."

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"What was the worst for you?" Ganie asked, eyes fixed on the faraway mountains glimmering blue in the fading sun. She felt spent. She and Dharma had come back to the farm to find Herman red in the face, pacing up and down on the porch in front of the house. Herman on the warpath was the last thing Ganie wanted to face after the morning's shattering news, but when she discovered the reason for it, the day—one she imagined could not possibly get worse—spiralled yet further downward.

"Have you gone mad?" Herman shouted from the porch as they approached the house. "Have you completely and utterly and finally lost your fucking marbles? How long has this been going on, Ganie? Tell me! I'd have thought you'd have more sense. Now I discover you're actually a bloody nutcase. Fuck it, man, I thought you'd grown up."

Ganie stared at Herman, dumbfounded. She did not know what he was talking about. Dharma, equally shocked and speechless, looked from Herman to Ganie and back again.

“What’s the matter, Herman? What did Mom do?” she wanted to know, but her words went unheard by Herman, who was almost hyperventilating, which made it difficult for him to get his words out.

“The emails, Ganie! The fucking emails! Those crazy goddamn emails you’ve been sending. Tell your daughter. You just tell her what you’ve been up to. Let’s hear what she thinks about that.”

The colour drained from Ganie’s face, still covered in dust. For the second time that day she had to find something to prop her up to prevent her from falling down, her legs only too eager to go on sabbatical. She stumbled onto the porch and sank down on one of Dharma’s colourful garden chairs.

“How ...” she tried meekly, tears stinging behind her eyelids again. “How did you ...”

“Don’t you worry about how I found them. For fuck’s sake, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist if you leave your bloody laptop on the dining room table for all to see. I just wanted to log on to check my own email. How long has this been going on, Ganie? Tell me! I thought you’ve come right ... left all that calling up spirits and glassy-glassy shit behind. That’s the kind of madness that landed you in shit enough times in the past. Shit that I had to keep rescuing you from. Fucksakes! Don’t you ever fucking learn?”

“But why has it made you so angry? What’s so terribly wrong about it? Stupid, maybe, but not wrong. I haven’t hurt anybody,” Ganie said. She looked at Dharma, whose head was tilted to one side. She looked totally confused. Ganie began to cry.

“It didn’t hurt anybody!” she yelled through her tears, furious at having been discovered doing something so childish, so embarrassing. “It’s *my* computer and *my* bandwidth and *my* time. And it’s private, you dumbfuck ape! In any case, it’s just my way of ... my ... my way of speaking to Ma! I need her. It’s easy for you. She didn’t live with you all those years. And you’ve got a wife running around wiping your arse. I have no-one else ... and I ... I miss her.”

Dharma kneeled down next to her mother and put her arms around her.

“It’s okay, Mommy, it’s okay. You don’t have *nobody*. You have me and Beatrix. And nobody’s accusing you of hurting anyone. You sound like you might hurt people sometimes, but you never mean it. Herman, what are you talking about?”

Herman dropped down on the chair next to Ganie, leaning back and stretching his legs out in front of him. He placed his arm over his eyes, as if he had a terrible headache.

“Ask your mother, Dharma. She’d better tell you herself.”

Sobbing, Ganie told Dharma. She told her how she’d been pretending to herself that Ouma Lana was still alive—that she was travelling on a long journey somewhere in a faraway place. How she had, in spite knowing better, hoped that her mother would send her a sign that she lived on, if not in human form, then in spirit. But no sign had ever come, even though she looked out for it every day of her life.

“But ...” Dharma started. “You mean you actually wrote emails to a dead person? How?”

“It wasn’t like that,” Ganie said. “I mean, if you say it like that it sounds crazy, but it wasn’t like that at all.”

“Where did you send them to? Did you write them and keep them in a special folder, or what?”

“No, I ... I created a Hotmail address. Then I’d log on and read them again when they arrived from my normal email address. It ... it was as if I really could speak to her again. And she listened. I know she listened, even if she never wrote back. And maybe she did actually respond. Maybe I’m just too dense to know how to listen to her. Of course I didn’t *really* believe there would be actual emails coming from her.”

Dharma looked at Herman, who was staring at Ganie in disbelief, shaking his head.

“Ma is dead, Ganie,” he said, more gently. “She’s been dead for five years. What is *wrong* with you?”

That was earlier in the day. The three of them were now sitting on the porch, watching the sunset, too emotionally exhausted for recriminations of any kind.

“What was the worst for me, you ask?” Herman’s voice was distant, to Ganie’s ear almost disembodied. She prised her gaze away from the horizon and stared at her brother as if he were a stranger and she saw him for the first time. He sounded so lost. Like the little boy who tripped in a rocky dirt road and dropped the chocolate cake his mother had baked, the little boy who’d been taught a lesson in karma at too young an age.

“Nothing,” he continued. “Nothing *was* the worst. *This* is the worst. The living of it, living *with* it as if I’m Gollum hanging onto his Precious. Every godforsaken

minute of every goddamned day. Being what it ... what he ... made me, the shape that I have taken on because of the shape that was in his power to mould. I am the shape of those hands and fingers of his. And I cannot change that shape. The mould is too strong.

“So, you want to know what the worst was for me? That is the worst. And remembering, of course. But as you can imagine, I hardly do any of that.”

## **Chapter Twenty-one: Back At the Junction**

“Well, if it isn’t the lovely Mrs de Bruyn ...”

Kittie jumped. Had it not been for the hand she felt snaking around the back of her neck—that hand with its all too familiar touch—she might not even have heard the voice above the noise in the bar. Resisting the urge to jerk away, she swung around instead and pretended to look pleased to see the man she once thought she loved.

“Bakkies, what a fright you gave me!” Kittie’s heart was thumping in her chest and her mind was racing, but she forced what she hoped was a genuine smile of affection onto her face. “God, it’s good to see you after the week I’ve had. How are you? I was beginning to think you weren’t coming.”

Bakkies’s eyes narrowed. He looked at Kittie with suspicion, but tentatively returned the smile.

“Let me get a drink, then we’ll find a place to sit and talk. Shall I get you a dry white?”

Kittie nodded. She did not take her eyes off Bakkies as he made his way to the bar counter. This was it. If she could pull it off ...

Her hand disappeared into her jacket pocket again. Feeling the recorder there gave her a sense of comfort. She would just have to keep her wits about her for the next hour or so.

“You have to help me now, Pappa,” she whispered to herself. “Please just help me.”

“Come, it’s too noisy to talk here. We’ll go to the pool room,” Bakkies said when he returned, motioning for her to follow him.

Kittie crossed the dark bar area behind Bakkies. Her ears were starting to hurt from the relentless buzz of voices, which rendered the music emanating from the speakers against the wall all but inaudible. Here and there, in between the human drone, she could make out the words of a song she knew well, though she could not immediately lace it.

“... You labelled me, I’ll label you, so I dub thee unforgiven ...”

Bakkies threw open the double doors leading off from the bar with his elbows, looked around and strode across the cavernous pool room to a seat at a bench table against the wall. He placed the drinks on the table and called Kittie over.

“Here, this will do!”

The pool room was much quieter than the bar, the regular clunk of a pool cue hitting a ball punctuating the fuzzy strains of voices and music filtering through the walls from next door. The room was large and virtually empty. At one of the two pool tables, four women were concentrating on their game. As Kittie walked past, one of them, a squat, mean-eyed khaki-clad woman who appeared to be as wide as she was short, gave Kittie a stare so aggressive Kittie’s heart skipped a beat. She stopped in her tracks as Mean Eyes positioned herself in front of her, balancing her chin on the thin end of the pool cue.

“You in the right place, babe?” the woman asked, a smirk playing around her mouth.

“Um ... ja ... excuse me,” Kittie stammered, then sidestepped the woman and dashed to take a seat on the bench opposite Bakkies. She watched, wide-eyed, as the woman winked at her and turned around to take her turn at the pool table.

“Gottapatot! What’s that one’s case?” she asked, breathless.

“Ah, don’t pay any attention to Rose,” Bakkies said. “She’s here with a new girlfriend every week. She’s just making sure you don’t get any ideas in your head about making a pass at her girl.”

Kittie was bewildered. Her girl? Even she could tell Rose was as butch as a farmer from Polokwane, but her pool partner was a sweet-looking dolly bird with long blonde hair, wearing strappy dress and stilettos, make-up immaculately applied.

“The blonde one? Geez, she doesn’t look like ... you know ... a ... a ... gay?” Kittie said.

“You never seen one of those?” Bakkies said. “All sweet and pretty on the outside and on the inside ... well, you know?”

He flicked his tongue out and wiggled it from side to side. Kittie felt like vomiting, but managed to keep a straight face.

“Just don’t look at her too much. Rose is the possessive type. You don’t want to get on her bad side. I’ve seen more than one chick taken down by her.”

Laughing, he leaned back on the bench and took a sip of his beer. He looked so smug, Kittie felt like crashing the glass into his face. Instead she smiled. Not saying anything, she picked up her wine glass with her one hand and slipped the other into her jacket pocket. One, two, three, she counted to herself as her fingers played over the recorder buttons. She pressed the third button and casually removed her hand from her pocket.

“Okay, my mother says you’ve been rethinking this nonsense of yours. I have to ask myself, what brought that about?” Bakkies’s smile widened and he gave self-satisfied a little chuckle. “Aren’t you supposed to be on holiday with that stuck-up cousin of yours?”

Kittie slowly placed the glass back on the table. The effort to keep her anger and revulsion hidden was making her shake, but she willed her hands to be still. She smiled again and looked up.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Rose lumbering over to the sturdier of her two opponents and, almost imperceptibly, slip a long knife into the other woman’s hand while speaking under her breath. It was an exclusive exchange between two predators—whatever she said was meant only for that woman’s ears. The woman slapped Rose on the back as the latter turned around and strode out through the double doors. Dolly Bird demurely retreated to a table on the opposite side of the pool room.

“Ignore them, for God’s sake,” Bakkies said. “They’ll leave you alone as long as you don’t make a fuss or look at them as if they’re weird. Now tell me what we’re doing here.”

“Well, Ganie and I had a bit of trouble along the way,” Kittie said. “Somebody threw a bomb into her brother’s house in Jeffrey’s Bay, so we couldn’t exactly stay there.”

“Now who would do a thing like that?” The smile on Bakkies’s face infuriated Kittie, but it was his eyes that gave him away. He seemed entirely unable to keep the satisfaction out of his eyes. “I mean, who would want to blow up a nice little house in the suburbs? What kind of riff-raff does this oke mix with?”

Kittie said nothing. Her mind was racing feverishly, trying to find the right words. When she’d played the interchange out in her mind earlier, she was always the one to control the direction in which the conversation would go. And this was going too fast. She needed to gain control and somehow catch Bakkies off guard, forcing him to admit to playing a part in the bombing.

“Who knows what enemies Herman has? But I don’t think the bomb was necessarily aimed at him—neither do the police, by the way. But that wasn’t all. We had some other trouble, too ...”

“What do you mean, other trouble?” Bakkies seemed genuinely surprised.

“Well, somebody tried to kill us by loosening the nuts on the wheels of the car.” Kittie’s words had the desired effect.

“What! “I didn’t ...” Bakkies barked, much too loudly. Realising his mistake, he stopped himself from finishing the sentence. “That sounds dangerous. What happened?”

Right away, Kittie felt more in control and, not taking her eyes off his face, she told Bakkies what had happened.

“So, the cops are convinced the attack was aimed at us, you see. And I don’t want to alarm you or anything, but they’re looking for you now. They think you may have had something to do with it ... the pipe bomb and the car,” she said innocently. “And you know what? I think it’s all gone too far. I can’t imagine that you’d really, really want to hurt me or, dear God, try to kill me. Whatever’s happened between us, we were married once, after all. Taking money out of an account behind your wife’s

back, selling her car and all her instruments ... that's nothing like trying to kill somebody, is it? I told them you'd never, ever do a thing to hurt me. Would you?"

Bakkies's eyes darted from side to side, then he lowered his gaze. Kittie felt satisfied—he couldn't look her in the eye.

"Am I right?" she insisted.

"Of course ... Of course I'd never hurt you," Bakkies mumbled. He fidgeted with the buttons on his shirt. "They were not supposed ... it was supposed to be just ..."

Kittie raised one eyebrow. She got him!

"Yes?"

"Well, Kitts ... I really wanted you to leave this fraud nonsense of yours. I mean, like you said, we were married. What's mine is yours and what's yours is mine, right?" Bakkies paused. He seemed to be locked in a fierce debate with himself.

Kittie decided to go in for the kill. Taking a deep breath, she said, "I know. Since the bomb and the car, I've been thinking about everything. And you know what? Life's too short to hold a grudge. I've decided to withdraw the charges against you. You're right. We were husband and wife. For better or worse. And what's been lost ... well, it's just worldly stuff. It's small-minded of me to hold all that against you."

Bakkies looked up again, looking as if he could not quite believe what he was hearing, but he was desperate to believe Kittie.

"Do you mean that, Kitts? What about us, then?" he asked.

"Baby steps, Bakkies. Baby steps. Let's first get this ... what did you call it? This ... nonsense ... let's get this nonsense out of the way. Tell me what you had to do with the pipe bomb and the car, because the police are going to question me again, I know. So, please tell me what really happened. I'll drop the other ..."

"I had fôkôl to do with any of that!" Bakkies blurted out. He sighed and wiped his hand across his face, which was shining with sweat. He seemed to come to a decision.

"I know nothing about a bomb. I told Rasheed ... I asked him to give you a little fright, that's all. And I definitely didn't say they must undo car wheels." He sounded indignant. "So yes, I told them where you were going and I asked them to ... well ... shake things up a bit. That's all. I didn't want you to get hurt."

Kittie decided to push a little harder.

"You just asked them? Who would drive hundreds of kilometres just to do an old tjommie a favour?"

“Well,” Bakkies said. “I ... I sort of ... I did kind of make it worth their while.”

“With whose money, Bakkies? Whose money did you use to pay them?”

Bakkies looked down at his hands again, his shoulders slouched.

“There was still that twenty grand from Investec ... that ...”

Kittie felt the earth drop away from under her, as if she had just taken the first plunge on a rollercoaster. Her legs felt paralysed as the adrenaline surged through her body. This she never expected. After everything, being bankrupted by this man, having had her heart and life broken by his shameless deceit, having lived through the humiliation of it all and having spent months trying to put together a case against him—and now, with that very same case still hanging over his head, to find out that he had the ultimate audacity to dip into her last nest egg. The money her father had signed over to her six months before his death.

“You didn’t ...” she began. “I can’t believe it. I just can’t ...”

“Come on, Kitts. You just said what’s yours is ...”

“You fucking bastard!” Kittie shouted and jumped up. In one fluid movement, she reached under her shirt to pull out the pistol and pointed it directly at Bakkies’s face.

“Fuck you! How dare you? That was the last, last little bit of money I had. How did you get your disgusting paws on it?”

A pool cue clanged to the floor and, as one, the women at the pool table turned towards the corner table to see what the shouting was all about.

“Calm down, dammit ...” Bakkies tried, arms outstretched as he pushed the bench on which he was sitting back to get up, but succeeding only in tripping backwards and stumbling up against the wall.

Kittie’s whole body was shaking. She had to make a conscious effort to remain standing, and as hard as she concentrated to keep the pistol steady and pointed at Bakkies, she could not bring herself to pull the trigger. The weight in her hand felt like that of a five-kilogram dumbbell.

“I’m going to ... I’m going to kill you ...” she said, but knew her threat was as empty as her heart right then. “I will ... I swear ...”

Instead of pulling the trigger, Kittie began to cry.

Suddenly, as she began to lower her outstretched arm, a solid block hit her from behind with such force she found herself flying forward and smashing down on the table before being pinned down in a full nelson.

“We don’t go around pulling guns on people over here, sweetie pie ...” said Rose, face right up against Kittie’s ear.

“I’m not ... your ... sweetie pie!” cried Kittie.

“Let her go,” said Bakkies. “Get your hands off her or you’ll taste a bit of this ...”

A shot boomed through the room, deafening Kittie for the moment. She felt the grip on her neck and back relax, then disappear altogether. Slowly she disentangled herself and tried to straighten up, but no sooner had Rose released her, than she was jerked upwards by an even stronger hold. Pulling her up with his arm across her neck, Bakkies dragged her away from the table.

“Hey relax, brother!” Rose said, standing with her arms stretched out sideways and eyes darting from Bakkies to the table. “I’ve let the cookie go. No need to get excited here. I was only trying to save your arse.”

Kittie’s eyes followed Rose’s to the table, on which lay the Dictaphone where it had fallen from her pocket when Rose tackled her from behind, the miniature tape inside still whirring around and around.

“So what have we here, Kittie-Cat?” Bakkies asked, shoving the Dictaphone with the barrel of the pistol, but not relaxing his hold on Kittie’s throat for a moment.

“Hey? Hey? What’s this? Are we trying to be clever, hey? Were we trying to set a trap for old Bakkies? Did we think we wouldn’t be caught out, my sweetie? Did we think old Bakkies is *dumb*?” Emphasising that last word, Bakkies jerked his arm inwards, tightening his grip on Kittie’s neck. “What were you thinking, my Kittie-Cat? Saving the day like Nancy Drew, were we? And the cops would just be sitting there, waiting for Wondergirl to bring home the proof? Not going to work, you know ... it’s not even legal. You must really think I’m a fôkken moron, bitch!”

Kittie’s eyes were beginning to tear from the stranglehold on her throat. It was useless trying to talk. Rose lowered her arms slightly and slowly began to move backwards while the other three women cowered at their table.

“You stay where you are, Rose,” Bakkies warned, pointing the gun at her with his free hand. “You’re going to wait patiently like a good girl until my wife and I are out the door. If you don’t ...”

“Hold it right there!” bellowed another voice as the door burst open with a clang.

Another shot rang out, followed by screams from the three women on the other side of the room. A second salvo of pain shot through Kittie's ears as she stumbled forward and fell on her knees as Bakkies's released the grip hold around her neck.

"Did you get him?" asked a timid voice in the distance.

"He's down," said a calm, familiar voice.

Kittie looked up into the face of Sergeant Goniwe as he bent over her.

"Are you okay, Mrs de Bruyn?" he asked.

Gasping for air, Kittie nodded and struggled to her knees. She took Sergeant Goniwe's outstretched hand and pulled herself up. The young constable from Jeffrey's Bay stood a few feet behind the sergeant. Around the constable's feet ballooned a puddle of blood as Bakkies writhed on the floor, moaning in pain. To one side stood the slight, shivering figure of man wearing a long white shirt, white trousers and a white skull cap.

"Okay, people," said Sergeant Goniwe, gesturing with his arms at the crowd that had formed at the door to watch the spectacle. "That's enough. Move away, please. We have everything under control."

"Sorry, officer ... I have to get in there. It's ... my God, Kittie! Are you all right?" shouted Karel as he dashed through the crowd and caught Kittie in his arms.

## **Chapter Twenty-two: The Anatomy of Hurt**

**From:** Ganie Blignault [mailto:ganieb@mweb.co.za]

**Sent:** 26 April 2007 09:17 PM

**To:** lanablig@hotmail.com

**Subject:** The Anatomy of Hurt

My dearest, dearest Mother

This will be my last email to you. Herman knows and so does Dharma. He found my laptop and saw my last email to you. My fault, of course. I can kick myself for not switching the thing off as I usually do. And after reading that email, of course he went hunting for more and ferreted out the others. Now he's furious with me, disgusted actually, for writing to a mother who has been dead for five years. I'm sure my actions must seem nuts to others, but I can't understand why he's making such a big deal of it. What the hell is the harm in it? But Herman has issues, as we all know. Big ones. He says he's not going to look after a fruit loop who talks to the dead in his old age. He says I spend too much time in my own company. He says I live in my head and that's why I talk to phantoms that aren't even there. And if I didn't pull myself towards myself he'd have to talk to Ingrid and Jake and that they'd have to seriously intervene. I suppose what he has in mind is an intervention like those engineered by Americans for their drug addict family members. He's so full of crap.

I suspect there's something more to this fierce reaction of his—overreaction, actually. It's entirely over the top. The way he carried on made me wonder whether

he's not the crazy one. He's the one who could do with a bit of introspection for a change—find some peace in his life. He paces up and down like a tiger in a cage. Even when he's doing nothing he paces up and down. In his head. A blind person could see that. Something awful is chasing him—maybe it is he, himself, or maybe it's Pa's ghost—but he is trapped in that cage of a mind of his and he cannot get out. I reckon even if it were history that has done the locking up, it was he, Herman, who threw away the key. At least I'm trying to unlock my cage, and if what it takes to find answers is to look for them among the dead, then who am I to resist? But I promised him I'd stop the emails, so I will keep my word. It is time in any case. The need is no longer there, and I'm sure you will understand.

Come to think of it, it's not like I've exactly been receiving the answers I've been seeking. Day in and day out, night after night, I've been hoping and waiting for a sign from you, Ma—the teensy-weensiest indication as to where you are. If you are. That you are. But there has been nothing. I thought if I tried hard enough, concentrated long enough, something would become clear, one way or another—in a dream, through an epiphany, in a vision. Anything. In spite of what I have to tell you tonight, I realise now that a spirit from another dimension will not reveal itself to a mortal just because that mortal wants it—especially not to somebody like me, who jumps at her own freaking shadow. Maybe it is precisely because of what I have to tell you that I realise that now.

A dream would have been fine, though. I wouldn't be frightened if you spoke to me in a dream. I would listen to you. Surely you realise that? Clearly not.

The one from whom I was born into this life remains resolutely absent—vanished like Persephone into the Underworld with Hades. I, reluctant Demeter that I am, roam the arid plains calling out to her, calling and calling to no avail. It's all wrong, of course, upside down. That's not the way the story goes. Persephone who must be found is the daughter. It is the mother who cries out for the daughter, not the other way around. And here I am calling and calling to a mother who is deaf to my pleas. All wrong. Always wrong.

I suppose it is true that when the mother dies the daughter becomes the mother's keeper and the guardian of her legacy. I console myself with that thought, even though it has taken me quite a while to get used to the idea. But now, at long last, it is time and I am ready to take on the role of guardian, Mother.

But before I take that step over the threshold and enter this new age, I have to share something crucial with you. It happened in two parts:

Yesterday was a terrible, terrible day. Dharma and I returned to the township to deliver our gifts to Fundiswa. When we arrived there, it was only to discover that she had been killed in a tragic accident. After our visit on Sunday, her daughter-in-law told us, she became confused again. She must have slipped out of the house in the dead of night, roaming the streets barefoot and in her petticoat, calling out for her son. Much like I've been calling out to you, except hers was a vocal, literal calling, whereas mine was of the soul. She strayed onto the national highway and was knocked down and decapitated by a large truck carrying timber. The driver hadn't seen her in the dark and only realised that something had happened about fifty metres along the road. I'm not sure what made him realise this and stop.

Her death was devastating. I'd been angry with her because I'd come to realise that the prophecy of the old sangoma must have been based on information fed to him by Fundiswa. And that the two of them had probably set out to scam me together, even though she put a stop to it soon enough. I could not believe that she'd betrayed me in this manner. But something also told me that maybe it was not all a scam and that he may have got some things right. That vision of his was, after all, the reason for me coming all this way to scatter the ashes. In a way, I did not want to know the truth about it all. And I wanted to make things better for her. So we drove to her neat little house with our car load of gifts. How pathetic. How shallow of me.

There was the usual chaos that follows death and we did not stay very long. I'd collapsed in the dirt road from shock and they took me inside to recover. After that, we left. I have thought about it, but have decided I would not go to the funeral. I've done what I came to do here and now I'd rather spend a day or two with Dharma than with people I don't even know. Tragic as it is, maybe death will be more merciful to Fundiswa.

Then, as we arrived back at the farm, we found Herman pacing up and down, furious after discovering my emails. I was forced to explain in detail how I contrived and executed the whole business with premeditation and in the sober light of day. But let me not dwell on my own aberrations. It makes me cringe and I can't turn back the clock.

The point is that with the horror of Fundiswa's death and my disillusionment about the old man's false prophecy, not to mention Herman's anger, I could not fall asleep last night. I tossed and turned and groaned and grunted. I shook and shivered. I kept on feeling as if I was about to burst into tears, but the tears would not come. I begged and pleaded to unseen, nameless creatures, but the only answer was the rustle and sigh of a creaky old willow outside my window. I cursed. I cursed Pa, the old man, Herman, Kittie. The universe. Then I'd turn over onto my other side and the whole process would start all over again while the minutes ticked by on the clock next to my bed. Until the synapses of my brain went into spasm from the effort and my cranium felt like cracking open from all the feeling and thinking.

After a long time, drenched in sweat, I decided a hot bath might be the answer. I crept down the creaking passage, closing doors as far as I went so as not to disturb the whole household with my restlessness and the noise of bathwater running.

I don't know why I did what I did next, but as I reached Herman's bedroom door, I could not help it—I had to go in. I felt compelled to check whether he was sleeping soundly after the day we'd had. The door stood slightly ajar and I could hear him breathe. Well, breathing is maybe not the best description—it was more like a guttural gasping for air. In between gasps I could hear other sounds, ones I could not identify at first. So I pushed the door open as quietly as I could.

He looked so small against that wall, my little boy brother, the tiger in his cage. He had pushed his back up against the wall in a corner of the room, sitting flat on the bare yellowwood floor, a rumped bedspread wrapped loosely around his shoulders, sodden with sweat, breathing fitfully, muscles jerking almost spastically and teeth grinding like fingernails on a blackboard, so hard my head hurt.

Yet he appeared to be fast asleep.

How does one rest, Ma, if that is how you sleep? I padded across the floor towards him. I wanted to wake him up and help him back to bed, but then I thought better of it. If he knew I saw him in this state, so unspeakably vulnerable, he would have been mortified. I wanted to do what I could to preserve his dignity.

I stood there for the longest time. And something happened.

I'm not sure how to describe it in words, but it was as if somebody joined me there, slightly to the side and behind me, but very, very close. So close, I could feel the presence on my skin. It could not have been you—I would have known if it were. And

then I would not have needed to repeat it all here, of course. It was also as if I had become someone else, as if I suddenly found myself in a strange universe. As if I'd accidentally tuned the radio to an alien station. But I know I was not alone, and I'm not talking about Herman sleeping in the corner.

A whisper of a breeze brushed across my back, lifting my T-shirt ever so slightly. And a deep peace came over me, so very incongruous with the psychic combat zone at my feet where Herman was fleeing his legions of demons, shuddering and grinding his teeth under that crumpled old bedspread.

That was when I heard it—hosts of creatures all laughing together. I heard the joy of the angels, a thousand choirs in synchronised jubilation.

In that moment I had the answer to a riddle that had always vexed me.

It is this: If we assume that there are higher beings—let's call them angels for the sake of this argument—what would their interest be in humans walking the earth and surviving? Why would it be important for any higher being, ascended master or deity—by extension then also Jesus, Buddha, Ganesh or whomever—for the human being to develop and progress? In short, is it even conceivable that God would care at all? And why is it of any consequence that the human pursues what is *good* and conquers what is evil? If I were to be in a state of Enlightenment, why would I want to waste energy on a dim-witted species such *Homo sapiens*?

But they do. Oh, they do!

That was what I realised in that instant when I heard the choirs laugh. Human beings and their growth on earth are indispensable: The exalted and the ascended need the human just as the human needs the rainforest. Without the rainforest the human cannot breathe. Likewise, those who are ascended have need of their own oxygen. And it is only the human being who can provide it. With each evolutionary milestone that is reached—physical, psychological or spiritual, big or small—with each act of unfurling the human consciousness, whether by forgiving or insight, with each act and thought that transport us beyond ignorance, a small drop of this oxygen is released into the universe. To the eternal delight of those angels, who celebrate in joyful song. You see, the impact of this type of oxygen is exponential. The tiniest drop will flood through all the dimensions of all life and thought, like a wave that grows bigger and bigger. And as this wave surges through all the worlds and heavens, the happiness can

be heard of those who can once more take a fresh breath from that delicious breeze—if you care to listen.

All it is, of course, is an as yet undiscovered branch of physics, one to which no nomenclature has been assigned. But let me tell you, those physicists are going to come up with something one of these days.

That was what happened to me in that room in Dharma's house where Herman sat on the floor twitching in his sleep. After a long time, I tip-toed backwards, closed the door as quietly as I could and went to run myself a bath.

More was to come before I finally went to sleep, as if that wasn't enough for one night!

I got into the bath, slightly discombobulated and very much overwhelmed by my experience a few minutes earlier, with the sound of singing still ringing in my ears, and lay back in the warm water. I closed my eyes to replay the whole incident in my head and think things through once more. I must have lost concentration and dozed off slightly.

What followed may well have been a dream, especially considering that I now believe that the more tangible appearance of a spirit would frighten me. But that's neither here nor there. What happened has changed everything.

Out of nowhere, Pa rose up in front of me, enormous in stature and cloaked in a brilliant nimbus. He was neither happy nor sad. He bore neither smile nor frown. This was my father without constraint of body. Everything about him was the man we knew, no doubt about that, yet nothing about him was as we knew him. In life, before the ugliness of hurt got him, Isak Blignault could break your heart he was so drop-dead gorgeous. But the brilliance of this figure was indescribable. I cannot even try.

Except to say this: Everybody will tell you that angels are incredibly beautiful. But when I saw him I realised that however true this may be, some angels are more beautiful than others. Much, much more so. And of course we all know who the most gloriously beautiful of them all the angels is, don't we?

“How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!”

In the face of this shimmering beauty—in its all-encompassing silence—I was overcome with profound empathy. I began to glimpse the epic sacrifice of a soul to

enter a lifetime on the understanding that he was to become the hated one, the one that would test and torment.

Let me put it another way: If we entered life to test the uttermost boundaries of being human, to be pioneers crossing new evolutionary frontiers in order that we, and the angels, may draw breath anew, then it makes sense that we can do so only if there were something or someone that pushed us in the opposite direction—backwards, away from going forward. How could it happen otherwise? In order to need relief one needs a condition that begs relief in the first place. Why fix something that's not broken? So we come here to be broken in order to be fixed. Without the perpetrator of hurt there can be no progress.

And then I understood, Ma. I understood the magnitude of Pa's gift to us! He effectively sacrificed an entire lifetime to become the adversary for us so that we could grow and become. And in that sacrifice he had to live his years being the hated one throughout. Even as a child he felt unwanted, maybe even hated, if everything we've heard is true. He was cast as the black sheep from the day he was born. How lonely that life must have been! How alone within the limited understanding of a human! It is only in our hearts that we can understand such things—the intellect still has a long way to go before it will catch up and create this language.

I do think, though, that somewhere in his deepest soul he had a memory of his purpose, even if he was unable to talk it into reality. Would that not have been the reason for his obsession with Isaiah 53? Does that not come closest to defining the undefinable, his role and place on earth.

How many times were we not forced to listen to that hated passage? How many times did I not plot murder listening to him reciting it, daydreaming about crushing his head like Adam the snake's simply to escape those words?

“He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.”

What is it to suffer in any case? That's is the easy part. Suffering is a reaction to something or someone hurting your body or soul, that's all. It requires no forethought or action. You are purely the receiver of the suffering.

But suffering meaningfully requires instruction and skilled guidance that cannot be found under any old cross or lotus flower or pentagram or crescent moon and star. And who is qualified to do it, I ask you? Who would be willing and able to take on that role? How many of us truly want to hurt others, even if it were to educate them in the outer frontiers of pain in order to break through human barriers to enlightenment? Not me, I can tell you, and I would venture to say not you either.

So, before I say my final goodbye to you, I want to make sure you know without a shadow of a doubt that I now view Isak Blignault in a completely different light. I am humbled and filled with gratitude towards him and the lessons I was privileged enough to have learned in my youth. It is not important any longer whether I hear from you across the divide. I know you are listening.

Herman says dead is dead, it is not alive, and you and Pa are both dead. Of course he's right, but only partly so. Your essence has to be somewhere, even if I cannot see or hear you, even though you've never come to tell me you are well. But I no longer need to know and therefore I will no longer be waiting. As soon as I press the "send" button, I will make sure this fake email address disappears off the Internet too.

I still believe you live in sunshine and that you can see and smell and touch the flowers, particularly Nasturtiums, I hope. I believe your heart is full of joy and that when I hear the angels sing, your voice is among those of the others. My deepest hope is that all the many years of heartache have been salvaged.

As I woke up this morning, I was overcome with gratitude. It was like that morning in 1999, almost exactly a year after Guy had died and I woke up knowing the pain had gone. I'd spent that year crying not because he died, since that was a relief for all, but because of lives wasted and dreams thwarted. I lay in bed that morning and listened to the birds twitter outside. The air was cool and pleasant and as I opened my eyes, for the first time in such a long time, everything looked bright and colourful. The grass was brilliant and green, the sky bright blue. It was as if I had walked through a very dark night into a glorious dawn. It was as if I'd been given the incredible grace to wake up and see, really see, the beauty around me for the first time. Gratitude is just

what the word implies—a state of grace, and a state of grace is what you're blessed with after being hurt very badly. Grace always follows grief.

And that is why I know I will never need to speak to you in this way again. The mourning is over and I enter life again. I know this because the state of grace tells me so. All that remains to be said is this:

Be IRIE, my beloved mother!

With all the love my heart can hold

Always

Matingane Blignault

PS You'd be so proud of me—I finally figured out how to cook rice.

### **Chapter Twenty-three: Scattered At Last**

“I have been just about everything a woman can be in the course of a single lifetime,” Ganie said as the Mini manfully soldiered its way around the hairpin bends of Route 396 on the last stretch between Barkly East and Rhodes. It was late and although the dirt road was in good condition, it was narrow and treacherous all the same. To the right, the craggy rock faces and slopes of the Drakensberg towered like a many-headed monster, one dark leviathan after another, while to the left the lower slopes fell away into a seemingly bottomless valley, untold kilometres down. Though the stars were flung like fairy dust across the sky, lighting up the plunging valley sufficiently for her to get a good sense of just how high up they were, Ganie was grateful for what darkness there was. She suspected that if they’d travelled this road by day, she would have been a nervous wreck.

“What do you mean?” asked Herman.

“Well, first I was a daughter, briefly the only, then the eldest, followed by fiancée, wife, mother, divorcee, wife again and finally widow. And now I can add orphan to that resume.”

“Aha, I see,” Herman chortled. “None as alone in the world as the widow and orphan. Or the orphaned widow!”

For the first time since leaving Cape Town, Ganie was not behind the steering wheel, having accepted Herman’s offer to drive as they said their goodbyes in Graaff Reinet. The nearly six-hundred-kilometre trek to Rhodes had taken far longer than anticipated, even with Herman driving.

Ganie had woken up in high spirits that morning, but her cheer changed to tears as soon as she took her last sip of coffee after finishing the sensible breakfast Dharma had prepared.

On this eventful journey she had taken the pipe bombing of Herman's house in her stride. She did not panic unduly when she discovered the wheels of her car had been tampered with. She felt elation at successfully negotiating the retrieval of Monty's ashes. She had been, in turn, shocked, dejected, disturbed and outraged at Fundiswa's death, yet she was taking a philosophical view, both of the accident itself and the history leading up to it. Then, even when faced with the very real and clearly long-standing distress of her brother two nights earlier, she had managed to draw solace from a reserve shored up in the recesses of her mind, however otherworldly that comfort might have been.

But she had no armour against parting from her daughter. She was reduced to a messy sluice of tears. These were tears of longing and regret. Ganie felt robbed. She thought of all the minutes and hours and days that have passed through her life—times she would never be able to conjure back. Not only time recently past, but the hours of her entire life. Why did she have to go and look up Fundiswa in the very week she was to die and thus be diverted from spending time with Dharma, who was much more important to her? Why did she not search harder for a way to bottle time when the girls were younger? Why did she not record every second of every moment of their fleeting childhood? How had she become so foolish—no, arrogant—to imagine she could rely on this flawed memory of hers to keep each stage of their development close to her heart? What cruel consciousness, in any case, would design time to be linear, so that she would never again see the guilelessness in their young eyes, hear the skittle of little voices, feel the softness of their innocent skin? And all those years—what did she do except remain swamped under her search for reason, vindication and validation, resolutely lifting pebbles and boulders on the off-chance that she would find any or all of these hiding away from her like scorpions. She was so busy searching that she failed to notice that all the reason and validation in the world existed right in front of her eyes.

"I'll be back in June, I promise, Dhar," she wept, her face buried in Dharma's neck. "And this time, I'm fucking flying."

Ganie did not stop crying until nearly two hours later, when wild pomegranate trees along the side of the road announced that they would soon be entering the bleak streets of Cradock. Not much was said for the rest of the journey as Ganie pondered her many regrets.

Now, on this last leg of her journey across the breadth of the country, an edginess took hold of her. Her senses were heightened, yet it felt as if they did not belong to her, as if this looming mountain range itself was living her, breathing her, drawing deep draughts of her into its oxygen-hungry belly and expectorating her with equal satisfaction in low, gurgling squalls. The heaving slopes had commandeered her eyes and ears and Ganie had become the mountain. She felt herself swell and shrink in constant earth-bound motion, unperturbed and impervious.

“What the hell ...” Herman said under his breath, slowing the car down to a crawl. “That light! Holy fuck, what is it?”

Ganie was jolted from her trance. Her jaw dropped. The valley below them was bathed in a yellow glow almost as bright as daylight. Fright registered and her limbs went heavy.

“Don’t stop, for God’s sake!” she shouted. She was so spooked by the unworldly light, her voice was shaky. Herman burst out laughing.

“What do you think, sis? Antjie Somers is out tonight, coming to get us?” He slowed the car down even more. “No, I know. It’s aliens. Chips! They’re coming to abduct you! They have their space ship parked down at the bottom of the valley and they’re just waiting to beam up travellers who find themselves on this godforsaken road to stick probes up their wazoos for some intergalactic experiment.”

“Fuck off, Herman, you’re not even funny.” Ganie relaxed a little and she could not help laughing. “What do you think it could be?”

Herman accelerated a little. In spite of his bravado, Ganie could see he was as puzzled as she was. She had never seen anything like it. It looked as if the valley below was a secret pocket, a parallel universe trapped in an eternal sunrise inside the mountain. As they crept along the dirt road, the glow seemed to become brighter and brighter, and as they rounded yet another bend, the source of the light became immediately clear.

Herman stopped the car and they sat quietly, transfixed. In front of them shone the largest full moon Ganie had ever seen, spanning the depths of the valley below to a point in the sky as high as the peak of the mountain.

“That’s ... it’s ... incredible,” she said.

Ganie got out of the car and walked to the edge of the cliff, no longer nervous but breathless, awed. After a while, Herman joined her. As she stood there, she became aware of her breath again and realised the mountain was no longer breathing her.

“This is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” she whispered. How long they stood there, she couldn’t tell. She walked over to a boulder about ten metres away and sat down. Herman followed.

“I know you were in my room the other night,” he said, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Ganie turned her head to look at him. For a moment she was confused, then realised he was referring to the night she watched him as he slept sitting up in a corner.

“How? You were ... I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t go in there to spy on you. I couldn’t sleep and wanted to have a bath, so I went around closing doors so the water wouldn’t wake up everybody in the house.”

Herman got up and walked to the cliff edge, staring out over the valley.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “I don’t mind. And it’s not always that bad. I just... I ...”

He turned to face Ganie.

“I just can’t sleep. It’s always been a problem, but lately ... since, you know, since he died ...”

Ganie thought of Herman as a little boy again. He, more than any of them, was at the receiving end of the worst their father had to mete out. He was, after all, the eldest of the two boys and therefore had to be made a “man”, as Isak used to say. Herman complied—he became as much of a man as any father could wish for, reasonable or unreasonable—though at what price? What, Ganie wondered, did her brother have to sacrifice on the altar of Isak’s distorted notion of manhood?

“Oh well,” Herman said. “It’s over now. We have to carry on, don’t we? Make the best of the mother of all fuck-ups. But let me tell you, I don’t feel like this shit anymore. I’m going to ...”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Something. Resign from the firm. Travel the world. Write a book. Something. I can’t do this anymore. We’ll see. Let’s go.”

<<◇>>

On the outskirts of the little hamlet stood a long, narrow house that looked more like a barn than a house. Many decades earlier, the house had been an inn where local villagers and farmers would gather to drink at night. In its heyday, it was said, as pumpkin hour drew near and the time approached to return home after an evening of copious revelry, the inn’s rambunctious customers would mount their long-suffering horses out on the front lawn, and with howls of bravado build up speed in their approach to the veranda. Momentum gained, they would spur the horses into a gallop and charge all the way down the long, wide passage through the building and out the other end through the stable door, yelling and whooping as the horses’ clattering hooves echoed off the uncommonly tall walls and the riders disappeared into the distance.

Some time before 1932, when Sam Blignault took up the post as headmaster at the small village school, half of the inn was destroyed in a fire, leaving the veranda short of building by half. Leading up to the front door, a rooster had left his permanent calling card by wandering onto the partially constructed stoep where the wet concrete had been levelled for the floor, leaving a line of footprints spanning the width from one side to the other, as if showing the way in. A house such as that, it was said, was known to be haunted. That was the house Sam Blignault was allocated when he moved his family to Rhodes.

When the Blignaults lived there, the kitchen and dining room were at the one end of the long passage with Sam’s study at the opposite end. Every evening after supper one of the two boys would be instructed to fetch the Bible from their father’s study so that he could read a passage, as was customary. They took turns to brave the long walk down the passage—the darkness crept them out and they were scared stiff of monsters and ghosts lurking in the shadows. The village had no electricity and the meagre light of the candle they used to negotiate the passage served only to flicker against the lower half of the walls, leaving the upper half and high ceiling cloaked in

terrifying darkness. Their mother added to their fear by telling them ghost stories over dinner.

Some distance away a real barn—old and disused—housed the rotting remains of the hay kept by the erstwhile inn owner for his punters' horses. It was also home to a million rats. This mass of rodents had bred without interference for many years, so prolifically that if one moved, they all had to move since their tails had become so entangled that they were all meshed together.

"I wonder whether that was actually true. About the rats, I mean," Ganie said after she reminded Herman of the story their father and grandmother had so often told them. They had just had lunch and were sitting on the cool veranda of the Rhodes Hotel, Ganie sipping vodka and ginger ale and Herman making short work of his third beer.

They had met with a somewhat stony welcome when they arrived around ten o'clock the previous evening, the hotel management having expected them three hours earlier, in time for dinner. The Blignault siblings were the only guests.

"Who knows?" said Herman. "It was probably just a story made up by Monty. Her idea of fun to scare the kids. So, where are we going to do this?"

"What?"

"The ashes, you moron. Where are we going to scatter them?"

Ganie thought for a while. What she'd seen of the village so far was so idyllic, anywhere would do.

"Don't know. Anywhere, I suppose. Was there any special place? Can you remember any other stories Pa used to tell about Rhodes?" she said.

Herman shook his head.

"Not really. Just how cold it used to get. You know, ice candles tinkling from the branches of the willow tree in their yard and the three-inch-thick pillar of ice that would form overnight under the dripping tap in the backyard. And how milk left out on the kitchen table would be frozen solid by morning."

"And how sheep would be buried under snow but still survive because little tunnels would form from their nostrils to the top layer of snow because of the heat of their breath, which made it possible for them to breathe through the snow," Ganie added. "Maybe we can do it at the river. As boys they used to play there, remember? They used to make figures from the clay. Or maybe the mountain. It's more peaceful there.

We could take a walk towards that peak over there, scatter the lot in a quiet spot at the foot of Ben McDui, away from footpaths and hiker trails and stuff. That way they won't be disturbed."

"Okay. We'll go straight after breakfast tomorrow morning," Herman said and looked over his shoulder to establish the whereabouts of the single hotel assistant on duty. His beer was finished.

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Ganie wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand and stopped to catch her breath. They'd been walking for an hour and she felt as if she was covered in a layer of dust from head to toe. When they set out at nine o'clock, there was a biting chill in the air. She had piled on layer upon layer of clothing. Now the sun had broken through the cloud cover and was beating down with a vengeance. The hill she had in mind when she suggested they walked there to scatter the ashes had proven to be considerably further away than she'd anticipated. She took several deep sips of water from the bottle in her backpack, where the four containers bearing her family's ashes were biding their time in silent darkness.

"Shite, we didn't exactly come properly prepared," she said, sighing.

"Well, if you stopped smoking like a fucking chimney you wouldn't be wheezing like a struggling old tractor," her brother called over his shoulder. "I don't know why you don't just give up like everybody else. Nobody smokes anymore. If you go into the smoking rooms in office buildings all you see is a bunch of grey-faced losers."

"Ag man, go and fuck yourself," Ganie muttered under her breath, but she was pleased that he was too far ahead to hear her.

Herman strode ahead in the distance, calling out to her as he veered off towards the right.

"I've found a place, Ganie!" He was at least fifty metres ahead of her. Ganie took another long sip of water, draining the bottle and replacing the cap. With a sigh, she began to walk in his direction.

Herman stood in a small creek where the mountain rose dramatically into the sky. A thin stream of water trickled down the rocks to one side, dripping down to the cool,

mossy groundcover. A protective half-circle of trees guarded the creek front. It seemed perfect.

“Let’s have a rest first. I’m fucked now,” said Ganie as she sat down on the nearest boulder she could find. She took out her water bottle again but found it empty. She wiped her forehead with her forearm.

“Jaysus, Mary and Joseph,” she panted. “I’d give my left arm for a cold beer right now.”

“We’re not doing anything touchy-feely, you hear?” Herman said. “We’re just going to open these things and chuck out the ashes. Then we go back and relax for a day before we leave. No hocus-pocus mumbo-jumbo. You promised you’d be done with that now, but I know you.”

“What do you mean, you know me? You don’t know me for shit, man,” Ganie said, defensive about the barb, which was nothing but a thinly veiled reference to the emails to her mother. “You really understand bugger-all, you know. What I believe goes way beyond hocus-pocus, but what’s the point of trying to explain? You just want to remain stuck in your own bloody misery, so go fuck yourself, man.”

She was tired, not only from the long walk from the village, but she had grown fatigued of her own idea. She wanted to be done with it now, put her feet up for a while, then go home. She wished she was home right now.

“Geez, no need to pee in your pants, old *Ouma-Kom-Help!* I was just saying it’s not in my nature to perform rituals and pray and call on spirits.”

“Okay, leave it now. I’m gatvol of this whole bloody Cecil B de Mille epic. Let’s just get it over with.”

Ganie leaned forward, pulled the backpack closer and snapped open the clasps. She reached inside and pulled out the containers one by one, arranging them in a row on the soil in front of her.

“Okay, who goes first?” she asked.

Herman dropped onto his haunches next to her and ran his fingers over the curves of the brass urn holding Sam Blignault’s ashes.

“I think Oupa should go first, then Monty, then Uncle Jorrie, then Pa. Oldest to youngest,” he said.

“Nope, that would be wrong. I think Monty should go first,” said Ganie. “She’s been waiting the longest. I think they should go in the order in which they died and

she died first. Besides, she's been languishing six feet under for twenty-five years. She must be rattling her chains to get out of there by now."

"Right. Whatever. We do your order then," Herman sighed. He rose holding Monty's elaborate and tarnished bronze urn in both hands.

"Jesus," he said, straining to prise the top off. "The fucking thing won't open."

"It's probably rusted rock solid," Ganie said, leaning over to look at Herman's hands as he turned and pulled the urn this way and that.

"Where were you in standard seven, old girl? Bronze doesn't rust. Brass neither, in case you wondered."

"Oh, of course. I forgot. Well, somehow or another it's gummed up solid enough," she said. "We should have thought of that and brought the car tools with us."

Herman's face twisted, turning red as he battled with the urn in the gathering heat. At long last he dropped it to the ground in disgust and pulled off his shirt, using it to wipe the sweat off his face before picking up the urn again. Holding it in his hand, he looked around for a likely tool.

"Find me a sharp rock, Ganie. I'll knock a fucking hole into it."

"Well, maybe the others are not as difficult to open. Maybe we should do them first, after all—change the scattering order. Or maybe we should go back and ask the hotel people for a saw or something ... to saw the top off."

"No bloody way am I doing this all over again," Herman said, his frustration replaced with resolve. "This is it. We're dumping the stuff now. I'm not allowing a bloody inanimate piece of metal to get the better of me. Go find a rock."

Not in the mood for argument, Ganie walked away obediently, eyes scanning the ground for a suitable tool. At the bottom of the creek where the trickling waterfall met the ground she found a rock in the shape of an obelisk. She picked it up and turned to go, but was drawn again to the running water. It looked so cool and refreshing. Kneeling down on the cool, moist groundcover, she lent over, cupped her hands and drank. As she sipped the crisp water, a gentle breeze brushed over her body, lifting her long hair off her back for a moment. The water and the breeze cooled her down somewhat and she was grateful for it.

"We don't actually need to rush, you know," she said as she returned to Herman. "It's so peaceful here. We should enjoy it."

She handed Herman the rock. He knelt down on the ground and held the urn on its side, slamming the rock into it repeatedly, managing to dent the metal in several places, but it was to no avail.

“This thing isn’t budging,” he said, looking at the mangled urn. “Fuckit, now what?”

“Here, let me try,” said Ganie, holding out her hand.

“Ha-ha! You reckon, Hulk Hogan? Here, knock yourself out,” Herman laughed and handed over the urn.

Ganie turned the buckled metal container over in her hands a few times, trying to work out whether there was a trick to opening it. As she did so, she felt a small protrusion in the metal where what seemed to be the lid met the body of the urn. Pressing down on the bump without looking at it, something hard crashed down on her feet, followed by a torrent of rough granules, grey bits and pieces that settled over her like a blanket as the breeze blew it back at her. She instinctively tossed the urn to one side, where it unceremoniously clanged onto a rock, then rolled onto the ground, quite empty.

Monty was scattered.

Ganie stepped back and stood helpless, like a statue, shoulders raised and arms slightly extended.

“What the fuck!” she cursed as she came to her senses, stomping her feet on the ground, trying to shake the ashes off her jeans and shoes. “Gross, man. The thing had an opening mechanism, you pea brain. Jaysus, now I’m covered in Monty!”

Looking at her, Herman burst out laughing and began to sing.

“Ashen lady, Ashen lady ... Give up your vows, give up your vows ... Save our city, save our city ...”

“Shut up, Herman,” Ganie said, feeling grubby and sheepish under the layer of ash. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

“Well,” he said, still smiling, his eyes full of mischief. “That went ... um ... unceremoniously. I suppose we can now resume proceedings ... dispense with the rest of them?”

As his laughter died down and he straightened up to compose himself, he pointed at Ganie’s feet.

“What’s that?” he asked.

Ganie looked down. Next to her feet lay a dark piece of metal that had bounced off her left boot and rolled to the side. The shape was round and uneven, about four centimetres in diameter and no less tarnished than Monty's urn. It lay on the ground attached to an equally discoloured chain.

Ganie drew in her breath sharply and dropped to her knees. She tried to speak but no words would come out of her mouth. She snatched the object and brought it close to her face, as if she could not believe what she was seeing, tears forming in her eyes and spilling over her face in big drops. She found her voice again.

"She did it! Look here, Herman! Just Look. She did it. I knew she would. She kept her promise. She gave me a sign. Don't you remember this? It's Ma's engagement present from Oupa Sam and Monty. Can't you remember, man? She said she lost it years and years ago, after Monty died, in fact. She promised I could have it, but then it got lost. Look, if you open it ..."

Ganie stood up and held the small brass pomegranate in the palm of her hand. Gently, she unclipped the side and unfolded the locket. Inside nestled a cluster of tiny garnets.

"It's Ma's pomegranate pendant."

"How the hell did it find its way into Monty's urn?" Herman wondered, head bent over Ganie's hand as he stared at the unusual piece of jewellery. "And why? Do you think she put it there herself after the old lady died? That's bloody weird. When would she have had a chance to do that? It's crazy."

Ganie did not answer. She did not need to know how the pendant had found its way into her grandmother's urn. The *why* of it, on the other hand, she thought she could understand—why would her mother not want to return a gift from a woman who offered her scorn and little else, a woman whom she believed had been at the very source of her own pain? The woman whose complexities had left one son denied her love, the other guilty of it.

As to the *how*, she had no need of an explanation. Ganie did not care. She held in her hand all she needed and all she wanted, all she had hankered after for five years.

"Hey, sis, let's get the rest done so we can get back to the hotel," Herman said. "It's getting too goddamn hot here."

In her emotion, Ganie had not noticed his hand on her shoulder. She patted his hand awkwardly. Shows of affection were uncharacteristic between them. She wiped

her face with the back of her hand, smearing streaks of ash and dust and tears across her cheeks.

“Thank you, Ma,” she whispered as she pressed the cherished pendant to her lips.  
“The crop is prolific, your rest earned.”

Turning around, she beamed a brilliant smile at Herman.

“Now let it roll, baby,” she said.

THE END

### **The Day We Die**

The day we die  
The wind goes down  
To take away  
Our footprints.

The wind makes dust  
To cover up  
The marks we left  
While walking.

For otherwise  
The thing would seem  
As if we were  
Still living.

Therefore the wind  
Is he who comes  
To blow away  
Our footprints.

Arthur Markowitz, from *With Uplifted Tongue: Stories, Myths and Fables of the South African Bushmen Told in Their Manner*, 1956.

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