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A Matter of Trust

by

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degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities

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Abstract:
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This novel is entirely the work of the author's imagination. Set in South Africa in the '70s, it is the story of an illicit relationship between skinny, misfit Tina and her teacher Nick, whose eyes have the tuck-shop moms wanting to come and hither, and not necessarily in that order. Their mutual attraction is discovered and they run away from Cape Town, hitching a ride aboard a yacht headed for Rio. Oliver, the irreverent, voluptuary captain, also becomes smitten with Tina. It emerges that she's only twelve, Nick is twenty-four, and Oliver is in his fifties. Once they are in international waters, Nick's mistrust of Oliver grows ever deeper, but Tina is convinced there's no threat, revelling in the attention and in the thrill of breaking boundaries. Oliver urges Tina to experiment, to defy convention, while Nick tries to protect her and to avoid being killed.

It is Oliver who gets maimed and apparently dies; Nick is charged with abduction and murder, and Tina wrestles with demons that come close to destroying her. The case against Nick is ultimately dropped and he disappears so as to give Tina a chance at being a normal kid, promising to return when she turns eighteen, and not knowing that Oliver is still alive and is manipulating Tina. When Nick reappears five years later, he's hurt by her hostility. He tries to woo this new, pugnacious Tina whom he says has confused hard with strong.

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PART ONE

University of Cape Town

Chapter one

She arrived at his back door in March, in a month with two full moons. A blue-moon month.

It was twenty past one in the morning when she tapped on his bedroom window. By that time the air should have cooled, but instead it had insulated the hot earth. It wrapped itself over her mouth, forcing her to take deep, shuddering breaths.

There was no doubt this was Mr MacCloud's house – she had cycled past it many times – but she wasn't certain this was his bedroom window. The rear wall of the semi-detached house backed on to the railway line. When the trains were running you could hear the announcements from Mowbray Station. The neighbours were students, poor-white trash, and coloured families who kept a low profile for fear of being evicted.

He ushered her inside, but she could tell his mind was still in limbo, as though rummaging for a severed dream. They sat opposite one another at the kitchen table, much as they had sat opposite one another in the classroom – he at the front, she at one of the empty desks – only this was so much closer. Both clasped their hands on the table between them, their fingers far enough apart so they would not touch, not even by accident.

"Tina, this is dangerous."

She shook her head.

"I rode so fast I was a blur. Nobody could have caught me."

She sat upright, realising she might have misunderstood.

"Anyway, my folks think I'm staying at Esmé's for the weekend. I left them a note, under my pillow. They'll only find it on Sunday."

They hadn't spoken to one another for a month, ever since her mother had found a scrap of paper hidden in her previous year's geography book, telling Tina that the

meeting with the Hamster – their name for the headmaster – had been a roasting but he hadn't been fired, and upping the bid to two camels. Not signed, but with two x's.

Her mother had come into her bedroom, sat on Tina's bed, plumped up a pillow and asked in her buddy-buddy voice who had written the message. She reminded Tina of Clark Kent, able to see through concrete, even metal. The more Tina tried to shake her off, the more tenacious she'd become. *He and I are just friends*, Tina had cried eventually. *We haven't done anything*. Her mother's lips had gone rigid, with little crimped lines around the edges. *We care about one another, that's all*. As she said this, she realised she'd gone too far.

When Mr MacCloud let her into his kitchen, he was wearing only running shorts and, had it not been for the time, the gloss of perspiration on his chest could have indicated that he'd just got back from a run.

There had been an uncharacteristic thunderstorm the previous afternoon and the evening had been overcast and stifling, with a hot berg wind blowing, and lights flickering in the distance. One of those nights when lightning or arson can cause wildfires to flare.

He pulled his chair round to the side of the table and leant towards her. In the past year they had hardly touched, except in a perfunctory way. Now he deliberately reached his hand across and cupped her face in it.

"You look shattered, Monster. What's happened?"

As Tina let the weight of her head rest in his palm she could feel that one of them had a staccato pulse.

"I was going through my mother's things and I found an acceptance letter from Marymount in Stellenbosch."

It was clear he was still trying to surface from sleep and hadn't appreciated the significance of what she'd just said.

“They’re going to send me to boarding school from the start of the new term – to keep us from seeing one another again.”

Now he closed his eyes, leant sideways and pressed his cheek against the cold of the fridge.

It was an ancient Frigidaire, with a huge stainless steel lever for a handle, that kept up a background rumble. Tina had expected a messy kitchen with two weeks’ worth of dishes in the sink, and empty baked bean cans and bottles everywhere. Instead everything was neat: on the table was a wicker basket with bunches of hanepoot grapes and ruby plums; glass jars with tea and coffee stood beside the kettle. Three Carling Black Label empties stood lined up next to the bin which had eggshells and the husk of half a sweet melon in it. The tiles were old, white.

“What did you say in your note?”

He had not opened his eyes.

“That I’m leaving and they needn’t bother trying to find me because if they do I’ll just run away again.”

She was tracing the edge of a crack in the Formica tabletop with a stunted thumbnail. “I didn’t mention you.”

She tried to start speaking again but had to stop and swallow.

Tina had been wanting to tell him about the scene with her mother that afternoon. How they’d screamed at one another and, in an act that had shocked them both, her mother had slapped her across the face. It had started when Tina found the acceptance letter from Marymount. Her mother had tried to sit her down and explain that, while she understood it would be terribly hard for her daughter, she was convinced, from personal experience, it would be the best thing for her to be separated from her teacher.

“What do you know?”

Her mother had smiled. An unfamiliar smile.

"I was in that kind of love once. I felt that way about your father. He was so much like your Mr MacCloud you'd be amazed."

In all the years she hadn't made anything other than oblique references to Tina's father. Without anything having been said, it was obvious that questions were not welcome.

"My parents – your gran and granpa – tried to stop me, but I wouldn't listen." While she was talking she wasn't aware she was gently stroking the skin of her throat.

The sash-window next to them was rattling in its frame as the hot north-easter buffeted the house. Tina was dying to close it, but couldn't afford the distraction.

"Why did he leave you?"

"He didn't. I divorced him. It was just not done in those days, but I couldn't bear it any more. He was a terrible father. Out at parties every night with his friends – mostly girlfriends. Sometimes he wouldn't come home at all. While you were being born he went out on a binge and didn't come to the hospital for three days, even though I had nearly bled to death."

"I remember him. Not what he looked like. His laughter." A deep, purring laugh. Like a big, shaggy lion playing rough-and-tumble with his cub.

"That's impossible. You were only two when I left him."

The window drummed, paused, then carried on knocking as one hot gust after another blew into the room.

Why did adults think they knew better about what you could remember, feel, do?

"I bet you he left you. I bet you he couldn't stand being with you any more because you never laugh. You see how Mr MacCloud and I feel about one another and how much fun we have together and you're jealous."

Her mother was dabbing with a powder compact at the perspiration on the top of her lip.

"You're still a child, Christina. You don't know what you're saying."

She realised her mother was using the mirror to try and keep her eyes averted, but Tina had caught a glimpse that told her she'd hit on something. She couldn't quite make out the shape of the target, nor even of the weapon she'd discovered, but the reversal of roles was intoxicating.

"You took my father away from me and now you want to take the only precious thing I've got and ruin that too. Well, I'm not going to that boarding school and you can't force me."

"Oh Tina. I'm doing this out of love. I want to protect you."

She held out her arms, but Tina shrugged clear of her clasp. Her mother got up and yanked the window down shut.

With some deep instinct directing her aim, and desperation goading her on, Tina ignored the voice inside her warning her to stop. "You're stuck with that dull old fart for a husband and your dull life is driving you crazy."

"How *dare* you."

"Dull, dull, dull."

Mr MacCloud rocked upright in his chair. She knew he was about to say, *I'd better get you home before your parents wake up*, and for the second time in just a few hours she knew she would scream things she'd one day regret. She tried to pre-empt him.

"I promise I'm not trying to put pressure on you, and if you decide not to come it's OK." She had run out of air and had to take in a sip. "But whether you join me or not, I'm leaving tonight."

He pulled his chair closer so their knees were almost touching. She could see individual droplets of sweat on his chest. It was difficult to concentrate with him sitting there, wearing so little. With the two of them alone together, even his bare feet looked as if they ought to be covered. A turquoise vein ran, like a faint-rule, under the

skin, down the length of his inner arm. It formed planes on either side, one reflecting light, the other, shadow. She wished he wouldn't smile at her like that.

"Tina, I have feelings for you which are so deep and so ... complex, it's frightening. If I didn't, I would say yes right now. But for the first time –"

He stopped, as if to cut short what he'd been about to say next. He made light of it with a laugh. With his thumb, he rubbed a slow, hot curve just beneath each of her eyes.

"We need to wait a few years. You're still so young."

"I understand: you've got your job and responsibilities and stuff. I'll phone you once I've found a place to stay. At least this way we can still see one another now and then." She was gouging the rut again and the soft flesh exposed by the bitten nail was turning raw.

He leant forward and lifted her stunted thumbnail to his mouth. He could not be aware that as he stroked it against his lower lip, it left a tiny smear of blood behind.

"Where would you stay? And how do you think you would make a living?"

She pulled her hand away. She was on the verge of saying something cutting, but after glancing up and seeing him using a clown's trick – a smile to camouflage other emotions – she recited, in very measured tones, the phrases she'd prepared for this eventuality.

"Please don't treat me like a child. I fully appreciate the consequences of what I'm doing. I've withdrawn my savings. I can fend for myself."

"Tina, look at me."

She made eye contact, then looked away.

He waited till she held his gaze.

"I have no doubt you could."

He paused, looking at her for a long time.

"Are you absolutely sure this is what you want to do?"

Chapter two

Tina was three years and seven months younger than her brother Allistair. He apparently had slipped into the world and been a model baby, sleeping through the night after only a few weeks. From what Tina could gather he had never once cried. Second cousin to the infant Jesus.

Her entry into the world had, by contrast, been fraught – as she was forever being told. She had asked: fraught with what? But no. Hers had merely been fraught. Early in her first trimester, her mother, then still Mrs Felicity Roland, had been instructed by her physician to lie flat in bed and not to get up until the child was born. But Tina, instead of presenting herself head down, as all good babies should, had persisted in arranging herself bottom first. Even after she had been turned twice. To turn her, the doctor had pushed and shoved bits of her through the outside of her mother's stomach, causing an enormous amount of discomfort to Mrs Roland. But before the good doctor had even arrived back at his practice, Tina had done a slow somersault and was the wrong way up again. She later learnt the position she had chosen was called a Frank breech, in which she wrapped her arms around her calves. Head tucked in and toes pressed against her soft skull, like a diver off the high board doing a jackknife just before a pike. She often wondered if this position explained why she was double-jointed.

The only other interesting thing Tina had gleaned about her birth was that it had taken place in the same year in which Marilyn Monroe was found dead. Ever since Elton John had released the *Candle In The Wind* seven-single a year ago, she'd felt some sort of fuzzy connection to the song. Not that she would ever have let that slip to anyone.

Tina had already been through four first days at new schools by the time she started at St Dunstan's. She was well versed in the class teacher's shrill instruction to the

others to welcome her and make her feel at home. How the different cliques would examine her for novelties and flaws and pretend to include her, but inevitably reject her. With surreptitious, sadistic glee. Then later how each of the class's misfits would try to latch on, like ticks standing on blades of grass, their arms waving, desperate for something warm-blooded to pass by. The boy with the warts spreading over his hands and elbows; John, the Jehovah's Witness; and Esmé, the girl with the alcoholic father, who came to school with bruises.

Being familiar with the mob instinct to stone those who did not fit in, Tina was unsure of what bearing to assume. Should she try to be ingratiating and win her way into one of the most popular girls' groups? Or be a tomboy and try to join a gang led by the biggest bully in the class. With her tall physique, scabbed knees and high threshold for slime and pain, she would probably have a better chance of success going the tomboy route this time.

Tina was still undecided by first break on day three. She sat alone outside the assembly hall and opened her lunchbox. Cheese and tomato sandwiches. She loathed cheese and tomato. She closed the lid and made it obvious she was engrossed in a book so that if any of the misfits tried to sit next to her she could ignore them.

She was seated on the edge of a raised corridor, painted ox-blood red, which ran along one side of the quad – the courtyard surrounded by dressed stone buildings. It was forbidden to walk on the small patch of lawn in the middle. A stone archway, topped by a large cross, channelled a cold breeze which raised gooseflesh on the legs of the other girls who were standing nearby. Tina found it no consolation that her legs were warm, for although she was wearing the second-term, winter uniform of brown Crimplene trousers, she was the only girl in the entire school doing so. All the others were ignoring the rules and were still wearing their first-term cotton skirts, which her mother refused to buy until summer time.

It was then, when she heard the acrid edge to the other girls' laughter that Tina realised she'd already left it too late. She knew, from having lived with her mother, to listen out for the tone of voice, as much as for the actual words people used. The girls were talking about Esmé being an embarrassment, an abortion, but in such a snide way she knew her own name was easily substituted for Esmé's.

Belinda and Sonja were standing closest to Tina. Sonja's hair dark, Belinda's so fair it could almost belong to an albino. They loved it when adults remarked on their resemblance to Abba's singers, Frida and Agnetha. They had both started shaving their legs and wore their odd nicks and cuts as badges of a sacred rite, still being kept secret from the other girls. Belinda, already had a clearly defined waist, like a Coke bottle. Sonja's bra straps could be seen through her dress, straining against her shoulders, though most of what she kept trussed inside the cups was what Tina's mother would have referred to as *puppy fat*. A *training bra* she would have called it. Training for what? All the same it made Tina aware of her own straight up and down figure. She was more like a Fanta bottle, the same width at hip, middle and chest. Not even mozzie bites, Allistair kept reminding her.

She heard two adult voices coming down the corridor behind her. One belonged to Miss Pryce, her class teacher who also taught them English. She was pretty, but wasn't aware of her habit of squeezing her acne in the middle of her lessons, standing right there, in front of them all. The kids called her Miss Pus.

She was recounting, in a voice more rushed than the one she used in class, "... and I said pound, as in pounds sterling? And he said, no, as in dog pound, and I felt *such* a fool."

The other voice laughed. The growly, gurgley kind of sound you would let out if you were squidding mud between your toes.

Several of the girls said in a sing-song, "Morning Miss Pryce." Then their voices changed frequency. It was as if a choir had suddenly swopped over, mid-hymn, to a Janis Joplin number. "Good morning Mr MacCloud."

Tina wanted to turn and see who it was that had this effect on them. But she couldn't do so without attracting attention, so she carried on pretending to read.

His footsteps hesitated. He was directly behind her back.

"Morning gels," he said, his voice mock serious, then the slap-slap of two long strides as he caught up again with Miss Pryce who was telling the rest of her story.

The girls trilled. Tina went back to her book.

She saw him after break. She took a seat near the back of the class which, according to her timetable, was a geography period. Tina had heard he also taught PT and sports. Cricket in summer, rugby in winter. That explained why he was wearing a white, open-necked shirt and tracksuit pants, whereas the other men teachers had to wear collars and ties. He was smiling as he cleaned the blackboard.

"OK guys, we're starting with a test to see what you've retained from last term."

The class gave a sudden intake of breath, like twenty-five bicycle pumps sucking in air.

He put up his hand to stop the commotion.

"We're a third of the way into the year yet we've got through less than a tenth of the syllabus," he said. "We've got orders to stop messing about and work hard to catch up."

Everyone started moaning. One voice more persistent, like a mosquito whine, than the others: "But Mr MacCloud ..."

That was Belinda. Belinda with the Barbie eyes which she opened ridiculously wide and the pale skin that seemed better suited to an English climate. She might as well have had a label, *Teacher's Pet*, staple-gunned to her forehead. Tina had a Barbie doll. She used it for target practice with her brother's pellet gun.

"No buts, Belinda. And no more goofing off for a swim or nature walks when we're supposed to be in the classroom."

He scratched a tickle just below his moustache and managed to stay serious.

“You have thirty minutes, starting now.”

Tina read through the question paper and sighed. She already knew that the history she would be covering in this school was the same as it had been at every other school: the Great Trek. Year after year, courageous Boer families conquering impossible mountains in their ox wagons; fording torrents; building laagers; fighting off marauding Zulus. But for some reason the geography was always different. She doodled in the margin. She tried answering a few questions. She sat and stared around. There were the predictable posters on the wall: a cross section of a volcano; a map of the world; how a coral atoll was formed. But there was also a poster of a surfer crouched under the overhang of a curling wave and a scrambler suspended in mid-air above a sand-dune, the rider floating behind his bike, holding on to the handlebars with his fingertips. What did these have to do with geography?

The surfer had sun-bleached hair, with streaks of white and yellow gold, like Allistair's. Hers was the colour of a peanut. She wondered how he did it: within days of starting at a new school, he was one of the most popular guys. In the company of his pimple-obsessed *chommies*, he treated her as his skivvy. She was sometimes allowed entry into their hallowed world in return for filching packets of chips and strips of biltong from the pantry, and of course, martyring herself to their mother's wrath when the thefts were discovered. But there were occasions when Tina grew sulky, such as when they forgot her down at the mulberry tree, hands tied to a branch above her head, while they smoked a Lucky Strike behind the compost heap. A game of pirates, and a cat-o'-nine-tails flogging abandoned. If she complained, Allistair would tell her she wouldn't ever be allowed to play with them again. And if ever she committed the ultimate betrayal of snivelling, he would use his deadliest weapon and say her persistent crying was the reason their real father had left them.

They had lived in a series of towns as her step-father worked himself up the ranks of the bank, or the Financial Institution as her mother called it. From the first

time they met, she, at that stage still Miss Felicity van Aswegen, had known he would one day be part of senior management. Whenever she told this part of their family's lore, Tina's step-father would straighten his Windsor knot and duck his head. As the years passed, her mother's breathless tone had gradually changed to a more strident one. Just before he turned forty he had been made Area Manager, but of a backwater, with his office in Roodepoort. Later when people would ask Tina: *Where is Roodepoort?* she would answer: *Exactly*. So when the offer came of a transfer and the position of Circuit Manager, based at the busy Newlands branch, there was never any question that the family would uproot again and move from the Transvaal to the Cape. But always with one eye on Head Office.

Erik, the boy with the warts sitting in the row next to her, was digging in his ear with his pencil. She looked away. Mr MacCloud was drawing on an overhead transparency, a frown on his forehead, but his mouth looking as if it were about to let something escape. He had thick black hair, with a messy fringe, like a gypsy's. There was a leanness about him that she'd only ever seen in photos of runners doing the Comrades' Marathon. She was sure, if she was to try Allistair's test of pinching a roll of skin to find out how much body fat you had, that in Mr MacCloud's case his skin would be too taut to be able to find a roll anywhere. The collar of his white shirt had fallen open, revealing some of his throat which was exceptionally smooth. By craning slightly, Tina could see that his deep tan did not stop at the V of his collar and she tried guessing what sports he played where he could take his shirt off altogether.

He must have sensed her studying him, because she found him looking at her, straight into her eyes, before she had a chance to glance away. His eyes were startlingly black, with no distinction between the iris and pupil; the sole purpose of the white cornea seemed to be to show off the thickness of his lashes, matted as if wet.

He didn't say anything for a second. Then: "You're new. What's your name?"

"I'm Tina."

"Tina what?"

"Christina Héloïse Roland. Sir."

The class convulsed.

Tina did not know what she had done. The mocking timbre made her want to squeeze her eyes shut, but she smiled as if ready to join in their laughter.

Mr MacCloud walked up to one of the boys and held out his hand. "Hello, Harold. I'm Dominic MacCloud." As the puzzled boy shook hands the teacher said, "But you can call me Sir."

Belinda's squeals were the most piercing. Like car tyres going too fast round a bend. A fleck of Erik's spittle landed on Tina's question paper.

Mr MacCloud was standing directly in front of her desk. She could not risk looking up for fear of him seeing what was blazing in her eyes.

"In this school we don't usually bother with Sirs and Ma'ams," he said, gently. "But Tina, if you want to call me Sir, you're welcome. And you, Steve," he walked to the last row and gave one of the biggest boys a whack across the back of his head with a rolled up paper, "can call me Your Highness."

"OK, settle down guys. You have five minutes left."

When their time was up, he instructed them to stop writing and to swop papers with the person next to them. Tina swopped with Erik.

"Number 1: What is the capital of Zambia?"

Everyone intoned, "Lusaka."

"Correct. Anyone get that wrong?"

Erik put up his hand.

"What's the answer in front of you?"

"Z."

There was a pause. Then Mr MacCloud chuckled. Gradually the class joined in. Only Belinda wasn't laughing.

"Number 2: What did Archimedes use for irrigating crops?"

The class chanted, “The Archimedes screw.”

Slowly everyone turned towards Erik. He raised his hand.

“Yes?”

“Water?”

The class erupted.

Mr MacCloud raised one eyebrow at Tina. She couldn’t tell whether he was about to laugh or shout at her.

“Number 3: What is Easter Island famous for? No, wait, don’t. Just hand your papers up to the front of the class and I’ll mark them during the week.

Tina swung her head to see Mr Botha, the headmaster, walking deliberately slowly down the passageway outside the classroom.

When she got home, trailing her satchel by one strap, her mother was squeezing the last swirl of cream through an icing nozzle on to a meringue base. She had a bowl of canned strawberries in syrup on the counter next to her.

“Hello, darling. How was school?”

“OK.”

“Good. Lovely. I’m having some ladies over this afternoon and I’ve made them my speciality.”

Her mother’s meringue always came out chewy. Tina squirted some cream on to the tip of her tongue.

“Oh for heaven’s sake. That’s so unhygienic. Now I’ll have to wash the whole thing out before I can finish this Pavlov.”

She wrung her hands on her apron.

“Go and get changed. Your father’s due home any minute.”

Her mother always used *father* whereas Tina always said *step-father*. Her mother was also *mother*, never *mom*. Theirs was a confusing family: her step-father’s surname was Le Clerq, which her mother had assumed when she’d remarried, and

Allistair – forever wanting to please – had done the same. She had refused and had remained Tina Roland, just as she'd refused to go to the wedding. Six-years-old, standing with her hands on her hips, saying *No*. Eventually her mother had pretended it was her own idea and Tina had spent the day with a nanny who had been unable to prevent her charge drawing on the walls and dropping wax crayons into the pop-up toaster.

Lunchtimes were her worst. The family sat around the table with the radio on full volume; no-one was allowed to talk after the chimes started their *goeng, goeng, goeng*. On the dot, the newscaster would say, "This is Radio South Africa. The time is one o' clock and here is the news." Then he'd read it out, with the voice grown-ups use when they're cross with children.

In today's news, Dr Connie Mulder, Minister of Information, was in the United States where he had held meetings with Vice-President Gerald Ford, as well as Governor of California, Ronald Reagan and a Senator from Texas. Workers at a motor assembly plant were on strike, demanding a six percent wage increase to R2,70 per week. After a performance by Uri Geller, a member of the audience had arrived home to find her entire silver cutlery service, still in the dresser, twisted out of shape. Muhammed Ali had won his bout in a knock-out in the second round.

When the news had finished their step-father cogitated for a few moments, then made his usual concluding remarks.

"These communist agents are inciting unrest among our workers. Don't they know our blacks are the best off in Africa? Show me one other country where they've got a standard of living as high as they have here."

No-one offered to show him anything and he went back to the office.

When Allistair got home from his afternoon sports practice he did not want to play and instead locked himself in his room. She was pretty sure he had a new

Scope magazine. He kept them in his old toy box, with the fish tank standing on top of it.

Once the ladies had arrived for their tea party, and she was sure her mother would not notice her missing, Tina walked down to the corner café and spent a while deciding which sweets to buy. She idled over the rack of Louis L'Amour books which, although new, always looked second-hand. Then she swiped a bottle of pink nail polish and hid it in her palm while paying for a string of necklace sweets, even though her nails were bitten down to skin and she had never worn varnish.

The next day Tina read in the sun again at both breaks. The clot of girls stood further away, accentuating the fact that they had placed her in Coventry, but still close enough so she could hear the odd comment. Belinda used words like *puerile* and *facetious*. Words she could only have got from someone much older.

Tina gave a theatrical yawn then cupped her hands round the outside of her eyes to look up at Devil's Peak, with Table Mountain behind and to the left of it. From here it looked ominous. She had heard the term *bergies* and wondered if this was the local word for trolls. The wind was blowing a streamer of foggy cloud that was forever parked over Newlands. She gave an involuntary shiver and continued reading. When she came to the end of the chapter there was no-one else in the courtyard. The chanting of a poem reached her through the windows of a class on the other side of the paving. She grabbed her timetable and tried to remember what day of the week it was; whether it was the first or second break that had just gone past. She figured out she was supposed to be in R.I., but had no idea what that was or where that took place. Up till now she had merely tagged behind the rest of the class. She hadn't felt like this since her first ever day of school when she'd gone to find the toilet, and when she had tried to return to her classroom, all the doors were shut and they all looked the same. On that day she had cried. Now she tried not to.

A quarter of an hour later she was escorted by the school secretary into Room 4b for Religious Instruction. She had been sitting outside its door all along. Surely someone from her class must have noticed her there.

“One of your lambs went astray Mr Van Rensburg.”

The secretary was so old her jowls wobbled like those on a guinea-fowl.

“There you go dear.” She patted Tina’s hair.

There was a fizz in the air as everybody examined the latecomer.

“Hurry up then, get your bible out,” said Mr Van Rensburg before turning back to the blackboard.

The hush made him swivel round again. He looked her up and down. “You don’t have your bible here, I take it?”

Not here, not anywhere.

He shook his head.

“You can share one with John. Next time, bring your own.” He turned away again. “Where was I? Oh yes, for homework you were to have memorised the names of the first eight books in the Old Testament. Call out their names all of you.”

Tina spent most of the lesson staring out the window. Towards the end she saw Mr MacCloud walk out to the parking lot and get into a metallic-red Volkswagen Beetle, with the black ragtop folded back. As he drove off she wanted to fling open the window and shout, *Rescue me*.

Chapter three

Tina told her mother she had been invited to play with a friend.

“You’re settling in so well. What’s the name of your little friend?”

Tina tried to make hers look like Barbie eyes. “Elizabeth.”

“Lovely. And you can invite Elizabeth to come and play here next weekend.”

“I’ll ask.”

Tina dawdled around the side-streets in Newlands, staying away from Main Road in case her mother should do the unthinkable and actually go out for a walk. She played in a streambed, but climbed out and sat on a fallen branch when she heard something in the long grass that might have been a snake. Looking up at Devil’s Peak, she thought of climbing it, but compared to the koppies she was used to in the Transvaal, the mountain looked so menacing. Boys in her class had warned her that the weather could change in an instant, from mid-summer one moment to gales and rain the next. If you got lost on Table Mountain, they said, you could stray off the path and die up there. Right now it was sunny, but she decided not to chance it and instead ambled down the avenue that led to her school. It had an ornate, white-gabled entrance, with heavy teak gates on massive brass hinges, which lead into a circular drive with a three-tiered fountain in the middle. The gates, apparently, were left open on Saturdays.

As she got towards the point where she would be able to see whether there were any goldfish in the fountain, Tina could hear loud music coming from the assembly hall. It was Pink Floyd, but she couldn’t remember the name of the song.

She walked round the corner to where a door was open and peered inside.

Mr MacCloud was on the parallel bars. He was holding himself upright, his arms locked straight, with the bars level with his hips. He looked as if it took no effort, yet the muscles and tendons just beneath his skin were changing shape all the time. His tape deck was on the floor. He was wearing shorts and a string vest, swaying

back and forth to the hypnotic rhythm, the wistful voices. With his toes pointed he should perhaps have looked tense, but instead he looked at ease, gracefully at peace. He swung higher, then higher still, then stopped, in a vertical handstand. Not a hair trembled. He lowered himself till his shoulders were resting on the bars. Languidly he wheeled back into his earlier position, again swaying to the music. The tempo of the voices increased. The words became raucous. Suddenly he swung much higher, back and forth, then, as he arced through the forward swing, he let go, legs spread apart above the bars and somersaulted. Twice? Three times? He was a blur. When he dropped, with his legs scissored closed, his hands seemed to miss when he ought to have caught himself. He fell between the bars, but at the very last moment caught them from underneath, now suspended full-length below them. He swung himself, gaining speed, then again launched himself into the air, spinning this time, upright, arms locked across his chest, an Oscar statue, spinning and turning, end over end. He landed on the mat, facing her, as the last note thrummed.

Tina had been seen. She could not duck away. She walked in.

He switched off the tape, clapped white powder off his hands, and began towelling the sweat off his arms and neck. There were two bottles of ginger beer next to his tracksuit top. He opened one and offered it to her, then downed the other without stopping.

She kept her eyes averted to prevent herself noticing his nipples, opaquely visible through his vest's fine mesh.

"Brain Damage," she said.

He looked at her as though she had just described herself.

And if your head explodes with dark forebodings too, she prompted.

He hesitated, then picked up the next line: *I'll see you on the dark side of the moon.* His chest was still heaving as he sat down on a school chair, leaning it back against the wall. His smile belonged to a boy caught smoking a cigarette, deciding whether to share it.

"How long have you been a Pink Floyd fan?"

She wasn't going to admit she hadn't been one until that moment.

"My brother has all the LPs."

That sounded so lame.

"But I think *Dark Side* is their best ever."

"Me too. What do you think of The Rolling Stones?"

The cover from *Goat's Head Soup* came to mind, with its skull and floating eyeball.

"Can't stand them."

He inclined his head. He smelt foreign: of fresh, abundant sweat and exhilaration.

She wanted to get off the subject of her taste in music.

"You're so good –"

"And my gym's not bad either." His daredevil grin.

She half-laughed, half-coughed to give herself time to recover.

"Have you won medals and stuff?"

"I used to compete. But I got injured so I'm not supposed to do this any more, but some times I can't resist it."

"Did you land badly?"

He shook his head.

"It wasn't while doing gymnastics. When I was called up I got into the Parabats. They were very proud of the fact that they had matched the Rhodesian SAS and were dropping guys out the back of Dakotas from five hundred feet in the daytime, seven hundred at night. Normally you wouldn't dream of jumping from anything under a thousand. At five hundred your chute pops, literally as you're about to touch the ground." He made an opening umbrella with his hand that came to an abrupt thump against his thigh.

"We were meat bombing at night, but the guy after me was nervous and didn't leave a big enough gap. He dropped almost on top of me so his boots got in the way when my rag opened. I had a fractured spine and spent four months lying in traction in One Mil in Pretoria, not knowing if I was ever going to walk again."

"Eina!"

She felt her face wince in empathy. What could she say that would sound comforting, without it coming across like somebody being sympathetic to a cripple? She tried to think how Alistair would respond. She gave a loud, ginger-beer burp.

"But you look fine now. Are you a hundred percent or ...?"

Every time she opened her mouth she made it worse; why didn't she just save herself the humiliation and have it sewn shut?

"You mean apart from this?" His neck was cricked to one side, his tongue lolled and his left eye and elbow twitched. "Nah. Nothing too serious."

He looked across at her battling to keep from snorting cold drink out through her nostrils.

"Why not give up teaching and become a full-time coach?"

"Don't tempt me."

He changed the subject: "So what are you doing hanging around school at a weekend?"

She shrugged. The silence went on too long.

"I'm double-jointed," she announced, and immediately wished she could kick herself in the head. What a spastic.

He wasn't old but already had permanent laugh puckers at the outer edges of his eyes.

"Show me."

To give herself time to calm down, she went and rewound the tape, before kicking off her slip-slops.

She walked across to the beam as the first song started with its soft heartbeat, gradually getting louder. Then the laughter and the manic screaming. As it died away and the lazy music started, she did a little hop then levered herself up on to the beam using her arms, her legs spread on either side of her body so that as she lowered herself on to the wood she was already doing the splits. She stood up and immediately knew she had done so with a lack of grace. To compensate, she paid extra attention to making her finger movements elegant as she stretched them above her head, and slowly backwards, until they were touching the beam right behind her heel. He had his hand a fraction beneath her spine.

"There's no need," she said from upside down.

"Just in case."

She flicked her legs up so she was in a handstand, but with her legs in the splits again, a mirror image of when she was the other way round. Then she curled into a ball and did a forward roll along the beam. *Boring*, she thought. He stayed at her side. She stood up again, trying to be more graceful this time, and to think of something a little more impressive.

The track was coming to a crescendo. She took a run, three paces, then sprang off the end of the beam, spinning, arms crossed over her chest, turning end-over-end, but panicking, realising she didn't have enough room to get upright before she would hit the floor. She put her arms up to take the brunt of the fall.

His hands caught her round the ribs. He staggered, but kept his balance, then lowered her on to her feet in front of him. She was breathing hard and could feel where his thumbs had gripped her. Perhaps she would find purple fingerprints there.

"What the hell were you trying to do?"

The top of her head reached to level with the middle of his chest. She looked down at where her feet were almost overlapping his.

"I have this knack of being able to copy movement. It's like some people have an ear for music – they can play a song after having heard it once. I have something like that."

"But you couldn't have managed my exit. For that you'd need a helluva lot more momentum than you can get from a three-step run-up."

"I nearly made it."

He tilted her head up so he was looking into her eyes. His irises were as dark as litchi pips.

"It's so easy to think you're invincible when you're young. It's only when you get hurt you realise your body's fragile. Don't ever take it for granted."

She nodded. "*Ja*." There was a long pause. "*Oom*."

He leant back and they were so close she could feel how he let go completely when he laughed.

"Uncle? Are you trying to make me feel I'm overdue for the knacker's yard?"

"No!" She gave him Barbie eyes.

"Merely showing respect ... to my elders and betters. Sir."

Neither of them had moved their feet. Now they became aware of it and drew apart, shuffling to make it look less deliberate.

"Thanks for catching me," she said softly. Then quickly: "So what do you think?"

He looked at her intently.

"Not bad."

Before she could stop herself: "And my gym's not bad either."

His eyes widened. He was about to say something more but stopped. Then he grinned, his wing-walker grin.

"I'd give you, eight for technique, four for elegance, ten out of ten for cheek ... and zero for common sense."

She knew she could have come back with some sparky retort but her throat blocked up and her eyes stung. She wished he hadn't been looking so closely at her, but he was.

"Technique and elegance are just a matter of lots of practice," he said, his voice a cold face-cloth against her hot skin. "And having a good coach of course. But bal— ... cheek and a lack of fear are what sometimes separate the truly brilliant from the average."

He started picking up his things.

"Want a lift home?"

That would take some explaining.

"No thanks. I'm fine."

"Go on. Get out of here." He tossed one of her flip-flops at her so she had to duck.

"Yes, Sir."

As she ran along the pavement it was like that recurrent dream where she was flying, for every time she did a *jeté*, brushing her fingers against overhanging leaves, she had no sensation of touching down again. Neil Armstrong strides.

When she arrived home she got into a fight, wrestling with Allistair and his older friend Simon who had stolen her last, carefully hoarded Easter egg. While Allistair pummelled her, Simon did his best to hold her, to stop her wriggling, and although he too smelt of sweat and exertion, it wasn't the same. Not even close.

Chapter four

It was the end of the school day, a double PT period, and although it was officially the start of a winter term, with the stifling temperatures they'd been having for the past week, most of the class had brought their costumes. It didn't take much persuading for Mr MacCloud to replace the cross-country run with a swimming lesson. He hadn't taken any notice of her since Saturday. Tina had tried showing off her flick-flack skills while he was on playground duty; had beaten the school's reigning tennis and swimming champions; and had been made a stationery prefect. During one assembly she had even been asked to read out excerpts from her history project – on what life must have been like while trekking via ox-wagon – which she'd copied from one of her brother's old assignments. Yet she remained invisible.

It was while Mr MacCloud was standing on the edge of the pool, preparing to blow the whistle for the next batch of swimmers to dive in, that she acted on reflex and gave him a hefty shove. He almost fell, but managed to twist to one side so that she was the one caught off guard. She grabbed his hand as she went over the vertical and, with her toes gripping the side but her centre of gravity above the water, she tried to make him topple.

"Come on Steve, Mike, help me get him in."

Nobody moved. Lined up at the shallow-end, they watched her teetering, that halfwit grin on her face.

She tugged harder, hoping to break the spell, to return them to Saturday afternoon.

He flicked her free with his, "Stop it."

He did not speak to her for the rest of the lesson, and neither did anyone else. At the end, as the class was traipsing through the antiseptic footbath, into the change-rooms, he called out: "Miss Roland. I'd like to see you."

While the others were getting dressed he took her round the side of the pump-house, out of sight, and crouched in front of her so their eyes were level.

"Just because you and I have had contact outside of class doesn't mean you can take advantage of that. I can't have you undermining my discipline."

"I'm sorry." If he had used an angry tone, she could have deflected it. But not this.

Water bubbled and churned in the sand filter. The bricks were permanently wet round here in the shade and it would have been dank, had it not been for the pungent smell of chlorine.

"Look," he said.

She couldn't.

"I've noticed you've been battling to fit in." He glanced over her shoulder. "If they see I'm treating you any differently, they'll tear your flesh from your bones."

He held out his thumb and made a snapping motion against it with his forefinger.

"I've got to treat you just the same as everyone else. No," he hesitated. "More than that. With a total lack of interest. OK? And if I can offer you a word of advice?"

She nodded.

"Don't do anything to make yourself stand out. Be Miss Nondescript."

She hadn't heard that word before. There was something else she did not understand. "What's this?" she asked, making the snapping motion between thumb and forefinger.

He smiled as if someone out of her earshot had made a joke.

"Have you done any scuba diving?"

She hadn't, but was thrilled that he thought she might have done.

"Promise you won't tell?"

"Promise."

"This," he held out his thumb again, but now snapped all four fingers against it, "is the hand-signal for shark. So when I was trying to think of a way to describe them," he twisted his neck towards the change-rooms, "I didn't want to call them piranhas out loud, so the smaller version of the same hand signal said it instead."

When she got to the door of the change-rooms the rest of the girls were coming out. They noticed the red rims to her eyelids and smirked.

On the way home the *jetés* were not enough, so instead of going straight to her house, she ran off at an angle, uphill. She knew her mom was on a shopping trip in the city with a friend and would not be back before four. Tina crossed Union Street and jogged up into Newlands Forest on the lower slopes of Table Mountain, intending to explore for just a few minutes, before Yasmin, their maid, would start fretting. With her satchel and tog-bag bumping against her back, she tried to keep note of which footpath she had taken. The forest was cool, despite the oppressive heat outside, and smelt of pine air-freshener and, deeper inside, of something dark and mushroomy. There were dirt roads and paths and even animal tracks going off at random and she felt a secret thrill knowing how easily she could get lost. For, although many of the giant fir trees were planted in strict rows, there were also areas where plants had grown wild, and in the watercourses things had become riotous. In every fairy tale there was always a forest, and this was surely the Hänsel and Gretel one.

On the Saturday afternoon she very nearly didn't get away from home. Her mother wanted her to phone Elizabeth and invite her round to their house for lunch and to spend the afternoon. Tina had to invent an older sister for Lizzy, with jaundice, who needed company. But then her mother fretted about Tina getting infected so she had to use the phone and come back and say the sister was past the contagious stage.

When she got to school there was a box-shaped Alfa Romeo with extra large chrome tailpipes parked in the driveway and again the music coming from the hall was loud. *Bohemian Rhapsody* this time. She inched her head around the door. Mr MacCloud was there, stretched out along the length of one of the roof beams, but he had someone else with him, standing on a ladder. A shorter man, wearing denim bell-bottoms, was handing something upwards.

Freddie Mercury was interrupted by a harsh fizzie accompanying an incandescent light, surrounded by a blue halo, like a giant firework expelling thousands of sparkles. She shut her eyes, to give them a chance to stop repeating the pattern of starbursts and zigzags, then popped her head around the corner again to see if they were still alive, hoping they'd been welding and hadn't just electrocuted themselves. The stranger was at the bottom of the ladder and Mr MacCloud was sliding down a rope. She went rigid; he was walking towards her, the glass visor in his helmet tilted up from his face. He had a man's body and a robot head. She looked around: there was nothing to hide behind, unless she ran to the fountain and lay down, curled around behind it. But if he noticed her there, how could she ever explain it? She couldn't let him know she'd been spying on him. She ran five steps in reverse, then started dawdling forwards again, so that as he stepped out the door she was walking up to it.

"Howzit, Sir."

A muffled: "Miss Roland."

She couldn't see his smile beneath his welding helmet, but she knew it was there.

"I was hoping you might pitch."

He lifted the helmet off and shook his head to free the hair stuck to his forehead. When he got to the boot of the car, he put the helmet inside and withdrew two large metal rings.

"I need a guinea piglet."

She followed him back into the hall.

“Johann, this is Tina, one of my many monsters. Monster, this is Johann, my house-mate and drinking buddy.”

Johann nodded in her direction. He had black hair, just like Mr MacCloud’s, only he wore his longer, and neater; blow-dried; with the side sections curved over his ears and the back falling well below his collar. She expected him to turn away and finish wrapping the thick cables around the welding machine, but he stopped and went and held the ladder. Mr MacCloud was on the second-from-top rung, tying the rings to the two ropes attached to the rafters.

“Johann, lift Tina up and let her hang from the rings.”

Tina came forward and Johann lifted her so that she could grasp the thin circles of smooth metal. She wondered if he just didn’t know his own strength or if he deliberately squeezed her so tight as to hurt her ribs.

Mr MacCloud sat astride the beam and pulled on the ropes, with her dangling below, adjusting them until he was satisfied with their length.

“OK Monster, jump down.”

She dropped off lightly, then moved aside as he lowered himself down the ropes using only his hands, with his legs at right-angles to his body. He gripped the rings and dismounted in a slow-motion backward somersault.

The three of them stood around.

“Johann made the rings and brackets. He’s a mechanic in a garage workshop.”

“Oh. How nice of you.”

That was what her mother would have said. At least she hadn’t said *how nice for you*, which would have had a totally different meaning.

Johann ignored her. She tried to think of something funny to say.

“So you’re the little gymnast.” Johann got in first, putting the emphasis on *little*.

She thought: there must be a word for these sentences to which there is no response.

"You must really love school to be here on a Saturday." He looked across at Nick. "If we've finished here, I'd say we head off to The Stag's Head. Right now I could attack a bottle of tequila with a blunt lemon." He smiled at Tina. It looked like he was already sucking on a wedge of lemon.

"I was on my way to see a friend. I'd better be off."

"Cheers," said Johann.

"Ciao, Monster. See you Monday."

She had two bottles of Fanta Grape, now lukewarm, in her tog-bag, but no way of opening them. The owner of the corner café refused to give her a refund on one so, to get the deposits back, she was forced to open and drink them both, there and then. She burped purple gas as she ambled into Newlands Forest, having to find a way to kill time to pass before she went home. Though it was gloomy inside, this time the forest was hot and claustrophobic, with no breeze at all. In the lower section, she came across the tumble-down ruins of a house, and made a mental note to ask someone who had lived there. Today it was the Little Red Riding Hood forest. Or the Billy Goat Gruff one, perhaps with a *bergie* lurking under a bridge. She walked faster on a path that led uphill. Soon she was sweating, but she kept going, faster still. She passed out of the pine plantation and into indigenous forest which was lush and chaotic. She was relieved when the track she was on joined a better-used path that followed the mountain's contour and, flipping a mental coin, she turned right along it. In many places it had been worn smooth and in places it felt spooky. Soon she was running along it. The path dipped into a ravine, where a small waterfall gurgled and the rocks grew slippery. By now she was thirsty again and dared to bend down to scoop up handfuls of the clear water, but when a tendril of moss slithered between her fingers and tickled her lips she leapt up and raced back along the path, getting home looking bedraggled and having to make up a story about a picnic at

Kirstenbosch and games of rolling down the lawns. Lizzie's sister had stayed at home. With an aunt.

University of Cape Town

Chapter five

The following week it rained all day, every day, and on the Saturday, when she rode past the school on a very roundabout detour to buy milk for her mom, she saw the Alfa parked outside the hall again. When she got home she didn't even bother making any excuses to go out, and instead spent the day irritating her brother. Slightly chubby Allistair, who had the ability to adopt at will the upturned, blameless expression of one of the saints in a stained-glass window; with his gold-streaked hair that their mother loved to ruffle; his eyes slightly more emerald than Tina's; his mind like a sewer rat's.

By evening their mother had had enough and gave Allistair money for the two of them to go to the cinema. The *fillums*, Yasmin called them. Their mother did not drive so their father dropped them off at five at The Capital and the arrangement was made to pick them up again at seven-thirty sharp. They were both supposed to see the latest Disney film, *Escape to Witch Mountain*, but as soon as they got to the box office, Allistair bought a single ticket for that show and another for *One Flew Over the Cuckoos' Nest*.

"Mom will have a hernia if she knows you're leaving me to watch a movie on my own."

"I'm not going to sit through that childish crap. I'm going to see Jack Nicholson. They say he's a weirdo."

"I don't want to see a kid's movie. I want to see the Cuckoos' Nest one."

She was close to kicking him in the shins.

"Tough titties PJ. It's got an age restriction." PJ: *piepiejoller*, she supposed pisswilly would be the closest English equivalent. "I can get away with looking eighteen, but no ways could you."

They parted company and Tina bought some popcorn and a cooldrink, then sat through the predictable Disney show. Tia was OK but her brother Tony was

totally obnoxious. Like somebody else she knew. They were orphans who felt alienated from everyone else. Which was hardly surprising when it turned out they were from outer space. Now that could explain a lot. Tina wondered on which planet she had been born. Pluto probably; the one named after the dog in Mickey Mouse.

Long after her film had ended, Allistair's was still on the go, so she sat on one of the mod velveteen cylindrical pouffes and spun it around and around until an usher came across and told her to stop.

She was pulling her knuckles, making them pop, when she recognised Mr MacCloud from his back; his unruly hair looked like it needed a comb through it. He was standing in the ticket queue and she was about to jump up and say, *Howzit, Sir*, when she noticed a pale arm, like a blindworm, wind itself round his waist and snoop into his jeans' back pocket. Tina shifted so she could see who was next to him. A tall female, with flouncy red hair, skin that had never seen the sun and long, long legs. She was wearing knee-high platform boots and hot pants, both in shiny black plastic. The hand was slowly kneading his bum as if it were cold Plasticine. He tilted his shoulder towards her and she leaned across. A long tongue came out and probed his ear.

Tina wanted to spew. Cream soda and popcorn. On that carpet you wouldn't have known.

"That was so" It was Allistair's voice. Standing next to her.

"Disgusting."

"No."

She looked up at him.

His eyes were out of focus. "Disturbing. Ja, that's the word. Disturbing." He turned his head towards her but his eyes were still funny. "There was this one scene where there's this young guy, see, who's finally had the courage to do something really ... outrageous, and he's happy and joking and this nurse, Nurse Ratched, says

she doesn't know how his mother is going to take this. It just zots him, like invisible lightning."

She could relate to that.

"So he kills himself."

"How?"

His eyes came into focus. "Why do you want to know that for? Anyway, that's not the main story. But the mother. Man oh man. I could just picture her."

So could she.

Allistair was subdued for three days after the show.

Tina did not see Mr MacCloud again until Tuesday, when he was taking the nets down after tennis practice. She went across to help. To be expected, Belinda wasn't far behind and the two of them had no choice but to work together.

"Thanks girls," he said afterwards as he gathered up the last few stray balls and dumped them in a tub.

She wanted to make some comment about The Capital, but he spoke first.

"I'm starting a gymnastics club. On Saturday afternoons. You should both come along."

Tina had hoped it would be a small group, by invitation only, but the following day there was a poster up on the notice-board announcing the start of the club and asking for those interested to sign up. There were already more than twenty names on the list.

As a stationery prefect, she had managed to wangle it so that this was one of the orders she did during her once-a-week duty. The next day, after she had delivered his exercise books, chalk and ballpoints, she dawdled until they were alone. Then she said, trying to sound off-hand rather than accusing, "You're going to have a huge crowd coming to your gym club."

He grinned. She had overheard two of the mothers talking as they got into their cars after doing their weekly duty in the tuck shop. Tina had been bunking a lesson and was sitting behind the bicycle shed, next to the car park, where the weeds grew unchecked. One mother had said, "He has *the* most devastating smile. He's indiscriminate though – smiles at everyone. But when he turns it on me, my ovaries bounce around like ping-pong balls."

The other voice: "And that black fringe just slays me."

They never named the person they were talking about, but Tina had known immediately.

"And those bedroom eyes." A groan.

The first voice: "I never know whether that *come hither* look of his is deliberate or not. It makes me want to come and hither. And not necessarily in that order."

Their laughter was seamy and muffled, as if they had their hands splayed over their mouths.

Then the first voice, twisted sharper, like barbed wire. "I hear he has a different girlfriend every week."

"I'm free next week."

Again that laugh.

Mr MacCloud was saying, "Only for the first two or three sessions."

"Sorry?"

"The gym club. It'll start off big then most of them will find they've got better things to do over a weekend. You'll see." He smiled again.

That fringe.

He was right of course. The club started with about forty kids. In the first sessions Mr MacCloud put them through a tough routine to start getting them fit and supple: lots of running up and down the stage's steps; knee-squats; flexes; sit-ups and touching

toes. No sign of any of the equipment. During a pause Tina bent over backwards until she was about to touch the ground, then instead gripped her ankles. But she caught an imperceptible shake of the head from Mr MacCloud and came up again before the others could take much notice. From then on she made sure that the way she performed the exercises was unremarkable, her execution neither better nor worse than anyone else's.

Within a month they were down to ten kids. Predictably, Belinda was one of them.

"We should have a club uniform," she said loudly but mainly for the benefit of Mr MacCloud. "A white leotard maybe for the girls, and white shorts and T-shirts for the boys. And we should have competitions against other schools."

"But white gets dirty so quickly," said Sharon, "and anyway it's see-through." Already she was thinking like a mom.

"And we can go on tour to Joburg," said Steve. Already he was thinking like his rugger-bugger older brother.

Mr MacCloud cut in. "That's all in the future, only once we've got any routines worth putting on display. OK, get the mats out and we're going to learn how to do a handspring. After that, we're going to get airborne." He indicated upwards. Resting on one of the beams was the set of rings.

How was she going to copy the others' clumsiness when all she wanted to do was copy his perfection? Christmas beetles versus a falcon?

During the winter term, Mr MacCloud supervised rugby practice on Monday afternoons; Tuesdays hockey; Wednesdays soccer; Thursdays rugby. The girls, by comparison, played such drippy sports: netball and rounders. Both boys and girls played tennis. Saturday mornings there were often matches against nearby schools. Mr MacCloud drove the bus and Miss Pus accompanied the netball players who practiced on the same days as the rugby team.

Tina joined the tennis team and, after the headmaster refused to let her play rugby, the netball team too.

Whereas all the other teachers went home to mark tests or do their preparation in the afternoons, Mr MacCloud often stayed behind after sports and did his work in his classroom.

One or two afternoons a week – she tried to ration herself – she would wander in while he was working. At first it had felt awkward, but now he seemed to expect her. Occasionally he would have a bottle of cooldrink waiting. They talked about everything. The army. The war in Rhodesia. During his call-up he had spent half a year in Angola. Whether age restrictions should be scrapped for films. He said they were sometimes justified. She said they were just stupid. Their taste in music: they both loved Status Quo; John Denver; David Bowie when he sang *Angie*, but not some of his other stuff; Slade; Ike and Tina Turner; and Cher, but they hated Sonny. He loved Elvis. She thought he was over the hill; Gary Glitter was sexier. They admitted their feelings towards Pink Floyd were mixed, depending on the album.

He told her he'd christened his Beetle Delilah. When she remarked that his car's colour was her favourite shade of red, he corrected her: Delilah was not red but metallic vermillion. It looked like he'd freshly painted her with nail varnish – the type with glitter. Tina did not tell him she'd swapped her bottle of varnish for one that matched Delilah. Her mother labelled women who wore that colour sluts. Delilah the Slut.

They argued over whether Twicks or Chappies bubble gum was better value. He explained to her what the fall of Saigon had signified, but first had to tell her what Vietnam had been about. The same with Watergate and Nixon. She asked him about homosexuality but he fudged his answer. They debated whether or not Uri Geller was a con artist; why you can't sneeze in your sleep, and whether they would want to live in a space station on the moon for a year.

She asked him to teach her more diving hand-signals. A clenched fist for *danger*, first to get the other person's attention, then pointing at the source of the threat; a thumbs up didn't mean *good*, it meant *let's go up* and thumbs down the converse; *good* was a circle made between thumb and index finger; stop: a hand held up like a traffic cop; *look*: two fingers pointed at your own eyes, then at the object in question. A forefinger cutting the throat meant *I'm out of air* and four fingers pointed to the mouth meant, *I need to buddy-breathe*.

Not to be confused with one finger to her mouth, *I'm going to be sick*, she said.

Or one finger up the nose, *I'm bored*, he added.

"What does *buddy-breathe* mean?"

"You always dive with a buddy, so if your tank runs out, you signal to him that you want to share his, then the two of you swim side by side, each taking alternate breaths from his DV."

She frowned.

"Sorry – his demand valve."

"I'd love to learn to do scuba. Would you teach me?"

"What a pleasure. But you haven't got any equipment."

"What would I need?"

"A wetsuit, though we can always make a plan; fins; weight-belt; mask and snorkel, although again in most cases I can borrow some stuff; and a tank of course."

"Couldn't we just share a tank?"

"You mean buddy-breathe?" He smiled. "It's really hard. Even experienced divers battle to get it right. You have to be able to hold your breath for a long time."

"I can hold my breath for five minutes, I bet you."

He chuckled. "Not five minutes. Three, top-side. But that isn't the secret. The biggest trick is to learn to relax every fibre in your body and to breathe slowly. Bring your cozzie next week and I'll see how well you can do."

She spent hours in her room, timing herself while she held her breath. At first she could manage no more than twenty seconds, but after a while she got it up to nearly a minute. During the weekend she climbed over the school's swimming pool fence and swam three times, trying to stay underwater for at least two lengths.

The following Friday she had her costume and towel with her. After school, once she had made sure everyone else had left, she doubled back and went into his classroom.

"Thought you'd forgotten."

"No chance."

"Come on then."

"Where are we going?"

"Newlands Pool."

"Not here?"

"Nah, it's not deep enough. I managed to get hold of a key."

At the municipal swimming baths he unlocked the gate and wrestled a bulky dive bag through the turnstile. They were the only ones in the huge grounds, which were surrounded by high walls and a pavilion on one side; the ever-present Table Mountain looming in the background. She so wanted to invite him to climb it with her, but couldn't think of how to phrase the invitation.

He handed her a tattered wetsuit which she took ages to struggle into, even though it was several sizes too large. When she came out the change-rooms she found him wearing what looked like a black rubber rugby jersey, and holding up a matching pair of long johns. She bent, as if to look at the equipment spread out on the paving, not wanting to see whether his white costume was see-through or not. Once he'd pulled on his leggings, she turned round.

"That's a weird wetsuit."

He put his hands up and twirled for her.

"Made it myself – I dipped clothing into latex and let it dry in shape. The one you're wearing used to belong to Johann many moons ago."

She felt sticky. "Why are we at the shallow end?"

"I want to check you get the hang of this before I take you deep enough to get into trouble."

When the double meaning struck him, he grinned at her – the grin a circus knife-thrower gives his lady accomplice before the blades start to fly.

She kept her composure. The perfect foil in a double act, though she longed to use their quip: *Don't tempt me*.

It had started when they'd got back late from an away match. Mr MacCloud had been driving the bus and, instead of offloading everybody back at the school, had dropped Miss Pryce off at her house, then each of the kids, one by one. Tina's home had been last on the route.

As they got to the intersection where he needed to turn, he'd switched off the indicator and said, *What if we were to just keep driving? What if we were to vanish?*

She hadn't used his favourite phrase, *Don't tempt me*, at the time – it was one of those chirps you think of only after the event – but from then on it had become the standard response.

On the next bus trip, while Rowena and Natalie were talking, she'd put her fingers to her temples and used her hands, like blinkers, to shield her face. Silently she'd mouthed, *What if?* She could see only his eyes in the small rectangle of the rear-view mirror, but they crinkled in a look she knew so well. She hadn't needed to see his lips to know what he was saying.

Mr MacCloud gave her a weight-belt with a single weight; a mask; three pairs of socks, so that the flippers he had borrowed would fit her; and a snorkel that tasted of

salty rubber. She wondered if it too had belonged to Johann. Then he showed her how to fall in backwards and get accustomed to breathing through the snorkel, and clearing it when it filled with water. Once she was comfortable, he demonstrated taking a breath from the demand-valve, which was attached, via a corrugated tube, to the tanks on his back. He passed it to her and while she took a breath, he released bubbles slowly, then inhaled again when she passed it back to him. She had to surface urgently twice – you can't laugh underwater – before they got their breathing to match. Then he fetched a brick for her and a weight-belt for himself and got her to grip the brick under one arm while they swam along the bottom, swopping the DV back and forth like the pipe from a hookah; aware of, but pretending not to notice the saliva that went with it.

With the brick on her one side, she started listing badly, so he held her level with an arm slung across her back. If they had been wearing swimming costumes, the skin contact would have made it a very intimate gesture, but with the two layers of wetsuit between them, it felt protective, brotherly. At first she swam fast, but he slowed her down with a hand-signal, and she copied his nonchalant style. In freestyle, you were taught to kick as fast as you were able, but in scuba you merely wafted her feet up and down. It was even better than her flying dreams.

When they got to the deep end he gave a thumbs-down signal and they descended along the incline towards the bottom of the shelf under the diving boards, to where the water changed colour. But as soon as she realised how far down they were, she took a deep breath. Immediately she started rising gently. He held her by her waist and signalled for her to take small – fingers pinched together – breaths. Even though her lungs begged to take enormous gulps, she did as instructed and they slowly descended, no longer skimming the bottom but now in 3-D. Her body wanted to panic as it felt itself losing its balance, tumbling till it was facing upside down; twirling. Side by side they mirrored his spectacular dismount off the parallel bars – only a thousand times slower. Then she saw he was helping to make this

happen, using his free hand to paddle water when it wasn't his turn to hold the DV. She forced herself to slow her heart-rate and to relish the sensation of vertigo. Floating, weightless; no longer subject to normal laws like gravity or the need to breathe air. Peter Pan and Wendy come to life in the Newlands Swimming Pool. If she smiled any wider she was afraid she would break the seal around the mouthpiece and drown.

One Friday, just before second break ended, she came to him, her cheeks the colour of washing powder, her fingers trembling.

“Please just sign this,” she said, holding out a stationery requisition form.

He was about to say something but stopped.

She waited for his question, but he did not say anything. Instead he signed the form without looking at it and handed it back to her.

“Thank you.”

She knew he would hear later that stationery had been found in her desk, though how anyone had spotted her putting it there she would never know, and that she had been accused of stealing. His signature had got her off the hook. She waited for him to bring it up but he never did.

Chapter six

Mr Botha, the principal, was ranting at them about complaints he had received that children from the school were being seen in town looking – he struggled to capture something in his fist – *slordig* – was the word he found. Tina wasn't sure of the English word, but the guttural *g* suggested something vile.

The school had a 10-minute assembly every day, the pupils and teachers standing in the sun while Mr Botha spoke down to them from the first floor balcony. But on Mondays the pupils sat cross-legged on the floor in the school hall, and sometimes got splinters in their bums, while the teachers sat on chairs on stage and Mr Botha gave his address from the lectern. He was huge, at least six foot two, and he had a way of shaking his finger when he got worked up about something. It was well known that while he thought of himself as a progressive headmaster, he far preferred his previous Afrikaans school where the boys were drilled as cadets for an hour before school every morning.

Mr MacCloud took a long slow breath, not quite a yawn, and let his eyes stray across the rows of children seated below. He did not show any sign of recognition as his gaze meandered on to Tina and then past her, but at that moment he swiped his finger across his throat and then rested his hand under his chin so that his thumb was pointing out the side door. She stifled her urge to laugh with something between a hiccup and a cough. Immediately she sensed that someone in her row was watching her, so she picked her nose and studied the snot with a great deal of interest before glancing across, straight into Sonja's eyes.

Within minutes of sitting down in first period, Miss Pus's English class, Tina asked to be excused. She forced herself to walk slowly down the corridor and to take the stairs one at a time, then walk back in the opposite direction along the corridor below, towards Mr MacCloud's classroom. As she got to his windows she did not look in, but rubbed her finger against the side of her nose as if it were itchy, then idly

turned and looked just as she was about to pass out of view. Mr MacCloud didn't seem to have noticed her, and was leaning over a pupil's shoulder, looking intently at an exercise book, but with his finger unmistakably resting along the bridge of his nose.

One morning Tina got to her place at the table early – she hadn't been sleeping well lately – and couldn't face the thought of yet another bowl of brown, lumpy sludge. Every day Yasmin prepared breakfast: Maltabella porridge, with a halved grapefruit in winter. Wheatbix and fruit salad in summer. She picked up her satchel and got to the door as Allistair was lurching downstairs in his pyjamas.

"Where the hell are you off to, PJ? It's the crack of dawn."

"I'm on zebra-crossing patrol this week."

A slight bending of the truth. The school did have a zebra-crossing, just not a patrol.

"Since when did you start sucking up so much?"

"Since when did you turn into such a Neanderthal?"

"Dog-breath." He feinted at her and she skipped aside.

"Do you want a match?" She held out a clenched hand and, as he reached for it, said, "Your face and my arse."

She sprinted for the front door but he tripped her in the passage and gave her a Chinese Bangle, twisting the skin on her forearm in opposite directions till it felt about to tear. She knew her behaviour would arouse his suspicion when she didn't howl for adult intervention, but needed, more than anything, to get out.

It was still dark when she got to school and she loitered around the car park, hoping that Mr MacCloud would get there early too, but as usual his '68 ragtop Beetle, with its matching metallic vermillion surfboard taking up the passenger's side, skidded into

its parking bay just as assembly was about to start, causing Mr Botha's eyebrows to quiver.

Tina had no choice but to get to school forty-five minutes early for the rest of the week. On the fifth morning, she waited for Solomon, a cleaner, to unlock her classroom and then went and sat at her desk, watching the clock tick. She turned to stare outside and noticed a smiley face drawn in the dust on the window next to her desk. She checked and found it had been done on the outside of the window, which had never been able to open and was on the first floor, with neither ledge nor foothold below.

When she walked past Mr MacCloud's office later that day he looked up and looked away, but rested a finger just below his nostril, pointing upwards. Tina swivelled to hear what the girl next to her was saying, but at the same time gave a hippo yawn, with a curled finger hooked over her lower lip, pointing towards the back of her throat.

They had found it significant that their birthdays were exactly one week apart, hers on the first and his on the eighth of May, and that he was precisely double her age. On his birthday-and-a-half, November the eighth, she slipped her silver St Christopher into his desk drawer, rehearsing how she would tell her mom she had lost it.

That was on a Thursday morning. At the end of the school day his door was locked. She waited for two hours but he never arrived. He wasn't at work on the Friday and for the first time he didn't pitch up for the gym club on Saturday. By Monday he was still not around.

At home she had a photo of him, hidden inside the lining of her jewellery box with its little ballerina which turned and tinkled when you opened the lid. Her mother had given it to her, hoping she would take an interest in feminine things. Tina stored a mummified spider in it to keep her mother out. She would open the lid at night,

deftly catching the figurine before it could emit the first note, and remove the photo, examining it under moonlight. It had been taken five years earlier and appeared in a 1969 issue of *Panorama*, with the caption, *Dominic MacCloud, in training for the forthcoming gymnastics competition where the Springbok team will be selected*. The photo showed him doing a crucifix on the rings, arms at exact right angles to his body, his muscles about to explode. A woman in the second row had been caught in the middle of a gasp – both hands clapped over her mouth. A black and white, with light coming in from a high window. Him in a pale skin-tight leotard, the individual muscles in his legs delineated by their shadows. His dark hair had been much shorter – he had been in the army – and he was minus the sideburns which now undercut his cheekbones, though still with his distinctive moustache that had since been tamed.

What if we were to run away and join a flying trapeze? she had often whispered, so softly he would've had to lip-read. She had pictured herself in a sequinned fuschia costume and black fishnets, arms above her head, spinning in the air, and him in his white leotard swinging from his knees above, readying to catch her. As their skin clapped and clasped, hand to wrist, hand to wrist, how they would feel their hearts falter, then synchronise. She had wanted to feel his moustache against her throat.

Now she begged him for forgiveness – surely he must be able to sense her torment. Was he sitting in a bar with Johann, or worse with the red-head, dangling the pendant, chuckling over the kid with the crush? The infatuation. Was he angry with her? Had she mistaken his kindness for pity he showed to all gammy misfits?

On the Tuesday she looked up from her desk to see him striding past, touching the second button of his shirt, wearing a tie for a change.

When they couldn't see one another at weekends, Tina would go for walks in the forest. The winter rain had brought out strange orange fungi, growing on bark like

undersea corals, and masses of arums; the flower Archangel Gabriel had given to Mary. But here this flower had no exalted status and was called *varklelie* – pig lily. At least the porcupines loved them; she found their quills, their tiny black *koeksister* droppings, and signs of them having burrowed and snuffled in the thick wet soil. Tina had done a school project and was learning to identify some of the local trees: *rooieels* – red alder, bearing creamy-white flowers in erect, fluffy clusters; giant yellowwoods; *keurboom* – blossom tree, with its pink sweetpea-like flowers; and wild almond that bore nuts with an outer husk just like an almond's, but inside, a fruit that was poisonous. She also came across foreign flowers – bluebells and snowdrops – and learnt that the ruin she had discovered had once been a house owned by the famous Lady Anne Barnard, who had named it Paradise. Tina spent hours walking around the tumbled stones, imagining herself dressed in long, hooped skirts, smocked bodices with sheer lace up to her throat and down to her wrists, entertaining visitors. She would be tall and elegant, a bit aloof; standing looking smouldering, with a glass in her hand, but now and then lowering her head to hear something being whispered by an admirer. Underneath she'd be wearing kidskin boots laced all the way up her ankle, and which accentuated the delicate curve of her foot. Did noblewomen wear anything else beneath all those layers in those days? And had this been Lady Anne's home – it was rather tiny – or did she have a mansion in the city and was this her trysting place for illicit meetings with darkly tanned men, who were way below her station? How did women and men behave in such situations? She was sure it was an ancient dance, but she didn't know the steps. Then she'd mock herself for being so Mills & Boon, abandon the overgrown remains of Paradise and trot through the gates, up towards Rhodes Memorial where she'd stalk the fallow deer. She imagined herself an Amazon woman, having cut off her right breast so as to be able to pull a longbow – though in her case she wouldn't have to bother. She would practice sneaking up on the buck with the biggest antlers, but could never be sure whether she would actually have it in her to pierce one with an arrow.

During the week it usually took her mother an hour or more to prepare herself for the outside world, so she seldom emerged from her bedroom before they left for school, but when Tina and Allistair got downstairs one morning she was already sitting at the breakfast nook, her make-up perfect, her brunette hair still flawless after a wash and set the previous day. She'd had it done specially for the St Dunstons' Parents' Evening. Each curl was so tight and neat, Tina felt an impulse to muss it up. Her mother's inscrutable expression stopped her. It was even more worrying than the look she used on public occasions to warn one of her offspring that they were doing something wrong.

"Your teacher is very impressed with you."

"Oh." Tina was learning to give away as little as possible. "Good."

Allistair sensed the air, like a dog trained to detect drugs or explosives, and left the room.

"Miss Pryce said you had caught up wonderfully with the rest of the class."

That had to be the good news.

"But she felt you weren't trying as hard as you could."

Tina's marks in every subject, barring Religious Instruction, put her slap-bang in the middle of the class. Never higher nor lower. Just like her gymnastics: unremarkable.

She attempted her own version of an inscrutable expression, but caught sight of her reflection in the toaster and what looked back at her was gormless.

"Miss Pryce said you hadn't made many friends."

She couldn't afford to change it now. Gormless would have to do.

"There's no Elizabeth in your class, Christine."

"No, maaa."

Trying to sound bored, concentrating on not letting words come tumbling out and then choking on them due to shortness of breath, which would be a total give away.

"I'm not ma."

"No. Mother."

"No need to get cheeky with me, young lady."

"Yes, mom."

"So?" In that dentist's drill voice of hers.

"Lizzy is in the standard above me."

"Oh."

"Anyway Liz and I broke up yesterday. Now I'm friends with Esmé."

"I see."

She tried to press home the advantage.

"So I've been invited to play at Esmé's this Sunday."

"No. I don't think so. This time I'd like a chance to get to know your young friend. We'll have a barbeque here on Sunday and she can come and join us."

Her mother was the only person she knew who said *can* when she meant *will*, and *barbeque* instead of *braai*.

Tina could just picture how Esmé would be startled when invited round.

"Oh, and your gym teacher, what's his name?"

Please, please, please may he have remembered to button up his collar.

"Mr MacCloud."

"Yes, that's him. He seems like a nice young man." She patted the back of her hairdo.

"Mmm." She hoped that had come out as a 'do you like toast?' *hmm*, not a 'do you like chocolate cake?' *mmmm*.

"I was chatting to him about me getting more involved in the school and he suggested the tuck shop, but that really isn't the type of thing I had in mind. I think the PTA might be more suitable." Her mother pronounced it *sewt-ible*, with a sibilant s.

Tina was packing her books into her satchel.

"He's on it too, you know."

She carried on packing, with sudden insight into what it must be like being a mouse, scurrying across a field at night, aware that there's an owl out there somewhere.

"Bye." She tried to head for the door, but one of her satchel's straps hooked on the back of her chair, overturning it and spilling her books, lunch-box, and coloured pencils across the floor.

Her mother knelt to help her gather her things together. They were so close to one another she could smell her mother's face talc.

"Is everything alright Christina? You spend hours out with friends or alone in your room, and you've been so highly strung lately."

"Everything's fine."

She got up to go.

Her mother put her hand on Tina's arm.

"You *can* talk to me. I too was young once, you know."

She so very nearly broke. "Nothing to talk about. Bye mom."

Esmé lived up to expectations when Tina invited her round. She was startled, but quickly accepted. Too quickly. Tick-like.

Chapter seven

Christmas holidays were approaching and neither of them had been able to bring themselves to raise the subject of how they were going to survive six weeks without contact. Her parents had rented a holiday cottage at *Perlemoenstrand*, Abalone Beach, on the warmer side of the coast, about two hours from Cape Town. Allistair pressured his mother into making Tina ask a friend along. He said she would be lonely otherwise. Truth was, he was going to *jol* with one of his buddies and didn't want to be hobbled with a little sister hanging around wherever he went.

Tina had been planning to say goodbye on the Thursday afternoon, but her mother had insisted on her getting home straight after school to pack, and Belinda had hung around so long that eventually she had been forced to admit defeat. On the Friday she couldn't get a moment alone with him, and would have no choice but to leave school with everyone else after final assembly at lunchtime. He sat obediently on stage and did not so much as look at her. She couldn't stop herself. She rubbed a finger under her eye, twice, as if wiping an eyelash or a tear, but he did not notice and did not respond, sitting, lost in thought, with the fingers of his one hand resting on his mouth. All that was missing was a cigarette. It was only when all the children were getting to their feet after the closing prayer that he tilted his middle and forefingers away slightly and blew out, the way a smoker, deep in reverie, blows out a long breath between lips slightly pursed. It was such an unconscious gesture, almost certainly not meant for her. But still.

On the walk home, she accompanied Esmé to collect the things from her house that she'd be taking along on the holiday with Tina's family. With her heart turning itself inside out, like a rubber glove, then outside in, Tina was intermittently silent then garrulous. At home, as she was about to throw her satchel into her wardrobe, she noticed her tog-bag and remembered she had not yet unwrapped her wet swimming costume from the day before. She would need the bag for the beach.

She opened it and pulled out the towel which already smelled like wet newsprint. As she unrolled it, out fell a small key. She picked it up and put it in her purse, turning to Esmé with an innocent smile, only to find her, head down, in *Asterix and Cleopatra*.

Perlemoenstrand was a dump. The little dorp had a few rows of holiday houses along a rocky shore on one side, a river mouth in the middle and on the other side, a postcard little beach with a vicious undertow. Behind the beach there was a low dune, and behind that a sandblasted camp-site and caravan park with ablution blocks where you had to squat above the seatless bowl and keep your pants from touching the puddles of water and wadded tissue on the floor. The house they had rented was furnished with hand-me-downs from the 1940s and '50s. A corner display with Toby jugs and porcelain statuettes, one of a clown holding a bunch of shiny balloons, another of a shepherdess stroking a lamb; an art deco clock on the mantelpiece; paisley-patterned feather eiderdowns on the beds; and net curtains that filtered out the sea view.

As soon as they arrived, Alistair and his friend Simon bagged the second best bedroom, leaving Tina and Esmé to occupy the one below the house. The two girls immediately unpacked their things into the imbuia wardrobe with its ball-and-claw feet. They threw their swimming costumes to one side in preparation for the beach.

"You can't wear that."

Esmé always managed to look as if you'd just shouted at her.

"Why not?"

"Because it's a black school cozzie, you moron."

If Esmé was going to be around her the whole two weeks, she'd have to develop some backbone.

"Didn't you bring a bikini?"

She shook her head. "My dad won't let me wear one. He says they're provocative."

Tina snorted a gob of laughter through her nose.

"You? Provocative?"

She looked up and saw the look of hurt on Esmé's face. "Or me for that matter. He's being ridiculous. C'mon, put this on."

She dragged out an old pink bikini from the bottom of her tog-bag and tried not to shudder at the thought of Esmé wearing something of hers as intimate as underwear. Esmé was like a stray from the SPCA: bony, with bland features and hair that, no matter how many times you shampooed it, always looked as if it needed a good wash.

Esmé refused to change in their bedroom and insisted on going into the main house to find the bathroom. When she emerged, with a pink neck strap peeking out from beneath her T-shirt, Tina's mother cornered them and made them eat lunch, then had them wait an hour before going near the water.

For the next few days they lay reading listlessly under the umbrella that Tina's mother had insisted they take along. Now that the weather was good there were scores of people crowded on to the small beach and dozens in the water, but on their second morning, Tina and Esmé had come across three dead baby seals washed up on the sand, probably killed in a recent storm and nibbled on by sharks. Neither of them could get rid of the memory of a flap of skin revealing a strip of moist flesh, so pale and bloodless, the colour of your gums when you grimace your lips back. They wouldn't swim for fear of having something like that brush against their legs.

At first, Allistair and Simon had dumped their clothes, towels, the hamper and cooler box next the girls before heading into the sea to bodysurf, and they wouldn't be seen again until they got hungry at midday and came back to raid the lunch things. The picnic hamper, which looked so appetising on the outside, was packed

with four school lunchboxes, each containing a cheese and tomato sandwich and a plastic bottle of cheek-puckering orange cordial. The family had brought Yasmin along to clean and cook and have a holiday. But lately Tina had noticed that the boys had started spending much more time under the umbrella, and were in fact now competing with one another for who got the right to put it up in the mornings. They would also take long walks and allow Esmé to tag along, but made it clear they couldn't care less whether or not Tina joined them.

It was on one of these days when the other three had walked off towards the headland, barely visible in the distance, that Tina had bought herself a soft-serve and was walking back to the ablution blocks to wash off where it had dripped on her, when she caught sight of an open-topped Beetle in metallic red. The number plate matched.

A déjà vu sensation flashed into her body from the previous night. She had been floating, weightless, Wendy-like. It matched exactly what she was experiencing at this moment, and she was certain that if she were to flick her shoulders right now, she'd do a barrel roll.

But the dream had carried on. Rather than in the air, she'd actually been underwater, in a strong current, executing the most amazing manoeuvres, accompanied by a hazy dolphin shape. But the friendly outline developed a sinister fin, and the water was rushing faster and faster, tumbling her, out of control, against rocks, dark shapes, towards a huge waterfall. She'd woken, struggling, just before she went over the edge and had tried to shake off the dread, just as she tried again now. Stupid dream.

She looked everywhere for him but couldn't find him, trolling the water's edge, searching under every umbrella and around every corner of the jagged outcrop at the far end of the beach. She waited outside the toilets until it was obvious no-one could possibly spend that long inside, then went and sat on top of the same rock from which she had seen whales, hoping they had been a lucky omen. At last, she

recognised him, by his fringe and his poise, riding his red surfboard along a massive wave that was threatening to curl closed over him. A skier trying to outrun an avalanche. As the wave burst in on itself, he shot out the back, the tip of his board visible for a fraction of a second above the spray. She watched him paddle back out, bobbing under the rollers just as they were about to crush him. How to attract his attention without him losing concentration?

At last he rode a wave all the way to the shore, and she scuttled back to the umbrella, pleased to see the others had not yet returned. She sauntered up towards the change-rooms and stood, pretending to look at the blackboard bearing the day's chalked-up sea temperature and currents, while she watched Mr MacCloud slot his surfboard in Delilah's passenger seat, pull a leather thong with a key from around his throat, then take some things out the cubby-hole. He came across to the outdoor showers and put his towel, keys and wallet down on the concrete while he stood under the spray, his back towards her. As he reached over his shoulder to wipe some sea sand off his spine, the flexion of the muscles in his back caused something inside her to curve till it too was arched to its limit. The sheathes of fibres, contracting and stretching, were those in the shoulder of a lathered race-horse being hosed down after a win; lean, sinewy; as sensuous as an otter under silk. Now he turned and she could not hold herself back from looking to discover whether his white costume was see-through, and it was not. He stepped out from under the spray and stood in the sun's dazzle, flicking his head from side to side, and his hair was like the tip of a welding rod, with sparkles flashing from him in every direction.

He spotted her and suddenly she was aware of her own body. Up till then it had always been something she'd taken for granted; she'd been a bit self-conscious about her lack of a figure, but had known there was nothing she could do about it. Yet in a split-second she became aware of her exposed stomach, the empty triangles of her bikini top; of how ludicrous she must look. As appetising as baby seal meat. She turned, stumbling between umbrellas, jinking through clumps of bathers, and

cantered into the sea, relieved that he would first have to get his wallet and keys locked away, and couldn't possibly follow and see where she was headed.

She duck-dived repeatedly till she was beyond the furthest swimmer.

Something grabbed her ankles and pulled her underwater. She came up, wanting to shriek but first having to cough water up from her lungs. He surfaced several meters from her, not looking at her, but unable to keep from grinning.

"Morning, Monster."

She tried to speak but vinegary fumes attacked the back of her throat and she hacked out coughs instead.

He turned either side to make sure there was no-one within earshot.

"How are your folks?"

Far apart, they both faced out to sea; from behind they hoped they would look like strangers

"Fine."

Tina was having to doggy-paddle hard to stay afloat. She'd never realised how, when you smile so much, you keep emptying your lungs and your body starts sinking.

"They never come down to the beach. Did I tell you Esmé was going to be here with us? Though she never gets in deeper than her ankles anyway."

As the next wave came through she got lifted on to its crest and turned to check their umbrella. It was now occupied. "You're loony."

"Certifiable. Couldn't let you get away though without saying goodbye."

"I wanted to but on –"

"I know."

"Where are you staying? And how long are you here for?"

Just their heads were afloat, rising and sinking, rising, sinking, in time with the heaving of the ocean.

"We've got to get back early Monday morning." That was a mere three day's away. "Johann could only get one day off work. He and I are staying in the campsite. In an old army tent. Pull in. There's plenty of space ..."

"OK," she laughed. "I'll ask my mom."

"No problem. She and are like this."

He held up his middle and forefinger, side-by-side.

She very nearly inhaled sea water.

"I'll go home quickly and pack some clothes and my pyjamas."

"No need. We're not shy."

"What if I am?"

"Your education needs broadening."

A set of waves had started curling further out to sea than normal and broke just in front of them. They had to duck twice.

"Is that why you're a teacher? Sir."

"Why else?"

"The others are back from their walk. I've got to get going."

"Meet me. Down here at the beach. After sunset."

"I can't." A twisting inside her, a Chinese Bangle of the trachea. "If they catch me." She looked at him, at the corners of his mouth on the verge of misbehaving, and felt the underwater rushing again; the dark shapes. "I'll try."

Suddenly she was certain there were triangular fins circling directly below her. She spun round and swam to the beach, head up, water- polo style.

For hours she lay with her head to one side, watching him ten umbrellas away. Now and then they'd mime diminutive messages.

Cheese and tomato. Want some Sir? 'Sir' was a two-fingered salute to the temple.

One finger pointed to his mouth, head shaken from side to side, then four fingers sticking out of the mouth, like fangs. *Puke, no thanks, Monster.*

Dammit, she'd forgotten to ask him about the key. How do you mime the word for key?

Yawn, followed by a four-fingered scratch down the back: *I'm bored, surrounded by these hairy-backs.*

A scratch down the back, followed by a combing motion, one of their oldest jokes: *you scratch my back, I'll comb yours.*

She saw him crack a beer, *cheers*, a second, *cheers again*, when Johann, the lemon-sucking friend arrived. Whereas Mr MacCloud's chest was hairless, Johann made up for it with patches of black fur – like two small toupets on either side of his breastbone – which crawled up his throat and also joined in a fine line that spread down to his navel and beyond. Johann lay and tanned a while, and even had a quick swim, but could not stop fidgeting.

Tina felt she was being swept over the waterfall when she saw the two men get up and head back to the car park. Johann mounted his green Kawasaki, revved till it sounded angry, then roared away in a barely controlled skid. Mr MacCloud climbed into Delilah's driver's seat, but instead of sitting, he stood, with his arm bent at the elbow, a statue captured beckoning.

"What's your case?"

It was Esmé lying on her back with Allistair's head resting on her stomach.

She hadn't realised the deep moan inside her chest had been audible to others.

"Nothing."

Esmé looked different. Thin still, her hip bones jutting out, but her lips plumper. Allistair too was altered. Sleek. Tina had heard the word *svelte* and although she thought it meant slim, which Allistair was not, yet somehow it made a sound that suited him. His skin glowed and the streaks of gold tinsel in his hair had

multiplied. Simon was sitting close to them. An adolescent baboon watching two others grooming, feeling left out. All three huddled under one third of the umbrella's shade. Yet if they'd just shifted their clothes and the cooler box aside, there would have been more than enough space for all of them to stretch out comfortably.

"Simon, be a star and put some cream on my shoulders. They feel burnt."

As she said this, Esmé kept her eyes on Tina.

Simon, with his rugby player hands that looked like they could crush bottles, grabbed the Coppertone and oozed a line on to Esmé shoulders and watched as she writhed as the cold cream touched her. Any minute now he'd start *hoo-hooing* and lip-smacking.

"Keep still, woman," said Allistair still with his eyes closed.

Not brat. Not *piepiejoller*. Woman.

When she looked round Delilah was gone.

Simon was rubbing the cream on to Esmé's shoulders, but very slowly. Esmé was arching her neck. She turned her head to one side.

Allistair jerked his shoulders up, turned over and blew a huge raspberry against Esmé's stomach. She yelled and squirmed, but Allistair and Simon held her down and tickled her. Her squeals were attracting attention.

"Stop it. Stop it," Tina shouted. "You're being pathetic."

When Tina came back from a swim, they had settled down again. If anything, closer than before.

"There's a beach braai on tonight," said Esmé. "You've got to convince your mother to let us come to it."

"Fat chance." But Tina felt as light-headed as if she'd caught sight of blood, and wished for something solid to lean against.

"It's being run by the God-botherers."

So Simon was capable of speech.

“The ones who drive round in that yellow Kombi with their loudspeakers at full blast, telling us to come and repent. Happy Clappers. The campsite's crawling with them.”

“It won't work if I try.” Tina looked across at Allistair. “You're The Chosen One – you ask.”

When they got back to the cottage, Allistair said he and Simon would be going to the Christian braai that evening. Esmé, overhearing this, said she would love to go as she would be missing out on her visit to church on Sunday. Tina said it sounded boring and she'd prefer to stay home and read a book. Mrs Le Clerq insisting on them all going. It would be so much fun. Tina gave in, reluctantly.

Down at the beach The Fishers of Men were delighted to see them. They were mostly teenagers with a zealous glee that made them look as if they were all running temperatures. They were not the only feverish ones. Tina watched the sun go down and prayed with them. She was quite sure her request was not the same as theirs, though. Watching it get dark and, for the life of her, not being able to work out how she was going to slip away, she was also certain hers were the more fervent.

Two of the Godly had guitars and one a bongo drum, and they sang hymns and did their best to look as if they were having a Fantastic Time. They forced Kool-Aid and *boerewors* rolls on the foursome and at one stage had them join a circle, hands linked, while a young lay preacher shouted at God to save their souls.

When it was truly dark Allistair sidled up to Tina.

“We're taking a walk. Don't go home until we get back.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“As long as it takes to finish this.”

He flipped aside the zip of the jacket he was carrying and she saw a one and a half litre bottle of Paarl Perlé.

Two down, one to go. Tina was twisting round to see where Esmé was when she saw the girl slink off with Simon who had a hand around her waist. She had not realised the *we* included Esmé but excluded her. She could not think *thank yous* fast enough. Maybe God had sent her a guardian angel who knew what it was to be in love; she couldn't imagine God having personal experience of this emotion.

Tina ducked into the shadows and headed off to the ablution blocks. She needed a pee but had to wait, squatted above the toilet bowl, for the stream to start. When she came out again, she was keen to get away from the light as quickly as possible, but had no idea of how to find Mr MacCloud's campsite, and how, without being seen, to let him know she was around. She stood in the gloom, trying to work out what to do when there was a cough she thought she recognised off to one side. As she took a few steps in that direction she could just make out a tall figure walking away, along the base of the dunes. She followed, sometimes thinking she'd lost him, stumbling over flotsam, till she found herself on the knoll above the rocky outcrop where she had sat and watched him surf.

His cough again. But she could not see him. She kept walking, as good as blindfolded, and was sent flying over something; his foot perhaps. He saved her and they fell to their knees, almost toppling in what would have been a tangle of limbs, sand, sunburnt lips, but they caught themselves in time and stood up, apart. Dusting themselves off.

"I thought I was going to have to come and kidnap you."

"I couldn't get away."

"I know. I was watching."

A thrill went through her. "Do you think if I shout for help they'll come and rescue me?"

He stepped behind her and twisted an arm behind her back in a grip that was hot and tight, but painless. "Shout away." His head bent, his mouth next to her ear.

They both turned slightly to look at the youngsters on the beach. The figures were more active now; an ant's nest disturbed.

"Help, help," she whispered.

"Where have your brother and Esmé and the other guy gone?"

He had not let go of her wrist and she leaned, every so gently, back into his warmth.

"Down the beach, to drink some wine."

"I worry about her."

A pang, like the stitch she got in her side sometimes when running.

"Why?"

"Girls like her ... They'll do just about anything to get affection."

"It's just my brother and Simon."

"I know. But they're from the male race."

"So are you. Sir."

"Exactly."

"Do you spend time with me because you feel sorry for me?"

Now she was praying again, wishing she could unsay what she'd just said.

What the hell was her mouth up to?

He turned and held her by her shoulders. He used his fingertips to read her expression.

"Tell me you don't really believe that."

And she didn't, but even so, she couldn't keep herself from blurting out: "Then why do you?"

She could hear each of his heartbeats. She counted ten.

"You want me to tell you how I feel about you?"

Yes. No. Yes. As he'd said it, she'd realised that her mouth was indeed trying to corner him.

"It's just that I'm so afraid it might all be one-sided."

He pulled her towards him and hugged her so hard she heard sounds that both a python and its prey would make in the final death-squeeze.

"From my side, or from yours?" he sighed more than said.

If she'd been doggy-paddling, she'd have drowned and hit the seabed by now.

"What if?" she asked, after a while.

Normally his voice would have had laughter in it, but this time it was serious: "Don't tempt me."

"In some ways I wish you hadn't gotten out of their clutches tonight." He was still whispering.

"Why?" She tried to jerk away, but he kept on crushing her.

"Because from now on it can only get complicated."

He shifted position. "Oh shit."

The Fishers of Men had torches and were headed in their direction.

"I can't get caught here with you."

She would do well in a war. When others' minds became scrambled, hers became ordered. "Let's split up. You go back behind the dune. I'll go along the beach."

But he was already gone.

It was like a game of hide and seek or cops and robbers, only this was too real. She huddled down in a crouching run, tripping on things she could not see, trying to stay below the skyline so as not to present a silhouette. She flailed down on to the beach, but one of the figures with a torch spotted her, and suddenly there was a cry and they were after her. She had a head start and she was fit. But they were older and the pack instinct was strong. After three hundred meters or so they gave up. She ran a bit further till the torch was no brighter than a distant candle, then stopped, trying to get her breath, afraid the inside of her throat was bleeding, wishing the sea were not as loud so she could listen for any furtive pursuit. Adrenalin

pumping through her, as well as other, new chemicals she couldn't name. Tina did not know how she was going to get back. There were low voices coming from the other direction.

"Allistair?"

"Are you trying to spy on us?"

"I came to warn you. The God Squad have got torches and they've been searching everywhere for you."

"Jesus."

"That's not what they were shouting."

University of Cape Town

Chapter eight

It should have been Mr Blakely awaiting them as their class teacher when the new school year started in January, but they found instead Mr MacCloud standing in front of the blackboard. He explained he would be taking over until Mr Blakely recovered from his temporary incapacity. Knowing glances passed back and forth – Mr Blotto's drinking problem was a badly kept secret. Tina wished she had enough pocket money to send him a get well card and a bottle of brandy.

"Seat yourselves in alphabetic order, according to your first names."

There was a general muddle and Tina headed for the right-hand side of the class, working out she would be sitting behind Simon. It would have been Sonja, but she'd done so badly at the end of the past year she'd been demoted to the B-stream.

"According to your full first names." His voice sounded urgent and when there wasn't much of a reaction, the instruction was repeated.

There were mutters as everybody rearranged themselves. Christina finally sat down in the back seat of the first row, against the left-hand wall of the room, with Angela, Anthony, Belinda, and Claudia in front of her. She opened the heavy wooden lid of her desk, intending to put her pencil case away, but immediately shut it again. Mr MacCloud was handing out stationery: new exercise books; a bright orange Bik ballpoint; and a set of timetables to each of them. He happened to be right next to her as she lowered the lid. She looked up and he gave a tiny flicker of an eyelid, though the rest of his face remained impassive, and he moved on without altering the tune he was whistling. She recognised it: *Go away little girl*.

They each initialled the attendance register and signed up for the various sports for that term. When the bell finally rang, Tina stayed at her desk, even though everyone else, including her teacher headed out the door. Once she was sure there were no onlookers, she eased open the desk again. Tacked against the underside of the lid was a brightly painted sun with an array of dots in bold purple across the

top. She had no clue what the random dots signified, but removed the drawing-pins and stuffed the poster hurriedly into her satchel.

On subsequent mornings she was extra careful to check no-one was looking before opening her desk. One day there was a pile of sand in the corner. Buried in it she found a closed oyster shell with what looked like a pearl inside, albeit one with a hole through its middle. On other occasions she found a page of drawings, showing deaf and dumb sign language, Braille, Morse code and semaphore. When she got the Braille alphabet home, it took a few minutes to decipher that the purple letters on the poster said *Hello smelly!* A week later there was a well-thumbed paperback entitled *Favourite Parlour Games*, which she flipped through in the girls' toilets. The chapter headed *Charades* had its top corner folded over.

Her first full sentence took three days to transmit. During a general knowledge quiz, she kept her hands in front of her while everyone else was busy writing, and touched the pinkie finger of her left hand with the index finger of her right, to spell out a *u*. He gave a frown and a tiny shrug of incomprehension. It took her the entire period to sign the first word in full – *you* – without anyone else noticing. The next day, when the attendance register came round, she underlined the date with a dot, a stripe and another dot: *r* in Morse code. When she delivered his stationery order, he did not even look up, but she knew he'd notice the doodles in the margin of his order form which looked like two domino halves, each with six circles, but with some of the circles larger than others: *my*. While the class was stretching and warming up for gym on the Thursday she semaphored four more letters.

Tina stayed behind after school on the Friday afternoon. He wasn't in the classroom, which was locked, but she found him doing flick-flacks across the length of the hall.

He came to a thudding halt right in front of her.

"I am a heron?"

"No!"

"I am your heron?"

"No."

"I am heroin?"

"There's no *n* at the end."

"Well what's this then?"

Mr MacCloud swung his arms, gorilla-like, at five and seven o' clock. Grinning like a chimp. *N* in semaphore.

"I must have been just stretching."

"You could have fooled me."

"Anyone could have fooled you."

She smirked and added, "Sir".

His message back to her took even longer. Eight words. First word: the diver's clenched fist for *danger*. Tina also got the next three: *I am falling*, but was baffled by the somersault he did after signalling that he was providing the subsequent three words. Then a new word: *in*, followed by the tugging of his earlobe, which meant 'sounds like', followed by a slight crick of the neck to indicate something outside. But there were a million things outside. Grass. Trees. Sky. Clouds. Mr MacCloud? He must have seen her look of confusion, because he lent his head on his upturned hand and surreptitiously cupped his fingers round his ear. Belinda turned in her seat suddenly and Tina only just managed to look down in time and pretend to be reading. There wasn't any noise outside, except a bird cooing. Coo – *Sue, too, loo?* By Friday she had given up, but couldn't admit she wasn't joking when Mr MacCloud laughed and laughed when she asked if he'd signalled: *Danger! I'm falling* something, something, something *into* ... she hesitated ... *the poo?*

Later she couldn't remember which one of them had introduced it. The dare. To reveal their most embarrassing day-dream. Probably her. But one way or another

she landed up having to admit hers first. Which is how Mr MacCloud found out about her fantasy of the spangled costume and the fishnets; her flying through the air and him catching her; even their synchronised heartbeats. He never did get round to disclosing what his had been, but when, in February, the circus came to the Rondebosch Common, he egged her on to get her parents to take her to see it.

Her mother was less than keen and Allistair treated the idea with contempt; but Tina persisted, begging to be taken, as a three-month-early birthday present, and eventually it was her step-father who buckled and accompanied her.

When they got to their seats, Tina craned in every direction, trying to see if Mr MacCloud was there too. He hadn't said anything, but she hoped all the same. Just as the lights dimmed and the band played its opening fanfare, he appeared, as if by magic, in a ringside seat directly opposite to where she was sitting. He did not seem to notice her, but clasped a hand around each wrist, just like the grip between two trapeze artists, that could easily have been mistaken for a stretch. In another stretch, he gestured, with a gracious, off-hand movement of his right hand, to the empty chair beside him.

Tina hardly noticed any of the acts, and neither did he, for they conversed non-stop, though neither breathed a word. While all eyes were on the three glamorous Stardust Sisters being hoisted to the heights of the big top, suspended by their hair, Mr MacCloud started a chameleon-slow sentence. Three words. First word sounds like: he cradled his hands together, then tipped slightly forward to show them filled with a heavy load. She knew this one: weight - *wait*. Four fingers: *four*, or *for*. Thumb pointed discreetly to himself – *me*. Palms together, as if in prayer – *please*.

She signed back. *For*. Question mark for an interrogative. *Long?*

Ten fingers then another eight.

She crossed her two index fingers in the middle – *No!* Then signed: *two/too long*.

His answer: *Me or I* then a knocking motion – *wood/would* – *wait four/for you four/for* and then two circles made with two fingers on each hand, interlocking. It looked like the deaf and dumb sign for *b*. That didn't make sense. Then Tina remembered the symbol for infinity. Or, in this case, *eternity*.

They had imagined their relationship invisible. But prying eyes followed their every move and she would hear the two of them being discussed in acid whispers as she walked down to the playing fields. Yet when she turned on the gang of kids, her fists bunched, they would be silent, holding back sniggers. He found orange graffiti sprayed across the wall behind the swimming pool, at the back of the pump-house: *D.Mc.C. sucks T.R.'s poessie*.

He had not wanted to tell her about it but she'd insisted when saw the abrasions on his knuckles where he'd skinned them while smearing the wall with handfuls of mud, trying to obliterate the writing in smears of brown and smudges of red.

It was a public holiday so there was no-one else was at school. He was sitting at his desk and she at a much smaller desk in the front row.

"All society cares about is conformity," he explained. "A friendship like ours doesn't conform, it bucks convention, so we're judged to be abnormal. A perversion."

She shut her eyes and imagined the public violation sprayed in orange. Seeing her battling, he softened his teaching tone.

"People are threatened by us. Yet in another era, another culture, there would have been nothing wrong with us spending time together."

She did not know what era meant. "What sort of culture?"

He tilted his chair till it balanced on its back legs, and put his hands behind his head.

"Until a generation or so ago in India there were still arranged marriages between older men and younger girls, so in that environment I suppose it would have

been acceptable for people of different ages to be friends. Some of the kings of England married girls the same age as you are now. I think it still happens in some Asian countries."

Tina went across to the world map on the wall, directing her face away from him.

"What if we were to run away to Asia?" She hoped she'd been sufficiently ambiguous. "How about Burma?"

He joined her at the map, her head only just level with his armpit.

She was wearing her cashew-coloured hair in pigtails high up on either side of her scalp, parodying school rules.

"Or Ceylon," he said.

"Or Baghdad. You could be a sultan and I could be a slave girl you bought at the marketplace."

"Nah, you'd be too expensive."

"How much do you think?"

"Oh, at least a camel."

She punched his arm.

"Extra lessons?"

They spun around to see Mr Botha standing in the doorway. They had no idea how long he had been there, nor whether he could have overheard their low voices.

"Mr MacCloud, could I see you for a few minutes? In my office."

He turned and walked away.

PART TWO

University of Cape Town

Chapter nine

Before she'd even swallowed her first sip of coffee from the shared mug, she knew this would be her favourite taste for all time – intensely sweet and creamy, with lashings of condensed milk and freedom. They were in Worcester, leaning against Delilah outside a backstreet fish and chip shop, waiting for a petrol station round the corner to open at seven.

"You're shivering. Can I get you a jersey?"

She was holding the mug and he was pouring the last bit of coffee into it, but she couldn't keep it from being a moving target.

"I'm not cold. And it's not shivering. It's trembling."

"There's a difference?"

He looked at her with his head tilted and his eyebrows uneven.

"It's not because I'm scared. I mean, I'm not scared. Just excited."

"Looks like the DTs to me."

She gave the diver's shrug and an upturned hand, *I don't understand*.

"Delirium tremens. It's what an addict gets when he's forced to go cold turkey and they take away all his drugs."

"I think I've got the opposite problem."

He blew across the coffee, even though it was no longer hot. "You're in good company." He held out his hand and she saw that he too could not keep his fingers steady.

The mountains in the distance were displaying every conceivable permutation in the indigo end of the spectrum, and they tried to find adjectives for each shade.

"Puppy eyes."

"Bunsen-burner flame."

"Kingfisher wing."

"Bruised toenail."

While they were talking, the Portuguese greengrocer opposite them had been sweeping his stoep, causing minor whirlwinds in the dirt road, and now he was carrying out baskets of plump aubergines, sweet potatoes, butternuts, and buckets of ericas and proteas. He was arranging them in tiers and every now and then would scatter a handful of crushed mielies to the flock of waiting pigeons.

"Pansy petal."

"Gecko lips."

Coffee burns when you breathe rather than swallow it.

"With a dash of Delilah's scarlet." He was thumping her between the shoulder-blades. "Delilah O'Hara."

Tina didn't tell him her name for Delilah.

While he had been in his bedroom, packing, she had stayed behind in the kitchen, unsure whether to venture after him. After a search, she'd located the tartan Thermos flask and made the coffee, puncturing a can of condensed milk when she'd found the milk bottle in the fridge had only a drop left in it. Then she'd stood there again, hesitant. She'd wanted to call out, but had not, for fear of waking Johann. It was meant to have been just one sip from the opened can, but she'd landed up nearly finishing it. Perhaps the sugar overload was the reason she'd started shaking so much.

Eventually she'd walked down the passage as softly as she could, past a closed door, to the next one where light was streaming out.

Mr MacCloud's wardrobe had been wide open and he'd been tossing things into a heap on the floor and stuffing others into an army duffle bag lying at his feet. A black dive bag, which was so full of gear it would be impossible to zip it closed, was open on his bed, and a rucksack lay on the pillows. Stacks, composed of magazines,

LPs, tennis racquets and mugs took up every other available surface. Clearly Johann was the tidy one in the house.

"Can I help?" she'd said in an unnecessarily loud whisper.

There had been a momentary flicker outside his curtains, like two live wires arcing, then dying.

"Come on in."

Just being in his passage had felt so taboo she hadn't been able to bring herself to step over his threshold. It might as well have had a metal spider's web stretched across it, a gossamer barrier of invisible steel filaments.

The rumble of delayed thunder told her the lightning she'd seen had struck somewhere far off. She'd stood as close to the web as she dared and immediately noticed how powerfully his room smelt of him. The girls at school had once had a competition to see who could come up with the most effective method to induce a faint. One had sworn that blotting paper under the tongue could do it. Another had said it was blotting paper inside your shoes. A third had told them all to spin round ten times, with their arms outstretched and their heads flung back. But none of the techniques had been as effective as his scent at making her feel light-headed. In just less than a year she'd become an addict. If her step-father had a smell, it was Old Spice. Allistair's was Mum for Men roll-on, though he hankered after Brut. But Mr MacCloud's did not come from a bottle. And standing here, it was concentrated a hundredfold.

He'd come across towards her. His voice was so deep as to be almost subliminal. "This is insane."

"And you, young lady" he'd taken a step forward, right through the spider web, and leant his hands on the wall on either side of her face, "are to blame."

In the confined space she'd been so aware of his looming presence, of how tall he was standing right in front of her that she'd felt a sudden urge to run. She'd

managed to overpower the impulse, desperate to know whether he was teasing, or about to change his mind.

“Would you prefer to stay?”

He’d stepped back with one foot and bent the other knee forward until his face was directly in front of hers. “Are you nuts? This is the best invitation I’ve had all day.”

“Then let’s hurry.”

“Nagging me already!”

He’d gone back and started lifting things off the top shelf of a built-in cupboard.

“Could you grab my toothbrush and bathroom things? There’s a pouch in the cabinet below the hand basin. Johann’s marked all my things with a dab of red paint on them, his are marked with green.”

She’d have been able to guess which was his toothbrush – the one with the bristles like the tassels on a destitute rug. With her fingers lacking dexterity, as clumsy as though she’d been in a car accident, she gathered his razor, shaving foam, and a badger-hair shaving brush, and shoved them all into a navy bathroom bag. There had been only just enough toothpaste left in the single tube she’d found to make it worth taking. She’d recognised the label, *Close Up*. The ads always showed a guy and a girl, with dazzle symbols on their hair and teeth, about to kiss, but she had tried it once and had wanted to gag on the strange consistency of the red gel. Just as well she’d brought along a new tube of Colgate. She’d taken the soap and identified which was his towel by its scent. From the medicine chest she’d grabbed the Disprin and a comb, but left behind the box labelled *White Night – Ribbed for Pleasure*, not sure of what was inside, but sensing from the blonde on the label with the blowsy white shirt and slightly parted, lip-glossed mouth, that she should not pry.

While he had still been inside getting his last few things together, and she'd been packing a tent and sleeping bags into the tiny compartment behind Delilah's back seats – the space he called the Dog Box – she'd thought she heard someone coming. She'd been about to sprint inside and warn him, when she'd realised the voices were coming from within the house. Johann's had been raised; Mr MacCloud's sounded cool, placating. She'd stayed in the car and watched as the frangipani tree in the miniscule front yard gradually materialised.

They had left his house in Abelard Street at last, but then made a stop at St Dunstan's, where Mr MacCloud had dashed inside the hall and into the props room below the stage. Tina had stayed in the car, but with Delilah's hood down, had soon regretted it – a cold ghoul had lifted the hair on her neck and run its fingernails up her scalp.

Before she could get out, he'd arrived back with handfuls of packets which he'd chucked on to the back seat. He'd started the engine, turned to her and said: "What if?"

Before she could respond he'd slipped the gear stick into first, stood up, and with the steering wheel in one hand and the other in the air like a rodeo cowboy, he'd hollered at the top of his voice, "*This* is if," as he'd popped a wheelie, leaving a half smile of twin black stripes around the school fountain.

He took a last sip and passed the mug back to her.

Petrol attendants were starting to unlock the pumps at Worcester's Trek garage, which had a life-size fibreglass zebra standing on the forecourt.

As the mug changed hands, their fingers touched and lingered for the length of time it takes to inhale a deep breath before passing the DV to your buddy.

His eyes flicked a warning in the direction of the greengrocer, but his smile stayed fixed on her. It had the same effect on her innards as a small plane hitting an air pocket.

"You're bad news, Miss Roland."

"I'm in bad company. Sir."

"You're going to have to stop calling me Sir."

"What should I call you?"

"Well, I was christened Dominic Raphael MacCloud. So you could call me Nick, or Dominic. Even Raphael if you like. You know, the angel." He gave her a very unangelic leer. "Just not Dommie. That's what my mum called me. And what the kids at school called me: *Dom*."

She loved names like Dominic and Jonathan and Timothy; names with a triple tap. She wasn't about to admit that early on she'd whispered his full name to herself while she was falling asleep each night, but had stopped abruptly, and from then on had tried to blot the three syllables out of her mind, terrified they would pop out in an unguarded moment, when she was asking someone to pass the cereal or in class.

"OK, I'll try to remember to call you Dominic. Sir."

He swatted her. "Fool."

As soon as they had filled up they pulled back on the R9 and headed for Laingsburg. But when they got there they found it had only an agency, not a full branch of the Allied Building Society, and if he was to withdraw his savings he would need to get to Beaufort West before that branch closed. It being a Saturday, the Canterbury-born teller reminded him, closing time was at eleven. He told Tina he hadn't stopped to ask what on earth a British *poppie* was doing in Laingsburg, for he suspected that that if he were to miss this deadline, then by Monday morning his account might well be frozen. Instead he put his foot to the floor and they hurtled through the Karoo, taking the chance there wouldn't be any speed traps, and arriving with twenty

minutes to spare. On the way they listened to every news broadcast, but the headlines remained unchanged throughout the entire morning: Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge was predicting that his forces, which had laid siege to Phnom Penh for months, would break through the defences and take the capital within a matter of days, and Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor had announced that they were to re-marry in June.

He parked opposite the Allied Building Society, leaving Tina on guard, ready to start hooting if she saw anything suspicious. Local farmers kept arriving with truckloads of dusty workers; families on their fortnightly excursion to town to buy supplies: pipe tobacco, a bag of mielie meal, loose tea, some sugar. They wore expressions of servitude, but became boisterous as soon as they were out of their masters' sight.

One of the most popular venues was the non-white section of the bottle store next to where Delilah was stopped. Despite its bare floorboards and laager-like counter, the place had a festive atmosphere, with a continuous din of shouted greetings and effusive hugs, in a village where everyone seemed to be the best friend, if not a blood relation, of everyone else. Now and then one of the white matrons of the town, in a wide-rumped cotton dress, would march down the sidewalk, pushing a pram, or leading a procession of barefoot children, as unruly as francolin chicks, and it was as if she radiated a negative force field because the crowd of brown faces would part, then close again behind her wake.

It was twenty past eleven and he had not reappeared.

A new looking billboard proclaimed: *Love is a 2-litre word – Toyota GSL.*

Old coloured men in suits, faces eroded as though by dongas, squatted in the sun, doffing their fedoras as two young white girls passed by, ignoring them.

She knew he was being held captive, awaiting the arrival of squad cars which must at that moment be speeding from Cape Town, blue strobe-lights flashing and sirens whooping, *wee-wah wee-wah wee-wah*.

Bonny in the getaway car, Clyde in the bank.

Time, which up till now had been an inoffensive factor in the universe, started to snag its hooks in her heart; like the barbs from the prickly pear fruit which were said to burrow into your flesh and grow there. She tried to concentrate on the clock on top of the church spire, but there had to be something wrong with its mechanism, for every tick of the minute hand took at least half an hour, and with each one, the barbs twisted deeper, swelling, germinating, and growing tendrils in and around her atria and ventricles.

When he finally strolled out, nonchalantly pushing his wallet into his jeans pocket, she wanted to shout at him. Instead she unlocked his door and kept quiet while he whistled. He did not notice her silence and turned on the radio. For her, the atmosphere resembled lunchtimes at home.

Liz Taylor was still in the headlines.

"You've got to teach me how to drive," she said when the eleven-thirty newscast was over.

"So you could have carried on without me?" He smiled.

"So I could have got the car into gear and rammed it through the plate glass window if you'd been in trouble."

She was squeezing her thumb into the ball of her other hand, having bitten the nail down to way below where the white should have started.

"What happened in there?"

"They had to phone the Rondebosch branch, and the line was busy, but they finally got through and I managed to make the withdrawal from my account. Just as well it's the end of the month and I hadn't had a chance to spend any of my salary yet, pittance though it is. Afraid I've never got round to putting away any savings. Anyway, I spent the time chatting with the bird at the counter, asking her for the best way to drive to Joburg via the back routes."

"Doesn't that make it easier for them to follow us to Joburg?"

"Yup."

Tina frowned at him.

"That's why we're going to Durban instead."

She was quiet for a while, trying to pick up the trace of one of those memory fragments that surfaces suddenly in the form of a smell or a taste or a sensation, then vanishes just as quickly. This one manifested itself as a spike in her side, which she'd now felt for the second time today – with the mention of the *poppies* in Laingsburg and Beaufort West. Then it came to her. The first occasion when she'd experienced this stitch had been while they were standing on the knoll at Perlemoenstrand, and he'd said he felt sorry for Esmé.

Ever since February, she'd been meaning to tell him about how she'd caught sight of livid bruises on Esmé's ribs and buttocks, when she'd walked into Esmé's cubicle in the change-rooms by mistake.

"Jeezy-emm, what happened to you?"

Esmé had tried to cover herself, but had realised it was a lost cause.

"My father gave me a hiding when he saw I'd been wearing a bikini."

"But how did he get to see that?"

Esmé's face had gone blank, and she'd looked through Tina as if she'd turned transparent.

This still didn't seem the right occasion to mention it. Instead Tina told herself not to allow the little gremlin perched on her shoulder to cause strife between her and Dominic. She'd heard of people having an angel on one shoulder and a little devil on the other, but in her case she had an angel on her left and an unshaven little man, with greasy hair and a self-satisfied grin on her right. Like the one in *Asterix and the Roman Agent*. All he had to do was walk into a room and immediately people's

speech bubbles turned green and they'd start getting suspicious, envious, disagreeing with one another and it always led to a fight. Even between best friends. Even between Asterix and Obelix. *Hou jou bek*, she told her slimy little man; shut your face.

As they drove out of Worcester, they debated whether to travel at night or during the day, and whether to reach Durban through the back roads in the hinterland, or to drive hell for leather south to the coast and then head up towards Natal along the busy Garden Route. He felt strongly that their first priority was to get to Durban before they became a news item, even though it meant travelling in daylight, and that Delilah would stand out more, like a tart on a tricycle, he said, going through miniscule dorps like *Slagtersnek*, Slaughterer's Neck, Hogsback, and *Onder-Smoordrif*, Lower-Smotherford, than seaside towns such as Knysna and cities like Port Elizabeth. Not wanting to invoke the smirking man, she agreed with everything he said. So he drove due south to Oudtshoorn – and though they were tempted they did not stop to try riding an ostrich – and from there on to George, where the CAW registration plates lived up to their reputation for describing the climate: Cold And Wet. They stopped only for odd bottles of cooldrink and packets of *slap* chips, or to fill the Beetle's thirsty fuel tank. Every time a police car came into view they felt their neck muscles clench even tighter, and whenever they passed a traffic cop parked at the side of the road, their posture was so rigid they could have been mistaken for crash-test dummies. But at other times they turned up the volume as high as it would go and sang even louder. *Annie's Song*. *Good Vibrations*. After they crossed the Kaaimansrivier and the pass took them around the headland, with Wilderness's miles of foamy beaches stretching out below them, *Me and Bobby McGee* came on. Tina stood on her seat, gripped the windscreen in her hands and sang about freedom being just another word for nothing left to lose. Her shoulder-length hair was blowing

in every direction, and she knew she would never again get a brush through it, and she didn't care.

It was getting towards dusk when they got to the signboard pointing to Jeffreys Bay, and Mr MacCloud just had to take the detour and pay homage to the best surfing site in the entire country. It was only then that Tina realised the sacrifice he'd made - she was sitting where his surfboard ought to have been.

It was suppertime when they went through Port Elizabeth, and from there they had the choice of going inland via Grahamstown, or to carry on along smaller roads along the coast.

"It looks like your little pilot light went out a while back."

"Sorry?" She sat upright. "What were we talking about?"

"Nothing too serious. Why don't you put your seat back and get some rest. You've probably not slept since Thursday night."

"No, really, I'm fine."

Later she felt herself being lifted, and she tried to rouse herself, but he shushed her as he carried her in his arms and she snuffled into the warmth of his chest and her wish was granted for, as far as she was aware, he did not put her down again.

At some stage she woke to find herself lying curled up, with him in a crescent behind her, his breath on the side of her throat, his right elbow slung carelessly across her middle and his hand clasping her left shoulder. Though they were each in a sleeping bag, they'd pushed their coverings aside. She was still in the same shorts and T-shirt; his chest was bare. A light flashed from somewhere behind them, but it couldn't be lightning, for soon it happened again, twice, then once, then twice. A lighthouse. With the sound of waves so close by she was worried the tide would come in and carry them away. She closed her eyes and wriggled backwards, deeper against his chest. Let it come.

When she woke again, the orchid dawn light was just starting to melt the dark. They were on a beach with dunes behind them and cliffs in the distance – and no sign of a human footprint having ever touched the sand. The secret kind of place where a turtle would come to lay her eggs, or a dugong to sing her laments to the moon. He was still sleeping, though he'd moved apart; there was a gap between them big enough for another person to have slotted in, with space to spare. He was lying with his head cushioned on his elbow, unconscious of his pose being similar to that of a body-builder showing off his arm muscle. His face, by contrast, was so gentle, she knew why his mother had included Raphael in his christening. Was this what a bride felt on the first morning of her honeymoon – looking at the face of her beloved, knowing she would do so, every morning, for the rest of her life? Surely no-one could ever, in the history of the human race, have experienced what she was feeling now.

A niggle irritated her right shoulder. She scratched there, remembering that other females had enjoyed this sight before her.

He opened his eyes.

"Was she pretty?"

"Who?"

"The chick at the building society."

He grinned.

"She had gorgeous eyes," he stretched across the gap and tilted her head towards the dawn, "luminous green. Like light seen shining through a hole when you're diving inside a wreck on the ocean floor."

He reached out to a spot just below her earlobe, but left a fraction of a space between his fingernail and her skin, making the downy hair as sensitive as a rabbit's whiskers.

"Skin so soft it looks that if you were so much as to brush against it you'd cause terrible damage; like not wanting to touch a butterfly's wing."

With his fingertips he slowly traced a line up her forearm, but kept the same gap between hair and skin, leaving behind a trail of sensation so intense she had to clench her fists to stop herself from letting out a noise.

From all her years as Allistair's fall guy, she knew the punch-line had to come now. She awaited the drop of the guillotine blade.

He opened her curled hand and kissed her palm, then pressed the kiss-print against his stubbled cheek.

"But she didn't come anywhere near as beautiful as you." He entwined his fingers through hers. It was the first time they'd ever held hands. The ends of her fingers reached just beyond his knuckles.

"Good morning, my treasure," he murmured, his voice the same pitch as sand being drawn back before an oncoming wave. "Do I need to tell you how I feel right now?"

Yes, she wanted to beg. Yes, yes, please, yes.

She made the mistake of looking into his eyes.

She shook her head.

Chapter ten

It was almost a relief by the time it eventually happened. During the one p.m. national news bulletin on Sunday, March 30 1975, the second item to be announced was that she had been abducted, that a Dominic MacCloud might be able to help the police with their investigations, and giving a description of Delilah and her registration number: CA 3624. Of course it might have happened before then, but they had been unable to pick up radio reception between Umtata and Port St. Johns.

Mr MacCloud turned off on to the very next dirt road heading down to the coast, bouncing and swerving to avoid holing the sump. They arrived at a river mouth, with a few rondavels and cattle kraals, no telephone lines, and again no radio signal. He parked Delilah amongst some thorn trees next to the river. A dozen little children came from the huts to stare at them and laugh coyly behind their hands. Tina tried to look fierce and shoo them away, but they just hid among the nearby trees and watched every move.

Mr MacCloud began splattering Delilah with mud, taking special care to cover her number plate.

Tina tried to help. She took a handful of mud and was about to smear it over her passenger door when he gripped her wrist.

"You'll scratch the paintwork."

She dropped the mud.

"Dominic." It didn't sound right. But then neither did Mr MacCloud. Nor Sir. "I sometimes think you care more about her than you do about me."

And only after she'd said it did she recognise the greasy little man smirking on her shoulder. She hoped he wouldn't take her tone seriously.

She was backed up against Delilah. He put his hands on the door frame on either side of her face, and thrust his face towards her, the way he had done the night before last, in the passage at his house. He was so close she could see the

long shadows thrown by his individual eyelashes. Wasted on a man, she'd overheard a tuck shop mother say. Irises glossy, like black olives.

"What more do I need to do to prove my feelings for you?"

A titter came from the foliage.

Just say the words she'd wanted to blurt out. They'd been together only two days and already they were on the brink of a fight. She knew she should disarm the situation, suggest they go for a run on the beach; make some cheese rolls for lunch. But she did not have control over what came out of her mouth next.

"Why do you always use the word *feelings* instead of the other one?"

"You mean, instead of the L word?"

She nodded.

He rested his forehead against her devil shoulder; hopefully he'd squashed the unshaven fellow into a vermillion smear.

"It's scary."

So it was true; he didn't love her. She'd always known he wasn't happy as a teacher. He would have left St Dunstan's anyway. She'd just given him an excuse to do it now, rather than in a few months' time.

He's stood back, pointed his thumb towards his breastbone, pressed his clenched fist against his left chest muscle, then pointed at her.

She did not match his smile. "Let's go for a run."

They'd stayed at the river mouth, swimming and attempting to snooze in the sweltering heat, constantly aware of the children's eyes watching them. Muffled giggles had alerted them to the evening arrival of vervet monkeys which made several attempts to swipe bread and fruit, and even the car keys. Tina and her teacher's nerves were shot by the time the fires at the huts had burnt out. They quietly packed away their things and drove back out on the rutted track, creeping along the least used roads they could find until they got to Port Edward. From there

they'd made a sprint for Durban, rushing past resort towns with names like Ramsgate, Uvongo, Pennington and Umbogintwini; ready to do a handbrake turn if they saw any sign of a roadblock up ahead.

As they crawled along Durban's Esplanade at three in the morning, Tina was sure the temperature had not dropped at all since noon. She breathed in muggy air that tasted of salt, the tropics, and mussel shells; heard trees full of Indian mynas erupt into raucous expletives; and saw a young black woman, with a bouffant of white hair and a mini so short she couldn't afford to sneeze, hitchhiking at the side of the road. The woman walked slowly, as if rubbing an illicit lotion between the tops of her thighs. Dominic turned left at the end of that block.

"Are we going to give her a lift?"

He turned off the lights then the engine.

"I'm just going to ask her something. Keep out of sight, and remember to hoot if anything happens."

Tina scrunched down in her seat and kept him in view by tilting the little mirror of her sun visor. She watched him walk back to the intersection and talk with the woman, who crooked an arm inside his and started escorting him back towards the car. He pulled her to a stop. They talked some more. A police van drove slowly towards them. Mr MacCloud tried to tortoise his head into his shoulders. She linked her arm back into his and turned with him down the side-street, waving effusively. The van gave two whoops on its siren and eased on by without turning in.

That walk.

The woman sidled up to Tina's window and bent down to look in at her, still slunk down in her seat. Tina sat up and said, *Hi*. She had often been close to black women before, nannies and cleaners at her Transvaal schools, but never a woman like this. She even smelled different. Of something powerful and illicit. Perhaps this is what dagga smells like, thought Tina, or something exotic like myrrh.

"Is this baas's girlfriend?" she spoke to him across the top of the car, apparently unaware that Tina had greeted her. The woman bent down to peer around inside the car again, her face jutting through the window. Tina pulled back. She was more like a girl. A teenager. She was wearing a sugar-white Tina Turner hairstyle, batwing eyelashes and a tank top that strained to contain her bosoms. That's the term Tina's mom would have used. But these didn't look prim and constrained, as the word implied. They undulated. They gleamed. Their clearly outlined nipples invited touch. They promised dark, forbidden pleasures.

She looked up again. "*Êh-heh*. Why doesn't baas stay at the Royal Hotel, or the Elangeni?" She looked at Tina. "Or is baas worried about the police?"

Mr MacCloud's voice took on a texture like a straight-edged box, "We can't afford an expensive hotel." He got in and included Tina. "Busty here has given us the address of a hotel where we can stay and keep Delilah out of view."

"Is your name Delilah?" she spoke directly to Tina for the first time.

"No. I'm Tina. Delilah is the Beetle. And this is –"

Mr MacCloud started the car. "We've got to go."

The Adelphi Hotel was in a semi-industrial area, with panel beaters, ship chandlers and bonded warehouses as its neighbours on one side of the street, and boarded-up shops on the other. A buzzing neon sign offered rooms by the hour or by the night. At first they thought the building was closed, but when Mr MacCloud ventured into the foyer a hulking black figure, perhaps a night-watchman, appeared from beneath the stairwell and exchanged a room key for cash. For an extra fee he opened a metal gate to allow Delilah to be driven up a steep ramp, on to a bare concrete slab, and parked behind stacked metal drums.

They had been going to lay out their sleeping bags on top of the bed, but they were so tired, and Mr MacCloud had sniffed the sheets and said they weren't too bad, so they didn't bother. They did however take the precaution of hanging their

bags from hooks behind the door, just in case rats or cockroaches got into them during the night. While he locked her in and went to the bathroom, she changed into her shortie pyjamas, the mauve ones trimmed with pale blue elephants, then got into bed and awaited his return, with hardly enough energy left to enjoy the anticipation; a feverish mixture of headache and the shivers.

When she woke again she guessed it to be around midday. Humidity enveloped them and the flimsy sheet on top of them made her as clammy as if she'd slept in a wetsuit.

She rolled away from the light and fetched up against a knee. It took her a while to work out that Mr MacCloud must have positioned himself head-to-toe with her. The sole of his foot was just in front of her mouth. It was just too good an opportunity to miss. She pursed her lips and blew against the tender flesh. He shifted in his sleep. She waited, then blew again. He turned over. Now his toes were at eye level. She blew gently against the pale skin where a frog would have its webbing. There was no reaction. She blew again. Pan-pipes. The bed erupted, he disappeared, the sheet contorted, like the surface of a whirlpool, and suddenly he was astride her, gripping her between his thighs, holding her wrists above her head with one hand and tickling her under the arms with the other. She hissed and writhed, like a cat being given a bath, trying to free her hands, to twist out from under him; breathless now, unable to withstand any more of the torture; trying to breathe through her laughter, to beg him to stop, to hide the tears running down the sides of her face.

"Mercy, mercy."

"You don't deserve any, Monster."

His torso as glossy as if he'd just stepped out of a hot shower.

She squirmed sideways and got one hand free, but he caught it and trapped it, forcing her arms apart, as if she were a pelt out to dry, with his arms stretched wide, pegging her down by her wrists.

They were both breathing harder than the exertion warranted.

A deep instinct warned her, just as it had done when she was standing in his passage and he'd invited her into his bedroom, that she should pull back. She was pressing against that spider skein. But this time it was too late; she was already ensnared.

His voice turned into a feather boa, moving between her pyjamas and her skin.

"Have you any idea what you do to me?"

She had a suspicion it must be similar to what she was feeling, but she shook her head, wanting to hear him describe it.

"I would give a million dollars to be insane right now."

"Why?"

"Because I want to do crazy things with you. But my brain keeps getting in the way."

"What kind of things?"

His lips had got fuller and his voice was passing straight through her navel, slithering between her intestines, and caressing somewhere deep within her, casually fondling her innards, squeezing her heart as if testing for ripeness.

Without warning, his voice switched from something soft but constricting into something with an edge, like an opened can lid you could cut yourself against if you weren't careful.

"Don't tempt me."

He spun off her, twitched his towel around his waist and delved for his toiletries bag and some clothing.

She lay, rigid as a washed cat.

He went out, locking the door behind him. He was away a long time.

Their room was on the fourth floor, overlooking the row of shops on the other side which no longer looked derelict, but were busy trading. A man holding a long pole

was busy unhooking lengths of bright cotton cloth – in patterns of lemon, magenta, pink, gold, and flame – from the awning outside his shop. Passers-by stopped to haggle. A woman in a fuchsia sari presided over a fruit stall. The smell reached Tina of plump mangoes, pawpaws, litchies, bananas, star fruit, jackfruit, passion-fruit and coconuts, mingled with spices: green cardamom; insignificant little bird's-eye chillies which probably registered nine on the Richter scale; fenugreek; saffron; dhania; fresh lime leaves; betel nut; *jeera* – cumin; *lavang* – cloves; *duiwelsdrek* – asafoetida, devil's dung.

While she watched, a man emerged from that store, carrying a shopping packet. From the way he moved, as slim-hipped as a bullfighter, she could have sworn it was Nick; but it couldn't be him. Nick had hair so thick you could bury both hands in it and a trim moustache, whereas this man had such a short military cut that his pale scalp could be seen in places, a bare upper lip, and he was wearing Polaroid sunglasses. A naval officer in mufti.

By the time he got back upstairs, she'd changed into shorts and a clean T-shirt.

He looked older and as if he'd lost ten pounds since he'd walked out the room. His attitude matched his new haircut.

"I've bought some dye. As soon as we've had some lunch we're going to give your head a shave and turn you into a boy. Then we'll go and find some way to get out of this place."

They sat on the bed eating lukewarm pies and drinking milk from the carton as he unpacked the other provisions he'd bought: dye, a copy of *The Daily News*, some mangoes and bananas. Tina had never before eaten café-bought pies; her mother had always said they contained dog meat. She took a tentative bite and was sure her tongue touched gristle. She attempted to swallow without chewing.

"Puppy pie?"

"Nah. That's what I've got." He was busy turning over the front page. "I bought you a kitten pastie."

She glanced over his shoulder. Her stomach felt as if she were in a lift and the cable had just snapped. The photo at the top right of page three was of him, in uniform. His head was tilted to one side, and he had an eyebrow raised in that querying smile which, if he had not been wearing a beret, would have made him look like a bandit. The photographer had captured the distinctive shadows beneath his cheekbones, giving him a sinister, Heathcliff air. The picture of Tina had been extracted from a photo of the school swimming team, taken the year before. She had her nose wrinkled up and looked lobotomised. Many of the other girls used electric tongs every morning to style their hair into page-boys. Hers was more pudding bowl. She imagined the headline would have to ask: *What can he possibly see in her?* Instead it shouted: *Teacher abducts young pupil.* She read in fragments.

Police have launched a nation-wide manhunt for a Cape Town teacher, Dominic MacCloud, who is believed to have kidnapped one of his pupils, Christina Roland. A side story described Mrs Le Clerq as being distraught, a devoted mother of two, and praying her daughter was still alive.

"Oh mother."

She carried on reading. "How can they say I was abducted when I told them in my note I was running away?"

She looked up suddenly. "When were you violent?"

"They must be referring to the odd pub brawls I got into when I was in college."

Nick had finished the article and was standing across at the window.

The last paragraph quoted Allistair: *I miss her. Mom and dad are going through a terrible time and I'm sorry I was ever mean to her.*

They both went into that quiet space that runners sometimes find.

Much later: "What does paedophile mean?"

He came across and crouched in front of her, placing a hand on either of her shoulders. "Tina, I'm not a paedophile."

"Sure. I believe you. But what is it?"

"It's ... a person who finds children attractive."

"But don't you find me attractive?"

"Of course I do. You know that. But not in that way. Not sexually attractive. That would be sick."

"Oh."

She bit a nail, then carried on reading.

He tried to force the window open wider but it was jammed.

While she had a shower, he stood guard outside the bathroom. She felt the same way about touching the stained basin as she had about the piece of gristle. When she was dressed, he came inside with her and shaved off her hair till only a short stubble was left, then dyed that black.

"Like father like son," he said, standing behind her as they examined themselves in a mirror.

She was shocked at how much she looked the part.

"From now on I'll be Kevin. That was the name of my best friend at school. And you? How about Tony?"

"Isn't that too similar to Tina?"

He closed the lid of the toilet and sat down on it. "True."

She sat on the edge of the bath. "Tom? As in tomboy."

"Tom." He tried it out. "Tomfool. Tom-tom."

She noticed he demonstrated by drumming his own belly, not hers.

"Sounds good: Kevin and son Tom." He took a coin out of his pocket. "Heads for buying a motorbike and riding up to Rhodesia or Moçambique. Tails for getting on board a yacht as crew, and sailing to wherever that yacht is headed."

Tina had been to Rhodesia twice before on holiday and quite liked the idea.

"Have we got enough money to buy a motorbike?"

"Nope. First I'm going to have to sell Delilah."

"But you've spent years fixing her up."

"Don't see that I've got any choice. She stands out too much. I should get a good price for her – the engine's in superb condition. Plus the spoiler and brand-new mags." He looked dejected. "Maybe eighteen hundred rand."

He flipped the coin, caught it, turned it and smacked it on the side of his fist.

"I hope you brought your water-wings, Tom Thumb."

In the early evening they walked down to the yacht basin. The air was so humid it was like breathing through a damp sock. On the way, Nick got Tina to practice the gait and mannerisms of a boy. While he wasn't watching, she also tried a few steps, like Busty's, rubbing imaginary ointment between her thighs.. A wolf-whistle called to them from the shadows, but by the time Nick turned to her she was slouching along again, scuffing her takkies.

At the yacht club they avoided the front entrance and asked amongst the black cleaners which boats were likely to be sailing soon on long-distance journeys.

Oliver Labuschagne, pronounced the French rather than the Afrikaans way, insisted they join him for a sundowner on his yacht, *Shady Lady*. She was, he was quick to inform them, the most beautiful forty foot sloop ever built, with mahogany planking on oak ribs; an interior panelled in Burmese teak; settees upholstered in an unusual variety of rawhide, as speckled as an Appaloosa; a ship's wheel instead of a tiller; brass fittings throughout; a Perkins forty horsepower diesel engine; a total of five sails; two anchors; and all the attributes of a strumpet: always wet; a motion that was fast and loose; and a temperament that was Thais the one moment and Lais the next.

Some of that went over Tina's head. Well, she thought, the boat might be sleek and elegant, but the owner was the opposite. Oliver was a huge man who looked as if he probably dropped delicate things and broke them. She could never tell anyone's age if they were over thirty, but judging by his greying hair, she guessed he had to be somewhere between forty and sixty.

He told them he was going to take them below decks to show them the saloon. Tina looked forward to a place of six-shooters and bottles of rye uncorked with your teeth, but it turned out to be no more than the lounge. It was a narrow room with a flap-sided table, slightly off-centre, running down the middle. The table had a nifty cocktail cabinet, that you could raise and lower, slotted into its centre. There were settees on either side of the table which could double up as berths, as well as a pilot berth built into the side of the yacht, just above the settee on the left hand side. Tina figured out that a berth was a bed, and was intrigued to see that this pilot berth was not much bigger than Delilah's dog box.

Shady Lady had no front cabin to speak of, just the heads – which turned out to be a tiny compartment with a toilet and hand-basin – and beyond that a shortened stowage area. This was where the spare sails, as well as several months' worth of supplies, were packed away.

It was funny to watch Oliver, who was exceptionally tall and broad across the shoulder, wedging himself into the galley. The kitchen was as compact as the one in a caravan, and he demonstrated how, without moving his feet, he could reach the two ice-boxes; the sink; the stove, which rocked on its gimbals; and every one of the cupboards. He looked like a teddy stuffed inside a doll's house.

Opposite him, at the widest point on the yacht, was a chart table and a large seat or very small bed. He called it a quarter berth. Behind that was his bedroom, the skipper's cabin, and behind the galley was more storage space, plus the engine compartment.

Once they'd looked round, they climbed back up on deck and sat on one of the open cockpit seats, which was like a long bench. The two men filled their long glasses from a frosted pitcher of clear liquid that contained slices of lime and dozens of ice-cubes, and Tina had a succession of three tonic waters.

"So Kevin and Tom," said Oliver, scrutinising them, "you've sailed before?"

He must once have had hair as black as Nick's, though now it was turning to silver; grey could not adequately describe its lustre. The mixture made Tina think of a piece of burnt wood after a braai – mostly ash with intermittent sprinkles of charcoal showing through. Or of Cinder, her favourite hamster.

She brushed her hand up the back of her neck and was jolted by the sensation of nothingness where her hair ought to have been.

"I've done some on the Vaal Dam, though it was a few years back," said Nick.

"Great."

"Where are you headed off to now?"

Oliver often paused before speaking, enunciating his words very precisely.

"I'm tired of the Med. I'm thinking about South America. Rio probably, where the climate is great and the culture is so," he lowered his voice which made them lean in to him, "uninhibited." He let out a belly laugh, and Nick and Tina leant back and laughed with him.

"Are you going to go there all on your own? Tina asked.

"I will if I can't find anyone to crew with me. I've rigged this lady to sail her solo, and I've cruised many thousands of miles alone, but I'd prefer some company. The last bint was off in a huff as soon as we docked. Have to leave soon though, as we're getting to the end of the season. So, where are you lads from?"

"Joburg," said Nick quickly. "I'm thinking of taking Tom out of school for a few months and doing some travelling."

"Superb idea, excellent. I've always said travelling is the best education a youngster can get. I did my first hitchhiking trip when I wasn't much older than you are now, and ye gods, was that ever enlightening. What is your age, kid?"

Tina looked at Nick. "Nearly fifteen," she said.

"And your voice hasn't broken yet. Don't worry," he patted her knee, "it'll happen any day now."

He chuckled. Nick and Tina smiled dutifully.

Over the second jug and the fourth tonic the suggestion came up that they join Oliver in sailing to Rio.

OK with you? flashed Nick while Oliver was looking the other way.

Perfect.

Nick asked if it would be difficult to miss going through Customs as he had not yet got round to arranging a passport for Tom.

"I have a loathing for all bureaucrats myself," he said. "They're an abomination. I just give the impression I'm off to some small place like Richard's Bay or Langebaan and then disappear into the big blue."

He also agreed to the idea of leaving at night, but would not hear of being paid for their berths.

"Don't be absurd Kevin," he said, "It is I who ought to be paying you as crew. Have no fear though – you're both going to work hard for your food and passage," and bellowed his familiar laugh.

For the next two days Nick left Tina locked in their room, reading second-hand comics and novels from the book exchange round the corner, making her promise not to open the door to anyone, under any circumstances, while he went off to try and find a buyer for Delilah. This time he left her with the key. She had chosen Wilbur Smith adventures which would have had her mother foaming at the mouth.

On Wednesday Oliver phoned their hotel and left a message, though did not leave his name, to say they should be ready to leave at nine the following night.

Nick got in late. He'd been able to get only twelve hundred for Delilah. It was clear he didn't want to talk about it, so Tina didn't get to ask what he'd meant when he'd said the Beetle was *hot*.

On Thursday morning Tina woke, with the brief, faraway sound of a woman's scream, whether in pleasure or pain she couldn't tell. They had forgotten to close the curtains and grimy sunlight diffused into the room through windows that hadn't seen a wet cloth in a long time. She could tell from his breathing that Nick too was awake.

"Hope they haven't called in tracker dogs," he whispered.

"How come?"

"With these feet they could pick up your scent all the way from Cape Town. No wonder I slept so well. Knocked out, boy."

She tried to tuck them under the sheet, but he'd caught hold of one.

"You bite your toenails too. Revolting!" He holding each of her toes in turn.

"How do you reach them?"

She wriggled, desperate to get out of his grip.

"And what's this?"

"Nothing."

With a wrench she managed to jerk her ankle free.

"Let me see."

This time it was an instruction, not a request. He pulled the sheet aside and grasped her foot, turning it and frowning at the two marks on the soft skin of her instep.

"How did this happen?"

"It was an accident."

"Tina." His voice was both hard and, at the same time, incredibly soft. "These are burns."

He was twisting her ankle from side to side.

"They're the same shape. Yet they happened at different times." He found two more marks on the inside of her ankle. He couldn't know about the fresher one high inside the opposite thigh. He closed his eyes. "Who did this to you?"

"Nobody."

He looked at her, down the length of her body, his eyes matching his voice.

She wished it was still dark. Softly, "Me."

"Why?"

Her voice was irregular, like a car going fast over speed bumps. "I don't know. Sometimes, the 'feelings' just got so intense, so powerful, it felt like my skin wasn't big enough to hold it all in and I was going to split if I didn't do something to relieve the pressure. The worst was, the feelings were invisible. At times like those, when it got so I was afraid I'd do something really stupid, I'd touch myself against something hot ... metal, a piece of glowing wood."

He flinched as if she had just demonstrated this against his skin.

"It doesn't hurt at the time." She tried to reassure him, gesturing to her foot.

"But it makes the pain inside more ..." she fumbled in her brain for a word that could describe her motive.

"Tangible," Nick finished the sentence for her.

"Yes." She hadn't realised she had been holding in so much air and let it out in a gush. "Exactly."

She thought this must be what it would be like to go to confession.

The first time she had burnt herself, it hadn't been premeditated. It was about eight months earlier at a pool braai her mother had organised for her step-father's work colleagues – an excuse to do some social climbing. It went against an unwritten rule

of bank hierarchy that they'd invited Ivan, her step-father's boss's boss, without even inviting his direct superior. Plus of course Ivan's latest wife, Sandy, who was twenty-five years younger than himself. Her mother insisted that her children be on hand to be charming but voiceless.

Tina had felt she was an appendix ready to burst. Why was it that Ivan could crouch there, fawning over Sandy's bikini'd body, rubbing baby oil all over her, yet she and Mr MacCloud – who had half the age difference between them – were not allowed to so much as to sit together? She'd got up and gone over to the fire where she'd tried reaching for a bit of boerewors stuck on the braai grid. But between her and the scrap of meat was the flat-bottomed potjie which had just been taken out of the coals, and she hadn't noticed that the pot's galvanised steel handle was standing upright. Her wrist had touched against the handle for less than a hundredth of a second. Instinctively, she'd jerked her hand away, and though no pain had registered, the skin had instantly developed a barely noticeable white weal with a thin inflamed edge around it. It had lanced something in her and felt surprisingly cool. She'd glanced around to make sure no one was watching, and then she'd done it again, for longer. She'd looked up to find that Sandy, whom she'd not noticed standing at the deep end of the pool, had seen her do it, but was already turning her head away.

The second white line had gradually turned into a thin, angry sore, and later a scab, then a shiny albino scar. The strange thing was that, when she deliberately touched the weal, she couldn't feel any sensation. It hurt like blazes when she brushed the shiny skin against something without thinking, and particularly when she forgot and put it in hot water. But not when she stroked it.

After a few months she had repeated the act, but this time against the grill element in the oven. It was an instant of contact that had later hurt more than she would have believed possible, but again, only when she wasn't conscious of it. That burn had left an indelible white stripe framed in brown on the flesh above her thumb.

Through a process of experimentation she'd perfected heating a piece of metal in the fire.

Her mother had noticed the marks but initially added them to her refrain: Christina was so clumsy. A proper little Dumbo. But then one day she'd got it into her head that Tina had burned herself while smoking. She used this as a reason to come into her room at any time – *Just to check on you, darling. Make sure you aren't puffing any more ciggies, sweetheart.*

Tina had specifically noted that her door had a key when they moved in, but that it had vanished within days. Alistair was just like her mom, coming in whenever he felt like it, not bothering to ask if it was OK. The only person who didn't do this was her step-father. But then he almost knocked before coming into the lounge.

"Where else?"

How did he know? She felt the need to run; not to stop till she collapsed dead from exhaustion. Like the soldier from the Battle of Marathon.

He shifted up so they were now face to face. His eyes were tender, absorbing some of her pain.

She wanted to crumple; instead she held out her left arm. Gently he touched his thumb against the pulse in her wrist, then against the inside of her elbow.

"Razor blade?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Dear heaven, Tina."

In one of her fantasies, which she would never in a million years tell him, she would cut much deeper. Dispassionately, she would watch the blood – first a gush then a steady flow – spread out on to a pristine white towel knowing that any moment now it would be too late. Then Nick would burst in and clamp his huge hand across her artery. He would grip her against his chest and she could finally let go and be held.

She wished he would read her mind right now, would rock her whilst hugging her head against his ribs, breathing into her hair and gently rubbing her wrist. She would be asleep within a few heartbeats.

She let out a jagged laugh.

"Have you any idea how difficult it is to cut yourself? It's worse than trying to pierce raw chicken-skin. It keeps moving and when you push into it, it just creases." She realised she'd been speaking too loudly and dropped her voice. "When you finally puncture the skin and start slicing, seeing the blood coming out releases something. The burning is easier, but it doesn't help as much as the cutting."

"Tina." His voice as compelling as if he had gripped her head between both hands and forced her to look at him. "I want you to promise me you'll never do this again."

She laughed again.

"Of course not. There's no need to now that we're together."

"That's not good enough. This hurting yourself," he kissed her inner elbow, so lightly the wound could still have been bleeding, "it's abnormal. I want you to promise me. No matter what."

His eyes probing her. Deeper than was proper. Overturning something inside, finding beneath it a place she had only caught hints of until now. A cavern of darkness, yearning.

"Would you do anything for me?" she asked

He took a while to answer.

"That should be obvious."

"Then trust me."

She took a Swiss army knife from her bathroom bag, opened the sharpened corkscrew and, before he could stop her, jabbed the tip of it into her forearm.

"What the hell are you doing?" There were tears in his eyes.

"It's only into the first layer of skin. It's nothing." She held the penknife out to him. "Will you be blood brothers with me?"

He took the corkscrew from her. His eyes did not leave hers as he pressed the tip against his arm, very slowly, gradually pressing harder and harder. The contraction of his pupils told her when the skin finally gave way.

Then they sat – like a bride and groom entwining their arms to drink out of each other's champagne glasses – but Nick and Tina were concentrating on their wounds, on pressing them hard together; waiting to see if they could tell the moment when some of their cells would be exchanged and absorbed into the other's bloodstream.

Wherever their skin touched, along the sides of their thighs and the inside of their arms, it was as sensitive as fresh burns.

Belatedly he did read her mind and held her – breathing into her hair, gently rubbing her puncture mark – and it did take only a few heartbeats.

Chapter eleven

At eight-thirty on Thursday night they caught a taxi to the marina. The entrance was just off the Esplanade, and Tina kept an eye out for Busty, but it might still have been too early for her to be around. Fruit-bats squealed and jostled; now and then one would lose its toe-hold, come tumbling down, and flicker around under the street lamps. A hot breeze tousled palm fronds, and above all this, people sat on their balconies, in deck-chairs, staring out. The huge natural harbour came right up to the other side of the road, and in the rippled water, every light was shattered and reflected a hundredfold. In the distance, ocean tramps and cruise liners twinkled, luring the footloose to exotic destinations, and in the foreground, the lights atop rows and rows of yacht masts swayed tipsily. At street level, everyone drove with their windows open, their music turned up, and their arms dangling down the flanks of their cars. Delilah would have fitted right in. Most of the men were young and shirtless, and the women wore halter-necks and smelt juicy, of cocoa butter and suntan oil. They could have been wearing leis. It was called Natal Fever, this torpid state of being on perpetual holiday.

The taxi dropped them in a darkened patch, behind the yacht club, and they walked down to where *Shady Lady* was rocking impatiently against her stays. Her beauty really did draw a gasp. She was low in the water, with swept-back lines so sharp and sleek, as if designed for space travel. Wherever the light touched her lacquered curves, it slid up and down, like candlelight gliding along the side of a tilting knife blade.

Oliver helped them carry their bits of luggage on board and showed them two tiny lockers into which they crammed their bags. Then he gave them a quick run-through of the correct names for parts of the yacht. He assumed that Nick was familiar with it all, and concentrated on Tina, whom he called Tom. The open space

where they were standing was the cockpit, less than four paces long and one and a half wide, with benches lining the sides and the wheel right at the back.

"You never refer to the back or the front of the yacht," he told her, "only to aft and forward."

She looked around.

"But this cockpit has no protection from the weather. What happens when it rains and you're up here steering?"

"You get wet." He found this very funny. "Tell me kid, which side is starboard?"

"The right-hand side?"

"Brilliant. And what's the nautical term for the left-hand side?"

"Errhm." She grimaced.

"Port my friend, port. It harks back from the early days when the rudder was carried over the right side, and so you always drew alongside the dock on the left, or the port side."

The short staircase down into the saloon was called the companion-way. When things got really rough they would slot washboards in place to seal it off. On the foredeck, if you were standing on top of the saloon, you would be on the coach-roof.

Oliver took them below and showed them the engine compartment, which was the one place where Nick asked a string of questions. He also showed them how to lift the lid of the chart table to access the wad of maps and the log book. He pointed out the radio, situated just above the chart table, and twiddled some knobs and rattled off the main frequencies.

"You can each grab a settee berth to sleep on, or one of you might prefer the pilot berth." Oliver pointed to the little capsule built into the bodywork.

The tiny galley was now even more cramped due to there being two nets swinging from the ceiling: one containing fruit and the other a basket of eggs

smear with Vaseline to keep them fresh. In the heads he demonstrated how to turn the switch and to pump, flush and then pump in more sea water.

At each stop he would say things like, "But you're familiar with that," and carry on to the next section before Nick could respond. Tina had long since stopped trying to concentrate and instead studied Oliver. She had never seen anyone, apart from Nick, who smiled so much. He had such an animated face. In the time it takes for a match to burn, his habitual grin could be replaced by a look of astonishment, then – while he was searching for a word – by the look of a wine-taster savouring a mouthful – and, before the match went out, by an expression so deep, so scorched, that you longed to soothe him; and all the while his eyes never left yours. Nick's eyes were hypnotic. Oliver's were unquenchable. If anyone were to try and describe Oliver for a police Identikit, they would have to give up, for his features altered from one moment to the next. And his meticulous way of talking contradicted his wrestler's build. He had the gait of a knight who had just stepped out of heavy armour. When he caught her sneaking a look at the notch in his starboard ear lobe, he gave her a wink and said he'd been a boxer in his youth.

He completed their tour saying it was a perfect evening for sailing, with the pressure high and a ten to fifteen knot northeaster. "Gentlemen sail downwind only," he said, his low voice making them crane towards him, then he let rip with one of his laughs, as if playing to a gallery.

He started the engine and shouted to Nick, calling him Kevin, to untie the lines attaching the yacht's bow and stern to bollards on the quay. Nick seemed almost deliberately to wait for the gap to widen before doing a Nureyev leap over the guard rail and on to the deck, while Oliver freed the slip line and reversed from the bobbing walkway.

Oliver lolled with a glass of Scotch in his hand and Beethoven's *1812* on the tape-deck. He issued a stream of instructions. A drill sergeant on happy gas. He instructed them to put on harnesses – it was a bit like putting on a nappy made of

webbing – and then to clip their harnesses on to the jackstay, which turned out to be a cable. While they were still struggling to adjust the buckles, he had motored out of the yacht basin and into the harbour. He waited for them, keeping the yacht almost stationary, out of the wind in the lee of a huge warehouse. When they were ready he told her, Tom, to release the kicker, which took her a while to understand, and told 'Kevin' to connect the main halyard to the head of the sail. Oliver shambled in a crouch to where Nick was, at the mast, to check he had tightened the shackle sufficiently, then rushed back to the wheel, bent, the way a prop forward would head into a loose scrum. Next he ordered him to wind the halyard clockwise round the winch and raise the mainsail by turning the winch handle as fast as it would go.

While Nick appeared to follow most of the instructions, Tina had lost track of what was going on and what she was supposed to be doing. She whispered to Nick: "Why do sailors have to have so many different names for a rope: a halyard, a line, a sheet? Instead of using one bloody –"

She was cut off by the boom, which started flogging violently from side to side.

"Better come aft, but I'd suggest you duck low if you want to avoid being smacked by the boom. Terribly embarrassing to have a man overboard while we're still within sight of the club."

With the engine still running Oliver turned the yacht, which heeled over sharply, and headed for the narrow channel at the throat of the harbour, and out to sea.

As they came clear of the headland and into open water the waves grew bigger and the motion turned into one of repeated slamming. Tina looked back and saw the lights of the city shrinking, till they were the same size as those little flashing ones you drape around a Christmas tree. She and Nick were drenched with sweat and sea spray as they careened about the fore-deck, as unsteady as the tiny ball-bearings

that roll around in a Christmas-cracker toy. They raised the No. 2 Genoa, the sail which creates a triangle between the mast and the front of the boat; stowed ropes and pulled in sheets to get the canvas absolutely smooth as the yacht surged, leaning violently. Tina was convinced they were going to capsize.

Oliver dropped his head back and smiled.

"Just wait till we get a real wind."

Once they were underway she and Nick came and sat in the cockpit and dried themselves off with a towel. Oliver offered them yellow oilskin jackets but, despite their goose bumps, they both declined, enjoying feeling cool for the first time since they'd arrived in Durban. Although there was a wind blowing from behind, they were moving forward just as fast, so what they experienced, sitting in the cockpit, was a gentle stillness, contrasted by the rushing of the water against the hull.

It was such a transition, being away from land. There they had worked under electric lights as stark as daylight, but now, to conserve the battery, there was only one green light on in the cockpit, just bright enough to illuminate the compass, and another pale one on in the galley. Nonetheless, Tina kept her face averted whenever Oliver lumbered up and asked Nick to hold the wheel so that he could rehydrate the ocean. He said he'd felt obliged, for purposes of quality control, to sample all liquid stores brought on board.

The two men chatted; Oliver showing Nick what he'd need to know to be able to take the wheel for a full watch. After some fossicking, Oliver found a pair of thick leather gloves which he said Nick would need for handling the sheets

"Don't you need these yourself?"

Oliver held up his calloused hands with fingers so thick they looked as if he were wearing wicket-keeper's gloves.

"I've had so many rope-burns, I could probably pick up molten ingots without feeling it."

Once he was confident Nick was able to steer to a pre-selected course, Oliver said he was going below to refresh his glass and conjure up a snack, and asked Tina – Tom – to give him a hand.

As Oliver folded up double to descend into the saloon, Tina turned to look back at Nick. He signed something, but it was too quick for her to catch.

Below, Oliver could only just stand upright, with his silver hair touching the ceiling. Nick was six foot, Mr Botha six foot three, but Oliver was taller still. And in this light his hair wasn't silver so much as that grey-blue you sometimes get in doves or, as Tina had seen once, in a Brahman bull.

As she'd stepped into the saloon, she'd inhaled fug that she would get to know as the distinctive smell of yacht. A recipe of diesel fumes, mildew, wood, damp fabric and, the ever-present tang of the heads under a thin coating of disinfectant.

She ventured into the heads briefly to check that the wide strip of plaster she had stuck across her chest – from under one armpit to under the other – had not started curling at the edges. She wasn't looking forward to the time coming when she would have to peel it off and replace it. As she turned she got a fright – she'd caught her reflection in the mirror and hadn't recognised the skinny boy with the black convict cut. The only part of her that looked familiar were the green eyes, and even these were more hollowed than she remembered.

While Oliver stood in the doll's house galley frying steaks in spluttering oil, Tina buttered some rolls, got out plates and found the powerful home-made garlic and chilli sauce he wanted. She chuckled as she tried to anticipate the surge whenever the yacht dipped into the next trough, or the slight hesitation as it lifted on to the following crest, but it was unpredictable and she sometimes staggered like a hobo. Oliver, on the other hand, could have been standing on granite.

"We're soon going to find a diet of canned food, pickles and salami so tiresome, so may as well enjoy the fresh supplies while we can," he said, stabbing at

a steak with the magnificent dagger he kept holstered on his belt. "Hey kid, how about pouring me a rum and Coke."

He passed her his tumbler and Tina poured him his drink, trying to sway his glass in time with the waves so as not to spill.

"Have you always been a sailor?"

"No such luck. I used to be a corporate lawyer. Only started sailing when I went into voluntary retirement." He pointed at her with the tip of the knife. "Which is a euphemism for saying I was paid a shitload of money to piss off." He took a pull from his glass. "Whoa!" He leaned back as if someone had given him a shove in the chest. "Now that's what I call a drink. How much rum did you put in here?"

"About half. Sorry, was that wrong?"

"In future this much would be about right," he said, indicating two inches at the base of the glass, "otherwise we'll have to stop in at Cape Town just to restock on booze." He took another draught. "But right now I'm not complaining. It's sublime. Here, have some."

Tina took a sip. She pulled a face.

"What's the matter. Worried your ... dad won't approve?"

"No. It's just got a funny flavour."

"Drinking takes practice at first. Here, let me pour you a weak one, it'll probably taste better. Just promise me you won't tell him, OK?" He moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue.

"OK." This time it tasted mainly of Coke. "So how come you were paid to go away?"

"I've always found it easy to unearth the things people most want to keep secret. Plus they like to confide in me. Part of what I was paid to do was to keep those secrets from ever getting out." He leaned closer as if to avoid being overheard. "So I had lots of ammunition when I was caught *in flagrante* and, let me tell you," he

paused for effect, "it was very *de-lic-to*, with someone close and dear to the chairman."

A mental picture of him flicking his tongue between someone's toes made her both queasy and squirmy. She dared not tell him that she did not understand, fearing that his explanation might be even more unsettling.

Back on deck, Tina sat next to Nick on one of the cockpit seats. Being in the saloon was like being inside a train compartment with the blinds down – lots of sound of movement, but not much sensation of it, whereas up here was different. In the dark, you couldn't see the waves but you could feel the droplets of spray hitting your skin and making it tingle; right through to your very core you could feel *Shady Lady* racing the waves, surging over their backs, cutting through their crests, and surfing down the other side.

Tina bit into her second prego roll. "I could eat a hundred of these."

"Well, don't be shy kid, we made plenty."

Oliver had one hand on the wheel and was licking sauce from the fingers of the other.

Nick said he was full after two, so between Oliver and Tina they polished off the rest.

"Are you happy, Kevin?" she leaned back and looked up at him, then clenched her jaw as she realised she'd just called her father by his first name.

Nick smiled back at her, then spread his arms out on either side, one resting just above her head.

"Like I can't begin to tell you. I feel like I've been on a hair-trigger for days."

He hugged her head against the side of his chest and held her there.

Paternaly.

"The stars are magic. Look there – a sputnik."

She put her head back to see for herself. She must have been living under a different sky all her life. A muted one compared to this.

“Fairy dust on black satin.”

“A glitter-dipped paintbrush flicked at the underside of a black umbrella.”

“The aftermath of an explosion inside a diamond mine.” That was Oliver’s contribution.

Tina caught sight of him looking at her, discreetly pinching his nose with his fingers. She held her breath, pulled free and went to sit one level higher, on the deck itself – her knees now level with the back of Nick’s head. Leaning against the guardrail, she gulped down the last of her drink. She was about to get up to take the empty glass down to the galley when Oliver stretched forward and took it from her. He was soon back with a fresh one.

“The kid and I were chief cooks, so that makes you bottle-washer for tonight, Kevin.”

“Sure. No problem.”

Nick gathered up the plates and took them below.

Tina tilted her head back to watch the stars, her legs stretched out before her.

“Afraid that’s the one downside of rum,” said Oliver very softly. “It has a more pungent smell than a rogered ringpiece. Though admittedly it would take some doing to penetrate through these garlic fumes,” he chuckled.

Then even more softly, “How are you feeling?”

She thought about it with her eyes closed.

“Heavenly.”

When Nick came back on deck Tina was at the wheel with Oliver standing behind her, his hands over hers.

“He’s so short he can’t see over the coach-roof,” Oliver said. “We’re going to have to sit the kid up on about five cushions if he’s going to take a watch at the

wheel.” He paused. “But right now we need to change course, so prepare to loosen the sheet when I tell you.” he looked down at Tina, “And you had better move back over there, out of the way of the boom when it comes round.”

As the yacht came about Tina found that her seat, which had been tilted downwards, was now canted steeply upwards. She held on to the deck behind her and put her head back, closing her eyes as she tried to adjust to the new motion. But this was different. Instead of riding head on into the waves, they were hitting them at an oblique angle, so the motion had a bit of a twisting added to its pitching. Like trying to ride a racing camel, blindfold.

They had learnt about movement along different planes in Sir’s geography class. *Pitching* was another word for rocking forward and backward. *Rolling* was from side to side. As the word *yawing* – a mixture of the two – surfaced in her mind, she felt solid bile rise and bump into the back of her tonsils. She opened her eyes to steady the giddiness, but the stars overhead all had asteroid tails attached as they swooped and cavorted around the sky. She rose and turned her head towards the black waves just in time to miss the deck, leaving a chunky smear against the side of the yacht.

She knelt so that her head could hang over the edge, and tried to hold on to the guardrail with one hand. Nick stepped across to her.

Oliver tossed his head back and laughed until he ran out of air.

“Better hang on to him Kevin. If he falls in we’d never find him again. It would take us at least ten minutes to drop sail and come about, but with the wind and currents we wouldn’t ever get back to this exact spot.” He whooped in a huge lungful. “Oh that’s classic. Seasickness always waits until you’ve got a full stomach. Don’t worry kid, it usually wears off after three or four days.”

Tina tried to signal to Nick to leave her, that she was fine, but the next surge hit her and she lunged forward, just as the yacht thumped into an out-of-sequence wave and the deck came up and slammed her in the chest. She threw up

spectacularly, then heaved again and again, struggling to breathe in, with a thick plug clogging her airway. Nick had gripped her around her torso and was trying to hold her, while allowing her lungs enough room to expand, but she could hear he was breathing deeply himself, battling to keep his own gullet under control. Oliver put the wheel on lock, came across, lifted her as if she were a puppy and carried her to the stern. He lowered her in a kneeling position next to the rudder, with her head over the back of the boat. Nick sat nearby and tried to rub her back reassuringly, but had to move away every time she started gagging again.

During the night Oliver and Nick began the routine they would follow from then on of each taking four-hour watches at the wheel.

“The biggest worry is being run down by one of these huge tankers. We’re right in the shipping lanes and these buggers wouldn’t even hear our screams,” Oliver said before going below to fetch one of the long cushions which he laid out on the starboard cockpit seat. Then he picked up Tina’s limp body again and deposited it on the leather upholstery.

“If you’re going to puke,” he warned her, “at least get your head over the side first.”

Nick went and fetched a blanket which he tucked around her.

Last thing before going below to sleep, Oliver brought her a mug of sweet tea.

Tina woke as the sky was in that transition stage between maroon and amethyst.

She flicked her eyes open long enough to see it was Nick at the wheel.

He noticed her movement.

“How are you feeling, Monster?” His voice was low and soothing.

She tried to recall the words he’d used one morning when he’d asked her to fetch him a cup of coffee from the staff-room and a headache pill from the First Aid

box. "Like somebody's used a toilet brush in my mouth, my ribs are sore, and my head is pounding. Apart from that, perfect."

"Not queasy?"

She sat up gingerly.

"Difficult to say. But I don't think so."

He gestured to his flask next to him. "Hot cocoa?"

"Love some. Just give me a second."

First she wanted to brush her teeth and rinse her face. As she stepped down into the saloon, she noticed the frying pan and dishes had been washed and packed away, and that Oliver was not around, though his cabin door was closed. In the heads she tried to remember how the toilet worked. There was a pump and a switch. The instructions had been along the lines of pumping in sea water and turning the switch to position 1 to open and flush, and to 2 to close, but somewhere along the line you had to keep pumping. Plus there had been mention of a seacock which, if you left it open, would keep letting water in until the boat sank. That's all she needed now. To drown them in diluted pee.

When she came back, the tattered line between sky and sea was starting to show. An edge of faded denim, roughly torn. It was chilly and the wind kept trying to find its way under the blanket she held wrapped around her. As she stepped close to Nick he pulled her across and hugged her spine into his chest, pressing his chin on to the top of her head. He handed her a mug filled with swirling vapour.

During the night there had been no reference point against which to judge how fast they were moving, but as it got lighter it felt as if they were riding on the back of a racing horse, or a whale, or a dragon, and when she closed her eyes the sounds she could hear were its wings beating the air.

"I can't believe we've done it," he said. "If anybody had told me a fortnight ago we'd be here today, on a yacht, sailing for Brazil, I'd have backed off slowly and headed for the nearest exit."

She stiffened.

"You're not sorry, are you?"

He gripped her shoulders.

"That's not what I meant." He turned her to face him. "Do you know how I felt while you were lying there looking so vulnerable last night?"

"Revolted?"

"Tina." His frown an admonishment. "It was a physical sensation. It actually hurt right here," he pointed to his chest. She held her hand against the spot; her palm registering his warmth through his pullover.

He lifted her hand away. She looked at him, puzzled. He slipped it under his pullover and placed it back on the same spot, but this time with only his thin T-shirt separating her hand and his flesh.

"Did you ever find the key?"

"Yes!" She couldn't believe she still hadn't asked him about it.

"It fits," he pressed her middle finger between his third and fourth ribs, "right here."

"I can feel each beat," she said softly. "Oh yes, and what does this mean?"

She copied what she could remember of the sign he'd flashed her as she was about to follow Oliver down below.

Nick repeated each symbol, very slowly.

"Am I your sweetheart?"

"Well ... unless I was hoping Oliver would turn around"

Without giving herself time to think about what it was she was about to do, Tina slid her hand underneath his T-shirt and held it directly against his hot skin. It felt just as smooth and delicious as she'd imagined.

He stopped and she stood there, counting the thumps, wishing life came with a rewind button. His body pulled back. She had no choice but to let her hand drop out of his T-shirt.

He was Sir again.

“Don’t. You’re too young.”

Tina felt her anger and her humiliation, like two atoms, collide and start a nuclear reaction.

“Why do you keep treating me like a child? she hissed, not wanting Oliver to hear. “We’ve run away together for goodness’ gracious?”

She’d really wanted to say *for fuck’s sake* but had changed her mind to say *for goodness’ sake*, but instead found her gran’s phrase coming out. Any moment now she’d say things like *silly billy*, or *super-duper*.

“But you are still a child and I have duty to protect you.”

“I am *not* a child.”

It felt like her brain was overheating and was about to spew out of her ears and nostrils. Lava instead of a tongue.

“I’ve made adult decisions and I can carry on making them.”

She was sobbing and couldn’t stop.

He crunched her against him with one arm, the other hand on the wheel.

A machete-shaped headache had buried itself in her skull and she’d started hiccuping. She knew that after a while she would cringe at her outburst. For now all she could think about was that she must be smearing snot on his pullover and that she didn’t know what to do with the cup of cocoa she was still holding in the hand behind his back.

A long time later, her voice muffled in his jersey, but steady: “If I had to die soon, this is the way I’d want to go.”

“No need to be so morbid.”

He stretched out her hand and kissed the inside of her elbow. He kept holding her, even though her breathing was back to normal.

“Do you know what language they speak in Brazil?” He studied her at arm’s length, his eyes shiny in the dawn light. He was Nick again.

She knocked back the cold cocoa.

“Brazilian?”

“Clown.”

He blew a raspberry against her neck and clamped her back to him.

“It’s Portuguese. Do you know it’s the fifth biggest country on earth? I wonder if I can get a job teaching English. Perhaps to businessmen.” He was breathing into her hair. “And you’ll pick up the language very quickly.”

She would learn Eskimo, as long as he kept holding her.

University of Cape Town

Chapter twelve

Tina spent most of the morning sleeping below, curled up on the quarter berth which also served as the seat for the chart table. Oliver came down periodically to check weather forecasts on the shortwave radio and, using a compass and a slide rule, to work out their position on the map. As he sat listening to odd radio traffic, his hand rested on her ankle. She kept her eyes closed. Everyone seemed to have a thing about her feet. Two fingers crept round until they were lightly gripping her big toe.

"I've composed a poem for you:

"This little piggy had a barf fit,

"This little piggy hugged the throne,

"This little piggy had steak rolls,

"And this little piggy ...

"Spoke to God on the Great White Telephone."

He stretched his arms around an imaginary toilet bowl, and roared into it: "Oh Gaa-aawd."

She burst out laughing, but instantly became aware of how loud her voice sounded against the whispering of the sea against the hull; the stillness up on deck.

Nick took the helm again in the early afternoon and Oliver went below to put together a meal of bread, camembert, avocado and cold steak from the night before. While he was working, Tina snuck a pickled onion and popped it in her mouth.

"It's a miracle."

He had a way of modulating his voice so that you were always leaning towards him.

"What is?"

"Your recovery. I've never seen anyone get over sea sickness so quickly." He leaned over into the ice-box and lifted out two beers.

"A frosty for you, Kevin?" he boomed.

"No thanks," came Nick's voice from above.

"Poofter," he said, putting one back. "And how about a Coke for you, kid?" He glanced at her, dropping his voice. "With a wee drop of something just to liven it up a little?"

She gestured a finger down her throat, but said aloud, "No thanks."

They grinned.

After she had changed into fresh underpants in the midget-sized bathroom and checked on her plaster, Tina went up on deck. The sun was hitting the crests of the waves and splintering in shards that threatened to take the top off her skull, like the top off a soft-boiled egg.

Nick was at the wheel and Oliver was sitting sipping his beer. Both men were without T-shirts.

She yearned to be an artist. To be able to capture his light and shade; what her art teacher had called chiaroscuro. The way sweat gave him a glossy coating that made every movement shimmer, like a water mongoose. She tried to study him as if he were an object in an art class. He was a series of V's. His chin, a V but with a flattened base. There, the tiny inverted one that he never quite managed to shave completely. The V below his throat, where his collarbones intersected, and where her St Christopher rested, pointed, like an arrow, to the cleft which separated his pectorals, and below that, to the split between the ridged muscles underneath his ribcage. The start of a V at the waistband of his shorts. She started thinking of x-ray vision, but grew conscious of the fact that Oliver was watching her. He might have been made of V's once, but they had long since turned to ovals.

"Don't you want to take off your T-shirt, Tom?" asked Oliver.

"No. Thanks."

"And why not?"

"I don't want to get burnt."

A very ambiguous, "Aah."

She deflected the subject slightly: "You're getting burnt. Dad. Would you like some suntan lotion on your back?"

Nick felt his shoulders.

"Mmm. Good idea."

He squatted on his haunches and Tina squeezed a zigzag of Coppertone on to his back and shoulders, then rubbed it in, tilting his head forward to she could massage it into his neck. She used gruff, off-hand, boy gestures.

When she was done, Nick carried on smearing oil on his chest and arms.

Oliver, turned his back to Tina and looked over his shoulder at her.

"Wo' abou' Uncle Oliver then?"

Tina hesitated, then went and did his back.

He murmured his appreciation.

She found he had more muscle and less fat than she'd been expecting.

They sat in silence. In whichever direction Tina looked, there was nothing but sea. All the way to the horizon; to infinity. *Shady Lady* looked brave, but all too fragile against this vast expanse. It would be so easy to get disorientated out here; to get lost. No wonder sailors treated the ocean as if it were a she, with a distinct personality: ancient, mysterious, moody, and sometimes hungry for sacrifice. At the moment she looked playful, and she and *Shady Lady* were romping together, having fun.

When Oliver finished his beer he took the bottle, tossed it over the side, and took a swipe at it with the winch handle, smashing it in mid-air.

"Why did you have to do that for?" said Nick.

"Saves carting all these empties across thousands of miles of ocean. You just have to be careful though. One of my friends – admittedly after a few pints – threw his last winch handle in the air and tried to hit it with the bottle. Of course the winch handle went into the briny and he was left with an empty bottle in his hands. Tore his

fingers to shreds working the ropes without one of these,” he held up the handle.

“Now I always carry plenty of spares, just in case.”

He could see Nick was scowling. “Ah, so you’re one of those honey-buggers. You’re worried about the sea life. No need my lad. The sharp edges get ground down by the sand almost immediately – you’ve seen what glass looks like when it washes up on the beach. So blunt, if you tried cutting your wrists with it you’d die of boredom rather than loss of blood. So blunt it couldn’t pierce a hymen.”

Both Nick and Tina’s eyes flicked to the inside of her left elbow, then hurriedly away again, trying to pretend it had been a coincidence. She looked up to see if Oliver had noticed. But with his permanent cryptic grin, it was impossible to tell. The Mona Lisa on happy gas.

Chapter thirteen

Hands, hair, everything they touched was sticky. Tina had always hated having dirty hands; even the tacky way her fingers stuck together after eating an orange was unbearable. She kept going below to the heads to wash them off in the little hand basin with the foot pump.

After her third trip of the morning, Oliver made it clear they had only three hundred and fifty litres of fresh water on board, which might need to last them thirty days. That worked out to an average of about three litres per person per day, so it was to be used for drinking or cooking only.

She must have looked unconvinced.

"Let me put it into perspective for you, kid: how many litres do you think the average land-based toilet uses, per flush?"

"One?"

"Ten."

"I get the message."

They could each take a two-minute shower on deck, once a week, he said. In between they could heave to and take a dip in the sea if they got too high. If you absolutely had to, you could elect to drink less and have a wipe-down with a face cloth. Dishes were washed in salt water. Brushing teeth was a frivolity, and even then only if you swallowed the toothpaste. You wore the same pair of shorts until they started scuttling round on their own, then you drowned them in a bucket of seawater with some bleach.

Underpants were obviously also an optional extra, Tina thought, trying not to notice Oliver bulging in full view as he sat with his legs spread apart. A Buddha with not too big a paunch who had lost the ability to bend at the knee. She couldn't quite work out what that thing, the one she was trying not to notice, would look like when it wasn't being squidged into a distorted shape. It resembled a two-day-old faded

balloon that had been twisted and twisted. With goose bumps and sporadic black hairs, similar to those on the head of the tramp who was always asleep at Newlands station. Oliver did not notice her not noticing and scratched there often.

Nick had been dozing on a cockpit bench. He opened one eye.

"What's that about taking a swim? We've been at sea for," he looked at his watch, "less than fifteen hours, and already I'm feeling the way I did when my father took us camping and it rained non-stop for three weeks." He stretched. "Is there any way we can slow down enough for me to do a few hundred meters?"

"No problem."

Oliver turned the wheel hard and slowed the yacht to a virtual stop, while Nick went below to change.

"Don't you want to cool off too?"

"Nah. I'm afraid of sharks."

Nick dived in and swam just behind the yacht.

Tina hoped that her saying the word *sharks* out loud hadn't summoned them from the deep, for when she looked back, there were lots of dark shapes just below the surface, and sometimes she thought she could make out a fin. The memory of a dream stayed just beyond reach. She watched Nick, willing him to outswim the shadows. Whether or not he picked her up telepathically, he swam like he was being pursued. Now and then he would change strokes, and when he switched over to butterfly it was like watching a sea creature porpoising. He kept his head tucked in, and a bubble of water enveloped him whenever he surfaced. Tina was convinced he was going without air.

After about an hour he gave an extra spurt and caught up with the yacht, grabbing hold of the stainless steel ladder at the rear and launching himself halfway up it. Oliver had his back turned briefly, and in that moment Nick pointed a thumb towards himself, held his fist to his chest, then pointed at Tina.

She blew him a kiss.

Nick's head, which had been turned slightly, snapped sideways. He flung both hands to his cheek, as if to catch something that had landed there, and with that fell backwards, theatrically, into the water; his eyes, huge, on hers.

She pretended to be choking and kept her head ducked when Nick clambered back up the ladder.

"That was magnificent," Nick said, rolling his shoulders and flicking water droplets from his bristle-cut, before rubbing himself down with a towel.

Tina had her back to him, but was watching the top half of his reflection in the galley's little window. His St Christopher was heaving and, even in this distorted light, she could see his eyelashes clotted with water, thicker and glossier than ever.

He put on one of his tapes and Roberta Flack sang *The first time ever I saw your face* to Tina while he went below to change.

Suddenly Oliver let out a Red Indian whoop.

"Take the wheel," he yelled as he turned and started bringing in an invisible line, hand over hand.

Tina thought he was miming until she saw the clear filament cutting into his outsized fingers.

"Son of a bitch's fighting like he's possessed."

He let out some line, then suddenly yanked it in hard, rocking the yacht as he surged backwards, his arms above his head; a water-skier trying to keep his balance; one hand wrapping line round the other which was turning blue at the fingertips.

"Come on baby, come to papa. I'm not going to hurt you," he gurgled. "Just eat you."

He whooped again.

Tina held the wheel in exactly the same position it had been in when Oliver had let go. She noticed the sail starting to flail.

"Keep her on two-thirty," Oliver shouted, forcing her to let go as he gave the wheel a quarter spin with one hand, before launching himself on to the deck, to give the fish another run.

Tina looked around for any clue as to what his instruction meant. She noticed the compass, floating in its ball of fluid. The number facing her looked like 240. She turned the wheel to the left but nothing seemed to happen, so she tried turning harder. Before she could react, the boom, with the mainsail attached, swung round in a vicious arc, from way out as far as it could go on the left-hand side to the same distance on the right, where it stopped dead. The impact as the full sail, with several tons of force behind it, was brought to such a sudden halt jarred everything, right down to her eyes in their sockets. Tina tried to correct, spinning the wheel in the opposite direction. The boom came swinging round, like a scythe gathering speed through grass, and again hitting a concealed concrete block.

"Holy mother, kid. Are you trying to destroy my yacht?"

"I'm sorry. I don't know how to steer."

Nick came stumbling up the ladder from below, still fastening the top button of his fly.

"Duck!" she shrieked.

Nick bent low at the waist as the boom passed over where his head had been less than a moment before. He crossed the length of the cockpit in two paces, running as if to get to a helicopter, grabbed the wheel from Tina and quickly got the sail under control.

"Remind me not to let you play with the spinnaker, kid," Oliver said, still wrapping line round his hand, dragging the fish over the guard rail. It was at least as long as his arm and looked as if it were being electrocuted, bucking and convulsing on the deck, flashing vivid blue, violet, silver, purple.

"Dorado," he said. "The finest eating fish in the entire universe. But this is just a little one. Still a tiddler." He reached around behind his waist and drew the dagger

from his belt. "Grab a bucket and the breadboard, won't you, kid, these entrails are going to make fine bait."

When she brought them from below she followed him on to the foredeck where the fish was still leaping and contorting. An iridescence jolted just above the surface of its skin.

Oliver stamped on its head, crushing its skull with his heel. The fluorescent colours dimmed, sparked, then dulled completely. They were watching a very drab grey fish with goo oozing from its eye. He hacked off its head and fins, gutted and skinned it, and began cutting off slivers of translucent flesh and lowering them into his mouth with bloody hands. He tilted his head back as if slurping fresh oysters.

"Join me in some? It's the freshest you'll ever taste," he called across to Nick who shook his head and frowned, looking as if he had a headache.

Oliver said something under his breath that Tina couldn't catch, then looked at her.

"What about you? You strike me as someone who's not afraid to experiment. Not like ..." he moved his chin a fraction towards his shoulder.

She looked down at the gory mess and couldn't help the shudder that trickled down inside her.

"Come on. Don't be such a pansy." He rinsed his hand over the side. "It's one of the most refined tastes you'll ever experience. Not fishy at all. When it's cooked, dorado has a rich, smoky flavour, but like this it's so subtle, while you're still trying to capture it, it's gone. Something ephemeral like," he searched for the right image, "licking a teardrop from the cheek of your beloved."

He held a tiny shaving up for her. She closed her eyes, tilted her head back and swallowed.

"Not like that. You didn't even taste it."

He held out another piece for her.

This time she retained eye contact as she gave the morsel three chews and swallowed. She smiled.

“See what I mean?”

He ran his tongue round his lips then lowered another strip into his own mouth.

“This is what makes life worthwhile.”

They crouched on their haunches over the fish, him feeding each of them in turn.

“I once sailed with a chef from the Philippines who had been to Japan. He told me about a banquet where one of the courses was a huge fish on ice, with everybody carving off thin slices. The fish’s sides were still moving.” He puffed his cheeks in and out, breathing noisily.

Tina felt her appetite curdle.

His laughter bubbled out at the sight of her.

Later in the morning, while Nick slept in the saloon, Oliver showed Tina how to steer by a compass bearing and how to keep the sails in trim. She stood at the wheel and he sat behind her, leaning forward to put his hands over hers and correct her course once in a while.

“You’re going to have to build up some muscle to be able to pull the sheets in.” He squeezed both her biceps.

She twisted round to get a better look at him. His hair, which she had earlier decided was the colour of the foil from a cigarette pack – shiny silver in the light but more like pewter when in shadow – was dazzling up close. It occurred to her that Nick’s hair might be this colour one day. And picturing Oliver at Nick’s age, she realised that he too must have been a lady-killer in his twenties.

“Why do you call it a sheet? That sounds like the word for a sail, not a rope.”

He laughed. "Haven't you noticed how every group has to have a language of its own?"

"What's the name again of this blue canopy you've put over the companion-way?"

"The spray dodger."

"Funny name. Makes me think of Jolly Roger."

"Well, if this is a pirate boat, I must be Captain Hook. Which makes you," he ran a finger down her spine, "Peter Pan."

It surprised her how annoyed she felt that he'd used a name she associated with herself and Nick.

Her attention was distracted when Oliver gave her a pair of leather gloves that fitted perfectly, then showed her how to pull the sheet in and lock it in place in the jammer. He did it nonchalantly with one hand but she had to use both, and brace a foot against the wooden deck.

"You're doing well, kid." He swatted her across the backside. "You take the watch. I'm going to have a zizz."

"Just give me a sec. I've got to dash below."

She knew that he knew that she was going to the heads for a pee, and though she dreaded him saying she should stop being such a moffie and piss overboard like a man, he merely smiled his obscure smile and made no comment.

Tina stood alone at the helm, breathing the salty air deeply into her lungs and making minor adjustments to keep the compass steady on 220. It was disconcerting, not being able to see straight ahead, her view obscured by the spray dodger. It meant she had to steer blind and rely solely on the compass. She kept imagining whales or ice-bergs lurking directly in front of the bow.

The waves were still coming from behind and had grown bigger over the course of the morning. Every now and then it would feel like they were body-surfing

down the incline of a particularly tall one. When they got to those crests, she could just make out land in the far distance. Oliver had said he was keeping five to ten miles offshore, in the warm Agulhas Current which runs down the east side of the continent, in exactly the direction they wanted to go. He had instructed her not to get too close to land or they would meet the counter current. She was more afraid of half-submerged rocks.

Tina wondered whether she would recognise the lighthouse where she and Nick had slept together that first night. She had no idea how long it would take to cover the three or four hundred kilometres, but the way it felt right now, she could easily believe they were travelling faster than a car; a plane maybe. When she caught sight of the coastline again, she saw houses and three-storey buildings which might have been blocks of flats or hotels. It still looked too orderly – she knew that further south the scenery got much wilder.

It was after midday when Nick came up on deck. Tina hoped he would be impressed by her sailing ability, but all he commented on was that she was getting burnt and should put on some sunscreen. When she handed the wheel over to him she was surprised to find her arms shaking. She had not slept all that well the night before, curled up on the quarter berth behind the chart table. She'd been too hot inside her sleeping bag, even though it was unzipped, and was forever being disturbed when either Nick or Oliver came to listen to the weather forecast on the radio, or to fill in the logbook.

She went below and thought about sleeping, but remembered how at break Nick was always being teased that he had a pet tapeworm which needed regular feeding. The girls were forever offering him half their sarmies. Eleanor's were accepted most often. Her family's domestic worker made her toasted ham and smelly cheese; toasted mock lobster; toasted bacon, banana and dates. Tina had begged Yasmin to make her some toasted sandwiches but had never asked again after

getting toasted anchovy spread, and being called Fish-Paste Breath by Belinda and Sonja. Soon the nickname had spread, faster than ringworm, throughout the school.

Tina looked around the galley for inspiration. She found a loaf of bread and some butter, and after a little searching she discovered a can of tuna, a bottle of mayonnaise and one of tomato sauce. The highlight was a tiny bottle of Tabasco sauce, which she sprinkled over her creation. She took five slabs of bread slathered in tuna up to him, together with a cold beer from the ice-box.

"You – are a *star*."

So, she couldn't get praise for sailing single-handed but could for slaving in a galley. She wasn't so much disappointed in him, as in herself, for the sense of accomplishment at having mastered the making of lunch.

He gave her a look that could tilt the earth's axis and took his first bite. As he swallowed he began coughing and his eyes watered.

"Breathed in a crumb," he said, thumping his chest.

It was only when she bit into her own lunch that she found she had overdone the Tabasco. By about fifty-fold. She left hers on her plate but he ate all five of his door-stoppers.

He laughed when he caught her yawning.

"Why not bring one of the cushions up here and sleep on the bench? I like having you close by."

While she carried the cushion and rummaged for a pillow, he rigged up an awning for her out of a sheet.

She lay on her back, her eyes closed. Cleopatra on a royal barge. Serfs on the shore kneeling in supplication. Antony at the helm.

Being a royal gave her the courage to ask: "Have you had lots of girlfriends?"

"Quite a few, I suppose."

"What's it like?" She hesitated, then stumbled on. "Having to pluck up the courage to ask someone to go out with you?"

A pause.

"I don't know. It hasn't really happened like that. Usually the bird has asked me to go somewhere with her."

Like I did, she thought. "No, I meant to go steady with you."

He stroked her hair. She wanted him to scratch her scalp.

"I don't think I've ever asked anyone that."

She could feel herself bobbing in and out of warm velvety liquid. A bath of asses' milk. Her words taking longer to travel from her mind to her mouth. She wasn't sure if some of them weren't getting lost along the way.

"Why not?"

"It never occurred to me."

Now he was scratching. She curled her neck. A reincarnation, Cleo the cat.

"Does that mean you're going to play hard to get?"

"You can get me any time you want."

There was no reply for a long time.

"Have you had lots of boyfriends?"

But she did not respond.

Chapter fourteen

Tina was lying on her stomach on the quarter berth, composing something. Oliver, who had just come off duty, whistled as he cracked a bottle of cold ale, and subsided on the edge of the seat.

“Let me have a look.”

“No,” she jumped, clamping the writing pad to her chest.

He shrugged and went into his skipper’s cabin, and she carried on writing.

At eight in the evening, when Oliver went back on deck for his next watch, she heard him remind Nick that it was his turn to prepare dinner, then say: “After that, time for some beauty sleep for you, chum.”

It was their third night at sea. Nick’s voice was scratchy. “This four hours on, four hours off takes some getting used to. I toss around for ages then, just as I’m starting to doze, it’s time to wake up again.”

While they were talking, Tina sneaked across to Nick’s berth and back again.

When he came below, she pretended to be asleep, and watched him through her eyelashes. He cracked eggs with one hand into a bowl that waltzed lazily, occasionally with the flourish of a little quickstep. It clearly did not faze him to be working with boiling water that swayed, hiccupped and did the odd shimmy now and then.

The three of them ate together on deck, with only Oliver making conversation. He insisted on Nick joining him in a bit of white wine. While Nick was looking down at his plate, Oliver tilted the bottle towards Tina and raised an eyebrow. She gave a quick shake of her head. Nick had a single glass and Oliver finished the remainder of the bottle. Whenever Nick looked across at her, she kept her face averted.

It was her turn to do the washing up. By the time Nick came below, Tina was again curled up on the quarter berth with her eyes shut.

Her feet got heavier. She was standing on the beach, with quicksand sucking at her ankles, unable to move. A gigantic tidal wave was growing bigger and bigger. She was breathing so hard, dizzy, not daring to scream, trying to get her timing right so that she'd have her lungs filled with air when the wave smashed down and engulfed her.

When Nick came back on deck again at midnight, Oliver was standing at the wheel in the glow-worm green of the little night light, whistling to a Carpenters' song on the tape deck. Tina was sitting with her head turned away from them, her cheek resting on her knees which were gathered up inside a tent-size pullover that Oliver had loaned her. She ignored Nick's arrival.

As Oliver gave Nick an update on conditions, his voice was quizzical. The wind was a steady ten to twelve knots still from the north-east and they were on a due downwind heading of 225. Waves one to two meters. No need to alter course unless the wind changed, in which case he should be woken. Just the usual injunction – to keep the sails tight as a fairy's twat.

Nick put the wheel on lock and jumped up to scout the deck and check each of the sheets was hauled in tight and securely fastened.

Oliver had a pee over the stern and went below.

Though the sea was heaving placidly, the waves rising and falling in time to the breathing of the sea goddess asleep on the ocean floor, Tina couldn't get rid of the tsunami image.

"Monster," Nick called quietly as he jumped back down into the cockpit. It was as if she had not heard him. He stepped across to where she was sitting motionless; in the gentle phosphorescence she could see that her colour was of someone who had spent her life underwater. She might have been hiding a tail under the wool.

"Are you OK?"

She shrugged without looking at him.

"I read your note."

She could not look at him but hugged her knees even tighter.

"Tina." He lifted her under the elbows.

She rose and stood in front of him, her forehead level with his heart, the bottom of the pullover brushing against her calves.

He sat down and swivelled her sideways so that she was standing next to his knees. Now their heads were level, though still she kept her face averted.

"I haven't been able to sleep since I read it," he whispered.

"I feel like such a fool."

"You've changed your mind?"

He turned her face towards him, but she could not meet his eye.

"No."

He pulled her close and put his lips next to her ear.

"Do you really want me to kiss you?"

No sound from her. Then an indrawn breath. A yes so soft it could almost have been a wave brushing against the hull.

He gathered her chin in his hands. She had her eyes closed. He bent his head. She felt his rough, chapped lips press against hers. They held there, breathing through their noses, in and out in time with one another, lips pressed together. She felt as dazed as when the stars had spun and cartwheeled. Now she understood why Barbara Cartland maidens always swooned at this point. To be unconscious, incapable of being held responsible for whatever was going to happen next. At the same time she wanted to luxuriate in every sensation; to be trapped in amber, like this forever.

He pulled apart. Smiled. He ran his thumb across her lower lip, pressing her teeth slightly open. Then, still holding his thumb there, he touched his lips to hers again, but this time she felt his warm, moist tongue touch hers. It gave her a jolt.

He stopped. "Are you sure you want to carry on?"

She nodded.

"Take this off." He gestured the pullover. "It smells of him."

She dragged it over her head, and cast it aside, standing in front of him in her shorts and T-shirt, quaking ever so slightly as the night inhaled cold air against her arms. His skin had taken on a merman sheen under the pale cockpit light. She saw he was freshly shaven.

He lifted her on to his lap, tilting her backwards, supporting her shoulders in a flexed elbow, holding her face with his other hand. The heat of his body surprised her.

"Any idea how often I've wanted to do this?"

He kissed her again. She felt one element of herself there, experiencing everything intensely, but another off to one side, observing. This time she opened her teeth when his tongue touched against them and she felt him gently probe her mouth. At first she did not respond, but then tentatively began exploring his tongue with her own, a portion of her analysing the sensation, another portion lost. Abandoned. Huddling in an underwater cave. The texture of his tongue was as foreign and disturbing as maybe caviar would be. Yet also overwhelmingly warm and soft, like a wet little mammal, lacking hair, but with a life of its own. He tasted of Close Up, masking something more subtle; something that she, at a cellular level, was powerless not to respond to. Musk perhaps? Or must? She was off-balance. She clasped him round the neck, kissing back, running her own tongue around his mouth, his teeth, finding herself arching when he plunged deep into her mouth. He kissed her eyes, her ears. She was giddy, as with the tidal wave, only this time longing to be engulfed; for oblivion. He went on and on, probing, filling her mouth, drawing sounds from her she had never heard before.

"What am I doing?" he whispered into the top of her hair.

"Don't stop."

She bit his throat, not taking a nip of skin between the teeth, but ravenous, with mouth open, canines bared; she turned her head and locked her teeth deep into his bicep; her tongue hearing his blood pumping. She recognised now the origin of werewolf and vampire stories.

He pulled her head back and kissed her throat, clamping his mouth across her windpipe.

"Oh God." He pushed her away from him, hard.

"What's wrong?"

She fell to her feet, felt his rejection set off a bubble of panic rising inside her, like bile up her throat.

"Oliver."

She flicked around.

Nick sat and worried his head back and forth, pinching the skin between his eyebrows.

"He's gone now."

"It's so dark. Did he see anything?"

"What do you think he saw? A father and son having a friendly hug?"

She flinched.

He sat at the wheel.

She went and stood at the front of the boat, leaning over the pulpit rail at the prow; experiencing nausea, vertigo. What were the chances of her being able to sweet-talk Oliver out of handing them in to the authorities? Zilch. It was all over. Save for the police, her parents; reformatory for her; prison for Nick? She felt a strong urge to jump overboard. She hoped the impulse would pass, but hours later she was still wondering what it would feel like.

Oliver did not emerge until the sun had risen, crawled all the way across the sky, and was in the process of being extinguished by the sea. A cigarette *stompie* in the dregs

of a beer bottle. Venus was heading for the same fate when they heard him whistling as he clattered around in the galley. Nick and Tina had not so much as looked at one another since the night before.

Oliver came up on deck, having to turn his shoulders at an angle to fit through the companion-way, bearing a tray with an ice-encrusted litre of vodka and two tumblers, plus a long sparkling drink for her.

He walked along the narrow strip to where she was sitting at the bow, though on the tilting deck it was more of a slow sashay in time with the waves. He did not pay any attention to the tray above his shoulder. A waiter in a French restaurant; he could have had a white cloth over one arm. The levels in her glass and in the bottle stayed true with the horizon, while their containers did not. When he got to her he leaned down low.

"A spritzer for *madame*."

Then he swayed lazily back to the cockpit and poured two tumblers of vodka which left less than half that behind in the bottle.

Oliver handed a sweating glass to Nick and knocked back a large shot from his own.

Nick did not say anything but took a swig and immediately sucked in air through gritted teeth while shaking his head from side to side as though in pain.

They sat looking in different directions. None of them saying anything. Just the two men drinking and Tina sipping from her glass, not sure whether she liked the fermented note. The closest to it she'd tasted before was cider vinegar, and that she'd hated.

The silence, though invisible, grew more noticeable.

Tina wondered if this was a technique Oliver had perfected when he was a lawyer in court. She didn't know where Nick had learnt the skill. She found the hush worse than a dentist drilling without an injection but she, for sure, wasn't going to be the one to end it.

The two men seemed far away in thought, yet matched one another, sip for sip.

When their glasses got down to half an inch, Oliver refilled them, leaving less than that in the bottle.

Nick broke first.

"What are you going to do?"

Oliver rested his hands on his hips.

"What's it worth to you?"

"Everything. Anything."

Oliver cocked an amused eyebrow.

"All I can offer is a eight hundred rand."

Oliver kept staring at Nick.

"OK, thirteen hundred." Tina had never heard his voice so subdued. "It's every last cent I own."

Oliver let out a hacking sound – part bark, part laugh.

"I'm pulling the piss out of you." He raised his glass. "To Nick." He turned to where she was sitting and raised it again. "To Tina."

"You know who we are!" Tina rushed aft along the deck, nearly tripping overboard on a stray rope. If there had been anything left in her glass she'd have spilt it.

"Have done all along. Amusing to watch how long your charade would last."

Now he was laughing full-throttle.

"You swine." Tina felt as if she were a puppy and had just been let off her leash. She punched Oliver on the arm.

He fell to one side, as if having taken a heavy blow, still pretending to be laughing.

Tina went and sat next to Nick. Her brain felt as fizzy as sherbet dropped into a bottle of Pepsi, but Nick was obviously exhausted.

Oliver got up and walked to the front of the cockpit, his back towards them; feeling the air on either side of his face, as would a seal bull; twisting his neck from side to side. He sat down again, swirled his glass.

“Useful stuff this. If all else fails you can water it down and run the engine on it. Or use it to etch steel.”

No one laughed.

He took a draught, threw his head back and exhaled. Perhaps expecting to see flames.

“So, Nick, you were a Parabat?”

“For a while. Until I got injured.”

“Like 007? Trained to kill with your bare hands?”

Oliver was smiling, clearly having fun.

Nick did not respond.

“Ever do so?”

Nick shook his head.

Tina couldn't understand why he wasn't feeling as relieved as she was. She wanted him to cheer up and join in Oliver's joshing.

“What about you Oliver?” she asked, copying his ironic tone. “When you were a boxer?”

“It wasn't my blow that did it – I'm pretty sure the bugger already had a clot on in the brain from his previous bout. His coach should never have let him into the ring.”

He sat for a moment, then slapped his massive thigh as if he'd made a decision.

“Time to put balls to the wall. ‘Scuse the language young lady.” Oliver winked at her then whacked the deck behind him. “Let's get the spinnaker up so you can see what this trollop is capable of.”

He took over the wheel and began issuing commands. He had them close all the hatches and slot the washboards into their grooves to seal off the entrance into the saloon below.

"If we screw this up and she fills out of control, we can get knocked flat in a second. For God's sake don't try'n hold on to a sheet by wrapping it round your wrist – it can slice through you neat as a cleaver. That's if you're lucky. If not, it can whip you overboard and flog you to death against the hull or the water. You'd both better clip on."

"Don't you want to clip on too?" she asked as she searched in the lockers for harnesses while Nick went to the fore deck and started untying the spinnaker pole.

Oliver stroked a chunky knuckle against her throat.

"Not me, sweetheart. When you're sailing solo, that would be the worst possible way to die." She noticed his eyes were moist. "To fall overboard and get dragged behind, like a plough behind a pair of galloping mules. Until you eventually drowned or expired from the cold, unable to reach the yacht but sure as monkeys have nuts you'd keep on trying, seeing her right there, just out of reach." He took his hand away and clenched it as a quiver went through him. "I'd prefer to go quickly – if I fell in I probably wouldn't last more than twenty minutes, ten in southern waters. Unless of course a shark came and – hap!"

He grabbed her arms and lunged at her, snapping his bared teeth close to her ear.

She squealed, feeling his three-day bristle, like sharkskin, against her neck.

Oliver shouted that he was about to gybe – he pronounced it *jibe* – then spun the wheel. The yacht turned and the boom swung, with the mainsail now out to port. He bellowed orders, telling them to let down the front sail, the Genoa, then he instructed them to attach the spinnaker pole to the mast and to prepare to winch up the new sail. On Oliver's signal, Nick cranked the winch handle so fast it spun out of focus.

The arteries on either side of his throat bulged till Tina feared the turquoise vessels must surely rupture. The spinnaker, the colour of gentian violet, flopped sullenly, clinging to the mast, then filled with the percussion of an eardrum bursting, and yanked the vessel forwards and to the right. Tina was caught off guard but Nick grabbed her arm in a bruising grip and kept her from falling, despite the fact that he too was unsteady.

“You OK?” he asked, his breath corrosive.

She nodded.

Oliver yelled, “Get that fucking halyard cleated off or we’ll all be in the drink.”

“Now this is sailing,” he slurred when they came aft. “The only thing that comes close is when we’re goosewinged, with mainsail to one side and headsail to the other.”

Tina noticed that he was sitting with his knees goosewinged, his shorts hitched up in his crotch.

“You could bloody water-ski behind her now,” he continued, slinging an arm around Tina’s waist as he unclipped her.

“Care for another?” He looked over her shoulder to Nick, with his arm still draped around her middle.

Froth splashed up *Shady Lady*’s sides. The rigging groaned like straining leather.

“No. Thank you.” The same voice Nick had used to decline the offer of raw dorado. “I’m going to get some sleep.” He had been at the helm for eighteen hours straight and hadn’t slept for a day and a half. He looked like he’d had mustard powder blown in his eyes. “You coming below Tina?”

She hesitated.

“I’m not as tired as you. I think I’ll stay up just a little longer.”

Oliver had finally let her go, but she was still standing at his side. Nick stood looking at them, swaying with the rhythm of the sea, but leaning each time just a little further than was necessary.

"We need some food. Tina, please come and give me a hand." His words were a request but his voice was not.

They lifted the washboards out of the companion-way and stepped down the narrow ladder into the saloon. Nick grabbed a handful of cans and punctured them viciously. He ought to have used sea water but instead ran some precious drinking water into a pot to heat them. She got out some plates.

"I want you to be careful around Oliver."

"Why? What's he done wrong?"

They were both whispering so as to keep Oliver from hearing them.

"Nothing I can point to. But you have to stay clear of him."

Again, a command.

She was so drained she was hallucinating slightly. She could picture the greasy, smirking little man sitting just behind her peripheral vision, contaminating their speech bubbles, turning them boomslang-green.

"When has he been anything but kind to us? Just because he –"

Nick barged out of the galley and went back up the companion-way, but missed the last one and smacked his shin against the top step.

With the hiss of the gas stove and the sound of the sea rushing against the hull, Tina could not make out what they were saying, but could hear their low voices building. She thought she could recognise Nick's, but it sounded different, a deep growl. More cat than dog-like, but from deep in the chest. A leopard's rumble. Then Oliver's laugh. From his repertoire of laughs, this was what the one that the biggest, oldest seals would sound like if he could laugh, with his head back and his tusks bared. Using his advocate's ability to throw his voice, two of his words were audible, ... *her choice*.

As Nick came back down the companion-way his feet touched only the second step. He thumped down on to the floor and his momentum kept him going as he plunged past, into the bulkhead at the end of the saloon.

Tina busied herself with opening the cans, not noticing they were still only luke-warm, wishing she could think of something suitably light and witty to say, to make that reconnection. She dished up a tin of meatballs in gravy and some grey corned beef on to bread that was hard but not yet mouldy. She took a plate up to Oliver, then one to Nick. He was lying on the settee berth, his back towards her. She stood there, not knowing what to do. The rise and fall of his chest indicated he was asleep, so she returned to the galley and covered his food, then went and sat on the opposite settee and silently ate as many of the congealed lumps as she could get down.

Much later, she took off her T-shirt, grabbed the edges of the plaster on one side of her ribcage and, with both hands, ripped it off in a single yank.

She did not make a sound and he did not open his eyes.

Chapter fifteen

Oliver came below before dawn.

"I hope you've been catching up on some sleep because it looks like we're in for some ugly shit." He chuckled. "The sea and wind are building and the pressure is still dropping fast. It's come down from 1023 last night to 1016. We're going to have get off the continental shelf, to head into deeper water."

"But then wouldn't we be better off aiming towards shallower water?" asked Tina. "To be close to land in case we get into trouble and need to get into a harbour."

Oliver shook his head.

"This stretch isn't known as the Wild Coast for nothing. A simple rule of thumb, kid: the shallower the water and stronger the wind, the bigger the waves. Plus we have a third factor at play here, the current. With the wind having swung to the south-west, which means the waves are coming from there, but with the current coming from the opposite direction, you have the two conflicting forces which result in e-bloody-normous seas. You often get forty to fifty foot waves here, sometimes bigger."

He had told her, a few nights ago, of supertankers being either snapped in half or swallowed by these freak waves, but nobody knew which as no sign was ever seen of them again.

"The last place you want to be in a storm is too close to land. For one thing," he held up a forefinger the size of a bratwurst, "it's only too easy to bump into it by accident." He clearly expected them to laugh with him at this. Tina chuckled.

Nick butted in: "I've heard the swell in some of the smaller harbours can be awful. Boats breaking free of their moorings and smashing into one another."

Oliver took this as support.

“Absolutely. We’ll be much safer being far out to sea. Probably take us a good few hours to get off the shelf. We’ll need to put another reef into the mainsail and change down to a small storm jib, so there’s as little canvas up as possible.”

He left it as neither a request nor an order.

University of Cape Town

Chapter sixteen

The gods seemed determined to destroy the yacht. Wind shrieked at them, trying to drive them insane. The rain made it difficult to breathe without their lungs getting waterlogged. Frenzied lightning detonated all around, seeking them out, wanting to electrocute them. The waves built to above mast height, then threatened to topple over on to the deck. Most of the waves did not break, but Tina and Oliver could hear, through the changing beat of the engine, how Nick was trying to keep out of the troughs, battling to stay halfway up the next wave because once in a while one would overbalance and explode on deck, doing its best to break *Shady Lady's* spine. Each time, Tina would pray and pray until she heard the engine change beat again. Oliver had scoffed at Nick for motoring during a storm, but for Tina, it was her only way of telling that Nick, who had no shelter on deck, had survived the last assault.

The saloon was ankle-deep in water; flotsam of books, clothes and broken plates that had burst out of their cupboards churned around her. Tina tried to stay standing. Her tendons ached as she hung on to grab rails; she found she was breathing with her mouth open, her teeth bared. As she had once done on a huge fairground contraption when she had felt something shift as they started whirling and she had screamed as the front of their pod flew open, knowing that if she let go the rail behind them she would be flung out.

She wished Nick would come below, but knew the men were right: if they allowed the yacht to go side-on to the waves she would turn turtle and possibly roll through 360 degrees. They might be lucky and survive the first or second of those, but not a few hours' worth.

She'd refused to sleep when the men changed shifts and at first had tried to warm some soup for them, but given up after the kettle capsized for the third time. They would not let her take a turn at the wheel. She'd plundered the emergency supplies and found them peanuts and chocolates, which they'd force down before

collapsing into a few of hours' sleep. When she heard the three thumps from above, she'd wake whichever one of them was sleeping below and help them prepare for going back on deck and taking over again. How long had this been going on? Four shifts? Six? She had no idea. The cabin lights kept failing intermittently, and she had to guess whether it was day or night.

Oliver had recently come below and Tina wanted to give him a packet of savoury biscuits and a box of cheese triangles she had found. She lurched aft towards his cabin and got as far as the door when she lost her footing as the yacht rocked back violently, being carried high on top of a monster wave. The vessel gave a sickening shudder and seemed to stop in mid-air. Then they were dropping. Hurtling through nothingness, having fallen over the top of the crest. The bow slammed into the base of the wave and hesitated, unsure whether to turn end-over-end or to plunge through and keep moving forwards. Tina wasn't certain of the outcome because she had hit her head and was trying to find something to hold on to; a marble inside a tyre, not knowing whether she was on the floor or the ceiling. Suddenly Oliver was there, lifting and holding her while the yacht regained its balance and they heard the motor throb as they surged out of the trough and part-way up the next wave. She sagged against him.

"You're soaked and shaking, kid," he said. "Take these things off. You need to lie down for a spell."

Between them they peeled her off, down to her panties, and he bundled her into his berth; then he got in and wrapped a blanket around them. She was wedged into his cocoon-shaped bunk which was open down one side, with the yacht's wooden hull above, below her, and on her right, and with Oliver on the outer edge on her left, so no matter what the yacht did she could not fall out. She should have felt safe, but couldn't relax, knowing there was only a puny layer of wood between her and the giant fist that was trying to smash its way through to her. The cold part of her

brain tried to sound convincing that this was not between her and the elements, that the yacht was so infinitesimal as to be of no consequence to the combatants outside.

"I crave this," Oliver said in a low murmur, holding her tight against his torso.

"Aren't you frightened?"

Lightning struck once, twice, a third time, three pistol shots going off right next to their heads. She quailed against him and, even through closed eyelids, could see each dazzling light.

"This is when you really know you're alive. When you go out and pull death's tail. See if you can get away with it."

"And if you can't?"

"You die."

"Don't you fear death?"

He shifted and put his hand low on her back and pulled her flush against the length of his body.

The hull thumped them from below and she heard his head hit against the roof of the bunk.

"I'd rather risk death than lead a boring life. Fuck moderation, that's my motto. Pity for you though because you're so young."

He pulled his head back, but it was so dark they could not see one another.

"How old are you?"

He left no room for a lie. "I'm twelve. Nearly thirteen."

"Christ."

A fissured lightning bolt seared their eyes. The thunderclap felt like a grenade had gone off in the saloon and it took them several minutes to recover.

"I've been thinking about myself at around your age. I'd just turned thirteen when my mom died. Slipped on a mat in the hall. My sister a year or so later. She didn't even know she was allergic to bee stings. I realised then that you can die at

any moment. For no fathomable reason. Whether you're good or bad, it makes no difference. So you have an obligation to live every minute as if it's your last."

He was rubbing the back of her legs.

"And boy have I lived." His laugh, a bull's bellow in the enclosed space.

The bunk vibrated with the crash of a wave over the deck. Tina held her breath until she heard the engine thrum again.

"I'm also frozen. You'd better rub me too."

Tina was lying facing him and put her left arm up on to his shoulder and started rubbing as far round his back as she could reach.

"Lower," he said. "Seems to me you and I are very alike."

"Why?"

"You're hungry. You've had the guts to risk everything. To give society the finger and do what you want to do." He reached round and shifted her palm to low on his hip.

Her hand stopped. She hadn't realised he wasn't wearing anything.

"I'm still cold," he whispered in her ear. His hands were rubbing her bottom.

"And you – are *hot*."

She kept still.

"And for all we know we could be dead within the next hour." She couldn't see him but knew he was looking at her. "What's the matter kid? Don't you trust me?"

"Yes. Yes, of course I do."

The bunk gave a vicious lurch that left her stomach outside her body. The yacht corkscrewed, then settle back level and she felt the beat of the engine as they struggled out of the whirlpool she pictured they'd nearly fallen into.

"Did you enjoy that kiss?"

No option but to tell the truth.

"Yes."

"Would you like me to kiss you like that?"

"I don't know."

"Liar."

"Yes."

She could feel him shifting, leaning on one shoulder, swinging his leg across and between hers. He felt for her face with the palm of his hand then held her shoulder down as he began tracing the contours of her face with his lips, but keeping them just a fraction above her skin, breathing over her eyelids, her mouth. She pressed up but he seemed to anticipate her movements and kept just out of reach, then slowly relented and lowered his lips on to her skin.

"Tell me if you want me to stop," he said, just audibly, brushing the tip of his tongue over her face.

She had her mouth open and was breathing from far back in her throat. He finally brought his mouth level with hers and began catching her lip between his own and tugging gently. She felt herself lifting her mouth, her hips grinding into his thigh.

"You are hot," he laughed.

Three hard thumps on the washboards, followed by another three.

"Something's wrong. Damn." He lifted himself off her. "Stay here. Get some sleep. I'll try and get back quickly."

She heard him cursing in the saloon as his wet jeans clung to his skin and his sopping jersey tried to suffocate him when he pulled it over his head. He tugged on his oilskins, then clambered up the companion-way and shoved a washboard aside to climb out on deck. A wave splashed into the saloon and this time she did not hear the engine kick in. She scrambled to get clear of the blanket, to find her clothes and see if Nick was alright. By the time she got there Oliver had replaced the washboards. She held herself on the ladder with one hand and managed to shift one of them aside. She gripped tight, thinking she was being hit by a wave, but when it didn't stop she realised it was rain. Tina could just make out Oliver's shape at the wheel.

"Is Nick OK?" she yelled. But with the wind thrashing her, trying to suck the air out of her lungs, he did not hear her. She scuttled up to him, only then seeing Nick leaning over the stern.

"The fucking rudder pin's broken, so we're unable to steer. Nick's trying to fix it."

Oliver suddenly roared and pointed behind her. "Get that washboard before we lose it."

She reached it just before it was swept into the sea.

"Get below," he yelled.

Tina put on her elephant pyjamas – everything else was drenched – and clutched a towel around her. Both men stayed on deck for hours. Then eventually Nick came below. Tina helped him struggle out of his oilskins and sodden clothes which he threw in a bucket. She draped the towel around his shoulders. He was battling to hold on, and to undo his belt buckle at the same time, so she did it for him. His skin was a pale grey, with red streaks across his hips where the harness had gouged him. She led him to Oliver's cabin and urged him to get into the bunk and cover himself with the blanket, the last dry one on board. Only when he tried to climb in and swore as he got knocked off his feet did she notice the deep gash in his left palm. The red meat beneath the skin was visible. She felt seasick again. In the bilious glow of the little cabin light she found the first-aid kit and tried to dab the wound clean with a wad of cotton wool dipped in Mercurochrome, then wrapped his hand in a triangular bandage, just as she'd learnt in Brownies. She climbed in with him and held him. A massive thump from the side threatened to knock her out, and although she felt she'd almost dislocated her shoulder, she was able to hold on and keep them from falling. She hoped it was a freak wave, not a sign that they had turned side-on.

"I'm sorry I got you into this," he said. "I don't want you to die."

"We could get killed slipping on a mat. Or being stung to death by bees. We could die for no fathomable reason. So we have a ... duty to live every moment as if it's our last." Her hands were rubbing over his shoulders, his back. Whereas Oliver was malleable, like working with clay, Nick was ceramic, glossy and smooth. Lightning struck a wave next to them. It was like looking directly into the sun. In the aftermath all she could see was the same jagged pattern arcing again and again. She reached up and tried to kiss him, but missed and kissed his chin. She moved his hand on to her bottom.

"Tina."

He hugged her, clamping her arms to her sides, and squeezed hard. For a long time.

She woke to a pallid, aluminium sky. Lightning still flashed in the distance, a neon bulb flickering; the rain had stopped but the movement of the waves had changed. They were no longer being flung over a never-ending succession of waterfalls, being sucked through cauldrons and cataracts; now they were bobbing along a river in flood, churning their way through a series of rapids. The gods had lost interest in their quarry. Tina pulled on Nick's oilskin jacket which came down to her calves, and got up on deck, her heart skittish, afraid she would find no-one there. Or perhaps Oliver's nightmare, his body trailing behind in the water, for he must have clipped on during the storm. But there he was, slumped at the wheel, still keeping them heading in the same direction as the waves, but his movements lacked coordination.

"I need a drink," he said.

"You've been here for hours. Go below. I can take a watch."

He did not argue and lurched down the companion-way as she struggled to keep them from turning sideways, with the wheel her only means of control.

"Clip on and watch out for the freaks. There are still a few of them around," he said before his head disappeared.

Everything was a mess, with ropes strewn all around, pieces of wooden decking and part of the guard rail missing, and the boom looked as if it had been twisted as easily as a paper drinking straw.

University of Cape Town

Chapter seventeen

Thirty-six hours later they motored into the yacht club in Port Elizabeth, with a jury-rigged mainsail and a bolt that Nick had filed smooth replacing the rudder pin. To match their mood, there ought to have been a welcoming party of tugs spurting water-jets, a band playing, and streamers fluttering in the wind. Instead, the water in the harbour looked lethargic, and there was no sign of there ever having been a storm. The three of them were still floating on the elation of having survived the storm and must have appeared drunk as they staggered around, clinging on to one another, howling with laughter, trying to get rid of their sea legs. They agreed to the extravagance of booking into a hotel room so Nick and Tina could stay out of sight while workmen were on the yacht, fixing the damage.

They flipped a coin as to who got the first shower. Tina was last, but there was still lots of hot water left so she ran a bath and felt like she was on a movie set as she poured in bubble bath and frothed it up until she could fully submerge under a glamorous lather.

The pads on her fingers and toes had turned wrinkly by the time the men had called her for the fourth time and she finally let out the suds.

They agreed that Nick would work on the engine at night. He wanted to give it a complete overhaul and to make sure they had sufficient spares for a transatlantic crossing. Oliver would be on board during the day, overseeing the repairs to the mast and fittings. Tina would have to stay in the room. She volunteered to wash all their clothes in the bathtub. Nick and Oliver couldn't agree whether to re-dye her hair, or shave it off as it now looked ridiculous, the colour of beach sand for the first half centimetre, then a black zebra stripe above it. She refused to have her head shaved so Oliver went out and bought her more black dye.

A few days later he also came back with a Chinese dressing gown in a tender pink with a flamingo, wings unfurled, across its back. He presented it to her in the evening, when she was counting to a thousand, one for every left-handed catch of the tennis ball she was throwing at the wall.

“Put it on. I’ll take you out to dinner.”

“I can’t go outside wearing a dressing gown.”

“Try putting it on back to front, then tying it like a kimono.”

She came in from the bathroom.

“I look like I’m wearing a pink strait-jacket.”

“Here, let me turn down the collar at your throat, like so. And you’ve tied it like a gown rather than a kimono. Don’t you know what a geisha is?”

She shook her head.

“That explains it. Come here kid. Let me redo it.”

He turned her round, undid the sash and let the gown fall open before wrapping it tightly against her, folding first one side in, then the other. He strapped the sash around her twice and tied it behind in a neat bow, two thirds of the way up her back.

She went into the bathroom and took the crayon of scarlet stage make-up that she had found floating in a tog-bag and applied it rather inexpertly. He wiped smooth the smudged edges.

Next Oliver disappeared into the bathroom, and when he emerged it was as if he and a dashing, broad-shouldered younger brother had done a swop. He was wearing an uncreased tux, with a ruffled dress shirt and a bishop’s purple cummerbund.

He took her by taxi to a small place where the waiters in black bow-ties were too polite to stare at her slip slops, where fourteen pieces of freshly polished silverware surrounded her place setting, and the unctuous *maître d’* came to the table himself to

flambé their chateaubriand. In the light of the candelabra, Oliver's hair shone like the cutlery. He ordered a white with the starter and a red with the meat, and had the waiter pour a glass of each for Tina while he drank the rest.

When they were finished their meal and he was knocking back grappa, he looked across at her, not dropping his eyes.

She knew by now it was useless trying to outstare him, so she just looked back, not worrying about blinking.

"My God," he said at last.

She waited.

"Are you aware that you have untapped power?"

She snorted.

"Don't laugh. You don't know how to use it yet. But it's there."

He studied her.

"You'll need to learn how to use it selectively. Because it can be devastating, to others and sometimes also to yourself. So never be negligent with it. But mostly it can be," he leaned forward and lowered his voice so that she was drawn towards him, "achingly delicious."

She frowned. "You're mocking me."

He sat back. "I don't think I've come across any woman with as much potential as you have right now."

"I don't feel powerful."

Oliver lit a cigarillo and blew smoke out his nostrils.

"Let me tell you a secret. Men in general are terrified of feminine power. That's why we spend so much energy trying to subjugate women. Whether it's by trivialising them," he enumerated on his fingers, "vilifying them if they dare step out of line; impregnating them; making them financially subservient; or brutalising them."

He leant forward again and said softly. "And most women are complicit."

"What does that mean?"

"It means they allow it. They run themselves down, they settle for second best."

He sucked the smoke deep into his lungs.

"A simple illustration: I've seldom known a beautiful woman who did not hate her own body. *My tits are too small or my arse is too fat.* Yet if only she could see her body the way we do, she would worship it."

"But I don't even have a figure yet. I'm just straight up and down."

He sighed. "Did you not hear what I just said?"

She wished she could excuse herself and go to the ladies' but knew that if she did, he would drop the subject and never bring it up again.

"This power I'm supposed to have. Can you give me an example?"

He thought for a while.

"You're not wearing anything underneath that kimono."

He'd said it so quietly it took a while for Tina to work out what it was he had murmured.

She felt a rash break out on her throat and spread up her face. She knew he would disapprove if she blurted out that the only reason was because all her panties were still damp.

"How has that made you feel while we've been sitting here?"

"Embarrassed."

"No." His voice adamant.

She closed her eyes and searched her feelings, the ones she did not want to admit, even to herself.

"Daring."

"And?"

Still with her eyes closed, she bit her lip.

"Powerful?"

Chapter eighteen

Nick was standing in the car park when they got back to the hotel.

"Where the fuck have you been?"

He grabbed Oliver's shoulder. "And what's she doing dressed like that?"

Oliver indicated for Nick to lower his voice and follow him to their room.

"We just went out to get something to eat. Tina was bored to distraction. So I bought her something she could wear to a restaurant. That's all."

"That's a bloody dressing-gown, not a dress. And you might have been seen. Someone could have recognised her from the newspapers."

"They're looking for a girl in the company of a young stud. Not a geriatric like me."

They slept that night with all the windows open, but the air inside the room remained infused with the scent of cigarillos. As always, Nick slept on the couch, facing Oliver in one of the twin beds and Tina in the other; a cane side-table between them.

Tina dreamt of struggling and thrashing in a quagmire of viscous mud that slowly sucked her under.

The following morning Oliver went down to the yacht basin, but instead of sleeping in, Nick got up early and sat in his shorts, repetitively wrapping and unwrapping the bandage around his hand.

Tina got changed in the bathroom and brushed her teeth, then came and sat next him.

Nick took a deep breath.

"I'm not sure we should carry on with this sailing thing. We came close to dying out there." He stopped and looked at her. "Maybe I should rather buy another motorbike and we could ride up to Moçambique or Rhodesia."

She felt her throat tighten. "But either way it would take us days to get out of the country. Yet if we go by boat, you've said we could be ready to leave by tomorrow. This is our best chance."

She leant her cheek against his upper arm.

"The newspapers said if you get caught you could go to jail for ten to fifteen years. If I had to choose between the risk of dying in a storm, and you being locked up for the next fifteen years – there'd be no question."

He kissed her forehead. She wriggled on to his lap and leant her head against his St Christopher. She turned away when she noticed his nipple pucker as she inhaled nearby. Yet she longed to be a doctor, to have a valid excuse to study his body for hours. The veins, so prominent, would be simple to map, but it would be a challenge to detect all the easy-to-miss arteries with their faint give-away pulsations. She traced a vein up his arm, from wrist to armpit, watching the turquoise ridge collapse and immediately refill as she ran her fingernail along it. He shifted uncomfortably.

"Sorry, am I too heavy for you?"

"No." He coughed. He started playing with the bandage again and she caught sight of his hand.

"It's looking terrible." She unwrapped it gingerly. "The wound is infected." She hoped this was not retribution for her daydream. "You need to see a doctor."

He turned his puffy hand from one side to the other.

"Maybe it'll clear up on its own. As you said, I can't afford to get caught."

"But this looks serious. It's swollen and it's got pus inside it. Please Nick, you've really got to see a doctor. I'm sure you can make up a story that will sound believable. Please."

"It's diesel poisoning. Johann's had it before and it cleared up on its own."

"Imagine if we're out at sea and it gets worse. I don't want to have to ask Oliver to hold you down while I saw off your arm."

He kissed her hair.

“OK, I’ll go. Now stop nagging.”

While both men were out, Tina went down to the tickey-box beside the men’s bar, well before opening time, and stood jiggling coins in her pocket. She tried to resist but the tug was so strong. She balanced the twenty-cent piece in the slot, picked up the receiver and dialled. Four rings. Allistair must be losing his edge, he was normally faster than this.

As the phone was answered, she nudged the coin and heard it rattle down into the box, establishing the connection.

“Le Clerq residence.” It was her step-father’s voice. An impatient silence. “Hello.”

She started to put down the phone. Hugging her ribcage, as if someone had punched her there. She tried to picture her step-father’s face, but all she got was his suit.

“Tina? Tina, where are you?”

She started sobbing. Trying not to let out any sound.

“Tina?”

She could hear her brother’s shout in the background. “Is it her?” He must have grabbed the phone. “Tina, you’ve got to come home. Jesus, mom’s having a nervous breakdown. Please. Stop doing this to us. Come home.”

She was doubled over with the receiver between her knees, trying not to let out the noise that was caught at the back of her throat, blocking off her windpipe. She reached up blindly and tried to get the black receiver back into its cradle, but kept missing.

When Oliver sauntered in, late in the afternoon, he commented on the fresh bandage and Tina told him about the diagnosis of suppurating secondary bacterial infection

and the tetanus shot in the bum, which she was sure the doctor could just as easily have given him in the shoulder, and the nine stitches and the prescription for antibiotics and how Dr Simpson wanted Nick to come back to her surgery again the following morning. Oliver was smiling and she realised she was making it sound as if she had been there herself.

“I’ve been thinking about whether we should carry on with you to Rio,” Nick said as Oliver handed him a cold beer, “or find some other way to get out of South Africa. Maybe buy a motorbike and ride to Moçambique.”

“And I’ve said we can’t risk not going with you,” said Tina, her bottle of Appletiser halting midway to her lips. “Nick could go to prison until he is,” she stopped and stared at the ceiling, her fingers moving against the bottle, “nearly forty.”

“Haven’t you heard what’s happening in Moçambique? They’re three months away from independence and then we’re going to see violence that makes the Mau Mau look like The Jackson Five. And Rhodesia’s next. But don’t let me stop you – I’m easy either way.” Oliver leant back.

“Just let me know what you decide. The repairs are ninety percent complete and I’ve provisioned for three of us. But no matter.” He held up his hands as if expecting them to offer to pay their share. “And obviously you’ll need to put my engine back together Nick, now that it’s in a million pieces. You can finish the job tonight?”

Nick grunted. “Obviously.”

The next morning Tina was still in her pyjamas when there was a pounding down the corridor and thumping at the door.

“It’s me. Hurry.”

She let Nick in.

“Get changed, quick. We’ve got to leave. Now.”

“What’s the matter? What’s happened?”

He started stuffing things – his, hers, Oliver's – into bags. "There were policemen parked outside the surgery in an unmarked car. They were expecting me."

A feeling like a sharp icicle lodged itself in her gullet. They must have traced her call, just like in *Squad Cars*. She hadn't yet found the right moment to tell Nick what she'd done.

"Hurry. I don't think they spotted me, but once they realise I've missed my appointment, they'll probably start checking all the hotels. At sea we can disappear, but on land, it's only a matter of time."

When they got to the yacht basin Tina recognised the Peter Sarstedt singing *Where do you go to my lovely?* Oliver did not look particularly put out at the thought of leaving straight away. The workmen had cleared most of their equipment, but there were still two huge oxyacetylene cylinders propped up in the cockpit.

Nick gripped one of them with his right hand, bent his knees and heaved the end of the cylinder to level with his waist.

"Oliver, help me get this over the guardrail – it must weigh eighty kilos."

Oliver reached across and lifted it over Nick's head, and on to the quay.

Within half an hour they were ready to cast off. Nick had to take the wheel as he couldn't handle ropes with his injured hand, and between Oliver and Tina they quickly got the fenders stowed, the No.1 Genoa up, and the mainsail ready to hoist.

There was a twenty-knot wind blowing, forming little white horses in the harbour, and puffy clouds, like a giant's alveoli, were swelling on the horizon.

As they motored out to sea Oliver, tried handing Nick a glassful of whisky and ice.

"I've no intention of getting shitfaced again every day before noon."

"Oh quit being so Calvinist. It's a libation to the gods – an appeal to them not to get as pissed off with us again. After this one you don't have to drink again until we see the Corcovado."

He handed Tina a glass of Coke. She sniffed it surreptitiously.

"What's that?" she asked, looking into her glass.

"You don't know the famous statue of Christ above Rio?" He stood with his arms spread magnanimously.

She tried to avoid looking up, not wanting Nick to see her expression, but out of the corner of her eye she spotted him making a crude gesture: *arsehole*.

"And what about the Rio Carnival?" Oliver jiggled his chest and revolved his pelvis. "And we can samba. They invented it."

He grabbed Tina's hands and pulled them so that her shoulders rocked as he got her to shadow his movements, leaning back and forth over one another, "Every night until dawn. And the tango." He put out his knee and lowered her backwards over it until her hair was touching the deck.

She stretched out a leg, toe pointed.

"That's Buenos Aires," said Nick, taking a sip.

"You can be so tedious." Oliver turned and let Tina drop.

She squealed but he caught her with one hand beneath the spine as she was about to hit the deck. He lifted her and slapped her on the bottom.

"Go on, get your swimming costume on. It's a magnificent day. Would be an awful pity to waste it."

Nick was on his feet.

"I've had it up to here." He put a finger across his throat. "Keep your hands off her Oliver, or I'll fuck you up so badly you'll be wearing your testicles for a bow-tie."

Nick looked across at Tina.

"As of now you and I are doing our shifts together."

She couldn't help glancing at Oliver who gave a tiny shrug.

"Watches," he corrected, picking up Nick's glass and sipping from it.

They were three days out of Port Elizabeth and the weather remained perfect – the wind had picked up to thirty knots, but the big cold fronts stayed away. Nick's hand was responding well to the antibiotics, though while they were on watch Tina insisted on doing most of the setting and trimming of sheets and working the winch, to give the wound a chance to heal properly. He agreed, in return for her spending three hours each day studying the sailing manual and the school text books he'd bought in P.E.. While she took a turn at the wheel he would sit with the chapter open in front of him and quiz her: *Define a parallelogram. A trapezium. A rhombus. Which comes first in the Order of Operations: multiplication or addition? What is a limerick? What is a sonnet? A synapse? An aorta? A capillary?* It felt like school, just without other children around.

Oliver spent almost all his time when he was not on watch either in his cabin with the door closed or lying on the settee berth in the saloon, reading one of the many books he had picked up – Leon Uris and James Michener were his favourites – always with a glass at hand. Occasionally he fished.

He treated Tina and Nick with indifference and gave the impression it was only out of boredom that he offered to teach them how to fix their position using trigonometry. Nick caught on straight away but Tina kept getting it wrong. Several times a day he had her stand swivelling the radio direction finder towards the north, where land was, and listening through earphones to identify where the strongest signal was coming from. Once she had done this she would go below and have to identify the beacon from the chart. Then draw a line along through it, along the compass bearing she had taken. This told her the direction in which the nearest radio beacon was located, but did not tell her where along that line they were located.

Exactly an hour later she would have to do the same again, drawing another line along their new position relative to the beacon. Then close the triangle by

drawing a third line along the base, making sure that the angles at each of the bottom two corners were equal. She could then look up the distance they had covered during the hour on a table. This enabled her to calculate the length of the base of the triangle, and from that to use a formula to calculate the lengths of the other two sides of the triangle, which were identical. The result told her how far away from the beacon they were, and in which direction it lay.

But this only gave her their position based on their compass bearing. She still had to make allowances for the difference between a compass bearing and the true bearing. Oliver pointed out that this could be as much as twenty degrees. It could make the difference between aiming for Rio and hitting Uruguay or Argentina instead. Or if she got it badly wrong, maybe missing South America altogether. He nuzzled her neck while Nick was in the heads and made her repeat after him, True Virgins Make Dull Companions. True, Variation, Magnetic, Deviation, Compass. From the compass bearing she had either to add or subtract a set number of degrees to allow for the deviation which was printed on the chart, multiplied by the number of years since the chart had been printed; the difference between magnetic north and due north, and finally the variation caused by their yacht's individual magnetic characteristics.

She often made mistakes and had to redo the entire exercise.

Nick couldn't settle down, listening to every radio frequency, half-expecting to hear that they were being hunted, and jumpy that they might see a navy launch on the horizon at any moment.

Tina once tried to cook a slap-up breakfast, but after the canned mushrooms turned to the consistency of putty, and she did not get all the Vaseline off the eggs before breaking them, she was relieved of cooking duties but given chief responsibility for washing up after meals. She sat for hours reading the book on sailing, though neither of the men noticed that she had Nick's copy of *The Godfather* tucked between the open pages. The risqué bits made her churn inside; then she

wished she could go for a hard ride, or at least a swim, but Nick was keen to get away from Africa as quickly as possible, so they kept on sailing. She wore her bikini and did handstands on the foredeck, seeing how long she could keep her balance on the tilting surface.

At night she and Nick slept in the saloon, he on the settee berth; she in the pilot berth which was similar to the cocoon-shaped one in Oliver's cabin. She'd renamed theirs the Dog Box. Nick still battled to sleep for such short stretches and kept turning over, trying to find a comfortable position, only to be in deep, dreamless state when the call came for them to take over.

When they were alone on deck on their first midnight to four a.m. watch – the graveyard shift – and Oliver was asleep in his cabin, she cuddled up to Nick.

The moon was one night away from being full. They sat so still they could have been two phantoms, destined to float forever in a melancholy embrace.

On the fifth afternoon after leaving Port Elizabeth, Tina calculated that they were due south of Cape Town. Oliver double-checked her maths then sheared open a bottle of champagne, using an egg-lifter in place of a sabre, and they toasted crossing the line from the Indian Ocean into the Atlantic.

"Only three-thousand three-hundred miles to go before we hit land again," said Oliver. "Soon we'll be out of South African territorial waters and then no-one can do anything to you. As far as I know there are no extradition treaties between Brazil and South Africa. You're very nearly free to do whatever you like."

Nick celebrated by asking Oliver to heave to so he and Tina could have a swim. It was amazing doing gymnastics without having to worry about gravity. They did upside-down pirouettes and backwards somersaults, sometimes twirling together like dolphins, their air bubbles intermingling above them in a helix. When she tired, Tina grabbed the handrail at the back of the yacht to climb on board while Nick swam in a sprint nearby, clearly loving the chance to get some real exercise. He stayed in

for another hour and a half, and when he got back on board he was looking luminous and relaxed. He sat and unwound the duct tape which he'd strapped around the wrist of the yellow kitchen glove he'd worn, but Tina could see it had not been entirely successful in keeping his bandage dry.

A magnificent cloud had developed in front of them and they were treated to a display of lightning bolts criss-crossing inside the towering thunderhead. It drifted aside as they approached, and the west-facing nodules flared from rose to cochineal as the sun went down.

Oliver cooked a special meal that night, a fiery fish curry with fragrant rice and spicy dhal, accompanied by a special bottle of Riesling. Tinned gooseberries and cream for desert. Under gentle pressure, Nick relented and poured himself some wine and let Tina have a small glass with dinner. He had finally got the self-steering mechanism to work. Attached to the rudder, it acted like a weathervane, keeping the vessel facing downwind. This enabled them to sit together for the first time for a meal in the saloon. Oliver told a non-stop string of his courtroom jokes, which Nick called vulgar but he insisted were merely ribald. After miscueing her laughs at several of the punch-lines, Tina stopped pretending to understand them all, but smiled anyway. Nick, slurring his movements, had to wipe his eyes he was laughing so hard. He taught them edited rugby songs, though he kept forgetting the next line. He then won five out of seven rounds of arm-wrestling with Oliver, where shots of KWV brandy were presented as forfeits. Tina suspected Oliver could have tried harder. When they all went up on deck and Nick stood to have a pee over the stern she noted that she was not the only one on the alert, ready to spring if Nick started toppling overboard.

Long before ten o' clock Oliver hooked a shoulder under Nick's armpit and half supported him, half carried him down the companion-way and laid him out on the settee berth.

"Thought your boyfriend was able to hold his drink a bit better than that," he wheezed when he came back up on deck. He selected a track, *Moonlight Sonata*, and waltzed solo for a few steps.

"He was just having a good time."

"No need to get so defensive, kid." He patted her knee. "You and I are going to have to share the watches tonight, so you're going to need to get some rest yourself. Come here for a minute first. I feel like a hug."

She sat astraddle his knee, her back against his chest, and he wrapped his huge body around her so there was little of her left visible.

He gave a grunt and reached round behind him.

"Digging into me."

It was his dagger, *Flamberge*, flame cutter. The moonlight flashed along its edge, but dissolved into crazy whorls along the flat of the blade.

"It's Damascus steel. It's made of a four different metals which have been heated in a forge, folded and hammered flat again; folded and hammered; several times, until you have hundreds of layers which produce these intricate patterns.

"The guy who sold it to me half-convinced me that the duller steel – see, this one here – was melted down from part of Charlemagne's two-handed sword of the same name."

"How sharp is it?"

He tilted her head up and kept her gaze captive with his as he stroked the blade up her throat.

He brushed her fingertips against the same strip. "Feel it."

"I had no idea my throat was so hairy."

"You have no idea how easily I could eat you all up."

She snuggled into his warmth.

"When this is over, I hope we meet again. One day when I'm grown up," she said. When he didn't answer she added, too brightly, "Who knows where that might be."

He was quiet for a long time.

"I don't know if I'll like you as much when you're older."

She did not know what to say to that.

He remained quiet too, but kept swaying her from side to side, in counter-rhythm to the waves; halfway between the rocking of a chair or cradle and a slow dance beat.

Hours later he shifted.

"Have to decant I'm afraid."

He lifted her off his lap and turned, unbending his joints, to face the stern. She twisted away and felt chilly now that she was no longer in his arms. She went below to find a thicker jersey. Nick was lying on his back, snoring evenly.

When she came up on deck again, Oliver had vanished. As her eyes adjusted to the quarter moon's faint light, his silhouette slowly took shape at the prow, in the same stance as she had been in when she'd wrestled with the urge to throw herself overboard.

She called to him, offering to take the watch.

He turned and, moving like a sleepwalker, went below.

Chapter nineteen

Once it got light she tried waking Nick twice, but each time he shoved her away and turned over burying his head under the pillow. Mid-morning, Tina finally managed to get him sit up and have some coffee.

“How much did I drink?” he said, leaning his forehead into his hands.

Oliver bellowed a laugh and Nick cringed and covered his ears.

“Keep those eyelids closed, Nick – can’t stand the sight of blood.”

“Never again. I swear.”

For the next forty-eight hours, Nick and Tina kept missing one another. When he was awake, she was yawning, just about asleep. Nick was battling to do a running repair on the solenoid, which had corroded, leaving the other two to take turns at the wheel. They swapped sad smiles and squeezed one another’s blistered hands as they passed, one on the way to lie down or find some food, and the other heading up on deck.

Then one midnight, all three of their cycles coincided. They had a meal together and dumped their dishes in the sink. Oliver, whose turn it was to do the washing up, said he was too tired and would do it in the morning. He headed into his cabin, saying they would have to shake him hard to wake him at four.

Nick and Tina went on deck and he put the self-steering vane in place. Carly Simon was playing. They sat, side by side, looking at the stars. He pointed out Betelgeuse, one of the two pointers to the Southern Cross, and though she chuckled at its pronunciation, *Beetle Juice*, she was studying his Adam’s apple instead.

With the sound of the water rushing past, it felt like they were in a space craft, travelling at hundreds of miles an hour, yet with everything inside their own little capsule moving very slowly. He stretched out his arms and she moved closer, into the warmth of his chest. The sky looked like Walt Disney had been given free rein. As

they watched, a shooting star clawed a rip in the sky, the spangled blackness quickly healing closed behind it.

“Nick.”

“Mm.”

“Please look at me.”

“Hmm?” He turned his head down to her. She could sense more than see his expression.

She started but couldn’t hear her own words. She started again.

“Please kiss me. Like you did that night, before the storm.”

His voice came out hoarse. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

He reached down to find her face. He stroked the down on her cheek.

“Do I really have to explain it to you?”

She nodded.

His fingers slid down and gripped her around her throat.

“Because if I start I won’t be able to stop. Don’t you realise how close I am to devouring you completely?”

She could barely breathe. “What if I don’t want you to stop?”

While the cold part of her brain, the part that was the same temperature as the fading stars, was off to one side, commenting that everyone was bent on consuming her lately, the warm-blooded part felt sharp tears lacerate the back of her throat.

“Tina. Don’t do this to me.”

It took forever for the time to come round for them to call Oliver for his shift.

Nick and Tina went to their respective bunks, as formally as if they were no more than teacher and pupil.

An hour later, Nick was making anxious noises in his sleep and Tina felt as if she'd been overdosing on coffee.

"What's up?"

She lifted the glass out of Oliver's hand and took a large swallow. Then she sat down next to him, watching the sky starting to lighten.

"If I'm so powerful, how come it doesn't work on him?"

She gestured below with her head.

"Perhaps he wants to protect you."

"I don't need to be protected. I can make my own decisions."

"What is it you want from him?"

She thought about it.

"To be treated as an adult. The way you do."

He nodded. "Fair point."

She lay down on her back, her head near his knee. "And what is it that you want?"

He grinned at her. "Kid, with your legs and my scruples"

She wasn't sure what he meant, but the tone felt like skinny-dipping at night. The cold, astral part of her, observed her from a distance. She felt she wasn't in charge of her actions any more, that something reckless had taken over and all she could do was watch.

"Oliver." She stretched her arms above her head and brushed against him.

"It's a lovely name. I'm not sure it suits you though."

"Of course it does. I can never get enough. Like you, I always want more."

"Oliver." She nodded and was quiet. Then: "Can I ask you something?"

"Absolutely anything."

She closed her eyes.

"I'm twelve."

He waited, but she didn't carry on.

"Hm-mm." He made it sound encouraging.

"And I haven't reached. You know. I haven't started" She turned her head away from him and she could feel the side of her neck exposed to the chill air.

"You mean you haven't reached puberty. You haven't started menstruating."

"Yes."

He waited.

"I'm not sure. If I was to" She bit her lip. "I don't even know how it's done. I've been given a book and everything. But it was all very vague. What I want to ask is, if I was to lose my virginity, when my body isn't yet fully mature"

Her face was hidden but she was sure the hot blood thudding in her veins must be giving her away.

It came out in a tumble. "Would it do me any physical harm to do ... you know?"

"To be honest I'm not entirely sure, kid." He sat back. Then reached and held her hand. He half rose, holding the wheel with one hand, and kissed the inside of her wrist. "If your lover was gentle and you went slowly, until you were very, very excited, you'd probably be fine, just a little raw and tender."

He ran a finger down her palm, to where his lips had just been on her wrist, on down the inside of her arm, around the edge of the hollow between her collar-bones. Up below her ear, to the side of her mouth.

She turned her head, eyes still closed, and her lips touched against his fingerprint. He pressed the edge of her lips to make them part; for her to take his fingertip inside her mouth. It tasted of salt and dirt.

"Do you know," he started.

She opened her eyes.

"... that there are many other ways of giving and receiving pleasure that don't involve losing your virginity?"

She shook her head. She stopped as she realised it had the effect of moving his finger in her mouth. He swapped his index finger for his thumb.

“I could teach you.”

She closed her teeth around the joint of his thumb and squeezed.

“And I have a hunch you would be an exceptionally talented pupil.”

He thrust her head back and her lower jaw open. “I see you like biting. Perhaps you’ll find you are one of those who enjoys a bit of pain.” With his other hand he was still massaging her wrist.

Suddenly he knelt, pulled her top and shorts apart and bit her on the inside of her hip, sucking the skin while she writhed to free herself. She tried to bite his thumb but he jammed it between her molars, forcing her head back into a tilt until her spine arched. He stopped but held her in that position. She could feel a bruise developing.

“Come back tonight.”

She crept back into her bunk but could not sleep, nor could she for the whole of that day. But when they got into their sleeping bags at eight in the evening, and while she waited for Nick’s breathing to deepen, she went under as if inhaling ether and slept right through both Nick and Oliver’s watches.

Nick woke her with a breakfast of pancakes the next morning. Then he sat next to her reading a book and laid her head in his lap, gently stroking her hair. He smiled whenever she opened her eyes.

“Sorry I’ve been so edgy lately. But we’re safe now. During the night I checked our position. No-one can touch us any more.”

She thought of turning her head so his fingers were against her lips, but didn’t.

He looked down at her again. “Have I told you lately” He bent and kissed her eyelids, each in turn.

That night she again fell asleep after the four to eight p.m. watch, but this time balancing on a few centimetres of cushion, sharing a bunk with Nick, propped up against one another like two pieces of toast.

She dreamt of black patches on the inside of her wrists and elbows, but every time she scraped one patch off, all the skin below it would tear off too, creating deep gouges in her flesh. The patches kept spreading over more and more of her body. In her dream she screamed, but did not make a sound and did not wake.

Next morning, while she and Nick were having breakfast, Oliver had a Bloody Mary for breakfast followed by a brandy chaser. Then an ale as a palate cleanser. After that he went back for seconds.

At midday he hove to and they each took a turn at the wheel while the other two jumped in for a swim. Oliver showed her how to keep the headsail and the rudder at right angles to one another, so that the yacht just drifted back and forth. He dived into the water with Nick and wrestled with him, ducking him repeatedly. It didn't look like they were playing. When Nick took the wheel Oliver tried to duck her, but she dived deep and swam away.

Oliver was back at the wheel when Nick and Tina went for a swim together. Nick wanted them to wear the goggles and snorkels again, but she was feeling out of sorts, and got back on deck after only a few minutes. She towelled off and went below to change. Oliver called to her to organise some lunch for herself and a G and T for him.

When she came back on deck she looked around for Nick and saw him swimming some distance behind, his yellow rubber glove flashing on alternate strokes. She sat and peeled a hardboiled egg then mashed it and smeared it on savoury biscuits for herself and Oliver. When she looked up again Nick was much further behind. She checked the position of the headsail and the rudder and saw they were at about forty-five degrees.

"What are you doing?"

"Just having some fun," said Oliver, turning the rudder back to full lock.

Nick gradually caught up with them. As he neared the handrail, the rudder shifted slightly and the gap between them grew again.

"Oliver. Stop that."

"It's only a joke."

Nick had stopped swimming and was treading water. The gap was widening by the second.

"Oliver. This isn't funny. He must be exhausted."

"He's a fit little shit. This won't do him any harm."

"Please stop." She was almost shouting.

"What will you do for me in return?" His voice deep.

She stood up. Nick's head was so far away she could no longer make out his features.

"What do you want?"

"You decide. Make it something you know I'll enjoy."

Her mind spun but made no more progress than the little wind cups whirring around at the top of the mast. What was she supposed to do now? How was she supposed to act? Sexy, obviously. But what was sexy? Barbie? Modesty Blaise?

Nick was swimming again but she could see an arm only every fourth or fifth wave.

"I'll give you anything you want."

"No Tina," his voice exasperated. An F on a test paper.

"You can't just surrender like that; it takes all the pleasure out of negotiating. I tell you what. You enjoy being a cock-teaser. Take off your panties and for the rest of today wear a skirt with nothing underneath."

"I don't own a skirt."

“That’s terrible.” He looked affronted. “All gorgeous young women should wear skirts. How about the gown I bought you? No. Better still. Find the scissors and convert one of your pairs of shorts into a mini.”

He looked behind him.

“You’d better hurry.”

University of Cape Town

Chapter twenty

Tina was still below when Nick hauled himself on board. She could see him through the tiny galley window – his lips had taken on the same colour as the water, and his skin was that of the dead dorado.

“What in the name of Christ did you think you were doing?”

Oliver, in a subdued voice: “It was meant as a prank. We had no idea you’d get so cold or we’d drift so far. You really need to get below and put on some warm clothes.”

“Don’t you ever do anything like –”

“Oh quit it, Nick. There truly was no harm intended. And I’m sure Tina is just as sorry as I am.”

Nick turned to go below. As he approached the window, Tina could see him from the waist down, his right fist bunching, his bandaged left hand hanging immobile. There was no sign of the yellow glove.

As he reached the companion-way, Oliver’s voice continued behind him.

“It wasn’t such a big deal. You weren’t that scared were you?”

Nick stopped, teetered; his knees bent slightly. A duellist waiting for his second to finish counting before he swivels. But he did not turn. Instead he came below.

Tina was in the galley.

“Are you alright? You must be frozen. I’m warming up some soup for you. And I’ve made some sweet tea.”

Nick went past without speaking and got a towel out to dry himself. He slumped on to the settee.

“I had to beg him to stop,” she whispered.

He didn’t look up. “How about that tea?”

“Could you come and fetch it? I’m busy right at the moment.”

He surged to his feet and came to stand directly in front of her. She hugged her hips against the counter between them so he could not see what she was wearing, but could not bring herself to look into his eyes. After a few breaths he turned and crashed open the liquor cabinet, taking out a glass and a bottle, pouring himself a half tumbler of brandy. Ignoring the mug of tea on the counter, he walked back and lay down on the settee and started sipping, slowly, methodically.

As Nick lay with his eyes closed, Tina washed up the few dishes and reorganised cans and packets in a locker. When she was sure he was asleep, she climbed up the companion-way.

"That looks delightful. Turn around and let me see you from all sides."

She sat down, legs tightly crossed, at the opposite end of the cockpit. Three and a half paces separated them.

"We're going to do a port tack. The wind is coming from the south-west and we need ultimately to head west-north-west. I need you to release the starboard sheet and pull in the port sheet."

"Do it yourself."

He shrugged. "As you please. But you'll need to take over here."

She walked carefully to where he was sitting. He stood and smiled. She waited for him to step out from behind the wheel before she moved in from the opposite side and took his seat. Oliver lurched forward to make the sail adjustments. When he gave the signal she had to stand to turn the wheel as they changed direction, but as soon as they were on their new course she sat down again. He came aft again and sat facing her, elbows resting on his knees.

"I kept my side of the bargain. I saved your boyfriend's life. Now I need to know that you're keeping your side."

She frowned.

He moistened his lips. "Prove to me you're not wearing anything underneath that."

She dropped her eyes.

"I could come over and check for myself."

She got up. Turned her back to him and lifted the uneven hem a scrap.

"A bit higher. Oh yes."

She sat down again, still with her head down.

"You should be proud of yourself," he said quietly. "You have the power to make me do anything you wanted."

She looked up. "Jump overboard?"

He let out a laugh that unrolled across the waves.

"If you made it sufficiently worth my while. Even that."

"Don't tempt me."

Chapter twenty-one

Nick took forever to come on deck. When he did, Tina was at the wheel and Oliver was lying on his back on the starboard bench, whistling softly. The crêpe bandage round Nick's hand was now more tramp-grey than hospital-white. He ignored Oliver's greeting and asked Tina whether she'd seen his pills.

"Aren't they in your navy bathroom bag?"

She knew he still had three days' worth of medicine to go.

"That's where I've been looking."

"What about in your rucksack?"

"I've emptied it. Twice."

Nick stepped across to where Oliver was lying and stood directly in front of him. His voice had thorns running all the way down it:

"Where have you put them, you fat turd? And what have you been slipping into my drinks?"

Oliver did not budge.

"My boy, you're getting paranoid. I never touched your drink and I haven't been anywhere near your things. Ask Tina. She and I have been together all the time you've been snoozing."

Nick looked across at Tina. She didn't mean to avoid his eyes but was trying to remember whether or not Oliver could have had an opportunity to go through Nick's bags. The only time he'd been out of sight had been at sunset when she'd gone into the heads to change out of her hacked shorts and into a pair of jeans, and to have a quick pee. But that hadn't taken more than half a minute. Two minutes at most. And anyway, Nick's bathroom bag must have been in the locker directly above where he'd been lying. When she glanced up again Nick was no longer facing her.

She could see Nick's finger, silhouetted against stardust, pointing at Oliver's face. At such close range that if Oliver were to focus on it, he would have to squint.

"I warn you. I am this close" He held up his thumb and forefinger with a paper's breadth between them. His right fist was curled, but his bandaged left was lying inert on the wheel.

"Oooh, I just love it when you get so butch." Oliver's voice a sharp falsetto. "But you really ought not go round making such careless accusations, lad. It's not only defamatory. It's also very dangerous."

He launched himself to his feet and sauntered across to the companion-way.

"Night lovers." He waved. He could have been wearing stilettos.

Nick took over behind the wheel and Tina shifted close next to him. It was cold and she was always uncomfortable sailing on cloudy nights when you had no way of telling which way you were headed; when it was easy to start doubting the compass. Tonight the dark felt as if it were hiding huge sea monsters. She hunched her shoulders, half expecting him to rebuff her.

"That guy's dangerous."

"Oliver's not dangerous. He's just got a funny sense of humour."

He pulled back.

"Do you call stealing my antibiotics funny? Or putting Mickey Finns in my drinks?"

"You don't really think he would try to harm you?"

"Are you being deliberately naive? Why are you always trying to defend him? And spending so much time with him?" His voice was fraying, getting louder.

"He's following you round like a bitch on heat. And you're leading him on."

Tina felt that rare but familiar sensation of hot urine burning; the need to clamp to avoid humiliating herself.

He whispered, "Don't you see? There were no witnesses to us getting on board. There's no evidence that connects us with him. He wants you for himself, and

I'm just in the way." Nick held up his bandaged hand. "It would be only too easy for him to get rid of me."

"But, but I'm here. I would know if he did anything to you."

He grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Once he'd done whatever he wanted, he could make you disappear too." He spun her round. "Look out there. What do you see?"

She did not answer.

"Exactly. Miles and miles of bugger-all. There wouldn't be a single trace of us."

"You're wrong about him, he's –"

He swung her round again, shaking her.

"And who do you think tipped off the police that I would be at the doctor's rooms in P.E.? He wanted me in prison so he could escape with you."

"That wasn't him. It was my fault. I phoned my family from a tickey box at the hotel the previous day. I didn't mean to give us away, I just –"

"Did you tell them where we were?"

"No!"

"So what makes you think you're to blame?"

"The police must have traced the call, they –"

"Oh quit being so stupid."

She needed to get away; where he couldn't see her face.

"I'll go below and see if I can find your pills. Maybe they've rolled under a berth or something."

He released his grip.

"Be my guest."

The saloon was in a shambles. There were charts everywhere. Nick must have emptied every locker, opened every canister; ransacked Oliver's cabin. She turned

on the overhead light and started tidying up. There was a tin labelled blackberry-flavoured lozenges that had spilled a scattering of nail clippings; a bigger biscuit tin had shed photographs all over the floor. She bent and gathered up a handful. There was one which must have been Oliver as a toddler, bare, on a yellow rocking-horse; another of him, recognisable now, wearing a gown and carrying a scroll, an impressive stone building behind him. Him, older still, seated on a rock; the kids standing next to him in baggies, a boy in the background captured in mid-air, leaping off the rock into the waves.

There were magazines on the floor. She picked up a pile but the top one slid off and fell open at the centrespread, where a naked woman, wearing only a stetson, cowboy boots and spurs, was leaning so far back her shoulders were almost touching the rump of the bucking bull she was riding, but with her legs spread so wide her private parts were in full view. They were dark pink, almost purple. The closest to this Tina had ever seen had been in Allistair's copies of *Scope*, but the women on those pages had black rectangles printed over their nipples, and their nether regions were always in shadow. You never saw so much as a pubic hair.

Oliver, standing in the dark of his cabin, murmured: "I see you're admiring some of my collection."

She dropped the magazine. She couldn't see his expression but could easily picture it.

"As you have no doubt gathered, my tastes are eclectic. Catholic." He laughed in a deep gurgle.

She turned away and tried to remember why she was down here. She reached for the torch in its bracket next to the small fire extinguisher and started searching under the table, but jerked upright when she came across more of his magazines fallen open. When she looked back his door was closed.

A while later she came back up on deck and handed Nick two black and orange capsules and two hexagonal white tablets, with a glass of water.

"Where did you find these?"

"In your rucksack."

"He must have put them back."

"They were in a side pocket, tucked inside a packet next to a bog roll."

"I looked there."

He paused.

"You don't believe me."

"Of course I do. I just think you might have missed them."

He snorted.

Nick reached out for her hand and hugged her into him.

A sea fog had crept up. It enveloped the yacht, making the mast vanish, the prow dissolve.

"It's going to come down to whoever moves first having the element of surprise on his side." He wasn't talking to her.

The following morning was windless and the cabin stifling. All three of them sat up on deck. After his watch, Nick gave Tina a meaningful look, then lay down on the cockpit seat and fell into an uneasy sleep. Tina fussed over him, tying the sheet in place to shade him and fanning him when she noticed sweat on his forehead.

"I can see why you consider him delectable."

They both looked at Nick's midriff. It was hollowed and every time he inhaled his flanks sucked in and the deep concave made him look all the more vulnerable. So lean, like paintings of Christ on the Cross thought Tina. He had not shaved or cut his hair since leaving Durban, and that added to his look of Messiah-like ascetism; his Che Guevara-piety.

"Please can we turn back."

"Sorry, Rosebud," Oliver reached across to stroke her cheek but she drew back.

"We're getting into the trade wind belt now. No turning back. If we did, it would take us longer to get to Cape Town than it would to keep going and reach Rio."

"Nick thinks you might try to ... harm him."

"Oh classic. The poor fellow's feeling threatened by him having some competition around for the attentions of a young damsel. Not that you're not worth fighting for, my darling, but to be honest, I'm no longer up to that." He yawned, stretched, scratched his crotch.

"Why don't you come and take over the helm for a while. Keep her on two-nine-fiver." He looked out at the becalmed ocean. "Not that we're going anywhere in a hurry."

When Nick woke he tied a plastic bag over his hand and gently lowered himself down the ladder and into the sea, his hand held high. Tina stayed at the wheel. When he got back on board he could not keep still, forever drumming his foot, his fingertips, his spoon, till the other two threatened to throttle him.

Oliver went in for a dip. Nick looked at Tina and at the sails, hanging limp, and looked away. While Tina spun the wheel as if racing around a grand prix circuit, Nick read a book, his hand thrumming.

Oliver, with just a towel round his waist, was standing in front of Nick and holding out his hand.

"To a truce."

Nick had been caught in the middle of the sentence he was reading. He remained still.

"I hear you think I might try to do you in while we're at sea."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Well, just to set your mind at rest, young friend, you have no grounds for concern. I admit I am indeed besotted, but not enough to kill anyone. If I were to win it would be by fair means, not foul. And I would never do a thing to her unless she wanted me to do it."

Still Nick did not make any move to take the outstretched hand.

"Think it through: we can't both be on guard every minute of every day for the next four hundred and eighty hours. One of us will no doubt crack, start running amok with a hatchet, butcher all three of us. Much safer all round to agree to a *détente* until we reach land again. A truce?"

Tina counted six heartbeats.

"I hate the way you lust after her."

"And you don't? Please, Nick, while we're so immoderately clad in tight proximity for days on end, such things are ... transparent."

By now Oliver's hands were busy hooking a chunk of obscene smelling bait on to a hand-line.

"But I'm trying not to take advantage of her need for specialness, whereas you're doing your best to exploit it."

"Oh spare us. Tina doesn't need you to father her. She's not innocent. I've come across 16-year olds who know more about good and evil than most 30-year olds."

"She's a child for God's sake. We have to protect her."

"Suit yourself. I'm not as noble."

An hour later, the line in Oliver's hand ripped taut. After a brief fight he brought a thrashing baby barracuda on board. This time he did not stamp on its head, but very deliberately drew his dagger out from the sheath on his belt and stabbed it through the throat.

He bled the fish, gutted it and salted it, leaving it butterflied open on the coachroof while he slept on the bench in the open cockpit, within touching distance of Nick and Tina who did not say a word to one another the whole afternoon.

When the sun finally set, a gentle breeze began teasing the sail and allowing the cabin slowly to exhale its torrid air. It was not until much later though that any of them felt hungry, and Oliver went below to cook. He called Tina to help him carry up a platter of barracuda steaks, a spicy ratatouille and hunks of fresh bread to mop up the juices.

The fish was excellent, just very salty, and Oliver opened a bottle of white. Even in the dark it was obvious that Nick was being careful never to let his glass out of his sight.

Though there were no clouds in the shrapnelled sky, the air had the feel of a Rhodesian mid-afternoon in October: suicide month. Thunderheads would build every day, farmers would pray for rain, but the clouds would dissipate, only to build again the following day. Tonight there was so much static around that whenever Tina touched metal, there'd be a tiny spark and she'd get a jolt.

Nick yawned, got to his feet, tottered, and sat down again, grinning bashfully, trying to make it look as if he'd been playing the fool.

He went below, and came up again with two of the leather settee cushions which he laid out on the coachroof. He stretched out on one and Tina curled up on the other.

Oliver put on an Eartha Kitt tape.

Nick's eyes closed and he started snoring gently. He jerked awake, then after a few minutes, slowly relaxed again.

"He will never be enough for you, you know."

Tina did not respond.

Oliver's voice was low, but loud enough for her to hear.

Quietly, she eased herself off her cushion and came aft.

Gusts of wind were buffeting the mainsail.

“He’s so...” Oliver clenched his hand in the dark air as if hoping to grasp the word there. Not in the way that Mr Botha did; his fist was not so much belligerent as theatrical.

The invocation of Mr Botha must have reached through to him.

“The Afrikaaners have the best word for it: *mak*. Tame, docile, meek, gentle. Amazing isn’t it, all that captured in a single word?”

“Have you been lacing his drinks?”

He ignored the question.

“You know, he brags that he was in the Parabats, but I bet he’s never been in a single brawl in his life. He wouldn’t stand a chance. So many guys talk and act tough, but the truth is that whoever gets the first punch in wins the fight. I don’t suppose you’ve ever been hit hard in the face?”

She shook her head.

He pressed his knuckles against her cheek-bone.

“Nothing can prepare you for that initial strike. It leaves you stunned. You can’t help dropping your hands and leaving yourself open to the next blow. Of course in boxing, you’re so accustomed to it.”

His arm darted out faster than she would have thought possible and he caught her left hand. He brought it slowly to his mouth and kissed it, delicately, as would a duke the hand of a princess.

He lifted her so that she was astride his knee, facing Nick – though with her chin tucked in – and started swaying her in that lazy, half rocking-chair, half dance-beat rhythm, hugging her to his chest. Only there was something different this time. The cotton of her shorts had rucked up so that it felt as though she were wearing the miniskirt again; almost naked against the coarse hairs of his thigh. The sensation was disturbing, vile, but she couldn’t help feeling her body secretly responding to it.

She hung her head lower, hoping Oliver wouldn't feel the flush spreading up her chest.

"Tina, my pet, you put the nymph back into nympho."

Neither of them noticed Nick until he was right in front of them. He ripped Tina off Oliver's lap and thrust her aside.

"Go below." He did not look at her.

"And you, pig, get up."

Oliver raised his bulk very slowly, but as soon as he was upright he began bouncing his weight from one foot to the other, like a prizefighter. His hands, in contrast, were busy tucking his T-shirt into his belt behind him.

"Take your knife out, and put it beyond reach – on the coachroof."

Oliver gave a shake of his head, but did as he was told, placing the knife, with exaggerated care, just over the companion-way hatch.

Tina had not gone below but was squatting on the coachroof, behind the hatch, her pupils fully dilated as she tried to discern each movement in the dim green night-light. She watched Oliver place his dagger between her feet and could visualise what was about to happen next; she tried to search inside, to find whether she would have what it takes to grip the knife and slide it into Oliver's flank, to stop the fight.

There was just enough light to catch Oliver's wink. Then to see his face contort as he let out a quiet *aah*.

Nick had launched himself, judo-style, across the tiny cockpit and kicked in Oliver's kneecap from the right-hand side.

Oliver listed as he turned; no longer bouncing; raising his paws, but not quickly enough to block a fist, clenched unevenly – like a knuckleduster – from striking his Adam's apple. With one hand clasped at his throat he buckled over, rasping for air.

Nick struck again. An elbow chopped down into the little concave between neck and collarbone.

Tina felt something break.

Stop it, she started screaming. Stop it.

They paid her no attention.

Oliver was already up again and smiling, dancing a little jig, starting to circle, jabbing feints. Even Tina could see that if he could get Nick within his reach, his superior stretch would give him the advantage. And in a grapple, his weight would be impossible to counter. Plus the bandage on Nick's left hand seemed to glow, as if under ultra-violet.

Oliver slapped Nick across the cheek. Then again. Enough to raise a red flush. Not the punch he'd described to Tina. These seemed intended to anger Nick, for him to lose control.

Instead of fighting back, Nick stepped back up on to the bench behind him. On the offensive, Oliver lunged forward, straight into the trajectory of a heel that rocked his jaw sideways. He staggered and almost lost his balance against the bench behind him.

Stop, I beg you.

Oliver used his momentum to sway drunkenly towards the companion-way, then he was upright, instantly sober, reaching for his knife. His fingers closed over it, but Nicks' were there too, though his two hands only just encircled Oliver's one.

There was a sound like carpet tearing. Bears panting. Tina heard gristle pop.

She climbed over the guardrail and stood for a moment, calmly staring into the dark waves, before letting her body topple.

Chapter twenty-two

Tina was standing at Oliver's door. At first he did not register her presence, then she heard him turn over in his berth and face towards her.

"You jumped in, to save me."

His voice sounded full of regret. She tried to work out why: was it because she'd jumped in, or because she'd tried to save him?

After they had fished her out, the men had ordered her to stay wrapped in her sleeping bag till she'd regained her core temperature and the coughing had stopped. Plus another twelve hours, just to be safe. In those two days and nights, Nick had spent hardly any time at the wheel; instead he'd sat cradling her in his arms, stroking her hair, and murmuring to her, lulling her back to sleep. Occasionally she'd woken to find his body shaking, as if he were still hypothermic, but as soon as he realised she was aware of the tremors in his chest, he would inhale deeply to get his ragged breathing under control, nuzzle loving words into her neck, and hug her till she slept.

Nick had been the first to react. He'd tossed the lifebelt after her with one hand, with the other he'd released the mainsail to bleed off speed, shouting something to Oliver. She could hear voices for a few moments after she could no longer see the navigation lights on the tip of *Shady Lady's* mast. Then nothing. She never saw the lifebelt.

Oliver, she'd learnt later, had knocked Nick out the way, hauled in the sheets and heeled the yacht over hard, using the speed to turn her as tight as she would go. Nick had taken hold of a sheet and was leaning out as if on a trapeze, the two of them now working in silent unison.

They did not spot Tina on the first circuit, and Oliver was cursing violently as they came round again. He tried to make allowance for the currents and wind, to make their turns as circular as possible, rather than drifting ellipses. But in the dark,

he knew the chances of finding her were tiny to start with, and growing progressively sligher with each orbit.

Nick had grabbed the powerful spotlight and was at the prow, playing it in a rapid grid pattern over the water.

After the fourth lap, it was Nick who insisted they drop all canvas, heave to and started shouting for her, hoping she would be within earshot; that she would find them.

Tina had heard their faint voices and had tried calling back, but by then, less than fifteen minutes after she'd hit the water, she was already feeling her lungs wanting to seize closed from the cold. She's swum, waved, *halloed*, and eventually screamed when she'd seen the ghostly flutter of the mainsail starting to rise up the mast. Nick had heard that final shriek. Shedding his jeans and jersey he'd dived in, heading at first at a tangent to her, but narrowing in on her voice. It had felt as if he'd lifted her clear of the water and carried her back to the yacht where Oliver had helped drag her on board and had forced the seawater out of her lungs.

"You've come back for more." Again, Oliver's voice had an ache of regret.

"Did you lace his drinks?"

"No." Oliver looked insulted. He had that air of one who thinks himself still capable of holding his drink. He leant out of his bunk towards her.

"No need to. He should have read his medicine packages' inserts for himself. They warn of mixing the pills with alcohol: *can lead to impaired concentration, drowsiness, even temporary paralysis.*"

The wind had picked up again and a fine spray was hissing against the hull.

"And you tipped off the police in Port Elizabeth."

"Who else? But again, I meant him no harm."

He leant across to where she was standing and whispered loudly, both of them aware of Nick's presence up on deck; that she was still supposed to be asleep.

"It was just that he was threatening to take you off on a motorbike. Away from me."

He lurched for her hand but she was too quick for him.

"You're afraid of me."

"Am not."

"Well come over here and climb in then, and stop treating me like I'm an untouchable. Don't tell me you don't like me any more."

"No."

"Oh my, how ambiguous. Let me ask you straight then: do you hate me? Do you wish Nick had beaten me to a pulp? Do you wish I was dead?"

"No."

"So you do like me. And I know you like it when our bodies touch. I can feel how much you like that."

She turned to go.

"But you're frightened. Of me. What's the matter? Do you think I'll hurt you?"

"Course not."

"Well then?" He held open the flap of his sleeping bag and shifted aside to make space for her.

Chapter twenty-three

It was night-time again and she hadn't noticed. Nick was there, holding her, trying to feed her, begging her to try to keep something down, heartbreak in his voice, but she wrestled herself free. He covered her with blankets as she curled up into a foetal position on the cockpit seat, back towards him at the wheel. She knew she wouldn't sleep, but found herself being rocked in his arms whenever she was woken by a scream.

He said something. She ducked her face away, but couldn't remember why.

"The stars are the wrong way round," she noticed.

"We've turned about; we're headed back to South Africa."

"But somebody said that would take longer than if we kept going for Rio."

Nick was kneeling next to her. "Can you tell me – did he hurt you?"

She turned away. "No."

She was aware of wind and of rain. Sea monsters.

She ate something that made her sick.

She kept waking, hearing screaming.

She was in public, naked from the waist down, feeling exposed. She put her hand into her satchel to find a fresh change of clothes, but when she withdrew it, the hand smelt of shit. She was trying to hide it from Nick.

It was light, he was talking to her.

"Tina. I need you to help me. There's a ship coming. To take him to hospital. We've got to drag him out of his bunk and into the saloon so you can hide in his cabin. You can't be seen or they'll work out who we are. Tina, can you hear me? Do you think you can do this?"

Oliver was lying in a twist of sheets. He stank. Half his chest and neck were covered with a stretched Rorschach pattern of livid red, surrounding a pulpy yellowish white. The colours carried on up over his lips, split and bleeding; one puffed cheek; through one eye, which was wide open and splashed as if with milk; and into his scalp. Inside the pattern line, some of the skin was wrinkled, belonging to a thousand year old mummy, yet at the same time shiny. Outside the line, the skin was normal. The other eye blinked.

"Grab his ankles and I'll take his shoulders."

They struggled and heaved, but could not lift Oliver. He did not make a sound, but Tina could hear a silent scream inside her head and she jerked her hands away. He tumbled out on to the floor and now she did hear a scream.

Nick stepped across the struggling body, lifted her and carried her into the saloon. "It's OK, you don't have to do this. It's OK. Go up on deck, I'll sort this out. If you see the ship coming, call me."

Later, it was light again. Nick wanted her to hide in Oliver's cabin, but when she got to the doorway she couldn't go in. He tried to persuade her it was safe, yet it was if there were fine glass shards across the entrance, which she could see and he couldn't. They would shatter and rake her if she tried to step through. A loud throbbing was growing ever louder. Eventually he got her to crawl across the cushions on the opposite side of the table to where Oliver was stretched out on the settee, and into the heads; to stay there. How long did she stay there?

"Tina."

It was dusk.

"Tina. I need you to come back to me."

A storm that went on and on.

She looked up and saw that Nick was no longer wearing the bandage.

"Have you been on diet?"

He turned his head away.

"Where's Oliver?"

"He was transferred on to a ship. He should be in Cape Town by now."

"Why?"

"He got burnt. We're near land, my love. We're going to have to make sure we don't run into it at night."

"I'd better start taking turns at watch then."

"When you're ready."

"I'm ready now." She studied him. "You look finished. Go down and sleep. I'll take this watch."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

He slept on deck.

A day later, or perhaps more, they saw two fishing vessels, coming at a tangent from where *Shady Lady* was heading. Nick corrected their course so they were now sailing in the direction from which the boats had come.

"I've been trying to keep track of our position, but all I can say for sure is that if we see land, it'll be Africa."

"Nick."

He turned round quickly. She caught an expression on his face, just for an instant, that quickly softened.

"Yes my love."

"What are we going to do? When we reach land?"

"I'm not too sure, but whatever we do, we can't afford to get caught. It's bad enough that I'll have a charge of kidnapping against me, but if Oliver's still alive he'll also have laid charges."

"What do you *still* ... but you're ... why would not –" She kept battling to get words to form sentences.

"Come here," he beckoned to her and she came and sat beside him so he could wrap his arm around her while he held the wheel with the other. "Don't worry. Shh. Don't worry. I'll take care of things."

She leant against him and took long, deep breaths. "What if we found a deserted beach, then sank the yacht and swam to shore? Then if they were to catch us we could say, *What yacht?*"

He pulled her away and smiled.

"So you're not just beautiful but quite intelligent too."

She tried to punch him, but he ducked aside.

"Funnily enough I'd also thought of that. But it's hellout risky. I think the best would be for us to find a small harbour. One that doesn't have anyone on duty at night – and we motor in and disappear before anyone sees us."

"Where will we go?"

"I've been thinking that you need proper ... care. It might be an idea for me to take you home –"

"No." She tried to flee from him but he held her, clamped next to him.

"I'm worried about you, Monster. You've been through –"

"No!" She bit his arm and sprang on to the deck which was tilted almost into the water, hanging on to the mast stay with just a two fingers.

He abandoned the wheel and came across to her, as one would to a puppy on a traffic island in the middle of a freeway.

"Ssh, ssh, OK, Tina. I won't do anything you don't want me to."

Stars again. And other lights.

"What are those?"

"We're just off Camps Bay. I'm going to sail us round the Cape Peninsula and then into False Bay. The little harbour at Gordon's Bay should be ideal. I've packed up our things my love. I just need you to stay here with me tonight."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Good." He squeezed her hand. "Talk to me, please."

"What about?"

He shrugged. "Have you been to Gordon's Bay before?"

"A few times. There's a small beach there. What's it called? Bikini Beach."

"And do you remember where the little yacht harbour is?"

She was quiet. "Yes. Yes, that's right. I've stood above it and watched this huge, transparent jellyfish. It was so big it wouldn't have fitted into a bucket, swimming around between the yachts."

"Well done. That's where we're going now. We're going to –"

"Why are you talking so slowly?"

"Sorry. I'm just so afraid you'll go away again. I really need you to hang on and be with me tonight. I can't do this if you leave me. Will you try?"

She nodded.

Nick started the engine and Tina steered while he lowered and tied off the sails. He took over and they motored quietly into the harbour. He cursed himself in a whisper: he'd forgotten about the adjacent navy barracks. In the gloom of its perimeter lights, they found an empty berth and he docked at his second attempt, but he wouldn't let Tina be the one to jump on to the jetty, and made her stay on board while he leapt and secured the lines on to the bollards. Then she threw him his rucksack and her satchel and jumped across into his arms. They ducked low and half-stumbled, half-ran, on ground that seemed to sway and heave at every step, up to a locked gate at

the end of the quay. The barbed wire sagged where it had been climbed over many times, and they scaled that quickly, landing awkwardly on the other side. Then they ran out of the yacht club and up on to the main road, weaving like vagrants.

“Stay on this side, next to the shoulder, so that if we hear a car coming we can slip down the bank.”

“Where are we going?”

“There’s a river, the Steenbras, a few kilometers out of town.”

“I haven’t been there but Allistair has. Isn’t there a place higher up where you can jump into a rock pool from a helluva height?”

“That’s it. We can wait at the river till dawn, then hitchhike our way up the Garden Route as fast as possible.”

In the morning there was a light fog at first, which hung around while they had a freezing dip and shampoo in the tea-coloured river. While she washed, he stood guard downstream and she did the same for him. They both had blistered heels from feet not accustomed to wearing shoes and the ground still felt unstable. They each washed a set of clothes, but put them in a packet to take along as there was no time to dry them out, then pulled back on the same pairs of shorts and T-shirts they’d been wearing for a week or more.

“We might be clean but our clothes smell like we’ve been rolling in stinkbugs,” she said.

“We’ll give them a soak in tick dip when we’re a few days from here.”

They were offered a lift by the eighth car that came past, an old, rusted Mercedes which swayed round the bends as if it too was battling with sea legs. The driver was a shrivelled old fisherman, so tanned he could almost have been a Cape Malay. The car had rods sticking out the windows and the stench of red-bait was seeping out of the cracked polystyrene cooler box next to Tina’s feet in the back.

"Where are you headed?" Nick had asked.

"Knysna."

"Perfect," he'd smiled, "that's where we're going too."

When they were on their way Nick flapped down his sun visor and grinned at Tina in the dusty little mirror, the edges of his eyes crinkling. She wanted to mouth *what if?*, as she had done on the bus, only a few months before.

He turned to her and she half-heard, half-lip-read: "Just as well we didn't bother with the fresh laundry."

They sashayed round the curves past *Koeëlbai*, Bullet Bay, teetered on around the next headland, and just as the road straightened out, there, in front of them, was a police roadblock.

Nick turned round to Tina again and said, very softly, "No need to worry. It's just routine, I'm sure."

The fisherman turned round to her too as he coasted up to the sergeant who was holding up a stiff hand. Clearly the old *toppie* wasn't as deaf as they had assumed.

"Are you alright, *juffrou*?"

He put his hand on her knee.

Something like a total eclipse was taking place, and the screaming had started again inside her head.

PART THREE

University of Cape Town

Chapter twenty-four

They arrived way too early, her mother fretting they would not find parking. There had been an extensive debate about what she should wear. Her father had thought her school uniform – with blazer, boater, and navy tights – appropriate, but Tina had been absolutely intractable; she was going to wear her yellow Sunday-school dress, the one that had been picked out for her and which she'd subsequently coerced her mother into buying. Tina and her parents sat on a bench, aware of their every whisper being echoed and reinforced by the vaulted ceiling, two storeys above them. Every few minutes her mother would ask her if she was alright and whether she was nervous, then would get up and fill a cup with water as she was sure Tina must be thirsty.

On the previous day her parents had been called to give evidence. They had left Yasmin with copious instructions that Tina was not to listen to the radio, or go out to the shops, or to speak to anyone on the phone. So Tina locked herself in her room – she had changed the lock herself – and heard highlights of the case on a little bedside radio she'd shoplifted from OK Bazaars a month earlier.

She needed a pee. She got up to find the ladies' and when she stepped out again there was an impatient voice calling out, *Juffrou Roland*. Round the corner an harassed court usher was standing holding a side door open for her. She urgently needed to head back into the toilet for another pee and to throw up.

She stepped into the courtroom. Everything was more than double its normal size: the soaring wooden columns behind the judge's bench; high atop them, a coat of arms bearing a snarling lion and a unicorn; the upstairs gallery, just like the one at the cinema, the crowd jostling to look down, but not at a screen – at her. So many eyes. She recognised those of her old headmaster, Mr Botha; Esmé's father; the Fishers of Men pastor; her step-father's boss's boss, Ivan. Though the day was cold,

there was intense heat radiating from them. Down at ground level there were various benches, each of them raised on a platform, with lots of unsmiling people sitting or standing; looming, tall, in black gowns; or in uniforms, complete with holsters and guns. All the lights were on, yet still the room seemed dark. She could see her own shadow foreshortened in front of her; light streaming in from behind, leaving a hazy outline of her body surrounded by the wan yellow of her dress.

She was about to take a second step when she looked up at a raised wooden cubicle straight ahead. Nick was rising as if to stand, then remembering where he was, he slowly sat down again, his eyes never leaving hers. He was the only one in the room who looked life-size. Nick. Every night she'd tried to recapture what his face looked like, his eyes, his mouth. But all she'd got were two-dimensional words, *naughty grin, thick eyelashes, messy fringe* – and not once had she been able to picture him accurately. He'd always come out in colours from the heart of a furnace, so bright you had to look away; heat swirling, shape changing. She'd once been on a school tour to a mine and had watched a gold pour. These images were like that stream – so bright they burnt your eyes, and if you were to try and reach out a hand to capture some of that liquid, it would sear straight through your flesh. But now, right here in front of her, he was real, a solid ingot. Something you could look at without getting burnt.

"Miss Roland." An angry god-voice from a glowering pair of spectacles high up at the front of the court. The judge.

The whole room had been caught, as happens when you're in a car and you see a rock fall off the lorry in front of you, bounce, and come somersaulting lazily towards your windscreen. Now time's cogs and wheels bit in again and things returned to normal. The usher showed her up the steps and into the witness box. She rubbed the side of her nose and Nick, furtively, rubbed his. She could see where it ran slightly skew from a point where it must have been broken.

A man in a black gown came up to her. She assumed he was the one who was going to interrogate her, but all he did was swear her in and sit down again. A woman came forward, also wearing a gown, with a smile that said, *trust me*, and introduced herself as the state prosecutor, *but you can call me Miss Visagie*, and went through a number of self-evident questions, such as Tina's name, address and age.

"Thirteen and a half."

She'd been so tempted to lie and say fourteen. She knew the older the better, and was almost prepared to gamble on nobody challenging her. They seldom did. Lying had become one of her most distinctive characteristics – ranging from trivial facts, such as who had left the milk out the fridge, to where she'd been when she ought to have been at church last Sunday. Her mother had stopped asking, even about blatant untruths, preferring to accept at face value whatever Tina had to say.

Looking over Miss Visagie's shoulder at Nick made something burn in her throat as she thought of him having been in jail all this time – he hadn't been able to afford bail – and with no means of contact between them. His expression right now held such emotion. It was as if there was something inside Tina that had been uprooted and left lying out in the sun for the past eight months. Since Gordon's Bay. But now it was showing little green shoots again. He smiled and her lips responded by stretching so broadly they stuck to her teeth.

Nick's lawyer started having a coughing fit. He seemed to have swallowed the wrong way and banged his glass down on the table in front of him. One of his flunkies patted him on the back. Tina looked across and saw him clawing her with his eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said to Miss Visagie. "Could you say that again?"

"I said, please describe to the court how the accused forced you into going with him on the night of the twenty-eighth of March this year."

Tina was ready for these loaded questions. She'd been trained by the best: *don't get upset; don't challenge every question. Just word your answers so there's no doubt you are disputing their version of events.*

She continued giving evidence until a short tea break. Then for another two hours before lunch.

Tina wanted so badly to say something to Nick, to step across and touch him, but at each interval in proceedings, he barely had time to send her a heavily disguised kiss or to brush his hand to his heart and make an almost imperceptible infinity sign before he had his handcuffs swapped round to behind his back, his feet shackled, and he was being escorted down a staircase directly into the holding cells below. She had a letter for him, but when, at the start of the lunch hour, she tried to approach his lawyer, Advocate de Vries, he deliberately turned away and avoided her.

As she left the High Court with her parents at lunchtime, there was a downpour in the city which shorted the traffic lights for entire blocks and caused chaos. A small group of protesters were holding a one-hour demonstration with placards that said: *Protect our Children* and *MacCloud = Molester – Castrate him*; but in the rain, they did not see Tina, and apart from the photographers, no-one took much notice of the picketers.

After a nondescript meal, of which she could manage only a mouthful, Tina was again in the witness stand. Outside the weather looked set to continue for the rest of the day, gusting through in squalls of grey drizzle accompanied by a viciously cold wind, but inside, the courtroom air was stale and the windows scumbled from the crowd's exhalations.

Miss Visagie's tone changed.

"Tell the court about how the accused got the knife wound in his hand that was treated by Dr Simpson in Port Elizabeth."

She hadn't noticed it before. Nick was wearing a suit. He looked as if he was going to a wedding. All he needed was a little flower for his buttonhole. A rosebud. She pictured herself carrying a bouquet.

"Miss Roland." That omnipotent voice again, capable of chilling the blood in the veins of a multiple murderer.

"Yes, Your" Worship? Honour? Majesty?

"Describe how the accused got that knife wound."

Miss Visagie was trying to match the judge's tone.

Tina tried explaining about the storm and the injury, but had to admit that she had not seen Nick actually get cut on the rudder pin; that yes, he and Oliver had been alone on deck at the time; that no, she could not prove that the wound was not as a result of a fight between the men.

Miss Visagie's cosy chumminess tarnished and then wore away altogether. She became serrated, deft at finding and probing unshielded spots. *Why had the accused locked her in the hotel room in Durban? Why had she phoned her family from Port Elizabeth but not spoken? Tina felt herself a fencer with a much shorter foil than her opponent. No buttons on the ends of the lethal tips. Had someone prevented her from speaking? Dizzy, Tina sought out Nick's eyes, which were so full of empathy they brought her back. Why had no-one from the hotel in Port Elizabeth ever seen her except in the company of the accused? Had she been held there against her will? How many more times could she say no and sound convincing? Without succumbing to the desire to cry? You said in your statement that Mr Labuschagne was transferred, badly injured, on to a passing ship. Yet no trace of any such ship, or of him, has ever been found. And you cannot give the name of this putative ship, or any description of it. Isn't it true that there was no rescue ship? That the accused killed the owner of the yacht and dumped his body overboard? Or perhaps threw him overboard while he was still alive? Despite all her preparation, Tina had dropped her foil, couldn't find it.*

She played for time, taking out a hankie and blowing her nose while she tried to work out how to answer. She realised they had skipped over days and weeks, over major events which gave context to what had happened. She tried to backtrack, to fill in gaps, but was thwarted at every attempt by Miss Visagie who clearly wanted to hear only about incidents that could be twisted to portray Tina as an innocent and Nick as a molester and a violent killer.

“And how do you explain these?”

Miss Visagie held up the pair of Tina’s shorts that had been hacked into a mini.

Tina was unprepared for this question – it had never occurred to either her or Oliver that her shorts might be found. Despite all his coaching, she could think of no means of explaining them away. They had agreed that she would state that she was the one who had thrown the oil over him, and that her motive was a mistaken belief that he was trying to harm Nick – by tipping off the police, by hiding his pills. But the shorts blew her logic flow to smithereens. Tina looked at Nick. She tried to work out how to mime: *forgive me for what I am about to tell you?*

She described the swimming incident; the trade, in return for Oliver halting the yacht so that Nick could get back on board. And once Tina began telling the truth, she was as powerless to stop herself as she had been once her deceptions had started becoming a habit.

No, Nick signalled, *please. Not true.*

Is true, she signalled back.

Though they’d discussed it, they’d never developed a hand-sign for *sorry* – believing too strongly that love meant never having to say you’re sorry.

What crap, Tina thought.

“You’re trying to fabricate a huge story so as to convince the court that you had a motive for harming Mr Labuschagne. You are so infatuated with the accused that you want to take responsibility for his crimes; you want to deflect the blame from

him to yourself, a minor, who cannot be tried for these crimes – which is very convenient – and to a missing man. A murdered man. Well it's not going to work, Tina. You can't prove a single one of your allegations."

Tina stared at the lion and unicorn. She and Oliver had rehearsed and rehearsed her evidence. But now that she'd deviated from her lines, she couldn't work out how to get back to the script.

Miss Visagie kept calling her name to get her attention, but Tina did not notice. She was trying to reach a decision, but just couldn't manage it.

Eventually she got her eyes to focus.

"I can prove that Nick didn't kill Oliver, Mr Labuschagne. Oliver is still alive and is paying his fees," she pointed at Advocate de Vries, "to defend Nick."

The lawyer let out a guffaw that filled the court and bounced against the domed skylight above them. Miss Visagie, people in the gallery, and the judge, joined in.

When calm returned: "Oh really. And why would he be doing that?"

Tina opened her little white vinyl handbag and took out a Polaroid.

Miss Visagie took the photograph, stared at it for a long time, then passed it without saying a word to the judge.

Tina did not see what happened after that, as she could no longer keep her head up. She heard protests as the court was cleared. The sound of scurrying between the bench and the lawyers' platform. Nick's intake of breath.

Much later, when all was quiet, Miss Visagie came and stood in front of her; her voice sticky as a Venus fly-trap.

"Tina. Look at me. We can identify you in that photograph. But not the man. It could be anyone, including the accused."

Tina shook her head and kept it bowed. She had known the picture was a bit blurred, but it was the only one she'd been able to snaffle while Oliver had his back

turned. She took a quick glimpse at the judge and the defence lawyer. They both had the same expression as Miss Visagie. She could not look at Nick.

Oliver had asked her: *Who do you think loves you more – me or him?*

Nick of course.

Swear to me, on the life of the one who loves you most, that you will never reveal my whereabouts.

She tried praying, but that was pointless. If she broke her promise, God, or Oliver, might exact revenge by taking Nick's life. But if she didn't, he could be hanged for murder.

"I can give you Oliver's address. The flat where we've been meeting. It's in Rosebank."

University of Cape Town

The Cape Argus
Tuesday, April 13 1976

**Child-molester found dead –
'Lolita Affair' suspension mooted**

The badly burnt body of a man, believed to be that of Mr Oliver Eugene Labuschagne (57), was found in the bedroom of his house in Green Point in the early hours of this morning.

Mr Labuschagne was the owner of the yacht, "Shady Lady", on which teacher Dominic MacCloud and his 12-year-old pupil, were allegedly heading for Rio de Janeiro earlier this. MacCloud is on trial in the high-profile 'Lolita Affair' case currently being heard in the Cape Town High Court. He has been charged with abduction of the pupil, the murder of Mr Labuschagne, who was thought to have gone missing in mid-ocean, and for theft of the yacht.

Police have declined to comment on the identity of the deceased, nor to speculate on whether or not foul play is suspected, however the neighbour who discovered the body, Mr Alan Williams, said he had found a suicide note in the bedroom.

"At about 4 a.m. this morning, I was woken by something and noticed a burning smell coming from the next-door house in Fairmont Street," he said. "I smashed the bedroom window and was able to extinguish the fire with my garden hose. but not in time to save my neighbour, whom I had never met."

"I broke into the house and on the side-table next to the body I found a note with instructions on how to dispose of his assets, and the words 'Greater love', signed by Mr Labuschagne, as well as an empty bottle of Chivas Regal.

Mr Williams is of the opinion that a cigar might have set the mattress alight, resulting in the fatal fire.

Well-placed sources at the High Court, who wish to remain anonymous, said they expected the 'Lolita Affair' trial to be suspended pending the outcome of the post mortem and positive identification of the body.

PART FOUR

University of Cape Town

Chapter twenty-six

Tina was used to having people knock on her door at all hours. Her bachelor flat was the first one you came to on the ground floor. It had been the cheapest she could find in Hillbrow, which was in turn the cheapest part of Johannesburg, if you were white. But having a place of her own was better than living in a university residence. The downside was that every beggar, salesman, Jehovah's Witness, and prospective intruder tried her door before any other. So when she heard a knock at just after ten on a Thursday night, she did not bother getting up from her law books to answer it.

The knocking persisted much longer than normal. The caller must have seen her lights on from the street; she hadn't yet been able to afford curtains. Eventually she gave up and peered through the spyhole in the front door, but as usual, the bulb in the passage was out.

"Whoever you are, I'm not interested. Get lost. *Voetsek*."

A voice like no other: "What if?"

She was quiet for a long time.

"How did you find me?"

"You make it sound like you didn't want to be found. Could you open the door so we don't have to conduct this conversation in front of every resident in the block?"

"Hold on."

A few minutes later Tina came out. Her flat had no heater, so she'd had to extricate herself from the blanket she'd had wrapped around her legs, change out of her slippers into a pair of boots, and catch her shoulder-length hair into a pony-tail.

Nick was holding his arms open, but she turned, busying herself with wrapping a woollen scarf around her neck as she locked the door behind her. That split-second glance had been enough though to show he was even better-looking than before. His black hair had developed premature silver flecks, and his worn motorbike jacket accentuated his wide shoulders and nipped in at his small waist.

She started walking down the front stairs and Nick hurried to keep in step.

“Where are we going?”

“Café Zurich is still open.”

They did not talk until they were inside, had taken off their jackets and ordered two Irish coffees. Café Zurich was a favourite amongst foreign residents and students as you could nurse a pot of coffee for hours while you read international newspapers, played backgammon, or watched a movie they screened in a curtained-off section of the room. The room smelled of dark-roast Costa Rica and Gauloise smoke that was visible as a spectral haze.

“You’re looking fantastic. But have you been eating enough?”

Tina hadn’t been, and the plate of kassler ribs at the table next to theirs was making her stomach yearn audibly, but she wasn’t going to get sidetracked. She looked Nick in the face for the first time, but immediately shifted her gaze to a point just over his shoulder. Dammit, she’d forgotten about those eyes; like the snake’s in *Jungle Book*. Kaa-eyes.

“How did you find me?”

“Through Alice. Pryce. I asked her to keep an eye on you while we were apart.”

Tina clicked her tongue in her cheek, the way a rider signals a horse to trot on. She’d always wondered why her ex-English teacher had shown such a soft spot for her, and had come to the conclusion Miss Pryce was queer.

Nick was watching her so intently she looked away.

“Why weren’t you at Gordon’s Bay for our reunion?”

Still no response.

“I waited all night. I was certain something had happened to you.”

She kept silent, noticing the effort it was taking to keep her features so immobile.

“unbeing dead isn’t necessarily being alive,” Nick blurted out.

At last she spoke: “e. e. cummings.”

He smiled and inclined his head.

“Tina. It’s like I’ve been beneath the polar ice-cap for the past five years, waiting for this moment to come up for air. But I never pictured you being like this. What’s going on?”

“Why didn’t you phone me, or visit me, or even just send me a postcard, not once, in all this time?”

He jerked forward.

“Please don’t tell me you never got my note? Where I explained I’d already done you too much harm; that I wanted you to have a chance at a normal childhood? Arranging our rendezvous for your eighteenth birthday? My lawyer swore he’d delivered it to you in person, before I was even acquitted.”

“I got the message.”

Nick let his hands slide back from hers, which lay rigid on the table.

“Then why are you so antagonistic? All along I thought I’d been doing the honourable thing. To give you a chance to grow up without having all this unnatural pressure on you.”

“Bullshit!”

She dug inside her purse and took out a thoroughly creased Polaroid and passed it to Nick. It showed him, from a distance, in an embrace with the red-head from the cinema. They were leaning against a door. Nick had one hand on her breast and she had a leg crooked around his hip.

“You broke it off because you were disgusted with me – because of what I’d done with Oliver. So you discarded me and went and shacked up with one of your girlfriends. Just a few weeks after we’d sworn our eternal love for one another in that courtroom.” Her laugh was on the verge of breaking into something else.

“I needed a place to stay.”

Now her laugh was so loud that people at other tables turned to stare.

“Oh, that looks really platonic.”

The louder she got, the quieter his voice became.

“I was lonely.”

In a single motion she was on her feet, turning and flinging the coffee pot at his head.

Nick ducked, as neatly as he had done when the boom swung round, and the pot shattered against the wall, staining the wallpaper.

“How do you think I was feeling?” she screamed from the doorway.

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Chapter twenty-seven

The next time he knocked at her door it was Saturday afternoon, he was gripping a bunch of sunflowers, and wearing a motorcycle crash-helmet.

"Peace offering." He held the flowers out, and kept his other arm up, guarding his averted face.

She took the flowers but did not invite him inside.

"Would you care to come down to Zoo Lake for a walk? Or tea and scones? We need to clear up some misunderstandings."

Again she made him wait outside while she got ready. When she emerged she was wearing khaki corduroys, a baggy, tawny sweater with random threads of gold, and malachite earrings. They matched the colours of her hair and eyes. She looked deliberately at her watch.

"I can't stay long."

There was no-one else on the water when they hired a little red row-boat. Without discussing it, Tina took up the oars and headed out on the choppy water towards a small island upon which clumps of unhappy looking ducks were huddled, trying to escape the chilly breeze.

It took her several figures of eight before they at last came to a halt, bumping into the island, where a few stunted willow trees offered some shelter.

Now that Tina was no longer concentrating on keeping the oars in the rowlocks, she had no excuse not to look at Nick.

He was staring at her.

"All this time you've been under the impression I'd been avoiding contact with you because I was disgusted with you?"

She nodded.

"I am so deeply sorry, I can't begin to tell you. Nothing could've been further from the truth. I admired you, idolised you, for having made that sacrifice for me. Honestly, it just hit me, when I was watching you in court, that you'd been through way too much, at way too young an age, on account of me. All I wanted was for you to have a fresh start, to enjoy being a normal kid for a change."

Tina shook her head and let out a sound that could've been mistaken for the wind hissing through the willow canes.

Nick unwrapped her fingers and gripped her hands in his. He went down on one knee.

"Forgive me."

"Why is it we always meet on water?"

"Don't try changing the subject. I'm going to stay here like this, with my jeans getting soaked in this gunk at the bottom of the boat, until you accept my apology."

"It's not as simple as that. Now please, sit down and stop tilting the boat, or we'll overturn."

He settled back on to his bench.

"As for me and Georgina, I apologise for that too. Truth is, I needed a place to stay, and she had the hots for me. Wasn't much I could do without seeming ungracious. But again I'm deeply sorry that I hurt you without knowing it."

He wiped aside a wisp of hair that was blowing in her eyes, making them water.

Nick took the oars and rowed them round the lake in a few circuits before fetching up against a large cement block in the middle of the lake.

Tina could read from Nick's body language that something was coming but couldn't guess what. Suddenly spouts of water started shooting out of the top of their mooring block – which turned out to be the base of an enormous water fountain – drenching them immediately.

"It's his favourite trick." Nick – barely able to breathe he was laughing so much – gestured to the little office where the surly cashier had taken their money.

"And you knew about it, you bastard. You were expecting it."

"I told you to bring water-wings."

She gave Nick a violent shove and they both landed, neck-deep, in the water.

A foghorn sound blew across to them, warning them they were breaking the rules.

Nick was still laughing. "Come in No.10, your time is up."

When they got out, they wrung out their clothes as best they could in the late afternoon sun, and shivered all the way back to Hillbrow on his motorbike.

At Tina's flat, she turned her back on him as she undid the double lock and mumbled a goodbye.

"Oh come on, have a heart. I'm freezing."

As she turned to him he double-declutched to his gruffest baritone.

"Besides, this was the only pretext I could think of to get inside your door."

"No," he chuckled, grabbing her wrist when she turned to slap him, "I didn't mean it that way. I'm just dying to see inside – to see what sort of a life you live these days."

"There are parts of my life which aren't fit for you to see. They're private."

"I already know about Club Pussycat."

She tried to swing around away from him, but he held her.

"I followed you there. I even saw part of your show. Are there other parts of your life you're trying to hide from me? Do you have a boyfriend?"

She shook her head, unlocked the door and left it ajar.

He closed and bolted it behind him.

"The bath looks disgusting but it's an old stain that won't come off; no spare towels – you'll have to use mine." She pointed into the bathroom which was on one

side of the entrance, a tiny kitchen on the other. The rest of the space was taken up by a bed, a trunk, a bookcase and a desk.

A man standing at his window on the other side of the street waved. Tina ignored him.

When they had each had a bath, she sat on the bed and he sat on the trunk, drinking their coffee from unmatched mugs.

"I see you're studying law. How's it going?"

"Top of my class."

He grinned.

"Then what's a bright young thing like you doing a raunchy number with a life-size pink panther in a place like the Pussycat?"

"I can either support myself by working there three nights a week, or by working as a waitress in a steakhouse seven nights a week. Simple."

"By the same argument, you can make so much money sleeping with your customers, that you won't need to study."

Tina put her mug down.

"Did you come here to tell me how to lead my life?"

"I care about you a lot. I worry about your safety."

"That's the same excuse men have used throughout the ages to subjugate women. It's the reason they give in countries where women have to wear the burka and can get stoned if they so much as set a toe outside their home without a male relative as a chaperone. Being worried about our safety is a male weapon of domination."

"Whoa!" Nick held up his hands. He was looking at her and laughing. "You've changed."

"You've noticed."

She got up. "Time for you to go. I've got to get ready for my shift."

"Will you come with me to a movie, or to dinner? Say on Wednesday?"

"Not during the week. I study every night till ten. But maybe at the weekend. I've got this Friday night off."

"Very well, your highness."

"And only if I get to choose the movie."

Nick raised an eyebrow.

Tina crossed her arms.

"Alright, alright. What film shall I get tickets for?"

"There's a bughouse in central Hillbrow. It has a billboard outside, with a poster of a huge toad, which has this human arm dangling out of its mouth. I can't remember the film's name, but the tag line is something like: *Today the swamp, tomorrow the world.*

"And this is the movie you want us to see."

"Hey, we agreed: I get to choose. Otherwise the deal's off."

"OK, but then I get to choose where we have something to eat afterwards."

"Seeing as you'll be the one paying, I suppose that's only fair. But you'll have to tell me what to wear. I don't have a huge selection to choose from."

"That little red item I saw in your wardrobe should do just fine."

Tina gasped and tried to punch his arm.

"No chance – it's strictly a work outfit."

"And you'd better wear those strappy black sandals you had on in the pink panther number – we're goin' to do some serious boogie."

At the door, Nick turned to Tina. She retreated a step. But he was framing a question.

"I need to know where Oliver lives."

"Why?"

"I have some business to settle."

"Please don't. He's old and alcoholic – he can't harm either of us any more."

She looked at his expression.

"I forbid you to do anything to him."

"Oh, you do, do you?"

"Yes. I do. I've had men taking power out of my hands all my life. I'm not going to let any male do that ever again."

"There are some sick creatures who don't deserve to live."

"He's harmless now. You're just going to have to trust me on that."

Nick started to speak again, but she interrupted.

"Goodbye Nick. See you on Friday."

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Chapter twenty-eight

When they were shown to their table at the Three Ships, there was a sapphire-blue match-book at each of their settings, discreetly positioned on their white damask serviettes. The match-books had their names, Tina and Nick, embossed in silver and linked by a silver cupid's heart. They were at the summit of The Carlton Hotel, with the lights of Johannesburg spread beneath them on three sides, and on the fourth they could see the Top Star drive-in on the crest of a disused mine dump. The wine steward – who looked as though he should be the one sitting at their table and they serving him – made a grand performance out of helping them to choose wines to go with each course. While he was within earshot they made small talk and did not discuss the film they had just seen.

Tina chose a crayfish tail starter and guinea-fowl as her main; Nick selected a half-dozen oysters and followed her lead on the guinea-fowl. She was wearing a sleeveless black sheath she'd borrowed from one of the other dancers and the strappy black sandals; he had on a midnight-blue suit with an even darker tie and silver collar studs that set off the shine in his eyes and glossy blackness of his lashes to full effect.

"When I was diamond diving up in South West Africa, we got so tired of crayfish, that eventually we'd tear the tails off, throw them away, and just eat the flesh and yellowish gloop from inside the *doppe*, the carapaces." He kissed two fingers. "Magnificent."

"You were so close to Cape Town? All that time?"

"It was just a few months, in '76 and '77. Most of the time though I was diving off oil rigs in the North Sea. You have no idea how cold and hungry you can get after eight hours in the water. As soon as I got out, I wouldn't even bother stripping my dry suit off completely; I'd boil a pot of water, then I'd chuck in an entire box of spaghetti and stand there in the galley, slurping it down, straight from the pot."

Their first course arrived and Nick began shucking his oysters, slowly chewing each one with his eyes closed.

"I saved up a lot of money, but you can't go on doing that for too long. Eventually the lack of oxygen has a long-term effect and your brain lands up indistinguishable from a cauliflower."

Tina had scraped the hollandaise sauce off what looked like a large, reddish egg with speckled ridges, but still hadn't worked out how to go about eating it. She'd never had crayfish before. She gave it an unobtrusive tap with the back of her fork, but it just made a hollow sound.

"Thought I'd noticed a change," she murmured.

"Nice."

She looked straight at him. "Seriously though, you have changed."

"You've noticed."

Tina tried hitting the crayfish even harder.

"Are you going to play with that thing, or eat it?"

"I don't know how to get inside it."

"Try turning it over."

"Ah."

"OK, so you're going to make me fish for this – in what way have I changed?"

Tina was savouring her first mouthful and had decided she could live on crayfish for the rest of her life.

She swallowed and reluctantly put her fork down.

"You used to be ... god-like. Perfect. Just looking at you used to make me have difficulty breathing."

"So you're saying I've become an old fart?"

She shook her head thoughtfully.

"But I think I like you better this way."

“Henri.” Nick gestured to the wine steward. “The lady admits it – she likes me! A bottle of French champagne please.”

Henri backed off. “That’s the only kind we have, sir.” But he too was smiling.

Henri tried to ease off the cork without letting out a sound, but Nick insisted that it had to come off with a pop. When they each had a full flute before them, Henri retreated and Tina said, “Cheers.”

“Hold on. Don’t drink yet. I’ve got something for you.”

It took some manoeuvring for Nick to get his tie and collar studs off, and to undo the top three buttons of his shirt. With his tie awry he reached inside his shirt and extracted a long chain which had the silver St Christopher dangling from it, as well as a ring. Nick unclasped the chain and held out the ring.

“I found this stone soon after I left Cape Town – it turned out to be the biggest I ever saw. I’ve been wearing it on this chain, so that I could tell you when we got together again, that you’ve never once been out of my thoughts; that you’ve been as close to me as my own heartbeat, all the time we’ve been apart.”

Tina had both hands raised in the air.

“Nick. Hold on. First we need to talk. I’ve been building up the courage to say to you tonight: you’ve got expectations I’m not able to meet. You’re just assuming we can go back to the way we were. But we can’t. I’ve been through the heart of a ... a volcano and I’ve come out the other side a different shape.”

Nick looked her up and down.

“I’ve got no complaints about the new shape.”

“Stop trivialising what I have to say,” she hissed so that only he could hear.

A waiter had come across and taken away her plate, even though she’d had only one mouthful of the dish. Another was laying out fresh sets of cutlery. The ring lay on the table between them.

Nick was also speaking in a low voice.

“It’s not a bloody engagement ring. It’s a bloody I Love You ring.”

“How can you claim to love me? You don’t even know who it is you’re talking to.”

Tina sat back as two waiters placed silver cloches before them, and lifted them simultaneously, revealing a splayed, glistening guinea-fowl, surrounded by steaming vegetables on each plate.

Tina looked across at Nick’s face and it was like looking at metal being twisted.

“I don’t intend hurting you. It’s ... just so hard to explain.”

“Tell me then in short, simple words that even my brain can comprehend.”

She began ticking off points on her fingers in a rasping whisper.

“I’m totally fucked up. I have nightmares, every night. Every now and then I go completely out of control, and do crazy things. I’m a stripper, but I can’t stand intimacy, for God’s sake.”

Nick rocked back on his chair, just as he used to do in the classroom many years earlier.

“If you’re trying to scare me, it’s not working.”

“This is not funny. You fell in love with a child. I’ve turned into something else. Something evil.”

Nick leant forward and grabbed her wrist.

“OK, so you have nightmares: if you let me, I’ll stay with you, and when you get these nightmares I’ll come across and rock you until you get back to sleep.”

He enumerated each point by pressing a different finger against her pulse.

“You go out of control: we’ll get help. We’ll go for counselling. Or find out if you need to be on some sort of medication. Whatever it takes, we’ll work it out.”

“You can’t stand intimacy: I’ll keep my distance, we’ll gradually get to know one another. Slowly you’ll learn to trust that I will never, ever do anything to hurt you.

She wrenched her hand free.

“Aren’t you listening? I’m not going to do this.”

She picked up his ring and flung it across the room. It hit a window, bounced and landed somewhere in a corner.

It took Nick a long time to loosen his grip from the armrests of his chair.

He called for the bill and drove her home in the white Mercedes he'd hired for the evening, walked her to her door, but did not say good night. Neither did she.

When he spoke, his voice was completely colourless.

"You're right, you have changed. But somewhere along the line you've confused strong with hard."

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Chapter twenty-nine

The ad appeared a fortnight later and ran for a week:

The Star Classifieds

Monday, June 9 1980

LOST & FOUND

Lost – marbles; manners; ability to differentiate hard from strong. Found – 1-carat stone, plus remnants of a 24-carat friendship (latter has since been misplaced again.) Have no way of re-establishing contact. Will owner please come by and collect. Tina

Chapter thirty

Three weeks later, the following ad appeared, once only:

The Star Classifieds

Tuesday, July 1 1980

LOST & FOUND

Lost – stone: no longer of any sentimental value. Throw it in lake. Friendship: has been missing for ages, don't know if it's worth anything any more either. Will meet you at the jetty, Sunday at 3, perhaps to say goodbye. Nick.

Chapter thirty-one

She arrived at one thirty. He sauntered out of the Zoo Lake Restaurant, where he'd been watching her through the huge, tinted picture-window, at two fifty-eight.

He was wearing his full motorbike gear – thick pants with padded reinforcing in the insides of the knees, half-zipped leather jacket with a red shirt beneath, a neckerchief, helmet, and backpack, and with a bulging set of panniers slung over his right shoulder.

They hired a boat, a blue one this time, but they could see it was going to be more difficult finding a quiet place where they could talk as it was a gorgeous Highveld winter's day and there were lots of other couples out on the water. Nick rowed them into the middle of the lake, far from the fountain, flicking an oar now and then to keep them from drifting.

"Nick, I'm sorry."

"I see you found the ring."

She was twisting it off.

"I went back the same night. The *maître d'* had handed it in to security." She coughed. "It's the most beautiful gift anyone could ever dream of being given."

His voice, confused: "Don't."

"What?"

"Say but."

"However."

"No buts. No howevers. No unfortunatelies. No neverthelesses."

"That said, I have no choice but to"

"If you're going to try and give it back to me, I'm going to chuck it in the lake and then be on my way. You will never hear from me again."

"Please don't do that. It nearly killed me, having no way of contacting you for the past five years, and again for the past six weeks. I can't survive that a third time."

"Serves you right."

Tina got down on both knees in the middle of the boat.

"Look – I'm grovelling, begging your forgiveness for hurting you in the restaurant."

"Will you wear the no-bloody-strings-attached ring?"

She pressed both hands to her eyes, then looked up at him.

"Yes, if you insist. But only on my right hand."

"Who ever said anything about the left?"

Still on her knees. "Can we start again? From scratch. As if we've only just met?"

"You mean I've just given my ring to a stranger?"

"Nick!"

"OK. Let's give it a bash."

He held out a hand to help her up and steadied the boat as she found her seat again.

He took up the oars and rowed to the little island where he looped the painter from the front of the boat round a dead willow stem and tied a loose knot.

"So," he said, "we're going to turn back time, forget what's happened in between, and start again from where we left off a few weeks back?"

"Sounds good."

"As I remember it, I had just apologised for you thinking that the reason I'd avoided contact with you all these years was because I was disgusted with you, and I was awaiting an acceptance of that apology."

"And I said it was more complex than that."

"So? Are we back at stalemate?"

"Has it ever occurred to you to wonder who took that photograph of you and Georgina?"

"I just assumed it was someone with a grudge."

Tina rubbed the gooseflesh on her arms; her eyes never left Nick's.

"Well – who was it who took the photo?"

"Oliver, of course."

Nick looked as if she'd spoken in a foreign language. Slowly he shook his head.

"But that's impossible. I stayed with Georgie only after the case against me was postponed and later dropped. And it was Oliver's suicide that triggered the case being dropped. The dates don't make any sense."

"Oliver was alive and kicking then, and still is for that matter. Apart from cirrhosis of the liver, which is still slowly killing him. But he's as hale as ever. He lives here in Berea." She gestured behind her.

Nick kept rubbing his temples.

She hadn't noticed it before. Nick's hair was starting to thin on top.

He lifted his head.

"So who died in the fire then?"

"He said it was an accident. That he intended killing himself, but invited a few friends round for a final drink – couldn't bear to miss his own wake. One of them got completely motherless, so Oliver let him pass out on his bed, but he must have fallen asleep with a cigarillo still burning. Oliver woke up in the smoke, half-pissed, saw he couldn't save his friend, panicked and ran."

Nick looked up.

"Do you believe him?"

Tina shrugged.

"Sort of. He also said if I ever told anyone what had really happened that night, he genuinely would kill himself. Then I would have that on my conscience. And he knew what I'd been through when I thought he'd committed suicide over me the first time."

Nick slouched forward again, his muscular fingers slowly massaging the pale scalp visible through his shaggy hair.

Off to one side, children shrieked as the water fountain came to life. A fractured rainbow shone through the spray, though neither of them noticed it.

“How much have you been seeing of Oliver?”

Tina wanted to respond with a sharp *What business is it of yours?* or with a lie. Instead she blurted out, “I carried on visiting him every fortnight, for years. Just as I had done before the trial.”

“For God’s sake, why?”

She was silent for a full minute.

“I’ve tried so hard to work that one out. Maybe I felt sorry for him.”

“Sorry for him? He’s a murderer. A child molester. A blackmailer. He’s the lowest form of scum on this planet.”

Nick seemed to be waiting for a response, but Tina said nothing.

“Did he force you in some way?”

“No.”

“So you went of your own free will?”

It felt like she was on the stand again.

“You can’t talk of free will in a situation like that. You don’t understand – it’s as if you’ve been brainwashed.”

Tina detested the child-like pleading that had entered her voice. She coughed and got her voice back to a detached sing-song.

“You swear you’re going to stop seeing him, but as soon as you’re in his presence, it’s as if he’s cast a spell over you. He would beg me not to leave him. He’d tell me I’d be destroying his life. The only one pure, true thing he’d ever loved.

“You know, he bought me a little black Persian kitten which he kept in the flat in Rosebank. I called her Suki and every second Sunday when I went round there – I

used to bunk church – I'd hand-feed her finely chopped liver and he even bought a cute diamond collar for her."

Tina paused and looked away.

"I had threatened to stop seeing him. I didn't pitch up one Sunday. On the Tuesday he phoned me at home – he only ever did that twice – and said she'd vanished. Begged me to come and help him look for her. Of course, as soon as I did that, the sex just started again. I think he killed Suki, but of course I couldn't prove anything."

She was staring into the distance. "On my seventeenth birthday – just over a year ago – I said I was leaving him for real. He threatened to end his life. But I had promised myself a gift. So I said, go ahead; said, as long as I never saw him again, I'd be happy. He did make a half-hearted attempt at suicide. I didn't visit him in hospital, even though he phoned and begged. He got a nurse to come around and plead his case on his behalf. Told her I was his daughter who had rejected him. I told the nurse the truth. She didn't believe me of course, and I haven't bothered telling anyone else about it ever again. I've seen him since, often in fact, but never let him touch me again."

The sound of Nick retching over the side of the boat brought her out of her reverie.

"Oh shit, I never should have told you."

Nick's heaving stopped. He spat, then scooped up some of the lake water and used it to rinse off his mouth.

"Now I understand," was all he said before slumping back into silence.

Tina took up the oars and paddled them back to the jetty. They went and sat in the tea garden, and Tina ordered a pot of rooibos for them. They each drank a cup, and still Nick had not spoken, though he looked as if he might throw up again.

"Are you disgusted with me?"

His eyelashes, normally so close together, flew open.

"No!"

"Because I am."

He held her hands.

"No. There's absolutely no reason for you to feel that. I'm the one who's feeling guilty."

"You had no way of knowing."

"But I would have if I'd stayed in contact. I should've been near you, to protect you."

He shuddered.

"I need to know where he's living now."

"Nick, I've told you, he's harmless. Doing something to Oliver now won't solve anything."

"You have your nightmares you've got to find a way to live with. I've got mine."

"You're fooling yourself."

"He's taken the one good thing I've ever experienced in my life, the only part of me I've ever felt was worthwhile, and damaged it; sullied it."

"Now you're starting to sound like him."

"Don't *ever* say that to me."

"Sorry."

"Is it even possible for us to repair the damage?"

"What's the alternative? To give up on us?"

"No chance. I'm not going to do that."

"Me neither."

They sat forward, both with their eyes lowered.

"Do you regret our having run away together?" he asked at last.

"Not at all. It was worth any price."

He looked worried, staring into the tea-leaves in the bottom of his cup, as if divining their future there.

“There’s so much pain. It’s going to be difficult. We’re both going to have to be gentle with one another. And I bet we’re going to have some horrific fights. I don’t know if we can make it work, but let’s try.”

Much later he carried on, still looking into his dregs: “I’m also going to need Oliver’s address. On this, you’re going to have to trust me.”

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Chapter thirty-two

Nick gave Tina three presents. The first was Oliver's dagger, *Flamberge*. He insisted he had barely touched the man, but had merely taken it from him and described in full, technicolor detail what he would do with it if Oliver ever approached anywhere near Tina or himself again.

The second was a sarong and air tickets for a holiday in Mauritius, but the dates he had chosen clashed with her mid-year exams, and in any case, she was desperate to locate the beach to which he had carried her, and where she had slept, nestled in his arms, with a lighthouse flashing in the distance; before they had reached Durban and ever laid eyes on *Shady Lady*.

During her mid-year vac, they rode down the coast on his motorbike and on the second day found the beach that had snagged in her mind. Officially it now fell in the Ciskei, and although it was still undisturbed, and still beautiful, the magic was no longer there. Three men followed them from their tent in the morning and became aggressive when Nick and Tina refused to buy a fish they did not want. The appearance of *Flamberge* helped them to extricate themselves and they decided to move on.

They spent a week in the honeymoon suite at a little family hotel on the Wild Coast, where they went for day-long, naked walks on beaches where theirs were the only footprints; found trading beads which had washed up from sunken sailing ships; swam in rock pools rather than the treacherous ocean; ate as much seafood as they could manage; and tried making love three times, each attempt more disastrous than the last.

The third gift was a Siamese kitten whom Tina named Cameo. Her refusal to be house-trained was the reason why Tina finally capitulated into moving out of her little bachelor flat, which she had refused to share, and to live with Nick, in a dilapidated, gold-rush-era cottage they found in Melville. With some reluctance on

her part, they lived on Nick's savings, and he put energy into renovating their home, and doing occasional work as a TV extra – valued for his ability to dance and scuba-diver, to ride anything and to bale out of burning buildings – while she put in long hours on her law degree.

It was Cameo who consoled him on the nights she didn't come home, and after he'd followed her and seen evidence of her serial affairs with slick men in risky hotels; who messed in the passage when he brought a woman home he'd met at a bar and fucked her in their bed, leaving snail-trails of sex on the sheets for Tina to find. Cameo who ran away from home during their confrontation in which they railed at one another, cursed one another, she threw things, and he gave her an ultimatum – that he could no longer offer her patience and celibacy. Cameo was also the one who alerted him, through her incessant pacing to and fro, like a polar bear in a cage, when Tina attempted to hang herself with barbed wire.

Tina did agree to get help, and spent many hours, spread over a number of years, wrestling with demons. Her two biggest setbacks were when Cameo died, having fallen, or been thrown – Tina could never remember which, though she had been the only one at home – from an upstairs window on to an iron palisade fence; and when Nick left, having tried too hard, for too long, to compete with her monsters.

They reunited, both burnt, fourteen months later, agreeing to give it one last chance. Their lovemaking was functional; productive. He was the one who needed to be held when her first pregnancy ended at eight weeks; then and for a long time after. And as she held him, she discovered soft parts within herself that had been veiled till then. As soon as she had written her final exam, they got on his bike and rode non-stop through two nights till they reached a place, north of the Namib desert, where they climbed to the top of a rocky outcrop and slept, wrapped as if swaddled together, in the freezing night air. In the morning they trekked down into a dry ravine, ever deeper into a desolate area where it was quite likely that no human, and few animals, had

walked before. They hiked for two parched days until they found a shallow cave at the back of which there was a moist crack in the rock, bearing a trickle of water, and they stayed there, talking. In the daytime they hid from the sun; at night survived by combining their body warmth. They had planned to be away from the road for no more than three nights, but by rationing their food till they were close to hallucinating, they stayed longer, exploring, without defences, their haunted, menacing areas as well as rediscovering the halls of light and sparkles.

Late on the fifth afternoon they found a faded, centuries-old painting, at knee height, on the yellow sandstone of their shelter. An almost invisible lion, with a flared ochre mane and human calves and feet, striding into a crack in the rock. They touched then, with a tender significance that was new to them, as he crouched behind her; she on all fours, he kneeling upright, his fingertips only just holding her hips. She turned and faced him, also on her knees, and slowly stripped him of his clothing; she had him lie back on a blanket as she bathed him with the billycan of water they'd collected and the only soft, clean T-shirt she had left. She was at last that doctor, mapping his unfamiliar anatomy as her hands travelled over his ribcage, his flat belly, his curious symbol of manhood. She kissed him there, something she had never done before, nuzzling him, tasting him, while he did not move in response, but all the while watching her, and she found him paradoxical, both vulnerable and potent. She was taking him over the threshold when he gripped her wrist and had her wait while he hung the billy under the seeping drip; till he had enough water to start washing her body in return. Before every stroke of the cloth, he would run his palm there first, telling her skin where it was going to next, waiting quietly for any reaction. She began, as she'd always done to date, keeping her muscles tensed, under control, to prevent herself from striking out, from letting escape trapped harpies and hell-hounds; but while she lay rigid, he rested his hand on her hip, unmoving, until she closed her eyes and let go, allowing her body to find its own way, to jerk aside if it so wished, to relax if that was what it preferred. With his left hand guiding the route

of the soft, blood-warm T-shirt, he washed her, as gently as one of the disciples washing a cripple brought forth on a pallet.

She felt so strangely at peace as to be on the verge of unconsciousness, and when he replaced the soft cloth with his softer tongue, still preceding every move with a reassuring stroke of his hand, she did not flinch. Sensing the touch of his shaggy hair against her belly, her thighs, she would previously have been sinking into a well, where it so dark and so cold that, numbed, she would no longer have been capable of feeling anything; but now, instead, she was lying on the blanket, in the last, long rays of warm sunlight, and she willed herself to open her eyes and watch him cleansing her, preparing her, using his burred tongue to probe her, and she slowly opened to him. There was a short battle, between body and mind, until her body claimed its right to respond in similar, uninhibited, animal fashion; nuzzling him in return, twitching her hips, moving them rhythmically, indecently, languidly, taking forever. Then, reaching an unbearable point; calling urgently for him to join with her, letting out full-throated screams as convulsions she'd never known before pinioned her, wracked her, undid her, threatened to annihilate her, again and again.

She woke when the moon was at its zenith to find him leaning on one elbow, watching her steadily.

“What if we –”

“Shh.”

She lunged up and kissed him.

“This *is* if.”

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