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**TERMINATION**

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Masters in Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities

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**COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Signed by candidate Date: 08/02/2008

## **ABSTRACT FOR MASTERS DEGREE IN CREATIVE WRITING**

### **"TERMINATION" by KAREN RUTTER**

*Termination* is a genre novel which follows a contemporary crime fiction format. It adheres closely to the narrative shape of modern mystery books, containing the essential elements which constitute a work in this field. With a few twists.

Contemporary crime fiction can follow a couple of paths along the way to solving a misdemeanour. Which is usually a murder. The protagonist is either on the spot and in the plot by virtue of his/her job. In other words, they could be a cop, forensic specialist, medical examiner, private investigator etc. Or they could be drawn reluctantly into a scenario, by circumstance or due to an over-developed sense of "doing the right thing." Either ways, there are a couple of characteristics most contemporary crime-solvers share:

- They have something bad or sad in their past.
- They have experienced some form of substance abuse.
- They often have problems with intimate relationships.
- They are drawn to helping others, particularly if they sense unfair play.
- They are flawed knights, called upon to battle the dragons of modern life. And their own demons.

There are other aspects that may or may not be included:

- The city or country where the crime takes place can be a strong character in itself.
- The crime can be a reflection on a certain aspect of the society where it takes place. In this way, issues such as racism, sexism, exploitation of women and children, environmental problems, drug dealing and more can be commented on.
- The central protagonist often has a side-kick.
- People get hurt.

With *Termination* I have tried to follow the narrative look and feel of writers such as Elmore Leonard, James Ellroy, James Lee Burke, Carl Hiaasen, Minette Walters, Linda Barnes, Ian Rankin, Peter Robinson and the like. In terms of a sense of place, I have also been inspired by writers outside of the crime epicentres of the United Kingdom and the United States. Geographically-specific authors of influence include Andrea Camillieri (Sicily), Peter Temple (Australia) and Henning Mankell (Sweden) as well as South Africans Deon Meyer, Mike Nicol and Joanne Hichens, and Richard Kunzmann.

The central protagonist in *Termination* is Kain Hunter, a Cape Town-based journalist who is reluctantly drawn into investigating the death of a young musician. Her search for the truth takes her from sweaty clubs in the inner city to township streets and into the leafy southern suburbs. In the process, she uncovers a horrifying medical secret and has to confront a number of unpleasant heavies.

## THANKS

There are a number of people I would like to thank for supporting me during the process of putting together "Termination" for my Masters Degree in Creative Writing.

Jane Mayne and Nini, without whom there would be no Ninja. Karen Press, who doesn't know just how inspiring she can be. Mike Nicol, for rigorous, stimulating and always engaging feedback – and for pointing out my Enid Blyton tendencies. A true crime guru. My parents, for teaching me to love reading. And Liz de Wet, for getting me into this in the first place, and then taking the journey with me. Thanks for the ride!

While "Termination" is a work of fiction, it is based on very real facts that are a feature of contemporary South African society. The medical articles and notes that appear are adapted interpretations of newspaper articles and medical journals which deal with controversial and contentious issues. Any medical mistakes are the fault of the author.

**FOR NORMA**

# TERMINATION

## By KAREN RUTTER

### PROLOGUE

*The bullet hole looked like a third eye. Small and neat, it was symmetrically placed in the centre of her forehead. Set against her pale brown skin, it made her look exotic. The back of her head wasn't quite as tidy, though. When he turned her face to one side, bits of broken skull were embedded in a porridge of grey and yellow brain matter. Most of the blood had been cleared away, but her hair was plastered to the exit wound in red clumps.*

*Still, he was happy with the overall presentation. Below the neck, she'd hardly been damaged at all. The small swell of her belly was intact.*

*He stood, absently staring out the window as he thought. Several stories below, a few yellow taxis were trawling the dark streets and he could faintly make out the sound of a siren. It was late, and he was tired. The bright fluorescent lighting was starting to hurt his eyes. But he still had a lot to do. At the moment, there was nobody around and he had a fair chance of finishing up before he was seen.*

*Snapping on a pair of rubber gloves, he moved decisively. He'd save the parcel for later. She was more important.*

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## CHAPTER ONE

Smoke spewed, thick and hot. Orange strobes flared with manic urgency. Every few minutes a mass of writhing bodies would jerk into the shifting light then career away. Sweat covered my forehead. Ahead of me, white flashes exploded where Rozena was crouched, camera jammed to her eye.

Despite the heat, the crowd and the lack of air, I was getting into it. Ben Wilson and his band Itslikethat pumped, and the crowd was like kids let out of school early. Kids being the word. Most of them looked sixteen. My Friday night scene's not a club crammed with manic rockers, I'd rather do a Helen Martens and eat ground glass, but Rozena had pushed. "C'mon, Kain," she'd said. Kailan is my full name, the one I use on my bylines, but the shorter version has stuck. "I've got you a free pass, and you'll like this band. They'll surprise you. I'll work for a bit, then we can get a drink and catch up." Call me a sucker.

Rozena's freelance. She'd been commissioned to take shots of Ben and his band for a youth mag obsessing on hot new talent. It was a good choice. Me, I prefer music that's more on the jazzy side. But I could see Itslikethat had an edge. Much of it had to do with Ben Wilson himself. Lithe, blonde, good looks and a bad-boy image that kicked ass. The way he lifted the mic stand, strutted the stage, grinning at the girls in the front row. He had style. From my point of view. A good voice too, low and growly on the verses, then suddenly sweet and high on parts of the choruses. And he could crank up the guitar. His bandmates were also pretty tight – Siphon Mazana on bass, all cute dreadlocks and slap-and-pop action; Reuben Samuels attacking the keyboards with a shaved head and a killer technique; and hardcore drummer Johan Brink, a muscle-shirted powerhouse behind his kit. The sound was rock-meets-Cape-Town-goema-and-goes-mad, and it wasn't bad.

Rozena had spent an hour catching the final set, and the band was winding down. Ben announced the last number – I caught something about "choices" in the title – and I made my way to the bar to wait. The closing song was a surprise. I'd expected something fast and furious to end the night on a high. But Ben started singing the soft, clear notes of a ballad. It caught the crowd immediately. I noticed a young girl standing in front of him, her face tight with concentration. Behind her, a skinny boy in a baggy black coat stared up at the band, like they were all that existed.

I liked it. There was an emotional hum here that felt real. I watched Ben, his eyes closed, body leaning into the mic stand.

A bunch of older men and women sat at the bar. Some probably music industry types, lounging, doing the cool thing. Others awkward. Maybe parents of the guys in the band. I was right on both counts. Once the musicians finished, they pushed their way to the bar through a throng of back-slappers. I heard Ben call out: "Dad, I didn't think you'd make it," hugging a tall man with greying good looks. Next to him was a slightly younger man, smiling. Drinks were ordered. I overheard one of the industry types saying "definite international potential". Then Rozena joined me.

As we turned to leave, I was jabbed in the gut by a guy elbowing through. "Ben ... Ben ... will you sign this?" he shouted. "Hey, dude," I said, grabbing his arm. "Watch it." He shook me off. It was the boy in the baggy coat, the one I'd noticed during the final song. Up close, his eyes burned dark against pale, pockmarked skin. He waved a piece of paper. Ben hadn't heard him, so he shoved his way closer to the bar. "Asshole!" someone yelled as the boy stumbled against a table piled with drinks. He didn't seem to notice, and pressed forward. The people around him looked pissed off, like a leper was trying to join their group.

"Crazy fan, huh?" said Rozena, hustling me towards the exit.

"Loser."

"But the band was alright, don't you think?" she grinned. An infectious smile, the kind of good spirits that catch me out. I'm more a loner, not so quick with the social cheer. I've known Rozena since our early twenties when we shared a student house in Observatory. Fifteen years on, we're still good friends. Good together on a job, too. When she needs a journo, I'm it. Not tonight though – I was off duty. Just along for the ride.

"Yeah, okay, it was good."

"Good!"

"What you want me to say?"

"How about amazing?"

"Jeesh, you doing their PR? They should pay you. Alright – I liked them. They've got something."

We waded through teenagers in Loxion Kulcha shirts and Diesel jeans waiting for the DJ to get the rave happening.

"Had enough of the kids though," I grunted.

A pale girl with blue fingernails saw the look on my face and pulled her pink-haired partner aside for me to pass.

"Yeah right, you're ancient," Rozena said. "C'mon, let's get a drink."

"Sense at last."

Outside, the cold air smacked us hard. It wasn't raining anymore but the temperature was vicious, the wind aggressive. Dirty plastic bags caught our feet, then blew away. Roeland Street was deserted, parked cars lining the kerbs but no people lingering. Most of the buildings and warehouses locked up behind security grills. The area worked well for the clubbers and bands. Nobody to complain about late-night noise. But on a dark, squally night there was a creepy edge that made us move quickly to my car.

Back of my mind were the week's headlines. "Road of Death." "Fear Stalks the City." The naked body of a young woman had been dumped on the road leading to the cable car station on Table Mountain. She was the second corpse found on that stretch this year, beaten, mutilated, strangled to death. 22-year-old Stephanie Lambrecht, part-time model. Last seen leaving a club not far from where we were walking. We picked up the pace.

"Kennedys?" I asked, scanning the dark alleyways.

"I'm buying," said Rozena.

We climbed into the car, left the warehouses behind. I jabbed the heater button. Hadn't worked for three years. Didn't stop me trying.

"Shit," I mumbled.

"When are you going to sell this thing?" Rozena flicked the dashboard.

"Don't even go there. It's not going to happen." I have a close relationship with my 1990 Suzuki jeep. It's old, can't go faster than 100 kilometres on a downhill, and Rozena reckons you need a kidney belt for the jolts. That, and a reinforced bra. I don't care. Some things I want around for a long time. Rozena knows this. She still winds me up.

In Long Street the lights were brighter, people trawling the strip of cafes, bars and backpacker lodges. Kennedys was all warm wooden floors, smoky mirrors, a Jimmy Dludlu soundtrack and leather couches. We fell onto one and ordered frothy coffees, mine with a shot of bourbon.

"Tell me – how's the writing going?" asked Rozena.

"Not great," I admitted. "Last month was fine. Got that gender series, and the feature on violence in schools. But it's gone quiet. I'll need work soon."

"You know what's making big news at the moment? Stephanie Lambrecht's corpse. The cops are thinking serial killer."

"Reckon the two murders are related?"

"For sure. The first woman, Tania Smith, was killed in the same way and found in the same spot just a month ago."

"Doesn't mean shit. Dead bodies in Cape Town aren't a rare species."

"Both had their hands tied behind their back with their own bras."

"Could be a copycat killer." Too many headcases watch *True Crime* TV shows and get ideas.

"Uh uh," Rozena shook her head. "I spoke to some of the crime journos. There are other similarities which weren't released."

"Convince me."

She hesitated, lowered her voice. "Kain, it's gruesome. Their ... their nipples were cut off and stuffed in their mouths."

"Christ. That's nasty."

Rozena continued. "Tania also disappeared from outside a nightclub."

"Alright, you got my attention."

Two young women, mutilated, murdered, dumped like rubbish on the side of the road. We sat in silence for a while. Rozena sipped her coffee, looked at me.

"You thinking of following up?"

I was tempted. The facts were gross, and that meant hardcore features. The murders had all the makings of a media feeding frenzy. And I needed work. Problem was, I'd be fighting all the hacks for column space. I'd leave it to the dailies.

"Nah. Not worth it."

"I'll keep an ear out for something solid we can work on together," promised Rozena.

I don't know how she balanced it all. She's married to Guy, a sweet but sort of vague marine biologist whose speciality is penguin migration patterns. Which means he's often out on a boat following small flightless birds. They've got two young daughters, and still Rozena manages a hectic photographic schedule. She's got this zen-calm thing going.

Me, I handle things differently. I go in hard, don't know how to stop. Somehow, the mix works. The Razing-Kain Roadshow, our colleagues call us. I suppose we look funny together. Laurel and Hardy. I'm tall, with spiky blond hair and what my mother calls a "too-skinny" figure.

Rozena is short, with dark curls and a rounded body that shows how much she likes messing around in the kitchen.

"The evening wasn't so bad, hey?" She smiled. "It's good for you to get out."

"I'm not a hermit."

"Following a lead doesn't count. Nor karate classes."

"Says who?"

"Kain, at some point you've got to do the social thing."

Her tone was light, but there was concern in her voice. I didn't respond. A while back I'd spent too much time on my own, and it hadn't been good for me. The pills had helped. Then they started helping too much. I didn't take them any more, felt much stronger. Rozena still fussed, though.

"Okay, give me the lowdown on the band." I changed the subject. "I think they've got a vibe. Especially Ben."

I meant it. Despite his sensual posturing, there was something earnest about Ben's performance. A poignancy that went further than stage theatrics. Although he carried off a macho don't-mess-with-me act pretty well.

"He can sing, that's obvious." Rozena settled herself into the couch. "Tonight he was on fire. But there've been stories – drugs, wild parties – that make me wonder what sort of person he really is."

"C'mon, that goes with the territory."

"Maybe the band is just a phase."

"An expensive one, then." I scooped frothed cream and bourbon from my glass with a spoon. "All that equipment, the hip clothes ..."

"Oh, his parents are loaded. Dad's a doctor. Mum inherited some fortune."

"A rich kid playing pop star. I read him differently."

"That's why I'm not sure. Maybe he is genuine."

"We'll have to see where he goes. He's not exactly in the Jim, Jimi or Janis league yet, anyhow."

"Oh Kain, still banging that tired line?" Rozena shook her head. It was an old debate. Me, I think if you want to listen to rock, than Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin were the best.

"Yeah. Often the good ones are the dead ones." I stopped. Rozena's brown eyes were warm with care, but this was a conversation I didn't want to take further.

The waiter came around. I asked for the bill.

"Let's get going," I said.

Rozena looked like she wanted to say something else, but instead she put down some money. We unpeeled ourselves from our leather cocoons. On the street a hard rain ambushed us before we reached the car. Broke the slight tension.

"God, I'm soaked," groaned Rozena, as I revved the engine and pulled out in a spray of scuzzy water. Table Mountain loomed ahead, almost obscured by black clouds. I shivered and reached for the heater again. Same story – no juice.

"Kain, I won't bug you. Not tonight, anyway. But we need to talk sometime, okay?"

"Gimme a break. I'm fine."

"I know, I know. You've been doing really well. It's just ..."

I rolled my eyes. Then turned my attention to the road.

The wind had picked up, bucketing the jeep along the freeway that flanked the eastern ridge of the mountain. Rain struck the windshield in a solid wall. We slid down Hospital Bend and cut into Rondebosch, where Rozena has a gingerbread house with big trees and a wrap-around stoep. I watched her duck inside, turned back onto the freeway, headed home.

It took about forty minutes. I live in a cottage made of corrugated iron that sits above False Bay. Follow the spine of Table Mountain as it slouches towards Cape Point, and my home is halfway. It's in an inlet called St James. I moved here six years ago. On the left lies the sandy stretch of Muizenberg Beach, to the right the Kalk Bay fishing village. I bought my cottage from my neighbours Jane and Edi. It's high enough to have a view of the entire bay. Thickets of fynbos keep it private. The way I like it.

When I lie in bed, I watch waves breaking on the reef. In September, I hear whales sighing when the traffic's quiet. All year round, I sleep with the sound of Ninja, my bad-breathed asthmatic dog. I don't mind.

By the time I pulled into my garage, the rain had stopped. Ninja hurled his small, brown body at my knees. Edi was taking a late stroll in the garden we share between houses. "He's been fed, he's fine," she said. We have a mutual arrangement. When she and her partner Jane are out, I look after their animals and vice-versa. I have the better deal – their two labradors and ageing cat are a lot easier than my street-special.

"Cool. 'Night." I scooped up the dog. Inside, I chucked my smoky clothes in a heap on the floor and fell into bed. Ninja snuffed into his basket.

Next morning, I worked through twenty sets of the *Taikyoku Sono Chi* kata. I still hadn't mastered some of the kicks. The wet grass was crap for my grip. I did another five sets then stopped, thighs burning. My sensei might have made me do twenty more, but I was beat. In the kitchen I put on the kettle, tuned the radio to a local station. The newsreader was saying, "Music fans are reeling from the shock announcement that Ben Wilson, popular lead singer of the band Itslikethat, was killed in a car crash while returning home from a club early this morning."

## CHAPTER TWO

Ninja pulled my laces, demanding breakfast. I ignored him, turned up the newsreader. He switched to the weather report. I flashed to what Rozena said about drugs. Pictured Ben driving, trashed, in last night's storm. Wondered if he was alone. Thought about his voice. What a waste.

Rozena would be upset. I phoned, got the engaged noise, left a message. While Ninja ate his disgusting meat goo I showered and dressed in my standard winter uniform. Jeans and about a thousand sweatshirts. Did the Michelin Man walk to my study.

The news websites just had the basics on Ben's accident. Fatal car crash after last gig. Too early for details. My inbox was another zero. No big commission from *The New Statesman* or

*The Washington Times*. Yeah right. Nothing from my local contacts either. "You'll be eating dry bread next month," I warned Ninja. He wagged his stump tail.

There was one personal mail. "Don't hibernate on me, Kain. Call when you feel like a glass of red wine." James worked for the newspaper where I sometimes took freelance shifts. He covered the health and medical beat, was shit hot. Big surprise. I'd taken him for a slacker, he seemed so laidback. But with tough investigative stories he was a pit bull. Sunk his teeth in. We'd had a thing going last year.

It was uncomplicated. James wasn't hard work. When we weren't writing we spent hours on the beach, swimming, reading. We'd go to Kalk Bay harbour, score a fresh yellowtail off a boat, braai it with lemon. Fall asleep with salt on our skins.

But I got edgy. I like my own space. And James was spending a lot of time in it. Getting more serious. I freaked. Rozena said I was an asshole. I said I wanted out. James, confused, backed off. A year on, we were back to being friends. I heard he might be seeing somebody else. That was fine. Me, I don't do domestic bliss. Not anymore. I'd join James for a drink, that was okay.

The phone rang. Rozena, finally.

"You heard, Kain? About Ben?"

"Yeah. Tough break."

"It's lousy." Her voice caught. "Especially after last night. There were some international recording people at the gig. Things were moving."

"How much d'you know?"

"Well, Joan from *Beat* magazine told me about the recording stuff. She had a drink with Reuben and Johan – you know, the keyboardist and the drummer – and met the international reps."

"They leave late?"

"After 3am, apparently. Some of Ben's family was there, also Reuben's mum and dad, but they went early. There was just a small group at the end."

"Ben with anybody?"

"He SMS-ed his girlfriend, Petra, but she was studying. When the party broke up, it was pouring. Everybody ran for their cars. Ben drove off on his own."

"Pissed, I suppose."

"Actually, Joan said he seemed sober. Apart from one beer, he was drinking Red Bulls."

"Hard to believe."

"Maybe he'd done a line or two. Or smoked a joint. Who knows?"

"True."

"Anyway, there'll be a coroner's report. The family want it."

"If he took funny shit, it'll show."

"I know."

Rozena continued. "Either ways, he's dead. All that talent – now nothing."

There wasn't much else to say.

I swivelled on my chair, scanned the bay. My house has floor to ceiling windows. Bad for anyone with vertigo, great for me. The sea was a soup of swells and foam splattered with kelp. Messy. Like Ben's accident, I guess. I had no assignments waiting. The drizzle was monotonous. I curled up with a book.

Next day the lawn was even more slippery and my kata stank. I took it out on the punch bag. Forward strikes, reverse punches. Ten at a time, alternating until my shoulders screamed. After, Ninja and I mooched next door to borrow some milk. Jane was in the studio with a blowtorch. I don't always get their art, but people pay obscene amounts for her and Edi's work. So it must be okay. They've been partners for about twenty years, have grown to look the same - lean, grey, laugh-lines.

Martina and Ellen, the labs, lumbered up to smell Ninja's bum.

"Lend us a pint?" I called.

Jane wiped her hands, nodded, followed me into the kitchen, Edi was at the long wooden table. Coffee mugs, a plate of muffins, an old cat on top of the Sunday newspapers. He raised one eyelid, went back to sleep.

I stared at the muffins. Jane noticed. "C'mon, sit down, I'll get the kettle." Edi handed me a plate. "Eat, Kain. Bet you've forgotten breakfast. You're like Ninja when you look at food like that," she grinned. I didn't argue. The muffin tasted too good.

We sat around, shot the breeze. Nothing serious. The cat moved off the newspapers and I scanned the headlines. Typical Sunday schlock. "Musician dies in fireball!" "Rock star killed in horror crash!" I picked up a page.

"Ben Wilson, 23, lead singer of the rock band Itslikethat, was fatally injured in an automobile crash in the early hours of Saturday morning. The musician was returning home to Constantia from the Mercury Lounge club in the city where he had performed with his band. His car left the road on Wynberg Hill as it joins the Blue Route Freeway at approximately 3.30am. According to a witness who was following, Wilson lost control of his vehicle as it descended a hill. His car slid off the freeway and hit a stand of trees. It burst into flames almost immediately. The witness tried to save Wilson, but could not get close to the car because of the extreme heat. He called emergency services on his cellphone. When they arrived, they were able to remove Wilson but he was already dead. A mixture of smoke inhalation, severe burns, and injuries caused by the impact were believed to be the cause of death. "He was like a broken doll when they pulled him out of the car," said the upset witness. Wilson was identified through his car registration, and later, dental records. His family is too shocked to comment.

A toxicology report is still to be confirmed, but an initial finding leaked to the press confirms the presence of some alcohol, marijuana traces, and an unidentified drug in the late Ben Wilson's blood test."

There was more. Pieces on Ben's international potential, comments from band members, a photo-essay. The same byline on all the pictures – Rozena Jafta. Didn't realise she'd done so much on the band.

Jane looked at the spread.

"Someone you know?"

"No – but I saw him on Friday. With Rozena."

"That's where you went?"

"Yeah. Not my kind of place. He was good, though."

I siphoned some milk into a jug, went home. Thought how quickly things can change. A dark night. A wrong turn.

The next few days I hustled for work. Nobody was biting. Reading the paper one morning, a pic stuck out. Ben Wilson's funeral. Freaked-out family, a pale woman identified as his girlfriend Petra, flamboyant fans and friends. I learnt the emergency team at Ben's crash had found his guitar case, thrown from the car. Inside was an envelope of cocaine. Ben's blood test had been made official. Minimal alcohol, a small trace of marijuana plus another unidentified drug. Seeing he was dead there were no charges. The stigma was less easy to dismiss.

On Friday Rozena called. Upbeat.

"I've got something, Kain."

"Work?"

"We're talking serious bucks. Major exposure."

"The tabloids want us?"

"Huh, funny. *Rolling Stone*."

"Yeah right."

I sometimes covered issues for international magazines and newspapers. But I wasn't a household byline in London, Paris or New York. *Rolling Stone* didn't have my name on speed dial. Or any dial.

"I'm serious, Kain. You're in, if you want it."

Turned out the music mag was planning a special feature on South African popular culture. *Vanity Fair* had splashed Desmond Tutu on its cover. *Rolling Stone* needed to keep up. They wanted to look at who was being creative - filmmakers, musicians, yada yada. But not a "happy rainbow nation" punt. They wanted the good, the bad and the ugly. The commissioning editor went ape when heard about Ben. Young, wild, drug-snorting rock musician dead in a James Dean crash. It would "add the necessary colour to his cultural kaleidoscope", to quote Rozena. Because she had taken the last pics of Ben alive (and she was well-known), she was commissioned. She had to recommend a local journalist for the text. She chose me.

"I owe you."

"I know. Kain, it's a proper profile. Background, family stuff, band details, the crash ..."

"Hard to believe the fuss. He's just a local boy."

"They reckon it brings an edge. Why argue?"

"Yeah. It's their money."

"Better than a story on dancers in animal skins and those 'natural rhythm' stereotypes."

"Like we're just one big ol' game reserve out here."

"Hakuna Matata."

"Shit."

"So you'll do it?"

"Yup."

"We've got a month. Ben's family want to help. I think they're keen to minimise the drug details."

"Hey, if it went down that way, they must deal with it."

"Sure. But go easy."

"Hullo - there was coke in the boy's car."

"Still ..."

"Hey, I'm a professional."

"I'm just saying - it's sensitive."

Rozena was right. The drug angle was tricky. *Rolling Stone* wanted the dirt. Ben's family didn't. I didn't want to cause them any more pain. But would *Rolling Stone* be interested in a clean-living musician who happened to hit a tree? I don't think so. I hoped Ben was a coke head.

I needed to check out the family. Ben still lived with his parents and younger sister. Got the number, phoned. Miranda, the mother. I could come over that afternoon.

I pictured her son's body burnt to the bone. Stopped. No time for sentiment. I had a dog to feed. A bond to pay. Later that afternoon I cranked up the jeep. It poured furiously all the way to Constantia.

### CHAPTER THREE

The road was stuffed up. Trees overstressed with heavy rain threatened to squash the jeep. I dodged splintered branches that had already fallen. Skidded past huge homes behind high walls. Vineyards, horse paddocks. Flashes of cold blue steel between landscaped shrubs. Old money and nouveau wannabes.

I pulled up at a pink Victorian. Massive garden, flowers with names I didn't know. More relaxed than the neighbours - no hi-tech security system. But the place still said big bucks.

I got out the car, dodged the drizzle to the door. Caught movement upstairs. The twitch of a curtain. Checking me out.

Whatever. The doorbell chimed faintly inside the house. Shuffling feet. I was greeted by a slim, blonde woman. Red-rimmed eyes. Fifty-ish.

"Kailan, uh, Kain Hunter? Miranda Wilson. Please come in."

Her walk had the look of somebody concentrating on their feet. The Valium two-step. I wondered if this was usual, or because of the circumstances.

We sat in a lounge lined with bookshelves, piano against one wall. Family photographs on the coffee table. A jumbo box of tissues. I made condolence noises, said how sorry I was about Ben. I'm not good at that kind of stuff. But it's what you do.

She reached for the tissues. I pushed on. Said how great it was that *Rolling Stone* wanted to profile her son. Didn't add I hoped he was a drug addict.

Miranda Wilson just nodded.

"I'd like to touch base with Ben's circle. Set up interviews. Make a date to sit down properly with you and your husband. Perhaps you could help with contact details?"

More nodding.

"Ben lived here?"

She cleared her throat. "Yes. He also spent a lot of time at his girlfriend Petra's flat." Her voice was flat, one pitch. Tranquilised. I recognised the tone. Had used it myself, once upon a time.

"He used to share a student house," she continued. "He moved back home when he started taking the band more seriously. He needed to save money, and have space to write his songs."

It was the longest thing she'd said since we'd met. The effort exhausted her. Frankly, I didn't think I'd get much from this meeting. Miranda was spaced out on grief and something chemical. Still, I could round up names, numbers. Scope out Ben's room, get a feel for him.

Light footsteps behind me. I turned, met bright blue eyes behind glasses. A young face framed by long brown hair. Familiar. Not sure why. Around 18 years old or so, she glanced protectively at her mother, coolly said hullo.

"This is Anna, our daughter," said Miranda.

The girl clearly knew why I was there. Didn't look enthusiastic. Had come to give her mother support.

"Anna, do you know where the numbers are for Reuben and Johan and Siphoo?"

Wary eyes. Anna wouldn't have done well at poker. "No," she hedged. "Dunno those guys so well."

Seemed Anna wasn't too keen on my poking around in her brother's business. Or maybe it was something else. I realised who the curtain twitcher was.

"Could you have a look on Ben's laptop?" Miranda was battling to hold it together.

"I'll help," I said quickly.

"I suppose." Reluctant.

We walked up wooden stairs, turned into a bedroom. Anna ignored me and made for an Apple MacBook. I stood on the threshold. Wanted to laugh.

So much for the wild boy image. Tidy bed, CDs stacked neatly, wall to wall books. An acoustic guitar on a stand. A desk, papers and notes in orderly stacks. Either Ben didn't spend much time here, or he was a closet nerd. Perhaps Petra's place was different. But she

was the girl who was home studying when Ben was playing his last gig. Didn't sound like a rock chick.

"You had the cleaners in?" I asked Anna.

She didn't turn around. Punched keys on the laptop. "Nope. This is how it always was. You got a problem?"

"Uh uh. Just surprised."

"You know stuff-all about Ben."

"True. But you're not helping."

"Why should I?"

"Why not?"

"You just want the sensational rubbish. Like, he was this tragic druggie music hero."

Sure. That's what *Rolling Stone* was paying me for. I kept quiet.

"What are you going to say about my brother?" Anna whirled to face me. "Sure, he smoked the odd joint. My parents are freaked about the coke in his guitar case. But there was a lot more to him ..."

Suddenly anxious. The cool reserve down.

"You're right – I didn't know your brother. Hopefully I will when I've finished."

She looked like she was making her mind up about something. Frowned. Turned to the laptop and printed out a list.

"The band guys. Shakes, their manager. Petra, my Dad's details, some other friends."

Downstairs, I made plans to set up a more formal interview, headed for the door. Not quite a waste of time, but close. Miranda was shell-shocked, out of it. Anna was prickly and suspicious. Understandable, I suppose. Welcome to the house of fun.

Walking to my car I heard footsteps pumping. Anna, breathless. Not quite meeting my eyes. She pressed a book filled with papers into my hand. "Ben was writing stuff before he died. Maybe his personal notes will help your story. Like, show people the real Ben."

I took the book. She ran off.

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The weekend passed by the time I pinned down Shakes Matshikiza, band manager for Itslikethat. I'd left several messages. Told a silky recorded voice I needed to get in touch. When I tried again around noon on Monday, the same voice answered. Live.

"Kailan. I hear you, sister. What's up?" Low register, honey-smooth, polished.

I told him, briefly, about the *Rolling Stone* piece.

"That's cool. Just a damn shame about the timing. That kind of coverage, when Ben was alive, could have done amazing things for him."

I pointed out that if Ben were alive, *Rolling Stone* probably wouldn't be interested. His sudden death was the angle. Felt uncomfortable admitting this. The guy had only just been buried. Shakes didn't seem to mind.

"Hmmm, I see what you mean. Actually, the article may still be helpful." He paused. "If you want to talk, come around. I'm free right now."

"I need background material on the band. Publicity, press releases, that sort of thing."

"I've got it all."

His address was in a complex of business-loft apartments above the city centre. I made plans to be there in an hour.

Interesting, Shakes' reaction. The man had hardly sounded grief-stricken. More concerned with the publicity side – "the timing", as he put it.

But maybe he was doing the macho thing. Some men would rather stick burning matchsticks in their eyes than admit they had feelings. Something told me Shakes Matshikiza could be one of those guys.

I took De Waal Drive into town. Passed below the road where the bodies of two young women had been found, naked and bound, posed above the unsuspecting sprawl of the city. A lonely place to die. Black clouds scudded over the bay, pushed inland by a strong northerly wind. I hunkered into my leather jacket and thick hiking boots.

They clearly didn't make a great impact on Shakes. Opening the door to his office, his eyes flicked over my outfit and came to rest on my Merrell hikers. His mouth pulled into a pained smile. Not impressed with my wardrobe. Looking at his, I realised why.

The suit said European and expensive. Dark charcoal, offset by a teal shirt and the kind of tie that costs the same as a small car. Square-topped black shoes. They matched Shakes' eyes – dark and shiny. Neat cornrows, a model-perfect mocha complexion and chiseled cheekbones. A seriously stylish package. Unlike me.

"Uh – Kailan Hunter?" he checked. Obviously I didn't look the part of a *Rolling Stone* journalist.

"Call me Kain. Shakes Matshikiza?" Like the smoky voice could belong to anybody else.

"Please come in, sister."

The room was straight out of a décor magazine. "How to make your office look shit hot and successful." State-of-the-art PC set-up. Executive desk. Leather sofa. Funky chairs. Casually-scattered music magazines - *Downbeat*, *Roots*, *Mojo*. I could smell good coffee, spotted an Italian espresso machine. Three of the walls boasted a framed Basil Breakey black-and-white of a South African jazz musician – Abdullah Ibrahim, Chris McGregor, Winston Mankunku. The fourth was floor to ceiling glass over the city bowl.

I sat down on one of the chairs. Shakes shot his cuffs, relaxed into the sofa, one leg crossed over the other at the knee, arms spread expansively.

"What will you be covering in your story?" he asked.

I did my spiel about the tragic death of a young talent. Mentioned the drug factor. Expected Shakes to have a problem with that. He didn't object.

"This will go into a special *Rolling Stone* South African feature?"

"Yup."

"The readership – it's in the thousands, right?"

"Yup."

"So people all over the world will know about Ben, and his music?"

I switched from yup to yes.

Shakes looked pleased. I added another positive spin-off.

"It'll also help the rest of Itslikethat. Siphon, Reuben and Johan. I suppose you'll keep on managing them?"

Shakes' eyes narrowed. "You must be joking – those losers?"

"Uh – aren't they part of the team?"

"They're a waste of time."

I remembered glossy keyboards runs, thumping bass, metronome-tight rhythms.

"I thought they were good."

Shakes leaned forward, relaxed posture gone. "Those guys are bad news. Without Ben they are nothing. I couldn't even book them a cocktail set in a Dubai hotel."

"But surely ..."

"Believe me, they are not worth it. I hope you're not going to include them in your article."

"Of course I'm going to write about them." I hate being told how to do my work. "What kind of profile would it be without speaking to Ben's band members?"

Shakes considered me for a moment.

"My sister, you must realise there is a terrible problem with these three boys." The voice became a conspiratorial hush. "They were all horribly jealous of Ben."

"Didn't look like that on stage."

"All an act, Kain. I think they actually hated him."

"C'mon, Shakes. That's harsh."

"They weren't crying at the funeral."

"Doesn't mean anything."

"I think it does."

"They really didn't like each other?"

"Serious. In fact, just before his death, Ben spoke about going solo. He wanted me to help him with this."

So much for my picture of a tight band of musicians grieving for their lost friend. More like celebrating, according to Shakes. But maybe the manager was exaggerating.

"If they didn't get on, why stick it out?"

"Those three knew they would get nowhere without Ben. Meanwhile, Ben was talking about doing his own thing. Not that he told the others." Shakes smiled, like he found this last part amusing.

There was something oily about the conversation. I changed tack.

"How did you get into managing Itslikethat?" Gestured at the black and white photographs on the wall. "Jazz seems your thing."

"Those guys – you don't get them like that anymore." He looked at Ibrahim and McGregor and Mankunku.

I nodded.

"But," he continued, "who wants to listen to them now? It's kids who spend money on music. They don't buy old jazz. I'm just following the bucks, sister."

The oiliness was turning into a slick. Time to get the stuff I needed and split. I wasn't sure I liked Shakes. Fancy suit and all.

"You have the publicity material I asked about?"

"Sure thing."

He rose and went over to his desk. His cellphone rang.

"Do you mind if I take this call? Sorry, Kain, it's business."

"No problem."

Shakes walked towards the glass windows. I idly stepped over to the desk, spotted a striking colour photograph of Ben. It looked like one of Rozena's. Bent to look more closely, noticed a letter with the logo of a large international record company. Without thinking, I started to read the first lines.

"Dear Shakes Matshikiza,  
With reference to the forthcoming *Ben Wilson* release on Shout Out records ..."

Shakes moved in quickly and scooped up the letter. I hadn't heard him approach. He was standing too close, looming over me.

"I think all you need will be in this file." Shakes handed me a folder. Hard eyes.

"Thanks. If I want anything else, I'll call."

He smiled, but there was no warmth behind it.

Weird. Smooth manager dude Shakes had changed when I mentioned the other band members. He'd definitely not been happy I'd seen his business papers. And what *Ben Wilson* release were the Shout Out people talking about? Was this the supposed solo material? It didn't add up. Also, Itslikethat had seemed a solid unit – I wasn't so sure about the jealousy part.

Too many questions. On an empty stomach. Only one thing to do. Take my notes, grab a table at Gianicolo's, get sorted.

## CHAPTER FOUR

I'm not the knit-your-own-muesli type. Sure, I try to recycle. I know global warming is a bad thing. But I draw the line at wearing crystals round my neck or doing full moon meditations. Somebody has to. Also, I'm not that fussy about food. Organic, fine. Greasy, even better.

That's why I like Gianicolo's. The name sounds Italian. That's as far as it goes. The menu is pure fast-food Cape Town. Toasted cheese sandwiches. Gatsbys. Salomes. Chip rolls. Thing is, they're really good. And you don't have to eat on the run. There're about four or five plastic tables where you can park off. Office lunch hours are hectic. But I was outside the margin, so I got lucky.

Even better. Mr Gianicolo himself was at the fryer. I ordered my usual – grilled cheese sandwich and chips. Sat down in anticipation.

The view out the window is hardly captivating. Shops, offices, a small inner-city park with swings and things. I stared out absently. Became aware of a little boy and his father playing on a roundabout. The kid around five, chubby. The same wild black hair as his father. Shiny red anorak. Clutching the bars of the roundabout, he laughed as he rotated. Lifted one hand, lost his balance. Nearly fell off. Swiftly his father was there, catching him in a bear hug before he could hit the concrete. I saw two heads of curly hair, a small body cradled in big safe arms. Without warning, my eyes filled.

The man reminded me of Ethan. It was the hair, his instinctive response. And the child. Made me think of what could have been. It still hurt. Six years ago, I had seriously wondered if I could carry on. It had taken time. Also major input from friends like Rozena and Edi and Jane, before I started to feel vaguely normal again. I was in pretty good shape now. But every so often, something would come out of left field and slam me back into that space. I never knew when to expect it.

The man and his son wandered off to the swings. I gazed unseeingly at the bright roundabout. Where I was looking it was dark. Only a few streetlights were working.

*That was typical in Observatory. The narrow roads lined with semi-detached Victorian houses and small stand-alone homes were badly lit. Trill Road, where we lived, was no exception. Clogged gutters. Everything covered with a thin film of grime from the trains that spliced the suburb into above and below the line. One side hunkered below the left flank of Table Mountain, the other sloped towards the Black River. Freeways all around, like a macadam laager. Still, we loved it here. It was home.*

*Ethan and I were walking to our house after a late supper at Diva's, our local pizza hangout. Main Road, behind us, was a gaudy parade of restaurants, pubs and clubs. Our street was shadowy, however. Ethan's arm around me, I was laughing at some comment he'd made about a colleague..*

*Two men slid out of the darkness of a doorway.*

*"Fucken hand over your cellphones. Now, quick quick. And your money," the one hissed.*

*The other moved more closely towards us. I caught the glint of something sharp in his hand. He didn't say anything, just stared. Angry eyes, but a calm posture. He scared me more than the man who talked.*

*Ethan kept his arm around me, started to speak softly.*

*"No problem, take it easy. I'll give you my wallet. But I don't have a cellphone." His voice was steady, his body reassuringly solid next to mine.*

*"Don't talk shit, everybody has a cellphone," said first man.*

*"Take mine," I said, pulling it out of my pocket. "And here's all I have on me." It was about R75. Not much, I knew. Just change from the pizzas.*

*The man with the knife snatched the phone and money, putting them in his jacket without looking.*

*"Now your cellphone," he said to Ethan.*

*"I really don't have one," he replied. "But here's my wallet." He took his arm away from me and reached into his pocket.*

*Ethan's answer seemed to infuriate the man. I hardly saw him move. Next thing his knife hand had driven into Ethan's chest, withdrawn, stabbed again at his stomach. The third lunge was higher, slashing across his throat and leaving a serrated red line. It must have been a fishing knife. The kind with a jagged edge.*

*It happened so fast I was still staring as Ethan's hands reached up to his neck. Trying to close the gash. Blood spurted through his fingers. He fell forward with a soft moan. The men looked at each other, turned and ran into the shadows. I never saw them again.*

*I caught hold of Ethan, on his knees in the road. Ropes of blood were pulsing rhythmically from his neck. A dark, almost black stain spread across the front of his jersey. I held him against me, frantically shouting for help. The traffic behind us was just heavy enough to drown out my cries. Ethan slumped in my arms. I pulled him close. Reached for the cellphone in my pocket. Numb with fear, I remembered it was gone.*

*"Sorry ...didn't realise ..." Ethan spoke softly, his eyes fluttering open and then closing.*

*I pressed my forehead to his. "Don't talk, sweetness, save your strength. You're going to be fine," I whispered. But I was terrified. Blood was soaking into my clothes from his neck and chest, pooling on the road beneath him. I needed help fast. Nobody could see or hear us.*

*"I'm going to have to leave you and run up to Main Road," I said. He barely acknowledged me, but as I gently laid his head on the pavement, he looked up.*

*"Love you, Kain. Be careful ..."*

*Tears streaming down my face, I reached down and kissed him on a cold cheek. Turned and sprinted for the light. It took a few minutes to reach the nearest restaurant. I flung open the door and shouted at a startled waitress to phone the police and send an ambulance to Trill Road. I was covered in Ethan's blood and probably scaring the staff. Too bad. Making sure they'd placed the call, I raced back to Ethan.*

*It was too late. His eyes were blank orbs, no life behind them. His body was lying at a stiff angle, neck propped up by the pavement, one arm covering his chest. The wound in his neck had stopped pumping and was oozing slowly from the cruel slit. Blood smeared his hands. They looked dirty. I was wiping them clean with my shirt when the ambulance arrived. The paramedics were kind, but I was beyond communicating. Everything that happened afterwards felt like I was moving underwater, against an enormous pressure, with no sound. I don't remember how I got home. What I did recall was how ironic it was that I, as a crime reporter, had ended up being a character in the kind of stories I told every day.*

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*Like the trainline cutting through Observatory, the population was equally divided. The older families who had lived there for generations. And then the passing parade of academics, hippies, activists and bohemians, hooked by its closeness to the university, cheap rent, original wooden floors, high ceilings, a laid-back vibe. The downside? The very casualness of the place also made it a hunting ground for predators.*

*For Ethan and I it had been an off-and-on home since we were students. Although we didn't know each other then. I had shared a place with Rozena during my 'varsity years. Ethan had*

*lived in a variety of communal houses. We'd both moved back here, separately, after travelling and then getting jobs. When I met Ethan I was 26 and he was 28. He was staying next door with two colleagues who worked with him in the archaeology department at UCT. As was typical in the 'hood, they had a party one night and invited everybody who lived in the street. I ended up sharing a bottle of crappy red wine with a tall man with startling blue eyes, a mop of wild curls, and the most outrageous taste in music. He liked folk.*

*Our relationship started out as a series of arguments about CDs. I never did truly accept Joan Baez into my life. But by the time we agreed that John Martyn and Madala Kunene could be folk and jazz at the same time, I was in love.*

*Ethan was open, warm, affectionate, funny. Everything that was good for me. I had started writing as a crime reporter on one of the local papers. Work was adrenaline highs, heartbreaking lows, headache-inducing deadlines. Ethan was perfect to come home to – his research on early San settlement areas in the Cape was a mellow counterpart to my manic schedule. He'd sit and listen to me unwind for hours over cups of rooibos tea. In turn, I listened to his patient way of recreating a history he was passionate about. We moved in together after a year, buying our own place just up the road from our previous communal houses. I was happy. We had even talked about the Big K – a kid, can you believe – and I hadn't run for the hills.*

*We had been together for four years when we walked down Trill Road together for the last time. I was 30 when it happened. I sold our house, resigned from my fulltime job, and moved into the cottage next door to Edi and Jane. I couldn't stay in Observatory any longer.*

*The move was fast. But it took longer to get my head together. Drugs and alcohol helped. I got to like them a lot. Then they became a problem. I didn't care, took risks, maybe secretly hoping I would go over the edge and join Ethan. Rozena and Edi and Jane stopped me. Then I discovered Kyokushin karate, and channelled my frustration into sweaty muscle-burning sessions. I'm okay now. Although there's still a slow-burning rage, or sadness, that I can't seem to shake completely.*

"Your lunch, Kain." Mr Gianicolo was leaning over me with a piled-up plate.

I blinked.

"Wassa matter? Seen a ghost?"

"Kind of." He left me and the food alone. I dug into melted cheese and fries, made one of those pop-psychology connections. That night in Obs was a major reason why the recent murders of Stephanie Lambrecht and Tania Smith bugged me. I've seen violent death. Their murders made me angry.

Unlike Ben's death. His accident was possibly his own fault. Didn't get me riled up. I'd write the story, move on.

Problem was, what I had so far didn't add up neatly. Version one was simple. Hot bad boy of rock tragically killed while driving home stoned. Family and friends shattered. Loss of new South African talent etc etc.

But. I'd seen Ben's ordered room, sensed a close relationship with his mother and sister. Didn't strike me as a guy with a white powder problem. Sure, the occasional hit. Who doesn't? But I know hardcore. He didn't look the type. Not dumb enough to overdo things on a dangerously rainy night. Sadly, I didn't think Ben was a coke head.

Maybe he was something else. There was the report of an unidentified drug found in his system.

Also, there was Ben's relationship with the band. Was he really planning to go solo? Did the band hate him? Was anybody going to benefit from his crash? And would I develop unattractive fatty deposits from my lunch?

One person I knew who could help with the drug side was James, my health reporter friend. Swallowing a big bite of melted cheese and white bread, I dialled his number with my cellphone.

"Hey Kain, calling about that drink?"

"Need to pick your brain first."

"Pick ahead. I'll see if I can help."

"It's about drugs. The kind you don't buy at your local pharmacy."

James laughed. "I'm more a natural herb kind of guy. But try me."

"What kind of drug is tricky to find in a test? You know, hard to identify?"

"Every drug is identifiable. Just depends what you're looking for."

"You mean, if you're not testing for a specific thing, you come up blank?"

"That's the 101 version."

I had a flash. "And what kind of drug could be given to somebody without them knowing? Slipped into a drink or something?"

I'd thought of Ben's band members. Jealous, angry, dropping something into his drink at the club. Hoping to cause trouble. Maybe not meaning Ben to burn out in a car crash. But wanting some mischief.

"Well, roofies of course. Date-rape drugs. I'll get back to you on that for more detail. Give me a day or so?" James replied.

"No problem. We'll talk."

With a few chips to go, I pulled out the book that Ben's sister Anna had thrust at me. Looked like a diary or journal. Started paging.

Ben wrote well, I had to admit. There was a mature edge I wouldn't have expected from his kick-ass stage act. Many of the pieces were about the band's gigs. Wry, funny, self-critical. I enjoyed them.

Some personal notes. A lot about his girlfriend Petra. Nothing porno, but enough to make me feel I was prying. Which I was.

There were also lyrics and poems. Different themes. Love songs, not chauvinist or cliched. Thinky lines, about environmental issues, race, even gender commentary. There was clearly more to Ben than a testosterone-loaded rocker. I felt I was starting to like him. Posthumously, obviously.

I hadn't finished when my phone rang. Didn't recognise the caller ID.

"You the woman writing that stuff for *Rolling Stone* about Ben?" A young, rough voice.

"Yup. Who wants to know?"

"How can you write about him without speaking to us first, man? We're the ones knew him the best." Pissed off.

"It would help if you said who you were." But I was getting a picture. Shaved head, fingers lightning fast on a keyboard. "Reuben, right?"

"For sure."

"My name's Kain. And actually, I wanted to see you guys soon as possible. You around?"

"All the time, at the moment. Man, we're not exactly busy right now."

Turned out Reuben shared a flat with Johan, the drummer. It was in Plumstead, about half-an-hour's drive away. I said I'd come across. I wondered how Reuben had got my number.

"Ben's mother gave it to me. She told us about the article," he explained.

Seemed relations between the band and Ben's family were fine. I would have to find out more about the so-called bad blood Shakes had described.

"I'll be over," I told Reuben.

"Later." He rang off.

I paid Mr Gianicolo and said goodbye. Glancing back at the playground, I saw the man and his curly-haired son walk out the park hand in hand. Refusing to play back any more memories, I climbed into my car.

Ethan is the reason I find it hard to get close to anybody anymore. Why I prefer to put my energy into work. And karate. As I'd said to Rozena the other night, it's often the best ones who are the dead ones. Ethan had been the best one, for me.

Turned the jeep towards Plumstead. Braced myself for another cold, bumpy ride.

## CHAPTER FIVE

"Put some clothes on Johan, fuck's sake. We've got company." Reuben spun my way. "You were quick."

He opened the door to a small flat, marched ahead. Scooped a sweatshirt off the floor and hurled it into a bathroom. "I'm telling you – get dressed and join us. Kain's here." Turned to face me. Shaved scalp emphasising a brown, elfin face. Bright eyes dancing behind trendy reading glasses. Slight figure under baggy combat trousers and a woolly polo-neck. We were around the same height. Reuben raised one exasperated eyebrow.

"Ever since Ben died, we've had no rehearsals or gigs. So Johan spends most of his time lying in bed. Lazy pig." He raised his voice, but there was affection in the tone.

"I heard that. Look who's talking. You haven't touched your keyboards in a week." Johan, fresh from the shower. Damp black hair scooped into an Antonio-Banderas ponytail. Kikoi around the waist, a small T-shirt, taut stomach muscles pressed against fabric. Arms sculpted as a swimmer's.

"Yeah, well. I just haven't been in the mood. Man, it feels weird to play our songs without Ben." Reuben sank into a moth-eaten armchair. I brushed magazines off a couch, sat down. Johan stayed standing. The flat reminded me of my student digs. There was a posh part of Plumstead, and this wasn't it. A block of facebrick units. Hand-me down furniture. But cosy. And obviously cheap.

"I know, I've felt the same," said Johan. Soft voice, strong Afrikaans accent. He moved with a languid, solid ease. Reuben was all wired energy: Interesting duo.

I did the condolence thing again.

"Ag, it's just unbelievable." Johan's green eyes held a hint of tears.

Reuben bounced off his chair. "And all that *kak* about the drugs. Fuck's sake, Ben would never have driven if he was out of it."

"Ja, and he didn't do coke."

"Man, he hardly even smoked doobie. He was almost straight."

Reuben paced the small lounge. Kept smacking one fist into the palm of his hand. "That's why I said you must speak to us." He stared at me. "Also, there was other stuff happening."

"I don't know if we should get into that yet," Johan said slowly.

"C'mon – you discussed it with Marius. You tell him everything."

Reuben continued the fist-smacking. Eyes beamed on me. "Ben's mother said you were doing a story for *Rolling Stone*. So you need to know what's been going down."

"So tell me."

"Man, Ben didn't have a drug problem. The coke in his car is crap. And we had some serious plans."

"Marius says we should wait ..." Johan broke in ...

"Back up, guys. Who's Marius? What plans are you talking about?"

Silence. Reuben looked pointedly at Johan. He sighed.

"Marius is my boyfriend. And Reuben is right – we do tell each other everything."

"They have to – they've got nobody else to talk too. Their families would freak if they knew they were gay," said Reuben. Sympathetic frown. "My parents are different. When I said I wanted to move out from Mitchell's Plain and share this flat with Johan they had no problem. They were more worried about him being Afrikaans than being gay."

Johan looked sheepish. "Ja, everybody in my family thinks I'm this big butch drummer. One day I'm going to shock them. I dunno when, though ..."

"Shame, it's okay." Reuben looked at him fondly. "You don't have to force yourself out of the closet. It'll happen *mos* naturally."

He laughed. "In the meantime, Johan's parents think all my girlfriends are his. I don't mind."

Ice broken. Johan asked if I wanted coffee. Loped into the kitchen to make it. Reuben got serious.

"I'm not sure how to prove that Ben wasn't a big druggie. You'll have to take our word for it."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Serious - we've been together for three years as a band. Sometimes we have a *skuif*. I like a bit of Ecstasy if I'm at a party. But Ben and coke – uh uh. That stuff in his car worries me. And that unidentified drug from the blood test."

"Sure he wasn't hiding a habit from you guys?"

"Would have been fucken difficult."

"How come?"

"We used to go on these mini-tours. Knysna, Plett and places like that. Drive together, play together, all stay in one place, to save money. We were living in each other's jocks, man. There's no way Ben could have been high, and we wouldn't notice."

"What about when he was alone?"

"Man, do you know how serious he was about the music? And his writing? Uh uh."

Johan came through with three mugs of coffee. Handed one to me then Reuben, lowered himself onto a beanbag. I pushed a bit further.

"What about the rumours? Ben the big party guy. Rich kid fooling around with the music business."

"No way!" they both responded. Reuben, indignant. "The magazines made up shit for fun. It sells. You should know." Accusingly. "Nobody worked harder than Ben, even though his parents are loaded."

"Check with Petra, Ben's girlfriend. She'll back us up. Meanwhile, maybe we should tell you about the other stuff," said Johan.

"I'm listening."

"Okay – we'll try and make it short as possible," he replied.

According to Reuben and Johan, the band had been looking for a way out of their contract with Shakes. "That guy was screwing us. He started out cool, but he became a real shark," reckoned Reuben.

Problem was they'd signed a deal that gave Shakes a certain percentage of every live performance, as well as of any recording contracts that were signed. Shakes organised the gigs and was also negotiating with various recording labels. The band didn't actually know what sort of figures were being thrown around, or how big a cut Shakes was taking.

"All I can see is he drives an Audi while I've got an old Nissan bakkie," said Johan. "Also, that office space of his is expensive. We're not the only band on his books. But I know we've made him some money."

"We were trying to find a way out of our contract when Ben died," said Reuben. "Ben was actually the one who wanted to find a new manager. He said money wasn't everything, but he was buggered if somebody else was going to get rich off our hard work."

"Ag, we're not good at business deals and things like that," admitted Johan, pointing at himself and Reuben. "And Siphos is really shy. So Ben was finding out what our options were."

"Thing is," he added, "it wasn't just the gig money. We released one album last year on an independent label. It sold quite well. Then we went back to the studio and recorded a whole CD's worth of shit hot new material. It hasn't been released to a label yet – and I think it's going to be worth a lot of money when it is."

"Man, it's sick, but I think Ben's death will boost the sales," said Reuben.

"And Shakes has the master copy," concluded Johan.

It didn't look good. I reckoned Shakes was trying to muscle Reuben, Johan and Siphon out. Then he'd collect mega-bucks from a CD he was trying to punt as a Ben solo act.

Other hand, Reuben and Johan could be selling me a line. Maybe they did resent Ben's status, as Shakes had said. Felt pissed at being left behind while Ben signed a solo deal. With Ben off the scene, nobody would know this, however.

I'd have to figure it out. Reuben and Johan were a cute act, but that meant nothing. I didn't say anything about the letter I had seen in Shakes' office. I needed to find out more. I also wanted to see what Siphon Mazana had to say. I had his phone number, and Reuben wrote down his street address in Brooklyn.

Drugs, recording deals, band dynamics, power plays. Rock 'n' roll time. I could build it into a good feature. Once I had all the facts. It was starting to grab me. My straightforward dead musician story was actually not quite so simple. And hey – I was getting paid to scratch around.

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It was dark by the time I got home. Rush-hour traffic had been insane. Ambushed by red traffic lights and rogue taxi drivers all the way to St James. I wanted a cup of tea, toast and reality TV. (Yeah, yeah, another bad habit like eating greasy food.) First I had to check in with Bob Guttenberg, the *Rolling Stone* Special Features Editor who was driving the South African culture project.

When I'd agreed to do the job (like I was going to say no?), Rozena had put me on to Bob. He'd asked me to mail my CV and examples of my writing. Standard operational requirements. I got the thumbs up, we spoke about the angle. Over the phone Bob crackled with energy. Friendly, enthusiastic, fast-talking. Wanted to go with the "diverse faces of South Africa" bit, with Ben as the poster boy for the young, talented but tragic sector. DJ Khabzelo, who died of HIV/AIDS, and Moses Molelekwa, the brilliant jazz pianist who'd hung himself, were also in this section.

The brief was clear. And once Bob filled me in, he left me alone. Wasn't breathing down my back. Yet. But behind his genial call I'd sensed a steely attitude. Running the Special Features pages of a major international magazine wasn't a job for a wimp. Bob would be on my case if I didn't deliver.

And I wanted to do well. The money was good. Enough to keep me solvent for a while. More than that, it was a major break. One that could help me with future freelance work. As James would have said: "You can't fuck this one up, Kain."

So I wanted to keep Bob up to speed. He would still be in his Los Angeles office. Time for professional-speak.

<To: Bguttenberg@Rollingstone.com>  
<From: Khunter@iafrica.com>  
Subject: Ben Wilson feature

Hi Bob,  
Hope you are well. Just a quick update on the Ben Wilson story.

I've spoken to some of his family, a few band members and his band manager, in terms of building up a profile.

There are two issues that need to be cleared up. One is the drug factor. As we discussed, the media have reported extensively on the presence of cocaine in Ben's personal bag, and the autopsy revealed a still-unknown drug in his bloodstream on the night he died.

And yet those closest to him insist he wasn't a coke user.

Secondly, it would seem that there were bad relations either between Ben and his band mates, or between the band members and their manager, Shakes Matshikiza, prior to Ben's death. What's at stake here are the rights to unpublished/unreleased new material recorded by the band, which could be worth a lot of money.

I plan to get clarity on both issues, as I think this is essential for the piece. Hope this still falls within the brief you supplied, and your general vision for the special feature.

Yours,  
Kailan

I pressed send, stretched. Wind rattled the window frames. Definitely a night in. I flicked through the DSTV guide, checked the Reality Channel schedule. An omnibus re-run of *Survivor: Guatemala*. My evening was made.

The incoming mail icon flashed.

<To: Khunter@iafrica.com>  
<From: Bgutenberg@Rollingstone.com>  
Subject: Ben Wilson feature

Hey Kailan,  
Thanks for the update. Here's what I think: sort out what's going down with the drugs. The tension between the band manager and the band members sounds like it could just be typical music biz bitching. Don't hassle too much if it is.

Otherwise, let's try and stick to the plot. We want to show that contemporary South African musicians/artists are a diverse, complex bunch of people, many with the same kind of problems that youth around the world face. Like drugs. We need to emphasise that "talented but tragic" feel.

Cheers,  
Bob

I wasn't so sure about "typical music biz bitching". It seemed a bit more than that. But Bob didn't sound like he was too interested. I kept my response short.

<To: Bgutenberg@Rollingstone.com>  
<From: Khunter@iafrica.com>  
Subject: Ben Wilson feature

Hi Bob,  
Thanks for the feedback. Will keep you posted.

Best,  
Kailan

Duty fulfilled, I logged off. I wasn't entirely happy with Bob's reply. Mainly because I couldn't manufacture a drug problem if there wasn't one. Still, I didn't want to lose the job. It would just mean more digging. Somebody wasn't telling the truth. I'd find out who. And why.

I kicked off my jeans and leather jacket, got out track pants and an old athletic sweatshirt. Thick woollen socks. Ninja took one look, wiggled his stumpy tail. He knows a stay-at-home wardrobe when he sees one.

We both settled in front of the television. Me with a cup of tea, slices of Marmite toast and the remote control. Ninja with a soggy rubber bone. I flicked until I saw Jeff Probst's familiar dimples deep in a Guatemalan jungle. Last thing I remembered was Sandy, or Brandy, or

maybe Mandy, trying to start a fire with a piece of seaweed. I definitely would have voted her off. If I wasn't so sleepy ...

There was a shrill, insistent ring. The house was in darkness, except for the flickering TV screen. I lurched to the telephone.

"Kain. I'm awake." I tried to see my watch. 11.45pm.

"I'm so glad I got hold of you. I'm terribly sorry about the time, but I need to see you." It was a woman, young-ish. Good-school accent. Kind of formal. In the background, loud voices and rowdy music.

"And you are?"

"It's Petra – Ben Wilson's girlfriend. Well, I used to be. I ... um, I really need to talk." She sounded upset.

"I'm free tomorrow. What time do you want to meet?"

"The thing is ... do you think we could speak now? I'm down the road at the Acoustic Café in Muizenberg. I was told you live in St James."

Mrs Wilson had obviously been working the phone.

"It's kind of late."

"Please ..."

Call me a sucker. I said yes. Maybe because part of me knew how she was feeling. Besides, I had to see her at some point. Right now, though, I'd rather be in bed. I swapped my comfortable clothes for my jeans and leather jacket, laced up my hiking boots.

## CHAPTER SIX

Ninja was smugly coiled in his basket. Nice for some. I locked up, left. Froze my butt off on the short drive to Muizenberg.

At least the Acoustic Café was warm. Also loud. Beer drinkers celebrating some sport result on the big-screen television. I realised I didn't know what Petra looked like. A young woman threaded through the tables. Tall, long blonde hair, dark smudges her eyes. She looked tired. Something more. Worried.

"Kailan, uh, Kain Hunter?"

I nodded. "Let's grab a seat."

The Acoustic wasn't big. Just a local pub. Live bands some nights, sports specials on others. Basic décor – wooden tables and chairs scarred with cigarette burns. Cheapish drinks. Sometimes it got rough, mostly it was mellow. Tonight was a rugby moment.

Although it was Petra's call, she hesitated. I took the lead, ordered two glasses of red wine, steered her to a smaller room off the main pub. Non-smoking section. Empty, of course. As we left, she turned and signalled to a younger man sitting at the bar. He smiled, nodded.

"My brother, Francois. He'll wait for me."

We sat in the dingy lounge. Petra curled her legs under her as she sank into a grubby couch. I chose a chair. Felt something sticky under my jeans. Got up and moved next to her.

I went through the routine of saying sorry for your loss, etc. It was starting to feel strangely familiar. Waited for Petra to respond.

"I know you're doing that piece for *Rolling Stone* on Ben, and you've been talking to a few people."

I didn't interrupt.

"You've probably heard, then, that Ben wasn't into hard drugs. Which is totally true. There were a lot of media rumours, but he laughed them off. He wasn't bothered, because he knew the real story."

I let her continue. Sensed she was building up to something.

"What's worrying me are the odd drug traces they found in his blood. Not the dope, the other stuff. And the cocaine package. I can't understand it – it's not Ben. And he was a really safe driver. He used to joke I was the scary one behind a wheel, because I drove too fast."

Blinked away tears, carried on.

"The cops aren't investigating, they think it's a closed case. His parents are so upset they don't want to take it any further. But I do."

Took a big breath.

"Don't laugh. Or think I'm mad. I think somebody set Ben up. They – whoever they are – wanted to make out he was some irresponsible druggie musician. I think they put something in his drink, and planted the cocaine in his bag. I think someone wanted him hurt ... or dead."

True, it had crossed my mind when I asked James about the drugs. A fleeting thought. Not that serious. Just playing around with ideas. Spoken out loud, Petra's theory sounded melodramatic. She'd just lost her boyfriend, wanted to blame somebody. I'd humour her.

"Why would anybody do that?" I asked, sipping my wine. Bad mistake. Red vinegar. I put the glass down quickly.

"D'you know about Shakes and the new CD deal?"

"It's blurry at the moment."

She explained that whoever had control of the *It'slikethat* copyright and master recording, and managed to secure a distribution deal, would make a lot of money.

"All the compositions on the CD were Ben's, which means he owned them. He would have shared the distribution proceeds equally with the band. Somehow, Shakes has ended up with the only master copy of the recording."

"I heard."

"Ben wanted to cut Shakes loose. He'd been talking about it. If that happened, Shakes would get nothing," she said. "Unless he changed the copyright to benefit himself – which Ben couldn't stop if he was dead. And the others wouldn't be able to do anything."

"Why not?"

"They're really sweet, but they aren't good at organising the financial side. They left it up to Ben."

I knew bits of the story. Petra had pulled some missing parts together for me. With Ben gone it made things a lot easier for Shakes. Unless, of course, Reuben, Johan and Sipho were

more business-savvy than they appeared. If Ben went solo, they'd also lose out. They'd have to make a plan.

Maybe not so far-fetched after all. Still, there was a big difference between bad band politics and actually bumping someone off.

"That's why I contacted you," Petra continued. "It's been going round and round my head. I didn't know who to talk to. When I heard you were a journalist doing this story, I looked up some of your work on the web...I felt I could trust you," she confessed.

I felt bad because I'd tagged her as a melo-drama queen.

She explained that when her brother Francois said he was coming this way to watch a sports match on the television with some friends, she thought she'd contact me. "I wasn't really thinking about the time, I was just so worried. I'm sorry about getting you out here," she continued.

A blast of hearty laughter. Three men swung into the room. Beer bottles clutched in their hands.

"What're two *lekker* chicks like yourselves doing all alone here? We'll keep you company," said the one in the middle, obviously the ringleader. The belly hanging over the belt of his jeans suggested advanced pregnancy. His sidekicks sniggered.

Petra said nothing, shifted closer to my side of the couch. Clearly any response was up to me. "It's cool. We just need some space to talk." I turned back to Petra, waited for them to leave.

"Ag, talk is boring. We're much more fun." Beer Belly walked towards us, smile not quite reaching his eyes. I sensed trouble – not too much of it, enough to irritate. Stood up fast and met him in the middle of the floor. His stomach reached out to mine. I had an absurd urge to pat it and ask: "Girl or boy?" "We're busy here," I said firmly.

There was a stand off. Then he backed down, lurched away, two buddies in tow. "Cold bitch," he threw back. Didn't bother me. Ever since that night in Observatory with Ethan, I didn't take shit from a-holes. It got edgy sometimes. But hey.

I started to grin reassuringly at Petra, stopped. She'd gone rigid, eyes wide and staring.

"What's up?"

She waited a beat, spoke shakily.

"It's just ... that man reminded me of somebody. He was also a bully. I should be over it, but it still gets me sometimes."

She leaned over to pick up her wine glass, long hair swinging over her face. Straightened up, looked a bit better.

"I don't know if you should drink that – it's awful." My lame attempt to lighten the mood.

"I should explain myself. It's the least I can do after dragging you out here. And ... maybe it's related."

Turned out that before meeting Ben, Petra had been going out with a student who was also at the University of Cape Town, where she was studying economics. It hadn't been a long relationship. It also hadn't been happy.

"Everybody thought Spencer was great – he was in the rugby team, he got good grades, a big social guy. His parents are very wealthy, he always had money to burn. He pursued me

relentlessly. I thought it was quite funny. There was me, hardly a party sort. And there was Spencer, one of the most popular guys on campus," she laughed self-consciously.

I looked at Petra. Slim figure and obvious good looks. She was selling herself short.

"Anyway, we started going out. It was fine at first, we had a good time. But then I started to see a difference in the way Spencer was when we were with people, and when we were alone."

"Uh uh. That's never good."

"He was charming with company – but once they'd left, he'd get rude. It was like he had a personality change." She shuddered. "He'd criticise me, say my clothes looked funny. At first I tried to shrug it off, thinking he'd had a bad day or whatever. But it carried on."

She picked at the worn fabric of the couch, stopped. "Things came to an end when he started hitting me."

The first vicious slap to her face had been so shocking she didn't know how to respond. Except to stare at her boyfriend in horror. He'd apologised immediately, tears in his eyes. The second time he used his fists. Petra wore large dark glasses for a week. Third time, he threw her so hard against the wall she thought she'd cracked a rib. She got up and walked out of his life.

"He hounded me, left messages on my phone, said he was sorry. But I'd had enough. I didn't tell anybody. I think my dad would have killed him. And there was no point talking to Spencer's family. They were quite strict with him, but he was their golden boy. I wanted to deal with it myself, and I did."

Half a year later, some of Petra's friends had persuaded her to go to a concert at the student union. It'slikethat was playing. She'd loved the band, thought Ben was amazing. Turned out the feeling was mutual. When he'd joined her group of friends at the bar after the gig, they started talking. That was that.

"I won't say it was love at first sight. But it was pretty close." They'd been going together ever since. Petra moved out of residence and rented a flat in Gardens. Ben started to spend most of his time there.

"It was good," she said simply. I knew what she meant.

"But Spencer never really went away," Petra continued. "Those guys that came in – they way they acted, reminded me of him." Glanced at her watch, looked alarmed. "It's getting late. I'm sure Francois will want to go, and I've kept you too long."

"It's okay," I said, but I was starting to feel tired. We walked to the door. Her brother began making his way through the mostly empty tables towards us.

"I'm worried that Spencer never got over me leaving him, and choosing Ben," finished Petra. "He's started phoning me again. He sounds really weird. Sort of gloating. He also seems to know exactly where I am and what I'm doing, like he's stalking me."

We stepped outside. "I'm really scared he had something to do with Ben's death. Although I can't see how it would tie in with the band, and what we've been talking about ..."

Francois joined us, we found our cars.

"Thanks, Kain. Really."

"We'll talk again. Go well."

The late night, bad wine and too much information made me slow. When I rolled up to my house, I almost didn't notice the dark shape that melted away from my front door. The figure slipped into the bushes. I woke up. My adrenaline levels surged. Hit the hooter loudly. Flashed the car brights. Seconds later, Jane and Edi's lights came on. The dogs barked. I shot out the car, ran to the bushes, saw nothing. Swung back to open my house. Reached for the door, saw ragged deep lines gouged around the lock. Somebody had tried to get in.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Ninja shot through my legs and headed into the garden when I opened up. My key still worked, at least. Must have surprised the intruder in time. Jane and Edi trotted over, pulling anoraks over flannel pyjamas. "You okay?" called Edi. "We heard your car horn."

I gestured at the door. "I'm fine. The lock's a bit trashed."

We don't have much trouble up on the mountainside, except once when someone stole my favourite Levis off the washing line. Irritating. But it wasn't a break-in. Invading my personal space was something else. I felt angry.

Deep barks from Ellen and Martina, punctuated by Ninja's short yaps. The noise came from the undergrowth above us. The dogs had peeled off into the fynbos while we were talking, maybe found something. Good. Although I was worried about them getting hurt. Didn't know who was out there. If they were armed. I pushed through thick bushes, wet leaves smacking my face. Feet slipping on the soggy ground. Heard a car door slam high on the narrow road behind us that links Muizenberg and Kalk Bay. An engine coughed to life, tyres burnt rubber. Boyes Drive was usually dead this time of night. Whoever had tried to get into my house had obviously parked there. Slid down the mountainside to my door, managed to get back up ahead of the dogs. Somebody fit.

I whistled. The labradors swaggered out of the fynbos, followed by a panting Ninja. Looking pleased with themselves.

"You going to call Chubb?" asked Jane. The local security company which patrolled the area.

"Not much they can do. Door's not broken. Whoever did it has gone."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. And I've got Ninja for back-up."

"Lest we forget."

Yawning, Jane and Edi went back to bed. I locked myself in, did a quick check of the windows. The burglar bars looked secure. Maybe why the intruder hadn't tried that way. Still, it was a bit whack for somebody to hack away at a front door. Inexperienced? Or sending an ugly message? Something sharp had made those gouges.

I rewarded Ninja's tracking skills with a buttermilk rusk from my special stash. Cleaned my teeth while he killed the biscuit and disemboweled it under my bed. Hit the sack.

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The marks didn't look better in the morning light. Crude. Just the kind of nudge I needed to put some bite into my kata. I warmed up with one eye on the door. Moved into five, ten, twenty repetitions. Arms driving, thighs flexing through the burn. At thirty I stopped. Felt the calm that comes after a concentrated session. Even smiled.

The rain had disappeared and a weak sun warmed False Bay. I remembered to have breakfast. The rest of the buttermilk rusks. Hit the phone. Rozena and I needed to get together. Bounce the Ben story around. She was working from home, said come over. Had a sick kid, but Guy didn't have any urgent penguins so he was on parenting duty.

Their house was its usual creative mess. I pushed children's books and Lego constructions to one side of the big couch in their lounge. Waited while Rozena organised coffee. Stretched out my legs, nearly knocked over a fish tank on the floor. Filled with white beach sand. "Don't ask," said Rozena. Guy wandered through with Sam on his back, bent to kiss my cheek. "Nice job the two of you have got with *Rolling Stone*," he smiled, laugh lines crinkling his sunburnt face. Guy's always got a tan, because of all the time he spends on research boats. Should make him look like a jock, but it doesn't. Guy looks like what he is – a penguin researcher. With a tan.

"Don't kiss me I've got gems." Sam, huge eyes peering over her father's shoulder.

"I won't," I promised.

"Guy, she's supposed to be in bed," reminded Rozena.

"We're just getting the ant farm, then I'll tuck her up and she can play with it," he replied. Sam slid out of her piggyback position, scooped up the fish tank, made for her room. Guy followed, carrying a book called *Wonders of the Arthropod World*.

"An ant farm in bed?" I looked at Rozena.

"Her latest obsession. She's given them all names."

I briefly considered what ants would be like as pets. Cheap to feed, easy to replace. Felt like I was betraying Ninja, so I stopped.

"Let's go to my study, it's quieter." Rozena passed me a mug of coffee.

Illy Roast, the best. My eyes moved automatically around Rozena's room. She's continually changing the prints on the walls as she takes new pictures, so her study never looks the same. Except for the red light above the door to her darkroom. Today's new shot was President Thabo Mbeki receiving an "HIV Positive" T-shirt from activist Zackie Achmat. I wondered if he would wear it.

"How're you doing for background on Ben?" asked Rozena.

I broke it down. Told her about meeting Ben's mother and sister, how Anna had given me Ben's notes. Shakes' aggro attitude toward the rest of the band. Johan and Reuben's story. Petra, and her psycho ex-boyfriend. How everybody said Ben didn't do hard drugs.

Rozena sat back. "We'll have to nail all this down for the story," she said. "First off, I want to check where your head is at. Do you still think Ben's death was an accident? Or are you considering something else?"

Trust Rozena to cut to the chase.

"Honest? It feels funny."

"Which part?"

"Not sure. But I smell bullshit."

"So who's hiding something?"

"And why?"

"Mm. Ben's crash was quite convenient. For some."

"Yeah. Bump the boy, get the bucks. Or the girl."

Shakes stood to score big time. The remaining Itslikethat-ers could also make money, if they played it right. Petra would be single again – available to her ex-bully boyfriend. So many motives, so little proof. And maybe we were over-reacting. Seeing monsters when there weren't any. Wasn't really the *Rolling Stones* brief, anyway.

"So we do anything about it?" I asked.

"Depends what we find out."

"James owes me a drug report," I remembered. "To see if Ben could have been knocked out behind the wheel."

"There's no medical back-up, though."

"Ben's father is a doctor. Surely he wants to know about the unidentified drug in Ben's blood?"

"Not what I heard. He and his wife want to put the whole thing behind them."

"Don't ask, don't tell?"

"The stuff in Ben's car upset them. They want the whole drug thing to blow over."

"Wishful thinking."

"They want people to remember Ben as a good musician, not an addict."

"How about we speak to the father?"

"Why?"

"He helps us, we clear Ben's name. That's the line I would use, anyway."

"He should run a test on the corpse?"

"Yup."

"And if it turns out badly?"

"Say Lah Vee."

"I love it when you talk dirty."

"Give him a call. His office is in Rosebank, quite close."

Turned out Doctor Wilson had a cancellation. His secretary said we could come through in an hour. "He's just got 20 minutes free," she warned. Rozena made more coffee. I told her about the scene at my house last night. She raised her eyebrows, asked if everything was okay. I did the reassurance thing. She looked away thoughtfully.

We set off in my car, found the right address. A family home renovated into a suburban medical practice. Bronze plaque against a white-washed wall. *Dr Wilson and Dr Parker*. Followed a brick path through a small neat garden. Ushered through a reception room into Dr Wilson's office. I met Ben's father for the first time.

Recognised him from the gig in town. The tall, greying man who had hugged Ben at the bar. Grief and strain had lined Dr Wilson's face since his son's death. We sat. On the wall to my left, several medical certificates and a large photograph of the Wilson family, father and son with their arms around each other. Everybody smiling.

"Thanks for seeing us at such short notice," said Rozena, after the introductions.

"I understand you're working on the tribute to Ben for *Rolling Stone*. I appreciate what you're doing," Dr Wilson replied.

Tribute? Did the man think we were planning some kind of Princess Di piece? I bit my tongue. We needed him on our side.

Rozena took the lead. She's good at diplomacy. Me, I'm lower grade.

"Dr Wilson, I know this is sensitive. But we're trying to get to the bottom of the drug allegations surrounding Ben's death," she said gently.

"Please call me David." He paused. "I'm not sure how to say this, so don't take it the wrong way. Miranda and I – and most people close to Ben – are convinced he never took hard drugs. But who knows what really goes on a person's life?" Anguished eyes.

"I loved my son deeply. I believe he was truly talented. But in the world he occupied, we all know drugs are a big attraction. I know he smoked dope sometimes. If he'd moved on to cocaine, or more, there's nothing we can do about it now. The police believe his crash was a result of drug-taking. And I can't blame them – the evidence was all there."

David stopped, went on more slowly. "We want to put this behind us. The newspaper reports were incredibly painful. We don't want to go through that again."

Rozena nodded in empathy.

"Hopefully, as time passes, people will forget that side of Ben and remember him as a brilliant musician. I hope you can understand ..." he stopped.

I couldn't help myself. "What about the drug which wasn't identified?"

"We don't know, and we don't want to know. What difference does it make?" said David. "Maybe he was mixing it all up – cocaine, alcohol, pills."

"What if it shows Ben wasn't responsible for the accident?"

"What do you mean?" Faint hope in the voice.

"Maybe he took something by mistake. Didn't know what was happening."

"But how?"

"Somebody may have wanted to harm him."

"Why on earth? Everybody loved Ben. This doesn't make sense." David stopped looking hopeful, switched to disbelief.

"We think ..." I started.

David cut me off. "I'm not sure what you're getting at, but the subject is closed. Nobody would have wanted to hurt Ben. It's hard to admit, but we think the accident was his own fault."

"And the other drug?"

"It's not important."

I disagreed. Thought it was pretty crucial. But David wasn't going there. So much for exhuming the body.

There was a tense silence.

Rozena stepped in. Spoke about the shots she had of Ben and the band. Offered to make prints for the family. David looked relieved she wasn't dragging out the drug angle. We made nice. Then time was up.

As we were leaving the office, I bumped into a man outside the door. Started to apologise, looked into piercing blue eyes framed by dark curly hair. "Sorry, I was in the way," said the man, offering his hand. I shook it, felt a strong, warm palm against my own. "You must be Kailan Hunter – and Rozena Jafta," he said, smiling at us both. I clicked I had seen this man before. He'd been with Ben's father the night of the last gig.

"This is my partner, Dr Parker," said David.

"Call me Clay," he said, turning his bright blues my way again. I saw curiosity, and something else. Something interesting.

"You're writing about Ben – that's wonderful. I often went to see the band, they were great," said Clay. I caught a faint twang in the accent, couldn't place it. He was still staring at me.

"You have a nice practice," I said lamely, gesturing at the bland reception room. Kain Hunter, Queen of Scintillating Conversation. "Thanks," he said. "Actually, this is just one half of it. Most of my time I'm in Langa. I've set up a wellness health clinic for women in the township."

"You may be interested in writing about it sometime," David said to me. "Clay has been doing wonderful work."

"I don't know about a story," said Clay. Modest smile. "But if you give me your card, I could call and show you around sometime. If you'd like." I handed one over.

Back in the car, Rozena laughed. "We go to an interview, and you get hit on."

"Talk shit."

"He got your number."

"It's about work."

"He wasn't wearing a ring. And he gave you the eye," Rozena grinned.

"Whatever. He just wants publicity for his clinic."

"I didn't get that impression. Kain, he's a friendly guy who's into women's health issues. Sounds good to me."

"Stop playing Cupid. It's stupid." I switched tack. "What did you make of David Wilson?"

Rozena sobered. "I think it's sad he doesn't want to take things further. But I can understand."

"Doesn't help us."

"That doesn't mean we stop digging. There's too much that's still unclear."

"For sure." I was glad we'd moved away from Clay.

"But we need to go carefully," said Rozena. "Frankly, that stuff with your door makes me wonder if it's related to the story. Maybe someone wanted see your notes, or leave a strong message. Somebody who doesn't want you asking questions."

"Sounds a bit extreme."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"We'll see how it pans out. We could be totally wrong. And we've got a deadline to catch."

"Kain, there're are at least three people who know you're poking around in Ben's business. Shakes, Johan and Reuben. And then there's Petra's ex-boyfriend, who sounds like a nut. Think about it." Rozena looked serious.

She hopped out the car. I saw Sam's face peering out her bedroom window. She waved, I waved back.

"Be careful, Kain," said Rozena. "We'll talk."

I drove home, thinking how much I liked blue eyes.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

"You haven't forgotten about tonight, have you?"

There's only one person who can make me feel instant guilt even when I haven't done anything wrong. My mother. Comes from all those times my sisters and I would try and weasel out of trouble by blaming each other. There were four of us. Keeping us in line when we were growing up was a mission. My mum eventually took the easiest way out. If something happened - a window smashed by a netball, cigarette stumps found in the garden - she'd blame all of us. We got guilt by association.

This time my mum was spot on. I'd forgotten I was due to drop off some books and stay for supper at my parents. Yesterday, after meeting David Wilson, I'd gone home and sorted all the Itslikethat press releases and media info from Shakes. The material was waiting for me when I woke up this morning. I'd spent the day reading reviews and interviews, going online to cross-reference with other contemporary music acts. Now it was around 4pm. Better move.

I threw a pile of detective novels into a bag. My parents and I have this unofficial book club going. Crime fiction. We're kind of hooked, with a challenge on to find new authors. Peter Temple, Henning Mankell and Andrea Camillieri are on the cool list, at the moment.

Racing ahead of the rat pack clocking out of the city, I made it to the Koeberg Interchange in record time. For the jeep. From here, you can swing right onto the N1 highway and drive all the way to Johannesburg. Pass vibracrete walls and boxy houses until the road relaxes into the Karoo. Or you can turn left and aim for where Woodstock Beach used to be. Now it's industrial warehouses instead of waves. Straight ahead is the way to my parents.

Down Koeberg Road to Milnerton, the mountain is at your back and the landscape flattens. No monolithic compass point. Urban beacons. Traffic lights and street signs. In Milnerton it's big trees and swimming pools. But before that, it's Rugby and Brooklyn.

Used-car lots, porno dives, take-away cafes, second-hand furniture shops crammed with greasy armchairs and stained mattresses. Miserly stand-alone houses surrounded by chicken wire. Thin dogs in gutters. Occasional bursts of effort - a bright windowbox on a balcony, a freshly-painted postbox. It's a losing battle. Even the skinny trees struggling in the sandy yards look depressed.

Rugby and Brooklyn have always been like this. The demographics have changed since apartheid. It's perked up the place some. But the main strip is still kind of seedy.

I was ahead of schedule. And Sipho Mazana lived in Brooklyn. Pulled over to the kerb, looked up the address Reuben had given me. Turned left into a warren of tiny houses and faded blocks of flats.

Away from the stretch of forlorn shopfronts things were more lively. I maneuvered around children on bicycles, saw yards where clean washing hung on lines, a chicken or two pecking the dirt. Men in traditional African boubous and women with intricately braided hair. I heard French, and Brenda Fassie.

Sipho's place was a tiny room sub-divided off a larger house. He had a separate entrance up a short driveway. I thought I heard voices inside the room, but when I knocked there was silence. Eventually, a face looked out of the small glass pane next to the door. Dreadlocks, an anxious expression. Sipho.

I spoke through the window. Assumed Reuben and Johan had told him about me.

"Hey, I'm Kain, the journalist doing the *Rolling Stone* piece. Sorry to just arrive. Can we talk?"

Sipho looked hesitant, then answered.

"Um, okay. Just wait a second."

I stood outside, looked at the street where two women were shooting the breeze while herding some toddlers. Sipho opened up. I walked into a room that did duty as both lounge and bedroom. Sleeper couch, small television. Sipho's bass guitar and amplifier.

"Um, you want some tea, anything?" Sipho hovered in the entrance of a small kitchenette. Next to him was a closed door. Probably a bathroom.

"No thanks. I won't be long."

With his angular face framed by spiky locks, and an athletic figure casually dressed in chinos and a Puma sweatshirt, Sipho was effortlessly handsome. Except for his expression. That was strained.

"Reuben and Johan told me about you. Also Ben's mother. What can I help you with?" Polite but stiff.

I wanted him to relax. Went in slow, asked whether he'd been playing since Ben's accident.

"I've been practising on my own. I've got an audition later this month."

"For another band?"

"Um, no." Sipho looked shy, continued. "I want to get into UCT Music College next year. The jazz degree. My theory is a bit behind, but my playing's not so bad. That's why I need to keep sharp."

I was surprised. "You do mainly rock with Itslikethat. Now jazz?"

"I've always preferred it. But we have fun with Itslikethat – I like the challenge, it's something different."

"How did you come to join the band?"

"Ben saw me jamming with some guys at this club in Long Street. It was very casual, just messing around, y'know?" Loosening up as he spoke about the music. "He talked to me afterwards, I liked his ideas. When he asked if I wanted to join Itslikethat with him and Reuben and Johan, I thought 'why not?'" Sipho smiled. Then his eyes turned sad. "He was a cool guy ..."

We sat in silence. I wondered when Sipho had decided to audition for UCT, asked him.

"I've been wanting to do it for ages. The problem has always been money. My parents can't afford to pay, and they're old-fashioned. They live in the Eastern Cape, in the rural part. They don't understand what I do here in the city," he replied. "They think I should be studying something practical, that will earn me a good salary."

"So how will you manage the fees, if you get in?"

"I'm not sure." Sipho hesitated, went on. "I spoke to Shakes. He handles the money. When I gave him our latest recording, I thought he was going to organise some big deal for us. Guess I'll have to see."

"Wait a minute – you gave Shakes the master copy?" I was confused.

"You've heard about the CD? Yeah, I had it because I was notating the bass lines. You know, writing them down note for note. I wanted them for my submission to UCT, as part of my portfolio. Shakes called and said Ben needed the master copy, so I dropped it off at his office."

He paused. "Reuben and Johan are a bit freaked out, but I'm sure it'll be fine."

An understatement. They thought it was a disaster.

"What's your relationship with Shakes like?"

"Oh, it's okay," said Sipho vaguely. But he didn't meet my eyes.

"Were you going to leave It'slikethat when your jazz course started?"

"It would have depended on how I could balance things. I wouldn't have just dropped the band. We are – were – really close. I guess ... I guess I wanted to see what would happen."

I glanced at my watch, saw I'd have to go.

"One last thing – Ben have a substance problem?"

"No way. That's all rubbish." Sure of himself, for the first time.

He looked relieved as I stood up. Glad the interrogation was over. Me, I'd only just begun. Had a feeling there was more going down here. Fuck's sake, why had Sipho given Shakes the one and only copy of the CD? Surely he wasn't that naïve?

As I walked across the room he moved swiftly, blocking my path to the bathroom. When I reached the front door he relaxed. But not much. I thanked him for his time, said I'd be in touch to fill in more gaps for the feature.

"Sure, I'm around," said Sipho. Bouncing on the balls of his feet, clearly wanting me out.

Once he closed the front door behind me, I waited a moment. "Lurked" is the right word. I heard hushed voices inside once again. Couldn't make out what they were saying.

Sipho was hiding something. And someone. I wondered just how close he was to Shakes. He needed money. The question was, how far would he go to get it? Sell out the band? Plot to put Ben away?

Mental note to self. Miranda seemed to be on good terms with the three boys. Maybe she'd be able to give me more background on them. I texted a message to her, asked if we could meet soon. Drove off wondering who was in Sipho's room.

"Red or white? Your mother's in the kitchen doing something with a butternut. Come and show me what books you've brought, before she grabs them all." My father, corkscrew in one hand, soft fluffy toy in the other. Ah – my sister Andrea and her two kids, Jordan and Gemma, were obviously also around for supper.

I hugged my father, followed him into the lounge. My knees were ambushed by a small five-year old boy with Barbie clips in his hair. Jordan's pink phase. Gemma sat gurgling on a kelim in front of the fire, the way only a six-month-old can. Andrea looked shattered. Her husband Mark was on business in Germany for a month. This was only week one.

I grinned, raised my glass of white wine. "To Mark's speedy return."

"You're telling me," she groaned.

My father started shifting through the paperbacks in the book bag, chuffed he could choose a few before my Mum zoned in. They've been married 48 years, have the kind of relationship people develop when they've been comfortable together for a long time. Some gritching, a bit of pretend-arguing, a lot of easy communication. Try as I might, I can't dredge up an unhappy childhood to blame for any of my flaws. They're entirely self-made.

My mother swept through, T-shirt spattered with orange goo. "Butternut soup – and don't look at me like that, it's my cooking T-shirt, it's supposed to get dirty." She sank into a chair next to me.

Our lounge hasn't changed much since I was a child. Floor to ceiling book shelves, scuffed wooden floors, a mantelpiece displaying the asymmetrical results of school pottery classes. In one corner is an old record-player. My parents have learned how to work Windows and email, but they haven't made the switch to CDs.

"How's work going?" my mother asked. I told her about *Rolling Stone*.

"That sounds good."

"Thing is, it's getting complicated." I explained about the drugs and the recording deal.

"It's like one of our crime novels," said my mother. "You should track down the killer."

"Not sure there is one," I answered.

"Find a motive, interrogate suspects – get the bad guys," my dad chimed in.

"Like it's that easy. Sure, Rozena and I will poke around. But in the end, *Rolling Stone* wants a specific story. Soon. I'm not sure they'll hold back the pages while we play amateur detectives."

"Surely you'd want to expose the truth, if somebody has done something wrong?" my mother asked cautiously.

"Well, even the cops don't buy that," I said defensively. "And I've got a bond to pay." Who did my mother think I was, Kay Scarpetta? Yeah right. Just give me a Mercedes Benz and a lesbian niece, and I'd solve the case.

My mother looked at me gently. "Kain, you've never been driven by money. Ever since you started writing as a journalist, you've always wanted to expose the truth. If you really suspect foul play, could you live with yourself if you didn't try and do something about it?"

She was right, of course. That's the infuriating thing about my mother. She usually is.

She gave me a smile, went to check on the meal.

The butternut soup was divine. I was scraping up my second helping with a piece of bread when my cellphone rang. Took the call in the kitchen.

"Kain? I got your message. David is away at the moment, but I'm home this evening. Would you like to come around?"

Miranda Wilson. I really didn't feel like seeing her tonight. Butternut soup makes me sleepy. But after my mother's comment, I thought I'd make an effort.

I looked at the clock above the stove. 8.30pm. Not too late. "I'll be there," I replied.

When I came back into the dining-room, my parents looked at me quizzically. "I have to go – it's about Ben."

My mother followed me out to my car, gave me a squeeze. "I know you'll do the right thing."

She seemed sure. I wished I felt the same.

## CHAPTER NINE

Koeberg Road is different at night. Bad lighting hides the grime. Buildings morph into black silhouettes, broken by the flicker of television sets behind windows. Mist had moved in from the sea, clammy trails across my headlights. I was freezing. Crazy to leave the fire and family. What was I thinking? Okay, I'd started it by messaging Miranda. But still.

In Constantia the fog was so thick I could hardly see the Wilson driveway. The house was easy to spot. Lit up like a mad person's wedding cake. Lights blazing from every window of the Victorian. Miranda was out the door before I even stopped the car. The Valium shuffle had kicked up a gear.

"Kain. I'm so glad you're here. We've had ... a bit of a scare." Trying to retain some poise, but slipping. She'd pulled a bulky jersey over a tracksuit, loose slippers on her feet. Hair flattened on one side like she'd been sleeping on it.

Talking faster. "David is away at a conference in Jo'burg. We weren't sure what to do. And there've been those awful stories in the paper, about a serial killer."

"What's going on, Miranda? You okay?"

Anna jogged down the stairs. Looked relieved to see me, pretended she wasn't.

"Somebody was in the house, in Ben's room," she blurted.

"You called the cops?"

They looked at each other. Miranda spoke.

"No. I've had enough of dealing with the police, recently. It's ...exhausting. And I can't bare to think of them pawing through Ben's things. It's just .. too much."

"Doesn't look like anything valuable has been taken. We just got a fright," said Anna.

"What do you want to do about it?"

"I'm not sure ..." Miranda, upset. I felt my sucker side move in.

"Let me see Ben's room, you can tell me what went down," I said. Kain the Brave. More like Kain the Idiot, really. "You sure nobody's here anymore?" I asked. They looked uncertain. "I think so," said Anna. "At least, I saw somebody running away."

Great. They *thought* the house was empty. That filled me with confidence. For a split second I wished I had Ninja with me. Realised how ridiculous that was. What would I do, throw him at someone?

I stepped into Ben's room, pushed the door wide so if anybody was standing behind it they'd be squashed. No screams of pain. There wasn't really anywhere else to hide. The room was as neat as before. Window open. When I looked out, I saw a drainpipe leading down to the grass. Thick and old, not one of the new skinny models.

Miranda joined me. "Ben always used to climb in and out of his room this way when he was growing up. He'd sneak off to play with his friends, or they'd climb up," she said, eyes sad. "David said it might be a security risk. But we kept forgetting about it."

Anna was busy with the papers and books on Ben's desk. "It looks like some of his notes are gone. Not the ones I gave you, others." She walked over to a cupboard. "And his leather jacket – the black one."

"Anything else?" I wondered.

"Doesn't seem like it."

"The rest of the house?"

"I think whoever was here only went through Ben's room. I was up here all the time," said Anna.

"Let's go downstairs. You can tell me about it," I suggested. Miranda closed Ben's window. Anna offered coffee, but nobody felt like it.

Turned out Anna had been upstairs studying at her desk – she had her final high school exams coming up – and Miranda was reading in the lounge.

"I heard a bump in Ben's room. Then I heard footsteps. I didn't know if the person was going to come to my room. I just sat there, waiting." Anna's eyes wide as she told the story.

"But nothing happened. I thought maybe I had imagined the noises. I started to get up and knocked over my chair. It made quite a bang. Obviously, the person heard."

Miranda broke in. "I heard Anna's chair falling. It woke me up, actually – I had fallen asleep on the couch," she admitted.

"I came out my room, and Mum joined me upstairs. We both heard somebody on the pipe outside – it clanks when you slide on it. I ran into Ben's room and looked out the window. There was this guy. He stared up at me, then slid down and ran away into the garden," Anna finished.

"What did he look like?" I asked.

Anna screwed up her eyes, remembering. "Kind of skinny, with big glasses. He was wearing dark clothes. I think his hair was black, long."

Maybe it was a drug thing. Rozena and I could be wrong about Ben. His guitar case did have cocaine in it, after all. Perhaps a buddy who knew how easy it was to get into the house and hoped to find an old stash. Or something to steal and sell. Otherwise just a chancer. Couldn't think of anything else.

"Would you recognise the guy again?" I asked Anna.

"Probably – funny, he looked familiar," she replied.

A car swept up the driveway, fast. "You expecting someone?" I checked.

"No," said Miranda, looking jumpy again. She peered out the window, untensed. "It's Clay. I phoned David in Jo'burg. He must have asked him to come over."

Clay walked in, face etched with concern, gave Anna a hug.

"Are you both alright? I came as soon as David told me what happened." Saw me, looked surprised.

"Hi again," he said.

"Have you already met?" asked Miranda.

We assured her we had.

With both Clay and I in the house, Miranda and Anna started to unwind. We trooped into the lounge, they gave Clay a recap. "I know it seems a bit silly now – but we really got a shock," said Miranda.

I didn't think it was silly at all. They were lucky nothing worse had happened. Clay seemed to feel the same.

"All he took were some papers, and a leather jacket? That's odd," he said thoughtfully.

"They were Ben's personal notes. We don't exactly know what's missing," said Anna.

Clay looked up. "Personal notes? I thought you meant things like music scores, or lyric sheets. What sort of notes?"

"That's just the thing – we don't know. Ben wrote all the time, he virtually kept a daily diary. Sometimes he would use bits in his songs, other times it was just private thoughts," said Miranda.

Clay still looked concerned. "So you have no idea what's been stolen – or by whom?"

"No. All we can work out is that a pile of personal notes, or papers, whatever you want to call them, are missing. And his jacket."

"Are you sure you don't want to call the police?" I broke in. "Maybe they can help."

"Oh, I'm sure Miranda and Anna are right. Best to keep them out of it," said Clay. "Nobody wants them poking around in Ben's private affairs."

Miranda looked up, eyes bright. "It's bad enough that somebody broke into his room. It's a ... a violation."

Clay's brow furrowed, then he smiled. "Tell you what, why don't I do a last check to see that everything is safe, and then you can relax?"

"I'll come with you," I said. Ms Useful.

"It's fine – I won't be long," said Clay.

"I want to help," I replied, started up the stairs. Clay followed.

He took a while going through Ben's room. Looked out the window, carefully scanned the notes left on Ben's desk. Those ones *were* mostly music scores.

"It's strange ..." he said. Finally walked out.

I turned to go, spotted something bright on the floor in the corner. Must have been swept there when I slammed the door open. Bent down, scooped it up. A badge, the kind you pin on a jacket. Black, silver writing that said Nexus. Maybe it was Ben's. Maybe it wasn't. I put it into my pocket.

Clay and the others were settled in the lounge. Drinks were being poured. I said yes.

The whiskey was good. Felt myself warming up. Clay pulled off his polo-fleece jacket, leaned comfortably into the couch next to me. Long, graceful fingers cupping his glass. Inquisitive eyes.

"Where do you stay, Kain?" he asked. "I don't know much about you, except that you're a journalist."

"I'm pretty close. St James."

"Love it on that side. I go sea-kayaking in False Bay. Have you ever been?"

"Nope. Looks like fun."

"I've got an extra kayak. If you ever want to go out, call me."

"I'll think about it."

Yeah, right. In the middle of winter. Still ...

I mentally slapped myself. What was going on? I was happily single, had my friends, did my karate. Since when did I want to go sea-kayaking in freezing conditions with a guy I hardly knew? And why was I admiring his hands? I reckoned it was time to go. Before I said something lame.

Clay, Miranda and Anna walked me to my car.

"Thanks again for being here," said Miranda. "I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to discuss your message. Maybe we can reschedule?" She looked drawn again, ready for another Valium round.

"Sure, I'll call."

Clay leaned into my car.

"I know it's cold for kayaking. Maybe you'd like to start off watching others do it. We could take a walk on the beach?" Sparkling eyes.

Play it cool, Kain. "Yeah – sometime. We'll talk."

I couldn't hide the smile on my face, though.

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By Thursday the fog from the Atlantic reached False Bay. I did my kata on the beach for a change. Moved through muted light. Watched kelp arching through the water as the waves broke. Moist air settling on my face, my gi. By the time I finished I was soaked. Felt good.

At my desk later, I picked up the little black badge with Nexus written on it. No idea it what meant, but it definitely wasn't on the floor first time I saw the bedroom. Either it was Ben's. Or the drainpipe-climber had dropped it.

The lettering on the badge looked stylised. A pattern came to mind, black lines looped in an intricate circle. Like the tattoos I'd seen all summer on the beach, boys and girls with trendy

designs around their biceps and on their backs. Celtic – in a commercial, new-age kind of way.

Dictionary time. I looked up Nexus. “A connection or series of connections linking two or more things.” Like an intertwined tattoo, I suppose. Or maybe there was some esoteric meaning I was missing. Wondered if Ben or his band mates were into the “hey shoo wow stuff” as Rozena called it. Didn’t think it fitted with the rock-ska edge of Itslikethat, more with the rave-and-trance crowd, or even the Goths. One person might know. I wanted to speak to him anyway.

“Hey sister, what’s up?” Shakes was friendly, tone smooth as ever.

“Wanted to ask a question. Were Ben or his buddies into Celtic mythology, new age philosophy, that sort of thing?”

Shakes laughed. “Nah, not those boys. All that tattoo shit and building teepees? I’ve never understood it – you get some middle-class kid, lives in a great house, suddenly he wants to sleep in a hut.”

“Yeah, it’s crazy. Cold, too.”

Shakes snorted. “You’re telling me. I grew up in a shack – it’s not something I would choose. Mind you,” he added thoughtfully, “those rich kids all have money. Maybe I should find a new age band to manage.”

I steered Shakes back. “So Ben wasn’t into that scene?”

“Uh uh. Reuben sometimes goes to those hippie raves, but I think it’s to score some of that free loving spirit. He does enjoy the ladies ...like me.”

“Tell you the truth,” he added, “The boys were more interested in social issues, especially Ben. He liked to write about things he said were important, politics even. He took songwriting seriously, my sister.”

“You don’t know what Nexus is, then?” Explained I had seen it on a badge I picked up in Ben’s room. Left out the break-in part.

“No, means nothing. How’s the article going, by the way?”

“Fine. But some details aren’t clear.” I decided to poke. “Like the new Itslikethat recording.”

Shakes’ warm inflection fell away.

“Who told you about that?”

“I thought it was common knowledge.”

“Nobody has anything to do with that CD except me. Ben wanted it that way.” Voice flat and hard.

“Don’t the rest of the band have a say? What are your plans, anyway?”

“That’s none of your business, girl. I’m the one with the contracts and the contacts. Until I decide what happens, you don’t write a word about it.”

Fat chance. Nobody tells me how to do my job. Second time Shakes had crossed the line.

“No can do, Shakes. Why’re you so uptight? Seems to me it would boost sales if I talk about an upcoming Itslikethat CD.”

"Yes, but who will benefit? That's the part I'm working on. It's what Ben wanted," Shakes said self-righteously.

Kerchang. It fell into place. Shakes was gunning for a solo release of the Itslikethat recording. It would put all the power in his hands. And the money. Ben was dead, the other band members were confused. Shakes had no-one in his way. But he had to bag a distribution deal first. If I raised these issues in my article before that, it could blow it all. No wonder Ben wanted to change managers. Shakes was a snake.

Right on cue, he hissed into the phone. "Don't cross me, Kailan. Don't get in my face, sister. You may think I'm a city slicker. But I told you I grew up in a shack. My mother left me and I had to look after myself. I didn't climb my way up by being nice."

Shakes had a lot at stake, and he wasn't happy. But I had a story to write. "I'm going to tell things like they are, Shakes. It may go better for you if you're upfront with me."

"I'm warning you. Back off or you'll be in a world of trouble, girl. You don't want that."

He rang off.

I stared out my study window. Shakes was hustling and he didn't want me in the way. I thought about the stab marks on my front door. Did he know where I lived? Was that a warning? But the gouges had been made before I confronted him about the CD. Still, he may have realised I would find out more. Wanted to scare me into shutting up. One thing was sure. Ben's death was a *bonnsela* for Shakes.

I still didn't know what the Nexus badge meant. It was going to bug me. Shakes said Reuben liked rave parties. Worth a shot.

He answered after a few rings.

I told him about the Nexus badge in Ben's room.

"That's weird, man. I've never seen Ben there. It's not his kind of place," said Reuben.

"Place?"

"The shop, you know. Nexus."

"Where is it? What kind of shop you talking about?"

"It's not some kind of secret, Kain. It's in Cavendish Square."

The huge shopping mall down the road from Reuben and Johan. More upmarket than their flat, though.

I groaned. "You're joking? I could have looked this up in the phone book?"

"Or on the web." I could sense Reuben grinning. "Shit, they've got their own site and everything. Nexus.co.za."

Some journalist. I had forgotten Rule Number One. Always Google first.

"It's one of those places that sells rave T-shirts and books about fairies and chunky plastic crap and comics. You can get tattoos. A lot of teenagers hang there. And some older funny guys – you know, aging hippies?"

I heard Reuben strike a match and inhale. "That's better." Croaked through a mouthful of smoke. "I was dying for that. How did a Nexus badge get into Ben's room?"

I told him about the break-in.

"That's fucked-up."

"How come you go to Nexus?"

"It's chill. There's all these young kids trying to be hip and everything. And the staff are lekker – well, one of them, anyway. She's cool."

Reuben the lady's man. He spoke again.

"If you want to take a look I'll come with you. Jo's probably missing me."

I had nothing to lose. And I was still curious about the badge.

"I'll pick you up."

"Later."

## CHAPTER TEN

It was a giggly Reuben who jogged down the stairs, fell into the jeep. I smelt dope on his woolly jersey. Remembered him puffing over the phone. Didn't know how much help one stoned keyboard-player was going to be. But hey – the dude had been going through some rough space. If it took a joint to lighten the load, so what.

Wished I'd had one myself when we reached Cavendish Square. I hate malls, and this one is a mega-bitch. High-end boutiques, marble-tiled floors, bling city. On weekends it's a nightmare. Even now, weekday afternoon, it was hectically busy. A joint would have helped. But I don't do that stuff anymore. Was a time I did too much. After Ethan. I glanced at Reuben. He was glazing his eyes over designer jeans, imported crystal, hand-crafted chocolates.

"Wouldn't have thought you were a Cavendish kind of guy."

"I'm not. That's why I need to get stoned before I come here. Man, then it's all just bright colours." Goofy smile. "The only shop I go to is Nexus. Otherwise it's all plastic people spending big bucks."

He floated through the door of Nexus. I bumped into a gaggle of schoolgirls, low-slung jeans covered in koki-pen drawings of flowers. They shot Reuben a glance, wanted him to look their way. He was focused on the girl behind the counter. Older than the schoolkids, but not much. Spiky hair, brown eyes rimmed with dark kohl. Spunky attitude. Grinned at Reuben, small tongue ring flashing.

"Well, well, it's Mister Magic Fingers. How's it hanging, Reuben-boy?"

"Well, you know ..."

"Shit. I heard about Ben, and I'm really sorry." The girl stopped smiling. "You must be feeling really crap. I wasn't thinking."

"No, it's fine, man. We're just taking a break at the moment, you know?" said Reuben.

"Don't wait too long. You've got too much talent to waste," the girl said matter-of-factly.

I left Reuben and the girl to their semi-flirting, cruised the shop. More tie-dyed pants than at a Grateful Dead concert. Bright plastic rings, the schoolgirls trying them on by the handful. Nexus badges, others with similar fonts and Celtic designs. Bookshelves marked Fantasy, everything from graphic novels to Harry Potter. Behind me I heard a low buzzing noise, turned

and watched a guy inking a letter onto the upper arm of a woman with long blue hair and dark glasses. Hoped it wasn't the name of her boyfriend. These things can go horribly wrong.

I wasn't in the mood for buying a ceramic fairy or a manual on How to Become a Wiccan. Thought about a dog's bowl with the words Running With Wolves on the side. Wasn't sure if Ninja would go for it. Reuben called me over.

"Kain, Jo says she's never seen Ben in the shop. She and Elmore are the only ones who work here, so she'd know," he said.

"Not a big surprise," I said. "It doesn't seem to fit."

"Yeah, too spacy, maybe," said Jo, not like it was a problem. "Most of the people come here are kind of hippie-like, or cartoon collectors, or into fantasy. Or schoolkids."

"It's not like the rest of the mall," I said.

"Yeah – the owner likes to think it's a healthy alternative to the bling. Not that our things cost any less."

"Figures. How d'you know Reuben and the band, anyway?"

"Oh, my work partner Elmore nagged me to go and see them. He's a real fan, just wouldn't stop bugging me 'til I went to a gig. That's when I met Reuben. Now he likes to hang here. I dunno if it's me or the shop fittings." Jo, straight face.

I looked past her at a pinboard behind the counter. Posters for raves, pamphlets advertising new age therapies like rebirthing. A photograph. Jo smiling, arm thrown casually around the shoulder of a tall, skinny boy with long dark hair and glasses. Stiff, intense stare.

"That Elmore?" I asked casually. It was almost too easy.

"Yup – he's off today, but he'll be back tomorrow for the afternoon shift. We alternate. You know, he was really upset about Ben's crash. He was kind of obsessed with the band, went to all the shows." Jo wrinkled her nose. "I sort of feel sorry for him. He's a good friend, but he's such a loner. When he gets into something, he's gone."

I had seen and heard enough. Knew where I was going to be tomorrow afternoon.

"Reuben, you coming? I'm going to head back," I said. Thought I'd keep my suspicions to myself.

Reuben shook his head. "Ag, I'll keep Jo company for a while. Sorry if this didn't help."

But it had.

"No problem – thanks for bringing me." The sea of shoppers ebbed and flowed around me as I pushed against the tide and headed for my car. Bingo.

---

Next afternoon I slunk into Nexus, tried to blend. Well, as much as a thirty-something non-hippie in hiking boots could. Perhaps people would think I was shopping for my kids.

I was wishing that Jo wouldn't be there. Didn't feel like explaining why I was back. Luckily she wasn't – the alternate shifts were solo. Sitting behind the counter was the dark-haired boy from the photograph, eyes magnified by strong lenses. Flipping through a Japanese comic book, didn't notice me. I spotted a coffee bar opposite Nexus, slipped out and sat down with a cappuccino. Had a good view of Elmore, would see when he left. It was around five o'clock. Either he would be replaced for an evening shift, or the shop would close soon.

An hour and another cappuccino later, I needed the toilet. Saw Elmore speaking to a lone girl in the shop, pointing at his watch. Not exactly customer friendly. The girl mooched out, Elmore followed with a large bunch of keys. Pulled the shop doors shut, locked them. Headed towards the escalators.

A moment's panic. What if he got into a car before I could catch him? Hadn't thought this part through. Was relying on him walking or using public transport. I stepped onto the escalator behind him. At the next level he turned, made his way to the doors leading outside. I followed. Hoped he didn't have a car down one of the side roads. He kept trudging, looking at his feet. Small backpack over one shoulder. Long black coat, wind twisting it round his legs.

It was getting dark. Made it easier for me to slink in the shadows. Elmore was zoned out. Wrapped up in his coat and his thoughts. Saw him turn into a narrow street. Away from the smart mall strip. Older flats and houses, no landscaped gardens or high security fences. He mooched towards a crumbling three-storey. Faded stencil on the wall. Rosemary Court.

I watched him walk through the open foyer and up a flight of stairs. There was no security gate and the steps were open to the weather. Saw him stop at the second floor, pull some keys from his pocket. Went inside. I held back a few minutes then followed.

The landing outside Elmore's flat smelt of old cooking oil and disinfectant. I knocked, waited. Silence. I knocked again, calling Elmore's name.

"Who – who's that?"

"I'm a friend of Jo's," I lied.

"W-what do you want?"

"I need to ask you something. Can I come inside – it's freezing out here?"

Nothing happened for a beat, then the door opened a fraction. Brass chain holding it in check.

"Hi, I'm Kain. You're Elmore, right? Glad I caught you." Breezy, going for the non-threatening look. I needed him to let me in.

It worked. Elmore loosened the chain, moved aside. Hovered nervously near the door.

Up close I could see how pale he was, black rings pouched under his eyes. Even through his thick coat he looked painfully thin. Skin on his face ruptured with pustular little bumps. Barely out of his teens. I recognised him. The guy awkwardly shouting for Ben's autograph at his last gig. Who'd bumped into me.

"I haven't seen you with Jo. W-why did you come here?" Elmore had finally clicked something was up.

I dumped breezy, went for brazen.

"Why did you break into Ben Wilson's house and steal his stuff?"

Elmore's eyes widened in shock. Looked like he was going to make a run for it. I stepped in front of the door. Folded my arms. Made my stern face.

"Were you looking for drugs? Or maybe you wanted to sell Ben's jacket to buy them?" I'd spotted a leather coat over the arm of a chair, took a guess.

Elmore crumpled. Shrunk against the wall looking fearfully at me. Hadn't taken much to intimidate him.

"I'd never sell anything of Ben's. And I don't do drugs," Elmore sniffed.

"You're not even going to say you weren't there?"

"W-what's the point? You've seen the jacket. Christ, I never should have done it. I knew it was s-stupid. I wasn't thinking." Elmore slid to the floor, huddled in a skinny heap.

Pathetic.

"You stole Ben's leather jacket and his notes. Why, if it wasn't for money?" I sat down next to him.

"P-promise you won't laugh?"

"None of this is funny, Elmore."

"Okay. I'll tell you." Deep, quavering breath. "I loved that band. Ben especially. They sang about important stuff, y'know. L-life and things. I could relate."

He gestured round the flat. "I spend a lot of time on my own – I like it that way. Also, I'm not s-so good with, y'know, girls." Blushed painfully. "I like to read and watch movies." He pointed to a small TV/DVD set next to a pile of animated cartoon titles.

"W-when I heard Itslikethat, I felt like they were talking to me personally. They sing about deep shit, like alienation. How p-p-people are with each other, and stuff." Elmore trailed off.

I got the picture.

"So after Ben died you wanted a souvenir – some kind of memento?"

He nodded.

"You found out where he lived, and you climbed up that drain pipe?"

"Yeah. It w-was really crazy. I thought his sister saw me, and I ran like mad."

"She did. You also left a calling card." I took the Nexus badge out of my pocket. Elmore rolled his eyes.

"I couldn't even break into a house properly. G-god, what an idiot."

He looked at me, fear once again on his face.

"Are you going to r-report me? W-will I be in trouble? I really need the job at Nexus – it pays my rent, and I'm saving to do a cartoon animation course next year."

Would it make any difference? The guy was kind of sad. I stood up from the floor, stretched my back. "Look, I think if you return the jacket, the family will be okay. Also, the notes. I don't see why it has to go further."

Elmore peeled the leather coat from the chair. Holding it, he said: "Problem is, the notes are at the shop. I was reading them during my breaks."

"When you back at work?"

"Saturday - tomorrow. We're closed Sunday."

I didn't want to make two trips to Ben's family, one with the coat and one with the notes.

"Tell you what. I'll tell Ben's family what the story is, come back here on Sunday to fetch everything."

Despite his height, Elmore looked small and forlorn. No need to punish him further.

"That was a majorly stupid thing you did. Feel lucky it won't go any further."

"I-I really do."

"Don't get into any more shit before Sunday."

Elmore's uneven skin broke out in a blush again.

"Thanks, Kain. Y-you've been really cool."

Yeah, call me a saint. Dunno why I didn't just hand Elmore over to the cops. Felt sorry for him, I guess.

I left the flat, pulled the hood of my sweatshirt over my head, jogged back to the mall where I had left the jeep. Kain Hunter, Super Sleuth. Had to grin.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

I got home, Ninja was in dog heaven. Gummy pile of bones in his food bowl. Ready for a serious round of crunching. Ninja has a ritualistic approach to treats. He also likes to hide them – in my bed, under the couch – which is not so great. It was going to be a noisy night. Thanks to Jane and Edi. No doubt they'd donated the stash.

My phone message-light was blinking. First call from Rozena, wanting to know how things were going. A second one from Clay.

"Hi Kain. I was wondering if you were still up for that walk on the beach? Maybe tomorrow afternoon. Perhaps we could have a drink afterwards? Let me know." He left a number.

No big deal. Just a walk. If I felt like it. I called Rozena.

"Hey Kain, what's up?" The phone went muffled. "Sam, find those ants and put them in the garden." Rozena's voice came back. "Sorry – minor crisis down on the farm."

I laughed. "Things have also been busy this side."

Told her about the burglary at Ben's home, my chat with Shakes, the expedition with Reuben. Got to the part about Elmore. She cut in.

"Jeesh, Kain. You followed some strange boy in the dark."

"Worked out okay."

"Luckily."

"Hey, I can handle myself."

"He could have been dangerous."

"He's a wimp."

"And what about Shakes? He sounds mean," said Rozena.

"Means we've rattled his cage. That's good."

"Listen, if you see him again, take me with you. We can double up if he gets heavy."

I agreed. Mentioned Clay's call. Casually.

"You go, girl!"

"Dunno if I'll phone him back."

"Chicken."

"Dunno if I'm in the mood."

"For what?"

"Shit, it's just a walk."

"So do it."

"Reckon I'll find out about his clinic, maybe write a feature."

"Forget about work, won't you? Just enjoy it." Rozena got serious. "Look, I know you're going to tell me the part about being happy by yourself and not needing anybody. But for once don't think about things too much. Just go with the flow."

"Okay, okay. Enough with the lecture."

"I've got to catch the ants. They made a bid for freedom this morning. Hold on - they're heading for the sugar. See you."

I flexed my shoulders, dialled again.

Deep voice. Friendly. Caught that twang once more.

"Kain? I'm glad you called. Are you free tomorrow afternoon?"

"Yeah. Muizenberg Beach?"

"Perfect. In fact, if it's windy maybe we'll see some kite-surfers, instead of sea-kayakers. I love watching them."

"Yeah." My verbal skills were at an all time high.

"I'll meet you in the parking lot at four?"

I stopped myself from saying yeah again.

"I'll bring my dog. He needs the exercise."

"Great. See you then."

Ninja was at my feet. "I phoned, okay. Don't give me that look." He stared back at me. Beady eyes, bone sticking out his mouth. I think his mind was elsewhere, tell the truth.

I grabbed a bottle of red wine, we strolled next door. Animals parked in front of the fire. Ninja hustled a spot between Martina and Ellen.

"Thanks for the bones. I guess." I handed over the bottle. Fell onto the couch next to Edi, stretched out.

"We celebrating something?" she said.

"Why d'you ask?"

"You brought one of your good reds."

"There's got to be a reason to drink nice wine?"

"Never. But you look ... pleased."

"The day went well."

"And ...?"

That's the problem with old friends. They notice things.

"I got a call. Going for a walk tomorrow. So what."

"Someone new?"

"Yeah."

"Someone have a name?" Edi's eyes were twinkling.

"Shit. He's this doctor, Clay. He likes to walk. I think."

"Don't let Edi give you a hard time. I think that's amazing." Jane walked over, bottle of wine and glasses. Thing is, Jane and Edi know me almost as well as Rozena. They also knew Ethan. I don't have to explain things to them.

Spent the evening sharing the wine, listening to a new Cassandra Wilson CD. Bread and cheese in front of the fire. I slept well. Didn't even hear Ninja munching.

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It was windy at four o'clock on Muizenberg Beach. But the sun was out. Scudding clouds, the sea a brilliant white-capped blue. Kite-surfers going mental in the surf.

Clay pulled up in a bakkie. One of those rugged 4 X 4 jobs. Saw Ninja pulling at his leash, cracked a grin.

"Looks like we're in for a serious walk. I hope I can keep up."

We set off. The air was cutting. Let Ninja off the leash, built up a bit of speed. Warmed up. Watched the kite-surfers break sea-speed records. Once I got over my monosyllabic phase we talked. The easy stuff – work, books, movies. Clay took his time with his sentences, made them long and interesting. I liked the way the sea reflected off his eyes, colouring them a light turquoise. We walked a few kilometres, Clay unclipped the small pack on his back.

"Do you feel like a break? I've got tea."

We found a sheltered spot in the dunes. Clay brought out a thermos flask, chocolate chip cookies. Sipping sweet tea, chasing crumbs, I asked where he was from. Still couldn't place the faint accent.

"I grew up in Johannesburg, studied at Wits University," he answered. "Then I worked in New York for a while. About five years. I'm 40 now – left for the States in my early 30s."

"You work in a hospital, or in research?"

"Both. The hospital in New York where I was based, City Central, had a pretty advanced research section. Mainly dealing with women and reproductive issues. That's where I got the idea to start the clinic in Langa."

I expected him to say more about the women's clinic, but he didn't. Changed the subject, asked where I was from. We compared cities, did the "have you been to?" thing. Me, I think nothing beats Cape Town.

Clay started clearing the thermos flask and biscuits. Jumped to his feet, reached down a hand to pull me up. Held on a few beats. Finally I let go, called Ninja. My palm felt warm.

By the time we reached the parking lot the sun had disappeared behind the mountain, streetlights crackling on. I was feeling mellow. All the fresh air. Probably.

"Do you want that drink?" I asked Clay, hoicked Ninja into the back of the jeep.

"Definitely. I'm off duty, so it's fine. Where do you want to go?"

I suggested the Cuban bar in Kalk Bay. "I'll drop Ninja off. See you there?"

"Can I order you something before you arrive?"

"Nothing with an umbrella in it."

I settled Ninja at home, found a stray bone to keep him happy. Back at the Cuban, Clay had seats overlooking Kalk Bay harbour. Cold bottle of chardonnay in an ice bucket.

The bar was over the top. Owner had a Cuban fetish, the joint overdone with clutter he brought back from the island every time he went. The staff in Che Guevara T-shirts and berets. But the view was the best in Kalk Bay. We looked out over fishing boats, a big sea pounding the harbour wall.

I felt the wine do its thing, leant back.

"Glad you suggested the walk."

"I wasn't sure if you could make it. Or if you had plans with somebody else ...?" So far we'd avoided personal relationship territory. I held his gaze.

"Nope – nobody except Ninja. You?"

"Not even a Ninja."

Rozena would have said: "Game on."

We talked, until my stomach grumbled. Ordered prawns and rice and salad, carried on working the bottle of wine. Halfway through the meal we slowed down.

Clay set aside his knife and fork. "Tell me, how's the story about Ben going?"

"Slowly. Hasn't been so straightforward."

Clay looked interested. "In what way?"

He was a friend of the family, had been fond of Ben. But I didn't know where he stood with the drug issue.

"It's complicated," I said cautiously. "You know the family well?"

"I joined David's practice a year ago."

"When you moved from the States?"

"Yes. I came here and found premises for the women's clinic in Langa. Then I looked for a practice I could join to help subsidise the clinic work. David's partner had just retired, so I moved in."

"You spend much time with the family?"

"They've been very welcoming, maybe because I'm new in town. Had me around for loads of meals. Obviously, I spend more time with David and Miranda. But Anna is a good kid. So was Ben."

I took the plunge. "You think drugs were a problem?"

Clay leant forward. "To be honest, Kain, I believe so. I'm a doctor, I recognised some signs. David just doesn't want to admit his own son had a habit. Look, it's hard."

"What about Anna, and his girlfriend Petra? They're convinced he was clean."

"Ah, it's often those who are the closest who don't want to see," Clay said sadly.

"And his band members?"

"As far as I know, they're also druggies. I wouldn't take them too seriously."

I remembered Reuben getting stoned before our Cavendish Square outing. Clay had a point.

Thinking about the shopping mall woke me up. Shit. I had forgotten to tell Ben's family about Elmore and the break-in. That I would bring back the leather jacket and notes.

"Damn! I've got to make a call." I looked at my watch.

"Something serious?"

No harm in telling Clay – he'd been at the house after the burglary. I told him about the Nexus badge, and the shop. How Elmore had fitted Anna's description. The way I'd followed him to his flat. I described dingy Rosemary Court, said I'd eventually felt sorry for Elmore. That he'd be returning the notes and the jacket.

"You see the papers?" asked Clay.

"No, I'll get them tomorrow. They might be song lyrics but Elmore wasn't sure. Hadn't finished reading them."

Clay sat back. "I didn't realise how involved you'd got. I thought it was just a piece on Ben's music, his tragic accident."

He didn't know the half it. But I kept quiet. The CD situation was still too messy to get into.

He continued. "Well, I hope my comments tonight will help you keep the story on track. And I'm sure you'll be discreet about your source. I don't want to hurt the family any further – but you need to know the truth. Ben's death was a horrible, but stupid, accident."

The waiter asked if we had finished our food. We nodded.

The evening was winding down. Clay and I split the bill, walked to our cars. He leaned over and brushed my cheek with his lips.

"I hope we can do this again." Held my eyes.

I felt warmth shoot up my belly. It had been a while. Made my casual face.

"Yeah, sometime."

Clay smiled, said he'd look forward to it. When I got home, the bed was comfortable but I couldn't get into my book. Lay awake, replayed the afternoon on the beach and the evening at the bar. Rozena was wrong. I hadn't been chicken.

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*He'd been pleased with the pace for the past few months. Things were nice and steady, and when an extra opportunity presented itself – like the girl last week, the one with the pale brown skin and the bloody third eye – he was able to act swiftly. So far there'd been three such cases, and he'd gotten away with each one. It was all about taking the gap. Being decisive.*

*The situation called for a cool mind, a steady hand. And the ability to plan. The right person in place at the right time. In his opinion.*

*And he wasn't hurting anybody. The women were there for a reason. They needed help, really. Knew they might be hurt, but expecting it. And as for the other cases – well, pain wasn't really a problem.*

*Yes, things were smooth on this side. So far. But he'd heard rumours and he knew he had to be careful. While he knew there were those who felt just like him – who didn't give a damn – there were others who could pose a threat. Unfortunately, those others had the power of the law behind them.*

*Sighing, he walked down the smooth corridor, nodding to his colleagues as he passed. His shift was nearly finished, and soon he could go home. No parcels were due, and he had no extra activities planned for tonight.*

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

Next morning I called David and Miranda Wilson. Let them know I'd tracked down Ben's possessions. Said I hoped they wouldn't press charges against Elmore.

Miranda was on the line, wanted to know why not.

"He's harmless. He made a stupid mistake."

"He was a big fan of Ben's?"

"Yeah. Says he could really relate to Ben's music. Was shattered by his death."

Miranda sighed.

"Somehow ...it makes me feel better knowing our burglar was actually a person who really admired Ben."

"Not even a proper burglar."

"Yes. I feel a bit sorry for him, actually."

"So do I."

Muffled conversation in the background, then Miranda came back.

"David and I agree, we won't press charges. In fact, we had an idea. I'd like Ben's jacket and notes back. And maybe you could give Elmore something in return?"

"Say what?"

"Well, he climbed up a drainpipe, could have got into a whole lot of trouble. All because of Ben. It's sort of ... touching."

"I suppose." Obsessive, more like it. But I knew what she meant.

"A while ago Ben and the band had a whole lot of T-shirts made. To sell at gigs. There are a few left. Perhaps you could take one to this boy."

"That's big of you."

Miranda, catch in her voice. "I think Ben would have wanted it this way."

Her call. What could I say?

I agreed to pick up the T-shirt on my way to Elmore. We were meeting at 10am, and time was tight. The jeep chundering in protest, I made it to Rosemary Court with three minutes to spare.

The curtains in Elmore's flat were closed. Hardly a surprise. Dude didn't strike me as a fresh air freak. No response to my first knock, so I tried again. Nada. Third time, I called Elmore's name. Silence.

Couldn't see through the frosted glass next to the front door. Couldn't hear any noises either. Got tetchy. I could have slept in. Plus I'd made a detour to pick up a present for him. From the people whose house he'd burgled. And Elmore was either asleep or out. Felt like kicking his sorry butt.

The arrangement had been clear. I didn't want to come back to Rosemary Court another time. Struck me, as I stood on the smelly landing, that Elmore could have done a duck with the coat and notes. Nah. More like he was out for the count.

Walked down the stairs, looked for another way into the block. Followed my nose, found a row of smelly dustbins in a small courtyard. A rusty steel fire-escape, leading up from the yard. Obviously the tenants used this route to take out their trash.

No visible security. Climbed up the fire-escape, shoes pinging on each step. Stopped at Elmore's floor. Dirty curtain covering the back door window. A slight chink. Pushed my face against the glass, peered in.

Jerked back. Wasn't sure what I'd seen, but it didn't look right. Again I squinted through the gap. Looked like a pair of legs lying on the ground, in the passageway leading to Elmore's lounge. I banged on the door, it gave way. Stumbled into a small kitchen. Strong smell. Like copper. And something else.

Elmore was on his back, thick pool of blood congealing under his head. Eyes open, blank stare. Arms splayed on either side of his body. He was wearing boxer shorts and a vest, loose on his slight frame. Leaned in, saw a gunky wound above one ear. Bone fragments trapped in clotted blood. One eye pulled off-centre by the shattered skull. Lying nearby was a chair leg, splintered end covered in pulp.

I picked up one of his arms, felt for a pulse, knew it was hopeless. Placed his wrist gently on the floor, stood up.

Felt calm, after the first adrenaline rush. Flipped open my cellphone, dialled the city emergency number. Explained the situation, said I would wait. Paced the flat, saw how

trashed it was. Papers all over the place, animated cartoon DVDs chucked around, TV screen kicked in. Chair in Elmore's lounge with its leg torn off. Got antsy. Suddenly wondered if the perps were still here. Listened. Faint sounds of a radio coming through the open back door. Padded to the room next to the kitchen. Single bed, unmade, books and papers lying on the floor. Empty. Same for the bathroom.

The police and ambulance were quick. I unlocked the Yale on the front door, let them in. Took a while to explain how I had found the body. The team collecting evidence, dusting for prints, checking out the damage. Cops struggling to find an address or number for his family. Once they'd finished with me – didn't seem to think I'd done the nasty – I offered to help. Phoned Reuben, got Jo's number. Was sure she'd know how to contact Elmore's family.

The hip act disappeared. "I can't believe it. Not Elmore, it's impossible." Heard her break down.

"I'm sorry."

Jo had the family details. I handed them to the police.

Went and sat in my jeep outside Rosemary Court. In my bag was the Itslikethat T-shirt for Elmore, still neatly folded. Shook my head. Another boy who would never have the chance to grow up.

---

The cops read Elmore's death as deadly assault during the course of a burglary. I wasn't so sure. Nothing obvious was missing from the flat. It was more about fucking it up. Somebody had been angry. I told the cops, they weren't convinced. Me, I had no clue who Elmore could have pissed off that much. Didn't know enough about him.

What I did know was weird. Within a day of linking him to Ben's break-in, he was dead.

On Tuesday I phoned the investigating officer. Detective Van Vuuren. Wanted to know what they'd got. That's when I suggested the murder might not have been random. He was polite – I'd helped them track the family, maybe that was the reason. But formal.

"Miss Hunter, we all know how bad the crime figures are. This sort of thing goes on all the time," he said. "A flat like that, it's very easy to break into."

"How do you reckon they got in?"

"From what we've put together, the perpetrator – or perpetrators – climbed up the outside fire-escape, like you did. They forced the door. It had a flimsy lock, they probably just pushed hard."

"About what time, you think?"

"The coroner puts the death at sometime between midnight and early morning. It fits - none of the neighbours would have been using the fire-escape. When you found the body, he'd been dead approximately eight hours."

And nobody had seen or heard a thing, despite the mess. According to Van Vuuren, the block was old with thick walls. Probably the intruder had been careful about how much noise he made, too.

There was another reason I called. Wanted to know if Ben's leather jacket was around. Hadn't seen it in all the chaos.

"Hold on a second, I'll check the list." Heard Van Vuuren shuffling paper. Came back on the line. "No, no record of a leather jacket. We just boxed up all those papers and notes that were

lying around. At the moment it's evidence, and can't be released until the case is closed. Not that it'll help us much, anyway."

Frustrated, I rang off. Yesterday I had told the Wilsons what had happened. I called again, told them about the missing jacket. They were bewildered, sounded in mild shock. Medication time, I reckoned.

Word had spread about Elmore's death. I got several SMS messages, including one from Anna. Said she realised why Elmore had looked familiar, that night outside Ben's window... Remembered his face from Itslikethat gigs. Petra had also heard, left me a message. Seeing it made me think about Clay's belief that Ben took hard drugs. I called her back.

"Kain. This is all so ... strange."

"It's not great."

"I knew that guy. Elmore. I saw him at a lot of Ben's gigs."

I told her Anna also remembered him.

"He was very shy," Petra continued. "He'd always be on his own, really into the music. I spoke to him one time, because he seemed lonely. We talked about the songs. After that we always said hullo. It's terrible."

On edge. I wondered if it was just Elmore's death that had shaken her.

"You holding up okay?"

"Honestly? Not that well. I've got exams at the moment, but I'm finding it hard to study."

"Yeah?"

"And Spencer is really bothering me."

The bullying ex-boyfriend. "What's he been doing?"

"I can't really talk on the 'phone – I'm in the 'varsity library. Could we, maybe, meet for coffee?"

I had no immediate plans, needed to get some clarity on Ben. Clay's comments had bothered me. Suggested Gianicolo's because I was low on grease. When I arrived, Petra already had a cup of coffee. Ordered my own and a side of fries. Asked her about Spencer.

"I'm sure he's been following me. I've seen his car outside my flat. I get these calls on my cell. Caller ID blocked. When I answer there's just silence."

Standard stalker shit.

"What's even crazier is I bumped into him at the shop, and he mentioned your name. He was laughing. Said he knew all about this journalist that was writing Ben's obituary, and he was going to make sure that the world knew what a loser Ben was."

Way too many people were poking their oars into my story. And it wasn't an obituary. Asshole. I wondered how Spencer knew who I was. She frowned.

"It's possible he followed me that night I met you in Muizenberg. He could have looked you up on the net, or the phone directory. He can get really crazy."

Spencer could have been watching me for a while, once he found out about the *Rolling Stone* piece. Plenty of people seemed to know about it, so why not the ex-boyfriend of Ben's

partner? I hate the thought of somebody spying on me. Can't stand it when people try to interfere with my work. I remembered the knife marks on my front door. A message?

"What's he look like?" I asked Petra.

"Kind of tall, brown hair and eyes. He played rugby for years, so he's pretty muscled up. Oh, and he has a scar across his chin – he got it in a scrum. He thinks it makes him look dashing." Flat tone, hunched shoulders. Talking about Spencer made her sink into herself. Bullies have that effect.

"I see him, I'll tell him to back off," I said. From Petra, and from my story.

"Just ... be careful. He really seems on edge."

"You still think he might have had something to do with Ben's accident?"

"I don't know." Petra looked miserable.

Too many loose ends, too many so-called suspects. We just needed Colonel Mustard in the billiard room with a hammer. Shit, Ben was dead. Why couldn't I just give *Rolling Stone* what they wanted? I knew the answer, even though it irritated me. I wanted to write the truth.

I asked Petra about her studies. She was doing Honours in Economic Studies, Masters next year. Was serious about it. "Funny. People were surprised when Ben and I got together," she said. "I'm don't go to clubs much. The night I went out and we met was unusual for me. I'm glad I did." She tailed off, looked out the window. I could have told her about Ethan. That eventually the hurt becomes less. Ran through the story in my head, kept quiet. Sometimes it's not so easy to get the words out.

We finished another round of coffee, got going. Big rain clouds, ugly wind. I wanted to be out of town before the storm and the rush-hour traffic hit. Scooted down the freeway towards home. Half-way there realised I had forgotten to mention Clay's drug theory. Crap. Would have to follow up. More crap – it started to pour. I turned into the road leading to my garage.

A black VW Golf cut me off. I slammed on brakes. Before I had even stopped a man leapt out, charged my way. Opened my door, yanked me out in one rough movement. Large, furious face. I felt a stab of fear. Flashed on the murders of Stephanie Lambrecht and Tania Smith. Was this how it had gone down?

Maybe not. Saw a scar snaked across the man's chin. I was finally meeting Spencer.

Shock morphed into outrage. "Fucking take your hands off me!" I twisted away from meaty fingers clenching my arm. Stared into manic eyes. "You like to push women around, Spencer?"

He grunted in surprise when I said his name. Stepped back. I pushed my advantage. "Why you following me? What d'you want?"

The astonishment didn't last long. Spencer's face got sly. The road was empty. Rain beating down, plastering my clothes to my body. No wonder everybody was inside. Spencer closed in. Confident no-one was going to interrupt us.

"You're the journalist thinks she's so clever." Blunt, aggressive tone. "I watched you with Petra this afternoon. But you know nothing."

Petra was right. He was big.

"Ben was a loser. A druggie loser." I felt spit on my face. "Petra doesn't want to believe it, but that's why he's dead. It's his own fault."

His voice rose. "That's what you've got to write. Petra will see the truth, we'll be together again."

Shit. Man was out to lunch. Thought the woman he'd beaten up was going to get back with him, now her boyfriend was dead. Scary thing, I could see he believed it. Would only make him madder if I disagreed. Not a good idea on a dark, deserted street. I tried something else.

Made my voice confiding. "Hey, I've heard about the drug stuff. I'm with you on that, Spencer."

He looked at me suspiciously. Unclenched his fists. "Just as long as you get the story straight."

"That's my job." Rubbed my arm where his fingers had bit in. Bruises, for sure. Bastard.

"I'm keeping an eye on you. I won't accept anybody messing up my plans." Arrogant. Expecting to get his own way. For now, I'd let him think he had.

"Sure, Spencer." Edged towards my car. Couldn't resist one more shot. That's why my friends sometimes call me dumb.

"You ever go to Ben's gigs?" Imagining Spencer slipping something bad into Ben's drink. Not sure it was his style. Too subtle. Still, worth a try.

Mistake. Spencer closed the distance between us, grabbed my face in one hand. The other a raised fist. I closed my eyes instinctively. His fingers tightened round my jaw. I couldn't move.

"Wrong question. I told you to stick to the plot." Our noses were nearly touching. I could smell expensive cologne, rancid breath. "And if you tell anyone – anyone – about this meeting, you'll be very, very sorry. Understand?"

He let go my face, gave me a sharp slap across the mouth. Before I could react he was in his car, driving off.

I drove up the road to my garage. No point in going anywhere else. No point in reporting Spencer. No witnesses, my word against his.

I was soaked through and shaking. Not sure who I was more angry with, Spencer or myself. I'm fit. Do karate. Like to think I'm street smart. So what do I do in a stand-off? Get smacked around. Pathetic. Switched on the shower, stood under hot water for a long time. Got out, caught my reflection in the mirror. Black and blue bracelet around one arm. Puffy red mouth. Turning away, I pulled on sweats and socks. Burned with rage. Next time he wouldn't have a chance.

I'd learnt a bit, though. Spencer was a violent man with an axe to grind. Did I think he was capable of killing somebody? After this evening, I'd say yes.

I hadn't managed to help Petra by warning Spencer off. But I'd gained something. Not counting the bruises and stiff jaw. Next question. What to do about it?

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

My coffee needed a kick. There was brandy in the cupboard, but I backed off. Not on top of the painkillers I'd taken. Been there, done that. Played in the twilight zone. Was tempted, though.

Thought about calling Rozena. Didn't want to wind her up. She was already leery of Shakes, thought I was nuts to follow Elmore, was jumpy about his death. Didn't like the gashes on my front door. If I told her I'd been slapped by Petra's sick ex-boyfriend, she'd get all protective.

She's done it before. When she thinks I'm in too deep. Me, I was ready to go deeper still. Amazing how a smack can be motivating.

I'd tell her sometime. I wanted Spencer's actions on record, even if the record was Rozena, not the police.

What was hassling me more was work. Hadn't written one word of Ben's feature, while we were nailing down the angle. I'd get a good fee, come the deadline. But meantime, I was itchy about bringing in other income. I take a break from writing, it makes me feel funny.

The phone rang. Wondered if it was Spencer, checking up on me. Kind of wanted it. So I could chew his ass off.

"Hey Kain. Thought I'd check and see how you are."

Clay.

"Me and Ninja are doing fine." Why did I always bring the dog into it? "How're things on your side?"

"Busy, actually. I had to hold down a couple of double shifts, so I've been out of touch since the weekend. Since I last saw you."

Couldn't believe it was only two days ago we'd walked on the beach. Felt like a lot had happened. Clay kept on.

"I heard about your horrible experience with that burglar. David and Miranda told me. I'm so sorry."

"Yeah. He was a lonely kind of guy."

"He shouldn't have stolen Ben's things, though."

"I know. It was crazy."

"Otherwise, have you been okay?"

Maybe it was Clay's sympathetic tone, maybe I just needed to unload. I told him about Spencer.

There was a silence.

"Are you alright?" First thing Clay said, and I was glad. Didn't feel like a monologue on being careful, etc etc. One battering was enough.

"Yeah, it's over now."

"You sure you don't want to lay a charge?"

"Nope. I'm just frustrated."

"How so?"

"I'm battling with Ben's story. Too many possibilities."

"Why not write it like your editor says? Musician tragically destroyed by drugs in car crash? I know it may hurt the family. But in the end people will remember Ben's talent."

"Perhaps it'll pan out that way. Need to clear up the loose ends."

"You really are tenacious." Smile in Clay's voice. I took it as a compliment.

"Yeah, well."

"How about dinner. Take your mind off things for a while?"

Dinner was different to having a walk. Dinner was like a date.

"Um, sure."

Clay laughed. "You sound really enthusiastic."

"Hey, it's fine."

"Tomorrow night? I know it's soon, but with our busy schedules ..."

I had an idea. "You know what would be good? I'm looking for stories in between the *Rolling Stone* project. How about I come out to your clinic, have a look around, get a feel for a feature? Have a bite afterwards?"

Clay hesitated. "You sure? Don't you have enough on the go at the moment?"

"I'm in the air with Ben. Be nice to have something concrete."

"Okay. I could show you the basics."

"Deal."

"Come around 4-ish. We'll take it from there." Clay gave me the address, we said goodnight.

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It was drizzling when I headed to the clinic. Took Prince George's Drive from Muizenberg, past Lavender Hill, Grassy Park, Princess Vlei. Pretty names for shitty council houses, poky flats. Only things that grew here were the broken bottles used for dagga pipes. Even the vlei was a no-go zone, a place gangsters took their rivals out execution-style. Left the bodies to rot in the reeds.

During apartheid whole families were shunted from homes near the mountain onto this sandy strip. Whites got to keep the big plots with the trees.

Even now people struggle. Gangsterism rules. The kids get sucked in early. Nothing else for them to do. Rozena was born here. Her youngest brother killed in a turf war. Her eyes get fierce when she talks about growing up on the Cape Flats.

I cut through Athlone, onto the N2. At Bhunga Avenue turned left, followed Clay's directions.

Langa's been around for a long time. The streets are still marked NY – for Native Yard. Go figure. You could call it an African ghetto, but it's not really. More like a suburb with an attitude. Houses with multi-layered extensions. Roofs bristling with TV aerials, illegal electricity connections. Vegetable gardens. Spaza shops, shebeens. Busy. When I arrived some people were already heading back from work. Schoolkids splashing through puddles. Hawkers on corners, umbrellas protecting pockets of potatoes, bags of tomatoes, onions. Every second block a smoking brazier grilling smileys - sheep's heads with death grins.

Clay's clinic was down a side street off the main avenue. House with a fresh coat of white paint. Small sign that read *Women's Wellness Clinic/Bafazi iHospitali*. Clay's bakkie parked on one side. I pulled up behind him, walked through a neat garden. Looked like indigenous herbs.

Inside, women sat in a circle of plastic chairs, chatting. In the middle of the floor a padded blanket with toys and two gurgling kids. Health posters in English, Afrikaans and Xhosa on the walls. A reception area next to a door that obviously led into the doctor's room. Behind the desk was a woman about my age. Red and green scarf wound round her head. Efficient manner.

"*Molo sisi*, you must be Kain. Welcome – I'm Nosipho Dlangamandla." Smiled. "Dr Parker told me you were coming. Take a seat, he'll be out soon."

I thanked her, took a few pamphlets from her desk, sat down. Scanned the pages. General women's health issues. With a holistic edge. The benefits of both mainstream and traditional treatment. Customary healing methods, medicinal uses of plants, modern innovations. Interesting. I liked the approach.

Clay stuck his head around the door next to Nosipho, saw me. "You made it – that's good."

Looked around the crowded waiting room.

"Don't worry about me – I'll sort myself out. We'll talk when you're finished," I said.

He smiled gratefully, disappeared. I went over to Nosipho.

"Hi again. I'm not sure if Clay – Dr Parker – explained why I am here?"

She nodded. "He said you were a journalist. That you might want to do a piece on the clinic."

"Yes. I didn't realise it was so busy."

"Things used to be worse, before I arrived," Nosipho smiled.

"How come?"

"When Dr Parker started the clinic he was on his own. No assistant."

"Sounds difficult to manage."

"It was. One day I came for an appointment, saw how things were. Dr Parker was trying to answer the phone in between seeing patients – it was too much. I offered to help. I've been here three months now."

"As a volunteer?"

She laughed. "Not quite. I have secretarial skills. I made a suggestion. I said I could work here four days a week and keep everything in order. In return, I get a small salary – and good medical care." She shifted in her seat, I saw a rounded tummy.

"Seems like you both got a good deal."

"Yes. It's my first child, and I want to make sure everything is alright. I'm seven months gone, already." Proud smile.

"So tell me," I said, "How does the clinic work?"

"Pull up your chair, *sisi*. I'll tell you what I know."

The other women watched me shift positions, went back to talking. A relaxed atmosphere. Didn't feel like other hospitals I had been to. I told Nosipho.

"Well, the clinic is small, so it's personal. If something is too complicated for Dr Parker he refers the patient to one of the larger hospitals or clinics," she explained.

I wanted to know who came here. Nosipho said mostly local, pregnant women. "Some are wanting to get advice about diet. But others may be more serious. Mothers with HIV/AIDS, or TB. Also," she lowered her voice, "Some women want to know about abortions."

"And the herbs I saw out front?"

"There are a group of us who started that garden. We're helping Dr Parker understand the medicinal qualities of these plants," said Nosipho. "You must come and meet the other women – I'll take you."

"I'd like that," I said. "But tell me, aren't there free clinics in the area that offer the same services?"

"Yes, there are some. But the queues are long. And sometimes they don't have the right medicine, and you have to travel far to get it. At Dr Parker you only pay if you can afford to, and the medicine is mostly free."

"Also," she added, "We like it that this place is just for women."

The room had emptied. Just two younger women. Teenagers, really. At the next opening they both went in. "They're friends. The one is nervous so she didn't want to come alone. It is also her first baby – even though she is so young," Nosipho said conspiratorially.

Eventually the women came out. Clay was next to emerge, still in his white jacket. "Thanks for waiting. Do you want a look around the room?"

"Sure."

Nosipho hefted a large handbag. "If that's all, I'll be going home, Dr Parker," she said.

"Of course – much appreciated, as always," said Clay, giving her a warm smile. She walked out, graceful in her colourful dress and scarf.

"Here's the tour. It'll be quick, though. I warned you, there's not much to see." He was right. Examining bed, textbooks, shelf of medicines behind locked glass. Clean and functional.

"Just the basics – I don't need anything else. I'm sure Nosipho told you the more serious cases are sent to the big hospitals. I don't do anything major. I don't have the equipment, anyway," Clay explained.

"Seems you get a lot done," I said. "What I heard, women prefer to come here if they can."

"The numbers are growing, and I'm glad. More than I could hope for in one year."

"How did you cope before Nosipho?"

"It was hectic." Clay leaned against the examining bed. "When I started, I worked mornings at the practice in Rosebank and afternoons here. People would just arrive and wait."

He hopped onto the bed, legs swinging. "I didn't think the response would be so good. Took me by surprise. When Nosipho stepped in, it was the best thing that could've happened." He grinned. "Now I'm open four days a week, Monday to Thursday. On Fridays and some Saturdays I schedule patients in Rosebank."

"Long hours – and you don't charge people if they can't afford to pay."

His eyes crinkled. "I get by. Also, I get a small donation every month from a similar clinic in New York that supports what we're doing here. It all works out."

"Specially for the women."

"I've seen what they have to face in some of the local clinics. The waiting, the lack of medication, the stress. If I can make it a little more easy, then I've achieved something."

He jumped off the bed, took off his white coat. "Enough about me. Seriously. Are you hungry?"

"Yeah. I've got more questions, but we can talk later."

"We'll see. Do you want to come to my place, get an early bite, watch the sun set?"

"Where do you stay?"

"Hout Bay."

"I'll follow."

The twisting route through ancient oak trees felt like a different country compared to the muddy streets of Lavender Hill and Langa. Arrived at a bay flanked by steep cliffs. A harbour on one side. We drove in the opposite direction, climbed up a narrow road. Clay pointed a remote control at an electric security gate. Large houses, landscaped complex. Discreet distances between the plots. Clay's home the furthest in the cluster, hanging right over the bay. He ushered me in. I could see through the open-plan living area to a grey expanse of water. Felt like we were on a ship.

"Not too shabby," I said, spotting glass sliding doors leading onto a deck.

"Glad you like it. I find the sea relaxing. Same with kayaking – there're some good channels around the bay, especially below Chapman's Peak." Clay slid the glass open.

I walked onto the deck, swivelled left to look at the winding road that leads out of Hout Bay. Chapman's Peak is beautiful, but it's a bugger to drive. Snaky. Every now and then rocks smash down the side, sometimes onto cars. Usually with tourists inside. Still, they keep on coming.

Rain and seaspray misted my face. I breathed deeply. Looked straight down, huge boulders dotting a vertical drop to the sea. Round Clay's house, a high security fence laced with razor-sharp barbed wire. No one was getting in – or out – that way. Even at the seaside you had to be careful.

"Glass of wine?" Clay was standing in the kitchen, looking into his fridge.

I moved inside, settled on a cream couch. The space was like Clay's clinic. White, clean, simple.

Clay strolled over with two glasses. "How have you been holding up?" Peered closely at my face, eyes sliding down to my mouth. It was better than yesterday, not puffy but still sensitive.

I sipped wine. "I'm fine. That Spencer is a number."

"He sounds nasty. And way too involved in your business. I wouldn't be surprised ..." Clay broke off.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's just – you have a violent guy like that, and then Elmore is killed. It's quite a coincidence."

"Sure, the timing is weird. But why would he do something like that?"

Clay looked thoughtful. "Perhaps he saw Elmore as a threat. Maybe he got the wrong idea, thought he was interested in Petra. Who knows – he seems unbalanced."

It wasn't a bad theory.

I looked at the sea. The sunset did its thing. I started to relax.

"I've got salad.– also some bread. I could whip up an omelette," Clay suggested.

"I'll help with the green stuff." We smiled at each other. My cellphone rang. Shit. Looked at the caller ID. Rozena.

"I'd better take this," I said. Clay nodded.

"Hey Rozena – everything okay?"

"Not really. I've got Reuben and Sipho and Johan sitting in my house, baying for Shakes' blood. Seems he's going ahead with some deal and they're sure they're going to be cut out. They want to meet with him now. And they want us there."

"Why us?"

"Seems we're the only ones they trust. Must be 'cos we're old and dependable."

"Yeah right."

"And we're the only ones they could think of."

"Why now?"

"Because the deal is going down soon, and they want to stop it. They're upset, Kain. Reuben is about to tear up the pillows on my couch."

I sighed. "You really want me?"

"You bet. This could help with the story."

I had to agree. Get the band and Shakes in the same room, have a showdown.

"Where is Shakes now?"

"Manenberg's. We could confront him there."

I looked at Clay breaking eggs in the kitchen. Rolled my eyes. "Okay, I'll meet you in twenty."

"Where're you coming from?"

"Uh, Hout Bay."

Silence, then a laugh.

"Tell me about it when I see you."

I turned to Clay. "I get the feeling this omelette is going to be for one," he smiled ruefully.

"Can we take a rain check?"

"I'll hold you to that. Is it about Ben?" Clay looked interested.

"Yeah. Let you know when it's sorted."

He walked me to the door, wrapped his arms around me in a hug. He smelled good. We pulled back at the same time, hesitated.

I really didn't enjoy the drive to Rondebosch.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The three musicians were lined up on the couch. Siphon the quietest, arms folded. One side of him, Johan cracked his knuckles. The other, Reuben was smacking a feather pillow.

"Man, you took ages, Kain. You've gotta help us sort out this guy. He's going to take us for a ride."

"Back up. Start at the beginning." I found a chair opposite the boys, pointed at Reuben. "You go. But I also want to know what the others think."

Johan and Siphon nodded. Rozena leaned against the wall. Movie soundtrack in the background - Guy watching DVDs with the kids in the back room. For now, the lounge was ours.

"You know the recording we did? You know Shakes has the master copy?" Reuben's words tumbling over each other. "I heard from a contact that the bastard is definitely going to release it as a solo album of Ben's. He's scored a major label. They're about to sign."

"It's like that is a band. How does he explain you guys?"

"We'll be listed as session musicians."

"Your fans won't buy it."

"Man, what can they do? They'll get the CD anyway, 'cos they like our music. All the profits will go to Shakes."

"You sure?"

"Shakes says Ben gave him permission to go ahead with the deal. Man, he even says he has Ben's signature confirming this shit."

Reuben threw the pillow on the floor. "It's a bitch. I don't believe Ben signed something like that. He's got a signature, it's forged. But how do we prove it? Shakes is walking all over us."

Johan broke in. "It's true. Without Ben we're nothing. Out in the cold." Shook his head in disgust.

I looked at Siphon. Still sitting quietly, fingers fiddling with the couch fabric. Cleared his throat. "Look guys, I feel bad about this. I gave Shakes the master CD, as you know. I honestly thought he was going to pass it on to Ben. I'm sorry."

"No man, it's not your fault," Reuben said. "How could we check Shakes would be such a prick?"

Siphon looked relieved. I kept my thoughts to myself. Knew he needed money to pay for his studies at UCT. What if Shakes had offered him cash for the CD? I already knew Siphon was hiding something.

Reuben flexed his shoulders. "Shakes is at Manenberg's with his *chommies*. Let's go there and *moer* him. What else can we do?"

Rozena, voice of reason. "Look, we want to help. But fighting Shakes in a bar isn't the best way to go."

"He won't let us into his office. We have to grab him now, while we can, and stop this thing." Johan looked firm.

Too much testosterone in the room. But all this stuff had an edge I could work for *Rolling Stone*.

"Make a deal, guys." Three heads turned my way "We go there with you, speak to the man, get some clarity. You're not allowed to get heavy." I looked meaningfully at Reuben and Johan.

"You gonna help us get justice?" Reuben, puppy-dog face.

Wasn't really part of my plan. Looked at the guys. Hopeful eyes. Call me a sucker.

"We'll see what we can do."

"We can go in my car, it's the biggest." Rozena's offer was practical, but she probably had an ulterior motive. Keep a close eye on the boys. She hates stereotypes, but she does have these mothering moments. This was one of them.

We piled into her ancient Toyota Corolla. I sat upfront, the boys in the back. Drove to the Waterfront. Manenberg's is smack in the middle of a glossy mall at the city harbour, which is why I mostly avoid it. Unless a good band is playing. It's one of the best venues for live jazz, despite the weird location. The crowd is usually okay, too. Mixed. Power players, rastas, serious jazz fans. The five of us barely a raised a glance when we walked in.

The band on the bill was a Congolese kwasa-kwasa outfit. Just finished a set. There was a surge to the bar. Johan spotted Shakes sitting at a corner table with two men. Slick suits, heads buried in conversation.

"The bastard." Reuben moved forward. I grabbed his arm.

"Easy," I said, eyeing the two meaty bouncers at the door.

Reuben stopped. "How d'you want to do it?"

"We mosey over nice and friendly, sit down and say we want a chat," said Rozena. Johan nodded, but Sipho stood back. Looked panicked. Worried about causing a scene? Or something else.

Reuben got to the table first. Shakes looked up. "What you doing here?" he hissed. Saw the rest of us. His eyes narrowed, but he quickly produced a slick smile. "How sweet. The musicians and the journalists on an outing. Well, I hope you enjoy the band." Waved a hand dismissively. I pulled out a chair.

"Good to see you too, Shakes. Why don't we join you?"

The two men at the table looked uncertainly from Shakes to the group of us. I smiled. "Stay. We're going to have a chat with Shakes. Then we're out of here." The group followed my lead, organised chairs. Reuben glowering fiercely. Rozena sitting close, ready to do damage control. She introduced herself. So did I.

"And you must know the members of Itslikethat – Johan, Sipho, Reuben," I continued, nodding at the three musicians. The two men exchanged glances. "Seen you performing with Ben Wilson. Thought you were session players," said the one. Shaved head, small stud in his

ear. Mid-thirties, same as the other man, this one with thin hair scraped into a ponytail. Leisure suits, gold chains. The Music Executives Guide to Style.

"Jimmy, Dwayne – why don't you order us another round at the bar? My visitors won't be long." Shakes unpeeled a wad of notes. They hesitated, got up and left. Curious looks at all of us. Shakes leant over.

"What the fuck you playing at? You want to speak to me, make an appointment. These are important people I'm entertaining here." Eyes glinting in his dark face.

Reuben jabbed his finger at Shakes. "You've got a fucking nerve. We know what you're doing with these men – you're signing away our CD. Taking all the money."

"It's our music – ours and Ben's. How can you do this?" asked Johan. Folded his arms, flexed bulging muscles. Shakes wasn't intimidated.

"Very easily." Shakes sat back, confident grin. "Before he died, Ben signed a form stating that if anything should happen to him, I would officially be in charge of the band's music. Seeing as he wrote all the songs on the CD, they now belong to me."

"You're lying," said Reuben.

"You don't want to know the truth," said Shakes.

"We played on that CD," said Johan.

"You'll get some money for your recording time. But the CD is going to be a Ben Wilson solo release."

I cut in. "Sure you got the right signature?"

"Oh yes, my sister. Feel free to come around to my office and I'll show you." He smiled dangerously. "I warned you not to waste your time with these losers. I also told you to stay out of my affairs. You're not paying attention. Perhaps you need another reminder?"

Sipho spoke up. "*Mamela*, Shakes. This arrangement with Ben doesn't seem right. Why didn't he tell us?"

"You, of all people, know that everybody always has some secret they don't want others to know. That was the case with Ben. Don't challenge me on it, or you will feel very uncomfortable." Shakes looked straight at Sipho. He blinked, turned away.

"Well, if that's all you've come to chat about, I think this conversation is over." Shakes, back to being Mister Smooth. Reuben and Johan looked punch drunk. Rozena broke the silence.

"Mr Matshikiza," she said, with deadly politeness. I love it when she gets formal. Means she's on the game. "If you have a genuine signature giving away Ben's rights to his music, so be it. But we are going to do our best to get to the bottom of this. I cannot accept these three musicians will have no control over the CD they helped create. You will be hearing from us again."

She rose, linked her arm through Reuben's. Johan and Sipho got up. I added a last shot.

"Don't forget I'm covering this for *Rolling Stone*. All the details, the dirtier the better. 'Manager makes big money from dead musician's songs.' Makes a good story." Jerked my head at Jimmy and Dwayne, over at the bar. "Dunno how they're going to feel about that."

I carried on. "I've got access to all Ben's notes and personal writings. I go through them, I might find something that contradicts your claims. Watch this space."

Thought Shakes was going to reach over and throttle me on the spot. He held back. But the anger on his face was deadly.

"You will regret getting involved in any of this. That I promise." Turned his attention to the bar. Fake smile back on his face. "Jimmy, Dwayne – we're finished here. Where are those drinks?"

We left the music execs to their business. They clearly didn't have a clue what was going on. Slumped back in the car, the trio looked disheartened.

"So much for beating the *moer* out of him." Reuben, upset.

"You did fine. I'm proud of that," said Rozena, glancing at them in the rear view mirror.

"Ag, thanks for coming with us. I just can't believe Shakes. He's got it all sewn up," said Johan.

Sipho didn't speak, just shook his head.

Reuben pushed into the gap between Rozena and I. "Man, you really going to write about this stuff?"

"Reckon so – it's part of the story," I said.

"Think you could find something to help in Ben's notes?"

"Can't promise. Be worth seeing Shakes' face if I did." It had got personal. I didn't like being threatened.

Reuben leant back against Johan. "Shit, it's probably good I didn't hit Shakes. I'm a lover, not a fighter."

Johan rolled his eyes. "You're a player. You're too skinny to be a fighter."

Reuben poked him in the ribs. Johan jabbed back. Started laughing. Turned on Sipho. Major tussling, the guys letting off steam. Back in Rondebosch, everybody in a better mood. They left together in Johan's old bakkie.

Rozena put on the kitchen light. "C'mon – I'm starving. Bet you haven't eaten." My friends usually say that. She found a big pot on the stove.

"Perfect – Guy and the kids left some curry. Open some wine?" Rozena passed over a bottle of red. She doesn't drink alcohol, but keeps a few bottles around for friends. Poured some mineral water for herself. We sat at the long counter table. Food heating up slowly.

"What're we getting into, Kain?"

"Messy, huh?"

"Telling me. Feel like we're losing the plot."

"Which one?"

"The simple one."

"What we got now?"

"Okay, I'll tick it off. Beginning with the brief." Rozena raised the fingers on her hand, started counting down.

"Musician takes drugs, crashes."

One.

"Musician taken out by manager for money, crashes."

Two.

"Musician killed by psycho ex-boyfriend, ditto."

Three.

"Musician tricked by his buddy band members."

Four.

"Last one's weak, Rozena."

She flipped down her last finger.

"Yeah. But I can add a creepy sidebar. Fan of musician bashed to death."

"Ouch."

"Not to mention manager screws band for bucks."

"At least that's a definite."

"So where are we, Kain?"

"Dunno. Doesn't help the deadline."

"My point exactly. We need to decide on an angle."

"How about this? We give it a week. Follow the death trail, see where it goes. Nothing shifts, we stick to the brief."

"We talk about Shakes taking over?"

"Sure. But the accident stays an accident. Drug tragedy."

"What's your first move?"

Anna, Petra, the band, all swore Ben never took hard drugs, never messed with coke. Left one other scenario. Something slipped into his glass after the last gig. Needed to put a face to the scene. Preferably Shakes. Call me biased.

"That friend of yours from *Beat* magazine," I asked Rozena. "Wasn't she at the bar, that night?"

"Joan? I could ask her who was around."

"Cool. And I'll get back to James. He's supposed to tell me about date rape drugs." The kind you could slip into a drink, move off. Wait for the impact.

Rozena checked the curry. Waved a spoon.

"This is ready"

I found plates. Spooned potato, coriander, courgettes into my mouth. Tried not to look too greedy. I had to stop letting my friends feed me. Or make them some food once in a while. I had two helpings.

Feeling like Miss Piggy I ran soapy water into the sink, got domestic. Rozena leaned back, watched.

"So you were in Hout Bay?"

"Uh huh."

"On your own? Enjoying the sights?"

"You're so full of shit."

"That's why you like me."

"Okay. I was with Clay. He was going to make an omelette."

"Handy in the kitchen."

"Don't know. You interrupted."

"And before that?"

"Saw his clinic. Quite impressed. May be a story, actually."

"On what?"

I turned to face her. "I think he's doing good things. The women trust him."

"Good sign. Kain – he sounds okay."

"He's alright. Nice house."

"Like that's so important."

"Yeah."

I dried my hands, made for the front door. Ninja was not going to be impressed. Way past his bedtime. Jane or Edi would have fed him, but he always waited up for me. I prepared to meet a pair of accusing little eyes.

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Thursday morning I stepped over a snoring Ninja, pulled on my gi. He likes to sleep in after a late night. I added some muscle training to my routine. Have a set of weights, don't always use them. After Spencer, I felt juiced. Did arm curls until my wrists were shot. Then 20 kata. Collapsed with a cup of tea.

Spent a couple hours researching women's healthcare facilities on the 'net. Comparing with Clay's set up. Remembered I needed to contact James. Rang the newspaper, he was out on a job. Called his cell.

"Hey Kain. Oops, I was supposed to get back to you about those drugs. Sorry, things have been insanely busy here."

"Me too." I said. "You manage to find anything?"

"Yes, I did. There's this ..." James' voice faded out.

"Can't hear you – bad line ," I said.

Faint voice. "I'm on the road, coming back from a story. You at home?"

"Yup."

"See you in half-an-hour."

The connection died. I put on the kettle. Carried on surfing. Ninja's bark meant James had arrived.

"Come here, ratbag." He swept the dog up with one hand, rubbed his tummy. Ninja loves that. He also really likes James. I couldn't help grinning. Ninja had on his adoring face. James was just – James.

He put the dog on the floor.

"How're things, Kain? You're looking well. Sticking with the Kyokushin?"

"Yeah, same old. You?"

He ran a hand through tousled hair. "Okay. I guess. All work and not much play."

I thought of last year, hours kicking back on the beach. Had been good for both of us. James seemed to read my thoughts. "I haven't had a break since we – you know, since last summer."

"Me too," I replied. Didn't know what else to say.

"So, are you going to offer me some tea?" James smiled, easy.

"Sure. What you've been working on?"

"Pretty gross story. Some kids discovered a bag of stuff at the Langa dump. Opened it, found human tissue, what looked like foetuses. Syringes, old bandages. Medical waste. Dumped."

"Who'd do that?"

"Not sure. Medical waste removal company, not doing the right thing?"

"Shit."

I made a pot of tea, we sat in the lounge. James on the floor, his usual spot. Long legs splayed comfortably, Ninja in his lap.

"Why did you want to know about date rape drugs?"

I told him everything. Started with Ben's death, built up to my feelings about Shakes. Described finding Elmore. Even spoke about Spencer, his anger. James just listened. Was one of the things I'd always liked about him. When he did ask questions, they were usually good. He waited for me to finish.

"What I found, it's pretty easy to get hold of the kind of drugs that'll either knock somebody out or make them woozy. Rohypnol is the most common," he said.

"I've heard of it."

"If you put it in somebody's drink, they won't taste it." James frowned. "An hour or so later, they're gone. Men mostly use it on women. Makes rape a lot easier."

"If you weren't testing for it, like in an autopsy, it wouldn't be picked up?" I asked.

"Right."

"So in Ben's case, they checked for cocaine in his blood because they'd found a stash. But nothing else."

"I assume."

"If he'd been slipped Rohypnol?"

"Taken all the circumstances – it was late, he must have been tired from the gig – Ben could have temporarily lost consciousness. Enough to make him lose control of the car."

"It's what I'm thinking."

James stared at me. "This is pretty heavy territory. Why don't you speak to the police? It's their job."

"I know. But it's starting to get to me, this story."

And I knew the cops had enough shit. Staff cuts, budget problems. A case seems straightforward, like with Ben, they're going to take it that way. Same for Elmore. Also, there were the serial murders. Maybe ongoing. Pressure to solve them.

"Just don't drive too hard. You always do that." James drained his mug, stood up. "Kain, I know all of this could make great copy. But promise me you'll go to the cops if things get really bad."

"Sure. Rozena and I are just playing amateur detectives at the moment."

James nodded. "Part of me understands. You want to do a shit hot job for *Rolling Stone*. Give them more than they bargained for. But I also know you." He paused. "You've always had this strong sense of right and wrong. You can't stand to see someone get away with murder."

"You're right," I said. "I don't want to see that - again."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I called Rozena, told her what James had said. Reckoned Rohypnol, or something like it, had legs. We could run with it. Casually slipped in my showdown with Spencer. Everybody else knew by now. Better tell her myself. Predictable explosion.

"Jeesh Kain! First you find a corpse in a flat, then you get slapped around by some misogynist pig."

"Not like I asked for any of it."

"Not like you were keeping your head down, either."

"I've got a story to write. Can't do that with my head down."

"Oh, enough already. Sometimes you drive me crazy."

"Yeah, you too."

"What next?"

"You're tracking down Joan from *Beat* magazine. I'm carrying on through Ben's papers. See what comes up."

"Chow."

I took James' place on the floor, started sifting through pages and loose notes. Divided them into four sections. Song lyrics, personal writing, material that looked like research for lyrics, business records. Knew the last was most important. But wanted to get back into the personal stuff. Said it before. I liked his style.

Picked up a pattern. Ben sometimes used a shorthand code for people's names. Easy enough to crack. P for Petra, R, J and S were the band, M and D were his parents, etc etc. Probably used it to make the writing flow faster – it was all in freehand. Ben spoke with ease about his relationship with Petra. Often referred to her as his soulmate. Got quite flowery. Not so much of the hard-rocking stage act. Guy was almost naff. In a nice way.

"P and I went for a walk on the mountain this afternoon. Was calm and peaceful. I feel so safe with P. She is my sanctuary."

He also wrote about his relationship with the other band members. Some tension around rehearsal times. Ben was into discipline. The other guys, maybe less. Not a train smash. Ben more funny about then it angry. He liked that the band were getting close. Spending a lot of time together. Playing, hanging out.

"Went for lunch with R to talk about a new rehearsal space. J and S joined us at the Spur in Claremont. Decided we should ask M and D about renting the extra space in the garage at home – could soundproof etc. R owes me R30 bucks – forgot his wallet so I bought his burger. I'll charge him interest, one free beer at the next gig. S said it was worth two."

So much for Shakes' theory about a split. The boys sounded fine together. Unless there was some blow-up I still had to find. Doubted it.

Started to see a reference to an "AnS" that came up more and more often. Couldn't make out if it was a man or woman. How the person fitted into Ben's life. But he was worried about him, or her. That was clear.

"Saw AnS this afternoon, seemed jumpy. Not sure what's going on. It's all going to come out at some stage, I'm sure. I'd say sooner would be better."

I marked all the AnS pages with Stick 'Em notes. Would work on these later. The song lyrics didn't take too long. Well-written, surprisingly serious, as I'd noticed before. Moved on to the research section. Bulky. Paragraphs pulled from web articles, quotes by environmentalists, politicians, artists. Comments on everything from global warming to child abuse. Big section on the nuclear power issue. Ben was an anti-nuker, wanted to use It'slikethat as a platform to sing about it. Right at the end were a series of entries about "SCR". Like the AnS notes, they were cryptic. Also some anxiety here. The last few sentences didn't make sense.

"Am seriously starting to think that SCR could be a possibility. How do I get evidence? And who do I tell?"

Didn't know what Ben was on about. But I marked the pages with Stick 'Ems, just in case.

The business pile was skinny. Bummer. Ben kept a casual record of gigs played, money earned, expenses paid. Not very detailed. Found out Shakes took 20 percent of every gig he organised. He also claimed for advertising and marketing expenses. The boys weren't making huge moola, but Shakes was getting a nice cut. And these were just the figures Ben knew about. Shakes could have been quoting mega-different performance figures. Pocketing the difference. Man had a comfortable lifestyle.

I stretched my legs. Getting uncomfortable on the floor. Hadn't learned much. The band were good buddies and Ben liked using code. Big deal. Didn't know what AnS and SCR meant. Or if it mattered. Didn't look like I would be able to bail out the band. Nothing to show Shakes. Looked at the piles of papers, felt disappointed. Then remembered the notes Elmore had stolen from Ben's room. The ones he'd stored in the shop, brought back to his flat to return to me. Detective Van Vuuren, the investigating officer, said they were sealed as evidence. Out of bounds. But maybe I could have a look. Worth a try. Called Van Vuuren at the Claremont Police Station. He was out, but the officer on duty took my name and number. Said he'd be back soon. While I waited for a reply, checked my email. First message in my inbox was from Bob at *Rolling Stone*.

<To: Khunter@iafrica.com>  
<From: Bguttenberg@Rollingstone.com>  
Subject: Ben Wilson feature. What's up?

Hi Kailan,  
Hope all is well. Just wanting to know what's happening with the Ben Wilson feature. Have you sorted out the drug angle yet? And the band problems? We're counting on a really gripping piece.  
However, if it looks like you're not making any headway, let me know. Soon. I do have an alternative feature on Lebo, who as you know also died in a car crash. It's already been written, so it's ready to go.

Keep in touch,  
Bob

Well, that was just dandy. Shit. I hadn't "made headway" as Bob put it. I was investigating a death which the cops had signed off as an accident. And helping a bunch of musicians hang on to their recording rights. Neither of which was paying my salary. Now it looked like the real bucks might disappear. Along with my reputation. Jesus, the guy had another story already lined up. I knew this was standard practice. But it felt harsh.

Only one way I could keep Bob interested. Convince him what I had was hot. Give him the dirt on Shakes, build the boys into underdogs, make Ben a martyr. Otherwise I'd be toast. With no bucks and a bond to pay. Also, a dog to feed.

I sent a scorcher back. Hoped it would work. Had no other option.

The telephone interrupted. Detective Van Vuuren, returning my call. Reminded him who I was, explained I was writing an article on Ben for *Rolling Stone*. Would need the material taken out of Elmore's flat. Didn't mention ulterior motives. Like trying to find out if Ben was murdered, or if Shakes was lying. Or why Elmore had died. Sounded mental, even to me. He listened, cleared his throat. Slow, pedantic tone. I didn't expect much.

"To be honest, Miss Hunter, I don't think there's anything in that box that's going to help us. Quite frankly, we are all very busy with the murders of those young women – Stephanie Lambrecht and Tania Smith. Just about every detective in the city is on alert."

I made sympathetic noises.

"I wouldn't normally do this, but you did help us find the victim's family." He lowered his voice. "Tell you what. You can come here to the station, go through the box in my office. Just call ahead. We'll make a plan. I'm about to go out now. Try in the next couple of days."

Too good to be true. I wondered what Van Vuuren wanted in return. Call me cynical. Still, it meant I'd see the papers. Agreed to call the detective in a day or two.

Looked out the window. Crappy weather. Radically cold, with a punchy wind. Perfect for hunkering down. Ninja was already arranging his basket. But right now, I felt restless. Nothing

immediate for me to do about Ben's story. A waiting game. I could use the time to generate back-up finances. Get out and get active. Remembered Nosipho at Clay's clinic. Her offer to introduce me to the women who grew the natural herbs. I liked the idea, could work it nicely into the clinic feature. I wanted Rozena to take the pics. Next thing I was driving past Lavender Hill back to Langa.

I didn't particularly need to see Clay. Would have been nice, but distracting. Was focused on Nospiho and her friends. When I arrived it was wall-to-wall patients, anyway. He would be hectic. Nosipho saw me, smiled.

"*Molo Kain. Kunjani?* It's good to see you again."

I greeted her, apologised for not phoning ahead. Explained I wanted to know more about the women who worked with indigenous herbs. Said it would be part of my clinic story. Nosipho looked around the reception area.

"It will be impossible for me to leave right now. I will send you to one of my friends who lives quite close. Her name is Thandi Dikeni. She will be able to help you, I am sure."

Waited while she dialled Thandi's number, made arrangements. Thandi was home. Happy to meet me. "Tell Clay I said hullo. Don't want to bother him," I asked Nosipho. She promised to pass on the message.

Thandi lived around the corner. Literally. I could have walked. Pulled up outside a small white-washed house. Large, green garden plot out front. A plump woman came down the path. Bright orange dress, matching headscarf, early forties I guessed. Generous smile.

"*Molo, sisi.* You must be Kain. Welcome," she beamed. "Nospiho said you wanted to see my garden. Come, I'll show you."

Neat rows of herbs, flowering plants. Thandi pointing out what each one was, what it could be used for. Told me both the traditional and the English names. Some I'd heard of, like Lemon Grass. Good for cooling irritated skin. Others, like Penny Royal, I wasn't so sure of. Thandi rubbed leaves between her fingers.

"This one, it must never be taken by a pregnant woman. She will lose the baby. We make a tea with it, and drink it when we have bad menstrual cramps. It's very good for that – but it's dangerous for a woman carrying a child."

Smelt innocuous. I believed her. Thandi was dead serious about her plants. Knew a lot. Asked her where she learnt about this stuff.

"Come inside, I'll make you a cup of tea and we'll talk. Don't worry, it will be normal tea," she joked.

We walked through a small lounge crowded with a lounge suite and a large TV. Into a tidy kitchen. Thandi did things with cups and a kettle. I sat at the table.

"My mother was the one who got me interested in plants. She was a sangoma, a traditional healer. I was never called to be the same. But I was always asking about the plants, since I was little. She taught me, and now I also show my friends," Thandi said.

"Do they all have gardens like yours?" Thandi's set-up was impressive.

"No, I'm lucky. This was my husband's parent's house. We moved in when they passed on. It's got a big plot, and my husband doesn't like gardening. He is happy to let me grow my plants," she said. "Some of my friends have small patches that they can grow on. Others help me here. We do this thing together."

"What's your relationship with the clinic?" I asked. Thandi put two mugs of tea on the table, sat down.

"Nosipho told Dr Parker about us. At first he wasn't so sure, but then he saw how the women listen to us. If they have a pain, they come here and we can help. He was interested to see if we could work together."

"And do you?"

"I am slowly showing him what plants he can use. Like the Penny Royal, for instance. He buys from us – but only the ones he knows about."

"The women will take traditional herbs from a conventional doctor?" I asked.

"Dr Parker is getting a good reputation here in Langa. Many women say he is the one to go to for help. He is very busy, but never too busy to turn people away. Also, he will deal with things that some women are afraid to talk about." Thandi looked conspiratorially at me.

"Like what?"

"You know. Safe abortions, HIV/AIDS, sexually-transmitted diseases, those kinds of things."

"The general hospitals also cover that."

"They do – but often it is difficult to get there. Also sometimes your family may find out. At Dr Parker, it is very confidential. Nobody knows who gets what done. He doesn't talk. Also, women trust him because of his work with us and the herbs."

She shook her head.

"*Eish*. This HIV/AIDS – it is the biggest problem we have at the moment. That, and also young girls getting pregnant. The boys just disappear, and the girls have to raise the children on their own. They can get a grant, but I am not sure how much it helps. Many just drop out of school," Thandi said. "I have two nieces, both teenagers. The one – I am sure she is pregnant, but she is hiding it. What can I do?"

We got into a little routine about the kids of today. Agreed that the times were a'changing. My tea was sweet and hot, things were cosy in Thandi's kitchen. Didn't want to go out in the cold, but time was moving. "I'd better be off." I stood up. Said I'd be around with a photographer, if she didn't mind.

"Not at all – you must come back. Maybe you can try one of my special teas, next time," Thandi smiled mischievously. "I have one that is good for the appetite. All kinds of appetite."

Shit. Could the woman see I hadn't had any action for a while? Had to do something about that.

I waved, drove off. Somehow took a wrong turn. Instead of leaving Langa, found myself deeper in the township. Passed some people at a fruit and veg stall. Lowered my car window to ask for directions. Scanned the group, passed over a couple holding hands. Came back to them. Two shocked faces. Bright blue eyes behind glasses, a spray of funky dreadlocks. Anna Wilson and Sipho Mazana. Hanging out in Langa. Not happy to see me.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Nowhere to hide. Ann and Sipho, frozen like bunnies in a headlight. If I hadn't been caught on the back foot myself, I would have laughed. Who would have guessed?

Sipho leaned into my car window. Sickly smile.

"Hullo, Kain. Um, what are you doing here? I mean, what a coincidence. You know, us being in the same place at the same time ... " Anna stood behind him, saying nothing. Pale as the proverbial sheet. We probably all looked a bit strange. The fruit-seller and his customers were staring at us.

"You on your way somewhere? If I give you a lift, you could show me the road back to the freeway." They glanced at each other, looked back at the fruit stand crowd, nodded.

"Okay," said Anna. She slipped onto the back seat, Siphos settled in next to me.

"We were going to catch a taxi back to Mowbray – this will help, thanks," he said. Spent the next couple of minutes guiding me back to the freeway. Fell silent as I slipped into the traffic stream.

I didn't want to bust the two of them. Whatever was going on was their business. But felt irritated. Another little intrigue to add to the Ben Wilson saga. We'd had the drugs and the rock 'n' roll. Time for the sex. I guess. Why else would they look so guilty?

Eventually, Anna spoke. Defiant.

"Are you going to tell anybody you saw us here today? Like, my parents or something?"

"Why would I?" I asked. Added: "Why shouldn't I?"

"It's just that, they don't know. About Siphos and I. Neither do his family. We're, um, going out together."

No, really?

Still pouty. "All of them would freak. I'm still at school, I'm not supposed to be seriously dating. Specially not somebody older than me."

She rolled her eyes. "Also, my Mum and Dad say they're really liberal. They like Siphos. But I don't think they're ready for this."

Siphos nodded. Anna went on.

"They'd lose it if they knew I came to Langa. They'd think it was dangerous. But it's not. We've got friends here."

Siphos broke in. "My parents would think I was being very irresponsible, playing around with a smart city girl. A white one. They want me to marry somebody from our community."

"How long's this been going on?"

"About a year," said Anna. "We met because of the band."

Siphos broke in. "We were rehearsing at Ben's house, we needed the space. Anna used to bring us coffee, hang out. We started talking," he grinned.

"You were there when I came to Siphos's place, right?" I asked Anna. She nodded.

"It's about the only place we can be together, without a hassle. I hid in the bathroom when you arrived. We didn't know if you would tell on us."

Siphos spoke further. "Sometimes we come out to Langa to visit some friends of mine – that's why we were here today. But mostly we just do stuff together – we listen to CDs, we watch DVDs. We talk a lot."

"Aren't you supposed to be at school today?" I asked Anna.

"No, it's exam time. In theory, I'm studying at the library. But it's cool – I always get good marks," she said.

Ah, the confidence of youth.

Mowbray was close. Siphos and Anna's relationship didn't have anything to do with my story. Just explained why Siphos had acted so weirdly when we'd met. And maybe let him off the hook about the CD. Would he really sell out his girlfriend's brother? Nah. More likely Anna was the reason he'd been so shifty. Personally I didn't give a damn.

"Anybody else know about this?" I wondered.

Anna smiled sadly. "Ben knew. He was the only one. He was amazing. About all of it."

Siphos looked out the window. Weird. Had the feeling he was still holding back.

"Sure – nobody else knows," he said. Wasn't sure if I believed him. Couldn't work out why he would lie.

"Look, this stays with me. And maybe my partner Rozena."

Relieved faces.

"But," I continued, "This turns out to have anything to do with my story, all bets are off."

We reached the Mowbray terminus. They hopped out. Watched them weave through the crowds. Siphos, his arm around Anna. She smiling up at him. Doing the happy couple thing. Pity about the parents.

Something clicked. Ben's notes. AnS. Anna and Siphos. He knew, had been concerned. Made sense. Was tough, to have to hide a relationship. At least one thing had been cleared up.

Was late afternoon, I was hungry. Stopped at a Mowbray café, bought some samoosas. Grease quota for the day. Standing in the queue to pay, I caught massive headlines on the front page of the evening newspaper.

"KILLER STRIKES AGAIN: ANOTHER BODY FOUND."

I added a copy to my bill. Sat in my car, ate the samoosas, scanned the story.

"The body of a naked woman was found on the Cable Car road early this morning by a jogger. Although she has not yet been identified, police have confirmed that a murder docket has been opened. Investigating Officer Rashid Salie said that although the investigation is still proceeding, preliminary findings are that her murder follows a similar pattern to two other cases recorded in Cape Town this year."

Hands bound behind her back with her own bra. Numerous blows to her face and body. Strangled to death. Unidentified, so far. Police would be release a photograph, see if anybody came forward.

Obviously victim number three. Same killer. She would probably have things in common with the other women. Young. Attractive. Maybe out at a club, night of her death.

My cell rang. James.

"How's today's paper?" I said to him. "Something almost ritualistic about the killings."

"You don't know the half of it. I get the inside skinny from the crime desk. I can't even listen anymore."

"Heavy duty."

"For sure." James paused. "I've got more information about Rohypnol."

"Tell me."

"Not over the phone. It's ... a bit strange. Can we meet?"

"I'm in Mowbray. Make it town?"

"Yeah. Manenberg's in 20 minutes? Too early for the main crowd, we can talk."

Wasn't so keen on going back there. But it was convenient.

"Meet you there."

Funny. Hadn't seen James in ages. Now two meetings in as many days. Was okay, though - he was as easy as ever. I was glad. No baggage from before. Dusted samoosa crumbs off my jeans, started the car.

James was at a quiet window seat. He got a beer, I went for water. He looked tired, lines etched around his eyes.

"Rough day?" I asked.

"Yeah. They found another of those medical waste bags. Some kid is going to get stuck with an infected needle, unless this thing is followed up."

"Dangerous."

"Yeah. And we all got co-opted into the serial murder story. Even the arts journalists. They had to look at clubs, how safe they are. Stuff like that."

"And you?"

"Well, this is where it goes weird. You know I've been talking to the crime guys, who've been getting leaks from the cops?"

I nodded.

"We know the name of the third woman. Maureen Paterson. 25-years-old, a call centre manager. Lived on her own."

I looked at him.

"But that's not it. Thing is, they'd all been ... mutilated."

He took a breath.

"We can't print most of it. Could bugger up the investigation. Wouldn't want to, anyway. It's too harsh."

He looked away from me.

"They'd all been raped, Kain. With a broken bottle. And then the bottle was shoved in their mouths. Along with their nipples. That's how the cops found them - with their lips shredded."

Involuntarily, I ran my tongue around my own mouth. Couldn't imagine the feel of a broken bottle. Didn't want to.

"Anyway," James carried on, "I was called in to do scout around a drug angle. Figure this - because I cover the health beat, the news editor reckoned I may have the right contacts. Crazy. But turns out he was right. Although it was a complete fluke."

"What drug angle?"

"This is the thing, Kain." James scanned the room before leaning forward. Spoke softly. "All three of the women had traces of Rohypnol in their blood. The forensic teams were especially looking for it, because of the circumstances. They'd obviously been drugged at whatever clubs they were at, then led out."

Rohypnol. Again. Different context, same drug. On the surface, nothing to link the murdered women and Ben Wilson. But the idea was there. Slip somebody the drug, wait for trouble. That was the common denominator.

Could be another one. The source of the drugs.

"Where d'you get Rohypnol? If not through a prescription?"

"You're thinking like my news editor. He wanted me to ask around, find out about black market sources. It was a crazy suggestion. The health beat has got nothing to do with drugs. But it paid off."

He finished his beer, ordered a second. I stuck with the water.

"So what happened?"

James did have a contact. Nothing to do with health issues. She was the girlfriend of a cousin of his. Had a little pill problem.

"Janice is a sad case. She's about 30-years-old, super-smart, high-powered job. Thing is, she gets stressed." James sipped his beer, carried on. "Anyway, during the day Janice functions like an uber-manager. Seriously gets things done. When she leaves the office, she comes undone. Uses anything she can to unwind. And she's built up a reliable list of suppliers."

"She doesn't take Rohypnol for fun?"

"No ways. She's more into Valium, Xanax. But she did give me the number of a man who deals in Rohypnol. And he's willing to meet me. Confidentially, of course. I think he liked the idea of a feature, even though he'd be anonymous. Some people are odd ..."

James tailed off, tired smile on his face.

"When you seeing him?"

"Thought you'd ask. You want to come along, right? Sort out the Ben Wilson theory?"

"You've got me."

"It's tomorrow afternoon. I'll call you, once it's set up."

Cool. We clinked glasses across the table. I noticed a familiar figure striding into the bar. Shakes, stylish as ever. Hoped he wouldn't see us. Wasn't in the mood for a fight. But he surprised me.

Spotting our table, he swiftly came across. Smiling, energetic. "Heita, Kain. Nice to see you in Manenberg's again. You staying for the band?" He looked queringly at James. I introduced them.

"Nice to meet you, brother. Well, I'm going to order a drink. I get you something?"

We said no, we were going to leave. Shakes said it was a pity. Said goodbye, practically bounced to the bar.

It threw me off. Maybe I liked it better when he was openly pissed off. What I picked up behind this latest façade was a suppressed amount of anger.

"That the music manager you told me about? Quite the dude," said James as we left.

"I don't trust him. Think he's lying. He'll lose a lot of money if we bust him." I paused. "He won't be happy."

"I said it before – be careful, Kain."

"Always. Thanks for the Rohypnol tip. See you tomorrow." Walked towards my car. Stopped. Shook my head. Parked next to my jeep was a black Audi with vanity plates. "Shake my Booty". The music manager was something else.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Next morning, my *Bassai-Dai* kata sequence was like a dream. I Moved Into The Zone. That's what my karate sensei calls it when you push through a pain barrier, and it feels like you're floating. His pain barrier is majorly higher than mine, though. I'd worked hard. Had bad dreams about the murdered women, James' descriptions messing with my head. Woke up sweaty. Was soaked by the time I finished my kata. Brushed up my *Oi-zuki* – stepping punches. Finished with a few hammerfist and knifehand strikes.

Even so, felt restless. Couldn't still. Thought I'd bug Van Vuuren. Later, I had a date with a drug dealer.

Van Vuuren answered after one ring, sounded busy. I asked if I could come over, look at the papers in Elmore's box. He hesitated.

"We're under a lot of pressure at the moment, Miss Hunter. This latest murder ..."

I made sympathetic noises. Didn't back down. "Won't take me long. It would really help my *Rolling Stone* piece."

He finally agreed. I scooped gunk into Ninja's bowl, left.

Claremont Police Station was stark, functional, like most cop shops in the city. Non-descript facebrick building. Charge office with stressed men and women in blue. Asked for Van Vuuren. Was directed upstairs to the detective's rooms. Found him sitting behind a desk piled with paperwork, speaking rapidly on the phone. Empty desk on the other side of the room. He pointed there. I sat, waited.

When he finished he looked over. "Miss Hunter, good morning." Big man, pale skin. Short brown hair, thick moustache. Intelligent eyes set in thick pouches of tiredness. He wore a beige shirt stretched over a round stomach. Sleeves rolled up to the elbows. He got down to business.

"The box is there, under Khumalo's desk. I pulled it from storage. You can work here, Khumalo's out on a job."

"I'll be fast," I said optimistically. Unpacked the jumble of papers. Van Vuuren watched, turned back to his own work. We shuffled pages. Odd situation. There's usually a border between cops and journalists. Van Vuuren was going out of his way. Couldn't figure out why. Maybe find out later.

Elmore's papers were easy to sort. Plain black notebooks, turned out to be personal journals. What was with these guys, keeping diaries like teenage girls? First Ben, now Elmore. Kind of hey shoo wow, as Rozena would say.

I didn't read them in detail. Didn't want to get sucked into bad poetry or something. Anyway, they'd hardly be relevant. There were formal sheets, admission documents to study cartoon animation at a local art college. Plain brown folder filled with receipts for rent, telephone, electricity bills. Pay cheques, bank records. Elmore may have been an obsessive fan, and kept a weird girlie diary. But the guy was neat.

A couple of large drawing books were filled with sketches of animated cartoon characters. The storyboards were complex, edgy designs. Not kid's stuff. More like contemporary graphic novels. Funky and thinky. No wonder Elmore dug Ben's band.

So far, no sign of Ben's stuff.

Van Vuuren glanced over. Cleared his throat. "So, *Rolling Stone*, hey?" Didn't know what he was driving at. Maybe thought I was bullshitting, wanted to know what I was really up to. Probably didn't know much about the magazine. Here, it was pricey, not easy to find. Only music freaks bought it.

"Yeah. They're doing a South African feature."

"And they want to use this Ben Wilson chap?"

I rolled out my line about the tragic death of a talent, etc etc.

He grunted, turned back to his work. Every few minutes his phone would ring, he'd speak in short bursts, English, Afrikaans. Sounded stressed.

Guess my story was trivial, compared to the serial killings.

Putting down one of Elmore's drawing books, a few pages fell loose. Thought they were more sketches. Stopped. Recognised Ben's writing. Bingo. The stuff Elmore had snatched from Ben's bedroom, with the leather jacket. Must have fetched the pages from Nexus, kept them in the book for safekeeping before meeting me. Felt a buzz of anticipation.

More of Ben's private musings, comments about Petra and the band, references to AnS. Also photostat copies of what looked like medical notes. Skimmed through, seemed to be about abortions and miscarriages. Handwritten comments, the letters SCR again. Put all of these to one side. To be continued. Next bunch of papers looked good. Five sheets of typed text, two signatures on the final page. Stapled to the front was an envelope, the South African Music Rights Organisation (SAMRO) stamped on it. Started reading. Tough shit, Shakes.

The first page was headed ITSLIKETHAT COMPOSITION, RECORDING AND DISTRIBUTION AGREEMENT. The papers dated before Itlikethat recorded their new material. Obviously meant to sort out legal and other matters. Before the band even went into the studio.

A lot of formal language. I got the gist. Wasn't a contract. Was a document spelling out the terms and conditions of any Itlikethat material released. The rights to all the songs recorded for demo or distribution purposes belonged to the composer of the songs, as legally registered with SAMRO. Without SAMRO registration, all rights would fall away.

With Itslikethat, Ben was the composer. As "owner" of the songs, he agreed to divide all proceeds from CD sales equally between band members. He named all of them in the document. Each musician in Itslikethat had the same share.

Nice of Ben. He could have taken a bigger cut for himself. Must be all that sensitive journal writing. Makes you a better person.

Read further. If a distribution deal was signed with a recording company, the agreement still stood. An additional clause. If any musician was no longer in the band, including Ben, the remaining members would divide the profits between them.

No mention of Shakes Matshikiza on any of the pages. The document was signed by Ben. Dated four months ago. Legally stamped. There was one witness signature. Clay Parker. Realised I had been holding my breath, let it out in a rush. Van Vuuren looked over.

"Everything okay?" he enquired.

"Fine, just resting my eyes." He grunted, turned back to his desk.

I opened the SAMRO envelope, found what I had hoped to see. A list of Itslikethat songs, all composition rights credited to Ben Wilson, acknowledged by SAMRO. An additional credit list naming Reuben, Sipho and Johan as musical colleagues, with their signatures. I had potentially hit paydirt. And I had a problem. No way Van Vuuren would let me take anything from the office. He'd already done me a favour. But I needed these papers.

Was this why Elmore's flat had been tossed? Didn't make sense. Only I knew he was Ben's burglar – until his death. Okay, I'd told David and Miranda and Clay, but they hardly counted. Maybe I'd been followed. Felt creepy. Had Elmore been killed because of this document? It was only because it was tucked into his drawing book that it hadn't been found.

Basically, this was a legal document that placed ownership of the new Itslikethat material with Ben. And in his absence, all the bucks would be divided equally. Backed by SAMRO accreditation, legally signed and witnessed. Shakes was calling our bluff. Whatever he had was shit.

Big question, how much did he know? Petra and the musicians said Ben wanted to drop Shakes. The document backed this up. Ben had been getting everything in order. Minus the manager. More to the point – minus the manager's cut of the deal. Enough motivation to kill Ben, fake a new recording contract? Maybe.

Meanwhile, I had to get this stuff out the station. Van Vuuren didn't look like he was going anywhere. Working the phones, ploughing through paperwork. Short of shooting him, or offering sexual favours, I was stuck. Didn't want to do either.

A hefty policewoman poked her head through the door. "Come on, Van Vuuren. It's Bokkie's birthday today, there's cake in the kitchen. *Maak gou* if you want a piece."

Small smile below Van Vuuren's moustache. He looked like a cake kind of man.

"*Dankie* Rita, I'll be there." Looked at me. "Will you be much longer?"

"Almost done."

"I'll just be a minute." Van Vuuren swept eagerly down the passage.

Office empty. I folded the pages I wanted, stuck them in my bag. Van Vuuren came back, brushed chocolate crumbs off his shirt. I put the last of Elmore's belongings back into his box.

"Thanks, Detective. Nothing I can use. But I'm glad I checked."

Van Vuuren walked me out.

"Tell me," I said, curious. "How come you let me see the box? You said I helped find Elmore's parents. But you would have got them eventually."

Van Vuuren went sheepish. Glanced over his shoulder. Empty corridor.

"No man, it's just that I've been a *Rolling Stone* fan for years, *mos*. I've got a friend in the States who sends me his old copies. I don't like the stuff about the new bands so much, but the main *ballies* – you know, Pete Townsend, the Grateful Dead, even Van Morrison – I love reading about them." His pale face flushed slightly. "When you said you were writing for the magazine, I thought I could do my bit."

I hid a smile. Van Vuuren, old-fashioned moustache, bland shirt. Closet rock fan. What could I say?

"You've certainly done that, Detective Van Vuuren."

Decided I liked the guy.

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I sat in the police station parking lot. What I had in my bag would save Reuben, Johan and Siphon from being ripped off by Shakes. But it moved the murder motive upfront. Maybe even two murders. Time to call in the cops? Maybe Van Vuuren would listen.

Wasn't sure I had enough evidence. My theory was based on a lot of gut feel. I didn't trust Shakes, he'd pissed me off. And he was mean. But that didn't prove anything. How would we link him to Elmore, for starters? He'd said he didn't know what Nexus was. And we still couldn't put him at the club the night of Ben's death.

Would have get the ducks in a neater row before I spoke to Van Vuuren. Wanted to check the Itslikethat document was solid. Clay, as a witness, would know. Ditto the SAMRO rights. The band would know about those.

When I phoned the Plumstead flat, a sleepy Johan answered.

"Ag, sorry. I just got up."

12 noon. Early in Plumstead.

"Quick question. You remember signing a SAMRO document a few months back?"

"Um, dunno. Signed a few things for Ben."

"This one registered Itslikethat compositions with Ben."

"Ja, I had forgotten about that. Ben wanted to get the rights organised before we recorded." There was a pause. "But it wasn't a business deal. Just said who wrote what songs."

"I know. Those are definitely your signatures on the SAMRO forms?"

"For sure. I remember Ben bringing them around. We had a band practice, a few beers afterwards. We said he was *lekker parat*."

"Because he was so organised?"

"Ja. The rest of us are slack about that kind of thing. Why you ask?"

"Nothing yet. Let you know."

Was looking better. Needed to check things with Clay. Left a message on his cell. Meantime, I had a drug dealer to meet.

On cue, James called. Could hear the newsroom in the background.

"We're on. Guy sounds like a complete sleazeball. But maybe he'll say something that helps. I'm kind of bribing him with the possibility of a feature. Maybe you can mention *Rolling Stone*?"

"Sure. Tell him we're bringing Kate Moss and Amy Winehouse for the photoshoot. Drug chic."

"He might even believe you. This guy – name's Robin – reckons he hangs out with all the movers and shakers. Major bullshit artist."

We arranged to meet at an address in Vredehoek. James was waiting when I got there. Small semi-detached house. Half the neighborhood middle-class families, other half yuppies. The dealer blending into city suburbia. Gussed the families didn't visit Robin much. Maybe the yuppies had chemical reasons to be sociable.

"We've got our stories right? I'm doing a feature on the designer lives of drug dealers, and you're on assignment from *Rolling Stone*?" said James

"C'mon James, nobody's going to fall for that."

"You haven't met Robin."

His house was surrounded by a high wall with a security gate. Standard for the area. Pushed the buzzer. Low voice asked who we were, released the lock. We walked through the garden to an iron grid barring the front door. Somebody peeked through a spyhole, decided we were safe. Grid and door popped open.

Robin had a narrow, bony face, thin mesh of dark hair. Tall, skinny. Black shirt hanging loosely over leather pants. Washed-grey eyes darting from James to me, measuring us up.

"Yo. Robin's the name. Mi casa su casa."

He really said that.

Moved into a dimly-lit living room. Curtains drawn, damp smell off the carpet. Robin offered us coffee, went off to make it. I sat on a couch with tattered armrests. Looked around. Few old chairs, not much else. Perhaps Robin entertained the movers and shakers elsewhere.

He brought three mugs. Arranged himself on the floor, leather legs crossed.

"So, how can I help you?"

The coffee was awful.

James explained he wanted to know how the "alternative" drug scene worked in the city.

Robin gave a worldly sigh.

"Let me spell it out, people. You have to realise I deal with the cream of the crop. We're not talking low-life here. I run a door-to-door service, confidentiality guaranteed."

Considering the product, I would hope so.

He continued. "It's the big thing in New York, London, places like that. I've travelled a lot, seen it for myself. Came back here, set up shop. Man, I have to turn down clients I'm so busy."

We made suitably awed faces.

"Way it works, somebody talks to a friend who talks to somebody else. If they're lucky, my name gets mentioned. They get a cellphone number – the one you called – and they contact me. I suss them out. They sound legit, we deal."

Robin explained his clients sent him a wish-list of pharmaceuticals. He then placed his order with a chemist who took a thirty percent cut. He delivered to his clients' homes, on a cash-only basis.

"See, the people I supply don't want to be bothered with street deals. They just want a little something to relax, and what they want they can't always get over the counter. So I help them." Robin made a sly face. "You guys, you wouldn't believe some of the names I supply. TV stars, celebs - they're in the social pages every week."

Robin getting into the role of savvy city dealer. Educating the naïve journalists. Trouble was, he couldn't pull it off. The shabby house, the cheap coffee, Robin himself, all spelt loser. Even talking to us seemed unprofessional. Like a serious drug supplier would discuss his operation with a couple journalists he'd just met?

Still, he might be useful. I let Robin carry on for a while about his high-powered business, then cut in.

"I'm wondering whether a couple of people I know use your service. You deal Rohypnol?"

"Rohypnol, Valium, Xanax, you name it. Actually, I'm one of the few operators in town who can get this stuff. It's tricky to organise. It's mainly guys who want the Rohypnol – know what I mean?" Robin smirked.

Felt like hitting him. Kept my face neutral.

"One person I'm thinking about is a really big guy, tall, brown hair, eyes. Big scar across his chin."

Suspect number one, Spencer.

Robin mused. "I would remember the scar. Nope, doesn't ring a bell."

I described Shakes. Suspect number two. Drew another blank. It was a long shot, and I knew it. Robin wasn't the only dealer in town, not even a major player. Bummer.

I let James take over, tuned Robin out. James soon shut the conversation down.

"Thanks for your time. "

Robin looked surprised to see us leaving. "Hey, have you got enough for the story? I can tell you more about my time in New York, the deals I made there."

Sure. I'd enjoy that as much as impaling myself on a stake.

Still, I gave him my card with my number. "Think of anything else, give me a call." Robin put it into the pocket of his leather pants. Nodded eagerly.

"You need to follow up anything, use my cell. I probably won't be staying here anymore. The lease is finished and I need to find a new place," he said.

Yeah right. In other words, he was skipping the rent.

As James and I walked away from the house, I felt grimy. Robin's "upmarket business" was another name for peddling a world of pain. Wanted to take a shower.

"Talk about creepy," said James.

I agreed. Part of me was already working out how to close Robin down. A tip-off to the police? Would think about it.

Halfway home, my cell rang. Clay.

"Hey Kain, got your message."

"I've got something I need you to explain." I glanced over at my bag, made sure the Itslikethat papers were still safe.

"That sounds ominous," he said. Sounded hesitant.

"Nope, I think it's good news. Like to come over to my house to talk?"

"You've caught my attention. I'll finish off here, drive through."

I gave Clay directions to my home. Made a detour to the local deli, picked up herbed prawns, crusty bread, olives. A decent bottle of merlot. If the Itslikethat papers were legitimate, there would be reason to celebrate.

Got home, showered off the sordid feel of the afternoon. Found clean jeans, my favourite black polo-neck. Even swapped my hiking boots for a newish pair of Nikes. Ninja looked impressed.

Time Clay arrived I had a fire going, merlot uncorked. It wasn't a date, really. But I was looking forward to the evening.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ninja seemed to recognise Clay from the beach walk, gave him a friendly greeting. Not the one which involves aeronautic choreography. That's reserved for a chosen few. Still, Clay looked pleased.

He gave me a hug, stepped back. Kept his arms loosely around my shoulders.

"It's really good to see you again, Kain." Our eyes locked. Felt a miniature revolution going on in my stomach. Well, lower. I smiled, broke away.

"Something to drink?"

"That'd be great. But you must tell me what your call was all about. The suspense has been killing me."

"Could be good news."

Clay looked questioningly at me.

"Sit. I'll bring stuff through."

Came back into the lounge with the olives, merlot, glasses and the Itslikethat papers. Clay was staring at the sea.

"You have a beautiful view – it's stunning here," he said.

"Yeah. Different to your side of the mountain. I don't get sunsets. But the sunrises are amazing."

"Would be good to see."

Like from my bedroom window. Hm. I poured wine, offered olives. Clay looked pointedly at the papers.

"Is that what you wanted me to ask me about? They look familiar."

I flicked to the page with Clay's signature.

"You were a witness, few months ago."

Clay took the papers, nodded.

"Yes, I remember. Ben needed to get these signed and posted in a hurry, and his father was away. He asked me to do it. They're copyright documents."

"Since Ben is dead, they're now more than that."

Clay's forehead creased. "How so?"

I realised he knew nothing about Shakes' plan to release the material and take the money. I hadn't told him, and I guess nobody else had either. No reason to, really. I gave Clay an abbreviated version. Didn't get into my theory about Shakes – or anybody else – being involved in Ben's accident. Would wait until I had something stronger to work with.

Clay listened, broke in.

"No wonder you wanted me to see these. You want to know if they're legitimate, in terms of what will happen to Reuben and Johan and Siphos?"

I nodded.

He grinned. "Absolutely. Ben was emphatic about control of the music. He wanted to keep it all in the hands of the band."

He carried on. "What you have here is proof of ownership. It's a legally binding contract."

He raised his glass. "I'm not sure how you found the document, and perhaps I shouldn't ask. But whatever Shakes has, it won't hold up. You did well, Kain."

Couldn't wait to see Shakes' face when I told him. Felt smug. Also something else. Clay and I were sitting side-by-side on the couch. I turned to him same time he moved towards me. When we kissed he tasted warm and woody. Faint tang of merlot. We started slow, couldn't hold the pace. Ripped off each other's tops. Felt skin against skin. Got sweaty. Got rid of our jeans. Got down on the floor. We moved well together. Both hot, urgent. I hadn't felt this good in ages.

Finally we lay back, my cheek resting on Clay's chest. Could feel his breathing slow down.

"You okay?" he asked quietly.

I nodded, smiled. Put my head back on his chest. Stayed like that for a while, the fire slowly burning down. Romantic moment – until my stomach grumbled. "You hungry?" I asked Clay.

"Guess you are," he grinned. Tucked a strand of hair behind my ear.

We went to the kitchen. I threw a salad together, Clay found plates, knives, forks. Banked up the fire, put on some Miles Davis. Sat on the floor and ate. Did cheesy things like feed each other prawns. Spoke about inconsequential things, laughed a lot. It got late.

Clay took my hand.

"I know we've gotten to meet under strange circumstances. I'm not in a hurry to rush into anything, and I don't think you are either," he said. "But I want you to know, I really like being with you, Kain."

"Me too," I said. Meant it.

We kissed for a long time. Eventually Clay pushed to his feet. "I'd better go. Early start tomorrow at the clinic."

We walked arm-in-arm to the door. After Clay left, I stood in the garden looking at the ocean. Could smell damp fynbos and clean sea air. A soft, spicy taste on my lips.

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Woke up in a perky mood. That's not an adjective I use very often, but it fitted. It was early but I didn't want to laze around in bed. Wanted to phone Rozena and the Itslikethat boys to tell them the news. Reckoned I'd hold off. Half-past-seven on a Saturday morning. Not everybody would be feeling perky, I guessed.

Made scrambled eggs for Ninja and I. Weekends I don't always workout – my sensei says you got to rest to get strong. But wanted to burn off some energy. Took Ninja for a climb on the mountainside. Sun struggling through a fat bank of clouds, ground soaked with dew. I pushed uphill, enjoyed the sear in my calves. Ninja skittered ahead. Reached a firebreak, took a rest on a tree stump. Hadn't been up here in ages. Watched Ninja following the line of the break. Saw how easy it was to use as a footpath from the upper mountain road. Wasn't as slippery as I'd thought. Remembered the knife gouges on my door. It explained how the intruder had got away so fast.

Time we got back home I couldn't wait any longer. Phoned Rozena first. No answer on her landline, cell went to voicemail. Same for the Plumstead flat. Siphon's cell was also off. Shit. Everybody except me was sleeping. I left messages for everybody to call. Decided to go through the rest of Ben's notes while I waited.

Wanted to read the most recent papers from Elmore's box. Especially the medical ones. Had only skimmed them at the police station. Couldn't figure out why they were with Ben's personal pages. The material seemed to come from a health guide, or a textbook.

"Abortion was made legal in South Africa with the implementation of the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1996.

Abortion is very safe. It is safer than giving birth and safer than receiving an injection of penicillin. Like all medical procedures, there are some risks with abortion, but the risk is comparatively minimal.

The risk of death associated with childbirth is about 10 times as high as that associated with abortion. Unless you have a complication during or after the abortion, abortion has no impact on your future ability to get pregnant or carry a pregnancy to term."

Several pages with similar info, including lists of clinics and costs. I sat back in my chair, frowned. What was it for? Struck me. Petra. She must have been pregnant. They were looking at abortion options, getting background details. Perhaps Petra was still pregnant. Carrying her dead boyfriend's child. Crap thought.

By now it was mid-morning. Not too late to phone. Petra picked up. Least somebody was answering their calls.

"This is going to sound personal, Petra. But I'm wondering. Been going through Ben's notes, found a whole bunch of stuff about abortion services."

Silence. I carried on.

"There was a list of clinics in Cape Town."

Still no response. I kept going.

"Was this something the two of you were thinking about?" I asked. "Are you ... do you need any help?"

Call me blunt. But I wanted to know. I'd probably pissed her off.

When Petra spoke, her voice was puzzled.

"Nothing like that, Kain. I can't understand why Ben would've had those notes. But no – I'm not pregnant." She spoke softly. "I ... we were always very careful."

"Sorry if I was pushy."

"It's okay. It does sound strange."

"Any idea why Ben would have been doing this research?"

"No – as I said, I really don't know."

Least I had good news. Told Petra about the copyright documents. That Reuben, Johan and Siphon would be in full control of the new CD.

"That's awesome, Kain. I was sure Ben had things sorted. This just proves it."

"Yeah."

"So Shakes won't be involved?" she asked.

"No. You were right about Ben wanting to cut Shakes out."

"He's going to be angry. I saw him lose his temper once, and it was ugly," said Petra.

"He's got to find out at some stage." Hopefully I would be the person to tell him. Call me nasty.

"That's what worries me."

"Not much he can do."

"I don't know ... he's got a violent side."

"Right now Shakes thinks he's in control. He knows Reuben, Johan and Siphon aren't a threat," I said. "But he's got nothing to back up his story. Some fake document, that's it."

"I don't like where this is going, Kain. Shakes is dangerous, I mean it. When I told you I thought there was something wrong about Ben's accident, I wasn't thinking of him. But now I'm not so sure."

"I'm with you on that."

"Don't you think you – we – should speak to the police?"

"No evidence. They'll laugh at us."

"Two people had definite reasons for getting rid of Ben. Shakes and Spencer. And one of them has got away with it, so far."

"I'm leaning that way myself. But we need more proof."

"A person may have been killed!"

"I get you, Petra. But don't forget Ben's parents aren't keen to re-open the investigation. And the cops have closed the case. We'll need more to convince them," I said.

"I know they want to let it rest. And a part of me also wants that. But I can't let it go while I still have doubts ... " Petra trailed off.

"Look, Rozena and I are looking at a few angles. We'll keep in touch. I swear."

Not much else I could say.

My phone was still silent. No replies to my messages. I went back to Ben's notes. The next few pages covered a different approach to abortion. Less about safety aspects, more about who was having them, who was providing them, and where.

"Abortion services in South Africa face two major problems: bringing the service to those most under-served, and at the same time respecting the rights of health workers not to be involved in terminations of pregnancy.

The primary aim of abortion legislation is to provide women with the safe option of a legal abortion in the case of an unwanted pregnancy. The women who most stand to benefit from this are those who cannot afford safe alternatives outside the public sector. However, it is questionable whether these women are deriving any benefit from this policy. Access to health services is still weighted in favour of previously advantaged areas of South Africa.

Clearly if the right to abortion on demand is to be extended to all South African women, steps need to be taken to ensure that the poorest and most vulnerable women can act on this right equally."

I thought of Clay and his clinic. Both Nosipho and Thandi had hinted he was willing to do abortions, discreetly and safely. That was good. He was actively making a difference in some womens' lives. I read further.

"The second group of people that must be taken into account is the health workers themselves who are required either to perform the abortions or to refer women to facilities where terminations are performed.

Some of them feel guilt arising from the conflict between their own moral values and beliefs, depression resulting from stress, and fear of harassment from anti-abortionists. Many doctors and nurses are refusing on ethical grounds to carry out the abortions.

Thus health services are faced with a difficult dilemma - to provide abortion services to all women who require it, most of all to those who are powerless and vulnerable, but at the same time to protect its health workers and respect their values and beliefs about this highly sensitive issue."

Yet another reason Clay's clinic was so important, even if it was small. He provided an essential service.

I finished all the pages on abortion. There were more photocopied notes, but I was getting restless again. Speaking to Petra made me keen to deal with Shakes. Nobody had phoned back. Time to hit the road.

Saturday afternoon, Manenberg's would be packed. Good chance Shakes would be there, seeing as he liked the spot. And there'd be other people around. Just to be safe. I wanted the element of surprise to work in my favour. Wanted to see what he'd say, without time to prepare himself. Also wanted witnesses, in case he jumped me.

Would be raining by nightfall, looked like another storm due. While it held off hundreds of people were strolling the Waterfront. Tourists shivering in safari suits. Looking surprised that Africa wasn't always hot.

At Manenberg's a trio was reworking jazz standards on the bandstand. The bar was three deep. Balcony full of smokers. The crowd made it easier for me to blend in. I didn't want to be noticed. But it also made it hard to find Shakes. If he was even here.

I got a mineral water, scanned the room. No sign of Shakes. Half an hour passed, was about to give up. Spotted a familiar bald head next to a recognisable ponytail. Jimmy and Dwayne. The styling music executives. They walked to a table, saw them sitting down opposite Shakes. Three young women between them, laughing, drinking shooters. Felt a surge of adrenaline. High noon.

Checking I had the Itslikethat document in my bag, I walked across the floor. Shakes saw me at the last minute. He looked up, amused expression. But his eyes were hooded and hard.

"Kain. We must stop meeting like this. People will start to talk." Grinned at the women, who giggled back.

I scooped up a chair, sat next to him. "We probably won't need to meet again after I show you what I found."

Shakes smiled again, but looked wary. "Ah, the busy journalist. " He turned to the table. "This woman - she is such a hard worker. She works so much, she ends up getting involved in things that have nothing to do with her. But still she carries on."

Jimmy and Dwayne chuckled. Judging by the empty bottles on the table, they'd been here a while. Ponytail spoke. "Aren't you writing about Ben Wilson? Shakes told us. Come on, have a drink." Mr Jovial.

"What're we celebrating?"

Shakes shook his head at the ponytail, but he carried on. "You should know, you're doing the story. We're going to release Ben's album in three week's time. It's gonna be big, baby," he slurred at one of the women.

"That so?" I said to Shakes. He raised his eyebrows.

"It's what I told you. Jimmy and Dwayne here are from Shout Out records. They signed a deal with me. It's what Ben would have wanted," he said.

I hate people who lie.

"I'm not so sure about that. You seen the copyright papers?" I asked the executives.

"It's all in order. Shakes sorted it out," said bald head.

I pulled the document out my bag. "I don't know what Shakes showed you. But I've got a dated, signed copy of a document that grants the rights to any releases to the remaining members of the band – Reuben, Johan and Sipho. It's witnessed and authorised by SAMRO."

Ponytail and bald head leaned over to see what I had. They must have known something about their jobs, because when they looked up they weren't smiling.

"This is the real thing. What papers did you show us, Shakes?" Bald head, more sober than his colleague, getting worried.

"Ignore this woman. She likes to make trouble. I've got it all covered," said Shakes.

"It's impossible. These are the right papers." Bald head starting to look cheesed off.

I folded the document back in my bag.

"Whatever you have won't hold up. Sorry to ruin your party, guys."

"But what about Ben's wishes? His solo career?" Bald head trying to understand.

"All a crock. Speak to your man about it." I nodded towards Shakes.

A range of emotions flickered across his face. Incredulity, frustration, outrage. And a strong, focused anger. He grabbed my arm above the elbow. It hurt. Jimmy and Dwayne were too busy talking in low voices to each other to notice. The women were trying to order more shooters.

"You're leaving. Now. Say goodbye to the nice people." He twisted me out my seat. The others barely noticed. Shuffled me through the crowd, my arm twisted behind my back. People talking loudly, the band funking up *Autumn Leaves*. Nobody glanced twice at us. Outside the club he pulled me close.

"You've made a very big mistake, Kain." Face sweating. Still holding tightly onto my arm. "Yes, you may have the right documents. You've probably fucked up my deal. But I have a few cards left to play."

Heat burning off him. "You think you're clever. You think you know me. But I told you before, I fought my way up. You don't want to ask what happened to the people who stood in my way. Now fuck off." He released my arm suddenly, and I stumbled. A group of people nearby looked over. Shakes smiled at them, raised an imaginary glass to his lips. I'd obviously had too much to drink, he was saying.

I was wired, ready to strike back. But it wasn't the right place to get into a fight. And I'd got what I wanted. He'd made it personal. So I'd bust him.

I started the jeep and drove to Rozena. Maybe I should have brought her along. Shared the satisfaction.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Rozena agreed. Truth is? She was furious that I hadn't included her.

"Kain, that was stupid." Hands on hips, her glaring face. "We agreed Shakes should be handled with care. And you went to speak to him by yourself!"

Guy and the girls had evacuated the lounge. They'd been playing a round of Monopoly before I arrived. Were cowering in one of the bedrooms. Rozena's rage is a powerful thing to see. Sure, she was concerned. That didn't stop her being scary.

"Chill out. I know it was crazy. But nobody was answering my calls." I'd ride the tornado 'til it was finished. Took about 15 minutes this time round. Rozena finally removed her hands from her hips, moved to the kitchen.

"Okay. I've said what I needed to. Coffee?" I nodded, she reached for the mugs. "You can come out now," she called down the passage. Three heads poked through the doorway of one of the bedrooms.

"Um, are you sure? We're quite happy playing Snap in here," said Guy mildly. Rozena smiled. "Sorry about the noise. I've finished shouting at Kain." She looked in my direction. "Unless she does something this idiotic again."

"Okay. Got the message. Loud and clear." I went over to help with the coffee. "C'mon, it's good news about Reuben and Johan and Siph." "

One thing about Rozena. She gets cross, she deals with it, it's over

"For sure. Can't blame you wanting to break the news to everybody, including Shakes. Have you told the boys yet?" she asked.

Checked my cell to see if anybody had phoned, saw it was flat. "Damn. I'll get hold of them from the landline when I get home."

Rozena unloaded coffee and evil slices of chocolate cake in front of me. "What I'd like to know is, was it worth it? Speaking to Shakes. What did you learn?"

I'd thought about this while I drove to Rozena. Shakes was blown away by the contract. I'd expected rage. But felt there was something more going on. Wasn't just about the money. He couldn't believe he'd been shown up by me. Got the feeling he was used to charming or forcing his way, particularly with women. I hadn't backed down. That bothered him.

He was also surprised. Thought I was going to write a simple feature about Ben, move on. Didn't think I'd get so involved. Hadn't planned it myself. But that's what happened. Say La Vee.

Whether Shakes had planned Ben's death was another issue. I still wasn't sure. He could have benefited from Ben's death even if it was an accident. He was sneaky enough.

I put it to Rozena, and she understood. The thing about best friends – they generally get it.

"We need to wait for Joan from *Beat* magazine. She's still got to tell us who was at the club on Ben's last night," said Rozena.

I agreed.

Guy and the girls emerged from the bedroom. Lured by the chocolate cake. We revived the Monopoly game. When one of the shutters outside the house banged I looked up, saw how dark it was. Black storm clouds. Time for me to go.

The family walked me to my car. Rozena hugged me. "I got cross because I was worried. Don't pull that kind of thing again."

"Maybe."

"Not maybe. Call me first."

"I did."

"Wait next time."

"Tell you one thing. I hand the Itslikethat document to Reuben and Johan and Siphon, they must take it further. Perhaps they can ask Clay or Ben's father for advice."

I looked at Rozena. "I've done my good deed. This story is getting way out of control."

Rozena stared at me. "Shakes spooked you, didn't he?"

Kind of. I'd had enough. I wanted to get the feature done, earn my money, look for new work. Okay, also spend some time with Clay. Didn't want complications.

The rain arrived before I got home. Sheeting in a solid wall, making me slow down, handle the road carefully. The car bucking with every gust of wind. Pulled into my drive, hopped out quickly. Reached my front step, stopped. It was dark, but I could see the outline of a small shape hanging on the door. Moved closer, put out my hand. Felt something soft and wet. I pulled back, saw a dark pool of liquid on the ground. And something else. Fur? Feathers? Ran back to the car, found my torch. Trained the beam at the mess on the door. Blood, and a small body. Wings resting limply at its side. Dead seagull. Impaled to the wood by a nail through the throat.

Swung the torch wildly. Wondered if whoever did this was still here. Couldn't see far. The garden was pitch black. I flashed on a bundle under a shrub. Ninja, huddled in the rain. Large eyes. Shaking.

Picked him up, tried to open my door. The lock was shattered, couldn't get in. I went across to Jane and Edi. Nobody home. Ninja must have climbed out their house through the cat flap.

No ways was I going to sleep in my car. I put Ninja on the back seat, threw the jeep into reverse and skidded back down the drive. All the way to the main road I felt I was being watched.

Didn't want to go back to Rozena. She would be sympathetic. But there was a chance she'd say my solo outing with Shakes brought this on. Didn't feel like being lectured.

One other place. My parents' house. Yeah, sounded lame. Running back to mum and dad for comfort. I didn't care. It was cold, I had a dead seagull on my door, and I couldn't get into my house. I reached for my cell to phone ahead. Remembered it was flat. Just had to head through the storm, hope they were home.

The journey took ages. Wondered if I was being followed. Had a *Silkwood* moment and imagined somebody ramming the back of my car, forcing me off the road. Freaked myself out. Finally arrived in Milnerton, rang the outside buzzer.

"It's Kain. I'm cold."

My father buzzed me in. My parents had been eating macaroni cheese and watching a video. Took one look at my face, got me settled with a plate of comfort food. Ninja got his own portion. My mother switched off the television, looked at me expectantly.

"It's storming outside. Much as I know you like my cooking, I suspect you didn't drive here just to carbo-load."

I swallowed a mouthful. "My cellphone died. Couldn't phone you. Sorry about that."

Wasn't sure how much to tell them without causing alarm. Kept it brief. "Somebody left something on my front door. I couldn't get in. Probably kids fooling around. Can I stay here tonight?"

My parents exchanged a glance.

"What sort of thing was it, dear?" My mother, doing casual.

"Nothing big."

"Yes, but what?"

"A dead bird."

They exchanged another glance.

"It sounds more than a prank, Kain," said my father.

I finished another forkload of macaroni. Decided to fill them in. "Remember that story I said I was working on, the one about Ben Wilson?" They nodded. "It's getting more complicated." I told them about Shakes, the copyright document, the confrontation at Manenberg's. They didn't say I'd been foolish, even if they thought so. Parents – aren't they great?

"I'd suggest you report the incident with the bird, so you have a record," said my father. I agreed.

I could see they wanted to talk more about Shakes and the band, but I was beat. Steered the conversation in a different direction. Soon we were discussing the latest crime novel my father was reading. An hour later my lids were drooping. Long day. Too many energy spikes. Seeing me yawn, my mother pointed to the spare room.

"Off you go. I'm glad you came here. Both of you," she smiled.

Ninja twitched his lips back. I fell into bed, dog on the floor. In ten minutes we were out.

My mother woke me up with a cup of tea. Outside it was still raining. Inside I curled up with a hot mug between my hands. My mother sat down on the end of the bed.

"It sounds like you've really got involved with this feature. More than you usually would," she said. Worried.

I wrapped the duvet around my shoulders, sat up.

"Just worked out that way."

"Do you know where you'll go from here?"

"Honest? I'm not sure," I admitted. "It's complicated."

My mother nodded. "Why don't you tell me about it – as much as you want to, anyway. Sometimes that helps."

I took a sip of tea. "It's going to take a while."

She smiled. "Your father's in bed with the Sunday paper. We're not going anywhere." Pulled one corner of the duvet over her feet.

So I spoke about everything that had happened since the last time we had talked. Apart from last night's details. Was quite a lot. Elmore's death, the music copyright issue, Ben's notes, Shakes and Spencer's aggression, meeting the drug dealer. When I mentioned Clay, her mouth curled into a small smile. But she didn't say anything. Sat thinking for a while. When she spoke, her comment was a surprise.

"The notes about abortion interest me. I'm wondering, if it wasn't an issue for Ben and Petra, why was he concerned?"

"I have no idea. Seems a bit abstract."

"Abstract?" My mother paused. "You know, dear, having an abortion is a lot more common than one may think."

"I know that. But there's still a negative stigma, even though it's legal."

"It's something people don't talk about – sometimes even to those who are close to them." My mother shifted on the bed, looked out of the window. She hesitated, then turned to me.

"I suppose I can tell you now. I'm sure Andrea won't mind. It happened a long time ago."

My brain did a few cartwheels. "You mean ...?"

"Yes. When you were working and Andrea was still at university – in her first year, actually – she went out with that boy who was studying engineering."

"The one who wore rugby shorts in winter? He was a disaster. Didn't last very long."

"Long enough to get Andrea pregnant. She knew she didn't want to carry on the relationship, and she also knew that having a child at that point would probably mean the end of her studies, for a while anyway." My mother took a deep breath, carried on. "Your father and I helped her find a suitable clinic. It happened very smoothly. There were no complications."

Talk about still waters. "You never told anybody else?"

"We decided not to – there didn't seem any point. We supported Andrea the whole way, and she carried on with her life." She sighed. "I suppose I'm saying that even if one is in a loving family environment, one may not want to talk about something as difficult as abortion."

"She was lucky to have the two of you," I mused, still taken aback.

"Well, what else could we have done, disown her? It's not the dark ages. These things happen. Thank goodness we have an enlightened system in this country that helped us deal with it," said my mother. She stood, took the empty cup from my hands. "But not all parents feel this way, and I can also understand that," she said gently.

Walking to the door, she paused. "My point is, perhaps there is something about the abortion notes that you're not seeing."

Once she'd left I pulled the duvet around me, went over what she'd said. Talk about breaking news. Hullo. I'd had no idea. I thought of Andrea as a young student, making one of the most difficult decisions of her life. Was glad she had my mother and father around. There were lots of parents who would have reacted very differently.

It hit me. Not quite the same, but a link. Two young people in love. Hiding their relationship. Afraid of their parents' response. Aware of a place they could get help, if they needed it.

I jumped out of bed, headed for the shower, pulled on the clothes I had been wearing yesterday. Had a game plan. Breakfast, then a surprise visit.

My mother and father were drawn into the dining room by the smell of toast and scrambled eggs. My repertoire is limited but irresistible. We sat in comfortable silence, passing around pages of the newspaper, making crunchy eating noises. Ninja lay under the table with a piece of egg toast. I washed up when we'd finished, prepared to leave.

"So soon? Will you be alright?" asked my father. "You know you can stay here as long as you like."

"Thanks," I said, kissing his cheek. "I've got some things to sort out."

My mother looked at me. "You've got an idea, haven't you?"

"Yeah. Thanks to you." I hugged her. "Thanks for talking this morning. About everything." She hugged me back.

"I think the two of you did good," I said softly. Pleasure, and some pain in my mother's eyes. I called Ninja and we left.

He wasn't so happy staying in the car when I parked a while later, but I left the window open a crack, told him to wait. He'd just have to sit it out. I walked up the short drive that led to Siphos's bedsit. Rainy Sunday morning, the streets around his place quiet. No children running around, the washing lines empty. Dirty mud puddles in the front yards.

I knocked hard, heard soft voices inside. Time to play heavy.

"Open up. It's Kain."

The door was opened by a shocked Siphos and Anna. "What are you doing here? Did you bring anybody else?" asked Siphos, trying to see behind me.

"I want some answers," I said firmly, marching into the room.

Anna quickly closed the door, went to stand next to Siphos. They looked like two frightened school kids. Which I suppose they were, in a way. Anna was eighteen, Siphos barely older. They'd been having a relaxing Sunday morning – two coffee mugs on the floor, next to a pile of DVDs. A movie running on the television, sound muted.

I didn't waste time. "Ben helped you organise an abortion, didn't he?" I looked at Anna. "A safe operation, with a person who you knew. Felt comfortable with."

She didn't deny it. Turned white. Siphos put his arm around her. "We decided on it together, although it was Anna's right to make the final decision. Yes, Ben helped us." They stood there, round eyes. I went on.

"You had the abortion at Clay's clinic, didn't you?" They nodded. "And neither of your parents know about it?" They nodded again.

Anna stepped forward. No sign of the tetchy teenager anymore. "Please," she said softly. "We'll tell you all about it. But you can't let anybody else know."

"I can't promise that." Thought how my own parents had behaved in a similar situation. Took a step back. "Look, I know it's tough. I'm not here to give you a hard time. But things are being hidden from me. Some of them may have to do with the story I'm writing."

I sat down cross-legged on the floor. "It turns out what you've been through has nothing to do with Ben and my feature, I'll leave it up to you to deal with it."

Sipho and Anna looked at each other. Anna took Sipho's hand.

"I'm still at school, and as you know, we haven't told our parents about our relationship." She tucked a strand of hair behind one ear, carried on. "We've been careful, I've been on the pill as well." She stopped, blushed. "It was an accident, one of those one-in-a-thousand mistakes."

Sipho gripped her hand more tightly. "Anna has to finish school, and she wants to study medicine at university. I want to study music next year. We both knew it would be very difficult, maybe impossible, to raise a child as well."

He carried on. "And we hadn't even told anyone about our relationship. It would be a terrible way to break the news. My parents would be so disappointed. So would Anna's. Maybe they would stop us being together."

Anna's eyes filled. "We were terrified. We didn't know who to speak to. Then one night I just couldn't keep it inside anymore. I told Ben."

"He was amazing," said Sipho. "He spoke to us, asked us what we wanted to do. Talked about various possibilities. He did research, finding out about safe abortion options."

Between the three of them, they had decided to approach Clay. They knew the work he did at the clinic. Although he was Ben and Anna's father's partner, they felt they could trust him to be quiet. Clay had performed the abortion a week before Ben's death. Anna had been two months pregnant.

"Dr Parker – Clay – was wonderful. He was very professional. He said it was my decision, I didn't have to inform my parents," said Anna.

I sat back. "So he and Ben are the only ones who know about this?"

Sipho looked uncomfortable. "Well, um, no." His body tensed. He unfreud his hand from Anna's. "I did something stupid – something I'm being made to regret."

He didn't say any more. Folded his arms and sat mutely. Anna urged him. "Tell her, Sipho. It can't carry on. And maybe Kain can help."

I waited. Sipho stood abruptly, walked stiffly to the window. Didn't look at the two of us.

"Okay. This is what happened. I went to Shakes to ask him for money to help pay for the operation. He wanted to know what it was for, and I told him. He promised not to say anything," he blurted out miserably.

"But now he's blackmailing me. He made me bring him the Itslikethat disc, otherwise he said he would speak to our parents. I had no idea he was going to try and steal the rights to the material. And he's still holding it over my head," said Sipho bitterly. "Whatever papers he has are rubbish. He must have forged them. But he has a plan. He phoned me last night. Told me about your SAMRO papers. He wants me to release my right to the new material. He said I must persuade Johan and Reuben to agree. Otherwise he will tell everything."

Shakes must have contacted Sipho straight after our confrontation at Manenberg's.

I went over to him, touched his arm lightly. "You've done nothing wrong. And we can stop Shakes." Saw a flicker of hope in Sipho's eyes.

I turned to Anna. "There is one way you can free yourselves. It will be difficult. But if you both tell your parents, Shakes will have no hold over you – or the new recording"

They looked doubtful.

"C'mon. How long can you keep this hidden? And is it so bad?" I asked.

Anna looked at Siphó. "Maybe she's right. We can't carry on like this forever, running from people."

"Think about it," I said. Reckoned they needed space.

Anna spoke. "You know, Ben even wrote a song about the whole situation. He called it *Choices*."

I remembered the final song of Ben's set, the night he died. A young girl standing rapt in front of the band. It had been Anna, of course.

I turned to go.

"Wait!" said Siphó suddenly. "I'm going to phone Shakes and tell him the deal's off. You're right, Kain. We can work this out – we don't have to be ashamed. And there's no way I would ask Reuben and Johan to give up their right to the music."

He pulled his cellphone out his pocket, dialled a number. Started talking fast in Xhosa. Without waiting for a response, he switched to English. "It's over, Shakes. Don't bother threatening me, because it won't work." He snapped the phone closed, breathed deeply. "I told him we were going to our parents. I said he must leave us alone." Eyes bright with tears.

Anna put her arms around Siphó. I left them like that.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

I'd phoned Jane and Edi from my parent's house. They were waiting for me when I got home. Had cleaned up the mess on my front door. There was just a hole where the nail had glommed the seagull's head to the wood. They'd called the security company to patrol our houses.

"Not sure what else we can do. Maybe file a report," said Edi. She put on the kettle, I called the local police station. Obviously wasn't the crime of the century. They barely took down the details. Sounded amused. I also left a message on Detective Van Vuuren's answer machine. Just for the record. I felt I had some kind of connection with him. Jane brought a pot of tea to the lounge, we sat and talked. Agreed to let the dogs run around outside until late. Canine burglar system.

They left, I finally got in contact with Reuben and Johan. Explained the copyright document. Had to do it again, they didn't understand first time round. Then major excitement. They said they "owed me big time." I said they could buy me a beer at their next gig.

I thought about Clay, his part in all of this, while I was doing my kata next morning. Sometimes works for me - legs go into automatic, brain randomly bounces stuff around. Maybe the extra oxygen does something. Or it's a way of ignoring the hurt.

Clay was sensitive about the women who visited his clinic. Understood that abortions were a private matter. People trusted he'd keep quiet. As my mother had said, even though the operation was legal, there were a lot of negative feelings about it.

Anna's visit to his clinic was complicated. She was the daughter of his business partner. Even so, he'd respected her right to choose. Her request to keep it below the radar.

So I could understand why he hadn't told me about his connection to Anna. To Ben and Siphó, too. It bugged me, though. He'd known about the secret relationship, Ben's involvement. I wasn't so sure it had anything to do with Ben's death. But it did add a different

dimension to the image of an irresponsible drug addict. Yet Clay was convinced that Ben had a substance problem. Didn't add up.

Showered, decided to call him on it. Got hold of him at the clinic.

"Clay. I know you're busy. I'll make it short." Cleared my throat. "I spoke to Anna and Siphon this weekend. They told me about the abortion."

He didn't interrupt.

"Couldn't have been easy, being Anna's father's partner," I continued.

Clay answered. "No ... no it wasn't a comfortable situation. But it was what they both wanted. And I felt it would be better for me to help, rather than a stranger."

"Ben made the arrangement?"

"Yes. He was the only person Anna could really talk too."

I told him about Ben's abortion notes.

"Hm. I might have guessed. He was very concerned." Clay paused, went on. "But I thought you hadn't found anything useful when you went through Ben's things."

"I don't know how useful these notes are. Haven't finished with the papers anyway."

"There's more?"

"Yeah. Still working through them."

"What are they about?"

"I don't know – more medical research. But I wanted to check something with you."

"By all means."

I said I reckoned Ben's behaviour didn't gel with the drug addict scenario. The methodical research on abortion, the support for his sister. The guy was straight up.

"We've talked about this before, but it still doesn't make sense," I said. "Now I know about the abortion, you can speak more openly. Do you really think Ben's death was a drug-related accident?"

Clay, slightly exasperated. "Yes, I'm sure. So are the police. When are you going to accept this, write the story and move on? I know it's tragic – but it's true."

"I just can't let it go. Doesn't feel right."

"Kain, the best thing you could do is drop it. Throw out those papers. Best still – burn them. Do your feature." His tone softened. "And then think how you'd like to spend your free time. Hopefully there'll be space for me."

I liked the sound of the last bit. The rest – I'd see. Felt bristly at being told what to do. But he had a point.

"My editor will be happy."

"Do it, Kain. You'll feel great once it's all over."

We made loose plans to connect later in the week. I watched rain lashing the bay. I hadn't ever got so personally tangled in a feature. Sucked into a world of weird. Been slapped around, found a dead body, had a seagull nailed to my door.

Wasn't all bad. I'd scored some musicians their recording rights. Maybe helped a young couple do the right thing. Itslikethat would have their own CD. Siphon and Anna were going to go public with their relationship.

And I'd met somebody. Yeah, I was cool being single. But Clay was ... interesting.

All of which was doing nothing to help my feature. Decided to mail Bob at *Rolling Stone*, tell him I was going ahead with the original story. Would deliver in a week. Seemed the only way to play it. I still had no evidence Ben's death was a murder. I'd bring in Shakes' shady album deal for colour, but that was it. Bob knew what he wanted. He'd made it clear.

Before I could mail, my cell rang.

"Uh, is this Kailan Hunter, the journalist?"

Gravelly voice. Heard it before. Couldn't place it.

"Yeah?"

"It's Robin – you met me with James, the other journalist. We spoke about, um, business deals." Money jingling into a slot. I recognised the Rohypnol dealer. Phoning from a public call box.

"Sure. How're you doing?" No idea why he was calling. Had left him my card, but didn't think we'd be bosom buddies.

"You were asking me about my clients? Well, I saw one this morning. You described him to me, but I wasn't thinking clearly. I said he didn't sound familiar. But I spotted him and I clicked. He's my man." Robin, pleased with himself. Wondered how much he was going to fleece me for his information. I took the bait.

"Which guy? Where'd you see him?" I asked.

"In the newspaper. One of those social supplements, pictures of party people having fun. He was at some music function, whole lot of girls draped over him."

Shakes. Had to be.

"Tall, smooth black man, cornrows in his hair?"

"That's the dude. S. Matshikiza, the caption said."

"You say he's bought Rohypnol from you?"

"Yeah. Primo customer."

He waited a beat, asked. "This help you any?"

"Some." Played it casual. Knew there'd be a price. "What can I do in return?" Expected a cash figure. Robin replied. I started to grin.

"Thing is, I'd really like it if you or your buddy wrote that piece about me. Not with my real name, of course. But you know, like a *Pulp Fiction* thing. I'd be, you know, a cool dealer type."

Rolled my eyes. Everybody wanted their 15 minutes.

"For sure, Robin." I'd do a story. Might not be the one he wanted, though.

"Amazing. Let me know if you need me to pose for any pics. You know, with my face hidden."

I put down the phone. Just when I'd decided to drop the murder angle, Robin linked Shakes to Rohypnol. I needed to talk to Rozena.

Turned out she was on assignment at Simon's Town, just around the corner from me.

"It's been a disaster," she laughed. "I'm supposed to take pictures of the new Navy Commander. She's the first woman to hold the position. She wanted to pose on a frigate. But it's pouring and we're soaked. We're waiting for a break, then we'll try again."

I persuaded her to detour past my house when she'd finished. Said I had hot news. Was afternoon by the time she arrived, damp from her shoot. I made coffee, even found a packet of biscuits. Kain Hunter, Hostess with the Mostest.

Told Rozena about the dead seagull.

"Sounds like Shakes, you ask me. Asshole," she said.

"Could be. If he knows where I live."

"Easy enough to find out."

"Can't prove it, though."

"That's the bummer."

"Yeah. Gets even more complicated."

I spoke about Robin and the Rohypnol, Shakes being his client. Rozena got excited. "As they say in the books, he had the motive and the means. To kill Ben, I mean."

"My thoughts too. But can you see a guy like Robin giving evidence in court?"

"Problem."

"And we still can't put Shakes at the club that last night."

"Joan hasn't got back to me yet," said Rozena. "I'll call her again."

Dialled, no answer. Left a message.

"Soon as she contacts me, I think we should speak to the police. Maybe that cop who you know – Van Vuuren. We can give him everything we've got, then it's up to them."

"Yeah. Only so much we can do."

She shot me a look. "By the way, what does Clay think about all this?" Innocent eyes.

"He's still certain Ben's death was an accident, that he had a drug problem. Almost convinced me, then I got the call from Robin."

"And how is Clay?" Rozena persisted with the wide eyes.

"Okay, I guess."

"Just ... okay?"

"Stop with the third degree." I threw a cushion at her.

"You've got that look on your face."

"Talk shit."

"You know the one I mean."

"So what?"

"So you like the guy. Kain, relax."

"Okay. He's hot. Can we change the subject now?"

"I knew it." Rozena laughed. "Listen, when we've sorted all this stuff, I want you both to come over for supper."

"It's a deal – if he's still around."

"Stop being such a pessimist." Rozena threw the cushion back at me.

"I'll work on it."

I made more coffee. Rozena was getting ready to go when my cell rang. "Hold on while I get this," I said.

Couldn't make out what the person on the line was saying. Heard rustling, a furtive whisper.

"Help ... taken me ... angry ..."

The voice sounded terrified. Felt myself stiffen. Rozena looked over.

"Who is it – what's wrong?" I asked.

"Kain? It's Petra ... help ... Spencer." The connection was breaking up. I moved to another spot. Got better reception.

"Spencer's gone crazy. He's taken me to his parent's holiday house in Scarborough. He's locked me up," I heard Petra whisper.

"When? What house?"

"Disa Way ... double-storey ..." I lost her again. Then Petra cried out, the line went dead. I pressed redial. No response.

"What's up?" Rozena looked confused.

"It's Petra – that ex-boyfriend of hers has gone crazy. I have to go," I was pulling on a heavy jacket as I spoke, reaching for my keys.

"Go where? What are you doing?"

"She's in Scarborough. She needs help. Call the cops while I'm on my way."

One thing I can say about Rozena. She decides to move, she doesn't waste time.

"You're not going on your own. And I'm driving. Your car's too slow."

I didn't argue. We raced out the house. Scarborough was about 20 minutes away. Had no clue what we'd do when we got there. Would make a plan. The fear in Petra's voice made my stomach churn. Hoped we weren't too late.

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Rozena's car didn't make much difference. We were headed straight into a squall off the Atlantic. Fighting a fierce wind. I was sick of this weather. Was getting dark, Rozena struggling to see her way. Scarborough was on the border of the Cape Point National Park, almost part of the nature reserve. Small village, wooden beach shacks, holiday houses. Getting there was beautiful on a sunny day. Tourist heaven. On a stormy night it was hell.

Rozena handled the road, I dialled directory assistance for the Muizenberg Police Station. Gritted my teeth as I was told to hold. Bored voice asking how they could help. Had to spell Muizenberg three times. Almost gave up, was paged to an automatic system spitting out the digits. Waited for the cops to pick up the call. Explained what was happening. Wasn't exactly a 911 moment.

"Look, lady, we're very busy tonight. There's a power failure in Lavender Hill and the gangs are looting the shops."

"A woman has been kidnapped. She might be hurt."

"Do you know that for certain?"

"She called me on her cellphone. She's in trouble."

"Maybe she's playing a trick. We get kids doing that all the time."

"She's not a child."

"Lady, unless you've got definite proof your friend is in real danger, we can't send somebody out. Maybe you should have a look and see."

"Can't believe it. Same as when I called about the dead seagull," I muttered to myself.

"Hey, are you the bird woman? I heard about you." The cop getting animated, big joke. "You wanted to lay a charge against a seagull?" I disconnected the call.

Rozena glanced at me. "Sure you want to go ahead with this?"

"We're almost there. Shit, let's see what we can do."

We hit the village. Just a main road, short tributaries leading off it. I started reading street names. In season all the cottages on the bay were full of holiday-makers. When they went, the surfers and a few families were left behind. In mid-winter the place felt deserted.

Dark houses. Empty driveways. Clouds across the moon, no light. We crept along, my eyes scanning for Disa Way.

It was one of the last roads in the village. We swung off the main stretch, followed a dirt path towards the Cape Point reserve. All the houses we passed were single-storey bungalows. Petra had described a double-storey. We carried on. Soon there were just empty plots, overgrown with bush.

"Have we gone too far?" Rozena, tense. She squinted through the windscreen.

"Not sure."

"Should I turn around? It's going to be tight on this narrow road."

Didn't like the idea of getting stuck. The rain had churned the dirt into mud under our tyres.

"Try a bit more. If there's no sign of Petra, we bail."

We skidded forward. I caught a flash out the corner of my eye. Swivelled, stared hard into the dark. Another flash. This time I saw the outline of a house – a double-storey, it looked like – before the light disappeared.

"Somebody's using a torch. There, to the right." I pulled Rozena's sleeve, pointed.

"Probably a side road." She gripped the steering wheel, looked for a path. "There – there it is." Swung into a tiny fork, switched off the engine. We sat in darkness, rain hammering the roof. The torch flashed again inside a large house squatting under a shelter of trees. About 50 metres away, hidden by foliage. Nothing nearby.

"Must be it," I said.

"We should sneak up, look through one of the windows. See if we can get inside," said Rozena.

"What about Spencer?"

"We need to know if Petra is okay. We'll work something out as we go along."

Another thing I like about Rozena. She decides she's on your side, you're stuck with her.

"Let's do it." I looked at Rozena, she nodded. We slid out the car, quietly closed the doors. Bending low, I led the way. Weaving to avoid plants, shoes making sucking sounds in the mud. Jogged all the way to one corner of the house. Leant with our backs to the wall, catching our breath. Our eyes were adjusting. Plus it was less wet in this position. Almost felt like laughing. Two thirtysomething women playing Lara Croft in the bush. Got more serious when I thought of Spencer. What if he heard us coming, was lying in wait?

The torch flashed again through a window five paces from where we were standing. Okay, the person was still inside. Looked more closely at the house. Bigger than a lot of other Scarborough buildings. Top floor all shuttered up. No outside furniture or plants on the downstairs level. A big, empty, wooden place sitting on an overgrown plot of land. A holiday house that was seldom used.

I edged towards the window where we'd seen the light. Stepped on a broken piece of paving, made a cracking noise. Froze. Nothing happened. Moved forward. Reached the window, Rozena behind me. Slowly peered in.

Torchlight bouncing erratically around a long room. Lighting up pieces of furniture covered in dust cloths. We were looking into a lounge. Directly opposite us on the other side of the room was a door, which obviously led outside. To the right another doorway, leading further into the house.

Holding on to the torch with one hand, clutching a bottle in the other, was Spencer. Talking to himself as he swayed around the furniture. Emphasising points by stabbing the torch in the air. The random flashes we'd seen from the road. No sign of Petra.

I raised my eyebrows at Rozena.

"What now?" she whispered.

"He's drunk. We need to get him out of there, find Petra."

"How?"

"He's big. Don't think the two of us can handle him."

"So what then?"

"Need to take him by surprise." Kain Hunter, aka Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill*.

I moved away from the window, thinking fast. Didn't know if Petra was injured, or worse. Didn't know if Spencer was armed. Saw Rozena fumble in her jacket pocket, pull out something with a smirk. Her small digital camera, the one she always carries just in case. She spoke quickly.

"I've got an idea. You go around to the front door. I'll stay here, use the flash on the camera to get his attention. He'll come outside to check what's going on. You rush in, find Petra."

"That's insane."

"Got a better idea?"

"Nope."

"So let's do it."

"What about you?"

"I'll run into the bushes. He's drunk – I'll lose him easily. Get Petra, go to the car. I'll meet you there."

"What if he catches you?"

"Worry about yourself – and Petra."

"Rozena, this guy's young and fit. Maybe I should do the running."

"You'll be faster in the house."

"You don't do karate."

"But I can work a flash. Decide."

Big irony. This was my friend who shouted at me when she thought I was being irresponsible. And she wanted to take on a violent drunk with a digital camera. I'd have to talk to her about this later. If we were both still alive.

"Go," she whispered. "I'll start in three minutes."

Made my way around to the front of the house. Climbed a few steps to a patio. On one side a braai area, big pile of wood. In front of me the door. I ducked into the deep shadow made by the braai, waited.

Could hear Spencer ranting. Then silence. Rozena must have fired up her flash. Heard stumbling footsteps.

"What the fuck ..."

The door suddenly swung open. Spencer's large shape silhouetted in the frame. I squashed myself into the alcove. Hoped he wouldn't wave his torch my way. He stumbled down the steps. Threw his bottle away, peered through the rain. Lurched off in Rozena's direction.

I ran towards the front door. Wide open. Petra had said something about being in a cupboard. Would need to move fast.

I had just stepped inside when I heard a shout. Another, louder yell. Sounded like Spencer had found Rozena. Looked for something to use as weapon. Grabbed a chunk of wood from the braai pile. Leapt off the patio, ran back to my friend.

Saw Rozena lying on the ground, trying to cover her head. Spencer aiming a vicious kick to her stomach. A bright red gash on the side of Rozena's face. Didn't stop running. At the last moment Spencer sensed something behind him. Turned, too late. I slammed the wood solidly into his temple. Used the *Uraken* strike, the backfist push, like my sensei showed me. Spencer fell like a sack of bricks.

I nudged him with my toe. Didn't move. Checked to see he was breathing, then bent over Rozena.

"You okay? How bad is your face?"

She groaned, got to her knees. Clothes covered in mud.

"I'm fine," she said shakily. I gently touched the gash on her forehead. Didn't seem too deep.

"Spencer got me with the torch. Guess I was too slow, huh?" Weak smile.

I helped her to her feet. "Was a good plan. We've got Spencer, anyway. Watch him while I find something to tie him up?"

"With pleasure," she said. I handed her my piece of wood. "If he moves, I'll brain him."

I left Rozena with the torch, ran back inside the house. Took a guess, turned right, found the kitchen. Flicked a light switch. No power. Electricity off. Next to me a wall of wooden drawers. Emptied them at random, until my hands closed on a thick ball of twine. Bingo. Sprinted back to Spencer, tied his hands tightly together.

"We should do his legs as well," said Rozena. "We can carry him inside, then look for Petra."

When we tried to pick him up it was hopeless. The man was a dead weight.

"We'll have to drag him," I said. We each grabbed Spencer under an arm, pulled him through the bush, up the patio stairs. Left him on the lounge floor. Found candles and matches in the kitchen. Spilt up to find Petra.

I climbed the stairs to the upper storey. Called Petra's name. Long corridor, bedrooms leading off. First one lined with floor-to-ceiling cupboards, but no sign of Petra. Second bedroom with the same layout. This one occupied. Curled up in the corner of a cupboard, hands tied and duct tape across her mouth. Petra. Eyes like saucers above the gag, pupils dilated with terror.

I knelt down next to her.

"It's alright – you're safe now." Her eyes darted behind me. "He's tied up, he can't do anything."

Bruising on her one cheek. Needed to get the duct tape off her mouth so I could hear what had happened. Maybe rush to the hospital. Didn't know how bad the damage was.

"I'm going to pull this – it'll sting, but just for a minute," I said, taking hold of one corner of the tape. Petra nodded. I quickly ripped it away. She took a few gasping breaths, quietly started crying.

Stopped after a while and sniffed. "I'm okay. I just want to get my hands untied." She straightened up, looked at me. "I can't believe you came – I didn't know if you could hear me properly. Then Spencer caught me with the phone and smashed it."

Rozena burst into the room. Petra almost broke down again. "It's fine – she's with me," I reassured her. Rozena took in the scene. "I'm so glad we found you," she smiled.

Between us we helped Petra to her feet, supported her down the stairs. A little wobbly but basically fine. Stopped when she saw Spencer. "How did you manage that?" Surprised.

"A flash of inspiration," said Rozena. Weak joke. But okay, all things considered. I found a knife in the kitchen, cut the rope round Petra's wrists. It fell off, revealing dark welts.

Spencer groaned.

I raised a candle above his head, saw a lump where I'd hit him with the wood. Hoped he had a huge headache.

"What do you want to do now?" I asked the others.

"He's not going anywhere. And I want to know what went down here," said Rozena.

Petra nodded. "I'll tell you, and then we can decide."

We lit more candles, settled down. Kept an eye out for movement from Spencer. Petra wrapped her arms around her knees.

"I had just arrived home from lectures when I saw Spencer pull up," she started. "He was drunk, and seemed furious."

She'd tried to get inside, but he'd blocked her way. "He was shouting about Ben, how he'd ruined things between us. He said it was a good thing Ben was dead, because now we could get back together again," Petra continued.

"I tried to reason with him, but he wouldn't listen. I told him Ben had nothing to do with our break-up. I said there was no way I wanted to be with him."

Spencer had got louder, grabbed Petra's arm. "Next thing, he pulled a knife out his pocket and held it to my throat," she said. "He forced me into his car and locked the doors. Then he tied my hands up."

"Nobody saw anything?" I asked.

"It was so quick. And all my neighbours were inside."

Spencer had driven to Scarborough, his family holiday home, ranting like a wild person.

"He'd completely lost it. He was raving about how he'd sorted you out." Petra looked at me.

"He said he'd found a way to stop you making Ben a big hero in your *Rolling Stone* story. Said he knew how to scare you."

I didn't interrupt. Petra carried on. "He wasn't making sense. He said something about carving up your front door, and a dead seagull. I didn't know what he was talking about. I was terrified."

So it was Spencer. I should have guessed.

When they'd arrived at the Scarborough house, he'd pushed her up the stairs to the bedroom. Said he'd keep her there until she changed her mind. Locked the door, went downstairs. Started drinking, talking to himself.

"I don't think I've ever been so scared," said Petra, pulling her arms more tightly round her legs. "Nobody knew where I was, and Spencer was mad. I thought he might kill me."

Then she remembered the cellphone in her jacket pocket. "I pulled it out, but it was difficult with my hands tied. And the room was dark, so I couldn't see properly. I heard Spencer coming back up the stairs, so I just pushed a random number in my address book. I didn't know it was you," Petra said, looking my way again.

"Thank goodness it was," said Rozena. I dunno – search and rescue missions aren't really part of my CV. But we'd done okay.

"I heard Spencer coming back to the bedroom. He caught me with the cell and broke it. He put the duct tape across my mouth and locked me into the cupboard. And then ... you both arrived."

I thought about the police. If Petra pushed charges, Spencer would be in big trouble. There was another groan. Spencer waking up. He tried to sit, looked at the rope round his hands and legs.

"What ... what's going on here?" Squinted into the candlelight, saw me.

"Kain ... how did you ..?" Saw Petra and Rozena. Jaw dropped.

I stood over him. "Gotcha. You're in deep shit, Spencer. Abduction, assault, harrassment. That's just the beginning."

He looked up at me. Despite his vulnerable position, a mean look crept into his eyes. "So what, bitch. You can't prove it. It's my word against Petra's. My parents will pay for the best legal team in town." He grinned slyly. "You like the present I left on your door? You're lucky it was a seagull, not your dog."

He didn't seem drunk anymore, his confidence returning. "Why don't you untie me, and we all go our separate ways?" He twisted his mouth into a creepy smile. "Petra will realise we're meant to be together."

I'd had enough. Walked outside, picked up another piece of braai wood. Pushed it hard into Spencer's face, tearing open his cheek. It wasn't a roundhouse killer kick, but it was nearly as satisfying.

"Shut up. You don't call the shots. Open your mouth, I'll hit you again." A thin trickle of blood ran down his face where I'd broken the skin.

"You fucked up my house, and you kidnapped Petra."

"I ..." Spencer began. I smacked his head, hard.

"I want to know one more thing. You don't tell the truth I'll knock you out again, leave you here. Could take a long time for anybody to find you. Maybe too long." I meant it. Spencer's eyes flickered in panic. A coward at heart.

"Did you have anything to do with Ben's death? Were you at his last gig?" I snapped out the questions. Realised Spencer could lie, betting he'd be too scared to try.

"No, I swear. I wasn't there." Voice strained. Eyes on the wood in my hand. "When I heard he was dead I was glad. I thought Petra would come back to me. But I had nothing to do with his crash." Turned to Petra. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

Either he was a good actor or he was telling the truth. I raised my hand.

"Last chance to change your mind. If you're lying, I smack you."

He flinched. "I swear. Jesus, Kain, don't hit me again."

I believed him. Thought of something else.

"What about Elmore?"

Spencer looked confused. "Who?"

"Dead guy. Another one. Fan of Ben's."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He seemed for real. Too out of it to fake anything, I reckoned.

Had an idea. Called Rozena and Petra, moved to one side of the room.

"Here's what I'm thinking," I said softly, so Spencer couldn't hear. "Petra, you can file charges and Rozena and I will back you up. Could be a long and costly business, though. His word against yours, no witnesses. He could say you came here voluntarily, you were both just fooling around."

Petra looked about to speak, but I carried on. "With expensive counsel, he could get away with it. Come back to hassle you again."

I continued. "Or we could call Spencer's parents, tell them what happened. They probably manage his purse strings. Maybe more. You insist he gets professional help. We promise not to press charges or go public. In return they have to control him."

Rozena shook her head. "I'm not keen on a cover-up. But it's your call, Petra."

She answered. "I agree with you, Rozena. But you have a point, Kain. And I just want to be in a quiet space. I don't want to be threatened by Spencer, and I also don't want a drawn-out court case. I think we should tell his family. Get them to deal with it."

We walked back to Spencer. I told him I needed his parents' contact details. He suddenly looked like a frightened little boy. "Oh no ... they can't know about this," he said. I raised the piece of wood. He gave me the number.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

We waited for Spencer's family to arrive. Rozena and Petra curled up on one of the couches. Me marching up and down with the braai wood in my hand. Bad cop. I was enjoying the role. Spencer liked to use muscle to get his own way. Felt good to give him the same back.

He spent the time in morose silence. I listened for a car.

It was quiet and expensive when it came. Two tall figures leapt out of a top-of-the-range 4 X 4, walked swiftly into the house. The woman gasped when she saw Spencer. The man looked grim. "We're Tom and Marcia – Spencer's parents. What on earth is going on here?" he demanded, eyes sweeping the room. Styling suit, expensive haircut. Confident, even though he was confused. His wife had an equally sophisticated edge.

They bent over Spencer, started to undo the twine round his hands. I stopped them. "Wait. Until you've heard our story."

"You've got our son tied up." Spencer's father continued to work the knots.

"I'm serious. Leave him alone."

"Why is he like this?"

Petra stepped forward. "Because he forced me here at knife-point."

Tom and Marcia stared at her.

"And he locked me into a cupboard. Gagged me, hit me."

They looked at Spencer. Took a few steps away from him.

When I'd called them, I'd just said to come fetch their son, he needed assistance. No more details. Now Petra told them the whole story. The harassment, the stalking. My vandalised house. Her abduction. Not hysterical. Just the facts.

She finished. Marcia spoke quietly.

"I am so, so sorry," she said, taking Petra's hands. "I had no idea Spencer was even still in contact with you. I thought it was all over, ages ago."

"It was – for me," said Petra. More firmly. "Spencer is your son. You have to stop him bothering me. Ever again."

Marcia was nodding. Looked over at Spencer. Something like shame in her eyes.

Petra carried on. "I could report all of this. Spencer would be charged, probably get a criminal record."

Tom folded his arms. Ready to argue.

Petra spoke. "I'm not going to do that. I've been through enough already, with Ben and now this. I want peace."

"But," she continued. "You have to take Spencer away. He's not well. There's something wrong with him."

"What do you mean, take him away?" asked Tom.

"Find him professional help. A clinic or hospital," she answered.

He shook his head. I wondered if Spencer had learnt his bully-boy tactics from his father.

"Tom, I'm sure you realise the seriousness of the charges Petra could lay against Spencer," I said.

He was silent.

"He's also admitted vandalising my house. Twice," I added.

Tom stayed quiet.

"But we'll drop everything if you deal with your son. Make sure he's nowhere near any of us."

"And if I don't want to do this?" asked Tom.

"It could get ugly. A court case. Publicity. Not sure how much sympathy there'd be for your son."

Spencer had been sitting quietly throughout, watching the exchange. All the arrogance drained out of him. His father shook his head again. Suddenly swung towards Spencer, kicked him hard in the ribs. "You stupid bastard!" he shouted. "How many times must your mother and I bail you out of trouble? When are you going to grow up?"

Hair out of place, eyes burning. Red face. He turned to me. "It seems my son still has a lot to learn. He has always had a ... difficult attitude. Perhaps his mother and I were too soft on him. But he's gone too far. This time, I'll see to him myself."

Spencer was curled in a foetal ball. Whimpering. I almost felt sorry for him. No wonder he didn't want us to call his parents. The father was more scary than his son.

Tom walked to kitchen, grabbed a knife, slashed the rope from Spencer's wrists and ankles. Shoved him out the door, in the direction of their car. "Go. I'll deal with you later."

Turning to three of us. Smoothed his hair back into place, pulled his suit straight. Spoke more calmly. "Thank you for not involving the police in this matter. I am sorry for the hurt my son has caused. If I can make some sort of financial compensation..."

We all shook our heads.

He continued. "I give you my word. You will never be bothered by my son again."

He put his arm out to Marcia, she joined him. "Put the front key under the doormat when you go," he told us.

They left.

Silence. Then we all exploded.

"What a fucked-up family," I said.

"Talk about dysfunctional," said Rozena.

"I guess they got tired of covering up their son's messes," said Petra. "But Tom is probably partways to blame."

We found our jackets and bags, blew out the candles.

"One thing's straight," I said. "I believe Tom. Don't think we've got a problem with Spencer anymore."

Petra nodded. "And he didn't have anything to do with Ben's death. Or Elmore's. I'm sure of that."

We put the key under the doormat, like we'd been asked.

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Next day I slept in. Night before Rozena had dropped me off, taken Petra home. But I couldn't fall asleep. Fired up from the strange night. Tossed around, finally passed out as the sun was rising.

Was close to midday when I surfaced. Checked in with Petra, she was doing fine. Mooched around. Thought about doing some work. Rozena must have been picking up my vibes. She called.

"Kain, you moving on the *Rolling Stone* piece?"

"Gonna start."

"I've got a gap. You told me about Clay's clinic, the women who grow the herbs?"

"Yeah. You interested?"

"Might as well make some money."

"I know the feeling."

"How about we go out there, I see what's happening, take some pictures?"

"I'll set it up."

We made a date for the next day, I'd fetch her. Dialed the clinic. Phone rang and rang, nobody picked up. Maybe Nosipho was helping Clay with a patient. I didn't want to bother them. Would call later. By mid-afternoon there was still no answer at the clinic. Clay's cell was off. Decided to stick to the plan with Rozena, head out to Langa tomorrow, see how much we could get done. Wasn't an ideal way to do a story. But it had worked before.

It was freezing the next morning. Rozena loaded a large camera bag into the jeep, jumped in. Told me Joan from *Beaf* magazine had got back to her. Shakes was nowhere near the club the night Ben died. Joan knew him quite well, she was sure.

"We're back to square one. The original brief," she said.

"Nothing else to do."

"You okay after last night?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Guy was kind of shocked when I told him. Couldn't believe we didn't ask the cops for help."

"We did. They laughed."

"True."

"Could have been worse." Had a flash to the mutilated corpses on the cable car road. The serial murders. That was a lot more hardcore.

"At least we cleared up some stuff."

"Yeah. Both Spencer and Shakes are off the hook. Looks like we're doing the tragic drug story."

Clay's bakkie was parked outside the clinic. Inside, nobody at the reception table. One woman in the waiting room. Clay's door opened, he came out. Taken aback.

"Kain. And Rozena, isn't it? What ... why are you here?"

Awkward. I should have phoned ahead. Explained I'd tried to get hold of him yesterday.

"Yes ... I had to leave the phone, I was too busy. Nospiho ... isn't well," he said.

"Sorry for just arriving. We wanted to follow up the feature on the clinic," I said. Clay looking stiff. Making me uncomfortable. I wondered what was going on. Rozena looked at both us quizzically.

"It's a bad time. We'll come back some other stage," I suggested. Clay looked relieved.

"Yes ... yes, perhaps that's a good idea. I'm kind of stretched, with Nosipho being off."

"Is she alright?" I wondered.

"She's had a bad experience. She needs a bit of time."

"What ..." I began, but he cut me off. "It's personal. I'm not sure I should talk about it."

Sounded stressed. Our visit wasn't helping any.

Rozena did the diplomatic thing.

"It's no problem. We'll make an arrangement to speak at a more convenient time," she said, swinging her camera bag over her shoulder. Clay looked grateful.

"Yes, that would help," he said.

Clay escorted us to the door. More relaxed now we were leaving. "I'll phone you, Kain. Apologies about this."

"It's fine," I said. Felt crap about not setting the story up properly. Clay probably thought it was unprofessional. We climbed back in the car, I pulled out.

"Shit. Waste of time. My fault," I said to Rozena as we edged down the road.

"One of those things. Clay seemed kind of uptight."

"Telling me."

"He always like that?"

"Not that I've seen."

"Our timing was bad."

"Yeah."

"Look, we don't have to waste the entire day. Didn't you meet a woman who grew medicinal herbs, in this area?" Rozena gazed out the window.

"Thandi. We just going to barge in, again?"

"C'mon. Clay got a surprise, seeing the woman he's dating arrive unexpectedly at his workplace," she grinned.

"You're full of it. Okay, let's give Thandi a try." I drove to the house with the garden of herbs.

Had to admit, Thandi greeted me with a lot more enthusiasm than Clay. I introduced Rozena. Then her tone grew soft.

"Come inside. She'll be glad to see you," she said. I was confused.

"Who?" I asked.

"Oh ... I thought you knew." Thandi lead us to the kitchen.

Sitting hunched on a stool was Nosipho. Tear stains on her cheeks.

"I shall make some tea," said Thandi. Rozena went to help.

I sat down next to Nosipho. Not sure if we were intruding. "How are you?" I asked tentatively.

Eyes wet. "I'm not well, Kain."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Is there ... can we do anything to help?"

She shook her head. "It is too late. Nobody can do anything." She curled a hand around her stomach and leaned forward.

"Is it your child, Nosipho?" I asked. Put my hand on her shoulder.

She started crying, body shaking with sobs.

"There is no more child," she whispered.

I looked up at Thandi. She shook her head. I didn't know what to say.

Thandi handed Nosipho a mug of clear, dark brown liquid. "Drink this, *sisi*. It will be good for you," she said. Stroked her head. Nosipho took a sip.

"I don't know what happened," she said.

"I was fine, I was healthy. I thought the baby was too. Then I had my regular check-up with Dr Parker, on Monday." She rocked slowly in her chair, the mug between her hands.

"He said he thought there might be a problem. He wanted to make sure."

Nosipho had climbed onto the examining table, still confident everything would be okay. "Then there was a big pain – down here," she said, pointing at her stomach.

"I was bleeding. There was so much blood. Dr Clay had to give me an injection for the pain. I must have fainted. When I woke up, I was still lying on the table and the bleeding had stopped."

She paused. "But I was empty inside." Buried her head in her hands, wept.

Sounded like a miscarriage. Clay must have seen the signs. Nothing could be done.

We stayed in the small kitchen. Thandi making endless pots of tea. I wasn't sure if we were imposing, but Nosipho and Thandi seemed comfortable. Was clear Nosipho didn't blame Clay. Was grateful he was able to help her. She said her husband, Monde, felt the same way.

"I have seen it before, at the clinic," said Nosipho. "Since I have come to work there. I always felt so sorry for those women. And now it has happened to me."

Eventually we stood up to leave. I took Nosipho's cell number, wanted to check on how she was doing.

"Thank you for coming," Thandi said. Looked curious. "If you didn't know about Nosipho, why were you here?"

We explained. Thandi agreed we should come back later in the week. A young woman walked past the herb garden. She looked vaguely familiar. Thandi shouted hullo, the woman waved a nonchalant greeting. I realised where I had seen her before. At the clinic, the first time I had visited. She had been with a friend. The two young women at the end of the day.

"That's my niece, Siphokazi," said Thandi. Lowered her voice. "I told you about her - she's a bit of a wild one."

We left. Turned the corner, saw Siphokazi saunter down the road. Had an idea. Told Rozena I'd seen her before.

"We could still do some work on the story. How about I ask Siphokazi about her experience at the clinic? We'll need to have interviews for the feature," I suggested.

"Okay – if she wants to talk," Rozena agreed. So far, the day hadn't exactly gone how we'd planned. I pulled up next the young woman, introduced myself and Rozena. Said I knew her aunt, explained what we wanted to do. She looked wary. Then gave a calculating smile.

"Okay, but you'll have to take me to the Kentucky for a rounder. Talking makes me hungry."

We agreed.

"And you can't use my real name. I'll get into trouble."

I said that would be okay. Ten minutes later we were at the local fast food restaurant. Chicken burger and chips in front of Siphokazi. Cooldrinks for Rozena and I. The girl was around 15 or 16. Shoulder-length braids, chubby face. Low-slung jeans, a bright red jersey. Nails painted dark pink.

I asked her about school. Said she didn't go every day because it was boring. "It makes my aunt cross, but she doesn't understand. She's very traditional," Siphokazi said. Flicked her braids. Turned out the teenager's family were out all day working, so she pretty much did what she wanted. A wild child, like her aunt said. I was sounding as traditional as Thandi.

I swung the conversation to Clay and the clinic. Siphokazi said she'd heard about it through friends.

"It's better than the government places. It's more private and Dr Parker doesn't ask you so many questions," she said.

"How do you feel that he is learning some traditional methods?"

"Oh, that stuff is okay," she said. "But I didn't need it for my operation." Chewing her burger.

"Operation?" I asked. I thought Clay sent the serious cases to the bigger hospitals.

She glanced around furtively. "I thought that was why you wanted to talk to me."

Rozena got it before I did.

"You had an abortion, right? You chose the clinic because you wanted somewhere safe and quiet?"

Siphokazi nodded. "Everybody knows that's the place to go. And Dr Parker is very nice. He even gave me some money for stuff after he finished."

"What stuff?"

"You know – pads and things."

She pushed her empty plate away. "Siphokazi, how many of your friends have been to Dr Parker?" I asked.

"Oh ..." she closed her eyes, thought. "About five girls. But their parents don't know. Like mine."

Five girls. That she knew about. There were obviously more.

"So ... can I go now?" Siphokazi looked out the window. A gang of girls and boys walked past. She shouted, waved. "Those are my friends," she said. Itching to move. I asked for her cell number in case I had more questions. She didn't mind, handed it over.

"Thanks Siphokazi," I said. "Maybe we'll chat again." Rozena sat in silence, watching her go.

As we headed back to Rondebosch, she turned to me.

"It's ironic, isn't it? There's Nosipho, heart broken because she's lost her baby. And there's Siphokazi, getting rid of a child she didn't want."

I nodded. "At least they were in good hands." But I felt unsettled. Sounded like a lot of teenage abortions going on.

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*He may have been too confident. He'd taken certain factors for granted, but he shouldn't have. On this side he was pretty sure how to handle things. It was a lot easier, because of his job and the way the situation was perceived. But over there ... that was another thing. They didn't like what people like him were doing. They'd stop it immediately if they found out.*

*Well, if he thought about it, maybe some people here wouldn't approve either. The thing was that they didn't know about it – or didn't want to know. The truth was easy to avoid. Of course, most people who knew him would never suspect. They'd be surprised, maybe disgusted if they found out. He didn't really care about that, though. He was doing amazing, incredible things. And he was more worried about the current situation.*

*A system had been put in place. It was necessary. And it was going so well. Until it slowed down. The parcels were drying up. Bottom line, things were no longer going quite so smoothly. He needed to find a solution. They were running out ...*

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## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Good news on the income front. James sent an email, said his paper wanted to run a feature on Clay's clinic. Big one. "Sounds good," he'd typed. "Especially the women's health angle. Yes please, we want 2000 words and pics."

Nice to know Rozena and I had a paying client. Couldn't shake off my antsy edge after our visit to Langa, though. Another story which was one thing on the surface, maybe another underneath. Clay's clinic, haven for township women. Progressive approach to conventional and traditional healing methods. But. He was also providing abortions for young teenagers. Lots of them, if Siphokazi was right. Didn't know how readers would respond. Kind, caring doctor on the one hand. Abortionist on the other. Hey, I supported a woman's right to choose. But there were people with very reactionary attitudes to women's health issues. Abortion still had a stigma. When it came to young, vulnerable teenagers, I also had concerns. Were they being helped properly? Should I leave those details out, only write half the story? Or dig deeper, see what came up?

Usually I go for the guts of a piece. Most editors know this. That's why they hire me. But I'd been thrown by Ben's case. Was way too involved. Lost track, sometimes. And got personal.

Same applied with Clay. Felt too close. If I wrote the piece with everything in it, the good and the controversial, it could have a bad reaction. Might turn the local community in Langa against him. I didn't want to mess up our connection that way.

Felt agitated. Pulled on my hiking boots, grabbed a sweatshirt. Ninja put on his eager face. "Yeah. We need fresh air," I told him. He was halfway across the back garden before I'd locked up.

We climbed through the fynbos, headed towards Boyes Drive. Hit the high road, turned left towards Kalk Bay. The big picture – sky, sea, space. Followed the curve of the road into Kalk Bay village between Victorian mansions, newer wooden bungalows, back gardens with rampant shrubbery. Fishing harbour below us.

Stopped for coffee at the local deli. Also one of their cheese-and-basil croissants. Ninja under my chair with a small plate of ham pieces (the owner has a soft spot for my dog). My cell rang.

"Kain, just wanted to say sorry again about wasting your time today." Clay's voice back to normal. Friendly.

"My fault. Should have told you."

"I guess I was distracted, with Nosipho being off and having to deal with things on my own."

"Yeah. She's really upset."

Silence.

"You spoke to her?" said Clay.

"By default." I explained about seeing Thandi, meeting Nosipho.

"I didn't realise you were so serious about the clinic story," Clay replied.

"It's a problem?"

"Not really. Just, there are plenty of people doing much more than me."

"The paper wants it."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"So will you speak to other people as well – patients and such?"

"Yeah – in confidence. Get personal comments on how well the clinic works, that sort of thing."

"How will you find these people?"

Thought about my talk with Siphokazi, felt funny to bring her up. Not sure why.

"I'll make a plan," I said. Hedging.

"Well, I suppose I could ask one or two of my patients if they would speak with you," Clay said. "No harm could come from that."

"Thanks." I wondered, though, if any of them would be teenagers who'd had abortions. I glanced around the deli. Nobody was listening to my conversation. Ninja was too busy snacking to eavesdrop.

"I want to ask you something," I said.

"Okay ..." he said. On guard again.

I explained I supported a woman's right to choose to terminate her pregnancy, was glad there were safe, private options. But I also said I was worried about teenage girls having abortions.

"If you had to do this procedure, would you refer them to a counselling service? Is there any kind of follow-up?"

"Of course, Kain. I don't do many of these operations. But if I'm asked, I try and help. However, I always try and see that the girl knows exactly what she is getting into." He sighed. "Most of the time, they don't want their family to know. It's difficult."

"Still a controversial issue."

"Exactly."

"On another tack," he said brightly, "Are you free any time this week? Maybe you'd like to go to a movie. Something light – not a medical drama." He laughed.

"Yeah. Maybe Friday." It was Wednesday today. Get some work in, then kick back.

"We'll talk."

Ninja had made a mess under my chair. I cleaned it up before we set off. After talking to Clay, I was keen to do some internet trawling on women's health issues. Logged onto the net, Googled my way through several dozen pages. Searched for articles containing the words "abortion" and "controversy". Plenty of pieces I expected, mainly from groups that called abortion an abomination. They also called the doctors that performed them murderers.

"A foetus is a life!" "Stop slaughtering babies!" "Beethoven could have been aborted!" Quite fancied the last one. I never liked *Fur Elise*.

Pictures of cute infants surrounded by flowers and hearts. Graphic shots of bloody human tissue labelled with captions like "Infanticide!"

Too much, after a while. I was about to click off when another article caught my eye.

"Human embryos used for experiments."

The site looked more credible than the previous pages. Like a medical journal, or a health news site. No emotional photographs, over-wrought headlines. I scrolled further.

"Human stem cell research is said to promise new life-changing treatments and possible cures for many diseases and injuries, including Parkinson's disease, diabetes, heart disease, multiple sclerosis, burns and spinal cord injuries."

Sounded good. I moved on.

"A stem cell is a type of cell that has the ability to divide or multiply indefinitely in culture. It can become any one of more than 200 different types of tissue cells in the body,

such as muscle cells, blood cells, nerve cells and even new teeth. Scientists hope to use these cells to develop new tissues, treatments and even organs for transplanting into a patient."

So one could "grow" new body parts or replace diseased tissue with "fresh" stem cells. Okay. I wanted to know more. Wasn't sure why this information had come up on the abortion search. Didn't know how the human embryos came into it. But I read further.

"The main area of controversy surrounding this research arises from the harvesting of cells for research. The most flexible stem cells are obtained from embryos. In order to harvest these cells, they are removed from the blastocyst, a process that destroys the embryo."

So stem cells were necessary for research. To create amazing new cures for serious diseases. And these stem cells ideally came from embryos. So how did one get these embryos? I scrolled on.

"Human stem cells can be obtained from a number of sources. The first is IVF (In Vitro Fertilisation) treatment, where surplus embryos (and unfertilised eggs for creating embryos) are donated for research with the consent of the donor rather than being destroyed. The second source is aborted tissue where stem cells are taken from the aborted foetus. Another is umbilical cord blood, rich in stem cells. These cells are harvested following the baby's birth. Another source is through therapeutic cloning, where cells are created for research that are genetically identical to the donor (patient)."

I remembered reading something a while ago about the legal wrangles behind stem cell research. Started looking for related websites. Hit and miss. Each page that offered informed commentary was matched by one that ranted like the anti-abortion brigade. Stem cell research was seen as "playing God" and "messing with nature".

My eyes were tired. Was already dark outside. I heated up some soup from a can. Rozena would have freaked. She thinks canned food is for the doomed, like people stranded on a life-raft in the middle of the sea. Me, I think she's way too fussy.

Took the bowl back to my desk. Carried on searching and reading until late. By the time I went to bed my head was buzzing. Something nagging my subconscious. Couldn't place it. Fell into a fretful sleep.

It was only when I was doing my 50<sup>th</sup> *Mawashi-geri* kick next morning it fell into place. SCR – the abbreviations in Ben's papers. Stem cell research. Had to be. But why?

After I showered I found his SCR notes. Now that I knew what the letters stood for, the articles were easier to understand. I picked up random pages.

"The most controversial method of SCR is therapeutic cloning. This is done by removing the nucleus of an egg and fusing this egg with any enucleated cell from the donor. This will create an embryo genetically identical to the donor."

So you could create cloned human beings and harvest their stem cells. "Embryo farming." Scary science. But this form of cloning was outlawed in most countries. Stem cell research was only legal if conducted on aborted fetuses or the "by-products" of IVF. Some countries, like the United States, imported embryonic stem cell lines. In South Africa, the research was forbidden.

"The current draft of the South African National Health Bill forbids any form of stem cell research, be it public or private, in sections 68 and 76."

Rubbed my eyes. Still didn't know where this was going. Or why Ben was interested. Maybe Anna would know. She and Ben talked. I called, got her at home. She sounded almost back to her cocky teenage self.

Things were good with her and Siphos. They'd be speaking to her parents that weekend, then Siphos would go home to his family at the end of the month to do the same. She was relieved about the decision. I asked if she could tell me a few details about her trip to Clay's clinic.

"I dunno. What do you want to know?"

"Did you and Ben discuss anything else, besides the safety issues?"

"No. I mean, we talked about whether I was sure about the decision. He gave me stuff to read. What do you mean?"

"He ever mention stem cell research?" I asked.

"What's that?"

"Medical research. Just wondered."

"I think Ben was more worried about how I would be. Especially since Siphos couldn't come with me."

"He didn't?"

"He couldn't. He got a letter from the university, asking him to come for an interview. It was scheduled for that day. He couldn't change it. I knew how important that was for him, and I said he must go. He didn't want to, but I insisted."

"So Ben went with you?"

"Yes. He was amazing ..." her voice quavered.

"I'm sure."

"It was strange, though," Anna said. "I've just remembered. After the procedure, I lay down for a bit to recover. Ben and Clay – Dr Parker – were talking in the waiting room. Nobody else was there. I don't know what they discussed, but by the time we left Ben looked different. I asked him what was wrong, but he said it was nothing. I didn't bring it up again."

"You don't know what it was about?"

"No. I guess he was stressed."

Maybe.

Interesting that Ben had accompanied Anna to the clinic. Probably nothing to do with the stem cell notes. But another positive tick next to his name. Not a bad guy, at all. Perhaps Clay would be the right person to speak to.

Got a chance to bring it up sooner when James called on Friday morning. He'd heard about the Scarborough fiasco from Rozena.

"Kain, it could have turned out bad. You know what's been happening to women in this town."

"Yeah. But this was something different. Not the same thing at all."

"Still ..."

"Enough, James." Nice to know he cared, though.

"Your new story. The clinic. Still going ahead?"

"Yeah. Maybe you could help with more medical advice."

"Drug stuff again?"

I laughed. "No – although our friendly dealer was in touch." I told him about Shakes buying Rohypnol. Added he wasn't anywhere near Ben on the night he died, though.

"He probably buys the stuff for other reasons."

"Like you said?"

"Yes. Getting women into bed. Comatose, mostly."

"The sick fuck."

"What can I say?"

"I can't prove it, though. Don't think Robin the dealer is the best character witness."

"What were you going to ask me about?"

"Oh yeah. Stem cell research. What do you know about it?"

James sounded surprised. "It's a heated topic, in some circles. Some parties are very pro-SCR, see it as a life-saving possibility. Others don't want anything to do with it."

"Why would they feel that way?"

"Well, largely because of how the stem cells are obtained. You've probably read about it?"

"Some. The embryo farms sound yucky. But what's wrong with using left-over embryos from IVF, or from abortions? With the mothers' permission?"

"That's the catch. Not all mothers are consulted after IVF or an abortion. Sometimes their embryos are used without them knowing."

"Surely that's illegal?"

"Of course. But some research facilities are prepared to pay a high price for the embryos. They don't ask where they come from."

"Comes down to money, then?"

"Doesn't it always, Kain?"

Too true.

Meantime, I had plans. Clay picked me up before 8 o' clock, we went to the local mall to see the latest Bond movie. Call me a sucker for big budget action thrillers. When we left, Clay put his arm around me.

"Feel like night-cap?"

"Sounds good," I said. Enjoyed the warmth of his body against mine.

We settled on the Cuban again, opted for Irish Coffees. Clay light and relaxed. I liked the play of the candle-light across the smooth planes of his face. Also liked watching his hands as he spoke.

Found myself opening up, telling him things I seldom talked about. Even spoke about Ethan.

"I'm so sorry, Kain."

I held his gaze. "You make it easy to talk."

"I like listening to you," he said simply. "I like being with you," he added. Buried far down inside me was a small pang of disloyalty, but I tried to ignore it. I couldn't carry on pushing people away. And Clay was easy on the eye.

"Time to go?" Clay raised his eyebrows.

"I'm ready," I said. In more ways than one. Drove to the house, felt excited and apprehensive. Once is a one night stand. Twice could mean more. Started talking about work. Kain Hunter, Big Romantic. I get nervous, sometimes. Act weird.

"Been doing some medical reading, found some odd articles," I said.

"Oh really?" said Clay. Concentrating on his driving. It was raining, his windscreen wipers doing overtime.

"Discovered these sites about stem cell research. What do you think about it?"

Clay's eyes flicked towards me, back to the road. "Why would you be interested in SCR?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," I said. I was going to explain the link to Ben's notes when he cut in.

"Surely you've got enough on your plate without wasting time on web articles?" he said.

"Yeah, but ..." I started.

He interrupted again. "Don't you have to finish up the *Rolling Stone* piece? I can't understand why you're surfing the net when you've got a deadline. You're the one who was so worried about Ben's feature."

True. I was about to ruin a really good evening. Did damage control. Worked on the mood.

"You're probably right." The guy was just trying to help, after all.

Clay unstiffened. "It's just that one can get really caught up on the web. So much of it is nonsense, anyway," he said.

I agreed. Switched the topic to some of the more bizarre sites I'd found. Time I got to the story about the woman who sold ashtrays made from recycled grapefruit skins we were both laughing. Mood salvaged.

We reached my drive, Clay idled the car.

"You like to come in?" I asked.

"Only if you're sure, Kain."

"Yeah. I am."

I hopped out the car into the rain. "I'll unlock, you can park under the shelter meantime," I said. Pointed out the overhang next to my garage. He nodded, I went to the house. Ninja was next door. I'd get him later.

The rain was pissing down. Couldn't even hear the sound of Clay's car as I found my keys. Dripping, I pushed open the door, stumbled inside. Before I could put on the lights, someone grabbed me round the neck. Slammed me into the wall. I felt my head explode with pain. Started to slide to the floor, was yanked up by my hair. Cold steel pressed against my throat, sharp enough to break skin. A face pushed close to mine. "Move, bitch." The knife digging into my flesh, I was marched towards the lounge. Even with the large windows it was pitch dark inside. The storm clouds created a curtain of blackness.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

I tripped over the coffee table, fell on my hands and knees. Was kicked in the ribs, felt something give. Rolled into a ball, protecting my stomach. A man stood over me, breathing heavily. "Get up Kain, or I'll kill you where you lie." Could hear he meant it. Could also hear who he was.

I uncurled myself, pushed into a sitting position. "Shakes ... what ... what do you want?" My head was spinning, and I could feel a warm trickle of blood running down my throat into my sweater. My side felt like a small truck had driven into it.

"What do you think, you interfering bitch?" Shakes loomed above me, large knife in one hand. Dressed all in black, seemed enormous.

"How ... did you get in?"

He twirled the knife expertly. "You have a very easy lock to pick. I told you, before I became a big businessman I was rough. There are lots of things I can do. Very useful things, I think."

He bent down, put his face level with mine. "You. You think you know everything. And you go poking around trying to find out even more. Well, now you've found trouble."

I lay in place. Sudden cold chill. What about Clay? Was he going to walk straight into a set-up, like I had? I thought of Ethan. My stomach roiled.

Shakes sat on one of my chairs. Seemed confident I wouldn't make a sudden move. His voice became pensive, although a deep fury clearly lay beneath it.

"Ah, Kain. I warned you right in the beginning not to poke around in my business." He settled back, palming the knife. "I told you not to bother with those boys in the band, but you did. You meddled in my affairs."

I stayed silent.

"And then I hear you've been asking questions about me. You and that fat friend of yours."

Joan. She must have talked to Shakes.

"And I ask myself – what more do they want from me, those two meddling cows? Are they going to fuck up something else for me now?"

He shook his head. "You ruined my record deal. You helped those boys in the band. And still you won't leave me alone. Why, I wonder?"

He waited for me to answer.

I remembered that thing about vicious dogs. Never show your fear. That's when they move in. I tried now. Even though I was scared shitless.

"You're right, Shakes. We did help the band," I spoke firmly. "One thing led to another. I couldn't ignore the facts. That's my job."

"Ah, your job," said Shakes. "Such a dedicated journalist you are."

He jumped up, pointed the knife at me. "But did your job ask you to embarrass me in front of my business partners? Did it ask you to turn Siphon against me?" Moved the blade an inch from my face. "I should cut out your eyeballs, you interfering bitch. You'll never spy on anybody again."

I listened out for Clay. Nothing. Maybe he'd gone for help. Or Shakes had an accomplice, and he'd caught Clay. Either ways, I was on my own. I assessed the damage. Cracked or broken ribs. Lump on my head. Throat cut, but not deeply. I'd live. For now. Had to make a plan. My legs were fine, I could kick. My arms were okay, could get a good swing in. My sensei would suggest I breath slowly, build up energy. I tried.

"You ever see someone's face without eyes? I have. I like the look." Shakes laughed, a bizarre sound in the dark room.

I tried to engage him further. Wanted to keep him talking, until I knew what to do.

"Look, sorry things turned out this way. Maybe we can talk to the boys, Reuben and them, make a deal. You're their manager, after all." Made my voice helpful.

"It's not about the money, you fool. Or the band, or the CD. It's the other thing. Now you're going to get me into even more shit." Shakes shook his head.

"What other thing?"

"That thing you were asking about. My movements. I know what you're up to."

"Just wanted to know where you were the night Ben died."

"That's not what you asked my dealer. He told me a journalist was sniffing around, asking for names. Wanting to know who buys Rohypnol."

Wasn't Joan who'd talked to Shakes. Robin. Might have guessed. But Shakes wasn't around when Ben died, couldn't have been involved. What was all this about? So Shakes bought Rohypnol. Big deal. Nothing I could do.

Shakes clearly thought otherwise.

"It was under control. Now you're going to fuck it up," he said. "You're just a cunt, just like the others." Voice getting harder.

"Out there, they all think they're so great. And they like to play games."

I sat still, tried to understand him.

"They're all over me, pretending they like me, they care about me."

He paced up and down, swinging the knife.

"They drink with me, they dance with me."

He hissed angrily.

"But then they leave. At the end of the night. They leave."

I started to get a very bad feeling.

"Just like my mother."

I remembered a conversation we'd had. Seemed like ages ago. I'd been asking about the Nexus badge. Shakes said he was abandoned, he'd grown up the hard way.

"You bitches. You're all the same. You need to learn how to behave."

Felt a bolt of pure terror run down my spine. Shakes and the ladies. He liked to have them around. Be photographed with them. Buy them drinks. Be the big man in the clubs. The big man with the Rohypnol. Headlines: Tania Smith, Stephanie Lambrecht, Maureen Paterson. Raped. Their lips hacked off with a broken bottle. Somebody had been teaching them a lesson.

"No," I whispered. Shakes didn't hear me.

"All those girls. They're happy to let me spoil them. They like being with the big music guy. Then they laugh at me. They know they'll never stay."

He smiled at me, eyes cold as ice. I thought of shouting, but the rain was still hammering. Nobody would hear me, not even Jane and Edi. And where was Clay?

"But I found a way to keep them. And they'll never make fun of me again. I show everybody what liars they are – with no mouth to laugh from."

He stepped closer.

"Long ago, I found out about this drug. It makes having sex easy. You give it to a girl, in her drink, she doesn't know. Wakes up the next morning, she can't believe what happened." He laughed again.

"They're so ashamed they never tell. But then I meet new girls. And there's the laughing and the lies, all over again."

He sighed.

"I had to sort it out more permanently. And I found the perfect solution."

Looked proud of himself. Then pissed off.

"Now you're going to spoil it all. Why did you ask that drug dealer about me? Have you been talking to other people? Who are you going to tell?"

"Nobody. I promise, Shakes. I didn't know ..."

He punched me in the face. I felt a tooth loosen.

"Don't take me for a fool. You and all your questions, your trouble-making. I came here to make you shut up."

"Please, Shakes, let's talk about this."

"You talk too much. Not any more."

"They'll link this to the other murders. You'll be caught. There's a link between us."

"I'm not stupid. I'll make it look like a burglary."

He smiled cruelly.

"But I'll still close your big mouth for ever. There are lots of ways to make a woman silent."

He reached into his pocket, brought out a small box. A sewing kit, the kind you could buy at any supermarket. Different sized needles, basic darning thread.

"Did I tell you, when my mother left, I had to look after myself?" Shakes said conversationally. "I learnt how to fix my own clothes. The other children made fun of me, especially the girls. But I became very good at working with a needle."

He put his knife down on the floor close to him. Pulled out the largest needle in the kit. About 10 centimetres long.

"These are very good for thick jerseys. It'll work well on your soft skin."

He started to thread the needle. Caught me staring at his knife.

"Don't think of it. I'll cut your throat before you can blink."

He closed one eye, concentrating.

"I'll do your mouth first, so you can't scream when I cut out your heart. I'll sew up your eyes last, so you can see everything I'm doing."

I slowly pulled myself into the nearest chair. Heart pumping too fast. Shakes watched me carefully, manipulating the needle and thread.

"Let me go. I won't tell anybody."

"Too late, Kain. You should have thought of that before you started all this."

Shakes had killed at least three women already. So far, he'd got away with it. Was sure he could do it again. I didn't know how to stop him. Go in hard, maybe a roundhouse kick to his head, get him down? A hammerfist punch to his nose? Then run? The thought of having my face sewn up was making the adrenaline in my system go crazy. Fight or flight?

I looked around for something I could pick up and throw. Couldn't see anything in range. I pushed back in my seat, something pricked my thigh. Something sharp.

Shakes looked at me again, returned to his task. The thread was nearly through the eye of the needle.

I slid my hand slowly down to my thigh, felt around. Pricked my finger, managed to keep quiet. Small surge of hope. Almost smiled.

I'd found one of Ninja's bones. Tucked down the side of the chair. Don't know how many times I'd told him not to do this. Tonight I was supremely happy he never listened. I moved my hand around the bone, felt its size. Not too big. Fitted into my palm. Very sharp on one end. Would have to do the job. I held it at my side, waiting.

Shakes made a satisfied grunt. He was ready. Grabbed the knife with one hand, held the needle in the other. I stayed still. Hoped he'd think I was weaker than I actually was. He would have to get close to do the job.

"Say goodbye, Kain. Before your mouth is shut forever." Shakes stepped in. Bent over me. I came up fast. Rammed the bone into his eye. Screaming, he dropped the needle, staggered backwards.

"You bitch ... what did you ..?"

I tensed my legs, delivered a side snap kick to his chest. He dropped.

I felt a shape brush past me, saw a tall figure fall on Shakes. Two bodies rolling on the floor. Recognised Clay. He climbed on top of Shakes, punched him. Shakes jerked his body, almost threw Clay off. Rolled on to his side to get up. Clay pushed him flat on his stomach. I heard Shakes gasp. He went still. Clay stood up, turned Shakes over. We saw a handle sticking out his belly. He'd fallen on his own knife.

All the air went out of my body in a rush. The adrenaline disappeared, too. Started shaking. Tried to hide it. Clay held me. "It's over ... it's over ..." he whispered. Stroked my hair. It felt okay to stop being tough, for now.

Eventually got it together. Stopped shaking, put on lights, found a blanket to cover Shakes. Didn't like the picture, his face staring upwards, bone sticking out his eye. Clay phoned the police, ran across to call Jane and Edi. I made one additional call, left a message. The neighbours and cops arrived. Chaos.

The Muizenberg police trying to figure out what had happened. Jane and Edi frantically checking I was alright. Ninja dancing round my legs. Aware something was wrong. I picked him up. "Thanks for the bone, you," I said quietly. He looked pleased.

We moved across to the neighbours while the crime scene specialists got to work on my lounge. After that, the coroner would take Shakes' body. Was around midnight. The police needed our stories. I was hoping my phone message had reached the person I wanted, in time.

"I saw Kain step inside, and then I parked my car," explained Clay. He was sitting close to me, holding my hand. I had a mug of sweet tea in the other. Jane and Edi with neat shots of whiskey. The cops looked envious, but stuck to coffee.

Clay continued. As he'd walked to the house, he'd seen movement in my doorway. "Looked like two figures struggling. There was no light. Obviously something was wrong."

He'd had run to the side of the house, then made his way to the door, which was still open. Edged in, saw nobody. Heard talking in the lounge, crept forward to listen.

"I didn't recognise the man, but he seemed to know Kain. At first I thought there was a power failure, and Kain was talking to a friend. I was confused. Then I saw the knife, heard him threatening her," said Clay.

"I wasn't sure what to do. I was worried if I ran for help, he would do something to Kain while I was away. And I didn't know if I could tackle him, with the knife," Clay said.

He'd stayed crouched outside the lounge, waiting for a chance to rush Shakes.

"Then I heard him talking about the murders – you know, the serial murders?" I saw the cops' eyes widen. Just then, the person I had been waiting for stepped into the room. He'd got the message from the Claremont station. I introduced Detective Van Vuuren to the rest of the room.

The Muizenberg cops weren't pleased with an outsider on their beat. I said I wanted him around. Reckoned I owed him one. He'd helped me with Elmore's papers, got the band sorted out. Even though he didn't know it. And in a weird way, we were all sitting here because of what had happened after that. Van Vuuren had played an important part. If I could help him in return, by handing him the serial murderer, then I would. Besides, I liked him.

We brought Van Vuuren up to speed. Clay continued.

"The man who'd attacked Kain said he knew how to deal with women. He described what he liked doing to them. Then he said he was going to shut Kain up."

"How?" asked Van Vuuren.

"By sewing my mouth closed," I said. "Cutting out my heart. Sewing up my eyes."

Clay explained he didn't know I had the bone in my hand. Decided to make his move.

"Then I saw Kain stab him. I rushed in and we wrestled a bit, and then he rolled onto his own knife. But Kain had already got him down. She handled it."

All those morning katas were worth something, at least.

Van Vuuren and the rest of the police got my statement. The crime scene was processed. The coroner left with Shakes' corpse. Was early morning. One more thing I wanted to do. Phoned James, gave him the scoop for his newspaper. Collapsed into bed. Clay'd strapped up my ribs, cleaned my cuts and scrapes. He wasn't happy I didn't want to go to hospital to have the lump on my head checked. I kissed him on his mouth, said I had my own personal doctor. Reckon the painkillers made me affectionate. Maybe a bit silly. Clay didn't seem to mind.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Turned out I had mild concussion. I spent the next couple of days taking things slowly. Was stiff, sore, a bit raw. Get older, you don't bounce back so fast. And the past few weeks had been bumpy. Too much going on in my brain.

I lay in bed, or sat in the lounge looking at the sea. Couldn't shut my head down.

Still wasn't one hundred percent sure Ben's death was an accident. Didn't know how obsessive Elmore fitted into the picture. Maybe his death was just a coincidence.

I'd found about Anna and Siphos secret relationship. But wasn't sure it had any relevance. Had a crash course on abortions, which eventually made sense. But had also learnt about stem cell research, which didn't at all.

There were some connections. Elmore's death led to the discovery of the papers which gave music rights to Itslikethat. My confrontation with Siphos and Anna made them decide to tell their parents. Robin the drug dealer had spilt the beans. All these things were bad for Shakes. He was the common denominator. And he hated me for messing things up for him.

Big irony. It was what I didn't do that drove him over the edge. I'd never once thought he was involved with the serial murders. If he'd paid attention he'd have realised this. But he couldn't get past his anger and paranoia.

Detective Van Vuuren filled me in on a few details when he and his team had pieced things together. Shakes wasn't lying when he said his childhood was rough. He'd grown up in Khayelitsha, the sprawling shack-land just outside Cape Town. Never knew his father. His mother had abandoned him and his two younger brothers when he was twelve years old. Shakes left school, took odd jobs. Looked after his siblings. He cooked, cleaned and yes, he learned how to sew, because otherwise their clothes would have fallen apart. But he was a bright boy. He learned fast. Shakes saw that stealing earned more than running errands or carrying loads for the spaza shops. He chose petty crime.

Was caught a few times. Never sentenced to jail, but built up a juvenile record. Got wiser as he grew older. A quick thinker and a good-looking charmer. Worked on his act. Graduated to more slick ways of making money. Became a conman who cheated young women out of their salaries and old women out of their pensions.

"A few times, the women laid charges," said Van Vuuren over the phone. In the background the bustle of the Claremont police station. "But all of them were eventually dropped. Knowing what we do now, Shakes probably had a way of persuading his victims to keep quiet."

He fell off the radar for a while. Surfaced as a music promotor. Rented a smart office, bought stylish clothes, got a new car. "We're not sure where the money came from. No doubt it wasn't earned legally. But he was in serious debt for his rent and car payments when he died. It was largely a show," said Van Vuuren. "We reckon he was bargaining on a big break to pay things off."

During this time he signed up and managed several bands. Many of them with young, impressionable musicians. It's like that were among those who fell for his smooth talk, hip jive. Shakes had re-invented himself, and he carried it off well. He also carried off most of the bands' profits.

But despite his new, worldly persona, two things clung to Shakes like woodsmoke from a township fire. Both related to his roots. First, he was a survivor, and he was good at it. Different circumstances, he would have made a kick-ass financial dealer or lawyer. But he had other skills he could use. As I'd learnt.

Second, he hated women. Ever since his mother had walked out the door of their one-roomed shack, he'd taught himself to distrust them. The girls who laughed at his tatty clothes and his sewing, the women who were stupid enough to hand him their pay packets. He despised them. It wasn't that he was attracted to men – he slept with women, often. But he loathed them, even as he used them.

"We don't know how many women he beat up or abused in the past. No doubt people will come forward now that he is dead," said Van Vuuren. "But we got hold of one or two women who spoke out. Once Shakes started hanging out at the clubs around town he definitely did spike women's drinks with Rohypnol. And then raped them."

"This year, he was under financial pressure. Cracks were starting to show, he was worried," said Van Vuuren. "He reacted personally when women were friendly but didn't want to take it further. He thought they weren't taking him seriously enough. His attitude towards women escalated. Tania Smith was his first victim."

The rape, the brutal slashing of her lips with a bottle – making her shut up. It made sense. In a sick way. Stephanie Lambrecht and Maureen Paterson were part of the same pattern.

"Frankly, we were struggling with these cases. We had fingerprints and DNA from the bodies, but no matches. That's because Shakes was never arrested as an adult, and his juvenile record was sealed," Van Vuuren admitted. "Once we could link the forensic evidence, it was all there. We also found articles of clothing, from the women, in his home."

He spoke gruffly. "I wanted to say thanks. I appreciated your calling me, that night."

His voice brightened. "I'm getting a promotion and a pay rise because of this."

"Hey, that's good. Get a subscription to *Rolling Stone*."

He laughed. "That'd be nice. If my wife doesn't use the money for new curtains or something."

Van Vuuren's news about Shakes had brought closure. And Spencer, the other violent person from my recent past, was also shut down. With the bad guys gone, I could get my work finished. Spend time with Clay.

He'd been amazing after the attack. Phoning, even sending flowers. My friends and family had also played their part, doing the home-made soup thing, bringing me chocolate. They didn't go as far as bringing me takeaways from Gianicolo's though. Bummer. Reuben, Johan and Siphon were dazed by the whole affair. Getting used to the idea their manager was a serial killer.

James did good. He'd got the news scoop, thanks to my call. Called me almost daily, seeing how I was. Was still following the medical waste story, kept me up to speed with what was happening in the real world. Tactfully didn't ask much about Clay. Knew he was curious, though.

By the end of the week I was ready for action. Enough lying around. I'd watched every re-run of *Survivor* I could find. And the chocolate was finished. Hadn't logged on to my computer for days. It was time to get back in the saddle.

My inbox was full. Three mails from *Rolling Stone*. Sent a few days ago. The first wanting to know what was happening with the Ben Wilson story. The second more demanding, saying that I should respond as soon as possible. The third to the point.

<To: Khunter@iafrica.com>  
<From: Bguttenberg@Rollingstone.com>  
Subject: Ben Wilson feature

Dear Kailan Hunter,  
Owing to the lack of a clear direction in the proposed feature on musician Ben Wilson, and due to our schedule, we have decided to cancel the said article. We will be running a series of pictures and captions, as supplied by Rozena Jafta, but will not require your copy.

Regards,  
Bob Guttenberg

Shit. I'd blown it. I could try and explain how complicated the story had become. That I'd nearly been killed by a serial murderer. But that wasn't what Bob wanted. It was his call. And I hadn't delivered. Chucked away my big shot.

I paced my study. Why hadn't I just given *Rolling Stone* what they asked for? Instead of messing about with musicians and recording rights. With weird fans and teenage lovers. And getting slapped around in the process. I was dumb. And I'd soon be broke. Had been relying on the *Rolling Stone* job for a cash boost.

I hadn't handled the Ben Wilson story the way I was supposed to. But then I thought about it. Didn't see what else I could have done. The band, Shakes, drugs or no drugs – how could I have walked away from that? There was shit going down, and I followed it. That's what journalists do.

Now with *Rolling Stone* no longer my employer, there was no reason to carry on. Ben's death would remain a mystery. End of story. I could carry on beating myself up. Or I could move along to something else.

Called Rozena, she said *Rolling Stone* were assholes, which made me feel better. Even though we both knew I'd fucked up. I felt guilty I'd let her down, but she wouldn't go there.

"Kain, I'm just glad you're still around. And that your dog hides bones."

Still had one story at least. Clay's clinic.

I had plans to see him later that day. It was Friday, a week since Shakes had broken into my home. Would use some of that time together to ask some questions. Nothing heavy, just background for the piece.

Meantime I went back to my notes. Still hadn't decided how to drop abortion into the story. If at all. On impulse I dialled Thandi's niece, Siphokazi. She answered, I heard a lot of noise in the background. People talking and laughing.

"It's Kain. The journalist. We went to the Kentucky."

"Oh ... you." She sounded surprised. Heard her whispering to somebody.

"You busy?" I asked.

"No, not really. I'm with my friends, we're waiting for my boyfriend. I was just telling them who you are."

"I wanted to know if I could speak some more to you, about ... what we talked about before."

Siphokazi hesitated.

"Well ... okay. But not on the phone."

"Where're you?"

"I'm in Cavendish. We're looking at clothes."

I looked at my watch. Early afternoon.

"I could join you for a short time."

"Find me in the Levis shop." Siphokazi rang off.

Cavendish Square again. The mall was a teen magnet. Wasn't sure how much value I would get from the meeting. Wanted to get moving, though. Worth a try. Didn't want to sit in front of my computer getting depressed.

The mall was as busy as the last time I was there. Crowds, canned music. Siphokazi was trying on a baggy pair of bootleg jeans. She introduced me to her two friends, Nandi and Patricia. They argued about Levis versus Diesel while Siphokazi paraded in front of the mirror. Both about 16 years old. Trendy street gear, long braids. All three girls in a light, happy mood. Getting into that weekend feeling.

Siphokazi didn't buy the jeans. "Too expensive – you can get much cheaper at the station market," she declared. I wondered whether we would talk with the girls around. Siphokazi anticipated this. "I spoke to my friends – we have no secrets. You can ask me anything," she said. Nandi and Patricia nodded.

We found a small restaurant in a quieter section of the mall. I ordered coffee. The three girls with strawberry milkshakes.

"Siphokazi – how do people feel about abortion, where you stay?"

She looked at me, sipping through her straw.

"It's like I said before. In the township there are traditional people, like my aunt. And then there are more ... modern people. My aunt is actually not so closed to these things. But some others, they say it is wrong."

She made a clicking sound of irritation. "Even though it is legal, and I know this. We learnt it at school."

"The ones who point fingers – when they have a problem, they will rather go to a bad place, or to an old woman, and have terrible things done to them. Sometimes they die."

I knew this was true. One of the online articles had been a report on deaths caused by backstreet abortions. Performed on women too afraid to go openly to a clinic. Avoiding stigma. Dying instead. Too many of them.

"What do people think about the clinic you've been to – Dr Parker's clinic?"

"We know you can go there and have a clean, safe operation. He doesn't ask questions. The older ones, and the more rural ones – they think it's not good, that it is a shame. They think he is a bad person. But most of the modern girls, and even their mothers, are glad for the clinic."

Nandi put her glass down and spoke softly.

"I have been there. And even Patricia," she said. "We got into trouble, and Dr Parker fixed it."

Patrica looked up. "He was very kind. It was quick, and afterwards ... he cleaned up nicely. It was as though nothing had happened."

Siphokazi broke in. "We know about condomising. We know that we should insist. But sometimes, these boys, they don't want to. Now, after my operation, I say no. Not without protection."

"Us too," said Nandi, solemnly, Patricia nodding.

"Does Dr Parker provide condoms?" I asked.

"No, we get our own. But he gave us money after the operation. Just a little – to help out," said Patricia.

"It was nice of him," said Nandi. "But now all three of us have got part-time jobs. We're working at a supermarket in Mowbray, weekend packers. That's why we can come and look at the clothes here, in Cavendish." Her face sobered, she went serious. "I made a mistake. I won't do it again. No sex without a condom. I'm young, I've got a job, and I'm going to finish school. I'm planning for my future."

She smiled at me shyly. "And one day, when I am ready, I will get married and have babies."

We finished our drinks. Siphokazi's phone beeped, she looked at the screen. "It's my boyfriend. He's at McDonalds," she said.

We shook our tailfeathers, as they say. Made a move.

Siphokazi stopped, looked at me. Clear, frank eyes. "You're okay. You were interested in me. And my friends. You didn't judge us. Sometimes it's nice to talk to an older person, who isn't going to get cross," she said simply. Nandi and Patrica smiled. Walked away. Three young girls, looked like they didn't have a care in the world.

The conversation bugged me. I was stuck in grinding traffic, had time to think.

It wasn't the casual sex that was the issue. Hullo. Was I one to talk? People have sex. That's the way it is. And I knew it made sense to tell teenagers about contraceptives. Not pretend they weren't sexually active. Let them know about safe options. Siphokazi was right when she said I wasn't judgmental. How could I be? My own sister had been there.

No, it wasn't the sex that was the problem. It was Clay and the clinic. He'd said he only did a few abortions. Didn't sound like it, what I'd just heard. And the money afterwards was strange. Sure, maybe for sanitary pads or something. But still.

I went straight to the deli in Kalk Bay, where Clay and I were going to meet. I was hungry. Funny that. Had forgotten to eat again.

Clay had a corner table, was paging through the evening paper when I arrived. I watched him for a moment. Looked good. Blue shirt, khaki chinos. I liked the way he took space on a chair.

I sat down.

"Good timing – I just ordered a bottle of chardonnay. Is that okay?" he asked. Smile crinkling his eyes.

"Yeah. Could do with a drink."

"Tough day?"

"You could say that." Told him about *Rolling Stone*. The wine arrived, he poured two glasses.

"I'm sorry Kain. But in the light of what's happened, perhaps it's for the best."

Felt disappointed. Wanted Clay to say that *Rolling Stone* had made a big mistake. But maybe he had a point.

"Yeah, I guess so."

"What do you plan to do?"

"For now? Finish the feature on your clinic."

"Are you sure it's a good idea? Maybe you should rest for a while."

"No way. I've had enough lying down. Need to start earning again," I said.

Clay reached across the table to take my hand.

"Kain, don't take offense. But if I can help in anyway, financially, I'd like to. I'd rather you were healthy ... " His eyes held mine across the table.

"No. It's okay." Earlier I had been suspicious of Clay assisting the women at his clinic. Now he was offering to do the same for me. I felt bad. Clay meant well.

The waitress arrived, saw hands clasped across the table. "Should I come back?"

"No, it's okay," we said in unison. Broke the awkward moment. Ordered fish and salad. I attacked the fresh bread on the table.

"How are things at the clinic?" I asked.

"Still very busy. Nosipho is not feeling well, yet, so it's just me on my own."

"She'll be alright?"

"Yes. She had a basic miscarriage. Physically, she'll be fine. But she's still very upset."

"You balancing things?"

"I did it before Nosipho came. And actually, I see a fair amount of patients after hours anyway. When she would normally have left."

"Why's that?"

"Well, some people can only come when they've finished work. It's a reality."

The fish arrived. I got piggy. Finally signalled for coffee.

"Be alright if Rozena and I come around sometime next week, take a few pictures? Maybe speak to some patients, wrap up the piece?"

"Are you really sure you want to do this?"

"Yeah. Nice to have a good news piece."

Clay sat back. "How much detail do you need?"

"I've been thinking about that. I know there're some controversial issues ..."

"Such as?" Clay smiling, but worried eyes.

"How about abortion?"

"You surely weren't going to include that in the story?"

"It's part of what you do. But I know some people still have conservative attitudes. I'm not sure."

"You're right." Clay said. "Kain, you were nearly killed during the last story you worked on. What if you wrote something that offended a reader? What if they wanted to take it up with you?"

"But ..."

"Enough. I don't think you should do the piece. I mean it. I don't think it's a good idea."

I bristled.

He saw the look in my eyes. Softened. "It's just that ... I care about you. I don't want some weirdo responding in the wrong way. Taking it out on you. Just leave it. Please."

Writing stories was my job. It was what I loved. In one day, two pieces were being taken away from me.

"It's your clinic, Clay. But my career. Think about it. We can talk again."

We finished our coffee in silence. I didn't ask Clay to come back to my house. "I'll call you," I said, turned away. He watched me walk to my car. I drove off.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Saturday morning I was restless again. Made tea, didn't feel like drinking it. Put on a CD, didn't listen. Clay's attitude had got under my skin. Didn't know how to read him. Or respond. He was sexy, thoughtful, funny. But he also had this bossy thing. Telling me I couldn't do my story. Nobody does that. So why didn't I just walk away?

Because I liked him. Some. Think he liked me. And maybe I was stubborn.

I'd have to work this one out. Talk to Clay. Tell him not to mess with my writing. But also say I wanted to spend time with him.

Meantime, I could get domestic. Hadn't cleaned up since Shakes. Well, since the body and the blood were removed. Books and magazines all over. Coffee mugs piling up. Chocolate wrappings. Empty, unfortunately. Looked at my study, realised I could dump all the *Rolling Stone* notes. Anna could have the papers she'd lent me. I'd trash the rest. Useless to me.

Packed stuff away, swept. Drew the line at dusting. Me, I reckon life's too short to get neurotic about dirt. I tackled the study. Desk buried in paper. Started packing up the notes from Anna. Found some SCR pages that looked new. I was getting bored with the cleaning, anyway. Sat down to read.

"The South African government has backed a ban on embryonic stem cell research. According to Dr. Eddie Mhlanga, Chief of Maternal, Child and Women's Health in the National Health Department, embryonic stem cell research poses a difficult moral problem. It provides the opportunity for large Western corporations to exploit impoverished women, mining their bodies for embryos to be developed into stem cell lines and shipped elsewhere for research purposes.

There were some sick puppies out there. Way I understood it, some research companies were paying poor women to give up their embryos. Their babies, I suppose. With the ban in place, at least South African women were protected. They couldn't be forced into giving up their embryos to benefit rich developed countries.

Ben was a funny boy. Why was he getting into this stuff? Was he writing a song about it? I couldn't see the local clubbing crowd getting down to a piece about dead babies. Carried on reading.

"The South African government's concern cannot be dismissed as paranoia. International concerns over embryonic stem cell research have landed some countries in an awkward stand-off between religious leaders and health professionals. Their solution is a compromise: forbidding the extraction of stem cells within their own countries. But allowing embryonic stem cell lines to be imported from elsewhere.

There is no law preventing research on stem cells that come from embryos outside the United States. The same is true for Germany, which has explicitly encouraged researchers to find stem cell lines from other countries. This compromise will likely be adopted by other developed nations. In this way they satisfy both the religious right, who seem to be unconcerned with embryos born outside their national borders; and the medical community, whose research agendas may continue."

So some countries like Germany and the United States were actively encouraged to buy imported stem cells. I wondered where they did their shopping. Wondered how effective the ban was, here.

"There are worries that the United States, Germany, and other countries may look elsewhere, for instance in South Africa, for embryonic stem cell lines. Investigations show a pattern of convincing poor women to hand over their embryos in exchange for a small sum of money. Stem cells would then be extracted from these embryos and transported back to the United States or Germany, for scientists to complete their research legally.

Dr. Mhlanga says this is "not OK," since money from this research will likely never find its way back to South African shores and benefit the women from whom the embryos were taken. Better to never allow the research in the country, he argues, than permit South Africa to become a petri dish for greedy Western doctors.

The article was titled "Ethics, Politics and Embryo Stem Cell Research in South Africa" and was written by one Udo Schuklenk of the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, and Jason Lott of the University of Alabama in Birmingham, United States.

I recognised Ben's handwriting at the bottom of the page. Several cryptic questions.

"Patients consulted?"

"American connections?"

"Anna's embryo?"

Okay, maybe all of this had nothing to do with Ben and his band. I started to see another angle. More personal. Possibly involving Clay – the reference to Anna's embryo. Ben had been at the clinic for Anna's abortion. Did he see or hear something that made him start looking up stem cell research? He may have spoken to Clay, asked questions. But why?

I had a fleeting idea. Pushed it aside. No way. Maybe Ben thought Clay was involved in "harvesting" embryos. He did abortions, he would have easy access. But I couldn't picture it. I'd heard how the women in the community liked and respected Clay. Had seen the hard work he put into the clinic.

So what was this all about? It pissed me off that this story still had so many parts that I didn't understand. Was I over-reacting? Reading too much into a collection of random notes by a dead musician? A dead musician with a drug problem, lest I forget.

Could be. Then I thought of James and his ongoing investigation into dumped medical waste. Syringes, human tissue, soiled bandages. The bag of foetuses, left to rot. Dead babies. Saw where this might be going. What if Ben had noticed something odd when he took Anna to the clinic? Was worried that Clay was being used, unknowingly, by an outside force. Somebody who knew he worked alone. That he performed abortions. Would be disposing unwanted embryos. Easy enough to pose as a medical waste company. Take the bits you need. Throw away the rest. Maybe slip up once or twice, leave embryos behind as well. I didn't know how the stem cells, or embryos, needed to be stored and shipped overseas. But it could be done.

Ben read newspapers. He would have seen the medical waste stories. Put the proverbial two and two together. Wanted to warn Clay. But wanted to be sure first. Not appear a fool. He'd been reading and researching. But had died before he could say anything.

I needed to speak to Clay. Wondered if he was still tetchy about his clinic. He might think I was making up stuff just to get another shot at writing my piece. Or that I was imagining things. The one other person who could help me was Nosipho. She knew how things worked at the clinic.

I wanted to see her as soon as possible. Not the kind of conversation to have on the phone. I would go to Thandi, ask her where Nosipho lived.

The sun was shining weakly when I got to Langa. Thandi was sitting in a chair on her front step. Inevitable cup of tea in her hand.

She smiled, but she also looked worried.

"*Molo*, Kain. It's good to see you again. Is everything alright – I read about the terrible thing that happened to you." My name had been mentioned in James' breaking story.

"*Molo*, Thandi. I'm fine. I wanted to see Nosipho. How is she?"

"Ai. She's still very sore. She is so sad, that one. But maybe it will be good for you to visit."

"I need to ask her one or two things about the clinic."

"She wants to go back to work soon. Being busy will help keep her mind off unhappy things."

"Could you tell me where she lives?"

Thandi gave me directions.

"I hope to see you again soon."

"That will be nice. How is your article going?"

"Slowly."

Thandi raised her eyebrows. "I hope things are still going well with Dr Parker?"

Why was it that everybody felt they could comment on my love life? Felt myself flushing. "It's all fine."

"You must do what you feel is best. Only you can know that."

She was right, of course. Nobody should decide what I could or couldn't do. Including writing stories.

Nosipho's house was a semi-detached square set on a tiny plot. Low vibacrete fence. Fresh white paint on the walls. Bright curtains. The neighbours out in force, chatting, being busy.

I rang Nosipho's bell, was relieved to hear footsteps. I wasn't sure if she'd be home. The door was opened by a tall, thin man. Early 30s, jeans and a sweater. Holding a screwdriver. Short hair moulded to an elegantly-shaped head. Kind eyes behind thick-rimmed spectacles.

I introduced myself, explained I'd met Nosipho at the clinic. Wondered if I could talk to her.

"Of course. I am Nosipho's husband, Monde Dlangamandla. Please come in."

The living room was dominated by a large couch facing a television set. One wall lined with shelves, packed with china ornaments and pictures. Monde had been fixing the top shelf when I arrived. It explained the screwdriver. He called Nosipho, asked if I wouldn't mind if he finished the job.

I told Nosipho I wouldn't be long, just had some questions.

"It's about the clinic," I said.

"Dr Parker would know more about anything than me."

"Thing is, I want to check something before I speak to him."

"Well, I can try and help."

I tried to be tactful. It's not my strong feature, but I did my best. Didn't want to upset Nosipho or Monde, who was listening.

"When Dr Parker performs certain operations, the private ones, does he always do them on his own?"

Nosipho nodded. "Yes – I am not qualified to help him. And he always says he doesn't need assistance."

"And when these operations are finished ... what does he do then?"

She crinkled her brow. "I am not sure if I understand."

I glanced at Monde. Nosipho caught my look. "It's okay – my husband knows what happens at the clinic. You can speak openly."

"I'll be more specific. After an abortion, what happens to the embryo? Is there a medical waste company that sees to these things?"

Nosipho was taken aback. "I have no idea. I've never asked. I have never dealt with such a company, but then that would be Dr Parker's business."

Pain in her eyes as she spoke again. "All I know is ... for myself ... after my miscarriage, Dr Parker saw to everything. He said I wouldn't want to deal with ... the body."

One last question.

"You've never seen any other people on the premises cleaning up?"

"Dr Parker's consulting room is his own space. There is a woman who cleans once a week, when he's there, but I stay in the reception." She paused. "Of course, he does also see patients when I have gone home. There could be a company he employs after hours to deal with that sort of thing. I don't know."

Monde hadn't said anything. But he'd been following intently.

"May I ask what this is all about?" he said.

"I've been going through some papers. I have some suspicions."

"Such as?"

"It's a long story."

"If this has anything to do with where my wife works, or even with what happened to her ..."

"I'm not sure. But I can tell you what I've been thinking, if you'd like to know."

"Very much so," said Monde. He went over to Nosipho, perched on the couch next to her. I told them about Ben and the band. Anna and Siphon. About secret abortions and stigma. Loose ends that didn't make any sense. SCR and how it worked. Where to harvest embryos. Bags of bloody tissue and babies. Tried to keep it as short as possible. Was still a mouthful.

Nosipho spoke. "You are worried that some people are using Dr Parker's clinic for bad purposes?"

"Possibly."

"You think this Ben, this musician, wanted to warn Dr Parker?"

"Yeah. But then he had an accident."

"You must speak to Dr Parker."

"It's complicated. That's why I wanted to see you first."

"How sure are you, about this medical waste thing?"

"I have nothing solid, yet."

Monde pointed at the papers I'd brought with me. Ben's notes on SCR, my internet print-outs. I'd shown them both. "Could you leave these with us? I'd like to look at them in more detail."

Nosipho smiled fondly at her husband. "That's very typical. Always wanting the facts." She explained. "Monde studied for an accounting diploma. He likes to have things laid out on paper in front of him."

"I'll get the notes back when you've finished. And I'll let you know what Dr Parker thinks, when we've spoken." I said.

We exchanged cell numbers, I left. Heavy clouds tumbling in from the sea, rolling past Table Mountain. Time to hunker down. Maybe I'd find a *Survivor* special I hadn't seen. Even better – an *Amazing Race* series. My pleasures hurt nobody but myself. That's what I say to Rozena when she sneers. I also usually tell her to piss off.

Called Clay, got his answering machine. Watched the weather scudding across the ocean, beating up the waves. I wanted to speak to Rozena, knock around the SCR idea. Maybe bitch about Clay's bossiness. But didn't feel like a big sermon. How I should stop being so uptight about my work and relax with Clay. She can be so *Dear Abby* sometimes. James was my next choice. He never gives me a hard time.

I could hear laughter, the churn of voices.

"Kain ... hold on a sec." He said something indistinct to somebody else. The background went quieter.

"I just stepped out. It's bloody noisy in there." Sounded happy, busy.

"Having fun?"

"A group of us are celebrating Sandy Tockar's birthday. Remember her?"

Yeah. Only too well. She worked in the newsroom with James. When he and I had stopped seeing each other, she'd just about thrown a party.

"Don't let me keep you," I said. Couldn't stop a pissy tone. I was being dumb. James and I were friends, now.

"What's up? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Wanted to pick your brain again. Forgot it was the weekend."

"I am a little tied up," James admitted. "Can we speak tomorrow?"

"Sure. Have fun with Sandy." I didn't mean it.

Things got better. I watched two morbidly obese sisters from New York try to bungee jump their way to a million bucks. Phil Keoghan told them they were out of the *Amazing Race* when one of them broke the chord. My night was almost perfect. Still felt a little touchy next morning when James called, though. Didn't help that he sounded tired. Late night with the lovely Sandy, no doubt.

"One thing, James. I'll keep it snappy."

"You said that about the Rohypnol. It got complicated."

"Yeah. And you got a scoop."

He laughed. "Guess I did. So fire away."

"Stem cell research. We talked about it before. It's illegal in South Africa, but not in other countries."

James got serious. "Whoah. Where are you going with this? I thought you were doing a piece on your, um, friend's clinic?"

"I am. This is something else. I think."

"What you want to know?"

"You spoke about research and money," I reminded him. "You said stem cell research is sometimes shady."

"That's what I've read. Other people see the research as the medical miracle of this century."

"As long as there are embryos and stem cells to work on."

"Which we know is part of the ethical debate."

"But we also know that big bucks talk."

"Exactly. If you have the money, you can buy anything. Even embryos. As far as the global situation is concerned, it's a seller's market."

"Any chance it could be happening here?"

"What do you mean?"

"How difficult would it be to get hold of the embryos of abortion patients? Specially young, vulnerable girls having abortions in private?"

"What do you think?"

"I reckon if you're in the right place, right time, probably quite easily."

There was a silence. James spoke urgently. "Kain. What have you found? What are you getting into?"

"I'm not sure. I think ... this is just a guess ... that Clay's clinic could be used as a kind of resource. An embryo shop. But he doesn't know what's happening."

"How could that be?"

"You know the medical waste stories you've been working on?"

"Oh my god."

"Yes. Somebody posing as a waste team, getting the embryos, dumping everything else. Maybe also the baby parts that aren't useful."

"You need to speak to Clay."

"That's what everyone says. I can't get hold of him."

"You have to sort this out. I can't believe it. You were nearly killed working on your last story. And now you've maybe found something equally dangerous. If there is some sort of illegal trafficking in embryos going on, you could be in big shit for exposing it. So could Clay."

"I didn't want to walk into this," I said. "I haven't even officially been working."

I told him about *Rolling Stone* cancelling my feature, cleaning out my notes.

"Look, this isn't about a story," I said. "If I'm right, I want to warn Clay. Shut the operation down."

"Nail the bastards."

"For sure."

"Kain, if you can't get Clay on the phone, go to his house. This is too important to wait."

"You're right. I'm gone."

"If you want me to come ..."

It could be awkward. I said I'd be fine.

"Let me know what happens," said James. "Meantime, I'm going to do some research of my own."

I put down the phone, it rang again. Nosipho. Frantic. "Kain, I am worried about Monde. He is so angry. He left to find Dr Parker. I couldn't stop him. He said I must wait here at home. I don't know what's going on."

I also needed to find Clay, didn't want to waste time. But I couldn't ignore Nosipho's frightened voice.

"Slow down, Nosipho. Why was Monde angry?"

"I am not sure. He was reading your notes last night, and he was sitting and thinking. He asked me about some of the young girls who have been to the clinic. He spoke about my miscarriage. He also phoned some people."

"This morning he said he was going to sort things out. He was so mad. He asked where Dr Parker lives. I have his address in Hout Bay, in case of emergencies. I gave it to him"

"Where is Monde now?"

"He caught the taxi to Mowbray. He was going to take a bus from there."

"Look. I'm on my way to Hout Bay. I'll find Monde at the taxi rank. He can come with me."

Monde must have worked out the same stuff I had. We could both warn Clay at the same time.

"Thank you." Nosipho, still anxious. "I have never seen Monde so upset. And after the baby and everything ... I am so worried."

So was I. We had to get to Clay. Fast.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Jane and Edi were happy to babysit Ninja. I left them all lazing in front of a fire, pushed the jeep hard to Mowbray. The cold was relentless. Biting through my jeans, sneaking under my sweatshirt. I was shaking from icy air and wound-up energy when I reached the Mowbray taxi rank.

It was usually a frenetically busy hub. Thousands of commuters snaking on and off buses, taxis, trains. On a Sunday evening it had gone dead. Empty parking lots, windswept concrete. Closed take-away shops. A handful of people waiting for their lifts under bleak fluorescent lights. Rain beating down.

Within seconds I was wet. Ran to the nearest group of people, looked for Monde. No show. Ahead of me two people were climbing into a taxi. The one in front a large woman. Behind her

a slight man with glasses. I sprinted. He was just squeezing in after the woman when I reached him.

"Monde?" I shouted. He spun around.

"I'm going to Dr Parker. Come with me? Nosipho told me where you were heading."

He stepped away from the taxi, nodded.

"I'm over there," I pointed at my car, broke into a jog. Monde followed.

In the jeep I looked more closely at him. He was soaked, like me. Raindrops clinging to his hair, the lenses of his glasses. Soggy jeans. But he didn't seem to notice. His eyes burned with a fierce glow.

We left the terminus. Monde turned to me.

"My wife told you where I was going. Did she say why?" Tense voice, holding himself in.

"No. She was worried."

"She should have worried when she started working at the clinic. That's where all the trouble began."

"What trouble do you mean?" Thought he meant the abortions. The stolen embryos.

"If she wasn't there, if Dr Parker hadn't been her doctor, I don't think we would have lost our child."

"Why do you think that?" Nosipho had a miscarriage. Clay had been there to help her. End of story.

"This is the way I see it. I've been thinking, and I also spoke to one or two people I know last night. Guys who operate – outside the system, shall we say."

"I get you."

"If this theory about stem cells and embryos is correct, then there must be a client requesting these ... goods."

"For sure. A customer and a supplier." Monde and I choosing neutral, business-like terms. Easier than talking about dealing in dead fetuses.

"I talked to my cousin. We don't always see eye to eye, because I don't like the way he makes a living. He sells stuff that is stolen," Monde admitted. "But I asked him about his work. He says he does well because he always meets his customer's demands. If they want a LG big screen television set by Tuesday, he'll have it."

"So?"

"So I am sure that whoever is selling these parts from the clinic also has a customer with demands."

"You mean, like deadlines? Goods to be delivered by a certain time?"

"Yes. Maybe, like with the stolen goods, it's an ongoing thing. Not just one delivery, but many."

"A quota?" I mused. "That would make sense from a research point of view. To have a reliable supply."

"That's my point," said Monde, eyes flashing.

"What is?"

"Our child – the child that died, could have been part of this quota." Monde, agitated. "Perhaps there weren't enough abortions that month. Not enough young girls in trouble. But the customer still needed his product. Then a pregnant woman who just needs a normal check-up appears."

"No ..." I said, but Monde went on.

"A pregnant woman who trusts her doctor. A very healthy woman who hasn't had any complaints up until now. She's simply doing what she has done every month of her pregnancy – making sure everything is okay."

"You can't ..." I began.

He interrupted again. "This woman goes into the examination room with absolute confidence that she and her baby will be fine. She doesn't know that she and her baby are actually a solution to a problem. And when she feels pain, and is told that she must be brave, that the doctor will help her, she believes him."

Monde's face, wracked with pain. "I have no way of knowing whether Nosipho's miscarriage was normal, or forced. But I think of what could be going on at that clinic. I wonder whether our child may have had a better chance if my wife had never gone there."

His voice rose. "I know I am making a heavy judgement against Dr Parker. But even if he was not involved and the miscarriage was natural, there is still the chance that the embryo has been exported. To a foreign country, to be cut up by strangers."

I didn't say anything.

"That's why I need to see Dr Parker. I want to know what happened to my wife. I want the truth. And if he doesn't know what could be going on at his clinic, behind his back, I must warn him. So it can stop."

I sympathised with Monde. But I thought he was wrong. Ben's papers on SCR had been put together because he was scared for Clay. I was sure about this. He'd wanted to help Clay. Because Clay had helped him and his sister. Now only I was left to help him. And Monde, if he could see things this way.

His face set in a hard, determined mask.

"Monde, I think you're mistaken. I think Dr Parker is being used. That's why I am going to see him tonight." I spoke more softly. "I'm sure he did the best he could for Nosipho."

"I will judge for myself, when I hear him speak."

"And if you don't believe him?"

"He will have to take the consequences."

I stared at Monde. "I'm not driving you to his house if you're going to get violent. I'm serious."

Monde smiled grimly, looked down at his thin figure. "I'm not built for fighting, Kain. And I'm not carrying anything more deadly than my wallet."

He stared at the rain washing across the windscreen. "No, I don't want violence. If I think Clay, or anybody else, is guilty, I will go about things the proper way. I will lay a charge."

He sighed. "My cousin would think I am stupid. But that's the way I do things."

We turned up the narrow road leading to Clay's house. Trees bucking and scraping. The jeep shuddering through drifts of water running down the mountainside. Engine threatening to cut out. My knuckles white on the steering wheel. I willed the car to keep going. We were blocked by the security gate. I was about to buzz Clay's number when it opened, a car sweeping out. We squeezed in quickly. Everybody inside, hiding from the weather. Nobody saw us arrive. The lights were on in Clay's house, his car outside. Didn't know why he hadn't returned my calls. Maybe doing the space thing after our last meeting? That was okay.

I rang the bell, Monde standing right behind me. Clay opened up, stared at me in surprise, peered over my shoulder.

"Kain! And ... is it Monde Dlangamandla? You came to see your wife at the clinic, I think?"

Monde stepped forward. "Yes, it's me, Dr Parker."

"Come in. You must be freezing." Clay shot a curious glance at me, ushered us inside.

He recovered well from his initial bewilderment. Bustled us into the lounge, took our wet jackets. Monde could wait no longer. "Dr Parker, there is something I need to discuss with you. It's very important."

"Please sit," said Clay, looking concerned. He moved onto the sofa. Monde stayed where he was.

"It's about my wife, Nosipho. There is something I don't understand."

"Is she alright – has something happened?" asked Clay.

"It happened a while ago. And you were there."

"Her miscarriage? A terrible tragedy, I was so sorry."

"Was it, Dr Parker? A tragedy? Something that couldn't be avoided?"

"What are you getting at?" Clay's tone shifted.

"My wife was healthy. Even you said that, the last time you examined her. How could this suddenly change?"

Clay shifted in his seat. When he spoke again, there was a patronising undercurrent in his voice. I didn't like it.

"Monde – may I call you by your first name? I can assure you that what happened to Nosipho was perfectly natural. The percentage of miscarriages, particularly for a first-time pregnancy, is extremely high. It's very sad – but it is also very normal, unfortunately."

Monde was about to speak again when I broke in.

"Thing is, there may be something going on at your clinic that you are unaware of."

Clay's gaze swivelled my way. "What do you mean?"

"I found some notes – they were part of Ben's papers. Not the abortion ones. These were about stem cell research. I told you I had been looking into that."

Clay looked annoyed.

"And I told you to stop wasting your time. I don't know what all this has to do with me, or Nosipho."

Bad time for an argument. I didn't want us to fight.

"I'll keep it short, there's a lot of detail. I think somebody has been using you, and the clinic, to get embryos to export overseas. Without you or your patients knowing."

Clay burst out laughing. "What a crazy thought! How could anybody gain entry to my clinic without my knowledge?"

"Don't you use a medical waste company, something like that?"

He hesitated. "Yes ... I do."

"So your medical waste is sealed, whatever, then collected?"

"Yes. I employ a local firm."

"You watch what they do?"

"I don't have to. They're professionals."

"Clay, they could be doing things you don't know about. Like collecting the embryos and stem cells you've discarded. Sending them overseas for research."

"It sounds macabre. And very unethical."

I sank down in the chair opposite Clay. "Please don't dismiss this. It could be really serious."

"Who else knows about these suspicions? Apart from Ben, obviously?"

"He wanted to warn you, Clay. But he died before he could."

Monde spoke up. "It's just me and Kain who are worried about this. We had to come and speak to you."

Clay's face changed again. The anger seemed to drain from him. "I appreciate that you came here. It's a lot to take in. It's ... I don't know what to say." He stood up, moved to the passageway. "Excuse me a minute, I just want to get a drink of water." Walked unsteadily out the room.

He had listened. Didn't think we were mad. I was relieved. Wanted to help him.

My cellphone vibrated in my pocket. An SMS. I moved to the sliding door in front of the balcony to read it. Flipped open the screen. Clay came back. Carrying a warm jersey, holding it out towards Monde. I decided to forgive his previously arrogant tone.

The SMS was from James. I didn't understand it at first. Read it a second time.

"Clay the danger. American connection. Don't go to his house."

I saw Clay watching me with the cellphone. He took a step towards Monde, threw aside the jersey. Pointed a silenced gun at his chest. Pulled the trigger twice, point blank range. A suppressed, popping noise. Monde's eyes jerked wide open, he fell to the ground. Blood seeping from two neat holes in his shirt. I stood, frozen, while his breathing slowed. Stopped.

The cellphone fell out my hand on to the carpet. Clay pointed the gun at me, smiled.

"Shakes was right, all along. You just never know when to stop poking around."

I gaped at him. "You ... you shot Monde."

"Yes. And when I call the cops later, I'll tell them he broke into the house and I had to defend myself. I doubt anybody saw you arriving together, in this rain."

"But ... I'll tell them the truth."

"No you won't. Because you're going to take a drive. Under the influence of a potent drug, which I doubt anybody will check for." Clay waved his gun hand in the air. "Everybody will think it was a tragic accident, you coming to visit me in the pouring rain and crashing off Chapman's Peak. Such a shame. Just like poor Ben."

"It was you," I said.

"And it was so easy. Being a respected medical doctor, I can always get my hands on Rohypnol. You never know when it'll come in handy."

"You were at the club for his last gig. I saw you there."

"That's right. I was the loyal family friend, come to support my partner's son. It was simple to spike Ben's drink before he left. The idiot even thanked me for carrying his bag to the car – which I'd filled with a little powdery present."

"Why? Was it about the stem cell research? He wanted to help you."

"Oh Kain. For somebody so bright, you really can be thick. Sit down. I'm going to have to tell you a story. After that, we'll go for a little trip."

My eyes swung wildly round the room. No escape off the balcony. It led straight down to the sea. The only way out was past Clay. And his gun. No point in shouting. Nobody would hear me above the storm and the ocean.

Felt a weird déjà vu moment. The room with Shakes. This time Clay. No dog bones around, though. I'd let Clay talk, work a different way out of this. I'd done it before.

As if sensing my thoughts, Clay walked swiftly towards me. Backhanded my face with the butt of the gun. Felt my cheek pop, blood gushing through my teeth. Fell to the floor.

"Stay down there. Move and I'll shoot you. I promise. You won't get lucky like you did the last time."

I held one hand over my mouth.

"And I know about your karate moves. Stay away from me. Don't get clever."

He knew the gun would stop me anyway.

"You know," Clay said conversationally, "I was going to let Shakes finish his number on you. I couldn't believe it when I came into your house and realised he planned to kill you. Too good to be true."

He kept the gun trained on me.

"I was going to let him do it, then rush in after he had left. The bereaved boyfriend. Nobody would have known. But then you had to get clever and fight back." His eyes narrowed. "I knew I had to step in, or else you'd have wondered where I was."

A coppery stream of blood slid down my throat. I choked. Clay punched me in the stomach.

"Shut up. Don't distract me."

He continued his monologue, casually. Switching smoothly from cold violence to nonchalant conversation.

"You see, Kain, I wondered if you would be a problem from the moment I heard you were writing about Ben. Of course, I thought you were going to do a piece along the lines I had planned." He indicated inverted commas with his fingers. 'Musician dies in accident, drugs in car.' End of story."

"But I wasn't sure. I needed to keep an eye on you."

He smiled again. "It was fun watching you fall into the trap. I had the perfect introduction. The family friend and business partner. And I played it just right, I reckon. The sympathetic doctor who finds himself attracted to the intrepid journalist. I think I struck the right tone, wouldn't you say?"

The carpet pressed against my cheek. I lay still. Ticking over options. Not many.

"I couldn't believe you didn't stick to the script. No. You had to investigate further."

He paced the room. "It was just as well you trusted me, else I'd never have heard about your little friend Elmore and his box of goodies."

My heart sank. I remembered telling Clay about my visit to Elmore's flat. I'd even described where he lived. Elmore was dead the day after.

"That's right," Clay saw the realisation in my eyes. "I couldn't take the chance the boy had something incriminating in his possession. I kicked in his back door, and the fool heard me. He put up a bit of a fight, but he wasn't much good. It was his own fault, really. I didn't have any other option. I took Ben's leather jacket to make it look like a burglary. I think it worked."

"What a waste," he added with a disgusted expression. "Elmore didn't even have the stuff in his home."

Clay had missed some of the most important papers, hidden in Elmore's sketch book. The SCR notes.

He sat down on the chair opposite me, carried on talking. About how he'd tried to persuade me Ben was a drug addict. How he wanted to stop me nosing around. How he'd worked on wooing me.

"And then you got all goody-goody, helping those boys in the band and speaking to Anna and Siphso. You just couldn't leave things alone," he sneered.

I had been right about Ben's suspicions. His paper trail, the abortion notes, the stem cell print-outs, all pointed to something bad happening at Clay's clinic. But I had also been terribly wrong. He didn't want to help Clay. He was going to bust him.

"Ben was a lot like you, Kain. He wouldn't mind his own business. He came to the clinic with Anna, and that's when the shit started."

Ben had waited in the reception room during the operation. It was early evening. Nobody else there. Nosiphso had gone home. Ben thought he heard Anna calling him. She hadn't – but he walked into the room in time to see Clay placing human tissue - the embryo - into a medical storage container. There was an American address on it.

Anna wasn't aware what was going on. Lying on the examination table, covered by a sheet, face white and gaunt. Ben didn't want to upset her further. But Clay's guilty expression had bugged him. He'd taken Anna home. Then he'd logged onto the net.

A few days later he confronted Clay. Obviously he denied everything. Adopted a hurt position, offered to show Ben exactly how things worked at the clinic. To stop his fears. A date had been set, on the surface things were fine. Clay even came to Ben's gig, to show he had no hard feelings. But he'd made several purchases before he arrived at the club.

Clay jumped up energetically.

"Enough about me. It's time to talk about you." He pulled me roughly to my feet, the gun pressed to my temple.

"We can work something out. Don't take this any further," I said. Weak suggestion. I couldn't think of anything else.

He laughed. "Don't be silly. What would you work out with me? No – far better that you're out of the picture. I can carry on undisturbed."

He shook his head. "You're like Ben and Elmore. You've brought this on yourself."

I tried talking again. He ignored me.

"I know you're fond of a good chardonnay. But on a night like this, a glass of red would be more appropriate, hmm?"

He pushed me against the balcony door. One the other side of the glass the rain sliced across the small patio. Pitch dark out there. I could sense the cold, the steep drop below the house.

"Stay there while I fix us a drink," Clay said, keeping the gun on me as he stepped to a wooden counter. Inside were glasses, racks of wine. Clay selected a bottle that was half full, two steel goblets. Filled them with his left hand, the gun steady in his right. Reached into his pocket. Brought out a vial. Popped the lid, poured a thin, grainy substance into one goblet. Swirled it around.

"Cheers, Kain." Clay walked towards me with the wine. "Chateaux Rohypnol." My back was pressed against the glass door. Felt something poke my spine. The key to the balcony door. Not much good it would do me. No exit that way. Could maybe use the key to hurt Clay. Against a gun? Maybe not.

Clay pushed the gun into my temple, forced the goblet against my mouth. I kept it closed. He pushed harder. Could feel the steel edge dig into my lips. A sheen of sweat on Clay's forehead. His eyes flashed angrily. "Dammit, Kain, drink this. Or else I'll splatter your face all over the wall, I swear."

He leaned hard. I could feel the tart wine taste spread onto my tongue. I gagged. As I gasped for breath he emptied most of the goblet into my mouth. I swallowed reflexively, tried to spit. But the damage had been done.

Clay stepped back, smiling again. "Okay, you're going for a drive now. I'll take you the first bit of the way, then let you handle the rest. Point you in the right direction, as it were. I'll be fine walking back home, don't worry."

I knew exactly what he had in mind. The treacherously winding route along Chapman's Peak. A night like this, no visibility, the road washed with water and debris, it was deadly. Dosed with Rohypnol, I'd soon ramp one of the low barrier walls, drop into the sea.

I was getting drowsy. Rohypnol on an empty stomach. Soon I would have absolutely no defence against Clay. I leant back, felt the key again. Unlocked the door, pushed out. Rain blew in with a vicious blast. I stumbled onto the patio. Clay lurched after me. I clung to the railings. My arms looped through the thin stanchions. My legs were numb, I could hardly

stand. Wanted to shout, to scream. Couldn't make a sound. My eyes started to close. Managed to keep holding on.

Clay grabbed my sweater, raked his gun across my head. My forehead hit the railings. I felt one hand loosen. As Clay raised his arm to hit me again, I heard a shout. From inside the house. Saw lights coming on, outlines of people. Blurry, but there. Clay saw them too. Looked around the balcony. No way out, same problem I'd had. Decided to try and climb down anyway. As he balanced on the balcony railing I pulled myself forwards. Lined him up, did the perfect *Mawashi-geri* kick to his back. He fell over the edge.

Then I blacked out.

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Rozena and James leaned over me. I was still wet, but I was inside. Lying on the couch in Clay's lounge. Thick blanket over me. Beyond my friends' faces a group of uniformed men doing things with crime tape, cameras, dusting powder. On the floor, a body covered in a sheet.

"What?"

"Don't talk, Kain. It's okay. It's over." James, soft voice.

But I needed to know what had happened. Looked at the balcony door. No sign of Clay. Unless the figure under the sheet ...

But I recognised Monde's slim shape.

"It's Nosipho's husband – he's dead," I said.

"We know," Rozena said.

"How did you get here?" I asked.

"You've been out for a while. Guess it's okay for you to sit up. We'll talk – you listen," said James. They tucked the blanket tightly round me. Felt a bandage on my head. Disinfectant in my mouth. "A medic saw you. You'll be fine," said Rozena.

"Clay?" I asked.

"Gone."

"What you mean?"

"Permanently."

The two of them explained what had happened since my call to James. He'd gone on to the internet, read about stem cell research, found a lot of the stuff I had. Phoned a few contacts. Put pieces together, typed Clay's name into a search engine, found some interesting results.

I could have slapped myself on the head if it hadn't been so sore. Rule Number One: Always Google. I hadn't done it.

Anyway, Dr Clay Parker had indeed worked at City Central Hospital in the U.S. for some time. Like he'd told me, that day on the beach. But before that, he'd been at another hospital. New York Medi-clinic. James had contacted the hospital. A helpful registrar who remembered Dr Parker filled him in. Clay'd been a mediocre doctor with high ambitions. Not in a medical sense. He knew he wasn't good enough, was lazy. But from an economic point of view. Clay wanted to make the big bucks. Without having to stress too much.

He'd been involved in several dicey deals at the hospital. They involved medical supplies and drugs. Nothing could be proved, but the hospital felt uncomfortable. They recommended a parting of the ways. Clay left. He appeared next at City Central Hospital. Known for its research programmes, and its focus on women's health. A contradiction, when one worked out what some of the research staff were getting into.

James did the maths, didn't like it.

"I reckon Clay watched what was happening – and what was needed – for several years. Non-American embryos, top of the list. He found the right people to speak to. Established useful connections. Came back to South Africa with a plan," he explained.

It had worked, too. For a while.

"He set up the clinic in Langa to harvest stem cells from poor girls and women," said James. "The practice in Rosebank was a front. He also needed some funds to get things started."

Rozena broke in. "We reckon he was regularly supplying his clients at City Central Hospital with embryos from abortion patients. The police are going to check the records from the clinic. There'll be a paper trail, no matter how hard he tried to hide it."

James nodded. "Once his customers started getting their orders, his bank balance flew."

"He might also have induced miscarriages to keep up his supply," Rozena added. "I thought of Nosipho."

When James realised where his research was going, he was frantic to get hold of me. Had no idea exactly where I was. Called Rozena, she contacted Thandi then Nosipho. James had SMS-ed me, then they'd raced here.

They'd panicked when they couldn't get into the complex. Didn't know which number to buzz. Also didn't want to warn Clay, maybe he'd do something dangerous. They'd abandoned the car, climbed over the fence.

"I recognised Clay's car so we reckoned we'd found the right place," said Rozena. "We were going to knock on the door. But then we thought fuck that. It was unlocked anyway."

"We didn't know you'd come with Monde," said James. They'd found the body in a pool of blood. Then seen Clay and I through the patio window.

"We were running to the balcony when we saw you kick Clay," said Rozena.

"What's happened to him?" I asked.

"Come," said James.

He led me to the patio. I looked over the edge. Impaled on the barbed wire security fence below the house was Clay. Face down. His body ruptured with a hundred steel points pushing through his chest, out his back.

I leant away. Let out a big breath. James put his arm around me. Rozena took my hand.

"It's okay," they said. "We're taking you home."

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## EPILOGUE

*Across the Atlantic in New York's City Central Hospital, Dr Michael Perry sat at his desk shaking his head. What a mess. He'd been happy when Clay Parker had set up his business. The demand for "anonymous" embryos here at New York's top research hospital was high. Parker had stepped in at the right time. And he was making good money using his clinic set-up in Cape Town. He knew what he was doing was illegal in South Africa, but he also knew his international colleagues weren't going to ask any questions. They just wanted the product. Besides, they had enough financial muscle to sort out any legalities – the hospital was behind the research one hundred percent.*

*But then Parker had blown it. Perhaps he'd been under too much pressure. Perry reckoned when Parker had said he was having a shortage at one point, that was when things got sticky. He was told to sort it out or he'd lose the contract. He'd probably started taking risks.*

*Perry knew all about taking chances when the situation demanded it. He called it using his initiative. He had illegally removed the embryos from three pregnant dead women whose bodies had been in the hospital. All of them were poor and had died violently, and no-one had found out about his late-night operations. So some woman from the projects comes in with a bullet hole in the head – and a full belly. Who's gonna care if her stomach is a little flatter when she gets buried? Ultimately, it was for a brilliant cause.*

*Perry knew that stem cell research was going to change the way medical systems operated in the future. Men and women would benefit from the research that was happening now. Diseases that were previously life-threatening would be curable. People would live for longer.*

*If a few women sacrificed their embryos for this cause, so be it. It was men like Clay Parker and Michael Perry who were making a medical difference. One day they would be thanked for it.*

*Meantime, Perry had a problem. His reliable supply of embryos from South Africa had dried up. He would need a new source. Flipping through his files, he started to note down possible names and connections. He wasn't too worried. The hospital paid well – and there would always be somebody willing to do the job.*

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