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# Something Between Us

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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: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Dedication**

In memory of Peter and Robert

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## **Abstract**

*Something Between Us* is a comi-tragedy, a novel that deals with the relationships between a group of adolescent friends. Set in a small South African mining town in the 1980s, against a general backdrop of political upheaval and border conflict, it aims to explore the nature and consequences of these relationships within the context of a central incident, in which the novel's narration reveals some of the wider fracture lines in the South Africa that was, and the South Africa that is today. *Something Between Us* is also a satire, in the manner in which it treats the behaviours, attitudes and idiomatic turns of speech that would characterize a certain sector of white youth from this particular era. The intention of the novel is to reveal, albeit with a comic-serio touch, the ways in which South Africa's past, as refracted through young lives, continues to reach into the present.

## ONE

Kia? You want my honest opinion? Typical Jap crap. Second and fourth set way too close together. The same goes for the clutch and brake. And less power than a Singer sewing-machine. No wonder I can't get the hang of it. I'm like my old man. Always going for the cheaper option and then regretting it.

Anyway, I better concentrate before I end up in some township, because that's the last thing I need right now. I'm trying to remember what the Avis guy said. Take a left when you get to the fork outside the airport, then carry on towards the city until you see the N1 south. Or was it a right at the fork? Fuck, I'm not even out of the carpark and already I'm lost.

I find the fork – so far, so good – and instead of hitting the indicators I hit the wipers. Right is a one-way; even if I wanted to I couldn't go down it, so I don't know why the Avis guy bothered mentioning it. I find third and move into the left lane behind a SAB truck that's crawling along at snail's pace. I don't want to miss the off-ramp so I sit there for ages, breathing truck fumes.

Only once I'm on the N1 do I start to unwind a bit. I don't know why I was so nervy in the first place. But that's just me. Being a Sunday afternoon, the road is quieter than a morgue. A few longhaul trucks, a couple of cars, a taxi or two, nothing much. The rest of the country must be farting under the covers after their Sunday lunch.

At least I have the road to myself for a change. It gives me a chance to think about things. Nowadays I never get a chance to think about anything, what with Jane and the kids, and the company helping itself to its pound of flesh. Jesus, I don't even have time to piss anymore, never mind think.

There's not a cloud in the sky, only this hazy pale blue. Brown veld stretches in every direction, broken here and there by scraggly thorn trees and overhead pylons and telephone lines. Everything looks worse in winter. Like an old photo with the colour washed from it. I don't understand how people can live here. I don't know how I could have lived here.

Unless global warming has got totally out of hand they must still get those summer afternoon storms. I haven't seen one of those for a while. You get nothing like it in the Cape. That tense build-up in the air, when everything, and I mean everything, goes deadly quiet. It's like the earth itself is tensing up. Then that first flash shattering the sky and the thunder following a few seconds later. And then, the rain. I'm not talking Cape drizzle. I'm talking fat globs of rain slapping the thirsty dirt. And that sweet wet smell afterwards. There's no better smell in the world. That's the only thing I miss about this place – the summer storms. My kids have never seen a real storm.

Once I'm off the N1 the road becomes narrow and potholed. I'm soon trailing this massive flatbed that's drifting over the white line and going eighty. The guy probably bought his licence. That's how it is nowadays. I gear the Jap toaster down to third, press my foot to the floor and crawl past without bouncing into the veld.

The turn-off for Kroonstad pops up ahead. I keep straight. At this rate I'm going to be there by four. That's taking it slow. I feel sick just thinking about it. There's nothing worse than arriving somewhere on a Sunday, unless it's in the dark. Especially a place you don't want to be.

Two hours later I spot the prison looming up ahead; it's too late to yank the handbrake and do a U-turn. It's grown to twice the size and it's wrapped in razor wire. No wonder the woman on the phone said the town doesn't get many tourists. A few guys in orange are hanging around the open quad area, looking bored out of their minds.

The facebrick mine houses on the opposite side of the road are still there and ugly as ever, but the trees that used to shade them, they've been mowed down.

As I lean into Sand River circle it seems as if I've never been away. Like past and present have collapsed into one, that everything in between doesn't count for anything.

I hardly recognise the Vegas. It's still standing, but only just. The red and white sign that flashed twenty-four seven is gone and the green grass where we used to lie with our ice-creams is a parking lot selling dodgy second-hand cars. I keep driving.

Like the woman on the phone told me, I take a right into Voortrekker, then a left into De La Rey, then another left into Retief, where I find the hotel. All this time I've been

imagining this posh new spot called the Jacaranda, meantime it's the old Doringboom dressed up in a fancy new name.

I pull into the half-empty parking ground and find a place near the entrance. I squeeze out of the car. My back hasn't felt this stiff in ages. By the looks of it they've given the hotel a facelift. It could be worse. It's got two stars, whatever that means, apart from an excuse to charge you more. There was nothing else listed on the internet, and anyway, I only booked for one night.

I take my overnight bag from the boot and make sure all the doors are locked. You can't trust anyone these days. Not even in small towns.

The woman behind the reception isn't bad looking, in that Afrikaner sort of way. Nice skin, big bones and shiny brown hair going down to her shoulders. She's also friendly, which makes a nice change. I appreciate that. A good-looking woman that's also friendly, that is. A black guy in a red jacket and black pants appears from nowhere and takes my bag from me. I follow him up the stairs to Room 104. That's the same number as our house in Durbanville. If I was Jane I would believe it meant something. An omen or something like that. But I'm not Jane so it means zip.

The old guy is also friendly and polite. Maybe too polite. He's been working here most of his life, lugging suitcases up and down the stairs. While he fiddles with the key in the door, I'm thinking how many suitcases. It must be thousands.

I give him a tip, five rand in coins. It's all the loose change I have. But it must be more than he earns in a week because he genuinely seems to appreciate it; you would swear I've given him a Christmas bonus. I tell him I'm not his baas, but it goes through one ear and out the other. Like I always maintain, this so-called new South Africa is a bullshit story. Except in the cities, nothing has changed. It's the same old thing in a different wrapper. That's why I'll never bring Jane and the kids to a place like this.

I lock the door and check out the room. I've long since lost count of all the hotels I've stayed at. That's the price you pay for being in sales. I go around the room opening the cupboards, turning on the hot- and coldwater tap, checking under the bed for dust, testing the mattress, that type of thing. It's called a ritual. I can't relax until I know what I'm dealing with.

I'm feeling it a bit now. It feels like I've been on the road all day. I don't know what the rush was about. I lie down on the bed and kick off my Crocs. They probably haven't replaced the mattress since the Doringboom days; it's way too soft and it sags in the middle. There's a long crack on the ceiling, running from one side of the room to the other. I bet caused by an earth tremor from the mines. People don't believe it when you tell them you grew up on an anthill, with these million black ants in mining helmets drilling holes miles under you.

Someone has tried to fix the crack, but they've done a terrible job of it. You can't just slap on Polyfilla. With these things you have to get to the root of the problem. You can't just cover over the surface and think it will go away. Nine times out of ten you'll have to start from scratch again.

The room has a TV, one of those massive dinosaurs from way back when. Because it doesn't have a remote I have to sit up and lean forward on the edge of the bed to flick channels. I don't know why I bother, there's nothing to watch on a Sunday, besides Bible bashers getting their rocks off. Nobody must tell me who and what to believe. I turn the sound right down and sit there thinking what to do until dinner.

Maybe I should try get in touch with Eddie. Apparently he's been living with his mom all these years. I wonder if he still looks the same. He probably wouldn't even know who I am; that's how long it's been. Anyway, I had better stick to my gameplan and leave it for another time.

The crack on the roof is bugging me. If it was up to me I wouldn't just cover it up with Polyfilla. First, you've got to chip away the plaster around the crack until there's a clean groove. Then you cover the groove with 40mm joinery tape. And only then do you smooth it over with Polyfilla. Once I'm finished with it you won't know there was a crack there in the first place.

I could give Jane a quick call, let her know I got here safe, make sure everything is okay and tell her to lock the Trellidoor. She's a complete hippie when it comes to safety and security. If I didn't insist she carry a cellphone she wouldn't bother. I once asked her what she would do if she broke down on the N2 at night. She just shrugs her shoulders and says some airy-fairy nonsense about fate. That's Jane for you, still living in the 60s.

I dig out my cellphone from my jacket and start dialling our number. But I hit Cancel before it rings on the other side. I'll call Jane later, when the kids have gone to bed. I check my watch again. Still three hours to kill before dinner. I get up and fill a glass of water from the bathroom, then find my Rennies in my toiletry bag. I down two of them and lie on the bed again. Before I know it I'm staring at the crack, fighting off this heavy lump of dread I've had from the moment I stepped off the plane.

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## TWO

Sean's psycho. He has this thing about going fishing at sparrow's fart, so by the time we've locked our bikes to the side of the bridge and stumbled down the slimy path to the river the sun still hasn't poked its head over the mine dump.

A fine mist is hanging over the river and it must be a couple of degrees colder down here at the water's edge. The willow trees on the other side look like dangly skeletons in the mist, dipping their bony fingers into the water. You don't want to be alone here when the river's like this; it's something out of a horror movie. I stick to Sean's back as we trek along the path running next to the river.

"Chips with that rod, you're going to take my eye out," says Sean after I've jabbed him in the back for the fifteenth time.

"Sorry."

"Don't mention it."

It's a bit of a hike to get to our secret spot, a soft patch of green grass spread under a huge ancient willow that's crammed with weaver-bird nests. It takes forever and a day to get there, at least fifteen minutes from the bridge, but it's always worth it because nobody else comes here. It's just Sean, me, the weaver-birds and the river.

We throw our haversacks onto the dewy grass and begin to organise ourselves for some serious fishing. While we are unpacking, I start patting my pockets. Sean must see the seriously worried look on my face.

"What's wrong?"

"I forgot my lighter."

"You kidding, right?"

"I swear, I'm not kidding."

"Jesus, Jamie, now what are we going to do?"

"I dunno. I can be such a loskop sometimes."

"That's no lie."

"Up yours, too."

“Maybe later. By the way...” says Sean casually, his back to me, “If you look carefully, you’ll find a box of matches in my tackle box.”

You would swear he’s saved my life, I’m so grateful. We spread the groundsheet open on the grass and I arrange the matches and unopened box of Chesterfields, and then the tackle and the bait and then my lunchtin. Things must be in order before I can get going. It’s not like there’s any rush and it’s not like I’m really that big into fishing. Not like some guys. They go into a panic soon as they smell the water. Sean falls into that category. He’s big time into fishing.

“I wonder if I should use a number two or four hook?” I say.

“Two’s best for carp, the four for bass. With this mist, the bass might be biting,” says Sean. “I reckon try a four. You might get lucky.”

I screw on the coffee grinder tight and proper. The last time we were here I almost tossed my reel into the water, together with the rest of the rod and my bait.

“I reckon today’s the day, Seanie. You watch, I’m going to catch the biggest mother you’ve ever seen.”

And I pick up my rod and start going through the motions of hooking a fish the size of a marlin. Slipping and sliding across the grass, the marlin drags me towards the water. I dig my feet hard into the ground and fight it and slowly reel it to the shore. As it reaches the river bank I pull out my Okapi and stab it in the throat, then collapse on the grass and have a heart attack. By this time Sean’s killing himself.

“You’re such a doos,” he says, shaking his head, but wiping his eyes at the same time.

“That’s why you like me. Birds of a feather and all that,” I say.

“True. But sometimes I wonder.”

I look at my watch. It’s almost eight and sun is beginning to break through the mist.

“How about a good luck smoke before we start?”

Now Sean looks at his watch. “If you’re keen, I’m keen. You can do the honours.”

So I squat down on the groundsheet and unwrap the Chesties and flick open the box and carefully tug at the silver paper. The last thing we need now is our pack of twenties to land up in the water. I lift the box up to Sean’s nose.

“Like mother’s milk,” he says.

It's my turn next to take a sniff. "Nothing like it, hey? I still maintain Chesterfield is the best brand in the world."

"You're probably right."

"Of course I'm right. You first," I say, offering him the box.

"No, you first. You paid for them."

"Okay, if you insist," I say in this stuffy English gentleman accent and help myself.

When we have both settled down and are ready, I light Sean's for him and then mine. It's the ritual. I close my eyes, pull the smoke deep into my lungs, hold it there for a bit and then slowly let it out through my nose. There's nothing better than that first drag. Especially when the person I'm sharing it with is Sean and we are standing on the misty banks of the Sand River. Sean blows a smoke ring into the air and we watch it float away slowly and dissolve into the mist.

"Mother's milk," he says, and takes another deep drag. We stand next to each other, looking at the river, neither of us saying much. You don't need to say much in moments like this. Sean finishes his first and flicks the butt into the water.

"You want the last drag?" I offer.

"No, you enjoy it."

After I've sucked mine to the bone I also flick it into the river and watch it bob up and down, hoping a fish will go for it. Sean yawns and scratches his balls like he's got crabs or something.

"This is the life, hey. What more can a man want?"

Right now, I can't think of anything.

As I said, when Sean and me go fishing I do more messing around than actual fishing. But eventually I get my act together and my line into the water. Sean's already tackled up and trying his luck higher up, which means I get to have the spot under the willow.

I don't know how long Sean and me have been coming here. It must be years. And I hardly ever catch anything. Not even a barbel. But it's not only about catching fish. It's hard to explain, but there's more to it than that. Sean and me understand that.

Once my line's at the right tension and my rod at the right angle, I settle into the gnarly trunk of the old willow and stare out over the water, taking in the early morning:

the sun burning up the mist, the weaver birds having it out above my head, the gentle slap-slap of water against the muddy bank, the smell of morning grass, the bubbles popping on the surface. Stupid thoughts start popping in my own head. Like, I start wondering what the biggest fish is in the Sand River. And the oldest? And are the bubbles on the water just crabs or some other underwater creature we don't know about? Or maybe it's just the mud farting. And were those black things in that peanut-butter jar really Swapo ears and is it true that Luke Scheepers cut them off? Or is it just another of Eddie's bullshit stories? Dumb thoughts, floating in and out of my head, as I lie there waiting for a nibble.

The time passes. The sun climbs higher and higher and I slide lower, until I'm on my back staring up at the sky, watching this small cloud changing shape, from a dog into a bird, then into a tadpole, then into a fat dog turd.

"Had any luck?" asks Sean from somewhere way above. It feels like he hasn't been gone for five minutes.

"Think I just lost a huge motherfucker," I say, blinking my eyes in the bright light and yawning.

"Like hell you did. We wouldn't hear the end of it, even if a guppie nibbled your bait."

"What about you?"

"Nothing much. Just a couple of ten-pounders."

"Where are they?"

"Threw them back."

And so we go on, back and forth, talking non-stop crap until the sun burns a hole in the top of our heads and Sean decides to try for barbel lower down where the water's more muddy, and I decide to stay put. While Sean squelches in the mud and I doze off with my hat over my face, I'm thinking it's lucky no-one's around when Sean and me go fishing; they would think we're nuts.

By the time we get back to our bikes at the bridge my shirt is sticking to my back and my face feels as if someone's smeared Deep Heat over it. It's one of those typical Free State days, when it's so hot that nothing moves. Not a leaf on a tree, not an insect, nothing. It's

so hot even breathing is a mission. It's one of those days where all you want to do is sit and stare at nothing.

"Looks like someone's moving in," says Sean, after we've crawled to the top of the hill and spotted a double trailer truck parked outside the old mine manager's house. Vans Household Movers is splashed down both sides.

"About time," I say. "The place has been standing empty for ages."

It's true. Ever since the mine built a new mansion for the mine manager, with a tennis court and a sauna, no-one's been living here.

Sean pulls up ahead under a syringa tree. I pull over next to him and we stand there panting over our handlebars. It's a real mission getting back from the river, especially when you have to carry a rod at the same time. Four black guys in blue overalls are hauling a piano up the driveway. It must weigh a ton.

"Definitely not Morkels," says Sean, pointing with his rod to the furniture on the grass.

"Or Russels. I wonder who's moving in."

"Must be some larnies. Check that Beemer in the driveway. You know what that thing must have set them back?"

"How much?"

"Minimum eighty grand. If it's the 735i even more than that. Imagine getting behind the wheel of that thing."

"You can buy a house with that."

"You're telling me. You can buy your own tropical island with eighty grand."

I don't know how a car can be so expensive, but I have to believe Sean because he's always reading up on technical stuff and is pretty clued up. Not like me.

"Hell, it's hot," Sean says for the hundredth time today. "How about we hit the pool this arvie?"

"What a question."

As we pull away from under the shade of the syringa, the four black guys in overalls begin hauling the piano up the stairs to the front door.

### THREE

Thwack! The first blob lands on Angelo's back. He pretends not to notice. Then a second cruise missile collides with the back of his hairy thigh. Angelo lifts the corner of his towel and smears the gob off, but he's not even done when an orange missile comes flying in from the other side and lands on his arm.

"Come on, please guys," says Angelo, spinning round on his blubbery arms, trying to catch us in the act. By the innocent look on our faces you would think we are all angels. Angelo pulls up a handful of grass and wipes the gob off his arm, watching Eddie at the same time.

"What you looking at me like that for?" says Eddie.

"I know it was you, Eddie. Don't do it, man. You know I hate it."

"Do what? I'm not doing anything," says Eddie, all innocent-like.

"You're the only one who's drinking Fanta," says Angelo.

"Yes, Porra, don't accuse someone for something they didn't do," chips in Gavin, who is also guilty as sin.

While the three of them argue, I prepare for the next attack, mixing Creme Soda with spit in my mouth. The longer you mix it the thicker and stringier it gets. While Angelo is looking the other way I fill my hand with a fat glob and send it in his direction. It whacks him between the shoulder blades. Angelo swings round like a wounded bull, but by the time he gets to me I'm looking the other way. Eddie and Gavin and Sean pack up laughing. Like that book we did in class, *Lord of the Flies*, Angelo is our very own Piggy. There are some people in this world who bring out the worst in other people. Angelo is one of those.

"Hey guys, I reckon Angelo's had enough," says Sean, looking at Eddie, then at Gavin and me.

"Ja, okay, if you insist," says Eddie, and flicks his spitball onto the grass.

Angelo stands up and waddles over to the pool and jumps in and triggers a tidal wave. Gavin burbs a loud Coke burp that goes on for about ten seconds.

"I bet I can do it longer than that," says Eddie, and downs the rest of his Fanta.

“Prove it,” says Gavin.

Eddie sucks in some more air, filling his lungs, building up the pressure, which is the way you must do it. He looks around to make sure we are watching and then lets rip with this long slow burp, controlling it all the way, stretching it out for as long as possible. It goes on for about an hour and he’s blue in the face by the time he’s squeezed the last drop of air from his lungs.

“Beat that, motherfucker,” says Eddie, looking real chuffed with himself. Gavin’s impressed even if he pretends not to be.

“Buy me a Grape Fanta and I bet I’ll beat you,” says Gavin.

“Like hell. You can buy your own Fanta,” says Eddie. “You try, Jamie,” he says, because I’m the only one who still has some Creme Soda left.

“Guys, guys, get a load of that,” says Sean, before I have a chance to beat Eddie’s record.

“Where, what?” I say.

“On the high board.”

Like a bunch of meercats we twist our heads to where Sean’s looking. A tall tanned guy with blond hair, who I haven’t seen at the pool before, is balancing at the edge of the high diving board, bouncing slowly up and down. He’s wearing a black Speedo; I wouldn’t be caught dead in a Speedo.

“He’s quite built, hey,” says Gavin.

“What are you, a moffie or something?” says Eddie.

“Your mother’s a moffie,” says Gavin.

But Gavin’s right, the guy is built. Not in a chunky body-builder sort of way, but his arms and chest and abs are really defined. He carries on bouncing, like he’s in no rush, testing the diving board, his eyes closed, as if he actually enjoys being up there. I’m not kidding, it’s like jumping off a ten-storey building. Whoever designed it must have been crazy or mixed up their feet with their meters. We are not the only ones watching. It’s like everyone at the pool is watching what he’s going to do next. The way he takes his time it’s like he knows people are watching.

“I bet he chickens out,” says Gavin.

“I bet he doesn’t,” I say.

“I bet you a Grape Fanta he does,” says Gavin.

“He’ll jump, but there’s no ways he’ll dive,” says Eddie. I’m thinking Eddie’s right for a change. I’ve never seen anyone go head first.

The guy has stopped bouncing. He looks over the edge like he’s making sure the coast is clear. More likely he’s having second thoughts. He turns around, his back to the pool.

“I told you he’s going to chicken out!” says Gavin. “You owe me a Grape Fanta, Jamie.”

“I don’t remember shaking on it.”

The tall tanned guy now shifts his feet until he’s balancing on the balls right at the edge.

“No ways,” says Sean. “The guy is psycho. He’s going for it backwards.”

I swear, everyone on the grass is now watching. The guy on the diving board lifts his arms straight in front of him, then goes deadstill for a second or two, then bounces once, twice, three times, and launches himself off the board, twists his body in mid-air and enters the water like an arrow.

“Jesus!” says Sean for all of us. We watch as he comes to the surface and swims towards our side of the pool and pushes himself straight out of the water. His arms look like pistons. Especially in this late afternoon light.

“Who owes who a Grape Fanta?” I say to Gavin.

“We didn’t shake on it.”

“Nice one!” Eddie shouts across to the guy. He looks back at us.

“Thanks,” he says and heads towards the shower.

“You’re such a doos, Eddie.”

“What? I just said nice one.”

“You don’t even know the guy.”

“So?”

“Never mind,” I say. You can’t argue with Eddie.

Eventually we turn back to our towels. Sean wipes his kuif from his eyes.

“Maybe I should shave it all off, go GI for the holidays. What you reckon, Jamie?”

“Do whatever.” I’m still thinking about the guy’s dive.

Sean sniffs his fingers. “I can’t believe it, I still smell like curry. What are we doing tonight?”

“I dunno. What you want to do?”

“I also don’t know, but I’ll think about it. You coming out with us, Gav?”

“Can’t.”

“What about you, Eddie?”

“Can’t.”

“Why?”

“Luke’s back from the border. He’s taking us to the Ranch Grill.”

The way Eddie says it you would swear he’s never been to a restaurant before – which is maybe true.

Nobody asks Angelo what he’s doing tonight.

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## FOUR

Simon's already gobbled down his spag bol and is licking his plate when I walk into the house. I reckon Simon has worms.

"Don't do that, sweetie," my mom says to him. For once he listens, but then leans over towards my heaped plate, which is waiting for me with steam rising.

"Can I have some of yours, Jamie?"

"No."

"Why not, you said you don't like mince?"

"Since when?"

"Since that day with those burgers mom bought."

"That was different, dummie. I said I don't like horsemeat."

"Please don't call your brother names," says my mom. "I hope you wore suncream today?"

"Yes, don't call me names, beetroot face," says my brother. For a ten-year-old he's really cheeky.

"Beetroot face. Can't you come up with something better than that?"

"Not now, boys," says my dad, poking his head from behind his newspaper, which he likes to read at the table. My mom isn't too keen on the idea, but he's at work all day so she doesn't make a scene.

The table goes quiet for a few seconds, before Simon tries to grab my bread-roll, but I'm ready for him and grab it at the same time. He manages to tear a corner off and you would swear by the look on his face that he has won the jackpot or something. He's a complete pain. Before I can snatch it back he's stuffing it into his face like there's no tomorrow.

"Arsehole," I whisper to him from behind my hand.

"Mommy, Jamie called me a arsehole," whines Simon. My mom looks at Simon, then at me, not sure who to believe. I help her by putting on my surprised and innocent look.

"What are you talking about, Simon? I said rascal."

Simon sticks a purple tongue out – he’s addicted to Kool Aid – but I ignore him as I stuff my face with spag bol. I’ve hardly eaten a thing all day and I’m starving. My dad folds his newspaper into a neat square, then into a smaller square and then into a smaller one still, and looks around the table as if he’s noticed us for the first time.

“So, how are my boys doing?”

“Fine,” Simon and me say at the same time and carry on eating.

“How was your first day of the holiday, Jamie?”

“Not bad.”

“What did you get up to?”

“Went fishing with Sean. Afternoon at the pool.”

“You shouldn’t talk with your mouth so full,” says my mom.

“Sorry,” I say, my mouth still crammed with spaghetti. Simon laughs at this. My mom gives him a look, but I can see she’s trying not to smile.

“Did you guys catch anything? Other than a cold, that is? You get it Simey? Catch a cold. Huh, huh?” My dad starts laughing at his own joke.

“You’re so corny, dad,” says Simon, rolling his eyes.

“Sorry. Seriously, Jamie, did you catch anything?”

“No.” I sniff loudly. “Just a cold.”

“And you Simon, what did you do?” my dad asks.

“I didn’t go fishing.” And we all laugh at this, although it’s not funny. It’s just the way Simon says things. Like I said, he’s real cheeky for his age.

After supper we all head into the lounge and my dad heads straight for the Barlow-Vision. I’m waiting for Sean to phone so I decide to stick around. My dad’s only allowed to switch the TV on after supper – that’s another of my mom’s rules. She’s got this thing about spending quality time together. Maybe she has a point because if Simon and my dad had their way the TV would be on day and night. It’s the same with the radio. My dad’s really into his news; the family has to play dead when it comes on, which is nearly every hour when something important is happening in the world.

As the blue clock counts down to seven we settle down on the couch, Simon on one side of my mom, me on the other. My dad has his own TV chair, a fancy plastic-leather

La-Z-Boy with a gear lever on the side. My mom can't stand the thing. I can't remember exactly, but she said something about zero aesthetic value when he lugged it home from an auction sale one Saturday morning. He had this huge smile on his face like he had scored the bargain of the century. I think it's pretty hot, what with the gears and the drinks tray that swings out.

"Shhh..." my dad says as the news comes on. My dad worries he's missing out on life if he doesn't watch Adrian Steed every night. For him the world doesn't exist unless you see it on the news. Lately there's been a lot of political stuff on, which I haven't really been following, but basically PW Botha made a big speech that got my dad hot under the collar. While Freek Robinson interviews some black guy in a suit and tie, Simon is wagging his finger like an idiot. "Talk about bloody brinkmanship," says my dad. "It's ridiculous that we've had to get to this point. They should have started negotiating years ago. No wonder we are where we are."

My mom looks up from her book. Like me, she's not really into this political stuff, although I think she's clued up in her own way.

"I suppose they can't rush into these things, honey. They must know what they are doing. I'm sure they are negotiating behind the scenes."

"Please, Isabel. You call negotiating from behind the barrel of a gun negotiating? Now they're talking State of Emergency. What bloody good is that going to do? They're a bunch of effing imbeciles, the lot of them."

It's quite embarrassing the way my dad goes on sometimes. You would swear he's a communist and not a mine engineer.

"Not in front of the children, Daniel," my mom says, giving my dad this funny look.

"What's a effing imbecile?" asks Simon.

"Don't worry, Simey. It's nothing. Your dad just gets a bit emotional sometimes."

"A bit emotional? Is that what you call it? I'm sorry Isabel, but nothing is ever going to change at this rate. You watch what the rand is going to do now."

The phone rings and Simon leaps up and sprints out of the room to get it, slipping and sliding in his pyjamas two sizes too big for him as he takes the corner into the passage. A second later he's back, screaming his head off.

"It's for you, Jamie!"

“Who is it?”

“It’s a girl.” And he starts giggling and leaps back on the couch.

“Idiot.”

I get up and walk to the phone, for some reason my heart’s beating. Simon is bullshitting, but you never quite know with him. Maybe it is a girl. I pick up the phone. It’s Sean. Sounding all excited.

“You want to go to the drive-in?” He doesn’t even wait for my answer. “I can pick you up in fifteen.”

“How will we get there?”

“I’ve lent my boet’s car for the night.”

“Borrowed,” I say.

“That’s what I said. Anyway…”

“You said ‘lent’. The word is borrowed.” I’m like a teacher sometimes. I just do it to get on people’s nerves.

“Who cares a rat’s arse, lent, borrow, stolen, what’s the diffs, my brother’s given me his cabbie for the night. You keen to go to the drive-in or not?”

“What’s showing?”

“Some Clint Eastwood movie. It will be good.”

“It looks like it’s going to rain,” I say, playing really hard to get.

“Who cares, it will clear up. It always does. Okay, how about we pick you up in a couple of minutes?”

“Okay. Who’s we?”

But Sean’s put the phone down. He’s like that sometimes. Totally out of control.

An hour later Sean comes hooting up the driveway. My mom rolls her eyes.

“Why people can’t simply get out of a car and knock on the door is beyond me,” she says, but only half-seriously; with Sean my mom and dad are always ready to make an exception. He doesn’t even have his driver’s license.

I stand up and zip up my jacket.

“Okay, see you all later.”

My mom tilts her head to the side and I give her a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Have fun. Say hi to Sean.”

“Have fun,” says my dad, aiming the remote at the TV and turning the volume up. I reckon if he could have his life over he would come back as Jacques Pauw.

The red Fiat idling in the driveway was a complete wreck when Russel bought it. Russel is Sean’s eldest brother. But you would never say so; about the car, that is. It’s still a wreck inside, but he’s done a brilliant job so far fixing up the engine and spray-painting it red. When the engine starts it sounds just like a stock car.

Before I even get to the car I see why Sean was out of control on the phone: there’s a girl sitting next to him. I take a deep breath, pull open the back door and climb in. The car smells of Brut and girl’s perfume.

“Evening,” I say.

Sean clicks on the light. “Howzit Jamie. Jamie, Adele, Adele, Jamie.”

“Hullo Jamie,” says Adele, in a nice Afrikaans accent. She reaches over and shakes my hand. Her fingernails are long and painted bright red. Her skin is brown, her teeth white. Her hands are cool and soft.

“Don’t worry Adele, he’s not as bad as he looks,” laughs Sean. “Deep down he’s actually quite a nice guy.”

“Stuff you,” I say, and try slap the back of Sean’s head, but he ducks.

Sean, me and Adele hit it off like a house on fire. Sean cranks up his new Dire Straits, until the Fiat’s crappy speakers begin to vibrate, and we are singing and messing around before we even get to the Lighthouse. Sean has a bottle of Old Brown that he passes around the car. Every time it reaches Adele she takes a small sip, but doesn’t miss her turn. There’s a tug on my jeans when Mark Knopfler belts out, “Money for nothin’ and chicks for free.” I look up to catch Sean winking at me in the mirror. I wink back and take another sip from the OB. To think, if it wasn’t for Sean I would still be sitting on the couch staring at PW’s wagging finger.

While we’re waiting in the queue for our tickets, Adele tells me she lives up the road from Sean and that Sean’s mom knows her mom from the mine tennis club and that’s how they met. Every few seconds she looks across at Sean like he’s the best thing since sliced bread. And with his elbow hanging out the window and his white puffy shirt and his other arm on the seat behind Adele, Sean thinks he’s Don Johnson.

The Lighthouse has been around forever and a day and I'm clueless why they call it that because there's nothing Lighthouse about it. There's nothing but dusty mielie fields and mine dumps for miles around and the nearest ocean is more than five hundred miles away.

Like I told Sean on the phone, it's a bad night for drive-in because it starts coming down the second after we've bought our tickets. It's only drizzle, but enough to blur the screen. Sean drives round and round until he thinks we've found the perfect spot. And then he goes back and forwards over the hump until we find the perfect angle. Of course, we are just messing around for Adele's benefit.

"More back." I say, stuffing a handful of popcorn into my mouth.

"Like this?" Sean moves a few inches forward.

"No, more back."

"Is that okay?"

"Ummm... Just a few inches to the front again."

"Better?"

"No, too far. Try again." Sean drops the clutch and the Fiat stalls and we crack up, including Adele. The car next to us must think we are total imbeciles.

For our troubles we end up with a dodgy speaker and have to repeat the exercise from scratch and this time it's not so funny because the trailers have already started. Sean fiddles with the new speaker, but the sound's still coming from inside an empty tin of baked beans – that's because half the people drive off with the things still attached to their car. The Fiat's window winder is broken so I have to climb out and do the necessary; while I push the window up, Sean holds onto the speaker.

Eventually we sort things out and settle back to watch the film. All I know about *Death Wish II* is that Charles Bronson is in it – not Clint Eastwood, like Sean said on the phone. Not that I really care either way. It's just good to be here in Russel's old Fiat. Some of the cosiness I'm feeling is Old Brown cosiness, but it's also that cosiness you get when you're with someone you actually like being with. If it was Gavin or Eddie or some other guy, I would probably feel the odd one out, but it's not like that with Sean. It's him and me first, and only then the rest of the world.

"We must come see *Rocky III* next, it looks excellent. What you say, Jamie?"

“I’m keen.” I shove a fistful of popcorn into my mouth and pass the box back over the seat. Sean now has his arm around Adele’s shoulder.

“What you think, ’Dele? You want to see Rocky with me?” Adele giggles and shifts up close to him.

Five minutes into the main feature the sky farts and all hell breaks loose: cars hooting, flashing their lights, revving, that type of thing. It’s the same every time and all part of the Lighthouse experience. A few minutes later the rain cuts back to a drizzle and calm returns. Sean and Adele have lost interest in what’s happening on the screen and have sunk lower into the front seat, both of them whispering sweet nothings. This means I get to eat the rest of the popcorn. I try concentrate on the film, but it’s not so easy, what with the misty windscreen and the tinny sound and Adele’s long brown hair hanging over the seat, touching my knee. Before I know it my own film is playing out in my head, with Adele’s shiny hair and tanned hands and long red nails all over the main actor. Meanwhile, somewhere up in front, Charles Bronson is beating the crap out of a greaseball.

We have to get Adele home by eleven. By the sounds of it, it’s a miracle her parents let her go out in the first place. They are happy clappers, into this reborn Christian stuff that’s become the latest fashion. Adele’s house is one of those face-brick miner’s houses that just about every person in this town lives in.

Sean parks around the corner. He climbs out and goes round to Adele’s side and opens the door for her. If you saw him you would think he’s playing the real gentleman. Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the Fiat’s passenger door doesn’t open from the inside.

“We better move it, Adele; you’re going to miss your bedtime.” Sean is looking worried at his watch. It’s already way past eleven.

“Nice meeting you, Jamie,” says Adele. She leans over the seat and kisses me on the lips.

“Nice meeting you too,” I blabber.

I watch Sean escort Adele up the driveway, the glow of her soft cool lips still warm on my lips. To kill time I eat the last dregs of popcorn. Sean’s back a minute later.

“What happened?” I say.

“Zilch. Her old man was waiting at the front door in his pyjamas and stokies.”

All the way home, Sean can't wait to blab on about Adele. Not that he says anything. He doesn't need to. To be honest, we haven't had much experience with girls. The only woman I've been out with is Sarah Bosch and that was our standard five farewell party, which lasted about four hours. So Adele is quite a big thing. With Sean's bad leg and all it's even a bigger thing for him, I reckon.

Sean cuts the engine at the bottom of our driveway and we sit there a while listening to the rain banging on the roof. He flips the Dire Straits tape back to side one and adjusts the volume. It must be the hundredth time we've listened to it. Not that I mind. He takes a glug from the Old Brown.

“So what you think?”

“About what?” I say. I've got this thing about pretending to play clueless. I can't help myself.

“About Adele, idiot. What do you think of her?”

“She's okay.” Of course, I'm lying. The truth is, she's hot, but I'm not giving in that easy.

“Okay's arse, says Sean. “Here, have some more OBs. Maybe it will help you think straight.”

While I'm busy taking a swig Sean jabs me in the ribs, sending a spray of sherry over my jeans.

“Seriously, what you think of her?”

“She's great. Nice sense of humour,” I say. This time I mean it.

“You really think so?”

“Ja, I really think so. That's why I can't understand why her parents allowed her to go out with someone like you. That part I don't get.”

“It's all about charm. I should give you a lesson sometime.”

“Charm? Like what, for instance?”

“What if I told you I gave her mom a box of chocolates for her birthday and she's been eating out of my hand ever since.

“Arse-creeper, that's what I would say.”

“Seriously though, Jamie, you must meet them. They’re total verkramptes. Everything is God this and God that.”

“Maybe another time,” I say. “When are you seeing her again?”

“Dunno. Maybe I should ask her to come with us to the pool sometime. I reckon she looks hot in a bikini. What you think?”

“Ja, I also reckon she looks hot in a bikini.”

“I meant about inviting her to the pool, idiot.”

“Great idea. I thought you meant... So, what did you think of the movie?”

“Not bad. What I saw of it.”

“Here we go again. You’re full of shit.”

“I know. But we must definitely go watch the new Rocky when it shows at the Phoenix.”

“That will be in ten years time,” I say.

The Old Brown goes back and forth until we’ve sucked the last drops from the bottle. The rain cuts back to a slow drum solo. Sean carries on non-stop about Adele. *Brothers in Arms* plays for the two hundredth time. We play noughts and crosses on the misted-up windscreen and I win four games in a row. Between all of this going on I’m wishing I could stop time. Because if I could I would stop it right here, with Sean and me in his brother’s crappy old Fiat.

## FIVE

“That’s right, listeners, it’s the Coca Cola countdown. And we’re counting down, right down to this week’s Number One. Next up, at thirty-six, it’s Rastaman, Eddie Grant, with, *I Just Wanna Dance*...”

I poke my arm through the duvet and fumble around for the Sanyo’s snooze button. Another fifteen minutes pass. “At number big Three-O we have Alphaville, down from eighteen last week...” This time I manage to find the Off button.

I try open my eyes, but they’ve been glued together with Bostik. I didn’t know Old Brown could do that. I lift the duvet: 8:05am blinks back in orange. I groan and pull the duvet back over my head, wishing I was dead. A furry lump of something sits in the back of my throat. It can’t make up its mind which way it wants to go.

Across the room Simon is sawing down a tree. I hang over the side of the bed, find one of my takkies and toss it across the room. Way off target. I find the other one. This time I take aim and the takkie connects with Simon’s head. He let out an animal groan, then turns over and pretends to go back to sleep. That’s the only thing Simon and me have in common: we both hate Sundays.

Like clockwork, the door opens and my dad pokes his head into the bedroom. I play dead.

“Wakey, wakey, guys, time to get up.”

Silence. My dad comes into the room and pulls open the curtains.

“Come on, Simey, up you get. We’re leaving for church in thirty minutes.”

“I don’t want to go to church, dad,” groans Simon. “I’m not feeling so good.”

“What’s wrong?”

“My tummy’s sore. I think I’ve got food poisoning.”

Simon comes up with amazing excuses, but he must think my dad suffers from amnesia.

“I’m sorry to hear to hear that, Simon, but you know the rules. Tell you what...”

“What?” moans Simon. A hopeful moan.

“You come with us to church, and afterwards you can stay in bed all day if you like. How does that sound?”

It doesn't sound so good because Simon lets out another dying groan.

“Are you awake Jamie? Or are you also suffering from food poisoning. I'm a little worried it may be contagious.”

From under the duvet I can hear my dad laughing at his own joke. He's a complete nerd. I keep staring at this mosquito smear on the wall, then give him a grunt, which he translates as, “I can't wait to go to church, dad.”

“Excellent, we will see you both at breakfast in ten.”

I wait for the door to close, before flipping over and staring up at the ceiling.

Simon and me shuffle into the kitchen at the same time. My mom and dad are already tucking in. My dad with his Jungle Oats, my mom with her toast and Roses Lime Marmalade.

“Morning, boys,” says my mom.

“Morning.”

“How was your evening, Jamie?”

“Fine.”

I shift my placemat further down the table, away from Simon. I'm not sure I can handle the sight of food this morning. Especially oats. I don't know how my dad manages to eat the stuff. Luckily nobody is in a chatty mood, not even my dad. It makes a nice change. My mom pushes the toast my way.

“Would you like some coffee?”

“Okay.” And she pours me a cup, adds two sugars and milk, stirs it and passes it down.

Still half-asleep, I spread a slice of toast with a thin layer of butter and marmalade, making sure the corners are covered. I take a bite and wash it down with a mouthful of coffee. I'm only eating to block out Simon's eating. He doesn't weigh more than thirty-five kilos, but he eats like a horse. Even with food poisoning. He breathes out loud through his nose as he slurps his porridge, half of it plip-plopping back onto the plate. It drives me nuts. I try focus on my own chewing, but it doesn't help much. I imagine a

slow slimy river of oats and toast and coffee heading into his Simon's guts. That's how bad I'm feeling.

"Can't you eat like a civilised human being, Simon?"

"I can't help it." And Simon sniffs again.

"Jesus! You can at least blow your nose."

"Now, now, Jamie, no blasphemy at the table," says my dad. "Especially on a Sunday."

"Don't sniff, sweetie. Use this," my mom says and hands Simon a serviette. Simon drains his head into it and tosses it into his empty oats bowl. He's a complete savage.

Before I have a chance to brush my teeth my dad is hooting in the driveway. He's forever worrying we are going to be late for this and that. My mom says he should have been German. Maybe that's where I get it from.

"Come now, guys, we're going to be late," says Simon, imitating my dad as we climb into the car.

Nobody says much the whole way to church. I feel like a sheep on my way to an abattoir. The parking area is almost full when we arrive and most of the people are already inside, which sends my dad into panic mode.

"Isabel, we should really make an effort to leave ten minutes earlier. It's ridiculous that we are always late," he says, battling to park the Merc in this tiny space crammed between Mrs Coetzee's white Camry and the fish pond. My dad's Merc is one of those old 1970s models. It doesn't have power-steering and he's broken into a sweat by the time we are parked.

It makes no difference we are late, my dad still insists on sitting close as he can to the front, which means we have to walk past thousands of people. We slide in next to Mr and Mrs Jacobson and their daughter, Amelia, who would be quite hot if it wasn't for her teeth. Father Dominic is still organising his things at the altar so my mom gets chatting to the neighbours. I look around and spot Eddie and his mom sitting right near the back. Luke's not with them; when you come back from the border I bet church is the last thing you are interested in. Eddie's wearing a mustard green polo-neck shirt that he must have

got from a jumble sale. He spots me, checks to make sure no-one's looking, then throws me a zap sign.

There's no sign of Sean or Martin. Unless they're upstairs sitting with the blacks like they sometimes do, just for the hell of it. Packed into the front row, Angelo and his family make up a solid wall of flesh. If you add them all together, the Constantinoples must weigh at least a ton. Then there's the usual Catholic Church crowd, most of them old types who come for the free tea and biscuits afterwards, and a few others I've never seen before. That's how it is in a mining town – people come and go all the time.

Father Dominic must have a lot on his mind today because his sermon carries on and on. I only catch some of it, the bit about how we must judge people by how they act and not by how they look, which is probably what I think anyway. My dad must be the only person in the church who understands Father's sermons. And it's not just the accent, Father Dominic is way too intellectual for this town.

Simon is picking away at this huge scab on his knee, from when he fell on the school quad. The edges are brown and dry, but the middle still looks pink and mushy underneath. It's one of those things you don't want to look at, yet you can't help yourself. I'm waiting to see what happens when he gets to the wet pink part. But when he breaks off a chunk of scab and starts nibbling it, like it's a Big Korn Bite, I can't handle it.

"Jesus, you're disgusting," I whisper in his ear. I must have whispered it too loud because Mrs Coetzee swivels round in her mauve dress and gives us a funny look. Simon shifts up the bench and presses against my mom. The look she gives him, you would swear he's an angel.

I actually feel quite sorry for Father; it must be a lonely job being a priest in this dump. It's like the shepherd and his flock come from different planets. I bet he never knew what he was in for when he came here in the first place. If he did there's no ways he would have left Holland. He's like one of those missionaries who came to Africa to convert the primitive tribes. If I was him I wouldn't bother.

I'm so into my own thoughts I hardly notice Simon tugging at my shirt.

"Move, Jamie, I wanna get past."

I block his way with my knee. "Where you going?" I whisper.

“Please, Jamie, I have to pee,” he says urgently. Mrs Coetzee spins round again, almost setting the nylon of her mauve dress on fire. So I let Simon pass because there’s no way I want him peeing all over me.

I start feeling a lot better on the home stretch after communion, and I’m not the only one. Suddenly the church has more energy. You can see it in the way people start packing away their books, sitting up straighter and looking around them.

All that’s left are the announcements, which I don’t mind so much. The church fête is the main item on the list. Mrs Andrews, who is one of the main organisers, stands up and says we can use her garage for second-hand clothing and other donations for the fête, as long as people don’t think it’s a dumping ground for their rubbish. Next, Father Dominic talks a bit about the youth group Mr Stevens is trying to get going, and which I’ve been roped into. And then the usual farewells and welcomes. Like I said, people are always coming and going in this place.

“May we wish Jimmy and Joyce Gordon the best of luck in their travels. We will be thinking of you as you settle into your new life in Witbank. Bon voyage, as they say in French.” Mrs Gordon goes red in the face and Mr Gordon nods like there’s no tomorrow. “And last, but not least, a big welcome to the new members in our parish, Vanessa and Malcolm Dempsey, who have joined us all the way from Johannesburg. We wish you a very happy stay in our town.”

A hundred heads turn and gawk at the new people. They must have come in late because I didn’t notice them earlier. They are a tanned and fit-looking couple. Their son is as tall as his dad, with the same wavy blond hair and tanned face. It takes me a few seconds to recognise him as the same guy we saw at the pool in his Speedo. He looks about seventeen, maybe even older, with these broad shoulders. His mom’s also quite tall, with red lipstick, dangly earrings and shiny black hair scraped back. Before you know it, everybody and his dog, Eddie and his mom included, wants to shake hands with them. It’s all a bit embarrassing, if you ask me.

Mass ends with the usual tea and biscuits outside; as I said, it’s the only reason some people come to church. You would swear we are living in Ethiopia because there’s a

stampede to get to the tea table and those who got out first are already tucking in like there's no tomorrow. Eddie's one of them. I elbow my way through to him and grab a handful of biscuits while there is still something left. We work our way along the table to Mrs Cummings who is helping with the tea and coffee. The pot is so huge the old people can't lift it by themselves. Mrs Cummings is forever making small talk while she pours.

Eddie and me take our coffee and biscuits and work our way out of the stampede to the fish pond, away from the grown-ups and screaming kids. I spot Simon on the other side, acting the clown with the De Freitas twins. Nearby my dad is having an intellectual conversation with Father Dominic; he's nodding his head up and down. My mom is standing next to them sipping her tea with her pinkie sticking out. She could have been a movie star. The new people in town are chatting to the Gordons, telling them about life in the Transvaal. Their son is sitting on a bench, flicking pebbles into the water.

"Boring or what, hey?" says Eddie through a mouthful of Lemon Cream.

"What's boring?"

"Church. What else?"

"Ja, I suppose so."

"I suppose so, he says. I saw you. You were half-asleep."

"Bullshit. I just had a big night, that's all."

"What, with Sean?"

"Yip. We went to the Lighthouse. You missed out."

"And?"

"And Sean's boet lent him his car."

"And?"

"And he had a girl with him. A hottie. Her name's Adele."

"And?" says Eddie, like he hasn't heard me.

"And we shared a bottle of Old Brown between us."

"And?"

"And what? That's it."

"And I bet you went home and wanked off over Adele."

Eddie packs up at this, spraying bits of Lemon Cream into the fish pond.

"I thought I was sick," I say, even though it's true what Eddie says.

We stand and watch the goldfish fight over the crumbs of floating Lemon Cream. Eddie breaks off a bigger chunk and tosses it into the water. Loads more fish head their way and in no time there's a mad swirling of water as the fish fight it out.

"Like hungry piranhas, aren't they?"

Eddie and me look up. The new guy is standing behind us and also watching the goldfish.

"What's a piranha?" says Eddie, like a total idiot.

"A man-eating fish. Not much bigger than those there. But lethal. You find them in the Amazon."

"Oh," says Eddie. I keep staring at the water, not saying anything.

"They can strip a cow to the bone in four minutes flat. And a full-grown man in about half that time. In their case, maybe a bit longer," he says, pointing to Angelo and his sister across the way. Eddie and me laugh at that. The new guy comes closer. He's wearing aftershave.

"Ja, right," says Eddie. "There's no ways a tiny fish like that can do what you're saying."

"Of course they can," I say.

"How do you know, Jamie?"

"No, in a way your friend's right," says the new guy. "On their own, piranhas are pretty harmless and won't do much damage. But imagine a few hundred of them attacking you at the same time."

Eddie and me think about this for a while. It makes sense.

"Ja, I suppose so," Eddie says, but I can tell he's not convinced. That's Eddie for you. He always has to be otherwise. The goldfish have devoured the last crumbs of Lemon Cream and we have nothing more to toss.

"By the way, I'm Michael," the new guy says, and puts out his hand. Eddie wipes his hand on his jeans and shakes the guy's hand.

"I'm Eddie Scheepers. You from Joburg?"

"I suppose you could say that."

“I’m Jamie,” I say, and shake Michael’s hand. He has a strong grip. He’s wearing a thick bracelet on his wrist that must be made from real gold. “We saw you at the pool yesterday.”

“At the pool? I don’t remember seeing you guys.”

“After you dived off the high board. We were lying on the grass...”

“Ja, where did you learn to dive like that?” asks Eddie, before I have a chance to finish my sentence.

“I had a few lessons when we lived in the US.”

“You lived in America?”

“For a few months, yes. Why?”

“Just asking.”

Michael’s parents are waving at us from the other side of the pond.

“I think your mom and dad are calling you.”

“Coming!” Michael shouts. “Right, boys, looks like I’ve got to go, but I’m sure I’ll catch you around.” He turns to Eddie. “By the way, nice shirt.” He winks at me and walks off to join his parents.

“I’m going for a slash,” says Eddie, and heads off to the bogs.

I watch Michael and his mom and dad walk to their car. It’s the same gold BMW Sean and me saw parked in the driveway of the old mine manager’s house. They’re about to drive off when the door opens and Michael climbs out. He walks back to where I’m standing.

“I was just thinking, Jamie. If you are not doing anything, maybe you would like come round to our place sometime.”

“Thanks. That will be great. Like when?”

“I don’t know. Anytime. What are you doing this evening, for example?”

“Nothing much.”

“Okay, so why don’t you come round this evening then?”

“That would be great. What time?”

“Excellent. Let’s say about seven. Let me explain how you to get to our house...”

“I already know. It’s that big house on Larkspur.”

“That’s the one. How did you know?”

“I saw your dad’s car parked in the driveway.”

“You’re pretty sharp. Well, till later then, Jamie.”

“Till later.”

“What were you guys talking about?” asks Eddie, when he gets back from the bog.

“Nothing much, except he wanted to know where you got your shirt from.”

University of Cape Town

## SIX

As I take the next turn left into Duiker, then a sharp right, then another left into Gemsbok I'm wondering if the years have done to Eddie what the falling gold price has done to this town.

There it is ahead. Eddie's old house. The grass doesn't look like it's been cut for years and the school bus shelter that used to be on the corner is gone, but the house has hardly changed. It's the same old depressing mine Monopoly house, with the same ugly metal windows and ugly pillars on the stoep, and the cement driveway.

I stop a little way up the road and cut the engine. Apart from two women gabbing under a tree in their Zionist best, the street is deserted.

Simon said the place had gone to the dogs; I didn't realise it was this bad. He didn't say it's become a ghost town. The wall across the way, that's where Eddie and Sean and me used to duck behind and puff on his dad's Lexington stompies; any second now a head will pop up to check if the coast is clear.

I take a deep breath and climb out of the Kia and walk back towards the house. The women under the tree stop gabbing as I walk past.

"Molweni," I say, forgetting they speak Sotho here, not Xhosa.

"Molo boetie," says one of the women.

I have to lift the front gate to open it. Nothing's changed. It was hanging to the one side then and it's hanging to one side now. I walk slowly up the driveway and notice the garage door is half open. I bend down to take a look. There's a car parked inside. A yellow XR-3. Eddie still lives here.

The sound of metal banging against metal is coming from behind the garage. I lift the garage door and duck inside, then squeeze past the car to the door at the back. It doesn't budge when I try the handle.

"Edward!" I shout. More metal hammering. "Eddie!" This time much louder. The hammering holds up for a second, followed by something falling over and then, "Fuck!" Eddie. Already I'm thinking this was a bad idea. That I should have left sleeping dogs lie.

The door unlocks from the other side and a moment later a grease monkey in a blue overall is blocking the light.

“Fuck me! What the hell are you doing here?” Eddie seems genuinely happy to see me. “Shit, Jamie, sorry I can’t shake your hand,” he says, wiping his hands on his filthy overall.

“Not a problem,” I say, slapping him on the shoulder, careful not to hit the oil patch. “Hell, it’s been a long time, Eddie? How is it going? You look good, man.”

Eddie actually looks like shit. Much older than a guy of forty-two should look. His hair, or what’s left of it, is grey – the only colour is from the grease flecks. His skin is a roadmap of creases and lines. And his eyes, there’s something different about Eddie’s eyes.

“Great, man, great.” Eddie’s smiling like a lunatic. Not such a good thing because his teeth are a mess. Probably from all the crap that’s gone into his mouth. “Shit, man, but it’s good to see you, Jamie. How long you back for?”

“Only a day or so.”

“A day! Are you out of your tree?”

“That’s the only leave I could take,” I lie. “So what are you busy with here?” Pieces of metal and car parts and other scrap are lying all over the place, but I can’t work out for what.

“Ag, nothing much. Only a day?”

And he punches me on the shoulder and I punch him back. Eddie seems genuinely excited to see me and I think I feel the same way. But I’m already having second thoughts, especially when he says we must go for a little drink for old times’ sake. I heard a drink with Eddie is never just a drink. But what did I expect? That Eddie would put the kettle on and we would sit down for a cup of tea?

“Ja, sure, let’s go for a drink. It will be good to catch up.”

“Excellent, man. I’ll go get cleaned up.”

Eddie doesn’t invite me in. As I watch him disappear inside and slam the kitchen door behind him I’m thinking what’s the worst that can happen?

## SEVEN

Michael's house must have cost a mint, what with the glass roof and the heated swimming pool in the middle. Not that I've ever been inside to see for myself. Come to think of it, I don't know anybody who has.

I get there on my bike just before seven. The Dempsey's don't mess around because the gardener has already climbed in, with the lawn freshly cut and the edges straightened with a spade. The garden's as big as a rugby field and has heaps of roses and three palm trees and a fountain with an angel squirting water from its mouth. The driveway is lit up from the gate to the front door by small lights buried in the ground.

I lean my bike against this Roman pillar thing next to the front door. The door is a massive carved number with brass handles and a knocker. The mine must have got it from a German castle. I knock, and while I'm waiting I take in some more. The house is even bigger and grander than what you can see from the road. I knock again, but still there's no answer. Now I begin to worry maybe I got the day wrong.

"Hey, James!"

At first I can't make out where the voice is coming from, until I spot Michael sitting in the shadow of the veranda, with his feet up on a table. He's been reading a book and must have been sitting there watching me for a while. He puts the book down and walks over from the veranda.

"How are you doing?" Michael says, shaking my hand. He looks like he's just come out of the shower or the pool because his blonde hair is still wet and slicked back. He's wearing those Island Style long white pants and a black short-sleeve shirt with a crocodile badge. A thin gold chain hangs from his neck. And here I am in my old jeans and Kempston Ford t-shirt.

"Ja, fine," I say. "How you guys settling into your new place?"

"Not bad, not bad. Still sorting through a couple of things, but nothing serious."

"Like what?"

"The usual. Pool thermostat playing up. Still waiting for some of our stuff to arrive. That type of thing."

I nod, as if I know exactly what Michael's talking about.

"And what about you? What were you up to the rest of the day?" he says.

"Nothing much, this and that." I can't think of anything interesting to tell him about the rest of the day. "So you guys are from Joburg?"

"Yes and no," says Michael, pushing his hair back.

"What you mean?"

"Well, I was born in Johannesburg and go to school there, but because of my dad's job we move around quite a bit."

"What does your dad do?"

"He's a management consultant."

"Is that like an accountant?"

"Something like that."

"My dad's a mine engineer."

"Okay."

"Where did you live before you came here?"

"More like, where didn't we live? Let me think..." Again, Michael runs his fingers through his wet hair. "Last stop was Cape Town. Before that, Johannesburg and Durban, with a few months between the two in the States and London.

"East London?"

"No, London London," he laughs. "You know? Royal family, Lady Di, guy with the big ears, London?"

"I was just joking," I say, feeling my face go hot.

"Of course you were. What about you? You been living here all your life?"

"No, I was born in Pietermaritzburg." I don't bother telling him we moved here when I was two years old. "But with all the moving around, how do you go to school?"

"I'm a boarder. At St Stithians in Northcliff. You probably haven't heard of it."

"I think I have."

We carry on making small talk at the front door, taking in the garden and the tennis court and the view: the red roofs of the mine houses below, the open scratchy veld after that, the thick bush and thorn trees along the river. Seeing it from up here makes it look nicer than it actually is.

“Hey, what are we hanging around outside for? Let’s head in,” Michael says.

I follow Michael into the house.

“I’ve never been inside your place before.”

“That’s to be expected; we’ve only been here a few days. But I know what you mean. Never ever?”

“Well, except when they were busy building it. But that was years ago.”

“It’s a bit OTT, though I think you’ll be impressed.”

Michael leads the way down the wide passage, through the hotel kitchen and into the lounge, pointing out this and that along the way as if it’s all nothing. The place is a palace. He adjusts the lights in the lounge and points to the couch.

“Make yourself at home. Listen, I was about to have a beer. You keen for one?” Michael says it casually, like he’s offering me Oros.

“What about your parents?”

Michael laughs. “Don’t worry about them. They’ve gone out.”

“Okay, why not? A beer would be great,” I say, also trying to sound casual.

“Hansa or Amstel? That’s all we’ve got, I’m afraid.”

“Um, anything. I don’t mind.”

“Choose one.”

“Okay, Amstel.”

“Good choice.”

While Michael fetches the beers I look around the lounge. I swear, Sean would cream himself. It’s fitted wall-to-wall with hi-fi’s and thin speakers and graphic equalisers and a big TV. Next to the TV is a shelf packed with original videos. The other side of the room is crammed floor-to-ceiling with books. They’re not the books and magazines you normally find in people’s houses, like Readers Digest and DIY books and old encyclopaedias that some travelling salesmen conned your parents into buying. There is a huge couch in front of the TV and a coffee table with a glass top. The couch is made of real leather, kudu or something like that, not the imitation leather you get on lounge suites at Russels and Morkels. Instead of the usual posters and prints from CNA, genuine paintings are hanging on the walls. My mom would go mad for this type of art. Come to think of it, she would go mad for the whole house.

“Anything grab your fancy?” says Michael, from behind me. He hands me a beer, which he’s poured into a long thin glass.

“Thanks. Seriously, where did you get all these videos from?” I’m not exaggerating, there must be at least fifty.

“Here and there. You can pick them up really cheap overseas, especially in the East.”

“It sounds like you’ve been all over the place.”

The only person I know who has been overseas is Martin, and that was to Mauritius, which doesn’t really count.

“That’s no lie. Cheers,” says Michael and holds his glass up and waits for me to do the same. We clink glasses. “I’m really glad you could make it.”

“Thanks for inviting me.”

We both take a gulp, then stand around looking at Michael’s video collection.

“I’ve got an idea, Jamie. If you are keen, why don’t you select something for us to watch and I’ll phone for pizza.”

“I’m dead keen.” Which I am. “But don’t you want to choose? You must have watched them all.”

“Not necessarily. Besides, I’m interested to see what you’re into.”

While Michael is on the phone to Napoli, I’m busy frying my brain trying to decide. Half the movies I haven’t even heard of, but eventually I decide on this movie called *Deliverance*, mainly because I like the cover. I bet Michael has seen it, but already I can tell he’s so polite he won’t let on.

“I’ve never had takeaway pizza from Napoli before.”

I reach over and help myself to another slice of salami and pineapple.

“They’re not bad,” says Michael. “Are you keen for another beer? I’m having one.”

Before I can say yes or no Michael has hit the pause button and gone to fetch two more beers from the bar fridge. This time he doesn’t bother with the glasses.

“By the way, excellent choice of movie, James,” says Michael, hitting the remote.

“You think so? I bet you’ve seen it ten times already.”

“That’s not true. Anyway, I could watch *Deliverance* a hundred times and never be bored.”

I'm chuffed because it ends up being a brilliant movie. It's about these guys who go on a fishing trip in the backwoods of America and get stalked by psycho hillbillies. It's so hectic in parts you just want to close your eyes.

Michael cranks up the volume. "Concentrate, Jamie, one of the best scenes is coming up."

One of the guys is called Bobby and he's fat and slow and useless. He has no chance against this hillbilly psycho who's got his buddy tied up against a tree and is getting ready to take Bobby up the bum.

"Squeal like a pig, fatty. Is that a classic line or what, hey Jamie?"

While Bobby crawls around the forest starkers, Michael's leaning forward on the couch, chewing his lip and really getting into it. But I can hardly watch. He grips my knee when the leader of the expedition, Lewis, shoots the hillbilly dead with his crossbow.

"Whoa! Now that's what you call taking someone out in style. What you say, Jamie?"

Michael turns the volume down and lies back on the couch.

"That must rank as one of the best films ever made, don't you think? Right up there with *Clockwork Orange*. You must have seen *Clockwork Orange*?"

"No, not yet."

"What! You are missing out big time. If you like *Deliverance*, then you've got to see *Clockwork Orange*. Maybe I can get hold of a copy from my buddy in Johannesburg."

"That will be great." To be honest, if it's as hectic as *Deliverance* I'm not so sure I want to see it. "Talking of clocks, I suppose I better hit the road."

"There's no rush."

I sit down again.

"So what are you guys into?"

"What you mean?"

"I mean you and your buddies. What do you do in this place?"

"I don't know. We do lots of different stuff."

"I know that. But like what?"

"Okay, we go fishing often, or we hang out at the river and the pool..."

“I’ve never been fishing.”

“Not even on the Vaal?”

“Not even on the Vaal. I once had a goldfish that ended up down the toilet. That’s about as much as I know about fish.”

“You knew a lot about piranhas.”

“That was something I read. You must take me fishing with you sometime.”

I can’t picture Michael in his white pants, threading an earthworm onto a hook.

“You would probably find it boring.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I mean, you sit around most of the time doing nothing. I hardly ever catch anything.”

“But when you do it must be exciting?”

“Ja, that’s true. It’s even exciting when you get a take.”

“What’s a take?”

“When the fish goes for your bait.”

“Sounds like fun. So that’s what you and Eddie do. You go fishing?”

“No, it’s mainly Sean and me. Eddie’s not really into fishing.”

“What’s Eddie into?”

“Not much, except if it has something to do with military and war and guns. His brother is a Reccie.”

“Interesting. Maybe I’m wrong, but Eddie doesn’t look the brightest. And Sean? Who is Sean?”

“Sean’s my other friend. We’ve known each other since I was this high. But actually, Eddie’s not as dumb as...”

“And Sean’s into fishing?”

“Big time. He’s got his school colours.”

“Wow. What else is Sean into?”

“A whole lot of stuff. His family had a farm in Rhodesia so he’s really good with his hands and outdoor stuff.”

“So Sean’s a when-we.”

“What’s a when-we?”

“When we were in Rhodesia. But never mind. In what way is he good with his hands?”

“Okay, for instance, you can give him a broken engine or something electrical and he will be able to fix it. And he can build just about anything.”

“Like what?”

“You name it. For example, from scratch he built this sound-to-light system for me. I’ve got it in my bedroom.”

“Is there anything Sean can’t do?”

“Not really. Except if it involves hardcore sprinting.”

“Why is that?”

“Because of his leg. It got caught in a speedboat propeller when he was six.”

“By the sounds of it, Sean’s your best friend?”

“Ja, I guess you could definitely say that. Him and Eddie.” I look at my watch. It’s almost midnight. “Shit, I better get going, Michael. My parents will think I’ve been kidnapped or something. But thanks a lot, it’s been great.”

“No problem,” says Michael, standing up and walking me to the door. “We must do it again soon. It’s been fun.”

Michael waits until I’m on my bike and I have my jacket zipped up. As I hit the bottom of his driveway and swing a right home I see him still standing at the front door.

## EIGHT

I decide to wait for Eddie in the car while he gets cleaned up. Don't ask me what he's doing – twenty minutes later I'm still sitting here. To be honest I don't really mind because the Jap crap has a decent radio and I'm happy tuning into the different stations. Half of them I haven't heard in years, so it's like a trip down memory lane. I reckon Radio Oranje is playing the same tunes they were playing half a century ago. It's probably even the same DJ. Merv Kotze – the name rings a bell. Short for Mervyn, I bet. Judging by the gravel in his throat, he's been around forever and a day. Like all the other DJs in this province, he's into this Tracy Chapman woman. It's the third time I've heard her today.

The passenger door rips open and Eddie jumps in.

“Right, my china, let's hit the road!”

Nobody has called me his china for at least ten years. It's a word straight out the Ark. I don't say anything, but Eddie also looks like he's come out of the Ark. His hair is plastered back skate-style – short in front, long at the back, David-Beckham style. The worst of it is that Eddie's going bald in the front, plus he's wearing this imitation brown leather jacket, with a V-neck jersey underneath. I'm already feeling embarrassed going out with him in public although he's probably the height of fashion in this place.

“Cool wheels,” he says, drumming on the dashboard. “So, where we going, china?”  
You would swear he's just got out of jail.

“I dunno. You tell me.

“Let's do Players.”

“Players. What's that?”

“My new drinking hole next to the old Ranch, china.

“Is that place still going?”

“Long dead. Come on, start this thing up, I seriously need a dop. By the way, it's good to see you, Jamie.”

“It's good to see you too, Eddie.”

I don't realise how bad Eddie needs a drink until we arrive at Players. The building where the Ranch Grill used to be has been boarded up. The old guy who owned the place – Johnnie Da Silva, if I remember right – must be dead and buried by now.

Players is a total dive and I can't believe Eddie's brought me here. It's a shebeen, not a pub. I'm about to tell him we should go somewhere else, but I've already raced through the options in my head. There aren't any, except the Jacaranda Hotel ladies bar. And there's no way I want to land up with Eddie there. Besides, it's too late. Eddie is out the car before I've even switched off the engine and he's heading up the path like a kid out of control.

"Come china, you're still as slow as ever. Don't you want a drink, or what?"

What can I do but follow Eddie, thinking I could be sitting at the Jacaranda enjoying a civilised drink on my own. I follow Eddie inside. It's like stepping into a cave and it takes me a few seconds to get used to the dark. Luckily, it's still too early for the Sunday boozers. Like a fly to a turd, Eddie heads straight to the bar. Master of his kingdom, he slaps the counter.

"Basil! Two double rum and Cokes for me and my long lost friend here."

He doesn't even ask if I drink rum and Coke. Because Eddie drinks rum and Coke the whole world must drink rum and Coke. What the hell, I'll go along with him for the ride, but I've already decided in my mind it's going to be one drink and then we are out of here.

"Let me get this one, Eddie," I say. I don't need to say I insist because Eddie's quite happy for me to pay. The drinks arrive and I notice Eddie's hand shakes when he pours his Coke. Some of it spills onto the bar counter.

"Here's to my old buddy. Good to see you, James."

"Cheers, Eddie. Good to see you too," I say for the tenth time, but I actually mean it. It is good to see him again. After all, we grew up together. "It's been a long time, Eddie."

"Too long, china. You should come back to visit more often."

You would think Eddie's come out of the Sahara. He's downed half his glass before I've even had a chance to top mine up with Coke.

"So why have you taken so long to come back?" Eddie's question catches me unawares.

“To visit you. Why else?”

“Ja, right. After how many years.” Eddie says it like an accusation.

“I’m just kidding, Eddie. I grew up here, remember. I wanted to see for myself what’s become of the place. No other reason.”

“You’ve taken your flipping time about it.” Eddie’s mouth is laughing but not his eyes. “And?”

“And what?”

“And what you think?”

“About what?”

“This place.”

“It’s a shithole.”

“Ag, it’s not so bad. You guys from the city are just soft. This is the real Africa, china.”

“Maybe. Anyway, I was only kidding. Another one for you, Eddie?” I’ve hardly touched my drink and he’s already finished his.

“What a question. Same again, but this time skip the Coke. You hear me, Basil? Just ice.”

And so the afternoon goes. Eddie boozes it up like there’s no tomorrow. He must think I’m a charity because I pay for most of them. We make small talk about this and that, but it’s hard going. We don’t get around to talking about what happened to him and Sean in Angola. I don’t know why, we just can’t get there. By the sounds of it Eddie’s been doing nothing ever since, except maybe the odd job here and there. I push the peanuts away and ask him about his mom and his brother, Luke. His mom spends most of her time in bed with her rheumatoid arthritis. Luke hardly ever visits. He’s apparently married and living in Pretoria. He’s got a job with Eskom.

Eddie doesn’t bother asking me any questions. He doesn’t ask me what I’ve been up to all these years, why I’ve taken so long to come back. I want him to ask, but he doesn’t. Most of the time he’s stares into his glass, or at the black chick and her skinny white boyfriend in the corner who looks old enough to be her father. She’s wearing this short

skirt and keeps crossing her fat thighs, uncrossing them, crossing them, uncrossing them. A cock-teaser if ever there was one.

An hour drags by and the bar begins to fill up, which means it's time to hit the road; you don't want to be in a place called Players when the shit hits the fan. It always does in places like this, even on a Sunday. I look at my watch and act surprised.

"Shit, Eddie, I must go!" Eddie looks all hurt, like I'm dragging him away from his own birthday party. "Sorry man, I've got an early start tomorrow."

"Come on, Jamie, one more for the road. The party hasn't even started. Besides, we haven't seen each other in years."

I'm already on my feet. "Sorry Eddie, you can stay, but I have to go. You understand?"

"If that's the way you want it," he slurs. Now I'm feeling guilty for going.

"Listen, have another drink on me." I place a twenty on the counter and he instantly looks much happier. "Maybe I'll swing by your place early tomorrow? My plane only leaves at four." I know I'm lying because right now I don't know if I could handle seeing Eddie so soon again. It's not his fault; he is what he is. It's more about me; what I've become. Eddie doesn't budge from his barstool. We shake hands. It's as if he wants to say something, but at the last second changes his mind. "It was good seeing you again, Eddie."

"Ja, china, good seeing you too." Eddie looks past me, at the black chick crossing and uncrossing her legs.

I head towards the door.

"Jamie!" I stop. Turn. Wait. "Ag, don't worry about it." Eddie turns back to the bar.

As I walk away from Eddie and into the fading light outside, I realise what it is about Eddie's eyes. That crazy blue spark that used to be there is gone.

## NINE

Mrs Daniels is busy mopping the stoep in her apron and pink stokies when she spots me coming up the path.

“Hi Jamie. Howzit going?” It’s clear as day where Sean and his three brothers get their friendliness from.

“I’m alright, Mrs Daniels.”

“Jeez, but you’re already looking nice and tanned, hey. I bet you guys are enjoying the hols?”

“So far, so good. Is Sean around?”

“He’s out the back. How’s your mom and dad?”

“They’re fine, Mrs Daniels.”

I squeeze past Mrs Daniels and her bucket of Handy Andy. Cleaning is a fulltime career for her because she doesn’t have a maid. I head straight through the house, into the kitchen and out the back door. Russel’s Fiat is parked on the grass and his feet are poking out from underneath. The soles of his feet are black; no wonder Sean’s mom has to clean non-stop. Russel is hammering something under the car. The Fiat’s radio is tuned into Radio Oranje. I don’t bother saying hi because he wouldn’t hear me anyway.

Sean’s apartment, as he likes to call it, is actually the maid’s room and separate from the house. Before I even get to the door I can hear his huffing and puffing. Ever since Sean saw this program on body-building he’s become obsessed, but I reckon it’s just an excuse for guys to check themselves out in the mirror. Body-building is too much hard work as far as I’m concerned, although I wouldn’t mind looking ripped like you see in the magazines.

Sean spots me and points to the chair, then carries on in front of the mirror. There’s a pile of *Muscle & Fitness* stacked next to his bed, which he’s read front to back and back again, and there’s a bench press in the corner with a heap of rusty weights, which Sean got second-hand. While I’m waiting for him to finish his set, I dig around in his tape collection for the new Pink Floyd. I rewind it to the beginning and plonk down on the bed and stare up at the sack-cloth ceiling. The first time Sean and me heard *The Wall*, we

knew it was going to become an instant classic. There's nothing like it and there never will be ever again.

"What did you do last night?" I ask.

"Nothing much. And you?" Sean puffs.

"Went for pizzas and video at Michael's house."

"Who's Michael?"

"You remember the guy who did that backward somersault off the high diving board?"

"Ja."

"Well, that's him."

Sean stops for a second.

"They've moved into the mine manager's house."

"Oh ja?" says Sean, eyeing out his biceps in the mirror.

"You should have seen this place, Sean. I'm not lying, there must be six bedrooms. And every one of them has its own bathroom with wall-to-wall carpets and these gold taps and heated towel rails."

"Sounds interesting."

"And then there's not just one lounge, but two."

"Why does someone need two lounges?"

"The one they use for entertaining posh guests. It's got these genuine leather couches and aircon and an electronic bar thing that pours your drink for you. You can set it to how many tots you want and it pours the exact amount. But you would cream yourself, Seanie, if you saw the other lounge."

"Why?"

"Because it's full of electronic equipment and a heap of records and videos and TV games. They've even got a Bang and Olufsen system like we saw in that sales catalogue, with those long thin speakers you like. They're flatter than they look in the photo."

"Must have cost a mint," says Sean, puffing his cheeks out.

"I swear, Seanie, not just one TV in the house, but three. Michael even has his own mini colour TV in his bedroom. You must see this room. It's got these double glass doors opening to the heated pool..."

Before I can finish my sentence Sean grabs the Muscle & Fitness I've been paging through.

"Imagine having a girlfriend with a body like that."

"Lemme see."

Sean holds up the page. It's a photo of a ripped lesbian in a bikini.

"I wouldn't say no to a body like that," I say.

"Of course you wouldn't. Even if you trained your arse off you wouldn't get your legs to look like her arms." Sean turns the page. "This is what I call a perfect body."

"I bet he pumps steroids," I say.

"No ways. The pros work out all the time. Imagine walking down the street with arms like that."

"We should organise to do something together with Michael sometime. You would like him."

"You reckon?"

"Ja, I reckon. And he's keen to do something with us."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Anything. He says he's keen to go fishing."

"Whatever. You can organise it." Sean pages through the magazine some more. "I bet you also wouldn't say no to a face like that," he says, and shows me this photo of a girl who looks like a guy after a sex change, with legs and arms bigger than ours put together.

"You're such a wanker," I laugh, and toss my slip-slop at him, but he ducks out the way.

"Come on, why don't you train with me for a change?"

"Like, now?"

"Ja, why not?"

"What about Eddie?"

"He didn't pitch."

I think about it for a minute, then leap off the bed.

"Okay, let's do it!"

Before Sean knows what's hit him, I've pulled off my vest.

"Your turn, Sean."

“What?”

“Come on, you said you want me to train with you.”

“You’re nuts, you know that?”

“I know. Shirt off!”

“Okay, if that’s the way you want it,” laughs Sean, and strips down, including his shorts. A second later we are both standing in front of the mirror in our jocks.

“Is that God’s gift to mankind or what, hey Sean?”

“The before and after.”

“Ja, you the before, me the after.”

“Watch this,” says Sean, and moves into his Mr Universe pose, puffing out his cheeks until his face turns red.

“Careful you don’t blow a poepstring.” That’s how hard Sean’s trying to pump his arms.

“Check those veins, Jamie. Am I huge or what?” Sean’s really getting into it now, posing this way and that way, checking himself from the back, then the side. You can tell he’s been studying Muscle & Fitness because he knows all the poses. “A couple more months and I’m gonna be massive. Feel that, Jamie.”

I give his arm a squeeze.

“Hard or what?”

“Hard to find.”

Sean stops to rest.

“Out the way,” I say.

Now it’s my turn to do a Mr Universe demonstration, tensing my muscles until I’m also red in the face. Maybe it’s the mirror or maybe I’m imagining it, but I’m looking bigger from the few times I’ve worked out with Sean.

“What you think?”

“You’re huge,” says Sean.

“You think so?” Suddenly I’m fully into this body-building thing.

“I wouldn’t say so if I didn’t mean it.”

“You know what we need now?” I say.

“What?”

“Oil.”

“You mean like Johnson’s Baby Oil?”

“Ja, whatever. You have any?”

“I don’t know. But I can go look.”

Sean pulls on his shorts and bolts from the room. That’s what I like about him; he’s always game. While he’s gone I look at myself, this way and that way. He’s back in no time, carrying a half-empty bottle of sunflower oil.

“This is all I could find.”

I take the bottle from him, flip open the lid and take a sniff.

“It smells like mixed herbs.”

“It’s the only oil we’ve got. Unless you want Castrol.”

“What the hell,” I say, and start pouring oil into my hand and rubbing it into my arms. I pour some more, not shy this time, and work it into my chest and abs. I hand the bottle to Sean and he does the same. We’re both soon covered head to toe in salad dressing.

“Imagine if someone walked in now,” giggles Sean, rubbing some more oil into his shoulders. “The stuff you talk me into.”

“It takes two to tanga.”

“You mean tango?”

“Who’s the teacher now? Whatever. If we are going to do this we might as well do it right.” I walk across to the window and yank the curtains closed.

“Maybe I should turn the light on?” says Sean.

“Okay, but just the bedside light. I’ll organise some other music.”

A minute later *We are the Champions* is blasting through the speakers and Sean and me are taking turns to pose in front of the mirror. I swear, with the bedside light dimmed and the music blaring and our bodies pumped and glistening with sunflower oil, Sean and me look just like Mr Universe. And between all the giggling and huffing and puffing, I’m thinking I haven’t had this much fun in ages.

## TEN

It takes so long to scrub the oil off, we end up arriving way late for Mr Steven's youth group meeting. Martin and Eddie and Mr Stevens are already on their knees at the front of the church.

"Sorry we're late," I whisper, and slide in next to Eddie, who shoulders me and rolls his eyes.

"Sorry, Mr Stevens," says Sean and moves in next to me.

"No problem, guys. I'm glad you could join us," says Mr Stevens. "We were just kicking off with a prayer, which you are welcome to join us in." Sean and me nod, both serious. You can't help being serious when Mr Stevens is around. A drop of sweat rolls down my spine. "Shall we continue, guys?" We all bow our heads.

I still don't know what to make of this whole idea, but soon after his divorce Mr Stevens got it into his head to start a youth group. Before we knew what was happening a couple of us, me included, had become the chosen ones. I don't know what I was thinking because now the problem is Mr Stevens and Father Dominic believe in us, and because Mr Stevens' wife took everything and he's living alone in this small flat across from the slimes dam, we don't want to disappoint him.

"We ask you to guide us on the way forward, Lord. We ask you to be a beacon of light for your young Crusaders. For, as you know, and as I have explained to the guys here, without your guidance we cannot move forward."

Mr Stevens stops praying and a long silence follows, so long my knees start to burn. I open my eyes. Eddie's looking at Sean and Sean is looking at me. Martin and Mr Stevens still have their eyes closed. Mr Stevens is moving his lips, but nothing is coming out of them.

"Have you been eating garlic?" Eddie whispers in my ear. I ignore him.

It all started with a casual chat and hot-cross buns in Father Dominic's lounge, and Martin and Sean and me getting a bit carried away. Mr Stevens and Father Dominic wanted to know what teenagers are getting up to nowadays, what they want from life, that type of thing. I don't know why, but we started coming up with answers about stuff

we had never thought about before. Like, yes, the youth of today are bored stiff and are looking for meaning and direction in their lives. And yes, they have definitely lost the plot. Father Dominic asked us if teenagers need more guidance and leadership and we all nodded our heads furiously, like it was something we've been thinking about our whole life. And then before we knew it Mr Stevens was calling us his Youth Crusaders and organising the first meeting. And now none of us want to tell him it's like a farmer trying to train a wolf to look after his sheep.

Out of the blue Mr Stevens says, "Amen," and opens his eyes and looks around him in a daze, as if he's forgotten where he is. He gets off his knees and sits back on the bench. We do the same.

"Guys, the Lord is telling me we need more time. He doesn't want us to rush into things."

It's been the same every week. Everything Mr Stevens does, he believes it's God speaking to him. Like, if he goes to buy the Sunday Times, it's because God has a message for him on the back page. I'm not exaggerating; Mr Stevens believes every move he makes is because God is telling him to. That's why we are still waiting for God to tell him what to do next with the youth group. And it doesn't look like God is in any hurry to get started.

Mr Stevens must see the disappointed look on our faces.

"But what about the team-building weekend at Golden Gate, Mr Stevens?" asks Sean.

"Yes, the team-building weekend. Don't worry, I'm still getting to that. But you know, it's not always good to rush into..."

"But you said last week we were going to talk about it some more at today's meeting." Martin and Eddie and me nod our heads furiously.

"Did I say that? Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. Anyway..."

"Ja, you said you were going to work on it during the week and tell us what we must bring," says Eddie.

We've got Mr Stevens backed into a corner now.

"Are we still going to Golden Gate on the team-build, Mr Stevens?" asks Sean.

“Of course we are. Would I go back on my word? Don’t worry guys, it’s all A for away.” Mr Steven coughs. “In fact, I’ve been spending a lot of time working on the logistics.”

And for the rest of the meeting we discuss the team-building weekend. By the end of it even Mr Stevens is fully into the idea and he hauls out his diary and starts to make lists of things we need to take with us and what food we are going to eat, and who must do what and get what. And just as I’m thinking this youth group thing isn’t so bad after all, Mr Stevens decides to end the meeting by showing us how to speak in tongues, which he is into big time. Shit, and before we know it, Eddie and Sean and Martin and me are standing in a circle holding hands and Mr Stevens is shaking and speaking this weird language that sounds like a mix of English, Hebrew and Chinese and some other language I’ve never heard.

University of Cape Town

## ELEVEN

“A Michael phoned for you,” my mom says when I walk through the door and she’s asked about the meeting and I say it was okay. She’s standing at the kitchen table arranging flowers in a glass vase. My mom’s dead keen on her gardening. I can hear Simon and my dad in the lounge. As usual both of them are in front of the TV, giving running commentary. “Twice in fact.”

“Twice? What did he say?” From nowhere comes a funny butterfly feeling.

“That he would like you to call him as soon as you get in. Have we met Michael?”

“No. Did you tell him where I was?” I don’t know what Michael would think if he knew I was at a Youth Crusaders meeting.

“I don’t think I did. Why, does it matter?” my mom asks, snipping the stem of a white rose and holding it to her nose. She passes it to me. “Smell.” And I take a sniff, but my mind is on other things now.

“Don’t you think that’s the loveliest perfume ever?”

“I guess so. When did Michael phone?”

“After lunch, then again about an hour ago. You better call him, he sounded very keen to speak to you. I’ve left the number next to the phone. He seems like a charming boy, I must say.”

“Mom, he’s hardly a boy,” I say, and leave her to her flower-arranging and head straight for the phone and dial Michael’s number. The phone rings about three times before Michael answers it.

“Michael Dempsey.”

“Hi Michael. It’s Jamie Robinson.”

“Jamie Robinson? Sorry, I think you may have the wrong number.”

“It’s me, James. I was at your house last night. I got a message from my mom to phone you.”

“I’m sorry. Are you sure you have the correct number? What did you say your name was again?”

“Jamie Robinson. Don’t you remember? We had pizzas and watched a video.” I’m starting to feel seriously confused.

“I’m sorry, I really don’t know any Jamie Robinson.”

“Is this the Dempsey’s phone number?”

Now I’m starting to wonder if I’ve got the wrong number, but it sounds just like Michael on the other side.

“Jamie Robinson? Of course!” Michael blurts. “How could I forget?” And he bursts out laughing over the phone. “Sorry, buddy, I couldn’t resist. I got you there, didn’t I?”

It takes me a few seconds to realise what’s going on.

“Shit, I was starting to lose my marbles. Ja, you got me alright.”

“So, what are you up to?”

“You mean like now?”

“Yes, like now. Like, what are you doing tonight?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it.”

“Great. Because I thought it would be fun to cruise the town, like we talked about. That’s if you’re not hanging out with your buddy, Sean. What you think?”

“Ja, okay. I’ll come round to your place if you want.”

Long after I put the phone down I’m still trying to remember when we talked about cruising town.

It takes me ages to decide what to wear. My faded denim jacket or the corduroy one? My Wranglers or my Lee’s? You would think I’m going on a date or something because usually I grab the first thing I see in the cupboard. Simon is sitting crosslegged on his bed, pretending to colour in a spaceship.

“Where you going?”

“Mind your own business.”

“I want to know.”

“Why should I tell you?”

“Pretty please.” That’s his latest thing: Simon says it all the time. He kicks his legs out and starts bouncing up and down the bed until the springs squeak.

“Okay, okay, if it’s so important to you, I’m visiting a friend. You happy now?”

“Who’s the friend? A girl?”

“Of course it’s not a girl. Don’t be dumb.”

“Then why are you taking so long to get dressed? And why are you putting that stuff on your face?”

“Jesus, can’t you let me dress in peace for a change?”

And so it goes on with Simon. He never lets up. Not for a minute. Before he comes up with any more questions I grab my cord jacket and I’m out of there.

“Wow Jamie, you didn’t have to get dolled up for me,” Michael says when he opens the front door.

“I didn’t get dolled up for you. I always dress like this,” I say.

“If you say so.”

Michael can’t talk; he must have a new outfit for every day. He’s wearing those new stonewashed jeans that are becoming the latest fashion, and a white Polo shirt and Adidas slops. It looks like he’s blow-dried his hair, but I’m probably wrong because there’s no ways a guy would do that.

“I’m really looking forward to my grand tour.”

“Don’t get your hopes too high. There’s not much to see.”

“I’m sure there’s plenty. Especially with you as my tour guide. You must know all the good spots.”

“Thanks a lot, Michael, now I’m really feeling the pressure.”

“Don’t mention it. So, you ready to hit the road?”

“Ready when you are. Are we going to walk?”

“Walk? You’re a funny guy, you know that? We have a choice.”

“Between what? Walking and walking?”

“Between my mom’s Ballade and my motorbike.”

“I didn’t know you had a motorbike.”

“Didn’t I tell you? I thought I did.”

“What is it?”

“A KTM.”

“You kidding me, right?”

“Would I kid you?”

“Yes.”

“Touché.” Michael punches me on the shoulder. “It’s no big deal, it’s only a bike. So what’s it going to be?”

“Difficult choice,” I say, scratching my head. “It’s not everyday I get to choose between a Honda Ballade and a KTM.”

“I’ll decide for you then. Let’s do the bike,” Michael says. “It’s a perfect night for it.” Which it is: warm and still and the moon hanging like a disco ball from a black velvet ceiling. “Hang ten here, I’ll go open the garage.”

I hang around outside, waiting for Michael. He takes ages doing whatever he’s doing. Eventually there’s a grinding noise from inside the garage and the double door glides open. Michael isn’t bullshitting. Standing in the middle of the garage, between the gold BMW and his mom’s silver Ballade, is a KTM. Michael’s next to it, holding two red helmets. I walk up to the garage.

“Jeez, I really thought you were having me on.”

“Catch.” Michael tosses a helmet in my direction. “Try it on for size.”

While I fiddle with the strap, Michael kickstarts the bike. It blasts into life on the second take. Michael revs the engine. The sound goes right to the bottom of my guts. There’s no better sound in the world than the machinegun rattle of a KTM.

“Let’s hit the road,” Michael shouts above the idle’s tuk-tuk-tuk.

“What do I hold onto?” I shout into his helmet.

“Me or fresh air. Your choice,” he shouts back. I take hold of Michael’s shirt. “You ready?” I nod. “Okay, hold on.” Michael leans over and flicks the garage door switch, then kicks the bike into gear and guns the engine. As the door inches down on us he drops the clutch and I just about do a backward somersault. My arms are wrapped around Michael’s waist before we even we hit the end of the driveway, holding on like there’s no tomorrow.

It turns out to be the best night ever and we end up cruising all over the place. Michael rides like a pro because he did junior motocross when he lived in Joburg. Once he shows

me how to lean into the corners with him, not against him, the bike tears into the circles and corners like a hot knife into butter.

“Okay, where to now?” Michael shouts after we’ve been riding around for a while.

“Keep going straight,” I shout back.

Michael gears down and we cruise past a Skyline. Two girls about our age are sitting in the back, dolled up to go somewhere. As we motor slowly past one of the girls waves at us and I let go one hand and wave back. I can’t remember when a girl last waved at me.

“Yeehaa! Michael screams, and kicks into second and hits the throttle.

We take a slow cruise up Voortrekker, into town. It always looks better at night; by day it’s a dusty dump. It’s January already, but the Christmas lights are still on, with half the coloured bulbs blown. We pass the Galaxy Arcade.

“That’s where we play Space Invaders,” I shout into Michael’s ear.

“Who’s we?”

“Sean, Eddie and me.”

“What’s that?” shouts Michael pointing at the roadhouse and the rows of cars parked in front. “It looks festive.”

“Vegas Roadhouse. They do good burgers. If you want, I’ll stick you a Coke or something?”

Michael slows the bike and pulls into the carpark. He keep the engine idling. For a Thursday the place is quite busy. There’s a family in the car next to us, all of them licking ice-creams. There must be at least five kids crammed into the back seat, gawking at Michael and me. Most of them look like the dad, with gingery hair and freckles.

“Christ. It’s like stepping back in time,” says Michael, looking around us.

“What you mean?”

“What do I mean? Get a hold of that, for example,” he says, pointing to a guy walking back from the toilets. He looks like one of those people my mom visits at the centre. Down syndrome, I think they call it. “If that’s not the missing link, I don’t know what is.”

“You sure you don’t want me to buy you an ice-cream or something?”

“No, I say let’s keep going.”

We ride the town flat, me pointing out this and that the whole way. The Phoenix, where we go just about every Saturday, my old school, the new Checkers where we race trolleys when we're bored, the Tropicana swimming pool, which they closed down after it caved in and two people died. As we come past the graveyard Michael does a U-turn and decides it's time for a midnight stroll. I act keen, not that I am, but it turns out quite interesting in a depressing sort of way. I tell Michael what my dad said about apartheid carrying on when you're dead because all the blacks are buried on the one side and all the whites on the other. He thinks it's quite a hoot.

After the graveyard I take him past my old kindergarten, with its yellow jungle-gym and sandpit of old car tires and the rusty red tractor that's still going to be there after the Russians blow the world up. Sean and Eddie and me played there together when we were still in nappies. Michael cuts the engine and asks all sorts of questions about our favourite games, what Sean was like when he was a kid, that type of thing. It's so long ago I'm in danger of blowing a fuse trying to remember the answers. But at least he's interested. All my other friends would be bored out of their skulls by now.

"If you like we can go past Sean's house on the way back," I say, when we are on the bike and heading home.

"Why don't we visit your buddy Eddie, instead? You said he lives somewhere around here."

"I don't know if it's a great idea."

"Why? Are you embarrassed or something?"

"I'm not embarrassed. It's just that..."

"Just what?"

"They're probably asleep."

"It's still early. Let's go check."

We stop in front of Eddie's house. The front stoep light is on. I lift open the gate and walk to the front door, almost breaking my neck on the broken cement. I work my way around the bits of metal and old car and motorbike parts on the stoep. Eddie's bike is lying turtle with its front wheel off. I look back. Michael is watching me. When I knock on the door the neighbour's dog goes ballistic in the backyard. Luckily it's kept chained to their washing line. I knock again, louder this time. I shrug my shoulders at Michael.

“There’s nobody at home.”

But I knew that already. I could have told him I saw Luke and Eddie and their mom parked outside the Vegas, licking ice-creams.

“Forget it,” Michael shouts and revs his bike.

When we get to my house, instead of turning up our driveway like I think he’s going to, Michael carries on and turns into Jamboree Park, which is just up the road from us. He cuts the engine next to the cricket field.

“And now?” I say.

“The night is still young. How about we end it with a nightcap?”

“Oh ja. And where do we organize a nightcap?”

“Let’s say I’ve already organized it. Are you keen?”

“I suppose so.”

“Good to hear. For a moment I was afraid you were going to fade on me.”

“Me fade? Why do you say that?”

“No particular reason. Get your butt off the bike.”

I climb off and Michael lifts up the seat and brings out a plastic bag with something wrapped inside.

“Voila,” he says and takes off his helmet. “You lead the way.”

We start walking across the field. There’s not a soul around. The club bar must have closed hours ago because there’s not a single light on. The moon we saw earlier has disappeared. Now it’s just an explosion of stars, with the Milky Way smearing the sky from one end to the other. Michael bumps up against me and giggles.

“Sorry. I can hardly see where I’m going.”

“How about here?” I suggest when we reach the grandstand. You can’t exactly call it grand because at the most the Jamboree takes fifty spectators. Like my dad says, there’s only one sport in this town and it’s not cricket.

We climb to the top and flop down on the rough planks. Careful not to get a splinter through my spine I lean back and look for Orion’s Belt, while Michael struggles to undo the knot of the plastic bag. He gives up and rips the plastic open. I hear the snap of the seal being broken. Michael unscrews the top.

“Okay. Take a sip of this,” he says.

I sit up. “What is it?”

“A little something to celebrate.” He passes me the bottle. I take a whiff and cough.

“Is it brandy or something?”

“Don’t ask so many questions. Open your mouth.”

Michael empties half the bottle into my mouth. I push his hand away and swallow, my eyeballs popping out of my head.

“Jeez, are you trying to kill me?”

“Kick’s like a mule, doesn’t it?”

“What is it?”

“Jim Beam. Bourbon.”

“What’s bourbone?”

“It’s pronounced bourbon. It’s a type of whisky. Comes from America. And don’t even ask what it costs.”

Michael lifts the bottle to his mouth and swallows loudly. This is the first time I’ve had neat whisky and I can feel it working through my veins. Michael passes the bottle back to me. I take another swig, but a small one this time. I hold onto the bottle, then pass it back to him and lie back on the rough planks. Michael takes another gulp.

“Move up,” he says.

I shift to the edge of the bench. Michael lies down so our heads are almost touching. We both stare up at the sky.

“I enjoyed tonight, Jamie.”

“Me too. It was fun.”

“I don’t know, but I feel we really connect. Like we could be blood brothers. I don’t know if you feel the same way?”

I’m not sure what to answer, except I feel proud when Michael says we could be blood brothers.

“How well do you know your constellations?” he says.

“Not that well. Orion’s Belt is about it.”

“Can you see Orion’s now?”

“Ja. It’s straight up there.”

“Okay, now look to the left of Orion’s, across from the bottom of the dagger. Do you see that cluster of small bright stars that form a rough square?”

“I think so.”

“That’s called the Jewellery Box.”

“You’re right. It really does look like a jewellery box.”

Michael sits up and hands me the Jim Beam. I lift my head and take another swig. It’s getting to me already. I lie back again. Our shoulders are touching and it doesn’t feel weird anymore.

The bottle goes to and fro. Michael shows me how to find the Southern Cross, which he says sailors use to work out north from south. We are soon giggling like schoolgirls and I’m feeling more amazing by the minute. Michael tells me he feels the same way. I’m drifting in and out of my own world until his voice is miles away. In no time I’m imagining myself cruising in my private Startrek spaceship high above Jamboree Park. I hit the thruster button and before I know it I’m blasting through the galaxy, watching the stars rush by. Then I’m laughing like a hyena, telling Michael how great he is, that I also felt the connection that first day we met. His body is pushed up against me and he’s also giggling like a hyena. And just as I’m convinced I can hold on to this feeling forever, my spaceship spins out of control and I start falling back to earth. Next thing I know, I’m hanging onto the side of the grandstand, puking my guts out.

## TWELVE

Dinner has already started when I get back to the hotel. I take an empty table near the window. It faces onto the carpark. The place is dead, with the usual background music. Richard Clayderman. It's always Clayderman or George Zamfir and his panflute in these small towns. I bet they never see the royalties.

The friendly Afrikaner woman brings me the menu. She's got a nice arse, I'll say that for her. There's a guy with a sweaty face in a blue short-sleeve shirt and khaki pants eating alone at the table opposite me. He must be a rep; they all dress the same. There are also two couples, one of them with a whiney kid. That's all they must get here, reps and couples desperate for a romantic night out. Not that you can call the Jacaranda romantic; the lights are turned up way too bright. They should invest in a couple of dimmers.

The waiter is the same madala who carried my suitcase. He brings me the menu and flashes his big white smile. No ways those teeth are real; they're too perfect. He asks if I want to see the wine list.

"Have you got Windhoek?" He shakes his head. Only SAB horse piss. I run through the wine list.

"Okay, give me a bottle of Chateau Libertas. A seven-fifty, not a dinkie, hey."

What the hell, it's only forty-five bucks.

The old guy comes back with my wine, shows me the label, opens it in front of me, pours some in the glass for me to taste, the whole tootie. I'm impressed. The wine tastes like Chateau should so I give him the go ahead. And before I can stop him he's filled it right to the bloody brim.

Who would have thought? Twenty-three years. Twenty-three years for me to get it together to come back. I wonder if I'm the only one or have there been others. Others who've booked into a room with a crack running across the roof? I wonder what they're up to nowadays. It's like they've fallen off the planet.

The only one I'm still in touch with is my own flesh and blood. Simon. He's living in Australia, with his wife and three kids. Joined the chicken run. He left just before the elections. Thought all hell was going to break loose, that the blacks were going to murder

us in our beds. He didn't say that was the reason, but I know it was. Why else would he leave? Maybe it turns out he's right. That one day we whites will have our throats slit by the darkies. Maybe Simon and the rest of them just got the date wrong.

My Madagascar rump arrives. It's drowning in mushroom and peppercorn sauce and is way bigger than what you get in the city. I should have thought before ordering it because I'm not even hungry – the lump in my guts still hasn't shifted. The rep across the way doesn't have the same problem. He's tucking in like there's no tomorrow.

The last time I saw Simon was when he came out for a holiday four years ago. He even made a special trip to visit us. To check up on how I was doing. The way I carried on when he was here you would swear we were living in paradise. Knocking back the beers around the braai at our place in Durbanville, I'm telling him how perfect everything is. The weather, the women, the government, the economy, what more can a man want? Simon swallows my bullshit hook, line and sinker because he wants to believe it. He's not like those other South Africans living overseas. He wants to believe everything is hunky-dory here, that we are working side by side for a better future, that blacks and whites are mad for each other. It's because he feels guilty he made the right decision by taking his family away from here. He feels bad him and Fiona are happy together and living in a safe neighbourhood in Brisbane. I play along with him. I help him believe I'm okay. I help him leave the past in the past.

I ask the madala for a doggie-bag because there's no ways I'm going to get through this rump. Maybe some poor guy on the street wants it. I finish the last of the Chateau and decide to call it a night just as Richard Clayderman gets going for the third time.

## THIRTEEN

The only decent thing about Eddie's house is it lies opposite from where the cops trap. And I know it sounds dumb, but watching cops is more fun than watching sport on TV. At least that's what I think. It's even better now that we have a pair of binocs, which we found in Eddie's dad's cupboard among the Tex Bar wrappers and empty Lexington cartons and an open box of condoms. Although he's been dead for ages Eddie's mom still hasn't cleared out his dad's cupboard.

"You must check the boep on this one. I swear, he would give a hippo a run for its money," says Sean, squinting down the binocs.

"Lemme see," says Eddie, yanking on the strap.

"Just wait... They're getting ready to take a tea break."

"Come on, let me have a turn."

I twist the angle of the beer crate so I can put my feet up on Eddie's bed. I take another drag of the Chesterfield we've been bouncing because it's the last one in the pack. To be honest I don't really care what's happening on the other side of the road. Part of the reason is because my head still feels like porridge.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, the players will take a break," says Sean, still hogging the binocs and pretending he's Charles Fortune. Eddie takes the cigarette from me and sucks on it. "Cop with boep gets ready to stuff his face with a sarmie and, yes, he now begins cement-mixing it with his coffee."

"How do you know it's coffee?" says Eddie.

"Whatever. Tea, coffee, what's the diffs?"

"Watch this one coming!" says Eddie, excited.

A Cortina has come into view at the top of Gemsbok. I watch with Eddie and Sean as it barrels at a rate towards the cops and hits the wire. One of the cops leans forward in his folding chair and watches it fly past. He sits back and carries on chatting to his buddy.

"Did you get a hold of that?" says Sean. "He must have been doing at least a hundred. Jesus, Eddie, don't gob all over it, I still want a last puff."

Sean hands Eddie the binocs and Eddie hands Sean what's left of the Chestie.

“Where were you last night, Jamie? I thought we were going to hang out.”

I’ve been waiting for Sean to bring up the subject.

“I went out with Michael.”

“Who’s Michael?” says Eddie.

“That new guy from Joburg.” says Sean.

“Oh, that Michael. I didn’t know you were chommie with him.”

“Ja, he’s Jamie’s new best friend.”

I ignore Sean and start telling both of them about the amazing time Michael and me had, about his KTM, about us cruising up and down town. And about how we ended up at the cricket field and drank Jim Beam bourbon. I don’t tell Eddie I saw him and Luke and his mom at the Vegas, but that they didn’t see me.

“What’s boarbone?” asks Eddie.

“It’s a type of American whisky. And you pronounce it bourbon, not boarbone, Eddie. And don’t even ask what it costs...”

“I think we get the point, Jamie,” interrupts Sean.

“What you mean?”

“I mean, you haven’t stopped gaaning on about Michael this, Michael that. You’re sounding like a stuck record.”

“A stuck record,” laughs Eddie. “I like that.”

“Bullshit. You asked me what I did last night, now I’m telling you.”

“Thanks, but now you’ve told us.”

“Next time I won’t bother telling you.”

Sean turns back to the window. “Ag, just forget it. Pass me the binocs, Eddie.”

I try concentrate on the blue skadonk puffing smoke and crawling along at snail’s pace. An old black guy is behind the wheel. The cop with the boep leaps into the road and flags the car down. You would swear he’s parking a 747 the way he waves his arms about.

“Nail the black bastard!” shouts Eddie. He’s still hogging the binocs.

I’m still thinking about what Sean said. About me going on about Michael.

The old guy looks about eighty. Even without the binocs I can see the cops are giving him the works, walking around the car and pointing at this and that; the indicators, the

brake lights, kicking the tyres, the whole time shouting at him. The guy just stands there and takes it. His wife or whoever's in the passenger seat stays put. Eventually the cop with the boep tears a page from his book and sends the guy on his way.

"What a doos," I say.

"I bet he bought his license at some shebeen," says Eddie, still cackling. "These monkeys shouldn't be on the road in the first place."

"Oh, shut the hell up, Eddie," says Sean.

"What did I do now?" says Eddie back, looking offended.

"You're talking out your arse," I say. "That's what you did."

"You are both talking out your asses. Anyway, who cares a stuff?" says Sean. "Let's talk about something more interesting."

"Like what?"

"Like, has Jamie Robinson decided yet if he's going to have a party?"

"I told you, I'm not into the hassle of organising it."

"What's there to organise? All you need is good music."

"And some hot chicks," chips in Eddie.

"It's easy for you to say. When last did one of you two have a party?" The answer is never. The last party we went to was my own, and that was when we were still in primary school. "Besides, let's say I did have a party. Where would we get your so-called hot chicks, Eddie? We don't know any hot chicks," I say. And that's a fact.

"What about Adele?" says Sean. "I could ask her to come."

"Okay, apart from Adele, who else?"

"What about Martin's sister?" Eddie says. I've already thought about Tanya. Often.

"She doesn't count."

"Why?"

"Because she's Martin's sister, idiot. It's like asking your own sister on a date."

"Jamie's right," says Sean. "It's like paying your sister to give you a love bite. I bet if you had a sister, Eddie, that's something you would do."

We all crack up at this. The mood in the room is now suddenly lighter. As if somebody's opened the window and let a gush of fresh air in.

“What you mean love bite, Sean? If Eddie had a sister, he would pay her to give him a blowjob.”

“Very funny,” says Eddie.

“There’s only one person who would give Eddie a free blowjob, Jamie.”

“Who?”

“Eddie.”

“Oh, shit, that’s funny,” I say, clutching onto my stomach. “You’re going red in the face, Eddie.”

“No, I’m not.”

Sean wipes the tears from his face. “I bet Eddie doesn’t even know what a blowjob is.”

“Do you think I’m an idiot or something?” Sean and me look at each other, then crack up all over again.

“I wonder why it’s called a blowjob,” says Sean, after we’ve calmed down.

“Ja, why don’t they call it a suckjob?”

“But the job part’s true. I swear, if I was a woman I wouldn’t do it unless you paid me a huge whack. It must be like shoving your fist down when you want to puke. No ways.”

I decide to give Sean and Eddie a demonstration, shoving my hand in and out of my mouth, then pretending to puke, which has both of them in stitches.

“Seriously, Jamie, you only turn sixteen once, hey. You must have a party.”

“I skim so too,” says Eddie.

Before I know it I’m buying into the whole idea and lapping up Sean’s plans – Sean could sell sand to a camel dealer in Saudi Arabia. He has the whole thing worked out. He says we will have it in our garage at home and he’s going to sort out all the music and the lights, and we’re going to invite Adele and a bunch of her friends from her school, although we don’t know any of them. And Eddie’s going to be the bouncer and the barman, and I’m going to organise with my mom to make trays of sausage rolls and other snacks, and I’ll ask my dad if we can have some beers, but no hard tack because we don’t want things to get totally out of hand.

“So how about it?” says Sean, after he’s explained his grand vision to us.

I shrug my shoulders. “Okay, what the hell.” I say it like it was never a big deal in the first place.

“That’s our Jamie!” shouts Sean. And we give each other a round of high-fives. And Eddie punches the door.

“Eddie, I’m starving. You got anything for us to eat?” says Sean, after a while.

“Just bread.”

“With what?”

“Jam.”

“Better than nothing, I suppose,” says Sean.

We troop after Eddie into the kitchen and sit round the table and begin to make doorstep sandwiches with white margarine and apricot jam straight out the tin. You would think a bomb’s hit the place by the time we’re finished.

“Luke, you want a sarmie?” shouts Eddie through the hatch between the kitchen and the lounge.

“No thanks, boetie,” says Luke’s gravelly voice through the hatch. “But you can bring me another Blackie if you want.”

“You guys want to hear a good story?” says Eddie, his mouth full of bread.

Before Sean or me can say yes or no, Eddie is leading the way into the lounge. Luke is lying on the couch with his bare feet up on the coffee table.

Luke Scheepers is a Reccie or a parabat – I always mix the two up – and I would be lying if I said I wasn’t a bit scared of him. I don’t mean scared in the normal *Chainsaw Massacre* way, or he’ll stuff you up if you look at him wrong sort of way. He’s actually a decent guy, calm and friendly, and he’s always got time for us. But once he tells you what he’s done and Eddie’s shown you some stuff to prove it, you are not so sure anymore. It’s like now and then you get a cold shiver down your back when you are around Luke Scheepers. It’s like you can’t put two and two together, this calm guy and the stuff he tells us.

This must be about the tenth time Luke has been to the border. He’s always going or always coming back. He must see more action than anybody. That’s what they call it in the SADF, ‘action’. This time he’s been back for about a week and I swear he looks like

Rambo. His hair is shaved on the sides in a GI Joe-style and the skin on his neck is almost black from the sun. And I'm not exaggerating like I normally do, but he has these ripped muscles everywhere, especially his arms, which look like engine pistons. Even his neck is one bulging muscle, with a thick vein running down the side. Whenever Luke gets back from the border he looks fit as all hell. One look at him and you also want to sign up with the Reccies.

I can tell Eddie's chuffed as all hell with him because it's usually non-stop Luke this and Luke that when his brother's home. But I suppose I would also act like him if he was my brother. He must think Eddie's a total pain in the arse, when all he wants to do is rest, drink beer and watch TV.

While Eddie goes in and passes Luke his beer, Sean and me hover near the door with our marg and apricot jam sarmies.

"What you watching?" Eddie asks him, all casual-like.

"Ag, just some Western," says Luke and cracks open the Black Label and takes a swig, burps, but softly, letting the air out slowly. He's not wearing a shirt and his stomach muscles are really ripped. I try not to stare, but it's not easy.

"Can I have a sip?" says Eddie, just to impress us. Luke hands Eddie the bottle, who takes a gulp. And then another one.

"Luke, why don't you tell Jamie and Sean about that last time in Angola," says Eddie, handing the bottle back.

"What last time?" says Luke, and drags his cigarettes over the coffee table with his foot. He smokes Texan Plain.

"You know, that night you told me about."

"Oh that. Just the usual shit," says Luke in that calm voice of his. You can see he isn't in the mood to talk and I think we should maybe leave him in peace and get the hell out of here. Like maybe wait for another day to hear his story. But Eddie wants Luke to tell us now so he can brag afterwards.

"Tell them about the ambush Luke, like what happened. Sean and Jamie want to hear."

And he turns to us for moral support and we nod our heads.

"Ja, we're keen Luke," says Sean for both of us.

Luke keeps staring at the TV. I reckon he's thinking the only way to get rid of us is to tell his story. He could probably squash us like a mosquito. But luckily he's not that type of guy. He really takes good care of Eddie, especially since their dad died two years ago. That's why nobody ever lays a hand on Eddie at school. It would be committing suicide.

"Okay, if you guys really want to hear this shit," says Luke.

He turns the volume down, but carries on staring at the TV. Only now do Sean and me move more into the room and find a place on the carpet. And then Luke starts telling us about this night he and four of his company had to sleep in the bush somewhere in Angola. How they weren't even sure where they were exactly because they had lost their bearings earlier in the day after tracking a group of terrorists. How they lay there nipping themselves in their sleeping bags, listening to the lions and hyenas circle around the camp, but couldn't light a fire because the SWAPO terrors might see it.

Luke is telling us the story in this calm voice of his, as if he is telling us about a Sunday tea party. Meanwhile Sean and me and I bet even Eddie, who has heard the story before, are lapping it up.

But that's not half of it. Sometime during the night one of the guys hears this sound like footsteps and twigs breaking and soft voices. He tugs at Luke's sleeping bag, but he's already wide awake. And so are all the other guys in his company. They whisper to each other. They're sure it's the group of Swapo terrorists they've been following during the day. Sean's mouth is hanging open now and I can see his tonsils and bits of bread stuck to his teeth.

And before they know it the footsteps are coming straight in the direction of their camp. And Luke reckons there must be at least ten of them. He tells us, still in this calm voice, how they've got no choice but to engage – that's the word he uses, 'engage' – because they are sitting ducks. Sean is now also staring at Luke, his eyes shining, and so is Eddie, who keeps looking at us, then back at Luke, then back at us.

Luke lights another Texan from the first one. The ashtray on the couch is overflowing with stompies. It's one of those perlemoen ashtrays you get when you go on holiday to places like Durban.

And now the worst bit comes. Luke tells us how all hell breaks loose as the enemy walks straight into their camp without even realising it. And because it's so dark, Luke

and the guys in his company wait until the very last second before letting them have it. And the terrors don't know what the fuck has hit them. Luke says half of them are probably dead before the rest of their black brothers have a clue what's going on. There's lots of screaming going on, not just from dying Swapo, but from our side as well.

Luke, who is now staring at the ducks flying above the TV, says it's the adrenalin, you can't help yourself, it just takes over. It's so dark all they can see are black shadows. So they just keep shooting and shooting, until there aren't any shadows left to shoot.

"That's about it," says Luke, and then stops talking and turns the volume up again.

"But what happened next, Luke?" asks Eddie. I don't need to hear any more.

"That's it, boetie. Finito. Nothing more to tell except terrors lying everywhere, some moaning and groaning. The usual."

Sean now asks a question. "What did you do with the injured ones, Luke, the one's that didn't die, what did you do with them?"

Luke turns and looks at Sean as if he doesn't understand the question. Eddie also looks at Sean as if he's stupid or something. I don't know where to look. Eventually Luke turns back to the TV and says in that calm voice of his, "A boer maak 'n plan. Not so boetie?" And he roughs up Eddie's hair. And Eddie laughs and looks real chuffed with himself.

## FOURTEEN

“Don’t forget you owe me,” I tell Eddie, after we collect our ice-creams and head back to the pool. As usual, he doesn’t have a cent to his name.

“Ja, ja,” says Eddie, chuffed he’s scored a free cone, although it’s only a boring Classic. There’s no way I’m going to see my money again, but I know that already. By the time we get back to our towels my Choc-Dip is dripping from my fingers.

“Where’s Sean,” asks Gavin.

“Coming later.”

You would swear Eddie’s never eaten an ice-cream before, he’s licking it so fast. His mouth is smeared in white.

“Close your legs, Eddie, I can see your sack,” Martin says. Eddie’s costume is a pair of old rugby shorts with a split down the middle.

“So what?” But Eddie closes his legs anyway.

I break off the bottom of my cone and inspect the inside. Eddie starts to giggle like a schoolgirl.

“What’s so funny?” I say.

“Jamie, tell Gav about the time you found that cockroach. Remember that?”

“Why do you think I break off the end? You think I do it for my health?” Actually I do do it for my health, but it doesn’t matter; it goes way over Eddie’s head.

“I promise you, Gav, it wasn’t a tiny cockroach or anything. You should have seen this thing.” Eddie opens his arms wide. “It was one of those fat Parktown prawns you get in Margate.”

“Thanks for reminding me, Eddie. For your information it wasn’t a fat Parktown prawn as you so creatively put it. It wasn’t bigger than this.” And I show Eddie my middle finger. Gavin has also started giggling like a schoolgirl. “I swear, that’s the most disgusting thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“The roach probably thought he was being ambushed by one of those trapdoor spiders,” says Martin.

“Meanwhile old Jamie here is happily munching away.”

I also can't help giggling because it's funny now that I come to think of it.

"It wasn't that hilarious, Eddie."

Eddie and Martin are already licking their fingers and I'm not even halfway through. Eddie digs something from out of his nose and wipes it on the grass.

"Shit, man, that's disgusting, Eddie. Can't you see I'm still eating?"

"Your fault if you want to eat so slow."

"At least I taste my food."

"Hi guys," says a voice from behind us. I twist round on my towel. Michael. Standing over us without his shirt on, holding his red helmet. I scramble to my feet.

"Hi Michael. How is it going?"

"Good, good. You should have told me you were coming to the pool. I could have given you a lift."

"We sort of decided at the last minute."

Michael looks past me, at Eddie and Gavin and Martin, who are watching us, waiting for the next move. Michael walks over to them.

"Mind if I join you guys?" he says and throws his stuff down on the grass. Martin moves to the side to make space for him. "It doesn't look like Jamie's going to introduce us... I'm Michael."

Martin and Gavin reach across and shake his hand.

"I'm Eddie. We met at church."

"Yes, how are you doing, Eddie?"

Michael shakes Eddie's hand, then spreads his Beacon Island towel on the grass and drops his denim shorts. He's wearing his black Speedo again and he's the only one of us who doesn't have a farmer tan.

"What's the water like?"

"Like bathwater," says Martin.

"Ja, from these guys here pissing in it," says Gavin. "So where did you learn to dive like a pro?"

Instead of ignoring the question Michael starts telling Gavin about the time he lived six months in America, and about the diving instructor friend of his dad who nearly made it into the Olympic diving team. He's soon got Eddie and Gavin and Martin lapping up

every word because they start asking him questions about where else he's lived, what his dad does, that type of thing. Michael's already told me the story, but it's impressive hearing all the places he's been and the things he's done. I'm battling to concentrate because I'm just so chuffed he decided to sit with us.

"So that's my story," says Michael eventually. He stands up. "I think I need something to drink after all that. You guys want something?"

Eddie looks up at him. "You mean you're sticking?"

"If you mean paying, yes, I'm sticking."

Eddie looks at the rest of us, like he can't believe Michael is serious.

"In that case I won't say no, I'll have a Fanta," he says.

"What about you two?"

"I'll have a Grape Fanta," says Martin.

"Me too," says Gavin. "Hell, thanks, Michael."

"No problem. Do you want something, Jamie?"

"I won't say no to a Creme Soda. Come, let me give you some money."

Michael waves my hand away. "Another time."

"Is he loaded or what?" says Gavin, after Michael has gone off to fetch our order.

"Maybe he's just generous. You should take some lessons," says Martin.

"Michael is big time generous," I say. "I have to keep saying no."

"If I was you I wouldn't say no."

"But you're not me, Eddie."

"So why's he hanging out with you?"

Michael is back with the drinks before I have a chance to explain to Gavin.

"No problem," Michael says after we've all said thanks for the tenth time. "It's only money."

"You hear that, Jamie?" says Eddie.

"What?"

"It's only money."

"What, did Jamie lend you money?" says Michael.

"Ja."

"How much?"

“Thirty cents.”

“For what?”

“An ice-cream.”

“And he wants it back?”

“Ja. Can you believe it?”

“It’s the principle, Eddie.”

“Come now, Jamie,” says Michael. “I’m sure you can afford to give your friend here thirty cents.”

“Yes, Jamie,” says Gavin. “You mustn’t be so suinig.”

“Thanks Gavin. If I want your opinion I’ll ask for it.”

“Look who’s finally arriving,” says Martin, changing the subject. We all look up and spot Sean walking across the grass towards us. Maybe it’s the light, but his limp looks worse than usual. I wave, but he’s already seen us. He’s taken off his shirt and looks pumped, like he’s been working out before he came to the pool.

“Hey, the elephant man cometh,” says Michael, in this deep voice. Eddie and Gavin pack up giggling at this. Michael digs his toe into my side. “Only kidding, Jamie.”

It takes Sean forever to cross the open stretch of grass between the ticket office and where we are lying on our towels.

“Howzit, guys,” he says and throws his haversack to the ground. He looks around at us, then at Gavin and Eddie.

“What’s so funny?”

Gavin elbows Eddie in the ribs. “Come on, quit it, it’s not that funny.” But Gavin can’t keep a straight face and they both pack up giggling again.

“What’s going on, Mart?”

“Don’t look at me,” says Martin, trying to keep a straight face.

“Jamie?”

I shrug my shoulders and look at Michael, who is watching it all go down.

“I’m Michael,” he says, and stretches out his hand. He doesn’t bother standing up.

“Don’t look so serious, your friends are just playing silly buggers with you.”

Apart from me, Michael is the only one managing to keep a straight face.

“Who cares, anyway. I’m Sean.”

Long after he has shaken hands with Michael, Sean is still looking seriously confused.

University of Cape Town

## FIFTEEN

Because my uncle is busy dying from cancer we have to leave for Joburg first thing. My uncle's only forty-two. He's had it for quite a long time now, about six months, but even so it's a big shock when you hear the doctor tell your parents he's got less than a month to live. I don't know how they know these things, they just do.

It's all a bit weird because my uncle was such a fit guy and into his sports. Especially tennis, he was mad about tennis. He used to play at least three times a week. If you saw the photos we have of him, which were taken when he was about thirty-five, you would say he was the healthiest guy around. If anyone was going to live forever it was Uncle Jacques. But, like Sean says, life's a bitch and then you die. That's just how it is.

Nobody has much to say as we drive to Joburg because we are all quite morbid about the whole thing. Only Simon, who's too young and dumb to know what's going on, is his usual self. For a change I'm actually quite happy to have him around.

"Why's Uncle Jack been sick for so long?" he says, as we hit the N1 and leave the mielie fields and mine dumps behind.

That's what he calls him, Uncle Jack, because he can't pronounce Jacques, which is my uncle's real name. I pretend not to listen, and keep staring out of the window, trying not to count telephone poles. It's become an addiction, this counting telephone poles; it drives me crazy sometimes. My mom's the only one to take notice of Simon's dumb question.

"Uncle Jack has a very serious illness, Simey. One that takes a long time to get better from."

I know my mom's lying. We all know my uncle is going to die. The doctors said so.

"But he's been sick for ages, I want to know when he's going to get better?"

"I don't know, sweetie, but we must all pray and hope he gets well."

I don't know why my mom doesn't just tell Simon the truth. But I can't be bothered to get involved. My dad's also not bothered because he keeps staring straight ahead at the road. He's hardly said a word since we left home early this morning. Uncle Jacques is his younger brother so he must be feeling it the most. I'm not sure how I would feel if Simon

got cancer, but probably not as bad as my dad is feeling right now. It's different for adults, they seem to get along a lot better with their brothers and sisters.

"Mom, can I sit in front with you and dad?" Simon asks in that baby voice of his, the voice he uses whenever he wants something. My mom first looks across at my dad before answering.

"Sure Simey, as long as you promise not to disturb daddy while he is driving."

Simon looks at me all chuffed, then climbs over the seat and squeezes in next to my mom. Like I said, I can't be bothered. I've got enough to deal with. In between counting telephone poles and wondering who I'm going to invite to my party and whether the whole thing's actually a crap idea, I can't help thinking about my uncle lying on his hospital bed. I wonder what he's thinking this very minute. Everybody knows there's no cure for what he's got so he must know he's going to die, even if the doctors haven't told him.

The 175km sign for Joburg comes up and my mom hands the Tennis Biscuits around. I wonder what it's like to know you are going to die. My uncle must lie awake at night thinking about it, imagining what nothingness feels like. I hope he does believe in life after death, although I don't, because if you believe there's something better waiting you probably feel less scared about dying.

I manage to count sixty-eight telephone poles without stopping. As we go through the first toll gate, Simon blurts out of the blue, "Is Uncle Jack going to die?" Even I'm a bit shocked because I stop counting and turn from the window and look first at my mom and then my dad. My mom doesn't know what to say so I decide to say it for her.

"Are you dumb, or what, Simon? Of course he's going to die. Why do you think we are driving all the way to Joburg? It's not for a Sunday picnic, if that's what you think."

And now everyone in the car starts getting upset, my dad, my mom, me, Simon. My mom starts crying and tries to hide it, but she can't, and then Simon starts bawling as well.

"I don't want Uncle Jack to die, mom."

And now I feel awful that I opened my mouth, but it's too late to do anything about it.

"Sorry, mom," is all I can say, before turning back to the window and counting from scratch again.

My dad heads straight for the hospital as soon as we hit Joburg. He's hardly said a word the whole way, which isn't like him; he usually talks non-stop when we go somewhere in the car, pointing out this and that the whole way. He could have been a tour guide with all the stuff he knows.

When we get to the hospital, which is actually called a hospice, my dad pulls into the parking lot and tells Simon and me to wait in the car.

"I want to come with," whines Simon. "I need to pee."

"I also need to pee, dad," I say, and I'm not lying. My bladder is about to explode; we haven't stopped once the whole way. If it wasn't for the pee I would be happy to stay put and listen to the radio. I have a knot in my guts and I haven't even stepped a foot out of the car.

You can see they've tried to make the place nice for the visitors and patients, with a pretty garden with roses and a friendly guy at the gate, but it's still a place where people go to die. It's not like visiting a hospital.

Because my dad doesn't want Simon peeing in his pants or in the flowerbed next to the car he has no choice but to take us with. So we all climb out and traipse inside, my dad walking way out in front, the rest of us behind, my mom holding Simon's hand. As soon as we're through the revolving doors Simon and me bolt straight for the toilets, which are next to the reception office. I don't know who needs to pee more, Simon or me, but luckily there's a proper toilet and a urinal thing.

"You use that," I tell him.

I go into the toilet and lock the door behind me. I can hardly get my zip open it's so urgent, and I nearly pee all over the seat. I can hear Simon on the other side, pulling up his pants. He still pulls his pants right down whenever he takes a pee, like it's a number two.

"Have you washed your hands?" I say over the top of the wall. Simon never washes his hands, even after a number two. That's how unhygienic he is. But before I have a chance to make sure he has, I hear him pull open the door and disappear out of there.

My parents are speaking to this lady doctor with grey hair in a bun and these old-fashioned glasses with thick black frames that you see in old black-and-white movies. She seems the real serious type, but I suppose you can't exactly start cracking jokes in a place like this. I have to come really close to hear what she's saying because she's almost whispering, as if she doesn't want anybody else to hear.

"Jacques is feeling very little pain," the doctor is telling my parents. "He stopped eating a few days ago. We've been feeding him intravenously." My dad nods his head, but doesn't say anything, so she carries on. "He's been slipping in and out of consciousness for the past few days, though I have to tell you, he's hardly been awake today." My mom and dad nod some more. Simon must know what's going on because he's keeping his mouth closed for a change. "Once the disease spreads to the brain it's just a matter of time."

I'm hearing the doctor's words, but I'm not hearing them at the same time. It's hard to explain.

"May we see him?" my dad asks in a croaky voice.

"Yes, of course." And the lady doctor looks at me and Simon, then back to my dad.

"They should be fine," he says, and turns to us. "Would you like to visit your uncle? You don't have to if you don't want to."

Simon looks up at me and we both nod at the same time. We've come all this way.

We follow the doctor down the passage. My mom reaches for my hand, but I pull it away gently so she doesn't notice. Instead she holds onto Simon and my dad's hand, and I follow behind them. We pass a room with the door half open. I try not look, but it's too late. A young girl is lying on the bed, with these hollow cheeks and tubes coming out of her nose. She must be about my age, maybe even younger; it's hard to tell. A black nurse is standing over her, wiping her head with a facecloth. We pass another open door, but this time I keep my eyes straight ahead.

Right at the end of the passage the doctor with the old-fashioned glasses comes to a halt in front of Room 18.

"Would you mind waiting a moment here?"

She disappears into the room and closes the door behind her, while we stand around like lost farts. The door opens a few seconds later.

“I will leave you alone now, but I am next door if you need me.”

Right there and then I decide my uncle is lucky to have doctors like her looking after him.

My dad leads the way. I can't see much at first because the curtains are drawn and the lights are off. But my eyes soon get used to the dark and I can make out my uncle's bed in the far corner. There's a very soft yellow light glowing above it. The room has a strange sweet smell I've never smelled before. It's not the usual hospital smell.

The walk from the door to the bed feels like miles. Simon and me stick to my mom's back.

“Oh, my God!” my mom whispers.

I step out from behind her. I can hardly recognise Uncle Jacques. It's him but it's not him, the skeleton lying on the bed, covered in paper-thin skin. There's nothing much else. All the muscles have disappeared from his face and he has no hair, and it's as if his head has caved in, like a soccer ball with a puncture. His eyes are closed and his breathing heavy and slow, struggling to get air. My mom now starts crying, very softly, trying not to. Simon stares up at her with big round eyes. My dad says nothing. There's nothing to say. I just stand there, this prickly numbness seeping through my body.

## SIXTEEN

I'm so dead keen to tell Michael about the party after we get back from Joburg, I don't even bother unpacking first.

His dad's car is parked in the driveway when I ride up to the house, which makes a change because he's always away someplace on business. The maid answers the door. She's dressed in a fancy black and white uniform that looks like it's just come out of the wash.

"Is Michael in?"

"He's in his bedroom." She says it in this perfect English. She's from Malawi and doesn't say master or madam like other maids. Her name is Doris or something like that.

Although I've been here a few times already, the maid leads the way down the passage. We pass a sculpture of a naked woman with no arms, which I haven't noticed before. As I said, my mom would go mad for the Dempsey's art. The maid knocks on Michael's door for me.

"A visitor for you, Mikey."

"Who is it?" comes Michael's voice from the other side.

The maid looks at me.

"It's me, Jamie."

If this was Sean or Eddie's house, or anybody else's for that matter, I would just barge in. A long silence follows and the maid and me stare at the door like idiots.

The door opens. Michael looks as if he's just woken up, with his hair all over the place.

"Thanks Doreen."

The maid turns and disappears down the passage. I'm feeling bad I didn't phone.

"Are you just going to stand there?"

"I can come back later if you want."

"Don't worry about it. You're already here so you can stay for a while."

I follow Michael into his bedroom. With its own bathroom and all it's more of a flat than a bedroom. Michael closes the door behind me and points to the chair. His bed is a mess and books are scattered around on the floor, half of them lying open.

"What are you reading?"

"Nothing you would be interested in."

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't know, but you don't strike me as a reader."

"I'm actually quite into books, and my mom and dad are forever reading."

Michael leans over the side of the bed and slides a book across the carpet.

"What do you think of Nietzsche?"

"The name sounds familiar. What else did he write, besides this one?"

Michael slides another book across to me.

"How about Hermann Hesse then?"

"Herman who?"

"Never mind. Conrad? You must know Joseph Conrad?"

"I know him! Didn't he also write *Heart of Darkness* or something like that?"

"Yes, something like that," says Michael, and picks up another of his books and starts paging through it. "So, what have you been up to?"

"Nothing much. We just got back from Joburg.

"Joburg? What were you doing there?"

"We went to visit my uncle. He's got cancer."

"That couldn't have been much fun."

"You're right, it wasn't."

"And besides visiting the sick?" says Michael, still paging through the book, like he's looking for something important.

"Nothing really. Except... except that I'm organising a party."

"A party?"

"Yes, a party. I'm turning sixteen next Saturday."

"I didn't know you were fifteen."

"Why, how old did you think I was?"

“I don’t know,” says Michael. “I thought more like fourteen. Anyway, what are you planning for the big occasion?”

So I start telling Michael about our plans, about how we are going to have the party in our garage and that Sean’s sorting out the music and the lights, and Eddie’s getting his brother to buy us a few cases of beer, and we’re going to invite a whole bunch of people, including some hot girls.

“Why are you smiling?”

“Nothing. Carry on.”

“That’s it, I’m finished. So what do you think?”

“In a garage, Jamie? You are having your party in a garage?”

“Ja, what’s wrong with that?”

“Each to their own, I guess. At least now I know where the word garage-party comes from. Nothing personal, but I don’t know if I would celebrate my sixteenth in a garage. Surely you can come up with something a little more ambitious than that?”

“Like what?”

I can feel my ears burning. Michael puts his book down and folds his pillow in half and leans back against it. Maybe Michael is right. Maybe it is a dumb idea.

“Jesus, why didn’t I think of it before?” Michael blurts.

“What?”

“I’m such a selfish bastard, Jamie.”

“I don’t know what you’re on about.”

“I mean, it’s your big one-six coming up and here I am giving you a hard time.”

“So, what are you saying? You saying you’re keen to come?”

“Of course I’m keen to come. Do you really think I wouldn’t be there for you, Jamie?”

“Well, I thought...”

Michael is now sitting upright and his blue eyes are shining.

“Seriously, who do you think I am, Jamie? How can I not be at your party? After all, we are best buddies.”

“I just thought maybe you weren’t so keen on the idea...”

“I am right, aren’t I? We are best buddies?”

“Ja, of course.”

“Good. Because then I’m there all the way for you. In fact, not only am I going to be at your party, I’ve decided something else, too?”

“What’s that?”

“There’s no way you’re going to celebrate your sixteenth in some greasy garage.”

“Why, where are we going to have it?”

“Right here.”

I’m still revved up when I arrive back at our house. It’s going to be brilliant because Michael has some great ideas from all the parties he’s been to in Joburg. And it’s true what he says about us living in the Dark Ages.

As I come up the driveway I spot Sean and Simon on the front lawn, messing around with my soccer ball. Sean is dribbling the ball around Simon, acting the idiot, Simon chasing him, laughing hysterically. Sean is seven years older than my brother and he’s pretending he’s having a good time. Sean sees me and collapses in a heap. Simon takes the ball and dribbles it away and boots it between Sean’s slops, which they’ve been using for goalposts.

“Nice one, Simey!” Sean shouts. Simon sprints around the garden, thinking he’s Maradona or something. I don’t know what Sean sees in Simon; it’s quite irritating the way the two of them carry on sometimes.

“Hey, Jamie, where’ve you been?” says Sean, panting like a dog. “I thought we were supposed to meet up?”

“Sorry, I forgot.”

Simon sits himself down on the ball and watches us from a few feet away.

“Okay Simon, you can go now.”

“Leave him alone,” says Sean. “You can stay if you want, Simon. You were here first.”

Sean walks over to his haversack, which is lying on the garden table, and starts pulling at the straps.

“I organised some cool music we can use for our party.”

He lifts out a Checkers packet stuffed with tapes and carries it over to me. I’m trying to ignore Simon, who is still watching us, as if he’s actually interested.

“There’s been a change of plan, Sean.”

“A change of plan? Like how?”

“Well, it’s just that Michael and me decided to have the party at his house instead. That’s where I’ve just come from. And that’s why I forgot about you coming here.”

“Slow down. You’re speaking gobblygook.”

Simon giggles and I give him a look and he shuts up.

“Let me get this right. Are you telling me we must forget everything we’ve done so far because you’ve now decided to have the party someplace else?”

“I’m not saying that.” Or maybe I am saying that. I don’t know what I’m saying. “All I’m telling you is that Michael came up with this brilliant idea to have a pool party at his house instead. He said he’ll help us organise the whole thing. I promise you, Sean, if you saw this place you would also think it’s a much better plan.”

But Sean doesn’t let me know what he thinks; instead he turns his back to me and stares at Simon, who by this time is bored with our conversation and is dribbling the ball again and acting his usual clown self.

“You want to know what I think? says Sean, his back still to me.

“Of course, I do. Why would I have bothered to tell you in the first place?”

“You can have your party wherever the hell you want to, Jamie.”

Before I can ask what he means by that, Sean is on his feet and chasing after Simon.

## SEVENTEEN

It sounds weird, but for the rest of the afternoon I'm in the mood to hang out at home. To be honest, it makes a change from having to be somewhere different every minute of the day. And for once it's just me and my mom, which also makes a nice change.

While I've been busy working through the gears of the La-Z-Boy, my mom's been lying on the couch, reading a book thicker than a loaf of government special. From what I can make out on the back cover it's about a Jewish family from Poland who got wiped out in the war. Only one daughter survived and she was the one who wrote the book. It's one of those depressing stories that my mom loves.

But my mom's not really concentrating; every now and then she looks up and stares at nothing. I pretend not to notice, but I know what she's thinking. She's taken out the photo albums again – that's how I know.

Thanks to my dad we have stacks of albums. He reckons photos help you remember and give you a stronger sense of who you are. Like, if you know where you come from, you know yourself and the future better, that type of thing. He will go totally overboard sometimes, taking photos of everything he sees. Even if my mom bakes a fancy cake my dad will snap away at it. He must have been Japanese in his past life.

I'm like my mom. Every couple of months I also have to haul the albums out the drawer. I can't help myself, it's the same as a craving for *slap* chips or a greasy cheese burger from the Vegas.

I've been looking at these photos of my gran; it's hard to imagine she was once young. My gran died about three years ago. Also from cancer, so it must run in the family, which means I might get it one day. My grandfather was also Japanese in his past life because there are heaps of photos of my gran. I don't want to sound weird and all, but my gran was really beautiful and my grandfather quite a handsome guy. My favourite is this ancient black and white photo of them in Paris, sitting on the back of a park bench, with the Eiffel Tower behind – Eddie actually believed me when I told him the Eiffel Tower is in Pretoria. My gran has her arms around my grandfather; you've never seen two people looking so happy together. You would swear they were on honeymoon or something. But

they weren't because they must have been at least forty when the photo was taken. It's just that they were so into each other that they could look like this after all those years together. I don't care what anybody says, it's a great photo, even though it makes me bit depressed every time I look at it.

"Would you like me to pass you another album?" my mom says. Just the way she says it I get the feeling she's been watching me all this time.

"No, I'm fine."

"Is that the one with gran and grandpa on holiday in Europe?" It's also her favourite.

"Ja."

My mom leaves it at that. That's what I like about her. She can tell when I'm not in the mood for chit-chat. She's definitely not pushy like Gavin's mom, who can be a total bulldog.

After a few pages the photos are just of my gran. And she's looking nothing like that time in Paris. That's how quick things change. That's how quick you get old. After a few pages she looks like any other grannie you see in the street. Especially if they get their hair done at Rochelles. When old people walk out of Rochelle's they look like they've popped out a sausage machine. I'm not even a trained hairdresser and I could do a better job.

Only when you look closer at these photos of my gran – there's one of her reading to my sister in hospital, and one of her holding Simon when he was still in nappies, and another one of her in a big hat watching my uncle play tennis at the country club in Joburg – only then you know it's the same person. Even if she was a hundred years old the eyes would be identical to those in the photo of her with my grandfather in front of the Eiffel Tower.

Come to think of it now, I really miss my gran. Not to mention my gramps and Uncle Jacques. And he's not even dead yet.

I look up to catch my mom staring out the window again. I know I should ask what she's thinking about, but I don't bother. Like I said, I know the answer already. I look at my watch. Shit! I said I would visit Michael so we can talk about the party. I throw the clutch, gear the La-Z-Boy down to first, and jerk forward to Upright.

"I'm sorry, mom, but I have to go."

My mom says it's fine, I must have a good time and all that. I don't know why, but I actually feel bad leaving her alone with her depressing book and all these photos to remind her of things she maybe shouldn't be reminded of.

University of Cape Town

## EIGHTEEN

“Don’t worry about it, Jamie, you get people like that in the world. They just want to drag you down.”

“Sean’s not like that. If you got to know him you would see he’s a really loyal guy. That’s why I don’t get it.”

To be honest I’ve been feeling a bit bad for Sean, but pissed off with him at the same time. You would swear it’s his party I’m organising. Michael rolls his eyes to the ceiling, like he’s heard it all from me before.

“No, seriously, Michael. Sean is one of those guys who would stand with you to the bitter end. Like, if you were fighting on the border, he’s the guy you want in the bush next to you.”

“Come on, get real,” laughs Michael. “If he can’t help you with the smallest thing like a pathetic birthday party, do you really think he’s going to be there when you actually need him?”

The more Michael talks, the more confused I get. And when I’m confused my head throbs, as if there’s more blood going in than blood coming out.

“Trust me, Jamie, there’s plenty more where Sean came from. But if you want to delude yourself that’s your choice.”

“Maybe you’re right, but let’s talk about something else.”

I carry on staring out the window, at the rain whipping against the glass like some wild dog trying to get at us. It hasn’t bucketed down like this in ages and the sky’s been flickering non-stop. But at least it’s better than living in a dust bowl and chewing sand. I’m not exaggerating; it’s been so bad this time we couldn’t see the sun because the sky was so brown with mielie-field dust.

“I bet you never got storms like this in America.”

“You make it sound as if I’m missing out. I’ll tell you one thing, Jamie. This is definitely the arse end of the world.”

“You guys are also living here now.”

“Not for long if I’ve got anything to do with it. I still can’t believe my dad took on this consulting job.”

“It’s not so bad.”

“It’s worse than bad. You just haven’t experienced anything else to know better.” Michael cuts the pack of cards. He’s been cutting and shuffling them for the last hour. We’ve hardly even spoken about the party. “How about a game of poker?”

“You mean like gambling poker?”

“Yes, I mean like gambling poker.”

“I don’t have any money with me.”

“I’ll lend you some.”

“What if I lose?”

“And I thought Elephant Man was negative! What if you win? Have you thought of that?”

“I’ve never won a thing in my life. Not even a church raffle. You shouldn’t call him that name.”

“Whatever. So, are you keen to play?”

“Why don’t we play for matches so we don’t owe each other afterwards?”

“Boring! There’s no point if you don’t play poker for money. Christ, do you want to have some fun or don’t you?” Before I know it Michael has dealt out five cards each.

“Don’t turn your cards over yet.” He digs around in the drawer of his desk and finds a box of matches, which he empties onto the floor and splits into two heaps. “Okay, we will start with a rand a match. Even your friend Eddie could afford that.”

“But that’s more than fifty rand. If I lose there’s no ways I’ll be able to pay you back.”

“Then you had better make sure you win. Not so? Relax Jamie, it’s only a game.”

I can’t believe it, but I’m on a winning streak from word go. I win the first hand, with three Jacks, then the second with two Tens and two Kings. Michael must have total duds because he folds both times before I get to see his cards. In no time I’m up twelve rand and cruising on a high. Michael deals another hand.

I make a big show and dance of lifting my cards one by one. “Yeah, am I feeling lucky, or what!”

“You’re slaughtering me, Jamie. You must have played this before?”

“I swear I haven’t, Michael. Sorry, but you’re the one who wanted to play for real money. And you’re right, it’s much more fun playing for cash.”

I turn over my last card and break into an instant sweat.

“Shit.”

“What?” says Michael, looking up from his hand. I can tell he doesn’t look too chuffed.

“Nothing. You start.”

“Okay, what the hell,” he says. “I must as well throw caution to the wind. I’ll open with five matches.”

“You sure?”

“Why not? I might as well go down in a blaze of glory.”

“If that’s the way you want it, Mikey boy. I will equal your five and raise you the same again.”

My hands are clammy and I can feel Michael’s eyes on me, searching for cracks. But there aren’t any.

“I’m impressed, Jamie. You’re braver than I thought. Okay, how about I equal your ten and raise you by another ten?”

I didn’t expect him to do that. Suddenly I’m not so confident anymore. But I’m dead-certain he’s bullshitting. I can see it in the way he’s pretending to be calm.

“Shit, Michael, that’s a heap of money.”

“You’re the one who wanted to raise the stakes, Jamie.”

“Ja, but are you sure you can afford it?”

“I think I’ll manage.”

“Okay, if that’s the way you want it, I’ll match your ten and see you.”

“Is that it? I thought you would push the envelope a bit further. You show your cards first.”

“It’s good you’re sitting down. You sure you’re ready for this?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be. Let’s see them, Jamie Robinson.”

Acting the poker pro I am, I turn my cards over one by one. “Nine, Nine, Ace... And another Ace.” I look across at Michael. “You hundred percent sure you want to see my last card?”

“Come on, Jamie, you’re torturing me.”

“Get a load of that!” I shout, and slap down the Ace of Spades.

“Fuck!” says Michael, throwing his cards down. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“I swear, I knew you were bullshitting the whole time!” I’m dancing up and down, chuffed as anything. “Send those matches my way, if you don’t mind.”

As I reach over to help myself to the heap in the middle, Michael grabs hold of my wrist.

“What?”

“Not so fast cowboy. You haven’t seen my cards yet.”

“Okay, whatever. Show them to me.”

Michael turns his cards over, imitating me. “Queen, Queen, Queen, Five of Clubs.”

“Big deal. And the last one?”

“Are you hundred percent sure you want to see it? Your face is looking seriously anxious?”

“Yes, I want to see it. Show me.”

Michael flicks the card across the floor. It lands face down. I reach across and turn it over. Queen.

“What are you going to do now?” asks Michael.

“I’m going to have to pay you back, I suppose.”

“But you don’t have the money.”

“I’ll make a plan.”

“You want another loan?”

“And lose it all again?”

I won’t lie, I’ve been waiting for Michael to come out and say, forget it, it was just a game, I don’t need to pay him back. But he hasn’t.

“I’ve got an idea.”

“What’s your idea?”

“Let’s play another round, but this time you can use clothes instead of money.”

“That sounds like strip poker.”

“Call it what you want. And tell you what. I’ll equal every item of clothing with five matches. How does that sound?”

“And if I lose?”

“All you lose are your clothes. How bad is that? But if you win, think about it, you’ll get your money back.”

“It’s better than nothing, I suppose. Okay, let’s play.”

Half an hour later the rain is still lashing against the window and I’m sitting in my jocks. Michael holds out the pack of cards.

“Your turn to deal.”

“There’s no ways I’m going starkers, Michael.”

“But what if you win?”

“Oh ja. What if I win? How many times have I heard that today? I told you I never win anything.”

Michael tosses the pack of cards to the side of the bed.

“If that’s the way you want it. Which I suppose means you will just have to pay me back.”

“Like I said, Michael, I’ll make a plan.”

“But what if I need the money urgently, Jamie?”

“What’s urgently?”

“Let say... by tomorrow, for instance.”

“You know I can’t pay you back by tomorrow.”

I reach for my jeans because I’m starting to feel cold sitting in my jocks, with the whole world watching me.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting dressed.”

As I’m sorting out my clothes, I can feel Michael’s eyes on me.

“Maybe you can pay me back in some other way.”

“Like what, for example?”

“I don’t know. But I’m sure I can think of something.”

I start pulling on my jeans, hopping about the room on one foot. Michael sticks out his hand for me to hold onto for balance.

“Thanks.”

Before I know what’s happening I’m flat on my back. With Michael on top of me. For a few seconds I lie there doing nothing. I must be in shock. Apart from that night on the cricket field the most we’ve ever done is shake hands. I can’t move. Michael has my arms pinned behind my head. His face is so close I can smell his coffee breath and Calvin Klein aftershave and his own smell under that. He’s breathing hard and his mouth is half-open and I can see where his teeth meet his gums. I don’t know why I notice all this, I just do.

“So, what are you going to do now?” Michael says.

“What do you want me to do?” I say. His full body weight is on me and I can hardly get air. I relax for a moment, then give it all I’ve got. It doesn’t help, he’s got me in a vice grip.

“You’ll have to give much more than that, James.”

“Okay, I give up.”

“You don’t think it’s going to be as easy as that, do you? Say, please.”

“Please.”

“Please, sir, would you mind getting off me?”

“Please, sir, would you mind getting off me? You happy now?”

“Not yet. Please, sir, I would be truly grateful if you removed yourself from me.”

“Come on, Michael, it’s not funny.” I’m starting to feel desperate.

“I want to hear it.”

Just to make him happy I say it, but I mess up the words, and he makes me say it again, twice, until I get it right.

“Please, sir, I would be truly grateful if you removed yourself from me.”

“That’s more like it.” Michael pats my cheek, then rolls off me and stands up. He walks to the window and stares out at the rain. “Looks like it’s letting up.” I don’t say anything. He turns around. “Come on, Jamie, don’t be so serious. We were just having some fun.”

“If you say so.”

“And seriously, you don’t have to pay me back.”

“I’m going to pay you back.”

Michael sticks his hand out.

“Promise me you’re still my buddy and we’ll pretend you never owed me a cent.”

I hesitate. I don’t want to ask my mom or dad for money.

“Come on, lighten up, Jamie. Best buddies?”

I give Michael my hand.

“Best buddies,” I say.

University of Cape Town

## NINETEEN

It turns out to be a seriously bad day. The moment I walk into the house and the flyscreen slams behind me and my mom doesn't say anything I know something has happened. My mom and dad are sitting on the couch, with Simon squeezed between them, talking in soft voices. The photo albums are still lying around the place.

You don't talk in soft voices unless you are in a library or something is wrong. When my dad and mom spot me standing at the doorway they look up at me with long faces.

"What's the matter?"

"Come sit down, Jamie."

"I've been sitting down all day. It's Uncle Jacques, isn't it?"

My mom nods her head. "He passed away this afternoon."

"Oh," I say, and take a deep breath and flop down on my dad's chair. I've been expecting it, but hearing my mom say it is a shock.

"When did it happen?" I ask after a while.

"About an hour ago. The hospice phoned us," my mom says. An hour ago I was about to lose my jocks in Michael's bedroom.

I look at my dad. His eyes are red. I've never seen my dad cry. And I don't know if I could handle it if he started crying now. Next to him my mom blows her nose into a tissue. I can handle my mom crying. Her job is to cry for the rest of us.

"When's the funeral?" I ask.

My dad clears his throat. "It will be held on Saturday." He's totally cut up because he has to squeeze the words out.

"Are we going to Uncle Jack's funeral?" asks Simon, looking up at my mom while he weaves his fingers in and out of hers.

"Yes, sweetie, we will all be going."

"I don't know if I want to go," I say. I'm not big into funerals. Not that I'm an expert or anything; the only funeral I've been to was my little sister's. Which I can hardly remember. But what I remember I didn't like.

"It's your choice, Jamie," says my dad. "You don't have to go if you don't want to."

But when he says it like this, I suddenly want to go. It doesn't seem right not to.

I didn't realise my Uncle Jacques knew so many people because there's a crowd at the funeral, including some posh-looking types. And the funeral service, which is held in a stone church in Hillbrow, isn't as bad as I imagined. There's a really good black choir who knows how to hold a tune and the priest doesn't go on and on like Father Dominic does sometimes, and near the end some friends of my uncle walk up to the front and say some really nice things about him. And not in a way that blows him up into something he wasn't; the way they describe him is the way I know him. My dad also gets up to say a few words, but he's so choked up he can hardly get past the first sentence. Every few seconds he has to stop and blow into his hanky and before you know it half the church is hauling out their hankies and doing the same. It's all pretty sad and emotional.

After the church service we follow the black Merc to the graveyard, which ends up being miles away. My dad has to jump three red robots to keep up because he doesn't know the directions to the graveyard, and we've got this convoy on our tail who thinks he does. We are so busy keeping up with the Merc it takes our mind off things for a bit.

While we stand around at the graveyard, waiting for everyone to arrive and the guys from AVBOB to organise themselves, a couple of people walk up to my parents and get chatting. Except for a few distant relatives I don't recognize any of them; my uncle never married and he was my dad's only brother, so I don't have much in the way of cousins. My mom hasn't let go of my dad's hand since we climbed out the car and she does most of the talking. Every now and then she points to Simon and me standing in the shade of this jacaranda tree, but luckily nobody comes over to speak to us. Right now I'm really not in the mood for small talk.

For once I don't mind looking after Simon. He looks like a magician's assistant, dressed in his black jacket that's way too big for him and his black hair slicked back. I can't exactly talk, what with the brown suit I wore for my confirmation and my black school shoes and the white socks I borrowed from my dad because I forgot my socks at home. It's a good thing we don't know anyone.

"Are they going to use the coffin again when they've finished burying Uncle Jack?" asks Simon.

“Of course not, dummie. It’s going to stay in the ground until the worms eat it.”

“Not even the gold handles? Won’t they use those again?”

I don’t bother answering. It’s a dumb question, but part of me thinks maybe Simon has a point. I reckon if my uncle had the choice he would have gone for a much cheaper coffin. Maybe one of those pine ones with the rope handles. That’s the type of guy he was.

Eventually everybody is ready and the priest begins to read from his Bible. The world goes into slow motion as my dad and three big guys in black suits shift my uncle’s coffin into position. My dad steps right to the edge of the grave as the coffin is lowered into the hole and swallowed up by the earth. The priest reads some more from his Bible. The birds in the jacaranda carry on above our heads as if it’s just another day. My mom steps forward and holds onto my dad’s arm. My dad throws a fistful of sand into the hole. Other people do the same. There’s the loud thud of a stone hitting the coffin lid.

I bite my lip; it doesn’t help because the tears keep coming. I turn and face the other way because there’s no way I want Simon to see me like this. I also want to be at the hole with everyone else, throwing red Joburg sand into my uncle’s grave. But I stay put, with Simey under the jacaranda tree, biting my lip until I taste the blood.

## TWENTY

It takes me a couple of seconds to work out where I am. My heart is beating out of control and the sheets are soaking wet and everything is crazy and back to front and upside down. But once I work out I'm in Room 104 of the Jacaranda Hotel and it's 11:48 and I'm forty-three years old, not sixteen, my heart slows down and I breathe in and out deeply and slowly pull myself together. As I've learnt to do a hundred times before.

I get up and switch the TV on, making first sure the sound is off. I pour myself a glass of water from the basin in the bathroom, then climb back into the bed. Some people count sheep to help them sleep, I stare at the TV. It's the only thing that works for me.

There's nothing much to watch, but what can you expect when you only have two channels to choose from; the Jacaranda should do themselves a favour and invest in DSTV. I flick back and forth between eTV, which is wall-to-wall adverts, and SABC 1, which has dug up some old Apartheid documentary with black and white shots of cops and blacks running amok in the townships and a hall packed with people bawling their eyes out. All this pussyfooting and trying to be civilised about the past – they should have seized the moment and done it Africa-style when they had the chance.

It's the same every time; these crazy dreams and the wet sheets. I tried to explain it to Jane because she's the one who has to put up with it. I said try imagine reality catching you off-guard, or a glass shattering into a thousand bits and you have to piece together again. Sometimes it takes days. Jane reckons I should see a shrink, but like I told her, I don't do shrinks.

I carry on staring at the TV. Who doesn't have a skeleton in their cupboard, Mr Tutu? Maybe it would be better for everyone if we all just kept them there. That way, no misunderstandings. Why they even bothered with this TRC thing – there must be a million others out there who haven't owned up to the past. Most of them I bet about my age, sitting in front of their TV with a Blackie in one hand and the remote in the other, their cute kids falling asleep on the couch next to them, their peroxided wives cleaning up in the kitchen. But don't worry, Mr Tutu, they aren't really enjoying themselves; it only looks that way because they're pretending. Pretending to everyone, even their own wives.

Not that their wives really want to know about it. Day after day, year after year they carry on like nothing's happened. They clock in at work, they watch their rugby on the weekend, they stand around the braai with their mates, their boeps touching the Weber. Pretending past is past.

University of Cape Town

## TWENTY-ONE

“Whoever wins the toss gets to choose, okay?”

“It’s not fair, you always win,” whines Simon. He’s whinier than usual today.

“Nonsense. What do you want, heads or tails?”

Simon says tails. I toss the ten-cent coin. It comes up heads.

“I’ll take dad’s gun.”

“You always get his gun.”

“That’s not true. I won it fair and square. Jesus, if you carry on like this, mom’s going to be home before we’ve even started. Look, I don’t care, you can have dad’s gun, but then I get Bravo.”

Before Simon can argue further I take my gun and empty a handful of pellets into my pocket and jog to the other side of the garden. Bravo Camp runs all the way along the wall between us and the Greek neighbours. The bushes in front have grown so thick we’ve got this tunnel running from one end to the other, which you can leopard-crawl without being spotted. It’s brilliant.

I set up base under the low tree at the top end of the tunnel; it’s also camouflaged by bush. I hang my dad’s birdwatching binocs on the branch, then arrange my pellets in a neat row next to the wall. The butterflies are already getting to work.

“Are you ready, Simon?” I shout.

Simon doesn’t answer so I push the bush to one side and stick my binocs through the gap. You never know with Simon, it might be an ambush. But he’s still farting around at Caprivi. His anorak is zipped to his neck and he’s battling with the strap of his plastic bike helmet. He must be sweating like a pig because I’m lying in the shade and I’m already hot.

It’s a bad thing to say, but ever since the funeral a black cloud has been lifting from our house. It feels like we are all recovering from a sickness we didn’t know we had in the first place. One of those illnesses you only realise you’ve had when you start getting better. Even my dad is acting lighter, now that it’s behind us. Or he’s just doing it for our sakes.

“Ready or not,” I shout.

I crawl a few meters along the tunnel and move into sniper position, sticking the barrel of the pellet gun through the bush. Not even a Swapo terr would spot me. I have the garden shed and upturned wheelbarrow in my sights, but there’s no sign of Simon. I can’t tell if he’s behind the wheelbarrow. There’s only one way to find out. I take aim and pull the trigger. Twang! The pellet slams into the wheelbarrow’s belly.

“Hey, I’m not ready yet!” Simon yells.

“Too bad!” I reload and wait for the enemy to show himself. The seconds tick by. I start feeling restless. Simon’s just sitting there doing nothing. “Are you asleep or what?” I shout.

Still nothing. I’m about to tell Simon to get a move on when I spot a foot poking out the side. The adrenaline starts pumping big time, but I stay calm. You have to be calm in battle because if you panic you mess up. That’s what Luke says. I shift my sights and then gently-gently squeeze the trigger. For a moment I think I’ve missed because nothing happens. But then the foot disappears and the scream of a pig being slaughtered fills the sky.

“Yes!”

I stand up and sprint across to Caprivi to inspect the damage. Simon’s rolling around the grass and rubbing his ankle and bawling his eyes out all at the same time. The Swapo terr is dying a slow death so I pull out my fishing knife and get ready to slash his throat. I swear, there’s nothing like a kill to get the adrenaline pumping.

Simon calms down, but carries on rubbing his ankle.

“How was that for bulls-eye, hey Simon? You’ve got to admit that was good.”

“I don’t want to play this game anymore,” he says, and starts bawling again.

By now I’m feeling sorry for him. I sit down on the grass next to him.

“Lemme see.”

But he won’t let me touch his leg.

“Come on, let me rub it for you, Simey. It will make it feel better.”

“No, I don’t want you to. I don’t want to play this game ever again.”

“I don’t want to play this game ever again.”

Simon and me look up. It's Michael, standing few feet away, watching us with this smirk on his face.

"I don't want to play this game ever, ever again," he says again, in this squeaky baby voice.

"How long have you been here?" I say.

Michael walks over to us.

"Long enough. Come on, show us your injuries," he says to Simon. "Maybe we need to call a medic?"

Michael winks at me and I sort of wink back.

"Come Simon, why don't you show us," I say.

Simon looks at Michael, then at me. He rolls down his sock. There's a blue bruise the size of a five-cent piece.

"Christ, the way you were carrying on I thought we would have to amputate your leg," says Michael.

I keep staring at the bruise. Michael plonks himself down on the grass next to us.

"What's this game you were playing?"

"Ag, we were just messing around," I say.

"You call trying to kill your brother messing around?"

"I wasn't trying to kill him. These pellet guns couldn't kill a fly..."

"What's it like having a brother who wants to kill you, Simon?"

Simon looks up from the ground.

"Not nice."

"I wasn't trying to kill him. Simon and me always mess around..."

"I bet you would like to get your own back, wouldn't you Simon?"

"I suppose so."

Michael reaches into his pocket and hands Simon a pack of Beechies. It hasn't been opened.

"Help yourself. It's the new grape flavour."

"Thanks."

Michael and me watch Simon tear open the wrapper and stuff a Beechie into his mouth. He takes another one for later.

“Maybe you want to play another game, Simon?” says Michael.

“Like what?”

“How about hide-and-seek? I bet you like hide-and-seek?”

“Yes.”

“But this hide-and-seek is more exciting.”

“Like, how more exciting?”

“Much, much more exciting.”

After Michael has explained the rules of his new game and he’s given Simon two more Beechies, Simon is keen. Michael decides Simon can go first, as if it’s a big treat. But I’m not so sure.

“Okay, buddy, you’ve got two minutes,” says Michael. “If I was you I would make a move, unless you want to get slaughtered by the hunters.”

There’s a flash of panic across Simon’s face and now he doesn’t look so chuffed anymore with the idea.

“You better get going, Simon,” I say.

“Okay, I’m going,” he says, and wings away down the side of the house. Michael sets his stopwatch. There’s a big grin on his face.

“This is so childish. But what the hell, it should be fun. Just to be fair we’ll give your brother an extra minute.”

According to the rules of the game we’ve got ten minutes to hunt the prey. If we don’t catch him by then, the hunters must let him go.

“Okay, time’s up for your brother,” says Michael, and jumps to his feet. “Let’s go!”

Like a burning cigarette tossed into a dry veld, the day explodes into life. Simon isn’t hiding in any of the obvious places like I thought he would. I first check behind, and under, and in the caravan, but he’s not there. I stand on Michael’s shoulders and check the garage roof. We search the long grass running down the side of the garage. We race into the house, checking behind the doors, in all the cupboards and under the beds.

Michael and me stop to catch our breath.

“Shit, he’s taking this bloody seriously!” Michael says, breathing hard from excitement and the running around. “Seven minutes are already up. If he knows what’s good for him, he better not be hiding outside the property.”

“I’m sure he isn’t.” According to Michael’s rules leaving the property is punishable by death. “Simon’s not that dumb.”

“Okay, let’s not give up yet, he must be here somewhere. Jamie, you check the back garden again, and I’ll carry on searching the house.”

Michael and me split up. Already I’m anxious we won’t find Simon and it will be my turn next. I check my watch for the tenth time. Less than two minutes to go. I search the garden shed, this time turning the boxes and all the crap upside down in case Simon is hiding underneath. I race around under the fruit trees and stare hard into the branches. Only a minute left. I’m about to give up when there’s an excited yelp from the house.

“I’ve got him, Jamie!”

I don’t need any encouragement. I’m back in the house like a shot. The squealing is coming from the laundry room.

Michael’s got Simon with his arm twisted up behind his back. I’m so excited I hardly notice Simon’s watery eyes.

“Where did you find him?” I’m still panting I’m so out of breath.

“In the laundry basket, under your mom’s panties and bras! Can you fucking believe it?”

Simon is struggling to free himself from Michael’s grip, but Michael’s not messing around.

“What do you think we should do with him?” Michael doesn’t wait for me to answer. “What did they do with perverts in the old days?”

Simon’s face is looking scared and he’s starting to snivel.

“Maybe we should let him go, Michael.”

“They burnt them at the stake, that’s what they did to perverts like you.”

By now I have this nervous giggle, a mixture of nervousness and excitement. But Michael’s on a roll, he’s a runaway train. Simon starts bawling.

“Seriously, Michael, I think we should let him go.”

Michael lets go his grip and pushes Simon away from him. Simon flops to the ground.

“For fuck’s sake. What’s wrong with you? It’s only a game.” Michael turns to me.  
“Come Jamie, let’s get out of here.”

“It’s only a game, Simon,” I say to him.

As I follow Michael out the kitchen door, I turn to check if my brother is okay. He hasn’t moved or said a word. He’s just sitting there on the heap of dirty laundry, staring at the ground in front of him.

University of Cape Town

## TWENTY-TWO

Sean is like Michael. When he gets an idea into his head, there's no stopping him.

"Seriously, we don't need to do this, Sean."

"It's too late, he knows I'm coming. Tony told him. Don't look so worried, we'll be out of there in a flash."

"It was just an idea."

"You can wait outside if you want."

"What for?"

"I dunno. In case things turn nasty."

"Funny. I'm coming with you, but you can do all the talking."

I can't believe we're actually going through with this because Greg Romano gives me the creeps. There's something evil about him. And his brother, Tony, who's at school with us, is going to end up just like him. It's in the genes.

The Romanos live in this tiny flat above the Majestic, which stopped showing films years ago after someone left a burning stompie behind. I've only been in their flat once and that was when Greg was still in the army. The place is a chicken coop, hardly big enough to kill a cat. I swear, that's what they say Greg does. He kills cats.

Their father, Mr Romano, owns a radio repair shop near the mine compound, also a coop crammed with wire, old switches and broken radios. I don't know how he ever finds anything. Most of Mr Romano's customers are blacks from the compound who hardly speak a word of English, never mind Italian. He must rip them off blind. Mr Romano's forever sitting behind this mountain of junk in his shop, with a soldering iron in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He smokes Lexington. "For after action satisfaction, ahhh, Lexington." After that ad came out everyone started smoking Lexington.

"You still not coming with us to Rocky tonight?" says Sean, as we cross the veld to the Romano's flat.

"I already told you, Michael wants us to do something together."

"Ja, you told me, but I thought maybe you had changed your mind."

“You know I want to come more than anything, Sean, but I can’t exactly tell him I’ve got something better to do.”

“You didn’t have that problem before. Anyway, it’s your loss.”

I stick to Sean’s back as we climb the rusty metal stairs to the flat. When we get to the door Sean bangs on it really hard, which sends my heart racing. He points to a black rubbish bag on the ground and pinches his nose. There’s a stench coming from it, like a cat has peed on it or something. More likely, there’s something dead in it. Like Greg’s latest victim. That’s how jittery I am.

The door unlocks on the other side and a second later Greg Romano is standing in front of us in a white cut-off t-shirt.

“Hey, how you guys keeping?” he says with this big smile, like we are long lost buddies. I’ve never seen him so close up. He has a gap between his front teeth and a scar running next to his eye. His hair is shiny and slicked back.

“We are good,” says Sean, also acting like he’s bumped into a long lost friend. Greg Romano shakes Sean’s hand and slaps him on the shoulder. He ignores me.

“Come in guys, is it just the two of you?” he says and looks past us down the stairs. It’s something out of Miami Vice.

“Ja, just the two of us,” says Sean.

Greg Romano locks the door behind us and starts singing that song, *Just the Two of Us*, as we follow him down the passage into the lounge. To be honest, he doesn’t have a bad voice. The lounge is a mess. All this electronic stuff from his dad’s shop is everywhere, dirty plates are on the table and the TV is on full blast. The Romano’s cat is lying on the couch licking itself. For a threatened species it actually looks quite healthy.

“Make yourself at home, guys,” he says and lifts the cat off the couch.

Sean and me sit next to each other. Greg stays standing. He must work out because his arms are ripped.

“So gentlemen, my boet tells me you wish to make a small purchase.”

Sean nods and looks at me, so I also nod.

“Fantastic.”

He gives us this evil smile, which sends my heart racing again. All I want to do is get the hell out before the cops break down the door. But Greg insists on dragging the whole the thing out.

“Let me tell you guys something. I don’t deal in crap. Because if that’s what you want you can go buy it from the munts on the mine. You gentlemen with me?”

Sean and me both nod. I don’t know why he is telling us this. Greg stares at us for a bit, then reaches into his back pocket and takes out a bank envelope half filled with brown stuff that looks like tea leaves. He tosses it on the coffee table in front of Sean, next to a plate smeared with dried scrambled egg and a white bread crust.

“Get a whiff of that, guys. It’s top drawer.”

You would swear Sean does this everyday because he opens the envelope and takes a sniff and nods his head up and down like he’s impressed. He passes it to me next and I do the same. It smells like wet leaves on a compost heap. I nod my head like I’m also seriously impressed. I hand the envelope back to Sean.

“How much do you want for it, Greg?” he says.

Greg goes down on his haunches so that his face is about two inches from ours.

“Because you’re friends with my boet, let’s say fifteen for the full contents. Trust me, you’re getting a bargain.”

Sean scratches his chin. “Fifteen? Hell Greg, I only have ten on me. I thought that would be enough.”

“Ten? I told you, if you want crap you must go to the compound.” Greg flashes me his evil grin. “What about you?”

“I don’t have any money on me.”

“Sorry Greg, but I thought that’s what the price would be,” says Sean.

I can’t believe what I’m hearing because I know Sean’s got at least twenty rand in his back pocket, but I just keep my mouth shut, praying he will give Greg the money so we can get out of here before he decides to cut our throats. You never know with guys who torture animals for fun. Greg stands up and I’m thinking this is it, he’s going to pull a knife on us.

“Okay, gentlemen. I’ll give it to you for ten, but next time I’m not so generous. You with me?”

“Hey, thanks a lot Greg, you’re a star, we really appreciate it,” says Sean and digs into his pocket and hands Greg a ten-rand note. Greg hands Sean the bank envelope, which he stuffs into his jeans pocket.

“Okay guys, I think that concludes our business,” Greg says, and points to the door. He follows us down the passage. It seems like ages before he unlocks the front door. But he’s not quite finished with us yet. “Hey, one word to anyone...” And he drags his finger across his throat. Sean and me nod like there’s no tomorrow. “Good, I’ll see you around.” Greg Romano stands to one side and watches us take the metal stairs two at a time. All the way down I’m praying he doesn’t notice my shaking legs.

University of Cape Town

## TWENTY-THREE

Even the tiniest platteland dorps get films before we do. And then by the time we get them they're scratched to hell and gone because they've already been shown a thousand times. It's no different this time. It's been forever and a day for *Rocky III* to arrive at the Phoenix.

I spot Sean and Eddie right near the front of the queue, which runs halfway around the block. I lock my bike to the nearest empty lamppost, push my hair back into place and navigate my way through the crowds hanging around on the pavement.

I tap Sean on the back of the head and duck down to the ground. He looks around him confused, before this idiot behind him points to me squatting below.

"What the hell are you doing here?" says Sean. He and Eddie look genuinely happy to see me. Sean especially.

"I thought I would join you guys."

"What about you and Michael? I thought you said you guys were hanging out tonight..."

"Nah, he cancelled at the last second. He's got a friend of his from Joburg come to stay with him for the weekend. Anyway, did we or did we not say we wanted to come see Rocky together? So, here I am."

"That's great, Jamie." I can see Sean is real chuffed. Which makes me real chuffed. We shuffle a step closer to the ticket counter. "Apparently, it's absolutely brilliant."

"How do you know?"

"Russel saw it last night. He reckons it is Stallone's best ever."

"My boet also reckons so," Eddie says, digging into his pocket with this concentrated look on his face. Any second he's going to tell us he forgot his wallet at home.

"Whatever. I'm deader than dead keen to see it," I say.

Eddie steps up to the guy behind the counter. "Give us three." He slides the full amount through the hole, then hands Sean and me our tickets.

"Here you go, Eddie." I hold out my five-fifty.

"Ag, don't worry about it," Eddie says. "I'm sticking."

“Ja, right. Take it, Eddie.”

Eddie pushes my hand away.

“You don’t need to, Eddie. Seriously. You give it to him, Sean.” Now I’m feeling bad Eddie won’t take my money.

“Relax, Jamie,” says Sean. “If Eddie wants to stick you for your birthday, it’s his choice. Let’s head in before he changes his mind.”

“Geez, thanks Eddie.” And I really mean it because Eddie hardly has a cent to his name.

“No problemo,” says Eddie. Maybe it’s the neon light above, but I swear his ears have turned pink.

Sean leads the way and hands our tickets to the frizzy-haired woman at the door. She’s been tearing tickets for years, at least ever since we’ve been coming to the Phoenix. Sean and me hang around while Eddie goes off to buy something to eat from the tuckshop. There’s a girl standing next to us with a bag of apples. This must be the only town on earth where people bring apples to the movies. She unties the knot and hands one to her brother. Sean looks at his watch for the hundredth time. An hour later we spot Eddie pushing through the crowd, spilling Fanta.

“Here’s your change,” he says to Sean and pours a handful of coins into his hand.

“Don’t even try, Jamie, I’m sticking this one,” says Sean. Before I can say anything Eddie’s handed me a Creme Soda.

The trailers have already started and we have to fumble our way in the dark. The Phoenix isn’t one of those bioscopes where they give you special seat numbers and you have to sit there even if the guy in front is eight foot tall and has an afro. You sit wherever you want at the Phoenix. But the place is so packed we don’t exactly have much choice.

I spot three empty seats near the front. “How about here?” At least they aren’t front row.

“Hey Scheepers, sit your fat arse down!” shouts someone from the back.

“Who said that?” Eddie shouts back. Like an idiot he keeps standing, staring into the dark.

“You’re blocking the flippin’ screen,” says a woman behind us. It’s true, Eddie’s shadow has filled half the screen.

“Sit the fuck down!”

I yank on Eddie’s sleeve. “Come on Eddie, sit down!”

“Stuff you all,” says Eddie, but he sits down and the row behind us starts clapping. It’s always like this at the Phoenix. A total dog show. The matinees are even worse.

We settle down and start passing the popcorn back and forth, trying to keep up with each other. With Eddie you have to work at it or you get left behind.

“I’m seriously looking forward to this movie,” says Sean. I reckon Sean would give his left ball to have a body like Sylvester.

“Me too.”

“You must also be looking forward to the party tomorrow?”

“I suppose so.”

Someone a few rows back lets out this massive burp, and for about ten seconds the advert for the new Toyota Cressida is drowned out.

“You must let me know if I must do anything?”

“Thanks Sean. I appreciate it.”

“But seriously. I’m not just saying so.”

“Ja, I will, thanks.”

Eddie leans over into the aisle. “Who wants a apple? There’s a whole bunch of them coming our way.”

Eddie’s not bullshitting, there is a bunch of apples rolling down the aisle. Eddie stretches his leg out and boots one of them to the front; it whacks the panel below the screen. The kid whose apples they are starts bawling a few rows behind. As the curtain opens all the way and the Lion roars, his sister comes sprinting past and begins picking up apples in the dark. Like I said, the Phoenix is a total circus.

But Rocky ends up being so brilliant I don’t even notice the popcorn crunchers. Sylvester’s body is ripped to perfection. He must have worked out non-stop getting ready for the film. By the end of it I would also give my left ball to look like him. Sean doesn’t say a word the whole way through. He is transfixed, if that’s the right word for it. So is Eddie, who is so transfixed I get to eat most of the popcorn.

## TWENTY-FOUR

The singing starts the second I walk into the lounge. My mom and dad and Simon are still in their pyjamas, but they must have been awake for hours because there's a tray on the coffee table piled high with pastries and cakes from Athenia Bakery. There's also a heap of presents. Some of the wrapping paper I recognise from Simon's birthday.

"Thanks mom and dad," I say, when they've stopped singing and Simon's done his "nog 'n hip hip" for the tenth time. At least he's enthusiastic; I can say that for him. And it's not even his birthday.

"So, big guy. How does it feel to turn sixteen?" asks my dad.

"Much the same as fifteen, I guess. Except for a few more pimples."

My mom gets up from the couch and wraps her arms around me. "I feel I'm losing my baby."

"Come on, mom. I'm not that old."

"Open your prezzies, open your prezzies," says Simon, bouncing up and down the couch. There's a blob of cream stuck to his chin. I stretch over him for an éclair.

"You guys didn't need to buy me so many presents."

"Maybe Jamie's right," says my dad. "We could keep some of them back for next Christmas. What you say, Simon?"

"No!"

"Actually, this amount looks just about right, dad. Okay, can I go for this one first?"

"That's from me!" says Simon, real chuffed with himself. I can tell by the wrapping it's from him. It's full of tears and he's used masking tape instead of Sellotape. "I bet you can't guess what it is, Jamie."

"I bet I can." I know it's a LP, but I play along because Simon likes the game. I lift it to my ear and shake it.

"It sounds like..."

"You want me to open it for you?"

"I'm sure Jamie can manage," says my mom.

The wrapping falls off the cover. “Wow, this is great.” I’m genuinely chuffed. “How did you know I wanted Iron Maiden?”

“Don’t look at me, I had nothing to do with it,” says my mom, winking at me.

“Thanks Simon, it’s a great present.”

I shove the rest of the éclair into my mouth and get going on the other presents. I don’t deserve all this stuff. There’s a denim jacket from my mom, which I really need, and a fishing box for my tackle, with two layers of compartments for different size hooks and sinkers. I also get a huge box of Quality Streets and the new Wilbur Smith book; I’ve read three of his already and they were all brilliant. My dad also gives me an envelope with a fifty-rand note inside, for me to buy whatever I want. Eventually there’s only one present left, wrapped in expensive-looking shiny gold paper; my mom says I should open it last. I sit back and drink my coffee, which is lukewarm by now.

“Thanks mom and dad, you’ve totally spoilt me.”

“Can I have another donut, mom?” says Simon.

“You’re going to make yourself ill. You’ve already had two.”

“Ag, let him mom. It’s my birthday.”

“Thanks, Jamie.” Simon stretches across me and helps himself to a donut and an éclair.

“Okay, dad, can I open yours now?”

But my dad is busy trying on my new jacket over his stripey pyjamas.

“How do I look?” he says, strutting across the lounge floor, pretending he’s a model on a ramp.

“You look ridiculous dad,” says Simon.

“What you mean, ridiculous? I’m a cool dude,” says my dad in this American accent. The jacket sleeves are halfway up his arms. Simon’s right, he looks totally ridiculous, especially with his blue stokies and hairy white ankles.

“Dad looks like one of those old guys you see wearing Woolworths jeans pulled up to their armpits and their shirts tucked in. All you need now dad is one of those white imitation snakeskin belts.”

“Daniel, I think your sons are trying to tell you something.”

“At least dad’s enjoying himself,” I say. It’s true, my dad hasn’t joked around like this in ages.

“Philistines!” My dad plonks himself back on the couch.

“Open dad’s prezzie, Jamie.”

I pick up the small square box and take my time unwrapping it because I don’t want to mess up the gold paper. Inside is a black box with a lid. I open the lid. My uncle’s Omega. The same watch he got for his twenty-first. The watch I learnt to tell the time on when I was about five. I look up at my dad.

“Dad, you can’t give this to me. I’m serious.”

“Jacques would have wanted you to have it, Jamie. Besides, I can’t think of anyone more deserving.”

The room has suddenly gone quiet.

“It’s okay, sweetie,” says my mom and squeezes my dad’s arm.

“Sorry, I don’t know where that came from” my dad says. “Oh shit,” he says, wiping his eyes. He takes a serviette from the table and blows his nose.

“I don’t know what to say, dad.”

“You don’t need to say anything. Try it on for size. We may need to adjust the strap.”

“Thanks dad.”

“You sound like a foghorn when you blow your nose, dad,” says Simon.

Sometimes I don’t know what we would do without Simon in our family. I reckon we would probably be depressed half the time.

## TWENTY-FIVE

I'm already in a tailspin when my mom drops me off at Michael's house. It's way past six and there's still heaps to organise. My mom and Simon stay in the car while I cart the trays into the house. She really went to town on the snacks, with a whole bunch of different fillings for the sandwiches and all of them cut into triangles.

"Are you sure you don't want us to help you carry?"

"I'm fine, mom."

There's no sign of the flame torches that Michael said he would organise for the driveway. My hands are so full I don't bother knocking and the front door is half open anyway.

"Hey, Michael, I'm here!"

There's music coming from somewhere deep in the house. I lug the trays into the kitchen and drop them on the table. Except for a packet of salt and vinegar that's been ripped open, all the Checkers bags I dropped off earlier are lying on the counter, just as I left them. I look at my watch for the millionth time. I rush through the dining room to see what's been done to the area around the pool. The pool looks good with the lights switched on and there are a few candles arranged on the tables. But I can't see any of the floating candles that Michael promised, and except for candles there's no food or anything on the tables.

"How are things looking?" my mom asks when I head back outside to fetch the last tray.

"Fine, I suppose."

"We'll be off then. Have a lovely time."

"Thanks again for everything, mom." And I mean it.

I wait for my mom to reverse down the driveway. Simon is hanging out the back window, waving his arms about, navigating my mom into the street. My mom waves. I wave back and head inside.

The music is coming from the TV lounge. I can hear Michael's voice and some other laughing voice. It's one of those grating laughs that doesn't let up. The door is slightly

open, but for some reason I just stand there, cemented to the floor, listening to Michael and his friend.

“Down the hatch, Jono!” Michael shouts.

Silence. Then the sound of a glass slamming onto the table, followed by a massive burp and that grating laugh again.

“Okay, your turn boytjie,” screams Jono.

I turn around and head back to the kitchen.

Like I asked them to, Sean and Eddie arrive half an hour early. By this stage I’m running around like a blue-arsed fly.

“Am I glad to see you guys!” I’m so grateful to see them I hardly notice Eddie’s outfit. “Where’s Adele?”

“She’s not coming,” says Sean.

“Why? I thought you invited her.”

“I did, but like I told you, her parents are full of their Jehovah Witness shit. I don’t know why I even bother.”

If I had time I would ask Sean the hows and whys, but right now I can’t think of too much else. I point to the pile of flaming torches heaped on the veranda.

“Can I ask you guys to stick these things into the ground and light them? Michael was supposed to do it.”

“Why, where’s he?” asks Sean.

“Partying it up inside with his friend from Joburg.”

I hand Eddie the box of matches and race back inside to fill the bowls with chips and peanuts and all the other stuff I’ve set up on the tables. I soon have everything from the Checkers bags arranged on the tables around the pool. It looks okay, not great, but it’s going to have to do. As soon as I’m done I sprint to the front to check how Sean and Eddie are getting on. It’s starting to get dark. Michael still doesn’t even know I’m here.

Sean is busy lighting the last torch and is Eddie is going up and down making sure none of them fall over. It looks absolutely brilliant, like something out of King Arthur, this avenue of flaming torches. I don’t know what to say.

“It looks good, hey?” says Eddie.

“It looks better than good. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

Of course I don’t actually do it, but I feel like hugging Sean and Eddie right there on the spot. I think they feel it too because we stand there for a while saying nothing, watching the torches burn and the night get darker. And by the time we head into the house that old bond we used to have between us is back again. And nothing, except maybe Eddie’s orange shirt, will ever break it.

The moment everybody arrives they start tucking into the food as if there’s no tomorrow. Especially the guys Eddie invited from his class. It’s like a plague of locusts has landed on the snack table; after a while all that’s left are a few sausage rolls and chopped-up lettuce. You would swear half the people we invited haven’t eaten for months.

Most of the girls Eddie and Sean invited haven’t bothered to pitch. Or they weren’t invited in the first place. So far it’s only a few blorts and Natalie and her friend. Her name is Larissa or Melissa; Michael has turned the music up so loud I can’t hear when she tells me. She’s actually quite hot in her tight stonewashed jeans and black cut-off top with glitter down the front, and big dangly earrings. But when I try talk to her she acts totally not interested, so I don’t bother.

After all the food has been polished off everybody stands around the pool in these tiny groups, drinking the beers and sucking on their ciggies and not saying much intelligent. Michael and his friend, Jono, who is apparently in the same class with him, are having their own private party on the deckchairs at the far end of the pool. It’s weird, but it’s like there are two parties going on at the same time, with a moat of crocodiles between the two. Every few seconds Jono’s grating laugh cuts the air in two and I have to concentrate hard to enjoy myself.

“What you reckon they paid for this place, Jamie?” says Gavin, smoke pouring out his nose.

“What?”

“I said what you reckon they paid for this place?”

“My dad reckons at least three hundred Gs.”

“I was asking Jamie.”

“I dunno. Something like that,” I say.

“Did you guys see the size of that TV? I swear it’s bigger than our lounge.”

“You would have to watch it in the garage.”

“That’s no lie. Where does your buddy go to school, Jamie?”

“Joburg.

“St Johns.”

“It’s actually called St Stithians, Eddie.”

“Whatever. Same larney crap.”

“St Stithians. What’s that? A private school or something?”

“Don’t you remember, dummie, they won interschools last year.”

Gavin burps. “That’s because they can afford the best coaches. If we didn’t have Loch Ness for our coach we would also win.”

“You talk such crap, Gav.”

“It’s a fact.”

Michael wanders over to where we are huddled together. In his white Island Style pants and black cut-off t-shirt he’s by far the best dressed of all of us. He must think my friends are a bunch of skates.

“Is Jamie looking after you guys?” he says.

Maybe it’s because he is taller than the rest of us, or that he’s from Joburg, or that we are using his house for the party, but now suddenly everyone acts dumb, staring into the bottom of their beer cans, saying nothing. They’re a bunch of fish out of water. Eventually Sean opens his mouth.

“I like your pad,” he says, and takes another swig of his Blackie.

“It’s okay. Anyway, I’ll see you guys a bit later. Jamie, mind if I grab one or two of your beers?”

“They’re in your fridge.”

“Thanks buddy.”

Michael walks back to Jono. I turn back to my friends. Once again they have heaps to say.

After two more beers I don’t care anymore and the party starts to go better and a couple of my friends start shuffling their feet to the music. At some point Sean tugs me on the

arm. He's been chatting up Natalie and her friend, Melissa, or Larissa. That's one thing about Sean. He can talk to anyone. Even a girl he hasn't met before.

"Let's go outside. I've got a present for you. Eddie, you can come too if you want."

The three of us troop outside. Sean leads the way and we end up on the bench next to the angel fountain, far away from the house so nobody can see us.

"I love that song," says Eddie. He starts singing, "Forever young, I want to stay forever young." He's completely out of tune. He would be even more out of tune if he wasn't wasted.

"I also loved it until you opened your mouth," I say.

"Okay, boys, you ready for this?" says Sean, and flicks his lighter. He takes a few quick puffs to get it going. Every time he puffs his face lights up orange. It smells much sweeter than a cigarette and it makes tons more smoke. Eddie and me watch Sean's face, like we're watching the first man get ready to land on the moon; I've never smoked dagga before so it's quite a huge moment. Once it's lit up and going Sean takes a deep drag, coughs, and passes it to me. It's bent and lumpy. Sean coughs again and spits something onto the ground.

"You must inhale deeply and then hold it there," he instructs Eddie and me, as if he's been doing it his whole life. My fingers tremble as I put it into my mouth. It tastes wet and woody, like a cigarette made from BB tobacco or dried peach leaves. I do as Sean says, I take a big drag; it must be too big because I have a coughing fit on the spot. Sean and Eddie think this is the funniest thing out, but when it comes to Eddie's turn he has an even worse coughing fit.

We are too scared to have a second puff because of the stories we've heard about people going psycho who smoke too much dagga, so we head back to the pool. Natalie and her friend have already left and it's just the dregs hanging around. Michael and his friend are still sprawled out on the deck chairs, with a row of unopened beers lined up between them. Half of them must be mine and Sean's because when I open the fridge there's nothing there. I'm starting to feel quite out of it so I don't really care.

"You keen to go out somewhere after this?" Sean says.

"Dead keen. You just say when."

Sean's been keen to leave the whole night. Not that he said anything. I just know Sean.

"How about now?"

"Okay. I better tell Michael we're leaving. Where's Eddie?"

"Just left. Said he's walking home. I'll wait for you in the car. And tell Michael thanks."

But in the end I don't tell Michael we're leaving. I don't know, maybe it's because I'm wasted, or maybe it's because Michael and his friend are so into their private party that I just don't bother.

University of Cape Town

## TWENTY-SIX

“What do you want to listen to?” says Sean.

“I don’t care, you choose.” At this stage Sean can give me opera and I won’t mind. He scratches around on the floor and finds a tape.

“Shit, I’m slaughtered,” I say, blinking my eyes. I can hardly see straight. I flip down the mirror and take a look. “Check my eyes, Seanie. What was in that stuff? You sure you okay to drive?”

“I only had one puff. It’s you I’m worried about,” says Sean. He’s smiling to himself because I’m spewing such crap. “But as long as you’re having a good time, that’s all what counts.”

“I’m having a blast. What were you and Michael talking about earlier?”

“Ag, nothing much.”

I’m still staring into the mirror. “Do you think my eyes will go back to normal? What did he say?”

“Nothing worth talking about. How about some Van Halen?”

“Come on, Seanie, give me five.” And Sean obliges and holds his hand out and we do a high-five. “How am I looking? Do you think I’ll score?”

“With those dagga eyes, definitely.”

“Ja, right,” I say. And we give each other another round of high-fives.

“Okay, let’s do like donkey shit and hit the road,” says Sean, and he gives Russel’s Fiat a rev like it’s a Formula One Ferrari.

“Thanks, Sean.”

“For what?”

“I dunno. For everything.”

“No problem. That’s what friends are for.”

And Sean smiles at me and I smile back and I don’t feel so drunk anymore. I lean forward and crank the volume on the Hitachi up, right up, until the speakers vibrate, and I push my seat back until I’m staring out the sunroof and watching the streetlights flash by.

“Come on, give it some stick, you’re driving like an old man!” I scream above Eddie van Halen’s solo. Van Halen must be the best guitarist in the world. He would beat Hendrix hands down. So Sean puts his foot flat and the Fiat nudges forward and by the time we hit Sand River Way we are doing over ninety.

“What a jol!” I scream, and slap Sean on the back of his head and he throws his head back and screams like a wild man. I pass him the bottle of rum and Coke he mixed earlier for the party, and he takes a swig and passes it back and I take a gulp, but not too big because I know I have to save myself. It’s going to be a long night, I can feel it already. This sour beer-sausage roll burp comes up and I hand the bottle back to Sean and he takes another swig. And we’ve got the windows wound right down and we’re singing, *You Really Got Me*, at the top of our voices, and all the hassle that went into organising the party and the mixed up feelings I’ve been having lately, they’re already coughing in the dust behind us, and the only thing that matters is the high I’m having right now.

“Keep going straight. For old time’s sake!” I shout, as Sean’s about to take the Velvet Lounge turnoff. So that’s what he does. He keeps going straight until we hit the gravel road next to graveyard and then he rams his foot into the floor.

We’ve done this a few times before, but only this time Sean really pushes the envelope. We must be doing at least a hundred when I give him the, “Now!” and Sean takes his foot off the accelerator and I yank up the handbrake and the wheels lock and the Fiat begins to skid, but before it has a chance to lose control Sean pulls the steering wheel to one side and we start spinning. Round and round we go, three, four, maybe even five times before we come to a stop in this cloud of dust. For a couple of seconds we just sit there, too shocked to say anything, then we start giggling like schoolgirls, and then like crazies we start singing again at the top of our voices. It’s finally turning out to be a brilliant night.

We pull into the Velvet Lounge and by local standards the place is pumping because there are cars and bikes everywhere. It takes Sean a while to find a parking place; while he’s manoeuvring into this tiny spot I have the mirror down, inspecting my eyes for the hundredth time.

“I bet you there was cat in that stuff Romano sold us. There’s no ways I’ll score looking like this, Seanie.”

Sean is too busy manoeuvring the Fiat back and forwards to agree or not agree.

“Shit, this space is tighter than a virgin,” he says, and I crack up at that.

Sean finally manages to squeeze in, then cuts the engine and inspects himself in the mirror.

“Let’s do it!” he says, and we climb out the car and hit the Lounge.

The place is pumping. Once we press past the bouncer, who is seven foot tall and about the same distance wide, straight away we can tell it’s not your the average night out in the sticks, where the men outnumber the women two to one and the whole scene is more aggro. Sean gives the thumbs up, like we’ve struck oil, even though neither of us has ever scored at a disco. We have to inch our way up to the bar because there is such a crowd.

“What you want?” Sean shouts. “I’ll get the first one.”

I can hardly hear him the music is so loud. “I better take it easy,” I scream back into his ear. So Sean orders two rum and Cokes and hands one to me. “Bastard!” And I pretend to head-butt him.

We find a spot against the wall where we can stand without getting shouldered. We sip our drinks and take in the scene. As usual the music is out of the Ark, but the sound system is good and it can handle the heavy bass being pumped out. Sean presses his mouth against my ear.

“Crap music,” he shouts, as if he’s just read my mind. “Check that girl dancing alone?” I look to where he’s pointing, to a short tanned girl with black hair coming down to her shoulders. She’s wearing a red mini-skirt and a matching top.

Sean’s mouth is back at my ear. “I’m gonna hit the floor.”

“Go for it. I’ll wait here.”

To be honest, flapping my arms around with the whole world staring isn’t my idea of fun. But Sean’s got no problem with it. Even with his gammy leg. Ever since he saw *Saturday Night Fever* and did this disco dancing class when he was on holiday in Durban, he’s been fully into it. He’s actually pretty good, working his John Travolta moves under the strobe light.

When the rockspiders and their girlfriends start looking like John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John, and every girl in the Velvet Lounge looks like God's gift to mankind, I know I'm on my way to getting seriously wasted. Everything and everyone looks amazing and I don't care about a thing. I don't even care if this built guy next to me catches me staring at his girlfriend. I don't care about anything because I'm feeling invincible, like I've been given super-powers. I'm ready to take on the world. I'm even ready to hit the dance floor.

Sean's really getting into things, shaking his hips like a madman and going down to the ground and coming back up again and spinning around and almost losing his balance because he must be as gone as I am by now. He's dancing right next to this girl in the red mini-skirt. Next thing we are going crazy under the strobe light. Every five seconds he shouts into my ear, "You still having a good time?!"

There's a break in the music and everyone stands around waiting for the next song. Sean starts chatting up the girl in the red skirt and she doesn't walk away like most girls do. When the music comes back on Sean is still talking to her and she's still acting interested. It's not that he's God's gift to women or anything, but Sean's got charisma – I think that's the word for it. He says something to her at the end of *Tainted Love* and she laughs like he's told her something really funny. Next thing, his mouth is back in my ear.

"Her name's Tracy! From Durban! Here for the weekend! Visiting her aunt!" I just nod and wave like an idiot when she looks my way and smiles.

Typical of the Velvet Lounge, without any warning the music switches direction, to Chris de Burgh. Sean says something in the ear of this Tracy girl and by the look on her face it's like he personally got the DJ to play *Lady in Red* for her. I can't believe it, but she lets him slow-dance with her, so I walk back to the bar for a smoke. I need to sit down anyway. I find an empty chair and flop down, my head starting to spin. I light my second-last Chesterfield and watch the people on the dance floor, thinking how crazy life is, that I'll never work it out no matter how long I live...

A hand grips my shoulder. I look up. It's Michael. With his Italian-looking friend, Jono, hovering behind him. It's a total shock seeing them here.

"Hullo, Jamie. Thought you could sneak off without telling us?" says Michael. His friend sneers.

“I wasn’t sneaking off. I thought you saw us going.” I must have mumbled it because Michael pretends not to hear. I’m suddenly stone sober.

Michael looks around the place. “So who you with?”

“Sean.” And I point to the dance floor where Sean is getting down on *Eye of the Tiger*.

The two dogs at the table next to us stand up and disappear into the crowd so Michael grabs their chairs and joins their table with mine.

“What you think, Jono?” shouts Michael across the table. “Not exactly Flashbacks, is it?” Jono curls his lip and rolls his eyes. I’ve already made up my mind I don’t like him one bit. “And you thought I was exaggerating?” Michael grabs onto his friend’s arm, almost knocking my glass over. “Please, I beg you man, you’ve got to get me out of this town!”

“Christ almighty, get a hold of that one,” says Jono, and he points to a chubby Afrikaner girl dancing just a few feet from us. Jono starts imitating her moves and they both crack up. I pretend not to see her.

“What about that one?” This time Michael points at Sean. “John Travolta meets Elephant Man.” Jono packs up and leans across and says something in Michael’s ear. Michael shakes his head and looks at me and winks. I reach for my glass, swirl it around and down the rest of it. An empty feeling has crept into my stomach, like I don’t want to be here anymore.

The DJ decides it’s time for some ABBA. I decide it’s time for a pee. As I stand up to go I spot Sean heading our way, with this Tracy girl following behind. Sean’s face drops the moment he sees Michael.

“Hey, JT, come join the party,” Michael shouts. Sean stays standing.

“Come on, take a seat!” Michael pushes a chair in Sean’s direction.

“Ja, come sit with us,” I say to Sean, and pull up another chair. I can see he’s not keen, but he sits down anyway. This Tracy girl flops down on the empty chair next to Michael and me. Before Sean can do a thing about it, Michael is hogging her, asking her name and where is she from and how come she knows Sean. I can only just make out what she’s saying because the music is so loud and her words are slurred.

“I’m thinking of heading,” Sean says to me.

“Why? It looked like you were having a ball out there. Stay and have another drink.”

“No, I’ve done well. Club duvet is calling. But you stay.”

Michael says something to this Tracy girl and she giggles and leans into him. I can smell her perfume. Sean looks over my shoulder, but then quickly away again.

“How about we have one more drink and then we head out together?”

“Alright, sounds like a plan,” says Sean. “I’ll get the last one.” He stands up. “Anyone want something to drink?” Tracy asks for a Coke. I also want a Coke. But Michael sticks his hand up.

“Hold up, cowboy, nobody’s drinking Coke! Tracy and Jamie will have a Vodka Lime.” Tracy looks at him and giggles some more. “And the same for us. In fact, Seanie boy, make it doubles all round. It’s Jamie’s birthday, for Christ sake.”

There’s no point arguing because once Michael gets an idea in his head there’s no stopping him. I try push the last of my cash onto Sean, but he waves my hand away and shoves his way through to the bar.

“Thanks, buddy,” shouts Michael behind him, then carries on chatting up Tracy, who is lapping him up big time.

“Okay, now I’m out of here for real,” says Sean, after he’s downed his Coke. “Guys, thanks for everything. It was a jol.”

I stand up and also make to leave. I’ve hardly touched my glass. I don’t know if I can face another drop.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?” says Michael.

“I’m catching a lift home with Sean. It’s been great, Michael, thanks for everything, but I’m ready to crash.”

“Sit down, James, you’re not going anywhere.” I look at Sean for support because I really wouldn’t mind getting out of here.

Sean shrugs. “It’s your choice.”

“You heard the man, it’s your choice,” says Michael. “So what’s it going to be, Jamie? Are you going to be a total wet or will you stick around and enjoy yourself? What do you think, Jono?”

“Nah, he’s gonna go,” says Jono, his sarcastic sneer still plastered to his face.

“And what do you say, Tracy baby?”

“Come on, man, stay,” she says.

They are all staring at me waiting for my answer. There’s nothing I can do but shrug my shoulders at Sean.

“Okay, I’ll stay. But only for a bit longer.”

Michael slaps the table, splashing Vodka all over the place. “Yeah! That’s our boytjie.”

Sean zips up his jacket. “I’ll see you around, Jamie.”

He turns and leaves without saying bye to Michael or Jono or Tracy. When I sit down again Michael has this smug smile on his face; you would think he’s just won the jackpot.

“We’re going to get some fresh air. You coming?” shouts Michael in my ear, after he and this Tracy girl have been dancing for about an hour; all this time Jono and me have been sitting at the table with nothing much to say to each other. I get up and follow them because I’m seriously keen to get out of here.

Tracy and Michael are all over each other as we walk across the carpark. All the way down the grassy slope to the river she’s making these drunk giggly sounds and holding onto Michael and bumping against Jono at the same time. She must be totally tanked after the vodkas they’ve been feeding her.

It’s good to be outside, under the stars. I feel I can breathe again. It’s a perfect night, with the air so warm you just want to rip off your shirt. We make our way down to the river, where Michael and Tracy start pulling into each other big time. Jono spots a pile of bricks that the municipality has been using to repair the pump station; he begins tossing them one by one into the water. I stand around like a lost fart, trying to get my head straight.

“You guys are bad,” this Tracy girl says every two minutes.

“Jamie, why don’t you take us to your fishing spot?” says Michael, after they’ve been sucking face for a while.

“What, now? It’s after two in the morning.” I can hardly stand anymore.

“Big deal. Hey, Jono, you keen?”

“I’m with you all the way, buddy.” Jono picks up another brick and hurls it into the reeds. A duck explodes into the open and skims across the water, dragging a racket behind it.

“You guys are bad,” Tracy giggles for the hundredth time.

The whole way Tracy is moaning about her high heel shoes getting messed up and telling us that we are crazy. She’s starting to get irritating, but as we trample our way through the long grass and mud I’m thinking she’s got a point; Michael just doesn’t know when to stop. He’s been on this mission from the moment him and Jono walked into the Velvet Lounge.

“Christ, when are you going to stop your whining?” he says to Tracy as we come to our fishing spot. The way he says it puts an instant plug in her mouth.

“You guys are crazy,” she says sulkily, more to me than Michael and Jono.

“I know, you’ve told us how many times already.” Michael pulls her back to him. “Give me a kiss.”

“No.”

“Come on, don’t play hard to get.”

Jono and me are watching to see what happens next. Michael holds her chin and turns her face up to him. She lets him kiss her on the lips, then pulls away again and walks off and sits down next to the river.

“Have you got a cigarette for me?” she asks over her shoulder.

“Smoking’s bad for you,” Jono says, and laughs.

“They’re finished,” I say.

I walk a bit further along and squat down against the willow tree. This is the first time I’ve been here so late at night, with the moon so full and the water reflecting like polished metal. A hadeda flies past, almost skimming the water, the moonlight catching the tips of its wings. I close my eyes and begin to drift off, listening to the night sounds. Something is moving about in the reeds below, probably a frog or a snake on the hunt for bird’s eggs. For a change the weaver nests above my head are dead-quiet, but I bet they’re on high alert, what with Jono’s non-stop cackling down the way. Michael must have said something funny because Jono laughs. This Tracy girl then says something, but she

doesn't sound too happy. Maybe she's just discovered she's sitting in a muddy patch. I could have told her.

It's too far away to see what they're doing, but Michael must be pulling in big time because she's doing her moaning and giggling thing again, like she's keen but she's not. When the moaning gets louder and higher pitched a funny prickle goes down my back.

"Jamie!" shouts Michael, ripping me out of my dreamy state.

"What?!"

"What the hell are you doing? Get yourself over here."

"Why?"

"Don't ask why. Just come."

I stand up and walk back towards them. I still can't make out what's going on, but it looks like Michael and the girl are messing around on the ground, with Jono standing a few feet away, watching them get it on.

"For fuck sakes!" says Michael into the dark.

"What happened?" says Jono.

"The bitch bit me! I swear the bitch bit me." Next thing there's this slapping sound. "That will teach you to bite me."

"Please, let me go," she whimpers.

"Jono, come and give me a hand here," Michael hisses.

"Fuck, what do you want me to do?" says Jono, laughing at the same time.

"Just hold her."

"What's going on?"

"Shut the fuck up, Jamie. Jono!"

Next thing I know Jono is on his knees, holding her head back by her ponytail. She twists her head and tries to bite Jono's hand. This time Michael gives her a serious slap. Her squealing becomes a soft whimper.

"If she can't behave nicely, we will have to show her, won't we?" hisses Michael. He looks up at me. I just stand there, not knowing what to make of it. I might as well be watching a movie in slow motion. I can hear my teeth chattering in my skull.

"Not so, Jamie?" Michael gives this crazy laugh.

The girl is now snivelling big time.

Jono is still giggling non-stop.

“For fuck sakes, what’s wrong with you? Just calm down, we’re not going to hurt you,” Michael says to the girl, stroking her face. He’s still sitting on top of her. Her arms are pinned down under his knees. She’s not struggling so much anymore. Michael looks up at Jono, then at me. Everything returns to calm. We’ve just come through a bad storm and it’s going to be okay. I try focus on the river, how the water shimmers against the moonlight. I must bring Sean fishing here one night.

“Please...”

“Please what?”

“Let me go.”

“First say you’re sorry for biting me.”

Jono giggles. The girl whimpers. She’s shaking like a leaf. And it’s not even cold.

“I can’t hear you.”

“I’m sorry.”

Michael stays where he is. On top of her, with Jono now pinning her arms down. The girl’s red mini skirt is pulled up high. Her thighs look white in the moonlight.

“Shit, Michael. She said she’s sorry.”

“Shut the fuck up, Jamie.”

I shut the fuck up.

“What are we going to do now, Mikey?” says Jono.

“I don’t know. What you want to do?”

“I dunno. You decide...”

Michael looks up at Jono, then at me. “Maybe Jamie wants a go with her. What you say, birthday boy?”

I say nothing. I can’t find any words to say.

“Ja, I reckon she wants him,” says Jono.

Before I can see it coming Michael lunges forward and yanks my arm and pulls me to the ground. I nearly land on top of him and the girl.

“Go for it, Jamie,” he whispers in my ear. “Have a go with her.”

I’m so close to her I can smell her perfume, mixed in with the smell of grass and mud and her sweat. She’s staring at me with big eyes.

Michael takes my hand and shoves it between her legs. It's soft and warm down there. Michael starts moving my hand up and down. Up and down.

"See, she wants you, Jamie," Michael whispers in my ear. His breath is hot. "This is your chance, buddy. Don't be chicken."

"Ja, go for it buddy," says Jono.

"Shut the fuck up, Jonathan," says Michael. And he shuts up. "Come on, Jamie, what have you got to lose? You feel that?" Michael takes my fingers and presses them deeper between her legs. "Don't tell me you don't want to be in there." My hand stays where it is. "Feels good, doesn't it?"

I swallow to get the word out. "Yes."

"So, go for it, Jamie."

"Let me go," she whimpers again.

I pull my hand loose. "Please, Michael, I don't want to." I roll off the girl and stand up.

"Oh, for fuck sakes. Come on Jamie, we don't have all night."

"Seriously, I don't want to, Michael. I want to go home."

"Aw, did you hear that Jono? Jamie wants to go home."

I don't wait to hear what Jono says. I turn and start running down the path alongside the river. Tripping and stumbling in the dark. Michael shouts my name. I don't look back. I just keep running.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

The 1Time flight back to Cape Town is at two, which means I have to be on the road by eleven. It's now or never. I decide not to bother with breakfast. The last thing I feel like is eating. My back is so stiff I can't reach the tap with my mouth and I have to use a glass to rinse out the toothpaste. The lump in my gut hasn't budged.

I pack my bags and tidy the bed and check the bathroom and all the cupboards and under the mattress to make sure I haven't forgotten anything. I walk down to reception to sort out my bill. The friendly Afrikaans woman isn't on duty. Instead it's her husband who serves me and he acts like he's doing me a favour. I don't know what she sees him.

While I'm arranging my stuff in the boot, I spot the madala shuffling at a rate towards me, waving his arms about. This is what I get for giving him a nice tip; now I bet he wants my arm...

Just as I'm about to tell him I don't have any change he hands me my credit card. Shit! He can hardly speak he's so out of breath. For the first time I notice the badge on his shirt.

"Hell, thanks Jeremiah. You saved my life. Imagine if I forgot my bank card behind."

Not that he would know. I'm sure he doesn't even have a bank account. He tells me to have a safe journey and to come back soon. He starts walking back up the path.

"Hey, Jeremiah!"

Before I can change my mind I've taken a hundred bucks from my wallet and handed it to him. The guy looks like he's about to keel over. But before he can thank me for a tenth time, I'm in the car and reversing out the parking lot.

The mine must still be operating because there's a cloud of steam gushing from one of the old ventilators. And all this time I've been thinking the place has gone belly up. As I drive past I can't help smiling at the bullshit story I spun Simon, about this monster living underground and the steam coming up from its lungs. I still can't believe he bought it hook, line and sinker, that for weeks after he took the long way round to school.

I decide to take a detour, past Sean's old house a bit further on. It's the same as Eddie's place, with grass pushing through the pavement, and the same ugly stoep at the front and the vibracrete wall and the cement driveway. Sean's mom always had flowers next to the driveway. Mostly pansies and daisies and daffodils. The pansies were my favourite. But now there's nothing but weeds and dust and a mongrel of a dog giving me the evil eye from the stoep. A red Sierra is parked outside the house. Simon was right. This is where all Fords come home to die.

It's a pity Sean's folks no longer live here because I would visit them. I would pitch up at the front door and knock. It would be a hell of a shock, but they would be happy to see me. They're that type of people. And I would explain everything. My mom tells me Mr and Mrs Daniels are retired in Port Shepstone. Maybe one day I'll take a slow drive along the coast and visit them. Make things right with them. Maybe one day I will do that, when I've got some spare time.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

The sun is burning the back of our legs by the time Mr Stevens manages to squeeze the last things into the back of the Combi. There is so much stuff to pack you would swear we are off to the North Pole. It's obvious Mr Stevens hasn't done this before, even though he pretends he has. It's total chaos. Eddie doesn't even have a sleeping bag; instead he's brought a pile of blankets and a sponge mattress to sleep on. And Martin has a huge brown suitcase from World War I, with locks and straps. Sean is the only one who's organised, with his own backpack and his food organised in different see-through plastic packets.

"Right, guys, I think we're ready to roll," says Mr Stevens. He looks nervously at his watch for the hundredth time; we were supposed to leave hours ago.

The Combi is from the Assembly of God church, with a *Jesus Doesn't Mind U-Turns* sticker on the back. We've already tossed to decide who must sit in front with Mr Stevens, and Martin lost. The rest of us pile into the back.

"Right..." says Mr Stevens again, polishing his Polaroids on the sleeve of his khaki shirt. He must have bought it specially for the weekend because there's a M label still stuck on the collar. With his Polaroids and moustache Mr Stevens looks like Magnum. He seriously does. Mr Stevens waits for Eddie to pick up the last of his NikNaks from under the seat. "Okay, before we head off on our adventure I think we will all agree..."

"A little prayer is in order," Sean whispers.

"A few words of thanks are in order," says Mr Stevens.

Although we are running ten hours late Mr Stevens starts thanking the Lord for the good weather and the loan of the Combi from the Assembly of God church. By the time he asks the Lord to keep us safe on the road Eddie is halfway through his litre of Fanta.

Mr Stevens slides a tape into the deck and we brace ourselves for some happy-clappy gospel band. Instead, John Denver comes blasting through the speakers. And a minute later, as the mine dumps fade into the horizon behind us and the speedo hits a hundred, Mr Stevens and the rest of us are belting out *Country Roads* at the top of our voices.

The landscape soon becomes less flat and there are more trees and less of those ugly thorn bushes and the veld isn't that dry white colour anymore, but soft and golden, like you would actually want to lie down in it. Mr Stevens holds the speedo at one-ten and fiddles non-stop with the different switches and dials and the tape deck equaliser. You would swear he's piloting a 747.

Because we had to wake up at sparrow's fart I begin drifting in and out of my own world, taking in the scenery and Mr Stevens' music. This guy, Jim Croce, who I've never heard of, goes in next and he's really good, although his songs are quite sad. They're even more sad when Mr Stevens tells us from the front that Jim Croce died really young in a plane crash.

I'm soon half-asleep, with my half-thoughts, half-dreams floating here, there and everywhere. My party and the Velvet Lounge and what happened at the river is the one minute miles away, the next minute right here on the seat.

"Jesus Christ!" blurts Sean, his eyes big as saucers. His face is screwed up, as if he's dipped his head into hydrochloric acid. A few seconds later it drifts over to my side of the Combi, and it's a seriously bad one.

"Fuck, Eddie, you're disgusting."

"What?" says Eddie. "It wasn't me."

"Swear on your mom's grave it wasn't you!" says Sean, and slides the window open, letting in a gush of air. Eddie can deny it all he wants, but there's no two ways about it, this is an Eddie Fanta-NikNak fart. Sean tugs on my shorts and points to the front – Mr Stevens has wound down his window a few inches. Martin hasn't noticed yet because of his snotty nose. Sean and me and Eddie pack up giggling until the tears are rolling down our faces and my stomach aches. Eddie lets rip again, only this time it's not so funny.

We hit Bethlehem just after two and Mr Stevens says we can have lunch at a restaurant called the Golden Egg, which is next to the petrol station. While Mr Stevens stays behind to fill up with petrol and make sure the guy doesn't mess up, the rest of us troop inside. I head straight to the bogs, with Eddie and Martin in hot pursuit. The place stinks of sour pee. Because I freeze up if someone is standing next to me I pretend I need to make a number two. Eddie and Martin don't have the same problem because even

from inside the cubicle they sound like fire hydrants. It must be a physical defect I was born with.

Sean has found us a table at the window. The chairs are covered in that plastic vinyl that sticks to the back of your legs. We all squeeze in next to Sean so we can look out the window. Mr Stevens is still busy checking the tyres.

“The All-Day sounds good,” reads Sean. “Two fried eggs, pork or beef sausage, bacon, mushrooms, toast, juice, tea or coffee. I’m gonna have that. With coffee and a Mega-Coke.”

“I’ll have that too,” says Martin.

“Me too,” says Eddie. “You can have my juice, Mart. I’m too Fanta’d up.”

As usual, I can’t make up my mind. While I’m going through the menu I’m busy scratching at something under the table. When I sniff my fingers they smell like Beechies Grape.

A bakkie pulls up in front of us, towing a caravan that’s ready for the scrapyard. A guy wearing blue rugby shorts and a short-sleeve shirt with a collar steps out. His legs are thicker than tree trunks and he’s barefoot. He bends over and checks under the bakkie, his crack showing to the whole world.

“Why do people always do that?” says Sean.

“What?” says Martin.

“Check under their cars when they get to a petrol station.”

“I reckon I know why,” I say.

“Why?”

“To make sure the black guy they knocked over on the highway isn’t still stuck underneath.”

When I say this a jet of Coke comes streaming out of Sean’s nose.

“Imagine being married to that,” says Eddie when the guy’s wife steps out of the bakkie.

“I reckon she could kickstart a Jumbo, no problem.”

“I bet her parents had to pay the lobola.”

“What’s lobola?” asks Eddie.

“Cows and sheep.”

The guy is going around the bakkie kicking the tyres. I’ve decided to have the cheese burger. With extra chips and a Creme Soda.

“Sean, I’ve got one for you. How do you do naai something like that?”

“I don’t know, Eddie. Tell us.”

“You cover her face with a flag...”

“And do it for your country,” Martin and me say at the same time.

And so we carry on, until the guy and his wife climb back into their bakkie and pull off in a cloud of diesel, and Mr Stevens joins us at the table.

Because Mr Stevens misses the turn-off to the campsite and we end up doing an extra fifty kays, the sun is already melting behind the mountain when we drive through the boom. But it’s really pretty, with the foothills of the Drakensberg washed in gold light and the poplar trees next to the river the colour of a dying fire. We slide open the windows while Mr Stevens cruises around the campsite looking for a good spot. The air smells of old wood-fire mixed with thatch and horses. It’s the best smell in the world.

It’s getting dark by the time we find a place close to the river, but also not too far from the bogs. We soon discover there’s nothing like pitching a tent in the dark. Because Sean has his own tent he has it up in record time, but the other two Mr Stevens borrowed from the Assembly of Gods. It’s chaos. If you saw us you would think we’re trying to invent the atom bomb. Only after Sean steps in and helps Mr Stevens work out which poles fit which poles, do we manage to get the tents up and our stuff organised for the night.

We build a huge bonfire under the stars and Mr Stevens turns out to be quite fun when he’s more relaxed. While Sean looks after the wors and chops Mr Stevens is telling us about the time he studied something called theology in America and why he and his wife got divorced. After supper we keep adding logs to the fire. Mr Stevens is a completely different guy to the one we know from church, playing his guitar and belting out campfire songs, which he knows all the words to. I start feeling quite bad for him, after everything he’s gone through since he discovered his wife was having an affair with a foreman from the mine.

We are up at the crack of dawn and breakfast is a huge cook-up with burnt scrambled eggs and bacon and coffee, before we leave on our team-building exercise, as Mr Stevens likes to call it. It's actually just a hike up to Eagles Nest, which we can see from the campsite, but Mr Stevens likes to give fancy names to everything. For example, we don't talk about something, we debate it. Or something is up for discussion.

Eddie and me help Mr Stevens into his old army backpack. It weighs a ton. Sean leads the way out of the campsite, with the rest of us following behind and Mr Stevens bringing up the rear. We go down a path that tracks the river for a while, then breaks away and zigzags up the mountain. High up on the far side of the valley patches of wet rock catch the morning sun, but where we are the air is still so crisp you can cut it with a breadknife. We pass two hadedas poking around for worms on the lawn; they don't even bother to fly away.

Sean and me are soon way up front, with Martin and Eddie and Mr Stevens and his overloaded pack trailing behind. Every time I look back Mr Stevens has stopped to adjust the straps.

"Why've you been so quiet today?" says Sean after we've been walking for a while.

"I'm not quiet. Who says I've been quiet?"

"What? You've hardly said a thing since we woke up."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Whatever."

We come up to a ridge, where there's a view dropping off on all sides. The Free State isn't pancake-flat as most people think. Eddie and Martin and Mr Stevens are way below us. Mr Stevens has his binoculars out and he's pointing at the sky. Sean drops his pack to the ground and flops down.

"You don't like Michael, do you?"

My question takes Sean by surprise. It also takes me by surprise. Sean squints up at me like I'm a bit weird.

"When did I say I didn't like him?"

"Well, the two of you aren't exactly big buddies."

"No thanks to you," he says, and starts digging in his backpack.

"What you mean, no thanks to me?"

Sean fishes out his army water bottle and unscrews the cap. He doesn't offer me any. He leans over and picks up a pebble and flicks it over the edge. I follow its curve through the air.

"You haven't exactly made an effort, have you now, Jamie?"

Before I have a chance to answer he continues. "It's like when you are with Michael you don't care about anyone else."

"That's bullshit, Sean."

"Okay, tell me one time when you invited me to do something with the two of you? It's always just about you and him. Even Eddie thinks so."

"What about the party? You guys were invited to that."

"Thanks a lot. That's different and you know it."

"What's different about it? Anyway, let's talk about something else, Sean."

This heavy black cloud has come from nowhere and settled over the mountain. I stand up and walk over to the edge to see what's keeping the others. Now Eddie has the binocs and Mr Stevens is doing the pointing. I look up to where he's pointing and spot the pair of eagles pinned to the sky. They're hardly bigger than black dots. Right now I wish I was an eagle.

"Why change the subject? You brought it up. You really want to know what I think of Michael?"

"It's already obvious. You don't need to spell it out."

"That's good to hear because I don't know what the hell you see in that guy."

"You're just jealous."

"Jealous? Please, Jamie! What would I be jealous of?"

"That he's my friend and not yours. And that you wish you were like him and had all the opportunities he has. And you're jealous because he doesn't have a limp and you do."

Sean shakes his head, but says nothing. He turns away and stares down the valley.

"I'm sorry Sean, I didn't mean that. I swear I didn't."

"A bit late for that. You've said it."

I stare at Eddie and Martin and Mr Stevens making their way across to us. Sean stands up and adjusts his pack.

“By the way, do you still want to know what Michael said to me at the pool that night?”

“So, tell me. What did he say?”

“A lap-dog. That’s what he called you.”

“Bullshit.”

“See, that’s exactly what I mean. I swear Jamie, you’ve really lost the plot,” Sean says, and then carries on walking.

Time goes into slow motion after we get back from the hike and all I want is the weekend to be over with. Sean acts like nothing’s happened, but it’s obvious he’s avoiding me. That’s okay by me because I don’t exactly want to hang out with him either. When Mr Stevens decides it’s time for another team-building exercise, where one of us is blindfolded and the other one has to tell us where to go and where not to go, Sean and me end up together. We act real polite to each other and Sean makes sure I don’t walk headfirst into a tree. If you saw us you would never think we had an argument in the first place, but underneath it all is this tension that makes everything heavy, even thinking; it would be easier dragging a sack of lead around.

For the rest of the weekend I’m a total zombie, going through the motions and pretending to have a good time. It’s so bad that when Eddie lets rip with a massive Bully Beef fart around the campfire I have to force myself to laugh with the others, including Mr Stevens, who has a good cackle over it.

After we’ve packed up on Sunday afternoon and are getting ready to leave, Mr Stevens tells us to gather round for a debriefing session. We’ve only been here two days, but he’s already brown from the sun and his face looks happy; like someone who’s conquered Everest.

“Right, guys, I just want to say it’s been a pleasure leading you on this expedition of ours. It’s been brilliant.” Mr Stevens looks at each of us and we nod solemnly. “And I must tell you, guys, I’m one hundred and ten percent convinced our youth group has a great future together. If we pull together like we did this weekend, I’m telling you, we can achieve some excellent results.”

“Thanks, Mr Stevens,” says Eddie, before Mr Stevens has a chance to carry on.

“Ja, thanks Mr Stevens for organising everything,” says Sean and walks up to Mr Stevens and shakes his hand. Eddie and Martin and me do the same, thanking Mr Stevens for organising everything. By the time we’ve all gone up to him and shaken his hand he has this huge smile running across his face.

“Hey, before I forget, I have a little something for you.”

Mr Stevens digs around in the Combi and comes back with a bag. He hands each of us a blue t-shirt wrapped in plastic. Eddie is the first to rip his open and he spreads it out for the rest of us to see. On the front is a picture of a mountain with an orange sunset behind, with funeral parlour writing below it: *Scaling New Moral Heights – Golden Gate 1984*

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## TWENTY-NINE

The Phoenix looks like it has always looked. The plaster on the high side wall is peeling off; they never did have a ladder long enough to paint that wall. The front of the building doesn't look much better. The glass doors where we used to queue up, they've been plastered over with God-squad posters. There are torn and scraped-off bits where someone's tried to remove them. I look up. The windows of the Romano's old flat have been smashed. The metal staircase is still there.

Who would have thought, that old Tony Romano would end up making a success of his life? And from what I heard from Simon, all above board and legal. The guy we were all dead-cert would end up behind bars like his brother, instead ends up a Catholic priest in a township outside Joburg, setting up feeding schemes and doing good work among the poor. Like I always maintain, what you see is not what you get.

I leave the humming CBD behind and cross over the bridge. No matter what time of the year, before or after the rains, the river is the colour of brown mud. No wonder Retief or whoever named it the Sand River. It's actually quite pretty if you stop and think about it, what with the willow trees and the weaver birds and the reflections on the water and the secret stretches of soft green grass for fishing. The hole in the fence next to the bridge is still there.

I make my way towards the industrial area. Because it's been so long and so much has changed, I end up driving round in circles before I find the cemetery. But eventually I stumble on it at the end of a potholed gravel road that used to be a tar road, surrounded on all sides by rusty mine buildings.

The pine trees are much taller than I remember. Razor wire runs all the way round from either side of the iron gates. I didn't know there was a market for second-hand coffins and tombstones; maybe it's the body parts they're after.

I park the Kia a little way from the iron gates. Apart from me there is one other car. Good. The last thing I need now is to be accompanied by a full-blown funeral procession.

I sit for a while, fighting off these waves of dread. I've been putting this off for twenty-three years, so you must understand it's not easy for me. I was hoping I would

feel numb by the time I got here, that opposite emotions cancel each other out. I light a cigarette, take one drag, then kill it.

I climb out the car. The gates and the pine trees and the crunching gravel under my feet are familiar. It's like yesterday, Michael and me walking through here that night.

I haven't counted on the fact that people also die like flies in small towns because when I push open the gate I discover mile upon mile of graves stretching in every direction. For the next fifteen, twenty minutes I wander the narrow gravel pathways, becoming more and more desperate. There's no order to the place; the 1970s are mixed in with the 1990s and 2000s. But then I see the pattern; I've just been going about it back to front. In no time I've narrowed my search to the '84s to '86s. I'm now off the gravel path, stepping between the graves. Next to a fading photo of a girl with blonde pigtails, I find what I came for.

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## THIRTY

The first I hear of it is on Monday after our weekend, when I stop at Mario's for a quick Creme Soda and a game of pinball. I'm so busy racking up bonus points I don't notice it at first, the headline splashed across The Vista. But then I slip up and watch my free bonus game go down the tubes, so I stop and dig around in my shorts for another coin. But I've spent the last of my twenties and I'm not in the mood to stand in the queue to change a two-rand note. And because there's nothing better to do I start reading the article.

### **Teenage Girl Drowns in Sand River**

The body of a 16-year-old white female was discovered on Friday morning by a passer-by walking his dog next to the Sand River. The body has been identified as that of Tracy Adrians, who was reported missing last Sunday after she failed to return home. The victim was from Durban and was staying with a relative at the time of her death. According to police and a post-mortem report, the cause of death has not been established, as the body was in an advanced state of decomposition. Post-mortem evidence indicates the victim drowned after slipping down an embankment. The police have confirmed that high concentrations of alcohol were found in the girl's blood, together with trauma to the back of the head. Adrians leaves a widowed father. The police are investigating further.

My heart only starts beating again when I'm back home. I lock my bedroom door and stare at the article again. Next to it is a photo of a girl. She looks really young. She can't be older than twelve when the photo was taken. She's wearing a school uniform and has this Lady Di hairstyle. It's as if I'm looking at someone else, but I know it's her; it can't be anyone else. I read the article again, but I can't get my head around it. My mouth is dry and my throat so tight it feels like a sock has been shoved down it.

*Post-mortem evidence indicates the victim drowned after slipping down an embankment.* What do they mean by that? *Drowned?* I can't think straight. *Drowned how? The police are investigating further.* Why are they investigating further if they know she drowned? It doesn't add up. My brain is struggling to put two and two together. *Tracy Adrians.* I stare at her name, feel it form in my mouth. I read it over and over. It

still doesn't match the face in my head. It's like my head is playing out this weird horrible dream.

And then I'm wondering over and over if Michael has seen the article. He must have. The whole town must have read it by now.

Next thing I hear my mom's car coming up the driveway. I fold the newspaper, then run to the lounge and arrange it on the coffee table. I walk quickly back to my bedroom, shut the door and lie down on my bed. Tracy Adrians. I keep seeing her face as I lie there waiting for the front door to open, my heart thumping in my throat.

I hear my mom's voice first, then Simon's whining.

"Jamie, we're home!" she shouts down the passage.

"Hi mom." It doesn't sound like my voice.

"What are you up to?"

"Uhh, nothing much, just having a nap."

I hear her steps coming down the passage. She sticks her head round the door.

"How are you, sweetie?" she smiles.

"Fine, just a bit zonked. How was your shopping?" Like, I'm actually interested.

"The usual. I can never find anything I want. Would you like to join us for tea? I bought a pack of your favourites."

"Okay, I'll come now-now."

I wait until my mom's in the kitchen, unpacking the groceries and making small talk with Simon. Eventually I force myself to stand up and walk through to the bathroom. I splash cold water on my face and stare at myself in the mirror. I think I look normal. As normal as normal can look in the circumstances.

My mom hasn't finished pouring when she spots the article. She begins to read while stirring her tea, shaking her head from side to side. I try focus on drinking my tea, but I'm feeling more and more anxious, waiting for her to say something, which, of course, she does.

"This is so tragic. The poor girl. Only sixteen. What her poor family must be going through." I watch my mom turn the page, but she turns it back again to the front page and stares at the photo of the girl. She carries on shaking her head from side to side. Simon's

too busy dipping his Romany Cream to be interested. “To think this happened just up the road from us. It’s really too awful.”

“What’s too awful, mom?” says Simon.

“A young girl drowned in the river.”

I take a gulp of tea. It’s so hot I almost burn my mouth to smithereens. Although the last thing I want to do is eat, I help myself to another Romany Cream.

“Didn’t she know how to swim?” says Simon.

“I don’t know, Simey. It could have been anything. That’s why I want you boys to be so careful.”

I keep staring straight ahead, concentrating on the bottom of my cup. I down the rest of the tea and stand up.

“Thanks for the biscuits, mom. I think I need some fresh air. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay, sweetie,” she says.

She is still looking at the photo of the girl when I exit the room. And Simon is climbing into the Romany Creams like there’s no tomorrow.

## THIRTY-ONE

When I finally come around I'm lying curled up on Sean's grave, my cheek plastered in snot and gravel. Lucky there is no-one to witness the spectacle; if there was they would get on their cell and call Lifeline. I don't know how long I've been lying here. It could be minutes, it might be hours. My tears have dried and the winter sun feels warm against my back.

Sean's grave is a nice simple one, nothing grand. A white marble tombstone with simple words from our favourite song. Someone has placed a small vase of daisies on the grave. They are still quite fresh. I can't think who could have left them. After the mine crashed I thought everyone, except Eddie, had left.

There is so much I want to tell Sean. About my life. My half-life. About my marriage to the witch. About my divorce. About meeting Jane. About my two kids. They would have got on like a house on fire. Like a madman, out comes my wallet and the photos I carry of Josh and Mia and I'm asking Sean doesn't he think they're cute, and when is he going to come visit us. You won't believe it, but now I start giggling like a village idiot. I tell him about Jane and her great sense of humour, that she's a total hippie, and I don't know where I would be if I hadn't met her. And out comes the picture of us on honeymoon in Mauritius.

Of course, there's no answer, only this lonely silence coming from Sean's grave. My heart feels like it's being ripped in two.

But I'm not done yet. I haven't come all this way to talk about my family. The waterworks open up again and I have to really work hard to keep myself under control. I take another deep breath and carry on.

I tell Sean I wrote a long letter to his mom and dad apologising for not coming to his funeral, but I ended up not posting it. I want him to know this isn't about excuses. I don't want to be excused. There's no excuse for missing your best friend's funeral. It's just that after I got the news of what happened to him and Eddie, I couldn't move. And that's how things have been for the last twenty-three years.

I've lost track of time sitting with Sean in this peaceful place. I don't want to leave. But eventually I sit up and look at my watch. It's getting late. I tell Sean I'm sorry, but I have to go because I have a plane to catch and I only took two days leave and I have a sales meeting first thing tomorrow morning. I promise him I'll come back soon and this time I'm going to bring Jane and the kids. I stand up and clean myself up. I must look a state. I walk slowly back towards the car, forcing myself to look straight ahead.

Why did it have to end like this, I catch myself telling the Kia: Six feet under a syringa tree, in a place nobody has heard of.

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## THIRTY-TWO

There is a photo in one of our albums, of Sean and me standing together in one of those blow-up swimming pools with fish swimming around the bottom. You would think we were twins, both with the same straight white hair and podgy legs and baby boeps. Sean is holding the fish net and I'm holding the bucket for the imaginary fish we are catching. The photo was taken in the front garden of our old house.

What I'm saying is Sean and me have been friends since we were this high and that's all that matters. And if I can't tell him stuff, who can I tell? That's how I see it. Maybe he feels different but I don't care anymore what happened between us on the mountain. All I know is that it doesn't have to be like this.

I pedal like a madman, my legs still feeling strong from the hike we did. As I hit the dirt road to his house, I tell myself over and over that it's going to be okay. That Sean will know what to do.

The door to his room is shut. Usually I just barge in, but this time I knock.

"Enter at own risk."

Sean is sitting at his workbench, with a soldering iron in his hand. Sean will die with a soldering iron in his hand.

"Hi, Sean."

Sean stops what he's doing and turns around.

"Oh, it's you."

I can tell by his face I'm the last person he expected to see.

"Who did you think it was?"

"I don't know. Just not you."

"Thanks a lot."

"I didn't mean it like that." Sean unplugs the soldering iron and stands up. "You want to sit?"

"I'm okay." I stay standing at the door. Maybe this wasn't such a great idea.

"I was actually thinking of phoning you," he says.

He must see the doubt on my face.

“No, seriously. Ever since the hike I’ve been feeling bad about the stuff we said to each other.”

When Sean says this and he smiles his gap-tooth smile, the heavy load I’ve been lugging around the past few days evaporates.

“Listen Sean, I’m sorry about what I said...”

“Don’t stress about it, Jamie, I’ve been acting like a doos.”

“What are you saying? It’s me who’s been the doos. I don’t blame you for not wanting to speak to me.”

For the next ten minutes Sean and me argue who has been acting the biggest doos: him or me.

“Why don’t we just forget the whole thing and start fresh?” he says eventually.

“I’m happy with that.”

I stick out my hand and we shake on it, both of us with these sheepish smiles plastered to our faces.

“I’ve got an idea, Sean.”

“What?”

“Are you hungry?”

“Is a pancake flat? You know me. Why?”

“Why don’t we hit the Ranch for a burger? I’m sticking.”

“You serious?”

“Deadly serious.”

All the way to the Ranch, with Sean pedalling and me on the back with my feet dragging on the ground and rocking the bike from side to side, we argue who’s going to stick who. And it’s like old times again when it was just Sean and me and we could mess around and say what we want to each other and not care. Sean will think I’m mad if I tell him, but I can’t deny it: I don’t know what I would do if he wasn’t in my life.

The Ranch is a total dump, but the burgers are brilliant. Everything in the place is imitation Wild West, including the owner, Johnnie Silver, whose actual name is John Da Silva. The waiters have to wear paper cowboy hats and speak in an American accent,

which sounds ridiculous because most of them are Afrikaners. It must be the cheesiest restaurant in the world.

“Howdi folks, what can we do you for?” says the bored-looking waitress after we’ve sat down and looked at the menu. Because it’s four o’ clock in the afternoon we have the place to ourselves. Sean and me know already what we are going to have. Bounty Hunters, with extra chips on the side.

“Anything to drink with that, folks?”

Sean asks for a Tarbrush Soda and I order a Slime Creek, which are just other words for Coke and Creme Soda floats. Like I said, the place is totally over the top.

We talk about this and that, about the weekend with Mr Stevens, about school starting next week, which is something I don’t want to think about right now, about the garage remote-control thingie Sean’s building for his dad. About everything except what I need to talk to him about.

When the burgers arrive Sean takes a massive bite, almost dislocating his jaw and squirting tomato sauce down his chin.

“Sean, there’s something I want to tell you.”

“Like what?” he says, wiping his hand across his mouth. “This was a good idea, Jamie.”

I wait until he’s chewed and swallowed and ready to concentrate.

“Are you listening?”

“I’m listening.”

While I’m hunting for the right words Sean manoeuvres his burger into position for another bite.

“Okay, you remember that night at the Velvet Lounge?”

“Of course I remember it. It was only last week. What about it?”

“And you remember that girl you were dancing with?”

“The drunk one? Ja, I remember her. What was her name again?”

“Tracy.”

“Yes, Tracy. What about her?”

“It’s the same girl they found washed up next to the river.”

Sean is still staring at me bug-eyed after I've told him about the newspaper article, which he's heard about but hasn't yet seen. He's hardly chewing now.

"Everything good with you folks?" asks the bored-looking waitress. She's been working at the Ranch for years. Eddie once tried to get a job here so he could eat as many free burgers as he wanted, but they fired him after one day because he messed up so bad.

"Are you bullshitting me?" says Sean.

"Why would I bullshit you?"

"Just checking. Shit. The same girl. I can't believe it."

"But there's something else."

"Something else what?"

"I think Michael and that friend of his from Joburg had something to do with it."

Sean stops slurping his Coke float. "What do you mean had something to do with it?"

So I start telling Sean what happened after he left the Velvet Lounge that night. How Michael and his friend kept buying her drinks, and how Michael decided we should go to the river afterwards, and about him and Tracy getting it off on the grass.

"I don't know, Jamie. It doesn't mean they had anything to do with it?" says Sean, when I'm finished telling him.

"But they were the last ones with her."

"Maybe they were, maybe they weren't. Unless you were there, how do you know for sure?"

"Like I told you, I was there. But just not right to the end."

"What do you mean not right to the end? You said she wasn't keen and then you went home. Maybe I'm dumb or something, but what you're saying doesn't make sense. Maybe you need to tell me again from the beginning."

"Like I said, we all ended up at the river. I swear, Sean, by this time I was so wasted. After you left Michael just kept feeding us vodkas..."

"And then?"

"I don't know, but I must have passed out for a few minutes because the next thing Michael was pulling in big time."

"And where was all this happening?"

"Like I told you. At the river."

“Ja, I know at the river, but where at the river? Next to the jetty, at the pumphouse, where?”

“What does it really matter?”

“Of course it matters.”

“Okay, if you really want to know... At our fishing spot.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“I’m telling you now.”

“Whose idea was that?”

“Michael’s. He said we should go there.”

“But how did Michael know about it?”

“I suppose I must have told him about it.”

By the look on Sean’s face you would think I’ve just shot him through the heart. But he says nothing.

“I’m sorry, Sean. Michael just kept at me to take them there.”

A mom and dad and two kids enter the Ranch and start walking around the place trying to make up their minds where to sit. The youngest kid is trailing after them and picking his nose at the same time. After circling around for five hours they plonk themselves in the booth next to us. That’s how people are in this town.

“So you took them to our spot. And where were you when everything you’re telling me about was going down?”

“A bit further up the way. At the old tree.”

“And that was that?”

“Ja, I suppose so.”

“Suppose so? We’re talking serious stuff here, Jamie.”

“You don’t need to remind me. Okay...” I take a deep breath. “After a while things started getting hectic.”

“Hectic?”

“You know. Like, she wasn’t so into the idea anymore.”

“And Michael and his friend were?”

“Ja, they were really going for it with her.”

“And you decided to leave them to it?” Sean says it like an accusation.

“What was I supposed to do? If you were there you would do the same. It was none of my business. And you don’t know Michael. He can be totally out of control.”

“I was just asking.” Sean stirs his straw around the bottom of his glass, then licks it.

“And you reckon they did stuff to her?”

“I can’t say for sure, but I think so.”

“And you didn’t do anything?”

“No. Nothing.”

“And then you left?”

“Yes.”

“And then what?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they panicked or something.”

“Or maybe they also just left her there and she fell into the river and drowned.”

“Maybe. But what if they didn’t?”

Sean leans back and sighs. “I wish you hadn’t told me all this stuff.”

“Sorry, but I just thought you should know.”

“Thanks a lot. But what am I supposed to do with it?”

“Are you saying I shouldn’t have told you?”

“I’m not saying anything.”

“Now I feel bad for making my problem your problem.”

“I said thanks for telling me, Jamie.” Sean looks around for the waitress. She’s hanging around behind the counter, chatting up the griller. Eventually Sean catches her eye and she makes her way slowly towards us like it’s a huge effort. “What I want to know, Jamie, is what you’re going to do now? That’s all I want to know.”

### THIRTY-THREE

“Are you sure you are okay, sweetie? You’ve hardly eaten a thing.”

“I said I’m fine, mom. I just don’t have an appetite.”

I’ve been staring at my bolognaise for the last ten minutes. Usually I can’t get enough of the stuff.

I can feel my mom’s eyes on me and the worried look on her face. I keep staring at my plate, twirling spag around the fork, untwirling it. This thing in my head hasn’t left me alone for a second. Speaking to Sean helped a bit, but now it’s back with a vengeance. It’s a starving tapeworm with ten heads and growing all the time, eating me from the inside out. If it carries on like this, there’s soon going to be nothing left.

“Can I have yours, Jamie?” says Simon.

Before I can say no, he’s stretching over the table. I slap his grubby paw.

“I didn’t say you can have it.”

“But you said you weren’t hungry.”

“What if I want it later?”

“Later is breakfast. You can’t eat spaghetti for breakfast.”

Simon must think this the funniest thing ever because he starts giggling to himself.

“Mom?” says Simon.

“Simey, I’m sure your brother will let you finish what he doesn’t want.”

“No, he won’t,” says Simon.

Simon stands up and pushes his chair back and makes to leave the table. He catches me totally unawares when he dives across and snatches the bread-roll off my plate. I try grab his hand, but he’s lightning-quick and all I get is fresh air. He crams the roll into his mouth as fast as he can, watching me with wide eyes.

“You’re pathetic,” I say. “Mom, I really don’t have time for this. I’m going to bed.”

For hours now I’ve been staring at the shadows from the tree outside, moving slowly back and forth across the ceiling. The Spitfire I built when I was a kid has become a real fighter plane cruising through the night clouds – that’s how bad it is.

It's one of those nights when the air stops dead in its tracks, grabs you around the neck and slowly suffocates you. When the sheets stick to your back and you're as helpless as an insect caught in a spider's web. It's one of those nights when counting sheep or switching on the radio or walking up and down the passage doesn't help.

But once I make up my mind there's nothing to stop me. I fumble in the dark for my jeans and slops, tip-toeing around so I don't wake Simon, who's busy grinding down his teeth.

Next thing I'm standing in the flower-bed outside our bedroom window. I head round the side of the house, climb over the fence and cut my way through the veld. The shhh-shhh of the grass against my jeans, the kiwiets getting upset, the purple sky crammed with stars, the cool air against my skin, at last I can breathe again.

I cross over Voortrekker to the wide grassy island that runs all the way down towards the bridge. I kick off my slops. The grass is cool and soft between my toes, and covered with long black shadows from the jacarandas. I suck in deeply, filling my lungs with the night air. It smells of early morning dew and municipal sewerage water. Simon once drank the water in the park and had the runs for days after that. I don't know where he kept it because it just kept coming.

A red Skyline cruises slowly past and we end up meeting at the Stop-street. The guy has to wait for me to cross over and he gives me this look as I walk past his bonnet. He must think I'm psycho walking around at midnight. But he also looks dodge, like someone who's been getting it off with the wife of some poor guy on shift.

I arrive at the bridge and crawl through the hole in the fence and make my way down the path to the river. Luckily there's a thin slice of moon to light up the way because I didn't even think of bringing a torch. Michael would do his nut if he knew I was here, but right now I'm so revved up I don't really care.

The water is flatter than glass; except for the turning shaft lifts miles downstream there's hardly a sound in the air. I must have been walking in a half-dream state because in no time I'm back at the spot, and not so revved up anymore. I tell myself there's nobody but me here, which doesn't help much; I'm becoming more spooked by the second. It's like I'm being watched, but I don't know by who or what. I don't know why

I've come back here, but I force myself to focus, to work out what happened and what didn't happen.

My head is still playing games with me and nothing makes much sense. I'm back where it happened, but I'm struggling to remember. It's all one big soup.

I see her dancing under the strobe light, first with Sean and later on with Michael. I see Michael handing her a double-vodka, and then another one. I see her smoking my last cigarette under the flashing blue sign outside. I see her walking in front of me, tramping through the mud and long grass, complaining all the way. I see her and Michael getting it on big time. I see Michael slapping her through the face. I see him and Jono pinning her down....

But from here everything goes fuzzy and into fast forward. I can't stop seeing her body, white and puffy, floating in the river, face down, her legs and arms wide open, her long black hair fanned out around her, her mini-skirt pulled up high around her hips, the sun's rays piercing the brown water, catching her silhouette as it sways this way and that way, with a crab crawling up her leg to take a closer look, and a carp and a barbel in the background. At night I lie awake for hours, watching the moon reflect off those big silver earrings and the bangles on her wrists...

I'm still telling myself there's nobody here but me when something blasts from the bulrushes. There's no way I'm hanging around to see what it is; I'm out of there so fast I don't bother with the path. And I don't stop running until I'm through the hole in the fence and cutting through the veld back to our house.

## THIRTY-FOUR

Jesus, who would have thought? You spend half your life in the same place, between a mine dump called Everust and a brown river called the Sand, and you think this is it. This is what life's about and this is how life will always be. You believe nothing can, nothing will ever really change. But then something comes along from nowhere and catches you so unawares you don't know if you're coming or going. And from then on nothing is ever quite the same again.

It must have been a dream come true for Eddie. Him and Sean together in Angola. Fighting side by side. Eddie behind his R1 and Sean with signals – electronics was always Sean's thing. I still don't know how he passed the physical. But he did.

I can remember the phone-call from my mom. It's what you call a 9-11 moment. One of those moments life never allows you to forget. I can still smell the callbox – the stale Stuyvesant smoke and the farts of a thousand Maties students trapped in the blue wall-to-wall carpeting running up the walls and across the ceiling.

Fortunately my mom spared the small talk. From what I pieced together, it was one of our own, an officer who had seen one bloated Swapo corpse too many. The grenade must have rolled along the floor and come to a halt under Sean's bed. They say he died instantly, none the wiser. Eddie was luckier – if you can call it that. He was sitting on the longdrop when the grenade tore into the sleeping bodies. If I know Eddie he would have chosen to join Sean and the seven others who died in the shrapnel and R1 bullets that followed, before the *bossies* officer shoved the barrel into his own mouth and pulled the trigger. But Eddie wasn't given the choice. Next thing he's discharged on compassionate grounds and given a life sentence in this place.

Shit, it feels like it happened just yesterday.

Anyway, I had seriously better get moving now because I've been sitting here for ages, staring through the windscreen at this couple who've been here since before I arrived; arranging their flowers and pulling up the weeds and trimming the grass around the grave with pruners they've brought along specially for the job. It must be their son or

daughter. Maybe an only child. Who else would you put in so much effort for, besides your own kid?

University of Cape Town

## THIRTY-FIVE

*Tight Lines* is mainly filled with photos of big Afrikaner types in tight rugby shorts and dirty t-shirts holding up dead fish. I don't know why I bother. They're mostly salt-water fish. Cob, leervis, galjoen, that type of thing. I would be much more into fishing if we lived at the coast. Sean and me would go fishing every day.

I flip forward to the fresh-water section. The pictures are now of muddy dams and rivers and ugly fish. There's a photo of a guy with a scary-looking 45kg barbel, caught at Hartebees. The photo could have been taken next to the Sand. There's even a big willow tree in one of the photos.

"Knock, knock." My mom pokes her head around the door. "What are you up to, Jamie?"

"Nothing much. Just reading."

"In that case, how would you like to go on an outing with me?"

"What type of outing?"

"Well, let's see... How about, after I've popped in at the home we buy you a few new clothes. Followed with cake afterwards at the mine club. What do you think?"

"And Simon? Is he also coming?"

"No, it will only be the two of us. Come on, we haven't done anything together for ages."

I don't know if it's Dries Vermeulen's 58kg grunter caught off Gericke's Point on eight kilo tackle or the crazy stuff that's going round and round in my head, because I look up from the page.

"Okay, I'll go with you."

"Mom, the thing I want to know is why they give these places such rosy names. I mean, when you think about it, there's no difference between an old age home and a mortuary."

"That's a rather depressing thought."

"Well, it's true. The one is just a departure lounge for the other. Sonskyn. What a bullshit name. And that place gran stayed at, what was that called?"

“Village of Happiness.”

“You see what I mean? That’s also a bullshit name.”

“Language, sweetie.”

“Sorry. But why can’t they just say it like it is?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Watch out for that truck, mom, he’s not indicating. Okay, how about... Death’s Door? That’s a good name. Or what about, Home for the Nearly Dead?”

“My, you are in a cynical mood today,” says my mom, but trying not to smile.

We pass the Phoenix – *Rocky* is still showing – then we swing a left into De La Rey and then a right at the NG church. Huis Sonskyn, as it’s called, sticks out like a sore thumb; you would have to be blind to miss it. It’s a long brown block of a building with tiny windows at the front and a high wire fence running right around to keep the old people in. The place is real depressing.

The bored-looking black guy at the gate lifts the boom and waves us through – if we were on a kidnap mission he would still wave us through. The only patches of shade have been hogged by white cars with G number plates. The idea of waiting in the blazing sun doesn’t exactly appeal so I have no choice but to join my mom. I help her carry the basket of goodies she’s baked, all of it stuff you don’t need teeth for. The first time my mom came here she baked crunchies and the staff ended up eating them.

I’ve never been inside before and it’s worse than I thought. There’s a waiting room with plastic chairs and old salt and pepper wall-to-wall carpets and a pile of *Readers Digest* that’s at least a hundred years old. On the wall there’s a faded poster of a tropical island with palm trees. A fat woman in a nurse outfit is standing behind the counter. Her badge says M Masebe. She’s got a huge smile and perfect white teeth.

My mom and the nurse woman chat for a while, like they are old buddies. I’m not exactly keen to hang around the dingy waiting room so I follow my mom through the door marked A-Section. We walk down a long dark passage smelling of Jik and old age. At the end of the passage the door opens to a stoep and a quad area covered in moth-eaten brown grass. There’s a fountain or some other water feature in the middle that’s bone-dry.

The stoep is lined up with ancient black people on white plastic chairs. A few of them are in wheelchairs. They don't look in a good way. Some of them don't even look human. They're mostly bags of skin and bone dressed in old rags, staring at the ground and scratching at their paper-thin skin.

My mom looks back to check that I haven't fainted. She stops at this shrivelled old man with snow-white hair, and puts her basket down. He must be about two hundred years old. He's so tiny his stick legs don't touch the ground. He's wearing Bata school shoes, but no laces and socks.

"Hullo, Mr Mafokeng!" my mom shouts into his ear. "How are you today?"

I look around, but nobody seems to be paying much notice. Mr Mafokeng's tiny head looks up at my mom and flashes this toothless smile, and his eyes sparkle like he's just come back from the dead.

My mom and Mr Mafokeng are soon chatting away about the weather and Mr Mafokeng's children, Dumisani and Harriet, who haven't visited him in ages by the sounds of it. The old people in their plastic chairs begin to stir and look more alive. When Mr Mafokeng gets revved up about the families never visiting an old woman in a rusty wheelchair rolls her head from side to side and claps her hands. He's a total character, this Mr Mafokeng, with a laugh that's way too big for his body.

My chest wants to burst as I watch my mom go around greeting the old people by their names and handing out biscuits, and before I know it I'm helping her hand out the rest of the stuff she's baked.

The mine tea garden must be the most underrated spot on earth. Most times we come here we have the place to ourselves and the menu has just about everything it says it has. The only other people who come here are oldies with purple hair and moms with young kids who want to feed the ducks.

We find a shady spot near the pond and wait for the waitress to serve us. To kill time we watch a skinny kid with red hair tearing chunks from a loaf of white bread and squeezing it through the chicken-wire. The ducks are going psycho for it. They're the type of ducks that would kill their own mother for a few crumbs.

My mom breaks the silence. "This is very pleasant, don't you think?"

“I guess so.”

“What are you going to have?”

“The usual.”

“Float and chocolate cake?”

“Yep.”

“I might try the scones for a change. And a Nescafe.”

My mom’s been trying to make small talk all afternoon. I don’t want to sound ungrateful and all, but I’m really not in the mood for talking. Which isn’t like me.

The waitress takes our order and we sit watching the redhead for a while. The kid’s mother is sitting alone at a table, watching him start a duck riot. She’s looking more stressed by the minute.

“Is everything okay, Jamie?” my mom asks out of the blue. I keep staring at the kid, feeling her eyes drill into me.

“Ja, why shouldn’t everything be okay?”

“You don’t seem your usual self lately, that’s all.”

“What’s my usual self?”

“Well, for a start, you are usually a lot more talkative.”

“Maybe I just feel like being quiet for a change. I can’t be on stage twenty-four seven, you know.”

“Nobody is saying you have to be on stage, sweetie. We are just a little concerned something may be wrong and you’re not telling us.

“Who is we?”

“Your father and I.”

“Oh.”

“And you’ve hardly been eating.”

“I’ve ordered chocolate cake, haven’t I?”

“I’m talking proper food.”

While the waitress is arranging everything on the table I ask for extra ice-cream to prove my mom wrong about my eating. I scoop the whole lot into my float and make a big show of eating it.

“How is the chocolate cake?”

“Not bad. You want to try some?”

“I’m fine.”

I stuff a chunk of cake into my mouth. They’ve used Stork, not real margarine to make it.

“Thanks again for the clothes, mom. I appreciate it.”

“It’s a pleasure. I’m just relieved we found you a replacement pair of school shoes at the same time.”

“Me too. I was getting ready to go back to school barefoot. You should try some of this float, mom. It’s much better with extra ice-cream.”

My mom takes a small, delicate sip. Everything she does is delicate. That’s what I like about her. That she’s delicate and strong at the same time. She hands the glass back.

“I don’t want to harp on, but if there was something wrong, you would tell us, wouldn’t you, Jamie?”

“There’s nothing wrong, mom. I told you already.”

“But if there was, I want you to know you can come to us.”

“Thanks, mom. I know that. But do you mind if we change the subject now?”

As usual my dad is sitting behind his Star when I walk into the house lugging my bags of new clothes. *A Country in Flames* is splashed in red capitals across the front page. Under the headline is a photo of a burning car and rioters going berserk.

“Your friend called,” my dad says from behind his newspaper. “Twice, in fact.”

“What friend?”

“Michael Dempsey.”

“Oh.” The afternoon with my mom vaporises into nothing. “What did he want?”

“I don’t think anything in particular. Except that he would like you to give him a call when you get in. He sounds like a charming guy.”

“Is that all he said? That he wants me to call him back?”

“Yes. And apparently there’s something he would like to talk to you about.”

“Like what?”

“I have no idea, Jamie. I’m only the messenger,” says my dad, before his head disappears behind the newspaper.

## THIRTY-SIX

I would be lying if I said I'm not avoiding Michael. To be honest, I've been avoiding him like the plague. Even though I keep planning to, I still haven't phoned him back. He's phoned four times already. So that's why it comes as a total shock when I hear his voice behind me at the OK record bar.

"Don't bother buying it, James. Their last album was miles better."

I turn round and there's Michael standing next to me, looking as tanned as ever, but with dark rings around his eyes. From partying too much, I bet.

"Hi, Jamie."

"Hi, Michael."

"I've been trying to get hold of you for days."

"Sorry. I've been busy."

"That's okay. I thought maybe there was something wrong. I haven't seen you for ages. What have you been so busy with?"

"This and that. Getting organised for school, that type of thing. And you?"

"This and that. We've been away for a few days."

"Where to?"

"Sun City. That's why I was trying to get hold of you."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is I wanted to invite you to join us. You missed out big time. But that's what you get for not phoning me back."

"I was going to phone you..."

"Sure you were. But don't look so worried. Like I said, it's okay."

"My dad said there was something you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Oh, so you did get my messages."

"I didn't say I didn't get them. I've just been busy."

"You've already told me. Something I wanted to talk to you about? Yes, thanks for reminding me. But it's not important."

“What’s not important?” I say, still holding onto the new Bad Company. Sean reckoned it’s the best thing they’ve done. Now I’m not so sure.

Michael acts like he hasn’t heard my question because he’s now more interested in what’s going on in the shop: the grannies pushing their trolleys, this old black guy staring at the rows of dog food, these two kids jumping on the new mattresses, the manager, Mr Swart, walking over to them. Michael must think we’re a bunch of hillbillies. Eventually he turns his attention back to me.

“Listen, my mom’s waiting in the car, but I was just thinking, why don’t we hang out at my place this eve? Come on, it will be great to catch up.” Michael pretends to right-hook me on the shoulder. “I’ve been missing my old buddy. And what’s more, I’ve got a little present for you from Jozie.

“A present?”

“Don’t look so surprised. So how about it?”

The way he says, “How about it?” doesn’t give me much choice.

“Ja, okay. But I can’t stay late.”

I watch Michael push his way through the queue at the till, cross the road and climb into the driver’s seat of his mom’s Ballade. I want to run after him and say I’ve changed my mind. Instead, I just stand there, still holding onto Bad Company.

The rest of the afternoon is a mess; I can’t concentrate on anything. Lame excuse after lame excuse keeps popping into my head, but Michael sees through everything I come up with. It’s like he has this power over a person. Where I’m this radio-controlled car and he’s holding the controls, steering me this way and then that way. Of course I’m exaggerating, but I swear that’s how it feels.

I’m standing outside the front door spot-on eight. The driveway is empty; Michael didn’t say anything about his parents going out. For once the lights along the driveway are switched off. None of the lights in the front rooms are on either. I haven’t been here since the party. The house seems different for some reason; I’ve definitely changed my mind about buying it if I won the jackpot.

I take a deep breath and knock. Nothing. I knock again, harder this time. Just as I’m getting my hopes up a door slams deep in the house. Next thing the entrance hall lights up

and I hear footsteps. The front door scrapes open and Michael is standing in front of me in his black Adidas tracksuit. He's barefoot and his hair is wet and slicked back. The dark rings around his eyes are still there.

"Hey, good to see you, Jamie. I wasn't sure if you would pitch."

"Why wouldn't I pitch?"

"You know. Not getting back to me when I phone. Leaving the party without saying goodbye. Anyway, no worries, I'm glad you could make it. Come in."

I follow Michael into the house. The lights in the lounge are dimmed low. There's classical or opera music playing, I'm not sure which. Either way it's the stuff my parents listen to. Michael walks across the room and turns the volume down.

"What can I get you?"

"Water would be good."

"Funny. How about we have a whisky?"

Before I can say I can't handle the taste of whisky since that night at the cricket field Michael is scratching around in his dad's booze cabinet. He lifts out a bottle of White Horse and pours it into two glasses and doesn't bother with water or ice. He hands me the bigger glass. Rand Mines is engraved on the side.

"Cheers, Jamie. To good friends and all that jazz."

We clink glasses. I take a sip. A shiver ripples down my spine. Michael takes a gulp.

"Wow. Enough to put hair on a man's back, or what?"

"You said you wanted to talk about something?"

"Jesus, relax Jamie. Why so jumpy?"

Michael takes another gulp. It must be an acquired taste. Or he pretends to like it. I take another small sip. The shiver isn't so bad this time. Michael points to the leather couch.

"Sit."

Michael stays standing.

"Seriously, it's good to see you, Jamie. I can't even remember the last time you were here."

"The night of the party."

"Of course. Wasn't a bad party, don't you think?"

“It was okay.”

“It was okay, he says! Jesus, I’m surprised you remember any of it. You were drunk as a skunk.”

“I wasn’t that drunk.”

“You were man down, Jamie. I thought we would have to carry you home from that bar. I swear, I don’t know how you made it back.”

“You make it sound like I was paralytic.”

“Deny it all you want,” laughs Michael. “It doesn’t change the facts; Jono and I both thought you were high as a kite. We even had a good chuckle about it afterwards. Come on, drink up.” Michael walks over from the fireplace and pours some more whisky into my glass, although I’ve hardly made a dent. He still hasn’t bothered sitting down. He leans against the fireplace, watching me take a sip. “You must feel really bad about that girl,” he says.

“What girl?” I say. But I know what girl.

“You know, the girl you were all over that night. The one that drowned. You do know about it, don’t you? It was all over the papers.”

Maybe it’s the whisky, but my body has gone cold and my skin prickly.

“Of course I know about it. But what do you mean I was all over her?”

“Come on, Jamie, we know you were wasted, but surely you weren’t that wasted?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. You were all over her, not me.”

“That’s not the way Jono and I saw it. Feeling her up and all, what do you call that? Anyway, what does it matter now? I’m not surprised she drowned. She was completely legless.”

I just sit there, saying nothing. Michael walks over to the hi-fi system and adjusts the graphic equaliser.

“I love this part,” he says, and turns up the volume and stands there with his eyes closed, listening to the music. At the end of the part he loves Michael opens his eyes and turns the volume down.

“You and that Sean friend of yours must have been plying her with drinks the whole night.”

“What?! You were the ones who kept buying her drinks.”

“Not the way we remember it. She was already legless when we arrived.”

“I swear, I can’t believe what I’m hearing.”

“Why? Can’t you handle the truth?”

“The truth?”

“What’s the problem, Jamie? You’re acting like you’re personally responsible for what happened to her.”

“How can I be responsible? You were the last ones with her.”

Michael places his glass on the mantelpiece.

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning nothing. Except it just seems weird that the two of you were with her last and the next thing she ends up drowned.”

“What the fuck are you on about, buddy? Who says we were the last ones with her? Who says you weren’t the last one with her. Has that crossed your mind?”

“I don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Of course you don’t. That’s because you don’t think before jumping to conclusions. By the way, what conclusion are you jumping to?”

“I’m not jumping to conclusions. I’m just saying.”

Michael slaps his forehead and laughs. “Duh. Just saying. Okay, okay, I get it. Jamie here thinks Jonathan and Michael had something to do with that chick drowning. Why didn’t you just say so in the first place, instead of beating around the bush?”

“I didn’t say that. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“Ag, don’t worry about it. Let’s change the subject.”

Michael walks over and plonks himself down on the couch, right up next to me.

“I want to tell you something, Jamie. Are you listening?”

I nod. “I’m listening.”

“Good, because I’m going to say it once and once only. Jonathan and I had nothing to do with that chick’s drowning. Comprendo?”

“Comprendo.”

“What’s more, for all we know maybe you hung around and came back for leftovers.”

“Oh please...”

“Don’t interrupt, I’m not finished. You and I both know she was zeroed before we even got to the river. You agree?”

“Okay, but what happened after? That’s all I want to know, Michael.”

“What happened? For fuck sakes, aren’t you listening? Nothing happened. We had a bit of fun with her. *You* had a bit of fun with her. She was so wasted she got a bit freaked out. Jono and I got bored and went home. End of story.

“And you just left her there?” The same question Sean asked me.

“Of course we just left her there. What were we supposed to do? Lift her onto our shoulders and carry her home? Please, Jamie, try think logically for a change. How were we supposed to know she was going to crawl into the river and drown herself?”

I stare dumbly at Michael because I don’t know what to make of it all. It sort of makes sense the way he explains it.

“I’m sorry, Jamie, but that’s the truth. And if you don’t believe it, that’s your problem. So, anything else you want to know?”

“I suppose not. But don’t you think we should at least tell someone?”

“Like who?”

“I don’t know. The police, for instance?”

Michael looks at me like I’ve seriously lost my marbles.

“What would be the use of that? Imagine for a second what it would look like? How are you going to explain it? Christ, Jamie, that’s the last thing you want to do. Unless of course you want to land up in shit creek. Is that what you want?”

“Obviously not. I just feel bad about what happened to that girl.”

“We all feel bad, but we’ve got to put it behind us. How were we supposed to know she couldn’t handle her booze? That’s basically all there is to it. End of story.”

“It’s been worrying me, that’s all.”

“And you think it hasn’t been worrying me? Of course you won’t believe me, but I honestly thought you maybe had something to do with it. I thought that’s why you’ve been avoiding my phone calls. And meanwhile you’re thinking the same about me. Crazy, hey? I swear, this is what happens when buddies don’t trust each other.”

I manage to squeeze out a laugh because it is crazy now that I think of it. “You’re probably right.”

“I just wish you had brought the subject up earlier, Jamie. I don’t know why you waited so long. Or is that Sean friend of yours messing with your head?”

“Sean’s got nothing to do with it.”

“If you say so. By the way, what have you told him?”

“What do you mean what have I told him?”

“About that night. Come on, what did you tell him?”

“I didn’t tell him anything.”

“Don’t give me that. You blabbed to him, didn’t you?”

“Okay, maybe I mentioned it. But what does it matter? Sean’s my friend.”

“I knew it! You just don’t know when to keep your mouth shut, do you? Now what if Sean decides to go to the police, Jamie? Have you thought of that?”

“Sean wouldn’t do that.”

“How do you know?”

“He’s my friend.”

“Oh please. Let’s just say he does decide to spill his guts? Do the honourable thing and all that crap.”

“Sean wouldn’t do that. Like I told you, he’s my friend. Friends don’t blab on friends.”

“You have such a way with words.” Michael sticks his hand out and smiles. “All I can say is congrats, James Robinson.”

“Congrats for what?”

“No, seriously. Shake my hand.” Michael takes hold of my hand and shakes it. “Congrats for making Sean an accomplice.”

“An accomplice? How can Sean be an accomplice?”

“You’re so convinced we were responsible, so you work it out... Shit, I almost forgot!”

“What?”

“The present. I’ll be back in sec.”

Before I have a chance to think about what Michael’s just said, about Sean being an accomplice, he’s back in the room and handing me a present wrapped in silver paper.

“Open it.”

“What have I done to deserve this? After everything I said...”

“See it as a belated birthday present.”

I rip open the paper. Staring back at me is a Sony Walkman.

“No ways, Michael. I can’t accept this. Are you crazy?”

“Of course I’m crazy. And of course you can accept it. It’s no big deal. I just hope you don’t already have one.”

“I wish. But seriously, I feel bad. It must have cost a whack.”

“Don’t ask. But listen, if you don’t accept it, I’ll feel hurt. So you have no choice. Come on, open it up. The guy in the shop said it’s the best one on the market.”

“Shit, Michael, what can I say? I still can’t believe it.”

“Don’t say anything. You deserve it. Especially after everything I’ve put you through. Up on your feet, a toast is in order.”

I stand up and I let Michael top up my glass.

“To loyalty.”

Michael waits.

“To loyalty,” I say.

We clink glasses. I force myself to swallow. A cold shiver rips down my back.

## THIRTY-SEVEN

“I’m just telling you what he said.”

“And then he gave you a Walkman. Just like that, hey. What bullshit. You really know how to choose them, Jamie. But I’m not going to tell you I told you so.”

“You just did.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“By telling me you’re not going to tell me so, you’ve already told me.”

“Whatever. Read it like you want.” Sean is pacing up and down the room like a lion stuck in a small cage. “What’s he playing at? If I’m a so-called accomplice then he’s saying it did happen.”

“He didn’t say that. He just said that if the police thought we had something to do with it then you would be an accomplice.”

“Because I didn’t go to them first?”

“Ja, that type of thing.”

“Then maybe I should go to the cops.”

“Sean.”

“Why not, Jamie? If you are so innocent like you claim and your best buddy is innocent like he claims, what’s the problem? Maybe I’ll be doing you both a favour.”

“He’s not my best buddy. Come on, Sean, you know why we can’t go to the police. I’ve explained it to you a hundred times. It will just make things worse.”

“Whatever.”

Sean picks up a tennis ball from his workbench and starts working out with it. First his left hand, then his right.

“I hope you’re not going to keep that Walkman?”

“I can’t exactly give it back to him, can I now?”

“Why not? Can’t you see what he’s doing? A present!”

“Maybe you’re just reading too much into it.”

“You reckon? Anyway, it’s your choice.”

Sean bounces the tennis ball against the wall. He misses the catch and it rolls under the bed.

“That bastard deserves to be taught a lesson.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m not saying anything. I just can’t believe you’re letting him get away with his crap.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Do you know what he’s doing, Jamie? He’s playing this little cat-and-mouse game.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. Jesus, your head is so stuck up your arse you can’t see things for what they are.”

“I’m just confused, that’s all. I don’t know what to think anymore. You don’t know Michael. He’s really good at convincing you into believing something.”

“I can see that.” Sean digs under the bed and starts tossing the tennis ball again.

“So what should we do?”

“I like the we.”

“You were the one who said he should be taught a lesson. Maybe you’re right.”

“I am right. But you know what? I actually I don’t care a stuff.” Sean stops tossing the ball and listens. “Eddie’s here.”

“You haven’t told him anything?”

“Not yet,” says Sean and goes to the door and shouts, “Eddie!”

Seconds later Eddie barges into Sean’s room, wearing one of Luke’s old army t-shirts and a pair of rugby shorts that’s been in the wash one time too many.

“What you been talking about?” says Eddie, after he’s plonked himself down on Sean’s bed and told us how hot as hell it is outside.

Sean carries on bouncing the ball against the wall, but says nothing. The plastering is so bad he has to duck and dive for the ball. I look at Sean, then I look at Eddie.

“We were busy planning to take someone out.”

Sean stops tossing the ball and stares at me.

“You mean kill someone?” says Eddie.

“Ja, that type of thing,” I say. “But we have to make it look like an accident. Just for fun, we’ve been thinking how we would do it.”

“I like this game. I bet I can come up with plenty of ideas.”

“But you’ve got to make it look like an accident. You can’t just go shoot him through his head with Luke’s R1.”

“Ja, if you can’t get away with it, it doesn’t count,” says Sean, slotting into the idea.

“An accident?” says Eddie.

“Ja, my dad reckons it happens all the time.”

“What?”

“People getting taken out and not going to jail for it.”

“Like where?” says Sean.

“Like what’s going on in the townships, that’s where.”

“That’s different.”

“No, it’s not.”

“That’s political stuff.”

“So?”

“So, it’s different.”

“Are you going off your rocker, Jamie? Of course it’s different,” laughs Eddie. “I skim Jamie’s losing it, Sean.”

“I skim so too.”

“You can think what you want. Anyway, if you’re so cocky, Eddie, how would you make it look like an accident?”

Eddie scratches the side of his face, like he always does when he’s trying to think. He’s been doing it since he was this high.

“I know!”

“What?”

“I would use those mine detonators we found at the dump. Who is it we want to take out?”

“Let’s pretend it’s someone we know, about our age. That’s right, hey Jamie?”

“Ja, someone like that.”

“Okay, so what I would do is take the detonators and invite this guy to go with us to set them off, like we did that time in the veld.”

“And?”

“Give me a chance. When he’s not looking we will jump him and wrestle him to the ground. While Sean and me hold him down Jamie here can tie him up with a piece of rope. And then we will set off a mother of a detonator right next to his head. Bham! Problem solved.”

“You call that an accident?”

“Duh. You just tell the cops the guy was messing around with the detonator when it went off.”

“Ja, and what do you tell the cops when they find his arms in a tree and they’re still tied together with rope?”

We all laugh at this, even Eddie.

“I’ve got a better idea,” says Sean.

“I bet it’s not better than mine,” says Eddie.

“It’s simpler for a start. Okay, what you do is you invite this guy to go fishing with you on the dam.”

“And then?”

“And then you row to the middle of the dam and you start fishing.

“And then?”

“I’m getting to it. After you’ve been fishing for a bit you get him to lean over the front of the canoe.”

“How you going to do that?”

“Easy. You pretend your line is stuck in the reeds and you ask him to help you untangle it.”

“And then?”

“While he’s leaning over the front, you whack him on the back of the head with the oar and toss him into the water.”

“And you call that an accident. My idea was much better.”

“I’m not finished, Eddie. First you make sure he’s drowned, and then what you do is you capsize the canoe and swim back to shore.

“But what if someone sees you whacking the guy over the head?”

“You do it when nobody’s around. Like at night.”

Eddie and me think about Sean’s idea for a while. It’s not a bad one.

“It’s a brilliant plan. What you think, Jamie?”

“Ja, it’s not bad. Better than Eddie’s at any rate.”

“What if the guy gets seasick and doesn’t want to go with you?”

“What if your guy doesn’t want to schlep into the veld with you and blow up detonators?”

“You show me anyone who doesn’t want to blow up detonators.”

“I bet there are plenty. At least I can give my guy seasick tablets.”

“What about you, Jamie? What genius plan can you come up with?” asks Eddie.

“Yes, come on, Jamie. This was your idea,” says Sean. “What better scheme have you come up with?”

“You really want to know?”

“Ja, give it to us.”

“I’ve been thinking about it a long time. That’s why it’s much better than any of your ideas.”

“Ja, so?”

“And it’s quite complicated.”

“Ja?”

“And violent.”

“Who cares!” says Eddie.

“You sure you want to hear?”

“Come on, Jamie!”

“But before I tell you, you’ve both got to swear on your mother’s life that what I tell you won’t leave this room.”

“Okay, I swear, Jamie,” says Sean, seriously.

“What about you, Eddie. Do you swear? I’m not joking. We are going to go ahead with this.”

Eddie also now turns serious. “Ja, I swear, Jamie, I won’t tell anyone.”

“Because if you do there could be big shit. Especially for you, Eddie, because you play a big role in the plan.”

“Ja, ja, I swear.” Eddie’s face now looks worried. “What you mean, big role?”

“Don’t worry, I’m getting to it.” I stand up and walk to the door, check that there’s nobody around, then lock it. “You ready for this, Eddie?”

Eddie nods.

“Sean?”

“Ja, I’m ready, Jamie.”

“Okay, here goes.” I take a deep breath. “You borrow Luke’s R1. You shoot the guy through the head. You then chop him into a hundred pieces and feed him to Eddie’s neighbour’s dog, one piece at a time. And when the cops come round and ask you what happened, you tell them it was an accident.”

University of Cape Town

## THIRTY-EIGHT

We've hardly sat down for supper when the doorbell goes. Simon rushes off to answer it and he's back a second later. He climbs back into his chair and says nothing.

"So?"

"Evening all," comes Michael's voice from the doorway behind me. It's like someone's whacked me on the back of the head with a baseball bat. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

My dad leaps up and walks round the table to greet him.

"Not at all."

"Hi Mr Robinson, I'm Michael."

"Yes, of course, Michael. Great to finally meet you." My dad shakes Michael's hand. "Would you like to join us for supper? We were just about to start."

"Are you sure, Mr Robinson. I'm sure you haven't planned for extra guests."

"Of course I'm sure. There's plenty to go round. I hope you like lasagne?"

"What a question, Mr Robinson."

"Well then." And my dad pulls out a chair at the head of the table and Michael slides into it.

"I really hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Not at all," says my dad for the hundredth time. Simon and me still haven't said a word.

"Hullo, Jamie," says Michael.

"Hi."

"Well, well, well," says my dad. We all turn and look at him. He's the only one who looks chuffed to have an uninvited guest for supper. "You will be interested to know, Michael, we sat next to your parents at the mine dinner last Friday."

"Yes, they mentioned it, Mr Robinson. Apparently it was a ball."

"It was. Your mom and dad know how to have a good time."

"That they do. They also really enjoyed meeting you and Mrs Robinson."

"They did?"

Before Michael has a chance to lay it on thick, my mom walks in with the lasagne. Michael leaps up and rushes over to her.

“Hi, Mrs Robinson. I’m Michael. Let me help you with that.”

Although my mom has done this a thousand times before she hands the tray to Michael.

“Mind moving that jug, Jamie. Thanks.”

“Yes, just put it there, Michael,” my dad says, looking impressed. “This is Michael Dempsey.”

“Nice to meet you, Michael. We were with your parents only a few days ago.”

“Dad’s already told him, mom,” says Simon.

“I hope you’re staying for a bite to eat.”

“I’ve already twisted his arm. I told him your lasagne is the best thing this side of Sicily,” says my dad, and winks at Michael, who winks back.

“That’s if you don’t mind, Mrs Robinson?”

“Of course not. I can’t believe we haven’t met you before. Jamie’s told us so much about you.”

“Hopefully not all bad.”

“Quite the opposite. Jamie, why don’t you fetch an extra plate and cutlery for your friend.”

“Thanks, Jamie, you’re a star,” says Michael, as I walk past him.

I take my time in the kitchen because I need to get my head straight. While I’m finding a clean knife and fork my dad and mom are cackling over something Michael’s just said. I move closer to the door and stand there listening.

“I don’t know what my dad was thinking, but he leaned over to pay the gondolier and the next thing we hear is this massive splash. We turn around and there’s my dad treading water and looking like a drowned rat.”

“Oh my goodness,” says my mom, with her hand still over her mouth when I walk back into the room. “He must have been so embarrassed.”

“Thanks, Jamie,” says Michael. “That wasn’t the half of it. He had his wallet and passport on him at the time.”

“Oh heck,” says my dad, shaking his head. Even Simon is looking interested in Michael’s story. “And? Did he manage to save them?”

“Lucky for my dad he didn’t spend too much time in the water. But to cut a long story short, we spent the rest of the day in the hotel room blow-drying my dad’s passport and a wad of travellers’ cheques.”

“I can’t believe it,” says my mom, wiping her eye with a serviette. “Please help yourself, Michael.”

My dad is still shaking his head from side to side. “What a story,” he says.

“This lasagne is delicious, Mrs Robinson. It beats anything my mom’s ever made.”

“Thank you Michael, but I’m sure your mom is an excellent cook.”

“No, seriously. My mom’s not one for the kitchen. With her job and all we don’t get to spend much time sitting around the table like this. It’s really great.”

“Try telling that to Jamie and Simon,” says my dad. “But yes, I guess we are very fortunate.”

“I suppose you only miss something when you no longer have it,” says Michael.

“That’s very true,” says my dad. He gives my mom a look across the table. “You guys should take a page out of Michael’s book.” I pretend I didn’t hear my dad.

“Can I have some more, mom?” Simon says.

“Perhaps ask Michael first if he would like some more?”

“Do you want some more?”

“I’m fine for now. Maybe a little later,” says Michael.

“Wait a little while, sweetie,” my mom says.

“But I’m still hungry.”

“Simon,” my dad says.

“To change the subject,” says Michael, stretching for the salad. “Did you and Mrs Robinson hear about that girl who drowned in the river.”

Michael’s hand closes over the salad bowl, then drags it slowly across the tablecloth towards his plate.

“Yes, everybody seems to be talking about it,” my dad says. “Very sad.”

“I haven’t stopped thinking about her poor family,” says my mom. “What they must be going through.”

“Apparently she was an only child,” says Michael.

“Which makes it all the more devastating. The pain doesn’t bear thinking about,” says my mom. “Have some dressing, Michael.”

“Thanks, Mrs Robinson, I think I will.” Michael pours some dressing over his salad and forgets a few drops behind on the table cloth. He pushes the cork back into the bottle.

“I know I shouldn’t say this... By the way, this dressing is really good, Mrs Robinson.”

“Shouldn’t say what?” says my dad.

“I don’t know... Okay, the newspaper and police said it was an accident, but how do they know that for sure?”

“Are you suggesting foul play may have been involved? That’s an interesting thought.” My dad manoeuvres a piece of lettuce that’s too big to fit into his mouth. “On the other hand, I’m sure the police have their methods for assessing something like this.”

“Maybe you’re right, Mr Robinson. But you know what I’m saying?”

“I think I do. And you’re right, I wouldn’t put it past our police to jump to the wrong conclusion. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“That’s what I’m saying. Maybe they jumped to the wrong conclusion. Like, they didn’t say what she was doing at the river in the first place. And they said she had an injury on the back of her head, but they didn’t really explain where that came from. And they didn’t say if she was alone or with somebody at the time. Or anything like that.”

“Well, it’s an interesting thought. And it’s good to question these things, Michael. You haven’t thought of studying law by any chance, have you?”

“Actually I have, Mr Robinson. Law or maybe medicine.”

“I can imagine you would be very good at both. But back to the topic, from what I read it’s a cut-and-dried case of accidental drowning. I’m not sure what evidence would have to come to light for the police to reopen the case.”

“As if her poor parents haven’t been through enough already,” says my mom. “Would you like some more salad, Michael?”

“Michael does have a point, Isabel. I’m sure her family has a niggling question at the back of their minds. After all, this is South Africa.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, Mr Robinson. I just sometimes think people believe what they want to believe because they can’t be bothered to find the truth.”

“That’s very true, Michael. History is full of examples.”

“Well, in this case it’s something I would prefer not to think about,” says my mom, standing up. “It’s far too depressing. Who would like some dessert?”

“Me!” shouts Simon.

Michael pierces a baby tomato onto his fork. While my mom and dad and Simon clear the plates, I watch him chew on it slowly. He swallows, then turns and winks at me.

It must be two hours later when Michael gets up from our couch.

“Well, Michael,” my dad says. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you. And I must say, Jamie is privileged to have a friend like you.”

“Thanks Mr Robinson. It’s been great meeting you too. And thanks again for dinner; it was excellent.”

After my dad and Michael have shaken hands and again told each other how great they are, I lead the way to the front door.

“You want to walk with me part of the way?” he says.

“Didn’t you come by car?”

“No. There’s something I need to tell you.”

I’m still holding the door open for him, but he’s in no rush.

“You can tell me now, can’t you?”

Michael looks over my shoulder. “I suppose I can. As long you don’t mind your brother listening in.”

I turn around. Simon is standing a few metres away, watching us.

“What do you want, Simon?”

“Nothing.”

“In that case, scram!”

I turn back to Michael. “I’ll walk with you to the end of the road.”

When we come to the bus shelter at the corner of Hibiscus, I stop. Someone has carved the word Poes in big letters down the one side.

“Okay, what do you want to tell me, Michael?”

“I’m going back to school tomorrow.”

“Oh.”

“And I don’t know if I’ll see you again.”

“Why? Aren’t you coming back?”

“Not if I can help it. And my dad’s been offered another job. They’ll probably be long gone from here before I come back.”

I don’t say anything.

“I’m sorry about tonight, Jamie.”

“It wasn’t funny. I can’t believe you did that.”

“Come on, lighten up, I was just messing with you. I said I’m sorry.”

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

“You’re right, I shouldn’t have. So you forgive me?”

“I suppose so.”

“I’ve given you a hard time, haven’t I?”

“That’s no lie.”

“You won’t believe me, but I actually feel really bad about some of the things I did and said. I wish I could make it up to you somehow.”

“I’ve already got a Walkman.”

“Funny. That was a present and you know it.”

“It doesn’t matter. You don’t have to make anything up to me. Maybe it’s better you’re leaving.”

“I’m sorry you feel like that.”

“I’m also sorry.”

“I suppose I don’t blame you. You must admit though, we had some fun times. Don’t you think?”

“If you say so.”

“Come on, you know we did.”

I’m waiting for Michael to say bye.

“I suppose that’s it then.”

“I suppose so.”

“Sorry, Jamie, there’s one other thing. Do you mind if I ask a personal question?”

“Why should I mind?”

“Okay, great. Can I trust you, Jamie?”

“What you mean can you trust me?”

“Can I trust you to keep what is ours, ours. You know what I mean.”

“Ja, okay.”

“Ja, okay, what?”

“If that’s the way you want it.”

“Please, I want to hear it, Jamie.”

“What?”

“That you promise to keep what is ours, ours.”

“I promise to keep what is ours, ours. There, you happy now?”

Michael takes hold of my hand and says in this serious voice, “And I swear, Jamie, I will do the same for you.”

I pull my hand away. I don’t say anything. I don’t know what to say. What to feel.

“I guess I had better get moving. I told my parents I would be back ages ago. Anyway, what can I say, Jamie, except that it’s been a blast. The past month wouldn’t have been the same without you. And listen, if you ever come up to Joburg you know who to call.”

We shake hands. Michael looks me in the eye.

“Blood brothers, hey Jamie?”

And then Michael laughs. And he turns, and walks away.

## THIRTY-NINE

I never went to the police. And Sean kept to his word. He didn't even tell Eddie – as far as I know. He left the decision in my hands. Not that you can call it a decision. It was more like a non-decision. For twenty-three years I kept what happened that night to myself. Like all those guys sitting in front of the TV with their Blackie in one hand and the remote in the other, you think it will eventually go away.

I must have been caught up in Mandela's Rainbow moment because just after the elections I decided to visit the girl's father. I went as far as tracking him down to an address in Berea: 104 Earl's Court. The address has stayed in my head – carved into my brain like that word on a bus shelter along Hibiscus Avenue.

I had it all worked out. I would overlap it with a visit to my mom in Pietermaritzburg; she's been living there since my dad passed on. I even went as far as booking the flight and hiring a car from Avis to make the day trip to 104 Earl's Court. Anyway, as my big date with Fate approached, this fantasy of mine – I swear, that's what it was all along, nothing but a dumb fantasy – began to fall apart. Who was I to offload my crap onto an old man? Who did I think I was? An upcoming star in my own episode of the TRC? And what was I going to say when the door to 104 Earl's Court opened? "Morning, Mr Adrians, my name's James Robinson. I'm here to tell you your daughter was maybe raped and maybe murdered by two psycho kids. How do I know this? Well, Mr Adrians, I was sort of there when it happened."

I cancelled the car and lost what I paid on the airticket. And that's where I left it. Until a few months ago, that is.

It's weird how life works; like I always maintain you never know what's lying around the next corner. To cut a long story short, here I was settling into the Holiday Inn, enjoying the facilities, taking a slow wallow after a day on the road, trying the different soaps and lotions, getting my money's worth. I don't know if they designed it that way, but with the bathroom door open I could watch TV at the same time – the Holiday Inn should advertise it on their brochure.

The Deluxe rooms had DSTV Compact, so I'm busy flicking through the channels, trying to keep the remote dry, and I end up at this program about a massive development going down in the Transkei, with Deborah Patta or some other bulldog presenter travelling up and down the coast interviewing stakeholders, those for and against progress.

I'm about to climb out the bath when who do I spot being interviewed? The one and only Michael Dempsey! I know straightaway it's him. He's put on about ten kilos and his cheeks are fatter and that chiselled look is long gone. But it's the same Michael alright. His face is tanned, from all the time he spends on the golf course and the Tiffindell ski slopes. He still has his blonde hair and the Michael smile and Colgate teeth. And he's charming the panties off Deborah or whoever, telling her how much employment is going to be created by his golf estate and casino. How he is donating money from his own pocket to the local communities. When he turns to the camera and tells the world his vision for the Eastern Cape, it's typical Michael. At one point he's looking straight at me.

When I eventually did climb out the bath, the water was lukewarm and my skin grey and wrinkly and the sales convention dinner I was looking forward to was the furthest thing from my mind. I've gone back in time and Michael is there with me, real and alive as anything I've ever known.

A couple of cop vans are parked in front of the police station. I don't see a visitors parking. Just a long yellow line running for miles in front of the station: police vehicles only. I have no choice but to cross over and jump the pavement and park halfway in the veld.

I lock the Kia and walk back towards the station. It looks as sad as the rest of this town. What's going to happen now? I haven't a clue. And to be honest, I don't care anymore; anything will be better than the way it's been.

I push past the battered wives and their six-pack of babies in dirty nappies and a dronkie with a bandage wrapped around his head. I climb the cement stairs and walk into the station. Three bored-looking cops look up from their KFC takeaways. They then look at each other, deciding whose turn it is next to serve the public. One of them stands up, wipes his mouth and waddles over to the counter.

“Yes, meneer?”

Jesus, I hope I’m doing the right thing.

“I want to lay a charge.”

“A charge?”

“Yes, a charge.”

The cop reaches under the counter and lifts out a dog’s breakfast of an A4 book and opens it slowly. He licks his fingers until he finds a blank page. If he carries on at this rate I’m going to miss my plane. And you never know with Jap crap.

“In what matter do you want to lay a charge?”

I look him straight in the eyes. And I know I’m doing the right thing. Because in those yellow cop eyes I see it all.

I see Sean packing up at my marlin act until the tears are streaming down his cheeks. I see Michael acting like a God on the diving board. I see him leaning forward on the couch, biting his lip, whispering squeal piggy, squeal. I see Luke staring blankly at the TV. I see Simon staring at the ground next to the laundry basket. I see that look in Michael’s eyes as I strip down. I see my uncle’s coffin being lowered into the red Joburg earth. I see my mom staring dreamily out the window. I see Eddie’s ears go pink when he hands me my movie ticket. I see Sean and me screaming our lungs out in his brother’s crappy old Fiat. I see him walking away from me at the Velvet Lounge. I see Michael slap Tracy Adrians through the face. I see him and Jono holding her down. I see me getting the hell out of there. I see me trip. Stand up. Look back. And, in the moonlight I see Michael. I see Michael slam Tracy Adrians’ head into the ground.

For the first time in twenty-three years I see it all as clear as day.

“Meneer, I said in what matter do you want to lay a charge?”

I’m still looking at him. And he’s looking at me, thinking maybe he should reach for his gun. I take a deep breath. Here goes.

“I want to report a murder.”