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‘Sure, I can get a warrant, but I don’t want to officially search your premises. That’ll mean lots more cops, dogs, the works. We don’t want that, do we? It’d be so much easier to just have a quick chat, you, me and your son.’

Sergeant Cupido was standing outside in the muddy road, leaning on the farm gate, her muscular forearms taking the weight of her torso, her spatulate hands hanging.

Ryan’s father, Charlie ‘Vlieg’ Chapel, stood inside the gate, fuming. He had refused to put the giant dogs in the back, so the noise of their barking and snarling dominated, filling the air with guttural wrath, making it almost impossible to be heard, which was clearly the point. The man was holding both by their collars, one in each hand, and the dogs were twisting and lunging.

‘That girl wasn’t here. I told the mother and I’m telling you!’ he shouted.

‘It’s not that I don’t believe you, Mr Chapel,’ Cupido shouted back, seemingly unconcerned by having to compete with the boerboels in order to be heard. ‘It’s just that this is the last place she said she’d be, and she hasn’t been seen since last night. Maybe Ryan knows something – maybe it’s something he doesn’t even know he knows.’

The two stared at each for a moment, the stoic woman with her steady brown-eyed gaze and the irate fat man with the cartoon moustache and the muscular dogs twisting at the ends of his ham hands. It was hard to believe that Vlieg had earned his nickname for being in the flyweight division of the amateur boxing league he’d belonged to when he was a teenager, thirty years and the same number of kilograms ago. And while life

flipped

hadn't been exactly cruel to him, it also hadn't delivered the fame, glory and riches he'd expected back then, when he routinely won every fight he entered.

Sergeant Cupido shrugged her shoulders, apparently in defeat, and began turning away. 'I'll get a warrant and come back this afternoon.'

'No, just wait,' Vlieg shouted. 'Let me put the dogs away.' He didn't want the police poking around here. Not every single car on the property had been procured in a one-hundred-percent legal way, and if talking to this bloody woman meant getting the cops off his back, fine.

Sergeant Cupido nodded. She'd expected his capitulation, not least because the red Alfa Romeo Spider with the black soft-top that she'd spotted in the back corner of the yard, half-covered with a tatty tarpaulin, didn't look like the kind of car someone might bring to a backyard mechanic for attention. She also recalled that a 1980 model of this very car had been reported stolen from a nearby town a couple of months before. In an area where most crime was petty, nicked expensive classic cars tended to make an impression.

Chapel manhandled the dogs to the back of the property, shutting them behind a small gate. They continued to bark.

As he walked back towards the farm gate, Sergeant Cupido let herself in.

'Wait on the stoep,' Chapel said. 'I have to wake up the boy.'

Not ideal, thought Sergeant Cupido. She wanted to get inside the house. But, as is the case with so many things in life, it was better than nothing. She stood stamping the mud off her boots, looking out over the front portion of the property. It was a kind of junkyard of car bits and pieces, but she also saw household appliances: several fridges, some chest freezers, a stove, a pile of old airconditioners. She could now see the half-covered Alfa

Romeo more clearly. It was missing its rear number plate, but looked to be in perfect condition. She felt more certain than ever that it didn't legitimately belong here.

Chapel came out the front door, banging it open hard so that it slammed against the house wall. He was followed by a young man who had his father's facial features but was considerably taller, and who would, Sergeant Cupido could see, very soon beat his father in girth too.

'Ryan,' Chapel said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at his son by way of introduction.

The young man, whose mouth, like his father's, was naturally downturned, was rubbing his heavy-lidded eyes and porcine nose, and pushing his hands through his thick black hair. Stick an over-large ungroomed moustache on him and he'd be a dead ringer for Chapel senior. The younger version was wearing pyjama bottoms and had on a thick winter coat, but was barefoot. It was clear he'd been dragged out of bed.

Sergeant Cupido looked up and down the stoep. There were four wire chairs and a folding table at the far end, but it seemed they weren't going to be sitting there. Chapel was going to keep them all standing. He wanted this interview to be as short as possible.

'Morning, Ryan,' the detective said. 'I'm Sergeant Cupido. Your friends Rosanne Bronson and Jess Hallett are missing, and I just want to have a quick chat to you.'

'That bitch Jess Hallett isn't my friend,' the big teenager said in a phlegmy voice. Already a heavy smoker, Cupido thought. 'She's just Annie's handbrake.'

Sergeant Cupido nodded mildly, then said, 'Okay, let's start there, then. What's your relationship to Annie?'

The teenager leered at her. 'We hooked up, you know?'

'I don't know,' Cupido said. 'Let's assume I'm the total idiot