



48 HOURS

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by

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CHAPTER 01

He picked up the ringing cellphone from the scratched wooden coffee table and turned towards the window. Looking through thin white metal bars into the garden, he pressed the answer button. His dark brown eyes narrowed as bright sunlight hit his pupils. He noticed that the lawn needed mowing and that a fine reddish brown dust covered the green leaves of the bushes along the mud spattered boundary wall.

"Hello?" he said.

"Hello," a man answered.

He recognised the caller's voice instantly. The Asian accent was unmistakable. Rolling his eyes, he turned his bulk away from the window and concentrated on what the Asian was trying to say.

"Last shipment went bad -" he made out.

The big man shook his head irritably. The Asian was always exaggerating, demanding and exaggerating. For such a small man, he could be quite annoying. Unfortunately, he knew the guy had plenty of muscle behind him. Going head to head with him was not an option if he did not want to get hurt or be put permanently out of business.

Overly polite, he asked, "What are you talking about?"

"Last shipment no good," the Asian said impatiently, his voice sounding like a chirp from a little bird.

"What happened?"

"Don't know, but no good," he reiterated. "Boss not happy."

"So?"

"Boss wants new shipment," the guy said.

The big man walked over to a battered couch and let his bulk fall onto threadbare beige cushions. A tired squeaking sound escaped from the springs beneath him.

The boss wants a new shipment, the big man thought cynically. The buyer was going through the goods faster than *he* went through his underwear. What was the man doing? The merchandise was usually sturdy and well maintained.

Staring at a picture of a ghastly painted Italian landscape, he shrugged his shoulders.

What did he care? If they wrecked the goods before the expiry date, then it gave him the opportunity to supply some more - as long as they paid him.

Thoughtfully, he turned his head and glanced towards the dingy kitchen at the end of a long narrow passage, its floor covered by a threadbare spot-stained brown carpet. An overflowing dustbin winked at him from behind a paint peeling door. The head of a Rottweiler peered around a corner. The dog's pink gums glowed in the semi-darkness as it opened its huge jaws.

"The price has gone up," the big man said, drawing his lips back to reveal sharp pointy teeth.

"That no good," the Asian twittered.

Growing increasingly irritated by the Asian's attitude, a frown appeared on the man's forehead. He loathed the wiry man with his ugly pock-marked face, his smell of incense, cigarette smoke and cheap hair gel.

Ready to snap at the Asian, he just caught himself in time, remembering that this was business.

Nevertheless, his next sentence sounded like a growl. "Take it or leave it."

There was a moment of silence on the other side.

"How much?" the Asian finally asked.

"Double for each," he answered, pushing his luck.

The Asian did not reply, but the big man heard him tapping on a calculator pad.

"We want five," the Asian said after a short while.

He nodded appreciatively. Five wasn't too bad. That would make him a nice extra chunk of money for maybe four or five days work.

Rubbing his shaved scalp, the big man ran quickly through the figures: his guys would get about twenty percent, which left him with some play-money.

He shifted his bulk on the sofa. "When do you want it?"

"One week," the Asian replied quickly.

He didn't hesitate. "Where?"

A small silence ensued. The Rottweiler trotted closer and rubbed his square head against the big man's leg. The dog's tongue shot out from between its teeth, warm saliva drooling from the tip of the pink muscle onto the thin carpet.

The Asian's chirp came back over the line. "The usual place," he said.

The big man pushed the slobbering Rottweiler out of the way. "All right," he agreed.

"Thank you," the Asian tweeted politely and disconnected the call.

Cradling his cellphone in his hand, the big man turned back to the window. A tiny brown bird with white freckles on its chest, almost hidden by dusty leaves, perched beside the wall. With its head tilted to one side, it stared with black beady eyes at the tall, bulky man behind the glass.

"What are you looking at?" he scowled and waved his hand threateningly. The small creature opened its wings and fluttered away to the far side of the overgrown garden.

He turned around and leaned his back against the grimy wall, his mind already in overdrive.

First he had to get his team together, then he had to organise transport. He also had to make sure the transit site was available and that the contact was properly rewarded. And he had to fork out the money, before he got paid.

This was the part which always annoyed him, but he had no choice in the matter. His guys wanted to be paid immediately once they had finished the job. They did not care if he only got his money at a later stage. They had had plenty of arguments about it in the past, but he always gave in because he did not want to lose his team.

Licking his lips, the big man brought his cellphone up to his ear. It was time to get to work.

xxx

Carefully checking that Mrs Du Plessis had her back to the class, Lucy bent down and picked up the tightly folded piece of paper which had fallen beside her desk. She hid the little square in her hand and glanced questioningly at her best friend Tanja, who was sitting to her left, two desks further to the front.

Her friend's face turned pale and Tanja pointed frantically at the girl sitting behind Lucy, indicating the message was for her.

Lucy frowned with confusion.

Suddenly, the teacher's voice rang out. "Tanja! What's the problem?"

Instantly the grade eight class was quiet. One could hear a pin drop. Tanja shot one last desperate look in Lucy's direction.

"Tanja?" Mrs du Plessis called again.

Lucy's best friend faced the teacher. "Nothing, Mrs Du Plessis," she mumbled.

The teacher glanced over at Lucy knowing full well that the two girls were up to some kind of mischief, but Lucy's pretty dark-skinned face reflected only innocence.

Lucy clutched the tiny piece of paper tightly in her hand, giving nothing away. There was no way she was going to get Tanja or herself into trouble.

"Please concentrate," Mrs du Plessis demanded and turned back to the blackboard.

Lucy breathed a sigh of relief. That had been close.

The last ten months had been quite tough for her. Primary School was so different. In High School everyone just looked out for themselves and it was difficult to make friends. Luckily, she and Tanja had become fast friends quite early on in the year. They shared a lot of giggles and, although they came from totally different backgrounds, they got on like a house on fire! They lived close to each other and walked home together. Many afternoons were spent together brooding over algebra or finishing off one of the millions of projects they had to complete for the next day.

Slowly and carefully Lucy unfolded the small piece of paper keeping one eye on the teacher's back. Staring at Tanja's scribbles, she tried to make out the message her friend was sending to Mandy, the tall brown haired girl with droopy eyes sitting behind her. She squinted at the tiny letters and finally grasped what her friend had written.

The message read: I don't want to study with Lucy any more. She is too pushy. She always wants it her way. She doesn't give me a chance. I just don't know how to tell her. Any ideas?

Lucy stared at the piece of paper in her hand. Sudden pain stabbed her chest. The words began to blur as tears gathered in her eyes. She looked up at Tanja hardly believing what she had just read.

Her friend's face was ghastly white and her lips were quivering.

Lucy looked back at the paper in her hand, reading the words again as if the meaning of the message had changed miraculously during the last few seconds, but the words stayed the same: her best friend did not want to be friends with her any longer.

Lucy thought her heart would break as wild thoughts swirled through her head.

How could she do that? she screamed silently. How could Tanja betray her like that? Why hadn't she said anything before?

A sob rose in her throat and it took all Lucy's will power to swallow it.

Seeing her former friend's distraught face, Tanja turned her head away.

Lucy crumpled the piece of paper and dropped it on the floor. Quickly, she wiped her hand across her eyes forbidding her impending tears, steeling herself against the pain and humiliation that wanted to overwhelm her. Biting hard on her lower lip, she thrust out her chin defiantly.

If that was how Tanja felt, then so be it, she thought. There were many more girls in her class and her grade. She didn't need Tanja! Tanja was not the only girl in school and she did not depend on Tanja's friendship. She would not stand alone during break time. She would make new friends and Tanja could go to hell!

With great determination, Lucy pushed her hurt and disappointment into the back of her mind and faced the blackboard, stubbornly concentrating on Mrs Du Plessis's next explanation.

The rest of the day went by in a haze. Lucy was glad when the school bell rang and the soundless torture ended. She closed her books and packed them with great deliberation into her bag. An excited hum followed the grade eight pupils out of the classroom, but Lucy was silent.

She avoided Tanja carefully, making sure her former friend left the room with her new-found friend Mandy long before her. But unwilling to walk alone and to become a target for probing questions from her nosy classmates, Lucy joined a group of girls from a neighbouring class.

Amidst the other loud pupils, she wound her way down the worn out grey concrete stairs, rounded the corner at the principal's office and walked beneath the blue painted corrugated iron awning towards the open exit gates. The other girls tried to include her in their senseless chatter, but Lucy stayed quiet. Her heart hurt too much and all she wanted to do was get away from school and Tanja.

She passed the security hut with its huge windows and glancing momentarily in the direction of the young black man in his green uniform, she walked through the school gates and turned right.

"Lucy! Lucy, wait!" Tanja suddenly shouted.

Lucy cringed involuntarily at the sound of her former friend's voice. Instinct told her to run, to avoid any more hurt, but logic and curiosity demanded that she should at least ask Tanja for an explanation.

"Lucy," Tanja called again.

Lucy slowed her pace and finally turned around. Tanja ran past a group of grade eleven boys and caught up with her. Out of breath, she stopped.

"What do you want?" Lucy's voice was cold.

Tanja recoiled as if she had been slapped in the face.

"Aren't we walking home together?" she stuttered, all at once unsure of herself.

"Why would we?" Lucy snapped. Red hot anger took over and she pointed her finger at Tanja. "After what you said about me? How could I ever walk with you again?"

Tanja slipped her hands under the straps of her backpack and shuffled her feet embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, peering sheepishly at Lucy from under her blonde fringe.

Lucy wasn't consoled. "Sorry isn't good enough," she hissed, the hurt still trying to rip her heart apart.

Desperately trying to make amends, Tanja said, "It wasn't meant that way."

Lucy glared at Tanja disbelievingly. "What are you talking about?" she asked, flapping a hand in the air.

"I only wrote it because ..." Tanja's voice trailed off.

"Forget it!" Lucy shouted, fresh tears threatening to spill over. "Leave me alone."

Swinging her heavy bag onto her back, she spun on her heels and started walking away.

"Lucy," she heard Tanja's pleading voice behind her.

"Leave me alone," she shouted back over her shoulder, picking up her pace.

A few ninth graders looked at her curiously, but when they saw her angry face, her lips pressed thinly together and her eyes spewing fire, they forgot about her and continued with their conversation.

Lucy rounded the corner and carried on walking, leaving her friend behind, but taking the hurt with her.

xxx

They were sitting in the front of the white *bakkie*, 'Ultra Cleaning Services' painted in big green cursive lettering on its side panels. Every time Angus turned a corner, various buckets, brushes, brooms and a step ladder clattered around on the metal floor in the enclosed back.

Angus could hardly move the gear lever because they were all so squashed together. But Dirk had insisted on joining them and had squeezed himself in the middle, not worried that his legs were in the way. Meshak sat on his left side, his broad shoulder pressed against the window, his black scarred face a blank mask.

Angus knew that Meshak was angry. His dark eyes were cold and two deep pale lines cut away from the side of his nose to the corners of his mouth. He hadn't said anything the entire way and Angus was worried Meshak would snap. The black man's fury was something to be wary of. He had seen Meshak break bones just because a youngster had given him lip.

Angus sighed quietly. He knew it had been wrong allowing Dirk to ride with them. They were not supposed to take anyone without first clearing it with the boss, but Dirk had been persistent. He had whined, wheedled, pleaded and begged. Eventually Angus had capitulated and included him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Angus looked at his cousin. Excitement was written all over the youngster's smooth face.

Angus swore under his breath. He had gone against his better judgement and now it was too late.

Dirk rubbed his hands on his jeans with anticipation. He flicked his long fringe away from his forehead and continued to babble incessantly. Once more, Angus glanced over at his partner and saw Meshak clenching his teeth. His jaw jutted out prominently and Angus realised with trepidation that time was running out fast. Very soon his partner would lose his temper.

Trying to prevent an inevitable altercation, Angus turned his head. "Shut the fuck up," he growled.

Although stung by his cousin's harsh words, Dirk thought it better to keep quiet. But hating to be told what to do, he began snapping his fingers with an air of defiance, aggravating the two men in the car just a little bit more.

Dirk didn't know why, but instinctively he knew how to annoy Angus, how to push his buttons, make him end up in a white hot rage. Dirk got a kick out of needling him, checking how far he could go before Angus lost it. However, lately, he had refrained from antagonising him. It had just become too easy.

Dirk liked his cousin, but did not think he was the brightest spark in the tool shed. Angus did not seem to hold a regular job and it intrigued Dirk how his cousin was always flush with money.

He himself had no idea what he wanted to do with his life. Although his Matric certificate qualified him to go to university, there was no money for it, so that

studying for a degree was out of the question. Since leaving school, at the end of the previous year, he had looked at a few jobs, but nothing really appealed to him. And why did he have to be formally employed anyway? Angus never seemed to work, but was always rolling in bucks.

Sometimes, his cousin went out in the white *bakkie*, claiming he was cleaning carpets, but Dirk never quite believed him. Carpet cleaning did not make as much money as Angus had available at the end of every single month.

Not that Dirk complained.

His cousin had been generous in the past. Angus had bought him a nice iPod and sponsored his expensive taste for clothes, but Dirk had wanted in on the action. He wanted to do what Angus was doing, whatever it was. He wanted a share in the big bucks, especially because it seemed to involve so little effort and time.

Dirk glanced at the huge black guy beside him. Angus had introduced him as his carpet cleaning partner, but he doubted that Meshak had ever held a vacuum cleaner or a bucket in his life. His small dark eyes made Dirk uneasy, since the black guy was a man of very few words. When Angus had explained that Dirk would be one of the team, the black man had grabbed Angus by the arm and dragged him effortlessly outside into the yard. Dirk had heard loud angry voices, but was unable to make out exactly what they were arguing about.

What was very clear was that Meshak was not impressed with his cousin's decision. The argument lasted a hot white moment, but in the end Dirk was allowed to join the two men. Dirk wondered what Angus had said to his partner, but had to be satisfied with a low, "Shut up and don't ask questions."

His cousin's unwillingness to explain himself did not really matter to Dirk. In the end he got what he wanted: a slice of the action.

xxx

Lucy followed a group of grade ten girls down the road. Their blazers were slung loosely over their shoulders and their laughter wafted towards her, but she hardly heard it. Her heart was too heavy and finally hot tears began rolling down her cheeks.

She just couldn't understand how Tanja could be so cruel. Lucy remembered all the afternoons they had spent together, swatting and sweating over their homework, eating biscuits and drinking orange juice. Once their homework was done, they swam in the pool, watched TV or gossiped about their classmates.

As if in a trance, Lucy put one foot in front of the other, trudging homewards, her mind in turmoil, not knowing what to think or how to react.

The sun stood high and burned through the leaves of the young trees shadowing the pavement. Her dark skin soaked up the heat and soon her blue short-sleeved school shirt was damp. Her backpack became heavier by the minute, but Lucy hardly noticed. Keeping her head down, tears dripping down her face, she followed her route home.

The grade ten girls in front of her split up and Lucy was alone. She crossed the road and continued through the quiet suburb, passing grey concrete walls and driveways barred with automated black metal gates. Ignoring barking dogs, she neither looked right nor left. She had walked this way every day of her High School life and knew it by heart.

Her mother had moved them into this area because the new house was only fifteen minutes away from the school, suiting her mother well. She did not have to drive Lucy to school in the mornings and collect her again in the afternoons.

Lucy's black school shoes slapped softly on the cracked cement pavement and the monotony of the sound calmed her. With the back of her hand, she wiped the tears off her face.

There had to be some kind of explanation. She could not believe that Tanja could be that mean. They had been getting on so well and there had never been any indication that Tanja was not happy to be with Lucy.

She shook her head resolutely.

There had to be a mistake, she thought. Maybe Mandy had manipulated Tanja into saying those things? Maybe she had put Tanja under pressure because she was jealous of their friendship?

She remembered that Mandy spent most of her time alone. Lucy did not particularly like her; Mandy was arrogant and bitchy, but she had never believed for one second that Mandy would try to drive a spike through her friendship with Tanja.

Lucy nodded wistfully.

When she got home, she would give Tanja a call asking her if that was what had happened.

xxx

Dirk looked through the dirty windscreen and wondered how long they would take to get where they were supposed to be. They had been driving through various suburbs, but had not stopped once. It almost seemed that Angus had no idea where he was going. When asked, Angus refused to say what their actual destination was. Dirk had pestered him a few times, but his cousin's only reply was: "You'll see, and once you see, you are going to shut up."

The *bakkie* rolled slowly along another quiet suburban street. Reaching a corner, Angus set the indicator and turned left. Nobody was about, except for a black school girl walking with her head down, oblivious to her surroundings. Her backpack looked heavy and Dirk felt sorry for her. His own walks home from school meant hiking for many kilometres through the dusty veld, the merciless sun burning his back, his mouth parched dry. One thing he could say: he had been fit, more fit than he was today. Nowadays he used his four wheels wherever he went, even to the shop down the road.

Angus stopped the *bakkie* and Dirk looked at him in surprise. "Are we here?" he asked.

His cousin stared straight ahead but his eyes narrowed. "Don't say a word," he ordered. "Don't even mumble. Don't ask questions and stay in the *bakkie* if you know what's good for you."

Dirk opened his mouth ready to protest, but Angus' glare made him swallow his snappy remark.

His cousin shifted the gear lever into neutral, left the engine running and opened the door.

xxx

Lucy turned the last corner before home. Her emotions were still not quite under control, but at least she had some kind of plan. Striding out determinedly, she lifted her head and straightened her shoulders.

She would not give up her friendship with Tanja. They had got on too well for her to let it all fall apart just because of a stupid note. Who was Mandy anyway?

As she passed old Mrs Viljoen's house, Lucy noticed a white *bakkie* coming up the road from the opposite direction. She watched the car out of the corner of her eye. Three men - two white and one black - were sitting in the cab. The chubby white man driving the *bakkie* was wearing a dark baseball cap. The youngster in the middle seemed to be talking and the huge black man was squashed against the passenger window.

It was not unusual for a maintenance crew to work in the area. Lucy looked for some kind of indication of what services this lot offered. Her eyes wandered alongside the *bakkie* until she could make out the lettering. 'Ultra Cleaning Services' it read.

The vehicle came closer and slowed down. It stopped beside Lucy at the curb. She pushed her thumbs under the straps of her heavy backpack and waited. Smiling tentatively at the driver she could already anticipate his question.

The crew was most probably lost and needed direction. It happened fairly often and after the first few times, Lucy had memorised the street names in her suburb to be prepared for these occasions.

Lucy looked at the white man and his broad flat face. He opened the door and got out of the car. His thick lips pulled into a smile as he took a step towards her. The loud rumble of the *bakkie*'s engine drowned out any other sound. Lucy kept her eyes on the driver's flat face waiting for him to pose his question.

The man came closer, towering over her. She had to look up to see his face and instinctively took a step back. He still smiled at her and she could see his crooked stained teeth and ugly blackheads covering his hooked nose. She gripped the straps of her backpack tighter and took another step back, but Mr Ugly closed the gap quickly. An uneasy feeling came over her.

Why did he get out of the car? she wondered. Why hasn't he asked his question? Why was he so close to her?

Before Lucy could take another step back, she was grabbed from behind. The straps of her backpack dug painfully into her shoulders and pulled her school shirt tight around her breasts. A hand was placed over her mouth muffling her involuntary scream. Her eyes grew wide as she stared at Mr Ugly. His friendly smile had disappeared and was replaced by a vicious snarl.

Lucy's hands clawed at the arm holding her.

She was picked up from the ground. Her feet kicked out desperately and connected with something soft behind her. She heard a low groan.

Trying to free herself, she wriggled her body in all directions. She sunk her teeth into the flesh of the hand closing her mouth. The stinking hand slipped and she gasped for breath.

Shaking her head from side to side like a dog shaking off water, she gulped down sweet warm air. She opened her mouth to scream her lungs out, but before she could utter a sound, the hand was back.

She bounced up and down, kicking and twisting her lithe body in impossible ways, struggling desperately to loosen the grip of the person behind her, all the time mesmerised by the snarling grin of the white man in front of her.

Suddenly a soft cloth was placed over her nose and mouth. It smelled sweet and stung her nostrils. She tried to identify the odour. It reminded her of a hospital. Then everything went black.

xxx

Casually, Angus walked to the back of the *bakkie*. Reaching out, he turned the handle and opened the rear door. Meshak tightened his grip on the girl and stood beside his partner. Unceremoniously he dumped Lucy on the dirty metal floor. She landed with a dull thud between buckets and brooms. The back of her head hit the edge of the stepladder, but no cry of pain escaped her mouth. Her short pleated school skirt rode up her legs revealing white panties. Angus slammed the door shut and locked the handle in place.

Meshak bent down and rubbed his shin. "Damn," he growled. "Stupid bitch kicked my leg."

Angus curled a corner of his mouth. "She's a fighter, isn't she?"

His partner looked at him sharply.

"They'll appreciate it," Angus smirked. "I heard they don't like them too placid."

Meshak shrugged his shoulders.

Turning his back, Angus walked to the front of the *bakkie*, opened the door and climbed into the driver's seat. Meshak followed suit and closed the passenger door. Angus pushed his foot on the accelerator and gently they rolled away from the curb. Flicking the indicator, he turned the corner slowly. Strictly keeping to the speed limit, he navigated the streets of the suburb, passing several clusters of school kids walking home. Eventually, he found his way into a busy main road and the *bakkie* soon merged with the general afternoon traffic, becoming invisible.

Finally, Dirk found his voice. "What the hell are you doing? What the hell have you done?" he shouted agitated. "What the fuck is this all about?"

Angus pulled a sour face. "I told you not to ask questions," he replied, a hidden threat resonating in his voice.

Dirk twisted in his seat and looked over his shoulder at the lifeless body lying in the back of the car. He went cold and a moment later a hot flush reddened his face.

"Don't tell me not to ask questions," he screamed.

Keeping his eyes glued on the vehicle in front, Angus growled, "Shut the fuck up."

Grabbing his cousin's arm, Dirk started shaking him. "You've kidnapped her!" he shouted. "You can't kidnap her!"

Angus shrugged Dirk's hand off without offering a reply; instead he concentrated on the heavy traffic.

"What if she's hurt? What if she's dead?" Dirk whined.

Suddenly he felt Meshak's hand on his neck. The fingers were like iron clamps. Slowly and deliberately, the huge black man forced Dirk around. He held him tightly and Dirk thought he could hear his spine crack under Meshak's grip.

"Listen to me, you little fuck," the black man hissed.

Dirk's lips started to tremble.

Meshak's eyes glittered like black diamonds. "You say another word and I break your neck."

Sudden fear coursed through Dirk's body; he knew very well that Meshak was able to make good on his threat without blinking an eyelid.

"But you can't do this," Dirk whimpered. "You can't just kidnap a girl off the street."

Meshak's eyebrows narrowed. "We do whatever we want to, whenever we want to," he said quietly.

"But what about the cops?" Dirk complained.

The black man increased the pressure on Dirk's neck. His fingers dug painfully into the soft flesh.

"You don't worry about the cops," Meshak snarled. "As long as you keep your mouth shut, nothing happens."

"But"

"Shut the fuck up," Meshak bellowed.

The black man's head came forward with lightning speed and connected with Dirk's nose. A searing pain shot up into his brain and Dirk thought his skull was going to explode. Red and blue dots danced in front of his eyes and a deep groan escaped his lips.

Meshak removed his hand from Dirk's neck. "This is just a warning," he heard him say through a haze. "You make another sound and you are dead."

Holding his bleeding pounding nose, Dirk squinted at the huge black man who sat with a smug grin as he leaned against the window. As much as he wanted to argue further, Dirk thought it wiser to keep his mouth shut, at least for a little while.

Dirk's mind was in turmoil as he watched the blood run through his fingers and drip onto his T-shirt. He tried to make sense of what he had seen during the last half an hour. Dirk could not help but replay the scene over and over again.

He had been sitting in the car when Angus approached the little black girl. Dirk thought his cousin was going to ask her for directions when he noticed that Meshak had also gotten out of the car and was standing behind the girl. The next few seconds were an absolute nightmare.

Frozen in place, he watched how Meshak had placed his huge black hand over the girl's mouth. Dirk wanted to scream, but no sound crossed his lips. He saw how Meshak pulled a painful grimace and let his grip slip. For a brief moment Dirk sighed, relieved that the girl's ordeal was over, that they would let her go, only to see Meshak place something over the girl's mouth. Helplessly, Dirk watched how the schoolgirl went limp in the black man's arms and how Meshak threw her in the back of the *bakkie*.

The shock of it all made him shake uncontrollably.

This is impossible, Dirk had wanted to shout. This is not happening, but it was as if his voice had gone for good.

Dirk shook his head in despair.

He might not be the straightest guy on the block, but this was not right. They couldn't just snatch a kid off the street. It was just not on! He had always known that those two were up to no good, but he had never ever expected them to kidnap a child. For Chris' sakes, if they were caught, all three of them were going to spend the rest of their lives in jail.

Stemming the blood flow from his nose with the hem of his grubby T-shirt, Dirk turned around to look at the girl again. Rolling around lifelessly, her body only responded to the movement of the *bakkie*.

What if she was seriously hurt? Dirk worried. What if she was dead?

He glanced at Meshak, carefully avoiding the big man's eyes.

What did they do to her anyway? he thought anxiously. What had they put over her nose? Why had she passed out so quickly?

An almost inaudible groan escaped his mouth.

What had he let himself into?

He squeezed his eyes shut.

It served him right. He wanted in on the action; in on the big easy money. He should have known they were involved in something bad. On the other hand, what did he expect they were going to do? All the fancy clothes, the luxury cars they drove, the rolls of money and no cares in the world. How stupid could he have been?

Dirk opened his eyes.

He didn't want any part of this. He wanted out and that very quickly.

But how?

Meshak had been very clear: if he made the smallest sound, Meshak would break his neck and he knew the black man was good for it.

What was he supposed to do?

Dirk's thoughts were interrupted when they turned off the main road onto a dirt track. He was jolted in his seat as the *bakkie* bumped over deep ruts carved into the dry reddish brown soil. Despite the grimy windshield, Dirk recognised the area immediately. Although he had not paid much attention during the forty minute drive, he recalled the route they had taken. After they had left the suburb, they had driven south towards Vereeniging and were now approaching one of the old holiday resorts near the river.

Many years ago an ambitious developer had invested in a stretch of land along the bank of the river. Unfortunately, the spot had been too remote and difficult to access for potential holiday makers so that the idea of a holiday haven was soon abandoned.

One day, during one of their aimless drives in the area, when Dirk was still in high school, but Angus was already earning money, they had discovered the dilapidated chalets. They had immediately claimed the chalets as their weekend retreat. They had fixed up one of the places, made it almost habitable, furnished it with second hand couches and beds, organised a couple of shelves, and stole electricity from the nearby main power line. They had chatted up girls and invited them to party through the weekends. Alcohol flowed in abundance, cigarette and *dagga* smoke hung in thick clouds under the ceiling and sex was free and easy, practiced either with a particular partner or in groups.

Those had been good times. They had no cares; nobody knew where they were and the wild parties were appreciated by all participants so that people approached them regularly for an invitation. However, they had grown older, Angus had gone his own way and without his cousin it had not been fun any longer and the whole thing had eventually fallen apart.

Dirk looked around curiously. He hadn't been out here for at least two years.

The dirt track wound its way further away from the main road. They drove beneath tall indigenous trees casting long shadows and past short green brush growing in all directions.

The area was deserted. Nobody ever came here. Dirk wondered if anybody still remembered this secluded spot. Neighbours were kilometres away and the chalets could not be seen from the main road.

They rounded one last corner and approached the familiar cluster of chalets. On closer inspection one could see that they were on the verge of falling completely into disrepair. Windows without glass and entrances without doors gaped at them. Roof shingles were missing and the once white painted walls were mouldy and cracked. Everything was overgrown with entwined brush and only a narrow track led closer to the chalets.

Dirk stared at the sad small buildings and wondered what they were doing in this God forsaken spot.

Navigating along the dirt tack, his cousin stopped in front of the first chalet. Dirk chanced a quick questioning look at Meshak, but the black man had his face averted.

Angus turned off the engine and got out of the *bakkie*.

The door of the chalet opened and a slight man in his early twenties walked towards them. His hair was a dirty blond and his face reminded Dirk of a cornered rat. Tiny eyes darted in all directions. The guy wore jeans, black fancy *takkies* and an open checked shirt. Dirk thought he saw a gold chain glinting around the neck.

Angus stepped forward and held up his hand.

"Hey there, Rudi," he greeted Rat Face.

"Hey Angus," the skinny man replied with a toothy grin.

"Everything all right?" Dirk's cousin asked.

Rat Face nodded. "Who's that?" he wanted to know, jutting his chin at Dirk.

Angus flicked his head. "That's my cousin, Dirk."

Rat Face's eyes became even smaller. "What's he doing here?"

Angus, towering over the slight man, bellowed a laugh. "He's going to keep you company."

Rat Face hunched his shoulders and clenched his fists. "What?"

What was Angus up to? he thought angrily. Didn't Angus trust him? Didn't he do a good enough job before? Rat Face's nostrils flared with barely concealed fury. Angus was messing up his plans big time. He was spoiling all his fun!

"He wanted in on the action, couldn't stop pestering me, so now he's going to stay with you. Keeping watch," Angus grinned viciously.

Rat Face squinted at the fat man suspiciously. Did Angus know what he'd been up to? Did he know how he passed the long hours until they were ready to leave?

Angus turned down the corners of his mouth.

Recognising the danger sign, Rudi forced himself to relax. It was better to act cool in front of Angus and, who was he to argue with the boss man anyway? Angus must have a good reason to leave the Baby Face with him.

Rudi looked Dirk over.

At least he would have somebody to talk to while they waited for the rest of the shipment to arrive.

Rudi's thoughts were interrupted when the *bakkie*'s passenger door opened. Meshak crunched his way to the back of the car where he unlocked the handle and

released the hatch. Reaching inside, Meshak grabbed the ankles of the young black girl unceremoniously, pulling her towards him and lifting her off the metal floor boards. She hung limply in his arms and her head lolled back exposing the delicate skin on her throat as he carried her towards the chalet.

CHAPTER 2

Ryan Bates flicked his indicator and turned left into the new business park. Driving slowly around the traffic circle, its centre sprouting a display of colourful flowers and a palm tree, he approached unit F. Looking up at the geometrically designed white-painted façade, he nodded appreciatively.

Six months ago, he had moved his company into this office complex. Having run out of space in the house from which they had been operating, he finally decided to take the risk of renting office space in the Rivonia business park. The rental he paid every month was substantially more than before, but it was worth it. Now they had the use of a boardroom, every single employee had their own office, and a modern airy reception area welcomed prospective buyers and bankers.

Ryan manoeuvred his silver BMW 4x4 into his reserved parking spot reserved and switched off the engine. Opening the door, he grabbed his calf skin leather briefcase from the passenger seat, ducked his head and climbed out. A quick press on the remote locked the car doors with a faint beep.

He climbed up grey-veined marble stairs framing the entrance and walked through tinted doors. Cool conditioned air greeted him, instantly producing goose bumps on his forearms. A midnight blue carpet dampened his footsteps as he walked up to the reception desk.

The telephone receiver was clenched under Nomsa's chin and her hands rapidly moved over her computer keyboard.

"Yes, Sir," she said sincerely. "I understand. I'll give him the message as soon as he comes in."

The multi-coloured plastic beads on the tips of Nomsa's long braided tresses bounced up and down as she nodded vigorously and her long red fingernails hammered a staccato on the keyboard. Ryan watched her amused, wondering anew how she was able to work with such talons. Even so, Nomsa was extremely efficient and her typing skills were beyond reproach.

"Yes, sir," Nomsa said with a grimace. "Thank you. Good bye." She threw the receiver back on its base set and sighed heavily.

Ryan stepped forward, startling her.

"Ohh, Mr Bates," she stammered.

"Hello, Nomsa," he smiled at her.

The receptionist's forehead creased with a frown. "You are late," she admonished him gently.

Ryan grinned lopsided. "I know. Was that *the* Mr Philips?" he asked, putting his briefcase on the glass counter.

She nodded, dismayed. "He's phoned three times already, wanting to speak to you urgently."

Ryan rolled up the sleeves of his white button down shirt. "Why don't you put him through to Raphaela?"

Nomsa picked up the little yellow message slips from her immaculate desk and held them out to him. "He doesn't want to speak to Raphaela. He insists on talking to you."

"He's a pain in the arse," Ryan grumbled.

Mr Philips, an investor, was worried about his stake in a large townhouse development in Fourways. Somehow, Phillips had gotten hold of information that the

municipality was demanding documentation which could ultimately put the project in jeopardy. The rumour was simply not true, but Mr Philips was not to be assured. For the last three days he had called the office at least fifteen times and it did not matter what Ryan said to him, Philips was not satisfied.

Ryan reached over the counter and held out his hand. "Give them to me," he said. "I'll tell Raphaella to handle it."

Nomsa shot him a weary look. "Mr Philips won't like it," she objected.

"Don't worry," Ryan said. "Raphaella will keep him at bay."

Reluctantly, Nomsa placed the message slips into Ryan's outstretched hand. "If you say so...."

Ryan pushed the slips into his breast pocket. "When he phones again, put him straight through to Raphaella," he instructed.

Nomsa smiled reluctantly. But before she could utter a reply, the telephone rang again and she reached for the receiver. Ryan pulled his briefcase off the counter and nodded approvingly at her.

Her full voice followed him down the passage. "Bates Incorporated, good afternoon," he heard her say.

Ryan stopped at the first office and pushed open the door. "Afternoon, Raphaella," he greeted her.

His assistant's head lifted from behind a sleek black flat screen and she shook her auburn mane. The sun shining through the large windows behind her created a halo, giving her an almost ethereal appearance. Ryan squinted against the light and the vision vanished. Raphaella tilted her head to the side, her green eyes sparkling with good humour and her full sensuous mouth curled into a wide smile.

"Good afternoon, Ryan," she said with her dark melodious voice.

Ryan had hired Raphaella Patrizio when they had moved into the new offices. Whilst in the old building, he had finally conceded defeat, realising that the workload had become too much for him. From the thirty or so applicants Ryan had interviewed, he had liked Raphaella the best.

She was a tiny thing in comparison to him, hardly reaching up to his shoulder, with a wasp-like waist and full breasts. But it was Raphaella's spark that Ryan had first noticed: she was not intimidated by him in the least and had answered his probing questions in a self-assured and intelligent manner. He had been genuinely impressed by her and laughed out loud when she asked straight out, at the end of the interview, when she was going to start, confidently believing that she was going to be offered the job.

Ryan stepped into her cluttered office and pulled the message slips from his breast pocket. Raphaella got up from her black leather chair and walked to the front of her oak desk. She wore a white, figure hugging top, slacks with a broad brown belt emphasising her small waist, and stilettos, making her appear taller than she was.

Standing beside him, she took the yellow pieces of paper from his hand and glanced at them.

"Oh, no," she groaned theatrically.

Ryan leaned his shoulder against a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf. "Yes," he confirmed. "It's Mr Philips again."

An amused look appeared on her face. "Are you avoiding him?" she asked.

He grinned back at her. "Seems like it."

Raphaela put her fists on her hips in mock protest. "You can't just hand him over to me," she said. "The poor man is in total distress."

Ryan rubbed the back of his neck and a blond lock fell across his eyes. "It's better for his health," came his retort. "If I don't hand him over to you, I'm going to kill him."

"Mr Bates," she exclaimed, pretending to be outraged. "You are talking about one of our better investors here."

Ryan grimaced. Mr Philips was small fry in comparison to their other customers.

"Just take care of him," Ryan said. "I really have no time to deal with his anxiety attacks."

Raphaela swiped her long hair over her shoulder and nodded graciously. She returned to her chair and reached for the telephone.

"Not to worry, boss," she chirped. "I'll let you know how it goes."

"Thanks," Ryan replied and pushed himself away from the bookshelf.

Pretending to dial Mr Philips's number, Raphaela's eyes followed Ryan out of the door. At 1,85 m, he was almost a head and a half taller than her, with broad shoulders and narrow hips. He was as sexy as hell. According to her, Ryan Bates was as handsome as any male model in a GQ magazine and his boyish grin took her breath away.

Raphaela sighed heavily. How she wished he would ask her out on a date. It took all her willpower not to throw herself at him whenever he stood close to her. She knew he appreciated her intellect and quick wit, but that was as far as it went. He never seemed to see a woman when he looked at her, only an employee. It was so frustrating! Nevertheless, she was obviously not going to make a fool of herself and run after him – she was not that desperate! - but she wished she could find a way to make Ryan Bates aware that she was interested in more than a professional relationship.

xxx

Dirk watched Angus, Meshak and Rat Face disappear into the dilapidated chalet and not wanting to remain behind he scrambled out of the *bakkie*. He slammed the door shut and quickly covered the short stretch of hardened red soil, clumps of dust-covered grass resiliently growing here and there.

Before stepping through the open door, Dirk turned and looked at his surroundings once more. Nothing much had changed since the last time he had been here, except that nature had taken over.

Green vines snaked around empty window frames and long thin grass grew out of cracks in the paving. Huge trees shadowed the brown trickle of water in the river murmuring lazily past the isolated area. The main road was far away. He couldn't hear the sound of cars passing by.

Drawing a deep breath, he turned and entered the darkness of the chalet. A main room, open plan kitchen, a bedroom at the back and a bathroom was all there was to it.

Standing in the doorway, Dirk stared appalled at the mess in front of him. Beige floor tiles were cracked, dirt streaked and covered with litter. Mouldy pizza and McDonalds boxes were stacked in the corners of the large room. A big brown wooden table overflowed with empty beer bottles and wrappers. Grime stuck to the kitchen walls. Dirty glasses, some with stale alcohol, stood in clusters on the

scratched counter. The metal sink was crammed with plates, congealed with old food.

Further to Dirk's left was an ancient couch, its material faded and worn out, yellow stuffing spilling through fissures, its original colour unidentifiable. In front of the couch stood an ancient cabinet holding a colour TV, soundless pictures racing across its screen. The air smelled sour, although the patio doors were wide open.

Dirk was not a neat freak, but the place was disgusting. Breathing flatly through his mouth, he made his way around the big table, carefully avoiding the filth on the floor. He stopped beside a pillar next to the open plan kitchen and pushed his hands into his pocket.

Rat Face jingled a ring full of keys before laboriously selecting a key to push into the lock of the bedroom door on Dirk's left. Meshak waited patiently beside Rat Face holding the lifeless black girl in his arms.

Rat Face turned the key and opened the door. With a grin he stepped aside and let Meshak pass.

Dirk craned his neck, but was too far away to see anything. Cautiously, he walked across the filthy lounge and peered around the doorframe of the bedroom. The windows were boarded up and the room was in semi darkness. A moment later his vision adjusted and a small gasp escaped his mouth.

Two pairs of eyes stared at him fearfully.

Dirk blinked and looked again.

Two girls were sitting on a dirty mattress pushed against the far wall. Both wore short skirts and blouses. They were clutching each others hands and their faces were tear-streaked.

Dirk swallowed hard.

The girls tried to get up, but before the girl on the right could get fully onto her feet, Rat Face had stepped forward and pushed her back onto the mattress.

"Don't even think about it," he snarled.

The girl on the left remained standing. Her lips trembled and tears started to roll down her cheeks as she lifted her hands. "Please let us go," she whimpered.

Rat Face's laugh was merciless. "In your dreams."

He pushed her hard and she fell on to the bare floor scraping the skin off her elbow.

"Make space," Rat Face hissed.

Scrambling out of the way on all fours, the girl clutched her elbow and moaned softly.

Meshak let go of the black girl in his arms, dumping her on the mattress. Small clouds of dust swirled up into the air. The girl bounced up once, but otherwise did not move. Her arms and legs were sprawled out and her head was lolling backwards. With disbelief Dirk watched as Meshak kicked her leg viciously. The black man grunted satisfied, turned away and walked out of the room, intentionally slamming his shoulder into Dirk's chest. Dirk winced as a sharp pain raced past his ribs, but he did not retaliate. Rat Face pulled the door closed and locked it, shutting out the girls' pleading eyes.

Angus threw the black girl's backpack on the floor beside the door where it joined two others.

His cousin's voice brought Dirk out of his numbness.

"You're going to stay here," Angus ordered.

Dirk looked at him dumbfounded. "Why?" he stuttered.

A corner of Angus' mouth curled upwards. "Because I say so."

Dirk looked from Meshak to Rat Face, and back to his cousin.

"You keep Rudi company until we come back," Angus dictated.

Dirk opened his mouth in protest, but caught the look on Meshak face; intimidating was an understatement.

Angus pointed at Rudi. "You keep an eye on him," he commanded. "It's his first time. Don't let him get up to any shit."

Rat Face reached under his shirt and pulled out a knife. The serrated edges glinted nastily in the fading sunlight. He squinted up at Dirk from under his greasy long fringe and started cleaning his black rimmed fingernails.

"No sweat, man," Rat Face chortled.

Panic rose up in Dirk's throat, threatening to choke him.

What had it let himself in for? he moaned silently. Why did he have to insist on joining his cousin and his dumb arse partner? He needed to get out of here! He needed to get away from them! He didn't want any part of what they were doing - whatever that was.

Glancing at Meshak and seeing his vicious snarl, Dirk realised he had no choice. Instinctively he knew he could rant and rave as much as he liked, the black man would make sure he stayed put, even if he had to punch Dirk's lights out.

Dirk plastered a grin on his face. "When will you be back?" he asked, trying hard to keep his voice even.

"When we're finished," his cousin snapped.

"What about food?" Dirk asked tentatively.

Angus looked around and shrugged his shoulders. "See what you can find," he replied indifferently. "We'll bring some around next time."

Dirk breathed in deeply.

So this was it, he thought. He was supposed to stay with Rat Face, at the mercy of this maniac.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dirk tried to size up Rat Face. The guy was shorter than he was, sinewy and slight. If push came to shove, he could take him on. Then light glinted off the edge of his knife again, reminding him that Rat Face had the advantage of a weapon.

Damn! Dirk swore under his breath.

Angus opened the front door and stepped into the waning sunlight. Meshak followed close behind and Dirk rushed forward determined not to be left alone with the ferret.

"Are you sure you want me to stay?" he shouted.

Angus climbed into the *bakkie*. "Yes," he said coldly, slamming the door closed.

Dirk felt, rather than saw Rat Face appearing beside him.

"Don't worry man," the ferret said softly. "I'll take good care of you."

Angus started the car and the engine revved to life. His cousin put the gear lever into reverse and spattering gravel in all directions, steered the car around. Without a backward glance, Angus put foot and the *bakkie* sped down the dirt road.

Longingly Dirk stared at the fast disappearing vehicle, watching wistfully as the dust cloud settled slowly behind it.

Ryan Bates knocked softly on Thomas Nkosi's door.

"Thomas," he greeted the handsome black man sitting behind the desk.

Thomas Nkosi was his partner in 'Bates Incorporated' and a relatively new addition to Ryan's company. Ryan had been very reluctant to take on a partner, especially because he had built the company without anyone's help. For a long time Ryan had not been prepared to let someone else share his success without adequate contribution, but if he wanted to grow his company, he was forced to join the government's strategic plan which had been established to improve the country's economy.

Ryan had grown up during the last years of apartheid. He matriculated in 1993, a year before the first democratic elections had been held in South Africa.

Ryan was not interested in politics, he was only interested in carving out a career for himself. Like so many other young, white South African men, he had been glad the government had stopped conscripting them into the army, where he would have wasted two years of his life. The war in Angola was finally over and everyone was now able to focus on a brighter future.

At eighteen, Ryan had his life mapped out for himself: first he would go to university and study for a Bachelor of Commerce. Then he would join one of the big businesses and after a few years he would become a manager. With some luck and hard work he would climb the corporate ladder and by the time he was thirty or maybe thirty-five, he would be a director. Life was good and the future looked rosy.

He enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand and after four years of intense studying, graduated with Honours. Compiling his Curriculum Vitae posed no problems and Ryan was confident he would soon be employed. However, his visits to personnel agencies bore no fruit. Time after time Ryan was told companies were looking for an affirmative action candidate. His hopes dwindled away day by day. After a trying six months of applying for every available job, it became clear to him that as a young white male in South Africa he hardly stood a chance of being employed. He had the wrong skin colour.

Ryan howled with frustration, realizing that he lived in a country where reverse discrimination was now applied and that there was nothing he could do about it. He was twenty-two years old and unemployable. Burying himself at home, he slowly slid into a depression. Nothing and no one could cheer him up.

Ryan could not remember what got him out of his dark hole - if it was an article he read in a newspaper, or if it was one of his friends who tried to talk sense into him - but one day his old determination was back.

If nobody wanted to employ him, then he was going to employ himself.

Ryan approached Snyder Properties, one of the largest estate agent and development companies in South Africa and asked if he could work for them. Always on the look-out for people who were prepared to freelance - earning commission only - the company agreed.

Ryan was required to write an exam in order to be registered as estate agent and he passed the test with flying colours. An elderly colleague took him under his wing and showed him the ropes on how to sell houses in the domestic market. It was back-breaking work. Prospective buyers were visited in the evenings, houses were on show on Sundays, and deals depended on credit available from the banks.

Ryan bit his teeth and learned everything there was to learn about the business. The first six months were very hard for him. The housing market was slow and his commissions were split fifty-fifty with the company.

Eventually he started making money. Not millions, but his income increased steadily and he soon made a name for himself amongst his colleagues and in the market. He was known as a hard, but fair negotiator who knew what he was talking about. The company took note of his success and offered him a position in their commercial building section. Ryan grabbed the opportunity with both hands. Instead of selling houses, he was now dealing with commercial buildings with values exceeding ten times the rate of residential property, which meant his commission earnings increased dramatically.

Ryan was very good at what he did, but it irked him that he had to share his commission with his employer. He understood that the company took the responsibility of placing advertisements and paying receptionists, secretaries and lawyers. However, when he sat down and calculated the actual costs the company covered, he realised that he was making the directors of Snyder Properties rich.

In 2001 Ryan decided to gamble. He went out on his own and founded 'Bates Incorporated'. Once again, life was tough. The big estate agencies threw boulders down to sabotage him. Wherever and whenever they could they undermined him and tried to steal deals. His capital dwindled away and on more than one occasion he wondered if he had made the right decision, but he persevered.

The housing market started to boom, commercial properties popped up all over the show and Ryan's company prospered. He employed five estate agents, a secretary and a receptionist. Ryan took care of the big deals while his employees sold houses, small commercial properties and dealt with rental agreements. His business grew and he made more money than he was able to spend.

Ryan began investing in existing properties, renting them out, only holding on to them until their value exceeded a certain profit margin. After two years, he took another gamble, a big one, and entered the arena of property development. Townhouse complexes were in demand and it was the sale of these properties that made him a wealthy man.

Ryan employed more people, including project managers and quantity surveyors. His company, although still small in comparison to Snyder Properties and Jamison Developments, was a force to be reckoned with. Ryan was wise not to get too involved in the management of the developments. For each new townhouse complex he formed a new company and subcontracted the work out. He never exceeded the budget figures and rather sold a half finished project to another interested party, avoiding getting bogged down with debt.

Although his company was doing well, Ryan wanted to do better. He was determined to break into the low cost housing market, which was expanding at tremendous speed. Unfortunately, his tender bids were rejected. Once again Ryan was faced with South Africa's economic reality. If he wanted to be a player in the low cost housing market, he would have to have a black partner.

Having to take on a black partner only to win tender bids made Ryan cringe. Often he wondered if he really needed the money, and he hesitated for many months. In the meantime he lost one low cost housing bid after the other to inferior competitors. Ryan mulled over his problem and consulted his lawyers thereby gaining an in-depth understanding of the Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment initiative which

the South African government was determined to force onto South African companies.

Although he did not like the conditions attached to the BBBEE initiative, Ryan knew very well that he had to follow the new political agenda if he wanted to grow his business.

Together with his lawyers they sought out and interviewed suitable applicants who wanted to buy 25.1 % shares in Ryan's company. As the months dragged by, Ryan rejected one applicant after the other. He was looking for a partner who was going to add value. He was not interested in a silent director, but the black suitors only offered money.

About a year later, when Ryan finally contemplated giving up his quest of finding a black partner, he received a phone call from Thomas Nkosi enquiring if Ryan was still interested in selling shares. By now deeply disillusioned, Ryan only reluctantly agreed to meet with Nkosi.

During their meeting Ryan was pleasantly surprised to discover that he and Thomas had graduated in the same year from WITS University and that Thomas had not only the money to buy shares, but also a wealth of experience. Thomas had been one of those young black men who had been favoured by large corporations and had worked his way up into the position of Financial Manager.

Ryan was impressed. He himself was a salesman, not necessarily a finance person and he felt strongly that Thomas would be able to add value to the company; that he would be a real partner and not only a name on paper. Ryan agreed to sell 25.1 % of his shares to Thomas Nkosi with the condition that Nkosi would also become the Financial Director of 'Bates Incorporated', working actively with Ryan. Thomas Nkosi was delighted to become Ryan's partner and the deal was signed.

Thomas looked up from the papers he was working on and focussed on the man standing in his doorway. "You are late," he scowled.

Ryan closed the door behind him. "Sorry man," he apologised half-heartedly. "It took longer than anticipated. But we still have some time. They are only coming at six, not so?"

Thomas rubbed his hand across his short, curly black hair. "Yes," he confirmed. "We still have some time, but I would have liked to go over the figures once more."

Ryan dropped his briefcase onto the floor and slumped into the visitor's chair in front of Thomas's desk. Peering over his partner's shoulder into the garden, he noticed the setting sun. The red-golden light shone through the open patio doors and streaked across the bookshelf lined walls. Faint traffic noises drifted into the room and small dust particles danced in the air.

Thomas leaned back into his leather chair and folded his arms. "So, how did it go?"

Ryan shrugged his shoulders. "As expected," he replied.

He recalled the telephone ringing at about nine o'clock in the morning.

An exasperated subcontractor required his immediate assistance. Ryan immediately suspected one of the usual problems and his hunch was confirmed. The contractor explained that the labourers were striking, demanding a substantial wage increase. The workers apparently threatened to leave the site and the contractor was

worried that the project would be indefinitely delayed, costing the company and its investors more money than they would appreciate.

Reacting quickly and without wasting valuable time, Ryan made his way to the site, situated past Kya Sands on the way to Lanseria. From Rivonia, he took the highway west towards Roodeport. Luckily, at this time of the morning, the road was no longer congested and he was able to cruise along at the maximum permissible speed. William Nicol off-ramp raced past him and he only slowed down when he approached the Malibongwe turn off.

Standing at the robot waiting for the green light, Ryan was surrounded by hawkers. Sunglasses hooked onto square boards of cardboard, baseball caps and cellphone chargers were held at random in front of his windscreen and he heard the hawkers' pleas, "Cheap, cheap, baas."

Ryan shook his head over and over again, eventually staring straight ahead, ignoring the hordes of black men walking on the road-side offering their wares for sale. Eventually the robot turned green and Ryan's BMW 4x4 shot forward leaving the hawkers behind.

Moving over the bridge across the highway, he sped up Malibongwe Drive, rapidly approaching the intersection of Banbury Cross. A huge truck sputtered up the road, its blue exhaust fumes obscuring Ryan's view. Impatiently, he flipped his indicator and swerved into the right lane, only to cut off a smart Mercedes SLK, earning him an angry horn blasting. Ryan raised his hand in apology and raced on.

Soon, he passed the industrial sites of Kya Sands. Ryan was always astounded how the suburb had expanded in the last few years. One- and two-storey warehouses standing side by side lined the road, sprawling down into the valley and up the hill. He kept his eyes on the traffic in front of him and left the last low-slung buildings behind.

A few kilometres further, Ryan came upon the first low-cost housing developments. He slowed down and checked his competitors' progress. The construction signboards read: *Jamison Developments, Eyabantu Projects, Smith and Carter Projects, Van Helfen Incorporated, Kaminisky (Pty) Ltd., Sabela Projects*, and many more. The townhouse complexes were growing steadily and in Ryan's estimation, it was only going to take another two months before the first owners would be able to move in.

Ryan found the dirt track on his left leading to his company's development and drove onto the hardened soil. His 4x4's shocks absorbed the potholes and small mountains of dirt without a major shudder. He looked out for the 'Bates Incorporated' signboard, spotting it a few hundred metres into his trek.

A large crowd had gathered under the signboard in front of the half completed townhouse complex. Ryan drove up to the mob and purposefully slammed on his brakes, raising a huge cloud of reddish dust. Forcing his way forward slowly, some of the men in blue overalls recognised Ryan's silver BMW and opened up a gap letting him drive onto the site.

Ryan stared grimly at their black faces and received a couple of balled fists and angry shouts in return. Taking a deep breath, he anticipated the worst. This was definitely not something he enjoyed: dealing with an angry, dissatisfied mob. Clenching his hands around his steering wheel, Ryan drove across the bumpy track to the far end of the complex where he found the supervisor's trailer.

He stopped the car, switched off the engine and opened his door. A musty smell of wet soil, concrete and diesel hung in the hot, dry air. He climbed out of the 4x4 and remotely locked its doors. Walking around his vehicle towards the green painted construction site offices, he tried to avoid the worst of the rubble, but within seconds his shoes were covered with fine reddish powder.

The site office door opened and McKenzy greeted him jovially. "Good morning, Mr Bates."

Ryan stepped forward and shook McKenzy's hand. "Good morning," he replied. "How are you doing?"

The burly man made way for Ryan and grunted in return. Ryan walked into the dim interior of the trailer where the rest of the supervising crew had gathered around a rickety table.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Ryan said, his face set tightly.

The men nodded at him and mumbled greetings. Ryan sat down in McKenzy's chair, immediately establishing the power of authority. The site's supervisor found an old kitchen chair in a corner and carefully lowered his bulk onto the contraption.

Ryan rested his elbows on the desk, covered with drawings - overflowing ashtrays and empty coffee mugs - and looked at the men around him.

"So, what's the problem?"

McKenzy folded his arms across his chest and turned to his colleagues. "Well," he started, expecting help from his men, but no one moved.

"Yes?" Ryan said.

McKenzy shuffled his feet uneasily. "I'm sorry we had to call you out here, sir," he said, "but we didn't know what else to do. You've seen them out in front, haven't you?"

McKenzy was a burly man in his early forties, with a shock of red hair and a bulbous nose. Unfortunately, his bulk was deceiving, because as soon as McKenzy felt he was unable to deal with a problem, he retreated into his trailer. Instead of taking immediate action, he phoned the office in Rivonia to inform the staff about the 'impossible situation' on site. Thomas and Ryan had contemplated replacing McKenzy on numerous occasions, but had rejected the idea each time. McKenzy was one of a kind. He was reliable and his work ethics were outstanding. He was trustworthy as a supervisor and as long as the workers behaved, he was the man to have on site. When McKenzy handled a project it was completed on time and there were no comebacks regarding workmanship. However, McKenzy was not able to deal with labour law problems. If his workers became difficult, the supervisor was at a loss and he became as insecure as a rabbit chased by a fox.

The red-haired man averted his eyes. "They say they're on strike," he muttered.

Ryan drummed his fingers on the desk impatiently.

Sensing his employer's mood, McKenzy finally blurted out, "They want more money."

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

A young, lanky man with blond hair and a harrowed face, sitting to McKenzy's left, leaned forward. Ryan recognised him as the site's Quantity Surveyor; Michael Bell was his name.

"When I saw they were not working this morning, I went out to talk to them," Bell said.

"And?"

"Apparently they heard the guys on the Jamison site get more money," Bell explained. "You know how they sit together during lunch time and quite a few of them stay at the same squatter camp down the road. They claim Jamison is paying them a quarter more than we do."

Ryan's laugh sounded like a gunshot. Jamison paying his workers more than 'Bates Incorporated'? Impossible! Jamison was a stingy son of a bitch. He would never pay his labourers more than the minimum wage and if he could get away with it, Jamison would even try to cheat his workers on that.

"I know what you are thinking, Mr Bates," Bell said quietly. "I told them they had the wrong information, but they won't budge. They're adamant. Either they get more money, or they won't go back to work."

Ryan sighed heavily. After all these years in the development business he should be used to workers' demands, but he still did not relish the negotiations which would have to take place. Apart from not having the time, the budget on this particular project was also very tight and there was not much room for manoeuvring.

But what choice did he have? The townhouse complex was only half complete and every day's delay was costing the company money.

"Who is their spokesperson?" Ryan asked resignedly.

"Gift Tshabalala," McKenzy said, having recouped his voice.

"Get him in here," Ryan demanded.

A young man, Sam Dornan, McKenzy's assistant, eagerly got to his feet and rushed to the door.

The men waited in silence until Dornan reappeared with Gift Tshabalala in tow, a skinny, wiry black man in his mid thirties. Tshabalala's sly eyes shifted around the trailer and rested briefly on McKenzy. Ryan noticed Tshabalala's look and wondered what had occurred during the unlawful strike action. Somehow, he sensed that McKenzy and his men weren't telling him the whole truth. Shrugging his shoulders, Ryan got up from his chair and held out his hand.

"Good morning, Mr Tshabalala," he greeted the black man.

Tshabalala eyed him carefully, but shook his hand. "Good morning, Mr Bates."

Both men sat down facing each other across the cluttered desk and the negotiations began.

CHAPTER 03

Dirk sat on the dilapidated couch staring at the pictures flickering across the colour TV screen. The sour smell of the fabric made the bile rise in his throat, but there was nowhere else to sit, except on the floor and he was in no mood to share his space with torn chocolate wrappers, empty beer bottles and greasy food containers.

Rat Face had gone outside and Dirk had no idea what the ugly, skinny man was doing.

The TV sound was turned low, but Dirk did not mind. He wasn't following the soap opera anyway, he was thinking instead of the precarious situation he was in.

His mind began to stir and as he pondered the most recent events, his stomach churned. His eyes travelled to the closed door on the other side of the chalet where the three girls were held captive. Although he had only caught a glimpse of the other two girls, he had noticed that they were as young as the black girl Angus and his mad black partner had kidnapped off the street.

Dirk put his head into his hands and groaned softly.

What on earth did they want with the girls? he asked himself for the hundredth time. Why the hell did they kidnap the black girl? What was going to happen to them? And what was going to happen to him?

Dirk's conscience dictated that he was supposed to take some kind of action – maybe rescue the girls? - but after a thought or two, he still had not the faintest inkling on how to go about it.

He was stuck out here with them. Angus had taken the *bakkie* and there was no other transport, not even a bicycle.

He glanced across the lounge.

Even if he could unlock the door, where would they go? The highway was on the other side of the wide open *veld*. It was a four, or maybe even a five kilometre *trek* through high grass.

He shook his head sadly. It was just too far away.

And another notion crowded his befuddled brain: What if the girls were injured? What if they were not even able to walk?

Dirk sniffed loudly and wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

He was fairly certain that he would be unable to carry all three of them at the same time. What man could do *that*?

"What are you up to?" Rat Face's voice startled him out of his plotting mode and he jerked his head around.

"Up to some kind of shit?" Rat Face snarled.

He was leaning with his shoulder against the patio doorframe, his hip thrust out aggressively. As if caught in the act, Dirk shifted his eyes towards the rickety cabinet.

Pulling out his knife, Rat Face glared at him. "Fuck!" he exclaimed. "Don't even think about it. Your cousin will rip your throat out if you cause any crap."

Dirk swallowed hard.

The ferret was right. If he did anything to jeopardise Angus's scheme, he would be a dead man. His cousin might have a soft spot for him, but family or no family, if Dirk put a foot wrong once, Angus would not hesitate to eliminate him - without a second thought.

Rat Face took a step forward, squinting at his charge. "What are you doing here anyway?" he asked with unconcealed curiosity.

What *am* I doing here? Dirk repeated silently, a cynical smile playing around his lips.

Dirk knew very well what had landed him here and into this trouble: he wanted to be as great as his rotten cousin. He wanted to get his hands on the big bucks and an easy life.

His mother had warned him over and over that there was no easy money, just hard work and patience. But, Angus was the ultimate proof that she was wrong. His cousin drove around in a neat *bakkie*, handled wads of cash and never seemed to lift a finger for it.

And now? Dirk asked, immediately answering his own question. Now he was in this impossible mess wishing he had never asked Angus to take him along.

He peered at the man in front of him.

Not that it was any of Rat Face's business, he thought.

Dirk shrugged his shoulders. "What's it to you?" he muttered.

Rat Face turned over the knife in his hand and stared at Dirk from under his long dirty fringe. Dirk watched him fiddling with the huge weapon, its serrated edge glinting ever so often in the setting sun.

"They might make me give you part of my share," Rat Face mused.

"And?" Dirk frowned irritably.

Rat Face took another step forward, pointing the tip of the knife at Dirk's chest. "Maybe I don't want to share."

Dirk's eyes grew wide. "What are you talking about?" he asked, all of a sudden worried.

"Maybe I don't want to give you any of my money," Rat Face repeated slyly. "Maybe you are going to have an accident tonight."

Dirk jumped up from the couch, his hands balled into fists. "Are you threatening me?" he hissed.

Rat Face took another step forward closing the gap between the two of them. His eyes turned into small slits as he lifted his knife. "Does it look like I'm threatening you?" he asked casually.

Dirk raised his hands, ready to defend himself.

Rat Face laughed viciously. "What are you going to do?" he snarled. "You want to hit me?"

Tauntingly, he waved the knife from side to side. Dirk lurched forward trying to grab Rat Face's arm, but the ferret was too fast, slipping his hand with the knife past the attack.

"You want the knife?" Rat Face growled.

Dirk launched again at the ferret's arm and missed. The knife shot out and nicked his T-shirt leaving a small gash above his breastbone. Trying to avoid another onslaught, Dirk stumbled backward towards the patio door.

"Hey man!" he shouted. "Don't be stupid. If something happens to me, Angus will have your hide."

Rat Face stopped advancing and tilted his head to the side.

"Remember," Dirk continued breathlessly. "You're supposed to be looking after me. What do you think is going to happen when Angus finds me dead?"

Rat Face gave him a shrewd look and pointed his knife at Dirk's throat, but before he could give a smart-arsed reply, a jolly cellphone tune jingled through the air.

The tension broke and the ferret retreated. Dirk concealed a deep breath, silently thanking his lucky stars for the diversion. He reached for his pocket, whilst keeping his eyes glued on Rat Face, but he realised quickly that the jingle did not belong to his phone. Rat Face pulled out his cellphone. Puzzled, he frowned at it for a long moment. The faint melody continued drifting through the room, but it did not come from his phone either.

Finally, Rat Face looked up. "I know," he smirked.

The cellphone disappeared into his back pocket and he spun on his heel. Bounding across the littered lounge, he traced the happy ring tone floating through the air. Dirk followed slowly, avoiding the empty beer bottles strewn all over the floor. Rat Face stopped beside the locked door and bending down, he reached for the black girl's backpack. Lifting up the blue and red bag, he unzipped all its pockets. He turned the backpack upside down and shook it vigorously.

An Afrikaans dictionary, a maths exercise booklet, an English reading book, loose sheets of paper, several coloured plastic folders, a purple plastic pencil case, various ring binders and a silver cellphone slipped out of the backpack, scattering onto the floor.

The cellphone still chirped its cheery tune.

Rat Face turned to Dirk. "I knew it," he stated triumphantly.

Lifting his foot, Rat Face brought his heel down on the ringing cellphone. The sound stopped abruptly as the little device crunched under his heavy boot. He ground his foot ferociously back and forth. Finally satisfied, he kicked the broken pieces across the floor letting them slide under empty food containers and torn wrappers.

"It's an anxious mom trying to find out where her daughter is," he laughed mockingly. "Now, she'll never find out."

On hearing the ferret's words, the blood drained from Dirk's face. Hot anger surged through him and he clenched his jaw.

Bloody arsehole, he swore quietly, wishing fervently that he was brave and strong enough to put his hands around the ferret's skinny neck. Throttling him would be bliss. It seemed the bastard got a kick out of reminding him that the girls had been snatched off the street.

Remembering the girls' frightened and pleading eyes, a huge knot formed in Dirk's stomach and a soft moan escaped his lips.

He knew he did not want to have any part of this, whatever it was the three men had planned for the girls, and he was looking desperately for a way out.

What if he could talk some sense into Rat Face? Dirk speculated. Maybe he could appeal to the guy's humanity? Maybe he could convince Rat Face to let the girls and him go?

Anxiety made him bold and Dirk waved his hand in the air. "Do you think it's right what you are doing?"

Rat Face turned his head and his face distorted with disbelief. "What are you on about?"

"I mean," Dirk stumbled over his words. "They are just kids and their parents must be frightened to death."

Rat Face's lip curled into a snarl. "What do you care?"

Having almost expected the ferret's reaction, Dirk sighed silently, but refrained from answering.

It's no use, he thought despondently.

Rat Face seemed dead set on his course of action. And after all that had happened in the last hour, Dirk thought it wiser to let the ferret believe that he was as hard and cold-hearted as he was. He did not want to give the guy any reason to have another go at him.

Rat Face pointed his thumb at the door. "They're worth a lot of money," he said. "And personally I don't give a rat's arse if their parents are worried or not. They're just brats." He paused for a moment. "There are many more out there and if business carries on as it has up to now, then I'll be able to retire very soon."

With a jolt Dirk realised Rat Face meant that this was not the first time they had abducted girls. Disbelief and anger threatened to choke him, but with great effort he kept his face blank.

He took a deep breath, ready to reason with Rat Face once again, ready to talk some sense into the ferret, but Rat Face held up his hand.

"Fuck! Don't even think of interfering. Those girls earn me money." He pulled out his knife again. "Don't spoil the fun," he warned with a low voice.

xxx

Ryan stretched his legs and folded his arms across his chest. "This Tshabalala guy is a real hard nut," he said with a smile. "I don't know where he learned to negotiate, because it took some real effort from my side."

Thomas raised his eyebrows, waiting for his partner to continue.

Ryan tilted his head. "Can you believe it? He demanded a twenty-five percent increase for all workers."

"Whoa!" Thomas exclaimed.

Ryan made a dismissive gesture. "Obviously, I declined. I pointed out to him that they were striking illegally, which Tshabalala didn't like to hear at all. He just got up from the table and walked out. Unfortunately, he had me by the short and curlies. As you know, each day they stay away costs us a fortune and we can't afford to find and train a new crew on short notice." Ryan grinned mischievously. "It took some fast talking and the promise of food to get him back into the trailer."

Thomas looked at him sharply. "How much is this costing us?"

"It's not going to break the bank," Ryan reassured his Financial Director. "The main thing is that they are back on site. It would cost us a whole lot more if they stayed away another day."

"You are right," Thomas confirmed with a sigh.

"Nevertheless," Ryan said, picking up a Parker pen from Thomas's desk and creating a noisy staccato by clicking it open and closed, "I still want to know where that rumour came from that Jamison is paying more than we do. Usually, where there is smoke, there is fire."

Thomas steepled his fingers. "I hear you, but you know how these things go. One guy mentions something, the next one picks it up and in no time at all, everyone believes they are being done in."

"Yes," Ryan grumbled. "But it irks me that our operation is interrupted because of a stupid, invalid rumour. I wonder if Jamison's site supervisor did not have something to do with this."

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "Why would he do that?" he asked warily.

"For the simple reason that the next bidder will think that we can't control our workforce," Ryan replied deadpan.

"That's devious," Thomas protested.

Ryan's voice was like steel. "Hey partner, get used to it. This is a cut-throat business and there is nothing nice about it."

A soft knock on the door interrupted their conversation. "Yes?" Thomas called out.

The door opened and Raphaela pushed her head into the office, her long dark hair falling over her shoulder.

"I'm going home now," she said. "Is there anything you two still need from me?"

Ryan checked his watch: it was close to six o'clock.

Thomas glanced at his desk. "No, I don't think so," he replied. "I've got your reports and the lists are complete." He shook his head. "I don't need anything." Thomas looked questioningly at Ryan. His partner twisted in his chair, putting his arm over the backrest. "No. Thanks Raphaela. Enjoy your evening."

Her smile lit up her pretty features. "You too," she replied, and closed the door behind her.

Returning his attention to his desk, Thomas moved a pile of papers to one side and pulled out a large yellow folder.

"I've made some changes to the budget and I would like you to have a look at them. Four eyes see more than two," Thomas said.

The documents represented the last phase in their negotiation with a black empowerment consortium which was interested in investing a huge amount of money in an exclusive housing project in Broad Acres, an area just north of Fourways. Thomas and he had worked on the figures for the last three months and it was imperative they convince the investors.

Ryan opened the thick folder and looked at the rows and columns of figures. Scanning the pages, Thomas pointed out the alterations and amendments he had made, saving 'Bates Incorporated' and the prospective investors several million Rand. Ryan was impressed, but before he could discuss the proposal more in depth, his cellphone rang. He fished the phone out of his pocket and slid open the cover.

"Hello?" Ryan listened for a moment. "I'm on my way," he said and closed the cover. He got up from his chair. "They are here."

Walking across his partner's office, Ryan rolled down his shirt sleeves, tightened his tie and shrugged into his jacket. He opened the door and made his way through the now empty reception area towards the entrance. A small group of people were gathered on the steps outside the building. He pulled out his key and unlocked the front door.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," Ryan greeted the visitors with his most charming smile.

Three black men in business suits and starched white shirts and two black women dressed in tailored pant suits filed through the door into the reception area.

"Mr Nchabaleng, Mr Masango, Mr Motaung, Mrs Simelane, Mrs Bhengu," Ryan greeted them in turn and shook their hands. "Please follow me."

The small group walked down the passage, turned left at the end and stepped into a medium sized boardroom. A large blonde oak table with ten matching chairs stood in its centre. The smell of freshly brewed filter coffee wafted through the conditioned air and finger snacks beckoned invitingly from a tray standing on a sideboard. The floor to ceiling glass sliding doors looked out onto a landscaped garden where

strategically placed spotlights illuminated a cluster of orange crane flowers and several large palm trees. A small waterfall cascaded into a fishpond surrounded by roughly hewn rocks.

Always the perfect host, Ryan offered coffee, which was accepted gratefully. As he poured the last cup for Mrs Simelane, Thomas entered the room. Out of the corner of his eye, Ryan saw the investors' faces light up.

A tiny cynical smile played around his lips. Nothing ever changes, he thought. As soon, as they see another black man, they feel comfortable. It did not matter how competent he was, or how effective, all that counted was that the company was owned by a black man, even if it was only twenty-five comma one percent.

On the other hand, Ryan was pleased that Thomas was working with him. Without his black partner, his company would have never been considered for this bid.

"Good evening," Thomas said with his dark voice, smiling broadly. "I'm glad you could make it."

Mr Nchabaleng, a podgy man with a shaved head, put his cup of coffee on the table and approached Thomas. Holding out his hand, he said, "The pleasure is all ours."

Ryan unobtrusively observed the group, trying to gauge who was their spokesperson, who would make the ultimate decision, who was the inevitable objector and who was the timid one. He had learned a long time ago that it was of utmost importance to be able to assess your potential business partners in order to be successful. Ryan balanced his cup of coffee in the palm of his right hand and made his way around the table, strategically placing himself on the long side of the table, leaving the seat at the head for Thomas. It was all about perception. People wanted to be mollycoddled and he was more than prepared to go along with that, as long as the potential investors were ready to part with their money.

The rest of the group followed Ryan and sat down. Mrs Simelane, who faced Ryan, placed a red crocodile leather briefcase on the table. Her short black hair was pleated into an intricate pattern. Diamonds glittered in her earlobes and her lips were painted a dark red. She snapped open the catches of her briefcase and pulled out a sheaf of papers. Ryan deduced that Mrs Simelane was the one in charge of the finances. Her dark intelligent eyes watched him shrewdly as she leaned back in her chair.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ryan tried to ascertain Mrs Bhengu's role in the set up. She had placed herself beside Mr Motaung whose half-moon spectacles threatened to slip off the tip of his nose at any moment. His black hair was streaked with silver and he sipped the coffee delicately holding the cup with thumb and forefinger, pointing his pinkie away at a right angle. Ryan briefly wondered if the man was gay, but discarded the thought as soon as it entered his mind. It actually did not matter to him if Mr Motaung was homosexual or bisexual. Ryan wanted his money, not become his lover.

Mr Masango did not look like a typical business man. He pulled at the lapels of his striped suit and was clearly uncomfortable wearing formal clothes. The skin around his eyes was deeply crinkled indicating that he was not a young man any longer, but his dark hair did not show one grey strand. Restlessly Mr Masango shifted in his chair and only settled back once he had unbuttoned his jacket. A plump stomach protruded from above his waistband and strained against his white shirt.

Thomas cleared his throat and all faces turned to him. "Thank you for coming this evening," he said with a smile. Leaning across the table, he distributed thick folders containing a copy of the prepared documents.

Thomas settled back in his chair and opened his own file. "As you can see," he said, "we have made some significant changes in the project's budget."

Folders opened, paper rustled as pages were turned over. Mrs Simelane pushed her briefcase aside and placed her papers alongside her folder. Her index finger quickly traced the rows and columns of figures and she compared them continuously with the information on her own papers. After a while, her forehead creased with a frown and she looked up.

"Mr Nkosi," she addressed Thomas. "On page sixteen you list a set of figures under the header 'incidentals'. Could you please elaborate what these amounts constitute?"

Thomas inclined his head and began to explain.

xxx

Lucy's head felt as if someone was pounding it with a hammer. The pain searing behind her closed eyelids created red and blue flashes. She tried to open her eyes wanting to escape the vicious lightning strikes, but her eyelids would not obey. Her body felt heavy as if weighed down by rocks. She decided it was not an entirely unpleasant feeling.

After several more attempts she forced her eyes open and dim light filtered through her lashes. She recognised ceiling boards far above her, which meant she was lying on her back. Without turning her head, Lucy moved her eyes to the left and saw a wall. She looked right and saw another wall.

No sound penetrated the thick, stale air. She wiggled her fingers, then her toes. With a groan, she pushed herself up on one elbow, only to be immediately assaulted by a wave of nausea. Her right hand moved to her mouth as she heaved.

"Don't," a voice from behind said hurriedly. "For heaven's sake, just don't throw up."

Lucy gulped down the rising bile and took a couple of deep breaths. Her head hurt like hell and her vision blurred.

A hand rubbed her back and the voice continued reassuringly. "It's okay. Just take deep breaths. There you go."

Lucy drew her legs up and rose into a sitting position. "My head hurts," she croaked.

"I know," the voice said.

Lucy smacked her lips together. Her mouth was like parched paper and her throat scratched when she tried to swallow.

"I'm so thirsty," she rasped.

A bottle was thrust into Lucy's hand. "Here, drink this."

Lucy grasped the bottle. "What is it?"

"Just water," the voice replied.

Lucy lifted the bottle to her lips and let the tepid liquid run into her mouth. The water rushed down into her throat and she choked. Coughing loudly, she dropped the bottle.

"Hey," the voice protested, snatching up the bottle. "You mustn't waste it. It's all we have."

With the back of her hand, Lucy wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes.

"What are you talking about?" she asked puzzled.

A girl appeared at her side. Her dark brown hair was pulled back into a pony tail, her nose was covered with tiny freckles, but her face was deathly pale. The girl wore a white blouse, maroon skirt, white ankle socks and black lace-up shoes.

"Who are you?" Lucy asked in her semi-drugged state.

The girl moved right beside her and stretched out her legs. "I'm Silvy Baxter," she said. "And you?"

"Lucy Nkosi."

Silvy put her hand on Lucy's arm. "Are you alright?"

Lucy nodded carefully, not wanting another onslaught of the earlier headache. Her mind was sluggish and she was unable to focus properly. Lucy turned her head slowly, taking in her surroundings. The walls were bare and streaked with dirt and mould. On one side was a window boarded up with wooden planks, filtering in the last of the fading sunlight. On the opposite wall was a wooden door - without a handle. Lucy was sitting on a thin, filthy mattress which had been pushed into a corner. A dented metal bucket stood at the opposite end of the room. She twisted her head further and jumped with fright. A pair of eyes was staring at her unblinkingly.

"Who the hell is that?" she asked, pointing at a small figure crouched in the furthest corner of the room.

The girl rocked back and forth on her heels, clutching her knees, without making even the tiniest sound. Her long black hair was held back from her pixy face, emphasising her delicate cheekbones. The girl's huge eyes were framed by long dark lashes giving her the appearance of an exotic Barbie doll. Her blue shirt was stained in front and her short navy blue skirt had a long tear down its side.

"That's Shelly Towns," Silvy explained.

She got up from the mattress and walked over to the girl rocking on her heels. Silvy crouched down and gently put her arm around the girl's shoulder. The girl continued to rock, back and forth, not emitting the faintest sound.

Silvy stroked Shelly's hair softly and murmured, "It will be alright. It will all be okay."

Her mind clearing by the second, Lucy stared bewildered at the two girls in the corner.

"Where are we?" she asked. "What's going on?"

Tears began to glitter in Silvy's eyes. "I don't know," she whispered, holding Shelly tighter.

"What do you mean?" Lucy asked worriedly.

A small sob escaped Silvy's mouth. "I don't know where we are," she repeated. "I have no idea what's going on. The last thing I remember is that I was walking home from school." The tears were now streaming down her face. "Then I woke up here," she said quietly.

Lucy looked around once more. The light faded by the minute and the walls seemed to close in on her. Fear gripped her. She jumped up from the mattress only to be overwhelmed by a wave of dizziness. Holding on to the wall with one hand, she opened her mouth.

"Help," she croaked. "Help!"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Silvy shaking her head. "It won't do no good. They'll just get angry."

Lucy leaned her back against the wall to steady herself. "Who will get angry?" she asked anxiously.

Silvy pointed at the door. "The men outside."

Lucy took a step forward in the direction of the door.

"Don't," Silvy said quietly. "They are mean and if you make them mad, then they hit you."

Disbelievingly, Lucy stared at the girls on the floor.

"What are you talking about?" she gasped. "Are we prisoners?"

Silvy nodded slowly. "I think so," she replied. "Sometimes they give us a bottle of water."

Lucy's mouth opened and closed. Wild thoughts shot through her confused mind like bullets fired from a machine gun.

What was she doing here? How had she gotten here? Where was 'here'?

Nothing made any sense.

She drew big gulping breaths and soon she began to hyperventilate. Her face flushed a deep red and her chest began to burn. Forcing herself to control her breathing, she put her palms flat against the wall behind her and slid down onto her haunches.

As much as she tried, Lucy could not for the life of her remember what had happened. She had no idea how she had gotten here. And now this girl, Silvy, was telling her that they were prisoners? Why were they being kept in this room? Who were the men outside? What did they want from them?

Lucy's mind was in absolute turmoil. Panic gripped her with an iron fist. She needed to get out of here! She needed to get away!

Staring at the door, she saw again that there was no handle. There was no way out! She turned towards the other wall. Jumping to her feet again, she ran to the window. The wooden planks were nailed against the window frame from the outside. With her bare fists, Lucy banged against the boards. She attacked the wood, hammering against it relentlessly, willing it to give. The skin on her knuckles ripped and blood started seeping from the wounds, but the planks did not move. Desperately, Lucy clawed at the boards, splinters raking the soft flesh of her fingertips, her nails bending painfully and breaking. Tears rose up in her throat, brimming in her eyes and eventually spilling over.

"I want to go home," she sobbed. "I want to go home!"

Finally admitting defeat, Lucy sank to her knees, her forehead pressed against the mouldy wall, holding her bleeding hands tight.

"I want my mom," she cried. "I don't want to be here! I want my mom!"

Big loud sobs racked her shoulders and hot, wet tears rolled down her cheeks, dropping onto her school shirt, leaving dark marks.

Silvy's arm snaked around her waist. "Sshhh. It will be alright," the girl sniffled. "Don't worry. We'll get out of here."

xxx

"So," Thomas said. "We agree, then?"

Ryan glanced discreetly at his watch. Two hours and twenty-three minutes later, the meeting finally came to an end. Mrs Simelane had mercilessly battered them with questions, picking every suggestion apart, querying figures, trying Thomas's patience to the utmost, but she did not succeed in rattling him.

For the last forty-five minutes, Ryan had held back, only occasionally giving his input, letting Thomas run the show. Ryan was genuinely impressed with his partner's performance. Although Thomas had already handled various negotiations since he started with Bate's Inc., this was the first project on this scale. Ryan permitted himself a small smile. It seemed his partner had pulled it off.

Mr Masango had his eyes half closed, a thin film of sweat had gathered on his hairline and he was half asleep. Ryan suppressed a grin. Fifteen minutes into the meeting and Mr Masango had lost interest. It had been obvious that he was unable to follow the intense negotiations. Ryan did not hold it against him. The meeting had soon become a competition between Mrs Simelane and Thomas, each trying to outdo the other with their superior knowledge of finances and the tax law.

Thomas caught Ryan's eye, nodding lightly. Ryan leaned forward in his chair and cleared his throat.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced. "That's it for tonight. I think we have covered the majority of your concerns." He raised his eyebrows questioningly in Mrs Simelane's direction. The black woman smiled reminding Ryan instantly of a beautiful wild, albeit satisfied, predator. Ryan let his eyes wander over to the other participants sitting in the boardroom. Mr Nchabaleng and Ms Bhengu nodded their heads.

Mr Motaung waved his hand. "I think you are right, Mr Bates," he said.

Ryan sighed silently, grateful for Mr Motaung's confirmation. Besides Mrs Simelane, he had been the second most involved person in the negotiations. Gay or not gay, the man was a hard nut to crack! Ryan glanced at Mr Masango who had awoken from his snooze. The black man rubbed his hand across his dark curly hair and straightened his jacket.

Ryan closed his file, pushed it towards the middle of the table and got up from his chair. The rest of the group followed suit. Mrs Simelane snapped the clasps on her briefcase shut and rose to her feet. She shoved the Bates' folder under her arm and turned towards the door. Anticipating her move, Ryan rounded the table with a few quick steps and put his hand on the door knob.

"May I?" he asked politely and opened the boardroom door, earning him a surprised tilt of Mrs Simelane's head.

The negotiators filed through the door into the reception area and made their way slowly towards the front door. Ryan unlocked the entrance door and held it open.

As Mrs Simelane stepped over the threshold, Thomas said, "We'll see you in two weeks time to finalise the contract."

Mrs Simelane eyes glittered at him. "Hopefully all amendments will have been made by then," she purred.

Thomas smiled confidently. "You'll not be disappointed, Mrs Simelane," he replied.

Holding her head high, she walked down the steps after her compatriots. Thomas and Ryan remained on the landing and watched the group get into their respective cars. Engines rumbled to life and cars reversed out of their parking spaces. Ryan held up his hand in one final greeting as the cars sped around the traffic circle, down the driveway, and out of sight.

Thomas rubbed his short cropped hair with his hand. "Man, that was tough," he sighed.

Ryan put his hand on his partner's shoulder, consoling him. "It gets tougher every time. It seems that these black consortiums learn faster by the day."

Thomas grinned.

"Two years ago," Ryan said, "we would have walked right over them. This time round they gave us a hard time." He glanced at Thomas and saw the exhaustion edged around his partner's eyes. "You were good," Ryan complimented him. "You were very good. I couldn't have done it better myself."

"It helps to know your stuff," Thomas replied. "I never thought I would have to fight so hard with my own people to win a contract."

Ryan burst out laughing. "Money is money, my friend. It doesn't matter what colour your skin is and obviously 'your' people have learned the value of money pretty fast."

Thomas pushed his hands into his trouser pockets. "I wonder where Mrs Simelane learned her trade?" he mused. "She has excellent knowledge."

Ryan shrugged. "I'd say she does this kind of thing all the time." He paused for a moment. "Practice makes perfect. After you've done it fifty times you'll know which buttons to push and what to look out for."

Thomas grumbled. "You might be right." Then he grinned. "That means that there's still hope for me?"

Ryan slapped him playfully on the back. "Don't be so hard on yourself. As I've said before, you've done very well."

"Yeah, but she almost tripped me up a few times," Thomas interjected.

Ryan shook his head. "But you saw her traps and avoided them skilfully. And that's what counts."

Thomas glanced at his partner sideways. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Anytime," Ryan replied.

He fished his cellphone out of his pocket and activated the ring tone function. "Let's see what else has happened in the world while we were negotiating a new housing complex."

He quickly scanned his messages deciding there was nothing demanding his immediate attention. Tomorrow was another day. Pushing his phone back into his pocket, he noticed Thomas's concerned look.

"What's up?" Ryan asked.

"I don't know," his partner replied. "There are several missed calls from my sister."

Thomas tapped out a telephone number and held his cellphone to his ear.

"Thandi? It's me, Thomas," he said.

Not wanting to intrude on his partner's privacy, Ryan walked away to the front door of the offices. His hand on the door handle, he heard Thomas reply in Zulu, his voice sounding concerned. His answers became shorter and sharper by the second. Eventually, Thomas snapped in English, "Calm down! I can't make out what you're saying."

His partner's harsh tone and worried look made Ryan hesitate. Once again, Thomas switched to Zulu, a language Ryan did not understand, although he was a South African through and through. He picked up a few words here and there, but could not make out the gist of the conversation. Finally, Thomas ended the call.

Ryan cocked his head. "Everything alright?" he asked.

Thomas's lips were pressed into a thin line. "No," he said. "My sister is hysterical. I could hardly get anything out of her. If I understood her correctly, then Lucy, my niece, did not come home today."

Ryan knitted his eyebrows together.

"Lucy goes to a high school a couple of blocks away from where they stay," Thomas explained. "She walks home every day because it's not far. Often she spends an afternoon with a school friend, but it seems today she neither spent time with her friend, nor did she make it home."

Ryan checked his watch. It was close to nine p.m. What would a school girl be doing out on the streets at this time of the night?

"She is a good kid," Thomas said quickly, as if reading his partner's mind. "She wouldn't just stay out and not tell her mother."

"How old is she?" Ryan asked cautiously.

"She's only fourteen. She's in grade eight," Thomas answered. "Thandi and Lucy only moved into the area at the beginning of the year."

Thomas gnawed on his bottom lip, turning his cellphone over in his hand.

"What are you going to do?" Ryan asked.

Thomas sighed. "I think I'll drive over to her house. Thandi is absolutely beside herself. She was crying and screaming at the same time. I couldn't get anything decent out of her."

Ryan nodded.

"Actually I wanted to finish up here," Thomas was indecisive. "I wanted to make a few notes before they slip my mind."

"You can work tomorrow," Ryan said quickly. "Your family is more important. You go and I'll lock up. There is nothing that can't wait."

"Are you sure?" Thomas asked unconvinced.

Ryan made a dismissive gesture with his hand, shushing Thomas towards his car. "Get out of here," he said firmly.

Thomas didn't need to be told twice. "Thanks," he said gratefully. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Ryan pushed open the door and stepped into the cool interior of the reception area leaving his partner outside on the landing. Walking along the carpeted passage, he switched off the lights in the boardroom and Thomas's office. He picked up his briefcase and checked that all windows were closed. Leaving the emergency lights burning, Ryan made his way back to the front door.

CHAPTER 04

As Ryan stopped at the reception desk to check if the switchboard's night bell and answering machine were turned on, he heard the stuttering whine of an engine refusing to start. He walked to the entrance door and peered through the glass. To his surprise, Thomas's black Alpha was still in the parking lot. His partner was sitting in his car, angrily slamming his hand on the steering wheel.

Ryan stepped outside, locked the door, slipped the key into his pocket and climbed down the steps. Softly he knocked on Thomas's window. Startled, his partner looked up.

"Car trouble?" Ryan asked with sympathy.

Thomas got out of his Alpha with a sour face. "This piece of shit gives me nothing but problems," he complained. "It cost me a fortune, but it spends more time in the garage for repairs than what I do behind the wheel." He hit the roof with his fist. "Every time I take it in they give me another phoney explanation." He mimicked a mechanic's voice. "It's the electronics, Mr Nkosi. It's an intermittent fault, Mr Nkosi. There's nothing much we can do, Mr Nkosi."

Ryan looked at him slightly amused. It was the first time he had seen his usually cool, calm and collected partner lose his temper.

"It's not funny," Thomas fumed. "When I need the bloody thing most, it won't start."

Ryan looked out over the deserted car park. Thomas was right. It was a nightmare when one's car wouldn't start. There was no other transport available, especially at this time of night. Hailing one of the yellow 'Rose' taxis in the day was chaotic enough; at this time of the night it would be almost impossible. Stranded in an empty office complex at nine o'clock in the evening was not how one would preferably spend one's evening. The only option for Thomas was to phone a friend to fetch him to take him to his sister's house.

"Will you be alright?" Ryan asked.

Worriedly, Thomas chewed on his lip. "I'll phone my buddy," he said. "He stays in Randburg. I'm sure he'll come and get me."

Ryan checked his watch again. Even if Thomas phoned, it would take his friend at least thirty minutes to get to Rivonia and that was only half the trip.

Ryan sighed heavily. "Come on, I'll give you a lift."

Thomas raised his eyebrows. "Don't you have plans for tonight?" he asked.

Ryan smiled crookedly. "Except for putting my feet on the coffee table and drinking an ice cold beer, no," he replied.

"Are you sure?" Thomas asked hesitantly.

Ryan turned away and walked towards his BMW 4x4. "What are you waiting for?" he called over his shoulder.

Thomas grabbed his jacket out of the car, locked the Alpha and made his way over to Ryan's silver BMW. He climbed into the passenger seat and closed the door. Ryan turned the key in the ignition and the engine began to rumble softly.

"Thanks," Thomas said quietly.

"It helps to drive a decent car," Ryan teased his partner.

"Tell me about it," Thomas grumbled in return.

Ryan shifted gears and reversed out of the parking space. He drove past the traffic circle, down the driveway and out towards the main road. He slowed down at a stop street, flicked the indicator and made his way through the quiet business district

towards the highway. The air in the car was stale, so Ryan switched on the air conditioner, which hummed to life almost inaudibly.

The roads were deserted. Streetlights cast an eerie orange beam at regular intervals. Stars glittered brilliantly in the African night sky, like diamonds scattered across soft dark velvet.

After a few minutes, they reached the bridge across the highway.

"By the way," Ryan said casually. "Where are we going?"

"Oh, sorry," Thomas replied, snapping his fingers. "Edenvale. Thandi stays in Edenvale."

Ryan nodded, flicked the indicator again and turned onto the on-ramp leading to the N1 South. He accelerated and the white markers on the road began to flash by.

Ryan broke the silence. "Is she older or younger than you?"

"Who?" Thomas asked distractedly.

Ryan glanced at him sideways. "Your sister."

His partner shifted slightly in his chair and looked at Ryan's profile. "She's older than me," he said. "By three years. Her full name is Thandeka, but everyone calls her Thandi. She's an auditor for LNOF in Johannesburg."

Ryan was suitably impressed. LNOF was one of the biggest and most prestigious audit firms in South Africa. To be accepted at LNOF an applicant had to be one of the very best. They didn't just employ anyone.

"She only got the job at the beginning of the year," Thomas continued. "She was working for Van Dyk, a much smaller firm. Last year they negotiated a merger between two big companies. Van Dyk represented the seller and LNOF worked for the buyer. It was a fair sized deal and took quite a few months to be completed. Thandi was the contact person at Van Dyk for the LNOF guys and she got to know the people at LNOF very well. The partner there was very impressed with how Thandi handled the negotiations and once the deal was concluded, LNOF head-hunted her." Thomas smiled indulgently. "She was very pleased. It was 'a dream come true' for her. She was finally able to buy her own house and she wanted to cut down on her travel time. That's how she ended up in Edenvale."

Ryan sped along the highway keeping the red rear lights of the other cars in his view. Logos on office complexes, occasionally appearing out of the dark, were illuminated by bright spot lights. Shapes of dry brush, stunted trees and open veld followed the buildings.

A short while later, Ryan asked, "What does your sister's husband do? Where does he work?"

Thomas shook his head. "There is no husband," he replied firmly. "Thandi is a single, working mother. She had Lucy when she was studying at university."

"Oh."

Thomas flicked his wrist dismissively. "It's no big deal. There was this guy who was taking the same courses as she was and she was madly in love with him. They were inseparable." A hard line appeared around Thomas's mouth.

"It sounds as if you didn't like him very much?" Ryan said tentatively.

Thomas harrumphed. "I couldn't stand the guy! Rich kid, who went to university because he didn't know what to do with himself. His father was a self-made millionaire." Thomas raised both his hands. "Don't ask me how. Nobody seems to know, but he bought his son a sports car and the kid was always flush with money."

"What happened to him?"

"Thandi was convinced they would get married once they finished their studies." His voice was scathing. "Unfortunately, or fortunately, Thandi fell pregnant. He told her to have an abortion, but she was adamant she wanted to keep the baby. She reminded him that they were supposed to get married. He wouldn't have any of it. He tried to buy her off, but she wouldn't budge. She would not terminate her pregnancy. He even tried to threaten her." Thomas chuckled quietly. "She is one gutsy woman, my sister. She wouldn't give an inch. Eventually, he realised there was nothing he could do." Thomas' voice became scornful again. "You have never seen anyone disappear so fast. As soon as he heard that it was definite he was going to be a father, he was gone. He dropped out of university, out of sight, and out of her life. Thandi tried to contact him, but he refused to speak to her. At one stage, she asked me for help and I went to his house. They refused to let me see him. They even went so far as to threaten me with the police." He shook his head. "Thandi cried for weeks on end. But she had Lucy, finished her studies and is now working for LNOF."

"She seems to be a very determined young woman," Ryan said admiringly.

"She is, she is," Thomas nodded his head forcefully. "I wouldn't have made it without her."

"What do you mean?" Ryan asked surprised.

Thomas hesitated, then shrugged his shoulders. "I wasn't always the most responsible man around and for a long time I didn't have a concrete goal in my life." He paused for a moment, deep in thought. Pursing his lips, he continued. "There were a few times during my younger years when I ran with the wrong crowd. Luckily, Thandi was there to prevent the worst from happening."

Ryan didn't want to pry, nevertheless, he asked, "What about your parents?"

The corners of Thomas's mouth turned down depreciatingly. "They're gone."

Ryan's forehead creased with a frown.

"My dad left us when I was six," Thomas explained. "I have no idea why he did it, or where he is now. You know the usual African story: he most probably got tired of his wife, his kids, the responsibility, leaving his pay check on the kitchen table at the end of every month, so he took off. We never saw or heard from him again. I presume he's got another wife, or two, and is busy contemplating leaving them."

Ryan smiled ruefully. Although Thomas tried to make light of his life story, it was a rather sad and unfortunately common occurrence. African men often did not take their responsibility for their immediate family seriously. As soon as they tired of them, they walked away from their wife and kids.

Ryan shook his head.

With his westernised values he often battled to comprehend black African culture. There was, for example the notion of 'labola', an amount paid by the groom to the father of the bride, either in money or goods, before he could marry the girl.

Another oddity was that a woman had to prove she was able to bear children before a man would consider her for marriage. Even after giving birth, the man did not always keep his promise and the young mother and her child would have to manage without his financial support. This was also one of the many reasons why there are so many unmarried mothers in South Africa.

Ryan scratched his cheek thoughtfully. There was so much about the African way of life which was difficult for him to understand.

Ryan kept his hands lightly on the steering wheel. The highway changed into four lanes on both sides and then back into three lanes. The streetlights rushed past, bathing the road in an orange glow.

"My mother died when I was sixteen," Thomas said quietly.

"I'm sorry," Ryan mumbled.

His partner sighed deeply. "She died of AIDS."

Ryan swallowed hard. AIDS was still the number one killer in South Africa. Although the government claimed the rate of new HIV infections was stagnant, it didn't mean that people, especially women, were not infected on a daily basis. And even though anti-retroviral drugs were available, a person's natural lifespan was only extended. Instead of living until an average seventy years, AIDS victims would die often by the age of thirty-five.

Not wanting to open old wounds, Ryan tried to change the subject. "Do you have any other brothers and sisters?" he asked.

Thomas shook his head. "There's only the two of us."

"How did you cope?" Ryan asked flabbergasted. "How did you manage to go to university?"

"It's a long story," his partner replied. But before he could explain Thomas pointed to an off-ramp. "Turn off here," he ordered. "Thandi lives only a few blocks away."

Ryan flicked his indicator and switched lanes.

xxx

It had grown dark. The moon's silvery rays shone through the gaps in the boarded up window. Lucy sat curled up on the dirty mattress, her legs drawn up under her. The other two girls were crouched down on the floor in the opposite corner. Silvy was stroking Shelly's hair, mumbling soothing words into her ear.

Fresh tears were rolling down Lucy's cheeks and she sniffled quietly. She would give anything to be at home with her mom. She pictured the two of them sitting in the kitchen, the spot lights shining down from the ceiling brightening the room. Her mom would be working on some papers from the office, and Lucy would be finishing off her homework. Both would have a mug of tea standing on the table and the radio would be playing in the background. They would have eaten dinner, maybe pasta or a stew, leftovers from the day before. Lucy could smell the meat floating in the rich, brown gravy, and her stomach grumbled.

She saw her mother's face, her dark eyebrows drawn together in concentration. Occasionally she would look up at Lucy and a smile would play around her full lips. Lucy could feel her mother's arms around her shoulders and a loud sob escaped from her mouth.

Was her mom worried about her? she wondered.

Of course! she answered her own question. Her mom would be worried sick to death.

Lucy knew her mom thought she was absolutely reliable. And Lucy had never given her any indication that it should be otherwise. After school Lucy always either walked straight home, or went to Tanya's house.

She stopped short her train of thought.

What happened this afternoon? she wondered. How did she end up here, in this room, on this filthy mattress?

Lucy tried to retrace her steps, but her mind would not give her the answers she was looking for. She tried to remember the last thing she could think of clearly and it took her right back to the morning when she had said good-bye to her mom.

Lucy recalled that she had walked to school as usual. It had been warm, the day promising to become another scorcher. She had assembled with all the other pupils on the rugby field, as they were required to do, chatting and joking with her friends until the first bell rang. She remembered her English lesson and the Social Science one, both the usual boring subjects.

Then it came back to her: they had been sitting in maths and Tanya had passed a piece of paper. Lucy's cheeks burned with sudden humiliation and shame. The piece of paper had said that she was bossy and that Tanja didn't want her as a friend any longer.

Lucy buried her face in her hands and groaned softly. How could her friend be so mean?

She had decided not to have anything to do with her friend, feeling too disappointed to just let it go as a mistake, as Tanya claimed it was. After school she had walked alone along the cracked pavement counting her steps and calming herself. She had been almost home, when a *bakkie* stopped beside her.

Lucy went cold all over. That's when it happened!

The man had gotten out of the car and had approached her. She recalled thinking that this was very unusual, because if he just needed directions then he could have rolled down the window.

An icy shiver ran down her spine.

As soon as the man stood in front of her she felt a hand covering her nose and mouth. Somebody picked her up from the ground and she struggled. She tried to fight back. She turned her body in all directions trying to free herself. She even bit the hand pressing the cloth over her face. But ultimately, the arms which held her were too strong and she had passed out.

After that she didn't remember anything, except waking up in this dump.

Lucy pulled on her tight braids, starting to doubt herself.

Maybe she hadn't fought hard enough? Maybe she should have kicked harder? Maybe she should have dug her teeth deeper into the hand? Maybe she should have tried to scream louder?

The questions raced around in her head like a hamster on a wheel.

Tears began trickling down her cheeks again.

It was all her fault! she condemned herself. She knew better than to speak to strangers! She knew better than to walk home alone! How many times had her mother told her to make sure she was never alone? Why didn't she listen? Why did she have to be so angry? Why did she have to be so stubborn? Her mom would be so mad at her.

Lucy sobbed quietly, salty tears dripping onto her school shirt leaving dark, wet marks.

"Hey," Silvy called quietly.

Lucy lifted her head, trying to make out the other girl in the dark.

"Are you crying?"

Quickly, Lucy wiped her wet cheeks with the back of her hand. She didn't want to look weak in front of this girl whom she hadn't seen shed one tear yet.

"No," Lucy replied bravely.

She sensed Silvy crawling across the floor towards the mattress.

"Don't worry," the girl said. "I cried my eyes out when I first got here."

Lucy was stunned. "How long have you been here?"

Silvy dragged herself onto the mattress, leaning her back against the dirty wall. Lucy could hardly make out her face.

"I don't know," Silvy replied. She pointed her chin in the direction of the other girl. "But I've been here longer than her. She came after me."

"Are you saying we could be here for a long time?" Lucy asked incredulously.

Silvy shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know," she said again.

A small sob escaped Lucy's mouth. "My mom will be so angry with me," she sniffed. "My mom must be worried sick."

"Why would your mom be angry with you?" Silvy asked puzzled.

"It's all my fault," Lucy whimpered. "If I didn't walk home alone, then I wouldn't be here."

"How can it be your fault?" Silvy asked aghast. "You didn't ask for this to happen."

"I didn't listen to my mom. She always said we must walk together," Lucy cried.

Silvy nodded with understanding. "I know," she sighed. "My parents also insist I never walk home alone. But I don't think your mother is going to be angry with you."

"How do you know?" Lucy flared.

"Because it's not your fault," Silvy stated resolutely.

Slowly, Lucy's tears subsided. Silvy was right: she hadn't asked for this to happen. Even though she went against her mom's instructions, she hadn't invited the men to snatch her. And she would explain this to her mom when she had the chance. Her mom would understand. Lucy nodded to herself. Once she told her mom what had happened, her mom would understand.

The girls sat in silence. Lucy stared at the boarded up window and Silvy played with her ponytail. There was nothing to say, or do, other than to wait for what was going to happen next.

Lucy stretched her legs and immediately felt her bladder. She pressed her legs together, but her bladder seemed to get fuller by the second, and soon it felt like a balloon ready to burst. She put her hand on her tummy, as if it would relieve the uncomfortable pressure, but it did not help. A few minutes later, she could not keep still any longer.

"I need a pee," she whispered.

"Oh," Silvy replied.

"What do I do?" Lucy asked desperately.

Silvy's outstretched arm pointed to the opposite corner. "You wee into that bucket."

Lucy stared at her flabbergasted. "What?"

"You pee into the bucket," Silvy repeated. "There is nothing else."

Lucy looked at the dented metal bucket glimmering faintly in the dim moonlight.

She couldn't do that! she thought embarrassed. She couldn't pee into that bucket in front of the other two girls.

Resolutely Lucy shook her head. She wouldn't pee into that bucket, no way!

The minutes ticked by and the pressure on her bladder became almost unbearable. It felt as if the urine would escape at any moment and run down her legs. Lucy stared at the loathsome bucket in the corner.

Eventually she crawled over to the other side of the room. She definitely didn't want to wet her *panties*. The closer she got to the bucket, the stronger the smell became. Her stomach heaved and she wanted to throw up.

Lucy kneeled beside the metal container and peered into it. The liquid almost reached the rim. She ground her teeth and pressed lips together tightly. Turning her back towards the foul smelling bucket, she lifted her skirt and quickly pulled down her *panties*. Her cheeks burned with shame and she kept her eyes averted. Squatting on her heels, she was careful to avoid touching the bucket's rim with her buttocks.

Lucy let go and waited for the relief.

Nothing happened!

Her bladder was so full that release would not come.

Panic rose in her and small beads of sweat formed on her forehead.

Please, she begged silently. Please body, don't let me down.

But her bladder refused to obey. Pain stabbed her lower abdomen and Lucy had to bite her lip hard not to cry out loud.

Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes and as the stench of the overfull bucket once again reached her nostrils, engulfing her, she had to fight the urge to pass out.

Lucy struggled to hold her position and only when drawing on her deepest inner reserves was she able to hold herself steady on her haunches. Drops of sweat slid down in between her furrowed brows, setting her eyes on fire. Blinking rapidly, she managed to rid herself of the burning sensation.

Desperately ignoring the painful throbbing in her bladder, Lucy worked her muscles slowly, and finally, a small trickle of urine emerged. The stream became bigger and anxiously she waited for her bladder to empty, but it seemed to take an eternity. Her calves began to cramp and she was worried she would fall over, taking the bucket with her, ending up on the floor drenched in stinking urine.

Eventually, she felt the last drop of wee fall into the overfull bucket.

Instantly, she straightened up and hastily pulled up her *panties*. Smoothing the folds of her school skirt, her cheeks still burning with humiliation and embarrassment, she made her way back to the filthy mattress.

xxx

Ryan followed his partner's directions and manoeuvred his car through the empty streets. This part of Edenvale was an old, but well maintained neat middle-class area. He noticed pre-cast concrete walls and green-painted picket fences. Large wooden garage doors were closed and warm light from kitchen and lounge windows spilled into front gardens dotted with pine trees and evergreen bushes.

Thomas indicated to Ryan to turn into a paved driveway and he came to a stop behind a black Audi A3. Thomas opened his door and climbed out of the car. Ryan switched off the engine and followed his partner into the driveway.

The wooden front door of the house was suddenly thrown open and a young black woman rushed out. She wore grey pleated trousers and a white short-sleeved blouse. Her hair was braided tightly to her scalp which emphasised her proud African features. High heels clattered a staccato on the paving as she ran towards them. Thomas stepped into the light and his sister flung herself into his arms. Clinging to

her brother, she sobbed loudly, and Thomas wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly.

"Sshhh," he mumbled, rubbing her back, comforting her as if she were a little child.

Feeling highly uncomfortable with the open display of emotions, Ryan retreated, hiding behind the bonnet of his BMW.

Thomas's sister lifted her beautiful face. "She is not home," she wailed. "She is not home!"

Thomas held her gently by the shoulders. "Start from the beginning, Thandi," he suggested. "What happened exactly?"

"She never came home," Thandi sobbed, tears running freely down her cheeks. "I don't know where she is."

Thomas shook her lightly. "Thandi, calm down."

"Where is she?" Thandi cried, flailing her hands. "She didn't come home."

Thomas squeezed his sister's arms. "Thandi!" he exclaimed.

But his sister kept on repeating the same sentences over and over again. Tears streamed down her face and mucus collected on her upper lip. Her hands clenched into fists and she pounded her brother's chest.

"Where is she?" Thandi howled, pain and fear distorting her features. "Why did she not come home?"

Thomas caught her wrists, holding them away from his chest. "Thandi!" he shouted loudly. "Calm down!"

Shocked into silence, his sister squinted up at him. Wide-eyed she stared at her brother, the questions stuck in her throat. Thomas draped his arm around her shoulders, gently guiding her towards the house. As they reached the front door, Ryan stepped away from his car, clearing his throat noisily. Thomas stopped in his tracks and for a moment stared at his partner as if he did not know who he was.

"Are you going to be okay?" Ryan asked, shuffling his feet uneasily.

Realisation dawned on Thomas. "Sorry, Ryan," he said, waving his hand. "I forgot you were here."

Ryan smiled crookedly. "Not to worry."

Thomas rubbed his sister's shoulder. "Thandi," he said, keeping his voice light. "This is my partner, Mr Ryan Bates."

Her eyebrows rose an inch in anticipation of an explanation.

"My Alpha didn't start, once again, and Ryan was kind enough to give me a lift," Thomas explained. Pointing at his sister, he continued, "This is my sister, Thandeka Nkosi."

Ryan moved a couple of steps closer. "Nice to meet you, Mrs Nkosi."

A faint smile appeared on her face. "It's Thandi, Mr Bates." Although her hand disappeared almost entirely in his, her handshake was firm.

Ryan pulled up a corner of his mouth. "I'm Ryan, not Mr Bates," he replied. "Mr Bates makes me feel old."

Thandi nodded graciously.

"Would you like something to drink before you head back?" Thomas asked, remembering his manners. "Maybe a cup of coffee?"

Pushing his hands into his trouser pockets, Ryan shook his head, thinking he would only be intruding unnecessarily.

"No, thank you," he replied.

"Please," Thandi said, gesturing towards the house.

Ryan hesitated and looked questioningly at Thomas.

"It's the least I can do for the lift you've given me," Thomas insisted.

Ryan was in two minds, but not wanting to appear rude, he accepted.

He followed brother and sister into the house, softly closing the wooden front door behind them. They walked through a dimly lit, narrow, tiled entrance hall into a lounge and turned left. A few abstract prints - yellow, red and blue splashes and strokes - decorated the walls. The kitchen was spacious and brightly lit. A modern stainless steel refrigerator stood to the right, a washing machine and dishwasher to the left. Glass fronted maple cabinets and cupboards hung on white-washed walls. The counter tops were clean and tidy. In the middle of the kitchen stood a square pine table surrounded by four chairs, their seats covered in green canvas.

Thandi pointed at the table. "Please have a seat," she offered.

Ryan pulled out a chair and sat down. Instead of following him to the table, Thomas leaned his shoulder against the doorframe.

Ryan did not know what to say to ease Thandeka's obvious pain and confusion and therefore, he kept quiet. Giving his sister space to compose herself, Thomas watched her silently as she walked over to the counter to pick up a designer stainless steel kettle. Thandeka opened the lid and checked for water. Without uttering a word, she shook her head, moved over to the sink, opened the tap and filled the kettle with water. Slowly she walked back to the other side of the kitchen and switched the kettle on. Thomas followed each of her movements with his eyes, but did not interrupt her self-imposed silence.

Thandeka opened the cupboard doors above the electric stove and removed three colourful mugs.

"How do you take your coffee?" she asked, without turning around.

"No sugar. Only milk, please," Ryan replied, still feeling highly uncomfortably. He was not quite sure what he was doing sitting in Thandeka's kitchen and wondered repeatedly how he could make an exit without being rude. A heavy silence hung like a dark cloud over them, only to be broken by the small sounds Thandeka made while walking around the kitchen. Her movements were stiff, robot-like, as if she was in a trance.

The water boiled and the kettle switched off automatically. Thandeka spooned coffee granules out of a glass jar into the mugs and poured hot water into them. Ryan noticed her huge brown eyes and her trembling hands. As she took an unsteady step towards the table, the mugs slipped out of her hands.

The porcelain shattered on the kitchen floor. Hot coffee spilled onto the beige tiles, spreading fast. Thandeka covered her face with her hands and a long wail escaped her lips.

Three quick steps brought Thomas to his sister's side. He put his arms around her thin body holding her tight. Thandi's shoulders shook uncontrollably and her sobs were heart wrenching.

Slowly, Ryan got to his feet. He looked around until he found a roll of kitchen paper on a rack mounted to the wall. Ripping off a few sheets, he got down onto his haunches and began cleaning up the mess. Carefully, he picked up the shards and put them into a sheet of kitchen paper.

"I'm so sorry," Thandeka said in between hiccups, placing her hand lightly on his shoulder. "You don't have to do this."

Ryan smiled up at her. "Don't worry," he replied reassuringly. "It's absolutely no problem."

Without another word, she dropped to her knees beside him. Taking the kitchen paper from his hand, she wiped the floor, soaking up the brown liquid. Ryan continued picking up tiny chips of broken china, throwing them into the dustbin standing behind him. A soft cry made him look up. Thandi was holding her hand to her mouth, frantically sucking at her palm.

"I think I've got a splinter," she said, her voice quivering.

Thomas pulled her to her feet. "Let me see," he ordered.

Thandeka turned her hand upside down. A small globule of blood was forming on the pale skin inside her palm, quickly growing into a larger blob, soon breaking up and dribbling down her wrist.

"Where do you keep your band aid?" Thomas asked, dragging his sister to the kitchen sink.

He opened a tap and held Thandi's hand under the cold water rinsing off the blood. His sister pointed to a cupboard to her right. Thomas rummaged around in between green tubes of ointment and brown bottles of cough mixture. A moment later he turned, triumphantly holding up a pair of tweezers and a box of band aids.

Carefully Thomas probed the cut, which was deeper than he had anticipated, until he found the splinter. Delicately he pulled the sharp sliver and dropped it into the dustbin. After drying Thandi's hand with a dishtowel, he fixed a plaster on her palm.

"There you go," he said with an encouraging smile.

In the meantime, Ryan had finished cleaning the floor. He threw the wet paper towels into the bin and walked back to the table.

"Let's try again," Thomas announced. "Thandi, you sit down," he commanded. "I'll make the coffee."

Wiping her face with the back of her hand, Thandeka sat down opposite Ryan. She clutched a tissue in her right hand and dabbed at the corners of her eyes stemming the flow of her tears. Her lids were puffy and her lips were swollen like ripe berries.

Ryan wondered what was going through her mind. Although he had no children of his own, he could imagine how she felt just by watching how her whole body trembled.

Trying to sympathise with the young mother, he asked himself how he would react if his daughter went missing. And he admitted to himself that he would be frantic with fear, anticipating the worst, because he knew all too well that South Africa was not a country where children could live carefree.

Every minute of the day, something terrible could happen. Rape and murder were on the daily agenda. Children were driven to and collected from school. They were not allowed to wander around in shopping centres without supervision. Extramural activities were held in closed off sports grounds, security guards were posted at the gates of schools. Children did not ride their bicycles in the streets, never mind play on the pavements.

Ryan shook his head. What a rotten place this country had become.

The water boiled again and Thomas prepared a second lot of coffee.

"Did you phone the school?" he asked with his back to them.

Thandeka nodded vigorously. "Yes," she confirmed. "As soon as I came home I phoned her teacher, Mrs van Riebeck."

“And?”

“I asked her if Lucy was at school today,” she replied.

Thomas looked at her expectantly, waiting for her to continue. Thandeka hesitated, trying to recall the conversation with Lucy’s teacher.

“Mrs van Riebeck was very surprised and wanted to know if there was a problem,” she said quietly. “I told her that Lucy was not at home and that I was very worried. She assured me Lucy had been at school. She taught the last period and saw Lucy leave the classroom after the bell rang.” Thandeka swallowed hard. “Mrs van Riebeck suggested I call Tanya, seeing that she and Lucy are close friends and spend a lot of afternoons together.”

Thomas put the steaming mugs onto the table and sat down. “Did you speak to Tanya?” he enquired brusquely.

Picking up a cup with both hands, Thandeka blew a few times on the hot liquid before taking a small sip.

Carefully, she put the mug back on the table in front of her. “At first I couldn’t get hold of Tanya’s mother,” she said haltingly. “I kept on trying. Eventually she picked up the phone. Apparently Tanya had been at ballet practice.” Thandeka bit her lip. “I asked her if Lucy was at their place, but Tanya’s mother said ‘no’. As a matter of fact she hadn’t seen Lucy for a few days.” Thandeka pressed her forefingers against her temples. “She gave the receiver to Tanya and I asked her if she knew where Lucy was. Tanya told me Lucy had insisted on walking home alone. I was shocked and wanted to know why, but all Tanya said was that Lucy did not want to walk with her. I asked if they had had a fight, but Tanya said ‘no’. I wanted to know if Tanya knew where Lucy could have gone, but she told me she had no idea whatsoever.”

Putting her forearms onto the table, Thandeka anxiously squashed her tissue into a ball.

“What about her other friends?” Thomas asked hopefully.

Again tears began rolling down his sister’s face. “I phoned all her friends, but nobody has seen her,” she wept.

Thomas moved his chair closer and put his arm around her shoulders. “We’ll find her,” he reassured her. “Don’t worry. We’ll find her.”

“Where can she be?” Thandeka moaned. “What happened to her? What if somebody took her?”

Concern etched around Thomas’s mouth. “We will not think the worst,” he said firmly.

“But what if somebody has hurt her? What if she had an accident? What if she is in hospital? What if she is in a coma? What if she is dying and I’m not there?” Thandi cried, her body trembling with unconcealed anguish and fear. “She’s all I’ve got,” she wailed, pulling at her hair. “She’s my baby! She’s only fourteen! She’s my only daughter and I don’t know what has happened to her!”

Thomas rocked her gently back and forth, all the time caressing her cheek. “Sshhh,” he tried to sooth her. “Sshhh. It will be alright. We’ll find her.”

Very slowly Thandeka calmed down. Eventually, she unravelled the ball of wet tissue and blew her nose noisily.

Thomas let go of her and picked up his mug. He slurped a sip of coffee and looked at his sister over the rim of his cup.

“Did you phone the hospitals?” he asked.

Thandeka shook her head tiredly. "No. Not yet. I first phoned the school and all her friends."

Resolutely, Thomas got up from his chair. "Where is your telephone book?" he demanded to know.

"In the lounge, beside the coffee table," she whispered.

Thomas left the kitchen and came back with the Johannesburg directory. Putting the thick, blue-bound book on the table, he opened it at the section listing the hospitals in the area.

Ryan cleared his throat softly. Brother and sister turned their heads to look at him.

"Does Lucy have a cellphone?" he asked cautiously.

Thandeka's lips quivered. "Yes," she replied. "I've tried phoning her every five minutes, but it just rings. There is no answer. It doesn't even switch over to voice mail."

Thoughtfully Ryan picked at the cuticle of his thumb trying to come up with another option.

He tilted his head to one side. "Have you called the police?" he enquired.

Thandi shook her head forcefully. "No. Not yet."

Ryan raised his eyebrows questioningly, but before she could answer, Thomas cut in firmly. "Let's try the hospitals first."

Without giving Ryan the chance to question his choice, Thomas pushed the telephone book into the middle of the table.

Ryan was slightly taken aback. Phoning the police was one of the first steps he would have taken.

He scrutinised his partner for a moment, but Thomas had his head turned away, scanning the pages for telephone numbers.

Ryan was not sure if he should insist on following up on his suggestion of calling the police, but he got the distinct feeling that Thomas was avoiding having to explain his reasons for not calling the cops. Ryan did not want to cause more trouble than brother and sister had already and shrugged his shoulders. If Thomas wanted to phone the police later, then it was fine with him.

His partner sighed heavily. "There are so many bloody hospitals," he complained. "We'll never get through them all."

Despondently he pushed the telephone book away. Crossing his arms behind his head, he closed his eyes. Ryan reached for the directory and flipped through the pages. Thomas was right. There was column after column of telephone numbers for hospitals.

Thomas nudged him on the arm. "I hate to ask you," he hesitated. "I know you want to get home, but as you can see, we'll be swamped with making calls." Thomas smiled sheepishly. "Would you help us?"

Ryan grinned tiredly. His partner was correct: it was late and he was yearning to put his feet up. But Thomas and his sister were desperate.

How could he possibly let them down? He had no family of his own and nobody was waiting for him at home: no girlfriend, no dog, and no goldfish. Quickly, he made up his mind.

His partner's fourteen year old niece was missing, for crying out loud! What could be more important than finding her and bringing her home?

"Of course I'll help you," Ryan stated firmly.

With those words, he pulled his cellphone out of his pocket, turned the telephone directory towards him and picked the first number.

CHAPTER 05

The TV aerial was transmitting only the three state-sponsored stations: SABC 1, 2 and 3, as well as the free-to-air channel 'e-TV', but none of the more interesting pay channels like Discovery, History or Action. Dirk had no choice but to make do with a silly game show on SABC 1.

The presenter was a black guy in his forties, trying to look casual in jeans and a blue button-down shirt open at the neck. Three black contestants, dressed in their Sunday-best, were standing on a platform behind green plastic pulpits displaying old fashioned digital numbers in red. The audience, about three hundred strong, consisting entirely of black people, cheered loudly, but Dirk could not understand one word that was being said. The show's language was held in Zulu, and although he was born and bred in South Africa, he had never managed to master another one of the eleven official languages. Staring unseeing at the moving pictures on the screen, he let his mind drift.

By now it was more than clear to him that he was in big trouble. He shifted uneasily on the dirty sagging couch. Rat Face had indicated that the kidnapped girls were worth a lot of money.

What exactly Angus and his cronies were up to, Dirk still had not figured out, but he knew it wasn't something he wanted to be involved in.

In the meantime he needed to devise a plan which would keep him out of even more trouble. This meant on the one hand, he had to stay as far as possible away from Rat Face. The guy was definitely unstable and that made him dangerous. And on the other hand, Dirk did not wish to have any further part in the planned activities. If they were caught, and he firmly believed that this was a real possibility, he wanted to be able to plead innocence. Maybe he would be able to talk his way out of this mess.

Dirk got up from the couch releasing a puff of sour smell from the threadbare cushions. He wrinkled his nose in disgust. Still deep in thought, he walked to the patio doors looking for Rat Face. He hadn't seen the ugly bastard in quite a while and wondered what he was up to.

Dirk opened the doors and stepped outside. Light spilled from the lounge onto the cracked patio. Wild grass and long weeds grew out of small concrete crevices. Gratefully, he breathed in the fresh air. The night was dark and still. No loud screeching engines or squealing tyre sounds reached the cluster of chalets. Only a few crickets chirped in the veld and the grass rustled quietly. He found a large rock at the edge of the patio and sat down. Placing his elbows on his knees, he stared into the night only just making out the tree line in the distance.

Once again he thought about the possibility of getting the girls out of this hell hole. He was sickened by the image of them being held captive. They were too young and innocent. For fuck's sake, they were not even teenagers yet!

Dirk rubbed his face with both hands.

He knew he was taking an enormous risk if he wanted to help them. If his plan backfired and Angus or his buddy Meshak caught him, they would cut his throat, simple as that.

Dirk had absolutely no desire to die. But what could he do? The ferret was not letting him near the door where the girls were being kept and who knew what condition they were in.

He picked a long stem of wild grass and pushed it between his teeth.

What about calling someone on his cellphone and telling them about the situation? he contemplated.

There was cellphone reception, even though they were in the middle of nowhere. As quickly as the thought occurred to him, Dirk discarded it.

Who would he call? His mother? His friend Matthew? The cops?

Dirk snorted derisively. He would have to explain what he was doing here and how he got himself into this mess, admitting that he was part of the operation and *that*, he knew, made him an accomplice.

He kicked his heel against the rock he was sitting on. The situation was hopeless. Whichever way he turned, there seemed to be no way out of it.

He bit hard on the grass hanging between his lips sucking at the sweet liquid leaking from the stem.

What if he could get close to one of the girls? Didn't Rat Face say something about giving them a bottle of water and some breakfast bars in the morning? The gang obviously did not want the girls to starve to death. Maybe he could wangle his way into the room and ask them their names? Maybe he could contact their parents without revealing who he was? Maybe he could drop a few hints to them and then let the parents contact the authorities?

Dirk pursed his mouth, nodding appreciatively.

This was a potential way forward, he concluded. This could possibly work. And, it would keep him out of the picture. He would call the parents, but withhold his identity. Once the girls were safe, if push came to shove, they would vouch for him as their rescuer; the guy who had treated them kindly and helped them to get back to their parents.

A broad grin spread across Dirk's face.

Suddenly a hand fell onto his shoulder. He jumped up with fright. Spinning on his heel, he raised his hands balled into fists, ready to punch whoever was standing in front of him.

"Take it easy, man," Rat Face laughed.

Dirk dropped his hands and took a deep breath.

"What are you doing out here?" Rat Face asked, pointing towards the empty veld.

Dirk shrugged his shoulders. "Getting some fresh air," he replied, trying to sound casual.

The ferret took a step closer, his eyes glittering dangerously. "Are you up to some kind of shit?"

Taken aback by Rat Face's question, Dirk looked away guiltily. "What makes you think that?" he mumbled uncertainly.

With lightning speed, the ferret produced his knife and pushed the serrated edge against Dirk's throat.

"Let me remind you," he hissed. "Don't try anything stupid. Neither me nor your cousin would like it."

Dirk grabbed Rat Face's arm, pulling the knife away from his throat. "Stop this nonsense," he croaked. "I've not been up to anything."

Rat Face dropped the knife to his side, his eyes tiny slits. "Just telling you," he snarled.

Turning around, the ferret marched back towards the chalet and disappeared through the patio doors.

Dirk watched his abrupt departure uneasily.

Once again, this had been too close to comfort. He wondered if Rat Face had a sixth sense, or if the bastard was just naturally suspicious. He seemed to catch Dirk every time he was plotting something. Dirk decided to be more careful and not let his face betray his thoughts. Rat Face was just too dangerous, likely to crack at any moment given the right opportunity. Feeling the serrated edge of the knife against his throat had confirmed Dirk's opinion of the guy's personality: Rat Face was a psychopath. The bastard had no conscience. He could kill Dirk without the faintest trace of remorse and afterwards nonchalantly claim self-defence. Dirk took another deep breath. He definitely had to stay away from that madman.

xxx

Exhausted, Ryan dropped his cellphone onto the kitchen table. They had called all the hospitals in the area and all had confirmed that no young black girl of Lucy's description had been admitted during the last few hours. Ryan checked his watch: it was past eleven. The spotlights from the ceiling shone on to the smooth surface of the pine kitchen table and reflected harshly into his eyes. His coffee mug was long empty and his stomach grumbled hungrily.

Ryan rubbed his cheeks tiredly. He was ready to give up, but Thomas's face was grim as he turned over another page of the thick telephone directory.

Gently, Ryan put his hand on his partner's arm. "I really don't think that she had an accident," he said quietly.

Thomas's head jerked up. "What do you mean?"

"I don't think she was hurt in an accident," Ryan repeated. "If she was, then she would have been taken to hospital and none of the places we phoned said they had admitted her."

Thomas clenched a fist so that his knuckles stood out white. "Maybe she was taken to a hospital in another area," he said.

Ryan shook his head. "Why would she have been taken out of the area? Her school is literally up the road and if she had been hurt on her way home, they would have taken her to the closest hospital and not to one which is kilometres away."

"How do you know?" Thomas argued.

Ryan turned to Thandeka for help, but her face was pale under her dark skin and her eyes were huge with fear. He could see that she desperately wanted to believe they would find her daughter in one of the Johannesburg hospitals.

Stubbornly ignoring his partner, Thomas dialled another number and asked the question which they had been asking for the last hour and a half. Ryan watched him with growing concern. His partner was hanging on, but the worry of not getting a positive response from the hospitals they called began to etch into his handsome face.

A short while later Thomas disconnected the call. "Nothing," he said despondently. "They haven't seen her." He cupped his hands and covered his face.

Ryan shifted in his chair to sooth his aching back. "We should go to the police," he suggested.

Thomas shot him a cold glance. "No," he replied harshly.

Ryan frowned. "Why not?" he asked. "It's our only sensible option now. The hospitals have not seen your niece and she hasn't come home. Our best bet is to go

to the cops. They have the manpower to search for her. We need to let them know that she is missing.”

His partner pressed his lips into a thin line and shook his head.

Ryan was surprised at Thomas’s refusal. He knew his partner as a reasonable, open-minded man and could not understand why Thomas was acting so obstinately. What was wrong with turning to the cops for help?

“Thomas,” Ryan coaxed him. “Don’t be so stubborn. The cops are there for a reason and we need all the help we can get.”

Thomas looked at his sister questioningly and Thandeka nodded slowly. “I think Ryan is right. We are not getting anywhere and with every minute that goes by, Lucy could be in more danger.”

“But ...,” Thomas interjected.

Thandeka put her hand over her brother’s. “I know how you feel,” she said quietly. “Think of Lucy. Whatever happened, it’s in the past. It’s long gone and forgotten. We need to find Lucy and that’s what counts.”

Thomas let his head hang, avoiding his sister’s pleading eyes and his partner’s probing look. The silence stretched out, interrupted only by water drops falling from a leaking tap into the stainless steel kitchen sink.

“Please,” Thandeka said softly. “I want my daughter back.”

Thomas straightened his shoulders. “Alright,” he said defeated. “Alright. We’ll ask the cops for help.”

“Thank you,” Thandeka whispered, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes.

Thomas squeezed her hand comfortingly.

“Let’s go now,” he commanded, but his sister shook her head.

“What?” Thomas barked with disbelief. “First you want to go to the cops and now you don’t?”

“You go,” Thandeka said firmly. “I need to stay here in case she comes home.”

Thomas nodded, fully understanding her reason for wanting to stay behind.

“I still have to take your car,” he pointed out to her. “Mine is standing at the office.”

Again, his sister shook her head. “No. You can’t have my car.” Before her brother could protest, she explained, “Maybe I will need to take her to the hospital when she comes home. Maybe she’ll be hurt.”

He threw his hands into the air. “But how am I going to get to the police station?”

Ryan cleared his throat noisily. “I’m going to take you,” he stated resolutely.

Thomas looked at him worriedly. “But you have already done so much. I couldn’t possible ask you to drive me around in the middle of the night.”

Ryan smiled sideways at him. “In for a penny, in for a pound. Remember it’s your niece we are talking about. What could be more important than to find Lucy?”

Thomas swallowed hard. His pride did not usually permit him to accept help from other people, but right now he was desperate. Lucy could be seriously injured and because of his stubbornness she might die. Thomas took a deep breath. He would not let his pride get in the way of his niece’s safety.

Slowly he nodded his head. “Thank you,” he said quietly. “I really appreciate it.”

Ryan got up from his chair. “Think nothing of it,” he replied. “You would do the same for me.”

Pocketing his cell phone, Ryan walked through the kitchen not waiting for his partner to change his mind. “Come on, then,” he ordered. “We have no time to lose.”

Thomas got to his feet, hugged his sister fiercely and followed Ryan to the front door.

xxx

The night was still warm and the air caressed their bare forearms softly. A single streetlamp cast yellow light across the road where the two cars were parked in front of the closed garage door. Ryan and Thomas got into the 4x4 and Ryan turned the key in the ignition. He reversed out of the driveway and followed his partner's instructions.

"I hope you don't mind me asking," Ryan said hesitantly, "but why are you so reluctant to involve the police?"

A cynical expression appeared on Thomas's face. "Actually," he replied. "I do mind you asking."

"I'm sorry," Ryan said. "I didn't mean to pry."

A harsh laugh escaped from his partner's lips. "It's an old and long story," he answered.

Ryan kept quiet.

A few minutes later, Thomas's voice cut through the silence. "Remember I told you that I ran with the wrong crowd for a while when I was younger?"

"Hhmm," Ryan confirmed.

"Obviously, in retrospect, I was stupid and I should have known better," Thomas sighed heavily. "But it was a time when I was feeling lost and had no direction in life. There was no father who could guide me and no mother who could keep me on the straight and narrow. Thandi herself was trying to cope with life as best as she could and I wouldn't have listened to her anyway. You know how it is. Which man would seriously listen to a woman and in particular when she is one's own sister?"

Ryan shrugged his shoulders. He wouldn't know. He was an only child. Sometimes he had wished for a sister or brother, but in the end he had grown up as the only heir to the Bate's name.

"There were about eight of us," Thomas continued. "Some were older than me, but all of them made a living by stealing cars, breaking into houses and selling drugs. I just hung out with them. They were always flush with money, drove the latest BMW's, wore Levy's, Nike *takkies* and thick gold chains around their necks. They were cool to be with and it was cool to be seen with them."

Ryan knew about the need to be part of a group, to be accepted by one's peers. A few times, he himself had come very close to doing something stupid, but luckily his common sense and his parents had prevailed.

"You have to believe me," Thomas said. "I never got involved in any criminal activities. I've never broken into a house, I've never stolen a car and I've never sold any drugs. I just hung out with them."

He drew a deep breath. "Then, one day everything went pear-shaped."

Thomas remembered that fateful day as if it was yesterday.

It was a hot Saturday. The sun burned their bare arms and their shaved scalps drew the heat of the sun. Fine reddish dust hung in the air, clogging their nostrils and drying out their mouths. Beer flowed in abundance, girls in short mini-skirts and high heels hung around the cooler boxes, swinging their hips and pouting their lips.

The crowd must have been a thousand strong. Young black people from all backgrounds had gathered at the usual square on the outskirts of Soweto watching dare-devils spin their BMW's in circles. Burning rubber, screeching tyres and a roaring crowd made this spectacle a perfect Saturday afternoon entertainment. Because these events were illegal, the organisers had posted several guys in strategic spots around the square to keep a look-out for the cops.

Then six cars approached from the opposite side of the square. At that moment Thomas was holding a beer in one hand and had his other arm curled around the waist of a pretty black girl with gorgeous eyes whom he had chatted up half an hour earlier. He immediately recognised the driver of the first BMW.

Jacky Ntolo was not called the 'Crazy One' for nothing. Without slowing down, Crazy sped into the middle of the square and started spinning his black car. His BMW whirled round and round. Brown dust flew in the air and the crowd screeched with excitement. Thomas watched for a moment, then thought better of it. Crazy was a troublemaker. Booze and drugs were on his daily agenda and often, his appearance ended in a major brawl.

Thomas let go of the girl on his arm – he didn't even know her name, he hadn't gotten that far yet – and began retreating slowly. He had no desire to be present when Crazy started one of his fights.

Thomas was half-way through the crowd when the tyre screeching stopped. Surprised by the silence, he turned to look past the people in front of him, but they had blocked his view completely. An uneasy feeling crawled up from his belly and he decided it was wiser to make a quick exit. He looked for his buddies, but they were hidden somewhere in the huge crowd.

With quick steps, he made his way towards the road leading away from the dusty square, using his elbows to clear a path. He was maybe fifty metres away from safety when he heard shots. Instinctively he ducked. Crouching on his knees, he spun around. More gun shots cracked through the hot air. The crowd exploded. Screaming and shouting, people ran in all directions like headless chickens. Thomas jumped to his feet. Trying to figure out what was going on by listening to the irregular gunshots whipping over the heads of the people, he ran towards the road.

A girl tripped and fell next to him grazing her knees and hands. Thomas stopped in full flight and grabbed her arms. Pulling the girl roughly to her feet, he pushed her in front of him, moving her towards the safety of the first houses bordering the square. Her eyes were filled with panic, her face was grey under her dark skin and blood ran down her shins from the torn skin around her knees.

They reached the safety of the buildings and Thomas shoved her gruffly past the corner of a house. Panting wildly, she dropped to the ground. With her head bent, she stayed hunched. He stopped briefly and checked behind him for any immediate danger, but all Thomas saw were people running from the square. With one last glance at the girl at his feet, he spun on his heel and raced along the road, making it in record time to his sister's place.

Thomas's relief was short lived.

During the early evening a knock on the door startled him and Thandeka. Cautiously his sister opened the door only to find two black cops standing on the front steps. The burly men pulled Thomas out of the house into the street, arrested him and read him his rights. Apparently, someone had claimed that he had been present when the shooting at the square had occurred. Thomas's protests went

unheard. The cops snapped handcuffs on his wrists and pushed him into the waiting white van.

The small vehicle was filled with black bodies, the stench of sweat, beer and sour vomit. His stomach heaving, Thomas roughly claimed a seat on the bench mounted against the side of the van. He looked at the other prisoners, recognising a couple of young men. They were the usual onlookers during the Saturday afternoon's spin offs, but not one of his friends was in the van. He wondered why they had only picked him up, but the bumpy ride did not let his mind pursue that line of thought for very long. He needed all his strength to keep perched on the edge of the hard bench.

Their ride soon came to an end and the prisoners were herded into the local police station. Just being present at the square was not a serious offence, but his repeated questions on what grounds he had been arrested, were stoically ignored by the cops. Pushed and shoved, they processed him and the others from the van. His fingerprints were taken, the black ink stubbornly clinging to his fingertips and a mug shot was produced.

Thomas was eventually led down a dim corridor towards the holding cells. He was marched past brightly lit cages filled with black men of all ages, sitting, lying and standing in the overcrowded cells. A low hum hung in the air, swelling to a considerable noise whenever the small party neared one of the cell doors. After the fifth cage, Thomas's guards stopped and pulled him to the side. A thick arm slammed him against the grubby wall, pressing his cheek against the once white painted concrete. He heard the heavy barred door being unlocked and opened.

With a low grunt, the hand on his back pushed him forward and Thomas stumbled into the crowded room. The cell, designed to hold eight prisoners, was filled with almost twenty men. As Thomas heard the door clank shut behind him, he became aware of the prisoners staring mercilessly at him and sudden fear clenched his stomach.

Six huge black men huddled at the back of the cell, their bulks leaning against the wall, glared at him maliciously. Their shaven heads gleamed in the fluorescent light. Arms like clubs bulged from beneath their T-shirts. Gold chains glittered around their necks and their eyes were cold and mean.

There were, however, three black men who seemed out of place. In their mid-twenties, their bodies were skinny and their heads were bowed. Old and new festering needle marks dotted the dark skin on their arms and Thomas suspected the Druggies were caught with more than the amount of dagga permitted for personal use.

To his left were a few black homeless men, their shabby rags wrapped tightly around their emaciated bodies. It was obvious they were either drunk or sleeping off their stupor.

Closer to the group at the back were some prisoners, who were neither druggies, nor gangsters. Their jackets, shirts, pants and shoes, although soiled were of good quality. Maybe they were caught speeding, resisting the cops or were caught dealing drugs.

Although Thomas was tall - 1,86 m was not to be underestimated - and his body was well developed, he felt intimidated by the group of men at the back of the cell. They scrutinised him and after a few minutes slow grins spread across their mean faces. Thomas had learned very early on in his life that it was wise to stay far away from these types of men. They spelled trouble and he was in no mood to be picked

on by any of them. Avoiding their provocative stares and taunting snickers, Thomas climbed over the bodies of two sleeping drunks. Sliding his back down the wall, he sat on the floor beside a well dressed, middle aged black man. Pulling his legs up, he placed his forearms onto his knees and bowed his head.

There was nothing else he could do but wait, hoping his sister would bail him out in the morning. He still had no idea why the cops had arrested him, but he assumed that someone had accused him of being involved in the afternoon's shooting at the square.

The night moved slowly. He had no idea what time it was, having left his watch at his sister's place. A low hum hung over the cell, occasionally broken by a shout or a bark of harsh laughter. Sometimes he heard other doors clank shut and the loud protests of arrested men being shoved into respective cells.

Thomas was tired and he wished he could catch some sleep, but the cold floor, his cramped position and the continuous threat emanating from the huge men at the back of the cell prevented him from closing his eyes. The men talked non-stop in hushed tones, their heads swivelling, their hands pointing first in one direction and then the other. Thomas knew they were up to no good and he kept them in the periphery of his vision.

In spite of everything, he must have fallen asleep because a piercing scream ripped through his uneasy slumber. Abruptly, his head came up and he opened his eyes wide trying to shake off the remnants of sleep. Another high pitched scream reached his ears. It came from the back of the cell. The group of black men who had claimed the spot at the beginning of the evening had their backs to him. Thomas heard a burst of laughter and an agonising groan.

Deeply disturbed by the sounds coming from the middle of the group, Thomas got to his feet. A painful moan reached his ears. Carefully Thomas climbed over the outstretched legs and sleeping bodies lying on the floor. Roughly he pushed his way into the tight circle at the back of the cell.

The biggest of the group was holding down one of the Druggie's. The man's pants and underwear had been pushed around his ankles and his face was pressed onto the cold concrete. The mean guy's zipper was lowered and he was pushing his red, swollen penis into the Druggie's anus. With each thrust the druggie groaned painfully.

Thomas started shaking with rage. He leaped forward, lifted his leg and with all the force he could muster, he kicked the rapist in the ribs. The black man grunted and his whole body twisted awkwardly from the sudden pain. Thomas raised his leg again and kicked the thug in the stomach.

But before he could attack him again, two pairs of strong hands pulled him back. Thomas ranted and raved. His legs bounced up and down, but the men holding him lifted him cleanly off his feet. The brute got up from the floor, stuffed his penis into his pants and pulled up his zipper, leaving his prey lying on the concrete, moaning softly and bleeding from his anus.

Raging with uncontrollable fury, Thomas continued to kick the air trying to connect his heel with the face or body of the rapist. The man sidestepped Thomas's efforts, raised his arm, balled his hand into a fist and let it smash into his attacker's face. Thomas felt a searing pain shoot through his skull. His head flung back and for a moment he saw stars. The blow stunned him, but he did not let up. He wriggled his

body in all directions, pulled against the hands holding him, trying to get away from his captors.

The rapist balled his hand again and let his fist fly, landing the punch on Thomas's mouth. Thomas's lips burst like a ripe melon, his teeth grated against each other and he tasted blood. The pain made him even more determined, but he did not stand a chance.

The rapist, having enough of the youngster's insolence, raised both his arms and let blows rain down on him. His strikes were fast and accurate, hitting Thomas on the nose, on his eyes, his mouth, in his stomach and his kidneys. The beating lasted for several minutes. Eventually, the man pulled back his arm and hit the youngster in front of him one last time. Thomas felt the fist connect. The pain was unbearable and he blacked out.

When Thomas woke up, his body was bruised and hurting all over. The sun was shining through the bars of the window set high in the wall. Carefully, he looked around, checking on his fellow inmates until his eyes came to rest on the six men at the back of the cell.

Their heads were lolling against the wall; their hands were dangling between raised knees; their eyes were half closed and they seemed totally disinterested in their surroundings. Thomas scanned the room and found the assaulted Druggie. The thin man was curled up into a ball lying on the cold floor, his raised arms protecting his head. Thomas tried to catch the eyes of the other prisoners, but every single one avoided his gaze.

Groaning quietly, Thomas shifted into a sitting position.

If his body wouldn't hurt so badly, he would have believed he had had a bad dream the previous night.

He touched his nose gently. A sharp pain exploded behind his eyes indicating a broken nose. He moved his bottom jaw carefully and bit down. At least his teeth seemed to be all in the right places. His ribs hurt like hell, but otherwise he appeared to be in one piece.

Recalling the events of the previous night, fresh anger surged through him. Those men had raped another man.

How dare they? he thought, at once outraged and disgusted. They were despicable human beings. They were animals!

Thomas was determined that he would not let them get away with it. They would pay for it!

His rage barely under control, he waited for the cops to arrive. The minutes dragged by, the sun rose higher and the air in the overcrowded cell became hot. Sweat gathered at his temples and small drops ran down his face, burning the small cuts on his cheeks. He was desperately thirsty and he needed the bathroom, but he kept his cool.

Eventually, Thomas heard footsteps trudging down the corridor. Two black cops in uniform stopped in front of their door. One of the officers pulled out a large key ring, while the other scanned the inside of the cell. Before the older cop could push the key into the keyhole, Thomas jumped up and pressed himself against the bars.

Pointing at the six men slouching by the far wall, he shouted, "They raped a man in here last night."

The younger police officer raised an eyebrow. The older cop halted the process of unlocking the door and looked questioningly at the group of men at the back of the cell.

Thomas, who had followed the brief exchanged, turned around angrily. "These *tsoties* raped another man," he said again.

The older police man pursed his lips thoughtfully. "If you say so," he replied cautiously.

"Yes." Thomas shouted. "I saw it."

The officer looked at the rapist. "Hey, Shobanda," he called. "Did you assault another prisoner?"

The man took a step forward. "I don't know what this *tsotsie* is talking about," he smirked.

Thomas seethed with cold fury. "I saw you," he hissed. "I kicked you in the ribs to make you stop." He whipped his hand in the air. "Ask him to lift his T-shirt," he demanded of the cop. "You'll see the bruise."

The older officer arched an eyebrow as he looked at Shobanda. "You were kicked in the ribs?" he asked.

The rapist shook his head. "No way, man," he replied. "This *tsotsie* is talking shit." He turned to his men. "Tell him that he's talking shit."

The posse nodded in unison.

"See," Shobanda said smugly, crossing his arms in front of his bulky chest. "Nothing was going on here last night."

"But ...," Thomas interrupted.

The uniformed officer held up his hand. "Shobanda says he's done nothing and his friends confirm it."

Thomas opened his mouth in protest.

The cop shrugged his shoulders. "If you want then you can make an official complaint," he suggested casually.

As if punched in the stomach, Thomas stumbled backwards. "What are you saying?" he yelled. "Aren't you going to do anything about it?"

The older cop remained calm and proceeded in unlocking the door. "What do you want me to do?" he asked slightly annoyed. "It's your word against theirs. And they are in the majority."

Thomas spun on his heel and addressed the rest of the inmates. "You also saw it," he shouted frustrated. "You have to tell them that he's raped a man!"

He scanned their faces, but every single one of them turned his head away, ignoring the outraged youngster. Not one of the prisoners opened his mouth to support his claim. Thomas could not believe it.

Didn't they have honour or moral values? he thought with sudden despair. Didn't they want to see justice done?

Thomas turned back to the cops, who by now had opened the cell door. He stared at the older police officer and saw a smirk stretch across the man's face.

Realisation dawned on Thomas.

There was nothing he could do! The cops would not lift a finger to help!

Thomas clenched his teeth with anger.

So, this is how it was played, he thought bitterly. Either the cop was taking bribes from the men in the back of the cell, or he simply didn't care. The cops knew

complaints could be made to disappear as soon as the paperwork reached the commandant's desk.

Disgust and disappointment spread through Thomas like an invisible cancer. A man had been raped, his dignity crushed, his privacy invaded and the cops were about to do exactly ... nothing!

This was how it was going to be and his hands were tied.

A harsh line appeared around Thomas's mouth.

The prisoners filed out of the cell and Thomas fell into step passing by the two cops, the one still grinning at him. Thomas wished he could punch his lights out, but knew better than that. He did not intend spending another night in a holding cell ever! He promised himself that this was about the first and only time he would ever spend in prison.

As Thomas had expected, his sister bailed him out the same morning. The charges against him were dropped. The allegation that he had fired a gun at the square had been proven false. The actual perpetrators had been apprehended and were held in custody. That day, Thomas swore to himself to go onto the straight and narrow. Immediately he cut his ties with his buddies. Afterwards, whenever he saw them in the street, he switched sides and lucky for him, they respected him enough to leave him alone.

Many weeks later, Thandeka, sensing that something was still bugging him about his time in the holding cell, pried the story out of him. Although shocked and outraged, she agreed with him. There was nothing they could do about the episode, except live their lives as cleanly as possible. However, since that night, Thomas had developed an intense dislike, a feeling almost bordering on hatred, towards the police force.

Ryan nudged his partner in the ribs. "So, what went pear-shaped," he asked.

Thomas let out a low growl. "Let's just say that I don't believe in the honour and honesty of our police force anymore. As long as they can make a few bucks on the side, they will close their eyes to any atrocity committed in their holding cells."

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "Are you going to tell me what happened?" he asked.

Thomas sighed. "I was unjustly arrested and while spending the night in a holding cell, I witnessed a rape. Unfortunately, the cops turned a blind eye."

Ryan swallowed hard. He had heard about the rapes, but had always put them aside as urban myths, stories made up to frighten citizens into behaving themselves. Not knowing how to respond, he glanced at his partner out of the corner of his eye.

Thomas's hands were balled into fists. "Sorry mate. I didn't mean to shock you," his partner said through clenched teeth. "Just hope and pray that you are never arrested and have to spend a night at a local police station."

CHAPTER 06

Lucy sat on the dirty mattress, her back pressed against the cold wall. The rough planks nailed to the window frame sliced the faint silvery moonlight into segments, throwing thin streaks across the dark room. Garbled sounds from a television filtered through the locked door.

What time was it? Lucy wondered.

She was desperately tired, but did not dare sleep. Fear kept her awake. Fear of the unknown. And she anticipated the worst. Horror stories from the daily evening news flashed before her: fourteen year old girl found in veld, shot dead; fifteen year old girl raped on her way to school; thirteen year old girl found in alley, stabbed to death; sixteen year old girl missing. Pictures of girls in school uniforms formed in her mind, their hair braided prettily or tied up in neat ponytails, their white and pale blue blouses tucked behind the waist bands of short pleated skirts, their black school shoes polished to a high shine.

Why did they have to die? she asked silently. Why had they been hurt? Had they made the same mistake as she had? Did they also walk home alone? Did they also not listen to their parents?

Tears gathered in Lucy's eyes. Was she ever going to get out of here alive? Was she ever going to see her mother again?

Desperate for the comfort of another human being, Lucy straightened her arm and reached out to the body curled up beside her on the mattress.

Silvy was lying on her side. Her skirt was tucked between her legs and she was snoring softly. Lucy touched the back of Silvy's hand, feeling her smooth warm skin.

The tears flowed freely down Lucy's cheeks.

Was that all she had left now? The touch of Silvy's hand? Was this how she was supposed to spend the last hours of her life, locked up in a dark room with a boarded up window, sitting on a stinking mattress? Was this all that she could expect? What happened to her dream of becoming a lawyer? What happened to her goals? Next week she was supposed to try out for the cheerleading squad! Was this all supposed to come to a sudden end? Was she about to die?

Lucy buried her head in her arms and small sobs escaped her mouth. Her swollen eyes burned like fire and her throat was dry like sawdust.

Silvy stirred in her sleep and let out a muted groan. Lucy reached out and stroked Silvy's shoulder lightly.

"It'll be alright," she whispered. "It will be okay."

Silvy rolled over to her other side, pushed her hand beneath her cheek, smacked her lips and continued to snore softly.

This was not how her life was supposed to end! Lucy thought fiercely. This could not be all! She was supposed to make the cheerleading squad! She was supposed to go to university! She didn't even have her first kiss yet!

Lucy swallowed her tears and dried her face with the back of her hand. She would not give up! She would fight to the end. She would make sure she got out of this hole alive and in one piece.

Lucy took a deep breath.

In order to stay alive, she needed strength and little sleep did not help. She slid down onto the mattress and curled up into a ball. But as soon as she closed her eyes, horrible images plagued her. She saw men chasing her with knives, felt

calloused hands pulling at her hair, felt thick fingers groping her legs and breasts, and felt hot stinking breath rush against her neck.

Lucy bit down on her lips, her new determination fading fast.

What chance did she have? What possibility of escape did she have without help? She was only a fourteen year old girl!

Suddenly Lucy heard voices filtering in from outside. Propping herself up on one elbow, she turned her face towards the gaps between the boards of the window. She was able to distinguish between the angry voices of two men. Lucy hauled herself onto her feet and with one step she was at the window. Carefully, she peered through the spaces. A short, skinny, white man was holding a knife against the throat of a slightly taller man.

A gasp escaped her lips. Quickly she clasped her hand over her mouth.

Watching intently, Lucy listened to what was going on. The skinny guy was hissing something, but she could not make out what he was saying. To her relief, the man who was being threatened lifted his hand and pushed the knife away. Skinny snickered and with a parting remark walked away.

With a clear view of the other man now, Lucy was surprised to see how young he was. He reminded her of a university student, wearing a pair of fashionable Levis and a T-Shirt with a big dark stain colouring its front. The guy's face was smooth and long, dark hair fell on to his broad shoulders. She watched the young man push his hands into his pockets and flick his fringe away. An expression of disgust crossed his face as he stared after Skinny.

Lucy had no idea why, but instinctively she knew that there was the help she was looking for. A calmness spread through her which she could not explain.

She replayed the scene she had witnessed over and over in her mind. There seemed to be no love lost between the two men. And if they did not like each other, then it would just be possible that the dark haired guy was prepared to help them get out of here.

A tiny smile crept into the corners of her mouth.

Maybe she would see her mother again. Maybe she would see her friends again. Maybe she would be able to curl up on the couch at home in front of the TV again. Maybe she would drink hot chocolate again. Maybe she would still be able to fulfill all her dreams.

With renewed hope she returned to the mattress, closed her eyes and fell into an exhausted sleep.

xxx

Following Thomas's directions, Ryan flicked the indicator and turned right. The car bumped over a short stretch of hard packed dry soil, raising a cloud of fine brown dust swirling high up into the orange glow of a lone streetlamp.

They stopped in front of a low slung building, its corrugated iron roof dulled by a layer of dirt. Small grimy windows and an open door faced the parking lot. Ryan pulled up beside a white dust-covered Toyota, its sides marked with the blue Metro police signs. A few dry bushes bordered the police station and a tall evergreen cypress poked its crown into the dark night sky.

Ryan switched off the engine and opened the door. A whiff of dust rose in the air, causing him to sneeze loudly. He followed Thomas towards the station building,

noticing the hair cracks in its once, white painted walls, and the cardboard used to board up sections of broken glass in the metal window frames. It was eerily quiet in the parking lot: no crickets chirped, no brush rustled, no human voices penetrated the warm air.

They entered the police station through the open door and found themselves in front of a long scratched wooden counter running the length of the room. A fluorescent ceiling light flickered unsteadily, illuminating the torn grey vinyl tiles on the floor.

Ryan spotted numerous dog-eared A4 notices pasted on the grimy yellow walls announcing step-by-step procedures to follow when an accident was reported. Other A4's displayed stark, dark faces of 'most wanted' criminals, and again others showed thick black arrows pointing in the direction of the counter indicating where to queue. The type face of the notices varied from huge to tiny on the same sheet, so that it was impossible to read the messages standing three metres away. The spelling was atrocious. The word 'stealing' was spelled 'stelling' and 'alleged' had an 'l' missing.

Ryan moved towards the counter. A portable radio blared R&B music, but the incident room was deserted. Old brown wooden desks were piled high with paper and rickety chairs were scattered haphazardly across the room. The shrill ringing of a telephone screamed in his ears, but did not elicit a reaction from anyone else.

Ryan looked questioningly at his partner.

Thomas shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows?" he said resignedly. "Maybe they've been called out."

"Someone must be on duty," Ryan insisted. "They can't leave the station completely unmanned."

Thomas leaned halfway across the counter to peer into a passage leading to their left.

"Hello," he shouted. "Anybody here?"

There was no reply.

"Hello," Thomas called again. "We need help."

Again, there was no answer.

A frown creased Ryan's forehead. "This is unbelievable," he griped.

His partner shrugged his shoulders. "What did you expect? Welcome to the South African police force." His voice dripped with sarcasm. "Your helper and protector in time of need. Stalwart against crime and injustice. The defender of the innocent."

A cynical smile tugged at the corners of Ryan's mouth. "I get you, pal."

The telephone finally stopped ringing and the incident room returned to silent. Undecided what to do next, the two stood behind the counter when they heard a rush of water.

Someone was flushing a toilet!

The partners faced each other exchanging incredulous glances.

A door banged loudly against a wall and feet shuffled down the passage. A moment later a black police officer rounded the corner. Startled, he stopped in his tracks. His huge belly hung over the waistband of his shiny black trousers, straining the buttons on his short sleeved, sweat-marked, shirt and his tie hung loosely around his thick neck. Masking his surprise, the cop wobbled towards the counter. Putting his hands flat on the scratched surface, he pulled his black flabby cheeks into a friendly smile.

"Can I help you?" he asked, his voice high pitched like that of a young girl.

Ryan was utterly disgusted. He opened his mouth ready to give this fat black slob a piece of his mind, but Thomas's hand on his arm stopped him short. He shot his partner an angry look, but Thomas shook his head. In consideration for his partner's earlier objections involving the police, Ryan clamped his mouth shut. Thomas released his grip and turned to the cop who was waiting, innocence incarnate.

"Officer," Thomas said with a syrupy voice. "We apologise for disturbing your nightly routine."

Thomas's sarcasm did not bypass the station cop. His eyes narrowed and his lips pressed into a thin line. Straightening his shoulders, his dark eyes glittered with sudden hostility.

"What do you want?" he asked coldly.

Thomas plastered a smile on his face. "We require your help in finding a missing person," he answered.

The officer raised an eyebrow. "A missing person?"

"Yes. My niece went missing and we need you to find her," Thomas explained patiently.

The officer scratched his cheek and looked at them thoughtfully.

The seconds stretched out.

How could his partner stand this cop's behaviour? Ryan thought irritably. He was ready to punch the officer's lights out. Firstly, he had ignored them while finishing his hour-long crap, and then the dimwit acted as if he was doing them a favour.

"How long has she been missing?" the cop eventually asked.

Thomas flashed his white teeth. "She didn't come home from school this afternoon," he replied amicably.

The cop dumbly regarded Thomas from under lowered eyelids.

"Have you checked with the school?" he asked.

Thomas nodded firmly.

The cop rubbed his hand across his shaven head. "Have you contacted her friends?"

The smile on Thomas's face became strained. "Yes," he replied curtly.

The cop hitched up his trousers and cleared his throat.

"Well," he drawled. "She might have run away."

Ryan noticed Thomas turning pale. "She has not run away," he stated grimly.

The cop raised an eyebrow again. "How can you be so sure? Kids run away all the time."

"My niece did not run away," Thomas reiterated.

"I wouldn't worry too much," the cop said dismissively. "Once they're hungry, they usually come home."

Thomas's face turned into a cold mask. "My niece is missing," he said slowly. "She did not run away and I want you to help me find her."

Sensing the change in Thomas's attitude, the cop relented somewhat.

"At what time was your niece," the officer emphasised the word 'niece', "supposed to be home?"

Although close to exploding, Thomas controlled his temper beautifully and Ryan instinctively understood why. They would not get anywhere by shouting and screaming. If they wanted the cop's help, they had to stay calm. The fat man was in charge and he had the authority to deny them any assistance if he chose to do so.

Nevertheless, Ryan was infuriated. The situation was totally unacceptable to him, but he was powerless to change it. Breathing deliberately, he watched the cop's every move carefully.

"She was supposed to be at home at approximately 15h00," Thomas said, trying to sound polite.

The cop checked his watch. Ryan caught a glimpse of the time. It was now close to midnight. The officer lifted his hand and slowly began to tick off the hours on his fingers. Halfway through, he started again.

Ryan could not suppress an annoyed snort. The cop had to use his fingers to figure out how long Lucy had been missing. It was unbelievable!

The officer narrowed his brows, but continued his count. Eventually, he came to a conclusion and shook his head.

"Sorry," he said. "We can't help you."

Thomas was startled. "Why?"

The cop crossed his fleshy arms in front of him. "The girl has not been missing for twenty-four hours yet," he replied smugly.

Thomas stared at the officer, a look of utter disbelief crossing his face. Finally, Ryan had had enough. He had watched the exchange between his partner and the insolent cop with strained patience, but now he lost his temper.

Ryan slammed his fist down on top of the counter. "You are going to help us!" he shouted.

Startled, the cop took a step backwards.

Ryan leaned over the counter, his face contorted with rage. "You are going to find this missing girl now!"

The officer pursed his lips and shook his head. "She has not been gone long enough," he declared with impudence.

Ryan snatched at the fat man's uniform.

"You are going to find this girl," he yelled, holding a fistful of shirt.

The cop slapped Ryan's arm out of the way so that he hit Ryan's wrist on the edge of the counter. The sharp pain brought him to his senses.

"We have to wait twenty-four hours before we can take any action," the cop said again, although his face was white beneath his dark skin.

Ryan glared at him. "This is unacceptable," he barked angrily.

"That's the procedure. Sir!" the officer replied forcefully, regaining his confidence quickly, now that Ryan was once again standing at a safe distance.

Ryan leaned forward, his eyes boring like daggers into the face of the fat man.

"You are going to take action now!" he demanded.

The cop shook his head adamantly. "We can't help you. You have to wait twenty-four hours before you can report anyone missing."

He turned around and waddled towards one of the wooden desks placed in the middle of the room.

"This is impossible," Ryan shouted, but the cop ignored him, busying himself with a stack of papers.

Ryan's blood was at boiling point. Who did this fat slob think he was?

"I want to speak to your superior," Ryan yelled.

The officer lifted his head slowly. "He was called out," he answered calmly.

Ryan's temper spilled over. He would force this fat slob to take appropriate action!

As Ryan made a move to jump over the counter, the cop's eyes became wide like saucers. As fast as his fat body allowed, he wobbled towards Ryan. Placing his hands firmly on the intruder's shoulders, he pushed Ryan back with all his might. Ryan was caught off balance and had no choice but to back down if he didn't want to end up with his backside on the dirty floor.

"I want to speak to your commander," Ryan demanded again.

The cop snorted derisively. "Sir," he said icily. "You are not in a position to demand anything. You were trying to enter a restricted area and you threatened a police officer. I have the right to arrest you for that."

The officer held Ryan's fierce stare with one of his own from behind half closed eyelids. The cop's hands were raised, ready to grab Ryan should he try to jump on the counter again.

Ryan was hungry and tired. The attitude of this insolent cop did not help his mood, but his own behaviour was not getting him anywhere either. He would just get into an undignified brawl and end up in a holding cell for the rest of the night.

Ryan drew a deep breath.

"If you are not able to mount a search and rescue mission, can you at least take down a missing person's report?" he asked more calmly, trying to make amends.

The cop tilted his head to the side, rubbing his nose with his forefinger. Slowly, he nodded. "We could do that," he conceded. "But it hasn't been twenty-four hours yet."

Ryan nodded in defeat. "I know that," he replied. "But we could give you the details now already."

The cop licked his lips. He was undecided.

"Please," Ryan coaxed him. "We are worried sick and the sooner we get moving on this, the sooner we will find her."

The officer finally consented and Ryan sighed deeply.

The cop ambled to the other side of the room where he opened a door of an old metal cupboard, its paint peeling in several places. Shuffling stacks of paper from one shelf to the next, he found what he was looking for. Holding the sheet in his outstretched hand, the cop shuffled back to the counter. Groping around the clutter on a desk, he picked up a ballpoint pen. Wiping the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand, he placed the form on the scratchy surface and poised the pen.

"Name?" he enquired, all business now.

Ryan looked expectantly at his partner and Thomas stepped forward clearing his throat.

"Lucy Nkosi," he stated.

The cop painted the letters painfully slow into the appropriate box.

Frustrated Ryan closed his eyes. This was going to take hours.

"Can we complete the form for you?" he suggested courteously.

The officer glared at him with open hostility. "The form has to be completed by a police officer," he snarled.

Ryan resigned himself to the seemingly unavoidable waiting period.

The cop turned back to Thomas. "Address?" he snapped.

Having won at least half the battle, Ryan stopped paying attention. In the corner of the reception area he spotted a chair, its green plastic cover torn and yellow foam spilling from it. With a heavy heart, he walked across the cracked vinyl tiles and sank tiredly into the rickety affair.

XXX

Lucy woke with a start. Tiny dust particles floated in the streaks of sunlight that shone through the gaps of the boarded up window. The air in the room was already warm. It promised to be another scorching hot day.

Lucy uncurled her legs and straightened her short skirt. Every muscle in her body screamed with pain as she moved into a sitting position. Silvy was still fast asleep, lying on her side and snoring softly. Shelly was rolled into a ball on the other side of the room. Her hand was tucked innocently beneath her cheek, the tangled mess of her hair covering her face.

The events of the day before came rushing back and Lucy groaned softly. She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head in despair.

This was all not happening! she thought miserably. She had not been snatched off the street on her way home and she was not held against her will in this dank room.

Silvy moved and a whiff of stink from the mattress caught Lucy's nostrils. She gagged and opened her eyes and once again she was faced with her stark reality.

What was she going to do?

Lucy got to her feet, stretched her stiff legs and walked over to the window. Pushing her face up against the planks, she peered outside and remembered the scene she had witnessed late the previous night.

She had forgotten all about the young man in the veld. Sudden hope surged through her. There might be the tiniest chance that he would help them get out of here.

Desperately trying to reassure herself, Lucy's head bobbed up and down.

Yes! she thought. She would somehow convince the young man to help them.

Lucy had no idea how to accomplish her mission, but her confidence level rose with each minute. She would run it by Silvy and Shelly and they might just come up with a strategy, a rescue plan.

"Hello there," Silvy mumbled.

Lucy turned away from the window and looked at her fellow captive.

"Hi," she replied with a smile. "How are you doing?"

Silvy eyed her carefully. "I'm okay. But what are you so happy about?" she asked.

Lucy slid down on the mattress. "I might have found a way out of here," she whispered excitedly.

A sceptical look crossed Silvy's face. "Suurre."

Lucy clutched Silvy's arm. "I'm telling you ..."

Her sentence was interrupted by the sound of a key being inserted into the lock of the door. A loud keening sound came from the other side of the room. Shelly had woken up when she heard the sound of the key. Pushing herself further into the corner, she hugged her knees. Rocking on her heels, a high pitched wailing escaped her throat.

Silvy flew across the room. Dropping to her haunches, she put an arm around the girl's shoulders.

"Sshhh," she mumbled. "Sshhh."

But Shelly's wailing continued unabated.

The key chinked loudly in the lock. The door opened a few centimetres and bright sunlight flooded through the gap. Fearfully, Lucy pressed her back to the wall, but

the door did not open any wider. A hand appeared and an object was flung into the room, ending up with a slapping noise on the floor in front of the mattress.

Shelly cried out; fear and anguish quivering in her voice.

Then another object sailed into the room and another and another. Lucy crawled further away into the corner pulling at her skirt, trying desperately to make herself smaller, trying to make herself invisible.

The missile attack stopped. The door was abruptly slammed shut and the key turned in the lock.

Lucy breathed out slowly and Shelly's cries subsided into a low moaning. Lucy waited a few moments, until curiosity got the better of her and she moved towards the objects on the floor.

"It's just some bottles of water and a few breakfast bars," Silvy's voice came from the other side of the room.

Lucy looked at her questioningly.

"Remember, I've been here already a while," Silvy said quietly.

"Sorry," Lucy mumbled ashamed. Obviously Silvy knew what to expect when the door opened.

"Don't worry about it," Silvy said.

Lucy picked up the bottles and stacked them against the wall. Scooping up the breakfast bars, she counted them. There were nine of them, which meant each of the girls could have three.

With dismay, she stared at the bars. "Is that all we will get to eat?" she asked, close to tears.

Silvy laughed mirthlessly. "Sometimes they give us another ration."

Lucy placed the breakfast bars beside the bottled water.

"Ah well," she replied. "At least they won't let us starve completely."

Silvy held out her hand. "Give me one of the bottles, please," she said.

Lucy rolled the bottle across the floor and Silvy caught it expertly. She unscrewed the top and took a deep swallow. Holding the bottle in one hand, she placed her other hand under Shelly's chin and lifted the girl's head.

"Come on, Shelly," she coaxed, "have a sip of water."

But Shelly pressed her lips together.

"Come on, girl," Silvy tried to persuade her. "Don't be stupid. You have to drink."

But Shelly kept her mouth firmly shut.

Suddenly the girl lifted her arms and pushed Silvy hard. Silvy toppled over, almost losing her grip on the bottle containing the precious water.

"Damn," Silvy muttered, scrambling to her feet.

Shelly pulled her legs up under her and began rocking on her heels again. Ignoring her surroundings, her eyes stared into nothing.

"What's wrong with her?" Lucy asked puzzled.

Silvy moved towards Lucy and lowered herself onto the filthy mattress.

She took a deep breath. "I don't know how long I had been here, when they brought Shelly in," she answered. "I was so glad to have company. Someone to talk to, you know. I waited until Shelly was awake and then I asked her questions. Her name, where she lives, what school she goes to She was alright at first, but the longer we stayed in here, the more upset she became."

Thoughtfully Silvy tucked at her skirt. "Then she started crying and it didn't matter what I said to her, she just wouldn't stop. She carried on about her mom and dad. She said that she didn't want to die. I told her that we were not going to die."

Silvy glanced quickly at Lucy.

"Not that I was too sure myself, but I wanted to calm her down, reassure her, you know?"

Lucy nodded with understanding.

"After a while she went quiet. She just stared into space. I tried to talk to her, but she wouldn't answer. Even when I shook her, she wouldn't say anything. She worried me, because I had no idea what was going on in her mind."

Silvy pulled up her legs, crossed them under her and leaned forward to pick at loose strands hanging from the edge of the mattress. Lucy kept quiet, waiting for her to continue.

"Then we heard the key in the lock. I knew what to expect and stayed in my corner, but Shelly Shelly jumped up, raced to the door and screamed that she had to get out of this place, that they had to let her go. She yelled and yelled. I didn't know what to do, so I stayed very still. Shelly grabbed the door and pulled it open. I have no idea where she got the strength from, but she managed to open the door."

At the memory Silvy shook her head with awe.

"But that was not a good thing to do, you see," she continued. "There was a big black guy, I don't know what they call him, but he grabbed Shelly and lifted her off the floor. He is very strong. Shelly kicked, lashed out and screamed. The big man told her to shut up, but Shelly just kept going. It almost sounded as if she went mad. You know, like one of those people in the crazy places."

Lucy pulled a grimace. She knew what Silvy was referring to.

"The black man started shaking Shelly, but she would not give up. She screamed and screamed, tried to scratch his face and kicked him in the stomach. I stayed in my corner. There was nothing I could do. Then the man turned Shelly upside down. He held her by her ankles and swung her back and forth."

Silvy gulped some air, her face turning pale as she remembered the scene.

"What happened?" Lucy asked quietly.

"Shelly carried on screaming. She would just not stop. I wished and prayed that she would, but she didn't. The black man swung her up and down a couple of times, telling her to shut up, but she wouldn't listen."

Silvy crossed her arms in front of her. "He let go," she said with finality. "He just let go. Shelly flew through the air across the room. She slammed into the wall and was quiet."

With utter horror Lucy stared at Silvy. "He did what?" she asked flabbergasted.

"He threw her across the room and Shelly hit the wall," Silvy repeated.

Lucy turned to the girl rocking on her heels.

"The man warned me that the same thing would happen to me if I misbehaved. Then he closed the door and locked it," Silvy said. "Believe me, I had no intention of throwing a tantrum. I was too scared."

"What about Shelly?" Lucy asked worriedly.

"At first I thought she was dead," she answered. "She didn't make a sound and she didn't move. But after a while she woke up. I asked her why she had flipped out, but she wouldn't talk to me. I tried a couple of times, but she just ignored me. I decided to leave her alone and sat in my corner."

Silvy pulled on her hair. "Much later, I tried again to talk to her, but she refused to answer. Then she pulled her legs up under her and started rocking on her heels."

Lucy glanced at her questioningly.

Silvy shrugged her shoulders. "That's what she has been doing since he flung her against the wall. She just rocks on her heels. She doesn't talk, only moans and cries out when the door opens."

Silvy sighed heavily. "She doesn't eat. She won't even take one bite of a breakfast bar and she won't drink, not even one tiny sip."

"But she must at least have some water," Lucy protested. "Otherwise she is going to die."

Silvy tilted her head. "Don't you think I know that?" she asked indignantly.

"Sorry," Lucy apologised. "I know you're trying."

"You are welcome to feed her," Silvy offered. "I'm not getting anywhere."

Lucy watched Shelly rocking back and forth on her heels. The girl's eyes were empty, seeing nothing, reacting to nothing.

"And she hasn't said anything since she hit the wall?" Lucy asked concerned.

"Not one word," Silvy replied. "The only time she does anything is when the door opens. Then she wails and moans, as you've seen."

"Maybe she damaged her brain?" Lucy said anxiously.

Silvy gnawed on her lower lip. "Let's hope not," she replied. "That would be terrible."

Her heart filled with worry and compassion, Lucy got to her feet and walked over to the girl in the corner. Kneeling in front of her she reached out, touching Shelly's shoulder softly.

"Hi there, Shelly," she said. "You have to drink some water."

The girl did not look up, did not open her mouth, only continued rocking on her heels.

Lucy took a bottle of water, unscrewed the cap and held the bottle against Shelly's lips.

But the girl did not open her mouth.

"Come on, Shelly," Lucy coaxed. "Please drink some water."

She pushed the bottle against Shelly's lips, but the girl did not react. Helpless, Lucy put the bottle down.

If Shelly refused to drink, she would dehydrate and that meant she was going to die, Lucy thought worriedly. Who knew how long they were going to be here? Food was not that important, but water was. It was essential for anyone's survival. If they wanted to get out of here alive then they had to drink! And she would be damned if she would let Shelly die!

Lucy picked up the bottle from the floor and poured some water into the screw cap. Holding the tiny container against Shelly's mouth she dribbled some drops onto the girl's lips. The liquid touched the cracked skin and to Lucy's surprise, the tip of Shelly's tongue appeared between her moistened lips.

"Yes," Lucy exclaimed excited. "That's it!"

She poured some more water onto Shelly's lips and the girl's tongue lapped it up. Encouraged by Shelly's reaction, Lucy held the bottle against her mouth, but that proved too much for the girl. She clamped her lips shut and was not to be persuaded to take in one more drop of water.

Lucy only saw it as a temporary set back. She would try later and if she had to feed the whole bottle of water droplet by droplet to Shelly, she would do so. Shelly would not die of dehydration!

"What about your rescue plan?" Silvy's voice drew her away from her task.

"Oh," Lucy replied, having momentarily forgotten about that.

Silvy glanced at her curiously. "Have you changed your mind?" she asked.

"No, no," Lucy said hastily. She rose to her feet and walked the short distance across the room to where Silvy was sitting on the mattress.

"So tell me," Silvy demanded. "What's your plan?"

Lucy hunkered down beside Silvy. "Last night," she said, "when you were asleep, I overheard a fight outside."

Silvy raised her eyebrows.

"It wasn't really a fight," Lucy conceded. "It was just some loud voices, but they made me curious. I got up and peered through the gaps. There were two men having words with each other. They weren't very loud so I couldn't quite make out what they were on about, but they must have been angry with each other, because the one man pulled a knife and held it against the other man's throat."

"What?" Silvy exclaimed.

Lucy placed her hand on Silvy's arm. "Nothing happened," she smiled. "The other guy just pushed the knife away, but I think he could help us."

Doubt crept across Silvy's face. "How could he help us?" she asked.

Lucy raised her hands. "I don't know really," she said. "I just have this feeling he could help us to escape."

"Oh, come on," Silvy moaned. "This is your rescue plan?"

Lucy puckered her lips. "Do you have a better idea?" she snapped, slightly annoyed.

Chastised, Silvy busied herself with her skirt.

"You see," Lucy continued, "I have this feeling the one guy is not happy here. Maybe he does not want to be involved. Why would he have an argument with the other guy if he agrees with us being here?"

Silvy scratched her nose thoughtfully.

"He also looks decent," Lucy added.

"What does looking decent have to do with anything?" Silvy protested.

Lucy shrugged her shoulders. "He just doesn't seem to be as mean as the other one."

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

"What does he look like?" Silvy asked.

Lucy frowned whilst trying to remember. "He looked like a university student. He wore Levis and a T-shirt. His hair is brown and a little bit long." She giggled embarrassed. "He is actually quite handsome."

Silvy gave her an amused look. "So he's really not old?"

Lucy shook her head, suppressing her laughter.

"And what makes you think he would help us?" Silvy asked, becoming serious again.

Lucy drew a deep breath. "I really don't know," she replied hesitantly. "It's just a gut feeling I have."

Silvy knelt in front of Lucy. "How is he going to help us?" she demanded to know.

Lucy pursed her lips. "I thought maybe we can talk to him," she said hopefully. "Give him our names."

Silvy snorted derisively. "How are we going to give him our names?" she complained. "You've seen that they don't come in here. They only open the door a few centimetres and throw the stuff threw the gap!"

Lucy picked at a cuticle. "Then we have to think of something that will make him come in here, or that gives us a chance to get close to him," she concluded firmly.

Silvy shook her head. "It will never work," she stated pessimistically.

But Lucy was not to be deterred. "We'll think of something," she said resolutely. "We'll make this work. He is our only chance."

CHAPTER 07

Desperate for another few minutes of blissful sleep, Ryan groped blindly for the 'snooze' button on his alarm clock. Feeling it a few beeps later, he pressed down his index finger on the small knob. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut, but two minutes later the alarm went off again, denying him any more time in dreamland. Opening one eye, he pulled the thick duvet to one side, swung his legs over the side of the Queen-size bed and got up. Stretching his arms over his head, he heard the bones in his back crack softly.

Was he getting old?

Rolling his shoulders to loosen his stiff muscles, he padded across the soft caramel coloured carpet into the bathroom. Once in the tiled shower, he let cold water sting his face and chest.

Some fifteen minutes later, dressed in navy blue Italian style pleated pants and a white, cotton, button-down shirt left open at the collar, Ryan pulled back the beige wool curtains in his bedroom. It was just after six in the morning and the sun was still rising. The sky was pale blue, showing a thin stretch of brilliant gold on the low horizon. A flock of small birds chirped in the bushes growing against the white painted boundary walls surrounding the immaculately groomed garden. A thin layer of dew covered the grass and small glittering drops of moisture hung on the dark green leaves of a crimson bottle-brush tree beside the window.

Ryan smoothed down his damp blond hair and turned his back on the tranquillity of the early morning. The house was silent and his footsteps echoed on the fawn tiles in the passage as he made his way to the kitchen. While waiting for the water to boil in the brushed stainless steel kettle, he glanced across the counter of the open plan kitchen and into the spacious lounge. His eyes travelled past his chocolate brown leather couches, the low mahogany coffee table and his oak dining room set, coming to rest on the bare white walls. A feeling of loneliness crept up on him.

It would be nice to have someone to wake up to, he thought wistfully. Someone to share his bed; someone to make coffee for in the morning.

As successful as he was, Ryan's life felt empty. There was no one special, no one to share his triumphs and defeats. He did not care to remember when last he was involved in a serious relationship. Women saw his car, his clothes, his bulging wallet, but did not seem to understand that these things required a lot of time to obtain.

As soon as his girlfriends realised he worked on average ten to twelve hours a day, more often than not including weekends, they looked for opportunities elsewhere. Most of his girlfriends had accused him of being married to his work. Ryan made no excuses, because what they could not grasp was that running a business required a lot of dedication, and often solutions had to be found at 9 o'clock at night when the lady of the house wanted to curl up with her man in front of the TV.

Ryan poured hot water over the coffee granules in his mug and added a swig of milk. Blowing at the hot liquid to cool it down, he walked over to his stereo sitting on a rack beside the flat screen TV mounted on the wall. Ryan switched on the radio and listened to a Lenny Krawitz song before the six o'clock news.

His mind travelled back to the issue of women and he shook his head sadly. It looked like he was going to spend his life as a bachelor.

At least during the day, Ryan consoled himself, he had the company of his employees. His management team was one of the best he could wish for, especially

Raphaela. He was really glad he had hired her. A smile curled around his lips. Smart, young, ambitious, dedicated and gorgeous, Raphaela was one sassy woman and he noticed that other men admired her too.

Ryan nodded slowly. Raphaela would make him an ideal partner.

A moment later, he pursed his lips with self depreciation. What wishful thinking! Raphaela was way out of his league. Why would a woman who had brains and a figure to die for, consider him of all people?

Nevertheless, there was no harm in dreaming.

He imagined his hands around her slender waist, burying his nose in her long dark curls and kissing her full sensual lips.

Ryan quickly banned the picture from his mind.

Raphaela would never see him as anything other than her boss. She was too much of a professional for that. What was it with bosses and employees anyway?

A frown deepened on his forehead.

Because he was a boss and because of his success, he was condemned to spend his life in lonely misery. It was the pits! Why wasn't there a suitable, ambitious, smart and understanding woman in South Africa prepared to share her life with him?

Before he could drown in self pity, he finished his coffee, switched off his stereo and left the house, locking the front door behind him.

It was still very early in the morning and the drive to the office took Ryan only fifteen minutes. He parked his BMW 4x4 in the usual spot beside Thomas's Alpha. Seeing his partner's car in the lot, the previous night's events came rushing back. Ryan wondered if Thomas's niece had finally come home. He pulled out his cellphone, pushed the speed dial button and held the phone against his ear.

"Hello?" his partner's croaky voice answered after a few rings.

"Good morning," Ryan replied.

Thomas cleared his throat. "How's it going?"

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "That's what I want to know from you. Did your niece pitch up?"

There was a moment of silence on the other end. "No," Thomas replied quietly. "She did not come home."

"Oh," was all Ryan could manage.

The two men kept quiet for a minute or two. Ryan had no idea what to say. He did not want to make the situation worse, but the thought of Thomas's niece being in serious trouble crossed his mind.

Eventually his partner's voice came back over the line. "Thanks for your help last night," he said.

"Anytime," Ryan replied. "Say, what are you going to do now?"

Thomas drew a deep breath. "To be honest, I haven't got a clue. I presume we have to be patient."

Ryan frowned. "Can't you go to the cops again?"

Thomas snorted scornfully. "You were there last night. Do you remember what the fat cop told us? We have to wait twenty-four hours before they will move a finger."

Ryan kept his mouth shut. He remembered very well what had happened.

"I think I'll go to the school, speak to the teachers, try to find out if there was anything that bothered Lucy," Thomas said wistfully. "Maybe something happened and she *did* in fact run away."

Ryan could hear how his partner clung to the hope that it was his niece's decision not to come home and not some other terrible event that might have caused her to be hurt or even killed.

"I think that's a good idea," Ryan agreed. "Maybe her teachers, or even her classmates, will know something. Maybe they'll be able to offer a clue."

"Yes," Thomas replied more firmly than before. "That's what I'm hoping for."

"Alright, partner. You go and find out what's going on," Ryan encouraged him. "If you need me, I'm only a phone call away."

"Thanks Ryan. I really appreciate it."

"Nothing to thank me for," he said. "Speak to you later."

Ryan disconnected the call and pushed his cellphone into his pocket. Climbing out of the BMW, he wished fervently that Thomas's niece would return very soon and in one piece.

Ryan unlocked the company's front glass doors, switched on the lights and walked down the carpeted passage into the small kitchen. The building was deserted. But at half past six in the morning he didn't really expect anyone to be at work. Standing in front of the kitchenette, he poured water into the coffee machine's container, scooped coffee grains into a filter and pushed the on-button of the appliance. The sound of gurgling water followed him into his office. He left his door open, settled into his leather armchair and pulled a stack of paper closer.

Ryan worked quickly and steadily. There were no ringing telephones, loud voices, or footsteps down the passage to disturb him. Time flew by without him noticing. The sun rose steadily and her bright, life-giving light shone through the large window behind him. As he pulled the next stack of documents across his desk, he noticed a figure standing in the doorway.

"Good morning," Raphaella said cheerfully. "You are in early."

Ryan checked his watch. It was seven thirty.

"You are not late yourself," he replied with a smile.

Holding a mug of steaming coffee, Raphaella stepped into the office and swinging her hips seductively, walked up to his desk. Ryan watched her approach and found himself staring at her full breasts straining against her tight white top. Her deep cleavage was emphasised by a gold cross dangling on a long, thin gold chain. Realising what he was doing, Ryan quickly averted his eyes, busying himself with the last stack of papers on his desk.

Raphaella pulled up a chair and sat down, crossing her shapely legs clad in fashionable black trousers.

"So," she drawled. "How did the meeting go last night?"

Ryan smiled. "Pretty well," he replied. "I think they're going to bite."

Raphaella raised an eyebrow.

"Thomas was great," Ryan said, remembering his partner's outstanding performance. "They took to him like a duck to water. If it had been me chairing the meeting, I think I would have had a hard time. It was the right move to let him do the talking. They listened to him because he was one of them, and they showed respect, because he is educated."

"So, Thomas handled it well," Raphaella said.

Ryan swivelled his chair to the side and stretched out his long legs. "He was better than that," he said with a grin. "Their financial boffin, a black woman, she was something else." Ryan paused, recalling the woman's shrewd look. For a short

moment he had been worried, but Thomas had handled the situation well with his quick professional answers. "She tried to rip him apart over a few figures," he continued. "But Thomas alleviated all her concerns. He explained everything to her in detail. She had no leg to stand on and once he pointed out the differences, making sure everyone understood the benefits of the changes in the proposed deal, they were sold. It was actually amazing. Thomas really knows what he's talking about and he spoke right to their hearts."

Raphaela put her mug on Ryan's desk. "When are they going to sign up?" she asked excitedly.

Ryan shrugged nonchalantly. "If everything goes well, by next week."

Raphaela pumped her fist in the air. "Yes!" she exclaimed.

Ryan grinned at her. This is why he had hired her. She appreciated a good deal when it came along. Her business sense was superb and she was as committed to the business as he was.

Raphaela pushed her long curly mane over her shoulder. "So what else is new?" she asked.

Ryan leaned back in his chair and looked at his assistant through half closed eyes. Raphaela picked up her mug of coffee again and cradled it in her hands. Without good reason, he noticed her long slim hands and red painted nails. Lifting his gaze to her face, Ryan contemplated for a moment if he should tell Raphaela about Thomas's missing niece.

Maybe it was too personal?

On the other hand, they all worked together so closely that they were almost like a family. Not that they lived in each other's pockets, but when people spend ten hours a day together, then one got to know each other pretty well.

Raphaela tilted her head to the side, waiting for an answer.

Ryan pulled down the cuffs of his shirt. "This is not for general consumption," he started.

Sensing Ryan's mood shift, Raphaela nodded seriously.

"Thomas's niece did not come home yesterday," he said quietly.

"What do you mean?" she asked puzzled.

"What I'm saying is that she did not come home from school yesterday afternoon," he repeated.

Raphaela pursed her lips. "How old is she?"

"I think fourteen," Ryan said hesitantly. "Her name is Lucy. Her mother is worried out of her mind."

"Any idea why she did not come home?" Raphaela asked, mystified.

"No," he replied helplessly.

Seeing the look of bewilderment on his assistant's face, Ryan decided to tell her the whole story. With Raphaela listening intently, he filled her in on the events of the previous night, from the moment Thomas received his sister's panicked call, to his non-starting car, to their arrival at Thandeka's house, to the confrontation with the cop on night duty, right up to the hours spent on the telephone calling the emergency rooms of every hospital in the greater Johannesburg area.

"Do you know if she came home last night after you left?" Raphaela asked worriedly.

Ryan shook his head. "No, she didn't come home," he said sadly. "I called Thomas this morning. He hasn't seen her."

Raphaela looked at him with great concern. "What now?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Thomas wants to speak to the teachers, to try and find out if there was any trouble at school which might have caused her to run away."

"That's a good idea," she agreed.

"Otherwise, I have no clue," Ryan said, drumming his fingers on his desk. "I have no experience with missing teenagers. I wouldn't even know where to start and as I've explained, the cops are of no help either."

"What are we going to do?" Raphaela enquired.

Ryan glanced at her surprised. Without hesitation, Raphaela had included herself, making herself available to assist with the crisis. He was amazed at her generosity and her obvious concern for a girl she did not even know.

"Where can she be?" Raphaela wondered aloud, trying to think of possibilities.

Ryan shook his head.

Raphaela's big eyes grew moist. "She is just a little girl," she whispered. "What if something has happened to her? What if she got hit by a car?"

"I don't think so," Ryan said firmly. "In fact, nobody has seen her."

Raphaela chewed on her lip. "What if someone took her?"

Ryan started. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

"What if someone snatched her off the street?" Raphaela replied anxiously.

Ryan stared at her uncomprehendingly.

Raphaela sighed deeply. "Don't tell me you don't know about the kid snatchers?" She looked at him expectantly, but Ryan shook his head.

"There are people out there who kidnap kids off the street, especially when they are on their way home, on the way to run an errand or visiting a friend," Raphaela informed him.

"But why?" Ryan stammered.

Raphaela pulled a face. "For their amusement, their perversion, to make money. Who knows?"

Ryan gulped some air. "Are you suggesting Thomas's niece might have been kidnapped?"

"Not so much kidnapped," Raphaela interjected. "It is rather a matter of being snatched. If they kidnapped the kids, then they would demand a ransom," she explained. "But these kids are often found murdered in some ditch, or not found at all."

Ryan stared at her in disbelief. "How do you know about this?" he queried.

She stared at him astonished. "I read the newspapers and I listen to the news. Don't you?"

Embarrassed, Ryan stayed quiet. He usually wasn't interested in the daily horror stories of drive-by shootings, robberies, rapes and murders in South Africa, and always skipped the first few minutes of the evening news, only tuning in when the business items and financial indicators came up.

Letting him off the hook by not demanding an answer, Raphaela leaned forward putting her elbows on her knees.

"What are we going to do?" she asked again.

Ryan shrugged his shoulders. Raphaela's comments on 'kid-snatchers' worried him greatly. He did not want any harm coming to Thomas's niece. The thought that

the little girl might be in the hands of evil criminals sent an ice cold shiver down his spine. No wonder Lucy's mother was out of her mind with worry and fear.

How could he have been so ignorant? He had seriously believed that Lucy was behaving like a typical teenager and had taken the day off, maybe to spite her mother because they had had an argument, or maybe Lucy had only forgotten to tell her mother she was staying over at a friend's house. The idea that something more sinister had happened to her, had never crossed his mind.

Abruptly, Ryan slammed his fist on the desk. "No," he shouted. "No. I don't think anything bad has happened to her."

Taken aback by his sudden outburst, Raphaela stared at him open-mouthed.

Ryan shook his head. "I can not let myself believe that Lucy has been snatched," he stated resolutely.

Watching him closely, Raphaela rolled the empty mug in her hands. "But it might be a possibility," she suggested cautiously.

"No way," Ryan growled. "It didn't happen. She is safe and sound and she'll come home soon. You'll see."

Raphaela squinted at him, surprised at his strong reaction. She too did not want to believe that anything bad had happened to Thomas's niece, but she was also a realist. There were ugly people living in South Africa and ugly things happened to good people and little girls. One only had to open a newspaper and read the daily headlines to find out how bad society had become.

Ryan glared at her from under drawn eyebrows, daring her to contradict him. Wisely, Raphaela did not pursue her theory; instead she put the tip of her finger on her bottom lip.

"I think I can help," she said thoughtfully.

He looked at her questioningly, relaxing his fierce stare.

"I have a cousin who is a detective," she explained. "Maybe he can help. I don't know which division he works in, but maybe he can pull some strings."

Ryan squinted at her. "You have a cousin who is a cop?" he repeated hesitantly.

Raphaela smiled. "I come from a large family," she stated. "We have family members in all sorts of professions."

Ryan brushed his hand through his hair. He liked solutions to problems, even if they were only small steps, as long as they were headed in the right direction. Seeing that he had no idea of how else to help Thomas find his niece, he believed this might be a good idea. At least he was doing something, not just sitting in his office and hoping for the best.

"If you think he can help, then please call him," he said. "And the sooner the better," he added.

Raphaela checked her watch. It was a quarter past eight. "I'll do it right away," she assured him.

On her way to the door she stopped and turned around. "Don't forget, you have to be at the CCMA this morning."

Ryan looked at her wide eyed.

"The case with du Preez," she reminded him. "It's today."

Ryan groaned loudly. With all that was happening, he had totally forgotten about his required attendance at the CCMA.

"You will still make it in time if you leave now," Raphaela pointed out.

Ryan closed his eyes and groaned again. "Do I have to go?" he complained.

"Mr Bates," Raphaela replied, mockingly placing her hand onto her hip. "You know better than to ask me that. If you don't want to pay up to twenty-four months salary as penalty, you better make an appearance."

Ryan sighed heavily. "Alright," he grumbled. "I'll go."

With a nod of approval, Raphaela left his office.

xxx

The air in the semi-dark room became warmer, the higher the sun rose. The contents of the bucket standing in the opposite corner of the prison room stank hideously and made Lucy gag every time she looked at it. She had resorted to breathing through her mouth, but it didn't help much. The stench permeated the air and seemed to have been absorbed by every pore of her skin.

Lucy pulled at her hair, feeling the rat's nest on top of her head. Wishing fervently that she could wash her face, brush her teeth and change her clothes, she groaned loudly. Silvy scrambled onto her knees, hunkering in front of Lucy.

"What is it?" she asked concerned.

Lucy sighed heavily. "I wish I could wash my face," she said.

Silvy stared at her uncomprehendingly. Then she began to giggle.

"What's so funny?" Lucy snapped.

"Imagine," Silvy replied, barely containing her laughter. "How often have our mothers told us to wash our faces, to brush our teeth, to look neat and tidy? How many times have we rolled our eyes at them? And now we are stuck in this hell hole and crave a face wash."

Lucy glared at her fellow prisoner angrily. How could Silvy be so callous? How dare she make fun of their situation? How dare she laugh at her need to wash her face? What was wrong with wanting to be clean?

Holding her hand in front of her mouth, Silvy continued to laugh.

"Don't you see?" Silvy hiccupped.

Lucy glanced at their dire surroundings; the grimy walls, the filthy mattress, the stinking bucket, and sad little Shelly rocking back and forth on her heels. Comprehension dawned on her and she saw the silliness of her longing. Here, they were locked up, not knowing what would happen to them from one minute to the next, not knowing if they would ever leave this dungeon alive, and she was hoping for a face wash.

At first, a grin pulled at the corners of Lucy's mouth, but then she burst out laughing. Soon, both girls were holding their stomachs because they were laughing so hard.

A hard bang on the door made them jump with fright and their hysterical laughter was abruptly cut short.

"Hey," a voice shouted. "Shut up in there! What's wrong with you? Do you want a *klap*?"

Sudden fear gripped the two girls and they instantly huddled together like two small terrified animals.

"You hear me," the voice yelled. "If you don't shut up, I'll make you."

Silvy clutched Lucy's hand and squeezed her fingers so hard that they hurt. Cold dread crept up Lucy's back at the thought of that man entering their prison cell.

In her mind he opened the door and charged into the room with unbound fury. She imagined him looming loomed above them, swinging his leg and kicking them viciously in the ribs. She could hear her bones snap, a searing pain shooting through her body that made her cry out loudly.

With wide eyes, Lucy watched the door handle, wishing feverishly that it would not move, wishing with all her heart that the man would stay outside, that he would not enter their sanctuary.

And that's what it was: a sanctuary.

Although the dirty room was their prison, as long as the men were outside, they were safe. But once they opened the door, all sorts of things could happen.

Lucy returned Silvy's fierce grip and both girls crawled further into the corner of the room, making themselves as small as possible, trying to hide with no place to conceal themselves.

A small sob escaped Silvy's mouth.

Without turning her eyes away from the door, Lucy hissed, "Sshhh."

"I want my mom," Silvy cried softly. "I want to go home."

"Sshhh," Lucy whispered again. "Don't make a sound."

"But I want to go home," Silvy cried a bit louder.

Lucy looked hard at the other girl. Tears were streaming down her face. Horror and dread reflected in her eyes and she had her fists stuffed into her mouth trying to stifle her sobs. Lucy's heart went out to Silvy. She was also scared, but instinctively knew that it was a mistake to surrender to her fear. Instead, she reached out, put her arm around Silvy's shoulders and pulled her close.

"It will be okay," she said. "Everything will be alright, you'll see."

Lucy had no idea if they would ever get out of this hellhole, but she thought it best to rekindle Silvy's hope, so she stroked the girl's hair and whispered, "We are going to be okay. We'll be fine."

After a few minutes, Silvy's sobs subsided. The girl sat up straight, wiped her face with the back of her hand and smiled tentatively.

"Sorry," Silvy said. "Sorry, I lost it."

Lucy held up a hand. "Don't be sorry," she replied. "There's nothing wrong with being scared."

"I acted like a ninny," Silvy complained feebly.

Lucy crossed her legs under her. "I also want to go home," she said quietly. "I'm also scared out of my skull. I miss my mom and wish there was something I could do to get out of here."

Both girls sat in silence, staring at the door, which fortunately stayed firmly shut.

Attempting to take her mind off their dismal situation, Lucy asked, "Where do you stay?"

Silvy uncurled her legs and pulled down her skirt. "I live in Mondeor," she replied. "You know where that is?"

Lucy shook her head.

"It's down in the south of Johannesburg," Silvy explained. "We have a house up on the hill. Actually the hill is more of a small mountain and it's covered with rocks. That's why we can't have a swimming pool. They would have to blast into the mountain and my parents say that it costs too much money."

Lucy nodded with understanding.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" she asked.

Silvy grinned mischievously. "It's quite nice. I have an older brother," she answered. "He's almost eighteen and although we fight a lot, he also helps me."

Lucy frowned. "What do you mean, he helps you?"

"Oh," Silvy shrugged. "We go to the same school and some of the teachers are the same that he had when he was in grade eight. So when I get stuck with my homework, he gives me a hand." She paused briefly. "And it helps a lot that he is almost eighteen. My parents allow me to go out with my girlfriends on Friday and Saturday nights, especially when they know that my brother is going to the same place. They feel I'm safe because he keeps an eye on me." Silvy giggled softly. "Which is not true. He has absolutely no interest in looking after me. As soon as my parents drop us off at the Glen Shopping Centre, and they are out of sight, we both do our own thing."

Lucy raised an eyebrow, but refrained from commenting.

"And then there are his friends," Silvy continued. "Obviously, my girlfriends are just too keen to go out with me because then they can meet my brother's friends." Seeing Lucy's surprised expression, Silvy added hastily, "Not that they do anything stupid. Sometimes we just go to the movies together, or have an ice cream at Milky Lane."

Lucy listened only half-heartedly as Silvy continued telling stories about her girlfriends. She sighed silently. Her mother did not allow her to go anywhere, with, or without girlfriends.

She remembered what had happened the last time, when Jacqui, one of her classmates had invited her to the movies.

It was a Saturday afternoon and her mother had driven her to the mall where they had met up with other girls in front of the movie house. Instead of leaving immediately, her mother had gone over to Jacqui's mom. Lucy kept her ears tuned into the adult's conversation and, to her utter horror, she overheard her mother asking for Jacqui's mom's cellphone number.

Spinning on her heel, Lucy walked up to the two adults. She pulled on her mother's sleeve, desperately seeking her attention.

"Mom?" Lucy whispered, urgency in her voice. "Mom?"

Her mother turned her head bending down to her daughter. "What is it?" she asked concerned.

"Mom," Lucy said quietly. "You don't need the cellphone number. We'll be fine here."

Her mother's face hardened and her eyes glittered with sudden anger. Lucy dropped her hand and avoided her mother's gaze. She knew that particular look too well, realising immediately that she was in trouble.

"Lucy," her mother said through clenched teeth. "You are only fourteen years old. We had this conversation before. I do think I need Jacqui's mother's number! If you think otherwise, you are welcome to spend the afternoon with me at home."

Lucy blushed hotly, but did not dare contradict her in case her mom made her go home. Biting her lip, Lucy thought she would die with shame. She wished the earth would open up and swallow her instantly. How could her mother embarrass her so badly in front of her classmates? None of the other parents asked for telephone numbers. What was wrong with her mother? She glanced at her friends, who pretended not to have noticed the short exchange.

Luckily, Jacqui's mom came to Lucy's rescue. She just gave out her number, had a short friendly chat with her mother and kept on reassuring her. Finally her mother left, but only to turn around every now and then to check up on Lucy.

Lucy apologised to her classmates, but they thought nothing of it. They just rolled their eyes, recognising her mother for what she was: another overprotective parent.

As for boys? Lucy had no time for boys. The guys in her grade were all childish and immature. They shot wet paper balls at each other with elastic bands during class, and pulled at the girls' ponytails. Some of them had pimples and quite a bunch of them were nerds, wearing glasses and blushed when she said hello to them. Even if she were interested in boys, her mother would never allow her on a date. Lucy always got to hear that she had the rest of her life to go out with boys; that it was much more important to concentrate on school and get good marks.

Silvy's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Hey," she said. "Where do you stay?"

Lucy sighed. "I live in Edenvale," she replied. "We haven't been there for long. Only since grade eight started."

"Where were you before?" Silvy asked curiously.

"We stayed in Soweto. We used to live in a house that belonged to my Uncle Elijah," she explained. "My uncle owns a few properties and he let my mom and me stay for free."

"Where's your dad?" Silvy asked.

"I have no dad," Lucy said unashamed. "My mother never married the guy. She said he was a coward and she preferred to raise me by herself."

Silvy nodded with understanding. "Sometimes it's better not to have a dad," she said wistfully. "Two of my friends' parents are getting divorced and it's so ugly. One weekend they stay with their dads, and the next with their moms. Their parents fight all the time, and it makes my friends upset."

"Well," Lucy replied. "I never knew my dad. It was always my mom and me and that was okay. She's a bit overprotective though, which is quite irritating, but overall my mom is great." Lucy hesitated for a moment. "My mom always supports me and she is always on my side, especially when we talk to the teachers on parent's evening," Lucy raised her hands. "Don't get me wrong, we do fight and argue, but we never hate each other. I don't miss not having a dad. My mom and me are very close."

Silvy scratched at a mark staining her blouse. "I know what you mean," she concurred. "I'm also close to my parents. They would never let me down."

Thinking of her mother, Lucy's emotions threatened to get the better of her. Biting hard on her lip, she struggled with impending tears.

"So, how come you ended up in Edenvale?" Silvy asked.

"My mom got a better job and we could afford to buy our own place," Lucy replied. "It's not a big place, but it wasn't too expensive and my mom had enough of my uncle's charity."

Silvy looked puzzled.

"Oh," Lucy continued. "My uncle Elijah has lots of money. He is actually very rich, but he interferes all the time. He used to come to our house at all hours of the day, never calling us first, and my mom got very annoyed. Unfortunately, she could not say anything because we were staying for free and he helped us with money. You see," Lucy paused briefly, "when my grandmother died, my mother was very young.

She and my uncle Thomas were still at school and they had nowhere to go. Uncle Elijah took them in, paid for their school fees and university, gave them food, bought them clothes, and in general looked after them. My mom feels she owes him big time."

"But you don't see it that way?" Silvy queried.

Lucy shook her head. "No, not really. Uncle Elijah has so much money he doesn't know what to do with it. A few thousand Rand doesn't make any difference to him."

"Do you like your uncle?" Silvy enquired.

"Sure," Lucy replied, picking at the hem of her skirt. "He's alright. He always bought me presents and he makes me laugh."

At the mention of presents Silvy grinned. "Do you still see him?"

"Yes. But not as often as before, now that we live in Edenvale," Lucy replied, regret colouring her voice.

Silvy poked her elbow into Lucy's side. "I bet you miss the presents?"

Lucy giggled without answering.

"So, how's school?" Silvy asked casually.

Instantly, a shadow passed over Lucy's face. "Fine," she sighed heavily.

Silvy looked over at the other girl. "What's wrong?"

Lucy crossed her arms in front of her. "You see," she started. "I have this friend. Her name is Tanja. She is really great. She stays a few streets further up from me and we spend most afternoons together ..." Lucy let the sentence trail off.

Silvy nudged her leg lightly. "And?"

Lucy bent her head, hiding her face. "The day I got here was the day we had a fight," she whispered.

Silvy stared at her mystified. "So?"

Lucy glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. "If we hadn't had a fight, I wouldn't have walked home alone."

Silvy shook her head, not understanding what Lucy was trying to tell her.

"Don't you see," Lucy said exasperated. "If I wasn't alone, I couldn't have been taken."

"Oh," Silvy muttered. Scratching her cheek thoughtfully, she asked, "Do you blame your friend for being here?"

"Yes! No! I don't know!" Lucy exclaimed.

Rubbing her hands on her legs, she searched the other girl's face for some kind of criticism. But none was coming.

"I guess it's not Tanja's fault," she said quietly.

Silvy nodded. "All friends fight," she confirmed. "To blame your friend for this would be wrong."

"I know what you are saying," Lucy objected. "But it seems that if we didn't have the fight, then I would be sitting at home and not here."

Silvy placed her hand on Lucy's arm. "That kind of thinking doesn't help you."

"What do you mean?" Lucy cried out.

Silvy shook her lightly. "Even if your friend triggered this, she is not here to get you out of it. Blaming your friend won't make you feel better, it only makes you angry."

Lucy opened to her mouth to protest, but quickly saw the reasoning behind Silvy's explanation. It really didn't help her to blame Tanja for her abduction. Tanja hadn't planned it, and it hadn't been Tanja who had taken her and thrown her in this hole.

Lucy nodded slowly. "You are right. It isn't Tanja's fault," she conceded. "It's those arseholes out there who are to blame."

"That's right," Silvy stated firmly. "I think if your friend knew what had happened to you, she would feel really bad."

Lucy pushed out her lip and nodded. "Tanya wouldn't want me to be here," she confirmed.

A small moan reached them from the opposite corner of the room, interrupting their serious conversation.

"What's wrong Shelly?" Lucy called gently.

Scrambling onto her feet, she made her way over to the girl who was still rocking on her heels. Lucy kneeled in front of Shelly, and reaching out, touched the girl's arm softly.

"Hey, Shelly," she said, pushing the girl's hair out of her face. "What's up?"

All at once, Shelly seemed to focus on Lucy's face. Lucy watched her intently and suddenly the girl's tongue appeared between her parched lips.

"Do you want some water?" Lucy asked kindly.

She reached for the bottle standing against the wall, unscrewed the top, and poured a small amount of water into the cap. Careful not to spill a single drop, she let the life-saving liquid trickle onto Shelly's dry, cracked lips. The girl's pink tongue licked eagerly at the water like a hungry kitten at a bowl of milk.

Lucy broke into a smile. "There you go," she said happily, and patiently repeated the process of feeding Shelly water, drop by drop.

CHAPTER 08

Rat Face's irate and irrational shouts woke him up. Dirk opened his eyes and squinted at the bright sunlight shining through the patio doors. He scanned his surroundings, confused, wondering where on earth he was. A minute later, the events of the previous day came rushing back. He squeezed his eyes shut, desperately wishing that none of what was happening was real, that he was actually having a nightmare from which he was going to wake up at any moment. Unfortunately, the stink from the soiled couch crept mercilessly up his nostrils. Dirk opened his eyes with a groan, swung his feet over the side and quickly escaped the stench oozing from the sofa.

"Good morning, good morning," Rat Face cackled from somewhere in the cottage. "I hope you slept well."

Dirk pulled a sour face. "How can anyone sleep well on that filthy sagging contraption," he growled in Rat Face's general direction. "Every bone and muscle in my body is sore."

"It's good for the posture," Rat Face mocked him. "At least you feel you have a body."

Annoyed, Dirk refrained from commenting.

The previous night, Rat Face had dragged away an old battered double size mattress from the wall. Throwing a thin, faded sleeping bag on top, the ferret had curled up on the mattress, leaving Dirk with a grey blanket full of holes, stains, hopefully no creepy crawlies and the sagging couch. Dirk had been too tired to argue and had spread his body out on the grubby couch trying to get a few hours of sleep.

Stretching his arms over his head, Dirk crossed the littered lounge and plodded into the tiny bathroom. He wrinkled his nose at the grime clinging to the walls and the once white basin. How anyone could use this facility without catching a deadly disease was beyond Dirk's comprehension. Gingerly, he touched the rusty cold water tap and turned the knob. Not expecting anything to happen, he took a surprised step back as a stream of cold, clear water poured into the filthy basin.

He didn't ask any questions as to where the water was coming from; he was just grateful he could splash it onto his face. Using his stained T-shirt as a towel, he dried himself.

So far so good!

Unfortunately, he was unable to get a reflection of himself in the mirror. Apart from being cracked, the piece of glass was covered thickly with dust.

Ready for his morning pee, Dirk closed the bathroom door with the heel of his foot, seeking a bit of privacy.

Staring hard at the lid of the toilet, he hesitated. Who knew what he would see once he actually lifted the cover. Maybe a rat would jump at him or a dead mouse floated in stinking sewage.

His bladder signalled overflow and Dirk took a deep breath. Reaching down, he touched the filthy edge of the lid with his fingertips. Slowly and carefully he lifted the cover, raising it higher and higher. Leaning back and averting his head in anticipation of the disaster, he flipped the lid, letting it smack loudly against the cistern.

Gathering his courage, he jutted out his chin and peered cautiously into the toilet. To his amazement, the bowl was relatively clean and the water pooling at the bottom of the pipe was clear.

Without a second thought, Dirk unzipped his jeans and relieved himself, a small satisfied groan floating from between his parted lips.

Feeling somewhat better, he returned to the main room of the chalet, looking out for the ferret. Dirk circled past the multi-coloured debris in the lounge and ambled towards the open patio doors. Poking his head around the corner, he saw Rat Face standing in the *veld*, his loud and false singing greatly upset the tranquil morning. The ferret had his back to the chalet and his shirt tails were fluttering in the light breeze. Before Dirk could call out to him, he saw a bright yellow arch of urine hitting the high wheat-coloured grass.

Dirk pulled a disgusted face. The open veld wasn't the place to pee when there was a bathroom nearby.

The slime-ball had absolutely no sense of decency! Dirk grumbled to himself. What else was the ferret doing? Did he also crap in the veld?

His face knotting into a deep scowl, Dirk walked back into the chalet leaving Rat Face to finish his business. He was determined not to get into an argument with the ferret. It was just not worth fighting with him. If Rat Face wanted to use the veld as his private bathroom, then he was welcome to it.

Nevertheless, Dirk was still annoyed as he made his way to the open plan kitchen. Angrily he kicked empty McDonald and Kentucky Fried Chicken boxes out of his path so that they flew in all directions.

He rounded the corner of the counter and stopped short. There was literally not a centimetre of unoccupied space left in the kitchen. Dirty soup and dinner plates, cracked breakfast bowls, cups and mugs, tall slim glasses, knives, forks and spoons intermingled with rotting food containers; brandy and half-drunk brown beer bottles were piled high on the counter top. Stacks of soiled tableware cluttered up the surface next to the grimy sink and the basin was filled to the rim. Huge brown cockroaches, their long antennae bobbing up and down, scuttled over, underneath and beside the crockery, feasting on congealing food. The mess stank disgustingly and Dirk put his hand on his empty stomach to stop himself from heaving.

This was impossible!

Dirk wanted to scream with frustration. He didn't want to be here and he wasn't prepared to put up with it any longer. He had had enough! Everything was wrong: the kidnapped girls, Angus leaving him here without any means of transport, Rat Face guarding and threatening him with a knife, and this unbearably filthy place. He didn't deserve this!

What the fuck was he doing here? How on earth did he get here?

Feeling utterly trapped, Dirk felt a cold rage creep up his neck.

He needed to get out of there! He didn't want any part of this!

Hot anger clouded his vision. Infuriated with his helplessness, he took his arm and swept it along the counter, sending dirty plates, cups and glasses to the floor where they shattered into a thousand pieces.

The sound of breaking porcelain brought him half-way back to his senses. He stared at the broken dishes.

This is not the way to go! he told himself, rubbing his cheeks with his knuckles. He needed to keep his cool. Rat Face was still a danger and he had to help the girls. He couldn't mess up and leave them in the clutches of their abductors.

Dirk trailed his fingers through his hair, pulling it tight against his skull.

He wasn't going to leave the girls behind! No fucking way! Who knew what these bastards had in store for them.

"I see you're cleaning up," Rat Face snickered.

Dirk dropped his hands and glowered at his adversary with cold hard eyes.

Rat Face placed his palms on his hips and mimicked the high pitched voice of an old woman. "If you feel up to it, you can clean up the rest," he mocked.

Dirk made a half turn away from the ferret. "Over your dead body," he muttered under his breath.

Rat Face tilted his head to the side. "What's that?"

"Nothing," Dirk replied dismissively.

Rat Face took a step towards the counter. "If you have something to say, then say it," he growled menacingly.

Dirk rolled his eyes. "As if I have anything to say to you," he snapped.

"Just watch it," Rat Face hissed, moving closer to the pillar that divided the open plan kitchen from the lounge.

Dirk took a deep breath watching Rat Face's progress cautiously. The ferret's feet crunched on the broken shards covering the floor.

"What are you going to do?" Dirk asked scathingly. "Are you going to pull your knife on me again?"

Rat Face stopped in his tracks. "And what if I did?" he asked slyly.

Dirk raised his eyebrows, disdain showing in his face. "You think you'll achieve anything by threatening me all the time?" he asked.

Rat Face's expression became blank.

Dirk watched the ferret through narrowed eyes, but Rat Face did not make another move. It was as if Dirk's bold comment had taken the wind out of his sails. The ferret stood motionless beside the pillar, his mouth gaping open like a fish on dry land. Surprised by Rat Face's lack of action, Dirk tried to figure out what had stopped the ferret in his tracks.

All at once it dawned on him. Rat Face was unable to deal with direct confrontation unless he had the upper hand and a weapon at the ready.

Dirk wanted to laugh out loud.

The guy is such a dumb-wit. Without his knife, he was lost.

A savage grin threatened to crease Dirk's poker face and he was thoroughly tempted to taunt Rat Face further. With great effort he managed to bring his impending sneer under control, thinking it wiser not to let on what he had just figured out.

Dirk turned to the cupboard above the sink and opened it.

"Is there something to eat in this place?" he asked casually, disregarding a horde of cockroaches dashing into the dark recesses of the cupboard.

"Why do you want to know?" Rat Face asked, having found his voice again. "We won't be here that long."

Closing the cupboard door and opening the next one, Dirk replied, "Because I'm hungry and I don't intend to starve."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rat Face move to the other end of the row of cupboards. Bending down he opened a door and pulled out a box of cereal.

Throwing it in Dirk's general direction, he piped sarcastically, "We don't want you to go hungry. Do we?"

Paying no heed to the ferret's jibe, Dirk caught the box, but some of the cereal spilled onto the floor.

"Hey man," he shouted annoyed. "Watch out!"

"What?" Rat Face sneered.

Irritated, Dirk clamped his mouth shut. It was not worth arguing with the idiot. Shaking the box, he could feel that not much cereal had been lost. He sauntered along the counter, shoved his way past Rat Face and moved towards the fridge. Opening the door, he found to his dismay that the ancient contraption was empty of any decent food. Its weak interior light shone on a piece of mouldy cheese and three bottles of beer. Angrily Dirk slammed the door shut, glaring hard at Rat Face.

"Where's the milk?" he asked through clenched teeth.

Rat Face grinned maliciously. "What do you need milk for?"

Dirk wanted to strangle the vicious little prick right there, but instead he pushed the cereal box under his arm. Looking right through the ferret, he marched across the lounge and through the patio doors into the bright morning sunshine, shoving fistfuls of crunchy cereal into his mouth.

XXX

By the time Ryan left the office it was already close to eight o'clock. He climbed into his silver BMW 4x4 and revving the engine loudly, he shot out of the parking lot. The drive into downtown Johannesburg would be agony. He usually avoided running the morning gauntlet, but today he had no choice. If he did not show up at the conciliation hearing, the commissioner would rule against him and that could mean a substantial amount of money out of his pocket. In his opinion, whoever had come up with the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration, should be shot.

He still recalled when the Basic Conditions of Employment were gazetted in 1998 and the Department of Labour, in conjunction with government, created the CCMA. The institution was established for the ordinary employee to lodge his complaints without engaging an attorney, whom many employees could not afford at the best of times. In addition, before 1998, the Labour Courts were overloaded with often trivial and petty complaints and it took forever to solve a matter at the High Court. In the meantime, the ordinary employee, who had a family to feed and, more often than not, supported also other extended family members on his meagre salary, lost out on his income. To refer a case to the CCMA was free of charge and the employee was able to represent himself, or be represented by a Union representative, if he belonged to one of the many registered unions in South Africa.

Government was adamant: ordinary employees should have recourse if they perceived themselves to be treated unfairly. And it worked! Thousands of complaints were lodged with the CCMA every year.

Although not classified as a court, a CCMA ruling was binding. If the commissioner decided during an arbitration hearing that an employer had not followed correct procedures, the company could be fined up to twelve months of the employee's salary. If it was proven that the case was unsubstantial, the employer could also be penalised with an amount up to twelve months salary. Should the Commissioner rule that procedures had not been followed correctly and that a case was unsubstantial, twenty-four months of income could come the employee's way.

Unfortunately, during the last few years, since its inception, the CCMA developed into a mini-court, incorporating many of the procedures, structures and rules of the High Courts. Due to the fact that the onus was on the employer to prove no wrongdoing, companies found themselves in a minefield of procedures which were hard to follow – employers were not qualified labour lawyers!

Interestingly enough, one of the CCMA rules stipulated that the employer was not permitted to be represented by a professional labour lawyer or attorney. However, driven to the edge because the CCMA, correctly or incorrectly, often ruled in favour of the allegedly wronged employee, companies soon found a way around this particular rule.

All in all, Ryan was not against the system. During the apartheid years, employees were fired and hired at will. They had no rights whatsoever. Should an employee have been in the fortunate position of maintaining an overflowing bank account, then he was able to take the employer to the Labour Court. There, sometimes he received justice and compensation, but in general the ordinary employee was usually at the mercy of the company.

If an employer did not like the shape of the employee's nose any longer, or wanted to downsize for whatever reason, the company had been able to get rid of an employee without paying him his dues. The inception of the CCMA changed all that.

Nevertheless, what irked Ryan to no extent was the bias of the Commissioners. They always seemed to be on the side of the employee, no matter how severe the charges against the employee, or how trivial their complaints. Many times workers referred cases to the CCMA only to make the employer's life difficult.

Besides the time an employer had to invest in attending the different sessions at the CCMA, Ryan felt the system had one fatal flaw: the CCMA actually decided on how an employer had to run his company, and he greatly objected to that interference. This was the reason why he gritted his teeth every time he received a notification from the CCMA.

Long ago, he had realised that his anger was misplaced, because he was not able to change the system, or fight the institution, and ultimately, he had no other choice but to be present in order to avoid being possibly fined with the maximum penalty.

Ryan drove his BMW 4x4 in between the slowly moving cars. Like most days at this time in the morning, the N1 was choked. The sun reflected off car roofs, glinted off windscreens and rear windows, making the sluggishly moving traffic look like a thick, brilliantly coloured python, snaking its way through the yellow-green veld. Thousands of cars rolled along the glistening black tarmac, never faster than thirty kilometres per hour. Vehicles were positioned bumper to bumper in all four lanes, pale blue exhaust fumes hung in the air, and grim faces stared straight ahead. Men tapped their steering wheels impatiently, women yapped away on their cellphones and younger drivers listened to their blaring radios or iPods, the sound drifting through rolled down windows.

Once Ryan reached the split to the M1 South, the traffic began to flow faster. He shifted gears and shot across two lanes to his left, cutting off a yellow bakkie. As he glanced into his rear view mirror, the white driver gave him the zap sign. Ryan lifted his hand apologetically, but his gesture went unacknowledged. Instead the man put foot and was soon hanging on Ryan's tail.

Ryan rolled his eyes. Christ, all he needed was another driver to succumb to road rage. He really did not have the time to deal with an overblown ego right now.

Nevertheless, he felt guilty. The correct steps in this situation were to let the *bakkie* catch up with him and then to give him right of way.

Ryan checked his rear view mirror again.

The *bakkie* driver's red face was contorted with fury and he leaned over the steering wheel as if he could spur on his car like a jockey a racing horse.

The driver's manner did not instil confidence in Ryan and he was unconvinced that his gesture of letting the *bakkie* pull in front of his BMW would be appreciated.

What if the man rammed his BMW once he was level with him? Or pulled a gun on him? It had happened to other drivers before.

Ryan shook his head.

There was no way he was going to take the chance of getting shot, because some immature guy was in a bad mood.

Holding his steering wheel tightly, Ryan pushed down on the accelerator. Checking on the vehicles in the other lanes, he wove in and out of the traffic, squeezing his 4x4 into the smallest gaps opened up by other cars, thereby quickly increasing the distance between himself and the enraged *bakkie* driver. However, a few minutes later, his rapid progress came to an abrupt halt. Two kilometres before the Sandton off-ramp the traffic came to an absolute standstill.

Ryan swore under his breath. According to his watch, he was going to be late if he could not get out of this traffic jam very fast. He craned his neck trying to determine if there was an accident ahead, but everything seemed normal. Carefully watching the traffic flow in the lanes beside him, he intended to take the smallest gap to move forward a lot quicker, but all the vehicles were standing taillight to headlight.

The minutes ticked by, the cars did not move and the off-ramp could as well have been in Cape Town. Far ahead, he saw traffic lights changing from red to green and back to red. Counting quickly, he realised that only three vehicles were able to make it across the intersection every time.

Ryan clenched his teeth with frustration. He wasn't even half-way into town and still had to pass two more tight spots. At this rate, he was never going to make it to the CCMA in time.

Before his temper could get the better of him, he took a deep breath. Patience was required. He knew when he left the office that this would happen and that there was no avoiding it. All other feeder roads into Johannesburg would be in the same state.

Ryan settled back in his seat, put the gear lever into neutral and took his foot off the accelerator. Switching on his radio and finding a morning talk show, he began listening to the DJ's humorous comments, while his 4x4 rolled slowly down the decline, trapped in between the other vehicles on the highway.

Half an hour later, Ryan finally made it past the notorious Sandton off-ramp and to his delight the way towards Johannesburg was relatively clear. He raced down the highway, risking a substantial speeding fine, but made it in good time to the Empire Road off-ramp. Preferring the route through town, he exited the highway, and once across the busy intersection, he drove into Braamfontein, carefully avoiding suicidal taxis and delivery vans. Choosing the road across the old flyover instead of the much newer, gleaming Nelson Mandela Bridge, he joined the traffic into downtown.

Non-descript grey buildings stood side by side, rising high into the sky, blocking out the bright sun. Cracked pavements teemed with people: young fashionably dressed, slim, black women in high heels, black professional men in smart business suits, old black women balancing bulging red and blue striped plastic shopping bags on their heads, white-haired old black men in blue overalls, and occasionally a white man wearing a button-down shirt and tie. All were hurrying; all were trying to get to their respective work places in time.

The two lane street leading through the centre of Johannesburg was clogged with traffic, everyone seemingly abiding by their own rules. Dented bakkies and battered delivery trucks were double parked on the side of the road, orange Metro buses pushed in from the fringes, regardless of their right of way, and Minibus taxis zoomed like swarms of bees from one lane to the next only to stop suddenly beside the road to offload passengers. It took all of Ryan's concentration to manoeuvre through the mayhem, without driving up someone else's backside, or hitting a careless pedestrian.

After a jaw clenching fifteen minutes, Ryan turned and found the CCMA building looming to his left. The ugly twelve storey structure was a relic from the early sixties and its age showed. Its grey façade was darkened from mercilessly pounding rain and its windows were dulled with grime.

Ryan drove into the supposedly secure parking lot around the corner and found a covered spot at the far end of the gravelled enclosure. During his past visits he had discovered that only company representatives and their respective lawyers used the lot. Complainants usually arrived by Minibus taxi, public transport, or on foot.

Trying not to bump into a black Saab in front of him, he parked beside a brand-new red Mercedes SLK. Ryan got out of his car, locked the door and hurried towards the security guard's wooden hut.

"Morning," he called from a few metres away.

The young black man wearing an unidentifiable official uniform rose from his beige plastic folding chair.

"Morning," he replied.

Stopping for a minute, Ryan pulled out his wallet. "How much?" he asked breathlessly.

"Twenty Rand," the guard replied with a smile.

Ryan groaned. "It's gone up again," he complained. "Last month it was only fifteen Rand."

The security guard pointed past the parking lot entrance and shrugged his shoulders. "You can also park in the street," he suggested with a smile.

The thought of leaving his 4x4 parked in a downtown street in front of the notorious CCMA did not appeal to Ryan at all. He searched the guard's face for any sign of sarcasm, but there was none.

"Ahh, well," Ryan said resignedly. "I don't seem to have a choice."

Pulling out a twenty Rand note, he handed the money to the man.

The smile broadened on the guard's face and Ryan wondered briefly if the man had artificially inflated the price, intending to pocket the difference.

The security guard picked up a thick square green note pad from a rickety white folding table, ripped off the top sheet and handed the numbered ticket to his customer.

"Thank you," Ryan mumbled and shoved the piece of paper into his jacket pocket.

"It's a pleasure," the man called after him, as Ryan rushed down the short stretch of road, towards the main entrance.

One could enter the building through a revolving door, or glass doors either side of it. Ryan chose the side door, squeezing past a group of black men in blue overalls milling around on the steps. Shouldering his way through the clusters of black people in the three-storey-high atrium, he approached the counter to sign the register.

Three black women dressed in traditional brightly coloured African shirts, old knee-length dull brown skirts, and worn out scuffed boots, stood in front of him, yakking away in Zulu or Xhosa - he wasn't sure which one - all three of them seemingly unable to complete the record book.

Ryan checked his watch. He was running late. Clearing his throat, he tried to gently persuade the women to hurry up, but either they did not hear him or preferred to ignore him. Ryan stepped closer to the counter, placed his hand on the scratched wood and drummed his fingers impatiently.

Why on earth couldn't they sign in? he thought irritably. What was their problem?

He cleared his throat again. "Can I help you?" he asked, forcing himself to sound polite.

The youngest of the woman looked up. On seeing a white man, she pressed her lips into a thin line and stared at him coldly. Her look could have frozen water to ice. Immediately realising his mistake, Ryan took a step back.

He was the enemy!

It did not matter to her in what capacity he was attending the CCMA, even if he were a complainant, just the fact that he was a white man made him the adversary which had to be fought at all costs.

Ryan sighed inaudibly.

Would it ever change? he wondered sadly. Sometimes he could not believe that South Africa was still in the throes of racist apartheid. White still meant adversary and a black skin indicated brother and friend.

Eventually the African women managed to sign the register. Disregarding Ryan completely, they ambled off. Ryan stepped forward, grabbed the cheap ball point pen and scribbled his information on the smudged sheet stuck on a shabby clip board. Throwing the pen on the counter, he walked swiftly to the gate where he pushed through the turnstile, past the bored looking security guard, entered the hallway to the lifts and stopped short. About fifty people were waiting in front of a row of closed lift doors.

Ryan groaned quietly, knowing from experience, that it would take him just as long to get to the third floor if he took the stairs as if he waited for the lift to arrive.

Lingering on the fringes of the tight gathering, he observed the crowd from under half closed lids. Ninety-five percent of the people were black, their ages ranging from early twenties to mid forties. No one appeared to be older than that.

On the far side of the hallway, he spotted three white men with immaculately styled hair, wearing smart business suits. Standing out like sore thumbs, there was no mistaking it: these men were company representatives meeting with their labour lawyer.

The other people in front of the lifts were dressed in faded overalls, or old shiny black pants and checked shirts with frayed collars. Some of the faces showed anxiety and worry, others were determined and angry. But strangely enough, any kind of conversation, either loud or hushed, was absent.

The first lift arrived and lucky for Ryan it was close to where he stood. Slowly, he filed into the cage with about ten other people. Someone pressed the button for his floor, the doors closed, and the lift ascended slowly, occasionally creaking ominously.

Still no one spoke. An almost hostile silence hovered beneath the ceiling.

Ryan was glad when the lift stopped and he quickly pushed his way out of the packed cage. Finding himself in the foyer of the mediation and conciliation section, he turned left and entered the small lobby through a set of glass doors. Stopping in front of a green notice board, he scanned the posted list for his case number. He memorised the room number and walked to the reception desk.

A black woman in her early thirties looked up and casually placed a metal nail file on the desk beside her. She was dressed in long grey pants and a red wool sweater. Her curly hair was short and huge golden hoops adorned her ear lobes.

Indifference was written across her face and she did not greet Ryan in any manner whatsoever, but came straight to the point.

"Are you a company representative or," her voice trailed off as if it was a foregone conclusion.

Ryan smiled at her. "I'm a company representative," he confirmed.

Glancing at him with unconcealed hostility, she pushed a register towards him.

"Fill in your case number and company name," she ordered.

Ryan kept his smile in place as he pulled the record book towards him. It was no use getting annoyed. In this building, she had the upper hand, although he could have easily slapped the woman for her rude attitude.

He completed the register and returned the pen. "Thank you," he said politely.

With a roll of her eyes, the receptionist pulled the forms towards her and with a look of disdain in his direction, picked up her nail file again.

Carefully keeping his thoughts to himself, Ryan tucked his folder under his arm and made his way back across the industrial type grey carpet to the entrance where he was supposed to meet his labour lawyer. Pushing his way through groups of black people, he found a spot close to the notice board. A quiet subdued hum hung over the waiting people, only occasionally interrupted by boisterous greetings exchanged between a company representative and his labour lawyer.

A short fat Commissioner with silver hair brushed diagonally over his balding head, entered the foyer. He held a heavy, black leather briefcase in one hand and an A4 sheet in his other, calling out the name of a company and a case number. Immediately, a slim, white man, dressed in a navy suit, stepped forward.

"I'm Steven Matteys from Alsatch," he introduced himself.

The Commissioner nodded graciously. "Is the opposing party here?" he asked.

Navy suit shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't seen him," he answered with a cursory look around the lobby.

Shifting his briefcase to the other hand, the Commissioner sighed heavily, but refrained from commenting. He turned on his heel and walked briskly down the narrow passage to his right. Soon, he disappeared behind one of the many grey doors lining the corridor, followed closely by Mr Matteys from Alsatch.

One after the other, the Commissioners arrived, calling out company names, collecting the respective parties and settling into conference rooms. Quickly the lobby emptied.

Anxiously, Ryan checked his watch. Where was Danny? He was supposed to have arrived ten minutes ago. Where on earth was his labour lawyer? Ryan hoped fervently that Danny was not going to be late.

Scanning the thinning gathering of people, Ryan wondered if his ex-employee who had referred his dismissal to the CCMA had already arrived, but he could not see him.

Ryan shifted uneasily on his feet. Danny was cutting it very fine. Although Ryan had represented himself many times, he did not feel *that* comfortable with this particular case. He really wanted the assistance of his labour lawyer.

The door to the foyer opened once again and finally he spotted his labour lawyer who walked into the hallway as if he had no care in the world.

Ryan stepped into Danny's path. "I thought you weren't going to make it," he grinned relieved.

Danny da Costa was a short, handsome man with jet black hair slicked back, and the olive coloured skin of Portuguese descent.

Danny held out his hand. "Good morning, Ryan," he said cheerfully. "How are you?"

Ryan rolled his eyes in mock annoyance, but shook his hand warmly.

"Cut the act," he said half jokingly. "I was worried I had to do it by myself."

Danny's lip curled. "Don't sweat it," he replied. "I wouldn't let you down. I just got stuck in traffic."

Looking over his shoulder, he asked, "Has the Commissioner called your case already?"

Ryan shook his head.

The labour lawyer squinted up at his client who was a full head taller than himself.

"Have you seen du Preez?" he wanted to know.

"No," Ryan replied, his face grim. "He doesn't seem to have arrived yet. And, I wouldn't be sorry if he couldn't make it to the CCMA," he added scathingly.

Danny raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. He knew how strongly Ryan felt about this particular case.

As far as da Costa could recall, Ryan's ex-employee was a burly white man with a red face criss-crossed by a thousand wrinkles. Jaco du Preez was an old fashioned, staunch Afrikaaner who still believed a black man or woman was a second class human being, if they were human beings at all. du Preez had been a foreman on one of Ryan's sites and unfortunately du Preez had been an excellent worker. He stuck to deadlines, watched the building material with an eagle's eye and kept the labourers in line. Although often rude, du Preez's colleagues described him as a fair and honest boss.

Sadly, one day recently, du Preez had gotten into an altercation with Robert, a black brick layer. The complaint sheet stated that du Preez had called Robert a 'kaffir' and that he had punched him several times. In his defence du Preez claimed Robert had provoked him, but too many witnesses had vilified this statement.

Ryan Bates had no other choice but to discipline du Preez. Behind closed doors, according to Ryan, du Preez had continued calling Robert racist names and he had been adamant he had been correct in punching the 'kaffir'.

Ryan Bates had been disgusted by du Preez's attitude. Apart from the fact that the company's policy did not allow for discrimination and racism, physical assault was a cause for instant dismissal. Bates had stuck by the rules and had given du

Preez a fair hearing, but in the end he had fired him. With a lot of swearing and uttering of threats, du Preez had referred the case to the CCMA.

Ryan had told his labour lawyer that he was sorry to see a good worker go, but long ago he had decided not to stand for racism and discrimination. If push came to shove, he was prepared to take this case right up to the Constitutional Court.

"Don't worry," Danny assured him, patting him on the arm. "We are going to win this. You've done everything right and he has no leg to stand on."

Out of the corner of his eye, Ryan saw a door opening. A tall, thin white man in his fifties with a stern look on his face entered the foyer, closely followed by Jaco du Preez.

The Afrikaaner had not changed one bit. His red and green checked shirt strained across his huge belly and the waist band of his old blue jeans disappeared into folds of fat. Catching sight of his former boss, he gave Ryan an aggressive glare. His face turned even redder and he clenched his fists. Ryan stared back at him coldly, not in the least intimidated by the huge man.

The Commissioner held up a sheet. "Bates Incorporated," he called out with a strong voice.

Determination strengthened Ryan's spine. Showtime! He took a step forward.

"Ryan Bates from Bates Incorporated," he announced.

The Commissioner peered over his shoulder and nodded an acknowledgment at Ryan.

"Is the claimant here?" he asked.

"Yes," Ryan replied, ignoring du Preez who was standing on the Commissioner's right.

"Do you know which room they have assigned to us?" the Commissioner asked no one in particular.

"309," Ryan said quickly.

The Commissioner nodded again, shifted his briefcase to his other hand and began walking down the passage to his left. The three men followed the tall mediator, without uttering a word, until they reached their destination. The Commissioner opened the door and to their surprise found the room occupied.

"Good morning," their mediator addressed the young black woman at the head of the boardroom table.

"Morning," she replied.

"We are supposed to be in this room," the Commissioner stated, holding up his information sheet.

The woman pulled a piece of paper closer and scrutinized it for a moment.

"Sorry," she said. "This is our room."

The Commissioner sighed resignedly. "Why can't they ever get it right?" he muttered under his breath. Loudly he continued, "Not to worry. We'll find another room."

The black woman smiled apologetically and the Commissioner closed the door.

Turning around, he faced the opposing parties. "Right," he said. "Let's find a room."

He marched along the passage followed by du Preez, Danny da Costa and Ryan, knocking on doors, interrupting mediation processes, until right at the end of the corridor, he found an empty room.

"Here we go," he stated tiredly.

They entered the room and each person quickly found a place at the eight-seater blonde oak board room table. The Commissioner sat at the short end, Danny and Ryan chose the seats on the window side and du Preez pulled out a blue padded chair with his back against the door.

Once they were settled, the Commissioner cleared his throat. "Good morning, gentlemen," he began. "My name is Donald Shire and I'm your Commissioner for today."

He picked up a sheet of paper and pushed it towards du Preez. "Please complete this form ... and don't forget to sign it."

du Preez scribbled his name and flicked the paper across the table in Ryan's direction. Danny shook his head, but remained silent.

"Can the parties please introduce themselves," Shire instructed.

Ryan's former employee cleared his throat. "Jaco du Preez," he said. Underneath all the bluster, Ryan thought he detected a quiver of anxiety.

The Commissioner turned his head towards the window, squinting against the bright light piercing through the half closed blinds.

Danny leaned forward. "Danny da Costa," he said firmly. "Employer Association."

Shire raised an eyebrow questioningly, but Danny shrugged his shoulders. The Commissioner realized immediately that da Costa was a labour lawyer representing an employer. Nevertheless, the rules allowed an employer to bring a second or even third company representative, as long as the outside representative belonged to a so called 'Employer Association'.

The Commissioner nodded in Ryan's direction. "Are you also from an Employer Association?"

Smiling, Ryan shook his head. "No, sir," he replied. "I'm Ryan Bates of Bates Incorporated."

"Someone who has the guts to face the music," Shire mumbled.

Ryan took a deep breath. This was not going to be fun. The Commissioner was already displaying a hostile attitude towards them. If this carried on then Ryan had no hope of winning this case. He shot a quick glance at Danny, but the labour lawyer's face showed no emotion.

Shire leaned back in his chair. "Does everyone know the procedures?" he asked.

Danny and Ryan nodded, but du Preez shook his head.

The Commissioner tilted his head. "Do you want me to explain how it works, Mr du Preez?" he asked, with only a slight hint of irritation in his voice.

"Yes, please," du Preez replied, ignoring the annoyed stares from Ryan and Danny who had been through the introductory process more times than they wished to remember.

Shire leaned forward on his elbows, shuffled the papers in front of him, and looked up.

"The process at the CCMA consists of two steps," he began. "At this stage I will try to accommodate both parties. I will facilitate the conciliation and mediation process, meaning that I will try to get the parties to agree on an amicable outcome. Each party will state its case, starting with you Mr du Preez. Then we will look at the Basic Conditions of Employment, the Labour Relations Act and at previous cases. Hopefully, we will come to an agreement. Should the parties not agree, then the case will be referred to arbitration, where a Commissioner will once again look at the

facts of the case and will ultimately rule for, or against, the complainant. Do you understand this so far?"

Du Preez nodded meekly.

The Commissioner smiled encouragingly. "You are permitted to call witnesses to testify on your behalf"

Ryan let the Commissioner rumble on, tuning out of the explanation at this stage, having it heard many times before.

CHAPTER 09

Rat Face had claimed the TV remote control and was watching some senseless talk show on SABC1. Unwilling to share the grubby couch with his adversary, Dirk moved outside to the patio. Although it was still early morning, the sun was already high in the sky. Thick, white, cotton wool clouds hung in the air, occasionally blocking out fiercely burning sun rays. Even so, Dirk could feel their vicious sting on his skin. Caution dictated that he walk around the corner of the chalet to find a place in the shade. Clearing a few small sharp stones and clumps of soil from the terracotta patio tiles, he sat on its edge, placing his forearms on his raised knees.

Dirk sighed deeply.

How many times had he sat on one of these patios here in this small dilapidated resort, his arm around a girl's shoulder, watching the moon rise over the trees in the distance?

Those had been the times, he thought sadly.

On Saturdays, in the early evening, a whole bunch of his and Angus's buddies used to climb into their freshly washed *bakkies* and drive to the nightclubs in town. Parking beneath madly flashing neon signs at their favourite spots, they scouted for girls milling about by themselves.

Practice had made perfect and the cousins had their pick-up lines down to a fine art. Angus posed as the older, responsible brother, with a car, and Dirk pretended to be a first year university student. Over time, other friends developed equally successful lines and more often than not the girls fell for them. After a couple of drinks and further smooth talk, the girls usually agreed to join them for a ride. Arriving at the secluded resort on the banks of the river, the party then started in earnest.

Angus had always ensured that they were prepared. Once a week he made a trip into town to stock up on booze and *dagga* so that there was never a shortage of either come Saturday. Andrew, if Dirk recalled his name correctly, a trainee electrician, had joined a wire to the main overhead power line. It had been a slightly dicey undertaking, but once the cable ran down into the chalet, they had light and were able to connect up a stereo.

Dancing, smoking *dagga*, drinking beer, and smooching were all on the nightly agenda. By midnight, most of the people were either stoned or drunk, and the lumpy mattresses on the floor were occupied by couples groping each other or simply sleeping.

Dirk always tried to stay reasonably sober, preferring to seduce one of the girls. Often he ended up on a patio with a pretty blonde or brunette. His arm snaking around her shoulders, Dirk knew he had won the battle when the girl leaned against his chest, allowing him to hold her.

A painful throb on his forearm brought Dirk back to reality. He pulled his arm out of the burning sun and rubbed the skin where it was turning an angry red.

Damn! He swore under his breath.

His nose was still hurting from the head butting he had received the previous day and now he was also sunburnt. Could it get any worse? He stroked the red blotches on his forearm softly, trying to alleviate the ache.

Once again Dirk became angry with himself. What on earth had possessed him to beg Angus to let him in on the deal? What did he think his cousin was up to? Did he really believe his cousin was making all that money by cleaning houses and office buildings?

Dirk slapped his forehead, with the palm of his hand.

Any normal person would have seen that Angus was up to no good. How could he have been so stupid?

Moodily, Dirk stared across the long, swaying, golden grass of the veld, wishing he was anywhere else but in this small deserted resort in the middle of nowhere. A soft breeze swooped up fine reddish dust, tickling his nostrils and settling on his bare skin. Licking his lips, Dirk tasted sand. Suddenly thirsty, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and got to his feet. Making his way back to the house, he approached the patio doors. Loud braying laughter wafted through the hot air.

Dirk shook his head. How could Rat Face enjoy those mindless game shows? Of course, Rat Face was a dim wit! He couldn't understand anything more mentally demanding.

Stepping into the cottage, Dirk carefully climbed over Rat Face's outstretched legs. But he needn't have bothered. The ferret's eyes did not stray from the TV screen. Rat Face followed the presenter's every move as if the middle aged host was about to hand over the Holy Grail.

Navigating his way past the debris on the floor, Dirk walked into the open plan kitchen. Ignoring the dirty dishes and roaches in the kitchen sink, he opened the cold water tap. Bending his head, he let the water splash into his parched mouth, gulping it down thirstily.

Closing the tap, Dirk burped discreetly and wiped his face dry with the bottom end of his T-shirt. His eyes drifted across the lounge towards the door on the opposite side. No sound emerged from the girls' prison.

Were they actually still alive? he wondered.

Tasting the fresh water on his lips, Dirk was reminded of how thirsty he had been a few minutes ago.

What about the girls? he thought with sudden concern. Weren't they also thirsty? Maybe they were busy dehydrating? Maybe that's why they were so quiet.

He remembered that they only had a few bottles of tepid water between the three of them. It was already very hot and he could just imagine how the girls felt being locked up in that room without any decent ventilation, or access to water.

Resolutely, Dirk walked up to Rat Face.

"Hey," he shouted. "Hey, Rudi!"

"What?" Rat Face growled, not liking it one bit that Dirk was interrupting his TV programme.

Dirk stopped beside the couch. "Don't you think the girls should get some water?" he asked.

Rat Face continued to stare at the TV screen. "Why?"

"They might be thirsty," Dirk replied patiently.

The game show host made a joke and Rat Face burst out in loud laughter, slapping his knee with glee.

"Hey, Rudi," Dirk tried again. "I think we should fill the girls' water bottles."

Rat Face held up his hand. "Just hold on."

One of the participants replied to a question the host had posed and again Rat Face howled with laughter.

Becoming increasingly annoyed with the ferret's lack of interest, Dirk stepped between him and the TV.

"Fuck! What are you doing?" Rat Face shouted, leaning sideways to catch a glimpse of the TV screen.

"I want to give the girls water," Dirk stated firmly.

Waving his arms wildly, Rat Face indicated to Dirk to get out of the way, but Dirk stood his ground and the show came to an end.

Rat Face stared at him angrily. "Fuck! What did you do that for?"

Dirk crossed his arms equally angry. "Giving the girls water is more important than watching a stupid game show on TV," he exclaimed.

A frown formed on Rat Face's forehead. "They don't need any water," he grumbled. "They are fine."

"What are you talking about?" Dirk asked in disbelief.

Rat Face curled his upper lip into a snarl. "They won't be here that long. We don't need to treat them like royalty."

Dirk took a step back and narrowed his brows. "Giving them water is not treating them like royalty," he hissed.

The ferret shrugged indifferently, but watched Dirk vigilantly, waiting for his reaction. Noisily, Dirk sucked in air, taken aback by Rat Face's callous attitude.

Those are young girls in that room! Dirk wanted to scream. They are human beings for crying out loud!

Furious, he clenched his fists, ready to punch Rat Face's teeth in, but looking at his adversary's malicious expression, Dirk realised quickly that he would not achieve anything by starting a fight. Exhaling slowly, he changed tracks.

"If you don't give them water now, then you won't have any girls left to trade," he said slyly.

Rat Face looked at him blankly.

Dirk kept his voice even. "If they die of dehydration then you'll have to answer to Angus," he explained.

Slowly, understanding dawned on Rat Face. He pursed his lips and tilted his head, eyeing Dirk from under half closed lids.

"So," the ferret drawled after a few moments. "You want to keep them alive?"

Trying not to sound too eager, Dirk replied, "Some water would be a good idea."

Rat Face got to his feet and pushed his hand into his jeans pocket.

"Well," he grumbled, "if you want to play the Good Samaritan, then go ahead."

Dirk let out a pent up breath. He had feared that he would have to fight the ferret for the keys to the room. Fortunately, Rat Face had seen the light before it had come to a brawl.

The ferret pulled out the keys and tossed them in Dirk's general direction. As Rat Face plunged back onto the couch, Dirk caught the keys expertly. Immediately losing interest, the ferret pointed the remote control at the TV and started hopping channels.

Clutching the set of keys, as if he had just won a most valuable prize, Dirk walked over to the prison door. Not knowing which key was the correct one, he simply used the very first one and slotted it into the lock. Unfortunately, it did not turn. Refusing to

ask Rat Face for help, he picked one key after another, repeating the process until one of them turned in the lock. Dirk pushed the handle down and opened the door.

A cloud of urine stench hit him in the face. Repulsed, he staggered backwards. With great effort he forced himself not to slam the door shut and run.

Breathing shallowly through his mouth, he stared into the room and waited until his eyes adjusted to the dim light. Scanning the interior, he spotted one girl hunched down against the wall to his left. Her skirt had ridden high up her thighs and her blouse was dirt streaked. She was rocking back and forth on her heels, but there was no other reaction. The other two girls were huddled together at the opposite side of the room. Their arms were wrapped around each other's quivering shoulders, and they stared at him fearfully.

Dirk raised his hands. "I'm not here to hurt you," he said soothingly.

The two girls did not reply, but crawled even further into the corner.

"It's alright," he tried to placate them. "I only want to give you some more water."

Dirk saw how the black girl's eyes flicked to the edge of the mattress. Taking a step forward, he noticed the bottles neatly lined up side by side on the floor. They were all empty. He had been right, the girls needed water desperately.

He dropped to his haunches. "How are you holding up?" he asked kindly.

Lucy tilted her head and looked at him cautiously. Was this guy really trying to be nice, or was it a ploy?

Dirk smiled tentatively. "Are you girls doing alright?"

Encouraged by Dirk's friendliness, Lucy dared to reply. "No," she said. "We are not alright."

Dirk nodded with understanding. "I know this is not pleasant, but".

"When can we go home?" Lucy interrupted him, despair edging her voice.

Dirk pulled a sour grimace. "I don't know."

A tear trickled down Lucy's face.

Dirk's heart wanted to break. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Can't you help us?" Lucy asked. "Can't you get us out of here?"

Dirk swallowed hard. That's what he had been thinking about since he had arrived in this god forsaken place. But how? How could he get the girls out of this room without being killed in the process? Because that's what would happen to all of them if he failed.

"Please," Lucy whispered urgently, reaching out her hand.

Dirk cleared his throat. "I'll try," he said. "But please understand, I'm also a prisoner here."

A puzzled frown appeared on Lucy's forehead. "How can you be a prisoner?" she asked. "You are not locked up with us."

Dirk pushed his hand through his hair. "I might not be locked up with you," he replied. "But I still have no way of getting away from this place. There is a guy watching me all the time and he'll kill me if I try anything to rescue you."

"You mean that ugly guy who looks like a mouse?" Lucy stated as a matter of fact.

Dirk chuckled quietly at Lucy's apt description. "I've dubbed him Rat Face," he said.

A small grin spread across Lucy's face. "I think it suits him."

Dirk's expression became serious once more. "If I'm going to help you," he said, "I need to know who you are. What's your name?"

Lucy nodded excitedly. She pointed to the girl beside her. "This is Silvy Baxter and I'm Lucy Nkosi. The girl in the other corner is Shelly ..."

"What have we got here?" a loud voice interrupted her.

Dirk jumped to his feet. Quickly, Lucy scrambled back into her corner, making herself as small as possible. Both stared anxiously at Rat Face who had snuck up on them. Instantly Dirk worried how much the ferret had overheard. He chanced a glance in Lucy's direction. The girl had slipped her arm around her friend's shoulders, holding her tightly.

Rat Face walked into the room, swinging his hips from side to side, grinning at the girls lewdly.

Dirk watched him warily.

Rat Face stopped at the edge of the mattress. "Are my girls ready for some fun?" he asked suggestively.

Gripping his balls, Rat Face thrust his pelvis towards the girls. Rubbing his crotch with a circular motion, he stepped forward.

"Come on, girls," he cooed. "Let's have a good time."

Dirk stared at Rat Face with unspoken horror. What was the idiot doing? Was he out of his mind?

Rat Face put his foot on the mattress and bent down, reaching out to Lucy. The terrified girl tried to push herself further into the corner, but the wall stopped her short. A whimper escaped her mouth. Rat Face's tongue appeared between his lips. Flicking it repeatedly up and down, the vulgar sexual message was unmistakable.

Dirk shook himself out of his stunned immobility. With a roar he lunged forward slinging his arm around Rat Face's neck. With super human strength, he pulled him away from the mattress and the girls.

"You arsehole," he shouted outraged. "How dare you?"

Rat Face pulled back his arm. His pointy elbow landed with full force in Dirk's ribs. A sharp pain shot through Dirk's side; he gasped for breath and released his grip on Rat Face's neck. His adversary spun around, lifted both his hands and shoved Dirk hard towards the wall. Losing his balance, Dirk tumbled backwards. He reached out wildly, grabbing hold of Rat Face's T-shirt. Digging his fingers into the cotton, Dirk pulled him down. A dull thump reverberated off the walls as the two men crashed on to the cold, filthy floor. With lightning speed, Dirk rolled over, seized the ferret's hair and pushed his face into the dirt. Groaning loudly and breathing heavily, Rat Face thrashed his body from side to side. Dirk tried to put his knee on Rat Face's lower back, but the wiry guy possessed greater strength than Dirk had anticipated, and he lost his hold on the ferret. Rat Face spun around, lifted his legs, and shot them out like a spring uncoiled. The heels of his shoes hit Dirk squarely in the chest, throwing him on to his back, knocking the breath out of him. Gasping, Dirk twisted away from Rat Face. As he rolled onto his stomach, his opponent disappeared from his field of vision. Suddenly, Dirk felt the serrated edge of a knife against his throat. Not daring to move a muscle, Dirk lay very still.

Rat Face was panting hard. "Fuck! What do you think you're doing?" he snarled.

Feeling the cold steel against his skin, Dirk refrained from replying.

"You're spoiling my fun," Rat Face hissed.

Dirk curled his lip into a contemptuous sneer. "You call that fun?" he spat.

Rat Face pulled Dirk onto his back, staring down at him coldly. "I'm just breaking them in," he scorned.

Hot fury rose up in Dirk. "You're what?" he shouted with incredulity.

Rat Face removed the knife from Dirk's throat and giggled like a little girl. "What do you think is going to happen to them?" he mocked.

Dirk looked at him blankly.

Rat Face pointed at the girls. "We're going to sell them to some Asian guys. They'll go on a ship to Thailand or Singapore, or wherever, and then they'll become the little sex slaves of some rich, fat Chink." Rat Face chortled. "Before they go, I take the pleasure of breaking them in so that they are nice and compliant when they arrive at the Chink's place."

Dirk became pale with fury. He had suspected something like this, but he would be damned if he allowed Rat Face to lay hands on any of the girls. Clenching his fists, he got to his feet.

"I don't care what you guys are up to," he yelled. "but you will not touch them."

"What are you going to do about it?" Rat Face taunted him.

Dirk pushed his face into his adversary's. "You'll have to kill me first," he hissed. "Then you'll have to deal with Angus. You'll have to explain to him why you cut his cousin's throat."

Rat Face stopped short and pursed his lips in thought. He frowned and scratched his head. Dirk could literally see the guy's mind spinning as he tried to comprehend what Dirk had just said.

"Okay," Rat Face finally exclaimed. "You win this time." Waving his finger at Dirk, he snarled, "But don't try anything stupid again."

Dirk shrugged his shoulders dismissively. "Whatever," he replied.

At a loss for a quick retort, Rat Face's eyes narrowed. Angrily he lifted his foot and viciously kicked the empty bottles lying on the floor.

"You better give them water, pansy boy," he snapped. "Otherwise, they might die on you."

Turning on his heels, Rat Face marched out of the room without looking back.

Bending down, Dirk collected the bottles. He glanced in the direction of the girls with a reassuring grin, but when he saw Lucy's distraught and pleading look, his face froze. Quietly, Dirk pushed the bottles under his arms.

"I'll get you out of here," he whispered with determination. "Even if it's the last thing I do." But his expression was gloomy.

xxx

The Commissioner got to his feet. "I'll only be a minute," he said. "I'm going to make a copy for our records." He swiped the document off the table and walked out the door.

Ryan had known that it would be a waste of time, but what choice did he have? If he didn't attend the mediation meeting, then the Commissioner would have referred the case immediately to arbitration. At least this way, Ryan and da Costa had an opportunity to force a conclusion. Unfortunately, du Preez had not only been obnoxious, but he had also been as stubborn as a mule. Nothing da Costa had said made a dent in du Preez's attitude. He was adamant he had been treated unfairly, and he wanted his due. Even the Commissioner tried to talk sense into du Preez, but Ryan's former employee would not budge. In the end the Commissioner had no

choice but to issue a certificate stating the case was unresolved and would be referred to arbitration.

Ryan dreaded arbitration meetings. They were handled exactly as the word implied: arbitrary. One could never be certain how a Commissioner would rule. It did not matter how much knowledge one possessed about the Labour Relations Act, Basic Conditions of Employment and past CCMA and labour court cases. Once in the hands of a Commissioner, one was at his, or her absolute mercy.

Ryan glanced at du Preez, who had crossed his arms defiantly in front of his chest. Ryan knew better than to start a conversation with him. It would be pure folly to continue trying to convince his former employee that he had no case and that he should drop the complaint.

Their heavy silence was interrupted when da Costa pushed his papers into a heap and shoved them into his briefcase.

"That's it," he said quietly.

"Yep," Ryan sighed despondently.

da Costa snapped shut the claps of his briefcase, the sound echoing loudly in the conference room. Across the table, Ryan stared coldly at his former employee, growing more and more angry with du Preez's unrelenting attitude.

Why couldn't the guy see that he was just wasting everyone's time? He hit and swore at a fellow employee for Christ's sake! There was no way du Preez was going to win! And even if the Commissioner ruled in his favour, Ryan would move heaven and earth to avoid re-instating him, or paying him a single cent.

Looking up at his ex-boss, du Preez attempted a smile, as if to say: "Hey, no hard feelings."

At that moment, Ryan could have easily strangled du Preez. Pressing his lips together, he fought to keep his composure. What on earth was du Preez thinking? He was a despicable human being without any regard for his fellow man. He was a racist and a bully! Ryan wanted nothing further to do with him.

Fortunately, before he could say what was on his mind, the door opened and the Commissioner walked back in.

He handed each of the parties their respective copy of the unresolved certificate. "You'll be notified when the arbitration meeting will take place," he said.

da Costa smiled politely at the Commissioner. "Thank you," he replied.

The Commissioner nodded graciously. "Have a good day, gentlemen."

Collecting his papers, the Commissioner waited for the three men to leave the room before following them.

du Preez moved quickly and was already standing in the foyer waiting for the lift to arrive. Ryan and da Costa stalled for time not wanting to share the small cage with the burly man.

"That went fairly well," Danny da Costa commented.

Ryan was unimpressed. "Don't act like a lawyer," he replied sharper than intended. "If it had gone well, the Commissioner wouldn't have issued an unresolved certificate and we wouldn't have to go to arbitration."

Danny pursed his lips. "You are right," he conceded. "But at least there was no shouting and name calling," he added, his face dead pan.

Ryan swallowed twice before realising that Danny was trying to make light of the situation. A small grin tucked at the corners of his mouth.

"Yeah," Ryan said. "At least I didn't strangle him."

Danny chuckled quietly and patted his client on the back.

"We knew he would fight," he reminded Ryan. "But he still has no leg to stand on and we are going to win this, even if we have to go the extra rounds."

Ryan gnawed on his lower lip. "I wish we could have avoided it," he mumbled.

Danny shifted his briefcase to his other hand. "Not to worry," he assured him. "It will only take a bit of time and some patience. It will be over sooner than you think."

"Your word in God's ear," Ryan countered sardonically, as the lift arrived.

They rode down without exchanging any further words. Exiting the lift on the ground floor, the two men walked swiftly past the turnstile to the entrance. Standing in the bright sunlight on the broad steps in front of the building, Danny and Ryan shook hands.

"Thanks," Ryan said.

"It was a pleasure," Danny replied with a smile. "I'll send you the bill."

"You can keep the invoice," Ryan joked.

"Then you'll be on your own during arbitration," Danny replied quickly.

"Yeah, yeah," Ryan sighed. "As if I would jeopardise my use of your expertise."

Danny pulled back the sleeve of his jacket and checked his watch.

"Listen, Ryan," he said. "I have to run."

"Okay," Ryan agreed. "I'll see you at arbitration."

With a last wave of his hand Danny walked down the steps and out of Ryan's view.

Ryan was slowly making his way into the parking lot. He unlocked his 4x4 and shrugged off his suit jacket. Throwing it on to the backseat, he climbed into his BMW. Carefully he reversed out of the tight parking spot and only stopped at the hut near the exit where he handed his ticket to the uniformed guard.

Unfortunately Ryan missed the street leading him out of the concrete jungle. To correct his journey, he turned right a few hundred metres further on and was immediately faced with the infamous downtown Johannesburg Minibus taxi rank. The mid-morning sun glinted off hundreds of windscreens and tinted windows, blinding Ryan momentarily. An uneasy feeling crept up his spine as he saw Minibus taxi, after twelve-seater Minibus taxi, parked in the open lot and next to the pavements. Warily he crawled down the congested road keeping his eyes wide open.

It was well known that the taxi business was run mafia style. The lucrative routes were defended fiercely and deadly taxi wars were fought on a weekly basis. Much too often taxi owners pulled guns on each other - sometimes killing innocent bystanders in the shooting chaos - claiming an infringement on their turf by rivals. If possible Ryan avoided this particular area, always aware of the dangers lurking in between the parked vehicles, not wanting to be caught in the middle of a shoot-out.

He glanced at the rows of Minibus taxis cautiously. Drivers lounged beside their box-like vehicles, eyeing passing cars suspiciously, smoking cigarettes, shouting loudly into their cell phones, or talking seriously to fellow drivers. A low electrifying buzz hung in the hot air.

Passengers - fat black women, their colourful skirts bulging over heavily jutting buttocks, young black females wearing tight fancy tops and short mini skirts, and black men in blue jeans and T-shirts - climbed noisily into the vehicles, storing plastic and canvas bags under their seats and on their laps.

Other passengers walked in between the countless rows of taxis, kicking up red dust, searching for the transport which would take them to their chosen destination.

Several groups of black youngsters, the shields of their baseball caps shading their necks instead of their faces, had positioned themselves on opposing street corners. Forming a circle around a blaring boom box, they moved their hips rhythmically or simply listened to the latest rap music.

The numerous hawkers forced pedestrians to walk alongside the gutters running parallel to the busy road. Claiming the space as their own, they had set up their makeshift stands on the dusty pavements, selling oranges, popcorn, cigarettes and cold drinks.

A few years back, the South African transport ministry had decreed that all twelve-seater Minibus taxis had to be replaced with a certain new type of sixteen-seater vehicle, which looked more like a small bus than the current Combi style taxi, and allegedly took care of the passengers' safety more effectively. Death by Minibus taxi was a common occurrence on the roads of South Africa.

Glancing over at the taxi rank, Ryan spotted maybe fifty of these new buses, the others, hundreds of them, were still of the old Combi type: dented, rusted, their doors held closed with chicken wire, their tyres smooth, their headlights stuck together with brown buff tape.

Ryan shook his head. How anyone was able to use these death traps was beyond him. Unfortunately, these Minibus taxis provided the main means of transport for the majority of South African people. Even the government had declared that these vehicles constituted the official public transport in South Africa. Sixty-seater buses were almost non-existent and not everyone was able to afford a car.

Finally Ryan made his way into the traffic on the arterial road leading out of Johannesburg. Running the gauntlet of cars swerving in front of him, suddenly braking to a stop next to a curb and drivers ignoring red traffic lights, he crossed the Nelson Mandela Bridge, which took him to the on-ramp of the M1 North highway. His office was now only thirty minutes away.

Moving quickly, he was soon navigating the traffic circle placed in the middle of his company's business park. A moving van was parked in front of the building next to Bates Inc. offices. A group of black men, dressed in blue overalls, sweat glistening on their dark faces, were lifting a brown double-door cupboard from the back of a truck. Ryan parked in his usual spot in front of his office and watched the men handle the heavy piece of equipment. Carefully, the removal crew manoeuvred the huge cupboard up the steps and through the double glass doors.

Ryan's mind turned to Thomas. He wondered if his partner's niece had made it home after all. He pulled out his cell phone and punched in his partner's number. The line was picked up after only a couple of rings.

"Hello," Thomas answered warily.

"Hey, partner," Ryan said. "How are you doing?"

Thomas drew a deep breath. "Not so good," he replied.

Ryan hesitated. Placing his elbow on the open window frame of his car door, he quickly realised that there was no easy way to ask the pertinent question so he decided to take the bull by the horns.

"Did your niece come home?" he asked bluntly.

Thomas swallowed hard. "No," he replied. "She did not."

"Oh, man," Ryan groaned.

He brushed his hand through his hair, not knowing what to say next. What the hell could he say to someone whose child was missing for the better part of twenty-four hours?

"How are you holding up?" Ryan wanted to know.

"Coping," was his partner's single word reply.

Ryan nodded. This is what he had expected Thomas to say.

"How's your sister doing?" he asked.

Thomas sighed heavily. "She's a wreck," he answered. "She cries and cries and cries. She won't sit down and she won't let go of her phone because she says she needs to answer it immediately in case Lucy phones. Thandi's blaming herself for Lucy not coming home. All the time she asks herself if there was something she has said or done which upset Lucy and made her run away." Thomas gulped some air. "She thinks she could have spent more time with her. She remembers not having made it to her last try-out at school. I try to tell her that she is a good mother and that she's done nothing wrong, but Thandi won't listen. I'm very worried about her."

Ryan was not exactly sure how to respond.

"I'm so sorry," he said after a long silence. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Actually, yes," Thomas replied to Ryan's surprise.

Ryan placed his forearms on his steering wheel and pressed the phone against his ear. "What is it?" he asked.

"I don't want to impose on you ...," Thomas's voice trailed off as if he had changed his mind.

"Come on, man," Ryan urged him. "Whatever you need, I'll do."

There was a small pause, then Thomas said, "I'm stuck here with my sister and she won't let me use her car. She's worried that once Lucy comes home, she might have to take her to a hospital."

A frown appeared on Ryan's forehead. "So?"

"Seeing that it's still too early for the cops to make a move, the twenty-four hours are not up yet, I want to go up to the school myself," Thomas explained. "I want to talk to the teachers, but I can't get there because my car is still at the office."

"You want me to take you to Lucy's school?" Ryan asked.

"Yes," Thomas replied eagerly. "I've been thinking the teachers might have seen or heard something which might explain where Lucy is. Maybe she had a fight with someone at school."

"Hhm," Ryan managed.

"You don't think it's a good idea?" Thomas said deflated.

"No, no," Ryan quickly reassured him. "I think it's an excellent idea. You are right. Maybe someone got Lucy into trouble and she is too frightened to come home."

"Yes," Thomas said with renewed hope. "The teachers might be able to help us find her."

Ryan checked his watch. "I'll tell you what. I'm just going into the office to clear some things up, and then I'll come to your sister's house."

"How long will you be?" Thomas asked worriedly.

"Only twenty minutes," Ryan replied, his mind already on the tasks he wanted to clear away. "I just want to check a couple of things with Raphaella, then I'm on my way."

Thomas breathed out loudly. "Thanks, Ryan," he said.

"Nothing to thank me for," Ryan answered. "You would do the same for me."

Ryan switched off his cellphone, tucked it into his pocket and climbed out of his 4x4. A few quick steps took him to the front door of the office and into the air conditioned foyer.

CHAPTER 10

Although the sun had no direct access to the room, it was stifling hot. Lucy thought she could slice through the thick motionless air with a knife. She crawled to the edge of the mattress and picked up one of the water bottles Dirk had rolled into the room a few minutes earlier. Lucy unscrewed the cap and drank the tepid water with big gulps. After wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she closed the bottle tightly not wanting to spill a single drop of the precious liquid.

Rising to her feet, she walked over to Shelly who was once again rocking back and forth on her heels. Lowering herself down onto her haunches, Lucy gently pushed the hair away from Shelly's face.

"How are you doing?" Lucy asked softly.

Shelly stared at her with big eyes, but did not reply.

"Are you thirsty?" Lucy asked holding up the bottle. Immediately, she shook her head.

What a stupid question to ask, she admonished herself.

Careful not to waste the water, Lucy poured a little liquid into the bottle's yellow plastic cap. Holding the tiny cup delicately between thumb and forefinger, she dribbled the water onto Shelly's dry lips. As the girl's tongue lapped up the precious liquid, she stopped rocking, keeping very still. Shelly watched Lucy attentively as she poured more water into the cap.

"Were you frightened earlier on?" Lucy asked quietly.

Shelly's eyes followed Lucy's every movement, but she did not answer.

Lucy wet the girl's lips again, and Shelly's pink tongue appeared, licking at the water.

"You mustn't worry," Lucy continued. "We will get out of here." She paused for a moment, turning her head to the locked door. "You see, that guy, the one who looks like a university student, he will help us."

A small whimper escaped Shelly's mouth. At first puzzled at the sound, Lucy quickly realised that she was supposed to continue feeding water to Shelly.

"I know you can hear me," Lucy said, scrutinizing the girl's face. "And I know you can understand what I'm saying."

Lucy waited for a reaction, but there was none. The only sign that the girl was still with them, were her eyes which remained focussed on the bottle of water in Lucy's hand.

Lucy wished with all her heart that Shelly had the sense, and especially the will, to live. Lifting the bottle Lucy shook it, letting the water swirl around in its plastic enclosure, enticing Shelly to grab the bottle, but the girl remained impassive.

Lucy knew what dehydration could do. First it made you weak, then you became delirious, and eventually, you died. If all three of them wanted to get out of this hellhole, then Shelly needed to be strong. There was no way that Silvy and Lucy could carry the girl if she was too weak to walk on her own. Shelly had to drink water, lots of water, if she wasn't going to dehydrate. Desperately wanting to get Shelly into a shape where she could stand on her own two feet, Lucy decided on another strategy.

Instead of squatting in front of the girl, Lucy stretched her legs and sat on the cold dirty concrete floor. Moving into a comfortable position, she crossed her feet under

her and straightened her short skirt. Shelly watched Lucy's change of position cautiously.

"You also want to get out of here, don't you?" Lucy asked quietly, waiting in vain for a response.

She leaned forward, looking into Shelly's eyes, wondering what was going on in Shelly's head.

"If you want to survive, then you have to be strong," Lucy whispered. "You can not give up. You can not let go. You must have hope."

To Lucy's surprise, Shelly blinked rapidly at Lucy's imploring words. Encouraged by the girl's first visible signs of life, Lucy said, "I promise you, we will get out of here, but you have to help us. We can not do it alone."

Shelly stared at Lucy without saying a word. Nevertheless, Lucy continued, "You have to drink, otherwise you'll dehydrate, and that makes you weak. I don't know if we will have to fight, but I need your strength, just in case."

Sudden fear appeared in Shelly's eyes.

Lucy put her hand on the girl's arm. "I don't know what will happen," she tried to reassure the girl. "Maybe we'll have to walk a long distance to get away from this place."

Shelly seemed to relax at hearing Lucy's soothing words, but the job was not done yet.

"I want you to drink all the water in this bottle," Lucy said firmly.

Shelly's eyes wandered to the plastic bottle in Lucy's hand.

"Yes," Lucy reiterated. "You must drink all the water and I can't feed all of it to you in this tiny cap."

Shelly looked at Lucy questioningly, a worry frown growing across her forehead.

Carefully Lucy reached out and touched the girl's shoulder. To her relief, Shelly did not flinch, or snatch her hand away, or start to scream. Slowly Lucy tightened her grip and lifted Shelly's hand, placing the bottle of water in her palm, curling her fingers around it. Shelly looked from the bottle to Lucy and back. All at once, Shelly grabbed the bottle and clutched it against her chest.

A big grin spread across Lucy's face. "Now," she said. "you must take the cap off and drink it all."

Eagerly, Shelly unscrewed the bottle, placed it against her lips and began to drink greedily. The water dripped down her chin, wet her blue shirt and left a big dark stain on her skirt. Lucy didn't mind. She was just happy that Shelly was drinking the water. The last thing she wanted was for Shelly to die of thirst. And if push came to shove, one more person might make all the difference in their escape.

Shelly gasped for breath and put the empty water bottle on the floor.

Silvy's voice pried Lucy's attention away from Shelly. "That was some fight," she said.

Lucy looked at the girl on the mattress. "What do you mean?"

Silvy leaned forward, closer to the edge of the dirty mattress. "Do you think the skinny man was going to kill the other guy?"

Lucy shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know," she replied.

"He had a big knife." Silvy shuddered at the memory of it.

Lucy chewed her lower lip. "I'm not sure," she said quietly. "I hope not, because Dirk is our only hope of getting out of here."

"Dirk?" Silvy asked puzzled. "Who is Dirk?"

Lucy rolled her eyes. "Don't you remember? The guy who looks like a university student, he said his name is Dirk."

"Oh," Silvy replied, feeling somewhat foolish for having forgotten.

Lucy crawled back onto the mattress and tucked her legs under her bottom. Wistfully, she played with the hem of her skirt.

"Can I ask you something?" Lucy asked shyly.

Silvy pushed a loose strand of hair behind her ear and tilted her head. "Sure."

Lucy hesitated, worried she would sound naïve if she asked Silvy her burning question. Scratching at a stain on her shirt with a fingernail, she stalled for time. Maybe she should try to figure it out herself. Maybe Silvy also wouldn't know.

"What is it?" Silvy asked, placing her fingertips on Lucy's arm.

Lucy stopped scratching her shirt. "You won't laugh at me?" she asked timidly.

Shelly raised an eyebrow. "I'm not going to laugh at you," she assured Lucy.

Lucy averted her eyes and drew a deep breath. "What did the skinny guy mean when he said 'he is going to break us in'?"

Silvy sucked in air noisily. "You really don't know?"

Lucy shook her head.

Suddenly agitated, Silvy pulled at her long tresses.

Surprised by Silvy's reaction, Lucy asked, "Did I say something wrong?"

"No," Silvy shook her head. "No, you didn't say anything wrong."

Still Silvy did not explain; instead, she wiggled nervously on her bottom and fidgeted with her hands. Lucy watched her for a few moments, wondering why Silvy had become so uncomfortable. It was obvious that she knew the answer to Lucy's question.

She nudged Silvy's leg. "So, what does it mean?" she asked impatiently.

Silvy stared past Lucy's shoulder at a dirty spot on the wall. "Well," she finally replied. "My brother and his friends sometimes use those words when they meet new girls."

A cold dread crept up Lucy's back, but she waited for Silvy to explain.

"I think it means that he wants to have sex with us," Silvy blurted out.

Lucy snapped back her head as if stung by a bee. "But," she stammered, "I don't want to have sex with him."

Silvy's face flushed with anger. "Do you seriously think I want to have sex with him?" she bit back.

Lucy shook her head. "No," she mumbled. "Of course not."

Silvy sighed heavily. "Think about it," she said. "What are you going to do if he comes for you? He is definitely taller and stronger than us."

Lucy stared wide-eyed at the other girl.

Crossing her arms in front of her, Silvy explained quietly, "I think, if we don't do it voluntarily, then he will force us."

Lucy blinked a couple of times.

What was Silvy talking about? she wondered confused. What was she saying?

It took a few moments, but then, slowly, the other girl's words sank in. Tears began welling up in Lucy's eyes.

"But that's rape," she whispered.

Biting her bottom lip, Silvy replied softly, "I know."

Lucy shook her head violently. "No," she almost shouted. "No, I will not be raped. No way!"

Silvy drew her eyebrows together and a dark shadow crossed her face. "Those are nice words," she said icily. "But what are you going to do when he charges in here and grabs you?"

"I'll fight," Lucy exclaimed, clenching her fists and lifting them into the air.

Silvy snorted derisively. "Sure," she mocked the other girl. "He is at least a head taller than you. He just has to breathe on you and you'll end up on your arse."

Taken aback at Silvy's harsh words, Lucy narrowed her eyes.

"Are you just going to give in?" she asked angrily. "Are you going let him do whatever he wants?"

Silvy lowered her head. "What other choice do we have?" she said quietly.

Lucy tugged at her earlobe, contemplating Silvy's question. What would she do if the guy grabbed her? Would she hold still? Get it over and done with? Let him violate her body? Take her soul?

Lucy shuddered at the thought of the ferret's hands touching her bare skin. She imagined his stinking breath on her face, his slobbering tongue pushing into her mouth and his dirty fingernails scraping across her breasts. As she visualised his knee pushing her legs apart, his hand fumbling with her panties, Lucy struggled to breathe. Bile rose in her throat and she wanted to throw up. Swallowing hard, she got her heaving stomach under control.

No way! she screamed silently. There was no way the ferret was going to touch her. His body would never lie on top of hers, crushing her, breaking her. Even if it meant he had to kill her, she would not be raped! She wasn't going to live for the rest of her life with the knowledge of having been violated. She'd rather be dead.

"I for one will not hold still," Lucy finally declared. "I will not let him do whatever he wants. I know he's taller and stronger, but I'll scratch his eyes out and I'll kick him. I will not go down without a fight."

Silvy tilted her head sideways, amazed at Lucy's bold statement.

"He can kill me, but he will not rape me," Lucy continued fiercely.

Encouraged by Lucy's resolve, a tiny smile played around the corners of Silvy's mouth.

"You are right," she said. "And if he attacks you, then I'll jump on his back. If two people fight him, it might just be too much for him and he might give up."

Lucy nodded in agreement. "And if he comes for you, then I'll do the same," she stated.

Turning to look at Shelly sitting in the opposite corner of the dank room, Lucy said, "And I'll do the same for Shelly."

xxx

Ryan passed his desk and collapsed into his leather chair. Swivelling around, he reached for his keyboard and pulled it closer. He only wanted to check on a few e-mails before he went out to meet Thomas. Clicking his mouse on the inbox, his e-mails downloaded rapidly. Scanning the messages, Ryan deleted the spam mail, as and when it appeared on the screen. A delighted smile appeared on his face as he spotted an e-mail from Lehane Investments. He double clicked and the message opened up. Racing through the words, Ryan pumped his fist in the air.

"Yes," he shouted quietly.

They had fought hard for the Lehan Investment account during the previous months. The message confirmed that his persistence had paid off. All the haggling and bargaining had come to an end. Bates Inc. had been awarded the tender. This was excellent news. Thomas would be very pleased with the contract, especially since he had played a large part in the negotiations.

Ryan clicked the 'forward' button on top of the screen and typed in Thomas's e-mail address. He didn't have to add any explanation. Thomas would know exactly what this was about.

As he clicked on the 'send and receive' button, the door to his office opened. Ryan looked up and saw Raphaela's head.

"Hello," she greeted him. "Can I come in?"

Ryan waved his hand beckoning her closer. "Sure," he replied, "but I don't have much time."

Raphaela walked into the office, her long luscious hair swinging from side to side. Ryan watched her cross the room with graceful steps and his chest constricted. Minute dust particles danced around her head creating a silver halo. Her long lashes threw tiny shadows onto her olive coloured cheeks. Pink gloss made her sensuous lips shine.

A deep groan rose in his throat. She was so beautiful.

Stop dreaming Bates! he rebuked himself immediately.

Raphaela reached for the chair in front of his desk and sat down, crossing her slender legs.

What he would give to hold her in his arms, burying his nose in her luxurious hair, tasting her full warm lips, feeling her curvaceous body pressed against his.

Come back to earth, he shouted silently, and finally a small sigh escaped his mouth.

Raphaela's eyebrows rose questioningly at the sound. Ryan smiled crookedly and quickly pushed his thoughts into the furthest corner of his mind.

He leaned back in his chair and cleared his throat noisily. "Hi, there," he greeted her.

Folding her arms in front of her, Raphaela nodded in return. "How did it go at the CCMA?"

Ryan blew up his cheeks. "As expected," he replied. "du Preez was a real dickhead. Stubborn as a mule. We'll have to go to arbitration."

"Oh, damn," Raphaela exclaimed. "I so hoped he would see the light."

"Wishful thinking," Ryan said, steepling his fingers. "He gave us a real hard time, insisting that we treated him unfairly and that we are obligated to re-instate him."

"And?" Raphaela asked, leaning forward in her chair expectantly.

"Over my dead body," Ryan growled. "I will not have him work for me ever again. You know the rules, I will not tolerate anyone with a racist attitude."

A relieved smile danced around Raphaela's mouth. "I am so glad to hear you say that," she said.

Ryan's eyes narrowed. "Did you doubt it would end any other way?" he asked angrily.

Raphaela shook her head, chastened. "No," she said. "Not really."

He immediately regretted snapping at her. The frown disappeared from his forehead, but a small uncomfortable silence ensued between them.

Ryan tapped a few keys on his computer, the sound unnaturally loud in the office. Scrolling up and down, he scanned a few more of his e-mails, but kept Raphaella in focus out of the corner of his eye. To his relief, Raphaella's shoulders straightened and her determined look returned.

Lifting her head, she linked her slender fingers in her lap.

"Have you heard from Thomas?" she enquired, changing the subject.

Ryan pushed his keyboard away, glad to hear her voice again. "As a matter of fact," he replied, "I called him as I pulled into the parking lot." Ryan raised his hand. "And he hasn't heard anything. His niece hasn't come home and his sister is in an absolute state."

A small irritating spasm pinched the muscles between his shoulders, and he rubbed his neck.

"I can image," Raphaella said quietly, brushing at an imaginary piece of lint on her jacket.

Ryan tilted his head sideways.

Raphaella elaborated. "If it was my kid, I would be out of my mind with worry."

Ryan drew a deep breath. "Well," he said. "They *are* worried out of their minds, although Thomas tries to keep it together." Tapping his fingers on the desk, he glanced into the garden, irrationally noticing the bright orange bloom of the crane flowers.

"Thomas asked me to take him to Lucy's school," he continued thoughtfully. "His Alpha is still standing in front of the office and his sister won't give him her car just in case Lucy comes home, or she needs to go to her. Thomas wants to speak to the teachers to try to find out if they know something, or if they overheard her fighting with someone."

"Good idea," Raphaella agreed eagerly. "Teachers sometimes know more than we appreciate."

Ryan swivelled away from the window. "I told him I would come as soon as I had cleared up a few things. That's why I don't have much time," Ryan explained. "Was there something in particular you wanted to see me about?"

Raphaella pushed back the sleeve of her jacket and checked her watch. "I was hoping you could wait for another few minutes," she said.

"Why?" Ryan asked surprised.

Raphaella uncrossed her legs and brushed a strand of long hair behind her ear.

"Remember I told you about my cousin this morning?" Raphaella asked.

Ryan nodded. He vaguely recalled Raphaella having mentioned a family member who was a cop.

"Tony promised to come around to meet you," she said. "I explained to him what's going on and he said he would try to help."

Ryan's eyebrows rose, but before he could reply, the telephone on his desk rang. He picked up the receiver. "Yes, Nomsa?" He listened for a few moments, then replied, "Raphaella is with me." After a short pause he said, "Thanks, Nomsa. I'll tell her."

Ryan replaced the receiver and looked up at Raphaella. "I think your cousin has arrived."

Raphaella jumped to her feet. "Oh, great," she exclaimed, rushing to the door. "I'll go and get him."

His nod went unseen as she disappeared from his office.

Ryan clicked a few more times with his mouse, systematically shutting down his computer. He wanted to leave as soon as he had spoken to Raphaela's cousin.

As he heard a tap-tap on his door, Ryan looked up from the fading screen. Raphaela re-entered the office, closely followed by a young man about Ryan's age. Ryan got up from his chair and walked around his desk. Unobtrusively, he looked for any resemblance between the two family members, but for their olive coloured skin, there was none. Raphaela's cousin was about 1,75 metres tall, with jet black hair swept away from his high, wrinkle-free forehead. He wore a dark green golf shirt, faded jeans and soft brown leather boots. Ryan looked for a gun in a hidden holster, but it did not seem the young man was carrying a weapon. Raphaela's cousin stepped forward, holding out his hand. Ryan shook it, feeling the young man's firm grip.

"Good morning, Mr Bates," he said. "I'm Antonio Patrizzio." His voice was dark and melodious.

"Call me Ryan. Mr Bates is my father," he replied with mirth.

A large smile flashed across Patrizzio's face revealing brilliant white teeth.

"I'm Tony," he offered in return.

Ryan pointed to the chairs in front of his desk. "Please have a seat."

Raphaela and her cousin lowered themselves into the soft cushions and Ryan moved back behind his desk.

Picking up a ballpoint pen, Ryan twirled it in his fingers.

"So," he said. "Raphaela has told you that we need your help."

Hesitating, Tony pursed his lips. "I'm not quite sure how I can be of assistance," he answered cautiously.

Ryan's eyebrows shot up.

"You see, Ryan," he continued. "I actually do not work in 'Missing Persons'. I'm assigned to 'Organised Crime'."

Ryan's mind whirled. "Organised Crime," he repeated slowly. "Are you one of the guys investigating Jackie Selebi?"

Jackie Selebi was the South African Police Commissioner. About a year previously, during the investigation of the murder of a well-known mining magnate, the authorities had arrested several suspects. It was a high-profile case and the major newspapers had kept a close eye on the events as they developed. A few months into the investigation, the newspapers had reported that the suspects, Glen Aligotti and his co-accused, had apparently cut a deal with the prosecutors.

Many South Africans were surprised and had wondered what could possibly have been on offer to the prosecution in return for a lesser sentence. Information was soon leaked to the media that Glen Aligotti and his co-accused had claimed that Jackie Selebi was involved in drug smuggling operations and major corruption. This time, South Africans were shocked. Their Police Commissioner was a criminal?

The National Prosecution Authority (NPA) deliberated, investigated, seized confidential documentation and eventually issued an arrest warrant for Mr Jackie Selebi. There was a great outcry. Selebi's supporters stated adamantly that the National Police Commissioner was an upright man who would never be involved in organised crime and that the issue of a warrant constituted harassment. They even went so far as to claim that the NPA was instituting a political witch-hunt.

Those opposed to Selebi declared their suspicions from the start. The Police Commissioner was corrupt and it was about time he was put behind bars.

Unfortunately, before the warrant could be executed, the head of the NPA, Visu Pikolu, was axed from his post, effectively making it impossible to serve the warrant for arrest. The South African President put Jackie Selebi on extended leave, while Pikoli was defending himself before the Ginkwala Commission by answering questions concerning his fitness for the post.

Tony's face broke into a wide smile, but he did not answer Ryan's question directly. "Let's just say that I know a little bit more about the case than the general public."

Ryan returned his grin. "Understood." A moment later he frowned. "But what exactly are you involved in?" he asked.

Tony glanced at Raphaela, but she shrugged helplessly. She wasn't sure what to reply since she had actually no idea what position her cousin held in the police force. Raphaela had phoned Tony, because that's what members of their family did when they needed help.

Not so long ago she had gotten into her car after her Aunt Beth had phoned her in a panic.

Raphaela remembered that she had been watching a silly late evening sitcom when the telephone rang. Wondering who might call her at that time of the night, Raphaela nevertheless picked up the receiver.

"Hello," she answered distractedly, still keeping one eye on the flickering TV screen.

"Raphaela!" a woman shouted.

Although it was late, and Raphaela wasn't particularly interested in a telephone conversation, she recognised her aunt's voice immediately.

"Hi, Aunt Beth," Raphaela said. "Why are you shouting?"

The breathless voice of her aunt came back over the line. "Mario is in trouble," she gasped. "He went out clubbing with a few friends and they left him stranded."

Instantly understanding the grimness of the situation, Raphaela groped for the remote control. Pressing the red button, she switched off the TV, focussing her attention on what her aunt was trying to convey.

"He called about ten minutes ago. He and his friends had a fallout." Raphaela heard a sob. "I'm all by myself. Your uncle has not come back from his committee meeting. I can't get hold of Sylvester and I didn't know who else to call."

A frown creased Raphaela's forehead. She knew that her aunt, under normal circumstances, was prone to exaggeration, often throwing her hands into the air, making a mountain out of a mole hill. The family indulged her, but sometimes, behind her back, they would mock her and call her a drama queen. Unfortunately this time it seemed to be serious. Her aunt was almost in tears!

"They left him in Hillbrow," Aunt Beth wheezed. "Can you imagine? My seventeen year old son is all alone in Hillbrow!"

Raphaela pursed her lips. "Ohh," she managed.

Hillbrow was notorious for being *the* hub for drug dealers in Johannesburg. Many years ago the suburb was a first stop and safe haven for immigrants from Europe and Canada. Often whole buildings were occupied by British, German, French, and

Canadian immigrants, all helping each other take their first steps in South Africa, forming little communities and giving Hillbrow a cosmopolitan buzz.

Unfortunately, since the new democracy came into being, and all areas were open to all people in South Africa, Hillbrow had transformed dramatically. The high-rise buildings were still occupied by immigrants, but the distribution of flats and their rent was now controlled by Congolese gangs and Nigerian drug dealers.

Prostitutes, as young as thirteen, sold their bodies in dark narrow alleys, or out of stinking doorways. Street-kids, dirty and hungry, roamed the pavements like mangy dogs, continuously on the lookout for half-eaten fast food dropped in dustbins, or left as litter in the streets. Drugs and money openly exchanged hands, skeleton-like addicts in cheap clothes wandered the streets unashamedly, and the numerous nightclubs were frequented by leather clad gang bosses and their tattooed followers.

How her cousin Mario had ended up alone in Hillbrow was a mystery to Raphaella, but she did not ask any questions. Her aunt needed help and Raphaella was the only one at that time of the night to provide it.

"Don't worry, Aunt Beth," Raphaella said calmly. "I'm going to get him."

"Ohh, ohh," her aunt sighed. "Are you sure?"

Raphaella nodded determinedly, although her aunt could not see her. "Yes," she replied. "I'll call you once he is safe."

"Ohh, thank you Raphaella," her aunt cried. "Thank you so much."

Without wasting a thought about the danger she was putting herself in, Raphaella replaced the receiver, grabbed her car keys, locked the front door behind her and set out on her drive to Hillbrow.

She wasn't feeling very comfortable entering the devil's lair so late at night, but what choice did she have? Nobody else in the family was available and her Aunt Beth was in no position to make the trip. She would never make it even half-way; instead, she would succumb to a nervous breakdown and would have to be rescued herself!

As the street lights flashed past her car windows, Raphaella remembered the frequent newspaper articles about women being viciously beaten, raped, stabbed and strangled to death in the dark alleyways of Hillbrow. TV reports often mentioned gang rivalries and deadly shoot-outs.

All the way to Hillbrow, she debated with herself, knowing very well that it was not safe for a woman on her own to drive through the area. A wise idea was to turn around and wait for her uncle to come home.

Nevertheless, once Raphaella turned into Kotze Street, a steely resolve crept up her spine. Her seventeen-year-old cousin was stranded there and she was the only one who was going to be able to rescue him. Imagining her young handsome cousin standing at a street corner and being mistaken for a male prostitute for the taking, made her clench her jaw.

Her small can of illegal pepper-spray tucked between her legs, ready to be used at the smallest indication of trouble, Raphaella slowly and cautiously navigated the crowded street. Keeping one eye on the hustle and bustle on the pavement and the other on the cars in front of her, she scanned the throngs of people on the pavements, and in the street, trying to detect her cousin in their midst.

Suddenly, the black Mercedes limousine in front of her stopped and Raphaella had to slam on brakes. The rear door opened and a black teenager wearing a black studded windbreaker, baggy jeans and scuffed army boots stepped on to the curb.

Now the road in front of her was blocked by the Mercedes. There was no way around it. Nervously, Raphaela glanced in her rear view mirror. Several cars had stopped behind her. Feeling like a trapped animal, Raphaela agitatedly revved the engine of her car.

She watched a second man, a thick gold chain dangling from his neck, climb out of the vehicle. Red and green neon lights from a nearby nightclub streaked across his dark face, making him look like an alien from outer space. The two gangsters stood at the curb, gesticulating wildly, their voices carrying anger.

Her jaw set, Raphaela held resolutely onto her steering wheel. If they came any closer, if they threatened her, she would put foot and smash into the Mercedes in front. The damage to her car did not matter. She would shift into reverse, open up a gap and race past the vehicles, finding the shortest and fastest way out of this dodgy area.

All at once the Mercedes pulled away from the curb and the two gangsters parted ways. Raphaela breathed in deeply and relaxed her hands. Pushing her foot gently onto the accelerator, she followed the shiny black Mercedes down the road.

A few hundred metres further on, Raphaela turned into Pretoria Street. By sheer chance, she spotted Mario. To her great relief her young cousin had positioned himself at the intersection, at the edge of the pavement close to the street, giving him enough room to escape into a run if attacked.

Raphaela pulled over, stopped her car, unlocked the doors and waved at him frantically. It took Mario only two seconds to recognise her face. He raced to the passenger side of the car, jerked the door open and threw himself onto the seat. As he slammed the door, Raphaela accelerated away from the curb. Weaving recklessly through the slow traffic, they made it out of Hillbrow in one piece.

In the same way as Raphaela had delivered Mario to his mother without asking any questions, Tony had promised assistance without hesitation. He had come to her rescue, although it was Thomas's niece who was in trouble.

Raphaela smiled nervously. She hoped she had done the right thing by contacting her cousin. Her father had always spoken highly of Tony, almost bragging about him, claiming her cousin had influence. Looking into Tony's face now, she wasn't too sure that calling him had been such a good idea.

Tony stared past Ryan's shoulder and focussed on the beautifully maintained garden beyond the patio doors. The silence echoed in his office, but Ryan waited patiently, giving Tony a chance to come up with a reasonable answer to his earlier question.

Eventually Tony crossed his arms in front of him. "Without going into too much detail," he said warily, "I can tell you that we are presently investigating drug dealings, taxi violence, gun smuggling, sometimes fraud, often corruption, organised prostitution ..." his voice trailed off.

Ryan dropped the ballpoint pen onto his desk and thoughtfully began pushing it from one side of his desk pad to the other.

What on earth did those crimes have to do with a missing person? he wondered. How was Tony going to be of any use to Thomas? This guy was from the totally wrong department. His business was with serious criminals. And Thomas was trying to find his niece!

Slightly irritated at having wasted time, Ryan glanced at Raphaela. His assistant stared back at him, her brown eyes huge.

Tony cleared his throat. "Look, Ryan," he said. "Raphaela has filled me in on the basics, namely that your partner's fourteen year old niece did not come home from school yesterday. I assume you have reported it to the local police?"

Ryan snorted derisively. "Not without difficulties," he replied.

"What do you mean?" Tony asked stiffly.

Ryan brushed his hand through his hair, stalling for time. He wasn't quite sure if he should tell this particular cop the whole story of what had transpired at the local police station the previous night.

Sensing Ryan's reluctance to talk, Tony asked again, "What happened?"

Ryan took a deep breath. "Well," he said. "Obviously Thomas and I drove to the station in Edenvale. I admit it was very late in the evening, but that is no excuse to leave the station manned by only one person." His forehead creased with angry folds. "When we arrived, there was no one in the incident room. We could have robbed the place blind, not that there was anything to rob," he added sarcastically. "Eventually an officer attended to us. But he made a hundred different excuses why he was unable to help us."

Tony listened with quiet concentration.

"The officer was adamant the cops could only help after a twenty-four hour period had expired," Ryan continued. He glared at Tony angrily. "I find this rule extremely ridiculous."

Tony nodded. "I understand your way of thinking. Twenty-four hours seems to be a long time, but there is a reason for this."

"What possible reason could there be?" Ryan bellowed. "My partner's niece is a good kid. She is responsible and reliable. She doesn't run in the streets, doesn't get up to mischief ..."

Tony held up his hand interrupting Ryan's outburst. "I believe you," he said calmly. "And it doesn't seem fair. But do you know how many teenagers *are* up to mischief? How many of them *do* run in the streets?"

Ryan stared at him irritably, but refrained from commenting.

"Can you imagine the manpower needed to find all those teenagers who are just careless?" Tony continued. "We are understaffed as it is and if the police had to go after every teenager who just decided to stay over a friend's house without telling his or her parents, we would need thousands of additional officers."

"But," Ryan interjected heatedly. "Thomas's niece is not careless. She always comes home. What if something happened to her?" he snapped. "You cops have this rule, but maybe my partner's niece is lying in a ditch somewhere bleeding to death, just because of a stupid rule."

Tony's head shot forward. "Stop it!" he hissed dangerously.

Ryan clamped his mouth shut.

"You don't need to paint such a bleak picture," Tony said through clenched teeth. "I'm well aware of what could happen to your partner's niece. It is not my rule, but we have to adhere to it."

Ryan pursed his lips. He obviously had touched on a raw spot.

He raised his hands apologetically. "I'm sorry for shouting at you," he said. "It was not aimed at you personally."

Tony drew a deep breath and relaxed back into his chair. "I'll tell you what," he said. "I'm going to make some enquiries. I'll contact the station commander at Edenvale and I'll find out what progress they have made."

"Hmph," Ryan mumbled.

Tony narrowed his eyes. The two men stared each other for a moment in silence.

"I'll even go one step further," Tony said, scratching his cheek softly. "I'll come to your partner's place and have a word with his sister."

Ryan nodded appreciatively.

"Just don't forget that my hands are relatively tied," Tony reminded him. "I can make suggestions and even push your case along, but your partner's missing niece doesn't fall in to my field of expertise."

Ryan crossed his arms in front of him. "Understood," he said.

A small grin appeared around the corners of Tony's mouth. "So, we are all set then?" he asked.

Ryan returned the police officer's smile. "Thank you," he said. "And no hard feelings?"

Tony shrugged his shoulders. "I'll try my best."

CHAPTER 11

Bored out of her mind, Lucy watched as a cockroach scuttled across the dirty grey cement floor, its brown hard shell wiggling from side to side and its long antennae bobbing up and down. The cockroach made it to the crack where the bottom of the wall joined the floor. The insect stopped short, its antennae waving in the air, carefully checking its surroundings. Lucy drew a breath and blew warm air in the direction of the ugly insect. As soon as the roach felt the soft breeze on its body, it moved. With lightning speed it raced forward, too fast to be caught in one's hand, and disappeared into the crevice it had chosen seconds before.

Lucy's eyes wandered over to Silvy. The girl was lying on her side, her long brown ponytail sneaking down over her shoulder, the tip tickling her pale cheek. She was curled up in a foetal position, her knees pressed tightly together and her hands folded over her chest. She was fast asleep, snoring softly. Spittle had collected in the corner of her mouth, and every time she breathed out, a small white bubble formed on her lower lip.

Lucy's eyelids were heavy. She was dead tired, but dared not nod off. In a way she envied Silvy, who had fallen asleep quite a while ago. The girl stirred occasionally, moving a leg or her hand, but she did not wake fully from her slumber.

How could Silvy sleep so soundly? Lucy griped silently. Wasn't she scared? Here they were prisoners, and Silvy simply snored away as if she had no care in the world. What if the ugly rat-faced man came back? What if he tried to touch them again? What if the other guy wasn't there to rescue them?

Lucy hugged her slim body, trembling involuntarily at the thought.

Although she craved nothing more than to lie down and close her eyes, Lucy was too worried to just think about sleep. With her head cocked to one side and her ears pricked, she listened to the sounds from beyond the locked door, trying to pick up the movements of the two men in the chalet; trying to anticipate their next course of action. If the door opened again, she wanted to be prepared. Not that she had the faintest idea of what she was going to do: there was no place to hide and no weapon to wield.

Nevertheless, she didn't want to be caught by surprise and she kept her senses alert. But the only noise she could make out was the indistinct blaring of a TV. There was no door slamming or shuffling of feet outside her prison.

Lucy rolled onto her back and stared at the dirt streaked ceiling boards. She could see the rusty heads of nails holding the boards in place and the outline of the beams to which they were attached. Fine white spider webs hung limply from the cornices, and yellow cocoons containing a myriad of spider eggs clung to the walls.

Lucy shuddered. She hated spiders with a passion. She could stand the sight of cockroaches, but not spiders. Only imagining the black body of a spider with its long thin legs made her skin crawl.

Once, a few years ago, she had been to an outdoor exhibition and had seen bird spiders, tarantulas and baboon spiders. The ugly eight-legged insects had sat on small brown rocks, their hairy front legs perched up in the air, ready to attack at the slightest movement. Luckily they had been kept in cages, behind thick glass.

The man taking care of these evil creatures explained to her that the big spiders were relatively harmless, but she wasn't convinced. He also told her that it was the small spiders with the red dot on the back – like those ones found in cluttered

garages and garden sheds - that were more dangerous. Those spiders were the ones that could kill a person.

Lucy stared at the cocoons glued to the top of the walls. Didn't a brittle shell just move? Cold dread stiffened her spine. She watched the cocoons intently. She heard the fragile casing cracking open. Wasn't that long thin thing protruding from the crust a spider leg? Oh my God! The spiders were hatching.

Lucy pushed herself into a sitting position, her eyes never leaving the cocoons on the wall. Desperately, not wanting to believe what she was seeing, she raised her hand, rubbed her eyes hard and blinked a couple of times.

Looking back at the wall, she soon realised that the cocoons where the same shape as they had been a few minutes ago. There were no cracks in their oval crusts; there were no small openings in the yellow shells!

Lucy sighed deeply. Her eyes had played a trick on her. Nevertheless, she crawled across the mattress to be as far away as possible from the spider cocoons, hoping the evil creatures wouldn't mature before she could leave this hell hole.

As she settled against the wall, a whiff of the ablutions bucket hit her nostrils. Bitter bile rose again in her throat and an acidic taste gathered in her mouth. She glanced at the container filled almost to the rim. Another three or four pees and the bucket would overflow. And then? The filth would spill onto the floor, run into the cracks, soak the mattress, and the stench would make their lives totally unbearable.

Anger rose in Lucy at the indignity she was suffering at the hands of her kidnappers.

How dare they? How dare they treat them like animals? How dare they let them sit in their own filth?

Lucy jumped to her feet and rushed to the door. She balled her small hands into fists and hammered on the door.

"Hey!" she shouted at the top of her voice. "Hey!"

The banging was magnified in the room, sounding three times louder than it actually was. Together with her hands, she used her feet, kicking the door with full force, trying to make as much noise as she could to draw attention.

Suddenly, Lucy felt an arm around her waist pulling her away from the door. "What are you doing?" Silvy whispered urgently.

Lucy stared at the other girl dumbfounded.

"I told you what happened to Shelly when she went mad," Silvy said, her eyes blazing and her hand pointing to the girl in the corner. "Do you want to be swung by your feet and thrown against the wall?"

Lucy stepped back, putting some distance between them. "I don't care," she said crossing her arms in front of her.

"What's your case?" Silvy hissed, placing her hands on her hips.

Lucy flicked her head in the direction of the bucket. "I'm not going to wait until that thing overflows and soaks us," she stated heatedly.

Silvy rolled her eyes. "And what are you going to do about it?"

"I'll make them take it outside," Lucy replied offhandedly.

Silvy stared at her with disbelief. "You are crazy," she said, making a circling motion with her forefinger against her temple. "They'll kill you before they let you get rid of the bucket."

Lucy narrowed her brows. "At least I'll die without having my feet covered in our shit," she snapped angrily. "Maybe you are prepared to sit in your own filth, I'm not!"

Silvy pressed her lips together. She didn't like the idea of having to sit on a urine drenched mattress, but she didn't want to get her brains bashed in simply because Lucy was determined to get rid of the sticking bucket.

Lucy turned her back on Silvy and determinedly returned to the door.

Hitting the wood with the palm of her hands, she yelled, "Hey! Can you hear me?"

"Stop making such a racket!" Rat Face shouted back.

Lucy screamed even louder. "Open the door!"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Silvy crouching beside Shelly. The pixy-faced girl had started to whimper softly, so Silvy put an arm around the girl's shoulders protectively.

"Stop it, Lucy!" Silvy whispered loudly. "You'll get us all killed!"

Lucy ignored Silvy's desperate plea and continued beating the door.

Suddenly a key turned in the lock and the handle went down. Lucy took a step back. She had no intention of standing within easy reach when Rat Face entered the room.

The door swung back and the ferret's ugly visage appeared.

"What are you up to?" he asked menacingly.

Lucy crossed her arms defiantly.

"Did you make the racket?" he asked, barely suppressing his annoyance.

Rat Face took a step forward into the room, catching a whiff of the stench in the humid air.

"Fuck!" he exclaimed. "It stinks in here!"

As he raised his hand to cover his nose, Dirk appeared behind him. The young man's T-shirt was still dirty, but he seemed to have made an effort to wash out the stain. Dirk peered past Rat Face's head, his eyes taking in the girls hunkered down in the far corner, and the defiant Lucy standing in front of her abductor.

"What's up?" he asked kindly, addressing his words to her.

Encouraged by his friendliness, Lucy said. "The bucket is full and I want you to empty it." Nervousness made her voice high-pitched. She sounded like a whining five year old and she hated herself for it.

Rat Face's laugh sounded like a burst of machine gun fire. "You want what?" he screeched.

Lucy's courage left her in big leaps. Her lips, her hands, as a matter of fact her whole body shook like dry leaves in an autumn storm. Pleadingly she looked at the young man standing behind Rat Face.

The combination of Lucy's words and Rat Face's reaction made Dirk's mind go into overdrive.

Yes! he wanted to shout out loud. This was his opportunity! Now he could help the girls! If he could just get one of them alone!

Ideas raced through his head, but only one stuck fast. If he could get Lucy out of the room, then he could ask her for her parents' telephone number. He just had to get her away from Rat Face. They only needed a couple of minutes alone! Once he knew the telephone number, he could contact her parents. He could tell them where their daughter was being held and in turn her parents would be able to call the cops.

The whole nightmare would be over!

Dirk was barely able to control his excitement. Yes! Yes! He only had to convince Rat Face to let Lucy out of the room.

Glancing at the ferret, and being only too aware of his adversary's racist thinking, he quickly formulated a plan.

Dirk tapped Rat Face on the shoulder.

"What?" the ferret growled, glancing behind him in Dirk's general direction.

"She wants us to empty the bucket," Dirk stated calmly.

Rat Face spun on his heel. "I heard her," he hissed.

Dirk raised an eyebrow. "So?"

Rat Face hunched his shoulders forward aggressively. "Who do you think I am? Do you think I'm their maid?"

Dirk cocked his head to the side. "Never entered my mind," he mumbled, his words almost inaudible.

Rat Face watched him through narrowed eyes, hostility emanating from him in waves.

Worriedly Lucy watched the two men. Dirk kept his face a blank mask, but it was obvious that there was no love lost between the ferret and him. Lucy instinctively knew, given the slightest chance, Rat Face would pull his knife on Dirk once again and *that* was something Lucy wanted to avoid by all means! Dirk was the only hope they had of getting out of there alive.

Taking her heart into both of her hands, Lucy bravely took a step forward.

"I'll do it," she offered. "I'll empty the bucket."

At the sound of her voice, Rat Face turned to examine her carefully. His eyes travelled down her body, lingering for a moment on her small breasts, before wandering further down to the hem of her short school skirt. Eventually, his mouth turned into a vicious snarl.

"Yeah! There's a thought," he nodded. "You can empty the bucket. I guess your mama taught you right," he surmised. "You should be used to it, being black and all."

Although it stung like hell, Lucy ignored the insult, letting the words wash over her. The important part was that he had agreed to let her empty out the urine.

Without wasting precious time and before Rat Face had a chance to change his mind, she crab-walked sideways towards the bucket, the foul smell rising in her nostrils the closer she came to the container. Her foot struck the metal bucket with a faint clanging thud. Without letting Rat Face out of her sight, Lucy bent down, touching the rim of the bucket. Groping around its edge, her fingers touched the surface of the foul liquid a couple of times. Eventually she found the handle. With a silent sigh, she slipped her hand around the sturdy wire until she was able to clutch the wooden handle tightly. Lucy lifted the full bucket. Unfortunately she underestimated its weight. The pail tilted and urine sloshed over its side. The stinking liquid ran over her shoes, seeping through the tiny ornate holes cut into the black leather and wetting her white ankle socks.

Rat Face cackled loudly. "Not enough practice, huh?" he mocked her.

Tears of humiliation stung Lucy's eyes and she bit her lip.

It was just too much! She wished with all her heart that she could drop the bucket, run into a corner and hide forever.

Concerned, Dirk watched her struggle with the bucket.

"Hey, girl," he called. "Do you need any help?"

Rat Face punched Dirk's shoulder playfully. "She doesn't need your help! She's black and used to it," he laughed. "She's only acting. Aren't you, girl?" he taunted Lucy.

Taking courage from Dirk's offer to help, Lucy clenched her teeth. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment, but she gripped the wooden handle tightly.

She would show him! she thought with sudden fury. The arsehole! He wasn't going to get the better of her!

Carefully Lucy lifted up the bucket and held it steady. Putting one foot in front of the other, she approached the ferret, making sure the foul smelling liquid did not slosh over the sides again.

Rat Face watched her with raised eyebrows, and only when Lucy stood right in front of him, did he step aside to let her pass. Lucy kept her eyes straight ahead and made her way into the lounge. Her vision adjusted quickly to the bright sunlight filtering through the open patio doors.

A tiny gasp escaped her mouth. What a mess! There was paper everywhere. Empty food cartons and cereal boxes lay strewn across the tiled floor. The kitchen counter was piled high with dirty dishes, food wrappers, and empty glasses. Involuntarily she halted her progress into the mayhem.

Rat Face nudged her from behind. "What's up, little maid?" he goaded her. "Is the bucket too heavy?"

Lucy refrained from answering, not wanting to tempt him into pushing her any harder. One slosh of urine over her shoes was enough.

On nimble feet, Rat Face danced around her until he faced her. Using his finger, he placed it under her chin and lifted her head. His breath smelled as foul as the contents of the bucket in her hand.

"Hello, little maid," he leered.

Almost gagging from the stench of his mouth, Lucy turned away, but Rat Face held fast.

"What's up?" he asked in a syrupy voice. "Don't you like me?"

Lucy tried to hide the shudder that ran down her back, remembering Silvy's earlier explanation about rape. Taking shallow breaths, she lowered her eyelids to avoid having to look at him directly. Images of his dirty hands touching her tender breasts, his tongue roughly licking her neck, and his knee forcing her legs apart, flashed through her mind. His breath seemed to get hotter by the second and Lucy opened her eyes quickly. Rat Face's nose was almost touching hers. She could see his clogged up, black-headed pores, the yellow crusts in the corners of his unwashed eyes and the gunk covering his un-brushed teeth.

"Hey, Rudi," Dirk called. "Let the girl pass."

Rat Face's head came up and he let go of Lucy's chin. Gratefully, Lucy breathed in deeply, drawing in the hot lunch-time air. She wiped her dry trembling lips with the back of her hand and smoothed down her short school skirt.

How she wished her blasted skirt was longer. Why did the school insist on skirts? Why weren't girls allowed to wear pants? Why did they have to wear a school uniform at all? If she wore jeans, she would have at least felt a little more protected. Like this, in her thin blouse and her short skirt, she was so vulnerable. There was no extra layer of clothing to hide her body.

Drawing her shoulders back, Lucy banned the thoughts from her mind. It was no use dwelling on something she couldn't change. At this moment it was more important to focus on her survival and that was to stay out of Rat Face's reach. To her relief, the ferret had retreated behind the overflowing kitchen counter.

Glancing around the room, Lucy quickly realized they were standing in a small chalet. There seemed to be only one large room that served as a lounge; their dank room where they were held prisoners; an open-plan kitchen with a long counter running from one side of the chalet to the other, and another room hidden behind a closed door. Lucy took a tentative step in the direction of the closed door hoping she would find the bathroom so that she could empty the bucket. Seeing her hesitation, Dirk came to her rescue.

"Follow me," he said kindly, as he made his way across the lounge.

Holding the bucket steady, Lucy carefully picked her way through the debris on the floor. Dirk opened the door and Lucy saw the fixtures of a bathroom. Slowly she approached Dirk, who was holding the bathroom door open. She stepped across the threshold and Dirk followed her inside the small enclosure, closing the door behind them. Lucy placed the full bucket on the floor and opened the lid of the toilet.

While Dirk held up the toilet lid, Lucy lifted the heavy bucket and poured out the foul smelling liquid. It splashed loudly into the bowl and Lucy turned her face away to avoid any stray drops of urine.

"Hey, Lucy," Dirk whispered urgently.

Startled Lucy looked up at him, surprised to hear him speak her name. She didn't think he would remember it.

"Do you know your parents' telephone number?" Dirk asked.

Holding the now empty bucket in her hand, Lucy stared at him blankly.

"Come on, Lucy," he said anxiously. "Do you know their number?"

He nudged her arm lightly, pushing her for an answer.

Lucy tilted her head, but did not reply.

Worriedly Dirk glanced at the door. Rat Face could burst into the room at any moment.

A frown appeared on Lucy's forehead. "Why?" she asked. "Why do you want to know my mother's number?"

Now it was his turn to stare at her blankly.

Why was she being so difficult? Why was she asking him all these questions? His face darkened with frustration and he was ready to shout at her.

Why couldn't she just answer him?

Noticing her confused and frightened face, he immediately backed off. How would he react if he were in her shoes? he reminded himself. Relaxing his tense features, he leaned his hip against the basin.

"Because I want to tell them where you are," he explained patiently.

Her brain was not making the correct connections quickly enough. "Why do you want to do that?" she asked puzzled.

Dirk sighed theatrically. "Because I want to help you and the others," he replied.

"But," Lucy objected.

Dirk held up his hands. "Don't be so daft," he growled. "Do you know their number or not?"

"Sure," she replied.

Dirk looked at her expectantly. "So. What is it?"

"Oh, yes," Lucy stammered. "My mom's name is Thandeka," she finally answered.

"Right. And her number?"

"Her cell phone number is 082 637 4...."

The bathroom door flew open and banged against the wall. Lucy dropped the empty bucket and it ended up on the floor with a loud clonk. Dirk's cheeks paled to a chalky white.

"What are you two doing?" Rat Face snarled, looking from one to the other. "Are you having it on with her?"

Recovering quickly, Dirk altered his stance against the basin and managed a bored look.

"Are you mad?" he replied. "I'm not a child abuser."

Rat Face's brows narrowed. "So what were you two doing in here?" he asked suspiciously.

Dirk pointed to the bucket on the floor. "I was holding up the toilet lid while the girl emptied the bucket," he said indifferently. "I hope you don't mind," he added sarcastically.

Rat Face took a step away from the door, his upper lip curling into an ugly snarl.

"Get out of here," he hissed.

Holding the door open, he pointed his thumb in the direction of the lounge. With trembling hands, Lucy picked up the bucket. She lowered her head and walked out of the bathroom into the messy main room. Dirk followed her slowly. Lucy stopped after a few steps, quite a distance away from her prison. Staring at the closed door, her heart began to pound in her throat.

She didn't want to go back into that room! She didn't want to sit in the semi darkness not knowing what was going to happen next! She didn't want to wait ...

Her desperate thoughts were interrupted when she felt a hand grab her neck from behind.

Lucy was pushed forward and had no choice but to stumble along. Rat Face opened the dreaded door and Lucy was pushed back inside the dank prison. Giving her one last hard shove, Lucy almost fell on her knees but caught her balance at the last moment. Before she could turn around to plead with her abductor, the door was flung shut and she heard the key turn in the lock.

xxx

Ryan grabbed his car keys, checked that his cellphone was in his pocket and walked out of his office and down the carpeted passage. He stopped in front of Nomsa placing his hands on the reception counter. Nomsa's long talons were flying over her keyboard with tremendous speed, her concentration complete. More sensing than seeing her boss standing at the reception desk, she stopped typing.

"Please take messages for me," Ryan instructed her. "I'll be out for the rest of the day. And I don't know when I'll be back," he added.

Nomsa nodded. "I'll do so, Mr Bates," she answered.

"Thanks," he said with a smile, and turned away from the counter, almost bumping into Raphaella who was standing inconspicuously behind him. Her handbag was slung over her shoulder and her face was set determinedly.

"Do you have an appointment out of the office?" he asked puzzled.

Raphaella tilted her head. "Yes," she replied simply.

Mentally checking his diary, Ryan could not recall any entry indicating a meeting with a potential or existing client.

"Where are you going?" he asked finally.

She pushed her long dark mane over her shoulder, her lips curling into a tentative smile.

"With you," she said softly.

He looked at her surprised. "With me?" he repeated.

"Yes."

Ryan recovered quickly from her ambush. "Oh, no," he shook his head. "You are not coming with me. This has nothing to do with you and you are needed here in the office."

Raphaela pressed her lips together. "I am going with you," she announced. "The office won't fall apart whilst I'm not here and Thomas needs all the help he can get."

Ryan glared at her for a moment.

"Just think of his poor sister," she said persuasively. "She has to deal with the disappearance of her daughter and all she's got are men telling her what to do." She crossed her arms in front of her. "I really think she would like the support of another woman."

Ryan pursed his lips. Raphaela had a point, he conceded. He wasn't sure if Thandeka had any women friends, but he knew for certain that there was no mother or sister to help her through this difficult time. Another woman wouldn't be such a bad idea. At least it would relieve Thomas a bit. He could imagine that it wasn't easy for him, as a man, to deal with his anxious, crying sister, and he had already spent the last eighteen hours with her.

Ryan nodded his head. "Okay," he said. "You can come, but if there's nothing you can do, then you'll have to come back to the office."

Raphaela uncrossed her arms. "Deal," she replied amicably.

Men are so ignorant sometimes, she thought. As if there was the slightest chance she would go back to the office. Despite not having any children of her own, she could very well imagine how Thandeka felt: the worry about not knowing where Lucy was, the anxiety of not knowing what fate had befallen her daughter, the fear of not seeing her alive again eating her up inside. Ryan obviously had no inkling how a mother felt about her children.

Until Thandeka's daughter was back safely in her arms, there was no way Raphaela would even consider going back to the office. And Ryan could fire her if he wanted to, but Thandeka and finding Lucy were her priority now.

Without a further word, Ryan made his way outside into the bright sunshine. Raphaela followed him quickly. Ryan unlocked his BMW and Raphaela climbed into the front passenger seat. As he reversed out of the parking lot, she snapped on her safety belt. Within moments, Ryan shifted gears, pointed the BMW's nose in the direction of the traffic circle and raced away.

Navigating the on-ramp to the highway, thousands of cars rolled along the tarred surfaces, snaking past dusty brush, stunted trees and office blocks. Companies situated next to the highway displayed their respective logos dominantly, either on the roof, or on the buildings' facades.

Ten-ton trucks and other heavy duty vehicles occupied the left lane of the highway, their exhausts emitting dark poisonous fumes. *Bakkies* and slower moving cars clogged up the middle lane, and fully loaded Combis flitted past private vehicles, the taxi drivers neglecting to flash their indicators.

The sun reflected off windshields and rear windows. Its rays burned mercilessly onto the roof of their 4x4, quickly heating up the interior's air to an uncomfortable

temperature. Ryan switched on the air conditioner and fiddled with the vents on the dashboard. Soon a soft breeze cooled their skins, the wind playing with the fine wisps of Raphaela's long hair.

Without turning his head, Ryan glanced at his assistant. Raphaela's eyes were hidden behind large, black sunglasses, but he could still see the rest of her face. He admired her small-up tilted nose, her high cheekbones, her smooth olive complexion and her full sensuous lips. She had folded her slender fingers in her lap and had crossed her long shapely legs.

What a beautiful creature she was, Ryan grumbled silently.

His thought was interrupted when Raphaela cleared her throat.

"Thank you for letting me trail along," she said with a smile.

He nodded lightly. "You were right," he replied. "I think Thomas needs all the help he can get."

Raphaela shifted in her seat. "You do care quite a bit," she observed. "Is it because something like this has happened to you?"

Ryan shook his head. "No, nothing like this has ever happened to me," he answered.

"So, you've never been married and you don't have any kids," she fished.

Ryan burst out laughing. "No," he replied. "There's no ex-wife and no children. Who would want me anyway?" he added wistfully.

Raphaela raised an eyebrow. "Why *wouldn't* anyone want you?" she asked surprised. "You are young; own your business and you are handsome."

He shot her a surprised glance over his shoulder. "Thanks for the compliment," he said. "But it's not that simple."

"Why not?" she probed.

Ryan sighed. "Most women don't understand that it takes a lot of financial discipline to run your own business. They see the money, the big car, the paid-off townhouse, and instantly they believe they can go on a spending spree. If I object they say I'm stingy." Annoyed he shook his head at the memory of his last girlfriend's attitude.

Raphaela chuckled quietly in response.

Ryan tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. "They also don't seem to understand that it takes a lot of dedication to be reasonably successful. Almost every one of my ex-girlfriends thought my day was supposed to be over at five thirty." He drew a deep breath. "As you know, I often sit until late at night working on figures or reading over contracts." A sad look crossed his face. "They put up with it for a while, but then they start nagging, demanding that I spend more time with them, and when I point out that I don't have the time, they get all upset." Ryan paused for a moment. "I usually get accused of being selfish, uncaring, and of being a work-alcoholic." He shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "After a few months they break up with me."

Turning her head away, trying to hide her feelings, Raphaela looked out of the window. Her heart buzzed like a swarm of bees in her chest.

Was he implying that there was no one special in his life? she wondered.

A faint rosy glow spread across her cheeks. She was glad she wore her huge sunglasses.

Forcing her wild emotions under control, she tilted her head to the side. "Don't beat yourself up over it," she said offhandedly. "Most people don't understand what it takes to be successful in business."

A corner of his mouth curled into a smile. "I'm not beating myself up, but sometimes it would be nice to be together with someone. Someone who understands how the business works; someone who is not only gorgeous but also smart like you and pulls at the same end of the rope."

Realising what he had just said, he swallowed hard.

What had he been thinking? What the hell had gotten into him? Why did he just say that?

He groaned silently. He had blundered into this like a sixteen-year old schoolboy.

Trying to hide his embarrassment, he brushed his hand through his hair.

Raphaela had been listening carefully and her eyes grew huge behind her sunglasses.

Had he just implied that he would consider her? she thought feverishly.

She shook her head. That couldn't be true. She ran his words through her mind again. He had said that he would like to be with someone who is not only gorgeous but also smart like her. Did that mean that he liked her?

Raphaela bit her lip hard. Maybe she had misunderstood? Maybe he had meant someone else? Maybe there was a woman whom he admired, but didn't want to name.

Her mind racing in all directions, she set her jaw determinedly. There was only one way to find out.

"Well," she said nonchalantly, waving her hand. "She must be a lucky woman to be chosen by you."

Ryan raised an eyebrow not sure what to make of her comment. A few moments earlier, he had thought he had given away his feelings, and now she was talking about another woman.

Ryan pursed his lips.

He had to set the record straight quickly before she believed that he was involved with someone.

Ryan took a deep breath. "There is nobody who compares to you," he blurted out.

Raphaela looked at him over the rim of her sunglasses. "Oh," she replied. "I thought ...," her voice trailed off.

Immediately silence descended over them.

Raphaela's heart was singing. The man of her dreams had confirmed that he was available.

She chuckled quietly.

And, he had indicated that he was interested in her.

A little smug smile played around her lips. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, but he was staring at the traffic, his face set in stone. Raphaela wanted to touch his arm to reassure him that she was as interested in him as he was in her, but thought better of it.

Rather not push him, she advised herself. Take it easy. They had time enough. He wasn't going anywhere and she did not intend to resign from the company very soon.

Before she could plan on how to keep the conversation going in the right direction, they came to an abrupt halt.

"Damn!" Ryan swore under his breath and slammed his hand onto the steering wheel.

Raphaela stared through the window trying to make out what had stopped their progress, but they were stationary on a small incline and she could not see over the rise.

"What do you think is going on?" she asked concerned.

Ryan rubbed his neck with his hand. "Probably an accident," he replied irritably.

If there was one thing in the world which annoyed him the most, it was a traffic jam. He hated being stuck on the highway, unable to move as freely as he wished.

All three lanes were blocked. Trucks, *bakkies*, Combis and passenger cars stood bumper to bumper, not moving one inch. About five hundred metres further along, the driver of a big truck revved his engine and a cloud of acrid smoke escaped from his exhaust.

"Does he have to do that?" Ryan growled touchily.

Instead of replying, Raphaela looked out of the window. A youngster on her left had rolled down his window and loud rap music was drifting through the hot air. The red-haired woman in a silver Toyota in front of the youngster's Honda was yapping away on her cell phone. Two black people in the backseat of an old pea-green Mazda shifted in their seats and Raphaela saw them laugh at something the driver had said. Blue cigarette smoke curled out of the open driver's window of a charcoal grey Hyundai further up the lane.

A few minutes later, the traffic jam began moving forward. Ryan shifted gears and slowly followed the vehicle in front of him.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of sirens. Glancing in his rear view mirror, Ryan noticed several police cars and an ambulance speeding in the emergency lane. They approached with neck-breaking speed, the howls of their horns increasing by the second, until they had reached a crescendo as they raced past Ryan's BMW.

"I told you it was an accident," he stated.

Raphaela didn't say anything.

They moved up the incline and were finally able to see into the distance. The highway was still blocked across all three lanes. About two kilometres further on, the police vehicles and the ambulance came to a stop. Their blue and red lights flashed frantically, looking like lighthouse signals in a sea of cars. A swarm of police officers in short-sleeved white shirts and black trousers were cordoning off the area where the accident had occurred. They placed orange cones in the middle lane leaving only one lane open for the traffic to pass.

Ryan's and Raphaela's progress was slow and tedious. Three full lanes needed to filter into one and every driver in front of their 4x4 had to give way for at least two vehicles from the other lanes. A dark cloud settled over Ryan's features as he tried to control his impatience. He inched closer to the accident and Raphaela craned her neck to make out what had happened.

But all she could see was an overturned yellow truck lying like a huge ugly insect on its side. Its oily undercarriage was clearly visible, with the truck's tyres stuck up helplessly in the air.

As they passed the crash site, Raphael saw the cause of the accident.

A red Minibus taxi had attempted to cut off the truck, but had underestimated its speed. The truck had hit the Combi on its side. From the overall damage visible to the Minibus taxi, the vehicle had rolled several times and had come to a standstill in the grassy ditch next to the highway. Its tinted windows were shattered and brown

glass was strewn across the tarmac. A large pool of black oil shimmered in the bright sunshine.

The police cars and the ambulance were parked close to the truck's cabin so that Raphaella could not determine if there were any injured people inside.

Instantly disgusted with herself, Raphaella turned away from the window. It was bad enough that the drivers passing by the grisly accident scene tried to steal a glimpse of any hurt and bleeding people.

But she did not have to be one of them. She did not want to become another voyeur growing excited by other people's misfortune.

Glancing over her shoulder at Ryan, she admired the man's self-discipline. He never looked even fleetingly in the direction of the accident site, but instead focussed entirely on the cars in front of him.

"Bloody idiots," he grumbled quietly. "Why must they always speed?"

His comment did not require an answer. Raphaella knew very well that thousands of South Africans died every year on the roads due to excessive speed. Especially drivers of fully loaded Minibus taxis often lost control of their vehicles, crashing into oncoming traffic, or into the highways' barriers, thereby causing immeasurable grief.

As they left the accident scene behind, the traffic sped up. Ryan accelerated steadily and soon the two were again on their way to Thomas and his sister.

CHAPTER 12

Thoughtfully Dirk stared into the hazy distance. His attempt to obtain the crucial cellphone number had failed dismally. He remembered the number Lucy was able to give him clearly: 082 637 4. But unfortunately there were three digits missing.

Three lousy numbers, he groaned silently, and this nightmare would have come to an end.

He was not good at mathematics and he knew it would be impossible for him to work out the correct sequence of the missing digits.

How many possibilities were there anyhow?

Dirk began calculating. If he started at number one and went up to nine ... that was already nine probabilities! Now he had to do the same with the second number. But then he had to combine each number with one of the first numbers.

Despondently he shook his head. There was absolutely no way he could figure out the last three digits of the cellphone number.

Why did Rat Face have to storm into the bathroom? he moaned quietly. Why had Lucy taken so long to understand what he wanted from her?

Dirk rubbed his face miserably.

What was he supposed to do now? How was he supposed to create another situation in which he could ask her for the rest of the numbers?

The future looked bleak, more than bleak. The coming hours spelled disaster if he could not summon help. He could see where all this was going and he was desperate to prevent it from happening.

Thoughts swirled round and round in his head. What on earth was he going to do?

Having squatted too long in one spot, he felt the heat from the concrete patio start to burn through the soles of his *takkies*. On top of it, his stomach made its presence known with a loud grumble. Hunger gnawed at his insides and Dirk began to feel slightly nauseous from lack of food. The thought of something to eat made him push his worry about the girls into the back of his mind.

He rose to his feet and stepped into the lounge. The air in the small chalet was hot, humid, and stank of fried rancid chips. He walked across the littered lounge kicking empty McDonalds containers out of the way, the boxes spilling soggy pieces of cold, oily French fries drenched in tomato sauce. Disgusted at the mess, he kicked one food carton particularly viciously. The box flew across the floor and hit the opposite wall. Unbeknown to him the carton contained a bottle. The glass broke and jagged shards sprayed in all directions.

"Fuck!" Rat Face shouted. "What are you doing?"

The ferret was watching TV again.

Dirk shrugged his shoulders. "Nothing," he replied.

"Don't make such a fucking noise," Rat Face demanded and turned back to the TV.

Dirk ignored the ferret and continued booting boxes out of his way until he reached the kitchen. Bending down, Dirk opened one cupboard door after the other, inspecting the empty space behind each one briefly, only to slam them closed again.

Rat Face jumped to his feet. "Hey, arsehole," he shouted highly annoyed. "What the hell's your case?"

Dirk raised his head above the counter. "I'm hungry," he stated. "I'm looking for something to eat."

His head disappeared and he banged another cupboard door.

"Stop it, you idiot," Rat Face yelled.

Dirk peered over the countertop again, looking Rat Face up and down.

"I'm hungry," he hissed. "I want food."

"Why? Are you hungry?" Rat Face's eyes narrowed. "It's not even one o'clock."

"What's it to you?" Dirk spat.

Rat Face grinned maliciously. "Shame, the poor boy is hungry," he taunted.

Dirk rose to his full height behind the counter. His stomach growled loudly and he felt a hunger headache coming on.

There must be food somewhere in this place, he thought irritably.

His eyes strayed from Rat Face to the dilapidated couch, the TV, and across the lounge, but he could not detect any tell tale signs of new wrappers on the floor. On the other hand, the place was in such an incredible mess that there was no way of knowing if Rat Face had eaten anything without sharing it with him.

Dirk pressed his lips together and stared hard at the ferret. He was convinced that Rat Face had to have something edible at hand. The ferret was not the kind of guy who could hold out very long without starting to complain. But, in all their hours together, Rat Face had been quiet; not mentioning food once.

Angrily, Dirk glared at the ferret. "There better be some food in this place," he said.

Rat Face crossed his arms in front of him smugly. "Or what?"

Dirk was not in the mood for Rat Face's antics. As he pressed his hands on the kitchen counter, his fingertips touched a large kitchen knife. Instinctively his hand closed around its handle and he gripped it tightly.

Suddenly something snapped in him.

"I've had enough of you," Dirk shouted and made his way around the counter, holding the wooden handle in his hand. "You better tell me quickly where you've hidden the food."

Rat Face's pupils darkened at the sight of the knife. Before he could react, Dirk had the point of the knife at the ferret's throat.

"Are you going to tell me or not?" Dirk asked, his eyes glittering dangerously.

Carefully Rat Face raised his hands. "Calm down," he whispered.

Dirk pushed a bit harder and the knife drew a few drops of blood. Small beads of sweat formed on the ferret's upper lip.

"Take the knife away and I'll tell you," he said bravely.

Dirk shook his head. "You're going to tell me now."

For a moment Rat Face tried to judge Dirk's mood. Would he really hurt him if he didn't tell him where he had hidden the food? He looked into Dirk's determined face and decided it was not worth finding out. There *were* provisions to last for a few days. It would be no loss to share some of them now.

Rat Face pointed to the TV. "There are a few bags in the cabinet," he said hoarsely.

Dirk raised an eyebrow in disgust. "So, you'd let me starve just for the fun of it?"

A few more beads of sweat formed on Rat Face's forehead. His little eyes darted from the corners of the room to Dirk and back again.

"No," he replied, trying to shake his head carefully, not wanting to do more damage to his throat. "Angus said not to spoil you."

Dirk's head shot forward. "Don't lie to me," he hissed. "Angus would never let me starve."

Rat Face went pale. "Alright, alright," he relented. "It was me."

The ferret's shoulders sagged as he waited for the inevitable, but Dirk did not push the knife in any deeper. Instead Rat Face felt the pressure released from his throat. His hand went up and relieved, he massaged his neck.

Dirk lowered the knife to his side and walked over to the TV standing on an old scratched cabinet. He opened the double doors and found the cabinet stuffed to the hilt with shopping bags. Pulling them out one by one, he upended them on the floor. To his delight cans of Coca Cola, Sprite and Fanta spilled on to the ground. Packets of crisps, crackers and biscuits piled on top of each other. There were several loaves of bread, vacuum sealed cheese, ham and salami. Two packets of Mama's pies and frozen pizzas joined the growing stack. One full bag contained energy bars and slabs of chocolate. There was enough food to last them a week.

Dirk picked up the food stuff from the floor and put it back into the shopping bags. Keeping two plastic carriers filled to the rim, he stuffed the remaining bags back into cabinet and closed the doors.

"What are you doing?" Rat Face asked, keeping a cautious distance.

At the kitchen counter, Dirk pushed a pile of dirty dishes out of the way and dumped the plastic bags onto the surface.

"I'm making some food for me and the girls," he replied offhandedly.

Rat Face took a few steps in Dirk's direction. "You can't do that," he said worriedly.

Dirk glanced at him over his shoulder. "What can't I do?"

"You can't give them food," Rat Face complained, waving his hand anxiously. "Angus will not allow it. They can only have energy bars. If he finds out there will be trouble," he whined.

Finding a wooden board, Dirk wiped it clean with the palm of his hand. He opened the bread packet and proceeded to lay the pre-sliced bread side by side on the board.

Rat Face grabbed him by the arm. "He'll beat the living shit out of us if he finds out," he warned.

Dirk shrugged off his hand. "Then don't tell him," he replied indifferently, placing slices of ham and salami on the bread.

Slapping another slice of bread on top, he picked it up and took a hearty bite.

Rat Face watched him enviously. Dirk's mood improved with each bite he took. Taking a sandwich from the board, he held it out to the ferret.

"Want one?" he asked, chewing all the while with a full mouth.

Rat Face pursed his lips thoughtfully, but his hesitation dissolved quickly. Eagerly he grabbed the sandwich, broke off a big piece and shoved it between his teeth. He had to admit, he had been hungry.

Dirk watched Rat Face eat and his mind began to race.

Here was another opportunity, the one he had been waiting for. An excited shiver caressed his neck. When he gave food to the girls, he would try again to get Lucy's mother's cellphone number. Yes! He only had to get rid of Rat Face for a couple of minutes.

But how?

He gave an invisible shrug. It did not matter. He would make a plan when he got there.

Dirk slapped a few more sandwiches together and stacked them on top of each other. Balancing them in one hand, he demanded, "Now, open the door."

Rat Face cocked his head to the side. Dirk registered defiance in his stance. His eyebrows narrowed angrily. "Don't give me grief," he hissed. "Open the door."

Rat Face thought it wiser not to annoy Dirk and slowly walked over to the door. He pulled out his jingling key ring and pushed the appropriate key into the lock. Turning it, the key clicked softly and the door opened.

Three pairs of frightened eyes greeted him. The one girl, Shelly, if he remembered correctly, was still hunched in the corner. But this time she was clutching one of the plastic water bottles to her chest. Lucy and the other white girl, Silvy, was that her name?, were huddled together on the dirty mattress. Careful not to single out Lucy by saying her name out loud, Dirk stepped into the room closely followed by Rat Face. Holding the stack of sandwiches in his outstretched hands, he approached the girls.

"Hey, there," he said kindly. "You must be hungry. I brought you some sandwiches."

Lucy looked at him suspiciously, not moving from the wall. Silvy lifted her head, pushing a strand of stray hair away from her face, her eyes never leaving the sandwiches.

Dirk held the bread out to the girls. "Come on," he encouraged them. "Take them." Still the girls hesitated.

A loud cackling laugh sounded behind Dirk. "They don't like your cooking," Rat Face mocked. "They prefer salmon and caviar."

Dirk shot him a dark look. "Why don't you get out of here?" he growled.

"What? And let you have all the fun alone?" Rat Face hooted.

Dirk breathed in deeply. "You are frightening them," he said calmly. "I think it's better for you to go."

"You wish," Rat Face guffawed.

Dirk tensed his shoulders, the sandwiches still in his hands. Rat Face was leaning against the door frame, his arms crossed in front of him, a malicious grin plastered on his face.

"Give them the food and get out of here," Rat Face ordered.

Sensing that the opportunity to get the cellphone number was slipping away from him, Dirk tried again to get Rat Face out of the room.

He needed that number!

"Come on," he said crossly. "For once in your life do something decent."

Rat Face narrowed his eyes, staring at him for a full minute, without uttering a sound. Dirk could see his mind working overtime.

"What the fuck are you up to?" Rat Face finally asked, swivelling away from the doorframe.

Dirk took a step back. It seemed that he had pushed too far. Attempting to ease the ferret's sudden suspicion, he relaxed his shoulders.

"Nothing," he replied quickly. "Just thinking of the girls."

"Then give them the damn sandwiches and get out of here," Rat Face said through clenched teeth.

Dirk turned back to the huddled figures on the floor and held out the food.

"Here," he said gently. "You don't have to starve."

Hesitantly Lucy leaned forward. Dirk proffered the sandwiches in her direction. Finally she crawled across the mattress. He placed the bread in her hands and Lucy's fingers closed around the bread.

"Thanks," she whispered, holding them tightly as she crept back to Silvy.

Suddenly Dirk felt Rat Face's hand on his arm. "Fancy her, don't you?" his adversary mocked.

Dirk spun on his heel. "I'm not a pervert like you," he snapped.

The ferret's grip tightened, almost hurting Dirk. "Get the fuck out of here," he commanded. "If you don't fancy her, then you have no business in here."

Dirk pulled his arm away. "You are a sick bastard," he replied disgusted, and marched out of the room.

He heard the click in the lock and the girls were imprisoned once again.

Damn! Damn! he shouted inaudibly. The opportunity for the nightmare to end was gone. There had been no chance to ask Lucy for her mother's cellphone number. Rat Face had watched him like an eagle. And now, it seemed that the guy had become suspicious. Damn! Damn it!

Frustrated, Dirk stomped across the littered floor, passing the filthy couch on his way out into the bright sunshine. Slumping against the wall around the corner, he buried his head in his arms.

xxx

Rehearsing the directions from the night before, Ryan followed the route Thomas had shown him. During daylight, the suburb looked neat and tidy. Old gnarled trees threw shadows on pre-cast concrete walls painted dark green or white. Occasionally, through the black bars of a gate, Ryan caught glimpses of lovingly tended beds filled with red roses, lilac lavender, pink azaleas and yellow pansies. Cool water sprayed in wide arcs across emerald lawns, glittering seductively. Medium size houses stood well back from the road and paved driveways led up to shut garage doors. Pavements, their concrete slabs or brick tiles often cracked or missing, were lining every street they turned into. Now and then, a Toyota, Mazda or Nissan was parked in front of a home. Ryan's impression from the previous night was confirmed: Edenvale was a well-kept, middle-class area where people proudly maintained their properties and their neighbourhood.

He turned left and followed the road around a bend. A lone, white plastic bag flapped from a drainage hole beneath the pavement, but otherwise there was no movement in the street. Slowing down, he searched for the house he had visited the evening before. Spotting Thomas's sister's Audi A3 in a driveway, open to the street, he swerved towards the opposite side of the road, bounced over the curb stone and stopped beside the smart black car.

Ryan switched off his 4x4. "Here we are," he announced.

Raphaela straightened her top and retrieved her handbag from the floor.

Ryan opened his door and climbed out of the car. The heat was intense, radiating up from the paved driveway and threatening to take his breath away. Raphaella slammed her door shut and walked around the 4x4. Together they approached the small house. Ryan knocked on its wooden door and Raphaela turned to look at the eerily silent neighbourhood.

With only a few exceptions, six foot walls surrounded the houses on both sides of the street. The entrances into the properties were closed off by automatic gates, created from either plain metal sheeting painted black, or ornately wrought bars crafted into shapes of vines or leaves. The pavements were shadowed by the thick branches of poplar trees.

It was deadly quiet. No motorist drove down the street - not even a dog barked. It seemed as if the atmosphere had sensed the tragedy playing out in the house behind her.

Raphaela turned her back on the deserted neighbourhood as she heard the front door open.

"Hello," Thomas's melodious voice greeted them and a broad smile appeared on his tired face when he saw Ryan's companion.

"Hi, Raphaela," he said warmly. "Please come in."

Raphaela squeezed past Thomas and Ryan followed her into the entrance hall. Thomas closed the front door and the light dimmed in the narrow passage.

"Hello, Thomas," she said. "I hope you don't mind me coming along, but I thought another set of eyes and ears could be of use to you."

Letting go of the front door's knob, Thomas's expression became instantly serious.

"Yes," he replied. "I *really* appreciate you coming here."

Raphaela's eyebrows rose a notch.

Thomas shuffled his feet embarrassed.

"I mean," he stumbled along. "I am grateful for all the help we can get, but my sister might be grateful to have another woman around." Thomas thumbed his chest self-deprecatingly. "I think I'm not as supportive as she would like me to be, being a man and all."

A small smile tugged at the corners of Raphaela's mouth. She understood perfectly well. Men, in general, weren't the most sensitive beings on earth at the best of times and judging by Thomas's exhausted expression, she could just imagine that he had had about enough of comforting his sister whilst at the same time trying to find his niece.

"How is Thandeka holding up?" Raphaela asked sympathetically.

Thomas heaved a sigh. "As is to be expected, she is beside herself with worry. Nothing I say makes any difference. The whole night she's been wandering around the house and she hasn't stopped crying. She has hardly slept and to put it bluntly, she is a wreck."

Raphaela looked at her colleague carefully, noticing the grey tinge discolouring his brown skin and the dark rings beneath his eyes.

She reached up and touched his arm lightly. "And how are you doing?" she asked gently.

Thomas rubbed the top of his head. "I wish I could do something," he replied wistfully. "I'm cubed up in this place. Thandeka won't give me her car, just in case Lucy comes home, or she needs to rush out to get her. I've been staring at the phone wanting it to ring, but nothing happens. It's driving me nuts! On top of everything, my uncle arrived a few minutes ago. I've got no idea what he thinks he is going to achieve."

Thomas took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't mean to carry on like this, but I'm worried sick about Lucy."

"Don't sweat it man," Ryan said calmly. "We are here to help you and we'll do everything we can." A lopsided grin appeared on his face. "We'll find her," he said, "even if we have to move heaven and earth."

Thomas nodded a confirmation. "Thanks partner."

Drawing on an invisible source of energy, Thomas straightened his shoulders. With a forced grin, he passed his colleagues and turned right, exiting the entrance hall.

Ryan followed him into the lounge. He had spent the previous night in Thandeka's kitchen and had no chance to look around then. Curious, he scanned the interior of the house. A large sliding door opened onto a well manicured garden. Young green trees grew along its white painted boundary walls. To his right, herbs were planted in neat rows on a small patch of soil. A yellow plastic sunflower hovered in the midst of the immature plants and a red plastic shovel lay carelessly beside the brown patch. Ryan instinctively knew that this was Lucy's domain.

His eyes travelled back into the lounge. The furniture was not expensive, but tasteful. Light oak mixed with cream canvas and glass gave the room an airy feeling and made it look larger than it actually was.

Thandeka was huddled in the corner of one of the canvas clad couches, clutching a tissue. A pair of blue shorts and a loose red cotton T-shirt hugged her slender body. Her face was bare of any make-up and she looked very young and vulnerable.

Ryan's heart was instantly filled with compassion. He walked up to the couch and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Hello Thandeka," he said softly. "How are you holding up?"

She shook her head without lifting it. "I'm not," she replied.

Ryan sat on the sofa beside her. "We'll find her," he tried to reassure her.

Her eyes were huge and tears welled up in them. "Ohh, I hope so. I don't know what I'll do if I don't get her back safely."

Fear pulsed in Thandeka's voice and Raphaela approached the desperate figure on the couch.

Thomas put out a hand to Raphaela, indicating that she should wait a minute. "Thandi," he said quietly to his sister. "This is Raphaela. We work together. She heard about Lucy and wants to help too."

Thandeka lifted her head and looked at the woman standing in front of her. She noticed the long dark hair, the pretty face and the slim waist. She also saw the compassion and worry in her eyes. Instinctively, Thandeka knew that she could trust Raphaela.

Thandeka held out her hand. "Hello," she said. "Thanks for coming."

Raphaela sat down on a seat next to the couch. Leaning forward, she took Thandeka's hand in her own and held it tightly.

"I'm here for you," she said. "Whatever you need ...". Raphaela let her sentence trail off, knowing full well that her words sounded so empty. All Thandeka wanted was to hold her daughter in her arms again. Every kind word, every reassurance or action taken would fade into insignificance until Lucy was back home.

"Ahh," a voice boomed from the other side of the lounge. "We have visitors."

Ryan shifted his body and looked in the direction of the archway leading to the dining room and kitchen beyond. A large black man stood in the entrance. His bulky

shoulders were covered with a black T-shirt stretching tightly across a muscular chest. A chunky gold chain dangled from his thick neck. Ryan recognised the artfully torn jeans as Levis. The man's feet were covered by expensive blue suede sneakers.

"Uncle Elijah," Thomas said. "May I introduce you to my partner?"

The big black man nodded graciously.

Thomas pointed at Ryan. "This is the owner and Managing Director of Bates Incorporated, Mr Ryan Bates." He nodded at Raphaella. "And this is Ms Raphaella Patrizio, our assistant."

Thomas walked over to the bulky figure standing in the doorway and put his arm around the older man. "And this is my uncle, Elijah Nkosi."

As Ryan watched Thomas making the introductions, he thought he detected a hint of hostility in his partner's voice, although Thomas's face was the picture of amicability.

Ryan got to his feet and took the large man's hand. His grip was firm as he performed an African handshake: gripping each other's palms, releasing them, hooking their thumbs together, placing their fingers over the back of the other man's hand, letting go and shaking hands again.

"It's a pleasure meeting you, Mr Bates," Nkosi said. "I've heard a lot about you."

"From whom?" Thomas asked quickly.

Ryan glanced at his partner. This time he was sure he heard annoyance in his voice.

The big man pointed to Thandeka on the couch. "From your sister, of course," he replied with a syrupy voice.

Thomas's brow narrowed with irritation, but he refrained from commenting. With considerable effort he smoothed his forehead and pulled his mouth into a small smile.

Nkosi collapsed on to the sofa. Reaching out, he pulled Thandeka into his bulging arm, and she in turn placed her head against his shoulder.

Ryan watched Thomas out of the corner of his eye and saw his partner grimace painfully as the scene played out in front of them. Sensing a strong animosity between Thomas and his uncle, Ryan thought it better to diffuse the tension hanging in the air.

"I'm ready for something to drink," he announced. "Anyone else thirsty?"

Thomas shot him a sharp look, but Ryan had his best salesman expression glued to his face. Thomas knew this poker face very well. It was impenetrable and it fooled Ryan's opponents. They could not guess Ryan's intentions no matter how hard they tried.

Sighing resignedly, Thomas turned on his heel and marched into the kitchen. Ryan took the various orders and followed his partner through the archway.

Thomas lifted his index finger as Ryan stepped into the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" he asked annoyed.

"I'm making coffee for the ladies and I'm looking for soft drinks for your uncle and myself," Ryan answered innocently.

Turning his back on his partner, he began opening cupboard doors looking for mugs and coffee granules.

Impatiently, Thomas drummed his fingers on the counter. "Don't try to interfere," he said harsher than intended.

Ryan continued searching for a jar of coffee. "I'm not," he replied affably. "But it's obvious that there is something going on between you and your uncle."

Thomas snorted loudly. "He wouldn't be here if Thandeka hadn't called him."

Ryan stopped what he was doing and faced his partner. "He is your uncle," he said quietly. "He's family. Shouldn't he be here to support you and to give you a helping hand?"

Thomas's features softened a little. "Yeah," he replied. "He's family, but he shouldn't be here."

A puzzled frown appeared on Ryan's forehead. "Why shouldn't he be here?"

Thomas averted his eyes. If he had any choice in the matter, he was never going to meet his uncle ever again. A lot had happened between them and it had all started when he was a second year student. He shuddered involuntarily as memories flooded back into his mind.

It was two weeks before the semester ended when he received a call from Uncle Elijah.

"Hello Thomas," his voice boomed over the phone.

"Hi, Uncle Elijah," Thomas replied, happy to hear from him.

"I hear the semester is almost over," Elijah said.

"Uh-uh,"

"What are you going to do during your holidays?" his uncle asked slyly.

Thomas shrugged his shoulders. "Don't know yet."

There was a small pause on the other side that Thomas used to take a sip from his Coke tin.

Elijah cleared his throat. "How about coming to work for me?" he suggested.

Thomas was astounded. His uncle was offering him a job for the semester holidays! That was unheard of. Nobody was ever allowed near Elijah's business. His uncle was generous with his money, but would not permit him or his sister to poke their noses through his office doors.

"Seriously?" Thomas asked, barely keeping his excitement out of his voice.

"Yup."

"What?" Thomas asked. "You want me to drive one of the taxis?"

Elijah chuckled quietly. "No," he replied. "You are not going to drive one of the Combi's."

Instantly disappointed, Thomas pulled a face. "Then what?"

"I thought you could help out in the office," his uncle said.

"Hmph."

Sensing his nephew's reluctance, he continued, "Think about it. It's extra cash for you. And it gets you out of the house."

The thought of spending his holidays in an office was not appealing to Thomas, but the mention of extra money was very tempting. The year was very long and although his uncle gave him a generous allowance, he was always short of cash.

"It's not difficult work," Elijah explained. "You'll answer the phone, check some e-mails and keep an eye on the drivers. And I'll pay you three hundred Rand a day."

Thomas didn't need any more convincing. "Okay," he said. "I'll do it."

"Good," his uncle replied, sounding very satisfied. "I'll see you on Monday in two weeks. At seven o'clock sharp."

"So early?" Thomas exclaimed, shocked that he had to get up even earlier than usual.

A loud bellowing laugh came over the phone. "Be glad that I didn't say five o'clock. That's when we normally start."

Thomas's shoulders slumped. "Oh, alright," he managed.

"Then it's set," Elijah pressed. "You are going to be there?"

"Yeah, sure," Thomas replied.

True to his word, Thomas arrived two weeks later at Uncle Elijah's office. It had been a struggle to get out of bed, but the thought of earning three hundred Rand was a great incentive. He took a taxi into town and walked the rest of the way. The early sun tickled his face and he strode out, almost bouncing, along the pavement.

At seven o'clock sharp, Thomas pushed his hand through the burglar bars of a heavy metal gate and knocked on the glass door beyond. A buzzer sounded and the gate swung open. Thomas stepped into the dimly lit offices of his uncle's taxi empire.

The door closed behind him and Thomas looked around. A cheap green industrial carpet, patches missing here and there, covered the floor. On his right stood an old battered metal desk and on his left a metal filing cabinet, its doors partly open. A grey painted metal door with a huge padlock faced him, seemingly leading to another room, and to its left was a staircase reaching up to the first floor.

Thomas was disappointed. So, his uncle operated his business from here? This is where he made his money? In this dingy room? Was it from here that he directed all his taxis and collected the money at the end of the day? This couldn't be true!

His uncle's voice shattered his musings. "Thomas, come up here," Elijah shouted.

Thomas crossed the room and made his way up the staircase to the first floor where another heavy metal gate barred his entrance. A buzzer sounded and Thomas stepped into a narrow passage. The same cheap green industrial carpet covered the floor and the yellow walls were grimy with dirt. He followed the narrow hallway, passing several scarred dark brown doors and entered a large room at the end of the passage.

His uncle sat behind a large wooden desk that could have been purchased in the 1960s. The blue flickering light of a computer monitor reflected on the yellow wall behind him. Three telephones, two cellphones and stacks of papers were arranged around the desktop computer in front of his uncle. Two other black men, one wearing John Lennon glasses, sat behind similar desks hunched over their keyboards, furiously tapping keys, not lifting their heads to acknowledge the visitor.

His uncle got to his feet. "Good morning, Thomas," he boomed.

Thomas gave him a half hearted smile.

Elijah rounded the desk and threw his arm around his nephew's shoulder. "How are you doing?" he asked smoothly.

Thomas was not able to keep his disappointment at bay any longer. He pointed at his surroundings.

"This is your office?" he asked, disbelief swinging in his voice.

Elijah dropped his arm and looked at him curiously. "Yes, why?"

"It's so, so" Thomas stammered, not wanting to offend his uncle, but unable to find the appropriate words.

"Drab?" Elijah finished the sentence for him.

Thomas glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. Seeing the smile on Elijah's face, he relaxed and nodded.

His uncle crossed his arms in front of him. "Ahh," he said. "But this is business."

Thomas frowned, not catching on to his uncle's simple comment.

"In this business you don't spend your money on fancy offices, and expensive furniture," he explained. "Let me show you something."

He took Thomas's arm and together they walked towards a closed door further down the passage. Elijah pressed down the handle and they entered the room.

Thomas blinked once, then again. He could not believe his eyes. Quickly, he counted. Twelve monitors were mounted on the ceiling and a broad console ran along the length of the office. Every monitor showed a different picture and the scenes switched every few seconds to another live moment.

"Wow," Thomas exclaimed.

"This is where you spend your money," Elijah beamed a self satisfied grin as he pointed at the surveillance equipment.

Thomas approached a console, staring fascinated at the ever changing screens. His uncle appeared beside him and gestured at the monitors hanging from the ceiling.

"These four screens monitor our offices here," he explained. "You can see the front door, downstairs, up the steps and the passage."

Thomas glanced over his shoulder. "That's how you knew I was downstairs."

Elijah nodded. "Watch this," he said and tapped a couple of keys on the console.

The inside of a taxi appeared on a monitor. Passengers exited and entered, sat down, handed the driver some money and the taxi departed. Thomas stared wide-eyed at the pictures.

"These images are transmitted from all of my taxis," Elijah said.

"But how?" Thomas asked surprised.

Elijah chuckled quietly. "I've mounted cameras on the ceilings and with today's technology it's no big feat." He patted his nephew on the shoulder. "It's called wireless transmission."

"Ohh," Thomas replied captivated. He had heard about installations like this, but actually laying eyes on one was quite awe-inspiring.

"Come," his uncle said. "I'll show you what I want you to do."

Reluctantly, he followed Elijah out of the office. With regret Thomas closed the door behind him. He would have rather preferred to stay in the surveillance room studying the lay-out and functionality of the system, but his uncle had other ideas.

Back in the large room at the end of the passage, his uncle assigned one of the empty desks to him and briefly explained what he wanted. For the rest of the morning Thomas had to answer an incessantly ringing telephone, in between creating colour charts on the computer.

Soon, Thomas forgot about the fascinating surveillance room.

CHAPTER 13

As lunch time approached, Elijah told Thomas to follow him downstairs. Once on the ground floor, his uncle unlocked the heavy padlock hanging on the grey painted metal door. He pulled on the handle and they stepped inside the windowless room. Elijah flipped the light switch and for the second time that day, Thomas was awestruck. The room was lined with metal filing cabinets neatly touching the ceiling. At the back of the room stood a solid man-size safe complete with number locks and a hand wheel.

"This is where I keep my important and confidential information," Elijah explained.

He twirled a knob on the front of the huge safe a few times, turned the wheel, pushed down a handle and pulled open the heavy door without any effort.

"Here's what I want you to do," he said, facing his nephew. "As soon as the drivers come in and drop off their fares, you take the money and place it in the safe. When you walk into this room don't forget to close the door behind you."

Thomas leaned forward, looked into the safe, and frowned.

Noticing his expression, Elijah asked, "What's up?"

Thomas shuffled his feet uneasily. "Isn't it dangerous keeping all this money here?"

Elijah grinned slyly. "We don't keep it here forever," he replied. "Twice a day Fidelity, the security company, collects the money and they take it to the bank. There will be no more than a few thousand Rand in the safe at any given time."

Thomas nodded appreciatively. Even if his uncle was robbed, the criminals would not get away with much. The bulk of the money would be safely tucked away in the bank.

They left the room together and Elijah closed the door, but did not lock it. Soon afterwards, the first drivers arrived at the office. The men greeted his uncle respectfully; handed over the cash they had made during their morning trips, gave a few explanations on what had happened during their trips and left as quickly as they had come in. Elijah passed the money on to Thomas, who in turn placed it in the safe, never forgetting to pull the door closed behind him. About thirty minutes into the process, the line of drivers slowed to a trickle and Thomas took a breather.

But his reprieve was short lived. Once again the door opened and a thin, short black man, his right eyelid drooping, walked into the office. Looking studiously at the floor, he approached the desk. The driver's hands, holding a red baseball cap, were shaking like leaves in an August storm.

His shoulders hunched, Droopy Eye placed his green plastic money bag on the desk in front of Elijah. Watching the man's every move, a suspicious frown appeared on Elijah's forehead.

"What gives, Daniel?" he asked finally.

Droopy Eye Daniel crunched the cap in his hands. "Boss," he replied, his voice quivering. "There's been an accident."

Elijah's brows narrowed.

"Steven from Ndomi's crowd cut me off at the William Nicol turn-off," the driver rushed on.

Elijah leaned back and regarded the man in front of him, coolly. "You say Steven cut you off?" he repeated, his voice strained.

"Yes, boss," Droopy Eye Daniel stammered, still avoiding Elijah's gaze.

"What's the damage?" he asked icily.

The driver flinched involuntarily. "The front fender, boss."

Elijah exhaled loudly. "You know you have to pay for the damage?" he stated sternly.

Droopy Eye Daniel nodded meekly.

"I hope for your sake it's really only the front fender," Elijah said.

The driver lifted his head a fraction. "It's true, boss," he replied timidly. "It's only the fender."

Elijah glared at him for a minute. "Alright," he growled. "Make sure it's fixed by tomorrow."

"Yes, boss," Droopy Eye Daniel mumbled, already scrambling backwards, glad to have gotten off so lightly. As soon as he reached the door, he spun on his heel and disappeared down the street in a flash.

"That's not right," Thomas said appalled.

Elijah raised an eyebrow slightly baffled. "What do you mean?"

Outraged, Thomas pointed towards the door. "You're asking him to pay for the repair of your taxi?"

"Yeah," his uncle replied, shrugging his shoulders. "So what?"

"But aren't you insured?" Thomas asked flabbergasted. "Doesn't the insurance company cover the cost of the repairs?"

Elijah's laugh sounded like a burst of gunfire. "Insurance? If the drivers have an accident, they are responsible. They have to pay for the damage."

"You can't be serious," Thomas gasped.

Suddenly, his uncle's eyes glittered dangerously. "Drop it, Thomas," he warned. "This is business. This is how I operate and that's it."

"But ..." Thomas stumbled.

Elijah raised a finger. "I'm not a charity," his uncle hissed. "And you'll do well to understand that."

Seeing the controlled fury in Elijah's face, Thomas thought it wise to keep his mouth shut. Nevertheless, he was disgusted. How could his uncle do business this way?

But, this was only the beginning of his education when it came to the taxi industry. Over the next few days he learned that the drivers not only had to pay for repairs out of their own pockets, even if the damage was not caused by them, but they also had to account for a low fare intake and make up the shortfall from their earnings. On top of everything they had to maintain the vehicles: buy tyres and brake pads, fix torn clutch cables and pay for everything else that needed repairing.

Thomas got to know his uncle as ruthless, heartless, and shrewd. He wasn't sure if he should admire or despise him. Whilst trying to figure out if his uncle was practicing good business, he kept his own counsel.

A few days later Thomas had settled into a routine. At eight o'clock in the evening he prepared to go downstairs for the evening take. His uncle had already left his desk to meet a visitor on the ground floor. Tired from the day's work, Thomas stepped down the stairs, picking out the key for the padlock on the metal door. Rounding the corner, he lifted his hand to insert the key when the door swung open a few centimetres. Surprised Thomas stopped in his tracks. Through the gap he saw his uncle and another black man facing each other. The visitor's curly hair was cut short and as he turned his head, a diamond glittered in his ear.

Elijah's and the man's voices carried into the outer office. Thomas did not intend to eavesdrop, but he could not prevent overhearing the tail end of their conversation.

"Try to expand our territory," Elijah said with authority.

The man shrugged his shoulders. "It might be difficult," he replied casually. "Sam has a pretty tight grip."

"Doesn't matter," Elijah said. There was a small pause. "Maybe it's time to take him out."

The man chuckled. "Teach him a lesson."

"Maybe permanently," Elijah laughed in return.

Thomas heard a draw open and close. Then his uncle came back into view. He was holding a rectangular packet the size of half a shoebox, wrapped tightly in clear plastic.

"Here," Elijah said. "Try to have it distributed by the end of next week."

The man shoved the package under his jacket. "Sure, boss," he replied nonchalantly.

Thomas swallowed hard. What the hell was going on? He had seen enough cop movies to assume the worst. The package looked very close to compressed cocaine or heroin. Was his uncle selling drugs? It sure looked like it.

Shit!

"See you next week, boss," the man said and turned towards the door.

Reacting on instinct, Thomas scrambled up the stairs, out of sight. He had no intention of being caught. If his uncle was involved in drugs, he did not want to have any part of it. He didn't want to know about it!

Thomas stood frozen in the middle of the staircase. Carefully he listened to the sounds from the ground floor. He heard the clank of the padlock against the metal door as his uncle pulled out the key. He listened as the two men walked towards the front door and he heard the security gate bang against its frame.

Suddenly, the sound of approaching footsteps reached him in the stairwell. Frantically he looked around.

What was he supposed to do? If he stayed on the steps and his uncle found him, he would have to answer unpleasant questions.

Damn!

Drawing a deep breath, Thomas straightened his shoulders. The best way was to act as if nothing had happened.

Taking one step at a time, Thomas descended the stairs, keeping his head down, pretending to be deep in thought, the keys for the metal door in his outstretched hand. At the bottom of the stairwell, he purposefully bumped into Elijah.

"Oh," he exclaimed, lifting his head. "I'm sorry uncle. I didn't hear you."

Elijah's eyes narrowed.

Thomas smiled broadly at him. "Finished your business with your visitor already?" he asked innocently.

Elijah rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Yes," he replied.

"What did he want?" Thomas asked, immediately regretting his words.

But his uncle waved his hand in the air. "I had to give him some documents. They were overdue," he replied distractedly.

Thomas almost gasped. The package sure didn't look like documents to him.

"You know how it is in this business," Elijah continued. "I have so little time to get to the bank or the lawyers. These papers have to be signed by tomorrow otherwise I'll not get the loan approved for the three new taxis I ordered."

Thomas tilted his head, doubt creeping into his mind. Tiredly, he rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. His uncle sounded so convincing. Could he have been wrong? Did he really see drugs or just a packet of documents?

He watched his uncle from under hooded eyes, but Elijah's expression revealed nothing.

Maybe he *had* been wrong, Thomas concluded. As a matter of fact, he was dead tired. Maybe he had read the scene incorrectly. Maybe his uncle had really handed the visitor only documents.

Thomas took a deep breath. "Ah, well," he said, jingling the key in his hand. "I hope your visitor will get the papers to the bank in time. In the meantime, I'll get ready for the evening take."

Pushing past his uncle he made his way to the metal door at the back of the room.

During the following few days Thomas forgot about the incident on the ground floor. He worked hard and although the work was not difficult, it was tiring. Often Thomas wondered why he had agreed to work for Elijah. He was a student for crying out loud, and deserved to spend his semester holidays relaxing with his friends and in front of the TV. But he didn't quit. Every day he arrived at exactly seven o'clock and carried out his duties to the best of his ability. Every evening before he left the office his uncle called him to his desk and placed the well earned cash in his hand.

Two days before the start of the new semester, Thomas stepped down the stairs, keys in hand to prepare for another intake from the drivers. Rounding the corner he saw the grey painted metal door standing ajar. Images from the week before flooded his mind. Instead of turning back and making his way quietly up the stairs, Thomas reached out and pulled open the door.

The man with the glittering diamond in his ear was back. Elijah was holding a plastic wrapped packet in his hand.

His uncle's eyes narrowed on seeing Thomas. "What are you doing here?" he barked.

Assessing the situation with rapid speed, the man with the diamond earring grabbed the packet out of Elijah's hand and casually let it disappear under his jacket, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Thomas stood rooted to the spot, looking from one man to the other.

"What do you think you are doing?" Elijah shouted.

At the sound of his voice, Thomas hunched his shoulders. "What are *you* doing in here?" he growled back, refusing to be intimidated by his uncle.

Elijah took a step forward, his hands balled into fists. "Get out of here you nosy bastard."

Diamond Earring raised his hand and put it soothingly on Elijah's shoulder. "Don't do anything stupid," the guy said quietly.

His uncle glared hard at Diamond Earring and shrugged off his hand. Diamond Earring was shrewd enough to know when to disappear. He turned on his heel, squeezed past Thomas and walked with quick steps and without a backward glance out of the room.

Alone in the windowless office, Elijah grabbed Thomas by the shoulders and pushed him against the wall. Thomas's head banged against the concrete and a sharp pain raced along the back of his neck.

"What do you think you're doing?" Elijah asked again, his eyes glittering dangerously.

Surprised by the attack, Thomas let out a low cry.

His uncle shook him hard. Thomas's teeth jarred and he almost bit his tongue.

"Answer me," Elijah shouted.

Slowly anger rose up in Thomas and heat flushed his face.

"You are dealing drugs," he hissed finally.

Elijah's eyes turned to slits. "What do you know?" he growled. "You're just a snot-nosed kid."

Thomas pushed himself away from the wall, catching his uncle off balance. "Don't lie to me! You're dealing drugs!" he shouted furiously.

Elijah crossed his arms in front of him. "So what?" he taunted nastily. "What's it to you?"

Thomas stared at him in disbelief. His uncle hadn't bothered to deny it! He had admitted to being a drug dealer. Elijah Nkosi was dealing in forbidden substances! If he was caught, he would spend the next twenty years behind bars! And his uncle reacted as if it was nothing unusual!

"You are dealing drugs," Thomas repeated angrily. "You could go to prison."

Elijah's face contorted into an ugly grin. "And how would I end up in prison?" he asked. "Are you suggesting you would snitch on me?"

"Sure!" Thomas shouted.

"Ah, yeah?" his uncle mocked.

Thomas looked at Elijah dumbfounded. Why was his uncle reacting so cool, so unconcerned? Obviously he would go to the cops with the information! Elijah was a criminal. He was selling drugs on a big scale. That packet must have been worth thousands of Rand. That wasn't just small fry; that was Big. He was giving those drugs to teenagers, ruining their lives. Did his uncle think he would keep quiet about that?

Elijah stared at his nephew coldly, waiting for a reply.

Thomas took a deep breath steeling himself. "Yes," he said firmly. "I am going to tell the cops. You are not getting away with this. I've seen what drugs can do to people," he gesticulated wildly. "Don't you have a conscience? Don't you make enough money? I thought you were an honest business man!" Thomas shook his head. "I never thought you would deal in drugs. This is going too far! How you run your taxi operation is up to you, but dealing drugs is disgusting," Bravely Thomas straightened his shoulders. "You can say what you want, but I am going to the police."

Elijah took a step forward, his face so close to his nephew's that their noses were almost touching.

"Let me tell you something," his uncle said icily. "You are not going to the cops. You are going to keep your mouth shut. You've seen nothing and you heard nothing. You understand me?"

Thomas drew his head back and opened his mouth to reply, but Elijah's next words made him swallow his words.

"Don't ever forget who pays for the roof over your head. And the roof over your sister's head. And who do you think pays your university fees?" Elijah said bitingly.

Thomas's resolve was shaken momentarily. His uncle couldn't be serious. He wouldn't take the house away and stop paying for his studies, but Elijah's expression told him unmistakably that he was dead serious.

So what!

Thomas stared at his uncle defiantly.

Even if he was going to take away the house and stopped paying for his studies, he was determined to go to the cops. He would not allow Elijah to continue to deal in drugs! He and Thandeka would make it without his uncle's help. They didn't need a drug dealer's money!

Leaning forward, Elijah placed a hand against the wall, next to Thomas's head, effectively trapping him. "And something else," he said quietly. "If I hear so much as a rumour about what you've seen here, your life won't be worth a cent."

Thomas stared at his uncle perplexed.

What did he say? Did he just threaten his life?

Thomas's eyes grew wide.

"You heard right," Elijah hissed. "I don't care if you are family. If you don't keep your mouth shut, you can pick your own grave."

Realisation dawned on Thomas. He went deadly pale under his dark skin. His uncle was threatening to kill him if he uttered one word about what he had witnessed! Elijah would not hesitate to eliminate him like a rabid dog! Thomas's ears burned with rage, but he didn't dare say anything in retaliation. Who knew about his uncle's connections? Who knew how far his evil tentacles reached? One wrong word and the next time he crossed a street, he might be run over by a car.

He wanted to live! He didn't want to die!

Slowly Thomas nodded his head. "I understand," he whispered.

Elijah shot him a hard look. "You sure?" he asked ominously.

"Yes," Thomas replied firmly.

His uncle took his hand away and a slow nasty grin spread across his face. "I knew you would," he said mockingly.

Thomas's shoulders slumped and he looked down.

"Get out of here," Elijah growled. "You don't have to come back tomorrow. I'll send your money over to the house."

Thomas lowered his head, ashamed and defeated. Slowly he turned around and walked out of the door.

Thomas had never again set foot in his uncle's offices and whenever Elijah visited the house, Thomas found an excuse not to be there. He had kept his promise though; he never said one word about his uncle's illegal business. Not even his sister, Thandeka, knew about Elijah's drug dealings.

As soon as Thomas finished his studies, he began to provide for himself. His first job had been for little pay, so he was unable to rent a flat. Instead he had to stay with Thandeka in his uncle's house. But the generous allowance that Elijah offered him every month went quietly into an account set up in his sister's name. Under no circumstance did he want to be associated with Elijah's drug money.

For a long time Thomas scanned the newspapers, hoping against hope, that Elijah had been caught. But it had not happened, and it would in all probability never happen. His uncle was just too shrewd.

Now Elijah was in his sister's house pretending to be the loving, caring uncle. Thandeka had called him and Thomas did not have a good reason to refuse his sister's cry for help without telling her that their uncle was a drug dealer. Thomas had his doubts that Thandeka would believe him if he told her anyway.

"So," Ryan said. "Why don't you want your uncle here?"

Thomas gave his partner a sideways glance. "Never mind," he replied with a sigh. He was not about to tell Ryan any of his family's secrets.

Ryan watched him a moment longer, but when it became apparent that Thomas wasn't going to elaborate, he shrugged his shoulders.

"If you ever want to talk ...," Ryan let the sentence trail off.

Thomas grinned crookedly. "Yeah," he said. "Thanks for the offer, but I'm okay."

Elijah's voice reached the two men in the kitchen. "Do you need help in there?" he asked loudly.

Thomas rolled his eyes. "No," he shouted back. "The coffee is coming."

He stepped alongside Ryan who was standing in front of the kitchen counter. "Here," he said. "Let me get this for you."

Within minutes the two men had opened and closed cupboard doors, poured hot water over coffee granules and filled glasses with cold Coca Cola. Walking back into the lounge, Thomas left the tray with the steaming hot mugs of coffee on the low table in front of the couches. He handed one cold drink to Elijah.

Ryan sipped his Coke as he sat down on the couch next to Raphaela, who was stirring the milk in her coffee.

"Have you heard anything from the police yet?" he asked, looking at Thomas who stood with his back against the kitchen doorframe.

His partner rubbed his face. "Nothing," he replied tiredly. "They are still insisting that it's too early to start a search."

"But aren't twenty-four hours up already?" Ryan asked astounded.

Thomas pushed back his shirt sleeve and checked his watch. "Just about," he said.

"Cops," Elijah sneered, waving his hand in the air. "They are useless."

Thomas refrained from replying.

"They can never do anything right," Elijah continued. "You ask them for help and they mess you around."

Thomas's eyebrows narrowed irritably and he crossed his arms in front of him.

Elijah glanced at his nephew, noticing his dark expression.

"I'm telling you," he reiterated. "The cops can't protect us. They only look out for themselves. Before they move a muscle, they first hold out their hand asking how much it's worth to us." He sighed theatrically. "I can tell you all about it. I don't know how much money I have given to them over the years. Some of those cops have become very rich in the process. Just look at who is friends with the Mafia in this country"

Thomas could not contain himself. He had had enough of Elijah's self righteous tirade.

Thomas's arm shot out and he pointed a finger at Elijah. "And what are *you* doing?" he asked heatedly. "Lucy is missing and all you can do is complain about the

cops! They might not be the best police force in the world; they might be corrupt and lazy, but they are all we've got."

Elijah tilted his head to the side and a small smile played around his thick lips. "Me?" he asked smugly.

"Yes, you!" Thomas almost shouted.

Not ruffled in the least at his nephew's angry outburst, Elijah folded his arms behind his head.

"I gave word to look out for Lucy," he replied casually. "All my drivers have instructions to call me as soon as they spot her."

Elijah's words stopped Thomas short.

His uncle had instructed his drivers to search for Lucy? He couldn't believe it. Elijah had never gone out of his way for his niece and nephew in all of his life, except when showering them with money. What did he want? Why was his uncle so concerned all of a sudden? What did he have to gain?

Suspiciously Thomas glared at Elijah, but his uncle did not flicker an eyelid, returning his nephews cold stare calmly.

Thomas swallowed down a big lump. He didn't know the exact number of drivers Elijah employed, but it must be close on two hundred. Two hundred pairs of eyes were on the look out for Lucy in and around Johannesburg! That kind of attentive search just had to yield results!

"Yes," his uncle interrupted Thomas's train of thought. "All of them know that I'm looking for my niece's daughter." His mouth curled into a snarl. "I'm not as heartless as you think I am."

This last sentence made Thomas cold with anger. Elijah shouldn't have said that. As helpful as two hundred drivers were, his uncle was still not as generous as he would have others to believe. When Elijah offered to help, he usually had an ulterior motive. His uncle never ever went out of his way without gaining some kind of advantage.

But Thomas bit his tongue. Whatever Elijah's reason for helping, it did not matter right now. All that was important was that two hundred taxi drivers were on the look out for Lucy. Although it took great effort, Thomas relaxed his strained expression. Folding his arms in front of him, he stared out into the garden.

An uneasy silence settled over the lounge, only to be interrupted by Thandeka's soft sobs, who had begun to cry again. Elijah pulled her closer, gently caressing her hair and muttering soothing words into her ear.

Placing her mug on the table, Raphaela cleared her throat.

"I hope it's alright with you ..." she started, not sure if her suggestion would be welcome.

Thomas tilted his head, encouraging her to continue.

"I have a cousin in the police force," she said hesitantly, nervously pulling at the hem of her top. "I asked him for help. He promised to keep pressure on the local cops. He also said he would come around to talk to you."

To her relief, Thomas nodded appreciatively. "I didn't know that you were associated with the police."

Raphaela shook her head. "It's not me," she replied earnestly. "It's my cousin who is a cop."

A faint smile appeared on Thomas's face. "Thanks anyway," he said. "We need all the help we can get. What's your cousin's name?"

Raphaela leaned forward and placed her hands on her knees. "His name is Antonio Patrizio," she said. "He doesn't work directly for missing persons, but he has some influence."

"Alright," Thomas said his mood lifting. "Did he say when he's coming?"

Raphaela looked over to Ryan for confirmation.

"Later this afternoon," she answered.

Thomas breathed in deeply. At last some good news! Someone who could light a fire under the butts of the local cops was more than welcome.

The officers at the Edenvale police station were giving him the run around. Every time he phoned they came up with another excuse. It especially irked him always to be told that twenty four hours had to pass before they could take any action. Twenty four hours was a hell of a long time. All sorts of things could happen in that time span. He had pleaded, begged and threatened, but the cops were adamant about following their twenty-four hour policy.

Chewing wistfully on his bottom lip, Thomas's gaze wandered again to the garden. He saw the herb patch Lucy had tended so lovingly and a dark cloud settled over his forehead.

Ryan noticed his partner's mood change rapidly from hope to anger. "What's on your mind?" he asked.

Thomas spun his head to look at his partner.

"It all takes too long," he complained. "Who knows what's happened to Lucy." He glanced at Raphaela. "Don't get me wrong. I'm really grateful for your help, but I'm worried sick and I hate the waiting. Nothing is happening. Nobody is calling us. Nobody who has any decent information," he clarified. "There is no assistance from the cops and I feel totally useless."

Ryan's lips pressed into a thin line. There was nothing he could say to ease the load.

Irritably, Thomas began pacing the carpet like a lion trapped in a small cage. Four steps towards the patio door and four steps back to the archway leading to the kitchen, clenching and unclenching his fists, his face shadowed with anxiety.

After a few minutes, Thomas abruptly stopped his futile walk across the room. Lifting his wrist, he checked his watch. "It's almost two o'clock," he said thoughtfully.

Ryan confirmed the time by looking at his own wristwatch. "And?" he asked.

"School comes out in another half an hour," Thomas replied slowly.

His expression turned hopeful. "Would you mind taking me to Lucy's school?" he asked tentatively.

Ryan remembered his partner's earlier request. "You want to speak to the principal and the teachers?"

Thomas nodded eagerly. "Yes," he confirmed. "Maybe they can shed some light on Lucy's disappearance. It's possible they overheard something or saw something..."

"You are right," Ryan said, leaning forward on the couch. "It's worth a shot."

"Better than hanging around here and doing nothing," Thomas mumbled.

Without wasting any time, Ryan got to his feet and pulled his car keys out of his pocket. His partner was already halfway across the lounge.

After a couple of steps Ryan stopped short, turned and looked back at Raphaela.

"Are you going to be alright here?" he asked with sudden concern.

A smile crossed her beautiful face as her head bobbed up and down.

"Sure," Raphaela answered confidently. "Remember, I came with you to be here for Thandeka." She fluttered her hand, shooing him out of the room. "You go on and speak to the teachers. We'll hold the fort. As soon as we hear something, I'll call you."

A tentative smile appeared on Ryan's handsome face. "Thanks."

Ryan grabbed Thomas's arm. "Let's go," he said. "The sooner we get to the school, the sooner we might find your niece."

Thomas didn't need to be told twice. Walking over to his sister, he bent down and placed a soft kiss on top of her head.

"I'll be back soon," he assured her. "Please call me the instant there is any development."

"I will," she replied softly.

Without acknowledging his uncle, Thomas followed Ryan out of the house.

xxx

An ugly, fat, blue fly buzzed over the rim of the ablution bucket, its wings hardly disturbing the stench surrounding the container. Thick heat hung from the ceiling, threatening to suffocate the girls. Not the softest cool breeze was ruffling their sweat soaked strands of hair. Their once immaculate school shirts were stained with dark patches under their arms and on their backs. A fine sheen of sweat glistened on their faces.

Picking up two sandwiches, Lucy handed them to Silvy.

"I don't know what's on them," she said, "but beggars can't be choosers."

Silvy wiped her grimy hand on her crumpled skirt. "I don't care what's on them," she replied, grabbing the bread eagerly. "I'm starving."

Silvy bit heartily into the sandwich. "Some kind of cold meat," she commented, chewing rapidly.

Lucy left her to her meal and balancing the rest of the sandwiches carefully, she crawled across the mattress.

Shelly was crouched in her corner, rocking gently back and forth on her heels, clutching her water bottle protectively against her chest.

Lucy held out a sandwich. "Here you go," she said softly.

Shelly looked at Lucy, then at the bread, but did not reach for the sandwiches.

"Come on, girl," Lucy coaxed her. "You have to eat. It's almost as important as drinking water."

Shelly stared at her unblinkingly.

Lucy sighed heavily. "Why are so stubborn?" she asked impatiently. "You know you have to eat."

Shelly's chin dropped and strands of hair fell across her pixy face.

Lucy sighed almost inaudibly, knowing full well that this would take some work: Shelly was never easily persuaded. Curling her legs under her, she moved into a more comfortable position. Placing the sandwiches in her lap, Lucy reached out and pulled the hair away from the girl's face.

"Come on, now," she said encouragingly. "Any kind of food is better than none."

Shelly did not lift her head.

Lucy chewed thoughtfully on her bottom lip.

Shelly had to eat, no matter what! If they ever wanted to get out of this hellhole alive, they needed to preserve their strength. Who knew when last Shelly had eaten something? Her rocking motion was the only sign that Shelly was still alive.

Lucy stared at the swaying girl in front of her, becoming more and more irritated.

What the hell was she supposed to do? And why was she supposed to do anything at all? If the girl didn't want to eat, then who was she to convince her otherwise?

Instantly heat rose in her cheeks.

What was she thinking? She had a duty to look after Shelly! It wasn't Shelly's fault that they were locked up in this room. None of them had asked to be kidnapped. And they were in it together and that meant they had to look out for each other and make it out of their prison together.

But how was she going to get Shelly to eat?

Lucy frowned with concentration.

She could force-feed Shelly, she mused silently.

A moment later, she shook her head at the idea. That was not going to be an option. As soon as she came too close to Shelly, the girl would freak out. She couldn't risk Shelly screaming her lungs out. It would only get their kidnappers running into the room and she wanted to avoid that at all cost.

Lucy took a deep breath and held out the sandwich.

"Come on Shelly. You have to eat," she repeated. "You don't want to die, do you?"

Shelly stopped rocking on her heels.

Lucy raised an eyebrow, pleased that her words had caused an effect at last. Swiping at her plaits, she waited patiently.

Eventually, Shelly lifted her face, tears glittering on her cheeks. Her eyes were filled with fear and anguish.

"Oh my," Lucy stammered, taken aback that her words had evoked such a strong reaction.

A sob escaped Shelly's lips.

Lucy abandoned the sandwiches on the floor and crawled forward. Putting her arm around the shoulders of the crying girl, she held her gently.

Shelly grasped Lucy's shirt with both hands, dropping her precious water bottle as she buried her face on Lucy's neck weeping loudly.

Lucy rubbed her back trying to comfort the distressed girl.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled. "I'm so sorry."

After a few minutes, Shelly's sobs turned into hiccups, until finally her tears subsided altogether. The girl lifted her head, wiped her face dry with the back of her hand and for the first time, a faint smile showed on her lips.

Tentatively Lucy smiled back. "Are you going to eat a sandwich?" she asked hopefully.

In reply Shelly slithered across the floor where Lucy had dropped the bread. She picked up a sandwich, inspected it for dirt, wiped it briefly, lifted it to her mouth and took a bite.

A mixture of relief and hope bubbled up in Lucy, bursting forth in a loud laugh.

They were going to be okay! They would get out of this prison alive and together!

CHAPTER 14

Shifting into first gear, Ryan and Thomas drove up the broad sun drenched road. The school ground, a wide open space, was surrounded by a five metre high wire mesh fence intertwined with green leaved branches of thick shrubs, and shadowed by large blue-gum trees. A white billboard loomed over an immaculate cricket patch announcing the school team's latest rugby results in black letters. Ryan inched his BMW 4x4 towards the closed sliding gate, scouting for a parking space close to the entrance. They had arrived at 14h30 just as the bell rang. Hundreds of cars lined both sides of the street: mothers, fathers, and bus services waited for the kids, to pick them up and to take them home. Engines were idling, windows were rolled down, radio music floated through the air, while drivers kept their eyes peeled on the locked pedestrian exit gates.

At the bell's signal, an ordered chaos ensued. The first pupils ambled through the gates: boys with short cropped hair, dressed in blue shirts, the school emblem displayed proudly on their pockets, long grey trousers and black shoes, girls wearing blue, short sleeved shirts, navy blue and maroon tartan skirts, white ankle socks and black lace-up shoes, all long hair tied up in pony tails. As they stepped onto the pavement outside the school grounds, arms waved through car windows, horns sounded, and vehicles crawled forward drawing the kids' attention.

Boys and girls threw their heavy bags into boots and onto back seats, climbed into cars and slammed doors. Drivers reversed, making illegal U-turns, pushing into gaps that did not seem to exist. Ordinary traffic rules did not apply, but everyone was courteous, patient, and afforded right of way, although it wasn't always that particular driver's turn.

Ryan spotted a green Renault Scenic leaving the curb further up the road. Setting his indicator and swerving around a young good-looking mother in a red Mazda, he manoeuvred his 4x4 into the Scenic's parking space. He switched off the engine and both men got out of the vehicle.

As Ryan stepped onto the tarred road, the heat punched him in the face, almost knocking him sideways. The sun stung his skin viciously, pricking it as if a thousand needles were on the attack. Ryan squinted up at the sky, hopefully, looking for an indication that it would rain later in the day, but not a single cloud sailed across the milky blue expanse.

Purposefully, Ryan and Thomas made their way towards the school's gate, navigating, less than skilfully, against the thick stream of pupils on their mission for their respective transport home. Heavy backpacks slammed against the two men and sharp elbows stabbed their ribs without any apparent apology muttered by the culprit. Although battered and bruised, they eventually made it to the wide open gate in one piece, where they were instantly stopped by a security guard.

"Can I help you?" the young black man asked firmly.

He wore a khaki coloured shirt, baggy pants and black army boots. A walkie-talkie was clipped to his belt emitting a constant crackle and his hand rested on a baton stuck in a leather holster.

Surprised Ryan looked over at his partner. He hadn't expected to be accosted by a security guard. Thomas gave him a reassuring smile.

"We are here to see the principal, Mrs Gibbins," he informed the guard.

"Do you have an appointment?" the guard asked, not stepping out of their path.

Thomas shook his head. "No," he replied. "But it is a matter of grave importance."

The guard squinted at the two men warily, his hand tightening around the hilt of his baton.

Noticing the man's expression, Thomas hurried on. "It's about my niece," he explained. "We just want to have a word with Mrs Gibbins." He drew a deep breath. "You see, my niece has gone missing."

The security guard listened attentively, gauging Thomas's sincerity.

Thomas lifted his hands. "Please," he implored. "My niece goes to school here. Her name is Lucy Nkosi. She is in grade eight. I'm her uncle. Her mother is worried sick and we only want to find out what has happened to her."

Something in Thomas's desperate plea sounded believable, because the security guard stepped aside.

"Report at reception," he instructed, pointing in the direction of the red double storey brick building behind him.

"Thanks," Thomas answered gratefully.

The two men walked past the security guard and down a wide concrete path. A swirling mass of chattering pupils surrounded them. Greetings, laughter, jibes and good-byes flew threw the air. Hugs were exchanged and backs were pounded.

"My word," Ryan grumbled disconcertedly. "Do you really think he would have denied us entry?"

"Who?" Thomas asked absent mindedly.

"The security guard," Ryan replied.

Thomas slowed his pace and glanced at his partner.

"Yes," he stated firmly. "Security is tight. They won't let anyone in who doesn't belong here." He raised an eyebrow. "Especially two men who appear to be too young to have kids in high school."

Ryan pushed his hand into his trouser pocket. "This is nothing like it was in my day," he mumbled.

Thomas smiled ruefully. "A lot of things have changed," he sighed. "The world has not become a better place. There are a lot of ugly people out there."

Ryan nodded wistfully at his partner's words.

They continued their journey until they reached the office block where they fought their way through a never ending throng of pupils, blocking access into the dim entrance hall. Spotting the reception area to their right, Ryan and Thomas approached a waist high counter, wiping the sweat off their foreheads.

"Good afternoon," Thomas greeted the woman on the other side.

The middle-aged receptionist lifted her head and eyed him cautiously. Her shoulder length blonde hair, in need of a touch-up job, was parted down the middle. A pair of rimless spectacles, attached to a chain of colourful beads, sat on the tip of her nose. She returned the telephone receiver she had just lifted and got to her feet.

"May I help you?" she asked anxiously, looking from Thomas to Ryan and back again.

Thomas plastered his most amicable smile on his face. "We are here to speak to Mrs Gibbins," he said.

Her eyes narrowed and her hand went to the beaded chain. "Do you have an appointment?" she asked nervously.

Thomas shook his head apologetically. "No, ma'am."

Her expression relaxed. "I'm sorry," she said, almost with relief. "You have to make an appointment first, otherwise I can't help you."

Thomas's face darkened. "I need to see the principal," he said firmly.

The woman crossed her arms in front of her ample bosom. "I'm sorry," she repeated. "You can not see her without an appointment."

Thomas clenched his fist angrily, but before he could do any damage Ryan said, honey coating his voice, "Ma'am, Mr Nkosi's niece went missing yesterday. Although we don't have an appointment with Mrs Gibbins, we would like to be afforded the opportunity to have a word with her, owing to the fact that Lucy Nkosi is a pupil here at this school."

The receptionist's jaw dropped open. Ryan wasn't sure if it was because of his elaborate choice of words, or his exaggerated friendliness.

"Do you mind picking up the phone and asking Mrs Gibbins if she could spare a few minutes for a distraught family member? Or does the school not care enough about its pupils?" he added as a barb.

Like a fish out of water, the woman's mouth opened and closed, gasping for air.

Ryan did not give her a chance to find a suitable excuse. "I presume you know Mrs Gibbins's extension," he said pointedly.

The receptionist stared at him with open hostility, but finally she reached for the telephone. Picking up the receiver, she punched three digits on the keypad and turned her back on them.

A whispered conversation ensued. Neither Ryan nor Thomas were interested in what the receptionist had to say to her boss, as long as it resulted in an unscheduled appointment with the principal.

A couple of minutes later, the woman put the receiver down and announced gruffly, "Mrs Gibbins will see you."

Ryan nodded graciously.

The receptionist straightened her blouse, patted her blonde hair and left the desk.

"Follow me," she instructed.

Satisfied with the outcome of his interjection, Ryan grinned happily at Thomas whose face in turn had relaxed again.

His partner gave him a crooked smile. "Ugly bitch," he mouthed.

Ryan could fully understand his partner's anger.

It was always the same, he thought disappointed. A white man received a positive reaction from a white authority, but not a black man like Thomas.

A black man, even educated and immaculately dressed, was immediately stereotyped as a criminal, whilst a white man's skin demanded automatic respect. Prejudice and racism was still rife in the new South Africa. It was a sad state of affairs, but if one wanted to get results, one had to play the game.

Maybe conditions were going to change in another hundred years, Ryan thought cynically. One always had to have hope.

Pushing his thoughts to the back of his mind, he followed Thomas and the receptionist down a vinyl covered corridor, past the teachers' lounge, and around a corner to a closed office door. The receptionist stopped, patted her hair once more, and knocked on the door. A faint voice from within told her to enter.

They stepped into the principal's office and Mrs Gibbins stood up from behind her desk at the same time as attempting to pull her iron-grey tailored jacket over her full hips. The principal was so short she hardly reached Ryan's chin, yet she exuded an

authority that was uncanny. Ryan knew instinctively that no one, not even a grown-up man, would dare give her lip, or try to cross her.

Mrs Gibbins's short, curly blonde hair shone like a halo in the sunlight as she walked up to Thomas and held out her hand.

"You must be Mr Nkosi," she said, her voice warm and full of concern.

Thomas shook her hand. "Thank you for seeing us on such short notice," he replied courteously.

The plump principal nodded at the receptionist, who had remained by the door. "Thank you, Glynnis. That will be all," she said, dismissing the secretary.

With a huff, the blonde woman flicked her hair over her shoulder, turned on her heels and closed the door behind her.

Mrs Gibbins returned behind her desk. "I apologise for our receptionist," she said. "But she's just doing her job."

Sitting down, she pointed at the two visitors' chairs, indicating to Thomas and Ryan to have a seat. Crossing his legs, Ryan had a brief look around the room. To a pupil, a principal's office was the holiest of holy places and always a reason for a minor panic attack, or at least an outbreak of sweaty anxiety. Fortunately, Ryan could count on one hand how many times he had been called into his principal's chambers in his youth.

Mrs Gibbins's office was no different to the one Ryan remembered from his school days. The wall to his left was covered with thick books stacked behind glass cabinet doors. Numerous certificates and diplomas hung on the opposite wall. The medium size room was dominated by a huge, light coloured oak desk standing on a soft pastel blue carpet. Papers were strewn across the table's surface, concealing the keyboard in front of a desktop computer. A large window behind Mrs Gibbins offered a view of the cricket patch, rugby field, and school courtyard.

Mrs Gibbins cleared her throat. "My receptionist mentioned that your visit concerns your niece," she said.

Thomas nodded. "Yes," he replied seriously. "Lucy Nkosi is my niece. She is in grade eight and did not come home from school yesterday," he explained, articulating each word very clearly.

Mrs Gibbins raised an eyebrow, slightly puzzled. "And what can I do for you Mr Nkosi?"

"I was hoping to talk to Lucy's teachers," he stated simply.

"Why?"

Thomas contemplated her question warily.

"Her teachers might have noticed some unusual behaviour in Lucy yesterday," he replied after a moment. "They might have noticed something that might shed light on my niece's disappearance, because I can't understand why my niece did not come home from school."

A tiny smile played around the principal's lips. "Maybe Lucy went to stay with a friend," she said kindly. "You know, kids do that sometimes, especially if they feel they are in trouble at home."

Thomas's brows narrowed. "What are you implying, Mrs Gibbins?" he asked sharply.

The principal's smile disappeared. "I'm only pointing out that your niece might have a reason not to go home."

With sudden anger, Thomas jumped up from his chair.

"Let me tell you something, Mrs Gibbins ...!" he almost shouted, stabbing his finger at her.

The woman in front of him recoiled at his unexpected outburst.

Who does she think she is? Thomas seethed silently. What did she know about Thandeka's and Lucy's relationship? How dare she suggest Lucy was too scared to come home! Lucy was a good kid, never once getting into trouble. Lucy knew she had nothing to fear from her mother. Thandeka and he would always support her, stand by her, no matter what happened!

Ryan reached up and placed a hand on Thomas's arm trying to calm him. Thomas glared darkly at his partner and pressed his lips into a thin line, but Ryan shook his head imperceptibly. Taking the hint, Thomas took a deep breath, relaxed his shoulders and sat down again.

"I'm sorry," he said, raising his hands apologetically. He took another deep breath. "Let me assure you that Lucy has a loving family and there is absolutely no reason for her not to come home, no matter what trouble she might be in. Her mother and Lucy are very close. They share everything and Lucy does not hide any secrets."

The principal watched Thomas attentively.

"Lucy has never run away from home before," Thomas continued. "As you know, she is a very bright student and has caring friends." His lip quivered ever so lightly. "That's why we can't understand why she didn't come home. This is why I would like to speak to her teachers. Maybe something happened here at school," his voice trailed off.

Mrs Gibbins leaned back in her chair and picked up a golden Parker pen. A heavy silence settled over the three people in the room. The only sound in the office was a small, black fly buzzing past the window.

The principal stared thoughtfully over the two men's shoulders.

After a couple of minutes, Thomas shuffled his feet impatiently. "Is there any chance I could speak to Lucy's teachers, Mrs Gibbins?" he asked.

The principal returned her gaze to the tall, handsome black man in front of her.

"Have you called the police?" she asked, artfully avoiding his question.

Thomas sighed. "Yes," he replied edgily. "We have also called every single hospital in the Greater Johannesburg area and have filed a missing person's report with the Edenvale police station."

"And?" Mrs Gibbins said patiently.

Thomas shrugged his shoulders. "The hospitals have no admissions corresponding to my niece's description."

"The police?" the principal asked leaning forward.

"They are giving us the run-around," Thomas stated.

Mrs Gibbins looked surprised. "What do you mean?"

Thomas rubbed his face tiredly. "The cops won't move a finger for the first twenty-four hours. They have the same attitude like you," he said brusquely. "The police think she ran away and we should just wait until she comes home voluntarily. But I know my niece!" he shouted with despair. "Lucy would never run away! Something has happened to her!"

Mrs Gibbins's gaze lingered for a long moment on Thomas's face. Abruptly, she pushed her chair away from her desk and got to her feet.

"Come," she commanded. "I'll take you to the teachers' lounge. You can ask your questions there."

Although taken aback at Mrs Gibbins' sudden sense of purpose, the two men did not waste any time.

They followed her out of her office into the brightly lit corridor. With brisk steps she approached an open door further down the passage. Loud laughter floated in the air as they entered the teachers' lounge. It was a comfortable room. Several long wooden tables surrounded by high backed chairs stood on a durable grey carpet. A coffee machine emitted a soft hiss as the last of the hot water sputtered into a glass pot.

Huge notice boards were untidily decorated with typed A4 sheets proclaiming rules and regulations, lists of pupils' names, time tables, subject schedules, copies announcing events, and two or three jokes. The windows of the lounge opened on to the same view as that of the principal's office. About fifteen men and women were standing in small groups around the room, or sitting at the long tables.

Mrs Gibbins rose to her full short height. "May I have your attention please," she demanded loudly.

Ryan almost expected her to clap her hands and although the situation was very serious, he barely concealed a grin.

The chatter and laughter in the room ceased instantly and the teachers' faces turned towards their boss.

"This is Mr Nkosi," Mrs Gibbins stated, pointing at Thomas towering over her. "His niece is Lucy Nkosi and she attends grade eight here at our school."

Thomas looked from one teacher's face to the next trying to gauge their reaction to the principal's words.

"Now," Mrs Gibbins continued. "Lucy Nkosi went missing yesterday afternoon," she paused for effect, letting her gaze wander over her staff. "Mr Nkosi has requested a word with Lucy's teachers."

Ryan detected a slight unease settling over the various groups.

"Obviously we will give Mr Nkosi all the assistance he requires," the principal stated firmly.

She turned, tilting her head back in order to look up at Thomas. "Unfortunately, Mr Nkosi," she said. "Most of the teachers have left already. Only Mr Roux, Lucy's Maths teacher, Mrs Whitmer, her English teacher, and Mrs du Plessis, her Afrikaans teacher are still here."

Thomas's face fell with disappointment. He had hoped to speak to all of Lucy's teachers. The more people he could interview, the more information he would gain. He sighed deeply. It seemed everything and everybody was working against him.

Mr Roux, a balding man in his mid forties stepped forward. He wore dark pleated trousers and a white shirt. A thin moustache sprouted above his upper lip and his eyes danced over Thomas furtively.

"I'm Mr Roux, Lucy's Maths teacher," he introduced himself. "How can I help you?"

"As Mrs Gibbins explained, Lucy didn't come home from school yesterday," Thomas replied seriously. "Did you notice anything unusual in Lucy's behaviour? Did she act strange or," Thomas waved his right hand helplessly.

Mr Roux squinted, put a finger on his pouting lips and creased his forehead into a frown. "Let me think," he said with exaggeration.

Thomas watched him with anticipation.

The teacher tapped his finger a couple of times on his bottom lip.

"I taught them in third period," he said. "There was Jason who was a bit unruly and Nomsa who chattered during half of the lesson." He hesitated, then shook his head. "There was nothing unusual about Lucy," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "She worked hard and paid attention. I'm sorry," he said, "but that's about all I can tell you."

Thomas breathed in deeply, disappointment showing clearly on his face. "Thank you, Mr Roux," he said, nevertheless. "I appreciate your help."

The teacher nodded in return.

A young slender woman with red hair cut into a short bob, approached Thomas.

"I'm Mrs Whitmer," she said. "I teach English."

Thomas shook her hand and Mr Roux took this as an opportunity to move away.

Her bright green eyes were full of concern. "I wish I could help you, Mr Nkosi," she said sorrowfully. "Lucy is such a good student. I can't image what has happened to her. I had her in the first period. She was bouncy and participated in class." The teacher pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "There was nothing out of the ordinary about her. When she left class, I saw her talk to her friend, Tanja, and they seemed to have a real good giggle." She shrugged her shoulders helplessly.

Thomas pulled a skew face. "It's alright, Mrs Whitmer," he assured her. "I'm just trying to cover all bases."

Mrs Whitmer placed her hand on Thomas's arm. "Let's hope and pray that nothing serious has happened to Lucy. It would be unimaginable. Please let me know as soon as she is home."

A worried smile played around Thomas's lips. "I will," he replied, sounding more optimistic than he felt.

The young teacher walked back to the table at the opposite side of the room and was replaced by a thin grey-haired woman in her fifties with a pinched face. Her drab silver grey satin blouse and knee-length skirt did nothing to enhance her looks.

"Good afternoon," she said, her voice heavily accented with Afrikaans pronunciation.

Thomas nodded politely.

She crossed her arms in front of her, pulling a long plastic beaded chain tight against her flat chest.

"I don't know about the young people today," she started off. "I can't believe what they are up to nowadays."

Thomas raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"I'm telling you," she continued in her high-pitched voice. "Twenty years ago this wouldn't have happened. No kid would have dared not to come home after school."

Thomas narrowed his eyes uneasily. What on earth was this woman talking about?

The teacher sighed theatrically. "They have no respect for their elders any longer and think they can do whatever they like. I wish they would bring back corporal punishment. A good hiding has never done anybody any harm."

Thomas swallowed hard. "Excuse me," he said. "Who are you?"

The woman looked at him surprised. "Oh," she muttered. "I'm Mrs du Plessis. I teach Afrikaans."

Ryan nearly choked. That explained a lot. For him, this woman represented the epitome of every old-fashioned Afrikaans teacher. How he had hated them! They had never needed an excuse to hit a pupil with a ruler or send someone for a caning

to the principal's office. Just looking at them at the wrong moment would get you into trouble.

Luckily his school days were long over. He wasn't quite sure how he would react today if confronted with a teacher with such an outdated attitude.

Mrs du Plessis patted her grey, permed hair into place. "The youngsters today have no discipline," she whined. "If Lucy was my child, I would find an appropriate punishment for her once she was back home."

Thomas stared at her flabbergasted. "Why would you punish her?" he asked.

"Because she gave you trouble," Mrs du Plessis explained huffily. "She ran away from home, not so?"

Thomas's face darkened and Ryan knew that his partner was ready to explode. Quickly, he stepped forward.

"Mrs du Plessis," he said firmly. "I'm Ryan Bates and I'm Mr Nkosi's business partner." He heard Thomas exhaling loudly behind him. "We are not sure if Lucy ran away," he explained, forcing patience into his voice. "At this point in time, we are exploring all options, including the possibility that something has happened to her."

"Oh," the teacher muttered, taken aback.

Smiling benignly at her, he continued, "Can you remember anything unusual about Lucy's behaviour yesterday?"

The Afrikaans teacher pursed her lips, not quite sure what to make of this forceful young man.

"Please," Ryan said, his expression grave. "We would really appreciate your help."

The teacher flicked her head. "Well," she replied, "there was a small quarrel between Lucy and her friend Tanja."

Her words pricked Thomas's ears and he waited eagerly for her to continue.

Mrs du Plessis squirmed under Thomas's scrutiny. She flexed her fingers as if she were kneading bread, unable to think of what to do with her hands.

"Mrs du Plessis," Ryan prompted her. "What quarrel did Lucy and her friend have?"

The teacher blushed and strangely enough the soft pink on her cheeks enhanced her looks considerably.

"I don't quite know what happened," she replied hesitantly. "All I remember is that I had to reprimand Lucy to pay attention, and I never have to tell her to focus on her work," she added hastily.

Thomas jutted out his chin. "Is that all?" he asked impatiently.

Mrs du Plessis shook her head. "When class was over, Lucy did not wait for Tanja. She left the classroom alone and that is very unusual, because those two are as thick as thieves."

Thomas frowned at her.

The woman lifted her hands pleadingly. "That's all I know," she said, dropping her arms. "Maybe you should speak to her friend. Maybe Tanja can tell you why they quarrelled in class."

Thomas's expression was grim when he thanked Mrs du Plessis for her help. "I think we will speak to Tanja once more," he said.

The teacher nodded enthusiastically, but escaped quickly to the back of the room without another word, leaving Thomas and Ryan in the care of Mrs Gibbins.

"That sounds like a possible lead," the principal said hopefully.

Thomas pulled a corner of his mouth into a half grin. "It might be," he replied. "But we have spoken to Tanja already and she didn't mention anything about a falling out."

"Sometimes kids are afraid," she said kindly. "Sometimes, although there is nothing they have done wrong, they believe they might be in some kind of trouble and they don't tell the whole truth."

Thomas refrained from replying.

"They are only kids," the principal reminded him. "They do not act or think as rationally as adults." She patted him lightly on the arm. "You should give it another try. Speak to Tanja again."

Agreeing with Mrs Gibbins, they thanked the principal for her assistance and said their good-byes.

xxx

"Hey, check this out," Rat Face shouted.

Dirk glanced towards the patio door.

"Come on," he yelled again. "This is cool."

Reluctantly, Dirk got to his feet. Moving out of the shadow into the blazing sun, he instantly felt a hot sting on his bare arms. He squinted as he crossed into the relative dimness of the lounge.

Rat Face was pointing excitedly at the TV screen. "Look," he said, hopping up and down on the couch.

Dirk pushed his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and looked at the TV. Scenes with people flashed across the screen in rapid succession. He concentrated on the reporter's voice, only catching the tail end of what she was saying.

"... spread across the whole country. Thousands have been displaced ... seeking shelter at police stations, local schools and community centres."

The picture showed a street. Black people, men wearing blue overalls, jeans, flapping shirts, beanies; and women in skirts and faded polyester blouses, were running, shouting and swinging a variety of weapons. Dirk saw pangas, hammers, shovels, knobkerries and sticks. The mob clogged up the wide road from side to side. A few white police vans were surrounded by the swirling mass of bodies. The horde yelled and whistled. Cops in blue uniforms, holding riot guns and man-size Perspex shields, were trying to keep the crowd contained, but the mob was pushing effortlessly past the officers and chased further down the street.

The picture changed again. The camera panned in on a body lying on the dirty tarmac. Fresh blood flowed unrestrained from a head wound, pooling on the road's surface. The young black man was moaning pitifully, touching his forehead repeatedly. Blood ran down the side of his face, soaking his torn white shirt. Helping hands appeared, pressing thick gauze against the fiercely bleeding gash on his head.

"The xenophobic attacks continue," the female reporter stated. "From Alexandra the violence has spread to other townships around the country. The attacks are aimed at foreigners who have no way of defending themselves."

Next, a microphone was pushed into the face of a black man. "What happened to you?" the reporter asked.

"I was asleep," came the reply, his eyes darting around anxiously. "There was a loud crash and then they were in my house. They started beating and kicking me, shouting I must go home."

The camera focussed on the man's swollen eye.

"Where is home?" the reporter asked.

The man touched his face gingerly. "The DRC," he replied quietly. "But I can't go back."

The camera moved to the pretty dark-haired reporter. "Many of the victims are asylum seekers from other African countries," the woman explained, then she flinched as a glass missile suddenly exploded beside her. The reporter took a few steps to the right, glancing cautiously over her shoulder.

"They have left their war torn countries to come to South Africa expecting to find peace and a new way of life," she continued undaunted, any immediate threat to her life now of secondary importance. "Unfortunately, South Africans living in the townships have begun to attack these foreigners, blaming them for an increase in crime in their communities. These foreigners have nowhere else to go. They can not go back to their home countries and now they are afraid for their lives if they stay in the townships."

The camera captured a young black mother, her head covered by a yellow scarf, holding on to a small, frail boy. She was clutching a soft, colourful blanket with one hand and pressing the boy against her long flowing skirt with her other hand. Her brown eyes were filled with fear. Helplessly she stared back at the swirling mob down the road.

Well aware of recent developments, Dirk turned away from the TV.

A couple of days previously, xenophobic attacks had broken out in the townships. South Africans had already killed several foreigners and the violence seemed to be spreading across the country. No one knew what had triggered the aggression. Several voices claimed black South Africans felt threatened by foreigners, believing they were taking over their jobs by undercutting existing rates for daily piece jobs.

The government kept strangely quiet.

Congolese, Nigerians, Zimbabweans, Malawians, Mozambiquans and many other foreigners from African countries were fleeing to places of safety, camping in the forecourts of police stations, crowding community halls, and seeking sanctuary in churches. They arrived with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. Men, women and children were running for their lives.

"This is so cool," Rat Face jeered. "I hope they kill each other until no one is left." He raised his fist in the air. "Go home! You don't belong here."

Dirk stared at the ferret with disgust.

He was about to make a sharp remark that would put Rat Face in his place but thought better of it. Rat Face was a moron and it would not matter what he said to him - it would only end up in an argument. And Dirk was in no mood to get into a fight with an idiot who could barely add one and one.

Across the TV screen flashed a picture of another black man stumbling along a dusty potholed road, blood streaming down his face.

"Yes," Rat Face shouted. "Beat them to death! Kill them all!"

How stupid can you be? Dirk thought warily. And how racist? He sighed heavily. Rat Face was the perfect example of a narrow minded, uneducated, racist white South African.

A lot of things had changed since 1994, but the attitude of some people had not improved. How long would it take for all South Africans, of all races, to accept each other? Nelson Mandela stood for human rights and peace. South Africa was supposed to be a country where those principles were upheld under any circumstance, but there were still people who violated these fundamental rights and who actively supported and encouraged those who trampled on these principles.

Repulsed, Dirk wanted to spit at Rat Face, but instead he swallowed hard. It was not worth the effort. One could not change an inbred attitude. One could only stay away from those kind of people, isolate them, and watch them carefully.

Suddenly, Dirk felt his cellphone vibrate in his pocket.

Oh shit! What now?

He glanced a look at Rat Face, but the skinny guy had his eyes glued to the TV set.

Luckily, he had switched his cellphone to silent after Rat Face had smashed Lucy's cellphone to smithereens. His phone was his lifeline and he could not afford to lose it. If Rat Face found out about his cellphone ... Dirk didn't want to think about what would happen.

His phone continued to vibrate. He threw another glance over his shoulder. Rat Face was not paying him any attention. Quickly, Dirk stepped onto the patio and around the corner of the chalet. The heat outside assaulted him with a sucker punch. The heavy air stood still and every breath he took seemed to take an enormous effort.

Trying to find a place of privacy, Dirk checked his bearings and spotted another dilapidated chalet close by, crumbling beside the river.

Brown puffs of dust rose up with every step he took towards the ruin. Cinder dry branches crackled as he brushed past them. Sweat gathered on his forehead and ran down his back, dampening his T-shirt. A huge willow tree cast its shadow over the dilapidated place. Hurriedly, Dirk stumbled along, the phone still vibrating in his pocket. He almost ran into a thorn bush and only avoided its iron hard talons at the last moment. Disappearing behind a collapsed wall, he crouched down and pulled the phone out of his pocket.

"Hello," he whispered.

"Is that you Dirk?" his mother's voice asked.

"Yes, mom," he replied quietly.

"Why are you whispering? Speak up!" she demanded.

Dirk rolled his eyes. "What's up, mom?" he asked, raising his voice slightly.

"I was wondering where you are. You didn't come last night," she said.

"Oh, mom," he moaned, pulling his hand through his dark hair. "I'm nineteen. I'm not a baby. You don't have to check up on me."

"Tsk, ts," his mother uttered. "I know how old you are, but that doesn't mean I have to stop worrying."

A faint smile played around his lips. Although it annoyed him somewhat that she checked up on him, it was good to know that she cared.

"Where are you?" her voice came back over the ether.

Dirk looked around him at the dry riverbed, the broken stones on the ground, and the dusty grass.

Shit!

Suddenly, he yearned for his mother's comfort. He closed his eyes with sorrow. How he wished he could tell her where he was. He wanted to blurt out his misery to her. He wanted to tell her about the mess he was in. With every fibre of his being, he craved her reassurance. He wished he could tell her about Angus and Meshak, the abducted girls and their prison in this forgotten place. His lips started to form the words of how Rat Face had attacked him, but at the last second he thought better of it.

He clenched his fist in despair.

Mother, he wanted to shout, get me out of here! Help me! Please make things right! I didn't ask for any of this to happen. I've been stupid, but I didn't mean to be! I just slipped into this mess and now I can't get out!

"Dirk," his mother asked. "Are you still there?"

Forlorn, Dirk kicked at the brown hard soil, raising a brown beetle from its hiding place.

"Dirk?"

He cleared his throat. "Yes," he nodded. "I'm here."

"What's going on?" A strong suspicion edged her voice.

Oh God! Dirk groaned silently. What am I going to do? There was no way he could tell her about his situation. She would move heaven and earth to find him. He knew his mother too well – and that would only get him killed. There was no doubt about it!

Dirk straightened his shoulders with renewed determination. He would get out of this mess by himself! He would make everything right.

He shook his head. "Nothing is going on," he lied, sounding firm and confident.

"Where are you?" his mother persisted.

"I'm with Angus," Dirk replied, believing that to tell a half truth was better than to speak a full lie.

There was a moment of silence on the other side. Dirk hoped his mother would let sleeping lions lie, but it was not to be.

"Angus?" she repeated hesitantly. "What are you doing with him?"

"I'm helping him with a job," he replied smoothly. "You know, he was a man short and he asked me to help him out."

Dirk could sense his mother's frown.

"I never liked Angus," she stated.

Dirk's laugh was forced. "He's my cousin," he reminded her.

"I know, I know," she replied quickly. "But he was never up to any good. I don't trust him. He has strange friends and I don't know where he gets all his money from. There is something not right about him."

Now it was his turn to be silent. He stared across the riverbed into the distance. Nothing moved except the shimmering heat. It danced above the burnt ground like a mirage of water.

"You are not in any trouble?" she probed.

Oh mother! he wanted to shout. If you only knew! But he kept his thoughts to himself.

"No," he lied. "I'm in no trouble."

His mother sighed heavily. "Alright," she said. "When will you be home?"

"In a few hours," he answered casually, although he had no idea if he would ever see his mother again.

Suddenly tears stung his eyes.

"Well," she said. "Then I'll see you tonight. Love you."

"Yeah, sure," he replied, trying to steady his voice. "See you tonight."

He disconnected the call and pushed the phone back in his pocket. Slowly, Dirk got to his feet. With his head hanging, he walked away from the ruined wall. A hand on his chest stopped him short. He looked up into the eyes of the ferret.

"Where have you been?" his adversary snarled.

Dirk swallowed hard. "I went for a walk," he lied quickly.

Rat Face lifted a corner of his upper lip. "Ah yeah?"

Feigning indifference, Dirk pushed his hands into his jeans pockets.

"Ah, yeah," he repeated mockingly.

Rat Face narrowed his eyes, squinting at Dirk suspiciously.

Suddenly Dirk became highly annoyed with the ferret. "What do you want?" he shouted. "Stop checking up on me!"

Surprised at Dirk's outburst, Rat Face took a step back. "Hey," he said, lifting his hands defensively. "Take it easy."

Dirk shook his head irritably. "Just leave me alone," he growled. "I'm not going anywhere!"

"Alright, alright," Rat Face replied. "I won't check up on you."

"You better not, because I've had enough of you and your crap," Dirk hissed.

Rat Face looked uncomprehendingly at Dirk, unable to figure out what his charge was talking about. Dirk simply pushed him aside and walked off in the direction of the girls' prison.

CHAPTER 15

Ryan and Thomas plodded up the concrete path, its borders lined with a neatly trimmed green hedge. Approaching the sliding school gate, Ryan faltered in his brisk step.

"What are all those kids doing here?" he asked surprised.

"What?" his partner replied distractedly, stopping beside him.

Ryan pointed at a red brick enclosure covered by a tiled roof, its incomplete circle open to the schoolyard. Thomas followed Ryan's outstretched arm. About one hundred and fifty kids were milling around the front of the structure, or were seated on wooden benches inside. Their backpacks had been carelessly thrown on the paved ground, or piled up against the walls. Groups of girls and boys stood together in animated conversation. An occasional laugh drifted through the hot air. Blue shirts hung over the waistbands of the boys' trousers and the girls' white socks were pushed down below their ankles. The security guard stood watch at the gate, casting a casual eye on the teenagers.

"Oh that," Thomas answered dispassionately.

"What are they still doing here?" Ryan asked disturbed.

Thomas looked his partner puzzled.

"I mean," Ryan continued, waving a hand. "Aren't they supposed to go home?"

Thomas smiled and patted his partner on the shoulder. "As I said before, a lot of things have changed since you went to school."

Ryan's eyebrows rose a notch.

"Eventually they'll go home," Thomas answered patiently. "Nowadays, a lot of times, both parents work to keep the household going and it's too far for the kids to walk home."

"So they're waiting to be collected?" Ryan asked incredulously.

His eyes roamed over the teenagers who seemed quite comfortable standing around in the afternoon heat, as if it was nothing unusual; as if they were used to it.

Thomas nodded gravely. "Yes," he replied. "Some of them have to wait until after five in the afternoon, until one or both of their parents have finished work."

"Unreal," said Ryan, flabbergasted.

A cynical laugh escaped Thomas's mouth. "This is what life is about," he replied. "You have to earn a living and your kid has to wait at school until you are able to fetch her."

"But ... isn't it dangerous?" Ryan queried worriedly.

His partner shrugged his shoulders. "What isn't today?" he replied. "As long as they stay within the school grounds, they are quite safe." Thomas pointed at the security guard. "He is also watching them and as you have noticed, he won't let anyone inside who doesn't belong here."

Ryan swallowed hard. Thomas was right. A lot of things had changed since he was a pupil. In his time, no one had ever stayed behind after school. It was just not heard of. Everyone went home, either they walked or took the bus, but nobody remained at school.

He shook his head. What had the world come to?

"Come on," Thomas urged. "We still want to talk to Tanja."

Ryan resumed his walk, all the time watching the teenagers out of the corner of his eye. The kids ignored him completely, totally engrossed in their apparently life changing conversations.

The two men approached the gate. Thomas lifted his hand in greeting to the security guard, who in turn raised his baton in acknowledgment. They waited for the black man to push the heavy gate aside so that they could exit the school grounds. Once outside, the security guard closed the gate and the two men walked towards Ryan's car.

The sun stung their bare arms and their skin hurt as if touched with a red hot metal rod and Ryan shielded his eyes and scanned the sky. Thick cumulus clouds, like thick stiffly whipped up fresh cream were gathering in the distance. The accumulated moisture drops rose a kilometre or more into the cobalt blue sky. Ryan pursed his lips and watched the heavenly display for a moment. As the clouds gathered speed they pushed against each other forming a monstrous wall of white.

A thunderstorm was brewing.

xxx

Lucy picked at the hem of her school skirt. Her brown legs were outstretched and her feet were crossed at her ankles. Absentmindedly, she stared at her dirt streaked skin. Her eyes trailed along her shins down to her grimy, once-white socks and her dust covered black shoes.

She sighed deeply.

"What's up?" Silvy asked from the other side of the mattress. Her eyes were half closed and she had placed her arms on top of her drawn-up legs, dangling her hands. Lethargically, she rolled her head from one side to the other.

"I was just thinking ..." Lucy mumbled. Her face remained averted and she avoided looking up.

Silvy stopped rolling her head.

Wistfully, Lucy pulled at her shirt. "I was supposed to try out for the cheerleading squad next week," she said sadly.

She closed her eyes casting her mind back to her last cheerleading practice session.

The change room smelled of stale sweat and sweet deodorant. A long grey sock, one of those worn by the rugby guys, lay discarded beneath one of the parallel wooden benches. A white cricket sweater hung forgotten on a hook that was mounted on the wall. The door to the shower room was ajar and pools of water shone on the white tiled floor.

Lucy quickly found her usual place on the right side of the room and dumped her heavy schoolbag and tog bag on the scratched bench. The twenty-five girls, selected from grade eight to grade ten, easily fitted into the huge room. Amongst light-hearted chatter and laughter, the girls changed quickly into their blue cycling shorts, white T-shirts, and canvas trainers. Running, rather than walking, they assembled on the rugby field where Ms Vine, their trainer, was waiting for them.

"Good afternoon, girls."

Ms Vine had been in charge of the cheerleading squad for the last five years. A short woman - maybe one metre sixty - in her late twenties with a trim figure, wore

the same outfit as the girls gathered in front of her. A highly competent athlete, she had taken the cheerleading squad to the inter-school competitions every year, but St Michael's High had never made it to the Nationals. The team, never mind how hard they practiced, had always come second or third, which was partly due to the school's policy. The potential cheerleading team members always griped about the restrictions, but Ms Vine was adamant.

There would be no acrobatics: no throwing into the air, no somersaults or back flips, because of that accident a few years ago.

All cheerleading participants knew the story off by heart.

It had been a few weeks before the national competition and apparently a cheerleader in grade eleven had wanted to boast. It was a sunny day and during break-time she had gathered her team mates around her. Eager to show off their moves - the school bags had been piled into a corner - the shoes and socks had come off, and the girls had positioned themselves into the formation they had practiced so hard for.

Soon a crowd had gathered, whistling and cheering loudly, forming a circle around the elite girls. Even the appearance of some teachers could not stop the show, although the adults had demanded that the girls stop their performance immediately.

The cheerleaders were on their last leg of their presentation. Skirts and ponytails were flying, arms flipping and bodies rotating in perfect synchrony. The grand finale was approaching. At this point, the chosen cheerleader had positioned herself to be thrown into the air, to make a somersault, confident that the girls standing beneath her would catch her.

The throw had gone well. The girl went high up into the air, curled in a tight ball, and executed a perfect somersault. As she came out of her roll, one of the catchers took a small step back. Her foot gave way on the uneven ground and she stumbled. Instead of raising her arms to catch the falling girl, she used her hands to steady herself.

Unable to close the gap fast enough, the cheerleader fell past the rest of the catchers' outstretched arms. The girl hit the ground with a thud and lay still. A collective gasp from the gathered crowd was the only sound. Shocked, scared and worried, the team members rushed forward, but the girl was motionless.

She had broken her neck.

Since that unfortunate accident, no one, but no one had been allowed to train for somersaults, back flips, or throws. But that in turn meant they would never win first prize, because the other schools had not placed this restriction on their squads.

Ms Vine looked sternly at the assembled girls.

"Good afternoon, Ms Vine," the girls chorused back her greeting.

The teacher's ponytail bobbed jauntily as she bounced up a few steps. She folded her arms and the girls waited with anticipation.

"You all have trained very hard," Ms Vine stated loudly. "I'm very proud of you and every single one of you deserves to be in this team." She paused for a moment. "Unfortunately, as you know, a team can only accommodate fifteen girls."

All eyes hung on Ms Vine's lips expectantly.

"The time has come to choose those fifteen girls who will represent our school in the upcoming provincial competition," she continued.

The potential squad members shuffled their feet uneasily. All of them wanted to be included in the team. All of them wanted to represent their school. Their eyes drifted to the girl standing next to them. Lucy glanced at Simone, giving her a pinched smile. Both girls were standing in the front row. Lucy was hoping her position was an indication that she would make the team. Ms Vine always placed the stronger girls in front and the weaker ones at the back of the squad.

"To give every girl a fair chance to make the team," Ms Vine said, "we are going to have a try-out next week. That means this is your last opportunity to practice the steps." She drew a deep breath. "Give it your best!"

With those last words, Ms Vine bounced down the stairs, walked over to the radio tape deck and pushed the on button. Music floated across the rugby field and she started to count down. The girls manoeuvred into position, waited for the right beat and began to move their feet, their arms, in fact their whole bodies to the rhythm of the music. Soon, they were rolling on the grass only to jump up on the following beat. They kicked, swirled, hopped, and twisted their bodies to the sound of the music. Soon they were bathed in sweat. Their breath came in short gasps although they were fit, having trained every single day for the last six weeks. Countless times Ms Vine stopped the tape and instructed them to start from the beginning because one or more girls had stepped out of formation. Eventually the gruelling practice session came to an end.

Lucy was very pleased with herself. She had not stepped out of line once, her body in perfect rhythm to the music. Ms Vine had not once reprimanded her or moved her to the second row. She calculated that her chance of being selected for the team were very strong.

Now Lucy's memory met reality and a heartbreaking expression crossed her face.

"Hey," Silvy called softly. "What are you thinking?"

Lucy tugged on her braided hair. "Do you think we'll make it out of here?" she asked in an anguished voice.

A small, surprised cry escaped from Silvy's lips. Crawling on all fours, she made her way to Lucy's side.

"What makes you say that?" she asked anxiously. "You have been so positive up to now."

A tear glittered in the corner of Lucy's eye. "I don't know," she replied. "Maybe we'll never get home. Maybe they'll kill us."

Silvy cuffed her arm. "Don't talk rubbish," she chided her. "Sure we'll get out of here."

The tear rolled down Lucy's face leaving a trail on her dusty face. "How do you know?" she whispered. "It's been so long already and no one has found us."

Silvy crossed her arms resolutely. "They are looking for us," she stated firmly. "Our parents, the cops, our friends, all of them are out there looking for us."

"How can you be so sure?" Lucy protested feebly. "Wouldn't they have been here by now?"

Silvy rubbed her nose thoughtfully. "You know," she said. "It does take time. They don't know where we are. They have to figure it out first."

Another tear slid down Lucy's cheek.

Silvy raised her hand and gently wiped Lucy's face dry. "You mustn't cry," she said. "You mustn't give up hope."

"But what if they don't find us?" Lucy sniffed. "What's going to happen to us? Will they kill us? Will they bury us out here, never ever to be found? Maybe they are going to rape us first? Oh my God," she sobbed. "I don't want to die."

Silvy grabbed Lucy by her arms and shook her fiercely.

"Stop this talk right now!" she demanded. "You are not going to get depressed. You are going to keep it together."

Tearfully Lucy looked at the determined girl.

"You are going to be strong," Silvy ordered, squeezing Lucy's arms hard, driving home her point. "You are not going to show them that you are frightened. You are a fighter!" Silvy let go of Lucy. "Everyone is searching for us and they will find us. Until then we will keep on going." She stared at Lucy, her eyes glittering angrily. "You hear me?"

Lucy returned Silvy's hard glare. Her tears stopped and she wiped her nose with the back of her hand. Slowly she nodded her head. "Yes," she replied quietly. "Yes, we will keep going."

xxx

Back in the car, Thomas pulled out his cellphone and dialled his sister's number.

"Hey Thandi, it's me," he announced himself. "Anything new?"

Thomas listened attentively and nodded his head a couple of times. "Yes," he eventually said. "The Afrikaans teacher remembered that Lucy and Tanja had tiff. Do you know who she was talking about?" Thomas tilted his head with concentration. "Do you know where she stays exactly?" he asked.

Thomas turned to Ryan and made a writing movement with his hand. Ryan leaned forward, popped open the lid of the cubby hole, dug in its dark recess until his hand emerged with a small notepad and a cheap ballpoint pen. Thomas balanced the paper on his leg and jotted down an address.

"And you say it's only two roads up from you?" he asked, staring thoughtfully through the windscreen.

"Alright," he continued after a few seconds. "We'll go and see Tanja. Maybe she can shed some light on Lucy's disappearance."

He rubbed his face tiredly as he listened to his sister on the other end.

"Well," he said. "You hang in there and I'll talk to you as soon as we have spoken to Tanja."

He pulled a grimace. "Don't worry," he replied through clenched teeth. "I'll let you know the moment I've got anything useful."

His face was drawn when he disconnected the call.

Ryan turned to his partner and looked at him expectantly. "And?"

Thomas sighed deeply. "Tanja's surname is Coetzee and according to Thandi, they live a couple of streets up from my sister's place."

Ryan started the car. The engine rumbled and the air conditioner instantly emitted a soft hum. Cold air blew through the dashboard vents cooling their hot skins.

"I'm going to direct you," Thomas said, clipping in his safety belt.

Ryan manoeuvred the 4x4 out of its tight spot and filed in behind a red Audi.

"Apparently Tanja and Lucy are best friends," Thomas related the information his sister had given him. "They spent a lot of time together either at Tanja's or Thandi's

place, especially after school. Most afternoons they are doing their homework together." Suddenly, his arm shot out. "Turn left here," he instructed.

Ryan flipped the indicator and made a left turn. They continued down the road passing numerous groups of school kids making their way home.

"Turn right here," Thomas directed his partner, pointing to a tree lined street.

The pavements became quieter, with fewer kids walking beside the road. Silver Birch trees grew next to the pavement, providing much needed shade for the wary pedestrians. Ryan followed the road to the end. Crossing the third intersection, Thomas told Ryan to slow down.

Lowering his head, Thomas peered through the passenger window.

"This is the house," he declared.

Ryan pulled up in front of a wide, green metal gate, its welded bars running diagonally to the ground. He switched off the engine and opened the door. A wave of hot air engulfed him and he heaved a careful breath. Thomas followed him out of the BMW and exhaled loudly.

"Man, it's hot," he complained. "I wonder if it will rain later on."

"I sincerely hope so, for all of our sakes," Ryan replied.

Thomas walked around the back of the car and up to the remote intercom. He pressed the house button and waited for some to answer. They did not have to wait long.

"Hello?" a girl called out, her young voice distorted by the electronic equipment.

"Hi," Thomas said, bending down towards the square box. "I'm looking for Tanja Coetzee."

"Who are you?" the girl asked cautiously.

"I'm Thomas Nkosi," he explained calmly. "I'm Lucy's uncle."

There was a moment of silence, then her voice came back over the intercom. "What do you want?"

Thomas sighed deeply. "I don't know if you heard, but Lucy has disappeared," he said quietly. "I just wanted to have a word with Tanja, if she knows where Lucy might have gone."

Ryan looked at his partner appreciatively. He was impressed with the way Thomas was handling the girl's enquiries, neither growing impatient nor making demands, and using just the right amount of sincerity without causing panic.

A moment later, the buzzer sounded and with a grating noise the gate slid open. The two men stepped over its sunken guide rail and found themselves on a paved driveway.

To their left was a double garage. Its doors were open and Ryan saw a fairly new white Toyota Corolla and an old Tazz parked side by side. The outbuilding was flanked by a huge bottlebrush, its red feathery flowers buzzing with bees. A massive oak tree, its branches throwing wide shadows across an immaculately trimmed lawn was framed by white painted boundary walls.

As they came closer to the house, the panelled wooden front door opened. A woman in her mid thirties, her shoulder length Brunette hair framing her pretty face, was waiting for them. A pair of tight jeans and a white T-shirt could not hide her slender figure. She was barefoot and had her arms folded in front of her.

"Mrs Coetzee?" Thomas enquired politely.

The woman nodded cautiously.

Thomas took a step closer. "I'm Thomas Nkosi, Lucy's uncle," he explained.

Her eyes focussed on Ryan.

Thomas pointed to his partner. "This is Mr Ryan Bates," he said. "He's my boss and he's helping me out."

Thomas held out his hand and Mrs Coetzee shook it reluctantly.

Just then a face appeared behind the woman's back. Except for the hair colour - the girl's was blonde – the face was the splitting image of her mother's.

A smile spread across Thomas's face as he spotted the girl. "Hi," he said warmly. "Are you Tanja?"

The girl nodded shyly.

"I'm Thomas," he introduced himself. "I'm Lucy's uncle."

Tanja took a step forward. She had already changed out of her school uniform and was wearing pink shorts and a matching T-shirt with a big red flower print.

Thomas's face turned serious. "Did you hear?" he said. "Lucy did not come home from school yesterday."

Tanja looked at her feet, but did not reply.

Thomas addressed the girl's mother. "I was wondering if we could ask Tanja a couple of questions?"

The woman pursed her lips thoughtfully.

"Look," Thomas raised his hands defensively sensing the mother's hesitation. "We are not here to cause any trouble. All we want is to gather as much information as possible which might help us find Lucy. She is only fourteen," he pleaded. "The same age as your daughter. We don't know where she went and why she didn't come home. She's all alone out there and we need to find her before something happens to her."

Mrs Coetzee's features softened on hearing Thomas's words. She put a protective arm around her daughter's shoulders. A hint of an understanding smile crinkled the corners of her eyes. She stepped aside and pushed the door back with the heel of her foot.

"Please come in," she said kindly. "Of course we'll help you."

Thomas and Ryan followed Mrs Coetzee into the house. The wide, but short tiled entrance hall opened up into an airy living area. To the left was an open plan kitchen laid out with utmost efficiency. Modern chrome appliances shone spotlessly in the afternoon light. The counter was topped with fashionable black granite. A passage led to the back of the house and Ryan assumed it housed the family's bedrooms.

Mrs Coetzee invited them to sit down. Ryan slid on to the cushions of a brown leather sofa facing a large open patio door.

Thomas leaned forward and placed his forearms on his knees. "Thank you, Mrs Coetzee," he said sincerely. "We really appreciate you giving us your time."

Again, he smiled warmly at Tanja who was perched on the couch halfway hiding behind her mother.

"May I ask you a few questions now?" he enquired gently.

Tanja returned his gaze and nodded.

Thomas drew a deep breath. "What happened yesterday?" he asked.

Tanja looked at her mother and back at the tall black man on the couch. "Nothing," she replied wide-eyed.

Thomas frowned. "Nothing?" he repeated.

Tanja shook her head.

"So," Thomas said after a moment. "You had a normal day at school. You listened to the teachers, changed classes, sat together during break and went home together? Nothing out of the ordinary happened?"

Tanja lowered her eyes and shook her head, her blonde hair flying in all directions.

Her mother was watching her carefully. She knew her daughter well enough to know something was wrong. Placing her arm around her daughter's shoulders, she squeezed her gently.

"You are not in any trouble," Mrs Coetzee assured Tanja. "Lucy's uncle just wants to find his niece. He's very worried. Lucy is your friend, isn't she?" her mother urged.

Tanja glanced at Thomas, but did not reply. Her face had become pale.

"Please Tanja," Thomas begged, lifting his palms up. "Your Afrikaans teacher said you had a fight with Lucy. What happened?"

Tanja fidgeted uncomfortably on the couch.

Mrs Coetzee let go of her daughter's shoulders. "You had a fight with Lucy?" her mother asked surprised.

Tanja began kneading her hands, stubbornly avoiding the stares of the adults around her.

"Tanja," her mother said more firmly. "What happened yesterday?"

The girl glanced at her mother, but quickly averted her eyes again. "Yes," she whispered. "Mrs du Plessis is right. Lucy and I had a fight."

The three adults waited patiently for her to continue. Ryan uncrossed his legs with anticipation. Now they were getting somewhere! Thomas leaned back, waiting for the girl's explanation.

Mrs Coetzee nudged her daughter's arm. "And?" she enquired.

Suddenly tears rolled down Tanja's face. "It's all my fault," she whispered.

Her mother's eyebrows narrowed with confusion. "What is your fault?" she asked.

Tanja scrunched the bottom of her pink T-shirt into a ball. "That Lucy didn't get home," the girl sobbed.

Startled, Thomas sat up and a frown appeared on Ryan's forehead. Tanja's mother looked helplessly at Thomas.

They exchanged bewildered and worried expressions.

Thomas pulled on his shirt cuffs and drew a deep breath. "Now, now," he said calmly. "Before we assign any blame let's take this story step by step. Why do you think it's your fault?"

Tanja wiped her face with the back of her hand, but it didn't help much. The tears continued to flow.

"In class, I sent a letter to Mandy," she hiccupped.

"Who is Mandy?" her mother interrupted.

Tanja gave her mother a sideways glance. "She's in my Afrikaans class and she sits behind Lucy," she replied.

Mrs Coetzee scratched her cheek musingly, then nodded as she remembered her daughter's classmate.

"As I said," Tanja continued. "I sent the letter to Mandy, but it fell on the floor and Lucy picked it up. She shouldn't have," the girl wailed.

The three adults waited patiently for her crying to ease.

"Why shouldn't she have picked up the letter?" Thomas asked finally.

Tanja pushed her lip out and looked at the black man sheepishly. "Because I said something ugly about Lucy."

Thomas raised his eyebrows.

"I said that Lucy is pushing me too hard and that I don't want to be friends with her any longer," she whispered.

"Ohh," Thomas muttered, taken aback.

Fresh tears ran down the girl's face. "I didn't mean it," she sobbed. "I'm so sorry. I really didn't mean it. I didn't know that Lucy would pick up the letter."

"It's alright," Thomas assured her, although his heart hurt unbearably.

All the insults he had been subjected to when he was a youngster resounded in his head. There had been endless taunting remarks and turned backs because he was black. He remembered being left out of sport teams and how the other boys huddled closely together during break time refusing to open a gap for him to join the group. They had called him names and had pushed him around, bumping him at every opportunity. The sound of their mean laughter still rang in his ears. He had hoped that Lucy had found a true friend, one who would look past his niece's dark skin colour, but the girl had discarded Lucy as soon as she had found someone who was as lily white as herself.

"I tried to talk to her," Tanja cried loudly, interrupting Thomas's hurtful memories. "I asked her to wait for me. I wanted to explain, but she didn't want anything to do with me. She told me I must stay away from her and she just kept on walking."

Is it any wonder? Thomas thought bitterly, biting his lip to prevent himself from revealing his feelings.

"I'm so sorry," Tanja whimpered. "I should have insisted on walking with her, no matter what. I shouldn't have let her go home alone." She buried her face in her mother's arm.

"Sshhh," Mrs Coetzee soothed her daughter. "It's okay. We are going to find her. I promise you it will be alright."

Thomas shot Mrs Coetzee a cynical glance. His niece was missing because her daughter thought Lucy was not good enough for her.

Tanja lifted her head. "You sure, mom?" she asked hopefully.

Her mother nodded encouraging. "Yes," she replied firmly. "You are not going to lose your best friend."

Wistfully, Thomas looked from daughter to mother, doubts forming in his mind. Tanja seemed really distraught about the result of her letter. Her mother too seemed genuinely upset.

"I really didn't mean it, mom," Tanja reconfirmed. "But you know how pushy Lucy can be. She always wants to do *one more* exercise. The project can be that much better," she held her thumb and forefinger about a centimetre apart, "if we just included *one more* page." Tanja sighed deeply. "She always had to be the best and sometimes I couldn't keep up. Sometimes I just wanted to have a good time."

Thomas listened carefully, her words sinking in slowly. Was this what the fight had been about? Lucy wanting to be the best and Tanja not being able to keep up? He pursed his lips. Was it possible that this wasn't about racism and discrimination?

"I really, really like Lucy," Tanja said, her pleading eyes searching for Thomas. "She's my best friend."

Thomas had not considered this angle before, that Tanja's behaviour was not colour prejudiced. Lucy just had been too ambitious, would not settle for second best and that had proven to be too much for Tanja.

The issue had not been race related!

Pride swelled within him. Lucy would go far with this kind of dedication.

But an instant later, he brought himself back to reality.

Lucy would go nowhere! Lucy was missing! A shadow crossed his face. If only Tanja had not sent that letter!

He glanced at the girl hanging onto her mother. Her face was swollen and her cheeks were covered with red blotches. She looked so lost. Sudden remorse overcame him. It wasn't Tanja's fault that Lucy had disappeared.

Thomas shook his head determinedly. He wasn't about to blame a fourteen year old teenager!

Forcing a smile, he said firmly, "Don't worry. Friends do fight, that's what friends do and you are not responsible for Lucy going missing."

Tanja's eyes were begging for forgiveness. "I'm so sorry for what I wrote," she whispered.

Thomas leaned forward and patted her leg. "It's alright," he said kindly. "When we find her, you can tell her yourself."

Tanja sniffled, wiped her cheeks and nodded meekly.

Leaning back in his seat, pondering an idea, Thomas rubbed the tops of his legs. Ryan was watching him out of the corner of his eye, wondering what was going through his partner's mind.

Thomas cleared his throat nosily.

"After Lucy told you to leave her alone, did you see her walk home?" he asked expectantly.

Tanja chewed on her bottom lip trying to recall what had happened. "I saw her walking away from the gate," she answered slowly.

"And after that?" Thomas pressed.

The girl shook her head. "I was upset," she replied defensively, glancing at her mother. "I waited for Mandy and we talked for a while."

Thomas shuffled his feet impatiently. "So," he said. "You don't know if she actually went home?"

A frown creased Tanja's forehead. "No," she answered hesitantly.

Thomas looked at her searchingly. "Do you know where she could have gone if she didn't want to go home?"

The girl reached for her mother's hand, who squeezed it reassuringly. "We always go home after school," Tanja said, jutting out her small chin. "We don't go anywhere else."

"You don't have a secret place where you go sometimes?" Thomas enquired cocking his head to the side.

"No," Tanja almost shouted, immediately sensing where Thomas was going with his question. "We are not like the other girls who hang out with boys. We don't do that kind of thing," she added indignantly.

Thomas smiled in spite of himself. "I didn't mean it that way," he said soothingly. "I just wondered if you would sometimes make a detour ..." his voice trailed off.

"No," Tanja repeated defiantly. "We always go home."

This line of enquiry was obviously not getting him anywhere, Thomas concluded. Tanja and Lucy seemed to be very straight forward, honest, innocent girls and behaving appropriate for their age. He sighed deeply. There was nothing more to gain by pushing Tanja any further. The girl had obviously told them everything she knew.

Where was he supposed to go from here? he wondered.

Thomas caught the questioning look of Tanja's mother. Quickly he returned his focus to the young girl sitting on the opposite couch.

A corner of his mouth curled into a half-smile. "Thank you, Tanja," he said sincerely. "You've been of great help."

The girl stared at him with a puzzled expression. "But I haven't helped you. I don't know where Lucy is," she protested weakly.

"You did help," Thomas assured her. "At least now we know Lucy was on her way home."

"Ohh," she replied not really understanding.

Thomas turned to Mrs Coetzee. "Thank you for letting us talk to Tanja," he said quietly.

Tanja's mother nodded. "That's the least I could do." She placed her hand on his arm. "I hope you find her."

"So do I," Thomas replied lowering his head.

"Please feel free to come around at any time," she offered. "If there's anything else we can do, you'll find us here."

"Thank you," Thomas answered and got up from his seat.

xxx

The smell in the chalet became worse by the minute. The heat did not improve the stench of rotting food leftovers clinging in mouldy cardboard boxes, but Dirk was damned if he was going to clean up.

Dirk skirted the massive table, walked behind the kitchen counter, stopped in front of the sink and opened the tap. Cold water splashed onto dirty plates and grimy glasses. He bent his head and let the cool liquid run into his mouth. Greedily he gulped down the water. A fine spray covered his face as he drank. Lifting his head, he wiped the moisture off his skin.

Watching the water run into the filthy basin he thought of the girls in their dingy prison. He should collect the plastic bottles and give them fresh water.

Fresh water? Suddenly sickened at the term he had used to describe their need, he clenched his teeth. What was he thinking? They were not laboratory rats in a cage! They were not animals who needed to be given fresh water out of a bowl. They were girls, almost young women!

Abruptly he closed the tap, stopping the flow of water instantly. He unclenched his jaw and took a deep breath. Telling himself to stay calm, he stared at the closed door at the opposite end of the lounge. No sound came through the thick wooden door. He imagined the three girls huddled together on the thin dirty mattress, their eyes fearful, not knowing the fate that awaited them.

Dirk pursed his lips thoughtfully.

Maybe he should try once again to get the telephone number from Lucy. She seemed quite with it. Maybe he could use their need for water as a pretence to get into the room. If he was clever and fast enough, Rat Face wouldn't even notice.

Making up his mind, Dirk walked back through the debris towards the couch. Careful not to block Rat Face's view of the TV, he stopped in front of him and held out his hand.

"I need the keys," Dirk said firmly.

Without moving a limb, Rat Face glanced up at him, but quickly returned his attention to the TV screen unwilling to miss a single second of the stupid programme.

"Hey," Dirk called quietly. "I need the keys."

"What for?" Rat Face grumbled, without turning his head.

Dirk kept his face blank. "The girls need water."

"The girls?" Rat Face repeated, pulling his mouth into an ugly grimace. "The girls, the girls," he repeated mockingly. "All you can think about is the girls."

Dirk's face flushed with anger. "We've been down this road before," he pointed out, carefully controlling his voice.

"Yeah, yeah," Rat Face replied, waving his hand dismissively.

"Come on," Dirk pushed. "You don't want to have dead bodies in that room. Think what Angus would say if he found three dead girls."

Rat Face grunted something unintelligible. In slow motion, his hand trailed to the remote control lying on his chest. Then he lifted his right buttock off the couch and pushed his hand into the front pocket of his jeans. As he started to pull out the keys, they both heard a jingle.

Surprised, Rat Face let go of the keys. Swiftly he sat up and groped his back pocket for his cellphone. The irritating jingle continued until Rat Face slid open the cover.

He pressed the phone against his ear, his face alight with sudden anticipation. Turning his back on Dirk, the ferret walked out of the lounge onto the patio and around the corner.

All Dirk heard was his greeting, then there was only a mumble.

Disappointed, he slumped down on the sofa.

Damn! he swore under his breath. Why did the phone have to ring now and who for Christ sakes was calling Rat Face anyway?

He didn't have to wait long for his question to be answered.

The ferret bounced back into the room, a huge grin spread across his face.

"That was Angus," he smirked, hitching up his jeans.

Dirk shrugged his shoulders. "So what?" he replied.

Rat Face stopped in front of Dirk, this time blocking Dirk's view of the TV. "He's coming here later," he declared happily.

Crossing his arms, Dirk frowned up at him. "What are you so excited about?"

Rat Face see-sawed on the balls of his feet. "It means company," he answered, his cheerfulness undiminished. "And it means that our duty here is almost over."

Dirk's ears pricked up. "What are you on about?" he asked cautiously.

Rat Face hit the palm of his hand with his fist. "We are getting out of here," he said merrily. "They are going to bring the rest of the load and then we'll be on our way."

Stunned, Dirk stared up at him. He leaned forward and pushed his fringe out of his eyes, while Rat Face rubbed his hands together gleefully. The ferret's words went

round and round in Dirk's head: "they are bringing the rest of the load". He watched Rat Face for a moment longer and finally the full meaning of the ferret's words hit him.

"They are going to bring more girls?" Dirk asked disbelievingly.

The ferret's head bobbed up and down in response.

Dirk's shoulders sagged despondently. More girls! He had hoped that this was it; that these three were enough for the kidnappers.

"Hey," Rat Face laughed clapping him on the shoulder. "Don't look so disappointed. There might be another round in the future."

Heat rushed into Dirk's cheeks.

What was the moron thinking? Did he believe he was in it for the ride? Did he believe that the abduction of innocent girls was fine with him?

Angrily Dirk jumped up from the sofa. He balled his hands into fists and punched Rat Face hard in the chest. Taken off guard, the ferret lost his footing and stumbled backwards, his fall only broken by the dilapidated cabinet behind him.

"Hey man," Rat Face called out surprised. "What the fuck is the matter with you?"

Dirk raised his fists again, ready to smash them into Rat Face's mouth.

"Do you think this is fun?" he shouted. "Do you think I'm enjoying this?"

Rat Face stepped away from the cabinet putting some distance between himself and his attacker. Stealthily his hand reached behind him feeling for the grip of his knife tucked under his shirt in the waistband of his jeans.

"This is wrong," Dirk yelled moving forward. "You can't just kidnap young girls and sell them off. You're a swine! All of you!"

With a quick sleight of hand, Rat Face pulled out the knife. The tip of the sharp blade was suddenly pressed against Dirk's throat.

"Let me tell you something, smart arse," Rat Face hissed. "I don't care if you are in it for the fun of it, or not. You are in, if you like it, or not. And don't dare fuck things up." He pushed the knife a bit harder against Dirk's neck. "This deal is going down, with, or without you!"

Dirk stood stock still. A cold chill ran up his spine, but small droplets of sweat formed on his forehead. The ferret's eyes glittered dangerously and Dirk detected a hint of mania in them. Instinctively he knew that the slightest movement could cost him his life. Rat Face was ready to kill him for his share of the bounty. He couldn't care less.

Dirk raised his hands slowly, avoiding any rash movement.

"It's okay," he said quietly. "I won't mess things up for you."

Rat Face stared hard at him.

"I'm alright now," Dirk assured him. "I just got a bit edgy," he added.

Rat Face watched him closely, but released the pressure of the blade against his throat.

"Sorry, man," Dirk said. "The heat and this place got to me. I'm calm now."

The ferret curled his lip into a snarl. "Just don't go cuckoo on me," he warned. "I don't want to deal with a crazy dude."

Dirk nodded. "No sweat," he guaranteed. "I'm not going to go nuts."

As quickly as the knife had materialized, so it disappeared underneath the ferret's shirt.

Dirk drew a deep breath and took a step backwards.

His mind swirled.

How could he have lost it so badly? What had come over him? He should have known better than to forget that the ferret had a knife. What good could come out of attacking Rat Face? It wouldn't help the girls, or him!

Disgusted with his lack of control, Dirk turned on his heel and marched out of the room.

CHAPTER 16

Ryan and Thomas walked out of Mrs Coetzee's house. As they stepped onto the paved driveway, the heat beat down on them ruthlessly and immediately tiny beads of sweat pearled on their foreheads. Ryan hurried into the shade of the oak tree, its tightly woven branches and leaves filtering the vicious sunbeams. At the end of the driveway, he waited for his partner to catch up.

"If I had a handkerchief, I would knot it round my head, like the old men in the movies," Thomas griped with a grimace as he approached the gate. His hair glistened with moisture, making it look like a velvet cap studded with tiny diamonds.

"I hope it will rain later on," he Ryan said exasperated.

Thomas wiped the sweat off his face with his shirt sleeve. "It definitely is hot enough," he replied.

Both men turned towards the house indicating to Mrs Coetzee that they were ready to leave. Tanja's mother stood at the front door with a remote control in her hand pointing it at the gate, pressing the button repeatedly.

But the gate refused to open.

Pushing the button several more times, she gave up in frustration.

"I don't know what's going on," she called. "Maybe the batteries are flat. Let me buzz you out from the wall unit."

She disappeared out of sight and the two men stared at the open front door, waiting for the sound of the heavy metal gate to slide back.

A couple of minutes later Mrs Coetzee returned. "Sorry," she said raising her hand apologetically. "There seems to be a power outage. I'm going to look for the key to override the electric motor. Won't you come back into the house until I've found the key?"

Thomas sighed irritably and Ryan rolled his eyes. A power outage! And it had to happen now of all times! He glanced at Thomas and noticed his partner's grim expression understanding his annoyance and anger perfectly. They both wanted to get back to Thandeka and their search for Lucy as quickly as possible. They just didn't have any time to waste.

Ryan checked out the gate speculating if they could climb over the top, but quickly concluded that it wasn't such a good idea. He was still wearing his suit trousers and smart shoes. His leather soles wouldn't grip the slanted metal bars and he wasn't in the mood for hanging helplessly on the gate, unable to get over it, or unable to climb down again, without making an utter fool of himself.

Resigned to his fate, Ryan patted Thomas on the shoulder. "No choice," he grumbled. "We have to hope she finds the key quickly."

Thomas chewed on the inside of his cheek and eyed the gate. "You are right," he conceded after a moment. "I'd just wreck my pants."

The two men turned their backs on the stubborn gate and walked back up to the house.

"Damn power cuts," Thomas growled. "I wish they would get their electricity supply right."

Ryan knew exactly what his partner was referring to.

'They' meant the state owned electricity provider Eskom. At the beginning of the year the supplier had placed the country under siege. The incompetence of Eskom's

management had forced the electricity provider into an unenviable predicament. A lack of funds, gross mismanagement and irregular maintenance checks and repair work had resulted in an electricity shortage. Eskom was unable to provide continuous electricity to all parts of the country. The giant claimed the demand for power was just too great.

Initially, the power cuts occurred randomly and total chaos ensued. People on their way home from work, had to suddenly cope with malfunctioning traffic lights. Instant traffic jams developed and cars blocked all access and entry points in and out of suburbs. The highways backed up for kilometres on end and motorists were stuck on the roads for hours.

Ryan remembered sitting in a restaurant on one particular night. He had invited a potential customer to dinner and the waiter had just placed their plates on the table when the power went out and the restaurant was plunged into darkness. The patron reacted very smartly, digging in cupboards and under a counter to find candles and wind lights. Unfortunately, that was not enough. The restaurant was situated in a shopping centre and had no back-up generator. Within minutes the air in the restaurant had become stale because the air conditioning system was not ventilating the place.

Ryan felt as if he was about to suffocate and wanted to leave immediately. Carrying only his credit cards, he was unable to pay for the dinner since the credit card machine required electricity to function! He had left his business card and was honest enough to return the next day to pay his bill.

People all over the country had been outraged and demanded answers from Eskom. Businesses suffered tremendously, manufacturing facilities lost vast amounts of money, reducing shift work and introducing short time, restaurants closed their doors, grocery stores threw away container-loads of perished food stuff, geysers had no hot water, washing machines did not work, people were unable to prepare warm meals, and school kids couldn't do their homework.

Finally, Eskom came up with some answers. Their excuses included a sabotaged atomic reactor in Cape Town, and wet, apparently unusable coal for the power stations on the Highveld. The people of South Africa weren't fooled though, due to the fact that Eskom also demanded a twenty five percent increase in electricity rates. Consumers were not prepared to pay these horrendous tariffs and believed Eskom used the power outages as leverage in order to force customers to accept the higher rates.

Under pressure from Unions and consumers alike, Eskom agreed to a twelve percent increase, but the power outages continued. Eskom finally saw reason and resorted to cutting power at regular intervals. It even announced the scheduled electricity cuts in advance on their web site!

Ordinary citizens raced to buy candles, battery operated lamps, kerosene stoves, gas braais and small generators. Businesses rushed to purchase and install massive back-up diesel powered generators at huge costs to themselves.

That part of the industry was booming. Within weeks not one generator was available in the country and the companies that had not been fast enough to purchase a back-up system, continued to suffer during the power outages.

During the third month of the scheduled power cuts, a handful of journalists began investigating the reasons for the electricity shortage and they confirmed what everyone had suspected. The journalists found that the shortages were mainly due

to gross mismanagement within Eskom. They established that the electricity provider had been warned about an impending crisis more than ten years previously, based on an expected demographic influx of people who would substantially increase demand. But Eskom had done nothing with regard to building additional power stations. The electricity provider had also not maintained the minimum coal stock levels outside the existing power stations. Pictures taken from the air showed empty stock piles where forty metre high mountains of coal were supposed to be.

Eskom scrambled to right the wrong. It negotiated ridiculously pricey contracts with international coal suppliers in order to meet the country's demand. However, the occasional unscheduled power cut still occurred at the most inconvenient times.

Annoyed with the unnecessary delay, Ryan entered the house once again, closely followed by Thomas. He hoped Tanja's mother would find the override key soon, because he could sense his partner's anxiousness.

They stood in the passage listening to Mrs Coetzee opening and closing cupboard doors and drawers. She muttered continuously under her breath, complaining about the mess in her kitchen and her useless husband. Ryan glanced at his partner and raised his eyebrows. Thomas shrugged his shoulders. It wasn't his house, so he had no idea where the key had been placed.

"Ahh," Mrs Coetzee exclaimed finally, and smiling from ear to ear, presented a small silver key to the two men standing in the passage.

"I'm sorry it took so long," she said. "But someone in this family must have taken it from the key board and put it in the bottom drawer under the sink."

Ryan looked at her amused. He actually wasn't interested in how the key had got to where it had been found. All he wanted was to leave.

Sensing his thoughts, Mrs Coetzee blushed, embarrassed. Without another word she hurried down the steps towards the gate. Ryan and Thomas followed quickly.

Mrs Coetzee opened the lid covering the electric motor, pushed the small key into the lock and turned it gently. Ryan placed both of his hands on the metal bars and pushed hard. The heavy gate ran on its rail with surprising ease and soon there was a large enough gap for the two men to slip through the opening. Standing outside the boundary walls, Ryan pushed the gate closed behind him.

"Thank you," Mrs Coetzee said. "And sorry again for taking so long."

Ryan smiled graciously. "It's alright," he replied.

She tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear. "Please let us know as soon as you find Lucy," she said. "We are really worried about her."

A dark cloud crossed Thomas's face. "We will," he replied. "At least now we know that she was on her way home."

"Lucy must be somewhere." Mrs Coetzee hesitated for a moment. "Good luck and don't hesitate to call us if you need any help."

Thomas waved his hand in reply and climbed into the 4x4.

Ryan started the engine and instantly the air conditioner blew cold air. He adjusted the vents and revelled in the breeze for a moment, before he shifted the gear lever into reverse. At last they were on their way back to Thandeka's house.

Lucy unscrewed the cap of the water bottle, lifted it to her mouth and took a sip of the tepid liquid, rolling it around her mouth before swallowing. Holding the bottle at eye level she checked how much water she had left.

Her eyebrows narrowed with concern. There was only a third of the water left in the bottle.

Glancing at the boarded up window she tried to guess what time it was. The light slanted into the room but she had no idea if it was lunch time, early, or late afternoon. Lucy shook the bottle gently.

You have to last me a long time, she thought. I must use you wisely and must not waste you. Who knows when I'll get more of you?

Pressing the bottle against her chest, she held it tightly.

Silvy was watching her with half closed eyes. "What are you doing?" she asked lethargically.

Lucy glanced at the girl, who sat with her back against the wall, her legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles. Silvy's dirty white blouse hung over her crinkled maroon skirt. She had undone two more buttons of her shirt. A droplet of sweat ran down her throat and disappeared into her cleavage. Her ponytail had come loose and her untidy hair framed her freckled face. Silvy swiped at some fine wisps of hair that tickled her cheek.

Lucy held up her bottle. "I was checking how much water I've got left," she said.

"Why?" Silvy wondered, without moving her head.

Lucy raised her eyebrows. "Do you know how long we are going to be here?" she asked annoyed. "Do you know when we'll get more water?"

Silvy snapped her head forward.

"We have to preserve our water," Lucy explained. "Without water we'll die before they can rescue us."

Silvy scrambled to her knees and dug her hand into the gap between the mattress and the wall. She pulled out a bottle and shook it gently.

"Ohh, my," she exclaimed.

"What?" Lucy asked worriedly.

Silvy shook her bottle once more. "I think I've only got about a third left."

Lucy nodded. "Same here."

"Is it going to be enough?" Silvy asked, rolling the bottle between her hands.

Lucy shot her a furious glance. "How must I know," she snapped. "I can't read their minds. I don't know what's going to happen."

Silvy's face dropped with dismay. "Don't be angry with me," she said, her voice quivering.

Lucy eyed the girl carefully and saw that Silvy was close to tears. Immediately she regretted her outburst. It wasn't Silvy's fault that they were imprisoned in this dump and did not know what was going to happen next.

Sighing deeply, Lucy crawled across the mattress, sat down beside Silvy and put her arm around the girl's shoulders.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you," she said humbly. "I didn't mean to."

A small smile tugged on the corners of Silvy's mouth. "It's okay," she replied softly.

"I'm just worried we'll run out of water," Lucy repeated.

Silvy turned her head and looked at the black girl beside her. "What about the guy who gave us water before?" she asked tentatively.

Lucy frowned. "What about him?"

"Maybe he'll bring some more water," Silvy said hopefully.

Lucy pursed her lips thoughtfully. "It could be possible," she replied hesitantly. "But we can't be sure. What if he doesn't give us more water?" She squeezed Silvy's shoulder. "All I'm saying is that we must be careful with the water we've got."

Silvy clutched her bottle to her chest. "You're right. Who knows when we'll get more?"

XXX

Ryan stopped in front of Thandeka's garage doors, parked beside her Audi A3 and both men got out of the car. The front door flung open and Thandeka appeared in the doorway. Her red T-shirt was creased badly and her black coarse hair stood up in all directions. Fear and hope flashed in rapid succession across her face.

With an expression of regret, Thomas held out his arms. A sob escaped from Thandeka's lips and she threw herself at him, burying her head in his chest. The tall handsome man stroked her hair softly, straightening out the spiky strands. Without exchanging a word, brother and sister forgot the world around them as they shared each others' despair.

Ryan stood a small distance away not wanting to intrude.

A couple of minutes later, Thandeka let go of Thomas and wiped her tear streaked face with the back of her hand.

"Sorry for that," she said, glancing sorrowfully at Ryan.

He waved a hand, dismissing her apology as an unnecessary courtesy.

"Thanks for taking my brother," she said.

"No problem," he replied sincerely. "I just wish we were bearers of good news."

Thandeka not answer, instead she hunched her shoulders dejectedly, made a half turn and disappeared through the open front door. The two men followed the slender woman into the house.

The interior was much cooler than the air outside. The patio doors stood wide open and a small electric fan stirred the humid air. Loud voices echoed through the room. It took Ryan a moment to realise that Thandeka had not received more visitors, but that the sounds came from the TV in the lounge.

Elijah Nkosi sat on the couch by the window, staring at the wide flickering screen. He wielded the remote control like a sword as he followed a silly game show. His bald black head shone with sweat and his dark eyes gleamed with delight. Suddenly he slapped his leg with his large hand. It sounded like a gunshot had gone off and Ryan flinched involuntarily. Pointing the remote control at the screen, Nkosi whooped with laughter. The big man fell back on the couch. Cushions bounced in the air and his belly wobbled like a tidal wave beneath his tight T-shirt.

Out of the corner of his eye, he suddenly spotted Ryan standing in the doorway and his expression became instantly serious.

"Hello," Elijah Nkosi greeted him cautiously.

Ryan nodded politely. "What are you watching?"

The big man crossed his arms in front of him. "Just a stupid game show," he replied. "There's nothing else to do while we wait."

Ryan pulled back his lips angrily. His niece's daughter was missing and the moron was sitting in front of the TV, watching a mind-numbing game show and believing there was nothing else to do!

As if reading Ryan's mind, Elijah Nkosi said, "I checked in with my office several times, but my drivers haven't seen Lucy."

In response, Ryan pushed his hands deep into his trouser pockets.

"They are still on high alert, but there seems to be no trace of her," Elijah Nkosi continued. "I instructed them to keep on looking."

"Well," Ryan answered, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice, "I'm sure Thomas and Thandeka appreciate your help."

Nkosi placed his right ankle on his left leg making himself more comfortable.

"I sure hope so," he mumbled.

Ryan didn't know what to make of the man. On the one hand Elijah Nkosi was a successful business man, apparently very wealthy and influential, owning hundreds of taxis that clogged the streets in and around Johannesburg, making Nkosi more money than anyone could dream of. On the other hand, while his niece's daughter was missing, he sat nonchalantly on Thandeka's couch in the middle of the day watching TV and doing absolutely nothing.

Ryan eyed the big man disapprovingly.

The only thing that counted in Nkosi's favour was the strength he seemed to give Thandeka.

Once again it appeared as Elijah Nkosi could read Ryan's mind.

"Thandeka actually fell asleep," he said quietly, rubbing his bald head with the palm of his hand. "I didn't want to disturb her. The poor girl hasn't closed her eyes the whole night and all the crying"

Ryan scratched his cheek. "I'm sure you are doing everything you can," he said, only just hiding his disdain.

Nkosi looked at him sharply, his mouth a thin line of displeasure, but Ryan had forced his face into a blank mask and Nkosi had no choice but to stay polite.

"I am, I am," the big man finally replied, with absolute confidence.

Still annoyed, but unwilling to continue the conversation, Ryan tipped his head in the direction of the archway. "Let me see how Thandeka is holding up," he said. "I'm sure she would like a detailed update."

Nkosi flapped his hand. "Sure," he replied, his attention already returning to the TV screen. "I think she's in the kitchen."

With one last nod at Nkosi, Ryan marched across the thick rug and into the kitchen.

"Hey," Raphaela greeted him, her cheeks flushing a light pink.

Ryan's eyes roamed over the gorgeous woman. She stood sideways, her hip close to the kitchen counter. Her long dark hair was swept away from her face and hung like a thick rope over her left shoulder. She had taken off her tailored jacket and her tight sleeveless top hugged her body, emphasising her curvy figure. His mouth went dry, as he looked at the stunning creature on the opposite end of the kitchen counter.

Raphaela watched him secretly. Ryan's open admiration made her feel suddenly self-conscious. Although she had sought his attention and it was exactly what she wanted and hoped for, it was neither the time nor the place for a kindling romance.

She glanced at Thomas and Thandeka, but both were too engrossed in their own thoughts to have noticed the growing connection between her and Ryan. Nevertheless, to avoid any possible embarrassing situation, she quickly turned away,

presenting Ryan with her back, pretending to look for drinking glasses in the cupboard behind her.

The spell broken, Ryan decided to check on Thomas who was standing near the stainless steel kitchen sink. Thandeka's arm was snaked around her brother's waist and Thomas was rubbing her back softly, in the process pulling her T-shirt a few centimetres up and down.

Aware of Ryan's presence, Thandeka let go of her brother, straightened her narrow shoulders and forced a shy smile.

"Would you like something to drink? I have some Coke in the fridge," Thandeka offered politely, patting her unruly hair with the palm of her hands in an attempt to make herself respectable. "But it might be lukewarm," she added as an afterthought.

Without waiting for a response, Thandeka walked over to the fridge. Its white door was covered with magnets and photographs showing Thandeka and Lucy in a variety of settings.

Ryan took a closer look.

There were pictures of mother and daughter on a sandy beach; in a park shadowed by large willows and the hint of a river and one where they were waiting for a ride in an amusement park. In another picture Lucy wore a magician's outfit. Her pointy black witch's hat sat askew and her wide cape was swept up by the wind. In another photo, Thandeka and Lucy were dressed formally, in pastel coloured evening gowns adorned with diamante and sequences.

Ryan wondered briefly what kind of event they had attended. Trailing his eyes over the pictures, he noticed that in all of them mother and daughter were smiling either at each other or into the camera. There was not one photo where either of them was serious or sad.

Noticing Ryan's interest, Thandeka pointed at the picture where she and Lucy were dressed in evening gowns.

"This was taken at the beginning of the year," she said with a faint smile. "A client of mine was celebrating his company's twenty-fifth anniversary." Her finger stroked the photo gently. "It was Lucy's very first big outing."

Looking up at Ryan, her eyes swam with tears. "Doesn't she look gorgeous?" she whispered.

Ryan swallowed hard controlling his emotions with difficulty. "Yes," he replied. "She is beautiful."

Thandeka sniffed a coupled of times.

"Anyway," she said valiantly. "I was offering you some Coke." Thandeka pulled on the fridge door. "It might be warm. We are having a power failure," she explained. "It happened about an hour ago."

"Bloody Eskom," Thomas growled from the other side of the kitchen.

Thandeka tossed her head and threw her brother an angry look. "It's not my fault," she snapped.

Thomas closed his eyes tiredly. "I didn't say it was your fault," he replied, raising his hands defensively. "Let's have some Coke. It doesn't matter if it's warm or not."

Relaxing her taut features, Thandi turned back to the fridge and lifted a two litre plastic bottle of Coca Cola from the middle shelf.

Raphaella opened a cupboard door and took out four glasses.

Ryan accepted the drink gratefully and drank it down with big gulps. The Coke wasn't lukewarm. It was just right, neither spiking pain in his teeth from cold, nor

making him gag because it tasted like oversweet warm sugar water. The fridge must have held its temperature for the interim.

Thandeka peered at her brother. "What have you found out?" she asked. Anxious for his answer her skin colour turned from dark brown to grey. "Do you know where Lucy is?"

Uneasiness was written on Thomas's face. Without actually uttering the words, he implored Ryan to answer Thandeka's question.

Ryan puffed up his cheeks and blew out some air, then he took the lead.

"The school wasn't of any great help," he said gently.

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Thandeka slapped her hand on the counter with a loud bang. "I knew it wasn't any good going to the school," she said scathingly. "Since when do teachers know anything about what's going on?"

Slightly taken aback by her outburst, Ryan continued to tell her about their visit to Lucy's school in detail. He reported their conversations with the principal, Mrs Gibbins, her initial reluctance to help them and her determined assistance in the end. He also recalled the teachers' names, those who had been available, his impression of them and the information they had passed on.

At the end of his narrative, Thandeka's eyes filled with tears again.

"I'm sorry," Ryan said weakly. "I wish we knew more."

Thandeka held up her right palm. "You don't have to apologise," she stopped him. "You are trying your best. It's not your fault that Lucy didn't come home and I appreciate everything you are doing for me."

Ryan pushed his hands into his trouser pockets and hunched his shoulders. Thomas, also at his wits end, poked despondently with the tip of his shoe at a groove between the floor tiles.

A heavy silence settled over the kitchen. Only faint laughter from the TV game show in the lounge drifted through the air.

Thandeka pushed her back against the fridge door. Scared, frustrated, and worried to death, she began wringing her hands. Her knuckles first turned red, then white. Ryan watched Thandeka twist and turn her fingers, but he was too distracted to stop her from hurting herself.

Realising the damage Thandeka was doing to her hands, Raphaela reached out and placed an arm around the distressed mother's shoulder. Thandeka sagged against the slightly taller woman.

She pressed a fist against her mouth and fresh tears trickled from under her swollen eyelids.

"What am I going to do?" she wept. "What am I going to do?"

"It's alright," Raphaela whispered, stroking her hair soothingly. "We are going to find her."

Ryan's mouth curled into a cynical snarl.

How on earth were they supposed to find the girl? They had nothing to go on! Nobody had seen the girl! No one had even tried to contact the family for ransom money! Lucy had disappeared from the face of the earth. It was as if the ground had opened up and swallowed her.

Raphaela cleared her throat and all eyes turned to her. "What about Lucy's friend Tanja," she asked hopefully. "Was she of any help?"

Ryan raised his arms and folded them behind his head. "No, not really," he sighed.

Raphaela's forehead creased with a deep frown. "Why not?"

Ryan shuffled his feet uneasily, wondering briefly how to tell Thandeka about their visit to Tanja without upsetting her even more.

Gathering his thoughts, he finally said, "Apparently Tanja and Lucy had a fallout..."

"Why?" Raphaela interrupted startled.

Darn woman, Ryan thought. Can't you keep your mouth shut for one second? It was difficult enough to find the right words to tell Thandeka about Lucy's and Tanja's fallout. Couldn't she give him some grace?

Stalling for time, Ryan pulled on his shirt sleeves.

"Well?" Raphaela demanded, impatiently tossing her long hair over her shoulder.

He straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin. "Lucy intercepted a note intended for another girl. It seems that Tanja wrote something ugly."

Thandeka shrugged Raphaela's arm off. "What did she write?" she asked, her eyes suddenly blazing.

Ryan hesitated once again.

Thandeka's eyes turned to steel. "What did the note say?"

"Tanja said she didn't want to be friends with Lucy any longer, because Lucy is too pushy," he blurted out.

Thandeka gasped. An instant later, her skin flushed a deep red.

"The little bitch," Thandeka hissed angrily.

She clenched her fists until her knuckles became white. "Who does she think she is?" her voice dripped with venom.

"Hold on," Thomas objected, taking a step towards his sister, but she held her hand up stopping him in his tracks.

"She is a spoilt little white brat," Thandeka shouted furiously. "How dare she write something like that?"

Furiously she paced the tiled kitchen floor stamping her bare feet. Each step sounded like she was slapping someone.

"That racist piece of white trash," she raged. All at once, she stopped in the middle of the kitchen and raised a finger.

"I knew it all along," she shouted, hurt and anger alternating in her voice. "That little white cow has no respect. She's just like all the other white girls." Thandeka turned to her brother, her eyes spewing fire. "It was probably not the first time she was nasty to Lucy." She drew a breath. "Did she push her around? Call her names? Make fun of her in front of the other white girls?"

Her impending tears almost choked her. "No wonder, Lucy didn't come home."

Thomas grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her harshly. "Stop it, Thandeka," he said fiercely. "Stop it right now!"

His sister shut her mouth, but her body was rigid with.

"It's not what you think," he implored, staring into her eyes.

Thandeka shook her head. "What are you talking about?" she hissed. "That little bitch wrote that she doesn't want anything to do with my daughter."

Thomas nodded sadly. "Yes," he replied. "Tanja did write that, but not for the reason you think."

Thandeka stared at her brother with disbelief. "She's a racist," she shouted, flapping her hands. "Have you forgotten how you were treated? Have you forgotten what they did to you?"

Thomas let go of her shoulders and took a step back. "Will you listen to me, woman," he growled. "This has nothing to do with racism or what happened to us when we were young."

Thandeka tilted her head to the side, but her expression remained suspicious.

"Tanja and Lucy are friends, best friends," he stated firmly.

His sister opened her mouth to speak, but Thomas held up his hand. "Let me finish," he demanded. "Tanja didn't mean what she wrote. The child was just tired."

Confused, Thandeka pulled a grimace. "What are you talking about?" she asked irritably. "How can she be tired?"

A faint smile danced around her brother's lips. "How well do you know your daughter?"

Thandeka's head snapped back as if stung by a bee.

"You know as well as I do that Lucy is a perfectionist and very ambitious," Thomas continued. He shrugged his shoulders. "Tanja just couldn't keep up with her any longer."

All at once Thandeka's angry face slackened.

Her brother pulled on his shirt cuffs. "Lucy was pushing her too hard. She always wanted that little bit more, that one page more, that one drawing more. She was never satisfied." Thomas smiled. "It could tire anybody." He tapped Thandeka on the shoulder. "Does this sound familiar to you?"

His sister averted her eyes.

"She is your daughter," Thomas reminded her. "She is doing exactly what you did when you were younger. And as far as I can remember, you drove everyone around you crazy."

Thandeka chewed on her bottom lip, but did not reply.

"You also always had to study that one more hour, that one more chapter, that one more essay," he said gently. "Can you really blame Tanja for wanting a break?"

Suddenly embarrassed, Thandeka turned her back on the people in her kitchen. Hiding her face, she stared unseeing at the photos on the fridge door.

How could she have been so wrong? she thought ashamed. When Ryan had told her about the contents of the letter, she had immediately assumed that Tanja was a racist; that she didn't want to have anything to do with Lucy because she was black. Oh my God! What a fool she had made of herself in front of Thomas's partner and Raphaela.

Her brother placed his arm around Thandeka's shoulders.

"Hey," he whispered in her ear so that the other two couldn't hear him. "If it makes you feel any better, initially I had the same thoughts."

Doubtfully, Thandeka glanced up at him.

"It's true," he said softly. "I'm as guilty as you are."

A hesitant smile appeared on her face. "You are not just saying that to make me feel better?" she asked.

Thomas shook his head. "No," he replied firmly. "I suffer from the same syndrome."

Grateful for his reassurance, Thandeka turned to face Ryan and Raphaela. "I'm sorry," she said, blushing like a school girl. "I don't know what you two must think of me. I'm mortified. Please forgive my unqualified outburst."

Ryan cleared his throat noisily. "Don't worry about it," he said.

“Oh yes,” Thandeka insisted, raising her hands. “I’ve acted like an idiot. Please forget that I ever said those hateful things.”

Raphaella stepped forward and embraced the slender black woman. “We won’t hold it against you,” she assured her. “We understand that you are under enormous stress.”

Before Thandeka could reply, the doorbell rang.

CHAPTER 17

Dirk sat on the edge of the tiled patio, his back against the wall, avoiding the hot stinging sun. He watched an army of brown ants march past a clump of dry long grass, towards a small grey rock. They did not run in a straight line, but wove around small stones, past miniature craters in the hard dry soil, and over tiny mountains. Dirk took a thin brittle stick and planted it in the middle of the ants' trail. For a moment the lead ant stopped. It felt the new object with its front legs, then it checked in with the ant behind, and a second later the little creatures found a way around the obstacle. Undeterred and brave, the march continued unabated.

Dirk dropped the stick onto the ground and sighed deeply. What he would give to be an ant at this moment; a little brown pin head, forgotten by the world, only running forward, collecting food for itself and its horde, not worrying about life or death, right or wrong, good or evil.

Little stones bit into Dirk's left hand and he roughly wiped his palm on his jeans ridding himself of the fine grit.

Where had he gone wrong? His life was no different to anyone else's. School had been a drag, but he had gone every day without fail. He and his class mates had got up to mischief sometimes, but it had been nothing major. They had never dealt in drugs, broken into houses or, hurt another person. It was all just juvenile stuff, like scaring an old grandpa by setting his compost on fire, or taking someone's parent's car for a joyride. And most of the time they had gotten away with it.

At the end of last year he had written his final exams. His Matric results had actually been quite good, and he passed with a university entrance. Not that he had the faintest inkling of what he wanted to study. And to top it all, his mom didn't have the money for university, so the question of what to study hadn't been an issue.

The December holidays he had still spent with his friends, but one by one they went off to university or started their first jobs. He had also made every effort to find a job, but it had proven difficult. There weren't that many good jobs out there and he wasn't really keen on becoming a packer at a retail store, or a construction worker on one of those big building sites. But during all those months he had not been in any trouble at all - and now this!

How on earth had he gotten himself into this mess? Why hadn't he seen through his cousin's cover-up? Why had he so readily believed Angus was making big money with his cleaning business?

Dirk shook his head. He wasn't *that* stupid or *that* naïve.

No cleaning business earned the kind of money Angus was throwing around. Why had he closed his mind to the obvious signs? Was it because he was getting desperate for a job? Did he see his cousin's business as his last way out?

The thoughts went round and round in his head like a dog biting its own tail. There were no answers to his questions: there was only the here and now, which meant three girls who had been kidnapped off the street and who were locked up in a dark room in the chalet behind him.

Deep in thought, Dirk squinted up at the blue sky, shading his eyes against the glaring sun. Thick white cumulus clouds started forming an immense wall in the distance. The mountainous clouds moved rapidly across the sky, colliding with each other, adding continuously to the already existing grey mass. Dirk couldn't see any lightning bolts yet, but he was certain it would rain later on.

His reverie was interrupted when he noticed movement in the distance. A fine stream of red dust rose in the air further down in the veld, past the small forest of blue gum trees. Staring hard at the intrusion, Dirk rose to his feet to get a better look. Following the dust trail for a few moments, he quickly realised that a vehicle was approaching the area where the chalets stood.

Cold dread filled him.

If his hunch was correct, then his cousin Angus was in the car, together with his black accomplice Meshak, and who knew who else.

The vehicle was travelling fast and Dirk's shoulders sagged as he walked with heavy feet across the patio towards the door. Heavy-hearted, he stepped into the chalet, allowing his eyes to adjust to the diffused light.

Rat Face was again lying sprawled out on the couch. His bony hand again clasped the remote control whilst he stared intently at the pictures flickering across the TV screen. Noticing Dirk in the doorway, he lifted his head and glanced quickly at the young man.

"What's up?" Rat Face asked distractedly.

Dirk pushed his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. "Nothing," he replied.

Rat Face's looked at Dirk probingly.

Dirk puffed up his cheeks and blew out some air. What the hell, he thought, Rat Face would find out sooner rather than later.

He pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "It seems my cousin is coming."

The blood drained from the ferret's face. "Fuck!"

He jumped up from the couch, hit the off-button on the TV and dropped the remote on the sideboard.

Puzzled, Dirk's gaze followed his frantic movements.

Rat Face brushed his hands through his greasy hair, pulled his T-shirt down, wiped his jeans and rubbed his forefinger across his front teeth.

"What on earth ...?" Dirk stammered flabbergasted.

Rat Face slapped Dirk on the shoulder and shook him lightly with the other hand.

"Angus is coming," he stated, a smile flashing across his ugly face.

"Yeah. And?" Dirk replied, shrugging off Rat Face's hand.

The ferret bent down and checked his reflection in the dark TV screen, pulling a few strands of hair away from his forehead.

"We have to be presentable," he explained.

Dirk's laugh sounded like gunfire. "Presentable?" he guffawed.

Rat Face's look was almost hurt.

Dirk pointed at the lounge. "Check this place out," he said. "It's a pigsty." He took a few steps and kicked an empty KFC box. The carton went flying, hit the wall and dropped with a sickly thud to the ground.

"What do you want to be presentable for?" he shouted, placing his hands on his hips.

Rat Face glanced at the litter on the floor, the glasses and bottles on the big table standing in the middle of the room, and the kitchen area overflowing with dirty dishes.

"I know it's not clean," Rat Face conceded sheepishly, "but we can't have a maid in here. She might just give us away."

Dirk glared at him in disbelief. "What?" he asked dumbstruck. "You want a maid?" He waved his arms in the air. "How about cleaning up yourself?"

Rat Face jutted out his chin. "Fuck! No way!" he exclaimed. "I'm not cleaning up. That's a job for Blacks."

"Oh, my God," Dirk groaned, dropping his arms to his side.

He was dealing with a complete idiot! If it wasn't so sad and disgusting, it would actually be quite funny. Here they were sitting in the middle of no where, three kidnapped girls locked up in a squalid room, most probably hunted by parents and police alike, and the ferret required a black woman to clean up after him.

Dirk closed his eyes and shook his head. It wasn't even worth shouting about. The ferret had an IQ of sixty five and nothing what he would say to him was going to get through his thick skull.

Dirk exhaled loudly.

There was no other choice but to let it go. Despondently, he hunched his shoulders, turned his back on the ferret and walked to the patio door. Crossing his arms, he waited for the arrival of his cousin, dread spreading through his veins like an icy river.

Raising a huge cloud of dust, the *bakkie* skidded to a halt in front of the chalet. Dirk covered his nose and mouth with his forearm to prevent swallowing a ton of red dirt. The car's engine was switched off and the doors opened.

Angus was the first one out of the *bakkie*. His feet hit the ground and another plume of russet dust rose in the air. He skirted the bonnet and marched up to the chalet. His broad, flat face was tomato red and tiny drops of moisture clung to the top of his thick lips. His checked shirt hung unbuttoned over his waistband, and he had rolled up his sleeves to the elbows. With each step Angus's shirt flapped open and his unhealthy white belly wobbled like jelly in a dessert bowl. His faded jeans were stained with something dark and Dirk hoped to God that it wasn't blood.

As Angus walked onto the patio, Meshak appeared from behind the parked *bakkie*. Dirk shuddered involuntarily. The huge black man gave Dirk the creeps. Meshak's badly scarred face revealed nothing. The man never smiled or laughed and hardly ever showed anger. Dirk thought of him as a black ice block. In comparison to the sweaty Angus, the black man appeared as cool as a cucumber. His dark green T-shirt was wrinkle-free and his jeans looked as if they had been freshly ironed. The big man towered at least a head over Angus and his muscles bulged unashamedly.

After the previous day's episode, when Meshak had bloodied his nose without hesitation, Dirk had developed a great respect for the black man and he moved out of the way as soon as Meshak came closer. Averting his eyes so as not to provoke the huge man unnecessary, he let Meshak step into the chalet.

"Hey, Angus," Rat Face rubbed his hands excitedly.

"What's up, Rudi?" Dirk's cousin asked gruffly, without looking at the ferret.

Undeterred by Angus's indifference, Rat Face followed him through the chalet, almost stepping on the man's heels.

"Oh, nothing much," Rat Face replied, bobbing his head up and down.

Angus stopped in mid-stride and the ferret bumped right into him.

Dirk's cousin spun around. "Do you have to weasel in behind me?" he shouted.

"Sorry, Angus," Rat Face stammered, embarrassed, raising his hands. "I'm just so happy to see you," he spluttered.

Angus placed his hand on his hips. "Why? You've only been here for twenty-four hours."

Rat Face glanced at Dirk from under his long greasy fringe.

Oh no, Dirk thought. Here it comes.

Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do to prevent Rat Face from spilling the beans about what had happened between the two of them without getting into major trouble. He straightened his shoulders bracing himself for the onslaught that was surely to come.

Rat Face hunched his shoulders like a dog beaten with a whip. "It's not that."

Angus glared at him angrily. "Then what?"

Rat Face rubbed his palm on the top of his jeans, but did not answer.

Once again he glanced at Dirk, and Dirk could see the ferret's mind churning. Dirk breathed shallowly, hoping against hope that Rat Face would have enough sense not to blabber about their fights. He didn't want to know what else Meshak was capable of, and one head-butt was more than enough for him.

All at once, Rat Face grinned stupidly. "Did you bring any take-aways?"

Surprised, Dirk dropped his arms. He couldn't believe his ears. His mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. The ferret had not said anything about their fights! His eyes wide with astonishment, he looked over at the ferret, but Rat Face refused to return his open stare. Dirk composed himself quickly. Behind his cousin's back, he wiped his brow and drew a deep breath. At last the ferret had shown some common sense.

Angus brushed past Rat Face. "Yeah, yeah," he replied. "I've brought some McDonalds and a few Cokes, 'cause there is never anything decent to eat in this place," he added bitingly.

Rat Face let out an excited whoop. But instead of indulging the ferret, Angus pulled a sour grimace.

"Look at this filth," he snapped. "Why didn't you clean up this mess?"

Rat Face stared at Angus open-mouthed. "But," he stammered.

Angus swiveled on his heels, pointing at the empty bottles on the tables. "You've got nothing better to do than to wait."

Dirk almost sniggered. Served the little bastard right. He wanted to be in charge, but he was as lazy as hell.

Dirk caught a look full of daggers from Rat Face.

Oho! he thought. The little shit better not put the blame on me.

He returned the ferret's stare, warning him not to start with him. After a moment Rat Face lowered his lids having understood Dirk's unspoken message.

The ferret faced Angus and grinned almost pleadingly. "But I don't have any dustbin bags."

"Oh, Christ," Angus groaned theatrically. "Can't you ever make a plan? Never mind! There are some in the back of the *bakkie*."

With his tail between his legs, Rat Face turned to get the bags.

Angus held up his hand. "Wait," he shouted.

Rat Face stopped in his tracks.

"First let's get the girls out of the *bakkie*," he said.

Dirk's brows narrowed. He had so hoped that his cousin and Meshak had been unsuccessful in their hunt for more girls. There had been no indication that they had anyone in the *bakkie* when they arrived. Both men had acted so casually, as if they had no cares in the world.

Angus pushed Dirk aside brusquely as he stepped back out on to the patio. He walked purposefully to the *bakkie*, his shirt flapping behind him, and pulled a bunch of keys from his pocket. Meshak followed behind wordlessly. Angus turned the key in the lock and opened the door. Dirk took a cautious step forward and craned his neck. As soon as he was able to see into the interior of the *bakkie*, a sob rose in his throat.

Two pairs of feet clad in black shoes pointed towards the door.

Oh, God. No! he wanted to shout. It could not have happened again.

He stared at the feet, wishing with all his heart that it was an illusion, but the more he hoped it couldn't be true, the more he knew it was. With major effort Dirk suppressed his emotions. He swallowed his sob and hugged his arms. Lowering his head, he hid his feelings, not wanting to give his cousin any ammunition to have a go at him. Who knew how Angus would react if he knew about Dirk's true thoughts and intentions?

Meshak stepped forward and bent down. He grabbed the first pair of feet and pulled the body roughly towards him. The girl's head banged on the metal floor and a broom broke loose from the wall of the *bakkie*, clattering loudly on the bare boards, its wooden handle falling across the midriff of the second girl.

Dirk clenched his jaw preventing himself from shouting out aloud. Couldn't the big jerk be a bit more careful?

Meshak swung the girl's body over his shoulder as if she were a bag of cement. Her head hung down his back and her legs dangled down to his stomach. The girl's school skirt rode up, revealing a pair of blue bikini *panties*. Meshak tightened his grip around the girl's legs and marched effortlessly across the patio, only to stop in front of the locked prison door.

"Hey, Rudi," Angus bellowed. "Get me the keys."

Rat Face slunk across the room, pulled his key ring out of his jeans pocket and handed it to his master. Angus selected the correct key and turned it in the lock. Opening the door, he motioned Meshak into the shadowy space.

Dirk peered cautiously into the girls' prison. The acrid stench of urine hit his nostrils and he couldn't help it, but he pulled the collar of his T-shirt over his nose. He searched in the gloom for the three girls and found them cowering together in the far left corner. The black girl, Lucy, had her arm wrapped around the girl with the pixy face and the long black hair. The other girl was hiding behind Lucy's shoulder, cradling her head in her forearms. All three had their legs drawn up beneath them, trying to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible.

Meshak simply ignored the young prisoners, marched into the room with his latest prey over his shoulder and stopped in front of the dirty mattress. His right hand reached up and he pulled down the body, letting it fall unceremoniously onto the thin mat. The girl's arms flailed about and her thin tanned legs lay exposed on the floor. Her head bounced up and down and her long blonde hair came loose from her ponytail, splaying like a halo around her slim shoulders.

Dirk crunched up his face and winced silently. That must have hurt! Luckily the girl was unconscious.

Meshak lifted his foot and, not too gently, kicked the girl's legs back onto the mattress. Grunting satisfied, the black man wiped his hands on his jeans, straightened his T-shirt, turned around and marched back into the lounge.

Angus appeared in the doorway and slapped Dirk on the shoulder.

"Keep an eye on them while Meshak gets the other girl," his cousin ordered. "I'll get the dustbin bags for Rudi out of the *bakkie*."

His cousin was letting him guard the girls? Dirk thought surprised.

He watched Angus leave the lounge and noticed that Rat Face was right behind him.

Here was his chance! Dirk thought excitedly.

Keeping an eye on the open patio door, he whispered, "Hey! Lucy!"

There was no response.

Anxiously he poked his head into the room and looked over at the black girl hunched on the floor.

"Lucy," he called softly.

The girl stared at him with fearful eyes.

"Your mom's telephone number," Dirk urged. "Give me your mother's cell number, quickly."

Lucy's lip quivered, but she did not answer.

Worriedly, Dirk checked for Angus and Meshak. To his relief they were still outside, standing at the *bakkie*'s rear end.

He leaned his upper body into the room. "Come on Lucy," he begged. "Give me your mom's number. I want to help you."

Slowly Lucy rose to her feet and took a step forward.

Terrified, Dirk held up his hand. "No, no," he almost shouted. "Don't come to the door. Just tell me the number."

Lucy stopped in her tracks.

Dirk smiled at her encouragingly and finally Lucy opened her mouth. "Promise you'll help us," she whispered.

Dirk nodded enthusiastically. "Sure," he replied. "I'll get you out of here."

"082 637 4098," Lucy said firmly.

Dirk breathed a sigh of relief. "082 637 4098?" he repeated, a question mark in his voice.

Lucy nodded.

He waved a hand, motioning her back further into the room.

"Alright," he said. "Now go and sit down. Pretend nothing has happened."

A sad smile crossed Lucy's face, but she stepped back, slid down the wall and sat down in between the two other girls.

"It's going to be alright," Dirk assured her. "Just hang in there."

"Are you talking to the goods?" Angus's voice boomed over his shoulder.

Dirk jumped with fright.

"No, no," he stammered quickly, his heart pounding in his chest.

"Then what were you doing?" his cousin demanded to know.

Dirk recovered rapidly. He set his jaw and blanked his face. "Nothing," he replied. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Angus looked at him suspiciously, but Dirk held his gaze without flinching.

After a moment, Angus pushed Dirk out of the way and peered into the dimly lit room. His eyes roamed over the grubby girls who sat huddled together against the wall in the far corner. They had their heads lowered and avoided his inspection. Not noticing anything out of order, Angus grunted something unintelligible and finally shrugged his shoulders.

Meshak's heavy steps pounded on the tiles as he walked through the chalet. Another girl was hanging over his shoulder, her long brown legs dangling down his chest. The black man brushed past Angus and stepped into the room. The lifeless body was flung on to the mattress. The girl's head hit the wall with a dull thud. Her legs bounced up and down and her short skirt flapped up, coming to rest around her midriff.

"Hey," Dirk cried out involuntarily. "Watch what you're doing."

Meshak glared at him from under hooded lids. "Do you have a problem white boy?" he growled, jutting out his chin aggressively.

"You are killing her," Dirk shouted outraged, pointing at the girl on the mattress.

The black man hunched his shoulders and menacingly took a step forward. Dirk checked himself immediately and raised his hands defensively. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to interfere in your business."

Meshak continued to glare at Dirk.

Dirk flashed him an insincere smile. "I mean it," he muttered, waving his arms. "I'm sorry."

In response Meshak snorted loudly and relaxed his clenched fists. Without another word he walked past Dirk, making his way outside. Dirk breathed in deeply. He knew he had overstepped the line, but how could the jerk drop the girl like that?

"You shouldn't irritate him," Angus smirked. "He doesn't like to be told what to do."

Dirk did not reply. What was there to say anyway?

Angus slapped his back in a conciliatory way. "Come, let's have some McDonalds."

Angus closed the door, turned the key in the lock and handed the key ring back to Rat Face who was grinning from ear to ear, obviously revelling in Dirk's discomfort. Dirk could have smashed in the ferret's face, but chose instead to bite on his teeth. Rat Face's time would come and hopefully sooner than later.

Angus held out a roll of black plastic bags to Rat Face. "Your turn to clean up," he said firmly.

The ferret pursed his lips and crossed his arms sulkily.

Angus's expression darkened. "You want to take me on?" he asked dangerously. He pressed the plastic bags against the ferret's chest. "You better get started if you don't want a beating."

Reluctantly, Rat Face lowered his arms and took the bags from Angus. Very slowly, he unrolled the bin liners and tore one off from a serrated edge.

The ferret's time had come sooner than Dirk had expected and now it was his turn to grin, but he made sure he did it behind his cousin's back, not wanting to be on the receiving end of Angus' wrath.

With the pace of a snail, Rat Face approached the large brown table in the middle of the room. Picking at the edge of the plastic bag, he managed to peel it open and flapping it loudly, he billowed air into its darkness making sure it opened up completely. He held it against the corner of the table, bent his arm and swept the empty bottles into the plastic bag. The glass crashed and shattered in the bin liner, the noise sounding like a hundred cymbals.

"What the fuck?" Angus shouted from the other side of the lounge. "What the hell are you doing?"

Abruptly Rat Face stopped his cleaning-up process. Letting the half-full bag dangle close to the floor, he grinned innocently.

Angus's face turned blood red. Dirk thought he saw steam coming out of his nostrils as his cousin stomped across the lounge. He ripped the bin liner out of Rat Face's hand and smashed his palm into the ferret's chest. Rat Face's eyes nearly popped out of his head as he stumbled backward. He lost his balance and ended up on the grimy floor.

"Fuck! What did you do that for?" Rat Face shouted offended.

In response, Angus kicked him viciously. Rat Face cringed with pain.

"You fucking idiot!" Angus screamed. "Can't you do anything right?"

Rat Face writhed on the floor, clutching his ribs. Tears swam in his eyes.

"I said to clean up. Not give me a heart attack," Angus snarled.

Rat Face slithered across the dirty tiles, pushing empty cartons out of his way, trying to put some distance between him and his attacker.

Cautiously, Dirk stepped behind the pillar near the kitchen hiding from his cousin's view. He had never seen Angus this angry before and he was not about to join the firing line.

Rat Face lifted his hand apologetically. "I'm sorry, Angus," he whimpered.

Angus lifted his foot again ready to kick Rat Face once more.

"Please," Rat Face begged, his eyes full of fear.

Angus grabbed the bin liner off the floor and swinging the half-full bag, he caught Rat Face's raised forearms. The glass rattled and crashed inside the liner and Rat Face cried out in pain. Angus let go of the bag and glass shards rained down on the ferret, spilling on to the floor and rolling along the tiles, disappearing underneath crunched up boxes.

Angus seemed to have finally vented all his fury. "Get up," he barked.

Rat Face knew better than to defy Angus and painfully got to his feet.

Angus pointed at the torn bag. "Now, clean up," he demanded. "And don't you dare make a racket."

Rat Face nodded meekly. He bent down carefully, wincing in the process, and retrieved the bag. Standing in front of the wooden table, he picked up the bottles one by one and gently placed them in the black plastic bag, all the while watching Angus from under his greasy fringe. Eventually, the table was cleared, but rings of dried alcohol stained the dark wood.

Angus placed his finger on a stain and tried to rub it off. The tip of his finger came back brown and sticky.

"Shit!" he exclaimed. "Get a cloth and fix this mess."

Rat Face looked at him questioningly, wondering if it was in fact he who was required to complete this unpleasant task.

Angus stared at the ferret as if he was a complete dimwit.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" Angus bellowed. "Get a cloth."

Like a whipped dog, Rat Face slunk past the pillar into the kitchen area. Dirk kept a watchful eye on his volatile cousin, inconspicuously moving towards the wall beside the door of the girls' prison, carefully staying out of Angus's sight. He was genuinely surprised at his cousin's violent outburst, but Dirk knew well to leave alone. He wouldn't for the life of him speak up on behalf of the ferret, because he might just end up with a beating like the one Rat Face had just received.

Dirk heard plates and cutlery clatter loudly as Rat Face retrieved the wet cloth from underneath the dirty dishes in the sink. Water splashed into the metal basin and a few moments later, Rat Face appeared carrying a dripping dish cloth in his hand.

He reached out and started wiping down the wooden table top, scraping and rubbing it until the ugly rings were no longer visible. Satisfied with his efforts, Rat Face took the cloth back into the kitchen and dropped it into the overflowing sink.

Dirk shook his head in exasperation. The guy really had no common sense. Now he had dumped the cloth in the dirty sink instead of rinsing it and hanging it over the tap to dry. Next time he needed the cloth, he would have to go through the whole rigmarole again.

Dirk shrugged his shoulders indifferently. It wasn't his concern. If he was lucky he would be out of here by tonight anyway.

"Let's have something to eat," Angus boomed from the patio door. He motioned Dirk to follow him outside.

Dirk navigated his way past the debris on the floor. Stepping onto the patio, the hot air singed his lungs and the dry dust clogged his nostrils. The sun stung his bare arms and instinctively he checked the sky. Huge white cumulus clouds were still gathering in the distance, fusing into a thick grey wall. On this side the sun was glaring and the sky was a deep blue, but Dirk supposed that within hours a raging thunderstorm would break loose.

Angus opened the *bakkie's* door, reached in and withdrew three white plastic shopping bags. He handed them to Dirk, slammed the door shut and indicated to Dirk to take the bags into the chalet.

Dirk placed the bags on the newly cleaned table and Angus started unpacking. Several large McDonalds containers appeared, together with two litre bottles of Coca Cola, a stack of paper serviettes, two handfuls of small packets with tomato sauce and vinegar, as well as paper sachets of pepper and salt.

Dirk opened a box and was pleasantly surprised. He lifted out a Big Mac and took a hearty bite. Chewing, he stepped back against the wall. He watched Meshak open a container and gingerly lift out his burger. The big man held the two caramel coloured buns delicately between his fingertips, as if he wanted to avoid messing his hands. Amused, Dirk observed Meshak take a bite of his hamburger, holding the food as far away from his upper body as possible.

Dirk stuffed the last bit of his Big Mac into his mouth, wiped the bread crumbs off his T-shirt and took a swig from his two-litre bottle of Coke. The cold liquid went down like oil. Lowering the bottle, he looked at Angus who had also finished his meal.

Dirk was anxious to find out his cousin's next move regarding the girls. Now that he had the cellphone number for Lucy's mother, there was a real chance that he might be able to rescue the girls, but for that he needed to know as much detail as possible.

Dirk cleared his throat to draw his cousin's attention. "What's going to happen now?" he asked casually.

Angus burped loudly without covering his mouth. "What do you mean?"

Dirk picked a French fry out of his container and dipped it into tomato sauce before popping it into his mouth.

"I mean you've got all the girls you need," he remarked, thumbing at the locked door beside him.

Angus wiped his greasy hands on his jeans leaving dark streaks across the pockets. "Why do you want to know?" he asked.

Dirk chewed deliberately on his French fry, whilst considering his reply. Under no circumstances did he want to let on what he had in mind.

"I really want to get out of here," he lied.

A broad teasing grin spread over his cousin's face. "Why? Don't you like the company?"

Dirk shrugged his shoulders. "If it's nothing to you," he replied, "me and Rudi don't really see eye to eye."

Angus's laugh sounded like a thunderclap. "I didn't expect anything less."

Holding his French fry close to his lips, Dirk looked at him puzzled.

Angus hooked his thumbs through the belt loops on his waistband. "Maybe now you will stop bugging me," he said pointedly.

For a moment Dirk mulled over his cousin's cryptic answer, then understanding dawned on him.

"Ohh," he said. "You leaving me with him here was on purpose?"

Angus only smirked.

Thanks a lot, Dirk thought. I could have done without Rat Face and his aggravation. A bitter smile crossed his face. And, if I had known what you were doing, I would have never in a million years asked to join you.

Keeping his feelings to himself, Dirk glanced over at the ferret, who was crouching against the wall on the other side of the lounge, shovelling handfuls of French fries into his mouth and dripping tomato sauce onto his already stained T-shirt in the process. Disgusted, Dirk turned his head away and faced his cousin again.

"Well," he said. "I still would like to know what's going to happen now."

Angus lifted another two-litre bottle to his mouth and drank with big gulps, all the while squinting at Dirk over the rim. The plastic bottle made a cracking noise as the air was sucked out of it, creating a vacuum. Angus lowered the bottle and once again burped loudly.

Dirk waited patiently for an answer, watching his cousin's body language carefully. He didn't want to annoy Angus with his questions, but he needed the information desperately. When he called Lucy's mother later on, he wanted to tell her about his cousin's plans for her daughter, so that she could take the necessary steps to help save Lucy.

He flicked his fringe away from his forehead and looked at his cousin expectantly.

"We are going to make ourselves some money," Angus eventually replied, putting the Coke bottle on the table.

Dirk folded his arms. "I know that," he countered. "I just wanted to know how we are going to do that. What are the next steps?"

Angus pushed out his bottom lip and looked over at Meshak. The big man had finished his food and was picking some stray morsels off his jeans.

"What do you say Meshak?" Angus called. "Are we going to tell him?"

Meshak lifted his head, looked from Dirk to Angus and back again. Finally, he shrugged his bulging shoulders.

Angus walked up to Dirk, placed his hand on Dirk's shoulder and clasped it tightly.

Dirk shook off his cousin's hand. "You are hurting me, man," he complained.

Angus dropped his arm, but narrowed his brows so that his eyes became small slits. Dirk returned his stare, keeping his face an innocent mask.

"Tomorrow morning we'll come back with a cooling truck," he said, punching Dirk's arm lightly. "We'll load the girls and then drive down to Durban."

Dirk cocked his head. "Durban?" he repeated.

Angus nodded enthusiastically. "We'll drive down to Durban and drop them off at the harbour," he explained.

Dirk became more confused by the second. Why would they drive to Durban and leave the girls at the harbour? It didn't make any sense.

Angus grinned widely. "The boss has someone at the terminals," he continued. "The goods go into a container and from there our guy at the harbour will handle it."

Dirk stepped away from the wall. "Why are they going into a container?" he asked bewildered.

Angus sighed impatiently. "Are you really that daft?" he growled. "They'll be shipped to Asia. The buyer sits in Thailand. The goods are for his private collection."

Dirk's eyes became wide as saucers. "They are going to spend two or more weeks in a container on a ship?" he asked flabbergasted.

"So what?" Angus retorted irritably. "How else do you think they'll get there?"

"But," Dirk stammered.

Angus's brows narrowed angrily. "Do you have a problem with that?"

Dirk suppressed a sharp reply. Sure he had a problem with that, he wanted to shout. It was bad enough that they kidnapped girls off the street, but shipping them in a container to Thailand was unbelievable. What did they think they were doing?

He imagined the five girls in a dark metal box without sunlight or fresh air. What would they do if they needed to pee? Would they have to relieve themselves on the bare metal floor? Would they get any food? And what about water? They would surely dehydrate.

A dark shadow crossed Dirk's face. He sincerely doubted the girls would survive the trip.

His cousin, Meshak and Rat Face were totally bonkers! He had to do something and *something* very fast. He could not allow the operation to be successful. He had stop them somehow!

Dirk caught the look on Angus's face out of the corner of his eye. Quickly, he collected himself. His cousin stared at him as if he were a mouse about to steal cheese out of a trap. Angus's eyes were small suspicious slashes and his lips were pressed into a thin line.

Dirk drew a deep breath and pulled his mouth into a guileless smile. "Hey," he said with a small laugh. "You just caught me by surprise. I didn't think of doing it this way."

Slowly, his cousin's features relaxed. "Yeah," he replied. "It's pretty ingenious, isn't it?"

Dirk swallowed hard trying to keep his voice even. "Sure is," he said, but his mind was reeling with thoughts on how to prevent this disaster.

CHAPTER 18

The loud knock on the open front door was repeated.

"Hello," a man called. "Anyone home?"

Thandeka straightened her T-shirt and walked swiftly out of the kitchen. Raphaela pulled her dark mane over her shoulder and checked the watch on her wrist.

"That must be my cousin, Tony," she said, glancing at Ryan.

Ryan acknowledged her statement with a nod.

Thomas rubbed his face with both hands. "Let's see what he can come up with," he said, but did not move away from the counter; instead he placed his palms against the edge of the wooden top. Ryan thought it prudent to greet the visitor and followed Thandeka towards the front door.

Passing through the lounge, Ryan noticed that Elijah Nkosi's bulk was still slumped on the couch. Through half closed eyes Nkosi was staring at the TV screen, oblivious to the activities going on around him.

Thandeka welcomed Tony Patrizio into the house.

The young man's expression was serious, the dark stubble on his cheeks even denser than earlier in the day, but his brown eyes shone with alertness. Recognition flashed across his handsome face when he saw Ryan.

Patrizio held out his hand. "Hello Mr Bates," he said.

Ryan shook his hand. "Good to see you detective," he replied.

Thandeka stepped past the broad shouldered man, her tiny figure almost dwarfed by the muscular Italian.

"I see you know each other," she remarked, patting her wild hair, trying to make herself look more presentable.

Patrizio nodded solemnly. "We met earlier today in Mr Bates' office," he explained.

Thandeka gestured in the general direction of the couch and said, "Let me introduce you to my uncle and my brother."

Elijah Nkosi had the grace to lower the volume on the TV set. He placed the remote control carefully on the coffee table in front of him and heaved his huge body into a standing position. Pulling up his jeans, he walked up to the young man.

"I'm Elijah Nkosi," he said loudly, holding out his hand. "I'm Thandeka's uncle."

As Patrizio shook the offered hand his eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "Antonio Patrizio," he replied.

Nkosi dropped his hand. "And what are you going to do to help my niece?" he boomed.

Closely observing the black man, Patrizio shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever is necessary to find her daughter," he answered.

"And what can you bring to the party?" Nkosi said patronisingly, folding his arms.

Patrizio curled up a corner of his mouth into a grin. "I'm a detective with organised crime," he replied. "I think my expertise can add to the search for your niece's daughter."

Nkosi's eyebrows rose a notch. "You're a cop," he said, caution swinging in his voice. "With organised crime?"

Patrizio nodded in return, his eyes never leaving the big man's face, registering every small change in his expression.

"Well, well," Nkosi grumbled. "That is really good news."

Nkosi was about to turn away when Patrizzio's voice stopped him short. "Have we met before, Mr Nkosi?" he asked. "You seem familiar."

Elijah Nkosi cocked his head to the side. "No," he answered casually. "I don't think we have ever met."

A frown appeared on Patrizzio's forehead. "Hhm," he mumbled. "I thought I recognised you from somewhere."

Nkosi shrugged indifferently, slowly turning away. "You know how it goes," he replied easily. "All black men look the same."

Ryan had followed the exchange between the two men and was intrigued. "What was that all about?" he asked.

But Patrizzio shook his head, refusing to answer. Instead he watched Nkosi slump back onto the couch and reach for the remote control, completely ignoring the three people standing in the doorway.

Patrizzio looked at Thandeka. "Ms Nkosi," he said. "I apologise for any unpleasantness."

"Don't worry about it," she said. "My uncle is not the most social person on earth." She pointed towards the kitchen. "Rather let me introduce you to my brother."

She walked through the archway and waved to Patrizzio to follow her. Stopping beside Thomas, she linked her arm through his.

"This is my brother, Thomas Nkosi," she introduced him proudly.

Patrizzio stepped forward and shook the tall black man's hand. "I wish we could have met under better circumstances."

Thomas sighed deeply. "Thank you for your concern," he answered graciously.

Looking past Thomas, Patrizzio nodded at his cousin who was standing at the far side of the kitchen. "Hello, Raphaela," he said.

She acknowledged his greeting with a small wave of her hand.

Patrizzio walked over to the kitchen table and looked questioningly at Thandeka. "May I?" he asked politely.

"Sure," Thandeka replied and followed his example by pulling out a chair and sitting down. The other people in the room followed suit.

Thandeka leaned forward, placed her elbows on the table top, and rested her chin on the back of her folded hands waiting for whatever Patrizzio had to tell her, but the detective's gaze wandered over to her brother.

"Were there any new developments since I saw Mr Bates earlier on?" he asked.

Thomas pursed his lips and pushed his hands into his trouser pockets. "Not really," he said, the despondency clear in his dark voice.

"Why 'not really'?" he asked.

With his fingernail Thomas began tracing a grain of wood in the table's surface. "We went to St Michael's trying to find out if Lucy's teachers had observed any unusual behaviour or a fight, but they didn't see anything. Except for my niece's Afrikaans teacher who remembered Lucy and her best friend having a tiff."

"Lucy was involved in a fight?" Patrizzio interrupted, raising an eyebrow.

Thomas shook his head. "It wasn't really a fight, more of a school girl kind of misunderstanding," he explained.

The detective scratched his chin thoughtfully, the stubble rasping softly under his touch.

"We then visited the friend with whom Lucy had the disagreement," Thomas continued. "But the girl also does not know what has happened to Lucy."

Patrizzio placed his palm flat on the table. "What's the girl's name?"

Thomas crossed his legs and folded his hands on his knee. "Her name is Tanja Coetzee and she's Lucy's best friend." He looked at the detective probingly. "She had nothing to do with my niece's disappearance."

The detective held up his hand, but Thomas ignored the gesture.

"The girls only had a misunderstanding," he said. "During class, Tanja sent a stupid letter and by mistake Lucy picked it up. Obviously, my niece was very upset when she read what it said and she didn't want to walk home with Tanja. But the girl doesn't know anything more," Thomas insisted. "The last time she saw Lucy was outside the school gate."

Patrizzio's brows narrowed. "How can you be so sure that Tanja had nothing to do with your niece's disappearance?" he asked sharply.

Thomas bristled under Patrizzio's scrutiny. "Because she regretted every word she'd written." He gestured in Ryan's direction. "My partner can confirm it. He was there with me. The girl was sobbing her eyes out."

"That might be so, but we still have to check it out," the detective replied stubbornly.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Thomas erupted. "Tanja is an innocent school girl. She's very sorry that she hurt Lucy and if she could, she would take back every word on that piece of paper."

"Okay, Okay," Patrizzio said raising his hands. "Let's see what else we can come up with."

Thomas crossed his arms and stared at the detective coldly.

Ryan could see that his partner was extremely irritated with Patrizzio's attitude and that he was about to say something that he would regret later. It was time to defuse the tension. Patrizzio was only trying to help them.

Ryan cleared his throat and smiled hopefully. "Seeing that we have been so unsuccessful," he said. "what progress have you made?"

The detective shook his head. "None," he replied sadly.

Ryan was startled. "None?" he repeated.

Patrizzio rubbed his cheek tiredly. "I wish I had better news," he said quietly.

The detective's words shattered her frail hope and Thandeka jumped up angrily, pushing her chair so hard that it fell with a loud clatter to the floor.

"Why is nobody helping us?" she shouted, her eyes blazing. "What are the cops actually doing? Whenever we need them, they have an excuse, but when it comes to apportioning blame, then we are the first ones to feel their wrath."

"Thandeka," Thomas said warningly, but his sister did not listen. She slapped her hand on the table and pushed her face close to Patrizzio's. "What are you guys actually good for?"

A gasp escaped Raphaela's mouth and Ryan swallowed hard. But before either of the two could react, Thomas got up from his chair and pulled his sister away from the detective.

"Thandeka," he admonished her, forgetting his own earlier annoyance. "What are you doing? The detective is here to help us. He's doing us a favour."

Thandeka lifted her face and looked searchingly at her brother. Gently, he brushed a few strands of her black spiky hair aside. All at once, tears filled her eyes. She buried her head on her brother's chest, dug her hands into his shirt, and began to sob.

Thomas glanced apologetically at Patrizio. "Sorry," he said. "She didn't mean to attack you."

The detective waved his hand. "Not to worry," he replied easily. "Under the circumstances, your sister's reaction is totally understandable."

Thomas smiled gratefully, all the while stroking Thandeka's back trying to calm her down. It took a few minutes, but eventually Thandeka's tears subsided. She entangled herself from her brother's embrace, blew her nose noisily and returned to her chair. However, her shoulders remained hunched and she averted her gaze.

Thomas inhaled deeply and slumped into his chair. Ryan and Raphaela eyed each other in embarrassment, but Antonio Patrizio remained unfazed.

"So what happens now?" Ryan asked, taking the initiative.

Thoughtfully, Patrizio sucked on his bottom lip. "In spite of what Ms Nkosi believes, I have not been idle," he replied. "I have spoken to the station commander here in Edenvale." The detective took a deep breath. "He was quite clear about his officers applying the twenty-four hour rule."

Raphaela spun her head in his direction ready to protest again.

Patrizio held up his hand. "I know, I know," he said. "It doesn't seem right and it doesn't seem fair, especially because we know that Lucy is not a child to play truant. However, the station commander insisted that he could not make an exception. He pointed out that this could look like preferential treatment and could possibly lead to a disciplinary charge." Patrizio leaned forward to give his next words more emphasis. "But he promised to send a team around as soon as the twenty-four hours are up." The detective looked at his watch. "Which is about now."

Thandeka placed her fingers over her mouth.

Patrizio reached out and placed his hand on the young mother's arm. "They should be here any minute," he assured her.

"Once they are here," Ryan said thoughtfully. "What are they going to do?"

The detective's face hardened. "They'll take a statement from Ms Nkosi," he replied.

Ryan tilted his head as if to say, "is that all?"

Reading his expression correctly, Patrizio continued. "Once they have all the details, they'll verify the facts by interviewing the respective witnesses."

Ryan puffed out his cheeks. This could take hours, he thought glumly. What about finding Lucy? The girl was now missing for almost a whole day.

Ryan was more and more convinced that someone had snatched Lucy on her way home from school. And if his assumption was correct, then they had to do everything in their limited power to find her. Verifying facts and interviewing witnesses couldn't be part of the plan - that would simply take too long. By the time the cops had completed this tedious task, Lucy might be dead!

Ryan brushed his fingers through his hair. "Isn't there another way?" he enquired cautiously.

Patrizio frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, do they have to check all the details first?" Ryan hesitated briefly. "Lucy has been missing now for twenty-four hours and if we wait any longer ... who knows what will happen to her."

The detective exhaled loudly. "I see your point," he conceded. "But there is no other way. Procedure has to be followed and how else will we find any leads? When we interview the people who saw Lucy last, they might remember something which

they have previously overlooked, or forgotten. The tiniest detail counts and that's what we're after."

"But, ..." Ryan's voice trailed off when he caught the detective's warning glance. Without having to say a word, Patrizzio made it very clear that Ryan was to cease pursuing the subject.

Ryan complied reluctantly, but it seemed to him that it was hopeless. The cops would only repeat the exercise, Thomas, Thandeka and himself had completed a few hours ago already.

An uncomfortable silence settled over the small group around the kitchen table, the only sound coming from the TV set in the lounge. Everyone was deep in thought, waiting with pent up anger, impatience and barely suppressed fear for the cops to make an appearance.

Suddenly, there was another loud knock on the front door.

"Hello ,Thandeka," a high pitched old voice called. "Are you home?"

Thandeka lifted her head and rolled her eyes. She recognised the woman's voice, but was in no mood to acknowledge her arrival.

Another loud knock followed. "Thaaandeeeka," the woman called. "Are you in there?"

Thomas nudged his sister on the arm. "Answer the door, Thandi," he instructed her gently.

After a few seconds of hesitation, she rose reluctantly to her feet.

"Thaandeeeka," came the high pitched voice again.

Thandeka closed her eyes for a moment as if to draw on an inner strength. Forcing her lips into a smile, she replied, "I'm coming, Mrs Viljoen."

With heavy steps she left the kitchen, rounded the corner and was out of sight, but not for long. A minute later Thandeka reappeared with Mrs Viljoen in tow.

The old lady shuffled into the kitchen wearing brown, flat health shoes, her swollen ankles supported by beige elastic bandages. A shapeless knee-length cotton dress, on which the printed flowers had faded to a pale pastel colour, clung to her frail body. Reading glasses hung on a silver chain down her bosom, and curled up on her arm was a grey and tan Yorkshire Terrier. Her face was a landscape of lines and wrinkles, surrounded by a short mop of almost purple coloured hair.

The old woman squinted from one person to the next, her thin fuchsia painted lips forming a round O. Confused, she turned to Thandeka.

"I didn't know you had visitors," she said. "You should have told me."

Thandeka smiled benignly. "It's alright, Mrs Viljoen." She pointed to Thomas, "You remember my brother," she asked with raised eyebrows, to which the old woman nodded. Thandeka's finger directed her gaze to the rest of the people around the table. "The lady with the long dark hair is Ms Raphaela Patrizzio. She is a colleague of my brother's. The handsome gentleman opposite her is Mr Ryan Bates." Ryan grinned, embarrassed at her flattering description of him. "Mr Bates and my brother are partners in business. And this young man," Thandeka stood behind the detective. "This is Mr Antonio Patrizzio, a detective with the Organised Crime Unit."

Mrs Viljoen touched her almost purple hair. "A detective?" she repeated surprised. "What is a detective doing in your house?"

Thandeka's face crumpled and her bottom lip quivered.

"What is it, dear?" Mrs Viljoen asked. "Has something happened to you?"

The old lady shuffled over to Thandeka and placed her hand on the younger woman's arm. "Are you alright?" she asked, deep concern in her voice.

Thandeka swallowed hard. "I'm fine, Mrs Viljoen," she managed to utter.

The old woman waited patiently, watching Thandeka with eagle eyes.

"It's Lucy," Thandeka blurted out. "She didn't come home from school yesterday."

Mrs Viljoen drew her head back as if she had been slapped in the face. "Oh, my," she muttered.

She rubbed Thandeka's arm softly. "And you don't have any idea where she might be?"

Thandeka shook her head.

"Oh, dear," the old woman mumbled again. "This is so unlike Lucy." She blinked a couple of times. "She's usually so reliable." Her head lifted. "Maybe she is with her friend," she said excitedly. "You know that blonde girl who goes to school with her."

Thandeka smiled sadly at her neighbour's effort to help. "We spoke to her already, Mrs Viljoen, but Tanja also doesn't know where Lucy is."

The old woman let go of Thandeka and stroked her dog's soft hair. "What are we going to do, Alfie?" she said to the fur ball on her arm. "Poor Thandeka, poor Lucy."

Thandeka pulled a chair away from the table. "Please have a seat, Mrs Viljoen," she offered.

The old lady nodded gratefully, tottered on unsteady feet to the chair and sat down.

"What did you want to see me about, Mrs Viljoen?" Thandeka asked her kindly.

Thandeka's neighbour lifted her head again and looked at her puzzled, holding the Yorkshire Terrier pressed against her chest.

"Mrs Viljoen?" Thandeka prompted her.

The old woman focussed on her neighbour's words. "Oh, Oh," she replied fluttering her hand in the air. "Never mind. You have more important things on your mind."

Thandeka smiled gently. "Would you like a cup of tea?" she enquired.

Mrs Viljoen returned her smile. "If it is not too much trouble, my dear."

Thandeka patted her on the shoulder, earning her a growl from the tiny dog. Used to the cheeky creature's attitude, Thandeka conveniently ignored the Yorkshire's posturing. Instead, she turned to the counter, picked up the electric kettle and filled it with water from the tap over the sink.

While Thandeka busied herself with tea utensils, Antonio Patrizio turned his attention to the old woman.

"Where do you stay, Mrs Viljoen?" he asked as non-threatening as possible.

The old woman fingered her chain around her neck. "I stay at the end of street, where it makes a bend," she answered distractedly. "Just a few houses down."

Patrizio nodded encouragingly. "And how long have you stayed there?" he asked.

Mrs Viljoen cackled softly. "As long as I can remember," she replied, her eyes suddenly having a far away look. "You see, young man, my husband bought the house almost forty years ago. When my husband proposed to me, he wanted to make sure that we had a roof over our heads. My husband was a fabulous man. He looked after me and our children all of his life. When we first moved into this area it wasn't well established. It was a good suburb, but there weren't any shops and the

schools were far away. In those days, there also weren't many cars so the children could play in the street."

The detective raised his hand. "Ma'am," he interrupted her. "I'm sure this was a very good area in the good old days ..."

Mrs Viljoen's straightened her shoulders. "Young man," she stopped him, glaring at Patrizzio indignantly. "This is *still* a very good area."

The detective couldn't hide a smile. "I'm sorry, Ma'am," he said gently. "I didn't mean to insult you."

She huffed and refrained from answering.

"Mrs Viljoen," Patrizzio tried again. "Is your husband at home?"

The old woman's eyes misted over and she dabbed at the corners with her fingertips. "No, Mr Detective," she said sadly. "The dear soul has gone. It's now going on five years that he left me alone to fend for myself."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Patrizzio offered sympathetically.

The old lady sniffed a couple of times, but composed herself quickly. A bright smile pulled open her fuchsia painted lips. "It's alright, dear," she said. "I still have my children. They come to visit me often."

As the water in the kettle boiled, the automatic switch clicked off. Thandeka poured the hot water over the teabag which she had placed in a delicate white porcelain cup. Carefully she lifted the cup and saucer and placed it in front of the old woman.

Mrs Viljoen looked up through watery eyes. "Thank you, Thandeka," she said gratefully.

Thandeka smiled back at her kindly.

"Ma'am," Patrizzio picked up the conversation again. "Seeing that you have lived in this road for so many years, would you know the coming and goings of the people here?"

The old woman picked up her teacup, her pinkie finger straight as a soldier on parade, and lifted the cup to her mouth. Daintily she sipped the hot tea, eyeing the broad shouldered Italian over the rim of her cup.

The detective tilted his head, patiently waiting for an answer.

Mr Viljoen put the cup back on its saucer and placed her hand protectively over the Yorkshire Terrier's head.

"What are you asking me, detective?" she finally enquired.

Patrizzio leaned back in his chair, leaving his hands, fingers splayed, on the table top.

"I just wondered if you had the time to notice anything unusual going on in the street, yesterday, especially during the day?" he asked pleasantly.

The old woman chortled softly. "Time, young man, is all I've got."

A flicker of hope crossed Patrizzio's face. "Did you notice anything unusual, then?" he enquired cautiously.

Mrs Viljoen pursed her fuchsia coloured lips and looked at the kitchen window. "Yesterday, you say?"

"Yes," the detective replied.

She tickled the dog's tummy and a deep line furrowed her forehead. "Did we notice anything unusual, Alfi?" she mumbled.

Patrizzio held his breath. Raphaela, Thandeka, Thomas and Ryan watched her spellbound. This could be their first lead! This could be their break-through!

Please, Mrs Viljoen, Ryan begged silently, please remember what you saw yesterday. Whatever it was, it might lead us to the discovery of Lucy's whereabouts.

The old woman shook her head slowly. "No," she said. "Nothing unusual happened yesterday."

Patrizzio's head dropped with disappointment and Thandeka let out a tiny cry.

This can't be happening, Ryan thought with despair. Lucy can't have disappeared from the face of the earth without a trace. Someone, somewhere must have seen the girl. They knew Lucy had definitely left school yesterday. She definitely was on her way home. What had happened on the way home?

Ryan silently began to expand on his theory of somebody snatching Lucy off the street: if somebody had taken her, then he didn't do so by grabbing her and throwing her over his shoulder. Walking down a road with a girl flung over a shoulder would attract lots of attention and Ryan had no doubt, Lucy would not have gone with anyone voluntarily. The girl would have screamed, shouted and kicked. This meant, whoever had taken Lucy, must have used a car.

His eyes narrowed and he squinted at the old woman perched on the edge of the wooden kitchen chair.

Ryan cleared his throat. "Mrs Viljoen," he began, "did you watch the street the whole day, yesterday?"

The old lady touched her purple mop. "As a matter of fact, I did, young man," she replied, not sounding the least apologetic.

A tiny smile played around Ryan's lips. "Did you see other students arrive home?" he enquired gently.

Mrs Viljoen pushed her glasses onto her nose and peered at Ryan over the rims.

"Yes," she said, firmly. Her gaze turned back to the window as she remembered the previous day. "Little Claire from across the road came home at about one o'clock and Matthew, the rowdy son of Mrs Maple, arrived shortly after." She tapped her finger on her upper lip. "Then there was Chenade, together with her friend, Yasmine, at about a quarter to three and the black boy, Lindo, who lives three houses further up. He always dawdles so it was just after three when he walked up the driveway."

"But there was no Lucy," Ryan confirmed.

The old woman shook her head sadly. "No," she answered. "I didn't see Lucy. Maybe she went to her blonde friend two roads up."

Easing the tension in his neck, Ryan hooked his forefinger under the collar of his shirt and eased it away from his neck.

"What about cars?" he asked. "Where there any cars other than those belonging to the people in the street?"

The old woman crunched up her face with heavy concentration. The wrinkles in her face became deep ravines and her watery eyes almost disappeared behind the loose folds of her eyelids.

"Mr Randall came home early, at about half past two," she mumbled. "But he is a salesman and he works his own hours," she added as an explanation. "Ms Botha arrived shortly afterwards. She drives a snazzy little red car, but she always races down the road. She never gives a second thought to the children who might be playing in the street," the old woman said disapprovingly. Drawing a breath, she carried on. "Ms Meyerson had her children in the car and she dropped them off at home around the same time Chenade and Yasmine came up the street. Then there

was the cleaning van and at about half past three, Mr Spalding came home. He always leaves his car in the drive way."

Ryan nodded at her encouragingly. "You are doing very well, Mrs Viljoen," he said. "You seem to know almost all the people in the street and especially their daily habits."

The old lady bowed her head graciously, accepting Ryan's words as compliment.

"Now," Ryan continued. "Of all the cars you saw yesterday, was there one that didn't belong in the neighbourhood?"

The old lady frowned once more and Ryan thought he could see the neurons spark in her ancient purple coloured head.

Mrs Viljoen looked up. "The cleaning van," she answered triumphantly, as if the questioning constituted a quiz in which she could win a Million Rand.

Patrizzio's eyebrows rose an inch and Raphaella exhaled loudly.

Not wanting to scare the old lady, Ryan curled the corners of his mouth into a smile. "That's good, ma'am," he said pleasantly. "Can you remember what the cleaning van looked like and at which house it stopped?"

The old lady picked up the tea cup again and took a tiny sip of the cooling brew. Carefully, she placed the cup back on the saucer. Her expression was concerned.

"I don't know," she whispered finally. "I can't remember."

Ryan wanted to jump up from his chair, bang the table with his fists and scream with frustration.

They had a potential lead and the old crone couldn't recall what she had seen!

He wanted to grab her and shake her bony shoulders until her brain rattled inside her purple coloured head. How on earth could she forget such an important piece of information? Didn't she realise that they were talking life and death here?

Out of the corner of his eye, Ryan caught Patrizzio's warning glance to keep calm. Ryan drew a deep breath and steadied his trembling hands. With exaggerated care, he pushed his chair away from the table and crossed his legs.

Leaning forward, Patrizzio placed his hand on the old lady's arm. Immediately, the Yorkshire Terrier began to yap and growl. Quickly, the detective removed his fingers.

"Vicious little thing," he said with a half laugh.

Mrs Viljoen raised her eyebrows. "What are talking about, young man?" she protested. "My Alfie is the gentlest dog you can imagine."

Patrizzio kept his features neutral, but Ryan guessed what the detective was thinking.

Patrizzio laced his fingers and leaned back in the chair. "Mrs Viljoen," he began. "How do you know it was a cleaning van you saw yesterday afternoon?"

She gave him an offended look. "I might be old, young man," she huffed, "but I'm not senile."

Patrizzio tilted his head waiting for her answer.

Mrs Viljoen straightened her shoulders sulkily. "'Ultra Cleaning Services' was written on the side," she revealed after a moment.

The detective's eyes glinted with sudden excitement. "Do you remember the colour of the lettering?"

The old lady licked her fuchsia painted lips. "It was green," she replied thoughtfully, confirming the colour in her mind.

"What colour was the van?" Patrizzio asked.

Mrs Viljoen frowned at the detective's rapid questioning. "It was white," she grumbled.

Sensing her growing irritation and not wanting to lose her to an old age tantrum, the detective softened his expression.

"Ma'am," he said gently. "How many people were in the vehicle?"

The old lady chewed briefly on her bottom lip. "I think there were three, but don't ask me what they looked like," she added quickly, "because I didn't see their faces."

Patrizzio nodded encouragingly. "Don't worry, Mrs Viljoen. You are doing very well."

A hush of pink spread across her wrinkled cheeks at this unexpected praise.

The detective drew a deep breath. "Ma'am, can you remember if the van stopped in front of a particular house?"

Mrs Viljoen instantly shook her head. "No," she replied. "The car did not stop. I watched it turn into the street, drive along and leave at the other end. The car did not stop."

With his forefinger, Patrizzio rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "Was the car going fast or very slow?" he wanted to know.

Mrs Viljoen stroked the Yorkshire Terrier's head as she squinted with concentration. "It was not driving fast and it was not driving particularly slowly." She looked at the detective hopefully. "Is there something like normal speed?"

Patrizzio nodded, the corners of his eyes crinkling with a smile. "Yes, ma'am," he confirmed. "There is something like normal speed."

The detective brushed an invisible piece of fluff from his golf shirt. Eventually, he turned his attention back to the old lady.

"Mrs Viljoen," he said gently. "Do you remember what kind of vehicle it was?"

A flash of irritation crossed her face at the detective's relentless questioning. "One of those fancy things," she snapped.

Patrizzio raised an eyebrow. "Do you know the make?"

The old lady pressed her lips together forming a thin line. "No," she replied tetchily. "I am not familiar with the cars nowadays. I can only tell you that it was closed off at the back and it had a big metal bar in front."

The detective scratched the stubble on his cheek contemplatively.

It sounded to him as if the old woman had spotted either a *bakkie* or a 4x4. He needed to make a hundred percent sure.

Pushing his chair away from the table, he got up unhurriedly. "Mrs Viljoen," he said. "If I show you a similar car, would you recognise it?"

The old lady pursed her lips. "Of course," she confirmed.

Patrizzio helped her out of her chair. Standing on unsteady legs, Mrs Viljoen straightened the front of her cotton dress with the palm of her hand. Clutching the tiny Yorkshire Terrier tightly to her chest, she followed the detective out of the kitchen.

Desperately wanting to know what Patrizzio was up to, Ryan went after the odd couple. As he stepped through the front door, he caught the last bit of their conversation.

"You are sure that it was a car similar to this one?" Patrizzio asked pointing at Ryan's BMW 4x4.

Mrs Viljoen nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, yes," she confirmed. "Except it wasn't that high off the ground and it had a different colour."

The detective smiled generously at the old lady, but did not comment on her anxious attempt to be accurate. Instead he placed his hand on Mrs Viljoen's elbow and led her back into the kitchen.

CHAPTER 19

Ryan began pacing the tiled kitchen floor, rubbing his hands together happily.

"This is good news, isn't it?" he said, looking over at Patrizzio.

The detective smiled enigmatically.

Ryan stopped in mid-stride. "Why are you not excited?" he asked impatiently. "This is our first lead."

A huge frown wrinkled the detective's usually smooth forehead. "What makes you say that?" he asked.

Ryan was about to blurt out his theory, but at the last moment he thought better of it. He glanced at his partner, who had not uttered a single word for the last half an hour. Thomas returned his gaze and nodded in acknowledgment.

"I had the same suspicion," he said quietly. "Lucy is not stupid. She would have come home by now."

Thandeka placed her hands on her hips. "What are you two on about?" she asked angrily. "What kind of suspicion do you have?"

Thomas lifted his head to look at his sister. "We think someone snatched Lucy," he stated as a matter of fact.

The colour drained from Thandeka's face. Where there was a healthy brown before, her skin was now almost an ash grey. Uncoiled like a spring released, she threw herself against her brother. Her small fist flying, she hit him on the chest and pounded his arms.

"How dare you say that," she shouted. "How dare you suggest that someone has kidnapped Lucy?"

Her eyes were wild and small screams escaped her mouth as she punched her brother. Without a word, Thomas rose slowly from his chair, wrapped her arms around her thin body and held her close.

"Hush," he said. "Hush, Thandi. We will find Lucy. Nothing bad will happen to her."

Roughly, Thandeka pushed him away. Her arms were hanging loosely by her sides and her shoulders slumped in defeat.

"Oh, my God," she mumbled. "Oh, my God!"

Fear, horror, shock and terror crossed her face in rapid succession.

Ryan could only imagine what was going through her mind: had her daughter been beaten? Were her bones cracked and her teeth missing? Was Lucy crying out to her this very minute? Did the kidnappers rape her? Had they left Lucy bleeding and broken? Was she actually still alive?

Thandeka pressed her knuckles against her mouth stifling her anguished cries. Ryan's heart went out to the panic stricken mother. How he wished he could end this nightmare right this minute.

Helplessly, he looked at Raphaela whose face told it all. She was almost as distressed as the young mother. Ryan sidled over to Raphaela and touched her arm with his fingertips.

"It's going to be alright," he whispered.

Raphaela swung her dark hair over her shoulder in a gesture of defiance.

"It better be," she hissed back angrily.

Thomas took Thandeka's elbow and directed her to a chair. His sister reacted to his gentle guidance like a lifeless rag doll. She sank down on the kitchen stair,

staring unseeing in front of her. She opened and closed her mouth repeatedly, but no sound emerged.

Patrizzio cleared his throat. "Ms Nkosi, please don't assume the worst," he said quietly. "We don't know if Lucy has been kidnapped. There have been no ransom calls up to now and this is a good indication that Lucy might just have decided to spend the day somewhere else."

Thandeka latched onto the detective's words like a drowning swimmer holding onto a life raft. "You think so?" she asked hopefully. "You think she just wandered off somewhere?"

Ryan watched Patrizzio from under half closed lids. Did the detective really believe this or was he only trying to reassure a distressed mother?

Patrizzio glanced at Ryan and Thomas and shook his head imperceptibly, making it clear that the two men should refrain from pursuing their theory in front of Thandeka. It was bad enough they suspected a kidnapping, but this didn't mean they had to upset the mother even more.

The detective folded his arms and blanked his features. "I'm sure Lucy will be home very soon," he said.

Thandeka looked at him wide-eyed. Ryan wondered if she had spotted the detective's lie. To Ryan's relief, she did not question Patrizzio. Instead her back straightened and she patted her spiky hair.

A wan smile appeared on her face as she turned to the old lady still sitting at the table.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Viljoen," she said. "I shouldn't have lost my composure."

The old lady looked at her curiously. "My dear," she replied. "You have nothing to apologise for. I would be much more frantic if a child of mine had gone missing."

"Thank you for understanding," Thandeka whispered.

Thomas refocused the group's attention. "Nevertheless," he said, ignoring Patrizzio's body language, meant to silence them. "Mrs Viljoen's identification of a strange vehicle in the area provides us with a lead, not so?"

Patrizzio drew a deep breath. "It might be a lead, it might not be," he replied.

Thomas' head snapped back. "How so?"

The detective shrugged his shoulders. "Think about it," he said. "Mrs Viljoen saw a white *bakkie* or 4x4 with the words 'Ultra Cleaning Services' on its side at about the same time that Lucy was supposed to arrive at home. But what does that prove? She didn't observe anything else. She didn't see Lucy and she didn't see the vehicle stop beside the road."

"But it *is* possible that the car and the three men were involved in Lucy's disappearance," Thomas insisted.

Patrizzio looked at Thomas for a few long moments. Hope and despair was etched around the corners of the man's mouth. Quietly, the detective admired Thomas's rational thinking. The young man had stayed calm throughout this ordeal, had tried to contribute to the case, and had in no way been obstructive. Could he really crush the man's hope?

Patrizzio exhaled loudly. "It is possible," he conceded.

Thomas hugged his upper arms. "So," he said. "How are we going to find this vehicle?"

The detective rubbed the top of his head. "I'm going to contact the Metro Police and will give them the description. But don't put your hopes up too high," he added

quickly. "The Metro cops will have a look-out for the vehicle, but it doesn't mean they will find it. We don't have a registration number."

Thomas nodded silently.

A lightning bolt flashed past the window and startled everyone in the room. Immediately the flare was followed by a thunder clap, rattling the glass in the window frames.

"Oh my," Mrs Viljoen muttered. "A storm is brewing. I better get home."

She rose slowly from her chair and hugged her Yorkshire Terrier to her chest. Walking the few steps to where Thandeka was sitting, she patted the younger woman on the arm.

"You take care, my dear," she said encouragingly. "Lucy will be home soon. Don't lose heart."

Thandeka smiled gratefully and started to get up from her chair.

"No, no," Mrs Viljoen stopped her. "You stay seated, my dear. I'll see myself out."

The old lady shuffled toward the archway and was about to leave the kitchen when the detective called out to her. "Ma'am?"

Mrs Viljoen turned around unhurriedly and looked at him questioningly.

"Some police officer will come by a bit later to verify your story," he explained. "You are not going out tonight, are you?"

The old lady chuckled quietly. "That's kind of you to suggest, Mr Detective." She shook her purple coloured head. "No, I won't be going out tonight. Your people can come and visit me."

Patrizzio gave her a wide smile. "Thank you, Mrs Viljoen."

The old woman fluttered her hand in the air and tottered through the door.

Another lightning bolt blazed past the kitchen window. Ryan and Raphaela flinched at the subsequent whacking thunder, but Thandeka and Thomas were too numb to react. In between the rapidly rolling thunder, they heard the horn of a car in the driveway.

Patrizzio pushed his chair back and got to his feet. "About bloody time," he grumbled.

Ryan took a step forward; curious to investigate the new arrivals, but Patrizzio stopped him short.

"Don't worry," he said. "It must be my colleagues from the Edenvale police station. I'll see them in."

Ryan relaxed against the kitchen counter. Thomas slumped on a chair next to Thandeka and put his arm around her shoulders.

"You'll see," he said soothingly. "Now things are going to happen. In no time at all Lucy will be walking through the front door."

Thandeka did not reply; instead she rested her head against his chest.

Looking over to Raphaela who stood quietly on the opposite side of the kitchen, Ryan tried to gauge if she had the same confidence in the police force as Thomas pretended to have, but he could not read her expression; her head was bent and her dark hair hid her face.

Relating to her anxiety, Ryan walked past the table and stood beside the young woman. Raphaela pushed some long, thick tresses out of the way and looked at him out of the corner of her eye.

She tapped her fingers impatiently. "Do you really think Lucy was snatched?" she asked.

Tugging on his shirt sleeves, he replied wistfully, "I can't believe Lucy would run away, not after I've seen how much Thandeka and Thomas care about her."

Raphaela nodded thoughtfully.

"I don't see any other possibility," he continued, sighing heavily.

"I think so, too," Raphaela whispered.

Another lightning strike zigzagged past the window illuminating the dark sky. Daylight in the kitchen was fading quickly and Raphaela reached out to press the light switch beside the archway. Sudden brightness flooded the room emphasising Thandeka's drawn features and Thomas's gaunt face.

A moment later, the heavy footsteps of several people resounded throughout the house, compelling the sad little group in the kitchen to look expectantly towards the entrance.

One after the other, four police officers marched into the confined room followed closely by Antonio Patrizzio. The cops wore standard blue South African police force uniforms, including thick rubber-soled black boots. All four were black African men, their ages ranging from early twenties to late forties. They positioned themselves against the kitchen counter, their faces grim.

The oldest officer, his short cropped hair greying at the temples, stepped forward and introduced himself.

"Good afternoon," he said with a deep baritone voice. "I'm Constable Mlazazi."

Thomas got up from his chair and rose to his full height. He towered over the cop by almost a full head.

"Thomas Nkosi," he introduced himself.

A skinny man - his large dark eyes mournful - held out his hand. "Constable Nnodana," he said quietly.

Thomas shook his hand, gripping it in the African way, all the while conscious of the other two black officers.

The third man squeezed past the old cop. His cheeks were badly pockmarked and he smiled shyly. "I'm Officer Nzuzu," he introduced himself.

Constable Mlazazi thumbed at a short bulky man behind him. "This is Officer Siweya," he said. "He's new to our station."

Ryan thought he detected a slight flush cross the young officer's cheeks, but he couldn't be sure. The cop almost disappeared behind the back of the older man and it seemed as if he preferred to hide rather than stand in full view of everyone.

Thomas placed his hand protectively on Thandeka's shoulder. "This is my sister Thandeka Nkosi," he said. "She is the mother of Lucy, my niece, who has disappeared."

Nodding in acknowledgment, Constable Mlazazi stated officiously, "I understand you have already filed a missing person's report?"

"Yes," Thomas confirmed. "We," and he pointed to Ryan standing behind him, "visited the station last night." His voice was icy when he continued. "But the officers at the Edenvale police station were unable to assist us. It took a detective from the Organised Crime unit to get you out here." He checked his watch with exaggerated care. "And it took you more than twenty-six hours to make this trip!"

Antonio Patrizzio cleared his throat loudly. "Let's get down to business," he suggested.

Thomas glared angrily at the detective, but he caught the hint and kept quiet.

Thandeka rose to her feet. "Thank you for coming," she said.

The older police officer fished a small notepad from his breast pocket, clicked a Biro pen into action and looked at Thandeka expectantly.

Thandeka returned the officer's gaze, then looked helplessly at her brother. She wrung her hands wretchedly. "What do you want me to say?"

Constable Mlazazi pursed his lips. "Well ...", he started, then caught a glimpse of Thomas who stood with his hands pushed deep into his trouser pockets watching the constable sardonically.

The officer took a deep breath. "Do you mind if we sit down?" he asked, avoiding Thomas's derisive look.

"Sure," Thandeka replied, gesturing to the chairs surrounding the table.

Mlazazi dropped gratefully on a chair making sure that his back was turned to Thomas.

Thandeka sat opposite Mlazazi, interlacing her fingers on the table top.

The constable smiled amicably. "Ms Nkosi," he began. "We would like you to tell us everything that happened yesterday."

Thandeka tilted her head. "And then?" she asked. "What are you going to do then?"

Mlazazi twirled the Biro pen in his fingers. "One step at a time," he replied. "First we take a statement from you detailing the events in chronological order, and hopefully, we obtain crucial facts and names from you. Then we will visit those people and take statements from them. Obviously, they should all be people who have seen Lucy in the last twenty-four hours, or who have been involved with her recently. Once we have their accounts, then we are going to verify their individual stories."

"Fuck!" Thomas burst out. "So all you are going to do is take statements?" He flapped his arms angrily. "What about a neighbourhood search? What about sending Lucy's details to every police station in and around Johannesburg? What about an announcement over the radio? What about putting her picture on TV? What about ...?"

Mlazazi stared hard at the irate man.

"You are wasting time!" Thomas shouted. "My niece is missing, for crying out loud! Taking statements isn't going to do her any good. That won't bring her back!"

Thomas leaned across the table pushing his face close to the officer's. "You are all useless," he hissed. "You waste the tax payers' money and you don't even care. All you cops do is fill your own pockets, but when it comes to helping people, then you are nowhere to be seen."

Constable Mlazazi pushed back his chair and got to his feet. His eyes were blazing with barely suppressed anger. "We are doing the best we can," he growled. "And we are not corrupt. We are approaching this situation according to procedure."

"Procedure!" Thomas yelled, hitting his fist on the kitchen counter top. "What does procedure have to do with anything? You are supposed to find Lucy!"

"Sir," the police officer raised his hand as if physically trying to stem Thomas' outburst. "Calm down."

"Calm down?" Thomas bellowed. "Are you out of your mind?"

"What's going on here? What's all the shouting about?" Elijah Nkosi's voice boomed from the archway.

Nkosi squeezed past the officers crowding the entrance to the kitchen and stood in front of Constable Mlazazi. He placed his hands on his hips and glared at the people scattered around the kitchen.

Thomas pressed his lips into a thin line and crossed his arms defiantly. Thandeka lowered her head, fiddling with the hem of her T-shirt. Patrizio sidled over to Ryan and Raphaella who stood close together, but out of the way of everyone else.

Suddenly realising the company he was in, Elijah Nkosi's eyebrows narrowed. "What are all these cops doing here?" he asked cautiously.

Thandeka took a step forward. "They are from the Edenvale police station," she explained. "They are going to help us find Lucy."

Elijah Nkosi's upper lip curled into a cynical snarl. "Is that so?"

Constable Mlazazi straightened his shoulders trying to appear more authoritative. "And who are you?" he asked rather rudely.

Looking at him with contempt, Nkosi replied icily, "No one."

Thandeka's head snapped around. "Uncle Elijah!" she exclaimed.

Nkosi placed his hand on his niece's shoulder, whilst never taking his eyes off the police officers. "You know what Thandeka?" he said frostily. "I think this place is too crowded. I think I should go about my business in my office downtown."

Thandeka's eyes brimmed with tears. "But you said you would help," she whispered. "You said you would stay with me."

Nkosi pointed at the men in the room. "I think you've got plenty of help, now."

Desperately, Thandeka tugged at Elijah Nkosi's T-shirt. "Please stay," she begged.

Tenderly Elijah Nkosi put his arm around his niece's shoulders and pulled her close. "Don't worry, my darling," he mumbled. "I'm not going to be far away and remember my men are still on the look-out for Lucy." He placed his chin on top of her head. "Please understand," he continued. "I just don't like the stench of cops around me," delivering the insult in a quiet and dismissive manner.

The slur was not heard by the police officers in the room, but it reached Ryan. He swallowed hard and watched carefully for a reaction from the cops. His eyes darted from one officer to the next, but either the cops had deliberately ignored Nkosi's insult, or they really hadn't heard it.

Nkosi rubbed Thandeka's back. "Come on, now," he mumbled. "You'll see, Lucy will be home in no time at all."

Thandeka sobbed softly against his chest leaving wet marks on his black T-shirt.

Nkosi pushed her gently away.

Thandeka wiped away the tears with the back of her hand, pulled a tissue from a box standing on the counter and blew her nose noisily.

"I'll phone you later," Nkosi addressed her softly. "You just hang in there."

Elijah Nkosi brushed past the two officers blocking the archway.

"Sir?" Constable Mlazazi called.

Nkosi stopped in his tracks and looked over his shoulder.

"We will need your statement," Mlazazi ordered.

Nkosi shrugged his shoulders. "You can ask my niece," he replied, flapping his hand indifferently. "She'll tell you everything you need to know."

And Elijah Nkosi marched out of the kitchen and slammed the front door on his way out.

XXX

Leaving Shelly and Silvy sitting by the wall, Lucy crawled on all fours across the room. The light had faded in the dingy room and it was difficult for Lucy to make out the shapes lying on the thin mattress. Stopping next to the lifeless body of the Indian girl, her long black hair fanned out around her still head, Lucy looked back over her shoulder.

"Do you think they are dead?" she whispered.

Silvy pulled her dishevelled hair into a pony tail. Twisting the strands into a coil and snapping an elastic band around the gathered hair, she pulled it tight.

"Nonsense," she objected. "They're just drugged. The same way you and I were."

Lucy poked the Indian girl in her side. Her skin was firm, but gave away easily.

"How do you know?" she asked. "How do you know they are just drugged?"

Silvy rolled her eyes. "Don't be silly," she replied impatiently. "Didn't you listen to what those men were saying to each other?"

Lucy pursed her lips.

"They want to sell us," Silvy continued without mercy. "They can't have us dead. If we are dead, then we are worth nothing to them."

Lucy glared at the other girl. "You don't have to be so bitchy about it," she said angrily. "I don't need to be reminded of what they want to do with us."

Silvy pulled her legs up and wrapped her arms around her knees. "Why then do you ask stupid questions?" she countered.

Lucy flopped herself down on the mattress and sighed. "It's just that they have been out for so long," she said.

Silvy shrugged her shoulders. "It's not been that long," she replied. "You were gone much longer."

Lucy's eyebrows rose with surprise. "Really?"

Silvy nodded enthusiastically. "Really," she repeated. "It was almost completely dark before you came around."

"Wow," Lucy muttered, crossing her legs.

Silvy tugged on her dirt streaked blouse. Noticing the brown marks, she wet her fingertips with spit and began rubbing on the stains. After a few minutes of furious scraping, she gave up, having only spread the dirt further up the front of her shirt. She dropped her arms into her lap and a wistful expression crossed her pretty face.

"Do you think they are looking for us?" Silvy asked.

Lucy had been staring at a spot on the wall, not seeing anything at all and Silvy's voice drew her abruptly out of her reverie.

"Who?" she asked distractedly.

Silvy's head came up abruptly. "Our parents! That's who," she snapped.

Startled at her accusatory tone, Lucy gave the girl a withering look. She had a sharp reply on her lips, but then saw Silvy's distressed face. Instantly, her anger dissipated. Instead a million images flashed simultaneously through her mind:

It was early evening and she saw her mother coming home from work, dressed in her smart dark business suit, dropping her leather briefcase on the floor beside the front door and kicking off her high heeled shoes. In her mind, she was sitting in their warm kitchen during a cold winter night, mouth watering aromas from the pots on the stove wafting through the air, her mom stirring stews and gravies. She remembered

a Saturday afternoon with her mom's hand on her head, weaving extensions into her hair and stringing colourful beads onto the long strands. Then they were sitting on the couch, their bare arms touching, hopping from one TV channel to the next, giggling loudly, trying to catch a funny sitcom or amusing comedy.

Would she ever see her mother again? Lucy wondered anxiously. Was she condemned to be the sex slave of an old tottering man? Would his talon-like arthritic riddled fingers claw at her skin? Would she be at this man's mercy, having to serve him day in and day out? Would she have to satisfy his sexual needs at a snap of his fingers?

Lucy shuddered at the thoughts. Tears welled up in her eyes and a big lump formed in her throat.

This wasn't going to happen, she tried to convince herself. She clenched her hands into fists and swallowed hard. There was no way that her mother would allow her to be sold to become a man's sex toy.

She forced herself to suppress her fears and doubts.

"Sure they are looking for us. And you'll see they'll come very soon," she said confidently

"How do you know?" Silvy countered almost aggressively

Lucy shrugged her shoulders. "I just know," she replied calmly.

Silvy lifted up her arms. "They don't even know where we are," she argued.

Lucy raised an eyebrow.

The other girl flapped her hands. "How can they come and get us, if they have no idea where to look," she almost shouted.

All of a sudden, a whimper reached their ears.

Lucy glanced at Shelly who was crouched down on the floor. Her balled fists were pressed against her ears and soft cries were escaping her lips.

"Oh, Shelly," Lucy mumbled.

Quickly, she got to her feet and scrambled over to the hunched down girl. Putting her arm around Shelly's thin shoulders, Lucy tried to pry away the fists from the girl's ears.

Annoyed she looked in Silvy's direction, but refrained from giving her tongue lashing.

"Come on, Shelly," she soothed. "It's not that bad. Trust me. We'll get out of here."

The other girl rocked on her heels and keened softly, but with Lucy's encouragement lifted her hands away from her ears.

"They are going to find us," Lucy cooed. "You'll see."

Shelly lifted her head. Her cheeks were wet with tears and her eyes were wide with fear.

"Sshhh," Lucy comforted her. "It won't be long now and you'll be home safely."

In response Shelly began to hiccup. Lucy pulled the girl close, rubbing her back gently. She placed her chin on the girl's head and stared towards the boarded up window, wondering if she really believed her own words. But what else could she say to Shelly? Hope was all they had left.

The doors to the *bakkie* with the green letters, "Ultra Cleaning Services" on its sides, banged shut. Meshak rolled down the window and placed his arm on the doorframe, his elbow sticking out at a sharp angle. He stared straight ahead, his face blank, his expression cold and uncaring. Angus leaned forward, turned the key in the ignition and the motor turned over. He pressed down hard on the accelerator. The engine growled loudly and a plume of blue smoke belched out of the exhaust. Shifting the gear lever, Angus concentrated on his side mirror, reversing past the chalet. He swung the car around, shifted gears again, and sped down the dirt track leaving a huge cloud of dust behind.

Dirk stood on the patio and watched his cousin disappear into the distance. His heart was heavy. On the one hand he was glad that he had another night in which to plan the girls' rescue, on the other hand he had to spend another twelve hours with that psychopath in the chalet.

Pressing his back against the wall, Dirk slid down to his haunches. He picked up a thin brittle stick and twirled it between his fingers. Deep in thought, wondering what steps to take next, he looked out across the dry veld. The long golden grass swayed in the soft breeze. The stems rolled gently reminding him of waves in a yellow sea. Silently, a raptor drew circles high above in the darkening sky waiting for its unsuspecting prey to make a fatal mistake. Bright sun rays slanted from underneath the dark clouds across the empty country side.

Rat Face's loud voice pierced his contemplation. "Hey, man," he shrieked. "Look at this."

Dirk closed his eyes and shook his head. "Not again," he groaned under his breath.

"Hey," Rat Face shouted. "Come here. They are slaughtering each other again."

Reluctantly, Dirk got to his feet. He knew it was no use ignoring Rat Face. The ferret would only keep on calling him until Dirk took notice. Dirk stretched his legs and wiped some dust off his jeans. With one last look at the tranquil scene before him, he stepped over the threshold into the chalet.

Rat Face was flopped down on the dirty couch. His right arm was tucked under his head, his feet dangled over the side and his left hand brandished the TV remote like a sword.

"Look at this," he screeched excitedly, his mean little eyes gleaming with delight.

Dirk stopped beside the sofa, crossed his arms and looked at the TV. He narrowed his eyes trying to follow the scenes flashing across the screen.

A large group of black people were running down a narrow dirt road. Ramshackle houses, their doors and windows shut tightly, appeared in the camera's view. Dark heads bobbed up and down, indistinguishable from one another. Here and there metal glinted in the sunlight. The crowd chanted angrily and stamped its feet. Women and men rolled in one big wave down the street. Knobkerries and hammers were held high.

"What's it about?" Dirk asked concerned.

Rat Face's eyes stayed glued on the TV set. "Wait and see," he replied eagerly. "I bet they show it again."

Dirk watched as the ranting crowd made its way around a bend. They came upon a small group of police officers. There were only five of them, but they held shotguns in their hands and wore riot gear. Their heads were covered with blue helmets and their chests were protected by bullet proof vests, the word 'police' stencilled in white

across the front and back. The officers saw the manic crowd approach and lifted their pump action guns, but it did not deter the roving mass.

Suddenly rocks and bricks began raining down on the small squad. The officers opened fire. Rubber bullets tore into the swirling crowd, but it did not stop the crowd. More stones flew in the officers' direction. A cop was hit in the face by a large rock. He dropped to his knees holding both hands to his head. Blood spurted through his fingers and dripped down onto the dusty road.

The officers released another volley of rubber bullets. Several antagonists went down, but were ignored by fellow marchers. The dark mass moved forward engulfing the police officers. Rubber bullets flew sporadically. Rocks and bricks were returned angrily. Knobkerries slammed into the officers. Another cop went down onto his knees, holding his neck, gasping frantically for air. The mass swirled around the small stronghold. Suddenly, the white police van overturned. The crowd cheered ecstatically.

"The attacks on foreigners continue around Johannesburg," the reporter's voice stated dispassionately as the visuals continued. "The police seem unable to control the riots. Several officers have been injured while trying to stop the erratic crowds. The Democratic Alliance, the Independent Democrats, the FF+ and various other opposition parties have called on government to dispatch the army in order to stem the violence, but the ANC-led government has declined the requests, stating that the situation is under control and that the police force is more than capable of handling the riots."

The scene changed to another location.

Once again a dirt road was shown, but this time the camera caught the tail end of an angry crowd. Individual rioters, holding a variety of weapons, from sticks to shovels, trailed behind the disappearing chanting mass of people.

The camera panned in on a person lying in the street. The young man's head was covered in blood. His checked shirt had been ripped to shreds and his beige chinos were stained with blood. Lying on his back, his arms outstretched, he lay motionless. A few people approached him cautiously. A young black woman kneeled in the dirt beside him, tucked her long flowing skirt between her legs, reached out and touched his face gingerly. A low moan escaped the man's lips. A towel appeared and the young woman pressed it against the gash on the man's head.

"Hundreds of people have been injured in senseless attacks," the reporter said. "And the violence continues. More than thirty people have already been killed and it is not clear yet what caused these attacks. It is widely speculated that South Africans target mainly foreigners. People are flocking to police stations and community centres, fleeing from possible attacks, seeking safety in public places. They leave their houses with nothing, arriving at the places of safety with only their clothes on their backs."

The view changed to an unidentified community centre. Hundreds of black people were crowding into the fenced off yard. Inside the hall it was absolute chaos. Mothers and their children stood around helplessly or sat on the bare floor holding their kids close. Their eyes were wide with fear. Their faces displayed disbelief and incomprehension. Their body language expressed hopelessness and despair.

"This is great," Rat Face squeaked from the couch.

Dirk narrowed his brows and dragged his eyes away from the pictures on the TV.

"What are you talking about?" he asked carefully.

Rat Face did not turn his head. "This," he said with glee, pointing at the screen.

Dirk looked at him with utter disgust. "What is so great about it?"

Rat Face hooted loudly. "They are killing each other," he said, waving the remote control. "We don't have to do anything. They are doing it to themselves." His butt bounced up and down on the dilapidated couch releasing a cloud of fine dust. "They must all die," he screeched. "Saves us from chasing all of them into the sea."

Dirk shook his head with resignation. Rat Face was an idiot. The ferret was one of those incorrigible white South Africans who possessed such a deep seated hatred for black people that nothing but the death of a black person gave them satisfaction.

Slowly Dirk turned away from the carnage on the TV screen.

It was so sad, he thought. First there had been Apartheid, when the law sanctioned the killing of black people by whites and now black people were killing each other. And for what? he wondered confused. Wasn't there enough space in this beautiful country for everyone?

He stepped out of the lounge and onto the patio, the TV commentator's voice following him into the early evening sun.

Rat Face did not take any notice of him, his eyes stayed fixed on the screen. He sucked in the violence as if it nurtured new life in him.

Once outside, Dirk breathed in deeply. At this moment, he had bigger problems than the slaughtering of innocent people in South African's townships.

CHAPTER 20

Dirk made his way down to the river. He stopped in the shade of a willow tree growing at the edge of the river bank and looked down the steep ledge. A small amount of water snaked its way past grey boulders and large sharp edged rocks in the middle of the riverbed. The soft gurgle of the water reached his ears, but otherwise it was mercifully quiet.

Without thinking, Dirk pulled out his cellphone. Staring at the device in his hand he wondered what made him take it out. Fingering the cellphone, he let his thumb glide over the keypad.

Maybe this was his chance to make contact with Lucy's mother?

He looked back at the house. Rat Face was occupied by the TV and nobody else was around. He just needed to make a quick call to Lucy's mom. It didn't have to take long.

Could he take the risk?

The cellphone burned in his hand as if urging him on. Maybe this would be the only chance he would get. He knew it was the right thing to do, so why was he hesitating?

What the heck, he thought resolutely. It was now or never.

Stepping behind the trunk of the willow, he pressed the number for Lucy's mother. Before he could change his mind, he pressed the phone to his ear. Within a second, he heard a typical ring tone; the connection was established.

xxx

The faint ringing of a cellphone penetrated the silence that had settled over everyone after Elijah Nkosi had left. The chirp continued and was first noticed by Thomas. He pulled out his cellphone and checked if someone was calling him. The display was blank. Thomas lifted his head and glanced questioningly at Ryan.

Simultaneously Ryan and Raphaela inspected their phones, but neither cellphone displayed a caller.

The soft ringing continued unabated.

"Thandi," Thomas called. "Is it your phone?"

For a moment Thandeka listened intently to the weak sound floating through the air.

"Oh my God," she stammered and jumped up from her chair. It clattered with a loud bang on the tiles. She rushed from the kitchen, running like a hundred-metre sprinter across the lounge. She slipped on the rug in the middle of the room. Losing her balance, she scraped her shin on the sharp edge of the coffee table. The TV remote control, a small brass candle holder and a magazine sailed to the floor.

Thandeka cried out in pain, tears stinging her eyes. The cellphone continued to emit its persistent ring tone. Ignoring the painful throb in her leg, Thandeka reached out to the vibrating device lying on the table.

Holding the cellphone in both of her trembling hands, she fumbled for the green button.

My little girl is on the other side, she thought, hope surging through her like a jolt of electricity. Lucy wants to come home! She's going to tell me that she's alright! She's going to tell me where she is!

She pushed the right key. "Hello," she said breathlessly.

There was a moment of silence, then a male voice came over the line. "Hello. Is this Mrs Nkosi?"

Thandeka drew in a sharp breath.

It wasn't Lucy. It wasn't her little girl.

She slumped onto the coffee table, her shoulders hunched forward. She wanted to cry.

"Hello?" the man called tentatively.

Thandeka placed her left hand over her eyes.

She didn't want to talk to this man. It was most probably one of those telesales guys wanting to sell her another insurance policy, or entice her to buy a timeshare in one of those remote rural areas on the South African east coast.

All at once her stomach knotted into a tight ball. Couldn't they leave her alone? This line had to stay open! She didn't have time to argue with an overeager salesman. Her daughter could phone any minute and this guy was blocking her number.

"Hello," the man said again. "Is this Mrs Nkosi?"

"Yes," Thandeka replied scornfully. "This is Mrs Nkosi speaking. What do you want to sell?"

Thandeka heard a groan on the other end. She shrugged her shoulders. Served him right. Who wanted to buy his crappy products anyway?

"Mrs Nkosi," the man continued carefully. "I don't want to sell you anything."

Thandeka rolled her eyes. "What do you want then?" she asked impatiently.

The man hesitated. After a moment of uneasy silence his voice returned.

"My name is Dirk," he said quietly.

So what? Thandeka thought.

"I believe you have a daughter named Lucy," he continued.

Thandeka gasped for breath. Her hand clenched the cellphone until her knuckles went white.

"What do you know about Lucy?" she whispered.

Dirk cleared his throat. This was turning out to be more difficult than he had anticipated. He hadn't expected such hostility. Briefly, Dirk wondered if he should tell her about the abduction. Who knew how this woman would react?

Once again hesitating, his eyes wandered over to the chalet. He imagined the faces of the frightened girls huddled on the dirty ground.

Determined, he shook his head. No matter what was going to happen, the woman was the girls' only hope. Without her they wouldn't have a chance in heaven or hell.

Dirk drew a deep breath.

"I know where she is," he blurted out.

There was silence on the other end.

What was he talking about? Thandeka wondered confused. What did he mean by he knows where Lucy is? How would he know anyway?

"Mrs Nkosi?" Dirk probed cautiously.

Thandeka straightened her shoulders and a deep frown creased her forehead.

"What are you talking about?" she asked sharply.

Dirk sighed. "I know where your daughter is," he replied patiently.

"And how would you know that?" Thandeka enquired doubtfully.

Dirk pursed his lips. Here it comes, he thought. Here goes my freedom.

"Because I helped take her," he said quietly.

Thandeka's mouth dropped open. Her eyes turned into small slits.

"What?" she spat.

"I was in the car when they took her," Dirk clarified.

She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Something snapped in Thandeka. Red and blue stars danced in front of her eyes. Her head spun and she could feel herself losing her balance. Hot, searing rage rose from her belly.

"You took my daughter?" she hissed through clenched teeth.

Dirk nodded, his face burning with shame. "I'm really sorry, Mrs Nkosi."

"You are sorry?" Thandeka's voice rose. "You are sorry!"

"Yes, ma'am," Dirk said.

Thandeka's eyes blazed with fury. "You took my daughter and you are sorry?" she screamed. "You piece of shit! You scum!"

Dirk cringed. He hadn't foreseen this verbal onslaught. Jeez, he thought uneasily. This woman is going mental on me.

"Mrs Nkosi ..." he tried to interrupt, but Thandeka was not going to be stopped.

"You bastard," she screamed. "Tell me where my daughter is! Tell me what you have done with her!"

Dirk held the phone away from his ear.

"Answer me," Thandeka shouted, stamping her foot. "Tell me what you have done with Lucy! You piece of shit! Tell me where she is! Answer me!"

Sobs broke from her lips. Tears streamed down her face. She clutched the phone against her ear with both hands.

"You arsehole," she screeched. "Give me back my daughter! Where is she?"

Even though the phone was at least twenty centimetres away from his face, Dirk could still hear her screaming at him.

This was not how it was supposed to happen, he thought disturbed. She was supposed to be grateful. She was supposed to listen to him. She was supposed to help him.

Dirk gnawed on his bottom lip as he listened to her repeated demands and her continued insults shouted over the phone.

This woman was clearly hysterical, he concluded. She wasn't going to listen to anything he had to say. Maybe he should give her some time and call her back later.

But what if there was no later?

"Mrs Nkosi," he tried once more, but Thandeka wasn't going to be interrupted. She just didn't give him a gap.

Dirk listened for another few seconds.

This is not going to work, he thought. She was clearly out of it.

Slowly he lowered the phone. His thumb crept towards the off button. For a moment he let it hover over the key. What if this was his only chance to contact Lucy's mother? What if there was a change of plan and he wasn't able to phone again? What if Angus came and took the girls tonight?

He looked down at the phone. He could still hear her screaming voice.

Dirk shook his head.

There was no way he could get her to listen to him. He just had to take the chance and hope that he was going to get another opportunity to call her.

His thumb pressed the button, disconnecting the call.

"Hello," Thandeka shouted. "Hello?"

She shook the phone, held it back against her ear and listened intently, but there was no answer.

The line was dead.

Thomas pried the cellphone out of her hand. He led her to the couch and made her sit down on the soft cushions.

"Who was it?" he asked gently.

Tears were still streaming down Thandeka's cheeks and her hands were trembling.

"Thandeka?" Thomas urged her. "Who was on the phone?"

She hugged her arms and began rocking on the seat. "He said he knew where Lucy is," she whispered.

Thomas's head snapped back as if it had been hit with a five pound hammer. "What?" he barked.

"He said he was in the car when they took her," she hiccupped.

Thomas stared at his sister, desperately ordering his reeling mind.

"What did he want?" he asked.

Thandeka pushed her head into her hands. "I don't know," she mumbled.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" he queried. "Did he ask for a ransom? Did he ask for money?"

Thandeka shook her head hiding her face.

A knot formed in Thomas's stomach. "What did he tell you?" he demanded.

In reply Thandeka sobbed loudly.

He grabbed her shoulders. "What did he say?" he asked exasperated. "Did he tell you where he's keeping Lucy?"

Thandeka cries only became louder.

Thomas squashed her thin arms. "Stop crying!" he shouted angrily. "Answer my questions." He shook her roughly. "God damn it!"

Thandeka's head flopped back and forth, her hands hanging limply at her side and her fragile body dancing like a puppet on a string.

Ryan placed his palm on his partner's shoulder. "Hey, let her be."

Thomas's head spun around and he glared furiously at his partner.

Ryan shook his head. "You overheard the telephone call. I doubt the guy had even the slightest chance to tell her anything."

Thomas dropped his hands, suddenly deflated. He sagged onto the couch beside his sister and bowed his head. Thandeka's sobs were the only sounds in the otherwise silent room.

Antonio Patrizio stepped forward picked up the discarded cellphone from the coffee table and started pressing keys.

Ryan looked at him quizzically.

"I'm checking the call log," the detective explained, his fingers flying over the keypad. "Maybe the incoming call log shows a caller ID."

Ryan stepped closer and peered over Patrizio's shoulder. The call register appeared on the screen. Ryan squinted in order to get a better look. The last call was listed at the top of the log.

"Shit," Patrizio swore quietly. "There's no caller ID."

Disappointed, he closed the screen and dropped the cellphone onto the coffee table. It landed with a metallic thud.

Ryan looked from the detective to Thomas and back again.

"What now?" he asked.

Patrizzio hunkered down on his haunches and took Thandeka's hands into his own.

"Ms Nkosi," he said gently, trying hard not to intimidate her. "Can you recall what the man on the phone said to you?"

Thandeka stared wide eyed at the detective, her bottom lip quivering.

The detective waited patiently for the young woman to compose herself. "Can you tell me what he said to you?" Patrizzio asked again.

Thandeka pulled her hands away from the detective's grasp. "He asked if I was Mrs Nkosi."

Patrizzio raised his eyebrows encouraging her to continue.

Thandeka bowed her head and picked at her cuticles. "He said he was there when they took Lucy."

"Did he tell you where to find Lucy?" he asked.

Thandeka shook her head.

The detective rose to his feet towering over the young woman slumped on the couch.

"Did he ask you for a ransom?" he queried. "Did he give you an ultimatum?"

Once again Thandeka shook her head.

Patrizzio sighed heavily.

Thandeka lifted her head. Tears clung to her eyelashes, glittering preciously in the dim light.

"I messed up, didn't I?" she whispered sadly.

The detective pressed his lips together holding back a harsh reply. The young mother did not need any more grief, than she was already suffering.

Patrizzio's expression told Thandeka all she needed to know.

She clasped her hands in front of her chest. "Oh my God," she whimpered. "Oh, my, God. What have I done?"

Thomas put his arm over her shoulders. "Sshhh," he soothed her.

He looked up at the detective. "What are we going to do?" he asked. "How are we going to find Lucy?"

Constable Mlazazi now stepped forward and cleared his throat. "It seems that your daughter is still alive," he stated bluntly.

Thomas gasped with barely hidden anguish at the underlying implication.

But Patrizzio nodded in agreement.

"This is relative good news," Mlazazi continued. "However, the situation could change quickly for the worse."

Patrizzio crossed his arms, his face a grim mask. He knew only too well what Mlazazi was referring to. Kidnappings were always fickle: one minute the kidnapper was prepared to let his victims go, and the very next minute he changed his mind and killed them.

Mlazazi brushed his big hand over his greying hair. "The best thing to do right now is to call the Hostage Rescue Team," he said firmly. "Maybe we'll be lucky and the kidnapper calls again."

Thomas looked up hopefully.

"Our colleagues have the equipment to trace a call," Mlazazi explained. "They can pin-point the area where the kidnapper calls from. When they apprehend him, they'll find out where he holds the girl."

Thomas nodded enthusiastically. He had watched enough crime shows on TV to know what the constable was talking about. A moment later, a small frown appeared on his forehead.

"But what about our cellphones?" Thomas asked. "I thought the devices only trace calls made on landlines?"

"That's mostly correct," the officer replied, appreciating Thomas's observation. "But we also get in contact with the cellphone service providers and we have equipment that monitors the cellphone towers."

Thomas's looked at him surprised.

"As you know, nowadays everything is computer driven, most of the time via satellite or wireless," Mlazazi said with pride. "Our equipment is state-of-the-art. Even if the kidnapper phones from a cellphone, we'll still be able to trace the call."

Thomas pursed his lips. He wasn't completely assured, but he settled back on the couch. What other choice did he have anyway?

Then another thought crossed his mind.

He looked up at the elderly officer standing in front of him. "When will the Hostage Rescue Team get here?" Thomas asked probingly.

Constable Mlazazi pulled a radio from his belt. "I'll call them right now," he said.

"But," Thomas persisted, "how long will it take for them to arrive? When will they be able to trace the calls?"

Suddenly uncomfortable, the constable shifted his weight. "I guess about two hours," he replied cautiously.

Thomas jumped up from the couch as if bitten by a baboon spider.

"Two hours?" he shouted in disbelief. "Why does it take so long?" He waved his arms in the air. "In two hours Lucy might be dead."

Mlazazi held up his hand somewhat taken aback by Thomas's outburst. "Stay calm, Mr Nkosi," he said firmly.

Thomas's face darkened and he clenched his fists. "Don't tell me to stay calm," he bellowed, taking a step in the officer's direction. "We are talking about my niece's life!"

The constable stared at Thomas through narrowed eyes, watching the raging young man in front of him guardedly.

"I knew you cops were useless," Thomas shouted furiously. "How can it take two hours to get here?" He took another step forward. "By the time you guys get your arses into gear, Lucy will be dead!"

Mlazazi held up the radio. "The longer you scream, the longer it will take me to make my call," he pointed out to him.

Ryan grabbed Thomas's arm, pulling him back. "Hold on," he said quietly. "Let the officer do his job."

Thomas spun around, his face contorted with rage.

"It's no use getting angry," Ryan said calmly. "They're doing their best."

All at once, Thomas's shoulders sagged despondently.

"You just have to be patient," Ryan said.

Thomas shrugged off Ryan's hand. "Easy for you to say," he snapped, but there was no more malice in his voice.

Thomas walked back to the couch and sat down beside his sister. He leaned forward, bowed his head, placed his forearms on his knees and let his hands dangle down beside his knees.

The constable eyed the young man on the couch for a moment until he was sure that Thomas had calmed down and would not interfere with his call. With one final look in his direction, the constable turned his back and pressed a button on his radio.

xxx

Dirk turned away from the trickle in the riverbed. The sky had darkened considerably. The last sunrays slanted across the veld from under heavy clouds. In the distance several lightning bolts struck the ground and thunder rumbled through the humid air. Dirk watched the brewing storm for a while. The black wall moved slowly and it seemed to him that the centre of the storm would pass their area further to the west.

He brushed his hands through his lanky hair as he thought about his failed attempt to give Lucy's mother the location of her daughter.

He hadn't expected the woman to totally freak out. She hadn't given him the slightest chance to explain. All she did was scream at him and call him names.

Dirk pulled a face, disgusted with himself.

He knew how she must feel about him. He didn't feel much better about himself either, but he wanted to help. Wasn't that worth some consideration?

Dirk drew a deep breath. What was he supposed to do now?

If Angus found out what he had done, he would be dead meat. No doubt about it!

Slowly, deep in thought, Dirk made his way back to the chalet. His steps crunched softly on the dry soil and the long grass rustled gently as he let his hand drift over it. He approached the patio and stopped just outside the yellow circle of light.

The scene presenting itself through the open doors was almost homely. The TV blared loudly whilst Rat Face lounged on the couch. If he didn't know better, Dirk would have felt himself welcome to enter the cosy atmosphere. Instead, he dreaded having to enter the place where he would be forced to endure the continuous nightmare.

He straightened his shoulders and avoiding possible questions from Rat Face, Dirk quickly passed in front of the TV and approached the wooden table. Placing his palms on the table top, he dropped his head.

Where am I going from here? he wondered again. What are my next steps? How on earth can I help the girls out of this situation?

After a moment, Dirk lifted his hand and rubbed his face glumly. He presumed he could do nothing but wait and hope that another opportunity to phone Lucy's mother was going to come along.

A leaden tiredness began creeping up his legs. Suddenly his knees felt weak and the urge to sit down was almost overwhelming.

Dirk gazed forlornly across the lounge. Unfortunately, there were no other chairs or couches in the chalet, only those in the corner by the TV, but Dirk was in no mood to join the ferret on the dirty couch to watch some stupid soap opera.

Brooding over his bad luck, he gnawed on his bottom lip when he heard his stomach growl. All at once, Dirk's face lit up. The thought of preparing some food excited him immediately.

He pushed himself away from the table edge and made his way to the dilapidated TV cabinet. Getting down on his haunches he opened the left door where he knew Rat Face had hidden the groceries again after lunch. Dirk pulled out one plastic bag after the other and stacked them on the floor.

"Hey," Rat Face called from the couch waving the TV remote control in the air. "What are you doing?"

Dirk scrunched for more bags. "I'm hungry," he muttered into the cabinet.

"Great," Rat Face exclaimed. "I want two with salami and two with ham."

Dirk jumped up and placed his hands on his hips. "Are you suggesting I'm going to make sandwiches for you?" he asked incredulously.

Rat Face raised his eyebrows, surprised at Dirk's question. "Yeah," he replied. "Something wrong with that?"

Dirk pressed his lips together, but Rat Face continued to look at him, complete innocence written across his face.

Dirk dropped his arms. "I'm not your maid," he finally snapped. "You can make your own."

Rat Face flapped his hand lazily. "Oh, come on," he wheedled. "It's just some sandwiches."

Dirk shook his head. "Not interested, buddy," he said determinedly. "There's nothing wrong with your hands. Make your own."

"Fuck you, man," Rat Face spat, pulling his face into a sour mask.

Dirk ignored his outburst. It wasn't worth a reply. He picked up the bags from the floor and walked into the kitchen, dumping the plastic bags on the counter. In the kitchen sink he located the sharp knife he had used earlier on. Quickly Dirk slapped a few ingredients on two slices of bread. Sighing contently, he took his first bite, savouring the taste of the sandwich.

Chewing happily, his eyes wandered over to the locked door on the other side of the lounge. All at once, his mouth became dry and the food almost got stuck in his throat. Ashamed and embarrassed, he dropped his half eaten sandwich on the counter.

How on earth could he stand here and stuff his face and the poor girls were starving to death.

Dirk swallowed hard, but instead of chastising himself any further, he got to work. The stack of prepared snacks grew rapidly, but Dirk was only satisfied when he had prepared three sandwiches for each girl. Once he had finished, he walked across the lounge, stopping beside Rat Face who was still lying on the couch.

"Hey, Rudi," he called quietly.

"What?" Rat Face snapped irritably.

Dirk drew a deep breath. "I need you to open the door to the girls' room."

Rat Face moved his head slowly and looked up at him. "What for?"

Dirk plastered an innocent grin on his face. "I want to give them some sandwiches."

Rat Face sat up and swung his legs onto the floor. "You want to do what?" he asked cautiously.

Dirk folded his arm in front of his chest. "I want to give them some food," he said again.

Rat Face's eyes narrowed. "You made sandwiches for those bitches?" he asked, his voice taking on a dangerous edge.

Dirk tilted his head, wondering why the ferret was so upset.

"You want to feed those chickens?" Rat Face yelled suddenly, pointing with his outstretched forefinger at the locked door.

Dirk took a cautious step back, but nodded a confirmation.

Abruptly Rat Face jumped to his feet. The old couch creaked as if in pain. "Fuck you, man!" he shouted. "I'm not opening the door."

Dirk's head snapped back as if Rat Face had punched him in the face.

"Why not?" he stammered confused.

"I just won't," Rat Face snarled, his expression determined.

Mystified, Dirk stared at Rat Face trying to figure out why the guy was so angry, but came to no viable conclusion.

"Come on, Rudi," he pleaded. "The girls haven't eaten since lunch time. They must be starving."

Rat Face shook his head. "No," he stated stubbornly. "The door stays closed."

Now it was Dirk's turn to become angry. "Why are you acting like such a jerk?" he snapped. "They are just some young girls. Do you want them to die?"

Rat Face shrugged his shoulders.

"Jeez!" Dirk shouted. "Why are you such a dick head?"

Rat Face's cheeks flushed dark red. "I'm not a dick head," he yelled.

"Then why don't you open the door?" Dirk asked, desperation echoing in his voice.

Rat Face poked his finger at him. "I'll tell you why," he shouted with rage. "You want to give them food, but you think you are too good to make me a sandwich."

Dirk stared at him in total disbelief.

"You treat them like royalty," Rat Face hissed angrily. "But you tell me to make my own."

Realisation dawned on Dirk. Rat Face was upset because he had refused to make him a few sandwiches! The ferret was angry because Dirk had turned him down!

A slow grin spread across Dirk's face.

This is absolutely ridiculous, he thought amused, shaking his head at the same time. This guy is seriously nuts. Because he refused to make Rat Face some sandwiches, the ferret would let the girls go hungry.

He almost laughed out loud, but caught himself at the last moment. It was better to find a solution than to enrage the ferret even more by openly mocking him.

Trying very hard to keep the smile off his face, Dirk held up his hand. "Would you open the door if I made you some sandwiches?" he asked tentatively.

Rat Face looked at him dumbstruck, the wind taken out of his sails.

Dirk watched the ferret's reaction carefully. "If I make you sandwiches, will you let me give some food to the girls?" he asked again.

Dirk's words seem to have finally sunk in, because Rat Face nodded.

"Yeah," he said enthusiastically. "Yeah. If you make me some food, then I'll open the door."

Dirk clasped his hands. "So we have a deal?" he ensured. "I'll make you some sandwiches and for that you'll open the door?"

Rat Face pursed his lips as if wondering if there was some kind of trap, but a moment later, he relented.

"Yeah," he confirmed. "You give me sandwiches and I'll let you feed the girls."

Before the ferret could change his mind, Dirk marched back to the kitchen. He wasn't too keen on the idea of serving Rat Face, but what was it to him to make a

few sandwiches for the idiot, as long as he could give the girls some food at the same time? It wouldn't break his back and the welfare of the girls was more important than his pride.

xxx

The door swung open and Lucy wrapped her arm around Shelly's thin shoulders. Silvy was huddled on the other side of her, trying to hide behind Lucy's small back. The other two girls were lying unmoving on the mattress. A small sliver of light became bigger, but was suddenly blocked by a figure in the doorway. Lucy felt a shudder running through Shelly, making her whole body shake.

"Sshhh," Lucy whispered, holding the girl tight.

Dirk stepped into the room and was instantly hit by the revolting urine stench that permeated the thick air.

This is so unacceptable, he thought, wrinkling his nose with disgust. Unfortunately, the girls had to live with it, because there wasn't anything he could do about it. Rat Face would never allow him to escort the girls to the bathroom every time they needed to pee.

Breathing shallowly through his mouth to avoid smelling the worst of the stink, Dirk moved forward balancing the stacks of sandwiches in his hands. The room was dark and it took him a moment to make out the girls crouching against the wall in the far left corner of the room.

"Hey," he called softly. "I brought you some food."

He took another step forward and Lucy saw the sandwiches. Just like that, her stomach grumbled, reminding her of how hungry she was. Letting go of Shelly, Lucy got up on her feet. Ignoring the tingling in her legs, she walked up to the young man standing just inside the room. She held out her hands, waiting for Dirk to give her the food.

Smiling down at her, he asked kindly, "How are you holding up, kiddo?"

Lucy shrugged her shoulders. "We are doing okay."

Dirk glanced over to where the other two girls were huddled against the wall.

"Are they alright?" he wanted to know.

Lucy made a half turn and checked on her companions. "Suppose so," she said.

Dirk jutted his chin in the direction of the mattress. "And those girls?" he asked. "Are they still out?"

Lucy tilted her head towards her shoulder. "Yeah," she confirmed. "They haven't moved since you guys brought them in here."

Hearing the rebuke in Lucy's voice, Dirk suddenly felt awkward. The kid was right. Why am I asking her if they are okay? It's up to me to make sure they are alive and looked after.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "I shouldn't have asked you."

Lucy shrugged her shoulders. "It's okay," she replied. "Someone has to look out for them."

The conversation was getting more embarrassing for him with every word. Avoiding any further talk, Dirk held out the sandwiches to her.

"Here," he said. "I made them myself."

Lucy received the two stacks of bread and balanced them carefully against her chest.

Having nothing further to say, Dirk was about to leave the room when Lucy called out to him.

"Hey!" she coughed.

Dirk stopped in his tracks and turned back. "Yeah?"

Hope shone in Lucy's eyes as she took a step in his direction.

"Did you get hold of my mother?" she asked expectantly.

Oh shit! Dirk thought. The colour drained from his face and small beads of sweat formed on his upper lip.

What the hell was he going to tell her? he wondered anxiously. He couldn't tell her that her mother went crazy when he got her on the line. Telling the girl would certainly crush her and he couldn't take the chance for Lucy to break down. He needed her strength for crying out loud. She was the one who held the others together, the one who would be instrumental in their escape.

Dirk glanced at the young black girl standing in front of him waiting patiently for an answer, but her expression was suddenly guarded and her forehead creased.

"What's wrong?" she asked cautiously.

Dirk swallowed hard wondering if his face had given away his thoughts. Quickly he composed himself, fighting hard to keep his expression in check.

Lucy narrowed her brows. "Did you get hold of my mom?" she asked again.

Dirk did not want to lie, because he didn't want to put up her hopes, but he also did not want to tell her the truth. Instead he tried for the golden middle.

"You know it was very difficult to get away from here," he started.

Seeing Lucy's face drop, he quickly continued. "But I did get a chance to phone."

Instantly, Lucy became excited. "And?" she whispered almost too loud.

Dirk glanced worriedly towards the door, but Rat Face was nowhere to be seen. He looked back at the girl and cringed inwardly.

"Her line was engaged every time I called," he said as convincingly as possible.

"Oh," she replied, bowing her head.

Dirk cursed himself for not being able to give her better news, but what choice did he have?

Clutching the sandwiches against her chest, Lucy slowly turned away. Her whole body screamed defeat.

Dirk's heart went out to her. He reached out and stopped her walking away by putting his hand on her arm.

"Hey, kiddo," he called softly.

Lucy lifted her head and Dirk saw her tears.

He curled a corner of his mouth up into a smile.

"Hey," he said. "Don't give up. I'm going to try again. And again, and again, until I reach your mother."

Lucy's bottom lip quivered. "You promise?" she asked.

"Yeah," Dirk replied firmly. "I promise. Don't worry, kiddo. We'll all get out of here very soon."

Lucy nodded, her expression brightening a little.

Dirk squeezed her arm gently. "You'll see," he assured her. "This will be over sooner than you think."

CHAPTER 21

Two hours later and the core of the storm had yet to materialize. Nevertheless, lightning bolts continued to flash past the windows of Thandeka's home and the night sky was heavy with pregnant clouds. Thunder growled in the distance like a pack of hungry lions and the warm humid air felt like thick liquid.

The atmosphere in the house was subdued. There had been no further phone calls. But Thandeka's cellphone lay on the coffee table ready to be picked up at the first ring.

Waiting for a miracle to happen, Thandeka sat quietly on the couch with her head bowed, picking tissues apart. Tiny fluffy white pieces were piling up on the floor creating a small heap. Thomas was pacing impatiently around the lounge.

The police officers were seated on chairs positioned at the dining room table. From time to time, one of the cops would answer his squawking radio, answering a question or barking an order.

After fetching his laptop from the car, Ryan and Raphaela retreated to the kitchen. In spite of everything, Ryan still had a business to run. Using his 3G card he connected to the server in the office and downloaded various documents. Sitting quietly, Raphaela and Ryan worked together while waiting for the Hostage Rescue Team to arrive.

"What is taking them so long?" Thomas's voice boomed once again through the house.

Ryan could not remember how many times his partner had asked the same question during the last two hours. Every attempt to make Thomas sit down and relax had failed miserably.

Thomas's head appeared around the doorframe. His face was gaunt and his look haunted.

"I'm telling you the cops are useless," he grumbled from the kitchen entrance.

Ryan heaved a sigh. "Just hang in there," he said. "They'll be here just now."

Thomas glanced at his watch. "It's now more than two hours," he complained. "Why is it taking them so long?"

Ryan took his hands off the laptop's keyboard. "It takes time," he replied calmly. "They have to get the team together, gather their equipment and then drive out to this place."

Thomas rolled his eyes impatiently. "I can't believe you are defending them."

Ryan shook his head, but refrained from answering.

"What if something happens to Lucy while they're taking their time?" Thomas whined. "What if the kidnappers hurt her? What if they kill her?"

Ryan frowned irritably. They had been down this road plenty of times before.

"Thomas," he snapped. "Stop it."

His partner flinched.

"Don't work yourself up even more," Ryan admonished him sharply. "There is nothing you can do at the moment. You just have to wait."

Thomas opened his mouth to argue, but Ryan held up his hand.

"If you have any idea on how to find Lucy without the cops' help, then let me know," he said irritably.

Thomas glared at him angrily, but after a couple of minutes he shuffled his feet uneasily, unable to come up with an appropriate answer.

"I thought so," Ryan said. "You've got no idea."

Thomas stared at Ryan annoyed, but kept quiet.

"Instead of falling apart, go and comfort your sister," Ryan told him harshly.

A look of dismay crossed his partner's face.

"She needs you, buddy," Ryan continued in a softer tone. "She needs your strength, not your complaints."

Thomas hung his head and turned on his heel.

Ryan watched him walk through the archway and sit down beside Thandeka on the couch.

"Do you have to be so hard on him?" Raphaela asked quietly.

Ryan gave her an irritated look. "What do you want me to do?" he countered. "The guy is busy falling apart. He's working himself up and making everyone else edgy."

Raphaela swung her long dark hair over her shoulder. "We are talking about his niece here," she reminded him.

Lifting his hands exasperated, Ryan replied, "I am aware of that."

"You could be a bit more understanding," she repeated.

Ryan closed his eyes wearily. "He needs to stay strong," he said quietly. "He can't despair now. Who knows if they'll find Lucy and if they do, what shape she'll be in."

Raphaela gasped involuntarily. "What are you implying?" she asked. "Are you suggesting that she might be dead?"

Ryan glanced at her sideways. "It's a possibility, not so?" he said. "After all, this is Africa and a life is worth nothing."

"Oh, Ryan," she mumbled covering her mouth with her hand. "Please don't say those things."

"It's true though," he stated, pointing a finger at her. "And just to remind you, those are your words."

Raphaela gulped down some air. "I know, I know," she whispered wiggling uncomfortably in her chair. "But there is always hope. We mustn't lose hope."

Ryan's expression relaxed and he placed his hand on her arm. "You are right," he conceded. "I'll try to be a bit kinder to him."

Raphaela's lips curved into a smile, but before she could answer, they heard the engines of several cars.

Ryan jumped up from his chair. Raphaela followed suit, the back of her chair clattering against the wall. With long strides, they made their way out of the kitchen, past the dining area into the entrance hall. Thomas was already at the door swinging it open. A gust of wind blew into the passage bringing with it tiny drops of rain.

Ryan heard several car doors slam at once. Looking up and down the street, he counted eight vehicles parked beside the pavements on both sides of the road.

Apart from the Metro cruisers with blue stripes on their sides, there were three sedans without markings and two white panel vans. The door of a blue Ford Meteor opened and a man unfolded his tall frame as he exited the car.

The man stepped under the streetlight and Ryan noticed grey streaks in his dark curly hair. He wore soft ankle-high boots, faded jeans and a dark Golf shirt. His features were rugged and deep lines edged his mouth. Ryan tried to get a closer look, but another police officer blocked his view as the man approached the house. Soon the driveway was swarming with cops in and out of uniform.

Thomas appeared beside Ryan. "This is like a bloody invasion," he grumbled.

Ryan glanced at him sideways. "This is what you wanted," he replied.

"Ms Nkosi," a voice called out. "Ms Nkosi."

Thandeka pushed past the two men blocking the doorway and stepped onto the driveway.

"Yes," she called. "I'm Ms Nkosi."

A black officer wearing civilian clothes walked up to her. His head was clean shaven making it look like a polished billiard ball.

The officer held out his hand. "Good evening, Ms Nkosi," he greeted her. "We are the HRT."

Thandeka shook his hand, replying gratefully, "Thank you for coming."

The officer glanced at the two men standing beside the front door.

Noticing his look, Thandeka said, "This is my brother, Thomas, and his business partner, Ryan Bates."

The officer nodded in their direction, but did not offer to shake hands; instead he addressed Thandeka again. "Please show me where our men can set up their equipment."

Thandeka pointed behind her. "This way," she said and the cop followed her into the house.

Thomas and Ryan stood like two lost boys in the driveway. Police officers hustled about, carrying large cardboard boxes, smart aluminium cases and thick rolls of cables. Eventually, Thomas decided to see what was going on in his sister's lounge. He squeezed his way past three cops blocking the passage and stepped into the lounge.

The cops had pushed the furniture against the walls and the patio doors, had rolled up the loose rug and had moved the dining room table and its chairs against the window. White Formica tables had been unfolded, electronic equipment was unpacked and placed on the makeshift desks. People were on their hands and knees unrolling cables, whilst others were pushing furniture about looking for plugs.

Thandeka stood to one side observing the organised chaos, while Thomas and Ryan tried to keep out of the way on the other side of the lounge. Wide-eyed Raphaella watched from underneath the arch separating the kitchen from the rest of the house.

The tall man Ryan had noticed earlier on, walked into the living room looking around probingly. His eyes found Thandeka and he wove his way through the clusters of men, steadily approaching the mother of the missing child. He was as tall as Thomas and Ryan, and towered over Thandeka as he held out his hand.

"Good evening, Ms Nkosi," he greeted her. "I'm Steven Rapson. I'm the negotiator."

Thandeka shook his hand softly.

His manner and voice were gentle and his brown eyes showed genuine concern.

"I have to ask you some questions," he said. "Can we have a seat for a moment?"

Thandeka eyes searched for her brother. Thomas walked swiftly across the room, stopped beside his sister and protectively placed his arm around her shoulders.

"I'm Thandeka's brother," he introduced himself. "I'm Thomas Nkosi."

The negotiator nodded an acknowledgement. "Good evening, sir," he replied. "I'm Steven Rapson." He tilted his head to the side. "I am going to ask your sister a few questions."

Thomas squeezed Thandeka's shoulders ever so lightly. "Are you okay with that?" he wanted to know.

Thandeka nodded meekly in response.

Thomas let go of her shoulders and pointed at the couch pushed in front of the patio doors. "We can sit there," he suggested.

Ryan watched the three people head across the living room and shrugged his shoulders. Everything seemed to be in hand and there was nothing to do for him at the moment. Suddenly feeling like a spare wheel, Ryan edged along the periphery of the organised mayhem and made his way into the kitchen, joining Raphaela at the pine table.

xxx

Lucy stood at the boarded up window, her face pressed against the rough wood peering through a gap left by two slats. A beautiful horizontal lightning flash illuminated the empty veld. Thunder grumbled in the distance and rolled through the sky sounding like an eighteen wheeler truck. She pushed herself away from the wall and glanced over at Silvy, who sat cross legged on the dirty concrete floor, making out her shape with the help of the light spilling in by the door.

"Do you think the storm will break soon?" she asked, wiping her sweaty face with her palms.

Silvy lifted her long hair, twisted it into a tight bun and rubbed her neck. "No," she answered firmly. "The lightning and thunder are too far apart. The storm is kilometres away."

Lucy slid to the floor and hugged her knees. "I wish it would rain," she complained. "This heat is killing me."

Silvy tugged on her sweat stained blouse. "I don't think we'll have any luck tonight," she replied wistfully.

Lucy picked pensively at the hem of her skirt. "At least we got some food."

Silvy nodded. "Yep," she agreed. "I thought my stomach would shrivel up totally. It was so sore; I thought I'm going to die."

"You don't die that easily," Lucy laughed light-heartedly.

Silvy joined the chuckle.

A minute later she asked. "Do you still have the sandwiches for the two new ones?"

"Yes," Lucy replied simply, peering at the girls sprawled on the dirty mattress.

The two new girls had not stirred since their forced arrival and Lucy had wondered more than once when they would wake up. It was a long time now since they had been dumped in the room.

Both girls wore a typical school uniform: a loose fitting blouse, pleated short skirt, white ankle socks and black shoes, but the Indian girl had lost one shoe. The blonde girl's hair had come undone and long strands surrounded her head like a halo. Lucy guessed that both girls were about the same height and age as she was.

Maybe they should wake them up instead of waiting for them to come around.

Putting thought into action, Lucy got on to all fours.

As she crawled across the cold floor on her hands and knees, the girl closest to her let out a small groan. Lucy's head whipped around and she looked excitedly at Silvy.

"Did you hear that?" she asked.

Silvy nodded, got to her feet and walked over to the mattress.

The girl with the long blonde hair moaned again.

"She mustn't vomit," Silvy cautioned. "It's bad enough in here as it is. We don't need more bad smells."

Lucy touched the girl's arm gently. "Hey," she called out quietly. "Hey, are you awake?"

The girl's eyelids fluttered and her fingers curled into a weak fist. A pink tongue ran over her dry, cracked lips.

"She's thirsty," Lucy deduced. "Let's give her some water."

Silvy did not wait for further instructions, but walked to the corner where Shelly was crouching on the floor, and picked up a bottle of water. On her way back to the mattress, she unscrewed the lid.

The blonde girl's eyes opened fully, her pupils slightly glazed over. She turned her head first to the one side, then to the other, strands of her hair falling across her pale cheeks. The haze in her eyes cleared and the girl began to focus. Unable to see anything in the almost dark room, she started to panic. Abruptly, she pushed herself up on her elbows and panted wildly.

"Where am I?" she whispered, her voice a hoarse croak.

Lucy put her hand on the girl's shoulder trying to reassure her, but the girl panicked even more. With a startled cry, she swiped Lucy's hand away as if it was a rat that had touched her.

"Where am I?" she repeated frantically. "What's going on?"

"You are with us," Lucy said soothingly.

The girl started to gag.

"Woua!" Silvy called. "Don't you throw up now!" Quickly she reached out and placed her hand over the girl's mouth.

The girl shook her head weakly, trying to rid herself of this clamp.

"Don't hold her too tight," Lucy instructed. "Otherwise she'll choke."

Silvy looked at the girl. "Are you going to throw up?" she asked.

Slowly adjusting to the semi-darkness, the girl realised that Silvy was not a threat, just another girl. She wiggled her fingers indicating that she would be alright.

Carefully, Silvy removed her hand ready to slap it over the girl's mouth again, should she show the first sign of going to be sick.

"Who are you?" the girl asked tearfully. "Where am I?"

Lucy took the bottle from Silvy and lifted it to the girl's lips. "First things first," she said firmly. "Here, drink some water."

Sitting up fully, the girl complied and gulped greedily at the liquid in the bottle. Lucy screwed the lid back on and sat back on her heels watching the girl carefully. Silvy made herself comfortable on the other side of the mattress.

"What's going on?" the girl asked again, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

Lucy pursed her lips and glanced at Silvy. How were they going to explain to this girl that she had been kidnapped. They definitely didn't want her to freak out.

The girl's gaze wandered from Lucy to Silvy and back again, a big question mark pinned to her face.

Lucy drew a deep breath. There was no other way but to tell it to her straight. If the girl went psycho, they would just have to hold her mouth shut.

"You have been kidnapped," Lucy stated plainly. "They drugged you and then brought you here."

The girl stared at Lucy with utter disbelief. Her eyes wandered over to Silvy who shrugged her shoulders. The girl looked back at Lucy.

"What are you talking about?" she croaked.

Lucy puffed up her cheeks and blew out some air. "You've been kidnapped," she repeated. "They are going to sell you to some old fat fart somewhere in Asia."

The girl's pale face became even whiter. She tried to jump up, but her legs were still too weak and she fell back onto the mattress.

"You're lying!" she suddenly screamed. "You bitch! You are bloody lying!"

Lucy's mouth curled into a cynical snarl. She objected to being called a bitch when she was telling the truth, but what else did she expect? The girl obviously had no clue what was going on. Hadn't she herself reacted in a similar way when she'd woken up and found herself in this dingy room?

Lucy placed her hand on the girl's arm. "I'm not lying," she said calmly. "And it's better if you don't scream."

The girl brushed away Lucy's hand and looked wild-eyed at Silvy.

"She's lying, isn't she?" she insisted.

Silvy pushed her hair over her shoulder and shook her head. "No," she said firmly. "You have been kidnapped and they intend to sell you."

"Noooo," the girl wailed. "Noooo!"

In a flash Silvy was on her feet, pushing the girl over onto her back and clamping her hand over the girl's mouth.

"Shut up," Silvy hissed. "Shut the hell up!"

The girl struggled under Silvy's weight, but Silvy held her tight.

"You don't want them to come in here," she warned the girl. "They'll kill you right away if you throw a tantrum."

Hatefully, the girl stared up at Silvy, but stopped struggling.

"Are you going to keep your voice down if I take my hand away?" Silvy asked harshly.

The girl's brows narrowed, but she nodded tentatively.

"You better don't throw a fit," Silvy warned her again. "No matter what they have in store for us, I don't want to die before I've had a chance at an escape."

Silvy removed her hand. Lucy watched her cautiously, ready to throw her body across the girl's head to muffle any sounds should she start screaming again.

The girl sat up and pushed at her long blonde hair. She tugged at her blouse and straightened her pleated school skirt. Finally, she looked at the two girls crouching opposite her.

"I'm not going to scream," she assured them quietly. "But you have to tell me the truth. This is all some kind of joke, isn't it?"

Silvy snorted in response and Lucy rolled her eyes.

"Do you think we are here voluntarily?" Silvy asked bitingly, pointing at the grimy walls. "If this is a joke, tell me when to laugh."

The girl looked pleadingly in Lucy's direction and she took pity on the girl.

"What's your name?" Lucy asked her.

"Sam," the blonde girl replied. "Samantha Morrison."

Lucy smiled warmly. "Hi Sam. I'm Lucy Nkosi, this is Silvy Baxter and that over there," Lucy said, pointing to the far corner, "that is Shelly Towns. But we have no idea who the girl is beside you on the mattress. She hasn't woken up yet."

Samantha glanced down at the mattress and in the dim light she barely made out the form of another girl. Her gaze returned to Lucy.

"Have you all been kidnapped?" she asked, her bottom lip quivering.

Lucy nodded. "Yep."

Sam's eyes filled with tears. "But how? How did it happen?" she whispered.

Lucy tilted her head and picked thoughtfully at her once white socks. "What do you remember?"

Sam drew a deep breath as she looked at a spot on the boarded up window. "I was walking home from school," she recalled. Her brow furrowed with concentration. "I said good-bye to my friends and I turned into my street..." her voice stopped.

"And then?" Lucy prompted her.

Sam bit her bottom lip. "There was a bakkie," she continued. "The man got out and asked for directions."

Lucy held up her hand. "Then you felt something on your face, smelled something funny and after that everything went black," she finished the story for her.

"How do you know?" Sam asked surprised.

"Because it happened to all of us," Lucy replied sadly.

Sam looked for confirmation at Silvy. Silvy sighed heavily and nodded her head.

"That's how they took us," she corroborated.

Sam began to sob. Her shoulders heaved and small howling sounds escaped from her mouth. Lucy crawled over to the girl and put her arm around her shaking shoulders.

"Sshhh," she comforted her. "We have a plan. We'll get out of here."

But Sam was not to be consoled. Her cries continued and her tears ran down onto her blouse leaving wet spots that grew bigger by the minute.

The girls let her cry for a while. They moved further back and sat quietly.

Lightning bolts flashed sporadically past the boarded up window illuminating their dingy surroundings for split seconds, and heavy thunder growled in the distance. The storm seemed to have moved even further away. The air was heavy with moisture and sweat beaded on the girls' foreheads and noses.

Silvy made her way into the corner and picked up the sandwiches kept safe for the new girls. She pushed the bread under Sam's nose.

"Here," Silvy said. "You must be hungry."

Sam lifted her head and sniffed noisily a couple of times. She wiped her wet cheeks with the back of her hand and brushed her long hair out of her face.

Pushing the sandwiches away from her, she said, "I'm not hungry."

Silvy raised an eyebrow. "You better eat, even if you don't feel like it, if you want to get out of here alive."

Sudden fear distorted Sam's features. "What do you mean?"

"Listen, Sam, stop being a wimp," Lucy said sharply. "We are all in the same boat here. We have all been kidnapped and none of us want to stay here."

Sam puffed up her cheeks out indignantly, but Lucy held up her hand. "We want to get out of here and you need your strength, every little ounce of it, if you don't want to stay behind," she lectured.

Sam crossed her arms in front of her. "You don't have to be so rude," she complained.

Lucy groaned softly. "I'm not being rude," she disagreed. "I'm just telling you that you need your strength for when we are going to escape."

Sam pursed her lips. "My parents will get me out of here," she said defiantly. "They'll be worried and they'll move heaven and earth to bring me home."

Lucy looked over at Silvy, who in turn rolled her eyes.

"That's not going to happen," Lucy said harshly.

Sam's head snapped back as if she had been slapped on her cheek. "Why not?" she stammered.

Lucy raised her hands. "Don't you think our parents want us home?" She stabbed her finger in Sam's direction. "We've been here much longer than you have and nobody has found us yet. Our parents haven't got the faintest idea where we are or where to look for us. Don't put your hopes on your parents," she warned. "If you want to get out of here then you'll have to do it yourself."

Fresh tears brimmed in Sam's eyes. "But how are we going to get out of here?" she whimpered. "The door is locked, the window is nailed shut and there are men out there who are much stronger than us." She pointed at the walls. "We have no tools to break out of here and no weapons to defend ourselves."

Lucy smiled smugly. "There is a way," she said.

Puzzled by the girl's statement, Sam pursed her lips.

"You see," Lucy whispered as she leaned forward. "There is a young guy with them who is prepared to help us."

Sam stared at her doubtfully.

"You'll know who I'm talking about when you see him. His T-shirt has big stains in front, but he looks more like a university student than a criminal," Lucy continued. "And I gave him my mom's cellphone number. He's going to phone my mother and tell her where we are."

Sam's eyes widened.

Lucy nodded confidently. "He just needs a chance to talk to her and then we are out of here."

Sam sniffled noisily and wiped her nose with her forearm. "How do you know that he's going to phone your mom?" she asked unconvinced. "Maybe he's just saying it to keep you quiet. Maybe he's playing games with you."

Lucy shook her head so hard that drops of sweat flew in all directions. "No, no," she replied vehemently. "He is going to help us."

"How can you be so sure?" Sam argued.

Lucy drew a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. "Because," she replied, "he's the one who has been looking after us. He gave us water and food although he didn't have to. And," Lucy paused, "he also defended us against the other guy."

Sam tilted her head to the side. "Why?" she asked cautiously. "What did the other man do?"

Lucy pressed her lips into a thin line remembering the ferret's failed attack on them and Silvy's explanation about Rat Face's attempted rape. She glared at the girl in front of her, but refused to answer. The memories were too disturbing and she did not want to dwell on a scenario whereby the ferret would succeed in his attack.

Sensing Lucy's uneasiness, Silvy came to her rescue. "Let's just say that the other guy has different things on his mind than looking after a few teenage girls until they are ready to be sold," she explained quietly. "If I were you, I would stay far away from him."

Not quite sure what Silvy was implying, Sam nevertheless nodded in agreement.

Turning back to Lucy, she said, "Are you absolutely certain that this guy, this university student, is going to help us?"

Lucy bobbed her head up and down vigorously. "As I said, he just needs to get away from the others, then he can phone my mom," she repeated. "My mom can phone the cops and we'll be out of here in no time at all. We just have to be a bit more patient and stay out of the ugly guy's way."

Sam sighed deeply. "Alright," she agreed. "I believe you and I'll go along with what you've said. There's nothing else we can do anyway."

"That's right," Lucy confirmed.

Sam pointed at the sandwiches lying on the dirty mattress. "Let me have those." She pulled a face. "Although I'm not really hungry."

Silvy grinned mischievously. "Stop being such a girl," she chided lightly. "You need to keep up your strength."

In reply, Sam bit into a sandwich and began to chew slowly.

Finishing her second sandwich, Sam pointed at Shelly. "What's wrong with her?"

Silvy looked over at Shelly who was in her usual crouching position. The frail girl was rocking on her heels and keening softly, whilst clutching a half empty water bottle to her chest.

Lucy wondered if she had heard a trace of contempt in the girl's voice, but Sam seemed genuinely interested.

"Shelly got hurt," Lucy replied curtly, cutting off any further questions.

Turning to Silvy, Sam nudged her lightly on the arm. "What's her story?" she asked softly.

Silvy twisted her hair into a coil and held it in place with one hand. "Hhmp," she replied, also reluctant to talk about Shelly.

Sam looked at her expectantly. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Why don't you want to tell me?"

Silvy stretched her legs out in front of her and pulled her wrinkled skirt down. "Remember we asked you not to scream when you woke up?"

Sam nodded.

"You see," Silvy hesitated, then drew a deep breath. "Shelly freaked out when she woke up. She screamed her head off and hammered on the door demanding to be let out."

Sam's expression became worried.

"The kidnappers didn't like her shouting," Silvy continued. "They opened the door, grabbed her and threw her against the wall. She hit her head pretty hard."

Sam's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, my God," she gulped.

"Yep," Silvy agreed. "Since then, she's been like that. Rocking on her heels and not talking."

Sam's gaze wandered over to the girl in the far corner. "Do you think she's brain damaged?"

Silvy shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know," she replied. "I'm not a doctor, but I don't think so. Lucy got her to drink water and she also ate some sandwiches. I think she's just scared out of her mind."

"Will she be okay when we try to escape?" Sam asked anxiously.

Silvy raised an eyebrow.

"What if push comes to shove and she can't walk?" Sam worried. "What if she freaks out again?"

Silvy crossed her arms in front of her. "Even if we have to carry her, she is not going to stay behind," she said sharply. "It's either all of us, or no one."

Sam backed off. "You are right," she agreed. "As you said, we are all in it together and nobody will be left behind."

The matter cleared up, Silvy shuffled to the other side of the mattress and sat down.

Sam jutted her chin in the direction of the Indian girl still lying motionless. "What about her?" she wanted to know. "Shouldn't we wake her up?"

Silvy looked questioningly at Lucy.

"I mean, we don't know when we are supposed to escape," Sam continued. "And you said no one must be left behind."

Lucy agreed that Sam had a point. Dirk could come in at any minute and ask them to run. It would be devastating having to leave one girl behind.

"Yes," Lucy said. "I think we should try to wake her up."

The girls moved closer to the limp figure lying in the middle of the mattress. The Indian girl's face was peaceful. Her eyes were closed and her pink lips were parted. She was very pretty. Her long dark eyelashes rested on top of her cheeks and her brown skin was flawless. A thin gold chain nestled around her long slender neck and tiny gold studs decorated her delicate earlobes.

Lucy reached out and nudged the girl's arm. "Hey," she called softly. "Wake up."

The girl did not move.

Lucy placed her hand on the girl's shoulder and shook her. "Come on," she encouraged her. "It's time to wake up."

The girl's head wobbled up and down, but otherwise there was no movement.

Baffled Lucy looked over at Silvy. "She's not waking up."

Silvy pursed her lips. "Maybe she's under deeper than we thought," she replied. "Here, let me try."

Silvy unfurled her legs and slid in beside the Indian girl. Placing both her hands on the girl's upper arms, she shook her vigorously.

"Wake up," she said loudly.

The girl's head bounced up and down on the mattress and fine strands of black hair fell across the girl's face, coming to rest between her parted lips.

"Don't be so rough," Lucy protested. "You are hurting her."

Shoving Silvy out of the way, Lucy leaned forward and gently pulled the strands of hair from the girl's mouth.

"Maybe we should slap her cheek," Sam suggested.

Lucy glanced at her darkly, but Sam shrugged her shoulders. "I've seen them do it on TV," she explained. "And it always works."

Silvy chewed on her bottom lip contemplating Sam's idea. "Why not?" she said after a while. "As long as we don't hit her too hard."

Silvy moved to the Indian girl's side, lifted her hand and slapped her lightly on the cheek.

Nothing happened.

Silvy raised her hand again and smacked her softly on the other cheek.

The girl did not move.

"This is strange," Silvy remarked, looking over at the other two girls. "Shouldn't she at least moan or sigh?"

Lucy scratched her nose. "I wouldn't know," she replied. "I've never tried to wake anybody up who has been drugged into sleep."

"Me, neither," Sam added.

Lucy watched the Indian girl's features for a few moments trying to detect any kind of movement.

"Slap her again," she suggested. "Maybe this time it'll work."

Silvy lifted her hand and smacked the girl's left cheek, then her right. The girl's head rolled with the direction of each slap, her hair trailing behind.

"It's not working," Silvy complained, rubbing her palm wistfully.

Sam leaned forward and placed her fingertips against the Indian girl's cheek.

"What are you doing?" Lucy asked puzzled.

"Her skin is so cold," Sam replied thoughtfully. She moved her fingertips downward towards the girl's neck. "There is no warmth in her anywhere."

She took her hand away from the Indian girl's throat and looked at the other two girls. "Feel her yourself," she suggested.

Lucy reached out and touched the skin on the Indian girl's neck.

"You are right," she exclaimed surprised, snatching her hand away. "She is very cold."

Silvy's eyes became wide as realisation dawned on her. Lucy and Sam's expressions mirrored her frightening thought.

Sam was the first to voice what all three of them were thinking. "I think she's dead," she whispered.

Lucy gulped some air. "Oh, my God," she stammered.

"You really think so?" Silvy asked her voice quivering.

Sam nodded.

"Oh, my God," Lucy said a bit louder.

Silvy raised her arms and hugged herself. Sam withdrew against the wall, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Oh, my God!" Lucy shouted. "The girl is dead! They killed her! They murdered her!"

Red hot anger surged through her. The kidnappers had taken the Indian girl's life! It was one thing to be kidnapped. It was an entirely different story to be killed by one of them.

Lucy jumped to her feet.

They would pay for this! They would pay for this murder and if this was the last thing she would ever do, she would make sure they paid!

Lucy swirled around, balled her hands and with three short steps reached the locked door. She raised her arms and hammered with her fists against the wood.

"You killed her," she screamed, completely disregarding the possible consequences of her outburst. "The girl is dead!" she shouted at the top of her voice. "You killed her!" she yelled again hammering, against the door. "You murderers!"

CHAPTER 22

"What's that noise?" Dirk said.

Rat Face continued to stare at the flickering TV screen. "What?" he asked lazily.

Dirk took a step away from the blaring TV and listened carefully. A moment later he realised that the sound was coming from the locked room. One of the girls was banging against the door and shouting something intelligible. He looked over his shoulder at Rat Face who was not moving a muscle except for his eyeballs, as colourful images jumped from the left to the right side of the TV screen.

Dirk walked closer to the room trying to make out what the girl was yelling at the top of her voice. Finally able to hear the words, a confused expression crossed his face.

What is she on about? Killers? Murderers?

The banging and shouting continued unabated reaching an almost hysterical pitch. Worriedly, Dirk stared at the door. He had no idea why the girl was making such a racket, but something must have happened. Maybe it was better to check up on them before they got hurt, or even worse, hurt each other.

"Rudi," he called loudly. "Hey Rudi!"

Rat Face jerked his head irritably. "What?"

Dirk pointed his thumb at the room. "I think there's something wrong in there."

Rat Face rolled his eyes. "So what?" he replied laconically.

"We better check on them," Dirk insisted. "What if one of them is hurt?"

Rat Face threw the remote control onto the couch. "Fuck!" he yelled. "Do you have to interrupt my programme? So what if they kill each other."

Dirk raised an eyebrow cynically. "Remember," he said. "You still want to get your money. If one of them is injured, then she's damaged goods. You won't get paid."

Rat Face swung his legs off the couch onto the ground. With a load groan he got to his feet and stretched, pressing his hands on his lower back.

"Fuck," he repeated. "Those bitches are nothing but trouble."

Dirk ignored the ferret's obvious resentment. Instead he listened to the shouting behind the door.

"Can you switch off the TV?" he asked. "I can't hear what they are saying."

Rat Face pulled a sour grimace. "Anything else you want me to do?" he asked sarcastically as he reached down, picked up the remote control and switched off the sound.

In the sudden silence, Dirk could hear clearly what the girl was yelling: you killed her; you murderers.

The ferret looked at Dirk, total surprise written across his ugly face. Dirk stared back in astonishment, not sure what to make of the words.

"We better get in there," Dirk recommended. "They've been well behaved up to now. Something must have happened."

For once, the ferret agreed with him and pulled out his keys. Slotting the room key into the lock, he turned it and pushed open the door.

As soon as the door swung back, Lucy flew out of the room, fists rotating in the air like the blades of a windmill, hitting Rat Face on the chest and on the arms.

"Murderer," she screamed. "Murderer!"

Rat Face's arms encircled the young girl holding her tight. "Fuck!" he exclaimed. "What's your case?"

Lucy struggled to free herself. She tried to kick Rat Face's shins and her short nails tried to reach his face, but he was holding her too firmly.

"Stop it!" he demanded. "Stop making such a racket!"

Dirk looked at the distressed girl. Lucy's face was pale under her dark brown skin. Her lips were drawn back like an attacking cat.

He took a step forward and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Calm down," he advised her. "You're just going to hurt yourself."

Lucy glared at him. "Murderer!" she spat.

"Why are you calling me a killer?" he asked bewildered.

Lucy squirmed in Rat Face's arms, furiously trying to free herself, but the ferret was much stronger than the lithe girl and his arms held her like a metal vice.

"Calm down," Dirk said again.

Lucy stopped wiggling and glared at him from under narrowed brows. "Killer!" she spat at him again.

Dirk crossed his arms, slowly getting angry. "Stop being such a girl and tell me why you are calling me names," he said sharply.

Suddenly, the fire went out of Lucy. "She's dead," she said quietly.

Dirk frowned at her bewildered. "Who?"

Lucy flicked her head in the direction of the dark room. "The Indian girl," she replied sadly.

The ferret loosened his grip and the girl's feet slid back down onto the floor. Lucy pushed him away and straightened her rumpled blouse.

Rat Face looked at her in disbelief. "How do you know she's dead?" he asked.

"Because she hasn't moved since you dumped her with us and her skin is cold and she isn't breathing," Lucy snapped, her voice full of contempt.

In a flash Rat Face was through the door and on his knees beside the dirty mattress. Pulling Lucy along behind him, Dirk entered the dark room. The ferret's hands reached out to touch the girl's neck. He probed with his fingertips letting them glide up the girl's throat, underneath her chin, and back down again. His movements became frantic.

"Fuck!" he whispered. "Fuck!"

Standing right behind his adversary, Dirk peered over his shoulder, becoming increasingly more concerned.

"Fuck!" Rat Face repeated. He let go of the girl and rocked back on his heels.

"What's wrong?" Dirk asked, worry lines creasing his forehead.

Rat Face spun his head around. "I can't find a pulse," he barked. "The kaffir girl is right. The bitch is dead."

The blood drained from Dirk's face.

Oh, no, he thought anxiously. This can't be true. The girl can't be dead.

Swiftly, he bent down on one knee and felt along side the girl's neck. Her skin was soft and smooth, and strangely cold. He pressed his fingertips where he thought her main artery was.

There was nothing!

No gentle pumping, no soft pulsing.

Dirk moved his hand a bit further back and tried again.

Nothing!

He felt closer to her throat, but there was still nothing.

Shit! he thought distressed. The girl is really dead.

Dirk got onto his haunches and rubbed his face with both hands.

What have they done? he shouted silently. Oh, my God. They killed the girl!

Standing on the far side of the mattress, Sam watched the two young men kneeling beside the dead girl's body. Her eyes darted from their backs to the open door. Warm inviting light spilled from the lounge into the dark dingy room. Without conscious thought, Sam inched closer to the opening in the wall. Freedom was beckoning!

Her hand touched the wall beside the doorframe.

Just don't turn around, Sam thought nervously. Don't turn around. Don't look at me.

She edged closer to the open door.

Please God, she prayed silently. Help me get out of here. Help me escape. Please God, don't let them notice me.

The heel of her shoe slid past the open door. Sam pressed the back of her legs against the dirty wall. The fingers of her right hand curled around the doorframe.

I'm almost there, she thought excitedly. Just a few more centimetres. Please don't turn around, she pleaded silently.

Like a frightened rabbit, Sam watched the two men on the floor, registering every single move they made.

For long moments, she stayed glued to the doorpost. Finally she took a deep breath.

It's now or never, she convinced herself. If I don't run now, I'll never get away from here. She remembered Lucy's words: if you don't make it happen for yourself, it will never happen.

Wide-eyed she glanced one more time at the men kneeling beside the dead girl. She saw the long haired guy's distress and recognised the fury in the ugly man's face.

Run! she shouted silently. Run now! Otherwise you'll end up like the girl on the mattress.

Sam let go of the frame and stepped through the doorway and into the light.

Freedom! her heart sang.

Quickly she oriented herself. Spotting the open patio doors her swift feet carried her across the tiled lounge floor. Her legs pumped like a steam-engine and she flew onto the patio and into the dark night.

The sudden shift in light blinded her. She didn't see the small step leading into the uneven veld beyond the smooth patio surface.

She stumbled. Trying to keep her balance, her arms whirling frantically through the air, she steadied herself and walked on, taking one cautious step after the other.

For split seconds lightning bolts illuminated the pitch darkness around her. As she waited for the brief flashes to fade, her eyes slowly adjusted to the dark night.

She took another step and another. Suddenly, her foot hooked on an obstacle. Long strands of wild grass entangled her shoe. She tried desperately to free herself, pulling her foot forward and up, then back the other way.

Losing her balance once again, she fell face first into the dirt.

Instantly she felt a heavy weight in the small of her back, pressing down painfully.

Sam lifted her head and cried out.

"You little bitch," Rat Face hissed in her ear. "Did you really think you could get away from me?"

Tears sprung into her eyes. The pain was excruciating, but the disappointment of having been caught was even worse.

The knee pressed harder into her back.

"How far did you think you could run?" Rat Face mocked.

Oh, God, Sam moaned silently. Why did I have to fall? Why did he have to catch me? What's going to happen to me?

The knee lifted, but immediately she felt hands circling her ankles. Frantic with fear, she tried to twist around, but her angle was all wrong. She was trapped on her stomach.

"I'll show you what happens when you run," Rat Face grunted. "Fuck! You'll never try such a stunt again."

Gripping her ankles, Rat Face started walking backwards, dragging the defenceless girl over the bumpy ground. Fine brown dust whirled up settling on Sam's face and clogging her nostrils. Her pleated school skirt rode up, gathering around her waist. Small sharp stones scraped along her bare legs, slipping under her panties and collecting against her pubic hair. The buttons on her blouse popped off and her shirt ripped open.

Rat Face stepped onto the patio and pulled the girl up behind him. Without a second thought, he dragged her across the edge, its sharpness scraping against her thighs and belly, leaving deep gashes in her delicate skin. At the last minute, she lifted her head, her neck muscles straining, saving her chin from being cut by the patio bricks. As she squinted painfully at the receding dark veld, she saw a thin trail of her blood on the patio tiles. Her skin burned like fire. She clenched her teeth to prevent herself from crying out loud.

Finally, Rat Face pulled Sam into the lounge. With a flick of his wrist, he flipped the girl onto her back. Her head banged on the floor. He bent down and grabbed her long hair. Roughly he pulled her to her feet, holding back her head. With his right hand he reached behind him and plucked the knife from his waistband. The long blade glinted in the light as he held it against Sam's exposed throat.

"Hey," Dirk shouted, lunging for the ferret's knife arm. "What the hell are you doing?"

Rat Face drew back his lips. "Stay out of it, baby face," he snarled. "This bitch isn't going to run anywhere."

"Don't be stupid," Dirk said as he put his hand on the ferret's arm.

Rat Face pressed the serrated knife edge harder against Sam's throat. A thin line of blood appeared on her white skin.

"Don't be an idiot," Dirk shouted. "You killed one already."

Rat Face's head snapped around. "What? Fuck! I didn't kill anybody," he yelled. "Don't you say that I killed one of them."

Dirk let go of the ferret's arm and raised his hands. "Okay, okay," he said. "It wasn't you. It was Meshak and Angus."

"You better be careful what you say," Rat Face snarled.

Dirk glanced worriedly at the young girl. The knife was still pressed against her throat and a small trickle of blood was running down the side of her neck. Her eyes pleaded with him, but no sound came out of her mouth.

"Let the girl go," Dirk cautioned, anxious to diffuse the volatile situation. "We don't want to end up with another dead body."

Rat Face stared down at Sam. A mean expression crossed his face.

"You think I should let her get away with this?" he asked maliciously. "This bitch tried to run away. She would've caused a lot of trouble for me if I hadn't found her. And I would've lost a lot of money."

Dirk shrugged. "But she didn't get away," he said. "You caught her."

"Yeah," Rat Face replied. "I caught her and she needs to be taught a lesson."

Abruptly he let go of Sam's hair and the knife disappeared into his waistband. But if Sam thought that she was off the hook she was badly mistaken.

The ferret raised his hand and smacked his open palm across Sam's cheek. The slap stung like a thousand bees and tears brimmed in Sam's eyes.

Unfortunately, Rat Face was not finished. He lifted his hand again and the back of his hand slammed into Sam's face. Her head snapped back and she let out an involuntary cry.

Sam lifted her arms to protect her face, but Rat Face swiped them aside. He slapped her again, and each time she collapsed, he lifted up her face and slapped the cheek that was easiest to hit. Very soon, red welts appeared, the skin on her jaw bone ripped open and her bottom lip split. She was helpless in the grip of her attacker. Tears streamed down her face and mucus bubbled from her nose.

Dirk had had enough. "Rudi," he called. "I think the girl has learned her lesson."

Rat Face slapped Sam again. "You think so?" he smirked.

Dirk pursed his lips. "Yep," he nodded. "I really think so." He pointed at Sam's swollen face. "If you carry on like this then it will take weeks for the bruising to go away and then what? Maybe they'll reject her and you won't get paid."

Rat Face instantly dropped his hand. "Fuck!" he exclaimed.

He held Sam's face with thumb and forefinger and turned it to the light. Sam squeezed her eyes shut. Her face burned as if touched by a red hot iron and her nose felt like it had been prodded with a metal rod. Carefully she breathed through her split lips.

"Hhmmm," Rat Face mumbled. "You might be right."

He tightened his grip on Sam's arm and pulled her forward in the direction of the dark room. Lining her up with the open door, he gave her a hard push. Sam stumbled and landed painfully on her knees. Behind her, the door slammed shut with a loud bang and the room descended into darkness.

xxx

The chaos in Thandeka's lounge became more organised. Thomas and his sister sat together with the tall police officer on the couch. Ryan tried his best to stay out of everyone's way.

A few minutes later, Antonio Patrizzio and Raphaela walked into the kitchen.

"I'm leaving now," the detective announced.

Ryan looked up from his laptop. "Oh," was all he managed to say.

He had come to like the detective. The young man seemed so capable and it was encouraging to have him around.

As if reading Ryan's mind, the detective pointed to the lounge. "You are in good hands," he assured him. "There is nothing more I can do. It's not my field of expertise."

Ryan nodded with understanding.

Patrizzio took a step towards the archway. "I'll check on you guys later to see if there's been any progress."

Ryan smiled sadly. "For all of our sakes, I hope they will have found Lucy by the time you come back."

The detective hugged his cousin Raphaela and with one last wave of his hand in Ryan's direction, Patrizzio left the kitchen. Raphaela pulled a chair away from the table, sat down next to Ryan and looked at him enquiringly.

Ryan returned her stare.

"Do you think they'll be able to trace the next call?" she finally asked.

Ryan nodded confidently. "They seem to know what they're doing," he replied. "Have you seen their equipment? I'm not an expert, but the old cop wasn't lying when he said that it was state-of-the-art."

Raphaela leaned forward placing her crossed forearms on the kitchen table. The movement pushed her breasts against the fabric of her top, outlining the lacy trim of her brassiere. Ryan couldn't help but stare at her deeply seductive cleavage.

Raphaela tilted her head to the side. "That might be true," she conceded, "but it doesn't mean they are capable of handling the information."

Ryan reluctantly dragged his eyes away from the soft curve of her breast. "What do you mean?"

Raphaela tapped her finger against her bottom lip. "They might receive the call," she replied thoughtfully. "But what are they going to do with it?" She raised an eyebrow questioningly. "We both know the cops' response time is horrendous. What if they can't get a team together?"

"I don't think that will happen," he said firmly. "These guys are from an elite unit. They wouldn't mess up like that."

Raphaela pursed her full red lips. "What if they can't get there in time?"

Ryan drummed his fingers on the table top. After a minute, he replied, "Then we'll make a plan."

"What are you implying?" she asked cautiously.

A grim grin flashed across his face. "Let's just say, the cops are not the only ones with a car."

For a moment she stared at him without comprehension, then her hand flew to her mouth.

"Oh no," she stammered. "Are *you* going to go after the kidnappers? What if they have guns? What if they shoot you?"

Wild images flashed through her mind. A group of men wielding heavy guns were chasing Ryan. She could hear the sound of shots fired. Bullets flew all around him, hitting the pavement, spraying wall plaster over his dark pants. She saw him stumble, a crimson patch spreading across his back. His knees buckled and he fell face down onto the tarred road.

With great effort, she pushed the violent pictures to the back of her mind.

Raphaela looked at Ryan probingly, but seeing his determined expression she instinctively knew it would be useless trying to persuade him to let the police handle the situation.

Touching his arm with her fingertips, she whispered, "If you find them, promise me that you will be careful."

His nostrils flared ever so slightly.

Typical woman, he thought annoyed. Always fretting about things. Did she really believe that he was a fool? That he would put himself intentionally in harms way? He was going to do whatever it took to bring Lucy home safely and in one piece. She seemed to forget that Lucy's life was at stake here.

"Stop worrying woman," he snapped irritably. "I'm not an idiot."

Raphaela flinched at his harsh words and dropped her head. But her pride did not allow her to wallow in self-pity for long.

Raphaela straightened her shoulders and her eyes glittered angrily. "Mr Ryan Bates," she said, her jaw firmly set. "Don't patronise me." She jumped up from her chair, her dark mane flying in all directions and her cheeks colouring a ruby red. "It's no wonder you couldn't keep a girlfriend. You are mean, pig-headed and blind. I do not believe that you are an idiot, but I do care about you a lot and therefore I worry."

It took a few seconds for the words to sink in.

As Raphaela spun on her heels to rush from the kitchen, Ryan grabbed her arm, effectively preventing her escape. Slowly he rose to his feet all the while drawing her closer. At first Raphaela resisted, much too hurt and angry to want to be near him, but Ryan did not let go and gradually she relented.

Standing facing each other, his left arm circled her wasp-like waist. Her warm breath caressed his cheek. He moved his hand between her shoulder blades, gently pressing her lithe body against him. Her dark eyes watched him attentively as he lowered his head. His mouth touched her soft lips. Tiny sparks exploded in her head. As his tongue probed the inside of her mouth, she put her arms around his neck and closed her eyes.

xxx

Rat Face banged his fist against the wall. "Fuck!" he shouted. "Fuck! What am I going to do now?"

Dirk dropped his chin.

"Don't stare at me like a moron," Rat Face yelled. "We've lost a girl!" He gesticulated wildly. "There are supposed to be five and now there are only four. They are supposed to be delivered tomorrow."

Dirk stood like a statue.

Rat Face hit the wall again. "Fuck!" Angrily he kicked an empty food container across the lounge.

They were one girl short! Dirk's mind began to race and he began to scheme.

Maybe they had a tight deadline to keep? Maybe there wasn't enough time to kidnap another girl?

You wish! he sighed silently. If they promised the buyer five girls, then they would deliver five girls.

From experience he knew how easy it was to get a girl's attention. If Angus wanted to get another girl tonight then he could just drive to one of the social hotspots in and around Johannesburg. He only had to wait nearby a nightclub and wait for a girl on her own. It was so easy. Sometimes a girl might stand by herself smoking a cigarette, or wait alone for her friends to arrive. It was easy to stop, open the door of the car and pull her in. Nobody would blink an eye. Nightclub visitors would think the girl had had a fight with her boyfriend.

Dirk shook his head with frustration.

And if Angus couldn't find another girl tonight, then it would be easy to pick up a girl in the morning as he had done the previous day. There were enough opportunities out there, especially when girls walked home alone after school came out.

The ferret's voice interrupted his train of thought. "I have to phone Angus and tell him," he said, panic resonating in his voice.

Sudden excitement surged through Dirk.

What if he could stall Rat Face? If Angus didn't know that one of the girls was dead, then he would have no reason to kidnap another one. If Dirk was going to get this right, then Angus was only going to find out in the morning that they were one girl short. This would mean that Angus would have to move the deadline and that in turn would give Dirk more time to formalise his rescue plan.

Dirk's lip lifted into a smug smile.

Rat Face squinted at him suspiciously. "What are you up to?" he asked.

He had to play this right, Dirk thought cautiously. If the ferret caught on, then all would be lost.

Dirk took a step forward and placed his hand on the ferret's shoulder as if to comfort him.

"I would be shitting myself," he said, "if I had to phone Angus with the bad news."

Rat Face shrugged off Dirk's hand. "And rightly so."

Dirk took the rejection in his stride, pushing his hand into jeans pocket. "I was just thinking ..." he let the sentence trail off.

"What?" the ferret blurted out impatiently.

"Do you really have to phone Angus tonight?" Dirk asked casually.

A deep frown creased Rat Face's forehead. "Of course I have to phone him tonight," he replied, somewhat confused by Dirk's question. "If I don't then we are going to be late with our delivery tomorrow."

Dirk shrugged his shoulders. "Is it that bad to let him know only tomorrow morning?" he wondered aloud. "I mean, he'll give you hell anyway and if you don't tell him now you'll have at least one more night of peace."

Rat Face contemplated Dirk's idea for a moment, then shook his head. "You don't understand," he said, waving his hand. "We need to get the girls out tomorrow. There is a schedule. If we don't drive them to Durban tomorrow, then the ship leaves without them. I'll have to tell Angus now so that he can make a plan. We won't get paid if we don't deliver all five of them tomorrow."

Rat Face crossed the lounge and slumped onto the dilapidated couch.

Damn! Dirk swore quietly.

The ferret pulled the cellphone out of his back pocket and stared at the keypad for long minutes as if waiting for a miracle to happen. Finally, he pushed the buttons and held the phone against his ear.

A minute later, the ferret sat up straight and his expression became alert.

"It's me," Rat Face said. "We have a problem." He cleared his throat noisily. "The one girl is dead."

Dirk watched the ferret's reaction.

Rat Face turned pale and shrank visibly.

"But it wasn't our fault," the ferret objected feebly. "We didn't touch her. She was already dead when we got into the room."

Dirk could clearly hear the next part of the conversation, even though the cellphone was glued to the ferret's ear. Angus was swearing, screaming and shouting all at once. Rat Face looked up helplessly at Dirk.

In return, Dirk held up his hands in a gesture of 'what can I do'?

The shouting stopped.

"She is still in the room," Rat Face replied, pushing his hand through his lanky hair.

All of a sudden his eyes early popped out of his head. "What?" he stammered.

Dirk wondered what Angus had told him for the ferret to act so surprised. He did not have to wait very long.

"You want us to take the girl and dump her in the river?" Rat Face repeated with disbelief.

Dirk narrowed his brows. This was a lousy idea, he thought angrily. Angus could at least leave her in the house.

Rat Face stared at a point on the wall above the TV set, concentrating very hard.

"But the river is dry," he complained. "There's only a small trickle."

Once again Dirk could hear his cousin yelling and swearing. And if it wasn't his imagination, the ferret's face had turned another shade paler.

Eventually the shouting stopped and Rat Face nodded a few times.

"Okay," he confirmed. "Alright. We'll get rid of the body."

Rat Face got to his feet and began pacing the lounge.

"Yes," he repeated. "Yes, I heard you and I'll do what you say."

Finally he took the phone away from his ear and pressed the end-call button. Exhausted he dropped back on the couch, closed his eyes and exhaled long and loudly.

Although having guessed most of the instructions, Dirk wanted to know exactly what Angus had told the ferret.

"So," he said. "What's up?"

Rat Face rolled his head along the back of the couch. "He wants us to dump the body in the river," he replied simply.

Dirk shook his head. "But the river is dry," he objected.

"I told him that," Rat Face retorted.

"It doesn't make any sense. He could just leave her here in the chalet," Dirk argued.

Rat Face opened one eye and glared up at Dirk. "Fuck! Who do you think I am?" he snarled. "The guy threatened me with torture and death. I'm not going to make suggestions to him. If he wants the body in the river, then I'm going to throw it in the river."

Dirk sighed resignedly. Although he didn't agree with Angus, the ferret was right. It wasn't worth to lose his life over arguing or refusing to dump the dead girl into the river.

Tiredly, Rat Face got to his feet. "Come on," he said. "Let's get it over and done with."

Rat Face unlocked the door and Dirk followed him into the dank dark room. Dirk's eyes sought out the abducted girls. He found them huddled in the far corner, their young bodies shielding the beat-up blonde girl protectively. Lucy held a small rag and a bottle of water in her hands, trying to wipe the blood from the hurt girl's face.

Lucy looked up at him, her eyes glittering angrily. Her unwavering stare accused him of cowardice. Her look stabbed Dirk in the heart and he blushed with shame and guilt. But there was nothing he could have done, or could there?

Silently admitting his culpability, Dirk raised his palms behind the ferret's back. He was so sorry for all of this, and as much as he wished the nightmare would end, his hands were tied. Ill at ease, Dirk lowered his eyes.

Rat Face stopped beside the dead girl on the mattress. "You take the shoulders and I'll take the legs," he commanded.

Without replying, Dirk stepped onto the mattress, bent down and placed his hands under the dead girl's shoulders. Rat Face grabbed her ankles. They lifted her easily enough and shuffling forward, they left the room. In the lounge, as Rat Face let go of the girl's legs, Dirk lowered her shoulders to the ground. Fumbling in his pocket, Rat Face pulled out his key ring and locked the door to the girls' prison.

They picked up the girl again and carrying her between them, moved across the lounge, past the TV, and out onto the patio. Standing at the edge of the tiled patio, they stared at the darkness surrounding them. Occasional lightning bolts flashed through the night sky, illuminating the abandoned chalets and the empty veld for a few seconds each time.

"Don't you have a flashlight?" Dirk asked. "It will be a major mission to get to the river without one."

Rat Face snorted loudly. "As if they would give me a flashlight." He shrugged his shoulders. "We just have to make sure we don't end up with our faces in the dirt."

Dirk rolled his eyes, not being overly enthusiastic about trying to make his way through the rough veld in the dark. Before he could complain, Rat Face stepped off the patio. Dirk had no choice but to follow him.

They made slow progress. The girl's dead weight made Dirk's arms ache and it felt as if she was getting heavier by the minute. Rat Face began grunting with the exertion of carrying the body. They stumbled over clumps of thick wild grass and lost and caught their balance more than once as they stepped into deep holes dug by small rodents. After what seemed an eternity, they reached the tall gum trees by the riverbank. Dirk let go of the dead girl's shoulders and sank to his haunches.

"Shit," he exclaimed. "That was torture."

Rat Face dropped the girl's legs and stretched his limbs.

"Yeah," he replied. "But we are not finished. She still needs to go down there."

Dirk waited for the next lightning bolt to appear before he peered over the edge of the river bank. He groaned loudly. The embankment was at least three metres high and almost smooth from the flow of water. He glanced up and down the river to find a spot that was lower, but the bank just seemed to rise in both directions.

Frustrated, he rubbed his face with both hands. "Can't we just roll her down there?" he asked. "I mean, she won't feel it, she's dead anyway."

Rat Face pursed his lips, thinking seriously about Dirk's suggestion. After about two minutes, he replied, "Yeah. Why not?"

In a joint effort, they pushed the dead girl to the edge and pushed her over the side. They heard her bounce off the wall and thud downwards. Dried soil rained into the riverbed and small roots and parched branches cracked under the dead girl's weight.

All of the sudden, there was silence.

Dirk got down on his knees and crawled to the edge of the bank. Looking down, he tried to make out the body on the river bed.

The girl was not there!

Confused, he leaned further out over the edge and spotted her about halfway down the bank. Her right leg was raised up in the air, her upper body, her arms and her left leg were hanging downward. The right foot of the dead girl's body had snagged on a root growing out of the side of the bank.

He pulled himself back and sat on the ground. "Shit," he moaned.

A frown appeared on Rat Face's forehead. "What?" he asked.

Dirk pointed at the dried up river. "See for yourself."

Rat Face repeated Dirk's exercise and crawled to the edge of the bank. He held on to a root and peered into the darkness.

"Fuck!" he yelled angrily. "Fuck this!"

Instead of pulling back from the edge, he lowered himself into the gorge.

"Hey," Dirk shouted, getting onto his knees. "What are you doing?"

Rat Face gestured with his free hand. "What do you think I'm doing?" he snapped. "We can't leave her hanging like that. What if a farmer from the other side sees her?"

"Oh, right," Dirk managed. He hadn't thought of that.

The area across the river was farmland. It was very possible a farmer would work his land in the morning. If he didn't arrive in the morning, the farmer might come the following day.

On this rare occasion, Dirk agreed with the ferret. It was too dangerous to let the girl hang on the side of the river bank. She might be spotted too easily.

Holding onto a thick root with one hand, Rat Face lowered his legs. The toes of his shoes found a hold on a small ledge protruding from the wall just left and beneath the dead girl. Balancing precariously on the tiny shelf, Rat Face reached out and began tugging on the girl's shoe, trying to dislodge her foot.

Dirk watched intently from above.

The girl's foot did not move. Rat Face extended his arm further out and pulled on her leg, but the dead girl would not budge. Her whole body shook and swayed, but her foot stayed stubbornly wedged behind the root.

"I need more leverage," Rat Face shouted.

He cater-pillared alongside the small ledge. Small stones dislodged from the wall and cascaded down to the dry river bed. Carefully he moved closer to the dead girl until he was right beside her. Reaching up, Rat Face grabbed her ankle and pulled hard.

Suddenly, there was a dull hammering noise. Confused, Dirk lifted his head and listened to the unusual sound. The pounding increased. It became louder and louder. Dirk cocked his head and the noise whistled in his ears. He tried to figure out what the sound was about. It reminded him of the interference on a broken telephone line.

A lightning bolt flashed in the sky. For a second Dirk was able to see the dry bed upriver. His eyes grew wide and he froze.

What the hell ...? he thought.

Another lightning bolt illuminated the darkness. This time there was no doubt.

A huge wall of water was moving down the river bed. The flood rushed relentlessly through the gully. It gurgled viciously and hissed like a pit of snakes. White foam rode on the crest of a massive wave. Dirty brown water swept over the top of the

river's banks, gripping everything in its path and dragging it down into its swirling mass.

It growled like a hungry dog!

Dirk gasped at the oncoming floodwall. He forced himself to move, crawling to the edge of the bank.

"Rudi!" he screamed at the top of his voice. "Rudi!"

Irritably, Rat Face looked up. "What?" he shouted.

Dirk's arm whirled in an upriver direction. "Flash flood!" he yelled. "Flash flood!"

For a moment Rat Face stared at him uncomprehendingly, then he turned his head upriver. His felt his eyes grow to the size of saucers as he saw the wall of water descending on him.

"Quick!" Dirk screamed, reaching down into the gorge. "Give me your hand!"

In slow motion, Rat Face turned his head away from the oncoming floodwall. He let go of the girl's foot and lifted his arm.

Dirk grabbed the ferret's wrist. The mountain of water pounded closer and closer. Dirk could see debris rotating in its crest.

Panic rose up in him.

If he couldn't get Rat Face onto the bank in the next few seconds, the water would eat him alive.

Rat Face tried to scramble up the smooth wall. His feet found no purchase and he slipped back down. Primeval fear gripped his heart. He knew what would happen if the enraged flood reached him.

Again he clawed at the wall. The fingers of his left hand dug into the dark soil. Dirk pulled as hard as he could on his right arm, his feet burrowed into the mud. Watching the deadly water race towards him, Rat Face screamed.

Dirk held onto Rat Face with both hands and pulled with every ounce of strength he had in him.

The brown angry flood was only a few metres away.

Rat Face frantically clawed at the wall.

Dirk heaved again.

Rat Face's head appeared above the bank, his face contorted with fear.

Dirk pulled again. Blood pounded in his ears, drowning out the roar of the water.

The angry flood raced down the gully gripping Rat Face's legs. Rat Face's body was only halfway out of the gorge.

Rat Face screamed.

Dirk pulled with all his might, the muscles in his arms burning like fire.

The water let go of Rat Face's legs.

With one last desperate effort, Dirk pulled again.

Breathless, Rat Face landed on the ground beside Dirk. Swift brown, dirty water swirled around their feet, soaking their shoes, drenching their jeans, rising with each second. Quickly Rat Face and Dirk got to their knees and scrambled away from the furious river.

CHAPTER 23

Ryan woke to the sound of clattering porcelain. He lifted his head from his folded arms. His back hurt from sitting bent forward half of the night at the kitchen table. He stretched carefully, trying his best to ignore his screaming muscles.

Apart from calls from friends wanting to lend support, colleagues offering to help, and strangers fishing for information, the telephone had kept ominously quiet and the faces of the people gathered in Thandeka's house had dropped to silent despair. Finally, around three o'clock in the morning, hardly able to keep his eyes open, he succumbed to sleep.

Ryan twisted around on his chair, catching a sliver of bright sunlight shining through the window. He saw Thandeka close a cupboard softly, avoiding any unnecessary noise. Snatches of a hushed conversation drifted through the archway into the kitchen.

"Hello," he said gently, his arm dangling over the low back of the kitchen chair. "How are you holding up?"

Alarmed, Thandeka spun round, almost dropping the two mugs she was holding in her hand. Her other hand went to her throat and her mouth opened into a round 'O'.

"Sorry," Ryan said sheepishly. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Thandeka's eyes were red rimmed, her dark skin was blotchy and her black frizzy hair stood up in all directions. Ryan wondered if she had slept at all during the night.

A tiny smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

"I thought you were asleep," she replied.

Ryan shook his head. "Just woke up," he said. Rising from the hard chair, he reached for the coffee mugs. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"Sure," she replied, pulling self-consciously on her creased T-shirt.

Ryan took the kettle from its stand and walked over to the kitchen sink. He opened the tap and filled up the kettle with water.

"I assume there has been no new development," he said quietly.

Spooning heaps of instant coffee into mugs, Thandeka sighed audibly. "No. There hasn't been another telephone call."

Ryan placed the kettle on its stand and pushed the on-switch. "You mustn't give up hope," he encouraged her. "We'll find Lucy. We must just be patient."

Thandeka's shoulders tensed, but she nodded in reply.

Ryan wondered if he really believed what he was saying to this young mother. There hadn't been any more contact from the kidnappers and the cops had no leads whatsoever.

He checked his watch. It was now just after eight in the morning, which meant Lucy had been missing for close to forty-one hours. Was there actually any chance they were going to find her now? Maybe she wasn't even alive any longer.

The water in the kettle boiled and Thandeka filled the mugs. Placing them on a tray, together with a bowl of sugar, a jug of milk and a few tea spoons, she made her way out of the kitchen. Ryan followed her slowly into the lounge.

His eyes rested briefly on each person: Thomas was sitting on the couch beneath the window snoring softly. Rapson, the Chief Hostage Negotiator, had placed his forearms on the backs of two dining room chairs. Although his face was grey with fatigue, his eyes sparkled with alertness as he talked to his three colleagues manning the electronic equipment assembled on the folding tables. All three of them

listened intently, but their skins were pale and fresh stubble was darkening their jaws and cheeks.

Ryan spotted Raphaela sitting on the smaller couch pushed up against the wall on the other side of the lounge. Her legs were curled beneath her and the early morning sun played with her dark hair. She was awake and as she saw him standing in the doorway, her face lit up. He grinned broadly in return remembering their passionate encounter the previous night, and with quick steps he made his way over to the couch.

"Morning," he said.

Before she could reply, a loud voice came from the front door.

"Good morning, everyone," Elijah Nkosi boomed as he stepped into the house balancing several take-away boxes and brown paper bags in his arms.

"I've brought breakfast," he proclaimed loudly.

Thomas woke with a start and sat up hastily, rubbing his eyes. The police officers spun their heads and stared suspiciously at the huge black man. Thandeka appeared out of the kitchen drying her hands on a dishtowel. Briskly she walked up to her uncle.

"Do you have to shout so loudly?" she asked reprovingly, slinging the towel over her shoulder and taking a few bags off the top of the pile in his arms. The aroma of fried chips and crispy bacon wafted through the room.

"Sorry," Nkosi said more quietly. "Didn't mean to scare anyone."

Thandeka turned to the officers who stared with open hostility at the intruder. "This is my uncle, Elijah Nkosi," she introduced him. "He's here to help us find my daughter."

The cops' expressions relaxed and Rapson took a few steps in Nkosi's direction, holding out his hand.

"Good morning," he greeted Nkosi. "I'm Steven Rapson, Chief Hostage Negotiator."

Shifting the take-away boxes to his left arm, Elijah Nkosi shook the man's hand and raised an eyebrow. "Chief Hostage Negotiator, huh?" he repeated.

Rapson nodded in reply.

"Well, well. Finally the cops are getting their arses into gear," Nkosi mocked.

"Uncle!" Thandeka exclaimed. "How dare you?"

"Sorry," Nkosi replied, but there was no remorse in his voice. "I appreciate you assisting my niece in helping to find her daughter."

Steven Rapson shrugged his shoulders. "We always do our best," he said calmly.

Ryan watched the scene from the couch. He admired the detective's self control. Obviously, the Hostage Negotiator was used to aggressive attitudes from family members under stress and years of training must have honed his skills.

A friendly smile spread across Rapson's face. "I hope you'll be able to help us as well," he said. "We can use every bit of information we can get."

Nkosi pulled a face. "Yeah, yeah," he replied, but refrained from providing any details about what he had been up to. Instead he pushed past the detective and made his way into the kitchen.

"I apologise for my uncle's rudeness," Thandeka said to Rapson, flapping her hand with embarrassment. "He's usually not like this."

Rapson placed his palm on her shoulder. "It's alright," he said reassuringly. "You are all under tremendous stress. He'll talk to us when he's ready."

Thandeka nodded graciously and followed her uncle into the kitchen.

"I don't particularly like her uncle," Raphaela whispered to Ryan. "He's bombastic and annoying, but I'm starving. Let's see if I can scrunch up some breakfast for us."

She got up from the couch.

Ryan blocked her path. "I didn't get a proper good morning," he teased.

His hands circled her waist as he pulled her closer. A knowing smile tugged at the corners of Raphaela's mouth. Ryan bent down and kissed her softly on the lips. She wrapped her arms around his neck and returned his kiss.

Conscious of the people in the lounge and not wanting to make a spectacle of himself, Ryan reluctantly let her go. In silent agreement, Raphaela stepped away from him, straightening her top in the process.

Ryan's eyes followed her as she walked gracefully across the lounge, her hips swinging seductively, a serene smile curling around her lips.

Ryan's mouth tingled pleasantly where her lips had touched his.

Well, he thought. I seem to have gotten this one right.

His reverie was interrupted when the telephone started to ring. Immediately, every man and woman in the house moved towards the electronic equipment. As previously shown by the Hostage Negotiators, Thandeka quickly placed a sophisticated headphone with a microphone attached to it over her head. The young cop on Ryan's right pressed a button and indicated to the young mother that she could answer the call. Unfortunately, after the first sentence it became clear that the caller was just another friend who wanted to offer support.

xxx

The whole morning, Rat Face followed Dirk around like a puppy adoring its master. Although Dirk appreciated the ferret's gratefulness for saving his life, he was also highly irritated by his clinginess. Eventually, Dirk escaped the ferret by retreating outside on to the patio.

Dirk sat on his haunches with his back against the chalet wall enjoying the morning sun. The sky was light blue and there was not a single puff of cloud in sight. His gaze wandered across the veld, the long golden grass swaying gracefully in the gentle breeze. The tranquillity was only interrupted by the sound of the blaring TV in the chalet.

Suddenly, Dirk spotted a feather of dust forming in the far distance. Squinting against the sun, he watched it increase in size by the minute. The red dust fanned out and rose almost to the top of the trees growing at the far end of the open veld. Dirk watched intently wondering for a short while what was creating such a huge cloud. His puzzlement didn't last long. A few minutes later, Dirk realised that two vehicles were approaching the ramshackle resort at neck break speed.

Oh no, he thought dismayed. It was much too soon! Angus and Meshak couldn't have kidnapped another girl, yet.

Dirk jumped to his feet, staring at the vehicles with barely concealed horror.

What was he going to do? he fretted silently. Once the girls were in the truck, he would be unable to help them at all!

His thoughts somersaulted, but he couldn't come up with a solution.

He stood frozen to the spot, immobilized by the sight of the two clearly visible vehicles. The front one was Angus's *bakkie* with the green lettering "Ultra Cleaning

Services” painted on its sides. The second vehicle was a three-ton truck painted entirely white. The vehicles raced along the dirt trek as if the devil himself was chasing them. The bakkie sped over ruts and potholes, bouncing up in the air, its wheels occasionally spinning free. The truck followed close behind, with not much reduced speed. It swayed from side to side and a few times Dirk feared it would crash. It didn’t take long before both vehicles skidded to a halt in front of the chalet. A huge ball of dust swirled around Dirk and he pulled the collar of his T-shirt over his mouth to block out the fine sand.

The door of the *bakkie* opened and Angus bounded onto the uneven ground. He hitched up his baggy jeans, tucked in his green shirt and rolled up the sleeves. Having finished getting dressed, Angus lifted his foot and slammed the door closed. Purposefully making his way across the patio, he stopped in front of Dirk.

“What a disaster, hey?” he addressed Dirk, placing his hands on his hips.

Dirk thought it wise to play along. “Yeah,” he replied casually. “But I’m sure you’ve made a plan.”

Angus smirked and pointed at the white truck. “We’ve been lucky,” he said. “We got another one this morning. Was late for school so we grabbed her.”

An involuntary groan escaped Dirk’s lips. His worst nightmare was confirmed. His cousin and Meshak had abducted another girl.

Hearing Dirk’s moan, Angus looked at him darkly. “What’s up?” he asked. “You not happy or what?”

Dirk quickly shook his head. “No, No,” he reassured his cousin. “It’s good news. Now you can take them all to Durban.”

“That’s right,” Angus grinned, satisfied. “We’ve got five and we are ready to roll.”

Dirk tried hard to keep his expression neutral, but inside he was screaming with frustration. He had to come up with a plan. Now! When they loaded the girls, it would be too late!

But he couldn’t think clearly.

For a brief moment he considered stabbing the tyres of the truck, but he had no decent knife at hand. The bread knife in the kitchen would never cut through the thick rubber. He thought of fighting the three men, but knew for certain that they would rather kill him before they would walk away from the promise of money. He contemplated stalling them, but just engaging them in a lengthy discussion would not do the job. The men were not talkers and would brush him off in no time. He thought of sabotaging the truck’s engine, but how would he get to the truck’s bonnet to pull the cables unnoticed?

His thoughts went round and round in his head, chasing each other like a dog trying to catch its own tail.

Dirk clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white. What on earth was he going to do?

Angus pushed past his cousin and entered the chalet. He greeted Rat Face loudly and demanded that he open the door to the girls’ prison. All Dirk could do was to stand helplessly on the patio.

“Dirk!” Angus shouted. “Get in here and help us with the merchandise.”

Dirk drew a deep breath. What else could he do, but comply?

He walked into the messy lounge and approached the open door. Angus and Rat Face were already inside the room pulling the girls to their feet. Dirk searched for Lucy who stood defiantly against the wall.

"Get going, you whores!" Angus shouted, grabbing Sam's arm. "If you don't get a move on, then we'll carry you."

Dirk looked at the blonde girl. He could see the bruises on her face. Her lip was swollen, but it would heal soon, and the cut on her cheek was only broken skin, more of a scratch than a deep wound. He tried to give her an encouraging smile, but it did no good. She was scared out of her mind. Her whole body shook and her eyes pleaded with him. Before he could say or do anything, Angus grabbed the girl, dragging her past Dirk.

Rat Face heaved Shelly up onto her feet, but her limp body would not stay upright. She sagged back onto the floor into a huddled heap.

"Fuck!" Rat Face growled. "Get up you stupid bitch!"

But Shelly curled herself into a ball and whimpered pathetically.

For a moment Rat Face stared down at the wretched figure on the floor. Dirk was worried the ferret would get angry and kick the girl, but for once Rat Face showed restraint. Instead, the ferret bent down, pushed his arms under the girl's shoulders and knees and lifted her into his arms.

"You don't want to walk?" he commented casually. "Then I'll carry you. You are worth quite a bit of money to me and you're not staying behind."

Tears streamed down Shelly's face, but the girl was too weak to struggle against the ferret's strong arms.

As Rat Face left the room, Meshak entered.

Fear surged through Silvy's slim body as she saw the huge man. His bulk was emphasised by a black T-shirt stretched tightly across his bulging muscles.

Meshak approached menacingly.

Silvy started shaking uncontrollably and tears filled her eyes. The black man stopped in front of the girl, placed his big hand on her neck and squeezed. Silvy cried out in pain. Meshak ignored her wailing, spun her around and marched her to the door. The girl twisted her head and looked back over her shoulder silently pleading with Lucy, the last of the girls left in the room.

As Meshak approached the door, he glared hard at Dirk who had remained frozen on the spot.

"What's your case, man?" he growled in his deep voice. "Get the last one."

Dirk shook himself out of his paralysed state and forced himself to walk up to Lucy who had her arms crossed rebelliously in front of her. He reached out and touched her shoulder gently.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered. "There is still hope."

Lucy stared at him in disbelief. "You are a liar," she hissed angrily. "You promised to get us out of here. You said you would help us."

Her words cut into Dirk's heart. She was right. He had promised her.

Dirk looked sadly at the black girl. "I'm still trying," he whispered. "It's not over yet."

Lucy snorted derisively.

"Please have faith," Dirk pleaded. "I'm going to get help."

Lucy rolled her eyes and shook his hand off her shoulder. With her head held high, she walked past him towards the door. At the entrance she turned around.

"I hope you'll remember us and what you've done," she spat. "You are no better than the others."

Dirk raised his hands defensively. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "But I'm still going to try, even if you don't believe me."

Lucy ignored his words, spun on her heel and walked out of the room.

Quickly, Dirk followed her into the lounge. He did not want to give his cousin the impression that he wasn't in charge of the situation. Grabbing her arm, he pretended to guide her through the chalet and across the patio. They walked past the bakkie and around the truck.

Shocked, Dirk stopped in his tracks. He stared into the truck's interior barely able to hide his anguish.

The three white girls from the chalet were sitting on a thin dirty mattress. A fourth, black girl, was lying motionless on the bare grimy metal floor. Her maroon school skirt was riding high on her bare thighs, exposing her white *panties*. Her school blouse was torn at the seam, her arms twisted in an unnatural angle, and her cheek was pressed into a groove of the floor.

Dirk could not see her chest rising and falling and worried that she might not have survived the chloroform attack.

His gaze wandered back to the other girls. Their dirty faces were tear-streaked. Pain, anguish and sorrow reflected in their eyes. They were huddled together like frightened baby rabbits who knew they were about to be slaughtered.

Dirk's heart hurt as if squeezed by a mighty fist. Angrily he glared at Angus, but when saw his cousin's expression he knew it would be too dangerous for him to even utter the slightest sound.

Dirk looked at Lucy whose features were as hard as if chiselled out of stone. Without a word, she stepped forward, climbed into the truck and sat down beside the girls. Dirk tried to catch her eye, but Lucy refused point blank to look at him.

Before he could do or say anything, Meshak slammed the doors shut, jimmied the levers into place, locking in the girls.

Angus grinned and rubbed his hands. "That's done," he said satisfied. "Now we can get down to Durban." He checked his watch. "There's more than enough time."

Dirk was desperate to stop the inevitable happening.

"What time do they have to be there?" he asked, hiding his anxiety.

Angus turned away from the truck and made his way slowly to the chalet. "They have to be there between eight and nine tonight," he explained. "We'll have to wait for the contact at the harbour."

Following his cousin to the house, Dirk frowned. "Why do you have to wait for eight o'clock?"

Angus stopped in front of the patio doors. "Because they can't get past security before that. The boss's contact can only get us to the container site when the shift changes."

Dirk nodded with understanding. "And then?" he wanted to know. "What happens then?"

Angus stepped into the chalet. "Then the girls will be put into a special container which will be loaded the next day. Then the ship leaves and we'll get paid," he said easily.

Dirk sighed, his heart heavy as he imagined the five girls disappearing without trace. He had to do something! Dirk chewed his bottom lip thoughtfully. Maybe he could pry some more information out of his cousin.

Dirk quickened his step and stood beside Angus. "Do you know exactly where they are going to be sent?" he asked casually.

Angus shrugged. "Some Asian country," he replied indifferently, surveying the lounge area through narrowed eyes.

"Which Asian country?" Dirk persisted.

His cousin jutted out his chin. "I don't know," he growled annoyed. "And I don't care. The boss said some chink wants girls and that's all I need to know."

Dirk sensed his cousin's agitation, but he needed more than the bits and pieces Angus was throwing his way.

"Do you know which ship they are going on?" he pried.

Angus turned slowly, crossing his arms in front of him.

"Why do you want to know?" he asked suddenly suspicious.

Dirk faked innocence. "Just wanting to know," he replied, shrugging his shoulders. "No reason."

Angus squinted at him for a moment longer, then slapped his hand on Dirk's back.

"You can always ask the boss," his cousin laughed jovially.

Dirk's mind spun wondering who this mysterious boss was. He was about to ask, but checked his cousin's face. Angus was watching him carefully and Dirk realised with a sudden jolt that his cousin was testing him. Quickly Dirk decided that it would be much wiser to stop being nosy. Instead he smiled feebly and made his way back towards the patio doors.

But the thoughts kept tumbling in Dirk's head. What was he going to do? Very soon all four of them would be gone and the girls with them. He had to do something, but what?

His desperate scrounging for a solution was suddenly interrupted by Angus's loud voice.

"Me and Meshak will be taking the truck down to Durban." He pointed at the bakkie. "You and Rudi will drive my van back to my place," he instructed.

Dirk's ears pricked up. "We are not going with you to Durban?" he asked cautiously.

Angus shook his head. "There's not enough space in the truck's cabin," he explained. "It's only big enough for me and Meshak. You'll take the bakkie home. I'll pick it up when I come back from the coast."

Hope surged through Dirk.

Here was a chance to save the girls. He could hardly hide his excitement. If he wasn't joining Angus on the trip to Durban, then he could still contact Lucy's mother! He only had to wait for Angus and Meshak to leave. Once they were gone, he could make up a story to get away from the ferret for a few minutes. It would only take one phone call to tell Lucy's mom where her daughter was. Maybe Lucy's mom had already asked for the cops' help, that would make the rescue so much easier.

Angus returned to the patio and stared hard at Rat Face. "We are going to leave now," he said. "You are going to clean-up the mess in the room and lock up."

Rat Face screwed up his eyes.

"Don't try to give me lip," Angus snarled viciously, anticipating the ferret's objections. "You will make sure this place is decent."

Rat Face flinched and hunched his shoulders. He remembered his beating from Angus the previous day and he rubbed his palm over his bruised ribs. Instantly his attitude changed and he became the obedient servant.

"Don't worry, Angus," he schmoozed. "I'll clean up as you ask."

Hitching up his jeans again, Angus walked back to the truck.

"Let's go Meshak," he called. "I'll see you guys in a couple of days." He rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. "I'll give you a call once we got paid."

Rat Face grinned happily. "Can't wait," he shouted back.

Angus opened the door and climbed into the truck's cabin. Meshak followed suit on the other side and slammed the door close. Angus turned the key in the ignition and the engine rumbled to life. Shifting gears noisily, he reversed a short stretch into the veld, raising a cloud of dust, and turned the truck around. With a loud roar the truck rolled onto the dirt track and made its way towards the trees in the distance and the tarred road beyond.

The ferret disappeared into the chalet attending to the task of cleaning up the girls' former prison.

Here was his chance, Dirk thought, a nervous knot forming in his stomach. He needed to get this right. If he didn't, then the girls' fate was sealed forever.

Dirk poked his head past the doorframe. "Hey Rudi," he called. "Where are you?"

"I'm in here," Rat Face's muffled voice came from the girls' room.

Dirk crossed the lounge and saw the ferret lifting the dirty mattress.

Dirk pushed his hands into his jeans pockets. "I'm just going down to the river," he informed the ferret casually.

Rat Face glanced at him over his shoulder. "Why?"

Cocking his head to the side, Dirk replied casually, "Just making sure the dead girl is really gone."

Rat Face waved his hand dismissively. "Whatever," he responded without interest. "Just don't be too long because I want to go soon. I've had enough of this place."

"Sure," Dirk confirmed. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Dirk breathed in deeply. The coast was clear.

Slowly, not wanting to raise any suspicion, he walked away from the chalet down to the river.

Brown dirty water rushed along the river bed. It spilled over the edges and shallowly flooded lower lying areas of the *veld*. Dirk stared at the ominous swirling water and shuddered involuntarily as he remembered the close call from the previous night.

If he hadn't looked up-river, and if there hadn't been a lightning flash, he would never have seen the flash flood. Rat Face would have been swept away and would have drowned. Not that the ferret's death would be a great loss to the world, but he was still a human being. Dirk saw it as his duty to help a fellow man in dire need, even if that man was as despicable as the ferret.

Dirk stopped beside one of the large trees bordering the river bank. He stepped behind the huge trunk and peered up to the house. There was no sign of the ferret.

It was now or never!

Quickly, before he could change his mind, Dirk pulled out his cellphone. Scrolling through the list of dialled numbers, he found the one for Lucy's mother. Keeping his eyes on the chalet, he pressed the redial button. He lifted the phone to his ear, listened to the ring tone and held his breath. A minute later a female voice answered the phone.

"Hello?" she said.

Dirk was almost certain it was the woman from yesterday, but he wanted to make doubly sure.

"Mrs Nkosi?" he asked hesitantly.

The woman drew a deep breath. It seemed as if she recognised his voice too.

"Yes," she replied cautiously.

Knowing he had only a little time, Dirk rushed headlong into his admission.

"Mrs Nkosi," he said. "It's Dirk here. Please don't freak out like you did yesterday."

Dirk heard some noises in the background which he couldn't place.

"I'm not going to freak out," Lucy's mom said calmly. "What can you tell me?"

She sounded strange and it occurred to Dirk that she might be taking instructions from someone else.

"Mrs Nkosi," he said. "Are the cops with you?"

There was a moment of silence and Dirk thought he might have lost her.

"Are you still there?" he asked anxiously. "Don't worry about me. If the police are with you then that's a good thing. They can help get Lucy back."

Her voice came back over the line. "Yes," she confirmed. "The police are here."

Dirk nodded appreciatively. "That's good," he said. "You've got lots of help then."

"Where are you?" Thandeka asked calmly.

Dirk surveyed his surroundings: the swollen brown river, the golden veld, the red dirt track and the resort of rundown chalets.

"I'm in a remote area in the south," he replied, trying hard to come up with an appropriate description. "There is a small resort here, but the chalets are falling to pieces. They were never used as holiday retreat. The buildings are about five hundred metres from a river and it's about four kilometres on a dirt track to the next road."

Dirk heard a whispered conversation on the other side.

"How do I get there?" Thandeka asked.

Dirk shuffled his feet uneasily. This was all taking too long.

He drew a deep breath. It was better to stay calm and answer all the questions.

"Where are you coming from?" he wanted to know.

"From Edenvale," she replied quickly.

Dirk squinted at the rough bark of the tree trunk as he tried to picture the route from Edenvale in his head.

"You take the N1 South," he said, concentrating very hard. "Then you turn onto the N12 towards Witbank, but you get off when you come to Klipriver. You follow the road for about fifteen kilometres. Eventually you see a dirt road veering off to the left. You take that one and follow it. It runs along the railway tracks. After about five kilometres it goes over the tracks. Carry on for about four kilometres, past the trees, and eventually you'll see the chalets. You can't miss it."

"Let me repeat," Thandeka said. "I get on to the N1 South ..."

Dirk interrupted her. "You don't have time," he said edgily.

"Why?" she asked.

"Lady..," he growled, becoming angry, but then he heard an ominous crackle on the line and the connection was broken.

A second later a male voice came over the line.

"Hi Dirk," the man said. "Don't hang up on me."

Dirk rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to," he replied.

"Good. Let me introduce myself," the man continued. "I'm Steven Rapson. I'm a Hostage Negotiator."

"So what?" Dirk snapped. "The girls don't need a negotiator. They need a rescue team!"

"I understand that," Rapson replied calmly. "Can you tell me a bit more about the situation there?" he asked.

Oh, Dirk thought. This is what it's about. Lucy's mom freaked when I said that there's not much time, so this guy takes over because he can ask the right questions.

Dirk nodded in agreement, although Rapson could not see him.

"Sure," he replied confidently. "The girls are in a white, three-ton truck. Totally enclosed. It looks like one of those refrigeration trucks."

"What about markings?" the detective queried.

Dirk shook his head. "Nope," he said. "Nothing. It's plain white. No bumps or scratches."

Another few seconds of silence followed.

"Did you see the number plates?" Rapson asked.

Dirk shrugged his shoulders. He wasn't that dumb, he thought cynically. That's the first thing he looked for when the truck arrived.

Dirk pushed the front of his *takkie* into the soft ground. "Yes," he replied. "It's NPG1....."

Suddenly, Dirk felt a hand on his shoulder.

With a fright, he spun around, staring straight into the face of the ferret.

CHAPTER 24

"Who are you talking to?" a male voice boomed over the speaker in Thandeka's sitting room.

"Nobody," they heard Dirk reply.

Thandeka's hand flew to her mouth and Rapson drew a deep breath. Dirk had been caught in the act of making the phone call. Ryan glanced at Thomas and saw the blood draining from his partner's face.

"Fuck!" the man's sharp voice came over the line. "Don't tell me nobody! Who were you talking to?"

"If you really want to know," Dirk said sounding sheepish, "I was talking to my mother."

The other man snorted loudly. "Your mother?"

"Yeah," Dirk replied calmly. "Just letting her know that I'll be home soon."

"Your mother, my arse!" the other man shouted. "You've been snitching on us!"

"No," Dirk replied calmly. "I was talking to my mother."

Ryan and Thomas exchanged nervous glances. Rapson crossed his arms and stared intently at the black box standing on the folding table, his face unreadable. Raphaella was holding Thandeka's hand. Both women followed each tiny sound emitted from the speakers with rapt attention.

"Bullshit!" the other man yelled. "You are talking to the cops."

Suddenly, they heard a dull thud. Ryan thought it sounded like a punch and he flinched involuntarily.

Dirk yelped with pain. "Shit," he shouted. "What was that for?"

Instead of a reply, there was a clattering noise. Faint grunts and shuffling sounds echoed around the lounge.

"I'm going to kill you," they heard the other man's muffled voice.

Realising the two men were fighting and Dirk had lost the phone, Thandeka's legs became suddenly weak.

She needed Dirk back on the line! They still needed more information. They would never find Lucy if he didn't tell them what he knew!

Desperate for answers, Thandeka took a step forward and leaned over the loud speaker. Anticipating her reaction, Rapson put his hand on her arm and firmly pulled her back. Thandeka stared at him glassy eyed, her mouth open, ready to protest, but Rapson shook his head and placed his index finger on his lips.

A helpless groan escaped her lips, but Thandeka complied and sank onto the couch's armrest behind her.

More shuffling sounds reached their ears. Muffled voices, grunts and groans came over the speakers. No one in the room could make out what was being said, but it seemed clear the two men were caught up in a heavy fight. Silently, Ryan was rooting for Dirk. He hoped the guy was strong and fast enough to fend off his attacker.

A loud cracking noise bounced off the walls. Everyone cringed and instinctively ducked their heads. Another cracking sound bounced around the room.

Then, only silence hissed over the loud speakers.

They had lost the connection!

"Damn," Rapson whispered, dropping his arms to his sides.

Thandeka looked from one person to the next. "What happened?" she asked.

Rapson turned to her. "Sounded like the cellphone was dropped to the ground and someone stepped on it," he said. "One thing is for sure, we have definitely lost the link."

Thandeka's eyes filled with tears. "What are we going to do now?" she whispered. "We don't have all the details. How are we going to find Lucy?"

Rapson smiled and patted her on the back. "But we know a lot," he replied. "For example, we know where they are. Dirk has given us a description of the place where your daughter was held. I'll get a team together and we'll catch the kidnappers before they can leave the area."

Before Thandeka could ask another question, Rapson turned on his heel and walked to the dining room table.

"Allan," he called. "Get me a map of Johannesburg. John call the Metro and also connect me to the squad team."

As Rapson flipped open his lap top and began punching keys, Ryan and Thomas looked at each other. Both men had noted Dirk's directions and neither of them had any intention of waiting for the squad team to make an appearance. Time was of the essence and the sooner they got going, the sooner they would get Lucy back.

Rapson and his three colleagues were clustered together around the dining room table when Ryan and Thomas moved away from the telephone station in the middle of the lounge and quietly made their way to the front door. As they reached the small entrance hall, Ryan threw a glance over his shoulder at Raphaela. She stared worriedly back at him, knowing very well what he was about to do.

Although she didn't quite agree with what the two men had in mind, she was not about to jeopardise their plan. Nodding at Ryan, she mouthed silently: "be careful". A brief appreciative grin flashed across his face. Then he slipped quietly past the front door, walking quickly to catch Thomas who was already on the driveway.

Out of earshot, Thomas asked, "Are we going to do what I think we are going to do?"

Ryan nodded grimly. "I'm not waiting around for the cops," he replied. "By the time they get mobilised, we'll be halfway there."

"On top of that," Ryan continued as he approached his BMW 4x4, "they wouldn't let us go with them anyway. They would tell us to stay put and I can't have that."

"Right," Thomas concurred. "I'm tired of waiting. I need to get going, otherwise I'll go mad."

Thomas stopped in front of the car's hood. "Who's going to drive?" he asked tersely.

Ryan gauged that his partner was in no state to drive safely. All Thomas wanted to do was get to Lucy and the abductors as fast as possible. Ryan wasn't about to risk his life.

"I am," he replied, easing his words with a smile. "You're welcome to use the GPS to guide me in the right direction."

The two of them opened their respective doors and climbed into the vehicle. Ryan turned the key in the ignition and the engine rumbled to life. He reversed quickly out of Thandeka's driveway.

As he stepped back, Dirk felt the cellphone crunch under his heel. It broke in half and was buried into the soft wet soil.

Shit! he screamed silently.

Now there was no chance to talk to the cops any longer. The fate of the girls was sealed. And it was the ferret's fault! Why couldn't the guy leave him alone? Why did he have to come down to the river?

Dirk clenched his teeth with helpless anger.

Rat Face stared at him through narrowed eyes. "I'm going to kill you," he hissed. "You're not going to lose me all that money."

Dirk wondered for a brief moment if Rat Face was serious.

Noticing the ferret's pinched expression and the mania flashing in his eyes made Dirk realized quickly that Rat Face was determined to make good on his threat.

Cautiously, Dirk took a few steps backwards on the mushy ground, staying out of reach, all the while watching the ferret with great care.

Dirk tried one last time to talk sense into the guy. "Don't you have any conscience?" he asked distraught. He threw his hands up in the air. "They are so young. They'll not survive at the hands of a sex maniac."

Rat Face snorted loudly. "I give a flying fuck if they survive or not," he snarled. "If they die, even better, then we have to get more of them and get paid again."

Dirk shook his head angrily. "You are a despicable piece of shit," he replied heatedly. "You don't deserve to be on this earth. People like you shouldn't be born."

The ferret's lips curled up viciously. It took him three quick steps to close the gap between them. He raised his fists ready to punch Dirk again, but Dirk bobbed and weaved out of reach. He balanced on his toes and danced closer. His fist shot out with lightning speed and connected with the ferret's jaw. Rat Face groaned with pain and dropped his defence. Dirk stepped into the ferret's space and landed another punch. The ferret stumbled back catching his balance only with difficulty.

Dirk followed him into a shallow puddle of water, his *takkies* instantly filling with mud. His feet squelched and losing his concentration for a moment, Dirk did not see Rat Face advance. The ferret's knuckles landed on his mouth. Dirk's head snapped back, his lip split painfully, and he tasted blood on his tongue. Hurriedly, Dirk skipped out of the way, blinking away the tears forming in the corners of his eyes. Keeping a few metres distance between them, Dirk wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, smearing blood across his cheek.

If that's how the ferret wanted to play it, then so be it, Dirk thought furiously.

He narrowed his eyes and charged. But instead of retreating, the ferret raced forward. Their bodies collided and they both went down to the ground. Water splashed up, splattering Dirk's face and running into his eyes. As he shook his head, Rat Face wrapped his arms around Dirk's torso. Using his full bodyweight, the ferret pushed Dirk's head down into the stinking brown liquid. The ferret was trying to drown him!

Water filled Dirk's nostrils and mouth. With strength born from pure adrenalin, Dirk hammered the ferret's back and sides. Rat Face was wiry and surprisingly resilient. Dirk writhed and wriggled and finally Rat Face lost his grip. Dirk lashed out and his foot connected with the ferret's stomach. Rat Face doubled over, groaned with pain and rolled away.

During this short reprieve, Dirk sat up, caught his breath and wiped the water off his face.

Suddenly the ferret was on him again. But this time Dirk saw something glint in the bright morning light. He gasped loudly.

The knife! Rat Face had pulled out his knife!

Dirk threw his body out of the shallow pool. He landed awkwardly, his back hitting the thick protruding roots of a tree. The fall took away his breath for an instant, giving the ferret a much needed advantage. His head held low, Rat Face approached. The serrated edge of the knife glittered dangerously in the sunlight. Dirk struggled onto his feet, never letting the deadly weapon out of his sight.

The ferret stepped closer, throwing the knife from one hand to the other, a sadistic grin spreading over his ugly face. Slowly moving backwards, Dirk stayed carefully out of reach, but the ferret followed him relentlessly. Dirk had almost rounded the tree when his foot caught on another knobby root.

His arms flailed like the wings of a windmill as he tried to keep his balance. Rat Face pounced. He crashed into Dirk and they went down onto the ground again. Rat Face pushed his forearm across Dirk's throat and pushed downwards.

Dirk's right hand clawed desperately on the ferret's arm trying to pull it away from his windpipe, while his left hand groped on the ground hoping to find some kind of a weapon.

Soon, Dirk's breath came in short bursts. Starved of air, his vision began to blur and his face turned a dark red. His hand closed around a fist-size rock. As he raised his arm, he felt a white hot searing pain in his side. Dirk screamed and smashed the rock with all his strength onto Rat Face's head. The skin on the ferret's skull burst open and blood spurted over Dirk.

Rat Face grunted and went limp. His body slumped on top of Dirk's, but the pressure against his throat subsided. He was able to breathe again, but the pain in his side was unbearable. Dirk managed to roll the ferret's inert body off himself. He pushed himself into a sitting position groaning in agony with each tiny move he made.

Dirk leaned against a fallen tree trunk and felt his side. His hand came away sticky with warm blood. He twisted his head and looked down. His wet T-shirt was soaked in blood. Carefully, Dirk lifted the torn fabric and inspected his side. The ferret's knife had made a clean cut through his skin penetrating deep into his body.

The pain was excruciating and tears rolled freely down Dirk's cheeks. A rivulet of blood flowed into the waistband of his jeans. He pressed his hand on the wound to stop the bleeding, but cried out in agony. Dropping his hand on the ground, he let the pain swirl over him like dark waves in the sea.

After a few minutes, as his body adjusted to the searing fire in his side, Dirk lifted his head. Through tear filled eyes he stared at the ferret lying motionless a few metres away from him.

Why wasn't Rat Face moving? Why wasn't he sitting up? Why wasn't he on his feet, ready to attack him again?

Holding his bleeding side and biting hard on his teeth so as not to cry out loud, Dirk got on all fours and crawled over to the ferret. Once beside Rat Face, he slumped to the ground, dark clouds invading his sight. He drew deep breaths to stay conscious.

After several moments, he lifted himself off the ground, reached out to the immobile ferret and shook him vigorously.

Rat Face didn't respond.

Dirk inched closer to the ferret. Moving into a sitting position, he reached out and pushed the ferret's head.

Dirk gasped with shock.

The back of Rat Face's head was one big bloody mess. His hair was slippery with blood and Dirk could see a fist-size indentation in his skull.

Oh God! He hoped he hadn't killed Rat Face.

Anxiously Dirk pressed his forefingers against the ferret's neck, trying to feel for a pulse.

But there was none.

He moved his fingers up and down beneath the ferret's chin, but there was no flutter beneath the soft pale skin.

Rat Face was dead!

Deep despair overwhelmed him. He had never intended to kill Rudi. It had happened in self-defence. As much as he had loathed the guy, he never wanted to seriously harm him.

And now he was dead!

"I'm so sorry, Rudi," he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Tears of regret streamed down Dirk's face and his shoulders were racked by heavy sobs. The movement sent searing stabs through his side and into his stomach, cruelly reminding him of his injury. Groaning loudly, Dirk controlled his crying and wiped his face with the palms of his hands.

Once again, he inspected his ribs. The blood was still flowing freely into the waistband of his jeans.

As he lifted his head, wondering what to do about his wound, the world began to spin around him. Sudden nausea threatened to make him throw up. He desperately tried to focus on a particular point in the distance, but everything became blurred. His head felt light and darkness crept into his peripheral vision. Frantically trying to hang onto consciousness, Dirk rubbed his eyes and bit on his bottom lip, but it was no use.

Complete darkness settled over him and he passed out.

xxx

Every time Ryan approached a bridge he hoped there were no hidden speed traps. For the last thirty minutes he'd been pushing his 4x4, exceeding the speed limit and to hell with the law, although he really didn't want to be stopped by some overeager cop who wanted to make a quick buck by issuing a fine.

Throughout their journey, Thomas had been sitting quietly. He concentrated on the small GPS cradled in his hands, only passing on directions when necessary.

Ryan glanced out of the window. Trees, dry brush and open veld rushed by in a blur, until the area they were finally approaching started to meet the description the kidnapper had given over the phone. Ryan slowed down a little.

"Look for a dirt road on the left leading off this main road," he instructed Thomas.

Keeping one eye on the road, Thomas scanned the embankment with the other.

"There it is!" he called, leaning forward eagerly.

Without indicating, Ryan swerved onto the dirt track. His 4x4 bounced heavily over the deep ruts and for a split second he thought the car was going to roll.

"Shit!" Thomas exclaimed, grabbing the dash board and holding on for dear life. "You don't have to kill me!"

Ryan grunted something unintelligible, slammed his foot on the brakes and the car came almost to a standstill. A thick cloud of dust obscured their view. Unclenching his hands from the steering wheel, Ryan waited for the sand to settle. Thomas blew out a deep breath, but refrained from saying anything. When they were able to see through the windshield again, Ryan pushed his foot gently on the accelerator and moved the 4x4 forward.

He followed the dirt road alongside the railway line, dipping the car into deep potholes and navigating it over steep ruts. Time raced away and their progress was extremely slow. After a while Ryan increased his speed, only to be punished by another large pothole.

Eventually they reached the railway crossing. Ryan stopped the 4x4 as required by traffic law. The sun glinted off the thick metal tracks snaking emptily into the far distance on his right and left. Making doubly sure, he checked in each direction before driving across the tracks.

A few hundred metres further on, Ryan recognised the copse of trees the kidnapper had described. Following the rutted dirt road, they headed over a small rise. The trees receded behind their right shoulder and the *veld* opened up before them. Immediately they spotted the resort close to the river's banks.

Thomas sat forward and squinted through the windshield. "There it is," he growled, pointing at the cluster of derelict chalets.

Ryan slowed down to a crawl and scanned the area carefully. He did not want to run into an ambush. Who knew if the kidnappers were armed? He could do without a bullet to the chest.

A *bakkie* with green lettering on its panels was parked in front of a chalet. Ryan's eyes darted from one small derelict building to the next, wishing his gaze could turn corners and penetrate the waist-high crumbling brick walls. He scrutinized the area around the chalets one more time, but he detected no movement.

"Where are they?" Thomas asked bewildered.

"Don't know," Ryan replied tersely.

They approached slowly, letting their eyes roam the open *veld* vigilantly, both tensing at the slightest movement in the long grass and the faintest shift in the copse of trees in the distance.

Thomas swivelled his head from side to side. "Didn't the guy say they have a three-ton truck?"

"Yep," Ryan confirmed, carefully navigating his 4x4 around a thicket of dry thorny bushes.

"But I don't see any truck," Thomas complained.

Ryan stopped beside the white van. "Maybe they've left already?"

"Don't say that," Thomas growled. "If they've gone, that means Lucy is also gone."

Ryan switched off the engine and sudden silence surrounded them.

They sat in the 4x4 for a few minutes, waiting for something to happen, but there was only silence.

Resolutely Ryan opened his door. "Come," he said. "Let's check this place out. If the kidnappers have gone, we might find something that will point us in their direction."

Leaving his door wide open, in case he needed to escape quickly, Ryan approached the tiled patio of the chalet, noticing the wire running from the overland electricity pylon to the side of the building.

They are definitely organised, he thought begrudgingly. If they have electricity, who knows what else they have installed inside? Security systems, Infra-red cameras and sensors came to his mind.

Keenly aware of this ability to be prepared in the middle of nowhere, Ryan cautiously walked towards the patio doors. He checked for his shadow; God knew he didn't want it warning anyone who was hiding inside the chalet. He moved cautiously up to the door and peered around the corner.

A tiny lounge area, its floor littered with empty fast food wrappers and empty Styrofoam boxes greeted him. A broken couch stood to his left and an old TV set, its sound switched to mute, perched on a rickety sideboard to his right.

Suddenly, Ryan sensed a presence behind him. He spun on his heel, only to see Thomas raise his hands defensively.

"Damn," Ryan growled. "You gave me a fright."

Thomas jutted out his chin. "What did you expect me to do? Stay in the car?"

"No, of course not," Ryan replied quickly. "Sorry."

Without answering, Thomas walked past his partner and stepped boldly over the threshold. Ryan had no choice but to follow him into the semi-dark interior.

The two men made their way into the middle of the chalet. More litter was strewn on the floor and Thomas turned up his nose in disgust.

"To be expected," he muttered.

Ryan ignored the remark and walked towards the room leading off the main area. Just before he reached the door, he stopped dead in his tracks.

"Thomas," he called. "Look at this."

A few quick steps brought Thomas to his side. Both men stared with horror at their find. Five backpacks had been thrown haphazardly against the wall. Books, folders and single sheets of paper were fully or partially hidden under empty take-away boxes.

Thomas dropped to his haunches and pushed the rubbish out of the way. What he discovered took his breath away.

"These are broken cellphones," he stammered, pointing at the floor.

Ryan knelt down beside him and picked up a few plastic pieces. "The kidnappers made sure nobody could contact the girls," he said quietly.

Thomas sorted through the backpacks and picked one up. His dark skin paled considerably as he opened the small compartment at the top and pulled out a tiny pink telephone book.

"This is Lucy's," he gasped.

Holding the small book in his hand, he looked at Ryan by his side. Pain, fear and anguish flashed across his face in quick succession.

"She was here," he whispered. "She was definitely here."

Ryan nodded, his mouth set in a grim line.

"We have to find her," Thomas stated, his dark eyes suddenly flashing with fury.

Ryan placed his hand on Thomas' shoulder. "Sure," he replied comfortingly. "We'll find her and the other ones, too."

As Thomas clutched Lucy's bag to his chest, Ryan picked up a navy-blue backpack. Zipping open a compartment, he found a white envelope addressed to a Mr and Mrs Baxter.

"Here's a letter addressed to another girl's parents," Ryan said, holding up the envelope.

Jolted out of his dark thoughts, Thomas helped Ryan inspect the rest of the bags. Each one contained some form of identification.

Ryan got to his feet holding several items in his hands. "We must call Steven Rapson," Ryan said firmly. "He must contact the other parents telling them what has happened."

Still holding Lucy's backpack, Thomas rose to his full height. "Yeah," he agreed. "But first we need to find out where they've gone." His arm swept over their surroundings. "It's obvious they've left."

Ryan scanned the rest of the chalet. Apart from a mountain of litter, empty bottles and dirty dishes on the kitchen counter, there was nothing else to see.

"I don't think they've left any clues behind," he mumbled.

With big strides, Thomas marched through the lounge to the kitchen. Reaching up, he opened one cupboard door after the other, to find only emptiness staring back at him. He worked his way around the kitchen, but found not a single scrap of paper or note that might indicate where the kidnappers had gone.

Standing beside the filthy counter, Thomas pinched the tip of his nose. "What now?" he asked tiredly.

Wiping his face with the palm of his hand, Ryan replied despondently, "I don't know."

"Shit!" Thomas shouted in frustration, slamming his fist on the counter top.

He stormed out of the chalet and Ryan followed him slowly.

Thomas stopped on the patio, his face a stony mask. "There must be something we can do," he said. "It can't be the end of the road. We have to find Lucy!"

Ryan did not reply, because he had no answers.

Standing side by side in the sun, each one mulling over various possibilities, Ryan's eyes swept over the open *veld* towards the trees lining the banks of the river. A cluster of big black birds had gathered above a particular spot. He curiously watched them for a while, but the birds did not disperse. Instead, new ones joined those already circling.

Ryan pointed towards the river. "What do you think that is?" he asked.

Thomas squinted against the sun and followed Ryan's line of direction. "Don't know," he replied. "Maybe a dead animal."

"Let's check it out," Ryan suggested, suddenly feeling uneasy.

Without waiting for Thomas's consent, Ryan stepped off the patio and made his way through the *veld* towards the river. The long grass clung to his trouser legs, leaving dusty streaks. As he got closer, he watched the black feathered birds circle the blue sky; their wings spread wide, drifting without effort, using the hot thermal winds.

Ryan moved closer to the edge of the river and scanned the area before him. Pools of dirty water glistened in the *veld*, clumps of dead grass and broken off tree branches were scattered everywhere and, water lapped rhythmically over the banks of the river.

Ryan heard Thomas drawing deep breaths beside him. "What do you think?"

"Flood," Thomas replied simply, placing his hands on his hips and staring at the swollen river.

Slowly, Ryan walked on, circumventing pools of water until he had reached the tree line. His eyes roamed the river's banks and all at once he caught his breath.

"Shit," he muttered, rapidly walking forward until he had disappeared behind a tree trunk.

Puzzled, Thomas stared after Ryan.

When Ryan did not re-appear a few minutes later, Thomas decided to investigate. He approached the big tree where he'd last seen Ryan. Two large black birds sat on the ground and a third swooped down from a branch above him. It flapped its huge wings angrily, settling down a distance from the other two, emitting an annoyed screeching.

Thomas ignored the ugly creatures and stepped past the thick tree trunk. His eyes became wide as he saw Ryan kneeling on the ground. He rushed forward and came to a slithering halt beside his partner.

"Damn!" he gasped. "What happened here?"

Ryan was pushing his index finger against a young man's neck feeling for a pulse.

He flicked his head at the other guy lying motionless on the ground a few metres away.

"He's dead," he stated. "I can't find a pulse."

Thomas looked closer at the dead guy and saw dried blood clinging to his scalp. The wound was so horrible it was beyond reason to hope that the man could have survived the injury.

He turned back to Ryan. "What about this one?" he asked worriedly.

"I've got a pulse," Ryan replied, removing his hand. "It's very faint, but it's there."

They both stared at the man on the flattened grass. The young, almost handsome face did not sprout any hair and he looked more like a boy than a grown man. Ryan guessed he was not older than eighteen or nineteen years. Brown mud and small broken sticks stuck to his longish hair, which had fallen unruly across his forehead and clung to his cheeks. The boy's jeans were grass stained and his *takkies* were soaking wet. His grimy T-shirt was torn on the left side and drenched in blood.

"We have to call an ambulance," Ryan said, rocking on his heels. He pointed to the boy's ribs. "It looks like he's been stabbed and I don't know if he'll stay alive much longer. Look at all the blood he's lost."

The ground beneath the young guy was doused in red and his wound looked extremely deep.

Ryan pulled out his cellphone, but Thomas stopped him. "Maybe this is the young guy who phoned us?" he said.

A frown appeared on Ryan's forehead. "And?"

Thomas knelt down. "We should try to revive him," he suggested. "Maybe he can tell us where they've taken Lucy."

Ryan scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"It will take hours for the ambulance to arrive," Thomas continued, waving his hand. "By the time they get here, the guy might be dead."

Thomas's words made a compelling argument. Ryan glanced at the wound and noticed again how vicious it looked. Neither he nor Thomas were trained paramedics, but it was a good guess that the weapon used to stab the boy had

damaged internal organs. The young man might not make it before help arrived and then their chance of finding out where Lucy was, was gone for good.

Ryan pursed his lips.

Thomas nudged his arm. "What if he's bleeding out?" he asked anxiously. "The ambulance will be too late ... but he can help us now."

Finally Ryan nodded his head. "Alright," he said. "Let's see if we can get him back into the land of the living."

Thomas laced his fingers together and remembering CPR, he placed his hands on the young man's chest. Pressing rhythmically on the boy's chest, he started to count. After a while, he pinched the guy's nose closed and gently blew air into his lungs. Repeating the process over and over again, small beads of sweat formed on Thomas' forehead and dark wet patches appeared under his arms.

Leaving Thomas to his task, Ryan took his eyes off the boy and checked the area around him. A few more black birds had settled on the soggy ground and were steadily moving closer. Disgusted, Ryan picked up a handful of stones and threw them at the birds, but instead of flying away, the ugly creatures just hopped a few metres out of reach and screeched loudly.

As Ryan turned his attention back to Thomas and the boy, he saw the young man's eyelids flutter a couple of times.

"I think he's coming to," Ryan said excitedly.

Thomas stopped the CPR and held his cheek against the boy's mouth. Ryan was right: the boy was definitely taking some breaths on his own. After a couple of minutes a low groan escaped his lips. The boy's eyes came into focus and he stared up into their faces.

"Hello," Ryan said gently. "Welcome back. How are you feeling?"

The young man grimaced with pain. "It hurts," he whispered.

Thomas leaned forward so that the boy could see him without having to move.

"What happened here?" he asked, pointing his thumb over his shoulder.

The guy closed his eyes. "Got stabbed," he replied with difficulty.

Ryan took the boy's hand in his own. "Who are you?" he probed.

The young man opened his eyes and looked at him with sudden panic.

"I'm Dirk," he whispered urgently. "Are you here for Lucy?"

Ryan glanced quickly at Thomas.

"Yes," Thomas replied. "We came to get Lucy, but she's gone."

A tear appeared at the corner of Dirk's eyes. "I'm so sorry," he mumbled. "I'm so sorry."

Ryan squeezed Dirk's hand gently. "It's alright," he said reassuringly. "Tell us where they have gone."

Dirk looked fearfully at Thomas. "They ... in a truck," he said, trying hard to squeeze out the words.

Thomas's nostrils flared angrily. "You said so over the phone," he growled. "Can you tell us more?"

Dirk's breathing became laboured.

"Hey. Stay with us," Ryan called softly, worried the boy would fall unconscious again.

Dirk bit his bottom lip. "It hurts ... bad," he breathed.

Ryan nodded with sympathy.

"It's alright, the ambulance is on its way," he lied, trying to comfort the boy.

A grateful expression crossed Dirk's face. He turned his head to Thomas. "Number plate ... NPG 176 GP," he recited slowly, his voice quivering with pain.

Thomas sighed with sudden relief. At least they had that! Now the cops could put out an alert and hopefully stop the kidnappers from wherever they were going.

Dirk closed his eyes again. The pain was unbearable. It was an enormous effort to just keep breathing. Each intake of air burned like fire and his insides felt as if they were being ripped apart. Darkness threatened to close in on him again.

He was afraid. He was so afraid!

Sensing Dirk slipping away, Ryan squeezed his hand again.

"Come on," he encouraged him. "Hold on."

Dirk opened his eyes and focused on the tall man with the blond hair leaning over him.

"Am I going to die?" he asked pitifully.

Ryan shook his head. "No," he replied determinedly. "You are not going to die."

Dirk did not want to die. He wanted to live! He didn't want his life to end like this. He still had so many things to do! He still had to find a girlfriend. He wanted to go to university. He wanted to sit in the rocking chair at his mom's house and bathe his face in the warm sun.

Why did Rudi have to stab him? Why hadn't he been able to push him off?

Darkness swept over him like a soft velvet blanket.

The pain was excruciating. Dirk wanted to let go, but the voice of the black man held him back.

"Do you know where they are headed?" Thomas asked, pushing for an answer.

Dirk looked up at him, forcing himself to focus.

"Durban," he whispered. "Harbour." He drew a laboured breath. "They'll ... container." Dirk's face was a mask of pain. "Send ... to Asia ... sex slaves ..." his voice trailed off.

Darkness swamped him.

It was so tempting.

It was warm and comforting.

He couldn't hold on.

Dirk let go.

Ryan felt Dirk's hand go slack. "Hang on," he shouted, squeezing the young man's hand. "Hang on!"

Thomas stared at him. "What?" he asked puzzled.

"He's unconscious," Ryan replied, desperation in his voice.

Thomas bent over Dirk and placed his folded hands on his chest. He pushed and counted. Then he breathed into his mouth. Again, he pushed a few times. Stopping briefly, he tried feeling for a pulse, but there was none.

Ryan touched Thomas' arm and shook his head. "I think he's gone."

Thomas stared at him wild eyed.

"It's no use," he repeated. "The boy is dead."

Slowly, Ryan's words sank in and Thomas looked at him crestfallen. "I thought he might have a chance," he mumbled.

"I guess the wound was too severe," Ryan said.

Thomas nodded sadly in reply.

Ryan got to his feet, wiping dry grass off his trousers.

“Come,” he said. “Let’s get out of here. We can phone the cops from the car. Let’s go get Lucy.”

Without further comment Thomas jumped to his feet and began walking across the *veld* to Ryan’s 4x4.

CHAPTER 25

Thomas held onto his cellphone for dear life, his explanations coming in short bursts. Ryan listened only with half an ear to his partner's clipped answers, but he understood the gist of what Thomas was relaying to the cops.

As Ryan raced the 4x4 along the dirt track, fist-size rocks bounced up from the uneven ground hitting the car's side panels and leaving small dents in the silver paint. Taking sharp turns, he steered the BMW 4x4 past deep potholes and around thickets of dry bush. Thomas braced himself, but was unable to prevent sliding from side to side on the smooth leather seat.

After a gruelling twenty minutes, Ryan's car bounced over the last steep rut. Leaving a huge cloud of dust behind, he swerved the BMW 4x4 off the dirt track and onto the main road.

Thomas switched off his cellphone and pushed it into his pocket.

Ryan glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "Did they get everything you told them?" he asked grimly.

Thomas nodded. "Yep," he confirmed. "They are sending the info to the Metro cops who should release a bulletin to all its units within the next half an hour. Rapson assured me they will pull out all stops to get to the truck before it leaves the Vereeniging area." Thomas paused for a moment. "They are also going to send a mortuary van to the resort to collect the bodies."

"Oh, well," Ryan grumbled. "At least they're taking some action. I just hope that they'll find the truck in time."

As Ryan continued to speed along the broad road both men remained silent, each one deep in thought.

A few kilometres later, they followed a gentle curve and were faced with the rear end of a sixteen wheeler truck. Its grey heavy-weight tarpaulin flapped noisily in the wind and the roar of the slow moving vehicle drowned out all other sound.

Ryan held the 4x4's steering wheel in a tight grip and pushed his foot on the accelerator, beginning the process of overtaking the overlong vehicle. Halfway past the sixteen-wheeler, an old battered blue *bakkie* approached from the other side. The driver pounded the horn angrily, moving within inches of the rough embankment as he squeezed past the two vehicles.

Ryan calmly continued their journey.

Thomas watched brush and open *veld* race past the BMW's windows. Eventually his partner's fierce silence got to him and he twisted in his seat to face Ryan.

"How do you know where to go?" Thomas asked anxiously.

Ryan kept his eyes on the road. "There is only one way from Klipriver to Durban," he stated. "We are on our way to Meyerton. From there we'll cut across to the Heidelberg highway. The highway goes all the way to Durban. Somewhere on that road either we, or the cops, will catch up with the truck."

Rubbing his nose thoughtfully, Thomas decided to trust Ryan's instincts, hoping deep down that his partner was right.

Soon, small grubby houses with corrugated iron roofs and single story shops appeared beside the road. Battered *bakkies* and old Ford pick-ups were parked on the uneven pavements.

Ryan disregarded his surroundings completely and drove like a maniac into the centre of the small rural town. Paying no attention to traffic lights, he swerved wildly

around vehicles, following the road signs crazily and completely omitted to use his indicator as he raced along. Recklessly he overtook Nissan vans, lorries and old Toyotas. Horns blared angrily and tyres squealed, but Ryan continued on his quest single mindedly. Reaching the outskirts of Meyerton at last, he turned left, leaving the sad little town in his wake.

The road narrowed dramatically and dry open *veld* stretched out from both sides of the embankments to some rocky outcrops in the far distance. The empty vastness was disrupted only by the occasional thorn bush.

The minutes ticked by and Ryan refused to take his foot off the accelerator keeping his speed around the 150 km/h mark.

As they drove down from a small rise, Ryan unexpectedly slammed on his brakes. "What the hell?" he exclaimed.

Thomas held onto the dashboard as the 4x4 lost its thrust rapidly. The car came to a stop and both men stared, speechless, at the scene before them.

Cars, trucks, *bakkies* and a bus lined both sides of the road. Drivers stood beside the open doors of their vehicles shouting to each other and gesticulating wildly. Ryan counted about twenty police vans parked beside the street. Police officers in blue riot gear holding rubber bullet rifles walked purposefully in the direction of an informal settlement.

Suddenly, a roar rose into the sky. People started to stream into the potholed main road. Holding wooden bats, sharpened pangas, broken-off broom sticks, vicious hammers, carved knobkerries and rough planks, they chased after a few individuals who were running frantically towards the solid wall of policemen. The black bouncing mob followed close behind. Men and women chanted and screamed at the top of their voices, lifting their weapons high above their heads.

Three black men reached the protection of the riot police. Their faces were coated with sweat and their brown eyes were huge with fear. Clutching their torn shirts, pressing their hands on bleeding cuts and panting hard, they crouched low behind the armed police officers.

The riot police in the centre of the barrier lifted their shiny rifles, aimed, and released a volley of rubber bullets into the crowd.

"Shit!" Thomas shouted, flinching at the loud popping sounds.

All at once, the crowd's mood changed. The mob's forward movement stalled. More rubber bullets cracked in its direction. The chanting stopped, weapons were lowered and an irritated murmur hovered over the horde. Slowly, as if guided by an invisible hand, the mob turned.

From nowhere, a shrill scream pierced the hot air. Instantly, the crowd became a boiling mass. People pushed and shoved their way back into the main road. Weapons were raised high again and the chanting flared into the hot sky. More women and men appeared in between the tightly packed shacks. With open shirts flapping, skirts swinging, arms flailing and knees jerking up and down, they joined the roving mob.

Like thick dark molasses, the crowd toy-toyed its way down the street, destroying everything in its path. Pangas and hammers bounded off rusty corrugated iron roofs, smashing windows and breaking down flimsy doors.

Lit petrol bombs flew through the air. A shack burst into flames, the orange and red fire licking at the sky, then another and another.

A handful of young black men remained intimately close to the centre of the informal settlement. Rocking an old Toyota parked beside the curb, they only stepped back with a triumphant cry when the car overturned and rolled onto its battered roof.

Ryan's eyes travelled over the top of the swirling mass to see into the distance. The blocked road stretched through the middle of a squatter camp and continued straight for several kilometres. He hoped to catch a glimpse of the white truck holding the abducted girls on the other side of the settlement, but the mass of bodies was too dense for him to see anything.

Slamming his hand on the steering wheel, he swore under his breath. They had come so far only to be stopped by an angry xenophobic mob. Disregarding the danger surrounding them, Ryan gently pushed his foot on the accelerator and crawled closer, metre by metre, to the immediate outskirts of the squatter camp. He was determined to get to Thomas's niece before the kidnappers had a chance to leave the greater Vereeniging area.

A police officer peeled away from his unit's formation and quickly approached the 4x4 as it reached the boundary of the informal settlement. The officer's face was hidden behind a thick Perspex shield attached to a white helmet, and his torso was protected by a heavy vest.

The officer flagged down the 4x4 and Ryan had no option but to stop and roll down the window.

"Can I help you?" Ryan asked through clenched teeth.

The officer flipped up his Perspex shield to reveal piercing blue eyes. Holding the rubber bullet rifle tightly across his chest, he took a cautious step away from the car, unsettled by Ryan's hostility.

"Sir," the riot officer addressed him firmly. "You should turn around and find another route." He pointed with an outstretched arm at the informal settlement. "It's pretty ugly down there and we don't know when the road will be open again."

Ryan stared at the mob retreating further down the rise into the squatter camp.

"At this point in time they are very much out of control," the officer warned. "They'll target anybody they can get their hands on."

Ryan knew that what the cop was saying was true. He had seen the footage on TV, showing the extent of the recent xenophobic attacks. Getting caught in one of these crowds could mean instant death, especially for a white man.

"What are you doing in this area?" the officer demanded.

Ryan narrowed his brows. He was in no mood to argue or explain anything, but the man's fierce expression kept his tongue in check. Ryan realised in a flash that it would not take much for the officer to detain them or lock them up.

With an effort Ryan smoothed out his frown. "We are chasing a truck," he said. "The men have kidnapped several girls and are on their way to Durban."

The cop stared at Ryan as if he had escaped from a mental institution.

Ryan took a deep breath. "You should have received a bulletin a few minutes ago regarding the situation," he pointed out. "The truck should have come through here. Maybe you've seen it?"

The police officer cocked his head to the side, unsure what to make of Ryan's statement.

"Please radio the hostage negotiator, Detective Rapson," Ryan implored. "He's currently at the house of my partner's sister in Edenvale."

At the mention of Rapson's name, recognition flashed across the riot officer's face.

Encouraged, Ryan said, "Two of the kidnappers are already dead. You'll find them lying in the veld, in a small broken down holiday resort in the vicinity of Klipriver."

The officer raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Please," Ryan pleaded, raising his hands. "Let us through. We don't have much time left. We need to catch up with the truck to rescue the girls."

The riot officer moved a step closer. "You say it's a truck?" he probed.

Ryan nodded eagerly.

The officer turned away from the BMW and stared thoughtfully down the road.

Ryan followed his gaze to the informal settlement. The crowd had thinned out slightly. His eyes travelled past a burning hut and on to the other side of the squatter camp. All at once, he drew back with a start. Then slowly leaning forward again, he tried to get a better look.

"Check that out," he said quietly, nudging Thomas's arm.

His partner squinted against the harsh sunlight. "What?" he asked impatiently.

Ryan pointed downhill and Thomas followed his outstretched arm.

"Oh man," he groaned as he spotted the object of Ryan's interest. "It's a white truck."

The vehicle was lying on its side.

"Drive," Thomas shouted. "Come on! Drive!"

Ryan did not have to be told twice. He shifted gears and put down his foot. The 4x4 jumped forward like a race horse released from its starting gates. Out of the corner of his eye, Ryan saw the officer raise his rifle. He heard a dull thud against his vehicle's bodywork as the bullet bounded off the side panel, but he stubbornly ignored the officer's shouted demands to stop.

Swerving around clusters of men and women toy-toying and swinging their weapons, Ryan drove his 4x4 past burning tyres, piles of rubbish, over shards of glass, and past piles of broken furniture littering the street. A bottle came flying through the air hitting the driver's door. Ryan ducked instinctively and lifted his arm to protect his head, but the missile caused no damage.

A small group of young angry men tried to stop the BMW. They banged their knobkerries against the 4x4, cracking the rear window. A man dressed in a red shirt and jeans jumped onto the bonnet and hung onto the windscreen wipers. His eyes were bloodshot and he snarled like a vicious animal at the two men sitting in the car. Clenching his jaw, Ryan accelerated for a few metres, then braked hard, coming to an abrupt stop. The man lost his grip and slid onto the road.

Ryan pushed the BMW further through the parting throng. Sweat pearled on his forehead, but he held the steering wheel determined to get to the overturned truck on the other side of the mayhem.

Eventually they were close enough to the truck to read the number plate.

Thomas grabbed Ryan's arm and squeezed hard.

"Check this out," he shouted. "That's the number plate the young guy gave us. This is the truck!"

Regardless of the people running in the street, Thomas reached for the door handle ready to jump out.

"Hang on," Ryan cautioned him, holding him back. "I don't think it's a good idea to get out right now." He pointed at the people in the street. "They might just get the wrong impression about us. Let me find a safer spot."

Adhering to his partner's caution, Thomas dropped his hand from the handle.

Ryan moved the BMW forward, past the stranded truck and drove it half-way up the gravelled embankment, using the truck as a barrier from the mob. As soon as he stopped, Thomas was out of the door. Keeping his eyes on the crowd hustling about on the other side of the vehicle, Ryan followed more slowly.

As he stepped away from his 4x4, he spotted a body lying face down in a shallow ditch. Approaching slowly, he looked the man over. His clothes were torn and he seemed to have been badly beaten. Angry red bruises covered his back and the skin was ripped and bloody across his shoulders. Ryan bent down and rolled the man onto his back. As he wondered what a white guy was doing in a ditch, he saw an ugly round wound on the side of the man's head. Blood that smeared over his face had dried in flecks around his bulbous nose.

Squinting at the overturned truck, Ryan guessed that this man was the driver. Maybe a stone had shattered the windscreen and smashed into the man's head? From the impact he might have lost control and the truck had ended up on its side. Once on the ground, the angry mob probably dragged the man out of the cabin and beat him to death.

Ryan's eyes turned to slits.

If his assumption was correct, then the guy on the ground was one of the kidnappers.

His train of thought was interrupted by Thomas calling to him.

"Ryan!" his partner shouted. "Get over here! The bloody doors are stuck!"

Ryan turned on his heels and following his partner's call, he walked to the back of the truck, avoiding broken bottles and other debris lying in his path. Thomas had turned the large leavers holding the doors shut. He was pulling on the handles with all his might, but the doors would not budge.

"When the truck fell on its side, the doors must have bent out of shape," Thomas explained, rubbing his red throbbing palms together. "They are totally jammed."

Ryan inspected the back briefly and agreed with his partner.

"Come on," Thomas urged. "Give me a hand here."

Reaching up, Ryan grabbed a handle and together they pulled the doors towards them. With a loud grinding noise, the heavy panels gave way and they lowered the door to the ground. Immediately, Thomas was on his hands and knees, pushing his head into the dark interior of the truck.

"Oh my God!" he exclaimed.

Ryan bent down and peered inside the cavern. The blood drained from his face and he had to swallow hard a couple of times. Huddled in a far corner, the faces of four girls stared at him. A fifth girl was lying motionless on her side beside the small group.

"Lucy?" Thomas called softly. "Lucy, are you in here?"

There was a sudden flurry of movement and a young girl crawled forward.

"Uncle Thomas?" a high girlish voice asked tentatively.

Ryan let out a whoop of joy. They had found the girls! They had reached them in time! The race was over! The girls were safe!

"Lucy?" Thomas called again, shoving his upper body further into the truck.

Ryan twisted his head trying to get a closer look. A pretty black girl dressed in a dirty tattered blouse and a crumpled school skirt scrambled past the other teenagers. On her hands and knees she moved towards the open door. Thomas reached out and drew Lucy into his arms.

xxx

The riot officers had reacted quickly, chasing after the 4x4 and cordoning off the area around the stranded truck. Yellow crime scene tape was quickly strung across both ends of the road and three ambulances arrived with flashing lights.

The earlier angry mob now stayed at a respectful distance. Rumour about a handful of abducted girls had spread fast and the residents of the informal settlement showed genuine concern for the victims.

The girls escaped the confinement of the truck and immediately the officers bombarded them with millions of questions. It was unfortunate for the police officers, because the girls were disoriented and confused. They had no idea where they were or what had happened between the time they were locked in the truck at the resort until the vehicle overturned and the back doors opened. The officers tried a few times to get details out of the girls, but realised soon that they were unable to respond to their inquiries adequately.

Samantha, Shelly, Silvy and Lucy were clutching grey rough blankets thrown around their shoulders. The fifth girl, who was finally conscious, was lying on a stretcher where two medics attended to her. The whole time Lucy stayed close to her uncle, not once letting go of his hand.

Thomas turned to the officer in charge. "Sir," he addressed the older man in blue riot gear. "Can I take my niece home now? Her mother is very anxious and Lucy has been through a lot."

The officer smiled benevolently. "Yes," he confirmed. "You can take the girl home to her mother. Some of my colleagues will come by later to take a more detailed statement."

Thomas nodded in silent agreement. Holding Lucy's hand tightly, he started towards Ryan's 4x4.

"Excuse me, sir," the police officer stopped him. "One more question."

Thomas looked at the officer questioningly.

"We received information that there were two men in the truck." The police officer pointed to the embankment. "We found the white guy. But apparently there was another man ...," he let his sentence trail off.

Pulling Lucy closer to his side, Thomas asked gently, "Do you know if there was another man?"

Lucy shrunk back against her uncle, but nodded her head. "Yes," she said quietly. "There were two of them. A white man and a black man. The black man had a scar on his face and he wore a black T-shirt."

The police officer smiled encouragingly. "Do you mind having a look around? Maybe you can see him standing in the crowd."

Lucy hunched her shoulders. She did not want to look at the crowd! She wanted to go home! She wanted to forget about the terror she had lived through in the past forty-eight hours.

Sensing her reluctance, Thomas put his arms over her shoulders protectively. Although he wanted the second man to be caught, he found it annoying that the officer was pressing Lucy so hard. Hadn't his niece been through enough?

Thomas's eyes scanned the countless onlookers. His eyes roamed over their black faces and past their tattered clothes.

How on earth could anyone identify anybody? They all looked the same! The black faces seemed to melt into each other forming one solid dark wall. There was no chance of finding one particular black man in this crowd!

"I'm sorry," Thomas said firmly, aware of Lucy's vulnerable state. "I don't think Lucy will be able to spot the man."

The police officer sighed heavily. "I understand," he replied. "I doubt the man would have stuck around and the earlier mayhem and confusion would have made it easy for him to disappear. Nevertheless," the police officer said determinedly, "we'll keep looking for him. He won't get away."

Thomas refrained from replying.

Leading Lucy gently away from the overturned truck and the police officers, niece and uncle finally made it to Ryan's BMW 4x4.

Once again, Ryan exceeded the speed limit, but this time his purpose was to deliver Lucy to her mother as quickly as possible.

During the entire trip, Lucy was curled up into a ball, resting her head on her uncle's thigh. Her eyes were closed and Ryan wondered if she was asleep or if she wanted to avoid talking about her ordeal. Thomas had his arm wrapped over her slim body. Staring straight ahead, his expression varied from grimness to relief.

The journey back to Edenvale was over quickly. Soon Ryan turned into Thandeka's street and parked in front of her house. He switched off the engine, opened the door and climbed down from his seat. Thomas shook Lucy gently and the girl rose into a sitting position. He opened the door and helped Lucy out of the vehicle.

As Lucy pulled the blanket around her shoulders, a group of men filed out of the house. Ryan looked up surprised when he recognised Elijah Nkosi surrounded by plain clothed police officers. His hands were cuffed behind his back and his head was bowed.

Following close behind were Raphaella and Thandeka. The women's expressions were fierce and Thandeka's arms were folded tightly in front of her. Ryan wondered what was happening when Thandeka spotted her daughter standing beside Thomas.

Thandeka's hands flew in the air. "Lucy!" she yelled with joy as she ran past the police officers.

Lucy's face lit up instantly and she dropped her blanket. Thandeka wrapped her arms around her daughter showering her face with kisses. Tears of happiness were streaming down her cheeks as she stroked Lucy's hair and mumbled words of endearment.

Watching mother and daughter reunited, Ryan's heart squeezed into a tight little ball.

What a lucky ending to a horrible story, he thought.

As he took a step back to give Thandeka, Lucy and Thomas some space, he bumped into a police officer standing behind him. Turning around, he saw Rapson push Elijah Nkosi into a blue striped police van. Before he could make his way

across the street to ask the Chief Hostage Negotiator why Nkosi was under arrest, he felt a warm soft hand slipping into his. Strong fingers curled around his palm, holding his hand tight.

Lowering his head, he looked straight into Raphaela's smiling eyes.

"Hello," she said quietly. "I'm glad you made it back in one piece."

Ryan grinned self-deprecatingly. "We were lucky," he replied.

Raphaela raised an eyebrow mockingly, but refrained from pointing out to him that she was very well aware of the danger he and Thomas had been exposed to.

The white police van pulled away from the curb and Ryan's eyes followed its swift departure.

He pointed at the disappearing vehicle. "What's that about?" he asked. "Why is Nkosi in handcuffs?"

Raphaela watched the van turn a corner and sighed heavily.

"Elijah Nkosi is under arrest for masterminding the abduction of his niece and several other girls," she said sadly.

"What?" Ryan exclaimed with disbelief.

Raphaela nodded, her dark mane swinging across her back.

"They checked the registration number of the truck you were chasing," she explained. "They ran it through their databases and found out that the vehicle was registered in the name of Nkosi's company."

Ryan snorted loudly. "Are you telling me, Elijah Nkosi, Thandeka's uncle, arranged for Lucy to be kidnapped?"

"Yes," Raphaela replied sadly.

"But why?" Ryan asked, a puzzled frown on his forehead.

Raphaela shrugged her shoulders. "Money," she said simply. "It's all about money."

Ryan's eyebrows narrowed into a uni-brow. "Bastard," he hissed. "How could he do this to his own flesh and blood?"

Raphaela chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. "Apparently, he never knew they had abducted his niece. He only found out when they realised it was his truck."

"I hope that bastard gets everything he deserves," Ryan growled. "If he doesn't, then I'm personally going to kill him."

Raphaela squeezed his hand. "Not to worry. He'll get what he deserves," she reassured him, flicking her head towards the three people standing beside Ryan's car. "Thandeka will make sure he goes to prison and that he never sees daylight again."

Ryan nodded. It wasn't only going to be Thandeka who would seek justice, but Thomas would also make a hundred percent sure that his uncle was locked up for life. And Ryan would help him. He would make all his resources available to Thomas ensuring that it would happen.

Raphaela tugged on his arm drawing him away from his dark thoughts.

"It's over," she said quietly.

"Yes," he confirmed. "It's over."

A mischievous smile glinted in her eyes. "What about dinner?"

Ryan looked at her lovely face and his heart began to beat rapidly. Gently, he drew her into his arms. Before he kissed her, he whispered, "As many dinners as you want."

THE END

GLOSSARY

Bakkie	vehicle, sometimes closed with canopy, to transport up to 1 ton with a bench or two seats in front
Dagga	Marijuana / pot
Takkies	Sneakers
Veld	untended, wild field
Trek	hike
Panties	women's / girls' underpants
Tsotsie	thug / gangster
Klap	slap



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