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Jikeleza Labyrinth

A novel

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A novel submitted to the School of Literature and Language Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Writing (Research).

Declaration

I declare that this novel, *Jikeleza Labyrinth,* is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Writing (Research) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. *Jikeleza Labyrinth* has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university. I declare that *Jikeleza Labyrinth* is a work of fiction and in no way represents or reproduces any person or incident. Any likeness or similarity is coincidence.

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Karen Ramburuth-Hurt

27 August 2010

I hope the people who live along the stretch of coastline
between East London and Chintsa in the Eastern Cape, South Africa
will generously accommodate the fictionalising of place
I found necessary for *Jikeleza Labyrinth's* plot.
Jikeleza is an isiXhosa word that means to go around.

Chapter 1

It had been a mistake to take the canoe so far up the river so late in the afternoon. Kabelo knew that. The glassy river he thought would help soothe his anxiety and anger had quickly turned rough, like a moody friend. A sea breeze replaced the afternoon's stillness and whipped up into a strong wind, turning the river turbulent. Choppy waves headed upstream, like masses of fish bent on reaching the river's source. He was headed downstream.

Waves slapped the red canoe, rocking it uncomfortably. Dark grey clouds chased each other above his head; Olympics in the sky. He had to return the canoe to Jikeleza Backpackers, and get home before his father did. There was still far to go. Droplets of spray cascaded over Kabelo as he battled his paddle against the current. The canoe wasn't moving forward. In fact, when he stopped to rest, it bobbed upstream. He gave a click of annoyance and flung his paddle into the canoe where it landed with a thud.

Maps of lightening flashed in the distance. Thunder followed. Columns of rain were coming his way. He'd have to get out, swim and pull the canoe to the shallower water near the river's bank where he could stand, and drag it against the wind back to Jikeleza Backpackers.

Kabelo gripped the sides of the canoe to stabilise it, and swung his right foot onto the riverbed. He gave a reluctant grin. He loved the feeling of the warm mud squelching between each toe, sucking at his foot. With his right foot as firmly in the mud as it could be, Kabelo let go of the canoe, swung his left foot down, and yelled as shards of pain shot up from his toes. Ignoring the tears that sprang to his eyes, Kabelo tried to pull his foot up but it was lodged into something that rasped painfully against his toes.

Unsteadily, and balanced on one foot, he pulled the object hard against the suction of the mud. It suddenly loosened and freed his foot, and he brought the object to the surface. Kabelo's stomach heaved. He fought the urge to drop it immediately but if he did it would still be near him. He summoned all his strength and threw it as far away as he could. The skull landed in the thick grass on the riverbank. Kabelo rinsed his hands in the river. Over, and over, and over. And then he waded across to the canoe.

Rebecca was standing at the lookout point under the Wild Fig tree, her family's favourite place for sundowners. This afternoon the others were all doing their own thing, so she was deliciously alone. The wind tugged at her dress as she watched the river valley changing colours in the mounting storm. She followed the river's course along to Jikeleza Backpackers' small cove, and around the final meander before it met the grey sea alive with white horses. Rebecca picked up her binoculars and focused on the last people she could see out on the beach climbing up-up-up the steep dunes, and then leaping down-down-down, just as she and Sameer had loved to do ever since they were small. Lightning zigzagged in the sky and large plops of rain began to patter onto the leaves and drip through. She was about to run inside when a yell from the river below pulled her back. She lifted her binoculars and zoomed in on a red canoe, and then to the guy near it. She followed his every move, appreciating her powerful binoculars. Guilt-gift from Mom, she reminded herself, adjusting the focus.

'Oh my word,' she said softly, following the trajectory of the skull from his hands onto the riverbank.

'Rebecca! Why are you playing daredevil out here? You're under the highest tree on the hill. Do you want to get struck by lightning? You'll be turned into biltong,' shouted Dad right next to her. She jumped. 'Come in. Now. We need Sameer in too. Any idea where he might be?'

'Dad! You gave me a fright,' she said rubbing her ear. 'Did you have to creep up like that?'

'I've been calling and calling,' replied Dad, frowning in annoyance. He touched her shoulder. 'You're getting soaked out here.'

'I didn't hear, Dad, honest.' He gave her the dipped-chin wide-eyed expression.

‘*Okay*, Dad, I’m coming.’

‘Where’s Sameer? I don’t want him out in the bush in this storm either.’

‘Have you checked the lounge?’ Rebecca asked. ‘He was there earlier.’ Well, this morning could be considered to be earlier, couldn’t it? She needed to squeeze a few minutes more at the lookout point from him.

‘Dad, why don’t you check inside? You know how he sometimes likes to hide. I’ll check in the garden.’

‘Okay. But be quick.’ Her father ran back to the house. Rebecca combed her fingers back through her wet hair and shook the tiny droplets off the ends, lifted the binoculars, and re-focused. He was heading for JBs’ cove. She zoomed some more. He was wearing a dark band on his wrist, blue board shorts, and he seemed quite tall. Rebecca wiped the binoculars on her dress, put them back in their pouch around her waist, and ran back to the house.

When she reached the verandah Rebecca picked up an umbrella, pushed it open, grabbed a biscuit, and went munching down the driveway, thinking about what she’d seen. She met Sameer as he was coming through the driveway gate.

‘Where have you been?’ She popped the last piece into her mouth.

‘Nowhere.’ But Sameer’s muddy takkies and grassy socks betrayed him. He followed her glance. ‘Adventuring,’ he conceded with one of his innocent smiles. Rebecca put her arm around him and pulled him under the umbrella.

‘Ouch!’ she yelped and rubbed her ribs.

‘Oh! Sorry Becca.’ Sameer swung his camera to his other side.

‘It’s okay. I’m sorry about earlier,’ said Rebecca, relieved that her brother seemed to have gotten over the fight they’d had in the morning.

‘Me too.’ The wet grass tickled her ankles as they ran to the house. Splodges of mud gave Sameer’s curly hair unusual highlights.

‘You must check out your hair!’ she said, touching it.

‘Don’t,’ he replied, pushing her hand away, ‘it’s my new style.’ He stopped to give a model’s pose. She laughed, shaking her head at him, relieved that he seemed to be in a more chilled mood now.

‘Come on you two!’ shouted Dad from the verandah. Sameer pulled to a halt. He glanced up at Rebecca.

‘I wish Mom was here,’ he said. Rebecca hesitated. She didn’t want to spoil the moment.

‘Me too,’ she replied and pulled him closer.

The storm passed over while they were having tea with Dad and Naanii on the verandah. After Sameer and Rebecca had done the washing up, Rebecca wandered over to the lookout point. There was no sign of anyone on the rain soaked beach. The red canoe was lined up with the others on JBs’ shore.

Chapter 2

Kabelo sprinted across the beach. Another day he would have stopped on the beach, tilted his head back, and caught raindrops in his mouth. He would have watched the last flickers of lightning, and listened to the thunder grow fainter. But he needed to get home before Tata. He didn't want questions about where he'd been today. He splashed across the shallow river mouth, ran up the hill, and paused only to catch his breath when he was at the corner of his road.

Last week, Kabelo had cooked his father's favourite meal of beef stew, pap and pumpkin and broached the subject of visiting Don. Tata had pushed his plate away, and stared at Kabelo while he took ten deep breaths in and out, clearly practising Uncle Richard's stress management tips.

'Don is your friend. I respect that.' Tata's words had come out tense-calm. 'He was like a son to me. You know that. But drugs, Kabelo. He takes drugs. You will stay away from him.'

'But Tata…' began Kabelo, glad that his father didn't seem to know that Don also sold them.

'I forbid you to see Don unless I am there.' Tata slapped the table with each word, making everything hop. 'Sorry.' Tata put his hands on his knees. 'And that's not going to be for a long time. You know what my hours at the hotel are like at this time of year.' Kabelo also knew what was coming next. 'And I don't want any more missing family members.'

'I understand, Tata.' More than anyone in the world, he thought to himself, glancing at the photograph of his mother on the mantelpiece.

'Can I take your plate?' he'd asked, pushing his chair back.

He'd defied his father today, after getting Don's sms last night.

In a mess, it said. Come PLZ PLZ PLZ. Sarah in danger 2

What could he say? Sorry, can't do? Tata's busy for the next three weeks. Would you mind just holding off with your crisis 'til after the holidays, bru'? Don might be dead by then. And Sarah now. To be on the safe side, Kabelo had walked, with his cap pulled low, the extra four kilometres so he could catch a mini bus taxi from the main road instead of near the hotel. Once on the main road he walked past the entrance to Uncle Richard's game lodge. 'Welcome/Wamkelekile/Welkom to Ilanga Private Game Lodge' it said in wrought iron lettering on the tall stonewall. After that, it said: 'True Eastern Cape warmth and hospitality'. Kabelo smiled. He'd helped choose the words.

While waiting for a taxi, Kabelo tried to spot animals. Not far from the reserve fence three giraffe looped their tongues around thin branches of the Acacia trees to pull off the leaves. Kabelo thought of giraffes as wise animals. With such long necks they must get the bigger picture. If only Don had some giraffe in him.

A taxi pulled off the road, churning up dust. Green, yellow and red beads hung from the rear-view mirror. Bob Marley's *One Love* was way better than the gospel sing-along passengers he was forced to endure most mornings on the way to school.

'*Eita*!' shouted the driver using the steering wheel for percussion.

'*Eita bru*',' Kabelo replied. '*Ndiya eMonti*.' Kabelo placed the fare into the driver's hand.

'*Sharp. Ngena*!'

The taxi was almost empty. Kabelo dropped into a seat next to the window and stared out, with Don on his mind. All the familiar signs to beaches, camp sites, restaurants, shops and holiday homes flashed by as they headed for the city. He loved this part of Jikeleza Route, especially the trip home. The pharmaceutical factory where his mother used to work was coming up on the right. He still could not bear to look.

On Fridays, he'd sms his mother when he left school, and get off the taxi outside the factory. Mama waited at the entrance, ready to bring him in through security. After a hug, Kabelo would, if

Mama said she still had work to do, climb as high as he could up the tree outside her office. From there, he could see across the veld, over the houses and fields near the beach, and the sea. He could also watch his mother's ritual of leaving the office. She'd save files on her flash drive, shut down her computer, file all the papers on her desk, slot pens into the holder he had made her way back in primary school, check her diary for the week ahead, and, if she needed to work on the weekend, pack a few papers in her bag. Then she'd call him. But he'd be waiting on the ground for her by then. They'd drive home, debating, sometimes hotly, which DVD they were going to hire. They always agreed on the pizzas: one pepperoni, and one chicken and mushroom. That all came to an end two years ago. The taxi turned on to the freeway. Kabelo cleared his throat. Don. He wondered, without much optimism, what state his friend would be in this morning.

'Thanks for the great sounds,' said Kabelo, climbing out of the taxi. He walked down towards the harbour, and found himself wondering if Don's parents had ever visited Don here since their tough love thing. Don never spoke about them. Kabelo turned into one street, and then another. He stopped when he reached Don's block of flats. A broken bottleneck had slit one of the garbage bags open and a mass of flies was having a party in the disgusting rotting avalanche.

'*Hamba!*' he yelled angrily, kicking in the direction of a rat that scuttled by. It disappeared into a hole in the wall. Kabelo glanced up at the five-storey block of flats. If someone doesn't fix those cracks soon, this place will crack up, thought Kabelo, excusing his drug pun. The electric bell to Don's flat still worked. Kabelo stood back so that Don could see him on the pavement. Don's face fleetingly appeared at the window. The metal gate clicked.

'Thank god you're here,' said Don, fumbling his fingers around the door chains.

'My father doesn't know,' said Kabelo, crossing through the doorway. Don poked his head out and looked around. He closed the door and secured the chains.

'Thanks for coming, dude,' Don repeated but Kabelo didn't return their traditional handshake with much enthusiasm.

'When did you last wash your hair and have a shower?' Don pulled a face. 'What's happening with Sarah?' Kabelo had been quite close to Don's younger sister who hung around when he visited, but Don's parents had sent her to boarding school when Don's drug scene got bad.

'They're threatening to hurt her as well as me now,' he said, struggling to pull a cigarette out of its packet. 'And it's fricken' serious this time. It's not just money. They think I overheard some big plan of theirs the other night when I was working late at Dazzlers.' Kabelo sat next to the unmade mattress on the carpet and picked roughly at its fraying edges, and then pushed his finger at the hardened cigarette burns in it. He wanted to throttle Don for getting Sarah into danger. She was just an innocent kid.

'What did they say?'

'They don't believe I didn't hear anything and they're going to get hold of Sarah to force the truth out of me and they want their money.'

'Don't smoke in here,' Kabelo snapped as Don tried with trembling fingers to light his cigarette.

'I've given up the hard stuff,' said Don trying to put it back in the box. 'I stopped when my dealer brought up Sarah's name in a sinister way. I can't let them hurt her.'

'Like I believe you,' replied Kabelo, 'how many times have you told me you've given up?'

'You can ask the rehab place. I'm in outpatients there. I'll give you my counsellor's number.' But how could Kabelo trust that Don would stick with it?

'Dude, how do you think I feel about the Sarah thing?' Don's face crumpled and he started to cry but Kabelo was too freaked out to comfort him. He stood up. He needed fresh air and space to think.

'Don't go. Please help me,' begged Don but Kabelo had pulled back the chains and closed the door before Don could stop him. Kabelo ran down the stairs, pressed the buzzer in the entrance hall and let himself out. He didn't look back to see if Don was at the window.

When Kabelo got home he'd gone straight across to JBs and chosen the red canoe. It seemed to match his mood after seeing his dangerous friend.

Chapter 3

Sameer pulled his duvet tightly around him, and curled up into a ball. The curtains swayed in the gentle breeze, letting in streaks of light. A frogs' croaking choir, as his mother called it, had started up. Sameer kicked his duvet off, flipped onto his back and folded his arms. He sighed noisily, and glanced across at Rebecca. No response. Yet. He pulled the curtains open. Rebecca huffed. Sameer grinned. He had company. He padded across to the cupboard and groped noisily for his camera. She huffed again.

Sameer jumped back into bed with a squeaky bounce. He turned the camera in his hands a couple of times, enjoying the feel of it, and then pressed the 'on' button and watched its large screen light up. He began flicking through his afternoon's photos.

'Sameer. What are you doing?'

'Nothing.'

'Please stop saying that. No one is ever doing nothing. No one is ever nowhere.'

'Rebecca...'

'What?'

'I took photos of a guy in the river today.'

'Sameer, there were dozens of guys in the river today.'

'No, this afternoon in the storm. He had a red JBs canoe. He…'

Before Sameer had a chance to say another word, Rebecca landed on his bed. Sameer was impressed: (a) the bed survived and (b) with her skill, Rebecca should definitely try out for the long jump team. He was about to tell her this when Dad's voice boomed down the passage from the lounge where he and Naanii were watching television.

'What's going on in there?' Sameer shoved his camera under the duvet.

'You're supposed to be asleep. It's late.'

'Sorry, Dad,' they called back in unison.

'Shush!' Rebecca nudged him. Sameer frowned. He hadn't been the one who leapt across beds causing a commotion in the middle of the night.

'He was pretty freaked out,' whispered Sameer.

'Who? Dad?'

'No, man,' he replied. 'The guy who found a skull in the river.'

'I also saw him,' said Rebecca, 'from the lookout point.'

'Do you want to see the photos?' asked Sameer.

'What kind of a question is that?' She snuggled closer so that she could see the screen. Sameer flicked back to his first photograph of the afternoon. Rebecca sighed.

'Okay, okay, I'm getting there,' said Sameer.

'Do you think you'll always have a fascination for taking photos of odd bits of bikes and cars, Sameer?' He thought she sounded genuinely curious.

'Maybe,' he replied. 'Isn't it illegal to know there's a skull somewhere and not tell someone official about it?' A photo of the boy next to the canoe filled the screen.

'It might be,' replied Rebecca, leaning forward. 'It's hard to see him properly,' she complained.

'What do you mean? It's a seven centimetre screen with masses of megapixels!'

'Okay, okay. It's the best camera ever.'

'Pity Dad insisted on leaving his laptop at home this holiday,' said Rebecca. Sameer agreed.

'What's that on his right wrist?' asked Rebecca. Sameer zoomed in but it became a blur.

'Let's go to the internet café in the village tomorrow after breakfast,' said Sameer, 'and we can enlarge them there.'

'Yes, good idea,' she replied excitedly then held up her hand. They listened. 'Dad's coming,' she warned.

Sameer once again shoved his camera under the duvet. Rebecca returned to her bed more graciously than she had arrived on his. She developed a soft snore. Dad stood at the doorway. She'll never pull it off, thought Sameer.

'Hey, you two. Can't sleep?' said Dad, walking in. 'Come and look at the moon.' Dad knelt on Sameer's bed. Sameer got up and knelt next to his father at the window. Rebecca gave up her snoring act, and joined them. Sameer felt his father's arms lift and encircle them both. The storm had swept the sky clear of any clouds, except for a wisp of grey trailing across the moon.

'Will Mom be here for Christmas?' asked Sameer. Dad stiffened and stood up. Rebecca pinched Sameer's arm. Sameer regretted the consequence of his question, but he needed an answer.

'I think so. I hope so. Her assignment should be over soon.' Their father walked to the doorway, and became a silhouette.

'Time to sleep. Serious. I don't want grumpy children in the morning.'

'Dad, I'm not a child,' retorted Rebecca. Sameer rolled his eyes. 'I'm a teenager.' Sameer gave an exaggerated yawn.

'And teenagers need lots of sleep,' replied Dad. 'Goodnight.'

'Night, Dad. Love you,' said Sameer.

'Love you, Dad,' said Rebecca.

'I love you both too. If you sleep quickly I'll take us for supper at JBs tomorrow night.' He walked down the passage.

'What's up with the kids?' asked Naanii.

'Just holiday fever, I guess.' There was a pause. 'They miss their mother, I guess,' he added. 'Cheers.' Glasses clinked.

'That's natural,' replied Naanii. 'And do you?' Sameer strained his ears to hear his father's answer to his grandmother's question.

'Of course.' There was a thud and crackle.

'Strange having a fire in the middle of summer,' said Naanii. 'But it is chilly after that storm this afternoon.'

'Sameer, you spoilt things. Don't ask Dad about Mom. You know he's upset about her not booking a flight yet.'

'I just wanted to know when we'll see her,' he replied.

'As always, just take it that we'll see her when we see her. You know as well as anyone that her assignments are unpredictable. You can't expect Dad to promise anything about Mom. It's unfair.'

'Okay, okay, you don't have to go on about it.'

'Once we've been to the internet café to get close ups, let's keep a lookout for that guy,' said Rebecca. 'Maybe he lives around here. We can ask him if he's okay.' Sameer rearranged his pillows and tried to get comfortable.

'Dad's got enough to worry about with Mom,' she added. 'Let's not tell him about this.'

'Okay.'

'Good night, Sams.'

'Becca…'

'I'm asleep.'

But Sameer wasn't sleepy. He thought of the time when Mom called them to the lounge and told Rebecca and him about her new job.

'I've been offered a job with one of the world's top news photography agencies,' she'd said. 'It means I won't be here at home with you both as much as I want to. But Dad will be around even more for you.'

'How long will your job be for?' Sameer remembered asking, playing with her fingers to try and stop the glacier moving over his heart.

'Just two years.' Sameer hugged Mom tight. Rebecca slammed her bedroom door.

‘So, I’ll be ten then,’ he said, trying to be brave.

Sameer switched off his camera and laid it on the table that separated his and Rebecca’s beds. Two years had turned into five. His nightmares became scarier when Mom started travelling to take photographs in dangerous places. He’d wake up with his heart knocking hard against his ribs and his pyjamas sticking to his body.

But when school assignments came up, Sameer enjoyed watching his class and teacher’s eyes widen when he showed them her news-breaking photos. He didn’t show them the photo with Mom’s arms around small children at an emergency shelter after floods in Mozambique. It made him feel bad that he wanted Mom’s arms around him and Rebecca, not them.

Naanii’s sari rustled as she walked down the passage and into her bedroom opposite theirs. He waited for the plunk of her teeth in water. He’d got into so much trouble the night he went into her room and… Sameer finally succumbed to sleep.

The door opened before Kabelo put his key in the lock.

‘Hi, Tata. *Unjani*?’ he said, concentrating on saying hi to Snax who was jumping up and barking like a mad creature.

‘I’m fine, Kabelo, thank you. You’re not, I see. You’re wet and shaking. Have a warm shower and get dressed. Then we’ll have supper. We need to talk.’

Kabelo liked everything his father had said up until the last sentence. He made his way down the passage and into his bedroom. It was still light outside and he stood at his window. Holidaymakers had already moved into Mr Gould’s house on the hill across the valley. Windows were lit up and smoke curled out of the chimney.

They ate in silence. Tata meditatively broke off and dabbed pieces of bread into the gravy before popping them into his mouth. Kabelo found his food hard to swallow. He wished he could just fast forward to morning.

Tata finished his last mouthful. He left the dining room to wash his hands in the sink, and dried them carefully. Kabelo joined him.

‘Where were you today, Kabelo?’

‘I went canoeing, Tata.’

‘Yes, I know, son. I was very worried. I can’t understand why you put yourself in danger like that. Canoeing in an electric thunderstorm?’

Kabelo began to relax. Tata was just concerned about him being out in the storm.

‘I know, Tata. It was stupid of me. I won’t do it again.’

‘But even more worrying is where else you went today, despite me forbidding it.’

Chapter 4

A loaf of mielie bread warmed her arm through its brown packet. Rebecca's mouth watered at the thought of melting butter into it. She surveyed her favourite part of the shop, after the bakery, of course. Colourful beach balls were caught in a green net slung across the ceiling and psychedelic boogie boards were stacked up next to the blue, green and yellow fishing nets on sticks. She remembered the first time Dad bought her one, he'd joked that it was nearly taller than her. Even now, she never tired of observing micro life in the rock pools. She liked to poke, gently of course, the bright orange sea anemones that went private when you touched them.

'*Môre*, Kabelo.' Mrs van Jaarsveld's loud greeting broke through Rebecca's thoughts. 'That all for you today?'

'Yes thank you, ma'am,' said a young guy's voice. Rebecca took a small step sideways from the queue to look. He had a black wristband. He was tall.

'That's R12. Need a packet?'

'No thanks.' Three more customers before Rebecca. Please *hurry*. Rebecca watched him walk towards the door. Two more customers. He went through the door and turned right.

'How can I help you, Rebecca dear?' enquired Mrs van Jaarsveld. Rebecca put her bread on the counter.

'I've got a loaf of mielie bread.' She handed over the exact amount but Mr van Jaarsveld had come up to ask Mrs van Jaarsveld something and the seconds were ticking by while they discussed stock.

'I'm so sorry, Mrs van Jaarsveld,' Rebecca interrupted, 'I have to hurry, they're waiting for me at home.' Rebecca paid and left the counter with, she was sure, Mrs van Jaarsveld's eyes following her, probably thinking her quite rude. But she had to have another look at the guy. Rebecca turned right out of the shop door and broke into a run.

'Oh. Sorry!' said Rebecca, taking a couple of steps backwards.

'Someone trying to rob you?' he replied, rubbing his shoulder. The woman inside the estate agency waved at him, and he returned her greeting.

'Well, no. I was…' She didn't think he was listening. 'Actually. I was cha...' But telling him she was chasing after him didn't sound very cool. She started again. 'I was trying to get your attention.'

'Oh,' he replied, not sounding in the least bit interested. 'Why?'

'I saw you in the river yesterday. In the storm. I was watching from the hilltop. I had binoculars.' He frowned. 'I saw what happened.'

Rebecca put her hands on her cheeks to cool them down, but her palms were moist so she dropped them to her sides. She glanced at his wrist.

'It was you. You were wearing the same wristband and board shorts.' He looked at his wrist and down to his board shorts and up to her eyes. She gave an awkward smile. He didn't try to ease her discomfort.

'It must have been awful,' she finished off. He smiled stiffly.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' he said. He turned on his heels and strode away.

'Dad sent me to hurry you up,' said Sameer. 'Thought you came to buy bread, not check out the dudes?' Rebecca glanced absent-mindedly at her brother's teasing face and then back up the hill.

'Why are you frowning? Who is he?' he asked.

'I'm sure that was the guy in your photos,' she replied, without taking her eyes off him. 'He just froze me out when I told him I'd seen him in the river.'

'Internet café after breakfast,' said Sameer. 'Is the bread still warm?'

Kabelo leant against the trunk of the giant Outeniqua Yellowwood tree to catch his breath. That was the fastest he'd ever come up the hill. The concerned look in her eyes, and her boldness, unnerved him. She was with a boy now, and they were looking Kabelo's way. He suspected he was their topic of conversation. They were walking down the road towards the beach. When they got to the craft market, the girl turned to look back. Even though the tree's drooping branches screened him, Kabelo moved back into the shadow and remained where he was until they both disappeared. Kabelo wasn't sure why he'd denied knowing what she was talking about. He just didn't want it to be public knowledge; Tata would be on his case even more if he heard about the skull. He'd probably organise him a full-time job at the internet café through Uncle Richard, instead of part-time to 'keep Kabelo away from bad influences', as he'd overheard Tata say.

'Good timing,' Uncle Richard had said. 'My one morning assistant has just resigned. And I can't afford to spend time there.'

'She's pretty,' he heard himself say aloud. 'But way too pushy,' he added, loudly to the tree.

Kabelo retraced his steps down the main road to where it branched into his road. Even though he saw Uncle Richard's 4x4 coming he jumped at the sound of its hooter. When Uncle Richard signalled with all fingers that he'd see him at ten, Kabelo replied with a thumbs-up. Where had the girl watched him in the river from, he wondered? He would have noticed if she'd been out swimming or canoeing. There was no one around when he'd reached JBs to return the canoe. The beach had been deserted on his way home. Well, she hadn't been shy to wait for him outside the shop. He hoped she'd take the hint and would stay away from him. At number 13, Kabelo turned into the driveway, let himself into the house, and got ready for his first morning of keeping away from bad influences.

Sameer kicked his foot against the leg of the table. Sure, the mielie bread was good but were they really going to sit here all morning and eat the whole loaf? Had Rebecca forgotten their mission at the internet café? He tried to catch her attention. But Rebecca was engrossed in a discussion with Naanii. Yes, okay, so she wanted to get into the debating team at school, but did she have to choose now for a practice session?

Dad frowned at him. Sameer stopped kicking. Naanii flicked her grey plait over her shoulder as she made a counter-point, her bangles tinkled, just like Mom's.

'Pass the mango atchaar please, bacha,' said Naanii, 'It's good with cheese on this bread. You should try it.'

Sameer obliged, and then stared fixedly at Rebecca. Wasn't she as keen as he was to get to the internet café? Can't we stop global warming tomorrow?

'What are your plans for today?' asked Dad slurping his coffee and glancing between Sameer and Rebecca.

'Hang out at the beach. Swim. Maybe take a canoe up the river,' Rebecca replied.

'Back for lunch?'

'Probably not. We'll take food with us,' she replied.

'Okay. The usual. Stay within the beacons at the beach. Don't canoe beyond Crocodile Bend.'

'Why do you think they called it that?' asked Sameer. 'Everyone knows you don't get crocodiles around here.'

'To scare us,' said Rebecca making her arms snap like a crocodile's jaws over Sameer's head. Sameer swiped her away.

'Maybe because it's shaped like the curved tip of a crocodile's tail,' said Naanii.

'Get my point,' said Dad, pouring another cup of coffee. 'Don't take risks.'

'We know, Dad. We've got it. Years ago,' replied Sameer. His father opened his mouth to start a lecture, probably on the eating habits of crocodiles, when the phone rang inside. Dad jumped up. Rebecca quickly caught his chair before it toppled. Sameer raised his eyebrows. She should try her hand at cricket too.

‘Sorry. Maybe it’s your Mom. Enjoy your day guys.’ Dad cast an apologetic smile around the table and left. Sameer pushed his chair back.

‘Rather stay,’ Naanii said gently patting his knee.

Twenty minutes later they had their swimming costumes on under their t-shirts, and their brightly striped kikois slung around their necks. They’d made sandwiches, and put two naartjies and two apples, a packet of sours and bottle of water into their rucksack.

‘Camera,’ said Rebecca. Sameer threw her a *duh* look.

They shouted goodbyes, grabbed their caps from the rack in the passageway, and pulled them on. Sameer felt a thrill run through his body when he latched the driveway gate behind him. A day to themselves. How cool was that?

‘Hey, wait up, Becca.’

‘Sameer, how would you feel if you were him?’

‘I don’t know. I think he’s just keen for Mom to come home.’ Sameer didn’t feel like talking about their parents now. It had ended in a fight yesterday over Rebecca’s negativity about Mom.

‘I’m not talking about Dad.’ She picked up a stone and hurled it down the road.

‘Oh. Right. I don’t know. Never found a skull in a river before.’ Damn. His stone didn’t reach as far as hers. He’d have to practise more. ‘Have you?’

‘It must have been really freaky. I would feel scared.’ His sister was sticking with serious. Okay, he would too.

‘Creepy,’ Sameer agreed.

‘But why would he deny it?’ she continued. Sameer was faced with a choice. He could tease her that maybe the dude wanted to avoid her. Or he could say, which he did, ‘Maybe it wasn’t him.’

‘But I know it is,’ replied Rebecca, ‘Same board shorts. Wristband.’ Sameer let it go. He felt excited that they had a kind of a secret mission, and didn’t want to lose the feeling.

‘Beat you to the canoes!’ Sameer couldn’t believe his luck. Rebecca hadn’t challenged him for a race down the road the last couple of times they were here. They charged down the hill.

‘Wow. Hey. Wow. Watch out duuude!’ Sameer collided into a chest full of tattoos.

‘I’m sorry!’ Sameer apologised, stepping back. Rebecca skidded up beside him.

‘Go ea-sy.’ The man hitched up his denims. ‘There are other people walking on this road.’ He gave an aimless gesture around him nodding as if he was surrounded by a mass of people. ‘You could hurt someone.’

Sameer suppressed his desire to laugh. He glanced at Rebecca who seemed to be having the same problem.

‘We’re sorry,’ said Rebecca sweetly. ‘We were having a race.’

‘Ok-a-ay. Take it easy, like I said. There are people walking here.’ The man’s voice trailed off.

‘Yes, hundreds,’ said Sameer, and grabbed his sister’s arm. They ran further down the road and collapsed laughing on the grassy verge when they reached JBs’ first wooden chalet.

‘Which planet is he on?’ said Sameer, eventually. ‘With all his imaginary people.’ He floated his arms around.

‘He’s stoned. They say the best dagga grows around here.’

‘Who says?’ asked Sameer. ‘And how do you know how stoned people look, anyway?’

‘TV programmes. School talks. Whatever.’ His sister grabbed her phone out of her pocket. ‘Hey, it’s half past nine! Let’s move it.’ They walked in silence down the wooden steps and past the canoes. The red one hadn’t been taken onto the river yet. Sameer looked around. Everything was shimmering. The river, the sand, and the sea.

‘I wish we could live here,’ he said.

‘I just like visiting for the holidays. City life is for me,’ replied Rebecca.

‘East London’s close. Mom could travel from here and Dad works from home anyway.’

‘Don’t you dare even suggest it,’ replied Rebecca. ‘I said city life, dude. Jo-han-nes-burg. Jozi.’

‘You don’t have to be rude about East London. You don’t even know it that much,’ said Sameer.

‘And that’s the way it’s gonna stay,’ his sister replied.

‘See how high the floodwaters came last year after we left?’ said Sameer, stopping. Rebecca slung her arm over his shoulder. He traced the river debris against the dune with a stick, like he’d seen presenters do it on the nature programmes.

‘It must’ve been wild,’ replied Rebecca, pulling him along. Sameer squinted against the sea’s glare. He pulled his cap low. The beach had already filled up with people and their beach towels and umbrellas. He checked the waves. If a breeze picked up, it’d be perfect for body surfing after the internet café.

Sameer and Rebecca splashed across the low river and murmured lots of ‘good mornings’, ‘*goeie môres*’ and one or two ‘*molwenis*’ as they walked up the shady pathway towards the shops. Sameer was used to the backward glance that a few white people still gave when he and Rebecca were with Mom and Dad, and enjoyed turning around and giving a little extra friendly wave. But it was different when he was just with his sister. They stopped at the craft market, as they always did.

‘*Molweni bantwana*. I’ve been looking out for you!’ MaDilika shook Sameer’s and then Rebecca’s hands across the counter filled with bright beaded necklaces, bracelets, earrings, baskets, place mats and toys. While they exchanged news Rebecca examined some earrings.

‘They’re so beautiful,’ she said, holding them up to her ears. ‘Sameer, how do they look?’

‘Nice,’ he said, thinking that his sister was South Africa’s earring equivalent of Imelda Marcos. He’d watched a programme that said the former president of the Philippines had over 2 000 pairs of shoes.

‘I’ve got your mother’s order ready,’ said MaDilika. ‘When is she coming?’ Sameer glanced at Rebecca.

‘We hope for Christmas,’ said Rebecca. ‘But we don’t know for sure yet.’ MaDilika looked from Rebecca to Sameer.

‘Is everything okay?’ she asked. Sameer nodded. He traced his fingers along the zigzag binding of the traditional isiXhosa *iinxili* bags his mother loved and tapped the tiny white buttons. Mom placed orders for bags every year to take on her work trips as gifts for her colleagues and friends. Last year, they had gone home with MaDilika over the hill to take photos of her workshop so that Mom could help her with a brochure for an international market.

‘Are you still into reggae music?’ asked MaDilika. Sameer nodded. ‘Here’s a Rasta bracelet,’ she said, reaching into her apron pocket. ‘I made it for you.

‘Thank you,’ said Sameer, trying it on.

‘And those earrings you like so much are yours,’ she said to Rebecca. ‘I knew it would be better if you chose your own.’ Rebecca said she couldn’t accept them, and then, after some persuasion, appreciatively did.

Sameer glanced towards the shops. The Surf’s Up Internet Café sign stood out prominently on the first floor.

‘Okay, I can see you need to go somewhere,’ MaDilika laughed, ‘Please greet your father and grandmother for me.’ She turned to serve a customer. Sameer and Rebecca thanked her again and raced each other to the flight of stairs at the small shopping centre. They went up the first flight, and followed the internet café’s arrows along the passage. A blue, green and brown satellite image of Earth with Surf’s Up Internet Café written through its middle hung above the open door.

‘Wow,’ said Sameer, walking in. ‘Not too shabby.’

Rebecca tucked her hair behind her ears. She liked the way her new earrings dangled against her neck when she moved her head. There was no one at the counter. The internet café was divided into two sections. *Gamezone!* said a green and blue neon tubing sign pointing to the darkened wing where ten computers, some occupied, sat on long dark blue tables. The walls were also blue, with glow-in-the-dark stars scattered on the ceiling and walls. Rebecca examined the other section.

Workzone! said the purple tubing. There was a row of six computers on a long white table and a wide window at the end that framed a view of the sea. A girl, about Rebecca's age, sat at the computer next to the window.

'Sorry to keep you waiting. I was just sorting out one of the computers,' said a man's voice behind them. 'How can I help you?'

'Good morning, sir,' said Rebecca, turning around. 'We'd like to book a computer for half an hour.' She pointed towards the *Workzone*.

'Sure,' he replied, 'take any computer, and my assistant will be around shortly to help you if you need anything. He's coming at ten.' He picked up a bowl of sweets from the counter and offered Rebecca first. She chose one with purple wrapping and was pleased to discover it was a toffee.

'Just fill in your contact details here,' he gestured to an open book on the counter. He looked at his watch. 'It's nine-fifty but take it as ten,' he said. Rebecca said thank you, and paid for their half hour.

'He's cool,' said Rebecca in a low voice as they walked towards a computer near where the girl was sitting.

'Too old for you,' said Sameer. Rebecca, in the interests of dignity, resisted the temptation to trip her brother. Rebecca rolled a chair from another computer and it clinked against his. The girl looked up.

'Hi,' said Rebecca.

'Hi,' replied the girl, and looked out of the window.

'Ready?' Sameer connected the camera to the computer's port. Rebecca stole another look at the girl. She was barefoot and wore denim shorts. Her t-shirt had a big peace sign on the back in rainbow colours. Rebecca wondered where she got it from.

'All stations go.' Sameer pressed the thumbnails option. The small frames tumbled open.

'Go there,' said Rebecca, indicating to a photo in the middle row with the red canoe. Sameer double clicked. The photograph filled the screen. Rebecca looked from the red canoe to the skull in the guy's hand.

'You are quick with the camera,' she said, admiringly. He shot her an appreciative look.

'Zoom in on his wrist,' she whispered. He squirmed.

'Don't do that. It's ticklish,' he said raising his shoulder to rub his ear. He clicked a hundred and twenty five per cent, a hundred and fifty per cent, two hundred per cent.

'Nice abs,' Sameer remarked. Rebecca poked him. 'Blue baggies,' he added.

'His wrist,' she said, pointing. 'Just get there.' Sameer moved the mouse across to the wrist and clicked.

'It's definitely him,' said Rebecca.

'Do you need any help?' asked a young guy's voice. Rebecca felt her skin prickle.

'Shut it down,' she said to Sameer but her brother was absorbed in zooming in and out on the skull. She poked his knee.

'Ouch! What was that for?' Rebecca indicated behind her with her thumb.

'Or, should I say, do you need help deleting those photographs?' Sameer took an interest in examining his nails. Rebecca took a deep breath in and swivelled her chair around.

'I'm Rebecca and this is my brother Sameer,' she said, feeling her cheeks flush. 'Like I told you this morning,' she looked directly at him, 'we saw what happened in the river yesterday and we wanted to find you,' she said. 'You denied it was you at the shops and I wanted to make sure I wasn't wrong so we came to look at my brother's photos.' The girl from the other computer came over to stand next to him.

'*Wat makeer*, Kabelo?' she asked.

'I'm Kabelo and this is Anneliese,' he informed them, and then looked at Anneliese. 'They took photos of me in the river yesterday,' he replied, 'I was going to tell you about it.' He turned to

Rebecca and Sameer. ‘Why would you want to find me?’ he asked. Rebecca nudged her brother. Couldn’t he help her out here? *Any*thing?

‘And with the storm and the skull and all that it must have been...’ Sameer’s voice trailed off. He found it again. ‘We thought you might want to talk about it. Or something.’

‘What is there to talk about?’ Kabelo folded his arms. The girl folded hers. Rebecca stood up.

‘So, it *was* you?’

‘Look, I appreciate your concern and all. It might have freaked you out but it didn’t me. Please delete the photographs. It’s like an invasion of my privacy.’ Rebecca and Sameer exchanged glances. The girl nodded, refolded her arms and frowned.

‘Scuse me,’ called a customer from the *Gamezone*. ‘My game’s frozen. Can you help me?’

‘Sure, sir.’ Kabelo kept his eyes on Rebecca. ‘Coming right away.’

Kabelo looked at the photograph on the screen. Rebecca watched him. Sameer had left it zoomed on Kabelo’s face. The photo said it all; he looked totally freaked out. How could he say it didn’t affect him? Sameer closed down the programme.

‘My time’s running,’ said the customer, getting up.

‘I’ve got to go,’ said Kabelo. He gestured at Sameer’s camera. ‘Please delete all those photos. I don’t want you to have them.’

‘You’re right, Kabelo,’ said the girl. ‘It’s like the paparazzi.’

‘I’m not famous, Anneliese,’ he said, rather abruptly.

‘Okay, we’ll delete them,’ replied Rebecca slowly, her mind speeding. ‘But first won’t you meet us before we do it?’

Kabelo looked at the customer. He was tapping his foot.

‘Why?’

‘Just.’

‘Shouldn’t you tell someone about the skull?’ Sameer piped in. Rebecca felt a surge of appreciation for her brother. Kabelo gave an exasperated sigh.

‘OK. When and where?’

‘We’ll be at JBs around seven tonight,’ said Rebecca. ‘You can come too if you like.’ But the girl Kabelo called Anneliese did not respond.

‘Okay, I’ll come,’ said Kabelo. ‘And after that, you get on with your holiday and I’ll get on with my life. Privately.’

‘Thanks. Sure,’ said Rebecca. Her face was on fire but she was glad she’s pursued it with Kabelo. Meeting him would give her a proper chance to apologise for interfering in his life. She glanced at Anneliese. She didn’t seem pleased.

‘I’ve got to go,’ said Kabelo. ‘I would prefer it if you left now.’ He looked pointedly at the door.

Chapter 5

Kabelo couldn't get the look on his face in the photo out of his mind as he got into the bath. He turned the taps on, sunk into the water, and allowed his mind to drift back.

'I must have left Gogo's new cell phone number on my notepad at work,' Mama had said that night two years ago, after looking through her bag. She picked up her office keys, checked through them, dropped them into her bag, and snapped it closed with a sigh.

'You know how your grandmother is about birthdays. I'll have to get it from work so we can call her before the day is over.' Kabelo nodded. His grandmother had once sulked for months after they'd failed to call her on her birthday. He watched his mother drape her favourite orange silk scarf around her neck.

'Shall I come with you?' he asked. He wasn't feeling particularly appreciative of the ancient Babylonians for discovering algebra, and would have been glad of a break from his homework.

'No, no,' she'd quickly responded. 'Thanks for offering, darling,' she added, giving him a thankful smile. 'You get on with your homework. It's seven-thirty already. I'll be back in half an hour. Tata should be home by the time I get back. We can all sing to her over the phone. She'll like that.'

On her way past him, his mother ran her hand from the back of Kabelo's head to his forehead. She completed her ritual by tweaking his nose. He wrinkled it.

'I'm too old for the nose thing,' he said.

'Sorry bhuti but no matter how old you are, even when you become a father…' she began teasingly.

'… I will always be your baby,' he completed her sentence. Kabelo's mother gave him a hug.

'Just so long as you know,' she said. 'And I'm sure you will have solved that algebra problem before I get back.' She glanced meaningfully at his books. Kabelo liked his mother's optimism but thought it was misplaced.

'See you just now,' she called, pulling the front door after her. Kabelo heard his mother reverse out of the driveway. He got up, changed the radio station and pumped up the volume. He stretched and experimented with a few dance moves on the way back to his chair and drummed with his pencil in between trying to crack the equations.

When he heard the lock turn in the front door, Kabelo looked up at the clock. Eight-thirty. Mama had taken longer than she said. But it wasn't his mother.

'Hi son,' said Tata. 'Where's Mama?'

'She went back to work to fetch Gogo's new phone number. It's her birthday. She said she'd only be half an hour. That was an hour ago.' They looked at each other.

'Call her,' said Tata. It went to voice mail.

There were no streetlights on the stretch of the road from home to the factory where Kabelo's mother worked and it was new moon. A few vehicles sporadically lit up the road, like fleeting ghosts. Kabelo and Tata hardly spoke in the darkness as the veld on either side slipped silently by.

'Watch out, Tata,' he'd shouted. But his father had already seen and sworn at the big grocery van that turned its lights on only after it had passed them.

'Sorry,' said Tata, giving Kabelo a quick glance.

'It's okay. Don't think I've heard you swear like *that* before.' They gave each other anxious grins. Tata patted Kabelo's knee.

A minute or so later Kabelo's father flicked the indicator to turn right and drove up, tyres scrunching on the gravel driveway. He pulled up the brake in front of the pharmaceutical factory's boom gate. Apart from spotlights, the building was in darkness. A guard stepped out from the guardhouse, switched his flashlight on, and went to the front of the car to take down the registration number on a clipboard. He wore black fatigues and his beret had a red insignia. He shone a torch into the car. Tata put his arm up to shield his eyes from the glare.

'Sorry,' said the guard. 'Your name?' He held his pen ready, his clipboard tilted towards him

'*Nkosi yam*,' said Tata, deliberately. 'How are you, chief?'

'Yes, yes, good evening.' The guard responded in English. 'Your name?'

'Xolani Nomvalo,' said Tata. 'How are you Mr…?' Tata tried to look for a name badge.

'I am quite fine sir.' The guard bent down to peer at Kabelo.

'He is my son. I am looking for my wife. She works here, and she came here to fetch something earlier and I need to go into her office to see if she's been here,' said Tata tapping the steering wheel.

'Sorry but you can't enter,' replied the guard.

'She left home to come here around seven forty-five to fetch something from her office.' Tata pointed to her darkened office window next to the tree. 'She hasn't returned.'

'You must be mistaken,' said the guard. 'Nobody has passed here since six this evening when the last shift ended and everyone left.'

'There must be a mistake, she…' said Kabelo's father, feeling for the door handle.

'I'll double check,' said the guard quickly. 'What's her name?'

'Lerato Nomvalo,' said Tata. The guard walked out of their hearing range and spoke on his phone.

'Okay, yes. I understand. Will do. Thank you, sir,' he said, returning their way. He put his phone in his top pocket.

'Mr Nomvalo. I'm sorry, but your wife wasn't here,' he said in a more sympathetic tone. 'I hope you find her. Good evening.'

That night Kabelo and his father drove up and down the road endlessly, frantically, even recklessly. Maybe Mama had a punctured tyre. Maybe she stopped off at her friend Maria. Maria took to the road too. They tried all the side roads between and beyond home and the factory. They drove home to see if she had returned and then back to the factory where the security guard merely spread his hands and shook his head.

They called the police who told them that lots of people go missing, and if Mrs Nomvalo was still missing in forty-eight hours they would follow it up. They asked if Mr Nomvalo and Mrs Nomvalo by any chance had a fight earlier in the day. 'No,' Tata had replied. They said not to worry as they had already put out an alert for her car and asked again what her car registration was. Tata called Uncle Richard. He came right away.

'How is it possible that Lerato vanished just like that?' Uncle Richard paced the lounge and patio.

'She wouldn't have taken an evening swim in the sea would she? Was she upset about anything? Did she stop at Maria's? Did she call from the factory at all? What exactly did she say to you, Kabelo?' Kabelo told what he could remember over and over but there was nothing new he could think of that could be a clue to where Mama could be. Uncle Richard left to check the roads again himself.

The city's head of special investigations, Detective Mtsi-Smith told Tata that he would personally supervise the investigation. He promised to start that very night, never mind the forty-eight hours. He was true to his word and personally supervised the forensic search at the factory. He reported that they had searched Mrs Nomvalo's office and checked her e-mails and last used programmes, despite them being one hundred per cent sure that she had never arrived there.

Nothing. Detective Mtsi-Smith arranged for them to come and view the footage from the security cameras. It showed that no one had entered or left the factory after six that evening.

After a long eighteen-month investigation, Detective Mtsi-Smith himself came to their house to tell them that the case had gone cold. No leads. No abandoned car, no parts of her car had turned up in their raids on car and spare parts businesses of all kinds. Nothing. He described it as, 'one of those tragic mysteries, like the Bermuda Triangle'.

'I've heard people say that putting up a plaque in a special place can help families whose loved one went missing.' Kabelo thought they should do that but Tata refused.

'Mr Nomvalo, do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of any further assistance,' he'd said. 'If anything, anything at all, comes up, we'll reopen the case without delay or hesitation.' Detective Mtsi-Smith left their house, cap in hand and sympathy for Kabelo and his father in his eyes.

Kabelo reached for his flannel, dunked it in the bath water, and pulled it across his eyes. He spread it out and floated it on the water's surface and submerged himself in the water, except for his face. He sat up suddenly, creating a mini tsunami, causing bath water to spill over onto the floor. Kabelo decided he'd mop up later. He turned on the cold tap, rinsed his flannel, hung it up on its hook and got out of the bath.

Chapter 6

By the time Rebecca and Sameer arrived at JBs their father was already engrossed in a whisky-warmed conversation on the deck. Rebecca went straight to book a pool table.

'Hi Dad,' said Sameer and stole a glance at his father's companion.

'Hi Sameer, meet Akeyo – do you mind children addressing you by your first name?' His father always said that to adults. Sometimes, like now, it irritated him. The woman shook her head.

'Not at all. Hi,' she said, extending her hand. 'Your dad said you'd be along anytime. Pleased to meet you.' Sameer shook hands with a firm grip.

'Akeyo is an environmentalist from Kenya,' said Dad. 'We've been talking about the differences between the Maasai and Rothschild's giraffe.' This was a conversation that Sameer thought would have a short lifespan despite giraffes' long necks.

'So when did you say Mom will be joining us?' he asked.

'Sameer,' his father replied, with a tight smile. 'Soon.' He gave Sameer one of his cool-it looks and pulled out a couple of five rand coins from his wallet.

'Here, enjoy your games. Let's see if your sister will retain reigning champion title this evening. I'll play the winner.'

'I'll play the loser!' added the environmentalist cheerfully.

'Thanks, Dad,' said Sameer. Not likely, he thought.

Kabelo arrived when Sameer and Rebecca's first game of pool was almost over. Since there were four balls left and Rebecca only had the black to down, Sameer was quite pleased at Kabelo's timing. Maybe Rebecca would lose her concentration, and he would win the game. He nudged her. Rebecca looked up.

'Oh hi,' she said, pausing to rub chalk on her cue.

'Do you play?' asked Sameer.

'Sometimes,' he replied, putting his hands in his pocket and looking around.

'Are you good?'

'Depends who I play.'

''Scuse me a sec I've just got to beat my brother with this last shot.' She sent Sameer a mischievous smile. He looked behind him. Rebecca lined up her cue with the white and the black balls, pulled the cue back and gave the white a tight smack. The black skimmed across the table and plunged straight into the pocket. She put the cue down.

'Thanks for coming,' she said, turning to Kabelo. He nodded.

'That's my dad over there,' said Sameer, feeling obliged to make conversation, since they had, after all, invited Kabelo here. Kabelo raised his eyebrows in acknowledgement.

'And your mother?'

'My mom's not here yet. She's on an assignment.'

'What does she do?'

'She's a photographer,' said Sameer.

'Makes sense,' said Kabelo with a fleeting smile. 'Did you bring your camera?' he asked.

'Yes. You can watch me delete them,' replied Sameer.

'Sorry about the stress we've caused,' said Rebecca. 'We didn't mean to freak you out.'

'I'm sure you didn't.'

'Verse you?' said Sameer, thinking if they played pool, at least they wouldn't have to talk.

'Okay,' replied Kabelo. Kabelo put his finger and thumb into his jeans' change pocket and pulled out a five rand coin. He dropped it in the slot and pushed the lever. The balls clattered down like a hailstorm.

'I'll get us something to drink,' said Rebecca. 'What would you like?'

'Here's some money,' said Kabelo pulling out a note.

‘It’s okay,’ she replied. ‘I’ve got cash.’

‘Ginger beer, please,’ said Kabelo.

‘We’ll delete those photographs as soon as we’ve finished playing, okay?’ said Sameer. It wasn’t his night. Kabelo beat him easily. The game between Rebecca and Kabelo was about halfway through, with Rebecca in the lead, when Kabelo received a phone call. He took it on the deck.

‘Sorry. I’ve got to go,’ said Kabelo when he returned. He handed his cue to Sameer. ‘You can finish my game.’

‘What’s happened?’ asked Sameer. ‘You scared of losing?’ he added, jokingly.

‘My friend’s been taken to hospital.’

‘I’m sorry,’ began Sameer, with a flush of awkwardness.

‘My father’s going to pick me up in a few minutes,’ said Kabelo. ‘Just delete the photos without me.’

Chapter 7

Tata didn't stop lecturing all the way to the hospital; he didn't even pause when they went past Mama's factory.

'Now do you see why I banned you from visiting him?' Kabelo just kept replying, 'Yes, Tata,' and, 'You're right, Tata,' whenever he managed to get a word in up until they pulled into the hospital parking lot.

'*Enkosi*, Tata. Thanks for doing this.' His father looked at him.

'Well, I don't know who called but here I am, fool that I may be,' replied his father.

Tata joined the queue at reception while Kabelo went to check the casualty waiting area in case Don was there. A porter pushed a moaning guy with a gash in his head past in a wheel chair. Kabelo felt himself sway. He felt a grip on his arm. He opened his eyes to see the concerned look on a hospital cleaner's face.

'How do you stand it, mama?' he asked in a weak voice.

'I can tell you it wasn't my first choice in career,' she chuckled gently. 'But it has fed many mouths.'

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to…' She continued to hold his arm.

'Maybe I can help you? Are you looking for someone, or are you bringing someone in? Other than you as a fainting patient,' she chuckled again. He gave her a weak smile.

'I'm looking for my friend, he's my age. About this tall.' Kabelo raised his hand flat to half-a-head above his own. 'Brown hair. He's big. He used to be a rugby player.' Kabelo wondered why he had added the last bit of information.

'And…' she said touching her arm.

'Oh. He's kind of suntanned white.' Kabelo realised that was how he liked to remember Don, instead of the pale thin skeleton his friend had become, but he didn't want to complicate things by elaborating. The cleaner shook her head.

'Not during my shift. I came on at six this evening. I notice everyone who comes in here. He must've come in before.' She interrupted their conversation to manoeuvre her mop around a puddle of vomit. Kabelo gagged.

'Don't look down around here,' she advised. 'Anyway, if someone of that description shows up, I'll tell him that his friend was looking for him. What name shall I give?'
Kabelo introduced himself properly and thanked her. He quickly found his way back to Tata.

'He's not there,' Kabelo reported. Tata gave his hand a squeeze. 'Let's hope we have success here then.'

'*Molo sisi*,' said his father, when they finally reached the counter.

'*Thyini molo bhuti,*' said the receptionist, after filing some papers. '*Ninjani namhlanje?'*
Her badge said Ms Nkosi.

'Siphilile, enkosi,' replied Tata.

Ms Nkosi paused in her busy night. Kabelo was used to seeing women's admiring stares at his father's handsome face, and compliments about the Nigerian print shirts that Mama loved to buy him.

'Ndinganinceda?' She glanced at Kabelo.

'Yes, please. We're looking for a sixteen-year-old boy. Don McKenzie. I received a call to say he's been brought to this hospital but we're not sure which ward he's in, if he was admitted.' Tata gave Don's full name and date of birth.

'I'll check the records for you.'

She slid her finger down the entries in a large book, and flicked back a page. Her finger paused. She looked up.

'Who are you to this patient?'

‘Friends,’ said Tata. Ms Nkosi gave him a long stare and pursed her lips. A note had been added in red pen next to Don’s name but Kabelo gave up trying to read it upside down.

‘Hmmm.’

‘Don is my son’s friend,’ added Tata. He cleared his throat. ‘And Don’s parents are my business associates. They’re out of the country right now.’ Ms Nkosi’s eyes shifted to Kabelo. He held her gaze. Ms Nkosi looked out into the flash of ambulance lights. Kabelo followed her eyes across the parking lot and over the road to where a blue lit sign behind the high wire fence said ‘Central Police Station’.

‘Usually I ask for parental proof of permission for access to a minor,’ she said. ‘But you say they’re not around. Have you got ID on you?’ Tata nodded, pulled his driver’s licence out of his wallet, and gave it to her. Ms Nkosi made a photocopy and handed it back.

‘He went into the operating theatre for emergency procedures around lunch time and is now in surgical ward twelve.’

‘Thank you, Ms Nkosi.’

‘Okay, Mr Nomvalo. I’ll give ward twelve a ring to let them know I’ve cleared you. But I must warn you that it is entirely up to the sister-in-charge to decide whether or not you can see the patient.’

‘*Enkosi kakhulu.*’

‘Seems like the boy’s parents should thank *you*.’ She beckoned Tata closer. Kabelo strained to hear.

‘Please understand,’ she said in a low voice, ‘that what I am going to share with you now is because I can see that you care about this young man.’ Tata nodded.

‘The boy’s injuries, and they are serious, did not happen accidentally. The trauma unit staff has recorded it as assault. The police have been notified.’ She straightened and beckoned to the next person in the queue.

‘I hope this will be a lesson to you,’ said Tata while they crossed the tarmac to get to the next hospital building. Kabelo dropped back a step or two behind his father.

The lift doors opened. They stepped in and Tata punched the button for level two.

‘Please don’t follow my example,’ said Tata, examining the roof of the lift.

‘What do you mean, Tata?’

‘Bending the truth with the receptionist. I only did it so we could see Don. Although I’m still wondering whether it’s wise to do so.’

‘You mean lie, or see Don?’ The lift doors opened.

‘And where do you suppose his parents are?’

‘Maybe they really are on a business trip.’ Tata clicked his tongue in annoyance and shook his head. But Kabelo knew Don hadn’t seen his parents for months. After Don and some addict friends stole his parents’ computer and car, and his friends had threatened Sarah, Don’s parents kicked him out of the house, changed the locks, and sent his sister to boarding school.

They followed the signs, past hospital wards, a few security guards and departing visitors, some chattering and others subdued, depending, Kabelo guessed, on how the person was they’d come to visit. They reached surgical ward twelve.

‘Mr Nomvalo?’ said the sister-in-charge. ‘As you can see visiting hours are over. But because the patient is a minor in a serious condition, and because we don’t know where his parents are,’ she rolled her eyes, ‘I’ll allow you to see him.’

‘Thank you, sister. We appreciate it.’

‘Well we need to be able to contact *some*one. She looked away and shouted, ‘Nurse Zolile what *are* you doing with that trolley? This is not a race track!’ He gave her a big smile, which earned a disapproving frown but didn’t seem to bother him. The sister gestured for them to wait on a bench, they obeyed. Kabelo felt like a boy on line-up outside the principal’s office. The sister returned a couple of minutes later.

‘Okay, nurse will come for you. Please don’t disturb the other patients.’ Tata nudged Kabelo. ‘I’ll wait here,’ he said. Kabelo had assumed that his father would come in with him but Tata was already opening the newspaper he’d brought along.

‘Tata?’

‘I’d rather watch who comes and goes,’ said his father. ‘You know this is serious stuff, don’t you?’ Kabelo clenched his teeth. It was one thing to warn your kid but to go on and on about it?

‘Don is your friend?’ asked the nurse. Kabelo nodded. Kabelo found himself wondering whether lifting heavy patients gave him his muscular arms and physique, or whether he worked out too.

‘You can call me Bra Z. Most people do. Except The Sister, of course.’ He gave a wink. ‘I am glad you have come to see him. No one from his family has bothered. Follow me.’

‘Will Don be okay?’ asked Kabelo. ‘I mean, he’s not going to die or anything?’

‘He was badly assaulted.’ Bra Z stopped at the doorway and studied Kabelo’s face. Kabelo looked into the ward.

‘Fractured skull. Tibia so badly broken the bone was sticking through. Stab wounds. Just missed puncturing his lungs,’ he said. ‘He’s stitched up. He’ll survive if no one tries to beat him to a pulp again.’ Kabelo swallowed. He should have helped Don when he asked for it.

‘How long will he be here?’

‘Five days, minimum.’

‘And then…’ Kabelo’s mind raced. Bra Z shrugged, but he wore a worried look.

‘I guess that’s why you’re here.’ Kabelo felt the panic rise inside him again. ‘He’s going to need some post-op care. I’m the one who called your father.’ Bra Z paused. ‘You might find he’s drowsy from the pethidine.’ Kabelo looked at him blankly. ‘For the pain. Mind the tubes when you’re over there.’ He said it like Kabelo should look left, right and left again before crossing a road.

Kabelo walked up to the bed Bra Z pointed him to. Don was covered in bandages, his one leg was in a cast and elevated, and he was hooked up to two drips.

‘Ten minutes.’ Bra Z gave Kabelo a couple of pats on his shoulder and left. Kabelo walked around to the side of the bed without the tubes, averting his eyes from where the drip needles were plastered onto Don’s arms. He surveyed his legally, for once, drugged-up friend. Don’s eyelids flickered open and drooped closed. He opened them again, wide and scared, and tried to sit up, Kabelo steadied him.

‘Where is he?’

‘Who?’ Don flopped back on his pillows.

‘Hey, Kabs. It’s you. Sju. Thank goodness. Hey. Thanks for coming, bru’.’ He spoke in a hoarse whisper.

‘I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Pity I can’t see that much of you.’ Don grimaced. ‘Dude, it’s too sore to laugh.’

‘I didn’t make a joke. You said “where is he?”’

‘Oh.’ Don closed his eyes tight.

‘What happened?’

‘Trouble happened. Like I told you, he came for me.’ Don tried to reach out for Kabelo’s wrist. ‘Please stay,’ murmured Don before drifting off to sleep again.

Kabelo sat down on the plastic chair at Don’s bedside and dropped his head into his hands. When trouble happened to Kabelo, Don had been there for him. The night Mama went missing, Don had hitchhiked over within an hour of Kabelo’s call.

‘I’ll never forget how Don was there for you, for us,’ Tata had kept saying for weeks after. That night Don paced alongside Uncle Richard and then paced more, after Uncle Richard had left.

He and Don fell asleep on the sofas in the lounge. When Kabelo woke up in a cold sweat through the night, Don was there to talk to. He stayed for a couple of days, making sure they ate, and he ran messages for Tata down to the hotel. He wore the same mixture of hope and dread that Kabelo had when the phone rang.

'Your mom's like a mother to me,' Don repeated over and over. 'She can't be gone.'

'He threatened again that he'd get Sarah.' Don's scared whisper brought Kabelo back to the hospital ward and the nightmare of how to get Don and Sarah out of danger.

'*What*?' But Kabelo had heard him. Don's sister was two years younger than them. She was spending the December holiday with her friend's family, at their farm.

'He said he wanted to give me a taste of what would happen to Sarah if I ever told what I'd heard.' Don's voice was shaky. 'And he wants his money. Within a week. Imagine. I can't even walk, let alone raise money I haven't got.'

'How much?' Don held up five fingers. Five grand. The amount had doubled since he last saw Don.

'You really know how to get yourself in it deep.'

'I feel like I need a hit.'

Kabelo couldn't control his mounting anger and fear. He lowered his head and hissed in Don's ear. 'You have just been hit. You're in hospital in case you hadn't noticed. Now your own sister is in danger, you idiot.' He stood up, shaken by his own intensity. Don beckoned him down.

'But Kabs. I'm off the stuff now. I told you I started rehab already and being here…'

'Why should I believe you?' Kabelo didn't allow Don to finish. Kabelo couldn't stand by now Sarah was threatened too. 'You've lied and stolen so many times I've lost count. No wonder your parents threw you out. I'd throw you out too. Sarah has no part in your fricken' drugged-up life, and you've dragged her down with you.' Don held Kabelo's wrist tight.

'He knows where Sarah is.' Kabelo felt as if someone had grabbed the bottom of his heart and twisted it. Don had told Kabelo about the bouncer at Dazzlers when Kabelo visited him.

'You're a fricken' trouble breeder,' he said, ignoring Don's tears.

'He stood at the ward door earlier and told one of the visitors to tell me to look at him. When I did, he made that slitting throat gesture. Then he smiled in a sinister way and left.'

'I need to take his blood pressure and temperature,' said Bra Z, pulling the curtains around Don's bed. When Don let go of his wrist, Kabelo found the break in the curtains and went to stand by the window. It was easy to pick out Tata's car in the car park because most of the cars had gone.

'You can have five more minutes, if you like,' said Bra Z, who came to stand at the window. 'Perhaps it will help to settle him for the night. He's been very agitated, so we've had to sedate him.'

Kabelo nodded but he stood at the window a bit longer. A biker walked over to a rubbish bin and threw something into it. He got on the bike, pulled full throttle and rode out of the car park, rattling the ward's metal window frames. Kabelo felt a twinge of envy. The biker seemed so free. Kabelo wished he didn't feel responsible for helping Don. But now that Sarah was in danger, he couldn't stay out of it. Kabelo went back to Don's bed, sat down on the plastic chair again and leant forward.

'Okay, so tell me as much as you can remember,' said Kabelo. He listened without interrupting even when he felt like screaming at his friend. When Bra Z returned Kabelo quickly said goodbye, and left the ward. Tata looked up, and folded his newspaper.

'Ready to go?' They walked to the car in silence. Kabelo's father clicked the remote.

'Wait, please, Tata. I just quickly want to see something.'

'Okay. Be quick. It's late now.' Tata got into the car and tuned the radio onto a news station. Kabelo walked to the rubbish bin in the dim light and picked up an ice cream stick from the ground to poke around with. Chip packets, empty cans, a cigarette box, even a disposable nappy with a

nasty smell. Kabelo held his breath. A sim card. He picked it up, gave it a quick wipe on his denims, and slid it into his back pocket.

'You taking up recycling garbage?' Tata joked as he reversed the car. 'What was that about?'

'Something shiny attracted my attention. I just wanted to see what it was.' Had his father seen him take the sim card out of the bin?

'What was it?' asked Tata, switching the car on.

'Just a chocolate wrapper.'

'What happened to Don? What did he tell you?' Kabelo was relieved that his father didn't pursue the bin thing further.

'He was too drowsy after the operation to talk. The nurse warned me that he might be like that because of the pethidine. So I just sat there. I'll have to come again when he's more awake.'

'*We'll* have to come again. I'll come in with you next time.' Tata took his eyes off the road for a second to look at Kabelo. 'I just thought he might tell you more if I wasn't there. *Nyana*, don't get mixed up in this. Don has made his choices. Stay away from him.' Kabelo couldn't tell his father that it wasn't possible to do that anymore.

'You're right,' said Kabelo with as much conviction as he could muster. It seemed to work.

'Good. Now tell me,' said Tata, 'how was your day before we unexpectedly ended up at the hospital? How was your first morning at work?'

'It was good. Quite busy.' Kabelo stretched his legs out and remembered how his heart had given an unexpected jump when he saw Rebecca playing pool at JBs. Relieved that his father had not pursued more questions about Don, Kabelo mentioned, after a while, that he'd met a brother and sister who were staying at the Gould's house for the holidays.

'They seem quite cool,' he said and Tata nodded absent-mindedly. When they turned into Jikeleza Route the car's bright lights mutated familiar scenery into eerie shapes, and for the rest of the way home Kabelo could not get his anxiety about Don and Sarah out of his mind.

Chapter 8

The birds woke Rebecca at dawn. Or maybe it was restlessness. She threw back her duvet, grabbed her binoculars and let herself out of the house. She sprinted across the lawn to the lookout point, collecting loose bits of grass and a chill on her bare feet. Rebecca could easily sketch the different scenes from memory; the hills and houses, the river valley, and the coastline all the way north until it became a pencil point. Blue smoke from behind the hill swayed up in wispy ribbons. She imagined MaDilika making breakfast, and getting ready for another day at the craft market.

Rebecca focused her binoculars on the row of houses closest to the river. A family was busy hooking up a boat on its trailer to a 4x4. She moved along, house by house. She would instinctively know which one was Kabelo's. A *that's it!* feeling would tingle through her, like the psychics she'd seen on television. Rebecca wasn't sure if it would happen with one of the simpler houses built decades ago, or with a modern two-storey show off-y one.

She reached the last house in the top row on the ridge of the hill. No tingle. She sighed and turned her attention to the sea. It shimmered dark grey near the shore, lightening up all the way to the horizon where it reflected the mauves and pinks of sunrise. There were already people on the beach.

Rebecca knew that when she got to the beach this early she'd find three main categories of people. Dog walkers with their little spades and plastic bags, older people with their spindly legs and plumped out tummies, and workers walking with purposeful strides, to get to the breakfast shift at restaurants, or to clean people's holiday homes. And then there would be her, but she fitted into the category of teenagers, and there weren't usually that many up at this time. *She* wasn't always at the beach at this time but yesterday Kabelo had been at the shops early, in his board shorts, with sand on his feet. She ran back to the house.

'Is that you, beti?'

'Yes, Naanii.' Her grandmother's room faced directly onto the verandah.

'Why you up so early?'

'It's a beautiful morning, Naanii. There's lots of people on the beach. I want to catch some waves.'

'You take care hey. Only swim where the lifeguards are.'

'I always do, Naanii.' Rebecca smiled at her grandmother's grunt. There wouldn't be lifeguards at this time. Within seconds she'd pulled her purple and green swimming costume and board shorts off the line on the verandah and put them on. She slung a kikoi around her neck and yanked up her body board by its cord. She was out of the garden gate before Naanii could say wait beti, have something to eat first.

After she'd caught a few waves, Rebecca dried off and spread her kikoi next to her board on the beach. She sat down and wriggled her bum into the sand to get more comfortable.

'*Hallo*.' Rebecca felt a light touch on her shoulder, and she quickly turned around but it wasn't Kabelo.

'It's me, Anneliese. From the internet café, remember?' she said. As if I could forget, thought Rebecca to herself. 'Your name's Rebecca, right?'

'Oh. Yes. Hi, Anneliese,' said Rebecca with some trepidation.

'You're here early,' said Anneliese, looking down at her. She dropped her board on the sand. 'Are you waiting for someone?'

'No,' replied Rebecca, not sure whether to stand up. Did Anneliese suspect she was hoping to bump into Kabelo? 'I just came down to catch some waves,' said Rebecca. 'I often come down early.' Anneliese spread her beach towel next to Rebecca's and sat down on it.

'Why did your brother take those photos of Kabelo?' she asked. Did Anneliese think Rebecca and her brother were like some kind of stalkers?

‘Sameer takes photos all the time,’ replied Rebecca, shielding her eyes from the sun with her hand so she could see Anneliese more clearly. ‘It’s his hobby. He just happened to be on the riverbank when Kabelo found the skull and took photos of what he saw.’ Rebecca picked up a shell, smoothed the sand and started to make patterns with it. ‘He didn’t mean anything bad by it.’

‘Did you delete them last night?’

‘No,’ replied Rebecca, ‘Kabelo had to go off suddenly.’

‘Do you like drawing?’ asked Anneliese, pointing at Rebecca’s intricate patterns. The sudden change in topic of conversation was a relief.

‘Yes, I’m doing art as one of my subjects at school.’

‘Me too,’ said Anneliese. ‘I like making sculptures the most. You?’

‘I…’

‘Check that swell,’ said Anneliese, pointing out to the sea. She grabbed her board. ‘Coming?’

Rebecca scrambled up, got hers, and followed Anneliese. It was quite something trying to keep up with Anneliese’s quick conversation changes. She was like a hyperactive frog in a pond jumping from lily pad to lily pad. Rebecca splashed alongside Anneliese into the cool sea until they were beyond the breakers. Anneliese pointed back at the swell and they got on their boards ready to catch it. Rebecca felt her tummy turn as the wave picked her up and bubbled beneath her all the way to the beach. They landed up next to each other in the shallow froth.

‘Cool ride, nè?’ said Anneliese.

‘Awesome.’ She wasn’t sure what to say next. She hoped Anneliese would stay in the shallows and talk a bit more. Anneliese didn’t seem angry, like she had yesterday. Rebecca had never made a friend to hang out with while on holiday here. She liked the idea. Besides, Anneliese was friends with Kabelo. They lolled around in the sea foam.

‘We’re staying at the Gould’s place.’ Rebecca lapped water on her tummy with a cupped hand.

‘I know,’ replied Anneliese.

‘Oh,’ said Rebecca, trying not to show surprise. Anneliese picked up fistfuls of wet sand, moulded it into balls, and threw them ahead of her. They disintegrated midair and bits plopped into the water. ‘My mom is an estate agent. She knows what’s going on with all the properties around here.’

‘That’s interesting,’ said Rebecca and rolled over. Anneliese was quite nice after all, and she also seemed to want to be friends.

‘It is, sometimes. For example, did you know that the Gould’s house is going to be demolished to make way for a golf course and housing estate?’

‘But it’s where we come every year for our family holiday,’ said Rebecca in dismay. She sat up to digest the news.

‘I know,’ said Anneliese. Rebecca turned her face away from Anneliese and watched the waves crashing into the rocks.

‘My mom told me it’s the same family every year,’ Anneliese continued. ‘It’s just that I’ve never met anyone from your family before. You could always rent a holiday home on our side of the river.’ But Rebecca couldn’t begin to explain to Anneliese what the Gould’s house meant to her. Rebecca had photos of her parents holding her as a baby sucking her thumb at the lookout point.

‘*Ek is jammer*,’ said Anneliese, ‘I shouldn’t have told you like that.’ She rinsed the sand off her hands and stood up.

‘It’s okay,’ said Rebecca. Rebecca followed her back to the beach where they had left their stuff.

‘Kabelo and I go to the same school,’ said Anneliese, changing track again.

‘Oh, that’s cool.’ Rebecca tried to clear her head of an image of the Gould’s house being smashed by a grader. ‘Where?’

‘In East London. My mom and dad went there. It used to be only for whites,’ said Anneliese, glancing at Rebecca.

‘My mom gets all weepy at my school functions,’ ventured Rebecca. ‘She always says how lucky we are because it’s all normal now. She’s taken zillions of photos.’

‘My father was a fan of the old days,’ said Anneliese. ‘Until recently.’ She knocked the sand off her board with her fist. ‘I must go. My mom’s expecting me.’ Rebecca was curious to know how Anneliese’s mother felt about it but now, with Anneliese banging away, didn’t seem to be a good time to ask.

‘Are you in the same grade as Kabelo?’ asked Rebecca. Anneliese put her board under her arm.

‘I’m in grade ten.’

‘Me too.’

‘Kabelo’s in grade eleven. We go to school together on the taxi. My best friend Sarah is his best friend’s sister. Or at least she used to be my best friend.’

‘What happened?’

‘She’s gone to boarding school so I don’t see her much anymore. Don’s become an addict and he’s wrecked. My mom won’t let me see Sarah. She says the school’s going down the drain with all the drugs and stuff. She’s thinking of moving me. But all my friends are there, and my dad says that drugs are everywhere anyway.’

‘We didn’t delete the photos last night because Kabelo had to go suddenly to see a friend in hospital. Could it be the friend you’re talking about?’

‘Did he mention the friend’s name?’ asked Anneliese.

‘No.’

Suddenly a dog was yapping all over Anneliese and wagging its tail so fast it was a blur.

‘Snax push off! Hey Kabs. Control your dog man!’ He grinned at them and whistled. But Snax was having too much fun so Kabelo whistled until Snax came to his side.

‘Who did you go to see at the hospital last night? Was it Don?’ asked Anneliese.

‘News travels fast,’ he said, looking at Rebecca. ‘I came to tell you about it,’ he said to Anneliese. ‘Don’s dealer nearly killed him. He thinks Don knows something he shouldn’t. The dealer’s threatened to hurt Sarah. He’s a bouncer at Dazzlers. And of course there’s the matter of Don owing him five grand.’

‘Let’s go out and catch some waves and talk out there,’ said Anneliese. Rebecca wondered what happened to Anneliese needing to go home. ‘It always calms you, Kabs.’

‘How’re the waves?’

‘Awesome,’ said Rebecca.

‘You coming?’ Anneliese asked Rebecca. She nodded, pleased to be included.

They caught waves for a while and then they swam out beyond the breakers where they floated on their backs.

‘I don’t know if I can be bothered about Don anymore,’ said Anneliese. ‘But I care about Sarah. It’s not fair that Don’s put her in danger like this.’

‘Don says he never overheard anything.’ Kabelo told them about Don’s injuries and Bra Z.

‘I think I saw Don’s dealer last night,’ said Kabelo. ‘He was on his phone in the car park. I saw him throw something in the rubbish bin. When Tata and I got to the car park I fished out a sim card. It could be his. I’m not sure what to do with it.’

‘Kabelo, this is not something we can take on,’ said Anneliese. They were all treading water, facing each other. Rebecca’s eyes were beginning to sting from the sea water.

‘It’s too dangerous,’ Anneliese added. ‘We have to tell the police.’ Kabelo flashed Anneliese a sour look.

‘Okay, our parents then.’

‘Are you mad?’ said Kabelo. ‘I’m going to Dazzlers to see what that bouncer looks like. Don says he’s got a night adder tattoo on the back of his neck and a replica of it on his Harley. If

it's the same guy I saw from the hospital ward window last night, then I want to know what information we can get from the sim card.'

'How would you get that done? Don't you have to get the police to do it?' asked Rebecca, thrilled that Kabelo had said 'we', and hoped it included her.

'My uncle's an ex cop,' said Anneliese, slowly. 'He works at a cell phone company. I could ask him about the card, I guess.'

'But what will you tell him?' asked Rebecca. 'Like, isn't he going to want to know whose card it is?'

'Tell him it's your boyfriend's and you want to know if he's cheating on you,' teased Kabelo. Anneliese sent a whack of spray Kabelo's way. He held his hands up in truce.

'Kabelo, you know I don't have a boyfriend. Bye.' She swivelled around and swam off. Rebecca thought maybe she was joking and would soon turn around and swim back to them. But she didn't stop until she reached the shore. Rebecca glanced at Kabelo. He'd lost his grin and was staring after Anneliese. It was awkward, suddenly being on her own with him, especially after Anneliese's outburst. Rebecca ducked under the sea, and did a somersault. As she was coming to the surface for air, she had an idea.

'Is Dazzlers the nightclub near the mall with the movies?' she asked.

'It's a ten minute walk from there,' he replied. 'Why?'

'My Dad's taking my grandmother, Sameer and me to movies tonight. Maybe you could come with us and we could slip out to Dazzlers. Sameer and I usually go to a different movie to them.'

'But won't your dad think it strange? He hasn't even met me.'

'He saw you last night at JBs,' said Rebecca. 'Will your parents let you go with us?'

'I'll ask my father.'

'Ok.' Rebecca wondered where his mother was.

'I told him that I'd met you and your brother last night and that you are staying at the Gould's place for the holidays. My father and Mr Gould sometimes play chess together.'

'How will I know if you can come? I'll need to tell my dad.'

'I'll sms you,' said Kabelo. 'I've got to get to work.' Rebecca squirmed inside, remembering yesterday at the internet café. They waited for a big wave and caught it to the shore. Rebecca played with Snax while Kabelo dried himself.

They put each other's numbers into their phones and swopped Chatworx names.

'Probably see you later,' said Kabelo, throwing his towel around his shoulders. 'And. Well. Thanks.' He called Snax and headed towards the village.

Kabelo was at the internet café when he got a sms from Anneliese telling him to go online. He was glad to hear from her. He'd felt bad after she'd left in that moody way but sometimes she was just like that. He went online.

A: Hey. Unkl sez cn do. Takes 24hrs
K: Gr8 go 4 it
A: Ok
K: Tnx. U ok?
A: Ja. Bye

On the way home Kabelo went to see Tata at the hotel to tell him about the movie plan. His father was in a relaxed mood.

'Yho, Kabelo. A movie date already! But you only met her yesterday!'

'No, Tata, it's not like that. It's not a date. It's just a chance to see a movie. The whole family's going.' His father gave him a light cuff on his chin.

'The whole family! That's serious! Well, I'll have to find out whether she is suitable daughter-in-law material… Then there's the lobola…'

‘Tata, stop. Drop it, please. It’s not funny.’ But his father was getting so much fun out of teasing him, and it was cool to see his father in such a good mood for a change, that Kabelo just shook his head and smiled, and tried to ignore the uneasiness niggling inside. Tata trusted him but Kabelo already knew he couldn’t live up to it right now. As soon as he’d left Tata, he went online again to talk to Rebecca.

K: Cn come

R: Gr8 dad says kwl

Rebecca walked around the garden, and ended up at the lookout point. She decided to use some airtime to call.

‘I’ve spoken to Sameer. He’s in,’ said Rebecca when Kabelo picked up.

‘He’s okay to be at movies on his own?’

‘Yes. Dad says he’ll drop you home afterwards.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Kabelo, which house do you stay in?’

‘On the top road, three houses from the village side. You can see it from the Gould’s lookout point. Next time you’re there, like this morning, try waving.’

Chapter 9

Sameer settled into his velvety seat and put his feet up against the seat in front of him. That's what was great about being on your own at movies. You can do whatever you want. No sister or parent telling you how to sit or be.

'Stop kicking my seat.' The man in front turned around and glared at Sameer. 'It's irritating.' *You're* irritating, mouthed Sameer at the back of the man's head. He shifted to a seat further along the row where he could have some peace. He dug his hand into his box of popcorn and munched his way through the forthcoming attractions.

When the main movie started, Sameer looked at the time on his phone. He set the alarm to vibrate thirty minutes before Rebecca and Kabelo needed to be back. They had ninety minutes left. He smsed them a time check. If they weren't there when the movie was over, Dad would have the biggest melt down ever, and Rebecca would be grounded for the rest of her life. Sipping his coke, Sameer wondered what his punishment as colluder would be. The main movie's opening scene was starting. He sighed. It was cool to be part of all this, even if he couldn't be on the advance mission to Dazzlers.

Kabelo stopped when they came out of the shopping mall exit. *Iiholide ezimnandi! Merry Christmas! Ry veilig!* said the festive lights strung between the street lamp posts.

'You sure you want to do this?' Kabelo asked, playing with the sleeve of the black and white striped Chinese collar shirt he'd changed into in the men's washroom in the mall. 'You don't need to come. I could easily go on my own.'

'I want to come.' Rebecca's eyes glittered in the lights. She'd put on make-up, and swopped her t-shirt and jeans for a shiny strappy top and skirt. They'd left their other clothes in a bag with Sameer.

'This way,' said Kabelo. 'Let's cross.' He took her wrist as if she were a child. By the time they'd crossed the four lanes, she'd managed to prise out of his grip.

'Have you worked out what year to tell them you were born?' Kabelo was often mistaken for being older than he was, he was confident that he would get in. But would she? Rebecca shook her head at him.

'I don't need a calculator to do that!' He frowned.

'I'll handle the getting in,' said Kabelo.

'Okay. Relax, dude,' said Rebecca.

'I don't think you realise the danger,' said Kabelo.

'How much further is Dazzlers?' she replied.

'A few blocks.'

They walked briskly and in silence. Kabelo couldn't think of a single thing to talk about. Here he was taking a girl he'd only just met to a dodgy nightclub. They were going in search of the bouncer stroke drug dealer who'd put Don in hospital and who was threatening to harm Sarah. Rebecca's father thinks she's watching a movie in the theatre next to his. His head spun just thinking about it.

'That's it?' Rebecca asked, pointing ahead. In the next block, flashing lights bounced off office blocks and searchlights from the top of the building sent white lines crisscrossing into the sky.

'Yup. *That's* Dazzlers.'

'I always thought of this as a sleepy city,' remarked Rebecca.

'Don't judge a book by its cover,' he replied.

'My English teacher would send you to detention for that cliché,' she teased.

'We're not in school,' he replied before he could stop himself from sounding all that. Taxis and cars pulled up, and people spilled out, laughing and shouting at each other.

Kabelo and Rebecca walked across an alleyway before Dazzlers and joined the queue.

'Look at all those blue stars and fairy lights,' exclaimed Rebecca, looking around. 'They're so pretty!'

'Not in all ways,' he replied, pulling his eyes away from her face.

'Do you always put a downer on things?'

'Quite often,' he said, surprising himself. Kabelo wished he could join Rebecca in joking around but he was still worried she was taking the whole thing too lightly.

'Check the bouncers, they're huge,' remarked Rebecca. One walked up and down the queue, wearing dark glasses and a frown, another stood near the pay point and watched everyone get their entry stamps. The third, with enough bling for Africa, stood at the entrance to the revolving door, checking stamps and patting everyone down. The biker Kabelo had seen outside the hospital was at least a head taller than these bouncers, and much, much bigger. He told Rebecca that none of them was the guy they were looking for.

'Check out that bike.' Rebecca nodded at a black Harley-Davidson parked on the pavement.

'Wait here,' said Kabelo. He strolled towards it. In the club's mirrored windows, Kabelo could see Shades watching him. Get real, he thought. Like I would try to steal a Harley in front of three steroid-pumped bouncers and a queue of witnesses? Kabelo pretended he was looking for someone.

A police van drove past. The cop in the passenger seat examined the queue, and ended his survey with a nod at Shades. Kabelo wasn't sure if it was a threatening or friendly gesture. Shades gave nothing away.

'No night adder on the bike,' Kabelo reported back. They were next in the queue. Rebecca stood slightly behind Kabelo, as he'd asked.

'How many?' said the woman, chewing gum with gold-capped teeth.

'Two,' replied Kabelo.

'Hundred and forty bucks.'

Rebecca slipped seventy rand into his hand. Kabelo added his and pushed the money over the counter. They put their wrists forward for blue star stamps. When they reached the entrance, Rebecca caught his hand just before they went through. He was sorry she let go so quickly. They showed Checker their wrists, and he patted only Kabelo down and thumbed Rebecca through.

'We're in!' shouted Rebecca above the music. 'It's my first time to be at a club!'

'Careful. There's probably security everywhere.' Directly in front of them was a large dance floor with only a few people dancing. Don had told him when he first started coming here, and tried to get Kabelo to come along, that they only needed to come around ten. To the left was a long, blue lit bar.

'Don sometimes worked at the bar. But his main job was to get girls interested in drugs.'

'Were you ever tempted?' Her breath tickled against Kabelo's ear. He gave an involuntary smile, and rubbed his ear with his shoulder. He gestured that he'd explain later.

'Let's blend. Come dance,' he said. He could get a better sense of the club's layout from the dance floor, and they'd be less obvious. They joined the other clubbers drawn, like colourful moths, to dance over a huge lit circle in the middle. The DJ converged music with lights that swirled and pulsed.

'Let's dance on the edge of the crowd,' said Kabelo, putting his arm around Rebecca to lead her to the rim of the circle. He danced with his back to everyone. 'I don't want these guys to see me. They're from my school,' he managed to convey to Rebecca, who nodded. Any other time, Kabelo realised, he wouldn't have minded them seeing him with Rebecca. He would've quite liked it, in fact. Kabelo just hoped news wouldn't travel to his father through some network that he'd been at Dazzlers tonight. He couldn't believe it when Tata told him one of the hotel workers lived opposite Don, and reported Kabelo's visit. Kabelo watched Rebecca as they danced, enjoying the way she moved her whole body so naturally and rhythmically to the music.

‘Have you noticed if he’s down here?’ asked Rebecca, interrupting his thoughts. Kabelo shook his head. There were a few security-looking guys moving around, but none resembled the one they were looking for. The DJ put on a slow track and Kabelo hesitated, wondering how Rebecca would feel dancing up close with him. She took a step closer, and he opened his arms and she slipped into them. The track was over sooner than Kabelo wanted it to be, and the next one was faster so they moved apart to dance as they had before.

‘I’ll go to the washroom,’ she said, when it ended, ‘and look around in the corridors there.’

‘Then we’ll go up to the next level,’ he replied, after looking at the time on his phone. ‘Meet you there.’ He pointed to the bottom of the stairs.

A woman security guard stood in the corridor outside the women’s washroom. Rebecca turned the corner and almost bumped into a group of older girls who were laughing and talking loudly. A tall girl, the tallest, paused to look at Rebecca. The others stopped what they were doing. Rebecca wished for instant evaporation. She smiled self-consciously and went to the basin.

‘You new here?’ asked Tall Girl, who’d caught Rebecca’s eyes in the mirror.

‘Yes,’ replied Rebecca, blushing. She cleared her throat and said ‘Yes’ again, louder.

‘Where you from?’

‘Cape Town.’ She hoped they didn’t probe. Her mind quickly made up a story. She was at university there, doing journalism. But there was no need.

‘Well then, let’s welcome the chick from Table Mountain to Dazzlers!’ The other girls clapped and laughed in a friendly way while Tall Girl gave Rebecca a hug.

‘How long you here for?’

‘A month,’ replied Rebecca. She clasped Rebecca’s hand and drew her aside.

‘Wanna try something really nice that makes you feel warm and loving?’ whispered Tall Girl. The other girls looked in Rebecca’s direction and smiled and nodded.

‘Uh, sure.’ How could she say no? She could always flush it away.

‘Come with me.’ Rebecca thought of Kabelo and how anxious he’d probably be getting by now.

‘Just round the corner.’ Tall Girl led her out of the washroom and around a corner. She looked around, and then yanked out a small plastic bag with pink tablets from her pocket. She slid the seal open and took one out.

‘Here,’ she said offering it to Rebecca. Rebecca stared at her.

‘You here with someone? A guy?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then it’s your double lucky night. Here’s one for him, too.’ Tall Girl took out another one. Rebecca unclenched her hand and Tall Girl dropped them into her palm.

‘Now, listen to me, Cape chick. You listening?’ Rebecca nodded vigorously. ‘Drink lots of water all night long.’ She bent down a little so that she could look directly into Rebecca’s eyes, took Rebecca’s hand in hers, and stroked it.

‘Do that and you’ll have lots of fun here all night long. Long. Long.’ Tall Girl wiggled her hips and shook her head making her hair go wild.

‘Thanks,’ Rebecca forced a big smile. ‘Thanks very much.’

‘Oh, here, you might need this.’ She gave Rebecca two Chappies bubble gum. Rebecca looked blankly at Tall Girl.

‘To help you if your teeth grind, silly,’ she laughed. ‘Don’t you know *anything*?’ Tall Girl laughed a friendly laugh and gave Rebecca a hug.

‘I’ll see you here again soon,’ said Tall Girl. ‘But bring some extra cash along for your ecstasy-treaties next time!’ She stroked her finger gently down Rebecca’s cheek and walked away. Rebecca opened her hand and looked down at the pink tablets nestling in her palm. Each one had a heart stamped on it. She walked back into the washroom, glad that the other girls had left, and

caught sight of herself in the mirror. Should she flush them away? Kabelo was waiting. Rebecca watched herself slide them into her skirt pocket.

'What took you so long?' Kabelo frowned at her.

'Sorry. I met some really friendly girls there. One even…' But he couldn't hear her. The volume went up and the beat pulsed faster.

'We're not here to make new friends. Tell me later,' he shouted in her ear. 'He's not down here. You see anything?'

She shook her head. In the interests of their mission, she decided to postpone telling Kabelo how she felt about him reprimanding her like a school kid, especially after they'd had such cool dances together.

'Let's hurry.' He gestured up. They reached the top of the stairs and stayed in the background. He tried to be casual in his surveillance of the scene but it was much less crowded than on the ground level. The clubbers here were a bit older. Some lounged on sofas set against the mirrored walls, with their drinks on low tables. Some were dancing.

There was one bartender behind the small bar, and a few people sitting on tall bar stools. A few metres from the bar was a door with a sign that said Management Only. If there were security guys up here, they blended in. Maybe the bar tender kept an eye out. It was obvious that Kabelo and Rebecca didn't fit in here.

'He's probably in there,' said Rebecca, nudging Kabelo. Kabelo nodded. She beckoned him to lower his head.

'I'll do it,' said Rebecca.

'Do what? What are you talking about?'

'I'll get in there. It's better I go. Nobody knows me. When I go to the door, walk over there. It'll give you a good view into the office if they open the door for me.'

'You're mad. I'm not going to let you…' He tried to pull her back but she slipped out of his grip and instead put her phone in his extended hand.

'Watch me,' she replied. Rebecca knew it would attract attention to them if Kabelo ran after her. He watched, his heart sinking, as she knocked on the door. After a few seconds it opened halfway. Kabelo froze. A huge guy wearing a white suit and Panama hat blocked the way and then moved aside to let Rebecca through. What the hell had he been thinking hooking up with Rebecca, whom he barely knew, and coming here? He'd been stupid and selfish and mad, he told himself while frantically thinking of something he could do to get her out of there.

'Can't you read?' he snarled at Rebecca with narrowed eyes. He stood broad and stiff, like a Pit Bull Terrier. 'Whadduyuwant?'

Rebecca felt her confidence shrivel and her knees go wobbly. Why was she here? Now she had to see her bravado through.

'Let her in,' commanded an older man's voice. Pit Bull shook his head and muttered. Rebecca took a step in.

'You're the boss, Boss.' He closed the door behind her and turned the lock.

'I'm so sorry to disturb you,' she said in the sweetest voice she could muster to mask her quaver. 'It's just that I lost… or someone stole my phone when I was dancing… and…' Was Pit Bull even listening?

'Do we look like the local lost property department?' growled Pit Bull.

'Let her speak, for goodness' sake,' said the older man from behind a chrome and glass desk. 'Come closer.' He beckoned. Rebecca took a few steps forward. On the wall to her right were several security screens, zoning in on different locations inside and outside the club. Rebecca's mind suddenly boggled at the thought that they might have a camera in the passage where she'd accepted the ecstasy tablets from Tall Girl. A man dressed in black fatigues had his back to her, monitoring the screens. He tapped a couple of keys on a laptop computer and information scrolled

up. What was he checking for? All of them might have seen her with Kabelo. How idiotic and naïve she'd been coming here, thinking she could pull this off. She took a deep breath.

'Like I said I'm really sorry to disturb you but my boyfriend will kill me if he can't get hold of me and he's going to be furious about the phone being stolen.' She glanced at a fresh scar on her upper arm. Pit Bull's eyes slid there and back to her face, like a robot.

'He's incredibly jealous and… he already thinks I'm seeing someone else and…'

'Well how does your problem suddenly become our problem?' snarled Pit Bull, who had gone to stand by the older man's desk. The Boss's head shone like a polished ostrich egg.

'Show *some* sympathy. Surely you *once* had a relationship, Gary?' he jibed. Pit Bull's whole body seemed to scowl. He turned away from The Boss and, muttering, took off his hat, wiped a large white handkerchief over his head, and put it back on. Rebecca held her breath. In that quick movement, Pit Bull revealed his night adder tattoo with its body slithering on his crown and its head reared up ready to spit venom on the back of Pit Bull's neck.

'So what do you need from us?' asked The Boss while Pit Bull tapped his foot.

'Please could you find out if a phone's been handed in? I also need to call my boyfriend, if you don't mind.'

'And now we're a free phone-your-boyfriend service,' said Pit Bull shaking his head.

'Let the girl call her boyfriend, for god's sake. We wouldn't want one of our patrons harmed in any way. Would we? General.' The man in fatigues turned around to look at The Boss. 'Check with all the security guys if a phone's been handed in.'

'Young lady,' The Boss continued. 'Tell us what phone you lost.'

Rebecca clasped her hands to calm their shaking. The General was like a human lie detector, the way his eyes did not leave her for a second when she responded to The Boss. Rebecca focused on the round scar on The General's cheek and quickly made up details about her phone's make and model. He noted them down, still watching her. Pit Bull jammed his phone into her hand. She turned away so he could not see her trembling. It was the same phone as her father's. Who thought she was at the movies. She dialled, not knowing if they were merely letting her complete her act and then they would zap her.

'Hi. It's me. I'm waiting for you at Dazzlers. Downstairs. Um, outside. Bye sweetie.' Pit Bull grabbed his phone back as if she was an airtime thief, and shoved it in his jacket pocket.

'Thank you so much. You've probably saved my life. My boyfriend is….' But The Boss and The General had turned their attention to one of the screens.

'Just go,' said Pit Bull, turning the lock and opening the door narrowly, just enough for her to squeeze through. She was almost through when The Boss called out to her.

'Girl! What's your name?'

'Jasmine,' she replied, surprised that her pretend friend's name when she was five popped out of her mouth.

'Jasmine, I think you should dump your boyfriend.' She nodded and turned to go out of the door. A black leather biker's jacket full of badges and a black bike helmet hung on the coat stand. Harley-Davidson all the way.

She walked straight past Kabelo, down the stairs, and out through the revolving doors. She hoped Kabelo was following her. She turned right and walked up the street they had come down. Two blocks up, she stepped into the shadows of the park. She didn't have any way of telling the time plus she'd lost all sense of how long they'd been gone. Were the movies out already? She stood back, behind a tree, and waited, to see if anyone was following her. The street was quiet and the night air damp on her skin. Where was Kabelo? She couldn't see him. She didn't know whether to go back and look for him. She'd given him her phone. She couldn't call Sameer for help. What would Dad say if he saw her in these clothes, instead of the ones she went to movies in, and to top it all Kabelo wasn't with her? What if Pit Bull, The Boss and The General were playing with them, let her go, and grabbed Kabelo?

‘Rebecca.’ She jumped. Kabelo was behind her.

‘Where were you?’ she demanded.

‘I waited a few minutes and left. I checked down the alley at the back for the bike. It was there, also with the night adder.’

‘Are you crazy? They’ve got security cameras everywhere!’

‘*You* calling *me* crazy?’ Kabelo sounded furious.

They started walking briskly up the road.

‘How much time left?’ asked Rebecca. ‘Can I have my phone please?’

‘Ten minutes,’ replied Kabelo handing it over. ‘And I want you to know that I would never have brought you along if I’d known you’d do that.’

‘It’s him,’ said Rebecca. ‘He had the night adder tattoo on his neck.’

‘Sameer’s been sending frantic smses. On both our phones.’ They broke into a sprint and reached the mall with seven minutes to spare.

‘By the way,’ panted Rebecca. ‘A girl gave me two tablets when I went to the washroom at Dazzlers.’

‘You took drugs from a random girl you met in the washroom?’ He shook his head. ‘You’re flipping nuts!’

‘I couldn’t say no. She was friendly. She didn’t force me or anything. She took me outside the washroom to a quiet corridor.’

‘So, let’s get this clear. You can go into that dealer’s den but you can’t say no to a friendly girl dealing drugs outside the washroom?’

‘I didn’t swallow them or anything.’

‘That’s how Don started,’ said Kabelo. He stopped running and stuck his hand out. ‘Give them to me.’

‘Here? Now?’ she asked.

‘Okay, then, in the movies.’ They didn’t speak again until they reached the mall.

‘Did you get the bike’s number plate?’ asked Rebecca

‘LNT313EC.’

Sameer was extremely relieved to see them. Rebecca took the bag from him, and she and Kabelo went to change in the different washrooms. Her make-up had practically worn off so Dad and Naanii wouldn’t notice it. She was sitting between Sameer and Kabelo when the final movie credits started rolling.

Chapter 10

Instead of turning right to take the route that would lead them straight onto the freeway, Rebecca's father turned left and headed down the city's main road.

'Where're you going, Dad?' asked Rebecca, leaning forward.

'Naanii wants to see more of the city at night,' replied Dad. 'It's a good idea, since we're out anyway.' Rebecca slumped back.

'Wonder what's up?' said Dad, looking in his review mirror. 'There's a couple of police vehicles coming up fast behind us with their lights flashing.'

Rebecca panicked. The security cameras at Dazzlers. Had they recorded her accepting the 'gift', and alerted the police? Her hand went to her skirt pocket. She dropped her head into her hands. Kabelo leant down.

'Give them to me,' he whispered. But her panic grew. What if Pit Bull had tried to trace the number she called and he'd alerted The Boss and The General, and they'd had people follow Kabelo and her? What if a monitor picked up Kabelo checking out Pit Bull's bike?

'What the?' exclaimed Dad at the squeal of tyres. A police van pulled up in front of them. Rebecca peered up. Her heart was thumping so hard against her ribs it felt like it would break through them. She pressed her palm there to try and quell it. Dad braked and pulled over. Another police van pulled up alongside the first.

'Everyone okay?' Dad asked, looking around.

'What's up, beti? Did you get hurt?'

Rebecca raised her head and said no, she was fine. Sameer elbowed her to sit back. Police officers leapt from their vans, leaving the doors open and two-way radios talking. Instead of surrounding Dad's car to arrest Kabelo and her, they ran, hands hovering over pistols, onto the pavement outside Dazzlers.

'What on Earth is going on?' wondered Naanii aloud. 'What is this place?'

'It's a nightclub,' said Kabelo. 'They've trapped someone in the revolving door.'

'Let's go home, Dad,' urged Rebecca. 'We don't want to get hit by stray bullets.'

'No, no. Let's watch a bit more,' said her grandmother in delight. 'This is better than the movie we saw, hey?'

'You've got a point there, Naanii,' Dad replied, with a laugh, eyes glued to all the action.

'Dad, it's dangerous here,' said Rebecca. But her father still did not respond. Bling Africa and Shades were talking to the cops, gesturing to the guy they'd trapped.

'Check how pleased they look with themselves,' said Sameer. 'They're acting like they just caught the world's most wanted criminal.'

'*Now* do you see why I won't allow you to go to clubs?' Her father's eyes caught Rebecca's in the rear-view mirror. She looked away.

'*Okay*, Dad, I *get* your point. Can we please go now?'

'But this one looks safe,' said Naanii. 'They caught him before he could go in and cause trouble. I wonder what he was up to.' He was handcuffed and being escorted to a van.

Rebecca's father pressed down the indicator, and slowly drew out from behind the police vans, edged into the road and drove slowly past them.

'Wouldn't want to get a speeding ticket right here,' he joked.

Rebecca glanced back. Standing against the wall of the alley was The General lit up in flashes of blue light from the police vans. Rebecca nudged Kabelo and pointed back but by the time he looked, they had turned a corner.

'Well. That was a bit of excitement to end the evening off,' said Dad. 'Rebecca, put some music on, sweetheart.' Rebecca dug under the back of Naanii's seat for the CD case.

'Which one do you want?' It was a relief to be doing something ordinary.

'Moses Molelekwa. *Genes and Spirits*.'

‘My father likes it too,’ said Kabelo, bending to offer Rebecca light from his phone while she flipped through the CDs. She took a little longer than necessary to find it.

‘Here, Naanii,’ said Rebecca, passing it to her grandmother.

‘Thanks. Pretty blue star,’ said Naanii as she took it from Rebecca. ‘Why’s your hand shaking?’

‘What’s that?’ asked Dad.

‘Nothing,’ replied Naanii. Her grandmother turned to give Rebecca a meaningful stare, and then slid the CD into the player.

After being on the freeway for about ten minutes, they took the coastal road turn-off and got on to Jikeleza Route. They drove in silence beyond the turn-off to the Gould’s, crossed over the bridge, purred past darkened farm stalls and occasional zig-zagging pedestrians. Dad slowed down as they approached the turn-off to the township, where dust shone like gold mist in car and taxi headlights. Streetlights twinkled in the darkness and paraffin lamps lit spaza shops on the road side.

‘Sounds like a good party,’ said Dad. He switched off the CD player and opened his window. Even Naanii started patting on her knee to Brenda Fassie’s *Vulindlela*. Rebecca’s father accelerated up the tar road. As they wound down into the holiday village, Naanii pointed out to them, in delight, every house decorated with moving reindeer, Father Christmases, and flashing lights, and anything else she could see.

‘Chintsa’s full again this year,’ said Dad.

‘The hotel my father manages is up that road,’ said Kabelo, pointing.

‘It’s been getting great reviews,’ replied Dad. ‘What does your mother do?’

This was the question Kabelo found difficult because it still made his heart lurch, and his answer made people feel awkward.

‘She used to work at the pharmaceutical factory we passed near the freeway.’

‘And now?’ asked Dad. Kabelo took a deep breath.

‘Two years ago she went back one night to fetch something. We never saw her again. Nobody knows what happened.’ Kabelo could not gauge Rebecca’s facial expression but her hand found his. Rebecca’s father cleared his throat.

‘That must be very hard for you and your dad, son. For your whole family.’

‘It is, sir.’ replied Kabelo. Naanii turned to look at Kabelo, and shook her head in sympathy.

‘Did the police not try to find her?’ asked Naanii.

‘Yes, they did. But the case went cold.’

‘Dude, that’s hectic,’ said Sameer. ‘I can’t imagine…’

‘I will include you in my prayers,’ Naanii quickly interjected.

‘Thank you Mrs…’

‘You can call me Naanii. Everybody does.’

Mama would have liked Rebecca’s family, Kabelo thought to himself.

‘I’m so sorry, Kabelo,’ said Rebecca softly in his ear, and put her hand on his knee. Kabelo wished Rebecca had heard about Mama in a different way, instead of here in the car.

‘Nice family,’ said Tata, as they waved Rebecca’s family out of the driveway. He slung his arm around Kabelo’s shoulder. ‘Where’s the mother?’

‘Away on an assignment. She’s an international photographer.’

‘Wonder if the family runs into problems with being different races and cultures like that,’ said Tata.

‘Did you and Mama?’ Tata looked startled at his question.

‘We were from the same race,’ replied Tata. Kabelo noticed his father had used the past tense.

‘But not the same mother tongue. Or religion. Or culture. Like, initiation? I remember your and Mama’s fights about it from when I was young.’

Tata said ‘Mmmm,’ and guided him towards the deck steps. Mmmm was what Tata murmured when he anticipated a stimulating discussion, and the deck his favourite place for having it. Tata, Mama and Uncle Richard used to have endless discussions up there, some started before the sun set and ended only when it rose. On those nights, Kabelo would fall asleep in his room downstairs to the sound of their rising and falling voices and bursts of laughter.

‘I’m sorry, Tata, but can we discuss it another time?’ Kabelo eased his elbow out of his father’s hold. ‘I am interested it’s just,’ he manufactured a yawn. ‘*Ndidiniwe ngoku.* Do you mind if I just head for bed?’

‘Sure, nyana. It is getting late. And you have work in the morning.’ They stood in silence, watching the fluorescent wave crests chase each other to the shore.

‘I’m glad you liked them, Tata,’ said Kabelo.

‘Maybe we can invite them over for a braai sometime,’ said his father, sitting on a deck chair.

‘That would be cool,’ replied Kabelo.

‘You go on down, I’ll stay here for a while,’ said Tata, putting his feet up on another chair.

‘See you in the morning,’ said Kabelo, feeling a bit bad leaving his father alone.

‘Kabelo.’

‘Yes, Tata?’

‘Your mother would have been very proud of you,’ said Tata.

Kabelo closed his bedroom door and flopped on the bed and closed his eyes. He opened them after and bit and went online to tell Anneliese about Dazzlers.

K: Hey

A: Howaz da nyt?

K: Ok. Same guy

A: Wat nxt?

K: Yr unklz fone records

A: Wll cl hm 2morro

K: Kwl

A: Meet u 2morro?

K. Sharp. nyt

A: Nyt

A: Wait... u like R?

Kabelo hesitated. When Anneliese and he had started to hang with each other, and her father had seen them hold hands at the beach, he ordered her home. Anneliese told him what her father had said when they got home; she’d remembered it word for word.

‘You can be friends with Kabelo,’ Anneliese’s father told her. ‘This is the new South Africa so I suppose some social mixing is unavoidable. But you may only date your own kind.’ Anneliese’s father had pulled Kabelo aside a few days later when he bumped into him at the shops.

‘Kabelo, you are a nice fellow and all that. But I won’t allow my daughter to get involved with a black guy. Never.’ Kabelo had turned his back on Anneliese’s father, and walked away. Later, he’d asked Anneliese what her mother had said about it.

‘She said: “Sorry, Anneliese. Your father and I disagree about many things”.’ Kabelo and Anneliese had remained friends. It was easier visiting her after her parents got divorced and her father was gone. But Kabelo sensed that Anneliese still had other feelings for him. He didn’t want to hurt her; he didn’t want to lie to her, either.

Kind of, he replied, pressing each letter slowly. He waited. Her reply took a full minute. Maybe she was online with other friends too.

A: Datz kwl 4 u

Kabelo’s thumb paused above the keypad before texting again.

K: Tx. C u 2morro?
A: Ja nyt
She went offline.

Chapter 11

Rebecca crossed through the verandah's streams of sunlight and shadow and plonked down on a chair at the breakfast table. Her father looked up from the newspaper and said, rather dryly, 'Welcome to the day, daughter.' Sameer and Naanii were competing over the Sunday crossword and barely greeted. That suited Rebecca, who wanted to surface slowly.

'Orange juice, anyone?' she asked.

'No thanks, beti, I'm going to do the laundry. I've collected yours and Sameer's from your room already. Is there anything more?'

Rebecca put the jug down hard and things on the table clattered.

'What's up, beti?' asked Naanii. Dad frowned around the newspaper.

'Your hands are shaking. Have something to eat,' said Naanii getting up. Naanii would carefully check through all pockets before putting their clothes in the washing machine. Rebecca had to get there first.

'I'm fine,' replied Rebecca, pushing her chair back.

'Careful, you nearly bumped me off my feet,' said Naanii.

'Sorry Naanii, I just want to get my vitamins.'

'The way you're bouncing around, I'm not sure you need them,' said Dad. Rebecca flashed him a smile and dashed into the kitchen.

The laundry basket was next to the washing machine. Naanii came and stood next to her.

'I left a phone number in one of my pockets,' said Rebecca, scrambling through the clothes until she found her skirt.

'I don't remember seeing you wear that skirt,' said Naanii.

'It doesn't need washing, so we don't need to waste water washing it. I just had it out because I thought I might wear it to movies.' She folded the skirt and went into the pantry.

'What's happening with you, child?' asked Naanii, coming in. 'You've been acting very strange lately.'

'Sorry Naanii, I'm just adjusting to being on holiday and all that. De-stressing from Jo'burg.' Naanii lifted Rebecca's hand to examine her wrist but Rebecca had scrubbed the star away.

'Do you know where the tin foil is 'cos I want to wrap up our lunch,' said Rebecca. Naanii took the roll out of a cupboard and gave it to Rebecca rather abruptly. While Naanii was loading the washing machine, Rebecca opened Mr Gould's key drawer. Each key was labelled with a different, brightly coloured plastic key ring. Rebecca picked up the key for the garage door, walked out the house and turned onto the pathway along the shrubs that screened the garage and other outbuildings from the main house. She stopped for a minute to watch a sunbird poking its beak into an orange flower tube before unlocking the garage's side door and entering its murky light.

Rebecca took out the tablets and examined them. Except for the hearts they looked like ordinary tablets her grandmother took on a Bad Head Day. She took the tin foil from her back pocket and carefully rested the tablets on it. The pink and silver, her favourite colours when she was a little girl and took ballet classes, looked pretty together. She wrapped them up tightly over and over until a tiny silver package remained, like a gift for a fairy.

She looked around. Wooden shelves at the far end of the garage buckled under tins of varnish, paint, turpentine and organic fertilisers. There was a set of drawers in the workbench. Rebecca opened one. Old spice bottles rolled clinking forwards with nails of different sizes in each, clearly labelled. Rebecca yanked the drawer out further. Right at the back was a plastic zip lock bag with herbs, Rebecca looked closer, no, with *dagga* in it! a packet of rizzlers and a box of matches.

'Naughty old Mr Gould,' whispered Rebecca. She decided against the drawers as a hiding place. 'Shouldn't mix drugs,' she joked to herself. She looked around the rest of the garage with

its blistered walls, and chose the tub of SA Seed for Indigenous Birds. How would birds on ecstasy behave? Ecstatically? She dropped her smile. It would probably kill them and she wouldn't want that on her conscience. Rebecca pulled off the plastic lid and twisted her fist down through the birdseed until she reached the bottom where she deposited the package. She sealed the lid.

'Whacha doing? We're not supposed to be in here.' Rebecca jumped.

'Just seeing if there's any paints I could use for the piece I'm doing for Dad's Christmas present. I don't think Mr Gould would mind. He's always shown an interest in my art. Anyway, you gave me a fright.' She put her hands behind her back and tried to flick out the birdseed wedged under her nails.

'What's your painting of?' She glared at Sameer.

'Are you insinuating that I'm lying? It's of the river valley.'

'Will it, by any chance, have *la* Kabelo's house in it?' His voice could have been dipped in lemon juice.

'Maybe.' Sameer came and stood next to her.

'He's on the landline,' he said, casually.

'Why didn't you say so?' she yelled.

'Give me the key,' Sameer replied with a grin. 'I'll lock up.' The phone receiver lay on one of Mrs Gould's crocheted doilies, waiting to be picked up.

'Hello.' She cradled the phone between her neck and shoulder and fiddled with the doily's shell shaped edges, wondering if Kabelo could sense the smile on her face.

'Hey, Rebecca. It's me, Kabelo.' His voice made her heart dip.

'I know,' she replied. Rebecca listened carefully. After she put the phone down, she discovered Sameer lingering, within listening range, in the passageway.

'Anneliese has Pit Bull's phone records,' she told her brother. 'We're meeting up at the beach at a spot Kabelo knows. We'll take a picnic. Coming?' His hug was more like a rugby tackle. She returned it, stumbling and giggling with him.

'Just one thing, bhai,' she held his shoulders and stared into his eyes. 'D'you mind not wearing your Che Guevara cap? I want to wear mine.' Her brother hesitated.

'Okay, I'll wear my second favourite,' he agreed, and lifted his Manchester United one off the coat stand. She tugged the peak playfully after he put it on, and gave him a kiss on his cheek.

Their father was delighted that they were going off to the beach on a glorious day like this.

'I'm going to meet someone to talk about collaborating on an article about the effects of the golf course developments along the coastline,' said Dad. 'Do you have any idea how much water they require?'

'I'm sure you'll let us know,' said Sameer.

'Dad, you're never really on holiday, d'you know that,' Rebecca chastised, pleased that her father had found something to perk him up. He gave a sheepish smile.

'Gotta keep myself busy,' he said.

'You can work Dad like a charm,' said Sameer, on their way to say goodbye to their grandmother.

Naanii was lying in dappled light on the hammock at the lookout point. She put her book down when they arrived to tell her they were going on a beach picnic with Kabelo and Anneliese. They explained, when she asked, who Anneliese was.

'You're sure it's a picnic you're going on?' she asked, her bangles tinkling with her inverted commas around *picnic*.

'I don't know what you mean, Naanii,' Rebecca replied.

'You know exactly what I mean. Blue star, remember. Please take care, beti. You too, beta. What will your mother say if something bad happens to either of you?'

‘Naanii,’ Rebecca flared up. ‘My mother doesn’t seem to care what will happen to us if something bad happens to her on one of her assignments. We don’t even know when we’re seeing her again. Dad’s miserable too, anyone can see that…’

‘We’ll take care, Naanii,’ interjected Sameer, pulling Rebecca’s arm around him. ‘We’ve taken some of your delicious dhal puri. Hope that’s okay?’

‘Now who’s the charmer boy?’ said Rebecca.

‘No need to butter me up, beta,’ Naanii replied. ‘Just you go. And be careful.’ Naanii closed her eyes as if to meditate. They walked away.

‘And by the way,’ she called after them. ‘I’m proud of your mother. I would have given anything to have had a career other than unpaid cook and housewife for forty-odd years.’

Kabelo and Anneliese paused to wait for Snax. He was racing after another dog’s ball, ignoring Kabelo’s commands, and scattering showers of sand on unimpressed holidaymakers. Kabelo dipped his head in the wave foam. It tickled the top of his head and bubbled softly around his ears. The blue of the atmosphere became his ground and the sea his sky and it struck him that his world had turned upside down, again.

‘Don’t stop, Kabs. You were at the part where Rebecca marched off to the manager’s office.’ Snax scampered up, yapping and snuffling around Kabelo’s face. He rose laughing and pushed him away. He threw a stick as far as he could for Snax to fetch. By the time they reached the spot where he wanted to wait for Rebecca and Sameer, Kabelo had told Anneliese everything. She’d emptied herself of all her questions and she hadn’t asked him anything too personal about Rebecca, for which Kabelo was grateful. They dropped their rucksacks at the base of the steep dune and leant back on its warm sand to wait.

‘It’s weird,’ said Anneliese, prodding the sand with a stick. ‘It’s like nothing bad could possibly happen on such a perfect day, or a star-lit night, like last night. But then it’s like these parallel universes. People live these dual, secret, living-on-the-edge lives. And we know them yet we don’t know them. *Dit gee my grille*.’

‘It is scary,’ Kabelo agreed. ‘You thinking of Don and Sarah?’

‘Ja,’ replied Anneliese. ‘He was just like you or me, until a year ago. I didn’t know what he was getting into. Even you didn’t, fully.’ Kabelo nodded.

‘There they are.’ He pushed himself up, waved, and walked towards Rebecca and Sameer. He was beginning to feel glad that Rebecca had come into his universe. He offered to take her rucksack but she said she was fine, just hot.

‘Where’s this spot we’re going to?’ asked Sameer. Kabelo pointed to the top of the dune.

‘There’s a clearing in the bushes up there. It’s kind of like a cave. Not many people know about it. You ready?’ They raced up the dune and collapsed, out of breath and laughing, at the entrance to Kabelo’s special place. He enjoyed listening to Rebecca and Sameer’s comments about how hidden away it was, and how even though they’d been coming to this beach for years, they’d never noticed it.

‘My uncle said there were only a few numbers on that sim card,’ said Anneliese, sobering them up. ‘He’s given me a printout. He says not to say where I got it. Okay?’ They nodded. ‘Serious. He could get fired. He’s only doing this ’cos…’ They waited. ‘Well, ’cos I’m his favourite niece though he’s not my favourite uncle. We must write out the numbers so I can destroy it.’ She passed the printout to Kabelo, who unfolded it.

‘Five numbers dialled. One received,’ he looked up. ‘These dealers must go through masses of sim cards. The one received was from one of the numbers that had also been dialled.’ Kabelo unzipped the side pocket of his rucksack and pulled out his phone.

‘I’ll put the numbers into my phone as the backup for now. Can you read them out, Anneliese?’ He gave her back the printout and tapped the first number as she read it out. Then the second.

‘What?’ he exclaimed. The others drew closer. ‘It says number already exists.’ He frowned, and pressed the name details prompt. Snr Detective Mtsi-Smith. Kabelo’s head began to feel light.

‘Whose number is it?’ asked the others, all at once. Kabelo took a deep breath.

‘Pit Bull called Mtsi-Smith at twenty-twenty-one. That’s when I was in the ward with Don. That must be who he was calling when I saw him.’

‘How come you’ve got this senior detective’s number on your phone?’ asked Rebecca.

‘He was in charge of my mother’s case,’ replied Kabelo. No one spoke in the speckled light of the bush cave.

‘Maybe Pit Bull is an undercover cop. Maybe he was reporting back,’ said Sameer. Kabelo felt touched by the genuine concern in Sameer’s eyes.

‘Unlikely,’ said Kabelo. ‘I don’t think undercover cops go around breaking people’s bones. It must be against the law, even for undercover.’ Kabelo went to sit at the top of the dune. It was like that parallel universe thing Anneliese spoke about. The bright kites and sea gulls gliding and dipping in the sky were in another world to the one opening up like a scary canyon in his life now.

‘Could your uncle find out more about Pit Bull, Anneliese?’ asked Rebecca, reeling them in from their individual thoughts. ‘Like, who he really is. Maybe it will help to explain his call to the detective.’ She spread out her kikoi as a tablecloth and placed the food she had brought in her rucksack on it. Sameer picked up a naartjie, peeled it and offered segments around.

‘Well, from the sim card he knows the make and ID number for Pit Bull’s phone,’ said Anneliese. ‘He can get records of numbers dialled and received from it for up to two years. Maybe slightly longer. That’s if he’s kept the same phone.’ Anneliese finished off by popping a naartjie segment into her mouth.

‘Didn’t you say your uncle used to be a cop?’ Kabelo returned to sit with the others.

‘Yes.’ Anneliese poked the sand vigorously with a twig.

‘I hope nothing living was in there before you started that,’ remarked Sameer. She glared at him and spat a pip out into the bush behind her.

‘Can he find out if Pit Bull is undercover, or anything else about him?’ asked Rebecca.

‘Maybe. But Pit Bull is hardly a name to work off,’ said Anneliese.

‘It’s Gary someone,’ said Rebecca. ‘Well, that’s what The Boss called him.’

‘There’re thousands of Garys,’ said Sameer. ‘I know three at least.’

‘But only one who owns a Harley-Davidson with the registration number LNT313EC,’ said Rebecca. Kabelo looked at her with open admiration.

‘Brilliant memory,’ he said.

‘Tell me about it,’ said Sameer. ‘She remembers every bad thing I’ve ever done to her since I was born.’

‘Hey, that’s not true,’ said Rebecca, poking him in the ribs until he rolled over giggling and got sand all over himself.

‘So, we’ve got a registration number. How do we get the owner’s name?’ asked Kabelo.

‘At the licensing office. One of us could say we scraped his bike somehow and when we came back the bike was gone and we want to contact him to offer to fix it for him,’ suggested Rebecca. She went up a few more rungs in Kabelo’s estimation.

‘What licensing officer is going to believe any of us would go there to own up about scraping an expensive bike? They can see we’re *mos* school kids,’ said Anneliese, glancing at Kabelo and then Rebecca.

‘We got into Dazzlers,’ said Rebecca. ‘That means we’re over eighteen!’ She tore off some dahl puri and passed it along to Kabelo who broke off a piece, folded it and took a bite.

‘Nice,’ he said to Rebecca.

‘Ja, but everyone knows those places let in whoever comes. Those clubs are just in it for the money,’ replied Anneliese. ‘The licensing people are different.’

In the end they all agreed it was worth a shot. Kabelo decided to go to town the following afternoon, after his morning shift. Anneliese said she’d ask her mother if she could go with him.

‘Getting back to Dazzlers,’ said Kabelo, turning to Rebecca. ‘Did you bring those tablets with you?

‘What tablets?’ demanded Sameer.

‘Some dealer girl conned your sister into accepting drugs at Dazzlers.’

‘So *that’s* why you were so freaked out outside Dazzlers when the police came?’

‘Well… kind of,’ said Rebecca, tucking her hair behind her ears.

‘So where are they?’ asked Sameer.

‘Hidden,’ answered Rebecca. Sameer smiled knowingly.

‘Sameer, please see that Rebecca flushes them away, or gives them to me. Serious. I don’t know what you’re keeping them for.’ He shook his head at Rebecca. ‘You know what a fright you got the other night.’

‘Sure,’ said Sameer. ‘And if she doesn’t bring them, I will.’

‘Okay, okay, I’m not a kid,’ said Rebecca.

‘What are they? What do they look like?’ asked Anneliese.

‘I think they’re ecstasy,’ said Rebecca. ‘A guy from one of those anti-drugs organisations came and spoke to us at school,’ she added ignoring Sameer’s disbelieving look. She borrowed the stick from Anneliese’s hand, smoothed a patch of sand, and drew a circle with a large heart in the middle.

‘They’re pink,’ she added, wiping the sand off her hands on her board shorts. Kabelo looked at Rebecca’s drawing in the sand. The image niggled in his brain. It was only when he leapt down the dune with the others that it suddenly fell into place.

‘Come home with me! I want to show you guys something.’ They stared at him. ‘I can’t explain it now. Just come. Now.’

Chapter 12

The others munched on the red fruit from the umThungulu tree in Kabelo's garden while they waited for Sameer to finish at the tap. The cool stream of water soothed his feet and helped slow down his heart beat. It had been a challenge trying to keep up with Kabelo all the way along the hot sand and up the hill. Kabelo wouldn't even allow one dip in the sea.

Kabelo unlocked the front door and led them straight through to the kitchen, and stood in front of the fridge door. Amongst reminders, notices, to-do and shopping lists was a photograph of Kabelo with his father, and, Sameer presumed, mother.

'She's beautiful,' said Rebecca softly.

'Uncle Richard took it when we first moved in,' said Kabelo, as if Uncle Richard belonged to them all.

'Kabelo's dad's friend from when he was at university,' explained Anneliese, like an information bureau. 'The guy you met at the internet café the other day. He owns it. And the game lodge on Jikeleza Route.' Kabelo took the magnet off the photograph and showed them the back of it.

'When Rebecca drew that heart with a circle around it, it reminded me of my mother's note.' They looked at the three hand-drawn hearts in circles.

'*Love you both. Niziphathe kakuhle*,' Anneliese read. It means 'take care' in isiXhosa,' she added. Sameer was impressed.

'One of the cleaners at the factory kept it and gave it to me when we went there to fetch my mother's things. She said she found it under my mother's desk the morning after she went missing,' said Kabelo. 'She always used to leave Dad and me notes, like in my lunch box and on our pillows. They always had two hearts on and *Love you both*. It was like her special signature for us. But this one was different,' he said. 'Now it feels like she was trying to tell Tata and me something.' Or say goodbye, thought Sameer.

'Can I see?' Kabelo handed Sameer the photograph. 'I'm coming back,' he said walking out of the kitchen. 'I want to get something to show you. Anneliese, won't you organise some juice and biscuits?'

While Anneliese ferreted in a familiar way around the kitchen, Rebecca hovered and Sameer studied the photograph. How does Kabelo cope with not knowing what happened, he wondered. What would he do if his worst nightmare about Mom getting wounded, or killed in a war zone came true?

'D'you think Kabelo's okay?' said Rebecca.

'Ja. Let's go to the lounge,' replied Anneliese. They followed her into a large open plan room with huge glass sliding doors.

'Wow,' said Sameer. 'It's like we're actually *in* the garden.' Anneliese put the tray down on the table and came to stand next to him.

'It's beautiful, nè?' she said. 'The birds love those bushes.' Sameer could make out a bit of the roof of the Gould's house and Wild Fig at the lookout point.

'I'm used to seeing things from the other side,' he said.

Kabelo returned with a large box, which he put on the low table between the sofas. The box was covered with a photo collage. Each photo featured Kabelo at some age or another, doing something or another. First day at school, blowing out candles, swimming, prize giving, in a canoe with his dad.

'I was my mother's only child…' began Kabelo awkwardly.

'It's so cool,' said Sameer. 'Really. I mean it. Our mother would appreciate a work of art like this, hey Rebecca?' But his sister was way too absorbed in all the different Kabelos on the box to pay attention to him.

‘Mama gave it to me on my last birthday before she went missing.’ He sat down next to Rebecca, who moved slightly closer to him.

‘She must have spent hours and hours making it,’ said Rebecca. ‘You look so cute here!’ She pointed to a baby Kabelo, grinning from his mother’s back.

‘Who’s that girl?’ asked Sameer, pointing at a more recent photograph on the lid. He smiled to himself when Rebecca and Anneliese simultaneously leant forward to scrutinise it.

‘My cousin.’ They both leant back. Kabelo took off the lid. The box was divided by inner partitions into different sections. In the section ‘Mementoes’, was a tiny pair of leather slippers with lion cub faces, a teething ring, and a small box labelled ‘K’s baby teeth’, a string of beads, a blue plastic hospital tag: Kabelo Nomvalo, male, 4.1 kg. The other sections were ‘Photographs’, ‘School reports & certificates’, and ‘Letters/notes/cards, etc’. Kabelo’s mother was so organised Sameer was surprised she had used the word etcetera. Kabelo pulled out a bundle of papers from the ‘Letters’ section, stretched the elastic band off it and put the pile on the table.

‘Hey, a Valentine’s card, Kabs, from who?’ giggled Anneliese reaching to pull it out of the pile but Kabelo’s hand over it was quick and firm.

‘From when I remember, my mother collected things, even movie tickets. Tata used to joke and say one day he’ll have to build another room for it all.’ He flipped through the pile, and selected a few notes.

‘This is what I want to show you,’ he said. ‘The hearts thing. Here.’ He read each one aloud then passed it along.

Going to movies with Maria. Back by 10. Love you both ♡♡

‘If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude. Don't complain’. – Maya Angelou. It’s so true. Love you both ♡♡

Enjoy the match. Viva Bafana Bafana! Love you both ♡♡

‘Your mother is… I mean… This is just so amazing,’ said Rebecca.

‘Kabelo, what if you are right and there is a link? Where do we start?’ said Sameer.

‘At the factory where she worked,’ said Kabelo. ‘I know that Don’s mess is the first thing we have to deal with,’ he added. ‘But it’s linked in some way. I just know it.’ Kabelo gathered everything back in the box and put the lid on. He went over to the hi-fi and switched on the radio.

‘Let’s go sit in the garden,’ he said turning up the volume.

Rebecca and Anneliese got up and followed him. Sameer took his camera out of his rucksack. It seemed like a good time to do it. They were all lying on the grass in the shade where Kabelo’s head had somehow landed up resting on Rebecca’s tummy.

‘Kabelo,’ said Sameer. ‘I haven’t deleted them yet.’

‘Let’s see,’ said Kabelo, beckoning. Sameer knelt and handed over his camera. Rebecca and Anneliese rolled over next to Kabelo so they could see the screen. He flicked back through the photos, starting with their beach picnic. He paused for comments and requests to be sent photos for facebook. Flick. Oohs and aahs for Snax. Flick. Flick. The lookout point at the Gould’s. Flick. Rebecca at the breakfast table this morning.

‘Moving on,’ ordered Rebecca. Kabelo hesitated. She nudged him. He tilted his head towards hers with a little smile on his lips. Sameer started to worm his way in between them. Rebecca moved over to make space. Flick. Rebecca going through the garage door at the Gould’s.

‘Sameer, you’re a spy!’ said Rebecca. Flick. Rebecca playing pool. Flick. Kabelo pulling the canoe. Throwing the skull.

The landline rang.

‘Hold it there. Please don’t look without me,’ said Kabelo, getting up.

‘Do you know where it landed?’ asked Anneliese, after Kabelo was gone. Sameer nodded.

‘It was Don,’ said Kabelo, returning. ‘He called from Bra Z’s phone.’ He remained standing. Sameer pulled his sister up, and she did the same for Anneliese.

‘He’s going to be discharged in a couple of days. He’s freaking out. He doesn’t know where to go.’ They followed Kabelo indoors and flopped down on the sofas. Sameer turned the volume down. Rebecca stood at the window that overlooked the river valley and swept up to the Wild Fig on the top of the hill at the lookout point. She paced up and down a few times and then turned around to face them.

‘He could stay in one of the Gould’s outbuildings,’ she said, slowly. Sameer nearly choked on the biscuit he was eating. Was she mad? Why hadn’t she consulted before offering? She’d clearly lost her sanity.

‘Whoooaaa, Becca. Um… can we talk?’

‘No, seriously, Sameer. We can do it,’ she insisted. ‘It would just be for a couple of days.’ Sameer felt the intensity of three pairs of eyes on him. He had a sinking feeling in his stomach.

‘O-ka-ay.’ When Kabelo asked him if he was sure he was okay with it, Sameer replied, in a reasonably strong voice, that he could be counted on.

Chapter 13

There wasn't a queue at the licensing department. Kabelo put his crash helmet on the counter, and greeted the young clerk behind the glass. He'd spent the taxi journey to town rehearsing what to say and how to say it. Anneliese's idea to bring along her father's helmet was a brainwave.

'Licence for your bike?' asked the clerk.

'*Hayi bhuti*. Something else,' replied Kabelo. He clicked his tongue and shook his head. 'A problem.'

'Aah.' The clerk leant forward. Kabelo could see that he was pleased to have something unusual interrupt his day.

'Shoot,' said the clerk.

Kabelo rubbed his head sheepishly.

'Eish, I scratched another dude's bike. I waited but he didn't come. I want to settle with him before he reports it. Other people saw me. I don't want trouble with him, *yazi*. Usually it's really big guys who ride those bikes.' Kabelo was beginning to enjoy himself.

The clerk, who was not big, nodded empathetically. Kabelo was encouraged.

'The thing is, I don't know the owner's name. Just that it's a Harley-Davidson. I've got the registration number written down here,' he continued. 'It happened outside Dazzlers nightclub.'

'You could've chosen a less expensive bike to scratch, bru',' said the clerk.

'Don't tell me.' Kabelo rolled his eyes.

'Nice place, Dazzlers?' asked the clerk. 'Been meaning to take my girlfriend there.'

'It's cool. Good music. Here's the registration number.'

Kabelo pushed a slip of paper into the metal drawer. The clerk pulled the drawer to his side.

'We aren't supposed to do this kind of thing,' he said. 'But I feel for you.' He swivelled on his chair, and started tapping on his keyboard, while staring intently at the screen.

'Got it,' he said, pressing the enter key with a flourish.

'Harley Davidson. Registration LNT313EC. Owner, Gareth Bradfield.' The clerk smiled broadly. 'It's registered at Dazzlers' street address, so it's definitely the same dude.' He wrote the address down for Kabelo and slid it back through.

'Good luck. Aren't that many honest people like you left in the world.' Kabelo shrugged modestly, thanked the clerk profusely, and promised to look out for him the next time he was at Dazzlers. He picked up his helmet and strolled out, feeling more than a little pleased with his performance.

'*Dank die hemel jy's hier*.' Anneliese was flustered.

'What's up?'

'If I have to tell one more guy that I don't need passport photographs, or a date, I'll flip. Please pretend to be my boyfriend.' He slung his arm around her, and shook his head at some of the guys hanging around gawking at them.

'Let's get out of here,' he said.

'Did you get his name?'

'Mr Gareth Pit Bull Bradfield!'

'Next stop, your uncle.' Anneliese stiffened. She was subdued as they made their way down the main road towards the harbour, but Kabelo didn't say anything. He was used to her mood swings by now, and experience had taught him that keeping quiet sometimes helped her get into a better mood faster.

'Kabs,' she stopped.

'Yes?'

'I want to go and see my uncle on my own.'

‘Well. Okay.’ Kabelo was disappointed. He had some questions he wanted to ask Anneliese’s uncle about the sim card.

‘Why?’

‘It’s just… he’s not a modern thinking kind of guy.’

‘And…?’

‘I don’t want you to have to endure him.’

‘Do you think I haven’t…’

‘And I don’t want him to tell my father.’ Kabelo followed Anneliese to the curb and sat down next to her. She picked up tiny pieces of gravel, examined them, threw them down, and picked up more. Kabelo glanced at her and then down the street.

‘There’s something that I haven’t told you before.’ He waited. ‘I’m not a hundred per cent sure about it but…’ Anneliese’s face flushed. Kabelo didn’t know what to expect.

‘I think my uncle got up to evil stuff when he was in the old police force. I’ve overheard Ma arguing with him about it. But I don’t know anything for sure. Ma changes the subject when I ask her.’

Kabelo gazed down the road. Some of Tata and Mama’s older cousins had gone into exile during apartheid, to study or join the army. Other family members got involved in other ways. Some had been detained and tortured.

‘I don’t know why I’m his favourite niece,’ Anneliese brought him back to the pavement. ‘He disgusts me. Sometimes I walk out of the house when he arrives. Luckily he doesn’t come so often now Dad’s left.’ Kabelo caught hold of Anneliese’s hand as she reached to pick up more gravel.

‘We need your uncle’s help.’

‘Sometimes I wonder how I ended up in a family like mine,’ said Anneliese, standing up. She brushed off her jeans.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘One, we need Pit Bull’s phone records going back two years or more. Two, is Gareth Bradfield, or was he ever, a police informer.’

‘If yes,’ said Kabelo, ‘then the calls between Mtsi-Smith and Pit Bull could make sense, and Mtsi-Smith isn’t corrupt. Maybe he did investigate Mama’s case properly. If no, then. Well. Let’s wait and see what your beloved uncle says.’ Anneliese clicked her tongue at Kabelo.

‘Three,’ said Kabelo, ‘can you check at the police station on your way back to see if an assault case was opened? Say you’re Don’s sister. You know the family details.’

‘Okay, but only if you promise never refer to him as “your beloved uncle” again,’ said Anneliese.

‘Promise. Meet you at the ice cream place at the mall at four-thirty,’ said Kabelo. ‘I’ll buy you one since I’m an earner now.’ Kabelo watched Anneliese until she turned the corner, and then headed up the main road. He crossed over at the police station and made his way to the hospital entrance, joining in with the stream of visitors.

Don was propped up with pillows and staring out of the window.

‘Hey, Kabs! Thanks for coming!’ His face lit up when Kabelo touched his shoulder to get his attention.

‘How’s the pain?’ he asked.

‘Easing. *And* I’m starting to get mobile.’ Don thumbed at the crutches standing against his bed.

‘Has Pit Bull been around?’

‘I haven’t seen him. They’re releasing me soon. Where can I go? I can’t run. Dude, I wouldn’t even qualify for the Paralympics on speed.’

‘Can’t you go a minute without referring to drugs?’

‘No man. Not that kind of speed,’ Don clicked and frowned. ‘I told you, I’m off all of it. They’ve been monitoring me. Bra Z knows all about me, been giving me some pep talks. Anyway, the drugs here are kept mega locked up.’

‘Okay, okay, I believe you. I was just kidding,’ replied Kabelo.

‘You haven’t been to the hell holes that I have.’

‘I haven’t made the choices you have, bru’.’

‘Back off with this line of conversation, okay?’ Don’s face turned stormy. ‘Don’t visit me if you’re going to lecture.’

‘We’ve got a bit of a plan,’ said Kabelo quietly in Don’s ear, regretting he said ‘we’ immediately after it escaped from his tongue.

‘Who’s “we”? What plan?’

‘Shush,’ Kabelo warned Don, and swept his eyes around the ward. ‘Anneliese, me, Rebecca, Sameer,’ said Kabelo, reluctantly. He should have just said it was him organising a room somewhere.

‘Wait-oh. Who’s Rebecca? And your voice changed when you said her name. What haven’t you told me?’ Kabelo found a chair, placed it next to Don’s bed and told him about the backroom at the Gould’s.

‘Just for a couple of days, though. After that we’ll need another plan,’ said Kabelo. Don nodded, looking relieved.

‘Have you spoken to Sarah?’ asked Kabelo. The gong went to signal the end of visiting hours. It was as if a flight departure had been announced, fluttering everyone in the ward into noisy farewells.

‘Yes, Bra Z let me use his phone. I didn’t say anything about what happened, or even that I’m here. I didn’t want to scare her.’ Kabelo couldn’t work out whether he thought Sarah should know, or not.

‘We’ve got to work out how to get you to the Gould’s without anyone knowing. Your cast is a real bummer, dude. It’s not like we can disguise you as a nurse or anything.’

‘Don’t tell me,’ moaned Don. ‘You know Bra Z?’

‘He’s a cool guy, right?’ replied Kabelo.

‘Totally,’ replied Don. ‘He comes to chat when he can. He said he could tell about me straightaway. He’s seen all the signs before. His cousin was an addict. *Was* being the operative word. He’s dead. Tik’s hectic, hey. Makes you violent. Cheap and nasty. His cousin…’

‘Don, I’ve got to go,’ said Kabelo. Now Don had started talking he wasn’t going to stop.

‘Okay, sorry, so anyway, he says a guy calls every afternoon to ask when I’m going to be discharged.’ The gong went for a second time.

‘What did he tell him?’

‘That they only disclose that information to close family members. But yesterday a student nurse answered the phone and he must have pressured her. Said he was my father and needed to know so he could arrange to pick me up. Didn’t want me stranded.’

‘So what did she say to him?’ Kabelo asked.

‘Probably the day after tomorrow.’ The gong went again.

‘What! You kidding?’ Kabelo looked around. Most of the visitors had gone. The nursing sister from the other night was standing at the door with her hands on her hips.

‘Will you tell Bra Z about the Gould’s place?’ he said, hurriedly. ‘We need his help getting you out of here.’

‘He’ll want to help. He feels bad about his cousin. Like he should have done more to help him. I think his family pulls guilt trips on him about it too.’

‘Don, focus. I’ve got to go. Ask him and let me know.’

Chapter 14

The ice cream gave Anneliese brain freeze, licking it outside her favourite shop. She so wished she had money to buy clothes, instead of just window shopping, as usual. Suddenly someone covered her eyes from behind.

'Kabelo, do you want ice cream in your face?' She did a karate move that ended with her fingers pointing directly at his eyes.

'Nah. Think I'll just get one and eat it the normal way,' he replied. 'Wait here for me.' Anneliese fantasised about what clothes she'd buy if she won a thousand rand, doing the maths from the prices on the mannequins. Kabelo came and stood next to her. Anneliese studied the window's reflection of the two of them standing together, licking ice creams. Same colour ice creams, different colour skins. Same and different.

'Nice but pricey,' commented Kabelo, pointing at a white hoodie. 'How…?'

'It went okay,' she replied. 'But my uncle says that this is the last thing he'll do for me without telling my father.'

'We don't need him after this, anyway,' said Kabelo.

'He's clearly enjoying that I'm asking him for a favour. He likes that it changes the balance of things between us.' She sighed. 'I feel like I need to take a shower after I've been in his company.' Anneliese wondered if Kabelo could understand.

'We can swim if we get back in time,' he said. 'The sea always works for me.' Anneliese perked up. She liked the idea.

'When will you have the information?'

'He says tomorrow morning. He'll call me.'

'I'll be at work. Come there. Don's also going to call.'

'My word,' she giggled, feeling a bit hysterical. 'Jislaaik, we've got a lot going on, Kabs. I almost forgot about Don, can you believe it?' Kabelo nodded, and pulled out his phone.

'Rebecca,' he mouthed, pointing at it. Anneliese wandered further down the passageway, even though the shops there didn't interest her. Kabelo caught up with her.

'She just wanted to know how things went,' he told her. 'I said we'll meet at the internet café tomorrow morning. We can talk when I'm not busy. We have to work out how to get Don to the Gould's.'

Anneliese nodded. 'I think we should get home now. My mom knows what time the movies end.'

While they were standing in the taxi queue, Anneliese delivered her next piece of information.

'There's no assault case to do with Don at the police station,' she told Kabelo.

'Did you ask them to double check?'

'The police officer was very patient with me,' she replied. 'I cried a bit there, which helped.' Kabelo gave her a quizzical look.

'I just thought about your mom, Don and Sarah, and other stuff,' she explained. 'It started me off.' Kabelo stared at her.

'What?' she said.

'You're full of surprises. And weird,' he remarked. 'In a nice way,' he added, remembering her karate move.

'I'll take that as a compliment.'

Naanii had sunk nicely into her afternoon nap, you could hear from the snores. Sameer and Dad had sun blocked themselves into ghosts under hats and gone to the river to fish. She now owed Sameer, Rebecca knew that. Her brother hated fishing. She unlocked the backroom door and slowly

pushed it open. She doubted anyone had used the outbuilding next to the garage in years. A pine bed was propped against the wall. Even if there was a mattress here, and there wasn't, she was sure that it would have been spider occupied. That was the only, *only* thing she disliked about staying at the Gould's. The humungous evil-looking spiders. She'd once insisted her father get rid of one the size of his hand from the dining room ceiling. He'd wanted to leave it there. Ugh! She said she didn't care if it wasn't poisonous and played some critical role in the delicate balance of the ecosystem. It was playing a critical role in upsetting the delicate balance of her nervous system. Which was more important, she'd demanded. Her father liberated the spider in the garden.

This afternoon, however, she reassured herself that the spiders dotted around the room were not poisonous, and probably, hopefully, preferred mosquito meat to humans, and she decided to believe the story that spiders were more scared of her than she was of them.

She sneezed and wiped her eyes with the shoulder of her t-shirt. Several brown boxes with faded labels were stacked next to the cupboard. Someone had taped thick black plastic around the window. She flicked on the light switch and a dusty bulb woke up. The toilet wasn't in great shape but it flushed and would be okay. The taps and shower splattered brown water, and then clear.

Rebecca spent the next hour wiping, dusting and mopping. The spiders merely moved higher up the walls. She'd organise a makeshift mattress tomorrow. She took out her phone and selected Kabelo's number; she wanted to tell him the room was sorted. And, well, she wanted to hear his voice.

Dad led the way, a good few metres ahead of Sameer, searching, as always for the perfect fishing spot.

'If we go there, then we'll have shade, but the fish are usually over there at this time of day.' He pointed his rod towards the shade and then swept it across to the opposite side of the river. Sameer sighed.

'Dad, how about if we go…'

'Then again, if we wade across to the island… What do you think, son?'

'I think…' began Sameer.

'Yup, over there,' said Dad. Sameer pulled at the long grasses around him. Someone had once told Sameer that talking to yourself was the first sign of madness. He was a little kid then and had thought of Dad, and was, naturally, concerned. He'd confided in Naanii. She'd laughed until she had to wipe tears from her cheeks.

'No, darling, don't worry; it's not true. I do it all the time.' Her response had not been reassuring.

'We'll continue along this path,' said Dad. Sameer was relieved that at last his father had made the decision. He thought back to his conversation with Rebecca this morning.

'It'll be great,' Rebecca had said. 'Like a dad and son bonding thing.'

'How about a daughter and dad bonding thing?' he replied.

'Okay, okay. I'll do your next two washing up turns,' she said.

'Only two?'

'Don't be a brat,' she'd replied.

Now, at the riverside with Dad, Sameer hoped someone up there in the universe was making a note of the sacrifices he'd made recently. He looked up the riverbank. They were close to the umSintsi tree near where the skull had landed.

'Dad,' he called. His father stopped and turned. Sameer caught up with him.

'What happens if a person finds a skull, just like randomly, somewhere?'

'Am I annoying you that much, son? You threatening me?' teased his father.

'No, seriously, Dad. What happens?'

'Did you find a skull? Sameer?' Dad's voice went into his what-have-you-been-up-to-this-time tone.

‘No, Dad, *I* did *not* find a skull.’ He changed track. ‘I’m just, like, hypothetically, asking… I was watching a detective thriller on TV last night and…’

‘You are legally bound to report it to the police,’ replied Sameer’s father, tapping the base of his rod on the ground with each word. There was a plop in the river.

‘A-ha!’ said Dad, excitedly scanning the water. ‘Good choice, this spot, son!’ Sameer rolled his eyes. ‘Let’s bait up and lure supper in!’ said his father. He set down his stool and tackle box.

‘I’m just going for a bit of a walk, Dad,’ said Sameer. ‘Whistle when you’ve caught supper and I’ll take some photos as proof.’ His father gave him a wave and started fiddling happily in his tackle box.

Chapter 15

‘Can you meet me?’ asked Kabelo when Rebecca picked up the phone. It was after supper and Rebecca had been working on a drawing on the verandah table.

‘When?’ asked Rebecca, looking down the passage into the silky darkness of the garden.

‘Now. Well. As soon as you can,’ said Kabelo. ‘I’ll meet you at JBs’ beach steps.’ Rebecca felt a thrill run through her. Could she pull it off?

‘Give me half an hour,’ she said softly into the receiver.

Rebecca put down the phone and walked out of the lounge holding her breath. She reached the verandah and exhaled. Sameer was so engrossed in his favourite crime show he hadn’t noticed the phone ring. Rebecca walked up and down the verandah a few times, and then tiptoed up the passage and into the bedroom they shared. She grabbed Sameer’s camera and, as she passed through the verandah, her sketch bag. She skipped to the lookout point.

‘Da-ad.’ She crouched next to him, with the bag prominent in her arms. Her father seemed to have to physically tug himself away from his thoughts.

‘Yes.’ Was he thinking about Mom? She couldn’t see his face clearly enough in the candlelight to tell.

‘I want to do some sketches at JBs,’ she said. ‘Can I go down there?’ Dad pulled himself higher in his deck chair.

‘What? Now?’ he replied. ‘You’ve got all holiday. We can all go down for supper one night.’

‘We-ell, the thing is, they’re having a Mexican evening tonight,’ she replied, patting her sketch bag. ‘We’re doing Mexican art at school next year, and I’d like to do some drawings and take a few photographs.’

‘Pseudo Mexican evening,’ retorted Dad. She sighed loudly.

‘Dad, things aren’t always pure and perfect. You know that.’

‘She’s right,’ said Naanii, swirling the ice around in her glass and taking a sip.

Dad darted a look at Naanii but she was gazing deep into the bush beyond the lawn.

‘So can I go, Dad?’

‘Okay. And,’ he said, ‘I guess I ought to be impressed that you’re thinking ahead to your school work for next year already.’

‘Well, you know me and my art,’ Rebecca replied, giving him a hug.

‘Your art*ful*ness,’ said Naanii, almost inaudibly.

‘Take your phone and call me when you get there. I’ll come to fetch you at ten-thirty on the dot,’ said Dad. That would give Rebecca two hours. It sounded like Cinderella except if she messed up with Dad she’d be grounded forever instead of having a coach turn into a pumpkin.

‘Thanks, Dad.’ She touched her grandmother lightly on the shoulder and Naanii held her hand briefly.

‘Hope you have a creative time,’ he said.

‘I will, Dad, thanks.’

Rebecca decided on her new jeans and silk top. Her friends at home had complimented her on it when she wore it once when she went out with them. They said it made her look, well, sexy. Her Jo’burg home felt far away now. Rebecca threaded the scarf, which Naanii gave her when she returned from her trip to India last year, through the hoops of her jeans and tied it. She changed her earrings, pulled the tiny cork out of her jasmine oil bottle and tipped it against her left index finger, inserted the cork again, put the bottle down, and rubbed her wrists together. Rebecca pulled her hair up and tied it in a hair band. Then she pulled the band out and combed her fingers through her hair. The time! Rebecca put some money into her art bag, and her phone in her jeans’ pocket. After a final glance at the mirror, she slipped out.

There was no wind, so the beach would be perfect. Kabelo watched the waves ripple up and retreat. The night air was soft on his skin and the wooden deck slats rough under his bare feet. He turned and arched his back over the wooden rail, straightened, and found the warm yellow lights of the Gould's house. Rebecca had sounded keen to meet him. It was true; he did want to fill her in on the latest. But neither of them had mentioned Sameer or Anneliese coming with them. Kabelo's phone vibrated. She'd left home. Kabelo pulled his rucksack from the deck, slipped on his shoes, and smsed his father, who was busy with a function at the hotel, to tell him that he was hooking up with the others. Maybe he would see Sameer later too, or Anneliese. He slipped his hand into his pocket to double check he had matches, and picked up the bundle of wood.

'Have you ever had a fire on the beach here?' he asked, as they walked down the steps towards the beach.

'I've never had a fire on a beach anywhere.' Kabelo was surprised at how pleased he felt. Their hands touched as they walked across the bridge, and their fingers instinctively interlaced. They walked for a bit without talking.

'I've got a bundle of wood under the bushes over there,' said Kabelo. 'We can make a fire by the dune.'

'Wow.' said Rebecca softly. 'That'll be really awesome.' Kabelo took the fleece blanket out of his rucksack, and Rebecca helped him spread it on the sand.

'I'm good at making fires,' she said. 'I nearly set our tent on fire playing with matches when I was small. So my dad decided to teach me how to make a fire properly. Apparently I went around for months after that saying I wanted to be a fire fighter.' Kabelo laughed out loud at the image he had of a little Rebecca walking around with a fire fighter's helmet on.

'It's not *that* funny.' She prodded him.

'Hey, I'm ticklish there!' Rebecca carried on tickling him until Kabelo managed to restrain her.

'Let's start the fire,' said Rebecca, getting up. 'We don't have that much time. From fire fighter to Cinderella.'

'Huh?'

'You know, Cinderella had to get back from the ball before…?'

'Isn't there a handsome prince somewhere in there…?' They burst out laughing.

'I was brought up on other tales as well,' said Kabelo. Soon they were sitting side-by-side, cross-legged, watching the fire send sparks into the dark.

'Pit Bull's never been a police informer,' said Kabelo, after a while. 'The phone records show that he and Mtsi-Smith spoke to each other several times the night my mother went missing.'

'He's implicated in your mom going missing as well as assaulting Don?'

'It looks like it.'

'Sju, that's quite something.' She gazed out to sea. At night, the ships looked like fairytale islands.

'Rebecca.' Her eyes sparkled in the firelight. Kabelo uncrossed his legs and lay on his back to face the clear black star twinkling sky.

'Yes.'

'I don't believe that my mother is still alive. I haven't for a long time. What you hope for and what you know deep inside are two different things.'

'How are you so sure she…?'

Kabelo sensed Rebecca's awkwardness.

'I just am,' he said. 'But I can't stand not knowing for sure, not knowing where she is, or what happened to her. I have terrible nightmares about it.'

Rebecca leant over Kabelo and lay her head on his chest.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Rebecca whispered. Wisps of her hair touched his face. He sighed, and held her tight.

‘I don’t feel sad tonight,’ said Kabelo. ‘I feel kind of happy.’ He hesitated. ‘With you,’ he added.

‘Me too,’ she replied. He cupped his hands around her face, and she smiled at him.

After a while, they got up and paddled their feet in the sea. Kabelo scooped Rebecca up in his arms and swung her around and around. She shrieked and clung to him while he pretended to dip her in the water. After a while, they walked back to the fire.

‘What do you believe happens to people when they die?’ He caught the ends of her scarf and twirled them around his fingers. He did not want to rush her reply; he’d already put her on the spot by talking about Mama.

‘I think of them as going up there, as stars or spirits or something. They will always be there, for eternity. I don’t know how to explain it but I believe they kind of hold memory in the universe for us. They never leave us,’ she said. ‘Well that’s how I feel about my grandfather.’ Rebecca looked at Kabelo.

‘There are different religions in my family,’ she added. ‘They can’t all be right.’

Kabelo threw a log on the fire which sent orange sparks, like tiny flares into the darkness. They listened to the fire crackle and spit.

‘In mine too,’ he said, after a pause. ‘Some communicate with our ancestors, and others go to church every Sunday and communicate with God. Some do both. They all do ceremonies of one kind or another. My one cousin’s into Buddhism. He’s been telling me about it.’

‘And you?’ asked Rebecca, trailing her finger across his forehead.

‘I’m still working it out,’ he said. ‘I just want to know that my mother is at peace, wherever she is.’ Kabelo’s phone alarm vibrated.

‘Cinderella needs to get back to JBs,’ he said, offering her his hand.

Rebecca wished she could stay here with Kabelo, next to the fire all night. She wanted to watch the sun rise with him and see everything around them emerge in dawn colours. She reluctantly took his hand to get up, and helped shake out the blanket. They threw sand on the fire and walked back over the cool sand.

‘Shall I come up with you?’ asked Kabelo at JBs’ gate.

‘No,’ replied Rebecca, even though she wanted nothing more than to be with him for longer. ‘I’ve got to do some quick sketches. My dad will want to see them.’ There was an uncertain pause between them.

‘Thanks for the fire and everything,’ said Rebecca. ‘It was awesome.’ She took the first step up.

‘Rebecca, wait.’ Kabelo caught her hand. She stepped down again onto the sand.

‘Yes?’ she replied. He put his arms around her waist; she went on tiptoe and clasped her arms around his neck.

‘You are the best thing that has happened to me in ages,’ he said, and kissed her.

Rebecca hung her sketchpad over the wooden fence and felt for the tap. She splashed water on her face, rinsed the sand off her feet as best she could, in her giddy state.

‘Rebecca dear, so glad you came! Is your dad here?’ shouted George from under his extremely large sombrero, and above the yells of ‘Amigo! Amigo! Amigo!’ from the dance floor. Despite it being summer, ponchos were quite the fashion tonight.

‘Hi George,’ she shouted back. ‘I’ve been here for quite a while. I’ve been drawing.’ She thrust up her sketchpad.

‘Oh.’ He looked perplexed. Even though he joined in the partying, George did not miss a thing.

‘Hey, George, can I take a photo of you?’ George obliged in various poses, with and without the moustache, with and without backpacker guests, and then someone called him. He gave Rebecca a thumbs-up.

‘Have a dance!’ he said, pointing into the crowd, and then disappeared into it.

‘Did you get what you wanted?’ asked Dad while they walked up the road. It took Rebecca a moment to realise what her father was asking about.

‘Oh, yes, thanks Dad,’ she replied. ‘I did some sketches and took quite a few photos.’

‘Your mom’s coming on Christmas Eve.’

‘Oh,’ said Rebecca. ‘That’s great,’ she added, rather unconvincingly. Mom would want to spend time with her and Sameer but Rebecca wanted more freedom, not less. There was Kabelo. And Don.

‘You don’t sound too pleased,’ said Dad sharply. ‘She’s longing to see you and Sameer.’

‘Of course I’m pleased,’ Rebecca protested, searching her mind for the right thing to say. ‘Oh, Dad, you must be very thrilled.’ A wind had picked up and the long grasses swayed and bowed along the sides of the road. Her father told her he’d meet her at the gate and strode ahead. When she got there, he was pacing up and down.

‘I’m expecting you to perk up about Mom coming,’ he said. ‘Or else there’s no going out with your new friends at all.’ Rebecca’s heart lurched, another strategy was called for.

‘Daddy, I’m sorry,’ she said, facing him. ‘I *am* looking forward to seeing Mom.’

‘I know it’s not easy for you and Sameer with your mother away so much. It’s not been easy for me either.’ Dad cleared his throat. ‘When your mother called tonight she told me she’s been short-listed for the World News Photograph Award. I want us all to dig deep within ourselves and do something special to celebrate her achievement.’ Dad would freak his brain out if he knew what his son and daughter and friends were trying to achieve, thought Rebecca.

‘Please, Becca.’ Dad needed Sameer and her to help dilute the tension but wasn’t that something her parents should sort out for themselves?

‘You’re right,’ replied Rebecca. ‘That’s amazing, the award, for Mom. For all of us.’ Her father gave her a relieved hug.

‘Maybe you and Mom could do something special together. Like go away for a romantic evening. Naanii can always look after us.’ Dew droplets scattered as Rebecca tapped the bushes in passing.

‘Mmmm,’ replied Dad. ‘Now that’s a thought.’

Sameer was fast asleep when she got in. He gave a huff when she tried to remove his ear phones, and he pushed her hands away. He turned to face the wall. Okay, so he wasn’t asleep.

‘Hope you enjoyed yourself without me. I thought we were all in this thing together? And who said you could take my camera without asking?’

Rebecca sighed. Sameer switched on his torch, and shone it up and down her.

‘Your jeans are wet and sandy at the bottom and my guess is you were at the beach with Kabelo. So much for *Mexican* art. Dad would flip if he knew.’ Rebecca fought the urge to argue back. She needed Sameer on her side. On their side.

‘Sameer. I’m sorry. You were watching TV. Kabelo called me to report on the latest from Anneliese, it seemed best to meet him to hear…’

‘I thought we were in this together,’ he repeated.

‘We are. Please stop doing that with the torch.’

‘By the way Mom’s coming back on Christmas Eve,’ said Sameer, lowering the torch.

‘I know. Dad told me.’

‘May I?’ she asked Sameer, picking up the edge of his duvet.

‘Okay. But don’t get sand in my bed.’ Rebecca slipped under the cover and snuggled up next to her brother. She told him everything that Kabelo had told her. Well, everything to do with Pit Bull. She finished with her idea for Dad and Mom going away for a night.

‘I just hope the escape plan, whatever it is, works, and Kabelo gets Don here without being followed,’ said Sameer, slapping the wall lightly with the back of his hand.

‘And that we can keep him here undetected for a few days,’ said Rebecca.

‘Feel my heart,’ said Sameer, pulling her hand across his chest. She could feel it thumping against her palm. They found each other’s hands and lay in the dark, holding tight.

‘We’ve just got to believe we can do it, Sameer,’ Rebecca broke their silence. ‘Apart from helping Don, imagine if Kabelo finds out what happened to his mother?’

‘But what if they do to us what they did to Don?’

‘Let’s not think about it,’ she replied, squeezing his hand.

‘You smell of fire. Did they have a braai at JBs tonight?’ asked Sameer drowsily. At the first sound of his light snoring, she slipped off the bed and picked up her phone. Kabelo was online.

K: My best nyt eva

Rebecca sighed.

R: Me 2

Rebecca closed the windows, pulled the curtains together so the edges overlapped, and checked the front door was locked. Naanii’s light was off, and Dad was in the bathroom brushing his teeth. Rebecca locked the door between the dining room and the verandah.

‘Night, Dad,’ she called through the doorway.

‘Night, darling,’ he foamed back, brushing briskly and quickly rinsed his mouth.

‘What’s with all the locking of doors tonight?’

‘Oh, nothing,’ Rebecca replied. ‘Jo’burg habit.’

After she heard her father switch his bedroom light off, she took her pyjamas through to the bathroom, and turned on the shower.

Pit Bull had tied Rebecca up in a bright white tiled windowless room with monitors mounted at each corner. The Boss and The General sat at a table, staring at her. Pit Bull walked around the room, circling her, sneering, and tapping his gun on the walls. Clink. Clink. Clink. Rebecca sat up, a scream waiting to explode from her throat.

‘It’s me, Kabelo.’ Rebecca jumped up. She glanced at Sameer, who was snoring lightly. Was this part of ‘being in this together?’ But he needed his sleep, didn’t he? She ducked under the curtains and gently, soundlessly opened the window.

‘Go around to the back door,’ she whispered. Stealthily as a thief, Rebecca unlocked the door and opened it.

‘Don’s coming out tomorrow,’ said Kabelo. Rebecca’s heart lurched. ‘I’ve decided to make another plan. It’s too dangerous for you and your family having him here.’

‘What’s the worst thing that could happen?’ she asked. Somehow, his concern evaporated her nightmare.

‘What’s the worst thing you can imagine?’ he replied.

‘Let’s not think about it.’ She pulled her fingers through the lavender bush outside the kitchen and smelled its scent.

‘Let’s stick with the plan,’ she said. ‘Smell,’ she said, offering Kabelo her hand. ‘My Mom says it relaxes.’ Kabelo inhaled but his nose in her palm was ticklish and she ended up giggling.

‘We’d better go to the lookout point. My Dad sometimes gets up in the night when he can’t sleep.’ She closed the kitchen door. The valley was softly quiet and dark except for street lamps and a few house lights.

‘My mother’s coming on Christmas Eve. She’s been short-listed for an international award.’

‘Wow! That’s amazing!’ he said. ‘How do you feel about her coming?’

‘I don’t know. It’s complicated. Things have been tense. My parents have issues. I’ve not been getting on well with my mom.’

‘Why?’ asked Kabelo.

‘It’s different things.’ Rebecca was sorry to discover the hammock was damp. They sat on the bench at the lookout point instead.

‘Bra Z says I must come tomorrow afternoon,’ said Kabelo.

‘Rebecca, wake up! It’s late! Dad and Naanii are saying they need to keep a close eye on you. That maybe you’re coming down with something. Becca, wake up!’ Sameer shook her, deciding he’d risk whatever she threw at him, although the bedside lamp would be painful. He picked up her phone and looked at the time. He resisted checking her messages.

‘It’s twelve-twenty and we don’t want eyes being kept on us.’

Rebecca groaned. He watched impatiently as her eyes slowly brought him into focus. He’d learnt the hard way that his sister’s morning waking process could not be rushed. She stretched.

‘Say that all again,’ was all she could manage. He sighed in exasperation.

‘Get up! Dad’s coming through to talk to you.’

Rebecca grabbed the novel off the table next to her bed, waved Sameer to his side of the room, and opened to where she’d left her bookmark.

‘Hi son and daughter!’ But Dad’s eyes were on Rebecca who peered at him over the book. ‘You slept in very late, Rebecca.’

‘Morning, Dad!’ replied Rebecca cheerily.

‘Not anymore,’ he replied looking pointedly at his watch.

‘This book is a real page turner,’ she said. ‘I’ve already chowed through a few chapters this morning.’ She held her book up to show him its cover.

‘Naanii looked in a short while ago and said you were fast asleep.’

‘Well, I dozed off for a bit.’

‘Mom’s coming soon, as you know,’ said Dad overenthusiastically. ‘I thought we could go and look for a fallen branch or something to use as a Christmas tree, and generally make the house look festive. I’m sure we can find a pot in Mr Gould’s garage to put it in.’ Rebecca resisted looking at Sameer.

‘We’ll go into town after lunch,’ Dad carried on. ‘Buy coloured lights. Nothing that adds too much to our carbon footprint, of course.’ He cuffed Sameer playfully. ‘Some tinsel, Christmas crackers.’ Sameer restrained himself from commenting on who seemed crackers.

‘MaDilika has made some beautiful wire Christmas trees with beads,’ said Rebecca. ‘We saw them at the market the other day.’

‘Sounds good too,’ said Dad, looking pleased that they were rising to the occasion.

‘I’ll roast a turkey. Just ordered one from that excellent butcher in town that Mom says is so good. They said they were running out fast.’

‘I thought they sold them already slaughtered,’ Sameer piped in. Dad roared with laughter.

‘Good one, son, good one,’ and ruffled Sameer’s hair. Sameer smoothed it down.

‘You’ve gone traditional all of a sudden, Dad,’ remarked Rebecca. ‘I like it!’ she shouted, flinging her book aside. She sprung from her bed and gave him a bear hug. If Dad’s smile gets any wider, he’ll need a bigger face, thought Sameer, happily, watching his father nodding at both of them like one of those toy dogs people put on their dashboards.

‘Naanii is going to take a stab at making minced fruit pies. Let’s have a quick bite to eat and then head off to town.’

‘It’s a city, Dad,’ said Rebecca.

‘It’s just a manner of speaking, honey,’ he replied, walking out of the room. Sameer shook his head at his sister, and expertly ducked the pillow she threw at him.

‘Sameer, Kabelo’s fetching Don today.’

‘Maybe we can give Kabelo a lift to *the city*,’ said Sameer.

‘Oh my word, you can be brilliant sometimes, little brother,’ said Rebecca, dropping her second pillow on the bed. ‘I’ll call him and ask.’

‘Uh, Becca.’

‘Yes?’

‘Can’t I be the one to make the call?’ Sameer watched his sister struggle with herself for a few seconds.

‘Sure,’ she said.

Chapter 16

Rebecca stood in between Kabelo and Sameer on the Gould's lawn, holding an umbrella that dazzled against the grey sky.

'This weather could set in for days,' said Kabelo putting his hand out to feel the drizzle on his palm. It had been busy at the internet café in the morning, and he nearly didn't get away in time.

'What's the escape plan for Don?' asked Sameer.

'I only know that I have to wait in town,' said Kabelo, fighting the urge to hold Rebecca's free hand. He wasn't sure what Rebecca's father or grandmother would think of it. Come to think of it, he wasn't even sure what Tata would think. But he didn't want to antagonise Sameer.

'He'll sms or call me around two-thirty to tell me where to be. He's had someone on the look-out for Pit Bull at the main entrance since early this morning.'

'Are you scared?' asked Sameer.

'A bit,' he replied. 'But I'm more scared of messing things up. I've got to delete any messages he sends me and keep clearing my message log.'

Rebecca passed him a key and some money.

'Can you make two? One for you and one for Don.' He slipped it in his pocket.

'I've made up a bed for Don and left him some fruit, biscuits and juice. A torch, spare batteries.'

'Great.' He flashed her a grateful smile.

'Don will have to be careful,' said Sameer. 'Dad sometimes takes strolls down the road at night when he can't sleep.'

'So I've heard,' replied Kabelo, and instantly regretted it when Rebecca nudged him. He kept his eyes averted from hers.

'Don's been finding his way around in the dark for quite some time,' said Kabelo wryly.

'But he is off drugs now, isn't he?' asked Sameer, looking up at him. Kabelo wished he could say with a hundred per cent confidence that he believed Don would stay clean. But he couldn't.

'He says so. He'd stopped soon after Pit Bull threatened to hurt Sarah. Being in hospital has helped.' Rebecca twirled the umbrella one way and then the other.

'If we're not back by ten tonight,' Kabelo took a deep breath, 'I think you should call my father. I told him I'm spending the rest of the day and evening with you guys.'

'They're coming,' whispered Rebecca. 'Let's go to the car.'

'Why are you children waiting in the rain? There's a perfectly sheltered verandah for you to wait under. Or maybe you were plotting something?' Naanii laughed cheerily.

'Thanks for the lift to town,' said Kabelo, once they got in the car.

'It's a *city*,' chipped in Sameer, who had engineered himself in between Kabelo and Rebecca for the journey. 'Isn't it Rebecca?'

'City or town, here we come,' said Dad, reversing the car. 'Glad to have you with us, Kabelo.'

After saying goodbye to Rebecca and her family, Kabelo made his way downtown, with the umbrella Rebecca insisted he take. Usually, when he had time to kill, he browsed the music shops. Today, he found himself looking for a pair of earrings for Rebecca. But which ones? Dolphins, hearts, butterflies, or peace signs? He went across the road to buy a cold drink.

'Are they for someone special?' asked the shop assistant, in a kind voice, when he returned.

'Um. Kind of. Yes,' he replied, feeling himself blush.

'The hearts are a lovely choice then,' she told him. 'Shall I wrap them for you?'

Kabelo paid, and put the small box into his pocket. He walked around the corner to his favourite CD shop, and flipped through the hip hop, house, reggae, kwaito and world sections. He couldn't listen to any in case he got distracted and missed a message from Bra Z. His phone vibrated.

'Kabelo?'

'Yes.'

'Your guy's prowling around.' Bra Z spoke fast. Kabelo wanted to say, he's not my guy. 'He poked his nose in the ward this morning. He's been on his phone so I'm guessing he's got some of his people on standby. You listening?'

'*Ewe, ndimamele*,' replied Kabelo, walking out of the shop, holding his phone tightly against his ear.

'Good. I've also got people on my side. Come to the back entrance of the main section of the hospital and find the theatre lift.'

'Sharp,' said Kabelo.

Kabelo cursed himself for not coming to the hospital beforehand to familiarise himself with the layout. But he was working mornings, and time had been scarce.

Kabelo checked his watch. Five-thirty. The taxi queues were long. There was no point in waiting. He turned into a side road and headed up towards the hospital. He came out on a road at the back of the police station, and stood under a tree, where he could see the hospital. Pit Bull was in the parking lot next to his Harley, arms folded and staring at the hospital entrance. Kabelo tilted the umbrella, and walked unhurriedly, despite his racing heart, until he reached the service vehicle entrance. There was a security guard at the boom gate. If Kabelo lied about who he was, he'd be doing it on camera. Just then a hospital porter came up and pointed at Kabelo. Something had gone terribly wrong. The plan was obviously falling apart. Was Pit Bull in with these guys too? He turned on his heels.

'Hey, mzala, where you going?' Should he run? But his feet wouldn't move, it was as if they were held by powerful magnets to the ground. Mzala? Why would he call Kabelo 'cousin'?

The porter caught up with him.

'Kabelo? Why are you leaving?' He frowned at Kabelo. 'Bra Zolile sent me to guide you in. Don't you know what risk he's putting himself in to get your friend out?'

'*Ndicela uxole*. I thought things had gone wrong. Bra Z didn't tell me that you'd be helping me,' said Kabelo. The porter did not tell Kabelo his real name, and he was not wearing a name badge.

'Just call me Mzala,' he said. 'I've told the guard you're my cousin, coming to see my sick aunt. Just pretend. Let's talk about her. She's got cancer. You're David Sigobe, okay? Stand away from the camera when I sign you in.' Kabelo nodded, absorbing each bit of information, and gave him a grateful smile. Mzala patted him on the back.

'You can put your umbrella down. It's not raining anymore.' Mzala loudly discussed their sick aunt while he signed Kabelo in, and Kabelo nodded along. He wondered how the security guard would explain the fact that David Sigobe didn't sign out later in the day, but he had all the confidence in the world that his new cousin would make a plan. Mzala guided Kabelo around to a garden where benches were enclosed by a semi circle of neatly trimmed bushes.

'You can go to the men's room over there and put these on,' said Mzala, pressing a sports bag into Kabelo's hands and pointing towards a building.

'What…?'

'Nurse's uniform to help you blend in.' He ran his eyes up and down Kabelo. 'Should be a good fit,' he added, and then wagged his finger in Kabelo's face. 'But no giving injections, hey!'

Kabelo opened his mouth to say something but Mzala just chuckled, and patted Kabelo on the shoulder.

'Don't worry. I know it's your friend who's the junkie. Sorry. *Was*. Let's hope. Or this rescue mission is a massive risk for nothing.' At last Mzala paused, and Kabelo took the gap.

‘*Enkosi kakhulu*. For everything.’

‘Sure,’ he replied. ‘I’ll do anything for Bra Z.’ Mzala explained the route Kabelo should take to the back entrance of the hospital, and where to find the theatre lift. Kabelo looked at the umbrella in his hand. He couldn’t carry it around anymore. Rebecca would understand. He’d buy her a new one with money he earned at the internet café.

‘*Ndingakubambisa apha*?’ asked Kabelo, holding out the umbrella.

‘*Akho ngxaki*. Sure. Thanks. I do have a sick aunt, by the way. I’ll give it to her. It will brighten her up,’ he said. Then Mzala was gone before Kabelo could thank him again.

The long white pants and white tunic top fitted well. He even had a name badge. He was interrupted while examining it.

Meet @ theatre lift 1st floor in 5 said Bra Z's sms.

Kabelo took the stairs, and saw the sign Theatre Lifts → further along the corridor. A large guy carrying a bike helmet was coming towards him, looking left and right, like in a horror movie. Kabelo's heart thumped. Pit Bull would recognise him if he saw him on the security cameras at Dazzlers. A security guard greeted Kabelo as he walked past him. Whose side was he on, Kabelo wondered but knew he would soon find out. Pit Bull wasn't more than twenty metres away, just before the turn Kabelo had to take. The guard stopped Pit Bull. Were they making a plan to kidnap him? Kabelo carried on walking, fighting the urge to sprint to the nearest exit.

'Don't tell me what I can and can't do,' Pit Bull barked. Kabelo turned right, still trying to keep an eye on what was happening. He collided with an ICU bed and jumped back in horror. A seriously pale, ill-looking blonde-haired woman lay on it, eyes closed, with tubes and drips. 'Barrier nursing', said a sign on one of the drips.

'I'm sorr…' he began. Kabelo heard a chuckle. He looked up at the nurse wearing surgical scrubs. Bra Z, who was wearing scrubs too, winked over his mask.

'Be quick,' he said. Bra Z pulled a scrub hat over Kabelo's head and tied it at the back while Kabelo put the mask on, and struggled to get his shaking fingers into the surgical gloves. Bra Z gave the other nurse, who was also masked up, a thumbs-up. Her eyes widened. Kabelo turned around. Pit Bull had turned into their small passage way. He stood, tapping his finger on his helmet, in front of the lift. The doors opened. He barged in.

'Please use the public lift,' said the nurse, pointing outwards. 'This is for theatre use only. We have an emergency.' Pit Bull's eyes flicked down to the patient. He made no sign of moving. Kabelo kept his eyes fixed on the bed. He frowned. A spot of blood appeared on the patient's white gown near her chest. It grew rapidly; soaking, dark red blood. Kabelo was a nurse now. A nurse couldn't puke at the sight of blood. Bra Z nudged him from behind. Oh, I get it, Kabelo realised with relief. Fake blood.

'Sir, this is an emergency and this patient is being barrier nursed. We are dealing with an unknown virus,' said the other nurse. 'For your own safety, I suggest you take another lift.' Kabelo held his breath. Pit Bull leapt out. The nurse pressed the ground floor knob. The lift doors closed. Kabelo nearly collapsed onto the bed. Don opened his eyes and blinked.

'Pretty good act, wouldn't you say?' said Bra Z with a huge smile. The lift doors opened.

'All clear,' said the nurse. 'You take over from here,' she told Kabelo indicating that he must push the bed. 'Good luck.' He rubbed his palms against his pants, and gripped tight. The bed's cool metal bars were calming; it helped to have a simple task to do in the increasingly surreal world he was now in.

'Let's go,' said Bra Z. 'My sister's waiting. Kabelo felt less nervous. Pushing gave him something to do. He had no idea what Bra Z had planned – he was definitely one of those people who gave information only on a need-to-know basis. It made Kabelo feel anxious, not knowing what lay ahead. As the back entrance to the hospital grew closer and larger, so did Kabelo's feelings of hope and dread. He wished he could just thrive on adrenalin, like Bra Z seemed to.

'Stop. Turn here.' Bra Z strode into another side corridor just before the entrance. 'Staff toilets,' said the sign. The porter Kabelo had seen earlier appeared, gave Kabelo a bag, and went to keep watch.

'Wakey-wakey time,' said Bra Z to Don, helping him sit up. Bra Z pulled crutches from under the sheets and Kabelo helped get Don down.

'Go in there and help him change,' said Bra Z, giving Kabelo the drips. 'And throw these away in the bin while you're there.'

‘Hey Kabs,’ said Don in a quavering voice.

‘Don, bru’, eita,’ Kabelo replied, opening the door to let Don get through on his crutches. Kabelo untied the ‘bloodied’ theatre gown, pulled off the tube and fake blood bag and gingerly threw it into the bin.

‘Help me,’ said Don. By the time Kabelo had finished doing everything Don instructed, his friend had morphed into a reasonably healthy woman with long black hair.

‘Does Bra Z work part-time in the other kind of theatre?’ asked Kabelo.

No,’ replied Don. ‘His sister does.’ Kabelo changed back into his own clothes. He patted his pocket to make sure Rebecca’s gift was still there.

‘Great job, if I say so myself,’ said Bra Z appraising Don when they emerged.

‘What do we do next?’ asked Kabelo.

‘Phase three. Follow me,’ replied Bra Z beckoning towards the back entrance. He reached for his phone.

‘Bad news,’ he said. ‘Pit Bull’s pulled in reinforcements.’ Kabelo’s heart started thumping again.

‘I feel bad dragging you all into my mess,’ said Don, stopping. Bra Z took a deep breath.

‘Count yourself lucky, unlike my cousin who is now dead as you know, and get yourself into escape mode or this escape will fail,’ he said. ‘I’m giving you five seconds to decide. One, two…’

‘Thanks, guys,’ said Don. ‘I owe you.’ Bra Z nodded and said, ‘Let’s go.’ Once through the door, Bra Z pointed at an old VW Beetle parked in a nurses’ bay. It was drizzling again.

‘Move fast,’ ordered Bra Z. He got to the car first, pulled the door open, and levered the passenger seat forward.

‘Meet my sister, Q,’ said Bra Z.

‘Q?’ said Kabelo. Q nodded.

‘Are you happy with the job?’ asked Bra Z.

‘Yup,’ Q replied, surveying Don. ‘I think it’s gonna work.’ They high-fived.

‘Don, slide yourself along the back seat. Kabelo will sit in close to you,’ Bra Z told Don. Kabelo held the crutches, while Q sprung out and helped settle Don in.

‘Now you in,’ said Bra Z to Kabelo. Q tossed a fleece blanket over for Kabelo to cover Don’s leg.

‘Hold on.’ Bra Z dumped a baby’s carrycot on the front passenger seat, and passed Kabelo a car window sign with a suction plug on it that said ‘Baby On Board’.

‘Stick it on the back window,’ he ordered, and Kabelo licked the plastic plug and obliged.

‘You’ve been in the maternity ward,’ Q told Don. She looked at Kabelo. ‘You’re the father. Hope you’re ready for parenthood?’ Q and Bra Z looked at each other and burst out laughing. But Kabelo felt as if he was in a canoe at the top of Victoria Falls and the waterfall was drawing him helplessly to the rumbling edge. When he opened his eyes Bra Z was staring intently at him.

‘You still okay with this?’ he asked.

‘Just a bit dizzy,’ Kabelo replied.

‘Me too,’ said Don.

‘Never mind,’ replied Bra Z. ‘Having a new baby can do that to young couples.’ He and Q chuckled. Kabelo couldn’t work out if their style made him feel calmer or more terrified. Bra Z covered the carrycot with a baby’s blanket. He manoeuvred Don’s crutches over to Kabelo.

‘These must be totally out of sight,’ he instructed. Kabelo tucked them away. Q pulled a pair of glasses out of the car’s cubbyhole and passed them to Don, who shoved them on.

‘Not the latest fashion, but they’ll do,’ said Q. She pulled out something else from the cubby.

‘Finishing touch. Lipstick. Hope you don’t object to the colour. It was on sale yesterday. Passion pink.’

‘Is that totally appropriate for a new mama, Q?’ quipped Bra Z.

‘Just enjoy yourselves at my expense. It’s fine,’ said Don, shaking his head and half-smiling. ‘Passion pink works for me. More than murder mauve would.’ Don looked in the small mirror Q passed him and did his best at applying it to his lips.

‘Roll your lips together,’ said Q, stretching around so Don could demonstrate. ‘Like this.’ Don copied her.

‘Can you recognise me?’

‘Nah,’ replied Bra Z. ‘You look just like an anxious mama.’ He tossed a cap over to Kabelo. He put it on and pulled the peak low. The old car’s engine roared into life. Bra Z slammed the door, gave a thumbs-up and disappeared into the hospital.

‘Let’s pray,’ said Q. Kabelo wasn’t sure if she was joking but bowed his head anyway. When Kabelo raised his head, Q’s eyes were looking at him in the rear-view mirror.

‘Ready?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ said Don, loudly. ‘For anything.’

‘Cosy up, then,’ she said. ‘*Ke nako*. This is it.’ Don dropped his head on Kabelo’s shoulder. Kabelo hesitated, and placed his hand on Don’s knee. He couldn’t imagine what his father would say, or do, if he saw him now. But angry red was a colour that sprung to mind.

They turned the corner around the back of the hospital and headed for the exit. Bra Z had got the timing right. Visiting hour was about to begin. It didn’t take Kabelo long to spot Pit Bull standing at the exit.

‘He’s there,’ said Kabelo.

‘Show some love. Think about your wonderful new baby. Snuggle up,’ ordered Q. But all Kabelo could think of was Pit Bull.

‘Have you loving parents come up with any names?’ Q asked, leaning across to wind down the front passenger window halfway.

‘Are you mad?’ shouted Don. ‘Close it!’

‘We need to show that we are not afraid,’ replied Q.

There were two cars ahead of them, waiting at the exit for traffic to pass. Pit Bull was examining all occupants. It looked like he was putting the registration numbers into his phone. One car to go. Now them. Pit Bull took a step closer to them. Suddenly, loud baby’s crying erupted in their car. Q put one hand on the carrycot and rocked it. Pit Bull stepped back.

‘Got to get you home fast for your feed,’ said Q, above the crying, looking left and right. She released the break and accelerated into the main street.

‘What’s he doing?’ asked Don.

‘Don’t look back,’ said Q.

‘Watching our car,’ said Kabelo. ‘Writing down our registration number.’ Q accelerated, killed the crying, and slipped in a CD from the cubbyhole. They wove around the suburbs for twenty minutes and then took side roads until the turn off to Jikeleza Route, all the while listening over and over and over to Hugh Masekela’s *Stimela*.

Chapter 18

Rebecca had nibbled the skin around the nail on her thumb until it was raw. She'd have to put a plaster over before going to the airport tonight, and tell Mom, when she asked, which she would, that it was a blister from paddling, otherwise she'd pack Rebecca off to therapy. A trail of dust rose in the distance. Rebecca looked through her binoculars. George's bakkie. She withdrew under the trees but he'd seen her. He pulled over, sending up a mini dust storm.

'Rebecca, I thought you knew that the wild animals are over at the game reserve, even though, I agree, sometimes JBs' guests are pretty wild.' He laughed at his own joke. 'Seen anything exciting through those fancy binocs of yours?' George had to be the most playful man she knew.

'I was just looking at the weaver nests,' she answered over the rattling motor. 'So many this year.'

'It's because they've chopped down masses of trees for the wretched golfing estate.' He pulled a face. 'It's going to spoil the whole vibe of the area and require masses of water.'

'Dad says so too,' said Rebecca.

'Your family coming over tonight? It's going to be a roaring party.' Rebecca heard the drone of an engine and stole a glance up to the fork in the road. It turned down their way. George turned the engine of his bakkie off. Oh no. Didn't he have a roaring party to organise?

'You okay?' asked George, looking up the road. 'You seem anxious.'

'I'm fine.' She took her phone out of her shorts' pocket and checked the message.

Almst der. VW Beetle

She wished there was a button she could press on her phone and George and his bakkie would get beamed up and deposited at JBs.

'Mom's coming tonight,' she said.

'Wow, that's a great Christmas gift,' said George.

'Sorry?' she said.

'Your mom. Coming for Christmas. A great gift.' The Beetle pulled over about two hundred metres away. George glanced in his rear-view mirror. Rebecca looked at her phone.

'Oh gosh! That's the time? Sorry, George,' she said. 'I've baked a welcome-home cake for mom. I've got to take it out of the oven before it burns.' He looked at her dubiously.

'You still bake?' Had Dad told *every*body about how she'd burnt a cake and stank the house out with smoke so badly that they had to stay at friends for the night, she wondered?

'Only on special occasions,' she said. 'And I put the timer on now.' But George wasn't listening to her anymore

'Can't be new guests,' he muttered. 'We're totally full. No room at the inn.' George chuckled. 'Now I shouldn't say that, especially not on Christmas Eve, should I?' The Beetle did a u-turn.

'Must've got lost,' said George, somehow reassured. He turned the key and put his bakkie in gear. 'Hope your cake turns out okay.' He started to pull into the road. 'Pop down later for the party if you can. Bring the rest of your family, and a piece of cake for me. Unburnt.' Rebecca waved and ran down the driveway, hoping George never asked Mom about her welcome-home cake.

Come, she smsed when she was out of view of the road. George had disappeared by the time the Beetle crested the hill and flashed its headlights. She guided the car onto the lawn outside the outbuildings, and opened the passenger door.

'Whaaaat?'

'Don't worry. Fake baby. I'm Q,' said the driver, thrusting her hand across the carrycot to greet her.

'Rebecca. Hi,' she replied, and shook Q's hand. Q pulled the blanket off to reveal marble eyes gazing out of a plastic doll.

‘I’m so relieved to see you,’ said Rebecca. ‘How did it go?’ She took the carrycot off the seat and pulled it forward for Kabelo. Rebecca hugged him as soon as he got out of the car. The waiting today, willing nothing bad to happen to Kabelo, not hearing his voice, not even being on Chatworx with him, had been agonising.

‘Okay, okay, nice reunion,’ said Q. ‘Can we get Mama Don out of the car now?’ They manoeuvred him out. Kabelo passed him his crutches.

‘Meet Don,’ said Kabelo extending his arm in Don’s direction. ‘Bru’, this is Rebecca.’

‘A-ha,’ replied Don, looking from Kabelo’s face to Rebecca’s and back again. Rebecca flushed. He released his hand from one crutch to give Kabelo a light punch on the arm. Kabelo pulled off Don’s wig.

‘Glad to meet you,’ said Don. ‘Thanks for offering me a place.’ Rebecca opened her mouth to reply but Don got in first.

‘Yes. I know. It’s only for a few days.’ Rebecca frowned.

‘I wasn’t going to say that.’ She hated it when people presumed to know what was going on in her mind. ‘I was *about* to say that I hope you will manage okay here. And that you are welcome,’ she said. ‘So long as you don’t put words in my mouth.’ Kabelo patted Don’s back.

‘You two will get along great,’ he said. ‘All the signs are there.’

‘There’s the room,’ said Rebecca, pointing. Sameer skidded in on his bicycle.

‘Nobody… followed… you,’ he said, panting. ‘That I saw, anyway. Hi.’ They all laughed at the look on Sameer’s face when he saw Don.

‘It’s okay, dude,’ said Don. ‘I’m just busy morphing back into a guy.’

Don swung himself towards the room, showing off a few fancy moves.

‘Sameer, can you get my genuine ones out of the car,’ said Q, kneeling in front of the car’s licence plate with a screwdriver. ‘They’re behind the back seat.’

Rebecca leant against the doorway and watched Kabelo help Don pull off the dress and fake breasts.

‘How are you going to feed your baby now, bru’?’ asked Kabelo, standing well out of the range of Don’s crutches.

‘I’m off now,’ said Q, coming to stand next to Rebecca. ‘Stay safe, Don. When this is all over, go visit my brother. He’ll want to know you’re keeping to your side of the bargain.’ She gave him a hug.

‘Thank you. You and Bra Z are amazing. I can’t believe what you’ve done for me. We made it. You two are geniuses, man.’

Q extricated herself and left quickly. Rebecca pressed the spare key that Kabelo gave her into Don’s palm.

‘Kabelo also has one,’ she told him, ‘and me.’ Her eyes lingered on the scars on the inside of his arm.

‘I know. It’s not pretty,’ he said, and she felt bad for staring.

‘I’ll bring you some supper this evening,’ she replied, looking up. ‘There is some food in your room in the meantime, if you’re hungry now.’

‘We’ll check you later,’ said Kabelo. ‘I’ll try to come back late tonight but I can’t promise. I’m having Christmas Eve supper with Tata and Uncle Richard. It’s tradition.’

‘Thanks. Very much.’ Don eased himself on the bed and dropped his arms over his face.

‘I’ll lock the door behind me,’ said Kabelo. ‘Try to get some sleep.’

‘I saw an old brown VW Beetle leave here when your father and I were walking up the hill,’ said Naanii. ‘Who was it?’

Rebecca yawned and stretched on the hammock. She put her hand up to shield her eyes from the glare and looked at her grandmother.

‘It was Kabelo’s friend dropping him off.’ Her grandmother sniffed, scrutinising Rebecca’s face.

‘Ask them,’ she pointed in the direction of Kabelo and Sameer who were kicking a ball on the lawn, and shouted for them to come over.

‘Okay, I believe you,’ said Naanii abruptly. Her voice softened when the boys reached her.

‘Hello, Kabelo. How is your father?’

‘He’s fine, just very busy,’ said Kabelo.

Sameer gave their grandmother a hug, and, to Rebecca’s delight, turned to walk across the lawn towards the house with Naanii. Kabelo was, without doubt, the best part of her life right now.

‘I know you’re having supper with your dad and your Uncle Richard tonight,’ said Rebecca slowly. ‘But JBs has a Christmas Eve party happening, and George said to come.’ Kabelo was watching her face intently; she wished she could read his mind.

‘I thought maybe we could all meet there later, after you’ve finished and we’ve come back from the airport. Just for a bit, even.’

‘I could try,’ he replied. Kabelo pulled the hammock back and watched her swing in it.

‘It fits two,’ she informed him. He smiled and shook his head.

‘Okay, so how do you get onto this thing without falling out?’ he asked.

Chapter 19

Naanii stared through the doors, as if her eyes had superhero powers to land the plane safely. Dad paced up and down the arrivals section. Rebecca was sitting on a bench in her own dreamy world, listening to music.

'It's only due in twenty minutes, Naanii.' Sameer threaded his arm through his grandmother's. She nodded, without looking at Sameer. He sighed and wandered over to the tourism stand where he pulled out a pamphlet. Imagine listening to waves sound like thunder as they smashed against iziKhaleni, the Hole in the Wall at the glorious Coffee Bay. Whizzing along the fufi slides above the magnificent Tsitsikamma forest, bungee jumping off the Bloukrans River Bridge with terror and thrill in his heart, super tubing on a surfboard at Jeffrey's Bay (there would be a sunset behind him), visit Nelson Mandela's birthplace at Qunu, taking a boat ride from the small harbour through the Knysna Heads and onto the sparkling Indian Ocean. Taste Knysna's world famous oysters. Nah. He returned the pamphlet into its slot. Sameer rotated the stand and pulled out another one. The Ilanga Game Lodge, just forty-five kilometres from East London Airport and situated on the Jikeleza Route offers a unique experience. Get close up to African elephants (photos of people feeding them), take a ride on one (photo of a couple in wedding gear on an elephant), how did she keep her dress white? Be pampered at our spa with a hot stone massage. Special romantic packages for couples. Sameer folded it, and put it into his back pocket, to show Rebecca later.

'It's landing,' Naanii called for the whole airport to hear. 'Come watch.' Sameer went over to his sister. She uncurled her legs and stood up.

'I found this pamphlet about romantic getaways. It's just up the road from the Gould's. Maybe Mom and Dad…' Rebecca tugged on the cord of one earphone and it dropped, like a bungee jumper.

'Sorry?' she said. He clicked his tongue.

'It's like I don't matter anymore,' he said, before he could stop the words blurting out. Rebecca looked into his eyes. Her face softened. She pulled out the other earphone and hugged him.

'I'm sorry,' she said. Naanii beckoned them frantically, and mimed an aeroplane landing with her hand.

'There's Mom!' Sameer was the first one to spot their mother at the top of the plane stairs. Naanii beamed, and Dad looked happy-nervous. Suddenly Mom's arms were around Sameer, and he hugged her back tightly, inhaling her jasmine perfume. He felt as if a slice of heaven had fallen to Earth.

Christmas Eve and Ma still had to show two houses to a family from Jo'burg. Anneliese looked at her mother's tired face behind the desk.

'*Kan ek vir Ma gou 'n koffee skink*?'

'*Nee, dankie skattebol.* I've already had five cups today,' said Ma. '*Ek is baie jammer,*' she added. 'If they didn't seem like genuine buyers, I would not have agreed. But…' Her mother's voice trailed off. Anneliese nodded.

'I should be home by…' Ma glanced at her watch.

'Eight,' said Anneliese. That's the way things usually went. How many bathrooms? Enough built-in cupboards? How long does it take to walk to the beach? Any damp? Why is the owner selling? Is it a safe neighbourhood? And hundreds of other questions.

'It's okay, Ma. Just go out there and sell the big one in Whale Street then we can go on a holiday somewhere lekker next Christmas, instead of you working again.'

'*Ja, êk sal,*' said Ma, putting on a cheerful face, 'yes we can!' Anneliese waited for her next sentence. 'After we've paid off some old debts, including those ridiculously high divorce lawyer's bills. They're like those tow truck parasites, waiting for marriages to crash.'

‘I’ll see you at home, Ma,’ said Anneliese, giving her mother a hug. Ma pulled back, gave Anneliese a regretful smile and a kiss.

‘I love you, Annetjie,’ she said, getting in the car. Once she had driven away, Anneliese surveyed the tinsel, flashing lights and snow-etched *Merry Xmas* on her mother’s estate agency window. Snow must’ve last fallen around here during the Ice Age. Yet, we put the stuff up all over the show trying to pretend we are somewhere we aren’t. When Anneliese breathed in she felt that after-crying kind of shudder, which was strange since she hadn’t cried in months. The agency window reflected the late afternoon sky behind her. The last time Anneliese stared at her reflection in a shop window, Kabelo was standing next to her in the busy mall. Christmas Eve. *Mooi.* Everyone else was rushing doing festive things. Probably Pa too, all happy-happy with his new girlfriend. Anneliese walked on the pavement past the other shops.

‘And he had the cheek to ban me from going out with Kabelo with his “we must stick to our own kind” la-de-dah-de-blah-blah-blah,’ said Anneliese out loud, resisting the urge to punch the cheerful blow-up Father Christmas outside the liquor store. She crossed the road, up the stairs and into the hotel’s lobby. Kabelo’s father gave her a wave.

‘You okay?’ he asked, coming over. ‘You look upset.’ She nodded.

‘Sit here, my child,’ he said, beckoning a waitron to a table. ‘Stay as long as you like. Let me treat you to a milkshake. The usual?’ Anneliese nodded, afraid that if he offered her any more kindness she’d burst into tears.

‘Want to talk?’ She gave a small smile and shook her head.

‘I know all about the festive season blues, believe me.’ Kabelo’s father looked away and then back at Anneliese. ‘Pop in anytime, okay?’ Kabelo’s father gave Anneliese’s shoulder a squeeze and walked away. She pulled out her phone.

A: Wat doen jy 2nyt? she texted Kabelo.

K: Supper wid tata and unkl r. U?

A: Nx nie

Tears welled in her eyes and splashed onto her phone. She rubbed it against her t-shirt but even then she couldn’t read anything through the blur. She rested her phone on her forehead.

‘Mr Nomvalo said I must look after you,’ said the waitron, putting down the strawberry milkshake. ‘Do you want something to eat?’

‘No, thanks,’ replied Anneliese, picking up the serviette to dab her eyes. ‘Thank you very much.’ She tried once again to focus on the words on the screen.

K: Wll cll u l8er mayb we cn mt @ jbs. R n S 2

Anneliese sat up a bit, took the straw into her mouth and sucked. They made the world’s best strawberry milkshakes here.

K: U ok? Tata ses u @ hotel

A: Ja. Wl cm wid if u go 2 jbs

K: Kwl

She could always look the other way when Kabelo and Rebecca were looking at each other like no one else existed. Or, better still, hang out with Sameer. Anneliese looked at the time. She still had an hour. She thanked the waitron and walked back to the shopping centre and up the stairs to the internet café. She’d send all her friends festive messages and make it seem like she was having an awesome Christmas Eve.

Anneliese didn’t log straight on to facebook when she sat down at her favourite place, the computer next to the window. The blue sky had a spray of tiny yellow clouds across it, as if someone had thrown up a handful of butter popcorn for the birds. Sarah. Don. It was all too hectic. She sighed. Then she clicked onto a search engine and typed Gary Bradfield into the text box, and waited. Plenty of men on the planet with that name. Dazzlers, East London, Eastern Cape, South Africa, she added in and clicked Launch. Photos of Dazzlers’ opening a few years ago popped up. Lots of local dignitaries smiling, with champagne glasses in their hands. Politicians, business

people, socialites. Some, she noted, fitted into all three categories. Miss Eastern Cape, DJs. Next. Next. Hold on. Back. Anneliese frowned.

'And there's dear Pa,' she muttered. She checked the date. *Three* years ago. So much for *new* girlfriend. He wasn't even separated from Ma then. She clicked on the photograph to enlarge it, and then to Print Options. Colour. It was worth the extra cost. She really wanted Kabelo to see this.

Anneliese surfed some more. Drug merchant caught outside Dazzlers. Oh, so you're Pit Bull, she whispered to the screen. Jirre, you fancy yourself.

'We intend to protect our patrons against the scourge of drug merchants,' said Dazzlers' Gary Bradfield. She clicked on 'next page' at the bottom of the screen. A recent article from Star Water Craftware's magazine; Gary Bradfield was tagged. Anneliese examined the photo and read the caption: 'Seen here shaking hands with our East London Star Water Craftware's sales rep is Mr Gary Bradfield. Sales are on the up with another catamaran sold to a satisfied customer.'

He's buying a blerrie boat with sleazy drug money, and Ma's out trying to sell a house on Christmas Eve so ours doesn't get repossessed. Anneliese collected her photo printout, paid for it and her internet time, folded the photo and slid it into her sling bag.

'Merry Christmas!' called the assistant as she walked through the door.

'You too. Merry Christmas,' she flung the words back where they seemed to hang, like faded decorations.

One by one the lights in the Gould's house went on. Kabelo watched for Rebecca's torch signal from the lookout point. He wondered how things had gone with the family reunion at the airport. He wondered what Rebecca's mother was like.

'How are you finding working at the great Surf's Up Internet Café, Kabs?' Uncle Richard broke through Kabelo's thoughts. 'Sorry I haven't made it in to see you. I've been out of town with the tour bus. Big demand for the three-day trip. Maybe I can train you up to help out with that one day. How'd you like to drive a thirty-seater bus?' A light flashed on and off five times from the lookout point. They were home and Don was okay.

'How about that, nyana?' Tata's voice broke through Kabelo's thoughts. '*uMalumi u Richard uthetha nawe.*'

'Oh, sorry, Uncle Richard, replied Kabelo. 'Drive a bus? That would be awesome.'

'That girl on your mind?' Tata pointed his braai fork towards the Gould's and then turned the steak, lamb chops and boerewors. Flames rose to meet the fat. 'Quick, pass me the water.' Kabelo obliged. 'Enkosi,' continued Tata. 'What's her name again?'

'Tata, you know her name.' It was one thing that Tata knew that he liked Rebecca, but another now to open a public discussion on her.

'What's this, Kabs? Your father's allowing you to have a girlfriend?' Uncle Richard came over and swivelled Kabelo's cap back to front. 'Don't hide under there. Tell me more!'

'Eish, Tata.' Kabelo shook his head at his father. 'You always like to put me on the spot, nè? Tata made you his world famous chakalaka to go with the pap, Uncle Richard. I'll go get it and the rest of the food from downstairs.'

'Ha! You're just avoiding the question,' Tata called out, having fun. Kabelo walked down the steps and stopped at the bottom to listen.

'Give him a break, Xolani,' said Uncle Richard.

'He's growing up fast, Ricky. Next thing he'll be at university.' Tata's voice had a proud ring to it. 'He did well this year. Ask him to show you his report.'

'Lerato would have been very proud of him,' replied Uncle Richard, ducking out of the smoke. 'Have you noticed how it follows you wherever you stand?'

'That's the braaing life,' laughed Tata. 'No smoke without a fire. Another beer?'

'The girl? I must say I am a bit surprised that you're relaxed about it. They're teenagers. Aren't you...?'

'You know, Ricky, I haven't seen Kabelo so happy since...' Tata didn't finish his sentence.

‘Well, that’s good to hear,’ said Uncle Richard. ‘And he’s not a kid to do something risky.’

By the time Kabelo returned with a tray, the conversation had moved on to Uncle Richard’s latest business venture.

‘Is it okay if I go over to JBs later tonight, Tata, that’s if you don’t mind Uncle Richard? George is having a Christmas Eve party.’

‘… and let me guess. A certain girl might happen to be going there too?’ said Uncle Richard, his eyes dancing in the firelight.

‘I thought I was being given a break, Uncle Richard?’ So long as the answer was yes, Kabelo would endure the teasing.

‘We might take a turn over there later ourselves,’ said Tata, ‘and be entertained by those mad hippy foreigners.’

‘… who bring revenue into our country,’ added Uncle Richard, wagging his finger at Tata. ‘I wouldn’t be doing so well without them, and nor would you.’

‘Kabelo, check on the dining room table. I’ve left your Christmas present there from me and all the wild animals at Ilanga! I got it at a trendy shop along the coast when I was away. You should wear it tonight. It’ll show off your abs.’

‘Why are you encouraging him like that now, Ricky?’ His father shook his head. ‘Kabelo, the meat will be ready by the time you get back.’ Glad to get another break from the men, Kabelo made his way down the stairs again.

‘Times change, hey. Lerato didn’t tell her parents about me until we were very serious.’ Kabelo wondered whether Don and he would ever hang out like Tata and Uncle Richard. He picked up the parcel from the dining room table and stopped at the mantelpiece on his way to his bedroom, to pick up the photograph of Mama, Tata and him. He put it back. Once in his room, Kabelo ripped off the gift paper and held the t-shirt up against him. Turquoise and white tie-dye. Cool. He snapped the label off and dropped it in the bin. He took off his t-shirt, pulled the new one on and looked in the mirror. It was tight fitting but he liked it. When Kabelo got to the bottom of the deck the tone between Tata and Uncle Richard had changed.

‘You’ve got to get on with your life, Xolani,’ said Uncle Richard. ‘Everyone, including Lerato’s family and Kabelo, will understand if you start dating again.’

‘The meat’s ready,’ said Tata. ‘Kabelo!’

‘Ndikhona, Tata,’ said Kabelo, who had walked up the stairs slowly.

‘Ah, there you are. Good timing. Pass me a dish to put the meat in,’ said Tata loudly, as if he wanted to bury Uncle Richard’s words underneath his own. ‘Self service, guys. Go for it.’

‘I like the t-shirt, thanks Uncle Richard,’ said Kabelo, ladling chakalaka generously over his pap.

‘My pleasure. Knysna’s the place for cool gear. Tourists love it,’ he said between mouthfuls. They ate for a while without talking.

‘Another beautiful evening,’ sighed Tata. ‘I never tire of the sound of the sea.’ He turned his attention to Kabelo.

‘Have you heard from Don at all? I’ve not had a moment to ask you.’ Kabelo pointed to his mouth, and continued chewing, hoping the conversation, like the smoke, would change directions.

‘Don?’ said Uncle Richard. ‘What’s up with him?’

‘He got badly beaten up by some thugs,’ answered Tata.

‘Is he okay?’

‘Well, we went to visit him in hospital the day after it happened. Fill us in on the latest, nyana.’ Kabelo took a swig of lemonade, while his father and Uncle Richard waited for him to speak.

‘I haven’t heard from him since then. He was very drowsy from the pethidine when I was there, so I didn’t get the story of what happened,’ said Kabelo. ‘And now, as you know, I’m working at the internet café, so I’ve kindof lost touch.’ He took a bite of boerewors.

‘So you’ve no idea who the thugs were?’ asked Uncle Richard. Kabelo continued to chew and shook his head.

‘Nasty,’ said Uncle Richard.

‘That’s an understatement,’ agreed Tata. Kabelo swallowed.

‘You know Don, Tata. He lives on the edge. I wouldn’t want to get involved.’

‘Let us know if you hear from him,’ said Uncle Richard. ‘Maybe I can help in some way.’

‘Now tell me that this isn’t the best chakalaka you’ve ever tasted,’ said Tata.

‘The best. Always,’ replied Uncle Richard, on cue.

C u @ jbs in an hour? Kabelo pressed send to Rebecca, and then Anneliese.

Chapter 20

Rebecca's family had just finished their candlelit welcome-home supper at the lookout point under the Wild Fig. Mom entertained them with stories about her trip, and, for once, Rebecca listened intently and asked questions. Mom didn't mind at all that they wanted to go to JBs, saying she had some sleep to catch up on after all the travelling.

'Hope you have a divine time there,' she'd said, and hugged Rebecca and Sameer.

'Oh my word,' said Rebecca, when she and Sameer arrived at JBs. 'These backpackers really throw themselves into theme parties. You should have seen them at the Mexican one.' She immediately wished she could delete her last sentence before it reached her brother's ears.

'Well. I wasn't exactly *invited* to the Mexican party, was I?' replied Sameer, throwing her a light punch.

'Ouch! What was *that* for?' asked Rebecca, rubbing her arm.

'It's okay. I'm over it,' said Sameer. 'Check, there's George. He's Rudolf this year. What massive antlers! What a nose! So glad I brought my camera.' A tall backpacker, dressed up as one of Santa's elves, stopped next to them.

'Now vot vold u like fur Kristmaz, deer boy? Haff u bin gudt?' Sameer packed up laughing. The elf's partner, dressed up as the Christmas fairy, shiny wings and all, dragged him off.

'We should've dressed up,' said Sameer.

'I'll promise I'll do that next time hell freezes over,' said Rebecca. Father Christmases in board shorts, Mother Christmas in miniskirts, elves, fairies, reindeer, and red, green and gold tinsel-crowned guests made the wooden floor bounce dangerously as they danced to Mandoza's *Nkalakatha*. George beckoned them in.

'I wanna say hi to George,' shouted Sameer. 'Come!' Rebecca shook her head, and made a walking movement with her fingers.

When she saw Kabelo coming up the stairs from the beach, Rebecca's heart did a wild somersault.

'Hi,' he covered her hand with his at the gatepost, and leant forward, brushing his cheek against hers. Rebecca knew that, for eternity and beyond, she would be able to recall the tingling-floating sensation she felt right then. She slipped her arm around him and his hand cupped her shoulder as they walked towards the party.

'Want to dance?' he asked. Rebecca nodded.

'Take a chance on me,' sang ABBA as they reached the dance floor. I already have, thought Rebecca, and no regrets.

'You are the dancing queen, young and sweet, only seventeen,' sang Kabelo. He reached for her arms and ran his hands down them until he could interlace his fingers with hers. Sameer came past them, a hat with blinking red lights perched on his head, holding onto George in the conga line dance. Rebecca and Kabelo joined in for a while, and then they drifted out on to the deck.

'Don's fine,' said Rebecca when they reached the corner overlooking the swimming pool, shimmering with floating candles.

'Thanks for doing this, Rebecca,' said Kabelo. 'You're brave.' Rebecca decided she'd put herself in any amount of danger just to be able to be with Kabelo like this. 'How'd it go with your mom?'

'It was okay. Actually, it was nice. She didn't try to interrogate me about every move I've made in the past five months while she'd been away. I think Dad must've warned her not to.'

'Cool. I'm glad. Do you look like her?'

'That's a random question, Kabelo!' she replied, laughing. 'You'll have to tell me the answer to that when you meet her.'

'Does she know about me?'

‘Well, just that Sameer and I have met you and Anneliese and we hang out together.’

‘What’s my name doing in your conversation?’ Anneliese flung her sling bag down on the table next to them. She frowned at the yells of ‘halleluiah’ to Tina Turner’s *It’s raining men*. Everyone was making imaginary rain with their fingers high up in the air. Anneliese rolled her eyes.

Kabelo squeezed Rebecca’s hand and let go. They sat down.

‘Guess what I found?’ Rebecca looked away. She needed a moment to emerge from the magic of being on her own with Kabelo.

‘Hey, Anneliese. Glad you came,’ said Kabelo. ‘Happy Christmas Eve.’

‘People don’t say that,’ retorted Anneliese, looking from Kabelo to Rebecca. ‘Only Happy Christmas. And that’s still a few hours away.’ Rebecca found Kabelo’s hand waiting for hers underneath the table.

‘Oh no,’ exclaimed Anneliese, looking past them. ‘George is a fricken’ reindeer this year.

‘I said *happy* Christmas Eve.’ Anneliese glared at Kabelo. He shrugged. Rebecca took an interest in watching the conga line that had started again.

‘I found some photos on the ’net.’ Anneliese tapped her bag. ‘I’ll show you later when we go up to see Don.’ Sameer extricated himself from the dance and pulled Anneliese to her feet. Despite her protests, Rebecca thought Anneliese looked quite pleased.

‘You guys must come dance with us,’ said Anneliese. Rebecca turned to look at Kabelo but he was already on his feet.

‘You’re good for him,’ said Anneliese, as they made their way to the dance floor. ‘It’s a pity you live so far away.’

‘They’re so busy being into each other, they won’t even notice we’re gone,’ said Anneliese to Sameer, after they’d left the dance floor. ‘I’ve got a torch in my bag.’ Sameer considered it. He didn’t think they needed to mention they were going; he hadn’t told Rebecca about this plan. After all, she had gone off without him the other night without a second thought.

‘Right, let’s go,’ agreed Sameer and excitedly patted his jeans’ pocket to make sure his camera was there. When they got to JBs’ canoes in the cove Anneliese flicked on her torch and passed it to him. He found the path easily; he’d been walking here since he could, well, walk. They walked for a while without talking.

‘How much further?’ asked Anneliese.

‘Just a bit,’ said Sameer, although he wasn’t quite sure. It was very different coming here at night. With some relief, he saw the river island on his right. He flashed the torch up the riverbank. On the left was the umSintsi tree.

‘Up here,’ said Sameer. ‘You okay?’ He waited for Anneliese to catch up. Sameer was glad he was wearing jeans because the thorns looked seriously vicious in the torchlight. Anneliese was wearing shorts.

‘*Ja*, I’m fine. Keep going,’ she replied.

‘I could just go up on my own and bring it back here,’ said Sameer.

‘No, I’m coming with you.’ He led the way to the tree and, when he reached it, shone the light in front of Anneliese. She walked towards him and then exclaimed and stopped. Sameer went back to her. Blobs of blood rolled out of a deep scratch on her leg.

‘Is it sore?’ asked Sameer.

‘A bit,’ she replied.

‘Use my headband.’ Sameer passed it to Anneliese, with a silent prayer that the blood wouldn’t stain; it was his favourite.

‘*Dankie, hoor*,’ said Anneliese. ‘I’ll wash it, don’t worry.’ Sameer hoped the rustling in the bush was mice, not snakes.

‘I’m ready,’ said Anneliese. Sameer offered her a hand up.

‘It should be just over there,’ he said. ‘Ten paces from the tree in that direction.’

‘You’ve been back here more than once?’ she asked.

‘Once or twice,’ he replied, glad she could not see his face. He counted the paces, flashed the torch around the tall grass, and knelt down.

‘Hold this, please.’ Sameer passed Anneliese the torch. ‘Shine it here.’ He took handfuls of the grass he had covered it with before, and put them to one side, until the skull was fully visible. He sat down, ignoring the prickle of grass on his back. Anneliese crouched next to him. They sat in silence for about a minute, just looking at it. Anneliese reached down, picked it up, and turned it gently in her hands. First she circled her index finger gently around the circumference of the hole in the back of the skull and then traced up and over to the crack on the top.

‘Have you touched skulls before?’ asked Sameer.

‘No, why?’ Anneliese looked at him inquiringly.

‘Just asking,’ he replied.

‘It’s most likely from a bullet,’ said Anneliese, inserting her finger in the hole.

‘And a whack on the head, don’t you think?’ suggested Sameer, pointing to the crack. Anneliese nodded.

‘We’d better take the photos of it on the ground,’ said Sameer. ‘So we aren’t in them.’ On the way back, near the canoes, Sameer stopped. Anneliese was a few paces ahead.

‘I’m going to rinse my hands here,’ he called to her but she kept on walking.

Rebecca and Kabelo were standing on the balcony when Anneliese and Sameer got back to JBs.

‘Where’ve you two been?’ Rebecca called down.

‘Nowhere,’ Sameer called back. Anneliese looped her arm through his and smiled up.

‘Just strolling around,’ she added, looking at Sameer.

‘Okay, Mr Nowhere Man,’ said Rebecca, ‘we’ve got to go *some*where, like *home*, before our parents come to get us.’

‘Coming with us?’ asked Sameer, looking at Anneliese and then Kabelo, pleased when they said yes. Soon they were walking up the road, mostly lost in their own thoughts.

‘So, how was JBs?’ Don’s voice startled Kabelo.

‘What the hell are you doing out here on the road?’ demanded Kabelo. Count to ten, he told himself, breathe.

‘I couldn’t stand it in there anymore.’

‘Hey, Don. Long time,’ said Anneliese chirpily, which irritated Kabelo. Couldn’t she help make Don see reason, instead of encouraging him? Don received her quick hug.

‘Sorry I can’t hug you back.’ He lifted a crutch.

‘If they find you, we’re all screwed,’ said Kabelo.

‘Okay, okay, point taken. I was careful. I was in the shadows all the time until now when I heard you guys coming.’

‘Has anyone come past?’ asked Rebecca, uncurling Kabelo’s fist.

‘No.’

‘Exactly how many brain cells did you lose with all those drugs you’ve stuffed into your body?’ Kabelo asked. If Rebecca wasn’t holding his hand, he might have swung it back and whacked Don.

‘Let’s get to the room before anyone comes past,’ said Rebecca.

‘Was it better music than Dazzlers?’ asked Don.

‘Talking about Dazzlers,’ said Anneliese, walking next to Don towards the driveway. ‘Kabelo, Don. I just have to show you a photo of my Pa there.’

‘I’ll go and check where my parents and Naanii are,’ said Sameer, sprinting ahead.

‘This isn’t going to work.’ Kabelo pulled Rebecca back. ‘I’ve got to make another plan. What if Don gets tempted and tries to score around here?’ They watched lines of white waves, one

after the other, take their final rush onto the shore. Kabelo wondered whether it might make someone, like Don, imagine of one long line of cocaine.

Rebecca lit the paraffin lamp and gently adjusted the wick to avoid blackening the glass while Sameer arranged the food he'd rummaged from the house. He told them that Naanii, Mom and Dad were fast asleep. Kabelo didn't serve any for himself. He watched their shadows dance against the walls with dread in his heart. Don was just too high risk, and Kabelo felt responsible for agreeing that he could come to the Gould's backroom. Anneliese moved closer to the lamp, pulled a piece of paper out of her bag, unfolded and smoothed it with her palm several more times than Kabelo thought necessary.

'Check this,' she said, swivelling the photograph around for Don to see. 'It's taken at Dazzlers' launch. All East London's glitz and glamour was there, apparently.'

'I wasn't involved with Dazzlers then,' said Don, as if Anneliese was blaming him for something.

'Why's it important?' asked Kabelo.

'Well,' said Anneliese. 'I was searching the 'net for Gary Bradfield, and this photograph popped up. Pit Bull's in it.' Kabelo moved in and took the photo to examine it closely. Rebecca looked at the photograph over his shoulder. He glanced at Anneliese.

'Your father was there?'

'Ja. My *liefste* Pa. Look.' She poked the paper. 'That photo was taken even before Ma knew he was cheating on her,' said Anneliese. 'When he was "working late" such a lot.' But Kabelo didn't feel like discussing Anneliese's father tonight.

'Do you think your dad knows Pit Bull?' asked Don. Anneliese shrugged.

'Pass it here.' Anneliese picked up the paraffin lamp, took it over to the bed and held it for Don while he studied the photograph.

'She's right,' he said. 'Small world.'

'Let's focus on what we're going to do with Don,' said Sameer. 'We need a watertight plan for making sure he stays safe. Unless this photograph helps us do that in some way, let's put it away.'

'It's not that easy when your father basically abandons your family,' replied Anneliese, putting the lamp back on the table. She folded the photograph and zipped it into her bag.

'Time's running out. Don, think back. Can you remember anything, anything at all that you overheard outside the office that day?' Kabelo asked.

'Oh, by the way, I've got another photograph of Pit Bull. He bought himself a snazzy catamaran a couple of months ago,' said Anneliese, bringing out another piece of paper which they passed around.

'Catamaran,' repeated Don, frowning. 'Maybe the catamaran is part of a new plan to source the drugs first hand. When he had my back bent over the bridge threatening to push me over it, he said if I told anyone what I'd heard, he'd pump himself with tik and deal with me.'

'I watched a true story on TV when a mother killed her son because she couldn't take his tik-induced violence anymore,' said Sameer. 'He'd even raped his own sister.'

'Didn't you tell him you didn't hear anything?' asked Rebecca, breaking the sudden silence. Don gave a bitter laugh.

'She's just asking, Don,' warned Kabelo. 'We're in this together.'

Don gazed up at the roof, the walls, and finally at them. He rubbed his cast, and sighed loudly.

'So I'd just finished drying the glasses at the bar, and setting them on the shelves. All the time, I was worrying how I'd tell Pit Bull that I don't have the bucks I owe him. I was feeling nervous. I knocked over some glasses on the counter. They shattered and I was freaked out that Pit Bull might come rushing down. I was already getting on his nerves. I decided it would be better if I went and told him about the glasses rather than he find out for himself.'

‘Where was he?’ asked Kabelo.

‘Upstairs in the office with The Boss.’

‘Carry on,’ said Kabelo.

‘I cleared up the glass and walked upstairs to the office and waited outside the door. It was slightly ajar.’ Rebecca’s hand found its way into Kabelo’s. Anneliese and Sameer moved in closer.

‘Pit Bull and The Boss were arguing. The Boss said something like, “Just arrange the stuff and the van and the factory for ten on new lunar”.’ Don looked around at them. ‘Pit Bull was throwing his toys around about something. Then The Boss said, “No. You listen to me. We deal direct next time.”’

‘And you casually walked in there, Rebecca,’ noted Kabelo.

‘Pit Bull is scary. But The Boss seemed cruel in another way,’ Rebecca replied. Don nodded and looked down.

‘It made no sense to me. I was just worried about Pit Bull and the money. He stormed out straight into me.’ Don’s voice trailed off.

‘New moon at ten,’ said Kabelo getting up. ‘No, it was earlier.’

‘No, Kabs, you weren’t there. He said ten, I swear. I remember that much, ’cos ten is my lucky number.’

Kabelo sat down on the edge of the bed.

‘It was around eight, and new moon,’ said Kabelo, ‘the night my mother went missing. In July. The sun set earlier then.’ No one spoke.

‘When’s new moon?’ asked Sameer. Anneliese consulted her phone.

‘Twenty-eighth of December.’

‘Four day’s time,’ said Rebecca.

‘He thought I was eavesdropping,’ said Don. ‘I ran down the stairs and out through the back. But he caught up with me, pulled his arm around my neck, choking me. Shoved me in the boot of his car, and drove out, swerving as much as he could.’ Don paused.

‘Carry on,’ said Anneliese.

‘Then he drove for what seemed like hours but it could have been any length of time. I don’t know. I thought I’d suffocate and die in that boot. Then he suddenly drove off the road, and stopped. He pointed a gun at me and forced me onto this old bridge, somewhere remote. I only saw a few lights far away in the distance. He threw something, maybe a stone over so I could hear how long it took to hit the bottom of the gorge. I nearly fainted I was so scared. He put his gun back in his holster, and started punching and kicking me. He held me over the railing. I was terrified. I thought the railing was going to break.’ Anneliese got up and sat on Don’s other side. She took his hand.

‘He told me he’d kill me if I ever said a word. I told him I didn’t hear anything. Maybe he eventually believed me, I don’t know. Then he said he wants his money within two weeks, and that he’d leave it to my imagination as to what he’d do to Sarah if I didn’t deliver on it.’ Don began to sob. Anneliese took a tissue out of her pocket and passed it to Don.

‘Then he took me to the end of the bridge and pushed me over.’ Don spoke slowly and swallowed hard. ‘But he probably knew that I’d only fall a few metres.’ Don regained his normal voice. ‘A farm worker found me in the morning and called an ambulance. I asked him to leave me after that so he wouldn’t get caught up in the mess.’

Kabelo got up and paced the tiny room, ignoring the other’s requests for him to sit down.

‘The factory’s meant to be shut down between Christmas Day and New Year. If there’s activity there… If Pit Bull is going to be there…’ He stopped. ‘I’m going there on the twenty-eighth.’

‘Rebecca! Sameer! Are you out here?’

‘It’s Mom,’ said Sameer, jumping up. ‘Becca. We must go.’ Rebecca turned the wick down and quickly blew on the small flame.

‘Kabelo, it’s too dangerous,’ said Anneliese. ‘We have to talk about it first.’

‘I’ve already decided,’ said Kabelo.

‘Rebecca! Sameer!’ Her voice became more distant.

‘She’s probably going down to JBs,’ said Rebecca. ‘Sameer, let’s take the short cut and walk up towards her.’ Rebecca unlocked the door and they slipped out, murmuring quick goodbyes. Rebecca was gone before Kabelo could make a plan with her. He sat down next to Don. The earrings would have to wait for tomorrow, instead of tonight at the lookout point.

Chapter 21

Mom had ended up being more relieved than angry when she found them walking towards her on the road. She put her arms around them and listened, and laughed in delight, at Sameer's description of George as Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer.

'You're quiet,' she said to Rebecca. 'Everything okay?' So Rebecca told her about the German backpacker's interaction with Sameer, exaggerating it for effect.

'I can just imagine,' said Mom giggling. When they reached the verandah Mom kissed and hugged them both and said how pleased she was to be home with them, and that she was looking forward to spending lots of time with them. She didn't ask many questions about what they'd been doing, which Rebecca, as Sameer and her were getting ready for bed, put down to jet lag but Sameer said was emotional intelligence. Mom didn't even tell them to go to sleep straightaway, it's late. She merely padded down the passage to her and Dad's bedroom.

'One of us has to go to the factory with Kabelo,' whispered Sameer from his bed after they'd laid in the dark for a bit. 'I think it should be me.' Rebecca did not respond.

'Why? You're the youngest,' replied Rebecca at last. So she wasn't asleep, or pretending to be.

'Because I can take photographs at night without being detected better than you can, and if we want to prove anything we need photos without getting caught. Because it's my turn. Because I don't want you to get hurt.' The bed creaked as his sister turned over.

'Sams,' she gave a deep sigh. 'Let's talk about it in the morning.'

'It *is* the morning.'

'Oh, right,' replied his sister. 'Merry Christmas.' He waited. 'Sameer, I'm really tired now. Let's talk with the others about it. There's still time decide.'

'But I want you to back me up when I say I want to go with Kabelo,' Sameer felt his annoyance rising. Couldn't she just agree with him for once? He picked up his camera from the table next to his bed and flicked back to the day they arrived; the start of their holiday. He pressed forward each frame, up to tonight and then deleted the ones he took in the backroom earlier in the evening. Sameer wondered what the last photo he took this holiday would be.

Anneliese was glad that Kabelo had walked home with her, even though they hardly spoke. Kabelo was deep in thought, and barely responded when she spoke. She fumbled in her bag for her front door key and found it in the folds of the photo. Ma's car was parked in the driveway. Anneliese had called to say she was going to JBs with Kabelo, and her mother sounded relieved that she was going to be out having fun.

'I'll come in with you, if you like,' said Kabelo.

'Ma,' called Anneliese, after turning the key and opening the door slightly. 'Ma!' She called louder. Anneliese patted the wall and found the light switch. Her mother lay flopped asleep on the sofa; her book had slipped to the floor. Ma was okay.

'I'm home, Ma.' Her mother stirred, and stretched her arms around Anneliese. 'Kabelo walked me home. He's here.' Anneliese's mother turned her head to follow Anneliese's gaze.

'Hi, Kabelo. *Kom maar binne. Hoe gaan dit met jou? Geseende Kersfees*! Did you have a nice time?' They chatted for a bit and then Anneliese remembered the photo in her bag. She went through to the kitchen and pulled open a drawer, took out a box of matches, and picked up some newspaper from the recycling pile.

'I feel like making a fire outside, Ma,' she said when she returned to the lounge. 'We don't have to get up early tomorrow morning.' Her mother sat up and swung her feet to the floor, feeling for her slippers.

'Well then let's make hot chocolate and roast marshmallows,' she said. 'Kabelo, please won't you join us?'

‘Where will I find some wood?’ he asked, to Anneliese’s delight.

Uncle Richard was still there when Kabelo got in. He and Tata had moved to the lounge.

‘Hey Kabelo, come help me win this argument.’ Uncle Richard beckoned and slapped the empty place next to him on the sofa. ‘Who was our best ever soccer player? Lucas, I say,’ he continued without waiting for any answers, and shaking his head in mock disappointment at Tata. ‘Then Leeds poached him.’

‘Eish, what kind? You’re trying to get my son to gang up on me with you, Ricky. And in this season of goodwill! What else will you stoop to?’ Tata glanced at his watch.

‘JBs must’ve been good?’ he said, turning the music volume down and switching the TV on. Tata liked to see what was happening around the world at this time every year.

‘I’ll be back,’ said Uncle Richard. ‘Just want to get something from the car.’

‘Kabelo, get Uncle Richard’s gift from my room, please. It’s on my bed.’ Since Mama went missing, Tata had until now never said ‘*my* bed’. By the time Kabelo returned to the lounge, Uncle Richard was holding a sapling with a bright red bow on its trunk.

‘It’s a Pom-Pom tree to you and a *Dais cotinifolia* to me,’ he said, plonking it down on the verandah. ‘Indigenous to the Eastern Cape. Fluffy pink ball-shaped flowers. It’ll attract butterflies when it flowers the Christmas after next,’ said Uncle Richard. ‘Grows fast. In a few years, you’ll be able to sit in the shade with your girlfriend,’ he told Kabelo, giving Tata a mischievous glance. Tata shook his head at Uncle Richard and they went further out into the garden, teasing and arguing about where the best spot would be to plant it, and, given its young branches, how Uncle Richard’s gift would eventually spread and cast shade. Kabelo lay on the sofa, letting his mind turn over all that he’d heard this evening.

‘Say, why don’t you two come over to the lodge for New Year’s Eve?’ suggested Uncle Richard, wiping his feet on the mat before coming in. Kabelo’s heart dropped. He wanted to be with Rebecca on New Year’s.

‘No need to look so worried, Kabs. We can invite your romantic interest and her family.’ Uncle Richard put ‘romantic interest’ in air quotes. ‘Your father says they’re nice people.’ Tata looked across at Kabelo, who’d quickly sat up.

‘That’d be cool,’ he said. ‘Can we, Tata?’

‘Mmmm,’ replied Tata, his eyes twinkling. ‘I’ll think about it.’

‘Ah, Tata.’

‘Sure. It’s a great idea. I’m off on New Year’s Eve. My assistant manager is running the show. You’re very generous, Ricky.’

‘Will you call them and invite them Xolani? Just let me know how many people are coming.’ Uncle Richard looked pleased with the plan. ‘But there’s no fireworks, hey. We’ve got to protect the animals.’

‘So, when are *you* going to get some romance in your life, since you’re encouraging my young son so hard,’ said Tata, giving Uncle Richard a slap on the back.

‘Dad, I’m not *that* young.’ But they didn’t hear him. They were on a roll, back to their university days. Kabelo slipped away to take a last look at the sea, and the Gould’s house, which was in darkness. He went online, to see if he could tell Rebecca the news about New Year’s Eve.

Chapter 22

‘So, can we go?’ Rebecca looked around the breakfast table. ‘I’d really like to.’ She folded bits of Christmas wrapping paper and put them in a pile.

‘Well, it’s a generous offer,’ said Mom slowly, trying to give Dad her we-need-to-talk look but he was experimenting with the penknife Naanii had, along with a coin, of course, given him for Christmas.

‘But we don’t even know this Uncle Richard. It seems a bit…’

‘He’s invited us, Mom. He’s old friends with Kabelo and his father. Dad and Naanii have met Kabelo and his father. While you were away.’ Rebecca was aware of the power her last four words carried. She only used them when necessary, like now. What choice did she have when spending New Year’s Eve with Kabelo was at stake?

‘The father seems very nice,’ said Naanii. ‘And the boy, Kabelo, I like him. I told you about his mother who went missing.’ Rebecca’s love for her grandmother was growing by the second.

‘We’ve never been to that game lodge before,’ said Dad. ‘We’ve been meaning to every year.’

‘I just thought…’ said Mom.

‘I’d like to take some photographs there,’ piped in Sameer. Rebecca gave his knee a grateful squeeze. Mom’s eyes tried to catch Dad’s but he’d discovered the scissors part of the penknife and was trying them out on a leaf.

‘We’ve always…’ began Mom.

‘I’m in,’ said Dad, finally looking up. ‘Good to do something different this year.’

‘It’s settled then,’ said Rebecca with a broad smile. ‘I’ll tell Kabelo.’ She pushed her chair back. Her mother caught her wrist.

‘Rebecca, can we get some time together today? Go for a walk on the beach? A swim? We could borrow a canoe from JBs and go up the river.’

‘That sounds nice, Mom.’ But Rebecca didn’t want to pin her day down until she’d heard from Kabelo. Her mother let go of her wrist. Rebecca stacked the plates and cups onto a tray.

‘I’ll wash if you dry, Sameer,’ said Rebecca. She inclined her head towards the kitchen and was relieved that Sameer got up immediately to help her collect up the breakfast things.

‘Isn’t it nice that they’ve made friends with other young people this holiday,’ said Naanii. ‘Some rooibos tea, darling? I wouldn’t mind taking a canoe up the river if you feel like inviting me. Haven’t done that in ages. How about it?’

‘Okay. But please don’t wear a sari like you did last year,’ replied Dad. ‘You nearly drowned.’ They all burst out laughing, including Naanii. The sight of Naanii in a yellow, orange and purple sari floating in the river at sunset was burnt onto Rebecca’s memory forever. Her grandmother had enjoyed all the attention from other holidaymakers who swam over to help. A photo of Naanii had even, mysteriously, no fingers pointing to Dad and Sameer or anything, made the local newspaper.

‘Thanks, Sameer,’ said Rebecca when they were alone in the kitchen.

‘You owe me,’ replied Sameer.

‘Sure,’ said Rebecca absentmindedly watching the bubbles in the sink multiply under the stream of warm water.

‘I get to go with Kabelo to the factory.’ She turned her head to look at her brother. ‘Sameer, I would die if something happened to you.’

‘Nothing will happen,’ he replied. ‘We’ll just watch from a distance. Take a few photos.’ Rebecca sighed.

‘We need to take some food to Don,’ she said, not wanting to think about what lay ahead.

‘And wish him a merry Christmas,’ he replied.

‘Do you think his parents ever wonder about him?’ Rebecca asked. ‘Like, what do they tell the rest of their family and friends?’

‘He must have done some pretty bad things for them to kick him out, and then have zero contact,’ said Sameer, putting a pile of plates in the sink. Rebecca watched the soapy water suck between the plates and the water turn light brown.

‘Kabelo says the final straw for Don’s parents was when his drugged up friends hurt Sarah when she tried to stop them stealing her phone. They stole his parents’ computer and car,’ said Rebecca. She stared out of the window into the tangled bush beyond the garden, rubbing the sponge around and around the top plate.

‘I think it’s *really* clean now,’ said Sameer. ‘Pass for rinsing and carry on with the story.’ Rebecca handed Sameer the plate and looked into her brother’s eyes, trying to decide how much she should tell.

‘A gang of them, Don included, broke into the house after his parents changed the locks, and Sarah was there.’ Rebecca decided not to tell him about the attempted rape. ‘Luckily, Don regained some degree of sanity and he made them all leave. Kabelo thinks that Don might have been the only one not on tik. ’

‘That’s bad,’ said Sameer, in a low voice. Rebecca flicked the water off her hands and hugged her brother.

‘Don stole his parents’ car.’

‘Are we strong enough to get mixed up with this?’ asked Sameer. Rebecca stood back.

‘I think we are weak if we don’t,’ she replied. ‘You know what the worst is? The kingpins don’t even do drugs themselves. They know what drugs do.’

‘Rebecca, you’ve become so angry about it,’ said Sameer. ‘I know…’

‘Angry about what?’ asked Rebecca’s mother, edgily, at the doorway. If there was one thing Rebecca had learnt during this holiday, it was to think quickly. But Sameer beat her to it.

‘That golfing estate they’re building around here, Mom. Didn’t Dad tell you about it? It’s his pet subject. Have you heard about how much water it’s going to use? Like, masses. And they’re building mansions… People over the hill don’t even have flush toilets,’ he spoke so fast he left Mom blinking rapidly.

‘Yes, and the Goulds might sell this house into the whole golfing estate thing,’ said Rebecca. She pulled out the sink plug. ‘And we won’t be able to come here anymore.’ Mom walked to the centre of the kitchen.

‘Group hug,’ she said, sounding relieved. ‘We can find a new place to go to for holidays, guys. A change will do us good.’ Rebecca felt like stamping her foot and screaming, like she did when she was little and wanted her way.

‘You’re not helping, Mom. I want to come here,’ said Rebecca, extracting herself from the hug. The phone rang in the lounge, giving Rebecca an excuse to leave the kitchen to answer it.

‘My father’s at the hotel today,’ said Kabelo. ‘Anneliese is also free. Her mom’s clients want to see a house again. Can we come over? I know it’s a day to be together as a family so I understand if…’

‘That would be awesome. Let me speak to my mom.’ She put her hand over the phone.

‘Mom, is it fine if Anneliese and Kabelo come over?’

‘I’ll just check on your dad’s and Naanii’s plans,’ said Mom.

‘I’ll call you back,’ said Rebecca, and followed her mother onto the verandah to make her case, if necessary.

‘I think it’d be nice to have them over,’ said Dad.

‘Why don’t you two go off down to JBs and borrow a canoe,’ said Naanii, looking at Mom and Dad. ‘I’ll stay here. I want to get going with those minced fruit pies, never made them before, or brandy butter.’ Rebecca’s parents looked at each other.

‘It’ll be lovely. You can get some time alone together,’ enthused Rebecca. ‘It looks lovely down on the river, I was at the lookout point this morning.’

‘Great idea, let’s do it, babe,’ said Dad. He got up and put his arm around Mom.

‘It’s just that we usually do things all together on a day like this,’ said Mom. ‘I’ve been away, and was so looking forward to it.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Naanii, ‘We have the afternoon, and Christmas supper tonight.’

‘And Anneliese’s mom and Kabelo’s dad are both working today, so they’re alone,’ said Rebecca, deliberately putting Anneliese first.

‘Well, that does it then,’ said Naanii. ‘You two go and get ready for your romantic cruise.’ She gave Rebecca a nudge and beckoned her closer. ‘I’m talking to your parents, not you, hey,’ she whispered.

‘Naanii!’

‘I’m not blind, darling.’

Sameer was lying on his bed listening to music.

‘Anneliese and Kabelo are coming over in an hour,’ Rebecca informed him. He pulled one earphone out. She repeated what she’d said and sat down, pulling a pillow onto her lap.

‘Cool. I’ve organised food for Don,’ he replied. ‘Shall I take it out to him now while you keep watch?’

‘Let’s wait until Mom and Dad have left. They’re going canoeing. Then one of us can hang out with Naanii while the other goes to Don.’ The song had reached his favourite part. Sameer held his hand up to Rebecca so that he could sing and do some moves. She went across to the wardrobe and started pulling clothes out and holding them against her, looking in the mirror, and tossing one after the other on the bed. The song ended and Sameer pulled the other earphone out.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Nothing,’ she replied. Sameer caught Rebecca’s eyes in the mirror.

‘*Nothing*?’

‘Why are you smiling like that?’ she demanded, turning around.

‘Wear your denim shorts with the top Mom gave you for Christmas.’ Sameer waved at his sister, re-plugged his earphones in, lay back on his pillow and closed his eyes.

‘Happy Christmas, dude.’ Sameer and Kabelo did their handshake. Anneliese hugged Sameer tight, almost crushing his ribs. He guessed they had bonded on their night trip.

‘Uh, Kabelo. I need to tell you something,’ said Sameer, playing with Snax as he bounded around. ‘I’m coming to the factory with you.’ Sameer had practised over and over saying these words in a this-is-not-negotiable tone, while he waited alone halfway down the road. He needed his role in the mission to be sewn up. He was pleased at how assertively his words came out.

Kabelo looked at him, pulled a strand of grass from a clump on the road verge, and chewed on its fleshy stalk. Anneliese watched Kabelo and then looked at Sameer. Kabelo threw a stick for Snax. It took a while snuffling in the bushes for him to find it. They stood quietly in the grey day, a light breeze played with the grass and their clothes.

‘Let’s hear what Rebecca says,’ said Kabelo, finally.

‘I’ve told her,’ replied Sameer. ‘She knows I’m the right one to go. I’m more expert with the camera. We will need evidence and you will need back up.’

‘Sameer’s right. You can’t go alone, Kabelo,’ said Anneliese. Sameer flashed her a grateful smile.

‘Okay.’ Kabelo tossed the stalk away. ‘Thanks bru’,’ he said, giving Sameer a bear hug.

‘What about me?’ Anneliese ducked in between them and threaded her arms around them. Sameer felt intoxicated by their camaraderie as they walked up the hill.

‘Anneliese,’ said Kabelo, ‘is your father’s scrambler still in your garage at home?’

‘Ja. I stopped riding it because I didn’t want anything to do with his things. Guess that was a bit stupid ’cos I enjoy riding. Why?’

‘We can use it to get to the factory.’

‘I didn’t know you guys could ride bikes,’ said Sameer, admiringly.

‘Uncle Richard taught me on the sand roads at the game lodge. He wants to pass one of his on to me. But Tata says he’s not ready to handle the worrying about me riding a bike yet. I’ll show it to you when we go over there on New Year’s Eve.’

‘Let’s check out the bike when we go back later,’ said Anneliese. ‘Please stop.’ They waited while she bent down to select small stones. ‘After my uncle’s left. He’s coming over later for lunch with Ma and me.’ She hurled the stones down the road, like a meteor shower.

‘I love doing that,’ she said, wiping her hands on her jeans.

‘How’s Don? Have you seen him today?’ asked Kabelo, opening the Gould’s driveway gate.

‘He’s okay. But he’s going to freak out if he’s in that small room much longer,’ replied Sameer.

‘I’ll come back late tonight and take him out for a walk,’ said Kabelo. Rebecca was waiting on the verandah. Sameer noticed that she’d taken his fashion advice. She led them out to the garden.

‘Mom, this is Kabelo,’ said Rebecca. Kabelo was nervous in a way that he’d not felt before.

‘I’ve heard about you since I arrived,’ said Rebecca’s mother, rising from her deck chair, and removing her floppy sun hat. She offered her hand for Kabelo to shake. ‘Good things, don’t worry,’ she added with a laugh and a firm grip. Rebecca’s mother stole a glance at her daughter; they looked so much alike, it was startling.

‘Yes, a lot of people say that Rebecca and I look alike,’ she said with a twinkle in her eye, easily reading his thoughts, ‘Except our skin colour, of course!’

‘Have you eaten?’

‘Yes, thank you, Mrs….’

‘Please call me Maya. Everyone does. Titles make me feel old.’ Kabelo was not sure how easy he would find it calling Rebecca’s mother by her first name so he decided not to try it out right away.

‘Mom, this is Anneliese. Remember I told you her mother is an estate agent?’ said Rebecca. Rebecca’s mother greeted Anneliese warmly as well, and said how wonderful it was to meet her, and how nice it was that Rebecca and Sameer had made friends with them. Kabelo found it difficult to understand how Rebecca could feel antagonistic towards her mother.

‘Come say hi to Naanii.’ Rebecca touched his arm and Kabelo went indoors with her while Anneliese and Sameer stayed to chat to his and Rebecca’s mother. Naanii was bent over a small table in the corner of the lounge, arranging orange marigolds into a vase next to a brass lamp.

‘Kabelo’s here, Naanii. Anneliese too,’ said Rebecca to Naanii, who sat down on the floor, stretched her legs out, and rubbed them.

‘Will you organise some tea and a plate of gulab jamuns for us?’ she said to Rebecca, who nodded and walked into the kitchen.

‘Happy Christmas,’ said Naanii. ‘Do you celebrate it in any particular way?’ She patted the carpet next to her.

‘We did more when my mother was alive,’ he replied, squatting beside her. ‘But she hated the malls at Christmas time.’ Naanii listened without interrupting. ‘On Christmas Day she used to take me to an orphanage she was on the board of. We’d hang out there and play with the kids for a bit.’ Naanii nodded. Kabelo was sure the irony was not lost on either of them.

‘Your mother would have been proud of you and the young man you are growing up to be,’ she said. ‘I am sorry she is not here for us to meet her.’ Naanii flicked her plait over her shoulder. She took a box of matches from her apron pocket, took out a match, struck it, and lit a stick of incense. She gave it to Kabelo to press into a wooden holder, and sat back. With the curl of smoke came a fragrance he liked.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘Sandalwood.’ She pressed her palms together, bent her head and softly chanted, ‘*Shanti, shanti, shanti*.’ She got up.

‘When I light the lamp at sunset today I will pray for her, and for your whole family.’ Kabelo cleared his throat, and thanked her.

‘I am sure one day you will get answers about your mother. Sit here as long as you like. I’m going to start the cooking.’ She pushed herself up, touched the top of his head and walked out of the room.

‘Are you okay? What did Naanii say to you?’ Rebecca put the tray down on the floor and knelt in front of him.

‘Your grandmother’s cool, your mom too. What does *shanti* mean?’ he replied.

‘Peace.’

‘Uxolo,’ he said, drawing her closer. Rebecca leant forward, paused, kissed his cheek, and lingered. He cupped his hands around her face, the incense fragrance together with Rebecca’s own, making him feel quite dizzy.

‘Rebecca? Kabelo?’ They moved apart at the sound of Sameer’s voice.

‘I have a gift for you,’ said Kabelo, pulling the small box out of his pocket.

‘Thank you.’ Rebecca stood up. ‘*Enkosi kakhulu,*’ she added, with perfect pronunciation, and accepted it.

‘Pretty impressive,’ said Kabelo, grinning at her. Sameer bounced into the room, followed by Anneliese.

‘Mom and Dad have left for the river,’ he said, looking backwards and forwards between Kabelo to Rebecca. Anneliese went to study the Gould’s photos on the wall. ‘Where’s Naanii?’

‘In the kitchen,’ said Kabelo, with what he realised was a growing sense of belonging to Rebecca and her family. ‘Cooking.’

‘Have some,’ said Rebecca, pointing to the tray. ‘I’ll go and help Naanii.’

‘We’ll go to Don. Come, Anneliese,’ said Sameer, taking a gulab jamun and offering the plate to Anneliese. After they left the room, Rebecca caught Kabelo’s arm as he turned to follow them.

‘I also have a gift for you,’ she said. ‘I’ll give it to you later.’

Chapter 23

Kabelo tapped the signal lightly on Don's door and unlocked it. The three of them, Kabelo, Anneliese and Sameer, slid through. Kabelo re-locked the door behind them.

'Merry Christmas, dude,' said Sameer. 'Sorry you're stuck in here, today of all days.'

'We'll have you in a safer place by New Year's, we're working on it,' said Kabelo, hoping Sameer and Anneliese wouldn't give him questioning looks. Anneliese pulled a small parcel out of her sling bag.

'It's from all of us,' she said.

'Wow,' exclaimed Don, his face lighting up. 'I didn't expect anything.' It had been Anneliese's idea to put together some money to buy him something. Don tore off the wrapping paper and paused to look at them, thrilled.

'Try it out,' said Sameer. 'It's fully charged.' Don lifted the small music player and earphones out.

'It's also got a radio,' said Anneliese, delighted with Don's reaction, 'and Sameer's downloaded songs already.'

'I hope you like my taste in music,' said Sameer, but Don was already plugged in and smiling.

They waited while Don experimented with it, and they took turns to put in the other earphone when Don asked them to listen to a track with him. There was a signal knock on the door, and Kabelo got up to unlock and open it.

'Naanii's taking a nap in the hammock,' said Rebecca. She went over to sit next to Don, who immediately offered her an earphone.

'I didn't buy anything for you guys,' said Don, making an apologetic face. 'I'm sorry.'

'We didn't expect anything,' replied Rebecca. 'We just wanted to give you something to keep you company.'

'I *made* you each something,' said Don, 'I hope you like them. They're not much but...'

'Stop talking and give them to us!' said Anneliese shaking his shoulders playfully. Don slid his hand under his pillow and brought out four small wooden carvings.

'They're not very good,' he said. 'I was looking for wood that night when Kabs crapped all over me.' He grinned at Kabelo, and handed them out one by one, shaking his head self-consciously at their low whistles and compliments. Kabelo looked down at his tiny canoe; Rebecca received a VW beetle, with her name, in tiny letters, carved into the number plate. Anneliese showed Kabelo her tiny motorbike, and Sameer received a surfboard.

'You told me it's your dream to learn how to surf, dude. I could even have taught you if I wasn't in this prison.' Kabelo examined the intricate carving in his hand. It took him back to the last prize-giving at school before Don dropped out.

'Don got the award for art at school,' said Kabelo. 'He made a clay sculpture of Nelson Mandela, with his fist raised, like you see in the photographs when he was released from prison.'

'That's awesome,' said Rebecca. 'Your parents must have been proud.' But Don was fiddling with the player.

'I'll dish you some food,' said Kabelo. Don's father had expected Don to get the sportsman of the year trophy. His father's name was in gold lettering on the awards' board for it when he was at school. But another boy who had made one more provincial sports' team than Don beat him to it. Don's father was upset about it, maybe more than Don was even. Don had gone off the radar for a few days and when Kabelo visited him, Don wouldn't take his sunglasses off, even inside the house. Don had changed a lot after that, and hung around with a different crowd at school.

'Nice t-shirt, Kabs. I can see someone's been working out. You trying to impress anyone in particular?' Kabelo handed Don a plate of food and shook his head at his friend's grinning face. Much as he felt like klapping Don for his teasing, it was a relief to hear Don joke around.

‘Dude, you have no idea how much your broken leg is protecting you right now,’ said Kabelo.

‘No, seriously, it’s cool. Where did you get it?’ Don leant over to touch the t-shirt. ‘Expensive rags.’ Kabelo tried to swat Don’s hand away.

‘I know you’re hard up for entertainment, so just carry on. It’s from Headzup in Knysna if you really want to know.’ They talked while Don ate. Anneliese took his plate when he finished, and he flopped back onto the bed and pulled a pillow over his face.

‘I can’t hide like this forever,’ he said in a muffled voice.

‘It isn’t forever,’ said Sameer. ‘It’s just until we know if anything dodge happens at the factory when Kabelo and I go to check it out. We’ll work out what to do after that.’

‘Those guys are armed. Do you know how many millions those drugs are worth?’ Don threw the pillow aside and pulled himself up. ‘The cops are in it. If they bust one syndicate, they sell the stuff to another one. So who exactly are you going to report anything dodge to?’

‘I don’t have the answers to everything,’ Kabelo snapped, feeling irritation and panic rise simultaneously. ‘Let’s just see what happens at the factory first, Don.’ Don flopped down again, rolled onto his side, and faced the wall.

‘Thanks for the music player guys,’ he said. ‘I’m gonna sleep now, if you don’t mind.’

‘I need to go, anyway,’ said Anneliese. ‘My uncle’s coming over and my mom wants me to be there.’ She pulled a face. ‘I don’t know why she let him invite himself. It’s not like she’s married to his brother anymore.’

‘Okay, let’s go.’ Kabelo stood up.

‘I’ll stay a bit longer,’ said Rebecca. ‘Sameer, can you check on Naanii?’

‘You don’t have to stay,’ said Don. ‘I’m only going to sleep. It’ll be pretty boring watching me.’

‘Are you coming or not?’ Anneliese opened the door, letting a strip of sunlight shine into the dim room.

‘I’ll catch up with you,’ Kabelo replied.

‘Don. Listen. I know it’s not easy living like this. But Kabelo’s right. Let’s see what happens at the factory,’ said Rebecca.

‘I’m sorry to wreck your lives like this,’ muttered Don.

‘It’s been a different kind of holiday,’ admitted Rebecca, her eyes catching Kabelo’s. He smiled at her. ‘But not wrecked. Definitely not wrecked.’

‘I’ve got something for you,’ she mouthed to Kabelo.

‘Don, we’ve got to go now,’ said Kabelo.

‘I would be dead by now if it wasn’t for you all. I owe you guys big time. I…’ Kabelo didn’t want Rebecca to get sucked into Don’s mood swings like he had so many times.

‘I’ll try to come back later,’ said Kabelo, before they left.

‘What’s that?’ Anneliese noticed it right away.

‘It’s a wristband,’ replied Kabelo.

‘Rebecca gave it to you?’

‘She made it for me.’ He still had the tingle on his skin from when Rebecca quickly tied it next to his black wristband.

‘It’s for luck,’ Rebecca had told him. ‘For protection. It’s for… because I…’ she looked away and then back into his eyes. ‘Each colour means something. I’ll tell you another time.’

‘Check those massive grey clouds,’ said Kabelo, pointing out to sea.

‘There’s no law that says it has to be sunny on Christmas Day,’ replied Anneliese and asked to see the wristband closer.

‘It’s nice,’ she said. ‘Rebecca’s clever with things like that. Art stuff.’ Kabelo agreed but felt it wouldn’t help the mood between them if he said so too enthusiastically.

‘He’s already here,’ said Anneliese, when they reached her house. ‘I’ll come with you to the garage and then I’ll slip in to the house and get the bike keys. You can check the bike out in the meantime. I don’t want to spend time with my uncle anyway.’ Anneliese led the way down the driveway, and kept tightly to the hedge, so that it was less likely her mother or uncle would see them from through the lounge window. Maybe, she thought, as she swiped at overgrown Bougainvillea branches, she’d sharpen the hedge clippers, and snap off all the irritating branches.

The bike was as her father had left it, covered with a dust sheet in the corner of the garage. She grabbed a corner of the sheet and pulled it off. It reminded her of the part in the movie the *Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when Lucy pulls the sheet off the wardrobe and enters the fantasy world of Narnia. Except Anneliese’s sheet wasn’t soft and silky and didn’t pull away beautifully. But like Lucy, Anneliese didn’t know what world they were getting caught up in. Kabelo gave a low whistle of admiration at the bike. Anneliese looked at him.

‘I’ll be back in a minute.’ She left through the garage side door that led to the kitchen. Luckily her mother and uncle were in the lounge. Anneliese soundlessly crossed the black and white lino kitchen floor to get to the key rack in the passage. She lifted her hand to slip off the bike keys.

‘Damnit! Damn you,’ yelled her uncle. In her fright, Anneliese dropped the keys.

‘*Wie’s daar*?’ her mother called out. There was the click-clack of Ma’s heels and the squeal of her uncle’s takkies.

‘*Dis net ek, Ma*.’ Her mother looked relieved. The bike keys were on the floor. Anneliese did not want to draw attention to them.

‘I didn’t know you’d come home, Annetjie.’

‘Ja, I just came. I was getting the key for the shed. I want to get the shears out, Ma. That overgrown bougainvillea with its thorns is getting on my nerves. It just tore into me.’ Anneliese raised her arm to show a scratch. Ma noticed the keys on the floor, frowned, and slipped them back on the key rack.

‘Let me get you a plaster,’ said Ma.

‘It’s okay, Ma. I’ve got a tissue.’ Anneliese took one out of her pocket.

‘You should be more careful,’ said her uncle, tapping Anneliese on her shoulder. ‘And why don’t you greet your uncle any more hey? *Geseende Kersfees*.’ Anneliese shrugged.

‘*Ja, Oom, geseende Kersfees*.’ She sidestepped his embrace by giving her mother a quick kiss on the cheek.

‘Sorry I didn’t tell you I’m home, Ma. I just want the shed key.’

‘Let’s go back to the lounge then,’ said Ma to her former brother-in-law, and turned back down the passage.

‘So, how’s my favourite little detective doing?’ he said in a stage whisper, jiggling his eyebrows. ‘Been doing any more snooping around lately? Planning on a bike ride?’ He shot a glance at the bike keys on the rack.

‘I’m fine. No. And no,’ replied Anneliese. ‘Is the interrogation over?’ He took a swig of his beer. Anneliese thought Ma said she wouldn’t serve him alcohol when he came to visit anymore. Maybe he brought his own. Ma called firmly to him. He gave Anneliese a wink, and turned around. It was probably better not to take the bike keys now. Her uncle or Ma would notice if they were missing. With a sigh of disappointment, she took the shed key instead. And then she remembered there was a spare bike key in her mother’s jewellery box. Anneliese made her way on tiptoe down the corridor to Ma’s room. She stopped when she heard her mother’s angry voice.

‘I don’t care. You were given the chance. Everyone was. You *chose* not to go and tell the truth about what you and those other sadists did.’ Ma obviously thought Anneliese was outside already. ‘People have a right to know what happened. People need closure about how their loved ones died.’ Anneliese couldn’t hear her uncle’s response. She had only ever heard her mother so angry and mad when she found out about Pa’s affairs. Anneliese edged, against the wall, closer to the lounge, her heart thumped against her ribs.

‘I want you to go now,’ said Ma.

‘But I came here for Christmas lunch, you can’t chuck me out. Where am I supposed to go?’ What a mistake to whine with Ma, thought Anneliese. She was glad they had Pit Bull’s phone records and didn’t need him anymore.

‘I don’t care,’ said Ma. ‘You invited yourself anyway. I want to spend my afternoon in peace, and with Anneliese.’ There were footsteps and the front door was flung open.

‘You’re *frig*ging *un*believable,’ he shouted.

‘Enjoy the rest of your *holy* day,’ replied Ma and slammed the door. ‘And one day,’ she said loudly to herself, ‘I’ll expose you.’ Her mother click-clacked into the lounge and switched on the TV.

Anneliese dashed into her mother’s bedroom, opened her cupboard, and stepped onto a lower shelf to reach the top one. She patted around and behind the jerseys until she felt her mother’s jewellery box. She clutched hold of it, jumped down, clicked open the latch, and raised the lid. There, on the top level, lying next to Ma’s gold wedding band on blue velvet lay the spare bike key. Anneliese wondered, while she slipped the key into her jeans’ pocket and climbed on the lower shelf again to return the jewellery box, why her mother hadn’t thrown the ring away, or sold it. In her haste to put the box back, some jerseys tumbled onto the floor. Anneliese cursed, bent down, gathered them into her arms and stood up. As she did so, something fell out of her mother’s purple mohair jersey that she never wore anymore. A brown envelope.

Her uncle screamed something, and screeched his car out of the driveway. Ma yelled, ‘Good riddance to rotten rubbish,’ above the TV noise. Anneliese stuffed the envelope into her sling bag. She went to stand by her mother’s bedroom door.

‘Are you okay?’ she heard Kabelo ask her mother.

‘Ja, I’m fine, Kabelo. Dankie. It’s just that horrible ex brother-in-law of mine. I’m sorry about what you had to hear him say, he was offensive to you too. He’s like that. I think he even finds it hard to live with himself.’

‘He was swearing at you,’ said Kabelo. Anneliese quickly ran back to her mother’s cupboard, folded the jerseys, put them into a pile and packed them back up on the shelf, as neatly as she could. Anneliese heard Ma and Kabelo walking down the passage towards the kitchen.

‘I’m glad Anneliese did not hear it,’ said Anneliese’s mom. ‘She’s out in the shed getting the hedge clippers. Shall we call her and treat ourselves to a nice cup of rooibos tea and some melktert?’

When they tried it after tea, the bike refused to start. Anneliese and Kabelo both gave it their all to get it going when Anneliese’s mother popped over to the neighbours to take them a box of chocolates for Christmas.

‘We’ll have to kick start it down the road,’ said Kabelo. ‘I’m sure it’s just the battery.’

‘We can’t do it now. Ma will be back any minute. Let’s try tonight,’ suggested Anneliese. ‘She’s going to a church thing and said I don’t have to go if I don’t want to. So long as she and I have supper together.’ Kabelo watched Anneliese trace her fingers to and fro along the bike’s silver handle bars.

‘Your uncle’s disgusting. You’re right,’ said Kabelo. His yelling and swearing had brought Kabelo out of the garage in a hurry. It hadn’t surprised him, when the uncle caught sight of Kabelo, that the last few words of abuse he hurled had to do with Kabelo being black. Anneliese got off the bike, pulled out the envelope from her bag, and put it into his hand.

Chapter 24

'*Hee, nyana, ufike ngethuba*! I could do with an assistant. Glad you've come!' Tata slung his arm around Kabelo.

'This is my son, Kabelo.' Tata proudly introduced him to every guest in the vicinity, and then he helped his father by offering the guests gifts from under the tall wire Christmas tree that MaDilika had made especially for the hotel. Kabelo especially enjoyed the small children, some came shyly to him, and others bounced on top of him, to choose their gifts from the children's basket. He'd wrapped all the gifts for his father weeks ago, so he knew exactly what was inside. The children got wooden, clay, or wire beaded birds, fish, whales, and dolphins that Tata had commissioned MaDilika to make earlier in the year. The adults oh-ed and ah-ed in appreciation at their beaded necklaces and key rings. After a couple of hours helping out at reception, Kabelo asked his father if he could go and visit Anneliese.

Anneliese had parked the bike in the back garden where it stood in squares of light from the kitchen windows' burglar bars. The radio was tuned into Anneliese's favourite station, loudly. Kabelo walked through the door to find her concentrating on washing grease off her hands.

'You still listening to that rock junk,' he shouted, turning the volume down. 'When are you going to become more classy?'

'I've cleaned the spark plugs,' she shouted back, throwing a dishcloth at him. 'And tried a few other things. At least Pa taught me *something* useful when he was playing father-father.' She wrinkled her nose as if there was a bad smell. A chime of church bells broke out. She grabbed two helmets off the kitchen table.

'It's starting nicely now. We've got an hour before Ma comes back. Let's go. Here.' She thrust one into his hands.

'Ouch,' he protested.

'*Dis Pa s'n*.'

'Okay, but you don't have to…'

'Rock isn't junk. Metal rocks. House? Well. Boom, boom, boom, boring.' He shook his head at her.

'That's not all I listen to, and you know it,' said Kabelo. She gave him a playful punch and strode off to the bike. They pushed it up to the top of the driveway. Anneliese tightened the strap of her helmet, threw her leg across the bike and settled onto the seat.

'Climb on,' she said, kick starting the bike. Kabelo nodded and swung his leg over the seat. He'd get his chance to ride it. Soon. Anneliese pulled the clutch in and clicked the foot pedal into gear, and turned to grin at Kabelo. He gave her a thumbs-up.

'Hold on tight,' she yelled, and gave the accelerator a couple of wrenches, drowning another peal of church bells. 'Yahoooo!' Kabelo gripped the seat, and then, as they sped up, locked his arms around Anneliese's waist. After a minute or two, he leant forward to shout in her ear.

'Do you think we can ride over to the Gould's? I need to try it out with Sameer.'

'Hold tight!' Kabelo's stomach flipped over as Anneliese veered the bike steeply to take a right fork. Everything became a blurry ribbon of green and brown.

'Their car's not here.' Kabelo pointed to where Rebecca's father usually parked. The house was in darkness. Anneliese slowed down, cut the engine and glided behind Don's room. Kabelo climbed off. She pushed the bike stand down.

'You're good by the way,' he said, 'very good.' Anneliese took off her helmet, and ran her fingers through her hair.

'Never underestimate a girl,' she replied, getting off.

‘I never do,’ he replied, remembering Mama saying the same thing time and again. Kabelo tapped on Don’s door, waited a couple of seconds, and then pulled out his key and opened the door.

‘Don?’ No answer. ‘Don?’ Kabelo’s eyes slowly began to adjust to the dark. He walked to the bed and patted it.

‘Maybe he took a walk?’ said Anneliese.

‘Maybe,’ replied Kabelo but he doubted it. The room, somehow, felt deliberately empty. His mind darted in around with a frenzy of what ifs? Had Don left, or had he been taken? Or, as Anneliese suggested, maybe he took another walk like before.

‘We’ve had it if Pit Bull was here.’ Kabelo rubbed his temples with his fingers, as if that would release answers to Don’s whereabouts. He tried to think back to their conversations with Don in the morning but he couldn’t think of anything Don had said that gave a clue that he was thinking of leaving.

‘If Pit Bull knows where Don was staying, we’re marked. All of us,’ said Kabelo.

‘What do we do now?’ He had no answer to Anneliese’s question.

‘Maybe there’s a note?’ They couldn’t turn on the light in case Rebecca’s family returned and got suspicious. Instead, they used the limited light from Kabelo’s phone to look around but found nothing in the obvious places. Kabelo shook his head; Don had been a serious risk from the start. The whole situation was way out of control.

‘Kabelo, we have to go.’ Anneliese shook his arm. ‘Ma will be back from church in ten minutes.’

‘But what about…’

‘Sounds like their car,’ interrupted Anneliese. Kabelo quickly got up and closed the door.

‘We can call Rebecca on her mobile and ask if she knows where Don he is,’ said Anneliese. ‘Maybe there’s a not-frightening explanation for this.’

‘Go back home on the bike,’ said Kabelo. ‘I’ll find out from Rebecca if she’s seen him. I’ll walk home.’ Anneliese frowned.

‘I’m scared,’ said Anneliese.

‘I think it’s important that I find out if they know where Don is.’ Kabelo put his arms around her.

‘Hi.’ Rebecca’s voice was strained, uncertain. Kabelo released his arms and Anneliese looked around.

‘Do you know where Don is?’ she asked Rebecca.

‘What do you mean? He was here before we left, about two hours ago. I told him that we’d go for a walk after dark tonight. He agreed.’

‘He’s gone,’ said Kabelo.

By the time Kabelo left the Gould’s Don had not returned and he and Rebecca had been able to search the room thoroughly. There was no sign of a struggle and no note. When Kabelo got home, Tata kept asking him if he was okay.

‘I’m just thinking about Mama.’ He felt guilty but there was some truth in his response. Tata asked Kabelo to follow him to the garage to see his Christmas present.

‘It’s almost brand new,’ said Tata on the way. ‘I bought it from one of the foreign hotel guests. He’d only used it a few times.’ When Tata opened the garage door, Kabelo couldn’t believe his eyes. There, suspended by a special hanger, was a gleaming blue and white surf ski.

‘Do you like it?’ asked Tata, slinging his arm around Kabelo’s shoulder. Kabelo shook his head in amazement.

‘Tata, it’s awesome.’ His father beamed at him. ‘I can’t believe you got it for me.’ Kabelo stroked his hand along the surf ski.

‘I know how you love the sea,’ replied his father, patting his back.

‘I can’t wait to take it out,’ said Kabelo. Later that night, while Kabelo tossed and turned, unable to sleep, he got up and looked out of the window. The moon cut a thin grin in the blue-black

sky. Kabelo wondered if he'd ever get a chance to ride the amazing surf ski his father had given him.

Chapter 25

‘Quick,’ urged Anneliese, ‘Ma’s taking a shower.’ She handed Kabelo the helmets, gently this time. It had been two days since they’d been together and the hours had dragged past with no contact from Don. The four of them had seen little of each other, except once at the beach to plan the factory trip. It hadn’t been a very cheerful occasion.

‘You’ve got your phone?’ asked Anneliese. Kabelo nodded. ‘And you know to hide if they go after you?’

‘Maria’s,’ he replied. ‘Her dogs know me and won’t bark.’ Anneliese stared at him.

‘Kabelo, this is hectic. Please don’t do anything stupid.’

‘Chill, Anneliese,’ said Kabelo. She was making him feel even more anxious. ‘We’re just going to hide in the veld on the opposite side of the road. We’ll watch from there, and if they come, Sameer will take photos. We’ll ride back home.’ Kabelo heard himself trying to make it sound like they were going on a night safari at the game lodge. He got on the bike and started it. They’d heard nothing from Don; they had to assume everyone was at risk. He gave Anneliese a thumbs-up, and accelerated up the road. As he sped along, he was suddenly in two minds. Why put Sameer at risk too? Does a promise stand if you’re putting the person you promised in danger? As he approached the Gould’s turnoff a figure, wearing dark pants and a hoodie, ran out of the shadows. Sameer gave the taxi signal for East London. Kabelo smiled. He couldn’t just ride by.

‘You fit in, bru’. You should live here,’ he quipped, enjoying the smile that spread across Sameer’s face in the dusty light. He gave him Anneliese’s helmet, and he was relieved to see it fitted when Sameer put it on over his hood. Kabelo waited for Sameer to tighten the strap and climb on; he pulled off when Sameer tapped his shoulder. As they rode into the cool dips and up the warmer hills, Kabelo felt comforted by Sameer’s arms clasped tightly around him.

Kabelo patted Sameer’s knee to warn him he was going to pull over. Dust swirled up in the headlights. He cut the engine. Kabelo’s hands, cold from the wind streams, trembled as he undid his helmet strap. Sameer’s helmet was already off, and he was waiting for Kabelo to talk.

‘The factory’s about a kilometre ahead, on the right.’ Sameer nodded. ‘Look out for security guards when we go past. We only met one the night we came looking for my mother. But there might have been more.’ Kabelo frowned, trying once again to recall that night more lucidly but nothing new came to mind. ‘We’re going about a hundred metres down that road, and then we’ll cut our way back through the bush, parallel to the factory.’

‘Got it,’ said Sameer. He looked at his watch. ‘It’s eight-thirty now. Don said ten o’clock. ‘Let’s get set up.’

Rebecca knelt at Naanii’s shrine, and brushed her fingers along the tips of the marigold petals in the flickering light of the brass lamp. Watching her shadow on the wall, she put her hands together and silently willed the universe to bring her brother and Kabelo home safely. Then she crossed herself, like she’d seen the Catholics do in the movies, and racked her brain to think of other rituals she could perform. But she couldn’t think of any, so she got to her feet, placed her hands together again, and bowed her head so that the tips of her fingers touched her forehead. And then she went out to join her parents and Naanii for a game of cards. They had accepted Kabelo’s invitation for Sameer to go and stay over at his house tonight, and so, Mom said, they had ‘the perfect four’. Rebecca felt a shudder run through her body when she said it.

Manoeuvring the bike through the bush wasn’t easy; Kabelo was glad to have Sameer with him. Kabelo hoped they hadn’t scratched the bike.

‘Here’s good,’ he said when they reached a position opposite the factory, well beyond the reach of the security lights. They camouflaged the bike with the brown sheet Kabelo had carried in

his rucksack. Sameer unzipped a pocket in his own rucksack, and took out his camera and Rebecca's binoculars. Kabelo listened while Sameer explained how the night vision function worked, and then tried them out. He zoomed in on the huge tree in front of the factory outside Mama's office. He was impressed by the binoculars' powerful magnification, which brought the trees' branches so close he felt he could touch the leaves.

'They're awesome,' he turned to tell Sameer.

'The factory lights have gone out,' Sameer replied, pointing.

'*Ma, vertel my asseblief*. What was all that about with Uncle Richard on Christmas Day?' Anneliese held the cotton wool covered bullet casing in her hand, and pressed it, feeling its hard point on her fingertip. Anneliese's mother looked up from mending a tear in her skirt, and frowned into the darker part of the lounge where Anneliese stood. Anneliese stepped forward into the side lamplight, and held her mother's gaze.

'I'm old enough to know, whatever it is. I don't like the not knowing. I do not like you not telling,' she said. Ma muttered something about needing to get new glasses. Anneliese cleared her throat loudly. Ma gave a deep sigh, and lay the skirt down.

'Okay Anneliese. Maybe it is time that you know. Come sit by me.' She patted the empty space on the sofa. Anneliese felt the prickle of the grass mat on her bare feet as she walked over it, and sat down at her mother's side.

A large refrigeration truck covered in images of bright flowers, fruit and vegetables droned up, changed down a gear, and extinguished its lights as it turned onto a dirt track next to the factory.

'No registration number,' said Kabelo. The truck turned right behind the factory where it idled. A dark coloured 4x4 drove up and followed the same procedure. Within a few seconds both vehicles were out of sight and the night fell still once more.

'I got photos of them,' said Sameer.

'Good,' said Kabelo. 'I never noticed that track next to the factory before.'

'I don't think you were supposed to,' replied Sameer. Something niggled in Kabelo's mind, like a butterfly struggling out of its cocoon. Kabelo was sitting at the dining room table doing his maths homework. Mama said that he'd come right with it but he thought she was being optimistic. She picked up her keys off the table, and checked through them. She dropped them in her bag, and sighed.

'See you just now,' she said. The police showed them the footage but it was all from the front gate. What if she... Sameer nudged Kabelo.

'We've got to get closer,' said Sameer. 'Otherwise we've wasted our time.'

'Okay. But we must let Rebecca and Anneliese know what we've seen so far.'
Kabelo opened his rucksack and held his phone deep inside so the light would not show. He texted with full words, so that the message would be clear.

At factory. Car and truck went in on side road. We going closer. KnS

Kabelo cleared his phone of all sent and received messages, the call register, and deleted all his contacts. He and Sameer had memorised each others' and Rebecca's and Anneliese's numbers.

'Ready?' he asked Sameer. They did their handshake ritual and then Kabelo led the way through the bush.

'Who's your message from?' asked Mom.

'Sameer.' Rebecca quickly deleted Kabelo's sms, her heart sinking. They weren't sticking to the deal. Should she stop the card game and tell her parents what was going on?

'I wish you'd put that damned phone away and concentrate on the game,' said Dad. 'I feel like confiscating it.' Rebecca quickly transferred her phone from her lap to her jeans' pocket. But would Kabelo and Sameer listen to her anyway?

‘You’re just miffed because I can multi-task, and you’re losing,’ she replied, giving her father’s arm a playful squeeze.

‘What did he say?’ asked Mom.

‘They’re watching thrillers and eating popcorn.’

‘Thrillers?’ Naanii raised her eyebrows and played a card. ‘Hope they’re not too violent. You know how your brother gets nightmares. Your turn.’ Naanii scooped up some chevda with a teaspoon and popped it into her mouth.

‘Kabelo’s very responsible,’ said Rebecca more primly than a head prefect. ‘I’m sure he’s taking very good care of Sameer.’

‘It’s your turn,’ said Naanii, her voice softening when she noticed Mom lean over to kiss Dad on his cheek.

‘Can this be our last round?’ asked Rebecca, trying to work out when she’d be able to escape to wait for the boys with Anneliese.

Chapter 26

'Kabs?'

'Yes?' They had reached the end of the dirt road that curved behind the factory.

'If we clip the wire here next to the gate pole, we can slip through and stay alongside the wall.' The security lights went on. Sameer's heart felt like it gave way to gravity so violently that he grabbed onto Kabelo.

'It's okay,' said Kabelo, grasping Sameer's hand. 'I think they just switched them off for the vehicles. We're in shadow here.' Sameer opened his eyes.

'Pass me the wire clippers,' said Kabelo. Luckily, the gate's wire was thin, and Kabelo was able to clip without making much noise. He bent a triangle back and lifted it for Sameer to get through. Kabelo followed him and then bent it back in place. They flattened themselves against the wall and moved along it, like spiders. High above was a row of narrow windows that threw oblongs of light onto the hill just beyond the factory fence. In the light at the end of the wall he could make out a glint of the van.

At first, all Kabelo could hear was the pounding in his head but when he stopped, a few metres from the corner, he could make out the sound of things being passed along a human conveyor belt, from the van to the other side of the wall from where he and Sameer were standing. The conveyor belt ended with a clunk. He beckoned Sameer to follow and they edged their way until they almost reached the corner. Something dropped with a clang.

'Idiot,' growled a voice. 'I'll kill you if one sniff of this stuff gets lost. It's imported from a country you're too clumsy to spell without dropping letters.'

'C-o-l-u-m-b-i-a, you jerk,' risked a low and familiar voice so close that Kabelo instinctively moved back, and inadvertently stood on Sameer's foot. Sameer yelped and covered his mouth. They stared at each other. Kabelo didn't know if they should run, or stay. The conveyor belt stopped. Seconds felt like minutes.

'*What* did you say?'

'Can't wait to start the packing,' replied Don. Kabelo shook his head. Don must be suicidal. Did he hand himself over, or did they find him? How many people that Kabelo knew were now in serious danger?

'Don't *you* get wise with *me*, loser. If I'd had my way you'd have been shark bait a long time ago.' A glob of spit landed near them.

'Pit Bull,' said Kabelo softly, in Sameer's ear.

'I'm recording,' whispered Sameer pointing to his phone. Kabelo took it from him and held his hand as close as he could risk.

'Let's get on with the job,' said another, older, man's voice. 'We'll deal with the kid afterwards.'

'Who do you think it is?' whispered Sameer. Kabelo shrugged.

'At this rate, we'll get out of here next Christmas,' said Pit Bull. '*Jeeese*. There's a time limit on protection here.' So there *was* someone Pit Bull deferred to.

'Get moving you cretins.' said Pit Bull. 'Let's get *on* with the job. The General and me don't have all day.' Kabelo started breathing again.

'And you, scum bag, come over here. Just because you've got a little sore leg doesn't mean you can't work, oxygen thief. Put these on so your grubby paws don't contaminate the stuff. And the mask so you don't get stoned. Sit over here. Get the lids off.'

'How are we going to take photos?' asked Sameer. Kabelo had been wondering the same thing.

'I've got a mirror,' said Sameer. 'If you hold it low and out of the range of lights, we can see what's happening around the corner.' Kabelo nodded, impressed, as always, with Sameer the gadget guy. If he held the mirror in the wrong direction, it would reflect light and draw attention directly to

them. Then it would all be over. But Kabelo didn't have a better plan. Sameer took something out of his rucksack, opened it, flicked up a mirror, and passed it to Kabelo who took it and quickly experimented with positions.

'There's one guy passing the tins from the truck to another guy,' whispered Kabelo.

'What kind of tins?'

'Coffee tins with brown and orange labels, hot chocolate, yellow powdered milk tins.' He crouched. Sameer dropped down next to him.

'Two guards next to the back of the truck. With shotguns.'

'How many d'you think are inside?' whispered Sameer from behind his camera. Kabelo concentrated on the conveyor rhythm.

'At least three plus Pit Bull, Don and The General.'

'Where's Don?' asked Sameer. Kabelo manoeuvred the mirror and shook his head.

'Keep still,' whispered Sameer. 'You're shaking too much.' Kabelo took a deep breath in and exhaled slowly. It helped steady his hand, even if his heart was still beating wilder than a drummer in a rock band. He put his arm around Sameer to draw him closer. Pit Bull had come into view, next to the truck, holding a pistol. Pit Bull's shoes clipped as he paced back and forth from the truck to the room on the other side of the wall, endlessly spewing snide remarks.

'Got anything useful?' asked Kabelo. Sameer nodded. 'But only outside. The truck. The tins. A guard.'

'Don't think I won't find out who tried to protect you, slime ball,' growled Pit Bull not a metre away.

'It's not enough,' whispered Sameer in Kabelo's ear. 'We've got to get photos of what's going on inside.'

'Too risky,' replied Kabelo. He looked up at the windows again. They were too high and there was no leverage.

'I need to take a piss,' said Don, loudly and deliberately.

'Sameer, Don knew we were coming tonight. He's talking to us.'

'Don't try running... I mean *hobbling* away,' said Pit Bull.

'Focus,' snapped The General. 'Go, and come back fast. You've got thirty seconds, counting from now.' Don's crutches squeaked towards them and within a couple of seconds he'd rounded the corner. Even in the semi dark, Kabelo could sense the proud grin on Don's face framed by his hood.

'You're flippin' mad,' whispered Kabelo.

'It can work,' replied Don. 'Sameer, stand behind me when I go back there. I'll lean against the wall so they can't see you. Stick your camera in here.' He pointed between his arm and his side, and pulled at his baggy hoodie. 'You have ten seconds to shoot. Then get out.'

'What about you?' Sameer asked.

'I've got a plan,' replied Don, unconvincingly. 'Just get these bastards. They don't know where I was hiding.' Kabelo felt a flood of relief.

'Find someone you can trust to give the photos to. There must still be someone clean somewhere. Maybe Uncle Richard can help. Here.' Don took Kabelo's hand and pressed a piece of paper into it.

'Pit Bull's address.'

'Why don't we just all get out of here together now?' said Sameer.

'No. This is our chance to bust these pigs,' replied Don, giving Sameer a nudge. 'You're brave, dude. Let's get this done.' Sameer glanced at Kabelo, who shrugged and gave a nod. Was this the heavy feeling generals got when they send their soldiers to a battlefield knowing they're going to die?

'When I cough, get back and go.' Don moved to the edge of the wall and leant against it. Kabelo watched, with his heart suspended, while Sameer slipped his camera through the crook of Don's elbow.

'What you waiting for?' snapped Pit Bull. 'Get back to the table.'

‘Give me a break,’ replied Don. ‘I’m in pain, man.’ He tapped his crutch on the ground a few times and coughed. Sameer didn’t move. Kabelo held his breath. Should he pull Sameer back? Why wasn’t he following the plan?

‘Get here,’ barked Pit Bull.

Don coughed again and rolled his shoulders. Sameer stepped back, and turned around. It was going to be okay. They’d make it. Sameer took a step towards him and just as Kabelo put out his hand to reach for him Sameer tripped against the drainpipe. The clang of his camera against metal ripped through the yard and echoed around it. Kabelo reached forward to lift Sameer but he slipped out of his grasp.

‘I’ve dropped the camera,’ he gasped.

‘Leave it! Come!’ hissed Kabelo. Pit Bull rounded the corner, with The General right behind him. Pit Bull grabbed Sameer, and pinned him against the wall. He reached for his pistol. The other guards rushed over and aimed their guns at Sameer. The General watched, his hand on his holster. It would be madness to try and pull Sameer away. They would pump them both full of bullets. He needed to create a diversion, but what? Kabelo grabbed a tin from the back of the truck and aimed for Pit Bull’s face. It didn’t hit him but as Pit Bull tried to avoid it he fell onto the corner of the wall. Dropping his gun, he held his nose with both hands, and howled. The General ran to get the gun before Kabelo could. The guards rushed over to Pit Bull.

‘Go!’ screamed Don. ‘Go! Go! Go!’ He disappeared into the room.

‘Shoot them,’ shouted Pit Bull, blood pouring through his fingers. Above the commotion came the sound of tins crashing to the floor.

‘Stop him!’ yelled The General rushing into the storeroom. The guards followed him.

‘Come,’ shouted Kabelo to Sameer who was on his knees fumbling with the camera. ‘Just fricken’ come!’ Pit Bull kicked at the camera and it skidded under the truck. Kabelo was terrified that Sameer would chase after it. Pit Bull ran after the camera, still holding his nose. Kabelo lunged forward and grabbed Sameer in a vice grip. He wasn’t taking any more chances with him. Sameer didn’t resist. They sprinted towards the gate.

‘Watch out,’ screamed Sameer, ‘the guard!’ Kabelo looked back. One of the guards was taking aim.

‘Zigzag!’ shouted Kabelo and Sameer, miraculously, obeyed. Kabelo pulled the torch out of his rucksack, pressed the spotlight button and shone it into the guard’s face while Sameer wrenched the wire back. The bright light blinded the guard enough for them get through. Sameer smashed something on the ground. Glass marbles scattered behind them. A shot rang out. The gap would be too small for the guards to get through, Kabelo reckoned, and the gate would take time to open. Chaos would buy them time. He had no idea how The General, Pit Bull and the guards would divide themselves up between clearing up the mess he imagined Don had caused, and catching him and Sameer. But he did know that they could rely on seconds lead time rather than minutes. Adrenalin surged through Kabelo’s body.

‘Head for the bike,’ he told Sameer. ‘No, wait.’ He needed to think strategically. ‘Follow me.’ They would easily get outrun and captured in the veld. They had a slim but better chance of survival if they hid nearby and waited it out. Kabelo turned left, climbed the low fence into the factory grounds, and bolted for the tree outside his mother’s old office. Sameer was right behind him.

‘Climb as high as you can then along a branch until you’re hidden,’ Kabelo instructed. ‘I’ll follow you.’ He gave Sameer a leg-up, and hoisted himself up the closest branch, with his heart beating wildly. They had managed to get fairly high up the tree when the truck stopped metres away. Kabelo looked down. Were they high enough? Wasn’t this an obvious place for them to look? He fought his desire to climb higher, and peered through the leaves. Pit Bull was in the passenger seat, holding his nose. His phone glowed at his ear. He looked furiously left-centre-right, right-centre-left. The guards ran up. Pit Bull jabbed his phone in all directions.

‘We’re coming back just now to pick up the others,’ he shouted. ‘Find those brats but don’t kill them. I want that pleasure.’

The truck took off, dust swirling, onto the tar road, and turned left. Kabelo had a déjà vu so powerful he had to tighten his grip on the branch he was lying on. About five minutes later the 4x4 drove up, and, like the truck, stopped below the tree. Don leant forward in the passenger seat, anxiously looking around. The General whistled out of the driver’s window. The guards ran over to him, and listened intently. Kabelo couldn’t make out anything they said.

‘They’ve handcuffed him,’ said Sameer in a low voice. ‘I can see his crutches on the back seat.’ The guards gave informal salutes. One guard crossed the road and switched on a powerful torch, and began to scan the area. The other guard followed him and worked a different area. The General drove across the tar road and onto the dirt road that Kabelo and Sameer had taken with the bike. Kabelo watched the taillights until they were tiny red stars that finally extinguished. The guards were getting closer to where they hid the bike.

‘If they find the bike, they will trace it to Annelise’s father,’ said Kabelo softly, looking up to the branch Sameer was on.

‘D’you think we should climb down? We could go in the opposite direction to where they’re looking,’ whispered Sameer.

‘Not yet,’ replied Kabelo. ‘We don’t know for sure how many of them there are. There may be another guard we don’t know about. It could all be a trap.’ They fell silent.

‘Sorry about your camera.’ It was the only thing Kabelo could think of saying, and it felt stupid the moment he’d said it. They had armed guards after them. He should have said sorry about your life. A car’s lights appeared on the horizon. The guards switched off their torches. It passed; its taillights glowed like embers. The guards switched their torches back on and continued their hunt.

‘I’ve got the memory card,’ said Sameer. Kabelo inhaled, pursed his lips and blew a long breath out.

‘So *that’s* what you risked your life for,’ he said.

‘I wonder if they know yet,’ said Sameer.

‘So, if we get out of here alive, we’ve got evidence,’ said Kabelo slowly. ‘That’s amazing, dude.’ But who would they take it to, he wondered? Who could they trust? If they ever got out of here alive.

‘I could load the photos onto my phone and send them to Rebecca,’ suggested Sameer.

‘Not now. We can’t risk it,’ replied Kabelo. One of the guards was working his way back in their direction. ‘Just keep the card safe.’

‘We should have got out of here when we had the chance,’ said Sameer.

‘Shhhh.’

The guard re-crossed the road, walked up to the front entrance of the factory, and turned left along the paved pathway, towards the tree they were hiding in. Kabelo held his breath. The guard leant his back against the trunk, with his shotgun slung loosely in front of his body. His one hand rested on it, ready at any moment to aim and shoot. He pulled out a packet of cigarettes. Kabelo’s heart thumped against his rib cage. Last time they were at JBs Sameer had a sneezing fit when cigarette smoke came his way. The smoke would rise and spread through the tree. The guard tapped the packet and pulled a cigarette out with his lips. He patted his pockets and pulled out a lighter. Kabelo looked up to warn Sameer to cover his nose but didn’t know how, without risking drawing the guard’s attention.

The guard lit the tip of his cigarette, drew on it, and exhaled. The smoke filtered lazily up through the leaves. The guard drew again, long and hard, and switched his torch on to proudly observe his smoke rings. Was the guard playing with them? Sameer stifled a sneeze, making a squeaking sound, like a bat. The guard looked up and flashed his torch into the tree. Kabelo flattened himself against the branch. The guard took one last pull, dropped his cigarette butt and ground it into the grass. He took out his phone. Kabelo felt dizzy.

‘*Akho nto*?’ he grunted, switching to loudspeaker mode.

‘Negative,’ came the reply.

‘They must get their cop connections in with the dogs now. It’s late. I’m sick of this,’ he complained.

‘I told them they needed more security,’ said the other guard. ‘But no. Mr Harley-Davidson was born with a big mouth and no ears, and I won’t comment on the brain.’

‘You know,’ agreed the guard underneath their tree. ‘But I’m not sure about the “no brain”. This is a lucrative business they’ve got here. He gets the bike and the catamaran and the jeep and we get peanuts.’

‘Call him. Tell him to organise dogs. They won’t give us overtime for this.’

‘Meet you at the back,’ replied the guard below them. He looked up, and lazily beamed the torch light along each branch, in a calculated way. Kabelo tucked his head down and watched as the leaves all around him lit up. Was this all a sadistic game? The guard took a step backwards. He tripped and cursed. And then something happened that made Kabelo believe his mother’s spirit was present. The sprinklers burst on, spraying water from all angles onto the lawn and flowerbeds.

‘Aai, no man. It’s enough now.’ The guard ran back along the path. Kabelo clasped his hand over his mouth to stifle the hysterical laughter that threatened to erupt from his throat. He remembered the threat of dogs and that helped. Sameer sneezed.

‘Guard coming,’ warned Kabelo. The other guard crossed the road, and walked down the side road to the back of the factory. They waited until they heard the gate open, and climbed quickly down. When Kabelo dropped from the last branch into a crouch, he felt something against his palm. He picked it up. It was like a large sweet, wrapped in plastic and tied at one end.

‘What’s it?’ asked Sameer.

‘Proceeds from the factory, I think,’ replied Kabelo, and pocketed it. ‘One security guard trying to add to his peanuts. Let’s go!’ They ran low, alongside the front of the factory, through the spray, and sprinted across the road and a few metres into the veld where they dived for cover behind a clump of thorn bushes. There was no sign of the guards.

‘If they bring dogs, it’ll take them a while to pick up our scent. The ground will be soaked over there.’

‘That was like from a hectic movie,’ said Sameer. Kabelo nodded, wondering how it would end. They found the bike, and, despite his urge to call Rebecca, and to get home as soon as possible, Kabelo decided it was safer to drive to the city and return via smaller roads to get back on to Jikeleza Route. Riding around in the still night with Sameer holding on tight gave him a chance to replay everything that happened. His concern for Don grew by the minute. After a while, Kabelo pulled over in a dark cul-de-sac in Gonube, to give Sameer a chance to download the photos from the memory card onto his phone and send them to Kabelo’s and his own email addresses. Kabelo called Rebecca, and told her they were safe.

The factory’s security lights were on when they rode past a couple of hours later. There was no sign of guards, or dogs, or anyone else. The air was moist-cool in the valleys they dipped into, and Kabelo could feel the soft-warmth of the hill slopes as they climbed up them. Sameer held tightly around his waist, and rested his head against Kabelo’s back.

Rebecca had slipped away as soon as she could, and joined Anneliese to meet Kabelo and Sameer. Sameer jumped off the bike and ran into his sister’s arms, and then Anneliese and Sameer hugged each other. Kabelo remained on the bike. He took off his helmet, and rubbed his head. He felt overwhelmed, drained.

‘Hey,’ said Rebecca. ‘You have no idea how relieved I am to see you and Sameer.’ She slid her arms around him. He looked at her. Random words shot like sparks chaotically in his brain. Pit Bull. Don. Guns. Photos. Drugs. Fear. He climbed off the bike. A sentence finally formed itself.

‘It’s a miracle we made it,’ he said, ‘but I don’t know if Don is still alive.’ He hugged Rebecca tight, and rubbed his cold cheeks against her warm face.

‘Tell us everything,’ she replied.

Chapter 27

'I'm worried about her. Sure, teenagers need their sleep and all that. But still. We all agreed we'd go out early today.' Her parents' voices, a mixture of concern and irritation, filtered into Rebecca's consciousness. She wondered what time it was. She tried to open her eyes. Mission impossible. Had someone glued her eyelids together?

'We need to call Sameer and tell him to come home,' she heard her father say. Rebecca's eyes unglued.

'Hey Mom and Dad,' she croaked, rubbing her eyes. She sat up and stretched. 'I'm wide awake so don't gossip about Sameer and me. I can hear every word. It's the holidays. We're supposed to sleep in.' It was pretty late when Rebecca left Anneliese's house last night, where she'd gone after her parents and Naanii were fast asleep. Sameer went back home to Kabelo's, discussing what movie they would have watched in case they were asked.

'Oh. You're awake. That's good, darling.' Rebecca's mother pushed the door open wider, and took a step in. Dad was behind her.

'Have you forgotten we're going sailing? We must go before it gets too hot.'
Rebecca's hand crawled to her phone. She checked the time. Sailing. On almost zero sleep. She'd tip overboard and drown. Besides, they had to meet with Kabelo and Anneliese to finally agree on what to do next. Her mother walked over and sat on her bed. Rebecca groaned inwardly. Her mother wore a frown.

'Mom, what are you staring at? Please don't look at me like that.'

'You've got something that looks like engine grease on your face, darling. What is it? Where does it come from?' Her mother plucked a tissue from the box and began to dab Rebecca's face with it.

'Please don't do that, Mom,' she said, pushing her mother's hand away. She felt claustrophobic.

'Odd,' said Dad, still at the doorway. 'Engine grease. And you look pale. You've got dark rings under your eyes.' Her parents passed a questioning look between them.

'I'll call Sameer,' said Rebecca quickly, deciding that diversion was the best strategy. 'I'm sure he'll be amped for sailing. But, I'd like to change first,' she added, looking meaningfully at the door. After Mom closed the door, Rebecca called Sameer on his mobile.

'What do you mean, he's not there?' she demanded. 'Check the kitchen. The garden. The deck. He's not going to leave you there on your own.'

'D'you think I haven't done that already?' replied Sameer, irritably. 'Awkward thing is,' he added, 'his dad's here, wondering where Kabelo is. I told him he's gone for a swim.' Rebecca groaned.

'Come home,' she said.

'But…'

'Just get here quickly. We've got to think it through.' Rebecca pressed contacts on her mobile and found Kabelo's. It went to voice mail.

That night, after he and Sameer had got in, and he was sure Sameer was fast asleep, Kabelo had carefully eased himself off his bed, pulled on clothes, and silently left home, not sure when, or if, he would return. He twirled two sets of keys around his finger as he strode down the dark road. He let himself into the internet cafe, and concentrated on what he had to do, rather than the eeriness surrounding him. And then he headed for Anneliese's house. Kabelo unlatched the wooden gate, and went straight to the garage doors, where he had earlier left the padlock bolt turned so that it looked locked. He switched on his torch, inserted the key into the ignition, and pushed the bike out of the garage, cursing at the squeaking tyres. He propped the bike on its stand outside the garage

door so he could close the doors and leave the padlock behind him the same way he had before. He looked back. No lights had gone on. Kabelo freewheeled down the hill before starting the bike. He missed not having Sameer's arms holding tight around him. But he couldn't drag the others into any more danger. He had to do this alone. When he watched The General drive off with Don last night, an image of his mother, instead of Don, sitting handcuffed and terrified, flashed through his mind. He felt sick at the thought of it.

Kabelo felt for the flash drive on the lanyard around his neck. No matter what, he had to get Don out, if he was still alive, and force The General to tell him what happened to his mother. He had no doubt that The General knew. The photos Sameer had taken at the factory were perfect ammunition. Thirteen incriminating photos. Kabelo looked at them over and over at the internet cafe.

The photos showed it all. The back of the truck with its doors wide open, showing the tins. The mixing room with a long table, and the coffee and hot chocolate tins on top, some opened, small squares of bright yellow plastic. A pile of white powder to mix with, probably from the factory. An armed guard. Four people in blue overalls wearing surgical masks and gloves. It looked like three young men and one woman. One was weighing powder on steel scales. Another was adding powder with a spatula. The woman was twisting a small yellow packet, just like the one he found under the tree that had fallen out of the guard's pocket. All the packers had something in common: terrified eyes.

Kabelo zoomed in on the photo of The General and Pit Bull standing together. He wondered if Pit Bull knew that Sameer had removed the memory card from the camera yet. Would he torture Don until he told them who he and Sameer were, and where they lived? Or did they already know that? Would The General kill Don straight after?

Sunrise streaks shone through the grey clouds in the bike's rear-view mirrors as Kabelo left his home further and further behind. The factory was just five minutes away. Kabelo rode past it, giving an appreciative glance at the tree, and, he believed, his mother's spirit, that had saved them last night. He tried to conjure up the route he saw The General take last night. There was a maze of side roads and T-junctions around here. He needed to be focused. Time was everything. He had to get to Don.

Kabelo passed hedged gardens, smallholdings with dogs that barked wildly at the bike, and wide-eyed cows. A couple of cockerels got their morning routine going. How could everything possibly be so normal? Kabelo turned down the next road, around a steep bend, and arrived at a three-way fork in the road. He skidded to a stop. The right fork led to an unmarked destination around a ninety-degree turn. The left one to beach houses, he'd once visited a school friend there. The middle one led to a wooden farm gate.

Last night, The General turned right and disappeared. Kabelo freewheeled down the right fork until he reached a huge metal gate. 'Beware Ingozi Gevaar' said a large sign with vicious dogs snarling on it. Tall lampposts stood on either side of the gate. Lamps? Kabelo looked again. No, they were surveillance cameras on poles, like those he'd noticed outside Dazzlers. Most places around here had the name of a security company attached to the fence. This one did not. The General *was* his own security company. Was The General watching him right now?

Kabelo heard a heavy vehicle approaching. It was coming down his way. He rode the bike back to the farm entrance, got off, opened the gate, got on again, and rode through. He glanced back. A jeep. There was no time to close the gate. Had they seen him? But they didn't know that he and Sameer came on a bike last night, did they? Kabelo rode alongside the thick hedge in the field until he could see the security cameras poking into the sky. He switched off the bike's engine and pushed it as deep into the hedge as he could. He bent down, and pulled off his helmet. He tore off some leaves in the hedge so that he could watch. The jeep pulled up at the gate. Pit Bull was in the

passenger seat. The jeep's window slid down. Pit Bull had a plaster over his nose, which Kabelo found deeply satisfying. Pit Bull stuck his elbow on the ledge and held his phone to his ear.

'Shit. Bastard. He's not picking up,' said Pit Bull. 'Hoot.' Although he heard Pit Bull's order, Kabelo nearly jumped over the hedge when the horn blasted. It blasted again. And again. Pit Bull leant over the driver and punched the horn incessantly. The General's voice came over the intercom above the sound of barking dogs.

'What do you want?'

'Let us in.'

'I don't take orders from you,' said The General, with a curt laugh. 'Why are you here attracting the world's attention?'

'Where's the brat?' demanded Pit Bull.

'It's done,' replied The General. Kabelo felt as if he was falling down a deep canyon.

'Where's the body? I want to see it.' Kabelo put his hands over his face and closed his eyes. It's not a body, it's my friend, he wanted to scream at them.

'I don't report to you.'

'Tell me,' screamed Pit Bull.

'Just go.' And no amount of buzzing on the intercom or hooting brought The General back.

Chapter 28

Anneliese pulled open her bedroom curtains, one by one, and stood at her window. She watched three hadedas dig-dig-dig their beaks in the grass in search of earthworms and whatever else they could find. When she was small, the large brown birds used to frighten her with their scimitar beaks and prehistoric look, even though she knew they would quickly rise with loud and indignant haa-haa-haa-de-dahs when she found the courage to run out onto the lawn flapping her arms and clapping her hands shouting, '*Weg, weg, weg!'* They always flew away, just onto the roof, and they always returned. The hadedas ambled in a way that seemed to say they would rule the world, eventually. *Uiteindelik.*

From her window, Anneliese could see the garage wall. It occurred to her that Kabelo hadn't given her back the keys to her father's bike last night. She frowned. She would call him, just now. Anneliese's mind travelled to what she'd found in her mother's room when she'd looked for the spare key. She closed her door gently, and stealthily turned the key, even though her mother had called out much earlier '*Totsiens, sien jou later, skattebol, ek sal by die kantoor wees*'.

Anneliese went over to her bedside table, and pulled it away from her bed. She opened its drawer and took out a nail file. She squatted, and used the file to prise up a rectangular bar of wooden parquet flooring, and then prised up four more. She used her finger to get an edge on the thin metal sheet below, and pulled it off. She dropped into a cross-legged position, and took out the ziplock bag she had put the photograph and cotton wool covered bullet casing in. She opened the bag and drew the photograph out. Anneliese studied it, for the hundredth time, and as always, got an acid feeling in her mouth. There was her uncle, and three other men, standing with their boots on the body of another man who was lying on the ground. The man on the ground had a swollen face, blood coming from the crown of his head, his ear and mouth, and red-brown stains on his torn t-shirt, which said Amandla! and something else but she couldn't make out the words.

Anneliese stretched out her arm, opened her bedside table drawer, and took out a magnifying glass. At first, she examined the photograph at different degrees of magnification. This gave her vertigo, which got worse as the standing men's grins seemed to grow bigger and more victorious. Two of the men, including her uncle, had thick moustaches. Anneliese pulled a face and rubbed her fist between her nose and lips.

Then she worked from the left to the right of the photograph. Empty coke, brandy and beer bottles littered the grass. She focused on them: Klipdrift and Lion Lager with its proud lion and red, white and gold label. She followed the bottles' trail, past the man on the ground, to a bricked braai place. Anneliese moved the magnifying glass along. Smoke rose from the meat on the grid. A break in the bush revealed a path to a small jetty and a river. Anneliese moved to the top section of the photograph. The low white building had a wide verandah. On the corrugated red roof, a few aerials poked the bright blue sky. Anneliese looked closer. She was sure it was a pair of Black Harriers perched on a tree stump next to the building. Anneliese wondered if they were as endangered back then as they were now. She got the after-crying shudder again when she breathed out. Then she held the magnifying glass over the men standing up.

One man gripped a sjambok, its leather whip was coiled around his hand, like a snake. Her uncle had a holster around his hips and a gun in his hand. It was a .38 special revolver. The bullet casting nestled in the cotton wool hidden in her bedroom floor was fired from that type of revolver. She knew that because her uncle had taught her about guns; Ma and Pa had not been able to stop him because he'd do it when they were not around. Anneliese thought of the bullet hole and the hairline crack in the skull high up on the bank of the river, next to the tree.

Anneliese could not bring herself to examine the look on the face of the man on the ground in the photo. She shifted into the sunlight, stretched out her legs, and rubbed under them. Bars of shadow and sunlight criss-crossed into her room, and over her. They curved and contorted over her body until she moved into the shadow to reach for her phone on the bedside table.

‘Rebecca?’ Anneliese played with the multicoloured hearts on her mobile phone charm.

‘Hey Anneliese.’ Rebecca’s voice sounded strained.

‘I need you to come with me somewhere. *Dis dringend*,’

‘What’s happened? Are you okay?’

‘I am okay. Can you meet me at the canoes in half an hour?’

‘I can’t. My parents… Sameer and I are supposed…’

‘It’s *really* important,’ Anneliese interjected.

‘I’ll make something up. Anneliese, Kabelo’s gone.’

‘I’ll get back to you,’ replied Anneliese. She walked down the passage and out to the garage. The padlock was there on the door. It was turned, not locked. She lifted it off and opened one door wide enough to see in. No bike. She smsed Rebecca.

Bike gone. C u now bring binocs

Back in her bedroom, Anneliese pulled on her school swimming costume, shorts and a t-shirt. She picked up the camouflage cap that her uncle gave her for Christmas off the floor where she’d thrown it, hesitated, and put it on. She slipped her phone and camera into her waterproof bag.

There was a BMW parked outside her mother’s office. The door chimed when Anneliese walked through.

‘What a nice surprise! This is my daughter, Anneliese,’ said Ma to her clients, with a proud ring to her voice.

‘*Hallo Ma. Môre*,’ Anneliese greeted the couple sitting opposite her mother, and gave her mother a kiss on her cheek. The woman had a Gucci bag on her lap and smiled at Anneliese in a friendly way.

‘I’m sorry to disturb. *Ek wil Nuwe Jaar kaartjies met fotos maak vir Rebecca, Kabelo en Sameer. Ek wil net fotokopieës maak.*’ In the end, Anneliese thought, Ma would understand, wouldn’t she? Her mother smiled and nodded, and turned her attention back to her clients. Anneliese made copies of the photo. She picked up each one as it printed and slid them into an envelope.

‘*Totsiens*,’ Anneliese called, triggering the chime again. Ma returned her wave by blowing Anneliese a kiss. Maybe this is going to be a good day. For *all* of us, she thought to herself.

After returning the original photo to its hiding place in her room, Anneliese folded the three photocopies. She slipped one into the back of her Bible, and took a minute in the kitchen before selecting her mother’s recipe book *Making preservatives* to hide another one. The third one went into her bag. Anneliese grabbed her bag and a towel, closed the door, and ran up the driveway. It took her five minutes to get to the canoes. She was glad it was a cloudy day, otherwise they’d burn up on the water.

‘Hi Anneliese.’ She nearly jumped out of her skin at the voice that came from behind the tree.

‘Sorry,’ said Rebecca. ‘I have to keep a low profile. My parents think I’m sick.’

‘My mother thinks I’m making New Year’s cards,’ replied Anneliese.

‘Sameer’s gone with them,’ said Rebecca. ‘He’s pretty miffed that he’s not coming with us, though.’ Anneliese nodded. She would also have liked him to come with.

‘Any news of Kabelo?’ Anneliese asked.

‘No.’

‘Rebecca, you’re chewing your lip. Just now it will start bleeding. You don’t want a scab on your lips, do you?’

‘Where are we going?’

‘I’ll tell you on the way.’ Anneliese took hold of the edge of the blue canoe and dragged it to the water.

‘Ready?’ she asked Rebecca who shook her head as she got in. They pushed their paddles into the shallow riverbed, stirring up algae and sand, as Anneliese guided them upriver, past where Kabelo threw the skull, and the smaller river islands.

‘Please tell me what’s happening,’ pleaded Rebecca.

‘I want to get a bit closer,’ said Anneliese.

‘Closer to where?’ asked Rebecca. ‘Anneliese, you’re making me nervous. And anyway, what if Kabelo calls?’

‘Let’s paddle to the island. Over there,’ said Anneliese. ‘Hey, take it easy,’ she shouted. Rebecca, in her haste to get there, was spraying water over Anneliese.

‘I don’t want to be kept waiting any longer,’ said Rebecca, between pants. ‘Kabelo’s gone to do who knows what or who knows where, and you’re acting like you’re from the national intelligence agency.’ Anneliese saw the irony in Rebecca’s words and turned to give her a quick smile. The canoe ground to a halt on the shore.

‘Tell me what’s going on,’ demanded Rebecca, climbing out. She sat on the sand.

‘Okay *okay*,’ replied Anneliese. She dried her hands on her towel before zipping open her bag. She pulled out the photocopy, flattened it on a rock, and held it up for Rebecca to see. Anneliese watched her friend’s face break into an instant grimace.

‘Rebecca?’

‘This is sick,’ Rebecca looked at Anneliese. ‘Where did you get it? And what’s it got to do with you?’

‘He,’ replied Anneliese tapped the photo once, ‘is my uncle. It was taken years ago, and I think I know where.’ Anneliese pointed up the river, and watched Rebecca’s reaction. If Rebecca didn’t want to come, she’d go alone.

‘I feel like I’ve seen that guy before,’ said Rebecca, looking at the photograph again, and then away. ‘The guy on the ground. His eyes.’

‘Becca, that’s not possible. This photo was taken before we were even born.’

‘I know. It’s weird,’ replied Rebecca, digging her toes in the sand. ‘Why would you ever want to go there? It’s creepy.’

‘Because I think it might be linked to the skull.’ Rebecca’s eyes widened.

‘But what if Kabelo calls and needs us?’

‘He won’t. I know him. He doesn’t want us in any more danger, no matter how much of it he’s in himself. That’s why he’s cut contact.’ They looked at each other.

‘Okay, let’s go,’ said Rebecca. She helped Anneliese up.

‘Anneliese,’ she said, pulling the canoe back into the river. ‘What will we do if someone’s there?’

‘I have no idea,’ replied Anneliese, and got in.

The dust from the departing jeep had barely settled when Kabelo started walking back along the field, around the other side of the hedge, to The General’s gate. In a strange way, hearing the sound of his shoes crunching on the gravel gave Kabelo courage. He closed his hand around the flash drive, like someone would a talisman, for good luck. Kabelo found the intercom buzzer, pressed it, and waited. There was a whirring at the top of the pole. He faced the camera.

‘If you value your life, and your friend’s life, you’ll leave now,’ said The General.

‘Don?’ Kabelo’s mind raced. The General had lied to Pit Bull. Why?

‘*Uyayibona le nto*?’ Kabelo thrust the flash drive towards the camera. The camera whirred again, zooming up to him, Kabelo imagined.

‘Of course I can see it. I am not yet blind.’

‘Good. Because it’s loaded with *very* interesting photos taken at the factory last night. You feature. So do your drug business associates.’

‘Ha! You’re lying. We have the camera.’

‘But do you have the memory card?’ Kabelo wondered if The General would keep him waiting while he called Pit Bull to check. The gate opened but only wide enough to let Kabelo through. He stepped across the metal track. The gate clanged back against the post. His heart began to thump. The front door of the old farmhouse up the driveway opened, and The General appeared with German shepherds growling on each side of him. They pulled at their leashes and barked wildly to be let loose. As The General walked down the polished red steps to meet him, Kabelo clasped the flash drive to remind him that he had a different kind of weapon.

‘*Ngoku*,’ said The General, gripping Kabelo’s elbow. ‘How sweet,’ he said, his voice laced with sarcasm. ‘You’ve come to say goodbye to your friend and give me your flash drive.’ Kabelo frowned.

‘No. I have come to fetch my friend and find out what happened to my mother. Where is Don?’ The General feigned dismay and shook his head.

‘*Uqale nini ukungabi nasimilo*? This disrespect to elders has become like a fashion these days, I’ve noticed.’

‘Manners get lost, *sir*, when respect is lost,’ replied Kabelo. The General’s fingers pinched expertly into Kabelo’s elbow joint, and sent shards of electric pain along his arm.

‘I have done something that may make you respect me a little more,’ said Kabelo through clenched teeth. He was amazed to hear his words come out clearly when his brain felt like it was frying.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Have you heard of facebook?’ he gasped in pain. He felt a gigantic thud against the side of his head and the floor tilted up to meet him. The last thing he heard was the dogs begging to be set free on him.

Rebecca was thirsty and dizzy. The clouds had blown away and the day had turned very hot. Anneliese kept saying that it was just a bit further but they’d been paddling nonstop for ages. The last parts of the river that Rebecca was familiar with, including Crocodile Bend, with lay half an hour, or more, behind them. She looked around. There was just thorn trees and thick bush on either side of them. An African Fish Eagle suddenly rose from a tree stump and shrieked kyow-kow-kow as it took flight.

‘Anneliese…’

‘There’s the jetty,’ said Anneliese, pointing ahead. If Rebecca was playing Truth, Dare or Command and she said truth, then she would have to admit that she felt unbelievably scared. She’d promised her father that she would never paddle without him further than an hour upstream. And now she had to command herself to walk onto that jetty. Her knees didn’t seem keen to work with her here.

Throb. Throb. Throb. Kabelo felt the back of his head and brought his fingers in front of his eyes to examine the moisture. He rubbed his finger tips against each other, and watched how they slid, smooth and red. He lurched into awareness and patted his chest. No flash drive.

‘I’ve got it,’ said The General. Kabelo’s eyes focused on him, sitting in front of a large plasma screen. One by one the photographs from the night before appeared on it.

‘Enjoying the show?’ asked Kabelo.

‘Must I teach you more respect?’ Kabelo shook his head and smiled grimly.

‘Are you on facebook, or another social networking site?’

‘Of course,’ said The General, rolling his chair up to Kabelo, who shifted back against the wall. ‘I update the whole world on what I’m doing *every* day.’

‘Good,’ replied Kabelo. ‘Then you can share these photos of such a special time at the factory with all your friends. I’m sure you have lots of friends. I’ve already shared them with mine.’ He enjoyed watching the information sink in. The General looked at the screen.

‘Oh, I forgot to tell you. I’ve shared them with other people, too,’ Kabelo added. ‘*Official* kind of people.’ The last part was a lie, Kabelo still did not know who he could trust with the whole story, starting with his mother and Mtsi-Smith, and ending with Don, but The General could not know that, and would not know, unless he had a lie detector in his torture chamber. The General’s shoulders slumped when the photograph of him standing at the end of the table with Pit Bull appeared. Tins, scales, packets, people sorting. Even if The General killed him, Kabelo had already created a website and downloaded all the photographs onto it. He’d emailed the link to Rebecca, Sameer and Anneliese.

‘So what do you want?’ The General’s voice was flat.

‘Set Don free. He’s leaving with me. And tell me what happened to my mother. In exchange, I guess you get to make yourself a state witness.’

The jetty creaked.

‘Be careful of the rotting ones,’ Anneliese said, pointing to the planks. ‘And mind the nails.’ Long, rusty nails stuck out of the split logs. Anneliese worked her way carefully, knowing that the thin soles of her takkies would offer no protection against the sharp points.

‘Ouch,’ yelped Rebecca.

‘You okay?’ asked Anneliese, without looking back. She didn’t hear Rebecca’s reply. She pushed away the overgrown grass, and followed the path. And then she was in the place that she had examined over and over in the photograph, and, once again, began to reconstruct what she imagined happened that day.

Smoke rose from the braai and meat sizzled and spat on the grid. A man lay bleeding on the ground. The other men laughed and drank and tried to out-hero and out-horrify each other’s stories. And, in between, they did unspeakable things to the man on the ground, whose ankles were in leg irons, and who had a thin red trickle from his ear, and another from the corner of his mouth, and his head. Someone suddenly decided this trophy of theirs would make a good photograph. Anneliese wondered who. Was there yet another person there who took it, or was this the gang, and they self-timed it? They posed. Click.

‘Ja, you *terrorist*, you think *you* gonna overthrow *us*?’ Anneliese imagined her uncle’s voice, boozy and full of hatred and bravado. She put her hands over her ears to try and stop the high-pitched ringing in them. She could not bear to imagine the last bit. But her mind would not let her leave the scene incomplete. She imagined how her uncle pointed his revolver at the back of the man’s head, and squeezed the trigger.

Kabelo began to acquaint himself with The General’s room. He shook his head slowly in amazement.

‘How can you possibly have posters up of freedom fighters like Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko and Chris Hani and do the sick things you do?’ The General jumped up. His chair skidded across the room and crashed into a metal filing cabinet. Kabelo jumped.

‘I fought alongside Chris Hani,’ he yelled. ‘For twenty years in the liberation army. So, don’t lecture me, you kwedini.’ Kabelo raised his eyebrows. The General paced the room.

‘And what did I return to? No job. And no answers about my brother who “disappeared”.’ The General tore the air with inverted commas around ‘disappear’. Kabelo tried to shift back, to move out of range of The General’s spray. ‘Do you know what it’s like when someone you love…’. The General stopped abruptly and stared down at Kabelo. He turned on his heels and strode over to his chair, put it upright, rolled it to his desk, and sat down with his back to Kabelo. Kabelo pulled himself up. He needed air, he needed information. He couldn’t give a shit what had happened to The General, or his brother. His body ached. He walked stiffly across to the window and looked outside at the two-door garage and a white yacht next to it. One door was open and the other closed. He could see the green 4x4 The General used last night.

‘Take me out there,’ said Kabelo, pointing toward the garage.

‘Why?’

‘I think you know why,’ replied Kabelo.

‘Anneliese,’ said Rebecca impatiently, and clapped her hands behind her friend’s back. ‘It’s like you’re in another world. Didn’t you hear me calling you? This place is freaking me out. I want to go back now.’ Anneliese turned to look at Rebecca. Tears streamed down her face. Rebecca put her arms around her but Anneliese’s arms hung limply at her sides. Rebecca stood back. She fumbled in her pocket for a tissue.

‘Here,’ she said. But Anneliese didn’t take it, so Rebecca lifted Anneliese’s hand, and tried to prise Anneliese’s fingers open so that she could put it there.

‘I want to go now,’ said Rebecca, slowly and deliberately, trying to bring Anneliese back to normal. ‘We can come back with the others another time. This place and you are giving me the creeps.’ She walked towards the jetty.

‘*Nee, nee. Asseblief, nee.*’ Anneliese caught her arm. ‘Let’s quickly go up to the building before we go. Let’s just see what’s there.’ Rebecca rubbed her arms. They were sore from paddling. It was a long journey home. If they left now, she was in with a chance of getting home before her parents. But if they looked now, it would save her being dragged here again by a weird Anneliese.

‘Okay,’ she relented. ‘But don’t go funny on me again.’ This time, Anneliese hugged her back, tightly.

The General reluctantly unlocked and rolled the garage door up. Dried blood flaked from Kabelo’s fingers, leaving marks as he stroked the metallic blue car’s bonnet, door handle, mirror, and windows. Kabelo was in grade nine, and his parents were at the movies, when he’d got into his mother’s car in the garage. He’d just wanted to practise driving a bit on his own, nothing major. But when he reversed out onto the lawn he pressed the accelerator too hard and the garden tap had introduced itself to his mother’s bumper. Mama noticed it, of course. She’d yelled at him the whole evening for putting himself at risk, and for denting her car. In the morning, she forgave him.

‘It’s a small dent,’ she said, ‘and claiming on insurance will mess up my no-claim bonus.’ Kabelo listened; he knew that couldn’t be all. ‘So, your punishment is to wash my car, inside and out, every week, forever and ever. And there’s no DVD on Fridays for a month.’ He suspected Mama actually wanted to keep the dent, to remind him of what he had done.

‘There is always consequence to choice,’ she said, and never mentioned it again. What would she think of his choices now? Where was she? Kabelo slowly ran his hand around the rear tyre, up along the boot of the car, and he bent to touch the back bumper.

The front door was open and the building deserted except for signs that bats lived here. Sunlight poured in through the barred windows of the large, empty room they entered, making the floor look like it wore a carpet.

‘Is there anybody here,’ Rebecca called out, with a waver in her voice.

Anneliese stared at the wooden beams under the iron roof and walked beneath them. Near the wall and looped tightly around it was a thick chain, which must have gone unnoticed when they evacuated the place. She wondered when exactly that was. She felt Rebecca’s hand on her arm.

‘Come see this,’ she said. Anneliese followed Rebecca down a short passageway with six narrow cells, on either side. The walls between the cells were thick, and had ceilings, unlike the main room. Each had a thick steel gate and a solid metal door, all open now. Anneliese’s heart panicked at the thought of being suddenly thrown in, the door slamming, and the key being turned.

‘Do you mind standing by the door?’ asked Anneliese. Anneliese took a deep breath and walked into the cell. She brushed her palm against the eruption of damp bubbles on the walls and looked at the powdery white it left behind on her hand.

‘This whole place must have been given a thorough painting before they abandoned it,’ said Rebecca, from the doorway. ‘There are no signs on the walls of, you know, like of prisoner markings, and other stuff that you see in the movies.’ Anneliese nodded. Rebecca came in and stood next to her.

‘Let’s go,’ said Rebecca, lacing her fingers through Anneliese’s.

‘Look.’ Anneliese let go of Rebecca’s hand and knelt down. Someone had scratched letters on the cement floor in the corner of the cell. Perhaps a mat had covered it when the prisoner stayed there. Maybe the torture squad left the place in a hurry, and didn’t notice it.

‘M.E.D. Viva ANC viva exclamation mark,’ Anneliese read out. ‘Rebecca. Do you realise that we might be reading the last thing that person ever wrote?’

On their way down through the overgrown grass and weeds, Anneliese stopped and pulled out the photo and held it for Rebecca to see.

‘That’s more or less where he was lying then,’ said Rebecca, pointing to a spot a few strides away from the braai place. ‘Shouldn’t we, like, say a prayer, or something?’

‘Ja,’ said Anneliese. ‘*Goei idee*.’

‘At home,’ said Rebecca, ‘We would light a lamp.’

‘I think we should kneel, but not where we think he lay, rather just next to it,’ said Anneliese, ‘and say our own thing silently.’ She glanced at Rebecca, who nodded. Anneliese felt a bit self-conscious, and the doing their own thing made it less awkward, given their different family backgrounds, and all. She knelt down. A sharp stone pressed into her knees so she half stood to remove it and flatten the grass to make it more comfortable. She patted the ground, and prised it up with her thumb and index finger.

‘Rebecca. Look here.’ Anneliese brushed off some soil.

‘What is it?’

‘A tooth.’ They stared at each other, wide-eyed. Anneliese took out the tissue Rebecca had given her earlier, and laid it gently in the middle of it. She folded it over and over until it was like an Egyptian mummy. She unzipped the pocket inside her bag, and placed it gently in there. She pulled the zipper back. She looked up at Rebecca.

‘I’ll hide it in a safe place as soon as I get home.’

‘I’m sure it can be used to get DNA,’ said Rebecca, glancing around. ‘You know how they do it on those detective shows on TV. Should we look some more?’

‘No,’ replied Anneliese. ‘Let’s just finish the silent thing to ourselves and go.’

‘Let’s also think of Kabelo,’ said Rebecca. ‘Like, a wish for him to come back safely.’

Chapter 29

‘This is not your car,’ said Kabelo, rubbing his finger in the dent. ‘What did you do to my mother?’ The tin roof creaked as it expanded. The heat in the garage was suffocating. A fly buzzed around The General’s head. Kabelo thought that the concentration and energy he was taking swatting it away ridiculous. He wanted to swipe at The General’s head and kill the fly and The General in one go. Maybe The General could do with some of the throbbing that Kabelo felt returning to his own head.

‘She became a risk factor. We suspected she was onto the syndicate’s covert operations at the factory even though we were careful. Maybe someone was careless and dropped some tablets or a packet. We’d packed some ecstasy tabs as well as cocaine around that time. We monitored her phones at work and at home, and her computer, but she was careful.’ The General pursed his lips and studied his fingernails.

‘*Qhubeka*,’ shouted Kabelo, impatiently. ‘And look at me when you tell me about this! My respect for you is long gone. We are talking about my mother!’

‘Bradfield did it,’ said The General, looking up. ‘He was bouncing around the walls that night. Probably the steroids. Your mother came to the factory. She told the guard it was to fetch something. Bradfield insisted we eliminate her. I said we don’t have proof, she could be innocent. He said he’s not taking chances with a multi-million rand deal and her snooping around.’

‘What did Bradfield do *exactly*?’ Kabelo leant his back against the side of the car. The General sighed, and went to stand at the garage door with his back towards Kabelo. Kabelo closed his eyes and waited. The General spoke in short bursts.

‘It was quick. One shot. Through her heart. He used a silencer. He left me to handle the rest.’

‘And what exactly did “handling the rest” entail?’

‘*Ngena. Ndilandele*,’ said The General. ‘Follow me.’

‘Tell me!’ screamed Kabelo.

‘Be patient,’ replied The General. The path The General took past the garage wound, labyrinth-like, around a thicket of Acacia trees, and past a granite tombstone lying in the shade against a big boulder. Kabelo stopped.

‘Hah! You so worried no one likes you enough to buy you a tombstone you’ve bought your own?’ he shouted at The General, who was a few metres ahead of him. The General picked up a twig and snapped it into smaller and smaller pieces.

‘I’m sure God and your ancestors and whoever else are very proud with the upstanding business you’re in.’ The General dropped the bits of twig. Kabelo’s rage ballooned. ‘You mess up people’s lives. You killed my mother. Just. As. One. Example. Not to mention all the people you turn into runners and addicts.’ Kabelo picked up a stone and pulled his arm back to aim at The General’s back. The General turned around.

‘It’s for my brother. If I ever find his remains.’

‘And where will I find my mother?’ screamed Kabelo. ‘How do you think *I* feel all this time? How do you think MY FATHER feels. All. This. Time?’ Kabelo hurled the stone at the tombstone. It cracked against the letter M, and skidded off. The General did not react.

‘I did not kill your mother. I did not want Bradfield to do it.’

‘You did not stop him.’

‘Kabelo’s still not picking up,’ said Rebecca. She rechecked her incoming messages. There was nothing from him. ‘We’re going to have to tell his father.’

Anneliese gave the canoe a final tug up JBs’ shore. Rebecca tried out some phrases in her head, all beginning with ‘Hi, Mr Nomvalo…’ but they sounded lame and petered out. How do you begin to tell a person whose wife went missing that his son is also missing?

‘Let’s wait another hour before we call him,’ said Anneliese.

‘Good idea.’ Rebecca was relieved, even if it was just a short reprieve.

‘I must go,’ said Anneliese. ‘Thanks for coming with me. I would not have liked to be there alone.’

‘Anneliese?’

‘Ja?’

‘You’ve got the skull, haven’t you?’ Rebecca watched Anneliese’s face carefully.

‘No, I do not have the skull,’ said Anneliese, staring straight back at her. ‘Sameer and I went and looked at it that night we were all at JBs.’

‘Because you know it’s illegal to have a skull like that.’

‘A person’s skull needs a proper place to rest, a proper ceremony,’ replied Anneliese, her voice rising. ‘And I hope we can help to offer that person, skull, and its, his, her family, whatever you want to call it, that dignity. But, no, I do not have it hidden under my bed, if that’s what you think. You can come and search if you like.’

‘Why don’t you just broadcast our conversation on national TV?’ Rebecca stared pointedly at a couple about to pass them. Anneliese shook her head at Rebecca.

‘Okay, I believe you,’ said Rebecca. ‘I just want you to be careful.’ Rebecca’s phone vibrated, she answered.

‘I’ll be there in ten minutes,’ she said. ‘Sameer, tell them anything. Say I got better after they left. Anything.’ She looked at Anneliese. ‘My parents are back.’ An anxious frown had replaced Anneliese’s pout as she stared down at her phone screen.

‘It’s Kabelo’s dad,’ she whispered, pointing at her phone. ‘What do I do?’

‘Let it go to voice mail.’ They waited for a minute. A message came in. Anneliese called in to get it.

‘He’s frantic,’ she said.

‘*Ndilandele. Ndifuna ide igqithe lento*,’ said The General. Kabelo wiped his eyes on his t-shirt. Why on Earth should he trust The General? Kabelo began to follow him up a pathway made of gravel chips, like outside The General’s front gate. The path rose steeply and then followed a contour around the middle of a rocky hill. Some goats paused their tugging at wild grass to stare. Midway up the hill were three thatched rondavels. Beyond them, in the distance, the sea. Cameras on poles were strategically positioned to cover three hundred and sixty degrees. The main path split into three directions to reach each doorway. The General took the right pathway. Kabelo caught up to him. The General took out a bunch of keys, found the one he was looking for, and stuck it into the keyhole. He turned the doorknob and opened the door wide.

‘Your eyes will adjust to the dark,’ said The General. ‘Like people do, to circumstances.’

‘I’ll never buy your excuses,’ replied Kabelo, blinking against his sudden blindness after the brightness outside. He hadn’t slept for over forty-eight hours, he felt like he was going to faint. The General could get all philosophical in prison, as far as Kabelo was concerned. The General closed the door. Panic flared in Kabelo’s chest. What a fool he’d been. He’d simply followed The General into his own prison, and maybe to his death. The General stood by the door but he did not lock it. Kabelo breathed slowly to calm himself. Millions of dust motes frenzied in the tiny spears of light piercing through cracks in the room. Kabelo’s eyes began to adjust.

‘*Ngoku*?’ he said. The General didn’t reply. He seemed to want Kabelo to absorb what was in the room, and, looking around, he realised he’d entered some sort of a shrine.

‘Let me show you my brother,’ said The General. He turned on a light. He walked over to a large black and white photograph of two young men.

‘We’re here about Don and my mother. Which part of “I don’t care about you and your brother” don’t you get?’ shouted Kabelo.

‘Ah, Don. In my day they would try to crack you in detention,’ said The General. ‘And now our youth sit in crack dens.’

‘And I wonder who supplies it,’ replied Kabelo, and clicked his tongue.

‘Don is lucky to have someone like you as his friend.’ Kabelo ignored him.

‘If you look at the photograph, and listen without interrupting or other rudeness,’ said The General, ‘I’ll tell you what happened to your mother.’ Kabelo walked over to The General. The two men in the photograph looked alike, especially their eyes, and were probably in their twenties. The taller, slightly older looking one was The General. The brothers had their arms around each other’s shoulders, and were laughing into the camera.

‘Mxolisi became a trade unionist.’ Kabelo, reluctantly, had to take a step closer to hear properly because The General spoke in a low voice. ‘He disappeared one night. My family and his comrades were frantic. We pieced together that the police had stopped him at a roadblock on the way home from a meeting. People say he was taken to a special operations place somewhere and interrogated, tortured, and killed. I went into exile and joined the liberation army.’ The General cleared his throat and spoke louder. Kabelo took a step away from him. ‘But after the apartheid regime was gone and they held the truth hearings, no one came forward to say what they did to Mxolisi. Even though they could even get amnesty for whatever they did, if they fully confessed.’ The General fell silent.

‘Thanks for the history lesson,’ said Kabelo. He looked at The General and frowned. Didn’t The General get any of the irony of it all? Kabelo walked around the round room, and looked at the posters, t-shirts, caps, a worn out army uniform, flags – from Angola, Mozambique, Zambia, Swaziland.

‘I trained in all those places,’ said The General. Kabelo patted his hand over a fake yawn.

‘My mother,’ he said. The General sighed and walked over to a heavy wooden wardrobe that stood in the curve of the wall. He knelt on the floor and patted underneath it.

‘Help me with this,’ he said. Kabelo looked at him.

‘There is a small tin stuck underneath. Can you peel the tape off?’

Kabelo squatted next to The General, pushed his hand away, and scratched and pulled at the slippery tape until the tin was in his hands. He stood up, and with shaking fingers, tore at the sticky tape around its rim.

‘Here, let me,’ said The General trying to take hold of the tin.

‘Stay away,’ yelled Kabelo and turned his back on him. He worked the final strips away, and prised off the lid. There, like an orange flame, lay the scarf his mother wore the night she went missing.

‘What did you do with my mother?’ he screamed. The General walked slowly to the door, opened it, and pointed. Kabelo walked past him. The sea glistened blues and greens. Kabelo removed the scarf from the tin, and, still watching the sea, pushed it deep into his jeans’ pocket. He looked down at the tin. Through the tears welling in his eyes he could make out a flash drive and some papers. He looked at The General questioningly.

‘Your mother knew. It’s her reports.’

‘Why didn’t you destroy them?’

‘In case I ever needed them.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Kabelo, putting the flash drive into his other pocket.

‘Like now. Give me your phone.’

‘No,’ replied Kabelo. So The General was going to take him out too, after all, and wanted to make sure Kabelo didn’t call anyone before he did it.

‘I want to give you a number.’ The General’s outreached hand was insistent.

‘Whose?’

‘A very senior cop who is about to retire. He’s straighter than a flagpole,’ replied The General. Kabelo studied The General’s face.

‘And?’

‘I’ll confess.’

‘To *every*thing?’ The General nodded.

‘And Don? Where is he? Is he alive?’

‘He’s next door. I sedated him.’

‘What with?’

‘Pethidine.’

‘No coke or crack or anything like that?’

‘No, but I thought about it.’

‘Why didn’t you kill him?’ The General shrugged.

‘I wasn’t in the mood.’ Kabelo shook his head incredulously. ‘And you *were* in the mood with my mother?’ He spat on the ground near The General’s feet.

‘I told you. I did not do it. I only dispensed…’ Kabelo held up his hand in front of The General’s face before he could finish his sentence. He clenched and unclenched his fists.

‘What will happen to Don?’ he asked, in as controlled a voice as he could muster.

‘He’s still a minor. We’d both probably end up in a state witness protection programme.’

‘Don’t most people like that get killed?’

‘Some do. I am out of choices.’

‘Who is the kingpin?’

‘Not even I know that,’ said The General. ‘They hardly ever get the kingpin. Their syndicate lives are well disguised.’

‘I’ll put the number in myself,’ said Kabelo, taking out his phone. ‘Give it to me.’ Kabelo punched in the number as The General said it.

‘And now take me to Don,’ Kabelo demanded. The General led him to the next rondavel, unlocked the door, and indicated to Kabelo to enter. But Kabelo stayed outside, and instead called Don’s name.

‘Kabs?’ said a drowsy voice. ‘Oh no. Have they got you too?’

‘No,’ replied Kabelo. ‘I’ve got them. I’ve come to get you.’

‘I’ll give you a lift home in the 4x4,’ said The General.

‘No,’ said Kabelo. ‘You’ll give us a lift in my mother’s car. I want you to meet my father.’

Chapter 30

Uncle Richard made sure that this New Year's Eve at the game lodge was going to be a good one. His staff had turned the small banquet room at his house into a shimmer of candles. Platters of roast chicken and turkey piled high on the main table, alongside roasted potatoes, bright green beans, butternut and caramelised onion. Ice cream, vanilla mousse in chocolate potjies, fruit salad and meringues lay waiting on a side table. Kabelo hoped he'd have room for it. Silver cutlery and fancy glasses glinted while everyone chatted and ate and drank. Uncle Richard had let Kabelo do the music list, and TK's *Black Butterfly* was playing. He resisted the urge to turn up the volume. Kabelo tried to catch Rebecca's eye, but she was chatting animatedly to Uncle Richard.

'So, what did The General say when you showed him the photo and told him about the skull?' asked Anneliese.

'He was grateful. And hopeful. He's pleased that Tata's handed the skull over to the police and they're going to do the DNA tests. But it'll take quite a while to find out for sure.' He tried to forget the look on The General's face when he saw the photo. Kabelo didn't feel like discussing it now. He felt talked out, after all the people he'd had to tell the story to over and over.

'I wonder what will happen to my uncle.' Anneliese nibbled on a piece of garlic bread. 'I'm just relieved that Ma is behind me, I mean us, on the whole thing.'

'Can we talk about it another time?'

'Sure.' Anneliese turned to talk to Sameer. Kabelo looked past his father and Anneliese's mother, Naanii, and Rebecca's parents to try and catch Rebecca's attention. But she was still engrossed in a conversation with Uncle Richard. Kabelo pushed his chair back and got up. Everyone was so busy laughing and talking they didn't notice him leave. He went outside. From Uncle Richard's house he could look down on the main buildings of the guest lodge, all lit up. The darkness between where Kabelo stood and the guest lodge felt inviting. He wanted to be enveloped by it; he wanted to be with Rebecca in it, he'd hardly seen her in the past few days. He walked out onto the lawn, and looked up at the sky. Soon, Rebecca would be gone.

'You okay?' He turned to Rebecca, who must have noticed him leave, and smiled. She was wearing the earrings he'd bought her for Christmas.

'I was just thinking about you,' he replied. 'Let's go for a walk.'

'They won't notice,' he added, following Rebecca's eyes back inside. He tugged her gently. He didn't want to miss this opportunity to have her all to himself. Their parents had kept steely eyes on them after all that had happened. Pit Bull, The Boss and other members of the syndicate had been arrested, and guns, ammunition, vehicles, including Pit Bull's catamaran, phones and drugs had been confiscated. They'd refused Kabelo's request to go on the dawn raid but they invited all of them to go and see the police footage of it. It had been very satisfying seeing Pit Bull's face when he opened the door to his flat. Don and The General were in the witness protection programme.

'Okay.' Her answer sent tingles down his spine. He slipped his arm around her, and they took to the road towards the lodge. He stopped at a small wooden signpost.

'This way,' said Kabelo, and led Rebecca to one of his favourite spots on the game lodge. He took off his jacket and spread it on the large flat rock that tilted towards the sky. They lay on it, and gazed at the universe above them.

'Let's see how good you are at identifying stars,' said Rebecca.

'Orion's belt,' replied Kabelo, using Rebecca's finger to point with, 'Southern Cross…' He kissed her finger, her arm, her neck, and then, her lips.

A light breeze picked up and made goose bumps on Kabelo's arms.

'We'd better go back,' he said, reluctantly, looking at the time on his phone. We've been gone for half an hour.

'Pity,' she replied. She took something out of her pocket.

'Here,' she said.

‘What is it?’ He stared at the tiny tin foil package in her palm.

‘The ecstasy tablets from Dazzlers.’ He frowned.

‘Rebecca, I don’t know if that’s such a good idea.’ She burst out laughing.

‘No, man, I’m just giving them to you, like you told me to on the beach that day.’ That day seemed ages ago now. It was like he’d known Rebecca forever. Kabelo grinned, took it from her, and put it in his pocket.

‘I’ll dispose of it later,’ he said.

‘Let’s quickly walk down to the lodge and see what’s happening there. Looks like it’s rocking. When we get back, we can tell everyone that’s where we’ve been,’ suggested Rebecca. They walked down the road in the velvety night and even though he tried not to think about next week without her, Kabelo felt an ache in his heart.

‘Do you think I can visit you next holiday?’ Kabelo was beginning to wonder how he was going to live without having her around, in person. Sure, Chatworx and facebook would help. But when she was around he felt as if he could deal with anything.

‘Would your father let you come?’

‘I don’t know. But at least our parents are getting to know each other.’

‘Kabelo,’ she pulled him to a halt. ‘When do you think you’ll do the ceremony for your mother?’

‘Why?’

‘My parents say they want to come, if that’s okay with you and your father.’ He took her face in his hands and planted light kisses all over until she giggled and pulled his hands away. She sneaked a kiss on each of his palms. They walked on.

‘So, your parents are okay again now?’

‘Yes, I think so,’ she replied. ‘Mom’s taking up a job as regional photo editor for a travel magazine. Its head office is in Nairobi, but she won’t travel so much for a while. And she’s not going to any war zones soon.’

‘Is your dad pleased?’

‘Well, put it this way, he’s been wearing, like, the biggest smile in the neighbourhood since she told him yesterday that she accepted it.’ They reached the huge garage where Uncle Richard parked his tour bus, game lodge vehicles, motorbikes and quad bikes.

‘Let’s go in,’ said Kabelo. ‘I want to show you the bike Uncle Richard wants to give me.’ Rebecca followed him.

‘Maybe we can go on a night ride through the reserve to see the game before you go back?’ Kabelo jumped into the driver’s seat of the game-drive jeep. Rebecca jumped in next to him, laughing. He could imagine it all, a dark night, shining stars, he’d have his arm around Rebecca and she would be snuggled against him. He’d show off all he knew that Uncle Richard and the rangers had taught him. Rebecca would be growing more and more impressed.

‘Kabelo, stop.’ Damn. He put the movie running through his head on pause. Rebecca slipped out of his arms and climbed down. Kabelo watched Rebecca walk over to the tour bus’s luggage compartment and kneel down next to it.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘There’s a piece of paper stuck in here. Maybe it’s a secret letter that fell from a tourist’s bag,’ she giggled, coaxing it gently out.

‘Let’s see.’ Kabelo slid over the seats and jumped down to join Rebecca. He took the white piece of paper from her hand. ‘It’s blank,’ he said, ‘no secrets here.’ He turned the paper over and his world began to slide again. He stepped backwards until the cool metal of the jeep stopped him from going any further.

‘What is it?’ asked Rebecca. He looked into her worried face.

‘I think I know who the kingpin is,’ he replied in as steady a voice as he could muster, turning the brown and orange coffee tin label over for her to see. Uncle Richard’s trips in this tourist bus to Knysna, where The General suspected the drugs came on yachts through The Heads.

Uncle Richard had a catamaran. Uncle Richard had been to Knysna the day before Sameer and Kabelo went to the factory. That was when he bought Kabelo's t-shirt. All Uncle Richard's new businesses and wealth. His generosity. His guilt? Kabelo remembered The General's words when he asked him if he knew who the kingpin was.

'Not even I know that,' The General had said. 'They hardly ever get the kingpin. Their syndicate lives are well disguised.'

'Who? What do you mean?' asked Rebecca.

'Uncle Richard.'

'But that's crazy.' He pulled Rebecca towards him and brushed her forehead with his lips, and stroked her hair.

'I don't think so,' he replied. His phone vibrated.

'Hey Anneliese,' he said. 'Okay, chill. Tell them we'll be there now.' Kabelo looked at Rebecca and held her tight. 'I just have one phone call to make.'

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