WHERE TO NOW SOUTH AFRICA?



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Where to Now South Africa?

THINGS GET A LOT WORSE BEFORE THEY GET BETTER

(Adapted from “The Girl Who Couldn’t Be Hypnotised”, Exploring a near-future South Africa)

by

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This fact-based novel shows what could happen in South Africa if a power-hungry politician gained power.
Except for some well-known politicians, the characters are fictional.

The South African reality

"*The ANC may one day lose power; be an opposition party and a shadow of its former self.*" – ANC Youth League discussion document, *The Sunday Independent*

"*A South Africa without the ANC as the leader of society is no longer such a distant dream. In the next five to ten years this reality will deepen.*" – Justice Malala, political commentator, *The Times*

"*Let me be alarmist to the ANC government: The seeds of regime change are already sown in South Africa. How long these will take to germinate, grow and come to fruition is not known. But they are sown.*" – Dumisani Hlophe, political analyst at Kunjalo Development Research

"*South Africa has many of the ingredients needed for the electorate to vote a populist demagogue into power…*" – The Times, quoting historian Niall Ferguson

Harry Gwala, former ANC KZN Midlands chairman, predicted that an ANC-dominated government would be unable to fulfil black expectations and would be replaced by a more radical alternative. – News report, 1993

"*South Africans are in effect being forced to carry the can for a host of failed African states, and risks in consequence becoming a failed state itself.*" – David Saks, *Jewish Report*

"*Sometimes, after dark, downtown, you feel Jo'burg's been hit by a neutron bomb that killed all the people but it left the skyline standing.*" – Christopher Hope, *Jo'burg to Jozi*

Part One: Over the Edge
Chapter 1

"Soul loss is the shamanic term for what happens when one experiences trauma so severe that to fully experience it would be unbearable, and so one's consciousness dissociates, fragments. It is not a weakness but a reflex survival response." – *Soul Loss and Soul Retrieval* by 'Greyfox'

"The new South Africa will be a land where all decent people can sleep with their doors open." – National Party election advertisement, 1986

"So many South Africans from an early age are consistently exposed to trauma and stories about trauma that they have complex post-traumatic stress disorders that you would find, for example, among soldiers who had been in war." – Dr Brendan Belsham, Johannesburg psychiatrist

Two terrifying faces, grinning malevolently, suddenly appeared behind my eyelids. They were frighteningly familiar, yet I couldn't recall who they were. Then they began to fade, leaving me with a feeling of impending doom. Although I didn't know it at the time, I was repressing the memory of a horrific crime, a crime that was to change my life for ever.

My name is Oliver Jeex, but most people call me Olly. I'm a 38-year-old radio journalist, living in Melville, Johannesburg, and like most South Africans, I'm very concerned about the future of this country.

The story I'm about to tell you begins in early September of an election year. It also marked the end of the era that began when Nelson Mandela's African National Congress was voted into power in 1994. A few months before the 94 election, fearing civil war, my father had laid in a large store of essential foodstuffs and bottled water.

Initially, however, the new South Africa showed great promise.

It was portrayed to the world as a 'Rainbow Nation' and it seemed it would become a role model for other countries grappling with a troubled

past.

Within two years my father's pessimism gave way to optimism and we began sheepishly munching our way through all food we'd stored. My father now spoke approvingly of the efforts of the ANC government to achieve reconciliation, as well as its sensible economic policies.

Sadly, he didn't live to see whether his hopes would be realised. He and my mother were brutally murdered in a robbery at their home in Pinetown, near Durban. The robbers poured boiling water over my parents, apparently to force them to tell them where their money and valuables were. Then they stabbed my father to death and forced a wet dish rag down my mother's throat, choking her.

Afterwards, police strolled about, interviewing neighbours and domestic workers, but up until now the killers have never been caught.

It was now 7.30 and unless I stopped my musings I'd be late for work. On the way out I gave Erin, my beautiful wife, a kiss-on-the-run, pausing at the bottom of the stairs to shout goodbyes to Bonny and Frith, my teenage twin daughters. Outside the sky was blue – a perfect early spring day, with long-beaked hadedas probing the grassy verges for grubs and insects.

As I drove northwards along Beyers Naude Drive in rush-hour traffic, my luck seemed in. Amazingly all the traffic lights were working and no minibus taxis stopped suddenly in front of me. Passing Westpark Cemetery, I glanced at a procession of election posters fixed to street poles. Most were in the black, green and gold of the African National Congress. The opposition posters included the Democratic Alliance, the Socialist Peoples Party, and the Freedom Front Plus.

Although the Democratic Alliance had done surprisingly well in local government elections, the only party that presented a real threat to the ANC was the SPP, which had been gaining support at an astonishing rate. Though a relative newcomer on the political scene, it regularly drew huge crowds at its election rallies, addressed by its charismatic leader, Zebulon Phiri, who always wore his trademark Che Guevara beret.

Although the ANC's popularity had been slipping since Nelson Mandela's retirement as president, this decline had increased dramatically under the corrupt and scandal-plagued leadership of Jacob Zuma. Now there were persistent rumours that many ANC members were quietly defecting to the SPP. Nevertheless, most political observers predicted that the ANC would

still be re-elected but with a reduced majority. Normally elections in South Africa are held in April or May, but this time they were scheduled for September because of a series of nation-wide transport strikes earlier in the year.

As I passed Northcliff Corner my luck ran out. A minibus taxi swerved out from behind, clipping my back bumper. I was pitched forward, striking my face sharply on the steering wheel. I felt something jiggling in my mouth and was about to stop when I realised it was pointless: the taxi hadn't even slowed and was already out of sight.

Shortly after turning up under the canopy of jacarandas on the winding road leading to Northcliff Ridge, I found a safe spot to stop and check for damage. There was only a slight dent in the bumper. The 'loose something' turned out to be a broken dental bridge. I slipped the two halves into my pocket and reminded myself to call Dr Byat, my dentist. With a feeling of relief, I slipped behind the wheel and continued up to the top of the ridge.

The highest point is Aasvoelkop. Nearby with a commanding view to the north, is the Alfred Nzo Building (named after the ANC's first foreign minister) but better known as Broadcast Towers.

Four-storeys of concrete and glass, its north-facing windows give one the illusion of spying into the rest of Africa. The third floor is occupied by the production division of Africa International Radio (AIR), the satellite short-wave and internet-based station, jointly funded by European donor countries and the South African government. This was where I worked. The fourth floor comprises a penthouse for entertaining foreign visitors (and, it's rumoured, the girlfriends of senior managers), as well as plush offices for members of AIR's Governing Board.

> I was the editor of the Monitoring Section that recorded and re-cast news from broadcasts received from other African countries, as well as from the Africa services of various international broadcasters. My job was to evaluate the news and to supervise the news monitors.
>
> As none of the monitors were on leave or booked off sick, there was no need for me to work overtime, as I'd been doing for the past couple of months, so I left just after four, driving home under a darkening sky.

As I turned up towards my home in Eighth Avenue in Melville, a storm seemed about to break. The first large drops splashed on the driveway as I parked my car.

Chloe, our Dalmatian, was wagging her tail at the front gate as I unlocked

it. She pranced up the steps to the front patio, then turned about, extending a paw, as she does when she wants to tell me something. I patted her head and then opened the front door. I sensed immediately that something was wrong – no welcoming smells from the kitchen or teenage music thumping upstairs.

I went through to the kitchen and was about to pour myself a glass of wine when I saw a piece of yellow pad paper stuck to the fridge door. As I began reading it I felt like a passenger in a plane that has suddenly gone into free fall.

'I've met someone who appreciates me, Oliver, so I've decided to leave you. I need to find fulfilment, but for more than a year I haven't been finding it with you. I didn't say anything before because I knew you'd never understand. But for me the marriage is over. You'll be hearing from my lawyer soon and then we can sort out finances and custody of the children. In the meantime, I've taken Bonny and Frith with me and we're staying with my friend.

Erin.

P.S. There's a week's supply of frozen meals in the deep freeze.'

No address. No telephone number (I later discovered that Erin had even changed her SIM card.

In a state of shock, I plonked myself down in a kitchen chair and slumped over the wooden table where we normally have breakfast.

I still couldn't believe what I'd just read. It would need time to sink in. After nearly seventeen years of marriage I thought I knew Erin. Suddenly I realised I didn't.

As I sat there with my head in my hands I thought of her, pretty and slight, with hazel eyes and streaky blonde hair in an urchin cut. She had a shy dignity and a dry sense of humour that had always appealed to me. Although she was four years older than me, she looked younger. My mother had once called her 'guarded and self-contained'.

I needed a drink – a stiff one, so I opened the fridge and poured myself a generous glass of white wine.

As the alcohol relaxed me, the awful reality began to sink in. I drained the glass and filled it again, while I tried to make sense of Erin's note. I had to admit that I'd been edgy and withdrawn for months after the hijacking last year. I couldn't remember the details of what had happened before I awoke

battered and bruised in a gumtree plantation. But the lost memory was always there at the edge of my consciousness; though trying to retrieve it was like trying to catch an elusive fish with your hands in a deep pool.

Chapter 2

I was awakened around six o'clock by the shrill crowing of a neighbour's bantam cock. As I lay in bed it seemed as though I'd fallen through an invisible barrier into a parallel universe of unreality and couldn't find my way back. Over the next couple of days everything seemed remote and I went through my daily routine as if I were sleep-walking. On Friday, while driving along Beyers Naude Drive to the AIR studios, I nearly ran into the back of a taxi that had suddenly stopped on the bend skirting the West Park Cemetery. My mind wasn't on driving and my reactions were slow.

Arriving at the studios, I mumbled a greeting as I passed Will Allwell, Head of the Talks and News Archives Section, as well as a couple of other colleagues, then passed through the big open-plan newsroom and into the Monitoring Office.

I nodded to Prue Spence, the monitor on duty, before retreating into my glass cubicle.

A small family photograph taken seven or eight years ago on a camping holiday in the Drakensberg was on my desk. A smiling Erin was holding a steaming pot of camp stew. Matthew, Erin's son from an earlier relationship, was crouching in front. Bonny and Frith, dressed identically in green tracksuits, were on either side, grinning mischievously.

I recalled how the girls had filched bacon from Matthew's plate when he wasn't looking, and in their haste to grab the biggest pieces, had knocked sand into his food. To prevent a fight, I'd distracted them with a story of the mythical Harpies of Ancient Greece, the half-human bird-like creatures with sharp claws and bad breath. 'Not content with stealing food,' I told them, 'the Harpies always fouled what was left so it couldn't be eaten!'

When Matthew called the girls 'The Harpies,' they thought it hilarious. 'Kind of yucky cool,' as Bonny put it. 'Much better than "the twins",' declared Frith.

The name stuck.

I glanced up and saw Prue peering round the glass partition. A petite, green-eyed brunette of about thirty, she'd recently swapped her rimless glasses for contact lenses. She was not unattractive and had a lively sense of

humour. ‘Anything wrong, Olly?’ she said. ‘You’ve not been looking well all week.’

‘I’m okay, thanks, Prue,’ I said hastily, ‘just a bit of a sleeping problem.’

She didn’t seem convinced. ‘You know, Olly, I’ve been meaning to say this for quite a while: I really think you’ve been looking stressed for months. Actually ever since the hijacking…. Also, the dodgy political situation in the country doesn’t help! So why don’t you take some leave and just get out of Joburg?’

I was touched by her concern. ‘Can’t now,’ I replied, ‘perhaps later in the year.’

She stepped quickly over to me and gave me a friendly hug, before turning to go back to her workstation. ‘Well, call in at the health shop on your way home and get something with ginseng in it. I find it helps if I’m stressed.’

‘Mmmm,’ I murmured half-heartedly.

Halfway through the morning, Hannes Botha, the Deputy Executive Editor, a shrewd, barrel-chested Afrikaner who didn’t mince his words, breezed into my office to discuss the Monitoring Section’s monthly report. Suddenly his eyes narrowed. ‘Man, you look really buggered! Something wrong?’

‘Not really. Just difficulty sleeping. I’ll be okay.’

‘Well, you’ve been pushing it for months with all that overtime. I can see signs of burnout. I think you need a bit of a break, Olly – *seriously*. So take it easy this weekend. Maybe even take a couple of days off next week, and see your doc for a check-up.’

At four o’clock I grabbed my briefcase, exchanged a few words with Prue, and was out of the Alfred Nzo building in three minutes flat. But I didn’t bother to see the doctor, nor did I stop at the health shop.

Chapter 3

When I got home I warmed up the last of Erin's frozen meals in the microwave. Chloe was wagging her tail and looking up at me expectantly, her saliva pooling on the kitchen tiles. I tossed her a wing tip and some fatty bits of skin.

I thought I heard a noise near the gate – probably the postman – so I went outside to check my post box.

There was only one letter. The return address showed it was from *Hatchet, Skinner & Goudge, Attorneys-at-Law.* I ripped open the envelope and began reading.

'…We are instructed by our client, Mrs Erin Heloise Jeex, that the marriage between you and our client has broken down irretrievably, and she now wishes to institute divorce proceedings. The summons will be served on you shortly.…'

There was a lot more besides: demands for interim maintenance for Erin and the girls, a contribution towards legal costs, as well as disclosure of all my assets. Also, I was warned not to try and contact Erin directly but to channel all communications through *Hatchet, Skinner & Goudge*. The letter was signed by Claude Skinner.

I couldn't think of a time when I needed a drink more – something a lot stronger than my usual glass of wine. The hard tack I had included whisky, brandy and tequila, as well as a bottle of absinthe that Erin had given me for my birthday in the hope of stimulating any latent artistic talents. But having heard that Vincent van Gogh had cut off an ear while drunk on the fiery green liquor, I'd left the bottle unopened. So I played safe and poured myself a double whisky. After draining the glass, I poured another, hoping it would relax me. But my brain continued to race.

I reluctantly admitted to myself that my present priority was to find a competent lawyer. At this point I thought of Imogen, my elder sister, who'd become a kind of legal groupie after she'd had an affair with a young advocate. Although she was only six years older than me, I'd always felt a generation separated us. A somewhat austere ash-blonde, she reminded me of one of those flawless mature women in the L'Oreal ads. Although she lived

in Parktown, only a couple of kilometres from Melville, I seldom saw her, as she was too busy with her social round of bridge, tennis, golf, and coffee klatches.

She phoned me maybe a couple of times a year – usually around Christmas or on my birthday, but rarely invited me to her home. In the past few months, however, she'd started phoning me more frequently. This coincided with my inheriting some antique furniture from our maternal grandmother who'd died last year – pieces Imogen had hinted would blend in better with her furnishings than with mine. I'd wedged as many of the antiques as would fit among my eclectic décor; the rest I'd stored in the garage.

I had a great affection for Cully, as we called our grandmother (whose maiden name was Cullingworth), so I felt that I'd like to keep at least some of the antiques as a fitting reminder of her.

Cully had also played the stock market very successfully, and had left Imogen and me a sizeable parcel each of blue chip shares.

I dialled Imogen's number. The phone rang about a dozen times before she answered.

'Hilooo?' she cooed.

'It's me, Olly, how are–'

'Sorry, Oliver, I'm afraid you've caught me at rather a bad time. Hamish is getting the car out.'

I knew she'd cut me off in ten seconds flat unless I piqued her curiosity 'It's about Erin,' I put in hurriedly. 'She wants a divorce.'

Boredom instantly gave way to interest. 'Well, this *is* a surprise, Oliver! I thought you two were so well suited.'

I ignored the remark and came straight to the point. 'Obviously, I'll need a good lawyer, Imo. Do you know of–?'

Imogen interrupted me. She was in her element. 'Of course, I know *heaps* of lawyers, though I'm afraid most of them are *outrageously* expensive. But you might try Ted Thrupp of Sinclair, MacIntosh & Thrupp. Ted was made a partner only recently, so his fees are a bit more reasonable.'

'Can you email me his contact details?'

'You know I never email, Oliver.'

'Oh, right.' (Imogen had become email-phobic after a virus in a joke attachment had wiped her hard drive.)

In the background I could hear a car hooting.

‘Isn’t that Hamish?’ I asked hopefully.

‘Oh, he can damn well wait a few minutes!

Hamish was fourteen years older than Imogen but seemed more like twenty. Imogen had once remarked rather unkindly that he was like a classic car that had been unsuccessfully rewired.

‘Hello, are you still there?’

‘Yes, I’m here, Imo.’

‘You were telling me about Erin wanting a divorce. But before you go on, let me just say this…’

I knew that one of her ‘big sister’ lectures was coming and I wanted to end the conversation as soon as possible, so I resorted to my telephone exit strategy. ‘Hello? *Hello?’* I shouted, jerking the phone jack in and out, causing a loud crackle. ‘Hello? Can you hear me?’

‘Yes, I can hear you, Oliver. But before we get cut off, can’t we talk about those antiques? I’d like to come around and–’

In mock exasperation I shouted, ‘Bloody Telkom *again!’* With a final tug I pulled the jack out and breathed a sigh of relief. A few moments later I found Sinclair, MacIntosh and Thrupp’s contact details in the phone book. Ducking into my study, I scanned Claude Skinner’s letter and emailed it to Ted Thrupp, requesting an appointment.

As I pressed ‘SEND’ I had a depressing thought: I was losing a wife but gaining a lawyer!

Chapter 4

I didn't sleep well, and I wasn't able to doze in bed a bit longer after I woke up, as the insistent ringing of the downstairs telephone jogged me back to reality. I jumped out of bed and bounded down the stairs two at a time, but as I reached the phone it stopped ringing.

I put the kettle on the gas stove to make myself some coffee. (We use gas rather than electricity because of constant power cuts.) The phone rang again. It was Bonny.

'Sorry Dad, but I've been lank busy. How're you doing?'

'Fine, thanks … you girls getting to school okay?'

'Yes, Mum takes us in the mornings. We usually get a lift back in the afternoons.'

'So where're you staying?'

A long pause. 'Mum said not to tell you 'cause you'll only come and cause shit.'

'She really said that?'

'Yes.'

'And her friend?'

'Frith doesn't like him, but I think he's … well … he's sort of okay. He's nice to Mum.'

'What do you mean by "sort of"?'

'Well, he bought Mum some new clothes and took us to the movies … but it's not the same … He's not our dad.'

'Right.'

'What's his name?'

Another pause. 'Well, Mum calls him "Al", but I think it's Alec. I don't know his second name. All I know is he works part time at the gym at Cresta.'

I was at a loss for words, but now at least I knew the man's first name and where he worked … In the background I could hear the kettle whistling.

'Hang on a sec, Bonny, I need to check something.'

I went through to the kitchen and began making myself a cup of instant coffee. Up until then I'd suppressed the thought of Erin in someone else's

arms, but now the man had a name, somehow making him flesh and blood, I felt mounting anger.

When I returned, Bonny was saying something, but my mind was elsewhere.

'Dad?'

'Sorry, what were you saying?'

'My *fish!*… I said have you been feeding my fish?'

God! I knew I'd forgotten something. 'A few days without food shouldn't kill them,' I said lamely. 'Anyway, I'll feed them now.'

'Please, Dad … and don't forget again, will you?

'Right…' I said vaguely.

'I'd better go now, Dad. Bye.'

'Bye.'

My thoughts returned to what Bonny had told me earlier. I couldn't get the image out of my mind of Erin and 'Alec' in bed together, and I felt a surge of impotent rage. On a sudden impulse I marched through to the bathroom, lathered my face, and shaved off my beard, which I'd started growing all those years ago on my honeymoon.

I stepped back and viewed my handiwork in the mirror. Not bad. But I wasn't finished yet. I grabbed a pair of scissors and snipped off most of my hair. Next, I took the electric trimmer, put it on the first setting, and ran it over my head. The basin was full of stubble. I turned on the tap and watched the old me disappearing down the plug hole…

Now to feed Bonny's fish. As I lifted the aquarium canopy, the fish streaked upwards like jostling torpedoes, gobbling at the food I was sprinkling on the surface. I gave them another pinch of flakes, closed the canopy and headed for the front door to check the weather. As I opened the door icy air hit me. It was a late cold front and sleet was falling – and this was *September!* I didn't relish the idea of spending the weekend in a freezing house, so I decided to light the anthracite heater. It had been an exceptionally mild winter, so there'd been no need to light it until now.

I fetched a bucket of anthracite, as well as a couple of logs and kindling. I'm normally quite adept at lighting the heater, but for some reason I struggled to get it going. Perhaps the wood wasn't dry enough. It smoked a lot, but eventually it took, and I added the anthracite, waiting another twenty minutes to make sure it was burning. But even with the damper fully open, it burned only with a weak glow. Obviously the heater wasn't drawing properly

and would need a service before next winter.

Then out of the blue the feeling of unease that began when I started reading Erin's note announcing her intention to leave me suddenly returned with a vengeance. My mouth went dry and I broke out in a cold sweat. I was obviously having some sort of panic attack. I'd read somewhere that in cases of extreme stress a very long sleep is not only therapeutic but also promotes insight. I remembered that I still had some sleeping pills. If I took a couple now I had the whole weekend to rest. Hopefully, when I awoke my brain would be refreshed and I'd see things a lot more clearly.

I'd originally needed the pills when working night shifts, which meant I had to sleep during the day. But the fairly mild ones my doctor had initially prescribed proved ineffective against noisy lawnmowers, barking dogs and screaming kids. He then prescribed Rohypnol (flunitrazepam), which was a lot more potent. I rummaged in the medicine cupboard and found the Rohypnol box. I think there were four or five tablets left, which I washed down with a glass of water.

The bitter aftertaste of Rohypnol lingered in my mouth. *'You need a drink to take away the taste,'* a voice in my head seemed to say. So I strolled across to the bar where my eyes settled on the bottle of *Doubs Mystique* absinthe that had been gathering dust for several years. The green liquid seemed seductively inviting.

According to the promotional leaflet still attached, absinthe contains the drug, *thujone*, which is extracted from wormwood and causes 'heightened clarity of mind and vision'.

'Just what the doctor ordered!' I mused, opening the bottle and taking a generous swig and then a couple more. Initially I felt wonderful. All my troubles seemed to be melting away. I lurched through to the lounge and plonked myself down on the couch. I'd just taken a couple more swigs, when I heard a shrill sound. It took me a while to realise that it was the telephone ringing. I staggered across and picked up the receiver. I couldn't hear what the caller was saying and I must have let the receiver drop. Now I had trouble focusing, and objects around me appeared to be receding into a kind of pulsing murk. There was also a ringing in my ears – louder than the telephone – and I began to feel nauseous. An image of Erin entwined with Alec wormed its way into my brain. In a fit of mad rage, I grabbed anything I could lay my hands on – phone books, ornaments, a vase of flowers – and flung them across the room. Then I suddenly noticed a menacing bulky object in the

murk that for some reason, not clear to me, I knew I had to destroy! Seizing it with both hands, I wrestled it to the ground. There was a dull explosion. White dust drifted down like snow. I staggered backwards, tripped on the edge of the Persian rug and fell full length on the floor. The last thing I remember seeing was a dull red glow through the glass of the anthracite heater.

Chapter 6

As consciousness returned sometime after dark, I had a pounding headache and an unpleasant metallic taste in my mouth. There was a smell of vomit on my damp T-shirt and I was vaguely aware of being pushed in a wheelchair along Hospital Walk, the brightly-lit walkway through Nelson Mandela City Hospital, the largest medical facility in Johannesburg.

In my rumpled T-shirt and boxer shorts, bare feet, and with a loosely bound cut on my right heel, I couldn't have been a pretty sight. A woman was following the orderly who was pushing the wheel chair, but I couldn't make out who she was.

The woman behind me whispered something to the orderly, who manoeuvred the chair in and out of lifts and down a dimly-lit passage to Casualty Admissions. An antiseptic smell hung everywhere. The orderly handed a scrap of paper to a bored-looking desk clerk. Then a young nurse with a ready smile felt my pulse, took a blood sample and stitched up my heel.

After what seemed an interminable wait, a woman doctor with loose brown hair appeared, greeted me with a nod, and squinted into my eyes through thick-lensed glasses. When she finally spoke, her voice sounded like a distorted echo. She asked me a few questions, but my tongue felt thick and she apparently couldn't understand what I was saying. With a sigh she scribbled some notes and spoke briefly into the telephone, then signalled to the orderly.

As the orderly pushed the wheelchair towards the door, the woman who'd accompanied me remained behind talking to the doctor.

Another seemingly endless journey in slow, hesitant lifts and along colour-coded corridors finally ended outside a red double door. The orderly rang the bell. Moments later an eye appeared at a peephole. A nurse unlocked the door, whispered to the orderly, who nodded, then wheeled me into a brightly lit passage that led to the Reception area. I glanced up at a convex wall mirror that I later learned allowed staff to monitor those entering or leaving. As I continued peering at my reflection, my right ear slowly elongated to a pixie point and my nose skewed to one side.

In the mirror, standing behind me, I noticed a strikingly beautiful girl in her late teens, with long blonde hair. For some reason the mirror hadn't distorted her features as it had mine. I turned round to get a better look, but there was no one there.

On the opposite wall, a large sign said: WELCOME TO WARD 697, WE WISH YOU A PLEASANT STAY.

Behind the Reception counter a stout night sister was reading *The Sowetan*. She raised her droopy eyelids and began appraising me over the stripy leaves of a potted zebra plant.

'Why'm I here?' I slurred. My voice sounded strange, as if someone else was speaking.

When she didn't answer, I tried to struggle out of the wheelchair in the hope of getting her attention.

Her eyes widened and without a word she disappeared into what I later learned was the medications cubicle, emerging with a hypodermic. The last thing I saw before she stuck the needle into my arm was a notice that announced:

THIS IS AN ACUTE ASSESSMENT AND REFERRAL UNIT AND PATIENTS MAY BE TRANSFERRED TO OTHER PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITALS FOR CONTINUING TREATMENT.

Chapter 7

I awoke to find myself propped up in a high, tubular metal bed. My head was surprisingly clear considering the events of the previous day. I was in a ward with eight beds, two unoccupied. The other patients were still sleeping and in the next bed an elderly man with grey wispy hair was snoring loudly. Another patient, his eyes open, was lying on his back, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

The first question that came to mind was: *'what am I doing here?'*

As I swung my feet over the side of the bed, I saw I was wearing blue pyjamas stamped with a hospital logo. My soiled T-shirt and boxers were neatly folded on top of a metal locker next to my bed. Fastened to my wrist was a white plastic bracelet on which was printed, WARD 697, my name, and a nine-digit serial number. As I took a step forward, I felt a little unsteady, but the ringing in my ears had gone.

A nurse, who was bustling from ward to ward on her early morning rounds, called out, 'Time to get up!'

Some of the patients began stirring. Others rolled over and went on sleeping.

Soft sunlight was filtering in between curtains half drawn across a large window. The elevated view over Johannesburg's green northern suburbs indicated that Ward 697 was on one of the upper floors. A few minutes later there was a sudden squeak of shoes on the vinyl floor. A short, slightly built, straw-blonde woman in a blue-and-white uniform with maroon epaulettes bustled into the dormitory ward. 'Oh, I see you're awake now… You've had a very long sleep. … I'm Sister Braithwaite,' she announced with a friendly smile. 'Would you like to follow me?' As I accompanied her down the passage, she went on talking. 'Jenny from Admissions tells me you weren't well enough to complete your form when you arrived. Would you like to give me your details now?'

'No problem, Sister… but why am I actually here?'

As we reached Reception, she said, 'I don't know whether you know this is a psychiatric ward where we assess you?' She turned and looked at me steadily. 'So one of the psychiatrists who'll interview you soon should be

able answer that.'

She reached for a writing block behind the zebra plant. A small knot of patients, still half asleep, some in pyjamas, were queuing at a tea trolley in the passage nearby. A young black woman in her twenties moved closer and regarded me with an unblinking stare. She was singing quietly to herself.

'Don't mind Faith,' Sister Braithwaite whispered, picking up her pen, 'she's quite harmless. 'Actually, we'd better get a move on. Would you like to give me your details now? By the way,' she said with a smile, 'please call me Jill. We use first names here.'

I returned the smile. 'Olly … Olly Jeex.'

'That's a Belgian name, isn't it?'

'No, the "X" isn't from Belgium – more likely Ellis Island. There's a bit of a story to it…'

'Okay, well let's get your details first. Then you can tell me about it later.' She flipped the pages of her pad. 'Can we start with your age?'

'Thirty-eight.'

'You don't look it,' she remarked with a grin. 'I'd have put you at 26 or 27.'

I smiled back and continued giving her my details.

'So what work do you do?' she asked.

'I'm a news monitoring editor at Africa International Radio.'

'Oh.' A pause; then: 'What do you do exactly?'

'Our job is to listen in to African radio stations to get their local news and anything else of African interest.'

'Sounds challenging …

'But before I forget, is there anyone you'd like me to phone?'

'Maybe you could call Prue Spence at the office and tell her where I am and that I'm okay.' I scribbled the number on Jill Braithwaite's writing block. Suddenly I felt a sneeze coming. Cold air conditioning always has this effect on me – apparently more so since I shaved my head. I blew my nose to stop the sneeze.

'Oh goodness,' she said with a start, 'I promised Jenny I'd phone your particulars through in ten minutes. Better get this finished.' She picked up her pen. 'We need to know your next of kin, Olly – purely routine.'

'Well, my wife is … oh, but we're getting divorced.'

'I see … Parents?'

'Killed in a robbery a while ago.'

‘I’m really sorry.’ She paused with a sincere look of regret before continuing. ‘Any grownup children?’

‘My stepson, Matthew. He’s in America, but I’ve got his email address if you want it.’ I suddenly realised I hadn’t told Matthew about Erin wanting a divorce. It would have to wait until I was home. ‘I have an older sister in Johannesburg,’ I continued, ‘but she doesn’t contact me all that often. I can give you her address and phone number if you like. And maybe I should call one of my daughters myself – they’re only teenagers.’

‘Ok, fine. I’ll give your sister a ring just now. And you can call your daughter later. It’s important that immediate family should know you’re here. But I think also give me the name of a close friend – someone who’s reliable and easy to contact.’

I thought of Drew Dillon, an American journalist I’d known since I was a junior reporter. I scribbled his name and number on Jill’s pad.

When she’d phoned the information through, she smiled at me. ‘Now what were you saying about the “X” in your family name, Olly?’

‘Oh, yes … well, the original family name was Jeeves. My great-grandfather, Joseph Jeeves, was a poet and a romantic, but he grew up in Leeds, which was a boring industrial city in Yorkshire. He wanted to seek his fortune abroad, but unfortunately he’d got a girl into trouble and her family were pressing him to marry her. He didn’t want to – at least not then – because he knew he’d be trapped in Leeds, so he ran off to America. Somehow, in America, the name got changed from Jeeves to Jeex. According to my paternal grandmother, Joseph had a stutter and when the immigration clerk at Ellis Island asked him his name, he said “Jeee – Jeee – *Jeee* …” The clerk was impatient and simply put an “x” at the end!

‘He kept the name “Jeex”, possibly so he’d be more difficult to trace. Then he joined the rush of fortune seekers coming to South Africa after gold was discovered. And that’s how the Jeex family name came to be.’

‘And the girl in Leeds?’

‘Nothing more was heard of her or the baby. I’ve always been curious about that – and a little sad.’

‘It *is* a sad story.’

Jill glanced at her watch. ‘Breakfast is in about half an hour. Would you like a bath?’

‘That would be great.’

She looked up at me, suddenly serious. ‘I know what divorce is like,

Olly. It happened to me earlier this year. I'm still not over it.'

She turned quickly and led the way past my dormitory ward to where the passage turned right. There was a smell of toothpaste and disinfectant. 'Toilets on the left,' she said with a wave. 'Showers and baths on the right. There should be soap and towels in your locker.'

'Thanks, Sis—'

'Jill,' she called out over her shoulder, as she headed back down the passage.

An afterthought came to me. 'Hold on a sec, Jill. I only seem to have the clothes I arrived in. I need to phone someone to bring me some clean things.'

She pivoted gracefully on one heel. 'No problem. Come to the nurses' station after breakfast and you can phone from there.'

'See you after breakfast, then.' I strolled back to my dormitory ward. Most of the other patients were still dressing.

I nearly fell over an open suitcase lying on the floor next to the bed nearest the door. I noticed that all the clothes inside it – socks, underpants, pyjamas and shirts – were neatly packed in rows. Crouched next to it, his head bobbing as he polished his shoes was an aquiline-nosed young man with thinning dark hair, perhaps in his mid thirties, wearing a white shirt and charcoal longs. He reminded me of a youthful Sherlock Holmes.

'Faan Cloete,' he said, straightening up and extending a hand.

'Olly Jeex.'

He pumped my hand vigorously. Then he picked up a waistcoat that had been lying on his bed and began twirling it in his fingers, his head cocked on one side. The waistcoat was reversible, green and red paisley on one side and black on the other. He chose the black side and tugged it on with a brisk circular movement of his elbows, like a cock about to crow.

Suddenly he smirked, giving me a sidelong glance. 'You want to hear the good news, Olly?'

'Sure.'

'Well, one of the bonuses of being in a psycho ward is you're *allowed* to act crazy! So feel free. You see, in here what's abnormal is normal, and what's bizarre is routine.' He paused for a moment, apparently to see what effect his words would have. I wanted to laugh but managed to keep my expression neutral.

'Actually, most of us here aren't really crazy, just clinically depressed.'

'Hmmm,' I murmured doubtfully.

‘You’ll find that many of the patients here have very high IQs and a wide general knowledge. Sadly, this is both a blessing a curse.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, the blessing part is obvious, right? Now what about the curse?’ He paused for a moment, apparently to gauge my reaction. But when I didn’t respond, he continued. ‘It’s like this, Olly: if you’re smart enough to see the big picture and understand where this world is heading, then it can be very depressing, especially if you’re sensitive, as many of the patients here are.’

‘I see.’

‘You want to hear the other good news?’

‘Okaaay…’ I murmured tentatively, not sure where this was leading.

‘Well, a psychiatric ward is ideologically liberated territory where censorship is impossible and one can speak the truth. It’s the one place in the world where you can be totally politically incorrect, where you don’t have to look for soft answers to hard questions, where you’re not too chicken to talk turkey. Whatever you say, no matter how outrageous, no one can fire you … or lay charges against you … or sue you for libel … or complain to the Ombudsman. In other words, Ward 697 is a tiny island of free speech.

‘Anyway,’ he continued, ‘come and meet your fellow lunatics!’ He nodded towards a wiry little black man in a faded red T-shirt who was pulling on a pair of baggy khaki longs.

With a jerky, palms-up flourish, Faan said, ‘Olly, *Petrus* – Petrus, *Olly*.’

Petrus stepped forward, gave a final tug on his belt, clasped his hands together and bowed slightly.

‘Pleased to meet you, Petrus,’ I said.

‘Me too, sir.’

‘It’s okay to call me Olly.’

Petrus gave another little bow and nodded at us deferentially.

Faan moved on to the next bed where a man in an old khaki army jersey and limp, grey longs was stuffing tobacco into a battered pipe. I recognised him as the snorer. ‘This is Oom Henk,’ Faan said. ‘Good man, but he’s been having a bit of a hard time recently. Fell down and hit his head on the pavement. He was in Casualty for a couple of days before coming here.’

Oom Henk looked up and smiled, his lips puckering over toothless gums. His weathered face, bruised on one side, told of booze and sleeping rough, but his eyes showed intelligence and humour. He looked somewhat younger than I’d first thought, perhaps in his early sixties. As he shuffled forward,

stooping, I caught a whiff of stale urine.

'The name's Hendrik Steenkamp,' he announced, 'but everyone calls me Oom Henk.' He proffered a hand with nicotine-stained fingers. As I gripped it, I could feel the tremble. 'You know,' he continued with a wheeze, 'I was a journeyman carpenter until I got on the booze. Travelled and worked all over the country – not just Joburg but Durban and Cape Town, too.'

Oom Henk tried unsuccessfully to clear his throat, but was suddenly seized by a fit of coughing.

Faan brought up a chair and helped the old man into it. The coughing became a prolonged splutter.

A voice came from the opposite bed, 'Ag, shut up old man! You snore all fuckin' night. Now you kick up a racket all fuckin' day! A man can't get no peace and quiet with you around!' A sallow youngish man with sideburns dipping below jug ears was propped up on two pillows. He paused, sniffing the air. 'You smell bad, old man. For fuck sake, don't you ever bath? Your name should be "Stinky Steenkamp".'

I noticed the speaker had a tattoo on his left forearm – a red and black snake coiled around a blue dagger. On his right arm was another tattoo – a black 'SS' within a red circle.

Faan ignored the man, made a cracking noise with his knuckles, and then moved along the aisle between the beds. An elderly man in light blue flannelette pyjamas was slumped in a chair next to the bed nearest the window, staring into space. I recognised him as the man who'd earlier been gazing at the ceiling.

'Morris?' Faan called softly, laying a hand on his shoulder. *'Morris?'* The old man looked up and smiled vaguely. 'This is Olly. He's new here. They've put him in the bed next to you.'

Morris's lips moved, but no sound came. With an effort he hunched his shoulders and shuffled his feet. In a voice barely above a whisper he said, 'How do you do.' He paused, his jaw working. Presently he extended a bony hand. The skin was unhealthily white. I held it for a moment without exerting any pressure.

Faan nudged me and cast his eyes towards the door. 'See you at breakfast, then, Morris,' he said, taking my arm. As we reached the door, I remembered I wanted a bath. 'Hang on a sec,' I said, 'I need to get a towel and soap.' I found a towel in my locker but no soap.

'No problem,' Faan said, 'I'll lend you mine.'

In the passage, I turned to Faan, ‘I meant to ask you. Who’s the tattooed guy?’

‘Dirk,’ he said, rolling his eyes. ‘Small things irritate him. He picks on people all the time for no apparent reason. Says he’s a graduate “Come Lordy”. That means he’s done more than five years in jail.’

‘What for?’

‘Assaulting a petrol jockey. The guy was topping Dirk’s car up with oil when he dropped the cap somewhere in the engine. Dirk went crazy and broke the guy’s arm.’

‘How do you know all this?’

‘He told me himself. Actually, he’s proud of it.

‘Anyway, after he was released from jail there’ve been press reports of him threatening to stab his neighbours’ dogs. This time the neighbours chased him away and called the police, who found him standing in the middle of the road shouting at cars and waving a knife. They kept him in the cells overnight. But when he told them next morning that the dogs in Vrededorp were ganging up on him and he was going back to kill them, the cops brought him here.’

Faan gave a shrug before continuing. ‘I’ve seen Dirk’s mother when she comes to visit, and she seems a bit of a fusspot – obviously stressed out – but who wouldn’t be with a son like that.’

‘By the way, Faan,’ I said, ‘what’s that tattoo on Dirk’s arm, the one with the SS in a circle?’

‘It’s the symbol of the Siener Sirkel. You may have heard of it – it’s an extreme rightwing Afrikaner group that bases its beliefs on the prophesies of Siener van Rensburg.’

‘You mean the Boer War prophet who predicted South Africa would one day have a black government that would last only a few years and then the Afrikaners would take the country back?’

‘Right.’

‘You don’t take his predictions seriously do you, Faan?’

‘I don’t take *any* predictions seriously.’

‘But being an Afrikaner yourself aren’t you sympathetic?’

‘I can understand their motivation but I don’t excuse it. Their involvement in violence is dead wrong. And of course it can only backfire on them.’

Faan glanced sideways at me. ‘So why are you in here, Olly?’

‘I swallowed some pills that I shouldn’t have taken and then drank quite a lot of absinthe.’

‘Were you trying to commit suicide, or what?’

‘No, no, nothing like that. My wife suddenly took off with another guy, and it was a big shock to me. I just needed to de-stress, so I thought I’d try some self-induced sleep therapy – *big mistake!’*

‘Well, the opposite happened to me. I *stopped* taking the pills that I should have been taking. At the time I was feeling fine, so I saw no point in continuing. Then, if you’ll pardon the pun, the shit hit the *Faan!’* He glanced at his watch. ‘Hey, if you want a bath, Olly, you’d better hurry; breakfast is in less than half an hour.’

The bathroom was clean and neat except for an empty bottle of shampoo someone had left on the floor. Before I turned on the taps, I looked around for the bathplug but couldn’t find it, so I stuffed the outlet with a ball of toilet paper, resting my foot on it while the bath filled with hot water.

Chapter 8

Patients were now emerging from their dormitory wards and filing down the passage. As I joined the crush, I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Faan. ‘Medication time, Olly. Want to come along and keep me company?’

‘Okay. But I wonder if you could lend me some clothes until someone brings me mine?’

‘Sure. Hang on a sec.’

A couple of minutes later he was back with a pair of navy-blue boxer shorts and a white T-shirt.

‘Thanks a lot, Faan. Do you mind hanging on while I quickly change?’

‘No problem. Actually, I need to go to the toilet, so I’ll meet you back here.’

I’d already changed and rejoined the queue by the time Faan returned.

He indicated that I should follow him. We sauntered down the passage to a large north-facing room, which Faan said was the common room. This was where patients spent most of the day.

A constant background noise greeted us – shuffling feet; occasional shouts of laughter; someone singing off-key; chairs being shifted; the quick tap-tap of nurses’ shoes; and the click of plastic utensils. On the other side of the room was a full-sized ping-pong table. A similar but smaller table without a net stood in a corner. A long north-facing window stretched the width of the room. A couple of low coffee tables stood nearby. Next to these were about a dozen red vinyl easy chairs in which several patients were sitting, some half asleep; others quietly reading. A burly black man in a wheelchair was staring out of the window.

‘These people…’ I whispered to Faan, ‘…have they been here long?’

‘A couple of weeks on average. Most of them are suffering from depression or related conditions. When they’ve been stabilised they get discharged, or sometimes referred to Tara for longer-term treatment.’

Casting my eye around the room, I noticed an upright piano and a tea trolley in a small alcove. Next to this was a recessed dining area with Formica-topped tables and tubular metal chairs. Standing at the entrance to the dining area next to a stainless steel trolley, a middle-aged sister with

severely short hair was handing out pills and small plastic cups of water.

'That's Sister Nina,' Faan said. 'She gives us our medication. He pointed to the pink, green, blue, purple, yellow, white and multi-coloured tablets on the trolley. '"Smarties" we call them.'

Sister Nina handed Faan his tablets and a cup.

'It's generic Prozac and Lithium to control bipolar disorder,' he explained. 'That's just a fancy name for manic depression.'

Faan grimaced, took a sip of water and swallowed the tablets with a robotic jerk. Meanwhile, two kitchen staff had wheeled in a food trolley and were spooning out dollops of steaming oatmeal into bowls. There was an appetising smell of freshly made toast. We took a tray each and piled on bowls of porridge, plastic containers of scrambled egg, as well as toast, margarine, jam and coffee. Then we grabbed a set of plastic cutlery wrapped in paper napkins, before seating ourselves at a table meant for four.

I made the mistake of sipping my coffee while it was too hot and felt a twinge in my sensitive molar, reminding me that I still needed to make an appointment with Dr Byat.

Just then a distinguished looking woman in a pink satin dressing gown, who appeared to be lost, began wandering among the tables. She reminded me of an aging Bette Davis. (I'm a classic movie fan).

'That's Leah,' Faan whispered. 'She keeps very much to herself. Some days she's completely out of it – can't even find her own way back to her dormitory ward without a patient or a nurse helping her.'

Leah's eyes settled on us. 'Good morning, gentlemen,' she said in a cultured northern suburbs voice, 'May I join you?'

'Please do', we both said together, then laughed.

With unsteady hands, she placed her tray on the table, before taking a seat opposite us. 'How do you do, I'm Leah Lorkin,' she said, as Faan introduced me.

Her meagre breakfast comprised a small plate of cornflakes, some toast and jam, and a cup of coffee. As she toyed with her cornflakes, she strained to see through the window on the other side of the room. 'It's such a lovely day outside,' she said with a wistful look. 'But in here we can't even hear the birds singing. I used to love Johannesburg in the spring when Mendel and I would go for long walks around Delta Park… Mendel is my husband… or rather, *was* my husband. He died nearly a year ago of a heart attack.'

'Sorry about your loss,' Faan said. (Later Faan told me that Leah had

been admitted to the ward after becoming addicted to tranquilizers.)

Leah gave a sigh. ‘I get the feeling Dr Stott doesn’t think I’ve made much progress. I can’t even remember when I arrived here, but it seems a long time ago. She seems to think it’s important I should know what day of the week it is. But I can never remember that. … What day is it?’

Faan checked the date on his watch. ‘Monday.’

‘Sunday, Monday, they’re all the same to me.’

‘Is it really Monday?’ I asked. ‘I seem to have lost a day somewhere.’

‘Well, bru, you slept all of yesterday, which was Sunday,’ said Faan. ‘The duty sister came past just before breakfast and said Dr Stott had left instructions that you should be allowed to wake on your own.’

‘So *that’s* where Sunday went!’ I exclaimed.

Although Leah had finished her coffee, she had eaten only half her cornflakes and a few small bites of toast. ‘Please excuse me,’ she said turning to each of us with a smile, ‘but I want to see if there are any messages for me at Reception.’

At the next table, two nurses were helping Morris into a chair. He was wearing a loose double-breasted suit, braces, and a striped collarless shirt. The old man sat down heavily and stared blankly ahead. Faan greeted him with a wave, but he didn’t seem to notice. One of the nurses sat next to him and began feeding him spoonfuls of porridge. A little way from us, Oom Henk was sitting on his own at a table, loudly slurping up his porridge. After a few mouthfuls, he grimaced, licked his spoon, then dug it into a sugar bowl and took a big scoop. A moment later Petrus loped up to the table with a tray piled high with generous portions of everything.

A little above Oom Henk’s head was a wall notice, with the words, ‘YOUR D.T. PROGRAMME’, spelt out in bent pipe cleaners.

‘What’s a D.T. Programme?’ I asked.

‘Should be O.T., not D.T.,’ Faan said with a smirk. ‘O. T. stands for occupational therapy; DT, as you probably know, stands for Delirium Tremens, the shakes you get in the final stages of alcoholism. Some joker has straightened the left side of the O to make a D.’

‘So when do we do O. T.?’ I asked.

‘Most mornings. The occupational therapist – that’s Sue – takes patients down to the O. T. centre on the ground floor. Not all patients go; only those the doctors think are up to it. But I’m sure you’ll be going, Olly. It’s actually quite fun.’

As I downed my last mouthful of coffee – now cool – I suddenly remembered about getting more clothes, so I decided to call Drew Dillon. I'd also ask Jill whether I could use the phone to try and catch Bonny after school.

I excused myself, agreeing to meet Faan later in the common room. At Reception I found Jill busy with some paperwork. She looked up, smiled, and waved towards the telephone.

Drew was shocked to hear where I was, but said he would certainly bring me some clothes, as well as toiletries and a pair of slip-slops.

'Damn!' I said, just as I put down the phone.

Jill looked up in surprise. 'Forgotten something?'

'Yes, a bathplug. I meant to ask my friend to bring one.'

She giggled. 'That's one of the great mysteries here. Bathplugs disappear all the time. No one knows who takes them – or why. But we have a couple of spare ones.' She reached into a drawer and handed me one. 'Hang on to this, Olly, otherwise it'll also disappear.'

I thanked Jill and sauntered back to the common room to wait for Faan, where there was a pervasive smell of cigarette smoke, which I thought unusual, seeing it was a hospital. I went over and stood by the window. But like the window in my dormitory ward, this one was also sealed. There was no way I could inhale fresh air.

When Faan returned I said I thought smoking was banned in hospitals.

'Officially, yes, but it's very difficult to enforce the "no smoking" rule in a psychiatric ward. If you tried, most patients would be climbing the walls. Apparently, they tried to enforce the ban some years ago, but that just drove it underground, where it was considered much more of a problem. Some started smoking under their bedclothes, raising the risk of a fire. So now staff pretend not to notice.'

Chapter 9

Johannesburg's lush green suburbs spread in all directions before me in the bright morning sunlight. As I scanned the view to the west, I couldn't see Melville because most of it lay hidden behind Parktown Ridge. Further to the right was the open parkland above the Botanical Gardens where Erin and I used to walk most weekends. And beyond that was the Cresta shopping mall, where the Dutch girl had recently disappeared. Much nearer, clinging to Parktown Ridge like a Mediterranean hillside village was the multi-level Westcliff Hotel. At this time, I guessed, rich businessmen and foreign tourists would be having croissants and coffee on the terrace.

To the East was the Killarney Mall, which reminded me of my stepson, Matthew, who'd been drawn in the American Green Card Lottery. The American Consulate, scene of many noisy demonstrations, had once been located across the road from the Mall but had moved to Sandton. Matthew now worked in Salt Lake City as a programmer. At twenty three, and with a computer science degree, Matthew saw no future in South Africa, especially after he'd been stabbed on a suburban train in Cape Town. He had bled a lot but wasn't seriously injured. However, this incident had prompted him to enter the American Green Card lottery. He was drawn first time.

Through gaps between a stand of bluegum trees I could now glimpse the traffic flashing along the M-1 highway. Beyond the trees but within earshot was the Zoo. I wondered whether I'd be able to hear the lions roaring at night.

Just then I noticed Faan standing at the far end of the room, examining a wall notice. I strolled over to him. After a few minutes of small talk, I asked him bluntly, 'What actually happened to you, Faan? You said something about the shit hitting the fan after you stopped taking your pills.'

'That's right. Let's sit over there by the window and I'll tell you all about it. But first let's get some coffee.'

We found two easy chairs alongside a coffee table in a bright patch of sunlight.

Faan took a sip of coffee and leaned back. 'Actually it's a long story.'

I gave a nod of encouragement.

‘Well, it started a few years ago when I began getting terrible headaches. My doc prescribed some medication, but it didn’t help, so he sent me to a neurologist. After a battery of tests and scans, the neurologist finally told me, “You’ve got a brain tumour, so we need to operate as soon as possible.”

‘When I came round from the operation my first thought was, “Thank God, I’m alive and I can still think and feel!” I just lay there in intensive care wriggling my toes and wondering if I had cancer…’

Faan’s voice trailed off as he leaned back and absentmindedly plucked out a nose hair between thumb and forefinger.

Finally he said, ‘Well, I promised myself if it’s not cancer, then from now on I’m going to live life to the full, do crazy things just to remind myself I’m alive! Know what I mean?’

‘I think so,’ I said doubtfully’

‘Of course, when I heard there was no cancer, it was a massive relief. Still, I wasn’t entirely out of the woods. They gave me all sorts of tests, including a Rorschach blot test to check for brain damage, but luckily there was none.’

Faan linked his hands behind his head, leaned back further and stretched his legs out in front of him. ‘As soon as I got out of hospital, I looked for risky things to do that would get my adrenaline pumping. But it was too soon after the operation to take up parachuting and scuba diving, so I went gambling instead.’ Faan unclasped his hands and leaned forward, making eye contact. ‘You see, Olly, gambling was very stimulating to begin with and it was fun doing the rounds of the casinos, but after a while I started coming down. It was like getting used to a drug, and I found myself slipping into depression. When I started having seriously depressive episodes, I decided I needed help.’ He gave a dismissive shrug. ‘So I saw a psychiatrist. She said she wasn’t sure what was wrong – maybe it was because of the brain tumour I’d had. Anyway, she put me onto Lithium.

‘Anyway, I began feeling fine again, so I didn’t see the point of taking my medication, so I stopped. It was stupid, I know, but I was obviously back in a manic phase, although I didn’t realise it at the time. I wasn’t sleeping more than two or three hours, and sometimes I’d stay up the whole night frantically working on my car. It’s a souped-up 1960 DKW two-stroke that I built from scrap parts. One day I had this funny feeling that I needed a big buzz – a *really* big one. So I jumped into the Deke and took off like a rocket. I was weaving in and out of traffic, not stopping for anything. I shot down

High Street, Brixton, until I hit Ontdekkers Road, then headed west, jumping every red robot along the way.'

'You hit anything?'

'No but lots of near misses!' He slapped his thigh and chortled. 'Eventually, when I reached Krugersdorp, I began to calm down. I stopped and had a coke and a hot dog, and then drove quietly back to Brixton.'

Chapter 10

A few moments later, a fresh, cheerful voice rang out across the common room. A stunningly beautiful blonde girl in her late teens or early twenties was playing scrabble with a middle-aged man at a nearby table. Perhaps she was the same girl I'd seen in the convex mirror when I first arrived but who'd suddenly disappeared.

'Who are those two?' I asked Faan.

'Kristy and Gabriel. Kristy's been terribly abused and Gabriel is a religious nut who went berserk at a shopping centre.'

I felt a sudden frisson as the girl turned and smiled at me. The last time I'd felt such a sudden magnetic attraction was when I first saw Erin. As Kristy talked, she slowly rotated a piece of gum in her mouth. I normally find gum-chewing repulsive, but she had that rare, indefinable quality that some women have that can transform an unattractive habit into an endearing one.

I could only hear what *she* was saying; Gabriel was speaking in undertones.

'Wicca *is* a proper word!'

…

'Yes, it is.'

…

'No, it's *not* satanic.'

…

'Well, you don't have to play if you don't want to, Gabriel. No one's *forcing* you.' She had a young girl's animated voice, the accent mildly Afrikaans, crisp and sweet.

My pulse was racing. One part of me was smitten with this young girl and yet I still loved Erin. Anyway, I mused, Kristy was far too young for me; but *hey*, what's the harm in a little innocent fantasising…?

'Tell me about Kristy,' I prompted Faan.

'Kristy Minnaar … nice girl … she's in her late teens. But as you can see she looks older.'

'You said she'd been abused.'

'That's right. She told us that her grandfather had begun interfering with

her from when she was about five.'

'Her *grandfather?!'* I exclaimed.

'Ja, I know it's hard to believe. But that's not all. Her mother has remarried, and now her stepfather is always trying to feel her up. Also, her stepbrothers have been threatening her after she refused to have sex with them.'

'But why can't she just leave home?'

'With no skills? Where to?'

'I see…'

Faan pursed his lips and gave his head a slow shake. 'After this latest abuse, Kristy became self-destructive, cutting herself on her arms with a razor blade. Apparently, she also went a bit off the rails, but I don't know the details. All I know is that she was very depressed when she arrived in the ward, but she seems a lot better now. The one thing that seems to help her forget her problems is reading. She's always got her nose in a book.'

'Poor girl. I think I can understand the self-destructive urge.'

'Ja, some very depressed people see cutting as a form of cleansing. They feel it's easier to deal with the physical pain of cutting than the psychological pain inside.'

'Hmmm.'

'One of the night sisters told me that that's why we only have plastic cutlery.'

'So how do they treat people who cut themselves?'

'Gerda, one of the psychologists, uses hypnotherapy, and I hear that has quite good results with most patients.'

Pointing to a woman with untidy hair playing scrabble at one of the tables, Faan said, 'That's Sonja. She tried suicide, not because of a crime but because her husband was carrying on with other women. She swallowed a whole lot of pills. Medics brought her in here after her stomach was pumped.'

A plump young redhead had joined the group. 'And who's that girl who has just sat down?' I asked.

'Oh, that's Marge. Apparently, over the past couple of years she's been in and out of here at least three times. She's a Bipo like me. Well, not quite like me. She's what's called an "ultra-rapid-cycler". Her moods swing from up to down, and then back up again, all within a matter of minutes. My ups and downs usually last for months. I'm actually quite a stable person,' he added with a wink, '*if* I remember to take my medication!'

Chapter 11

After a good night's sleep I awoke the following morning feeling refreshed. All the toxins I'd swallowed had apparently flushed out of my system.

It was a bright sunny day – perfect for a run in the park. But here I was, behind unbreakable glass, confined in a mental health institution, with no idea when I'd be discharged.

After breakfast, Faan and I went through to the common room.

'I've been wondering, Faan, what's Gabriel's story?

'He's a religious nut, as I think I told you. For him the Apocalypse is always just around the corner – *and* the devil, too. Apparently, his teenage son rebelled against being force-fed religion and joined an occult group involved in drugs and sex. One day the boy was found dead in the driveway of his commune. Gabriel flipped out. He made a huge wooden cross of floor boards and dragged it into a shopping centre, where he produced a six inch nail and nailed his foot to it. That's how he ended up in Ward 697.'

'There're so many sad stories here.'

'You're right, Olly. I think we need cheering up a bit. What about some light-hearted music, eh? I'll play something on the piano that everyone knows. Then we can all sing along.' He went over to the table where Marge and Kristy were sitting with some other women patients, and invited them to join the sing-song. Kristy squeezed in between Marge and me. The touch of her body sent a delicious shiver down my spine.

'Any requests?' Faan called out, a cigarette bobbing in his mouth.

Silence.

He raised his hands in the air like a stage magician, then, with a great flourish, began to play *Die Bobejaan Klim Die Berg*. At the end of the first verse he called over his shoulder, 'Please listen to the words all of you because in a moment I want you to sing along too.' On the next time round, he called out, 'Okay, all together *now!'*

When the last tinkling note had sounded, Kristy leaned forward. 'You're fucking marvellous, Faan. Please play some more.'

'Maybe *ordinary* marvellous, Kristy; certainly not *fucking* marvellous.'

Although Faan was smiling I could see he was serious.

'Ag Faan, man, don't be snaaks! You know what I mean.'

I've always found the Afrikaans word 'snaaks' jarring when used by English-speakers, but in Kristy's case I sensed her choice of words and her accent were due to her upbringing and seemed at odds with her classy looks.

After the others had dispersed, Kristy and Marge went over to the big ping pong table, while Faan and I stood by the common room window, looking out over the zoo.

'Did you ever jump red lights again?'

Faan flashed me a wicked grin. 'Of course! By then I was hooked on the thrill. So I did it three or four more times over the next couple of months … before I finally got caught.'

'What happened?'

'Well, just as I was finishing my run back from Krugersdorp, I heard a siren. When I looked round I saw this cop on a bike behind me. Took me a minute or two to realise that this shorthaired, heavy-hipped, hard-arsed cop was a *she*. I thought I could shake her off, but no luck.'

'So what happened after you were arrested?'

'Of course, I was suspended from my job, luckily on full pay. Then they put me on indefinite sick leave after my psychiatrist contacted my boss and explained my mental state. When I appeared in court, my attorney called on her – the shrink, I mean – to testify. She said her diagnosis was that I was bipolar with suicidal tendencies. She said she would recommend that I be admitted to a psychiatric facility for further evaluation. I think it was the "suicidal" bit that got me off the hook. Actually, I'm not at all suicidal, just manic, which sometimes triggers risky behaviour. So there's actually quite a positive side to being bipolar!'

'Okaaay…' I said doubtfully.

'Ja, during your manic phases you become more creative, word usage improves, you get some unique ideas.'

'Then you must have some creative interests?'

'Sure. Besides playing the piano, I also play the guitar. I do the odd watercolour. And I do a lot of writing.'

'Anything published?'

Faan took a long draw on his cigarette and let some of the smoke filter out through his nostrils. 'Not yet… As an unpublished writer, I'm someone who gets rejected for a living!'

‘But if you eventually get one published, you could become rich.’

‘Not in South Africa, not from a novel.’

‘So what sort of writing pays best here?’

‘That’s easy, Olly – forged cheques, blackmail demands and kidnap notes. Crime’s the only profitable occupation left in this country.’

Chapter 12

Kitchen staff were now wheeling in a trolley stacked with clean crockery, tea bags and coffee. Everyone rushed to queue. I found myself behind Kristy. She turned and smiled.

‘You’re new here, aren’t you,’ she said, squinting up at me.

‘Yes, I arrived a couple of days ago.’

‘What’s your name?’ she asked.

‘Olly.’

‘Mine’s Kristy.’ She flicked her blonde hair away from her face and then added, ‘but you can call me “Kris”.’

‘Okay.’

‘I can tell that you’re a bit shy, Olly. I like that.’

I felt her take my hand in hers. She had only just learned my name, yet it felt as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I smiled but made no reply. She had a poise and confidence that seemed to belie her deprived background and her youth.

‘So who’s your doctor, Olly?’

‘Haven’t seen one yet.’

‘Well, if you’re lucky you’ll get Dr van Tonder or Dr Stott. They’re both nice. I’m with Dr Stott. I really hope you don’t get Dr Zapata. She’s weird.’

‘How weird?’

‘Seriously weird. Her first name is Pilar – Pilar Zapata. She’s from Cuba. So we, that’s Marge and me, call her “Dr Pull-a-Zap-at-Her”. Half the time she hasn’t a clue what you’re saying. When she asks you a *dom* question you know she hasn’t understood a fucking word.’

‘I don’t think one should blame her for language difficulties, Kris, provided she’s a good doctor.’

‘Well, some of the things she does are pretty random. She keeps a dice in her drawer and one of the patients saw her rolling it before she sent someone off for shock therapy.’

‘Could be just a coincidence. I mean her playing with the dice. You know, like doodling when you’re thinking about something.’

‘But Olly, it’s not only the patients here who don’t like her. The night

sisters also. She's the only psychiatrist who comes snooping around the wards late at night.'

The patient behind us tapped Kristy on the shoulder. It was Kristy's turn in the queue. The click of plastic spoons in cups sounded ahead. 'Let's talk later, Olly.' She gave my hand a slow squeeze, before helping herself to coffee.

Jill Braithwaite was beckoning to me from the end of the passage. 'Oh, Olly, Dr Stott would like to see you.'

I followed Jill through to Reception. 'That's her office over there,' she continued, pointing to a door on the right. 'She'll call you when she's finished with the other patient. You can wait here if you like.'

I liked Jill Braithwaite and felt like chatting to her. 'Are you very busy?'

'Just writing up patients' records. But I need a break. Hang on while I fetch a cup of coffee.'

When she returned I asked her about something that had been puzzling me. 'I see quite a lot of the sisters and staff in this ward are white, but in most other wards I hear they're mostly black. Why's that?'

'Well, quite a high proportion of medical staff – not just Blacks – aren't comfortable working with psychiatric patients. You have to be a special sort of person to handle this job. But apparently the proportion among Blacks is much higher, perhaps for cultural reasons.'

I paused for a few moments digesting what Jill had just said. Then I added: 'Earlier you mentioned disappearing bathplugs.'

'Yes, if it was patients who were taking them one would expect to find the odd one in a locker, or somewhere in a ward, but once they disappear, they're gone for good.'

'One other thing that's puzzling me, Jill, is that none of the nurses and sisters here wear name tags. My memory has taken a bit of a knock, so it would be helpful to know who I'm talking to.'

'I'm not sure about that. But I can ask, if you like.'

Dr Stott's door opened and Leah, wearing a black tracksuit, emerged. She seemed upset. A tall woman in her late thirties with a long sweep of dark hair was standing behind her. She put a hand on Leah's shoulder. 'I'm afraid not yet, Leah,' she was saying, 'We need a bit more time to see how you respond to the new medication. But I don't think it'll be too long now.'

'Thank you doctor,' Leah said uncertainly, and then drifted away towards the common room.

‘Mr Jeex?’ Dr Stott glanced around the Reception area until she saw me. ‘Please come this way.’ As she turned and walked back into her office, her long black skirt swung with panache. ‘Do sit down,’ she said with a smile, opening a brown file and paging through it. Finally, she gave me an appraising look. ‘I’m sorry I couldn’t see you earlier but I had to make sure that all the things you’d ingested had a chance to pass out of your system before I could prescribe any medication.’

I nodded.

‘I understand this was an accident, rather than a suicide attempt?’

‘That’s right, doctor. I just made a stupid mistake. I mean with the pills. I wasn’t trying to commit suicide or anything like that.’

‘Actually, I believe you, but you must understand that sometimes patients lie in order to be discharged earlier, so we officially still have to treat your case as a para-suicide. But, having said that, don’t be too hard on yourself. We all make mistakes, especially during times of stress. By the way, may I call you by your first name?

‘Sure.’

‘It’s Olly isn’t it?

‘That’s right.’

‘Well, please call me Liz. I’m your psychiatrist while you’re in this ward, as well as for any out-patient consultations. If you have any problems, just come to me. You’ll probably need to have one or two tests this week, possibly an MRI scan if we can get a booking. But first tell me exactly what happened.’

I sensed that Liz Stott was a decent person, so I decided to be open with her. ‘There’s a lot I can’t remember after I took those pills, but I’ll try.’

As I spoke she made notes. When I’d finished, she glanced up and said: ‘Well, you’re very lucky to be alive, Olly. If it hadn’t been for that woman who brought you to hospital, you probably would have died.’

‘Who was she?’

‘I don’t know. She dropped you off at casualty, but didn’t give her name. I find that rather odd.’

‘Possibly someone from work ... or maybe a neighbour.’

‘Well, clearly you must have been under a lot of stress before all this happened. The panic attacks are a strong indication.’

Dr Stott peered into the file before continuing.

‘I sense that you’ve probably been suffering from clinical depression for

at least a year. But breakdowns are not always caused by a single traumatic event. Often it's a cumulative process, but it was definitely the Rohypnol mixed with the absinthe that pushed you over the edge.'

'Did I do anything violent?' I waited with bated breath, dreading the answer and knowing that if I had, I was unlikely to be discharged any time soon.

'Nothing I'm aware of. According to your wife, who phoned the ward earlier to find out how you were – she spoke to me – all you did was drop the television set from a height and it exploded in the middle of the lounge carpet.'

With a sense of relief, I said, 'So *that's* where all the shards of glass and white dust came from.'

'Yes, you destroyed a perfectly good TV.'

'Actually, it was a very old 74 centimetre Phillips.'

'Well, you must have had a subconscious urge to trash it. Was it giving trouble?'

'Not really. I just couldn't bear to see my teenage daughters watching the mindless rubbish that passes for entertainment.'

'On a more serious note, as I've said, you are clearly in clinical depression, Olly. And I'm a little concerned about your panic attacks. So I'm going to start you on some medication from today. In the mornings you'll be getting two tablets. The oval one is Aropax. It's an anti-depressant that should also stop the panic attacks and generally balance your mood. The round one is Thiamine, or vitamin B1, which improves neural functioning.'

'Any side effects?'

'You may experience a dry mouth, ringing in your ears and occasionally leg tremors while you're sitting. Some people feel as if they've drunk too much coffee. If that happens we'll just reduce the dose for a few days.'

'Is that all, then, Liz?'

'Actually, that's the first "Liz" you've managed, Olly!' Her eyes widened in mock disbelief. 'It means you're beginning to relax, and that's good. Oh yes, I'd nearly forgotten. In the evenings you'll be getting a sleeping tablet until you settle down. At the same time we need to start you on therapy. I normally don't do that myself, but Gerda, one of our psychologists, will be seeing you. Is it okay if I make an appointment for you to see her tomorrow after lunch, say, at three?'

'That's fine.'

Chapter 13

Around eleven o'clock the following morning, Faan and I were drinking coffee in the common room when I saw Petrus peering at the pictures and notices on the walls.

'I've been meaning to ask you, Faan, why is Petrus here?'

'He's a victim of bureaucracy combined with a clash of cultures. Being a simple rural person who hadn't adapted well to city life, he didn't understand the rules and regulations he was supposed to abide by. He had a collection of thirty or more snakes in an enclosure he'd built in the backyard of the house where he worked as a gardener. His boss didn't mind, but some busybody reported him, and a conservation official came and confiscated them all. Well, since he regarded them almost as his children, he reacted as if they'd been kidnapped, rushing off to the Nature Conservation Offices and demanding they be returned. When the official refused, he started trashing the place. Someone called the police, who tried to arrest him for causing a disturbance and also as a suspected illegal immigrant because of his dark complexion. At this point, he calmly pulled a snake from his pocket and started eating it. The cops thought he was insane, so they brought him here.'

Faan lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out in a long stream. 'Anyway, Petrus's problems started long before he began catching snakes. More than ten years ago he was working in Johannesburg as a gardener when he heard that his wife was having an affair with a driver at her work. One day he found them kissing in a parking lot and was so enraged that he was about to fetch a knife and kill them. But then a voice in his head told him to go far away and live in the bush, where he would find peace, as well as wisdom. So he took a bus north to Limpopo, where he comes from.'

Faan paused to glance across the room at Petrus, who was still studying the pictures and notices on the walls, before continuing. 'Well, then he listened to the voice and went into the bush with nothing but his clothes, a knife, and some stout fishing line. He had to live off the land, learning to catch small animals, birds and snakes and cook them with herbs like *marog*. Sometimes he'd roast mielie cobs he picked up at the edge of fields. But after a while he didn't bother to cook the snakes, eating them raw, skin and all.

‘He also found that he could make a little money by selling wild herbs and roots to muti shops. After getting to know a few herbalists, he decided he’d like to become one too. One day he heard that some villagers were accusing him of being a wizard and causing lightning strikes, so he fled the area, finally drifting back to Johannesburg, where he did various casual jobs.

‘His experiences in the bush seem to have developed a special relationship with animals. On a recent accompanied trip to the zoo that our OT group went on, one could sense Petrus was communicating with the animals. They would come up to the fence and look steadily at him – they paid no attention to the rest of us – and he’d whisper something to them. Some would respond with grunts or snuffling sounds.’

After lunch, Faan suggested we play a game of ping pong. I hadn’t played for years but as we batted the ball back and forth, I recalled the raucous games I’d played as a teenager at Drakensberg resorts and later at youth hostels while travelling around Britain. I was still absorbed in my reverie when I heard Faan call, ‘My service!’ The ball streaked over the net. I powered my bat down, missed the ball and hit the edge of the table. The handle splintered with a loud crack.

‘Oh shit!’ I dropped the bat and gripped the edge of the table. I felt something sticky clinging to my middle finger. It was a lump of chewing gum stuck to the underside. ‘Shit again!’

Faan looked sheepish. He came round the table and whispered in my ear. ‘Sorry pal, I might have stuck it there yesterday when I was called to the phone. Anyway, don’t be too hard on chewing gum. It’s supposed to help one stay alert and also recall random words.’

I was about to say that I didn’t need gum to recall words, but I thought better of it. Faan was the sort of person I couldn’t be cross with. So was Kristy, who was a far more likely culprit.

Faan lit a cigarette, picked up the broken bat and began turning it over slowly. ‘Don’t worry, Olly, I’m sure we can fix it. Anyway, that gum has given me an idea. I’ll ask my wife Katie to bring some Pratley glue and a clamp when she visits me tonight. I know Kristy has a cell phone, and I’m sure she won’t mind sending Katie an SMS. Better hurry. Katie needs to slip out in her lunch hour to buy the glue.’

‘I checked my watch. ‘Better keep an eye on the time. I’ve an

appointment with Gerda... What's she like?'

'Really cool. She studied in Holland, so she's pretty broadminded. You'll like her. Just go through the red door on the far side of the common room and turn left. Hers is the second or third office.'

A name plaque on the second door said GERDA RIJNDERS, PSYCHOLOGIST.

After I knocked a couple of times, an attractive brown-haired young woman in a well-cut cream trouser suit opened the door. 'Oliver Jeex?' she said, with a ready smile.

I gave a tentative nod, not quite knowing what to expect.

Hers was a small neat office with a broad, light-wood desk, two easy chairs, and a bookcase topped with a vase of dried proteas. A filing cabinet and a small bar fridge completed the sparse but practical furnishings.

After I'd greeted her, she motioned me towards a chair, pulled up the other chair beside me, crossed her legs and opened a note pad.

'If you don't mind, let me call you Olly,' she began, 'and of course please call me Gerda. Dr Stott has given me your file and I've read her notes. She says she's pretty certain it wasn't a suicide attempt.'

I nodded, while I tried to place her accent. It seemed cultured Afrikaans, with a slight German or Dutch overlay.

'Dr Stott thinks you have a very high stress level that I think we need to work on. But first I want to get a clear picture of what's been stressing you over the past year or so. If you don't mind I want you to go over the events that led to your being admitted here.'

I repeated what I'd told Liz Stott but with a few more details. I added that like most people I also found the political situation in the country very stressful. When I'd finished, Gerda slipped her pen into her breast pocket and leaned back. 'Now I want you to think very carefully, Olly, and tell me if there was anything that was causing you stress *before* your wife left you, since Dr Stott tells me she thinks you've been depressed for quite a while.'

For a moment I was at a loss for words. 'I never really thought about it, Gerda. But, yes, I suppose I must have been. I went through a period about a year ago when I had trouble sleeping. I also had terrible nightmares. I still get them sometimes.'

'What sort of nightmares?'

'Mainly about hijackers. I was hijacked just over a year ago.' My tongue now seemed to be sticking to the roof of my mouth. 'I wonder if I could have

a glass of water please, Gerda?'

'Sure.' She swivelled round and reached across her desk for a carafe and a glass. The afternoon sun streaming through the window glinted on the carafe as she poured the water, somehow putting me at ease. Then she said: 'Did you have any therapy after the hijacking?'

'No, I didn't want to talk about it to anyone.'

'And did you say anything to your wife?'

'I told her I'd been hijacked. But I didn't tell her I'd been beaten up. In fact I tried to avoid the subject. I just wanted to forget about it as quickly as possible. So I told her that talking about it would only bring back bad memories and probably cause more bad dreams. Erin accepted that because some nights I'd wake up in a cold sweat, screaming.'

'What about now, Olly? Could you talk about it now?'

'I don't feel I'm quite ready yet … maybe later.'

'That's all right. It takes time to heal from trauma, especially if you don't have therapy.' She made a quick note. 'Any changes in libido? If so, let me emphasise that that's perfectly normal after trauma.'

I hesitated, then took a gulp of water. 'Yes, after the hijacking. But if you don't mind can we leave that for now?'

'All right. In the meantime let's give your medication a chance to work. Then we need to concentrate on bringing down your stress level. So I'd like to show you a relaxation technique during our next session.'

Chapter 14

After my session with Gerda I went through to the common room and fetched myself a cup of coffee. I'd hardly sat down when Jill called to me from across the room. 'A Mr Dillon to see you, Olly.'

Drew Dillon had those clean-cut patrician looks that went with an Ivy League education – in his case, Yale. Tall, with dark well-trimmed hair, he was a dozen or so years older than me. Unlike so many American journalists who had made a fleeting tour of post-apartheid South Africa and then returned home, he had decided to stay on. We often exchanged information that was helpful in our respective work. For example, the African radio stations that I monitored sometimes carried news reports that Drew found useful in providing background for his freelance articles.

At Reception, I found Drew holding a bulging carrier bag. 'It's the stuff you asked for, Olly, plus a few extras.'

'Thanks a million. But let me put them away, and then you can join me for a cup of coffee – that's if you can spare a few minutes.'

'Sure.'

Besides the clothes and toiletries I'd asked for, Drew had included a packet of EET-SUM-MOR shortbread biscuits, a *Weekend Herald*, the latest *Africa Confidential* newsletter, as well as Andrew Seligman's new novel, *Chance of a Ghost*. I put the clothes in my locker and stepped into a pair of slip-slops that Drew had also brought me.

Then I fetched Drew some coffee and we found two unoccupied chairs near the common room window.

As Drew stirred his coffee, he cast an eye around the common room. 'You know, Olly, you're the last person I would have thought could land up in a place like this. What happened?'

After I'd told him about the Rohypnol and the absinthe and what else I could remember, I also told him about Erin leaving me. As an afterthought I added that I'd recently heard she was involved with a gym instructor.

He leaned back, his fingertips pressed together. 'Well, I don't think you should get your hopes up about Erin, especially if there's a third party involved.'

‘I certainly don’t want to give up on her, Drew – not until I’ve tried everything.’

Drew blew his cheeks out in a long sigh before continuing. ‘Well I suppose one has to try everything before one can get closure…

‘By the way, Olly, there’s quite a bit of serious stuff about the election that we need to discuss, but I’m not sure whether you’re up to it now. So shall we leave it for another day?’

‘Maybe that would be better.’

Chapter 15

After I'd said goodbye to Drew, I returned to the common room where I joined Faan in a cup of coffee. Some scrabble players were hunched over a table nearby in animated conversation.

Faan nodded towards them. 'See the plump thirty-something woman on the left with the short, dark hair. That's Beth Loxton. She's one of the nicest people here, and one of the most intelligent. She's been in and out of mental wards for years. This time, like me, she became over-confident and stopped taking her medication.'

'But what caused her problems?'

'In her teens she got addicted to diet pills and became anorexic. Then she seemed to come right and got married in her early twenties. Her real problems started when she had a baby and began suffering from postpartum depression...'

We were cut short by a commotion coming from Reception. Two burly hospital security men were helping a porter restrain a wild-looking young black man with dreadlocks who was trying to wrench himself out of a wheel-chair.

Jill Braithwaite was standing nearby, hypodermic poised.

The young man, who was wearing a brightly-coloured afro shirt and jeans, was waving his arms and shouting unintelligibly. Finally, the security men managed to pinion his arms. 'Jill darted the hypodermic into his upper arm. He began yelling again and kicking his legs. One of his shoes fell off. After a few moments his words tailed off, his legs jiggled momentarily and then his eyes rolled back and he was still.

Jill turned to the men. 'Right. Now let's put him in here.'

They carried the man to a small room a little way up the passage where there was a single bed fitted with straps. The men trussed him to the bed and left.

'He'll be okay,' Jill said, as she turned to go. 'In a couple of days you won't know it's the same person.'

'Poor bugger,' Faan said, as the other patients melted away. 'Maybe he took some bad acid.'

‘I don’t think so,’ I said, as we returned to the common room. ‘I hear that Rasta people don’t take synthetic stuff.’

‘Maybe you’re right, Olly … Hey, that’s a good name for him, *“Rastaman”* ... I like that.

‘There’s another new arrival,’ Faan said, nodding towards the piano where a slim, youthful figure was poised on tip-toe like a ballet dancer.

‘Who’s she?’ I asked.

‘Actually, *she’s* a *he*.’

‘You’re joking?!’

‘Well, that’s what one of the nurses told me.’

‘Well, she’s very beautiful. And check her dainty feet. I can’t believe she’s not a woman.’

The newcomer’s Nordic features and big sexy glasses made me think of a fashion model. Her long white fingers were extended in a backward curve. One finger touched the top of the piano to maintain balance.

Suddenly, as if taking a cue from a hidden orchestra, he launched himself towards us in a series of intricate whirling steps. Spinning faster and faster like a Dervish, he made quick controlled movements with his hands, arms and neck. Suddenly he stopped, and in one lithe movement did the splits, then shot up again almost under our noses. ‘Hi, I’m Jean,’ he announced – pronouncing it ‘Jar’ – in a bell-like, feminine voice, ‘Jean Asterman’.

A pause, and then Faan said, ‘Hi there, you want to join us in some coffee?’

All the coffee tables were taken, so we pulled up some easy chairs near the window and put our cups on the floor. I couldn’t help noticing that Jean had a blood-stained plug of cotton wool in his right ear.

‘By the way,’ he said, ‘my real name is Henrik, without a “d”, after my Swedish grandfather. Only my middle name is Jean, which I always use.’

An awkward silence followed.

‘What happened to your ear?’ I finally said.

Jean stared at his feet for a while. Then he said, ‘I don’t like to lie, sweetie, but sometimes the truth isn’t very nice. Have you got time to listen?’

‘Sure,’ Faan said.

I nodded. So did Kristy.

‘Well, you see, I’d been living with a friend for three years. But then I got depressed – probably because of an ongoing inner conflict that I won’t go into now…

‘As you probably know, depressed people aren’t very good company and I sensed we were drifting apart. Then last year my friend – his name was, *is*, Tertius – started going out with older rich guys behind my back. When I found out, he simply denied it.

‘I wanted to believe it, but of course it wasn’t true. On the evening after the gay parade I came home and found he’d moved out. Of course I was devastated.

‘Anyway, that night I went to the Kalloni – that’s a gay club in Rosebank – and got very drunk. The barman told me he’d heard that Tertius had taken off for Cape Town with a middle-aged guy he’d met at the club – a flashy dresser who drove a red Ferrari.

‘I don’t know why I’m telling you all this. It doesn’t really matter, not any more.

‘Actually I suppose it does. It’s making me think about my identity…

‘Well, when I got home I felt suicidal. So I poured myself a triple Vodka and swallowed a whole lot of pills. Then on a sudden impulse I rammed a chopstick in my right ear and began pushing.’

‘Eina!’ Kristy exclaimed.

‘Luckily I passed out before I could push too far. Still, it ruptured the inner ear. The cleaning lady found me and called a neighbour who took me to hospital, and I ended up in Casualty here.

‘Anyway, they pumped my stomach first and fixed up my ear the next day. When the alcohol wore off I didn’t feel suicidal any more, just depressed. Then I was moved to this ward for psychiatric evaluation.’

‘And your family?’ I asked. ‘Do they know?’

‘There’s only my mom here in Joburg. My dad’s in Cape Town. I hardly ever see him since my folks got divorced, and my sister’s in Australia. I didn’t want to worry my mom, but I suppose I’ll have to tell her sometime.’

‘I’ve got a cellphone if you’d like to phone her,’ said Kristy.

‘Thanks, but not now, sweetie. Maybe later.’

‘So what work do you do, Jean?’ I asked.

‘I worked at *Inner Journeys*, that’s a New Age bookshop in Melville, but I was retrenched last month – looks like they’re going to close.’

‘I suppose in a job like that you read a lot.’

‘All the time – I’m a book addict ... mainly books on Sufism, Jung, the Tarot, conspiracy, also entomology. You see, I have an amateur collection of butterflies.’

‘I read a lot too,’ said Kristy, ‘mainly fiction.’

Actually, I’m a writer,’ put in Faan. ‘An unpublished one!’

‘What are the titles, sweetie?’

Faan lit a cigarette, took a puff, and as he exhaled gave Jean a searching look. ‘If you don’t mind, Jean, please call me Faan.’ He leaned across and gave the effeminate youth’s shoulder a friendly shake before continuing. ‘Well my most recent titles are: *Fraud in the Wings; Last Train to Robben Island;* and *Long Work to Freedom.’*

Chapter 16

"God knows what the local art world would do without apartheid." – Lin Sampson, *Sunday Times*

A flash of lightning somewhere to the north over Sandton City distracted us for a moment. The sky had darkened and a strong wind had sprung up, racing through the bluegums below.

'Looks like a storm is coming,' Faan said, peering through the window.

After a pause, Jean said, 'Faan, you were telling us about the books you're writing. What are they about?'

Faan fished another cigarette from his pocket, and without lighting it, gestured with it in a weaving motion. 'Well, *Long Work to Freedom* and *Last Train to Robben Island* are clearly political, but other than that I haven't a clue how they'll turn out. I'm still trying to come up with a plot.'

'Well, when you're finished, Faan, will you give me a signed copy?' Kristy asked.

'Sure, kid. But you could be post-menopausal by then. Getting published takes time!'

Kristy gave a snigger.

'And of course,' Faan added, 'my novels are also post-apartheid. Sure, apartheid caused great suffering and some of its bitter legacy continues, but after all this time I think the time has come to end this South African obsession with picking over the past. I'm not only referring to books about "The Struggle" but also the never ending stream of military memoirs on "The Border War".

'So all of us, black and white, need to move on. It's like recovering from mental illness – the collective mental illness of apartheid and war, if you like. As we all should know, if patients dwell indefinitely on the causes of their trauma or depression, they are *never* likely to recover. By all means *bow* to the past but don't be *bound* by it. Sure, let's examine it, evaluate it and process it, so we can come to terms with it. Then, as Liz Stott has pointed out, we need to make the critical psychological shift from being *victims* to becoming *survivors*. So let's work together in a kind of "out-patient group

therapy" to make a better life for everyone in South Africa.'

'Very well put,' said Jean.

'By the way,' continued Faan, 'a lot of children's stories contain profound truths and meaning. For example, just read *The Emperor's New Clothes*. It's more relevant today than anything I can think of in most modern or postmodern literary novels!'

Kristy gave an appreciative nod.

'Also, children's books, especially traditional fairy tales, are good therapy when you're in a low state. Just be careful not to read the politically corrected ones. Just the ones you liked best when you were a child and you'll find yourself back in a kind of healing comfort zone.'

'I think you're right about finding truth and meaning,' said Jean. 'But we all have different ways of searching for it. I'm interested in the Tarot, which I find helps guide me in this chaotic world.' He gently rubbed his ear.

'Each to his own, bru,' said Faan.

'Well, when I phone my mom I'll ask her to bring my Tarot pack. Then I can do readings for you all if you like.'

Gabriel, who had been standing at the edge of our group, elbowed his way forward, looking serious. 'I've been listening to you all talking about books and finding truth. But the only book you need to read is the Bible. And the only word you need is the Word of God.'

Everyone looked at him quizzically for a moment and then ignored him.

Suddenly I felt a large hand pressing on my shoulder. It was Hannes. 'Seems like a lot of monkey business has been going on since I sent you home!' he growled. 'You got run over by a lawn mower, I see.'

I laughed.

'Anyway, good to see you, Olly. Let's go and sit over there.'

'Excuse me a couple of minutes,' I said to the others.

After I'd brought Hannes up to date, he stared at me for a few moments. Then he said, 'You know, Olly, I phoned you last week and you sounded pissed – actually, a lot worse than pissed. I think you must have dropped the phone. Then I phoned again in the evening and a woman answered. She said you'd had some kind of accident and been taken to hospital.' He glanced around the room. 'I see everyone here's smoking. Mind if I do?'

'Go ahead, Hannes. There won't be a problem.'

'Well, it looks like you'll be taking that sick leave after all.' Hannes took a drag on his cigarette and leaned forward. 'Now I don't want you to worry

about work, Olly. Prue is filling in for you.

'By the way, I've brought you this.' Hannes handed me fifteen hundred rands. 'Just to tide you over until you get out of here. There's also this.' He pulled a cellphone out of his pocket. 'It's a spare one from the office. Prue or I may need to check a few things with you sometimes,' but it's okay to use it for other calls.'

'Thanks a lot, Hannes. It'll really come in useful. Phoning from here is a bit of a mission.'

He took a drag on his cigarette. 'I don't know if you're aware that Juma, Cyril and Mike of the Swahili service have come to the end of their two-year contracts?'

'No, I didn't know.'

'Well, when I asked them if they wanted to renew their contracts, which provided for a big pay rise, they said no. I thought the reasons might be sensitive, so I called Juma into my office. He told me that he and the others were sick of the xenophobic attitude among local Blacks. And all three agreed it was only a matter of time before they became crime statistics.'

'I'll be sorry to see them go. They're nice guys – good workers too.'

Hannes checked his watch. 'Better be going now. It's after four. I don't want to get caught in traffic. Oh, Will Allwell sends his regards, and Prue said something about visiting you tomorrow. Anything you need?'

'Yes. A tight-fitting hat.'

'A hat, to wear inside? What for?'

'To keep my head warm,' I said, patting my bare scalp. 'The air conditioning here is really cold.'

Two nurses were helping Rastaman into a chair near the common room window. He was able to sit up unassisted, but his eyes were glazed and he was staring straight ahead. After the nurses had propped him up, one patted him on the shoulder, bent down and whispered something in his ear, and then they left him sitting there in his long blue-and-white-striped pyjamas. He gazed after them, his mouth hanging open, a trickle of saliva dribbling onto his chin.

For a while the other patients didn't seem to notice him. Then Marge suddenly exclaimed: 'Hey, everybody, look at that!'

Rastaman's ample cock was drooping out of his fly like a chocolate bar

softening in the sun. The other patients, who'd been playing scrabble and draughts nearby, were staring in disbelief. Rastaman, oblivious to the stares, didn't move a muscle.

Oom Henk turned towards the onlookers. 'Haven't you ladies seen one of those before, hey? Half the world's got one!' Then he reached into his pocket and extracted a hand-rolled cigarette. He got up and walked over to Rastaman. 'Here, man, have a smoke.' Rastaman didn't seem to hear. Oom Henk lit the cigarette and placed it between Rastaman's lips. The man gave a start, his dreadlocks bobbing like a shaken mop. His eyes stared upwards but remained unfocused. Oom Henk held the cigarette for him as he took a slow, leaky draw. The shadow of a smile passed across his face.

'Now cover yourself up, man!' Oom Henk instructed, removing the cigarette. There was no response. Oom Henk, sighed, leaned over and gave Rastaman's fly a sharp tug to one side. His cock dropped back into his pyjamas.

Chapter 17

I START A DIARY

MONDAY 16TH SEPTEMBER (DAY NINE)

The next couple of days passed uneventfully, but on Monday morning Jill Braithwaite called to tell me that Gerda had left a message saying she could see me at two o'clock. I'd borrowed a couple of newspapers and a *Time Magazine* from Jill, and spent the morning reading in the common room. I'd been feeling abnormally alert, as if I'd drunk too much coffee. Perhaps the Aropax was kicking in...

Shortly before my appointment with Gerda, I went through to Reception to return the papers and the magazine. Paused below the convex mirror was a familiar figure. It was Erin. My stomach tightened. She was wearing a black, maroon and gold-striped caftan that complemented her femininity.

I assumed she was coming to see me, so I instinctively moved forward to greet her. But she walked straight past me towards Liz Stott's office.

At two o'clock sharp I knocked on Gerda's door. She opened it immediately and ushered me in. 'Well, I am impressed, she said, with a nod of head. 'Your short-term memory can't be all *that* bad!'

'I hope not,' I murmured, taking a seat and switching off my cellphone.

'So how are you feeling, Olly?'

'Getting better, I think. But a few minutes ago I had a bit of a shock. Erin pitched out of the blue, apparently to talk to Dr Stott.'

'I really wouldn't worry about it, Olly. It's routine for a psychiatrist to interview a patient's family. … Oh, and have you started on the Aropax yet?'

'Yes, but I haven't noticed any dramatic difference; just a feeling like

I've drunk too much coffee.'

'Well, antidepressants take time to work. In the meantime, I'd like you to try some relaxation techniques, starting today.' She pointed to a couch on the other side of the room. 'Would you like to take off your shoes and lie over there?'

When I was stretched out on the couch, Gerda said she had no other appointments, so we could take our time, in preparation for hypnotherapy. 'First, we'll start with the standard relaxation technique of deep breathing, gradually relaxing various parts of the body. This is to get you into a receptive state that will allow us to go back in time. I'm going to record our session, so you're welcome to play it back later and take notes. Okay?'

'Fine.'

Gerda's professional manner inspired confidence and I felt completely at ease.

However, at this point I had a twinge of doubt. 'By the way, Gerda, does hypnotherapy always work?'

'Mostly, but not always. We have a girl here who slit her wrists. But for some reason hypnotherapy didn't work with her, but she's an exception.'

'I see.'

Gerda spoke slowly and clearly in a monotone, with pauses between sentences. 'First, I want you to focus on that small circular picture on the wall opposite you. As you can see it's a sun wheel. Just let the whirling colours draw you in.'

She then went on to the standard relaxation breathing techniques before continuing. 'Now I want you to think of a tranquil scene, perhaps at your favourite holiday spot … hold it in your mind … it can be a beach, in the mountains, anywhere, as long as it's a place where you feel safe and relaxed … now to get there imagine you're astral travelling … but don't worry, I'll be travelling with you … just tell me when we've arrived … there's no hurry.'

I closed my eyes and began breathing deeply again. An image of a secluded mountain gully began appearing in my mind. As it came into focus, I recognised the Grotto, one of my favourite places in the Drakensberg's Royal Natal National Park. 'Okay, we're here,' I said. 'It's amazingly clear.'

'What do you see, Olly?'

'Except for a stream running past and the occasional call of a piet-my-vrou, it's very quiet. The stream flows between tall sandstone cliffs. Where it

turns a corner, there's a sunny spot on a flat rock.'

'Okay, well let's sit over there shall we? But remember I'm beside you, Olly, watching over you… now the sunlight is warming your body … can you feel it?'

'Yes, I can feel it.'

'Good. As the sun warms you, you can feel yourself becoming even more relaxed. Your eyes feel heavy, your arms and legs are limp. No matter how hard you try, you can't open your eyes. Try and open them now … You see, you can't do it. But you aren't asleep. You can still hear my voice.'

When I was fully relaxed, Gerda quietly intoned: 'When I count to three you will be able to remember things you have forgotten, right back to your earliest childhood.

'You ready…? One, two, *three*…

'Now I want to take you back in time to when you were very young … then we'll gradually move forward to the present time … what we are looking for are things that have had a strong emotional impact on you?'

'Okay.'

In summary, this is what I recalled: at age two-and-a-half, I swallowed my mother's cigarettes, thinking they were sweets. I was violently ill. At four, on the first day of nursery school, I put my shorts on back-to-front. The other children laughed. At six, I was sent to boarding school. Bad things happened to me there and I was always homesick. After that there's a big gap. At eighteen, I broke up with my first girlfriend – a really painful experience. Then another gap until my early twenties, when I was fired from my job at a morning newspaper by the eccentric editor. Things improved when I switched to radio. During the following years, after marrying Erin, my life settled into a quiet equilibrium.

'Now it's a year ago and you are 37,' Gerda was saying. A shock suddenly ran through me and I began thrashing from side to side.

'You're obviously reliving a traumatic event, Olly. Are you sure you want to carry on?'

'F-fine,' I murmured.

'All right, then, let's continue … When I count to three, you will feel calm and relaxed, and you will find it easier to control whatever emotions you are experiencing … One … Two … Three … Now you will remain in this relaxed state and you will be able to tell me about whatever is happening.'

‘Okay.’

‘Would you like to carry on?’

‘Yes, well, it’s a Saturday in September. I can’t remember the actual date. I’ve just parked my Nissan in the driveway and I’m about to unpack my groceries. I hear something behind me. Two black men are standing there. Both are neatly dressed. One is tall and athletic; the other is short and stocky. “Stocky” has a swollen scar in the middle of his upper lip. I ask them if I can help them. Stocky suddenly steps up to me and prods me in the ribs with a knife, then pats my pockets. He pulls out my wallet and takes out the money – about eight hundred rands. Tall is checking the cubbyhole and feeling under the front seats. I don’t have a gun, only an emergency whistle. He finds the whistle and tosses it to Stocky. Then he snatches the keys from me and shouts something in Sotho or Tswana. Stocky grabs me by the arms in a vice-like grip. I can hear the other hijacker opening the boot. Stocky is pressing his knife into my side. Suddenly Tall kicks my feet from under me and I fall down. He grabs me by the wrists; Stocky grabs my feet, and they dump me in the boot on top of all the groceries. I feel a sharp pain – and something wet and sticky. The boot slams shut. A few slivers of light are coming through the air vents below the back window, but my eyes aren’t used to the gloom yet.

‘The car starts and I can feel it rumbling down the road towards Beyers Naude Drive. A right turn. They keep a steady speed of around sixty. We’ve been going straight for what seems more than half an hour. Suddenly the car stops. Doors slam. Five minutes later they slam again. I can hear a metal cap being screwed off a bottle. The car starts and cruises along for another fifteen minutes or so. Then it suddenly slows. It turns off onto what must be a dirt track. It bumps and jolts along and I can smell dust. After several minutes it stops. The engine is switched off. Through the vents I can see we are under trees. Then a metallic rotating sound. The sound of fingers being sucked. A loud belch. The smell of fish – tinned pilchards, I think – is coming through the vents. Cigarette smoke. Doors open. Then I hear the key turning in the boot lock. The boot opens. Daylight floods in. I see I’m lying on a carton of broken eggs, the yellowish goo pooling around me.

Silhouetted against the sky is Tall holding a large automatic pistol. It is pointed at me. He grabs me by the hair and drags me out. Then he motions to me to move away from the car. We are at the edge of a patch of bluegums interspersed with wattles, close enough to the road to hear cars passing in the distance.

Stocky leans against the car, drinking from the neck of a half-jack of Impala gin. He spits into the dust. Then he passes the bottle to Tall. Stocky is digging among my groceries. He returns with some cold meats and a couple of beers. *"Picnic!"* he shouts. They both howl with laughter.

After the beers, they gulp down more gin. Stocky is staring at me. He whispers something to Tall, who prods me with his pistol. He points into the trees, indicating I should walk ahead. I think: *This is it. They are going to shoot me.* A little way into the trees, Tall points at my shoes. "Take off! Take off!" Playing for time, I pretend not to understand. Stocky pushes me to the ground and pulls off my shoes. He removes the laces and ties my hands together. Then he rips off my belt and ties my feet.

I notice the spot they have chosen is a dumping ground. Rubbish is scattered all over the place. Almost under my nose, draped over a twig, is a dusty condom, yellowed by the sun. The oily smell of eucalyptus is overlaid with the stench of human excrement. Flies are buzzing everywhere.

The two hijackers sit on a nearby log and Stocky begins rolling a zoll. He takes a couple of deep drags and passes it to Tall. They take more swigs of gin. The smell of dagga is sickly sweet.

Stocky suddenly begins to laugh. Then he gives several blasts on my whistle. Tall shouts at him to be quiet and snatches the whistle away. A torrent of Tswana or Sotho from Tall leaves Stocky looking humbled. Suddenly, with a crazed look Stocky jumps off the log and lunges at me with his knife. I expect it to plunge into my body, but he hooks it over my jeans and begins hacking through them.

First, he cuts down the back and then slices down each leg, ripping the jeans off without having to untie my feet. I am now lying on my stomach in my underpants. I can feel the bluegum seed capsules digging into my arms and legs. Stocky is pulling off my shirt. Then he begins undressing himself, kicking off his shoes. He suddenly bends forward and bites me hard on my back. He bites again, lower down. The pain is excruciating. He begins laughing loudly. I can't believe this is actually happening! I begin shouting for help. He reaches into one of his shoes and pulls out a filthy sock and stuffs it in my mouth. He takes another swig of gin. I feel him dragging off my underpants. He calls to Tall, who walks over towards me. Tall kneels on my legs and unties the belt. He spreads my legs apart and holds them down firmly by the ankles. I begin struggling to free myself. Stocky wriggles under Tall's arms until he is on top of my back. The smell of stale sweat is

overpowering. He belches loudly. His breath smells of gin, dagga and peri-peri pilchards. The pain and the sickening thought of what is happening to me are unbearable. He is grunting like a pig. Then I hear Tall shouting. ‘Hurry up bro. My chance now!’

In one supreme effort I try to throw Stocky off, writhing from side to side. He shouts to Tall, who jumps up with his pistol aimed at me. This is the end, I think. He’s going to finish me off. Instead, he begins kicking me viciously in the ribs. I feel a sudden pain and I know something has broken. The next moment Tall produces a tiny bottle and unscrews the cap. He begins chanting something under his breath. Then he pours the contents drop by drop down my back to my feet, and then slowly up again to my head and into my hair. It smells vile. I vomit – all over Tall’s shoes. A moment later I feel a stunning blow on the back of my head. Then nothing…’

Chapter 18

"I was raped. They were strong and armed. They weren't happy just taking my car. They wanted to prove something. How do you go back to your home, your kids, your wife and look them in the eye after two men have sodomised you?" – Neil X. *The Star*

"Psychological impotence is where erection or penetration fails due to thoughts or feelings (psychological reasons) rather than physical impossibility; this is somewhat less frequent but often can be helped. … Erectile dysfunction, tied closely as it is about ideas of physical well being, can have severe psychological consequences." – Wikipedia

Gerda told me later that at this point I groaned as if I felt real physical pain. 'I don't know if I can carry on, Gerda.' I eventually said.

Gerda took my hand and pressed it reassuringly. 'I want you to start breathing deeply while relaxing and clearing your mind of all painful thoughts. Okay?'

'Okay.'

After I'd done the deep breathing,' Gerda continued: 'Even if these memories are very painful, Olly, which I'm sure they are, remember I'm here to help you deal with them. So you will remember everything that has happened to you. You are now leaving the Grotto and when you open your eyes you will be back in my consulting room. You will no longer be experiencing your memories as if they are happening now. Instead, you will be able to recall them as they actually happened in the past. In other words they are *history*. Now I am going to count up to ten. When I say "ten" you will be fully awake.'

She began counting.

When she reached ten, I sat up and looked around. I felt a bit groggy … and then the enormity of what had happened to me suddenly hit me. Gerda must have realised that the conscious knowledge of the sexual assault would be almost too much for me to bear and had prepared a pot of tea which she

later confided contained a calmative.

I sat with my head in my hands for several minutes until, on Gerda's insistence, I began drinking the tea.

'Try and drink it all,' she said. 'Take your time. We don't need to talk.'

As I sat silently drinking the tea, Gerda busied herself making notes in my file.

I'm not sure how long it was before the medicated tea started working, perhaps half an hour. Finally, I began to feel better and I also felt as if I'd been relieved of a great burden.

Gerda put her pen down and looked up at me. 'Can you remember now, Olly?'

'Yes. Things are becoming clearer … Up until now I've had no memory at all of the sexual assault. My only recollection was that I'd been hijacked, beaten, and dumped at the side of the road. Now things that have puzzled me for a long time are beginning to make sense.'

'Actually, male rape is not uncommon these days,' Gerda said, 'but most men are reluctant to report it. According to a study done a few years ago, only one man in a hundred does so… Sorry, that was a bit of a digression. Would you like to continue?'

'Sure… Well, I was lying on the ground under trees after Tall had knocked me out. When I awoke it was almost dark. I was naked except for my socks. The pain in my ribs had worsened and I had a smarting pain down below. My hands were still tied with my shoelaces but my legs were free. I crawled over to a piece of broken glass and managed to cut the laces. There was a huge lump on my head and my hair was matted with something sticky. The Nissan was gone; my clothes were gone; and there was no sign of the hijackers. I searched for something to cover myself with. My cut-open jeans were nowhere to be seen. Then I saw them high up, wedged in the fork of a tree. I found a broken branch lying on the ground and hooked them down. I tied the jeans on as best I could with bits of shoelace, but they still flapped open at the back. I staggered along the dirt track towards the sound of traffic. It wasn't quite dark and I could see the road. I scrambled up onto the verge and stood there swaying. There weren't a lot of cars passing, and for the first fifteen minutes or so, none of them stopped. I don't blame them; I must have looked a pretty ghastly sight.

'Eventually this thin middle-aged Indian guy in a beige Mercedes pulled off the road in front of me. He wound down his window and gave me a quick

once-over. Then he called to me, beckoning that I should get into the car. When I was sitting beside him, he said, ‘You know with all the crime these days, my friend, I don’t often give lifts to strangers, but I can see you are in very big trouble.’ He introduced himself as Goolam Jeena, originally from Durban, like me.

I told him about the hijacking and the assault, but the horror of the anal rape must have been so traumatic that my conscious mind had refused to register it, leaving only a sense of unfocused anger.

I asked Goolam if he could give me a lift to Melville. He said that was fine, as he lived in Mayfair, only a couple of kilometres away. ‘But I think you better come to my house first; then you can clean up and phone your wife.’ He told me that his men’s outfitting shop in Fordsburg had been burgled several times and he had been held up once on his way to the bank. He said he was very worried about increasing crime and had recently joined a neighbourhood anti-crime initiative.

When we reached his house, Goolam’s wife, Feroza, cleaned and put Savlon on the bite wounds. Then she made me a strong cup of tea with plenty of sugar. After that I bathed and Goolam gave me a track suit which he said I should keep.

When I phoned Erin, I told her I’d been hijacked but was okay and not to worry; I’d be home soon. She was obviously shocked. I asked her to phone Mays Chemist to deliver some painkillers. Then I phoned the police to report the hijacking. The policeman sounded bored. He told me to come to the charge office the next day and make a statement. After that, Goolam dropped me at home and gave me his card. As he turned his car in the road, he beckoned to me. “Just remember one thing, Olly,” he said. “Don’t start hating black people. Many are also victims of crime.”

I’ve never been a racist, so I would never condemn a whole people for the actions of a few, so I gave a nod.

Goolam added that when I felt better I should contact him and he would tell me about his neighbourhood anti-crime initiative. It’s called VOICE.’

‘VOICE?’

‘Yes, *Victims Of Increasing Crime Epidemic*.’

Chapter 19

"…a rape victim … may have no conscious memory of the attack, yet experience depression, numbness, and distress resulting from environmental stimuli such as colours, odours, sounds, and images that recall the traumatic experience. The dissociated memory is alive and active – not forgotten, merely submerged. … symptoms … depression, anxiety, hyper-vigilance, rage, flashbacks, intrusive memories, inner voices, amnesias, numbing, nightmares, recurrent dreams." – Joan A. Turkus, MD, American psychiatrist

Erin must have heard Goolam's car turning into our cul-de-sac, as she was already standing at the gate. "My God, Olly!" she cried. "You look terrible!" She was staring at the bite wounds open-mouthed. I told her briefly about the hijacking, but shock was setting in and I didn't want to talk. She gave me some herbal tonic and a painkiller for my ribs.

'The following morning I went straight to the doctor. He gave me an anti-tetanus shot and antibiotics for the bites, as well as Lexotan to relax me. He told me that HIV could be passed on through a human bite and suggested I should have a quick test – a prick on the finger and a dab on a plastic pad. As I waited, each second seemed like a hundred years. The result was negative. I had an immense feeling of relief, but he said I would have to come for another test in three months time. After that he sent me for X-rays. As I suspected, I had three broken ribs. Although there was bruising, my skull wasn't fractured. But, as I soon discovered, the physical side was the least of my worries. I began to experience feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness, and I felt edgy if I didn't take the Lexotan. I totally lost my libido. Initially, I thought this was caused by the continuing uncertainty before the second Aids test, but now I know that was only part of the story. However, the broken ribs provided me with a legitimate excuse for not having sex, and I was able to tell Erin quite truthfully that I was in too much pain. But even after the second Aids test proved negative, I found I couldn't sustain an erection. Also, I had horrible dreams that left me feeling drained for days. I'd see the faces of Stocky and Tall leering at me, and I'd wake up

in a cold sweat with an overwhelming feeling of dread. When my insurance paid out for the hijacked Nissan, I replaced it with a third-hand Lada Niva, a much less appealing target for hijackers. Still, I had a mental block about driving, and for months I took saloon taxis instead. I had also developed an irrational fear of strange young black men. I still do, especially if one approaches me too close. Although I had continuing flashbacks about the hijacking, my brain continued to repress the memory of the sexual assault right up until it resurfaced now during the hypnotherapy.'

'That's not surprising, Olly. The ability to repress a traumatic memory is a vital survival mechanism. We psychologists call it psychogenic or dissociative amnesia, which is a form of selective memory loss. The brain simply decides to block out the shocking memory. But it's only a temporary strategy. At some point the memory needs to be recovered – and dealt with.'

Gerda got up and turned on some subdued harp music.

'Oh, I meant to tell you, Olly, a Dr Weddo Moloi will be talking to staff next week about mental illness among African people. He's both a psychiatrist and a sangoma – a very interesting man. Patients are welcome to attend.'

Gerda leaned back in her chair. 'Well, I think we've covered a lot of ground today… but there's more to do. Would you like to come again on Wednesday, same time?'

'Fine.'

'I meant to ask you, Olly, do you do any writing?'

'Nothing creative in the artistic sense; only radio talks, mainly developmental stuff on Africa. But I'd like to write something more ambitious when I've more time.'

'That's good,' she said, pulling a blue commercial diary from a drawer and sliding it across the desk. 'If you get any creative ideas you can jot them down in this.

'Thanks, Gerda.'

'Maybe try writing poetry. It's good self-therapy.'

'Poetry…? The last poem I wrote was for Erin, shortly after I met her. And, as far as I remember, it was pretty awful.'

'That doesn't matter. The cynics say all bad poetry is the result of genuine emotion. And genuine emotion is what we want in self-therapy.'

Chapter 20

It was late afternoon and I'd been whiling away the time reading newspapers in the common room, Kristy and Marge were sitting at the next table, playing draughts. Faan plonked himself down beside me. He was wearing a T-shirt with the logo: *WHO NEEDS A LAWYER WHEN YOU CAN BRIBE A JUDGE?*

'Oh, that reminds me,' I said. 'I need to phone my attorney before his office closes. Mind if I make a quick call?'

'Go ahead. I'll pop along to the TV lounge and see what's potting.'

My luck was in. The telephonist put me straight through to Ted Thrupp. I told him I was in hospital and I'd phone him again to make an appointment as soon as I knew when I'd be discharged.'

'You been in an accident?'

'Something that triggered a depressive episode. I'm in a psychiatric ward. I'll give you the details when I see you.'

'Sorry to hear that, Mr Jeex. By the way when we meet I'll need a list of all your assets and when you accumulated them, and especially any you may have had before your marriage, as well as your antenuptial contract. So you'll need to bring all this documentation with you.'

'Isn't that a bit premature? You see, I don't actually want a divorce; I'd prefer to try and reconcile with my wife. Even a separation would be better than a divorce. Perhaps she just needs time to think things through.'

'I see… Well, we can try. But from the tone of Claude Skinner's letter, I don't think there's much chance of that. Your wife is obviously taking his advice and he's a pretty tough divorce lawyer. And if there's a dispute about child custody, or even parental access, be prepared for him to use the fact that you've been in a psychiatric ward. So I wouldn't get your hopes up too high. In the meantime, is there anything else I can do?'

This news came as a bit of a shock, so I forgot what I wanted to say. 'There was something else. But it seems to have slipped my mind. I'll phone you again if it comes back.'

'Oh, one last thing. Let's use first names if that's all right with you. It's much easier.'

‘Okay.’

I was now on first name terms with my lawyer, but I wasn’t even allowed to speak to my wife!

From down the passage came the sound of an approaching dinner trolley. My mouth began watering as I caught the aroma of steaming food. I felt peckish, so I decided to eat as soon as the kitchen staff were ready to serve. This time it was vegetable soup, baked fish, gem squash, peas and mash. I grabbed a tray, several plastic containers of food and lashings of bread and marge. I’d just finished the main course when Faan arrived.

‘Hey, I’m still hungry,’ I said. ‘I’ll see if I can scrape up a second.’ I was back a minute later with another main course and a sweet.

Faan waited for me to finish. Then we drifted through to the TV lounge where we found seats at the back next to Kristy and Marge. Petrus was staring quizzically at the screen.

Then I noticed a trail of tiny Argentine ants winding up the wall panel towards a duct above. A pair of tiny feelers probed through a panel joint. A small cockroach emerged and peered about, waving its antennae.

‘What you looking at Olly?’ Marge wanted to know.

‘Just a cockroach.’

‘Oooh … a cockroach! I really hate those things. Oh, please, Olly, get it *away* from me!’

‘Look, Margie,’ I said, ‘this one is only *tiny*. He’s a Joburg cockroach and they’re small and clean – not like the dirty big Durban ones. *Look!* You can see he’s cleaning himself.’ I suddenly had an idea. Maybe Marge needed something to take her mind off the things that worried her. ‘Anyone got a matchbox?’

Kristy scraped the last few matches out of a box, and, with a knowing smile, handed it to me. I grabbed the cockroach and popped it into the box and closed the lid.

Petrus was looking over Marge’s shoulder. ‘Please, Mr Olly, don’t kill lickle kokorosh.’

‘Don’t worry, Petrus. I’m not going to. I’m keeping him as a pet and I’m calling him Jimmy.’

‘Oooh, that’s a nice name,’ Marge said, her eyes wide with wonder. ‘Let me see him.’

I opened the box. The little cockroach rose up on its hind legs, its antennae twitching, as if preparing to perform a trick.

‘Oh, he’s sweet. And I like his colour. He’s not dark like the big Durban ones. But isn’t a matchbox a bit too small? Let’s find a bigger box after we’ve finished watching TV.’

Chapter 21

A few minutes later, as the documentary's credits began rolling, chairs shuffled and some patients leaned across to light cigarettes. Marge grabbed my hand and gave it a little shake. 'My folks and Isabel are coming to see me tonight, Olly.'

'Who's Isabel?'

'My sister. She's still at school. She does the Lotto, and she also buys a ticket for me.'

'That's nice of her.'

'Well, I hope I've won this time.' Marge turned to face me, her green eyes wide. 'If I win, will you marry me, Olly?'

Kristy was pretending to read her book, but she glanced up and rolled her eyes good humouredly.

I was taken aback. 'You serious Margie?'

'Of course, I'm serious. What do you think?'

'Why me?'

'Because I can tell you're a nice man, Olly. And I really love your blue eyes.'

'It's very nice of you to say so, Margie, but I'm already married.'

As my words echoed in my mind, I wondered for how much longer...

Faan stood up. 'I better see if Katie has arrived. She promised to bring some glue to fix the ping-pong bat.'

While Faan was gone, Marge turned to me, 'Maybe we can get married as soon as you're divorced? There's a nice church around the corner from where we stay.'

'Oh.'

Faan returned after a couple of minutes. 'Katie has brought the glue but she had to rush.'

'Were my folks there, Faan? Marge asked, looking at her watch.

'There are some people near the front desk, but I think they were waiting for someone else.'

'I'd better go and see,' Marge said, with a catch in her voice.

A minute later she was back, her face glistening with tears. 'They haven't

come. And they haven't phoned. I don't know what to do! Maybe they've had an accident!'

Kristy moved her chair to face Marge. She leaned over and hugged her. 'Don't worry, Margie, I'm sure they'll be here soon.'

'You think so, Kristy?'

'Of course. Just relax. Here, have some gum.'

The TV news had started. An earnest young woman with an empathetic lilt to her voice began reading the bulletin. The coming election dominated the news, with all the main parties claiming they would win.

Just then the door opened and a nurse called to Marge. 'Your dad and mama and your sissie to see you, Margie.'

'Oh, thank you, Skwiza,' Marge sang out, dashing from the room, her auburn hair streaming. She was back a couple of minutes later smiling.

The bulletin shifted away from the election: two German backpackers had been gang raped on a Transkei beach, and three teenage girls had disappeared without a trace from a Johannesburg northern suburbs shopping mall.

The news shocked me, as this was the second recent report of girls disappearing from malls. Just then a nurse called to Marge. Her parents had forgotten some goodies in the car that they'd brought for her.

Marge dashed out again.

Jean, who'd been dozing, was wide awake now. 'The incidence of rape in this country is unbelievable! I even heard of a woman patient being raped at Tara by a male nurse.'

'Ag, what are you getting so excited about, pretty boy?' Dirk sneered. 'Anyway, what's it to you? You're a fuckin' moffie.' He blew cigarette smoke towards Jean's feet.

Kristy turned on Dirk, 'And you're a fucking pervert! People like you should be locked up.' She flung her paperback at him but missed. Her voice tailed off into sobs.

Dirk flicked his cigarette butt onto the floor and stalked off.

I stood up and retrieved Kristy's paperback. It was a dog-eared copy of Stephen White's psychological thriller, *Warning Signs*.

After a few minutes Marge returned laden with packets. 'Hey, look what my folks brought… Oh, what's wrong, Kristy?'

'It's Dirk.' Kristy sobbed. 'He said a lot of horrible things.'

Marge sat next to Kristy and stroked her hair. The special election

programme had started with a lot of talking heads, but no one was watching. I fetched the packet of EET-SUM-MOR from my locker and offered it to Kristy and Marge. ‘Take a couple, they’re delicious.’

Kristy slowly extracted the blob of gum from her mouth, flicked it into a wastepaper basket, and then fished out a biscuit. Marge took two.

Meanwhile, Faan had brought Kristy a cup of tea.

‘Thanks,’ she said, forcing a smile. ‘You okes are really special, you know.’ She took a sip of tea and nibbled the corner of her biscuit. ‘Don’t think I’m a cry baby, but the same thing happened to me as those backpackers. Her bottom lip trembled and tears were streaming down her face. ‘You want to know why I’m in here?’ Her voice was almost inaudible in the awkward silence. ‘Well, a lot of bad things happened to me in the past few years, but what really made me freak out was my stepbrothers. They hate me because I won’t have sex with them. Sometimes they punch me and kick me and push me down the stairs. Once they ripped my panties off and tried to rape me.’

‘But didn’t you tell your mom?’ I asked.

‘I did. And she spoke to the boys. But they said I was lying. Anyway, she doesn’t want to cause waves because she doesn’t want to upset my stepfather. Her whole life just goes around him.’

Her distress was mounting, so I said: ‘You don’t have to go on, Kris, if you don’t want to.’

‘No, it’s okay.’ She took a couple of sips of tea and seemed to regain her composure. ‘Well, a few days before I came in here, Kobus – that’s the older one – said, “A low-life bitch like you deserves to die!”.’ Her voice sank to a whisper. ‘Then he grabbed me by the throat and pressed with his thumbs until I couldn’t breathe. When I was nearly passed out, he put his face right up close and said, “One day I’m going to get you, you fucking whore!” I couldn’t take any more of it, and life seemed so pointless. But I didn’t know what to do. I felt trapped. Then a voice in my head seemed to say, “Kristy, there’s a way out…” In a flash I knew what I had to do.

‘When my stepbrothers had gone out I lay in the bath and cut my wrists with a blade. But it wasn’t only them that made me do it. They were like the last bit of water that makes a dam burst. It was the way I’d been feeling for years after my Oupa began touching me. I was only four or five when he started. Then when I was a few years older, my Oupa started forcing me to have sex with him. It was at that point that I realised that something was

terribly wrong but I was too scared to say anything. That's why I hardly had any friends, except for one girl, Jenna, whose dad was also molesting her. We were very close. We still are.

'Of course, I would have liked to have been popular and have lots of friends, but I felt I could never bring a friend home – not with my kind of family. I used to read books to try and escape from them, but in the end it just got too much. I couldn't see any other way out. Then, after I heard the voice, I thought it would be better just to die…'

Kristy began to sob. Marge gave her a little hug and then passed her a Kleenex. Kristy dabbed her eyes and blew her nose, then tried to smile. She took a deep breath before continuing. 'That day my mom forgot her movie card (she wanted to go to an early show), so when she was on lunch she came home to fetch it. She found me passed out in the bath full of blood. Otherwise I'd be dead.'

'And then?'

'Well, my mom called an ambulance and they brought me in here to Casualty.' She held out her wrists. There were three livid slashes on each wrist, the stitch marks still visible.

I suddenly sensed that Kristy was the girl Gerda had spoken of who didn't respond to hypnotherapy.

'I'm so sorry, Kris.'

She shot me a wan smile.

'What about school?' I asked. 'Couldn't you talk to one of your teachers?'

Kristy looked down at her feet. 'I dropped out last year, my matric year, when things got really bad with my stepbrothers. I felt so down. I couldn't concentrate. The teachers also gave me a lot of uphill. They said I had a very high IQ, so there was no excuse. I couldn't take it from them as well, so I just stopped going.'

'What did your mom say?'

'She was cross to begin with, but she knew she couldn't force me. I'd turned eighteen, you see. Anyway, she stopped nagging me when I got a part-time job and she saw I wasn't just hanging around the house.'

'A job? What kind of job?'

Kristy hesitated for a moment; then flashed me a guilty smile. 'Stripping ... I was a stripper at a club.'

I was a little shocked, but kept my face expressionless. 'So what do you

want to do when you leave here, Kris?'

'I don't want to go back home, that's for sure. It's not just because of being molested or anything like that. I don't know why, but I've always felt different from my family, never been really close to them, like we're on different planets.'

'Well, do you think that maybe you're adopted?' I asked.

Kristy paused for a moment and furrowed her brow. 'Well, if I was, that would explain a lot ... On the other hand, I think my mom would have told me, but she's never said anything like that.'

Chapter 22

When I woke early the next morning it was still dark and the other patients were asleep. I'd hoped that Faan would be up too, but he was lying on his stomach with a pillow pulled over his head. The only sound was Oom Henk snoring.

I put on a clean T shirt, boxer shorts and slip-slops, and padded down the passage to the bathrooms, and began shaving. (It was a disposable razor with an integrated blade that couldn't be removed, so these were allowed.)

After I'd finished shaving, I walked down to Reception. A plump middle aged night sister, who looked vaguely familiar, was behind the nurses' station. She was methodically folding last night's *Star* newspaper. There was no sign of Jill Braithwaite, who had mentioned that she came in early only when she needed to leave early.

'Morning sister,' I said. 'I don't think we've met. I'm Olly Jeex.'

The sister blinked at me with droopy eyelids. 'You can call me "Old Cow",' she announced laconically. 'Not my real name, but my husband calls me that sometimes, so it's okay.' There was a finality about the statement.

I checked to see if she had a name tag, but there wasn't one. 'I see only the student nurses seem to have tags. Why's that, Sister?'

Old Cow glanced at her feet for a moment then looked up sharply. 'We all used to have tags, but there were problems.' She leaned forward across the counter, spreading her fingers wide, her voice dropping to a whisper. 'What happens is that sometimes tsotsis make like they're crazy and come in here to hide from police, but it's not so easy to fool doctors and us sisters. When we know they aren't sick and we think they're a tsotsi, we call the police.'

'Oh I see.'

'It's very sad, Olly, but crime is everywhere.' She tapped the newspaper. 'Look, this happened only this week in this same hospital.'

Under the headline, DOCTOR MUGGED IN HOSPITAL PARKADE, was a photograph of a middle aged man, his face swathed in bandages.

'You can borrow the paper if you like,' Old Cow said. 'Just bring it back when I come on tonight.'

As the tea trolley trundled down the passage, doors swung open and

patients emerged from their wards. Being first in line, I poured myself some tea and strolled through to the common room. For the moment, I had the room to myself.

I went and stood by the window, contemplating the view. A rosy glow and a cloudless sky promised a perfect day.

'You're up early,' a voice behind me remarked. 'I suppose you're day-dreaming about breakfast at the Westcliff?' It was Faan, wearing his waistcoat on the paisley side. He gazed wistfully up at Parktown Ridge. 'You don't need to answer that, Olly – *we all do.'*

Faan was twisting a ping pong bat between his hands. 'Fancy a game to work up an appetite, Olly?'

'So is the bat okay now?'

'Perfect. Pratley glue is incredible stuff. The only thing it can't mend is a broken heart!'

Faan's remark – innocent enough – somehow got to me.

I served first. As I smashed the bat down with all my force, I imagined the ball was Alec what-ever-his-name's face. The same image sprang to mind every time I hit the ball. My aim was good. I won the game –and the next.

The medications trolley had arrived.

'Time for our Smarties,' Faan said, ambling over to Sister Nina, who'd begun doling out the pills. Faan gulped down his generic Prozac and Lithium and I swallowed my Aropax.

We finished breakfast before most of the other patients arrived and then took our coffee through to the common room.

'What about a biscuit with our coffee?' Faan said. 'I've got some ginger nuts in the ward.'

'Sounds good,' I said.

'Well, hang on a sec while I fetch them.'

While I was waiting for Faan, I went over to the window. Two men with a step ladder were fastening election posters to the street poles, but from this distance I couldn't make out which party the posters represented. Then I suddenly realised that I'd probably still be in Ward 697 on Election Day.

After Faan had returned with the biscuits, we chatted for about half an hour. Then a sudden thought came to me. 'Do you mind hanging on a few minutes, Faan, while I call my lawyer?'

'Go for it.'

Ted Thrupp answered after a couple of rings.

‘Thrupp speaking.’

‘Hello, Ted. I remember now what I wanted to speak to you about. Could you do a background check on the man my wife is staying with?

‘Sure. We have a private detective who does that sort of thing, Gary Simes.’

‘How good is he?

‘A bit overzealous sometimes. He talks a lot, so he can be a bit of a pain, but he gets results.’

‘Well, the only information I have is that the man’s first name is Alec and he works part-time at a gym at Cresta.’

‘Should be enough. I’m sure Simes will dig up the rest and a lot more besides.’

Chapter 23

A familiar figure was standing in the common room doorway, peering nervously left and right. It was Prue Spence, clutching a large plastic bag. When she saw me she darted across the room.

‘I can’t believe it, Olly. You’ve shaved off your beard – *and* all your hair!

Oh, before I forget, I brought you these.’ She dipped into the plastic bag and handed me a smart pair of dark blue shortie pyjamas, a *Time* magazine, a bar of chocolate and a bathroom bag filled with toiletries, duplicating some of those Drew had brought me. ‘Will Allwell sent the bathroom stuff,’ she announced.

‘Well, tell him thanks.… How’s the old bugger getting on?’

‘As cynical as ever. Actually more so, now he’s not far off retirement.’ She gave a little shrug, and then with a conjuror’s flourish, reached into the bag and pulled out a white yarmulke and a green kufi, the latter embroidered in gold curls and twirls. ‘Hope one of these solves your air-conditioning problem.’

‘Thanks, Prue, you’re a star.’

‘Well, let’s try this one,’ she said, placing the yarmulke onto my shaven pate. ‘My brother-in-law, Merv, said I could keep it.’

Faan sidled up. ‘Looks like a poached bantam egg on a dinner plate,’

‘Rubbish! Exclaimed Prue. ‘It’s fine.’

‘She replaced it with the kufi, which was also a good fit. ‘Well, why don’t you take them both?’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, I’d like you to have them, Olly.’

‘Thanks, Prue,’ I said, pecking her on the cheek. ‘And the pyjamas?’

‘Also from me.’

I kissed her on the other cheek.

She flashed me a tight little smile. ‘Must get back to work now.’

‘Well, thanks for everything, Prue. I’ll see you out.’

Faan turned to me. ‘I need to wash some socks, Olly. By the way, I think they’ve put you down for O.T. this morning, so I’ll give you a shout when it’s time.’

A huge basket of fruit wrapped in cellophane was waiting for me at Reception, as well as a tin of cheese biscuits. A ‘get well’ card signed by staff at AIR was pinned to the basket. As Prue paused at the entrance, she called over her shoulder: ‘Definitely better without the beard, Olly. Makes you look ten years younger!’

‘Popular guy!’ Jill Braithwaite said with a grin, pushing the basket across the counter towards me. ‘Oh, your daughter, Bonny, phoned just now from a call box. I gathered she was running out of time, so I didn’t call you. Anyway, she told me to tell you she’s sorry she and her sister haven’t been able to visit you yet, but they’ll try and come within the next few days – if they can get a lift. Oh, and there’s something else for you here. I think it’s from your sister.’

It was a Woolworth’s fruit cake sent express delivery. Imogen’s spiky, forward-slanting handwriting, with all the ‘I’s’ and ‘J’s’ precisely capped, was unmistakeable. *‘Dear Oliver,’* the accompanying note said. *‘I’m rather tied up at the moment, so I couldn’t come myself. Hope you enjoy this. Get better soon. Love, Imogen.’*

‘Have some.’ I said, sliding the cake towards Jill. ‘But I think we’ll need a proper knife to cut it. It’s pretty solid.’ I patted my pockets, but there was nothing there except a matchbox.

‘A matchbox? How did that get there?’ I wondered. Then it dawned on me. Jimmy the cockroach was inside. ‘Poor little bugger,’ I murmured to myself. ‘Better find a bigger box.’

‘Something the matter?’

‘No, I was just seeing if I had anything we could cut the cake with, but I haven’t.’

‘No problem,’ Jill said, producing a small Swiss army knife from her purse. She cut a couple of slices and handed me one, taking one herself.

‘Mmmm, it’s pretty good,’ she said, her mouth half full. ‘Plenty of nuts and cherries.’

I picked up the basket of fruit. ‘I’d better put this in the ward.’

On the way to the dormitory ward I noticed that Faith was following me. I turned and offered her some fruit. She hesitated for a moment, then reached into the basket and took a golden delicious apple. She turned it over in her hands before taking a bite. ‘Very nice,’ she said with a shy smile, then skipped down the passage towards the common room, singing.

I phoned Imogen’s landline to thank her for the cake. Her precisely

modulated recorded voice answered. She was playing bridge, the message said, and she should be called on her cellphone only in an emergency. I left a message, thanking her, put the basket on top of my locker and sauntered down to the common room.

Jimmy the cockroach's confined quarters had been worrying me. Perhaps Faan could help. He wasn't in the common room, but eventually I found him in the laundry room, wringing out wet socks and underpants. Yes, he said, he had a bigger box – one that had contained a pair of slippers Katie had brought him. After he'd hung his laundry on the curtain rail around his bed, we walked over to Reception and asked Jill if we could borrow her penknife. She watched in fascination as Faan poked holes in the lid.

'What's that for?' she asked, 'silkworms?'

'No, a cockroach,' Faan said.

Her mouth dropped open. 'A *whaaat?*'

'A cockroach,' I put in. 'It's for Marge. I suppose you could call it a kind of pet therapy.' I put the matchbox inside the bigger box and closed the lid. 'He must be pretty hungry. He hasn't had anything to eat since last night.'

'Will this do?' Jill said, scooping a few crumbs from inside the cake box.

'Perfect,' I said, opening the lid. Then I slid open the matchbox. Jimmy emerged, hesitated a moment, and then began attacking the largest crumb with gusto. 'Do you happen to have a big rubber band, Jill, so we can keep the lid on tight?'

'Let's have a look,' she said, rummaging in a drawer. 'Ah, here we are. This should be big enough.' She slipped the band around the box and handed it back to me. 'You mustn't think staff don't clean the ward properly. These little cockroaches are everywhere in the hospital. It's bad design, not dirt. There are just too many hollow spaces in the walls.'

Marge was in the common room playing draughts with Kristy.

'We found a bigger box for your little cockroach,' I said.

'Oh, good. Let's call him Jimmy.'

'I'm just wondering, Olly,' Marge said, putting the box on her lap. 'Don't you think he might get a bit lonely? Shouldn't we try and find him a mate?' Her hand took mine in hers and gave it a gentle squeeze.

'Sure we can do that. We'll look for another one, won't we Faan?'

'Of course. Just leave it to me,' Faan said. He grabbed me by the elbow.

‘What about you, Kristy, won’t you give us a hand?’ Kristy smiled and trotted after us.

First, we checked along the panels in the TV Room, then around the tea trolley, and finally in the dining area. I was examining the joints along one wall; Faan was probing those opposite. Kristy was on her hands and knees, searching under the tables.

‘*¿Caramba! Que pasa?’* A petite dark-haired woman in her mid thirties was standing over us, her hands on her hips. ‘You look for some-seen?’

Faan turned towards her, his face a blank mask. ‘Yes, we’re looking for cockroaches, Dr Zapata. Have you seen any today?’

‘*¡Muy loco!’* she exclaimed, shaking her head, ‘You real crazy!’ Then she caught sight of Kristy emerging from under a table, a swathe of midriff exposed. ‘And you, *chica*, what you doing?’

‘I’m also looking…’ She paused to work the gum in her mouth. ‘…for cockroaches, Doctor.’

‘*¡Madre mia!’* Dr Zapata exclaimed again, throwing up her hands. She turned and began walking away. She was well-endowed and had the ease of movement common to Latin women, yet she was also somewhat forbidding. Two patients that were in her path quickly stepped aside. A few steps further on she paused and turned to face Kristy. ‘Young woman, you must dress proper. What you got on today no right.’ She strode off without waiting for an answer.

A huge gum bubble Kristy had been blowing suddenly collapsed with a *splat*. ‘After all that we didn’t find a cockroach,’ she muttered.

‘One of the little buggers will pop out of the woodwork when you least expect it,’ Faan put in. ‘You’ll see.

‘Oh, and see the blonde lady with the clip board standing by the door? Well, that’s Sue. She’s the occupational therapist.’

Sue advanced to the middle of the common room. ‘All those for O.T. please line up here.’ She tapped the clipboard and glanced around.

Patients began gathering around her. Among them were Jean, Beth, Sonja, Gabriel, Petrus, Oom Henk and Dirk. One of the late arrivals was Helena, a washed-out blonde schoolteacher in her fifties, who Faan told me had had a breakdown after being raped.

When it seemed no more patients were coming, Sue began calling out names and ticking them off on her list.

Marge was sitting alone with the open slipper box on her lap. ‘What

about Marge?' I asked Kristy.

'She doesn't come to O.T.,' Kristy whispered, glancing down. 'Quite a few patients can't handle it.'

'Like who?'

'Well, besides Marge, there's Morris, and Faith, and of course, Leah. But sometimes when patients get a bit better they start coming.'

Sue was calling my name.

'I'm here,' I said, raising my hand.

She smiled and nodded.

'I think that's everybody,' Sue said, looking around.

Leah was standing at the back, her hands clasped in front of her. 'What about me, Sue? Can't I come?'

'I'm afraid not, dear,' Sue said. 'Doctor Stott hasn't put you down for O.T. yet. But I'll remind her that you're interested.'

'Oh, would you, *please*, Sue. I get so bored just sitting around.'

'Sue shot Leah an appraising look. 'What day is it today, Leah?'

Leah looked blank. 'Sorry, but I've lost count.'

The O.T. patients chatted excitedly as they pushed through the double doors into the passage that led to the lifts. Only Dirk was silent.

Helena was trying to catch Sue's eye. 'Oh, Sue,' she said, twisting her fingers together, 'Is there time for me to go back and wash my hands?'

'Let's wait until we get down to O.T, shall we?' Sue said, ushering us all into the lift. 'There's a toilet down the passage from there.'

Chapter 24

Sue led us through a yellow door into a large bright, north-facing room with four work tables, twenty or more chairs, yellow equipment cupboards, yellow shelving and a blackboard. A row of pot plants and ferns flourished along the window sill.

She paused and looked around. ‘Those who are doing stained glass or pyrography – that’s wood-burning, in case you don’t know – can choose a design.’ She placed a stack of design sheets on each table, and patients began riffling through them.

Then she glanced around. ‘Hands up all those who’ve been working on peg boxes.’ Oom Henk, Helena and Gabriel raised their hands. ‘Well, you know where your pegs are. You can fetch them now. What about you, Petrus? Would you like to make a peg box?’

Petrus sat up straight. ‘Yes, I like, Miss.’

‘Well, first you sandpaper the peg pieces so they are nice and smooth. After that you glue them together. Finally you paint them. But don’t worry about the paint now. We won’t have time today.’ She glanced up as an orderly wheeled in a trolley with coffee and biscuits. Raising her voice, she called out, ‘Help yourselves, everyone!’

Patients crowded around the trolley, chatting.

I felt a tug on my sleeve. It was Kristy. ‘Have you chosen a design yet, Olly?’

‘Not yet. I’m still looking. And you?’

‘One of the beautiful ladies. I’m going to give her a red dress, with yellow hair.’

About five minutes later Sue clapped her hands. The hubbub died away. ‘Back to work now, everyone. Or we won’t finish on time.’

We drifted back to our seats.

‘Oh, for some Jamaica rum … which you eat with a spoon...’ Oom Henk was singing to himself as he sanded his pegs. ‘A brave and beautiful ship, the Titanic … Let’s raise her up to make her smaller … so she’s cosier for the passengers.’

Sue was standing next to him. ‘Wouldn’t you like an apron, Oom Henk?’

‘No thanks, Missy, I pay the dry cleaners to do the job for me.’

‘Let’s put one on, anyway. You’ll be using glue later. If you spill that on your clothes, not even dry cleaning will get it off.’

Helena raised her hand. ‘Sue, may I please wash my hands now.’

Sue nodded. ‘Left, and down the passage on your right.’

Helena shuffled out of the room.

Sue turned to Faan. ‘Would you like to show Olly and Dirk how to do pyrography?’

‘Sure, Sue. No problem.’

Faan showed me the design he’d been working on. It was a tortoise whose outline and shell segments were burned into an oblong pine board. ‘It’s almost finished,’ Faan said, ‘All I have to do is the eyes and claws. Then I can hang it on the wall to remind me to slow down when I’m manic.’

After I’d riffled through the design sheets, I chose a fighting cock, flapping its wings. I traced the design onto a pinewood blank and began burning in the outline.

Sue was bending over me. ‘Lots of movement in that one, Olly. Your rooster looks as if he’s about to crow. Good choice.’

She moved across to Dirk. ‘A spotted hyena? That’s unusual, Dirk. What made you choose that one?’

Dirk was studying Sue’s face. ‘Because hyenas chase lions away and aren’t fussy what they eat – even dogs.’

‘I think it’s a challenging subject you’ve chosen, Dirk, all those spots. It’ll take a lot of burning to fill them in.’

Dirk’s eyes followed Sue as she moved over to Kristy. ‘So you’ve decided to do a stained glass panel, have you?’

‘Yep,’ Kristy said, nodding vigorously.

‘Well, Beth, Sonja and Jean are also doing stained glass. There’s a finished one on the shelf over there, Kristy, if you want to take a look. I’ll show you what to do in a minute.’

The door creaked open. It was Helena returning from the toilet. She entered with a sideways rocking motion, her hands tightly clasped in front of her.

‘May I go to the toilet now, Missy?’ Oom Henk sounded like a schoolboy who was up to mischief.

‘How far have you got with your box, Oom Henk?’

‘I’ve just finished sand-papering all those pegs. They’re as smooth as a

baby's bottom.'

'All right. But don't be long. You were away awfully long last time.'

As he sauntered out of the room he patted his pockets.

Fifteen minutes later Oom Henk was coughing in the passage. The fit continued for several minutes before he entered the room, still wheezing.

Sue looked hard at him. 'I suppose you've been smoking again?'

Spittle trickled from one corner of his mouth. Then he managed to gasp out: 'No Missy, I was just checking the lifeboats on the Titanic…' His shoulders shook with silent mirth.

'Why are you always talking about the Titanic, Oom Henk?'

'Well, Missy, back in the 90's, when my grandson was a laaitie, me and him saw the movie three times. We used to talk about it a lot, which got me thinking. I was living in an old outbuilding in the back yard after my son and his wife made me move out of the main house. They said I used to break things when I got drunk. So these days I wouldn't mind having a cabin on the Titanic, even if it meant hitting an iceberg.'

'So, as I understand it, Oom Henk, you feel your family is not treating you well?'

'I'm not complaining. It's good of them to have me – even in the back room. When I saw the Titanic movie, I could see the passengers had every comfort, even if it was only for a few days. But comfort can come… and also go. One minute you're drinking champagne on the Titanic; the next minute you're freezing to death in the sea.'

'I'm very interested in what you're saying, Oom Henk,' Sue said, checking her watch, 'but we're running out of time.'

'Hang on a sec, Missy, I need to finish what I wanted to say. You see, it's the same in this country. People feel comfortable in their nice houses, like on the Titanic. They hope things will stay that way… but will they? You see, you can only know, *really* know that things aren't forever if you lose everything, like I did. I talk about the Titanic because it's a lesson for us all, especially in South Africa. The point is this: *you don't see the iceberg until it hits you! You see…'*

Dirk, who had been listening intently, interrupted, 'Maybe it'll be a hyena, not an iceberg, old man,' he muttered. 'Wouldn't be too difficult for a hyena to pick up *your* scent.'

There were a few sniggers.

'Dirk! What made you say a thing like that?' Sue said sharply.

‘Oh, but he’s right, Missy,’ Oom Henk said slowly. ‘Very right. Something always eats us up in the end. It might be cancer … or TB … or *emphysema* – that’s what’s eating me up – or it might just be greed. Greed is so hungry it eats greedy people up, sooner or later.’

We were all silent for a few moments; then Sue spoke. ‘Okay, I think we can start packing away now …

On the way up in the lift Sue asked me whether I’d like to be responsible for the ward calendar.

‘Sure. What do I have to do, Sue?’

‘You just bring it up to date every morning before breakfast. I’ll show you when we get upstairs.’

The calendar, a joint project by O.T. patients, was attached to the wall in the passage facing Reception. It consisted of a large sheet of cardboard with slots for the current day and date. A pocket below held the day cards, and another, the date ones.

Above, headed *Life Is*, was a list of twenty lifestyle maxims in bold script. Several caught my eye: *Life is sorrow, overcome it; Life is a dream, realise it; Life is beauty, admire it; Life is love, embrace it.…*

Chapter 25

As I walked back to the common room I switched on my cellphone. It gave a beep, announcing a voice message from Gary Simes to call him. I found a chair at the far side of the room and pressed ‘reply’.

‘Ah, that was quick,’ Simes said.

I began with the usual courtesies and then asked if he’d made any progress.

‘Well, so far I’ve found out the name of your wife’s lover boy. It’s Sudman – *Alec Sudman*. The receptionist at the gym where he works told me. When I said I was looking for a part-time instructor called Alec, she gave me a kind of “Oh, has he been a bad boy again” look. She gave me the name of a woman he’d been friendly with at the gym, a June Findlay, so I’ll see if I can get something out of her.’

‘Would it be possible to give me a full report by the time I’m discharged from hospital.’

‘I’ll give it my best shot, Mr Jeex.’

‘Call me Olly.’ (I was later to regret this familiarity. Simes took it as an invitation to familiarise me with sordid details I would rather not have known about.)

Simes’s nasal voice was again in my ear. ‘These upmarket gyms are patronised by a lot of competitive thirty-something women and are hotbeds of gossip. I’m pretty confident that I should have something to report in a couple of days.’

At least Simes had found out the man’s surname. That was like finding the end of a ball of string…

Simes’ voice interrupted my train of thought. ‘You know, Olly, one thing that’s always puzzled me about these women who work out at gyms. One would think they needed the exercise, yet they’re terribly put out if they can’t park their 4x4’s virtually at the gym door!’

I wasn’t listening. As far as I was concerned the conversation was over, so I muttered a quick goodbye and clicked off.

Then I glanced around the common room. I noticed that Faan was standing near the window talking to a short Chinese man in his late twenties

or early thirties. He was waving his arms around as if he were directing traffic. The man clapped his palms together and made a weaving motion from side-to-side. Both were laughing. A little later Kristy joined them. Faan introduced them, and after about five minutes, excused himself, and walked over to me.

'Who's the Chinese guy?' I asked.

'Lin Chang. Nice dude. Speaks perfect English. He's a Bipo like me. He's from a wealthy Hong Kong family of importers and exporters now living in Vancouver. He was doing his Masters in politics and history at the University of British Columbia when he had a major episode, though not as hectic as mine.' Faan smiled to himself as if he were recalling something funny.

'Go on.'

'Well, he felt Vancouver's long wet winters were creating a yin-yang imbalance and making him depressed, so he told his parents he wanted to find a sunnier place to carry on with his studies. They gave him a round-the-world ticket and told him to check out New Zealand, Australia and Singapore. But he stopped off in South Africa, fell in love with it, and managed to get accepted at Wits. When he thought he was over the depression, he stopped taking his medication. The sunny South African weather had lulled him into a false sense of security. Then he went on a manic high and started dashing off letters to world leaders. When no one replied, he went on a terrible downer. That's how he landed up here.'

'And that gesticulating? What was all that about?'

'Racing along Canadian mountain roads in his Porsche. I was telling him about Bibi, my souped-up Deke. I'll introduce you to him now.'

When we were halfway across the room, a swarthy little man with a shock of dark curly hair weaved unsteadily towards us. He had the spaced-out look of someone on heavy medication. Something about him seemed familiar. He was wearing a pair of dark blue cotton pyjamas. Then it dawned on me. They were *my* pyjamas – the one's Prue had brought me!

I turned to Kristy. 'Well, we better ask one of the nurses to give him some hospital clothes so I can get my pyjamas back.'

'I'll go.'

Kristy wandered off and was back in about five minutes.

'It's okay. They're going to give him hospital PJ's and they'll also wash yours.' She laid her head against my shoulder and murmured up to me. 'His

name is Carlos and he's Portuguese. He'll come right when the medication wears off, just like that other new guy, Rastaman. See, he's standing over there talking to those other patients.'

Rastaman's dreadlocks were bobbing in animated discussion.

'Let's go and say hi … No, no wait! It's such a beautiful day, Olly. Let's rather stand here by the window for a bit. I just want to see the sun and trees.' She lit a cigarette and took a few leisurely draws, blowing the smoke in a stream down the plate-glass. She leaned against me, her head on my shoulder. As we stood in silence, gazing out over the leafy suburbs, Kristy took my hand, her fingers curling around mine. 'Look, Olly, the world is waiting for us out there. I just want to smell the flowers and hear the birds … and the blue sky makes me think of the sea. Wouldn't it be nice to be on a quiet beach somewhere?' She tilted her head and looked up at me, her expression full of hope. As her eyes lingered on my face, a disturbing thought came to me – was she able to sense what Stocky and Tall had done to me? I looked away, screwing my eyes shut. But behind my eyelids the grinning faces of the hijackers suddenly floated into focus.

Kristy squeezed my hand. 'You all right, Olly?'

'I'm okay,' I mumbled. 'Just something from the past.'

'Your wife?'

'No. I'd rather not talk about it, Kris.'

She gave me a questioning look. Then she said, 'I just want to be with you, Olly. I really care about you, you know that?'

'I care about you too, Kris,' I said, trying to banish the images of Stocky and Tall. 'Even though I haven't known you for long, you're already a special friend.'

She gave her head a little shake against my shoulder. 'Not *just* a friend, Olly.'

'Kris, my sweet. We're very close. But I don't think we should be more than good friends…' My words sounded hollow and I hated myself for saying them.

She tapped cigarette ash on the floor. 'Why not?'

'Well, you're only eighteen and I'm– '

'Actually I'm almost nineteen,' she interrupted. 'And I'm *legal*, if that's what you're worried about.'

'No, that's not it, Kris.'

'Well, what's it, then?'

‘Things are very difficult now. If I was…’ (I didn’t know where this sentence was leading, but I knew I’d have to choose my words very carefully.)

‘So why only friends now?’

I was silent for a while. At last I said, very quietly, ‘Well, because I’m 38, nearly twice your age, Kris.’

For a moment she looked a bit taken aback. ‘You really don’t look it, Olly!’ Then she added, ‘But, there’s only nineteen years between us. There was a much, *much* bigger age gap between Celine Dion and her husband. My mom used to talk about them, and they started going together when Celine was a lot younger than me!’

She had a point, but I still felt I should discourage her. A relationship such as ours in the outside world would probably be regarded as exploitive. But then we weren’t in the outside world; we were in a psychiatric ward. Apparently different rules applied here, but I wasn’t sure what they were...

‘I’m married,’ I persisted. ‘And we’re from different worlds.’

‘So what!’ She looked searchingly into my eyes. ‘We’re in the *same* world together now, aren’t we, Olly? And everyone knows your wife has taken off with another guy!’

She paused to gauge my reaction, one foot tapping the floor.

I wasn’t sure how to respond to this, so I simply said: ‘I still love her.’

Kristy took a quick draw on her cigarette, turned her head away and blew smoke towards her feet. The morning light caught the innocence of her slim neck. ‘Maybe we can be *best* friends, then,’ she whispered. ‘If that’s what you want.’

When she looked back at me, her face was wet with tears. ‘Oh, Olly, Olly, *Olly*…’ she intoned.

I’d never heard anyone say my name with such feeling. I put my arm around her and kissed her gently on the cheek. It was only a small kiss, not meant to lead to another…

Chapter 26

"There were voices everywhere. I heard the air whispering, the walls talking, the chair complaining, the floor pacing, the insects gossiping." – Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*

Marge was standing at the far side of the common room window, pointing downwards. 'Hey, you guys come and look here!'

We hurried over to join her. Jean, Beth, Gabriel, Petrus and Rastaman were among the curious onlookers. Faan and Lin Chang stood on the fringe, drinking tea. Dirk was lurking in the background.

At first I couldn't see anything.

'See … down there … *there!'* Marge pointed again. An almost invisible red dart was hovering far below. Suddenly it shot upwards almost to eye level. Two large dragonflies, their wings a rosy blur, were clasped together in nuptial embrace. For a moment they hovered against the window. A second later they shot backwards with astonishing speed, disappeared for about half a minute, and then reappeared, rising slowly as if riding an air current. Then they did a couple of rapid loops and were gone.

'They look a bit manic to me,' said Faan, cracking a knuckle. 'What sort are they, Jean?'

'Difficult to tell from this distance,' Jean replied, pushing his glasses down his nose and squinting through the window. 'And they're moving too fast ... a bit big for dragonflies, I'd say, but one thing I'm sure of is that the one on top is the male.'

'Not always,' Kristy said with a giggle. 'I wonder if they love each other – or are they just "*doing* it"?'

'We'll have to ask them,' I said facetiously, trying to boost her brighter mood.

'Ag, Olly, don't be snaaks,' she said, jabbing a finger in my ribs. Her face lit up in a smile.

'Mr Olly he be right, Miss.' Petrus said, stepping forward. 'You can talk to all animals and lickle things, even flies and kokoroshes.'

‘How can you talk to flies, Petrus?’ I asked, keeping a straight face.

‘You just stay quiet and think you inside fly’s head. You don’t try talk to fly first time. No. You listen for long, *long* time. But some day you hear fly talk. Then he talk *too* much!’

Dirk interrupted: ‘You’ll hear bugger-all if Faan doesn’t stop cracking his fuckin’ knuckles!’

Faan ignored the remark and turned to Petrus. ‘You serious?’

‘Of course, Mr Faan, plenty sangomas talk to animals and lickle things. Animals and lickle things make sangoma’s magic too strong.’

‘So you believe the animal and human worlds are one and the same, Petrus?’ I asked.

‘The very same thing, Mr Olly. I think also maybe *you* be special man for animal magic.’

‘Me?!’

‘Yes. You like good sangoma. I see you no kill lickle things here in hospital. Nearly all white people kill kokoroshes and ants and flies. Plenty black people kill too. Spray *Doom* everywhere.

‘You see, Mr Olly, when you say kokorosh is bad gogga, then easy to kill kokorosh. When you say *person* is kokorosh, easy to kill him too – same like in Rwanda, same like Mr Phiri he say sometimes.’

‘Sounds pretty far out to me,’ Faan said, lighting a cigarette. ‘Petrus, my man, I think you have a very different kind of reality to most people.’

‘Mr Faan, you must not make mistake about what real thing is. Real thing not just what you see … *Aikona.* Underneath in very quiet place be another thing. To find thing, you must also learn be quiet. You stop thinking about self. Go into bush or walk in mountains. Then you hear animals and other lickle things talking.’

Suddenly I felt Kristy’s hand working its way under the elastic of my boxer shorts. At intervals she pinched my rump. Then I felt something cold pressing against my coccyx.

‘Talking about flies,’ I said, removing her hand gently, ‘those dragonflies seem to have disappeared.’

A moment later her hand was back. A finger hooked the elastic, tugged it to its limit, and then let it go with a snap.

‘There are many false perceptions of reality,’ said Faan, ‘for example, schizophrenics perceive reality to be the voices in their head. And a politician’s supporters may perceive him to be an honest man, like Jacob

Zuma's supporters did, though that certainly didn't make him so. Not only here, but especially in America, where most politicians are dishonest, but they still get elected.'

'I sense you're an anti-imperialist, Faan,' Rastaman remarked suddenly. It was the first time I'd heard the dreadlocked newcomer speak. Everyone turned and looked at him. 'But that's cool. Not many white men like you, man.' He had quick intelligent eyes and a gravelly voice, with a slight American intonation. It was hard to believe that this was the same man who was semi-comatose not so long ago. Another strange thing – I didn't feel threatened by him, as I normally did in the presence of most young black men.

Chapter 27

"The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name." – Chinese proverb

Meanwhile, Kristy had wandered over to the window. 'Hey, I think I can see the dragonflies again. Come and have a look.'

Chairs began scraping as we all got up and went over to the window, peering through the glass in all directions.

'I've been thinking about those dragonflies,' Jean said. 'Did you know that the CIA developed tiny surveillance drones the size of insects?'

'That was years ago,' I said. 'Apparently they wouldn't work in a wind.'

'But now they've developed a new generation of miniature spy drones that are much more stable. The latest ones look like beetles, bumble bees, mantises and dragonflies. I read about them in a science magazine.'

'So what would they be doing here, Jean?'

'Could be checking on the Oppenheimer residence,' said Faan, with a smirk. 'A bit off course, though.'

'More likely the other way round,' said Jean.

'Bullshit!' Kristy put it. 'I'm sure the two dragonflies we saw were just ordinary dragonflies. Maybe the CIA can make dragonflies that can *spy*, but sure as hell they can't make ones that *fuck* – at least not in mid-air!'

There was a ripple of laughter.

'I can't see anything,' Marge said, peering through the window. Hey, wait! There's something else … *Look!* – in the trees. It's white. Actually, it's a house.'

'It's Brenthurst, the Oppenheimer mansion,' said Faan. 'You, know, the family that once owned half the mines in the country. Actually, it's probably only the servants' quarters. I think the main house is much further down.'

'Did you know that, according to David Icke,' put in Jean, 'the Oppenheimers are one of the families that have interbred with alien Reptilians who control the world?'

Faan's eyes widened. 'Well, David Icke should be in this ward – no,

sorry, *Sterkfontein* – having high voltage shock treatment! He's a lot crazier than any of us here!'

'I disagree,' Jean shot back, his eyes taking on a serious glint, 'He's actually a very brave man. He's exposed the world capitalist conspiracy and the Reptilians behind it – people like the British royals and the Bush family, and, of course, the Oppenheimers–'

'Well,' I interrupted, 'if it weren't for the mining magnates like the Oppenheimers, this country would have remained a rural backwater. And without the jobs and industries created by mining, the whole of southern Africa would be much poorer. Though some people may blame the mines' migrant labour system for the spread of Aids, saying it encouraged homosexuality and promiscuity, actually homosexuality plays hardly any role in the spread of Aids in Africa.'

'At last someone is letting gay people off the hook!' Jean said with sudden vehemence.

'Not me!' Dirk snorted.

Faan broke in. 'It's a pity homosexuals have hijacked the word "gay", particularly as it doesn't accord with the facts.'

'What are you talking about?!' demanded Jean, looking defensive.

'Well, stop and think about it for a moment.'

'Still haven't a clue.'

'Well, as you must know the original meaning of the word "gay" means happy and joyous.'

'So?'

'So how can you call a group of people "gay" if their rate of depression and suicide is more than six times higher than that of the general population?'

'My guess is that the reason for the high suicide rate among gays is that many are not openly able to be themselves, so they end up conflicted.'

'There, you're probably right,' said Faan. 'Anyway, "gay" is one of the words I want to see rehabilitated.' He leaned back and pressed his fingertips together. 'But don't get me wrong, Jean, I'm not homophobic, if that's what you think. Quite the contrary. My opposition to the word "gay" in that sense has nothing to do with sexual orientation; it's about bad word usage in general, not just "gay".'

'You're having me on!' Jean shot back, his eyes widening.

'Not at all, bru.' Faan rested a hand on Jean's shoulder. 'You see, words are the building blocks of *all* thought. For example, a word like "gay", used

erroneously, has no corresponding meaning in the real world.' 'Actually I'm *not* gay,' said Jean. Then quickly added: 'But then I'm not exactly straight either. I just have something in common with gays.'

'You AC-DC?' asked Faan.

Jean gave an embarrassed titter. 'It's a long story. I'll tell you some other time.'

Chapter 28

"As societies grow decadent, the language grows decadent, too. Words are used to disguise, not to illuminate action: You liberate a city by destroying it. Words are used to confuse, so that at election time people will solemnly vote against their own interests." – Gore Vidal

Dirk had pushed closer into our circle. 'You know you all talk such a lot of shit!' he growled.

'Well, no one's asking *you* to listen,' chimed in Marge.

Ling Chang, who'd been listening intently before Dirk's interruption, leaned forward. 'It's very interesting what you say about word usage, Faan. Confucius said more or less the same thing.'

'Really?'

'Well, let me quote him. This is what he said: "If names are not correct, then language is not in accordance with the truth of things and affairs cannot be carried out to success." So the first rule, he believed, was to use language precisely. When asked what he would do if he were to become ruler of a state, Confucius replied, *"The first thing is the rectification of terms. If language is not correct, the statements do not accord with facts; and when statements and facts do not accord, then business is not properly executed; when business is not properly executed, order and harmony do not flourish"*. The result, Confucius concluded, would be chaos, which is precisely what we have in our modern world, especially the Western world, because of the inaccurate use of policy-describing words. According to Confucius, this would finally lead to the collapse of the state.'

'That's pretty drastic,' I remarked.

'Yes it is, but believe me it's true. For example, Western politicians often talk about the "liberation" of a country when a more accurate term would be its "destruction"… like Libya, for example.'

Faan gave a vigorous nod of agreement. 'Right. Well, not only Confucius but Orwell also warned against the debasement of language and the subversion of meaning. Orwell said it was one of the techniques of

totalitarianism.

‘So when Americans start using verbal monstrosities like “collateral damage”, then they better believe their democracy is in danger. That’s why, in my small way, I’m concentrating on rehabilitating a few important words that have been grossly devalued.’

‘Like what?’ Jean asked.

‘ “Fuck” is one. It’s one of the most abused words in use today.’

‘Ag, Faan!’ Kristy chided, ‘don’t be snaaks!’

‘I’m not joking, Kristy. Everything these days is “fuck this” or “fuck that”. “Fuck” is a beautiful old Anglo-Saxon word that’s been hijacked by lazy people who use it as a term of abuse, or as a meaningless intensifier, especially in Hollywood movies. We now use the word “fuck” so indiscriminately that we are in danger of becoming a civilisation defined by Tourette’s Syndrome!’

Faan flashed Kristy an indulgent smile. ‘Actually you’re one of the worst offenders, Kris.’

‘What do mean?’ countered Kristy, sounding indignant.

‘Well, you pad your sentences with what I call “flabby fucks”. But I can understand that because you’re a very angry young woman. And after what happened to you, you’ve a right to be. But the effect is that when you use the word loosely, “fuck” doesn’t mean *fuck* anymore.’

‘What d’you mean by “flabby fucks”?’ Kristy asked with a dirty laugh.

‘It’s when people say, “You’re fucking stupid” or “It’s a fuck-up” or “It’s fuck-all to do with you” or “I’ll fuck you up!” Those are flabby fucks. The last example is particularly subversive because fucking should be about *love*, not aggression. All these flabby fucks have, like Gresham’s Law, devalued the word “fuck” until it has lost the last vestige of its erotic meaning. It has become stale and boring.’

Kristy leaned towards me and whispered, ‘Actually, Faan is right, Olly, “fuck” is a beautiful word, don’t you think?’

Chapter 29

"We in South Africa share with countries in other parts of the world the worst electoral system ever devised by man. It is in a few words a system where no one is responsible for anything; where the voters have no direct representation, and where a candidate once elected merely has to keep his nose clean with the party, to ensure years of lucrative stress-free employment." – David Wray, letter to *The Citizen*

"I am appalled by greed. I am appalled by misappropriation of funds. I am appalled by highly paid government officials who get massive salaries but still get to do private businesses when they should be working for the citizens." – Denis Goldberg, former Rivonia treason trialist

"Some R500-billion from pension funds, from state coffers, and from the private sector has been diverted into floating private BEE equity deals. Worse still, this is the money that is now returning back into our organisations to buy votes, to fund factional activities…" – The South African Communist Party, *Umsebenzi Online*

"With cadre deployment came a new governing culture where stealing from the state (the taxpayer) has become an accepted way of conducting government business. Relocating tax money for the personal enrichment of government officials by tampering with contracts, tenders and pay-offs have become an all pervasive source of additional income." – Dr Jan du Plessis

'Listen, everyone!' Jill called out from the doorway. 'There're some election leaflets from the various political parties at Reception. You're welcome to come and take some. Remember that election officials will be visiting the ward soon for you to apply for special votes.'

Beth headed towards Reception, but most of the others seemed not to have heard, or were not interested.

Lin Chang was sitting alone in the common room reading a newspaper.

He seemed one of the more perceptive patients, and I felt I'd like to get to know him better. So I walked over to him and held out my hand. 'Faan was going to introduce us, but didn't get the chance. I think you already know my name.'

'Sure.' Lin Chang stood up and shook my hand. The grip was firm. 'Honoured to meet you, Olly.' He motioned to a chair and I sat down next to him.

'Faan tells me you've been studying at Wits.'

'Right. I'm working on a comparative study of Ubuntu and Confucian ethics.'

'Sounds interesting. Where'd you get the idea from?'

'Well, you have such a lovely country with so much potential, just as China has, but in both cases there's a danger of going astray because of a lack of moral direction. Both countries are victims of Western cultural imperialism – largely self-inflicted, I might add. So both need to re-examine their own traditions and beliefs, which is where both Ubuntu and Confucianism come in. In other words, rather than seeking solutions elsewhere, we need to seek it within ourselves.'

'So what do Ubuntu and Confucianism have in common, Lin?'

'Well, both emphasise the collective good rather than selfish individual needs or preferences. Both advocate a traditional communalism, but this communalism has been distorted – in China, by communism; in South Africa, by patronage. South Africans could learn a great deal from Confucianism because of its moral focus.'

'What about crime?'

'Crime is a problem in China but not nearly as bad as in South Africa, where it is completely out of control. In China you have tough laws but no intrinsic moral philosophy that discourages anti-social behaviour. You only have socialist pep talks, which don't really work. So both countries need to get back to their moral roots.'

'Yes, but how?'

'First, we need fundamental moral change among the country's leaders. You will never overcome crime if the leaders themselves are involved in corruption, or are turning a blind eye to it. Criminals take their cue from the top. In ancient Confucian China all candidates for government office, whether local, provincial or national, had to have an unblemished record. In addition, they had to study Confucian ethics, administration, codes of conduct

and dress – in fact everything necessary to help mould an efficient, wise and honourable servant of the people who would command respect. The studies were arduous and took several years, after which candidates had to pass very difficult examinations. The result was stable government that lasted for more than a thousand years.'

Faan was beaming at us. 'You two look as if you're into something very deep. Didn't you see the food trolley? Shall we find a place to sit before it gets too crowded?

We trooped through to the dining area, served ourselves, and sat down at an empty table. A few minutes later Jean and Leah joined us. The main dish was curried chicken.

'Oh dear, I don't eat curry,' Leah said, wrinkling her nose. 'Even mild curry is too hot for me. I think I'll just have the rice and vegetables.'

When Leah began picking at her meagre lunch, I turned to her: 'You said you had a daughter in America.'

'Yes, Loren. She's a sweet girl, but full of nonsense. She was drawn in the American green card lottery, and she and a friend run a boutique in New York. I don't think I'll tell her where I am just yet. She always overreacts.'

'Well, I'd been putting off telling my mom I'm here,' Jean said, 'but this morning I phoned her. She's a bit of a fusspot but really very nice. Anyway, she was relieved to hear from me and said she would visit me tonight. She's bringing my tarot cards so I can do some readings.'

'Goodness me, what's this?' Leah exclaimed, peering over the edge of the table. 'Look! – it's a cockroach!'

'Don't worry, I'll take care of it,' I said, grabbing the little cockroach with a quick swipe. 'Faan, have you got a matchbox?'

'Ja, it's half full, but not to worry.' He emptied the matches into his pocket and passed the box to me.

'I'll give it to Marge later,' I said, popping the cockroach into the box. 'I'm sure she'll be happy.'

'What does she do with them?' Lin Chang asked, looking puzzled.

'Marge already has one pet cockroach. But she wants a friend for it, so we promised her we'd catch another one.'

'I see,' said Lin Chang, looking even more puzzled.

Feeling rather tired after a long day, I decided to turn in early and begin reading *Chance of a Ghost*, the paperback Drew had brought me. I read for a couple of hours, but the outlandish theme began to bore me and I dozed off.

A little later I got up to pee. The shower was running in the women's bathroom, but there was another sound – a woman crying. I stopped for a moment, listening, but I couldn't make out who it was. I thought I'd better tell the night sister, so I headed towards the nurses' station. Old Cow was dozing, her head on the counter.

'Hello, Old Cow,' I said. 'How're you doing?'

She gave a start, then looked up and smiled sleepily. 'Okaaay…' she murmured, stifling a yawn.

'By the way, Old Cow, I'm really concerned about someone who's crying in the women's bathroom.'

Old Cow's face became serious. 'Actually, it's Helena. Haven't you noticed? Late at night she stands under the shower for hours.'

'But why?'

'No secret. She was raped. A man came knocking on her door, asking for food. When she opened the door, he overpowered her. She told me she now feels dirty and that's why she needs to wash herself. When she didn't come right with normal therapy, she sees this American therapist who has a new rape recovery treatment.'

Chapter 30

The next morning after I'd showered and dressed, I went through to the common room. It was still quite early, so no one else was there. A minute or two later I heard the squeak of a shoe on the vinyl floor behind me. 'Oh, Olly, do you mind coming here for a moment?' It was a smiling Jill Braithwaite. 'I need to take a little blood from you. It's one of the routine tests Dr Stott spoke to you about.

When I'd rolled up my sleeve she began rubbing my inner arm with spirit-soaked cotton wool. 'Just clench your fist, Olly. Now hold still a moment. That's it.'

As she rolled down my sleeve after taking blood, she said, 'Oh, I nearly forgot to tell you, Olly. After breakfast you're booked for a scan. It's yet another routine test. An orderly will be here to take you at eight-thirty, so you should be back in time for O.T.'

I decided to have breakfast early so I wouldn't be late for the scan. So as soon as I'd had my medication, I grabbed a tray and hurried across to the dining area.

A moment later I saw Faan advancing towards me. As usual, he was carrying a tray that had already discounted second helpings. Behind him were Petrus and Oom Henk, who sat down at the next table.

'What gives, bru?' Faan said, sliding into the chair opposite me.

'Nothing much. 'I'm booked for a scan after breakfast.'

'No big deal. I've had them all: CAT scans, MRIs, mylograms – you name it. As easy as falling off a log, though the MRI's can be a problem if you're claustrophobic. They put you in a narrow tunnel, a bit like a torpedo tube.'

Morris, accompanied by a nurse, had taken a seat on the far side of the dining area. The nurse was feeding him with a spoon, while he stared into space. I waved at him, but he didn't seem to see me.

Kristy and Leah joined us at the table. Kristy ate with gusto, but Leah swallowed only a few mouthfuls of cornflakes before pushing the bowl aside. 'The one thing I do enjoy is fruit,' she said, picking up an orange and turning it over in her hand. 'Olly, would you mind peeling it for me. My hands just

aren't up to it.'

'No problem, Leah. But I'll have to use my fingers if you don't mind. These plastic knives aren't sharp enough.' As I dug into the rind, I glanced across the room. A short, ample woman with a clipboard entered the dining area. 'Mr Gordon?' she called out, peering around. 'Mr Morris Gordon?'

Morris didn't answer. The nurse looked up. 'Yes, he's here, madam.' The woman with the clipboard smiled and wrote something on what appeared to be a list.

'Who's she? I whispered to Faan.

'Nirit – from the kosher kitchen.'

'Well, Morris,' Nirit was saying, 'from tomorrow you'll be getting kosher food. Just like at home.'

Morris didn't seem to hear.

'Any other Jewish patients here?' Nirit called out.

'You're Jewish, aren't you?' I whispered to Leah.

'Yes, but I'm not *frum.'*

'Frum?'

'Orthodox.'

Nirit heard. 'It doesn't matter, dear. You're entitled to kosher food. I'm sure you'll find our menu very appetising.'

'Yoohoo, Nirit,' Faan called out again, waving a hand like a drunken traffic cop, 'I've decided to convert to Judaism after I'm discharged. Can you make sure I get kosher food in the meantime?'

Nirit shook her head but at the same time flashed him an indulgent smile.

Chapter 31

‘Are you all going to O.T. later?’ Leah asked, as we were finishing breakfast.

Faan and I nodded.

‘Well, do you think Sue would let me come along just to watch?’

‘I don’t see why not,’ Faan said. ‘She may not think you’re ready to start any projects yet, but I think your showing interest would be seen as a positive sign.’

‘Good. I’ll ask her then.’

‘I’d better be trotting along,’ I said. ‘Got to go for a test.’ I paused for a moment. ‘Oh, God, I knew I’d forgotten something. Faan, do you think you could give this to Marge? It’s the matchbox with the cockroach I caught yesterday.’

‘Will do.’

A tall, horse-faced orderly with a wheelchair was waiting in Reception. He had my file, which he gave me to hold, and then with a toothy smile gestured towards the wheelchair.

‘It’s okay,’ I said. ‘I can walk.’

‘Sorry, but patients have to go in the wheelchair. I don’t make the rules, but that’s what they say.’

‘Okay,’ I said, and climbed in.

Once he was sure I was comfortably seated, he began pushing the wheelchair at a leisurely pace towards the lift. ‘I don’t suppose you remember me?’

I looked up at him blankly.

‘It was me who fetched you from the ambulance and took you to Admissions and then to Ward 697.’

‘I must have been a bit out of it,’ I said apologetically. ‘I honestly don’t remember.’

I was anxious to reconstruct everything that had happened before arriving in the ward, so I asked him to help me fill in the blanks, which he obligingly did.

‘Any idea who the woman was who accompanied me to Admissions?’

‘She didn’t say. In fact she kept very much in the background. All I know is that she must have followed the ambulance in a car.’

The lift doors opened and the orderly pushed me in. As the lift began its stop-start descent, I decided to risk a peek in the file. I saw my chance when the orderly’s attention wandered towards a buxom redhead on his left, who was staring straight ahead at the division between the doors. Liz Stott’s hand-written notes were on top, and below them, a summary report:

Not a para-suicide as first suspected. Blood test shows Carboxyhaemoglobin (21%), indicating CO inhalation, probably due to a faulty appliance.

With a start, I recalled from school science that CO was carbon monoxide, a dangerous poisonous gas. There was only one possible cause – the anthracite heater must have been faulty.

As the doors opened, I quickly closed the file. Another orderly was waiting in the passage with an empty wheel chair. The two began chatting. I took another peek at the report:

Diagnosis: clinical depression, accompanied by panic attacks. Medication: Aropax 20mg, Thiamine 100mg. Prognosis: Good – if alcohol consumption can be controlled. Continuing psychotherapy recommended.

Further Remarks: alcohol consumption over the past three months estimated at half a bottle of whisky a day.

My mind was reeling as I closed the file. Certainly my drinking had increased over the past few months to four or five tots, but it was nowhere near half a bottle, which I calculated was about fifteen tots. At that level, I would probably be experiencing serious withdrawal symptoms, which I was not. How, then, had this bit of misinformation found its way into the report?

After the wheelchair stopped outside the MRI facility, the orderly took my file and handed it to a bright young nurse.

‘Let’s get you ready, shall we?’ Then coming closer, she said, ‘Before we begin, I’ll need to give you an injection. It’s an intravenous dye to enhance the MRI images.’

After she’d eased the needle into my arm, a young Indian man in a white coat approached from the scanning area. ‘Mr Jeex?’ he said, looking at my

file. ‘I’m Deepak Patel, your MRI technologist. Please come this way.’ He indicated that I should lie down on a padded platform that looked like a long ironing board. It was poised at the mouth of the massive doughnut-shaped scanner that, as Faan had said, was like a torpedo tube.

‘Have you any metal objects in your pockets like coins, keys, glasses, watch, nail clippers, as well as credit cards,’ he said.

‘No nothing like that.’

‘That’s fine.’

Deepak Patel made a few entries in my file and then glanced at his watch. ‘I think that gadolinium dye should now be where it’s supposed to be, so let’s get going.’

‘Will it take long?’

‘About twenty minutes – not more than half an hour. But just keep very still when you hear clanging or pulsing noises. That’s when the machine is taking images. There’s an intercom system, so if you need anything, just speak to me.’

‘Okay.’

‘Well, let’s slide you in, shall we?’

Once I was inside, the machine began to hum and vibrate. The sound was so soothing that within minutes I must have dozed off.

Suddenly, for some strange reason, I was transported back in time and found myself on honeymoon with Erin.

We’d spent our third night in a little country hotel near Port Edward. Before breakfast we went for a walk along the beach. It felt as if it was happening in present time. The air is crisp and still. Erin is strangely silent. As I take her by the hand, she suddenly turns and faces me. ‘I’m sorry, Olly, but this is all a big mistake. I’m afraid it’s not going to work out.’

Without another word she walks back up the beach towards the hotel. I am too shocked to follow. In a daze and with no particular purpose in mind, I walk several kilometres along the beach towards a small lagoon, narrowing where it spills into the sea. On the other side I see a young woman with short blonde hair waving at me. She shouts something, but I can’t hear what she’s saying above the sound of the surf. I begin wading across the lagoon towards her. Halfway across, I step on some spiny creature that stings me on the sole of my foot. The pain is excruciating. As I limp up the bank on the other side, I see the young woman is Kristy. She runs forward and lays her hands on my head. Instantly the pain is gone. She takes me by the hand and wordlessly we

walk along the beach together. She nuzzles my ear and says something I can't hear. We head up the beach and over a sand dune into a shallow depression fringed with tufty grass where Kristy spreads out a beach towel. We lie down together, our bodies touching. Kristy's lips are slightly parted as she leans across to kiss me. I can feel her tongue in my mouth. Then she pulls away and places her mouth next to my ear. 'You can—'

Suddenly the scene is shattered by a loud clanging noise. The MRI scanner is starting its imaging routine. Remembering not to move, I swivel my eyes to take in my surroundings; part of my mind is still with Kristy, but now I'm far from the beach in a narrow metallic tunnel. The clanging changes to a hum.

'We're finished now,' Deepak Patel is saying, as he slides me out of the scanner. 'You okay?'

'Fine,' I say.

Chapter 32

An orderly wheeled me back into Ward 697, as patients began gathering in the common room for O.T.

Marge was sitting near the window, nursing the cockroach box on her lap. ‘Thanks for catching me another one, Olly,’ she called across to me. ‘I’m sure it’s a girl. I’m calling her Jemima. Come and have a look.’

The little cockroaches had their heads down in a bottle cap filled with sugary porridge, like pigs at a trough.

Faan was beckoning. ‘Hi bru, how’d the scan go?’

‘Hummingly. Wonder when I’ll get the results.’

‘Should think they’ll send the report up today. Maybe tomorrow, allowing for hospital bureaucracy.’

Leah was beaming. ‘Sue says I can come down to O.T. today just to watch. I’m so looking forward to it, Olly. Actually I think it’s because I’m beginning to remember things now.’

‘That’s great.’

As we entered the O.T. room, Sue said, ‘Sit wherever you like, except those doing pyrography. Maybe it’s a good idea to sit next to someone else today.’

Oom Henk pulled out a chair behind Dirk.

‘I don’t want to sit next to this old man,’ Dirk called out, grimacing.

‘Why not?’ Sue knitted her brow.

‘Because he stinks. He stinks of piss.’

I recalled a faint smell of urine when I’d been near Oom Henk. Perhaps the poor old bugger had wet his pants. ‘He can sit next to me,’ I said, pulling out the chair beside me. Oom Henk moved over to my table and sat down with great dignity.

Sue leaned across and whispered to Oom Henk. ‘You know the hospital rules are that patients should bath or shower every day. Have you been doing that?’

‘No Miss.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’m not a sailor.’

‘What have sailors got to do with it, Oom Henk?’

‘They don’t call them swabs for nothing, Miss.’

‘Well, then, you mustn’t be surprised if other patients complain. I’m afraid I’ll have to ask Sister Braithwaite to check that you wash regularly.’

She moved across to Dirk’s table and looked over his shoulder. Then she said quietly, ‘I see you’ve still got quite a bit of work to do on your hyena, Dirk. You’ll notice that when you start burning on his spots you’ll only be able to smell the wood smoke…’

Dirk scowled at her. ‘Is that supposed to be a joke, or what?’

Sue ignored the remark and turned to the rest of the class. ‘Right, for those doing stained glass you can start painting in the panels. Oh, I see you’ve finished your peg box, Petrus. What would you like to do now?’

‘Me, I like do snake, Miss. Burning him on wood.’

Sue turned to Faan. ‘Would you two like to swap seats so Petrus can use the burner?’

She caught sight of Leah bending over a flower box by the window. ‘Oh Leah, please don’t pick the ferns.’

‘Sorry dear, I just wanted a few to brighten up our ward. I love a bit of greenery.’

‘All right, then. But only a few.’

Sue was standing next to Kristy. ‘That’s a beautiful lady you’re doing. I see you’re nearly finished. When you’ve coloured in the last panel, just put it aside over there.’

A couple of minutes later Kristy trotted over to the shelf and placed her stained glass lady on it. Then she turned and shot me an enigmatic smile.

Jill Braithwaite beckoned to me as the O.T. patients trooped back through Reception. ‘Can I see you for a moment, Olly?’ she called. ‘A big envelope has come through from MRI for Dr Stott. I think it’s your test results. Let me quickly check.’ She dialled through. ‘Yes it is. Fine, she’ll see you now.’

Liz Stott poked her head around the door. ‘Please come in, Olly,’ she said with a smile. After she’d ushered me to a seat, she opened my now familiar file. ‘We were a bit concerned when your first blood test showed the presence of carbon monoxide.’

I feigned surprise. ‘What the … I mean, how?’

‘Have you any heating appliances that burn with a flame?’

‘Yes, an anthracite heater.’

‘Well, that’s probably it. I’d have it checked as soon as you can, Olly. CO is a result of incomplete combustion and it’s highly poisonous, starving the brain of oxygen. In your case the MRI scan shows no visible signs of brain damage, though one can’t rule out neurological sequelae.’

‘What’s that in layman’s language, Liz?’

‘It means delayed neurological problems that involve the “higher” or cognitive functions. But don’t worry about that now. I’d say in your case the chances are quite small, though expect some short-term memory loss.’

‘So are you saying the MRI isn’t conclusive?’

‘It’s a very good indicator. But no, it’s not conclusive. You see, the effects of CO poisoning can be quite subtle, so no single test is able to determine absolutely whether or not there’ll be long-term effects. The best results are achieved with a combination of tests.’

‘So what are you saying, Liz?’

‘That you will still need to do some neuro-psychological tests.’

‘Oh … when?’

‘I’ll speak to Gerda. She’ll be testing you. It also probably means that your stay here will be somewhat longer.’

‘Hmmm… Okay, but generally, Liz, how do you think I’m doing?’

‘From what Gerda tells me, pretty well. If there aren’t any hitches, you may even be given a weekend pass.

‘And by the way, I won’t be around for a few days. I’m going to Cape Town on family business. Dr Zapata will be standing in for me.’

As I returned to Reception, I heard raised voices. Oom Henk was glaring at Sue and Jill. ‘I didn’t have to send myself to the laundry when I was on the road, so why should I have to now?’

Sue said quietly: ‘As I told you, Oom Henk, I can’t ignore a complaint, even if I wanted to.’

‘Don’t worry, Sue,’ Jill interrupted. ‘You’ve done your bit. I’ll handle it now.’

Sue shrugged; smiled; then walked off with one backward glance.

Jill turned to Oom Henk. ‘You heard what Sue said. I’m afraid you’ll have to abide by hospital rules and wash every day. Would you like to fetch your soap and a towel now? In the meantime, I’ll make sure there’s a plug in

the bath.'

'Haven't any soap, Sister.'

'Can you lend him some, Olly?'

'Sure. I've some still in their wrappers. I'll fetch one now.'

'And after you've had your bath, Oom Henk, please change into clean clothes and wash the ones you're wearing.'

'This is all I've got, Sister.'

'Can't you ask your family to bring some more?'

'They never come and visit me.'

Jill looked taken aback. Her voice softened. 'Sorry to hear that, Oom Henk… Well, let me fetch you a hospital robe which you can wear while your clothes are drying.'

She ducked into the linen room behind the nurses' station and reappeared with a robe.

'It's like being in the army,' Oom Henk complained with a sigh. 'No – *wrong,'* he corrected himself. 'More like the flippin' navy!'

Chapter 33

"According to recent statistics, depression is reaching epidemic proportions worldwide. Rather than interpreting this as some kind of global siege of neuro-chemical dysfunction, might this not be a healthy response to a world on the brink of disaster?" – El Collie, writer on spiritual matters

Shortly after two o'clock I was seated in Gerda's consulting room. She paged through her notes, then looked up.

'Last time you mentioned that your doctor had put you on Lexotan after the hijacking.'

'That's right. He just renewed the scrip every time I ran out – a month's supply at a time.'

'Not a good idea, Olly.' She shook her head slowly and tapped her desk with a pencil. Then she leaned over and switched on a white plastic kettle perched at the end of her desk. 'I come across this all the time – doctors over-prescribing. Certainly, tranquillisers may help after a sudden shock, but they shouldn't be taken for more than a week or two.'

'Why not?'

'Well, firstly, they're addictive. Secondly, at some point you need to feel the emotion of whatever caused your pain and then deal with it. Otherwise one can have a severe reaction later.'

'What do mean "deal with"?'

'I mean psychotherapy. Therapy helps you confront these emotions, and then work through the trauma. But you can't have effective therapy while tranquillisers are giving you a false sense of well-being. You must have read in the papers about the huge numbers of policemen who have resigned, or were boarded, or even commit suicide, because of stress-related depression.'

'But surely antidepressants would cause the same problem?'

'Not at all. They're not drugs like tranquillisers. They simply allow your serotonin, which is a natural mood stabiliser produced by your own body, to do its job properly. So, combined with therapy, antidepressants are usually an effective treatment for depression.'

‘What actually *is* depression?’

‘Think of depression as being like sliding down into a deep hole where the light at the top keeps getting smaller and smaller. A tranquilliser makes you feel better but leaves you in the hole. An anti-depressant helps you get out of the hole. Therapy is like treating your injuries once you’re out of the hole and in the open.’

‘Makes sense.’

‘Earlier you mentioned that you didn’t have therapy because you didn’t want to talk about the hijacking.’

‘Right. I think the repressed memory must have been blocking everything. But I think I’m ready now.’

‘Actually, Liz Stott asked me to do some neuro-psychological tests with you. We still have time.’

For the next hour I wrestled with various tests of memory, concentration, problem solving, and mental processing speed. At the end I felt exhausted.

‘Is that everything now, Gerda?’

‘For today, yes, but Dr Zapata will be doing a Rorschach blot test with you sometime next week.’

‘Why can’t you do it, Gerda?’

‘She asked if she could do it.’

‘Why me?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe she just wants to keep her hand in. Anyway, she wrote her Masters’ thesis on Rorschach, so she’s the expert.’

In the common room Kristy, Jean, Beth, Carolos and Faan were playing a board game near the window. It was clear that Kristy was winning. She was amazingly quick and decisive. After a few minutes, she flung up her hands and cried, ‘I won!’ Then she leaned back, stretched out her legs and lit a cigarette. ‘You want a turn, Olly?’

‘Not now, thanks, Kris. I just want to relax after all those boring tests.’

Faan pricked up his ears. ‘Tests? What kind of tests?’

‘Oh, the usual they give you to check for brain damage. There’s still one more I have to do with Dr Zapata next week – a Rorschach blot test.’

‘Actually, Olly, I’ve done one of those before. Remind me to give you the low-down on it nearer the time.’

Chapter 34

Across the room I saw the new patient, Carlos, chatting to Sonja. ‘I don’t think we’ve been introduced,’ I said, addressing Carlos.

He turned towards me with an embarrassed smile, then leaned across and shook my hand.

‘I was so out of it when I came in here that I even took this gentleman’s pyjamas,’ he told Sonja, who giggled.

I smiled at the memory, ‘But how did you get in a state like that, Carlos, if I may ask?’

‘Basically because of too many traumatic losses all at once. Firstly, the suppliers of my pie factory went bankrupt, forcing me also into bankruptcy. Then my wife left me, taking our baby. A bit later the bank took our house, so I moved in with a friend. I thought I was okay, but I wasn’t. Suddenly I had a breakdown that landed me in here.’

‘Well, I think the worst kind of loss is the loss of love,’ said Sonja. ‘That’s why I’m here.’

‘I agree,’ said Carlos. ‘My wife leaving me was the worst.’

Sonja continued: ‘I only discovered a few years after I got married that my husband was a womaniser. One weekend I went to Durban for a wedding. I told him I’d be away until the Monday. But I got bored, and frankly I was missing him, so I decided to come back on the Sunday night. I thought I’d come in quietly and surprise him. Halfway up the stairs I heard the unmistakable sounds of lovemaking. He was making love to a strange woman in our bed!

‘I got very depressed. So one night I drank a lot, felt life wasn’t worth living, and took an overdose.’

‘It seems the basic reason for most of the patients being here,’ I remarked, ‘is unbearable loss.’

Chapter 35

That evening most patients had visitors except for Oom Henk, Kristy and me. I'd been expecting a visit from the Harpies, so I'd waited in Reception with the other patients.

As they milled about, everyone seemed in a happy mood. Rastaman was talking animatedly to a pretty young black woman who was holding a copy of *New African.* Helena had brightened noticeably when her son arrived with a bunch of flowers, while Jean was battling to open a large overseas parcel of books his mother had collected for him. Marge was murmuring softly to a huge toy donkey her parents had plonked in her arms. 'His name is Eeyore,' she announced, grinning at the other patients. 'Say hello to everyone, Eeyore,' she added, giving the donkey a hug.

'Nice ta see ya,' Eeyore's recorded voice responded in a strong American accent.

'Now I can talk to an animal,' Marge said proudly. She hugged Eeyore to her breast as she waltzed away.

Just before visiting time ended, my cellphone beeped. It was Frith saying she and Bonny wouldn't be coming because they couldn't get a lift. 'But don't worry about me and Bonny,' she said, 'everything's fine. How're you doing, Dad?' I noticed that there was a slight constriction in her voice.

'Fine. I've been undergoing some tests, and so far everything seems normal.'

'C-cool.'

'So where're you staying?'

'Still with friends.'

I could hear voices in the background.

'Must go now, Dad. Someone's waiting for me… Bye.'

Before I could say anything more she'd rung off. The call register showed she'd phoned from a cellphone. She'd lost hers in the week before Erin had left me – perhaps Erin had bought her a new one? At least I now had a number where I could contact her.

When I'd returned to the common room, I sat near the window and gazed out at the twinkling lights of northern Johannesburg. Just then I heard a deep,

rasping cry that seemed to vibrate through the glass. I put my ear to the pane. There it was again. Then I knew. It was a lion at the zoo.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Jean. ‘Hi, Olly. Remember, I said I’d do a tarot reading for you when I got my pack?’

‘Right.’

‘Well, my mom has just brought it.’ He flashed me an engaging smile. ‘Do you have time now?’

‘Sure, Jean,’ I said, feeling like a bit of company.

‘Shall we sit over here?’ Jean said, brushing crumbs off a nearby table and pulling up two chairs. He placed a small wooden box before us.

‘This time I won’t do a formal reading, Olly. What I’ll do is more like a pictorial Rorschach blot test but using tarot cards instead. The cards can be likened to dream figures. They bring up symbolic messages from the unconscious. Also, I may have flashes of clairvoyance.’

Jean laid out twenty-two thick, oversized cards at the top of the table in an arc, face up. ‘These are the Major Arcana, or Trumps, as they’re called, the most powerful cards in the pack.’ He shuffled the remaining cards and laid them out below, face down.’

‘Okay.’

‘Then let’s begin. But first you need to choose the Major card that you identify with the most.’

I quickly scanned the Major Arcana cards, and then made my selection. The card I chose showed a bright young man, dressed richly like a prince in a fairy tale, dancing up to the edge of a cliff. A little dog was prancing at his feet.

‘Ah, The Fool,’ Jean said, brightening. ‘That’s a bit of a misnomer. Sure, he’s a prankster and a comic, but he’s also a protester, so there’s a more serious side to him.’

I studied the card again. ‘Although I feel drawn to The Fool, to me he looks a bit effeminate.’

‘Well, since he represents Everyman, he’s of indeterminate sex. But personally I’d say he’s transsexual. Just look at his feminine body language.’

‘Hmmm ... Well, I’ve never had inclinations in that direction,’ I said dryly.

Jean flashed me a strange little smile. ‘Also, Olly, He-*She* signifies the

flesh, perhaps even sexual experimentation. Actually, I can identify with that. For as Crowley once said in a rare lucid moment, “All ways are lawful to Innocence”. I think that’s very true.’

The next card I chose was the Moon card.

Jean raised an eyebrow. ‘Well, this is the card of depression and illusions – at least in its negative aspect. One could even say that it’s the card that governs this psychiatric ward and what we are experiencing here. We can either make this experience a positive life-changing one, or we can surrender to sadness and despair.’

‘A bit of a challenge?’

‘Right.’

‘So shall I take another card?’

‘Go for it.’

I passed him the Tower card. It showed a tall tower with a lightning bolt striking it. Two figures were falling from the tower towards rocks below.

‘This is also a scary card,’ Jean said. ‘But let’s have your impressions first.’

‘Well, firstly it shows the incredible power of lightning. Also, to me the falling figures represent how unexpected things can upset our lives.’

‘Hang on a sec, Olly, something is coming through …’ He placed his hand on mine, as if to draw inspiration, then leaned back and closed his eyes, remaining silent for a good half-minute before continuing. ‘I see an elderly man with glasses, wearing braces and a white shirt with a high wing collar. On his feet are carpet slippers and he’s sitting in a wicker bath chair in some dimly-lit place – looks like some sort of institution. He says his name is Joseph.’

‘Joseph who?’

‘Jeex. He says he’s Joseph Jeex.’

‘Good God! That’s my great, great grandfather. Is he saying anything else?

‘He says this is a time for watchfulness, Olly. Pay very close attention to what’s going on around you or you’ll make the kind of tragic mistakes he did.’

‘I’ll try and remember that … Anything else?’

Jean’s eyelids flickered and he remained silent for a while. At last he said: ‘You’ve reached an important turning point in your life, Olly. Joseph warns that you are about to embark on a quest that could prove extremely

dangerous. But you have many friends even in the invisible world…

'But now the old man is beginning to fade.'

'What do you make of all that, Jean?'

'It's obviously a wake-up call on many levels … but wait a moment … Something else is coming through … a spotted dog seems to be saying something. There is also a two-headed snake, but this could just be a symbol. I see you being drawn to righteous forces. You are also going to have intimate encounters with several beautiful women ….'

He didn't finish the sentence but gave a sigh, his lips parting slightly. Impressed with Jean's reading, I said, 'Have we time for one more?'

Jean glanced at his watch. 'Not really. It's almost medication time.'

Chapter 36

"There is a massive stigma around mental illness in South Africa, especially among black men as they are not encouraged to talk about their emotions because this is seen as a sign of weakness." – South African Depression and Anxiety Group

"It's time to embrace open conversations about mental disorders. The occurrence of mental illness is rising and incurring high social and economic costs. Soon it could even overtake HIV and Aids as the leading cause of illness in South Africa. It's time to give mental illness the urgent attention it demands." – Dr Unati Nemuhuyuni, Head of public-private partnerships at Metropolitan Health

'Wake up, Olly! *Wake up!'* Jill Braithwaite was shaking me. 'You've been rambling on about hijackers. You must have been having a nightmare.'

I couldn't remember the details of the nightmare, only that the hijackers were Stocky and Tall. 'You're right,' I said groggily. 'It was a bad dream – a pretty horrible one, actually. Anyway, Jill, thanks for waking me up.'

'That's okay,' she said with a smile. 'See you later.'

It was already light, and Morris was sitting in his chair with his pyjama pants rolled up to his knees. Oom Henk was crouched next to him, massaging his legs. 'Trying to loosen his muscles,' Oom Henk wheezed, looking up at me. 'If you sit around like Morris does, they get pretty stiff.'

As usual, Morris seemed in a world of his own, but I thought I saw a flicker of a smile. Oom Henk was already dressed and his clothes looked clean. His hair was shiny and damp.

After breakfast I sat in the common room reading a copy of *The Weekend Herald* that Jill Braithwaite had lent me. I was killing time before Dr Weddo Moloi's talk.

Faan, Petrus, Rastaman, Jean and Lin Chang were sitting around the same table.

Faan turned to me. 'By the way, there's a new dude in our ward.

Philip is his name. He's a security guard. Arrived while you were still having breakfast. He looks completely out of it. Nurse Constance had to pull the bed rails up so he doesn't fall out. She said someone in Casualty told her his boss brought him in after he drank insecticide. He's already been in the hospital for a few days. Apparently, a few weeks ago he reported a suspicious-looking car with four men in it cruising around the streets he patrols. He called the police who found the car was stolen. They arrested the four, but two escaped from the holding cells. A couple of nights later they burst into his room, struck him on the head, and when his fiancée started screaming, stabbed her to death. He took her death very badly and drank the poison. And he's only a youngster. Looks about twenty-two.'

'When is this government going to get real about crime?' I asked, glancing round the table.

'Never,' Lin Chang said matter-of-factly. 'Not this one.' The others looked at him expectantly, but he said nothing more.

* * * * *

"James is the name which I acquired when I was baptized into Christianity in primary school, but later I came to reject the name because I saw it as part of the colonial naming system when Africans were taken as slaves to America and were given names by the plantation owners … It meant that if an African was baptized, as evidence of his new self or the new identity, he was given an English name." – Ngugi wa Thiong'o

"Toby! Your name is Toby!" – The slave master in *Roots,* forcing Kuta Kinte to give up his African name in favour of an English one.

'Would you all like to come through now?' Gerda was calling from across the common room. 'Dr Moloi is here.'

We trooped into the TV lounge where the staff were already seated, as well as some of the other patients. Dr Moloi, a short rotund man in his late thirties or early forties, shook our hands vigorously. Liz Stott introduced him, telling the audience that he was not only a psychiatrist but also a sangoma, a practitioner of African traditional medicine. He was in private practice but he

also consulted at various hospitals, especially in cases where patients from a tribal background sought treatment from a sangoma.

His subject today was *Mental Illness in the Context of African Belief Systems*.'

Dr Moloi began by saying that one of the most important barometers of mental health in a country, or a population group, was the suicide rate. Since the early 1990s, suicides among black South Africans had increased by an astonishing sixty-two percent. Today, he said, South Africa had one of the highest suicide rates in the world. Sadly, many of those who took their lives were teenagers.

He pointed out that the traditional African extended family, which played a key role in creating an environment for mental health, was virtually extinct in South Africa's towns and cities and was under serious threat in rural areas. Also, its underlying concept of *Ubuntu* – a humanistic concern for others through communalism – had become eroded and distorted.

'We Africans,' he pointed out, 'have traditionally existed through our families and clans. When we lose them, or are divorced from them, we become a "nobody". And when we become a nobody showing disdain for who we are, we are no longer morally powerful. Then we drop babies down pit latrines…'

A shocked murmur rippled through the audience.

Dr Moloi added that another cause of the high suicide rate was the tremendous pressure on Blacks – especially young people – to perform in an increasingly competitive and materialistic environment. Many – especially those still studying – felt they couldn't cope with the demands placed on them by their parents and society. When they couldn't meet these expectations, they became depressed and often, tragically, chose suicide.

Dr Moloi went on to say that indigenous names connected Africans to their cultural traditions and, above all, to their ancestors, who were like roots are to a tree. However, the adoption of European names among black people separated them from their Authentic Selves. In some cases, a feeling of not being connected to one's ancestors could cause neurosis and depression. So this connectedness was essential to one's mental health. Perhaps this was the missing dimension in Western culture…'

He went on to criticise American film stars whose ultimate status symbol was to adopt an African baby. For them, Africa had become a colossal discount supermarket in which to shop for babies. But unfortunately for the

adoptive child, the relationships of these fickle celebrities were notoriously unstable. They frequently divorced, leaving the unfortunate African child marooned not just between two parents but between two cultures, and if they emigrated, between two continents – a prescription for mental illness in later life.

Dr Moloi said the belief that homosexuality was a lifestyle brought to Africa by the white man was simply not true. Homosexuality had always existed in Africa. But what the white man *had* brought was homophobia clothed in Christian doctrine. He added that Westernised television and movies had distorted the African sense of beauty and truth by focussing almost exclusively on Westernised ideals. *Whiteness* was assumed to be the ideal; that was why many black women used skin-lighteners, hair-straighteners and sometimes even blonde wigs to try to conform to this alien archetype.

Dr Moloi raised many other interesting points – too numerous to mention – and when he concluded his lecture, there was a loud round of applause.

Liz Stott stood up and whispered to Dr Moloi, who nodded his head vigorously. She smiled at the audience. ‘I gather you’ve all appreciated Dr Moloi’s talk.’

There was a chorus of approval. Some patients whistled and stamped their feet. ‘Well, I’m sure you’ll be pleased to hear that Dr Moloi has agreed to talk to us again next week.

Chapter 37

At lunch on Friday there was an air of excitement. Most of the patients who were on the road to recovery or whose family or friends could be relied upon to ensure they took their medication, had been given weekend passes, including me. Drew had said he'd fetch me at around five on Friday afternoon and drop me off at home. I was looking forward to seeing the Harpies, as well as Chloe and Toby-Felix. Perhaps Erin had had a change of heart and would visit me.

At around four my cellphone beeped. It was Frith. 'Hi Dad. How you doing?'

'Much better, Frithy. And you?'

'Okay. Bonny and me are coming to see you on Saturday afternoon.'

Her voice sounded strained, but I didn't remark on it. 'Will be great to see you, Frithy, but I've a bit of a surprise. They've given me a pass. I'm coming home for the weekend. Can you rather visit me at home?'

There was a moment's hesitation before she answered. 'Should be okay, but I'll have to phone and ask Mum first. She's already arranged to give us a lift to the hospital. I'll check with her and phone you back.'

A couple of minutes later Frith was back on the line. 'Mum says sorry, but visiting you at home is not a good idea.'

'Why not?'

'She says the house is in a terrible mess after you trashed it. There's still a lot of cleaning up to do.'

'Well, I can do that myself over the weekend. No problem.'

'Actually, she says we shouldn't go to the house.'

'Why not?'

'I really don't know, Dad. Mum says if you want to see us this weekend, you'd better stay in the hospital. We'll come at around four.'

For a while I hung around Reception, watching the other patients leave. It was obvious that Claude Skinner was trying to limit my access to the Harpies as much as possible in case I tried to influence their custody preferences. I phoned Drew and told him of the change of plan.

The phone call with Frith had left a nasty taste in my mouth, both literally

and figuratively. My tongue felt furry and my saliva had a metallic edge, so I went to brush my teeth. When I opened the drawer of my locker, I was surprised to find that the tube of toothpaste, which was almost full before breakfast, was half empty. The only other person in the ward was Dirk, who was lying on his bed reading *Trophy Hunter*, a gun magazine.

'Did you see anyone take my toothpaste?' I asked him.

'You accusin' me, chommie?' Dirk sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, his bare feet protruding from his frayed jeans.

'I didn't say it was you,' I said quietly, looking at him straight in the eye.

Dirk glared back but said nothing as I headed out towards the bathroom.

From mid afternoon those patients with passes had begun leaving with family or friends. Helena went with her son, and Marge with her parents. A young couple, who I hadn't seen before, fetched Leah. Faan, who was wearing his waistcoat on the black side, waved a cheery goodbye when Katie, a small, dark-haired woman with a ready smile, fetched him.

By late afternoon the common room was almost deserted. A cleaner, taking advantage of the near absence of patients was pulling a polishing machine back and forth across the floor, leaving a pungent smell of polish. Gabriel was reading his Bible in a corner; and Kristy, in a black tracksuit, was hunched over a table near the window, reading her Stephen White novel. I went over and sat next to her.

'I thought you were going home for the weekend, Olly,' she said, looking up with a smile.

'Change of plan. My daughters can't visit me at the house, so they're coming here tomorrow afternoon.'

'Well, I'm not going home either. Anyway, besides my mom, I'd hate to be with my shitty family,' she said, pulling a face, 'so let's try and have a good time here, just you and me together, shall we?'

As usual she was chewing a piece of gum.

Was it my imagination or was there a little smirk playing on her lips?

'Fine with me. Any ideas?'

'Ja, there's a classic movie on TV tonight, *Gone With The Wind.* And tomorrow someone said there's also a good movie. Not sure what it is,… Hope it's a nice chick flick. Most of the patients who haven't gone home seem to be reading in their wards. So we'll probably have the TV Room to

ourselves.'

'You want some popcorn for the movie?' I asked.

'I don't smaak popcorn,' she said, wrinkling her nose. 'What about chocolate and crisps?'

'Smaak' is another Afrikaans word I find unattractive when used by English-speakers, but in Kristy's case I found it oddly charming.

'Fine,' I said. 'Let me get some money.'

As I reached the ward I suddenly froze. Dirk had gone, but a young black man in a blue tracksuit was bending over my locker. He was stealthily closing the drawer.

I watched in silence. The man had my tube of toothpaste in his hand. He removed the cap and began sucking out the contents. This couldn't be a criminal, I reasoned. The man had the unmistakable look of a newly admitted patient on heavy medication. Then, as the man turned slightly, I saw the 'A-1 SECURITY' logo on his tracksuit. This must be Philip, the young security guard whose fiancée had been murdered by criminals. I tapped the man on the shoulder. 'Excuse me, Philip,' I said gently, 'but that's my toothpaste.' He turned and stared at me blankly, whitened spittle trickling from the corners of his mouth.

Like a child giving up a purloined toy, Philip edged the hand clutching the tube towards me.

After I'd slipped the tube into my pocket, I said, 'If you want more toothpaste, Philip, just ask, and I'll be happy to give you some.'

'Yes Baba,' Philip mumbled, his face expressionless, his eyes cast down.

'So do you have a toothbrush?'

'No Baba.' Still no eye contact.

'Well, I have a spare one you can have.' I reached into my toilet bag and handed him the toothbrush Prue had brought me.

A flicker of a smile passed across his face as he examined it. Then he held it out tentatively.

'More toothpaste?'

Philip nodded.

I took fifty rands from my locker and returned to the common room. 'This should be enough for the chocolate and crisps,' I said, handing the note to Kristy, who slipped a bookmark into her novel.

‘That’s plenty,’ she said, looking up, strands of blonde hair framing her face. ‘I’ll ask if one of the nurses is going to the shop. Hang on a sec.’

She was back a few minutes later. ‘All fixed,’ she said, ‘Promise says she’ll fetch the goodies after supper.’

Supper was a bland affair – fish cakes, mashed potato, gem squash and peas – and, with many patients away, we almost had the dining area to ourselves. The TV lounge was also virtually empty.

‘Here are your things, Kristy.’ A young nurse holding a large packet had suddenly appeared beside us. ‘Thank you, Promise,’ Kristy said, taking the packet. ‘Keep this for yourself,’ she added, giving Promise the change.

‘I think we better go through to the TV room,’ Kristy said, turning to me, ‘if you don’t want to miss the news.’

As usual, the news started with a report on the coming election, beginning with an interview with the President. He called on voters to continue supporting the ANC, the party that had defeated apartheid and liberated South Africa. It was the only party, he said, that could ensure that liberation remained intact. Other parties (he didn’t specify which) were either trying to turn the clock back, or making ridiculous promises they couldn’t keep.

Kristy stifled a yawn. When she saw my glance, the yawn turned to a laugh. ‘Let me get some coffee,’ she said, flashing a smile.

She returned during a report on the disappearance of the three girls from a Johannesburg shopping mall. As usual, they were pretty blondes. They were still missing, and a reward of three-hundred thousand rands had been offered for verifiable information concerning their whereabouts.

‘Hey, that’s terrible,’ Kristy said. ‘I’ve been to movies at that mall. Could’ve happened to me…’

The bulletin wound up with a report of a freak cold front that had reached the Karoo. Some newly shorn sheep had died and more livestock were expected to succumb. According to the Weather Bureau, the front should reach Gauteng tomorrow.

‘I hope our dragonflies find a warm place,’ Kristy said archly. She took my hand and held it.

‘Hope so too.’

‘Talking about insects,’ Kristy said, letting go of my hand and suddenly jumping out of her chair, ‘I promised Marge I’d look after Jimmy and Jemima over the weekend. I better give them something to eat … Any ideas?’

‘What about a small piece of chocolate?’

‘They eat chocolate?’

‘Sure they do. I found a couple in my hollow Easter egg once when I was a kid.’

She pulled a face. ‘Okay let’s give them a treat. After all it’s the weekend.’

Kristy was clearly enjoying *Gone With The Wind*. But I’d seen the movie twice before and dozed off towards the end.

‘Wake up, Olly!’ Kristy said, nudging me. ‘You’re missing the best part.’

I woke just as Rhett Butler was carrying Scarlett O’Hara up the stairs in his arms. ‘It’s okay, Kris, I know what’s going to happen.’

‘Please don’t tell me. I want it to be a surprise.’

When the credits began rolling, Kristy turned to me. ‘How *could* Scarlett love Ashley, Olly? He’s such a wimp! It’s only at the end that she finally realises she loves Rhett. But by then it’s too late.’

‘Life seems to be like that … People loving the wrong people. And the right people, *too late*.’

‘Hmmm ... I think you’re right, Olly.’ She was silent for a long moment and then added, ‘Is there any chocolate left?’

‘A bit. But it’s yours. I forgot to give you your prize.’

‘But you also won a prize.’

‘What for?’

‘For being so nice to me…’ She rubbed a finger slowly against the palm of my hand.

‘That doesn’t count. Please have it. Anyway, I’m still eating mine.’

‘You sure?’

‘Yep.’

Kristy popped the chocolate into her mouth; then she leaned across and, gently taking my head in her hands, kissed me deeply, her chocolate-covered tongue exploring.

I had no difficulty falling asleep. This time I had a pleasant dream. It was all about chocolate kisses.

Chapter 38

The following morning I gave a start when my cellphone shrilled in the toilet. The ring-tone in the confined space sounded obscenely loud. It was Gary Simes, and I was eager to hear what he had to say. I resisted a polite impulse to tell him I'd call back.

'Good news,' said Simes, 'I've found out quite a lot more about Sudman. He lives in a simplex in Sinden Avenue, Randpark Ridge. It's just off Beyers Naude on the other side of the Western Bypass. Your wife is living there with him.'

'How'd you trace him?' I asked, stifling a fart.

'Simple. I drove over to your place and spoke to the gardener next door. He told me your wife comes at around nine in the morning to feed your pets, and again at around six. So I sat in my car and waited. She pitched up half an hour later and I followed her to Sudman's house.'

'You find out anything more?'

'Well, he's a man of many roles. He has a used car dealership in Windsor West, on Beyers Naude. Alec's Motors, it's called. As you know, he also works part-time as a gym instructor at Cresta, and he's also a bubble-wrap salesman for a company called "Soft Landings". Actually, he doesn't need the part-time work. He has a pretty good income. But the man's a professional womaniser, so he needs to get out and about to trawl for new victims. His special fantasy is bored housewives. So he frequents tarot workshops, pottery classes, creative writing seminars, art appreciation classes, you name it. Your wife is just one of the many innocent flies he's caught in his web.'

'Shit!' I choked. The tightening in my throat apparently had the reverse effect below.

A loud plop.

I thought Simes must have heard it, but he pressed on undeterred.

'He picks up women in their late thirties and early forties, most of them married. He likes his women to be experienced.'

I was beginning to hate this man. I farted loudly.

'What was that?' Simes sounded surprised.

‘One of the patients here, making a rude noise.’ I steered the conversation back to Sudman’s conquests. ‘But how does Sudman find time for all these women?’

‘Simple. He leaves the daily running of the car business to his partner, Basil Breen. But Sudman is the senior partner, so he calls the shots. And when he’s on the prowl, he always has a stable of upmarket cars to draw from to impress the ladies.’

I’m no slouch when it comes to wiping and was giving myself a vigorous rub.

‘You running up stairs or something?’ Simes asked uncertainly.

‘I’m on the level now,’ I said. ‘But how did you find all this out?’

‘One of the best sources of information is often the caretaker where your target lives. I simply pretended to be interested in buying a townhouse, so I gained the man’s confidence. This guy was a lonely pensioner who welcomed a chat. So I managed to get the name of the woman who’d been staying with Sudman before your wife came on the scene – Cynthia van Staden. The caretaker knew where she worked, so I contacted her. She also left her husband for Sudman.’

‘And what’s her attitude to him?’

‘She’s very bitter and was only too happy to talk. She discovered that Sudman is a hypochondriac, and is always going for medical check-ups. Anyway, I thought I’d like to see Sudman in the flesh, so I called at Alec’s Motors and pretended I wanted to buy a car. I was lucky to find him in. He’s very presentable in a macho kind of way, very plausible – *smooth* is the right word – but I could immediately sense he was a con artist.’

‘Anything else?’

‘That’s it for the moment, Olly. But I feel I’ve only scratched the surface. I’ll ask one of my informants – he’s a former member of the police – to check out Sudman further. He still has cop connections. Okay with you?’

‘Go for it.’

Not caring anymore, I flushed the toilet. There was a deathly silence on the line. The last words I heard Gary Simes say before I rang off were ‘What was that?’

I began running Simes’s revelations through my mind as I headed towards the common room.

‘You look as if you’ve seen a ghost,’ Kristy remarked, as I walked across to her. ‘You okay?’

‘I’m fine. Just heard some shitty news.’

‘About your wife?’

‘About her relationship with her boyfriend. But I’d rather not talk about it right now, Kris.’

Kristy slipped an arm around my waist. ‘I know you’re a good guy, Olly, and that’s all that matters.’ She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek.

Chapter 39

The Harpies arrived an hour late wearing identical sneakers, jeans and blue T-shirts, but Erin wasn't with them. They'd brought me an avocado from the tree in our garden.

'Hi Dad, how you doing?' called out Bonny, as she loped across the common room with Frith a little way behind. 'Fine,' I said, giving each a hug. Frith seemed to hold back a bit, apparently embarrassed to be hugging me in front of strangers.

'Let's sit over there,' I said, pointing to some chairs around a coffee table.

I recalled I hadn't seen the Harpies since I'd found Erin's note on the fridge door.

'Been missing you a lot,' I said.

'Missing you too, Dad,' said Bonny.

'Me too,' said Frith.

'I'm really sorry about what happened before I came to hospital,' I said. 'Apparently, it was an accident, but I can't remember much.'

The Harpies exchanged glances but said nothing for a while.

'This place is really weird,' Bonny said suddenly. 'Gives me the creeps.'

'I suppose it's a bit of a culture shock for you girls, but you get used to it. Actually I'm glad I'm here.'

'You serious?!' Bonny raised her eyebrows in surprise.

'Yes, the doctors and staff treat you pretty well, and most of the patients are ordinary people, like you and me, who are just temporarily ill.

'By the way, where's Mum?'

The Harpies exchanged glances. Then Frith said, 'She's in the car downstairs. She wasn't feeling too good.'

'Sorry to hear that. Hope it's nothing serious.'

'Just a headache,' Frith added. 'Maybe she's getting some kind of–'

'Bullshit!' Bonny interrupted. 'Let's face it. She didn't want to come.'

An awkward silence followed.

'Hey, who's that pretty blonde girl sitting over there reading a book?' Frith asked. 'Is she also crazy?'

‘That’s Kristy. And she’s *not* crazy. She’s just had a lot of bad experiences in her life that got too much for her.’

‘Like what?’

‘Actually, it’s not right to talk about other patients. But if you’d like to talk to her yourself, we can go over there and I’ll introduce you.’

‘No, not really Dad,’ Frith said quickly. ‘I don’t want to meet any people who aren’t normal. They are just, well, you know…’

At first Frith’s answer shocked me, but after a moment’s reflection I realised that this was the general public’s unstated attitude towards mental illness. I was grateful at least for her honesty.

‘She’s a very nice girl,’ I said, ‘but you don’t have to meet her if you don’t want to.’

At this point Philip moved closer, toothbrush at the ready.

Bonny did a double take. ‘What’s he want?’ she hissed out of the side of her mouth. ‘Can’t you tell him to go away?’

Perhaps because of Philip’s simple trust, his calling me ‘Baba’, or father, I felt protective towards him. ‘Don’t be so unkind, Bonny! You wouldn’t be talking like that if you knew what this young man has been through.’ With that, I walked over to Philip and dabbed some toothpaste on his brush.

‘Holy crap!’ gasped Bonny. ‘Do you carry toothpaste around with you just for *his* benefit?’ She gawped at Philip as if he was some sort of old-time circus freak. ‘*You* must also be going crazy!’

‘I’d rephrase that if I were you, Bonny.’ I left it at that, knowing that tact was not a strong point among teenagers.

After a long silence, during which the Harpies cast nervous glances at the other patients, Frith finally said, ‘We’re a bit short of money, Dad. Can you help us with a couple of hundred rands?’

‘Sorry girls. I haven’t been able to get to a bank since I’ve been here. They don’t let patients wander about outside on their own, you know.’

‘Haven’t you *anything*, then?’ Bonny asked.

‘Well, I’ve only a few rands my boss lent me, but I need that for while I’m here. Can’t you ask Mum?’

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake!’ Bonny exclaimed. ‘That’s terrific!’

‘We’d better be going now, Dad,’ said Frith. ‘Mum told us to be back at the car in half an hour.’

‘Well, hopefully I’ll be out of here by next weekend, so I don’t think you’ll need to come again.’

I happened to look up and saw Erin paused in the doorway. As she began walking towards us, I saw she was wearing a black leather jacket over a black silky top and pants. A pair of expensive-looking black boots completed her ensemble. It's strange to see your wife in clothes you've never seen before and seem so out of character.

Turning to the Harpies, she said, 'We're very late, girls. Could you say goodbye to your father now?'

'We were just saying goodbye as you came in, Mum,' said Frith.

Giving the Harpies a meaningful look, I said, 'Do you mind waiting in Reception, girls, I need to talk to Mum.'

Wasn't this the moment when I should say, 'I still love you, Erin. Can't we give things another try'?

But after the Harpies had left, Erin quickly said, 'I don't think this is a very good idea.' Then looking me in the eye, she added, 'Actually, there's nothing more to say.'

'But surely–'

'No, there isn't, Oliver. Can't you understand we're in the process of getting a divorce? … and if you need to say anything, say it to Claude Skinner.'

From a legal point of view of course she was right but it still rankled. I knew it was a stupid question, but I felt compelled to ask it anyway. 'So does that mean there's no chance of a reconciliation?'

She took a deep breath before answering. 'No there isn't.'

'Is it because you're having an affair with Alec Sudman?' No sooner had I said the words than I regretted them.

Erin's eyes narrowed and she drew herself up to her full height. 'Actually, Oliver, I haven't loved you for a very long time … Come to think of it, I think the marriage was a mistake from the very beginning.'

Her words came like a hammer blow, but I managed to keep my cool and ask another question. 'Then why didn't you end it earlier?'

'Oh, for Heaven's sake, Oliver, draw your own conclusions!'

'I really don't know.'

'For the sake of the children! I stayed on *for the sake of the children.'*

She turned and began walking away. Then she stopped and half turned. 'But you obviously didn't think of *them*, did you when you tried to commit suicide?!'

'You don't understand,' I called after her. 'I wasn't…'

But by then she was already halfway across the room and out of earshot.

Chapter 40

After Erin and the Harpies had left, I walked over to Kristy and sat down next to her. My mind was in a whirl. I stared straight ahead.

Finally I regained my composure. ‘Want some avocado, Kris? It’s from our garden. My daughters brought it.’

‘That would be nice,’ she said, closing her book. ‘Hang on a sec, I’ll fetch a knife and a couple of spoons. You want some of those crisps left over from yesterday?’

‘Good idea.’

After I’d cut the avocado with the serrated plastic knife, I found the pip was bound around with roots in a pattern suggestive of a human brain. It came apart as I levered it out. I carefully placed the two woody hemispheres, the roots still attached to one, on the table in front of Kristy. ‘Don’t be put off by the pip, I said. ‘It only means it ripened on the tree. Should taste a lot better than the ones you buy in supermarkets.’

Kristy layered several slivers of avocado on a large crisp and took a bite. ‘Mmmm…’ she murmured, closing her eyes, her lips paused in bliss. ‘You’re right, Olly, it’s the best avo I’ve ever tasted.’ After a couple more bites she said, ‘I’d like to grow a little tree from this pip, like we used to do at school. Pity it broke in half.’

‘Not a problem. I can fix it,’ I assured her. ‘See, the roots are still intact.’ I returned a few minutes later with a metal paperclip and an empty sweet bottle. I straightened the paperclip and pushed it through the two halves, pinning them together.

Kristy took the pip. ‘You’re a genius, Olly. Wish the doctors could fix *our* brains as easy as that!’

A loud rumble of thunder shook the common room window. Somewhere beyond Sandton a dark bank of clouds had gathered menacingly. It seemed to be moving rapidly towards us. Suddenly a flash of lightning lit up Sandton City for a millisecond; the peal of thunder came moments later.

I stood up and went over to the window. Kristy followed.

‘Still a few kilometres away,’ I said, peering through the window. Kristy was standing next to me. As her arm touched mine, I could feel a sudden

discharge of static.

‘Wow!’ she said, slipping her hand into mine, ‘the lightning’s already here.’

‘I heard somewhere that lions roar a lot more during thunder storms. I wonder if we’ll hear them tonight. I mean the ones in the Zoo.’

‘I think I heard something then,’ Kristy said, pressing her ear to the glass. ‘Yeah, there it is again.’

I also pressed my ear against the glass. About half a minute later I heard a faint rasping cry. ‘Yes, I heard it.’

‘I think they’re calling us, Olly. Let’s visit them when we’re out of hospital.’

‘Okay, let’s do that.’

She leaned across and kissed me on the cheek. ‘That’s a date then…’

The food trolley was trundling through the doorway.

‘I’m not very hungry,’ I said, ‘after the avo and all those crisps.’

‘Me neither. But let’s have a quick bite, anyway. Then we can watch the movie.’

After we’d eaten a bit of stewed chicken, veg and mash, we wandered through to the TV Room.

‘Thank God the news is nearly finished!' exclaimed Kristy. ‘I couldn’t face listening to any more politicians. But I wonder if they’ve found the missing girls yet.’

‘Yesterday there was a report that one of the parents offered a five-hundred thousand rands reward for their daughter’s safe return.’

When we’d taken seats several rows back from the TV, Kristy lit a cigarette. As she exhaled, she turned to me. ‘I saw you talking to your wife this afternoon. She’s really beautiful, isn’t she?’

‘Yes she is.’

‘I can see you’re a bit tense, Olly. Something wrong?’

‘Well, she made it very clear that she doesn’t love me anymore. But I suppose that’s only to be expected if she’s divorcing me … I paused for a moment, but Kristy said nothing. ‘Up to now,’ I went on, ‘I think I’ve been in denial, but it still comes as a big shock.’

Kristy took my hand, placing it on her lap. Then we settled back to watch the movie. It wasn’t a romantic movie, as Kristy had hoped, but a futuristic horror called *Alien Invasion III*. The special effects were terrifying. Kristy’s head was on my shoulder, her hand gripping mine tightly.

When the movie was over, Kristy gave my hand a slow squeeze. ‘You know, Olly, that movie really, really scared me.’ She looked up at me, her lower lip trembling. ‘I know it sounds silly, but I don’t want to go into my ward alone. I just need you to be with me.’ She suddenly stood on tiptoe and kissed me on the lips.

There was a primal innocence about Kristy that seemed to belie the abuse she’d suffered. My head told me I should say goodnight and go off to bed, but my heart already knew something else ... After a moment’s hesitation I said, ‘Aren’t there any other patients in your ward?’

‘No, just me, Olly. Those who stayed behind this weekend are in the other ward.’

Before I could say anything more she took me by the hand and led me inside her ward. Then with a knowing smile she said. ‘Just give me a minute while I change.’

Chapter 41

Kristy was wearing a long white see-through nightie that revealed the colouring around her nipples and the shadow of her pubic hair.

‘You know what to do,’ she said shyly, as she led me towards her bed. As I lifted her up, she linked her hands behind my head and kissed me passionately on the mouth. Holding the kiss for a long moment, I felt the years between us melt away.

‘That was wonderful!’ she breathed, lying back on the pillow. She took my hand in hers, and looking up at me, smiled. Then she bent forward and pulled her nightie over her head, exposing her youthful breasts. She leaned back again, silently looking up at me with misty eyes. I began to have doubts; yet it was clear what she wanted. I leaned over and kissed her tenderly just above the eyebrows. She slowly lifted the sheet so I could see her nakedness. Her contours were like golden sand dunes shaped by the wind.

‘You can get into bed with me now, Olly,’ she said with an inviting smile.

I hesitated only a moment, then climbed in beside her, and slipped my shirt off.

‘If you’re worried that I’m too young and inexperienced, I’ve done it with a few guys at the club where I worked as a stripper. You see, Olly, because of what my Oupa did to me, I wanted to see if I could have normal sex with a man. They were nice enough guys, but they meant nothing to me.’

‘I understand,’ I said.

Her hand slid under the elastic of my boxer shorts, her touch sending a frisson through me. She held me for a while, not moving. Then she began kneading gently. For the first time in months I felt a stirring.

‘Since all that bad stuff happened to me, Olly, you’re the only man I’ve really wanted to go with.’ She gave a slow squeeze. ‘Oh, God, I really want you now…’ She slipped down under the sheet, her hair brushing against my belly. I could feel her easing off my shorts and the sudden thrill of her warm lips enclosing me. She paused for a long moment, savouring. After a minute or two she slipped me out. ‘I really love you, Olly’, she breathed, sliding upwards, like a swimmer coming up for air.

As she emerged from under the sheet, she kissed me full on the mouth. I could feel her silky nakedness brushing against me and smelt the delicious fragrance of her hair. She lifted my hand to her mouth and touched my fingers to her lips. ‘You can do it now,’ she whispered, her warm breath in my ear.

She took me again in her hand, moistening me in her wetness in a slow circular motion. Then she raised a leg slightly as she guided me in. I lay still for a moment, before moving against her. She began murmuring to herself in Afrikaans. Although I didn’t understand all the words, to me it sounded beautiful.

Whenever our rhythm allowed, I stopped to kiss her breasts and her mouth, while savouring the wonderful feeling of being inside her.

Wanting to give her more pleasure, I turned and slid down under the sheet. Parting her with my fingers, I inhaled her saltiness, my tongue exploring.

‘Oh, *that’s wonderful*, Olly …’ I kept teasing her with my tongue for several minutes and then her legs began to kick. She suddenly stopped, lifting the sheet a little. Then she whispered, ‘I want to come with you inside me, Olly.’

Once again we were face to face and she was guiding me into her. As we moved together in unison, I sensed that for the first time since the hijacking I was able to make love properly.

We continued this blissful rhythm for another five minutes or so. As her arousal increased she gave a gasp and bit her lip. Then she gripped my buttocks fiercely with both hands to pull me closer.

Suddenly I felt a sharp stab of pain below, and to my horror the images of Stocky and Tall began to form behind my eyelids. They weren’t motionless, with set expressions like in police identikits, but menacingly mobile, making threatening gestures. I rubbed my fingers on my eyelids, then blinked my eyes rapidly, hoping I could erase the images. But they wouldn’t go away.

I felt myself shrinking inside Kristy. Finally I slipped out. Waves of shame and frustration overwhelmed me, and although I tried to enter her again a few minutes later, the pain was too distracting. She reached down and held me gently, but I was already slack in her hand. Even with my eyes open, I could still see Stocky’s face pressed close to mine, with Tall behind him grinning.

‘It’s my fault, isn’t it?’ Kristy said dully, the concern in her voice

palpable. ‘I don’t really turn you on, do I, Olly?’

‘Of course you do, my sweet. It’s me,’ I said lamely. ‘Something terrible happened to me during a hijacking that I can’t seem to get past. I…’

Before I could say anything more, Kristy slid down and took me in her mouth. As I lay there, the pain was so intense that I finally blacked out. When I regained consciousness, the pain and the images of the hijackers had gone.

‘Don’t say anything now,’ Kristy said, smiling up at me, with love in her eyes, ‘just hold me.’ Then she kissed my face, my neck, and my ears. I sensed that her hand was busy under the sheets. She made no attempt to conceal what she was doing. Suddenly she gripped my hand and brought it down between her legs. I felt the pressure of her thighs, as she pressed my fingers into her. I began moving them rhythmically. She responded with a rocking movement. Her breaths came shallow and fast. She began to kick a little. Suddenly she gave a stifled cry, followed by a series of little shudders, then she plunged her tongue into my ear.

‘Oh, Olly,’ she murmured, ‘While I was doing it I pretended you were inside me.’ She flashed me a shy smile. Then she added, ‘But don’t worry about not being able to do it properly this time. I think I know what happened to you during the hijacking. I also know about the side effects of anti-depressants. You just need more time to get past it all, Olly, and when you’ve had more therapy and are finally off the medication, you’ll be fine.’

We lay together in silence for a while; then she said, ‘Actually I’ve stopped taking my medication.’

‘Did Liz Stott tell you to?’

‘No. I just hide the pills under my tongue and spit them down the toilet.’

‘I’m not sure that’s wise, Kris. I mean you could have a relapse.’

‘No way. I feel fine. Anyway, since I met you, Olly, I want to feel *all* my emotions. You can’t feel them properly when you’re on an anti-depressant.’

Chapter 42

"Our political leaders have lost belief in themselves and their ideas. … They believe in nothing, stand for nothing and are not prepared to fight for anything."—Justice Malala, political commentator, *The Times*

"*Unlike some politicians, I can admit to a mistake."* – Nelson Mandela

I awoke early to find myself in a state of heightened awareness. Everything around me seemed crisp and clear – the view through the window, the hospital smells, the click of shoes in the corridor. I felt so inspired that a poem began forming in my mind. Before it slipped away I jotted it down in my diary. Then I dressed quickly and tiptoed out past the remaining fellow-patients still sleeping.

In the common room, I found Kristy striding circuits. We were alone. When she saw me, she skipped across the room and threw her arms around me. I bent down and kissed her tenderly. A long moment passed, then she leaned back and looked up at me with a shy smile. 'After last night, Olly, everything looks so beautiful – even in here.'

'I feel it too,' I said.

'Even though we couldn't do it properly, it was still wonderful having you close to me. But next time things will be better – you'll see.'

Perhaps she was right, so I murmured my assent.

'By the way, Kris, I wrote you a poem.'

'Hey, that's fantastic! Let's have a look.'

'It's in my diary in the ward. Let me fetch it.'

When I returned, I began reading aloud.

To Kristy

One fine day I met a girl
Let me count her charms
First, I saw her cherry lips

And the blonde hairs on her arms
Her eyes were clear and blue
The mirror of her soul
When I looked into their depths
I felt they made me whole
Her milk-white breasts were rosy tipped
Just right for body willow
How I wished her lovely legs
Would lead me to her pillow
At last a lingering kiss
And time and space were one
A moonbeam on her golden hair
And silver turned to sun
Now I sensed a sensual glow
Spreading 'neath her arms
Then she led me to her bed
And there I knew her charms.

'That's so beautiful!' Kristy exclaimed.

'It's more doggerel than poetry. But I'm glad you like it. You can tear it out if you like. It's yours, Kris.'

'No. I'm not going to spoil your diary. I'll copy it out later. Do you write a lot of poetry?'

'I only started after one of my sessions with Gerda. She said writing poetry was good therapy. But of course *you're* even better therapy.'

'Oh, Olly.'

'Maybe you should try writing poetry yourself, Kris.'

'I think I will. The first one will be for you, my sweet. Maybe I'll try and write one tonight, after supper.'

Kristy was looking towards the door. 'I think there's someone to see you, Olly.'

It was Drew. As he strode towards us, Kristy whispered, 'You talk to your friend while I go and wash some clothes. I'll see you in about an hour…'

'How you doing?' Drew asked, as I motioned him to a chair.

'A lot better. Hope to be out of here by next weekend.'

‘Great. Any news about Erin?’

‘She was here yesterday for a few minutes, but she made it pretty clear that she’s determined to go ahead with the divorce.’

‘Well, that’s to be expected, isn’t it?’

‘You know, Drew, despite everything, I still have deep feelings for her, and I find it very difficult to just put her out of my mind. But I suppose I have to face the inevitable, so I’m already making a big effort to move on.’

‘Let me guess. Another woman?’

I hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

‘That blonde nursing sister who called you when I was here last?’

‘No, not her. One of the patients – Kristy. The girl I was talking to when you arrived.’

‘So you’re in love with two women, Olly?’

‘I suppose you could say that, but in completely different ways.’

‘Well, you know what the French say – you can love two women at the same time, but you can only have one *passion.*’

‘Hmmm…’

‘So which one is your passion, Olly?’

‘Kristy,’ I replied, without a moment’s hesitation.

‘I can see she’s a real honey, but isn’t she a bit young for you?’

‘She’s very mature, actually.’

‘Well, there’s nothing like a new love to get over the old one. But aren’t you taking a bit of a risk, old buddy?’

‘In what way?’

‘Getting involved with a patient.’

‘*I’m* a patient, aren’t I?’

‘But you’re different, Olly. What happened to you was an accident.’

‘Well, Kristy isn’t crazy, if that’s what you mean. She tried to commit suicide, sure. But she was driven to it because of terrible abuse.’

‘Be very careful, Olly. Often intense crushes develop out of the blue in confined environments, like on cruise ships or co-ed boarding schools, and I daresay in psychiatric wards.’

Drew obviously meant well, and I knew that if I were in his place I’d probably give the same advice. But somehow I knew this was different.

Drew reached into his briefcase. ‘I’ve brought you these, Olly,’ he said, handing me the Sunday papers and a *Time* magazine. ‘Oh, I meant to ask you, have you been following the news?’

‘A bit of TV, but with all this happening, I haven’t read a paper for a while. Anything important?’

‘Not really. Just a lot of speculation about the election. You know, the usual stuff… like the government has been losing more support, especially among unionised workers and radicalised students. But the ANC will still win but with a reduced majority.’

‘So you think the ANC is in trouble?’

‘Sure … As you know, it’s riven by factionalism, even tribalism. Some insiders talk of a major split. And of course, it’s lost its moral compass that guided it under the presidency of Nelson Mandela.’

‘Would you go as far as to say that the ANC could lose this election?’

‘Let me put it this way, Olly: recent polls suggest that the losses in the last two elections are a trend that will continue and the downside of that graph could be pretty steep.’

‘Hmmm…’ I murmured, not entirely convinced.

‘So are you saying the Democratic Alliance has a chance?’

‘Look, Olly, besides some years of internal bickering, they’ve become an effective opposition under Bitwell Nyama. So their support has once again been increasing among Whites, Coloureds, Indians and middle-class urban Blacks. But despite the promotion of Blacks to key positions in the party, support hasn’t increased significantly among the black masses, especially the rural poor. You see, they believe that the DA, being a party supported mainly by Whites, would turn the clock back to apartheid. That, of course, is nonsense.

‘No, I see the real challenge to the ANC coming from the Socialist People’s Party, which, being essentially a black party, has no such erroneous perception to overcome. The ANC has always feared the emergence of a leftist populist party. And now the SPP is that reality.’

‘Right.’

‘Sadly, it’s the SPP’s pie-in-the-sky socialism and its policy of targeting so-called “white monopoly capital”, re-nationalising the parastatals, seizing the mines without compensation, and taking over the banks, that appeals to the masses.’

‘So do you think Zebulon Phiri could cut it?’

‘Yes and no. As an effective president who could deliver, no way, but as a populist leader who has a flair for rousing the masses, absolutely. I don’t know if you’ve heard any of his speeches, but they are spellbinding and they

draw massive crowds.’

‘What about his declared commitment to the Constitution, and especially to Constitutional Court rulings. Isn’t that a sign of moderation?

‘Well, I can’t help thinking that this is more of a political stratagem to bring down the ANC, rather than a sign of moderation. My guess is that when the Constitution and the Court no longer suit his purposes, he will quickly ditch them. Also, his rhetoric has a strong anti-white undertone. He keeps on saying that the SPP is the only organisation in the country, including the ANC, that isn’t white-owned. Because of this he claims that the whole political establishment hates him as he can’t be controlled.’

‘Hmmm.’

Drew paused and then smiled to himself. ‘By the way, Olly, that blonde sister at the nurse’s station is quite a honey.’

‘Jill’s her name. She’s very nice. Actually, she told me she’s divorced, so she’s available if you’re interested.’

‘That’s good to hear.’ Drew glanced at his watch. ‘Better be going now, Olly.

Chapter 43

Sunday lunch was a traditional South African affair – roast chicken, roast potatoes and pumpkin with peas and gravy. Kristy sat opposite me sucking on a drumstick. Even with the bone between her lips I could see she was smiling. She licked the gravy off her fingers as daintily as a cat, wiped her hand, then rested it on mine.

'Let's just enjoy everything while we can now,' she said, suddenly serious. 'You never know what's around the next corner.

'Well let's hope it's something nice,' I said, squeezing her hand.

'Actually, I think I'll go and lie down for a while. Big lunches always make me sleepy.'

'Okay, see you later.'

A couple of minutes after Kristy had left, Faan slid into the chair opposite me. 'So how was your weekend, Olly?'

'My daughters visited me and it was really great to see them. Then after they'd gone, Kristy and I spent most of the time together. And yours?'

'Pretty good. Saw a movie with Katie; also had a few beers at the *Exclamation Mark*; gave Bibi a tune-up; and combed through a scrap yard. I got lucky and found an old Deke that I bought for spare parts.'

The noise level in the common room was increasing as it filled up with returning patients. Leah was ushered in by the same young couple who'd fetched her. They sat down with her at a corner table and seemed to be doing most of the talking. Marge was standing by the window, nuzzling Eeyore.

About half an hour later Kristy appeared next to us holding a shoe box. 'Hi Margie,' she said, handing her the box.

'Thanks for looking after Jimmy and Jemima,' Marge said, opening the lid and peering in. 'They look fine.'

'I think I spoiled them a bit,' chuckled Kristy. 'They even had some chocolate.' She stole a sideways glance at me. 'Maybe they'll start breeding soon. Chocolate's supposed to make you sexy…'

After supper when the sun had set, I stood at the window, gazing out over

the trees. It was the only way I could remind myself that there was another world out there. Below, the bluegums were bending with the wind. I longed to feel a breeze on my face again.

Kristy was sitting at a nearby table with a dark haired young woman in her early twenties who'd been admitted to the ward earlier that day. The newcomer was talking earnestly while she chain smoked. She reminded me of a meerkat – straight-backed, alert, and charged with nervous energy. When she got up and left, Kristy came over to me. 'You look a bit sad, my sweet,' she said, slipping an arm around my waist and nuzzling my ear.

'Not really. Just that Sunday night flat feeling.'

'Well, let me cheer you up.'

I smiled at her. 'Who's the new patient?'

'Serita. She OD'd after her friend dumped her. She's been put in the bed next to me.'

'What's she like?'

'Bit of a druggie, I think. Said she used to trip on Tik and Coke but claims she's off drugs now. I don't know if I believe her.'

By now it was dark outside and we stood for a while in silence, looking at the countless twinkling lights of the houses and street lamps to the north.

'By the way, Olly, I've got something for you. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a sheet of blue pad paper. 'It's a poem I wrote,' she said. 'It's about us. I've called it *Let's Pretend*.'

She began reading it aloud.

Let's pretend…
We're on our beach
Just you and me
The sand, the foam
Your hand in mine
The salty air
The shells between our toes
The wind kissing my hair
Your arm around me
Holding me close.

The simple beauty of the poem astounded me. I knew it was far better than anything *I* could write. 'Oh, Kris, that's wonderful! Makes me feel we're

really on that beach together.'

'Actually, I was going to write "The wind kissing *our* hair", but you've shaved yours off!'

I laughed. 'It still sounds fine.'

Jean was striding towards us, hands plunged deep in pockets. 'Can you believe it?' he groaned. 'Gabriel tore up all my tarot cards!'

'Oh, no! When?' I asked.

'When I got back from the weekend I found them lying on my bed ripped to pieces.'

'How do you know it was him?' put in Kristy.

'Well, he was in the ward when I found the cards and I asked him if he knew anything about it. "Yes, *I* did it," he said matter-of-factly, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. I said, "But why, Gabriel, *why?*" He said, "Because those cards are satanic".' Then he added: "In these End Times, Satan seeks to prevail and we must fight back in every way we can".'

'Well, whatever Gabriel believes, he had no right to do that,' Kristy said.

Jean's raised voice had drawn the attention of some of the other patients, who drifted over to see what was going on. Among them were Faan, Beth, Marge, and Rastaman.

When Jean had told them what had happened, Faan spoke to the onlookers: 'I vote we all put in some money to buy Jean a new pack.' There was a murmur of approval.

'I'll second that,' I said. 'Anyway, here's my contribution.' I handed Faan a hundred rands.

'I'll also put in a hundred,' said Faan. 'Anyone else who wants to contribute can settle up with me later. Meanwhile, I'll give the money to Jill and ask her to buy a new pack.'

Jean was beaming broadly. 'Thanks, Faan. I really appreciate it.'

'Let's go and watch TV,' Kristy suggested. 'I think there're a couple of good programmes on tonight.'

The TV lounge was almost full. Even Faith, who normally didn't watch television, filed in after us.

It was time for the sitcom, *Rough and Tough*. But just as everyone was settling back to enjoy it, the presenter announced there'd been a change of programme. 'We're crossing now to Newlands for the cricket.'

A collective groan went up, and most patients began heading for the door. 'No point in watching,' Faan said loudly, 'Most matches are fixed.'

Chapter 44

‘The cricket should be over,’ Kristy said, about an hour later. ‘Let’s see what’s on TV now.’

When we’d filed into the TV Room, Kristy sat next to me, Serita on her other side. After fumbling in her pocket, Serita offered Kristy a cigarette but avoided eye contact with me.

I’d wanted to spend the evening with Kristy, but Serita stuck to her like a shadow. After hanging about for half an hour in the hope of getting Kristy alone, I decided to go to bed early and read. I fell asleep with the night light on but was awoken some time after twelve by a whisper. Kristy was standing in the doorway in her pink flannelette dressing gown.

I slipped out of bed and tiptoed over to her.

‘Couldn’t go to sleep without saying goodnight to you, my sweet,’ she said, slipping her arms around me.

I hugged her tightly.

She looked up at me searchingly. ‘Sorry I couldn’t be with you tonight, but Serita has been very depressed. Just needed someone to talk to.’

‘I understand.’

Kristy drew my head down and kissed me on the mouth. It was a long deep kiss that seemed to banish time. Suddenly there was a sound of footsteps. We held the kiss, not moving. The footsteps stopped. Then there was the squeak of a heel turning. When we looked up, whoever it was had gone.

Kristy was frowning.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ I said, holding her close. ‘It’s not important.’

‘I’m not. The only thing that’s important is *us*.’

‘Would be nice to be lying close to you now, Kris.’

‘I don’t think we’ll have to wait too long for that, my sweet.’

Chapter 45

The next morning after breakfast Kristy and I sat alone together in the common room. For a while Kristy said nothing, avoiding eye contact.

'Anything wrong, Kris?' I asked her.

'Not really,' she said, leaning across to me. After a long pause she added, 'Actually, there is…'

'Tell me.'

'Well, when I got back to my ward after saying goodnight to you, I found Serita crying in bed. She said she just wanted me to hold her, so I climbed into bed next to her and put my arms around her.'

I listened in silence.

'After I'd been holding her for a while, she stopped crying and leaned across and kissed me on the cheek. Without a word, she slipped off her nightie. Then she lifted up the sheet and said, "Look at me, Kristy. What do you think?"

She has a beautiful body, so I said: "You're lucky to have such a nice figure, Serita." She said, "You think so? Well, why then would anyone want to leave me – unless I'm a horrible person? I mean … do you think I am?" "Of course not," I said, but her taking off her nightie so suddenly took me by surprise and I couldn't think of anything more to say.'

'So did her friend go off with someone else?'

'Yeah, she started having an affair with another woman at work.'

'Another woman? You mean Serita is…'

'I think so. But she didn't try anything with me. I went on holding her and after a while she fell asleep. After that, I climbed back into my bed.' Kristy took both my hands in hers. 'Lying in bed afterwards all I could think about was you, Olly, and how much I'd missed not being with you last night.'

By now the common room was filling up with other patients. We found seats some distance from where they were sitting.

Kristy glanced around before continuing. 'I really want to feel you close to me again, Olly – *soon*.'

I'd felt embarrassed after our failed encounter, but perhaps things would be better next time. 'I would really like that,' I said, gently squeezing her

hands.

She came straight to the point: ‘The only chance would be on a night when Old Cow is on duty. She usually dozes off for a while around twelve. The other sisters walk around too much.’

‘When is she on again?’

‘Tomorrow, I think, but I’m not a hundred percent sure. I’ll check.’ She looked up at me and smiled coyly. ‘Any ideas where we can be alone?’

‘What about the emergency room?’

‘Too risky. Too near the nurses’ station. Old Cow would see – or *hear* us.’

‘Where else, then?’

‘What about one of the bathrooms? Should be safe if we go very late.’

‘Wouldn’t it be a bit uncomfortable?’

‘Not if we take some towels so we can lie on the floor.’

Chapter 46

Just as I was finishing lunch my cellphone rang. It was Gary Simes. I stood by the window where it was more private.

'I think I'm onto something big,' Simes began, 'something that could provide you with ammo if your divorce goes to court. But I can't give you any details now until they've been double checked. All I can say is that it leaves a big questionmark over Sudman's lifestyle.'

'I thought it couldn't get much bigger,' I remarked dryly.'

'This is something else, Olly. When I've got confirmation, I'll run it past Ted Thrupp.'

'Why are you holding back now?'

'Could be libellous if the facts are a bit off, though I'm pretty certain they aren't. Still, one can't be too careful these days.'

After I rang off I tried to focus on something else, which wasn't difficult when I saw Kristy hurrying towards me.

'Worse luck,' she said as she sat down, 'Old Cow isn't on duty until tomorrow.'

'Who's on tonight?'

'Sister Eva. Too risky.'

'Well, we'll just have to be patient, won't we, my sweet.'

After a pause Kristy said: 'Oh, I nearly forgot. Faan says come to the TV lounge. The President is making an important announcement.'

The TV lounge was almost full. Serita had kept Kristy a place near the front, but the only seat I could find was two rows behind.

The President was speaking live from Cape Town: *'…it has come to the notice of the government that there have been some acts of gross intimidation of ANC supporters in the Eastern Cape by elements of the Socialist People's Party. If these unacceptable acts, which threaten democracy, do not stop within twenty-four hours, the government will be forced to declare a state of emergency in the affected areas....'*

After the President had finished, the scene switched to the Johannesburg studio, where Zebulon Phiri, dressed in his Viva la Revolucion beret and what looked like Cuban army fatigues, was standing by.

In his deep, resonant voice, Phiri responded: ‘A state of emergency would be a transparent ploy to prevent us from canvassing effectively. But we in the SPP are not at all surprised by this threat. The ANC knows we are doing very well, so they are scared of us. They also know we are a government in waiting and the army is behind us!’

Phiri sounded confident and sincere, in contrast to the plodding President. More importantly, his charisma was palpable, even coming through the cool medium of television.

The presenter was about to cut Phiri short, but the SPP leader pressed on undaunted: ‘There is something else that the ANC should be worried about. I have pleasure in announcing that the majority of the ANC’s union allies, including the National Defence Force Union, will be instructing their members to vote for the SPP.” He paused for effect, smirking. ‘They gave us the go-ahead to make this announcement today, and they will be confirming this later themselves.’

‘Right, Mr Phiri, we have to leave it there,’ the presenter said, clearly rattled. ‘We will be updating you with another election report just after the evening news. In the meantime, we return to our scheduled programming.’

The TV Room began emptying, and a sizeable group of patients gathered around two tables in the common room. Nobody said anything for a while; then Sonja spoke: ‘I’m too depressed to even *think* about elections. They’re a farce anyway.’

‘I agree with Sonja,’ Helena said, ‘I think I’ll abstain. Anyway, isn’t this rather academic – we’ll all be in here on Election Day, so how can we vote?’

‘Remember, electoral officials will be visiting the ward a couple of days before to record our special votes,’ said Faan.

All the while we’d been discussing the election Gabriel had been working his mouth belligerently. Finally, he said, ‘It’s a simple choice. It’s between all the main parties, which are godless, especially the ANC, and the African Christian Democratic Party, whose principles are founded on the Bible. I’ll be voting ACDP, and so should you all!’

‘Well, since God is a despot, not a democrat,’ Faan said, ‘anyone who believes he’s even remotely interested in the outcome of this supposedly democratic election needs his head read.’

Gabriel muttered under his breath and limped off.

‘We don’t need Bible-thumpers telling us what to do,’ Dirk said with a leer. ‘Anyway, all the main manne are in jail, so I won’t be standing in line to

vote with a bunch of kaffirs.'

We all stared at him in disbelief, shocked by his crude racism.

Finally, Faan retorted: 'I wouldn't talk about kaffirs if I were you, pally, especially since your family name is in Dr Hans Heese's book.'

'What fuckin' book are you talking about?'

'It's called *Groep Sonder Grense*, and was published in the 1980s.'

'Never heard of it,' Dirk said warily.

'Well, I suggest you read it, pally. It's about all the white families in South Africa who have an ancestor or two that *didn't* come from Europe. And your surname is listed…' He paused to let the words sink in. 'Nothing to be ashamed of, Dirk … except for racists like you!'

'You tuning me?!' Dirk spat out.

'Just read the book. You should find it in any well-stocked library, and if you don't want to read it, have a DNA test. That should clear up any doubt.'

Dirk's initial look of incomprehension had turned to cold hatred. His left eye began to jiggle. For a full minute he said nothing. Then he suddenly struck a match and held his hand over the flame. The other patients looked on in silence, aghast. He showed no sign of pain, keeping his hand there until the flame flickered out. Then he struck another match and repeated the performance. Spittle flecked the corners of his mouth. When the flame finally died, he got up and stalked off without a word, leaving an unpleasant odour of burning.

'What was all that about?' I asked.

'Oh, he's just another racist who refuses to face the truth about his origins,' Faan said grimly. 'It's amazing how some of the worst racists have a drop or two of colour. Their crude racism is just a way of burying the truth – at least in their own minds.'

Most of the patients melted away, leaving Kristy and Faan and me chatting in the common room. A few minutes later the sound of raised voices reached us from the Reception area. Then all was quiet for several minutes. Suddenly a loud banging and shouting shattered the silence, followed by the sound of running feet. We hurried to Reception to see what was going on. Papers were scattered across the floor, peppered with black potting soil. The zebra plant, its roots exposed, lay next to an upturned flower pot in front of the nurses' station. A few metres from the entrance to the ward a hefty security guard was crouched over Dirk, pinning him down. Dirk was pummelling the floor and shouting: 'I'll kill you, you fuckin' bastards – *all of*

you!' He gave a menacing laugh, '…especially you, Faan Cloete!'

Jill Braithwaite waited for the security guard to give her the nod; then she crouched down and darted a hypodermic into Dirk's arm.

'Bitch!' he snarled, flecks of spittle flying. 'You're also on my list!'

At the nurses' station, Dr Zapata was shouting into the telephone. When she saw patients gathering, she put her hand over the mouthpiece. 'All patients out of here, please! Only staff to stay,' she commanded.

The three of us retreated towards the bathrooms and then round the corner in the passage where we could still hear something of what was going on. We heard the main door opening and closing. Then all went quiet except for Dr Zapata's voice, which eventually tailed away. We waited a bit longer, and then tiptoed back to Reception. A flushed Jill Braithwaite was alone at the nurses' station.

'What happened, Jill?' I asked.

She took a deep breath before replying. 'Well, Dirk came running into Reception shouting something I couldn't make out. I knew something was seriously wrong when I saw the wild look in his eyes. Then suddenly he swept all the papers off the counter and knocked the pot plant onto the floor. After that he ran over to the entrance and tried to kick the door down. By then I'd pushed the panic button. Luckily there was a security guard nearby.'

'Where is he now?' Faan asked.

'On his way to Sterkfontein. Dr Zapata transferred him. Actually he's the second patient to go to Sterkfontein today. Dr Zapata also transferred Philip.'

Faan began cracking his knuckles. 'Sterkfontein! Oh my God! I think I may have said something that pushed him over the edge.'

'I wouldn't worry too much about it, Faan,' Jill assured him. 'If you ask me, he was a borderline case who should have gone to Sterkfontein in the first place.'

Marge was sitting on her own near the common room window, her cardboard box on her knees. Every now and then she would lift the lid and peep inside and smile to herself. Kristy strolled across and chatted to her for a while, then returned to us.

'How's she doing?' I asked.

'Pretty good. You know how she used to worry when her parents were a bit late visiting, or when she'd be discharged. Now it doesn't seem to bother her.'

‘Well, that’s good. See what pet therapy does for you.’

As we were about to get ready for supper, Dr Zapata strode into the common room. There was no doubt she had a commanding presence. For a moment she glanced around, and then approached Marge.

‘Joost give that to me, please,’ she said, pointing to the box, but Marge wrapped her arms around it and stared up defiantly. *‘Las cucarachas,’* Dr Zapata persisted, ‘Very bad, Very dirty.’ She pronounced her V’s like B’s, so it sounded as if she were talking about berries. ‘You no keep *cucarachas* here, chica. Plenty germs.’ She suddenly lunged forward and snatched the box from Marge. Then without a word she marched off with it under her arm.

In a flash Kristy was on her feet and after her. Before Dr Zapata could reach the door, Kristy grabbed the box and ran towards the piano. She lifted the lid, turned the box upside down, tipping the cockroaches inside. Dr Zapata caught up with Kristy and peered into the piano, but apparently Jimmy and Jemima had disappeared into the forest of strings. ‘You no berry clever, chica. You look for trouble, no?’ With that she stalked off towards her office.

Kristy turned to Marge, who’d been standing to one side, watching. ‘Don’t worry, Margie, we may be able to find them again.’

To everyone’s surprise, Marge wasn’t crying; she even looked relieved. ‘I know you did your best, Kris,’ she said. ‘If you hadn’t put them in there, Dr Zap-at-Her would have killed them. At least they have a chance now.’

After supper most of us patients watched television. There was no further mention of a possible state of emergency, and following a routine election roundup, the next item was about maverick Mormons who were coming to South Africa to take advantage of laws that allowed polygamous marriages.

‘How can a woman share a man with all those others?’ Beth remarked, shaking her head in disbelief.

‘Maybe I could,’ said Kristy, ‘if the man was really special and the other women were special too. But then I’d have to love them all.’

‘Well rather you than me,’ said Beth. ‘I couldn’t handle it.’

Kristy glanced at her watch and nudged me. ‘I vote we go to bed early…’ Then she leaned over and whispered in my ear ‘… because if all goes well, we’ll be staying up late tomorrow, won’t we?’

Chapter 47

"Cape Town's Tygerberg Hospital – the country's second-biggest – is a 'shopping centre' for crooks who have stolen vehicles, petrol, taps, pipes, ceiling boards and even a heart machine … A defibrillator was stolen by an employee who advertised it for sale on Gumtree. Up to five vehicles are stolen monthly." – Report by Nashira Davids in *The Times* of Johannesburg

"It seems the staff at these government hospitals are no longer there in response to a so-called 'calling' or 'vocation' – the employees are now simply hard, feelingless people doing a job, simply to make a living, and doing it in an awful authoritarian way!" – Diana du Toit, letter to the *Sunday Tribune*

"Three officials have been implicated in the sale of corpses at Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital in Johannesburg … All three officials who are implicated in this case have been relieved of their duties and transferred to different units as a precautionary measure." – Yadhana Jadoo, reporting for *The Citizen*

The next morning when I awoke there was a strong smell of urine from Morris's bed. The old man was sitting in his chair, his pyjama pants soaked, but he didn't seem to notice. His condition had been worsening over the past few days, and he was even more distant than usual. While I was dressing, two nurses strode in, lifted Morris onto his bed, and drew a curtain around him. When they flicked it open, I saw he was wearing a clean hospital robe. A few minutes later they helped him into a wheelchair and pushed him down the passage.

At breakfast, Faan said he'd heard that Dr Zapata had sent Morris for shock treatment.

'That's hectic!' Jean said, his eyes widening. 'Have you read *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest?*'

'Sure,' said Faan. 'That's where Big Nurse uses shock treatment to fry

McMurphy's brain.'

'So isn't it shocking that Morris is going for such a risky procedure?'

'No, not really', Faan said matter-of-factly. 'What Ken Kesey wrote may have been true for the 1960s, but today electro-convulsive therapy, or ECT, as they call it now, is much more refined. And it produces good results. I know – I've had it myself. It was the only thing that would bring me down from a hectic manic phase.'

'But there's no guarantee that any benefits from shock treatment will be permanent.'

'What *is* permanent in this world, Jean?'

'I mean, it's *unnatural*. I don't even approve of chemical antidepressants, although I must admit that the Prozac has helped me cope with my life crisis. But to me the medication is like a kind of steroids of the mind, or more like putting yourself under a sort of benign house arrest in your own head. So I think I'll switch to St John's Wort when I'm out of here.

'If that makes you happy, then go for it, bru.'

Jean gave a shrug but said nothing more.

I could accept Faan's contention that ECT had improved vastly since the 1960s. But I wasn't entirely convinced that it was a benign procedure. I couldn't help thinking that in the wrong hands it could lead to all kinds of abuses.

An hour or so later when Morris returned from his shock treatment, he was put in the two-bedded side ward near Reception, where the sister on duty could keep an eye on him.

Kristy and I peeped round the door to see how he was doing. We found him fiddling with the catches on his suitcase. He looked up and smiled benignly.

'Howzit, Morris?' Kristy asked.

'Well, besides a sore jaw and a bit of a headache, I'm fine. But I don't think we've met before, have we?'

For me – and I expect Kristy also – the rest of the day seemed to drag. The only relief to the tedium was watching Morris chatting to Lin Chang and Petrus over lunch. For the first time since I'd arrived, Morris was eating unassisted. It seemed a small miracle.

After lunch we whiled away the time playing chess. Much to my surprise

I managed to win the first game.

'My mind's not on it,' Kristy said, rubbing my leg under the table with her foot.

Although time still seemed to be crawling, eventually it was time for medication, then patients began drifting off to bed.

'Do you want to go and talk to Old Cow now?' Kristy whispered to me. 'And when you're ready, just walk past my ward and cough once and then go into the gents' bathroom and wait. I'll knock twice; then let me in.'

Old Cow was reading a newspaper. The front page story was about crime in shopping malls. She brightened when she saw me. 'How you doing, Olly?' she asked, sitting upright behind the nurses' station.

'A lot better, I think.'

'Good.' She leaned forward. 'You know, Olly, crime is everywhere, even inside hospitals. I'm sorry to say it's mainly staff involved. They steal anything and everything, even linen off the beds!'

'What about crime in Ward 697?'

'Not much crime here, thanks be to God. You see, you get more keen staff working in psychiatric wards. Most nurses don't want to come here; it's very hard work and some are scared of the patients.'

'Scared?'

'Sure. They think you're all crazy. I mean *really* crazy.' Old Cow chuckled. 'But I'm glad you're a *bit* crazy, Olly, otherwise I have no job!'

She glanced at her watch. 'Goodness, it's past twelve. I better check on the wards.'

Twenty minutes later I tiptoed past Kristy's ward carrying a toilet bag and towel. I coughed loudly, then strolled down the passage to the bathroom. As usual, there was no bathplug, so a wad of toilet paper would have to do. While running the hot water, I stripped down to my underpants.

The bath was about a quarter full when I heard two faint knocks. I opened the door quietly. Kristy was standing there holding a bulging yellow sports bag. After closing the door gently behind her and locking it, she flung her arms around me, and began kissing me passionately on the mouth. The dense steam wafting around us was like a scene from a fantasy movie.

She unzipped the sports bag and pulled out several bulky towels which she unrolled on the floor. As she stood up, she let her dressing gown slip, revealing her exquisite nakedness.

Beads of steam were forming on her forehead, her breasts, her stomach and her thighs. ‘Better not keep the light on too long,’ she breathed, pulling a penlight torch from her bag. ‘I’ll switch it off just now.’

She sat on the edge of the bath, stretching out her legs and smiling at me. Knowing what she wanted, I kneeled down, parted her thighs and began tasting her. She slipped her hands behind my head and gently pulled me inwards. Her thighs parted a little more, then closed warmly and wetly around my head. The sharp smell of her arousal was intoxicating. Her breathing quickened, and she leaned backwards, gripping the edge of the bath. Suddenly she shuddered, thrust open her legs, and guided my head upwards. I paused to suck on her nipples, which began hardening in my mouth. Before I could bring my head up further, she leaned down and kissed me fiercely on the lips. Then she reached up and switched off the light.

After I’d wriggled out of my underpants, she slipped a hand between my legs and gave me a loving squeeze. Then she switched on the torch, and we lowered ourselves onto the towels. When I entered her, her eyes widened suddenly in the faint torchlight.

We were linked together in a magical rhythm, like paired birds in flight, soaring above the world and all its problems, conscious only of each other. Her breathing quickened with every thrust and her breath smelt sweet.

‘A bit faster,’ she urged, clamping her bent legs around my back and pressing her hands rhythmically against my rump, ‘I’m nearly there…’ Then a shudder ran through her.

She smiled with contentment, then glanced down at the torch. ‘I don’t think we need this on,’ she whispered, switching it off. ‘Now I want to do something really special for you, my sweet.’ I felt a moistened finger sliding down between my buttocks. It paused for a moment, circling like a bird, searching. Suddenly it was pressing into me.

I tensed in apprehension.

‘Just relax, Olly,’ Kristy whispered, ‘This’ll be great. Trust me.’

At first it enhanced my arousal. Then after a minute or two I felt a stab of pain. Bright lights like Catherine wheels whirled briefly behind my eyelids. As they faded, to my horror the images of Stocky and Tall were suddenly there again, grinning more menacingly than ever. I had to grit my teeth to stop myself from crying out. At this point I realised that the terrible psychological aftermath of the hijacking and the sexual assault, which had already ruined my marriage, might haunt me forever. It was clear to me then

that I would have to get professional help after I was discharged.

Kristy gripped my hand. ‘Listen,’ she whispered, ‘I think I heard someone...’

We both held still in the darkness as the minutes ticked by, straining our senses. The interruption alone was enough to ruin the moment, and I felt my arousal waning, though Kristy didn’t seem aware of it.

For a while I heard nothing. Then I heard a faint scraping. It was as if someone was standing just outside the door and slowly shifting position. A smell of cigarette smoke seeped under the door. I could hear the handle turning slowly from side to side. Although Kristy had withdrawn her finger, the pain below was still there and I was already slack inside her.

Suddenly the handle shook violently. This was followed by a gentle rubbing against the door at about waist height. Another silence ensued, which was suddenly broken by the squeak of a shoe on the vinyl flooring. It seemed to come from down the passage. The images of Stocky and Tall began to recede and the pain eased.

‘We’d better go soon,’ Kristy whispered. ‘Remember, there’s a master key at the nurses’ station which can open *any* door.’

‘Somehow I don’t think that was Old Cow,’ I said.

‘Who else, then?’

‘No idea.’

‘Well, maybe we should wait for another ten minutes or so. It’s probably safer. In any case, I don’t want to leave just yet, my sweet. Do you?’

‘Of course, not,’ I said, suddenly aware the pain had gone. We lay together for a while, kissing deeply.

At last Kristy said, ‘I think it was much better this time, Olly – you were almost there, weren’t you?’

‘Mmmm…’

‘Pity that interruption spoilt things; we’ll just have to wait for another chance.

Chapter 48

When I awoke next morning the need to see Kristy banished my tiredness. I dressed quickly and hurried through to the common room, expecting to find her doing her circuits. Instead, she was sitting in a corner on her own, looking pensive. Her novel lay open with the cover upwards.

'Hello, Kris,' I said, pulling up a chair, 'Anything wrong? You look a bit down.'

'I've done something I'm ashamed of, Olly,' she said, avoiding my eye. 'But I don't think I can talk about it.'

I took her hands in mine. 'Of course you can, my love, I'll understand whatever it is.'

She lit a cigarette and took a deep draw. Then she pursed her lips and twisted her mouth to one side, blowing the smoke down towards her shoulder. 'All right, then,' she said reluctantly. 'But you'll probably hate me afterwards.'

'How could I ever hate you, Kris?' I replied, somewhat taken aback.

'She ignored the question and took another quick puff before continuing. 'Well, after I got back to my ward last night, Serita was still awake. "You're up very late,' she said in a funny kind of voice. I knew straight away then that it was her outside the bathroom. I could also see she'd been crying. So I went over to her bed and asked her what was wrong. She said she was very depressed and wanted me to hold her again like I did the other night. When I said I wasn't sure it was a good idea, she said, "*Please,* Kris, just do this one thing for me."

'Somehow I felt guilty – I don't know why. So I climbed into bed with her and put my arms around her. There were only two other patients in the ward and they were asleep.'

Kristy took a deep pull on her cigarette, holding the smoke in for a second or two before exhaling. 'About half an hour later Serita turned and faced me. "I feel a lot better now," she said, "but I notice *you're* very tense, Kris. If you want me to, I've got something here that'll help you relax, something I learned at a spa."

'She reached into her locker and brought out what I thought was a

hairbrush. It was black and it had a long handle with little knobs along it. There must have been batteries in it because it started humming. Then she moved it downwards. Before I knew what was happening I felt her slowly easing it into me. For some reason I didn't ask her to stop. But I suppose when you're all worked up, like I was, you don't stop to think. As she moved it in and out she went down on me. I began to feel turned on. Suddenly I had the most incredible orgasm. I let out a loud scream, and Serita hid under the blankets. At that point the other patients really *did* wake up! Of course, I told them I'd been having a bad dream.'

I loved Kristy unconditionally and I trusted her no matter what, so I didn't offer any comment. Instead I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

She smiled at me, but I could see tears welling up.

Tell me, Kris, why have you been telling me all this? You don't have to, you know.'

Her lips quivered slightly. 'Because if I didn't, Olly, you'd sense I was keeping something from you. And I know that would have come between us.'

'I understand,' I said.

'So do you think this make me a lesbian, Olly?'

'Of course not, Kris.'

'Actually, this wasn't the only time … When Jenna and me were in our early teens we discovered we had needs, so we started kissing and doing things to each other. You see, after I was raped by my Oupa, for a long time I could only go with girls. I wasn't a lesbian; it was just that I needed comforting, and I couldn't turn to men for that – I was too frightened of them. So I suppose what happened to me forced me to be bisexual…'

I didn't say anything. I just lifted one of Kristy's hands and kissed it. After I released it, she lit another cigarette and inhaled slowly. '

'Do you sometimes think about your wife, Olly?' She exhaled slowly, waiting for my answer.

'Yes I do. I can't just suddenly forget her and all the years we had together.'

'I respect that. But do you still love her?'

'In a way I suppose I do. But I realise now that it's hopeless.'

Kristy leaned across and kissed me. 'So is it really over between you?'

'Well, when she brought my daughters to visit me, I asked her if she still loved me, and she said "no" and the marriage had been a mistake.'

'So how do you feel about that, Olly?'

‘Of course, I felt very bad at the time, but being with you now, Kris, makes me see things differently. I realise that I love *you*, my sweet –very much –and as you said, love changes everything.’

After breakfast, Jill Braithwaite called Kristy and said Dr Zapata wanted to see her. Twenty minutes later Kristy was back in the common room, her face drawn, her lower lip trembling. As she sat down next to me, she burst into tears.

‘What’s the matter, Kris?’ I asked, putting my arm around her.

It was several minutes before she was able to answer. ‘You won’t believe this, Olly,’ she sobbed. But Dr Zap-at-Her says I’m better, so I must go home this week.’

‘When exactly?’

‘She didn’t say what day, but she’s going to phone my mom and make arrangements for them to come and fetch me. I mean, it could even be tomorrow.’

‘But how can she send you back to your stepfather and his horrible boys after what they did to you?’

‘She said she spoke to my mom a couple of days ago, and she said everything was fine at home. It’s not really my mom’s fault – she believes *anything* my stepfather promises her. But I know it will be just the same.’

‘I can’t see what the hurry is, Kris. Couldn’t Dr Zapata at least have waited until Liz Stott got back? After all, you’re Liz’s patient.’

‘I asked her that, and she suddenly started shouting at me, saying I was insulting her. She said she didn’t need Dr Stott or anybody else to tell her what to do. She said she’d been monitoring my case and it was obvious that I was well enough to go home.’

‘There must be something we can do, Kris. Haven’t you a friend you can stay with?’

‘Don’t worry, Olly, I’ll think of something; I’ll start phoning around. But one thing’s certain; I’m not going back to my stepfather’s house.’

I would have offered to put Kristy up myself, but I realised that if Claude Skinner learned about her presence at home, he would use it as ammunition in any custody dispute. Besides, it wouldn’t be fair on Kristy if she were dragged into a legal wrangle. I racked my brains for someone who might have a spare room, but most of my colleagues lived in small flats. Then I

recalled that Imogen had a cottage that her daughter, Fiona, who was working in Britain, used only during occasional visits home. I was normally reluctant to ask Imogen for any favours, but in this case I had no qualms.

She answered her cellphone after about six rings. ‘Oh, Oliver, I can’t talk now, I’m playing tennis. Can you call back in half an hour?’

When I phoned back, her cellphone rang until a recorded voice prompted a message. She had obviously seen my number come up and hadn’t answered. Undaunted, I changed the setting to ‘identity withheld’, waited ten minutes, and tried again. The phone rang six or seven times before Imogen answered.

‘Hellooo…’ she cooed, a fumbling noise in the background. But when she heard my voice, her tone changed. ‘Damn it, Oliver, you’ve just ruined my service!’

‘Sorry,’ I said, and proceeded to explain Kristy’s dilemma. After I’d finished speaking there was a silence.

‘Hello, are you still there, Imo?’

Another pause, and then, ‘Yes, I’m here.’

‘Well?’

‘Sorry, I didn’t get that last bit.’

After I’d repeated myself, she said very firmly, ‘I’m afraid I can’t help, Oliver. You see, I have absolutely no experience in handling people with mental problems. Hamish and I simply aren’t qualified. You need professional help for that. Besides, we’re very private people. So I would suggest you contact the—’

I pressed END CALL and thrust the cellphone back into my pocket.

During O.T. Kristy was unusually subdued. It was obvious she was deep in thought. When it was time to pack up she asked Sue if she could take her stained glass panel with her, as she was going home soon. Sue agreed and gave her a flat cardboard box to put it in.

After we’d returned to the ward, I turned to Kristy. ‘Isn’t Dr Moloi giving another lecture at eleven this morning?’

‘Yes, he is,’ she said. ‘Won’t you keep me a seat while I put this box away?’

As I entered the TV lounge, Dr Moloi was going through his notes. Dr Zapata was seated next to him, with Gerda on his other side. A minute or two

later Kristy arrived and sat next to me.

When everyone was seated, Dr Moloi looked up and smiled. ‘Glad to see you all again,’ he said, glancing around at the audience. ‘My subject today is *The Call of the Ancestors in African Traditional Medicine.* You will recall last week we spoke about the role of the sangoma in treating mental illness in conjunction with conventional medicine. Well, now we’ll be looking at how a person becomes a sangoma.

> ‘Normally such a person is called by their ancestors. But this can take forms that may appear strange to the Western mind. For example, an African person who is destined to become a sangoma may be leading a quite conventional life. Suddenly, however, he may disappear from his home and job and begin what appears to be aimless wandering. In this case, the person is obeying a call of the ancestors, although he – often a she – may not know it at the time. This mental state of confusion is called *thwasa*, or the Xhosa illness.

‘The thwasa person who “hears the call” then moves to the homestead of a sangoma, where he is taken on as an apprentice. In this state of life crisis the thwasa person often experiences strange and compelling dreams in which the unconscious mind is activated, enabling him to receive instructions from the ancestors.

‘This dream world is not only where the ancestors dwell, but it is also the seat of the archetypes – in this case, the *African* archetypes, not the universal ones of the collective unconscious, as Jung envisaged. These African archetypes are indeed the paradigms by which everything can be judged in terms of its “Africaness” – or its deviation from them.’

Dr Moloi went on to explain the importance of initiation in traditional African culture, not just for apprentice sangomas but for African men and women generally. ‘Initiation,’ he said, ‘is the bridge over which the African boy crosses into manhood, learning how to be a good husband and father and acquiring various adult life-skills. Similar practices were being revived for African girls.’

He went on to point out that ‘initiation into adulthood is distinctly lacking in Western culture. For example, twenty-first birthdays, which should be a serious form of initiation, are just another excuse for partying and excessive alcohol consumption, without any concomitant responsibilities.

‘If anything, these juvenile coming-of-age celebrations merely reinforce childhood and childishness. As a result, Western culture has become a culture

where adults are trapped in perpetual adolescence, a society which worships a false cult of youth and where age and wisdom are ignored, or even scorned. Perhaps we African traditionalists have much to teach the West in this regard…'

During the tea break, Dr Moloi chatted to Petrus, who seemed very animated. After tea, he put an arm around Petrus's shoulder and led him to the front, where he pulled up a spare chair. They continued talking until everyone was back in their seats, then Dr Moloi rose to speak: 'One of the patients here I believe has been called by the ancestors.' He nodded towards Petrus.

Petrus smiled shyly, then proceeded to talk about his experiences harvesting medicinal plants in the bush, how he caught snakes, and how he protected himself against wild animals.

'What about lions and hyenas?' I asked. 'Aren't you frightened of being eaten by them?'

Petrus gave an enigmatic smile. 'Aikona, Mr Olly, I no be fright. Sangoma he give me special muti to make lion be my friend. You see, sometime when lion lick himself, like cat, he swallow plenty hair. Then later he be sick and ball of hair come out. Sangoma, he take hair from ball and mix with special herb. Put in bag; keep round neck. Lion, he no worry me.'

'Very interesting,' I said. 'You sure it works?'

Petrus smiled benignly. 'I be very sure, Mr Olly. Maybe sometime you also need special muti for to make lion your friend. That time I give you muti.'

I thought Petrus's remark rather strange, especially as I had no immediate plans to visit the Bushveld. So I soon forgot about it.

For most of Dr Moloi's lecture, Kristy seemed distracted, but since Petrus had begun talking she'd been paying close attention.

Petrus continued speaking: 'When I come back to Joburg, big city too much for me, too noisy. I used to bush, very quiet. Something inside my head go *poof!*… make me forget to look for sangoma, and people tell me I make trouble. Then they take me here to hospital. Only here I find sangoma,' he added, beaming at Dr Moloi.

'Thank you for the compliment, Petrus,' Dr Moloi said. 'But as you understand snakes better than anyone I know, and since the snake is the most powerful symbol of the sangoma, I'm sure there's a lot I can learn from you. In fact, I am going to suggest that you apprentice yourself to

me after you're discharged from hospital. In turn, you could instruct me in the mysterious ways of our legless friends.'

'Yes please, Doctor. I like very much.' Although Petrus was smiling, tears were running down his face.

'One other thing before I close,' Dr Moloi said. 'At the end of this month I am moving from Soweto to Melville, where I'm opening new consulting rooms. I will also be consulting regularly at this hospital, so I may well be seeing some of you again quite soon. In any event, should you need to contact me for any reason, I'm putting some of my cards here on the table. So feel free to take one.'

I took a card and spoke to Dr Moloi on the way out. 'I found both your talks very informative, Doctor. I'd like to give you a call after I'm discharged and perhaps we could get together. I also live in Melville.'

'I'll look forward to that, Ali (As I was wearing my kufi, he must have thought I was a Muslim!)

Chapter 49

Jill Braithwaite called out to me as we passed Reception. ‘Hang on a sec, Olly. Can you spare a moment?’

‘Sure.’

I turned to Kristy. ‘See you just now, my sweet.’ She smiled at me and followed Marge through to the common room.

Jill had been talking to a tall man with long greying hair and a maroon bow tie, who was marking time like a pausing runner next to the nurses’ station. ‘I’ll be back in a moment, just wait here,’ she told him. As she tripped across to me, she rolled her eyes upwards. ‘He thinks he’s God,’ she whispered, ‘*literally!* ... You see, when he forgets to take his medication, he becomes delusional. Actually, he’s a professor at Wits.’

‘So what would you like me to do, Jill?’

‘I need you to keep him occupied for a few minutes. You see, now he’s familiar with the ward, having been here a couple of times before, he thinks he can just walk in anytime without being properly admitted. I’ve called for an orderly to fetch him, so a doctor can examine him. In the meantime, if you can just walk him around until the orderly arrives.’

‘So what should I call him?’

‘Well, he’s actually Professor Roberto Cruz, but it’s no use calling him that now. So stick with “God”.’

‘Does he believe he’s God *all* the time?’

‘No, when he’s normal – by that I mean when he remembers to take his medication – he thinks he was dreaming he was God. But when he forgets to take it, he actually believes he’s God.’

I nodded at her and then strolled over to Professor Cruz. ‘Olly Jeex,’ I said, offering him my hand. The Professor stared straight ahead without appearing to see me. After what seemed an eternity he turned slowly towards me. ‘I am God,’ he announced grandly.’

‘How do you do,’ I said in my most formal voice. ‘I hear you’ve been here before.’

‘This is my second – no my third – coming here. I know this place quite well. It’s almost my second home.’ For a moment he seemed puzzled,

tugging at his shaggy eyebrows. Then he said, ‘You didn’t tell me your name, Mr…?’

‘Jeex, but you can call me “Olly” if you like.’

Then taking him firmly by the arm, I said, ‘Let me introduce you to some of the other patients.’

As luck would have it, Gabriel was limping towards us. He stopped and smiled.

‘Well, I don’t think you’ll need any introduction, Gabriel,’ I said, keeping a straight face, ‘I believe you already know this gentleman.’

Gabriel looked bewildered. ‘Sorry, I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Gabriel.’

‘I am God,’ Prof Cruz said loftily, extending his hand.

Without a word Gabriel turned on his heel and limped off.

Kristy was tugging on my arm. ‘You want to come for coffee, Olly?’

Then Jill called out to me: ‘Just to let you know, the election officials will soon be here to record patients’ special votes. I’ll call you when they arrive.’

We fetched our coffee, then glanced around the common room. Marge and Faan were sitting at a table near the window. The box in which Marge had kept her pet cockroaches was on the table in front of them.

‘Let’s sit with them,’ Kristy said.

As we approached them, Marge carefully lifted the lid of the box, then called out to Kristy, ‘Hey come and have a look, Kris. Faan’s caught Jimmy and Jemima again.’

Two small cockroaches were crouched inside a shallow polystyrene tray, nibbling some crumbs. ‘Faan’s not a hundred percent sure they are Jimmy and Jemima, but I *know* they are.’

‘They look the same to me,’ Kristy said. ‘Where’d you find them, Faan?’

‘On the floor, behind the tea trolley.’

‘Well that’s not very far from the piano,’ Kristy said. ‘Aren’t cockroaches territorial?’

‘Yes, I think you’re right,’ said Faan. ‘That would mean there’s a good chance they *are* the same ones.’

I sensed this little charade was enacted solely for Marge’s benefit.

Now Kristy was speaking to Marge. ‘Well, now you’ve got Jimmy and Jemima back, just be careful Dr Zap-at-Her doesn’t see them.’

‘Don’t worry, I will,’ Marge said, closing the lid. ‘Oh, and Kris, Faan’s been telling me about the glass picture you made at O.T. Can I see it?’

‘Sure. I’ll fetch it now.’

Kristy was back a few minutes later with the panel. ‘Here it is,’ she said, handing it to Marge.

‘Oh, that’s nice. What lovely colours.’ Marge held the panel up to catch the light. Then a cockroach began crawling out from under the lid of the box, which hadn’t been closed properly.

‘Oh, no!’ Marge exclaimed, lunging forward. The glass panel slipped from her fingers onto the floor, breaking in two.

For a moment there was a stunned silence. Then Faan bent down and picked it up. ‘Don’t worry, Kris,’ he said. ‘I’ll be able to fix it with Pratley glue so you won’t even notice the crack.’

While I went with Kristy to put her broken panel away, Professor Cruz was wheeled back into Reception. He seemed sedated. Jill and the orderly wheeled him down the passage to the ward and lifted him onto Dirk’s old bed. From the passage, I could see the professor lying with his mouth open, snoring.

‘Better pull the curtain round him,’ Jill said as she was leaving. ‘I want him to sleep as long as possible.’

After Jill and the orderly had left, Kristy and I remained in the doorway.

Kristy yawned widely, making no attempt to stifle it. ‘God, I’m tired,’ she said, taking my hand in hers. ‘I’d like to lie down and just for you just to hold me, my sweet. And by the way, we don’t have much more time together.’

‘I know. Any ideas?’

‘Not yet. But don’t worry, I’ll think of something.’

I took her hand and led her towards my bed, pulling the curtain around us. The bed was on the same side as Professor Cruz’s, but further from the door.

‘If the curtain’s pulled there…’ I nodded towards the professor’s. ‘…then it’s less likely that anyone will notice that this one’s also closed.’

After we’d quietly slipped onto the bed, I put my arms around Kristy and she snuggled up to me. We whispered endearments to each other for a while, then a quietness settled over us. I lay back on the pillow and dozed, maybe for an hour or so.

Then in the middle of a dream I felt a poke in the ribs. ‘*Psst,*’ a woman’s voice hissed. As I opened my eyes, Jill Braithwaite was standing beside the bed, the curtain pulled aside.

‘Are you *crazy* Olly?’ she whispered, ‘taking a chance like that! You

should know that Dr Zapata checks the wards at odd times.' Despite Jill's urgent tone and set expression, laughter lines were playing at the corners of her mouth.

'And by the way, do you realise you've missed your chance to vote? The election officials left half an hour ago.'

After supper Kristy and I sauntered into the common room. I slipped an arm around her. 'You said something about phoning around for somewhere to stay. Any luck yet?'

She turned her face up to me and smiled wanly. 'Nothing certain. Jenna says she may be able to find me a place. She still has to contact a couple more of her friends.'

'Look, Kris, if you don't come right, I can start phoning some B&Bs in Melville. I don't mind paying for a room until you can find a job and more permanent accommodation.'

'That's really sweet of you, Olly, but let's wait until I hear from Jenna.'

'Okay,' I said, taking her hand. 'What about watching TV, even if it's the usual election stuff?'

'Fine by me; there's nothing much else to do.'

A few other patients were watching the final campaign roundup. Leaders of both the main parties said they were confident of winning.

At the end of the election roundup the presenter turned to a story about a young Indian couple from different caste backgrounds whose relationship was strongly opposed by their parents. Seeing no way out, they had driven to the *Park 'n Pet* love garage where they had connected a hosepipe to the exhaust and gassed themselves.

'What a sad story,' Kristy said, 'isn't it terrible that love should end like that?'

Faan shrugged. 'Sure, but the public feeds on that sort of thing. Shakespeare understood that when he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*.'

'I'm still tired,' Kristy whispered to me. 'I think I'll go to bed early.'

'Me too,' I said. 'Sleeping in the day makes one even more tired.' We excused ourselves, kissing each other goodnight in the passage.

After pottering about for a while, I went to brush my teeth. As I passed the women's bathroom, I heard a sniffle. Kristy was sitting on the floor in the passage, her back against the wall. She was wearing her pink dressing gown

and matching fluffy slippers. Tears were sliding down her face. I crouched down beside her and put my arm around her. ‘What’s the matter, my love?’ I said, kissing her forehead.

‘I’m just feeling sad,’ she said, blowing her nose on a tissue. ‘I think that story on TV about the young couple killing themselves really got to me.’

‘Yes, it was upsetting. But in those cultures parents are often big obstacles to love.’

‘Not just in those cultures.’

Chapter 50

"Unemployment and homelessness have tended to cause a lot of xenophobia among the poor Johannesburgers. The scapegoat is always the foreigner. Everyone who looks vaguely like a foreigner is regarded as an illegal immigrant. Especially if they are darker in complexion than the 'average South African' – whatever that means. South Africa's xenophobia is really racism." – Zakes Mda, *Jo'burg to Jozi*

"South Africa is in the throes of a moral and political crisis. In the current political landscape, truth is not merely misrepresented or falsified, it is overtly mocked. … We live in a surreal country where politicians' private and partisan interests have taken precedence over national issues and social development." – Farouk Araie, political and social commentator, in a letter to *The Sunday Independent*

"…it is the ANC that is in crisis. Their crisis is not only deep and fundamental. It is terminal (although the unravelling of this once-great party will take a long time, interspersed with catalytic moments…)" – Helen Zille, Former Leader of the Democratic Alliance

Election Day began like any other day. Patients queued for medication and at breakfast we chatted among ourselves as we lingered over coffee. Faan had dragged three tables together so we could all join in.

'I wonder who will win the election,' Beth murmured, half to herself.

'Isn't it obvious?' put in Helena

'Nothing is obvious,' pronounced Professor Cruz, with an air of gravitas. 'God ordains.'

'Well, lucky God is black!' said Rastaman, smirking.

'Now we've solved the world's problems,' said Jean, 'maybe the best thing for us to do today is to relax, get some snacks from the shop, settle back and watch other people on TV going to the polls.'

'I'll go along with the snack idea,' said Faan.

'Me too,' agreed Rastaman.

‘Okay, now that that’s settled,’ said Jean, ‘let’s ask if any of the nurses are going down to the shop.’

‘I’ll have a word with Jill Braithwaite,’ I said. ‘Hang on a sec.’

Jill looked up and smiled when she saw me. ‘I’m going down to the shop myself when I’ve got this paperwork done – say in about half an hour. Tell the others they’re all welcome to come along.’

She reached behind the counter and held up a small oblong package. ‘This is for Jean It’s the new pack of tarot cards that you guys asked me to buy. I also contributed, so I took the liberty of wrapping it. Won’t you call the others now and ask them to come and sign the card.’

Led by Jill, we all emerged from the lift on ground level half an hour later. I had a feeling of freedom, like being let out of boarding school for the weekend. Strolling along Hospital Walk, we were soon dodging throngs of people. After the sheltered environment of Ward 697, the bustle was almost overwhelming.

Oom Henk and Petrus, who had somehow acquired a plastic bag, were darting about picking up odd goodies that had been dropped along the walkway – half a packet of chips, a paper bag oozing tomato sauce, and several barely smoked cigarettes.

A thirtyish woman carrying a large bunch of flowers was walking towards us. She had a firm grip on a screaming, struggling toddler who moments earlier had dropped a hot dog. Oom Henk had snatched it up with vulture-like swiftness before the woman realised what had happened. Oom Henk swallowed a mouthful of hotdog, then wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

‘Do you want to go to the end of Hospital Walk and get some fresh air?’ Jill asked brightly. ‘We can call at the shop on the way back if you like.’

There was a murmur of approval.

‘Which reminds me,’ Jill continued, reaching into her bag. ‘I’ve got something here for Jean.’ She handed the small wrapped package to Jean, who eagerly tore it open.

‘Wow, thanks so much to all of you; you’re very kind!’ He bobbed about hugging everyone who’d contributed, as well as some who hadn’t. When he came to me his hug seemed to linger. After he drew away, he began scanning the flyer in the box. ‘This really is a great tarot pack!’ he exclaimed.

‘I think we’ve time to take a stroll down the road in front of the hospital,’ Jill was saying. ‘It should be nice and sunny there.’

Kristy gripped my hand as we emerged into the sunlight. A flock of

pigeons circled high above. I felt my spirits lifting. At last the feeling of claustrophobia was lifting; we were breathing un-recycled air for the first time in weeks.

On our right rose the huge glass and concrete monolith that was City Hospital, glinting in the morning sun. For the first time we could look up and see our ward from the outside. Along the road a few scraggly jacarandas were beginning to blossom, and from among the tall bluegums on the Oppenheimer estate came the sound of cooing doves. Kristy lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. As she exhaled she said, 'Dr Zap-at-Her hasn't said anything more about sending me home…'

'Maybe she's decided after all to wait until Liz Stott gets back.'

'Let's hope so.'

'I think we'd better turn back now,' Jill called out loudly. 'We've still got our shopping to do.'

As we reached the hospital entrance, loud screams suddenly reverberated down Hospital Walk. Some distance ahead two youths were dancing around three Muslim women in black hijab. One of the youths was trying to wrestle a woven bag away from the nearest woman, who was clinging desperately to the strap. The other youth suddenly sprang forward and punched the woman hard in the face. As she let go of the bag with a muffled cry, the youth seized it, and both muggers began running towards the entrance and towards us.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Jill using her cellphone. Faan was at the edge of our group, his hands in his pockets, his head down. Petrus was walking next to him. As the youth with the bag drew level, Faan suddenly stuck his foot out. The youth tripped and went sprawling, releasing his grip on the bag, which shot across the floor, landing in front of me. In an instant Faan and Petrus had the youth pinned to ground, but his accomplice had fled.

A few moments later two security guards arrived, handcuffed the mugger and then accompanied the women, apparently to make a statement at the police station.

'Fancy footwork,' said Jill, smiling at Faan and Petrus. 'I called security, but they would've been too late if you hadn't caught the one guy.'

'Anytime,' said Faan, with a school-boyish grin.

We were now outside the shop in Hospital Walk. The first special election edition of *The Star* was already on display. 'VOTING BEGINS SLOWLY,' the headline read. I scanned the first few sentences. The gist of the report was that during the last election many more votes had been cast by

nine in the morning.

I bought a paper, a large packet of crisps, a slab of chocolate (which I gave to Kristy), two packets of BB tobacco and some cigarette papers (which I asked Jill to give to Petrus and Oom Henk later without telling them that they were from me).

By the time we were back in the ward, everyone was in a jolly mood. As we filed through Reception, Serita and a gaunt grey-haired woman passed us, carrying a suitcase and several plastic bags between them.

When Serita caught sight of Kristy, she dropped the suitcase and ran forward and hugged her tightly. She whispered something, scribbled on a scrap of paper and handed it to Kristy, then kissed her full on the mouth. I sensed that Kristy wanted a private moment, so I went through to the TV lounge, which already had a scattering of patients.

The election coverage was in full swing, consisting mainly of live reports from various polling stations. So far voting had gone peacefully, and except for the slower pace and the presence of Canadian and African Union election monitors, it could well have been a replay of previous elections. I knew there was no way of knowing which way the poll was going until the results began coming in overnight.

About an hour later a report came in of the arrest of a group of anti-crime activists who'd been demonstrating too close to the polling station where the President was expected to vote. Another group calling itself VOX was parading up and down outside parliament, where some foreign media organisations were taking background shots. A spokesman for the group, a very dark-skinned man, said although many VOX members were taxpayers, they couldn't vote because they were foreigners. VOX, he told a reporter, stood for *Victims Of Xenophobia*.

A little later the scene shifted to the polling station where the President was voting. The camera zoomed in as the President, ballot paper in hand, paused for effect before dropping it into the ballot box.

Just then the continuity announcer cut in. 'We have important breaking news,' she said. 'There's been a bomb explosion outside a polling station in Tlokwe. Details are sketchy, but we'll be updating this story as soon as we have more information.'

Chapter 51

"South Africa has many of the ingredients needed for the electorate to vote a populist demagogue into power…" – The Times, quoting historian Niall Ferguson

The following morning many patients, including Faan, Jean, Rastaman, and I were up early to get news of the election, as well as details of the Tlokwe bomb blast.

According to the seven o'clock bulletin, two people had been slightly injured, but there were no fatalities. A police spokesman said the explosive device, which was concealed in a rolled-up coat that had been left inside the polling station, had been spotted by an alert official who'd taken it out of a side-door where it had exploded in an alleyway.

Our interest in the election quickened as results began coming in. Overnight, the ANC appeared to have achieved a commanding lead. But as the day wore on, the SPP began to catch up. It seemed to be doing well in constituencies that included large informal settlements, where counting was slower. The DA was improving its showing in most urban constituencies, but there was no sign of any big breakthrough elsewhere.

By late afternoon, the swing towards the SPP in the poorer areas had increased dramatically, but the ANC was still ahead. By early evening the gap had narrowed. Some of the political analysts interviewed were commenting on the much lower turnout than at earlier elections. One went as far as to describe it as a 'stay away' by disgruntled ANC supporters. This view was confirmed as more results came in. Nearly all the late results were going to the SPP.

Then at around eight pm, the shock announcement came. The SPP was now more than thirty thousand votes ahead of the ANC! Analysts said the remaining constituencies were also expected to go to the SPP. By late evening the SPP had a commanding lead of 109,000 votes, and even if the few remaining constituencies went to the ANC, it had no chance of winning now.

Chapter 52

Next morning when most of the patients interested in the election were once again seated around the television, grim-faced ANC officials were calling for a recount, claiming gross intimidation of voters by the SPP. Although they did not directly accuse the SPP of the Tlokwe bombing, they said it was obvious that those who would benefit most from electoral unrest were responsible. But a spokeswoman for the Independent Electoral Commission said although the Commission viewed the bombing in a very serious light, it was an isolated incident and there was no evidence of any other serious irregularities.

However, a little later the ANC issued a tersely worded statement saying that it was patently obvious that there had been ‘collusion’, which had affected the outcome of the election. It would therefore press on with moves for a recount.

Another half hour went by and then the TV presenter said that in news just in, all the main trade unions had issued a joint statement saying that if the ANC disputed the election result, the unions would call a general strike, take to the streets, and render the country ungovernable. This included the police union, which had been increasingly critical of the government for failing, as they claimed, to take the killing of police officers seriously. For good measure, the Defence Force Union, in a thinly veiled threat, said it would not be able to control the reaction of its members. Apparently terrified of army unrest, the government failed to react.

An hour went by and then the ANC issued what appeared to be a face-saving statement, saying that its acceptance of the election outcome was conditional on a report by the African Union monitors.

Another half hour went by while various talking heads tried to explain the reasons for the surprise result.

The scene shifted to SPP headquarters in Johannesburg, where Zebulon Phiri was on the telephone. When his smartly-dressed wife, Florence, gave him a nudge, he put his pudgy hand over the mouthpiece, paused for effect, and then adjusted his beret to a jaunty angle. A moment later he was grinning into the camera. ‘That was the head of the African Union Monitoring Mission

who, I'm pleased to announce, has just informed me that they wish to state unequivocally that, besides the one isolated bombing incident, there is no evidence of any serious voting irregularities. There is therefore no point in any further investigation.'

The TV reporter then almost grudgingly asked Phiri for his reaction to his party's win.

For a moment Phiri seemed at a loss for words but quickly recovered and gave a triumphant whoop as he seized the microphone. 'Well, this big vote of confidence in the SPP is going to completely change South Africa's political landscape. So my message to the country is this: *We have a mandate to let the people govern, and that's what we intend to do!*

'Indeed, this is a day of joy and hope for the masses, particularly among those condemned to unemployment, homelessness, lack of service delivery, or, more importantly, landlessness! It's very clear to me that the big voter stay-away in areas of traditional ANC support is their way of saying to the ANC that it has done "too little, too late".'

The SPP leader paused to take a sip from his glass, and then continued. 'At the top of our list of priorities will be to speed up the redistribution of farming land to the landless masses. But let me make one thing very clear. We are not going to be bound by the ANC's self-imposed restrictions that have benefited the historical exploiters. And that of course means revisiting the Constitution, which I'm sure all genuine Africanists agree is a Eurocentric document that cannot possibly serve the needs of the majority. It has also failed to right the wrongs of the past thanks to the pro-capitalist ANC that helped create it together with the apartheid exploiters. We'll also be revisiting our legal system, which needs to be restructured to meet African norms…'

Another pause during which he referred briefly to his notes.

'You'll recall that our party only came on the political scene relatively recently but has grown so fast that – against all the predictions of the so-called experts – we're about to enter parliament with a governing majority.

'At this point let me state that I don't believe in the "Mandela religion" where Mandela is given the status of a god. Mandela was not a god but an ordinary human being who made mistakes. His biggest mistake was to abandon the nationalisation agenda of the Freedom Charter in deference to the Americans. I'm not going to make the same mistake. I'm going to model my presidency on the late Fidel Castro, who resisted American pressure for nearly sixty years!

‘Oh, and I want to remind our American friends that we don’t need to come to them for handouts, as we have powerful friends in the Middle East. So we will not allow the CIA – or the Mossad, for that matter – to run around here abducting people.

‘And another thing: we’re going to scrap the law that allows same-sex marriages. We will also put a stop to the public promotion of homosexuality. There will be no more so-called gay-pride parades. This abomination is a legacy of colonialism and we will not allow it to take root among our African youth!’ He pointed his index finger twice with emphasis at the camera, drained his glass in one gulp and slammed it down with an air of finality. Then he gave a satisfied smile, and with an unproletarian flourish, glanced at his diamond-studded wrist chronometer.

The speech was over.

Strangely, he hadn’t mentioned the issue that was uppermost in many people’s minds: *crime*, so I didn’t hold out too much hope that the situation would improve any time soon.

Chapter 53

Later in the morning when Faan, Kristy, Jean, Lin Chang, Rastaman and I had gathered in the common room for coffee, we saw that someone had already been down to the shop and bought the newspapers, which were scattered around on the tables. Most editorials expressed shock at the defeat of the ANC, and *Business Week*, quoting a political scientist, said the SPP victory could herald a drastic economic downturn.

Kristy poked me in the ribs, then leaned across and whispered: 'It's lunch time and I'm starving, Olly. Let's get something to eat.'

It was what we called the 'solid menu' – braised chicken, pap, butter beans, pumpkin and cabbage, followed by jelly and custard.

After lunch, we strolled through to the common room and across to the window.

I suddenly sensed someone was standing behind us. It was Dr Zapata.

'You pack your things now, chica,' she said, staring at Kristy. 'Your family come to fetch you in half an hour.'

The colour drained from Kristy's face, and without a word she pushed past Dr Zapata and sprinted out of the room. I could see a flicker of what seemed doubt on the doctor's face, as she turned to go.

A few minutes later Kristy was back in the common room holding a box. Then she sank down with her back against the wall. Without a word she took out one of the pieces of the broken stained glass panel. Tears were streaming down her face as she sat there clutching the sliver.

I raced over to her. 'You know Faan said he could fix it,' I said, hoping to distract her. 'Faan!' I called out. *'Faan!'*

'Faan can't help, my sweet. You see, I'm *not* going home,' she whispered, pressing the glass sliver against her throat. The sharp edge nicked the skin and a row of red dots sprang up. By now Faan and several other patients, as well as two nurses, had gathered around Kristy.

'Please give me the glass, Kris,' I said. 'We'll find a way, I promise. Let me speak to your mother when she comes.'

'It's no use, Olly. My mom thinks she can look after me, but I know it's useless. As soon as her back is turned, my stepfather and his boys will do

whatever they want. I can't take it any more. I'd rather be dead.' She pressed the sliver firmly against her neck.

'That's not a good idea, Kris,' Faan said in an offhand tone. 'I've always admired your lovely neck. I'd hate to see you spoil it.'

Kristy managed to smile through her tears. She looked down for a second to wipe her eyes on her sleeve. I saw my opportunity. My hand shot out and grabbed her firmly by the wrist.

'Drop it, Kris,' I pleaded, but she clung desperately to the glass. As I struggled with her, the sharp edge sliced into my arm.

'Oh, I'm so sorry, Olly,' she whimpered, letting go of the glass, which fell to the floor.

'What happening?' a voice behind us demanded. It was Dr Zapata. One of the nurses whispered to her.

Dr Zapata stepped forward and took the box from Kristy. 'We no treat people here who try make suicide.' She bent down and picked up the piece of glass, slipped it into the box, and strode away.

I took Kristy's hands between mine. 'Whatever happens, Kristy, I'm here for you. You know that.'

'I know,' she said with a cracked smile.

I put my arm around her and held her. I could hear her crying while we just sat there. About ten minutes later Dr Zapata, accompanied by two security men, advanced towards us.

'You come now, please, chica,' she called to Kristy.

'But where's my mother?'

'Sorry, your mother no coming now. You go to Sterkfontein. They look after you properly – make you better.'

Kristy let out a long wail and sank further down onto the floor. The two security men hauled her to her feet and frog-marched her towards Reception. A nurse handed her sports bag to one of them, together with two bulging plastic bags.

'You can't do that!' I called to Dr Zapata, as I caught up with her. 'Why can't she stay here until she's better?

Dr Zapata halted, cocked her head on one side, and then pointed to the notice on the wall that always hung there like a sword of Damocles:

THIS IS AN ACUTE ASSESSMENT AND REFERRAL UNIT AND PATIENTS MAY BE TRANSFERRED TO OTHER PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITALS….

‘You berry clever man, I see, but you no tell me my job!’ Her voice was stern at first, but then softened noticeably. ‘Too much risk for girl who try suicide to stay here. We no equip. Next time she *do* it and maybe she die. Then we all sorry.’ Then she inclined her head briefly and walked quickly to her office.

When I looked around again, Kristy was gone. The cut on my arm was still bleeding, but I’d been too distracted to notice it.

I heard Faan’s voice behind me. ‘I’m really sorry about this, old pal.’ He rested an arm on my shoulder. ‘I know it’s hard for you to accept now, but Kristy will be okay. Sterkies may be a bit stark, but the treatment is pretty good. At least she’s not going back to her abusive step-family – and *that’s* a bonus.’ He paused and lifted my arm. ‘Now we better do something about this.’ He called one of the nurses, who took me across to the nurses’ station. She dabbed the cut with disinfectant and covered it with a plaster.

‘I think you’d better take this, Olly,’ Beth said, stepping forward. ‘I found it on the floor next to Kristy’s locker. The nurse must have missed it.’ She handed me a large white plastic bag.

‘There was also this,’ Beth said, handing me the avocado pip Kristy had put in a bottle of water. A tiny root had sprouted.

‘Thanks, Beth,’ I said. ‘I’ll look after them for her in the meantime.’

Before putting the bag away, I checked its contents: her yellow cellphone, three paperbacks, half a bar of chocolate, and a page from the classified section of *The Star*.

Several ads had been circled in black ballpoint: *‘New faces wanted for magazine modelling. Top rates … Casino staff required urgently. Training provided. Live in ... Topless waitresses for upmarket venue. Best hourly rates, plus tips … Classy ladies needed for established gentlemen’s club. Earning potential R50,000 pm … Attractive natural blondes (18-24) required for upmarket professional women’s relaxation retreat. Good pay, lovely surroundings. Contact the Pinnacle Health Spa…’* This last ad had a double circle drawn around it.

I folded the page, slipped it into the bag and stowed it in my locker. Then I walked through to the common room, crossed to the window and looked out. The sky was bright, but without Kristy even the trees seemed tinged with gloom. I moved away, and wanting to take my mind off what had just happened, I borrowed a Clive Barker fantasy novel from Jean. But I couldn’t get into it. Returning to the common room, I saw Professor Cruz pacing up

and down.

'I'm sorry about your young lady friend,' he said, stopping in front of me. 'But don't worry, God will look after her – at least while she's in Sterkfontein. You see, son, Sterkfontein has a special place in God's heart. I know; I've been there.'

Chapter 54

After supper, I watched television until the station closed, then wandered across to the nurses' station where I began chatting to Old Cow.

'So what do you think of the election result?' I asked her.

'I'd seen it coming for long time, Olly,' she said, leaning across the counter, her plump fingers pressed together as if in prayer. 'I have friend who's married to a top ANC official, and I tried to tell him the ANC no longer in touch with the people and it's time to pull up its socks.'

'And did he listen?'

'Of course not. When parties – or people – think they know everything. It's the beginning of the end.'

'So how do you think they got like that?'

'Power – too much power. Power makes you blind.'

'Old Cow was staring hard at me. 'You look pale like a ghost, Olly. Anything wrong?'

'I'm okay, just shocked that Kristy has been sent to Sterkfontein.'

'I don't think you must worry, Olly. Everybody has wrong idea about the place. It's not bad like people think. The open wards are okay, even good like this one. The public reads about these crazy ones in the Sunday newspapers *before* they're sent to Sterkfontein.' She paused and sipped her tea.

'To change the subject, one thing that's been puzzling me. Where do all the bathplugs disappear to?'

'Okay. Let me tell you. Sometime a patient will take one, but most times it's one of the ghosts.'

'Ghosts? You're not serious!'

'Well, speak to any nurse who does night duty and she'll tell you. It's because when a lot of people die in one place like a hospital and their spirits come out of their bodies. Most of them move on, but some get stuck here and they just hang around.'

'I don't believe in ghosts.'

'That's what I used to say.'

'But why would they want to take bathplugs?'

'It's not they; it's *him*.'

‘A particular … er … ghost?’

‘Ja.’

‘Tell me more.’

‘Well, when they were building this hospital, things went missing all the time. But no one could find who was doing the stealing. One Friday, three pay packets went missing. All the workers were searched, but no one had more than what he’d been paid. Then someone remembered seeing one man running to the far end of the level where they’d been making concrete. Even from so far he recognised the man from the way he run. They caught the man, tied a rope around his feet, and drop him head first down a lift shaft. It was filled quite far up with rain water. Every time they drop him under they asked him where the money is. Third time he come up he shout the money is put behind some wooden shuttering in the last pillar on same level – one where concrete not yet poured. All of a sudden the rope slip out of men’s hands holding it – or so the story goes – and the thief go under the water. By the time they got to him he drowned. *Kakalak*, is what they called him, because he could creep like a cockroach into small spaces!’

‘What a horrible story!’

‘But that’s not the end. After they pull out the body, they go look for the money, and sure, they find three pay packets stuck in a crack behind the shuttering. Then someone has idea. So not having to tell the bosses what happened, why not just put the body inside the pillar? And that’s what they’re supposed to have done. When concrete poured into the shuttering on the Monday, Kakalak’s body was closed up in the concrete. So maybe you can understand now why he haunts this hospital?’

‘Well, besides Kakalak, there are certainly a lot of cockroaches in the hospital!’

‘Some say that they *his* people – his eyes and ears, scouting out for things to steal. Certainly a lot of things disappear in this hospital – even in this ward, and not just bathplugs. He loves sweets, especially chocolate.’

‘Which part of the hospital is Kakalak supposed to haunt?’

‘He can be anywhere. You don’t see him, as you do some ghosts. Things just disappear.’

‘Are there any other ghosts besides him?’

‘Oh, yes. There’s Alice, daughter of Edith Marsden, an English governess who taught the children of Sir Percy Fitzpatrick at Hohenheim, the house that once stood near here before this hospital was built. Sir Percy was a cousin.

After Edith's young man ran off to America, she struggle to bring up Alice alone in Yorkshire. When Alice was in her teens, Sir Percy heard about Edith's problems, and offer her a job as governess. After they come to Johannesburg, everything was fine for a while. But then Alice got bored and would sneak out to go with boys.'

'Anyway, being from England, Edith wasn't used to the dry cold climate, and she died of pneumonia during the second winter she was here. Apparently, Alice was with some boy at the time. As the story goes, she couldn't accept that her mother had passed on, so she began searching all over for her. Alice died the next year of meningitis – some say of a broken heart. Now she is said to wander around the hospital at all hours of the day or night, looking for Edith. Sometimes patients see her – usually schizophrenics.'

'So have you seen her?'

Old Cow paused for a moment, made eye contact, then nodded.

'So what does she look like?

'Actually, she looks very much like Kristy – the same blonde type, a bit taller, with long hair. She normally wears a white nightgown.

'My God, Old Cow, I've also seen her!'

Old Cow's eyes brightened with interest. 'When was that, Olly?'

'It was when I first arrived I saw her in the convex mirror. I hope that doesn't mean I'm schizophrenic?'

'I'm sure Dr Stott would have diagnosed that when she examined you, so I don't really think you have to worry. Anyway, some staff besides me have also seen her, and we're not schizophrenics!'

'How come you know so much about ghosts, Old Cow?'

'Well, when you work in hospitals, strange things happen, especially on night shifts. I passed on some of my experiences to the International Institute for Psychical Research, and they invited me to become a member of their Haunted Hospitals Committee.'

Chapter 55

"When people look at Hermann Rorschach's famous inkblots, they tend to project their expectations into those unfamiliar, murky and ambiguous splotches." – Alan W. Scheflin, *Mind Manipulators*

When I awoke on Saturday morning, I still felt the air of unreality that had gripped me since Kristy's sudden transfer to Sterkfontein. Nevertheless, Old Cow's favourable remarks about the hospital had left me feeling somewhat relieved.

After breakfast, I phoned Sterkfontein.

The sister I was put through to told me that Kristy was sedated, and that I should try again on Monday.

Time began to crawl. I drifted through to the common room. Faan was chatting to Gabriel; and Jean, Rastaman, Helena and Lin Chang were playing a board game, while Morris, Leah and Marge looked on.

As soon as Faan saw me, he excused himself and hurried across. 'There's something I've been meaning to ask you, Olly. Have you done your Rorschach test yet?'

'No, not yet.'

'Good. Well, let me give you the low-down on how it works.'

'Okay. Let's sit over there, shall we.'

After we'd seated ourselves in two nearby chairs, Faan lit a cigarette and leaned back with one hand behind his head. 'At the time I had my test I suspected Rorschach blots were a lot of hocus-pocus, like phrenology, so I read up about them afterwards, and that merely confirmed my view. The two most helpful books I found were, *What's Wrong With the Rorschach?* And, *The Idiot's Guide to Rorschach Blots.'*

'You think the test is valueless?'

'Not entirely, Olly.' He took a deep drag. 'Actually, it can tell one a helluva lot more about the tester than the patient!'

'Really … So how does the test work?'

'Well, it works on the human facility for pattern recognition and the patient's interpretation of the pattern he sees on the particular card. It's rather

like seeing faces in clouds. There are ten cards, all of which have inkblots on them. The tester hands you the cards one at a time and notes what you say in response. Your interpretations of what you see are evaluated to determine your mental state. Usually you'll see whatever is lurking in your subconscious. In turn, whatever is lurking in the tester's subconscious will influence her evaluation. I'm going to assume, Olly that you want to create the impression that you haven't entirely lost your marbles … right?'

'Right.'

'Okay, so the advice I'm going to give is based on that assumption. On the other hand, if you want to have fun and bugger the consequences, then just do the opposite!'

'Okay.'

'Firstly, watch how you give your answers. For example, say "This blot *seems* like..." or "That *could* be..." never "This *is*..." After all, you're supposed to know that it's just an ink blot. Secondly, don't hide parts of the blot with your hands or the tester might interpret that as a sign of brain damage. But it's okay to be over-the-top if you can justify what you see. If you think you see two snails screwing, and can point out why the blot looks like that, then say so. Testers usually judge that to be an indication of intelligence or creativity.

'On the other hand, if you come up with something totally illogical – for example, if you see the fourth blot, which is basically round, as looking like a piece of string, then the tester would probably interpret that as a sign of psychosis. But when in doubt, always say you see a vagina. It's one of the differential "safe" interpretations.'

'Surely the tester's interpretation of your interpretation is subjective?'

'Of course it is. That's why I think Rorschach tests are problematical.'

Faan stubbed out his cigarette and linked both hands behind his head. 'What really bugs me, Olly, is that *millions* of Rorschach tests are done around the world each year, tests that can have an enormous impact on people's lives. Not only are they used to diagnose mental illness but also in parole hearings, child custody disputes, performance assessments, etcetera, etcetera.'

'Well, if the tests are so subjective one wonders what Dr Zapata will come up with in my case?'

'I wouldn't worry about it, Olly. Remember, now that you know how the test works, *you* are in control. The main thing is to get her to be sympathetic

towards you, which shouldn't be too difficult. Most women seem to like you…'

I snorted but said nothing.

'Well, I've even caught Dr Zapata sneaking an admiring look. You need to exploit that, Olly. A bit of flirting will probably do the trick.' He grinned before adding, 'But don't overdo it – just enough to be sure she gives you a good evaluation.'

'But to get back to the point, Faan, what do the Rorschach cards look like?'

'I don't think it would be a good idea for me to tell you now, Olly. That would spoil things. All I'll say is the first card is supposed to be what you think of your father; the second represents a mother figure. (A good answer for number two is "you", meaning the tester.) The third is just an inkblot – not really – but that's what you should say no matter how hard she tries to coax a different answer out of you. The fourth is how you see yourself. The rest – well, don't try and remember more than four or you'll get confused. So just play it by ear.'

'Okay … Well, thanks for the tips, Faan.'

'Anytime. Actually, I'd better get back to Gabriel or he'll think I'm rude. We were in the middle of a debate about whether God exists or not.'

After Faan had returned to his debate, I caught sight of Professor Cruz pacing back and forth, his hands behind his back. As I watched him I realised that I had grown to like him. He reminded me of the kindly Professor Marvel in *The Wizard of Oz*.

'Good morning, Professor,' I said. 'How you doing?'

'Very much better, my friend. I think my new medication is working.'

I'm normally put off by people who call me 'my friend', as they often turn out to be anything but friends. But in Professor Cruz's case I sensed that he called people 'my friend' simply because he was too absent minded to remember their names.

Just then a short, late-middle aged man with greying hair advanced across the common room towards Leah. His well-cut grey suit contrasted with the baggy track suits worn by most patients. Today, of course, Leah was the exception. She wore a chic black dress that made her look even more like Bette Davis.

'Hello, Cy,' I heard her say. 'I'm so glad you could come.' A few minutes later, as they left the room together, she said: 'Yes, brunch would be

lovely.’

I tried reading again to fill the emptiness left by Kristy’s absence, but I found the Clive Barker novel impossible to get into, so I returned it to Jean.

‘Have you another one you could lend me, Jean – perhaps something lighter?’

‘I’ve just finished *Duncton Wood*, which I really enjoyed,’ he said, getting up and walking with me towards the ward, ‘It’s a true *underground* classic in the literal sense – it’s about moles.’

Chapter 56

On Monday morning after breakfast, I phoned Sterkfontein and asked to speak to Kristy. A woman's voice answered. 'Sorry, she's with a psychiatrist. Please try again this afternoon.'

I strolled aimlessly about, pausing at the window, half expecting Kristy's elfin face to nuzzle up to me.

'Good morning, Olly,' said a voice behind me. It was Jill Braithwaite. 'Dr Zapata wants to see you in her office.'

'What about?'

'No idea.' She smiled knowingly. 'You know her. She doesn't say much.'

I walked over to Dr Zapata's office, which was next to Liz Stott's, and knocked on her door. After a short wait, Dr Zapata opened the door and ushered me in. She took a seat behind a large wooden desk and motioned to me to sit opposite her. I hadn't seen her up this close before. Like Frida Kahlo, her black eyebrows met almost in the middle and downy black hair grew below her ears. On her left cheek she had a small but not unattractive mole.

She eased a glass of water across the desk towards me and then reached for my file. As she flipped through it, she lifted her elbows, revealing dark hair under her arms. (I heard later that most Cuban women shave their armpits, but Pilar Zapata had allowed hers to grow as a form of protest after the arrest of her husband.) Although she was not my usual type, I realised with a slight shock that I found her attractive in a strange, exotic sort of way. How different she was from the usual shaven women who strive to be hairless Barbie dolls!

'We do Rorschach test today, yes?' she said suddenly, breaking into my thoughts. 'But first we talk.' Her lips parted slightly. 'You name is Olly, no?' she said, leaning closer. She contemplated me with almond eyes that suggested a trace of Amerindian blood.

I nodded.

Then she shot me an unexpectedly shy, awkward smile. 'You please call me Pilar, yes?'

‘Right.’

‘I look through your file sometime before and I see you no crazy.’ Her smile was reassuring. ‘You have accident, yes?’

I nodded.

‘Well, sometime carbon monoxide damage brain. I see you already do tests with Gerda. Look like maybe you losing some short-term memory, yes?’

‘Could be, but I’ve always had a problem with short-term memory,’ I said, beginning to relax.

‘*¿Por exemplo?* … I mean to say *for example?’*

‘Well, once, long before my accident, I was looking for a key. I searched for it for more than an hour. Eventually I found it. Do you know where it was, Doctor?’

‘No. You tell me, Olly.’

Although she’d said we should use first names, the sudden familiarity came as a shock. I took a sip of water, savouring the way she’d said my name. Finally I said, ‘It was on a string around my neck!’

She smiled broadly, revealing perfect white teeth. ‘No worry, Olly,’ she said, ‘Rorschach tell us if you have problem.’

‘You been in South Africa long, Pilar?’ I said, trying out her name for the first time.

‘No berry long. No even one year. When I come I no understand English so good. You see, I learn French in school. Also English way … how can I say, berry different, not like in Latin America. People there one big family. Here, same like in United States, no berry friendly. Sure, they say, “Have a nice day,” but no really mean it.’

I flashed her what I thought was a reassuring smile.

‘Only way I feel good is do job best I can. Everybody here think me berry strict person. But me no really so strict. I joost do my job. I come here in ward late in night – see patients okay. One time I find patient choking on being sick. She too weak to press bell. Night sister, she berry cross with me. She say I make her look bad. She spread stories … I no care, for me important thing patient still alive. Night sister, she sleep on duty. She gone now.’

She took a sip of water before continuing. ‘Yesterday, I see you think me no berry nice person after I send your friend to Sterkfontein. But, you see, Olly, when someone want to make suicide here, they find way. Maybe shoelace, sharp pencil, plastic bag on head – *anything*. But in Sterkfontein

they berry organised to stop patients making suicide. Maybe if I no send your friend there, she dead by now.' Pilar Zapata turned her palms upwards and gave a shrug.

I nodded. She was right. It was amazing, I thought, how easily misunderstandings could arise because of cultural differences.'

'Now we begin Rorschach test, no?' she said, opening a box in front of her. She handed me the first card and switched on a small recorder. 'Joost relax, Olly. You tell me what you see – even if bad stuff, or funny thing. You no be shy.'

I studied the inkblot on the card. My first impression was that it was a fox's head or the wings of a bat, possibly even a stealth bomber. After a few moments it seemed to metamorphose into a prostrate elephant viewed from above. When I told her my interpretations, she smiled. Then tapping what I'd seen as an elephant's trunk, she said, 'For long time I think most patients see chicken here. One day patient he say to me, "Berry, berry big cock". I say, "No look like cock to me, no *pico* – how you say – beak?" He say, "not cock like *chicken*, cock like *penis*".'

I doubled up with laughter. For a moment Dr Zapata held back. Then her laughter erupted. Tears were streaming down her face. 'I no laugh like zis for berry long time, Olly,' she said, wiping her eyes with a tissue.

She was still laughing as she handed me the second card. I recalled Faan saying this was the mother figure. At first the blot looked like two of the Seven Dwarfs giving each other high fives… then two brown dogs fighting over a bone. Turning it over, it looked vaguely like a fulsome bush of dark pubic hair. Heeding Faan's advice, I decided to take the plunge. Making steady eye contact, I said, 'I think it's *you*, Pilar…'

Then I slowly rocked back in my chair so that the front legs lifted off the floor.

'Me?!' she gasped, looking perplexed.

I turned the card upside down again just to make sure. The image was overtly sexual. 'I see a beautiful woman who has lovely dark hair … like in Gustave Courbet's painting, *L'Origine du Monde.'*

Pilar Zapata sucked in her breath. 'I know ze painting berry well, Olly. You no joke?'

'No, I'm serious, Pilar.'

She was silent for a few moments while smiling to herself. Then she added: 'Ze card no tell you someseen more?'

‘Well, the woman is definitely searching for something – something very important to her … you know like…’ I paused a moment, then gave her a long, meaningful look.

‘*¡Madre mia!’* For a moment she seemed to lose her cool. Then she took a gulp of water and began writing furiously in her notebook. Was it my imagination or were her nipples standing hard against her white summer shift?

When she looked up again, she appeared to have regained her composure. With a shy smile, she handed me the third card. The blot had a very busy feel. Perhaps because of the sexual overhang from the last card, the first thing I saw was two Chinamen with erect penises wrestling over a duck. Turning it over, it slowly transformed into the more prosaic image of a dung beetle’s head and forelegs.

‘What you see?’ Pilar asked anxiously, stretching a leg under the table. I felt her foot brush my ankle.

Once again, recalling Faan’s advice I said, ‘It’s just an inkblot.’

‘You no see someseen else?’ She sounded disappointed.

‘No. I’m sorry, Pilar,’ I said, leaning forward so that the front legs of my chair rested on the floor. ‘This one’s doesn’t tell me anything.’

She gave a little shrug. ‘Okay, we look at ze fourth one.’

At first this somewhat repellent blot suggested someone squatting on the loo. Turning it sideways it became a map of Zimbabwe. Upside down, it looked like nothing at all.

‘I see a shoe,’ I improvised.

Pilar sucked in her breath. ‘A *shoe?* You sure, Olly?’

‘Yes, I’m sure.’ Then deciding to go the whole hog, I added, ‘It’s a woman being smacked on the bottom with a shoe.’

‘¡Madre mia!’ she exclaimed.

Although Pilar was olive-skinned I could sense she was blushing. ‘Olly, you know “shoe” in Spanees is “zapata”, no?’

‘No, I didn’t,’ I lied. ‘What a strange coincidence!’

‘I no believe in coincidences,’ she replied firmly, knitting her brow.

It seemed we’d finished the test.

‘So, how did I do?’ I asked.

‘I no allowed to tell you exactly,’ she said apologetically. ‘But one thing for sure, Olly, you no crazy. Also, you berry loving person…’ As she accompanied me to the door, she draped an arm over my shoulder. ‘Best you

stay here some time longer, Olly, joost to make sure you better…’

Chapter 57

It was not until Wednesday, two days later, that I finally managed to speak to Kristy. The only telephone at Sterkfontein that patients could use was at the nurses' station.

'Oh, Olly, I've been missing you so, *so* much!' she whispered. 'Things aren't the same without you. Also, all the others in 697 – I miss them too.'

'Miss you too, my love. Hope they're treating you okay.'

'Actually, it's much better than I expected. Things are more controlled here for obvious reasons, but the food isn't too bad. The other thing I really miss is a mirror. They don't allow mirrors here because they're made of glass that can break and hurt people, so we have to do each other's hair and makeup. Also, we're not allowed to have dental floss, but toothpaste's okay. Maybe they think suicidal patients could use floss to hang themselves.'

'Talking about toothpaste, Kris, have you seen Philip?'

'Ja, he seems a bit better.'

'Good.'

'One time I saw Dirk in the exercise yard of the separate section for problem patients, but thank God he didn't see me.'

'Oh, I meant to tell you, Kris, one of your packets is still here. Your cellphone and a couple of other things were in it.'

'Great. I wondered where it was. Hang on to it, please Olly. We're not supposed to have cellphones here.'

'Any visitors?'

'Ja, my mom visited me yesterday and brought me some clothes, but Serita's been visiting me every day. She says I can stay with her and her mom when I get out – at least until I get my own place. The psychiatrist said that once I had a place to stay, there wouldn't be any reason to keep me here. After all, she agreed that I'd only cut myself when I thought I was being sent back to my family where my stepbrothers were threatening me. So I think she'll be talking to Serita's mom tomorrow to check the arrangements, so I could be out quite soon. Wouldn't that be great?!'

Serita was obviously a manipulative young woman and I didn't trust her, but at least her mother would be there and of course almost any

accommodation arrangement would be better than for Kristy to have to return to her dysfunctional family.

'Sure. Looking forward to seeing you.'

'Any idea when you'll be discharged, Olly?'

'Not yet. Dr Zapata tested me a couple of days ago, but she said I needed to stay a bit longer. But without you being here, Kris, time really drags.'

'You are the sweetest…' I could hear another voice in the background. 'Sorry, Olly, I have to go. The nurse says she needs to use the phone. Bye, my love…'

Jill Braithwaite was waving to Sonja from the doorway. 'Your brother's here to fetch you, Sonja,' she called.

'Coming,' Sonja replied. 'Won't be a moment.' She put her arms around Carlos and kissed him. Then she whispered something to him and he nodded and smiled. A moment later they walked towards Reception, hand in hand.

Beth, who was also being discharged, came to say goodbye. As we trooped out of the common room with Beth, Gabriel was standing at the far end of the passage. His head was bowed and his hands were clasped tightly in front of him. He remained there, staring at his feet, while Beth kissed everyone goodbye. As she headed for the door, he gave an unsure little wave, then turned quickly away and hurried towards the bathrooms.

My cellphone gave a beep. As I clicked on I could hear Gary Simes's nasal voice. He sounded excited. 'I thought you'd want to know. Sudman is a *John.'*

'I thought his name was Alec.'

'No, *john* in the American sense. He patronises ladies of the night! *That* was the sensitive matter I couldn't tell you about last time. But now that we have definite proof, Ted Thrupp said it was okay to tell you.'

I said nothing. The words were still echoing in my mind. *Ladies of the night…*

'Hello, you still there?'

'Yes, I'm here.'

'Well, as soon as you're discharged from hospital, Ted would like to see you. Apparently this and some other things I've discovered about Sudman could affect the custody issue, and—'

I cut him short. 'Can you tell Ted I still don't know when I'll be

discharged, but as soon as I do, I'll phone and make an appointment?'

'Will do.'

'Anything else?'

'Oh yes, I nearly forgot. Sudman screws women of all ages. About five years ago he got involved with an under-age girl who was fifteen when he met her. She moved in with him and then he took her on holiday to Umhlanga. Although she went with him of her own free will, the courts would still consider it abduction, and being under sixteen at the time, statutory rape. Her parents were about to lay charges, but he managed to buy them off. Still, it doesn't look good, although the girl turned sixteen just after they returned from Umhlanga. It's all in my report.'

I paused while I digested this information.

'You still there?'

'Yes, I'm listening.'

'Actually, this is quite important, Olly. You see, I decided I needed to find out more about what Sudman does in his spare time, so one morning I waited outside the gym at Cresta until he'd finished his workout. When he emerged, he strolled over to the mall and seemed to be wandering about aimlessly. But when a good-looking girl came along, he pretended to be looking in a shop window, but actually he was checking her out. Then he approached her and handed her a card. She looked at the card and said, "A modelling agency?" He nodded. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but after a couple of minutes' conversation, he produced a camera and began taking shots of her. She seemed happy to comply and after he'd taken the photos, he wrote down what I presume were her contact details. But knowing Sudman's reputation, I doubt if the offer was genuine. More like a ploy to get into her pants!'

'That sounds about right.'

If only Erin knew what Sudman was up to perhaps she would see him for what he was: an unscrupulous womanizer. But if I told her she would think I was just trying to muddy the waters because of the impending divorce.

Hardly had I rung off when my cellphone rang again. This time it was Imogen.

'I was wondering when they were going to discharge you, Oliver?'

'The psychiatrist hasn't told me yet, Imo, but I expect it could be quite soon.'

'Well, if you're stuck for a lift, you can always call me. But remember, I

play bridge on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and golf on Fridays. Any other day should be fine.'

'It's okay. I'm sure a friend will fetch me from the hospital.'

'I also wanted to talk to you about those antiques Cully left you. I hope you've been looking after them properly. Where actually have you put them?'

'Mostly downstairs in the lounge and dining room. A few smaller pieces in the upstairs bedrooms and some of the bigger ones…' I stopped myself from saying 'in the garage'. Instead I said, 'stacked in a safe place.'

'Sounds as if they're packed like sardines, Oliver, which is all the more reason why I should come round when you're out of hospital and have a look at them.'

'Anytime, Imo,' I said. 'Just give me a call.'

'Fine.' She paused for a moment. 'And, Oliver, please remember to stop calling me Imo. We're not children anymore. Makes one think of a soap powder,' she sniffed.

Chapter 58

"… studies show that depressed people tend to be more accurate in predicting probabilities than 'normal' people, who are too optimistic; it is the 'normal' whose view of reality is distorted, however adaptively." – Dr Peter D. Kramer, American psychiatrist and author of *Listening to Prozac*

"*Mentally ill people may become creative artists because of the novelty of their perspective, just as Tocqueville saw things about the United States that we had not.'* – Alice W. Flaherty

Shortly after breakfast the next morning Jill Braithwaite called across the common room. 'Dr Stott wants to see you, Olly.'

'I'll be right over … Has she seen anyone else yet?'

'Only Faan, and he was smiling when he came out.'

A moment later Liz Stott's door opened and ushered me in.

'Morning Dr… '

'Have I been away *so* long that you've forgotten my first name, Olly?' she said with mock severity.

'Hi Liz,' I said somewhat shamefacedly. 'Hope you've got some good news for me.'

'Depends on what you regard as "good".' She paused while she flipped through my file. 'I've just finished reading Dr Zapata's notes and I've listened to the recording of your Rorschach test session. It seems you've been making good progress…' She was grinning. '…in some ways a little bit *too* good!'

'Oh.' I adopted the bland, co-operative expression I'd seen Faan use to impress staff that he was back to 'normality'.

'But with respect to Dr Zapata's opinion, I think perhaps she's erred a little on the side of caution.'

'Meaning?'

'Keeping you here longer. But it's clearly your fault, Olly.' The grin became a smirk.

'My fault?'

‘You know *exactly* what I mean...

‘So the good news is I may discharge you somewhat sooner than Dr Zapata envisaged.’ Liz was already standing. Clearly the interview was over.

‘Like when, Liz?’

‘How about tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow!’

‘Yes. You can leave after lunch – even a bit earlier if you like. Some patients like to celebrate after they’re discharged.’

I was ecstatic. ‘Thanks Liz, this is fantastic news!’

‘Okay, but before you go we’ll need to do an exit interview. There’re quite a lot of things we still need to discuss.

That afternoon Marge and Carlos were to be transferred to Tara for further treatment. Helena was being discharged, and most of the other patients crowded into Reception to say goodbye.

Marge was sitting in a wheelchair, waiting to be transferred. She beckoned to me from across Reception.

‘Thanks for everything, Olly. You’ve been so nice to me. Remember, I still want to marry you some day. Okay?’

I bent down and kissed her on the cheek.

‘A hug would be nice,’ Eeyore said, as Marge was wheeled away. She was clutching a cardboard box with holes in the lid.

I suddenly realised I had a lot of phoning to do. First, I needed someone to give me a lift home after I was discharged. Imogen played golf on Fridays, so I wouldn’t ask her. Instead I called Drew, who agreed to fetch me around lunchtime. Next, I phoned Frith to tell her I’d be home tomorrow. She didn’t answer, so I left a message. Then I phoned Sterkfontein but couldn’t get through. After that I called Ted Thrupp and made an appointment for Monday, at two o’clock. Next I called Hannes to tell him I’d be back at work only the following week. Finally, I phoned Dr Byat to make a dental appointment.

I explained about the broken bridge, pointing out that I was running low on my medical aid’s dental allocation. He said it shouldn’t be a problem, as a new dental prosthetics firm had just opened, and as a promotion, was offering cut rates that should be within my allocation. Then I told him about the painful molar. He said he was pretty booked up, but I should check with him

again on Monday and he'd probably be able to fit me in.

A minute or two later Kristy phoned. 'Hi Olly, I've been trying to get through for half an hour. How you doing?'

'Great, Kris. I'm being discharged tomorrow, so I've been phoning a lot of people. I tried Sterkfontein just now.'

'Wouldn't have been able to reach me anyway. I was discharged this morning. Can you believe it, Olly!'

'Wonderful!'

'Where are you now?'

'As I think I told you, I'm staying with Serita and her Mom in their house in Weltevreden Park.'

'So when will I see you?'

'Might be a bit difficult for you to come here, but maybe we can meet at Cresta on Saturday. Fay – that's Serita's Mom – is going to an early movie. I'm sure she can give me a lift. I'll phone and let you know tomorrow, if that's okay. Oh, and I may have some good news.'

'What?'

'Tell you on Saturday.'

Gerda was approaching me. 'Hi Olly, Liz Stott tells me you're being discharged tomorrow.'

'Right.'

'Well, I think we'd better have a chat before you leave. Have you time now?'

'Sure.'

'Well, let's go through to my office, shall we? Better bring a pen and notebook.'

Once we were seated, Gerda asked me if there was anything in particular I'd like to talk about. I thought I'd better come clean about my relationship with Kristy without mentioning her by name. 'As you probably know, Gerda, I've become fond of a fellow patient.'

She inclined her head slightly and smiled. 'I know. It's Kristy, isn't it?'

'Right.'

'You know, Olly, a lot of relationships develop in psychiatric wards – frequently in group therapy. It's quite a common thing, really. We don't pay too much attention to them because, on balance, most are therapeutic. There are some exceptions, however, where those involved become very intense. Of course, if they become sexual, we have to step in. There could be

consequences for which we could be held responsible. Some family members ask why we don't keep the sexes separate. The answer, of course, is that we need to reflect the real world outside as closely as possible.

'Anyway, as you probably know,' she continued, 'most depressed or rejected people are desperate for love, and they look for substitute relationships almost anywhere. Unfortunately – or fortunately – depending on how you look at it, these relationships seldom last, though there are exceptions.'

'Certainly, I felt rejected after Erin left me, Gerda, but I'm sure seeing Kristy wasn't just a reaction to that. I really, really feel for her. But at the same time, I haven't stopped loving Erin. Do you think that's abnormal?'

'Not at all. Everyone who leaves you leaves a part of themselves behind. And the longer they've been with you, the more they leave. If you really loved them you treasure that.'

'But what I'm asking is this – can one be in love with two people at the same time?' I recalled Drew's opinion on the subject, but I wanted to hear what Gerda had to say.

'Well, I loved my first husband, Theuns, very much. When he was killed in a car accident I didn't stop loving him. But if one could love only one person I would never have been able to marry again. I love Geoff, my second husband, just as much as I loved – *still love* – Theuns. My love for him will never diminish.

'But again let me warn you, Olly. A psychiatric ward is an artificial environment. It's like a hothouse that allows things to grow that would never grow outside. There's a lot of neediness. Too often what seems wonderful today may not seem so wonderful tomorrow.'

'I understand that, Gerda. Yet in my heart of hearts I know my relationship with Kristy is very special. But when we got *really* close, I suddenly began seeing horrible images of the hijackers in my mind, accompanied by intense pain.' I pointed downwards. 'And of course, I couldn't…'

Gerda nodded.

'I really don't think many relationships would have survived that, but ours has.'

'You may be right, Olly. Only time will tell.'

'What really worries me, Gerda, is that I can never seem to escape from these images that always come back to haunt when I – *we* – try…'

‘You can be open with me, Olly. Kristy’s not here any more, so if anything sexual happened between you two, it’s academic now. And of course what you tell me is confidential. I gather you were trying to say that you were intimate with her?’

‘We tried. But it didn’t work because of the images and the intense pain I was telling you about.’

‘Well, just as you subconsciously associate all strange young black men with your hijacking, so you are associating sex with what the hijackers did to you. In other words your brain is hard-wired to make the connection at an unconscious level. So although you may consciously *desire* sex, Stocky and Tall are always there, spoiling it for you. It’s what’s called a negative conditioned reflex.’

‘So what can I do about it, Gerda?’

‘Time sometimes heals, Olly, but often not. In most instances victims need long and intensive therapy. Hypnotherapy works in some cases – and certainly we can try that – but it usually doesn’t work where the trauma is severe. Of course, you will have to finish your course of anti-depressants before we can really tell.’

‘And if hypnotherapy doesn’t work, what other options are there?’

‘There’s a new form of rape recovery therapy, apparently based on reverse conditioning. But I don’t do it myself. My colleague, Lana Lindstrom – she’s an American therapist who practises in Greenside – has developed it. It’s a bit unorthodox but it seems to work pretty well. I know she’s helped a lot of women rape victims in America, as well as in this country. She’s been treating Helena, with very good results.’

‘I heard so. Does she treat men?’

‘I’m not sure. But I would imagine the same psychological techniques apply. But let’s not cross that bridge before we come to it.’

‘Okay. So I’m clinically depressed, mainly because of trauma. But how serious is it?’

‘Well, first I’ll need to ask you a few questions.’

‘Okay.’

‘Severe depression, even stress, sometimes causes people to have hallucinatory experiences, not only visual, but also auditory and olfactory. Like hearing voices, smelling strange smells or feeling that some psychic entity is present. Anything like that, Olly?’

‘Well, when I first arrived here I saw a young woman in the bathroom

mirror that Old Cow tells me is Alice, the deceased daughter of a long-dead governess.'

'You're not the first patient to report having seen a similar apparition. When some patients say they saw something, others start seeing it too. It's infectious, like seeing UFOs. In your case it could be due to an increased sensitivity caused by the depressive state.'

'Is there anything I can do to help things along?'

'Sure. But perhaps you should take some notes here.' She waited for me to take out my pen. 'Firstly, remember to take your medication, and stay off alcohol while you're on it.'

'Why alcohol?'

'Well, alcohol makes depression much worse because it acts on the same chemical system in the brain that's affected by depression.'

'Not even a beer?'

She was smiling. 'Maybe a low-alcohol one, but not more than two.'

I groaned.

'Next, create a new image of yourself that you are more comfortable with, and throw out all the clothes and shoes that don't support that image. Buy new ones if necessary. Also a short fast – two days is enough – helps the body get rid of toxins that add to stress.

'By the way, how's the poetry going?'

'I've written quite a few, but they're pretty amateurish. Sometimes they just seem to pop up on their own without any effort on my part.'

'That's a very good sign, Olly. Means your subconscious is doing its job. But what about something more ambitious – a book on broadcasting, perhaps? Or you could even write a novel.'

'A novel?'

'Sure. Writing fiction is one of the best forms of self-therapy.'

'Maybe I'll give it a bash. But I think I'll have more pressing things to do for a while.'

'In the meantime, there're a lot of little mood boosters you could try, like tidying up and fixing things around the house, repainting walls in warm colours. All these are good.

'Oh, before I forget, if you want to continue having therapy as an outpatient, you can make an appointment with me now.'

I paused for a moment to think what I had on next week. Besides meeting Kristy on Saturday, not much. 'Okay, Gerda. What about next Friday at, say,

two o’clock?’

Gerda checked her diary. ‘That’ll be fine.’

Chapter 59

Supper was solid hospital fare – soup, baked fish with onion and tomato, mashed potato, bread-and-butter pudding. I sat next to Leah at the same table as Faan, Jean and Morris.

‘Did I tell you guys that Liz Stott is discharging me tomorrow?’ Faan said.

‘Me too,’ I said, brightening.

‘She said nothing to me about going home,’ Morris said. ‘But I still have a few more treatments to go.’

‘I think it’ll be at least another week before I’m discharged,’ Leah said with a sigh.

‘By the way,’ I said, shall I get a few goodies from the shop, so we can have a bit of a farewell tomorrow for those of us who’re leaving?’

‘Good idea,’ said Faan. ‘Let me give you something towards it. And we can have a sing-song round the piano, say around eleven.’

After supper, most patients trooped through to the TV lounge, where the news was in progress. At first I didn’t pay much attention to it – a fire in a block of flats in Hillbrow, a policeman had shot his family, a border clash in Kashmir, a rise in the price of oil, and then the pictures of the missing girls came on the screen. The presenter said a woman had come forward who claimed to have seen the girls with two men at a Casino near O.R. Tambo Airport. She had recognised them only after seeing their pictures on television. Claiming to be a psychic who’d located missing persons before, she said she was confident she’d find the girls because—’

The news presenter suddenly paused. ‘We have some breaking news… An international flight from Ethiopia to the United States has crashed into the FBI Headquarters in Washington DC. The aircraft is believed to have been hijacked only minutes before it was due to land. No further details are available…’

On my way to bed I looked in at the nurses’ station. Old Cow was on duty. She looked up and smiled. ‘Hi, Olly, I’ve heard something that may interest you.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes, I hear via the grapevine that Alice is sweet on you.’

The idea of a ghost hitting on someone sounded preposterous. ‘You’re not serious?’

‘Quite serious. And by the way, she’s finally found her mother, so she feels free to leave the hospital. So don’t be surprised if she follows you home after you’re discharged.’

This sounded even more outlandish, but I decided to play along, though tongue-in-cheek.

‘What does she have for breakfast?’

Chapter 60

I woke early after a good night's sleep. Shortly after breakfast Jill Braithwaite came up to me in the common room where I was sitting alone by the window. 'Hi Olly, I'm going down to the shop now. I wondered if you'd like to come too?'

'Glad you asked. I've quite a few things to get before I leave. Also some snacks and stuff for the farewell.'

We were alone in the lift and for a few seconds there was a silence. Then Jill said, 'I've really enjoyed our talks together, Olly, and I'd like to keep in touch.' She handed me a card. 'Maybe you'd like to give me a call sometime?'

'Great. When I've sorted out things at home and I'm back at work, maybe we can meet for coffee somewhere?'

'I'd like that.'

When we reached the shop, all the newspapers were leading with the terrorist attack in Washington. 'NEW PHASE IN TERROR CAMPAIGN', screamed one headline. 'MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED KILLED – MASSIVE BLOW TO FBI,' said another.

But another headline caught my eye: 'MISSING GIRLS – PSYCHIC SOUGHT.'

A scan of the first paragraph revealed that the psychic had claimed to have located the girls but had demanded money from their parents for 'expenses'. After being paid, she had disappeared.

I bought two newspapers, two Rizla machines, some cigarette papers and a couple of packets of BB tobacco, a five-litre box of fruit juice, several bars of chocolate, and a variety of snacks.

On the way back I noticed two youths approaching us down Hospital Walk. 'Can you believe it,' I said, tugging Jill's sleeve. 'It's the same two who were arrested here only last week.'

'Yes, I *can* believe it. I'm not even going to bother calling Security this time!'

I found Oom Henk and Petrus playing Snakes and Ladders in the common room. 'Just a little goodbye present,' I said, handing each a packet.

After taking a peek inside, Petrus was on his feet, shaking my hand. ‘Thank you, Mr Olly, you very good to me. I like this lickle machine too much. Maybe I see you in Melville when I work for Dr Moloi?’

‘Sure. I’m planning to visit Dr Moloi as soon as I’m settled back at home.’

Oom Henk, who’d been turning the Rizla machine over and over in his hand, looked up with a gummy grin. ‘Thanks a lot, Boss,’ he said. ‘But if you don’t mind me saying so, I think I can teach this little machine a thing or two.’ He paused to give a chesty wheeze. ‘Still, when I get the shakes, I can’t roll so good. Then I’ll let this little fella do the work!’

* * * * *

“William James described ‘cases’ of all kinds … people suffering from melancholia, from nervous maladies, from digestive complaints, people who had yearned for suicide, who’d heard voices and changed their lives overnight. … these voices described in detail how they’d lost the will to live, how they’d become ill, bedridden, abandoned by friends and family until suddenly a ‘New Thought’ had occurred to them, the thought of their true place in the universe, at which point all their suffering had ended.” – Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*

At two minutes past ten I was sitting opposite Liz Stott in her office for my exit interview. ‘You’ve made a lot of progress, Olly,’ she said, looking up with a smile. ‘And the good news is there’s no sign of brain damage. But as you probably know, clinical depression can’t be cured in a week or two. So I’m prescribing Aropax for at least another three months. After that we can review the situation. In the meantime, I want you to call in every two weeks, just to see how you’re doing.’

‘I’ve already arranged to see Gerda next Friday, Liz, and I’ll probably be coming regularly after that for more therapy.’

‘Fine, see you then … Oh, and remind me to give you a doctor’s certificate for a week’s sick leave. You need to take things easy before going back to work. You also need to make an effort yourself at getting better. And that means working through the things that probably caused your depression

in the first place.'

'Actually, Gerda has already given me some tips on that.'

'That's good. But there're still a few things I'd like to mention.' She tapped her desk again with her pencil. 'You know, Olly, depression is a very strange thing. You can take umpteen sight-seeing trips around the world, become a celebrity with millions of fans, win the Lotto, and *still* feel depressed – if the underlying causes remain. People in this condition, let me emphasise, are very difficult to live with.' She gave me a long hard look. 'And that could be one of the reasons why your wife left you.'

'I'd never thought of that, Liz. You really think so?'

'I'm not saying it's a definite cause, and obviously I don't know the ins and outs of your marriage. But that's not the main issue now – that's part of the past. It's no use looking back except to learn from your mistakes. Rather focus on the present and the future. But I must warn you that although things will generally improve now that you're having therapy, be prepared for some temporary setbacks, even the occasional anxiety attack.'

'What worries me, Liz, is how depression seems to sneak up without one knowing it.'

'Well, one of the reasons why people get depressed, or commit suicide, is that they see no purpose or meaning in life. Many feel that organised religion has failed them, or they themselves are lapsed believers, so they have no faith, no personal philosophy, no meaning in life – nothing to guide them. So today, people are basically alone and adrift in a hostile and chaotic world.'

'So what can one do about it, Liz?'

'Well, there is *some* good news, Olly. A New York professor of philosophy, Dr Louis Marinoff, has responded to this challenge by writing a book called *Plato, Not Prozac*. As the title implies, he argues that "philosophical counselling", as he calls it, would help many patients recover a sense of purpose, and hence overcome their depression. He believes that if you are struggling with a moral or ethical problem, then the root cause shouldn't be treated pharmacologically but philosophically.'

'Makes sense. So where can I get a copy of the book?'

'I can lend you mine, if you like.'

'Thanks.'

'Helping oneself is another important key to mental health, as Dr Marinoff's philosophical approach is. It is based on the belief that mastery of bad circumstances – usually a serious loss of some sort – is inherent to what a

person is and is part of what makes us truly human. There's no doubt about it, Olly, the pain of loss is the greatest pain in the world, but those who come through it best are those who can find meaning in their suffering.'

'I can't say I've suffered a great deal, Liz – nothing like most of the other patients here. Nevertheless, I'm beginning to see some meaning in what happened to me.'

'Good.' Liz glanced at her watch. 'I need to hurry, Olly. There's a staff farewell for Sister Nina in about ten minutes.'

'Where's she going?'

'She's taking a month's holiday; then she's starting a job at Broadmoor in Britain. The Brits pay a lot better… She's lucky to get the job.'

On the way out she handed me a doctor's certificate and gave me a peck on the cheek. 'And pop in here when you come to see Gerda. In the meantime, I'll bring you Professor Marinoff's book.'

Chapter 61

As I walked past the TV lounge I paused for a moment. A reality court session was in progress, but just as the judge was about to pronounce her verdict, the programme was interrupted. The announcer said that in news just in, the Siener Sirkel had claimed responsibility for the Tlokwe bombing. The statement added that the bombing was just a warning and that the next bomb would be much bigger. This would be 'the first shot' in what it called 'a God-ordained war of liberation.'

It was now about a quarter to eleven and I could already hear sounds of piano playing coming from the common room. But I decided to pack first before joining the others. When I entered the ward, I found Oom Henk sitting near the window, his shirtsleeves rolled up, and massaging Morris's legs. His faded suit jacket was hanging neatly on a hanger suspended from the rail round his bed.

'Morris is much better now,' Oom Henk informed me. 'Before I started doing this he was losing the feeling in his toes.'

'That's right,' Morris said. 'Thanks to Oom Henk, I think I'm well enough to walk out of here soon.'

'Well, come along to the common room – both of you. We're having some snacks and a sing-song round the piano.'

I dumped my packed luggage on my bed and the three of us strolled through to the common room. Faan and Jean were playing a duet. Most of the other patients were crowded around the piano.

'*Starry, starry night…*' Faan and Jean were singing. They paused when they saw the three of us entering.

'Hi guys, come and join in,' Faan called out, a thumb tucked in his waistcoat, which he was wearing on the black side. 'We're playing this as a tribute to one of the world's greatest artists … who was also a famous depressive. No prizes for guessing who!'

'Vincent van Gogh,' Oom Henk wheezed.

'Okay, it's not a prize, but have some crisps.'

I'd put the snacks and the box of fruit juice on the table next to the coffee urn. 'Help yourselves!' I called out. Then, paper cups in hand and nibbling

snacks, we mingled and chatted.

'Good news,' Jean announced. 'I've been phoning around and I've been offered a job at *Best Books*, the new bookshop in Melville.'

'That's great news!' Faan exclaimed. 'When do you start?'

'Next Monday.'

Faan turned to Lin Chang, 'And what are your plans, Lin?'

'Well, after I've finished my Masters thesis, which is a comparative study of Ubuntu and Confucian ethics, I'll be writing a book based on that, which should keep me busy for quite a while.'

'And Rastaman? Faan asked. 'What'll you be doing?'

'I'm applying for a job at the Sowetan. A lady friend of mine is a senior journalist there, and she's set me up with an interview next week.'

'Great, bru!' Faan, said, giving Rastaman a friendly pat on the back. 'I'm sure everyone here will join me in wishing you good luck.'

A murmur of approval followed.

'What about you, Olly?'

'Well, hopefully I'll be seeing a lot of Kristy, and, of course, also my daughters. Other than that, I have no concrete plans.'

'And Gabriel?'

'Well, I'm being referred to Tara next week for further treatment.'

'Don't worry, Gabriel, Tara's a breeze.'

'So what will you be doing, Faan?' Gabriel asked.

'Well, Dr Stott has booked me off work for two weeks. But I know that when I start prosecuting again, it'll be like trying to bail out the sinking Titanic with a tea cup!'

Leah glanced around and smiled at everyone. 'My memory seems to have improved a lot, so I have a feeling I'll be going home soon…'

'I think we need some more music,' Faan said. 'Come on Jean, let's tickle the ivories. We didn't finish *Vincent,* did we? I'm sure you all know it … *Starry, starry night…'*

There was a special poignancy about their playing and singing. It made me think of Kristy when she'd sung beside me. I felt a tightening in my throat and my voice tailed off, as I watched these gentle, damaged people singing lustily.

Chapter 62

"Spirits may attach themselves to a human being for many reasons including fear of the unknown after death … or to love and support a loved one." – Dr. William J. Baldwin, *Spirit Releasement Therapy*

"Haunting by another name is love." – Erica Jong

Jill Braithwaite was calling from the doorway. 'Mr Dillon's here for you, Olly.'

I fetched my luggage and went through to Reception. It consisted of a brown vinyl holdall, several plastic bags, my burned-wood rooster I'd made at O.T, and Kristy's avocado pip in its bottle.

'Here, let me carry some of that, old buddy,' Drew said. 'I've already signed you out.'

Jill Braithwaite stepped from behind the nurses' station and pecked me on the cheek. 'You'll give me a call sometime, won't you, Olly?' Then she leaned over and whispered, 'I really like your American friend. Just nod your head if he's unattached.'

I nodded.

'Well, won't you…?'

'Sure, we'll get together in a couple of weeks.'

Faan tapped me on the shoulder. 'I've got your number, Olly, and most of the others too. What about us all getting together for a brunch at the Westcliff sometime? Then we can view this place from another angle.'

'Great idea.'

'I'm game,' said Jean.

'Me too,' said Rastaman and several others.

'Don't you think we should give our group of friends a special name for when we meet afterwards?'

'Right,' I said. 'Any ideas?'

'How about The Crazy Gang?' suggested Faan.

'Perfect,' said Jean.

It was only at this point that it hit home that I was actually leaving Ward 697. I'd come to realise that a psychiatric ward creates a special bond among patients, and also between patients and many staff. I sensed that the world outside would be vastly different to what it was when I was admitted almost a month ago.

Jill was calling out to me. 'Oh, I forgot to tell you, Olly, there's a letter for you on the calendar.'

I quickly retraced my steps. A large peach-pink envelope addressed to me was pinned to the left of the calendar. On opening it I found a hand-written note on matching paper in a highly decorative italic script.

Goodbye Olly. You good person. Sorry you leaving. Good luck for you to get better. – Pilar.

Was it my imagination or could I smell perfume on the paper?

I had a feeling that I'd still forgotten something. Racking my brains, I absently nodded a goodbye to the zebra plant, which, as if in salutation, had thrust forth a small yellow bud. Suddenly I remembered what I'd forgotten – a farewell poem that had been forming in my mind. I began reciting it as several fellow Crazy Gangers crowded around me.

'Ward 697— hell or heaven?
Somewhere in between,
A limbo-land for souls to leaven
And from delusions wean.

Some patients yo-yo in and out
Others stay for days or weeks,
When all emerge, this crazy world
Considers them as freaks.

But in this almost saner place
There's true equality
Even some amazing grace
With gems of jollity.

In every heart the need for love
Waits for love to touch
Dear God, in heaven above,

Is this to ask too much?'

'Well, that says it all,' commented Faan.

'I really like the bit about love,' said Jean, with a sideways glance at me.

Now Faan, Jean, Rastaman and all the other patients were crowding around, pumping my hand. Faith, who was hovering nearby, grinned and gave a tentative little wave.

Just then Jill called out to us: 'Hey listen to this, guys. It's just come through on the news. There's been a massive car bomb explosion outside the Constitutional Court building in Braamfontein!'

'Any details?' Faan wanted to know.

'So far nothing. Only that all the windows in the surrounding area have been blown out.

There was a general muttering as we digested this news.

Turning to me, Faan said, 'Well, this proves what I've just been thinking.'

'What?'

'That we live in an insane country!'

I paused at the door and looked up at the convex mirror. Once again my right ear slowly elongated to a pixie point and my nose skewed to one side. The beautiful blonde girl I'd first seen when I arrived was standing there with a wistful smile on her face. I sensed it was Alice.

When I looked again she was gone…

PART TWO

Things Fall Apart

Chapter 1

As Drew and I emerged from the Nelson Mandela City Hospital, I blinked and took a couple of deep breaths. Although I was glad to be going home, a small part of me was sad to be leaving the psychiatric ward.

'Hope you don't mind a bit of a walk,' Drew was saying, 'but after the recent attack on a doctor in the basement, I thought it would be safer to park in the street.'

I nodded, and we strolled down Queens Road towards Drew's black Mercedes, a late 1980's 280 model, which he kept in mint condition. We stowed my luggage in the boot, except for Kristy's avocado pip, which I held on to. I slid onto the seat beside Drew, inhaling the comforting smell of sun-warmed polished leather. In this dreamy state I began to think of Kristy. This time tomorrow we'd be together again...

As the Mercedes sped down Loch Avenue's tunnel of trees, time seemed to flow normally again unlike in Ward 697, where it seemed strangely extended. Suddenly I sensed that there was another presence in the car. Perhaps Old Cow was right and Alice had sneaked in beside me. I dismissed the thought immediately. Surely such irrational thinking was a function of my depression?

I wound down the window to feel the fresh air on my face.

'You must be sick of hospital food,' Drew remarked, glancing sideways at me. 'Let me take you to lunch.'

'That would be great,' I said, thinking of some of the mouth-watering specials in Melville restaurants.

'Okay, well, let's try Che's. I hear the Peking Duck is fantastic.'

A minute or two later my cellphone rang. My heart missed a beat when I heard Kristy's voice.

'Hi Olly. Just to let you know I'll be at Cresta at around nine,' she said quickly. 'But I'd like to do a bit of window shopping first. So shall I meet you at, say, nine-thirty at Dominos?' She sounded constrained, as if someone was within earshot.

'Okay, Kris. See you then, my sweet.' As I rang off, I remembered that I still had her cellphone and that she was probably phoning on a landline. I

wanted to phone her back later, but there was no caller identity.

Drew parked outside Che's in Melville's Seventh Street restaurant area. Inside we found a window table with a view of the street scene. We ordered Peking Duck, as well as a bottle of Kelin Constantia Sauvignon Blanc and two small bottles of Perrier. 'Just half a glass,' I said to the waiter, as he began pouring the wine. After he'd left, I turned to Drew. 'So what do you think of the Washington attack?' I had a feeling he might have some inside information.

He didn't answer immediately. A shadow of regret seemed to cloud his face. 'Well,' he said at last, 'I suppose it means some heads in Homeland Security are going to roll.' He took a gulp of wine and smacked his lips. 'Of course it was Al-Qaeda or an African affiliate.'

'I would have thought it would have been Isis.'

'No, Al Qaeda is much more experienced in terrorism involving aircraft.'

'But how the hell did they do it?'

'One of my Washington contacts – let's call him "Prometheus" – tells me the CIA already knows more or less what happened ... This is off the record, Olly.' Drew's eyes locked on mine. 'Apparently, Al-Qaeda, through an intermediary, acquired a passenger aircraft of the same type used by Ethiopian Airlines, a year or two ago. It was then repainted to replicate an Ethiopian Airlines plane that would be used on a particular scheduled flight between Addis and Washington. Among the passengers of the scheduled flight would be a number of high-profile Ethiopians. That's why it was chosen. The cloned plane, which would be flown by suicide pilots, was packed with conventional explosives.

'On the day of the genuine flight, the clone was waiting ready for takeoff at a remote airfield near the western border of Sudan and South Sudan, not far from the normal Addis-Washington flight-path. Meanwhile, some days before the flight, Al-Qaeda agents had kidnapped family members of the pilot and co-pilot of the scheduled flight, threatening them with death unless the pilots co-operated. The pilots were told to land their plane at the remote airfield at the same time as the clone took off. Al-Qaeda made it clear that the family members would be released unharmed only if the mission succeeded.'

'What about satellite monitoring of the airfield?'

'Well, it's used mainly to bring food aid to the region, or so the Sudan government claims. The Al-Qaeda men at the airfield – probably posing as aid workers – were careful to establish a normal pattern of activity over

several months that would not arouse suspicion. In any case, the clone was camouflaged to look like an aid transport plane right up until the last moment.'

'And the on-board software that warns if airliners stray into no-fly zones?'

'Al-Qaeda's computer boffins apparently modified it, so that it could be deactivated at the appropriate time.'

'Isn't that stretching credibility a bit far, Drew?'

'Not at all. Computer security systems are only as good as the brains that design them. Remember that some of the world's top-secret facilities – including the CIA's master computer, the FBI, and even Nasa – have all been penetrated by teenage hackers!'

'Point taken.'

'Well, as the clone was coming in to land at Dulles International Airport, the pilot frantically called the control tower, saying the plane's landing gear and control lines were malfunctioning (all lies, of course), and he strongly suspected sabotage. He called for immediate assistance, saying the aircraft was basically out of control. On board were supposedly a number of high-profile Ethiopian officials, including the Interior Minister, who were due to hold important talks with U.S. officials on…*wait for it*…airline security! But of course they were being detained by Al-Qaeda at the remote airfield in Sudan. Meanwhile, the pilot had simply deactivated the no-fly software and flew the plane manually a few hundred feet above the ground towards Washington. It's only thirty miles to downtown D.C., and at around five hundred miles an hour, it would have reached its target in less than four minutes. The pilot rightly assumed that there would be frantic phone calls from Dulles International telling those in charge of Washington's security that the airliner had been sabotaged and normal security procedures should be overridden. Under no circumstances should it be shot down. So it flew on unhindered towards the J. Edgar Hoover Building on Pennsylvania Avenue. Then *boom*...'

Drew paused and looked away for a moment, biting his lower lip. 'I don't mind about the building being partly demolished. It's an ugly structure anyway; but some of the people who died inside were my friends.' I noticed his eyes were glistening.

'It all sounds very plausible, but why the FBI Building? Why not the White House or the Capitol? After all, they're also in Washington.'

‘Two reasons, Olly. Firstly, the message the terrorists wanted to convey was that the very people who are supposed to protect America can’t even protect themselves. Secondly, the plane would have been shot down if it had approached the White House or the Capitol, no matter what bigwigs were on board.’

‘That figures.’

‘Of course this means the U.S. will be re-evaluating *all* its Africa policies now – not just security.’

Chapter 2

"*The more Western elites ignore their own laws, allow unassimilated ethnic ghettos and profit from an exploitive labour market, the more their own nations will begin to resemble the very places immigrants fled from.*" – Victor Davis Hanson, Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution

> "*The [African] continent has the biggest number of refugees and displaced people in the world. African migrants, lured by the prospect of a better life in Europe, perish in the Mediterranean as they try to flee the nightmare that African leaders have concocted for them.*" – Barney Mthombothi, *Sunday Times.*

"*The major problem we face as African nations is not necessarily infrastructure development, but the lack of humane, intelligent and courageous leaders.*" – Matome Letsoalo, South African columnist

"*People worldwide think of Africa as a poverty-stricken continent. There is no real poverty in Africa – the poverty that there is, is created by the leaders.*" – Nairobi educator

"*If you are going to interfere in Africa, do it properly or not at all … the international community may need to 'embed' its own experts in the public service for a long time…*" – Peter Fabricius

"*In the West, some have openly called for reimposing colonialism on Africa, perhaps after a new Congress of Berlin (1884-85) which developed the rules and framework for the 'scramble for Africa' over a century ago.*" – James Biedzynski, reviewing George Ayittey's *Africa in Chaos*

Drew toyed with his wineglass before continuing. 'The other side of the coin is that Muslims are infiltrating Europe in their millions … and that's a ticking time bomb. Although some rightwing Western politicians claim that

this is part of an Islamic war strategy against the West – and there may well be some truth in that – it's not the whole story. Europeans are also to blame. Not only did they destabilise these countries through military interference, but on a more mundane level they refused to clean their public toilets themselves, or carve up carcases in slaughter houses, or wash dishes in restaurants, or pick their own fruit, so they allowed people from poor countries – mainly from the Middle East and Africa – to come in by the million to do their dirty work, paying them low wages.'

'So do you think Washington's policy review will affect South Africa?'

'Absolutely! As should be obvious the US isn't at all happy about the SPP victory. Actually it's more than just a victory; it's a *revolution.* The massive drop in the rand is saying just that.'

'I believe you're right. But what's the US attitude to Phiri himself?'

'They are keeping an eye on him because they regard him as unpredictable, if not irrational.

Drew took two quick sips of wine before continuing. 'You see, Olly, the U.S. could manipulate the ANC, but it will be much more difficult, if not impossible, to manipulate the SPP. Also, because the SPP is getting substantial funding from its secret allies in the Middle East. By the way, we haven't been able to find out who they are yet, as the SPP keeps this info on a strictly need-to-know basis.'

'Hmmm…'

Drew suddenly had a faraway look in his eyes. 'Maybe the Americans knew about the planned attack on the FBI Building and did nothing to prevent it…'

'Why would they want to do that?'

'Think Pearl Harbour, Olly. I don't want to stretch the metaphor too far, but maybe Washington needed another spectacular attack for which Africa's failed security could be blamed.'

'But why?'

'So they can intervene directly in Africa, like they did in Iraq. One theory is that the State Department is cooking up something with the former European colonial powers and a couple of compliant African states to place the more dysfunctional states under what's termed "protective administration" – a kind of trusteeship, if you will – to close the gaps in the war against terrorism.'

'What's in it for the Europeans?'

‘Simple. As I mentioned earlier, the whole of Europe has been swamped with a growing tide of mostly illegal migrants, especially from Africa, who are now a serious drain on Europe’s dwindling social resources. Then there are the thousands of Muslim migrants who are unassimilable and whose loyalty is primarily to their religion, not to their host countries. This is providing a potent electioneering issue for the extreme rightwing parties that have mushroomed everywhere, even in traditionally liberal countries. The potential for destabilisation is enormous, not only for the economy but for democracy itself in Europe.’

‘So how do the Europeans propose to reverse the trend?’

‘Most of these Africans streaming in are not political refugees but economic migrants. Under many of the corrupt African regimes it’s very difficult to make a living. So some of the more realistic European governments have now finally learned that the only way to stem the tide of migrants is to get Africa itself working again, so jobs can be created for them back home. But that would require skilled and honest administrators, who, as you know, are pretty scarce in Africa.’

‘So are you saying a form of trusteeship would do it?’

‘Sure. But that’s just a euphemism, as is the now preferred term “administrative assistance”. What they mean, of course, is *recolonisation!’*

Chapter 3

"*The last four decades have seen Africa going from one crisis to another due to poor leadership. Since the 1960s, everything that could go wrong in Africa has gone wrong. Genocide, civil wars, ethnic cleansing, dictatorships, coups d'etat, pandemics, falling life expectancy…"* – Moeletsi Mbeki, brother of former South African President, Thabo Mbeki

"*Private jets, Bugatti cars, many luxury homes and enough bank accounts to paper the new luxury yacht – the extraordinary capacity of some African leaders and their families for self-enrichment has been laid bare in a French lawsuit over allegedly stolen state money."* – Henry Samuel, *Daily Telegraph*

"*What is certain is that the U.S. empire is being enlarged to encompass parts of Africa in the rapacious search for oil. The results could be devastating for Africa's peoples. Like the old scramble for Africa this new one is a struggle among great powers for resources and plunder – not for the development of Africa or the welfare of its population."* – John Bellamy Foster, *Monthly Review*

"*In terms of natural endowment, Africa ought to be the richest of the continents, but look at the mess we have made of that potential. We have proved totally incapable of harnessing the abundant natural resources of our continent."* – Idang Alibi, Nigerian journalist.

"[In Africa] … *the outward signs of statehood are often facades hiding the real workings of the system … Crucially, resources extracted from the state are deployed as the means to maintain support and legitimacy in this system, with the effect that the control of the state is equivalent to the control of resources…"* – Ian Taylor, senior lecturer in African politics at the University of Botswana

"National Socialism seems the same as Chinese communism to me." – AF Pro *"Which is why Chinese National Socialism is the best solution. China needs more living-space/ Lebensraum. (In other words, China should colonize Africa)."* – AF Addict (Asia Finest Discussion Forum)

Drew chewed deliberately for several moments on a mouthful of crispy duck before continuing. 'Another thing we need to remember, Olly… crunch … is that we live in a world of rapidly dwindling resources and a lot of those resources are in Africa. But if the continent is trapped in an endless cycle of coups, corruption and conflict, with foreign workers being killed or kidnapped by dissident groups, it makes it much more difficult to access those resources. But there's a lot more to it than that. A recent CIA study has warned Washington that, with the continuing destruction of Africa's tropical rainforests, some killer virus, possibly worse than Aids or Ebola, could suddenly emerge, threatening all of humankind. That's not as far-fetched as it may seem. Then, of course, there's the wildlife lobby. They are telling American lawmakers that the bushmeat trade in Africa has already driven dozens of species to extinction and if nothing is done soon, a lot more will follow, especially the great apes. After years of fruitless pleading with African governments to do something, the lobbyists have come to the conclusion that the only solution is outside intervention.'

'From what you say it seems that a whole range of forces are coinciding to favour intervention, in what sounds like a "perfect storm".'

'Exactly. But there's still another important reason, perhaps the most important one of all. The Americans are worried about China, which in another ten years may be a lot stronger.'

'You talking about boots on the ground?'

'Probably. In that event, the Europeans would also be very concerned. You see, Olly, geopolitically, Africa is critical. Just look at a map and you'll see what I mean: Africa is poised like a fist under Europe. So the Europeans can't afford to allow this second-biggest, mineral-rich continent to be controlled by a potentially hostile power. So the US, together with its European allies, has made a strategic decision, at least in principle – the politicians are still debating the details – and that is… the West has to stem the Chinese advance.'

Theoretically I could understand America's and Europe's motivation for wanting to recolonise Africa, but I still found it a bit hard to swallow. 'By the way, Drew, why have you been telling me all this sensitive stuff?' I asked. 'I mean, I know I provide you with a lot of monitored African info in exchange…'

Drew looked at me over his wineglass and smiled wryly. 'Simple. I need a friend I can really trust who has no connections with any intelligence agency, so that if something were to happen to me – and that's quite likely for reasons I won't go into now – you could start asking the right questions.'

'Right, then I'm your man.'

'Well, now that's settled, Olly, I'll give you a number you can call – someone in Washington…' He opened his wallet and fished out a card and handed it to me. There was no name or address – just a telephone number.

'Who would I ask for?'

'Just ask for Prometheus.'

After lunch I told Drew I needed to buy presents for the Harpies, so we strolled over to the bead shop.

I chose a string each of outrageously expensive Moroccan beads, slipping into the bribery mode common among divorcing parents.

'Are you sure you're all right?' Drew said, as we headed for the car. 'You're welcome to stay a few days with me until you feel a hundred percent.'

'Thanks, I'm fine, Drew, but I need to get home. Lots of catching up to do before I go back to work.'

As Drew pulled up at my gate, Chloe sprang down the steps and peered through the bars, her tail wagging vigorously. Then Toby-Felix, our bulimic feline with a crumpled ear, suddenly appeared and began rubbing himself against my legs.

Suddenly both animals stiffened. Their eyes seemed to be following something at head height moving towards the front door. Chloe gave a low growl and the hair on Toby-Felix's back rose.

Once inside I sensed something was missing. It took a moment for me to realise what it was: there were no womanly smells of fresh potpourri and deodorant that subtly infused the air when Erin and the Harpies were there. Now there was only a smell of unwashed dog, tired cat litter and ageing newspapers.

The grandfather clock that I'd inherited from Cully had stopped and I noticed that the long oak-framed mirror in the hallway had gathered a film of dust. It was obvious that the once-weekly maid, Rosie, hadn't worked since I'd been in hospital. I wound the clock and began brushing the dust off the glass with my sleeve. Then I saw the misty outline of someone behind the dusty surface. Was it my imagination, or was it Alice?

I went through to each room in turn, opening all the windows to let in fresh air and any bad vibes out. This made me think of the anthracite heater. I walked over to it and opened the glass door. It was still full of ash. There was no way I could tell what was wrong with it, so I closed it again.

I decided to follow Liz Stott's advice and call in a professional to service it. Checking the Yellow Pages online, I found a firm called Anthracite Services, and made an appointment with a man called Bob, who said he would come next Friday at nine.

Then I unpacked my things and did a routine check around the house. I noticed that the weeds in the aquarium were much thicker. In the lounge a tall vase of wilted, foul-smelling gladioli stood on the mantelpiece. I emptied out the vase, replacing it with the bottle containing Kristy's avocado pip (which had already sent out a small shoot!); then I began checking the fridge in the kitchen for something to eat. On an upper shelf I found a wedge of rock-hard cheese and an open packet of suspect-looking bacon. In the crisper were the limp remains of a bunch of celery, half a rubbery onion, a wrinkled green pepper, two fungus-covered tomatoes and three carrots that had grown long hairy roots. Miraculously, there were also three low-alcohol Windhoek beers.

I grabbed one of the beers and sat on the couch to watch the news. The main focus was on the car bombing outside the Constitutional Court. Besides shattered windows, very little damage had been caused to the building itself. Sadly, three passers-by had been killed by the blast and two more had been injured. So far no one had claimed responsibility. However, President-elect Phiri had been quick to accuse agents of the previous regime of trying to derail socialism.

After the news I decided to drive down to Checkers and stock up. Amazingly, the Lada started after only two turns of the key. At the supermarket I was relieved to find that there was no recurrence of my anxiety symptoms and even the piped music sounded cheerful. After loading up with groceries, I headed for the liquor counter where I bought a couple of bottles of Delheim Chardonnay, one of Rooiberg Pinotage and two dozen cans of

Windhoek Lights.

When I reached home I had that familiar feeling one gets from driving anywhere in Johannesburg – a sense of relief, like a war pilot returning unscathed from a mission over enemy territory…/85+

Chloe was at the gate, wagging her tail, but this time she was prancing in a way that unmistakeably meant, 'Let's go walkies – *Now!'*

Good idea, I told myself. I would take her down to Van Riebeeck Park above Emmarentia Dam as soon as I'd offloaded the groceries. I called Chloe and we piled into the Lada and headed for the park. It was already after five and dark clouds were gathering. Lightning flickered to the south. 'This will have to be a quick one,' I said out loud, half to myself. 'We don't want to get caught in a storm.' Chloe looked up and wagged her tail as if she understood. I slipped on her lead as we got out of the car and then set off on our usual route around the two upper dams. Flocks of hadedas were flying home early to roost.

I'd brought a plastic bag along in case I found some parasol mushrooms+, the tastiest of all edible fungi, except perhaps for truffles. As I rushed from cluster to cluster, scooping them up, Chloe seemed to think it a great game, and I had to give a sharp jerk on her lead to stop her prodding the white caps with her nose.

Some distance away two youths were stretched out on the grass, listlessly watching us. A few moments later I caught a whiff of grass – not the kind you mow; the kind you smoke!

Eventually, when my bag was almost full, we reached a huge bluegum tree that had been struck by lightning a couple of years ago. It had been badly scarred down one side, but had somehow survived. Its lower branches were bushy with new green leaves.

Suddenly I began to feel uneasy – for no particular reason – and I turned to move away. Then I saw a notice nailed to the trunk. Below the photograph of a middle-age man was the word 'MISSING', followed by smaller print. 'John Latimer (aged 51)…'

I was distracted for a moment by a loud cawing that rang unpleasantly in my ears. Suddenly three large crows flapped out of the bare upper branches of the bluegum and, still cawing loudly, flew raggedly off to the north. Their black wings matched the leaden clouds, now edged with green. A chill wind had sprung up, scooping up swathes of litter and sending dusty spirals upwards.

I began studying the notice. '…Last seen on 3rd September, while walking in this park with his brown staffie, Boofuls. Both the dog and his car, a white Toyota Corolla, Registration No. LZM *** GP, are also missing…'

I felt Chloe tugging impatiently on the lead.

'Sit!' I commanded, reaching for my notebook to copy down the missing man's details.

'…Anyone with information please call Jenny on 083 380**** … or your nearest police station.'

The wind had suddenly gathered strength, twisting into a full-blown whirlwind measuring about fifty metres across, like the downdraft of a giant helicopter. It was advancing towards us. As the outer edge enveloped us, dust and grit stung my eyes. I was vaguely aware of a bright light shimmering above. Then I felt my scalp prickling and a tingling in my arms and legs. The metal collar chain on Chloe's lead began to crackle and hum. Chloe was hyper-ventilating and showing the whites of her eyes. She gave a violent tug. I needed no further urging and began sprinting away from the tree in the direction of the youths stretched out on the grass. I had covered only about twenty or thirty metres when there was a blinding flash and a sonic boom so loud that it seemed to herald the end of the world. A nanosecond later a shockwave flattened me and everything went black – then suddenly blindingly white. I found myself moving slowly down a tunnel of light that became brighter and brighter. At the end of the tunnel I could discern a figure that I knew yet did not know. All I knew was a feeling of pure love. The figure opened its arms as if to accept me. Suddenly I could see everything – past, present and future all at once – a flash of all-encompassing knowledge and understanding that hung there for a moment and then began to fade as quickly as dreams do.

This was followed by a loud ringing in my ears. Then I heard a distant calling. I turned and saw myself and Chloe stretched out motionless below. The two youths were crouching over us. Suddenly I felt I was falling. The next moment I opened my eyes and found myself lying on the grass. There was a strong smell of ozone, burnt eucalyptus, and a lighted joint. One of the youths was shaking me. His breath seemed to mirror the strange taste in my mouth. He was saying something, but all I could hear was the ringing in my ears. I opened my mouth to say something. There were a couple of loud clicks, followed by a popping sound. Faintly, very faintly, I heard him say, 'You okay?'

‘I think so,’ I said doubtfully, sitting up and squinting at him. I felt disoriented and I had a sharp pain in my chest.

The youths introduced themselves as Cedric and James. They were Wits medical students. ‘That strike was pretty awesome,’ Cedric was saying. ‘When we reached you, bru, you weren’t even breathing, so James took your pulse. Nothing. We thought you’d gone. To make sure I gave you mouth-to-mouth. But that didn’t work. We were on the point of giving up when I remembered reading somewhere that smoking dope enabled the Zulu impis to overcome the shock of being hit by bullets, so they could keep advancing. So I thought a few puffs might do the trick. We took turns in blowing the stuff into your lungs, and after a couple of minutes, *bingo* – you woke up!’

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘You saved my life.’ Then I looked around for Chloe. She was lying behind me, perfectly still, her mouth half open, her tongue lolling. ‘Won’t you pass me that,’ I said, pointing to the half-smoked joint that Cedric was clutching between thumb and forefinger.

I took a drag and blew the smoke into Chloe’s nose. Her cheeks inflated and there was a spluttering sound like a deflating balloon. I clamped her mouth closed, plugging the leak, and tried again. After about a minute her eyes flickered and she gave a kick. Then she sat up and licked my face, put her paw on my shoulder and stared up at me with soulful eyes. But her eyes looked somehow different now – more knowing, perhaps… or was she simply stoned?

‘You and Spotty are lucky to be alive,’ James said. ‘Look at the tree that was struck. It’s virtually fallen apart. Branches and bits of bark scattered everywhere.’

I glanced over at the tree. James was right. The whole upper trunk was split down the middle, with only the lower part still intact.

‘And did you know,’ James went on, ‘that a lightning strike is about a billion volts. You must have been just on the edge of the ground flash to survive.’

‘The outer limits.’

‘Hey, man, that’s cool!’ Cedric chuckled. ‘Which reminds me, did you see that thing hovering above the tree just before the lightning struck?’

‘I saw a bright light,’ I said. ‘But everything happened so fast I only caught a glimpse.’

‘I’m not pulling your chain,’ Cedric said. ‘But whatever it was had bright portholes. You know, like a UFO.’

‘I think you can rule out UFOs,’ I said dryly. ‘Probably just ball lightning.’

‘I suggest you keep an eye on Spotty, put in James.

‘She seems okay to me,’ I said. ‘Actually her name is Chloe.’

‘What I mean is that when an animal is struck by lightening and survives, it often develops enhanced powers.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like understanding more than you’d think.’

I had expected the grass would have affected my driving but as I cruised back up Beyers Naude in the gathering dark, I felt a heightened awareness and a feeling of being in complete control. Despite the ringing in my ears, every sound was peculiarly distinct and the passing cars’ headlights were like slow, shooting stars. Perhaps it was a special strain of grass, or maybe the lightning had somehow realigned my senses.

When I got home I suddenly knew that the key would stick in the gate lock. Sure enough it stuck on the second turn. After fiddling with the key for a about half a minute, the lock suddenly clicked open.

The first thing I did when I went inside was kick off my shoes. The cool carpet gave my bare feet a pleasant chill. Then I turned on all the lights to make the darkened house feel more welcoming. Next, I unzipped my holdall to unpack my clothes. Two small cockroaches popped out. I hadn’t the heart to kill them – after all, they were probably siblings of Jimmy and Jemima. Also, the grass had made me feel at one with all living things.

I watched the cockroaches scurry off towards the kitchen – which gave me an idea. I went through to the fridge and opened a Windhoek Light. It was then that I remembered that I wasn’t supposed to drink while on medication. But what the hell I reasoned; its alcohol content was only 2.4 percent!

Anyway, after such a close shave with death, I felt I deserved a beer! The fridge wasn’t icy cold, so I felt only a slight twinge in my molar, but it was enough to remind me to phone Dr Byat. I made a note and stuck it on the fridge door.

Suddenly a brilliant flash lit up the night sky, followed by a loud clap of thunder. Almost immediately sheets of driving rain began lashing the windows.

I lay back on the couch and stared blankly at the empty space where the TV used to be. Then I remembered I’d trashed it. Besides a faint stain on the carpet, there was no sign of any other damage. Erin or the Harpies must have

cleaned up the mess. Perhaps if I bought a new TV I could lure the girls back to Melville.

Just then I had a feeling that the phone was about to ring. Correction! I *knew* it was going to ring. I also knew it would be Bonny. Sure enough, ten or fifteen seconds later the phone rang and indeed it *was* Bonny.

'Hi Dad,' she said.

For just a moment hearing her voice made me feel we were a normal family again. But of course we weren't.

'Frith and me want to come and visit you,' Bonny went on, 'but Mum says we shouldn't come to the house. Maybe we can meet for coffee on Sunday morning somewhere in Melville.'

'Okay. Where, Bonny?'

'How about the Jugg o' Cream at, say, eleven o'clock?'

'Fine. See you then. By the way, it's "Frith and *I*", not "Frith and me".

'Don't be such a pain, Dad!'

Somehow this conversation made me think of Matthew, so I went through to the study and e-mailed him, telling him that Erin had moved out but not mentioning the divorce. In any case, I didn't know how to explain it. If there was any explaining to do, I felt it should come from Erin.

Chapter 4

The grass had given me the munchies, so I went through to the kitchen and microwaved a frozen shepherd's pie, washing it down with a second beer. Then I sat on the couch to read the accumulated post. As I shifted about to get comfortable, I noticed white hairs clinging to my trousers. It must have been telepathy because Chloe looked up at me guiltily.

'I know what you've been up to!' I said in as stern a voice as I could manage. She wagged her tail and gave me a skew Dalmatian grin. I made another mental note to buy her a dog brush and give her a good grooming.

I decided to have a bath and go to bed early. But when I was about to turn the water on I noticed the plug was missing. I went downstairs to fetch another one from the sink, but that too was missing. Then I recalled that I still had the plug that Jill Braithwaite had lent me. I found it in my toilet bag. Returning upstairs, I popped it into the plug-hole.

When the bath was nearly full, I stretched forward to turn the tap off. It was then that I caught a whiff of perfume, as if a woman was standing there. But perhaps it was my imagination.

After I'd dried myself and changed into pyjamas, I searched for a book to read. I suddenly recalled Faan's advice about children's books helping in recovery from depression. So I looked around in Frith's room and eventually found a copy of *Dr Dolittle's Circus* that I'd kept from my childhood and passed on to her.

The drumming of the rain on the roof made me drowsy. I must have fallen asleep because I found myself talking to a Pushmi-Pulyu, a strange kind of antelope with a head at each end, which Dr Dolittle had befriended in Africa. After a while its body seemed to dissipate, while its heads fused together on a single neck. When I looked again the heads had become those of a two-headed snake from whose eyes sparked little bolts of lightning. Despite its fearsome countenance, I sensed it was benign. Then the heads began to change again, this time from reptile to human – or rather *superhuman* – a blonde Goddess.

One of her faces was Alice's; the other, Kristy's.

Then the Goddess began to revolve slowly, revealing more faces. The

next one was that of a slightly older, incredibly beautiful woman who could have been Kristy's older sister. Now the Goddess began turning faster and faster like a spinning top until all the faces blended into one perfect face of such transcendental beauty that it was love at first sight!

Chapter 5

An unusual headache at the back of my head and persistent chest pains (which I put down to the lightning strike), woke me early with a little help from my neighbour's bantam cock. I checked my watch and saw it was only just before seven, which was just as well, as I had a lot to do before I met Kristy at the Cresta mall. I made myself a slice of toast, which I ate unbuttered, washing it down with a cup of weak tea in which I'd dropped two Disprins.

I checked my watch again. It was 7.30 – time to phone Dr Byat. My luck was in. His first patient had cancelled and if I came right away he could see me for half an hour. I slipped on my kufi, as I always do when I know I'll be in air-conditioned rooms.

As I arrived at Meldene Clinic, I noticed a man in a parked car opposite the entrance. He glanced at me over his newspaper. Perhaps it was incipient paranoia, but he reminded me of one of those seedy characters in American movies who always seem to be shadowing someone.

Dr Byat beamed when he saw me and ushered me into his dental chair. I'd brought the broken bridge with me, and after he'd examined it, he asked his assistant to phone the prosthetics company and have a new one made. Meanwhile, he checked the molar and said it would need quite a lot of work. There wasn't time now, so he gave me a temporary filling and told me to make another appointment.

On my way out, I glanced across the road. The man with the newspaper was still sitting in his car.

A little before nine I arrived at Cresta, withdrew money from my account, bought an envelope into which I slipped most of the notes, and then strolled across to Dominos to meet Kristy. By then my headache had almost gone.

We were both early. She was waiting outside, glancing the other way. I noticed she was wearing the same outfit she'd worn on the first night we'd tried to make love in Ward 697 – a semi see-through white dress and blue sandals. Her thumb was hooked in the strap of a beige vinyl shoulder bag.

When she saw me she ran forward and flung her arms around me. ‘Oh, Olly, my love,’ she sang out. ‘I’ve missed you so much!’

‘I’ve missed you, too,’ I said. As I hugged her I could smell the silky fragrance of her hair.

‘Let’s have coffee,’ she whispered. ‘There’s so much to tell you.’

Deadpan, I said, ‘But after we’ve had coffee, hadn’t we better get you some new clothes?’

Her eyes widened. ‘You really mean it?!’

‘Of course, my sweet, and I need to buy some too. Mine are pretty sloppy.’

After we’d found a table I passed her the menu. ‘You hungry?’

She nodded and smiled coyly.

‘This is on me, Kris. So order anything you like.’

She looked up at me and smiled. ‘You know what I dreamed of having when we were in the ward?’ Before I could answer she added, ‘A monster burger and chips with extra tomato sauce, washed down with filter coffee.’

‘By this time I was feeling peckish. ‘Sounds good. I think I’ll have that too.’

When the waiter had taken our orders, Kristy grinned at me like a child with a secret. ‘Guess what?’

‘What?’

‘I’ve got a job – my first proper one. I’m so excited. It’s at the Pinnacle Spa.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘It’s an upmarket health resort for ladies, past Fourways. I phoned them on Friday and they sent a lady round straight away to fetch me. When the manager, an American lady called Mrs Eberhardt, saw me she said, “Why, honey, you’re so beautiful! You sure fit in with our profile of girls.” Then she asked me a few questions and I filled in a form.’

Kristy gave a little shrug and smiled before continuing. ‘A couple of hours after I’d been dropped off at Serita’s, Mrs Eberhardt phoned to say I had the job if I passed the IQ and general knowledge test, which I could write next week. She said it shouldn’t be a problem.’

‘Great,’ I said. ‘When do you start?’

‘Monday. And, Olly, if you pass the tests, they teach you reflexology, massage, and helping with the sauna. You even get elocution lessons and coaching in interpersonal relations, so you know how to talk to clients.’

‘What sort of clients?’

‘Mostly rich businesswomen. One of the girls told me the tips are really, really good.’

The waiter returned with our orders, together with a bottle of tomato sauce.

Kristy shook a great dollop onto her plate and began attacking her burger with gusto.

After a few mouthfuls I said, ‘Listen, Kris, if you need a place to stay you can always move in with me. My daughters are still staying with friends, and I don’t think they’ll be moving back for a while – at least not until–’

‘Thanks, my love, but this is a live-in job. They want us girls to stay over. You see, a lot of the clients are serviced in the evenings. And those girls that don’t have bookings are expected to go for counselling sessions.’

‘What about on your nights off?’

She held a long, curved chip in her fingers and dipped it in the pool of tomato sauce. ‘Maybe after your divorce.’ She slid the chip into her mouth and savoured it for several moments. ‘I really wouldn’t like to screw things up for you, my love.’

Actually, she was right. I knew that Claude Skinner would use *anything* to portray me in a bad light. But somehow I didn’t care anymore. Even if the court’s decision on custody went against me, I felt things would work out somehow.

‘Anyway, think about it, Kris. Would be nice if we could get together a couple of times a week.’

She nodded and smiled.

‘Oh, I brought your cellphone.’ I pushed it across the table towards her, together with the envelope.

‘Wow! Five thousand rands. I can’t believe it!’

‘That’s for the clothes and a bit of spending money until you get paid,’ I said.

She lifted one of my hands and planted a kiss on the knuckles. ‘You’re so good to me, Olly. And I want to say a big “thank you”.’ But I’ll only take the money if we agree it’s a loan. I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.’

‘If it’ll make you happy, then that’s fine. But you really don’t have to, you know, Kris.’

She was still holding my hand as she stood up. ‘I need the toilet.’ With a lop-sided grin she added, ‘All the excitement, you know.’

When Kristy returned, I said, ‘Shall we shop for clothes now?’

‘Ja, let’s,’ she said, taking my hand in hers.

As we rode the escalator down to Edgars, Kristy turned to me. ‘I hope Cresta isn’t one of the shopping centres where girls have been disappearing.’

I didn’t want to tell a white lie, so I said, ‘Actually, a Dutch girl disappeared from here quite recently, and one of the girls who disappeared in the 1980s during the Gert van Rooyen kidnapping case was last seen here. But don’t worry, Kris, I’ll protect you.’

‘I know you will,’ Kristy said, giving my hand a squeeze. ‘But one shouldn’t give up hope of finding them even after years and years. Remember those clever detectives on TV who solved all those cold cases.’

‘Unlikely in this country,’ I said. ‘Only a few of the *current* cases are solved, never mind the cold ones!’

At Edgars, Kristy bought two halternecks, one black and the other blue; a red miniskirt, black pants, and a pair of jeans. At the shoe department I watched admiringly as she slipped her dainty feet into this pair, then that, and so on until she made her final selection some forty-five minutes later: a pair of trainers, chunky brown sandals, and sexy black high-heels. Then we went over to the men’s department where she helped me choose a smart blazer, fawn slacks, a couple of light blue shirts, and a pair of suede loafers. ‘I want you to look cool, Olly,’ she said, as she did the choosing.

I also bought an electric razor so I could shave my face and head at the same time.

After that we decided to go up to Better Books, where a sale was on. Kristy began browsing around the sale tables, while I bought a *Star* newspaper. The headline read: SIENER SIRKEL CLAIMS RESPONSIBILITY FOR COURT BOMBING.

According to the report, a hand-written note received by the newspaper purporting to be from the Siener Sirkel, said the Constitutional Court was a legitimate target, as it had ignored ‘God’s law’; adding that unless the rights of the Boer People to independence were recognised, the bombings would continue against what it called ‘this Godless government and its institutions.’

As I turned to the second page, Kristy called out, ‘Hey, Olly, look what I’ve found.’ She was holding up a blue-covered book. ‘It’s the novel Jean was telling me about in the ward – *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold. He said it’s a must-read.’

I walked over to her.

‘What’s it about?’ I asked.

‘It’s the story of a young girl who’s murdered by a rapist and then goes to heaven. From there she’s able to watch her brothers and sisters and friends growing up and doing all the things she never had a chance to do.’

‘Sounds pretty depressing.’

‘Jean said it was sad but funny.’

‘I guess that’s life,’ I said.

‘Anyway, I want you to have it.’

After we left the shop clutching our packets, Kristy said, ‘Mind if we go outside for a smoke, Olly?’

‘No problem.’

We strolled out into the parking area where a light breeze was blowing. Kristy slipped off her shoulder bag and extracted a packet of Peter Stuyvesant and a Bic lighter. I took the Bic from her and flicked it on. She cupped her hands around the flame, touching my hands briefly. I felt a sudden thrill. When her cigarette was alight she took a couple of drags, then blew smoke out of the side of her mouth. Finally, in a quiet voice she said, ‘You know, Olly, I haven’t told you everything – stuff that happened before my stepbrothers started abusing me.’ She took another deep drag before continuing. ‘After my Oupa started molesting me, I found I could do bad things and feel nothing. I felt dead inside. Only after I fell in love with you, Olly, have I come alive inside again.’

‘Oh, Kris…’ I took her in my arms and hugged her. Several people in the car park glanced at us.

‘I don’t want to say any more now,’ she breathed into my ear, ‘but I’ll tell you everything when the time’s right. All I’ll say now is that if I hadn’t met you, I would’ve landed in deep shit…’

‘You know, Kris, all that stuff in the past isn’t my business. You should just try and forget about it. After all, you’re starting a new life now, aren’t you?’

‘S’pose you’re right.

She took a last drag on her cigarette which she’d smoked almost down to the filter. Then she flicked the butt onto the tarmac and carefully ground it out with her sandal. Her red toenails swivelled from side to side, inviting me to dance.

It suddenly felt good to be alive!

I grabbed Kristy’s hand and began twirling her around. It was then that I

noticed that the cuts on her wrists had healed leaving only light, lateral marks. After a couple more turns I stopped and gave her a quick hug. ‘What’s that for?’ she asked, a little breathlessly.

‘Sommer,’ I said with a smirk.

‘I really love you,’ she said, giving me a slow kiss. She glanced at her watch. ‘Better go inside. The movies will be coming out soon. Remember, I’m getting a lift back with Serita’s mom. Oh! I nearly forgot to tell you … Dirk has escaped from Sterkies.’

‘What?!’

‘Ja, Philip told me. He didn’t know the details, ’cept Dirk disappeared one night.’

‘Well, I hope they catch him before he starts harming animals.’

‘Or *people.*’

‘You think he might?’

‘No doubt about it. Philip says he was always threatening staff and other patients.’

‘Anyway, I’d better go now,’ I said. ‘Still a bit of shopping to do.’

After we’d said goodbye, I looked for an art and picture-framing shop and bought a full-length gilt mirror. It would do nicely in my bedroom.

When I got home I looked for a suitable spot to plant Kristy’s avocado pip. I opted for the narrow bed between the front wall and the pavement. I dug a hole, popped the pip in and patted down the soil. The newly sprouted stem already had three leaves.

I’d been feeling tired, so I decided to turn in early. But before I went to bed I checked my e-mail. There was a short note from Matthew in which he said he was shocked that Erin and I had split up and wanted to know why. As I didn’t know myself, I decided to put off replying.

Chapter 6

***dysosmia**: "An alteration or perversion of the olfactory sense (hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity to smells, such as foods or the environment) that may be drug induced, a symptom of major depression, or an olfactory hallucination. … Dysosmia associated with depression frequently is resistant to anti-depressant pharmacotherapy."* – Frank J. Ayd, *Lexicon of Psychiatry, Neurology, and the Neurosciences*

It was a perfect day. Spring had begun to show its muscle and there'd been no more late cold fronts. Summer was just around the corner. I'd been looking forward to seeing the Harpies, yet I felt strangely flat. I could think of no particular reason for the feeling – probably just another inexplicable downturn in the cycle of recovery from depression…

I arrived at the Jugg o' Cream before the Harpies.

I bought a newspaper, ordered a filter coffee and a cheese scone and took a seat at a table near the pavement. The paper's headline was: NEW WAVE OF EMIGRATION. It quoted spokesmen at foreign embassies and consulates as saying that they'd been inundated with enquiries about immigration ever since the SPP had been elected.

On page two, the headline, MINISTER'S MURKY PAST, caught my eye. The report claimed that the Minister for Safety and Security had links with a Durban businessman under investigation for involvement in crooked casino deals.

Just as I was getting to the interesting part, I saw Erin's green Renault glide up to the kerb. After the girls had clambered out, Erin gripped the steering wheel stiff-armed, staring straight ahead.

As the Harpies hopped onto the pavement, I noticed that Bonny was wearing black jeans with vicious studs, as well as a nose ring. Frith wore an ultra-short white and maroon striped top that revealed something like a silver fishing lure embedded in her navel.

'Hi Dad,' they said in stereo, pulling up chairs and plonking their elbows on the table.

Suddenly a vile stench wafted my way. At first I thought one of the Harpies had trod in something, but then to my dismay I realised it was coming from the cheese scone. It was like smelly feet, only worse. Bonny was eyeing the scone hungrily.

'Can I have some?' she asked, taking a large bite before I could say anything. 'Mmmm…' she murmured through a full mouth. 'Tell you what, Dad. Please order some more, then you can have one of mine.'

'Sure that one's all right?' I asked dubiously.

'Better than all right, Dad. *Awesome!'*

'C'mon, Dad,' chirped Frith. 'I'm hungry. I could eat at least three. And don't forget to ask for strawberry jam.'

I ordered more scones, strawberry jam, and another filter coffee for myself. The Harpies opted for cappuccinos. When the scones arrived, the bad smell was overwhelming. But the Harpies seemed oblivious and blithely demolished nearly all the scones within minutes. It was only then that I realised that I was having an olfactory hallucination!

Our meeting was a mixed success. It was great to see Bonny and Frith again, but the dark clouds of divorce hung over us. I tried to soften the blow by saying that Erin and I still loved each other but in a different way. Their sceptical looks told me they weren't buying it, and I sensed a deep underlying anger.

'We're a bit confused,' Bonny said, toying with a teaspoon. 'Alec talks about us moving in with Mum and him, but Mum says the court still has to decide who we're going to live with.'

An awkward silence followed.

Frith stared into her coffee cup.

To break the silence I said, 'So we'll just have to wait to see what the court says, won't we?'

The girls exchanged glances.

'Anything wrong?' I asked, sensing more to come.

At last Bonny said, 'Actually, it's Alec…'

'What about him?'

'Well, he's okay up to a point but he's not our Dad.'

I was touched by the remark, but I still felt they hadn't told me everything. 'Is that all, then?' I probed.

'Not really. I don't think I – *we* – would like to live in the same house as him.'

‘But I thought you liked him?’

‘I did, sort of. I mean, he seems nice to Mum, but sometimes he makes me feel uncomfortable…’

‘How d’you mean?’

‘Well, when we stay over for weekends I’ve caught him looking at me in a funny way.’

‘Funny?’

‘You know…’

I didn’t like what I was hearing, but I didn’t want to prompt her. ‘I’m afraid I don’t.’

‘Well, eyeing me. Once he pretended to be looking over my shoulder at a book I was reading, but I knew he was peeping down my front.’

‘He eyes me too,’ put in Frith. ‘And sometimes he brushes past and touches me, kind of accidentally on purpose.’

My first impulse was to drive over to Sudman’s motor dealership and punch him on the nose; but what good would that do, especially with the looming custody case? On the other hand, I knew teenage girls had powerful imaginations, and coupled with sexual awakening, could they perhaps be fantasising?

‘Are you sure you’re not imagining this, girls?’ I asked.

‘I don’t think so, Dad,’ said Frith. ‘I mean, he hasn’t actually done anything wrong. He just makes us feel uncomfortable.’

‘Have you spoken to Mum about it?’

‘Sort of … But it’s rather awkward, you know. She thinks the sun shines out of Alec’s butt-hole, so she doesn’t want to hear anything bad about him. Like you, she asked us if we were imagining things, and when we said no, she said, “Well, that’s just Alec’s way. He’s demonstrative and he’s a very loving person, that’s all. I think you’re both overreacting”.’

‘Well, girls, I want you to promise me that if anything else happens like him trying to touch you, you’ll phone me straight away.’

The Harpies nodded glumly.

I decided to give Sudman a call.

‘Anyway, we miss you, Dad,’ put in Frith. ‘Also Melville and Greenside.’

‘Well, I miss you girls too – *a lot*…’ There was a lump forming in my throat, so I changed tack. ‘Oh, I forgot to tell you. I’ve decided to get a new TV.’

‘Shot, Dad!’ exclaimed Bonny.

‘You’re a star!’ sang out Frith.

I was ashamed to capitulate so soon after my recent victory over the one-eyed monster, so I tried to persuade myself that I needed to watch the news. But of course it was really a bribe... Just then Erin’s car pulled up a couple of parking bays away. She didn’t get out but sat smoking a cigarette. After a couple of minutes, she gave two short, sharp hoots.

‘Wait here,’ I said to the Harpies. ‘I need to have a word with Mum.’

I strolled over to the car and tapped on the window on the driver’s side. As she reeled down the window, she made brief eye contact and then looked away. ‘What is it?’ she snapped, her mouth tight.

‘I got an e-mail from Matthew wanting to know why we’ve split up. I haven’t replied because I don’t even know myself.’

‘I’ll handle it,’ she said, reeling up the window.

As I got back to the Jugg o’ Cream, Erin hooted again.

Better be going, Dad,’ Bonny said, giving me a quick kiss.

The first thing I did when I got home was to phone Alec’s Motors and ask for Sudman.

‘This is Jeex,’ I said, keeping first names out of it. ‘I want you to understand, Sudman, that if you ever interfere with my daughters in any way whatsoever you’ll regret it!’

There was a moment’s silence, *‘I have fuck all to say to you, arsehole, except you’re a paranoid prick!’*

There was a click and the line went dead.

Later I drove to Cresta to pick up a television set at Game. I finally settled on a 53cm flat-screen Sony somewhat smaller than the one I’d trashed. I also bought a dog brush from the pet shop.

When I got home I made myself a cup of tea, gave Chloe’s coat a vigorous brushing, despite her throaty snarls, and then began tidying and fixing up the house.

I decided that the house would look more cheerful if I repainted the interior in warm colours. But I would have to get a painter in to do it, as I wouldn’t have time myself. I measured up the rooms so I’d know how much paint to order.

Next I began sorting out all the junk and clutter. A couple of hours later,

the passage was stacked with old paperbacks, unwanted clothes, down-at-heel shoes, a slightly warped tennis racket, a chest-expander, a humidifier, and an old hairdryer. After that, I searched for boxes to put all this junk in so I could ferry it down to the Melville Charity Shop.'

I found several stout cardboard boxes under the stairs. After filling them, I went in search of more. At the back of the garage I discovered a battered suitcase, its lid open, filled with Erin's paperbacks. On top of the books was a brown leather-bound book I recognised immediately. It was a five-year diary I'd bought Erin for her birthday three or four years ago. I unpacked the paperbacks and stacked them on the floor. The suitcase was big enough to take all the remaining junk, so I carried it inside and put Erin's diary in a drawer.

The marathon clean-up had given me a thirst, so I poured myself a beer and settled back on the couch. The clean-up had also yielded some unexpected benefits. I'd unearthed a couple of books I'd thought were lost to 'permanent borrowers' and down the side of the couch I'd found a pair of nail clippers, some coins, and the business card of Goolam Jeena, the good Samaritan who'd picked me up at the side of the road after I'd been assaulted by Stocky and Tall.

I suddenly recalled that he'd said I should contact him, but in the turmoil after my hijacking it had slipped my mind. I dropped the card into my pocket.

Chapter 7

When I woke on Monday morning I decided to go on a fast to give my body a clean-out. So I had a cup of lemon tea without sugar for breakfast.

Next, I switched on my new Phillips electric razor and began running it over my face and head. The electrical field must have stimulated my brain, as I suddenly recalled that I had a dental appointment with Dr Byat. I checked my watch and saw that I had just enough time to get to Meldene Clinic on foot if I really moved it.

On my arrival at Meldene, I checked across the road for a parked car. There was no sign of the man with the newspaper.

I've had a terror of dentist's drills since childhood, so even before Dr Byat gives me an injection, he usually gives me a whiff of nitrous oxide to put me at ease.

'Sorry, I can't give you gas today, Olly,' he said with a shrug, 'problem with the regulator. I'll have to give you ketamine.'

'What's that?'

'It's a dual acting analgesic and sedative.' He gave a chuckle. 'In dentistry it's used mainly to sedate unmanageable children.'

'Any side effects?'

'Very few, actually.' You may have a floating feeling and afterwards you may feel as if you've had a couple of puffs of weed,' he chuckled.

'Hope it doesn't give me the munchies, doctor. You see I'm on a fast.'

'Quite the reverse, actually. Ketamine is an appetite suppressant.'

'Okay, let's go for it, then.'

Dr Byat took my blood pressure before inserting a small hypodermic in my arm. 'It takes about five minutes to work. That's about the same time as the local anaesthetic I'm also going to give you, so I won't begin drilling just yet.'

As he injected me again, this time in the gum, I noticed him glancing at my kufi with approval. He began talking about Western stereotyping of Muslims, and how they were all lumped together with terrorists in the public mind.

My tongue felt too thick to reply. His voice began to tail off and his face receded. I had a sensation of floating and I lost all track of time. Dr Byat's face was looming closer. 'The filling's done, Olly. You can rinse out now.'

I swirled the pink liquid around my mouth, spat it out, and struggled to my feet.

'Actually, we're not finished yet,' he said, easing me back into the chair. 'Remember we still have to fit your new bridge. As I was saying earlier about perceptions concerning Muslims …You know, although we have a government that's sympathetic to Islam, the country is still crawling with foreign intelligence agents, especially the CIA.' He gave my kufi a friendly pat. 'I just want to warn you, Olly, that they regard converts as even more suspect. So be careful.'

Perhaps it was the effects of the ketamine, but I didn't feel like contradicting his assumption by telling him that I only wore a kufi to insulate my head from air conditioning. Instead, I said, 'Thanks. I'll keep my eyes open.'

After he'd fitted the new bridge, I went through to the waiting room, where the assistant brought me a cup of tea.

I felt slightly spaced out when I left, so when I glanced across the road, I did a double take. The man with the newspaper was sitting in his car.

When I got home I realised I still had plenty of time before my appointment with Ted Thrupp. I began sorting through my personal files for the documentation that Ted had asked for.

Just as I was about to leave, I sensed the doorbell was about to ring. A gaunt man in a baggy double-breasted suit was standing at the gate, a nicotine-stained finger extended towards the bell-press. It was the Sheriff of the Court, who had come to serve me with the divorce summons.

I signed acceptance, glanced at it, and then quickly slipped it into a folder. Finally I packed the boxes of junk for the Melville Charity Shop into the back of the Lada, and set off for my appointment with Ted Thrupp.

Chapter 8

"The Rorschach test is used almost exclusively by psychologists… In custody cases, 23% of psychologists use the Rorschach to examine a child." – Wikipedia

The offices of Sinclair, MacIntosh & Thrupp were in a two-storey face-brick building that looked down from Northcliff Ridge over the wooded suburbs of Cresta and Blackheath.

The receptionist smiled as I entered, and after I'd introduced myself she called Ted Thrupp. A few moments later a boyish man in his late thirties or early forties emerged from one of the offices and ushered me inside. After we'd shaken hands and exchanged a few pleasantries, I took a seat opposite him and handed him the folder. A silence followed as he began leafing through it, consulting a financial yearbook every now and again.

I glanced around Ted's office. On the wall alongside the usual framed degrees and professional certificates was a colour photograph of Ted and two other young men in mountaineering gear. A wedge-shaped piece of rock served as a paperweight on his desk.

Ted glanced up and saw me examining it. 'A piece of Table Mountain quartzite,' he said with a wistful smile. 'But one can't go up the mountain today. Too many criminals waiting to mugg you!' He gave a sigh, then returning to the task in hand, scanned the financial pages of *Business Day*. He made a few pencil notes, and then keyed some numbers into a pocket calculator.

My food-deprived stomach suddenly gave a loud rumble. Ted hesitated for a moment, then looked up and smiled.

'Would you like some tea?'

'That would be nice.'

'How d'you like it?'

'No milk or sugar please.'

He spoke into the intercom and a few minutes later an elderly black man with grizzled hair brought us a pot of tea and two cups.

Ted gave his tea a stir then looked up at me. ‘Last time we spoke you were talking about wanting to reconcile with your wife.’

‘Right,’ I said with a sigh.

‘Well, now that summons has been issued, I’m sure you’ll agree that doesn’t seem a likely option. Also, I’ve seen Gary Simes’ reports. Not very encouraging.’

I nodded.

‘So now we need to move on from there and look at the practical implications of divorce. First, what it will mean for you financially – for example, maintenance for your children, as well as for your wife.’

‘For Erin too?’

‘I’m afraid so. She’s entitled to maintenance while she’s unemployed – or at least until she remarries.’

‘I can understand having to pay maintenance for the children but why for Erin if she’s with another man?’

‘That’s the way the no-fault divorce law works, Olly. Not only that, but you’ll be expected to give her a sizeable settlement – at least a third of your assets accumulated during your marriage, barring inheritances.’

‘You serious?’

‘ ’Fraid so … But there’s an alternative to paying maintenance. I mean, your wife may never remarry or get a worthwhile job, so you could end up having to pay maintenance for ever.’

‘What’s the alternative, then?’

Ted leaned back and made a steeple of his fingers. ‘To give her a big enough cash settlement which, when invested, would provide her with a reasonable income. The good news is that the courts tend to favour this approach because it means a clean break, so there’re no long-term problems of having to monitor maintenance.’

‘The only assets I’ve acquired during our marriage are the house, the car and our furniture. Am I supposed to sell those?’

‘That shouldn’t be necessary … I see you received a sizeable inheritance from your grandmother recently and also one from your parents ten years ago. I don’t know if you’ve done your sums yet, but according to my rough calculation the shares, unit trusts and endowment policies – never mind the antiques – should be worth a lot more than whatever you’ve accumulated during the marriage. If you liquidated these assets, you’d probably have more than enough to provide for your wife to the court’s satisfaction, and still keep

the house, etcetera, with a tidy amount left over.'

I didn't mind providing for Erin, but the thought of Sudman benefiting from my inheritances – even indirectly – stuck in my gullet.

Ted unsteepled his fingers. 'I know it's tough, Olly, but it's the only sensible thing to do. It may also soften Erin's attitude on the question of custody. Of course there're no guarantees. I've known the nicest people turn nasty where there's a dispute over who gets the kids, and when.'

'Let me have a couple of nights' sleep on it,' I said. 'I'll phone you as soon as I've come to a decision. But tell me more about the custody problem.'

Ted picked up the rock paperweight and began turning it over in his hands. 'That's a lot trickier. The courts normally prefer children to be with their mother, but not always. In the case of teenagers who've reached the age of discretion, their preferences are taken into account, but unfortunately that's not conclusive. The deciding factor is what the court considers is in the best interests of the child.'

'Any idea what I can expect?'

'When I phoned Claude Skinner to tell him I was acting for you, he said Erin would insist on sole custody. According to Skinner, she seems to think that trashing the house and your attempted suicide, as well as your spell in the psychiatric ward means you're psychologically unstable and therefore an unfit parent – perhaps even dangerous. So I gather that in any dispute over custody, Skinner will try and prove exactly that.'

I didn't like what I was hearing and gave a long sigh. Then I told Ted what Liz Stott had said about the accident with Rohypnol and my exposure to carbon monoxide being the sole reason for my being admitted to Ward 697, adding that I hadn't attempted suicide. I also told him about taking a peek in my file and finding the exaggerated report on my alleged drinking.

'That figures. You may not like to hear this, Olly, but it's pretty certain the report is based on info your wife gave your psychiatrist. Consider it as the first shot fired in the custody dispute.'

'Well, I don't think it'll carry much weight. I had a blood test that Dr Stott said would have shown up chronic drinking and it came up negative. The other tests I had were for possible brain damage caused by CO inhalation. These included an MRI scan, various neuro-psychological tests, as well as a Rorschach blot test. Again they all came up negative.'

Ted replaced the paperweight on the table, and gave it half a turn. 'I'm

very interested to hear about your Rorschach test – any specific feedback?'

'Well, the psychiatrist who did the test, Dr Zapata, said she couldn't give me any details, but one thing was certain and that was I wasn't crazy. She added that I was "a very loving person". Actually, I think she has a crush on me.'

'Well that at least is positive. You see, Olly, Rorschach tests are sometimes used in custody disputes – particularly in the United States – but also here if they're considered useful. Of course there's nothing to stop both divorcing spouses agreeing to undergo a Rorschach, or any other test, as part of mediation.'

'So is my having done a Rorschach test a plus?'

'The answer is *yes and no*. You see, Olly, for someone to have undergone a Rorschach test in the first place often means the psychiatrist suspects a serious personality disorder. That's probably what Claude Skinner will think, although it doesn't necessarily follow. But that's what I *want* him to think! He won't know that the Rorschach was just one of a number of tests you underwent to assess possible brain damage – *not* to identify a personality disorder.'

'So?'

'So by drawing the wrong conclusion, Claude Skinner may make a strategic mistake. He'll want to know the results of the Rorschach test, but we'll dig in our heels and argue that it's privileged information. Then he'll think we've got something to hide, which is exactly what we will want him to think. In the end we'll "reluctantly" agree to ask Dr Zapata to interpret the test in terms of your fitness as a custodial parent – but only if Sudman agrees to take the same test with her because of his intimate relationship with Erin, and perforce, with the children. I'm sure you can see that if Erin were granted sole custody, then Sudman would become a de facto stepfather in relation to your daughters.'

I pulled a wry face. 'I really hate that idea!'

'But there's a ray of hope, Olly. From what Gary Simes has told me, Sudman is supremely arrogant and self-confident and will readily agree, although his track record with women suggests he has serious personality flaws. And because of your wife's infatuation with him, which probably means she's shut her mind to his faults, she's also likely to agree. I know it's a risk, but I think it's our best chance of swinging things in your favour.'

'Well, that sounds much more positive.'

‘Let’s not count chickens before they hatch. Remember that if Dr Zapata gives an expert psychological opinion favourable to you but unfavourable to Sudman; and even if the mediator accepts this and makes a recommendation accordingly, this recommendation is not obligatory. In other words it’s unenforceable in law. So if Erin doesn’t like what she hears, she can still go to court and ask for sole custody.’

‘So what’s the point of mediation, then?’

‘Well, if the judge supports the findings of the mediator, he would probably make an order for costs against the party disputing those findings. This could be a substantial amount. Also, sensible litigants normally accept the findings of a mediator. Of course, a lot of people aren’t sensible – otherwise we lawyers would be out of business!’ He grinned and gave the paperweight a little twist. ‘But there’s something else I should warn you about, Olly. Be especially careful about contacting your daughters. It should be frequent enough to show you care but not so frequent that if it gets back to Erin you appear to be trying to influence them. You need to allay any suspicions she may have, real or imagined.’

‘You make her sound like an enemy.’

‘She is in a way – certainly an *opponent*. Never forget that! There’s plenty of time to be friends *after* the divorce.’

‘What if none of this works?’

‘Well, we have another important card up our sleeve, but one we should use only if all else fails.’

‘What’s that?’

‘I’d rather we cross that bridge only if and when we come to it.’

Chapter 9

As I unlocked my car I suddenly remembered I'd forgotten to drop off the boxes at the Melville Charity Shop. So I decided to do it on the way home and also check out some paint colours. Before I drove off, I called Kristy, but her phone was off. I left a message to say I'd phone again later.

After dropping off the boxes, my next stop was Mac's Paint in Melville. Against a side wall of the shop was a display of colour cards which I began browsing through. The colours I finally chose were *Lemon Zing* (for the entrance, passages, and kitchen), *Perpetual Rose* (for the Harpies' bedrooms), *Wheat Harvest* (for the lounge, and *Early Rise* (for my bedroom and bathroom).

Next, I scanned the notice board where workmen displayed their cards. The first to catch my eye read: WILSON THE PAINTER IS BACK IN TOWN. THIS TIME IS FOR REAL. I decided against Wilson and moved on to the next card: AMOS IS A RELIABLE PAINTER AND PLASTERER. NO JOB TOO SMALL. GOOD REFERENCES. This one sounded better, so I made a note of Amos's number and then gave the counter lady the room measurements so she could work out how much paint I needed.

Emerging from the shop, I saw a notice stuck in the window announcing in bold letters a meeting on crime and the non-delivery of services:

ARE YOU AS SICK AND TIRED OF BEING HELD HOSTAGE TO CRIMINALS IN YOUR OWN HOME OR BUSINESS AS WE ARE?
ARE YOU SICK AND TIRED OF INCOMPETENTS WHO ARE PAID HUGE SALARIES BUT NEVER DELIVER?
IT'S TIME FOR *REAL ACTION* TO MAKE OUR NEIGHBOURHOODS SAFE AND OUR CITY FUNCTIONAL!

The meeting was to be held at the Dutch Reformed Church hall, Fourth Avenue, Melville, on Wednesday at 7pm – the day after tomorrow. The meeting had been called by the Victims of Increasing Crime Epidemic (VOICE)., the organisation Goolam Jeena had mentioned as he was dropping me off at home after the assault by Stocky and Tall. There was something

about the name that sounded more effective than all the other anti-crime groups, so I decided to give him a call.

Goolam Jeena was a little vague for a couple of seconds when I told him who was calling, but when I mentioned the hijacking and assault, he knew immediately who I was.

'Good to hear from you, Olly,' he said. 'Since I saw you, our organisation has been growing like you won't believe! And most of the local security initiatives country-wide are now affiliated to VOICE. Hope you're coming to our meeting on Wednesday.'

'Sure,' I said.

'Good. Well, if you know anyone else who might be interested, please ask them to come along too.'

'Will do.'

Next, I dialled Faan, who told me he'd joined VOICE a while back. He'd served with one of their volunteer groups, but hadn't attended since his recent manic phase. 'But now I'm better, I'll definitely be coming to Wednesday's meeting. And I'll phone our friends who've been discharged from the ward and ask them to come along too. By the way, Olly, how's the divorce going?'

I told him about Ted Thrupp's suggestion that I make Erin a cash settlement, also about tricky Claude Skinner and the looming custody dispute.

'You know, Olly, divorce lawyers get rich through the stupidity of most divorcing couples. So don't be stupid. Shake hands with the mother of your children, and offer her *more* than she expects. Surprise Skinner so he's got nothing left to quibble about. And about the custody problem…. kids tend to follow the mother … and return to the father – if he's a decent guy, which I know you are. But if you're hard-arsed about this, Olly, the litigation will drag on, with mounting costs, and all you'll be doing is putting Skinner's buck-toothed daughter through medical school!'

What Faan said made sense.

After that I phoned Drew Dillon and Jill Braithwaite to tell them about the VOICE meeting. Jill said she'd seen the posters and had already decided to come. Drew hadn't heard of VOICE but was very interested. He already had an engagement but would try to put it off. I felt I was on a roll, so I phoned Imogen. She answered in her usual big-sister voice. I told her about the meeting.

'Sorry, I can't make it, Oliver,' she said, 'I'm playing bridge.'

Next I phoned Ted Thrupp and told him I'd decided to go along with his suggestion of a once-off cash settlement.

'Good decision, Olly,' he said. 'Let me work out something, I'll phone you later and run it past you.'

Then I phoned my stockbroker and told him to sell the shares and unit trusts.

'Not the best time to sell,' he said.

'Why not?'

'Well, the market has come down a lot since investors were spooked by the government's extreme socialist policies.'

'So when would be a good time?'

'Not until there's a change of government.'

This was obviously unlikely, but I needed the money soon. So reluctantly I said, 'I can't wait for that. Just go ahead and sell.'

After that I phoned Ted again and told him to make an offer to Claude Skinner somewhat above what he thought Erin could reasonably expect but conditional on the custody dispute being settled amicably. It was a first and final offer, I stressed. I wanted a quick settlement, not protracted haggling.

Next, I phoned Amos and asked him for a painting quote. He said he would come over straight away.

Half an hour later the doorbell rang. A tall wiry black man of middle age was standing at the gate. He had a friendly, open face. His quote was reasonable and his references, encased in a yellowing plastic folder, were obviously genuine. When I told him I'd already bought the paint, he said he could start the next day.

My fast was taking its toll.

I felt disoriented and simple chores seemed overwhelming. Also, I decided that I needed to keep my wits about me if I was to supervise the painting. Maybe these were just excuses: the fact was I was ravenous. So I slipped a frozen spaghetti bolognaise into the microwave and set the timer on eight minutes.

My mouth began watering as I caught the tasty aroma of oven-ready bolognaise. Although the meal was meant for two, I wolfed it all down while standing in the kitchen

The salty bolognaise meal had made me thirsty, so I grabbed a beer from

the fridge and went through to the lounge. When I'd settled back on the couch, I rang Kristy. Her cellphone rang more than a dozen times, and I was about to click off when she answered. 'Lots to talk about, my sweet,' she said breathlessly. 'Can't talk now.' She sounded a little constrained. 'Can we meet on Sunday? I've got the day off.'

We agreed to meet at the Zoo at 9.30.

Buoyed by the thought of a whole day with Kristy, I climbed into bed and was soon sleeping peacefully. But the peaceful sleep didn't last. At around three I awoke with a strange humming in my inner ear like a faint and badly tuned radio station. The sound went through cycles of varying pitch, punctuated by deceptive silences, only to start again. I lay awake for perhaps twenty minutes wondering what it could be. Then I decided to fight fire with fire and turned on my bedside radio. The music drowned out the humming. Eventually I fell asleep.

The doorbell rang around 7.30 while I was still in my pyjamas, shaving. It was Amos. I quickly changed into a T-shirt and boxer shorts and went to let him in. He was accompanied by a young man with protruding teeth, who he introduced as his son, Ben. Amos parked his battered Ford bakkie in the driveway and went inside, leaving Ben to offload the ladder, plastic sheets and other painting gear.

As Ben struggled past me with the ladder, I caught a whiff of stale alcohol and sweat that conjured up an image of Stocky. I suddenly felt the familiar dry mouth and my pulse began to race. I tried to reason with myself that Ben posed no threat, but it made no difference. I began to feel normal again only after he'd gone upstairs to help Amos.

A little later I noticed that Amos had pushed the furniture to the centre in each room, piling bric-a-brac on top and covering everything with plastic sheets.

The doorbell rang and I went to let Rosie in. She glanced about and said she couldn't vacuum or dust because of the painters. Instead, she would defrost the fridge and clean the oven.

Half an hour later I set off for Melville's Main Road shopping area with Chloe dragging me along at the end of her lead. The mirror-bright Highveld sun was drawing wafts of steam off the damp tarmac.

Most of the houses were small and arty, having been renovated by young

professionals who began moving into Melville from the 1970s. But these days an alarming number of properties were looking run down, which, according to one estate agent, was because many owners had left the country without being able to sell. Some had been occupied by squatters.

As Chloe hurried us along 3rd Street, dogs barked at us from behind most of the gates. These were not nice cuddly dogs with lolling tongues and wagging tails, but snarling Pit-bulls, Rotweillers and Dobermans. Although they normally bark when Chloe and I walk past, today their barks had a frantic note. Something was different: the hair on their backs and tails bristled.

Suddenly, it occurred to me that I was viewing the world through fresh eyes. Perhaps it was another side-effect of my near-death experience, or my spell in Ward 697. I was not only acutely aware of the burgeoning signs of spring but also of the signs of increasing security. Before, I hadn't consciously noticed the swivelling cameras, the winking red eyes, the castellated walls that seemed to have risen at least a metre overnight, or the ultra-bright halogen lamps that snapped on even in daylight.

On the wall of the next property two glaring tigers incongruously framed an avuncular black man wearing a white shirt and dark tie. THIS PROPERTY IS PROTECTED BY MAPOGO A MATHAMAGA, the sign read.

> Mapogo, I recalled, was a vigilante group that employed traditional African methods of dealing with crime. Stories abound of its members beating criminals within an inch of their lives and then dumping them in crocodile-infested rivers. True or not, these stories seemed to have deterred criminals, who steered clear of properties protected by Mapogo. I'd thought of signing a protection contract with the organisation but had decided against it. My concern was that vigilantism might create more problems in the long run than it sought to cure…

Amos and Ben had been working steadily, and by five o'clock when they began washing their brushes and rollers, only two bedrooms were left to paint. After they'd driven off, I poured myself a beer and went through to the lounge. The old paint – a safe white that had lost its brilliance – had disappeared under a subtly warm shade of pink.

That evening I had a hot bath, which was unusual, as I prefer bathing in

the mornings. The warm water had left me drowsy, so after I'd dried off, I decided to turn in. Then I thought of Erin and the looming divorce. I needed proper answers for her leaving me, not just, *'I need to find fulfilment, and I wasn't finding it with you…'*

So I opened the drawer and picked up the diary. I held it in my hand, but for some reason I couldn't bring myself to open it. So I slipped it back in the drawer and climbed into bed.

I awoke to the cheerful early morning chirping of Indian mynahs. Shortly before eight, Amos and Ben chugged into the driveway in their bakkie. Having left their gear overnight, there was nothing to offload except their lunch boxes. They ate their breakfast, with their legs swinging over the lowered tailgate, washing down hunks of bread and jam with tea from a flask.

After that they'd trudged upstairs to begin work on the bedrooms.

At around six o'clock Amos came to me, holding his paint-spattered cap in front of him. He told me that Ben had been feeling ill after lunch and had caught a taxi home. As a result, they'd managed to finish only two rooms. 'No problem,' he said. 'I come back tomorrow.'

Chapter 10

"The high-rise districts of Hillbrow and Berea in Johannesburg have been officially designated by Interpol as having the highest murder rate in the world, that is, 600 people per 100,000 population members per annum. Consider for a moment that such a figure represents 12 times the rate found in inner-city ghettoes in the United States, often seen as no-go zones by many Americans." – Dan Roodt, former academic and pro-Afrikaans campaigner

"One in three South Africans will have experienced an attempted mugging or house break-in during their lifetime. Such stats make for a chilling reality, one where most can expect anything to happen to them, at anytime, or anywhere. The safety and sanctity of home is not something that is guaranteed, not as long as there are people who're paid to kill, or who value an electronic device over a human life … This does scare most, but the time for fear, I believe is over. Assertive and more stringent measures against violent crime in our society should be called for." – Jonathan Brady, News 24

"Violent crime in South Africa is taking its toll on the country's psyche, with one out of every five people suffering from violence-related mental problems, such as post traumatic stress disorder and depression" – Jani Meyer

"The SA Police Service is rife with hardened criminals, murderers, rapists and hijackers. This is according to the SA Institute of Race Relations new report, 'The Wolf Guards the Sheep'. … In the report, researchers warn that the situation of police criminality is so severe that women driving alone at night have reason to fear seeing blue lights in their rear-view mirrors." – The Times, Johannesburg

"Unlike in other countries in the world, and ours not so long ago, those accused of criminal activities are not frowned upon, but are admired and raised to hero status." – Mosibudu Mangena, former Azapo President and a

former Minister of Science and Technology

"Crime, like any business venture, essentially comes down to an assessment of the risk: reward ratio. Simply put, if the potential reward is substantially higher than the risk, then you have a good business." – David Bullard

Just before seven that evening I set off on foot for the church hall, where the meeting of the Victims of Increasing Crime Epidemic (VOICE) was being held.

The hall was almost full, but there were still a few seats towards the back. I spotted Faan, Beth, Jean, and Rastaman sitting on the aisle, near the wall. I went over and joined them.

After a lot of hugging and shaking of hands, I scanned the audience. There must have been at least two hundred people. Towards the front I spotted Dr Moloi and a few rows behind him, Goolam Jeena.

On the other side of the hall I saw Jill Braithwaite sitting next to someone who looked vaguely familiar from behind. Only when she turned to talk to Jill did I see it was Pilar Zapata.

On the platform, three men and a woman were seated at a long table. Their heads were bent together in animated conversation. A ruddy-faced man in his fifties, who reminded me of a sergeant major, was doing most of the talking.

'Who's that?' I said, nudging Faan.

'Alistair L'Estrange, the national director and founder of VOICE. He's a Brit, but he's been here for years. Was in the S.A.S. He now runs a company that imports security equipment.'

'And the others?'

'The red-haired guy on his right is Ken Aitken – team leader of the *Friends of White Lines*, or FOWL. Those who volunteer to join FOWL help to re-paint white lines, touch up vandalised stop signs, trim trees, and even fill in pot-holes. They started with Parktown, now they're concentrating on Melville and Auckland Park. I think I'll be joining them.'

'I thought you said you were already a member of a volunteer group.'

'I was – probably still am – a member of the Friends of the Traffic Lights, or FOTL. They help direct traffic when robots go on the blink and

make citizen's arrests of criminals caught stealing traffic light electronics. They also report traffic violations – for what it's worth.'

'So who runs FOTL?'

'Nigel Morphet. The little bald oke in the tweed jacket next to Ken. Retired stockbroker. Bit of a golf club boozer. Not a bad oke. But when I joined FOTL, I realised I'd made a mistake. You see, after my manic dash to Krugersdorp I couldn't very well do something so high profile as directing traffic, so I've decided to switch to FOWL.'

'And the Indian lady?'

'Anisha Parbhoo. Started FOE on her own.'

'FOE?'

'Friends of Efficiency. She helps people sort out service problems. You know, staff who don't answer phones, incorrect water and lights accounts, cut-offs, coordinating private rubbish collectors whenever there's a Pickitup strike – that sort of thing.'

Alistair L'Estrange was now on his feet, adjusting the microphone. The audience fell silent as he began introducing himself and the others on the platform.

Drew slid into the seat next to me. Then I saw Lin Chang tip-toe in and take a seat on the other side of the hall.

Alistair continued: 'I think all of us will agree that whatever was achieved in South Africa during those first few promising years after our democratic election in '94 has been derailed by rampant crime and corruption.

'As far as crime is concerned – our main focus tonight – I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that life in South Africa today is like swimming in shark-infested waters with a bloody piece of meat tied to your leg!'

He paused for a moment and scanned his notes. 'People ask me whether I think the situation is likely to improve. My answer is: I don't think so – not unless there's a drastic change in our approach to crime.

'Although I was born overseas, I'm a South African citizen who pays his taxes. So I want to state very clearly that I'm sick and tired of crime, like you are, and I want to do something constructive about it. The question is: *are you?'*

The response was so loud that I imagine everyone in the hall shouted *'Yes!'*

Alistair nodded and smiled, then held up his hand.

‘As some of you may know, our organisation, VOICE, was formed less than a year ago to fill gaps in the justice system. I’m happy to say that we’re going from strength to strength. But today it’s not just a matter of filling a gap. The justice system, as we all know, has finally fallen apart, and one in four police officers is under investigation for a criminal offence.

‘Up till now we, the people of South Africa, have been very patient, voicing our concerns legally. We’ve signed petitions against crime; we’ve held street marches against crime; we’ve e-mailed the President, asking him to do something urgent about crime, but it has made little or no difference. People are becoming frustrated. They don’t believe the country’s laws protect them and they believe quite rightly that the politicians aren’t listening. History shows that frustrated citizens often take the law into their own hands...’

There was a strained silence before Alistair continued**.** ‘Although the previous government claimed to have stepped up the fight against crime in recent years, it was mainly empty rhetoric, usually just before elections.

‘As for the new SPP government, let’s not get our hopes up. You may have noticed that it has no concrete plans to combat crime and some of its ministers are reported to have close links with dodgy enterprises.

‘So where does that leave us?’ After a pause Alistair continued. ‘It means that crime prevention is something we will have to tackle ourselves.

‘Now let’s discuss some of the practical things you can do to control crime in your neighbourhood.’

He proceeded to outline various anti-crime strategies, such as setting up an email-linked data base into which VOICE members could access and input information on crime in their neighbourhood; organising street patrols; and photographing suspicious characters in the area.

‘You may ask: will crime ever stop? I believe it can be brought under control, but it will be a long, incremental process. I think VOICE has started the ball rolling. And the Men of Justice are also helping by gathering evidence. If we’re successful, and I think there’s a good chance we will be, then a lot of people may return to South Africa.’

The deafening applause lasted nearly a minute before Alistair L’Estrange held up his hand. ‘That’s all I have to say this evening; but don’t go away, my colleagues here are standing by to tell you about other creative ways you can help make a difference.’

Then Anisha Parbhoo, Ken Aitken, and Nigel Morphet spoke about their

volunteer groups and invited people to sign on. As we were breaking for tea, I managed to speak to Anisha about my hugely inflated phone bill, with a lot of mystery calls to West Africa. She said I should send her a copy and she'd see what she could do.

During the tea social, Faan and I wandered over to the volunteer tables at the back of the hall. I'd given some thought as to which volunteer group to join and had opted for FOWL. At the FOWL table Ken Aitken handed us some leaflets. 'I could do with a couple more pavement artists,' he said with a smile. 'Lot's of work to be done, starting in and around Melville.'

After we'd glanced through the FOWL leaflets we signed on.

'When do we start?' I asked.

'Tomorrow, if you like. Our work party is putting in a couple of hours along Sixth Avenue, Melville. Starting at nine – after the rush hour, but before it gets too hot. Sometimes we have a couple of beers afterwards. As you can imagine, painting in the sun is thirsty work. Okay?'

'Fine,' I said.

Faan nodded.

'Well, meet us in Sixth Avenue where it joins Main Road at say ten-to.'

I caught a glimpse through the crowd of Drew and Jill Braithwaite chatting beside a table laden with eats. Nearby, Dr Moloi was queuing for tea. As we fell in behind him, he turned and smiled. 'Hi Ali; Hi Faan. Saw you guys signing on with FOWL. I've also decided to join.'

'Great, Doc,' Faan said.'

'Guys, please call me Weddo.'

I was about to tell him my name was Olly, not Ali, but instead I said, 'How's Petrus?'

'Fine. He'll probably be discharged next week. As you know, he'll be staying with me. I guess he'll also want to join FOWL … which reminds me, I'd better sign on now.'

As he headed towards the FOWL table, I noticed Jill and Drew chatting to Ken Aitken. Pilar Zapata was filling in a form.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Goolam Jeena.

After I'd introduced him to Faan, he told us he was also joining FOWL.

Just then I heard the rattle of a cup behind me. 'Hello Olly. You looking berry good.' Pilar Zapata was smiling widely, showing flawless white teeth.

‘You’re looking pretty good yourself,’ Pilar, I said, taking her proffered hand, which seemed to linger. I felt it would be a good moment to mention the possible custody dispute and the relevance of the Rorschach test. So, except for the bits about legal strategy, I gave her a brief rundown of what Ted Thrupp had suggested.

‘No problem,’ she said, handing me her card as we joined the throng leaving the hall. ‘You give to your lawyer.’ She hesitated for a moment, then with a sudden movement, kissed me on the cheek.

Chapter 11

As I climbed into bed I resisted an impulse to open Erin's diary. Instead, I read a few pages of Dr Dolittle. But before switching off the light, I turned on my bedside radio. An old Avril Lavigne song, *I'm With You*, was playing. I thought of Kristy, so I left the radio on.

The persistent crowing of my neighbour's bantam cock woke me. The good news was that my chest pains had gone.

I stumbled downstairs to the kitchen to make tea. Chloe was still asleep in her basket, exhaling noisily through her jowls. I dropped a couple of Beanos in her food bowl and headed upstairs to run a bath. But there was no bathplug. I began to get a sneaking feeling that someone had followed me home from Ward 697….

I was still lying in the bath when I heard Chloe barking. A car was idling in the driveway. I dried myself quickly, pulled the towel around my waist, and went downstairs. Amos and Ben had arrived. I let them in, pulled on a faded blue T-shirt and some paint-stained boxer shorts for the FOWL work party. Then I rustled up a breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast.

It was a perfect spring day, the sort of day I wished I could be on a quiet beach with Kristy.

A minute or two later I arrived at the corner of Sixth and Main Road. Several people were clustered around a dark green Nissan bakkie piled with an odd assortment of painting equipment. Ken Aitken was in the driver's seat, chatting through the window. He waved when he saw me. The others turned and smiled. They introduced themselves as Anita, Trevor and Nico. All looked vaguely familiar. We soon discovered that we lived within a couple of blocks of each other – and yet we'd never actually met. Crime was bringing us together!

A bright yellow DKW of 1960s vintage was turning into Sixth Avenue. Faan was behind the wheel.

'Hi guys,' he called out as he parked the Deke.

Seconds later a beige Mercedes swept around the corner and parked next to Faan. Goolam Jeena stepped out, and together they sauntered over.

'I think everybody's here now,' said Ken, checking a clip-board list. 'No,

there's still one more – Dr Moloi. Let's give him another five minutes.'

'Doctors are always late,' Trevor remarked, shaking his head. He turned to Ken. 'Actually, I'm a police reservist. While we're waiting would you like me to fill you all in on the local drug scene?'

Trevor was short and stocky with closely cropped red hair. I could easily imagine him in police uniform.

'Go for it,' said Ken.

'Okay, take the parking bays over there.' He nodded towards the street parking on Main Road. Might look innocent enough, but it wouldn't be an exaggeration to call it a drive-in drug supermarket.'

'You're kidding!' Nico said.

'No, serious. See those characters sitting over there. They're dealers.'

'So why don't the cops arrest them?' Goolam asked.

'The drug unit is only interested in big busts, not small-time street dealing.'

'So who's Mr Big?' I asked.

'There's no Mr Big – at least not among the Nigerians who run most of the drug trade in this country. Unlike the other foreign syndicates like the Italian Mafia, there's no overall boss. They work in mini-syndicates of not more than fifteen members led by a sub-baron.

'The particular sub-baron who runs the syndicate operating in this area is a guy called Orlando.'

'Okay, guys, I think we've given the Doc enough time,' Ken said. Let's get started. I want a couple of volunteers to paint this small section from Main Road up to the blind rise, and I want someone to stand over there to direct traffic.'

Goolam volunteered to paint, while Nico positioned himself next to a large sandwich board that warned: DEAD SLOW - ROAD WORKS. We offloaded a few traffic cones, paint brushes, tins of paint and templates for Goolam.

Ken parked his bakkie nearby and brought us more paint and equipment as we needed it.

'Sorry I'm late,' a voice behind us said. It was Weddo Moloi. 'Had an emergency case that took longer than expected.'

Ken climbed out of the driver's seat. 'Okay, let's get moving. Still quite a bit of work to do.'

Our next task was to repaint the traffic circle at the corner with Third

Street.

However, when we reached the circle we were greeted by a pile of rubble and bits of junk spilling out onto the road from the stone steps that lead to the upper section of Third Street. A pile of broken bricks, spearheaded by a rusted fence pole encased in a cone of concrete, thrust more than a metre into the path of traffic.

‘No use phoning the municipality,’ Trevor said. ‘It’ll be weeks before they do anything. In the meantime, some poor sod will run into this mess at night.’

Ken said, ‘Okay, well let’s move it back onto the steps.’

Everyone lent a hand and in about ten minutes we’d cleared the road.

Half an hour later we’d completed this section.

Ken strolled up to us, his head down, his hands behind his back. ‘I think let’s pack it in now,’ he said, checking his watch.

We loaded the equipment onto the bakkie and arranged to meet again the following Saturday – same time, same place.

Chapter 12

When I awoke on Friday morning I splashed cold water on my cheeks, ran my electric razor over my head and face, and then checked my diary. Besides my appointment with Gerda at two, there was a note that Bob from Anthracite Services would be coming at nine to service the heater. Amos and Ben were also coming. Hopefully, they would finish the job before I left for the hospital.

The painters pitched at eight. A little after nine Bob arrived in a white Toyota bakkie with the *Anthracite Services* logo stencilled on one side. He was a beefy man, with broad shoulders, and an iron grip that suggested he undid nuts and bolts with his fingers.

I told him an edited version of what had happened, saying only that I had passed out in front of the heater after tripping and falling.

'Must have hit your head over there,' he said, pointing to the raised quarry tiles on which the heater rested.

I nodded but said nothing.

'Anyway let's check the heater,' he said, spreading a yellow plastic sheet in front of it. 'Have you touched it since the accident?'

'Just opened the glass door, but I didn't clean it or anything.'

'Good.' He opened the door and squinted inside. 'Hey, look at this, Mr Jeex… See, the anthracite at the top of the grate is only partially burned and the hopper is still half full. Yet the damper is wide open. That means it's not drawing properly. When did you last have it serviced?'

'Oh, about four years ago.'

'Well, there's a blockage somewhere. I'll do the normal service and let's see if it works then. And if you've got a bucket I'll put the unburned anthracite in it. You can still use it.'

I fetched him a bucket and then left him to get on with the job while I went through to the kitchen and made some tea and glanced through *The Weekend Herald*. When I returned some twenty minutes later, there was a pile of soot and the half-burned anthracite on the plastic sheet.

'Okay, let's see if it works now,' he said, putting some scrunched-up newspaper in the grate and striking a match. It flared up momentarily, but

when he closed the glass door, the flames flickered and went out. ‘Well, the blockage must be higher up. I’ll have to chip out the fire cement at the wall connection, then move the heater forward so I can push a brush up the flue.’

I retreated to the kitchen, where I began making notes of questions I wanted to ask Gerda. After about ten minutes, Bob called out to me.

‘Just take a look at this,’ he said, pointing to another pile of soot and what looked like a bunch of twigs. ‘These are part of a bird’s nest that was blocking the flue. That’s why it wouldn’t draw properly and caused carbon monoxide and other harmful gases to form.’

He lit a taper of newspaper and inserted it into the flue. The flames leaped upwards with a roar. ‘Perfect. You won’t have any more problems, Mr Jeex. But just remember to put a conical cap on the top of the flue so birds can’t nest there.’

A few minutes after two o’clock I was seated opposite Gerda in her consulting room. She was smiling and seemed pleased to see me.

‘How’ve you been doing, Olly?’ she asked, her hands across the table, fingers gently tapping, note book at the ready.

‘More or less okay,’ I said. ‘Sometimes I have down days. But I’ve been doing most of the things you suggested last time. I’m also involved with an anti-crime group.’ I told her about VOICE and my road-painting stints with FOWL.

‘That’s really great self-therapy,’ she said. ‘Keep it up. By the way, how’s the divorce going?’

I outlined my session with Ted Thrupp and the looming custody dispute. But I said I would try and leave the worrying to my lawyer.

‘Very sensible, Olly…’

Her voice tailed off when there was a knock on the door. It was Liz Stott.

She joined in the discussion and after hearing about my latest symptoms, she said she thought I was still suffering from depression. ‘I agree with that,’ Gerda put in, ‘although you seem to be doing better now, I think we need to work on lessening your stress levels, which of course would influence your depression.’

Liz, who’d been paging through my file, looked up and said, ‘One of the biggest causes of depression, as you may know, Olly, is continuing uncertainty. Obviously, the inadequate reasons you feel your wife gave you

for leaving are a source of that. To gain closure you should try and resolve this issue.'

'I'll try,' I said. 'But I don't think Erin will say anything, even if I ask her straight out. She's like that.' Then I told them about Erin's diary I'd found in the garage and my impulse to read it.

'You know, Olly,' Liz said, 'Women don't usually forget their diaries – at least not for more than a couple of days or so, certainly not for all that time. I can't be a hundred percent sure, but my guess is she *wants* you to read it. Maybe it's her way of giving you an explanation without the embarrassment of having to do it face-to-face. It might also reveal whether she thinks you were to blame and to what extent. That might help you get closure.'

'I agree,' said Gerda.

'I'll give it some thought,' I said. 'But maybe the best way of getting closure would be to get the divorce over and the custody sorted out.'

'Well, when the divorce is through, you might like to attend a Recovery from Divorce workshop. They're held every month. If you like the idea, call me when you're ready and I'll give you the details.'

'Okay.'

Then I told them that my morning male reflex was still absent. I said I knew antidepressants affected libido, so I asked Liz if I could stop taking the Aropax.

'I don't think that's a good idea just yet,' she said. 'But we can review the situation in the next month or so. Oh, and by the way, I've brought you my copy of Professor Marinoff's book, *Plato, Not Prozac*. You're welcome to keep it as long as you like.'

On the way out I stopped to chat with Jill Braithwaite at the nurses' station. She told me that both Professor Cruz and Petrus had been discharged that morning and Gabriel had been transferred to Tara earlier in the week. Only Leah was still in the ward, but she was taking a nap. Jill thought she'd probably be discharged next week.

'One other thing,' she added with a secretive little smile. 'I'll be able to make the FOWL work party next Saturday. Drew's coming too.'

I was tired and hungry when I got back, so I opened a tin of Delhi Breyani, heated it in the microwave, and washed it down with a couple of

beers.

At around ten o'clock, when Chloe was asleep in her basket, I made a cup of rooibos tea and went up to bed.

Erin's diary began to gnaw at my brain. Then Liz Stott's words came back to me. If I wanted to gain closure and get on with my life, I had to know exactly why Erin had left me. But after Erin's blank refusal to say anything during her visit to Ward 697, I knew I'd hit a stone wall.

That only left the diary. I hesitated for a moment, took a sip of rooibos, then got up and fetched it from the drawer. As I began flipping through it, I noticed that besides a few shopping lists and reminders, the first two years had no entries. Then from the 10th of January almost every page up until the week before Erin left me was filled with her familiar back-slanting script. I glanced at the first sentence: *Went to Dr Slotnik for a check-up a couple of weeks ago…*

I couldn't read any further. I don't know why. I just couldn't – at least not yet.

Chapter 13

Saturday was a day for chores, including going to the Koljander crafts shop to look for a present for Kristy. In a corner, looking up at me with tawny eyes was a hand-crafted toy lion made of golden velvet.

Perfect!

The shop assistant wrapped it in black and white striped paper and I wrote in a card.

On the way home I called Frith on my cellphone. 'You okay?' I asked her.

'Fine, Dad. Did you get the TV?'

'Yes. It's a 53 centimetre flat-screen Sony, a bit smaller than the one we had. But it's clearer and the colour is a lot better.'

'Cool, Dad. I only wish … It's really not the same here…'

Her voice tailed off. I gathered things weren't going all that well, but I didn't press her. I'd learned from experience that teenagers hate being questioned, so I changed the subject.

'Good news, Frith, I've had the house repainted, including your room.'

'What colour, Dad?'

'It's called *Perpetual Rose*. I think you'll like it.'

'Great. I can't wait to see it … Hey Dad. If Bonny and I come and stay with you, do you promise not to watch the news so much? I mean all that crime and stuff at dinner…'

'You know I need to know what's going on in the world, Frithy. So we need to compromise. Maybe we can eat before or after the news.'

A pause, then: 'Don't you love Mum anymore?'

'Of course I do,' I said.

'Then why are you getting divorced?'

I couldn't answer the question, not even to myself. 'These things happen,' I said lamely. 'One doesn't want them to, but they do…'

'Dad…' she said between sniffles. 'I want Mum to be with *you*, not with Alec. He doesn't belong in our family.'

My conversation with Frith had left me feeling empty and sad. The only sensible thing to do would be to try and make the divorce as amicable as

possible and not allow the custody dispute to become a tug of war.

As I was compiling my ‘to do’ list, the phone rang. I knew it was Imogen. This time I answered.

‘Sorry I couldn’t make the anti-crime meeting, Oliver,’ she said without a trace of regret in her voice. ‘Perhaps they’ll have another one some time. By the way, are you better now?’

‘I’m fine, thanks, Imo. And you?’

‘I’m all right. But before I forget, have you thought about the antiques yet?’

Imogen’s intense interest in the antiques had vaguely puzzled me. The thought had occurred to me that although Cully had left her a generous legacy of jewellery and collectables, Imogen somehow felt she’d been short-changed.

‘Haven’t had a chance, Imo. Lots of stuff to do before I go back to work.’

‘You will phone me when you’ve thought about it, won’t you, Oliver?’

‘Of course.’

‘One other thing. Fiona is getting married in December to a young man she met through the Heddington-Smythes – Dudley Harrington. His father is the Smythe’s stockbroker. At the moment he’s got a job in the City in London, gaining overseas experience, as Fiona is.’

‘So where’s the wedding?’

‘Here in Joburg at St. George’s Anglican Church, in Parktown. And the reception is at the Country Club.’

That evening I went upstairs, got into bed, and after a moment’s hesitation finally began reading Erin’s diary. The first entry was some months before Erin had left me.

Went to Dr Slotnik for a check-up a couple of weeks ago – the first time in five years. I should have gone before but just never got around to it. He examined me, took a Pap smear, and told me to return the next week. To my horror the test came back positive. Then he did a colposcopy, took a sample for testing, and told me to come back again the following Friday (today). My God, I’ve never known a week to pass so slowly! Today, he told me there was a lesion, the early stages of cervical cancer…

The word ‘cancer’ came to me as a shock. Erin, for some reason, had told me nothing about her illness. I closed my eyes, collecting my thoughts before I went on reading.

…I actually couldn’t believe it. There’d been no symptoms, no bleeding or anything. He said it had gone beyond the ‘wait and watch’ stage and that I should have immediate treatment. He recommended laser. For a moment I felt he was talking to someone else, that this wasn’t happening to me. To me cancer was something that only happened to other people. In any case, I believed I wasn’t at risk. That’s why I never bothered to have the vaccine. He said he could perform the procedure there and then, in his consulting rooms. In a daze, I agreed. He gave me a mild sedative and waited a few minutes for it to take effect. It was only the discomfort of the procedure and the faint smell of burning that made me realise what was happening. Afterwards, he told me to come back in three weeks. During that time he said I shouldn’t have sex. (No problem. It’s nonexistent!) He also suggested I give up smoking. (Much more difficult!)

This revelation, as well as Erin’s reaction, put a different light on things. I felt my attitude to her softening.

Chapter 14

I arrived at the Zoo at about 9.20 and parked in the parking lot. It was a perfect mid-spring morning: a cloudless sky, a faint breeze, and the leaves on the trees a deepening green. Grey Louries fussed in the branches above.

Just after 9.30 Kristy drove up in a red Audi roadster and stopped near the parking boom. As she stepped out, a blonde young woman in the passenger seat slipped behind the wheel and drove off with a friendly wave. For a few moments Kristy stood squinting into the morning sun. When she saw me she flashed me a big smile and ran towards me, her arms outstretched. ‘Oh, Olly, it’s so good to see you!’ I kissed her full on the mouth, holding her close for a long moment.

‘Wow!’ she said breathlessly when she eventually stepped back, her eyes sparkling. ‘I think that’s the coolest kiss I’ve ever had!’

‘Me too,’ I said, with a dazed smile.

She was carrying a brown leather shoulder bag, hand-crafted.

In contrast, I had a faded blue backpack, which contained two cheese and tomato sandwiches, four apples, some crisps, and the neatly-wrapped toy lion. I’d also brought my old Minolta 35millimetre with a freshly-loaded film. I had a Sony digital for happy snaps in colour that I can post online, but I much prefer the Minolta, since I like surprises, as I never know how the photos will turn out.

I discreetly clicked off a couple of shots.

After we’d bought our tickets, we strolled hand in hand along a walkway to the left, pausing from time to time to peer into various animal enclosures. A semi-circular walk, during which we laughed out loud at the antics of the chimpanzees, brought us to a small café.

‘I’m thirsty,’ I said. ‘Feel like something to drink, Kris?’

‘I’d love a banana milkshake,’ she said.

‘Sounds good, I’ll have one too.’

We found a table under some trees. After the waiter had taken our order, we heard the roar of a lion from a distant enclosure. Kristy looked at me and smiled. She put her hand over mine and left it there. We said nothing ... minutes passed … I closed my eyes, knowing that I would always remember

this magical moment. Finally, I took her hand in mine. ‘Happy birthday, my love,’ I said, leaning across and kissing her on the cheek. I undid the straps of my backpack and brought out the striped package. I handed it to her, camera at the ready. ‘Hope you like it.’

She eagerly undid the wrapping, and squealed with delight when she saw the golden lion. ‘Oh, he’s really lovely!’ she sang out, kissing the lion’s nose.

I got the shot.

Kristy leaned across, cupped my face in her hands, and kissed me. Then she replaced the lion in its wrapping and put it back in my rucksack. ‘Mind carrying him till we leave, Olly? I don’t want him to get dirty.’

The only sounds were animal calls, visitors shouting to one another, and the rustling of the leaves above. ‘Remember when we were in the Ward and how we all used to look across at the Westcliff Hotel and dream of having breakfast there?’

‘Sure.’

‘Well, we must do it sometime, Olly. I mean us and all our friends could go for breakfast, and then you and me could stay on and spend the night…’

The thought of the images of Stocky and Tall once again ruining our love-making left me with a sinking feeling, so I decided to seek treatment as soon as I was off the anti-depressant, as Gerda had suggested.

‘Great idea,’ I said, masking my feelings. ‘Let me speak to Faan and the others.’

‘Please, Olly. I’d really like that.’

The waiter returned with our order. A bluebottle fly was buzzing about, looking for a chance to sample our milkshakes. Kristy waved it briskly away.

‘So tell me about your job at the health spa,’ I said.

She took a sip of her milkshake and wiped her tongue across her upper lip. ‘Well, it pays well, Olly. That’s for sure. The tips are fabulous. I’m lucky to have got the job. I heard from one of the girls that there were about a hundred applicants.’

‘So what do you actually do, Kris?’

She paused for a while, staring into the distance before replying. ‘The unqualified girls, like me, do travelling massages, mainly in the evenings.’

‘The Spa closed during the day?’

‘No, a lot of clients come for beauty treatments, reflexology, aromatherapy, Swedish massage – that sort of thing. There’re also registered masseuses, mostly older women, who give Swedish massage and hot stone

therapy, but they work only office hours.'

'So how come you can give massages if you're not registered?'

She smiled, tilting her head just a little. 'They call us "travelling care-givers", not masseuses. But that doesn't mean to say we don't know how to give the kind of massage clients want.'

Kristy sucked up a mouthful of milkshake and then began working the straw slowly up and down in her mouth while keeping her eyes on me. I remained silent, so she went on: 'Actually, we care-givers get much better tips than the registered masseuses. Maybe it's because of the late hours… And, of course, most of the care-givers are beautiful. You see, the clients don't want plain girls, except for me,' she said, grinning.

'You're not plain, Kris, you're beautiful!' I cut in. 'In fact I think you're the most beautiful young woman in the world!'

'Oh, Olly…'

'I'm serious. But I don't think I like the sound of what you have to do, Kris.'

She pressed my hand and smiled at me. 'It's only for a little while, Olly – until I've saved up enough to be independent. Meanwhile, I can repay the money that you lent me now.' She reached into her bag and brought out an envelope, pushing it across the table.

'Thanks, Kris,' I said, somewhat surprised. I took the envelope without opening it and slipped it into my pocket.

'You know, Olly, something's been puzzling me.'

'What?'

'Well, Mrs Eberhardt makes us new girls – the care-givers, I mean – write tests, which the qualified girls don't have to do. Those girls … well, she just looks at their diplomas, lets them do one treatment and that's it. For us, we have to do an IQ test and a personality test, then group relaxation therapy; and then a couple of days later we do another test, mainly general knowledge. For that we're given study guides.'

'Nothing strange about that, Kris, as far as I can see. After all, you girls don't have diplomas or anything else to prove your competency.'

'It's not that, Olly. I noticed that in the general knowledge test there were ten questions about the Spa itself, which I didn't have a clue about, one's I *couldn't* know about.'

'Like what?'

'Well, like in what city is the head office of the Pinnacle Group, how

many Spa franchises are there around the world, and on what date did this particular Spa open. None of that was in the study guide or in any brochures. I guessed that as the company was American, the head office would be somewhere in the United States, but I didn't know which city. The questions were multiple choices, with six possible answers, so the chances of guessing right were like the Lotto. So I left them blank.'

'There's probably some simple explanation,' I said, without much conviction.

'Well, try and explain this, then…' Kristy tilted her head back with a puzzled frown. 'You see, Charlize, my room mate, who was sitting next to me in the exam, knew all the answers, but she didn't know *how* she knew them. When she saw I hadn't answered the questions and when Mrs Eberhardt wasn't looking, she leaned over and quickly ticked the correct ones.

'At the time I pretended to be cross with her but actually she's a honey. She's the girl who brought me here today.' Kristy leaned back, clasping her hands behind her head. 'But the mystery doesn't end there. There were fifteen girls writing the exam. But only Charlize and me got all ten Spa questions right. Merrill got nine, but most of the other girls left out that section. The day after the test, Mrs Eberhardt told Charlize and me that we'd been chosen to do a special course, with good chances of promotion. Though we answered the Spa questions right, we didn't do any better than the other girls. Some of them got higher marks than us, but they weren't chosen, not even Merrill, who was placed on a reserve list.'

'Your point?'

'I just feel something really weird is going on. Not just the exam questions. I mean, everything is so *controlled* – much more than at a normal job. Like we have to live on the premises and we have to dress the way they want us to, and use colourless nail lacquer (which I refuse to do, at least on my toes), and, most important, we have to give up smoking.'

'Surely giving up smoking should be a matter of choice?'

'Mrs Eberhardt says smoking is a disgusting habit. No matter how much you wash yourself, she says, the smell never really goes away. She says it puts clients off.'

'So has she given you a deadline by when you have to give up?'

'She's given us two weeks. In the meantime, she's given us nicotine patches. We also have to undergo hypnotherapy, which is a waste of time.'

‘Why’s that?’

‘I can’t be hypnotised...’

‘Really.’

‘Yes, Charlize can, but not me.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, Gerda tried hypnotherapy on me in the ward and it didn’t work. Also, I had a cousin who could hypnotise people but I was the only one he couldn’t put under.’

‘Oh... So what happens if you don’t give up smoking on time?’

‘Simple. She fires you!’

‘You wearing a patch now?’

‘Yeah. Have a look.’ She pulled up her sleeve to reveal the patch on her upper arm. Next to it was a small red mark that was hardly visible.

‘Anything else?’

‘A couple of things. But maybe I’m just being paranoid. Remember the application form I told you I had to fill in before I joined.’

I nodded.

‘Well, I didn’t think about it at the time but looking back on it, it seems rather strange. One of the questions asked was whether I had any metal dental crowns or bridges or titanium implants. Now why would anyone want to know that?’

‘I remember years ago singers often had their amalgam fillings replaced with white ones so when they opened their mouths, the audience wouldn’t see bits of black. Perhaps if you’re close to a client, they can see into your mouth.’

‘But this is different, Olly. You can’t see crowns or bridges or implants.’

‘You’re right. It certainly does seem a bit strange.’

‘In any case the question didn’t apply. I don’t have any, not even one filling.’ She paused for a moment and glanced towards the restaurant. ‘Then there are the elocution lessons I told you about.’

‘What about them?’

‘Well, do you know who’s giving them?’

‘Who?’

‘Mrs Eberhardt.’

‘So?’

‘So, she’s an American, which means we’re learning to speak like Americans!’ She leaned back for a moment and rolled her eyes before

continuing. ‘I thought this was pretty weird, Olly, especially as we’re living in South Africa. So I asked Charlize what she thought. She said it was probably because a lot of South Africans find an American accent sexy and this would impress clients. She could be right, but to me it still doesn’t quite add up. I can mimic voices easily, so if they want me to sound like an American, I can. But Charlize’s *real* voice is becoming American. It’s not just mimicking.’

‘Maybe there’s a simpler explanation, Kris. Perhaps Mrs Eberhardt just thinks her own voice is great – or maybe she’s just trying to save money by giving the lessons herself.’

‘Maybe…’ Kristy said doubtfully. ‘But there’s something more.’ She clamped her front teeth over her bottom lip. ‘I feel someone is coming into my room when I’m not there. The other day I found the things in my drawers and cupboard looked different, as if someone had been through them and not put them back quite right.’

I could see she was agitated and I sought to calm her. ‘Maybe Charlize wanted to borrow something and rummaged about looking for it, and then tidied up?’

‘I asked Charlize, but she said she hadn’t.’

‘Any other girl you’re friends with?’

‘Well, there’s Merrill. She borrowed a top from me once. But she wouldn’t just come into my room when I’m not there.’

‘And that red mark on your arm?’

Kristy hesitated for a moment. ‘Nothing serious. A client got a bit worked up.’ She giggled.

Something told me she didn’t want to say anything more, so I changed the subject. ‘So what are your plans now, Kris?’

She planted her elbows on the table and propped up her chin. ‘Well, I don’t think I can do this job for more than a couple more months. The money’s good but you can’t be yourself. You have to do what other people want all the time. Some are really, really weird, *including* Mrs Eberhardt.’

Chapter 15

We walked arm in arm along Ape Alley and past the elephant enclosure. As we passed under a tree, a light breeze stirred the leaves, making a sound like distant surf. Kristy turned and smiled at me. It now dawned on me that Ward 697 had put us in touch with the simple reality of just loving each other without artfulness or pretence.

Kristy offered me a piece of chocolate.

'No thanks,' I said. 'Let's have lunch first.'

'Okay,' she said, running her tongue over her upper lip. 'Actually, I'm really hungry.'

We found a quiet bench under some trees, where the bright sunlight filtering through the leaves danced on her shoulders. I handed her a sandwich and an apple. When we'd finished eating, I put my arm around her. For a long while we just sat in silence, her head resting on my shoulder. Then she ran a hand over my shaven head. 'Would be nice if you'd grow your hair again, Olly.'

'I will after all this is over.'

'You mean when you're off the medication?

'No, after the divorce is through.' But what I actually meant was when I'd recovered my manhood.

'Talking about hair,' she said, reaching into her bag, 'I want you to have this.' She handed me a brown leather credit-card holder with several see-through plastic sleeves. It was a most welcome gift, since my plastic card holder had started splitting.

'You must be a mind-reader, Kris,' I said, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

As I flipped through the card-holder, I noticed that in the first sleeve there was a small card in Kristy's handwriting. *'Happy Birthday, Olly'*, it said, *'and Lots of Love…'* In the second was a photo of Kristy in a bathing costume with the sea behind her.

'That was when Jenna and me were in Margate one long weekend.'

'Nice photo, Kris. I'll treasure it. I'll also scan it and use it as a screensaver.'

'You're a true romantic, Olly!'

‘Now look behind the photo.’

Behind it was a lock of hair. Then, as I flipped the sleeve over, the hair caught the sunlight and shone like gold.

‘Thanks, my sweet,’ I said, drawing her closer.

A lion suddenly roared some distance away.

Kristy gave me a nudge. ‘If we don’t hurry, we won’t have time to see the lions.’

When we reached the enclosure we saw two lions and a lioness stretched out in serene splendour in the shade of a tall bluegum tree. They were almost meditative in their stillness. The lioness had one paw draped over the larger lion’s back. Suddenly she stood up and licked his face.

Kristy’s cellphone rang. She answered and spoke briefly.

‘That was Charlize,’ she said. ‘She’ll be picking me up in twenty minutes.’

‘I notice she’s also blonde. You two could be twins.’

‘Most of us at the Spa are blondes. Mrs Eberhardt seems to prefer a certain type of girl. Maybe because she’s blonde herself.’

‘I see you’ve got a different cellphone. Yours is yellow, isn’t it?’

‘Ja, I’ve still got it. This one’s for business only. All the girls working at the Spa are given a latest model cellphone when they start. You see, Mrs Eberhardt likes us to look professional. Also, she doesn’t like us making private calls when we’re working, so don’t call me on this phone unless it’s an emergency.’

‘Okay.’

‘By the way, for the past three days I’ve had the feeling that someone’s been following me, a man with very short hair, but he never gets close enough for me to get a proper look.’

‘Sure you’re not imagining it?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘I don’t want to frighten you, Kris, but beautiful girls like you sometimes attract stalkers.’

She smiled coyly, but said nothing.

‘Look, Kris, this could be serious. If it happens again, I want you to call me, and I’ll try and get over straight away.’

‘Okay.’

We passed through the main entrance into the car park and strolled up towards the road to wait for Charlize.

‘I just want to remember this perfect day for ever,’ Kristy said, slipping an arm around me.

Chapter 16

Monday morning, and my first day back at work. I parked the Lada in the basement of the Alfred Nzo Building and rode the escalator up to the ground floor. The escalator usually glides silently, but now it creaked and groaned like the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz* before Dorothy oiled him.

The reception area seemed dimmer and strangely distorted, as familiar places often do when you've been away for a while. Pausing at the recessed shelf near the lifts where official notices are stacked, I picked up a copy of AIR NEWS, the staff newsletter and glanced at it: *REPORT COMPLETED ON POSSIBLE CLOSURE OF AIR*.

The consultants Mthembu, Hoogenrijk & Partners have advised that their report and recommendations on the possible closure of Africa International Radio (AIR) has been completed and has been submitted to government for its consideration. A date for a final decision is not yet known. Staff are urged to ignore rumours that are circulating and to carry on with their work as usual. You will be advised as soon as more information is available.

The statement didn't come from AIR management or the Governing Board, as one would have expected, but more ominously from the Director General in the Ministry. But I wasn't fazed. I was immune to shocks – or so I thought.

The lift took its time coming. When it finally arrived, about a dozen people crowded in. I pressed *three*. There was only one familiar face, Will Allwell, Head of Talks and News Archives, a short stout man with thinning hair who I regarded as my mentor in radio. 'Glad to see you back, Olly,' he said, rising on his toes and speaking over the shoulder of a sandy-haired woman. 'Hope you're better now.'

I hate conversing in crowded lifts, so I just smiled and murmured a greeting.

After a slow jerky climb, with stops and starts at the first and second floors, where most people got out, the lift shuddered to a halt almost a knee-length below the third floor.

‘Must be load-shedding!’ a woman at the back said. ‘I think I’ll get out and walk.’

I gripped the edge of the third floor and heaved myself up. Then I helped the woman, finally giving Will a hand. He stood there puffing as if he’d run a marathon. When he’d finally got his breath back, he shook my hand, and I thanked him for the toiletries he’d sent me in hospital.

‘Only a pleasure, Olly,’ he said.

‘Any idea what these rumours mentioned in the staff newsletter are about?’

Will glanced about, then guided me away from the lifts.

‘Well, the main one is that some people have sticky fingers.’

‘What’s it this time?’

‘Stolen equipment, abuse of credit cards, false travel expenses, kickbacks, diversion of funds for non-existent projects, defrauding the medical aid…. Apparently the Ministry has ordered an investigation.’

‘So who are the culprits?’

‘Haven’t the faintest. The only thing I’m pretty certain of is that it isn’t Tata. She may be a bad manager, but at least she’s honest.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Yes, the other rumour is that the new government wants to close AIR – but that’s pure speculation. Could even be disinformation.’

‘Why disinformation?’

‘To get the rats to jump ship so they don’t have to be pushed. Saves a lot of trouble, you know.’

‘Who’re you talking about?’

‘The ANC’s political appointees, who else?’

I made my way through the open-plan newsroom towards the Monitoring Section. Normally the newsroom is incredibly noisy – TVs blaring, people shouting on the telephone, loud conversations across the room, alpha types pounding computer keyboards. But today it was strangely quiet. Staff were huddled together in groups, talking in undertones. No one seemed to notice me.

Only Prue looked up as I entered the Monitoring Section. ‘Oh, hi Olly. Welcome back.’ She jumped up and gave me a tight little hug, then stood back and examined me.

‘You okay?’

‘Just the odd down day.’

‘Well, take it easy then. If you’re not feeling well, go home straight way, and I’ll tell Tata Zondi.’

‘Thanks, Prue, but I’m sure I’ll be fine. Anyway, I’m only working half days this week … You say Tata is back?’

‘She pitched last Monday. Full of moans, as usual.’

Tata Zondi, a rotund middle-aged woman, was born in the former Soviet Union. At the time, her mother, an ANC activist, was studying for a Masters degree in political science at Patrice Lumumba University. She’d named her daughter ‘Tatiana’ after one of her Russian lecturers, and this had contracted to ‘Tata’. As a manager, however, it was clear Tata had been promoted to her level of incompetence. On the positive side, however, she’d set about weeding out corruption, and this had made her many enemies.

‘I’d better trot along to the news meeting,’ Prue said, taking the news summary with her.

I called after her: ‘Tell them I’ll be back working full days from next week.

My cellphone rang.

‘Hello Olly. Ted Thrupp here. I phoned to tell you that I’ve heard from Claude Skinner. He says Sudman has agreed to the Rorschach test. We’ll make an appointment with Dr Zapata as soon as possible.’

Chapter 17

When I got home Chloe came running through from the lounge, then turned and raced to the front, barking. There was a sound of running footsteps. I followed, and flung open the front gate. Two figures were disappearing round the corner. No point in chasing them; they had at least a hundred metres' start. Then I saw the muddy scrape marks on the front wall. The criminals – that's what I presumed they were – had obviously been scrambling over when they heard Chloe barking.

Then I saw it: Kristy's little avocado tree was trampled flat. The two halves of the pip had split apart and the stem was badly bent. I found a flower pot and re-planted it, binding the stem against a stout stick to keep it upright. I decided that it would be safer on the front patio, where there was plenty of sun.

After catching up with household chores, I decided to turn in early. Once under the covers, I began paging through Dr Louis Marinoff's book, *Plato, Not Prozac*.

On page 93, a sentence caught my eye. *"If you value something that can be taken away, you put yourself in the power of whoever can take it."*

Did this mean that, having valued my relationship with Erin, and now it had been taken away, I was in Sudman's power? A disturbing thought to say the least!

Words here and there jumped out at me from the pages: *anger … betrayal … revenge fantasies…*

On page 114, a quote from Lao Tzu seemed appropriate for the coming divorce, *"Take care with the end as you do with the beginning, and you will have no failure."*

I decided to continue reading Erin's diary.

…It's after twelve, I've just had a hot bath and I've had time to do some thinking. Olly is already in bed, asleep. These days he seems to be sleeping his life away. I feel a bit better today, now that I've had a chance to think about changing my lifestyle. I've also decided to take Dr Slotnik's advice and

give up smoking. I've been thinking back on my life, doing some mental stock-taking.

When I was a child I always felt different from the other girls and that somehow, like a fairy princess, I would never grow old. Amazingly, this feeling remained with me right up until a couple of weeks ago.

But Dr Slotnik's diagnosis changed all that. Now I suddenly feel time is running out... So yesterday I went to see Madam Maxine, a psychic that Frieda recommended. She told me the cervical lesion was a karmic lesson to wake me from a long sleep. On the way home I felt the depression that hit me after Dr Slotnik's diagnosis beginning to lift. In the meantime, I've continued with the mental stock-taking, picking up from when I left school.

As a child I led a protected life and was naïve and ignorant even as a teenager. When I went to varsity, everyone drank a lot, smoked dope, and slept around. Your friends thought there was something wrong with you if you didn't. In my final year, I found I was pregnant! The guy responsible turned out to be an irresponsible jock type. But I decided there was no way I'd have an abortion. That's how Matthew came along. But I've never had any regrets. He's been a wonderful boy, and now that he's a young man I'm very proud of him.

But to get back to my varsity days ... When I met Olly, I stopped sleeping around, and we drifted into a relationship. All our friends were getting married, or at least living together. Although I wasn't in love with Olly, he was good to me and he accepted Matthew, and I could see he was fond of him. But subconsciously, I was always yearning for true love…

In the early years I leaned so much on Olly that I kind of got used to him always being there for me. He had a way of sorting out problems – little things, like not accepting bad service, having cars fixed, etc. Also, his lively mind impressed me, although he was four years younger than me. Initially, I allowed myself to be guided by him, but as I developed my own ideas, I began to follow a different path – away from him. Financially, I was still dependent on him, and that bothered me, but that's another story.

By then my main interest was New Age philosophy and the occult. But Olly had only a passing interest in these as part of general knowledge. So I felt I couldn't really share my interests with him anymore.

Also, I suppose both of us were unprepared for the inflexible and repetitive routines that marriage and children impose. I found myself giving my all to the children, who were very demanding, as all kids are. I became

more and more stressed, as I tried to balance bringing up children and my job as a proof reader, which I eventually had to give up.

But it was my own fault. I was a very permissive parent. I'd always felt guilty about Matthew, and perhaps to over-compensate, I devoted virtually all my time and space to the children, especially Bonny and Frith, indulging their every whim. But when I eventually realised I'd made a mistake, it was too late. Although, of course, I was fond of Olly, and I know he loved me, we began slowly drifting apart.

Chapter 18

Tata Zondi breezed into my office around mid morning. She came straight to the point. ‘Olly, I need to give a speech to the African Women Broadcaster’s Forum in Addis Ababa in two weeks time. Could you do me a favour and write it for me?’

‘What’s the subject?’

She drew a breath and looked at me sideways. *‘Empowering African Women in the Information Age.’*

As she offered no suggestions, I prompted her. ‘You mean through IT, the Internet, Twitter, telecentres, educational TV and radio, smartphones – that sort of thing?

‘Exactly.’

‘So you’ll do it, then?’

I hesitated for a moment.

She took a deep breath and then offered to pay me overtime rates.

I accepted.

We strolled through to her office to do the paperwork.

On my way back I paused in the newsroom. There was a noticeably different atmosphere these days. Gone was the swagger and banter of those ANC appointees who’d got their jobs through patronage.

These days Benjy Mlomo, former committee member of the ANC Youth League, had a hunted look. He had reason to. He’d rubbished the SPP on air!

One day I decided to pay Weddo a visit.

When I reached his house in Eleventh Avenue, there was a smell of burnt grass and a few lingering wisps of smoke after a fire on the Koppies a couple of days earlier. A brisk wind was singing in the power lines that run along the side of the parkland. Dark clouds were crowding in. A storm was approaching. I pressed the bell twice in rapid succession. A few moments later a buxom maid answered the door. She said Dr Moloi was with a patient, but he shouldn’t be long. She led me through to the kitchen where a delicious aroma of cooking, mixed with the sharp smell of drying herbs, greeted me.

Petrus was stirring a large steaming pot. Peering closer, I saw chicken legs and heads churning in an amber broth. Petrus looked up and grinned. ‘Afternoon, Mr Olly. You like some lunch? He leaned the spoon against the side of the pot and sprang forward and shook my hand.

‘What are you cooking?’ I asked, as an open beak broke surface in a silent squawk.

‘Walkie-Talkie.’

‘What’s Walkie-Talkie?’

‘Soup. Very nice. Better than hospital food. Have some, Mr Olly. I know you like.’

Before I could say anything, he had ladled generous helpings into two bowls and placed them on the kitchen table. He left the legs and heads behind. Something told me that these were his favourite bits and he would eat them later. Then he fetched a loaf of seed bread and a tub of margarine.

I took a tentative sip, then a larger spoonful. ‘You’re right, Petrus. This is *very* good.’

We had hardly sat down, when Weddo appeared in the doorway. He beamed when he saw me, and then drew up a chair. while Petrus fetched him a bowl of Walkie-Talkie (sans legs and heads).

I told Weddo about the lightning strike, the near-death experience, and my new powers of precognition. He listened attentively as he drank his soup, then he leaned across the table and placed a hand on mine. ‘You know, Ali, the electrical charge could have stimulated your pineal gland, sometimes called the “third eye”, which is believed to play an important part in telepathy. My guess is that you are in a mild *thwasa* state, which means you have shamanic powers.’

‘You be right,’ Doctor,’ Petrus said, between mouthfuls of bread dipped in Walkie-Talkie. ‘Mr Olly be thwasa person. He not like other white people.’

After we’d finished our meal, both men saw me to the door. The dark clouds were pressing down. I sensed that the storm would break at any moment.

As I reached my front gate, the first big raindrops thudded on the patio roof. Inside, the telephone was ringing – Anisha Parbhoo. The phone stopped before I could reach it, so I called her back. She sounded surprised, but then came quickly to the point. Telkom had agreed to reduce my phone bill from R57, 323 to R729. A West African criminal syndicate had apparently tapped

into the phone lines and had been operating an illegal ‘call centre’ from an empty house in Third Street. The men had fled before they could be arrested.

Suddenly there was a loud clap of thunder, followed by great sheets of rain sweeping in from the north.

‘Better ring off,’ I said. ‘I’ve already had one close call with lightning. Contrary to popular belief, it does sometimes strike twice!’

When the thunder had stopped, I phoned Kristy, just wanting to hear her voice. ‘I’ll phone you back, Olly, she answered. ‘I’m with a client. Lots to tell you.’

The rain had settled into a steady downpour. Kristy called me after nine. She sounded agitated. ‘Some funny stuff’s been going on, Olly.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like the feeling again that someone is following me. I had the same feeling today.’

‘Well just be careful, and call me if you feel threatened.’

‘Okay … Oh, I almost forgot. Mrs Eberhardt has offered Charlize and me jobs at the Pinnacle Spa in San Diego, California. That’s one of their main franchises in America. She said she’d received an e-mail from them, saying they were recruiting girls overseas. So she sent them our photos and exam results. They replied, saying they were interested. She says it’s a great opportunity, and of course, the money is good.’

‘And?’

‘Well, Charlize says she’s thinking seriously about it.’

My heart sank. ‘What about you, Kris?’

‘Well, with all the crime and corruption in this country, I must say I’m tempted. But I told her no.’ Kristy’s voice dropped to a whisper. ‘You see, Olly, whatever happens I just want to be with you…’

I spent the next couple of hours working on the speech for Tata Zondi, and by eleven o’clock I’d nearly finished it. It was still raining when I climbed into bed and opened Erin’s diary.

I smoked my last cigarette today, but I’m already dying for one. Maybe the books I’m reading will help take my mind off the craving. I’m finding Gail Sheehy’s book, “Passages,” very helpful. I’ve been trying to put some of her ideas into practise and I can already feel the difference. I don’t think my

basic personality is changing, but I know my behaviour is. I'm not such a stay-at-home any more….

Saw Dr Slotnik yesterday and he said everything seems okay. But he said I should try and relax more because new studies suggest ongoing stress can bring on early menopause. Also saw Madam Maxine. She said I should accept that life is not infinite and death is part of life. She said accepting that would add some urgency to the quality of my remaining years. Makes sense, actually.

I know it's an awful thing to say, but somehow I don't see Olly as part of my rediscovering life. These days he seems a different person, almost as if a part of him has gone missing. He used to be full of fun, but now he has such a sad unsmiling face. He's also become very forgetful. He even forgot my birthday – the first time ever!

Also, not having my own income is terribly depressing. If Olly had given me a monthly allowance, I would have felt more independent, but having to ask him for money has made me resent him.

Am reading a book I picked up at the Linden library, "The Bridges of Madison County." It's about a middle-aged woman who has the courage to take a gamble and follow her heart. It's really made me start thinking…

Chapter 19

It was drizzling when I awoke, and water was dripping off the branches of the avocado tree. A warm earthy smell of composting leaves filtered through my bedroom window. I went downstairs and let Chloe out to pee. The garden was waterlogged, bringing earthworms to the surface.

After I let Chloe in again, I turned on the radio to get the news. Two items caught my interest: a bomb had exploded outside the Brixton Police station in Johannesburg, injuring a fruit seller and a passer-by. Minutes later a man called *The Citizen*, claiming the Siener Sirkel was responsible. The second report was of a body that had been found in an open storm-water channel to the north of Van Riebeeck Park. The middle-aged white man, who'd been shot in the face, was identified as John Latimer. Apparently, his body had been hidden in a culvert for weeks, and was only dislodged by heavy rain.

That night I continued reading Erin's diary.

I may be repeating myself, but these thoughts just keep going round and round in my mind. After being stuck at home for so long I'd become depressed, isolated and bored. I felt overwhelmed by household chores, by life, by something indefinable. But now I'm embracing new ideas, meeting new people. I feel a strange ache inside me and a kind of accelerated heartbeat. I still have the odd down day, but mostly I feel up.

In this more positive frame of mind I've decided that I need some excitement in my life. But first I need to get fit and healthy. Perhaps my prayers have been answered. I was looking up 'cancer' on the Internet, when I came across this health site that said that one of the causes of cervical cancer is stagnation of the reproductive system. I know it's supposed to be caused by a virus, but apparently stagnation lowers one's immunity and allows the virus to gain a hold. Among the various health tips they recommend is a cleansing and rejuvenation diet, combined with an exercise programme. I'm on my fourth day of the diet – mainly brown rice, carrot

juice and fresh fruit – and I'm already feeling great!

A couple of years ago I allowed my gym membership to lapse. Today, I went along to Cresta to renew it and I had my first work-out (if you can call it that). Actually, it was just limbering up, stretching muscles I've hardly used in years. My instructor seems a nice guy. His name is Alec Sudman.

Chapter 20

On Friday morning I went to Tata Zondi's office with the finished speech and knocked on the half open door. She was shuffling through some papers on her desk, turning them this way and that. She looked up and gave me an absent smile. She didn't ask me to sit down. After a couple of minutes, she stopped, sighed, and began reading the speech. From time to time she nodded.

While I stood there, I thought of my career at AIR. There was little or no chance of promotion. I obviously needed to make a change or I'd be stuck in my present job for ever.

Then I thought about the rumours doing the rounds at AIR that were now gathering detail and momentum. According to the latest version, the new government had definitely decided to close the station and the announcement was a mere formality. The reason given was that the African Union, which had undertaken to contribute to AIR's budget, had only come up with promises. A more positive rumour (depending on how you looked at it) was that the government had opened negotiations with a Middle East consortium, which would help fund AIR on condition it opened an Arabic service.

Tata Zondi's voice broke into my thoughts. 'You seem to have covered all the points, Olly. I really appreciate your help.'

When I got back to my office, I could smell coffee brewing in the percolator.

Just after Prue had brought me a cup of coffee, the phone rang. It was Ted Thrupp. He skipped the pleasantries. 'Olly, Sudman has failed the Rorschach test, but Skinner says Erin won't accept the result. She's determined to have custody at any cost.'

'Does that mean it will have to go to court?'

'I don't think so.'

'Why not?'

'We have something up our sleeve.'

'Like what?'

'The report on Sudman patronising "ladies of the night", as Gary Simes calls them, as well as his involvement with the under-age girl.'

‘What are you suggesting?’

‘Well, I think I should send Skinner a copy of the report, together with a one-line comment as follows: “In the interests of your client, I think you should be aware of this.”

‘Isn’t that blackmail?’

‘Not at all. There’s no threat or condition attached. It’s merely informative. But of course Skinner will know that when a divorcing parent is living with a new partner, the lifestyle of that new partner is highly relevant in any custody dispute.’

‘So are you saying that if the contents of the report were to come out in court, Erin wouldn’t be given custody?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Actually, Erin is a very good mother, Ted, so in a way this seems unfair. On the other hand, the girls have complained to me about Sudman behaving in a way that makes them uncomfortable. But they love Erin, and I’m sure they’d rather stay with her if it weren’t for him.’

‘In any event I think we should send Skinner the report. It’s the only way of sparing the girls from being at the centre of a sordid court battle. And, of course, Skinner doesn’t have to disclose the contents of the report to Erin. All he needs to do is to point out that Sudman’s failure of the Rorschach test won’t look good in court and could affect the outcome.’

‘Well, go for it, then, Ted. Perhaps it would help resolve the dispute if you tell Skinner that if Erin consents to my having custody, I would agree to her having open access, so she could visit the girls or take them on outings anytime.’

‘Sounds as if you’re trying to win her back?’

‘No, I just want to create the nearest thing to normality for Bonny and Frith.’

Although things seemed to be looking up, something was still worrying me. There was obviously a good reason why Sudman had failed the test. I phoned Gary Simes and asked him to keep a closer eye on Sudman, and I made an appointment to see him on Monday, after work.

When I got home I decided to take Chloe for a walk. On my way out I paid scant attention to a small cluster of stones in the gutter.

Chapter 21

As Chloe and I were heading up 4th Street, we bumped into Jean who was on his way to work.

'I'm starting an evening shift at six,' he said. 'So I'm strolling over to Best Books. '

'Mind if I join you? I could do with a walk.'

'Feel free,' he replied with a coy smile. 'In fact there's something I'd like to talk to you about, Olly. There should be time for coffee before I start work.'

When we arrived at Best Books, Jean announced that he was nearly an hour early, so we decided to have coffee at the Pastry Parlour, next door. We took a table outside, and Chloe curled up next to me. She put her head on my feet, blinked a couple of times, and then closed her eyes.

'There's something very sensitive I need to talk to you about, Olly,' Jean said at last, peering at me over his glasses.'

'What's that?' I asked.

He placed a hand on mine before answering. 'I've decided to have a gender reassignment operation.'

'Whaaat?!' My exclamation was involuntary.

In recent years an increasing number of young people were clamouring to have sex changes, gaining wide attention in the media. So I couldn't help thinking that in many cases it was just a trendy fad to gain attention. Many of these people – dubbed by cynics as 'trans-trenders' – were simply young people trying to be cool. But in Jean's case I sensed that his decision was genuine.

'So what made you decide that?'

'Okay, well let me fill you in. You see, Olly, for many years I used to ask myself "Why am I *me?"* Well, my gender is the core of my being, my Authentic Self, which is female, and has been from my earliest memory. Now that I have the option of the operation I know I can soon openly be my true self. Although I've always associated with gays or queers, as Faan calls them, I'm not actually that way at all. Deep inside I'm a woman. You see, the main reason why I went to gay clubs was because I could dress there as a woman

and be accepted.'

Many things that I'd previously noticed about Jean now fell into place.

After a longish pause, Jean leaned back and made eye contact. 'You see, my physical gender is borderline. I started developing small breasts when I reached puberty and I've never grown facial hair.'

'But weren't your parents aware of your condition?'

'I think my mother was, but not my father. She must have kept it from him. When he finally found out, he went ballistic and said he didn't want a sissy for a son. After that he has basically disowned me.'

Jean finished his coffee before continuing. 'You see, Olly, trying to be what you're *not* leads to the greatest human unhappiness. The inner conflict eventually wears you down. Although I made an effort to please my parents by trying to be a boy, it didn't work.

'I even agreed to meet with our family's church minister who said that, like homosexuality, wanting to change the gender God had assigned me was a sin. He wanted me to join a prayer group of so-called "recovering" homosexuals.' Jean sighed again and shook his head. 'More than anyone, Olly, I feel this ignorant but well-meaning man raped my Authentic Self.'

I nodded.

'When I finally decided to take the plunge, beginning with female hormones, my breasts began developing. I had to be very careful of what I wore, and sometimes I had to tape them flat. Fear had trapped me into keeping up pretences. But some months ago I thought I was going mad. I couldn't continue getting up in the morning and living a lie.

'My biggest inspiration came from Caroline Cossey, the British transsexual model who became a Bond Girl and appeared in the 1981 movie, *For Your Eyes Only*. In her prime, she was one of the most beautiful women in the world. I found out about her when I was browsing around the Melville Charity Shop and came across a copy of her autobiography, *My Story*. That book, which I believe destiny put there just for me, changed my life.'

'Tell me more about her.'

'Well, Caroline rose to fame in the 1970s and 80s as an international model known as "Tula". No one but her family and close friends knew she was a transsexual, not even her fiancé with whom she was having regular sex, until she was "outed" by that most despicable of all British tabloids, the late unlamented *News of the World*.'

'So what made her decide to have a sex-change?'

‘She has Klinefelter’s Syndrome, as I do, which means that her chromosomes are predominantly female, although she was technically born a male. Another more recent example is Kim Petras, the blonde German pop singer – also born a male and also stunningly beautiful. You see, Olly, instead of having just an X and a Y sex chromosome, as normal males do – the Y being male – those with Klinefelter’s have one or more additional X chromosomes, the X being female.’

‘So why do men have an X if Y is male?’

‘All men have an X chromosome perhaps, as Jung suggested, as it provides them with the opportunity of developing their *anima,* or unconscious feminine component, which would help them to understand women better...’

Jean flashed me a shy smile before continuing. ‘In Caroline’s case, as well as mine, we have an extra *two*, not just one, so we are XXXY.

‘Although there are variations within the Syndrome, I felt myself to be very much Caroline’s type – feminine physique, sparse facial and body hair, and underdeveloped down below. Caroline, like me, believed herself to be female from a very young age, and when she heard about reassignment surgery in her late teens, she knew immediately it was the right thing to do.’

‘So was her operation a success?’

‘Very much so … same story with Kim. Check them out on Google Images and you’ll see for yourself.’

‘But won’t the operation cost a lot?’

‘Sure, and it’s not covered by medical insurance. My modest private means wouldn’t cover it either. Anyway, I’ve had a stroke of luck. You see, a day or two after I was discharged from the hospital, I met this elderly gent at the Kalloni Club – Cyril Glossop is his name – and we had a couple of drinks together.

‘Cyril told me he’d been a transsexual since birth, but in the days of his youth sex reassignment operations were unheard of. So he suffered in silence. When such operations became generally available it was too late – he was too old. He’s a wealthy man, so he’s offered to pay not only for my operation, but also for a complete makeover afterwards – no strings attached! He just wants to give me the chance he never had.’

‘That’s wonderful! I said. ‘When are you having the op?’

‘Well, I’m supposed to be in therapy for two years before it can go ahead – that’s the law. They don’t want people feeling they’ve made a mistake,

since the operation is irreversible. However, I've heard that most psychiatrists fast-track the waiting period if they're convinced of your sincerity about the change, especially if you have Klinefelter's.'

'I thought you were against psychiatry?'

'I didn't have a choice, Olly. In any case, Liz Stott is an exception, and I'm having therapy with her. She's very sympathetic about my decision. I think the Prozac she put me on in Ward 697 may have given me the initial courage to opt for the operation. But I wanted to make the decision without any chemical influence, so I asked her if it would be okay to go off the medication. She readily agreed, and once I'd been off it long enough to be as I was before, I still had no doubts.

'Actually, the op is no big deal. And they've perfected the technique in recent years. Of course, when the procedures are completed, I'll be able to do *everything* a person who was born a woman can do – except get pregnant.' He shot me a coquettish smile.

Chapter 22

"A 'hit list' found in a file on a building site in Parkhurst, giving the names and personal details of several property owners in the suburb, has been handed to police for investigation. There were also details of domestic workers and when the owners intended going away." – The Citizen

"…news of Eskom's extravagant spending on staff parties and executive bonuses come as even more of a shock than the escalating power bills. There is nothing funny about the legalised rape of family and business finances, but sparks should fly over revelations that Eskom spent R36 million on parties for its staff and their families last year." – Editorial *The Star*

"There can be no doubt that our erratic, and seriously strained, national power supply is a cause for huge concern. We are no longer a pastoral people with cooking pots over open fires, ox wagons, and messengers on horseback, but rather a modern national state striving to make our mark in the world on the back of technology, which is by definition powered by electricity." – Editorial, *The Star*

"*My dad cut his visit to Johannesburg short as no water and intermittent electricity was too much to stomach."* – resident of Solheim, near Johannesburg, commenting on the run down condition of South Africa

On the way home there was a rumble of thunder. A chill front of air cut into us as we turned into Fourth Avenue. Trees began to sway and bits of rubbish blew in my face. I leaned into the wind, dodging around cars parked on the pavement, with Chloe trailing behind.

Just as we were halfway down the steps leading to the top of the 8th Avenue cul-de-sac, all the street and house lights flickered for a moment and then went out. It was another of Melville's frequent power cuts. Another one of Eskom's little jokes! We groped our way down the steps and onto the tarmac.

I heard a couple of faint clicks. Chloe stopped and sniffed the air.

About fifty metres further on I bumped into something hard, flat, and unyielding. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I could make out the dark shape of a rubble skip lacking reflectors, which jutted across the pavement and into the street. It was only a matter of time before some poor sod drove into it in the dark, so I decided to fetch some white plastic bags and some string to tie around it to make it more visible.

A minute or two later when I opened my front door, I was greeted by a strong smell of pine air freshener. Under the air freshener I could smell cheap tobacco.

I felt my way along the passage wall like a blind man. Halfway to the kitchen where I keep the candles and matches, I stumbled over something that suddenly gave underfoot. The next moment I was dealt a stunning blow to the head. When I opened my eyes I was lying on the floor with Chloe licking my face.

After I'd struggled to my feet I felt my way along the wall to the kitchen and eventually found the candles and lit one. In the flickering light I saw some familiar objects: a pick, a spade and a rake – all my garden tools. The tines of the rake pointed upwards. That was obviously what I'd trodden on, levering up the handle to strike me on the head.

I noticed now that the kitchen door had been forced open, obviously using the pick and the spade. They had also been used to jemmy open the door to my locked study. The shattered lock and door-handle were lying on the floor among bits of splintered wood. But the rake stumped me.

I held the candle aloft. The high shelf where I store my old pop CDs was bare. I fetched the torch from my bedroom and began checking the house room by room.

My first shock was when I discovered that the envelope containing the five-thousand rands Kristy had repaid me was no longer under the paper liner in the drawer in my study. It was my own fault. I hadn't got round to banking it. Three suits and most of my shirts were also missing.

Luckily, the Harpies had taken most of their clothes with them, but Frith's china piggy bank lay broken and empty on her bedroom floor. She'd been putting all her ten rand coins in it – saving up for a digital camera.

The following morning I phoned Frith to tell her about the burglary and

the broken piggy bank. ‘No big deal,’ she said. ‘I think it was less than a hundred rands.’

‘Well, I’ll buy you another one,’ I said, ‘and start you off with a hundred rands.’

‘Gee, thanks, Dad,’ she said.

Then I phoned Alistair L’Estrange. His opinion was that because only money and clothes were stolen, it would be a waste of time reporting it to the police. He said that would make sense only if something valuable and identifiable, such as jewellery or a TV, were taken, and which might eventually surface in a pawn shop.

There was a moment’s silence, then Alistair added, ‘Anything else, like some sign or mark outside your house?’

It was only then that I remembered the small cluster of stones in the gutter. When I told Alistair about this, he said the burglary was obviously not an opportunistic one but the result of careful monitoring, or inside information. The stones were a sign to the thieves of what to expect. ‘Do you recall anyone hanging about outside or sitting on a street corner?’

‘Besides the regular fahfee punters who are usually there for not more than an hour, I can’t.’

‘Well, then you need to make a list of everyone who has had access to your home and then check them out one by one.’

‘I suppose so,’ I sighed. A provisional list would include Rosie, the maid; Sipho, her son; Amos and Ben, the painters; Bob from Anthracite Services.

‘Actually, Alistair, I can’t believe that any of the people who’ve recently been in my house would tip off criminals.’

‘You’d be surprised,’ he retorted. ‘I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard people say exactly that, only to find out later that it was someone they knew and trusted.

‘By the way, we’re having a VOICE meeting in the next month or so. Some important things are coming up. Nearer the time I’ll let you know the date.’

The following evening just before going to bed I decided to dip into Erin’s diary again. I was in for an unpleasant surprise:

Have begun the second phase of my diet – hardly any red meat, mainly

chicken and fish, lots of fresh fruit and raw or steamed vegetables. I feel so energised these days! The exercise is also helping. I'm gaining muscle tone, and I really look forward to my workouts at the gym.

Alec is a great instructor. He seems to anticipate whatever I need without having to ask. I was thinking the other day about what it is about Alec that makes him so special. Certainly, he's good looking in a rough, muscly kind of way. Sure, he's wealthy and he always seems to have lots of money to spend. But it's not just that. He listens, really <u>listens</u>. I know comparisons are odious, but I can't help it. You see, Olly doesn't listen any more. He's off in a world of his own. And something very strange is happening. All of a sudden little things about Olly that hadn't bothered me before have begun to irritate me. Like his morning cough, the sound of his crunching toast; the time he spends in front of the newspaper and the crackling noise when he turns the pages. Meanwhile, I'm becoming bored and frustrated, so I go to bed early. I seek comfort in sleep. Sleep is where I hide from Olly.

Anyway, after my workout today, Alec asked me for coffee. I hesitated – for about three seconds! Was this right? I didn't see why not. In any case – to use that ghastly cliché – I needed to move out of my comfort zone. So I said okay. For some reason Alec didn't seem at all keen on any of the places at Cresta, so we went to this little coffee bar around the corner from his showroom.

Chapter 23

Just as I was drifting off to sleep, my cellphone rang. It was a woman's voice that sounded so constricted that I didn't recognise it at first. Then I realised it was Kristy. 'Something horrible has happened,' she sobbed. 'Can't talk now, Olly … I just need … to be with you...'

'Are you hurt, Kris?" I asked quickly. I could hear more sobbing. As I waited for her to answer, something cold and heavy like a river stone seemed to sag in my stomach.

Eventually she said: 'I wasn't actually hurt, Olly … I managed to get away.'

'Shall I come and fetch you, my sweet?'

'No … it's okay … Charlize … says …*sniff* … she can drop me off … *sniff* … in about … twenty minutes.'

'I'll be waiting outside for you.'

I pulled on a pair of boxer shorts and a T-shirt and went downstairs, forcing myself not to speculate. In situations like this I've found it only makes things worse.

I took a dozen or so white plastic bags and some string and strolled up to the rubble skip, taking my time tying them on and patting them flat to increase their reflective surfaces. After I'd finished, I went back inside and poured Kristy a double shot of whisky. Then I fetched a blanket and waited for her at the gate.

At this time of night, when most of the late revellers have gone home, Melville is at its quietest. But tonight the hadedas that roost in the fir tree a couple of houses away were engaged in a noisy squabble, their sharp cries piercing the still night air. They fell silent for a minute or two, only to begin again with renewed vigour. They kept up this racket for at least another ten minutes.

As I was puzzling over what had upset their domestic equanimity, the familiar red roadster turned into Eighth Avenue and pulled up in front of the gate.

Kristy opened the passenger door and began clambering out. She was wearing a red tracksuit and trainers. Charlize, in a dark green tracksuit,

leaned across and whispered to her. Kristy nodded and then clicked the door shut.

'Take care of her, Olly!' Charlize called out, pronouncing my name "Arlly". 'She's had a nasty shock … Needs lots of TLC.' I noticed how American Charlize sounded. While I was thinking about this, she gave a friendly wave and sped off.

Kristy ran up to me, dropping the yellow sports bag she was carrying, then flung her arms around my neck. I draped the blanket around her and held her tight. She was shivering. After the ride in the open Audi, her cheek felt cold against mine. We stood in silence, while I rubbed her back with my hand. After a few moments I could hear she was crying. 'What's the matter, Kris,' I asked softly.

Between sobs she said, 'A man … a man … he tried to … hurt me.'

I took her by the hand and led her inside to the lounge. 'Drink this, my sweet,' I said, handing her the glass of whisky. She sniffed it and took two quick gulps, then settled back on the couch, gripping the glass in both hands. Her eyes lifted up to mine and she gave me a weak smile.

I put on a CD of Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*, and instantly the dulcet guitar music enveloped us like a comforting mantle.

'Let me take off your shoes, Kris,' I said. 'It'll help you relax.'

'Mmmm,' she murmured in agreement.

Kneeling down at her feet, I undid the laces and eased off her trainers. As I pulled off her socks, I noticed that her beautifully manicured toenails were still painted red.

I began massaging her left foot, beginning with the instep, with small circular motions.

'I'd give anything for a smoke,' Kristy said, 'but I better not.' Instead, she unwrapped a stick of gum and popped it into her mouth. Then she gave a little cough and said, 'Now let me tell you what happened.'

'Okay.'

'Well, it happened after I went to this client's flat in Clarence Court, Hyde Park. While I was massaging her, I heard a noise. When I turned, I saw this pink-faced man standing behind me. His piercing eyes were staring straight at me. I had the feeling I'd seen him somewhere before, but I couldn't think where. "Just relax," he said. "There's nothing to be concerned about. You're…" Then I noticed the injection needle in his hand. You know, like the ones they stick patients with when they get out of control. Suddenly

he lurched towards me.

‘I got such a fright that I just dropped everything and ran. I pushed past the man and was out the door and down the stairs before he could come after me. I called a taxi on my cellphone and waited in a doorway a couple of blocks away until it arrived. When I got back to the Spa, I told Mrs Eberhardt what had happened. She seemed shocked. Afterwards, she said she would phone the client, Mrs Sally Bombeck, and ask for an explanation. In any case, it’s against Spa rules for men to be present when we’re with a client.’

‘Did you call the police.’

‘I asked Mrs Eberhardt if we should, and she said she better speak to Mrs Bombeck first.’

‘Well, the main thing is you’re okay, Kris.’ I stood up and hugged her tightly.

She leaned back in my arms and looked up at me with a weary smile. ‘I’m really tired now, Olly. I think I’d like to go to bed.’

‘Okay. Let me show you up.’ I picked up her sports bag, and led her upstairs to the bedroom.

Kristy stripped off her clothes unselfconsciously and climbed into the double bed. I hesitated for a moment, then quickly joined her. Once we were under the covers, she snuggled up to me. We were lying face to face. ‘I just want to feel you close to me, Olly,’ she whispered, easing a leg between mine. ‘And being with you is the best way of getting that horrible man out of my mind.’

Chapter 24

Sometime around six the hadedas began their wake-up chorus. When I opened my eyes, Kristy was lying next to me, asleep. It had been a warm night, and she'd obviously kicked off the duvet to cool off. The morning light filtering through the window pooled on her bare legs. Beads of perspiration stood out on her forehead. I placed my hand on her brow.

She awoke with a start, stared about blankly for a moment, then sat up and hugged me. A deep probing kiss. Even her morning breath smelled sweet. 'Oh, Olly, it's so great waking up next to you. I need to pinch myself to make sure you're real!'

'I'm real enough,' I said, planting a kiss on her cheek.

'Mind if I have a bath?'

'Please do,' I said hopping out of bed to fetch a fresh towel and a new cake of soap.

I didn't feel like getting up just then, so I climbed back into bed and snuggled under the covers. I must have dozed off again.

I was awakened by a cellphone beeping through the half-open bathroom door. I heard Kristy talking to someone for a while, and then she called to me. 'Hey, Olly, that was Mrs Eberhardt. She's explained everything. Come in here and I'll tell you all about it.'

I went through to the bathroom, put the loo lid down and sat opposite Kristy as she reclined in the bath. The morning sun filtering through the window glistened on her wet body. She was so beautiful that I found it difficult to focus on anything else. There was only one small blemish: the red mark on her arm had turned a brownish yellow. 'So what did Mrs Eberhardt say?' I asked.

'Well, according to her it was all a big misunderstanding…' She paused, as she worked the soapy lather downwards. '…You see, the man with the needle is Mrs Bombeck's diabetic neighbour who's not used to injecting himself. His wife used to do it for him, but last month she passed away. So Mrs Bombeck helps him now. Yesterday, when he came for his injection, he didn't know she was having a massage. The door was unlocked, so he just let himself in. That's when I saw him. Oh, Olly, I feel such a *fool!'*

‘No need to, Kris. Anyone would have thought the same.’

Now Kristy was all smiles ‘The bath was great,’ she said, levering herself out of the water. ‘Won’t you dry me, please, Olly.’

I took the towel and began patting her – first her back, and then her front, gently.

She must have caught my look. ‘I know what you’re thinking, Olly,’ she said, with an uncharacteristically bashful smile. ‘Actually, I’m thinking the same. But we must be patient. It’ll come right; you’ll see.’

We went downstairs and made breakfast consisting of ProNutro, scrambled eggs, bacon, fried tomato, toast and marmalade. Kristy switched on the percolator, and soon the delicious smell of brewing coffee wafted through the house.

We ate in the dining room, hands touching across the table like a newly married couple. It was one of those magical moments when time stands still and you suddenly feel at peace with the world.

As the percolator began its final round of spluttering, Kristy gave my hand a squeeze, then went through to the kitchen to pour the coffee. I switched on the radio to catch the news. *Mid East funding for the Africar Project … another serial killer on the loose in KZN … the Rand loses three percent against the dollar … Amnesty International delegation is denied a visa … another teenage girl has disappeared from a Johannesburg shopping mall…*

I doubted whether Kristy had heard the headlines above the noisy percolator. But I thought it best not to mention the girl’s disappearance after the incident at Mrs Bombeck’s, even if Kristy was satisfied with the explanation.

After she returned with clinking cups, she spoke briefly into her cellphone. Then she rang off and smiled at me. ‘Charlize is picking me up in half an hour.’

About five minutes later Charlize arrived with a squeal of brakes. It was the signal for Kristy to give me a long kiss me goodbye.

Chapter 25

"Project MKULTRA, or MK-ULTRA, was the code name for a covert, illegal CIA human research program. … [It] involved the use of many methodologies to manipulate individual mental states and alter brain function, including the surreptitious administration of drugs and other chemicals, sensory deprivation, isolation, and verbal and sexual abuse.' – Wikipedia

In anticipation of the FOWL work party I changed into a faded blue T-shirt, black boxer shorts and a pair of well-worn veldskoens. Then I went downstairs, poured myself a cup of coffee and defrosted a large bone, which I tossed to Chloe, who was waiting outside on the kitchen steps. After that I checked my e-mail.

There was one message from Alistair L'Estrange, saying he'd put the details of my burglary into the VOICE database. He also reminded me to begin photographing people loitering on the streets in my neighbourhood.

After I'd downed the coffee (now lukewarm), I grabbed my Minolta, which still had about a dozen shots left, and headed out of the front door. It was a perfect late spring day.

At the corner of 8th Avenue and 3rd Street two men in overalls, who looked like painters or building workers, were sprawled on the grassy verge eating 'doorstop' sandwiches. I greeted them, explained our anti-crime project, and asked them if they'd mind being photographed and having their IDs checked.

'No problem,' one said sleepily. He placed the sandwich in a plastic ice cream box lying on the grass and reached for his ID card. I jotted down the details.

After the other man had handed me his ID, he squinted at me for a moment, then cleared his throat as if to speak. I clicked off a couple of rapid shots before he could object. Then I said quickly: 'I'll give you guys a photo after I print them. Okay?'

'Right, boss.'

When I was about twenty metres down the road, one of them gave a

shout. ‘My bread – it’s gone! You take it, Ephraim?’

‘No, I not take. You must have eaten…’

I left them arguing while I headed for the FOWL rendezvous.

Today’s FOWL stint was very much like our first one, except the weather was much hotter. We repainted white lines, re-erected a stop sign that had rusted through and fallen over, and put a ready-mix cold patch on a pothole. By then we were thirsty, so we decided to drive to the Exclamation Mark for drinks.

At the next corner a gentle breeze was rustling the fronds of the tall canary palms skirting the Dutch Reformed Church. Ahead of us to the east along 4th Avenue, the Hillbrow Tower thrust above the skyline like a cautioning finger.

As we pulled up outside the Exclamation Mark, our fellow Fowlites waved to us from the patio. We exchanged smiles and then moved inside to a larger table. Most of us ordered beer, white wine or sparkling water, but Faan ordered a T’nT. He explained to the bewildered waitress that this was Tequila ’n Tonic, a drink he claimed to have invented.

Four well-dressed black men at an adjoining table ordered a large plate of chips. The delicious aroma soon wafted across to us.

‘Let’s have a plate of those,’ Faan said suddenly, and before anyone could object, he called the waitress, placed the order. A few minutes later a mountainous plate of chips arrived, together with a bottle of tomato sauce. Conversation tailed off as we helped ourselves.

‘By the way,’ said Ken, ‘Alistair L’Estrange tells me there’s now a dedicated VOICE website giving accurate crime information. It’s called SACRO – S.A. Crime Reports Online.’

Pilar Zapata, who was now on her second glass of wine, had shifted closer. A moment later I felt her hand resting lightly on my leg.

After a decent interval, I contrived to drop my pen, and in bending down to retrieve it, managed to dislodge her hand. Peering under the table, I saw that Drew and Jill were holding hands.

As I straightened up, Jill gave me an impish grin. I smiled back but said nothing.

We all looked up as three Americans, who were talking loudly, strolled into the restaurant, glanced around, and plonked themselves down at a corner table.

‘Melville seems to be full of Americans,’ observed Faan. ‘I wonder what

the attraction is?'

'Well,' said Drew, with a mysterious little smile. 'Do you know what the American community in South Africa call Melville?'

Rastaman shook his head.

No one else seemed to know.

'Little Langley. You know … the CIA Headquarters at Langley, Virginia, outside Washington D.C.'

'But what's the connection with Melville?' said Anita, wrinkling her nose.

'Several reasons, the main one being that it's near the universities.'

'Why's that so important?' I asked.

'Well, the CIA has a long history of recruiting "assets" on campuses, both in America and overseas. Sometimes the Agency needs special information from experts such as professors of local and African politics that they recruit as "consultants" and sometimes can even be persuaded to pass on information from conferences they attend.

'But their main interest is in graduate and post-graduate students, especially ones from other African countries. These are recruited through offers of post-graduate funding through CIA front organisations. Once enmeshed by the CIA, such students return to their home countries where some eventually attain high posts in government or semi-government organisations.'

'Hey, bru, that's really shocking!' exclaimed Rastaman. 'I suspected these bastards were active in South Africa but not *that* active!'

'You CIA?' Faan asked Drew bluntly.

A silence followed. Finally Drew smiled wanly. 'I was for many years.'

'So what made you join?'

'Well, I went to Yale, which is one of the main recruiting grounds for the CIA. If you join Yale's elite secret society, the Skull and Bones, then you're virtually assured of a job with the CIA, but–'

Jean interrupted, with an edge to his voice. 'So are you saying you're a member of the Skull and Bones?'

'What happened was that I was "tapped" (that's the term they use to tell you that you're a candidate), but I refused. I thought that joining a secret society with all those bizarre rituals was childish and absurd. But that didn't put the CIA off; they still recruited me. But my time with the CIA itself is another story. That was serious stuff!'

‘I would have thought that your turning down the Skull and Bones would have barred you from the Agency?’

‘No way, with my Masters degree in psychology and political science I was a natural. And later one of my CIA seniors told me that my refusing the Bonesmen showed I could think for myself and didn’t run with the crowd – something valued by the CIA, at least for field officers.’

‘So what was it like?’ persisted Faan. ‘I mean in the CIA.’

Drew rubbed his chin and glanced around the table. ‘When you start you feel like the hero in a comic book for boys. But the reality is very, very different. Eventually I resigned.’

‘Why?’ (Faan’s rapid-fire questioning would have done credit to an interrogator of the former KGB!)

‘It’s a complicated story, Faan. But I suppose I can tell you; there’s nothing classified. In any case, I don’t really care any more.’ He turned towards Jill. She smiled encouragingly.

‘The main thing was because the CIA was violating its own charter. Instead of limiting its activities to gathering intelligence abroad, it was operating *within* the United States, which is supposed to be the sole province of the FBI. Also, it was doing things to American citizens that I didn’t approve of – not just spying on them, which was bad enough. You see, the CIA was supposed to have shut down its mind control programmes, like MK-Ultra, in the 1970s, but I found out they were not only continuing in secret but had actually been stepped up!’

Always sceptical, I said. ‘But isn’t that just conspiracy theory?’

‘Maybe it sounds like it, but let me assure you, Olly, it’s true. The Agency was using drugs, hypnosis and electronic implants to manipulate and control people. Some of the victims were programmed as couriers of top secret documents that couldn’t be entrusted to normal channels; others became sex slaves for high-up people in government, while still others were programmed to be assassins. Some say the CIA, or rather its political wing, has become the Praetorian Guard for a corrupt globalist elite. Ultimately, the CIA became a law unto itself. For me that was the final straw.’

Chapter 26

"To bring an end to this era in which the lies of our elected government and the covert operations of our secret government threaten the very survival of our society, we must begin to see the Cold War and our national security in a new light. … In his short three years as President, John Kennedy had already begun to change our attitudes and fundamental assumptions about the Cold War. His adoption of a more enlightened, less polarized view of the earth and its inhabitants, I believe, may have led John Kennedy to his death." – Jim Garrison, district attorney of New Orleans at the time of the JFK assassination

"The answer to the Kennedy assassination is with the Federal Reserve Bank. Don't underestimate that. It's wrong to blame it on [Senior CIA counterintelligence official James] *Angleton and CIA per se only. This is only one finger of the same hand. The people who supply the money are above the CIA." – Marina Oswald (Lee Harvey's widow, interviewed by A J Weberman in 1994*

"The corporate grip on opinion in the United States is one of the wonders of the Western World. No First World country has ever managed to eliminate so entirely from its media all objectivity – much less dissent." – Gore Vidal

Jean daintily wiped his mouth with a paper napkin before posing another question. 'What about the killing of JFK? I mean, some conspiracy theorists on the Net say it was carried out by a mind-controlled assassin.'

'It's possible. The mind control techniques depicted in the movie, *The Manchurian Candidate,* are based on fact.'

'So what's your theory about the assassination, if you have one?'

Drew gave a long sigh. 'This is a very complex subject and there are no easy answers.'

'But is it all that important now?' I asked. 'I mean all these years after the event?'

‘Actually, it is, Olly. If you want to understand what’s going on in America today and indeed the world, you need to know something about the forces that were likely involved in the Kennedy assassination because they are the very same ones that are still manipulating American politics today, including US foreign policy.’

‘Hmmm,’ I murmured, somewhat doubtfully.

‘Actually, the risk of war today is as great, if not greater, than during the darkest days of the Cold War, thanks to the warmongering neocons, who’ve infiltrated every level of government, the media, so-called independent foundations and other opinion-forming organisations. They have set America on a collision course with Russia, and possibly also China, never mind Iran. If only the US had a president with the balls of JFK to challenge these super-patriots, as he did during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the world would be a much safer place.’

‘Sounds a bit extreme to me.’

‘Well, the significance of the Kennedy assassination was that it entrenched the manipulative forces behind American politics that use criminal covert operations as an instrument of power, both at home and abroad.’

Everyone at the table was now paying close attention.

‘So who do you think was actually behind the assassination?’ I asked.

Drew proceeded to eliminate most of the usual suspects one by one including Russia, China, Cuba, and the Mafia.

Then he gave a tight little smile. ‘My considered opinion is that the culprits were within the US government.’

A few of us gave a gasp.

‘But first ‘I need to sketch in some background before I can answer Olly’s question.

‘You see, a high-powered committee variously known as the “5412 Committee”, or the “Special Group”, had been formed as far back as the 1950s (hence the “54”). Meeting in Room 40 at CIA headquarters in Langley, its original aim was to co-ordinate the working relationship between the CIA, the White House, the State Department, and the National Security Council. This group (let’s call them the Insiders) was also tasked with covert action – Black Ops, if you like. Eventually it evolved into something like a secret government within a government.’

‘Now we really are talking conspiracy!’ exclaimed Jean.

‘Well, some analysts have even gone as far as calling it “the *de facto* government of the United States”. More colloquially, it was called “The Secret Team”.

‘Over the years the primary emphasis shifted from co-ordination to covert action, including assassination. This set a dangerous precedent for much of the covert activities that continue unchecked today.

‘At the time of the Kennedy assassination, the 5412-Special Group was dominated by some super patriots who were on a fanatical anti-communist crusade. Don’t get me wrong – I’m no fan of communism – but these guys were dangerous ideologues who’d do anything – and I mean *anything* – to achieve their aims. They had a warped view of reality in which fact and paranoia merged. They regarded JFK and his brother, Robert, as “waffling liberals” who didn’t understand communism, or worse, were in bed with it.’

‘Incidentally, there’s very little difference psychologically between the super patriots of the 1960s and the neo-conservatives of today, who are their ideological successors.’

Drew took a sip of Perrier before continuing. ‘There’s a lot of circumstantial evidence that the super patriots within the 5412 Committee, or someone or some group with close links to them, or possibly even above them, organised the assassination of JFK, or at least incubated the idea perhaps in collaboration with elements within the CIA.’

‘Some people say JFK’s assassination was poetic justice,’ remarked Jean. ‘The same applies to his brother, Bobby.’

‘How come?’ I asked.

‘Because both brothers had affairs with Marilyn Monroe, and she died in questionable circumstances.’

Drew glanced around the table. ‘If there was any skulduggery it’s unlikely that the Kennedys were involved. No, if you’re looking for a culprit, I would suggest you look at, for want of a better term, the ‘Presidential Handlers”.’

‘I’m not with you,’ I said.

‘All I’ll say is that they’re not part of the official White House staff.’

Without asking us, Faan had ordered another plate of chips. But when the chips arrived, no one objected and we were soon hungrily helping ourselves.

After this temporary distraction, Drew leaned forward and said, ‘Now where were we?’

‘We were talking about who was to blame for the death of Marilyn

Monroe.'

'Right.' Drew paused for a moment before continuing. 'Actually, within the CIA itself there's also a blame game going on. On one side are the "Politicals", usually political appointees, often very senior officials, who invariably come from an elite, Ivy League background and who work closely with the hawkish Insiders in government.

'On the other side are the "Professionals", often but not exclusively former field officers, who stick to their intelligence-gathering mandate and take a more cautious, less political approach. They frequently have previous work experience with the FBI or the detective branch of a local police force and usually come from a more ordinary social background.

'It's a well-known fact that the Politicals and their allies in government want a more hands-on approach in Africa. They believe that Africa is becoming a nest of terror, and they don't trust African leaders to do anything effective about it. So they want an excuse to set up structures that will amount to a form of effective recolonisation, not only to combat terror, but also as part of the strategy for American world hegemony. But, as we all know, colonisation has a lot of negative baggage, which they believe could be ignored only if there was another Pearl Harbour or 9/11 type attack that, in this case, originated in Africa. In other words like the attack on the FBI building.'

'Makes sense in a twisted sort of way.'

'Well, the theory is that the Professionals had received a tip about the Ethiopian Airlines plot, but the Politicals either didn't pass the information on to government, or if they did, a decision was taken by government Insiders to let it go ahead for the reasons I've just mentioned.'

Chapter 27

On the walk home I received an SMS love heart from Kristy, together with a digital photo of her in a red bikini emerging from a swimming pool. I stored the photo in memory and sent a reply: LUV U 2. COOL PIC. C U SOON.

Now in the mood for phoning, I dialled Bonny. We chatted for a while; then she said: ‘Hey, Dad, when is all this stuff with lawyers going to be sorted out so we can come home to Melville?’

‘Hopefully soon,’ I said, my spirits rising. I made a mental note to call Ted Thrupp.

When I finally went up to bed, I didn’t feel like reading Erin’s diary either. Instead, I reached for my cellphone and clicked on the image of Kristy in her red bikini. I savoured the photo for a while, wishing she were snuggled up in bed with me, and then fell asleep.

The next morning I telephoned Kristy to find out if she was all right. She said she was fine, but she and Charlize had three appointments, so she couldn’t come over.

‘I know it’s Sunday,’ she said, ‘but they pay overtime. And, of course, I need the money. Maybe we can get together next weekend, Olly. Let’s talk about it tomorrow when I’ve had a chance to check the client bookings.’

On the way to work on Monday morning, I dropped off the spool of film at a camera shop at Cresta. The man behind the counter said the prints would be ready that afternoon, so I decided to collect them on the way home.

After I’d arrived at AIR, Will Allwell stuck his head round my door and told me that a senior SPP politician, accompanied by a delegation of Ministry officials, was touring the station. ‘In their dark suits they look like a bunch of Soweto undertakers,’ he added with a chuckle.

‘Burial or exhumation?’ I asked deadpan.

‘We’ll just have to wait and see, won’t we?’

About half an hour later I passed the delegation in the passage, accompanied by Tata Zondi, whose hands were clasped tightly in front of

her. She responded with a quick little laugh to a remark one of the officials had made. Then a portly man with a proprietary air, who I gathered was the SPP politician, began saying something about the need for an Arabic service. Tata Zondi nodded vigorously.

After the delegation had left, Tata Zondi called a staff meeting. She announced that the Ministry had dispensed with the services of Mthembu, Hoogenrijk & Partners and that a new team of consultants, Cassim, Nyati & Associates, had been appointed. Their first task would be to conduct a staff audit, including the checking of credentials.

As staff drifted away from the meeting, Will Allwell sidled up to me. 'Looks like we've had a bit of a reprieve,' he said owlishly.

'Meaning?'

'Well, if you remember it was the ANC consultants who wanted to close down AIR. And the new lot will probably take *months* – could be more than a year – before they begin to know what's potting.'

After I'd finished work and was waiting for the lift, I became aware that the ubiquitous humming in my ears had suddenly changed pitch. In the lift, however, the noise stopped. But as the lift doors opened on the ground floor, it resumed for perhaps half a minute, then reverted to its normal "white noise" level. Used to this, I soon forgot about it.

After I'd picked up the photos, I saw that the ones of Kristy at the zoo had come out fine, and I spent a good five minutes admiring them. But there was something strange about those of the two building workers. In each shot there was a third person – a wiry little black man with a mischievous grin. He was kneeling beside them munching a sandwich.

I felt like seeing a movie that evening so I decided to drive up to the Art Cinema at Hyde Park and see one at the Japanese film festival.

Hoping that Kristy would be able to come, I phoned her private phone. There was no answer – just her recorded voice prompting a message. I took a chance and phoned her on her business phone. Still no answer, so I left a message for her to call me.

The movie I chose was based on Haruki Murakami's enigmatic novel, *Sputnik Sweetheart.* It was about a girl who disappears mysteriously on a Greek island, and her male friend's efforts to find her.

As I went into the movie theatre, I switched off my cellphone. Although I enjoyed the movie I found it unsettling. I was so absorbed in thought that as I left the theatre I forgot to switch on my cellphone. It was only after I got

home that I remembered. There was a message from Kristy's friend, Merrill, to call her urgently. She'd never called me before, so I had no idea what it could be about. A feeling of dread was fast forming in my mind. When I called, she came straight to the point. 'I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Olly – *mind if I call you Olly* – but they've taken Kristy and Charlize!'

'Oh, my God! What happened?' I asked.

'They've been hijacked.'

'You serious? Where?'

'Please bear with me, Olly…' Her voiced trailed off. '…I'm very upset, as you can imagine… She cleared her throat. There was a long pause before she continued.

'…Well, I got a call from Kristy around 6.30 this evening … She said she and Charlize were travelling to meet a client when they stopped off at a mall. After they left the parking lot they noticed a big white car with two guys in it following them. On a quiet stretch of road off Corlett Drive they were forced off the road and hijacked. The hijackers pushed them into the boot of their car, from where she was phoning … She was amazingly calm considering … But I could hear Charlize crying next to her.' Merrill sniffled; then I heard her blow her nose. '…When the car drove off, they could hear one of the hijackers driving after them in the white car…

'…Kristy thinks they were driven back onto Corlett Drive and then onto the M1, where she thinks they began heading north. That's when she phoned me. She said she'd first tried calling 10111 several times, but she couldn't get through. Then she tried you, but your phone was off.'

I suddenly felt numb. 'Oh, my God. How stupid of me!' I could hear myself speaking, as if from a distance.

'Kristy said her battery was getting low, so she asked me to try phoning 10111 to call the Flying Squad. She also asked me to call you. After she rang off, it took four or five tries before I finally got through to the emergency number. After I'd told the operator what Kristy had told me, she gave me a number to call for an update. After that I tried phoning Kristy, but it was one of those "Please try again later" recordings. I think her battery must have finally died.'

It was with a very heavy heart that I went up to bed. I tossed and turned for what seemed hours, my mind racing, before I lapsed into a troubled sleep.

When I awoke around seven the next morning, everything for a moment seemed normal. But then I remembered that Kristy and Charlize had been

hijacked and were missing. Then reality kicked in.

At the office, only half my mind was on my work, the other half was on Kristy and Charlize. Merrill had given me a police number to call for information. I phoned several times throughout the day, but it just rang and rang and rang…

Chapter 28

It was only in the afternoon of the following day, as I was about to phone the police number again, when Merrill called me at the office. ‘It’s terrible news, Olly…’ Merrill’s voice was choking. ‘I’m … ‘I’m so, *so* sorry to be the one to tell you this … but Kristy and Charlize are … are …’ Her voice tailed off to a whisper. ‘…d-dead.’

‘Oh, no!’

‘I’m afraid so, Olly…’

A long silence.

‘Please go on,’ I forced myself to say.

Between sniffles, I heard her blow her nose. ‘…You see,’ she eventually said, ‘…the police found the car just off the R512. You know, the Pelindaba Road – the twisty bit just before the Hartbeespoort Dam…’ Her voice tailed off again.

‘And?’

‘…Well, from what I can gather … there were two bodies where the back seat was and one in the front.’

‘I-I thought the girls were locked in the boot.’

‘They were, but they must have been let out…’

‘So what actually happened, Merrill?’ I asked gently.

‘I’m not sure … probably the driver was going too fast round a bend and lost control. The car went down a steep embankment and crashed into big rocks under some trees…’ her voice dropped to a whisper again.

‘And then?’

‘A … a rock must have ripped open the petrol tank … Maybe someone was smoking … I don’t know…’ A long silence.

I forced myself to keep talking. ‘I’m listening, Merrill, please carry on.’

‘The … the car … must have exploded. It was completely burned out.’

‘Oh my God!’

‘Yes, I know it’s hard to believe, Olly...’ Her words came out in a rush. ‘…The bodies were burned beyond recognition. You see, it wasn’t the open Audi they were driving but the Mercedes, which, of course, is enclosed. They must have been trapped inside.’

‘Didn’t the car have a tracker?’ I asked, knowing the question was pointless but still trying to keep the conversation going.

‘It must have. All the spa cars have them.’

‘Then surely after you reported the hijacking, the tracking company should’ve been able to locate the car and contact the Flying Squad?’

‘I asked the same question, Olly. The police couldn’t give me that info, so I asked Mrs Eberhardt to phone the tracking company. At first she said it would be a waste of time, but eventually she agreed. They told her that the tracker only worked for a short while, then went dead. They said it must have been deactivated.’

‘Doesn’t sound like your ordinary hijacker to me. These guys must have really known what they were doing.’

When I got home, I reached for my cellphone to tell Faan the sad news. He was deeply disturbed and offered to do everything he could to help. He even suggested that he drive me out to examine the crash scene. That was about the last thing I felt like doing, so I politely declined. Nevertheless, he said he would drive out alone and cast his prosecutor’s eye over the scene. He added that he was pretty certain there would be an inquest and that it was unlikely that a funeral could be held before then. ‘At a time like this, Olly,’ you don’t want to be worrying about such details. Let *me* do the worrying and I’ll keep you informed.’

With his legal background, Faan was the ideal person to keep a watching brief, so I gratefully accepted.

The post mortem findings were inconclusive. The bodies had been so badly burned that it was as if they’d been cremated. Even the teeth had disintegrated under the extreme heat, leaving no trace of DNA. As a result, there could be no positive identification, nor could the precise cause of death be established.

The magistrate ordered an inquest which found that, given the circumstances of the hijacking, the bodies were presumed to be those of Charlize, Kristy, and that of the driver. The most likely cause of death was the car’s striking the rocks and the subsequent explosion and fire. A police forensic witness said the fire must have ignited dry branches nearby because he’d found wood ash everywhere. Judging by the state of the bodies, they must have been burning for hours.

Although, according to Faan, bodies are usually released for burial or cremation after a post mortem, the magistrate in this case had decided not to release them until after the inquest.

The finding was that the deceased driver and his partner were to blame.

It was therefore only a week later that the funeral could finally go ahead.

Someone had placed a notice in *The Star*, stating that a joint funeral for Kristy and Charlize would be held at 2pm, on Friday, the 1st of November, at Dove's funeral parlour in Braamfontein.

Chapter 29

"…a boulder with a steel rod embedded in it smashed through the windscreen of the car she was in, and killed her … The young Varsity College student died during surgery at St Augustine's Hospital after suffering extensive internal injuries." – Sunday Tribune report on criminals hurling rocks at motorists from an overhead bridge in Mayville, Durban

I arrived at Dove's at about twenty to two. After I'd found a parking under a tree, I sat in my car alone with my thoughts, the dappled sunlight filtering through the leaves. Soon it became hot in the car, so I rolled down the window to let in some fresh air. The dull rumble of lunch-hour traffic filtered in.

A few minutes later a grey Volkswagen Microbus with the Pinnacle Health Spa logo on one side pulled into a nearby parking bay and disgorged about half a dozen young women – all attractive blondes. They began talking quietly among themselves. One of them, slightly taller than the others, glanced about and then came over to my car. (I'd told Merrill that I'd be early and I'd wait in my Lada until she arrived.)

'I'm Merrill,' she said with a weary smile. She was not as breathtakingly beautiful as Kristy or Charlize, being a little on the plump side, but still very pretty – a strawberry blonde.

'Olly,' I said, as I got out of the Lada and pressed her hand.

She hesitated for a moment, then gave me a little hug. Then she said, 'Let's go in, Olly. I think the service is in the East Chapel.'

A silver late-model BMW driven by a middle-aged woman with greying blonde hair had pulled into the bay next to the Microbus. The woman, dressed in a tasteful grey suit, got out and joined the group of girls, who seemed to have been waiting for her. They strolled ahead of us towards the chapel. One girl was carrying a guitar. They paused as they entered the chapel, looked about, and then filed into the left back row. Merrill and I followed them. The chapel was filling up quickly. Then I noticed two identical light-wood coffins on metal trolleys positioned at the front. The

thought that the charred remains of Kristy and Charlize were in them struck me like a hammer blow and I was gripped by a terrible sadness.

Suddenly Merrill was nudging me, and nodding towards a woman in a black dress who was walking down the aisle. ‘That’s Kristy’s mom,’ she whispered, as the woman took a seat in the front row.

I could see her only from the back, so I couldn’t form an impression, except that she was the only person dressed in black. She seemed to be on her own. A middle-aged couple, also in the front row, sat with their heads bowed. They were Charlize’s parents, Merrill informed me.

Dotted among the other mourners, many of whom I didn’t know, were all our Crazy Gang friends, including Carlos, Sonja and Helena, who I hadn’t seen since I’d been discharged from hospital.

Gerda, Liz Stott, Pilar Zapata, Old Cow and Sue from O.T., arrived a few minutes later, followed by Drew and Jill. Next came Weddo and Petrus who, to my surprise and delight, were accompanied by Philip, the young security guard and former Ward 697 patient who had attempted suicide after criminals had murdered his fiancé. The last to arrive was Professor Cruz, who crossed himself as he paused at the entrance.

Soft organ music filtered through the chapel. The service began with the singing of the 23rd Psalm. I shared a hymn sheet with Merrill. We were both in a subdued mood, so we only mouthed the words.

The minister, the Reverend Roy Childs of the Melville Methodist Church, was a pale young man with a pleasant voice. He spoke about how violent crime in South Africa was tragically killing so many young people before they’d had a chance to live their lives. It was a great loss, he said, not only for their families but also for the country. He added, however, that those whom God loves best, he takes first, or words to that effect.

Only then did it hit me: I would never see Kristy again...

Roy Childs was now inviting members of the congregation to pay tribute to Kristy and Charlize. The girl with the guitar stepped up and began playing *Wayfaring Stranger*, a haunting folksong that brought a lump to my throat. As she played, she would sometimes close her eyes and shake her head.

Then another girl, smaller than the rest, recited Mary Frye’s *A Hopi Prayer* in a clear bell-like voice:

Do not stand at my grave and weep;
I am not there, I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry;
I am not there, I did not die.

After she'd finished, I felt I also wanted to say something to honour Kristy, but I wasn't sure quite what. Then it came to me: Kristy's poem, *Let's Pretend*, which she'd composed in Ward 697.

I raised my hand, and Roy Childs smiled and beckoned to me.

As I began reciting the poem, I imagined that Kristy and I were in the common room, looking out over the Zoo. I almost felt her take my hand and say:

Let's pretend…
We're on our beach
Just you and me
The sand, the foam
Your hand in mine
The salty air
The shells between our toes
The wind kissing my hair
Your arm around me
Holding me close.

I saw Marge's face crumple. She leaned forward and put her head in her hands, her shoulders shaking. Mrs Minnaar was blinking away tears. When I sat down, Merrill leaned over and whispered: 'That was so beautiful, Olly.'

'It was Kristy's poem,' I said. 'She composed it for me.'

Faan was on his feet, speaking to the girl with the guitar. Today, he was wearing his waistcoat on the paisley side. She nodded, smiled, and handed him the instrument. He hurried to the front and turned and faced the

congregation.

‘I want to play you something that is normally not played at funerals – *Sarie Marais.* It’s a song that Kristy loved to sing and which, I understand, Charlize loved too.’

A murmur of approval ran through the congregation.

Faan put one foot on a small wooden chair, played a few warm-up chords, and then began singing in a strong tenor voice. *My Sarie Marais is so ver van my hart, Maar ek hoop om haar weer te sien.…*

Faan’s recital had lifted the mood, and when we all trooped into the foyer for tea and snacks, there were quite a few tentative smiles. Several bottles of sherry and a few dozen small glasses had been placed on a trolley alongside the tea table.

Oom Henk poured himself a generous glass of sherry and downed it in one gulp. ‘Nearly as good as Jeripego,’ he announced to no one in particular. Then he poured himself another. As he was about to down it, Liz Stott, who’d been standing nearby, shot him a disapproving look. With studied nonchalance, he grinned back at her amiably, nodded, then turned and disappeared into the crowd.

I poured Merrill a glass of sherry, took one myself, as well as a plate of snacks, and then glanced about.

Standing near the entrance, the greying blonde woman, as well as Mrs Minnaar and Charlize’s parents were huddled in earnest conversation.

‘That’s Mrs Eberhardt,’ Merrill said, sliding her eyes in their direction. She gave the woman a long, hard look before continuing. ‘There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you, Olly.’

‘Like what?’

She took a sip of sherry before replying. ‘Well, when Mrs E heard the news of Kristy’s and Charlize’s death, although she acted concerned, I could somehow tell she was just going through the motions, not really feeling anything. Don’t you find that a bit strange, Olly?’

‘Not necessarily. Could be shock. It sometimes deadens the emotions.’

Mrs Eberhardt was saying goodbye, and moments later she hurried out into the parking area. I heard a car door slam and an engine start.

‘Mind if we go over there?’ I said, nodding towards my fellow Crazy Gangers, who were gathered around the tea table. ‘They were in hospital with

Kristy and me,' I explained.

'I'd like to meet them,' Merrill said, and we drifted over towards them.

When Marge saw me, she rushed up and gave me a crushing hug. 'Oh, Olly, Olly, *Olly*…' she wailed. A long pause punctuated by sobs. Finally she whispered, 'I can't believe Kristy's gone. You know, she was such a good friend to me. Remember Jimmy and Jemima, and how she rescued them after Dr Pull-a-Zap…?' She turned and glared at Pilar Zapata, who was standing at the other end of the tea table talking to Weddo Moloi. 'I've still got both of them, you know. After my dog, they're my best pets.'

Over the next ten minutes or so most of my Crazy Gang friends drifted over. After I'd introduced them to Merrill, they gave me little hugs. Few words were necessary.

Leah was crying. So was Beth. Pilar Zapata's hug lingered … as did her heavy perfume. Rastaman and Lin Chang gave me brotherly embraces.

'Good to see you, my man,' said Rastaman. 'Our thoughts are with you, Olly.'

'Likewise,' said Lin Chang.

Gabriel and Professor Cruz sidled up to me. 'I'm very sorry, Olly,' said Gabriel. 'I know it's difficult to understand, but it must be God's will.'

Professor Cruz, who was wearing a huge Coptic cross, stared wide-eyed at Gabriel for a moment and then turned to me. 'It will be all right, my son. You'll see.'

'How do you mean?' I asked.

He flashed an enigmatic smile. 'Just mark my words...'

I felt a tap on my shoulder. As I turned, Jean embraced me. 'I really loved Kristy,' he whispered. 'I'm going to miss her terribly.' The hug lingered. I could hear him weeping. At last, in a choking voice, he blurted, 'Love you too, Olly.'

Faan didn't embrace me. He took both my hands in his and shook them vigorously, turning his head to one side, closing his eyes and biting his lip.

Both Liz and Gerda gave me robust hugs that purists might have said compromised the doctor-patient relationship. Up until then I'd managed to keep my emotions under control, but for some reason these gestures of consolation from my psychiatrist and my therapist brought me close to tears. When Sue and Old Cow hugged me, I felt a constriction in my throat. No words would come.

Carlos and Sonja had some good news: they were getting married. Carlos

had a job in a restaurant at Monte Casino, and Sonja was working at a call centre. As they chatted with me, I noticed they were holding hands and smiling at each other.

Helena had been continuing with her special rape-recovery treatment with Lana Lindstrom, the American therapist, and looked a lot better. No nervous twisting of fingers, no abnormal walk. She was hoping soon to get a part-time job at a nursery school.

Oom Henk was weaving towards me, glass in hand. He stopped and blinked at me. 'Krishty wosh a fine girl,' he slurred. 'One of the besht.' He drained his glass, then shrugged and turned towards the drinks trolley.

'Hello Baba,' a voice behind me said. It was Philip. The glazed look he always had in Ward 697 was gone. He reached forward and shook my hand gently. 'Sorry about Kristy,' he said with downcast eyes. 'She was a very good person. Always friendly to me in Sterkfontein. You see, Baba, I know what it's like to lose someone you love. I lost my girlfriend – actually she was my fiancé.'

'I know,' I said. 'I'm really sorry, Philip.'

Philip's words had affected me. I nodded, smiled, and turned towards Dr Weddo Moloi, who'd been standing nearby.

Weddo took me aside and told me that Philip was staying with him. He'd managed to get him a paid job patrolling Westpark Cemetery during the week. (The unpaid VOICE volunteers patrolled only over weekends.)

Petrus came up and shook my hand. 'Sorry, Mr Olly. I be very sorry. Kristy she good like you. She no hurt lickle things, not even kokoroshes.'

Petrus leaned closer and whispered that he had something for me. It was a small bamboo tube sealed at both ends.

'What is it?' I asked.

'Small piece of magic snake skin inside, Mr Olly. He help you get better. He no make better by self; he bring other things make you better.'

'Thank you Petrus,' I said, slipping the tube into my pocket.

The Pinnacle Spa girls were drifting out towards the parking area. Merrill said she had to go. 'If you feel like some company, Olly, just call me.'

Chapter 30

As I turned back into the foyer, Mrs Minnaar was standing before me. She was a big woman with plump features and thick legs. I couldn't see any family resemblance to Kristy, except that she was blonde.

'Hi, I'm, Karen, Kristy's ma,' she said, extending her hand.

I would have preferred not to have been on first name terms with her, but whatever she'd done, or not done, she remained Kristy's mother. 'Olly,' I replied.

As we shook hands, she added, 'Kristy told me you were her boyfriend.'

I nodded and offered her a sherry but she declined. I really felt like a drink, so I poured myself a generous measure.

Her eyes widened, but she said nothing, though her expression told me she didn't approve. 'I have something very important to tell you,' she said. 'Can we go somewhere private?'

'Yes, of course. What about my car?'

'Ja, that's okay.'

We strolled across to the Lada, but as I opened the passenger door for her she hesitated. 'Do you mind if I have a quick smoke first?'

'Please go ahead.'

She stood by the door, lit the cigarette and took three or four deep drags, one after the other, paused for several moments, and then flicked the half-smoked cigarette across the parking lot. After she'd climbed into the passenger seat, she leaned forward and rested her head on the dashboard. A moment later I could hear muffled sobs.

Although, from what Kristy had told me, Karen Minnaar had fallen down badly as a parent, and I blamed her for that, the sound of her crying disarmed me. 'What's the matter, Karen?' I said gently.

She raised her head, and in a flat voice said, 'You see, I'm paying for my sins now…'

'What do you mean?' I asked, thinking she was referring to her failure to protect Kristy from being molested.

'It's a long story.' Her hands began to shake. Then she shot me a pleading look. 'Do you mind if I smoke in the car?'

After all the heavy smokers in Ward 697, I'd become accustomed to cigarette smoke in confined spaces. 'Go ahead,' I said. 'No problem.'

She glanced at me gratefully, fished her cigarettes out of her handbag, and lit up. 'Well, first let me say that I never wanted a baby…' She took a deep lungful of smoke before continuing. '…and when I got pregnant, it was a mistake – not just like, you know…'

'How do you mean?'

'You see, nearly all my family are alcoholics – my pa, my oupa; also my one sister and two brothers.' She dropped her eyes and began fiddling with the handle of her handbag. 'Hope you're not a drinker,' she sighed.

'Normally only a few beers. But a bit more at weddings and funerals. Pretty moderate, actually.'

'Well, I don't drink at all,' she said, bringing her eyes up to meet mine. 'But that doesn't mean I wouldn't have become an alcoholic if I'd started. Probably would have, seeing it runs in the family. My ex-husband was also a big drinker. So the last thing I wanted was a kid that would grow up to be like the rest of us. But I couldn't face an abortion. To me it just didn't seem right. So although I didn't want the baby, I decided to go ahead and have it.' She paused and drew urgently on her cigarette. 'Well, when I was in hospital just before I was due (I won't say which hospital, except it was in a small town in Mpumalanga), I gave a nurse five hundred rand to switch tags with another baby that looked quite like mine.'

Karen Minnaar's words shocked me. 'Are you saying that Kristy wasn't your baby?!'

'Yes, that's what I'm saying,' she said, with a wan look. 'Kristy's real mom was a Swedish backpacker who'd got herself pregnant while she was travelling around South Africa. Her name was Sigrid. Pretty blonde girl, about 17 or 18.'

I'd always sensed that despite Kristy's deprived background, she was somehow different from the rest of her family. Now it all made sense.

'And the father?'

'Well, Sigrid sometimes talked about a German she'd been travelling with but who went back to Germany to study. There was also an Afrikaans guy she'd also been seeing. Which one was the father, she didn't say.' She took another drag on her cigarette. 'Before our babies were born, Sigrid said she'd decided to fly back to Stockholm within a couple of weeks. It suddenly came to me then that my baby would be much better off in Sweden. You see,

I once read something in *You Magazine* about the alcoholism problem all over the world. It mentioned Sweden's strict liquor laws and how much booze costs there, so Swedes couldn't afford to drink a lot.'

'So that's what decided you?'

'Ja, that's right.' She shot me a weak smile.

'And then what happened?'

'Well, my baby came about twenty minutes before Sigrid's. An easy birth; no problem. But Sigrid was quite a slim girl with narrow hips and she was having a lot of pain. So they pumped her full of drugs. She was out for quite a while.

'When the sister was bathing both babies it was easy for her to make the switch. Sigrid didn't even get a chance to hold her own baby…' Karen dabbed her eyes and sniffled before continuing. 'When she woke up she was given my baby. I know it wasn't right, but I was only doing what I thought was best for the baby. But there was one thing I couldn't do. I couldn't breast-feed Kristy. Maybe it was because she wasn't my real baby. You see, I didn't want to bond too closely with her.'

She gave a long sigh. 'All this has been worrying me for years … Of course, I wonder what happened to my baby who's now grown up in Sweden. Sigrid named her Liselotte, after her Granny.' She took another nervous draw on her cigarette and blew the smoke out of the window.

'But now Kristy's gone, I thought I must tell someone the truth, so I decided I must tell you.'

I could understand but not excuse what Karen Minnaar had done. And I couldn't excuse her failure to stop the abuse of Kristy.

I looked her straight in the eye and said, 'You know that Kristy told me about what her Oupa did to her.'

She took another sharp pull on her cigarette, and after she'd exhaled, she looked down and said nothing for a while. At last she made eye contact. 'I know, but I didn't believe it at the time.'

She paused again, apparently collecting her thoughts. 'You must understand, Olly, that Kristy, like a lot of kids, used to lie a lot, especially when she was young. So I thought she'd just made up the story about her Oupa. After all, he was my father, and he never tried anything like that with me. Of course, I asked him, but he said it was all nonsense and he'd never been so insulted in all his life. It was only much, much later, after I'd got married again and came to Johannesburg with Kristy that I heard that he'd

touched a neighbour's child on her private parts. He said he was drunk at the time and couldn't remember anything.'

She slumped forward onto the dashboard and began weeping again.

I put my hand on her shoulder but said nothing.

Karen Minnaar looked up with a puffy tear-stained face. She seemed disorientated.

I offered her a lift home. She glanced at her watch. In a hoarse whisper she said her husband was fetching her in about twenty minutes. She snapped the clasp on her handbag closed, thanked me for listening, and struggled out of the car. Heading back towards the foyer, she dodged Oom Henk, who was staggering about the entrance.

As I watched her retreating back, a passenger jet roared overhead; a bus powered past; people shouted to each other. Life went on…

I'd been sitting sideways in the Lada for so long that my left leg had developed a numbing tingle. I needed to stretch my legs, so I climbed out of the driver's seat and stamped my feet to get the circulation going. I stood staring ahead, my mind in turmoil. A few departing mourners glanced at me curiously.

'You okay to drive?' Faan called over his shoulder, as he helped ease Beth, Marge and a sagging Oom Henk into his Deke.

'Sure. Just getting my bearings,' I said flatly.

Faan's questioning gaze seemed to turn to relief. 'I've been meaning to tell you, Olly,' he said, strolling over to me and lowering his voice. 'There was an American guy at the funeral. Something about him seemed out of place. D'you know if he was a friend of Kristy's or Charlize's?'

'No idea. What's he look like?'

'Late thirties, early forties. Well-built. Brown hair. Quite good looking. Smartly dressed.'

'I remember the guy. I'll ask Merrill if she knows anything about him.'

As I pulled out of the parking area and joined the stream of traffic, the aftershock of Kristy's loss hit me. The finality of the funeral had brought it home. My world was suddenly hollow and empty.

When I got home I went inside and plopped down on the couch, my mind in turmoil.

Thinking perhaps a drink might help, I went through to the bar and poured myself a generous glass of Old Brown sherry. I drink sherry only occasionally, but I thought I'd better stick to what I'd been drinking after the

funeral. I downed it Oom Henk-style, then fell back on the couch.

I switched on the TV, watching without being aware of what was showing.

After a while I must have fallen asleep. I awoke with Chloe snuggled on the couch beside me, her head resting on my feet. Opening one eye, she looked at me appraisingly. Dogs understand when there’s something wrong.

Chapter 31

When I woke next morning I felt no better. If anything, I felt worse. I knew that in my present state there was no way I'd be able to go to work on Monday. At around eleven I phoned Hannes and said I wanted to take three days leave. He didn't ask any questions. All he said was, 'I know you've been going through a pretty rough patch, Olly. No need for explanations. Why don't you rather take a week? If you feel better before then, then just come back earlier, that's all. Actually, I checked, and you've still got more than six months accumulated leave.'

I agreed, and we left it at that.

Most of the time I stayed indoors, sleeping late and emerging only to buy food, not even going to clear my P O Box.

I stopped doing all household chores. They didn't seem important.

Towards the end of the week I felt muzzy and broke out in a cold sweat. I thought I was getting flu, but the flu never came. At this point I decided to phone Liz Stott. She was consulting when I called, but said she'd call me back – which she did half an hour later.

I started rattling off my symptoms; but I hadn't got very far when she said, 'Stop right there, Olly. What I want to know is: have you been taking your medication?'

I realised with a shock that I'd forgotten to take the Aropax since I'd heard the news of Kristy's death. The last thing on my mind had been little white pills. 'No, I haven't,' I said lamely. 'It completely slipped my mind.'

'Well, it often happens to patients after they've been discharged, especially when something unexpected happens that derails their routine. If you suddenly stop taking an antidepressant, as you did, then you may experience withdrawal symptoms, varying in severity. I meant to ask you: have you had any panic attacks recently?'

'No, not since before I was admitted to Ward 697.'

'That's good. Well, maybe it's time to switch to another antidepressant. You see, Olly, Aropax is prescribed for patients who suffer panic attacks, but in your case the withdrawal symptoms were quite severe. So I think let's rather put you on Wellbutrin.'

By the end of the week I felt the depression giving way to anger – anger at the senseless deaths of Kristy and Charlize. Now I felt compelled to clear up some of the things that were puzzling me about the hijacking, and also to look into the strange incidents Kristy had told me about earlier. Could the man with the hypodermic and the stalker who'd been trailing Kristy have anything to do with the crime? I knew it wouldn't bring her back, but I intended to find out – whatever the cost.

I kept on mulling all this over in my mind. There were so many inconsistencies about the hijacking. It seemed so pointless and the criminals hadn't even got the car.

I decided it was time for me to visit the Pinnacle Spa and have a look around. I telephoned the Spa and asked for Mrs Eberhardt. The receptionist told me she was out, so I left a message for her to call me.

Chapter 32

By Thursday, I still hadn't heard from Mrs Eberhardt, so I called again. The receptionist told me she was in a meeting. I left a message for her to call me back.

On Friday I decided to give Faan a ring. I told him of the inconsistencies that had been puzzling me about the girls' deaths. 'Well, why don't you come over and we can talk about it? Just phone me first.'

I phoned Faan first thing on Saturday morning and he suggested I come straight over.

As I turned into the driveway, Faan emerged from his garage. He wasn't wearing his waistcoat and longs as usual, but a baggy white T-shirt, faded grey boxer shorts and oil-stained sneakers. After I got out of the Lada, he came over and put an arm around my shoulder. 'How're you been doing, bru?'

I knew he was talking about Kristy's death. 'A bit better. I'm on new medication.'

'Well, I may have some ideas that could be of some comfort to you. But we'll talk about those later.'

Once inside the house I noticed that cardboard boxes overflowing with books, old clothes, odd-sized pieces of plywood and workshop tools, were stacked along the passages, giving the impression that the occupants had only just arrived, or were about to leave.

'Would you guys like some tea?' a soft feminine voice said behind us.

'You've met Katie before, haven't you, Olly?' said Faan.

She was a petite darkish woman in her late twenties or early thirties, more than a head shorter than Faan and very pretty. Her dimples indicated a sense of humour.

'Hello Katie,' I said, pressing her hand.

She smiled at me. 'Let's go through to the lounge. The tea things are there.'

The lounge smelled of freshly brewed tea and old books. It had a pressed-metal ceiling painted in a warm, sandstone beige to match the walls. One wall was partially covered with letters, which, on closer inspection, turned out to

be publishers' rejection slips.

Faan poured us tea, and cut several slices of cake; then we settled back in two badly worn but comfortable brown leather chairs, which let out separate sighs as we sat down.

Faan lit a cigarette and flicked the match out of the window. Then he took a deep drag and blew the smoke in a slow contemplative stream towards the ceiling. He was silent for a while, then turned and made eye contact. 'You know, Olly, I've been giving some thought to your concerns about what happened to Kristy and Charlize.'

'And…?'

'I don't want to get your hopes up, but they may still be alive.'

Inconsistencies about the girls' deaths were one thing, but the possibility of their being alive was something entirely different. '

You're not serious?!' I exclaimed.

'Well, as you know there's no *absolute* proof that those burned corpses were those of Kristy and Charlize, was there?'

'So what are you saying, Faan – that someone faked their deaths?'

'One can't rule it out.'

'But who'd want to do that, and for what reason?'

'At this point I can only speculate. As you know, South Africa has a long history of girls going missing. Only about a month ago, three girls disappeared from a shopping mall. And remember the Gert van Rooyen case in the mid-eighties – you know the paedophile that kidnapped half a dozen young girls and committed suicide when the police were chasing him. Those girls were never found.'

I found Faan's theory that the girls might still be alive difficult to believe, but I tried to keep an open mind.

'You mentioned an American at the funeral. You said something about him didn't gel.'

'The same guy who attended the inquest, actually. Took a lot of notes. Then he asked the magistrate if he could have a copy of the findings. When the magistrate asked him why, he said the girls had worked for an American company, and as a freelance journalist stringing for American magazines, he was interested in the story.'

'So what's wrong with that?'

'Nothing that's immediately obvious. But think about it, Olly. Why would American magazines be interested? I mean, there must be *hundreds* of

American companies in South Africa. If the girls had been Americans, then that would have been a different story. But they were South Africans. Who in America would be interested in their deaths? Maybe a few South African expats, but that's about all. Also, why should the same guy come to the funeral? Something just doesn't add up.'

'Maybe so, but I don't see what this has to do with the possibility of the girls still being alive.'

'Sure, this is all circumstantial now, but often circumstantial evidence leads on to something solid.'

'Okay…' I said doubtfully.

'Oh, and one other thing, Olly. Why were the girls driving a Mercedes and not the Audi roadster, as they normally did?' Before I could answer, he went on. 'Let's assume for argument's sake that the main aim of the criminals wasn't hijacking but kidnapping, then boot size would've been important. The roadster's boot is far too small to squeeze two people into it, whereas the Mercedes's one is massive.'

'Hmmm… I see what you're getting at… But maybe the roadster was in for a service.'

'Well, then, we need to check that out.'

Chapter 33

When I got home I phoned Merrill and told her about Faan's theory.

'I agree there's a lot that doesn't add up,' she said, 'but I find it hard to believe that Kristy and Charlize are still alive.'

'Me too. Still, what Faan said has got me thinking. So I think it's worth doing some digging. It can't do any harm. And we owe it to them.'

'Okay. What do you want me to do, Olly?

I asked her if she would check when the Audi roadster was last serviced.

'No problem.'

She called me back within half an hour and said she'd checked the log book, but there was no record of any service on the date of the hijacking, or during the weeks before or afterwards.

'Thanks, Merrill,' I said. 'You're a star! Actually, I want to visit the Spa and look around a bit. I'd also like to talk to Mrs Eberhardt. She hasn't been returning my calls.'

'She's here today. So why don't you just come over?'

'Okay, in about an hour. I'll give you a missed call when I arrive.'

Next, I drove to Hyde Park to check on Mrs Bombeck and the man with the hypodermic. I managed to slip through the front door of Clarence Court just as a tall thin man was leaving.

Mrs Bombeck's name wasn't on any of the letter boxes in the foyer. So I rang the caretaker's bell. An elderly woman with a slight limp came to the door. She said Mrs Bombeck had moved out very recently without giving proper notice. 'She paid her rent, though,' she confided. 'So there's no problem.'

When I asked her about the diabetic neighbour, she looked at me blankly. 'Never heard of anyone like that … Mrs Fischer of Number 22 was Mrs Bombeck's neighbour on the one side, and Mr and Mrs Curlewis of 24 on the other. They've been here for years. And no one that I know of in this building has diabetes. I would know. You see, tenants are supposed to inform me of any chronic illnesses in case of a medical emergency.'

I asked her if she had Mrs Bombeck's forwarding address.

'Never left one. I thought it a bit odd.'

‘Was there anything about Mrs Bombeck that you thought unusual?’

‘In what way?’

‘I mean, her looks.’

‘Well, she’s certainly very overweight. And she has a large hairy mole on her chin. That’s something you can’t help noticing.’

The Pinnacle Health Spa was set in large grounds in a small side road about twenty minutes’ drive from Fourways. A bored looking security guard sat in a cubicle just inside the gate from where he operated an access boom. In a clearing among flat-topped acacias about a hundred metres from the gate was a large white double-story with a thatched roof. Some twenty-five metres to the right was a complex of low modern buildings. Further to the right, dotted among acacias, were about half a dozen thatched rondavels. A few guinea fowl were foraging in the open spaces between these, their metallic tick-ticking lending a rustic atmosphere.

I gave Merrill a missed call.

Almost immediately the door of one of the rondavels opened and Merrill emerged. She strode briskly over to me. ‘Good to see you, Olly,’ she sang out, giving me a hug and a sideways kiss. ‘Let’s sign you in and park your car and then I’ll show you around.’

After I’d left my car in the parking area, Merrill led me along a broad pathway that bisected the complex. Smaller, signposted paths led off on either side, including *Detox Clinic*, *Swedish Massage*, *Sauna* and *Flotation Tank.*

‘Pretty well equipped,’ I remarked, after we’d passed the last building and were looking out over the pool. ‘I suppose you’d have to stay at least a week to do all that.’

‘Actually, it’s mainly a day spa. The only clients who stay overnight are those on the detox and weight-loss programs.’

She took me by the arm and began steering me around the side of the pool. ‘I’ve been thinking about what you told me, Olly, and I agree that something isn’t quite right…’

We sat down on a low retaining wall near the deep end.

For almost a minute neither of us spoke. Then she said, ‘Remember what I told you at the funeral, Olly? You know, about Mrs Eberhardt not really caring. Well, I haven’t changed my opinion...’

‘Something happened recently?’

‘Not really, just a feeling.’

I asked her about the American at the funeral.

‘Oh, that’s Todd Trafficant. He visits Mrs E here sometimes – arrogant prick. Thinks he’s God’s gift to women.’

‘What’s his connection with Mrs E?’

He runs the New Life Recovery Clinic out in the country somewhere north of here. It’s a rehab place where rich Spa clients send their druggy kids. It also has a private psychiatric ward, mainly for patients with depression. Mrs E passes quite a bit of business his way.’

Merrill flexed her toes and gazed across the swimming bath. ‘Kristy once told me she thought he’d been following her, but she wasn’t sure. Then after Kristy and Charlize disappeared, he started coming on to me, so I told him I already had a boyfriend.’ Merrill shot a shy glance at me.

‘Anything else?’

‘Not about Todd. But apparently the Clinic also caters for overseas patients, mostly from America. I hear it provides affordable treatment at way less than what they’d expect to pay in the States.’

‘Interesting,’ I said. ‘Any idea where I can find Mrs Eberhardt? I need to talk to her.’

‘At reception – at least she was half an hour ago.’

We drifted across to the main building. Merrill waited outside, as she didn’t want Mrs Eberhardt to see us together.

I went up to the front desk and began leafing through some brochures. Mrs Eberhardt was writing a receipt for a client. After the woman had left, Mrs Eberhardt looked up. ‘Good afternoon. You from the insurance company, Mr…?’

‘Jeex. Olly Jeex. I’m–’

‘Oh, I remember now. You were at the funeral, right?’

‘That’s right.’

She gave me an appraising look. ‘Well, all of us here were shocked at what happened.’

‘Yes, it was so sudden,’ I agreed. ‘And I’m finding it hard to accept that Kristy and Charlize are *actually* dead.’ I placed the emphasis on the word “actually” in the hope of spooking her.

A flicker of something – I wasn’t sure what – crossed Mrs Eberhardt’s face. ‘Anyway, what can I do for you, Mr Jeex?’

I told a deliberate lie without a twinge of conscience. ‘It’s just that Kristy borrowed my camera – quite a valuable one, a Sony digital. She wasn’t able to return it for obvious reasons. Did you by any chance find it in her room?’

‘I haven’t checked the room myself. But her mother said she’d be coming by sometime to collect her things. I don’t think she’s come yet. Anyway, let’s have a look, shall we?’

Mrs Eberhardt reached under the counter and produced a key, then gestured that I should follow. We began walking across the parking area towards the rondavels. Some fifty metres away I noticed Merrill sitting on a bench under a tree, seemingly engrossed in a magazine.

‘I was surprised to hear that the girls were driving a Mercedes when they were hijacked,’ I said casually. ‘Normally they drove an Audi.’

Mrs Eberhardt seemed to stiffen slightly. ‘Now you *do* sound as if you’re from the insurance company.’ We walked on for several paces in silence. Then she said: ‘Actually, I lent them the Mercedes while the Audi was being serviced. But of course it doesn’t matter now…’

As a journalist, I’ve done a lot of interviews in my time and you develop a sense for when someone is hiding something. Her lie confirmed the feeling.

‘I suppose not. I was just thinking that Mercedes Benzes are among the most popular hijack targets.’

‘So what are you saying?’

‘Nothing really. It’s just that I’m interested in crime patterns. I’m a member of VOICE, the anti-crime group, you see, and we’re building up the risk profiles of various makes of car.’ I told her how VOICE worked and how its members pooled crime information.

‘Oh, I see,’ she said, seeming to relax. ‘I believe we’ve something like that in the U.S.’

We’d reached Kristy’s rondavel and Mrs Eberhardt unlocked the door. The windows were closed, the curtains drawn, and there was the slightly musty farm smell of an unaired room under thatch. The furnishings were sparse in the style of a cheap motel, with just a locker next to the single bed and a narrow cupboard against a wall. The only sign of Kristy’s individuality was a wall poster of a pride of lions lazing under a thorn tree.

Mrs Eberhardt nodded towards a large suitcase lying on the bed. ‘I asked Merrill to pack her things, so let’s look in this first, shall we?’

She opened the suitcase and lifted out an assortment of clothes, a bag of toiletries, an alarm clock, and a few paperbacks, placing them all on the bed.

‘Nothing in here I’m afraid, as you can see. But let me check the drawers.’

The sound of Mrs Eberhardt opening and closing drawers jolted me back to the purpose of my mission. ‘I understand Kristy and Charlize had been offered jobs with one of your spas in America?’

‘Yeah, that’s right. They were very promising girls.’

‘So is there a demand for South African girls in the States?’

She hesitated for a moment, apparently distracted by her search for the camera. ‘Oh, absolutely, they’re very well regarded.’ She closed the last drawer with a bang. ‘No sign of any camera here, Mr Jeex,’ she said with an air of finality.’

‘Thanks for looking, anyway.’

Mrs Eberhardt locked the rondavel and we began walking back across the parking area in silence. Somewhere nearby a guinea fowl twittered self-importantly.

I realised there wasn’t time to bat more questions to and fro in the hope of trapping her. A more direct approach was needed. ‘Oh, one last thing, Mrs Eberhardt. Could you give me Mrs Bombeck’s contact details?’

Mrs Eberhardt wheeled around. ‘We don’t give out information about clients. You must know that. It’s against policy.’

I said nothing, hoping the silence would draw her out. For a while the only sound was the gravel crunching underfoot.

Then she stopped, as though collecting her thoughts. ‘As a matter of interest, Mr Jeex, why would you want to contact Mrs Bombeck?’

‘Well, Kristy mentioned she had to leave Mrs Bombeck’s flat in a hurry. I thought maybe she’d left the camera there.’

Mrs Eberhardt stared at me for a long moment, her eyes narrowing. ‘I don’t know what your agenda is, Mr Jeex, but I’m sure it’s got nothing to do with cameras. I suggest you leave now.’

‘But –’

‘There are no “buts”.’

‘All right,’ I said, evenly. ‘But if you have second thoughts, here’s my card.’

She waved a hand dismissively. ‘We’re done.’ Then she turned on her heel and stalked off towards the main building.

I looked around for Merrill, but there was no sign of her. I called her on her cellphone. ‘Where are you?’ I asked.

‘Outside the gate,’ she said in a barely audible voice. ‘Just drive out.’

As I turned into the road, I saw her flattened against a tree some fifty metres from the entrance. She reminded me of an amateur schoolgirl detective in a teenage mystery novel.

When she signalled for me to stop, I opened the passenger door and let her in. ‘Let’s park further down the road, out of sight,’ she said with a secretive smile.

A couple of hundred metres further on I pulled off among some trees. When I told her of my conversation with Mrs Eberhardt, her eyes widened. ‘Now that I know she’s hiding something, I’ll be on the lookout. Only trouble is, I don’t have access to all parts of the Spa. And in the evenings I’m out servicing clients. Maybe someone posing as a patient might be able to help me find out more.’

‘I think I know just the right person…’ I said.

The first thing I did when I got home was to phone Beth.

‘Lucky to find me in, Olly,’ she said. ‘Normally, I’m out walking at this time. But I’ve been feeling a bit off for a couple of days. I think it was something I ate at my cousin’s wedding.’

I expressed my sympathies and then told her about Faan’s theory and my visit to the Pinnacle Spa.

‘Certainly sounds fishy, Olly. Wonder what the woman’s up to?’

‘That’s what we need to find out.’ I then told her about Merrill’s suggestion that someone go undercover.

‘I’m game,’ she said without hesitation. ‘Anyway, I think I could do with a detox. I’ll phone the Spa right now and make a booking. Should be better by tomorrow, or at least the next day.’

I offered to pay for her treatments, but she wouldn’t hear of it. ‘I’m doing this for Kristy, Olly. It’s the least I can do.’

Over the next couple of days, time dragged as it always does when you’re waiting for something to happen. To keep my mind off the waiting, I did some monitoring shifts at AIR – even some overtime – and spent my leisure hours reading *The Lovely Bones.* The ending really saddened me. I won’t spoil it for you, in case you want to read the book, but it has to do with what happened to Susie Salmon’s body, which of course made me think of Kristy.

I kept pondering the inconsistencies surrounding the girls’ apparent deaths. Certainly Mrs Eberhardt had lied about the car service, but that didn’t necessarily mean that Kristy and Charlize were still alive – only that Mrs Eberhardt had something to hide.

Two days later, Beth called me on my cellphone. ‘Not much to report, Olly,’ she said. ‘I don’t know what it is about Mrs Eberhardt – she’s been as nice as pie to me – but somehow she gives me the creeps. I’ll keep on digging, though.’

‘Any chance of getting into her office and having a snoop round?’

‘I’ll check with Merrill. Maybe we can do it together. One of us will need to keep watch.’

Chapter 34

"The service lane between the buildings is used as a rubbish dump. We managed to have the service lane cleaned through Pickitup, but 24 hours later there was 'new' rubbish and human waste being poured from the bathroom windows." – Property owner complaining to *The Star's* Metro Watch

"Everywhere in the city there is evidence of metal theft, from missing railings on the highways to damaged stormwater drains, drain covers and even traffic lights … Metal thieves are picking Joburg city apart piece by piece." Thabiso Thakali, reporting for *The Star*

I called Gary Simes and made an appointment to see him after work at his flat in Braamfontein. The priority now was for him to investigate the mysterious deaths of Kristy and Charlize, but of course I also wanted to know if he'd dug up anything more on Sudman.

Gary Simes lived in a fourth-floor flat in an anonymous-looking block in a side street, just over the road from Wits University. The building had an air of having once been respectable, but now the graffiti artists, litterers, and vandals had won. I emerged from the jerky lift that smelled of stale cigarette smoke and urine, and followed an arrow indicating flats 401 – 409. Simes's flat was 407.

I found myself on an open walkway overlooking the street. In one spot, water was pooling from a leaking pipe. The sound of a baby crying came from 405. I rang the doorbell of 407.

A good half minute passed before an eye appeared at the peephole. A chain rattled and the door opened. The man peering up at me was short and stout, with pink, dry skin. His pale watery eyes, under ginger eyebrows, roved across my face.

'Pleased to finally meet you, Olly,' he simpered, in his familiar nasal voice. He inclined his head slightly and extended a hand. It was cool and clammy. 'Do come in.'

We entered what must have been the living room but which was now crowded with work equipment. Grey metal shelving packed with numbered white plastic boxes covered one wall. A huge map of Gauteng covered another, while against a third stretched a long narrow work station where there were two computers, as well as what looked like a citizens' band radio receiver, a small soldering iron, an open toolbox, and a desk photograph of an unsmiling young woman. A sleek, grey model aeroplane was perched at the far end.

Simes motioned me towards a faded green sleeper-couch, then clambered onto a high-backed metal stool on wheels and began leafing through what looked like a pocket diary. A silence followed, punctuated only by the steady *thump-thump-thump* of a boom box from somewhere above.

'Happy here?' I asked, trying to get the conversation going.

'Yes and no,' he replied, closing the diary and slipping it into his pocket. 'It's deteriorated a lot since I first moved in twelve years ago. And by all indications it's likely to get worse under this new bunch of politicians. But the rent is reasonable, and I can live here anonymously, which is what I need in my profession.

'But let me show you some of the equipment I use in my work.'

He proceeded to show me an array of bugging devices: a "fertilizer stick" for indoor plants; "adhesive tags", marked *Batch No. 6743214,* for electrical appliances; a "keyboard cable adapter" that recorded and transmitted every key-stroke.

'So how do you manage to get in to install them?'

'Simple. I have a device that causes crackling on the phone line. I activate it for a while and then I knock on the door and say I'm from Telkom and there seems to be a problem on the line.'

'But don't people ask for identification?'

'Of course, but that's no problem. There're plenty of corrupt insiders in most companies who're very willing to "lose" their employment IDs and then claim a new one. You can buy them for a couple of hundred rands these days. I have a guy who doctors the photographs.'

'What about uniforms?'

'Same story – from insiders.'

Simes grinned and then his eyes slid over to the model aeroplane. 'But *that's* my real pride and joy.'

'Your hobby?'

‘I suppose you could call it that. But it’s also my eye-in-the-sky.’

‘For what?’

‘Checking out places I can’t get into. You see, it has a tiny spy camera in its belly, and it can also drop a bug disguised as a stick, or a pebble, or whatever. Much better than those new-fangled drones.’

I felt we’d had enough of small talk, so I told Simes about the mystery surrounding the deaths of Kristy and Charlize, as well as my suspicions concerning Mrs Eberhardt, stressing that the investigation was a priority. He took notes, posed a few questions, and said he’d get onto it right away. ‘First thing I need to do is put a bug on the Spa’s telephone. After that I’ll try and locate Mrs Bombeck and her diabetic neighbour.’

‘Great. I meant to ask you: how’ve you been getting on with the Sudman investigation?’

He pressed a chubby hand against his chin and blinked his eyes rapidly. ‘Well, let me put it this way, Olly. He’s still two-timing your wife.’

‘A new girlfriend?’ I asked hopefully.

‘Nah ... Like I told you before, he’s screwing ladies of the night – and anything else he can get on the side.’

I told Simes to e-mail his report to Ted Thrupp as soon as possible.

It was already dark when I left Simes’ flat. On my way home I drove down Melville’s 7th Street, the first time in weeks. The Christmas lights were on – rows and rows of bright five-pointed stars draped across the street, giving it a festive atmosphere. I wondered where the Harpies would be spending Christmas.

I hoped with me.

I followed the line of cars turning left into 4th Avenue. Just past the Exclamation Mark they slowed to a crawl and finally stopped. I noticed that about a dozen metro police had set up road block.

A burly policeman, his gut bulging over his belt, approached me with a pad clutched in his meaty hand. He said nothing, but peered intently at the licence disc on my windscreen. Eventually he said: ‘You got a problem here, Mister.’

‘What’s that, officer?’

‘Your license … upside down.’

I’d stuck the disc on in a hurry and had only noticed my mistake much

later. But by then it was stuck to the glass like a limpet. I said nothing, waiting for him to continue.

With a swaying motion, he stuck his thumbs in his belt like a cowboy and then made eye contact. ‘That will be a R300 fine for not displaying your license properly.’

‘You going to fine me for that?’

‘I tell you what, Mister.’ He put his right hand on the roof of my Lada and leaned down so his face was level with mine. ‘You give me R100 spot fine and we forget about it.’

‘I don’t think so.’

He shrugged. ‘Well, that’s your indaba, Mister. Remember, bad points go on your licence. You want that?’

I said nothing.

He stared at me for a good half minute. Then with a flourish, he scribbled on his pad, tore off the ticket and dropped it on my lap.

A few minutes later I received a cellphone call from Beth. ‘Merrill and I managed to get into Mrs E’s study,’ she whispered. ‘She certainly has some weird books.’

‘Like what?’ I asked.

‘Let me see. I wrote the titles down. Yes, there’s *Strictly Miss Martindale;* then there’s *The District Governess*, and also *The Female Disciplinary Manual.* You can draw your own conclusions from the titles.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Yes, I found her passport in a drawer. Her full names are Arista Cirine Eberhardt. I also found an envelope with five passport-sized photos of Mrs E, so I took the liberty of nicking one.’

‘Good girl,’ I said. ‘So what do you make of all this, Beth?’

‘Well, Mrs E is obviously kinky; but beyond that I don’t want to speculate. One thing I did notice: all the girls were blondes.’

‘So what’s next?’

‘Well, I managed to get a booking for the flotation tank next week. I’ll phone you after that – sooner, if something else comes up. One last thing: Merrill sends her love.’

Chapter 35

"*The use of extreme measures in the fight against crime is not a vice. Tolerance and moderation in the pursuit of justice are not virtues.*" – Clive Percival, in a letter to *The Star*

"*We phoned the police but they never showed up. We took the suspects to Roodepoort station and handed them over. The next day we saw these guys walking around the township.*" – Jabulani Khumalo, resident of Bramfischerville

"*There is negligible deterrent value in our justice and prison systems which are a soppy clone of liberalism from advanced western countries with a fraction of our crime. … even if a judge deems it fit to impose a severe period of incarceration, the prison system regularly counters that harshness by granting an early release on parole.*" – Gonville Rice-Davies, in a letter to *The Star*

"*…the ordinary law-abiding citizen feels ignored. … The constant exhortation not to take the law into his own hands, the daily formation of yet more commissions of inquiry into corruption, violence and malfeasance, the hollow assurance that the authorities will not rest until the perpetrators are apprehended are now greeted with derision … They've heard it all before…*" –Tshaka Gumede, CEO of Democratic Voice

On the way to work I was stopped at a police road block near Westpark Cemetery. I counted four SAPS cars parked at the side of the road with their blue lights rotating. About a dozen policemen were searching vehicles, opening boots, peering under seats, feeling under dashboards. Three others stood aside, heads swivelling, R-5s at the ready. There was a long line of vehicles ahead of me. Eventually it was my turn. Two policemen checked my car – even lifting the rubber floor mats – found nothing and waved me on. I was twenty minutes late for work.

When I arrived in the news office, a general staff meeting was in progress. Tata Zondi was reading from notes. '…and contrary to current rumours,' she intoned, 'no decision whatsoever has been taken to close AIR. However, our new consultants, Cassim, Nyati & Associates, will continue to assess the viability of the station, but we have good reason to hope…'

I eased into a chair next to Will Allwell. 'Got held up at a roadblock,' I whispered. 'Anything interesting so far?'

'Well, the consultants have been wielding the axe. Benjy's out.'

Tata Zondi glanced up with a reproving look.

Will waited until she began reading again, before continuing in a low voice. 'They found he had a forged degree…'

Tata Zondi began gathering up her notes.

'But the irony, Olly, is that no matter what the consultants discover, this is not really about weeding out corrupt staff – at least that's not the motivation at the top.'

'So what's it about, then?'

'It's about changing the passengers on the gravy train!'

Staff were drifting away. The buzz of conversation was louder than usual.

'Any idea what the roadblock was about?' I asked.

'Haven't you heard?'

'What?'

'A body was found hanging from the pedestrian bridge across lower Empire Road. There was a neatly printed placard around the neck saying: EXECUTED FOR HIJACKING, RAPE AND MURDER.'

'You serious?'

Will nodded.

'How was he killed?'

'Shot in the base of the skull.'

Just then Prue came running out of the monitoring office towards us. She flashed a smile at me before blurting out the news. '702 has just reported that several more bodies have been found.'

'Where?' I asked.

'One dangling from the Carlow Road Bridge over Barry Hertzog. Another at the Edenvale Bridge on the road to the airport. At least three more were hanging from street lights, and one was swinging from a roadside tree. All had placards around their necks. One said, "VIOLENT RAPIST". Another said, "HEIST GANG LEADER". All were signed "A.A.".'

Over the next couple of days similar reports of vigilante executions came in from all over the country. But now the placards were more explicit: “HIJACK SYNDICATE BOSS WITH BLOODY HANDS” (Kempton Park); “THE SWAMI’S MURDERER” (Isipingo); “HE KILLED WHILE ON PAROLE” (Port Elizabeth); “RAPED SIX-MONTH OLD BABY” (Cape Town).

All the corpses were suspended from bridges or lampposts or roadside trees along main roads or highways.

Newspaper editorials were unanimous in condemning the vigilantism. However, most blamed the previous government for allowing the criminal justice system to crumble. Others pointed out that the Socialist Peoples Party was following the same road of indifference and neglect.

For its part, the government, through the Minister of Safety and Security, issued a statement saying that those who took the law into their own hands were ‘playing with fire’ and would soon be apprehended and brought to trial, where they would face the full force of the law.

Chapter 36

"The fact is that a police chief in today's South Africa has easy access to almost unlimited amounts of cash from those anxious to avoid justice … In any modern South Africa city one is likely to be told that the head of the local police drugs squad is being paid off by the drug dealers, the head of the CID is being paid off by major gangsters and so on." – R W Johnson, *How Long Will South Africa Survive?*

"MINISTER WANTS POLICE TO ACT TOUGH AS 10 [POLICE] GENERALS ARE BEING INVESTIGATED FOR CRIME" – Headline in The Citizen

"Day after day the morning newspapers carry brutalising stories of yet another family held to ransom in their homes while thieves took their time collecting their material possessions. Why rush? The police are not going to show up." – Professor Jonathan Jansen

"The truth is that it is not the police who control the criminals, but the criminals who dictate when, where and how they will be policed." – Jonny Steinberg, author of *Thin Blue: The Unwritten Rules of Policing in South Africa*

"To an outsider, it often seems as though criminal syndicates are running our criminal justice system. It simply cannot be trusted to do right by the public, which has no alternative but to call for blood, and vigilantism becomes an attractive option." – Barney Mthombothi

"We need to group ourselves together in different communities and create vigilante groups and liase with each other to form an umbrella body that will do what the police are supposed to be doing." – Horace Dumisani Mpanza, *The Citizen*

On Wednesday morning while I was having breakfast and listening to the 8 o'clock news, I suddenly pricked up my ears. A man who had been charged with poisoning pets had escaped from the holding cells at Booysens Police Station. He had been driven off in a waiting car.

A few minutes later the phone rang. It was Ted Thrupp.

'Sorry, it's taken so long, Olly,' he said, 'but I had a late call yesterday from Claude Skinner and I wanted to catch you early with the good news.'

'Fine,' I said. 'Shoot.'

'Well, it seems Simes's latest report has swung things. Without giving Erin any details, Skinner told her that it would be in her interests, and those of the girls, to accept the settlement, and that it was the best she could hope for. So she finally agreed.'

'Great!' I exclaimed. 'When will the girls be returning?'

'I'll phone Skinner and finalise the arrangements. How does Saturday morning sound?'

'Fine.'

Late that afternoon Ted Thrupp phoned again. He said I could fetch the girls from the offices of Hatchet, Skinner & Goudge on Saturday morning, at eleven, if that was okay.

Earlier, a messenger had brought the divorce settlement papers over. Signing them felt like signing away part of my life.

When I arrived at work I heard that all the main newspapers and broadcasters in the country, including AIR, had received the following statement sent from a non-traceable server:

TO ALL HONEST CITIZENS OF SOUTH AFRICA.

As you know, barbaric criminals are the de facto rulers of this country and we are all in danger of becoming statistics of violent crime. Criminals have declared war against honest citizens, who are under siege.

We had hoped that the new government would take urgent steps to curb crime, but it is obvious that the situation is going from bad to worse. These days too many politicians have links with criminals that bribe and even control them.

This government, like the previous one, clearly hasn't the will or the ability to enforce the law and protect its citizens.

So criminals in this country are laughing at the justice system, which, as

we all know, has virtually collapsed.

Opinion polls held over the years show that around 90% of South Africans, both black and white, favour the death penalty. The politicians, however, choose not to listen.

In these desperate times desperate measures are needed. We have heard the voices of honest citizens crying out for justice, and we will respond by privatising the death penalty.

Signed: *The Avenging Angels (A.A.)*

Chapter 37

"Safety is no longer provided by the state at taxpayer's expense. It is provided by private owners of any racial group who need to buy their own security as they see it, and, as such, security has been appropriately privatised." – Frank Lewinberg, *From Jo'burg to Jozi*

The Minister of Safety and Security was smiling when he addressed a news conference on the seven o'clock TV news. 'We have arrested a man in connection with these so-called vigilante killings and he will appear in court soon. I wish to personally commend the Police Commissioner and his dedicated team of policemen and women, who have been working tirelessly around the clock, for this speedy breakthrough.'

The Minister gave an enigmatic smile. 'It would be premature to give specific details. All I will say now is that we view the situation in a very serious light and we will consider all options.'

I was relaxing on the couch, drinking a beer when my cellphone rang. It was Beth. 'Quite a lot to tell you,' she said. 'The flotation tank experience was really, really weird.'

'What happened?'

'Well, when Mrs Eberhardt closed the lid, she said she'd come and open it when my hour was up. She said not to worry if I felt claustrophobic or uncomfortable, as there was a buzzer inside the lid that I could press to call her. It was pitch dark in the tank, and I was floating on my back in a lukewarm solution of Epsom salts. I soon felt totally relaxed. You lose all sense of time. I was just beginning to have a sense of inner peace, when I heard a click and the lid opened. Well, my heart nearly stopped. I screamed. There was a giant green lizard with cold, mean eyes glaring down at me! After a few moments the image seemed to transform, and I saw Mrs Eberhardt standing there. "What's wrong, hon?" she asked. I was too shocked to reply. "Hallucinating?" she prompted. I nodded weakly. "Well, don't worry about it. It's normal".'

I wondered if Beth had been reading David Icke, but I didn't ask. Instead

I said, ‘You on any medication?’

‘Only Cipramil. It’s a pretty mild antidepressant, as you know. But the assistant who works with the flotation tank gave me a small glass of something about five minutes before I got into the tank. Said it was standard procedure and it would help me relax.’

‘What did it taste like?’

‘Ribena with a slight edge to it. Also the same colour as Ribena.’

‘Maybe you should try and find out what it was?’

‘Okay, I’ll try.’

‘Did you find out anything about Kristy and Charlize?’

‘Nothing yet, but I sense things here aren’t what they seem. I can’t put my finger on it, Olly, yet somehow I feel it’s all connected. But I’ll call you if I find something.’

That evening I received an e-mail from Gary Simes. All it said was: *‘the cockroach is in place.’*

I took that to mean he’d bugged the Pinnacle Spa’s phone.

The following day a somewhat hangdog police commissioner announced that the man who’d been arrested in connection with the vigilante killings was no longer a suspect. Under interrogation he’d confessed to murdering his wife’s lover and hanging a placard around the corpse’s neck to throw the police off the scent.

The commissioner said to end on a more positive note, the teenage girls who’d gone missing had finally been found. A full statement would be given after their parents had been officially informed.

A couple of days later the Police Commissioner was back on television. Again he had a hangdog look. The missing teens who he’d claimed had been found were actually runaways who fitted the description of the missing girls. The runaways had claimed to have been kidnapped at a shopping mall in order to conceal the fact that they had gone off on a jaunt with their boyfriends in a stolen car.

That evening I received a call from Alistair L’Estrange. ‘Hi Olly,’ he said. ‘I’m arranging an emergency meeting of VOICE on Sunday morning to discuss this wave of vigilantism. I called Ken Aitken just now, but he’s in Cape Town on holiday. He suggested I call you. Can you make it?’

‘Sure. Where?’

‘At my place. In the meantime, see if you can come up with some ideas on how we should respond.’

‘Okay.’

‘And if there’re any other members of FOWL you think could make a contribution, please call them.’

‘Will do.’

I phoned all the members of the FOWL team, but, at such short notice, only Faan, Drew, Weddo and Goolam could make it.

It was then that I noticed that, in addition to the humming noise on the line, there were several clicks.

Chapter 38

"According to one American study, a child whose parents divorce suffers a trauma worse even than seeing one or other of them die." – Philip Norman, *The Daily Mail*

On Saturday morning I dressed in the blazer and slacks Kristy had chosen for me at Cresta and drove to Hatchet, Skinner & Goudge. Their offices were in a large converted suburban house in a side-street near Northcliff Corner.

As I pulled into the parking area, I could see Bonny and Frith on the front veranda, idly rocking on a swing couch. Their feet were scraping noisily on the quarry tiles and they both looked glum. They were dressed in black gothic gear and their hair was teased up in spikes. Beside the girls were two bulging suitcases and a small wire cage containing two piebald rats.

This little scene filled me with both joy and sadness: joy that the Harpies would be coming home, sadness for the fact that their family was being torn apart.

'Hi Dad,' called out Frith, giving me a wan smile. She pushed herself off the couch and darted inside. Moments later she emerged, followed by Erin and a tall, forty-something man with a stoop. His dark suit reminded me of a funeral director. He paused for a moment to flick a cigarette butt into one of the large ceramic pots standing at the entrance.

'Claude Skinner,' he announced thinly, offering me a freckled hand. His handshake was limp and clammy and his forward-thrusting body seemed as if it was poised to extract something from those around him. He gave me a curt smile and a nod.

Erin was wearing a pale green suit and her off-blonde hair was tied neatly back. She gave me a perfunctory smile. I felt my mouth go dry and my breathing quicken.

'Why are you all dressed so smart?' mumbled Bonny, nudging the rat cage with her toe. 'You trying to impress someone, or what?'

No one said anything.

Finally, Skinner cleared his throat. 'Regarding the custody

arrangements,' he began, focusing on a point just behind my head. 'It's all in the settlement agreement, which you must have read.'

I nodded.

'As to the specifics,' he continued, 'Erin has the use of a holiday cottage at Hartbeespoort Dam, where she'll be taking the girls some weekends.' He made brief eye contact. 'And, as Ted Thrupp has insisted, and we've agreed, the third party *won't* be present.'

Erin appeared to be studying the grouting between the quarry tiles with intense interest.

It struck me then that there were so many unspoken things that lay between us...

'Is that all?' I said.

'Just that since the divorce is uncontested, only the complainant need appear in court.'

I looked blank for a moment.

'Your *soon-to-be-ex-wife*,' Skinner sighed, glancing at his watch.

The phrase jarred.

I said nothing.

'So what are we waiting for?' piped up Bonny. Something metallic sparkled on her tongue.

'I think that's all, then,' said Skinner, glancing around with a look that said: *I'm a busy man. Don't waste any more of my time.*

Erin clasped Bonny and Frith briefly to her breast. 'See you soon, Pumpkins,' she said softly. Then she followed Skinner inside.

I could sense that this was a defining moment for the Harpies. Both seemed close to tears.

'What about a hug?' I asked, holding out my arms. Frith stepped quickly between them. Her hug was stiff and mechanical. Bonny's hug lingered a little longer.

'Okay, let's go home, girls,' I said, picking up the suitcases, which felt as though they'd been packed with building rubble.

The Harpies dawdled after me. Frith nudged a small stone across the parking area with her toe. Bonny carried the rat cage, which she put down carefully on the gravel next to the Lada.

After I'd stowed the suitcases, I bent down to pick up the rat cage. The little rodents stood on their hind legs and peered up at me through the bars, their whiskers flexing inquisitively.

‘That’s Raxie and Peebles,’ announced Bonny. ‘Raxie’s mine,’ she added proudly. ‘He’s a boy. Peebles is a girl. She’s Frith’s.’

‘I hope they’ve been spayed?’ I remarked, trying to sound serious but failing.

‘Oh, Da-*aaad!* You’re so lame!’ chorused the Harpies.

I stowed the cage on the back seat beside the girls.

‘I really, really *hate* what’s happening,’ Frith blurted out. ‘If only–’

‘At least we’re going home!’ interrupted Bonny. ‘I couldn’t stand another day at Anthea’s.’

‘But things can *never* be the same,’ sighed Frith, glancing helplessly at me. ‘Not like when we were all a family together.’

She was right, and I felt for her. As someone once described it, divorce is like dropping a brick in an aquarium.

So I made up my mind to be the best single parent in the world.

As we drove on in silence, Bonny suddenly turned to me, frowning. ‘Why do you have to breathe like that?’

‘Like what?’

‘So loudly.’

‘We all have to breathe,’ I said mildly.

‘Not like that. You sound like Darth Vader!’

‘Well, that’s how I normally breathe.’

‘Then there must be something wrong with your nose. Maybe you need an operation.’

Breathing is something I’m not normally conscious of. But when someone makes a remark like that I suddenly become aware of it. My breathing slowed.

‘Now I can’t hear him breathing at all!’ Bonny whispered to Frith but loud enough for me to hear. Then, turning to me, she said loudly, ‘If you hold your breath like that, Dad, you’ll pass out. Then we’ll all be killed!’

As the Lada laboured up the steep part of Main Road, Frith said innocently, ‘Dad, can we stop off at the Spar to buy some stuff?’

‘Sure,’ I said automatically, slipping into the divorced parent’s indulgent mode.

Once inside the supermarket, the Harpies grabbed a trolley and disappeared down the first aisle. When they reappeared some minutes later, it was piled high, topped by a bag of parrot food. ‘What’s the parrot food for?’ I asked cautiously, fearing a concealed pet somewhere.

‘Oh, rats aren’t fussy,’ Bonny explained. ‘They eat anything – parrot food, hamster food, whatever. If we run out, they’ll even eat dog food.’

Back home after I’d settled on the couch to read my newspaper, I heard footsteps on the stairs. ‘Hey, Dad,’ said Bonny, ‘the new colour scheme in my room is really, really cool!’

‘Mine too!’ echoed Frith.

Chapter 39

"We're taxed like a First World country, but get the services of a Third World country. … Government needs to look after the goose that lays the golden eggs – the taxpayers – and not just expect them to keep paying." – Mike Schussler, economist, *Farmer's Weekly*

"Tax anger is how real revolutions start." – Justin G Steyn, former Idasa researcher, *Business Report*

On Sunday morning I awoke late and had a leisurely breakfast of grilled bacon, tomato, brinjal, toast and coffee. The Harpies were still asleep. They had returned only in the small hours from Dixies, where two popular rock bands, *Fuck U2* and *Parents Suck!*, were performing.

By the time I left for the VOICE meeting, the sun was already warming the front patio and a variety of bird calls were coming from nearby trees. On beautiful days like this it's hard to imagine all the problems we face in this country. But when I switched on the car radio to get the news, reality intruded: Jacob Sefoka, the man on trial for the murder of Johannesburg walker, John Latimer, had been found guilty. Evidence was led that Sefoka was a member of a hijacking and chop-shop syndicate. Other murders allegedly committed by Sefoka were being investigated.

And then a late item: a bomb had exploded outside the Apartheid Museum, killing one street vendor and injuring nine visitors. The Siener Sirkel claimed responsibility but so far had made no demands.

Alistair L'Estrange lived in a sprawling old house shaded by the huge plane trees that line Richmond Avenue. The gate was open when I arrived and Faan's Deke and Drew's Mercedes were parked in the driveway. I parked my car behind theirs and walked up to the house.

Alistair was standing on the veranda with a tubby dachshund slumped beside him. An aroma of freshly brewed coffee and baked cookies almost

masked the doggy smell. After pumping my hand, Alistair led me down a passage lined with hunting prints and faded family photographs. He ushered me into an oak-panelled study crowded with Victorian furniture and leather-bound books. Faan and Drew, who were settled in easy chairs, smiled up at me. After the usual round of greetings, we helped ourselves to coffee and cookies. Alistair plonked himself in a leather-bound swivel chair, and the dachshund curled up at his feet.

Just then Goolam Jeena's diesel Mercedes put-putted up the driveway. A few moments later Weddo emerged from a taxi. When they were both seated, Alistair opened the meeting. 'As you know we're here to discuss crime and the vigilante crisis, and also bounce some ideas around.'

A moment's silence followed in which the dachshund opened one eye and looked up hopefully at the plate of cookies.

'Well my sympathies are with the Avenging Angels,' said Goolam. 'They're only doing what Islamic states do to their criminals – *and it works.'*

'Maybe so,' said Alistair. 'But remember, Goolam, those tough punishments are meted out by legal governments, not a bunch of vigilantes, who aren't accountable to anyone except themselves.'

'What about the Men of Justice?' pointed out Goolam. 'Aren't they also anti-crime activists?'

'I've no quarrel with them. They work within the law, helping with investigations and gathering evidence. They don't hunt down criminals and punish them themselves. The A.A., on the other hand, is creating what amounts to a parallel justice system, where the normal procedures of a fair trial don't apply. I admit that vigilante executions will prove effective in deterring crime, but in the long run they undermine democracy.'

Faan leaned down and patted the dachshund. 'A lot of people would argue that there *is no* democracy to undermine … and they have a point. How can a government like the SPP and its ANC predecessors ignore the overwhelming public support for the death penalty and still be called a democracy? And how can a government that appoints a minister with close connections to dodgy characters involved in crooked casino deals be expected to curb crime effectively? In fact, South Africa isn't a democracy; it's a *kleptocracy.'*

Goolam nodded.

'As I see it,' said Drew, 'politicians who say one thing and do another are the crux of the problem. This government and the previous one have paid

only lip service to fighting crime. On top of that, despite their pious promises to end corruption, they turn a blind eye to it in their own ranks. So they have only themselves to blame for this crisis. When you have a policy vacuum, then something will eventually fill it. In this case it's vigilantism. But vigilantism – no matter how effective – comes at a high price.'

'Sure,' said Alistair. 'Even if the A.A. says it only executes criminals that are caught red-handed, there are still no checks and balances. The A.A. is setting itself up as police, prosecutor, judge, and executioner, all rolled into one. But it's not infallible. That's why one needs a system of appeal. Also, who's to say that some of the executions aren't being used to settle personal scores? No, I firmly believe that VOICE should distance itself from these vigilantes and what they stand for.

'So I think we should rather be seeking legitimate ways of putting pressure on the government to do what it was elected to do, namely protect its citizens.'

'Agreed,' said Weddo. 'But where is the government most vulnerable to legitimate pressure? *That's* the question.'

'Well, we need to deal with the government like you deal with ants in an environmentally friendly way,' said Faan.

'Ants?'

'Yes. When ants are invading your kitchen, and you don't want to spray them with *Doom*, the only effective strategy is to deny them food and water – not a crumb, not a grain of sugar, not a drop to drink.'

'What are you talking about?' asked Goolam.

'Tax.'

'Tax?'

'Sure. You see, governments need tax money, like ants need crumbs and sugar. Or if you don't like the ant analogy, then like a parasite needs a host. Without a host, the parasite dies.'

Goolam looked confused. 'You saying taxpayers should emigrate?'

'Of course not. I'm talking about a general strike by taxpayers and ratepayers, coupled with an ultimatum to the government to fulfil its obligations.'

'But wouldn't that be a bit premature, Faan?' I put in. 'After all the Socialist Peoples Party was only elected a couple of months ago?'

'I'd like to answer Olly's question,' said Alistair. 'Although the present crime situation is a result of years of neglect of the judicial system by the

ANC – and let's not forget its Nat predecessors – the SPP has not come up with any concrete plans to fight crime and is clearly on the same path of incompetence and neglect. Not only that, but as Faan mentioned earlier, the SPP itself is already tainted by corrupt connections. So if the SPP has to pay for some of the sins of previous regimes, then so be it. Actually we have no choice. You see, we have to do something proactive now that would show people that there is an effective alternative to vigilantism.'

'But wouldn't a tax and rates strike be illegal?' I asked.

'Maybe so,' said Alistair, 'but it would be *legitimate*. There's a difference. You see, if a government won't do the job it's paid to do and also can't prevent corrupt tax officials from diverting revenue collected, then we taxpayers have the right to withhold payment.

'But let's be realistic,' Alistair continued. 'Something of this magnitude takes time to organise. We need to extend our influence into every corner of the country. That means building branches, holding rallies, getting media support. That could take eighteen months to two years. We mustn't make the mistake of being in too much of a hurry. An ultimatum that gives the government, say, only six months to comply could fail because of insufficient support.'

'Well, shouldn't we build up the organisation first, and issue the ultimatum later?' I asked.

'No, no. We should still issue the ultimatum now, even if we give the government a longish period of grace. You see the ultimatum is something that fires people's imagination and makes them want to join VOICE. It's our best recruiting tool. Also, the long period of grace shows that we are reasonable people, not a bunch of wild men.'

'So are we agreed that we should go ahead?' I put in.

'Yes, 'I definitely think we should issue the ultimatum as soon as possible. And we should appeal to the A.A. to stop its vigilantism on the grounds that our strategy of putting pressure on the government would be a better option in defeating crime.'

Chapter 40

As I opened the front door I smelt pizzas cooking. At the same time the latest rap song of the *Deadly Dreds* hit me like a hurricane.

It was great to have the Harpies back, but the music was so loud I could hardly think.

'Please turn down the TV, girls!' I called from the passage.

There was a howl of protest, but eventually the window-rattling blast eased off. Half an hour later the sound was back up again.

At seven o'clock, I switched to e-TV news: Jacob Sefoka, the man found guilty of murdering Johannesburg walker, John Latimer, had escaped from custody. Sefoka had seized a firearm from one of his guards, shot him, before fleeing on foot. He had been due to be sentenced today.

Later that evening I had a call from Beth. She'd checked out of the Pinnacle Spa and sounded somewhat subdued. 'I wasn't able to find out anything about what happened to Kristy and Charlize, Olly, only about Mrs E herself. One of the girls from her little clique of admirers spent last night with her. I think they do it in rotation. Oh, one other thing, Mrs E disappears from the Spa for a couple of hours every evening. It may mean nothing. All I can say is that she has a very weird lifestyle. But that doesn't mean she's guilty of any crime.'

The next morning, halfway through my monitoring schedule at AIR, the phone rang. It was Simes. 'They must have found the bug, Olly,' he said, with a note of disbelief. 'I've never had a case where one of these state-of-the-art bugs has been de-activated. Means we're dealing with real professionals.'

'So what do we do now?' I asked.

'I'm still trying to trace Mrs Bombeck and the guy with the hypodermic. And I'll keep an eye on the Spa, for what it's worth. I'll phone you if I find anything.'

After I'd rung off, I had an idea. I phoned Drew and asked him if he could use his contacts in America to look into Mrs Eberhardt's background.

He said he'd be happy to oblige, so I gave him her passport details, and said I'd e-mail him the photo of Mrs E that Beth had passed on to me.

A few minutes later Will Allwell breezed into my office and dropped the late edition of *The Star* on my desk.

A.A. EXECUTES DRUG BOSS was the headline.

'You want to read it now?' he asked. 'I can wait.'

'Okay,' I said. 'Take a seat.'

He slumped into a chair and I began reading.

"The body of a man was discovered this morning in the boot of a car in the parkade at O.R. Tambo Airport. A hypodermic needle was stuck in his neck. The discovery came after a fax was received from the Avenging Angels vigilante group. It claimed that the man was the kingpin of a Nigerian drug syndicate that was responsible for the deaths of at least thirty young addicts and which had ensnared more than a hundred young women into prostitution.

Known as "Orlando" in drug circles, the man, believed to be a Nigerian, had a South African identity card in the name of "Lucky Dludlu". He also carried an American passport in the name of Ira Johnson. His Nigerian name is believed to be Irodinamba. His second name is unknown.

A police spokesman said a murder docket had been opened.

The AA's fax went on to say:

"We reject the appeal from the VOICE activist group, urging us to halt our campaign of executions and to support its tax strike. While we regard VOICE's appeal as well-intentioned, we doubt whether its strategy of putting pressure on the government will work."

'Can't say I'll shed any tears for Orlando,' Will murmured. 'That bastard deserved what he got. Although on principle I'm opposed to vigilantism, I can't help feeling sympathy for people who are fighting back against organised crime and making a dent in it.'

'I think a lot of people feel the same way.'

Just then the lights blinked, went out for a second or two, and then came on again, as AIR's emergency power generator kicked in.

'Hope it's not a long power failure,' said Will. 'I don't fancy eating cold food tonight.'

While Will had been talking, I'd glanced at the other captions on the front page:

SUSPECTED PET POISONER STILL AT LARGE was the one that

caught my eye.

Just then the phone rang. It was Imogen.

Will smiled, nodded, and ducked out of my office with his newspaper.

‘I wondered what had happened to you, Imo,’ I said.

‘I’ve been terribly busy, Oliver, trying to get the Council to do something about those yapping dogs next door. But these days it’s like trying to get blood out of a stone.’

‘Well, why don’t you phone Anisha Parbhoo of Friends of Efficiency, the activist group affiliated to VOICE. She gets results.’

‘I don’t believe in community groups, Oliver. I like to do things myself.’ Then, in her ‘elder sister’ voice, she added, ‘I wonder if I could come over this evening to have a look at the antiques?’

‘No problem. You know where the house is?’

She hadn’t visited me for so long that I had to give directions. ‘And the doorbell is behind a tall cactus. Be careful you don’t prick your finger.’

‘Hey who’s that smart lady at the gate, sucking her finger?’ called out Frith, peering through the French windows’ one-way glass.

I didn’t need to look. I knew it was Imogen. ‘It’s my sister.’

‘Your sister? I thought she’d moved overseas.’

‘No, she’s still living here in Joburg.’

‘How come we never see her?’

‘She’s very busy,’ I said, without much conviction. On the other hand, I thought, suing your neighbours was probably a full-time job!

The door bell gave three long impatient rings.

When I went to the gate to let Imogen in, she gave me a pained look through the metal bars. Her ash-blonde hair was set in a stylish sweep and she wore a conservative dark blue suit that suggested she’d spent the day in court. Now sensitised to auras since the lightning strike, I couldn’t help noticing that hers was dull and grey.

‘I actually did!’ she said.

‘You did what, Imo?’

‘Pricked my finger on your cactus!’ She gave it another suck. ‘And when, Oliver, are you going to stop calling me Imo?’

‘After all these years I’m so used to it, Imo. You see, it just comes out naturally.’

She shrugged in exasperation. ‘Well, let’s not stand here arguing, Oliver. Let’s go inside.’

I gave her a peck on the cheek which she accepted with a superior air. Chloe came to the front door and wagged her tail a couple times without much enthusiasm.

‘Oh, I see you’ve got a spotty dog,’ Imogen remarked. ‘They’re very beautiful but not very bright.’

Chloe curled her lips upwards.

‘My, God, it’s baring its teeth!’

‘Don’t worry, Imogen, that’s just the famous Dalmatian smile.’

The Harpies were standing at the end of the passage in their slouch pose, which, I’d learned, was meant to discourage questioning.

‘Hey, girls, you remember Auntie Imogen?’ I called out.

They murmured something inaudible and shuffled their feet.

Imogen cast a critical eye over their gothic gear, and frowned. Some of Frith’s black eye shadow had migrated down her cheek, giving her a Dickensian urchin look.

‘Hello girls,’ trilled Imogen, switching from frown to smile. ‘I can’t believe how much you’ve grown! How old are you now?’

The Harpies remained impassive.

Imogen’s smile faded. ‘Mind if I take a look around, Oliver?’

Before I could say anything, she began a self-conducted tour of the house. I trailed after her as she headed upstairs. ‘I can’t abide those awful clothes the girls are wearing,’ she sniffed. ‘Young people today don’t seem to know how to dress properly.’

‘You look as if you’ve been in court,’ I remarked, glancing at her formal outfit.

‘Actually, I was giving evidence at the trial of a former gardener who burgled the house. God, I’m beginning to hate these people!’

By ‘these people’ I knew she meant Blacks. These days I was amazed at how many former liberals – and Imogen had once been *very* liberal – thought like this.

‘Granted, there are a lot more black criminals than white ones, but there are also a lot more black victims of crime than white victims. It’s simply demographics.’

‘I know, I know,’ she said wearily, ‘It’s just that … I don’t know … It’s difficult to explain…’

Then, changing the subject, I said, ‘Wouldn’t you like some tea?’

‘Yes please,’ she said, sounding slightly miffed.

The Harpies passed us on the stairs, grunting something inaudible.

While I busied myself in the kitchen, Imogen reclined on the couch, one arm draped along the back like royalty preparing to grant an audience. She cast a critical eye around the room. ‘My God, Oliver, this place needs a jolly good cleaning! Just look at the dust on these antiques. Can’t you get those girls of yours to help a bit?’

When I didn’t answer, she continued. ‘You obviously can’t function without a woman, Oliver. Not that Erin was much use around the house.’

‘I had no complaints,’ I said, pointedly.

‘You wouldn’t. Because you’re just as sloppy.’

Meanwhile, I’d taken down the bone china tea set, a wedding present from Cully. It was stored on an upper shelf, where it had gathered a layer of dust. Normally we use teabags, so it hadn’t been used in ages. I gave it a quick wipe, but there wasn’t time to wash it out properly. Then I found some Earl Grey tea in a tin and began brewing it in the teapot.

Imogen, meanwhile, was plumping up the cushions on the couch. Suddenly she screamed, *‘Oh, my God!’* She’d apparently disturbed Peebles, who’d been having a quiet nap under a cushion. The little rodent poked her head out and blinked up at Imogen.

‘Frith!’ I called out. ‘Frithy!’

A moment later Frith appeared, scooped up Peebles without a word, and trotted off.

Imogen maintained a shocked silence.

I placed the tea set on the dining room table, and, after I’d poured the tea, arranged some boudoir biscuits on a large serving plate, hoping they weren’t stale.

At last Imogen found her voice. ‘Tell me, Oliver, is that awful rat allowed the run of the house?’

‘It’s quite new here. I think it’s still finding its feet.’

‘You can say that again,’ huffed Imogen, taking a sip of tea. ‘I’ve heard of free-range chickens but not free-range rats!’ Then she reached into her handbag and produced several A-4 sheets stapled together. ‘This is the inventory of antiques in Cully’s will. I presume you have one?’

‘I think Ted Thrupp has my copy.’

Imogen cast a speculative eye around the lounge and dining room like an

assessor valuing a deceased estate. ‘I like that Toby jug on the shelf up there … Also those Copeland display plates.’

I nodded but didn’t reply.

‘From what I can see, Oliver, quite a lot of the bigger pieces of furniture seem to be missing.’

‘That’s because I had to put them in the garage.’

‘The garage? That’s disgraceful! Listen, my friend, you can’t keep antiques in a garage! They’ll deteriorate.’

‘Actually, there was no more room in the house.’

Imogen was silent for a while. Then she took a sip of tea and suddenly froze. ‘What’s this?’ she gasped, peering into her cup with a look of horror. She thrust the cup under my nose. At the bottom was something small and black, like a sharply angled question mark. For a moment I was at a loss. Then the awful truth hit me.

‘I’m not sure,’ I lied. ‘Maybe a tea-plant twig.’

‘It’s not a twig, Oliver, it’s a cockroach leg!’ She tilted the cup, still peering into it. ‘Oh, my God, and here’s a *wing!* How absolutely disgusting!’ With that, she rushed through to the bathroom.

A disturbing thought occurred to me. Perhaps Jimmy and Jemima’s siblings had been quietly nesting in the teapot spout and had suffered an agonising death. On the other hand, I hoped, perhaps the spout was where old cockroaches went to die, a kind of roach equivalent of the elephants’ graveyard.

About five minutes later Imogen reappeared white-faced. She had the good sense to say nothing more about the incident, possibly because of the yet unresolved question of her ‘borrowing’ some of my antiques.

She took a deep breath and began reading from the inventory. ‘… grandfather clock, Sheraton sideboard, Victorian military chest, drop-leaf tables, Chippendale chairs, mahogany bureau, hat and umbrella stand, antique Austrian cuckoo clock (not in working order)…’ and so on, until she’d accounted for all the antiques downstairs. ‘I’ve already checked the ones upstairs,’ she added.

I agreed that she could borrow most of them (after all, the house was terribly cluttered) except the sideboard, the grandfather clock and the hat stand. She walked about placing small round white stickers on the corners of the ones I’d said she could take. Then she wrote numbers on them.

‘I suppose there’s a lot more in the garage?’ she asked.

I nodded.

‘I’m particularly interested in the Regency oak breakfront bookcase, which, according to the inventory, has a secret drawer.’

‘Oh, I didn’t know that,’ I said.

‘Well, let’s go and have a look, shall we...?’

We went through to the garage and after I’d switched on the fluorescent lights, Imogen began poking about, inventory in hand. Two daddy-longlegs spiders, apparently disturbed when she opened a cupboard, did a jiggling dance down to the floor.

‘Ugh, How revolting!’ she exclaimed.

There was a strong smell of motor oil, old paint and turpentine at the back of the garage. Imogen screwed up her nose, then opened her mouth to say something, but apparently thought better of it. She gave a shrug, and began ticking off the items one by one: ‘Ah, here we are,’ she said, pointing to a stately looking bookshelf with a cupboard below, standing in one corner. ‘That’s the bookcase I was telling you about, Oliver. There’s even a note here on how to open the secret drawer.’ She stooped down and pressed something. There was a soft click, and a small drawer sprang open in the central section. ‘Come and look here, Oliver.’

Inside the drawer was a clutch of documents tied together with faded red tape, as well as an old book whose cover was laced with mottled discolorations.

‘So *that’s* where they were,’ I said, after Imogen had lifted them out and handed them to me. ‘Cully once told me that she had some historical documents about the Cullingworth family.’

I turned the book over in my hands. It was Jeremiah Cullingworth’s *A Guide to the Colony of Port Natal, 1861*. I decided to dip into it at the first opportunity.

Imogen had taken a couple of steps backwards and was examining the bookshelf, taking notes, like an art critic reviewing an exhibition. ‘This would make a nice focal point in our study,’ she said, cocking her head on one side. ‘Do you think I could take it, Oliver?’

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘Except for the papers and book in the secret drawer. But I could make you copies, if you like.’

‘Don’t bother. The Jeex family history is bad enough. You never know what you might discover about the Cullingworths!’

Imogen paused for a moment, checking the inventory to see if she’d

missed anything. '… In any case, wasn't the first Cullingworth who came out to Natal just a tradesman?'

'Jeremiah Cullingworth … Well, he started Durban's first newspaper. He was Cully's great, great grandfather, and author of the book we found among these old papers.'

'A journalist? That's even worse!'

'So you're not interested in these papers, Imo?'

'Oliver, I haven't got time to pore over old books and documents. Anyway, the people who matter today aren't interested in whether your forefathers were big deals among the early Natal settlers.'

Her cavalier dismissal of our family background annoyed me intensely, so I decided to take the piss out of her. 'I've been meaning to ask you, Imo, did you know that insanity runs in the family?'

She stopped and looked at me, her eyes widening. 'What are you talking about, Oliver?'

'Well, a while back I found some family documents and medical records in an old trunk at Cully's place after she died. Didn't I tell you about it?' I was struggling to keep a straight face.

'No, you didn't.'

'Well, it seems Cully had a sister who was institutionalised for years at the Fort Napier insane asylum in Pietermaritzburg. Of course the family never talked about her for obvious reasons.

'Anyway, I destroyed all the documents. One doesn't want stuff like that hanging about.'

'Good grief. I never knew…' was all Imogen managed to say.

After we went inside again, Imogen began gathering up her things. 'Thank you, Oliver. I'll let you know when the movers are coming. You won't be sorry. Actually, I'm doing you a favour… All your antiques will be kept safely inside and I'll have them regularly oiled and polished.'

I'd lent Imogen the antiques partly in the hope it would bring us closer and she'd visit more often.

It had the opposite effect.

Although Imogen could be infuriating, I was still fond of her. 'What are you and Hamish doing for Christmas?' I asked on the spur of the moment. 'I mean, you'd be very welcome to spend it with us.'

'Thank you, Oliver, but we've already arranged to spend it with the Heddington-Smythes at Plett. We normally go there, you know. Oh, and

don’t forget the wedding. Remember it’s on Saturday at eleven o’clock, St Georges Anglican church in Parktown. I’m sorry we couldn’t invite your girls, but Fiona and Dudley had so many people they had to ask.’

She paused for a moment and then made eye contact. ‘I want you to remember this, Oliver, if you call me “Imo” in front of the guests, I’ll disown you!’

Something was bugging me. For a while I couldn’t think what it was. Then it came to me. Not once during her visit had Imogen referred to the Harpies by their names.

That decided me. I’d originally intended to tell Imogen that I’d made up the story about our insane great aunt. Now I decided to let her stew. My powers of precognition told me that it would soon come in handy…

Chapter 41

"You will scarcely credit it, but there are no locks or keys used on the doors, merely a temporary fastening with a piece of string; there is no fear of robbers or thieves entering your house; no poor men here. The contrast with England is truly striking." – Jeremiah Cullingworth, *A Guide to the Colony of Port Natal*, 1861

After Imogen had left I felt like a drink – something a bit stronger than beer. I poured myself a Castle milk stout. After a light supper, I went upstairs and climbed into bed. Then I looked for something to read. Once again I didn't feel like Dr Dolittle. And since Kristy's death I just couldn't bring myself to read Erin's diary. Instead, I began paging through Jeremiah Cullingworth's *A Guide to the Colony of Port Natal*, published in 1861.

Chapter III, entitled *The Zulu Kafirs*, began with the following paragraph:

'On the first arrival of the emigrant at Natal, he is somewhat surprised to find the natives, who are mostly refugees from Zululand, and are called Zulu Kafirs, almost in a state of nudity, actively employed at the wharves, assisting to land goods, and doing a large amount of heavy work. They are nearly black, with woolly heads, but they have handsomer features than the true negro.'

A couple of pages further on, Jeremiah is amazed at the lack of crime in Natal:

'There is perhaps no more astonishing trait in the Kafir character, at least so far as the tribes surrounding Natal are concerned, than the scrupulous honesty of almost every individual. The houses of white settlers, have hitherto been left without any fastening on windows or doors from year's end to year's end.'

On the same subject, he adds:

‘Large sums of money are often sent by Kafir messengers from one part of the colony to another, and it must be understood that they have nowhere to rest but in the huts which they pass along the way. Here they sleep with the matters entrusted to them laying near them, and yet there is not a single instance on record of money having been lost while in the messenger’s hands…’

When I checked my e-mail later the next day, I found that Alistair L’Estrange had sent me VOICE’s draft ultimatum. There were inputs from FOTL, FOWL and FOE, as well as from VOICE branches in other provinces.

As I began scanning the draft, I noticed that the demands were directed at both the government and local authorities. Among the former demands were that a referendum be held on capital punishment within six months; that hard labour be introduced for those convicted of crimes of violence; that penalties for the illegal possession of firearms, especially automatic rifles, be drastically increased; that policemen and prosecutors be better trained and better paid; that the court system be streamlined; that the systems of parole and bail be tightened up so that dangerous criminals were not released; that victims of violent crimes committed by perpetrators who had escaped from custody, be compensated by the state; and that border controls be effectively tightened to stem the tide of illegal immigrants.

Turning to local government, the draft pointed out that there was a lack of skilled personnel throughout most municipalities, and ratepayers were tired of chaotic billing systems, unwarranted utility cut-offs, power failures, tardiness in repaying deposits, and a general failure to deliver. It said that in some cases ratepayers’ associations, ably assisted by the Friends of Efficiency (FOE), were now having to operate as ‘mini councils’, where unpaid volunteers were doing the work neglected by paid officials of local authorities, which nevertheless demanded that rates and tariffs be paid timeously.

The ultimatum pointed out that the Constitution guaranteed everyone the right to freedom and security, and that a government that could not guarantee the safety of its citizens lost its right to levy taxes. The same applied to local authorities that failed to provide efficient services. Taxpayers and ratepayers, it added, were entirely within their rights to withhold payment if these

obligations were not met.

The ultimatum, as Alistair suggested, gave the government and municipalities two years within which to introduce legislation to address these demands and to begin with their implementation, failing which VOICE would call on taxpayers and ratepayers to withhold payment of their rates and taxes.

The Government dismissed the ultimatum as *"elitist nonsense, cobbled together by racist malcontents and elements of the previous government."* It said the SPP government's policy on crime compared favourably with other African countries, adding that it would respond vigorously to those who withheld payment of rates and taxes.

The next day our VOICE committee met at Alistair L'Estrange's house for a debriefing. It was decided to send the government an e-mail stating that VOICE would stick to the deadlines stipulated in the ultimatum.

In the meantime, it was decided that VOICE should launch an intensive lobbying campaign aimed at gaining wide acceptance for the rates and tax strike, so that when the deadline elapsed, the strike would be effective nation-wide.

Chapter 42

Fiona and Dudley's wedding at the Parktown Anglican church was a posh affair. Men in top hats and morning suits milled about looking as if they'd stepped out of a 1950s British newsreel, while the sprinkling of white and cream wide-brimmed women's hats reminded me of parasol mushroom season in van Riebeeck Park. The bride was strikingly beautiful in her long white wedding dress. But I wouldn't have recognised her as Fiona, which wasn't surprising, as I hadn't seen her since she was a schoolgirl.

Like most church services it soon began to bore me. It droned on predictably until it came to the part where the minister asks if anyone knows of any impediment to the marriage. He had just uttered the dreaded words, when the elderly man next to me farted loudly. There was a shocked silence that seemed to go on forever. Struggling to restore decorum, the minister unwisely improvised. 'Well, then,' he continued in a strained falsetto, 'I take it there are no *vocal* objections.'

The first thing I noticed when I stepped into the large reception room at the Country Club was how cold the air conditioning was. I'd brought my kufi and my yarmulke with me but decided to tough it out unless I felt a sneeze coming.

I peered across a sea of faces towards the main table, assuming I'd been placed there. But even at this distance I could see all the seats were taken. I went back to check the seating plan. I'd been placed at table 13, in a far corner. By some remarkable coincidence, the old gentleman who'd farted in church had been placed there too. There were also two over-dressed middle-aged women at our table who soon revealed themselves to be bitchy gossips.

'I hear Imogen has a batty brother,' one said.

'Oh, really!' exclaimed the other.

'Yes, and he dresses eccentrically; he even wears Muslim hats! Can you believe it, at a time when Muslims aren't exactly top of the pops!'

I'd had enough. I took the kufi out of my pocket, fitted it carefully on my head and fixed her with a psychotic stare.

'Oh, my God!' she yelped, clapping her hand over her mouth.

The other needed no urging. The two of them fled to a table on the far

side of the room.

Just after lunch on Monday, a tearful Imogen came on the line. I expected her to berate me about the kufi incident but she didn't mention it. In between sobs she told me that the minivan carrying all the wedding presents, including mine (two sets of bed linen), had been hijacked at the Carlow Road Bridge traffic light, minutes after leaving the Country Club. Nothing had been recovered. 'The worst thing, Oliver, is that Fiona and Dudley are returning to the U.K. after Christmas and they'd been banking on the presents to help them set up home.'

I was shocked to hear about the hijacking, and told her so, adding that I would send another present over as soon as possible. She said it wasn't necessary, but I insisted, and afterwards I phoned the linen shop at Cresta to arrange an urgent delivery.

I'd hardly put the phone down when it rang again. This time it was Ted Thrupp to tell me that the divorce was through. I was officially single again! I didn't feel like partying, as most divorcees do. I felt flat, but I gave myself permission to grow my hair again. I also e-mailed Matthew, telling him that Erin and I were now divorced. I said I couldn't explain it. Perhaps we'd just grown apart, as many couples do. But I still loved her and always would.

As usual, sometime in the afternoon, Will Allwell poked his head round my door. 'Thought you'd like to know there's a rumour going around that the new consultants are going to recommend AIR's closure, after all. Could just be passage talk, though.'

Experience had inoculated me against rumour, especially at AIR. The dire rumours hardly ever proved true, though a few of the harmless ones sometimes did!

When I'd finished my monitoring schedule, I phoned Gary Simes and mentioned the hums and clicks on my home phone line and asked him if it could be bugged. 'If you're being bugged, Olly, you wouldn't hear it – believe me – not with today's technology. Clicks and hums are from the apartheid era!'

'So what do you think it is, Gary?'

'Well, for a start we can rule out National Intelligence. They're far too busy monitoring opposition politicians to worry about small fish like you or me. Anyway, who'd want to bug your phone?'

‘No idea. Just a feeling I have.’

Chapter 43

It was now the Christmas holidays, that time of the year when most people are away and burglar alarms go off more frequently and dogs, left at home, howl a lonely chorus. The silly season at AIR, which seemed to start earlier and earlier each year, was now in full swing – late arrivals, two-hour coffee breaks, boozy lunches that lasted all afternoon, and people knocking off long before time.

As I'd been so preoccupied over the past couple of weeks, I'd left my Christmas shopping to the very last minute. My first stop was at Holistic Health, the New Age bookshop. After browsing around for a while, I found a novelty card game called "Illuminati" that made fun of conspiracy theories. I thought that since teenagers needed to develop a firm grip on reality early on, it would make an ideal present.

Besides the Moroccan beads I'd already bought them, I bought Frith a Kindle and Bonny a huge stuffed elephant made of dun velvet (even though she was almost sixteen, she loved cuddly toys), as well as a pair of kissing gouramis for her fish tank.

When I got home I found Christmas cards had arrived from Beth, Merrill, Drew, Faan & Katie, as well as a scented one from Pilar Zapata. With a pang of guilt, I realised that, with the unexplained death of Kristy on my mind, I'd forgotten to send out cards this year and e-cards were just not my style.

The next day Frith said, 'Although Christmas is just around the corner, Dad, I'm sad as well as happy.'

'Why sad, Frithy?'

'Well, I'm sad Mum won't be here.'

'I'm sad too,' I said, meaning it. 'But you're spending Christmas Eve with Mum, aren't you?'

'I know,' said Frith. 'But Christmas Day has always been the big day for us as a family.'

'Well, we'll just have to try and make the best of it, won't we?'

She nodded glumly.

Now that the Harpies were home, I was determined to celebrate Christmas properly. The turkey was to be a surprise. I phoned Katie for

advice. ‘No problem,’ she said. ‘Just put it in a giant roasting bag at 180 and it’ll be done about twenty minutes sooner.’ The humming noise was still on the line, but this time there were no clicks.

I bought the turkey well ahead of Christmas in case the shops ran out, as had happened a couple of years before. But hardly had I put it in the deep freeze, when there was a power failure that affected most of Joburg. It lasted four days. On the third day I realised that I’d have to cook the turkey in the gas oven or it would go off. So that’s how we came to have two turkeys that year, a few days apart!

The hadedas, already in a festive mood, woke me early on Christmas Day. A blue sky promised perfect weather. The Harpies slept late, having returned late from their Christmas Eve with Erin, who, incidentally, hadn’t totally ignored me this time, but flashed me a wan smile through her car window.

Bonny breezed into the kitchen while I was still cooking lunch, followed by Frith. ‘You know what Anthea said the other day, Dad?’ said Bonny.

‘No, what?’

‘She said, “There’s nothing like a family to fuck up Christmas”!’

I gave this cynical comment a few moments thought, then I said: ‘It’s not so much the family that does that, Bonny. It’s the alcohol that goes with it.’

‘Actually you’re right, Dad.’

‘What’s happened about the divorce between you and Mum?’ asked Frith suddenly.

For some reason I’d held back telling them. I thought Erin might have told them, but apparently she hadn’t. ‘The lawyer phoned me the other day and said it’s gone through,’ I said.

There was a long silence.

A tear ran down Frith’s cheek. ‘I knew you guys were getting divorced. But it only hits you after it’s actually happened…. but you know what?’

‘What, Frith?’

‘I’m always going to remember this day. It divides my life into two: B.D. and A.D. – that’s *Before Divorce* and *After Divorce*.’

Chapter 44

That evening I dipped into Jeremiah Cullingworth's *Guide to the Colony of Port Natal* and came across several more interesting snippets on crime and punishment in the 19th century:

'The Kafirs have a very fine and correct sense of justice. They never murmur at the infliction of any punishment or penalty that has been deserved. There is scarcely any jury in the world, which would be more ready to find a verdict of 'served him right,' in case of merited penalty, than one impanelled from Kafirs.'

'Some portion of the honesty of the Zulu Kafirs is probably due to the traditional policy of Chaka and his successors, death being the punishment of all thieves.'

'Upon the whole there is probably no land in the world in which property is more absolutely safe than it is in Natal.'

I had this thought as I closed the book: What had gone wrong since the 19th Century that had culminated in the present terrible crime wave? Was it the migratory labour system that had led to the break-up of the African extended family and its moral values; or the iniquitous hut tax that had forced Blacks out of rural areas and into the cities where temptation lurked; or the indignities of apartheid that robbed people of their self-esteem; or the abolition of the death penalty – or simply all of these?

The noises on my telephone line had continued, so I phoned Drew for a second opinion.

'Well, as you know, Olly,' he said, 'I was in the intelligence game for many years, and one of the most important lessons I learned was: *trust your instincts.* Often one is inclined to dismiss fears as unwarranted, but I always err on the cautious side and check them out first.'

‘But if, as Simes says, humming noises and clicks went out with the apartheid era, why would I hear anything if the line was bugged?’

‘Could be amateurs or someone trying to scare you ... I don’t know. One can only speculate. But I wouldn’t worry too much – just be alert. And ask Simes to check your line.’

‘Right.’

‘By the way, Olly, there’s something very strange about your Mrs Eberhardt….’

‘What?’

‘Well, according to official U.S. records, she doesn’t exist!’

‘But she’s an American citizen, right?’

‘According to her passport she is.’

‘Are you saying it’s forged?’

‘Seems genuine enough. But the trail stops there. No social security number, no driving licence, no bank accounts, current or closed – nothing. My Washington contact, Prometheus, even managed to check the FBI’s database at the National Crime Information Centre. It’s a kind of federal and state clearing house of sensitive personal information, not just on crime, but also on missing persons – *nada*.’

Chapter 45

News is cyclical. There's usually a lull during the December silly season, followed by a gradual increase in January before things get back to normal. But the really big events can come at any time like the devastating tsunami of 2004 that struck the day after Christmas.

On Friday the 31st of January, I awoke with a sense of foreboding that something terrible was about to happen. I switched on the radio to catch the early morning news, but there was nothing to justify my feeling. Halfway through the lunchtime bulletin, however, the newsreader suddenly paused. Then, in an urgent tone, she continued: *'A late news item just handed to me says thirty-four people have been killed and fifty-nine injured in a bomb blast outside Parliament in Cape Town. Eyewitnesses said an ice cream van crashed through a security barrier and exploded among a group of bystanders outside the House of Assembly. The explosion killed or injured people within a radius of about 80 metres….'*

By the evening news, the death-toll had risen to thirty-seven. Parliament wasn't sitting at the time, so it came as no surprise that none of the victims were parliamentarians. Instead, many of the dead were children from a primary school who'd been on a tour of Cape Town's historical sites. Others included tourists: four elderly Britons, two German backpackers and a Swede – as well as about a dozen passers-by. The driver of the ice cream van was also killed.

The camera switched to a grim-faced President Phiri, who, appealing for calm, said the bombing appeared to have been the work of a mentally disturbed loner who'd recently escaped from the Sterkfontein Psychiatric Hospital.

The following morning the Siener Sirkel claimed responsibility for the bombing of what it called 'this sinful house of Babel'.

In a fax to a local radio station, it said the bomber, Dirk Ahlers, was a *veldkornet* in the SS, and claimed that his detention in Sterkfontein had been 'purely political'. Describing him as 'a modern-day Boer hero', it said he had sacrificed himself in a legitimate military operation against the new

‘communist government’, which was in league with what it called the ‘Mohammedan Anti-Christ’. It added that the SPP, through its radical policy of land seizures and its complicity in criminal farm attacks, was persecuting the Boer nation even more than the ANC had. However, SS commandos would continue to attack ‘enemy targets’, as part of a war of liberation.

For the rest of the day, my feeling of unease continued. That evening, after I’d turned out the light and was drifting off to sleep, I heard a noise that sounded like the front door opening quietly and closing. I tip-toed downstairs and looked around. The front door was locked and everything seemed in order. I was on my way back to bed when I decided to check on the Harpies. I peered around their bedroom doors and saw they were safely tucked up in bed.

The following morning I had a late breakfast and then strolled down to the Spar to buy the Sunday papers. It was one of those hot, lazy days you sometimes get in February.

After I’d returned home and been reading for a while, I noticed there was no familiar loud music coming from the Harpies’ bedrooms. I checked my watch – twenty past eleven – too late for them to be still in bed. I called out *‘Bonny! Frith!’*

No answer.

I went upstairs to check. Yes, they were there, fast asleep. On a sudden hunch I took a closer look. The forms under the duvets were not Bonny and Frith, but three or four pillows laid lengthways.

I was soon to discover that a child’s disappearance is a parent’s worst nightmare, especially when blonde girls like the Harpies were disappearing at what now seemed to be increasingly frequent intervals.

Fighting panic, I forced myself to think rationally. Perhaps the Harpies, missing Erin, had sneaked out to visit her. I phoned her on her cell. No, she hadn’t seen them. I could hear the shock in her voice, turning quickly to anger. ‘This is *just* what I was afraid of, Olly. Your head is always in the clouds…’

I didn’t want to argue. ‘Look Erin, we can talk later. I need to do some phoning now to try and find the girls. Don’t worry, I’ll keep you informed.’

Next, I phoned Anthea’s number. Anthea’s mother, Gail Jervis, answered. ‘Oh my God,’ she cried, ‘have your girls also disappeared? I only found out that Anthea had gone this morning!’ She babbled on hysterically.

Eventually, I managed to interrupt her: ‘Have you phoned Anthea’s

boyfriend yet?'

'I had Kevin's number somewhere, but I can't seem to find it…'

I didn't know who else to phone. The Harpies never knew anyone's surnames, not even their friends'.

After the recent reports of girls going missing and what had happened to Kristy and Charlize, I'd become paranoid about the Harpies' safety. On the advice of the Missing Children website I always kept a recent photograph of them on hand. I insisted that they should never go anywhere alone, always leave contact numbers and what time they expected to get home, and who was driving. It worked for a couple of days; but after that they were always in too much of a hurry getting dressed to bother, or simply forgot.

Since the Harpies seemed to have left home voluntarily, I hadn't yet called the police. But now I decided to. I dialled the 10111 emergency number, but it just kept ringing. I was still holding on when I heard a car pull up. I peered through the French windows and saw Bonny and Frith climbing out of a sporty red Opel. A beefy young man of about twenty-five was reclining in the drivers' seat, drumming his fingers on the dashboard.

When he saw me, he swung himself out of the car and extended a meaty hand that gripped mine like a vice. 'Derek Labuschagne. I'm in charge of security at the club.'

'What club?'

'The Zeppelin. You know, the new rave club in Westdene.'

'I see,' I said, evenly, although I'd never heard of it. 'Anyway, why are you bringing my daughters back so late?'

'I expect they'll give you all the details themselves,' he said with a shrug. 'But, to be very honest, the guy they were with – Kevin, I think his name was – was pretty wasted.'

'But couldn't they have got a lift with someone else?'

Derek shot the Harpies a glance. Bonny was leaning with her back against the car's bonnet, staring into the distance. Frith lounged by the gate, rolling a pebble under her shoe.

'I only noticed your daughters as we were closing up. And by then it was very late…' He glanced again at the Harpies, but they kept their pose of studied indifference. 'You see, I wasn't sure where they lived, so I took them back to my place to crash.'

'Are you saying they weren't in a condition to tell you?

He gave me a long, hard look, but said nothing.

‘Well?’

‘Look, sir, I can’t watch everyone all the time. It’s humanly impossible. Sure, some drink too much – it happens in all clubs and bars.’

‘But these girls shouldn’t have been at your club in the first place. They’re underage.’

‘Sir, they didn’t come in through the normal entrance where we check IDs. I was there, so I know. You’ll have to ask them how they got in.’

‘I see.’

‘Look, the main thing, sir, is they’re okay. Nothing bad happened to them. Things could have been a lot worse if they’d got a lift with some dodgy character – or tried to walk home alone, as some chicks do.’

He had a point. I began to feel grateful. ‘Well, thank you for looking after my daughters. I appreciate that.’

‘No problem.’ He handed me his card. ‘I don’t work only at the club. I do other things. If you need me for anything – like where lawyers or the police can’t help, just give me a call.’

I looked at the card. On the front it read: DEREK LABUSCHAGNE, ZEPPELIN CLUB, SECURITY MANAGER.

On the back it said: PRIVATE DETECTIVE, SECURITY CONSULTANT AND FREELANCE DEBT COLLECTOR.

After Derek Labuschagne had driven off, I went inside. The Harpies, heads downcast, trailed silently after me.

Eventually, after a lengthy interrogation, most of the story came out. Kevin had smuggled the girls into the club through a toilet window. After that he’d bought them strawberry coolers, and then downed several Jager Bombs himself. Half an hour later he passed out. The Harpies, except for saying somewhat ambiguously, ‘We were cool,’ refused to say anything about their condition.

I grounded them for a month.

In a fit of temper, Bonny slammed the fridge door, dislodging three magnetic message holders. ‘Fuck! fuck! *fuck!’* she screamed, aiming a vicious kick at the dishwasher. ‘You’re the meanest parent in the world!’

Frith slunk up to her room without a word.

When I phoned Erin to tell her the news, she said, ‘Thank goodness they’re safe.’ There was a moment’s pause. Then she added, ‘But I’m afraid I’m going to have to talk to Claude Skinner about this, Oliver. It’s just not good enough.’

Chapter 46

The first thing I saw when I arrived at work on Monday was an announcement on the notice board saying Tata Zondi would be addressing a special staff meeting at two o'clock.

Will Allwell and I arrived early so we could find seats in the crowded newsroom. At twenty past two, Tata Zondi swept in and launched quickly into her address. 'The consultants, Cassim, Nyati & Associates have completed Phase One of their brief and already appropriate action has been taken where irregularities have been uncovered.' She glanced around searchingly before continuing. 'The consultants recommend that AIR should carry on functioning as usual until an in-depth ministerial evaluation is completed. That will begin next week. In the meantime, all new appointments are frozen until further notice.'

Before anyone could ask a question, she tucked her notes under her arm and strode briskly out of the room.

I turned to Will. 'A bit of an anti-climax don't you think?'

'It's not *what* she told us that we should relax about; it's what she knows but hasn't told us that should cause concern.'

'You heard something, Will?'

'No, just putting two and two together.'

'At least they're not closing down the station – so far, anyway. But what I can't understand is why the Ministry is getting into the act directly when consultants have already been appointed.'

'Probably to check on the consultants to see they're toeing the line, which means two lots of spies will be snooping around.

Halfway through the afternoon Ted Thrupp phoned me. He said he'd had a call from Claude Skinner, who'd informed him that, after the Zeppelin incident, Erin was extremely concerned about my parenting abilities. She now wanted the court to vary the custody order so that the Harpies would be with her.

'What now?' I asked.

'Oppose it, of course … unless you've changed your mind about having the girls.'

‘Not at all. I think things should stay the way they are, especially with Alec Sudman lurking in the wings.’

‘But I must warn you, Olly, if the matter does go to court, it could be an expensive business.’

‘Who do you think would win? I asked. ‘And who pays?’

‘Normally the loser pays, but I don’t want to make any predictions. Courts are full of surprises.’

I was about to end the conversation, when Ted added: ‘Oh, there’s one other thing, Olly. Skinner says Erin believes that grounding the girls for a whole month is unduly harsh. She wants to know if you’d reconsider this. You see, she wants to take them away for a weekend during that time.’

I could see where this was heading – a game of ‘good cop, bad cop’. Well, if sticking to my guns meant I was the bad cop, then so be it. ‘No way,’ I said. ‘The girls are going to have to learn that bad behaviour has unpleasant consequences.’

Just then the television news came on. The Minister of Safety and Security said investigations into the Cape Town bombing were continuing but so far there’d been no arrests. Police, however, were following up some important clues. The Minister added that the government was considering a comprehensive response to ‘these terrorist bombings’, which would be announced shortly.

As I mentioned earlier, news is cyclical. After the long news drought over the silly season, now everything seemed to be happening at once. The first item on the lunchtime news was a report of another bombing, this time at the SABC in Auckland Park, Johannesburg. A car bomb had exploded in the parkade on the side nearest to the TV building, killing seven people, injuring nine, and causing extensive structural damage. The Siener Sirkel was quick to claim responsibility, adding that the *‘vryheidsoorlog’*, or war of independence, would continue.

I sensed that things were now coming to a head. The evening news confirmed this. President Phiri, flanked by the Minister of Safety and Security and the Director of the National Intelligence Agency, was addressing a news conference. He began by saying that the current wave of urban terrorism and vigilantism was clearly escalating and drastic measures were needed to halt it. After careful consultation with his cabinet, he had decided to declare a state of emergency in terms of the Special Emergency Powers Act, which would empower the law enforcement authorities to detain

suspects without trial in order to deal with the situation.

The first wave of arrests came the following day. Those detained included the owner of a Pretoria gun shop with an indoor shooting range, the entire membership of a Mid Rand shooting club, a hunting safari operator based in Johannesburg, the manager of a Krugersdorp company that trained security personnel, three police reservists in Pretoria, and four members of an Afrikaans cultural organisation, also in Pretoria. Although the army had been put on alert, a special forces unit had been confined to barracks. Road blocks manned by police and army personnel were everywhere. I was stopped three times on my way to work.

The government made no attempt to conceal the identities of those detained. In fact, it seemed almost eager for the spotlight to be on them, as well as on the circumstances of their arrest. The only information not disclosed was where they were being held.

The opposition Democratic Alliance demanded to be given this information, and complained that such detentions should only be ordered after consultation with opposition parties. The ANC, however, remained silent.

The second wave of arrests, several days later, sent shock waves through the country.

Unconfirmed reports said five of the detainees were top ANC officials, including two former ministers (who were not identified).

Only now did the ANC react. It described the second round of arrests as ‘purely political’, aimed at intimidating the opposition and had nothing to do with the bombings. It demanded that all detained ANC members should be released immediately.

As *The Citizen* put it in an editorial, ‘…the revolution is devouring its children.’

Chapter 47

"The weakest link in any security chain is always a human being." – Andy McNab, former covert operative for the SAS, and author of *Deep Black*

About a week later, and halfway along my route to work on Beyers Naude, Drew called me on my cellphone. 'You might not believe this, Olly, but the mystery concerning Mrs Eberhardt deepens.'

I was keeping a wary eye on a clutch of taxis that were weaving in and out of lanes without warning.

'What's the story?'

'You remember I told you last time that according to U.S. records she doesn't exist?'

'Right.'

'Well, Prometheus tells me that the records were deliberately erased, which could only mean that she's working undercover for some agency.'

'You mean for the CIA?'

'More likely a rogue covert ops group.'

'Why d'you say that?'

'Prometheus feels something generally isn't quite right, not only concerning Mrs Eberhardt but with some other suspicious things that seem to tie in with this case. His theory is that a group of former Agency Politicals – "Plausibly Deniables", as they're called in intelligence circles – is into some murky covert stuff. So if they screw up, no one would ever admit to having known about it. This time, however, it has something to do with South Africa. So you could say that Prometheus's interest goes far beyond just Mrs Eberhardt.'

'So what do we do now?'

'We wait. And, let me emphasise, Olly, it could be a *very long wait*. Prometheus has already taken a huge risk.

The following day Dr Byat's dental hygienist phoned to tell me it was time for me to come in for a treatment.

'How is Dr Byat?' I asked, as I settled back in the dental chair.

She frowned and pursed her lips. ‘Actually he’s no longer with us.’

‘Where’d he go?’ I asked, hoping it was somewhere reasonably close, as I didn’t feel like changing dentists.

‘Nobody seems to know.’

‘That’s strange, isn’t it?’

‘Yes it is. One day he just didn’t arrive for work. Also didn’t phone or say anything to his partner, Dr Dangor. The next day we started making enquiries. His wife didn’t know where he was either. He simply disappeared. She filed a missing person report. Since then – about a month ago – we’ve heard nothing.’

Chapter 48

‘We want to go and stay with Mum,’ Bonny blurted out one day.

‘You not happy here?’ I asked.

‘We don’t like this grounding thing. Life’s not fun anymore.’

It was obviously blackmail, but I wasn’t about to give in. There was also the small matter of the custody order. However, I realised it would be useless to try and force the girls to stay. ‘Well, if you want to go, then I’ll respect your choice. But I thought the reason you wanted to stay with me was that Mum’s boyfriend made you uncomfortable.’

‘He does. But don’t worry, Dad, we’ve worked out a plan...’

Erin fetched them the next day.

Faan phoned me shortly after the Harpies had left. ‘Have you heard the news?’ ‘What news?’

‘Alistair L’Estrange has been detained. They picked him up during the latest round of arrests. As usual, no reasons given, and no info about where he’s being held.’

The news came as a shock to me. Not only was I worried about Alistair, but I was now having serious doubts about the future of the country. There was a palpable feeling of fear everywhere.

Two days later a bomb exploded outside the SPP headquarters in downtown Johannesburg, killing thirteen people and injuring thirty-two. Once again the Siener Sirkel was quick to claim responsibility. In its response, the government deployed all available police and army troops, sealing off Johannesburg.

Then the searches began – apparently random – often accompanied by police brutality, leaving people shocked and bewildered. Hundreds, if not thousands were detained, while rumours abounded that they were being held at a special detention camp at some secret location.

The mood of fear turned to paranoia, with many people attempting to flee the country. Almost all of these were detained at road blocks or while attempting to board international flights.

The following morning, an editorial in *The Weekend Herald*, said it all. ‘The period of relative peace since South Africa became a democracy in 1994

and Nelson Mandela inaugurated our Rainbow Nation is clearly over. Now things are falling apart. The country is poised on a knife edge, raising the spectre of civil war…'

PART THREE

Coming Together

Chapter 1

> *"Amongst Whites there is a complaint that they pay twice for everything. They pay tax for 'security of person' (chapter 2 constitution), but they also pay for their own security. They pay for education and then directly pay for additional teachers; they pay for road maintenance and do the work themselves. The bottom line is that this government is very expensive to keep around, with no benefits coming from it. In reaction the next step may be a formal note to the Minister of Finance and the Receiver of Revenue, demanding a tax discount for services promised but not delivered."* – Dr Jan du Plessis

"The erosion of the Constitution may begin slowly but, if the citizenry remain silent in the wake of the recent behaviour of those in powerful office, before we realise it our constitutional foundations may be weakened beyond repair." – Comment & Analysis, *Mail & Guardian*

"In Africa, the richest people are heads of state and ministers … The instinct of the ruling elite is to loot the national treasury and invest the booty in foreign banks." – George Ayittey

"There were about 66 000 commercial farms in this country in 1994; today the number has dwindled to 44 000. And yet the role of large-scale farmers in ensuring our food security and providing employment cannot be overstated. … placing a gun to the head of commercial farmers , as the Department of Rural Development appears to be doing with its 'draft final policy' on land reform – which envisages the expropriation of half of all commercial farmland on behalf of farmworkers – is unworkable and will destroy agriculture." – Editorial, *The Times*, Johannesburg

For more than a year I'd clung to Faan's theory that Kristy and Charlize

might still be alive. And yet there was still no evidence to contradict the finding of the inquest that the charred bodies in the burned-out Mercedes were those of the girls. However, I just couldn't believe I'd never see Kristy again. I'd asked Gary Simes to check for possible leads, but so far he'd come up with nothing.

There'd been a severe cold snap and the frost had blackened the shoots on Kristy's potted avocado tree. Sadly, it showed no signs of life. Although it seemed pointless at the time, I took it inside and put it in a sunny spot near the French windows and gave it a cup of water.

The Harpies had returned to Melville, but I'll come to that later...

Meanwhile, the threat of civil war, which had loomed so large after the spate of Siener Sirkel bombings, had gradually receded. Even so, the political and economic situation in South Africa continued to deteriorate and confidence in the country slumped. The rand had dropped to its lowest level ever and the cost of living spiralled. Foreign investors, wary of the SPP's re-socialisation programme and its increasingly close links with radical Middle Eastern states, were pulling out.

At the same time, unemployment and homelessness had increased dramatically, while farm invasions and criminal attacks had forced many farmers to abandon their farms and move to the cities, or emigrate. As a result, food prices rocketed, and South Africa had to import many basic necessities. At about this time, the *African Guardian* reported that work had begun on a mini palace for President Phiri near the pilgrimage site at Moria, in Limpopo. Meanwhile, the housing shortage – already critical under the ANC – continued to worsen, and the SPP, looking for short-cuts to solve the problem, introduced what it called the 'Shared Housing Programme'.

During Phase I, inspectors came knocking on doors in suburbia to check for empty granny flats, servants' quarters, and garages. These were summarily requisitioned; and in Phase II, squatters from informal settlements would be moved in.

As confidence continued to plunge, emigration increased to levels not seen since the Sharpeville shootings in 1960. Would-be emigrants, seeking visas and passports, formed long queues outside foreign consulates.

The wave of emigration, as well as negative perceptions about the country's future, caused the property market to collapse and virtually all building work ceased. Although most of those emigrating were Whites, Coloureds and Indians, among these were an increasing number of skilled

Blacks.

Around this time, President Phiri, anxious to divert attention from his increasing failures, began playing the race-culture card. He labelled whatever he believed to be blocking his radical socialist programme as ‘Eurocentrism’. His first target was the Constitution, which he said was based on Western models and was unsuited to Africa’s needs. He told a meeting of the Young Socialist League that ‘the Eurocentric constitution should be relegated to the dustbin of history’. To rousing applause, he announced that the SPP was working on a new draft Constitution that would enshrine the principles of African socialism.

Now to return to the bombings some eighteen months ago …

About six weeks after the Siener Sirkel had claimed responsibility and the subsequent declaration of a state of emergency, the Minister of Safety and Security announced the arrest of seventeen men who would face charges ranging from treason to murder. Police had also seized nearly two-thousand kilograms of explosives, detonators and an assortment of ammunition, as well as assault rifles, handguns and three grenade launchers.

‘We believe we have broken the back of this subversive racist group,’ the Minister continued. ‘In any case they can’t keep a secret. Offer them money and informers queue up!’

In contrast, not a single member of the Avenging Angels had been charged with an offence. While a few suspects had been detained, they couldn’t be linked to the vigilantism and were eventually released, including Alistair L’Estrange.

Alistair seemed no worse for his experience, and was even more determined to carry on as National Director of VOICE. It came as no surprise when the SPP government ignored the VOICE ultimatum, and did nothing to strengthen the criminal justice system, as we’d demanded.

At this point Alistair joined the DA, saying VOICE needed a ‘voice’ within an official political party.

From time to time the government continued to detain people for no apparent reason. These included members of opposition political parties, newspaper reporters, and free-speech campaigners. Although most of them were released after a few days or weeks, the government’s aim, according to the Freedom of Expression Institute, was simply to intimidate.

Meanwhile, we VOICE members continued with our campaign, lobbying ratepayers' associations and professional organisations throughout the country, significantly increasing our support. There was still six months to go for the government to meet the demands of our ultimatum, failing which we would declare a country-wide rates and tax strike.

In a worrying trend, begun under the ANC government, the SPP began ignoring virtually all court orders that went against it. When the Law Society condemned the practice, President Phiri said Roman Dutch law was 'a racist colonial relic', and he would soon be consulting with a group of African lawyers and academics to form a Law Reform Commission to devise a new legal system for the country. After that, a 'High Court of the People' – which he neglected to define – would replace the western-style Constitutional Court, whose judgments were too often 'counter-revolutionary'. He added that 'the Honourable judges must understand that there are other more relevant constituencies besides the Court….'

Around this time the Young Socialist League and the Socialist Guards, the latter a militant elite group for the over-thirty-fives, began staging noisy and sometimes violent demonstrations outside courts, as well as outside judges' homes. Similar demonstrations were staged outside newspaper offices, watchdog groups, the Gay and Lesbian Association, and the offices of opposition political parties.

Another ploy the SPP used to divert attention from its failures was a crash programme of name changing, far more radical than the ANC's earlier one. Hundreds of towns, villages and streets with English or Afrikaans names were changed virtually overnight, as well as some that had been re-named by the former government. The ANC was shocked when the SPP changed Beyers Naude Drive in Johannesburg to Robert Mugabe Avenue, and even more shocked when it changed Tshwane, the capital city (formerly Pretoria) to Phiriopolis.

Meanwhile, the Harpies had turned seventeen and had begun their matric year. They were still staying with Erin and Sudman. However, I learned later that they'd devised a plan to get rid of Sudman so that they could stay alone with Erin. Their plan was simple: make life such hell for him that he would bail out of the relationship. But it didn't turn out quite that way…

Phase One was to be generally annoying: playing loud music; taking two-

hour baths filled to the brim and using up all the hot water; leaving wet towels on the floor; dropping chip packets and sticky sweet papers in Sudman's car; 'forgetting' to do the washing up; or, if they did, then putting everything back in the wrong places, especially Sudman's favourite whisky glass.

Phase Two upped the ante. They spilled sugary cereal milk on the deep-pile lounge carpet, attracting an army of ants; they hijacked Sudman's favourite chair when he wanted to watch TV; they waited until Erin and Sudman had gone to bed and then called out to Erin to help them with their homework; and they banged doors late at night.

Phase Three brought matters finally to a head. One day at table, Bonny asked innocently, 'What have you got when you have little lumps on your skin, Mum?'

I gather that Erin was listening with only half an ear. 'You mean warts?'

'No, not warts, Mum, itchy blisters.'

'Where?'

Bonny glanced downwards.

'Oh, my God, not *herpes?!'* she cried. 'I'll take you to the doctor first thing tomorrow.'

'No, it's okay, Mum,' said Bonny. 'The blisters have gone now. Also the scabs. Really, I'm okay.'

The Harpies had looked up the symptoms of genital herpes on the Internet before staging their little charade.

The next day the doctor took a blood sample, but said that tests for herpes were often inconclusive between outbreaks.

A week or two later, Erin phoned me to say that the Harpies were ready to return to Melville, and that she was dropping the application to court to vary the custody order.

'Are we still grounded?" asked Bonny, with a roguish grin, shortly after they arrived.

'Only for today,' I said, keeping a straight face.

Chapter 2

"What seemed to be happening was that these youngsters committed murder or rape in response to wanting to join a gang." – IRIN United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

Since the Avenging Angels had begun their vigilante campaign of executing violent criminals, emails and calls unashamedly pledging support had poured into newspapers and phone-in programmes, many from crime victims.

However, human rights campaigners, academics and religious organisations protested strongly against the A.A. executions. Only this week a group of church leaders issued a statement condemning what they called 'jungle justice'. Although I could see that the A.A.'s executions could lead to injustices, I had to admit that the strategy generally seemed to be working. Opportunistic violent crime had decreased further, and the trend seemed set to continue. However, the A.A. had been less successful in deterring crime committed by gangs and syndicates. A criminologist had pointed out that gang leaders and syndicate bosses, with their vast resources, their bodyguards, and their ability to bribe officials, believed they were untouchable. The execution of the Nigerian drug lord, Orlando, was seen as an isolated case – or more likely, he may simply have been a casualty in a turf war.

However, whatever the merits or otherwise of the A.A.'s strategy, I still believed that VOICE's tax strike was the only acceptable extra-parliamentary option.

A few days after the A.A. statement to the media, the SPP government launched a stinging attack on VOICE. Not only did it continue to studiously ignore the VOICE ultimatum, but it announced that it would actually *increase* taxes, especially for those in upper income brackets. In addition, it said it planned to introduce a 'redistributive levy', because of what it called 'the ANC's failure to make those who benefited from apartheid pay adequately'.

Undaunted, Alistair L'Estrange, Ken Aitken and Anisha Parbhoo set off on a country-wide speaking tour to drum up support for VOICE. Much to the surprise and delight of Alistair and the others, support for VOICE, not only in big cities, but in small towns, was overwhelming. Membership climbed and donations poured in.

The money came from people of all races, as well as from businesses – mainly medium and small – which considered our campaign their last best chance of pressuring the government to do its job.

However, big companies, especially banks and in the mining sector, were coy about supporting us.

Despite this lack of corporate support, the VOICE tour raised over a hundred and seventy million rands. Some of it went into administration, but most of it went into a 'war chest' to pay the legal costs of anyone prosecuted in connection with the planned strike.

Chapter 3

Although the A.A. had been remarkably successful in reducing crime in cities and towns, it was less so in rural areas, where its resources seemed more thinly stretched. Criminals, sensing this, and emboldened by the government's permissive attitude, stepped up their violent attacks on farms, murdering the white owners and managers, and setting fire to grasslands and plantations in an effort to drive farmers off the land. This caused a spike in farmers emigrating to Australia and New Zealand, as well as to some African countries that welcomed their skills.

Farmers weren't the only ones leaving the country. There'd been a steady stream of doctors and specialists emigrating for more than a decade, but this became an exodus after the government announced that it was prescribing the maximum fees that could be charged in order to make medical treatment more affordable for the disadvantaged.

Come to think of it, every other person I knew seemed to be emigrating. Imogen was a case in point. A few months after the wedding, she told me that she and Hamish had decided to visit Fiona and Dudley in the U.K. and were leaving the following week. Soon after their arrival, and after reading a lot of dire predictions about South Africa in the British press, they'd decided not to return, as Hamish believed he qualified for an ancestral visa.

So they put their home in Johannesburg on the market and bought a small house in an up-market suburb of Tunbridge Wells.

> Meanwhile, Imogen had instructed an international removals company to pack up all their things in Johannesburg and ship them to the U.K. However, she'd forgotten to tell them to return my antiques, so these also went into the container.

Chapter 4

Jean's transgender operation had been successfully completed a few months ago. She was now as strikingly beautiful as her role model, Caroline Cossey, though much younger. One could never have imagined that she was once technically a male. But having been born with XXXY chromosomes, instead of just an X and a Y, like a normal male, she was predominantly female. Since the operation, however, she'd become outrageously flirtatious, calling everyone – including me – 'Sweetie'; sometimes rubbing up against me, or slipping an arm around my waist, as if she were trying to make up for lost time. Nevertheless, I'd always liked her, so when she invited me over for a tarot reading, I readily accepted.

I arrived at Jean's cottage in Fifth Avenue early on a chilly Friday evening and parked my Lada inside.

'Hello Sweetie,' she sang out, as she tripped down the driveway and gave me a lingering hug.

'Anyway, how are you?' I gasped.

'Great. Really great!'

Jean's cottage was furnished tastefully: a conservative but comfy cream linen lounge suite piled with colourful cushions; Raoul Dufy seascape prints,; a Chinese silk carpet; and in one corner, a low-burning wood fire. The faint hint of wood-smoke mingled with an aroma of potpourri and Jean's exotic perfume. To complete the cosy atmosphere, Spanish guitar music tinkled from hidden speakers.

As I sank into the couch, a large marmalade cat began rubbing itself against my legs. I stroked it while I scanned Jean's bookshelves. It came as no surprise to see that nearly half a shelf was filled with David Icke books.

Jean was now poised by the liquor cabinet, hand on hip, head cocked on one side. 'Would you like a sherry, Olly?'

I accepted, and she poured me a generous slug of Monis Dry. As she bent down to place the glass on the coffee table, the top of her dress gaped open, revealing an ample braless breast.

She took a seat next to me, giving her hips a wiggle as she settled back among the cushions. After making small talk for about twenty minutes and

refilling our glasses twice, Jean fetched her tarot cards. She laid them out on the coffee table in front of me. ‘Well, I think we should do only one or two cards today, if that’s okay with you, Olly?’

‘Fine.’

‘I seem to recall that The Fool was the card you were most drawn to, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘Well, there’s something I could add.’

‘Go ahead.’

She picked up the Fool card and handed it to me. ‘Notice that the Fool’s head is held high and his arms are flung wide so he’s ready to embrace whatever comes his way.’

‘Right.’

‘Well, this means that The Fool is the card of infinite possibilities. He’s undertaking a journey of self-discovery, including *sexual*….. self-discovery (she place lingering emphasis on the word “sexual” before continuing)…. with the freedom to experiment...’

She shot me a knowing smile. ‘Now let’s do the High Priestess. She’s the card I identify with most.’

‘Okay.’

‘Well, she always has a lot to say … And I think you’re going to find her very challenging, Olly. But of course your interpretation is what counts.’

‘That’s fine by me.’

The High Priestess was an ethereally beautiful young woman with penetrating blue eyes that revealed wisdom and power. As I held the card closer I felt her eyes lock onto mine.

‘Well, what do you make of her, Olly?’ Jean asked with a coy smile.

‘I feel drawn to her, and somehow the feeling seems to be mutual. Her eyes are saying we have an understanding.’

Jean paused as if she wasn’t quite sure what to say next. Then suddenly she said. ‘Well, I’ve always believed that I’m the reincarnation of one of the transsexual priestesses who served at the Temple of Cybele, the Roman Mother Earth Goddess who the Greeks called “Gaia”. Not only in Rome but also in other ancient cultures it was believed that intercourse with a temple priestess was intercourse with the Goddess herself…’

She drained her glass, poured herself another, and grinned at me

flirtatiously.

Suddenly the lights flickered and went out. ‘Oh God, not another power failure!’ she cried.

There was only a faint glow from the fire; the rest of the room was in darkness.

‘If you don’t mind, Olly, I’m not going to break my concentration by fumbling around for candles. Anyway, I know the High Priestess card off by heart.’

I could feel the cat rubbing back and forth against me, purring loudly.

‘As I was saying,’ continued Jean, ‘in some respects The High Priestess is the highest and holiest of the Major cards, the card of secret knowledge.’

I felt what seemed to be a hand – or was it the cat’s tail? – brushing lightly against my thigh. ‘Hers is a complicated card,’ Jean continued, ‘since she’s the virgin of the unconscious mind, concealed by a veil, as it were, but full of fruitful potential if the veil is pierced and she is *penetrated*…’

There was a long pause during which I heard a persistent rustle of fabric. Then in a low husky voice Jean whispered, ‘In case you don’t know, Olly, I’ve got all the normal equipment a born woman has, including the sensitive bits.’

Again a silence that was broken only by a soft metallic tugging sound. In the darkness a hand reached deftly through my now open fly and drew my cock out. Before I could say anything, her lips closed around me, her tongue circling. I began to harden involuntarily. I told myself to pull away, but for some reason I didn’t. Perhaps taking it as a sign of compliance, Jean began to suck more urgently.

Unbidden, the images of Stocky and Tall suddenly began to grimace before my eyes. I felt the familiar stab of pain. Slowly I went limp in Jean’s mouth. She persisted for a while, then finally gave up.

‘I don’t turn you on, do I,’ she said dully. It was more a statement than a question. The anguish from all the years of rejection was in her voice, and my heart went out to her. I drew her to her feet and embraced her, holding her for a long moment, gently rocking her back and forth in my arms. I could feel she was completely naked, her breasts pressing against my chest, her shoulders shaking. I kissed her on the cheek. It was wet with tears.

The images of Stocky and Tall had begun to recede. ‘I don’t think you do understand, Jean. You see, something happened to me a few years ago that ruined sex for me – with my former wife, even with Kristy. Every time I try

to do it, I suddenly feel this terrible pain. I'm still in therapy for it.' I paused to let the words sink in.

Just then the lights came on. Jean stepped back, blinking at me through her tears. Some of her dark eye makeup had run down her cheeks. 'I'm so, *so* sorry, Olly,' she sobbed. 'I had no idea…'

Chapter 5

My encounter with Jean had unsettled me; not because of her advances, but because it was clear that Stocky and Tall would not simply fade away with time. As soon as I'd had breakfast I phoned Gerda and told her about the incident, but without mentioning Jean.

Gerda sounded very concerned. 'I've treated lots of women rape victims and most eventually responded to conventional therapy. But I've come to the conclusion that the trauma is somehow much worse for men. In your case, Olly, the attack was extremely violent. That's probably why these images are so persistent. So, although I've been doing my best, I think it's time for some alternative therapy.'

'Like what?'

'Like the techniques developed by Lana Lindstrom, the American rape recovery therapist. I think I've mentioned her before. She treated Helena successfully.'

'Right.'

'So shall I phone Lana and set up an appointment?'

'Okay, let's give it a try.'

My appointment with Lana Lindstrom was for 3pm the following Saturday at her house in Greenside, where she worked from home. I arrived ten minutes early. The property, a large rambling double storey, was in a heavily shaded and low-lying part of the suburb, where temperatures are usually four or five degrees lower than in Melville. But today was one of those mild, late winter days that seemed to promise an early spring. I sat in my car for about five minutes before ringing the doorbell.

No answer.

Just then I heard scuffling steps behind me. An athletic thirty-something blonde in jogging gear, hands on hips, was jogging on the spot. Beads of perspiration stood out on her brow.

'Lana Lindstrom,' she panted, flashing me a wide smile. 'You must be Olly Jeex?'

I mumbled a greeting.

‘You’re a tad early, but I’m also late.’

I shook my head in disbelief. Lana Lindstrom was amazingly like Kristy as I imagined she would be in her early thirties. Allowing for age, the two could have been twins, though Lana was a little taller and fuller.

‘You want to put your car inside? Her voice was educated American, a little husky at the edge.

She climbed in beside me and directed me down the driveway to a carport. In the confined space I could smell her fresh clean sweat.

‘I need to cool off. Mind if I take a quick dip?’

‘No problem. I’m in no hurry.’

As we climbed out of the car, she gestured towards some white patio chairs arranged around the nearest end of a large rectangular pool. Then she loped to the edge, and, as if following a routine, kicked off her trainers, tossed aside her tracksuit top, and hooked her thumbs in the top of her jogging shorts. She checked herself, smiled at me, unhooked her thumbs, and dived in.

She swam three lengths in a crisp efficient crawl, her long legs scissoring, her blonde hair trailing behind. At the far end she paused, dived down and headed back underwater.

‘Jeez it’s cold!’ she gasped, as she broke surface. With straightened arms, she levered herself out of the water in one agile sweep. She stood there for a few moments letting the water run off. The dappled sunlight filtering through the trees played on her glistening body. Her nipples pressed against her wet T-shirt, her areolas clearly visible through the thin white fabric.

Smiling, she grabbed a towel off the back of a chair, plonked herself down next to me, and began rubbing herself vigorously.

‘Gerda sent me a copy of your file,’ she confided, ‘Also, the recordings of your hypnotherapy sessions. It seems we’ve a lot of work to do, Olly…’

‘Right…’ I said, vaguely.

‘I think I’m dry enough now,’ she said with a bright smile, ‘let’s go inside.’

She walked ahead of me past a rock garden crowded with succulents and tall cacti, towards a sliding door, her hips moving as gracefully as a dancer’s.

As she slid back the glass door, a piercing wolf-whistle greeted us.

‘Shush, now, Kinsey!’ Lana called out to a green Amazon parrot in a large round cage suspended from a stand to the right of the door.

The parrot did a little dance on its perch. ‘Damn you!’ it retorted with a flap of its wings. ‘Damn you, Lewis!’

‘He didn’t like my ex-husband,’ Lana said with a grin.

We were now in what was apparently a lounge-study-cum-consulting room.

‘Make yourself at home while I slip into something,’ Lana said, with a graceful twist of her body.’

I began scanning the bookshelves.

Among the titles that caught my eye were Mark Amaru Pinkham’s *Conversations With the Goddess*; Gustav Heusler’s *Entheogenic Aspects of Shamanism*; and several by Lana Lindstrom herself, including: *From Rape Victim to Survivor: An Interactive Conditioning Program.*

Next, I glanced at the certificates on the wall. There was a Masters degree in psychology from the University of California; a PhD from the Institute of Advanced Study in Human Sexuality in San Francisco; and a diploma from the International Professional Surrogates Association in Los Angeles.

‘Find anything interesting?’ a voice behind me sang out.

Lana was wearing one of those loose-fitting Indian shirts that look as if they’ve been scrunched up instead of ironed and baggy knee-length pants of the same semi-see-through material. It was obvious that she wasn’t wearing a bra or panties, and her feet were bare.

She must have read my thoughts. ‘Expected something a tad more formal, Olly? … I know; most people do. But relaxation is the core of my therapy. You can’t do it in formal gear. And just to let you know, although I’m qualified in the theoretical aspects of psychotherapy, my primary focus in our later sessions will be on practical sexual healing.’

She took me by the hand and led me down the passage. ‘A massage will help relax you before we begin with the hypnotherapy.’

The massage cubicle was softly lit and mildly warm. A large bowl of pink roses placed on a white medicine cabinet in one corner gave off a sweet and welcoming fragrance. Along the walls on either side, thick red candles in recesses stood to attention like sentries in their boxes. A small louvered cupboard and a mini music player completed the sparse décor.

Lana ushered me inside, then asked me to strip. She indicated that I should lie on a towel-covered massage plinth. Then she dimmed the lights, lit the candles and adjusted the almost silent air conditioner. After that she put on some soothing music – *Enigma,* I think. Next, she took a bottle from the

cabinet and poured some of the cool, yellow contents onto my back. ‘Neroli oil,’ she announced, ‘wonderfully calming.’ She began rubbing my back, neck and shoulders in broad flowing strokes. After adding more oil, she worked her way down to my buttocks, then down my legs to my feet.

‘If there’s anything you’d like to ask me,’ she said, pausing briefly, ‘then fire away.’

I’d been mulling over some of the books on her shelves. ‘Who’s the Goddess?’ I asked.

‘Oh, she’s the soul of the universe that keeps everything in balance. You could say that she infuses Nature with its restorative and healing power.’

‘Hmmmmm…’ I murmured partly in agreement and partly in appreciation of her trailing fingers. Her gently probing fingers were easing away the tenseness, overcoming my inhibitions, prompting me to ask more questions ‘So what brought you to South Africa?’

She hesitated for a moment before replying. ‘It’s a long story, Olly. I’ll tell you about it some time. But, very briefly, what finally made me leave the States was a failed relationship.’

She went on to tell me a bit about her background. She was born in Minnesota, her family’s home state where her Swedish great, great grandparents had settled and founded a furniture factory. Her father had joined the military, with numerous overseas postings, so Lana was used to travelling.

‘Ironically,’ she said, ‘the nicest Americans are the ones you meet outside the country. Not the ones on package tours but the ones who’ve worked and lived overseas long enough to understand other cultures.’

‘So how did you get into your present field?’

‘Well, when I returned to America and went to college, I knew exactly what I wanted to do – help people, so I started studying psychology. Human sexuality was my special interest. From there it was a logical step to what I’m doing.’

She gave a couple of long sensuous sweeps up and down my back. ‘How d’you feel now, Olly?’

‘Really relaxed.’

‘That’s great. Well, I think we can begin with the hypnotherapy now. You see, I need to get a practical insight into your case to confirm what’s in your file – if that’s okay with you?’

‘No problem.’ I said.

She put me though the same deep breathing routine that I'd worked through with Gerda. But after slipping into a hypnotic state I remembered nothing more. Afterwards, although Lana had recorded the session, she looked at me earnestly and said, 'I think it's best if you don't listen to this, Olly. It wouldn't serve any useful purpose. All it would probably do would be to bring it all back, and that's the last thing we want. In the meantime, before our next appointment, I want you to do some homework.'

For a moment I pictured having to plough through one of her books on rape recovery.

Instead she said, 'Do you take showers?'

'Every day,' I replied.

'Well, while you're in the shower I want you to think pleasant thoughts and then gently press a lubricated finger into yourself for a moment or two; then remove it. That's all. No big deal.'

Chapter 6

My stint in Ward 697 had made me much more aware of the true value of friendship. Several of us former patients formed an informal movie club, where we'd go to an early show at the Art Cinema on a Tuesday evening, and then have a meal afterwards. Among the regulars were Faan and Katie, Drew and Jill, as well as Beth, Merrill, Pilar Zapata and Jean.

Crime, ironically – or rather the threat of crime – was also forging friendships and bringing our community to life, as it was in communities around the country, especially those who were affiliating to VOICE and involving themselves in security and municipal monitoring projects with their neighbours. I was meeting people who lived only a couple of doors away but to whom I'd never spoken!

A couple of days later I received a call from Gary Simes. 'I don't know whether this will be of any help, Olly, but I've found out through a contact at the airport that Mrs Bombeck has just left the country for the States. Apparently, she was on a one-way ticket. A man was with her.'

'At least we know where she is now,' I said. 'I've a contact that can follow it up in Washington.'

'I've already e-mailed you the flight details. Should be in your in-box by now. By the way, I re-installed a super bug on the Pinnacle Spa's landline, but like the previous one, it was deactivated within a couple of days. These people are more than just professionals!'

'And Mrs Eberhardt?'

'Well, I try and follow her everywhere she goes in her car. But one afternoon a couple of days ago a helicopter landed in the Spa's parking lot and a man who seemed to be a paramedic jumped out and rushed across to the foyer. Moments later he emerged with Mrs Eberhardt and a semi-comatose girl they were holding between them. They helped the girl into the helicopter, and then it flew off with Mrs Eberhardt still on board. If there'd been more time I might have been able to plant a tracker on the 'copter, but it all happened so quickly there wasn't a chance. The helicopter was white with a red cross on the side, but except for that I could see no other markings. I phoned all the air ambulance services in Gauteng to check whether any of

their helicopters had been sent to the Spa, but none of them had. I also checked all the nearby hospitals to see whether a patient had been brought in by helicopter, but also drew a blank.'

'Well, maybe you could question some of the Spa staff?'

'Could be dangerous. The last thing we want is to warn Mrs Eberhardt that she's under surveillance.'

'That's true. To change the subject, I've been meaning to tell you that the Sudman investigation is no longer a priority. I've resolved the custody issue, and my daughters are now living with me. However, I don't want you to drop the matter entirely. Just do the occasional routine check on him.'

'Will do.'

Half an hour later Drew phoned. I passed on the information Gary Simes had given me, as well as the e-mail with Mrs Bombeck's flight details.

'Has she any distinguishing features?' Drew asked.

'Hmmm. Let me think ... Oh, yes, Kristy once told me she had an unsightly mole on her chin. That's all I know.'

'Well, I'll forward all this to Prometheus in Washington. Maybe there's a connection between this woman and Arista Eberhardt, who, incidentally, uses more than one alias, the main one being Shelly Krebwinkel. My info is that she's definitely working undercover; but for whom, Prometheus isn't sure. To find out more will take time.'

Chapter 7

The next afternoon Weddo phoned. ‘Your friend Drew ... Can you arrange an urgent meeting, Olly? I need some advice on something very important. I’d like you to be there, too.’ He gave me a list of times when he’d be available. ‘And ask your friend, Faan, to come along too. We need a lateral thinker.’

On Friday evening, just as the sun was setting over the Western Koppies, the three of us arrived at Weddo’s house together. The good doctor met us at the front door. He ushered us into his consulting room and pointed us towards some padded vinyl chairs. Seating himself behind his desk, he leaned forward on his elbows, his hands steepled as if in prayer. ‘I wanted to talk to you all about some very disturbing information that one of my patients has uncovered,’ he began. ‘He doesn’t know quite what to do about it. Frankly, neither do I, but I’m the only person he trusts. However, he’s a great believer in brainstorming. That’s why he asked me to assemble a group I could vouch for.’ Weddo flashed us a smile.

‘What about doctor-patient confidentiality? I asked.

‘His psychological condition is only incidental to the problem,’ Weddo replied, ‘which goes way beyond that.’

‘What actually is the problem?’ Drew asked.

‘It’s a long story,’ Weddo replied. ‘But first let me say that Mike Molefe – that’s not his real name but let’s call him that – is employed in a relatively senior position in a section of the government’s intelligence apparatus. He asked me not to disclose specific details for obvious reasons. In any case, at this point it’s not relevant…’

Just then there was timid knock on the door and a buxom young maid came in with a tray of tea and mixed biscuits, which Weddo passed around before continuing. ‘I’m treating Mike for depression resulting from unresolved trauma. But first let me give you a bit of background.’ He paused to nibble on a chocolate biscuit.

‘Actually, Mike was brought up in Britain where his parents had gone into exile in the 1980s. They were Christian activists and supporters of the ANC. Their role in the struggle was to raise money from British churches to

pay for the legal representation of political detainees in South Africa. Mike, who later became an anti-apartheid activist at Essex University, graduated with an honours degree in politics and international relations.

'Some years after the ANC and the apartheid government reached a political settlement, the Molefes decided to return to South Africa. On their way back, they stopped over in Israel to join a tour of Biblical sites. On their last day they went to an open-air market to buy souvenirs.

'Mike was browsing around a stall while his parents were at another stall some distance away. Suddenly there was a blinding flash and an explosion. Mike was knocked flat, but he sustained only minor injuries. However, his parents and about a dozen other people – mostly tourists and stallholders – were killed. Sadly, Mike's last memory of his parents was their mutilated bodies. The Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the bombing.'

Weddo took a sip of tea, glancing at us speculatively over the rim of his cup, before continuing. 'Mike returned to South Africa, and soon after the ANC came to power he was offered a post in intelligence. Although he began to have bouts of depression, he didn't go for therapy. The years passed and he climbed the ladder of promotion, but psychologically he was a ticking time bomb.

'After the SPP government took over, the whole atmosphere in Molefe's section changed. The old ANC cadres began to be eased out and replaced with SPP loyalists, who took a militantly pro-Islamic line. A group of senior SPP-aligned officials, dubbed "The Taliban", even voiced approval for terrorist bombings in Europe, Israel and other countries. The triggering event came at an office party, when drunken officials, including Mike's immediate boss, were loudly celebrating the terrorist car bombing in London about six months ago that killed some thirty people.

'Something in Mike's brain snapped. He started to have terrible flashbacks of the bombing scene where his parents were killed. A couple of months ago he decided to come to me for therapy.

'Meanwhile, the purge of pro-ANC officials has continued and Mike now suspects that he's on the short list. Of course, he doesn't want his bosses to know he's undergoing psychiatric treatment – that may provide them with an excuse to sideline him – so he makes appointments with me after hours and pays me cash so it's not reflected on his medical aid. After I recently learned what was going on, I've been treating him for free….'

Weddo paused to take a couple of quick sips of tea. 'After the office

party, Mike had a gut feeling that the Taliban group was involved in something irregular, so he began checking for possible clues. One day while his boss was at a meeting, he began searching though some folders on his desk. He came across a document which turned out to be a position paper on South Africa's nuclear policies from the apartheid era to the present, as well as an indication of future policy.'

Weddo put on his reading glasses and reached for a sheaf of A-4s on his desk. 'Mike made some notes so he could recall the contents later. I've paraphrased what he told me. According to the document, the apartheid government, probably at the urging of Washington, dismantled South Africa's nuclear weapons capability with the specific aim of diminishing the incoming ANC government's leverage on the Nuclear Weapons States, especially America. The aim was to make South Africa more vulnerable to Western manipulation and pressure. This would ensure that South Africa became the West's obedient African surrogate, shouldering the thankless task of peace-keeping and helping end regional conflicts. The ANC meekly fell into line with this policy, without any preconditions or linkages, in the hope of gaining Western investment and support, as well as a permanent place on the UN Security Council. Instead, the Americans regarded the ANC government with mild amusement if not contempt!

'The document is highly critical of America's interpretation and implementation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which it says is grossly one-sided, a viewpoint which is probably correct. It adds that the ANC's decision to end South Africa's nuclear research has paid no dividends whatsoever and has seriously disadvantaged the country. The result of this policy of capitulation is that South Africa has voluntarily given up any influence it might have had to advance nuclear disarmament, while the Nuclear Weapons States – dominated by the West – constitute a nuclear elite who can now pressure any non-compliant states in the world…'

Weddo paused and peered over his glasses. 'So far I don't have a problem with this analysis…'

'It's probably closer to the truth than you may think,' put in Drew.

Weddo nodded an acknowledgment before continuing. 'Anyway, the next part of the document deals with future nuclear policy. It is couched in apparently innocuous language, referring to "research for peaceful purposes" and the need for "sharing information". And then – here's the important part – it goes on to say that immediately after coming to power, the SPP

government decided to reverse the ANC's nuclear policy. The reason it gives is that the US and other western governments were using their nuclear muscle to advance globalisation, which was disadvantaging developing nations, especially in Africa. It was therefore in South Africa's interests to co-operate with the second-tier nuclear powers, and, quote, "or other nuclear interest groups" that could help redress this imbalance. Although there is nothing that is overtly sinister in the document, what worries Molefe, and indeed, myself, is the term "or other nuclear interest groups".

'With his uneasiness growing, Molefe redoubled his search, checking his boss's folders and computer disks whenever the opportunity arose. A couple of weeks later he came across a document marked "PROJECT PHOENIX, TOP SECRET" on a high-capacity disk. Reading between the lines of the anonymous document, there were indications that the SPP government might be planning to secretly restart South Africa's nuclear weapons research programme. Although it gave no details, it mentioned the recruitment of nuclear experts overseas, especially from Iran, Pakistan, and the former Soviet Union. The document ended with a note: "DETAILS AVAILABLE TO RANKING OFFICIALS ON ENCODED DISK, SERIAL NO. Q17/239". Well, that's about the whole story so far.'

'Oh boy!' exclaimed Drew. 'Sounds like we've the mother of all stories here! The only problem is that although the document mentions research, it doesn't mention nuclear weapons. That, of course, is the sixty-four thousand dollar question.'

'Well, any suggestions as to what we should do now?' asked Weddo.

'Obviously, we need to find out what's on that encoded disk,' said Drew. 'Can't you ask Mike to make a copy, or, if that's not possible, simply steal it?'

'Will do,' said Weddo. 'And by the way, what will you do with it?'

'If the contents are really as earth-shattering as they seem, I'll pass it on to the right people.'

Chapter 8

Although spring had sprung, employees arriving at AIR on Monday morning soon lost any spring they may have had in their step. The up escalator from the basement parking was stationary and a crush of people, some with bulging briefcases, were struggling up the uncomfortably high metal stairs. The escalator had ground to a halt two weeks ago, but so far no one had come to repair it.

As I arrived in my office, Prue, as usual, was there to greet me. ‘Special announcement this morning, Olly,’ she said breathlessly. ‘No idea what it’s about. Tata Zondi is to address us all in the newsroom at eleven.’

Would the persistent rumour that AIR was to finally close prove true? As I’ve said before, I normally don’t pay attention to rumours, but this one had been given some credence after the United States and European donor countries had suspended their annual subsidy to AIR. The move came after AIR’s Arabic service had taken on a militantly anti-Western tone.

In addition, the African Union’s promised funding for AIR had failed to materialise. Also, according to a recent *Sunday Times* report, the Middle East financial aid for South Africa hadn’t come through yet, resulting in a desperate cash-flow problem. This had apparently forced the government to close several smaller diplomatic missions abroad and cast around for more candidates for cost-cutting.

Meanwhile, after Benjy Mlomo’s firing, the expected Great Purge at AIR hadn’t materialised. Inquiries into irregularities continued, but the disciplinary procedures leading up to dismissal seemed to be on hold. A few minutes before eleven, I took my seat in the newsroom alongside my old mentor, Will Allwell. ‘Any clue what this is about?’ I asked him.

He opened his mouth and said ‘I think …’ and then closed it, as Tata Zondi strolled into the room, a little early for once. She began with a few words of praise for the performances of several staff members before coming to the point. ‘As you know,’ she began, ‘the restructuring process recommended by our consultants is aimed at achieving certain economies, as well as greater efficiency…’ She raised her eyes, but instead of looking at her audience, she gazed out of the window, northwards, towards the rest of

Africa, as if seeking inspiration. '…The Ministry, as well as AIR's governing board,' she continued, 'has accepted the recommendation of the consultants that all staff members will be required to resign and reapply for their posts within the next three calendar months.'

There was a disbelieving silence that lasted a couple of seconds, followed by angry muttering.

Tata Zondi raised a limp hand. 'There's also some good news. Successful candidates may be evaluated for higher salary scales. Some posts, however, will be abolished in terms of the restructuring process. The posts in question will be announced after a review of all job descriptions.'

She gathered up her papers and swept out of the room.

Prue, who was sitting on my other side, was making twittering noises like a frightened bird.

'I don't think you have anything to worry about, Prue,' I said, reassuringly. 'Your post is a key one, and I can't see them abolishing it. And anyway, the main thing is that she made no mention of the station closing.'

Turning to Will, I said, 'But isn't this resign-and-reapply business in breach of labour laws?'

'Of course it is,' he said wearily. 'But don't expect any joy from the unions or the courts, for that matter. As you know, the same thing happened in Zimbabwe.'

'What about the Constitutional Court? Surely we could take the matter on appeal?'

'Don't be so naïve, Olly. What are the learned judges going to do when Phiri and Co. ignore their ruling? Call the police!?'

Chapter 9

One afternoon Faan and I were having a couple of beers at the Exclamation Mark, when Faan began talking about all sorts of inconsequential topics. Somehow I got the impression he was stalling about something.

‘Are we tip-toeing around an elephant in the room here, Faan?’ I finally said.

He gave a shrug, paused for a long moment, then said: ‘I think it’s time you began to move on, Olly.’

‘You talking about Kristy?’

He placed a hand on my arm. ‘I know I said there was a possibility that Kristy and Charlize might still be alive, but that was more than eighteen months ago ... It’s like the girls Gert van Rooyen kidnapped: the more time goes by, the less chance there is of finding them. You can’t put your life on hold forever, old pal.’

I knew Faan was saying this with the very best intentions, but I had an intuitive feeling that made me still cling to hope. ‘I feel she may still be alive, Faan.’

‘Don’t do this to yourself, Olly. Maybe for your own sake you need to accept that they died in that hijacked car.’

‘That won’t work for me …’ I said slowly, trying to keep my emotions under control. ‘I need to know what really happened.’

‘Fair enough, but you must also face the possibility that you may never know. In the meantime, life must go on. What I’m saying, Olly is that you need to have a social life.’

‘Well, I often see my friends from the Ward. And, of course, there’s the movie club.’

‘That’s not the same thing. I’m talking about women friends. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I get the impression that you have no close relationships with women now.’

He was right. I’d been alone with Merrill to movies a couple of times. I really liked her, and I sensed she liked me too. But for some reason I hadn’t made a move on her.

Faan checked his watch. ‘By the way, do you ever read President Phiri’s online newsletters?’

‘I read one once, but it was such tendentious nonsense I’ve never bothered since.’

‘Well this week’s one is quite important, or rather the reaction to it.’

‘Sorry, I’m not with you.’

‘Remember that *Citizen* editorial reluctantly admitting that the A.A. was responsible for the drop in crime. Well, that really got under his skin. In his online response he said the decrease had nothing to do with the activities of what he called “criminal vigilantes” but was the result of his government’s zero tolerance of crime and more effective policing. He added that vigilantism was part of the problem and was hampering the police in their ability to perform their duties.’

‘Zero tolerance!’ I put in. ‘What planet is he living on?’

‘But the interesting part is this.’ Faan reached into his plastic bag and fished out *The Star*. He pointed to the headline on the front page: “A.A. TO HALT EXECUTIONS.”

‘That *is* interesting!’

According to the report, the A.A. had interpreted President Phiri’s attack on them as a challenge that they reluctantly felt obliged to accept: *‘Since the President claims the drop in crime is not due to our deterrents but to his policies, we are prepared to halt all executions to put his claim to the test’*.

Chapter 10

A couple of days later I got a call from Drew. He told me he had some news that he didn't want to disclose over the phone. We agreed to meet around seven that evening at the Chong Hing Chinese restaurant, a couple of doors up from the Exclamation Mark.

The pretty young Chinese waitress showed us to a table in the open section. We ordered a large bowl of Wonton noodle soup and a bottle of Drostyhof Light.

'First some personal stuff,' Drew said with a boyish grin. 'Jill and I are getting engaged.'

I leaned across and shook his hand, offering my congratulations.

Drew smiled and then turned serious. 'There's something else I wanted to tell you, Olly. I've received more info about Mrs Eberhardt – or Shelley Krebwinkel, as she now likes to be known – but let's stick with Eberhardt. Anyway, what I can tell you is that she's not just working undercover. She's in *deep* cover.'

'What's the difference?'

'Well, undercover is playing a role – usually pretending to be a criminal wanting to join or do business with the target organisation – during a single or a limited number of operations. The aim is to gather evidence that will stand up in court. So ultimately the undercover agent's cover will be blown because he or she will have to appear as a witness.

'On the other hand, deep cover is when the agent takes on a whole new identity, 24/7, with all the supporting governmental records and documentation. In this case, the agent is seldom identified because the primary aim is not to gain a conviction in court but to gather vital information. Sometimes the information is required to prepare the way for covert operations, such as assassinations or kidnappings, or even an act of war. Of course, in deep cover operations the stakes are usually a lot higher.

'There're also other differences. For example, undercover operations are usually mounted by the FBI, or the DEA, for crimes committed in the United States, while deep cover operations are usually set up in foreign countries by the CIA, and are almost always political.'

‘So where does all this leave us?’

‘Well, Prometheus in Washington is following up more leads. He says he was extremely lucky to get the info about Mrs Eberhardt’s deep cover role. Someone associated with the operation she’s involved in had a twinge of conscience and leaked it to him.’

The waitress had arrived with a big serving bowl of prawn Wonton soup and two smaller bowls.

After we’d helped ourselves, I said: ‘Talking about undercover operations, Drew, I’ve never worked out why none of the A.A. activists have ever been caught. I mean, the government keeps on saying that bringing these people to justice is a top priority.’

Drew heaped some noodles onto his china spoon before replying. ‘My guess is that the A.A. has borrowed its operational structure from American activists. Their structure – or should I say *lack* of it – is called “Leaderless Resistance”, which, like a franchise operation, means no central control, only independent cells which improvise independent acts of resistance, sometimes receiving coded instructions from coordinating sites on the Internet.’

‘But now that the A.A. has halted executions, don’t you think its funding and support will dry up?’

‘Maybe marginally, but not for long. I think it was a very shrewd move because crime will go up again – you can already see the signs. And when it gets back to its previous levels, more and more people will demand that the A.A. should start executing criminals again.’

At the next VOICE meeting held at Alistair L’Estrange’s house, Alistair reported that, in terms of membership and money, VOICE was going from strength to strength, especially as people were once again becoming very worried about crime. But the government had continued to ignore our ultimatum and had done nothing to improve the criminal justice system.

It was time to flex our muscles!

Alistair emphasised that VOICE needed to be more active to keep the public attention focused on our organisation and what we stood for. He suggested we should hold a mass protest meeting outside the Azania Buildings (formerly the Union Buildings) in Phiriopolis.

Chapter 11

It was a mild spring day and the purple jacaranda buds were opening along the streets of Melville. Soaking rain had fallen overnight, softening the long-dry soil, allowing the hadedas, their cries once more triumphant, to peck for grubs along the grassy verges.

That afternoon I had an appointment with Lana Lindstrom.

She answered the doorbell in a wet red bikini, the water running down her legs and forming puddles at her feet. Yellow blossoms from a nearby tree had blown into the pool, forming a swirling trail across the surface. A few petals clung to her hair.

I followed her inside, and once more she left me in the study while she changed. About five minutes later she emerged in a clinging ivory sarong, looking like a Greek goddess. After she'd ushered me though to the cubicle, I stripped and lay on the massage plinth. As soon as the Neroli oil and her fingers began to work their magic, I felt myself relaxing.

'Did you remember to do your homework, Olly?' she asked, her hands pausing halfway down my back.

It was a subject I'd hoped she wouldn't bring up. 'Most days,' I said defensively.

'And how did it go?'

'Okay, I suppose.'

'Anything else?'

'Well, some nights I had nightmares about Stocky and Tall.'

'Were they more or less the same as before?'

'A bit more vivid, but basically the same.'

'Do you ever have other dreams?'

I told her about the dreams I frequently had of making love to a beautiful blonde whose identity I could never recall.

'Well, Jung once said that when a man dreams of a woman he doesn't know, he's trying to get in touch with his Anima. And conversely, when a woman dreams of a man she doesn't know, she's trying to get in touch with her Animus. It's a quest for wholeness.'

'What's the Anima, Lana?'

‘The Anima is the subconscious feminine counterpart all men have. It’s the source of inspiration through which creative impulses arise – a Muse, if you will. It’s also the source of spirituality, inner peace, as well as gentle eroticism. But it needs to be invoked for it to work for you.’ A little smile played around her mouth. ‘I’ve been meaning to ask you this, Olly, but were you able to actually *do it*, I mean with your dream woman?’

‘Yes,’ I replied, recalling how the Goddess had led me through the secret door with the Cupid knocker.

‘Well, the irony, then, is that you’re able to have fulfilling sex in the dream world but not in the real world. Hopefully my therapy will cure that…’

I smiled wanly back.

‘According to your file,’ Lana continued, ‘arousal doesn’t seem to be the problem; it’s the act itself. So there’s a vicious circle. To reverse it will require a special technique similar to desensitisation therapy. It’s called Trauma Replacement Therapy, or TRT.’

‘What’s it involve?’

‘Well, let me start off by explaining conventional desensitisation therapy to you, then at a later stage we can talk about TRT.’

‘Okay.’

‘Let’s say, for example, that you’re very shy around members of the opposite sex. The very idea of talking to an attractive woman, let alone asking her out on a date, terrifies you. Now what desensitisation therapy teaches you is to gradually approach the feared situation by imagining scenes from the least threatening to slightly more threatening, and then working your way up through a series of ever-more stressful scenes until you finally see yourself doing what you fear most.’

‘I get the idea.’

Lana slowly slid her hands between my legs, leaving them there for maybe half a minute before continuing. ‘Although conventional desensitisation therapy works with phobias such as fear of attractive women, fear of flying, fear of lifts, fear of injections, and so on, it won’t work for your condition. You see, my job is not to desensitise you to the sexual assault – *God forbid!* – but to *replace* it with a positive physical experience, so you can reconnect with your sexual self. That’s why it’s called Trauma *Replacement* Therapy.’

‘So when do we begin with the physical treatment?’ I asked, not knowing what to expect.

‘I need to test your reflexes first. You see, penetrating yourself is one thing; someone else doing it is quite another.’ She handed me a small glass of dark liquid. ‘In the meantime, please drink this. It’ll help you relax.’

‘What is it?’

‘It’s a herbal blend of kava kava, valerian, passiflora, flavouring, and a touch of my own secret ingredient.’

I took a sip. It was tart yet subtly sweet. I drank the rest in one gulp.

She put on a *Deep Forest* CD, and the haunting ethereal music seemed to transport me to some restful place. In my mind I was in the Grotto again. ‘It’ll take quite a while to work,’ she said, her hands beginning to move again. ‘So we have plenty of time to talk. In the meantime, you can ask me anything you like.’

‘Okay. Well, last time you mentioned that a failed relationship made you come to South Africa. You said you’d tell me more later.’

‘Actually, it was *two* failed relationships: one with my ex-husband and the other with my country.’

Lana poured more Neroli oil onto my back and began spreading it vigorously with both hands. ‘For me, coming to South Africa has been a kind of distancing period, as well as a journey of self-discovery after a traumatic divorce. My Ex, Lewis Kingstone – he’s a prominent psychoanalyst – had an ongoing affair with a woman he met at an analysts’ convention. It was a huge blow to my self-confidence and I became very depressed.’

She was now massaging my toes individually, pausing in concentration before continuing. ‘Afterwards, when I thought about what he’d done, it made me so angry! And worst of all, Lewis’s parting shot was: “You know, Lana, you could write all the sex manuals in the world but you’ll still be a lousy lay!”

‘Even though that hurtful remark was a transparent ploy, somehow it continued to fester in some recess of my brain. That was one of the reasons why I became a sex surrogate. I had to prove to myself that I was okay, that I could bring even traumatised patients to sexual fulfilment.’

‘I understand.’

Her fingers were making little circles just above my bottom. ‘So I suppose you could say the main reason I left America was to get away from bad memories and make a fresh start.’

‘I see.’

‘Would you like to turn over now, Olly, so I can do your front?’

After I'd flipped onto my back, she eased the towel off my midriff. 'You don't need that now,' she said with a knowing smile, pouring oil onto my chest and working it down my stomach to my crotch. She paused for a moment and then began kneading me gently with one hand. 'You'll have to get used to being touched there, Olly. And only when you're used to that can we progress further.'

Lana had given me much food for thought, so I remained silent for a while, listening to the music, imagining myself in the Grotto. At last I said, 'I've noticed that the strongest criticism of the American way of life often comes from Americans living abroad.'

'Sure. Henry Miller could only see America in perspective when he returned after living for years in Paris. He wrote about it in his book, *The Air-conditioned Nightmare*, in which he described Americans as greedy, self-indulgent and ignorant of history.'

'Was there anything in particular besides travel that made you see America in a different light?'

Lana gave my cock a slow thoughtful pull. 'Yeah, I spent some time in India studying yoga; then I spent nearly a year in South America, and it was there that I learned about the San Pedro cactus. It's called the plant of wisdom, and it certainly opened my mind!'

She did a final sweep of her hands and then stopped. 'I think I put a bit too much oil on you, Olly. Would you like a shower before you go?'

'Good idea,' I said. 'Where is it?'

'There's an en-suite one upstairs. Follow me.'

She led me upstairs and through her bedroom, which was furnished in the no-nonsense Swedish style – light and square. The centrepiece was a low, king-sized bed, standing a little less than 30 centimetres off the floor. She handed me a towel and a fresh cake of soap, and then lay back on the bed with a magazine. 'Take your time, Olly, there's no hurry.'

I let the warm jet of water play on me for a while before soaping myself. Then I heard the shower door slide open. Lana was standing there in her ivory sarong. But this time it was tucked below her bare breasts which stood firm and proud.

'May I join you?' she asked, with a lilt in her voice. Before I could answer, she let the sarong fall, and stepped inside. Through the steam I saw her perfect body. Again, except for a mole or two, I felt I was looking at Kristy.

All she was wearing was a surgical glove on one hand, and in the other she held a tube of lubricant. She put her arms around me and drew me towards her. ‘We need to begin preparing you for intimacy,’ she whispered in my ear, running her tongue around the rim. Then, making steady eye contact, she reached behind me. ‘Relax,’ she said, smiling up at me. Before I could say anything, she slipped her finger into me and began moving it slowly. I felt a surge of fear and nausea. ‘How’s that?’ she asked tentatively.

‘N-n-not so good,’ I stammered.

‘I’m afraid it’s necessary to do this to accustom you to associate penetration with being relaxed and safe. But it’ll take time.’

After a couple of slow probes she pushed a bit deeper. Suddenly I could sense the outlines of Stocky and Tall forming. ‘*Please stop!’* I called out. ‘The same thing seems to be happening – I mean the bad images.’

She withdrew her finger gently. ‘No problem,’ she breathed, hugging me reassuringly.

As I felt her naked body pressing closer, the images of Stocky and Tall began to fade. ‘They’ve gone now,’ I finally said.

‘Well, that means we’re making progress, doesn’t it, Olly?’

Chapter 12

That evening at around six, Weddo rang my doorbell. When I went to let him in, he said he was in a bit of a hurry, so he'd talk to me outside. 'There's something I need to tell you, Olly, something I couldn't speak about over the phone.'

'Okay.'

He stood close to the bars of the gate and kept his voice down. 'Well, Mike Molefe has found the encoded disk on the Project Phoenix and he needs to make his move soon. His boss will be in a meeting on Friday afternoon, so he says that'll be his best chance of lifting it. As soon as he has it, he'll tell his secretary he's feeling ill, so he's going home early. But he's concerned that the disk will be missed, and they'll come after him.'

'Is he under suspicion?' I asked.

'Well, he believes they may be checking up on him. The other day he saw a man going through the wheelie bin outside his house. He wasn't after food, like your normal street scavenger, but papers, which he put into a plastic bag. So Mike says he needs to pass the disk to you as soon as possible after leaving the NIA compound. That's why you need to be waiting in a car parked at a rendezvous point as close to the compound as possible but without exciting suspicion. The best place, he says, is the turnoff to the Rietfontein Dam, on the R50. Your job will be to hide the disk somewhere secure until the dust has settled. But you'll need a fast driver who can take evasive action in case you're followed.'

'I know just the right person,' I said.

'One last thing,' said Weddo. 'When Mike stops next to your car he'll call out to you, *"Metro cops are never around when you want them!"* And you'll reply, *"Who in their right mind wants them?"*

'Only then will he give you the disk.'

Friday came. I'd taken a day's leave, and Faan was the driver. He pitched up in a white Toyota Corolla.

'Where's the Deke?' I asked.

‘Use your brain, man! The Deke would stick out like a sore thumb. For a dodgy operation like this, I should’ve pinched some wheels, but as an honest, tax-evading citizen, I couldn’t bring myself to do that. Actually, this is my father-in-law’s car. It looks like a million others, which is why I chose it. But I’ve given it a tune up, added a nitrous oxide injector and put on false number plates.’

The interior was strewn with plastic bags, sweet papers, ice cream sticks, empty cola cans, cigarette butts, a grubby teddy bear, and a baby’s dummy.

‘It’s not what you think, Olly,’ Faan said with a grin. ‘It’s actually our camouflage. The idea is to make me look like a harassed but harmless parent in case we’re stopped.’

‘Who am I then?’

‘You’re the uncle.’

‘The Man from Uncle, you mean,’ I said dryly.

Faan was wearing a racy checked cap and an ill-fitting green tweed suit that I suspected he’d borrowed from his father-in-law or bought from a down-market charity shop. Underneath, he was wearing his waistcoat on the paisley side. He looked more like an old-fashioned bookie than a harassed parent.

Without further ado we set off on the motorway to Phiriopolis.

We’d been parked at the rendezvous point for about an hour, munching on a couple of packets of crisps we’d bought along the way. The car had become uncomfortably hot and the country odours of burnt grass and warming veld filtered through the open windows.

Suddenly a grey Audi drew up next to us. A round-faced black man leaned across and lowered the passenger window. ‘Metro cops are never around when you want them,’ he said in an urgent whisper.

‘Who in their right mind wants them?’ answered Faan.

The man, who’d been nervously checking his rear view mirror, leaned across and thrust a disk into Faan’s hand. ‘Mike Molefe,’ he said.

We exchanged hurried greetings. Molefe was glancing in the mirror again. ‘Jesus!’ he exclaimed. ‘I think I’m being followed. We better get out of here double-quick.’

In the middle distance two cars were approaching from the direction Molefe had come. ‘Get rid of the disk cover,’ he shouted as he accelerated away. ‘Must have a tracking chip.’

Faan snapped the cover off and flung it out of the window. We sped after

the Audi with a squeal of tyres. Whatever Faan had done to the Toyota was working. The speedometer climbed to 170. A few minutes later we reached the Eastern Bypass, which was already crowded with traffic.

The Audi took the north-bound onramp to Phiriopolis, while we headed south towards Johannesburg. One of the cars, a black BMW, raced after Molefe. The other, a silver Mercedes, with two men in it, began tailing us. Soon the gap began to narrow.

'Can't you go a bit faster?' I shouted to Faan.

'Speed's not everything, Olly,' he said, switching lanes. The Mercedes, in the outer faster lane, drew level. The driver, a hefty black man in a dark suit, gesticulated that we should pull over.

Faan gave him a cheery wave which suddenly morphed into a zap sign.

The man rolled his shoulders menacingly, then lowered the passenger window. He was holding a pistol.

Faan hit the brakes, swung left into the emergency lane, and pulled a switch. The Toyota shot forward like a rocket. 'That's our nitrous oxide injector kicking in,' chortled Faan. The speedometer swung past the calibrated maximum of 240. 'We can only do this for a short burst. Need to keep some for an emergency.'

The sky had clouded over. There were flashes of lightning in the distance towards Johannesburg. As we came over the brow of a hill, I spotted a broken-down truck about a hundred metres ahead, blocking the emergency lane. Faan stomped on the accelerator. 'Now this *is* an emergency, Olly!'

'Well, why are you going faster?'

'Got to reach that gap in the line ahead. It's our only chance. If we stop, those dodos will shoot us.'

The back of the truck was looming larger and the gap was rapidly narrowing. The Volvo level with us made no move to let us in. Faan hooted desperately. The driver stared stolidly ahead. My heart was in my mouth and I said a quick prayer. Then I closed my eyes and waited for the inevitable. Suddenly there was a squeal of tyres as the Toyota lurched violently to the right. Faan wrestled with the steering wheel as he squeezed the car ahead of the Volvo, creating a narrow gap. The Volvo dropped back slightly. But it was too late – not for us but for the Volvo. There was a dull thud, as the Toyota clipped its front bumper.

'Fucking arsehole!' roared the driver.

Faan lowered his window and stuck his head out. 'We have a medical

emergency, Sir!' he shouted. 'My passenger's having a heart attack!' He reached into his pocket and produced a white handkerchief which he wedged in the top of the window. 'Now try and look like you're dying, Olly.'

'That shouldn't be too difficult,' I croaked, slumping back in my seat and letting my tongue loll out.

'Perfect!' declared Faan. 'You're in line for an Oscar!'

I said nothing, focusing instead on yoga breathing.

Faan began weaving from lane to lane, ignoring the shouts of other drivers.

'Great!' exclaimed Faan. 'The best way to lose a car is in heavy traffic.' He put a cigarette in his mouth and asked me to light it.

'How can I do that if I'm supposed to be dying?' I countered.

'People have very short memories, Olly. If it wasn't for that, no politician would ever get re-elected!'

'Okay,' I said, finding a box of matches in the cubby hole.

Faan talked almost incessantly, the cigarette bouncing on his bottom lip, his hands jumping around on the steering wheel as if he were playing an accordion.

A few kilometres further on I became aware of a whirring noise above. A low-flying helicopter was inching along the line of traffic.

Faan glanced upwards. 'Not your normal traffic police,' he observed. 'This one's unmarked.'

At the Brakfontein interchange we swung left onto the V.I. Lenin Highway (formerly Ben Schoeman). Here the traffic was denser and had slowed to a crawl. Cars inched along like prisoners on a chain, then abruptly darted forward a couple of metres, changing lanes with abandon, and edging into spaces just large enough to squeeze bumper to bumper.

The helicopter followed, patrolling back and forth along the line of cars.

The sky had suddenly darkened and although it was only around 3.30, the light was failing fast. The traffic jam had eased and cars were moving faster. Some drivers began switching on their headlights. As we reached the outskirts of Johannesburg, more taxis joined the flow of traffic. *"NOT YET UHURU"* declared a bumper sticker on a battered taxi that had squeezed in front us.

The Mercedes was sneaking up behind us in the emergency lane. 'Hey, I think we've got company!' I remarked.

The helicopter was hovering a little ahead.

‘Now what?’ I wondered aloud.

‘Don’t worry, Olly,’ said Faan in a reassuring voice, ‘I didn’t play chicken on the Bapsfontein road for nothing.’

The Mercedes was now only about fifty metres away, and still gaining.

Just before we reached the Corlett Drive offramp, the ‘UHURU’ taxi suddenly veered to the left and stopped dead in the emergency lane. There was a screech of brakes, as the Mercedes was forced to stop. Passengers began climbing out of the taxi in leisurely fashion. Then others got back inside. The Mercedes hooted frantically. My last fleeting impression was of the taxi driver examining a front tyre in the fading light. In my wildest dreams, I never thought I’d ever bless a taxi driver, but then again there’s a first for everything!

The dark clouds had closed in above us and it was now almost as dark as night. Suddenly there was a blinding flash of lightning and an ear-splitting clap of thunder. The helicopter, which was still hovering above, seemed to hesitate. Another flash of lightning followed, accompanied by sheets of driving rain. The helicopter hung there for a few more moments, then rose rapidly out of sight, the clatter of its rotors fading into the distance.

‘The good God Thor must have heard my prayer,’ said Faan, with a grin. ‘That dodo in the Mercedes didn’t worry me. But I thought we’d never shake the helicopter.’

Faan turned off the highway and down the Kwame Nkrumah Boulevard offramp (formerly Empire Road). As he stopped at the T junction, the Mercedes loomed in the rear-view mirror.

The driver lowered his window, did his little trick with his shoulders, then leaned out and fired two shots in rapid succession. One missed; the other shattered the passenger side mirror.

‘Time for more laughing gas,’ announced Faan, activating the injector. The wheels spun viciously and I could smell burning rubber. But instead of turning right in the direction of Melville and Brixton, as I expected, Faan turned left.

‘Where’re you going?’ I asked.

‘Home,’ he said, with a grin.

‘But home is the other way.’

‘Trust me, Olly.’

The car shot up Kwame Nkrumah and, without slowing, lurched left into Fidel Castro Avenue (formerly Jan Smuts).

I checked behind us. No sign of the Mercedes. Almost immediately Faan swung right into St Andrew Road and raced towards the first traffic light just as it turned red. Faan shot through the red light at breakneck speed, narrowly missing two cars.

‘Aren’t you…?’ I began.

‘Look behind you, Olly.’

The Mercedes was coming up to the traffic light. It was still red. A large removals van lumbered across.

‘I think we’ve got enough N2O for one more burst!’ chortled Faan, gunning the Toyota down the curving section of St Andrew. But just before it becomes Carse o’ Gowrie, he wrenched the steering wheel to the left and shot up York. In the rear view mirror I caught a glimpse of the Mercedes chasing down St Andrew and past the York turnoff.

‘Our second home,’ announced Faan, as he turned into the driveway of City Hospital, ‘Ward 697.’

Chapter 13

We stopped off at the shop in Hospital Walk to buy a few small gifts for the Ward 697 patients. Among the biscuits, sweets and cigarettes that Faan plonked down at the till, was a slab of Prestik.

'What's that for?' I asked.

'Wait and see.' he replied mysteriously.

Faan pressed the bell outside Ward 697. Half a minute later an eye appeared at the peephole. It belonged to Jill Braithwaite.

'Hi guys,' she cried. 'What a nice surprise!'

'Actually, we were in the area,' said Faan, 'and we decided to just drop in.'

'Well, come in and make yourselves at home.'

After taking our leave of Jill, we strolled through to the common room.

Pausing at the door, I whispered to Faan, 'Are we going to give the disk to Jill to pass on to Drew?'

'Not a good idea. We don't know if any of us are being watched. And we don't want to involve her in this. Better to hide it and wait for the dust to settle before we make a move.'

'I suppose you're right,' I said, glancing around the common room.

Faan was wandering around, handing out gifts and chatting animatedly to little clutches of patients. There were no familiar faces.

Then I sensed that someone had come up behind me. It was Old Cow.

I hadn't seen her since Kristy's funeral. 'Hey, it's great to see you!' I said.

'You're looking pretty good, Olly,' she said, as she stood back. 'Now tell me all your news.'

After I'd brought her up to speed, she told me she was now on day shifts for a while. 'You can't work night shifts for ever,' she added. Then she shot me a questioning look. 'Just wondering, Olly, didn't a couple of ghosts follow you home?'

'Well, my bathplugs are still disappearing and once I thought I saw a blonde girl in the hallway mirror.'

Old Cow smiled to herself but said nothing more.

Someone began playing the piano. A large woman with puffy fingers was hammering out a rousing number from ‘Fiddler on the Roof’.

I went across to listen. A little while later Faan joined me.

The woman paused and looked up at us. ‘Maybe I’ve been spoiled,’ she said in a surprisingly deep voice. ‘But I’m used to playing on a Steinway baby grand. I’ve also got a Yamaha – an upright like this – but it’s in good condition. This one needs a major overhaul – or better, replacing.’

‘So what’s actually wrong with it?’ prompted Faan.

She struck a couple of notes. ‘Can you hear that? It’s not in tune.’ She leaned over and pointed downwards. ‘And you see those tiny holes in the wood. Looks like borer.’

‘Well, when you’re finished I’ll take a look,’ put in Faan. ‘If the borer is still active there should be some sawdust on the floor.’

‘Okay,’ she said, heaving herself off the stool. ‘Have a look now, then.’

Faan crouched down on all fours and squinted under the piano. He ran his hand underneath, rubbing it from side to side. As he got up he examined his fingers. ‘No sawdust that I can see. By the way, we’re former patients,’ he added, introducing us both.

‘I’m Gertie Levitt,’ she said.

‘So what are you in for?’ asked Faan.

‘What most of us have, depression.’

Faan gave her a few words of encouragement, then he asked her if he could have a turn on the piano. Gertie readily agreed.

Faan began bashing out his familiar medley of ragtime. As he finished, he raked a finger across the keys. ‘I think I like the slightly off-key quality,’ he announced with a grin. ‘Good for honky-tonk. Actually, the piano and I have something in common: a ringing sound. Both of us suffer from tinnitus!’

‘You really are a hoot!’ chuckled Gertie, giving Faan’s shoulder a friendly push. Then she squeezed in beside him. ‘What about a duet?’

‘Good idea,’ said Faan.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Gerda. ‘Am I interrupting something?’

‘No, not at all.’

‘Well, I’ve a few minutes before my next appointment. Can we talk?’

‘Sure,’ I said.

I made my excuses to Faan and Gertie and then followed Gerda through to her office.

She closed the door and we took chairs opposite one another. ‘I just

wanted to tell you, Olly, that I've heard some very good reports about Lana Lindstrom's treatment. But some aspects may seem embarrassing… So what I'm saying is this: don't be put off if it seems unorthodox. Just give it a chance.'

'I'm pretty open-minded,' I replied. 'In any case I'll do *anything* to get better!'

As Gerda ushered me out, the sounds of a Scott Joplin number tinkled through from the common room. I waited for it to end and then strolled over to the piano.

Faan looked up. 'I'm afraid we have to go now, Gertie,' he said.

For a moment she looked crestfallen. Then she brightened. 'I really did enjoy that,' she said, her cheeks flushing. 'I hope you'll come again.'

'We definitely will,' said Faan. 'Anyway, we have to come back to fetch something in a week or two. See you then.'

Gertie beamed after us.

'So where is the disk?' I whispered.

'I stuck it on the underside of the piano with a couple of blobs of Prestik.'

Chapter 14

The following Saturday was the appointed day for the VOICE demonstration at the Azania Buildings in Phiriopolis. It had been widely advertised and VOICE members around the country had been notified. Alistair L'Estrange had hired a bus and most members of FOWL had said they'd be coming.

FOTL members were directing traffic at non-functioning robots due to 'load-shedding'. But the few who were off duty said they'd make their own way to Phiriopolis.

We were all due to meet outside Alistair's house at 7.30.

Faan and I arrived as the driver started the bus and left it idling. As we climbed aboard, I saw many familiar faces: Ken Aitken, Drew, Jill, Goolam, Lin Chang, Pilar Zapata, and some of the others who'd been on FOWL stints. There were also about seven or eight people from FOE, but the only one I knew was Anisha Parbhoo.

While we were waiting for a few late-comers, Alistair began distributing white T-shirts with the logo: FIX CRIME, OR NO TAX.

Jean was one of the last to arrive, her perky white baseball cap bobbed as she clambered aboard. She was dressed in a smart light-blue tracksuit with white stripes down the sides.

'Hello Sweetie,' she sang out when she caught sight of me. Faan's eyes widened but he said nothing.

'Mind if I squeeze in between you?' she said, sliding in before either of us could reply.

As the driver began revving the engine, Weddo Moloi hauled his bulk aboard and took the empty single seat at the front.

The sky was partly overcast and a cool breeze was blowing. As the bus pulled away, all of us were in high spirits like children going on a picnic.

After about twenty minutes, Jean's head sagged against my shoulder. I made no effort to wake her, if indeed she was asleep.

Pilar Zapata, who was two seats ahead of us, glanced around and smiled at me. I smiled back.

Someone had a portable radio which was tuned to 702. The reporter in

Phiriopolis was saying that cars and buses from all parts of the country were converging on the city. By eight o'clock, she said, most of the parking near the Azania Buildings was taken.

When we arrived in the city at around 8.30, and eventually found a parking space five or six blocks from the Azania Buildings. After disembarking, we joined the festive throng of people heading towards the assembly point for the demonstration.

We'd expected that the crowd would assemble on the lawns below the Azania Buildings, but we found that all the nearby streets had been cordoned off. A large contingent of police and their vehicles was assembled behind the cordon, effectively preventing the swelling crowd from approaching the Azania Buildings.

Most of our group gathered near the cordon. But in the crush, the others had become separated.

Alistair L'Estrange strode up to the police officer in charge and said he wished to hand the VOICE petition to a government representative. The officer, a stocky, leathery-faced man with prominent teeth, said the march had been banned and no one would be accepting the petition. He switched on his loud-hailer and called on the crowd to disperse. A police helicopter, equipped with a powerful loudspeaker, flew back and forth over the crowd, ordering people to leave the area immediately.

Alistair L'Estrange protested to the officer that VOICE's lawyers had confirmed that the demonstration was legal, and it was unacceptable that it had been banned at the last minute. 'That's your problem,' the officer said with a curl of his lip. He winked at a police dog-handler who'd been standing nearby. The man lunged forward, and his large German Shepherd reared up in front of Alistair, with bared teeth. Alistair took a step backwards and then grimly stood his ground.

The mood of the crowd became restive but not confrontational. Suddenly, without warning the police turned high-pressure water hoses on the crowd. A howl of outrage went up. People surged backwards, but soon regrouped. Then they began to jeer at the police. 'You treat us like rubbish!' someone shouted. 'But our taxes pay your wages. Just remember that!'

After a while the jeering died down. No one pressed forward, neither did anyone retreat.

Just then members of the Young Socialist League, who'd mingled with the crowd, began attacking demonstrators with sticks and plastic sjamboks,

injuring at least a dozen people. A few burly demonstrators quickly disarmed the youths.

Suddenly the police began firing tear gas into the crowd. A canister whistled over our heads and landed among demonstrators some distance back. Another followed, landing nearer. Screams of terror erupted. This time people began running away in panic but the crush of the crowd slowed their progress. Many were coughing and spluttering, or holding handkerchiefs over their faces. I got a faint whiff of teargas, enough to make my eyes smart.

A few minutes later there was a noise like firecrackers exploding. It continued for about half a minute.

'My God, they're shooting!' Ken Aitken shouted.

'Rubber bullets?' asked Faan,

'No, live rounds.'

An acrid smell of cordite hung in the air. Like a movie on freeze-frame, no one moved for a long moment. Then a mad stampede began.

'Has anyone seen Jill?' called out Drew.

I could see that Drew was very distressed. He forced himself into the crowd, calling, 'Jill! Jill!'

When we finally reached the bus we found that most of the others had got there before us, including Drew. Jill was lying next to him, her head resting on his lap. She told us later that she'd been pushed up against a wall by the surging crowd. She was bruised and shaken but not seriously injured.

We drove home in silence, too stunned to talk. Eventually, when we pulled up outside Alistair's house, he called out: 'I think we all need a drink!'

'Good idea,' said Faan.

Some declined and drove straight home, but most of us, including those who formed VOICE's inner circle, stayed.

The atmosphere in Alistair's lounge remained subdued until we were on our second drink. The first person to speak was Faan who cracked a joke, easing the tension. After that the conversation got going. But for some reason everyone avoided talking about the events earlier in the day.

At seven o'clock, Alistair switched on the e-TV news. The solemn newsreader reported that 27 people had been killed during the demonstration. Some had bullet wounds; others had been trampled to death. About seventy more were injured, some seriously.

The Minister of Safety and Security came on next, reading from a prepared statement. He said the shooting had occurred when an unruly mob

had tried to break through a police cordon that had been erected to prevent an illegal demonstration. Armed elements had then begun firing on the police, who returned the fire.

‘Of course, we know the Minister is lying,’ said Alistair,’ rattling the ice cubes in his whisky glass. ‘My guess is that the shooting was deliberate and planned well in advance at the highest level.’

‘So what are you saying?’ asked Goolam.

‘I mean President Phiri ordered the shooting.’

‘But why?’

‘Simple. President Phiri sees VOICE as a serious threat to his regime. He knows that an effective tax strike would paralyse his government. So he’s decided on a strategy of violence and intimidation to try to derail our strike.’

Chapter 15

"Johannesburg was the only city I ever visited in which I could not walk in the streets, because of the very high rate of crime." – Augusto Areal, Brazilian tourist

The following day the death toll had risen to thirty three. The enormity of what had happened was only beginning to sink in. But while the press deplored the loss of life, it remained ambivalent about who was responsible.

As one would expect, all Western countries condemned the shooting but said they would react fully only when all the facts were known. Britain called for an international inquiry under the U.N., but President Phiri rejected this, saying his government had the resources and the expertise to conduct its own inquiry. He would, however, consider an oversight role by the African Union.

Reaction from the United States came a few days later. Unlike other Western countries, it placed the blame squarely on the SPP government, saying it had irrefutable evidence that the police had orders to fire on unarmed demonstrators, and it was holding President Phiri personally responsible.

The next day VOICE issued the following terse statement:

'Shooting unarmed demonstrators will not deter us. And we will not be intimidated by threats. If the government does not immediately indicate its willingness to meet its obligation of governing properly, as set out in our ultimatum, we will proceed with the early implementation of our threatened tax and rates strike.'

As Alistair L'Estrange put it, 'We now know that the SPP will never pull up their socks voluntarily. They have no political will or interest, and Zebulon Phiri has all the instincts of a dictator, which means we're going to have to turn the heat on.'

Separate funerals were held for the victims of the shooting, as many had come from other parts of the country. A VOICE memorial service was to be held later on a date and venue still to be decided on.

Meanwhile, crime had once again reached levels where it was affecting

tourism. From the moment their plane touched down at Zebulon Phiri Airport, tourists were targeted by criminals, who saw them not merely as soft targets, but as ‘Christmas turkeys’ to be plucked and eaten!

Chapter 16

The municipalities of Phiriopolis and Johannesburg had refused to allow VOICE to hold its memorial service at any of their stadiums. They gave no reasons, but these were obvious.

Eventually, we opted for a farm near Irene that belonged to Alistair L'Estrange's brother, since it was convenient to both Phiriopolis and Johannesburg.

A large crowd – estimated at around thirty thousand – turned up at the service. Alistair L'Estrange made a stirring yet touching speech, paying tribute to the victims and making it clear that VOICE's plans for the strike were still on track. The mood was sombre yet grimly determined.

Drew, who was among the inner circle members on the podium, said he needed to talk to Faan and me afterwards, so we arranged to meet at Faan's car.

We found Drew waiting for us at the Deke. 'Let's sit in the car if you don't mind,' he said. After we'd climbed in, he came quickly to the point. 'Some bad news, I'm afraid, guys. Mike Molefe was detained yesterday by a special elite unit that reports directly to the President's Office, rather than by NIA men, as one would have expected. 'But just so you know, "Mike Molefe" is just a cover name, as I think Weddo told you. His real name is Edwin Gumede. Obviously there's no longer any reason to keep it secret. Anyway, my local contacts believe he's being held in a detention centre disguised as a psychiatric ward, after word was put about at work that he was suffering from what was termed "delirium, following worrying mental behaviour".'

'That really is bad news,' I said.

'By the way,' said Drew, 'I'm leaving for Washington tomorrow for a week or two, so it's important that I take the disk with me.'

'No problem,' said Faan. 'I'll have it in a couple of hours.'

After we'd said our goodbyes, I settled back to the soothing bumble bee buzz of the Deke.

'Well, we'd better drive straight over to Ward 697,' said Faan.

As we entered the common room, we stopped dead in our tracks. The old

piano was gone. In its place was another piano – also an upright – but a modern pale-wood model.

We raced back to the nurses' station where Jill was working.

'You guys look as if you've seen a ghost,' she said, frowning. 'What's wrong?'

'The … the old piano,' panted Faan. 'What's happened to it?'

'You remember Gertie Levitt, the patient you played a duet with when you visited us recently?'

'Sure,' said Faan, exhaling slowly.

'Well, she had two pianos. So after she left she gave us her Yamaha as a token of gratitude.'

'When was this?'

'Last week.'

'So where's the old one?'

'We sent it to the auctioneers a couple of days ago. Why? Don't you like our new one?'

'I'm sure it's fine,' said Faan through his teeth. 'But if the old one's not sold already, I'd like to buy it.'

Jill raised an eyebrow. 'What? That old wreck? It was finished, Faan. Patients had been complaining about it for years.'

'Maybe so. But I still want to buy it.'

'What for?'

'Sentimental reasons.'

'Well, it's at Kelly's Auctions at Northcliff Corner. When I asked the man when we could expect our cheque (you see, we need the money for a party we're having after Open Day), he said the piano would be auctioned today, and we could pick up the cheque tomorrow.'

'Did he say what time it would be sold?' asked Faan.

'Not specifically. But I think they sell the smaller items in the morning and the bigger ones in the afternoon.' She checked her watch. 'You may still have time. But you'd better hurry.'

In the basement garage a green Honda with tinted windows was parked behind the Deke. A man was sitting in it, but I could only make out his bulky frame. At the time, I thought nothing of it.

Faan started the Deke and we put-putted towards the exit. I glanced in the

rear view mirror and saw the Honda was also leaving. As we stopped at the cubicle to pay, I glanced again in the mirror. Something about the man seemed vaguely familiar, but I couldn't work out what it was.

On Kwame Nkrumah Boulevard Faan put his foot down. The Deke surged forward and we were soon over the speed limit. I kept my eyes peeled for cops.

The problems started on Main Road, Melville, where two traffic lights were out. Traffic had slowed to a crawl. This time Faan didn't shoot across as I expected, but waited his turn like everyone else. 'If the lights were working normally, Olly, I could take a calculated risk,' he said by way of explanation. 'It's all a question of timing. But if they're not working, then you never know what the other idiot is going to do!'

At Judith Road the lights were also out, but the traffic was moving normally. As we drew closer I noticed a figure in the middle of the road. It was Nigel Morphet, impeccably turned out in his FOTL uniform and polished brown boots, directing traffic.

Just past Westpark Cemetery on Robert Mugabe Avenue, several metro policemen were signalling randomly to cars to pull over. The Deke, perhaps because of its age, was one of the unlucky ones. I recognised the burly Metro policeman, pad in hand, advancing towards us. It was the same character who'd once demanded a bribe from me – and I'd refused. I quickly told Faan about the incident.

'Well this time we'll have to pay,' he said matter-of-factly.

'What are you talking about?'

'No time to argue,' Faan said, fumbling in his pocket.

The cop was peering into the interior of the car. 'You got a problem here, Mister.'

'What's that?' asked Faan.

'No seatbelts,' he growled.

'As you can see, officer, this car is a 1960s model. Seatbelts weren't a requirement then.'

'This is the 21st century, my man.' The ballpoint in his right hand was poised over the pad. 'You know the fine is six hundred and fifty rand for not wearing a seatbelt.'

'Sorry, officer, but I only have two hundred on me.'

The cop studied Faan's face for a long moment. 'Okay, you're in luck, Mister. I won't give you a ticket this time.' He draped his arm nonchalantly

through the car window. Out of sight, his fingers did a little beckoning dance.

We raced north along Robert Mugabe Avenue without further incident. But as we turned into the Northcliff Corner parking garage, I noticed the green Honda was behind us.

Chapter 17

The man in the Honda got out and followed us to the lifts. He was a bulky black man in his late thirties or early forties, and was wearing a light grey suit, highly-polished black shoes and wrap-around dark glasses. As he pushed past us into the lift, he gave his shoulders a roll. I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. I was pretty sure he was the man who'd fired at us on the Kwame Nkrumah offramp.

Kelly's Auctions was on the second floor. It was in a cavernous room divided off with a long maroon rope strung between movable wooden stanchions. A couple of metres back from the rope were about thirty or forty people seated on an odd assortment of chairs. About a dozen more were standing around the sides. The area behind the rope was stacked with furniture and office equipment of all descriptions, but there was no sign of the old piano.

'I suppose it's been sold,' I said to Faan, who was standing on tip-toe, craning his neck and scouting about.

'Hang on a sec,' he said. 'Isn't that it over there among all those filing cabinets?'

'Actually, I think you're right.'

'Well, I'll just nip over the barrier and grab the disk.'

The auctioneer, a short rotund man with a fleshy face, was extolling the virtues of a scuffed coffee table.

Then I saw the Honda man lounging against the wall near the entrance. He gave his shoulders a roll. A short, pink-faced woman nearby looked up at him nervously.

Faan was already straddling the rope.

The auctioneer looked up with a frown.

'Excuse me, sir, but you had your chance during inspection time. We don't allow people past the barrier once the auction has started.'

'But I only…'

'Sorry, sir, but I don't make the rules.'

Faan, whose leg was poised in mid air, lowered it back across the barrier.

'Just as well,' I whispered to him. 'I think we've got company.' I quickly

told him about the Honda man.

‘Well, that changes everything!’ groaned Faan. ‘With this dodgy character snooping around, I wouldn’t risk trying to retrieve the disk even after the auction. And he might not be the only one watching us. Now we’ll just have to buy the piano.’

The auctioneer was now only a couple of items away from the old upright.

‘I’d better go down to the ATM and draw three thousand,’ said Faan. ‘That’s the maximum I can draw at one time. I’ll also phone Drew and ask him to bring a couple of thousand more just in case. That old wreck isn’t worth more than two thousand at the very most, but you never know how high some dodo will bid it up to.’

Faan had been gone about ten minutes when the auctioneer reached the piano. He draped his arm across the top and drummed on it with his fingers. ‘Who’ll start me on two thousand?’ he began. An earnest young man with glasses bit his lip, opened his mouth then closed it again. ‘Come on now,’ barked the auctioneer. ‘Two thousand is not too much for a piano Chopin used to practise Chopsticks on…’ He opened it and struck a tinny note. ‘Beautiful sound,’ he announced. ‘And what’s more, it’s got all its keys. So let’s be reasonable.’ He paused and scanned the audience speculatively. ‘But there’s a reserve on this one so we can’t go any lower – even if we wanted to. So who’ll give me two thousand? Anyone?’

The young man raised a hand tentatively like a schoolboy fearing a strict teacher.

‘I have two thousand over here.’ The auctioneer smiled and nodded at the young man.

‘Two thousand two hundred,’ a slightly greying middle aged woman towards the back called out in a strong, clear voice.

My heart sank. The young man didn’t worry me. My precognitive powers told me he’d soon give up. But I’d read somewhere that some driven menopausal women who compulsively attend auction sales will bid an item through the roof, once they’ve made up their minds to have it.

‘Will you say two thousand-three hundred, sir?

The young man blinked his eyes rapidly, opened his mouth but no sound came.

‘Sir?’

The young man nodded.

‘I now have two-thousand-three hundred…’

‘Two thousand *five hundred,’* the middle aged woman promptly sang out.

I could see Faan threading his way through the crowd.

‘You got three thousand?’

‘Yes, and Drew is on his way. But he’s on the other side of town, so he could be a while.’

‘What about you, sir?’ the auctioneer turned to the young man. ‘Shall we say two-six?’

The young gulped, then shook his head.

‘Well, are we all done at two thousand five hundred?’

Silence.

‘Well, going once … twice…’

‘Two-six,’ I called out.

‘We now have a gentleman here on two-six, lady. What do you say?’

‘Two-eight,’ the woman shot back.

I went to two-nine and then turned to Faan. ‘I hope Drew gets here on time, because Kelly’s Auctions demands full payment for each item immediately it’s sold, unless they know you. If you can’t come up with the cash, then they offer it to the next highest bidder.’

‘Three thousand,’ the woman called out.

‘You got cash on you?’ asked Faan.

‘Only fifty,’ I said.

‘Well bid that then,’ said Faan.

‘Three thousand and fifty,’ I blurted out.

‘Sorry, Mister, but we don’t do fifties here – at least not for big items. Otherwise we’d be here all day! You want to make it three-one?’

I looked at Faan nervously, then at the woman. A triumphant smile was spreading across her face.

Faan tugged at my sleeve and swivelled his eyes over his shoulder.

Drew’s tall frame was visible above the crowd. ‘Four thousand!’ I shouted out.

The auctioneer’s eyes widened. ‘Did you say four thousand, sir? … You sure about that.’

‘Yes, I’m very sure.’

The woman’s face crumpled.

‘Any other bids…?

‘No...? Well, gone to the man in the blue shirt and fawn pants over there.’

Between them Faan and Drew made up the four thousand, which I handed to the auctioneer's clerk, an obliging young Indian man with severe halitosis, who said he could arrange transport immediately. We asked him to deliver it to Faan's house.

'What about the Honda man?' I asked Faan.

'Elementary my dear Watson,' he said. (I later learned he'd recently been ploughing through the collected works of Conan Doyle.) 'Watch this.'

He turned to the auctioneer, who was now inviting bids on the filing cabinets. 'Sorry to interrupt,' called out Faan in a voice so loud that everyone could hear, 'but I saw that man over there put his hand into the lady's handbag.'

'Which man?' The auctioneer's voice rang with concern.

Faan pointed to the Honda man. The plump woman standing next to him gave a shriek and began digging in her bag.

'Anything missing?' The auctioneer called over the heads of the crowd.

'I – I think so,' she said weakly.

'Don't worry, madam, we'll deal with this, chop-chop.' Two tough-looking security guards pushed through the crowd and escorted the protesting Honda man away.

'Did he actually have his hand in her bag? I asked Faan.

'Of course not! But never underestimate the power of suggestion, Olly. And I've yet to meet the woman who can give you an accurate inventory of what's in her handbag. It'll probably be hours before she can say whether or not anything's missing.'

Katie ushered us into the lounge and brought us tea and an assortment of biscuits. A few minutes later the removals truck arrived with the piano. Faan shepherded the men inside and had them place it against the lounge wall that was papered with publisher's rejection slips.

'Now for the most important part,' said Faan after the men had left. He knelt in front of the piano and groped under it. Moments later he withdrew his hand, and with a flourish produced the disk.

'Do you want to know what the joke is?' said Faan, grinning. It was a question directed at all of us.

'Do tell,' said Drew.

'Well, the fate of the country – and perhaps the world – could've been

hanging on a blob of Prestik!’

Chapter 18

"A former prison boss who is doing time for murder virtually runs the jail where he is being held. Russel Ngubo, who is serving a 25-year jail term at Serfontein in Pietermaritzburg, is said to have a direct line to senior politicians, including cabinet ministers, and has been linked to the removal of two prison bosses who clashed with him." – Sibusiso Ngwalwa, reporting for *The Sunday Times*

"After decades of mismanagement and corruption, most African states have become hollowed out. They are no longer instruments capable of serving the public good. Indeed, far from being able to provide aid and protection to their citizens, African governments and the vampire-like politicians who run them are regarded by populations they rule as yet another burden they have to fear in the struggle for survival." – Martin Meredith, author of *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence*

As expected, the government had failed to respond to VOICE's latest statement threatening early implementation of the tax strike.

A couple of weeks after the memorial service, Alistair L'Estrange called an emergency meeting. 'We need to declare the strike immediately,' he told our inner circle. 'I think we have enough support now. There's been a rising tide of outrage since the shootings, and we need to tap into that before it begins to wane.'

We unanimously agreed.

VOICE's announcement that it was calling the strike with immediate effect drew a swift reaction from President Phiri. He called on VOICE to disband, describing it as the 'internal wing of U.S. imperialism', which was plotting to re-impose apartheid on South Africa. He added that he reserved the right to take action against VOICE 'at the appropriate time'.

Meanwhile, reports from across the country indicated that the strike was gathering momentum.

Even when the Avenging Angels had been executing criminals no one had been executed for corruption. So corruption was still flourishing. Indeed, it had become the norm virtually everywhere, even worse than under Jacob Zuma. Virtually all licensing departments across the country were reported to be controlled by criminal syndicates, with corrupt officials selling licences and taking bribes. Also, unless you gave the clerk at a toll plaza a few extra rands, he would secretly signal to a traffic policeman (with whom he was in cahoots!) to come and 'inspect' your vehicle, forcing you to unpack everything at great inconvenience, especially if you were going on holiday. As the A.A. put it in one of their statements: 'In most countries corruption is an *aberration* of government but in Africa it's the *purpose* of government!'

Chapter 19

By now the resign-and-reapply exercise at AIR was underway. Since it didn't apply to staff who were less than ten years from retirement, Will Allwell wasn't affected, but Prue and I still had to be evaluated. For some reason the Monitoring Section was last on the list. I wasn't particularly worried, as I'm a bit of a fatalist, but Prue was all-a-twitter.

I did my best to calm her during long coffee breaks but with only moderate success.

Jerry Lategan, one of the few remaining white news readers, hadn't been reappointed. His drinking habits and his frequent failure to read the news on time had finally caught up with him.

Everyone had expected Tata Zondi to be another casualty, but after she'd conveniently switched allegiance from the ANC to the SPP, she was duly reappointed Executive Editor. However, her management style, according to Hannes, remained dysfunctional.

During her frequent and protracted absences on 'sick leave' or 'study leave', Hannes would step in as Acting Executive Editor, although he was empowered only to make day-to-day decisions. Sometimes when a policy decision was needed urgently, he would refer it to the Ministry. But usually that too would be a fruitless exercise, with no official willing to go out on a limb.

Meanwhile, Hannes tried to keep the station on an even keel. Within the limits of his disempowerment, he spelled out his vision of multi-skilling. For example, those who worked on the website and had good voices could be trained to read news bulletins, and vice versa.

As AIR began to shed staff, more than two dozen SPP loyalists, with little or no broadcasting experience, were recruited and given temporary posts. This ploy was used to bypass the official freeze on permanent appointments.

Chapter 20

When I got home I switched on the TV to get the news.

The first item was about a disastrous rugby tour of Australia, which I didn't pay attention to. Then came news of a delay in President Phiri's Africar Project due to 'technical problems'. Next came a report on the mysterious deaths of two anti-nuclear campaigners near the Pelindaba nuclear facility. Their bodies had been found in plastic bags dumped in tall grass at the side of the R104. The cause of death was as yet unknown.

During the following report I heard the news reader mention the name 'Edwin Gumede'. A face flashed on the screen that looked familiar. It was the man I thought of as 'Mike Molefe'. The news reader continued. '…Only after persistent enquiries by Gumede's wife, as well as by the ANC, was a short statement issued by the government Information Service, saying Gumede had died of cardiac arrest (quote) "as a result of excessive arterial tension". He had been undergoing psychiatric evaluation at a private clinic for several weeks. The statement added that no post mortem was necessary as he had died of natural causes.'

Chapter 21

I was back on the massage plinth at Lana Lindstrom's and a soothing *Enya* CD was playing in the background. As Lana bent over me and smiled, the answer to the mystery of why she seemed so familiar, besides her striking likeness to Kristy, suddenly came to me. Hers was the last of the faces of the Goddess in my dream of nearly two years ago.

Lana glanced at her watch. 'Well, I suppose we need to begin with your hypnotherapy now.'

She began the relaxation routine, and shortly after that I must have gone under.

When I was conscious again, she said, 'A lot more came out this time, Olly. Although the rape was the immediate cause of your impotence, your wife leaving you also contributed.'

'You think so?'

'Absolutely. You see, feelings of rejection, which I picked up in this session, are always a serious blow to your self-image, as well as to your libido. In fact, rejection is one of the most difficult of life's experiences to deal with. I can empathise because, as you know, the same thing happened to me. One other thing; under hypnosis you kept on talking about a diary, which I understand is your ex-wife's?'

'That's right. You see, when I first started therapy with Gerda, I told her I'd found the diary lying around. Gerda said if it would help me to get closure, then I should read it. I did for a while, but I stopped after my friend Kristy, er…' (I was going to say 'died' but I couldn't get the word out.).

'Well, I think you should start reading it again before our next appointment. You see, Olly, I favour a holistic approach to therapy. We need to cover every base, including your feelings of rejection. I definitely think it would help if you knew why your wife left you.'

'Maybe you're right.'

'Another thing. I saw from your file that Gerda told you about these divorce recovery workshops that are held regularly. Have you been to one yet?'

'No, not yet.'

‘Well, I think it would be a good idea if you attended one soon. Dr Roger Bligh is the counsellor who runs them. I know him well – a fellow American and a real Renaissance Man. I’ve got one of his cards here. Let me slip one in your pocket.’ She picked a card off a small shelf and popped it into the pocket of my coat, which was draped over a chair.

As she went on talking she pulled on a surgical glove and lubricated a finger. To begin with I felt a sense of shock, and I expected Stocky and Tall to appear at any moment. While I was in this state of fearful expectancy, I felt a sudden but not unpleasant frisson. I gave a slight shudder.

‘Well, this massage should induce pleasurable feelings and a mood of relaxation that should enable you to focus more positively on the present moment. In turn, this should help to exclude the negative images that have been spoiling your sexual encounters.’

‘Does that mean I’m cured?’ I asked hopefully, since Stocky and Tall had so far failed to appear.

‘It’s a process, Olly. You won’t be cured overnight. You may even have occasional relapses where negative images intrude again. The key words are patience and persistence.’

‘So what’s the next step, Lana?’

‘Actually there are two. Firstly, you need to come off your antidepressant. This kind of therapy requires that you be able to experience your emotions fully. So, if you’re agreeable, I’ll contact Liz Stott and check whether it’s okay.’

‘And after that?’

‘I’m not sure how you’re going to take this, but we need to monitor your progress independently. That’s where the Tenderloin Club comes in.’

‘The Tenderloin?’

‘Unofficially known as the TLC. It’s an establishment in Melville.’

‘What kind of establishment?’

‘Well…’ she began, taking a deep breath, ‘…it’s staffed with working girls.’

‘You mean…?’

‘Before you get the wrong impression, Olly, let me point out that it’s primarily a sociology project, rather than a … you know. It’s also a kind of half-way house for girls wanting to escape from the clutches of pimps and syndicates.’

‘But it’s still a brothel, isn’t it? I thought brothels were illegal.’

‘Technically, yes. But the law isn’t enforced these days unless police want to extract a bribe. Incidentally, that’s a good reason why prostitution should be decriminalised. In the case of the Tenderloin, the intention is quite different from that of the usual brothel. Profit isn’t the motive. You see, my good friend, Sarel, who runs the establishment, is doing research for a doctoral thesis on *“Prostitution in Post-apartheid South Africa”*. The idea is to gather material for suggested reforms.’

‘What sort of people go there?’

‘A lot of them are shy men who don’t know how to approach women; others are lonely pensioners whose wives have passed away. Still others are young first-timers who want to get a bit of experience, so they don’t embarrass themselves. In your case, as I’ve said, it’s a way of independently monitoring your progress during therapy.’

‘I see…’ I said somewhat uncertainly.

‘I’m not telling you what to do.’ She flashed me a smile. ‘I’m just pointing out an option – a good one, I believe. The choice is yours.’

‘But I really hate the idea of going to a brothel.’

‘I understand that. But from a psychological point of view it may be your best bet. For example, if you had a lady friend and found yourself in a situation where you wanted to make love, you’d be obsessing about whether or not you could perform. It then becomes a vicious circle, and most likely you wouldn’t be able to do it. Whereas, if you went with a working girl, you wouldn’t have any exaggerated expectations – neither would she. So you’d be much more relaxed about it.’

‘You say that we need to monitor my progress … but you’re a sex surrogate, aren’t you, Lana? I mean couldn’t you do that?’

Lana flashed me an almost shy grin. ‘I’d better not do the surrogacy part myself, Olly, although I really, really like you. That’s just the problem. Sex, unless it’s for sale, like at the Tenderloin, often creates all-consuming emotions between the parties, where one can no longer be objective, and that wouldn’t be good in a professional relationship such as ours.’ Her grin broadened. ‘Of course that’s not to say I’m not sorely tempted…’

‘Hmmm,’ I murmured. ‘Let me think about it.

‘By the way, what’s Sarel’s surname?’

‘Bothma.’

‘Rings a bell. I’ve met him a couple of times at news conferences and at the Press Club, but that was some time ago.’

‘He’s a really nice guy. Believe me, Olly, at the Tenderloin you’d be in good hands.’

‘And the girls?’

‘A cut above most in this business. And no druggies. Sarel won’t take them. There’s also one who freelances there who’s a qualified sex surrogate. I’ve sent quite a few patients to her. She’s a blonde. I think you’d like her.’

Lana took out a card and scribbled something on the back. Then she handed it to me.

The name on it was ‘Angel’.

Chapter 22

"Enough nuclear explosive to fuel half a dozen bombs, each powerful enough to obliterate central Washington, is locked in a vault at Pelindaba, the nuclear research centre near Pretoria." – Douglas Birch and R Jeffrey Smith, reporting for *The Star*

About ten minutes after I got home, the phone rang. It was Drew. 'Hi, old buddy. Just flew in yesterday. When can we meet?'

'This evening's okay if it suits you.'

We agreed to meet at the Exclamation Mark in an hour. It was still light when I left on foot, carrying my swordstick. A few noisy hadedas were flying home to roost.

'Lots to tell you,' Drew said, after the waitress had poured our beers. 'But first I want to say how sorry I am to hear about Molefe.'

'Looks like he was murdered,' I said flatly. 'Everything points that way.'

'I agree. But sadly it's unlikely that the bastards responsible will ever face justice. My guess is that the order came directly from President Phiri.'

Leaning closer, Drew said, 'Before we start talking about what's on the disk, I guess you'd like to hear the latest Intel on Mrs Eberhardt.'

'Of course.'

'Well, Prometheus tells me that she joined the CIA after graduating from Yale. Shortly after that she married Cordell Eberhardt, a fellow CIA "Political", who was killed in Afghanistan some years ago. But in case you think she was a grieving widow, that's not the case. It was more a marriage of convenience. Actually, she's an aggressive bisexual, with a preference for submissive partners. She not only took Cordell's surname but changed her first name to "Arista". As I think I've mentioned before, one of the names she uses is Shelley Krebwinkel, which was her unmarried name.

'Both she and Cordell worked at a U.S. detention and interrogation centre in Afghanistan, the Mid East equivalent of Guantanamo Bay. But Cordell was killed, together with eight other operatives, in a suicide bombing while he was visiting a remote CIA base in Khost Province, on the border with

Pakistan.

'After that there's a blank of about eight years when Arista Eberhardt seems to have dropped off the radar. Then she suddenly surfaced in South Africa and opened the Pinnacle Spa.'

'What about the so-called 'rogue' project she's supposed to be involved in?'

'The woman's a real professional, Olly. She's covered her tracks very well. So far nada.'

'Well, Gary Simes is still keeping an eye on her. I phoned him recently, but he also hasn't come up with anything solid. He checked out that drug rehab centre run by Mrs Eberhardt's American friend, but he says it seems above board.'

I took two quick sips of beer before continuing. 'But until I've solved the mystery of Mrs Eberhardt's role in the disappearance or death of Kristy, I'm not giving up hope.'

'I can understand that, Olly, and I agree you shouldn't give up.'

Drew leaned across and rested his hand on my shoulder for a moment. 'But now I think it's time we talked about the disk.'

'Okay,' I said. 'Anything important on it?'

'Well it confirms what we already suspected.'

'We?'

'You know, my contacts in Washington … Anyway, what's clear is that Project Phoenix is not just at the planning stage. Up till now no one had any idea of how far it had advanced. From what's in the file, however, it seems that President Phiri's Mid East buddies are getting ready for the next phase.

'Which is?'

'I'm not entirely sure. One thing's clear, though. If they're able to obtain fissionable material like plutonium or enriched uranium they'll soon be able to produce nuclear devices.'

'You mean for terrorism?'

'It can't be ruled out.'

'You said the file confirms what you suspected.'

'Right. You see, Washington's suspicions were first aroused when our banking intelligence people reported that the SPP was receiving large sums of money from Middle East sources, filtered through the Cayman Islands.'

'Enough money to make up for lost tax revenue?' I asked.

'The SPP seems to think so, but I doubt whether any private sources

would ever be able to cover those kind of losses, though it should be enough to fund Project Phoenix and have some left over to divert into SPP pockets.'

'I wonder what motivated the SPP to get involved in such a scheme?'

'Well, it's not just for the money, Olly, although that's a major consideration. As you know, the SPP has a deep and abiding hatred of the West…' Drew took another swig of beer. '…which, I must admit, considering the aggressive nature of U.S. and British foreign policy, is not entirely unwarranted. But of course that doesn't excuse something like Project Phoenix.

'Oh, one other thing. The documents in the file were in two different codes. The first was relatively easy to crack; the second, well, I hear the boys at Langley are still working on it.'

'You think the SPP knows the U.S. has found out about Project Phoenix? I mean, they must know that Molefe slipped the disk to someone.'

'Sure. But not necessarily to whom. You see, if your Honda man had reported everything to his superiors, both you and Faan would be in detention now. But the Honda man (his name was Jakes Mbuli) has, or rather *had*, a huge ego, and this was well-known in the intelligence community. He was the worst kind of operative you can get. People like him are called 'Solo Flyers' or 'Lone Rangers' because they keep everything they find to themselves until they have what they think is enough to crack a case, so they can claim sole credit.'

'I see you're referring to him in the past tense.'

Drew smiled, took a gulp of beer, and seemed to focus on a passing car.

'So what will the U.S. do about Project Phoenix?' I asked.

'Its reaction will probably be within the context of its strategy for the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, which it's busy refining, together with the Europeans.'

'After you fetched me from the psychiatric ward and we had lunch in Melville, we spoke about America's plans for Africa, remember?'

'Sure.'

'Are you saying that these plans have changed?'

'Not at all. It's just a question of timing. What the U.S. and the former European colonials are talking about are a timetable and logistics for a Western takeover of Africa. Although there's no particular deadline set, the West nevertheless needs to make a move before China beats them to it. Also, all the efforts to control illegal African migration into Europe are proving

quite useless. Because of the porous borders, as well as the vast expanses of ocean that the Europeans need to patrol to intercept the traffickers' boats, it's like trying to swat flies in an aircraft hangar!

Chapter 23

"I keep seeing the whole thing over and over again in my head; it is as if the hijackers have taken a part of me away." – Annemarie Mostert, hijack victim

By now car hijacking was back at the level it was before the A.A. began executing criminals. This was one of the crimes that South Africans feared most. You could be hijacked at any time, any place, usually when you least expected it. And often you wound up dead.

In Durban, hijackers hurled a brick through the window of a car near Spaghetti Junction, hitting a small girl on the head. The girl's mother managed to get away and drove to a hospital. But the child had already lapsed into a coma and died a week later.

In a ghoulish twist to roadside crime, looters, instead of helping accident victims, routinely stripped them of their clothes, shoes and valuables, leaving them to die.

At about this time I noticed letters in newspapers expressing serious concern at the rising crime rate. The majority of writers said that although they didn't support vigilantism, the reality was that crime had risen dramatically since the A.A. had stopped executing criminals.

Chapter 24

"Alma Dione praecipitte nostrum est, quod pudet, inquit, opus." (What you blush to tell is the most important part of the whole matter.) – Ovid

I'd been carrying Angel's card around in my pocket for more than a week, occasionally taking it out, examining it, and then dropping it back. And because I was dubious about going to the Tenderloin Club, I'd been putting it off. I suspect, however, that most men would be willing to go to hell and back if it were the only way they could restore their manhood. So finally, late one afternoon, I screwed up enough courage and set off for the TLC.

I didn't know what to expect, never having been inside a brothel before. My only impression of such establishments was what I'd seen in movies.

The Tenderloin was in a double-storey building near the Shell garage on Main Road, Melville. Other tenants included a steak house and a gymnasium.

The Tenderloin was on the second floor up a steep flight of stairs. On reaching the top I hesitated for a few moments, then pressed the buzzer. A few seconds later a peep-hole opened and a woman's voice piped through, 'Can I help you?'

'Lana Lindstrom sent me,' I replied, sliding Angel's card through the peep-hole. I felt like a character in a classic movie set in the American Prohibition era. But as I was wearing my yarmulke in case the air conditioning was cold, I couldn't very well pull the brim over my eyes like Humphrey Bogart!

'Oh, *Olly,'* the voice said in a familiar tone. 'We've been expecting you.'

The door was opened by a plump fortyish woman with an elaborately piled bouffant hairstyle, whom I took to be the receptionist. 'Angel's not here at the moment,' the woman went on. 'But she said that when you arrived I should give her a call. She should be here in about half an hour.'

The receptionist nodded towards two ample red leather sofas on which three or four girls, reminiscent of old calendar pinups, were reclining. 'Make yourself at home, Olly,' she said with a smile. 'The name's Rentia.' She gave me a quick peck on the cheek, then returned to the reception desk.

A busty redhead gave me an appraising look. ‘Hi Handsome,’ she called out, giving me a slow wink. ‘Want a bit of TLC?’

Suddenly I knew this wasn’t my scene, so I turned and began heading for the stairs. Just then a hearty voice rang out, ‘Hi, Olly! Lana told me you’d be paying us a visit.’

The voice belonged to Sarel Bothma, who was standing behind a long bar lined with liquor bottles of various colours, shapes and sizes. He was smiling broadly. ‘Hey, man, long time no see. Come and have a drink. It’s on me. But if you want to take a look around first, be my guest.’

I hesitated for a moment. Then deep down, at the level where every man’s self-image remains vulnerable to what can be euphemistically termed ‘his erectile functionality’, I made the decision to stay. As I stepped back inside, a beautiful blonde of about twenty three sidled up to me. ‘See you later Sweetie,’ she purred. ‘Remember, I’m Venus and I’m the best!’

I shot her an embarrassed smile and then strolled around the foyer nonchalantly trying to look at ease. The walls were hung with Tretchikoff prints – not the usual saccharine ones of a tearful child or a fallen orchid but of ample nudes: *Lenka*, *Resurrection*, *The Inspiration*, *Birth of Venus*, and, with a touch of irony, *Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery*.

The décor was late 1950’s to early 60s. About half a dozen old-style pinball machines stood against the walls. There was also a huge jukebox that seemed to be swelling with pride, but for the moment stood silent. Even the women on the sofas, a couple of whom had their heads together, whispering, looked as if they’d stepped out of that era: look-alikes of Doris Day, Marilyn Monroe, Lana Turner and Bettie Page … As I passed them, they looked up and smirked.

On the wall above the bar was a long banner proclaiming: ‘SENIOR CITIZENS MONTH’. Below it was a slogan: *‘IN THIS UPSIDE DOWN WORLD, LIFE BEGINS AT SIXTY NINE!’*

‘Good to see you, Olly,’ boomed Sarel, leaning across the bar counter and shaking my hand.

‘Good to see you too,’ I said flatly, easing myself onto one of the red leather barstools.

Sarel saw me glancing at the Senior Citizens’ Month banner. ‘Ja, well, we have that every year. A lot of the old toppies have had deprived second childhoods, so we give them a bit of a discount!’

I managed a grin.

‘Now what about that drink?’

I thought I might need some Dutch courage to handle what was coming. ‘Make it a double T’nT.’

Sarel poured the tequila with a flourish and slowly added the tonic. He poured himself a Windhoek Light. We clinked glasses.

‘Welcome to the Tenderloin, Olly. I hope things work out for you. Angel’s a great girl. She doesn’t come here all that often – only by appointment for surrogate therapy. When Lana phoned and told me you’d be seeing Angel I guessed your problem.’

‘Okay,’ I murmured, taking a swig of my drink.

Just then the buzzer sounded. Rentia went to the door and let two clients in. One was an elderly man in a faded double-breasted suit, who looked like a church sidesman; the other, nerdy and middle-aged, perhaps a maths teacher at a cram college. They drifted to the other end of the bar.

Two girls got up and joined them.

Sarel excused himself and went over to serve the men. A couple of minutes later he was back.

‘The girls are busy now, but remind me to introduce you later. The girl with the ponytail is Venus; the one with the blonde wig and gold tooth is Aphrodite. Of course, those aren’t their real names, but we like to give our girls classical *noms d’amour*.’

‘So do you enjoy running the Tenderloin, Sarel?’

‘Well, I’m gathering first-hand information for my doctoral thesis on prostitution in South Africa, which hopefully, will influence opinion in favour of decriminalisation. So that’s an interesting challenge, but I wouldn’t necessarily call it enjoyable, though sometimes there are some funny moments.’

‘What about house rules?’

‘Yes, we do have rules. Firstly, no girl need accept a client she doesn’t want to go with; also clients must pay upfront (we split the fee forty-sixty. Forty per cent to the house; sixty to the girl); and of course, the girls must shower first – not afterwards like Jacob Zuma! – and they must brush and floss their teeth; they must always use a condom; and we don’t allow drugs.’

The buzzer sounded. Rentia put her eye to the peephole and gave Sarel a nod.

‘She’s saying Angel’s arrived.’

A stunning young blonde woman stood at the door and glanced around

the bar. Unlike the other girls who were in 50's gear, she had a modern short hairstyle and was wearing a loose-fitting red top and matching pants, with strategically placed zips down the front.

She moved towards us with the graceful ease and self-assurance of someone who's confident in what she's doing.

'Hi, I'm Angel,' she announced before Sarel could introduce us.

'Olly,' I said laconically.

'Pleased to meet you,' she said, giving me an encouraging smile. She said a few words to Sarel and then turned back to me. 'Lana e-mailed me a summary of your case, Olly, so I'm already up to speed.' She flashed me another smile. 'I'm ready if you are...'

'What about payment?' I said.

'Lana has already arranged that. She'll just debit your account.'

Someone had put some coins in the jukebox, which was now playing Elvis's *Love Me Tender*. I'd heard it many times as a teenager. It was part of my father's record collection.

Angel steered me through a door at the end of the bar and along a passage past the toilets. Several metres further on, the passage made a turn to the right. Here there was a tangy smell with a hint of bleach.

On the left there were three shower cubicles, and a little further down on the right were four or five closed doors. On the nearest one the name "Venus" was etched in gold lettering. 'We both need to take a shower,' Angel said, opening a wall cupboard. She handed me a small sports bag containing a towel, a robe and toiletries, and took another bag herself from a locker nearby. 'If you finish before me, Olly, it's the second door on the right. Just go in and make yourself comfortable.'

'Okay.'

I had a quick shower and went through to the door Angel had indicated. Concealed lighting infused the room with a soft rosy glow. An enormous king-size bed with black satin sheets – hugely out of proportion to the size of the room itself – took up most of the floor space. Several large panelled mirrors were fixed to the ceiling.

I heard the door open behind me. Angel was standing there, poised and relaxed. She was dressed in a cream kimono and exuded a warm glow. She advanced slowly towards me and undid my robe, allowing it to drop to the floor. Putting one arm around me, she drew me closer so her chin was resting on my bare shoulder. 'You can undress me now if you like, Olly.'

I slipped off her kimono, tossing it on top of my robe. She had nothing underneath except black lace panties and fishnet stockings.

She turned around once slowly. She had a beautiful body, with well-formed breasts that rose upwards, seeming to challenge the world.

She balanced nimbly on one leg as she slipped off her panties. Then she took me by the hand and we both sat on the edge of the bed. 'You can take these off now,' she said, wiggling her fishnet-encased toes. After I'd eased off her stockings, I noticed she had neat, white-edged French toenails.

She put a towel on the bed and took a bottle of aromatherapy oil from the locker. 'Lie on your back please, Olly,' she intoned. 'I need to test your responses to various levels of stimulation.' She began by massaging my chest with the oil, which had a wild, musky fragrance, working her way slowly downwards. Her fingers moved expertly over my body, lingering between my legs, gently kneading me. Nothing stirred. After about ten minutes she crawled down the bed on her elbows and took me in her mouth. After some minutes I had a semi hard-on. But almost as soon as she stopped, I went limp. Maybe I'd drunk too much tequila, or perhaps it was the culture shock.

'Not to worry,' Angel said, stroking my chest. 'No big deal. There's something else we can try.'

She reached into the locker and produced a transparent plastic tube, about thirty centimetres long and two-and-half fingers wide. A thin flexible pipe led from the closed end to a small battery-driven electric pump. A stout rubber ring was stretched around the tube a little way up from the open end.

'What's that?' I asked.

'It's a penis pump. It should help you get an erection. Just lie back and relax, Olly. Just make sure you don't move.'

She slipped the open end of the tube over my penis and pressed the cushioned rubber seal against my pubic area. As she activated the pump, it began sucking air out of the tube.

'That looks pretty healthy,' Angel pronounced encouragingly. 'I'll let the pump run a little longer just to be sure. Then all I need to do is slide the cock ring down around the base of your penis, and *Voila!* – you'll have a respectable erection.'

Just then I saw a shimmer behind my eyelids, followed by dull outlines. As Stocky and Tall had failed to appear during Lana's last therapy session, I'd thought I was finally rid of them. But here they were again, right on cue, grimacing menacingly!

I shifted suddenly in panic.

‘Don’t move!’ cried Angel.

Too late! There was a sudden slurp, sucking me inside, followed by an excruciating pain.

‘Oh my God, I’m so sorry!’ Angel gasped, quickly releasing the pressure valve. My compressed genitalia collapsed down the tube like a deflating balloon.

She removed the penis pump and put it on top of the locker. Then she leaned over and stroked my hair. ‘I think that’s all for today, Olly.’

‘Okay,’ I said, miserably.

‘Next time I want you to take something like Viagra or Erectin.’

‘Right…’ I said uncertainly, recalling Lana’s sceptical remarks about Viagra.

‘I know medication alone isn’t the answer, Olly, but you need to at least achieve an erection before we can take things further. Also, at some point I want you to go with one or two of the other girls. You may find just the right chemistry that works for you.’

Chapter 25

That evening I was feeling rather down after my failed encounter with Angel. But I knew I had to be patient and that I would probably need a lot more therapy with Lana. Despite this, the thought of having to admit my failure to her was somewhat disconcerting.

Sometime during the night I got up to go to the bathroom, but perhaps I was dreaming.

In the passage, to my horror, Stocky was waiting for me. He flashes me an evil grin and then brandishes his knife. There's nowhere to run except downstairs. I bound down the stairs, three at a time, but I trip on the last one, falling flat on my face. When I stand up I find myself before the mysterious door with the Cupid-shaped brass knocker. The door opens on its own. I hear Stocky pounding down the stairs. I enter, and the door closes quickly behind me.

I'm in a large, dimly-lit room furnished in the late Victorian style, with heavy wall drapes, three leather settees and dark, polished antiques, including a very tall grandfather clock. There's a half-open door on the far side, through which I can hear the sound of water splashing.

I peep through.

A beautiful blonde is leaning forward in an enamel claw-footed bath, filled almost to the brim with pink soap bubbles. I do a double take. Through the steam wafting up from the bath I recognise Alice. She is scrubbing her back with a long-handled brush. Turning towards me with a smile, she says archly, 'What took you so long…?'

As she stands up, the bubbles slide off her, revealing plump well-formed breasts. I stand there open mouthed.

She steps out of the bath and moves towards me. Then she whips off the towel and wraps it around us both, drawing me to her. I can feel her wet body pressing against me. My pyjamas seem to magically dissolve…

The grandfather clock suddenly begins to strike. On the third stroke I find myself back in my bed. I awake feeling rested and a lot more positive. My pyjamas are damp in front.

Chapter 26

"Every task in the public service needs a concept document. Public servants spend months writing these documents or sometimes the drafting of the concept document is outsourced. Then they spend months having workshops consulting each other about it. Then they spend months integrating the comments arising from the workshops. Then they spend a few months more obtaining approval for the concept document … By then the accounting officer or the political principal has been changed – and the new person scraps the work of the former – and the cycle starts again." – Gladys Malapane, Diepkloof, *Business Report.*

Drew had asked Alistair L'Estrange to arrange a special meeting of VOICE for this Saturday morning. He had something important to tell us.

It was a warm, clear summer's day and when I arrived at Alistair's house, the dachshund was lazing on the veranda, snoring. It opened its eyes and wagged its tail perfunctorily, then closed them again and gave a long throaty sigh.

After our inner circle had gathered in the lounge and we'd helped ourselves to tea and biscuits, Drew scanned his notes and began to address us. 'As you all know, VOICE has created a remarkably effective DIY society. We pay security companies to protect us; we also have our own neighbourhood patrols; our own power generators, our boreholes and our water tanks, and when the street lights don't function, we switch on our halogen lights. And these days we take our rubbish to the dump, or we pay someone to do it for us. Then, of course, we have FOTL to direct traffic and FOWL to repaint street signs, and we have FOE to sort out the endless problems with the metro councils.

'These are all duties that should be performed by local or national government and for which, until recently, we paid rates and taxes. But in doing these things ourselves, we have, in effect, created a parallel government. In fact, the time will soon come, if it hasn't come already, when the elected government will be redundant.

'Also, the government itself has tacitly confirmed this by abandoning its

capacity to govern. As you know, it has failed to fill thousands of civil service posts for ideological reasons, posts that should be filled by officials qualified to do the job the government was elected to do. Moreover, many of the officials appointed to important positions have forged qualifications but still keep their jobs even when the fraud is discovered! The result is that South Africa has become a badly-managed banana republic, where nothing gets done – unless you do it yourself!'

'Quite right, Drew,' said Faan. 'These government politicians do bugger all. Like shop window dummies, they're only for display purposes!'

A general murmur of agreement followed.

'As you all know,' Drew continued, 'parliamentarians and metro councillors are still paid the same princely salaries, whether they do their jobs or not. And clearly they're not! Which raises this question: if the government, as presently structured, stubbornly refuses to perform, shouldn't we insist on a new governmental structure?'

Alistair stifled a yawn. 'Meaning…?'

'Well, since VOICE is turning off the revenue stream of rates and taxes that fuel government, the state coffers will soon be empty. Then we will be effectively holding the power. As the old saying goes, "money talks", so we don't need to plead or demand anymore. In fact, very soon we'll be in a position to *tell* the government what to do.'

'What specifically?' asked Faan, cracking his knuckles.

'To reform – or resign.'

'You must be joking!' exclaimed Alistair.

'Not at all. But first let me give you some background information. Then I'll explain why the government will be forced to comply, whether it likes it or not.'

Alistair leaned forward, alert now. 'Okay, shoot.'

'What we're talking about is the future political system of the 21st century, not just in South Africa (actually we'll probably be among the last to adopt it), but in the rest of the world. You see, one person, one vote democracy has clearly failed.'

No one said a word.

Drew glanced over the top of his notes at us. 'Why, you may ask? Well, the answer is very simple. It's because modern democracy is incapable of demanding the kind of sacrifices necessary to safeguard the future of the planet.'

‘I’m not sure I follow you,’ said Goolam, sounding sceptical.

‘Well, as you know, voters only think about their immediate needs, and politicians only think about getting re-elected. That’s a five year time-frame, max. Therefore, under the present form of democracy and economic system it would be politically impossible to introduce the kind of long-term strategies needed to seriously reduce the consumption of scarce resources that will run out within about thirty years, never mind solving serious ecological problems such as pollution.

‘Modern democracy, therefore, is characterised on the one hand by electorates addicted to rampant consumption, and on the other by politicians who are unqualified to tackle the complex problems that, if left unsolved, will lead to a new Dark Age and possibly to humankind’s extinction. So one could say that the present political system carries within it the seeds of its own destruction.’

‘Maybe so,’ said Alistair. ‘But the idea of “one-person-one vote”, or universal suffrage, is now so deeply entrenched everywhere that no one seriously questions it. It has attained the status of a universal truth, if not a religion – at least in the West.’

‘More like a universal delusion,’ said Faan, dryly. ‘Common sense tells you that a system based on counting heads irrespective of what’s inside them is insane.’

‘That’s a bit of an exaggeration, perhaps,’ said Drew, grinning, ‘but basically I agree. We have to move beyond the idea that every person, just because he or she has reached the age of eighteen, is capable of making an informed choice about a political candidate – a candidate, who if elected, could well decide the fate of the country, or, indeed, the world!’

Faan was absent-mindedly inspecting a plucked nose hair. ‘If you’re looking for a definition of modern democracy,’ he said, ‘it’s the sovereignty of the unqualified.’

‘That says it all,’ said Jean.

‘Anyway, to illustrate the point about incompetence,’ said Faan, ‘would you allow someone who’d been *elected* to the position of brain surgeon, but hadn’t qualified for it, to operate on your brain?’

‘I think Faan has put his finger on the problem,’ said Lin Chang. ‘Politics today is concerned solely with image, not competency. It promotes photogenic and charismatic candidates who can charm the masses on TV and garner votes, rather than qualified ones who can actually do the job.’

‘Ironically,’ said Drew, ‘the true rulers of the world today are not so much the voters, or even the governments they elect, but the chairmen of financial institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, the OECD, issuing banks, and those Frankenstein monsters, transnational corporations. Some would also say the Council on Foreign Relations.

‘What is beyond dispute, however, is that these unelected elites make far-reaching decisions that impact on all our lives, often extremely negatively. But they’re in no way democrats. The only reason they go through the motions of supporting democracy is that they need materialistic electorates that can be bribed with promises of immediate benefits, as well as compliant politicians who won’t rock the globalist boat. This, of course, underlines the need for a political system that penalises unsustainable quick fixes and rewards foresight and wise planning.’

‘So how could that be achieved?’ asked Alistair, suddenly sounding interested.

‘Well, in the real world if you have more shares in a company, you have proportionately more voting power. It’s to do with greater commitment and the fact that you’ve got more to lose. And, of course, you usually have some degree of expertise. Now consider government as a giant company in which taxpayers are the shareholders. Why should a person who contributes millions in taxes have a vote that is equal only to that of someone who contributes little or nothing? For example, in South Africa there are twelve voters to each taxpayer. In other words, if you’re a taxpayer, a dozen people get to decide how the state is going to spend *your* money on *them!* Remember the old saying that fuelled the American War of Independence: “No taxation without representation”?’

‘Sure,’ said Alistair.

‘Well, there’s a corollary: “No representation without taxation”.’

‘Makes sense,’ said Alistair.

‘I think we’re on very dangerous ground here,’ objected Goolam. ‘During the apartheid era, and even before, Blacks were seriously disadvantaged. So after the liberation struggle, no black person would ever accept any form of qualified voting.’

‘Maybe not now. But some time in the future they’ll have no option. As I told Olly earlier, America and the West have decided, for various reasons, which I won’t go into now, to recolonise sub-Saharan Africa.’

‘You’re not serious?’ said Alistair.

‘I’m very serious. But perhaps “recolonise” is not quite the right word. They don’t want to start actual colonies in Africa again, they want to stabilise it – through occupation.’

‘Are you talking about South Africa too?’ asked Goolam.

‘Well, South Africa has always been regarded as a Western surrogate – that is, until the SPP was elected. If possible, the Western nations, especially the United States, would like to restore that relationship, but they realise that would be impossible under the present SPP government. Also, they believe that the SPP has seriously blotted its copy book by allowing South Africa to become a safe haven for terrorists, as well as a conduit for the funding of terrorist groups. So what the Americans and the Europeans are planning for this country is regime change.’

‘So are you saying,’ said Goolam, ‘that they want a compliant South Africa that they can co-opt, if not control, rather than one they can merely cooperate with, in their so-called war on terror?’

‘That’s about it,’ said Drew.

‘This regime change…’ put in Weddo. ‘How do they propose to achieve it?’

‘Well, they’ll give the SPP an under-the-counter ultimatum that will go something like this: “either accept a new political model that will restore order and stability and which will bring South Africa back into the Western fold, or face recolonisation like the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. If you fail to co-operate, we will organise mass corruption trials at which you, the SPP leadership, will face serious charges. We already have extensive dossiers on your links with international criminal syndicates”.’

‘And the Chinese … Won’t they challenge the U.S.?’ I asked.

‘At the moment the U.S. is much stronger militarily, so the Chinese may well grumble, but they won’t risk an open confrontation. Nevertheless, they regard South Africa as an important priority for their expanding influence. Ironically, what has slowed their expansion in this country up to now is crime. They refuse to allow their citizens to become sitting ducks.’

‘Tell us more about this proposed new voting system,’ said Alistair.

‘Well, it’s the brainchild of Professor Greg Matheson, a political scientist at the University of Chicago, who’s also the founder of the paleoconservative magazine, *The Incentivist.* He coined the term “Incentivism” because his system offers voters the incentive of increasing their voting power in proportion to their taxes paid to the state.

‘The system also stipulates that before politicians could stand for office, they would have to study and pass exams in subjects like political science, history, public administration, economics, law, logic, environmental studies, etcetera, as well as serving several years apprenticeship in the civil service, and they would also have to have a spotless moral conduct record. That, of course, would weed out most of the over-ambitious toadies who these days claw their way onto candidates’ lists.’

Chapter 27

"Our failure to make sure that people really were paid according to the good they did society means that the big bonuses will, now, go to those who can do the most harm." – Katherine Whitehorne, British columnist

Weddo shook his head slowly. 'I can foresee some serious problems with the proposed system, especially if voting power increased according to western materialistic values. For example, greedy speculators and corner-cutting businessmen who earn huge incomes and benefit only themselves would have much higher voting power than poorly paid teachers, nurses, social workers and policemen – people who benefit society the most. That's clearly unfair. To put it in perspective, imagine explaining our system of financial reward to an alien visitor from a distant star. First, you'd list the most important functions in society, such as teaching, nursing, policing, social work. And then you'd need to explain that these are paid the least because their members have little political muscle and seldom strike – except in South Africa.'

'I agree,' said Drew. 'In fact, the Paleoconservatives foresaw this problem and proposed what they called a "Transvaluation of Values" as an essential prerequisite for the system. It is an application of Nietzsche's philosophical concept of that name to the value a society places on various professions and occupations. So we have to change the decisive factor from a quantitative one to a qualitative one, which means changing the very foundation of the present political system.'

'In other words,' said Lin Chang 'isn't this Transvaluation of Values a sort of practical Rectification of Terms – the latter being concerned with the proper use of words, the former with proper occupational rewards?'

'Exactly,' said Drew, rubbing his hands together enthusiastically. 'But obviously in any society you get paid according to the value that that particular society places on your services. So if you live in a short-sighted, materialistic and morally debased society, like the modern West, which richly rewards services that provide instant gratification and the indulgence of the

senses, like pornography and pop singing, but neglects those that are essential to its future health, like the ones Weddo mentioned, then that society puts itself at long-term risk.'

'Not so long-term,' I put in. 'I reckon the West is going down the tubes pretty fast. I mean, there's a whole generation of youngsters now who are born bankrupt because their parents and grandparents demanded unsustainable salaries and benefits, as well as politicians who spent trillions on no-win wars, and as a result mortgaged this generation's future. For example, allowing an educational system where student loans are almost impossible to repay. So sooner or later this generation will revolt and demand a better political system.'

Lin Chang put his hand up like a polite pupil. 'Perhaps one could say that the values of a society – its *soul*, so to speak – can be gauged by how it rewards various professions and occupations. If it pays poorly those that really benefit society, but allows the money-grubbing parasites to thrive, then it has lost its soul.'

'You mean it's committing slow suicide,' said Goolam.

'Exactly,' said Lin Chang.

'I'll second that,' said Drew. 'But, as I said, the Paleoconservatives seek to correct these gross imbalances by urging a re-evaluation of the nurturing professions so that they are properly rewarded. At the same time they propose a downgrading of those occupations that add little or no value to society, or actually harm it, like derivatives trading, which causes bank failures and ruins the world economy. Failure to curb the latter, they concede, would mean that the Incentivist voting system could become an instrument of a new tyranny of the rich and greedy. So a Transvaluation of Values is a vitally essential prerequisite for the system to work equitably.'

'Isn't the idea of a Transvaluation of Values a bit too idealistic,' said Alistair, 'given how deeply entrenched materialism and instant gratification are in American culture, as well as in Western culture generally?'

'In the short term, yes, but in the long-term when resources start running out, probably not.'

'So how would this apply to South Africa?' I asked.

'Well, unfortunately, somewhere along the line the Washington Insiders and the CIA Politicals picked up on the Incentivist idea and decided to hijack it, believing it could be adapted – *distorted* is the right word – to become a tool for achieving regime change.'

‘You mean like the Communists hijacked and distorted socialism?’ put in Alistair.

‘Exactly. In fact, what they propose to do is to simply eliminate the Transvaluation of Values altogether from the Incentivist equation. Their first priority is to use this gutted and distorted form of Incentivism for regime change abroad.’

‘That’s scary,’ said Goolam. ‘I mean, if it’s applied to South Africa.’

‘Sometimes one needs to choose between the lesser of two evils,’ said Drew. ‘I believe that Incentivism, even in a distorted form, would be a better choice for South Africa than the present crazy socialist system that is plunging the country into chaos and corruption from which it may never recover. At least it would give us more time to set things right.’

‘And this system, would it apply only to South Africa?’ I asked. ‘What about America itself?’

‘Well, like America’s nuclear non-proliferation controls, it’s only for export – at least at this stage. Imposing it abroad first is in the nature of a trial run for the Insiders.’

‘Just one more example of American hypocrisy,’ muttered Goolam.

‘Sure. But my belief is that sooner or later logic will demand the implementation of true Incentivism everywhere in the West, including the United States.’

Chapter 28

After the penis pump fiasco at the Tenderloin, I'd been putting off going for more sex therapy. But about two weeks later, Lana called me, saying continuity was important and I shouldn't leave it too long between appointments. I said things were pretty hectic at the moment, but I'd phone and make an appointment as soon as I saw a gap.

Since so much had been happening, I hadn't got around to reading Erin's diary or attending a divorce recovery workshop, as Gerda had suggested. However, after Lana rang off I phoned Dr Bligh's office and managed to book a place at the *Recovery from Divorce and Relationship Rehab* workshop he was holding at a Magaliesberg resort over the weekend.

That evening I decided to read the rest of the diary, so I took it down to the lounge and lay back on a comfortable sofa. Chloe lay at my feet.

Although the divorce was now water under the bridge, I felt that if I couldn't make sense of Kristy's tragic accident, I should at least try and make sense of why my marriage had failed, as both Gerda and Lana had suggested. Then perhaps I'd find a new direction.

However, the loss of Kristy had somehow intensified the loss of Erin. Kristy's loss remained unbearable, but at the same time my feelings for Erin were tender and sad. It was another kind of loss – and another kind of love.

I began mulling over what I'd read so far. I'd been shocked to learn that Erin had been treated for a pre-cancerous lesion, after which she felt a compulsion to start a new life, *but without me*. It was obvious to her that the marriage was in serious trouble.

As I read further, I found that in the time that had elapsed since I'd last read the diary, my emotions had cooled and I could be a lot more objective.

'Olly is overwhelmed by negativity and, since the hijacking, he sees only the gloomy side of things. Sometimes I feel something is missing in Olly, but I can't put my finger on it. I only know that he can't give all of himself to me. Maybe it was like that from the beginning. I don't know. Perhaps that's why I found the relationship ultimately unsatisfying. But I only started admitting this to myself recently…

‘Meanwhile, I feel I’ve reached a crossroad in my life, and although the Robert Frost poem, The Road Not Taken, *suggests a new path, I’m still not sure what to do. I mean, I’ve been married for nearly eighteen years, I have three lovely children, and I have a nice home. Putting all that at risk is a frightening prospect. Yet it’s as if a barrier has gone up between Olly and me, a barrier I can’t fully understand. There are so many unspoken things between us. It’s as if we’ve drunk some lethal potion that has poisoned the relationship. Of course, as is often the case in many troubled relationships, sex is a major problem. Even months after the hijacking, when I thought Olly was over it, and I tried to initiate intimacy, I could see the fear in his eyes. And more often than not he couldn’t do it. But when he could, he would soon begin losing it. I realised then that the magic had gone. Sex had become an ordeal – for both of us. Now I seldom bother. Sadly, I have come to learn that two people can sleep in the same bed and still be alone…’*

The next few entries dealt with various appointments, the Harpies after-school activities and meeting friends for coffee. I skipped ahead until I saw an entry that caught my eye.

‘…I realise now that Olly is a very different person to the person he once was, especially since the hijacking. I know he must have suffered trauma, but other people I know who’ve had similar experiences usually bounce back after a couple of months. Now, a year later, he’s still morose and remote.

I think that every woman feels in her heart that if her husband doesn’t satisfy her, she has the right to look elsewhere. So I didn’t feel guilty – at least not at first – when I started seeing Alec. He may be a bit of a rough diamond but that’s part of his attraction. By that I don’t mean he’s not well-groomed. He’s always impeccably turned out in a manly sort of way.

Erin’s mention of how I had changed since the hijacking now made more sense. It suddenly dawned on me that there’d been a lot more wrong with the marriage than Erin’s infatuation with Alec Sudman, which now seemed only secondary. The proximate cause was the assault by Stocky and Tall which had robbed me of my manhood, causing my fear of intimacy, and plunging me into major depression, all of which had poisoned the relationship.

‘…Alec has joined the fantasy fiction writing class I attend on Mondays,

so we see each other much more often these days. Actually, I was a bit surprised, as I didn't think he was the literary type. Many of those in the class are – how shall I put it? – 'cool people who hang loose'. They've quickly picked up on the fact that Alec is involved with me and say openly that we 'make a nice couple', which I'm sure we do….

There were several pages in the same vein, which I found painful to read, so I leafed ahead.

'Things have got to the stage now where I have to admit to myself that I'm leading a double life. Outwardly I seem to be coping, but sometimes I have off-days when I'm full of doubt. I can feel the pressures building up, trying to act as if everything is normal when it isn't. For the first time I'm beginning to feel guilty. But I've noticed a strange thing. The more guilty I feel, the more my indifference to Olly grows. Actually, it's more than indifference these days, it's actual dislike – dislike for his sad unsmiling face, his remoteness, his turning in on himself.

Anyway, for a long time now it's been clear to me that we've come to the end of our happy times together. Olly no longer touches my soul. And it's too late to try and go back to the way it was. So I realise I have to work up the courage to leave him…'

Although Erin and I had been divorced for more than eighteen months, I felt a chill in my stomach as I read those words. If only Erin and I had communicated better perhaps all this wouldn't have happened. I'm not making excuses, but I realise now that since the hijacking, I'd been in a state of emotional numbness. Erin, for her part, as I may have already said, seldom shared her feelings. Not even her hopes and dreams. The only window into her soul was through her diary.

It was almost a year since I'd heard from Imogen, which was a long time even by her lax standards, so I began to be concerned. She hadn't given me her U.K. telephone number or e-mail (she was e-mail-phobic, as I may have mentioned), only her physical address, so I made a mental note to send her a card. It was her birthday soon, anyway.

Chapter 29

The following day Faan phoned me and suggested we get together over the weekend for a couple of beers. I told him I couldn't make it, as I would be attending Dr Bligh's Divorce Recovery and Relationship Rehab workshop.

'Actually, I wouldn't mind coming along,' he said.

'What! Don't tell me your marriage is in trouble?'

'Not at all, but like cars, marriages need maintenance to keep running smoothly.'

'Well, maybe we should also invite Jean along. I gather she's having problems adapting since her operation.'

'Good idea,' agreed Faan.

I had no trouble arranging two extra bookings for the workshop, which was to be held at the Leisure Hills Retreat, a pleasant resort in the Magaliesberg.

Shortly after eight on Saturday morning, Faan picked me up in his Deke. Jean, who was in the front passenger seat, turned and gave me a broad smile, then leaned over the seat and gave my hand a squeeze. We were soon put-putting northwards along the R512 in the direction of the Hartbeespoort Dam. It was the same road along which Kristy and Charlize had been driven in the hijacked Mercedes before it plunged down an embankment and caught fire.

I said, 'Do you mind if we stop when we get to the place … you know?'

'Sure,' said Faan, 'I was about to say the same thing.'

When we reached the spot, Faan parked the Deke at the side of the road, and we all got out.

Below, the blackened, rusting shell of the burned-out Mercedes was still visible among some rocks and tangled weeds. We stood in silence in the bright sunlight for a couple of minutes.

I was the first to speak. 'Even after all this time I still can't believe…'

Faan placed a hand on my shoulder, patted it a few times, but said nothing. Jean slipped an arm around my waist. 'I loved her too,' she whispered.

After we'd returned to the car, Faan drove off in silence, continuing at a leisurely pace, never exceeding 100.

The road led around the western end of the dam and over Kommandonek, which brought us out on the northern side of the Magaliesberg, a rocky, thorn-tree dotted terrain, much warmer than the Highveld. We continued westwards, still on the R512, which ran parallel to the mountain range. About twenty minutes later we came to a signboard that announced: LEISURE HILLS RETREAT. We turned off to the left along a steep winding dirt track that led up to a boomed gate. A khaki-uniformed guard noted our registration number and directed us to the parking area.

The reception office was in a sprawling, green tin-roofed building, surrounded by several ancient bluegums. A pleasant middle-aged woman signed us in, gave us each a workshop timetable, and showed us to our rondavels, which were some distance away among some spreading thorn trees. Faan and I were given one rondavel to share, while Jean had one to herself.

As she left, the woman turned and smiled. ‘We’re all meeting in the lapa in about ten minutes for tea and coffee.’ She pointed between the trees. ‘It’s that thatched open-sided building over there. It’s also where the workshop is being held.’

As we joined the throng of about thirty people gathering at the lapa, a short well-built man with a sweep of greying hair greeted us at the entrance. He spoke with an American accent and was dressed in a loose-fitting Hawaiian shirt, baggy shorts, and chunky sandals. The name tag on his shirt said ROGER BLIGH.

‘Good morning!’ he began. ‘During our workshop I’m not going to give you the kind of pat answers that abound in self-help books. My approach is practical and preventive and is based on years of counselling people in troubled or terminal relationships.’

In summary these are the main points he made: Our disposable society was creating a culture of non-commitment which undermined marriage. Partners were treated like an old car that could be traded in or scrapped. This resulted in divorce replacing marriage as the norm. In this vacuum people were experimenting with new relationships, such as swinging and polyamory. Most relationship counsellors condemned swinging, but the jury was still out on polyamory. The negative effects of an affair should not be underestimated.

He then went on to give tips on how to detect if your partner is cheating. ‘The main sign is if she tries to keep you at arms length, giving seemingly plausible explanations which you need to decode. For example, “I need to

find myself" (I've found someone else); "I need some space." (I've found someone else); "Maybe we shouldn't see each other for a while." (I've found someone else); "I'm not good enough for you" (I've found someone else); "I've got a vaginal infection." (I've found someone else); There are many, *many* more, but you get the idea…'

Most of the audience found this amusing but some said in their experience there was a lot of truth in these jokey tips.

After he concluded his lecture, Roger Bligh said the next session at three o'clock would focus on the initial mistake many people made in their relationships, the one that sowed the seeds of divorce.'

Chapter 30

Faan decided to stay in the rondavel and read, while Jean and I felt like a swim. Instead of heading for the crowded swimming pool, we set off for some natural pools in a deep sandstone gully carved out by the stream that formed the western boundary of the resort. The path wound for a couple of kilometres among low rocky hills. But except for clumps of stunted proteas, there was little shade, and we were both sweating when we reached the pools.

Jean changed into a bright red bikini and quickly dived in. As she surfaced, she turned and began splashing me with the cool spring water. Catching her playful mood, I dived in and splashed her too.

‘Hey, this is much better than the swimming pool!’ she sang out. ‘And there’s no one else around.’

‘Right,’ I said. ‘As far as I remember, there’re some even better pools further up. I think I’ll go and explore.’

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘I just want to soak up a bit of sun first; then I’ll join you.’ She stretched out on a large flat rock, while I waded upstream through a series of smaller pools. About a hundred metres further on, I came to a deep, shaded pool, where the ochre cliffs closed in on either side. In the subdued light the deeper parts were a clear bluish green.

I dived in and swam upstream. A little distance further the long pool turned a corner, where it narrowed to about two metres. Now, only a faint ribbon of light filtered down through the overhanging bushes at the top of the gully cliff. At the far end of the pool a small waterfall hardly disturbed the surface. I turned over and floated on my back.

Suddenly I heard a splash. I raised my head and looked around, but couldn’t see anything. As I began relaxing again something tugged my big toe. Jean surfaced in front of me, laughing, her long blonde hair shedding water, her ample breasts cheekily exposed. She trod water for a few moments then paddled closer. Linking her hands behind my back, she drew me to her. I felt a warming against my chest, her hard nipples pressing. She inclined her head slightly and gazed up at me, her eyes searching. ‘Sometimes I wonder if we’ll ever heal… ’ she sighed, suddenly serious.

She let the words hang and we were silent for a while. My heart went out

to this beautiful yet damaged young woman and I sought words of comfort.

'It might sound like a cliché, Jean,' I finally said, 'but it's true: love really does heal all.' I'd meant this in a universal sense, but she must have thought I meant *us*. She pulled me closer and before I knew it her tongue was in my mouth, her hand gripping me through my costume.

The strong possibility of Stocky and Tall reappearing sent a chill through me, so I thought I'd better cool things. 'Hold on a sec, Jean…' I managed to blurt out. 'I'm still in therapy. You know, for the pain I told you about.'

'You still seeing Gerda?' she asked, relaxing her hold, a note of disappointment in her voice.

'I see her every couple of months or so for an out-patient evaluation, but I'm also seeing Lana Lindstrom. She mainly treats women rape victims like Helena.'

'That was after Helena didn't respond to normal therapy?'

'Right. Anyway, it apparently worked for her. You see, Lana is a … a sex therapist.'

'Ok*aaay…!'* Jean exclaimed, her eyes widening. Then she squeezed my hand. 'Come down with me now,' she giggled. 'I want to show you something.'

She disappeared underwater. When she hadn't surfaced after about twenty seconds, I stuck my head under and opened my eyes. The water was crystal clear, but there was no sign of her. I swam to the upper end of the pool near the waterfall and called out to her, thinking she might have climbed out there while my back was turned.

Still no sign of her.

Then I swam back along the narrow pool to where it turned the corner. I called her name again. No answer. I heard faint voices some distance away – but they were too far off for one to be Jean's. Then at the far end of the larger pool I noticed something red tied to an overhanging branch. I put my head underwater again and looked downstream. Jean was swimming towards me along the bottom of the pool, her long blonde hair trailing behind her like a swathe of seaweed heaving in the tide. There was something incredibly sexy about it, especially as she was naked.

She surfaced in front of me, inches from my face, water running off her hair. Then she put her arms around me and pulled me close, her chin nuzzling my shoulder. She didn't say a word, but held me like this for more than a minute. I could feel the warmth of her body through the chill water, her

smooth skin pressed against my chest. Suddenly she dived down again and before I knew it she'd eased my costume down and took me in her mouth.

Just then I heard voices again, but this time much closer. I reached down and gently drew her up. Almost immediately she scissored her legs around my waist and linked her hands behind my head. Then she kissed me passionately. 'I can hear people coming,' I managed to blurt out of the corner of my mouth.

'Pity, we were just getting started,' she said, sounding disappointed. She took my hand in hers and held on to it. 'You know, Olly,' she added, 'if we want to be really honest, we're just two damaged people groping in the dark. Maybe we should get together again sometime in a quiet place where we won't be disturbed…' She paused for a moment, giving my hand a squeeze. 'I mean, even Gerda says self-healing is the best form of therapy…'

Chapter 31

When we all met again at the lapa, people were milling around the lunch tables eating sandwiches. There were some egg and mayonnaise ones left, as well as a few ragged cheese and tomatoes. Jean and I were ravenous after our swim, so we piled our plates high before taking seats.

Roger Bligh's final presentation was mainly about the hidden pain of divorce, especially for children. He also spoke about what he called 'settle-for relationships', i.e. the ones lonely people often drift into just to be with someone. This was usually a prescription for disaster, as there was seldom an initial spark to sustain the relationship.

His advice was to be patient and wait for that special person who really ignites a spark, in other words a case of love at first sight. This person usually turned out to be your soul-mate. He concluded by saying that, because of no-fault divorce laws, marriage had become a temporary arrangement that either spouse could unilaterally terminate. Consequently no-fault divorce sent a signal that marriage itself was no longer significant.

'Well, what do we need to do to get things back on track?' he asked.

The main thing was to put the guard rails back on marriage. A lot of marriages, which would have stayed on the road and maybe bounced off the guard rails with a bit of counselling, had plunged over the cliff. So in his opinion divorce should be made more difficult, not easier, with appropriate cooling off periods, except in cases where there was physical or other forms of chronic abuse.

As he finished speaking, Roger Bligh leaned backwards and rubbed the small of his back with both hands. He grimaced before continuing. 'Well, as we near the end of this workshop we need to ask ourselves: can our society continue along this same path of failing relationships to the point where, on present trends, everyone will be divorced, and what we can do about it?

'I think from what I've said in this seminar the answer should be clear.'

A pause, then: 'Any questions?'

Faan put his hand up. 'I have a friend whose girlfriend was killed in what seemed to be a suspicious motor accident. He hired a private detective to check it out, but the investigation hasn't turned up any concrete leads. Now

more than eighteen months later, he's unable to move on. What do you advise?'

'Well, if there're still some unanswered questions, it would be best to try and answer them. Trying to let go when you're plagued by doubt is difficult. So I'd say continue with the investigation, maybe bring in another investigator, but set a time limit on it of, say, six months – a year at most. After that, if nothing turns up, then he needs to try and put it behind him. I know it's difficult, but clinging indefinitely to what may well be a false hope, puts recovery on hold.'

Chapter 32

The drive back to Johannesburg the following morning was uneventful except I did a lot of thinking, especially about Roger Bligh's answer to Faan's question.

Jean also said she'd decided to make an appointment with Lana for possible treatment. 'I haven't actually been physically raped,' she confided, 'only mentally, but it's just as bad.' She leaned over and whispered in my ear. 'Actually, I think you and I are on the right track to healing Olly…'

When I got home the phone was ringing. It was Drew. 'I've some important intel, Olly. Can we meet this evening?'

'Sure.'

We decided on the Ocean Basket behind the Rosebank Mall.

When I arrived at the restaurant, Drew was sitting at a table in a quiet corner. A waiter was hovering nearby.

We both ordered Nile perch. After the waiter had poured the wine, Drew looked at me over his glass. 'Some interesting news about the covert unit Mrs Eberhardt belongs to.' He took a sip of wine before continuing. 'In fact, Prometheus tells me that what he's onto is like touching a live wire!'

'Meaning?'

'Well, it seems the covert unit – the "Plausibly Deniables" that I told you about – is probably linked to the Special Group 5412, or rather its faceless successor.'

'You mean the outfit suspected of involvement in the Kennedy assassination?'

'Correct. And, as you can well imagine, these people don't play. No wonder James W. Douglass, author of perhaps the best book on the Kennedy assassination, calls them the "Unspeakable". The really scary part is that the trail apparently leads even higher…'

'How high?'

'Can't say yet. But what I can tell you is that Mrs E's unit is code-named "Force-X".'

'*For Sex?* That's a weird name. But considering her sexual preferences, maybe not.'

Drew sighed. ‘Not *For Sex*, Olly; Force *Ex*, as in “X marks the spot”.’

‘Oh, right ... any theories about it?’

‘My guess is that it’s a black ops project that’s gone horribly wrong. Trouble is the closer Prometheus gets the more life-threatening the security around the unit’s activities becomes. But he’s pressing on because as I think I mentioned a while ago, he’s convinced that Force-X is involved in something much, much bigger.’

‘So where does that leave us?’

‘Well, perhaps while we’re waiting for developments on Prometheus’s side, we should do more digging this end.’

‘Actually, I’ve told Simes to keep the case open, and he checks on the Spa fairly regularly.’

‘Maybe we need to step up the investigation.’

‘You don’t think Simes is up to it?’

‘I’m not saying that, Olly. By all means keep him on. What I’m saying is that someone with a fresh viewpoint and a different area of experience may see something Simes may have missed.’

‘Good idea,’ I said. ‘Anyone in mind?’

‘Sure. The guy who sorted out the Honda man. He’s pretty sharp.’

‘You want to put me in touch with him?’

‘No, no. I’ll make the arrangements. He likes to keep his contacts limited and he likes to remain anonymous where possible.’

‘That’s okay,’ I said. ‘But what should we call him?’

‘He calls himself a “Durable Solutions Officer” Drew replied with a knowing smile. But let’s call him “Mr Y”. And of course I’ll take care of the costs.’

‘You sure?’

‘My pleasure.’

The waiter appeared at our table with the salad. A few minutes later he brought two sizzling pans of Nile perch and chips.

Drew took a mouthful of fish, chewing it thoughtfully. ‘Pretty good, I must say.’

He turned and looked me in the eye. ‘About Project Phoenix, Olly … I think you should know that the U.S. has positive proof that the Phiri government has secretly imported fissionable material from China.’

I gave a low whistle.

‘It’s most probably enriched uranium rather than plutonium, though

plutonium can't be ruled out. Before, we only had suspicions about the SPP's intentions, based on circumstantial evidence. Now we know. The details are contained in the document in the file in the more secure code, which has finally been broken.'

'That's serious.'

'Sure, but hardly surprising. The Chinese don't care who they do business with, as long as they benefit, either financially or politically. They even sold enriched uranium to apartheid South Africa in 1981 to make a fast buck. Now the sales are in line with their Africa policy, which is to ensure that African countries become increasingly obligated to them.'

'You mean the fissionable material deal is being financed through Chinese credits?'

'Exactly. Not only that, Olly, but VOICE's tax strike is starting to bite, so the SPP will soon be short of cash, as funding from the Middle East hasn't come through yet. That creates more opportunities for China to increase its control.'

'So how do you think the U.S. will react?'

'Although the situation is fairly urgent, Washington won't do anything just yet. Timing is critical. They want the whole thing to develop to the point where the SPP government is so obviously in the wrong and would be perceived to be in the wrong internationally. Then only would they make a move. The strategy is this: give Phiri enough rope and he'll hang himself. You see, Olly, the U.S. wants a legitimate excuse to intervene in South Africa if necessary. Project Phoenix provides the perfect pretext.'

Chapter 33

When I got home Chloe dashed down the passage to greet me. She wore a guilty grin and wagged her tail a little too enthusiastically. I soon discovered why: the couch was warm and covered with dog hair.

As I opened my mouth to scold her, the Harpies walked in. They'd been to a teenage party and were dressed to shock. And I'm not talking about outlandish gear. That was bad enough. I'm talking about 'Pube Peepers'.

This was the latest teenage fashion craze imported from America (where else?), and had started by accident. It was also the logical result of female midriffs creeping inexorably lower. Finally, a teenage girl, while strolling through a shopping mall in one of America's more conservative Mid West states, had exposed a narrow moustache of dark pubic hair nudging over her ultra low-slung jeans, probably unintentionally. A concerned Christian woman had complained to the police, who arrested the girl on charges of indecent exposure. Hearing of her plight and sensing the circulation-boosting publicity, the teen magazine, *Teen Street*, hired a top lawyer to defend her. He pointed out to the court that only a few years prior to the bikini becoming acceptable, an exposed navel would have meant similar charges. One had to move with the times, he argued. The judge rejected this argument and the case went on appeal.

In the meantime, a Republican senator, under pressure from the fundamentalist Christian lobby, proposed the Indecent Exposure Amendment Bill, which would make it illegal to wear, in public, clothing that 'exposes undergarments or any portion of the pubic hair, cleft of the buttocks, or genitalia.'

Meanwhile, teenage girls across America, in a kind of junior 'Slut Walk' protest, began exposing their nether hair in solidarity. The more parents and the various 'guardians of morality' cried *'indecent!'* and *'outrageous!'* the more teenagers defied them. From there the Pube Peeper phenomenon caught on.

In order to cash in on the craze, *Peepers Inc*, an enterprising wigmaker, had begun manufacturing artificial Peepers, which were initially coloured blonde, auburn or brown. Impossible to tell from the real thing, they became

an immediate hit, especially among follically-challenged pre-teens striving to look older.

Not to be outdone, *Muff Ruff International*, another enterprising manufacturer, offered synthetic nether hair in a range of colours indicating sexual preferences and degrees of availability: blonde (I'm just out for fun); black or brown (I'm currently attached); green (I'm a romantic and want to be wooed); orange (Let's play it by ear); red (I'm hot and ready); blue (I need cheering up); pink (I'm gay); two-tone pink (I'm bi).

Inevitably, teens began dyeing their own pubic hair and exposing that. Since only a sharp tug could reveal which was real and which wasn't, policing became impractical. At this point, Pube Peepers became semi-legitimised, and, *voila*, a new icon of American culture was born!

'Don't you think you should cover up?' I ventured, as the Harpies strolled down the passage, sporting blonde Pube Peepers over black silver-studded jeans.

'Don't be silly, Dad,' retorted Bonny. 'All it means is that we want a bit of fun. In any case it's pretty mild compared to the Durban July, with body-painted ladies in the buff.'

Chapter 34

As more and more people were hijacked in their driveways, groups of concerned residents began applying to the Metro Council for approval of enclosed suburbs, or parts of suburbs, as the most effective way of keeping out crime.

VOICE supported the closures, arguing that the government should subsidise their costs, or at least grant a tax rebate, since it was the government's duty to provide effective policing, which it clearly wasn't.

Meanwhile, the Council introduced ever more stringent requirements for the approval of enclosures, claiming they were 'apartheid enclaves.'

Nothing dramatic had been happening at AIR for a while, only a slow, steady decline in organisation and controls. There were still no agreed job descriptions, no probationary service periods, no performance assessments or merit ratings, no standard operating procedures. Somewhat surprisingly there'd been no noticeable decline in the standard of the broadcasts themselves. This was probably due to the professionalism of a small core of staff who would continue to give of their best no matter what.

Meanwhile, the resign-and-reapply dispute had become bogged down and had eventually been referred to the Council for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration. But the CCMA itself was plagued by internal disputes, with charges of financial mismanagement levelled against its director, and staff threatening industrial action.

Despite the SPP's tightening grip on all parastatals, AIR still had a degree of independence, thanks mainly to Hannes and reporters like Sipho Khumalo and Jenny Baumann (who had now left AIR and was working at a radio station in Sydney).

It was around this time that I sensed that things were going badly wrong for Hannes, who'd become the target of a vicious campaign of sniping and rumour-mongering. There were constant mutterings among SPP-aligned staff about a 'settler' being in charge, even though he was only Deputy Executive Editor, an acting manager. No matter how reasonable or diplomatic Hannes

was at staff meetings, a small group of SPP-aligned malcontents set out to undermine him, challenging anything and everything he proposed. When Tata Zondi returned from her most recent bout of sick leave, she countermanded Hannes's multi-skilling project as a result of pressure from SABWU unionists, who claimed that multi-skilling was 'a management manoeuvre to exploit the workers.'

The same group of malcontents drew up a petition, accusing Hannes of bad management, claiming he favoured the old ANC appointees and had failed to exercise proper control over equipment.

Most staff knew the charges were completely false and that the only reason why some ANC appointees had been given more challenging assignments was that they were more experienced. Moreover, the petition was in such poor English, with spelling and grammatical errors, that in any media organisation where professional journalistic standards applied, the drafters would have been summarily fired for incompetence!

Their next move was to call for disciplinary proceedings against Hannes.

When he arrived at work on Monday, his access card wouldn't swipe. 'There must be some mistake,' he told the security official.

The man dialled a number, nodded, and then turned to Hannes. 'There's no mistake, Sir. My instructions are not to allow you into the building.'

Later that day Tata Zondi announced (I sensed somewhat reluctantly) that, in consultation with the Governing Board and Human Resources, Hannes Botha had been suspended from duty, while all the allegations against him were being investigated.

Chapter 35

"The anima or animus is the archetype through which you communicate with the collective unconscious generally, and it is important to get into touch with it. It is also the archetype that is responsible for much of our love life: We are, as an ancient Greek myth suggests, always looking for our other half, the half that the Gods took from us, in members of the opposite sex. When we fall in love at first sight, then we have found someone that 'fills' our anima or animus archetype particularly well!" – Dr C. George Boeree, Professor Emeritus Psychology Department, Shippensburg University

On Saturday afternoon I had an appointment with Lana Lindstrom and I was looking forward to it. After a session with her I always felt good, despite her stressful manipulations.

I arrived a little early.

As usual, the massage cubicle was softly lit and comfortably warm. A stick of incense was burning in a small brass Indian bowl, giving off a sweet and welcoming fragrance. Lana, who was dressed in a loose-fitting white wrap of almost transparent material, gave me a close hug and a lingering kiss on the lips. Then she stood back, arms extended, hands on my shoulders, and looked into my eyes. 'Now tell me about your visit to the Tenderloin, Olly. And remember it's important not to leave anything out.'

With a growing feeling of embarrassment I trotted out the details of my failed encounter with Angel.

'I wouldn't worry about it too much,' she assured me, letting her hands drop. 'When you're recovering from a serious trauma like yours, it's often a case of two steps forward and one step backwards. But that's still progress.'

'S-so do I need to visit the Tenderloin again?' I stammered, hoping the answer would be no.

'I think it's very important that you see Angel regularly or even one of the other girls if you prefer. I know you're not happy about it, Olly, but it's really the only practical way of independently monitoring your progress.'

'Okay,' I sighed. Then I told her about Jean's suggestion of us getting

together for self-healing.

'Actually, that's not a bad idea. Self-healing for those who are motivated to do it properly nearly always has a good outcome.' She bent down and eased off her leather sandals. 'Now I'd like you to undress and lie on the plinth on your stomach, Olly.' Without a hint of embarrassment she unfastened her wrap and let it drop, revealing her lithe body.

She shot me a meaningful glance. 'By the way, Olly, we've got to the point in your therapy where we need to simulate actual sexual contact as closely as possible.'

'Okay…' I said vaguely, not knowing quite what to expect.

She poured some fragrant aromatherapy oil on my back, rubbing it around until it was evenly spread, and then doing the same to her front. Then she climbed onto the plinth and slid onto my back. 'You see, Olly,' she breathed into my ear, 'the idea is that you should feel a body bearing down on you in a pleasant, non-threatening way…'

I could feel her fulsome breasts pressing against my back and her pubic hair tickling my rump. 'We need to hold this position for at least half an hour while you get accustomed to it,' she said reassuringly. 'So there's plenty of time to talk ... Just lie still and relax.'

'Okay.'

I heard the snap of a rubber glove.

She paused for a moment and gave my thigh a slow squeeze. Then she slipped her hand behind me.

I held my breath, hoping that I'd finally overcome the mental intrusions of Stocky and Tall.

Lana left her finger motionless for about a minute, and then began working in slow strokes, as she'd done during our last session. Again I felt a pleasant inner ache and a heightening sense of arousal. She continued massaging me for about five minutes. But suddenly the images of the two hijackers flashed before my eyes. 'Oh, my God!' I cried out.

'You seeing the faces again?'

I felt a stab of pain. 'Mmmm,' I murmured.

'Now listen to me, Olly,' she said soothingly. 'Try and ignore them and focus only on what I'm doing.' She withdrew her finger slowly and began kissing my neck open-mouthed, her tongue trailing. At the same time she began moving rhythmically against me, sliding back and forth in the scented oil. 'How does that feel?' she asked in a low voice.

‘G-*great*…’ I gasped. The images of Stocky and Tall began to fade.

‘They’ve gone now,’ I said.

‘Well, I think that’s enough for the moment, Olly. There’s no big hurry. This kind of therapy takes time.’ Then leaning closer, she kissed me on the mouth. ‘Now tell me about the workshop.’

I gave her a brief summary, telling her what Roger Bligh had said about soul mates and settle-for relationships. Then I asked her if she believed in soul mates.

‘Sure,’ she purred, nuzzling me between my neck and shoulder. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Well, I once believed that Erin was my soul mate, but after our divorce I’m not so sure.’

‘One can never just dismiss a soul mate, Olly. One’s feelings are there forever. You see, one can love more than one person but in different ways.’

Then she gripped my shoulders and began sliding slowly against me as if we were making love. Her grip on my shoulders tightened and she nuzzled my ear. ‘By the way, your friend Jean has begun therapy with me. Obviously I can’t say too much, but I will say I find her an attractive and willing person.’

On an impulse I said, ‘Me too.’

Lana gave me a little hug. ‘I think we’re done for today, Olly.’

As I was dressing I noticed a white plastic basin on the louvered cabinet. Lying inside it was what looked like a purple snake made of silicone.

Lana saw me looking at it. ‘Actually, I was using that this morning on one of my women patients. I was about to sterilise it and put it away when you rang the doorbell.’

‘What is it?’

‘I call it an Amphisbaena, after the two-headed snake of Greek mythology. “Amphis” means both ways, and “baena” means to go. I use it in the final stage of rape recovery therapy. That’s why it’s called the A-Treatment.’

Chapter 36

"My polite, sensitive, funny, generous niece, a poet of great talent, was raped by an adolescent living in the bushes at Gillooly's Farm [near Johannesburg]*… He got off with a thrust, a knife and a smile and now she is on Ovril. AZT, 3TC. Who, I ask, who will make her whole again…?"* – Brenda Atkinson, *Mail & Guardian*

"[Rape] seems to cause the most psychological distress of all crimes. It appears to have the most pernicious effect. These effects are very intense in the first four to 12 weeks post-rape. Then it subsides, but even six years later victims still experience heightened fear and anxiety." – Sia Maw, psychologist, University of Cape Town.

"The family, as a family, have made a decision not to report the [rape] *incident to the police. They say that it will cause more problems, that other members of the family will be attacked by relatives of the perpetrators, that to do something about this will provoke worse violence."* – Carol Lazar reporting in the *The Star* on a black township teenager raped by three boys from a neighbouring family

"For months he paraded as a captain from the police's crime intelligence unit. Vusi Makhubela drove his Hummer fitted with blue lights. …But then it emerged that he was not a police officer. … Now the SAPS are appealing to the public to help find his accomplices, who are believed to be real policemen." – Report in the *Saturday Star*

I'd hit a somewhat routine patch, with not much happening. At AIR the deployment of SPP apparatchiks in senior posts continued and Hannes remained on what now seemed to be indefinite suspension. I'd phoned him a couple of times at home, and I could sense his morale was faltering.

With not a lot to do at work, my mind would sometimes wander and I'd think of Kristy. If only a modern Sherlock Holmes could unravel the

mysterious circumstances of her death, as Faan now believed. But I was not about to give up on her.

Meanwhile, I regularly attended meetings of FOWL. However, like most voluntary groups, some members had dropped out, while new ones had joined.

I was also having regular therapy with Lana, usually about every two weeks. At her suggestion I'd returned to the Tenderloin to monitor my progress. Although I took Viagra, as Angel had suggested, I was once more plagued by images of Stocky and Tall.

After my latest abortive encounter, Lana proposed something different during our next therapy session: 'Olly, I've been listening to the recording Gerda made during your hypnotherapy session when you recalled the repressed memory of your anal rape. (Note I'm not saying "assault" anymore. I'm calling what happened by its proper name!) And in case you don't know, anal rape is about the worst experience anyone – man or woman – can have: it invariably interferes with their ability to experience sex in a pleasurable way.'

I wasn't quite sure what she was getting at, but I nodded.

'Anyway, to continue … Because you were raped in a bluegum plantation where there was a strong smell of eucalyptus, we need to replicate that situation as nearly as possible during therapy – also the smell of marijuana, gin and peri-peri pilchards that you associate with your rapists.'

'Ah … right.' I said uncertainly.

'As I think Gerda explained to you, stimuli associated with your trauma, especially smells become embedded in the limbic part of your brain. That's also where strong emotions like fear and hate are triggered, as well love, as I said earlier. So we need to gradually create an association of those smells with pleasant sexual experiences, not traumatic ones. In that way we can hopefully banish your involuntary memories of the rapists.'

Over the past couple of weeks some particularly disturbing cases of rape were reported in the newspapers.

Case One: Two Johannesburg teenage sisters were awakened late at night when they heard a scraping noise above. At first they thought it was a rat in the ceiling, but unbeknown to them criminals had stealthily removed the roof tiles and lowered themselves onto the rafters above their bedroom. Suddenly

two men kicked through the ceiling and dropped onto their beds. The girls were held at knifepoint and brutally raped by both men.

Case Two: An 18-year old pregnant Roodepoort girl was walking home after a night out with her boyfriend when they were held up at gunpoint by three men. She was raped by all three. Her boyfriend was shot dead when he tried to save her.

Case Three: A pregnant Pretoria woman who was gang raped seven months before, became HIV positive and lost her baby. Her husband said their family had been destroyed by one vicious crime.

The Citizen pointed out that of the 54,000 reported rapes a year, 25% were gang rapes, sometimes with up to 15 rapists involved! However, only one in 36 of all rapes was reported. Of these, only 7% resulted in an arrest. And of that figure only 1% resulted in a conviction.

As crime increased, there was a worrying trend: more and more policemen in uniform were committing violent crimes themselves, including robbery and rape. Previously, it was criminals dressed as policemen who were the perpetrators.

Perhaps the most sickening example of police involvement in crime was the discovery that corrupt officials at the police Central Firearms registry were part of a syndicate granting firearms licences to criminals, including convicted drug dealers and others convicted of violent crimes. Hundreds, if not thousands of licences had been obtained in this way. Moreover, many guns that had been handed over to the police for destruction by those who couldn't get licences had been quietly sold off to criminals.

By now the SPP government had opted for what one economist called 'Mugabe economics' by simply printing more money. Inflation was now at around 80% and rising rapidly. Although President Phiri had introduced price controls on food and other essential commodities, this had led to many items disappearing from supermarket shelves. Despite the price controls, there were no controls on President Phiri's spending, especially on his pet projects. On the completion of a new SPP Party Headquarters in downtown Johannesburg (built at a cost of two billion rands), he spent a further twenty million on an inauguration party, to which several African heads-of-state were invited. The architectural theme was African, but the food and drinks were foreign: French champagne, Italian truffles, Canadian salmon, Russian caviar, Chinese bird-

nest soup, among others.

Chapter 37

I had an appointment for a dental check-up with the Dr Dangor, Dr Byat's partner, who'd been running the practice on his own since Dr Byat's disappearance.

A tall thin man with receding hair, Dr Dangor welcomed me warmly when he saw my kufi. He motioned me into the dentist's chair, and after reaching for a small dental mirror and a metal probe he peered into my mouth, poked around for about a minute, and then said, 'How's the bridge doing?'

'Okay, but I find it a bit of a bind to clean.'

'Well, why don't you have an implant?'

'An implant?' I felt my blood running cold.

'It's just like a real tooth. And you can floss it just like you floss your other teeth. It's really the procedure of choice.'

'So how long do implants last?'

'For life – if you get a good quality one.'

'Where are they made?' (I was stalling for time.)

'There's a local one; others are made in Germany, Sweden, and America.' Dr Dangor pulled a wry face and added, 'Though I must say I'm not too happy with the American ones.'

'Which are the best?'

'The Swedish, but they're a bit pricey.'

'Okay, let's go for the Swedish one,' I said on impulse.

'Fine. We'll have to take an impression first and then you need to come back for a couple more appointments.'

Dr Dangor and his assistant fiddled around in my mouth with some gooey stuff for a while. When they were finished, I asked, 'Any news of Dr Byat?'

Dr Dangor gave a long sigh and shook his head. 'Nothing definite. After he disappeared his wife hired a private detective to try and trace him. Some weeks later the detective was questioning some street children near Dr Byat's house. They said that one evening they saw a man fitting Dr Byat's description being bundled into a car by three white men. We believe he's another victim of the CIA's programme of extraordinary rendition.'

Chapter 38

There are certain events in one's life that one always remembers. This was one of them. It was some months later and I was relaxing in the bath when the phone rang. As I jumped out of the bath, shedding water, I knew it was Drew. But my powers of precognition hadn't developed enough for me to know what he was going to say. All I knew was that it was important.

His voice had an edge to it. 'Can we meet somewhere?' he began. 'On second thoughts Olly, let me pick you up in about twenty minutes if that's okay.'

'No problem.'

After Drew arrived we drove to the Rosebank Mall and parked on the less-used upper level.

'If you don't mind we'll stay in the car while we talk about the sensitive stuff,' he said.

For a long moment Drew stared out through the windscreen, drumming on the steering wheel with his fingers. At last he said, 'Let me first give you a quick update on Mr Y's surveillance operation before we get on to what I called you about. Unfortunately, there're no definite leads so far, though Mr Y is convinced that Mrs Eberhardt is up to something. But after all those years with the CIA, she's a real pro at covering her tracks.'

'I didn't expect the investigation to be easy. And I know these things take time.'

'Right.' Drew took a deep breath and swivelled round to face me. 'What I really wanted to tell you, Olly, is this: a nuclear device has been transported out of Pelindaba and no one knows where it is now.'

I gave a low whistle.

'Shocking, isn't it.' Drew thumped the steering wheel twice with the palms of his hands.

'Any more details?'

'Well, it was tracked for a while, but then suddenly the tracker lost the radioactive trace. Apparently the device is bigger than a Soviet suitcase nuke – about the size of a refrigerator. But as you may know, nuclear devices don't have to be big to devastate a city. The amount of plutonium necessary to

create a Nagasaki-type bomb fits inside a grapefruit. If it's enriched uranium, then it's slightly bigger – about the size of a basketball, so this one could be quite big.'

'That *is* bad news!

'Of course, what this means is that the team of scientists at Pelindaba – mainly Russians and Iranians – must have been much further ahead with Project Phoenix than was first thought. There were tons of radioactive scrap at Pelindaba left over from South Africa's decommissioned nuclear facilities, and this may well have been quietly processed and the fissionable material extracted, giving Project Phoenix a head start. The thinking in Washington, however, was that Phoenix would only have become operational after the money came through from President Phiri's Mid East backers. But it seems obvious now that it's payment on delivery.'

'Are you saying the Americans haven't a clue where the device is now?'

'Pretty much. And what worries me, Olly, it's very difficult to stop a determined and well-planned terrorist attack. You see, revenge knows no fear.'

'You said a while back that the U.S. was looking for a pretext to intervene in South Africa. Is this Pelindaba device it?'

Drew smiled enigmatically.

Chapter 39

…although the ANC's crisis does hold serious risks for South Africa, it actually offers far bigger opportunities to consolidate our democracy within a single generation, if we manage the situation well." – Helen Zille

It was around this time that the Americans made their move. It came in the form of an unlikely meeting of opponents reminiscent of the 1987 Dakar talks between the ANC and white intellectuals seeking an end to apartheid. But in this case the venue was New York.

As Drew put it, 'In politics there are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies, so a coalition between the ANC and the DA is now on the cards.'

Initially, the ANC had objected to the New York venue, saying that as the talks involved African participants, they should be held in Addis Ababa. But with some behind-the-scenes arm-twisting to show who was boss, the venue was confirmed as New York.

I asked Drew why the U.S. was getting involved.

'The strategists in Washington say that if South Africa goes, then the whole of Africa goes, and that obviously means getting rid of the SPP government.'

As Drew described the New York talks, the Americans were the 'facilitators'. The participants were the ANC, led by Enver Tladi, a mild-mannered apparatchik, who'd become party leader after the corrupt clique in the ANC had been weeded out, and the Democratic Alliance, led by Lionel Brodie, Shadow Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was reputed to have the ear of American President Lyman Koonce. There were also observers from Morgan-Chase, the Citigroup, as well as a token member of the Oppenheimer dynasty, perhaps in recognition of its behind-the-scenes experience in crafting unlikely political accommodations.

The cold reality of being in opposition, with all the perks of a governing party gone, had forced the ANC to take a long, hard look at itself and to re-evaluate its strategy. Realising that the chances of getting back into power

through a straight fight at the polls were remote – at least in the short to medium term – it had reluctantly begun to look at coalition politics. As Drew put it, ‘They’d be prepared to make a pact with the Devil himself to get back on the gravy train, or better still, in the dining car!’

Although the DA’s traditional support was among White, Coloured, Indian, and urban black voters, it had made little or no breakthrough among rural Blacks, and it still needed to reach a critical threshold among the latter to win an election.

Clearly, the ANC and the DA needed each other.

During a second round of talks there was much horse-trading, and both sides were forced to compromise, though somewhat reluctantly. The DA insisted that the ANC should finally shed its liberation movement mindset and commit itself to becoming a genuinely democratic and effective political party. And once the coalition came to power, moves should begin immediately to reintroduce the constituency system, so that politicians once again became accountable to their constituents.

Both parties also had to sign an undertaking that any of their MPs involved in corruption would be prosecuted and would lose their seats in Parliament. This was aimed at avoiding a repeat of the disastrous Zuma presidency that had almost destroyed the economy and made the country the laughing stock of the world. For its part, the DA undertook to promote more Blacks to senior positions in the party and the future coalition government. Finally, a deal was struck and both parties agreed to work together.

At this point, the newly formed alliance refrained from flexing its muscles or even announcing its existence. Apparently, the thinking was that before making the first move, the strikes by taxpayers needed to bite deeper, further eroding confidence in the SPP government. However, when the time was ripe, the alliance would spring a surprise parliamentary vote of no confidence in the President and the government. With the ANC and the DA voting together, the vote would pass, forcing both President Phiri and his Cabinet to resign – or so opposition leaders calculated. But as it turned out, theory and practice often conflict...

At this stage VOICE’s inner circle members were not aware of the secret agreement between the ANC and the DA. However, some leading members of the DA were also members of VOICE, and these began to lobby for more pressure to be put on the government.

VOICE didn’t need much urging. It upped its demands, not only about

combating crime but also about improving services. It also demanded that state, municipal and parastatal pensions wiped out by inflation should be topped up and linked to the inflation index.

Meanwhile, VOICE created a fund into which tax strikers could pay a portion of their withheld tax money to help compensate victims of crimes. It also started a fund to support job creation – the ‘Jobs for All’ or JOFA Programme – to help prevent crime, especially among the unemployed youth.

Chapter 40

In the continued absence of the A.A. deterrent, many residents of the wealthier suburbs were forming their own motorised crime patrols of highly-trained and armed reaction units. This was the good news. The bad news was that the middle and working class suburbs that couldn't afford such patrols had become victims of crime displaced from the patrolled areas.

Some desperate home owners had resorted to unconventional low-tech methods of fighting crime such as exposed high voltage wires criss-crossing the crawl space above the ceilings, broken bottles cemented along the tops of perimeter walls, and spiked planks placed on the ground below these walls.

One morning, Radio 702 reported that banners strung across highways and bridges in and around Johannesburg and reading "A. A. PLEASE SORT OUT CRIMINALS" had appeared overnight.

At least three newspapers followed up with editorials, pointing out that crime had increased alarmingly since the A.A. had halted its executions and that the government's claim that it was fighting crime was not borne out by the facts.

As *The Weekend Herald* put it: *The government's so-called master plan to address crime is merely a set of plans to make plans. Meanwhile, emotions among crime victims are running high, as we can see from the many letters we receive.*

At AIR, the war of attrition against Hannes continued, and he remained at home on suspension. The apparatchiks in Human Resources used every possible ploy to drag out the dispute and create an atmosphere of uncertainty and insecurity. Hannes became more and more depressed, and from what I could gather, the stress was even affecting his marriage. And so the weeks became months and nothing was resolved.

Later it emerged that, as part of the campaign of character assassination against him, an anonymous letter had been sent to the Minister, repeating the allegations in the petition, and also alleging that he was hostile towards the government's socialist policies.

When the task team set up to investigate the complaints against Hannes eventually presented its findings, it was an obvious hatchet job. All the complaints were upheld. Afterwards, both Will and I tried to persuade Hannes to see a lawyer, but he was in no mental shape for a fight. ‘I’ve had enough, Olly,’ he said. ‘I just want to forget about it all now. I couldn’t handle spending days in court, with no guarantee of winning. And, if I lose, end up paying massive legal fees, including AIR’s costs.’

On the first of the following month, an SPP appointee, Sipho Sithole, took over Hannes’s job as Deputy Executive Editor. Sithole was a large paunchy man with a permanently knowing smile and small eyes set so far apart that he reminded me of a hammerhead shark. He dressed impeccably in dark suits; walked around clutching a sheaf of papers; attended all meetings and made opinionated contributions, but no one knew what he actually did! It was soon clear, however, that he was being groomed to take over from Tata Zondi, who, despite her switching support to the SPP, was apparently no longer in favour.

Shortly after Sithole’s appointment, Tata was sent to Canada on a three-month broadcast media course. Will Allwell said it was an obvious ploy to get her out of the way. But at this point he wasn’t sure why.

Although at this stage Sithole was only Acting Executive Editor in Tata’s absence, he seemed – unlike Hannes – to be magically empowered to make policy.

The morning after Tata Zondi returned from Canada, there was an air of excitement in the newsroom. ‘Haven’t you heard?’ Prue asked me as I entered the monitoring section.

‘What?’

‘Two senior managers from Human Resources went to Tata Zondi’s house and found a whole lot of missing equipment, including laptops, in her garage.’

‘So what did Tata say?’

‘She said she knew nothing about it. She claimed that none of the items were in her garage when she left, so someone else must have put them there.

Just then I became aware of Will Allwell standing behind us.

‘What do you think, Will?’ I asked.

‘Tata may be a bad manager, Olly, but I very much doubt she’d commit theft. It’s obvious she’s been set up.’

Chapter 41

After a couple more therapy sessions with Lana, I felt some improvement, although the smell of the eucalyptus oil she'd rubbed on me sometimes triggered feelings of anxiety. She'd also left a smouldering joint in an ashtray, though this didn't faze me. Once, however, I had a disturbing flashback, and we cut the session short.

At the end of my last session, Lana said she thought I was ready for another visit to the Tenderloin. 'Shall I give Angel a call and tell her to expect you?'

'Okay,' I said somewhat reluctantly.

We arranged a date for the following Saturday.

On arriving at the Tenderloin with a small blue tablet in my pocket, I saw that Sarel wasn't behind the bar, but there were three attractive girls in 1950s gear perched on barstools at the far end of the counter. Among them was Venus, a beautiful blonde of about twenty-three. She wore a red and white candy-striped top and a pink 1950's-style poodle skirt.

When she saw me she placed one hand on her hip and cocked her body in my direction. 'Sarel won't be long,' she called out. 'He's feeding the marmosets.'

Feeling a bit more relaxed, I wandered around the foyer glancing at the framed photographs and prints on the walls, as well as at odd pieces of memorabilia, including a carved jade penis in a glass case, of Chinese origin.

'Found something interesting?' Sarel was back behind the bar.

'Just filling in time waiting for Angel,' I replied.

'Well, why don't you come over here and have a drink, Olly?'

'Thanks.'

'What's your poison?'

'Urbock.'

'Not a bad choice. I'll have one myself.'

'Angel's a bit late, isn't she?' I asked tentatively.

Sarel checked his watch. 'You're right. Maybe the traffic...'

We swapped pleasantries for a while, and then suddenly a white-eared marmoset popped out of a flap in the wall behind the bar and sprang onto

Sarel's shoulder.

'Hi, Cheeky,' he cooed, 'still hungry?'

The little animal blinked at him and moved its head rapidly from side to side.

'Is that a yes?'

Sarel held out a small slice of apple which Cheeky grabbed with his tiny hands and began munching frantically.

A moment later another marmoset scurried through the flap and sprang onto Sarel's other shoulder. 'Hello Poppie.' Sarel widened his eyes, pursed his lips, and made little sucking noises, as he transferred both animals onto the top of an ornate wire cage behind the bar counter.

'I have a bigger enclosure at home,' Sarel said, 'where they can exercise properly. They only come to the club for a bit of company.'

'What sort of personalities do marmosets have?' I asked.

'Like the old song, try a little tenderness. It works with them.' Sarel paused to take a sip of Urbock. 'But tenderness should never go as far as kissing. You see, Olly, most humans carry the herpes virus, although most don't know it. Herpes is fatal to marmosets …

'Talking about kissing reminds me, Olly. Most working girls won't let their clients kiss them.'

'Because of herpes?'

'No, it's to do with intimacy. Ironically, the girls believe that kissing is much more intimate than fucking. So they only let their boyfriends kiss them.'

'And Venus?'

'Well, if she likes you, and she's enjoying it, she'll let you kiss her. But she's an exception.'

Sarel stepped out from behind the bar. 'There's something I want to show you, Olly.' He gestured towards a pinball machine near the jukebox. 'This is a Twin-Bill, made by the Gottlieb Company of Chicago in the 1950s – a real collector's item. We call it "Deep Throat".'

At the top of the glass score frame, a scantily-clad brunette reclined in a sexy pose. 'This is one of my favourites,' he continued, 'but we've got a whole room more of them. Come and have a look.'

He led me through a door into a small room with rows of classic pinball machines along each wall. Some were like brightly lit coffins, with the painted faces of garish women whose open mouths begged for balls to drop

in.

‘Some people say pinball is obsolete,’ Sarel sighed. ‘But I beg to differ. Pinball is the ultimate challenge. I mean, it’s not just a game of chance but of true physical skill. An almost sexual intimacy develops between you and the machine, and, like making love to a woman, timing and technique is critical. You’ve got to nudge just the right spot!’

He gestured towards a suggestively designed machine that was labelled “FOR AMUSEMENT ONLY”.

‘This one’s another favourite of mine. I call her Pretty Woman.’

Sarel switched ‘her’ on and she suddenly came to life. He put a coin into the slot, pressed a knob and a shiny metal ball rocketed out of a slot at the side. Then by punching the flipper buttons alternately, he swiped the ball in the direction he wanted, keeping it floating in the upper half of the inclined playfield. Finally, Sarel guided the ball towards the highest scoring hole, which was not-too-discreetly sited between her legs. As the ball dropped in, the machine made the sounds of a woman in the throes of ecstasy.

‘Pretty Woman comes again!’ Sarel announced laconically.

‘I must say you’re pretty good.’ I remarked.

‘But not as good as Jack. He’s a real pinball wizard. That’s why we call him “Jack the Flipper”.’

‘Are the machines just for entertainment, or do they help with your … er … main business in some way?’

‘Well some guys say they come here just for pinball and they’re not interested in *poes*. But after a while some change their minds …’ Sarel chuckled. ‘Actually, that was thirsty work, Olly. Feel like another drink?’

‘Sure.’

After Sarel had poured two more Urbocks, Rentia strolled over and said she had a message from Angel. ‘She says she’s very sorry, Olly, but she can’t make it today. Something about her mother not being able to look after her kid, as she normally does when Angel’s working. Said she’d phone you later.’

I was relieved. Failing with Angel was a bit of an embarrassment.

‘What about Venus,’ offered Sarel? ‘It’s going to be a quiet afternoon because of the rugby, so you’ll have plenty of time. She’s got no other bookings.’

As if receiving a telepathic message, Venus turned and smiled at me.

‘R-right,’ I stammered, looking away.

‘Well, that’s settled then,’ Sarel confirmed, turning to Rentia. ‘Mind telling her, Ren?’

Rentia went over to the end of the bar and whispered something. Venus’s smile broadened and she gave me a slow wink. Then she sauntered over to us. ‘Hi, my name’s Venus,’ she purred, arching an eyebrow.

‘Olly,’ I said simply.

‘Please to meet you,’ she said, looking genuinely pleased. ‘I believe we have an appointment later.’

I was at a loss for words, so I just nodded.

Perhaps sensing my nervousness, Sarel said, ‘I don’t know if you’re taking medication for today … but if you aren’t, I can recommend something.’

I still had the little blue pill in my pocket. ‘No, not yet.’

‘Well, during Senior Citizens’ Month we gave out Virectyl at cost.’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s like Viagra, only much better. Made in India at a quarter of the price. You want to try some? It’s on the house.’

‘Um, okay, thanks,’ I said.

Sarel reached under the counter and produced a red, torpedo-shaped pill. ‘You want to take it now?’

‘Right,’ I said, turning the pill over a couple of times in my hand before swallowing it down with a gulp of Urbock.

Feeling a bit embarrassed, I changed the subject back to pinball. ‘Your machines must be quite unique. I mean the artwork and the sound effects.’

‘Sure. But I’ll tell you a secret, Olly. We keep them for a couple of good reasons. One is to pull in the old toppies.’

‘Why the old toppies?’

‘Because they’re the best customers. They’re gentle with the girls. And they don’t give hassles. That’s why we have 1950s décor and the girls are dressed in Fifties styles. Of course, most of the old guys weren’t around in the Fifties. But that was the classic era of rock and roll, as well as pinball, so Fifties styles are best to evoke nostalgia.’

Sarel checked his watch. ‘Still a bit of time to go before the Virectyl kicks in, Olly. So let me show you our toy section.’ He sounded like the floor manager of a department store showing Christmas shoppers around.

Before I could answer, Sarel was leading me past the girls towards a backroom. As I walked past them, Venus leaned over and pinched my

bottom. She gave a sexy laugh. ‘Don’t forget our appointment, *Handsome*. And remember to buy me a drink first. Helps me get in the mood.’

‘Okay,’ I said, a little awkwardly.

The toy section didn’t have a door, just a heavy curtain. On the opposite wall were shelves crammed with an array of dildos in various shapes and sizes. Alongside these was a section marked “Fruit & Veg”. It was stocked with mock cucumbers, bananas, carrots, baby marrows, mielie cobs – and even a butternut. ‘For those who like extra girth,’ Sarel explained, with a grin.

‘Oh.’

‘Hold on a sec, I need to pee.’

While Sarel was gone, Venus sauntered over to the jukebox and slipped in a couple of coins. The record she’d chosen was Jimmy Rodgers’s *Kisses Sweeter Than Wine,* an old-time Fifties hit. She began a sexy little dance, swaying with the music. After a few more turns, she put her hands on her hips, looked over her shoulder and smiled at me. When I smiled back, she sashayed over, her pony-tail bouncing. She gestured towards the barstool next to me. ‘May I?’

‘Sure.’

She loosened her ponytail and flicked her hair over her shoulder. ‘What about that drink you promised me, Olly?’

‘Sure, what would you like?’

‘Greek sex on the beach.’

‘Come again?!’

‘It’s a cocktail, Olly: vodka, Bacardi, Southern Comfort, tequila, orange juice and grenadine. You should try one.’

‘Okay,’ I said, before realising that mixing beer with such a powerful cocktail might not be such a good idea.

Sarel was back behind the counter. ‘Two Greek Sexes coming up,’ he announced with a knowing grin and a clink of the cocktail shaker.

Venus downed her cocktail in three quick gulps, then rested her elbows on the bar counter. Then she cupped her chin in her hands and looked up at me coquettishly. ‘Has anyone ever told you that you’ve got beautiful eyes?’

I took a sip of my cocktail (it tasted like a cool drink), then looked away in embarrassment.

She waited a few moments before continuing. ‘Can you pass me those?’ she said, pointing to a bowl of chips with a nod of her head and a child-like

gesture of her little finger. I slid the bowl towards her.

‘Thanks, Sweetie.’

Like the Wife of Bath, she had a noticeable gap between her top front teeth which I found oddly attractive.

She stood up and slipped an arm around me, resting her chin on my shoulder. Her scent was strong and musky. Then she breathed softly in my ear. ‘You want to come with me now, Sweetie?’

Chapter 42

Venus and I emerged from the showers at the same time. Then I noticed that she'd shed her 1950's gear and was now wearing a diaphanous bright red sari with a gold-embroidered edge. I'd put on the standard white towelling robe and matching slippers supplied by the Tenderloin.

This time I had no second thoughts, so I padded after Venus through the door marked with her name.

Like Angel's room, this was also dimly lit and had a king-size bed but with red satin sheets instead of black.

Venus closed the door very quietly with a little nudge of her shoulder. Without a word she knelt down and eased her head under my robe. She took me in her mouth and began tonguing me lightly. I had a firm erection in no time. After a while she parted the robe and looked up at me with an inviting smile. 'Would you like to take off my sari?'

I needed no second urging. Removing the diaphanous drape – a seemingly never-ending length of silk – was like undoing a well-wrapped birthday present. Eventually, when it was all unwound and lying at her feet, I discovered she wasn't wearing anything underneath. Not even stockings. The only covering her flesh had – if you could call it that – was her neatly trimmed blonde delta and a cupid's arrow tattooed on her upper thigh.

She removed my robe, took me by the hand, and led me to the bed where we lay down side by side, our naked bodies touching. We chatted for a while – a sort of verbal foreplay. Then she slowly rubbed her well-rounded thighs together and smirked up at me. 'Okay, Olly, I'm ready now!'

Reaching into the bedside locker, she produced a ribbed condom which she rolled deftly onto me with her mouth. She sucked me for a while, ensuring my erection remained rock-hard.

I immediately began with hard fast strokes. I could hardly believe I was doing this and for a moment I thought I might be dreaming. But after a while I noticed something strange: although I was feverishly aroused, I began to lose the intense feeling one normally has while having sex. At first I didn't pay too much attention to it, since in all other ways I was performing normally, indeed, much better than normally.

At this point Venus cried out, ‘Oh my God, this is incredible!’ She grabbed my nether cheeks and pulled me against her. In a final prolonged shudder, she came.

Afterwards, she sat there panting for a long moment, her eyes dewy and half closed. ‘I really like you, Olly,’ she whispered.

She began rolling off the condom. ‘But there’s nothing in here!’ she exclaimed, holding the condom up between thumb and forefinger. She gave the condom a disbelieving shake. ‘And I didn’t hear you come.’

‘I didn’t,’ I said lamely. Then I told her about the loss of feeling.

‘Maybe it’s a side-effect of the Virectyl that Sarel gave me,’ I theorised, ‘though I’d imagine other clients would’ve complained if the same thing happened to them.’

‘Not necessarily. Clients don’t like to talk about their failures. Anyway, Olly, though it may not have been so great for you, let me assure you that for me it was really awesome!’

Then she leaned over and kissed me deeply on the mouth.

When I got home I phoned Lana and told her what had happened. She said she’d check on Virectyl’s pharmacological properties and phone me back. When she did, she said no such side-effects had ever been reported. ‘And of course, since you’re off the antidepressant now, Olly, it can’t be that either. Which means it’s not the medication. So it must be the psychological effects of post-traumatic stress that are still blocking your ability to achieve a normal feeling during sex.’

‘So where do we go from here?’ I asked.

‘Well, the fact you could achieve and sustain an erection with Venus is definite progress. But your loss of feeling means you need more therapy. Actually, I think it’ll soon be time to begin with the A-Treatment.’

Chapter 43

"Moeletsi Mbeki, the political economist, admitted he was weary of that unholy trinity: colonialism, apartheid and racism. 'If I never hear those three words again, I will go to my grave a very happy person because I think those three words tell us very little about what is happening in South Africa,' he said." – David Smith, *The Guardian*

"Sadly, it would appear that colonialism, far from having been responsible for Africa's poverty, was in fact a major source of skills and infrastructure and the region has become worse off economically the further from colonialism it has moved." – Francis Fukuyama

"Africa's potential is enormous, yet it is inexorably mired in steaming squalor, misery, deprivation, and chaos. Four out of ten Africans live in absolute poverty and recent evidence suggests that poverty is on the increase. Most Africans today are worse off than they were at independence." – George Ayittey, Ghanaian economist and author

"Many members of Africa's intelligentsia have not been able to live with the cruelty of their homelands. They've either been driven into exile or left voluntarily and are enriching other societies. Some are wasting in jails because they cannot but question the blatant abuse of power. And we wonder why Africa remains poor." – Barney Mthombothi, former newspaper editor and political commentator

In an apparent attempt to boost his flagging popularity with the African masses, President Phiri announced a number of punitive measures mainly targeting Whites and the rich black elite that had prospered under the ANC. Among these was the Accelerated Employment Equity Programme, which would introduce a second round of radical transformation, as well as a 'reparations levy' payable by all white taxpayers, as compensation for more than three centuries of colonialism and four decades of apartheid. There

would also be a 17% rates surcharge on properties with a municipal valuation of over five-million rands. These were situated mainly in suburbs occupied by the ‘previously advantaged’ and the ANC-supporting black elite.

Soon after FOWL had finished repainting the faded street names in and around Melville, the Metro Council announced that it would be changing all ‘non-indigenous’ street names to African ones, many of which would be honouring local SPP politicians.

At our next meeting, Ken Aitken threw up his hands in frustration. ‘Funny how the government seems to have the money to change street names but not to maintain existing ones!’

As political events now seemed to be moving faster, Drew and I met nearly every Friday evening to compare notes over a meal. We usually went to the Ocean Basket in Rosebank or the Chong Hing in Melville.

‘Lots of China stuff to discuss,’ Drew said when he phoned me. ‘So let’s rather make it Rosebank.’

‘What about Mimmos this time?’ I replied.’

‘Fine. I’ll pick you up in half an hour.’

We found a quiet corner at the back of Mimmos, ordered chicken kebabs and rice for two, and settled back with a glass each of the dry white house-wine.

After Drew had taken a couple of sips, he leaned forward and propped his elbows on the table. ‘Well, it’s finally begun, Olly…’

‘What has?’

‘The new Scramble for Africa.’

‘I thought it had already started.’

‘Only the softening-up process. I’m talking about the actual hands-on part by the Americans and the Europeans.’

‘Why now? I thought there was no immediate urgency.’

‘There’re a number of suddenly coinciding factors that have forced them to move quicker. Firstly, the recent CIA report entitled *“A Revised Strategic Assessment of Africa: US Options”* has been causing huge waves in Washington.

‘According to the report, the ten-year U.S. military programme to train and bolster African forces in an effort to prevent the continent being used by terrorist networks has failed dismally. In fact, more and more Islamic

militants are infiltrating sub-Saharan countries than ever before. The report also warns of a tightening of China's grip on the African countries it already has a presence in, as well as expanding Chinese penetration of those countries considered to be western spheres of influence.'

'So what is Washington's response?'

'Remember the so-called "administrative assistance" programme I spoke about last time?'

'Sure.'

'Well, it's being urgently activated in those countries that are still not too dependent on China, and, where necessary, it's being coupled with some serious arm-twisting, as well as the usual bribing of their leaders. In the countries where China would be difficult to dislodge, the plan is to recolonise the surrounding states and exert pressure inwards.'

'Just like the rival European colonisers did in the 19th Century?'

'Exactly.'

'You mentioned that the "administrators" would be from the former colonial powers. How did Washington manage to get the Europeans to come on board at such short notice?'

'Not really such short notice. They've been mulling over it for quite a while. But the wake-up call for them was when the latest opinion polls showed a massive increase in support for far-right parties that have made non-European migration their main campaign issue.'

'What about the actual recolonisation process?' I asked. 'How will that work?'

'Well, on the ground it will be a European effort, in cooperation with one or two compliant African countries for window dressing. Of course, it will be mainly funded by the U.S., which will also provide much of the logistical support.'

'Makes sense.'

'But there's still a Joker in the pack, Olly.'

'What's that?'

'Actually there are two. The first is that a new administration in Washington could get cold feet. (I have a hunch that President Koonce won't complete his term in office, and that could complicate matters.) The second is that European countries have proved to be unreliable allies. Remember how they began pulling out of Afghanistan one by one.

'But there's still another complication, Olly – Project Phoenix. There's

still no news about the missing nuclear device.’

Chapter 44

"Already we are looking at a situation where what you will have to spend on security is more than the value of the contract." – Dawie Cronje, Vice President of the Electrical Contractors Association, commenting on theft from building sites

So far there'd been no visible reaction from the Avenging Angels to the crime wave, despite the banners and letters from the public appealing for them to do something.

Meanwhile, more and more incidents of violent crime were being reported around the country. In Durban, a gang of between ten and fifteen criminals, armed with AK-47s and R-4 rifles, mounted co-ordinated attacks on two shopping malls in succession. The criminals shot and killed four security guards and wounded several shoppers. In Gauteng, three Eskom patrolmen guarding power-lines were shot and killed by cable thieves, while in the Western Cape, stabbings and robberies on commuter trains were once again out of control. There were also incidents of violent rape, too numerous to mention.

After the A.A.'s execution of the Nigerian drug lord, Orlando, the Nigerian crime syndicates had stepped up security, and after a short pause, had resumed their criminal activities. Kidnappings had increased dramatically, with wealthy Indian businessmen perceived as soft targets. Their frantic families usually paid up, the victim was released, and the kidnappers usually walked away with at least five million rands. But as wealthy Indians took counter-measures, the kidnappers turned their attention to less wealthy, middle-class people.

The actual kidnapping was usually sub-contracted to local criminals, often those with military training, or former members of the Zimbabwean Army. The Nigerians, however, remained in overall control. But sometimes things went wrong.

The latest kidnap victim was Caitlin Beresford, a sixteen-year-old Durban schoolgirl, who'd been abducted outside her private school while waiting for

her mother to fetch her. At first I thought she could be another victim of whoever was behind the disappearances of blonde teenagers, as she fitted the profile. But a later report said those responsible were indeed Nigerians. The Beresford family had paid the kidnappers half the ransom money of two million rands, but after a week Caitlin had still not been released

Chapter 45

I seldom walked up Main Road these days except to visit the Tenderloin. On my last visit, on Sarel's suggestion, I'd gone with Aphrodite. 'When she's in a good mood she's as good as Venus,' he said, 'only different. But you better go with her now. A little bird tells me she may be leaving us soon. She thinks she can make more money at another club.'

Sarel was right about Aphrodite's charms, and they were indeed incredibly arousing. Her gold tooth gave me the impression I was with a sexy lady pirate. But just as she was getting into her stride, to my horror Stocky and Tall suddenly reappeared, resulting in yet another frustrating failure.

Later that week I gave Drew a call and we arranged to meet at an Indian restaurant tucked away at the back of a small arcade in Parkview.

We both ordered Rogan Ghosh. While we were waiting for our curries, I asked Drew the inevitable question about Mrs Eberhardt.

'Still nothing obviously suspicious we can pin on her yet. But Prometheus tells me he's heard that Mrs Bombeck is making arrangements to return to South Africa. I've passed the info on to Mr Y, and he says he'll keep an eye out for her.'

Chapter 46

‘Have you seen my jeans?” called out Bonny one Saturday evening, as she and Frith were preparing to go out. ‘I’ve looked everywhere for them. Did you take them, Frith?’

‘Why would I take your jeans?’

‘You’re always borrowing my things.’

‘Not this time.’

‘You seen them, Dad?’

‘Sorry.’

‘Well, where *are* they? Someone must have taken them!’

Eventually Bonny found a pair of slightly soiled jeans in the wash basket that were still okay to wear. As the girls were leaving, I noticed they were sporting Pube Peepers. I didn’t say anything, but raised a questioning eyebrow.

Bonny caught the look. ‘Everyone’s doing it, Dad,’ she blurted. ‘If we don’t wear them we’ll be so uncool!’

‘Does that mean you have to follow the crowd?’

‘Actually, there’s a whole crowd of us entering the Pube Peeper competition at Rosebank Mall today. So that’s where we’re going.’

After the competition, the Harpies seemed in an upbeat mood. ‘Hey, Dad,’ exclaimed Bonny, ‘we won a prize and got invited to a mega party in Boksburg. And there’re a lot more prizes to be won! I think they must have thought we were the coolest girls because they took lots of photos of us.’

Chapter 47

"…the ordinary law-abiding citizen feels ignored. … The constant exhortation not to take the law into his own hands, the daily formation of yet more commissions of inquiry into corruption, violence and malfeasance, the hollow assurance that the authorities will not rest until the perpetrators are apprehended are now greeted with derision … They've heard it all before…"
–Tshaka Gumede, CEO of Democratic Voice

When it seemed that the A.A. had permanently halted its executions of criminals, desperate crime victims began taking the law – such as it was – into their own hands.

In Johannesburg, a group of young toughs known as 'The Bouncers' patrolled the northern suburbs in fast cars with scanners to monitor emergency calls to security companies. Usually they reached the crime scene before the armed response and in time to catch the criminals. According to one report, the criminals were then taken to a remote spot and severely beaten.

In Soweto and other black townships there were increasing reports of mobs stoning criminals. Sometimes violent criminals such as murderers and rapists were necklaced, dying agonising deaths in a blaze of burning rubber. By the time the police arrived the mob had melted away.

The Sons of Kali (SOK), a group of vigilantes in the mainly Indian suburb of Chatsworth in Durban, executed several notorious drug dealers who had been supplying mandrax and heroin to children as young as ten. The preferred method was strangulation.

In Durban's Idi Amin Boulevard (formerly Yusuf Dadoo Street, formerly Grey Street), a once safe and popular oriental shopping area whose tourist trade had been killed by crime, vigilantes calling themselves the Wrath of Allah (WOA) hunted down criminals and handed them over to Mapogo for punishment.

One Saturday morning when the malls were packed with shoppers, gun-wielding gangs hit three malls – two in Johannesburg and one in Durban –

targeting mainly jewellery shops, and killing six shoppers and two security guards.

This proved to be the final straw.

A few days after the shopping mall shootings, the A.A. sent a statement to various newspapers and TV stations:

As you know, we halted our executions to give President Phiri a chance to prove his claim that his policies were reducing crime. However, these dastardly shootings and the many other serious crimes committed recently, give the final answer to his unsubstantiated and nonsensical claim. The spontaneous growth of small vigilante groups that we now see is a clear message from the community that they are desperate for something effective to be done to halt the crime wave. We wish to announce that we have heard your voices and we will respond appropriately… '

As the weeks passed and there was still no news of Caitlin Beresford, or any message from her kidnappers, many people began to question whether she was still alive.

Then one day, *The South Coast Courier*, a small regional newspaper, received an email from the A.A:

We are pleased to announce that Caitlin Beresford has been returned to her parents after a special A.A. squad rescued her. Enquiries as to her condition should be addressed to her parents.

We will soon be taking appropriate action against her kidnappers, who are also the kingpins in a drug syndicate.

The A.A. gave no further details. The word among newshounds, however, was that the reason why Caitlin had not been released was that a Nigerian drug lord had taken a fancy to her. This was not mentioned in any media reports because Caitlin was underage. But apparently the drug lord had fed her heroin as part of a softening up process. She was now receiving treatment, as well as counselling.

That evening e-TV interrupted its late night news bulletin to say that it had received a message from the A.A., directing viewers to a website where the fate of those responsible for kidnapping Caitlin Beresford, as well as running drugs in Durban's Point area, could be seen. It cautioned that this was not for sensitive viewers.

I immediately logged onto the website, clicked on "Execution" and then

pressed play.

The scene was of three heavily built men in spotless white shirts, and bedecked with chunky gold chains, struggling to extricate themselves from what looked like a muddy mangrove swamp. But the more they struggled, the deeper they sank, their heads and flailing arms finally disappearing under the murk.

'A fitting death', the caption read. *'Drugs and quicksand have much in common. They both suck their victims in!'*

A few days after the quicksand executions, Nigerian trafficker Oshie Oyenusi returned from one of his regular roundtrips to London, Moscow (with side-trips to Odessa, Sofia and Bucharest), and then on to Bangkok, Sydney, and finally, Johannesburg. He had reason to be in an upbeat mood, having signed up more than fifty attractive young girls for jobs with his International Entertainment Corporation, as well as a number of drug mules of all ages, including teenagers and grandmothers.

He turned the key in his left-hand drive black Mercedes sports car, which was parked in the basement of the Sienna Hotel in Rosebank.

The bomb that went off killed him.

In a statement to the media, the A.A. announced that from now on it would be executing criminals for what it called 'serious offences against the community that result in the death of innocent people'.

A rash of executions followed. These included three cable thieves who'd caused the deaths of several patients in a rural hospital; the instigator of a group of striking nurses who refused to help a trauma patient who'd subsequently bled to death; three agitators who whipped up xenophobic passions in a mob that murdered six Somali shopkeepers; a tow trucker who'd tampered with traffic lights in order to cause accidents to bring in more business, causing the death of a young couple. *'Having a legitimate grievance or a pressing need does not excuse criminal conduct,'* the A.A. warned. *'Those who commit such crimes against the community will be treated as saboteurs in wartime.'*

Chapter 48

One Saturday evening Frith told me she was going with a group of friends to a ‘gig’ in Boksburg. She said something about having been given the invite at the Pube Peeper event at the Rosebank Mall, but I was only listening with half an ear. It was only the next day that I saw a promotional flyer she’d left lying around.

SEXY HAPPENINGS
Presents
FUCK ME, I’M FAMOUS!
So get down and dirty and come dancing
with
Real PORN STARS!

ALL CRAVING <u>YOUR</u> BODY!

Lights, Camera, ACTION!

HAVE YOU GOT WHAT IT TAKES?

If you’re over 18, just sign up and

JOIN the ACTION and FIND OUT!

PRIZES GALORE!

FIRST PRIZE: A FREE TRIP TO LOS ANGELES
WHERE YOU’LL BE INTERVIEWED
BY FAMOUS MOVIE DIRECTOR
ROMAN GUZMAN
WHO’S LOOKING FOR
NEW TALENT…

Dress code: Summer Funk
(Leave your underwear at home!)

BANDS: Slash & Burn, Big Cox,
Diesel Whores, Pimp Squad.'

Doors open @ 7.30pm
Tickets: R250

Please note: ID to be produced on request.

I'm certainly no prude, but this shocked me, though my guess was that Frith and her friends had gone only out of curiosity.

When at last Frith surfaced at around four, I decided to speak to her. 'We need to talk, Frith.'

'What about?'

'That party you went to last night. I saw the leaflet, and I'm not impressed.'

'So?'

'I thought there was an age restriction of 18.'

'They never asked for IDs. Anyway I'm nearly 18.'

'Oh, Frithy … Let's stop this nonsense. I'm only trying to protect you and…'

I tried to put my arm around her, but she pulled away. I didn't know quite what to do. It was no use banning her from places I didn't approve of. That only made them more alluring, and teenagers were experts at sneaking out undetected. My hope was that common sense would prevail and this would be the first and last time she went to a tacky event like this.

Frith flashed a challenging look. 'Anyway, we might win a big prize.'

'What prize?'

'They asked for our details and then took photos of us and said they'd let us know. Oh, Dad, we could win a trip to Hollywood and a chance of starring in a movie! It's a chance of a lifetime!'

I began to get an uneasy feeling 'What kind of movie?'

'You know, a Hollywood movie.'

'Like what?'

The next look was defiant and remained frozen on her face. I realised I'd asked one question too many and I wouldn't get anything more out of her.

That evening I phoned Simes and asked him to check on the 'Sexy Happenings' organisation. 'Will do,' he said. 'Actually, it rings a bell.'

Chapter 49

"So many South Africans from an early age are consistently exposed to trauma and stories about trauma that they have complex post-traumatic stress disorders that you would find, for example, among soldiers who had been in war." – Dr Brendan Belsham, Johannesburg psychiatrist

I gave Gerda a call and told her I felt out of my depth in parenting my teenage daughters. I also told her about the "Sexy Happenings" teenage party.

'Certainly that sounds dodgy, Olly. I'd keep an eye on the girls and where they're going. One can't be too careful these days, especially – as you probably know – some girls have been disappearing recently.

Gerda reminded me that divorce not only damaged kids but left them angry for a long time afterwards. It was important for the Harpies to let their anger out, as it helped in healing. 'So don't be too fazed by their behaviour, Olly. And for goodness sake don't try any heavy-handed discipline. Try rewards rather than banning. Banning will only make things worse.'

Her voice took on a more serious tone. 'But sometimes there're drugs involved.'

'I don't think so,' I said. 'I'm sure I would have picked it up.'

'You're probably right. But we need to make absolutely sure.'

'What do you suggest, then?'

'I think the girls need therapy. Then I should be able to discover what's going on, if anything. We don't want to scare them with a urine test at this stage.'

'Okay. Let me talk to them first and then perhaps we can make an appointment.'

At first the Harpies were reluctant to go. *'You're* the one who's screwed up, Dad, *not us!'* But eventually they agreed after I hinted at a substantial bribe, hastily making it conditional on a reasonable matric pass.

The Harpies were now seeing Gerda once a week and she reported to me regularly. 'The girls are definitely clinically depressed, Olly. That's for sure. As I suspected, the divorce has affected them badly; but somehow I don't

think that's the whole story. There's something else, though I'm not sure what it is yet. But before we go any further, I'd like them to see Liz Stott to see if they need to be put on medication.'

I made an appointment for the girls to see Liz, and she confirmed that they were indeed depressed. She prescribed generic Cipramil, a mild anti-depressant.

For the first few weeks I could detect no improvement. When I told Gerda this, she reminded me that it took a while for anti-depressants to kick in.

To try and unravel other possible causes of the Harpies' behaviour, Gerda decided to use hypnotherapy. A week later she phoned me.

'I've found something else, Olly,' she said.

'What?'

'Television.'

'You mean soapies and sitcoms?'

'No, no, not that. Not even violent movies are the main cause, though they certainly contribute. You may not like to hear this, Olly, but it's the years of exposure to graphic TV news bulletins, which are essentially catalogues of crime and violence. The girls' brains, particularly when they were younger, were not mature enough to handle it.'

What a fool I've been! I thought. How could I not have realised this. Instead of focusing on what this broadcasted violence was doing to my children, I'd focused on something Will Allwell had said when I first started in radio, 'The thing that sorts out the men from the boys in radio journalism, Olly, is monitoring news bulletins *in between* shifts. You have to be on top of the news *all* the time.'

And so I had – but the Harpies had paid the price!

'It's no use worrying about what's happened,' Gerda continued. 'It's history. We need to focus on what we can do about it now.'

'What do you suggest?' I asked miserably.

'Well, at some point family therapy might be a good idea. You would attend some sessions, together with the girls. This kind of therapy aims to create an environment for acceptance of parents as ordinary flesh-and-blood humans who do their best but make mistakes like all of us do, rather than mythically perfect beings that "should always have done it right".'

'I'm willing to do anything you think may help.'

'Fine. But I don't think we're ready for a family session just yet. I need to

do more hypnotherapy with the girls. I sense there's still a lot more that needs to come out. In the meantime, you could mention it to them, saying you're willing to attend if they're comfortable with that.'

Frith, to my surprise, said she had no objection. But Bonny, as usual, had a quirky response. 'After all this hypnotherapy, Dad, I think I may have multiple personalities. One of us may want to go. But I'm not sure about the others. We'll let you know...'

Chapter 50

"South Africa's efforts to combat human trafficking are not enough, with government, police, prosecutors and inadequate resources blamed for failing to curb the number of victims smuggled in, out and within our borders. This was according to the United States' State Department 's Office Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report … which downgraded South Africa's rating and placed us on a watchlist…" -- The Star

"Human trafficking is the fastest growing form of modern day slavery and is the third largest and fastest growing criminal industry in the world." – Wikipedia

I got a call out of the blue from Simes one evening. He came straight to the point. 'I hope your daughters haven't accepted any offers from the organisers of that party you asked me to look into.'

'Not that I'm aware of. Why?

'I suggest you tell them it's a big no-no.'

'Oh… What did you find out?'

'Well, I'm pretty sure it's a front for trafficking – just one of many. I checked them out in a database on one of the most reliable anti-trafficking websites and they are listed in the category "highly suspicious". Also mentioned, was the case of a girl who disappeared after attending one of their "gigs". Although everything points to them, nothing has so far been proved. Most traffickers are pretty good at covering their tracks'

'That's very disturbing.'

'I agree.'

'So how do they operate?'

'The way most traffickers do. They lure girls with the prospects of a dream job, like modelling or a movie contract, round-the-world travel as a tour guide, and promises of earning an obscene amount of money. The recruiters are always professionally groomed and dressed to inspire confidence. Sometimes they make contact with girls through internet chat

rooms, especially girls who can't get on with their parents. They give the girls a contract to sign, saying it's just a formality, so no big deal. But in the small print there's a clause saying the girls have to pay back the costs of visas, air fares and hotel accommodation. As soon as the girls arrive in their destination country – usually the United States or Europe – someone meets them at the airport and takes their passport away. That's the last time they see it.

'At this point the girls find themselves in a seedy hotel where they are locked in their rooms. They are forcibly injected with drugs to get them hooked, and those that won't cooperate are beaten. They remain in their locked rooms until the traffickers are satisfied that they are completed addicted – usually to heroin – and then they are put to work as prostitutes.'

'Oh, my God!'

'They tell them that if they try to escape or ask any of their clients to contact the police, they will kill their family. The girls have to carry on working to pay off the debt. But things also just keep being added to their tab so they are never able to pay it off. After a couple of years the girls' health is so destroyed by drugs that they are of no further use to the traffickers. Some die while still working; others are turned loose to eke out a life on the streets; still others – regarded as risky – are "disappeared", probably murdered.'

At this point I felt physically ill. I didn't want to hear any more, so I thanked Simes for this information and rang off.

I decided to tell the Harpies everything. So I went straight upstairs and called them.

'Oh, please! Not another one of your boring lectures!' Bonny protested. Frith let out a long sigh.

But when they saw the troubled look on my face, they must have realised that this was serious.

After hearing me out in silence, they exchanged glum glances and then I heard sniffling. It took me a couple of seconds to realise that they were both crying.

Eventually Bonny dried her eyes and said something in a very subdued whisper.

'Sorry, but I can't hear what you're saying, Bonny.'

'I said… (long pause) …thanks, Dad, for warning us. … 'We could have been the next victims ... We were going to sign up this week.'

And then she did something she hadn't done for a very long time. She

gave me a hug.

Frith did the same.

Chapter 51

One day Lana called me. ‘I hear you haven’t had a healing session with Jean yet, Olly,’ she said, in a gently chiding tone. ‘It’s the next logical step, you know. And I’m certain she’d also benefit.’

I’d been feeling guilty about not calling Jean after she’d come up with the idea of us getting together for mutual ‘self-healing’. More recently I’d been postponing it because I’d lost more confidence since my failed encounter with Aphrodite. I was also much too fond of Jean to risk embarrassing her with a similar fiasco.

‘And if it doesn’t work?’

‘Well, as you both know one another very well, you should be much more relaxed about it.’

I took Lana’s advice and was about to call Jean when the phone rang. It must have been synchronicity, as it was Jean. ‘Howzit, stranger?’

‘Fine. And you?

‘Really good. My therapy with Lana is going well and I feel a lot more confident.’

‘Good.’

‘By the way, Olly, I have two free tickets to a French movie premiere at the Art Cinema. Would you like to come?’

The night was hot and sultry and when I arrived to fetch Jean, crickets were chirping loudly in the hedge. A couple of minutes after I’d rung the bell she sauntered down to the gate, her movements suddenly triggering the security spotlight. She was wearing a V-necked burgundy dress with narrow straps that looked as if they were about to slide off her shoulders. She gave her blonde hair a flick as she got into the car, then leaned across and kissed me on the cheek.

The movie was a chick flick with rapidly flashing subtitles, so I missed quite a bit of the dialogue. But both of us enjoyed it. Afterwards Jean said, ‘Let’s go back to my place, Olly. I’ve got something I think you’ll like in the slow-cooker.’

‘Great!’ I said.

When Jean opened the door of her cottage, an appetising aroma greeted us.

‘Hmmm, smells good,’ I remarked. ‘What is it?’

‘One of my specialities – chicken casserole with mushrooms and artichoke hearts with wild rice. If you’re hungry we can start now, but if you don’t mind waiting, let’s have a sherry first.’

‘Good idea.’

She poured us both a Monis Dry, then seated herself on the couch next to me. We went on chatting for a while and then Jean said brightly, ‘Shall we eat?’

We ate in silence for a while and then Jean leaned closer. ‘You want to tell me what Lana is treating you for, Olly? I mean, you once said something bad happened to you.’

The bluntness of the question took me by surprise. Then I thought that if anyone deserved an explanation it was Jean. After all she’d told me all the intimate details of what had led to her decision to have reassignment surgery. So I told her about the hijacking, the anal rape, the disintegration of my marriage, the loss of my manhood, and finally about Lana’s therapy.

While I was talking, she took my hand in hers, gently squeezing it. ‘I’m so, *so* sorry, Olly. I’m only beginning to understand now...’ After a pause she added, ‘but maybe we can try something.’

‘What do you have in mind?’

‘She didn’t answer my question but placed a hand on mine. ‘Would you excuse me for a minute?’

She turned and headed towards the bathroom, returning a few minutes later wearing an almost transparent robe of silky pink material loosely tied at the waist, allowing a glimpse of her ample breasts. I sensed she wasn’t wearing anything underneath.

Her robe had parted, exposing her long shapely legs. At this point she pressed the remote, dimming the lights so I could barely see our glasses on the table.

Then she turned and smiled at me. ‘Would you like to freshen up, Olly? There’s a spare robe in the bathroom.’

‘Okay,’ I said.

I’m not one for long showers, so I was in and out in about three minutes. Afterwards, I pulled on the yellow robe hanging behind the door.

Sitting together on the couch once more, we sat in silence for a long moment. Her body was now angled towards me, her legs crossed, her shapely right foot inclined upwards. She began rubbing her big toe and her second toe slowly together.

On impulse I suddenly said: ‘Has anyone ever told you, Jean, that you’ve got beautiful feet?’

She gave a start, dropping her liqueur glass on the carpet. Almost as a reflex, she crouched down on all fours beside me, groped for the glass, and put it back onto the coffee table. She hesitated for a moment, and then without a word ducked her head under my robe and took me in her mouth.

Her technique was incredibly arousing and I was hard almost immediately. I parted the robe and watched her head bobbing slowly and methodically. Several minutes later she paused and smiled up at me. She licked her lips and without saying a word, climbed back onto the couch. Then she took my hand in hers and placed it under her robe.

I was right: she *had* removed her underwear. Seeing this as an invitation, I eased my middle finger into her. She felt just like any other woman in arousal, though a little tighter.

‘You can do it to me now, Olly. That’s if you…’

I dropped my robe next to hers and climbed back onto the couch. Then I positioned myself over her and pushed a little way in. She smiled at me encouragingly, running her tongue across her lips. When I met resistance, I pulled back, not sure whether I was hurting her.

‘It’s okay…’ she breathed, gripping my buttocks and pulling me closer.

I pushed a bit harder, and her nether lips parted slightly. I pulled back momentarily. Then, feeling the wetness of the lubricant, I pushed in slowly. I couldn’t tell the difference between making love to Jean and doing it with any other well-endowed woman.

Her legs were wrapped tightly around me and her fingernails clawed at my back.

Suddenly I realised that this was usually the point at which the images of Stocky and Tall would appear, so I paused for a moment, rubbing my eyelids, as if to banish any images lurking there.

Jean began drumming her heels against my back. ‘Don’t stop Olly, *please.’*

A few moments later when there was no sign of the images, I began moving again, gathering pace. Soon our bodies were damp with sweat and I

could hear myself slapping against her. I kept on thrusting. ‘Oh, my God, yes! That’s it! … She was now shaking uncontrollably against me.

Suddenly, with a loud scream, she came. After a final shudder, she began to slowly relax.

I still hadn’t come, but ironically I remained proudly erect.

A few minutes later she wanted more. So I began again, but like my encounter with Venus, my orgasm remained maddeningly elusive. I persisted for what seemed hours, and although I was on the verge of coming a couple of times, I just couldn’t get there.

Jean, however, came twice more, again with shuddering intensity.

Finally, I realised that no matter how long I kept going, and despite Jean’s wonderfully erotic tightness, I wasn’t going to come.

So I decided to fake it.

I gave a long shudder followed by several deep, slowing thrusts.

‘Did you come?’ Jean asked languidly.

‘Hmmm,’ I sighed. ‘That was awesome!’

She took my hand and held on to it.

I knew I’d done the right thing. Jean was now snuggling up to me, her breasts pressing against my side. ‘You’ve no idea what you’ve done for me, my sweet.’

‘Meaning?

‘Taking my virginity… I feel a complete woman now.’ She bent down and with an adoring look, kissed me tenderly on the lips. ‘Tell me, Olly, can one be in love with two people at the same time?’

‘It’s happened to me before. Why do you ask?’

She bit her lower lip. ‘Well, maybe I’m just crazy mixed-up. I love you, Olly … but I’m also in love with Lana.’

Chapter 52

"Andre Jordaan fell as the steel bullet connected with his flesh. … Jordaan was shot trying to protect his daughters-in-law from armed assailants who had stormed his Muldersdrift home. … Zwane, Samson Mandlezi and Manir Lubisi are accused of a reign of terror in Muldersdrift, during which Jordaan, Allysa Botha, 13, and many others were shot and killed." – Report in *The Star*

By now A.A. executions had become routine news – continuing at the rate of about three or four a week. Two reports caught my eye: the first was the execution of Jacob Sefoka, the man who'd escaped from custody after being found guilty of murdering Johannesburg walker, John Latimer. He'd been shot in the face and his body strung up from a tall gum tree in van Riebeeck Park.

The next report was of the execution of seven members of the notorious Muldersdrift Gang that had been murdering and terrorising plot dwellers for more than a decade. The gangsters' bruised and battered bodies were strung at intervals along Robert Mugabe Drive (formerly Beyers Naude Drive).

While the in-house investigation into Tata Zondi's alleged theft was continuing, she was suddenly informed that her records at Home Affairs revealed that she was born in Russia and that her parents (now deceased) were born in Zimbabwe. She therefore had no right to work or reside in South Africa. The next day she was served with a deportation order and bundled onto a plane for Harare.

'What do you make of all this?' I asked Will Allwell.

'My guess is that an SPP appointee in Home Affairs has tampered with the computer records. It's an old trick to get rid of "problem people", especially whistle-blowers.'

'And Tata herself?'

'I'm not yet sure why they wanted her out of the way, but I'm willing to

bet we'll soon find out.'

As expected, Sipho Sithole was promoted to Tata Zondi's former post of Executive Editor. The next day he announced that the station's name would be changed to 'Radio Azania International' to comply with the country's forthcoming name change. He also said he would be adapting the station's aims and objectives to harmonise with the principles of African Socialism, stressing that there was no place in journalism for what he called 'false neutrality.'

Chapter 53

One afternoon as I was about to leave the office, Prue collared me in the passage. ‘I want to ask you a favour, Olly.’

‘What is it?’

‘I’ve joined a singles club, but I’m too shy to go on my own. Can you come along?’

‘Sure, no problem.’

On the appointed evening, we met at the Cupid Singles Club, which was in a large house with a sprawling garden near the Parkview Golf Course. Prue signed me in, and as the idea was to meet other people, we wandered off separately.

I drifted about chatting to people, many of whom seemed anxious to unburden themselves about their failed marriages or relationships.

Towards the end of the evening, Sandra, the owner of the club, announced that there would be a Paul Jones dance to get people to mix. The music stopped several times to change partners. Finally I ended up with an athletic thirty-something woman with perky tits. ‘Hi, I’m Lois,’ she announced, ‘As in Lane.’

The music suddenly livened up and Lois kicked off her shoes and began dancing wildly. I suspected she was bipolar, or possibly on speed or coke. Anyway, she was fun to be with, so I kept on dancing.

Towards the end of the evening she whispered. ‘Let’s go into the garden, Olly. It’s quieter there.’

‘Sure,’ I said following her outside.

We stopped near a spreading moonflower shrub, which was giving off a heavy erotic perfume. Some crickets nearby were chirping loudly, almost drowning out the buzz of conversation coming from inside.

I felt a hand slowly squeezing my crotch. ‘You want a trip down Lois’s lane?’ she asked roguishly.

I looked blank.

‘Don’t be so dumb, Olly. Let’s go back to my place and fuck our brains out!’

After my failed encounter with Aphrodite and my only partially

successful one with Jean, I wasn't ready for more of the same. So I politely made an excuse and hurried towards my car.

'Well fuck you!' she shouted after me. *'Fuck you, arsehole!'*

Chapter 54

"I was appalled on various trips to Africa at the state of the criminal justice system in various countries … [in Kenya] *there are no published court opinions, no transcripts of trials, no assistance for prosecutors, cases that would go on for eight or ten years, and anyone with money is able to buy his way out of the criminal justice process."* – Report to the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Africa

"…the ruling elites of Southern Africa have demonstrated that they are less interested in democracy than they are in pursuing their self-interest and retention of power." – Ian Phimister, professor of African history

By this time the invisible structures that sustain a state existed in name only in South Africa, as in many other African countries. As already mentioned, the first to collapse was the criminal justice system, then the crisis-hit electricity provider, followed by the currency. Next, the civil service – including education and health – as well as the long-dysfunctional postal system and the state airline. Most opposition and independent media commentators agreed that the main causes were the SPP's staggering inefficiency, its all-pervasive culture of patronage, and, above all, the endemic corruption that infected every state department and any enterprise in which government became involved. One cynical media commentator described the SPP as 'a hundred times worse than the ANC at its very worst!'

Concerns about the country's deterioration were mounting overseas. As *The Wall Street Journal* put it in a rare editorial on South Africa, 'If the African National Congress government was a kleptocracy, the Socialist Peoples' Party government is a criminal syndicate. South Africa, once the brightest hope for Africa, is now a cesspool of corruption and crime from which investors have fled. Moreover, the Phiri regime's links with extremist Islamist groups are a cause of great concern and demand a robust response from the United States.'

As if by coincidence, a U.S. naval task force comprising the nuclear-

powered aircraft carrier, the Dwight D. Eisenhower and two guide-missile cruisers, which had been patrolling between the Arabian Gulf and the coast of southern Somalia, suddenly sailed south and began unscheduled ‘exercises’ in international waters off Cape Town.

President Phiri issued a statement calling the exercises ‘provocative’, but Washington responded, calling them ‘routine.’

In a televised speech a few days later, President Phiri said that his birthday – in three weeks’ time – should be considered a public holiday. ‘After all, the state and I are one!’ He added that a birthday rally would be held at the Orlando Stadium in Soweto. On the day in question, SPP supporters were bussed into Soweto from all over the country, including thousands of schoolchildren, members of the Young Socialist League, as well as praise-singers of the SPP Women’s League (dubbed by an *African Guardian* columnist as the ‘Ja-Ja Sisterhood’).

In a speech to a crowd of about 40,000 broadcast live on television, President Phiri announced that South Africa would soon be renamed the ‘Peoples Republic of Azania’.

When the DA spokesman on Justice posed a question in Parliament on the pardoning of three SPP officials jailed for corruption, he was drowned out by government back-benchers chanting, “Sit down! Sit down!”

The DA leader, Bitwell Nyama, rose to his feet, saying the Opposition deserved an answer.

The Speaker, however, ruled that President Phiri had exercised his presidential prerogative in pardoning the officials and the matter was now closed.

Mr Nyama said the problem with the government was that ‘it makes rules in order to break them. And by the time the government has moved the goal posts, nobody knows where they are. This, I may add, demonstrates the government’s total disrespect for the rule of law.’

President Phiri sprang to his feet and waved a fly-whisk at the DA leader. ‘This so-called rule of law you talk about,’ he boomed, ‘is not a holy cow! In fact it is an old and very dirty donkey! During the colonial era it was widely used as a means of preserving the “rights” of white settlers to land stolen from the indigenous people. But in this new era of African socialism it is an insult to the majority.’

With a dismissive flick of his fly-whisk, President Phiri added that as far as he was concerned, the subject was now closed and he had more important things to say. He began slowly leafing through his notes, keeping the House in suspense.

Finally, he looked up and grinned knowingly. ‘I’m pleased to announce that I have approved a draft Bill drawn up by the Law Reform Commission. I’m sure all true Africans will welcome the news that this government will soon introduce legislation abolishing Roman Dutch Law. The process will be implemented in stages, with the two systems running in parallel for a period of five years, and offering litigants a choice…

‘Perhaps more importantly,’ he continued, ‘the new draft Constitution enshrining the principles of African socialism, is now ready.’ He made a challenging gesture with his fly-whisk towards the opposition benches. ‘At one point we had thought of holding a referendum, but we believe that there’s some urgency in this matter; and since we already have a mandate from the people, we don’t think that’s necessary.

‘And just so you know,’ he added, dropping his voice almost to a conspiratorial whisper, ‘the new constitution enshrines that traditional African principle of government – *life presidency.’* There was murmuring throughout the House. ‘And in case you’re wondering… yes, it will be a presidency with enhanced executive powers!’

For the next couple of days the media was abuzz with speculation about President Phiri’s announcements: What exactly would the President’s brand of ‘African Justice’ mean? Was a Mugabe-style land grab in the offing? And was the country heading for dictatorship?

Three days later the DA and the ANC made their move in Parliament.

Bitwell Nyama stood up and almost casually said that in terms of Section 102 (2) of the Constitution, he was proposing a vote of no confidence in President Phiri and his government because of the parlous state into which he had plunged the country.

Then Enver Tladi, the ANC leader, stood up and said he would support the motion. ‘After all,’ he said, ‘in 1994 Nelson Mandela set up a coalition government of national unity with F.W de Klerk’s National Party and Chief Buthelezi’s Inkatha Freedom Party, so the ANC is no stranger to coalition politics.’

For a moment there was a stunned silence.

President Phiri was on his feet. ‘Who bought you, Tladi?!’ he shouted.

‘No, don’t answer that. I already know! The white imperialists have not given up their dream of regaining power and are speaking through the mouth of a black man.’ He paused and seemed to focus on every face. ‘I call on all true Africans in this House to vote against this shameful motion, which clearly seeks to subvert our glorious African socialism.’ He gave a menacing wave of his fly-whisk. ‘And to those who are so unwise as to support it, I say beware! Beware of consequences that you will live to regret…’

At the last moment before the vote was taken some ANC backbenchers indicated that they would abstain, tipping the scales in favour of the government. But most of the smaller parties, after some whispering among themselves, indicated that they would support the motion.

In the final count the motion was carried by just seven votes.

For a long moment President Phiri stood shaking his head slowly. Finally, in a low voice he said, ‘African socialism isn’t something that can be defeated by a mere vote of no confidence in a parliament cloned from the former colonial power. So I say to you, rather than submitting to this colonialist-imperialist conspiracy, I intend ruling by decree in terms of the existing state of emergency.’

The next day, and without warning, a formation of jet fighter-bombers from the U.S. aircraft carrier, the Dwight D. Eisenhower, flew over the city, buzzed the presidential residence three times, before returning to the carrier. In a terse statement, the Americans described the action as part of what they called ‘Operation Uphold Democracy’. They added that President Phiri should consider his options very carefully since any further moves seen as hostile to democracy could have ‘drastic consequences.’

President Phiri issued a hysterical counter-statement, calling the buzzing ‘an unprecedented provocation’. He threatened ‘naval counter-measures’ if the American task force was not withdrawn.

In an editorial, *The Citizen* pointed out that more than half of South Africa’s naval ships and submarines were in dry dock and there weren’t enough funds available to carry out repairs. Besides, there weren’t enough trained staff left to man them.

Chapter 55

‘I had a rather strange customer the other day,’ Merrill said while we were having dinner after a movie.

‘Strange in what way?’

‘I don’t know. I just felt something wasn’t quite right. You see, most of the women I massage enjoy it so much that they don’t have time to talk. But this woman seemed more interested in my family background and other personal stuff than in the massage. But she still made another booking for next week.’

‘So are you going?’

‘Sure. She gave me a huge tip. But I’m still a bit uneasy.’

‘Well, just be very careful,’ I said, giving her hand a lingering squeeze.

If there was a spark of some sort between us, now was the time for it to ignite … But it wasn’t there. So we just sat holding hands.

Chapter 56

One evening Pilar Zapata called me to say that she'd accepted a post at a private psychiatric clinic in Valencia, Spain, and she was having a small farewell at her place before she left. Of course, I accepted the invitation; but I only realised how 'small' the farewell was when I arrived: there were just the two of us! She said the other couple she'd invited had cancelled at the last moment. But I had a sneaking feeling that I'd been ambushed, especially as she was wearing an outrageously short black skirt with an equally skimpy white top tied in a sexy knot way above her navel. Black patent leather high heels completed the ensemble.

I'd always found Pilar attractive in an exotic kind of way. But today, in this outfit, especially so. However, I'd been reluctant to get involved; firstly, of course, when Kristy was still with me; and secondly, as I may have mentioned, because of lingering concerns about the doctor-patient relationship.

She greeted me at the door with a kiss on the cheek and a whiff of heady perfume. 'Welcome, Olly, berry good to see you.'

'Good to see you too, Pilar,' I said, handing her a large box of chocolates.

'Muchas gracias. ¡Mi gusta chocolate! I like berry much.'

She led me through to the lounge-dining room with the ease of movement common to Latin women.

'You like someseen to drink?'

'That would be nice.'

'You like ze black bush, no?'

'Black bush?'

'Si, Black Bush Irish whiskey. Berry good. Bushmills, he make. Put in Spanees Oloroso sherry casks for to mature. You want to try?'

'Sure.'

She poured us each a generous tot and served it neat.

'Well, here's wishing you good luck with your new job,' I said, touching glasses. I took a sip. It had a smooth, nutty flavour.

'I berry happy,' she said, smiling. 'Money in Spain better than here. Also, I been missing speaking Spanees. You know, Olly, people in South Africa

not so warm like people in Latin America. Spain more like us.'

Then with a meaningful smile she added, 'Of course, you different.' She leaned across and placed her hand on mine for a long moment.

I smiled. 'When do you leave?'

'Couple of months. I no book yet. Also helping find new tenant.' Before I could comment, she added, 'Scuse me. I need to check someseen.' She disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a heavy cast-iron casserole dish, which she placed on the dining table set for two. As she lifted the lid, a wonderful aroma wafted out.

'What is it? I asked.'

'This *ajiaco*, Cuba national dish. Kind of country stew, with pork, chicken, corn (you call mielies, no?). Also, plantains, sweet potatoes, vegetables. In Cuba we put in yucca, but I no find here.'

'Smells good.'

'In Cuba we say, *"La persona Latina viva para comer."* Means "We Latinos live to eat".'

I'd noticed that Pilar's lapses into Spanish increased when she became nervous. 'You like some wine, Olly – rioja from Spain?'

'That would be nice.'

After she'd filled my glass, we went on chatting for about half an hour while we ate. I began to feel unusually relaxed. Maybe it was because we'd nearly finished the bottle. Also, the Black Bush had quite a kick … or could she have slipped something into my drink…?

When we'd finished the main course, Pilar served dessert: *flan de calabaza* – a pumpkin flan (she used butternut) with a taste of cinnamon. As I tucked in with obvious relish, she flashed me an indulgent smile. 'I go look for more wine in ze cellar, Olly. You take your time. If you like, you come help me joost now?'

'Sure.'

'Cellar over there,' she pointed down the passage.

When I'd finished eating, I found the wooden steps to the cellar and clambered down. Wine racks randomly filled with bottles covered one wall. Two other walls were of unpainted brick in which several round metal rings were set at various levels. Heavy curtains of some deep red material covered a wide recess in the fourth wall.

Pilar had lined up four or five bottles on the floor and was reaching for another on an upper shelf. She turned with a little wiggle of her hips, slowly

licked her upper lip and then grinned broadly in what was unmistakably a suggestive gesture.

Meanwhile, the feeling of relaxation had deepened and my day-to-day concerns suddenly evaporated. I also felt a stirring in my loins. I was now almost certain she'd put something in my drink, but for some reason I didn't care…

'You want to fetch that one for me?' she asked, pointing to the bottle. I went over to where she was standing. Her bare arm brushed against mine. It was like a tingle of electricity. As I reached for the bottle, she squatted down and unzipped my fly. It happened so quickly that I had no time to react. The next moment she had me in her mouth. I was already semi-hard and within seconds I was fully erect. She gave it to me so expertly that much to my surprise and relief I sensed a long elusive orgasm coming.

Suddenly she flipped me out of her mouth. 'No come so quick, Olly,' she chided, grinning wickedly. 'We come much better … *joost now…*'

Then taking me by the hand she led me to the curtains and parted them with a flourish. In the recess was a brass king-sized bed, its well-polished frame shining invitingly. At the head of the bed were two pairs of silver handcuffs, about a metre apart, fastened to the bed's upright bars. Two cuffs yawned open. A multi-thonged whip hung from one bedpost. Maybe it had something to do with Pilar's Spanish roots, I mused. After all, during the Inquisition the Spaniards were experts in restraining people!

Suddenly in one movement she sprang onto the bed, shedding her skirt and top, and kicking off her shoes. All she had on now was a pair of black lace French knickers.

'Please,' she begged, lifting her hips, 'take off.'

I hesitated for a moment and then began pulling down her knickers slowly. Suddenly her eyes flew open as she wriggled her bottom in an effort to shed her knickers more quickly. When she was finally naked, she rotated her hips upwards, the dark shadow of her bush spreading symmetrically on either side of her 'centre-fold' like a beckoning Rorschach blot. 'You fuck me now, Olly!' she commanded, her almond eyes glinting with lust.

I needed no second urging. As soon as I entered her, she wrapped her lithe legs around my back, pulling me in with her heels. To my surprise and frustration – she came in less than half a minute, with a gurgling shout.

She lay there panting for a while, and then squinted up at the whip. 'I been berry, berry naughty, Olly. Please … You know what to do…'

I'd never beaten a woman in my life and I wasn't about to start now! 'I'm sorry Pilar, but I can't do that.'

Normally, I think I would have jumped off the bed and run for it, but the drug – or whatever it was she'd slipped into my drink – kept me there. By this time I'd gone limp. Pilar must have sensed something was wrong, as she didn't persist. 'Okay, joost look in ze drawer,' she rasped, swivelling her eyes towards the bedside cabinet. It took a long moment for me to regain my composure.

'Hey, Olly, you no hear?' There was a note of urgency in her voice.

Finally, I mumbled a 'yes' and opened the drawer. Straining to get out was a wicked-looking spiked dildo with straps that looked as if it was designed by Torquemada.

'Okay, you put on and do it to me now,' she panted.

Reluctantly I buckled it on and eased it into her. She gave a sudden gasp as it went all the way in. Then with a grinding motion, she settled into a steady rhythm, periodically raising her hips to meet my strokes and fiercely clawing my shoulders. As her arousal intensified, she drummed her heels on my buttocks, while emitting wild little cries. Finally, after about ten minutes she gave a loud scream, and thrashed her arms against the cuffs. After a brief rest to catch her breath, she begged me to do it again. I did it three times in all. Each time her vocal appreciation was louder. Finally, exhausted, she asked me to uncuff her. The key was on a chain around her neck.

Suddenly she began sobbing. 'I really no understand, Olly. I become psychiatrist to understand people but I no understand myself…'

Chapter 57

It was around this time when I received a postcard from Imogen. It was a view of the Pantiles, the famous colonnaded Georgian walkway in Tunbridge Wells.

‘Dear Oliver,’ Imogen wrote, ‘this is where Hamish and I used to sit and have tea after we first arrived. Many happy memories. But that seems so long ago.

‘Sadly, things haven’t turned out at all well here, and I’m returning to South Africa. I’m not quite sure when, as there are some things I need to attend to first. But I’ll let you know as soon as I can.

Love

Imogen

Merrill and I had arranged to meet at the Art Cinema the following week, but this time she didn’t pitch. I found this strange since she was normally very reliable. I called her on her cellphone but there was no answer, only a recorded voice saying she was not available and that I should try again later. After I got the same message three times in two days, I began to get worried.

I decided to call the Pinnacle Spa. As luck would have it a friendly receptionist answered. She told me that Merrill had resigned suddenly and had gone overseas.

‘Where?’

‘I’m not sure, she didn’t say. Actually, it was Mrs Eberhardt who told me.’

I began to get a bad feeling.

I asked the receptionist if she remembered where Merrill went for her last service call.

‘I can’t give you the name of the client. It’s against policy. But I remember Merrill saying she was going to the Milpark Holiday Inn.’

I thanked the receptionist and hung up. At this point I recalled that I had a photo that Kristy had given me of herself, Merrill and Charlize taken in the grounds of the Pinnacle Spa shortly after they’d started working there.

I drove down to the Holiday Inn and showed the photo to the desk clerks. One of them recognised Merrill. ‘That’s the young lady who was taken ill last week while visiting Mrs Jacobs.’

‘What happened?’ I asked.

‘Mrs Jacobs said the young lady suddenly passed out and she couldn’t revive her. Then she called an ambulance and she was taken to hospital.’

‘Which hospital?

‘I’m not sure. Mrs Jacobs said she’d arranged it.’

‘And where is Mrs Jacobs now?’

‘She checked out the same day.’

‘Can you remember what she looked like?

‘She’s about forty-five, somewhat overweight, if I may so.’

‘Anything else you can recall?’

‘Let me see ... Oh, yes. I noticed she had a large mole on her chin.’

I didn’t need to hear any more to know that Mrs Jacobs and Mrs Bombeck were almost certainly one and the same person.

I thanked the clerk, and with a sinking feeling I began to call all the nearby hospitals. There was no record of Merrill having been admitted.

After that I phoned Beth and asked her if she had Merrill’s parents contact details.

‘They’re somewhere in the Cape,’ Beth said, sounding concerned after I’d told her what had happened. ‘I know Merrill didn’t get on with her father and that’s one of the reasons she came up here. The only info I have is that she banks with Standard. Oh, yes, and I think she said her medical aid was Momentum Health.’

I passed the info on to Gary Simes and asked him to investigate. A couple of days later he phoned me, and said that he’d used an old trick to persuade the medical aid to give him the contact details of Merrill’s next-of-kin, who naturally were her parents. It seemed that Merrill was in regular contact with her mother, who’d told Simes that although Merrill was saving to go overseas, she would definitely have phoned to say goodbye.

Then one day at about 11 a.m. my cellphone rang. It was a woman’s voice I didn’t recognise. ‘I don’t know your name, but I have a message for you…’

She told me that her cat had killed a dove in her garden, and when she

picked it up she'd found an oval ball of chewing gum stuck around its leg. Pressed into the gum was a small piece of cigarette paper on which my cellphone number was written in pencil.

I felt my heart beating faster. 'Could I come over and have a look at it?' I asked.

'Certainly,' she replied. She gave me an address in Lonehill. 'You can come right now if you like. I'm pottering about in the garden.'

Half an hour later I pulled into her driveway in a woody cul-de-sac with well-trimmed verges. A ruddy-faced fortyish woman, clutching a pair of pruning shears, greeted me with a genteel handshake. 'Barbara Knights,' she announced. 'I've left the bird just as it was; except I've put a bin lid over it so Sherlock – that's my cat – can't get at it. I left the piece of paper next to it after I'd scraped off the chewing gum. I'm sorry to say that Sherlock must have chewed part of it.'

I smiled politely as we strolled across the lawn towards the bin lid. Barbara Knights lifted it off the mangled dove and handed me the piece of paper. As I smoothed it open I saw that my cellphone number was written in pencil in a round feminine hand, followed by two printed words: 'I'M AT … (The rest of the message was missing).

'Perhaps your cat spat the other piece out somewhere around here,' I suggested. 'Mind if I look around?'

'Not at all. Take your time.'

I spent the next five minutes carefully examining the lawn around the bird, but there was no sign of the missing fragment. Finally, as I was about to give up I spotted something white in the grass a bit further away. It was a scrap of cigarette paper. On it were the words 'NEW LIFE R…'. The rest of the word was missing.

'Is it okay if I keep this?' I asked, holding up the pieces of cigarette paper.

'Not a problem. I presume the message was for you, anyway.'

I thanked her, and then drove home deep in thought. I assumed the message was from Merrill, but there was also a possibility that it could be from Kristy – though less likely – since she and Charlize had been missing for more than eighteen months.

When I got home, I first phoned Drew and told him about this new development. He said he'd look into it. Then I phoned Beth and told her the same.

She sounded excited. ‘This means that at least one of the girls is still alive, Olly – possibly all three!’

Chapter 58

Since the ‘buzzing incident’ over Cape Town, a war of words had developed between President Zebulon Phiri and President Lyman Koonce of the United States. It focussed mainly on each leader’s interpretation of ‘democracy’.

After President Phiri had threatened to call out the army ‘to safeguard South Africa’s hard-won socialist democracy’, President Koonce said he should ‘respect the rules of genuine parliamentary democracy, as it was understood internationally’ and warned him against any hasty action.

Meanwhile, the satirical American magazine, *Suck*, which was seen by media observers as a conduit for the Koonce Administration’s off-the-record comments, quoted ‘Washington insiders’ as saying that the Administration considered South Africa’s ‘ill-disciplined and poorly trained military a joke.’

Apparently piqued by this insult, President Phiri carried out his threat to deploy the army, and motorists found themselves being stopped and searched at military road blocks.

When President Phiri threatened to seize all American and British-owned companies in South Africa, the US increased its naval presence off the South African coast, adding three amphibious landing craft to the task force.

Meanwhile, *Africa Confidential* reported that for the past week military planes had been landing every few hours at the US air base in Botswana. Reports from Gaborone later confirmed that the Americans were flying in troops from the United Sates, Britain, and bases in Germany.

Both the African Union and China protested, but a resolution introduced in the UN Security Council condemning the US build-up, was blocked by the United States and Britain. The Koonce Administration, secure in the knowledge of America’s vastly superior naval and air power, contemptuously ignored all objections.

A few days later, South Africa recalled its ambassador from Washington. The following day the Americans reciprocated.

The build-up of American forces in Botswana had continued unabated and there were unconfirmed reports of British Special Forces arriving in Lesotho. When President Phiri responded with a general mobilisation of the

SANDF, more and more panic-stricken people of all colours and classes began stocking up with emergency provisions. In some of the smaller towns supermarket shelves were emptied.

Alarmed by the prospect of conflict in southern Africa, a group of nations including Canada, France, Sweden, Ireland, Brazil, India and Mauritius, proposed urgent mediation to resolve the crisis. Former UN Secretary General, Annak Koffman, indicated that he was willing to help. This gave rise to an atmosphere of relief in South Africa and in neighbouring states.

It was short-lived.

Both President Koonce and President Phiri rejected the proposal.

As the days and weeks went by and the expected American invasion failed to materialise, fears among the public began to subside. I'd expected the Americans would already have made their move, but when nothing happened except for more sabre-rattling, I asked Drew what he thought was going on.

'It's an interesting situation, Olly, something I don't think President Koonce anticipated. The Russian ambassador, Boris Zagladin, called on him recently and, according to my sources, what he said was something like this: "You can threaten the South Africans, Mr President, you can buzz them as much as you like, you can even slap sanctions on them. We won't oppose you. But we draw the line at an invasion".

Sandwiched between an American land invasion force in Botswana and a powerful US strike force at sea, President Phiri eventually realised the gravity of the situation. Apparently his advisors had told him that his best course of action was to settle with President Koonce while he still could. They pointed out that the Americans had let it be known that President Phiri's role in ordering the shooting of the twenty-seven unarmed VOICE demonstrators placed him in the same category as the former Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, who was executed for crimes against humanity.

Media commentators said later that it was this threat that had finally persuaded President Phiri to co-operate, and he acceded to virtually all of President Koonce's demands.

For his part, the US President, with the Russian threat hanging over his head, began to look for a face-saving formula that would reduce tensions but still allow him to keep up pressure on President Phiri.

At this point both sides agreed to mediation, and Annak Koffman began shuttling between Washington and Cape Town. After much wrangling, a deal

was finally struck. President Phiri agreed to lift the state of emergency, to demobilise the army except for a small force needed to man key road blocks, and to release all detainees. He would dissolve Parliament immediately, and more importantly, agree to the formation of a caretaker administration that would govern the country until an election could be held within sixty days. The poll and the run-up to it would be supervised by international monitors approved by the US, with a token number from the African Union. All anti-American or anti-Western electioneering, as well as extremist rhetoric, would be banned, and any serious outbreak of violence would result in immediate American military intervention. Lesser infractions could lead to a postponement of the election for a further sixty days. The caretaker administration would be led by Enver Tladi, with Bitwell Nyama as deputy. Zebulon Phiri would retain his title of President, but only for formal and ceremonial purposes. In practice, he would be a Minister without Portfolio – 'a hogtied loose canon', as Drew wryly put it with a delightful mix of metaphors.

President Koonce, for his part, agreed to return the naval task force to patrol duty off the coast of Somalia, after the election; to halve the US force in Botswana; and to indemnify President Phiri for any crimes he may have committed. If the election went off smoothly and there were no serious incidents, the rest of the U.S. force would be withdrawn after a year.

Chapter 59

At this point I decided to book an appointment with Lana. I'd been putting it off, hoping, as I've said, that things would come right on their own; but after my only partially successful encounters with Jean and Pilar Zapata, I finally realised I would need more therapy.

After I told Lana what had happened – or rather what *hadn't* happened – she said it was time to begin the most important part of my treatment. She warned me, however, that I wouldn't be in a fit state to drive afterwards, and it would be better if I slept over. Luckily, on that weekend, the Harpies would be staying with Erin.

Lana took a few minutes to answer the intercom. I drew in my breath when she appeared. She was barefoot and her long blonde hair hung loosely down to her shoulders. She was wearing a flame-red wrap of gauzy material that was split down the front, giving the impression of a kind of dressed nakedness. I had to remind myself that she wasn't an older incarnation of Kristy who'd suddenly appeared in present time through some mysterious time-warp.

As she welcomed me with a lingering hug, I inhaled her musky perfume. Taking me by the hand, she ushered me into the cubicle, which was bathed in a soft rose light. She gave my hand a slow squeeze and said matter-of-factly. 'I think it's now time to begin with the A-Treatment, Olly.'

Recalling the snake-like object I'd seen lying in the basin during our earlier session, I began to feel apprehensive. But she gave me a reassuring smile and poured me a glass of herbal tonic, much larger than previously. 'Drink this. It'll help you to relax.'

I took a sip. It was definitely stronger than last time.

Lana bent down and turned up the volume of the sound system, filling the cubicle with the haunting sounds of a South American pan flute. It was then that I noticed that she'd replaced the narrow massage plinth with a plastic-covered medical couch, a little narrower than a three-quarter bed. She proceeded to stretch a white cotton cover over it, smoothing it down and securing it with the elastic border. Smiling again, she told me to undress and lie on the couch on my side, while she gave me a cleansing.

‘Now I want you to focus on something and keep the image in your mind.’

‘What sort of thing?’

‘It doesn’t matter. It’s just a mental exercise to help you relax.’

I closed my eyes and concentrated, but my mind went blank. Then I saw the outline of a figure behind my eyelids. At first I thought it might be Stocky or Tall, and I felt a stab of fear. But as it came into focus, I saw it was the Goddess of my dreams in all her ethereal beauty. She turned her perfect face towards me and smiled. Then her face began to change. First it became Kristy’s; then it faded into Jean’s. Now it had become Lana’s. The figure of the Goddess’s faded and then slowly came back into focus.

Lana was massaging my feet slowly and gently. I felt myself relaxing. In my mind’s eye I still saw Kristy, and I wondered whether I’d ever see her again in the flesh.

‘Did you visualise something, Olly?’ Lana wanted to know.

I’d begun to feel the effects of the herbal tonic – a slight buzzing in my ears and a light headedness. My body felt heavy. ‘Yeah,’ I said lazily. ‘The Goddess of my dreams. And you were one of her faces.’

‘Oh, really!’ she said, sliding two well-oiled fingers between my buttocks.

After about five minutes, Lana reached into the louvered cabinet and produced the white basin in which the Amphisbaena lay coiled in a rose-coloured liquid like a sleeping serpent. I no longer felt apprehensive. Perhaps the calming effects of the herbal tonic and Lana’s fingers were working a combined magic.

She took the Amphisbaena out of the bowl and dried it on a small white towel. Then she leaned over me and gazed long and deep into my eyes. Her face began to blur. I closed my eyes.

When I opened them I was looking into the eyes of the Goddess. She leaned down and kissed me on the lips. It was no ordinary kiss but ineffably tender. After what seemed an eternity I blinked. Now it was Lana who was looking down at me. I wondered whether the herbal tonic was causing me to hallucinate.

In an effort to anchor myself in reality, I asked Lana to tell me more about the Amphisbaena.

‘Well, you see, Olly,’ she said, moving her fingers in little circles, ‘there should always be a mythological metaphor for everything significant that we

do. Symbols help guide us towards the meaningful roles we need to play. For example, the Amphisbaena is a mythical serpent with a head at each end that can look forwards or backwards like a kind of reptilian Janus, representing the union of opposites. It also symbolises our need to know where we've been and, more importantly, where we're going...'

'I see.'

'Now undress me,' she said suddenly. 'It's your turn to massage me!'

I hesitated for a moment before hooking my fingers under her shoulder straps and easing them off her arms. Her wrap slid to the floor. She wasn't wearing anything underneath. Then in one swift movement she vaulted onto the couch where she lay smiling up at me. I marvelled at her flawless figure, her ripe breasts and her blonde pubic mound.

'You can go ahead,' she said, pointing at the bottle of Neroli oil. 'Massage me lightly with your fingertips. You can touch me anywhere.'

I took her at her word. After about ten minutes, she murmured 'I think I'm ready now,' indicating that I should take her place on the couch. After we'd swapped over, she knelt across me on her hands and knees, and slipped a pillow under my bottom.

Crouching over me, she eased the Amphisbaena into position. Next, she gently lowered herself until I could feel her full body weight on my chest and stomach. At first I feared that the memory of the rape would resurface, but the feeling quickly passed as Lana's hypnotic fragrance enveloped me, putting me in a light trance. I slipped my hands around her to draw her closer. Almost imperceptibly she increased the pressure and I could feel the muscles in her back tightening as she pushed forward. Our bodies were now linked together. 'Hold still for a moment, Olly,' she breathed into my ear. 'We need to remain perfectly still to savour this intimacy.'

A full minute passed as I inhaled her breath before she began to move. As she gazed into my eyes, it was as if she were looking right into my heart and reading my deepest secrets. 'Now I want you to imagine that I am you and you are me, Olly. Then, holding this image, you will begin to feel what a woman feels. So your responses become her responses. By shifting your consciousness away from yourself and towards me, you will begin to dissociate away from your remembered trauma and towards non-threatening and pleasurable feelings in someone else. Then that "someone else" will presently become you…'

'I'm beginning to understand.'

‘Drink more of this,’ Lana whispered, handing me the glass of herbal tonic.

I took a generous swig, which warmed me as it went down. Then I took another … and another.

Now I felt the tonic beginning to work, and a moment later we were surrounded by a brilliant white aura. After about ten minutes, I’d reached such a level of ‘divine intoxication’ that I began to lose my sense of self – almost of being a person. I suddenly realised that it was no longer Lana holding me but the Goddess. She flashed me a ravishing smile. Then without a word, she turned on her back and pulled me down onto her. I felt a strong stirring in my loins, stronger than anything I’d ever felt. It was as if I’d hungered for her all my life. As I entered her, she gave a great gasp and her other faces flashed before me: Lana – Jean – and finally Kristy.

Now I was possessed by the Goddess and she was possessed by me. I wanted to absorb her into myself and be absorbed by her. In another instant we became one. We joined with such perfection that when she placed her lips on mine, I could feel both sides of the kiss.

Suddenly the Goddess cried out in ecstasy. It was a wild, otherworldly cry, pure and clear, that penetrated to my very soul. She gave a long shudder, and then with a sigh of satisfaction, she drew me to her and kissed me. As her lips lingered, I suddenly felt an intense drowsiness creeping over me. I must have fallen asleep, but when I awoke I found Lana lying still naked beside me.

‘What we did today was a two-way thing,’ she whispered. ‘You see, Olly, I also have inner demons – in fact deep psychological needs, if you will.’

‘Like what?’

‘Well, as you’ve probably gathered, I’m a highly sexed woman. I had plenty of sex – *fulfilling* sex – before my marriage, but during my marriage I never fully experienced a vaginal orgasm. After a while Lewis, my ex-husband, wasn’t interested in intimate foreplay and it had become just a joyless pounding. As he so crudely put it, “I hate the taste of pussy, so don’t ever ask me to go down on you!”

‘And I haven’t met any man since then with whom I’d like to be that intimate. You see, there’s a difference between surrogacy and intimacy.’

‘So those are your inner demons, then, Lana?

‘Basically, yes. But there’s still another one, though I’m not sure I’d call it a demon – quite the reverse in fact. You see, I’ve wanted a baby for a long

time and so far I haven't had one. I've always felt I would only want to have one with a man who'd embraced his Anima. Maybe that's why I didn't get pregnant with Lewis. But now I feel it's time…'

'So what are you saying?'

'I'm saying there's only one eligible man I know who's in touch with his Anima and yet is a real man…' she smiled but didn't continue. Subtly her grip on me tightened.

At that point I must have drifted off to sleep.

I awoke the next morning in my underpants. I had a respectable erection, which was an encouraging sign, but it didn't necessarily mean that the Amphisbaena therapy had worked. Lana, in a loose-fitting nightshirt, was curled up next to me on the lounge sofa, which was much more comfortable than the cubicle couch. How we'd wound up in the lounge, I had no idea.

The early morning sun was streaming in through a window and birds were chirping in the trees outside.

'Hmmm,' Lana murmured, stretching and yawning, extending a hand to touch me. 'You were really, really great, Olly!' Her voice had lost its slight South African edge, reverting to a full-blown American drawl.

'I was?'

'Yeah, last night was awesome…'

Although I could vaguely remember my encounter with the Goddess, after that my mind was blank.

'And the nice things you said to me,' she purred.

'Like what?'

'You know...' She poked me playfully in the ribs. 'Firstly, you called me "Goddess".'

'Well, I must have had a dream about a Goddess.' I began telling her about my 'dream', and she listened intently.

After I'd finished, she smiled at me. 'You say you and the Goddess made love?'

'Right.'

Lana just smiled.

Ever since I'd recognised her as being one of the faces of the Goddess in my dream I'd felt drawn to her. 'I also feel very close to you, Lana,' I said, really meaning it, though I knew that Kristy was the Goddess's main face, like the main facet of a diamond.

Lana gripped my hand. 'You know, Olly, even Jung had intimate

friendships with at least two women he was treating, so it’s not exceptional…’

Chapter 60

Driving home through the streets of Greenside and Melville I noticed an explosion of election posters along all the main routes.

The presence of the US naval task force in South African waters and American troops in Botswana, as well as the hordes of election monitors, had had a restraining effect on the campaign. Another restraining influence was VOICE's announcement that it would only lift its tax and rates strike after the election was declared free and fair.

'SAVE SOCIALISM, VOTE SPP' urged one poster cautiously. 'VOTE ANC-DA: YOUR WINNING TEAM', said another tamely. Slightly more daring was one that urged wordily: 'SUPPORT THE COALITION – YOUR LAST CHANCE TO PUT THINGS RIGHT'.

The first thing I noticed when I arrived home was a green shoot protruding from the side of Kristy's long-dormant avocado sapling.

A few days later I got a call from Drew. This time he sounded serious. 'Mr Y knows what the writing on the fragment of cigarette paper mean. It was a reference to the New Life Recovery Clinic, which is an upmarket drug rehab centre that also has a psychiatric facility. Mr Y did a routine check on it some time ago when we heard that its director was a business contact of Mrs Eberhardt.'

'I remember now. The guy's name is Todd Trafficant. He's an American. My friend Merrill, who worked with Kristy, told me a bit about him and the Clinic. She said some of the patients come from America because the treatment here is good and a lot cheaper.'

'Right. Well, Mr Y is keeping a constant check on the place, and although everything seems above board, as it did the first time he checked, there's something he says that doesn't quite add up.'

'Like what?'

'Well, sometimes there's a faint banging and muffled sound, not coming from the psychiatric ward as one might expect, but from a shipping container on the far side of the property. Normally one wouldn't be able to hear it, but Mr Y has been scanning the area with a parabolic microphone that can pick up faint sounds at several hundred metres. He's made some recordings which

I've passed on to Prometheus in Washington.'

'Surely Mr Y is taking a risk of being seen?'

'Not really. He has a camouflaged "hide" in some long grass where he has a view of the whole property. The other day he saw a small model plane flying overhead. I presume that's the one Simes uses to get aerial photos?'

'Could be.'

'Well, according to Mr Y, we're definitely dealing with professionals, so it's important that we don't make a move until we're one hundred per cent certain of success.

'In the meantime, Mr Y has given me the geographic coordinates which I've also passed on to Prometheus, who should be able to confirm the layout of the place from Agency satellite photos. But he says the agency photos will be helpful only up to a point. It's essential we get someone on the inside.'

'Well, have you any ideas?'

'Not yet. We need to do some lateral thinking.'

'Drew's mention of lateral thinking made me think of Faan.

I decided to give him a call.

'We need to find a way of getting inside the Clinic without arousing suspicion,' I told him. 'Any ideas?'

'Well, let me get back to de Bono basics,' Faan replied. 'I'll also ask Jean to search the Net. Then I'll call you once we've come up with something.'

A couple of days later when I cleared my post box, I saw there was a postcard from Imogen. This one had a photo of the Tower of London and a long-haired beefeater posing with a tourist.

In a slightly better-formed handwriting, Imogen wrote that things were taking much longer than expected, but she'd let me know when she'd finalised her arrangements to return to South Africa. *'I have a friend with e-mail. 'I'll be contacting you through her.*

By the way, Oliver, I'd be grateful if you'd check to see if there are any affordable cottages in your area.

I checked the ads at the back of the *Northcliff & Melville Times* and saw there were plenty of cottages at reasonable rentals in Melville and Auckland Park, and also a few slightly more expensive ones in Northcliff. I made a mental note to tell Imogen when she e-mailed me.

Chapter 61

After the Harpies had had a couple more hypnotherapy sessions, Gerda phoned me. ‘I think I’ve discovered something very important, Olly. Actually, it would be better if you came and saw me. It’s not the sort of thing I’d like to discuss on the telephone.’

We made an appointment for the next day, a Saturday morning, at eleven. Gerda had recently moved to private practice and her consulting room was in a complex of medical suites near the Cresta mall.

I arrived five minutes early. Gerda was dressed simply but elegantly in a green skirt and sweater. She gave me a quick hug and motioned me to a chair on the other side of her desk. After taking a seat herself, she folded her arms and leaned back slightly. ‘Olly, this is about what happened *after* you took the Rohypnol ... Remember?’

‘It’s all very hazy.’

‘Well, after swallowing the tablets, you drank quite a bit of absinthe. Then you apparently tripped and fell in front of the anthracite heater, hitting your head. After that do you remember someone hammering on the back door?

‘Vaguely.’

‘Well, actually it was Frith. When you eventually got up and opened the door, you collapsed forwards, down the steps. She tried to catch you, but you suddenly started throttling her. Bonny, who was with her, managed to pull you off.’

I was flabbergasted. ‘Oh, my God! Was Frith hurt?’

‘Not seriously – at least not physically – a few bruises. But obviously she was badly shaken.’

‘I can’t believe this! I would never hurt Frith. I must have been hallucinating.’

‘I’m pretty sure you were, Olly.’

‘Could the absinthe have caused it?’

‘Absinthe alone doesn’t cause hallucinations, unless you’ve been abusing it for years.’

‘Actually, that was the very first time I ever drunk the stuff.’

‘Well that rules that out, then.’

‘So what do you think caused me to hallucinate, Gerda?’

‘To my mind the prime suspect is the carbon monoxide you were inhaling from that blocked anthracite heater. You see, CO is known to cause hallucinations, as well as feelings of dread, panic and paranoia. Some victims have reported seeing mysterious figures that touched them. Many of the reports of haunted houses have been explained by defective heating appliances that were leaking carbon monoxide.’

‘Okay ... But what I need to know now, Gerda, is this: what effect has what I did had on Frith?’

‘Not good, I’m afraid, but she’s responding well to therapy. And so is Bonny. I told the girls you weren’t responsible for what you did because you were hallucinating.’

‘What was her reaction?’

‘She kept very quiet.’

‘Well, I would have thought that after such an unnerving experience she would have been afraid of me afterwards.’

‘Resentful but not afraid. She realised you were not yourself when it happened. Still, she felt very bad about it, and of course it made her lose trust in you.’

‘So do you think she and Bonny have been reacting to what happened all this time?’

‘Not consciously. They suppressed the memory.’

‘You mean like I did after what those hijackers did to me?’

‘No, that was a *repressed* memory.’

‘What’s the difference?’

‘Well, a suppressed memory is a conscious act of will. You decide you don’t want to think about a stressful episode, and you push it out of your mind. A repressed memory, on the other hand, is involuntary. Your brain automatically buries the traumatic memory without your being aware of it. In the girls’ case, they didn’t want to think about what had happened, but it was always there in the background, probably fuelling resentment against you.’

‘No wonder the girls have been angry with me all this time … But what I can’t understand is why they didn’t say anything about it to me?’

‘Your being their father … it was probably too stressful for them to handle. In any case, what actually was there to say?’

‘Hmmm … I see.’

‘I think you should know that Frith actually saved your life. You see, while you were lying on the floor inhaling carbon monoxide you were being slowly poisoned. Remember, CO is odourless and heavier than air, so it was accumulating in a layer along the floor. If you hadn’t reacted to Frith’s thumping on the door and got up, you probably would have died within a few hours. Liz Stott told me that tests done on you showed that you had quite high levels of CO in your bloodstream.’

‘God, I feel terrible, Gerda, really terrible!’

Gerda stood up and came over and placed a hand on my head. ‘Maybe it’s time to begin with the family therapy I mentioned earlier. In the meantime, apologize to the girls. Just tell them everything you can remember in your own words. Full disclosure is a great healer.’

‘By the way, what were the girls doing at home?’ I asked. ‘They weren’t living with me at the time.’

‘Apparently they’d come over to fetch some clothes. If they hadn’t, we probably wouldn’t be holding this conversation.’

Chapter 62

I needed to find out whether the Amphisbaena therapy had actually worked, so I'd decided to visit the Tenderloin again.

Just as I was crossing Main Road, a Jeep Grand Cherokee, with mean-looking mag wheels and a menacing grill, made a sudden U-turn and swept up onto the pavement, with a screech of rubber. It came straight for me like a Great White coming in for the kill. But at the very last moment it braked violently, stopping barely half a metre away. Without even a sideways glance, the driver, a sandy haired man with a narrow moustache and wearing mirror lens aviator sunglasses, casually extracted a CD from the cubby hole and slipped it into the player. Despite his sudden braking, he seemed in no hurry, and began clicking his fingers to the beat.

Still somewhat shaken, I headed up the stairs to the Tenderloin.

Rentia welcomed me with a smile and ushered me in. From the jukebox came the romantic sounds of The Fleetwoods' 1959 hit, *Come Softly To Me.* Two middle-aged men were at the bar a little way down from Sarel. Venus and Aphrodite were hovering around them.

I'd booked an appointment with Angel, as she was a qualified sex surrogate and probably better able to assess my progress than either Venus or Aphrodite.

I'd begun chatting to Sarel when the driver of the Cherokee walked in. He flicked a cigarette butt into a planter in the foyer, as he strolled across to the bar. Cheeky and Poppie, the marmosets, who were perched on their cage behind the bar, blinked sceptically. As the man passed behind me I got a whiff of alcohol. 'Gimme a Bells on the rocks, Sarel,' he growled. 'Make it a double. And have one on me.'

Sarel glanced at me and raised an eyebrow as he poured the whisky. Then he helped himself to a beer. 'Thanks, Jack.'

'My pleasure,' he said loudly, grabbing the last remaining potato crisps from a bowl on the counter.

There was something familiar about him, but for a moment I couldn't place it. Then it came to me – *the voice.* I'd heard it somewhere before…

The man remained standing, with one foot propped against the cross

piece of his barstool. He lit another cigarette and, with an exaggerated wrist roll, flipped the spent match into the ashtray. After downing his drink in three gulps, he sauntered over to the jukebox and inserted a coin. Elvis began belting out *Hound Dog*.

He reached for another coin, this time slipping it into the pinball machine. Then, in time to Elvis, he began nudging the playfield with his groin while alternately jerking the flippers. Buzzers sounded and lights flashed on and off.

'Jack the Flipper. He's in the motor business,' Sarel explained in an aside. 'Always has plenty of money to spend.'

'I think you mentioned him before.'

'Right.' And then as an apparent afterthought, Sarel added, 'Of course that's only his nickname. His real name is Alec Sudman.'

At the mention of the name 'Sudman', I felt surge of anger, a tightening in my stomach, and my mouth went dry.

'Actually, he doesn't mind us calling him Jack,' Sarel continued. 'Once, when he was very drunk, he told me that the boys at school used to call him "Soapy Sudman", so he said any nickname was better than that. He's really not a bad guy – *when he's sober.*'

It took several moments for me to digest what Sarel had just said.

Sudman finished his pinball game with a flourish and strolled back to the bar. As he swivelled onto his barstool, he turned briefly towards me. In the mirror lenses of his sunglasses I was split in two – separate and identical images of myself peering back at me.

I was now very conscious of my dry mouth, so I asked Sarel for a large draught beer. As soon as he'd poured it, I took a couple of long, deep gulps.

Sudman's cellphone began ringing. He pulled it out of his pocket, checked the caller identity, rolled his eyes, and then muttered something under his breath. While he was speaking, he removed his sunglasses and dangled them loosely by one temple, swinging them slowly from side to side. He had busy watchful eyes under light sandy eyebrows.

'No, it's fine, Sweetie,' he told the caller, slipping his sunglasses into his breast pocket. 'I'm taking a client for a test drive. Should be back in an hour or so.' He stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray with a vicious twist. 'Fuckin women!' he muttered to himself. 'Always checking up on you.'

I'd noticed a new girl standing at the end of the bar talking to Aphrodite. She was a petite brunette with nice legs – very young – with heavy makeup.

‘Who’s the new girl?’ I asked Sarel.

‘Tish. She ran away from home in Cape Town. Her stepfather kept coming into her room at night ... And her mother did nothing about it – an all-too familiar story!’

As if on cue, Tish trotted over to our end of the bar and smiled shyly.

Sarel had placed a bowl of peanuts on the counter. Tish took a small handful.

Sudman began hogging the peanuts. When they were finished, Sarel refilled the plate and set it down on the bar counter.

After giving Tish the once over, Sudman offered to buy her a drink. At first she hesitated, but when he pressed her, she asked for a strawberry Brutal Fruit. He ordered a double whisky. He seemed to have a bluff sort of charm, and, focusing on Tish, began cracking off-colour jokes. Then keeping steady eye contact, he dipped his finger into her drink and slowly licked it.

Like a frog hypnotised by a snake, she didn’t seem to notice. After about five minutes, Tish eased off her barstool and turned to walk away.

‘Off so soon..?’ Sudman called out, adjusting his crotch with one hand.

‘I need to go to the Ladies,’ Tish said quietly.

Sudman reached out and lifted Tish’s cigarette from her fingers. He took a drag, and then returned it. ‘Why don’t you take a leak on the way to the passion pit, girly?’ He took a wad of notes from his pocket and riffled through it like a gambler. Then he tapped Tish’s bottom with a freckly hand. ‘Let’s go.’

As Sudman left with Tish, he made a bravado turn like a matador bowing to the crowd.

Sarel whispered to me. ‘That bugger has a way with women that could loosen tampons. Beats me how he does it.’

‘Hmmm…’ I murmured, unimpressed.

One of the men at the bar began talking loudly about the election.

‘Sorry, but we don’t allow politics in here,’ called out Sarel. ‘That’s one of our rules.’

The man gave a sheepish nod and then remained silent for a while.

Sarel and I continued chatting, and about half an hour later Sudman emerged from the passage leading to the bedrooms. He sauntered up to the bar with a smug smile and ordered a triple Bells, which he tossed down in two gulps. ‘Screwing makes me hungry,’ he announced in a throaty voice to everyone at the bar. Then turning to Sarel, he added, ‘be a pal and order me a

rare rump steak and chips from the place next door?'

So far, Tish hadn't made an appearance and by the time Sudman's steak arrived, there was still no sign of her.

Sarel asked Sudman where she was.

'In the … fuckin … shower,' he mumbled, in between mouthfuls of steak. 'You know what women are like; they take forever.'

'Still, she's been away a long time. I think I'd better see if she's okay.'

While Sarel was away, I overheard Sudman boasting to one of the other men at the bar that he'd given Tish an extra thousand rands to have sex without a condom. 'I hate those fuckin things,' he slurred. 'It's like having a bath in your socks.'

Aphrodite, who was standing next to the men, raised an eyebrow.

A few minutes later Sarel returned with Tish. Her hair was still damp. She stood at the bar next to Sudman looking slightly embarrassed. Then she touched him lightly on the shoulder. 'Can I have a cigarette, plea–'

'Don't *ever* touch me!' he growled, slapping her hand aside. 'I hate people touching me!'

Tish seemed close to tears.

The two marmosets blinked at Sudman.

Apparently oblivious to the hurt he'd caused, Sudman smacked his lips and suddenly gave a loud belch that echoed off the walls, startling the marmosets. He looked around and grinned, but no one seemed amused. 'Oh, all right, have it your own way!' he snarled. 'At least I'm open about what I do. You all sit there silently farting. Fucking hypocrites!'

Nobody said anything.

'Why's everybody so fuckin tight-arsed today? Sudman suddenly demanded.

Silence.

He gave a snort, then looking at the girls standing at the bar, remarked: 'Well, standing around for hours, like you do, eating pies and pizza is what makes you constipated.'

One of the men at the bar laughed, but the girls looked at one another and rolled their eyes.

I wondered how Erin could ever have got involved with a creep like Sudman, but perhaps she'd only seen him when he was sober. Still, I'm continually surprised at how many attractive and normally sensible women fall for dodgy characters, drawn to them like moths to a flame.

As Sudman swallowed his last mouthful of steak, he drained his glass of whisky, thrust his empty plate aside and belched again. ‘Nothing like a rump steak to put lead back into your pencil!’ he pronounced, giving one of his wrist rolls. ‘You see, I’m seeing another lady in about an hour … and after that maybe I’ll scout for some talent at Cresta.’

This talkative drunk was beginning to irritate me. I felt a sudden surge of anger. Was he on a tour of gentlemen’s clubs, or was he talking about Erin? I had no way of knowing. But the thought of him pawing Erin after what he’d just been doing sickened me.

Just then I noticed Aphrodite whispering to Tish. Tish’s mouth tightened and she suddenly grabbed a jug of water from the bar counter, leaned towards Sudman, and poured it slowly onto his lap. ‘Arsehole!’ she hissed, then walked away without another word.

‘Bitch!’ Sudman shouted after her.

Sarel walked slowly around the bar and put his hand on Sudman’s shoulder. ‘You know the rules, Jack. I think you better leave now.’

‘Take your fucking hand off me!’ Sudman growled, rolling his shoulder aggressively. He gave a final, very loud, purposeful burp and headed for the door. As he crossed the foyer he aimed a vicious kick at the planter but missed.

Angel still hadn’t arrived; but no matter, it was time for me to go. I followed Sudman down the stairs a few steps behind him. Perhaps out of curiosity and sensing a confrontation, Aphrodite and Venus followed.

The pedestrian traffic light was red on Main Road, so I paused on the pavement, intending to cross when it changed in my favour.

As Sudman opened the door of his Cherokee, he glanced up and saw me standing nearby. ‘Who the fuck are you?’ he demanded in a slurred voice.

‘Oliver Jeex,’ I replied evenly, making eye contact.

A slow look of comprehension crossed his face. ‘So you’re the fucking wimp who was married to Erin!’ He put his hands on his hips, threw back his head and laughed loudly. ‘Well, shithead, in case you don’t know, I’m the one who’s screwing her now!’

‘Watch your language!’ I retorted sharply.

Sudman raised his fists and glared at me with a drunken stare. ‘Oh, so you want a fight, do you? Well, I’m going to fuck you up big time!’ He suddenly lunged forward and took a wild swing at me. I managed to duck, but like a maddened bull, he was readying himself for another charge.

I didn’t want to get into a fist fight, especially in the street, but I hadn’t much choice. I took a deep breath, darted forward, and threw a straight right at him with all my force. He made an attempt to dodge the blow but the alcohol had slowed him down. As my fist smashed into his face, blood spurted everywhere. He staggered backwards towards the open car door and fell across the front seat, clasping his bleeding face in his hands. ‘Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit...’ he moaned. He lay there for a minute or two and then suddenly gave a bellow like a wounded buffalo. He lunged across the seat and tried to claw at me through the open door. I gave the door a vicious kick, slamming it on his fingers. He gave an agonised yell, then slumped back across the seat.

‘Good for you, Olly!’ Aphrodite called out. ‘The bugger had it coming.’ She came over and pecked me on the cheek, then turned and went upstairs to call Sarel, who appeared a few minutes later.

‘Are you responsible?’ he asked me, glancing at the bleeding Sudman.

‘Kind of,’ I replied in a neutral voice.

Sarel rolled his eyes and grinned.

Sudman’s cellphone began ringing. He fumbled around for it, but it stopped ringing before he could answer. He called back. ‘You want to know why I’m late?’ ……. ‘Well, I’ve just been assaulted by that crazy ex of yours. They should’ve kept him locked up permanently in that psycho ward!’ ……. ‘Yes, I’m bleeding.’ ‘No, I’ll just sit in the car until I feel better.’ ……. ‘Yes, I’m sure.’ ……. ‘No, the bastard is still here; he’s standing on the pavement talking to someone.’ ……. ‘The client I took on a test drive.’ ……. ‘Yes, of course the client lives in Melville.’ ……. ‘Actually, I’m beginning to feel … ah … not so good … I think you’d better come and...’

At this point Sudman passed out.

Sarel peered into the car, then turned to the girls. ‘We can’t just leave him here bleeding like this. Better take him inside and patch him up.’

I helped Sarel carry Sudman inside. We put him on the sofa in the foyer and Venus fetched a first-aid kit and began tending his wounds.

‘Somebody better watch his car,’ Sarel said.

‘Okay,’ I said, and headed back down the stairs.

While I was standing next to the Cherokee, Angel arrived. I told her briefly what had happened, and said we’d better cancel today’s appointment. ‘Quite honestly, I don’t think I’m in the mood right now.’

‘Not a problem,’ she said. ‘In any case I was late. Just call me again when

you’re ready, Olly.’

Chapter 63

I'd finally received an e-mail from Imogen, informing me of her date of arrival and asking me if I wouldn't mind fetching her from the airport. She also wanted me to try and find her a furnished cottage within walking distance of the Melville shops. She was arriving in just under a week, so this didn't leave much time.

I managed, however, to check out quite a few possibles and ended up with a short list of three. So I was able to take her on an inspection tour soon after she arrived. She looked tired and drawn and her aura seemed duller than before, but I could sense that she was glad to be back.

She finally decided on a cosy three-roomed cottage in the tree-lined upper section of Avalanche Street in Meldene, only a couple of blocks from Melville's Main Road shopping area. Shortly after we'd collected the keys from the landlady, a middle-aged Afrikaans woman with greying hair, the woman herself brought us a tray with a pot of tea and biscuits.

Imogen began telling me that things hadn't gone well for her in Britain.

'Ironically, I left this country because of the crime and politics. Now things seem to be looking up here. But *Britain…!'* She gave a bitter little laugh.

'What happened?'

'Well, as you know, Oliver, I used to *love* the Brits. Now I *hate* them!'

She took a sip of tea before continuing. 'Actually, "Avalanche Street" is an appropriate name.'

'I'm not with you.'

'Well, over the past year I've been feeling as if I've been hit by an avalanche!'

'What actually happened, Imo? (Normally she would have reacted sharply to my calling her by her childhood nickname, but she didn't seem to notice.)

'Well, for starters, Hamish died suddenly of a heart attack.'

'Oh, no! You didn't tell me… I'm so sorry.'

'I didn't tell anyone except Fiona because at the time I was in a mental hospital suffering from clinical depression.' She gave a long sigh. 'Being in

hospital I couldn't even attend Hamish's funeral, so Fiona had to make all the arrangements. I feel so guilty that I was so beastly to him, but now I miss him terribly…' She gave a sniff and then dabbed her eyes. '…then Fiona told me that she and Dudley were getting divorced. I mean, how long have they been married, Oliver? A year – or is it two?

'Just over a year, I think.'

'Well, divorce seems to be the norm these days. Nobody seems to stay married very long.'

'Hmmm,' I murmured, not knowing quite what to say.

'Anyway, after I was discharged from hospital I found that our house in Tunbridge Wells had been occupied by a band of dirty, thieving Romanian squatters who wrecked the place.'

'Oh, no!'

'I had to stay at a B&B while the damage was being repaired. By then my finances were depleted, so I was eventually forced to sell the house.

'It was only then that I discovered that we'd been taken for a ride by the previous owner. There were all sorts of defects that he'd concealed – things like rising damp and structural cracks that had just been painted over. I couldn't afford to have these things fixed, so I had to accept a much lower price.'

'That was bad luck.'

'Not bad luck, Oliver, *sheer dishonesty!'*

'I see what you mean.'

'Actually there's more…'

She hesitated for a long moment before continuing. 'You see, Oliver, Hamish and I went to Britain on a tourist visa after an immigration lawyer told us that Hamish qualified for an ancestral visa through his grandfather. However, Hamish's application was turned down because his grandfather was born in India, where *his* father (Hamish's great-grandfather), a British army officer, had been posted shortly before the War, together with his pregnant wife. I mean, if the old man had refused to serve King and country and had chained himself to the railings of Parliament so he couldn't be sent to India, then we wouldn't have had a visa problem!'

'Right.'

'Of course, we appealed. But Hamish heard he'd lost the appeal only weeks before he died. I think *that's* what killed him!'

'I'm so sorry.'

Imogen drank the last mouthful of tea, and as she set the cup down, I noticed that it rattled as it touched the saucer.

She cleared her throat. ‘I have a confession to make, Oliver. It’s about the antiques.’

‘Not a problem. I realise the shippers packed them by mistake.’

‘I’m afraid there’s more to it than that… You see, after I was discharged from hospital I was forced to sell them just to keep my head above water. A couple of months after we’d bought the property, the market collapsed, so when I finally sold it and repaid the small bond, I got virtually nothing back, especially after paying for all the damage the squatters had caused.’

‘Not to worry, Imogen. I don’t really appreciate antiques anyway. In any case, the Cullingworth papers in that hidden drawer mean a lot more to me than the actual furniture.’

‘But I still feel terrible about it, Oliver. I’d like to pay you back for them, but I can’t – at least not now.’

‘That’s not necessary. For me most of them were just old bits of wood gathering dust in the garage.’

‘There’s something else I’ve been meaning to say, Oliver. I want to apologise for being such a bitch to you all these years.’

I noticed that her eyes were moist now, and she paused to dab them. ‘Oh, one other thing, Oliver, if you want to call me “Imo”, please do so. But I prefer “Oliver”, so if you don’t mind, I’ll continue calling you that.’

I was at a loss for words. I felt a lump in my throat, so I quickly swallowed the rest of my tea and looked out of the window.

‘And if there’s anything I can do for you Oliver. And I mean *anything*, just tell me.’

An idea began to form in my mind. ‘Actually, there might be something, Imo, but I’ll have to think about it and let you know.’

Chapter 64

As campaigning for the election began, both Bitwell Nyama and Enver Tladi exuded a quiet confidence, drawing large and enthusiastic crowds at all their meetings.

But during these initial stages, President Phiri acted like a subdued schoolboy dully reciting his homework while a strict master peered over his shoulder. As he delivered his carefully worded speeches, he seemed almost a different person.

‘What has happened to the charismatic SPP leader?’ the *Sowetan* asked in an editorial. ‘Have the Americans clipped his wings so much that he can’t fly?’

However, as the election date drew closer, President Phiri, as if emerging from a trance, suddenly threw caution to the winds and reverted to his usual fiery anti-Western rhetoric. He called President Koonce an “imperialistic Zionist stooge” whom he claimed was planning to recolonise Africa. Yet he was careful to keep the Socialist Youth League in check, warning against any violent incidents that would give the Americans an excuse to intervene militarily.

Media commentators speculated as to what was behind President Phiri’s sudden change of tactics. The most persuasive theory was that he sensed the SPP was heading for defeat, so by violating the lesser conditions set by the Americans he hoped they would call for a postponement. This would give him more time to regroup before another poll was held.

Chapter 65

As Gerda had suggested, I apologised to Frith and Bonny for what I'd done after taking the Rohypnol. And during one of our family therapy sessions, the Harpies apologised to me for their unruly behaviour. They did point out, however, that I'd been a rather distant dad when they were growing up (I'd made the mistake many fathers make – spending too much time working and not enough time at home).

So I said I was really sorry about that, giving them each a hug – not that years of neglect can ever be rectified by a single gesture; but as Gerda told me later it was a first step. After that our relationship rapidly improved, with only the occasional ups and downs you get in any family.

To my great relief and joy, Bonny and Frith both passed matric; enabling them to study at university should they wish to. I rewarded them with generous vouchers to spend at Edgars.

The Harpies hadn't decided yet what to study, so they were considering taking a gap year in Europe, something I encouraged.

I enrolled both girls as members of the Overseas Visitors Club, which had a large database of temporary jobs in Europe and North America. The girls had British passports through Erin, so they didn't need visas. They also had an aunt and several cousins in the U.K. with whom they could stay if need be.

'I've come to the conclusion that all families are crazy,' Bonny said one day, 'even the normal ones. They just seem normal to other people. But my friends tell me you wouldn't believe what really goes on behind closed doors.'

'No one has the perfect family,' I said matter-of-factly.

'You kidding,' said Bonny sarcastically.

'Almost perfect,' said Frith, sounding serious. 'The only thing that's missing in our family is Mum.'

There was a long silence. I felt a twinge of sadness. Then Frith added, 'actually, you're pretty cool, Dad. All my friends wish they had a dad like you!'

Chapter 66

A couple of days later Faan called me. He sounded very excited. ‘Olly, I think we’ve found a way of getting inside the Clinic without arousing suspicion.’

‘How?’

‘It’s better that we meet somewhere to talk. Maybe you could invite Drew and Weddo. I’m pretty sure they’ll have some useful ideas.’

‘Okay, I’ll call them. By the way, Faan, Drew already knows about the Clinic. He’s hired an investigator to check it out. He also has a contact in Washington who’s doing more checking. I’ll explain to Weddo that we have strong suspicions that a psychiatric centre is being criminally misused. That ought to pique his interest.’

‘Sure. Anyway, as regards the venue. Maybe a restaurant is the best place to meet. What about the Ocean Basket in Rosebank?

‘Fine.’

One evening a couple of days later we all met in a quiet corner of the restaurant. The day’s special was a king prawn and calamari combo, which we all ordered, as well as a couple of bottles of the dry white house-wine.

While we were waiting for the wine, Drew propped his elbows on the table and leaned forward. ‘Before we begin, let me give you a bit of history about the New Life Recovery Clinic … my investigator (who, as Olly knows, I call Mr Y) has discovered that it was a former hotel and conference centre. It was sold during the last recession to the present owners, a pharmaceutical company registered in the States. The Clinic itself is registered in South Africa as an approved psychiatric and drug rehabilitation centre. But the psychiatric patients and the recovering addicts are housed in separate sections. The psychiatric section treats less serious mental disorders like depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety attacks, eating disorders and non-violent schizophrenia – that sort of thing. All violent patients are referred elsewhere.’

‘So what’s the treatment like?’ I asked.

‘According to Mr Y, who questioned a couple of former patients, really top class. There’s more individual attention and there are fewer patients to a ward. The American-style meals are outstanding, if somewhat rich. But they

said the Clinic's charges aren't cheap – at least, not by South African standards. For Americans, on the other hand, it's bargain basement.

'On the security side,' Drew continued, 'Mr Y says it's very tight. The area around the drug treatment unit has high walls and the outside perimeter of the property is patrolled.'

'What about the people who run the place?' asked Faan.

'Well, the director of the Clinic, Todd Trafficant, is also the local director of the American pharmaceutical company that owns the Clinic. But now for the interesting part: my contact in Washington tells me that a couple of years ago, Dr Trafficant was a member of a group of researchers that was working on an improved "truth" drug for use in interrogations; and there appears to be a link between this group and former members of MK-Ultra, the CIA mind control programme.'

'I think you've mentioned MK-Ultra before,' said Jean. 'I seem to recall your saying that although the programme was supposed to have been shut down, it's been continuing in secret.'

'Correct. Actually, the programme was stepped up after the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. But there's something else that's unusual about the Clinic. Mr Y made some recordings of faint sounds he picked up with his parabolic microphone, and I sent them to Washington for analysis. I've just received the results: they are voices speaking in Urdu, Pashto and English.'

'Hmmm,' murmured Weddo. 'That certainly raises some questions.'

'I agree,' said Drew. 'My guess is that we are dealing with some sort of rogue unit operating on its own and using the Clinic as a cover. Or if they are in any way connected to the CIA, then they are "plausibly deniable", the term used in intelligence circles. In other words, if they screw up, the CIA can deny any knowledge of them.'

The wine arrived at this point, and after the waiter had filled our glasses, Drew continued. 'That's more or less all I have to say for the moment.' He turned to Faan. 'Would you like to tell us about your idea of getting someone inside the Clinic?'

'Sure.' Faan looked at everybody and grinned. 'Actually, it isn't my idea; it's Jean's. So I think she should tell you about it.'

Jean took a sip of wine before beginning. 'I don't know if any of you have heard of the Rosenhan experiment?'

Weddo smiled broadly and nodded his head.

'Well, for the benefit of those of you who haven't,' Jean continued, 'let

me fill you in. The story begins in the 1970's when this American psychologist, David Rosenhan, suspected that many people being admitted to psychiatric institutions were misdiagnosed and were actually sane. So he decided to conduct an experiment. He sent eight perfectly sane volunteers to various psychiatric hospitals to see if they would be admitted. Most of them were qualified mental health care professionals. These "pseudo-patients", as he called them, told the interviewing psychiatrists that they were "hearing voices". On the strength of this, all were admitted except one.

'After that, none of them faked any more symptoms and behaved quite normally. The aim, of course, was to be diagnosed as "sane" and then be discharged.

'But that didn't happen. The average length of their stay was nineteen days, with one being held for fifty two days! What was interesting from our point of view, guys…' Jean paused and smirked '…was that none of the psychiatrists spotted them as fakes.

'The interesting thing,' Jean continued, was that on their eventual discharge none of the pseudo-patients was declared sane but were released on a diagnosis of "schizophrenia in remission". So my guess is that we may also be able to fool the psychiatrists running the Clinic and have a couple of undercover people admitted as patients.'

'I see nothing wrong with your plan,' said Weddo 'It doesn't violate any professional code of ethics, especially since those running the Clinic seem to be holding sane people against their will. So in the circumstances, it's my duty as a psychiatrist to help expose them.'

Drew glanced around the table. 'Well, then, I think we need some volunteers to go undercover. I'd love to go in, but I think I need to be on the outside to co-ordinate things. I also think that as Weddo is a member of the profession he may be compromised. That leaves you three.'

'I'm game,' I said. 'I've got plenty of leave due to me, so that's no problem. 'I'll just have to get my ex to look after our girls and the pets.'

'I can make it, too,' said Faan. 'No problem.'

'Me too,' said Jean.

'We may need a few more volunteers,' said Drew. 'At some stage we might need to create a diversion, and that might need more manpower – *and* woman power,' he added hastily.

'What about some of the other patients who were in Ward 697 with you?' Weddo queried, 'ones who're cured, I mean. If you can think of any suitable

people then I could talk to their psychiatrists – tell them there's been a breach of professional ethics that we need to expose – and ask them to refer their patients to the Clinic.'

'Excellent!' remarked Drew. 'Of course I'll take care of all the costs. My contact in Washington will have access to a special fund to help nail these bastards.'

A couple of days after Imogen had returned, I invited her for coffee at the Cuppa Café, on Main Road, and proposed our pseudo-patient plan to her, filling in all the details about the captive girls in the Clinic.

'Well, this is a big surprise, Oliver, but of course I'll do it. When do we start?'

Weddo had consulted several trustworthy professional colleagues, including Liz Stott, about our plan to expose the abuses at the New Life Recovery Clinic. Initially, they'd raised concerns about professional ethics, but when he explained that the girls were being held illegally and that their lives could be at risk if we called the police and they went bumbling in, they agreed to help.

To avoid arousing suspicion, the plan was for each of the doctors to refer one or two pseudo-patients to the Clinic, with a couple of days in between.

At an earlier meeting at Weddo's house we'd drawn up a tentative list of former patients from Ward 697. Sadly, we'd eliminated Marge, Gabriel, and Professor Cruz because they were still on heavy medication, while others like Rastaman and Lin Chang couldn't take time off. The final list was: Faan, Jean, Beth, Imogen, Leah, Petrus and me. Faan had reluctantly admitted that he was still on bipolar medication, but added, 'Not to worry, I'll smuggle my pills in.'

A couple of days before the admissions, Weddo had arranged a briefing at his house. After he'd ushered us into his consulting room, and his maid had brought us tea and biscuits, he settled back in his chair and contemplated us owlishly. Then he linked his hands behind his head and smiled. 'Voluntary admission to a psychiatric hospital,' he began, 'is much the same as admission to a general hospital. But unlike patients in general hospitals, you're not free to leave when you want to. If the consultant psychiatrist decides you're suffering from a mental disorder warranting further treatment, he can detain you after examination by another psychiatrist. Now, since the New Life Recovery Clinic is involved in some sort of criminality, the consultant psychiatrists could decide to keep you there indefinitely … if they

discover you're aware of what they're up to. So that's the risk.'

There was a concerned murmur among us, but Faan was first to speak. 'Don't worry, Doc, I'm sure we'll all put up a good show in bluffing them.'

'Well, that's what I was coming to. I've been reading up on the Rosenhan Experiment, and with a few modifications, the best plan seems to be: keep it simple; don't over-act or sound as if you're giving rehearsed answers; be consistent; be co-operative; stay away from visual hallucinations (auditory ones are fine, but don't overdo it). In fact, after exhibiting your first symptoms, try and act relatively normal.

'Also, remember, the psychiatrist can't see inside your head, so he has to take your word for it. In the case of Rosenhan's pseudo-patients, the voices they claimed to be hearing said things like "empty", "hollow" and "thud", so you'll have to think of something else.'

'What about "plop"? Faan asked.

Weddo grinned. 'Plop is good. It suggests premature potty training!'

'Any advice on what sort of clothes we should wear?' I asked.

'Good question. My guess is that the men should dress poorly and shouldn't shave for a day or two. The unkempt look should work best.'

'What about the women?' put in Imogen.

'Well, remember, you're trying to look depressed. Depressed women are inclined to look dowdy, so put your smart outfits away and go for what you'd wear when spring cleaning.'

'Oh,' said Imogen, sounding a little disappointed.

'And now a very important thing,' Weddo added. 'Remember to hide the medications they give you under your tongues and then flush them down the toilet. Some medications make you drowsy, whereas you need to be alert on this important mission.'

Chapter 67

A couple of days before I was due to be admitted to the Clinic I had an appointment with Dr Dangor for the final stage of my dental implant. After he'd removed the dental bridge and screwed the new tooth in place, I noticed something different, though at first I couldn't put my finger on it. Then it came to me: *the silence*. The humming in my ears had stopped.

On the appointed day for my admission to the Clinic, Drew arrived at around nine to drive me there. Liz Stott had provided me with a letter of referral in the name of Dr Oliver Watson (I'd decided to promote myself!), saying I was suffering from clinical depression and that during my recovery I needed a supervised environment such as the Clinic provided. She said I periodically heard voices.

I'd taken a couple of weeks leave from AIR, and the Harpies had arranged to stay with friends in Melville. This would enable them to walk over and feed Chloe and Toby-Felix.

The weather was fine as Drew and I set off in his Mercedes. Bowling along the R511, Drew updated me on the latest satellite information, as well as on Mr Y's surveillance of the Clinic.

The psychiatric ward was on the ground floor of the former hotel and conference centre, which also housed the staff quarters on the upper floor. The drug treatment unit was in the second-largest of the three low concrete buildings in the fenced-off section, on the north side of the property. As already suspected, the girls were being held in the smaller building with the exercise courtyard. A satellite photograph had shown two of them playing basketball. So far, Mr Y had not been able to establish what the third building was used for. The kitchen was at the back of the main building, with a door opening onto a pathway leading through a locked gate to the concrete buildings at the back. Several satellite photographs had shown staff carrying trays of food along the pathway.

'By the way Olly,' added Drew, 'Mr Y has established that all the professional staff are Americans, but the gardening is done by patients as part of their therapy.'

About half an hour later we turned into the Clinic's driveway and parked

in the open gravelled area in front of the main building. Drew, who was carrying my suitcase, walked ahead of me into the wood-panelled reception area. It still had the cosy feel of a country hotel, with piped background music. The only false note was an abstract painting on one wall that clashed with the rest of the décor.

The receptionist, a dumpy middle-aged blonde dressed in white, with a fast-fading smile, gave me a quick once-over and introduced herself as 'Sister Munster'. She handed me an admission form. In keeping with my new role, I mumbled under my breath to Drew, asking him to help me fill in the form. When he'd handed Sister Munster the completed form in the name of Dr Oliver Watson, he wished me a speedy recovery, shook my hand and left.

Sister Munster pressed a bell on her desk and a few moments later a powerfully built young man in a white uniform emerged from a side door. He took up a sentry-like position just inside the door.

Without so much as a glance at me, Sister Munster called out in an abnormally nasal American accent suggestive of enlarged adenoids, 'Noo patient, Gene.' The man gave me a tight smile and announced he was Nurse Stubblewood. I introduced myself as Dr Oliver Watson.

'So what's a doctor doing here?' he asked with a smirk. 'I thought doctors weren't supposed to get sick.'

'Actually, I'm a doctor of English literature,' I lied.

'Oh,' he said picking up my suitcase and motioning me to follow. He led me down a dimly-lit passage to a small room. 'Okay, doc, you mind getting undressed? He handed me a loose-fitting blue cotton top and matching pants, as well as a pair of tartan carpet slippers. 'From now on you'll be wearing a hospital outfit,' he explained, putting my clothes and shoes into a labelled box. 'One other thing,' he added, pointing to my suitcase, 'any sharp objects, belts, shoe laces, mirrors?'

I looked blankly at him.

'Well, let's have a look, then, shall we?'

I hesitated for a few moments and then opened my suitcase.

'Sorry, but you can't keep these,' he said, dropping my nail file and clippers into the labelled box. 'I don't know about this, though,' he added, picking up a small metal camping mirror. 'Hmmm … maybe it's okay,' he conceded, handing it back to me.

As I wanted to be around when my fellow pseudo-patients arrived, I'd taken to hanging around reception – much to the annoyance of Sister

Munster. ‘You wanna sit in the patients’ lounge?’ she coaxed. There’s a lotta magazines and stuff to read. Also, some really great satellite TV.’

I pretended not to hear, staring blankly at the abstract painting. After several fruitless attempts to gain my attention, Sister Munster gave a sigh, shrugged, and carried on with some paperwork.

Later that morning I heard the crunch of gravel as a car drew up outside. Katie was in the drivers’ seat and Faan beside her.

As Faan got out of the car I could see he’d been working on his image. He had several days’ stubble, and his faded check shirt and rumpled pants looked as if they’d been bought at a garage sale. To complete the ensemble, he wore a wide-brimmed Australian outback hat from which dangled about a dozen corks on short yellow strings.

I was about to dash out to greet my friends, when I remembered we were not supposed to know each other.

Katie lifted a suitcase and a carry bag from the boot and led the way. Faan lurched behind carrying a large fish bowl in which two goldfish – one large and one small – slopped around. ‘Meet Sardine and Tuna!’ Faan announced grandly, before plonking the bowl on the reception counter almost under Sister Munster’s nose. ‘I’ve brought them in for therapy.’

Sister Munster was staring dubiously at the bowl, which was decorated with a sunken treasure chest, a multi-turreted castle and a swathe of green aquatic weed. ‘I don’t think fish are allowed in–’

‘It’s all right,’ Katie interrupted. ‘Dr Moloi explained the situation to Dr Trafficant, and he said it would be fine.’

‘I should hope so,’ chimed in Faan. ‘After all, they’re the ones coming here for treatment!’

Sister Munster picked up the phone and dialled. While she was talking, Katie winked at me.

‘I see…’ Sister Munster was saying uncertainly. Then she put down the phone and turned to Katie with a shrug. ‘Well if he says it’s okay, then I guess it is.’

‘See!’ said Faan, giving his hat a shake, setting the corks dancing. ‘Who said only humans needed therapy?’

Sister Munster was staring at the hat. ‘You don’t need to wear that in here,’ she observed dryly. ‘We don’t have many flies.’

‘I’m wearing it to accustom myself to Australian culture, such as it is,’ Faan replied. ‘You see Sardine and Tuna told me they’d prefer to live in Oz

because in the pet shop they made friends with some Australian Rainbow Fish and they got on famously.' Faan paused for a moment and peered into the bowl. 'Isn't that right, Tuna?'

Tuna gave a clumsy victory roll.

Katie glanced at me with a half-suppressed grin. Sister Munster frowned and shook her head wearily.

'Okay, I think we're done here,' she sighed. 'There're a couple of spare beds in Dr Watson's ward. I'll put both you and your goldfish in there,' she added with a touch of sarcasm.

'Dr Watson?' queried Faan, looking blank, as if he hadn't seen me.

'Sorry, I should have introduced you,' said Sister Munster, beckoning me forward. 'Mr Den Aap, meet Dr Watson. He only arrived yesterday.'

'Funny, he has that institutionalised look about him,' remarked Faan with a smirk, pumping my hand vigorously.

I scowled at Faan, smiled at Katie, and gestured that they should follow me.

I led the way down a passage to my ward, which was at the back of the building. It overlooked the fenced-off portion where the three concrete buildings were.

Unlike Ward 697, where there were eight beds to a ward, here there were only four. The beds themselves were wider and lower, made of light polished wood, not steel tubing, and were neatly covered with light blue bedspreads. The curtains were a deep blue, making for a pleasant contrast. There was even a tasteful maroon rug covering the centre of the wooden floor.

'Hmmm … not bad,' observed Faan, looking around for a place to put the goldfish bowl. 'How about over here?' he queried, pointing with his nose at a sturdy writing table to the left of the window.

'Perfect,' said Katie. 'Just enough light for the plants, but not enough to turn the water green.'

As Faan lurched towards the table, his left foot caught the edge of the rug. He staggered, and for a moment I thought he was going to drop the bowl. But with some amazingly fancy footwork, like a juggler with a tower of plates stacked on a stick, he regained his balance and plonked the bowl down on the table. 'Whew! That was close,' he gasped, white-faced. 'Could have been a disaster!'

'You okay?' I asked.

'A bit shaken but okay.'

‘How about some tea?’ I suggested.

‘Good idea,’ breathed Faan.

‘That would be nice,’ agreed Katie

I led the way down the passage, past the kitchen, which was infused with lingering breakfast smells, to the patients’ lounge, which was also at the back of the building.

It was a lot more comfortable than the Ward 697 common room, with modern décor and well-padded chairs, a large, almost brand new ping-pong table and a chilled water dispenser in one corner.

Faan looked around with approval. ‘Almost like a hotel. But something’s missing.’

‘What?’ I asked.

‘A piano.’

‘Would be nice. But I suppose one can’t have everything. Actually, there’s something else that’s missing.’

‘Tell me.’

‘Our little cockroach friends.’

‘Well, like the Boy Scouts my motto is: always be prepared.’ Faan reached into his pocket and produced a matchbox. ‘I thought Jimmy and Jemima might enhance our act. Talking to a matchbox would make it more convincing.’

‘You’re incorrigible!’ chided Katie with a grin.

‘I’m going to fetch the tea,’ said Faan over his shoulder, as he headed towards a small alcove nearby. In it there was a hot water urn and a melamine worktop with plastic cups, sugar, teabags, instant coffee and a carton of long-life milk. Faan made the tea in the cups, put them on a tray and carried it over to us.

At this point a sombre young woman in her late teens or early twenties, with untidy brown hair wandered into the lounge, her slippers scraping the floor. She was about to head off into a corner when Faan called out to her in a friendly voice. ‘Hi, why don’t you come and join us?’

She stopped in her tracks, peered over her granny glasses and then shuffled over.

‘What’s your name?’ Faan asked brightly.

‘Stella,’ she mumbled, the muscles around her right eye pulsing in a sudden tic. ‘Stella Alterskye.’

‘Faan Den Aap,’ said Faan, pressing her hand gently, ‘and this is my

wife, Katie, and this is Olly Watson.'

'Pleased to meet you.'

'Actually, I better be going,' said Katie.

'But you haven't had your tea,' objected Faan.

Stella's face reddened and her lips began to twitch. She looked around wildly. Suddenly she began shouting, 'But? Butt? *Butt!* Well, fuck my butt! *Fuck my butt!'* Then her eyes glazed over and she was silent for a while, her hands gripped together tightly in her lap.

We sat in stunned silence, not sure we'd heard correctly.

Then Stella began shaking her head from side to side very rapidly. 'Stretch my ass!' she yelled. 'And lick my slit. You can do that, can't you, *motherfucker?!'*

'Excuse me?' I reacted involuntarily.

Then she suddenly sprang up and hurried away. She sat by herself in a corner, her head bent over between her legs, her shoulders shaking.

Katie went over to her and began talking to her in soothing tones. After a while Katie took her by the hand and led her back to where we were sitting.

'I'm so, so sorry,' Stella sobbed. 'But I don't think you understand. You see, I'm a Tourette's sufferer.'

A single tear coursed down her cheek. 'I think I need to be on my own for a while,' she said, standing up. 'Please excuse me.'

Faan drained the last mouthful of tea from his plastic cup, rinsed it through his teeth, and then looked up at Katie and me. 'Well, out of respect for Stella, I obviously can't pretend to be a Tourette's sufferer as part of my pseudo-patient routine, so I'll have to switch to Plan B.'

'What's that?' I asked.

He reached into a carry bag and pulled out a deerstalker cap, a short cape, his ubiquitous waistcoat, and a curved clay pipe. 'Meet Sherlock Holmes, my dear Watson.'

'Isn't that a bit over the top?' I objected. 'I mean, Dr Moloi warned us to keep things simple. Anyway, why Sherlock Holmes?'

'Well, there was no such thing as political correctness in his day, so I can now say whatever I like. Also, he was bipolar like me.'

'But Sherlock Holmes is only a fictional character,' I pointed out.

'Well, most Americans firmly believe he was a real person, and these are supposedly sane people. So my apparent delusion that I'm the reincarnation of Sherlock Holmes no longer seems so far-fetched. And, my dear Watson, I

plan to relish the role! Which reminds me I'll need to shave and smarten up a bit.'

'What about your role as a crocodile hunter in Australia? Are you simply going to drop that?'

'Of course not. Some days I'll be Sherlock Holmes; on others I'll be Crocodile Dundee. I may even add more characters to my repertoire. You see, Multiple Personality Disorder is a bigger challenge. And as you know, my dear Watson, challenges are my forte. Also, I sometimes need to take a break from Holmes's archaic way of speaking. I imagine it gets a bit tedious.'

'Hmmm…' I murmured doubtfully. 'Well, I hope it works.'

'It shall, Watson, it shall!'

'So where do we go from here?'

'Obviously our aim now is to look for security weaknesses, and, if you'll pardon my lapse into modern vernacular, to take the piss out of the psychiatric staff, keeping them distracted, while we look for an opportunity to rescue the girls.'

His enthusiasm was infectious. 'Capital!' I replied, embracing the role of Holmes's plodding partner.

We were just finishing our tea when I saw Sister Munster striding towards us. 'Hi there,' she called out. 'Dr Stricker would like to see you.' She nodded at me, but without mentioning my name. 'He's conducting the usual admission interviews, and seeing that you arrived yesterday, he'll see you first.'

Sister Munster led me down the passage towards the front of the building and then stopped outside a door with gold lettering that announced: DR EARL STRICKER.

After she'd knocked twice, a voice called out, 'Come in.'

Sister Munster opened the door and steered me inside. 'This is Dr Watson,' she announced in a firm voice, 'He's one of our new patients.' She closed the door behind her as she left.

A thick-set middle-aged man with rimless glasses and unruly eyebrows looked up from behind his desk. He gave me a perfunctory nod but didn't smile.

'Sit down,' he said curtly, opening a file on his desk. 'So you're one of us, then?'

'I'm not sure I follow you, doctor,' I said guardedly.

'Well, you're a *doctor*, aren't you?'

‘Oh, I see what you mean. Actually, I have a doctorate in English literature,’ I lied.

‘Where did you study?’ He took off his glasses and began polishing them with a small cloth, while fixing me with a fishy stare.

My mind raced. I knew that if I gave the name of a legitimate university he would be able to check up on me. I decided to take a plunge into uncharted territory. ‘The American University of the United States,’ I said, citing a notorious diploma mill that sold online degrees without requiring study.

‘Oh,’ he sighed, rolling his eyes and blowing out his cheeks.

‘I see your referring doctor says you hear voices.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘She’s been talking to me for quite a while now.’

‘Your former wife?’

‘No, my dog.’

He raised his eyebrows. I saw a flicker of interest. ‘What does she say?’

‘Woof.’

‘Besides “Woof”?’

‘Woof, woof.’

Dr Stricker sighed. ‘I meant *talking.* You said she talked, didn’t you?’

‘Oh yes, she talks all right.’

‘Fine. Well, does she tell you to do bad things?’

He was obviously thinking of David Berkowitz, the serial killer known as ‘Son of Sam,’ who had claimed that his neighbour’s Labrador, Harvey, controlled him and had ordered him to shoot strangers.

‘No, not really. She tells me I should let her sleep on the couch – that sort of thing.’

He put a pudgy fist in front of his mouth to stifle a yawn.

‘I’m going to put you on an antipsychotic, Dr Watson. Risperdal should quieten the auditory centres in your brain.’

When I returned to the patients’ lounge, Katie had left, but Faan, wearing his deerstalker and cape, was still there. He’d poured himself another cup of tea and was smoking his curved pipe.

‘How’d it go?’ he asked me, raising his eyebrows as he sucked on his pipe.

‘Pretty well I think, but I had to do a lot of improvising.’ I gave him a blow-by-blow account of the interview.

‘I’m really impressed! Couldn’t do better myself.’

Sister Munster was calling from across the room. ‘Your turn now, Mr

Den Aap.'

Faan swivelled round and looked behind us. 'No one by that name here, it seems,' he called back to her.

Sister Munster marched up to us. 'I'm talking to *you!'* she hissed. 'Who else?'

Faan blew a stream of aromatic pipe-smoke in her direction, then stared at a spot just above her head. 'I'll have you know, Sister *Monster*, that I suffer from dyslexia.'

'What's that got to do with it?' she retorted, seemingly unaware of Faan's deliberate mispronunciation. 'If your name's not Den Aap, then what is it?'

'Holmes,' he replied matter-of-factly. 'Sherlock Holmes.'

Faan winked at me over his shoulder as he trailed after Sister Munster. At the door he turned and did a little pirouette, so that his cape flared out in a circle.

I poured myself another cup of tea and waited for him to return.

About twenty minutes later Faan sat down next to me. He was grinning from ear to ear.

'Well?' I prompted. 'How did it go?'

'Excellent, my dear Watson, excellent! I now have the measure of the man.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, when we reached Dr Stricker's door I could hear he was talking on the phone. Sister Munster said, "Wait outside until you hear the phone click off and then knock. Dr Stricker hates being disturbed." So I waited until she'd disappeared and then I peeped through the keyhole. I could see Dr Stricker holding the phone with one hand and picking his nose with the other. After each dig he wiped the bogey on the underside of his desk.'

'What a pig!

'So what is your measure of the man, as you put it?'

'Well, a surreptitious bogey wiper is a bogus fellow, if you'll pardon the pun. He has something to hide.'

'Hide what?' I prompted.

'I've no idea. But I intend to find out … Now let me continue with my story. After I heard the phone click off, I waited a minute or two and then knocked. He called me in brusquely and told me to sit down. Then I noticed him absently running his hands under the desk.'

'Like a criminal returning to the scene of his crime?'

‘Precisely. Then the index finger of his left hand went up to his nose. I suspected he was about to have another dig. At that point he must have remembered I was there and stopped, finger poised. “Anything you want to tell me?” he said. “Well, I’m writing a story,” I replied. “What’s it called?” he asked in a bored tone. “*The Great Bogey Mystery.*” I replied. “You mean about Humphrey Bogart’s love life?” “No”, I answered, “it’s about bogeys, or, as you Americans call them, ‘boogers’. It reveals all the strange places nose-pickers hide them.”

‘His eyes went glassy for a moment, and then he said, “I think we’re done now.”

‘And that was it?’

‘That was it. He couldn’t wait to get rid of me.’

I suspected that Faan might be heading for a manic episode. ‘Did you remember to bring your medication in with you?’

He glanced around to see if anyone was looking and then reached behind the sweatband of his deerstalker. ‘Here,’ he said revealing a white capsule in his hand. ‘I’ve stuck them between double bits of sticky tape. Mind if I take a swig of your tea?’

‘Not at all.’

He popped the pill into his mouth and drained the cup. ‘So far so good,’ he said. ‘But we are spies in an enemy’s country, Watson. These are much deeper waters than I’d thought!’

I’d noticed that the American patients, with the exception of Stella, seemed to stick together. They were polite enough, greeting Faan and me, but that was about as far as it went. Most of them looked fairly normal except for a pudgy faced young man with a narrow-brimmed black hat pulled down over the top of his ears, who kept on dunking his teabag up and down endlessly in his cup like a yo-yo. Eventually one of the others would get annoyed with him and say, ‘Cut it out, Cal, that’s enough!’

Over the next week or so all the other pseudo-patients arrived: first Petrus (who moved into the ward with Faan and me. He had a mysterious blue plastic toolbox into which he peeped periodically); then Beth, Jean and Imogen, who were all put in the same ward. I was happy to see that they all got on well together. Imogen’s voice had lost its strident, didactic tone, but, as I learned later, she could switch it on at will.

The last to arrive was Leah, who shared a ward with Stella and two obsessive-compulsive American girls, Maddie and Anna-Marie. Having

suffered from mental illness herself, Leah understood Stella's condition, taking her under her wing.

After Leah's interview, Faan, who'd been lurking around a corner of the passage, had overheard Dr Stricker talking to Sister Munster. "The voices that woman hears seem to speak in tongues," he told her. "She thinks it's a sign of the imminent arrival of the Messiah." "A classic case of End Times Delusion!" observed Sister Munster. "You got it!" agreed Dr Stricker with finality.

'Well,' said Faan, as he related the conversation to us, 'If jumping to the wrong conclusion regarding mental illness is so common, how much more easily do we misjudge so-called normal people?'

Then turning to Leah, Faan doffed his deerstalker. 'My dear woman, I commend you for your inspired choice of voices. What do you say, Watson?'

'Ingenious!' I said, 'Positively ingenious!'

'Why are you guys talking like that?' Leah wanted to know, squinting at us doubtfully. When we'd explained our new roles she hooted with laughter. 'I just love it!' she cried, 'but don't overdo it, boys.

Petrus never did tell us what voice he'd told Dr Stricker he was hearing, but he walked around opening and closing his plastic toolbox and exclaiming, 'Hello Mr Fly.'

Chapter 68

One morning we pseudo-patients had gathered in the dining room for breakfast. Stella had also joined us at our long table. Jean, in a nipple-hugging white T-shirt and tight blue shorts, squeezed in between Stella and me. The other American patients, including Cal, were hunched over a table on the other side of the room.

Bright morning sunlight was streaming in through the large bay window, and an appetising aroma of frying bacon and brewing coffee wafted through from the kitchen.

The neatly hand-written menu offered raisin bran crunch, papaya, eggs, bacon, sausage, fried green tomatoes, hash browns, waffles, orange juice, and coffee.

‘Pretty substantial,’ exclaimed Faan. ‘Which is all to the good. One can’t fight villains on an empty stomach!’

‘Let’s eat, then,’ I said. I led the way to the self-service counter and picked up a tray, helping myself to bacon, sausage, a large omelette, toast and a glass of orange juice. The others also did themselves proud.

We’d all finished our food and were drinking our tea or coffee, when Sister Munster marched up to our table. She was carrying a small briefcase. ‘Good morning,’ she began, ‘those of you who have cellphones with cameras, please indicate.’

Everyone except Petrus raised their hands.

‘Well, I’m sure you’ll understand that for security reasons camera phones are not permitted. So if you’ll be so kind as to remove your simcards and hand over your phones, I’ll provide you with camera-less ones for the duration of your stay.’

With a bit of grumbling, especially from Faan, we handed over our phones.

‘Oh, one last thing,’ Sister Munster added, ‘there’s occupational therapy this morning. So please meet in the patient’s lounge half an hour after you’ve had your medication.’

‘Turning to us, Beth said: ‘Hey, did any of you hear a man screaming last night?’

‘From where?’, Imogen asked.

‘I think from one of those concrete buildings at the back.

‘Maybe one of the druggies going through cold turkey,’ Jean suggested.

Then we were distracted by the sound of wheels rolling down the passage. Nurse Stubblewood was pushing the medications trolley.

‘Medication time,’ Sister Munster called out. ‘Please stand in line.’

Cal stood up and began to head out of the dining room. Nurse Stubblewood strode over to the door and blocked his exit.

‘Cal, come and get your medication,’ Sister Munster called out. But Cal ignored her and tried to push past Nurse Stubblewood.

Sister Munster gave a shrug and began walking towards Cal. She halted abruptly in front of him and sniffed. ‘When was the last time you took a shower, Cal?’

He pulled his hat lower over his ears but said nothing.

Sister Munster took him by the hand and tried to lead him to the medications trolley. But he pulled his hand away and stood in front of Nurse Stubblewood, glowering.

‘Well, Cal, if you won’t take your medication, we’ll have to put you in the restraining ward and give it to you the hard way,’ Sister Munster announced loudly for all to hear. ‘It’s your choice: pill or needle.’

When Cal failed to respond, Nurse Stubblewood grabbed him by the arm and dragged him down the passage.

Meanwhile, we pseudo-patients had been queuing next to the trolley patiently waiting for our medication. Our practicing with placebos now stood us in good stead. We pretended to swallow the pills that Sister Munster dished out, but deftly secreted them under our tongues.

About half an hour later we were seated in the patients’ lounge waiting for our occupational therapy class. The American patients were also there, but sitting some distance away. One of the men was leaning forward, his head clasped in his hands between his legs. Maddie got up and left the group and was sweeping crumbs – real or imagined – off all the tables. Anna-Marie was on the other side of the room vigorously polishing a door knob.

A few minutes later two young women breezed into the room. One was a tall redhead with freckles; the other a small bird-like blonde with sharp features.

‘Good morning!’ the redhead sang out. (I could tell she was American by her accent.) ‘My name is Faye Longley and this is Emma Denton. We’re both

occupational therapists and we'll be doing our best to entertain you!' She paused for a moment and smiled at her colleague. 'Actually, Emma also runs the library.'

Emma nodded and flashed us a friendly smile.

Over the next few minutes the women divided us into two groups: one that would go outside for 'horticultural therapy' (a fancy name for gardening); the other would move to the recreation room where the patients would be given a choice of various arts and crafts projects. The 'insiders' were Jean, Beth, Leah, Stella, Cal, Maddie and Anna-Marie. The 'outsiders' were Faan, Petrus, Imogen and me, as well as the three young American men, Jeb, Rob, and Ethan.

The Americans tagged along behind, saying very little. I learned later that Jeb, from a wealthy Boston family, had had one schizophrenic episode. Rob and Ethan had attempted suicide and were clinically depressed.

Emma led us outside across the car park and along a path past a sunken garden with a bird bath, to a large fenced-in field some distance from the main building. Most of the field, which was criss-crossed with straight paths, was level and prepared for planting. But here and there, there were outcrops of rocks almost hidden by low thorn bushes, like little green and brown islands. One level section was covered with spreading pumpkins, marrows and squashes and was bordered by several rows of mielies. The boundary on the northern side was part of the same fence that separated the former hotel from the three concrete buildings.

Emma halted beside a slatted wooden shed just inside the gate that opened into the field. She took a small garden spray off one of the shelves in the shed and began handing out gardening tools. Except for a pair of sharp-bladed pruning shears, which she put in the top pocket of her overalls, I noticed that all the tools were made of hardened black plastic. She gave us each a trowel and a small fork, as well as a refuse bag. Along one side of the shed were rows of seedlings in trays. Next to these were about a dozen 10kg bags of compost, stacked in neat piles. Four light-weight green wheelbarrows were propped against the shed.

'Well, there're lots of easy-to-grow vegetables to choose from,' Emma announced brightly. 'They're all labelled, so pick three or four sorts, one tray of each. You'll also be using one bag of compost. So put that in your wheelbarrow first.'

Faan, Imogen, Petrus and I crowded around the trays, reading the labels:

tomatoes, carrots, radishes, peas, green beans, lettuces, green peppers, and chillies.

After we'd made our choice we began loading the seedlings into our wheelbarrow.

The three Americans stood by until we'd finished loading before choosing theirs.

'Oh, one last thing,' Emma said, as we lifted the handles of our wheelbarrows. 'Here are some corn kernels (I believe you call them mielies). Just plant them in a row at the end of your vegetable patch. 'Corn-on-the-cob is always a special treat.' She gave each of us a small paper bag in which the mielie pips rattled around. Then she showed us the patches she wanted planted. The Americans chose a patch some distance away from us.

We dug for a while in silence. Imogen and I worked together on one patch, Faan and Petrus on another alongside ours. Overhead a black and yellow rose beetle circled us lazily in the shimmering air.

Emma came up to us and cleared her throat. 'Please carry on with what you're doing. I need to check the rose garden for aphids. It'll only take about five minutes. Okay?'

She picked up the spray and headed towards the far end of the garden.

She hadn't been gone long when I heard a faint whirring in the distance that grew louder. It was a helicopter approaching. About half a minute later it dipped out of the sky and landed on the flat roof of the largest concrete building. Three men in orange overalls with shaven heads quickly emerged. Their hands were tightly clasped behind their backs. Two men in civilian clothes walked behind, holding small black objects that looked like TV remotes. The pilot remained in the helicopter.

Faan reached into his pocket and pulled out a cellphone. He glanced around to see if anyone was looking, and then began to photograph the helicopter, as well as the men who were now entering the canopied stairway.

'I thought you'd handed in your camera-phone?' I remarked.

'I happened to have two!' Faan said dryly. 'Sister Munster didn't ask for a second one.'

In the distance I thought I saw Jeb watching Faan.

When Faan had finished filming, he turned his back to the others and called up a number on his cellphone. He grinned as he pressed "send".

'Well that takes care of that!' he said triumphantly. 'I'm sure this will mean a lot more to Drew and Mr Y than it does to us.'

We went on planting our seedlings for a while, and then Petrus turned to me. ‘Mr Olly, lots of snakes in dis place.’

‘You seen some?’

‘I hear.’

Suddenly there was a distant thumping, followed by what sounded like a muffled shout.

‘What was that?’ I asked Petrus.

‘Very bad people here.’ He pointed to the shipping container at the back of the property ‘They do bad tings to people inside that ting like locked-up spaza shop.’

‘What sort of things?’

‘Like in time of apartheid.’

Then with a shrug, Petrus picked up his tool box and wandered off, peering among the rocks in a nearby outcrop. He’d been away for only about five minutes when he returned smiling.

A few minutes later Emma also returned. ‘Everything okay?’

‘Fine,’ we pseudo-patients chorused.

The Americans remained silent.

‘I see you’ve planted all your seedlings. Gardening is a lot of fun, huh?

‘By the way, don’t you think we should make a scarecrow to keep birds away from your seedlings?’

‘Not a bad idea,’ I said.

‘I’ll give the project my blessing,’ said Faan, pompously. ‘As long as we can make one with a brain. Grey matter, not straw, like in *The Wizard of Oz,* is needed to outwit our feathered friends!’

‘Okay, that’s settled then,’ said Emma, ignoring Faan’s stipulation. ‘So I’ll ask Faye if you can make one when it’s your turn for OT.’

We pseudo-patients murmured our approval.

‘Okay, I think that’s enough for today,’ Emma announced. ‘Let’s pack it in now, folks.’

After we’d taken the tools and wheelbarrows back to the shed, we set off along the path towards the main building. A little distance from the bird bath Emma held up a hand. A small speckled bird with a splash of red on its neck landed on the edge of the bath, looked about for a moment, and then began ruffling its feathers in the water.

‘What sort of bird is that?’ Faan asked.

‘I’m not sure. Never seen one before. But we can check it out in

Roberts's book, *Birds of Southern Africa*. There's a copy in the library.'

'Mind if I come and browse around?' Faan asked.

'I'd like to come too,' I put in.

'You're welcome. But the library is closed during lunchtime between twelve and two. How about meeting me in the patients' lounge, just before two, and then I'll take you there.'

Chapter 69

Faan and I hadn't been waiting long in the patients' lounge when Emma came up to us with a friendly smile. 'Shall we go?'

We followed her down the passage to a stout wooden door at the back of the building. After she'd unlocked it, we entered what appeared to be a large added-on section. It had a high ceiling and long, lateral windows set above bookshelves that covered three walls. A wooden counter running almost the length of the fourth wall ended at a low swing door just to the left of a glass cubicle that housed a desk and a computer. I presumed this was Emma's workstation. In the centre of the room were two long polished wooden tables around which were seven or eight straight-backed chairs in matching dark wood.

'Have a seat,' said Emma, 'while I fetch the bird book.'

She was back in about half a minute with Roberts's *Birds of Southern Africa*. 'I think that little bird was a member of the finch family,' she said, placing the book before Faan.

'I'll peruse the illustrations,' said Faan, 'and see if I can identify it.'

While he was searching, I got up and walked around the library, which was stocked well enough to serve a sizeable school or college. There was a large non-fiction section, an equally large fiction one, (with a bias towards American literature), and several shelves of reference books.

'Ah, here it is. Number 855,' Faan called out. 'I think I've identified our avian bather: *Amadina fasciata*. However, it has a somewhat sanguinary popular name – the cut-throat finch!'

Emma peered over Faan's shoulder. 'Obviously, because the red feathers on its neck look like a splash of blood.'

'Talking about things red,' said Faan, 'do you happen to have copies of the Sherlock Holmes books, *The Red-Headed League* or *A Study in Scarlet?'*

'Actually, we have a volume of Conan Doyle's collected works. Let me fetch if for you.'

A moment later she returned with the book. 'Do you mind filling in a library card in the meantime and I'll sign it out when you leave. And if there's a book you can't find here, we can always order it on inter-library

loan.'

Her remark seemed innocent enough, but it seemed to indicate that she thought our stay at the Clinic might be quite a long one.

'Indeed, there is one,' said Faan nonchalantly. 'Would you like to jot it down?'

Emma fetched a notebook and sat down beside him.

'It's David Icke's, *Children of the Matrix: How an inter-dimensional race has controlled the world for thousands of years – and still does*.'

'Hmmm…You interested in conspiracy?'

'My good woman, to a practicing detective such as I, conspiracies are my bread and butter!'

Turning to Emma, I said, 'While I was browsing through your fiction section, I saw a copy of Alice Sebold's, *Almost Moon*. Have you read it by any chance?'

'Sure. But it's not as good as her earlier books like *Lucky* and *The Lovely Bones*. Actually, we have a young patient here who has read all her books. Alice Sebold is her favourite author.'

I immediately knew she was talking about Kristy, and I felt a surge of excitement. But I decided to play it carefully. 'You mean Anna-Marie or Maddie?'

'No, no. The girl I'm talking about isn't in your section, She's…' Emma hesitated for a moment. '…She's in the long-term therapy ward.'

'Where's that?' I asked innocently.

Again she hesitated. 'Ah … it's in the building next to the drug rehabilitation centre.'

'So why don't we ever see those patients?'

'Apparently, the treatment is still experimental, and like the patients in rehab, they're subject to a stricter regime. For example, they can't come here unaccompanied.'

'I see. Actually, we haven't seen Dr Trafficant yet. He's the director of the Clinic, isn't he?'

'Correct. But he spends most of his time in the long-term therapy ward. Like the staff working in rehab, he usually comes over only for staff meetings.'

'Oh, one other thing. Do you keep newspapers and magazines here?'

'Sure. The newspapers are over there.' Emma pointed to a rack in a far corner. 'And the magazines are on the other side of the shelves nearest to the

newspapers.'

'Mind if I look through them?'

'Not at all. Take your time. I've some work to do. If you need me, I'll be in my cubicle.'

Faan remained at the table, immersed in the Conan Doyle book, while I browsed through the newspapers and magazines. The only story of interest to me was a headline in the *International Herald Tribune:*'TERROR DEVICE ON US SOIL?'

WASHINGTON: According to a senior intelligence source, the Department of Homeland Security's anti-terror security net may have been breached and a powerful device smuggled into the United States. The source, which is well known to this newspaper and has proved reliable in the past, would not comment on whether the device was conventional or nuclear, only that it is understood to have come from a country in the Southern hemisphere and entered the US overland through the border with Mexico. Its present whereabouts could not be confirmed, raising the possibility that it has not been found. Asked for its comment, the Department said the report was 'speculative', but did not issue an outright denial.

I went on leafing though magazines, but about half an hour later I had an urge to go to the toilet. I tapped on the glass of Emma's cubicle. 'Where's the…?

'The bathroom? It's that door over there next to the entrance.'

As the door was unmarked I realised that there was only one toilet for both sexes. I opened the door and immediately I sensed an 'aura trace' of Kristy. With a mounting feeling of excitement I locked the door. Then I had an idea. I lifted the lid off the cistern and peered inside. It was a perfect place in which to hide messages. I felt the underside of the brass inlet valve. It was dry. This meant that a piece of chewing gum, with a message attached, would cling to it unseen.

Chapter 70

It was a warm pleasant evening after a late afternoon shower, and swarms of flying ants were beating their wings against the window panes of the patients' lounge. All we pseudo-patients were in a good mood.

'Let's watch some television after dinner,' suggested Faan – a suggestion to which everyone agreed, except Petrus, who said he wanted to catch flying ants. 'Good to eat,' he explained. 'Taste like butter.' He opened a window and dozens of flying ants flew in!

For a few moments Faan watched Petrus as he scooped up the insects and dropped them into his toolbox.

Faan shook his head before continuing: 'Also, I suppose we need to find out what's happening about the election. And perhaps after the news there'll be something more entertaining.'

Just then my camera-less cellphone rang. When I heard it was Drew, I excused myself and took the call at a secluded end of the dining room. 'You've no idea how valuable that info Faan sent me is,' Drew said. 'I forwarded it to Prometheus and I've already had a report back. I'll visit you tomorrow and bring you up to speed.'

After dinner we went through to the patients' lounge in time for the news. The Americans were already seated in front, so we took seats a couple of rows behind them.

It was only a week before the election, which was now the focus of the news. The latest development was that a greatly increased number of American troops with helicopters at the ready were deployed on the Botswana side of the border with South Africa, while several of the vessels of the American naval task force had sailed up to Port Elizabeth and Durban, the others remaining off Cape Town, where they continued with what observers described as 'aggressive naval manoeuvres'.

It came as no surprise, then, that President Phiri had begun to tread carefully once again, calling on his supporters to 'respect democracy' and to 'avoid violence'.

Chapter 71

It was Sunday an open day for visitors, and a strong wind was sending dark low clouds scudding across the sky. The temperature was dropping and it looked like rain. Faan, Jean, Leah, Petrus and I were all expecting visitors, so at around ten thirty we grabbed some coffee and waited in the patients' lounge.

Lana was the first to arrive. She was dressed casually in a breast-hugging blue jersey and tight jeans, with navy blue sneakers trimmed with white. She gave both Jean and me a lingering hug and a kiss and then took a seat between us.

'Coffee?' I asked her.

'That would be nice,' she said, flashing me a warm smile.

Just then Katie arrived and Faan followed me to fetch her coffee.

A few minutes later Cy and Weddo arrived. After a round of greetings we were soon seated around two tables pushed together in a quiet corner of the room. All four of our visitors were well aware of our mission at the Clinic, so I came quickly to the point. I told them I'd learned from the librarian that there was a young girl in the long-term therapy ward whose favourite author was Alice Sebold. 'She's also Kristy's favourite author,' I said, 'so I just *know* it's Kristy!'

Cy raised an eyebrow.

The subject now turned to possible ways of rescuing the girls. I didn't say anything about leaving messages for Kristy in the library toilet, as I hadn't worked out how to tell her of my plan.

'I know some pretty smart guys who are members of a crack crime prevention unit,' said Cy. 'If anyone could stage a successful rescue raid – that's if the girls are actually here – it would be them.'

'I'm afraid we're dealing with some really desperate people,' I countered, 'who probably wouldn't hesitate to kill the girls if there was any risk of being caught. So I think we must proceed with extreme caution.'

'Hmmm … point taken,' said Cy, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. 'Any other suggestions?'

'Even Sherlock Holmes is stumped,' said Faan, somewhat glumly. 'I

don’t think we’ve enough information yet to formulate a proper plan.’

‘I got one idea,’ said Petrus suddenly. ‘I scare bad people with snake. Make them run away.’

There was a long silence. I sensed that no one took Petrus’s suggestion seriously but were too polite to say so.

Cy broke the silence. ‘By the way, Leah, I’ve brought a letter for you. From the return address I see it’s from Loren. Would you like me to fetch you some coffee while you read it?’

‘Yes, please, Cy.’

Those of us who hadn’t had coffee yet or wanted a refill took this as a cue.

As I was on my way back to the table with coffee for Lana and Jean, I noticed that Leah was frowning.

‘What’s wrong, Leah?’ I asked.

She gave a long sigh. ‘Loren has joined a Jewish polyamory group in New York. They’re all vegetarians and it seems she’s become one too.’ Leah took a sip of coffee, then pursed her lips. ‘I mean, I can see the point of going vegetarian when kosher meat is so expensive, but this *poly* thing …’

‘Actually,’ put in Jean, ‘by being in a polyamory group, Loren has a better chance of finding her Authentic Self, in other words, of discovering who she really is and what her emotional needs are *before* she gets married, if in fact that’s her ultimate choice.’

Leah gave a little shake of her head but said nothing.

‘I think you need to be a special kind of person to succeed in a polyamorous relationship,’ said Lana. ‘You need to be able to compromise, to communicate well, and have the ability to share. And of course you need to be able to commit.’

‘So what’s your view on marriage, Lana?’ I asked.

She smiled at me enigmatically. ‘Well, I would say that monogamous marriage would work only once men have become real men again, partners that women can respect. And of course a man can only succeed in a polyamorous relationship if he earns that respect. So perhaps polyamory may play a useful role in redefining and healing modern relationships.’

Chapter 72

At around eleven the following morning while we pseudo-patients were relaxing in the patients' lounge, Sister Munster waved to me from the doorway, calling out that I had a visitor.

It was Drew.

I would have preferred if the others could have joined us, but we didn't want to risk appearing conspiratorial, so Drew and I sat together at a low table, some distance from them. I fetched a couple of cups of coffee and then I told Drew about my idea of using the toilet cistern in the library as a 'drop' to communicate with Kristy. But that still left the problem of how to inform Kristy of our plan.

'Let me think,' said Drew, drumming his fingers on the table. He took a sip of coffee and then stared into the plastic cup as if seeking inspiration. 'I know,' he said at last. 'Couldn't Simes use his model plane to drop a note to Kristy when she's in the exercise yard?'

'But wouldn't that be too much of a risk?' I countered. 'I mean, if one of the Clinic staff spotted the plane it might alert them. You yourself said we're dealing with professionals.'

'Look, Olly. Time is running out. Of course it's a risk, but it's a risk we'll just have to take. Maybe if Simes does the drop on a day when members of that model aircraft club are flying their planes, then if someone spots his plane, they'll probably think it's just one that's strayed off course.'

'Hmmm … Not a bad idea.'

'Well, let me contact Simes and run it past him. If he says he can do it, then we're in business. In the meantime, would you like to write a note to Kristy?'

'I'll do it right now if you like,' I said with mounting excitement.

Drew tore a page out of the back of his pocket diary and handed it to me. After I'd explained to Kristy how we could exchange messages, I ended by saying, 'Hopefully, see you soon, my love.'

'G'day mate,' said Faan slapping me on the back. 'Thought I'd give

Sherlock a rest this afternoon.' He gave the corks on his Crocodile Dundee hat a shake.

We fetched two cups of coffee and sat in a quiet corner of the patients' lounge. I quickly told Faan about the plan to exchange messages with Kristy.

'Reckon it's a fair go,' he said.

He took a mouthful of coffee and rinsed it around his mouth. 'On second thoughts, you may well be right. I get the feeling Dr Stricker is involved and that he's part and parcel of the menace, as you call it. We'll know soon enough if we succeed in getting his gander up. You see, mate, angry people drop their guard.'

'Makes sense.'

A few minutes later Nurse Stubblewood began moving the chairs in the patients' lounge to form a large circle. 'In case you don't know, group therapy is at two o'clock,' he announced gruffly.

About five minutes later Dr Stricker strode into the room followed by Sister Munster. They both took seats to the left of us and Dr Stricker began going through what looked like sheaves of notes on his clipboard.

Stella sat on the right side of Faan. She turned and smiled at us shyly. Then she took two earplugs out of a small yellow box and stuffed them in her ears. Anna-Marie and Maddie sat on the other side of Stella, their hands periodically fidgeting in their laps.

Petrus was the last to arrive and, clutching his toolbox, took a seat on the opposite side of the circle of chairs.

After everyone was seated, Dr Stricker stood up and walked to the centre of the circle. 'Good afternoon everyone! Welcome to group therapy. What we'll be doing this afternoon is giving you an opportunity to tell some stories and generally to voice your concerns.'

A long silence.

'What about you, Ethan?' Dr Stricker asked. 'Anything to say?'

Ethan ignored the question.

'Ethan. I'm talking to you.'

Ethan suddenly stood up and began flailing his arms about and shouting. 'Don't you understand, any of you? My problem is that the world is fucked! *Really fucked!* What I need, no one anywhere can give me. I'm only here because my parents sent me.'

'Well, Ethan, perhaps we can discuss that later in private therapy?'

'Maybe,' said Ethan doubtfully. 'But it still won't do any good. You

can’t fix this fucked-up world. Nobody can.’

‘Hmmm… And you, Cal, have you been taking your medication?’

Cal stuck his tongue out at Dr Stricker and pulled his hat down over his eyes. Despite further promptings, Cal stayed mute.

Faan leaned towards me and whispered, ‘I wonder whether…’

Doctor Stricker frowned in our direction. ‘Yes Mr Den Aap? You have something to say?’

Faan cracked his knuckles loudly.

‘Tell me, then, Mr Den Aap, if you were discharged tomorrow, what would your plans be?’

‘Simple. I would open a recycling plant to reprocess used ear buds.’

Suppressed laughter came from someone on the other side of the room.

‘But would that be cost-effective?’ Dr Stricker asked, with a note of irony.

‘Of course. It’s the answer to global warming.’

‘I don’t see the connection.’

‘You wouldn’t. You’re a psychiatrist!’

‘So do you think psychiatrists see things differently to other people?’

‘Of course. A person’s daily occupation determines how they look at things. For example, an estate agent looks at your house as a sales prospect, a cannibal checks to see how meaty your thighs are; a psychiatrist examines you for signs of pathology. He thinks he can see inside your head, but he can’t.’

‘Good point, Mr Den Aap, good point. Unfortunately, psychiatry is not an exact science – *yet*. But we at the Clinic may be able to make a modest contribution to remedying that situation in the near future, as a result of research we are conducting in…’ Dr Stricker seemed to check himself.

‘Well, let’s move on to story-telling. Anyone got a story to tell us?’

Jeb’s hand went up.

‘Yes, Jeb.’

‘I want this show to end.’

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Dr Stricker.

‘You know exactly what I mean,’ said Jeb darkly. ‘You’re one of the chief actors in this reality show you’re televising about me. You’re all actors, every one of you! Even the new patients are actors. In fact, they’re only pretending to be mentally ill!’

Faan suddenly swapped hats, putting on his deerstalker. ‘My good man,

you're the impostor! In fact, you're trying to steal the role I'm rehearsing for my cinematic debut, *Truman Show Two*, in which Sherlock Holmes unmasks the conspirators responsible for this charade!'

Jeb gulped, rolled his eyes, and sat down and said nothing more.

'It's very apparent to me that neither of you have been taking your medication,' Dr Stricker said sternly, shaking a finger at Jeb and Faan. 'Do you know what we do with patients who don't take their medication?'

'Put them on a diet of caviar and champagne,' offered Faan facetiously.

'Not quite, Mr Den Aap. We put them in the restraining ward where Dr Trafficant gives them electro-convulsive therapy. I can assure you it's not a pleasant experience, especially if you're not sedated.'

'Well, there you have it!' cried Faan triumphantly. 'The man has practically admitted that this establishment is not what it seems. What else are you hiding, Dr Stricker?

'I don't have to answer your questions, Mr den Aap. You're a patient, not an interrogator.'

'Interrogator?' repeated Faan, ramming the point home. 'Well, you'd obviously know more about that than I do ... I think I better take a look around, starting with that container.'

Faan got up and headed for the door. Dr Stricker swivelled his eyes from Nurse Stubblewood to the doorway and back again. Taking the cue, Nurse Stubblewood marched across and barred Faan's way, then frog marched him back to his seat.

Without missing a beat, Faan continued. 'So what you're saying, Dr Stricker, is that this is actually a torture facility, not a psychiatric clinic, and that Dr Trafficant is the chief torturer!'

There was angry muttering among patients and pseudo-patients alike, and for a moment I thought I saw fear in Dr Stricker's eyes. He glowered at Faan for a long moment. Finally, he said. 'I'll leave it to you to find out, Mr Den Aap…'

Chapter 73

The next day Faan told me that Dr Stricker had obviously ordered a change in his medication. Instead of the usual small white pill, he was now given a long, purple capsule that he duly hid under his tongue and spat out later.

In order not to arouse suspicion, Faan decided to play it cool for a while, walking around with a bland expression, nodding amiably at everyone.

Nevertheless, I sensed that Faan had been skating on very thin ice, so in order to shift attention away from him I decided that it was my turn to exhibit bizarre behaviour. I took to carrying the shaving mirror with me everywhere, peering into it periodically and pretending to talk to it.

Faan complimented me on my acting.

'I'm not acting,' I said emphatically.

Faan gave me a funny look. 'Good heavens, Watson, isn't that taking things a bit far?!'

Drew paid me another visit one morning a couple of days after his earlier visit. 'Good news, Olly,' he said, as soon as we'd settled ourselves in the patients' lounge with cups of coffee. 'I phoned Simes straight after my last visit and asked him if his model plane could make the drop. He said "no problem". All I had to do was give him the time Kristy and her friend would be in the exercise yard on a day when the model plane hobbyists were meeting and he'd coordinate the drop. In the meantime, I gave him your note to Kristy.

'Meanwhile, Prometheus has checked the real time satellite images and says two girls can be clearly seen playing frisbee or basketball every morning in the yard at around eleven. Simes has contacted the hobbyists and they say they are having another meet today. The weather looks perfect. So today, Olly, is the day!'

I felt a rush of adrenaline. 'Great! Well, maybe we can take a walk around the parking lot at around eleven and see Simes's plane in action?'

Drew checked his watch. 'Right. That's in about forty-five minutes.'

‘By the way, Drew, I saw an interesting new report in the Clinic library.’

I told him about the headline in *The International Herald Tribune* claiming that a device had been smuggled into the United States.

‘I’m aware of the report, and if it’s true it’s very worrying.’

‘Any info on the device itself?’

‘Well, it’s probably one of the Project Phoenix ones. If so, it would be nuclear. President Koonce mistakenly believes he has an impenetrable security net in place, but I’m sceptical.’

‘So what happens next?’

‘I’m not sure. For what it’s worth I think that President Phiri’s Mid East pals will soon be issuing demands. But you never know with these fanatics. They could just detonate it without any prior warning.’

‘That *is* serious! Is there nothing that can be done?’

‘Not much. Once the device is in the country, it’s like looking for a needle in a haystack.’

‘Whew! That’s bad. And Phiri? Could the smuggled nuke be used as a bargaining chip to help him make a comeback?’

‘It can’t be ruled out. But frankly I think he’s served his purpose and his paymasters will leave him to sort out his own problems. Also, he’s so boxed in by conventional American forces that he has no room to manoeuvre – at least not at this stage – certainly not unless he wins the election.’

Drew checked his watch. ‘I think we’ve got time for another cup of coffee before eleven, haven’t we?’

‘Sure.’

After we’d fetched the coffee and settled in our chairs again, Drew smiled broadly. ‘There’s still something more to tell you, Olly, but it’s nothing to do with politics.’

‘What?’

‘Jill and I are getting married.’

‘Great news!’ I exclaimed. ‘When?’

‘No date yet. We’re waiting for the dust to settle after this operation, and then we’ll work something out.’

We carried on with small talk until a few minutes before eleven, and then strolled out into the car park, the gravel crunching underfoot. We stopped at the far end of the car park where we had a clear view of the concrete buildings at the back. I knew that beyond the walls of the smaller building, Kristy and Merrill were probably playing basketball or frisbee.

Then somewhere to the north-west I could hear a sound like mini lawn mowers.

‘Must be the model planes,’ said Drew. ‘Keep your eyes skinned.’

The planes were making a circling sound that every now and then would grow louder and then retreat. I judged them to be only a few hundred metres away.

We waited in silence staring in the direction of the sound. Then suddenly I spotted a small grey model aircraft flying towards us. I recognised it as Simes’s. It flew overhead and as it approached the small concrete building, it slowed. A millisecond later a small object dropped from its belly.

‘Right on target!’ cried Drew. ‘I saw it drop towards the centre of the building which is where the exercise yard is located.’

By now the little grey plane was heading back in the direction of the hobbyists.

‘Mission accomplished!’ declared Drew.

‘Hope you’re right.’

‘I’ve spoken to Prometheus and he’s organising a helicopter rescue for the girls. The helicopter will be the same model with the same markings as the one Faan photographed. In other words it’s the same strategy that those terrorists used to target the FBI Building.’

Chapter 74

I visited the library late that afternoon and chatted to Emma for a while. I sensed that she was a decent person and not part of any criminal conspiracy. Still, I wasn't taking any chances. I'd been tempted to ask her when the patients from the long-term therapy ward visited the library, but decided against it. I took my time reading the newspapers before checking the cistern in the toilet.

There was no message yet.

The following morning was again O.T. This time the groups swapped around so the former 'inside group' did gardening, and we 'outsiders' did arts and crafts.

Faan, who was wearing his Sherlock Holmes hat, whispered to me, 'I hate having to do this to such a nice young woman, but if I can get her gander up she may – to mix metaphors – let a cat or two out of the bag!'

Faye Longley greeted us brightly and then led our group to the recreation room. 'Well, there are lots of things you can choose from,' she began. 'There's painting, clay modelling, origami, papier mache, gluing seashells to make ornaments, designing greeting cards, and moulding coloured candles.'

Jeb, Ethan and Rob decided to work together on a large water colour poster.

'I believe we shall be constructing an avian frightener,' Faan called out loudly.

'An avian frightener? I'm not sure I follow you.'

'In common parlance, my good woman, a scarecrow.'

'Oh, I see,' trilled Faye. 'Emma told me about it and I've got everything you need. Would a couple of you like to help me carry?'

Faan and I followed her to a large walk-in cupboard, where we fetched two broomsticks, some old clothes, a floppy felt hat, an off-white heart-shaped cushion, a scuffed pair of children's soccer boots, a pair of gardening gloves, socks, and some rags for stuffing.

I fixed the broomsticks together to make a cross frame; Imogen sewed an old jacket and a pair of patched jeans over the frame; and Petrus stuffed rags inside to fill out our scarecrow's body. Faan worked on the feet, hands and

head.

'Hey, this cushion I'm using for the head has a zip,' called out Faan. 'I think I may have a spare brain somewhere, so when I find it I'll just slip it in.'

Faye shot Faan an indulgent look and grinned. 'Well, now you've finished, all we need is a name for him.'

'Perhaps "Todd" would be appropriate?' suggested Faan innocently.

A shadow seemed to cross Faye's face. 'Ah … actually, that's Dr Trafficant's name.'

'All the better,' countered Faan. 'I'm sure he scares a lot more things than crows...'

Faye paled visibly and looked uncomfortable for several moments. 'All right folks. I think that's enough for today. You can put your scarecrow in the garden now.'

About half an hour after lunch I visited the library again. This time I sensed a much stronger 'aura trace' of Kristy. With mounting excitement I waited until I'd spent enough time reading newspapers and magazines before heading for the toilet. I carefully lifted the lid off the cistern and felt under the inlet valve. There was something round and smooth attached with a blob of chewing gum. It was a small lapel badge, the kind you get in Christmas crackers. The catch phrase said: *I do whatever the little voices tell me to do.* A tightly folded piece of paper was stuffed into the hollow of the badge. I prised it out and smoothed it open, revealing a tiny lock of blonde hair tied together with a piece of pink cotton. I immediately recognised Kristy's neat handwriting in pencil.

'My very dearest Olly,' she began, 'I always knew you'd try and find me, but after all this time I was starting to lose hope. I could hardly believe it when that model plane dropped your message! Dr Trafficant uses hypnosis to condition us, but as you know hypnosis doesn't work on me. So I just fake whatever he expects. One time when Dr Trafficant thought I was under, and he was discussing his plans with Mrs Eberhardt, I heard him calling us "Presidential Models". Unfortunately, the hypnosis worked on Charlize and she's already been sent to America. Now they think Merrill and I are almost ready, so we could be sent to America any day now. So you guys better hurry!'

There's so much more to tell, my sweet, but that will have to wait. Please

leave another message soon.

Yours, as always, Kristy.
P.S. I've never stopped loving you!

I'd come prepared with scraps of paper, so I quickly penned a reply. I told Kristy that she and Merrill should continue exercising in the yard at the usual times and to be ready to be rescued by helicopter at very short notice.

I walked out into the car park and found a quiet spot at the far end under a spreading acacia tree where I phoned Drew on my cellphone. I told him everything Kristy had told me. 'This is extremely serious,' he said. 'Although Prometheus and I suspected that Trafficant and his fellow conspirators were involved in something big, this is much, much bigger than we ever thought. I'm going to contact Prometheus right away, and when I've heard from him I'll either visit or SMS you.'

Feeling a lot better now that things were finally moving, I went through to the patient's lounge where I found Faan and Jean having coffee. Fetching a cup too, I told them what Kristy had written.

'Poor girl!' exclaimed Jean

'So what do you think we should do now? I asked. 'I mean about Trafficant & Co?'

'Patience, my dear Watson, patience,' counselled Faan (now in Sherlock Holmes mode). 'All things come to those who wait.

'I've just remembered,' he went on, 'I'd forgotten to put a spare brain into our scarecrow so that he's properly equipped to outwit those hungry birds. Maybe it's also time to change the water in the goldfish bowl.' With a shrug, he dashed off to the ward, emerging a few minutes later lugging the bowl. He staggered down the passage and out through reception.

'Where are you going with that?' Sister Munster called after him.

'Fetching water from the bird bath,' he puffed. 'I need standing water, not tap water. The chlorine would kill Sardine and Tuna.'

'Oh, well, I suppose it's all right,' she sighed grudgingly.

When he returned, I played along, asking him if he'd given the scarecrow a brain.

'Oh, yes,' he replied with a mysterious smile. 'A large lump of grey matter.'

Chapter 75

"My premise is that the CIA was looking for the ultimate security device short of assassination. They already have bribery, blackmail and murder to control people. But there are still too many honest men who would talk, and if you murder them you leave their bodies around. Erase memories – that would be the best." – Alan Scheflin, *The Mind Manipulators*

Next morning while I was having coffee in the patients' lounge with Faan and Jean, Sister Munster announced that I had visitors. Drew and a shortish, well-built man in his late thirties or early forties strode towards us. The man was wearing a brown tweed jacket and corduroys and looked like what I imagined an American academic would look like. 'Dean Mumby,' he said, shaking my hand warmly.

'Alias Prometheus,' put in Drew with a knowing smile.

'Pleased to meet you,' I said, opting for American usage.

After I'd introduced Faan and Jean, I turned to our visitors. 'Would you like some coffee?'

They both agreed, and after we'd fetched cups and settled down around a low table, Drew turned to Dean. 'Well, now, it's over to you, old pal.'

Dean tapped his mouth with the back of his hand, stifling a yawn. 'Jet lag,' he explained with an embarrassed grin. He took a big gulp of coffee.

Finally, he began. 'Well, after I received confirmation that your two friends were being illegally detained here, this provided an important piece in a complex puzzle that's still not quite complete. In fact, what I'm about to tell you is a long and very disturbing story…' He paused and glanced around before continuing. 'Firstly, after analysing the recordings Mr Y made, it was clear that the voices in Urdu and Pashto were those of terror suspects who've been detained for interrogation. This clinic is merely one of a chain of outsourced detention and interrogation centres in secret locations around the world run on behalf of the CIA. Since the increasing criticism of Guantanamo Bay, their number has increased dramatically.'

'Surely you're not allowed to disclose this sort of information,' objected

Faan.

‘Normally, not, but when there is evidence of a serious crime committed by Agency personnel, more or less anything is permitted to bring them to justice.’

‘I see,’ said Faan.

‘But what about Kristy and Merrill?’ I put in.

‘The kidnapping of the girls is a so-called rogue project, piggy-backing on the detention of the terror suspects. As you already know, it’s run by a special unit known as Force-X, headed by Mrs Arista Eberhardt and Dr Todd Trafficant. But somewhere along the line, the two projects’ roles were reversed, and the processing of the girls became the main focus. So basically the detentions of low-level suspects was camouflage for the rogue project.’

‘So what’s the motive?’ I asked with a growing sense of alarm.

‘I suspect it could be part of the so-called “Monarch Programme”, a spin-off of the CIA’s MK-Ultra mind control project, where young girls were apparently forcibly conditioned over many years from early childhood to eventually become companions, or so-called “Presidential Models”, for political high-ups, including presidents, hence the name. But let me emphasise that although there are strong suspicions, nothing has yet been conclusively proved.’

‘Why “Monarch”?’

‘It’s a reference to the Monarch butterfly that starts off as a dull chrysalis and is slowly transformed into a beautiful creature. The girls are supposed to undergo a similar transformation.’

‘You say there are suspicions, Dean, but how much could be true?’

‘There’s lots of stuff about the Monarch Programme on the Internet, but it’s difficult to separate fact from fiction.’

‘You mean like David Icke’s books?’ put in Faan.

Dean shot him a wary look before replying. ‘Actually the Icke books are mild compared to this. Several women who claim to have escaped from the programme say “Monarch” victims are subjected to trauma-based programming, where they are placed under tremendous psychological pressure, if not actual abuse. As a defence mechanism, the victim’s mind splits into multiple personalities, or alters. Each alter can then be accessed by a handler using a trigger word and used for a different purpose. Besides providing sexual favours for top politicians, these include acting as a courier of top secret documents, spying, and even assassination.’

‘Like the Manchurian Candidate?’ Jean put in.

‘Exactly. But there’s one book on the subject that has the ring of truth. It’s called *The Monarch Conspiracy* by Phyllis Marks. There are no outrageous claims, and the girls aren’t raised from childhood to become sex slaves. They’re kidnapped as young adults in foreign countries and then transported to America, after being brainwashed in a facility like this.’

‘And the terror detainees … what happens to them?’

‘After their interrogation is completed, they’re subjected to a special form of shock treatment, as well as hypnotism and drugs to erase their memories. They end up virtual zombies, and then they’re shipped to the United States among returning psychiatric patients. After that they’re detained in special psychiatric hospitals for months or even years before being handed to allied intelligence services in Pakistan and Jordan for “final processing”.’

‘Who at the Clinic is part of all this?’ I asked.

‘Both Dr Trafficant and Dr Stricker who’re former CIA psychiatrists, as well as Sister Munster and Nurse Stubblewood. But the latter two are at a much lower level and don’t know the full story. The other staff members are all clean.’

‘So are you still with the CIA, Dean?’ Faan asked bluntly.

Dean steepled his fingers together and looked at each of us in turn. ‘Yes, I’m still with the CIA, but I’m not sure for how much longer … There’s a struggle going on for the soul of the Agency – the so-called “Politicals” versus the “Professionals”. Right now the Politicals, who are mostly Neocon sympathisers, seem to be winning. If they do, I’m out.

‘You see, I joined the CIA to protect America from outside enemies. But now I’m convinced that the biggest threat to America is from inside the country, not just from the Politicals in the CIA, but from the government itself. It’s as if they’re all run by Kafka!

‘But most Americans are decent people and would be appalled if they knew what was really going on. Let me emphasise that this is an emergency, where the rules need to be bent when necessary. You three are essentially undercover members of the rescue team, and you wouldn’t be able to work effectively unless you knew the full story, and more importantly, of the dangers involved.’

Chapter 76

"Politics gives guys so much power that they tend to behave badly around women. And I hope I never get into that." – Bill Clinton, former U.S. President

The following morning while I was on my way to join the other pseudo-patients for coffee in the patients' lounge, I saw a familiar figure in a white medical trouser suit striding towards me. The body language was unmistakeable. I felt a sudden chill. It was Mrs Eberhardt! She seemed to break stride as she drew closer, but although she glanced at me, there wasn't a flicker of recognition.

I had just sat down at the table where the others were sitting, when my cellphone beeped. It was an SMS from Drew. It said: PICKUP TOMORROW 11H00.

A few minutes later Sister Munster put her head around the doorway. 'Would you please come with me, Dr Watson?' she called.

I began to get a bad feeling. My instincts told me to get rid of the cellphone as soon as possible, so I passed it to Faan under the table. However, I decided to play it cool and I followed her down the passage in silence. She suddenly stopped outside the restraining ward. The bad feeling increased and I sensed someone behind me. I turned and saw Nurse Stubblewood standing there. His hands were on his hips, shoulders squared, blocking any escape. The door opened and he prodded me inside. I found myself in a dimly lit room slightly larger than our dormitory ward, with three narrow beds, across which lay three or four stout straps with buckles. Mrs Eberhardt and the American man I'd seen at Kristy's 'funeral' were standing in the centre of the room. The man, who was also wearing a white medical uniform, studied me with stony, pale eyes. He smiled at me knowingly with tight lips. 'Todd Trafficant,' the man announced, taking a step forward. Turning towards Mrs Eberhardt, he added, 'I believe you two have met.'

Mrs Eberhardt inclined her head slightly but remained tight-lipped.

'Actually, Mrs Eberhardt tells me you've been sticking your nose into our

business, asking questions about Mrs Bombeck, to name one example. There are others that I won't go into now. You see, Mr Watson, our mission here is to safeguard the interests of important people in the United States government, so we can't allow nosy parkers to threaten them. That's why you're going to be our guest for a while…'

He nodded towards Nurse Stubblewood, who sprang forward and grabbed me in a vice-like grip. I struggled, but it was no use; the man was built like an ox. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Mrs Eberhardt readying the straps on one of the beds. Dr Trafficant seized my legs and Nurse Stubblewood gripped my arms, and between the two of them they hoisted me onto the bed. While they held me down, Mrs Eberhardt fastened the straps across my body and on my wrists and ankles.

'Comfortable now?' enquired Dr Trafficant with a smirk. 'You don't mind my not calling you "Doctor" I hope, as I understand your doctorate was purchased online?'

I tried to move, but I was trussed as tightly as a chicken.

'What's your game?' I snarled through clenched teeth.

'Game? This is no game, *Mr* Watson. This is a very serious business.'

'You're right. Kidnapping *is* a very serious business. And why are you holding Kristy against her will?'

'Ah, the delectable Miss Minnaar. His knowing smile had a wolfish edge. 'She's in very capable hands. All her needs, both physical and mental, are being well taken care of.'

Before I realised what was happening he'd stuck a needle in my arm. 'Just a mild sedative to help you relax …' Then he stood back and watched me for a couple of minutes in silence.

I began to feel light-headed and I was no longer conscious of the restraining straps. My mind, however, remained alert.

When Dr Trafficant saw the sedative was taking effect, he leaned over me. 'Perhaps I should do the talking now, Mr Watson.' His voice was soft and reassuring. 'You see,' he continued, 'all the great men in history have had companions, lovers, mistresses … call them what you will. Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, all had them. In modern times, many European leaders like Francois Mitterrand and Silvio Berlusconi had mistresses as a matter of course, indeed as a given right.' He clapped his hands once lightly and rubbed them together several times in what seemed like a gesture of approval. 'So why do so many men in positions of power require sex on the side?'

He didn't wait for an answer. 'The reason is that men of absolute power believe they're entitled to absolute access to women! And also because, like ordinary cheaters in suburbia, they think they can get away with it. In a word, power is *sexy*. And the aura of power makes even ugly men seem attractive.

'So Presidents consider extramarital sex a privilege, a perk of office, like the kings of old … except in those days there were no investigative reporters, no scandal magazines, no electronic bugging. Today, you can't take a chance with a Marilyn Monroe, a Monica Lewinsky or a Paula Jones. These part-time trollops could sink your presidency!'

While Dr Trafficant was in such a talkative mood, I decided to pose a question that had been bugging me ever since Drew had raised the subject a year or two ago during our meeting at the Exclamation Mark. 'Talking about Kennedy,' I slurred, 'who do you think assassinated him?'

'Ah, I see you're fully relaxed now, Mr Watson.' He gave me an enigmatic smile. 'In answer to your question, I could give you names, but I won't. All I'll say is that our unit wouldn't be in existence if it weren't for them.'

I decided not to press him further.

'Now to return to the subject of presidential companions,' he continued. 'You see, Mr Watson, there's a need for special girls who won't blab – in fact, *can't* blab. And you need a trustworthy organisation to provide and manage them – one that's above the police or the FBI – even above the CIA. And the only organisation like that is the one that controls you as President, as well as your opponents, an organisation that's one hundred percent leak-proof – as long as you remain unswervingly loyal and do exactly what's expected of you. For want of a better term, let's call them the "Presidential Handlers".'

Todd Trafficant's sonorous voice and the sedative had begun to make me drowsier, but at the mention of "Presidential Handlers" I was suddenly awake. I'd heard Drew use the term before and I recalled him saying they weren't part of the official White House staff.

'You wanted to know why we're holding Miss Minnaar,' Dr Trafficant continued. 'Well, I'm going to tell you in a moment. But first a bit more background history. You see, on May 28, 1997, something happened that made the Presidential Handlers take a strategic decision. On that date the US Supreme Court decided that Paula Jones could proceed with her sexual harassment lawsuit against President Clinton while he was still in office. As

the alleged harassment took place *before* he became President and while he was Governor of Arkansas, this set a very dangerous precedent. The Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution did not shield a sitting president from having to face lawsuits over acts unrelated to his official duties. Clinton's legal representative in the case, Robert Bennett, quite rightly pointed out that it posed a danger to the nation. He said it meant that sitting presidents could become embroiled in litigation and thus distracted from their job of protecting the country. For example, if America were at war, how could a President be expected to manage the conflict effectively if his mind was preoccupied with defending accusations of sexual misconduct, as Clinton was in the case of Monica Lewinsky? More to the point, on the morning the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke, Clinton was so distracted that he couldn't recall where he put the plastic card containing the codes to launch a nuclear strike! … Now how about that?!'

I sensed that he expected me to say something, but when I remained silent, he continued: 'By the way, although Clinton was a pretty cool customer, he was nevertheless under such intense pressure that he had a heart attack, necessitating bypass surgery. Cases like that could easily cause a President to die in office at a critical point in some international crisis.'

Dr Trafficant furrowed his brow. 'Luckily for Clinton, however, the case was settled out of court; otherwise all the sordid details would have emerged, further damaging the presidency. Bennett's argument alerted the Presidential Handlers for the need to provide "safe, professional women" to sitting presidents and other senior political leaders – women who wouldn't talk or sue – thus avoiding embarrassing and distracting scandals.'

'Hmmm,' I murmured dully – a response that Dr Trafficant must have taken for encouragement.

'That's where our covert unit comes in,' he went on, his voice now animated, 'a unit known as Force-X. Although the name may sound a trifle sinister, our motives are purely patriotic and in the vital security interests of the United States government.'

'I'm not sure I follow you.'

'Look,' he said, 'if sex on the side is what it takes to relieve the stresses and strains of being in high office, then *that's* what it takes and it needs to be factored into policy. The President and other high-ups have to relax … or else the job would burn them out, and that would obviously be bad for the country. We are simply being realistic and are catering for this need in a safe,

professional way. That's where our unit comes in. We get things done by hook or by crook – even if we have to break a few rules…'

The cynicism of the remark angered me, but I tried not to show it, murmuring instead a non-committal 'Mmmm.'

Buoyed by my apparent approval, he plunged on. 'You see, Mr Watson, America can't afford to have presidents who get involved with indiscreet amateurs, so we provide beautiful women from outside the United States that we've located and trained ourselves. And believe me President Koonce, despite his Family Values Campaign, has a healthy appetite for extramarital sex, especially with young girls.'

'Why from outside the US?'

'Well, there was an earlier programme called "Monarch" that worked up to a point, but it had inherent flaws that ultimately proved unfixable. You see, all the girls were recruited in the United States and conditioned from a very early age. The drawback was that occasionally they could be recognised, or their parents – who originally co-operated – might later decide to come clean to salve their consciences, especially if stricken with a terminal illness. Also, the plastic smiles and generally robotic behaviour of the programmed girls, reminiscent of Stepford Wives, proved a turn-off for discerning clients.

'So the decision was made to recruit girls abroad from English-speaking countries, or countries where English is widely spoken. Both Australia and New Zealand were ruled out because of their island status, making it more difficult to smuggle girls out. Britain was ruled out for the same reason and also because of its more effective policing, so cover-ups are difficult to stage.'

Dr Trafficant gave a sinister little smirk. 'Finally, South Africa was identified as the perfect country because of its ineffective policing, its bribable officials and its porous borders, all of which make it a human trafficker's paradise. It also has a long history of disappearing girls who are never found. More importantly, after Charlize Theron made it in Hollywood and Charlene Wittstock married Prince Albert of Monaco and pics of Reeva Steenkamp were on every news channel for months, South Africa got noticed for its beautiful girls, especially blondes. That's why our finders have focused on South Africa for so many years now. Their job is to locate target individuals who have no close family or intimate friends. We also subcontract to locals to act as talent scouts, as they are often more familiar with promising targets, and of course we pay them handsomely.'

As the implications of what Dr Trafficant was saying dawned on me, I gave a sharp intake of breath. It seemed highly probable that Sudman was one of these sub-contractors. His remark about scouting for talent at Cresta and his taking photos of a girl at the mall, suddenly made sense…'

Dr Trafficant went on: 'So our finders, a sub-unit of Force-X, are busy scouring South Africa. They want beautiful girls who won't be missed – at least for a while – or whose absence can easily be explained away. The girls are then put under stage-one hypnosis, where a clear and definitive pattern of their usefulness is determined by our psychiatrists and field officers like myself and Mrs Eberhardt. If the candidate possesses a relatively high IQ and is physically attractive, she'll be filed in a category file called a "call file." Photographs or videos of her will then be circulated to our potential clients, not only in America but also in our allied countries, where we need to keep their leaders happy!'

'Does that mean that the girls who have been disappearing from Johannesburg shopping malls recently were kidnapped by Force-X, as you call it?'

He raised an eyebrow and gave me an enigmatic smile.

I realised he wasn't about to answer the question, so I changed tack. 'So why did you go to all the trouble of staging a fake "death" for Kristy and Charlize?'

'Ah, the delectable Miss Minnaar again … Well, my colleague (he nodded towards Mrs Eberhardt) sent photos of her to our agents in the United States from where they were circulated among elite clients in Washington. Let me just say that a most distinguished client picked out Miss Minnaar from among dozens of other girls. The status of this client meant that we had to take extreme precautions. So we had to stage an apparently clean break.'

'I've been wondering why you've been telling me all this?'

'Good question, Mr Watson. Two reasons. The first, to be perfectly honest, is pure pride. I get a huge kick out of revealing everything to someone "working for the other side", so to speak. The second is that by the time we've finished with you, you won't remember anything – not even your name!'

Chapter 77

"The aim is to create a mechanism in flesh and blood, with new beliefs and new thought processes inserted into a captive body."– Edward Hunter, CIA agent and inventor of the term "brainwashing"

I awoke the next morning in the restraining ward feeling stiff and cold. I felt an urgent need to pee. Then I noticed a plastic pipe, apparently attached to my penis, leading down the side of the bed to a plastic bag. I hesitated for a moment and then emptied my bladder. The yellow foamy liquid ran down the pipe, half filling the bag. Suddenly I became aware of Dr Trafficant and Mrs Eberhardt silently watching from the other side of the room.

'So you see, Mr Watson, we make every effort to make our guests comfortable!' said Dr Trafficant with a thin smile.

Swivelling on his heel, he continued, 'I just want to put your mind at rest, Mr Watson, before we finally wipe it.' Mrs Eberhardt gave an audible snigger. 'You seemed very concerned about Miss Minnaar, so I thought you'd like to know that we are flying her out by helicopter this morning at 10.30 on the first leg of her journey to the United States. I'll be accompanying her to cater for all her needs…' (My heart sank. All our efforts would be for nothing, as the rescue helicopter was due only at eleven.) '…so you really don't need to worry about her. You see, her friend Charlize has already been installed in a luxury condo in Washington, where she's the intimate playmate of a prominent New York Senator. He's old and ugly as sin, but after we'd programmed her, she thinks he looks like a young Brad Pitt! As for Miss Minnaar, we have more ambitious plans for her…'

As Dr Trafficant continued his boastful monologue, Mrs Eberhardt began setting up some electrical equipment on a mobile stand.

Then suddenly a deep rumble of thunder shook the walls of the restraining ward.

'Sounds like a big storm brewing, Todd!' she exclaimed. 'Think they can still make the pickup?'

'Luckily the helicopter we're using today flies in all weathers,' replied Dr

Trafficant. ‘We couldn’t leave things to chance on this operation.’

I felt a sudden sinking feeling in my stomach. Our rescue helicopter’s markings wouldn’t match those on Force-X’s all-weather one, and there was no way I could inform Kristy, or equally importantly, Drew and Dean.

Dr Trafficant looked at his watch and then spoke into the intercom. ‘Earl, can you spare a moment? We need your expertise to operate the ECT machine.’

A minute or two later Dr Stricker arrived, and began bustling about, adjusting the equipment on the mobile stand with an air of knowledgeable self-importance.

‘That should do,’ he said finally, drumming four fingers on the machine housing. ‘The levels have been stepped up to do what’s necessary.’

Dr Trafficant glanced at me and then at the machine. ‘Let me introduce you to the *Brain Wiper Mark III*, Mr Watson. It’s a specially modified ECT machine. He paused and flashed me an evil grin. ‘But of course we don’t want to just wipe your brain. We need a more permanent solution…’

I think Dr Trafficant expected me to say something at this point but I remained silent.

When I said nothing, he went on. ‘You see, Mr Watson, it’s also fitted with a terminator, so you’re going to have a fatal heart attack while undergoing shock therapy.’

He turned towards Dr Stricker. ‘That means the second terminator setting, Earl. The one that does the job quickly without causing needless pain…

‘On second thoughts, put it on a level one. Mr Watson has caused us a lot of trouble and needs to be taught a lesson – even if it’s a belated one!’

Dr Stricker nodded and then bent over the machine. He turned a couple of dials and then stood back.

‘All set to go, Earl?’

‘Not quite. We still need to shave the sides of his head so the electrodes can make proper contact.’

‘Okay, but don’t use the electric razor this time. The old-fashioned wet razor gives a closer shave. But I think we need a feminine touch here. Arista, will you do the honours? The shaving stuff is in the cabinet above the basin.’

‘It’ll be a pleasure,’ Mrs Eberhardt purred, ‘a real pleasure.’

She strode across to the basin. ‘Shit! The plug’s missing!’

‘There should be one in the ward next door.’

‘Hang on a sec, I’ll check.’

She returned a couple of minutes later empty handed. ‘I can’t believe it! I’ve checked all the wards along this passage and every one of the plugs is missing!’

‘For Christ’s sake, we’re beginning to run late! Can’t we carry on without shaving him?’

‘’Fraid not,’ put in Dr Stricker. ‘For a blonde he’s got very thick hair. We need to shave him to make proper contact.’

‘Well, can’t you improvise? What about a wad of toilet paper?

‘I’ve got a better idea,’ said Mrs Eberhardt, pointing to a roll of duct tape on a shelf. ‘Let me try sticking a piece of tape over the plughole.’

‘Fine, but hurry.’

‘Will do … Ah, that seems to be working.’

She turned on the hot water, and began readying the shaving equipment.

‘Gene, I think you’d better hold his head still while Arista shaves him.’

Nurse Stubblewood bounded across the room and clamped his meaty hands around my face at cheek-bone level. I could hardly breathe and began to splutter. The stale smell of nicotine on his yellow fingers almost made me gag.

‘A little lower, Gene,’ called out Dr Trafficant. ‘We don’t want the autopsy to show he died of asphyxiation!’

I now felt the warm shaving soap on my temples as Mrs Eberhardt worked up a lather. Once the hair had softened, she began shaving one side of my head, and then the other, before patting both sides dry with a small hand towel.

‘Is there any way you can speed things up?’ demanded Dr Trafficant.

‘I still need to apply contact jelly,’ she said, producing a small tube and squeezing a cold substance onto the bare patches of skin.

‘That’ll do,’ said Dr Stricker. ‘Just keep him still now, Gene, while I attach the electrodes.’

I felt Nurse Stubblewood’s grip tighten as Dr Stricker clamped a device like an old-fashioned pair of earphones onto my head.

‘No, Mr Watson, we’re not going to play musical requests now,’ chuckled Dr Trafficant. ‘No time for that. You can switch on now, Earl.’

Dr Stricker flicked a switch on the machine. I expected to be plunged into oblivion, but there was no terminal jolt, only a faint hum.

‘Just warming up,’ Mr Watson. ‘When we throw the main switch, you

won’t even have time to wince, as you did now.’

Just then the intercom rang. Dr Trafficant answered it. He placed a hand over the mouthpiece and turned to Nurse Stubblewood. ‘Sister Munster needs your help with a difficult patient, Gene. Apparently it’s serious. I’ll hold things till you get back. But make it quick. We can’t keep Mr Watson waiting all day!’

Nurse Stubblewood nodded and left the room. The minutes ticked by and after about ten minutes Dr Trafficant glanced at his watch. ‘What’s he doing – subduing a fucking elephant, or what?!’

About five minutes later the door opened and Nurse Stubblewood and Sister Munster pushed Petrus inside. As usual he was clutching his toolbox.

‘What took you so long?’ demanded Dr Trafficant.

Sister Munster gave a deferential tilt of her head. ‘He suddenly went berserk just after the election officials arrived to record the votes of the South African patients, claiming they were rigging the voting. Then he started overturning tables and throwing chairs around, so I thought he needed a spell in the restraining ward. But when Gene came to help me, he started acting up even more.’

‘That’s right,’ said Nurse Stubblewood, rubbing an egg-sized swelling on the side of his head. ‘He’s stronger than he looks. Hit me with a chair leg. He only agreed to come quietly when we said he could bring his toolbox.’

‘Well, what’s in that thing?’

‘Nothing. We checked it when he was admitted and a couple of times after that, and it’s empty.’ Sister Munster grinned. ‘But he thinks it contains talking flies!’

‘He’ll hear talking flies all right when we’ve finished with him!’ Dr Trafficant hissed, sliding his eyes towards the ECT machine.

I expected Petrus to begin struggling now, but he sat down quietly on his toolbox and stared vacantly at the opposite wall.

‘Well, he’ll just have to wait his turn,’ Dr Trafficant went on. ‘He’s already made us late, and we need to finish with Mr Watson first.’ He checked his watch. ‘Actually, I can see we’re not going to make it by 10.30. I’m going to have to call Support and tell them to send the chopper at eleven.’ He fished out his cellphone and made the call.

My hopes began to rise – at least as far as Kristy and Merrill were concerned. If the rescue helicopter arrived a minute or two before the Force-X one and the girls were waiting on time, then there was still a chance. But a

minute either way would mean the difference between success and failure.

Just then there was a deafening peal of thunder followed almost immediately by a flash so bright that it almost blinded me through the small fanlight. At the same time a large luminous electric-blue sphere suddenly appeared from nowhere and floated across the room. I'd heard of the rare phenomenon of ball lightning, and this was obviously what it was. The sphere, which was about half a metre in diameter, hovered for a while and then, drifting from side to side like a falling leaf, sank to the floor where it rolled about aimlessly for a few moments. Then it suddenly shot up and settled on my bed in front of me. I stared at the fiery ball for some moments. A shape began to form inside.

As I looked closer a face smiled out at me. It was Alice!

Suddenly the ball floated up and settled on the ECT machine.

'Throw the fucking switch!' bellowed Dr Trafficant. *'Now!'*

A split second later Alice's eyes flew open wide and her face began rippling rapidly. The ball grew momentarily brighter, then her mouth seemed to form a cry. Suddenly there was a loud explosion and sparks flew out of the ECT machine. The ball had disappeared in a puff of smoke, leaving only an acrid smell of burning insulation.

Dr Stricker bent over the machine. 'I'm afraid it's burned out,' he pronounced. 'That must have been a massive static discharge.'

All eyes were still on the machine, when out of the corner of my eye I saw Petrus stand up and bend over his toolbox. He suddenly opened the lid and three long black, hissing snakes slithered out. *'Mambas!'* Petrus cried. 'When he bite; you die!'

Amid shrieks of terror, all five clinic staff rushed for the door, tripping over one another in their haste to get out. After they'd gone, Petrus quickly freed me. Then he scooped up the angry snakes and returned them to his toolbox. 'Only mole snakes, Mr Olly,' he confided, with a grin. 'Look bit like mamba, but he not poisonous.'

'Quick,' I said. 'We need a place to hide. They'll be looking for us soon.'

I had an idea. Somehow I knew I could trust Emma. So I led the way to the library. She was alone. I took the plunge and told her everything. Her eyes widened in horror. 'I always sensed there was something not quite right here,' she confided. 'Anyway, I know of a great place for you guys to hide – the stack room. Very few people ever go in there.'

She ushered us inside a large room at the back of the library lined with

metal shelves packed with books. Several double-sided bookcases filled the rest of the room.

‘Let me fetch you some tea and cookies,’ she said. ‘You must be hungry after your ordeal.’

She returned a few minutes later with two cups of tea and a large plate of cookies.

‘There’s a window above those shelves where you have a clear view of the building where the long-term therapy ward is. I guess that’s where the girls are. You can use the ladder over there.’

After we’d gulped down the tea and cookies (few meals ever tasted so good!), I propped the ladder against the shelf below the window. Petrus was there to steady it. Then I climbed up and peered through the glass.

The sky was heavily overcast and a strong wind was bending the trees. Flashes of lightning forked all around, followed by loud claps of thunder. I could see the smaller concrete building where Gary Simes’s model plane had dropped my message. I could even see our vegetable garden with our scarecrow standing guard near the fence, his felt hat flapping in the wind. I wondered whether the girls would venture into the exercise yard in this weather.

If not, our rescue plan would fail.

Chapter 78

About five minutes before eleven I climbed up the wooden ladder again and positioned myself at the window. In the middle distance a couple of crows, buffeted by the storm, were blown sideways across my line of vision.

The minutes ticked by, and then above the howling wind I heard a helicopter approaching. Moments later it was hovering over the small concrete building, silhouetted against the dark storm clouds. I crossed my fingers, hoping that Kristy and Merrill were waiting below. Then I saw a rope ladder drop down, jerking and swaying as gusts of wind caught it. Seconds later Merrill was gingerly climbing up, while the ladder swung back and forth.

Then suddenly she froze. Agonising seconds went by as she clung to the ropes without moving. A crewman in green overalls was leaning out of the helicopter, beckoning urgently to her. But she remained stuck on the ladder, glancing downwards.

Just then I heard a high-pitched whine. It was another helicopter; obviously the Force-X one detailed to fetch Kristy. It approached the building, hovering a little distance away, and then touched down on some flat ground between the building and our vegetable garden. The rotors had hardly slowed when two men armed with pistols sprang out.

Kristy, who'd been climbing up the flimsy ladder until she was just below Merrill, reached up and gently shook Merrill's ankle, apparently in an effort to urge her upwards. But Merrill remained where she was.

A shot suddenly rang out.

At last Merrill began inching upwards, looking down nervously, with Kristy following.

Now the men were aiming their weapons at the helicopter. I heard another shot. A violent gust of wind seemed to buffet the helicopter sideways, and the girls, like puppets on a string, jerked back and forth.

A third shot rang out.

To my horror, Kristy seemed to lose her grip and began slithering down the ladder. She'd already slipped down four or five rungs when she managed to grab one of the ropes with one hand, hanging there precariously. I expected

the men to fire again at any moment. But Kristy hung on, and then swung her other arm across in an attempt to gain a hold on the rung above her.

Merrill had already reached the top of the ladder and the crewman was pulling her aboard.

The Force-X men began firing again. The helicopter suddenly made an evasive sideways manoeuvre that swung the rope ladder around wildly. Kristy was hanging onto the rope with one hand, her other arm flailing. I knew that if she lost her grip now and fell she would probably be seriously injured. And – *God forbid* – she'd be back in Dr Trafficant's clutches! However, she hung on grimly, trying to get another handhold, as the ladder swung back and forth in the howling wind.

Suddenly there was a blinding flash, accompanied by a deafening explosion that seemed to come from our vegetable garden. The blast rattled the window in front of my face and I almost lost my balance.

Kristy reeled in shock, lost her grip, and began sliding rapidly down the ladder. A couple of metres before hitting the ground she grabbed both ropes and managed to slow her fall.

Meanwhile, the Force-X men had dropped to the ground, covering their heads with their hands. The garden had been flattened and there was a small crater in the ground. However, the Force-X helicopter seemed undamaged and its rotor was still idling. There was no sign of our scarecrow.

Kristy stood for a moment, peering about, as if trying to orient herself. Then the storm suddenly broke and rain came down in sheets. With a shake of her head, she grabbed the ladder and began climbing up again. The force of the storm was hampering her progress, and she was only able to reach the rung above, after pausing to regain her strength. Agonising seconds ticked by before she was able to pull herself up to the next rung.

But now I could see that the two Force-X men were on their feet, reloading their weapons. One had assumed a crouching position and was pointing his firearm at Kristy. The ladder was swinging from side to side as it was buffeted by the wind.

I heard the crack of another shot. The wooden rung above Kristy's head suddenly splintered. For a long moment Kristy didn't move. Then she managed to reach up to the rung above the damaged one, gripping it with one hand. Another pause as she shifted her feet on the rung she was standing on.

Finally, in a supreme effort she pulled herself up and past the damaged rung.

Moments later she reached the top and willing hands were helping her aboard.

Just then one of the Force-X men began firing again. Bullet holes suddenly peppered the fuselage. The helicopter hung there for a few moments, and I half expected it to go into a tail spin like in the movies.

Then it slewed sideways and I could hear its rotors turning faster. Was this the sickening sound that often precedes a chopper crash?

The two men kept on firing. But the helicopter began rising almost imperceptibly, then, as if caught in a powerful updraft, it suddenly rose vertically and peeled away out of sight. The sound of its rotors was soon swept away on the wind.

I heaved a sigh of relief. But I realised we couldn't relax yet. Dr Trafficant and his helpers were probably still in the building and there were two armed men outside.

As I was about to climb down the wooden ladder, I saw two figures racing through the rain towards the Force-X helicopter. One was Mrs Eberhardt; the other Dr Trafficant. They ducked their heads under the rotor blades as they clambered aboard, with the two Force-X men climbing in after them. The rotor picked up speed and the helicopter lifted off.

'I think you'd better wait here and have more tea and cookies while I check things out,' said Emma. 'After all, Nurse Stubblewood is still around, and from what I've heard he's an ugly customer!'

She was back in about five minutes. 'All clear! Some patients and the election officials managed to subdue Nurse Stubblewood, Dr Stricker and Sister Munster. Apparently they're all tied to chairs and locked in the linen cupboard. I saw Faye on the way, and she's packing to go, together with all the kitchen staff. I'm also out of here, so I'll say goodbye now.' She gave us both a little hug. 'By the way, your friends seem anxious for you to join them in the patients' lounge. One last thing: Faye and I have given them our cellphone numbers in case they need to interview us.'

In the lounge everyone was seated around four tables that had been pushed together: Drew, Dean, Simes and all the pseudo-patients, as well as Stella, Anna-Marie and Maddie. Lana, Goolam, Weddo, Rastaman, and a beefy man who seemed vaguely familiar, were part of the rescue team posing as election officials. The beefy man stood up and extended his hand. 'Derek Labuschagne,' he said, grinning, 'They call me Mr Y.'

'Hey, I know you!' I exclaimed. 'You brought my daughters home safely

from that rave club when they were underage.'

'Small world,' he said, gripping my hand. 'So how're your daughters now?'

'Fine,' I replied. 'They're about to leave on a working holiday overseas.'

'Great.'

'Do you mind…' Lana put in, slipping her arms around me. 'I need to give this man a big hug.'

She smelled of water lilies. 'You know, Olly, I was very worried about you,' she whispered in my ear. 'Nobody knew where you were, and although we asked Sister Munster if she'd seen you, she claimed she hadn't.'

'I'm not surprised considering what happened.'

'Well, I think everyone wants to know the details, Olly, so why don't you sit down and tell us.'

And so I did.

There were exclamations of amazement when I got to the part where Petrus released the snakes. I had to halt my story while people got up and shook his hand and clapped him on the back.

As I finally reached the end of my story, I told them about the ball lightning but not about Alice's selfless sacrifice, which brought a lump to my throat.

'What's wrong?' asked Faan. 'You don't look too happy.'

I said nothing.

'Friend of Mr Olly who very brave lady,' Petrus chimed in. 'I see what she do. Not good time for questions now. Let Mr Olly be.'

'Thank you,' Petrus,' I said. 'So how did you know I was in the restraining ward?'

'I sangoma. My lickle friends tell me everything!'

Out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of Jean, who was advancing towards me with a broad smile. 'We're all so proud of you,' Olly, she said, enveloping me in a tight, lingering, fragrant hug. Not to be outdone, Imogen gave me a warm, sisterly hug. As she stood closer, I noticed that her normally dull, grey aura had gone, and it was now bright and clear.

It was now time to hear from the others.

Gary Simes and Derek Labuschagne, with input from Drew, had put together the team of rescuers, with Weddo suggesting that Rastaman also be invited. 'We need the Press,' he pointed out. 'Publicity is the enemy of conspiracy. But I've asked him to hold the story until we get the green light

from Drew.'

Gary Simes had brought along a bitch on heat to distract the guard dogs, while Stella had created a diversion by faking an attack of Tourette's.

'I really enjoyed standing in front of Sister Munster and screaming, *'Fuck you, bitch! Fuck you, bitch! Fuck you, bitch!'* she confided with a wicked grin.

Anna-Marie and Maddie had acted as lookouts, standing in doorways, pretending to be polishing door knobs.

Jeb, Ethan, Rob and Cal had returned to the United States a couple of days earlier, as had all the American patients in the drug rehabilitation centre.

'What was that huge explosion?' I asked.

Faan grinned. 'That was the grey matter I put in the scarecrow's head! Before being admitted to the Clinic it occurred to me that at some point we might need something a little more forceful to deal with these dodos. So I managed to get some plastic explosive from a police contact. I hid it in a waterproof packet inside the treasure chest in the goldfish bowl. I simply inserted a detonator that could be triggered from a cellphone and waited in the car park. When I saw the armed men firing at the rescue helicopter, I hit the "send" button.'

A round of clapping followed. I shook Faan's hand vigorously and gave him a bear hug. 'Thanks, old pal,' I think you saved Kristy's life.'

'Anytime,' he said.

'Talking about Kristy,' said Dean, we've sent her and Merrill to a safe house for debriefing. I'm afraid you won't be able to see her for quite a while – maybe a couple of weeks.'

'Of course, I understand,' I agreed, but feeling disappointed.

'Any idea where Dr Trafficant and Mrs Eberhardt have gone?' asked Faan.

'You can be sure they have a backup base somewhere,' answered Dean. 'We're dealing with highly skilled operatives and we can still expect plenty of trouble from them.'

'I'm afraid you're right,' said Drew.

'There's some sensitive stuff we still need to discuss,' confided Dean. 'Do you mind if only those directly concerned come along?'

Everyone agreed, with most of our fellow pseudo-patients wanting to stay and watch TV, or chat among themselves.

In the end, Dean, Drew, Simes, Weddo, Faan, Derek Labuschagne, and I

withdrew to the smoking room. We fetched cups of coffee and sat down around two tables.

‘What I find difficult to understand,’ I began, ‘is how supposedly professional psychiatrists can work for a sinister outfit like Force-X?’

Dean took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. ‘Actually the CIA – and once again I’m talking about the Politicals – had no problem recruiting tame shrinks to help run MK-Ultra. Both Trafficant and Stricker were working for MK-Ultra’s secret successor unit before being recruited by Force-X. Mrs Eberhardt was also one of those. She’s a psychologist, specialising in hardcore interrogation.

‘During her stint in Afghanistan several detainees committed suicide on her watch. There was an enquiry and she was officially “demoted”. After that she resigned and dropped off the radar completely. When she reappeared some years later, the Politicals recruited her and appointed her chief interrogator at the Clinic.

‘You probably won’t be surprised to hear that the elusive Mrs Bombeck and her “diabetic” neighbour – also former CIA Politicals – were part of Mrs Eberhardt’s “Finders” team involved in the abduction of young girls.’

‘That’s shocking!’ exclaimed Faan.

‘But getting back to abductions, we realise that the locals who acted as talent scouts for the Finders team are just as culpable. They must have realised that after they had identified a girl for the Finders, and then the girl had disappeared, a serious crime must have been committed.’

‘I think we know one of them…’ put in Simes, with a sidelong glance at me.

‘Mmmm,’ I murmured in agreement.

‘Well then, we’ll be settling accounts with the local talent scouts too,’ said Dean.

‘So who are the main “customers” for the abducted girls, so to speak?’

‘Some are congressmen who Force-X’s controllers need to keep voting the right way; also foreign diplomats and UN officials, who also need to be kept in line.’

‘What do you think will happen after the Clinic is exposed?’ asked Faan.

‘Where possible, the CIA Politicals will clean up. They always look after their own, even those who’ve gone “rogue”.’

‘What about the Pinnacle Spa,’ I asked. ‘Do you know anything about that?’

‘Sure. Although the spa’s headquarters is in America, remember that all the branches are franchises. Except for the start-up capital from headquarters, they’re responsible for their own funding and are virtually independent. Most are legitimate operations and serve to distract attention away from the real agenda. As far as Mrs Eberhardt’s franchise is concerned, the money came from the Chicago branch of a Montreal bank, filtered through a front company in Liechtenstein.

‘My guess is that the money originally came from a secret “black budget” fund set up by the Politicals to be used for the detention and interrogation of terror suspects but was skimmed off by Agency collaborators with Force-X. But I have no positive proof yet as to whether or not the Politicals were aware of the kidnapping and detention of the girls.’

‘Tell us more about the terror suspects,’ said Faan.

‘They are still in the other concrete building, where some of my colleagues are busy with a preliminary debriefing. I understand that most of them are Arabs, with some from Pakistan and Afghanistan. They’re victims of what is called “extraordinary rendition”, in other words “enforced disappearance”. Initially the Bush Administration got permission from some foreign governments to establish detention centres in their respective countries. This permission was often given reluctantly and under pressure, sometimes accompanied by hefty bribes, but after a while the CIA Politicals came to the conclusion that such arrangements were unreliable and began to establish independent centres of their own, typically disguised as treatment facilities like this clinic.

‘One of the reasons behind the move was the risk of smuggling suspects across borders. Where such a risk existed it was better to hold the suspects in the country where they were detained if a suitable clandestine interrogation centre existed. Also, interrogators with experience of local conditions and culture usually get better results.’

‘What about the suspects you say are being debriefed at the moment? I mean, are they really dangerous?’

‘Some may well be Arab terrorists. And let’s face it Arab Islamists have demonstrated their willingness to employ extreme terror, like Isis in Iraq and Syria.

‘Of course,’ Dean continued, ‘one can be too impartial, too understanding, too open-minded. The bottom line is that you have to look after your own interests but without going too far. It’s actually a very fine

balance.’

‘Right,’ said Faan.

‘I’m not denying that some of these people may be extremely dangerous, but the point is that they’ve never been put on trial. Let me put it this way: if we Americans stoop to the level of what was going on at this clinic and at other detention centres like Guantanamo Bay, then we need to ask ourselves: “Are we any better than the terrorists?”

‘I agree,’ I put in.

‘But the neocons justify their methods by saying that the suspects “hate our freedom” and “all we are doing is protecting democracy”.

‘Actually, I’m convinced that the biggest threat to America is not from outside but from inside America itself. Not just from the Politicals and the neocons but from the super-lobbies like Big Oil and Big Banks, who can make or break political candidates.’

Chapter 79

The election went off relatively peacefully, with only minor intimidation reported in the Eastern Cape and an unconfirmed attempted shooting in the North West Province. This positive outcome was probably due to the large number of monitors deployed throughout the country.

When I went to vote on Election Day, after the confinement of the Clinic, I felt like a schoolboy on an outing. Although I have no confidence in politicians generally, I cast my vote for the Coalition.

When the results were finally announced, the SPP did somewhat better than predicted, but the Coalition still won a workable majority. Enver Tladi issued a statement saying that the ANC and the DA would soon be forming a government. Details would be announced later.

The Harpies were now busy packing for their working holiday in Britain. The next day I drove them to the airport for their flight to the U.K. Erin had arranged to meet them at International Departures to say goodbye.

On the drive to the airport, Frith smiled at me and said, ‘Did you know that Mum has dumped Alec?’

I gave a noncommittal grunt.

‘We also heard you thumped him,’ said Bonny, archly. ‘Mum wasn’t too impressed at the time, but now she’s over it. Anyway, we’re glad you did it, Dad. Alec is an arsehole!’

I drove on in silence.

Finally, Frith said in a hesitant voice. ‘I was just wondering, Dad … um … couldn’t you and Mum get back together?’

I hadn’t told the Harpies about Kristy and how much I loved her. Not wanting to raise any false hopes, I said, ‘I think your mum and I have both moved on, girls.’

Frith’s lower lip began to quiver.

‘Of course we can still be friends,’ I added hastily. ‘I’m still very fond of Mum. And maybe we can go to the Family Life Centre for counselling.’

‘Counselling?’ she asked hopefully.

‘Yes, to help us work together as better parents.’

‘That’s not the same,’ said Frith, with a little shuddering gasp.

‘Look,’ I said, patting her shoulder, ‘Your Mum and I still love you just as much as when we were married. That will never change.’

‘I know, Dad, I know…’

When we arrived at International Departures, Erin was waiting there. She shot me a shy smile as she hugged the Harpies.

Then the Harpies hugged and kissed me. All of us were close tears.

Chapter 80

"The architects of power in the United States must create a force that can be felt but not seen. Power remains strong when it remains in the dark; exposed to the sunlight it begins to evaporate." – Samuel Huntington, American political scientist and author of *The Clash of Civilizations*

Late that evening I received a call from Drew, saying he and Dean had nearly finished interrogating Dr Stricker, Nurse Stubblewood and Sister Munster. They'd be holding a report-back on Saturday morning in van Riebeeck Park, and it was important that Faan and I should attend.

'What time?' I asked.

'At ten on the southern shore of the upper dam on the eastern side of the park.'

'Can I take my dog along?'

'Great idea! Then it makes us look like regular walkers.'

A quarter of an hour before the appointed time, I fetched Chloe's lead and called her. But she lay with her head on her paws, blinking up at me without enthusiasm. 'Come on, Clo-clo.' I coaxed. 'It'll do you good. We haven't been on a walk for ages.'

Eventually, I had to virtually drag her out to the car by her lead.

It was an overcast day, with a gentle breeze and the promise of showers. When I pulled up in the parking area and walked across to the dam, the others had already arrived: Dean, Drew, Gary Simes, Weddo, Faan, and Derek Labuschagne. Our meeting place was in a grassy clearing where few people were in sight.

I had two urgent questions for Dean. 'How's Kristy, and when can I see her?'

'She's one tough young lady,' he replied, 'and she's doing real good. The information she's giving us is invaluable. But after a traumatic experience like this, she'll need some time to readjust.'

'Well, I'm really missing her,' I said with emphasis.

'She's missing you too, Olly, but I'm afraid her debriefing will take up to

three weeks.'

'You serious?'

'Yes. In the meantime, I want to make a suggestion: when it's over, how would you like to go on holiday with Kristy anywhere you like, all expenses paid?'

'Sounds wonderful!' I exclaimed, feeling a lot better.

'Well, that's settled, then,' he said. 'As soon as we've finished the debriefing, Drew or I will give you a call. In the meantime, you can go ahead and make a booking, beginning anytime after three weeks. Oh, just one thing. For security reasons Drew or I'd better stay at the same resort as you for the first week of your holiday. But we can arrange that later.'

I nodded in agreement.

'Now down to business,' Dean continued. 'You may be pleased to hear that Earl Stricker and his two side-kicks have been singing like canaries.'

'How did you get them to talk?' asked Faan doubtfully.

'I told Stricker that if he didn't come clean, we would make sure that he was charged as an accessory to kidnapping and assault. If found guilty (which is virtually certain), he'd never work as a psychiatrist again. Similar threats worked with the other two.'

'So what did they tell you?' asked Weddo.

'It was more a case of filling in specific details. You see, we've been onto Force-X for quite a while and have a pretty good idea of what they've been doing.'

'But how did they manage to fake the deaths of Kristy and Charlize?' I wanted to know.

'Both Trafficant and Mrs E are seasoned operatives, and for them it was child's play. They simply bribed a corrupt mortuary official to supply them with the bodies of two unidentified women. Then they put the corpses in the back of the Mercedes and pushed it off the road at a spot where there was lots of dry brushwood. After that they piled more wood around the car and, for good measure, added some High Temperature Accelerant. Then they set it alight, causing the petrol tank to explode. Even without the petrol and the HTA, the wood would have burned at over two-thousand degrees Fahrenheit – hot enough to incinerate teeth, making DNA testing impossible. One of the Force-X team was a forensic expert who checked afterwards to make sure that all evidence of identity was obliterated.'

'But what I can't understand is why the girls were held for so long,'

remarked Faan.

‘Well, first of all they had to be trained to pass as Americans. That meant that their accents had to be flawless. To achieve that takes quite a while. Also, their past memories had to be erased and replaced with new ones, and that requires many sessions of hypnotherapy and other specialised forms of mind control. They also needed to be schooled in American culture, history and politics so that they could converse intelligently with the elite. In Kristy’s case she also had to learn White House protocol.’

‘What about Charlize?’ I put in. ‘Trafficant told me she’s already in America.’

‘That’s correct. She was an excellent hypnotic subject, so she could be processed relatively quickly.

‘But as I think you know, Olly, Kristy couldn’t be hypnotised, so she had to fake it. She also had to pretend that she was a slow learner, but because she was so stunningly beautiful – the kind of girl who could eventually become a Super Presidential Model – they were prepared to wait.’

I had another question: ‘Dr Trafficant spoke of a group that controlled the President and was even above the CIA. He called them the “Presidential Handlers”. What was he talking about?’

‘My guess is that it was the 5412 Committee, or its successor, whatever that’s called now. They–’

‘Can I come in here?’ interrupted Drew.

‘Sure.’

‘I recall us discussing the 5412 Committee some time ago.’ He glanced at Faan, Weddo and me. ‘Remember after that FOWL stint when we went for drinks at the Exclamation Mark.’

‘Right,’ I said.

Both Weddo and Faan nodded.

‘Well, for the benefit of those who weren’t there, let me recap. The 5412 Committee has been through various incarnations, constantly changing its name, but let’s stick with 5412 Committee for our purposes. Meeting in Room 40 at CIA headquarters, beginning in the 1950s, its officially stated aim was to co-ordinate the working relationship between the CIA, the White House, the State Department, and the National Security Council. Its agenda, however, was so secretive that after a while most people assumed that it had ceased to exist. But it was quietly carrying on behind the scenes, with some conspiracy theorists calling it “the de facto parallel government of the United

States".

'In a Senate committee investigation into intelligence operations, Senator Frank Church said the 5412 Committee had been responsible for framing covert operations in such a way that they could later be 'disavowed' or 'plausibly denied' by the United States government – or by the President himself.

'Think about it ... it means that Force-X could be considered the President's personal "Pit-bull terrier", running off the lead and free to do whatever it likes. And since the 5412 Committee was tasked with covert action, Force-X could well be its creation!'

Drew plucked a long piece of grass and waved it about like a conductor warming up an orchestra. 'The really scary part is that the trail leads even higher…'

'How high?' asked Simes.

'Certainly above the 5412 Committee. Some researchers call this mysterious "above group" – whoever they are – the "Olympians", and those who do their dirty work, like Force-X, the "O-men".'

'The O-men?' I put in. 'Sounds like characters in a comic book.'

'If only they were confined to a comic!'

'That sounds pretty bad, Drew. Any theories about the "above group's" identity?'

'Well, conspiracy theorists call them the "Illuminati". But "Olympians" or "Illuminati" are only convenient labels. I prefer the "Insiders".'

Drew raised an eyebrow before continuing. 'My belief is that the main function of whatever, or whoever, is above the 5412 Committee is to vet all presidential candidates, blocking those suspected of wanting to follow independent policies and supporting those who'll fall tamely into line. One of the reasons that the Insiders within the Republican Party feared Donald Trump so much and did everything to sabotage his election campaign was because they thought they couldn't control him. In the final analysis, however, this means that in virtually all cases an unelected group pre-selects the President of the United States, and then controls him!

Derek Labuschagne leaned forward. 'But we still aren't any closer to knowing the actual identity of this secret group. Is it American oil interests, the Skull and Bones, the Bilderbergers, the Freemasons, or the Illuminati?'

'As in the case of those who killed JFK, we will probably never know for sure,' said Drew. 'We can speculate, but it's unlikely to take us much further.

But whatever is above the 5412 Committee is like a malignant tumour.

‘But like all tumours, there’s a limit to its growth. Eventually it kills its host, and then it dies too. That’s the good news. But the important thing now is to recognise that there’s a manipulating, if not controlling, power that works behind the scenes in American politics, and then to proceed on that assumption.

Chapter 81

As Chloe seemed listless and off her food, I began to get worried. So I took her along to Dieter Dunkelmann, the Melville vet, for a check-up. After a thorough examination, he said, ‘Although she’s not young any more, I can’t find anything physically wrong with her. Maybe she’s just depressed.’

‘Depressed?’

‘Yes, dogs can suffer from depression just like humans.

The good news is that there are canine anti-depressants that can help. I can prescribe some Clomicalm if you like. Or if she’s fussy, there’s another one that’s beef-flavoured.’

‘How long do they take to work?’

‘Like anti-depressants for humans, they usually take a while – months rather than weeks. So don’t expect an improvement overnight.’

‘Okay, let’s go for the most effective one.’ I said.

Since I hadn’t seen Kristy for so long and longed for her so badly, I hoped we could get away for a romantic holiday of at least six weeks after her debriefing. I still had months of accumulated leave due to me, so I decided to make the arrangements as soon as possible. I phoned the Cavern Hotel in the northern Drakensberg – the nearest resort to the Grotto – and booked a luxury suite for a week. Then I phoned Drew and told him about the booking. He said he and Jill would be accompanying us and he would phone the Cavern to see if they had another room for two. Half an hour later he phoned back to tell me he’d got a booking.

Meanwhile, the Coalition had formed a government and had announced a list of ministers. The minister responsible for broadcasting, Thabo Mthetwa, was a former editor of *The Sowetan* who’d also worked for Radio 702. He had a no-nonsense reputation, as well as having a very short fuse. According to one of our reporters who’d worked with him, he didn’t have a very high opinion of AIR and favoured its closure. ‘In any case,’ Mthetwa had said in

an interview, ‘AIR will soon be irrelevant. If we need to broadcast to anyone about Africa, it should be to the US and China.’

Negative attitudes towards AIR were also rife in both coalition parties. The DA saw AIR as an irredeemable gravy train, while the ANC wanted revenge against AIR’s SPP-aligned management for purging it of ANC supporters. The latest rumour was that Mthetwa would replace Cassim, Nyati & Associates with yet another team of consultants to investigate the station’s viability. We’d been through it all so many times before that it didn’t faze me.

Just before the 8.30 news meeting, Will Allwell sidled up to me. ‘Did you know that Tata Zondi is back in the country?’

‘As you know I’ve been away, so I’ve not been in the loop.’

‘Well, apparently the charges against her have been quietly dropped and I hear she’s demanding to be reinstated.’

‘Good for her. Well, I hope Hannes also demands his job back.’

‘Sure. He deserves it. ‘But as regards Tata, let’s be honest. She may have taken a tough line against corruption but she was a bloody awful manager.’

‘Maybe so. But why should that have counted against her? After all, management skills haven’t been a priority at AIR since the SPP crowd took over. And remember, she switched allegiance to the SPP.’

‘Not good enough. They wanted someone they could control completely and who’d turn a blind eye to corruption. Apparently she wouldn’t play ball.’

Chapter 82

The Coalition got down to business within days of taking office, announcing that they would be calling a policy planning conference. There was clearly an urgent need to hammer out effective new policies to restore badly dented confidence in government.

VOICE sent a delegation that included Alistair L'Estrange, Ken Aitken, Weddo Moloi, Anisha Parbhoo and Goolam Jeena.

Meanwhile, Drew was helping Dean with the debriefings and both Faan and I had a lot of work to catch up with, so we couldn't attend. But Anisha recorded the proceedings, which we listened to afterwards.

Many DA members had joined VOICE and these were now almost a majority in the party. These members had quietly let it be known that although the tax strike had been lifted after the SPP's electoral defeat, VOICE would call for its reintroduction unless the Coalition committed itself to real change, as already set out in VOICE's demands, especially concerning the justice system.

Under the SPP, and earlier under the ANC, as most South Africans were aware, the efficiency of the civil service and of local government had been so badly compromised through the deployment of cronies lacking in skills and motivation that many departments and services had all but collapsed.

One of VOICE'S demands was for the 'decronyisation' of the civil service and of local government, and from now on all candidates should be properly qualified. Local government officials should have completed an Advanced Certificate in Municipal Governance before being eligible for office.

The DA had already set preconditions for the merger: only leaders with an unblemished record would be considered for the new government; any MPs involved in corruption should be prosecuted, and if convicted, would lose their seats in Parliament.

On the second day of the conference the delegates began debating a new crime policy. Alistair L'Estrange (who was now a senior member of the DA) proposed what he called 'The Kalahari Option'. This would entail a complex of high-security detention centres in the Kalahari Desert, where all prisoners

convicted of violent crimes, sex trafficking or serious drug offences would perform hard but useful labour. Some would dig and sift sand; others would mix wet sand and cement; while still others would pour the mixture into moulds to make bricks and building blocks. Cement would be trucked in, and the finished bricks and blocks would be trucked out – to be used in low-cost housing projects for the poor.'

'I'll second that!' called out Enver Tladi.

A round of applause followed.

Chapter 83

"With respect to inducing specific action on the part of a subject by hypnotism, it would be possible to brief a prisoner or other individual, subsequently dispatch him on a mission and successfully debrief him on his return without his recollection of the whole proceeding." – CIA memorandum

Almost three weeks to the day since Drew and Dean's report-back in the park, Drew called me one Saturday morning. 'Good news, Olly. We've finished debriefing the girls.'

My heart leaped for joy. 'When can I see them?' I exclaimed.

'How about if I pick you up as soon as I can drive over?'

About twenty minutes later we were bowling along in Drew's Mercedes. Bright sunlight glinted through the windscreen.

After crossing the Carlow Road bridge, we turned into Hillcrest Road and then up one of the steep roads leading to the top of Westcliff. Only a suburb away from modest Melville, Westcliff is one of the poshest addresses in Johannesburg.

The safe house was a large Cape Dutch style double storey in spacious grounds with spreading trees, a couple of roads from The Ridge School. As we drove in through the gate, three German Shepherds bounded down the long driveway towards us. They wagged their tails furiously when they saw Drew, but sniffed me warily as I got out of the car.

As we crossed the veranda, I saw a man cradling a sub-machine gun, standing in an alcove hidden from the road. He was a beefy individual with a buzz cut that made me think of an ex-marine. I followed Drew through the front door and there stood Kristy smiling at me in the foyer. At first I thought she might be an image spun out of my memories, a wonderful waking dream!

We stared at each other for one long moment. 'Oh, Kris…' I murmured barely above a whisper.

She was wearing a white T-shirt and ragged cut-off jeans that revealed her tight athletic thighs.

Just then Merrill appeared behind her wearing stylish black slacks and what looked like the top half of a bathing costume, also in black. Both girls were barefoot.

Suddenly both girls ran forward and hugged me. ‘I always knew you’d find us!’ cried Merrill.

‘Oh, Olly, it’s been so, *so* long…’ murmured Kristy.

She put both arms around my neck and buried her head against me. I held her tightly, my hands caressing her back. I felt the tension go out of her as she began to cry.

‘Oh, Olly, thank you for rescuing us,’ she sobbed, her voice muffled by my jacket. After a long pause she looked up at me and smiled.

In an instant that smile seemed to erase all the bad things that had happened. Then she stood back and without moving her feet, did a little swaying dance.

‘Hey, would you guys like some tea and cookies?’ a voice from the end of the passage called. It was Dean.

‘Sounds great,’ I called back.

Half a minute later we were seated at a rectangular stinkwood table in a panelled dining room that evoked the 1920s. It smelled of old wood and furniture polish.

Dean said he’d leave us for an hour or so while we talked. After that he and Drew had things they needed to discuss with me.

Merrill poured the tea and we all helped ourselves to shortbread biscuits.

Turning to Merrill, I said, ‘Firstly, how did Trafficant and the Force-X people manage to kidnap you?’

Merrill was about to take a bite into a shortbread biscuit, but she stopped in midair and put it down on her plate. ‘Well,’ she began, ‘Mrs Eberhardt sent me to a client at the Milpark Holiday Inn, a Mrs Jacobs. She was middle-aged and well-dressed, but I immediately got a bad feeling about her. I don’t know why. Maybe the repulsive mole on her chin put me off. Anyway, while she was undressing she came over and stood next to me with a kind of weird smile. Suddenly she seemed to fall against me. As I lunged forward to steady her, I felt a sharp prick in my shoulder. I didn’t realise it at the time, but she must have been holding a hypodermic under the clothes draped over her arm. I knew something was terribly wrong and I tried to run for the door. But she pushed me back and then I began to feel dizzy. A few moments later everything went blank. Then I woke up in the Clinic. A couple of days later,

when I was put in a room with Kristy, I told her about Mrs Jacobs. She said the woman must have been Mrs Bombeck, who tried to kidnap her.'

Kristy nodded and smiled.

'Sounds like the same woman,' I said. Then turning to Kristy, I said. 'What about you, Kris? Tell me about your time in the Clinic.'

Kristy rested her elbows on the table, her hands together, steepling her fingers and smiling at me through the space between her hands. 'Actually, the best preparation for the Clinic was my time in Ward 697 and in Sterkies. It was a similar experience, but of course the Clinic was much more controlled and I was there a lot longer. And there was no way you could escape. There was even double-barbed wire and patrol dogs. I tried putting messages in pill boxes and flushing them down the toilet, hoping they'd end up in the Hartbeespoort Dam, or somewhere where someone would find them.' She gave a sniff before continuing. 'But that didn't work...'

There was a catch in her voice. 'The dove I caught with some bread and a loop of dental floss was my last try. And thank God, Olly, you found it!' I leaned across the table and gripped her hand. 'But I learned a lot in the Clinic,' she went on. 'They taught me the history of the United States, the background and layout of the White House, as well as etiquette, business practice and computer skills. As you know there's a very good library there and I read a lot – novels by authors like Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Henry Miller and Vladimir Nabokov, which I probably wouldn't have read if I hadn't been there. So I suppose every bad thing that happens has some good in it…'

I'd noticed that Kristy was more poised, more sophisticated. After all, she was nearly two years older than she was when I last saw her. Although she had no American accent, I discovered later that she could switch it on and off at will.

Suddenly her sophistication seemed to melt. She smiled nervously and fished a bent cigarette from her pocket and lit it with a shaking hand. 'Smoking was banned at the Clinic – just like at the Spa – but I really feel I need one now.'

After a long pause, she made eye contact. 'You see, Olly, I knew I couldn't escape. So I just went along with the so-called "re-orientation therapy", pretending it was working, speaking like an American. But I was always aware that no matter what they did, they couldn't make me believe the things they wanted me to. I knew the "hijacking" was a set-up. And the

“hypnotherapy” didn’t work because, as you know I can’t be hypnotised. I just pretended that it did. I was playing for time, so I had to do some things I really hated doing...’

Another pause while she took a drag. ‘You see, Olly, Todd Trafficant made me sleep with him…’

I think she expected me to say something but I listened in silence.

‘It meant nothing to me, Olly, believe me…’ She blew smoke out slowly. Her eyes were brimming with tears. ‘I knew if I didn’t do it, I’d soon be on a one-way ticket to the United States, like Charlize, and the chances then of escaping would be zero.’

I took her hand in mine and gazed into her eyes. ‘It doesn’t matter, Kris. I love you no matter what.’

She tipped her head slightly and said nothing for a while; then she turned to face me. ‘I told Todd it was just this once and I wouldn’t do it again until I was freed, just to keep him on a string. Besides pretending to be a slow learner – but there’s obviously a limit to that – it was the only way I could get him to delay sending me to Washington. He respected my decision but said it would be impossible to arrange for my release unless they found a replacement. One day he told me they’d finally found a girl. I was shocked to find out later that it was Merrill.’

Merrill gave a bitter little laugh.

‘But then things suddenly changed,’ Kristy went on. ‘Todd started avoiding me. Before, he used to play chess with me a couple of times a week, but that stopped. I couldn’t work out why, and then one day Dr Stricker let it slip that they’d received new orders from Washington … from the White House … I gathered that President Koonce wasn’t interested in any girl but me!’

Just as I was about to ask more questions I saw Dean standing in the doorway. He smiled and beckoned to me. After excusing myself, I followed him down the passage to the softly-lit library lined with towering teak bookcases. Drew was leaning back in a well-padded leather chair, reminiscent of those in an elite London club, reading a newspaper. I took a seat in a similar chair, but Dean remained standing while he fished out a black briar pipe from his jacket pocket. ‘Mind if I smoke?’

‘Not at all,’ I replied.

After Dean had lit his pipe he took a seat opposite us. Soon the library was infused with the subtle aroma of scented pipe tobacco that somehow added to the cosiness imparted by the shelves of leather-bound books.

After taking a couple of quick draws on his pipe, Dean turned to me. 'Where to start…?' he said half to himself. 'Well, as I think you've gathered, Olly, both Drew and I have become increasingly concerned about the way the CIA has been diverging from its original mandate. Instead of confining itself to intelligence gathering abroad, it has become operational within the United States, spying illegally on American citizens, covertly assisted by the super-secret National Security Agency, who's illegal spying was partially exposed by whistleblower Edward Snowden during the second Obama Administration. And as the CIA becomes more and more politicised, it sometimes even hijacks the policy-making role of government.

'Being a Professional, not a Political, I fear that if the CIA continues on its present course it is heading for disaster, a disaster that could have grave repercussions for the whole country, if not the world. You see, Olly, the Politicals, who've now gained control of the Agency, think they know it all! This arrogance has finally gotten to me.'

He paused to draw on his pipe. 'But for you to understand what's been going on, I first need to sketch in some background. For example, if you live in America or in any industrialised country today, the CIA has all your details in a database, and, if you are considered "a person of interest", it has records of your telephone conversations; your surfing history on the Net; as well as the contents of your hard drive.'

'That's really scary.'

'Can you imagine what those in control of the CIA are doing with this kind of information?!'

'I think so. During your report-back in the park, I think you guys mentioned sinister groups above the CIA. Wouldn't the Politicals be funnelling info to them?'

'You bet! And just like the Politicals, these "above groups" consider themselves untouchable patriots who always know what's best for America *and* the world.'

'So what's their motive?'

'In a word, *control*.'

'Hmmm.'

'But that's not the whole story, Olly. A lot of interesting stuff came out

while we were interrogating Earl Stricker, and also during the debriefing of the so-called terror detainees.'

Perhaps my powers of precognition were kicking in, but I began to feel uneasy. 'Like what?'

'Putting two and two together, this is the picture that's emerged…'

Dean looked at me over the bowl of his pipe as he took a couple of slow draws. 'A couple of years ago, Force-X began monitoring all Muslim dentists and their patients in South Africa. Meanwhile, they'd set up a dental prosthetics company that offered very affordable rates. Their PR man posed as a Muslim, so most of the Muslim dentists switched to the company. But actually the company was a Force-X front that placed tiny microchip implants in all the prosthetics. If a patient seemed suspect, the microchip was activated. When they checked you out, Olly, and found you wore a kufi, they probably thought you were a convert to Islam, so they decided to keep tabs on you.'

'Any noticeable side effects?'

'Some of the targets heard intermittent humming noises.'

Suddenly a lot of things began to make sense…

'I meant to ask you, Dean, was there a Dr Byat among the detainees?'

'Sure there was. We're still debriefing him.'

Chapter 84

Dean glanced at his watch and announced that he had some business to attend to. We went through to the dining room where Kristy and Merrill were still chatting. Then Dean plucked two envelopes from his pocket and placed them on the table before them. ‘There you go, girls, shopping vouchers,’ he announced. ‘Time to hit the Rosebank Mall! But first you need to put these on,’ he added, handing them each a pair of dark glasses and a feathered brunette wig.’

‘Cool!’ Kristy and Merrill said almost simultaneously.

I’d already told Kristy about the holiday arrangements, which I’d held back as a surprise.

‘That’s great,’ she’d exclaimed.

Drew tapped me on the shoulder. ‘We better leave fairly early tomorrow for the Cavern,’ Olly. Could you meet us here at around eight-thirty?’

‘Sure.’

He told me that he’d hired a Toyota van, which had ample room for all of us, so I could park my Lada at the safe house. I’d already arranged with Faan to feed Chloe, Toby-Felix, and the tropical fish while I was away; so around eight-fifteen the next morning I hefted my suitcase and rucksack into the Lada, patted Chloe goodbye, and drove to the house in Westcliff.

When I arrived, Drew and Jill were packing things into the Toyota. They turned and waved a welcome. After I’d parked my car, Jill came up to me and gave me a hug. ‘Long time, no see, stranger!’

‘So glad you and Drew could make it.’

‘Actually, we’re cheating,’ she laughed. ‘We’re having our honeymoon *before* the wedding!’

Having packed the Toyota, we said our goodbyes to Dean and Merrill, who stood in the driveway, waving. As they walked back to the house I noticed they were holding hands.

Drew was driving, while Jill sat in the passenger seat, and Kristy and I were in the back. For the last part of the journey we had a magnificent view of the Drakensberg Amphitheatre, almost formal in its sweeping grandeur, with sheer basalt cliffs rising to an altitude of more than three-thousand

metres.

The Cavern Hotel was situated in a secluded valley beneath the Little Berg's massive sandstone rock faces, several kilometres before the Amphitheatre. Set among trees and tranquil gardens, the sprawling thatched buildings blended beautifully with the natural surroundings.

A petite dark-haired receptionist showed us to our chalets, and after we'd unpacked, we went through to the dining room for lunch. Many of the diners were elderly or middle-aged, but there were a few young couples and one or two teenagers. The quiet buzz of conversation and the occasional clink of plates completed the genteel atmosphere.

As I'd missed breakfast and had only a few snacks in the car, I ordered two helpings of the butternut, feta and thyme quiche. Kristy had a single portion of the same; while Drew and Jill both ordered fried fish and sesame chicken salad.

The forecast was for fine, cool weather, so we decided to go on fairly long walks the next day. Jill and Drew opted for the famous Tugela Gorge, a twenty-two kilometre hike that takes you through dense forests and beside deep, clear pools.

Kristy and I had of course decided on the Grotto, which was a ten kilometre round trip. Both walks were more accessible from Royal Natal National Park, a short drive from the Cavern.

That afternoon Drew and Jill went off together to look at the trout dams, while Kristy and I strolled hand in hand through the gardens and woods around the hotel. After a quick dip in the pool, we met Drew and Jill for a pre-dinner drink.

It was the superb dinner menu, with dishes such as sesame coated salmon, pork fillet medallion with stilton and blueberry port sauce, and sticky date pudding that finally convinced me that I was on holiday!

Back in our chalet, Kristy went through to the bathroom and seconds later I heard the shower running. After about five minutes she emerged wearing a silky red nightie trimmed with black lace. Her wet blonde hair had darkened to honey. She sat on the edge of our four-poster bed next to me, drying her hair.

I leaned across and kissed her. She took a long, searching look at me. I traced her lips with my finger, and then suddenly she caught it playfully between her teeth. After a few moments she let go. 'Oh, Olly,' she sighed, 'I love you so much, but let's not rush things. I've been locked away for so long

behind walls that I want to make love with you somewhere special where I feel really free.’

Chapter 85

"Have you never met a woman who inspires you to love? Until your every sense is filled with her? You inhale her. You taste her. You see your unborn children in her eyes and know that your heart has at last found a home. Your life begins with her, and without her it must surely end." – Don Juan DeMarco, psychiatric patient in the movie of the same name.

The next morning I awoke to the sound of a piet-my-vrou calling. Bright sunlight was filtering around the edges of the curtains and I heard Kristy brushing her teeth in the bathroom.

When she finally emerged barefoot and wearing a white T-shirt, she was hoisting up her cut-off jeans. Her neat navel winked above her half-open zip. I had a sudden urge to skip the walk and take her back to bed, but I recalled her words about not wanting to rush things, so instead I said, 'Ready for breakfast?'

'Won't be a sec, my love. I need to put on my walking shoes.'

When we arrived in the dining room, Drew and Jill were already seated. Four neat bags of sandwiches and fruit were waiting for us at our table. We'd all ordered packed lunches to take on our hikes.

Kristy leaned towards me and whispered, 'There's a man behind you on the other side of the dining room, Olly. Don't look now … I think he's watching me.'

I waited about half a minute, and then just as I was about to glance casually behind me, Kristy said, 'Oh, shit! He's just got up and left.'

'Don't worry about him,' I said. 'You're very beautiful, Kris, so it's not surprising men look at you.'

'Oh, Olly, you say the nicest things … but this guy gave me the creeps.'

About half an hour later we pulled into the parking area outside the Visitor Centre at Royal Natal National Park.

'Well, we'd better make a move now,' I said. 'We don't want to start walking when the sun's too high. By the way, we need to fill in the Day Walk Register. That's so if we don't report back on time they'll know where to

search. It's just a precaution.'

The Visitor Centre was a large thatched building whose main room was filled with display cabinets, hiking clothes, books, curios, snacks, as well as fridges with cool drinks. At least a dozen people were milling around, making their purchases. We went up to the reception desk and began filling in the register.

'You got cellphones?' the receptionist asked.

'Yes, we have,' said Drew.

'Well, take the number here – just in case. Also make sure you write down your numbers too.'

I turned to the others. 'Before we go I think we ought to buy a couple of energy drinks to take with us. Maybe also a bottle of wine.'

'Good idea,' said Jill.

'Well, we better say goodbye now,' said Drew. 'I see from the map that if we drive to the Gorge car park, we'll cut about three kays each way.'

'Right,' I said.

Drew and Jill drove off with a cheery wave. Just as I bent down to pick up my rucksack, Kristy leaned down and whispered in my ear. 'Olly, I think the man who was staring at me in the dining room has just walked into the Visitor Centre.'

'Well, let's get moving, then. If there's something dodgy about the guy, the best thing is to put some distance between us.'

'Okay,' said Kristy, hoisting her rucksack onto her back.

We hiked up the road towards the Day Visitor's car park, turning right across a small bridge over the Mahai River and then up the steep path to the Grotto and Sunday Falls.

For a while we walked in silence, concentrating on our walking. Every now and then Kristy would stop, turn, and give my hand a squeeze. Once we stopped in a shady spot for a long, slow kiss.

'You're pretty fit,' I remarked.

'One of the few good things about the Clinic was the mini gym with a treadmill for us girls to keep in shape. I used to spend a couple of hours there each day.'

About half an hour later, the path suddenly veered steeply to the left. Now we were climbing in earnest. The sun too was climbing, with no breeze to relieve the heat. Up and up we went until we finally came to the top of a gently rounded hill with a magnificent view of the Amphitheatre. In the

background we could see Cathedral Peak and in the far distance, Cathkin Peak and Champagne Castle.

We paused to admire the view and to sip our energy drinks before trudging on.

About five minutes later Kristy stopped and looked around. ‘Did you hear that, Olly? I think I heard someone coughing.’

‘Probably just a baboon,’ I said.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Well, whatever it was it sounded quite far away.’

The valley along which we were hiking was beginning to narrow, with tall sandstone cliffs on either side. Here the path ran along the base of the western cliff. A little further we came to a rocky shoulder thrusting out from the main face. To me it looked like an elephant’s head in profile with a weeping eye.

We stopped for a few moments to marvel at this strange example of Nature’s sculpture. Then I noticed that the back of Kristy’s T-shirt was stained with sweat. I felt it with my hand and it was soaked.

‘Hmmm, would be nice to cool off in the shade,’ she said, reacting to my touch.

‘Not far now,’ I replied. ‘Only a few minutes to the Grotto Bush where it’s a lot cooler.’

We hiked on steadily until we could hear the sound of tumbling water. At this point there was a fork in the path, the left one leading to the Grotto, the other to the right to the Camel’s Hump – a prominent hill in that shape.

After entering the Grotto Bush – actually a dense forest – we found ourselves in a deep rocky cleft filled with bird sounds and woodland echoes. Initially, there was the shrill song of cicadas, but suddenly they went quiet.

We walked on in silence, just giving one another reassuring glances as we scrambled over huge fallen logs and around hanging vines.

At last we reached the Grotto, a place of special magic. Over millions of years the stream had worn away the sandstone to form a long narrow gorge that made me think of an open-air cathedral.

Very little sunlight penetrated here but where the gorge turned a corner there was a sunny spot on a flat sloping rock. We decided to rest there a while.

I lay back on the warm rock with Kristy stretched out beside me, and the trickling stream below us.

She patted the rock. ‘A bit hard isn’t it?’ She shot me a meaningful grin. ‘Actually, I’m quite hungry,’ she added. ‘Shall we eat our sandwiches here?’

‘Good idea.’

We ate in silence for a while. Then I said, ‘I bought a bottle of Drostdy Hof Light at the Visitor Centre. Want some?’

‘Let’s keep it for later. We can drink it when we find a comfy spot.’ She took my hand in hers and we started heading back the way we came.

As we emerged from a patch of forest, Kristy stopped.

‘You tired?’ I asked her.

‘No way.’

‘So why are you stopping here, my love?’

‘I can see some lovely soft grass over there,’ she whispered, nodding towards the hillside above the path leading to the Camel’s Hump. ‘I want you to take me there,’ she added, with a shy smile.

‘Okay.’

Suddenly I felt her grip tightening as a solitary hiker came into view below us. The man was standing at the fork in the path, consulting a map. He was tall and thin-faced, and a long narrow backpack was propped against his legs.

When we reached the spot where he was standing, I asked him if he needed help. He grunted something inaudible and continued staring at the map without looking up. After we’d turned onto the Camel’s Hump path, he put his map away, slung his rucksack onto his back and headed up the path towards the Grotto.

‘Hey, Olly,’ Kristy whispered urgently. ‘I think that was the same guy I saw earlier going into the Visitor Centre; the one who was staring at me.’

‘You sure?’

‘I’m not a hundred percent sure, but he looked like him.’

‘He’s going in the other direction, so I wouldn’t worry.’

Our path led across the stream and then began skirting the eastern cliff that formed the other side of the valley. We followed the path for a little way and then struck out to the left up the steep hillside covered with soft grass. We scrambled up towards an ochre cliff where, above a delta of bush, there was a long crack that ran almost all the way down the cliff face. A little way below this we picked a grassy hollow between two large boulders, dotted with pink everlastings. A small tree above the upper boulder provided us with dappled shade.

There were beads of perspiration on Kristy's forehead and half-moons of damp under her arms. 'Whew! That's better,' she said kicking off her shoes. I followed suit, and the soft springy grass felt wonderfully cool on the soles of my feet.

On an impulse I took her in my arms and kissed her. We stood there for a long moment, locked in our embrace, the mountain breeze cooling us. Then Kristy stepped back, and looked into my eyes, smiling. She gave my hand a quick squeeze, turned, and clambered onto the upper boulder. An orange butterfly flitted past. After Kristy and I had clambered down, I lifted the bottle of wine out of its cooler and poured us each a glass.

We sipped our wine for a while and then Kristy said, 'Do you know, Olly, how good it is to be with a man who's afraid of nothing?'

'You're not talking about me, are you?'

'Who else?' she replied, planting an affectionate kiss on my nose.

A faint chorus of doves, punctuated by the plaintive call of a piet-my-vrou, echoed across the valley, while the shrill electronic music of cicadas – strangely not unpleasant – rang like a sweet tinnitus in my ears.

Then Kristy edged a little way up the grass and leaned back on a mossy mound just below the upper boulder. Her legs were extended, her bare feet touching me. I knelt below her and tickled her foot with a piece of grass. She gave a small kick and giggled. Then she looked down at me and smiled, nudging me with a toe.

Suddenly, she gave a sigh and slipped all the way down the mossy mound to lie beside me. I gently placed my lips on hers and kissed her. Her response was hungry and demanding. I tugged on her cut-offs, and she wiggled her bottom to ease them off. As her breathing quickened, I thrust my head under her T-shirt and began sucking her nipples. There was a musky odour of fresh, clean sweat. She suddenly shrugged off her shirt to allow me free access, her wet nipples glistening in the morning sun. I sucked a bit more until they popped erect. Then I moved downwards, gently parting her legs. I let my tongue rest in her opening, hardly moving for what seemed a blissful eternity. Then she began slowly rotating her hips. I ran my tongue upwards. Her eyes were now tightly shut and she had an urgent, fixed smile. I felt a shudder run through her and her breathing came in gasps. She pushed her hands under her rump, thrusting her hips higher. Suddenly the singing of the cicadas rose to a new pitch, as if obeying the baton of a celestial conductor.

In one quick movement, I shed my shirt and shorts.

‘I want you inside me, Olly,’ she breathed, looking up at me with the most beautiful smile I could ever imagine. She gripped me with one hand and guided me inwards. Suddenly she pulled me closer. Now that we were linked together, she stopped moving and we savoured the long moment.

Then suddenly she swung her legs around me in a scissor grip. ‘Oh, Olly!’ she cried urgently, pressing her heels into my rump. ‘I’ve been waiting for this for sooo long!’ As I pushed deeper into her, she let out a low moan. I began with slow, even thrusts, and she buried her face in my neck, kissing me and sobbing. Then I slid one hand upwards, cradling a soft bra-less breast. She gave a little moan and then clamped her hands on my cheeks and kissed my lips hungrily. Her eyes seemed to widen and contract in time to my thrusts.

‘Oh yes, that’s it!’ she cried, her head thrown back, a little to one side. Her tightness was bringing me quickly to orgasm. But suddenly I sensed an image forming behind my eyelids. I went cold as I felt my old fears returning … Had Lana’s treatment been successful, or was it only a temporary reprieve, my love life destined to be ruined for ever by the terrible recurring images of Stocky and Tall?!

I was trying desperately to picture something different in my mind – *anything!* – when the image came slowly into focus.

I almost cried out with relief when I saw it wasn’t Stocky and Tall but the beautiful Goddess! She had a look of all-encompassing love as she smiled at me. Then the Goddess began turning and I saw her other faces – Alice, Lana, Jean, and finally Kristy, all smiling at me.

On the seventh or eighth stroke I came, carried along on a wonderful tide of love. Kristy suddenly shuddered and a low sound, which seemed to come from her belly, rose up her throat and emerged in a strangled cry that echoed off the cliff face. Her body bucked and writhed against me, her head tossing from side to side.

‘My sweet, I can’t believe this is happening to me,’ she cried.

I gave several more deep thrusts and she collapsed forward onto me, letting out a deep sigh. ‘Hold me Olly. Just hold me…’

We lay there for a long while inhaling the smell of the pressed grass and flowers and of our love-making.

Chapter 86

Suddenly Kristy jumped up, her breast jiggling.

‘My pussy is sore, Olly, and I’m all sticky … and it’s all your fault!’ she added playfully.’

‘Well, maybe we can take a bath together when we get back,’ I laughed. ‘Actually, we better get moving, Kris, or we’ll be late.’

I was admiring her naked perfection when I heard a sound like the pop of a pellet gun. Kristy didn’t seem to hear it, but began a little stationary dance, her head bobbing. A few seconds later there was a second pop. Suddenly her eyes glazed over. Then she collapsed like a puppet on a loosened string, hitting her head hard against the lower boulder. To my horror, blood began oozing from a head wound.

For a moment I had no idea what had happened, and then I realised that she’d been shot. I sensed that the shot had come from somewhere across the valley, but where exactly I had no idea. In any case, I was too concerned about Kristy to think about the shooter. I bent over her. She was unconscious but still breathing.

Suddenly it seemed as if I’d been plunged into some waking nightmare. I gently raised her head so I could examine the wound, but there was so much blood I couldn’t tell how deep it was. After I’d partially staunched the flow with paper towels, I phoned the Visitor Centre on my cellphone and informed the desk clerk what had happened. The clerk told me to stay where we were and they would send a team of field rangers to bring Kristy down by stretcher.

I then phoned Drew, who immediately said he would arrange for a helicopter to airlift Kristy from the Visitor Centre to hospital. After Drew had recovered from his initial shock at the news, he said, ‘I know you don’t want to think about things like this right now, Olly, but it’s very important that you try and find the slug. It may help us identify the shooter. Actually, we’re still on our way back from the Gorge. We should be at the Visitor Centre in about half an hour.’

‘Right,’ was all I could think of saying.

Kristy was still unconscious.

For a while I sat next to her holding her hand and dabbing her scalp with paper towels and murmuring words of encouragement, although I was pretty sure she couldn't hear me.

Then I remembered Drew's words about the slug, and I began searching the area between the two boulders. After looking around for a while I noticed a fresh chip on the rock face of the upper boulder, just above head level. I continued searching in the grass below and eventually I found it – a small blunted cone of metal – under an everlasting. I picked it up and slipped it into my pocket. Finally, I managed to ease Kristy's clothes back on before the field rangers arrived.

The rest seemed to happen in slow motion: me following the rangers down to the Visitor Centre with an unconscious Kristy strapped to a stretcher; easing her into the waiting helicopter; accompanying her on the flight to Pietermaritzburg, where she was rushed to Casualty and then to ICU at St Anne's Hospital; and worst of all, the endless waiting not knowing whether she would recover or not.

Jill had also accompanied us on the flight, while Drew had driven back to the Cavern to collect our things and settle the bill before driving down to Pietermaritzburg. He'd managed to arrange accommodation at Oak Lodge, an upmarket B&B in the suburb of Montrose. It was only about fifteen minutes drive from the hospital, a three-storey red-brick building in the city centre.

By now Drew had arrived, and all three of us were waiting at the hospital for news of Kristy. Eventually, a young Indian doctor in a white coat came out and spoke to us. 'I'm Dr Chetty,' he said, 'and I'll be treating Ms Minnaar.'

'How is she?' I wanted to know, apprehensive of the answer.

'At the moment all I can say is that the bullet grazed her scalp, but her main injury seems to have been caused when she fell down and hit her head. However, we'll have to wait for a CT scan once her situation stabilises before I can tell you more.'

'But will she make it?' I persisted, trying to keep my voice even.

Dr Chetty pursed his lips and looked at me over his glasses. 'Well, I have cautious hopes she will, but at this stage I can't make a definitive prognosis.'

The following morning shortly after we'd arrived at the hospital, Dr Chetty came through to us in the waiting room. 'We've just given Ms Minnaar a scan and we've found a small haematoma – that's a blood clot – which we'll have to monitor. At this stage, however, it doesn't seem

necessary to operate. In the case of minor haematomas it's often best just to leave them. But during the scan we discovered something rather odd. There's a small subcutaneous device implanted at the back of her neck, just below the hair line.'

'Holy shit!' exclaimed Drew, 'So that's how they knew where she was!'

'Who?' asked Dr Chetty.

'The people who arranged the hit.'

Dr Chetty raised his eyebrows. 'I think you'd better start at the beginning.'

Drew gave him a brief account of what had happened, emphasising that it was vital that the device be removed immediately or Kristy's life might be further endangered.

'Are you a relation?' he asked.

'No, just a friend.' Drew glanced at me. 'But my friend here is her fiancé.'

I noticed Jill smiling faintly.

'That's fine,' said Dr Chetty. 'You see, we need authorisation to perform the procedure. But these days "partner" is good enough. So fill in the paperwork and I'll remove the device under a local anaesthetic.'

I signed a form and about half an hour later Dr Chetty returned. He smiled and held out the palm of his hand. In it was a tiny translucent tube about the length of two rice grains, with tiny gold and silver wires running through the centre.

'We've got to get it away from here as soon as possible,' said Drew. 'Otherwise whoever tried to kill Kristy will come after her here.'

'I've a suggestion,' said Dr Chetty, with a wry smile. 'A little unorthodox perhaps, but I think it will work and we won't be breaking any laws. I have a cousin who works at a funeral parlour here in Maritzburg. I'll ask him to put the tracking device in their refrigeration room where they keep bodies awaiting burial or transportation. If the people who're after Ms Minnaar are still searching for her, the device will lead them there, so they'll think she's dead and won't bother to come to the hospital. However, if they do happen to check at the parlour, my cousin will tell them that the body is being kept there pending transportation to Johannesburg for the funeral.'

'Brilliant!' I exclaimed.

'Yes, I think the plan would work, said Drew more soberly.

Kristy had been transferred to a high care ward, but she remained in a

coma. Drew, Jill and I visited her every day, but sometimes Drew and Jill would go off for a few hours on other business. I would sit next to Kristy's bed, holding her hand and talking to her quietly in the hope that she could hear me. But there was no response and no movement in her hand. And although she could breathe on her own, she was being fed through a tube.

On the third day, while I was sitting at Kristy's bedside, I saw Dr Chetty standing in the doorway. He walked into the ward and stood next to Kristy's bed.

'So what are the chances of her coming out of the coma?' I asked him, trying to keep the strain out of my voice.

'Her condition seems to have stabilised, but at this point I can't promise anything other than that I'll see she gets the best possible treatment.' He rested a hand on my shoulder. 'I'm sorry, Mr Jeex, but there're no guarantees with head injuries.'

The following day, while all three of us were visiting, Jill sat next to Kristy's bed and held her hand. We were talking quietly among ourselves when suddenly Jill stopped in mid-sentence. 'I don't know if I'm imagining it but I think I felt her hand move slightly.'

'Really!' I said, feeling a surge of hope. 'Do you mind if we swap places?'

I took Kristy's hand in mine and gave it a gentle squeeze. Nothing. I kept on holding it for the rest of our visit, but her hand remained limp.

The next day Kristy's condition was unaltered. I was beginning to wonder whether she'd ever be her normal self again. The thought of her remaining in a coma after being rescued from the Clinic seemed a cruel twist of fate.

I wanted to ask Dr Chetty if he'd reached a more definitive prognosis, but I didn't want to speak in front of Kristy in the remote chance that she could hear what I was saying, so I made an appointment to see him in his rooms.

I came quickly to the point. 'I really need to know what the chances are of Kristy recovering, doctor. I mean becoming normal again, so please be frank.'

He fiddled with some papers on his desk for a moment and then leaned back in his chair, his hands clasped behind his head. He made eye contact for a few moments before speaking. 'Well, Mr Jeex, although I'm pretty certain she will recover, the extent of her recovery is another matter. Coming out of a coma is mostly incremental and usually over a number of weeks, or longer.

And at the end of it most patients do not recover completely.'

'So what are you saying, doctor?'

'What I'm saying is that there's usually some form of impairment, and patients often have to relearn things. Most have varying degrees of amnesia, often depression. At best they feel confused and it'll take time before they start feeling better. During this time they'll need a lot of love and comforting.'

'Any idea when Kristy will be discharged?'

'Much too soon to say. But don't worry, if she shows any improvement, you'll be the first to know.'

For the next couple of days Kristy seemed pretty much the same, but on the third day, while I was holding her hand, I felt a gentle pressure. I wasn't sure whether I was imagining it, so at first I didn't say anything.

And then I felt her hand moving. She was tickling my palm with her forefinger! I can't tell you how wonderful it felt. 'Hey guys,' I shouted. 'I can feel her finger moving. Please call Dr Chetty!'

Dr Chetty was all smiles when he heard the news. 'I think your fiancé is on the way to recovery. And of course I'll be monitoring her closely for further signs.'

The next day while I was holding Kristy's hand she managed a few faint squeezes and then opened her eyes. She murmured something inaudible and then drifted back to sleep.

In the days that followed she made steady progress. But she was only awake for a few minutes at a time, with the duration of her waking periods gradually increasing. Then one morning when I took her hand, she stirred as she felt my touch, slowly opened her eyes and reached up to me. 'I'm going to be okay,' she whispered in a croaky voice.

'Well, what are you going to do about it?' Kristy asked me sleepily during one of her conscious interludes.

'About what?' I asked.

'About being my fiancé,' she replied.

'You heard that?'

'I heard a lot of things when people were around my bed.'

'Well, that's a silly question, isn't it? I mean, what does one usually do with fiancés?'

She stared at me for a long moment and then smiled weakly. 'Marry them, I suppose?'

‘That’s right!’

‘You really mean that, Olly?’

I held her hand. ‘Of course, my love.’

More than anything this conversation made me realise that Kristy had emerged from the coma mentally unimpaired. I said a silent prayer of gratitude.

That was the day Kristy was moved from high care to a private ward. By now she was eating normally on her own and could get up and go to the toilet with a little help. She was getting stronger by the day, and Dr Chetty said she could be discharged soon, but would need home care for a while.

I phoned Lana and explained the situation. ‘Well, Olly, I absolutely insist that both of you come and stay with us for as long as you like. You obviously have to go to work, but as I work from home there’s no problem. Also, Jean, I’m sure, would be only too willing to help.’

A couple of days later Kristy was discharged from St Anne’s Hospital. We thanked Dr Chetty warmly for all he’d done, and then set off for Johannesburg.

Chapter 87

The plan was for Kristy to spend a night or two at the safe house before we moved to Lana's. If possible, she'd have a gentle debriefing to try to piece together more details of the shooting.

Jill had to report for work at the hospital the next day, so we dropped her off at her flat before driving to the safe house.

As the gates to the safe house opened, Dean and Merrill walked out into the driveway to welcome us. Their body language told me that they were, as the Americans say, 'an item'.

Merrill gave Kristy a long, affectionate hug. Dean also hugged her. I noticed that Kristy was unsteady on her feet, so I took her arm and helped her inside.

After we'd unpacked the car and carried our things inside, Dean ushered us into the study while Merrill went to make tea.

When we'd settled back and were having our tea and biscuits, Dean turned to Kristy and said, 'I know you're probably feeling stressed, Kris, but is there anything you'd like to say?'

'About the shooting?'

'Yeah. But if you don't feel like talking about it now I understand.'

'No it's fine.' Kristy took a sip of tea before continuing 'Well, one thing I remember at the Clinic was them telling us that if we ever tried to escape we were dead meat.'

Although Kristy couldn't recall anything since the shooting until she came out of the coma, she was able to describe the man who'd been staring at her in the Cavern dining room and who we'd seen on the Grotto path. 'Besides the tracker under my skin, I'm pretty sure he knew where we were heading simply by checking the hiking register.'

'Of course,' murmured Dean, 'In the meantime if you don't mind I'll email that description to my contacts right now.'

He was back within five minutes. 'The spent bullet Olly found is a 7.62mm calibre that was probably fired from a sniper's rifle. It was a sub-sonic round and my guess is that the rifle was also silenced – both trade marks of covert action groups. That's why you only heard a faint pop.'

‘I’ve suddenly begun to feel tired,’ Kristy said with a yawn. ‘Do you mind if I go and lie down?’

‘You do that,’ said Dean. ‘I think what you’ve told us already is enough to go on.’

Kristy shot him a wan smile.

Merrill gave Kristy’s hand a squeeze before accompanying her out of the room.

‘Would you mind excusing me?’ said Drew. ‘I need to see Jill for a couple of hours. See you guys later.’

Dean lit his pipe and settled back in his chair. ‘You may have already gathered this, Olly, but I’m part of a special investigation unit charged with uncovering crimes and abuses of power by covert ops groups linked to the CIA Politicals, operating both within the U.S. and abroad. I can tell you now about this because you’ll probably also be required to give evidence regarding Kristy’s attempted assassination. So you need to be prepared.’

‘I gathered as much,’ I said. ‘By the way, what’s happened to the so-called terror detainees?’

‘The suspected dangerous ones have been flown to America and turned over to a special unit run by CIA Professionals – people who have a respect for the Constitution and believe in limited powers. After further debriefing, they’ll either be put on trial, or if there’s insufficient evidence to do so, released into the custody of their home countries. But where this might result in their re-detention and torture, they’ll be given into the safe custody of a human rights organisation willing to help resettle them.’

‘Were all the detainees dangerous?’

‘Not all. In fact most of the local ones were merely sympathisers who provided safe houses, transport and money to activists and had no active involvement in terrorism. Your friend, Dr Byat, didn’t even do that; he just wrote some strong letters to the newspapers.’

‘Were there also foreign detainees?’

‘Quite a few. These were mainly from Afghanistan and Pakistan. They were brought to the Clinic for some of Dr Trafficant’s “enhanced interrogation”. None of them were captured on the battlefield and many were abducted by Pakistani warlords in exchange for bounties paid by the U.S.’

‘Were any of them tortured?’

‘Well, there’s a sound-proof basement under one of the concrete buildings at the Clinic where suspects were interrogated. And yes, the

treatment they were subjected to amounted to torture. Some detainees were held for a week at a time in a metal shipping container which was cold at night and scorching hot during the day. All the suspects were forced to wear black hoods in the presence their interrogators – usually Mrs Eberhardt and Dr Stricker.

'The freed detainees claim that some of their comrades died under torture and their bodies clandestinely flown out of the country. This is something that will have to be investigated. Let me stress that the things that went on at the Clinic were not isolated incidents but part of a systematic regime of torture at clandestine detention centres around the world, with no accountability in law.'

'So was the Clinic one of the main ones?'

'It was the main one in enhanced interrogation methods.'

'Do you think the so-called "enhanced interrogation" methods at the Clinic got results?'

'In some cases the hypnotism probably worked. But of course not in the case of Kristy. But in my opinion, not only is torture immoral; it's also counter-productive. What prompted the US to go to war in Iraq were lies about weapons of mass destruction given under torture.'

'That really is shocking, Dean. No, more than shocking – *tragically wrong!'*

'Well, after debriefing the detainees at the Clinic, I decided that I had to do something to put a stop to all this abuse. But maybe it's too late. Already the measures that the Politicals and their neocon bedfellows justify in the name of "security" have turned America into a rogue state. America is no longer a democracy but a *securocracy*, serving the interests of those and their successors who ordered the assassination of JFK – for "security reasons"!'

'It's the old story of the path to hell…'

'You said it! Well, we Americans had better be wary of those who promise us security in return for our freedom. We must recognise that part of the price of freedom may well be security, but that the price of *complete* security is inhumanity. And inhumanity is precisely what the Insiders have in store for us.

'In an Orwellian twist, while subverting the very concepts of freedom and democracy, they continue to preach these concepts as a smokescreen to mask their true agenda, which for countries they don't like is "regime change".

'Actually, the largest single category of covert activity sponsored by the

Politicals today is tampering with elections around the world. These election-fudging operations make up more than thirty per cent of current covert action projects.'

'What about the recent election in this country?'

'Ironically, in that particular instance, perhaps the Politicals were on the right side for a change! Given enough time, President Phiri would have turned into another Robert Mugabe and totally destroyed the country. But having said that, what business has America interfering in the politics of other countries, even if their politics are wrong? Usually the best foreign policy is to leave well alone.'

'I agree.'

'But the Politicals and their puppet-masters are dangerous precisely because they're so powerful. Indeed, these are the forces inside America today that only a foolish man would disobey. But I guess I'm a foolish man!'

Dean took another draw on his pipe and blew out a long stream of aromatic blue smoke. 'But of course a one-man war against them would be absurd. They have too much to lose, including President Koonce.'

'So what do you propose doing, Dean?'

'*Exposure!* … Exposure is our only chance.'

'Does exposure mean you'll return to Washington and issue a statement to the media?'

'That would be a waste of time. The Insiders would see to it that the story was soon buried. No, I'm going to start here!'

His pipe appeared to have gone out. He paused while he tamped more tobacco into it and then relit it. 'You're in the media world here aren't you, Olly?'

'Sure. I'm with Africa International Radio. We call it AIR. It's a shortwave and internet-based station.'

'Any suggestions, then?'

'Well, I could do a live interview with you that would be broadcast around the world. For good measure I could also give your statement to a contact of mine at *The Sowetan*, Sheldrake Mokatse. He would definitely use it.'

'Perfect. Once he runs with it, the wire services will pick it up. It wouldn't matter if they were in Africa, or the Mid East, or India, or wherever – once the story got exposure there, then Amnesty International would react and maybe some governments would also comment. Finally, the slavish US

mainstream media would be forced to notice it, and so would the authorities in Washington.'

'Makes sense.'

'But timing is critical, Olly. I'll contact you as soon as I'm ready for the interview.'

'Fine. But there's one thing that's bothering me. Couldn't you be prosecuted for violating the CIA's code of secrecy?'

'Technically, yes. But I intend releasing my statement to coincide with the special investigation into abuses of power by covert ops groups. Of course, the Politicals would try to put a lid on it by claiming that it's an "in house" matter and shouldn't be made public. But if I go public at this point, there'll be precious little they can do about it. They couldn't very well charge me in the face of an international outcry.'

Chapter 88

The following morning when I was on my way downstairs, the appetising smell of frying bacon wafted up to me. Just then Merrill and Kristy came through from the kitchen, carrying trays of breakfast dishes to the dining room.

About an hour after breakfast, Drew arrived. He seemed in a jovial mood, and after pouring himself a cup of coffee, he went through to the computer room.

Kristy and Merrill were strolling around the grounds, while Dean and I were having coffee in the library. Dean was talking about the clandestine forces he believed controlled the United States from behind the scenes and how they used war to achieve their goals. 'Today, Olly, the biggest business in America is *war*. It's central to the strategy of the Insiders' and the other groups that manipulate American politics.

'So by going public do you think you'll be able to defeat these forces?'

'Unfortunately, it'll only shrivel one tentacle – the one that manipulates the Politicals. To mix metaphors, Olly, the tentacle is like a secondary cancer. Unfortunately the primary cancer will remain intact.'

'So how does one destroy the primary?'

'My guess is that America will have to suffer a devastating attack, not just one like 9/11, but much, *much* worse – one that will shake the country to its very foundations. Only something on that scale will shock the American people out of their inertia.'

Kristy and I stayed another day at the safe house before moving to Lana's. I'd already arranged with an estate agent to let my house, and all I had to do was collect Chloe, Toby-Felix, Raxie and Peebles, as well as the tropical fish.

My Lada was still parked at the safe house, so after Kristy and I'd loaded our things into it, we drove over to Melville and picked up the pets, as well as Kristy's potted avocado tree.

It was around eleven o'clock and the sun was already bright in a clear sky

when we set off for Greenside. Chloe sat in the back of the car peering out of the window. Although her appetite had improved a little since she'd been on the canine anti-depressant, she still seemed listless.

Both Lana and Jean came to the gate to greet us. After a lot of hugging, we moved inside and Lana showed us to our bedroom, a spacious north-facing room on the second floor, overlooking the swimming pool.

Kristy was still pretty weak and couldn't move at her normal pace and tired easily. She also had problems doing little things that previously were second nature to her, like tying the laces on her running shoes and fastening and unfastening her bra. One evening at dinner I found her struggling to cut a lamb chop, so I cut it for her.

These little things frustrated and depressed her. She also complained of headaches and ringing in her ears, as well as dizzy spells. More seriously, she was having frequent anxiety attacks. If one came on in the evening after I'd returned from work I would put my arms around her and try and comfort her. Apparently, Lana and Jean often did the same during the day when I was away.

Concerned about these symptoms, I made an appointment for Kristy to see Liz Stott, who said it would take some time for the brain to create new pathways to perform the tasks the damaged ones had previously done. Liz said that the chances were good that these symptoms would eventually fade.

One evening while we were all watching TV, Kristy told Lana that the recent trauma she'd been through had somehow revived memories of what her Oupa had done to her. 'I keep on seeing his face in horrible dreams and he's touching my private parts. But this morning I happened to see some books in your library about treating molested women, and I wondered whether there's anything you could do to make him go away?'

'Sure, there is,' said Lana. 'It's called Amphisbaena therapy, and I'm pretty certain it would help.'

'I have it regularly,' put in Jean, 'and it's working for me.'

'Okay, when can we start?' Kristy put in.

'When you feel you're ready.'

'How about tomorrow?'

After Kristy had been having therapy with Lana for about two weeks I noticed a definite improvement. Gradually the bad dreams occurred less frequently and at her next appointment with Liz Stott, Liz confirmed a marked improvement in Kristy's physical coordination.

Over the next month or so Kristy became much stronger. She swam in the pool every day, and in the late afternoons she would go for walks with Chloe and me in the park. Soon the walks got longer and there was no sign of her tiring. Chloe, however, seemed to tire easily, which wasn't surprising, as she was now nearly twelve.

One evening when we were about to turn in, Kristy asked me to push our beds together and drape queen-sized sheets over them. 'I want to be close to you tonight, Olly,' she said simply, kissing me tenderly on the lips.

Feeling her body next to me that night, I sensed a stirring in my loins, but I held off in case she wasn't ready. We hadn't made love since the Grotto, and although I'd often fantasised about our love-making in the grass, I realised it wouldn't be right to initiate sex while Kristy was still recovering. The next night, however, she crawled under the sheets and took me in her mouth. I knew then she must be better. After that we made love slowly and tenderly almost every night.

A couple of days later when I was chatting to Lana, I noticed her stomach looked swollen. I asked her if she was okay, and she flashed me a shy smile.

'I'm pregnant,' she said.

'Great! Who's the lucky father?'

After a longish pause she said, 'I'm looking at him.'

'*Me?*'

The thought of becoming a father again came as quite a shock.

'Yes, it happened after we'd had some of that herbal tonic, and later you told me you'd been making love to a Goddess.'

It took a moment for this to sink in. Then I said: 'It certainly felt like it.'

Another shy smile.

'You okay with it, Lana? I mean being pregnant.'

'More than okay, Olly. I've wanted a baby so badly that I just went ahead and let it happen. You see, you're the only man I've ever met who I'd want to make a baby with. I suppose I should have told you earlier, but I wanted to be sure everything was okay first.'

'And is it?'

'Sure. The pregnancy is going very well. I get a lot of exercise. That's why you see Kristy and me swimming so much in the pool.'

'Well, I'm really, really looking forward to being the father,' I said, meaning it, 'and yes, I'd like to contribute in any way I can to the child's upbringing.'

‘Actually, it’s a girl.’
‘Great.’
‘I’ve explained to Kristy how it happened, and she understands perfectly.
‘Oh, and one other thing, she’s also pregnant.’

Chapter 89

As I heard on the lunch-time news, the Minister had issued a statement announcing the impending closure of AIR because of ‘budgetary constraints’.

I immediately went into a huddle with Will and Prue and we agreed to launch an online campaign to save the station. The campaign document pointed out that millions of African listeners still relied on shortwave for their news and that AIR provided an alternative to the many tightly controlled state broadcasters.

Phone calls from listeners poured in, pledging support, followed by a flood of emails, not only from Africa but from around the world. The Commonwealth Broadcasting Association said South Africa could not have a more cost-effective means of reaching and influencing its neighbours than AIR.

Each day we updated the online document with extracts from the latest messages of support, creating a snowball effect.

Chapter 90

"…*how* likely *is it that terrorists will explode a nuclear bomb and devastate a great American metropolis? In the judgment of former U.S. Senator Sam Nunn, the likelihood of a single nuclear bomb exploding in a single city is greater today than at the height of the Cold War … on the current trend line, the chances of a nuclear terrorist attack in the next decade are greater than 50 percent"* – Graham T. Allison, director of Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and author of *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe*

I heard it on the car radio while driving to work. There'd been a massive explosion in the Mojave Desert, in the United States. Details were sketchy, but first reports suggested that a nuclear bomb had been detonated in a remote part of Death Valley. Calls from Las Vegas said a mushroom cloud was clearly visible on the horizon.

When I arrived at AIR there was a buzz of excitement in the newsroom. Although AIR normally concentrated on African news, the bomb was what everyone was talking about.

As the morning progressed, more details came in on CNN and the Voice of America, but so far no group had claimed responsibility. It was too early to assess possible casualties, but one report said a party of German tourists was missing.

An hour later President Koonce addressed the nation, saying that although he had declared a state of emergency in the surrounding areas, there was no cause for panic and the government was 'on top of the situation'.

Chapter 91

When I took Kristy in my arms and hugged her on the news of her pregnancy, she smiled at me shyly. ‘Actually, I’m having twins, Olly.’

‘You sure?’

‘That’s what the doctor says.’

‘Fantastic! Well, they will be real *love* children,’ I said, warming to the idea. ‘Weren’t they conceived among the grasses and everlastings at the Grotto?’

‘Where else, silly boy?’

I took her in my arms and hugged her again. ‘But why didn’t you tell me earlier, Kris?’

‘I thought that while I was still recovering there was always the risk of a setback. If I’d told you then and I’d lost the babies, it would have made things a lot worse.’

‘I suppose you’re right.’

‘It’s really strange, Olly, but in a way I think I’ve benefited from this awful injury. It wasn’t just my body healing but also my mind and spirit. I realise now that I’m no longer quite the same person I was before. I’m stronger, more focused, and I don’t take anything for granted. The most important thing, though, is that before it happened I never even thought of having a baby. Now I really, really want one – actually, *two,’* she added with a grin.

‘Another good thing,’ she went on, ‘I’ve managed to give up smoking.’

I’d received a call from Erin, who said the Harpies had asked her to send some things over to the UK that they’d left behind. Some of the things – mainly clothes – were at her cottage, while others were in cardboard boxes I’d brought to Lana’s. Erin said a friend, who was going over to the UK, would be able to take a couple of extra suitcases, so she wanted to know if she could call around and fetch the boxes. I hadn’t got round to telling her that I’d moved from Melville, so when I told her where I was staying I sensed surprise in her voice. We arranged for her to call round at Lana’s the

following morning at eleven.

When Erin rang the doorbell, Lana and Jean and Kristy all found pressing reasons to answer it! But I said I would.

After I'd introduced them to Erin, there were slightly forced smiles all round.

I helped load the boxes into Erin's car and then she suggested we have coffee somewhere. There were quite a lot of parenting issues we needed to discuss, she said.

So we drove up to the Jugg o' Cream in Melville and ordered two cappuccinos. While we were waiting, there was an awkward silence.

The music in the background was an old tune, *No Matter What*, which reminded me of our good times together.

After the coffee arrived, she took a sip and looked at me over her cup with slightly narrowed eyes. 'Quite a ménage you have there, Olly…'

'I wouldn't call it that, Erin,' I said with a shake of my head. 'If you really want to know, Kristy is my girlfriend, and Lana and Jean are just good friends.'

'Oh, I *seeee*…' she said, sounding sceptical. Then she began toying with her coffee spoon. Finally she gave me a skew look. 'Actually, I could sense it was more than that – at least as far as *they* are concerned.'

I now got the impression that the 'parenting things' she said we needed to talk about were not the main reason why she'd suggested having coffee.

Suddenly she leaned across the table and said, 'I'm really sorry things didn't work out between us, Olly. I hope you can you forgive me.'

I was taken aback by this candid remark, since Erin was normally a very closed person. 'For what?'

'For everything that happened. Also for the horrible things I said to you when you were in the psychiatric ward. I realise now I made a terrible mistake.'

'It wasn't your fault, Erin. Events simply conspired against us.'

'Well, I must be a very bad judge of character, then.'

Although she hadn't mentioned Sudman, I knew she was referring to him.

It came to me then that it was time to clear the air, to have everything out in the open, otherwise we'd never gain proper closure. So I took the bull by the horns. 'I understand you're no longer involved with Alec Sudman.'

The bluntness of my remark must have taken her by surprise. She didn't

answer straight away, and I could sense that her first reaction was one of anger. But after a long moment, she appeared to get her feelings under control. Then she made steady eye contact. ‘It took me quite a while to see through him, Olly. He’s very plausible. But he has a darker side that I only discovered much later…’

‘So you don’t see him anymore?

‘No. Actually he has disappeared. No one seems to know where he’s gone.’

I had my own theory as to what had happened to Sudman, but I decided to leave it at that. So all I said was ‘Oh.’

As a way of explaining the events that had ‘conspired’ against us, I’d thought of telling her about the anal rape and how its psychological effects had ruined our relationship, but I decided not to. It was history, so there was no point in dwelling on it. Instead I said, ‘But whatever happened in the past shouldn’t stop us from being good friends.’

‘You’re beginning to sound like a Hollywood celebrity!’ she replied archly.

I took her hand in mine and gave it a squeeze. I suddenly realised that somewhere beyond love we’d finally found friendship.

She looked up at me. There was a vulnerability in her eyes that made me forget all the bad things that had happened between us.

‘By the way, Olly,’ she continued, ‘do you remember when you took all those pills and then passed out when Frith opened the back door?’

‘I can’t remember much. People told me about it afterwards.’

‘Well, do you remember someone accompanying you to hospital?’

‘Vaguely.’

‘Well, that someone was *me*, Olly.’

‘You?’

She shot me a shy smile before continuing. ‘You see, the girls phoned me after you passed out. So I drove straight over and rushed you to hospital. But you were so out of it; I don’t think you even recognised me.’

‘Thanks for doing that, Erin. I’ve always wondered who it was who saw me into Casualty.’

‘Well, whatever happened between us, Olly, I still care about you.’

Chapter 92

"…the longer our forces stay on the ground in the Arabian Peninsula, the greater the risk of the next 9/11." – Zbigniew Brzezinski

Finally, after weeks had passed, a group calling itself the 'Martyrs of Palestine' (MOP) said it had detonated the nuclear device in the Mojave Desert. During this time hysteria had mounted across the United States and the Department of Homeland Security, as well as the armed forces, had been placed on maximum alert. Meanwhile, a sizeable number of Americans had left the country, mostly for Mexico and Canada.

In its statement given to Al Jazeera and later posted on the Internet, MOP said:

'*There is no military solution for what you call "terrorism". You can bomb any and all Islamic countries; you can kill Osama bin Laden, as you have already done, as well as thousands of Arab people – even millions – but all you'll succeed in doing is breeding a new generation of martyrs who will attack you again and again…'*

The statement went on to say that nuclear bombs had already been placed at strategic locations throughout the United States. It added that if the United States launched any pre-emptive strike against any country, MOP would immediately begin detonating the bombs already in place.

I phoned Drew after the statement had been broadcast and asked him what he thought.

'Well, my guess is that these guys really mean business, Olly. By detonating a nuclear bomb in the Mojave, they have shown that they are not making idle threats. Ultimately it will mean a tectonic shift in American politics, but it will take time for the blinkered politicians in Washington to get the message.

'The next question is what do I think President Koonce will do? Well, every time you think American leaders can't get any dumber, then they do something really stupid, like the Bay of Pigs, or Vietnam, or Iraq. So I expect Koonce will do the same.'

Chapter 93

One evening Drew phoned me and asked me if I was free next Saturday morning. He said he and Dean were having a meeting at the safe house and he'd like me to attend. It had nothing to do with the Clinic or the safety of Kristy and Merrill, but there would be a discussion and update on the recolonisation process in Africa. 'Seeing you monitor African broadcasts,' he said, 'we thought you might have some input.'

Saturday was heavily overcast, with intermittent rumbles of thunder, and by the time I arrived at the safe house it was raining. Within minutes I was huddled in the cosy library with Drew and Dean, sipping a cup of hot coffee. There were stacks of reports, press clippings, and emails on the coffee table, which Dean had been sorting through. He paused to light his pipe and then began passing the papers around, one by one.

Apparently, the US-European cooperation in the recolonisation plan had hit a serious snag. President Koonce, who was angered by what he perceived as the unhelpful attitude of a French delegate at an international foreign policy conference, had made insulting remarks about the French. In an aside to an aide, which had been picked up by an open microphone, he had whispered, 'They can pour all the Chanel they like on their fucking foreign policy, but it still stinks like shit! And you can never trust them ... One moment the Frogs are hugging and kissing you on both cheeks; the next moment they are stabbing you in the back!'

The French government was demanding an explanation, but President Koonce had said the remark was only a joke and shouldn't be taken seriously. He added that if the French felt insulted, then he was sorry. But the French media, smelling blood and after behind-the-scenes government prodding, wasn't backing down.

As the crisis worsened, various media commentators and academics across the political spectrum demanded that US-European diplomatic co-operation, including the administrative assistance plan for Africa, be re-evaluated. The only credible comment was that the Americans were simply using the French to do their dirty work for them.

Meanwhile, other voices had joined the chorus of criticism, saying it was

also time to re-evaluate Europe's response to illegal immigration.

Sunday newspapers ran heart-rending stories on the plight of Africans trying to flee to Europe. As a spokesman for a Senegal-based human rights group put it:

'These are people who don't believe in Africa anymore. They have no jobs and they know they cannot feed their families and live decently in their home countries. Many, fleeing civil war and political persecution, trek through the bush braving wild animals and pay huge bribes to board rickety boats to find safety outside of Africa. The boats often sink and many of the refugees drown. Then their families are deprived of their only potential source of income….'

Public opinion polls, however, showed that while there was sympathy for the plight of migrants, there was little support for pleas to relax immigration controls. This was because most Europeans felt that there were already far too many migrants in their countries, and some experts were warning that the real exodus from Africa had not even started. The leader of the rightwing French National Front said the huge numbers of illegal immigrants flooding into Europe mirrored the theme of Jean Raspail's 1973 dystopian novel, *The Camp of the Saints*, in which a mass immigration from the Third World led to the destruction of Western civilisation!

In the face of these conflicting positions, European leaders were at a loss for a coherent response. Instead, they suggested more coastal patrols; improved integration programmes; sensitising the police to immigrant concerns; providing more training for disaffected youths; and dialogue with immigrant community leaders. But for the moment at least recolonisation seemed to be off the table.

Chapter 94

The four of us living together in Lana's house was proving to be a happy arrangement, but there was always the fear that Force-X agents might make another attempt on Kristy's life. Sometimes Kristy sensed that the house was being watched, but we others hadn't seen or heard anything suspicious, although occasionally Chloe would bark, or Kinsey would shriek, as dogs and parrots sometimes do for no apparent reason. Nevertheless, we all remained alert, and every week or so Dean or Gary Simes would sweep the place for bugs.

The house itself was spacious, and each of us had our own study where we could work in privacy. Kristy and Merrill were writing a book about their kidnapping and detention at the Clinic, so Merrill would often come over during the day to consult with Kristy.

Meanwhile, Dean had begun negotiating with a publisher in Canada on their behalf. A few weeks after they had submitted the first three chapters, Dean phoned on the encrypted line.

Kristy took the call in the lounge where we all could hear. *'A million dollars!'* she gasped, turning up the speaker-phone. 'Sure,' Dean replied, 'this is probably the hottest story of the decade – it could even bring the President down – so the publisher is prepared to pay a million in advance to each of you. Of course, when it's published you'll be getting a helluva lot more!'

'I can't believe it!' exclaimed Kristy. 'But won't it be risky? I mean–'

'Don't worry, Kris, I've known this guy for years. He's handled some pretty hot books in the past, and I can assure you he won't breathe a word. In any case, the publication date will coincide with the special investigation into covert ops groups, and believe me, the Force-X types, or their controllers, wouldn't dare do anything after that.'

'Hmmm. I -- I don't know…' stammered Kristy.

'Trust me, Kris. It'll be okay. Anyway, if it'll make you feel any better, I'm dropping off a hundred thousand rands worth of shopping vouchers tomorrow morning to keep you going until your advance arrives.'

The following day Dean accompanied Kristy on a shopping spree to Sandton City – not because he enjoyed shopping (as he confided wearily later), but for security reasons.

Kristy returned laden with dresses, half a dozen pairs of shoes, a brown leather handbag, books, toiletries, a Tissot watch, and several bottles of expensive perfume. ‘This is the first time in my life that I’ve ever been able to spend big bucks on myself,’ she confided, ‘and it’s really, really cool!’

As it seemed to be a week for surprises, I thought it might be the right time to inform her of her real origins. Although I could have done so myself, I thought it should rather come from Karen Minnaar. ‘I think your mother has something to tell you,’ I said. ‘She told me a few things that you ought to know.’

Kristy looked at me quizzically, ‘When was that?’

‘After the so-called funeral for you and Charlize.’

‘You know what! She doesn’t even know I’m alive! Dean told me not to get in touch with anyone in the family until I’d moved out of the safe house and got over the worst of my trauma. Maybe I should surprise her.’

The following day Kristy made an unannounced visit to her family. Again Dean insisted on accompanying her.

When she returned I could sense that she was both shocked and elated. ‘Wow! That’s another big thing to get my head around, Olly. But somehow I always knew I was different from the rest of my family. Now a lot of things are beginning to make sense.’ She shook her head slowly. ‘And I’m so, *so* happy to hear I’m not related to my Oupa!’

‘So what do you think about your biological mother being Swedish?’

‘It feels as if something important that’s been missing all my life has magically slotted into place. When all this is over and I have the money from the book, I’m going over to Sweden to search for her.’

Chapter 95

The Save Air Campaign was continuing to gather momentum as messages of support poured in. The Botswana-based Southern African Broadcasting Association said, *'If there were no Africa International Radio, an important "Voice of Africa" would have been silenced … We should not leave the international airwaves to broadcasters from the north only.'*

Doctors Without Borders said, *'AIR has played a major role in raising public awareness about the conflicts in Sudan, Somalia and the DRC, a role that is helping to save lives.'*

Meanwhile, the phone calls never seemed to stop, many from as far afield as the United States. I'd received another call from the Minister, asking me if there was anything I could do about the flood of late-night calls to his home. 'Sorry, sir, but we have no control over the response to our campaign. But I'm sure if you were to announce that you were reconsidering the closure, the calls would stop.'

'Hmmm,' was all that the Minister said.

Two days later the Minister issued a statement saying the government was reviewing its decision to close AIR.

Chapter 96

A day or two later Faan phoned me. ‘You remember, Olly, when we were in Ward 697 and we all agreed to have brunch at the Westcliff after we were discharged?’

‘Sure, I remember.’

‘But somehow we’ve never got around to it.’

‘Right.’

‘Well, how about as soon as I can contact everyone and arrange it?’

‘Great idea, Faan. I’ll tell Kris and Jean. I’m sure they’ll be for it.’

Faan phoned me back a couple of days later to say he’d managed to get hold of most of our fellow former patients and had booked for a Sunday morning brunch on the pool deck, in two weeks time.

On the appointed morning Kristy, Jean and I set off for the Westcliff Hotel. We’d invited Lana, but she thought she’d feel spare, like someone attending the wrong school reunion, so she stayed at home to do some gardening.

We parked the Lada in the hotel garage just inside the gates. After being ushered into a small courtesy bus we were whisked up the long steep driveway that wound between tiers of Tuscan-style former townhouses (now hotel suites) to the top of the hill, where the dining rooms and terraces were.

A waiter led us out onto the pool deck, which had a magnificent birds-eye view across Johannesburg. Three glass-topped tables overlooking a long oblong swimming pool had been pushed together to accommodate our large party.

We were the first of our party to arrive, so we sauntered to the front of the deck to admire the view. A low hum of traffic could be heard coming from the busy M-1 motorway in the valley below. Above the motorway was a swathe of dark green bluegums on the Oppenheimer estate. Just above the trees I could see the long stark façade of City Hospital, and to the right of it, the Hillbrow Tower. Behind the tower was Hillbrow itself, which was rapidly recovering from decades of crime, vandalism and neglect, thanks to a newly launched rehabilitation and crime clean-up programme, one of the Coalition government’s first priorities.

‘Hey, I think I can see Ward 697!’ exclaimed Kristy, pointing to a gap in

the trees. ‘We must visit Old Cow and the others sometime soon, Olly. And can you see over there? … that’s the Zoo! I really want to see our lion friends again. What about next Sunday?’

‘I hear the Zoo is packed over weekends, Kris, so I’d rather take a day’s leave during the week and go when it’s quieter, if that’s okay with you?’

In the next half hour most members of the Crazy Gang arrived, as well as Imogen, who we’d invited because of her stint as a pseudo-patient at the Clinic. We’d also invited Merrill, but she’d said she needed to continue working on the book.

Just then Petrus sidled up to me. ‘Morning Mr Olly. You be well?’

‘Fine, thanks, Petrus. And you?’

‘Good, *good*.’

‘By the way, Petrus, we’re friends, so you don’t need to call me “Mr Olly”. Just “Olly” is fine.’

‘No, I like call you “Mr Olly”. You see, I got plenty respect for you. You honest, good man. Myself, I be traditional, so respect for me very important.’

‘I understand.’

‘I got present for you, Mr Olly,’ Petrus said, handing me a small leather pouch attached to a leather thong. ‘Same like one I tell you about in hospital. Bring good luck. Also wild animals be your friend.’ He pursed his lips, then added, ‘This muti very, *very* strong. Even lion and hyena he no bite you.’

I thanked him for the gift, then slipped the thong around my neck.

‘Let’s see,’ said Kristy, fingering the leather pouch. She bent over and sniffed it. ‘Hmmm… Kind of herby.’

Then much to my surprise and delight, I saw a waiter ushering Old Cow down the stairs to the pool deck. It had taken me a moment or two to recognise her in her smart green dress, as I was used to seeing her in her sister’s uniform. ‘What a surprise!’ I called out, moving forward to greet her. ‘Kristy and I were just talking about visiting you. You well?’

‘Fine, Olly. Everything’s fine.’

‘There’s something I need to tell you,’ I said. ‘Do you mind if we move to the far end of the pool deck for a couple of minutes?’

‘No problem.’

Old Cow was one of the few people I knew who not only believed in ghosts but could see them. I quickly told her about the Clinic and how Alice had rescued me from certain death. ‘She sacrificed herself for me,’ I added, feeling a sudden surge of sadness.

‘I’m not surprised,’ Old Cow said.

‘You know she loved you, Olly. She told me so herself.’

‘What exactly did she say?’

‘She said, “I’ve always loved him – not just in this incarnation – and always will.” I found that a rather strange remark.’

I gazed across the valley at City Hospital and the long stretch of windows of Ward 697. The events there seemed almost a lifetime ago or perhaps they were part of some strange dream.

She smiled. ‘You’re the only white man I know who understands these things, Olly.’

‘Meaning?’

Before replying she stared down at the traffic moving below. ‘I mean that you know that the physical world and the spiritual world are interconnected.’

I felt a hand slip around my waist and a chin nuzzling my shoulder. Then I smelt a delicious waft of perfume. It was Kristy. ‘The waiter has brought the menus, Olly. I think he wants to take our orders.’

‘Won’t be a sec, Kris. I’ll be there now.’

I took a seat between Kristy and Jean, with Faan and Imogen opposite me, and Old Cow next to Imogen

On the advice of Weddo we’d agreed to order only sparkling water, since alcohol clashed with the medications that some of us were still taking.

‘What a fantastic menu!’ exclaimed Kristy, waving it playfully under my nose. ‘I already know what I want – mussels with miso broth and noodles.’

Petrus called to me called across the table. ‘You see something good, Mr Olly?’

‘How about smoked eel in aspic with creamed horseradish?’ I replied. ‘Eels are the nearest thing to your favourite food.’

‘Good,’ said Petrus, grinning. ‘I order.’

I also opted for the eel, as did Weddo and Rastaman, but the others ordered more conservatively: Caesar salads, club sandwiches, deluxe beef burgers, lamb kebabs, and assorted cheeses with preserves. Leah and Cy ordered smoked salmon salads from the kosher menu.

While the waiter was fetching our orders, we were soon bringing each other up to date. Thanks to Lana’s therapy, Helena had fully recovered from her rape ordeal and was now a full-time teacher at a nursery school in Parkview.

‘I really love my job,’ she told us. ‘It’s helped restore my faith in

humanity. The children are so natural and so innocent and so full of love.'

Helena's remarks got Beth talking. 'I also love my work,' she said, smiling at us across the table. 'And I consider myself privileged to be interacting with the San people. You see, I'm working as a tour guide, taking people to San sites in Botswana. I also occasionally take people to view Bushman paintings in the Drakensberg.'

There was a long moment of silence and then Carlos said, 'Well, if I hadn't lost everything and ended up in Ward 697, I wouldn't have met this lovely lady.' He flashed Sonja an affectionate smile, who reciprocated. 'And to bring you up to date, Sonja and I have recently opened a Portuguese restaurant in Parktown North. We've called it the *Sintra*, after the town in Portugal my family comes from. It's hard work, but so far we're doing well.'

'So why not have our next get together there?' said Faan.

There was a murmur of approval.

'Same thing happened to me,' said Marge, 'I met my boyfriend, Nick, when I was sent to Tara from Ward 697. He's not bipolar like me; he just got very depressed after his dad died when robbers broke into their house and shot him. It took Nick quite a while to get over it (actually, you never really get over it), but he's kind of okay now. Everything is fine for me and him as long as we remember to take our medication.' She turned and grinned at Kristy. 'But don't tell him, Kris; I still want to marry Olly.'

'Fat chance!' said Kristy with mock severity.

'Any ideas what those aircraft are doing?' I pointed to two helicopters that were circling on the city side of the Hillbrow Tower. One looked like a small police helicopter, the other was somewhat larger and dun coloured.

'They're part of the new crime cleanup in Hillbrow and the CBD,' said Faan. 'The police are sending in ground teams to flush out suspects from dodgy buildings. When they try to escape, a spotter helicopter tracks them. Then a military helicopter – that's the big one – drops off a swat team to help make arrests.'

'But is it effective?' asked Kristy.

'Sure. Over the past few weeks dozens of suspects have been arrested, tried, and those convicted are being held in temporary custody waiting to be sent to the Kalahari detention centre when it's completed.'

'Better not try escape from that place,' put in Petrus. 'Plenty of lions and hyenas in Kalahari. Also poison snakes.'

Just then the waiter arrived with our food. Not only were the dishes

beautifully presented, but after a couple of mouthfuls everyone seemed to be enjoying theirs. ‘Eel *too* good!’ exclaimed Petrus.

‘Mine too,’ I agreed.

‘Excellent!’ said Weddo.

‘Much better than hospital food,’ said Marge, nibbling on her kebab.

‘Sure it is,’ said Leah, ‘but all considering, the hospital food wasn’t all that bad, was it? Just a bit repetitive.’

How’s Oom Henk getting on?’ I asked.

‘Haven’t you heard?’ said Old Cow, sounding surprised.

‘No, what?’

‘Well, I’m afraid it’s bad news, Olly. After he stopped coming to the hospital to fetch his medication, we checked up and found out that he’d died about six weeks before.’

‘Oh no! I’m so sorry to hear that.’

‘Yes, they found him in his room at the back of his son’s house. Two empty brandy bottles next to him. All of us Ward 697 staff are very sad. He was quite a character.’

Petrus gave a little cry and then slumped forward, his head in his hands on the table, his shoulders shaking. Then he suddenly stood up and without a word walked to the other side of the pool deck. He leaned against the railing, looking out across the valley towards the hospital.

There was a long silence around the table, the only sound being the occasional click of a knife or a fork.

‘Seems we’re just about finished eating,’ Imogen said, ‘Let’s order coffee, and maybe stretch our legs.’

Everyone agreed and soon most of us were admiring the view from the other side of the pool deck, allowing Petrus his privacy.

Kristy and Beth were chatting near the pool, and while I was standing at the railing on my own, I became aware of Professor Cruz at my elbow. He cleared his throat before speaking.

‘She misses you, you know, my friend.’

I knew he was talking abut Alice. I just nodded.

After a longish pause I said, ‘We’d better get back to the table. I see the coffee has arrived.’

As I was about to take my seat, Rastaman, came over and whispered in my ear. ‘Any idea when I’ll get the go-ahead to run the Clinic story, Olly?’

I’d discussed the timing with Dean and Drew, who’d said that ideally it

should be released shortly before the publication of Kristy's and Merrill's book, which would then hit the bookshops on a wave of publicity. I assured him that he'd be first in line to run with the story, as promised.

'Great,' he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. 'I'll wait for your call, then, Olly.'

There was a scraping of chairs as people returned to their seats. Imogen was scowling. 'Strange, you'd think that in an upmarket hotel like this there'd be plugs in the basins,' she sniffed.

Old Cow rolled her eyes. 'Uh, oh. I have a feeling someone followed me here…' She made eye contact with me, and then gave a wink.

Chapter 97

About six weeks after the government had announced that it was reconsidering its decision to close AIR, it issued a statement saying it had now decided to extend AIR's life by a year, while it sought a solution to the funding problem.

I immediately posted a new Internet document entitled: "AFRICA INTERNATIONAL RADIO STAYS ON AIR THANKS TO WORLDWIDE SUPPORT!"

'Well, it seems we've had a reprieve – thanks to your campaign!' Will Allwell said, smiling broadly. 'Now all we have to do is get Hannes reinstated.'

'That would be great.'

'Tata has already hired a lawyer to get her job back, so I'm suggesting he consults the same one.'

'Good idea.'

'Now that we have an extension, Will, are you going to stay on?'

'Up until a few months ago I thought I'd take early retirement because I couldn't take any more of Sipho Sithole's nonsense, but now that things are looking up, I think I'll stay on.'

'That *is* good news!' I seized Will's hand and pumped it several times.

When I told Prue, she gave me a fierce little hug. 'That's wonderful! I hope you're also staying on, Olly.'

'In the meantime, yes,' I said guardedly.

Just as I was packing my briefcase to go home I received a call from the Minister. 'By the way, Mr Jeex, would you be interested in a job in the Ministry's PR department?'

Six months ago I would have jumped at the opportunity, as I saw no chances of promotion at AIR, but now I saw a ray of hope.

'Thank you, Sir, but no. I'm happy where I am.'

'I thought so, 'he said. 'But if you ever want to change your mind just call me…'

Chapter 98

"The mad hyena that causes other animals to weep will feel the heavy paw of the lion fall upon him." – Credo Mutwa, African proverb

Today was the day Kristy and I'd decided to visit the Zoo. It was a Monday, when there're normally far fewer visitors. The weather was warm and clear, and we set off in the Lada just after nine. While we were driving through the suburban roads of Greenside, I noticed a road crew repainting white lines. Two men were also repositioning a crooked stop-street sign, and further along another crew were trimming trees. Now that the Coalition had taken power, services were beginning to work again.

As we drove up the long stretch of Wicklow Avenue through Parkview, Kristy glanced a couple of times in the rear view mirror. 'There's a black BM that seems to be following us, Olly. I think I saw it parked about a hundred metres down from the house before we drove off.'

'Could be just a coincidence,' I said, not wanting to alarm her.

'Hmmm,' she murmured doubtfully.

The BM followed us onto Westcliff Drive and was still behind us as we drove along Upper Park Drive, skirting the Zoo. But when we turned into the Zoo's parking area, there was no sign of it. Since the Grotto shooting, I was always concerned about Kristy's safety, so I remained alert. As an ongoing security measure, Kristy had a GPS tracker on her cellphone, as well as an emergency panic button to call Dean or Drew.

After buying our tickets, we strolled down the Camel Trail towards Memorial Boulevard. As expected, there were far fewer visitors than at weekends, and instead of noisy schoolchildren, we could hear the calls of animals and birds. We paused at a kiosk to buy ice creams and then turned up Memorial Boulevard, the main walkway from which smaller ones branch off to the right and left.

A little way beyond Baboon Bend, Kristy paused. 'Let's see if we can see the Westcliff from here?'

We both turned. There it was in the distance, its tiers of once distinctive

salmon pink buildings – now a demure grey after a revamp – climbing up the slopes of Parktown Ridge.

Then further down the Boulevard I noticed two figures advancing rapidly towards us. They were a bit too far away to see their faces, but I would have recognised Mrs Eberhardt's walk anywhere. The other figure, a man, was carrying what looked like a rolled-up newspaper.

'My God, Kris, that couple coming towards us…'

'What about them?'

'The one is Mrs Eberhardt and the other I'd swear is Todd Trafficant!'

'Well, I'm pressing my panic button now,' Kristy answered with a trace of fear in her voice. 'But it'll obviously take a while for Drew or Dean to get here.'

There were very few people about. At that moment an elderly gent was strolling down the Boulevard towards the advancing pair. Moments after he'd passed them, Trafficant suddenly unfurled his newspaper, revealing a black tubular object. Almost instantaneously he lifted it, aimed, and fired at us. I heard the characteristic 'pop' of a silenced weapon.

'Come on!' I cried, tugging Kristy's hand. 'Let's get out of here!'

We turned left, sprinting down African Avenue. A little way along we came to a raised wooden walkway leading to the crocodile enclosure. 'I think this is our best bet,' I panted. 'It twists and turns, and we'll be able to hear them coming.'

Without a moment's hesitation we leapt onto the walkway and raced along it. Not thirty seconds later I heard Trafficant and Mrs E pounding over the wooden slats behind us. Just as we were about to duck into the crocodile enclosure, which was covered in heavy duty translucent vinyl, I heard another 'pop'. The bullet ripped through the vinyl above our heads.

We raced through the long, humid tunnel where a crocodile lay motionless in a shallow pond on our left. Emerging on the other side, I saw to my relief that the walkway continued to twist and turn, and we sprinted along it. About a hundred metres further it ended abruptly at a thatched, glass-fronted observation hut overlooking the lion enclosure. We halted momentarily, considering what to do.

Two tawny lionesses and a magnificent white lion were stretched out on the grass behind a rocky lair a short distance from three huge gum trees. A white lioness was sunning herself on the flat rock roof of the lair from where she had a view of the whole enclosure.

The pounding feet drew closer. Both Trafficant and Mrs Eberhardt were highly trained professionals and I knew that if they could get a clear shot at us, we'd be dead meat. There was nowhere else to go. 'This is our only chance, Kris,' I said, pointing into the enclosure.

'Are you crazy?!' she exclaimed.

'Don't worry. I've got Petrus's protective charm with me.'

I glanced around for a way into the enclosure, but an electric fence and a water-filled moat barred our way. I grabbed Kristy's hand and sprinted along a railed concrete walkway curving off to the left. At the end of the moat a short barrier of upright gum-poles, with an upper cross-strut for a foothold to scramble down, was our only way in.

Moments later we'd landed on the grass and were sprinting towards the relative safety of the gum trees. I heard another 'pop' and felt a sudden burning sensation in my shoulder. Paying no attention to it, we reached the protection of a huge tree trunk, where, gasping for breath, I noticed my shirt was warm and clammy.

'My God, Olly, you're bleeding!' Kristy exclaimed. 'You've been shot!'

I pulled my shirt open to get a closer look. It was a shoulder flesh wound. 'Not all that serious, Kris,' I said.

Meanwhile, the lioness who'd been sunning herself on top of the rocky lair was watching us. To my relief she remained motionless.

Seeing that the lions had left us alone, Trafficant must have thought it safe to come in after us. He scrambled around the barrier and dropped into the enclosure, leaving Mrs Eberhardt on the walkway, peering after him.

Suddenly there was another pop. This time the bullet slammed into the tree, scattering bits of bark and wood splinters onto the ground.

'Shit!' Trafficant shouted, 'missed!'

The lioness lifted her head and stared in his direction.

Mrs Eberhardt was moving towards us along the walkway, and it was obvious that she'd soon be able take a side shot at us.

I grabbed Kristy's hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. She returned the squeeze fiercely, as we peered around the tree to see Trafficant edging slowly towards us. The lioness was watching him, motionless.

In desperation I eased myself down and picked up a round stone at my feet about the size of a cricket ball.

It was now or never. I stepped quickly around the tree trunk and hurled the stone with all my force at Trafficant's head.

‘Watch out, Todd!’ Mrs Eberhardt shouted.

Trafficant ducked sideways, but losing his balance, flailed his arms wildly.

In an instant the lioness sprang down from her rocky perch, leapt across the grass, her head up, tail thrashing from side to side, and with a final rush she fell upon Trafficant. Seizing him by an arm, she pulled him down under her. There was a sickening crunch as she bit through bone.

Seconds later the huge lion and the two other lionesses, alerted by the commotion, joined in the fray.

I shall never forget Todd Trafficant’s terrible screams as the lioness dragged him towards the entrance of the rocky lair. Mrs Eberhardt, though a tough, experienced operative, turned tail and ran.

At the entrance to the lair, the lioness stood over Trafficant – who was silent now – like a dog guarding a piece of meat. The other three lions crouched nearby, watching. Then the lioness raised her head, looked about, and finally clamped her jaws on his head before dragging him into the lair. Only his legs were sticking out of the entrance. He gave a few feeble kicks and then was still.

‘There’s no way he could have survived a mauling like that, Kris,’ I murmured, shocked and nauseated. ‘Nothing more we can do here. Come on, let’s go.’

As we began clambering out of the enclosure, the lions watched us lazily. The lioness that had first attacked Trafficant licked her paws as if nothing had happened.

Weakened by the loss of blood, I wasn’t making much progress. When Kristy saw me struggling, she grabbed my hand and pulled me over. I slid down onto the walkway with my back against the low wall, my legs stretched out in front of me.

‘You’re not looking too good, Olly,’ she said. ‘I’m going to call Dean and Drew.’

They’d both been at a meeting in Sandton when they’d received Kristy’s panic message, and had just turned into the Zoo parking when Kristy’s call came through.

She quickly told them what had happened and exactly where to find us. ‘And call an ambulance, please guys. Olly has lost quite a bit of blood.’

Dean and Drew arrived on the walkway minutes later. As they examined my wound I gave them more details of what had happened.

‘Actually, the wound isn’t too bad,’ said Dean. ‘But you’ll need hospital treatment in case of infection.’

‘Okay.’

‘Do you think you can walk?’ Drew asked.

‘I think so,’ I said, rising unsteadily to my feet.

‘Great. You’re doing well,’ said Dean. ‘Actually, we don’t want to attract attention. We need to cover this up.’

‘What are you talking about?!’ exclaimed Kristy.

‘Look,’ said Drew, putting a hand on her shoulder. ‘If the media finds out what actually happened they’ll start asking lots of questions, like *“who is the dead man in the lion enclosure and why did he shoot Olly?”*. Eventually there’ll be a high-profile inquest in which both you and Olly will be compelled to give evidence under oath. And trust me, Kris, with investigative reporters digging, eventually the whole story will come out. We can’t afford that.’

‘Why not?’ Kristy persisted.

‘Because once the Force-X and the Clinic connections are discovered, our plans to expose them, as well as President Koonce’s apparent involvement, could go off at half cock. That could be very dangerous. It could put your life at much greater risk. So timing is crucial.’

‘Fine,’ said Kristy. ‘But now we need to get Olly to an ambulance.’

‘Actually,’ said Drew, ‘we figured that since ambulances often take ages to arrive, we should take him in my Mercedes.’

‘So what story do I need to come up with?’ I asked.

‘Simple,’ said Drew. ‘You stopped at a traffic light and this dude tried to hijack you, but as you drove away, he shot you through the window.’

‘And where was this attempted hijacking supposed to have taken place?’

‘Nowhere near the Zoo, that’s for sure. No, I think Dean should drive the Lada to a street a block or two from your house and park it there. That’s where we “found” you, Olly, sitting in your car, bleeding.’

‘What about Trafficant’s body?’

‘We’re certainly not going to inform the Zoo officials or the police of what happened. If anyone asks, we know nothing except what we’ve read in the papers. In any case, when the body is discovered, the police will probably think it was a suicide.’

As arranged, Dean parked the Lada around the corner from my house and Drew drove me to Milpark Hospital, where I was initially admitted to the

casualty ward. The bleeding had stopped, but the wound was hurting badly. The young woman doctor who examined me said that since the bullet had passed through the flesh of my upper arm, no surgery was necessary. She cleaned and dressed the wound, gave me a painkiller and an antibiotic, and told me that I should remain in hospital for a day or two for observation.

The following day I had a string of visitors, while Kristy, who spent most of the time in the ward with me, acted as gatekeeper. She told everyone that I'd been a victim of a hijacking attempt, and since I was still in shock, I shouldn't be hassled with questions.

Among my visitors were Lana, Jean and Merrill, who brought me homemade pizza slices. Imogen brought me flowers and a *Time* magazine, while Will and Prue brought me a box of chocolates, as well as an update of events at AIR.

'Some good news about Tata and Hannes,' Will Allwell announced. 'Their lawyer has got things moving. As you know, Tata was never charged with anything, so getting her reinstated was relatively easy. He also managed to get an urgent review of Hannes's dismissal. The finding yesterday was that the disciplinary hearing did not reach a logical conclusion based on the evidence. So Hannes will also be reinstated.'

The following morning when I was due to be discharged, Dean and Drew came to fetch me. Drew was carrying a newspaper. 'Have a look at this,' he said, thrusting this morning's *Star* into my hand and pointing at the headline.

MAN FOUND DEAD IN LION ENCLOSURE

I scanned the story for the salient details. *'…no form of identification … body badly mauled … thought to be mentally unbalanced … pistol found nearby … no apparent link to the man's death … appears to be a bizarre suicide … no foul play suspected…'*

'Any news from the United States about the Clinic or Force-X?' I put in.

'I think we all should go back to the safe house and discuss it there,' said Dean. 'That's if you're feeling up to it, Olly.'

'I'm fine.'

Once we were settled in comfortable leather chairs in the library and we'd made ourselves a pot of coffee, Dean started bringing us up to date.

'Obviously the botched attempt by Trafficant and Mrs Eberhardt to assassinate you both has got back to their controllers in America. We now

need to anticipate their next move and plan accordingly.'

'Do you think they might have another go at us?' asked Kristy matter-of-factly.

'Possibly, if we don't pre-empt them.'

'So what are you suggesting?' I asked.

'Well, my feeling is that we should bring our plans forward,' said Drew. 'I'm talking about releasing details of the Clinic detentions to the media.'

'That would also mean an earlier publication date for your book, Kris,' said Dean.

'No problem,' she said. 'We've just finished the last chapter, so you can tell the publisher he can go ahead. I can email you the chapter when we get home and you can pass it on to him.'

'Great. In the meantime, Olly, you can tell your friend, Rastaman, that he can run with the Clinic story now, but tell him not to mention President Koonce at this point. We don't want to pre-empt Kristy's book. After that we can do that live interview at your radio station, if that's okay.'

'Fine,' I said. 'But how will this affect the special investigation into covert ops groups?'

'Well, it could pre-empt the investigation. In other words, if enough damning evidence emerges, it could make the investigation a mere formality. You see, before releasing Earl Stricker and the others, we took the precaution of obtaining signed confessions from them in the form of affidavits. All very incriminating for the Agency Politicals linked to the Clinic.

Chapter 99

"Our intelligence system is broken and we lack good quality human sources on the major threats to Americans … Terrorist networks are a greater threat because terrorists seek nuclear weapons in order to use them." – Ishmael Jones, long-serving former CIA case officer who served in senior operational roles, interviewed by Marc Ambinder, the politics editor of *The Atlantic*

Everything began to go as planned: Rastaman ran the Clinic story in the *Sowetan*. I interviewed Dean on air, and later these were fed to the wire services. The Doha-based news network, al Jazeera, seized on the story and began focusing on the plight of the Middle Eastern detainees at the Clinic. In no time the story was all over the world. And then, as predicted, Amnesty International and other human rights groups began demanding answers from Washington. President Koonce tried to deflect attention by focusing on what he called 'the great job our Department of Homeland Security is doing to thwart the sinister plans of extremists who hate our democracy.'

The President had continued to ignore MOP's demands, without ever mentioning the group by name, saying only: 'We don't negotiate with terrorists'.

For a while this deflective strategy, aided by America's servile mainstream media, seemed to be working. Media commentators quoted 'intelligence sources' as saying that the Mojave nuclear blast was a 'once-offer' and that the threat about more nukes was a bluff.

'One explosion does not mean an attack,' declared a confident-sounding President Koonce on CNN. 'And I would also like to assure you that we are very close to arresting those responsible.'

An hour later the second bomb went off!

The Martyrs of Palestine had indeed been bluffing …but only about the bomb's location. It wasn't detonated in Manhattan, as they'd threatened, but in Hollywood.

The nuclear blast, estimated at between ten and twenty kilotons (comparable to the Hiroshima bomb) incinerated World Wide Studios, as well as flattening everything within a radius of about three kilometres. Even the famous Hollywood Sign some distance away on Mount Lee was reduced to bits of twisted metal scattered down the hillside.

This time MOP was quick to claim responsibility:

This is the final wake-up call to the people of America. We regret the loss of life, but without it, we doubt whether Americans would seriously begin questioning the dangerous direction their leaders are taking them.

As could be expected, the psychological consequences were enormous – one columnist described it as 'a thousand times worse than 9/11' – with waves of panic spreading across the United States and frantic citizens calling their congressman. The question uppermost in most city dwellers' minds was, 'Will we be next?'

I won't dwell on the grisly long-term effects of radiation, especially as this nuclear device had been enhanced to cause maximum radioactive fallout. The effects are all too well known. Suffice it to say that after Drew had expressed his shock in a call to me shortly after he'd heard the news, he added, 'Previously the consequences of a terrorist attack, no matter how devastating, like 9/11, were not permanent, except, of course, for the tragic loss of life. But after this one, Hollywood is going to be a quiet neighbourhood for a very long time. Which means we've entered a new era, Olly, an era characterised by what will become known as *"The Terrorism of Irreversible Consequences"*.'

I must confess that I initially felt almost a sense of relief when I heard that the bomb had exploded in Hollywood rather than in Salt Lake City or New York, where Matthew and Loren were living, respectively. Of course, I was shocked by the number of people killed or injured in the blast (first estimates put the death-toll at around a hundred thousand, with a similar number expected to die later from radiation sickness), but there wasn't the same emotional impact as there would have been if I'd known any of the victims personally. So it was only when the images of the dead and dying filled our television screens that the enormity of the tragedy really hit me.

A couple of days after the bombing, Drew phoned to say that we needed to get together at the safe house to discuss latest developments in America.

In the meantime, President Koonce, in his television address to the American people, announcing three days of national mourning, had disclosed

that the source of the fissile material used in both bombs had been identified.

'The fingerprint is African,' he said (with what sounded like a note of triumph in his voice), *'a fact that I find very disturbing. What this seems to be telling Americans is that African leaders are either unable or unwilling to control the activities of vicious terrorist groups operating from their territories to attack America. This means that tighter controls are urgently needed on the African continent – controls that may well have to be imposed from outside. I think that after the despicable bombing of Hollywood, I have the overwhelming support of the American people to do whatever is necessary…'*

After we were comfortably settled in the safe house library, I posed a question to Drew. 'The other day you mentioned a new era of terrorism with "irreversible consequences", as you called it. What would you say the implications of that are?'

'There's a moral here, Olly. Sadly, people tend to react realistically only *after* the event when they're faced with consequences that can't be undone. And of course if multiple nuclear devices are detonated across the United States, making huge areas uninhabitable, then they ask: "what did we do to deserve this?" or "how could it have been avoided?"

'These are good questions to which there are no simple answers. But essentially it's a failure of foreign policy.'

'Well,' I continued, 'I recall your saying a while back that if President Koonce could convincingly allege an African connection to the MOP blast, then that could provide a pretext for his imperial designs in Africa.'

'Correct. I guess he'll use the MOP threat to prod the Europeans into reactivating the stalled recolonisation plan. I personally don't like the man, but I believe the Europeans must be brought back on board – whatever it takes – or else the Chinese will grab all of Africa.'

Chapter 100

Often apparently small incidents, like the burglary of the Watergate Hotel during the Nixon presidency, change history. In this case, the *Grudge Report*, a sensational online newsletter that focused mainly on Washington scandals, made the link between the girls 'treated' at the Clinic and various Washington high-ups, including the President himself.

President Koonce himself didn't respond, but neo-conservative media commentators dismissed the report as 'scandalous rumour-mongering' generated by 'a liberal clique with eyes on the White House'.

A couple of days later, Kristy's and Merrill's sensational book implicating President Koonce hit the bookshops like a tsunami. The title, *Detained at the President's Pleasure*, said it all.

At this point, for security reasons, Kristy and Merrill moved back to the safe house.

President Koonce, unlike President Nixon who brazened it out for more than two years after the Watergate scandal broke, had the good sense to take a different course. A brief statement issued by his personal physician said the President had suffered a mild cardiac arrest and would shortly address the nation.

An hour later a drawn-looking President Koonce came on national television. He began by expressing his deep and abiding love for America and his faith in its democracy and the American people. There was a sudden catch in his voice as it dropped almost to a whisper. Then there was a long pause as he looked down at his hands in silence. When at last he regained his composure, he continued in a halting voice, saying this was the hardest speech he'd ever had to make in his life.

'In the interests of the nation, therefore, I shall resign the presidency, effective from noon tomorrow. Vice President Frank Picton will be sworn in as President at that hour in this office. Since I have never been a quitter, I make this announcement with great sadness. However, I have every confidence that Vice President Picton, on assuming the presidency, will be more than equal to the task, and that the affairs of this great nation will be in

the most capable hands…'

According to Dean, Vice President Picton, in a comprehensive secret deal, had reluctantly agreed to pardon President Koonce for any and all indictable offences committed during his presidency on condition that he resign immediately. As part of the deal, however, the inquiry into covert ops groups linked to the CIA would be quietly quashed on condition that a whole raft of senior Agency Politicals should resign.

The thinking behind the deal was that in a national crisis such as this when more nuclear devices could be detonated at any time, the Administration in Washington needed to give its full and undivided attention to managing the crisis and therefore could not afford to become mired in a damaging and distracting scandal as bad, if not worse, than Watergate.

The deal had mixed results – some good … some not so good.

Firstly, Kristy and Merrill wouldn't have to fly to Washington to give evidence; and as they no longer posed a threat to President Koonce, or Force-X, or the Politicals, their lives would probably no longer be in danger. Secondly, the Professionals within the CIA were restored to effective control of the Agency, and the CIA could now hopefully return to its duties of fulfilling its legal mandate. On the other hand, the links between Force-X and its controllers, which Dean and Drew had hoped to uncover, remained hidden. This meant that although the 5412 Committee (or its successor) and the Insiders above it had lost a few pawns, they remained essentially in control of the game.

However, as inevitably happens with secret deals, details gradually began to leak out, fuelling a flurry of media speculation.

One of the more interesting theories was that Frank Picton, when picked as Vice President by President Koonce, was never seen as a possible president, since President Koonce was in good health when he took office and he had high approval ratings in the polls. As a result, the mainstream media had largely ignored the quiet, unassuming Vice President, treating him as a virtual nobody. However, when one investigative reporter discovered that Picton had once been a speech writer for anti-establishment senator Ron Paul, the alarm bells began ringing.

Chapter 101

"What paleoconservatism tries to tell Americans is that the dominant forces in their society are no longer committed to conserving the traditions, institutions and values that created and formed it, and therefore, that those who are really conservative in any serious sense and wish to live under those traditions, institutions, and values need to oppose the dominant forces and form new ones." – Wikipedia

In his role as titular president, a post of only ceremonial significance, President Phiri had remained subdued, possibly because he was keenly aware that President Koonce had been keeping a close watch on him. But after the two nuclear bombings in the United States, followed by President Koonce's sudden resignation, President Phiri began to smell blood. With America's big stick no longer poised, President Phiri became emboldened. In a speech to the Central Committee of the Socialist People's Party, he declared that since former President Koonce had imposed the Coalition government on South Africa, it was therefore not a people's choice but an instrument of American imperialism. This meant that it was an 'illegitimate regime', and he called on what he termed 'the Coalition puppets of Washington' to resign – 'or,' he added menacingly, 'I will review my options...'

President Frank Picton was considered a man of integrity but something of a "dark horse", having kept a low profile as Vice President. He had a reputation as a rightwing conservative, but it soon became apparent that he wasn't an aggressive Neocon, as former President Koonce was, but a peace-seeking Paleo, who, like Ron Paul, was opposed to foreign adventures. Shortly after taking office, he called for a Middle East peace conference, amid howls of protest from the mainstream media, which accused him of 'bowing to threats from terrorists' in the wake of the Hollywood bombing.

Undaunted, he said his aim was to achieve a truly comprehensive and lasting Middle East peace through negotiated political settlements, which was

the only sensible way to reduce the threat of terrorism.

Chapter 102

One Sunday morning, Lana, Jean, Kristy and I were having a leisurely breakfast on the patio when Lana said, ‘It is such perfect weather. Shall we go for a walk in the park after we’ve had coffee?’

We all agreed, and even Chloe, who had been lying at my feet, looked up and wagged her tail lazily.

We piled into the Lada and drove to van Riebeeck Park, halting in the parking area off Thomas Bowler Street, near the West Park cemetery. Then we strolled across the expanse of grass to the earth wall of the upper dam. A light breeze was blowing, rippling the surface of the water.

Chloe eyed a clutch of ducks paddling along not far from the bank. She hesitated for a moment, staring intently, and then apparently thinking better of it, trotted ahead, head down, sniffing the grass.

We walked on ahead of Lana and Jean, who were strolling along, hand in hand.

‘Actually, being out in the open like this,’ said Kristy, ‘makes me feel we need another holiday.’

‘Great idea. Where?’

‘I’d like to go back to the Cavern. It’s so beautiful.’

‘Even after what happened at the Grotto?’

‘Sure, it’s like climbing back on a bike when you fall off.’

Chloe looked up at Kristy and wagged her tail, as if in agreement.

I leaned over and gave Kristy a lingering kiss. ‘Maybe it’s time we got married, Kris.’

‘You really mean that?’

‘Of course. I’ll start phoning around for venues tomorrow, if you like.’

‘Oh, Olly...’

We’d halted near the dead gum tree, where Chloe and I had survived a lightning strike. But today the weather was clear, without a cloud in the sky.

The only thing that troubled me was Chloe’s listlessness. I bent down and gave her head an affectionate pat. She looked up and flashed me a limp, sad, Dalmatian smile.

Chapter 103

On a warm, bright Saturday morning three weeks later Kristy and I were due to be married in the gazebo alongside the Zoo's Old Elephant House. The reception was to be held in the Elephant House itself, an atmospheric old Georgian stone building with large arched windows and beautiful, highly polished red brick floors. Now a venue for conferences and weddings, it once housed the Zoo's elephants before they were moved to their present open enclosure.

Kristy looked lovely in her strapless cream wedding dress, as she walked down the pathway towards the flower-bedecked gazebo on the arm of Drew, impeccably dressed in a dark blue suit. I wore a pinstripe charcoal suit that Lana and Jean had helped me choose.

As I stood beside Kristy, I whispered, 'You ready to get married, Kris?'

'What do you think?' she replied with a smug little smile.

We'd invited Roy Childs, the minister who'd presided at Kristy's and Charlize's 'funeral', to conduct the service. To some this might have seemed bizarre but we didn't think so – quite the contrary: we saw it as a symbol of restoration.

Roy also approved. 'Last time,' he said, smiling benignly at Kristy, 'we came together to mourn your "death". Today, we come together to celebrate your life … as well as joining you with Olly in holy matrimony.'

After the ceremony, we all ambled across to the Elephant House, which had an arch of pink and white dog roses over the entrance, as well as displays of hydrangeas, hibiscus and moonflowers, decorating the pillars inside.

All of our friends who'd been at the Westcliff brunch, as well as Jill, Gerda, and Merrill, were among the guests, as were Will Allwell, Prue, Hannes, Goolam, Ken Aitken and Alistair L'Estrange. Karen Minnaar was also there, but needless to say, Kristy's stepfather and stepbrothers weren't invited.

Drew, acting *in loco parentis*, gave Kristy away. Weddo Moloi, an avuncular figure in a colourful Madiba shirt and black pants, was a superbly competent master of ceremonies.

Faan, of course, was best man, with Merrill, Lana, Jean and Beth as

bridesmaids. A regal-looking Imogen, in the dress she'd worn at Fiona's wedding, was matron of honour. Kristy had secretly sent the Harpies air tickets, so to my surprise and delight they were able to attend. An invitation had also been sent to Erin 'and partner'.

Erin's partner turned out to be an affable well-groomed man in his mid forties who Erin introduced as 'Ron Johnson', her publisher. He greeted me with a smile and a firm handshake.

A little later the Harpies sidled up to me. 'Thanks, Dad, for inviting Mum and Ron,' Bonny whispered. 'You did the right thing. And we think Ron is a really nice guy.'

'Not quite as nice as you, though!' put in Frith, with a mischievous smile.

Carlos and Sonja had supplied the eats and drinks from their restaurant, laying them out invitingly on several long tables: aromatic chorizo, espetadas, peri-peri chicken livers, mountains of freshly grilled pawns, steaming pots of mussels, as well as breads, cheeses and sweet pastries.

On a separate smaller table, prominently displayed on a white embroidered table cloth, was an elegant three-tiered wedding cake that Lana and Jean had baked themselves. Our two special friends had also handled the other wedding arrangements, including the hiring of a three-piece band, *Peachy Mood*, featuring two attractive young women, a blonde and a brunette, who sang and played guitar, as well as a curly-haired thirtyish man on keyboard.

For the next half hour or so the guests mingled, chatted, and nibbled snacks to a background of relaxing music.

When I spied Petrus near one of the food tables, I went over to talk to him.

'Thank you, Petrus, for saving my life again,' I said, shaking his hand warmly.

He looked at me shyly.

'The lion charm you gave me really worked!'

'Very good, Mr Olly.'

I sensed he knew what I was talking about, but he didn't seem to want to know the details.

Suddenly the hum of conversation was interrupted when a smiling Weddo tapped his glass with a spoon.

It was time for speeches.

Drew began by saying that he'd known me for many years and had met

Kristy when he was visiting me in hospital. ‘Initially,’ he began, ‘I must confess I had doubts about the relationship, since relationships that begin in confined environments like institutions don’t have a great success rate. However, it was not long before I realised that in this case I was hopelessly wrong.’ Drew took a sip of wine before continuing. ‘But the path of love is not always smooth … When I saw Kristy lying in a coma in a Pietermaritzburg hospital after sustaining a serious head wound, I feared the worst. Yet she’s a very resilient girl, with a great will to live, and I’m pleased to say she has made a full recovery.’

Kristy nodded and smiled.

Drew went on to propose a toast to our future happiness amid murmurs of ‘To Kristy and Olly.’

Loud applause.

Then it was my turn. As I’m not very good at giving speeches I kept it short. After thanking all those who’d helped with the wedding, I turned to Kristy and said, ‘I think all I need to say now, Kris, is that you are my soul mate and I really mean the bit about “until death us do part”.’

Amid a round of clapping and whistling, I bent down and kissed her.

Faan, who was wearing his waistcoat on the black side (it looked smart with his navy suit), began his speech with a joke. ‘This is the only place I know where there was once an elephant in the room, but people didn’t try and tiptoe around it!’

There were a few polite titters.

‘Actually,’ Faan continued, ‘there’s still an elephant in the room. You see, Drew mentioned that he’d met Kristy in “hospital”, which was a euphemism. To be more precise, it was Ward 697, City Hospital’s *psychiatric ward*, where at least three-quarters of the guests here today were patients.’

There was a burst of cheers and clapping.

Faan grew more serious. ‘I think all of you must be familiar with the incident in which a burned-out car was found, supposedly with the charred bodies of Kristy and her friend, Charlize, inside?’

A murmur of assent.

‘Well, initially I thought it might be a set-up, but the inquest found nothing suspicious and, as the months went by, I reluctantly came to the conclusion that after all the bodies were probably those of Kristy and Charlize. So I urged Olly to move on with his life.

‘But Olly never lost faith. He continued to search and make enquiries,

and eventually, with the help of a little dove, he found Kristy, as well as Merrill, who'd also been kidnapped. Sadly, Charlize had already been trafficked to America, but I understand that efforts are now underway to secure her return. I would just like to add that I feel very privileged to have been part of the undercover rescue mission that finally freed Kristy and Merrill.'

More applause.

After Faan had toasted the bridesmaids, Weddo announced that it was time to dance, and the band began playing a series of timeless romantic favourites.

I led Kristy onto the well-polished floor to the strains of *Our Love is Here to Stay*. I clasped her close as we slow-danced around the room, hardly believing that at last we were now man and wife. Her heady water lily perfume, however, reassured me that what was happening was real, as others joined us on the dance floor.

There was a brief interlude while we cut the wedding cake. After the guests had each taken a slice, the band struck up again and couples crowded onto the dance floor. Erin took a turn around the floor with me, chatting mainly about possible avenues of study for the Harpies after their gap year. When the music faded, she gave me a peck on the cheek and tripped off the dance floor.

Having done our duty dancing with virtually everyone, I asked the band to play *A Whiter Shade of Pale*, and Kristy and I close-danced until we were ready to go. After saying goodbye to our guests, we left them to enjoy themselves.

It shouldn't come as a surprise to hear that we spent our wedding night at the Westcliff, which was only about five minutes drive away. After a light, mainly salad supper, we watched the stars and the twinkling lights of Johannesburg from the Pool Deck.

Just as we were about to turn in we heard a lion roar.

Chapter 104

The following morning after a hearty breakfast, we set off in our hired Toyota for the Cavern Hotel. A couple of hours later as we paused at the turnoff to the Northern Drakensberg, Kristy suddenly said, ‘Now I won’t have to go to all the trouble of changing my name, Olly. I’m very happy to be called Kristy Jeex.’

‘You sure?’

‘Quite sure.

‘By the way, Merrill tells me that she and Dean are getting married soon. I told her it would have been nice if we could have had a double wedding, but she said that because of Dean’s sensitive work they needed to keep it low profile. So they’re getting married quietly at the Magistrate’s Court, and then they fly to Boston to meet Dean’s folks.’

‘I’m really happy for them,’ I said.

We had a memorable honeymoon at the Cavern. Although Kristy was pregnant, she insisted on climbing up to the Grotto. But this time she was wearing baggy white hiking pants, rather than her usual cut-offs.

At the very spot where she’d been shot, we lay down among the grasses and mountain flowers for a long while, saying nothing. Then Kristy eased off my boxers, removed her pants, and climbed on top of me. The only sounds were the occasional bird call, the wind rustling the proteas, and Kristy breathing in my ear as we made slow, beautiful love.

Postscript

A couple of months later Lana had a baby girl, and we named her Beryl. Soon after that Kristy's twins were born – a boy and a girl – Beau and Jenna. Now we had a happy, noisy household, and a little while later, toddlers were romping everywhere.

Ever since Kristy and Merrill had been rescued from the Clinic, we'd all been very concerned about Charlize. I'd told Kristy, Dean and Drew what Todd Trafficant had said about Charlize's memory being wiped and her being programmed as a 'playmate' for the amusement of a New York Senator. It took a while for Dean to discreetly make contact with Charlize and to arrange for her parents to be flown to Washington. When she met them secretly, vague memories began to surface, and she agreed to undergo hypnotherapy. After several months of treatment she was able to recall everything, and when the New York senator was revealed as a repulsive old man, she was eager to return to South Africa.

These days hordes of South Africans were returning home, so organisations like the "Homecoming Revolution" and "South Africa the Good News" were no longer necessary.

Amazingly, the Johannesburg CBD was safe again. You could even window-shop at night and leave your car unlocked in the street. In an effort to solve the vexed question of town and street names, the coalition government scrapped most of President Phiri's controversial name changes and introduced dual names, so Phiriopolis became Pretoria-Tshwane, much to the delight of tourists, map makers, and the general public.

As for Zebulon Phiri himself, he had apparently decided to give up politics and retire to Zambia, where he would live off a generous parliamentary pension, as well as money (it was rumoured) that had been stashed away in a Swiss bank account by various bribe-givers.

One evening during a fierce thunder storm, lightning was striking very close to Lana's house. I felt my scalp tingling. Then there was deafening clap of thunder, and all the lights went out for several seconds and then came on again.

Chloe was having a “running” dream, kicking her legs sporadically. She suddenly sat up and stared at me, a strange, distant look in her eyes. Then her eyes began to glaze over.

Just before the life went out of them, she looked at me for a long moment as if she was trying to say something.

I was shocked and deeply saddened that my old friend was no longer with me. We buried her in the back garden in the middle of a grassy patch.

And then a strange thing happened.

Around the grave the next day there was a mysterious circle in the grass.

THE END