

# **The Accidental Prospector**

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## **ABSTRACT**

While excavating an ant nest in the river gravels of the NW Cape Diamond fields, Amanda de Bruyn, an entomologist studying the aggressive *Camponotus fulvopilosus*, finds a diamond. She is torn between the necessity of handing it in to the authorities and the dream of making a quick buck. When a stroke of bad luck renders her current research project null and void she is faced with the prospect of losing her career and her research funding. She is forced to consider selling her diamond and embarks on an adventure that will carry her back into South Africa's dark past and derail her marriage and career.

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## Chapter 1

The idea is to take the colony by surprise; attack in the cool early morning while the ants are still sluggish and won't retaliate. Pete will pump in carbon dioxide and Amanda will follow up with a bonding liquid that will later solidify, immobilising the whole lot of them.

But things don't go according to plan. It takes them ages to pack the equipment, and then the bakkie won't start. Pete pushes it out the yard while Amanda steers, but she makes a mess of things — thinks it's in second gear when it's actually in fourth — so they end up at the bottom of the hill with no power and no more gravity to drive them. If their neighbour, Dave, hadn't been driving past with his jumper cables, they would never have started at all.

They take the main road out of Warrenton and turn right onto the N12 to Kimberley. After 10 kilometres, they take another right to Windsorton where they cross the Vaal River, then left onto a gravel farm road that leads to Amanda's sampling site.

As they pull into their normal parking spot, their ridgeback sees some vervet monkeys under the river willows and leaps off the back of the bakkie. Jude has zero chance of catching these nimble creatures, who wait until he's within spitting distance before they bother to leap up into the branches.

Driving to Windsorton is not part of their usual routine. Most of their field trips, to do with Pete's blackfly project, are closer to home, on a farm just five kilometres outside Warrenton. But today they have to work on the ants that Amanda is studying, a species not found in the Warrenton area. They have mistimed things badly and as they start unpacking their field equipment, Amanda realises that it's probably already too hot for the experiment that she's planning. But she's reluctant to call the whole thing off, even though the late February sun is high enough to raise a sweat and may have mobilised their insect prey. Still, it doesn't seem too serious. She spots some soldier ants near the nest entrance, moving slowly across the sandy soil. Perhaps they are still docile after all.

Amanda is into the third month of studying these strange creatures and has developed a liking for them, despite their mean reputation. Destruction of the whole colony seems a terrible thing to do, but her supervisor has insisted that nest architecture is an essential component for understanding the social structure of this species.

The underground nest is in sandy soil about 50 metres from the Vaal River, a site favoured by diamond diggers for over a hundred years. It seems as if every grain of sand in the river bed, as well as the strip along both sides of the bank, has passed through hundreds of diggers' sieves before being deposited in heaps that have now radically altered the shape of the river and messed up the natural flow. The river has been transformed into a series of pools punctuated by high levees and it is difficult to imagine that a single diamond has been left behind.

Yet the diggers are still here. On the way to her study site Amanda notices Gerrie, one of the regulars, setting up his equipment about 10 metres from the river. They don't have time to stop for their usual chat, but Amanda notices that Gerrie has dug out a channel to direct a stream of water to his spot and has already started panning and sifting, eternally optimistic.

First they unpack all the gear and set up the carbon dioxide pump. Then she puts on her protective clothing: overall, rubber gloves, and long socks pulled up over the bottom of her pants. Just in case the ants decide to climb higher, she also winds a scarf tightly around her neck. The heat is stifling even though the sun hasn't yet reached a quarter of its full power.

These are no ordinary ants: *Camponotus fulvopilosus*, commonly known as the 'balbyter', is a 12 mm black-bodied ant distinguished by its massive mandibles and the bright orange hairs on its abdomen. The colour functions as a warning to potential predators, to let them know that it would be unwise to attack. Not only do they deliver a nasty bite; they also squirt formic acid.

This defence is usually directed at other insects, but these ants have also evolved a strange behaviour pattern that terrifies humans. They stealthily crawl up their victim's leg and when they reach the groin area they let fly with a double attack. First a fierce bite, then a jet stream of formic acid, right in the bollocks.

Mindful of the *balbyter's* reputation, Pete's barrier of clothing is even more formidable than Amanda's, which gives him the confidence to face the soldier ants. He arms himself with the CO<sub>2</sub> cannister and approaches the nest entrance, ready to start spraying. But the nozzle is too wide for the entrance hole. So he uses a small garden trowel to dig out the edges and widen it a bit.

The ants react instantly: about 20 of them emerge and swarm up Pete's leg. Trying not to panic, he backs off, shaking each leg alternately. But he can't get rid of them. So he retreats five metres, removes his gloves, and picks them off by hand. Within a few minutes he has rid himself of the pests — or so it seems.

Then he feels a sharp pain in his groin. He has been bitten, but the sting of formic acid that follows the bite is worse than anything he's ever experienced.

He starts to tear off his clothes: shoes and socks first, then the rest. Then he is running, heading for the river barefooted and panic stricken, wobbling over rocks and hard ground, tripping over his underpants. It ends with a headlong rush down a steep bank into the cool, but slightly turbid, waters of the Vaal River.

Amanda has never seen anything so funny as Pete hopping over the rocks, tearing his clothes off. The way he is running — with his long skinny arms and legs sticking out at awkward angles as he wobbles over the rocks — reminds her of why he was once given the nickname of *Sick Insect* as an undergrad entomology student. She doubles up with laughter and almost falls over, so sits down quickly to regain her balance.

Then she too feels a bite followed by a burning sensation. It's excruciating, and she finds herself repeating Pete's performance. It isn't so funny anymore, until she joins him in the river.

They laugh so much that it's difficult to stay afloat. Then the ant-induced fire in their loins is replaced by fire of a different kind. Not long afterwards, they find themselves making love on the river bank under a *kameeldoring* tree.

## Chapter 2

A grey mist, rising from the river, has invaded the low-lying areas of town as they set out before sunrise the next day, but by the time they reach Windsorton, all traces of mist have dissipated.

Pete parks the bakkie under some willow trees growing near the bank and they start to unpack their equipment and drag it over the soft river sand to their site. Amanda has repaired the holes in their overalls, so today they have reason to trust their protective gear. She picks up the box of pumping equipment and makes her way across some large river cobbles towards their site. Her load is heavy and she dumps it for a moment to plan her strategy, mindful of the telephonic conversation that she had with her supervisor the previous night. Prof Lewis had recommended that they select a colony further away from the river, where the soil will be more compact. Her eyes sweep across the riparian area and she notices a clump of large rocks about 500 metres away. It's the kind of habitat favoured by *balbyter* colonies.

Pete catches up with her as she reaches the spot. "Remind me again about what the Prof said."

"He says we should look for a colony from compacted gravel rather than from the loose sandy gravels of the floodplain."

"Why?"

"I want the bonding liquid to penetrate all the small tunnels in the nest, to reveal the architecture. In porous soils it will probably leach out through the tunnel lining."

Pete isn't convinced. "That man always meddles with your ideas. I hope he's not sending us off on a wild goose chase."

"But I think he's right," Amanda says. "If the surrounding soil is compact then the plastic inside the tunnel will form a stronger cast. This is going to be important when we have to dig the whole thing out."

They find a nest that looks perfect. The soil is compact and the entrance is close to the rocks. The added bonus is a *witgat boom* that's growing from a gap between the rocks, so they will have some shade while they work. This time everything goes according to plan. Pete inserts the nozzle into the entrance of the nest and floods the cavity with carbon dioxide. The

gas will sink down into every part of the nest, displacing oxygen and lulling the whole colony into a permanent sleep.

They have to wait for two hours before the next phase of the experiment so they head off to their favourite spot under the willow trees for a breakfast of rusks, yogurt and coffee.

By 11 am the sun is high in the sky and they feel as sluggish as the ants at sunrise. This time they load the pump with a two-part canister of liquidised sealant. Amanda breaks the seal that separates the two components and shakes the canister vigorously for two minutes. Then she inserts the nozzle into the entrance and slowly pumps the liquid compound into the nest. It creeps its way down into each tunnel and cavity that has been laboriously excavated by thousands of worker ants, probably over a period of about 10 years. The plastic substance will take about 15 hours to harden completely so they have decided to return the next day.

Amanda is dying to get to the next phase. Other hymenopterists have investigated the general morphology and aspects of behaviour, but the physical nest structure hasn't received much attention, perhaps because this type of study is so difficult. She's hoping that her approach will give her some new insights into the social functioning of these nasty-but-fascinating small creatures.

As they start to pack up their gear Amanda notices a shiny object at the nest, right near the entrance where they were digging. She drops her gear and bends down to pick it up. Then holds it up to the light.

It is unmistakable: the shape, the bluish white colour, the smooth, almost-greasy surface texture. And the sparkle. Even in its uncut state, there is nothing that shines quite like a diamond. Why hasn't it been noticed before? It must have been underground ... Pete would have dug it out when he inserted the canister into the ant nest.

She rushes over to Pete and holds the stone up in the palm of her hand.

"Look what I've found."

Pete, who is about to explode from the heat, barely gives it a glance. "What's the big deal? It looks like a piece of quartz."

"Can't you see how it shines? It's a diamond!"

"Oh, come off it. You'll never find a diamond here. The diggers have gone through every grain of sand in this area. They wouldn't leave something like that behind."

"I've seen uncut diamonds before and I can assure you that this isn't quartz. It's a diamond — you can tell by its greasy looking surface and its shape."

Pete, who is busy ripping off his T-shirt, doesn't even bother to look again. But he manages another comment after he's stripped down to his shorts and splashed water all over his body: "I don't think it's a diamond. But even if it is, you wouldn't be able to sell it. You have to have a diggers licence."

Amanda doesn't believe him and stashes the stone away in the pocket of her overall.

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They drive out before sunrise the next day. The cloudless sky has failed to contain the heat that radiated from the earth during the night; so even though it's mid February, the early morning temperature has dropped to 16 degrees. They are in the grip of a North Western Cape summer of cool mornings and baking-hot afternoons when temperatures often reach 40 degrees.

Today they have added spades and picks as well as small trowels and forceps to their usual equipment. All for the delicate task of exposing the finer architecture of the ant nest.

Pete immediately begins to dig a circular trench at a two metre radius around the nest entrance. But Amanda stops him. "Hang on. You don't have to dig so far out. This is a small colony."

Pete pauses for a moment, leaning on his spade. "I've seen this done before. I helped Dan dig out a colony last year and we started in a wide circle and moved inwards."

"That was for a different ant species," Amanda says. "This species is known to have small colonies and only one queen."

"But don't all ants have one queen? Like the honey bee?"

"They're similar to bees, but not exactly the same," she says, trying not to sound edgy. "Most ants have a number of queens, but this species has a small colony and a single queen. So its nest should be smaller than most."

"You're just working on assumptions," he says. "Haven't you read up about the nest size of this species?"

Amanda doesn't reply. Just picks up a spade and moves closer to the nest where she starts to dig a shallow circular channel. Then she pauses, unable to contain her anger. "It doesn't occur to you nobody has worked on this. If everything about this species was already known, why would I be doing the research?"

Pete is thoughtful for a moment and stands still, watching her work. Then he drops his spade and walks over to give her an awkward hug. "Sorry. I'm being a bit unrealistic. You're right – at this stage, you have to speculate."

Then he starts digging along the line that Amanda has indicated. They dig a shallow trench in a 1 metre radius around the nest, but soon realise that this is an enormous task. It's okay to use spades up to a depth of about 20 centimetres but when they reach the rock-hard subsoil the going gets tough. Pete, who is handy with a pick, sets to work with one mighty swing, but this only increases the depth by a small fraction. After an hour of solid sweaty work they have only managed a shallow trench.

By 11am they are ready to collapse so decide to take a break and move over to a shadier spot under a karee boom that they had noticed on their way in. Its deep shade provides some respite from the unforgiving glare of the sun. They collapse in an exhausted heap and drink deeply from the water bottles that they have brought along.

They stop for a short break, then move back to the nest site. But within 10 minutes Amanda is close to collapse. The thin floppy cotton hat that she is wearing is hopelessly inadequate against the blazing sun. Her whole body is covered in sweat so she sprinkles water over her face and neck, but fails to cool her over-heated body. She is feeling and weak and light-headed so sits down on a rock next to the *witgat boom* close to the nest and leans back against the trunk. Its promised shade hasn't materialised. What a bloody hopeless tree this is! It is famous for attracting browsing animals and the goats must have had a go at this one. The leaves have been stripped from her side of the tree but she is too tired to move to a shadier spot.

Pete doesn't immediately notice Amanda, but when he does see her she is leaning back against the tree trunk, her eyes closed, her face exposed to the blazing sun. He drops his spade and moves towards her.

"Are you okay?"

She doesn't respond, so he grabs her shoulder and gives a slight shake.

"Amanda, are you okay?"

She opens her eyes and looks at him blankly. "What ... what's going on?"

"Wake up," Pete says, giving her another shake. She looks at him but doesn't speak. Just leans forward against him.

Pete unscrews the lid of the water bottle that hangs from a strap across his shoulder, pours some water into his hand and pats her face; then sprinkles water across her neck and shoulders.

This helps to revive her and he manages to get her onto her feet. But she is dizzy and can't seem to keep her balance. So he helps her across the river cobbles to another resting place where she can lie down in the deeper shade. He remains next to her, watching. After five minutes her face is still flushed but her skin is dry. He feels her pulse and notices that it is quite rapid, but weak.

She is showing symptoms of heatstroke and Pete realises that he must make every effort to bring down her body temperature. He forces her to drink more water and then empties the entire contents of both their water bottles over her head, face and cotton shirt. Then he fans her face with his hat, hoping that the evaporation will help. After ten minutes she is calmer and goes to sleep. It would be dangerous to move her into the sunlight at this stage, so he leaves her lying in the shade and goes back to the river to fill up their water bottles.

When he returns she is fast asleep, but he wakes her up and forces her to drink. Then lies down next to her.

Amanda wakes up an hour later, wondering where she is. Pete is fast asleep, lying close beside her with one arm thrown across her shoulder. The memory of him cooling her overheated body gradually returns and she edges into the gap between his chin and shoulder. He slowly surfaces into consciousness and they lie still for awhile, staring upwards, mesmerised by the play of light on the leaves above them.

She has recovered from the worst effects, but is too exhausted to go on. It has also become clear that the delicate work of clearing soil from the small tunnel and cavity structure will not be possible in the field.

“I can’t do the fine work out here”, Amanda says. “And I don’t see how we can get that damn lump of soil out of the ground.”

Pete is silent for a moment; then comes up with an idea. “We can lift the whole thing out if we hire some extra help — people who are used to hard labour.”

“What about the base of the structure? It’s going to be difficult to dig that out without damaging the nest.”

“I think it is possible, but it’s going to be a huge task. And the plastic that we pumped in will help to hold it together. We’ll have to remove a lot of soil from the sides. Then dig deeper and work upwards. If we’re careful we should be able to lift it out.”

Amanda’s response is to dive into her rucksack and pull out a small pen and notebook. “I checked up on the bulk density of this kind of soil. I need some kind of estimate of the weight...”

But Pete is sick of weights and measures and needs to cool down. So he leaves Amanda to her calculations and heads to the river for a swim.

By the time he returns she has finished, but isn’t happy with the result. “The damn thing is going to weigh about 160 Kg. I can’t see how we’ll manage to lift that out in one piece, even if we hire extra help.”

Instead of replying, Pete picks up a small twig and idly starts scratching in the soil near his feet. Amanda is familiar with this kind of behaviour and, although frustrated, waits in silence for his response.

It comes in the form of a child-like picture, of a tree and a squiggle underneath, that he draws in the soil. “It’s not so impossible,” he says as he completes his scribble. “You just need the right equipment ... like a winch.”

Amanda looks down at his drawing, while he explains how it will work. “We’ll have to anchor the winch to something – the bakkie, or a tree perhaps.”

“But what about the cost? I doubt if my research grant will cover that kind of equipment.”

Pete quickly reassures her: “We’ll borrow, or hire, one.”

“I’ll ask Gerrie if he can recruit some of his friends or relatives,” she says. “He might also know someone who has a winch.”

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They return two days later, this time with a backup team. Amanda has hired Gerrie and his cousin Dawie for a few more days, to help with the initial digging of a wide trench around the nest and the more careful removal of excess soil closer to the nest.

It is noon on their second day of work and the temperature has already reached 35 degrees. Amanda has been working in the sun for less than an hour but it feels as if her body is about to explode. She is sitting in a cramped position in the trench that Gerrie and Dawie have excavated, trying to locate the tell-tale pieces of white plastic that will indicate that she’s reached the nest cast. Her body is drenched in sweat and a swarm of *Simulium chutteri* blackfly is buzzing around her face. These pestilential creatures are the focus of Pete’s research, so she is already familiar with their nasty habits. Nevertheless, she reminds herself to be grateful that this South African species is quite particular about its diet: it only goes for cattle and sheep; doesn’t fancy the taste of human blood. This is unlike its Canadian counterparts who emerge in their trillions during the spring thaw and attack anyone who dares to venture into their territory.

In some ways the blackfly are like mosquitoes: their larvae and pupae live in water and, to develop their eggs, the female adults require a blood meal from their favoured victims. They both carry a variety of parasites, the most famous being malaria in mosquitoes. But, in spite of its much-vaunted preference for the blood of cattle, a *chutteri* female is now trying to crawl up Amanda’s nose. As she wipes the pest away, she begins to wonder why this nasty species has such a terrible fascination for her eyes, ears and nostrils.

### Chapter 3

After three days they are ready for the great excavation. Gerrie has brought along two of his cousins to help for the day: Leroy, who will provide extra help with labour, and Shadrack, who has some kind of engineering background and has managed to hire a winch for two days. Some of the workers that Gerrie has assembled are from Barkly West, so Amanda fetches them from a bus stop in Windsorton. The basic equipment is the same as before: crowbars and ropes, taupaulins, picks and spades, bits of wood support for levering up the nest, and a large shallow-type wheelbarrow. To this they have now added Shadrack’s winch, which comes with attached ropes and a detachable canvas sling.

Their biggest fear is that the whole unstable structure will fall apart as they lift it out of the ground. So they have also brought along some protective wadding to pack around the bolus of soil. Gerrie and Dawie have widened the trench, increased its depth to about 1.2 metres, and

removed excess soil from the sides. Gerrie now climbs into the trench and digs inwards to remove some plant roots that are still attached to the mass of soil that surrounds the nest.

After ten minutes they are ready to start. Shadrack has worked out the best strategy for levering the mass upwards and, under his direction, the others take up their positions at the surface, each armed with a crowbar.

Their initial task is to lever the mass upwards slightly, to create enough space for inserting a canvas sling under the mass of earth to be lifted.

What follows is a pantomime of sweating, heaving and pushing, but the thing won't budge. Then Leroy gives a huge push and the whole mass topples sideways.

Gerrie and Dawie struggle to hold the massive clump of soil away from their side of the cavity.

“*Wat maak jy?*” Dawie shouts.

“*Hierdie ding is moerse difficult.*” Leroy says.

“*Moenie so rof wees. Jy't amper my voet ge-squash.*”

Leroy drops his crowbar and turns towards Dawie. “*Wat sê jy? Jy dink jy's die baas?*”

“*Ek sê jy's sommer n dof hotnot,*” Dawie says.

Leroy lifts his crowbar and advances towards Dawie. “*Jou fok. Dis blerry kaffer werk hierdie.*”

“What's your case, you bloody *skollie*,” Gerrie says as he picks up his own crowbar and moves towards Leroy.

Leroy's response is unexpected. He moves towards Gerrie, then suddenly swings his crowbar sideways, catching Dawie on the leg. Then turns back to face Gerrie. “*Kom! Ons sal sien hoe jy kan veg.*”

Dawie manages to retrieve his weapon and quickly joins Gerrie.

None of them has noticed Shadrack, who had quietly slipped away when the fight began. He now steps in front of Leroy, holding a can of pepper spray. “*Hou Op!*” he shouts.

Leroy stands his ground for a few moments, staring back at Shadrack, then suddenly drops the crowbar. “*Jou moer! Julle mense het my alreeds verneuk. Wag nog; ek vang jou later.*”

He storms off towards the bakkie. Then turns back, gesturing with his middle finger. “*Onthou ... ek het vriende en ek vergeet niks.*”

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They take a tea break, and after half an hour are sufficiently calm to start work again. Pete takes Leroy's place and Shadrack climbs back into the trench. The final push, that had previously toppled the nest, has now freed the mass of soil from the roots that were holding it in place.

It takes half an hour to lift the bolus of earth out the ground. It starts with Gerrie, Dawie and Pete taking turns to insert crowbars to lift the weight, inch-by-inch while Shadrack inserts small slivers of wood under the soil to be lifted, so that they slip a canvas sling under the whole mass. The sling is then attached to a rope that is winched up by a machine that has been secured to the *witgat boom* close by. They eventually manage to lift the mass of soil out of the ground and transfer it to a wheelbarrow. Moving such a weighty barrow over the rocky ground to their bakkie is a tricky business that takes another half an hour, after which the winch is again used to lift the whole thing onto the back of the bakkie.

It is already dark by the time they drop Gerrie, Dawie and Shadrack off at the taxi rank and Amanda and Pete set off on the drive back to Warrenton. They arrive home, exhausted, after 10 pm. The chances of getting rain that night are close to zero, so they're not too worried about their precious load getting any water damage. Lifting it off can wait until morning.

#### Chapter 4

The garage in the back garden of their house has become Amanda's new laboratory. The ant's nest is in a prime position, on the old workbench that has been there right from the beginning, when they first moved into the house in Warrenton. At first glance the nest looks like an extraterrestrial organism encased in a meteorite, the core a rock-like substance from which a number of strange white protrusions emerge.

But a closer examination reveals that the inner globular section is composed of compact sand rather than rock. And this is what concerns Amanda. How will she remove the rock-hard sand without damaging the tunnels and protrusions that comprise the nest?

She wanders out the garage, across their back garden and into the kitchen where she starts rummaging around in the cutlery drawer, but can't find anything that would be remotely suitable. She needs a powered instrument that is capable of fine delicate work. Like a dentist's drill, perhaps? But that would be too expensive. The money spent on extra labour last week has almost flattened her budget for the year.

If only she had Pete's finances. His project has massive funding from the Water Research Commission (WRC) and the generosity of this organisation is prompted by the economic implications associated with blackfly pests. Four years ago the population explosion of *Simulium chutteri* in the Lower Vaal River area, from Warrenton to Barkly West, reached such high levels that it significantly affected agriculture. The constant attacks from blood-sucking blackfly were causing anaemia and infection, resulting in a loss of condition in livestock. Dairy farmers complained about decreased milk production, sheep farmers complained about lower wool production and both complained about lower meat production.

Amanda has a much smaller grant from the National Research Foundation. It covers basic equipment and stationery and a small stipend for her living expenses. If she wasn't married to Pete, she wouldn't be able to survive at all. The WRC pays for the rent of their house as well as the conversion of the dining room to a laboratory. So she is technically a hanger-on. If only she had more funding, she wouldn't have to worry about getting the equipment that she needs — like a dentist's drill.

Her thoughts turn to her mother, a lecturer in the School of Geoscience at Wits University. Maybe the department has some old drills. It might not be a bad idea to ask her Mom if she can pull a few strings and organise for her to borrow one of them.

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Janet de Bruyn isn't available when Amanda calls the next day. She has spent the afternoon in a meeting set up by de Beers Mining Company, the principal funders of the exploration geology projects in the Witwatersrand University School of Geosciences. The whole research initiative has taken up a lot of her energy and she feels like taking a break. It would be a good time to visit Amanda. Why not take a week's leave? She phones her daughter as soon as she can but is mystified by her request. What on earth does an ant nest have to do with geological drilling equipment?

After some further explanation she gets the gist of what Amanda needs and gives it some thought. The drills used by geologists are either massive, for industrial-level work, or corer machines that wouldn't be suitable for this purpose. Her thoughts turn to palaeontology and she decides to drop in on James Ericson.

She finds him in his laboratory in the Bernard Price Institute and after she has explained her needs, they set off for the main fossil laboratory. James escorts her past rows of benches to the storeroom at the back. He scratches around in their workshop for a few minutes and then comes up with a small drill. "I think this will do," he says. "It's designed for soft sediments. Not really for soil, but if you put it at the lowest power setting it could do the trick".

They take it back to the lab and he gives Janet a demonstration. She hasn't done any fossil work since her Honours degree, but remembers the technique.

"I suggest you try it out when you visit your daughter. If it works she can keep it for a couple of months." James says.

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Janet takes the trip to Warrenton a week later. She follows the south-western route out of Johannesburg, past Soweto and then takes the N12 to Kimberley. She will be driving close to the course of the Vaal all the way, meeting up with the river at Klerksdorp, Bloemhof, Christiana, and eventually Warrenton.

She stops for brunch at a restaurant on the other side of Klerksdorp. As she leaves, a sudden gust of wind blows in from the south, heralding the arrival of a summer storm. A monumental thunderclap signals the start of the deluge and by the time she reaches the car she is soaking wet. But this is the Highveld, where storms are sudden and dramatic and move quickly across the land. When the deluge has passed the sun comes out and life resumes triumphant. It is late March and the grass is turning from green to gold. Janet loves this time of year and she especially loves the aftermath of Highveld storms. She stops at the side of the road to take it all in. The flying ants are emerging. They pour out from holes in the ground, attracting the attention of insects, frogs and birds, who are raising an optimistic chorus of croaks, chirps and whistles. At times such as these every kind of animal becomes a predator, especially birds. Besides the specialist insectivores such as shrikes, there are many others — barbets, weavers, bulbuls and kites — who move in to take advantage of this unexpected feast.

Janet arrives in Warrenton at 4 pm on a stinking hot afternoon. Amanda hears the car pull up the driveway and rushes out to greet her mother, eager to show her their new home.

They have a quick cup of tea, followed by a tour of the house. Then they move to the garage to try out the new drill. Amanda wants to get started right away, but Janet insists on a preliminary inspection of facilities.

She is not satisfied. “You need a high stool to sit on, a good angle-lamp, and safety glasses,” she insists.

Amanda retreats to the house and comes back with a high laboratory stool and one of their bedside lamps. After phoning around they soon find that nobody in Warrenton stocks safety glasses. But they are planning a two-day trip to visit Janet’s sister in Kimberly anyway. So the safety glasses will have to wait.

Pete returns from his field trip in time to join them for a sundowner in the back garden. This is the time when the people of the North Western Cape get some compensation for having survived a hellish summer day. The sky is glowing, luminous. They sit on garden chairs facing west, watching the sun as it sinks down below a sharply-defined horizon.

## **Chapter 5**

Soon after Pete leaves for his field work the next morning, Amanda fetches the stone from her bedroom.

She comes back just as Janet emerges from her room. “Before we go, I want to show you something special. Close your eyes and stretch out your right hand,” she says as she places the stone in Janet’s hand.

Janet looks down. She recognises it immediately, but moves over to the window to examine it in a brighter light. Then looks up at Amanda in surprise. “Where on earth did you get this?” she asks.

“Dug it out the ground when I was examining the ant nest.”

Janet rolls the stone around in the palm of her hand, then holds it up to the light streaming from the window. “Seems like a diamond to me.”

“Great! I thought so too. So you think it’s real?”

“Yes, but let’s examine it more closely.”

They move to the laboratory and Janet sets up the microscope to get a closer look. She adjusts the focus up and down. “My God! It’s massive. And the quality looks good – no major flaws as far as I can see.”

Amanda is thrilled. At last she has someone to share her excitement.

Janet is astounded. “How could such a massive diamond have escaped detection for so long? This was one of the first places where diamonds were discovered. Soon after the Barkly West discovery, in about 1860-something. Besides which, the diggers focused most of their attention on the gravel sites next to the river.

Amanda has been giving this some thought, ever since Pete expressed similar scepticism. “Actually it wasn’t in the loose gravel. The ant nest where I was digging was in more compact soil. I think the diggers have always avoided this spot because of the ants, probably ever since people started searching for diamonds here. I know it sounds a bit ridiculous, but I’ve studied these creatures. Their favourite habitat is next to large rocks or under fallen branches. My colony is located in just such a spot.”

Janet, who knows almost nothing of the habits of *Camponotus fulvopilosus*, doesn’t immediately appreciate the significance of this comment. “Why should the diggers be put off by some silly little ants?”

Amanda explains the fierce behaviour of this species and Janet is amused by her story of their first encounter with the *balbyters*.

“It’s a huge diamond. I guess about three carats, but it will be smaller after cutting,” she says, looking at Amanda.

When she sees the delighted expression on her daughter’s face, she is quick to dampen her enthusiasm. “Remember that size isn’t everything,” she says. “One must always look at the “four C’s”: carats, clarity, colour and cut. And there’s also fluorescence, which is an ambivalent characteristic. To assess that you need a special lamp.”

“So how would you value this diamond in terms of all those characteristics?” Amanda asks.

Janet gives a sigh. It's difficult to give quick answers when a proper assessment is required. "I can't give an instant answer," she says, "but I can say two things. It IS a real diamond and the quality doesn't look bad. But please don't ask me for a monetary value."

Amanda is thrilled with this reply, but tries not to show it. Nevertheless, Janet spots the tell-tale sparkle in her eyes. "Don't get too excited. I'm sure you know about IDB – illicit diamond buying. And the authorities are stricter than ever because of the blood diamonds in Africa."

"Yeah, I know about that," Amanda says. "But what is one supposed to do if one stumbles across an uncut diamond, like I did?"

"You're supposed to take it to the nearest police station and hand it in."

"What! Our corrupt policemen? They'll sell it to the first crooked dealer they find."

Janet knows that Amanda is probably correct. But she is also wary of the law. "I know it sounds like a joke. But that's the law. You can check it out on internet if you like. They also say that if nobody claims it within 21 days, the state is entitled to sell the diamond and keep the proceeds."

"So who would claim it?" Amanda wants to know.

"I think the person who owns the property has some claim. But normally he would also need to have mineral rights. And some people have diggers licences."

"Like Gerrie," Amanda says.

"Who's Gerrie?"

"This man who is always digging at the river. He sometimes helps us when there is extra work."

Janet thinks for a moment. "I wouldn't ask him," she says. "The small-time diggers are being watched. Everyone is twitchy about blood diamonds. Gerrie could get into serious trouble if you tried to fence a diamond through him. And if someone found out, you'd also be in trouble."

"Why is this such a big deal?" Amanda wants to know.

Janet suddenly feels tired. "Let's discuss this on the way to Kimberley. It's only an hour's drive, but I want to get there early so we have time to look around town."

"OK, but let me quickly have a more detailed look," Amanda says, taking her mother's place at the microscope.

"Wow, take a look at this. It's beautiful ... and it sparkles. Even though it hasn't been cut."

Janet's attitude softens a bit. She can understand her daughter's excitement and sense of wonder. She has always been crazy about diamonds herself. "Okay, I'll admit that it looks good. But what are you going to do with it? I don't want you to get into trouble."

Amanda is quick to reassure her. "Don't worry Mom. I won't do anything with it. I just want to keep it for awhile."

She picks up her sewing kit, with the intention of stashing the diamond away but Janet stops her. “That is the most pathetic hiding place I’ve ever seen.”

“I get your point, but right now I can’t think another place to hide it. Besides which, nobody is going to look in my sewing basket. It’s the very last place where one would stash a diamond.”

“You’d be surprised. Someone will find it.”

“OK. I promise to find a better place to hide it, but not now. It can wait until we get back.”

They’ve wasted a lot of time and are about to leave, when Pete comes home. Amanda wants to get going, so they pack their bags and some extra goodies that Janet has left on the table, and then head off in her car.

As soon as they’re out of town, Amanda asks about blood diamonds. “Why is this issue such a big deal; why can’t I keep a diamond that I picked up myself? I didn’t steal it from anyone.”

Janet launches into her usual explanation. “I’m sure you know about the economic principle of supply and demand,” she says. “If the diamond industry wasn’t controlled then people would flood the market. It would collapse very quickly. It’s what Cecil John Rhodes saw right away. I know that he was a real bastard, but he was right about this issue. If he hadn’t controlled the market right from the start, we wouldn’t even have a diamond industry.”

“So what’s this new thing about blood diamonds?” Amanda asks.

“Some renegade dictators, like Charles Taylor, used diamonds to fund vicious wars involving child soldiers. Robert Mugabe’s wife Sally has also been accused of gross exploitation, even murder, of small-time diggers at the Marange Diamond Fields near Mutare. It’s a major problem in many African countries – Zimbabwe, Angola, Congo, the DRC, Cote d’Ivoire: corrupt government officials and human rights violations against simple, poor diggers.”

Amanda understands the seriousness of the situation. But she hasn’t committed any human rights violations; her only crime was to find a diamond. And why should she give her diamond away to some corrupt cop who’d probably sell it to dodgy dealers?

But her mother doesn’t agree. She is getting into her stride. “You don’t understand how serious and delicate the whole situation is in South Africa. The diamond industry is doing everything in its power to project a clean image. They’ve set up a new protocol called the *Kimberley Process*, which stipulates that every diamond sold has to have authentication and the source of the diamond has to be validated. If we lose our reputation, it would have a massive impact on our economy. The advertising industry has succeeded in giving diamonds an image of being pure, clean and romantic.”

“Like ‘*Diamonds are Forever*’?”

“Yes. Exactly. Those three words are famous: the most effective slogan in the history of advertising. You may laugh, but the industry depends on that image. Blood diamonds would destroy it all. The bottom would fall out of the market.”

Amanda says nothing. Her mother has gone into her lecturing corporate mode; best not to respond. But she can already see that there are some holes in her argument. Even the mighty diamond industry wouldn't be able to stop small-time dealers — people with the right skills and equipment who can cut rough diamonds in their own backyard workshops.

## Chapter 6

Nothing much has changed when they return two days later. Jude runs out to greet them at the gate, setting up an excited welcoming bark. Then Pete emerges from the front door and rushes to open the gate. He follows the car up the driveway, so that he's ready to give Amanda a hug as soon as she emerges. She can see that he's excited about something and it doesn't take him long to tell her.

“I've got some great news. You're not going to believe it,” he says as he pulls their suitcases out of the back of Janet's Audi.

Amanda recognises the excited boyish look on his face. It's something she loves about him... his child-like sense of wonder.

“OK, spit it out.”

“*Simulium chutteri* lays floating eggs!”

Amanda stops in her tracks and dumps the suitcase that she is carrying. “What? I can't believe it! I thought they attached their eggs to water plants.”

“Not this species. It's different to other simuliids,” he responds as they move towards the house from the back yard. “I've got rock solid evidence.”

“How did you find out?” she asks.

Janet, who is stuck behind them at the kitchen door, chooses this moment to interrupt. “I'm sure that the egg laying habits of your pestilential little fly are quite fascinating,” she says, “but can we discuss this inside? Preferably over a nice cup of tea.”

Pete and Amanda move into the lounge, hardly noticing Janet who goes to the kitchen and starts to fill the kettle.

The conversation over blackfly eggs is still going at full steam when Janet brings the tea into the lounge. “I was checking the drift sample with the field magnifying glass” Pete is saying, “Gerrie was helping and he didn't understand why I was so excited. I was dying to tell you.”

Janet pours the tea and hands them each a cup. But they hardly notice. They're now rattling on about eggs and larval development and how this will affect control methods.

It is only after her mother has returned to Johannesburg that Amanda gets a chance to work on her ant nest. The garage has become her new laboratory. Their landlord previously used this space as a workshop, so it is equipped with a work bench and a power source.

It takes two weeks to remove the soil that encases the nest structure. On a Tuesday morning at about tea time, Amanda drills out the final clump from a large inner chamber of the nest. She carefully places the drill on the workbench and stands up. It's been a long haul and she is just about there but her aching neck tells her that some relaxation is a necessity that she can no longer ignore. She stands up, stretches her arms above her head and moves her neck from side to side.

The nest now resembles a megacity of interlinking concrete highways punctuated by chambers through which its citizens must pass. Except that this particular city has only one entrance and ends blindly in chambers and tunnels that don't go anywhere. She has already noticed that the chambers near the surface are quite simple expansions of the tunnels, while the deeper ones are larger and have a number of lobes. But she's too tired to think this through, and decides to take a break. It's also time to show Pete. She hadn't wanted him to see her nest until it had been completely exposed.

She massages the side of her neck as she walks across the garden to the kitchen door. Then makes a U-turn back into the garden and out the gate onto the street. She has just remembered that Tuesday is a special day. It's the day when the *Aurora* café stocks up on fresh muffins.

She's back within half an hour, puts on the kettle, and then pokes her head around the laboratory door.

"I'm finished! Muffins for tea."

Pete, who is leaning over his microscope, immediately looks up. "You mean ... finished with life and the goddam-awful work, or finished with the drilling?"

"I mean finished! Finished with the goddam-awful drilling. Time for celebration."

"Great! I'm also buggered. This microscope is killing me," he says as he starts to massage the back of his neck.

"OK. Tea first. Then I'll show you the nest." Amanda says as she heads for the kitchen.

They sit outside on wire-framed garden chairs at a table that had once belonged to Eskom. It's the inner part of a wooden reel that was used to transport heavy-duty electrical cable. Pete had paid R10 for this treasure, at a farm auction held close to his study site.

It is a perfect day. The intense heat of February/ March has given way to a golden April of slightly chilly nights and glorious sunny mornings. They relax and chat for awhile but Amanda is itching to show her nest to Pete, so they move to the garage and she takes him on a tour. It will be good practice for the report-back seminar that she will have to present to the Entomology Department in two weeks' time.

She stands at the side of the nest, takes a deep breath, and launches into a speech. “I present you with the nest of the *Camponotus fulvopilosus* ant. The yellow-haired sugar ant, *aka* the *balbyter*. Family Formicidae, Order Hymenoptera.”

Pete interrupts. “Hang on a bit,” he says. “It looks like this is going to be a long session. I need a chair... and my cigarettes.” He disappears for a few minutes, and returns prepared: settles down in his chair and lights up.

Amanda takes up her position again. “As you probably know, the physical structure of the nest provides us with an idea of the general functioning of these eusocial animals. The first thing that strikes you is the small size of the nest. Unlike many other *Camponotus* species, *fulvopilosus* has a relatively small colony — only about 1000 individuals. The chambers represent different components of a socialist-type ant city: the nursery where workers tend to the ant juveniles – eggs, larvae and pupae – and the special chamber in which the queen ant lives and reproduces.”

Pete puts up his hand. “May I ask a question?”

“Certainly.”

“What about the special chambers for food processing, where the ants cultivate symbiotic bacteria that help to digest their food?”

“That’s the case for some other *Camponotus* species, like those that feed on rotting wood and make their nests in wood. This one has its nest in the ground ... as you well know.”

Pete keeps quiet as Amanda describes the general social structure. “Apart from the short-lived male ant, whose only function is to mate with the queen, all the workers are female,” she says, unable to suppress a grin in response to Pete’s half-smile. “There are two main castes: the major and minor workers. The former are the aggressive bastards that protect the nest and squirt formic acid on any creature that ventures into their territory. But they also hunt for food. The smaller minor-caste workers stay inside the nest and perform domestic duties, tending to the young, preparing food, and ventilating the nest.”

Pete now remembers the question that he had wanted to ask. “Okay, so this species doesn’t eat wood. What does it eat?”

“It preys on other insects, such as termites. But also eats honeydew.”

“What ... honeydew!” You mean this fierce aggressive bastard — this *balbyter* that nearly had my balls for breakfast — feeds on honeydew! I don’t believe it.”

“Actually the ones in Namibia seem to go directly to plants that exude sweet honeydew. But in this area they get most of their honeydew from mealy bugs that feed on acacia trees. You know about mealy bugs?”

“Ja. I know. They’re like aphids: they suck up the sap from plants ... the sugar water just oozes out of their bodies and other insects feed on this. But I never expected the *balbyter* to feed like that.”

“Well it does. When the mealybug inserts its proboscis into the plant, the pressure from the rising plant sap is so high that the sugary water just oozes out of its soft abdomen. Balbyter ants gather around and lap up the excess liquid – like milking a cow.”

Amanda pauses, realigning her thoughts: “Because of their strange feeding behaviour, balbyters are unlikely to need the complicated food processing chambers commonly found in the nests of other species — like harvester ants and other carpenter ants. Honeydew doesn’t need to be processed, so the major-caste balbyters can regurgitate it directly to the minor-caste workers, who then pass it on to others in the colony – the juveniles and the queen.”

“OK. I believe you,” says Pete. “But it’s quite hard to believe that this species can be so different to the other species of *Camponotus*.”

“It’s not so hard to believe. *Camponotus* is a huge genus – over a thousand species and a massive variation between species. Anyway, think of lions and leopards: same genus, different species. Think of how differently they behave.”

“You’re right. Well done, actually. But what if someone asks you about what goes on inside the nest?”

“I’ll just say that I’ll focus on that aspect later in the year. This seminar is going to be a minor report-back on progress. The big seminar will be at the end of October. Right now I must focus on the external structure – the shape of the nest, how many chambers, how deep, how wide. You know my plans... when I get back at the end of April I’ll dissolve the whole structure in sections and extract individual ants from different parts of the nest. Then I’ll find out more about their social behaviour.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to do that. But when you go to Wits next week, you should also find out more about which solvent to use. Ask some organic chemists.”

## Chapter 7

Amanda is terrified of public speaking. She hates the sound of her own voice projecting into silence; people in the audience staring at her, their faces blank, unresponsive, yet somehow hostile. Most of all, she hates academic audiences. Professors ready to pounce on her deficiencies: her experimental methods, her conclusions, what she may have left out, possible false assumptions, faulty logic. She has been dreading this moment for weeks and as she mounts the steps onto the podium she feels her legs shaking.

The power point presentation is her only security. If she freezes up completely, then she will just flip through the photographs and read the text straight from the screen. But first she must get the system to work. Her mouth goes dry and her hands are shaking as she inserts the memory stick into the multimedia system.

But the system has frozen; the bloody cursor hasn't appeared on the screen. She pushes the mouse around, but nothing happens. "Sorry, but I can't seem to get this to work," she says in a strangled voice.

It worked so well for the student before her: Lindy Adams — impossibly young, looked like a schoolgirl — who gave an immaculate presentation. She had spent six months working on pest control at an organic farm in Mpumalanga, trying to develop enviro-friendly alternatives to insecticides. Lindy's PhD is on a tiny brachonid wasp parasitoid that lays its eggs on the cabbage white caterpillar, a serious pest of cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli cauliflower and brussel sprouts. Her photograph of an infected caterpillar cocoon, with yellow wasp parasites bursting out from its collapsed skin, had elicited responses of horror and excitement. She had clearly impressed the lecturers.

It's a hard act to follow. But where is the bloody cursor? Prof Lewis showed her the system this morning, but it's no longer working.

"Sorry ... the cursor ... where is it?" she asks, her voice shaking.

Fortunately, help is at hand. A young guy, who also looks like a school kid, comes bounding down the steps from the back of the lecture theatre. "Don't worry. This system sometimes gives you grief," he says as he moves behind the keyboard and picks up the mouse. He guides her through the process, helps to locate her file and launches the programme. Then returns to his seat.

Her mouth has gone dry. She grabs the glass of water next to the lectern and takes a gulp, then reads the title of her presentation: "Nest architecture of the yellow-haired sugar ant, *Camponotus fulvipilosus*" (better not to mention crude common names, like *balbyter*; safer to go with the more genteel English option).

She knows from previous experience that screwing up the introductory sentence is a recipe for disaster, so she doesn't even attempt to look at the audience ... safer to look down and read directly from the text in front of her.

After the first five minutes things improve and she starts to relax. But she has a bit of a wobble when she gets to the photograph of her team digging out the ant's nest. They look like a bunch of *skollies*. She cringes at the picture of her sweaty self, red in the face, toiling away at a dirty ant nest. This is grunt research, gross and dirty and, worse still, it doesn't have any economic value. Unlike the elegant project of her predecessor.

Her talk is a marathon. She's got too many slides and receives the five-minutes-to-the end reminder when she's only half way through. So she scampers through the last part and leaves out the bit about future research.

Then the questions.

Prof Edwards stands up. “There’s one thing that bothers me,” he says. “As far as I can see, you haven’t yet done anything original. Others have described nest structure in the *Camponotus* genus, albeit not for this species. What do you hope to find out?”

Amanda fields this one quite well – explains her future plans, how she will dissolve the plastic cast, work out the physical location of the queen and major and minor workers, gain insights into the social behaviour.

The next question flummoxes her. “What solvent will you use?”

Her answer – about seeking advice from chemists – sounds lame.

Then the curve ball from Dr Willoughby. “I seem to recall reading a similar paper, also on *fulvopilosus*; someone from Namibia ... van Vuuren. Have you come across his work?”

Before she can attempt an answer, the moderator rings the small bell on his desk. “We’re out of time. I recommend that you continue this discussion over tea.”

Amanda feels slightly sick as she makes her way back to her seat. Her talk was a disaster and she has a bad feeling about this guy from Namibia. She doesn’t feel like discussing this with anyone, so she skips tea and takes the lift downstairs to the Biological & Physical Sciences Library. She swipes her student card to enter, heads for the bank of computers, and logs into the biological sciences search engine.

It doesn’t take long to find the paper. All she has to do is enter two keywords: van Vuuren and *Camponotus fulvopilosus*. She doesn’t even have to get past the abstract to realise that this is a disaster. This horrible person from Namibia has done it all, and more. The only difference is that he used some kind of orthodontic fluid to pump into the nest. After describing the architecture he dissolved the whole structure, section-by-section. He then worked out the locations of all the different ant castes. His conclusion includes a discussion about hierarchies and the significance of this species in the evolution of altruism in social insects. It is an excellent paper.

She hasn’t the courage to go back to the Zoology Department and decides to go home. Janet had given her a lift onto campus in the morning, but has taken the afternoon off, so Amanda must make her own way home. She walks across the Wits East Campus to Jorrison Street, across Jan Smuts, then through Braamfontein, the bad part of town. But she couldn’t care less; getting mugged is the furthest thing from her mind. She makes her way to Simmonds Street, then across the Nelson Mandela Bridge to Newtown and Park Station.

She catches the famously expensive Gautrain to Rosebank. It only takes 10 minutes, which is considered close to miraculous in terms of South African city transport.

She’s now in familiar territory, where their family lived during her high school and university years. But, just over a year ago, Janet had moved out of their old house in Tyrwitt Avenue, to a safer place in a gated complex near Tottenham Avenue. Amanda can’t remember how to get there.

She goes to a café in the Rosebank Mall and orders cappuccino and pecan pie. The fact that she can't find her way to her mother's home is ridiculous. But this part of town has changed so much in the past five years that it is now foreign to her. Property developers have eaten up the grand old mansions and transformed the area into a maze of gated complexes, a necessity born out of the high crime rate in Johannesburg. Since the late 1990s the most attractive survival option is to huddle together, try to create a village atmosphere behind high walls.

After fifteen minutes of self-indulgence, Amanda is calm enough to phone her mother and the first part of her conversation sounds normal: "Hi. I'm at the *Mugg and Bean*. Can you come and fetch me?"

"How was the seminar?" Janet asks.

Amanda tries to keep her voice steady, but fails. "Okay ... actually not. I'll tell you later." Then cuts the call and turns off her mobile. Prof Lewis will be phoning soon and she can't face the thought of speaking to him.

It takes Janet 10 minutes to arrive. They order a second round of coffee and don't say much for awhile. Janet realises that something must have gone terribly wrong and avoids asking questions. They drive home in silence. Amanda dumps her handbag in the lounge, then moves to the patio and sits on one of her Mom's comfortable upholstered outdoor chairs. Janet has a ground-floor, stand-alone townhouse with a small north-facing garden that attracts an amazing variety of birds. It is warm and sunny and Amanda lets her mind drift, noticing the small things in the garden: her mother's water feature that has created a trickle of water flowing down into a small fish pond, and the grey loerie that now sits on the rafters above her squawking out a raucous call, proclaiming its right to be here, beyond its native range. It is trying to warn off the pigeons that have now occupied the bird bath. Amanda takes it all in, letting her mind drift. The sunshine and the birds are a healing balm and she dozes off into a light sleep.

Later in the evening after an early supper, Janet broaches the problem. "Tell me what went wrong."

"It's a total disaster. Someone has trumped my research."

It takes some time to convince Janet that this is a real problem. They go through all the possibilities, then get onto Janet's internet and do a search on Google Scholar. They download the paper and print it. Then Amanda goes through the whole thing step by step. The first impression that she had in the library is correct. Her research is an exact duplication of the work that this person has now published. And all her plans for future research have already been completed by him.

"But didn't you do a literature review?" her mother asks.

"Yes ... in November last year. This paper was published in January."

"I suppose I should say that you should have checked again in January, but I must admit that one can't always keep abreast with every new development."

At least her mother understands. But she is also insistent about contacting Prof Lewis. “He’ll be sympathetic. Remember that this is also a blow to him. It’s an awful experience for a supervisor: nurturing a student, helping her set up a project, and then having something like this happen. Believe me, it’s almost as bad for him as it is for you. You owe it to him to phone.”

But Amanda can’t face the Prof just yet. She decides to phone Pete instead, but first checks her mobile to see if he’s called her. But there is nothing ... not even an SMS. She remembers now that he hadn’t bothered to wish her luck when she left, or this morning before the seminar.

She phones and he answers immediately. “Hi ... how’re things. Hope you’re enjoying the big city.”

Her seminar is obviously the last thing on his mind. “You won’t believe what Jude did today! He was with me at the river and decided to chase a troop of baboons. I was shit-scared. Couldn’t stop him. You should have seen the size of the big male baboon that confronted him. I tell you ... Jude was almost history. The baboon reared up into threat mode ... bared his canines. They were huge, about 10 centimetres long. Luckily Jude backed off, turned tail and ran.”

Amanda doesn’t say anything.

“Are you there?” Pete asks.

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Aren’t you concerned about Jude? He could have been killed.”

“Aren’t you concerned about my seminar?”

“Oh that! Well ... I presume that it went off okay, otherwise you would have phoned.”

“It wasn’t okay. It was a bloody disaster.”

Pete’s response is breezy, patronising: “Oh come on... you’re always a drama queen about public speaking. I’m sure it was fine.”

Amanda can’t find the words to respond. She just cuts the call.

## Chapter 8

Prof Lewis’s office hasn’t been properly cleaned since he first moved in, ten years ago. As she enters, Amanda trips over a pile of books on the floor. She stumbles, then regains her balance and looks around.

There is no sign of him. So she clears her throat and tries a tentative greeting. “Prof Lewis? I’ve come to see you ...”

He pops up from behind a pile of papers and journals that are stacked so high on the central desk that one cannot see across the room. “Hello Amanda. Sorry ... I forgot the time. Busy with a dissection.”

She can see his head bobbing up and down as he moves towards her through the narrow passage between the laboratory bench against the wall and the central table and she gets a full view of him as he moves around the corner. He is wearing a lab coat over a pair of brown corduroy pants and a green sweatshirt emblazoned with the logo of a conference he once attended. This time it's the *XXIII International Symposium on Formicidae*. The title is printed in a double curve above an illustration of an army ant, underneath which is the place and the date: *Stellenbosch, 1998*. Amanda has seen this one before. It's one of his favourites, second only to his dark blue sweatshirt from the *20<sup>th</sup> International Symposium on Hymenoptera: Atlanta, 1996*, which is adorned with a picture of a pompilid wasp dragging a large spider to its underground nest.

Prof Lewis walks towards her, his expression concerned. "Where were you yesterday? We were supposed to meet after the seminar."

"I'm sorry, but something awful happened ... I tried to explain this morning on the phone."

"Yes, but the line was bad so I didn't quite get it," he responds as he looks around the room. "We need to sit down and have a talk."

He wanders off to the recess behind the desk. Amanda hears papers being moved around, then the sound of books crashing to the floor. He emerges a minute later, carrying a low chair, then disappears again and returns with a high chair, the one that he uses at his microscope.

Amanda sits on the first chair while Prof Lewis climbs up onto the high chair. He peers down at her for a moment before speaking. "Tell me what happened ... someone trumping your work?"

She hands him a printed manuscript. "Read this first," she says. "You'll see what I mean."

It's the van Vuuren paper that she downloaded from the internet last night: *Nest architecture of the yellow haired sugar ant, Camponotus fulvopilosus, with a note on social hierarchies*.

She waits while he scans through the abstract. It only takes a few minutes for him to get the message. He looks up, concerned. "I never imagined. University of Namibia ...?"

He turns his attention back to the paper, skims through the introduction, and then pays close attention to the Materials and Methods and the Results. Amanda feels ill at ease, not quite sure what to do with herself. She picks up various documents that are lying around, most of which are exceptionally boring academic papers covering topics that can only be of interest to a handful of specialists around the world.

At last he looks up to ask a question. "When did you do the literature review?"

"November last year."

He grunts, then looks down again, peering at the small print at the top of the page. "*African Entomology, January 2012*. No chance for you to have picked up on this one."

It is only then that he notices Amanda's defeated expression. "Don't worry, my dear," he says, leaning forward to pat her shoulder. "We can find a way around this ... think of other options."

She can't stand the false cheeriness. "Even if there were, I wouldn't be interested."

"How long are you staying in Johannesburg?"

"I'm catching the 12:30 train to Kimberley on Thursday."

"Good. You'll have some time to relax, think about things. I want to see you before you go. How about tomorrow afternoon, four o'clock?"

Amanda isn't keen but agrees to see him. He can see the hopeless look on her face and struggles to comfort her. "Don't give up, Amanda. You can start again ... try looking at another species that hasn't been researched."

"I couldn't bear to go through all that again," she says.

"This has happened before. One of Prof Butler's students. He was also devastated, but started again on a similar project. The second time round is always much easier. You have already worked out the techniques and can catch up very quickly. Believe me, it's not nearly as difficult as you think."

Amanda mumbles something about giving it another try. But she knows that she'll never go back. She has always hated repeating work, and this project is no exception.

## Chapter 9

The train pulls into the Kimberley station at 10 pm, half an hour late. Amanda catches sight of Pete waiting on the platform but his face is turned the other way so he doesn't see her waving. As the train trundles to a jerking halt, she drags her suitcase out from under the seat, then looks out the window. Pete seems to have disappeared, so she carries her luggage off the train on her own.

She is still sitting on her suitcase ten minutes later when the train lurches forward, continuing on its journey to Cape Town. What on earth could have happened to Pete? The sight of the train receding down the tracks intensifies her feeling of abandonment.

She is scrolling for his number on her mobile when he suddenly appears right in front of her. She jumps to her feet and throws her arms around him. "Thank God you're here. You had me worried."

"Sorry about that ... I had an urgent need to take a dump just as the train pulled in. You won't believe how difficult it is to find a toilet around here. Most of them were locked ... I only just made it."

"That is most unromantic of you," she says, hugging him fiercely. "Definitely not part of the script."

Seeing Pete again has lifted her spirits and for a while everything seems normal. They make their way out the station to the car park and take the N12 north out of Kimberley. She tells him of her predicament as they drive home, but he doesn't seem to understand.

"OK, so it's a setback," he says. "But you shouldn't abandon this project. Think of a new angle, a new research approach."

Amanda isn't in the mood for this discussion. The tension of the past few days has exhausted her and she sleeps for most of the way home.

As soon as they arrive back Jude rushes to the gate and leaps around barking wildly as Amanda emerges from the car, a welcome distraction from the tense conversation that she had been having with Pete.

Amanda spends the next few days doing the sort of things that she usually neglects: weeding their vegetable patch, tidying clothes, and even darning some of Pete's socks. But she gets sick of domesticity and, on Saturday, decides to take Jude for a walk.

They go to a picnic spot on the Vaal River where the fishermen often hang out. She follows a path that winds its way through riparian reeds and occasionally opens out onto sandy sections of the river bank. This is the best part of their walk, when Amanda repeatedly throws a tennis ball into the water, for Jude to retrieve.

But he gets too enthusiastic and collides with a fisherman who is dozing on a three-legged stool near the water's edge.

The man wakes up suddenly, notices that his line is taut, and swoops up his rod. Then the battle begins, as he alternately lets his line out and then reels his prey in again. It takes him about five minutes to pull a large fish in to the shallow water near the bank. But the battle is far from over.

Amanda, who has been watching close by, realises that the fisherman is struggling to land the fish, which is too big for his small landing net. She hurries across the river gravel to where he is standing, knee deep in the water. "*Kan ek help?*" she asks.

He is too busy to answer immediately, trying to contain the writhing fish, which Amanda has recognised as a barbel, *aka* a sharptooth catfish. Its distinctive flat head, and large barbels protruding from the sides of its mouth, are unmistakable. It is a massive fish, almost a metre long, probably weighing about seven kilograms.

After he has regained some control, the man looks up and suddenly notices her. "*Asseblief ... vat daardie skepnet,*" he says, pointing to a larger landing net that is lying in the sand where he had been sitting.

As he guides his catch into the larger net, Jude leaps up and snaps at the barbel's tail. The fisherman is clearly annoyed. "*Kan jy die hond wegvat!*"

But then he changes his tone, as if he's come to a decision. "*Asseblief ... kry vir my daardie klip,*" he says more calmly, pointing towards a large flat stone lying close by.

Amanda grabs Jude by his collar, then picks up the stone and hands it to the fisherman.

The next part is brutal. The man drags the fish towards some nearby rocks and clobbers it on the head. Amanda tries not to feel squeamish. She reminds herself that she regularly eats fish and meat; she'd be a hypocrite if she disapproved of hunting. Nevertheless, the image of the fish's head being bashed to a pulp on the rocks is not pretty.

She starts making her way back along the path that they took earlier, but realises that Jude is no longer with her. He has run back to the fisherman. She calls but he ignores her; he's far too interested in the dead fish. Damn! She'll have to go back and fetch him.

As she approaches the spot, she sees that Jude has something awful and bloody in his mouth – the decapitated head of the catfish. By this time she is thoroughly embarrassed by her dog.

"I'm terribly sorry," she says, forgetting to speak Afrikaans. "My dog is a hell of a nuisance."

He looks up, surprised, and answers in perfect English. "Don't worry. It's what one expects ... my dog would do the same."

He gestures towards the degutted fish that he has placed in a clear plastic bag. Then picks up a bowl into which he has thrown the bloody remains. "I just need to dispose of this lot," he says as he grabs the bowl and walks towards the river.

Amanda, who has managed to retrieve the fish head from Jude, runs after him.

"Hang on! You can add this to your pile," she says as she drops the fish head in the bowl.

He walks down to the water and throws the mess into the main stream. Then washes the bowl out in the shallows. Amanda isn't sure what to do next. It would seem rude to walk away, but she feels awkward waiting for him to return. So she pats her dog, then leashes him up.

The fisherman is looking down as he walks back towards her. When he looks up, he seems surprised that she's still there. "Thanks for your help. That one would have got away if you hadn't been there with the catch net."

"I must also thank you for being so patient with my stupid dog," she says.

They stand for a moment, not saying anything. Then she grabs Jude and turns towards him: "I must get going ... late for lunch. I hope you enjoy your fish."

He responds by reaching down to pat Jude. "You'd better give your dog a good supper ... to make up for the fish head that you took away."

Amanda laughs awkwardly, then grabs Jude's leash and turns back along the path. She makes her way home feeling lighter, less worried about her future. Perhaps there is life after a failed PhD.

Pete has already made lunch by the time she returns. This isn't a very onerous task: all he has to do is set up tea and cups on a tray to carry to their table under the pepper tree. After that they each make their own sandwiches in the kitchen, to take outside.

“Where were you?” he asks. “You took quite a while.”

“Went for a walk along the river path. Jude and I helped a man land his fish ... a huge barbel.”

“Interesting ... what did Jude do?”

“He woke up a fisherman, who was snoozing ... hadn’t noticed that he had a bite.”

Pete leans down to scratch Jude behind his ear. “Clever dog. And you ... what was your contribution?”

“I fetched his large landing net ... and a stone to clobber the fish with.”

“Hmm ... skillful stuff! Remind me to invite you and Jude along when next I go fishing.”

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Although they are free to work in their own time, Pete and Amanda generally follow normal office-type routines and nearly always take weekends off. But in the interminably hot summer they start earlier in the morning, which justifies a long siesta after lunch.

After they’ve finished eating, Pete broaches the subject that’s been hanging between them for the past few days: “So what are you planning to do?”

“I don’t really know.”

“But you can’t go on like this. You’ve got a grant from the NRF.”

“Yes... it’s really bothering me. I suppose I should send them a tactful report. But they’ll probably say that I should have known; that my literature review was inadequate.”

“Well they may be right.”

“How can you say that? Even Prof Lewis agreed that it was virtually impossible for me to have picked this up. My literature review was in November and van Vuuren’s paper was published in January.”

“Prof Lewis is an idiot... he should be aware of work that is being done by other universities around here.”

“You’re so self righteous ... I’d agree with you if we were talking about a South African university. But this was the University of Namibia, for God’s sake! You can’t expect him to know about every study that is going on in the whole of Africa.”

“Not under normal circumstances... but if he has a student who wants to study a particular animal, he should make an extra effort to find out. I don’t think Lewis did that.”

“Okay. But I think you’re being super-critical. The Prof is only human and he has a huge work load ... teaching, applying for funds. Also his own research.”

“You mean those funny little ants that he studies... what are they? The solitary ants?”

“Technically they aren’t ants. They’re a separate family — the Mutilidae.”

“Yes them. I mean what’s the point? They aren’t economically important and are of zero interest, except to a handful of dry old academics. It’s ridiculous ... spending so much time on an obscure little ant that nobody cares about.”

“They’re important for evolutionary studies. But I have a similar problem. Nobody wants to fund studies on a whacko species, like the *balbyter*.”

“You had better think of other options. Otherwise your grant will dry up, and we can’t come out on my funding alone.”

“Surely the NRF won’t stop paying, simply because something unforeseen happens.”

“Not immediately. You’re not important enough for them to notice at this stage. But you will have to put in an annual progress report which Prof Lewis will have to submit to the funders.”

“When will that be?”

“I think it’s the end of November. Surely Lewis has told you about this?”

Prof Lewis has not mentioned this to her before, but she realises that Pete is probably right.

“I suppose I’ll have to think of something. Do you think I can change direction altogether and still get funding?”

“You’ll have to ask Prof Lewis. But I think you should at least motivate for an extension. You’ll have to come up with a new project proposal.”

“Oh my God! What a pain.”

His attitude towards her softens a bit. “I’ll tell you what. We should follow your mother’s advice. Discuss it over another cuppa tea,” he says, reaching for the teapot.

Pete disappears into the kitchen and returns a few minutes later. Pours them both a cup, sits down opposite her and takes a gulp.

“I know this is going to be a huge pain,” he says, “but it’s something you’ll just have to do. I don’t think they’ll make you pay back, but it will look bad if you just do nothing. You’d better come up with something quite soon, otherwise we’re in the dwang. We can’t survive on my grant alone.”

“Shit, Pete. My mind’s a complete blank. I’ve lost all energy for that sort of thing.”

He leans forward and pats her knee. “It won’t be so bad and I can help. Just come up with something — like an interim report.”

## Chapter 10

Amanda spends a week reading through the scientific literature that she has on hand. Then she tries *Google Scholar*. But there are too many, rather than too few, ideas. She struggles to find any focus and feels frustrated and depressed. She tries to phone Prof Lewis but there is no

reply. She sends an e-mail and gets an instant out-of-office reply: the prof will be away for the next two weeks, attending a conference in Madrid.

She wanders around the house, not knowing what she should do next, so she walks outside and sits down at their garden table. Then decides to call her mother, to ask if Pete is right about the funding situation.

Janet is about to catch a flight to Washington where she will be attending a conference. She confirms everything that Pete said about funding, but can hear from Amanda's response that this is not the news that she was hoping to hear. So, in an effort to cheer her up, she asks about the diamond. Has she moved it to a safer place?

Amanda remembers her resolution to move the diamond, but her mind blanks out. Did she or did she not move it? This isn't something that one would normally forget, but she has been so stressed about her project that she wonders if she's suffering from memory loss. She checks the top of the cupboard where she normally keeps her sewing box, reaching up with her hand, but can't feel anything.

She fetches a small fold-up step ladder from the garage, just to be sure, but the box is definitely not there. Instead she finds her art equipment, still packed away in the special case that her father gave her. She hasn't even opened it since they first moved to Warrenton last year. She hauls the case down and places it on the bed, then continues searching, but there is no sign of the sewing box. She looks underneath the cupboard, but instead of the sewing box, she finds some more painting equipment: an easel and large sheets of artist papers.

In a state of rising panic she searches the whole room, empties out the clothes cupboard, and looks under the bed.

She spends the rest of the day spring cleaning the house and their laboratory. By the end of the afternoon she realises that its time to calm down and think logically. First of all, she reminds herself that it's the sewing box and not the diamond that she must find. Maybe Pete took it?

As soon as he comes home, she asks.

"Why would I want the sewing box? You're the one who does all the sewing."

"Yes, but I thought you might know. Have you perhaps seen it?"

"Didn't you take it with you somewhere? Now I remember ... it was when you went to Kimberley with your mother. I picked up the box and asked what you wanted to do with it. You suddenly decided to take it ... said you were going to do some sewing while your mother was driving."

It all comes back to her. They were about to leave on their trip and she had been showing her mother where she had hidden the diamond – in the lining of the sewing box. Then Pete appeared and picked up the box. She had panicked and come up with the story about taking it with her to Kimberley, then packed the box in a place where people wouldn't normally look: in

the boot of her mother's car, beneath the spare wheel. She had forgotten all about it when they unpacked the car at the end of the journey.

The sewing box can only be in one of two places: either in her mother's car, or – in the unlikely event that her Mom has removed it from the spare wheel compartment – it would be in her flat. But Janet hadn't said anything about the box, so it must still be in the car.

Amanda picks up her mobile phone and starts scrolling down to Janet's number. Then she realises that, right now, her mother is sitting in an air-conditioned Jumbo jet, on her way to Washington. She won't be back for a week, so it will have to wait.

The fuss about the lost diamond has distracted Amanda away from the horrible task that is supposed to be her primary objective: trying to dream up a new project. The thought of wading through mountains of boring scientific papers, trying to find something of interest, fills her with an immense lethargy.

She wanders back to her bedroom and notices the box of paints lying on her bed. Her father had made it for her, two years before he died. She was in Grade 11 and he had wanted to encourage her interest in art. She picks up the box, carries it down the passage, and places it on the dining room table before opening it up.

It is all there, neatly packed: a beautiful large wooden box; *kiaat*. It is the exact same design as the toolbox that her Dad had made for himself. She opens it up, unclipping each side to remove the lid in its entirety. The upper layer is divided lengthways, with three smaller compartments on each side. Each half is supported by a hinge that opens upwards and outwards, so that one can look at all the contents at once. The smaller tubes of acrylic and oil paints are stored in the six upper compartments, while the bottom of the box is reserved for the bigger things: large paint tubes, brushes, palette knives, ceramic mixing palettes, and two small empty bottles. Also an old rag, stained with paint and smelling faintly of turpentine.

The box brings back memories: her Dad; art at school. She had been good, got a distinction in matric. She had wanted to go further, was thinking of a Fine Art degree. But her Dad hadn't been around to encourage her and she had been persuaded to go for the sensible option: a BSc, which would lead to better job opportunities.

It was a bad choice. She suddenly feels absolutely sick of science. How can she ever go back? At the very least she should take a break and do some painting. Give herself time to think, even if it's only for a week or two.

She decides to check if the paints are still usable. So she unpacks the contents of her box and spreads them out on the dining room table. Then arranges them into categories — acrylics and oil paints, pencils and charcoal, and all the cleaning material — while also checking which paints have dried and need to be discarded. She is delighted to realise that most of her paints are still in good condition, after not having been used since she finished matric eight years ago.

As she starts to pack the good paints back into the box, Pete emerges from the laboratory.

“What on earth are you doing?”

“Sorting out my art equipment. I’ve decided to paint again. I want to practise some techniques this afternoon.”

“Can it wait? ... I need some help with my field trip this afternoon.”

“Can’t Gerrie help?”

“He couldn’t make it today. So I was hoping you’d come.”

“I’d rather not ... I’m really keen to get started.”

“For God’s sake! You have nothing to do all week. Then on the one day when I need help, you want to paint.”

Amanda struggles to stay calm. Today is the first day that she has started to feel some purpose in her life and she resents his intrusion. “I’m willing to help, but don’t expect me to always be at your beck and call.”

“Okay. Can you come today? You’ll have the rest of the week for your art.”

She reluctantly agrees and packs the paints back into her box.

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In spite of herself, Amanda feels her spirits lifting when they get to Pete’s study site. She enjoys being in the field, and enjoys Jude’s company as they make their way down to the river, carrying Pete’s equipment. They go to the rapids where Pete has been monitoring the blackfly population for the last six months. It’s a beautiful place, where the river narrows down into steep rapids, followed by a waterfall that plunges into a large pool — their favourite swimming spot during the summer.

She knows the routine: while Pete collects rock samples from the river substrate she measures a few water quality parameters – water temperature, pH, Total Dissolved Solids, and Conductivity. Her task is over within 15 minutes but Pete takes a lot longer. He must sample the small invertebrates that cling onto rocks within the fast-flowing water. He pulls on his waist-length waders, grabs a fine-mesh long-handled net and heads into the rapids, to an area where the substrate consists of loose boulders. The next part is a bit tricky but not really difficult: he positions the net downstream, then picks up a boulder and holds it in front of the net, so as to catch any small animals that may try to escape by detaching themselves from the rock and drifting down with the current.

After Pete returns he dumps the rock and contents of the net in a bucket of water, then has to go through the tedious work of picking all the small animals off the rock with forceps and preserving them in a weak solution of formalin. The whole process is repeated five times, so that five separate rock samples are taken – the minimum sample size for statistical analysis.

Pete can do most of this sampling on his own but it helps to have Amanda there for water quality tests, and to write up the field note book. Also for occasional special and unusual tasks,

like the 24- hour sample that they once did to measure activity patterns. Pete has however recently trained Gerrie to help with the field work.

They break for lunch which they share with Jude. He has been exploring up and down the river, but immediately appears when they call.

“I hope there aren’t any baboons around,” Amanda says. “Tell me exactly what happened. I was so upset about my failed seminar that I didn’t take it in.”

Pete doesn’t respond. He’s still angry about her lack of concern for their dog and they remain silent while they finish their lunch.

As they pack up the picnic basket, they hear someone calling from the small hill that they had descended earlier. A tanned man wearing hiking boots is making his way down the hill towards them. He looks vaguely familiar and Amanda watches as he negotiates his route with skill, hopping from boulder to boulder down the hill towards them. The route is clearly very familiar to him, obviously a path that he has taken many times.

“Hi Pete’ he says as he approaches. “There’s something that I’d like to discuss with you.”

Then he notices Amanda. “Sorry ... I’m being rude” he says as he turns towards her ... “you haven’t introduced me”. Then he pauses for a moment, while examining her face. “But I know you. You’re the one who helped with my fish.”

Amanda had recognised him as soon as he started speaking. “Pete, this is the fisherman I told you about ... the one I met at the river.”

“What a coincidence” Pete says, surprised. “It seems that you already know each other, except for names.”

Pete then goes through the formalities: “Amanda, this is Andries le Roux, the man who owns this farm... it’s quite surprising that you hadn’t met before. But you have of course... a giant barbel, I believe.”

Then he turns to Andries, “Meet my wife, Amanda.”

They laugh, slightly awkward for a moment, then Andries breaks the tension. “I tell you Pete, your wife was a star. I would never have landed that fish without her. It was a real whopper.”

Then he looks around, “Where’s the dog?”

Jude appears on cue and Andries bends down to pat him on the head. “This one is a real *brak*. First he wakes me up to catch the fish; then he tries to steal it from me.”

The big ‘something’ that he wants to ask Pete about is rift valley fever, a cattle disease that is carried by the blackfly. Pete isn’t a trained vet, something that farmers don’t seem to understand. But he promises to get the contact details of some vets who specialise in this topic.

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The weekly field excursions soon become a source of enjoyment that Amanda looks forward to. Pete's research has entered a phase where he spends most of his time wandering up and down the river, surveying sites in the side channels where the floating blackfly eggs are likely to settle.

After Amanda has fulfilled her duty to measure water quality, she has many hours to herself. She starts doing pencil sketches of small features: rocks perched on top of each other; a clump of reeds; the willows growing on a mid-stream island. Then she tries to paint with acrylics. Her first attempt is a view across the river, with reeds dominating the foreground.

It takes 30 minutes to sketch a rough design. Then she starts on the foreground detail. She spends two hours painting a clump of reeds whose shivery movement is dictated by the water current and the wind. But it is difficult to work at the river, being constantly plagued by blackflies. Today a slight breeze is helping to keep them away, but Amanda imagines that they would be a major problem on hot, windless days.

She steps back to review her effort but is interrupted by a voice behind her.

"That's interesting. So you're an artist as well as a fisherwoman."

She turns around, surprised to see Andries standing right behind her. "Oh, it's you ... I didn't hear you."

"Sorry, I should have warned you. The rapids make quite a noise over here."

Amanda is not in the mood for conversation, but reluctantly puts her brush down. But he is quick to stop her. "Please go on painting. I like watching people paint, but you must tell me to bugger off if you'd prefer to work alone."

She appreciates the straight talk: "It's fine if you watch, but if you start to bother me I will let you know."

"I also promise to avoid a running commentary. I'm an occasional painter so I know how it feels to have an audience."

Andries is a good watcher. He sits on a rock to the side of where she is standing but spends most of his time looking at the river, only occasionally glancing at her painting. Amanda does not notice his quiet departure.

The painting becomes a weekly event and after the third week Andries appears with his own sketch book. He is careful not to stand close to her and takes up a position about 100 metres upstream from her spot. But he wanders over for a chat towards the end of the afternoon.

Amanda, who has been struggling with rendering light effects, is slightly embarrassed by his scrutiny of her work. But she is also longing for advice from another artist.

"As you can see, I'm very much an amateur," she says. "I'd really like some tips on how to deal with light effects on water. Also, how to capture the movement of water."

He looks at her painting for a moment before answering. “Yes, it’s a common problem and there are no easy answers. But I’ve got an art book that will help. I could lend it to you.”

‘Great. That’s just what I need.’”

He sits down on a rock, an action which immediately attracts a swarm of blackfly that gather around him and hover around his head. “Bloody muggies!” he says. “Don’t they drive you nuts when you paint here?”

“They’re a major nuisance. But I really love being at the river and painting is a new challenge for me.”

“I generally rely on photography, but it’s still nice to work at the river sometimes, just to get a feel for the place.”

Before he leaves they arrange for Amanda and Pete to fetch the book from the farmhouse on their way back.

## Chapter 11

It is imperative that Amanda does something about a new project proposal, so for the next week she resists the temptation to paint.

She manages to get hold of Prof Lewis, who advises two things: first a letter explaining the situation and, second, a request for an extension of her project, while also informing the NRF of her intention to submit a revised proposal. This should at least buy her some time, but she will have to follow up with a credible new proposal, and a new literature review.

The first part is not too difficult. She compiles the letter one morning and sends it to the Prof for his approval. The second task is a bad dream. She is trying to stay afloat in a rapidly-setting viscous liquid. If she stops swimming the substance will solidify around her. She’ll be trapped forever.

She may be able to fool her lecturers for awhile, but not Pete. The conversation usually starts in the evening, while they sit outside having sundowners. It follows the same pattern each day.

“Any new ideas about your project?” Pete would ask, attempting to sound casual.

“I’ve been reading around the subject,” she would say, attempting to sound earnest.

Then she would launch into a lame description of the reading she had been doing and how this could relate to a new project.

Pete isn’t fooled. “That sounds like the same tired idea you had yesterday,” he’d say. ‘Can’t you think of something new?’”

Amanda would then hit back: “It’s not so easy to think of something new. Most things have already been studied, as I’ve discovered before.”

The fight that invariably follows is also predictable: Pete accuses her of being lazy and unmotivated; Amanda accuses him of being pompous, self-righteous and lacking in empathy.

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There is a temporary respite after Prof Lewis phones a week later. A short extension has been granted, but he warns that the project proposal must be completed within the next month.

Then it starts up again, Amanda's lethargy versus Pete's nagging. After a week she begs him to give her a break, to let her just paint for awhile, it will help to clear her head, let some new ideas in.

He can see the sense in what she is saying and agrees to let up.

Inspiration strikes a day later. But this isn't about high-minded research; it's more about finding a clever way out. Strangely enough, it starts with painting.

Amanda has been painting all afternoon in the back garden – just fooling around, trying out new techniques. But the sun has already set and it's getting too dark, so she packs away her equipment and starts making her way back towards the house. As she reaches the kitchen door she notices some large ants crawling around in a patch of grass that has been illuminated by a beam of light coming from the window. They look like balbyters but she immediately sees that they're different. In any case, she knows that balbyters are not active at night so this has to be a different species. Nevertheless, they are likely to bite, so she goes to the lab to fetch a killing bottle and catches one.

Later that evening she identifies it as the spotted sugar ant, *Camponotus maculatus*. Its distribution, behaviour and general biology is very similar to that of *C. fulvopilosus*.

The possibilities are obvious: a study of this species would be easy. But she doesn't immediately mention this to Pete.

The next day she gets onto the internet and does an advanced search on the Wits library search engine. The results are promising. There are quite a few studies on *C. maculatus* but none on its nest structure. And should such a study exist, it is extremely unlikely that anyone would have attempted to compare the nest structure of this species to that of its congeneric, *C. fulvopilosus*.

This is the easy way out that she's been looking for. *C. maculatus* occurs in the Warrenton area, so she'll just have to find a nest and repeat the process that she did before. Then compare structures. If she downgrades from PhD to MSc she won't have to delve any deeper – no need to study the social structure within the colony.

When she tells Pete he tries to be encouraging although he doesn't really approve of downgrading to an MSc. "You have so much potential. Why not take it a bit further?"

"Pete, you don't understand. I've lost interest in this subject. I'm doing this to save face and keep some funds rolling in."

“I’ve never known you to be so cynical. You were once really keen.”

“Yes, and look where that led. Anyway, please don’t push me. Realise that it’s either an MSc or nothing. I don’t have the energy for a PhD.”

Pete knows that he should back off, but doesn’t give up completely. “OK. I can see that. But you can always upgrade if you find a more interesting aspect to study.”

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Amanda is now galvanised into action. Her motivation has less to do with a great love of her research and more to do with getting a pesky but necessary task out of the way. She finds a Johannesburg supplier of the orthodontic fluid that was used in the experiments of the hateful van Vuuren from Namibia. Then she realises that she again needs to borrow that drill from the Wits Geology Department.

Janet’s secretary arranges a door-to-door courier to deliver the parcel before 09h00 on a Wednesday morning, while Pete is out on a short field trip. By 9h30 she is becoming nervous, unable to concentrate on anything other than the doorbell. It is not only the drill that she’s waiting for; there’s something else in the parcel that fuels her anxiety.

Half past ten, and there is still no sign of the courier. She starts to wonder if the delivery man is lost, remembering the lack of a street number on their front gate, or front door.

She goes outside and walks up and down the street. But what if they arrive while she’s out? They’ll miss her, go back to Kimberley. She turns back and sees a small van parked outside her front gate.

A wave of relief sweeps over her, but as she draws closer she sees that the van is unlikely to belong to any kind of courier company. When she peers in through the canopy window she notices that the back section is packed to the roof with pockets of potatoes and onions. A bloody farmer has parked his bakkie in front of their house.

By 12h30 she is starting to despair. Pete is due home any minute and the damn parcel hasn’t arrived. Then a knock at the door; a short man standing on the front veranda, holding out a parcel. “Does Ms” .... he pauses to peer down at the label. “A-man-da de Bruyn live here?”

Amanda resists the urge to snatch the parcel from his outstretched hand: she signs the forms, and takes the parcel. Then closes the door and rushes to the study to look for scissors.

It’s all there: the drill, the orthodontic fluid, the sewing box. And the diamond; still hidden inside the lining. She turns it over in the palm of her hand and examines it from different angles, and at different light intensities. It’s like meeting up with a long-lost friend.

Her mother was right. A sewing box is really a stupid place to hide a diamond, especially since she had just slipped it into a hole in the lining, hadn’t even bothered to sew it up again. She must hide it right away; there’ll be enough time before Pete gets back.

She has already assembled all the necessary equipment, which she now fetches from the study. First, a small strong box, the kind that entomologists use to send specimens to various experts. She lines the bottom with cotton wool, places the stone inside and fills up the remaining space with more cotton wool. After placing a tight-fitting lid on the top, she seals the whole thing with brown paper, parcel tape and string. Then she fetches some *PresStick* from the desk drawer and carries this, together with the wrapped box, to the garage outside.

Because the garage doesn't have a ceiling, there is a gap between the wall and the sloping roof. She climbs up a step ladder and feels along the top of the wall to select a suitable spot. Then she pushes the *PresStick* down, places the box on top and pushes the box down again.

She climbs down, to check what it looks like. It is perfect: the outer edge of the box is about 30 centimetres from the edge of the wall and cannot be seen from below.

## Chapter 12

They are both completely absorbed in their work for the next few weeks. Pete is writing a paper on the egg laying habits of *Siumulium chutteri*, which he will present at the Annual Symposium of Entomology in Cape Town in September.

Amanda is merely trying to cover her butt. She must make some progress, otherwise she'll jeopardise her NRF funding. First she must find a *C. maculatus* ant nest, a task that turns out to be ridiculously easy. One evening she goes outside with a torch, finds the ants that she's looking for, and follows them. Fortunately the nest is on their side of the fence, so they won't have any difficulties with the neighbours.

This time round everything is a breeze: injecting the orthodontic fluid, digging out the nest; even the tedious task of drilling away the soil to expose the nest. Fortunately the nest of the spotted sugar ant is much smaller than that of the balbyter, which translates into less work.

The progress report is ready in a month and she sends it to Prof Lewis. The literature survey is a bit sparse, but she's done enough to keep them all at bay: Prof Lewis, the Dean of Science, and the NRF funders.

But Pete isn't impressed. "You've done the bare minimum ... just enough to cover your butt."

"I had to send in something. Otherwise they'll cut funding."

"You're exaggerating. You could have easily spent another week on it. Nobody's going to be impressed with this half-baked effort," he says, waving the report around.

Amanda snatches it back. "You're such a pain. First you badger me for two weeks. Then when I do what you want, you're still not satisfied."

"You should at least check for mistakes. I've already picked up a few."

"Too late. I emailed it today."

“You could send an urgent message. Ask them to wait for the next copy, to follow in a few days.”

She doesn't bother to answer.

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It is their first visit back to the field in four weeks and it feels like a truce. Amanda is relaxed and happy at the river, first doing the routine measurements for Pete, then painting.

This time they have brought Gerrie along to help. Pete has to set up traps to collect drifting eggs and larvae. The apparatus is heavy and awkward and it takes them 30 minutes to lug the equipment down the hill. Then they set off upriver, looking for suitable sites.

Amanda is free to paint for the whole afternoon. Her focus is on water and she tries out a number of exercises from the book that Andries lent her: how to capture light, reflections, movement; how to use colour to create the impression of depth.

She is half hoping that she will see him this afternoon and is pleased when Jude barks, then bounds up the hill, wagging his tail.

Andries appears a minute later, making his way towards her over the large river cobbles, apparently eager to greet her.

“Hi... Good to see you” he says, but he slips on one of the cobbles so that he is forced to lean forward, as if to give her a hug. He regains his balance, but it is an embarrassing moment and he pats Jude to cover up. As he bends over the dog, she notices that his close-cropped curly reddish hair is shot through with grey. Yet he is youthful. Tripping over the cobbles as he approached her was in sharp contrast to the nimble lithe way in which he usually moves across the rocks.

Jude demands their attention, yet again. He has noticed something in the river and takes off, barking and splashing. A huge leguaan has emerged from the water and crawled onto a midstream spit of land. Its large scaly tail thrashes violently from side to side as it splashes through the shallows, then dives into a channel on the far side of the river. Jude is in pursuit and there is a lot of barking, splashing and growling. But the leguaan escapes.

Jude runs back a minute later. He has something in his mouth, which Amanda removes: a baby bird, black with smooth wet feathers.

Amanda holds it out to Andries. “Do you know what this is?”

He places his hand under hers and examines the bird, turning her hand from side to side. Then takes the bird from her. It is obviously dead.

“It's a cormorant. The leguaan regularly catches the chicks from that nest in the middle of the river,” he says, pointing towards the spit of land.

“It seems so cruel,” she says. “But we all know what this is about: predation; survival of the fittest, ecosystem dynamics.”

“So you’re also an ecologist, like Pete?” he responds.

“Actually, at the moment I don’t feel like much of an ecologist,” she says.

“Why? Pete said that you were doing your PhD. On balbyter ants.”

“I was, but my project has come crashing down.”

She explains the whole saga to him and ends by saying that she is now more interested in painting, that painting has always been her passion.

“Something similar happened to me, years ago. But in a different way.”

“How so?”

“At school I was quite good at art and applied to do Fine Art at the University of Free State.”

“I can guess what happened next. Someone persuaded you to do agriculture instead.”

“Something like that, but not agriculture. I did a BSc in geology and chemistry.”

“So how did you get to be a farmer?”

“It was partly because my Dad bought this farm, after taking early retirement. When he died he left the farm to me. But it’s actually a bit more complicated than that ... a long story that would bore you to tears.”

“But it seems that you’ve kept up with your art anyway ... which reminds me. Thanks for the book. I’ve been practising some of their techniques” she says, gesturing towards the book that’s lying on top of her rucksack.

His eyes turn to the sheet of paper that she has set up on her easel. “I see you’ve been practising. Light effects on the river?”

“You guessed it. But I’m still struggling. I’d like to see how you deal with these problems.”

“You must come up to the house and I’ll show you some of the stuff I’ve done. I’m not an expert... it’s just that I’ve been trying to paint this river for years.”

“Can I come next week? I’ll return your book at the same time. If you don’t mind, I’d like to keep it for another week.”

“OK ... next week then,” he says, then stops to look at his watch. “I’d better be going, I had wanted to talk to Pete, but I guess it’ll have to wait.”

He starts walking up the path, but pauses when he sees Pete and Gerrie coming down the path towards him. “Hi Pete, I wanted to ask you ...” But he stops mid-sentence when he sees Gerrie.

“Gerrie?” he asks as he takes his eyes off Pete. “*Hoe gaan dit, my broer? Ons het lanklaas gepraat. Ek het nie verwag om jou hier te sien.*”

“*Ja. Dit gaan goed. Ek het dit ook nie verwag nie.*” Gerrie responds, then looks away abruptly.

There is an awkward moment. Then Andries turns back towards Pete.

“I just wanted to ask if you know of any other experts on Rift Valley Fever. I didn’t manage to get hold of those vets that you mentioned.”

“Oh shit! I was supposed to get back to you. Sorry. I forgot. I’ve been so busy.”

While Pete and Andries continue their discussion, Gerrie sits quietly, staring into the distance. But every few seconds he glances at Andries, then quickly looks away.

When Pete and Amanda start moving back towards their bakkie, Andries walks over to where Gerrie is sitting. “*Dis lekker om jou weer te sien. Hoe gaan dit met die ou mense?*”

Amanda and Pete continue up the hill and Gerrie catches up a few minutes later.

### Chapter 13

The first thing that she learns from Andries’s art book is ridiculously obvious: painting water movement is very difficult, since the water and the light constantly change. The easiest option is to take photographs, to freeze the picture, and then use the photograph as a model. So the next time she visits the river she brings her camera along.

As soon as they reach the site Pete and Gerrie start dragging the drift sampler upstream. The damn thing is heavy; it has to be heavy, otherwise it would topple over in the water. Designed like a paddle wheel, it can only operate in fast currents. As the wheel moves upwards, water collects in small cups attached to each paddle. When the wheel changes direction the cups spill their contents through a filter net, thus trapping a myriad of small organisms that normally drift downstream in rivers.

Today Pete will do four half-hour samples at four different sites, which translates into a long afternoon.

As Pete and Gerrie set off upriver, Amanda moves in the opposite direction, to the spot just above the rapids where she usually likes to paint. She starts with some general photographs of the river site — the quiet upstream reach, the rapids, the waterfall, and the pool below the waterfall.

Then she takes more specific shots of smaller areas. Her painting isn’t going to be ambitious; she just wants to try out techniques. She will concentrate on a small part of the river with a striking foreground feature: a bird, or a plant growing in the water.

She tries some close-up shots, almost at water-level. For this she has to lie on her stomach with the camera balanced on a low rock in front of her. Then she decides to try a shot from a higher angle. She gets up and is looking around for some bigger rocks to balance the camera on when she sees Andries walking towards her.

“So you’re now into photography,” he says as he draws closer.

“Hi! Good to see you. I want to know what you think of my latest plan.”

“I can see what this is about. You’re trying to capture movement and light.”

“I got the idea from your book — using photographs to freeze the light effects.”

He is now standing quite close and puts his arm across her shoulders as he leans down to take a look at her camera.

“Have you brought any of your work along... I mean the painting?”

“No. At the moment I’m concentrating on photographs. The book recommends ...”

“I know. I’ve done it myself. It’s a good idea. Last year I did a painting of a heron at the water’s edge. I used two different photographs — of the heron and the river. It worked quite well.”

“I’d like to see what you did — also look at the original photos if possible.”

“Why don’t you come up later on, after I’ve spoken to Pete.”

“I don’t think you’ll manage that today. He and Gerrie are doing a huge amount of sampling up river. I don’t expect them back before five.”

“In that case, I have a suggestion. You can finish up with your photographs, while I take a walk – I need to check a water pump downstream. Then, once you’re done, you can come up to the house for tea and I’ll show you some of the work that I’ve done.”

Andries disappears, but is back within ten minutes.

“Don’t worry about me,” he says. “I enjoy just sitting here, watching the water.”

“I won’t be much longer ... just a few more shots.”

When she’s finished she walks over and sits down beside him. They are quiet for a few moments, listening to the roar of the waterfall.

Andries is the first to speak. “You see that water churning at the bottom of the waterfall?” he asks, pointing to the spot. “It has something special that not many people know about.”

“What?”

“Before I go on I must just say that this doesn’t apply to all waterfalls, only those in this area, or in places like this area.”

“There’s a dead body down there?”

“No ... not a body, but diamonds. They tend to concentrate at the base of waterfalls. As you can imagine, they’re a bit difficult to get hold of.”

“Why would they be under the waterfall?”

“Diamonds are heavier than most river pebbles, so they sink lower into the gravels, while the lighter pebbles are easily washed out by the strong currents. Problem is that it’s dangerous to dive under a waterfall. You get into a whirlpool that pulls you down. People have drowned trying to get to such diamonds.”

“Have you ever tried?”

“Actually I have, but I’ll never do it again.”

“Did you get anything?”

“Believe it or not, I did. But it wasn’t very valuable. It’s a long story, I’ll tell you about it sometime if you’re interested.”

“You can tell me later, after I’ve seen your paintings.”

Amanda is not really surprised to find that the house is empty. Annette and the children have gone to Wednesday-afternoon-Mom’s tennis, a weekly event that includes the services of a nanny.

Andries leads Amanda through the house, out the kitchen door and across a farm-style backyard. They walk past a wire-mesh chicken run and an orchard full of peach and apricot trees, towards a large building situated some way from the house. The rough stone exterior and huge double-door entrance suggest that this was once a barn, a surmise that Andries confirms.

“It was used mainly for sheep-shearing,” he says as he leads her towards the building. “We once had a flock of merinos, but my Dad also used the barn as a milking shed.”

They enter through the massive double doors, into a high-roofed room with rough unplastered walls. It still retains a faint smell of animal wastes – dung, stale milk and the oily smell of sheared wool. But this is mixed with the smell of axle grease and diesel. The building is now used for storage of farm equipment, as evidenced by the presence of tractors, ploughs and an assortment of garden tools. The concrete floor slopes downwards towards a channel that runs along the length of the building and then out through a gap in the wall, presumably for the purpose of sloshing out animal waste.

It doesn’t look remotely like an art studio and Amanda wonders if Andries is having her on. But then he leads her towards the far end of the building where a section has been bricked off.

He opens the door and stands back to let her enter first.

She can sense his pride in this room. Unlike the barn, it has a proper ceiling and the walls are plastered. Light streams in from a skylight in the sloping ceiling above and from a large window that looks out onto the river, some 50 metres below. A number of pictures hang on the side walls.

She is quite stunned. It is the most beautiful studio she’s ever seen. She imagines herself sitting here, painting. Andries stands back looking at her, clearly waiting for a comment.

The response that he gets must have pleased him. She turns back towards him, eyes shining, quite overwhelmed. “I have only one word for all of this – Wow!”

She now starts to notice other features that are of great practical value: the high stool and easel set up a little way back from the window, the long bench and two chairs that are placed alongside the large window, and a large storage area for paintings.

The presence of a laptop computer and a filing cabinet at the far end of the large window suggests that this room is more than a studio.

“So why the computer?” she asks.

“The room was originally built as an office. That was my Dad’s arrangement, but I made some alterations — the large window, the skylight. I turned most of the area into my studio, but I also have to do the general farm management, keeping accounts and so on. So I shoved all the boring stuff away, into the corner.”

There is also a bed — a single bed in the far corner of the room, against the wall.

“So you also sleep here?”

“Yes. Sometimes I work very late and it’s more convenient to sleep here than to go back and wake everyone up. There’s also a bathroom of course.”

Amanda looks around the room. “Where?”

He shows her the living area — the kitchenette, which consists of a cupboard containing crockery and cutlery, a kettle, microwave and a small kitchen sink. Also a bathroom with toilet and shower, accessed through another door at the side of the room.

“It must be great to have a place like this,” she says. Then walks back towards the window.

“But the best thing is the view,” she says as she gazes out, looking towards the river.

He comes up behind her, places both arms around her waist and starts to kiss her on the back of her neck.

She is only half surprised. She had expected more preliminaries, at least some kind of pretence about teaching her how to paint. But it is hard to resist him and she finds herself relaxing into his arms. He continues nuzzling her neck and then pulls her around and kisses her on her mouth. It begins gently but escalates into a passionate exploration of tongues and playful lip sucking and biting.

After some time, she pulls away, responding to her guilt-ridden sensible inner voice.

“My God ... what are we doing?”

“Come on... it’s just a kiss,” he says pulling her closer.

“You know it’s more than that. There’s this small matter of us both being married.”

“But there’s no harm in playing around ... just a little.”

She relents, places her arms around his neck and they kiss again. But then she pulls away.

“Sorry, I’m just not ready for this. I’ve never cheated on Pete... I can’t do this.”

“OK. I guess you’re right,” he says.

There is so much tension between them now that it’s difficult to get back to a normal conversation, but Amanda tries. “Are we going to go back to where we were? The art lesson”

“Forget that ... lets just relax a bit. How about a cup of coffee?” he asks.

He puts on the kettle and the tension between them starts to subside. They’re quiet for a few moments while Andries makes coffee and she sits at one of the chairs at the window. She is thinking of his story about the diamond and deciding whether or not to ask him.

He walks across the room carrying a tray which he places on the desk. “Help yourself,” he says.

She picks up a cup of coffee, adds sugar and takes a sip.

“Thanks, I was dying for some coffee.”

She pauses for a moment, then brings up the question that she’s been thinking about. “I was wondering about the diamond that you found in the river. Are you ready to tell me about it?”

Andries looks at her for a moment, as if overcoming some inner reticence. Then it seems like he’s come to some kind of decision and he starts talking.

“It was an unusual event. Strangely enough it was to do with the blackfly. The scientists advised a complete river shut down every Sunday ... to control the population.”

“Oh yes. I’ve heard of that,” she says. “Pete told me about it. They shut down the flow at the Vaal Hartz Diversion Weir. It worked quite well, caused a drastic decline in blackfly. But there were some problems, to do with the impact on fish.”

“Yes. They only did it for a few weeks. But it was pretty exciting for me and some friends. It was some time ago, I must have been about 18 years old ... it was in the September varsity vac. We had heard the story about diamonds and waterfalls and had always wondered if it was just a myth. This was a unique opportunity to find out.”

“So you just walked in and scooped up some gravel?”

“Not exactly. There was still some flow in the river, but it was really low, the lowest I’ve ever seen. And the water in the pool was very clear. We decided to use snorkels and goggles. We swam right up to the waterfall but then realised that the snorkels were absolutely useless. So we ended up just swimming and using shallow plastic bowls to scoop up the gravel. We went in a number of times and brought quite a lot of gravel to the side of the river. Then we sorted it in the usual way — passing the gravel through a sieve and then spreading the stones out over a flat surface.”

“Did you find a diamond?”

“Not just one – we got six. But only one of them was big enough to be of any value.”

“The big question is ... did you manage to flog it?”

Andries pauses, looks at her for a moment ... clearly struggling with an inner decision. “I’d rather not talk about that right now,” he says. “But I can show you some of the small diamonds that we found. They’re right here in this room.”

He moves to a cupboard against the wall and pulls out some screw-topped jars of paint. Then selects one of them and opens it up.

Even though the outer jar is smudged with paint, the inner section is hollow and contains a small box, which Andries now removes. Amanda’s first thought is to weigh up the pros and cons of this hiding place versus her own. But she is excited and curious about his stones, dying to see what he’s got.

He opens the box and spills its contents onto the top of the desk. Amanda takes a look and immediately realises that they really are quite insignificant, probably not worth much.

She spends some time looking and they talk about diamonds and IDB. Even though the diamonds aren't worth much, he wants to keep them. She is longing to find out more about the diamond that he had probably sold, but decides that this isn't a good time to ask.

Then she glances down at her watch and quickly stands up. "Hey. Its half past four. I must get going. Pete will be back soon."

Andries is also worried about the time. He stands up and walks with her. "I must also go," he says.

Amanda guesses that Annette may soon be back from her tennis and they both hurry out. Andries walks with her for part of the way down the hill, then turns back.

When she reaches the river, she is relieved to see that Pete hasn't yet returned. She packs up her belongings and waits for him and Gerrie.

## Chapter 14

Amanda is distracted and moody. She can't think of anything but the diamond, and how she's going to handle her next meeting with Andries.

She can't even remember when she and Pete last had sex ... probably about a month ago. She hasn't even missed it. Now she feels like a 15-year-old about to go out on a first date. What will she say to Andries when they meet next Wednesday? She also frets about all the things that could go wrong. What if Annette decides to skip tennis, or if Pete abandons the drift sampling? Worst of all, what if it rains? That would be a double whammy – no tennis for Annette, a shorter sampling session for Pete.

Her thoughts of Andries are also tied up with the diamond. He had hinted that he'd sold one of his diamonds, the one that had some value. In spite of what her mother had told her, Amanda wants to sell her diamond. It will break her dependency on Pete, buy her some financial security. She's unlikely to ever meet anyone else who knows how to fence an uncut diamond, so this is a unique opportunity.

She comes up with a risqué idea and spends hours fantasising about it, wondering if it will work. If she tries to carry it out, will Andries think she's a complete slut? It would be humiliating if he's turned off, if he refuses to play along? She vacillates for a week, then on Tuesday night comes to a kind of decision. The plan will depend on the weather report: if it rains, then she'll abandon the whole idea.

In spite of everything, she is unusually interested in the E-news weather report on Tuesday night and is excited when she gets the news that she had hoped for: the chances of rain over the north western Cape are somewhere around zero.

They set out at noon the next day and stop to pick up Gerrie. She has brought along her equipment and she tells Pete that Andries will be giving her an art lesson at his studio. Pete doesn't think anything of this and drops her off at the turnoff to the farmhouse. She walks off carrying her equipment, trying to look confident. What if Annette's tennis is cancelled, what if she answers the door?

As she walks down the driveway she reaches into her bra, to the place where she's hidden the diamond. It's still there, tucked away in the bottom corner of the left cup, with the weight of her breast keeping it in place.

She walks along the driveway past an avenue of jacaranda trees, then takes a stone-paved garden path to the front door. There's no response to her knock so she waits for a minute then knocks again, but there is still no answer.

Then she knocks loudly and calls: "Hellooo. Is anyone at home?"

Nothing. It's like a slap in the face. He knew she was coming, they had made an arrangement. She is disappointed, depressed and feels foolish. Imagine putting a diamond in her bra ... how embarrassing. He must have realised that things between them were getting out of hand, and decided to stop.

She turns to go back, but as she reaches the end of the driveway she realises that she's being oversensitive. Maybe he's expecting her to go straight to the studio. It would be stupid to just go back to the river. But she resolves that if they meet she won't go on with her wild plan. She will be cool and businesslike, serious about the art lesson.

She walks back towards the house and then branches off along a dirt track that is obviously used by tractors. It skirts around the side of the house and as she walks through the orchard she sees that the barn doors are ajar. So she walks in, past the tractors to his studio.

There is no reply to her knock. The door is unlocked so she goes in and looks around, then decides to leave.

She is halfway through the barn when she hears a car outside, pulling up with speed and screeching to a halt. A car door slams, then footsteps, coming towards the barn.

Andries appears a minute later. "Hi. I'm so glad you're here," he says, breathless and flustered. "I'm so sorry ... I was caught up in a farmer's meeting. Then had to go and get petrol. The bakkie was almost out."

He walks up to her, embraces her, then steps back, holding her at arm's length, examining her face. Then he notices the art box that she's carrying, and the flat file containing large fine-art papers for water-based acrylics.

She is overwhelmed by his welcome, and for a minute is at a loss for words.

"There was nobody at the house. So I came here. I was on my way out."

"Anyway, you're here, so lets get started" he says as he takes her arm and guides her back to the studio.

This time he is more serious. “Why don’t you unpack some of your stuff and we can take a look at your work.”

She places her art box on the bench near the window. Then removes the anorak that she is wearing.

“I was wondering if you’d take a look at the paintings that I did at the river,” she says as she unpacks a number of small acrylic paintings that she’s completed. She spreads them out on the bench.

“Here’s one of the fast-flowing water, above the rapids,” she says, pointing. “And the waterfall, the pool.”

Andries examines each painting closely. “You’re not doing too badly,” he says. “But you need to practise more.”

They spend the next hour looking at the work that Andries has done and going through exercises in the art book. Then they examine Amanda’s photographs and practise techniques on how to capture these images on paper – ripple effects, light spots, reflections.

They stop for a break and sit together on the bed, sipping tea. Then he puts his cup down, takes her cup away from her and draws her into a tight embrace. She puts both arms around his neck and they kiss.

It escalates rapidly. He kisses the side of her neck, and then starts to unbutton her blouse.

She stops him for a moment. “Hang on a second,” she says pulling away. But this time it is clear that she has no intention of stopping.

“I’ve got a proposition for you, one that you’ll enjoy,” she says as she kisses his neck, then nibbles his ear lobe.

He is clearly amused. “I’m intrigued.”

“It’s a treasure hunt.”

He stops to look at her, surprised. “Interesting.”

“I have a really valuable treasure. It is hidden somewhere on my body. You must find it.”

He examines her face, amused, enjoying himself. “Quite a challenge ... I wonder what kind of treasure this could be?” She is now lying on the bed and his eyes dart up and down the length of her body. Then he pulls her blouse up and looks at her stomach.

“The question is, where should I start? Maybe here, right in the middle?” he says as he bends over and licks her navel. Then looks up, as if needing confirmation.

“How about starting at the top and working your way down?” she says.

The next few minutes are a roller coaster ride and it doesn’t take him long to locate the diamond. He is so overwhelmed by its size and beauty that he forgets Amanda for an unbearable amount of time, probably as much as a minute. He holds the stone up to the light and turns it around, examining it from every angle.

“My God! Where did you get this?”

She is breathless with excitement, her clothes are awry and she's ready to explode. "Just put it down somewhere, in a safe place," she says, trying to keep the note of desperation out of her voice.

Andries turns to look at her, as if surprised by her presence. Then he walks across the room and places the diamond in his desk drawer.

Returning to Amanda, now with a box of condoms in his hand, he says, "Should we continue from where we left off?"

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After things have calmed down, after they've both taken a shower, they sit at the window bench and spend some time examining the diamond, discussing its possible value.

Amanda tells him of her mother's assessment and he concurs. He once worked for de Beers in Kimberley so he knows a lot about the valuation of diamonds, is actually more expert than Janet in this respect. But, like her mother, he says that he'll have to first examine it properly.

"I don't really need to test its authenticity," he says. "I can already see that from its brilliance and texture. But let's check anyway, just for fun. I've still got the hardness kit from my undergrad geology course."

He rummages around in a cupboard under the bench and comes up with a box that contains the complete set of stones used to test the hardness of minerals, graded from 1-10. From graphite (with a hardness of 1) through to quartz (at 7), on to corundum (at 9) and a small cut diamond, at 10. The stones are laid out in order, with the hardness number under each one.

Andries selects the corundum and places it in the bright light close to the window, then wipes it clean with a damp cloth so that he can see any existing scratches.

Amanda knows about this test and is eager to do it herself. So after the initial check she takes her diamond from him, turns it around to find the sharpest point, then scratches it hard across the corundum. They both look down at the stone, then Andries wipes it again with the cloth and they look again. As expected, there is a new clean sharp scratch across the top surface.

Neither of them is surprised, but Amanda can't contain her excitement. "I knew it!" she shouts. Then sits down, remembering the important questions she has for Andries.

"Do you know anyone who I could sell this to?" she asks.

He doesn't reply immediately. Just looks at her, sardonic, serious. "You've told me already that you know about IDB. But have you any idea of the consequences?"

"I do know. My mother warned me. But I really need the money. How risky is it? Is it worth trying? You already know something about this, so I thought you could give me some advice. I'd also like to know what you think it is worth."

He doesn't answer at first. Just looks at her intently for a long time. When he starts to speak his voice is low and serious. "All I can say is that it IS dangerous. But the biggest danger is from the dealers, not so much the cops. Although I wouldn't like to tangle with them either, and I'm not too keen on spending time in jail."

"I know. I'm also nervous. But you've done this before ... you didn't end up in jail."

He looks troubled, clearly remembering something that still bothers him. "Yes, I have done it before. But I swore I'd never do it again."

"So you think I shouldn't go there?"

"The sensible answer is that you shouldn't even think about it." Then he looks at the diamond again. "But it seems such a waste ... such a beautiful stone, hidden away in a box somewhere. So much money doing nothing. I can understand why you're tempted."

His response is so different to that of her mother, or from the imagined response that she'd certainly get from Pete. For the first time she has found someone who understands how she feels about this. She gets up and walks over to stand behind him, puts her arms around his neck and gives him a hug from behind, rubbing her face against his neck and cheek.

"Thanks for that, Andries. I'm so glad that you understand."

He pulls her face down over him and kisses her gently. Then swings his chair around and pulls her onto his lap.

"I have a suggestion: first I'll do a decent evaluation. I already have the necessary information on how to do this, but will need to borrow some equipment."

"I know ... a fluorescent light. My mother told me."

"Yes. I have a friend in Jan Kempdorp who has one. He often comes to Warrenton. I'll try to get hold of him."

"So what next?"

"Give me a week. First I'll value the stone; then we can think of what to do."

Amanda is reluctant to leave her stone behind, but realises that it's the only sensible option.

## Chapter 15

Amanda imagines that the word GUILTY is written right across her forehead, but Pete doesn't notice a thing. Nor is he upset about her plan to continue having art lessons with Andries every week. The photography provides a good cover for her: the blackflies make it impossible to paint at the river, so she will work from her photographs, at home and in his studio.

Pete's concern about her project has also subsided, especially after she received a positive comment from Prof Lewis about her progress report. The requirements for originality in a Masters degree are not as onerous as they are for a PhD, so being trumped isn't such an issue.

She can use the results of her previous research as long as she acknowledges van Vuuren. And comparing the ant nest structure of the two species won't present a problem.

But the downgrading to an MSc hurts. Although she will still receive a grant, it has been reduced by 60% — from R100 000 to a miserable R40 000. It is insulting, humiliating. It also bothers Pete although he tries not to show it.

On their way home they take a detour to the *Warrenvale Supermarket & Restaurant* in 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. It is late and they are both tired, but a restaurant meal is out of the question. Pete heads for the grocery section, while Amanda buys some toiletries and they meet at the checkout. She unloads the trolley and he keeps a close check on each item as the cashier swipes it through the system.

When she gets to the shampoo he calls for a halt. "How much is that?" he asks.

"R69.95."

"Sorry, it's just too expensive" he says, as he picks up the plastic bottle to read the label out loud: *John Frieda Sheer Blonde Shampoo*. His eyes then move down to the small print at the bottom: *Moisturising. For lighter blondes*.

He looks up towards the cashier, who stares back at him, infinitely cynical, barely concealing her impatience. "Sorry, but I'll have to change this. I won't be long," he says as he rushes back down the nearest aisle.

He returns a minute later, carrying a larger bottle of shampoo. Before handing it to the cashier he reads out the label, for Amanda's benefit: "Johnson's Shampoo. *For all types of hair* R28.45."

Amanda storms out the shop, heads for the carpark. Pete stays behind, pays with his credit card and picks up the groceries.

"I can't believe you did that," she says as he reaches the car. "It was so humiliating."

"What's so humiliating? I just changed to a shampoo to one we can both use. And a cheaper option."

"You still resent me for not doing a PhD, admit it."

"Stop making such an issue out of this. We've got to adjust, get used to it."

"But you didn't have to make quite such a fuss."

They drive home in silence. As soon as Pete parks the car Amanda picks up her art box and walks towards the house, leaving him to carry the groceries and unload the rest of his equipment. By the time he reaches the house she has already fed Jude and retreated to the bedroom.

It's baked beans and bacon on toast for supper. They finish the meal in silence. Amanda clears the plates and dumps them in the kitchen sink, then takes a shower. By the time Pete gets to bed she is fast asleep, or so it seems.

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Andries phones her on Friday morning. “Hi. Amanda?”

She can hardly hear him, is not really sure whether it is him. “Hello, this is Amanda speaking. Who’s calling?”

The line clears momentarily and he is able to reply. “It’s me, Andries. I need to speak to you. I’ve found someone ....” He sounds stressed, excited. But then the line fails.

Amanda, who has been washing up the breakfast dishes, moves out of the kitchen into the garden, out of earshot of Pete. She phones his number repeatedly without success. After half an hour she gives up.

Just after lunch he calls again. “Can you meet me? I’m here at the river, near the low-water bridge ... where we first met, when I caught the fish.”

This is easy; Jude can be her cover. She goes inside to fetch his leash, puts on her walking shoes and calls out to Pete as she leaves: “I’m just taking Jude for a walk.”

He is so busy at his microscope that he hardly notices, but manages a brief acknowledgement. “OK, enjoy your walk.”

She walks quickly up Uys Street, left along Church Street and downhill towards the river. When she reaches the bottom of the hill, she turns right into a street that is lined with small brick houses on the right, and a number of riverside irrigated plots on the left. She walks along the pavement until she finds the overgrown fisherman’s path that meanders, through dense stands of reeds, down to the river. This is where she usually lets Jude go, but this time she has decided to keep him leashed up. Just in case there’s something wrong.

Jude is straining at the leash, mirroring her own mood. She is tense and excited, anxious about what may happen.

She finds Andries in the same spot where they first met, about four months ago. He is with a coloured man, and as she draws closer she is surprised to see that it is Shadrack.

Jude knows Shadrack, so she lets him go and he takes off, exploring for crabs along the river bank.

“Hi. Shadrack. I didn’t expect to see you here,” she says. Then she turns to Andries. “I didn’t know that you knew each other.”

“Oh, we go back a long way,” Andries says, but Shadrack looks uncomfortable and only manages to mumble a brief “*Dag*,” then looks away towards the river.

There is a moment’s silence, then Andries takes control. “Let’s find a comfortable place to sit,” he says before leading them along a path to a place where the reeds have been cleared. It’s a spot that has obviously been used before for meetings, as evidenced by the number of logs and tree stumps that have been arranged in a circle.

After they have settled down, Andries explains the situation to Amanda. “Shadrack knows someone who can help us.”

“But can we trust him?”

“Yes. Absolutely. Actually, I know him too, but haven’t seen him for a long time. It would be better if Shadrack contacts him first. He will set up a meeting for us.”

Shadrack doesn’t say anything and Andries explains the situation to her. “I just want to know if you’re sure about this. I’ll give you more details, but I wanted you to first meet Shadrack, so you know who we’re dealing with.”

Amanda looks at Shadrack. She doesn’t know him well, but so far her impression has been good. They are all silent for awhile, then she comes to a decision.

“Shadrack. *Ek ken jou ‘n bietjie. Dit lyk vir my dat jy’s iemand wat my nie sal verneuk nie.*”

“*Jy kan my vertrou. Ek en Andries is ou vriende.*”

Andries turns to Shadrack. “*Hoe lank sal dit vat?*”

“*Ek sal vir jou sê.*”

“*Wanneer?*”

“*Maandag.*”

“*Volgende week?*”

“*Ja, ek sal vir jou bel en sê wanneer.*”

After Shadrack has taken his leave Andries turns to Amanda. “Before we go on, we need to get our priorities right,” he says as he wraps his arms around her and starts to kiss her.

She disentangles herself a few minutes later. “Whew! Now you’ve mangled my brain... I can’t think straight. Where were we?”

“We were talking about diamonds, with a bit of action on the side, to keep the conversation interesting.”

She laughs, then leans into his arms. “OK. You’ve got me interested. But now we have to talk.”

“First of all, I must tell you about the diamond. It’s a fabulous stone, about three carats, no flaws. It’s hard to put an exact price on it, but I guess the cut stone would retail for at least two million.”

“Wow! Really?”

“I think so. But when you deal the way we will, you’ll be lucky to get a tenth of the retail value. So we can’t expect anything above R200 000. Maybe even less. We should set our sights on R100 000 if we want to be realistic.”

“So we don’t go below R100 000?”

“Yes.”

Amanda thinks for a moment. Then comes to a decision. “It’s not a lot of money, but it will be enough to get me through this year. I’m desperate; I hate being so dependent on Pete.”

He looks at her searchingly, as if realising something he hadn’t thought of.

“I can understand that. You lost money when the Ph D fell through. That’s pretty lousy,” he says, giving her a quick hug. “It would be great if you got something, just to tide you over till next year.”

She knows now that he understands her; he is someone she can trust. But she also has to ask, “So what about you? You don’t seem to be in any financial difficulties.”

His voice, when he replies, is shaky, as if he’s struggling with some inner emotion that he is trying to hide. “Actually, this isn’t only about money,” he says. “Well, it IS about money, but not about my money. It’s also about paying back a debt, a very old debt.”

There is a brief silence. Then Amanda touches his hand. “You don’t have to tell me, but you must also be sure of what you’re doing.”

They agree to wait until Monday. Andries will send her an SMS as soon as he hears from Shadrack. Then they’ll have two days to think about things before they meet again on Wednesday.

As they part, Amanda thinks of something else. “So what’s the split? Should we say 50/50?”

He looks at her for a moment, smiling. “That’s very generous of you. We should also give this some thought. We must decide by Wednesday.”

## Chapter 16

He doesn’t phone on Monday, but sends an SMS: “No news. Will call tomorrow.”

There isn’t any news on Tuesday, so when Amanda visits the river on Wednesday she half expects Andries to be missing, but goes to check anyway.

She decides to try the front door rather than going straight to the studio, but walks up the path a little hesitantly. Then stops about five metres from the door, wondering whether or not to turn back, but changes her mind again.

There is no reply at first. Then she hears footsteps from somewhere in the recesses of the house, then a pause as someone apparently checks the one-way security ‘eye’ embedded in the door. A minute later she hears someone fiddling with locks and a security chain, after which the door opens.

It is Annette. Her face is guarded, truculent and she doesn’t immediately greet Amanda. Nor does she bother to open the *Trellidor* security gate, so their conversation continues through a diamond-mesh maze of interlinking metal bars.

As if the words are being dragged out of her, Annette finally comes up with a muted greeting: “Oh, it’s you. I didn’t expect to see YOU here.”

Amanda is at a loss for words. What feasible excuse can there be for her visiting?

“I was expecting to see Andries,” she says. “It’s about my ... art bag.”

Then, realising that she's making a hash of things, she takes a deep breath before continuing. "I left some things down at the river last week. Did he say anything about picking up my bag?"

Now she realises, too late, that the bag that she has slung over her shoulder is full of art equipment – paints, sketch book, and some long brushes that are sticking out the top.

There is a long pause while Annette looks at her through narrowed eyes, not saying a word. The silence hangs between them and Amanda is so uncomfortable that she rushes on, breathless. "Never mind, it's not important. Maybe I left it in the car ... I just thought I should check," she says, backing off down the path.

Before she can make her escape, Annette suddenly stops her, as if she's changed her mind about something. "Actually I haven't a clue where Andries is ... haven't seen him since Sunday afternoon. I thought you might know where he is."

"What, me?"

"Yes you. I'm not quite as stupid as you think. I know his habits ... Wednesday afternoons, when I go to tennis. So tell me, where do you think he is?"

"How on Earth should I know? I haven't seen him since last week."

"Well then, maybe you should take yourself back to look for your art bag. Funny that you should miss it so much when you seem to be carrying a spare over your shoulder. Anyway, as you say, it might be in the car."

They are interrupted by a little girl who comes running down the passage holding up a playdough figure that is stuck onto a piece of cardboard.

Annette bends down to take a closer look. Then she turns back to Amanda. "As you can see, I have more important things on my mind. I suggest that you take yourself back to the river, to see if your bag is still there."

She picks up her child and turns away, slamming the door behind her.

Amanda has never had a door slammed in her face before. She stands still for a moment, humiliated, shamed. Then she retraces her steps back along the path to the front end of the garden and walks through an ancient brass gate that is hanging skew on its hinges. She ambles along a farm road that snakes its way between tumbled piles of rocks along the ridge of the hill. When she reaches a fork in the road she takes the left turn and starts to make her way down to the river.

But there's nothing to do at the river. Pete and Gerrie have disappeared upstream and she's not in the mood for painting. She sits on a rock looking across the water, thinking of Andries and Annette.

Annette's behaviour was strange, so fearful and aggressive. She obviously knows what's going on between herself and Andries. But why was she so jumpy? Why had she barricaded

herself into the house? It went beyond jealousy and resentment towards an intrusive presence in her marriage.

She gets bored waiting for Pete and wanders around aimlessly for awhile before making her way back to the bakkie where she finds an old newspaper to read.

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She doesn't hear from Andries for a whole week and her repeated efforts to reach him on his mobile continue to elicit the same response: "*Sorry I'm not available right now. Please leave a message.*" She is torn between worrying about his safety and wondering if he's double crossed her. Maybe he's just taken the diamond and run?

Then on Thursday she receives a call. When *le Roux* comes up on her phone screen she answers immediately. "Hi Andries, Where on earth have you been? I've been so worried."

But it's a woman at the other end of the line. "You've got a nerve, being worried. Have you given any thought to his family?"

"Sorry, but you must have the wrong number. This is Amanda speaking."

"Of course I know that you're Amanda. You're the only person who knows about Andries. Where is he?"

"Is that Annette?" Amanda asks.

There is a pause at the other end of the line. Then an exasperated sigh. "Yes. It's Annette speaking."

"Sorry, but I don't have any idea where Andries is."

"Well in that case, let me ask you a small favour. If that bastard husband of mine phones, tell him to give me a call. It's urgent."

The phone goes dead.

Amanda can only conclude that Andries is in some kind of trouble, and that it probably has something to do with her diamond.

The next day she gets another SMS from Andries: "Set up meeting next Sunday Barkly West. You must be there. Will be back Thursday."

She presumes that "next Sunday" means the weekend after next. Which is very convenient. It's the weekend when Pete will be attending a conference in Cape Town. He will be catching the Friday night train to Cape Town and will be away for six days.

At least things are moving now. But should she tell Annette? She had been so desperate and worried. Is this just about a jealous wife harassing her competition? Or is it more serious — maybe a crisis in the family, perhaps a sick child?

For the next three days she's in a dither of uncertainty and constantly picks up the phone to call Annette and then reconsiders. Sometimes she dials the number and lets it ring a few

times, but then hangs up. On one occasion Annette picks up the phone after one ring and immediately starts talking. “*Andries is dit jy? Asseblief... kom huis toe. Ons MOET praat.*”

Amanda puts the phone down. She is consumed with guilt, but what can she say to Annette?

Then she does something utterly stupid. She takes a walk into town one morning, to a public telephone that she has seen, close to the municipal buildings in the main street. Fortunately it’s an old fashioned type — a closed booth with a door. She pulls a heavy cloth from her pocket, drapes it over the speaker, and phones Annette on her landline.

There is no reply, but an answering machine asks callers to “leave a message”. Amanda growls through the back of her throat: “Andries will be back Thursday”. Then she puts the phone down.

On her way back she realises that her behaviour is nothing short of ridiculous. It’s more likely to raise alarm than bring reassurance. Annette may even contact the police and ask them to trace the call.

## Chapter 17

Andries phones on Thursday morning just after breakfast. Amanda is in the kitchen talking to Pete when she receives the call and immediately recognizes his voice.

She’s adept at handling this situation. “Hello, hello ... sorry, the line is bad. Wait a minute, I’ll move outside.”

After putting some distance between herself and the back door she is ready to continue.

“Hello Andries? I’ve been so worried. You’ve been away for such a long time.”

“I’ll explain everything when I see you. We need to meet. Today. It’s really important.”

They meet at their usual place at 12:30 and Andries fills her in on the latest developments. His contact has found a buyer, but is reluctant to give details over the phone, insists on a face-to-face meeting. Andries feels that it’s important for Amanda to be part of the discussion so he has arranged for both of them to meet with the dealers in Barkly West on Saturday evening. They will spend one night at a guesthouse and return to Warrenton on Sunday.

Pete is busy finalising the presentation that he will give at the conference, so doesn’t notice Amanda’s distracted behaviour during the next two days. He spends the whole of Friday afternoon sorting out the illustrations for his talk and only finishes his *Power Point* presentation ten minutes before his planned departure. There is no time for supper and Amanda helps him with some last-minute packing before driving him to the bus stop.

Although the Johannesburg passenger train to Cape Town passes through Warrenton, it doesn’t stop there. Pete despises the so-called “luxury” buses, but has arranged to catch a

*Greyhound*, which will arrive at the Kimberley station at 9 pm. This will give him enough time to buy himself a snack before catching the 10 pm train to Cape Town.

Even though she had been eager to be rid of Pete for the weekend, Amanda feels a sudden pang of guilt and sadness as he kisses her goodbye before climbing onto the bus. She drives home, parks the bakkie in the back yard, and lets herself in through the kitchen door. She is struggling with keys and trying to control Jude at the same time when her mobile phone starts to ring.

It is Andries. He needs to discuss details of how they are to meet the next day.

Travelling alone with Andries on a Saturday will present some problems. Warrenton is a small town and many people know Andries and his family, so picking Amanda up in the middle of town will not go unnoticed. They also have to consider Jude. If Amanda leaves him in the garden and then walks out the house, he will find a hole in the fence and follow her. Alternatively, if he sees her driving off with Andries, he'll either follow the car or go wandering.

After some discussion they devise a complicated strategy. Amanda will lock Jude in the bathroom with some food, lock up the house, and leave the keys with her next-door neighbour. After half an hour Mrs Oberholzer will let Jude out and leave the keys under the mat at the front door. Amanda's excuse for such strange behaviour is that she's going bird watching for the whole afternoon and the dog will follow and be a nuisance. In case of any problems she also takes Mrs Oberholzer's phone number.

Jude sleeps in a kennel outside so she will leave enough food and water to keep him happy for two days.

The arrangement on how to meet Andries is even more complicated. After repeated SMS messages to each other they settle on a story that ties in with the one that Amanda spun to Mrs Oberholzer.

She puts the plan into action on Saturday morning. First she packs a clutch handbag and a minimal amount of clothing into a small rucksack, which she carries on her back. Then she calls Jude inside and dumps a tin of dog food into his bowl, which she carries to the bathroom. While he's gobbling up his meal, she quietly retreats and shuts the bathroom door behind her. She fetches her rucksack from the bedroom and walks out the house, locking the door behind her. She is wearing jeans, sensible walking shoes and a floppy sun hat. Also a small pair of binoculars, that hangs from her neck.

She makes her way down the hill to Warren Avenue where she turns right to the spot where they normally take the path down to the river. Her timing is perfect. It is now 12:20. Andries should be here any minute. She turns off the road onto a bush path but stops to wait in a quiet place, where she's not easily visible from the road.

Andries is a few minutes late. As soon as she sees him driving slowly along the road, she steps out onto the pavement. He stops immediately and opens the back door so that she can climb in quickly and lie down on the back seat.

They drive through town in silence. Then Andries takes a right turn onto the N12 highway. They drive for a further two kilometres until they have passed the last houses in town. Then she sits up and moves to the front of the car.

“Wow! That was some operation we’ve just pulled off,” Amanda says. She is hyped up, excited, and so turned on that she places her hand on his thigh. He immediately moves it upwards, to hold it tightly against his crotch.

They drive on for a few minutes until Andries can take no more. “My God, you’re turning me on. I’m about to explode,” he says. “We can’t go on like this.”

Amanda quickly removes her hand.

“That’s not what I meant,” he says, but continues driving, scanning the road ahead until he sees an intersection. “This is what I meant,” he says as he slows down to turn off along a farm road.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see. It’s a surprise.”

They drive for two kilometres. Then stop at a spot where a thick clump of bushes is growing close to the road. They get out, lock the car, and Andries leads her along a track that meanders through the bush to a spot that is hidden from view.

When they emerge fifteen minutes later, they are covered in dust and Amanda’s shirt is missing two buttons. Her clothes are crumpled and dishevelled, and when she touches the side of her head she finds a large thorny stick tangled into her hair. She pulls it out and holds it up to show Andries.

“That’s nothing,” he says. “Right now I seem to have a similar piece of wood stuck in my underpants.”

When they reach the car they both dig into their baggage in search of clean clothes. Then quickly change at the side of the road.

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They drive back along the dirt track and rejoin the N12, then travel in silence for a while, as if avoiding any discussion on the reason for this journey. But after turning onto the R374 towards Windsorton, Amanda breaks the silence. “So tell me what happened. Why were you away so long?”

“Believe it or not, I was in Zeerust.”

“What? Why? I thought that Zimbabwe was the place for illegal diamonds.”

“Well yes. But I’m no expert on this sort of thing. My Windsorton contacts persuaded me to go with them to meet this guy in Zeerust who is going to help us.”

“Isn’t there any way to sell it in South Africa?”

“It’s not so easy here. The people who I contacted are from Barkly West and are shit scared of dealing here. The police are watching them, watching for blood diamonds, and they’re on the lookout for people like Gerrie who have diggers licences.”

“But I thought you were just going to value the diamond. Not start selling.”

“Yes, I was. Actually I’m jumping ahead of myself. First I took it to Shadrack’s family, who I know from way back. They have a lot of experience in diamonds and many of them have diggers licences. They had a look and confirmed my valuation – said that it would probably retail for about R2 million as a cut diamond. But that would mean less than R100 000 on the South African black market. I wasn’t happy with that so asked if we could get a better price elsewhere.”

“So you went to Zeerust. Seems crazy to me.”

“I also thought so, but I was persuaded by the others. A lot of diamond dealing happens in Zeerust, on the Botswana border. People go from there across the border into Botswana, then onto other countries, not necessarily in Africa. But we didn’t cross the border. Just spoke to people who organise some trade around there.”

“So what’s happening now?”

“I had to return before the others. They were going to meet someone who can trade. They will fill us in on the latest developments.”

Amanda is silent for a while. She’s not happy with Andries’s account — too many vague aspects and loose ends.

“So who has the diamond now?”

“The guys that we’re meeting in Barkly.”

“What! That’s not okay. How can you trust them?”

“I do trust them. Some trust is necessary, otherwise you’ll never make any deals at all. And they won’t even start to discuss trading if they can’t see the stone. There would be nothing to talk about.”

“But some of those Barkly people are a bit dodgy? I happen to know that guy Leroy and I wouldn’t trust him an inch.”

“Don’t worry. I also know Leroy and I agree with you. But he’s not involved. I have only dealt with Shadrack and his father, Oom Piet.”

“How well do you know them?”

“We go back a long way. I was at school with those kids for a couple of years. In Warrenton. Remember when the Model C schools first started? Oh, you wouldn’t of course ... too young. But I remember it clearly: 1992, when they opened up the formerly-white schools to all races and the coloured kids came to our school. I was in Grade 8, 14 years old. I immediately made friends with Gerrie and Shadrack. They were my closest friends. We had so

much fun together, were inseparable for two years... bloody naughty but not in a horrible way. We used to do crazy things. I remember jumping off that low-water bridge outside Warrenton when the Vaal River was in flood. It was crazy, mad, but such fun. The water was wild and very dangerous, but letting yourself go in that current was really something. We discovered we could do it as long as the water was still just under the bridge. When it rose above the bridge it was too dangerous.”

“Sounds hectic. So you remained friends until matric?”

“No. That was the sad thing. In Grade 9 Leroy appeared at our school. He had a lot of influence on all of us and we began to go wild. The craziness got out of hand. We started smoking a lot of weed, and taking ecstasy. I was caught with some dagga, was almost expelled. My father was furious. Took me out of the school.”

“So where did you go?”

“Grey College in Bloemfontein, as a boarder.”

“That explains your English South African accent.”

“It was part of my Dad’s intention. He wanted to get me as far away as possible from my new friends. He thought of them as *skollies* and reckoned that they’d be less likely to go to English schools. He was a terrible snob.”

## Chapter 18

The journey to Windsorton normally takes about an hour, but their sojourn in the bush has delayed them. They travel westwards through a dry scrubland of flat plains punctuated by low rocky outcrops. It is a harsh environment. The land is dominated by small grey *vaalbossies* interspersed with clumps of grass and patches of bare soil. But far away to the northwest there is a sudden change. Here a massive unbroken ridge of elevated land dominates the horizon and something about its shape arouses Amanda’s curiosity. It is so very flat, so unlike the normal sight of a mountain range.

“Do you know anything about that strange ridge of hills ahead?” she asks Andries. “It’s so uniformly flat – almost like the sea.”

“That’s the Ghaap Plateau, also called the Ghaapse Berg. But if you wait awhile it will look like a real sea; at sunset, when it turns blue-black against the red sky. Some people even call it the Ghaapse See.”

“So it’s some kind of huge geological formation?”

“Yes, quite a significant feature. It’s part of the central elevated landmass of South Africa, but what you’re now seeing is the edge of the Ghaap Plateau. If you reach the top you’ll find yourself in a boring drought-stricken plain that stretches way north, past Kuruman and into the Kalahari. “

They reach Barkly West just before lunch and turn right onto Transvaal Road, apparently the main street in town. They are searching for a right turn into Campbell Street but after a few minutes find themselves driving along Campbell Street. This is at odds with Andries's directions so they stop at *de Kock's Supermarket* to ask the way.

Amanda gets out to stretch her legs and take in the scene. Unlike Windsorton, which has degraded to a sad little hamlet, Barkly West is humming. It appears well-ordered and clean, with wide streets, neat pavements, and very little sign of litter.

Andries emerges after a few minutes, clutching a piece of paper on which the directions have been sketched. "No wonder we were confused. There are no less than THREE Campbell streets in this town. We need to drive back, but it's not far."

They retrace their journey past supermarkets, hardware stores and a plethora of furniture shops, including the usual franchises -- *Lewis Store* and *Ellerines* – and the independents, such as *Ipi Tombi Furnishers*. All single-storey, brown face-brick, with very little window display.

But one local building stands out from the rest and grabs their attention. The "*Cocopan Take Away*" has been painted a glow-in-the-dark yellow and two cerise cocopans decorate the front entrance. Something about the cheekiness of this food outlet prompts them to stop for lunch.

The *One Fountain* guesthouse, at the intersection of *Oos* and *Fontein* streets, is an old-fashioned *klein-dorpie* sort of house that has been smartened up to accommodate guests. It has a rigidly rectangular outline with a recessed front stoep, after the style of South African suburbia in the mid-1950s. The zinc roof is silver and the house a freshly-painted creamy yellow. The obligatory security fence is quite stylish and probably expensive, with a brick base and upright pillars that support a fence of black metal rods, each one ending in a sharp spike.

They park in the street and have to ring a bell at the security gate to get the attention of the owner.

A female voice comes on the line, "Hello. *Dis Marie wat praat.*"

After a brief conversation the gate swings open and they make their way along a paved path to the stoep and ring the doorbell.

Amanda has never done this sort of thing before and is starting to wonder about names and marriage certificates. But such Agatha Christie-era thoughts are quickly banished by the conversation that follows.

First they hear footsteps in the passage. Then a smartly-dressed woman opens the door. She is wearing an outfit that is clearly tailored for a middle-age figure: navy pants and cerise tailored top of a flowing fabric that flares out over the hips, reaching down to her thighs. Her grey hair is elegantly styled and cut to a mid-length, just below the ears.

"*Goeie More. Jy's seker Andries le Roux. Ek's Marie de Wet,*" she says as she reaches out to shake hands.

Andries doesn't have any hangups about the situation. "*Goeie More mevrou. Ja. Ek's Andries en dis Amanda,*" he says touching her shoulder.

Mrs de Wet ushers them to their room at the back of the house. It is clean, crisp and sunny with its own *en suite* bathroom and an outside door that opens onto a small private garden — not bad at R400 for a double room.

They are due to meet Shadrack at four o'clock on the Barkly Bridge. It is within easy walking distance, but they decide to drive, in case Shadrack wants to travel elsewhere and won't be able to give them a lift back. The bridge is an old-fashioned metal girder suspension bridge, supported by hulking great stone pillars built on bedrock.

There is no sign of Shadrack so they take a walk across the bridge and stop halfway to look at the river.

"Did you know that this is the first bridge ever built across the Vaal?" Andries says. "In those days there weren't many steel mills around, so they had to transport the whole upper structure — all the metal — from England.

"What! I can't believe it. How could they move such a huge structure? It would be impossible."

"They did. It was transported in sections from England — first by sea and rail, then ox-wagon. There weren't any proper roads for the last part of the journey."

"That is so hard to believe. When did they build it?"

"I'm not sure of the date. It must have been about 1880 or something."

"I suppose it had something to do with diamonds."

"It had everything to do with diamonds. This is where the first major diamond rush occurred, in 1869, before the Kimberley rush. In those days the town was known as Klipdrift, after this very spot on the river. All hell broke loose. The Cape, Orange Free State and the old Transvaal Republic all laid claim to this little bit of land on the Vaal River. The rightful owners were obviously the Griqua, who had always lived here. They also put in a claim."

"Then a group of wild diggers made things even more complicated. They moved to the other side of the river and called themselves the *Klipdrift Republic*, even elected a leader, one Stafford Parker. The Transvaal then took note that this republic was on *their* side of the river. So in 1870 they sent in some negotiators, including President Pretorius, no less. And his magistrate, an Englishman called Hugh Owen."

"I suppose they got a hot reception from the diggers?"

"You guessed it. Owen was sent across the river to negotiate, armed with some documents and a Transvaal *Vierkleur* flag. I guess it was the flag that did it. They tore down the flag, dumped Owen in a boat, and sent him back across the river."

"So who won in the end?"

“The British, of course — the ones with the least right to the land. They didn’t even have to fire a shot.”

“So they won by devious means?”

“Yes, very British. They set up some sort of commission and awarded the territory to the Griqua, the famous *Keate Award*.”

“Sounds okay.”

“The story doesn’t end there, of course. Part Two was when the British ‘persuaded’ the Griqua to give the territory back to them. Smart, hey?”

Amanda looks at him with admiration. “I didn’t know you were a history boffin. I thought you studied Geology.”

“Actually, in my case the two things go together. I don’t know much about general history, but I’m very interested in mining history, particularly in this area where the Griquas were cheated. But I must admit that the Griquas wouldn’t have had a clue about administering something as complicated as the diamond industry, especially in those days; nor did the Boers, for that matter. The Brits were the only ones who could have handled it.”

They’re quiet for a moment, looking out at the river, then Andries looks at his watch. “I wonder what’s happened to Shadrack. It’s almost half past four.”

He tries his cell, but there’s no reception.

“I’ll go ask at the museum. See if I can use their landline,” he says and turns to walk back along the bridge to the car park.

She remains in the middle of the bridge, leaning on the railings and gazing down at the river. It doesn’t look deep enough to require a boat, so she has some difficulty imagining the luckless Harry Owen’s river crossing. Then she notices a number of people digging along the banks and realises that the situation is probably similar to that in Windsorton, where the diggers have drastically reshaped the flow of the river. In the old days, when they first found the diamonds, this river would have been completely unregulated — no dams, no water abstraction. It would have been a much deeper river, one that required boats for river crossings.

Amanda has a special attachment to the Vaal, somehow feels that it is her river. Her early childhood home, in Melville, Johannesburg, was close to the source of the Klip River and many of her childhood adventures had something to do with the Vaal or its tributaries: holidays to Lake Chrissie, bird watching excursions with her father to the Blesbokspruit near Springs, and canoeing weekends at Vaal Dam. She loves the Vaal’s natural blue-grey colour, so different to the muddy looking Orange River.

Each river has its own signature, distilled from the chemistry of its catchment. Every living organism, every rock, every bit of soil, and every kind of waste, leaves a trace of itself in its river. Even the diamonds in the river gravels originated from somewhere else in the catchment.

People intuitively understand rivers. They know that a river has the power to heal, can detoxify and re-oxygenate, restore and recycle. The river is resilient, seemingly immortal, apparently able to cope with the flood of waste that pours into its tributaries. But the river has its limits and Amanda thinks of the latest threat to her river — the sea of acid mine drainage water that lurks in underground caverns beneath Johannesburg. It was all over the news a few weeks ago: fears that this highly toxic water was rising, that it would spill over into the Vaal. That it would exceed the river's capacity to heal.

The news has already faded from public attention and she feels too powerless to do anything about it. So she turns her attention back to a scene that has been developing on the river bank below, where a group of about six diggers has set up some kind of sorting/sifting apparatus.

When Andries returns she asks him, "Why are there so many small-time diggers? Surely the place is all mined out by now?"

"Well, as they say ... some diamonds arrive by bicycle."

She looks at him, puzzled; then catches on. "OK, I get it. There's a lot of IDB going on and these guys are merely pretending to dig?"

"Barkly West has been a centre for dealing since the early days. But I'm not really sure. I know that the cops are watching the diggers and it's also true that a considerable amount of legitimate diamond buying takes place here. So maybe I'm exaggerating."

"So did you get hold of Shadrack?"

"Yes. He had been trying to contact me, but – as we found out – the reception was bad. He's been held up at work and must still drive back from Windsorton. But he says he'll be here just after five.

"So we've still got about 15 minutes."

They walk back along the bridge and make their way to the small Toll Museum. As the name implies, this was once a building where toll fees were collected from those wanting to use the bridge. It's a square stone building, slightly dilapidated, although restored. The corrugated iron roof, which is propped up on metal pillars, hangs low over the entrance, giving the place a hooded look. The displays inside are mostly about diamonds, diggers, and much of the history that Andries has just spoken of.

The museum closes at five so they move out to wait in the carpark.

"Maybe it's a good thing that he's been delayed," Andries says. "Because we haven't got around to talking about the diamond discussion and how we're going to act generally."

"You said that we didn't want to accept anything below R100 000."

"Yes. I think that should be our position. I also think that your presence is important when we discuss the diamond and prices."

Amanda isn't keen on this. She's never been any good at haggling over prices. But she can see his point. "I appreciate the fact that you don't want me to be sidelined. But I'm actually lousy at business talk, so I'd rather leave most of the talking to you."

"Okay. But you should still be present. And we must act with restraint, make it clear that this is strictly a business deal."

"So what exactly is our story?"

"It's a fairly standard story: you heard that I had some contacts, so approached me about the diamond. You don't want Pete to know because he won't approve, is worried about being caught. The same story applies to Annette."

"So we tell them that this is strictly confidential. Not a word to Annette or Pete. Who's going to tell them?"

"Me, obviously," says Andries. "I know these guys very well so I'll tell them — in detail. You needn't say a word. But you must be ready to give the right answers if they ask."

## Chapter 19

Shadrack arrives at half past five. Andries had expected him to come by taxi, so they're surprised when he pulls into the carpark in a blue Toyota Corolla.

Andries is clearly pleased to see him. He steps forward and performs an extended African handshake followed by a quick hug.

*"Shadrack! Hoe gaan dit?"* then he turns his attention to the car. *"Wanneer het jy dit gekry?"*

*"Hi. Ja, dit was my Ma s'n. Maar ek het wiewe nodig. Ek werk nou by die Rockwell Mine naby Windsorton. Maar bly nog in Barkly, met my vrou en kinders. "*

*"Ek het nie geweet jy was getroud. Met kinders nogal – Hoeveel?"*

*"Ja, twee seuns. Maar ons kuier dikwels by die oumense. Ons huis is nie ver van hulle s'n."*

The carpark is not a good place for the discussion that they need to have, so they decide to move to Shadrack's parent's house.

*"Ek ken nog die pad,"* Andries says, then explains to Amanda. "I visited his family, when Shadrack was a boarder at Warrenton Hoërskool. Came home with him for the odd weekend." But the family have now moved to a bigger house, so Shadrack drives ahead and they follow. They drive back through town, down one of the many Campbell Streets, which turns into Tembisa Street and takes them out to the Mataleng Township. Unlike the situation in most South African towns, the traditionally-black suburb of Barkly West is only a few kilometres from the commercial centre.

It is a slightly down-market part of town, but the house where Shadrack's parents live is considerably smarter than those of their neighbours. The automatic high-security gate that guards the driveway opens smoothly and they drive into a well-kept neat garden.

Almost half the garden is given over to a brick-paved parking area and Andries manoeuvres his Pajero next to a 4x4 off-road Toyota Landcruiser. Shadrack gets out of his car and leads them up a paved pathway towards the house.

It's a modern face-brick, flat-roofed home, with an elaborate set of security barriers. First they negotiate their way through a heavy-duty Trellidor gate that blocks their way to a veranda that is enclosed in a cage-like metal structure. A second security door guards the front door. Shadrack, who is armed with two remotes and a large bunch of keys, lets them in but it's not yet over. As soon as the front door is breached, a high-pitched signal warns that the alarm is about to go off. Shadrack punches a four-digit code onto a small keypad next to the door, and only then does he relax.

He ushers them into a lounge that is stuffed with furniture: a huge 10-seater black leather couch wraps its way around a corner of the room, occupying the space opposite an enormous flat-screen TV. They have to negotiate their way through a small gap between two other large upholstered chairs and the middle of the room is occupied by an enormous coffee table.

"Sit. Relax." Shadrack orders, then waits until they are seated before he takes his seat. But he's still restless, and quickly stands up again.

*"Wil julle iets hê om te drink? Tee, koffie, bier, coke, brandewyn?"*

*"Brandewyn en coke,"* Andries replies and Amanda asks for a beer.

While Shadrack disappears into the kitchen, Andries passes a hushed comment to Amanda. "I'm amazed. They obviously have a lot more money than I imagined."

When Shadrack returns Andries voices his opinion more politely. *"Dis 'n mooi plek hierdie ... die huis, tuin, en baie lekker TV,"* he says, looking around with obvious appreciation.

Shadrack looks pleased but shy, and tries to play down the comment. *"Ja, my Pa het hard gewerk. Hulle is alreeds drie jaar in hierdie huis."*

It is clear that nobody else is at home. Perhaps Shadrack has planned it this way?

They sip their drinks and indulge in some small talk before Andries comes to the point. He wants Amanda to understand, so switches to English and the conversation proceeds in South African fashion, with participants passing effortlessly through language barriers.

"So what can you tell me?" he says. "Did you get rid of the stone?"

*"Ja, Nee. Ons het iemand gevind, maar hulle praat nog oor die prys."*

"Who has the stone now?"

*"My Pa. Hy praat nou met iemand. Hy't 'n bespreking na werk gehad."*

"But I thought he was going to close a deal last week."

*“Ja. Maar dit het nie uitgewerk nie.”*

There is a silence that nobody seems to be able to fill. Shadrack gets up, fiddles with the TV antenna, then sits down and suddenly notices Amanda’s empty glass.

He jumps up again, almost lunging towards her. *“Wil jy nog `n dop ... drankie hê?”*  
*“Nee dankie.”*

Shadrack sits down again. Then stands up suddenly when they hear a car pulling up outside. He goes to the front door, then out to the garden.

Amanda and Andries sit in the lounge, listening to a broken conversation outside.  
*“Nee... jy kan nie.”*

*“Maar ....”*

The conversation continues for a few minutes, but they can’t figure what it’s about. Then it picks up again, loud and clear: *“Kom, ons gaan binne.”*

The door opens a minute later and a middle-aged man in workman’s overalls makes his way into the room.

As soon as Andries sees him, he jumps up and strides across the room, extending his hand for a vigorous shake. *“Oom Piet! Hoe gaan dit?”*

*“Andries! Ek het jou lanklaas gesien! Hoe gaan dit?”*

Andries, who seems to have forgotten their previous conversation about correct decorum, puts his arm around Amanda and draws her close to him before making the necessary introduction. *“Oom Piet... Dis my vriendin, Amanda.”*

The middle-aged man looks at her appraisingly before commenting. *“Andries, waar kry jy so `n mooi meisiekind?”* he says as he shakes her hand.

Amanda is initially at a loss for words, but manages to shake hands and mumble the correct phrase, *“Aangename kennis, Oom.”* Then she sits down abruptly, feeling flustered and awkward.

After a few polite comments in English, the men switch to Afrikaans and continue their conversation amid much merriment. They talk of old times, anecdotes about school, youthful antics. Then the topic moves on to *diamante*.

Amanda is unable to take part in the macho conversation and doesn’t know what to do with herself, but then notices a copy of *The Diamond Fields Advertiser* that is lying on the coffee table – a nice diversion for her. She is surprised to see an English newspaper, but presumes that someone must have had a special interest in one of the articles.

She reads for about ten minutes while the babble of conversation continues. Then Oom Piet turns towards her, with a twinkle in his eye as he tries his hand at English. *“Tell me ... jy .. you, found diamant in `n mier ... ant nest?”*

She doesn’t fully understand the question, so Andries takes over. *“They’re amazed at your story about how you found the diamond.”*

Her response in broken Afrikaans is pathetic. “*Ja, Oom. Ek was besig met navorsing.*” It’s inappropriate for the bantering talk that is going on and, as soon as possible, she goes back to reading the newspaper.

After awhile, she becomes aware that they have moved on to more serious topics, but she doesn’t feel part of it and wonders why her presence was necessary. She’s read all the interesting articles in the *Diamond Fields Advertiser* and is now skimming through the obituaries. This high-security home is starting to feel like a jail. All the windows in the room are closed, every nook and cranny is occupied with furniture, and she is beginning to feel claustrophobic. Then – just in time – Andries stands up and starts to make some noises about leaving.

They all move to the garden and Shadrack uses his remote to let them out.

As they drive away Andries tries to explain. “Sorry about all the Afrikaans. I didn’t mean to leave you out like that.”

“I was bored out of my skull. I’m wondering why I had to be there.”

“I thought you should be there. It’s your diamond.”

“Yes, but I couldn’t understand what they were saying. I know a bit of Afrikaans, but their accents are impossible.”

“I really am sorry. It was rude. Those guys can hardly speak a word of English and we had a lot to say.”

“That’s fine with me. I understand. So what was the outcome?”

“Unfortunately, Manie hasn’t returned. He’s the guy who’s been doing the dealing. Was supposed to be back yesterday. But he didn’t pitch.”

“Maybe he’s just skipped with the diamond? Do you know this guy?”

“I don’t know him very well, but the others trust him completely. They’re a bit worried though ... wondering what has happened.”

“Shit! What if he spills the beans to the cops? What if he mentions our names?”

“Don’t worry about that. Oom Piet was very careful to conceal our identities.”

This fails to satisfy Amanda. What if the police start to interrogate Manie? She has heard of the techniques that they use to extract information.

Andries tries to reassure her. “Don’t get too worried. It might be something simple like his car breaking down, or some other delay.”

“So what do we do now?”

“I’ll phone them early tomorrow morning. Then we’ll take it from there.”

“Okay. We’ll just have to be patient... wait and see. But I was also surprised at how well you know this family. Have you dealt with them before?”

“Yes. Remember I told you about how me and my friends found some diamonds in the river? I knew that Shadrack’s family were into diamonds but I hadn’t seen them since my

Warrenton school days. It was easy to trace them in Barkly West and, when I brought them the diamond, I got to know them really well. They flogged our diamond and paid us our share, as promised. It wasn't nearly as valuable as the one that you found and we split the money between the three of us. We each got R2000."

"Doesn't sound much."

"To us it was a lot of money. We took ourselves off to Sun City for the weekend. Spent all our money. It was a huge adventure."

"So what's happened to your friends? Are they still around?"

"I haven't seen them for years. The others have also lost contact with them."

They don't say much and are occupied with their own thoughts as they drive back to their guesthouse.

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The weekend, which had started out with such a buzz of sexual tension and excitement, turns into a disappointment. Manie doesn't pitch the next day; nobody knows where the diamond is; and the night of passion in their own private hideaway doesn't live up to expectations. The thought of spending a whole night with Andries in a proper bed has occupied Amanda's fantasies for a week, but the reality is a huge let-down.

The sex was okay, but she hadn't figured on the unromantic aftermath. Andries sleeps with his mouth open and snores all night, he has bad breath in the morning, and he wears gross underpants with a picture of a busty blonde in the front — a big turnoff. The worst thing is that, in her half-conscious state, she imagines herself sleeping next to Pete. It feels so weird to wake up and find a strange man in her bed.

But that isn't all. She doesn't like the way he acted in front of his diamond-dealing friends. All that macho stuff, and the way he introduced her to Oom Piet, as if she was some kind of trophy.

They arrive back in Warrenton at noon on Sunday and play the same charade as the one acted out the day before, this time in reverse. Andries stops the car five kilometres out of Warrenton so that Amanda can move to the back and lie down on the seat. They drive into town and turn onto the river road where she gets out quickly. Andries is in such a hurry to drive off that his goodbye is curt and sounds dismissive. As she walks up the road with the rucksack on her back, ostensibly returning from a short walk, she feels empty, hollow. The whole experience now seems furtive and sordid.

She walks past the massive Dutch Reformed Church at the top of the hill and encounters a stream of congregants emerging from the church grounds — people who have stayed for tea after the service and mothers fetching children from Sunday school. The thought of bumping

into Annette and her children is too ghastly to contemplate and she quickens her pace, staring ahead as if she's in a great hurry, anxious to get home.

Then the anxiety becomes real. What if Jude has disappeared? He often goes wandering, sometimes for up to four days. Even though Jude is mostly ridgeback, Pete reckons that he has the nose of a bloodhound, which explains his wayward behaviour. This dog can smell any bitch on heat within a radius of at least 10 kilometres.

Amanda rushes back to the house and is in such a hurry that she fumbles with the garden gate and struggles to put the key into the front door. Then she hears a welcoming bark from the back garden and Jude appears a minute later, waving his tail around in circles. He is hysterical with joy and when she lets him into the house, he charges back and forth, barking wildly, returning to her every now and then to leap up and lick her arms, neck and face.

She can't help laughing at the sight of his skinny whippy tail waving around in haphazard circles that seem to change direction every few seconds. This has been the subject of much merriment between herself and Pete – the unexpected outcome of new veterinary regulations in South Africa. In the past, most people believed dog-breeders' excuses: that docking the tails of certain breeds, such as fox terriers, ridgebacks and Dobermans, is necessary for the health of the dog. Now the truth is out: inbreeding had resulted in some embarrassing defects that the breeders would have preferred to keep secret. Ever since the ban on tail docking, the curly little piggy tails of a number of breeds have been on display for all the world to see. Harmless, but comical.

Her behaviour isn't much different to that of Jude. She's so overjoyed to see him that she finds herself hugging and patting him, laughing and crying, and then realises that she's wet her pants and has to rush to the toilet.

It is good to be home, but the house feels empty without Pete.

## Chapter 20

Andries phones on Tuesday with some good news. Manie has sold the diamond, and they must go to Barkly the next day, to meet with the others and sort things out. Pete is only due back on Thursday, so Amanda is happy about this arrangement.

She is sick of the silly charades and subterfuges, so arranges for Andries to pick her up at her house. Nobody seems to notice and they have an uneventful trip to Barkly West. They book into the same guesthouse as last time and then drive to Oom Piet's house in the late afternoon.

The formidable security gate is closed, but three cars are parked in the front garden, so Andries parks his *Pajero* on the pavement outside. They don't need to press the intercom

button on the gatepost because Shadrack, Oom Piet and Gerrie are in the garden setting up a braai, and they let them in.

They chat for awhile. Then Shadrack takes his leave, explaining that he won't be able to come over that evening. His family will be attending a concert at the primary school in which his son will be playing a part. But he will see them again in the morning, when he visits his parents.

Oom Piet ushers them into the house and leads them to the kitchen where he introduces Amanda to his wife, Tannie Kobie, and two young women: their daughter Dina, and her friend Letitia. They are preparing snacks for a small group of men who are gathering in the lounge, waiting for the start of a rugby match between the *Lions* and the *Cheetahs*.

The older woman immediately takes control. "*Aangename kennis,*" she says, wiping her hands on her apron before shaking Amanda's hand, "*Wil jy rugby kyk, of hier bly met die vroumense?*"

Andries joins the men in the lounge and Amanda moves to the kitchen to help the women prepare the snacks — chopped up biltong, *droëwors*, samoosas and packets of chips — which they place in small bowls and carry through to the men. Then they start to prepare the salads that will be served later on, together with the braai.

The two girls have recently finished matric and now work as cashiers in the SPAR supermarket in town. They talk about incidents at work and Dina's preparations for her upcoming 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday. Amanda feels more comfortable in the women's company, but she wonders when she will be expected to join the men. When will they get around to the serious business of discussing her diamond and the recent deal?

After the rugby the action moves outside to the stoep and the front garden, where the women join the men over beers and cold drinks. Amanda stays with Andries and starts to relax, until the arrival of Leroy, who she recognises as the aggressive man who had attacked Gerrie when they were digging out the ant nest three months ago. He is accompanied by two men, both of whose faces are covered with tattoos: a sign of prison-gang affiliation. She decides to avoid them and notices that Andries is doing the same.

Once the food is cooked the crowd moves to the dining room, for a meal that is served from two hot-trays — *wors*, steak, *sosaties*, and a large pot of *stywe-pap*. The other ingredients of the meal — *Kerrie boontjies*, chutney and salads — are laid out on the dining room table.

After supper the women bring out a pudding, of melktert and ice cream, and everyone moves back to the front stoep where a table and garden chairs have been set up. It's time for serious conversation and the women retire to the kitchen to wash the dishes. But Andries insists that Amanda stays behind with the men.

"I'd rather be with the women," she says.

“Come on! I never thought you’d want to be a *kombuis-meisie*,” he says in a hushed voice.

“You need to know what’s going on.”

She reluctantly joins the men who have gathered around the table.

The conversation first focuses on ribald stories of rugby, diamond dealing and various other exploits. Then Oom Piet raises the topic of their diamond. He turns to Manie, a quietly-spoken man with a pale brown skin that is pock-marked with darker-pigmented patches. Oom Piet carries out the interrogation, while the others listen.

“*Sê vir my, Manie. Wat het met die diamant gebeur?*”

“*Ek het ‘n goeie prys gekry, Oom. Twee honderd duisend.*”

“*Het hulle betaal? Met tsjeld?*”

“*Ja. Maar eers net die deposit.*”

“*Watter soort deposit?*”

“*R50 000.*”

“*Wat! En waar’s die diamant?*”

“*Hulle het die diamant.*”

All hell breaks loose. Everyone seems to be shouting at once and Leroy leans across the table and holds his fist in front of Manie’s face. When he speaks, his voice is low and full of venom. “*Jou fokken dom doos.*”

Andries also chips in with a comment, “*Ek stem saam. Manie, dit was baie dof.*”

But instead of appreciating his support, Leroy now turns his attention towards Andries.

“*Wat sê jy, witman?*”

Andries, who is clearly angered by this remark, raises his voice in reply. “*Onthou julle. Dis Amanda se diamant. En ek praat vir haar.*”

Amanda’s efforts to keep a low profile have now collapsed as Leroy and his friends switch their attention to her. “*Wat? Hierdie skraal stukkie! Dis nie haar diamant nie. Dis myne.*”

Amanda gets up and slips into the lounge, while the increasingly noisy conversation continues outside. Fortunately, Leroy and his friends are now fully engaged in an argument with the others, and the spotlight has shifted away from her. She joins the other women who have also moved indoors, but are too curious to move away. They sit near the window in the lounge, listening to the loud voices outside.

First Oom Piet’s voice. “*Leroy, jy praat kak. Hoe kan die diamant joune wees?*”

Leroy launches into a long story, the gist of which is that he was doing a deal at the river. It was eight o’clock in February, almost dark. He had the diamond in his hand, one that he had bought from a guy from Zimbabwe, and had already paid ‘*Goeie tsjeld*’ for it. He was about to pass it over to another man who had the money ready. Then they noticed people following.

“*Agents. Ek erken hulle. Die anner man het weg gehardloop en ek was alleen met die diamant, weet nie wat om te doen nie. Ek het my amper gepoep, ek was so bang. Daardie*

*polisie sal my vreeslik donner. Ek probeer om dit in te sluk, maar kannie, het amper ge-choke. Toe sien ek die balbyters daar. Hulle kruip na hul nes toe. Ek het sommer die diamant in die nes-gat gesteek.”*

The crowd bursts into hysterical laughter. Then Oom Piet speaks. *“Leroy, jy’s ‘n genius. Dis die beste storie wat ek nog gehoor het.”*

*“Sowaar, dis die hele waarheid. En toe die polisie my gevang het, het hulle my nogal opgedonner. Maar ek het nie die plek vir hulle gewys nie.”*

Oom Piet then asks the obvious question, *“Hoekom kry jy nie die diamant die volgende dag?”*

*“Ek het probeer, maar het vergeet watter nes dit was... en die balbyters het my vreeslik gebyt. My balle het amper ontplof.”*

The men explode with laughter, slapping the table with glee. Oom Piet and Gerrie are clutching their stomachs, almost in tears.

After things subside a bit, Andries speaks. He’s clearly not amused, *“Waar het dit gebeur?”*

*“By die rivier. Naby die brug.”*

*“Watter brug?”*

*“Die ou brug, daar by die Toll Museum.”*

*“Jy lieg, Leroy. Amanda het dit in Windsorton gekry.”*

*“Ek lieg nie. Sy lieg. Sy het dit sommer hier geky, in Barkly Wes.”*

*“Dis die grootse kak storie wat ek nog ooit gehoor het. Dis nie jou diamant. Dit behoort aan die hele familie.”*

*“Wat sê jy? Eers was dit Amanda se diamant. Nou behoort dit aan almal. Jy’s mal.”*

*“Amanda moes ietsie kry, maar die grootste porsie behoort aan die gesin. Ek gee dit vir julle om die skuld te betaal.”*

*“Dis wat jy nou sê. Maar vroër was dit ‘n anner storie. Ek vertrou jou nie, jou skelm.”*

Oom Piet tries to intervene and has to shout above the others to make his voice heard, *“Luister almal. Andries het so vir my gesê. Hy betaal vir sy Pa se skuld.”*

The crowd outside is becoming noisier and nobody hears what Oom Piet is saying. But Amanda, who is sitting close to the window in the lounge, hears quite clearly. She wonders if she has understood correctly. Did Andries really say that the diamond mostly belongs to this family, that she will only receive a small share?

But there is no time to consider this because things are turning violent outside.

*“Jou bloody skelm.”* Leroy shouts. There is a noise of someone turning chairs over and the sickening thud of punches.

Then Oom Piet’s voice, which is still lost in the crowd, *“Hou op met die geveg.”*

Nobody's listening and the sound of punching and shouting continues but moves from the stoep to the garden.

Amanda can't bear to look at first, but then feels compelled to pull the curtain aside a few centimetres and peer through the window. Three men are savagely kicking someone who is lying on the ground, someone whose arms are pulled up over his face in an attempt to protect himself. His checked shirt tells her that it is Andries. As she watches with a growing sense of horror she notices three other men – Oom Piet, Manie and Gerrie – suddenly charge in from the side and push the attackers away. This gives Andries enough time to stand up and stagger towards the gate, which opens as he reaches it. Someone must have pressed the remote.

She has seen enough and quickly makes her way back towards the kitchen, but encounters Tannie Kobie in the passage.

*“Kom saam met my, Amanda. Die manne raak te rof. Ons gaan na die slaapkamer.”*

Tannie Kobie leads her to a large room at the end of the passage. They try the door, but it is locked.

*“Maak oop,”* Tannie Kobie says, *“dis ek en Amanda.”*

There is a sound of rapid footsteps, then someone turns the key. Letitia and Dina have locked themselves in, and they quickly lock the door again after the other two women have entered.

For a short while, things seem a bit quieter. Then they hear Oom Piet outside, apparently speaking to Leroy. His voice is loud and very angry.

*“Gaan weg, julle skollies. Julle was nie genooi nie, en nou maak julle groot probleme vir ons.”*

Then Leroy's voice: *“Jammer Oom. Maar daardie witman wou ons weer verneuk. Net soos tevore.”*

*“Dis nie waar nie! Hy wil ons terugbetaal. Ek het mooi met hom gesels, het 'n goeie plan gemaak. Maar jy en jou vriende het alles opgevoek. Julle is rubbish. Ek wil niks met jou te doen hê nie, wil jou gesig nie weer sien in my huis nie.”*

Things are quieter as Leroy makes some kind of murmured reply. Then they hear Oom Piet again. His voice is louder than before and shaking with anger. *“Weg is julle. Jou vrot kak. Voetsek!”*

Leroy mutters something in reply, which the women can't quite make out. Then they hear the security door opening and a car driving away.

The front door opens a minute later and they hear voices in the lounge. Then Oom Piet's raised voice. *“Kobie! Waar's jy?”*

Tannie Kobie leaves the room and the girls hear a murmured discussion receding down the passage as she and her husband walk back towards the lounge.

She returns a minute later and explains the situation. *“Piet moet Manie en Gerrie huis toe neem. Maar hy’s bekommerd oor Leroy. Ons moet in die slaapkamer bly en die deur toesluit.”*

When she sees the worried look on her daughter’s face, she is quick to reassure her. *“Moenie worry nie, Dina. Pa sal nie lank wees. Net so vyf of tien minute.”*

Oom Piet’s car pulls away, and things quieten down for a while. There are three beds in the room so they all lie down, with Letitia and Dina sharing a bed. Amanda is tired and starting to drift off to sleep, when she is jolted awake by loud knocking on the door.

It’s Leroy and his two friends. God knows how they got past the security gate and the locked doors, but they’re back, full of bravado.

Leroy speaks first. *“Kom uit meisiekinde. Ons wil ‘n bietjie warm poes hê.”*

Then another voice, presumably one of his friends: *“Ek soek ‘n stukkie van daai wit poes.”* And yet another voice demands, amid much ribald laughter, that *“ek wil enige poes hê, solank as dit nat en warm is.”*

Tannie Kobie jumps out of bed and rushes to the door. *“Voetsek jou bliksem. Ons roep die polisie.”*

There is a pause, then Leroy’s voice: *“Ons doen niks aan jou, Tannie. Ek wil net iets van daai wit poessie hê. Soos Andries. Hy skuld ons, en sy hoertjie sal vir ons betaal.”*

*“Wat bedoel jou ... ‘ons’. Wie’s saam met jou?”*

*“Dis my vriende – Gert en Tokkie.”*

*“Gaan weg julle skollies.”*

The voice outside is suddenly quiet. Then there is another voice, probably Tokkie.

*“Ons kom nou. Ons kry julle.”*

Tannie Kobie switches on the light and quickly speaks to the others. *“Kom ons skuif die meubels.”*

They drag a heavy cupboard across the room, then a dressing table. But this is followed by a volley of kicks against the door.

Tannie Kobie rummages in her handbag, finds her mobile, and calls her husband. *“Piet. Kom vinnig. Die skollies het terug gekom ... Leroy en sy vriende.”*

Oom Piet’s response is so loud that the others also hear. *“Wat! Hoe het hulle ingekom? Sluit die deur ... en kry vir jou die pepper spray. Ek sal nou-nou daar wees.”*

Letitia dials a number on her mobile, waits for a few seconds, then speaks. *“Pa. Kom vinnig. Iemand wil ons verkrag. Dis daai skollie neef van Dina, en sy vriende.”*

There’s a pause, then Letitia speaks again, in a hushed voice: *“Ek’s by Dina se huis. Kom vinnig. Hulle skop die deur by die slaapkamer.”*

Another pause, then *“Ons het dit toegesluit, maar hulle skop die deur.”*

## Chapter 21

When the gangsters finally break through the door, the women defend themselves as best they can. Tannie Kobie picks up a small stool and takes a swipe at Tokkie. He pushes past her and then bundles her out of the room.

Dina buys some time for her and Letitia by pepper spraying Gert, but not before receiving a vicious blow to the side of her face and losing her canister in the process. She and Letitia escape down the passage in spite of Gert's attempt to spray them with Dina's canister as they leave.

Gert crawls back into the room and collapses to the floor while Leroy and Tokkie focus their attention on Amanda.

Dina and Letitia search frantically for the family's remote control for the front gate. They open the front door in desperation and are momentarily relieved to see Dina's father with Letitia's parents and her two older brothers. They also see that the security gate has been chained and padlocked from the inside.

Oom Piet breaks the moment of stunned silence. *“Ons het 'n bolt cutter nodig. Shadrack het een by sy huis. Ek is nou terug.”*

Meanwhile Amanda has taken a punch to the face and has collapsed on a bed. She tries unsuccessfully to get up, only to be punched again. Leroy and Tokkie begin to rip her clothes off.

*“Kry vir jou 'n bietjie koek,”* Leroy says before repeatedly punching his fist into her pelvis and groin. She releases a flood of urine that soaks the bed.

*“Andries se hoertjie het haarself nat gepoes!”* Tokkie shouts as he and Leroy burst into raucous laughter. Which prompts Leroy to turn his attention towards her breasts: first a sustained series of left-right-left-right punches to both breasts. Then he places his mouth over her left nipple, and bites down, as hard as he can. Amanda screams in pain.

They hear a screech of tyres outside and Tokkie rushes to the window. It doesn't take him long to assess the situation. *“Leroy. Hou op. Daar's 'n klomp mense buite. Hulle het die hek oop gemaak.”*

Leroy joins Tokkie. *“Yislaaik... dis Oom Piet en Shadrack en vyf anner manne.”*

They rush out the door, helping Gert up by the collar of his jacket.

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Shadrack and Oom Piet are the first to enter the house. They run down the passage towards the bedrooms, but there is no sign of Leroy, Tokkie and Gert. Instead they find Amanda, slumped against the wall in the passage. Oom Piet kneels down next to her and starts to check her condition.

Shadrack hurries on down the passage to see if he can find his quarry in any of the other bedrooms. But he soon realises that Leroy and his friends have given him the slip. They must have run out the back door while he and his father were entering the front of the house. He turns back and starts running back down the passage but, instead of Leroy, he encounters Letitia's father and brothers who have just entered the house. They are not sure what they're supposed to do next. The passage is dark and they can't find the light switch, nor do they know which bedroom they are heading for. There is an enormous amount of confusion when they encounter Shadrack, and it takes some time to realise that they've all been outwitted.

Oom Piet and Tannie Kobie turn their attention to Amanda. They support her on both sides and guide her down the passage to Dina's room. Tannie Kobie helps her onto the bed, pulls the blankets back, and fluffs up the pillows behind her head. Once she's settled Amanda, she sits down on a chair next to the bed while Oom Piet goes to the bathroom to fetch some *Codis* pills and a large glass of water.

Amanda drifts into a shallow sleep, then wakes up suddenly and is immediately assaulted by waves of pain. She lies still for a few minutes then she starts to cry softly. Tannie Kobie stays next to her, holding her hand and stroking her hair while she murmurs a few words over and over. "*Bly rustig ... dit sal regkom.*"

Amanda drifts in and out of consciousness for awhile, and as she re-surfaces into a more wakeful state, the memory of the attack returns. With it comes a desire to leave this place as soon as possible.

Kobie has placed her torn and bloodied clothing in a plastic bag and with Dina's help has assembled a clean replacement outfit.

Shadrack comes into the room and offers to drive Amanda back to her guesthouse.

## Chapter 22

Shadrack avoids looking directly at Amanda. Then he adopts a very businesslike manner and there is an uncomfortable silence during the first half of the journey. Shadrack seems about to speak a number of times, then lapses into silence. But as they take the turn into *Oos Straat* he starts talking.

*"Dit was vreeslik, wat gisteraand gebeur het. Ek's baie jammer. Jy moet verstaan dat Leroy en sy maats was nie genooi vir die braai, hulle het sommer opgedaag. Leroy is 'n groot probleem in ons gesin. Hy's gevaarlik, veral met vroumense, het alreeds probeer om Dina's se suster te verkrag. Janine werk nou in Kimberley; sy's te bang om huis toe te kom."*

They arrive at the *One Fountain* but Shadrack doesn't immediately get out. He just parks near the front gate and remains silent for a moment, as if deciding whether or not to tell her something. Then he comes to a decision and suddenly speaks: "*Daar's iets belangrik wat ek*

*moet vir jou verduidelik. Dis oor Andries. Iets oor sy Pa en die geskiedenis van hierdie familie.”*

In the next few minutes, Shadrack outlines a complicated story. First he explains about their extended family, the four brothers of the previous generation and their numerous offspring, which include himself, Gerrie, Leroy, Andries, Dina and Janine. In about 1980 Andries’s father, Willem, went through the process of “trying for white”. During apartheid South Africa, this entailed a long and complicated process that was often humiliating and incurred huge expense, mostly for bribing corrupt bureaucrats. The extended family could see the benefits of such a plan: reclassification would open doors for Willem and he promised to pay back. But nobody had reckoned on the complicated outcome: in spite of paying huge bribes, Willem had failed the ‘Pencil Test’ for reclassification, so technically remained a “Coloured” person. Nevertheless, he landed himself a decent job and fell in love with a white woman. They lived together, had a child. But because of various complications to do with apartheid, Andries’s father’s name doesn’t appear on his birth certificate.

Shadrack stops suddenly. *“Jammer, maar dis baie ingewikkeld. Jy moet vir Andries vra, om die res van die storie te hoor.”*

In spite of what he has just said, Shadrack adds one more detail as he helps Amanda out the car and picks up her backpack. *“Net een ding wat Andries sal miskien jou nie vertel nie: sy Pa het geen geld terug betaal. Hy het ons verneuk”.*

It is already 3 am when Shadrack presses the intercom at the security gate so they expect to have a long wait and perhaps another attempt to call the guesthouse. But the gate opens after a pause of only two minutes.

Mrs de Wet opens the front door, takes one look at Amanda and ushers them inside.

They hadn’t expected Andries to be up and about, but it transpires that he has already received some treatment. Seeing him is both a shock and a relief. He is sitting in an upholstered lounge chair, obviously in pain. His face is covered in cuts and bruises, there is a bandage over his ear, and his right eye is almost completely closed. His nose is also swollen and looks as if it’s been broken.

Amanda hobbles across the room to his chair. “Andries, thank God you made it here.”

Andries doesn’t reply immediately. He gazes blankly ahead of him, then looks up at Amanda as if seeing her for the first time. When he starts to speak, his voice comes out as a croak, each word an expression of pain: “You don’t look too good either. What happened?”

Mrs de Wet scuttles off to the kitchen and returns a few minutes later with mugs of rooibos tea.

After they have finished drinking Amanda makes her way to the bedroom that she and Andries were sharing. Mrs de Wet gathers the tea cups to carry back to the kitchen, and

Shadrack moves across to sit next to Andries. They start a muted conversation as the women are leaving the room.

Andries then makes his way to the room with the assistance of Shadrack and Mrs de Wet. Amanda has already swallowed another codeine pill and Andries takes his painkillers before he gets into bed.

It is difficult to share a bed in such circumstances, as they are both still in shock. Nevertheless, Amanda drifts into a restless disturbed sleep. She's not sure which is worse – the wakeful moments when she relives the whole experience, or the nightmares that follow; the verbal threats, the sound of the thin plywood splintering as the thugs batter their way through the locked door. Then, during the wakeful moments, the pain in her breast, her groin and her face. And the humiliation, the shame of having her whole being — everything that she is, that she's ever been — reduced to *'n warm poes, 'n wit poessie* or *Andries se hoertjie*. Eventually she falls into a deep sleep and wakes up after an hour. There is a moment of relief, when her mind is blank. Then, as consciousness returns, so does the memory, and the pain in her battered body.

Andries is tossing and turning next to her and it is clear that spending the night together is not going to help. It would be better to just drive back home to Warrenton.

Amanda, who has taken another pain-killer, insists that she is strong enough to drive. Andries raises a weak objection but then gives up. They don't want to wake Mrs de Wet again, so Amanda writes a note, leaving her contact details and a promise to pay for any extra expenses and to courier the key and remote control. Then they pack up and leave quietly. It is about half an hour before sunrise when they make their way out of Barkly West, onto the Windsorton road.

Neither of them speaks until they reach Windsorton. Then Andries breaks the silence. "I need to ask", he rasps. Then pauses for breath before continuing, "What happened?"

Amanda can't bring herself to answer immediately. Then she manages a few words. "It's hard to talk ... Leroy and his friends tried."

It's ridiculous, but she can't say it, and Andries has to supply the words.

"To rape you?"

"Yes."

"So did they?"

"Almost, but not quite. But I'm not ready ... can't talk."

"So they were interrupted?"

Amanda nods her head.

"But beat you anyway?"

She nods again, and tries to say something but her throat has clammed up.

They drive on in silence and it is only when they approach Warrenton that the question of getting Andries back to the farm arises. He can't cope with the idea of Amanda having to drive along the bumpy farm road, and they eventually agree that Annette should fetch him from Amanda and Pete's house.

As they take the turn off onto Station Road, Amanda broaches the topic of his past. "Shadrack told me about your family. How your father got reclassified, or almost got reclassified ... something about your birth certificate... I just want you to know that I know."

Andries doesn't react immediately. But then says in a tired voice, "So you know it all."

"Not everything. But I've been thinking... you and I ... we're a disaster." She tries to say more but can only manage a weak cliché: "We must talk about it sometime."

It is just past 6:30 am when they turn into Church Street and stop at Amanda's house. They hobble towards the front door, then hear the sound of barking and Pete's voice: "Hang on. I'll be there in a minute."

Amanda is horrified. What will she say to Pete?

But she hasn't got time to think. He opens the door almost immediately.

## Chapter 23

Pete had returned early from his conference. The paper that he presented on the first day was a huge success, but after three days of lectures the whole talk-shop became a bore. So he jumped at an unexpected offer of a lift to Kimberly, from where he caught a minibus taxi to Warrenton. When he arrived back at 11:00 pm on the previous evening, he couldn't understand why Amanda wasn't at home, especially since Jude was in the garden and the car was still parked in the yard. Amanda's mobile had apparently run out of charge, and when she still hadn't returned by 01.00 am he started phoning some Warrenton friends and neighbours. But nobody knew of her whereabouts.

He hasn't had much sleep and is now fully dressed and about to drive to the police station, to ask if they've had any reports of an accident involving his wife. Then he hears a car pull up, and – a few minutes later – the sound of Amanda's voice outside.

He rushes to the front door feeling relieved and excited.

But his relief is short-lived, especially after he sees her bruised and swollen face and notices the way she winces in pain when he hugs her. It is only then that he sees Andries, who is standing in the street, leaning against his car. He looks even worse.

"Oh my God, what the hell happened? Were you in a car accident?"

"No. We were attacked."

"By who?"

Neither of them replies and Pete realises that they need help, not questions. He takes Amanda's arm, guides her into the house and settles her on the couch in the lounge. Then goes back for Andries.

After settling them both Pete rushes off to fetch two blankets, having remembered something from a long-ago First Aid course.

They still haven't explained anything, but he gives them a few moments before asking. "Aren't you going to tell me what happened?"

There is a moment of silence; then Amanda replies: "We went to Barkly West to sell a diamond. We got damaged in the process."

"What the hell does that mean? How were you damaged?"

"Beaten up. Separately, in different ways."

"How? And what the hell is this stuff about diamonds?"

"Remember the diamond that I found in the ant nest?"

Pete looks at her, completely mystified and she has to prod his memory.

"Oh that! I thought it was quartz. You mean it was real?"

"Yes."

"So why didn't you say so?"

"I wanted to sell it but you would have disapproved. Then Andries put me in touch with some people."

Andries, who hasn't said a word, now tries to speak, his voice rasping painfully. "Pete. Amanda hasn't told you. They beat her, tried to rape her... three of them."

Amanda doesn't speak and all of them are quiet for a moment. Then Pete moves across the room and sits next to her on the couch. He strokes her hand, traces his fingers lightly over her bruised face and softly kisses her on her cheek.

Her skin is clammy and she is very pale. Pete knows that these are symptoms of something, but can't remember what, so he feels the pulse on her wrist. It is rapid and weak; she is obviously in shock. Then he focuses on Andries, who is slumped against the back of the chair, restlessly moving around as if trying to get comfortable. It is quite obvious that both of them need help.

Pete suddenly stands up and walks across the room to the telephone. "What the hell am I doing, talking so much?" he says out loud.

He leads them, one at a time, to Andries's bakkie that is unlocked and still parked outside, but realises that he hasn't got the keys. Then he remembers that Amanda had been holding car keys when he answered the door. He runs back to the house, finds her handbag on the floor and rummages through for the keys and her driver's licence. Then runs back and gets into the Pajero. There is a moment of panic when he struggles with the immobiliser but Amanda points

to the slot in the dashboard in which the multi-pronged key must be inserted. Then she slumps against the front seat, weak and tired.

Warrenton's Private/Public hospital is at the edge of town, in a suburban area. Pete drives into the paved car park and stops near a brightly-lit entrance over which the word CASUALTY is emblazoned in red neon letters. He jumps out and runs to the admission desk.

The nurse at reception is used to this kind of situation and arranges for two orderlies to bring stretchers. They go to the car, load up their patients, and wheel them back to Reception.

"Why have they deteriorated so quickly?" Pete asks. "Half an hour ago, my wife was driving a car."

The nurse checks Amanda's pulse and forehead and then turns her attention to Andries.

"It could be internal bleeding, delayed shock," she says before contacting a nurse on one of the wards. The two interns that arrive a minute later immediately set up drips and cover each patient with a blue blanket emblazoned with the *Netcare* logo.

Pete has all the information necessary for Amanda's admission but gets stuck on Andries. The receptionist helps him to get hold of the farm landline number.

Annette answers immediately, as if she had been expecting a call. She has been sick with worry about her husband's disappearance, so it is a relief to hear that he is alive and being taken care of. Pete reassures her that Andries's condition is not life-threatening and they arrange to meet later in the morning, after she has visited Andries in hospital.

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The full medical examination of each patient produces a formidable list of injuries. Andries has a broken nose, broken cheekbones, broken ulna, damaged larynx and cuts and bruises all over his body. The injury that causes most concern however, the one that will keep him in hospital for more than a week, is to his right kidney. The thugs that beat him had aimed their kicks at the exact spot on his back, high up, close to the spine, just below the rib cage. They know where the kidneys are and how to cause maximum damage. Because he had been lying on his left side during the attack, the right kidney had been more exposed and vulnerable.

Amanda has a number of cuts and bruises around her breast and face. Because Leroy is right handed and she had been facing him, the punches on her left are more severe and she has a broken cheekbone, just beneath her left eye. The bite on her breast has become infected, but a course of antibiotics will clear that up. Her most serious injury, the one that will keep her in hospital for four days, is to the bladder. If she hadn't let go and pissed all over the bed when Leroy was punching her pelvis, her bladder would have probably ruptured. Nevertheless, the doctors are worried about tissue damage and internal bleeding, the cause of severe pain in her lower abdomen.

Both of them need to remain in hospital for general observation, and arrangements are made for Amanda to travel to Kimberly for a cystoscopy. The diagnosis indicates some damage to her bladder and the urologist recommends an additional two days rest in the Warrenton hospital. Amanda must remain in bed for most of the time, but is also encouraged to walk, which she is now able to do without doubling up in pain.

By this time she has discovered that wandering around the hospital is possible, within limits. Visiting patients in other wards is also okay, as long as she gets permission from the ward sister. So she pays Andries a visit.

She is vaguely aware that she looks terrible. Her face is still battered and the bruise around her right eye has ripened to a traditional black-and-blue colour. She hasn't washed her hair since the previous week, and she's wearing a dowdy old dressing gown over standard-issue unsexy hospital pajamas. But she's beyond caring and shuffles down the passage to Andries's ward.

He looks much better than before and is able to sit up and speak more easily.

At first their conversation is strangely formal, considering all that they have been through.

"Hi. Hope you're feeling better."

"Much better, thank you. And you?"

And so it goes. The questions are punctuated by long silences. Then Amanda sits on the chair next to the bed, and takes his hand.

"It's difficult to talk, so I'll just sit here for awhile, if you don't mind."

He nods. "That's fine by me."

"You must tell me to bugger off if you're sick of talking."

"Fine."

After a while they get used to each other's presence and Amanda broaches the topic that has been on her mind.

"I want to ask about some things that Shadrack told me — your family background and the birth certificate. He said that I should ask you."

Andries looks at her silently, then looks away.

"I can see that it's not OK", she says. "You don't want to talk about it."

"Not really. Not now. But when I'm ready, I will. Maybe tomorrow."

"OK, maybe tomorrow," she says. Then makes her way out, back to her own ward.

When she returns the next day, he is sitting and smiles when she arrives. "Okay. I'm ready to talk. I've been planning what to say all morning. But tell me what you wanted to know."

"First of all — what is the 'pencil test'. The one that your Dad failed?"

"Oh yes, the pencil test ... now regarded as a joke. In the bad old days of racial classification, some of the officials used a pencil as a benchmark criterion for who could be

classified as black or white. It was absolute bullshit of course, completely unscientific. The whole classification thing was unscientific.

“Anyway, I digress. Back to dear old South Africa: the officials would insert a pencil into an applicant’s hair. If it fell out, then they were classified as ‘White’; if it stayed put, then they were ‘Black’, or ‘Coloured’. Simple hey?”

“So your Dad failed, even though he looked pretty white.”

“But it didn’t end there. The next step was to bribe your way. And my Dad paid handsomely, with money he had borrowed from the rest of his family.”

“But didn’t pay back, according to Shadrack.”

“Well, that’s what they say. I think he did pay some, but not enough. The financial accounts of the extended family have always been a bit dodgy. IDB dealers have a problem with book-keeping. They want records, but records provide evidence. Also, once they get the money, it has to be laundered. And I’m pretty sure that my Dad helped with that aspect. But then again, there’s the farm. My Dad borrowed money from them to buy it, but I don’t think he ever paid back. My problem is that when he died, I didn’t have a clue about how much he actually owed them.”

“So, they were pressurising you to pay?”

“They all felt that I owed them. But Oom Piet and Shadrack, were more tolerant. They understood that I wasn’t entirely responsible for my father’s debt, especially since everyone had a different opinion about how much he owed. But they all failed to understand that I simply didn’t have the money. It’s the usual problem of farmers – we may seem rich in terms of land and equipment, but most of us are poor in terms of cash flow. I am heavily in debt, as was my father.”

“So your relatives have been giving you a hard time?”

“Yes. Especially Oom Jan and his family, which includes Leroy and his two brothers. They’ve been really threatening.”

“Couldn’t you come to some kind of agreement?”

“No. They had no proof of anything, were incoherent and all over the place. They even demanded the whole farm in compensation and Leroy has been making threatening phone calls.”

“So you used my diamond to pay them back?”

“I’ll admit that. I’m sorry... but it wasn’t only about the diamond. You’re a lovely woman, Amanda ...so easy to talk to, so funny, so sexy. I couldn’t help falling for you.”

Amanda tries to convince herself that Andries is being manipulative, but she isn’t able to suppress the warm glow that sweeps over her when she hears these words. Nevertheless, she pulls herself together when she responds.

“I haven’t completely forgiven you. But I’m not actually all that bothered. I didn’t work for that diamond and it caused me a lot of grief, so I’m glad to be rid of it. But you used me, double crossed me. You’re quite a bastard, but then again, so am I. I’ve cheated on Pete, taken him for granted, probably ruined my marriage. Maybe ruined yours too.”

She pauses for a moment, then continues, “But I’ve also used you. I’m really sorry, especially when I see how you’ve suffered. So we should call a truce. The bottom line is that I’m no longer in love with you, but I can’t help liking you. You’re so interesting, so good looking and attractive, but I guess that’s part of your downfall.”

“Maybe that applies to you too. You’re too damn sexy. Even with that black eye, and in that grotty dressing gown that you’re wearing.”

Amanda laughs and bends over to plant a kiss on his cheek. “There you go again, you charmer. Should I visit tomorrow? There’s still a lot to talk about. Next time my interrogation will be less intense.”

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When she returns the next day, Andries’s condition has improved considerably. The bruises are still there, but his voice is stronger and he seems to have more energy.

He is clearly eager to speak. “I’ve been thinking all night. About my childhood, my family. I guess it’s a story that’s happened all over the country. Coloured boy wants to make good, so pretends to be white.”

“You told me about the classification and how your Dad bribed the guy from the Department of ‘Pleural Affairs’, or whatever it was that they called themselves in those days. But he ended up being classified as Coloured anyway?”

“Yes. The guy that he bribed double crossed him. But by then my Dad had been passing himself off as white for years, had acquired the necessary social skills. He was living with a white woman — my mother — and had got rid of his Cape Coloured accent. He also found a job in the bank. In those days there was such a thing as job discrimination according to race, but the bank never asked to see his ID book. They just assumed that he was white.”

“So he just continued along quite happily?”

“Well, not so happily. He was so eager to impress his in-laws, who didn’t know of his background. Cut himself off from his family ... was slow about debt repayments. But they didn’t forget ... kept harassing him for money. It wasn’t a happy time for him. He didn’t have any friends, didn’t fit in with the right-wing *boere* that dominated Warrenton in those days. He was a lonely man ... we were a lonely family.”

Andries is suddenly overcome with emotion and stops to pour himself a glass of water from the carafe at the hospital bedside table. Then drinks the whole glass, slowly.

He waits until he's regained his composure and then continues. "Things should have improved in 1985, when the apartheid government abolished the Immorality Act and the Mixed Marriages Act. To most people it was *'too little, too late'*, but to us it was a big deal. My parents could come out of the closet ... get married."

"There was a problem with my birth certificate — I was born in '78, before all this happened. The space for 'father' was left blank, as if he was unknown. Made my mother look like a slut ... like she had been sleeping around. But it was their only option. Otherwise my Dad would have blown his cover."

"But they still couldn't change the certificate. Even after they were married. Apartheid hadn't yet been abolished. I could have been reclassified, yanked out of the white school ... would have had to face all the crap ... of not being white in South Africa."

"So why did it bother you? Kids aren't usually aware of things like birth certificates."

"My parents tried to keep it secret, but I found out when I was ten and started to wonder why my younger sister had a different surname. She was born after they were legally married and my father felt very strongly about her taking his name."

"So you're the only one in the family with a different name?"

"No. My Mom kept her maiden name after she was married, so our family was half *le Roux* and half *Fredericks*. Not really a happy situation: there was a lot of awkwardness about my sister having a different name, made worse by the fact that we all had such a hangup about it."

"But you still have problems with your Barkly family. You seemed eager to maintain your connection with them."

"Yes. I admit that. Oom Piet and Shadrack were like a father and brother to me. It's also about being part of a big extended family, something that our small family didn't have."

"You yearn for that still?"

Andries is suddenly quiet, for such a long time that Amanda gets up to go. "Sorry. I'm being too pushy. You don't have to tell me about it."

She turns to go, but he grabs the sleeve of her gown. "No. Don't go. I need to talk about this. You've seen the Barkly family at their worst. They're not normally like that. Leroy was in Cape Town for a long time and now he's back, causing huge problems."

"He even tried to rape Dina's sister, according to Shadrack. So why do they put up with him?"

"I suppose it's because he can be so funny, so entertaining. He makes them laugh."

"Yes. His story about the diamond and the ant nest was hilarious, had them all hosing themselves. But there are problems with your extended family, with many extended families. It's all the male bonding that goes on. Especially when there are thugs like Leroy around."

"You mean that you disapprove of men sharing a beer and having a laugh while they watch a game of rugby or cricket?"

“No, of course not. I mean the kind of male bonding that’s so important to some men that they tolerate abusers in their homes, as long as they’re part of the great extended family.”

Andries looks at her, surprised, as if she’s revealed something unexpected. He’s quiet for a moment and then starts to talk slowly, looking past her as if speaking to himself:

“I’ve never thought of it like that before ... I also wanted to be part of that male bonding thing ... I see what you mean. Leroy makes them laugh.”

They’ve spoken for long enough. But Amanda thinks of something as she’s about to leave. “I’ve just remembered ... this also happened in my mother’s family. Long ago. Her sister — my aunt — was raped by their uncle. It was hushed up ... the uncle was too popular, too charming. Too posh and upper class. Nobody would have believed that such a man would rape his niece. Besides which, he got on so well with my grandfather and all the uncles.”

## Chapter 24

Amanda is to be discharged from the hospital at lunch time but there are a few things that she still needs to do: visit the psychologist, go for a final checkup with the urologist and sort out future appointments. She feels strange getting back into civilian clothes. In her few days in hospital, she’s become institutionalised and is now fearful of going back into the world.

Before she leaves she pays a last visit to Andries, who is alone in his ward.

His face lights up when he sees her. “Hi. I was hoping that you’d drop in. I’ve been thinking of what you said.”

He moves his legs over and pats the bed. “Take a seat... or would you prefer the chair?” he asks, gesturing towards the straight-backed hospital chair next to the bedside table.

She opts for the chair and pulls it over so that she can face him. “Tell me about it.”

“I was thinking about that whole male bonding thing. In many ways you’re right, but you’ve forgotten the elephant in the room. The diamonds.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s obvious. Leroy gets away with everything because nobody reports him to the police. Take us for example; we’re not going to prosecute those bastards.”

“Because we’re guilty,” she says, “were trying to fence a diamond.”

Amanda stands up and walks over to the window to look out at the green grass in the garden outside and the tinder-dry veld beyond. Her mind has drifted off the topic for a minute, reminding her that there is a world outside beyond the confines of this hospital. She walks back and sits down to face Andries.

“Aren’t we pathetic,” she says. “It’s not as if we’ve come to an earth-shaking new conclusion. It’s what my grandmother told me: *If you meddle with illegal stuff, then you can’t*

*expect any protection from the law*'. It's what Pete says and I had the nerve to despise him for being so *'upright and uptight*'."

"It's also what Annette says. And that's what eating me up."

"Why?"

"She's been anxious about those gangster relatives of mine. Leroy made some threatening phone calls and she doesn't want him getting near our children. It's been a huge problem in our marriage."

"I suppose you told her to stop being uptight and over-protective."

"Yes and more. I also accused her of racism, which was unfair. She is not a racist; she's just scared of Leroy."

As Amanda makes her way back to her ward, she sees Annette walking down the corridor towards her. This is the woman that she really wants to talk to. She wants to tell her she's sorry. Try to explain. But her throat clams shut and all that she manages is: "*Oh, hello*". Can't even look her in the face.

Annette gives her a surreptitious glance, then walks on as if in a great hurry to reach Andries's ward.

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Pete fetches Amanda just after lunch. As he walks along the brick path to the entrance he notices that the gardens are now magnificent in their late spring colours. The grass is green and the Australian silky oak trees are covered in lavish cascades of golden blossoms. He tries to enjoy the scene without disapproving of the presence of these invasive alien trees and the disproportionate amount of water that they demand. This really bugs him, especially in the context of the surrounding countryside that is parched and dry, and hasn't yet received its expected spring rains. Amanda would call his attitude "upright and uptight".

But he can't help it: he is upright and uptight. Especially about Amanda. He struggles to cope with his new role of the cuckolded husband whose wife has become a victim of a violent sexual assault. His emotions are a mix of contradictions, swinging wildly between feelings of compassion, concern, anger, resentment, revenge, and anxiety about Amanda's health. He also imagines himself pounding his fists into an object called Leroy.

There is also some resentment towards Amanda. She has lied to him, cheated and deceived him, screwed around with a married man, and then acted like some kind of macho cowboy with her diamond. Thinking she could get away with dealing with dangerous thugs and criminals. She had been consumed by pure greed: hadn't given a thought to him or Annette and her children.

Then she had arrived home, a beaten up broken wreck. He can't stand seeing her damaged face and doesn't even want to think about what the rest of her body looks like. The bite mark

on her breast and her bruised and battered abdomen have so far been discreetly covered by one of those awful hospital gowns with the slit at the back.

The thing that is bugging him the most is the role in which he and Amanda are now finding themselves. She has become the victim, which somehow exonerates all her previous behaviour. But his anger against her is periodically replaced by terrible guilt and he can't get Andries's words out of his mind: "*They beat her, tried to rape her.*"

He resents the fact that Andries is now the nice guy, the sympathetic one giving advice to the cuckolded husband.

His main problem is talking to Amanda. He doesn't want to express the thoughts that constantly plague him, mindful that she is fragile and in need of help. He doesn't know what to say, or how to act, when he's with her and the thought of bringing her home fills him with trepidation.

Amanda has signed herself out and is waiting at reception. Pete has visited her every day and watched her progress, but she now looks completely different in her normal clothes. She has washed her hair, the bruises on her face are changing from purple to brown, and she can walk normally. In fact she looks amazingly normal.

He picks up her bag and takes her arm as they make their way back to the car. But she pulls away. "Don't worry so much Pete," she says trying to sound normal. "I'm fine. I can walk on my own."

They walk on in silence, and he stashes her bag in the back of the bakkie.

"So how's Jude?" she asks.

"Fine. But he's missing you. Oh God. He's probably going to jump up when he sees you. Should I go ahead and lock him in the back?"

"No Pete. I'm OK. I'll be able to handle it."

Nevertheless, when they arrive home, Pete is more than usually vigilant about calming Jude down.

## Chapter 25

Pete has acquired a camp stretcher and moves to the room that they had always called their office. His explanation – that he doesn't want to disturb her sleep – clearly avoids the issue, but Amanda accepts the new situation.

Conversation is now mostly about everyday things: grocery shopping, housekeeping, looking after Jude. The only departure is academic, when Pete voices his thoughts about aquatic ecology or taxonomy.

It is another week before Amanda attempts to start the meaningful conversation that she knows they must have. They are sitting at their outside cable-table, seemingly relaxed after a

lunch of tuna salad and fresh bread rolls. Spring has finally arrived in the North Western Cape: not the false spring of garden flowers that bloom in response to irrigation. This is the second spring, the real one that comes after the rains. The veld has turned green and the *Acacia karoo* trees are budding fresh green leaves that provide a youthful contrast to the cracked dark brown bark of the branches that bear them.

“Pete we can’t go on pretending that nothing has happened. You seem to be scared of me, scared to say anything because I’m supposedly too fragile. I also know that you’re hiding a lot of anger and I don’t blame you. You should know that I still love you, that I want us to be together.”

He doesn’t respond. Not at all. First he pours himself another cup of tea. Then feigns a sudden interest in scratching Jude, who is lying at his feet.

Even though she tries to remain passive, five minutes of this treatment is enough to rouse a flash of resentment. Pete is obviously doing this to annoy her. She tries not to react, but can’t entirely let it go.

“Okay, I get it. You don’t want to talk. I will have to give you time. But we can’t go on like this.”

She gets up and starts packing the remainder of their lunch onto a wooden tray, which she picks up and carries back to the kitchen, shouting a brief instruction back to him.

“Can you bring the rest of the stuff?”

That evening, a crack appears in the glacier that surrounds Pete. They are washing the dishes after supper: Amanda washing, Pete drying. He picks up three plates at once, and is concentrating on drying all three in stack-wise fashion, while walking towards the crockery cupboard. He starts speaking, carefully at first. “About what you said at lunch: I know you’re thinking that I was just being bloody minded and arrogant, that I deliberately wanted to ignore your question. But that’s not true.”

“It seemed like that to me.”

He turns to face her. “It’s just that I can’t seem to find a place to start. I’ve tried once or twice, but I can’t get the words out.”

“I know that’s difficult. But we should try.”

Suddenly the words pour out in a rushing torrent. “I am confused. I love you, hate you, feel sorry for you, then think you deserve to be punished, then that nobody deserves to be punished like you were. I also resent the fact that you’re now the victim and I’m suddenly the villain. Most of all I resent Andries for his new role as the good guy.”

Amanda bursts into uncontrollable sobs that shake her body. “I don’t blame you,” she says in a choked voice. “I’m a horrible person ... dishonest, self centred. I don’t deserve forgiveness.”

The pitch of her crying increases to a howl and she pauses to blow her nose on the dishcloth that she is carrying. Pete makes no move to comfort her and she rushes out the room.

He is left standing in the kitchen, not sure if he should follow her immediately or give her time to calm down.

When he approaches the bedroom a few minutes later, he finds a locked door. He knocks. "Amanda. This is ridiculous. First you want to talk then you act like a child and have a tantrum. Please let me in."

She opens the door. Her eyes are red and swollen and her face is puffy, but she has calmed down and manages to speak in a steady voice. "Sorry. I admit that locking the door was childish. Let's talk in the lounge."

They sit opposite each other with the coffee table between them. Amanda starts.

"I don't blame you for being angry. I've been such a bitch to you. So childish, so full of myself. And the excuse about being upset about my failed PhD is not good enough. Andries is also childish and full of himself. How did you find out about us anyway?"

"Annette told me. But that was only after you got back last week. Up until then I was blissfully unaware of what was happening during those very long art lessons in Andries's special little pad above the river. Never suspected a thing. Problem was that I trusted you."

"Ja. It was pretty stupid of you ... to trust me," she says, her voice breaking as she starts to cry again.

Pete looks at her, silent for a moment. Then he starts to speak slowly, concentrating on eliminating all emotion from his voice. "Well at least we agree on one thing ... it was pretty stupid."

He pauses for breath, trying to regain control but his voice trembles as he continues, "I have also been an asshole. I didn't give you any empathy when your study was trumped, was such a self righteous prick. I'm sorry about that."

Amanda gets up and walks over to where he's sitting. But as she bends over to embrace him he pulls away. "I'm sorry, but I'm not ready for that. I wish I could trust you again, but I can't. You deceived me for too long. It wasn't just one little deceit; it was a whole string of deceits ... Andries, the diamond, all the shenanigans at Barkly West. I would like it if we could rebuild trust but we have to be realistic. It is too much to ask. It's not going to happen."

Amanda returns to her chair opposite him. She is quiet for a long while as she tries to control her emotions. It takes a great effort to speak again, but she eventually manages to get the words out. "So where do we go from here?"

"I don't know, will have to think about it. We've said enough for now."

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They don't speak much in the next few days. They are calm and excessively polite for awhile, then settle into a quiet, emotionless routine. Amanda has decided to complete her MSc and her latest deadline has been extended until mid-January, on the basis of the trauma that she has suffered. The first draft of Pete's thesis must be submitted at the end of March.

Most days are filled with the drudgery of writing up their theses, punctuated by a daily walk with Jude. But at the end of November they give themselves a treat, a whole day off at the Rob Ferreira resort near Christiana. They relax next to a big swimming pool and indulge in some low-key holiday sport: a game of putt-putt and then table tennis. Then a braai lunch served at the resort followed by a lazy afternoon in the shade of some willow trees growing near the swimming pool.

They both fall asleep but Pete wakes up first, and spends some time watching Amanda, recalling the previous "meaningful" conversation that they had a few weeks ago, at the same time realising that many things have remained unsaid. They are still sleeping in separate rooms and he feels no desire to change this arrangement.

As if aware of his scrutiny, Amanda slowly wakes up.

"You seem very relaxed," he says.

"Yes. Today has been good for me. Pity we can't do this more often."

"Perhaps we will ... one day when we're through with all the academic stuff."

She sits up, fully awake now. "That sounds like you think we have a future."

"Well, who knows? But I was also thinking that we haven't finalised the 'meaningful conversation'."

"No we didn't, did we? But I'm too tired to think of that stuff."

"But I have to ask. Are you happy with our present sleeping arrangements?"

She looks away towards the other holiday makers and her attention focuses on a couple who are lying in the sun, about ten metres away from them. The woman, who is about the same age as Amanda, is wearing a skimpy yellow bikini and lies on her stomach with her head resting on her forearms, half asleep, warm and lazy in the sun. Her bikini bra strap is undone and her partner is tracing his hand languidly over her back, then around the side of her body, stroking the side of her half-exposed breast. Then he concentrates on the area around her g-string bikini, his hand straying up her inner thigh.

Amanda can remember when she and Pete used to play such games, lying on the grass next to the Wits University swimming pool.

She turns back to Pete to say something and sees that he is also watching the couple.

"I see what you see," he says. "We don't really have that kind of spark anymore. Do we?"

"No, we don't. It was good while it lasted, but definitely no longer there."

They don't say much more but on the way back home, while they're driving southwards across a darkening landscape, Amanda brings up the topic. "Let's be honest. I don't think either of us is missing it – sex, I mean. But I'm OK with that. How about you?"

"Me too. Celibacy is quite appealing right now. I feel like a monk anyway, sleeping in a little narrow bed in the study, writing my thesis day and night."

"So where do we go from here? Is celibacy grounds for divorce?"

"Maybe, if one partner demands conjugal rights. So that won't apply to us, will it?"

"No. We're both fine with this. Should we make some kind of vow, promise to be celibate with each other forever? I've heard of a couple in the UK who did something like that."

"No. No vows. We just take things as they come. Let's just say that we both need a lot of body space."

"And that neither will make any sexual demands on the other ... until further notice."

"OK then. Until further notice."