

## CHAPTER ONE

Isn't life funny? You know, how one thing leads to another in a way you just don't expect.

That Sunday morning, I was in my kitchen stirring my apricot jam in the cast-iron pot. It was another dry summer's day in the Klein Karoo, and I was glad for the breeze coming in the window.

'You smell lovely,' I told the appelkooskonfyt.

When I call it apricot 'jam' it sounds like something in a tin from the Spar, but when it's konfyt, you know it's made in a kitchen. My mother was Afrikaans and my father was English and the languages are mixed up inside me. I taste in Afrikaans and argue in English, but if I swear I go back to Afrikaans again.

The apricot konfyt was just coming right, getting thick and clear, when I heard the car. I added some apricot kernels and a stick of cinnamon to the jam; I did not know that the car was bringing the first ingredient in a recipe for love and murder.

But maybe life is like a river that can't be stopped, always winding towards or away from death and love. Back and forth. Still, even though life moves like that river, lots of people go their whole lives without swimming. I thought I was one of those people.

The Karoo is one of the quietest places in South Africa, so you can hear an engine a long way off. I turned off the gas flame and put the lid on the pot. I still had time to wash my hands, take off my blue apron, check my hair in the mirror and put on the kettle.

Then I heard a screech of brakes and a *bump* and I guessed it was Hattie. She's a terrible driver. I peeked out and saw her white Toyota

Etios snuggled up to a eucalyptus tree in my driveway. I was glad to see she had missed my old Nissan bakkie. I took out the melktert from the fridge. Harriet Christie is my friend and the editor of the *Klein Karoo Gazette* where I write my recipe page. I am not a journalist; I am a just a tannie who likes to cook a lot and write a little. My father was a journalist and my ma a great cook. They did not have a lot in common, so in a funny way I like to think I bring them together with my recipe page.

Hattie was in her fancy church clothes, a pinkish skirt and jacket. Her high heels wobbled a bit on the peach pips in my walkway, but when she stayed on the paving stones she was okay. I still feel a bit ashamed when I see people coming straight from church, because I haven't been since my husband Fanie died. All those years sitting nice and pretty next to him on those wooden pews and listening to the preacher going on and on and then driving home and Fanie still dondering me, kind of put me off church. Being beaten like that put me off believing in anything much. God, faith, love went out the window in my years with Fanie.

I've left the windows open since then, but they haven't come back in.

So there was Hattie, at my door. She didn't have to knock because it's always open. I love the fresh air, the smell of the veld with its wild bushes and dry earth, and the little sounds my chickens make when they scratch in the compost heap.

'Come in, come in, my skat,' I said to her.

A lot of the Afrikaans ladies stopped being my friends when I left the Dutch Reformed Church, but Hattie is English and goes to St Luke's. There are more than forty churches in Ladismith. At St Luke's, coloureds and whites sit side by side quite happily. Hattie and I are both fifty-something but otherwise we are different in many ways. Hattie is long and thin with a neat blonde hairstyle and a pish-posh English way about her. I'm short and soft (a bit too soft in the wrong places) with short brown curls and untidy Afrikaans. She has eyes that are blue like a swimming pool, and mine are pond-green. Her favourite shoes are

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polished, with heels, but I prefer my veldskoene. Hattie doesn't bother much with food (though she does like my milk tart); while for me cooking and eating are two of the best reasons to be alive. My mother gave me a love of cooking, but it was only when I discovered what bad company my husband was that I realised what good company food can be. Some might think food is too important to me, but let them think that. Without food, I would be very lonely. In fact, without food, I would be dead. Hattie is good company too, and we are always happy to see each other. You know how it is – some people you can just be yourself with.

'Good morning, Tannie Maria,' she said.

I liked the way she sometimes called me Tannie, Auntie (even though she says it in her English way, as if it rhymes with 'nanny', when in fact it rhymes with 'honey'). She leaned down to kiss my cheek, but she missed and kissed the dry Karoo air instead.

'Coffee?' I said. Then I looked at the clock. The English don't like coffee after eleven o'clock. 'Tea?'

'That would be super,' said Hattie, clapping her hands in that Mary Poppins way of hers.

But she wasn't looking so super herself. Her frown was wrinkled like the leaves on a gwarrie tree.

'Are you okay, skat?' I said, as I prepared the tea tray. 'You look worried.'

'I do love your house,' she said, patting my wooden kitchen table. 'All the Oregon and the thick mud walls. It's so . . . authentic.'

When Fanie died, I sold the house we had in town and got this one out here in the veld.

'It's a nice old farmhouse,' I said. 'What's the matter, Hats?'

She sucked in her cheeks, like the words were falling back down her throat too fast.

'Let's sit on the stoep,' I said, carrying the tray to the table and chairs outside.

From my stoep you can see the garden with its lawn and vegetables and all the different trees. And then on the other side of my low wooden fence is the long dirt road leading up to my house, and the

dry veld with its bushes and old gwarrie trees. The nearest house, is a few kilometres away, hidden behind a koppie, but the trees make good neighbours.

Hattie smoothed her skirt under her as she sat down. I tried to catch her eye, but her gaze jumped all over the garden, like she was watching a bird flying about. One of my rust-brown hens came out from where she was resting under a geranium bush and helped herself to the buffet on the compost heap. But this wasn't the bird Hattie was watching. Hers flew from the lemon tree to the vegetable patch then hopped from the lizard-tail bush to the honeybells and back again. I heard birds calling all around us, but could see nothing where she was looking.

'Can you see something there in the veld plants?' I asked.

'Heavens above, it's warm,' she said.

She took an envelope from her pocket and fanned her face with it.

'Let me give you some milk tart.'

I cut slices and put them on our plates.

'It's just got to rain soon,' she said.

Now she was following the invisible bird as if it was jumping all over the table. I pushed the plate towards her.

'It's your favourite,' I said.

I could tell Hattie had more to say than the weather report. Her face was red, as if there was a hot thing in her mouth, but the corners of her lips were tight where she was holding it in.

Hattie was not one to be shy to speak, so I did not try and rush her. I poured our tea and looked out at the dry veld. It had been a long time since the rain. Across the veld were those low hills of the Klein Karoo, rolling up and dipping down like waves. On and on, like a still and stony sea. I picked up my melktert and bit off a mouthful. It was very good, the vanilla, milk and cinnamon working together to make that perfect comforting taste. The texture was just right too – the tart smooth and light, and the crust thin and crumbly.

Hattie looked into her cup, as if her imaginary bird had jumped in there. I could see a real bird in the shadows of a gwarrie tree, too far away to see what kind. I love those old trees. Some of them are thousands

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of years old. They are all knobbly and twisted like elbows and knees, and their leaves are dark green and wrinkled.

Hattie sat up straight and had a sip of her tea. She sighed. This is what stoeps are for. Drinking tea, and sighing and looking out at the veld. But Hattie was still looking inside her cup.

‘Delicious,’ I said, eating the last melktert crumbs on my plate.

My bird flew closer and landed in a sweet-thorn tree. It was a shrike. Hunting.

Hattie did not touch her milk tart, and I couldn’t sit still any longer.

‘What *is* it, Hattie, my skat?’

She swallowed some air and put the envelope on the table.

‘Oh, gosh, Maria,’ she said. ‘It’s not good news.’

I felt the tea and melktert do a small twist inside my belly.

## CHAPTER TWO

Now I'm not one to rush into bad news, so I helped myself to more tea and milk tart. Hattie was still drinking her first cup of tea, looking miserable. The envelope just sat there, full of its bad news.

'It's from Head Office,' she said, running her hand over a bump in her throat.

Maybe the air she had swallowed had got stuck there.

Hattie didn't often hear from Head Office. But when she did it was to tell her what to do. The community gazettes are watchamacallit, syndicated. Each gazette is independent, and has to raise most of its own funds through advertising, but they must still follow the Head Office rules.

The shrike dived from the branch of the sweet-thorn tree down onto the ground.

'Maria, they say we absolutely must have an advice column,' she said. I frowned at her. What was all the fuss about?

'Like an agony aunt column,' she said. 'Advice about love and such. They say it increases sales.'

'Ja. It might,' I said.

I was still waiting for the bad news.

'We just don't have the space. Or the funds to print the four extra pages that we'll need to add one column.' She held her hands like a book. I knew how it worked. Four pages were printed back to back on one big sheet. 'I've tried to rework the layout. I've tried to see what we can leave out. But there's nothing. Just nothing.'

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I shifted in my chair. The shrike flew back up to a branch with something it had caught.

'I phoned them on Friday,' said Hattie, 'to tell them, Sorry we just can't do it, not right now, I said.' Her throat became all squeezed like a plastic straw. 'They said we can cut out the recipe column.'

Her voice sounded far away. I was watching the shrike; it had a lizard in its beak. It stabbed its meat onto a big white thorn.

'Tannie Maria.'

Was the lizard still alive, I wondered?

'I argued, told them how much the readers adored your column. But they said the advice column was non-negotiable.'

Was the butcher bird going to leave the meat out to dry, and make biltong?

'Tannie Maria.'

I looked at her. Her face looked so tight and miserable – as if her life was going to pot, instead of mine. That recipe column *was* my life. Not just the money. Yes, I needed the extra food money; the pension I got after my husband's death was small. But the column was how I shared what was most important to me: my cooking.

My throat felt dry. I drank some tea.

'But I've been thinking,' Hattie said. '*You* could write the advice column. Give advice about love and such.'

I snorted. It was not a pretty sound.

'I know nothing about love,' I said.

Just then one of my chickens, the hen with the dark feathers around her neck, walked across the lawn, pecking at the ground, and I did feel a kind of love for her. I loved the taste of my melktert and the smell of rusks baking and the sound of the rain when it came after the long wait. And love was an ingredient in everything I cooked. But advice columns were not about melktert or chicken-love.

'Not that kind of love, anyway,' I said. 'And I'm not one to give advice. You should ask someone like Tannie Gouws who works at CBL Hardware. She always has advice for everyone.'

'One of the marvellous things about you, Maria, is you never give

unsolicited advice. But you *are* a superb listener. You're the one we come to when there's anything important to discuss. Remember how you helped Jessie when she couldn't decide whether to go and work in Cape Town?'

'I remember giving her koeksisters . . .'

'You listened to her and gave her excellent advice. Thanks to you, she is still here with us.'

I shook my head and said, 'I still think it was the koeksisters.'

'I had another idea,' Hattie said. 'Why don't you write a cookbook? *Tannie Maria's Recipes*. Maybe I can help you find a publisher.'

I heard a whirring sound and I looked up to see the shrike flying away. Leaving the lizard on the thorn.

A book wasn't a bad idea, really, but the words that came from my mouth were: 'It's lonely to write a book.'

She reached out to take my hand. But my hand just lay there.

'Oh, Tannie Maria,' she said. 'I'm so sorry.'

Hattie was a good friend. I didn't want to make her suffer. I gave her hand a squeeze.

'Eat some melktert, Hats,' I said. 'It's a good one.'

She picked up her fork and I helped myself to another slice. I didn't want to suffer either. I had no reason to feel lonely. I was sitting on my stoep with a lovely view of the veld, a good friend and some first-class milk tart.

'How about,' I said, 'I read people's letters and give them a recipe that will help them?'

Hattie finished her mouthful before she spoke.

'You'd need to give them some advice.'

'Food advice,' I said.

'They'll be writing in with their problems.'

'Different recipes for different problems.'

Hattie stabbed the air with her fork, and said, 'Food as medicine for the body and heart.'

'Ja, exactly.'

'You'll have to give some advice, but a recipe could be part of it.'



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*'Tannie Maria's Love Advice and Recipe Column.'*

Hattie smiled and her face was her own again.

'Goodness gracious, Tannie Maria. I don't see why not.'

Then she used the fork to polish off her melktert.

## CHAPTER THREE

So it was on the stoep with Hattie that we decided on *Tannie Maria's Love Advice and Recipe Column*. The column was very popular. A lot of people from all over the Klein Karoo wrote to me. The letters I wrote back gave me the recipes for this book: recipes for love and murder. So here I am, writing a recipe book after all. Not the kind I thought I'd write, but anyway.

One thing led to another in ways I did not expect. But let me not tell the story all upside-down, I just want to give you a taste . . .

The main recipe in this book is the recipe for murder. The love recipe is more complicated, but in a funny way it came out of this murder recipe:

### RECIPE FOR MURDER

- 1 stocky man who abuses his wife
  - 1 small tender wife
- 1 medium-sized tough woman in love with the wife
  - 1 double-barrelled shotgun
- 1 small Karoo town marinated in secrets
  - 3 bottles of Klipdrift brandy
  - 3 little ducks
- 1 bottle of pomegranate juice
  - 1 handful of chilli peppers
  - 1 mild gardener
  - 1 fire poker
- 1 red-hot New Yorker

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- 7 Seventh-day Adventists (prepared for The End of the World)
  - 1 hard-boiled investigative journalist
  - 1 soft amateur detective
  - 2 cool policemen
  - 1 lamb
- 1 handful of red herrings and suspects mixed together
  - Pinch of greed

Throw all the ingredients into a big pot and simmer slowly, stirring with a wooden spoon for a few years. Add the ducks, chillies and brandy towards the end and turn up the heat.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Just one week after I sat on the stoep with Harriet, the letters started coming in. I remember Hattie holding them up like a card trick, as she stood in the doorway of the office of the *Klein Karoo Gazette*. She must have heard me arriving in my bakkie and was waiting for me as I walked down the pathway.

‘Yoo-hoo, Tannie Maria! Your first letters!’ she called.

She was wearing a butter-yellow dress and her hair was golden in the sunlight. It was hot, so I walked slowly down the path of flat stones, between the pots of aloes and succulents. The small office is tucked away behind the Ladismith Art Gallery & Nursery in Eland Street.

‘The vetplantjies are flowering,’ I said.

The little fat plants had pink flowers that gleamed silver where they caught the light.

‘They arrived yesterday. There are three of them,’ she said, handing me the letters.

The *Gazette* office has fresh white walls, Oregon floorboards and a high ceiling. On the outer wall is one of those big round air vents with beautiful patterns that they call ‘Ladismith Eyes’. The office used to be a bedroom in what was one of the original old Ladismith houses. There’s only room for three wooden desks, a sink and a little fridge, but this is enough for Jessie, Hattie and me. There are other freelance journalists from small towns all over the Klein Karoo, but they send their work to Hattie by email.

On the ceiling a big fan was going round and round, but I don’t know if it helped make the room any cooler.

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‘Jislaaik,’ I said. ‘You could make rusks without an oven on a day like this.’

I put a tin of freshly baked beskuit on my desk. Jessie looked up from her computer and grinned at me and the rusk tin.

‘Tannie M,’ she said.

Jessie Mostert was the young *Gazette* journalist. She was a coloured girl who got a bursary to study at Grahamstown and then came back to work in her home town. Her mother was a nursing sister at the Ladismith hospital.

Jessie wore pale jeans, a belt with lots of pouches on it and a black vest. She had thick dark hair tied in a ponytail, and tattoos of geckos on her brown upper arms. Next to the computer on her desk were her scooter helmet and denim jacket. Jessie loved her little red scooter.

Hattie put the letters on my desk, next to the beskuit and the kettle. I worked only part-time and was happy to share my desk with the full-time tea stuff. I put on the kettle, and got some cups from the small sink.

Hattie sat down at her desk and paged through her notes.

‘Jess,’ she said. ‘I need you to cover the NGK church fête on Saturday.’

‘Ag, no, Hattie. Another fête. I’m an *investigative* journalist, you know.’

‘Ah, yes, the girl with the gecko tattoo.’

‘That’s not funny,’ Jessie said, smiling.

I looked at the three letters sitting on my desk, like unopened presents. I left them there while I made coffee for us all.

‘I want you to take some photos of the new work done by the patchwork group – they will have their own stall at the fête,’ said Hattie.

‘Oh, not the lappiesgroep again. I did a whole feature on them and the Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging last month.’

‘Don’t worry, Jessie darling, I’m sure something interesting will come up,’ said Hattie, scribbling on a pad. I didn’t think she’d seen Jessie rolling her eyes, but then she said: ‘Or else you can always find work on a more exciting paper. In Cape Town maybe.’

‘Ag, no, Hattie, you know I love it here. I just need . . . ’

‘Jessie, I’m truly delighted you decided to stay here. But you are a

very bright girl, and sometimes I think this town and paper are too small for you.'

'I love this town,' said Jessie. 'My family and friends are here. I just think there are big stories, even in a small town.'

I put a cup of coffee on each of their desks, and offered the tin of rusks. Hattie never has one before lunch, but Jessie's eyes sparkled at the sight of the golden crunchy beskuit and she forgot about her argument.

'Take two,' I said.

When she reached into the tin it looked like the gecko tattoos were climbing up her arm. I smiled at her. I like a girl with a good appetite.

'Lekker,' she said, and her hip burst into song.

*Girl on fire!* it sang.

'Sorry,' she said, opening one of her pouches. 'That's my phone.'

The song got louder as she walked towards the doorway and answered it.

'Hello . . . Reghardt?'

She went out into the garden and her voice became quiet and I couldn't hear her or her fire song any more. I sat down at my desk, and dipped my beskuit into my coffee. It had sunflower seeds in it, which gave it that roasted nutty flavour. I looked again at the envelopes.

The top letter was pink and addressed to Tannie Maria. The 'i's were dotted with little round circles. I took a sip of my coffee, then I opened the letter. By the time I'd finished reading, I was so shocked I stopped eating.

This is what it said:

*Dear Tannie Maria,*

*It feels like my life is over and I am not even thirteen. If I don't kill myself, my mother will. But she doesn't know yet. I have had sex three times, but I only swallowed once. Am I pregnant? I haven't had my period for ages.*

*He is fifteen. His skin is black and smooth and his smile is white, and he said he loved me. We used to meet under the kareeboom and then go to the shed and play Ice Cream. He said I taste like the sweet mangoes that grow on the streets where he comes from. He tastes like*

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*chocolate and nuts and ice cream. These are things I used to love to eat. I tried to stop the visits to the shed, but then I saw him there in the shade of the tree, and got hungry for him.*

I fanned myself with her pink envelope and carried on reading.

*When I told him I might be pregnant, he said we mustn't meet again. I go past the tree after school but he's never there.*

*I have been so worried that I can't eat. My mother says I am wasting away. I know I'm going to hell, which is why I haven't killed myself.*

*Can you help me?*

*Desperate*

I put down the letter and shook my head. Magtig! What a tragedy . . .

A young girl who can't eat.

We had to get her interested in food again. I needed a recipe with chocolate and nuts. And ice cream. With something healthy in it.

I would of course tell her that you can't get pregnant from oral sex. And in case she really was not able to talk to her mother, I would give her the number for the family planning clinic in Ladismith. But if I could just come up with an irresistible recipe for her, it might save everyone a lot of trouble.

Bananas, I thought. They are very healthy, and would help her get strong again. How about frozen bananas, dipped in melted dark chocolate and rolled in nuts. I wrote out a recipe for her with dark chocolate and toasted hazelnuts. That should help her get over him. And in case the boyfriend read the paper, I put in a recipe for mango sorbet too. Mangoes were in season, and the good ones tasted like honey and sunshine.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Sjoe, but it was hot and those cold recipes looked good. But there were still two unopened letters on my table. The letters did not call as loud as the frozen bananas.

‘I’m going to work from home,’ I told Hattie. ‘I need to test some recipes.’

‘Mhmm,’ she said.

She had a pencil in her mouth and was frowning as she worked.

‘Hattie, what time is Saturday’s fête?’ asked Jessie.

Jessie was at her desk, taking a little notebook out of one of her pouches.

‘Fiddlesticks,’ said Hattie, pressing buttons on her computer. ‘Hmm? Two p.m.’

I stood up, the letters in my hand.

‘It’s important the recipes are good.’ I said. ‘Irresistible.’

Hattie looked up from her work.

‘Maria, darling. Go.’

My little bakkie was parked a few trees away from the office, beside Jessie’s red scooter. We tried to stay a bit of a distance from Hattie’s Toyota Etios; I already had one ding she had made on the door of my van. My Nissan 1400 bakkie was pale blue – like the Karoo sky early in the morning. With a canopy that was white like those small puffy clouds. Though the canopy was usually more dusty than the clouds. I’d left all the windows open, and it was in the shade of a jacaranda tree,



but it was still baking hot in there. It really was a day for ice cream.

I popped in at the Spar to pick up the ingredients. It was a quiet time of day so I was lucky to get out of there with only chatting to three people. Not that I mind chatting. It's just that those sweet cool dishes were calling to me quite loudly, so I couldn't listen properly.

I could smell the ripe mangoes as I drove past the farmlands, through the open veld and between the low brown hills. I turned into the dirt road that goes towards my house, drove past the eucalyptus trees and parked in my driveway, next to the lavender. Two brown chickens were lying in the shade of the geranium bush; they didn't get up to say hello.

I went into the kitchen and plonked my grocery bag on the big wooden table, then straightaway peeled six bananas and put them in a Tupperware in the freezer. Then I chopped four mangoes and put them in the freezer too. I stood over the sink to eat the flesh off the mango skins and suck their sticky pips clean. It was a messy business.

Then I crushed the hazelnuts with my wooden pestle and mortar and lightly toasted them in a pan. I tasted them while they were warm. I broke the chocolate up and put it in a double boiler. I would do the melting when the bananas were frozen. I tasted the dark chocolate. I ate some together with the nuts just to check the combination. Then I prepared some more nuts and chocolate to make up for all the testing. It would take a couple of hours for the bananas and mangoes to freeze. How was I going to wait that long? My letters. I had brought back my two letters from work.

I decided to take them outside so I could focus without distractions. I sat on the shady stoep and opened one. It was from a little girl who liked a boy and didn't know how to make friends with him. I gave her a nice easy fridge fudge recipe. Little boys never say no to fudge.

The next letter I opened said: *Oh hell, I'm such a total idiot. Please tear up that last letter. If my husband ever sees or hears about it . . . I'm a fool. Please don't publish it. Destroy it. I beg you.*

What last letter? What was she afraid of? I looked at the postmark on the envelope. Ladismith. The date was two days ago. I phoned the *Gazette*, and got Jessie.

'Hey, Tannie M,' she said.

‘Did I leave a letter on my desk?’ I asked.

‘Hang on, I’ll check.’

I looked at the kitchen clock while Jessie was gone. Not even an hour had passed since I’d put the bananas in the freezer.

‘No, nothing. But mail did arrive after you left. And there’s a letter for you.’

‘White envelope,’ I said. ‘Postmark Ladismith, sent two or three days ago?’

‘Mmm . . . ’ she said. ‘Yup.’

‘I’m making some choc-nut frozen bananas,’ I said. ‘If you want to pop over sometime . . . ’

‘Why don’t I shoot across in my lunch break? I’ll bring your letter.’

‘Just right,’ I said.

I didn’t have a good feeling about the husband in the woman’s letter. It gave me an uncomfortable worry in my belly. I decided to put something sweet in my stomach instead. The banana wasn’t frozen yet, but it tasted good with the nuts and chocolate. I needed to test the recipe properly – with frozen banana and melted chocolate – so I stopped at just one banana.

To get myself out of the kitchen I put on my veldskoene, old clothes and straw hat and went into the vegetable garden. I had two pairs of veldskoene: one light khaki, which was smarter, and the other dark brown, which was better for gardening. It was like a roasting oven outside but there was a part of the garden that was in the shade of the lemon tree, and I kneeled down there and started pulling out weeds.

There were some snails on my lettuce and I chucked them onto the compost heap where the chickens would find them.

I was lucky I had good borehole water. It had been too long without rain. The Karoo sun tries to suck all the moisture out of the plants and people. But we knyp it in, holding on. The little vygies and other succulents do the best job of holding onto it. I put olive oil on my skin at night so I don’t turn into dried biltong. But I don’t use it when I go outside or else the sun would fry me into a Tannie Maria vetkoek.

After a while the sun was too much. I stood up and brushed the soil off my knees and washed my hands under the garden tap. I took my

hat off and splashed my face with cool water and wiped it with my handkerchief. Then I went inside and put the chocolate on the double boiler to melt and took the mangoes out of the freezer. They were frozen, but not rock hard, which is just perfect. I whizzed them in the blender, then put this nice sorbet in the Tupperware and popped it back in the freezer.

I heard Jessie's scooter coming so I took the bananas out of the freezer and the melted chocolate off the stove. I used my little braai tongs to dip the frozen bananas into the bowl of dark chocolate and then roll them in the plate of toasted nuts.

Jessie grinned as she came in the kitchen.

'Wow, Tannie M, something smells lekker. Jislaaik, what is that?'

She put her helmet and denim jacket on a kitchen chair and looked at the chocolate-nut bananas that I was putting onto wax paper. When I had done five bananas I popped them in the freezer.

'First, our starters,' I said, and dished us two bowls of mango sorbet.

'Ooh, this is awesome, Tannie. What's in it?'

'Mangoes.'

'Ja, but what else?'

'Just mangoes.'

'No. Really?'

'Ja. The Zill ones are the best, but they aren't in season yet. These Tommy Atkins are very nice too. Oh, and a bit of lime juice on top, to give it that tang.'

'Wow. Amazing.'

I put our empty bowls in the sink, and got us two plates for the main course. Jessie adjusted her belt.

'What *is* all that stuff on your belt, Jessie?' I asked, as I dished the bananas onto our plates.

'Mmm,' she said, patting the different pouches that hung across her hips. 'Camera, phone, notebooks, knife, torch, pepper spray. That kind of stuff.' She was looking now at the chocolate banana. 'That looks, um, delicious.'

'They do look a bit funny like that,' I said. 'Not quite right.'

'Do we eat them with our fingers?'

‘I’m not sure,’ I said. ‘I’ve never done this before. Here’s a knife and fork . . . Wait a minute. Cream. That’s what they need.’ I put a big dollop of whipped cream on our plates. ‘There, that looks better.’

We started with a knife and fork but ended up using our fingers because they were too delicious to waste time fiddling.

One of the best things about Jessie is that she appreciates food. She has a sensible body with padding in the right places.

We didn’t talk as we ate, but Jessie closed her eyes and moaned a bit.

‘Jislaaik,’ she said, when she had finished, ‘that is the best banana I’ve had in my whole damn life.’

I smiled and dished up her pudding. Another frozen choc-nut banana and cream. I gave myself one too, to keep her company. I wished that I could send Jessie’s sensibleness to the girl I was sending this recipe to.

Jessie cleaned the last smudges of chocolate off her plate. Then she sighed and stroked one of the geckos tattooed on her arm. She sometimes does that when she is happy.

‘I’d better get back,’ she said, standing up and opening a pouch on her belt. ‘Here’s your letter.’

It felt hot in my hands.

## CHAPTER SIX

When Jessie left I did not even clean up; I went outside and sat on the metal chair in the shade of the lemon tree, and opened the envelope. The handwriting was the same as the other letter.

*Dear Tannie Maria,*

*I've always enjoyed your recipes. I read them every week.*

*I am ashamed to be writing to you now for advice. I've made my bed and I should lie in it, but then after what's just happened . . .*

*I promised to love and obey this man. My husband. The love has dried up, but I do my best. He does his bit too, he pays for our son who has cerebral palsy and is in a special needs home.*

*The beatings only happen when he is drunk or jealous. If I don't fight back it's not too bad. He says he is sorry afterwards, which in an odd way I believe, and that he won't do it again, which I don't. Sometimes something snaps. I think it has something to do with his own father and with his time in the army. He has nightmares about the army. Not that I'm making excuses for him – I'm just saying he's not a monster.*

My mouth was dry and I stood up, leaving the half-read letter on the chair. I went inside and poured myself a glass of water from the fridge. My hands were shaking a bit. My chest hurt as I swallowed. It happens when I drink cold water too fast. I went back to the letter in the garden and carried on reading.

*The beatings are about once a month. The sex once a week. So I have twenty-five days a month when he doesn't bother me much. I have a lot of happy hours with my woman friend, who comes to visit when he is out. I work only two mornings a week, so am at home a lot. She*

Sally Andrew

*and I have a kind of love for each other, though I prefer to keep it platonic.*

*She gave me the ducks. Three white ornamental ducks. We fixed up the pond for them to swim in.*

*Those ducks were the first things I've ever loved in a totally pure way. Without guilt or pain. Pure bright joy. I could just watch them for hours. Swimming. Waddling. Rooting in the grass. Lying with their beaks tucked into their feathers.*

*He shot them.*

*All three of them.*

*With his fucking shotgun.*

*They were sleeping.*

*I wanted to kill him. I grabbed a kitchen knife and ran at him. He held my arms, until I'd cried myself into exhaustion.*

*My husband had drunk a bottle of Klipdrift brandy. He was jealous of my friend and of the ducks. But the final straw was the curry I made. He said the lamb was tough and the curry too spicy. He said I didn't care about him. He was right on both counts.*

*Could you please give me a recipe for a good mutton curry?*

*And any other advice?*

*Yours sincerely*

*Bereft woman*

I sat there for a long time with the letter on my lap, looking at my veldskoene, remembering things I didn't want to remember. The sun slowly chased me out of the shadow and I felt its warmth on my legs and shoulders. But I was shivering and felt cold. Then suddenly I was hot, the sun burning my skin. A wind rustled the leaves in the tree and I stood up and went inside.

There were unhappy feelings in my tummy. I ate the last frozen banana, and it pushed aside those feelings. I couldn't feel much other than chocolate bananas in my stomach any more. But my mind, my mind was still going where I didn't want it to go. My hands were shaking again.

## *Recipes for Love and Murder*

I made myself a big mug of coffee with lots of sugar and took it outside to the stoep table, with the woman's letter and my pen and paper. I thought the sweet coffee would pull me right. But even after that whole mug of coffee I still felt down. I was full of a sadness that I couldn't shake off. All those years that I had spent with a man who was much the same as her husband. Not exactly the same. He had not shot my ducks. I did not have ducks. Or a good friend to give me white ducks. And my beatings were more like once a week, and the forced sex once a month. If I was lucky. But still the story felt the same. Even the Klipdrift brandy was the same. I didn't ever run at him with a knife. And I didn't leave him. I had been scared of dying. And scared of living too.

When Fanie got a heart attack and died, something broke free in me. But while he was alive, I just could not escape. Even the priest at our church said it was my duty to stay by my husband, so I stayed and stayed.

I hoped this woman would not do the same. I picked up my pen. We would of course not print what she wrote, but we could publish a recipe and a letter from me. I spent a long time working out what to say: writing and crossing out. It took me two hours and a bowl of mango sorbet. In the end I said:

*I lived for too many years with a man that beat me. Bruises and bones can heal. But the heart, the heart can be damaged for ever. Love is a precious thing. If you are with a man who abuses you, you should leave him. I know there are many reasons why it is hard. But you can find a way.*

*You can do better than I did. You can save your heart.*

Then I wrote out my best recipe for a slow-cooked lamb curry. (My mind jumped to a duck muscadel dish, but of course I didn't write it.) You will find the mutton curry recipe at the end of the book, with all the other recipes. It is a very tender and delicious curry with excellent sambals.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

A couple of weeks later I was walking in my veldskoene down the path to the office, in the morning heat. I could hear voices as I got close to the door.

‘That’s super-duper,’ said Hattie, ‘I knew you could write a great fête article.’

‘Ag, Hattie, please. Now, the story I wanted to discuss with you. Local farming practices and how overgrazing and pesticides are totally mucking up the ecosystems—’

‘Maria,’ Hattie said, clapping her hands together as she saw me, ‘just look at that pile of letters on your desk. Isn’t it marvellous?’

I stood under the ceiling fan and felt the air dry the sweat on my face and neck. My brown cotton dress felt rumpled and sticky though it was perfect when I put it on this morning. Hattie was sitting at her desk and she brushed a speck of dirt off her smooth apricot cotton trousers. I don’t know how she always managed to look so smart. Jessie grinned as she handed me a glass of cold water. Her smile was bright in her round brown face.

‘Dankie, skat,’ I said and gave her a Tupperware. ‘Bobotie for you.’

‘Ooh, lekker,’ Jessie said, and put it in the small fridge.

She stood for a moment with the fridge door open, and lifted her thick ponytail up, away from her black vest. She let the air cool her face and the back of her neck.

*Girl on fire*, sang Jessie’s cell phone. She took it out of its pouch and pressed a button which turned the song off.

‘Just a reminder,’ she said.



## *Recipes for Love and Murder*

‘Goodness, Jess. We don’t need reminders that it’s hot,’ said Hattie.

‘No,’ said Jessie, smiling. ‘It’s reminding me to check on a certain website that should be ready by now . . . ’

She went and clicked some buttons on her computer. I sat down at my desk with my glass of cool water. It had been two weeks since we’d started the column and the letters were flowing in. A lot of people were hungry for my recipes and advice. It was quite a responsibility, but I was enjoying it. When I gave someone a recipe, I usually cooked it for myself too. When I wasn’t writing, I was cooking. More than I could eat myself. Sometimes I froze the extra food; often I brought it to Jessie.

I put down my glass and picked up the thick handful of letters on my desk.

‘Jinne,’ I said. ‘How am I going to choose?’

I laid them out like a solitaire game on my desk. There was only space to print one or two letters per week, and I felt bad for the people I couldn’t answer. Some of them gave addresses, and I sent them replies. But most of them didn’t.

‘Maria, darling, we’ve been working on your problem,’ said Hattie. She looked at Jessie, who was in front of her computer. Jessie nodded and gave Hattie a thumbs-up sign. ‘And we are delighted to tell you we’ve got a website up now. I got sponsorship from Klein Karoo Real Estate Agents. We can post loads of your letters up on the website. And people can email their letters to you.’

‘Come have a look,’ said Jessie.

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Thanks, skat.’ I didn’t want to sound ungrateful. ‘The thing is, I am sure most of the people who write to me don’t have web thingies. They are just . . . ordinary people.’

‘You’d be surprised, y’know,’ said Jessie. ‘Many people have internet in their homes. And lots of the little towns have got internet cafés these days.’

I went to look at the website on her screen. It was called the *Klein Karoo Gazette*, just like the newspaper. Jessie clicked on something and a page came up that said: *Tannie Maria’s Love Advice and Recipe Column*. There was a drawing of a nice tannie who didn’t look like me, holding a lovely cake in the shape of a heart.

‘It does look nice,’ I said. ‘I know I’m behind the times and all . . . with this website stuff.’

‘Oh, do tell her, Jessie, what you organised.’

‘I spoke to the manager of the Parmalat cheese shop,’ said Jessie. ‘They have bought some ad space next to your column, and . . . you know how they have that notice board up in their shop with announcements and stuff? Well, they’ve agreed to put up a second board, just for Tannie Maria’s letters and recipes.’

‘Ag, moederliefie,’ I said, smiling at them both. ‘That is so sweet.’

‘And now,’ said Hattie, ‘we can pay you a bit more for your work. What with all the extra letters you’ll be posting.’

‘Most people keep their letters anonymous,’ I said, ‘so I can’t post to them.’

‘No, darling, I mean posting on the website, and the notice board.’

‘About Parmalat,’ said Jessie. ‘They ask if you could put dairy products in your recipes. Cream and cheese and that.’

‘All of them?’ I asked.

‘Um, no, but in a lot of the ones that go up on the board.’

‘That’s okay,’ I said, ‘I like cheese.’

I was going to make some coffee before starting work, but the handwriting on one of the envelopes stopped me. I pushed the other letters aside and sat down and opened it.

It was from the woman with the dead ducks.

It said:

*A note for Tannie Maria (not for publication)*

*The mutton curry was superb. It seemed to pacify my husband a little. I kept some for my friend, who loved it.*

*I am making a plan that will allow me to leave. I will just have to tread water till I get it right.*

*Thank you.*

Sometimes I wished the letters to me weren’t anonymous. That I could write back. I suppose there was the danger that the woman’s husband could get his hands on my letter. I wrote back to the duck lady inside

## *Recipes for Love and Murder*

my own head: *You can do it! I'll send you every recipe I know to help you.*

I have a drawer in my office, where I keep my thank-you letters. But I didn't put her letter there. I felt worried about her; she hadn't escaped yet. I was going to take her letter home and put it in a special place.

I made us all coffee and then read through the other letters. Hattie and Jessie were arguing about an article, but I tuned their voices out while I worked on my laptop. I like writing by hand but it's easier to fix mistakes on a computer.

By lunchtime I had a headache but a good feeling in my heart. There were only two letters left to answer. To all the other people – teenagers and grannies, men and women, writing in with their problems and their dreams – I had given some small advice and a good recipe. The best recipe, the one that kept reminding me it was lunchtime, was the potato salad with mint and cream. I needed to go home at once and test that one out. I also wanted to take the duck lady's letter home. I couldn't reach her, but I could look after that letter as if it was a piece of her.

'I'm going home,' I told Hattie.

My house was cooler than the office. And I had some ice-cold home-made lemonade.

'Goodness gracious,' said Hattie, glancing at her watch, 'it's one o'clock already.'

'I've done most of the letters, and will bring them tomorrow.' I said. 'I just need to work out which are for the paper and which are for the cheeseweb.'

Hattie laughed. She had a tinkling sort of laugh. Cool like water.

'You know what I mean,' I said. 'I'm too hot and hungry to talk right.'

Before I got in my little blue bakkie, I opened the doors on both sides and chased the heat waves out. Still the seat burnt my skin wherever my dress wasn't covering me. I left the windows open when I drove and the air dried out my lungs.

The hills were lying low, as if they could escape the heat. Towerkop

rock, on top of the Swartberge, wasn't shy of the sun, sticking its bald, split head high up into the sky. The sides of the mountain looked fuzzy and wobbly.

When I got to my house, before I even poured myself that lemonade, I took the letter to the kitchen shelf. To the big recipe book my mother had given me. I opened the pages of *Kook en Geniet*. I folded the duck lady's letter between the pages, and closed the book around her words. Like it was holding her, sending her everything she needed.

I spent the afternoon with my potato salad, preparing it and eating it at my stoep table, and then I sat beside the leftovers with my last two letters and my pen and paper.

One letter was from a young girl with no friends and a school cooking project. The other from an old man living alone on a farm, with too much mince in his freezer. I could feel the unhappiness of the writers, and I sat with it for a while, trying to work out what I could give them. They were asking me for recipes, but it's obvious that they were lonely and wanted love. I did not have a recipe for love.

But if I could give them really good recipes, easy ones they could make themselves, they could invite someone to eat with them. I knew the recipe for a perfect macaroni cheese that I could give to the girl. And for the old man, the best spaghetti bolognaise. And even if they ending up eating them on their own . . .

'If you are honest with yourself,' I said to the potato salad, 'is the feeling of love really any better than the satisfaction you get from a good meal?'

Food is good company, but it doesn't answer back, not in words anyway. Maybe that is one of the reasons why it is good company. But it did communicate with me somehow, because next thing I knew I was polishing off the leftovers of that cream and mint potato salad.

My mouth was full of delicious flavours and my tummy full, and I answered my own question: 'I think not.'

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning my phone rang. It was Hattie.

‘Have you heard?’ she said. ‘Nelson Mandela died last night.’

When I put the phone down, I made myself a cup of coffee and took two rusks and sat out on the stoep. But before I could bring the coffee to my lips, the tears started leaking out of me.

Mandela was ninety-five and had been sick for a while, but it still came as a shock. I looked out at the brown veld and the wrinkled gwarrie trees and the distant mountains. My tears made it seem like rain was falling, but the sky was wide and empty. I knew that people all over the land were crying with me for Tata Mandela.

Then my belly started shaking and tears from deep inside me came up and I realised I was crying for my own father too. My pa who had left me too soon.

I looked out at the veld and let my heart be filled with my sadness and my pride for my father and for Mandela.

Sometimes I thought that my father left my mother because of Mandela. But of course I couldn’t blame Mandela, who had, after all, sat for over twenty years in prison on Robben Island, a long way from the Klein Karoo. I knew my father did love my mother – with her brown eyes and soft hands, and her delicious food – but I also knew that the Klein Karoo, even with its big veld and open skies, was too small for him. And my mother’s mind too narrow.

To my pa, Mandela was a freedom-fighter and a great leader; to my ma he was a terrorist and a kaffir (though she did not use the K-word

in front of my father). They did not often argue in front of me, but this was a disagreement that I heard more than once.

My father was the African correspondent for a newspaper in England, the *Guardian*, and he would travel a lot. Over the years, he came home less and less, and then he stopped coming back altogether. He would send money and postcards. The cards made my mother angry. Eventually the postcards stopped, although the money carried on every month. When I missed him I would read the old postcards that I had rescued from the rubbish bin (and sometimes had to stick together where my mother had torn them). I kept them in a book my father used to read to me when I was little – Rudyard Kipling’s *Just So Stories*. And I waited to grow up, because when I was eighteen I would go and find him, and visit some of the wonderful places on the postcards and in the *Just So Stories*. But that’s not how it turned out.

When I was eighteen my mother got a long-distance phone call saying my father had died in an accident. She seemed just as upset that it was a black man who gave her the news as by the fact that my pa had died.

The money from my father stopped, but the *Guardian* continued with a small pension for my mother. I got a job at Agri – the Farmers Co-op – to help cover the bills. I lived with my ma right through my twenties.

In 1990, the apartheid government finally lifted the State of Emergency. Political organisations – including the African National Congress – were unbanned, and all political detainees and prisoners were released. Mandela was free at last. But the country was full of fighting and blood.

Mandela led the reconciliation talks and somehow took us down a path to peace. In 1994 all South Africans were allowed to vote in the first non-racial democratic election. The ANC came into power and Mandela was our president.

My mother, along with lots of other whites, was terrified. She bought boxes of tinned food and put bolts on all the doors and windows. I did not know what to think about the politics, but I felt more and more trapped in the house. It was then that Fanie started courting me. I was thirty-three. When he asked me to marry him, I was just glad to get out of my mother’s home.

Fanie had done his two years of conscription in the apartheid army and was angry with the Afrikaner National Party government for getting 'all buddy-buddy' with the ANC. This same National Party had trained him to kill these 'ANC terrorists', and had now let 'the enemy' take over our government. Mandela eventually charmed my mother, but Fanie never relaxed with him, or with the black government.

'I like the way he dances,' my mother said of Mandela. Of Fanie she said: 'He has a good job at the bank, and the Van Hartens are a respectable family. His father was a NGK priest, you know.'

It was only once she had relaxed the bolts and started shopping normally (though she still kept two big sacks of flour in the pantry) that she told me the truth about my father: he had been an underground member of the African National Congress. Even though the organisation was unbanned and my father already dead by the time she told me, she whispered the news to me, and told me to keep it secret.

She would not tell me more about what he did or about what kind of accident had killed him, or why we didn't have a funeral for him.

I hoped Mandela would cure her of some of her anger towards my father and the blacks who stole Pa from her, but she held on to a lonely kind of bitterness until she died.

Because Mandela was a good man, and was ANC, like my father, I started listening to him as if he might have the same sort of advice as my pa would have given me. Before that I had not paid much attention to politics; it all happened far away from me. After all, as we saw on TV, most of the unrest was trouble with the blacks, and in the Klein Karoo there were mainly coloured townships. After listening to Mandela, I didn't vote ANC (in fact I didn't vote at all), but I joined the NGK women's group that raised funds for coloured schools and AIDS orphans. I did a lot of baking for those church fêtes.

And when I was married to Fanie and he started to beat me, I took courage from Mandela. Mandela stood up for women's rights and criticised violence against women. Sometimes after listening to him, I felt I must just walk away from Fanie. But my fear was stronger. So was the voice of my husband, mother and church: *Staan by jou man. Stand by your man.*

*Sally Andrew*

Still, even though I stayed with Fanie, Mandela's wise words helped with the loneliness and the pain, and made me think maybe, just maybe, it wasn't all my fault.

When I had finished my coffee and brushed the rusk crumbs off my lap, I found myself crying a bit more. And the tears for my father and for Mandela, the father of our nation, were all mixed up on my cheeks.



## CHAPTER NINE

Over the next week, South Africa mourned Mandela's death and celebrated his life. People from all over the world came to pay their respects. At the memorial service in Johannesburg, the heavens opened up and it rained and rained. We listened to parts of the service on the radio in the *Gazette* office. The office was hot and dry and we sat still, listening as the fan turned slowly round and round. The president of Tanzania reminded us that in Africa, rain is the biggest blessing. Rain will fall when a chief arrives. The skies were celebrating as the chief, Mandela, went to heaven.

'His grandmother was San, you know,' said Jessie. 'The Bushmen know how to make rain.'

During Barack Obama's speech Jessie started crying and even Hattie was dabbing at the corner of her eyes with a handkerchief. I had already done my crying. I was surprised to see how moved Jessie was. She was too young to know Mandela. But he was the kind of man whose story and whose dreams reached across the ages. And like Mandela and Obama, Jessie was passionate about justice.

We all liked the lines that Obama quoted – the ones that kept Mandela going when he was in prison for all those years – about being captain of your own soul.

The day of Mandela's funeral was an unofficial public holiday. I was surprised that even Ladismith took the day off to honour Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. Twenty years ago the whites and even many of the coloureds would have seen him as a terrorist, like my mother did. But

Mandela in his life and in his death managed to win their hearts. He reminded us all of the goodness in ourselves and each other.

I met up with Jessie and Hattie at the Ladismith Hotel, and the bar was full of people watching the funeral service on the big-screen television. The hotel served coffee and rusks at no charge, and had brought in a whole lot of white plastic chairs alongside the usual wooden ones. The curtains were closed, so we could see the TV nicely.

The bank manager in a suit was sitting alongside the old coloured man who begs outside the Spar. And the young black policemen were drinking coffee with the old white women who work in the furniture store. Everyone was sitting together as if they were old friends, in a way you don't usually see in Ladismith.

When they carried Mandela's coffin off, I had to work at not crying. Jessie, Hattie and me sat there, with our heads held up high. I hoped that Mandela's spirit would live on in us somehow.

## CHAPTER TEN

The next day we were back at the *Gazette* office, and everything was back to normal. Though I did have a feeling that from now on everyone in South Africa would treat each other with respect and kindness. I was wrong about that . . .

I was leafing through a new batch of letters. The fan on the ceiling was going round and round. It was like an oven with a thermafán. Jessie, Hattie and I were all being evenly baked as we sat at our desks.

Jessie had her usual black vest on, her fingers moving so fast across her keyboard I don't know how her thoughts were keeping up with them. The geckos on her arms swayed a little as they followed her typing fingers. Hattie was at her computer, wearing a peach linen short-sleeved shirt and matching skirt. Linen, and still it wasn't creased.

'There are five emails for you, Maria,' said Hattie. 'Isn't that marvelous?'

Jessie's phone sang, *My black president*. It was the song Brenda Fassie had written in honour of Mandela. But I did not look up; the letter on my table was pulling all my attention. I ran my fingertips over the writing on the envelope. I could learn a lot about someone before I even opened their letter. This writer used capital letters and pushed too hard with the pen, as if their message was very important. The address was written in the Afrikaans way, with the number after the street name. *Elandstraat, 7*. The words of the letter were pressed onto a lined page with a black ballpoint pen:

TANNIE MARIA. I'M SCARED MY FRIEND'S HUSBAND IS

GOING TO KILL HER. HE BROKE HER ARM. HE THINKS SHE'S LEAVING HIM AND HE SAID HE'LL KILL HER. SHE DOESN'T WANT TO CALL THE POLICE. SHE SAYS I MUSTN'T GO TO HER HOUSE. IF I KILL HIM IN SELF DEFENCE OF HER, HOW LONG WILL I GO TO JAIL?

I put my head in my hands.

'Hey, Tannie, what's up?' asked Jessie.

I gave her the letter. She read it in three seconds.

'Gosh, you look peaked, Maria,' said Hattie. 'Can I make you a spot of tea?' I nodded. 'What's the letter say?'

'It's another bastard dondering his wife,' Jessie said, handing the letter to Hattie. 'Threatened to kill her. Jislaaik. I wish there was a giant insecticide for these guys. DDT that we could spray from an airplane.'

'There was that other lady of yours,' said Hattie, looking at the letter, 'with the husband who was also a rotter.'

'Yes,' I said. 'The lady with the ducks. Without the ducks.'

'The bastard shot them, didn't he?' said Jessie.

'I got another letter from her recently,' I said, 'telling me she was making a plan to leave. I think the woman who wrote this letter is duck lady's friend. The one who gave her the ducks.'

'Is there no return address?' said Hattie.

I shook my head.

'Nearly all my letters are anonymous,' I said. 'But it's got a Ladismith stamp.'

'It might be someone else,' said Jessie. 'One out of four women in South Africa is beaten by their husband or boyfriend.'

'I don't think she's one of those. I've just got a feeling that it's my duck lady. She spoke about her friend who loved her. I told her to leave her husband. And now he might kill her.'

'Fiddlesticks,' said Hattie, putting a cup of tea on my desk. 'There's no need for that sort of nonsense. Let's get a response to this woman right away. I'm sure you can help her. We can put your answer on the website now, and the Parmalat board, and we can get your letter into tomorrow's *Gazette*.'

‘Eish. We’d better act fast,’ said Jessie. ‘I’ve got the number here for People Opposing Women Abuse.’ She was looking at her BlackBerry phone. ‘This is serious. At least three women are killed by their partners every day in South Africa. Okay, let’s give her the numbers for the Battered Women’s Shelter, Life Line and Legal Aid.’

While Jessie wrote the phone numbers down on a bit of paper, I had a sip of my tea, and tried to think not of all the women in South Africa who were beaten, raped and killed, nor of my years with Fanie, but only of this woman and her friend, asking for my help. What did they need right now?

‘I can tell you this for sure,’ said Jessie, handing me the phone numbers, ‘self-defence won’t work as a legal argument, if she’s killing to protect her friend. The woman who’s being beaten can get a protection order and a warrant for the man’s arrest. If he breaks the protection order, the police will arrest him. The wife must organise this. A friend can help, but can’t do it for her.’

I spent an hour making phone calls and another half-hour writing the letter telling her what I’d learned. Jessie was right. There was not much the friend could do. The woman had to act for herself. She must ask for the domestic violence clerk at the Ladismith Magistrates’ Court, and get a protection order. Her friend could give her all the information and the phone numbers. There was counselling and legal aid, and a shelter in George where she could stay.

If duck lady was reading the paper – or the web or the Parmalat board – she would get this story herself. I don’t know why I hadn’t sent these numbers in my first letter to her. That was really stupid of me. I should have asked Jessie earlier. I wish I’d known about those phone numbers when I was with Fanie.

I wanted to give the woman who had written to me some comfort food, recipes for chicken pies and chocolate cake. Things you could rely on when everything else is deurmekaar. But I knew that she would probably not be in the mood for baking, even if she had a thermafan oven. And I had no way of taking the food to her myself.

Then I remembered Tannie Kuruman made the best chicken pies. Soft and juicy inside, with flaky pastry crusts. I phoned her up and got her

recipe and put it at the end of my letter, saying that the pies were for sale at the Route 62 Café.

Jessie put the letter on the website, and I went and pinned a copy on the Parmalat notice board. On the way back I stopped at Tannie Kuruman's café and bought two warm chicken pies.

I sat in the shade of a big umbrella, watching the mountains, the Swartberge, with the Towerkop peak, there above the town. The heat made them look further away than they really were. The shadows on their flanks were purple and green, like bruises.

The pies were delicious. The first one I ate for duck lady. The second for her friend. In case they didn't get a chance to buy their own.