

CHAPTER ONE

Have you ever wanted something really badly? You can't just wait till it lands in your lap, but if you chase it too hard you might chase it away from you. Or catch something you didn't expect. I was maybe too hungry for love and ended up with murder on my plate.

It was a warm Saturday afternoon in March, and I was getting ready for dinner with Detective Lieutenant Henk Kannemeyer. A bokmakierie shrike sang out in my garden, and a bird replied from a thorn tree in the veld.

I put a bowl of salad onto the porch table. 'Ag, you look beautiful,' I told the salad.

I had made three salads and two puddings, for just two people. I guess that shows I was trying too hard.

Henk was bringing the potjie food for the fire. The potato salad and coleslaw were in the fridge; the rocket salad with Brie, red figs and pomegranate pips was on the stoep table. There had been some gentle rain the day before that made the air so clean that I could see the red rocks on the Rooiberg mountain and the purple folds of the Langeberge. But now was not the time to enjoy the view. There were still the butter dumplings to make, as well as the icing for the peanut-butter coffee chocolate cake.

Tonight was a special date because Henk was going to spend the night. We had discussed where Kosie, his lamb, was going to sleep. The lamb was a gift from Henk's uncle Koos, the sheep farmer, and was not meant to be a pet. But although Henk loved roast lamb, he didn't have the heart to do that to Kosie. In his own house, the lammetjie slept

in the kitchen, but Henk agreed it was time the lamb learnt to be an outside animal, and it would sleep in the little hok behind the house with my chickens. It got on well with my chickens.

The idea of Henk spending the night made me nervous. I ate some of the potato salad with its cream-and-mint dressing. The bokmakierie was still singing in my garden. Most birds have just one hit single, but that shrike could make a double album with all its tunes. My favourite song is the one where it throws its head back, opens its beak and pumps its little yellow breast. It was singing that very song as I iced the cake with melted chocolate and coffee. Another bird that sings with such feeling is the fiery-necked nightjar. When there's a full moon, it sometimes sings all night. It makes a beautiful bubbling sound that is filled with such pleasure it can make you blush.

I cleaned the icing bowl with my fingers. Now I would need to scrub my hands before putting on my lacy white underwear. White, like it was going to be my first time.

It would be the first time since my late husband, Fanie.

Henk arrived in his Toyota Hilux bakkie just before sunset. He came with a bag of wood for the fire, a three-legged potjie pot, a lamb and the lamb's blue blanket. Kosie wandered over to join my chickens at the compost buffet. Henk put the cast-iron pot by the braai spot in the garden. I stood on the stoep, watching him as he brushed his hands together and then wiped them on his jeans and looked up at me. He smiled that big smile of his, and the sun caught the tips of his chestnut moustache. He wore a white cotton shirt with some buttons undone, and his chest hairs glowed silver and copper. What had I done to deserve someone like him?

'Hello, Henk,' I said, smiling. I stood with my hands on my hips, in my cream dress with the blue flowers.

He did not answer but walked up the stairs onto the stoep. He cupped my chin in his hand and tilted it up to him. He bent down (he is big and tall, and I am round and short) and kissed me. He smelt like fresh bread and cinnamon, and honey from the beeswax on his moustache.

The Satanic Mechanic

He held his large hand in the small of my back and pressed me to him. I wanted to lead him inside there and then, and if I'd followed the wild blood of my father (who was English and a journalist), I would have done just that. But my mother was a respectable Afrikaans housewife, and she had fed me her morals along with all her good meals.

'I should light the fire,' said Henk, his voice warm in my ear.

'Yes,' I said.

The best potjie needs a few hours simmering on a low heat.

CHAPTER TWO

The frogs and toads were making music like an underwater marimba band. There's a spring near the Swartberge, the Black Mountains behind my house, and a stream with little pools, where the frogs sing love songs to their mates.

The potjie was delicious. The meat and onions at the bottom were sticky and brown, and the layers of vegetables had that fire flavour.

'Leave some room for pudding,' I said. 'I have a special chocolate cake, and botterkluitjies with brandy sauce.'

'Jinne, I haven't eaten those butter dumplings since I was a boy. My brother gave me a black eye once, fighting over the last kluitjie.'

We sat side by side on the stoep, listening to the frogs, holding hands and looking out across the veld. His hand was warm, and wrapped all the way around mine. The moon was not yet up, so the burning stars filled the sky.

'The sky gets so big at night,' I said.

'It's big in the day too.'

'Ja,' I agreed. 'But I don't notice it so much. Now it's so full and busy. All those stars. And planets.'

'Look there, on the hilltop. That's Venus rising.'

'So that one's Venus. When I can't sleep, I sit and watch it setting, early in the morning.'

Henk's lamb butted at his thigh with its little horns, and he fed it a piece of rocket. He wasn't bottle-feeding Kosie any more.

'You still having nightmares, Maria?'

'I'll go make the coffee.'

‘What that man did to you . . .’

‘Ja,’ I said, thinking of Fanie. But Henk was talking about the murderer who’d tried to kill me. Henk and I had first met when we were investigating a murder, a few months ago. He didn’t know the whole story about Fanie.

‘You can get help, you know,’ Henk said. ‘Counselling or something.’

The problems I had were bigger than Henk Kannemeyer knew about. The kind of problems no one else could help me with.

‘I’m fine,’ I said.

‘But sometimes—’ His phone rang. ‘Sorry,’ he said, answering it.

I went to the kitchen, to prepare the dumplings and brandy sauce. I could hear him talking on the stoep.

‘Sjoe . . . They got her? . . . She didn’t run? . . . Ja, they’ll keep her in Swellendam now. Maybe send her off for psychological assessment . . .’

When I came back with the kluitjies, he was looking out into the darkness.

‘What happened?’ I asked.

Henk shook his head again. He didn’t like to discuss work with me.

‘Was it that woman?’ I asked. ‘Who stabbed her boyfriend in the heart?’

Jessie’d written about it in our *Klein Karoo Gazette*. I did the ‘Love Advice and Recipe Column’, and she wrote the big stories. The woman was from our town, Ladismith, but the murder had happened in Barrydale. The man had been eating supper in the Barrydale Hotel with a friend, and his girlfriend had walked up to him and stabbed him in the heart. While they were trying to save the man’s life, the woman had just walked out.

‘They’ve caught her?’ I said.

‘Ja. She went back to the Barrydale Hotel, had supper at the same table . . .’ He shook his head.

‘You think she wanted to get caught?’

‘She must be mad,’ he said. ‘Stabbing him like that, in front of all those people . . .’

‘I wonder—’ I said.

‘And then going back . . .’

‘I wonder what he did to her,’ I said to the pudding, as I dished it onto our plates.

‘I’m sure her lawyers will have a story,’ he said. ‘But it’s over now. The Swellendam police cover Barrydale. Let’s not talk about it on a night like this.’ He swept his hand out, to show the flowers on my dress and the stars scattered across the soft dark sky.

The botterkluitjies put an end to the conversation anyway, because all that you can say when eating those cinnamon brandy dumplings is ‘mm mmm’. Then there was the cake. I didn’t think my buttermilk chocolate cake could be improved, but then I invented another version with a cup of coffee in the dough, a layer of peanut butter and apricot jam in the middle, and an icing of melted coffee-chocolate. It was so amazing you would think it had come from another planet.

‘Jirre,’ said Henk, after a long time of speechlessness. ‘What kind of cake is this?’

‘A Venus Cake,’ I said, wiping a little icing from his lip with my finger. Henk licked my fingertip.

‘Kosie,’ Henk said. The lamb was now lying under the table, resting its head on his foot. ‘It’s time for you to go to bed.’

CHAPTER THREE

Kosie was lying on his blanket in the chicken hok, and I sat on the edge of my bed, my feet on the floor. Henk knelt in front of me, ran his hand through my untidy brown curls and kissed me softly on the lips. Then he kissed harder. He looked into my eyes and smiled as he undid the top button of my dress. That smile that turns my heart upside down. Those eyes that are blue and grey like the sea on a rainy day. They made me forget about the dead man, and the woman locked up in prison. They even made me forget about my own problems, locked inside of me.

‘Wait,’ I said, and got up to switch off the bedroom light.

There was pale starlight coming in through the sash window.

‘I want to see you,’ he said, standing up to turn on a bedside light. ‘There, that’s not so bright.’

He unbuttoned his shirt and took it off, then put his big arms around me and held me against his warm furry chest. He smelt like spice cake and nutmeg. His waist pressed against my belly, and I could tell he was ready. I felt ready too, but not ready to be seen. Parts of me needed to stay in the shadows.

‘I’m a bit shy,’ I said. ‘The light . . .’

‘I just want to see your face,’ he said.

‘That’s okay,’ I said, ‘it’s the rest of me that’s shy.’

‘Hmm,’ he said, leaning down to kiss my ear. ‘How about . . .’ His hands travelled down the back of my dress and onto my round bottom. It was a bit too round, but his hands didn’t seem to think so. ‘How about we keep your dress on?’

His hands moved down a little further, and he edged the skirt up a little. Then a little more. His fingers followed the edge of my white lace panties.

I made some noises that I didn't really mean to make; they just came out.

'I'll take that as a yes,' he said, his finger hooking into my panties, pulling them down.

We heard Kosie bleating, a lonely sound. Henk undid the leather belt on his jeans. It was a big belt, with stuff attached to it, including a gun holster. Everything about Henk was big; I tried not to stare as he took off his jeans.

Kosie bleated again. And again. Baaa. Baaaa. Baaaaaaa!

'Sorry,' said Henk. 'He sometimes does that, even in the kitchen. Just a second. Or else he will get worse.'

I sat down on the bed, and he walked to the sash window and shouted, 'Kosie! Go to sleep, little lammetjie. Lamtietie damtietie. Doe-doe doe-doe.'

Kosie went quiet. Henk came back to me, and I got a front-row view of him putting on a condom. Then he stood me up again, kissed the top of my head and bent down to nuzzle my neck, while his hands moved my dress up over my hips. He held me firmly by the waist and lifted me up and kissed me on my throat then on my lips. I am short, but I am not a little lady, not at all, but he made me feel small and light.

Then Kosie made a real racket, bleating like crazy. We heard another sound: a rough sawing call. Then the noise of chickens kicking up a big fuss.

'Leopard,' said Henk, lowering me onto the floor.

I felt let down. But I loved my hens, and that hok might keep out a rooikat, a lynx, but it was no match for a leopard. Henk pulled on his jeans and headed for the door.

'Take a weapon,' I said, looking around for something, finding only my hairbrush.

'Leopards are very shy.'

'Not if you get between a leopard and her lamb.'

The Satanic Mechanic

'I have my gun,' he said, patting the holster on his belt, but he took the hairbrush from me anyway.

'Be careful, Henk,' I said as he left, suddenly realising he meant more to me than my hens. Much more. Although I really loved those chickens.

The lamb and the hens were still shouting for help. I leant out of my window into the darkness and shouted, 'Go away, Leopard! Voetsek!'

A beam of light lit up the wild camphor tree outside my window, and Henk ran past with his torch, gun and hairbrush.

Soon Henk came back to the bedroom with a shivering lamb in his arms.

'It's okay, Kosie,' he said, 'it's okay, lammetjie. The leopard's gone.'

'Did you see it? Are my hens okay?'

'Ja. Its tracks were by the hok, but it didn't get in. There was rustling in the bushes; I threw your hairbrush, then heard something disappear into the veld.'

He laid Kosie's blanket on the floor and tried to settle the lamb on it, but Kosie bleated hysterically when separated from Henk, so he picked him up again and held the shivering lammetjie in his arms. It nuzzled its head under his armpit. Henk sighed and sat down on the bed. I sat down next to him and leant my head on his shoulder.

But Henk is not a man who gives up easily. He managed to slip Kosie off his lap and me onto it. Then I was lying on the bed, and Henk was slowly lowering himself onto me.

He looked into my eyes and said, 'My hartlam.' My heart lamb.

Then, suddenly, I saw Fanie on top of me and remembered things I didn't want to remember. A wave of black nausea washed over me, and although the rest of my body disagreed, my arms pushed Henk away, and my mouth cried out.

'What did you say?' Henk asked. 'Did I hurt you?'

'I feel sick,' I said, wriggling out from under him. I was shaking. 'I am so sorry.'

I rushed to the bathroom. The pictures I didn't want to see, the secrets I didn't want to tell, were bashing about in my head. I knelt down and threw up into the toilet. Until I felt completely empty.

Henk was at the bathroom door, knocking.

‘Maria . . .’

‘Just leave me,’ I said. ‘I’ll be fine.’

The words I’d said, when I’d pushed him off me, were: ‘I’ll kill you.’

When I was finished in the bathroom, Henk offered me a tot of brandy, and I shook my head. We lay down, and he held me tight against his chest. I was still shaking, and he pulled the blanket over me. After a while, he started snoring. The frogs were singing, but quieter now, like the party was over. I carefully climbed out from under his arm and made my way to the kitchen. I knew what I needed. It wasn’t brandy; it was Venus Cake.

I took the lid off the tin and saw the cake glistening inside.

‘Jislaaik, you look good,’ I said.

I ate until the bad taste was gone from my mouth. I ate until the shivering stopped. I ate until every corner of the emptiness was filled with peanut-butter coffee chocolate cake.

But even though it was the most satisfying cake I had ever made, and I’d eaten almost half of it, I did not feel complete. I wanted something else. And then, there he was, standing in the kitchen – the man I wanted to love and make love with.

‘Maria . . .’ he said.

He looked at me and at the cake. The tears started leaking from my eyes. I looked away; I didn’t want him to see me covered with icing and tears. But he touched my chin and turned my face towards him.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I’ll try . . .’

But I didn’t know what I could try.

CHAPTER FOUR

Monday morning, I drove along the stretch of dirt road from my house to Route 62, and the ten minutes into Ladismith. My little Nissan pick-up is a sky-blue bakkie with a cloud-white canopy. We had been lucky with the rains this year. On the mountainside there were some patches of purple and yellow where the ericas and other fynbos were flowering, but mostly the veld was different shades of green. Grey-green of the sweet-smelling bushes, brown-green of the grass, deep green of the karee, gwarrie and boerboon trees, bright green of the spekbome – the bacon trees. There should be different names for each of these greens.

The sky was pale turquoise, a kind autumn sky after the long hot summer. I could see it was a lovely day, but my heart was having trouble enjoying it.

Outside the *Klein Karoo Gazette* office, I parked in the shade of a jacaranda tree, next to Jessie's red scooter, which had her bike helmet clipped onto it. We kept a good distance from the back of Hattie's white Toyota Etios, because her reversing was even worse than her forward driving.

I walked along the path between the potted vetplantjies. The leaves of the little succulents were fat and silver-green. The building used to be a grand Victorian-style house; the *Gazette* now shares it with a small plant nursery and an art gallery. Like my farmhouse, it was built a hundred years ago and has mud-brick walls, and floors and ceilings of Oregon wood. But it's a town house and bigger and fancier than mine.

At the front of the building are pillars with broekie-lace ironwork and those ‘Ladismith eyes’ – round, patterned air vents. The *Gazette* office fits into one room at the side of the house. I heard Jessie and Hattie chatting as I walked between the plants towards the open door. I was carrying a fresh tin of buttermilk beskuit – one of my favourite kind of rusks – and a Tupperware with a few remaining slices of Venus Cake.

‘This is the guy I’m going to interview in Oudtshoorn,’ Jessie was saying, pointing to the front page of the *Weekly Mail*. The newspaper was on Hattie’s desk. ‘Slimkat Kabbo.’

“‘Slimkat’ . . . makes a change from all the “fat cats”,’ said Hattie.

“‘Slim” means “clever”, not “thin”, Hattie. Anyway, I’ll interview him tomorrow if someone doesn’t kill him first. He’s had death threats.’

‘Goodness gracious,’ said Hattie. ‘Just up your alley, Jess. But can you link the story to your coverage of the arts festival? You said he was launching his book there.’

‘Ja. It’s about the Bushman struggle for land. *My land, my siel*. My land, my soul,’ She looked up at me. ‘Oh, hello, Tannie M!’

Jessie’s a lot younger than me, so she usually calls me Tannie – Auntie. Her smile was wide in her brown face. It got wider as I handed her the Tupperware with the cake. She’s short like me (though not as round), and her dark hair was tied in a ponytail. She wore her usual black vest, jeans, and belt full of pouches with useful things in them.

‘Maria, darling,’ said Hattie. ‘We were discussing the KKNK.’ The Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees is the arts festival that happens in Oudtshoorn every year. ‘Will you be coming?’

‘I’m not sure—’ I said.

‘My, oh my, whatever happened to your hair?’

Hattie is tall, blonde, blue-eyed, speaks a Mary-Poppins-posh English and never has a hair out of place. She’s the owner and editor of the *Klein Karoo Gazette*. Today she wore a clean cream top and an uncreased apricot skirt. Jessie’s half my age, and Hattie’s in her mid fifties – not much older than me, but it sometimes feels like she is the grown up, with Jess and I the youngsters.

I ran my fingers through my messier-than-usual brown curls. I had

on a green floral dress that sort of matched my eyes but was already wrinkled.

‘Henk threw my hairbrush at a leopard,’ I said.

‘What?!’ said Jessie. Then she opened the Tupperware and forgot about the leopard. She popped a piece of cake into her mouth.

‘Here you are,’ Hattie said, handing me a hairbrush and a small mirror.

‘Ta,’ I said, and did the best I could with the brush. ‘It’s called the Venus Cake.’

‘Oh. My. God,’ said Jessie. ‘It is totally awesome.’ She stroked the gecko tattoo on her upper arm, which is something she does when she’s happy. ‘Out of this world.’

I put on the kettle, which lives on my desk next to the beskuit tin, and prepared coffee and rusks for us, and tea for Hats. Hattie’s not much interested in food, apart from my milk tart, that is. She’s funny that way.

There was quite a pile of letters on my desk. ‘Tannie Maria’s Love Advice and Recipe Column’ is popular. People write in with their problems, and I give them some advice and a recipe that I hope will help. Finding just the right recipe takes time, and I only work half-days. You’d think that with all the advice I give, I’d be able to sort out my own problems. But you know how it is: a mechanic often doesn’t fix his own car.

I opened last week’s *Gazette* to the page with my column. There was my recipe for soetkoekies, those old-fashioned sweet biscuits, which I’d given to that woman who was feeling bitter about her mother-in-law. Next to my letter was a small advert in a pink box, saying, ‘Relationship problems? Difficulty with intimacy? Free FAMSA counselling at your local hospital. Family and Marriage Association of South Africa.’ And a phone number. Could they help me with my problems? I wondered. I dipped my rusk, took a bite and felt better right away.

Jessie and Hattie were still talking about the newspaper article and this guy, Slimkat. I took my coffee over to Hattie’s desk to have a look. The headlines said: ‘Kuruman San Land-Claims Victory’.

There was a photograph of a big group of people on the steps of

the Supreme Court in Bloemfontein. Closest to the camera were two men who were being carried on the shoulders of others. One looked like a lawyer: a white guy with a neat haircut and pinstriped suit, his mouth wide open as if shouting, and his arms stretched up in the air with joy. The other was a small man, in a T-shirt and neatly pressed trousers. He was a little crouched, and looking away, as if shy or thinking of climbing down.

‘That’s Slimkat,’ Jessie said to me. ‘One of the Bushman leaders.’

‘San or Bushman?’ asked Hattie. ‘What is the politically correct term these days?’

‘Organisations say “San”, but most Bushmen say “Bushman”,’ said Jessie. ‘Both are okay, I think.’

‘So they won at last,’ I said. ‘That case has been going on a long time.’

‘Ja, they got some international funding for legal fees, and the Supreme Court ruled in their favour.’

‘I am glad,’ I said. The Bushmen were good people who had been treated badly.

‘Hardcore, the diamond miners, aren’t,’ said Hattie, pointing at a tall man in a dark suit, standing higher up the court stairs, looking down his nose at the Bushmen below.

‘Nor is Agribeest, the cattle company,’ said Jessie, tapping her finger on the big belly of a man with cross eyebrows and crossed arms.

‘These companies were both after the nature reserve beside the Kuruman River, which has now been awarded to the Bushmen as their ancestral lands,’ Hattie explained. The talk of Kuruman made me think of Tannie Kuruman from the Route 62 Café and her excellent chicken pies.

The title under the photograph said: ‘San leaders celebrate their victory’. The lawyer certainly looked happy, but the faces of the Bushmen were peaceful rather than celebratory. Some had soft smiles, but no one was jumping up and down.

Amongst the small crowd were an old man and woman wearing traditional clothes: leather aprons, ostrich beads, headbands with feathers and porcupine quills. The old woman was holding the hand of a small

boy who wore only a loincloth; her face was turned away from the camera, looking at the child. A young woman in a smart dress gazed up at Slimkat with adoring eyes.

One of the Bushmen was not looking happy at all. He was staring at something or someone outside of the photograph. His fists were held tight, as if ready to fight.

‘They are a modest-looking bunch,’ said Hattie.

‘Ja, it’s not the Bushman way to boast,’ said Jessie. ‘Even if they catch a big animal when hunting they will tell others it is small. And they are cautious too. For good reason.’

She read out loud from the paper: ‘Caitlin Graaf, spokesperson for the International Indigenous People’s Organisation, said, “The San leaders have been subjected to harassment and death threats over the last few months. We are investigating this seriously and will not hesitate to take legal action.”’

‘When asked about how they felt about this ground-breaking victory, Ms Graaf said, “Of course we are all pleased that the San can return in peace to their ancestral lands in Kuruman, but the San are not people to crow over a victory.”’

I looked at the lawyer with his arms in the air, and Slimkat crouching down.

““There is a saying,”” Jessie continued reading. ““The rooster that crows loudest at dawn is eaten by the jackal at nightfall.””

CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning, Jessie and I worked at our desks while Hattie was at the bank. I was getting through my pile of letters.

Dear Tannie Maria,

My boyfriend wants to have sex with me, but I don't know if I'm ready. I am seventeen, and I really like him. It's just that emotionally I don't think I'm ready. But I am scared he will leave me if I don't.

What should I do?

Janine

I didn't feel ready to answer that letter, so I picked up the next one. I hadn't seen Henk since Saturday. He was busy with work, he said. I helped myself to another rusk and offered the tin to Jessie.

'He's coming here,' said Jessie, taking a rusk and brushing crumbs off her desk. 'Slimkat. He said he and his cousin were dropping someone off nearby. They're going to pop in.'

We heard a car backfiring as it parked in Eland Street.

'That's probably them now.' She got up and stood at the door, and I put on the kettle.

I heard Slimkat before I saw him, his voice quiet but strong as he spoke to Jessie. She led him into the office, and he introduced his cousin, Ystervark. Porcupine. Then he shook my hand.

'This is my colleague, Tannie Maria,' said Jessie. 'She does the "Love Advice and Recipe Column".'

His hand was warm and dry, but I hardly felt it, because it was his

eyes that filled me with feeling. They were big and black, like a kudu's, and they looked right into me. It was very strange . . . I felt like he could see me. Really see me. Not only my body but all of me. It was as if my eyes were windows without curtains, and he could just look inside. He saw everything. Including the things I kept hidden, even from myself.

I looked away.

'Coffee?' I offered, fiddling with the cups.

'Rooibos tea?' he asked.

I nodded.

'Black,' he said, 'but with lots of sugar for Yster.'

Ystervark was looking at all the pouches on Jessie's belt and frowning. Like Slimkat, he was a small man, but while Slimkat was relaxed, Yster's whole body was tense. His hands were tight fists, and I recognised him from the newspaper photograph. Ready to fight. Ready to kill, maybe. He looked at Slimkat, then at Jessie's belt and at Slimkat again.

'Sorry,' said Slimkat. 'We don't mean to be rude. But could you show us what you are carrying on your belt? We've had some . . . incidents, and Ystervark likes to be careful.'

'Sure,' said Jessie, and emptied all the things from her pouches onto her desk. They made quite a pile and included her camera, notebook, pen, phone, torch, string, knife and pepper spray.

Ystervark grabbed the spray and the knife and looked at Slimkat as if to say, 'I told you so.'

'Sorry,' Slimkat said again. 'He'll give them back when we go. We can't stay long.'

Jessie set up two chairs for the visitors, but Ystervark stood at the office door. Then he walked towards the street and back again, with the knife and the pepper spray in his hands. He put them in his pockets when I handed him his tea and rusk. I gave the others their hot drinks and beskuit too.

'Would you like me to go?' I asked Jessie.

'No,' said Slimkat. 'Stay,' and he fixed me with those eyes again.

I spilt my coffee on my desk. I rescued the letters, but the coffee got all over last week's *Gazette*.

Jessie picked up her notebook. 'I know you don't like to sing your own praises,' she said, 'but you must be feeling good about the victory over big business. Diamond miners and agribusiness are used to getting their way. Yet you won the fight.'

'I am sad,' said Slimkat. 'It was not right to fight.'

'What do you mean?' said Jessie. 'It belongs to you, that land. Your ancestors have lived there for tens of thousands of years. You could not just let the companies steal it from you.'

'No,' said Slimkat. 'You are wrong. The land does not belong to us. We belong to the land.'

Jessie blinked, and her mouth opened and closed. It was not often that I saw Jessie without words.

She found them again. 'But surely,' she said, 'if you do not fight, then injustice will be done. Again and again.'

'That is true,' he said. 'Some people like to fight.' He took a sip of his tea and glanced at his cousin, who stood at the door with his back to us. 'I do not. Fighting can make you bitter. But sometimes it must be done. If you have to fight, then you must do so with soft hands and a heart full of forgiveness.'

He dipped his rusk into his tea and took a bite. Then he smiled and looked at me.

I mopped at the *Gazette* with a napkin. There was a brown stain over the pink advert offering relationship help.

'I hear there have been death threats?' Jessie said.

Slimkat nodded and chewed on his rusk.

'Who do you think is responsible?' she asked. 'Agribeest cattle business? Hardcore diamond company?'

Slimkat waved his hand as if pushing smoke aside. 'Maybe,' he said. 'Or people who are jealous. It doesn't matter.'

'What do you mean it doesn't matter? Surely it will matter if you are killed?'

Slimkat smiled. 'Not really,' he said. 'Yster wants me to hide away. He says that the buck that grazes in the shadows does not land on the coals. But I believe my time will come when it comes. I am not going to hide from the sun.'

The Satanic Mechanic

Ystervark's back twitched. He put his cup down on the ground and took out the pepper spray.

'My life is a very small thing,' said Slimkat. 'It is not like the life of a river, or the earth, or the stars. It does not matter very much if I die.'

Maybe he was right, but I wanted to say to him, 'Don't be crazy; of course it matters.' But it wasn't my place to say that. Instead I wrote down the phone number from the coffee-stained advert in the *Gazette*.

CHAPTER SIX

The interview was short, but it went far back in time. Slimkat told Jessie about the Bushmen's ancient and sacred relationship with the earth and the stars. And then he spoke of the many ways that people, animals and plants were being killed today.

'We must leave this highway of death,' he said. 'This road of hatred. We must return to the path of love.'

When they were finished, Jessie walked out with Slimkat and Ystervark, and I phoned that FAMSA number and made an appointment.

When Jessie came back to the office, she told me that Ystervark had not returned her knife.

'It was weird,' she said. 'He looked up and down the street as if someone might be following them, and he wouldn't let me near the car. There was someone in the back that I couldn't see properly, wearing a woman's scarf. I got my pepper spray back, but he shook his head when I asked for my knife.'

'What did Slimkat say?'

'I don't think he realised what was happening. We'd said goodbye, and he was getting in the car.'

I clicked my tongue. 'It wasn't right to take your knife.'

'Maybe he needs it more than I do,' said Jessie.

Later that morning, I sat in a soft orange armchair in a small room at the Ladismith hospital.

'So . . .' said the counsellor from FAMSA. She also sat in an orange

armchair. She was young, with wide eyes, blonde curls and a matching blue top and skirt, just like a little doll. A poppie. She looked down at some paper on her clipboard. 'First, I need to tell you that I am a counsellor in training, but I'm perfectly qualified to assist you.'

She looked up and gave me a bright smile, then clapped her hands together like a kindergarten teacher on the first day of school.

The room was clean, the walls lemon-yellow. There was an orange couch and a white plastic table, and in the corner, on the floor, a box of children's toys. High up was a long narrow window with white curtains that waved softly in the breeze. Between the curtains, I could see a grey-blue piece of the Swartberge and a section of sky.

'So how can I help you, Mrs, um,' she looked down at her clipboard again, 'van Harten.'

'Ah,' I said.

'English or Afrikaans?' asked the poppie.

'Um . . .'

Her questions seemed so difficult. I looked at the window.

'Are you cold? Shall I close the window?'

'No,' I said. 'No, thank you. I like fresh air.'

I struggled to sit up straight in the armchair; it seemed to be swallowing me. She was perched on the edge of hers, her head tilted to the side, like a bird. Her birdie-poppie eyes were bright, but it did not feel like she could see me. How could I describe to her the dark things from my past that still live inside my head? And my very personal problems with Henk?

'What's on your mind?' she asked.

I stared down at my hands.

'How about,' she said, 'just to get us warmed up, I'll give you some abstract pictures to look at, and you tell me what they remind you of.' She pulled some sheets from her clipboard and handed three of them to me. 'Just look at the top one and tell me what it reminds you of.'

That was easy. 'It's a pumpkin fritter with lots of syrup and butter.'

'Okay. And how does that make you feel?'

'Hungry.'

‘Okay. Let’s have a look at the next picture, shall we? What can you see there?’

‘A group of people dancing around a fire. And on the fire is a potjie pot, with lamb potjie in it. And here, in the middle of the flames, are two big black eyes staring at me. They can see right into me.’

‘What do they see?’

I shrugged.

‘Hmm,’ she said. ‘What do you think of the third picture?’

I looked at that one for a while.

‘Arms and legs and blood,’ I said. ‘There’s a woman who’s been torn in half, and a man who has been stabbed in the heart. See, here is the knife. And they have both been run over by a tractor; look at the tyre marks. They are all flat and squishy, like a pumpkin fritter.’

‘All right!’ she said, sitting so far forward in her armchair I thought she would fall onto the carpet. ‘And how does that make you feel?’

‘Hungry?’ I said. ‘It’s nearly lunch time, isn’t it?’

‘Hmm,’ she said, and wrote something on her clipboard.

I swallowed. ‘My boyfriend . . .’ I said. The word felt funny on my tongue, at my age.

‘Mm?’

‘Henk. He wanted me to get help. He thinks I’m traumatised after my kidnapping. There was a murderer . . .’

‘You were kidnapped?’

‘And locked in a freezer, but I escaped, although he nearly shot me, with his bow and arrow.’

‘Gosh,’ said the poppie.

‘But it’s not that, it’s not that giving me the trouble.’

‘The trouble?’

‘Nightmares and shaking and that. Anyway, I haven’t wanted to tell Henk, but I know my troubles are not about the murderer. He’s dead and gone. My trouble is with him, Henk, coming in to my life. Getting close and all that,’ I said.

‘You are finding intimacy with him difficult?’

‘No. Yes. What do you mean by intimacy? I really want it to work

out. But it's just getting worse. Getting close to him makes me worse. It brings up the trouble. Especially when we . . . if we . . .'

'Yes?'

'Isn't our time up?' I said.

She glanced at her little silver watch. 'No, we still have plenty of time.'

She looked at me, and I was quiet. She lifted her eyebrows to help me continue, but I held my mouth closed. It just wasn't right to tell this young girl about my private life. I looked at the window. The curtains were still now. Still and heavy.

'Mrs van Harten,' she said. 'Perhaps tell me about some of the difficult feelings you have. And anything you have noticed that makes your feelings better or worse.'

I sat thinking on what she said. A little breeze moved the curtains again. A Karoo robin caught my eye as it flew past the window.

'That's an interesting question,' I said.

I tried again to sit up, but my feet didn't quite reach the floor and that armchair wasn't letting go, so I just leant back into it.

'When I feel worried,' I said, 'potato salad – with cream and mint – makes it a lot better. I still feel lonely sometimes, although it's a different kind of loneliness from the one I used to have, before Henk. In some ways it's worse, because he's right there, but . . . Anyway. Cake. Chocolate cake helps with loneliness. And with frustration, if it's a good cake, that is – a satisfying one. With peanut butter. Cakes help with lots of problems. And you get so many different flavours. But you know, now that I think about it, you have to be careful. If you are feeling guilty, for example, and you eat chocolate cake, it can make it worse. Of course, cakes are perfect for celebrating. But you asked about difficult feelings . . .'

I was excited now and waving my hands about. This was important stuff. And very helpful for my recipe advice column. I should make a chart of foods to go with each of the problem feelings.

'Shame . . . and guilt – these are my most difficult feelings,' I said. 'I can't sleep and I shake and I remember . . . things. I see things that happened long ago as if they are happening now in front of my eyes.'

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath. ‘And I’m scared of what might happen, in the future.’

I paddled myself forward with my hands so that I was now on the front of my armchair, my feet back on the floor.

‘I must give it more thought . . . I’ve been eating chocolate cake for shame, and I don’t think it’s the right thing. I think maybe I need something lighter.’ I looked at the orange chairs and yellow walls. ‘With citrus. Maybe a lemon meringue pie . . .’

‘Mrs van Harten . . .’

‘Call me Maria,’ I said, feeling friendly now that the counselling was helping me so nicely. ‘Tannie Maria.’

‘Tannie Maria, do you maybe eat as a way of escaping your feelings?’

‘No . . .’ I said. ‘I’m trying to help. To help my feelings. Trying to feel better.’

She looked down at her skinny legs and then up at me, her eyes running across my length and width.

‘Have you ever been on a diet, Tannie Maria?’

CHAPTER SEVEN

I sat at my stoep table with the first diet meal of my life in front of me. Cucumber, lettuce, tomato and a boiled egg. No dressing. I wondered if I should eat the diet pills before or after the meal. The counsellor had recommended these pills, and I'd picked them up from the chemist on the way home. I decided to have them after my lunch, like pudding.

I looked through the diet sheet she'd given me and shook my head. I'd never use these recipes in my column; they gave punishment instead of comfort. Punishment to those who enjoy food and have a little padding.

I clicked my tongue and looked out onto my lawn. Two of my hens were scratching through the compost heap, their rust-brown feathers fluffing up as they pecked at tasty treats. The other three were lying in the shade of the lemon tree. It was a warm day but not too hot – the right weather for Welsh rarebit. I looked at the boiled egg on my plate; it would go so well with a piece of buttered toast and a creamy sauce made with cheddar.

I distracted myself while I ate, by answering one of the letters I'd brought home with me. The handwriting was beautiful but spidery, and the paper was thin, almost see-through.

Dearest Tannie Maria, it said

There is a man I fancy who is quite a bit younger than me. I think he may fancy me too. He definitely fancies my shortbread.

When it comes to love, does age matter? Or is it just a number?

The man has a sweet tooth and I need some more treats for him. Maybe something savoury too. I think variety may keep him visiting more often, don't you think?

Sally Andrew

Here's my mother's excellent shortbread recipe for you. She was a fine baker.

Yours faithfully,

A lass almost in love

Hmm, I thought, nothing says 'kom kuier weer' – come visit again – like Hertzoggies, those little coconut jam tarts that General Hertzog used to love. I thanked the Scottish lass for her mother's shortbread recipe and sent her my mother's recipe for Hertzoggies.

I told her that age doesn't matter (unless the boy is under sixteen, of course, and then you must make sure the only treats you give him are the ones above the table). And I gave her a recipe for cheese scones made with mature cheddar. As cheddar matures, the quality and flavour improves.

Your young man may realise that mature women are more delicious.

The diet pills made a poor pudding, but reading and writing those delicious recipes helped a bit. The phone rang. It was Henk. His voice was warm and sweet like hot chocolate, and it made a smile run through my whole body.

'Are you doing all right?' he asked.

'I went to see someone today . . . She put me on diet.'

'Ag, no, you need a counsellor, not a diet-lady. There are counsellors who come here to the police station. They help crime victims.'

'I'm not a victim,' I said. 'And she is a counsellor. She thinks I use food to escape my feelings. And that I'm fat.'

'Rubbish, you're lovely.'

'She says I should exercise too. You don't think I need to go on diet?'

'You're the best cook, and your body is just right. Sorry, I must go now. I'll come see you tonight?'

'I don't know what I'll cook, with this diet and all—'

'Forget the diet,' he said. 'See you later, bokkie.'

Bokkie. He called me bokkie. A little buck. My body was just right, he said. It was worth going through some trouble to get close to a man like that. I could at least try following the poppie's advice . . . Maybe going for a walk would take my mind off food.

I put on my veldskoene – my comfortable leather veld shoes – and headed out of my garden gate. It opened into the veld, and I walked on a narrow animal-path between the small bushes and succulents. The sun was hot, and I wished I'd brought a hat. I followed the path towards my old friend, the gwarrie tree. I sat down in its shade, a little out of breath, on a low branch.

'Hello, Gwarrie,' I said. It was a very old tree, maybe even a thousand years old, with thick rough bark and dark wrinkled leaves.

I thought of what Slimkat had said: 'The land doesn't belong to us; we belong to the land.'

I could see by the little piles of shining bokdrolletjies on the ground that the tree was used to visitors. The little buck poos looked a lot like chocolate peanuts. I wondered if that is how the sport of bokdrolletjie-spitting began.

A flock of mousebirds landed in the upper branches. They had scruffy hairstyles and long tails. When they saw me, they chirruped and flew away. My worries seemed to fly away too.

A breeze picked up and brought with it a sweet, unusual smell. I looked around for what it might be and saw a patch of grey-green bushes with flowers of little yellow balls. I walked to them and bent down to sniff. The smell filled my nostrils and tickled the back of my throat on its way down to my lungs. It was something like lemons but was also sweet like honey. My thoughts scratched in the back of my mind trying to find just what it smelt like. Maybe it was a smell-memory, passed down from the faraway days when we all used to hunt and gather like Bushmen. I stopped trying to name it and started on the path back home.

The vygie bushes were filled with dried seed pods, but now and again there were small flowers on the ground that had jumped up after the little bit of rain: a pale purple orchid, a tiny bunch of Karoo violets.

Then, maybe because I had stopped trying, I remembered what that smell reminded me of. It was Japie se Gunsteling – that famous orange and lemon pudding – Japie's Favourite – from my mother's cookbook, *Kook en Geniet. Cook and Enjoy*. I would make some for Henk tonight. The walk home was much quicker, and I picked a lemon from the tree as I passed through my garden, into the house.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When I'd finished cooking, I showered and put on my nice underwear. I dabbed a little perfume behind my ears and between my breasts.

The phone rang, and I went to answer it, wearing only my panties and bra. It was Henk. I blushed, even though I knew he couldn't see me.

'I've made a pudding for you,' I said. 'I've changed Japie se Gunsteling to Henk's Favourite. I didn't have enough orange juice, so I used my homemade Van der Hum instead.' Henk just loved my naartjie liqueur.

'I'm sorry, Maria. I can't make it tonight.'

I sat down on the chair beside the phone table.

'I have to leave town for a few days,' he said.

'Oh,' I said. 'Has something happened?'

He was quiet a moment, and then he said, 'We agreed you wouldn't get involved with my work. You know how I feel about dragging you into anything dangerous . . . ?'

We'd had this discussion a few times before. After the death of his first wife, he couldn't face the idea of losing me. He'd been very upset when I was nearly killed by that murderer.

I asked, 'Has someone been killed?'

He didn't reply. It was getting dark now, and the first toads started calling in their deep cracked voices.

'Did it happen in Oudtshoorn?' I asked. I could smell the orange pudding caramelising.

'Maria, this is what I wanted to avoid. I'm sorry, I must go now.'

In my underwear and oven gloves, I took out the hot pudding. It was perfect, all golden-brown on top.

The Satanic Mechanic

‘I am so sorry,’ I said to Henk’s Favourite.

I phoned Jessie and told her about my call from Henk. ‘I’m worried about Slimkat,’ I said.

‘I’ve been a bit worried too,’ she said. ‘I called him just now but got no reply.’

‘Has Reghardt said anything to you?’ I asked. Reghardt worked with Henk and was Jessie’s boyfriend.

‘Just that he’s busy tonight,’ she said. ‘I’m going to Oudtshoorn first thing tomorrow. For the festival. I’ll find out what’s happening and let you know.’

I ate my diet dinner and listened to a frog calling for its mate.

The pudding cooled, and I put it in the freezer.

The frogs and crickets sang me to sleep. But then my nightmares woke me. I heard myself shouting, ‘No! No!’

It’s lucky my neighbours are far away, or they might have come running to see if someone was being killed.

When the sweating stopped, I was left with the shame shaking through my body. My body remembered things that my mind tried to forget. I went to the bathroom and wiped my face with a wet cloth. And then I went to the kitchen, because the kitchen was my best friend.

Although my hands were still shaking, they got the pudding from the freezer into the oven. My fingers and head felt far from each other, but I managed not to break anything. As I waited for the pudding to get hot, I watched Venus rising. The planet seemed so very far away.

When Henk’s Favourite was ready, I sat on the stoep and ate that warm orange pudding until my mouth and hands and belly came closer together; even Venus felt closer. Finally I was whole again, and the shaking stopped.

CHAPTER NINE

I drove in early to the *Gazette* that morning. The Karoo hills looked soft and quiet in the dawn light, as if they were still sleeping. The sunrise painted the sky a baby pink and blue. As I drove, it looked like the hills were rolling over in their veld beds. They had a better night's rest than me, I'm sure.

The troubles from my past sat heavy on me, and on top of them were fresh worries about Slimkat. I wished I could chuck my problems out the car window. I felt the cool morning breeze on my face. I sighed. And the wind blew the sigh back into my mouth.

I let myself into the office and looked at the tin of buttermilk rusks that lived on my desk. Was there any point in having coffee without beskuit? Although the orange pudding had interfered a bit, I was still trying with that diet. For breakfast, I'd eaten a fruit salad.

Hattie had printed out some emails for me and left them on my desk. And there was that letter from the teenager who wasn't ready for sex. She was worried her boyfriend might leave her. It's not unreasonable for a man to expect his girlfriend to be his lover. Otherwise they are just friends. He may have patience for a while, but how long can it last? But it didn't feel fair to say these things to the seventeen year old.

I picked up another letter, an email this time, with yesterday's date on it.

Dear Tannie Maria,

I wonder if you remember me.

It is because of your letters that we started the Ostrich Supper Club.

The Satanic Mechanic

You got us to meet each other at the Farmers Co-op in Oudtshoorn. I was so shy before that (what with the scars after the accident), and the Supper Club has helped me so much. I've started to feel almost normal, and now I'm dating one of the people in the club.

Anyway, at this year's arts festival, our Ostrich Supper Club is doing a little project with the sponsorship of some ostrich farmers. We have made an ostrich recipe booklet (including some of your great recipes!) and we are having a cooking demonstration and a small dinner at one of the stalls near the beer tent tomorrow night. I hope you are attending the KKNK, and it would be so wonderful if you could come as our guest of honour. You started the whole thing going, and we are all big fans of your 'Love Advice and Recipe Column'. Sorry for the last-minute notice, but we are a bit deurmekaar when it comes to planning. We are better at eating and chatting and drinking red wine.

Below is my phone number. You are welcome to bring a date or a friend.

*All best wishes,
Annemarie van der Walt
(my real name!)*

The idea of a date vs a friend pulled my mind to that teenager's letter. But I steered it back to the Supper Club. Maybe I should go to the KKNK. But it was quite a long drive to Oudtshoorn. I yawned and looked at the office clock. Only 8 a.m. and I was tired.

I heard revving and squealing; Hattie had arrived outside. There was the clicking sound of her neat footsteps up the path. I put on the kettle to make her tea.

'Hello, Tannie Maria,' she said. 'You're here bright and early.'

'Morning, Hats.'

'Goodness gracious, Maria, what happened to you? You look dreadful.'

My hand went to my hair.

'No, not your hair, the rest of you. You look like you haven't slept for a week.'

'I'm fine,' I said, or tried to say, but it came out funny: 'I-i-i'm fi-i-i-i-ne.'

‘My, oh my, Maria,’ said Hattie, pulling her chair up next to mine and sitting down. ‘Whatever is the matter?’

She handed me my coffee and a rusk.

‘No, thanks,’ I said. ‘I’m on a di-i-i-i-et.’ To my surprise, I found I was crying.

She drew in her breath in shock. ‘No! Is that why you’re in such a state?’

I shook my head. Then nodded my head.

‘You’ve been having trouble sleeping for a while, haven’t you?’ she asked.

I nodded.

‘Have you tried sleeping tablets?’

I shook my head.

‘Have you been to see a doctor?’

‘I saw a counsellor. She put me on this diet.’

‘What a load of poppycock!’ Hattie said. ‘You need a doctor, Maria. I know we’ve got doctors in Ladismith, but there’s an excellent one in Oudtshoorn that I’d like you to meet. Doctor Walters. You are coming to the KKNK, aren’t you? It’ll be fun.’

I found a tissue in my handbag and blew my nose. ‘I’m not sure,’ I said. ‘I feel so tired—’

The phone rang, and Hattie answered. ‘*Klein Karoo Gazette* . . . Jess!’ She listened for a while and then said, ‘Hold on . . . Maria, Jessie says Slimkat is fine, but something has happened. Warrant Officer Reghardt Snyman, Detective Henk Kannemeyer and half the Ladismith police are at the KKNK. Can I tell her we’re on our way?’

I took a deep breath and said, ‘Yes.’