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Sundowners

Written by Lesley Lokko

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Sundowners



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PROLOGUE

December 1990: Paris

It was already dark at four o'clock in the afternoon and a fine grey mist was falling on the Champs-Élysées. Christmas lights shimmered in the rain, sending rivers of red and gold cascading onto the slick, dark surface of the damp streets. A tall, slender young woman stepped hurriedly off the kerb, wrapping her black woollen coat tightly around her. She looked anxiously at her watch: he would be waiting for her half-way across the city and, as usual, she was late. A black car pulled up in front of her, but she was too busy searching among the headlights for a taxi to pay it any attention. A man emerged from the car, stopping directly in front of her and blocking the road. Impatiently, she tried to move round him, still looking for a cab. He held out his hand to her and called her name.

She looked at him warily. She was used to being recognised, but there was something familiar about his voice. She looked closer, peering at him in the glow from the streetlight.

'What are *you* doing here?' She was surprised to see him. She tried to think where they'd last met. Los Angeles? London? Before he could answer, she heard another car pull up, heard the heavy door slam and the scuffle of shoes behind her. She turned round, wondering what all the commotion was about. She missed the quick nod the man gave to the two standing behind her. One of them lunged forward suddenly and grabbed her by the elbow, dragging her quickly towards him. She began to panic, struggling to release her arm. Before she could do anything, even scream,

a gloved hand went over her mouth, the second man opened the car door and she was shoved into the back of the waiting car, banging her head painfully against the car frame as she was pushed inside. No one on the street noticed anything: it was over in a matter of seconds. Someone inside the car pulled her roughly by the hair and pushed her, face down, onto the leather seat. The man who had grabbed her got in beside her and someone else jumped in on the other side. The doors slammed, one after the other and the two cars began to move. She started screaming as the car powered away from the kerb, swerving wildly as the driver cut across several lanes of traffic and disappeared towards the Arc de Triomphe. She felt, rather than saw, the hand coming towards her, felt a crisp, sharp odour flood her senses and then, suddenly, everything went blank.

PART ONE

1

September 1981: Malvern, England

Somewhere along the journey she awoke with a start. For a split second she was at home in the backyard watching Poppie hang the day's washing in the searing white light of a Johannesburg summer. Just for a second she could hear the shrieks of laughter as her cousins Hennie and Marika escaped the heat in the pool at the bottom of the garden. The pool. Tears welled in her eyes almost immediately. She shook her head abruptly, forcing herself out of the past. *That* was South Africa. That was then. She was in England now. She looked out of the window as the Mercedes ate up the miles from Heathrow to Malvern, in the west of the country. Grey skies, grey fields . . . low dense cloud, the persistent threat of rain. It was so different from the light and space she had left behind, a world away from the clear skies of the high veld and the vast, sweeping landscapes of the Western Cape. The rain ran against the car window, a dreary, slow spittle that swallowed the light and blurred the distinction between cloud and sky. *England*. She shuddered. She had never felt so alone. She huddled down in the soft leather seats, hurriedly wiping her tears with the back of her hand. She closed her eyes again.

She could still see their faces as they waited in the departures lounge – Marika's wet with tears; Hennie silent and brooding; her aunt Lisette anxious and guilty. Rianne ignored her, her heart thumping inside her chest. She was being sent away. Lisette was casting her out of the only

family she'd known since the death of first her mother, then her father. She was shaking with a mixture of rage and fear. But she was determined not to let it show. She hugged Marika one last time, then picked up her carry-on bag and disappeared through the door of the first-class cabin without looking back, not once. She was damned if she'd let Lisette see her cry.

She walked quickly to her seat, ignoring the sympathetic glance of the stewardesses. Saying goodbye to Marika and Hennie had been hard, but saying goodbye to Poppie had been hardest. Poppie was maid, housekeeper, surrogate mother, keeper of secrets and best friend, all rolled into one soft, dark, comforting figure. She had said goodbye to Poppie hundreds of times before as she left to spend the South African winter in Europe's summer with her mother's relatives, or a month with Aunt Lisette and her business associates in New York. But she had always returned, back home to Poppie and the warm, familiar smell that had been with her for as long as she could remember. It was Poppie who had held her and turned her face away after her mother drowned and they came to take her body out of the pool. It was Poppie she had run to after her father had disappeared and Lisette had told her he was dead. And it was Poppie who had intervened when Lisette told her it would be best for her to leave Vergelegen and the terrible memories that surrounded the house and come to live with her in Johannesburg. Rianne was hysterical and refused to leave, clinging desperately to Poppie and screaming that she would rather *die* than leave Poppie behind. So Poppie moved too, bringing her own children with her to Lisette's elegant, sprawling house in the northern suburbs. There was no *way* Rianne would have gone without her. And now she had left her behind. Just thinking about it hurt. She swallowed her tears.

The chauffeur flicked a quick look backwards at her as she sank below his field of vision. He wondered who she was.

His instructions had simply been to pick up a Miss de Zoete from the Penhaligon Hotel at Heathrow and deliver her to boarding school. Born and bred in East London, the name meant nothing to him. Who was she?

She was Rianne Marie Françoise de Zoete, daughter of disappeared tycoon Marius Tertius de Zoete; niece of South Africa's most powerful businesswoman, Lisette de Zoete-Koestler; and heiress to the vast de Zoete mining fortune. She was sixteen, rich, beautiful and thoroughly spoilt. Tall, slim, with heavy blonde hair that fell to her waist, high, tight cheekbones and, unusually, dark brown, almond-shaped eyes. Her mother's eyes. And her father's temperament.

Her mother, the French socialite Céline de Ribain, was nineteen when she met the young, brash South African at a London ball given by mutual friends. Although his French was atrocious and her English limited, she was intrigued. Her parents were worried. Despite his wealth, they thought him gauche, unsophisticated and rather *nouveau*. When she married him, three months later, they were horrified and more than a little afraid. They had reason to be. Before they realised what had happened, she was gone, heading for a new life they could scarcely imagine at the 'bottom of the world', as they put it. Overnight, it seemed, Céline de Ribain had become Céline de Zoete – and, as Marie-Hélène de Ribain remarked acidly to her husband, not only was he an *africain*, she suspected the family might even be Jewish. *Affreux*.

Claude de Ribain's worried but discreet enquiries bore little fruit. Not much was known in European circles about the *nouveaux riches* families down south. He found out that the man's father – a penniless Jew – had indeed come to South Africa from some Eastern European village, seeking his fortunes in the gold and diamond mines like so many had. He had married into a good, respectable family – again, nothing new there – but other than that, there was

surprisingly little information Claude could get his hands on. Marius bought them a large, sunny apartment on the Avenue Foch, just doors away from her parents, but it was clear that she was lost to them: she spoke English at first, then later Afrikaans, that strange and difficult language, to her husband and their beautiful daughter, Rianne. They adored their only grandchild and begged Céline every time she came to Paris to leave her with them for a season, just *one*, to improve her French and get to know her mother's culture. But Céline always refused, laughingly claiming she couldn't bear to spend a night apart from her darling child.

And then the unspeakable happened: she drowned. In the family pool. In front of her daughter on one of those clear, Cape summer days that she had always spoken of. Rianne was ten when it happened but she was old enough to understand what it meant. Her mother was gone. When her father disappeared, only a few weeks later, she understood, too, what that meant. Her life had changed for ever, and for the worse. Her grief-stricken French grandparents, Claude and Marie-Hélène de Ribain, had begged Lisette to allow them to look after Rianne. Claude had flown to Cape Town, to the gracious family home at Vergelegen. He pleaded with Lisette to be allowed to take all that was left to them of their daughter back to Paris, but Lisette was coldly adamant: Rianne was Marius's daughter, a de Zoete. And, as such, she was Lisette's responsibility, not theirs. Claude had returned to Paris empty-handed with a heavy, dull pain in his chest that never fully left him, despite Rianne's visits every other year. Rianne never knew of their attempts to claim her. Her aunt thought it best not to tell her. She would look after Rianne as if she were one of her own. Unfortunately, Rianne didn't see things quite the same way.

Their relationship did not begin well. Rianne shied away from Lisette and her cloying attempts to mother her. She was cold, unreachable, then hostile, prone to mood swings and periodic outbursts of tears. She was unpredictable,

flighty, wilful. She and Hennie, close as they were in age, were sworn enemies. They *hated* one another. Lisette feared pulling into the driveway to find her beautiful home turned into a battlefield. She would look at her son's arms in horror – covered in scratches and bruises – the result of days and weeks of fighting between the two of them. Sometimes, coming upon them wrestling each other to the ground in the hallway or pinching each other as they sat together on the floor watching television, she would call in desperation for Poppie.

'Why can't you *stop* fighting, you two?' she would shout exhaustedly, pulling them away from each other and trying to protect her nails in the process. 'Stop it – I said *stop* it, Rianne!' Invariably Rianne would burst into tears and run crying down the corridor to her own room. Then it seemed Poppie was the only one who could comfort her and Lisette would wearily leave her to it. *She* had to comfort Hennie. Those were terrible months. Hell. No other word for it.

Marika would look on in sympathy, unable or unwilling to intervene. She was two years older than Rianne and already somewhat in awe of her looks and her dare-devil attitude towards everyone and everything. The 'good' girl in the family, Marika longed in secret to be more like her younger cousin. She would often take Rianne's side, sending Hennie into fits of rage. Lisette was at her wit's end. She tried everything, every approach she could think of – she was motherly, friendly, strict, sisterly, but nothing worked. The girl remained as aloof and distant as ever.

By the time Rianne was twelve, they had settled into an uneasy truce. They tolerated each other. Rianne was not like most other girls, Lisette would confide worriedly to friends, and certainly nothing like her older cousin. She was popular at school. Everyone wanted to be close to her. Everyone wanted Rianne as a best friend. The phone rang constantly. Curiously, she seemed not to notice or care. She was as happy alone as she was the centre of the crowd. Lisette, whose good looks and trim figure owed more to

years of rigorous self-discipline than any natural gifts, remembered with pain beautiful girls just like Rianne at her teenage school who *never* had to try. Being beautiful was enough. People moved towards Rianne, not the other way round. She was used to having things her own way. She simply took what was given or what she wanted *when* she wanted.

She was sent to Glendales, the expensive, co-educational day-school just outside Pretoria. Marika was a model pupil there but it was clear that Rianne had no such ambitions. Marika was responsible and dedicated; Rianne was flighty and undisciplined. Marika was class prefect and routinely came first in exams. Rianne routinely skipped class and was twice caught smoking with a couple of older boys behind the chemistry building, her skirt tucked inside her underwear as she showed off her long, brown legs. At Glendales, this was nothing short of a scandal. Things quickly got worse. Eventually Rianne was spotted sneaking into a senior boy's car, leaving the school grounds and returning after dark. Where they disappeared to, no one knew: she refused to say. Lisette, called in to pick up her niece, on a temporary suspension order, was at a loss as to what to do, she told Poppie, as she walked through the kitchen to fetch a glass. She desperately needed a drink. Poppie simply shrugged and squeezed Rianne's waist as the girl slipped past, a bored expression on her beautiful face.

Lisette had almost resigned herself to living in a perpetual state of war when, just before Rianne's sixteenth birthday, a miracle happened. She and Hennie suddenly stopped fighting and appeared to make peace. A calm descended upon the house. Marika was preparing to sit her matric exams and rarely left her room. Lisette was so grateful for the ceasefire that she paid neither of them any attention – she was fully preoccupied in those days with the family business. She and Hendryk, her and Marius's younger brother, were moving the company into a rapid

series of expansions, from diamonds and gold into platinum, titanium and other rare precious metals. She travelled frequently to London, Amsterdam and further afield, to New York and Buenos Aires. The three children – although one could hardly call them children any longer – were used to her long absences and the sight of her neatly monogrammed leather cases standing in the hallway. They were looked after by Poppie, Seni – Poppie's youngest son – two drivers and three security guards.

They were safe in the way young white South African teenagers were safe: rich, pampered, secure. Everything in their world was as it should be, nothing would ever change. On the rare occasions when Rianne was home in the early evening, they would take their plates from the formal dining room and carry them into the den, flopping down on their stomachs to watch TV. For the most part, Rianne enjoyed those evenings, lying sandwiched on the floor between her cousins. It made a change from hanging out at the mall or, lately, in bars where she and her friends looked old enough to pass for eighteen. With Lisette frequently gone, she could do as she pleased, free of her aunt's watchful gaze and the burden of trying to decide how to behave, what to do, how to *be*. She had never figured it out. What was she in this house? Sister, cousin, daughter, friend? She was sixteen: she knew she had to start making some decisions about her life, where she would go, what she would do. Marika would be leaving soon, she wanted to study medicine at Stellenbosch. In a year or so Hennie would go into the army. Rianne had no desire to go to university. She couldn't imagine working. Should she go abroad? But where? She appeared to have no real ambitions yet did not seem disturbed by it. She seemed quite content to drift.

That year, she and Hennie spent hours talking in front of the TV or floating on their backs in the kidney-shaped pool. Things had begun to change between them, subtle changes that both alarmed and excited Rianne. She noticed the way

Hennie looked at her, the way his hands trembled a little when she asked him to tie her bikini straps or put sunblock on her tanned shoulders. At seventeen, almost a year older than her, Hennie was turning into a younger, fair-haired version of his uncle, Rianne's father. He was loud, physically confident, alternately aggressive and insecure. He was handsome, too. He certainly didn't lack admirers – the house was often full of girls from Glendales and other prestigious schools, some of them friends of Rianne who thought she was just the *luckiest* thing in the world to be living with Hennie *all the time*. Rianne laughed at them.

Unfortunately, Rianne was not the only one to notice the changes. Lisette came home late one evening from a business meeting to find Rianne and Hennie lying on the floor of the darkened TV lounge, limbs entwined, her head on his lap as he whispered something to her. She switched on the lights, horrified, although more by what she feared than by what she had actually seen. In a shaking voice, she ordered them to bed. 'It's a school day tomorrow, what on earth are you thinking of? It's past midnight!' Hennie at least had the grace to look embarrassed, his cheeks flushed. He scrambled to his feet and beat a hasty retreat down the corridor. But Rianne simply stood up, wearing only a pair of skimpy shorts and a loose top in which her adolescent breasts swung freely, and calmly walked past her aunt to her room.

Lisette stood in the middle of the room, breathing deeply. That was it. Something had to be done. With Marika gone in a few months, she couldn't leave the two children alone. Although they were hardly children, she kept reminding herself. She had to do *something*. But what?

A few weeks later, as she stood on the patio waiting for Hennie and Rianne to finish their tennis lessons at the bottom of the garden, she thought she had the answer. She would send Rianne overseas, to England, like her father before her. A change of scene would be good for her. Perhaps after she'd done a year or two in England, she

could go on to Switzerland – one of those expensive finishing schools where Rianne might learn the rudiments of charm. She had spoken to a few friends in the UK, asking them to help her select a suitable school for her troublesome niece. But first she had to tell her.

She stood there, nervously watching the two of them as they walked slowly up the short hill to the house, arms linked, racquets trailing behind. They were so alike. She did not take a photograph, but kept the image of the two of them, her son and her beloved Marius's daughter, as if it were the last time she would see them so. Hennie was almost a head taller than his cousin, but she was easily as strong. She had inherited Marius's love of the outdoors, his passion for sport and physical challenge, as well as her mother's more delicate beauty. At sixteen, she was stunning. Lisette was worried, not only for her son but for all the other young men who had taken to hanging around the house lately, just as Rianne's friends hung hopefully around Hennie. Yet despite her beauty, there was something in the girl that was . . . *damaged*, something fragile and brittle and painful. Of course it was to do with the loss of her parents, Lisette knew that. But Rianne had lacked nothing . . . love, security, warmth. Lisette had seen to it that the girl was brought straight into the heart of her own family . . . and yet, somehow, it was not enough. There was a kind of hunger in the girl, although for what exactly, Lisette couldn't say. There was a fearlessness about her, a recklessness that worried her. Rianne behaved as though she were accountable to no one, not even to what was left of her family. And this worried Lisette.

She smiled at them as they came up to the patio. They were both sweaty and tired from an hour's game in the late autumn sun.

'Darling,' she said to Rianne, as she handed her a cold glass of lemonade, 'won't you come here and sit with me for a minute? I have some important news . . . for you both.'

Rianne looked at her suspiciously. Whenever Lisette addressed her as 'darling', she usually had bad news. She was not wrong.

'England?' Rianne looked at her aunt, alarmed. *'England?'* she repeated. 'Why?'

'Well, your . . . father would have wanted it, darling,' Lisette said quickly. 'He was educated among them, you know. He would have wanted you to have the same.'

Rianne's dark eyes flashed dangerously. 'But I don't *want* to go to England,' she burst out angrily. 'I like it here. I don't want to go. I—'

'It'll be good for you, *skatjie*,' Lisette interrupted her. 'You'll enjoy it, you'll see. I would have given *anything* to go, at your age, you know.'

'I don't care about *you*,' Rianne shouted. 'I'm not going. I'm *not*!'

'Can't she go to Ellersby, Mum?' Hennie mentioned the exclusive all-girls boarding school near Cape Town. It wouldn't be Johannesburg but it wouldn't be England either.

'No, it's decided.' Lisette was firm. 'Uncle Hendryk and I have agreed, Rianne, that you'll be going in September when the school year starts over there.'

'I won't. I *won't*. I'm not going, d'you hear me? You won't *make* me!' Rianne threw her racquet angrily onto the ground and raced indoors.

Hennie immediately started after her but Lisette stopped him. 'Leave her alone for a while, darling, she's upset.'

'Of *course* she's upset. Wouldn't you be? Why do you always have to decide everything *for* her?'

'Me?' Lisette was alarmed. Hennie had never spoken to her like that before. 'Everything I – *we* – do for Rianne is for the best, you know that.'

'No, everything you do is the best for *you*, best for what suits *you*, not for her. Why can't you just leave her alone?'

'Hennie!' Lisette was furious now. 'Hennie! Come back

here this minute!' But he was gone. Lisette sat down on the wicker patio chair, her hands trembling and her heart racing. She needed a cigarette. Her angry exchange with Hennie had upset her. She was not used to talking to her children in that way. But she was also sure she was doing the right thing. Although she thought that nothing had 'happened' between her son and her niece, it would be no bad thing to put a bit of distance between them. She sighed. For about the hundredth time that year, she missed Marius dreadfully. What was she to do with his daughter?

'Are you all right, miss?' the chauffeur enquired gently, breaking in on her thoughts and forcing Rianne back to the present.

'I'm fine,' Rianne replied tightly. She rubbed her eyes fiercely.

'Would you like to stop for a bit, get something to eat?'

'No.' She wished he would leave her alone. He was paid to drive, not talk. Who did he think he was? All the drivers she'd known back home were black and knew their place. They hardly ever spoke to her. She preferred it that way.

'Well, we won't be much longer. Another hour, I'd say. Miserable weather, isn't it? Mind you, that's England for you,' he added.

Rianne ignored him. The weather outside just about matched her mood inside. Grey. Sad and grey. She watched the windscreen wipers through tear-soaked lashes. Swish-wish, swish-wish, swish-wish . . . She was lost again in thought.