Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Power Play

Written by Mike Nicol

Published by Old Street Publishing Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

POWER PLAY

Mike

NICOL



ADVANCE READING COPY. NOT FOR RESALE.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2015 by Old Street Publishing Ltd,
Yowlestone House, Tiverton, Devon EX16 8LN
www.oldstreetpublishing.co.uk

First published in South Africa by Umuzi, an imprint of Penguin Random House

ISBN 978 1 910400 21 0

Copyright © Mike Nicol, 2014

The right of Mike Nicol to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Every effort has been made obtain permission for all illustrations, but in the event of an omission the publisher should be contacted.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in Great Britain

‘Here is a place of disaffection’
– T.S. ELIOT, *Four Quartets*

He sat in a chair beside the swimming pool. A big man with a shaven head watching her. The man she'd been hunting.

Mkhulu Gumede.

Sitting there with statue stillness, wearing a black jacket, open-necked shirt, black slacks. The shirt untucked. The jacket's sleeve pulled back at his left wrist, a trace of silver exposed. As if he'd arranged himself, carefully, purposefully.

The hunted come to the hunter.

Krista Bishop in her kitchen making coffee. Just returned from the pursuit, her backpack slung down on the countertop. Her gun in the bag.

Across the mountain the dawn light was hardening, darkness drawing back into the trees.

Mkhulu Gumede sat there watching her, unperturbed.

At the sight of him, Krista felt the adrenaline kick in. A sudden clarity. Her heart faster, a pulse in her neck, heat on the palms of her hands.

Remembered she'd been warned. He's a killer. That's what he's been trained to do. To kill.

Yes, well, she thought, me too.

Here the man she'd waited for all night in the quiet suburban street. That man, here, now, in her garden, waiting for her.

She slid a hand along the marble countertop, grasped her backpack, drew it slowly towards her.

Enough light now to see the man's face. The black eyes watching her. Confident. Relaxed. His hands loosely in his lap.

Had to be concealing a gun. Thing was, why sit there waiting for her? Like they were going to talk about it over coffee. Calmly. Reach some sort of understanding? Shake on it? They both go back into their lives. Game over.

After what he'd done?

No, boykie. No ways. No ways ever.

Her father saying to her, 'There comes a payback time, C. Probably it's a law of the universe. You know, an energy or something.'

The wisdom of Papa Mace. Not a girl's best role model.

'You always get a chance at justice. Just not often legal justice.'

Mace Bishop saying to her, 'Take it when it comes. Only comes round once. Be ready. You miss you can kiss your arse goodbye.' Always the sage. The two of them on the shooting range, killing targets of cardboard men.

She remembered these things he'd told her. Years ago. Seemed like years ago.

Her focus in this moment. The light sharper. The city below still in shadow. Sun coming onto the high cliffs, sliding down the mountain, reaching into the gorges. The glint of it off the cableway lines, the cable cars starting out of their stations.

She took the gun from her bag, found the silencer. Raised the pistol so he could see it. So he could see her fitting the can.

He kept watching. Didn't move. Didn't shake his head, hold up a hand to say, No need. We don't have to go there. Doesn't have to be like that. Didn't even show his weapon. So sure of himself.

He's a killer.

She knew that. No argument there, the reason she was chasing him.

The Bialetti came to the boil, spitting. She kept her eyes on him. Put the gun down, switched off the gas. Without looking found the handle to the coffee pot, lifted the pot from the hob. Watched him watching her. No movement in his face, no twitch, no grimace, no tightening of the skin around his mouth. Just the languid gaze. Alright, my brother, we play this game.

Krista took her eyes off him, poured herself a demitasse. Flicked back at him – he hadn't moved. Sat there relaxed, feet square on the floor. The only tension about him, the placement of his feet. Ready to stand, ready for anything.

She noticed his shoes then. Not trainers – she expected trainers – but long pointed-toe dress shoes. City-slicker pointers. What was it with guys and these shoes? They fancied them. Some hip image they craved.

She blew lightly across the coffee's surface. Wet her lips in anticipation, brought up the cup, tasted a hot mouthful. The French roast full on her tongue. Swallowed, felt the tension ease in her neck.

Nothing for it. Get out there, get it done.

Krista took another quick sip, put down the cup. With the pistol in her right hand, walked to the sliding door. Unlocked it, pushed it open. Stepped onto the patio. Faced him. The bastard not moving, staring at her. About nine metres separating them.

She heard him say, 'What's it you want?'

Oh, my brother, what a question. If you don't know the answer to that, what kind of agent are you? What kind of game are you running?

'To kill you,' she said.

He nodded. The only movement he'd made, thoughtful.

She heard the mountain for the first time then. Bird twitter. The shrill of cicadas anticipating the day's heat. From below, in the City Bowl, the morning prayer rising, a low hum. Smelt the camphor of the vegetation, the tang of summer.

In this time and place they talked. To no end. Staccato sentences, a language of difference. Until the words ended.

'You can try talking,' she heard Mace telling her. 'Sometimes it works. Most times it doesn't. Most times, in the end, you have to act.'

You're right, Papa, she thought, listening to Mkhulu Gumede making excuses.

Seeing him stand, holding the gun against his thigh: the long barrel, the silencer. Don't want to disturb the neighbours. She raised her pistol, held it on him.

'This's not only about Tami,' she said. 'D'you know what they did to her, to Lavinia?'

Hearing him going on about Titus the gangster, the gang wars on the Cape Flats, abalone poaching, the coming of the Chinese. Hearing him, not hearing him.

Watching him take a step towards her. Asking her to lower the gun. 'Please. Please lower the gun.' So condescending.

She kept the gun up, unwavering. He stopped.

'In a situation,' Mace would say, 'you got to get in first. Take this scene: you're in a confrontation, you're standing there, you've both got guns. He's the invader. Law says you can use equal force. So what you going to do? You can wait till he shoots you. You can. Be a good girl, stick to the letter. Then retaliate, let him have it. Assuming he's not killed you by taking

the advantage. Or you drop him. Me, I'd drop him. Worry about the law afterwards.'

Mace Bishop Rules. Mace always inclined to sort things out his way when he had to.

'Step back,' she said. 'Sit down.'

Or what? Or you'll take Mace's advice?

Mkhulu Gumede didn't move. Except she saw the grip on his gun tighten, his arm rising.

Part 1: Lagoon Beach

1

They ate supper in a steak and seafood joint at Lagoon Beach, Titus Anders not letting go of how their little brother Boetie died.

Trussed in weight belts, dropped over the side of a rubber ducky in six metres of dark water, he went down to talk to the abalone. RIP Boetie.

'Yesterday I watched him going off with his chommies. Going camping in the mountains. All happy boys. Good boys. Nice boys. Teenagers, you know, joking around, no problems in the world. This morning he's dead.'

Fishermen found his body chained to a plastic buoy, mistook it for an abalone drop just waiting for smugglers. *Property of Titus Anders* written on the buoy.

'Stop it, Daddy,' said Luc, Titus's eldest. 'Leave it now. Please. We all feeling this.'

'No, man, I can't believe it,' said Titus, looking at Luc. 'Boetie was my boy. Your mommy's precious because they thought he was dead inside her. She said to me, "Look after Boetie, Titus. You got to look after him

for me. Give him a good life." That's what she said. I never told you that before. Now look what we got to do.' He made a gun of his fist, held it up. 'I thought all this was past times. Over. Finished.'

'Not your problem, Daddy,' said Luc. 'Me'n Quint'll handle it. Like I told you. We got it sorted already.'

'You know what it's like to drown?' said Titus. 'Going down there holding your breath till you can't anymore. Till you have to breathe. Only you know when you open your mouth there's going to be no air. Only water. You know the panic that'll cause? The fright? Oh no, man, is there a worse way to die? Your lungs filling up with water.'

'Daddy, stop it.' Lavinia, his daughter, sitting there toying with her food.

'Don't,' said Luc, reaching across to grab his father's hand, lower it to the table. He glanced round the restaurant. Big zooty restaurant with views over Table Bay, the harbour, the soccer stadium flopped like a puffer fish beneath Signal Hill. Family diners at most of the tables. A Neil Diamond loop on the sound system. 'Not here, Daddy.'

Quint said, 'What's the plan?'

Quint the youngest of the family now, a monster man of muscle, neck the size of his head. Quint worked out, daily, ate a lot of meat. Had on the plate before him a five-hundred-gram T-bone, well done. A pile of fries beside it that spilled onto the table. What Quint meant was what would happen to the boy they'd got chained to a chair in a Montague Gardens warehouse.

The boy they'd taken as tit for tat not even an hour after they'd seen Boetie's body. Quint liked to think he and Luc worked fast.

'We got to kill him,' said Luc, cutting into his steak. He forked a chunk, chewed it. Tough, well-done steak the way he liked it. The brothers of a similar mind on their steaks, though Luc was a thin guy, weedy. Said, 'We cut him into pieces. Send him back to his mommy by PostNet.'

Titus said, 'These boys are too young. You can't use boys like this.'

'Wasn't us that started it,' said Luc. 'But we got to finish it. You know that, Daddy. You know that's what we got to do. It's what you would of done in the old days before. Nothing's changed. Then and now it's all the same.'

'I can't eat this,' said Titus, pushing away his plate.

He'd brought them in here because a family like his had to be seen. Had to act normal in times of trouble. For the sake of Boetie. Show everyone that the Anders family couldn't be messed with. Titus Untouchable.

Which meant blood in, blood out. Just why'd it have to be Boetie? Why'd she go for him? Not going to be so nice for her now they had her boy.

Titus looked at his daughter. 'What d'you think, Lavinia?'

Lavinia, a stunner. Big brown eyes. Delicate nose. Pouty lips that didn't often smile. His princess. She talked fancy. She gave the Anders name class. Titus

thought that except for her dead mother, she was the only other woman he loved. Anything happened to her … He couldn't hold the thought, couldn't do that sort of what-if scenario.

Lavinia shrugged, nibbled at her onion rings. 'You want to do that, you do that, I don't care.'

'She killed your brother.'

'We've gotta hurt her,' said Quint.

'To even the score?' Lavinia stared at him. 'You think that'll settle it?'

'No,' said Titus. 'But where's our option?'

Lavinia flicked hair out of her face; it fell back in fine strands. 'There is always another option.'

'Like what?' said Luc.

'You got a plan?' said Titus.

'She's got shit for brains.' Luc sneering at his sister.

Lavinia raised her fork, brought it close to Luc's face. No anger in her gesture, just the menace of the fork millimetres from his face.

'What you want to do, sis?'

'Stab out your other eye,' she said. Luc with a pirate patch over his eye. As kids she'd blinded him in the right. Used a stick she'd found on the beach to limit his vision. So much for fun times at the seaside.

Titus waited until Lavinia lowered her fork. 'What's your plan?'

'I haven't got a plan.'

'So what d'you think? Man, girl, don't get clever with words.'

Lavinia went back to her onion rings. Long, fine

fingers picking at the food. Bright gold bands on her fingers.

'Tamora's your problem, Daddy,' she said.

'Ja, I know,' said Titus. 'That's what Luc's telling me.'

'She's a big problem, Daddy,' said Lavinia.

'That's why we gotta chop her boy into pieces.' Luc sat back. 'Teach her a lesson. Like tooth for tooth.'

'Eye for eye, first,' said Lavinia, looking at him, unsmiling. Luc frowned at her.

'We got to do it for Boetie,' said Quint. 'Tonight. Quickly like they did it to him.'

Titus let this rest there, thinking he didn't want it. He didn't want more blood. But what other way out? They didn't do this, Tamora would piss in his face.

'Alright,' said Titus. 'You and Luc.'

'We can chop him up?'

'You want to do that?'

'Shit, Luc,' said Lavinia. 'Just shoot him. What's your problem?'

'No problem.'

'Just shoot him, okay? One of those slow bullets. No mess, okay? Take him into the sand dunes, okay.'

Quint glanced at her and away, his jaw working at the meat.

'Pretty little sis giving orders,' said Luc. Held up his hand, the one with the deformed finger, made it into a gun as Titus had done: 'Just shoot him, okay. One of those slow bullets, okay. Take him out into the sand dunes, okay.'

'Luc,' said Titus. 'Stop now. Enough.'

Wasn't Luc though, it was Lavinia, always on her brother's case. Like the two were born to irritate one another. Sometimes Lavinia coming out with stuff like she was a hardarse woman. Use one of those slow bullets! Jesus!

They ate in silence. Titus opposite Lavinia, facing the view. The sun setting, the ocean turned liquid gold. Grief in his heart. Grief for a drowned son. Anger too that he'd been disrespected. That a woman he'd given a break was biting his bum. He pulled his plate back, ate without taste. There would be heartache. There would be tears. He was Titus.

Titus set down his steak knife, his meal half-eaten. He signalled for the restaurant owner. The man hurrying to him, grinning.

'Mr Anders.'

'Calvados,' said Titus. Pointing a finger round his family.

'Only the best,' said the restaurateur. He picked up Titus's plate. 'Something wrong, Mr Anders? The meal was good?'

'Fine,' said Titus. 'The Calvados, alright? And the bill.'

'On the house, Mr Anders,' said the restaurateur. 'Always a pleasure for your family.'

'I'll pay.' Titus waved his palm over the table. 'Tax deductable.'

The owner smiled. 'Sure, no problem' – calling to have the table cleared.

'I'm not finished, Daddy,' said Quint.

'Get a doggy bag.' Lavinia shoved her plate at him. 'You can have mine too.'

'It's raw.'

'Rare.'

Quint forked her meat onto his plate. 'I'll nuke it at home.'

'You better,' said Luc. 'A vet gets that, he can make it moo.'

Shots of Calvados were set down, the waiter said, 'Mr Titus, that man' – indicating across the restaurant – 'says he's paying for your drinks. He sends condolences.'

'Thank him,' said Titus, raised his glass in the man's direction. The man palmed his hands in supplication, bowed over them.

'Who's that?' said Quint.

Titus tasted the brandy. Got the kick of it at the back of his throat. 'Someone we helped with a loan.'

Luc snorted. 'He pays for the drinks with our money.'

'No, man.' Titus stared at his son. 'Don't always think the worst, man, Luc. He paid up. He acknowledges us. Our grief.'

'With interest?'

Titus shook his head. 'Don't start, okay, don't start.'

Luc kept his gaze lowered, toyed with his drink. He looked up there was Lavinia smirking at him. He wagged a finger at her.

'Come,' said Titus to the waiter, 'clear the plates. And a doggy bag for Quint.'

Lavinia's BlackBerry buzzed.

'Lover boy's after you,' said Luc. The sneer on his face now, his tongue snaked at his top lip. 'Doesn't matter that our little Boetie's been killed. Wants to know if it's his lucky night.' Luc taking up the song with Neil, singing: 'Hands, touching hands. Good times …'

'Shut up.' Lavinia focused on the phone screen. 'Just shut up, alright?'

'Is that Rings?' said Titus. 'Tell him howzit.' Titus holding out his drink. 'Come, come, chink chink for your brother.' They touched glasses. 'Boetie.'

Drank the rest of the apple brandy in a single toss.

'We got to do this now,' said Quint.

'Ja.' Titus stood, smoothed the sleeves of his leather jacket. Looked round for the owner, saw him standing at the grills, a cellphone to his ear. The owner saluted, saying 'Ciao, ciao.' Titus giving him a thumbs up.

The family angled through the restaurant, people saying sorry for your loss as they passed. Reaching out to touch them. Men shaking their hands. Women wanting to stroke Lavinia's arms. Lavinia holding herself rigid.

Titus unsmiling, thinking bad news got around fast. Was the right thing to be here. Give everyone the message, don't mess with the Anders.

A waiter holding open the door, offering a bowl of mints. Luc pushed past, turned to Lavinia. 'Bring you back some pictures, hey, sis.'

Outside the evening warm, windless.

II

Two gents in a Beemer M5 waited down the street from the seafood and steakhouse. Tamora's men: the driver and the shooter.

The driver's cellphone rang. 'They're leaving,' he was told.

The driver heard restaurant buzz: 'Sweet Caroline', chit-chat, the clatter of plates. He heard a voice call out, 'Ciao, ciao.' The driver thumbed off the connection. He fired the car, pointed down the street. 'Spot on, my friend.'

The shooter said something in Russian the driver didn't understand.

'What you saying?'

'Go, go,' said the Russian.

For more than an hour they'd sat there waiting. The Russian not talking much, the driver playing his iPod through the sound system, a medley of R&B, jelly-baby warbling.

The Russian had said, 'Shit music.'

'You got something else?' The driver sitting up in his seat. 'Let's hear it.'

The Russian had mumbled in Russian.

'Speak English.'

'Your arse,' said the Russian.

The driver's name: Black Aron Chetty. As he'd told the Russian, pronounced A-ron. He didn't know the Russian's name. Wasn't interested to know. Couldn't

understand why Tamora wanted the Russian on the job.

'He shoots straight,' she'd said.

'I don't, you're saying?' Black Aron came back. Black Aron squirming beneath Tamora, popped his load between her thighs. She pressed down on his groin, grinding against him. Had sighed out, 'Depends on the rod.'

The Russian had an Uzi pistol, semi-automatic.

'Go,' he said to Black Aron. 'Go.'

Black Aron let out the clutch, easing the car into the street. No traffic. 'You wait until they're in their car,' he said, 'we're civilised here. Not like Moscow.'

'Your arse,' said the Russian.

'Why d'you use a gun like that?' Black Aron tapped his index finger against his head. 'Stupid gun. Stupid.' Black Aron pointed at the Russian. 'You.'

The Russian grinned at him, a perfect set of gold teeth. Lifted the Uzi, rubbed the muzzle behind Black Aron's ear. 'You think, stupid?'

Black Aron knocked the gun away. 'Just do your job, Smirnoff.'

He could see the Anders family getting into their car, a Merc, late '80s-style 300-series. Prick Titus could buy new models every year, but he kept an antique. Some kind of man-of-the-people gesture. Big windows to shoot them through. Nice one, Titus.

'You kill them, you won't find the boy,' Black Aron had said to Tamora. Not his place to make comments but sometimes he risked it.

Like earlier with Tamora dressed up in slacks, a

jacket (no camisole, no bra underneath), killer heels for some maker-and-shaker dinner. You saw her like that with her short spiky hair, slim figure, you wouldn't say she ran the Mongols gang, smuggled abalone for a living. You wouldn't say tattooed men with no front teeth listened to her.

As they'd left her apartment, she'd said, 'The boy's dead.' Her teenage son she was talking about, like she didn't care. Which Aron reckoned she didn't. The boy'd been living with other people for years. Story was she'd dumped him in some foster home for a couple of grand a month subsidy.

'You worry about the Russian,' she'd said. 'No cock-ups.'

The other thing about Tamora Black Aron couldn't work out was why she screwed him. He was low rent. Her driver. Her skivvy. Her messenger. She was moving up. Meeting important people. She gave orders. Got consignments.

Once he'd asked why me? She'd smiled, stroked his cheek. 'Is my A-ron nervous?' she'd said, coming in close to whisper in his ear. Her tongue teasing. 'Nervous he'll get pushed?' Her breath hot against his skin. 'Why d'you think?' she'd said, slid her hand down into his crotch. 'You give good cock, Aron.'

Which was the deal.

Which Black Aron Chetty saw as a skill he had the way some men were good at carpentry. For the moment he could live with it. Ever ready, though, for the throwaway occasion. Like she'd discarded her son.

'The boy's dead.' Tamora realistic.

'You don't know.'

'I know.'

'For sure?'

'The soon as they found sharkbait Boetie all weighted down, they took my boy. I know Titus, he kills chop-chop.'

'You can't be certain.' Black Aron going out on a limb. Not that he knew the boy – he didn't. Had seen him once in six months. But felt he had to make some play for the boy's life.

'What'd I say, I know Titus. Just didn't think the old man was so fast anymore.'

'Maybe you shouldn't've killed Boetie.'

'None of your business, Aron.'

He'd backed off right there. Watched Tamora slide into her car, sleek Golf 7 GTI, brand new.

'No other way to go, Aron. You know. What d'you boys say, blood in, blood out? Titus loves that one. What's his other saying? No pain, no gain. Like he's a MBA graduate.'

Black Aron shook his head. Tamora was a crazy fem. Crazy to screw, crazy to work for. But the money was good. Better still, looked like the money would pile up. The way she was heading he'd do alright. Might lose his privileges but she needed him as first lieutenant. At least that's what Black Aron Chetty had in mind.

He fastened both hands on the steering wheel. Smirnoff alongside him slid down the window, all ready there with his Uzi.

Black Aron drove slowly down the street. Stopped next to the big Merc, about three metres between them. He looked past the Russian, saw the Anders all staring at them. That oh-shit look coming into their faces.

'Spot on, my chinas,' he said.

III

Cape Town International Airport.

'You are women,' said the fat Chinese man. The thin Chinese man nodding alongside.

'You've got a problem with that?' said Krista Bishop, glancing from one to the other.

'Last time we looked,' said Tami Mogale.

'No, that is beautiful,' said the fat man. 'You are beautiful.'

Krista thinking, Here we go. The chick thing. Haven't even exited the airport, they're at it.

People pushing past to get out of the terminal, the four of them mid-flow, baggage trolleys causing mayhem.

Krista and Tami ushered their clients to one side.

The two men going at one another in their own language, Krista and Tami standing patiently. Both women in jeans and T-shirts, black linen jackets, black tekkies.

The two men bowed, straightened, held out their hands.

'I am Mr Yan.'

'I am Mr Lijan.'

'We are businessmen in your beautiful country,' said Mr Yan.

Krista and Tami shook their hands.

'You are Complete Security?' said Mr Lijan.

Krista said yes.

'In Johannesburg we had big black men.'

'I'm black,' said Tami.

'We can see. You are very nice. You are better for us,' said Mr Yan.

The two businessmen laughed.

'But you are very beautiful. The men were like bulls.' He held his hands either side of his shoulders. 'Shoulders like bulls.'

'These men don't talk,' said Mr Lijan.

'They stand and watch,' said Mr Yan. 'We say good morning, goodbye. That is all. You will be more friendly. You are nice women. Show us the town.'

'We're your security, Mr Yan,' said Krista.

'You look after us.'

'We are your security.'

'Full stop,' said Tami.

'Full stop?' said Mr Yan.

'That's our service. That's what you hired us for.'

'Very good,' said Mr Lijan. 'Very good.'

'You will come to our meetings? You will come with us seeing the sights?'

'If that's what you want,' said Krista. 'Yes. It's what we undertake.'

'Such beautiful young women to be our bodyguards. This is wonderful,' said Mr Lijan. 'Where is the transportation?'

Krista caught Tami's eye, rolled hers. Tami's mouth tight, not like she was enjoying this.

In the car, a seven-seater VW Sharan, one of the men took the middle row, the other the back. Talked on their cellphones, talked to one another, never quiet. All the way into the city. No comment on the shacklands, the rise of Devil's Peak against the twilight, no comment on the wall of Table Mountain, nothing to say about the city as they cruised down the boulevard into the CBD. Not like the women Krista and Tami guarded: the celebrities, the businesswomen, the wives of rich men, they had something to say about it all. The men, they kept chatting, but didn't say anything Krista could understand.

'You got to realise,' she could hear Mace sermonising, 'in the guarding business most of the time you don't know what your clients are on about. Jabbering away in their languages. They could be major hellhounds for all you know. You could be ferrying around serious players. Putting your life on the line for rubbish.' Mace always ready with the 101 lecture.

Tami driving, said in Xhosa, 'This isn't going to work.'

'It will.' Krista not entirely sure, talking herself into it. She glanced at Tami, Tami shook her head. 'We had no choice.'

'We've always got a choice. We don't do men. We've

never done men.' Tami jerked her thumb at the two behind them. 'They think we're part of the deal. Escort gals.'

'They're going to learn otherwise,' said Krista.

'We should've said no.'

'We couldn't, Tami. I couldn't. You know that, I couldn't.'

They came off the elevated freeway into the Waterfront, going out the top of the roundabout to the Cape Grace.

'So soon we are here,' said Mr Yan. 'Good driving. This is an excellent hotel, yes?' He looked across the basin at the hulk of a ship, dark, deserted.

'It's good,' said Tami.

'You know the story of the man who had his honeymoon bride killed?' Krista angled herself to look at the men behind her. Krista wanting to put in a touch of local colour.

Mr Yan shook his head. Mr Lijan raised his glasses above his eyebrows.

'Two pretty people,' said Krista, 'came here for their honeymoon. Only thing is the husband arranges a hit on his wife. Using the taxi driver.'

'Oh no,' said Mr Yan, 'even in Beijing this arrangement is not possible.'

'This isn't Beijing,' said Krista. 'Anyhow, what I heard was probably the husband's father who set it up for his son. Turns out the father is that kind of control freak.'

The Chinese clients shook their heads. 'Impossible.'

'You think so?'

'Why would he do this?'

'That's the mystery,' said Tami.

'They stayed here? She was killed here?'

'They stayed here,' said Krista. 'She was killed in a township. A pretend hijacking.'

'And what about the husband? The husband is alive?'

'That was the deal.'

'A taxi driver can arrange this?'

The two women nodded.

'So easy?' said Mr Yan.

'For how much?'

'Fifteen thousand rand,' said Krista. 'We charge more than that.'

The two men staring at her until Mr Yan laughed. 'You are making a joke. Very funny joke.'

Krista didn't say if she was or she wasn't.

IV

There was Mart Velaze sitting at the Vida e in Cape Town International with a double espresso when the two young women pushed through the glass doors. Mart Velaze watched them cross the concourse towards Arrivals. Fierce chicks. Lovely. Two women on a mission. Not a smile on their faces. About as grim a

look as you could get on a pretty. Made Mart Velaze smile.

Hot babes, both of them.

Beddable babes.

That Krista especially. Skin like a smooth latte. Like you could lick it and taste a caffè macchiato. Would give a Sunday-afternoon phata-phata on the bed to die for. The other one, too. Tami. Both of them would be good. Entertaining was a word that came to the mind of Mart Velaze. A threesome idea something to fantasise about.

Mart Velaze finished the remains of his coffee, peeled the wrapper off the small Lindt square, let it melt in his mouth. Coffee and chocolate. Krista and Tami. He stood up, walked towards where they talked with the Chinese men.

This was the part he always enjoyed. The anonymity of the spook. Standing there pretending to be waiting for someone. Rising on his toes to see over the heads. All the time listening.

The girls not at all happy with the arrangement.

Tough titty, as the English would say.

The Chinese trying it on. Krista and Tami laying down rules.

'We are your security.'

'Full stop.'

Nice one, Tami.

They had mouths on them, these sistas. Mr Yan and Mr Lijan would know all about it sooner or later. Probably sooner.

When Mart Velaze'd phoned her, Krista had been, You can't do this, you can't do that, called him an extortionist. More exactly, a fucking extortionist.

What could you do? It's a tough world, babe. Sometimes you just got to live with things you don't like.

She didn't like hearing that her lovely home, her red Alfa Spider would disappear in the puff of a tax audit.

That'd got Krista firing. She came on like a witch exorcising devils. Entertaining. Even over the phone.

'Just you try it,' she'd said.

'I don't want to, sisi,' he'd come back. 'Do me the favour, look after the Chinamen and we're sharp.'

'Until next time.'

'Maybe there isn't a next time.'

'There's always a next time, buti.'

Mart Velaze picking up the sarcasm on buti. My brother. He'd let it go, told her: 'Do the job.' Gave her the details. 'They pay good money.'

And they were on it as he'd expected. Krista knowing what was good for her.

He followed the two women and the Chinese men out of the terminal into the sunset glow. Warm summer late light. A windless evening. Very rare. Rare as the bums on the two babes. Pleasure to walk behind them.

He put his hands into the pockets of his chinos, keeping back where the women wouldn't notice him. Then in the queue at the pay booth, he was suddenly behind them. Krista looked round, but he flicked his eyes away. Felt her staring at him. He drew cash from his pocket, counted change from one hand to the other.

Going out of the parking garage he was behind them in a white Audi, white the best colour you could have for a tail job.

He followed them onto the highway, accelerating into the traffic flow. He knew where they were going, he knew how long it would take them to get there. He could drive ahead, keep them in the rear-view.

Mart Velaze did not expect anything to happen to Mr Yan or Mr Lijan on their way to the Cape Grace. As he passed the power station, his cellphone rang.

An unknown number.

Mart Velaze squinted at the screen in the hands-free clip, wondered if he should answer. He did. The voice said, 'Chief.'

Mart Velaze frowned, tightened his grip on the steering wheel. Never had the woman they called the Voice ever phoned him on an operation.

'Ma'am,' he said.

'Everything alright with our guests and their … er … escorts.' A hint of humour in the word escorts.

Mart Velaze smiled. 'Everything on schedule, ma'am.'

'The Bishop girl didn't misbehave?'

'No, ma'am. She wouldn't.'

'And Ms Mogale?'

'The same.'

'Wonderful, chief. Now listen …' Then silence. Mart Velaze waited. Silences had become part of the Voice's conversation technique as she put one person on hold to talk to another. After all these years he still didn't know

her name. But she was a survivor. As the Scorpions became the Hawks and the secret services exploded and imploded and re-formed, as cop commissioners rose, were corrupted, chopped down, the Voice stayed the same. Slightly husky, always calm, always polite.

At first Mart Velaze had thought of her as a large woman, but that had changed in recent months. Now he thought of her as slim, a power dresser, a short-dread hairstyle, discreet jewellery, sometimes a silver chain necklace, sometimes a diamond ring. No wedding band. The Voice was single. A woman alone, talking to people she'd never meet. A woman handling her spooks.

'Chief,' she said. 'Leave the escorts and the Chinamen.'

Mart Velaze checked the rear-view mirror, the vw coming up in the fast lane.

'Understood?'

'Understood.'

She gave him the name of the restaurant in Lagoon Beach. 'You got that?'

He told her yes.

'There's been a shooting there, chief, with interesting people. Titus Anders, one of those I told you to read up about. Seems I've got my fingers on the pulse. Let me know, asap. Go with the ancestors.'

Mart Velaze eased off the accelerator, let the vw overtake, tracked them up Hospital Bend down the boulevard, came off before the highway skirted the Foreshore.

'Till later, my hot babes,' he said aloud.