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**ROBIN BAKER**



**THE  
HITCHHIKER'S  
CHILD**



*A story of murder and mystery, love and sacrifice. Mark gives a lift to a woman thrown bound and naked from a car. Her story is bizarre but intriguing: her child cannot be her husband's, yet she had no lovers. Mark, a zoologist specializing in Kalahari lions, is pulled into increasingly violent situations until survival depends on solving the mystery. As in PRIMAL and CABALLITO, the innovative sexual science behind THE HITCHHIKER'S CHILD is real.*

## The Hitchhiker's Child

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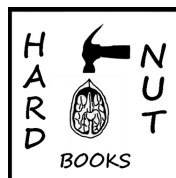
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# The Hitchhiker's Child

Robin Baker



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## **Chapter 1**

In a dimly-lit corner of the empty car park I switched off the car lights, reclined my seat, and closed my eyes. Only twenty minutes I told myself – but I didn't manage even one. Just as I was drifting off I was jolted awake by a banging on the window, then startled by the sight of a bruised and bleeding white face only inches from my own. I froze and stared in shock and the person backed away. Now I could see. The pale figure was a woman, hands behind her back, a gag in her mouth, naked.

I peered into the dark to see if anyone else was lurking nearby but the car park seemed deserted. So I eased out of the car then advanced slowly, sensing how afraid the woman was. I tried to reassure her saying I would help if she would let me; that she had nothing to fear. Did she want me to untie the gag and her wrists? Because if she did, I would need to come close. I would need to stand behind her. She wavered, then slowly turned.

Close-up her long hair smelled of petrol. The knot of the gag was tied tightly and incorporated thick strands of her hair. At the front it was pulled hard back between her teeth. I could neither untie it nor slide it up or down without pulling out her hair. As for her wrists... My rapidly cooling fingers could do nothing to free her. She was shivering violently, her skin freezing to the touch.

'Best get in the car,' I said. But she squealed and shook her head. 'You've no choice,' I continued. 'You need warmth and I need light. I can't see what I'm doing.' Again she squealed, so I moved around to face her, hoping that she could see enough of my eyes to trust me. 'I won't hurt you, I

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promise. You're safe with me. I'm a doctor – of sorts. You'll be hypothermic if you stay out here.'

She appeared to calm down – or maybe accepted that she had no other option – and I helped her awkwardly into the passenger seat. Then I rummaged in the car-boot for a knife; a blanket too, which I draped over her. As soon as I cut away the oil-soaked gag, the woman spat out the taste. Her hands were tied with what looked like piano wire which had begun to cut into her flesh. As I sawed at the bonds she gave tiny cries of pain. 'Sorry,' I said at each whimper.

Once free she examined her wrists, wincing as she rubbed them. 'I need a shower,' she said.

'But...'

'I need a shower. Now! Can't you smell me? They had matches.' She burst into tears and began to rock backwards and forwards holding her head in her hands.

I placed my hand on her bare back but she shrugged me away. 'Sorry, but I need my phone?' I said gently.

'What!'

'My mobile. You're sitting on it.'

'Phone! Why?'

'The police.'

'No! Not the police. Not anybody. Promise me. My husband...'

'But...'

'No! Just a shower. That's all. Please!'

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I loaned her my tracksuit, pulled from my weekend bag, the trouser-legs and sleeves way too long for her. With no spare footwear to offer, I found her the least dirty pair of my socks. Then with her face wiped as clean of blood as I could

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manage, she stayed at a distance while I booked us into the service-station motel.

‘Where’s your room?’ she asked, standing framed in the doorway to her own.

‘Next one along. I hope your shower works.’

‘So do I. I will pay you back. Honestly.’

‘I should hope so. Call if you need me. Or bang on the wall. Don’t worry about the time.’

She began to close her door, but opened it again. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Mark.’

‘I’m Mia.’

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Next morning, we travelled back north along the M1 to the service station where Mia had been attacked, grabbed from behind while unlocking her car, then bundled into a large white van. She told me that much at least as we drove. But when we searched the parking area her car – a red MG midget convertible – had gone, and with it her overnight case. So I bought her some clothing, the minimum she needed to be comfortable and not attract attention. Then we went to the restaurant for breakfast.

‘Do you work out?’ Mia said. ‘You look as though you do.’

‘Occasionally. When I’m in England. Not the rest of the time.’

‘Really? Why’s that?’

‘Long story.’

‘Oh... OK,’ and for a while we ate in silence, Mia needing to concentrate. ‘You have beautiful eyes,’ she said eventually. ‘Kind – and very...’ She winced, and I winced

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with her. The weeping cuts on her lip and cheek looked raw and painful.

‘Maybe best not to smile.... . Very what?’

‘I was going to say very brown.’ She put her pale and delicate hand with its long and painted fingernails to the corner of her mouth to deal with a pastry flake. ‘Much like the rest of you. I mean – that’s either one terrific tan or... Are you English?’ Suddenly she flushed. ‘Oh, sorry! I didn’t mean... Of course not. But isn’t that a slight accent?’

I smiled. ‘No need to apologise. And yes, I am English... At least, according to my passport. My mother was English you see. But I was born in Zimbabwe after my father escaped there from South Africa – and even now I spend half my time in Botswana. Maybe that’s the accent. So – you’re right – this colour is partly the African sun. But you’re right about the other bit too. My father’s father. Seems my grandmother was married to a Boer but also had a moment of racial unity – with a Zulu, so I’m told. And quite a lot seems to have surfaced in me.’ A look of discomfort flickered across Mia’s face. ‘Does that bother you?’ I asked.

‘Me? No! Of course not. A Zulu... Wow!’ She hesitated, staring at me as if studying my face. ‘Are you sure you don’t mind taking me home?’

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‘Unusual way to thumb a lift,’ I said as we drove down the motorway towards London.

‘Not my choice.’ She glanced at me. ‘What’s your address? So I can send you a cheque? Pay you back all this money you’ve spent on me.’

‘Oh, it’s not so much – but I won’t say no. Just rummage around in there.’ I indicated the glove compartment.



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'You should find a business card or two. Unless I gave them all away over the weekend.'

She found a card and studied it for a moment. 'So that's what you meant by "sort-of."'

'Afraid so. But the doctor bit worked didn't it? Isn't that when you began to trust me?'

'Not sure that it was. I think it was more that you knew the word "hypothermic" .... By the way... Have I said 'thank you' yet?'

'Not exactly. But did I have a choice? I could hardly just leave you, could I? Anybody would have done the same?'

'Would they? I'm not so sure. But... Tell me. Honestly. Would you have been such a Samaritan if I'd been a man? Or ugly? Or even just wearing clothes?'

I didn't answer – just smiled – then broke off from conversation for a minute or so while I overtook a two-carriageway string of lorries. 'Now... What about you?' I said eventually. 'Are you ready to tell me what happened yet?'

For a few moments it seemed that she wasn't. But then: 'They didn't rape me you know. If that's what you thought.'

That was what I thought. 'So why did they strip you?'

'For the other reason. There is only one isn't there? That I know of any way.'

'Is there? What's that?'

'To humiliate somebody. Break them. Get information from them. It's the first step. And if stripping doesn't work...'

'...you tie their wrists with piano wire, pour petrol over their head and threaten to light a match, eh? My God! Who are these people? And what were they trying to get out

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of you? It must have been important to merit that. Did it work? Did you tell them?’

‘I couldn’t tell them. Because I don’t know. And it’s probably just as well I don’t.’ She pointed at a large hoarding. ‘Can we stop? At this Service Station? I need the loo. Do you mind?’

She also seemed to need time on her own. So I sat at a table and let her wander the shops for a while, occasionally glimpsing her in the newsagent, flicking through magazines. She was very petite, very graceful in her movements; in her mid-twenties I would guess. I tried to imagine her as a spy, or an undercover policewoman – but couldn’t. Eventually she joined me and began sipping the cappuccino I had ready for her.

‘Are you married,’ she asked. ‘Children?’ Her look was quizzical, her swollen upper-lip making her mouth lopsided. ‘My guess is no.’

‘Your guess is right. Just a girlfriend or two. And what about you? I mean, I know you’re married and... OK. Here goes. My guess is that you do have a child. Am I right?’

‘Yes... Ha. How did you know?’

‘A size-eight with stretch marks?’

She spluttered into her drink. ‘Oh my God... Do they show that much?’

‘It’s the car light. It’s weird. Highlights things like that. I noticed them while I was putting the blanket over you last night. So... Where is he? Or she? Your child?’

‘He. Lex.’ She fell silent, cup to her mouth but not drinking. And when I saw that her eyes were watering I didn’t press, just waited. ‘He’s with my parents. Nottingham. I’ve just spent the weekend with him. Every chance I get.... I love him so much. It kills me every time I leave him. But...’ Her eyes were still welling.

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'So why leave him? Can't you...'

'I've had no choice but go back to work. So it was either a doting Grandma or a paid stranger; a large comfy house or a tiny bed-sit. Which would you... ?' Her sad and lingering look made me feel I was being judged. 'Actually... Can I trust you? Lex is what all this is about.'

'Really? How?'

'You're going to think I'm crazy but... He came out dark-skinned. As dark as you.'

'Is dark-skinned a problem?'

'Oh yes. My husband, you see...'

'Ah... But I still don't... Not 'crazy' anyway. Unlucky perhaps. But you must have known the risk you were taking. You know... Having a lover who...'

She shook her head. 'That's the whole point. There never was a lover. White or black. I wouldn't dare.'

'So what are you saying? That your husband – or you – also once had a grandmother...'

'Now that really would be funny. More than you know. But... No. Not as far as I know.' She hesitated again. 'We – I – had paternity tests. Several. After the first, my husband threw us both out: me and Lex. But I couldn't just let it go. Those tests, they had to be wrong. Yet they all came back the same. My husband couldn't be Lex's father. I genuinely thought I was losing my mind.'

'So wasn't Lex yours? Had the hospital...'

'What hospital? I was at home, with my own midwife and doctor. All the care and attention money could buy. Until...' She gave a despairing laugh. 'No, the baby was mine all right.'

My own laugh was one of confusion. 'OK. Then I give up. So what is the explanation?'

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‘No idea. All I know is: I was never unfaithful to my husband, but the baby isn’t his. It really is crazy, yes? Or at least, it would be if...’ She stopped in mid-sentence.

‘If... What?’

‘I’m so frightened Mark. Because I know... Last night was nothing. If my husband ever does decide he knows who Lex’s father is... Well... That man is dead. And me and Lex with him.’

## Chapter 2

‘Of course he won’t kill her. Where did you say they lived?’

‘I didn’t. She made me drop her at Wimbledon Underground.’ I was at the window gazing out at the galaxy of lights that was London at night.

‘Well, wherever. She had her fun, she’s been found out, now she’s worried her alimony is going up in smoke. So she’s come up with this stupid story. As for you, she just wanted your sympathy. And your money. You’ll never see that couple of hundred quid again.’

‘Mike... Do me a favour and shut up! Go and do something useful. Make us both a coffee. It’s your turn.’

While he obliged I picked up the latest edition of *Animal Behaviour* and began reading.

‘Anything interesting?’ He handed me my cup of instant black.

‘Cheetah infidelity in the Serengeti. It’s good work. I heard a preview at the Glasgow conference at the weekend.’

He chuckled – ‘Cheetahs or cheaters?’ – then held up his hand. ‘OK. Sorry! So how did it go? Your conference? How was Scotland?’

‘Cold. Grey. But my conference was fine. Lots of new contacts. And my lecture went well, I think.’

‘Any women?’

‘Lots.’

‘And?’

‘And nothing.’

He grunted. ‘OK, so don’t tell me then. But while we’re on the subject, that Psychology lecturer you screwed a

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few weekends ago rang. She thinks she left some earrings here.'

'Marsha?'

'Hell, no! The other one. The one with the laugh.'

'Oh God. What did you tell her?'

'That I'd tell you. Have you found them?'

'They don't exist. They're just an excuse. Anyway. How was your weekend? That stag-thing? And the wedding, I suppose... What did you subject this poor sod to?'

Mike began stirring his café au lait, mixing in his three sugars and splash of whiskey. 'The usual. But... Tell me honestly Mark. Am I getting into a rut? The lamp-post thing... I don't know – it just doesn't seem funny any more.'

'It never did.'

'Used to make me laugh. Besides, that's why they ask me. They want it to happen. But now...' He sighed. 'Even the treacle-and-feathers seems to be wearing thin.'

The phone rang and Mike answered. 'It's for you.' He threw me the receiver.

I half-expected to be asked about lost earrings, but it was a man's voice, with an accent. Maybe Scottish. 'Mark de Vries? PhD?'

'Yes. Who's that?'

'I've got your business card here. All your details.'

'That's what business cards are for. Who is this?' Outside on the street below, I heard an ambulance speed past with its sirens blaring.

'“Lecturer in Zoology” it says. “University of London.” Picture of a lion. I just wanted you to know.'

'Know what? Has something happened?'

'Not yet.'

The line went dead. Under 'Received Calls' all I found was 'Private.'

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'Sir! Doctor de Vries!' Three second-year students were bearing down on me; two earnest looking men and a disturbingly pretty woman of probably Middle-eastern or Pakistani extraction.

'Christ Almighty,' I chastised them. 'Call me Mark, please.' They looked uncomfortable.

'We just wanted to say...' said one of the men, '... how much we've enjoyed your lectures this semester.'

'And how gutted we are that they're over.'

I thanked them.

'And we were just wondering – if you've got a moment that is – if we could talk to you. Some time soon.'

'It all looks so amazing. My God... Chasing around the Kalahari after lions. Just brilliant.'

I checked the clock on the lecture-room wall. 'Look, I can't stop right now. But if you really want to talk, meet me in the 'Cockney Arms' at two. Buy me a drink and I'll spare you an hour.'

They exchanged disappointed glances. 'We can't. We've got a Physiology practical all afternoon. Part of our assessment.'

'Then I'm afraid you've left it too late. I'm away now until October. Well, apart from a flying visit or two.'

They thanked me and left the theatre, but a few moments later the woman returned. Until now, she'd said nothing. 'Please... Dr de Vries. You are in a hurry, I know, but...'

'You really will have to be quick.'

'OK. Very quick. Your laboratory project next year? The DNA one? Using your samples of lion blood? I am on the short-list and I was wondering. Have you decided who will do this project yet?'

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‘Sorry, I can’t tell you that. Departmental rules. You’ll have to wait until you get the official e-mail.’

‘Really?... ..... Oh, I am sorry. I should not have asked, should I? I can see that you are cross with me.’

‘Not cross, no. I can’t blame you for asking. But rules are rules.’

‘I know. But my father... He is always telling me and my brother. When you really want something... Anyway, if you can give me just one more moment, there is something else I wish to say. Something that my father has also urged me to tell you.’ Long black hair, big brown eyes, white even teeth – she really was very striking.

‘What’s that?’

‘That, if you are interested, he is prepared to pay for me to do a PhD after I graduate. Or at least, he is prepared to do so as long as I work hard and get a First Class degree. For my father, I have to earn this money.’

‘A PhD?’

‘Yes. On lions. In the Kalahari. With you. If you will accept me. I have told my father: I now know that this is what I wish to do. My ambition has always been to do wildlife research, but I could never decide on what. But since your very first lecture, sitting and listening to you, everything just clicked for me. You really do make it all sound so exciting.’

‘Well... I try. Look... What’s your name? I should know but...’

‘No, please. Do not apologise. Why should you know me? There are so many of us. My name is Sharda. Sharda Kaur.’

‘Ah...’ I knew the name very well. Many of my colleagues had eulogised about her – some of them even for the right reasons. She had a very good chance of getting a First. ‘Sharda, eh? A Hindu goddess, no less. Right... Sod the



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Rules. You can relax. You were top of my list. The first name pencilled in.'

'Really? Really? Oh my God. That is fantastic. Can I tell my father?'

'Probably best to wait until you get the e-mail.' I glanced at the clock again. 'Look... I'm sorry Sharda but...'

'Of course. And no, it is me who should be sorry – for delaying you. But thank you for telling me this thing. Getting that project means so much to me. So... I shall go and prepare for my practical then. Let you fly off and chase your lions for a few months. See you next October...'

As soon as I was back at my office computer I opened my 2010-11 project list, deleted 'Ian Mayhew' from alongside the lion DNA project and replaced it with 'Sharda Kaur'. Ian was a good student. Adaptable. He could do something else. But my Kalahari research station needed money and research students like Sharda far more than I needed principles.

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After telling Mike I would walk, I resisted the urge to hail a taxi despite the early-evening drizzle. But unlike the other pedestrians with their umbrellas, hoods or waterproof coats, I was unprepared. All I could do was turn up my jacket collar, bow my head and walk fast, anticipating the cosy pub where I was to meet everybody. Mike had insisted on arranging a farewell party for me; tomorrow was also my thirtieth birthday.

A car drove past at kerb-crawling speed; a large car, with darkened windows. Ahead of me it pulled in at a vacant parking meter and the driver climbed out wearing a peaked hat, dark clothes and black gloves. He gave the meter a

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cursory glance then stood on the pavement and watched me approach. 'Mark de Vries?' he asked as I drew near.

The car's rear door opened and another man got out. 'Mr Cruickshank wants to talk with you.' And before I could say anything or resist I was bundled on to the back seat and sandwiched between two burly men. The one seated to my right was holding a dagger in black-gloved hands. The blade was glinting in the light from the streetlamps – until blinds came down over all the windows leaving us suffused in a dull green light.

'I don't know any Cruickshank.'

'Well he knows you. Now be quiet. Just enjoy the ride.' Built like a night-club bouncer his eyes were hidden behind sunglasses and his voice was gravelly. He and the others were such caricatures and the set-up so clichéd they just couldn't be real.

'This is Mike isn't it?' I said, looking from one to the other and hoping I was right. '*Rent-a-Hood*. He's told me about you.' Their expressions stayed set; I slumped back in the seat between them. 'Oh, God! Where is this party? Birthday or not, I've got a plane to catch tomorrow.' In the dim light I tried to take a closer look at the dagger to see if the blade was plastic. Maybe it was. Perhaps noticing my attention the man sheathed the knife inside his jacket. 'Whatever Mike's paying you, I'll double it. Say you missed me. Or I escaped. How about it?'

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I judged the journey lasted about an hour – and despite my attempts to get the two men to talk they remained silent all the way. London streets gave way first to Motorway then to quiet and winding lanes. My guess was that we travelled North then West but with the blinds down I couldn't be sure

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of anything – except that we had travelled too far for the destination to be a surprise party, even one of Mike's. But if not a party... Four words were going round in my head: Cruickshank; Scottish; 'not yet'. And if 'Mr Cruickshank' really was the voice on my telephone, where did he get my business card? I hoped it was Glasgow.

When the car eventually crawled to a stop and the doors opened we were in a spacious garage containing several other cars, all expensive. The smell of engine oil and exhaust fumes hung in the air. Light-headed and with racing heart I was ushered into a lift which took us to the third floor. As the door slid open my last faint hope of a friendly explanation disappeared. There was no drunken gathering, no party sounds. Just a small brightly-lit room without furniture or windows. The tiled walls and floor were white and bare. A large plasma television screen was high up on one wall and a CCTV camera high up on another.

'Take off your clothes,' growled the man with the knife.

'What? Don't be stupid. No!'

'Take them off.'

'C'mon. You're joking.'

'No joke. Bollock-naked Mr Cruickshank said, so bollock-naked it is.' My arms were grabbed from behind and the man in front of me pulled the neck of my T-shirt with one hand and stuck his knife-blade down inside the front with the other. 'Take them off or I'll cut them off.'

My lips were dry. 'That knife... It's plastic, right?'

In one continuous movement he slit my shirt from neck to waist. 'Your choice,' he growled, now pulling at the waist of my jeans and again sticking his knife inside.

The door to the room opened and a woman came in. Dressed in a nurse's uniform she was carrying a sealed plastic

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bag which she began to open. I glanced up at the camera. It moved. 'Your choice,' the man repeated, tensing his knife-hand.

I began undressing, trying to kill the tremor in my hands as I fumbled with my belt.

'Open your mouth,' said the woman once I was naked.

'What?'

'Open your mouth,' echoed one of the men, yanking back my head by the hair and pulling down my lower jaw. The woman inserted something very like a cotton bud into my mouth and began working it against the inside of my left cheek. When she finished the three of them left, taking my clothes with them.

'Who the hell are you?' I shouted at the camera, though by now I was almost certain. 'And what do you want? Because it can't be me. You've got the wrong man.' Frantically I pressed the lift button. The doors stayed closed.

Suddenly the plasma screen lit up and a picture appeared: a magazine cover showing a pair of hands – a woman's. One hand was stroking the back of the other, showing-off long and painted finger nails. The picture faded and another magazine cover appeared, this time showing a hat photographed from above. Clear blue eyes gazed up at the camera from beneath the rim. The model's hair was blonde – and all remaining doubts disappeared. The picture changed again, but this time not to a magazine cover. Mia was standing on steps outside the large door to a very large church; a cathedral even. She was wearing a white wedding dress with a long train. In her hands was a posy of white flowers. 'I don't understand,' I said to the camera. 'What has any of this got to do with me?'

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As if in answer, the picture of a building – a service station motel – appeared on the screen followed seconds later by another picture, this time of Mia and myself at a table eating croissants and jam. And when that picture faded it was replaced by the image of a newborn baby, his skin as dark as mine. Suddenly a voice boomed round the room. ‘You’ve humiliated me Boy. Now it’s pay-back time. Behave like a dog and you’ll be treated like a dog.’ It was a man’s voice, with an accent. Probably Scottish.

The room was stiflingly hot but still a shiver ran over my back. ‘You think that baby’s mine? That’s crazy. I’ve met Mia once, that’s all.’

‘Don’t lie to me Boy. I knew she’d lead me to the father one day.’

‘Lead! That meeting was a complete accident.’

‘Accident! You were following her. You were going to meet her at some sleazy motel. And when you saw her get into the white van you just kept on following. Did the pair of you really think I’d believe her crazy lies?’

‘Well there’s one thing you’ll have to believe. Those mouth swabs. They were for a DNA test, yes? OK, fine. Get the results. Then you’ll see. I am not that baby’s father. And hurry up about it. Because if you don’t, you’re going to owe me a plane ticket to Botswana.’

The picture on the plasma screen changed. In place of the baby there appeared a tombstone with a simple inscription:

**Mark de Vries**  
**14 April 1980 – 14 April 2010**

### **Chapter 3**

‘Breakfast?’ I said to the camera when I grew hungry. But none came – nor again after ‘Lunch?’ and ‘Dinner?’

‘Come on. You must have that result by now. Admit it. You made a mistake. Let me go.’

Long past the time that I judged I should be on my plane, the picture of my tombstone was replaced by two others that I’d already seen: the Motel that Mia and I used, and our breakfasting together the next day. ‘I helped her. And that’s all. We didn’t even share a room. You should be thanking me.’

‘Know what you need to learn Boy? Respect! Now get out of my sight, before I decide that even just having breakfast with my wife is a firing-squad offence.’

The door to the empty lift opened in invitation, and down in the garage the car was waiting with engine running and rear door open. I could just make out the driver through the darkened glass. ‘Hey! Where are my clothes?’ I shouted after I climbed in, expecting to see them on the back seat. Nobody answered, the blinds came down, and the car began moving forward. When we finally stopped we were back somewhere in London. ‘Clothes!’ I demanded again.

‘Fifteen seconds to get out,’ said the driver through an intercom. ‘Or never.’

So still naked I clambered out on to the pavement. There was a cold April wind blowing down Charing Cross Road, and everybody except me was dressed for warmth as they hurried past. Some stared at me, some pretended not to notice. Some giggled, and some looked afraid.

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'Excuse me,' I said to a man. 'Can I borrow your phone?'

'Fuck off, pervert.'

A few seconds later, I tried somebody else. 'Excuse me...'

'Leave me alone! I'll call the police.'

'Good. They can take me home.'

But he didn't call anybody, just walked quickly away. A woman scuttled past virtually dragging her two gawping children. I looked around for a phone booth.

'Dr de Vries? Is that you?' I spun round. 'My Goodness! What are you doing?' It was Sharda Kaur, her expression flickering between surprise, concern and amusement. In contrast, the tall man with a white turban and black beard by her side looked disapproving and irritated.

'I'll explain later. Can I borrow your coat? And could you help me get a taxi home?'

Sharda took off her calf-length bright-red coat and handed it to me. It barely reached my knees. 'You drew less attention wearing nothing,' said the man.

'This is Mazher Singh, my brother. He is reading Law.'

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Sharda and I stepped into the lift at my apartment block while Mazher stayed with the taxi; they were on their way to the theatre. The journey had been long enough for me to explain everything that had happened and for the conversation to move on. 'Before you put on my coat at the railway station...' said Sharda, 'I noticed... You have a big scar on your shoulder. Can I ask how you got that?'

'From stupid bloody impatience. It was during my PhD in the Serengeti. I didn't wait long enough for the

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sedative to work after this big lion rolled over. As I knelt down he swung round and grabbed me in his mouth. Took out a big chunk of flesh. I was lucky it wasn't my head. I won't make that mistake again.'

Her eyes opened wide but she said nothing more until we stepped out of the lift on the ninth floor. 'Is there somebody in your flat? To let you in?'

'I doubt it.'

'Then how...?'

'Digital lock.' And moments later I was keying in the number. 'Do you want to wait here?' I said. 'I'll just put on a dressing gown and you can take your coat and go.'

'And miss the chance to see inside your apartment? Oh – unless there is something you would prefer me not to see of course.'

I invited her in, then went into the bedroom to get dressed.

'Are these all your scientific papers?' she shouted, my bedroom door slightly ajar. 'How many have you written?'

'Fifty-two at the last count. And two more *In Press*.'

I peered through the crack in the door. She was flicking through one of the journals. 'Are you decent yet?' she called a few minutes later.

'Nearly. Just a moment.... OK.'

She appeared in the bedroom doorway and leaned against the jamb, watching as I rummaged for a T-shirt. 'It must be so fantastic to see your work in print. And to have it discussed in newspapers, magazines. I have seen articles about you. You seem quite famous.'

'Hardly famous. I have a long way to go yet.'

'Well... I cannot wait. Just the thought of doing something that nobody has done before. Discovering something new. Something really important. Maybe even a



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new theory. It all seems so amazing and exciting. I even lie awake at night, you know. Sometimes, just imagining.'

I smiled at her passion, and decided not to tell her about the hard work, disappointments and put-downs that were also part of the researcher's life; not to warn her about the inordinate amount of time she would need to spend begging for money just to keep her dream alive. Unless, of course, her father...

'Dr de Vries? Are you alright?'

'Oh... Yes. Sorry. Was I staring?'

'A little, yes.'

'It's just that... The things you were saying. You could have been me, ten years ago.'

'Really?' The comparison seemed to please her.

I pulled on my T-shirt, unable to see her for a few moments. 'Yes, really. I never wanted to do anything else either. Still don't.'

She watched as I pulled my hair out from the shirt-neck. 'Are you really not going to report what happened today to the police?'

'No point – and I haven't time. I've credit cards to cancel and a flight to re-arrange.'

'Oh... Have you not heard? Your flight will have been cancelled. There is a volcano erupting in Iceland. A big cloud of ash. All flights to and from the UK and Europe are grounded.'

## **Chapter 4**

In the speeding open-topped jeep I spat out a fly, then raised my arms to let the hot dust-laden wind dry my armpits. ‘It’s so good to be back at last,’ I yelled; if I didn’t shout I couldn’t be heard above the sound of the engine.

‘It’s good to have you back,’ said Inga, her long plait of sun-bleached blonde hair whipping from side to side behind her. ‘The place loses its soul without you. So how was Maun? Still infested with donkeys?’

‘More than ever. But everything else... I really miss that ‘Wild West-ness’ we used to like so much.’ Our jeep hit a pothole on the dirt track and as we lurched and bounced Inga swore at herself. I laughed – ‘Maybe slow down?’ – but the suggestion only made her laugh too, then nod towards the approaching thunderstorm. Every few seconds forked lightning from the towering black cloud hit the acacia-dotted grassland. Earlier, as my air-taxi descended toward the landing strip, the huge anvil of the distant storm had looked magnificent.

‘Do you think we’ll make it?’ Inga said. ‘Or should I have driven something with a roof?’

‘The way you drive? We’ll make it.’

As we rounded a rocky outcrop our ramshackle camp came into view. A battered large pick-up truck with half-a-dozen people in the open bed sped out of the gate only moments before Inga accelerated in. She braked hard to halt in the centre of the compound, enveloping us and everything about us in a cloud of red dust. Immediately she checked her

watch – ‘Damn! Sixteen! Total crap.’ – then sprang out and slammed the door. ‘This stupid jeep needs servicing.’

I was home.

The camp-site had been in existence for just over a decade, established not by me but by one of the first home-grown ecologists to graduate from the University of Botswana. Seretse Masire was a huge personality: a passionate traditionalist who never missed an opportunity to speak out against what he called the “desecration” of the Kalahari, the “genocide” of the Bushpeople, and the “Christian emasculation” of the African people. After winning over the Tswana in a tiny grass-hut settlement in the south-eastern Kalahari, Seretse sank a water bore-hole and erected a couple of more-permanent buildings. This was to be his base for a research programme aimed at conserving not only the local fauna and flora but also what he saw as the traditional way of life of the local people.

I first met Seretse at a conference in South Africa. He invited me to visit his camp, tempting me with an invitation to take over the large-mammal side of his research, particularly of the Kalahari lion. My visit was a success on all sides, largely – he said – because I was the only European to have visited the place who was prepared to adopt the camp’s ethos rather than “prance and pontificate like a colonialist”. But only months after I started to work alongside him two policemen arrived at the camp in my absence, arrested him, and drove him away. No jail ever admitted to his arrival, and no trace has been found of him since. In effect the camp site became mine to try to finance and use – and for six years now I had been working there whenever my teaching commitments in London allowed.

Inga and I began unloading the jeep, mainly crates of rum and a few boxes of cigarettes that the plane had delivered

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with me. Two men ambled over, both tall gangling and very black, their loose and rhythmic gait almost a dance. 'Hey, Mark. Welcome home Man.'

'Kopano... Tau...' I hugged them each in turn, remembering afresh the salty smell of their bodies. 'How are the wives? Still only the three?'

Kopano smiled, displaying a mouthful of grey crooked and chipped teeth. 'Still lazy. Still hate us. Who would want more?'

The three of us slapped each other's shoulders. 'Real booze,' I said, gesturing at the rum. 'We'll talk more this evening, yes?... .. Oh, by the way... Who were the people in the pick-up truck that Inga nearly hit?'

Kopano spat on the sand. 'Missionaries. Second time this year.' Whether the camp Tswana had been anti-missionary before Seretse Masire had joined them I couldn't be sure. But to hear Kopano or any of them speak now was like hearing Seretse all over again, especially when it came to missionaries.

'Missionaries! Here! I'm surprised they dare. What did they want?'

'Same as before: to save us from hell. This time they bring us shorts to save us. Why are Christians so afraid of cocks?'

I laughed. 'Beats me. So what did you do with the shorts? Throw them back at them?'

Tau answered for his brother. 'Naagh. First he piss on them. Then he throw them back.'

'Kopano! Really?'

The man was beaming. 'Sure I did. Because shorts supposed to stink, ja? Bit of piss, bit of shit, lots of fart, dribble and sweat. That why men wear them, ja? So they can smell like a goat.'

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‘But you could have kept them to wear when you visit the other villages. Or you could have traded them for something.’

‘Wear them? Naagh. When I must wear something, I like my wrap better. Shorts hurt my balls. And who would want them?’

Tswana in settlements nearer to Gaborone than our own possess a hybrid mixture of beliefs and customs. Most still turn to a traditional Shaman for healing, but otherwise their values are those dictated by the missionaries. Clothing is a mishmash of loin-cloths, animal skins, cotton sarongs or second-hand western-style clothes. Even the most minimal covering is considered acceptable as long as it hides the genitals. And much as Kopano despises himself for doing so, he always wears something – usually a sarong – when he goes visiting.

A third man joined us. Much shorter than the other two he was tan rather than black; a bushman. ‘I hear you’ve new cubs for me Nick,’ I said after we embraced.

He nodded.

‘First light tomorrow?’

He nodded again. Nick’s real name was something like N!xau with a tongue-click in the middle and a strange ‘whoosh’ at the end. But on the grounds of “either pronounce my name properly or call me something you can” we’d found a compromise. I had known him for five years.

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Rucksack over my shoulder, I followed Inga into the dormitory hut. ‘The perimeter fence still isn’t finished,’ I remarked.

She untied the full length patterned sarong she had worn to meet me from the plane and dropped it screwed-up

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onto the bed. 'We've run out of metal poles and wire netting – not to mention money. And we've been busy. Besides, according to Nick we haven't had a leopard or hyena anywhere near the camp for over a month. Haven't lost a goat for ages.' Just like her face, Inga's top half – both front and back – was tanned almost mahogany but from waist to knees she was paler. After over a decade in the African sun, only the colour of her hair and the paleness of her buttocks betrayed her Scandinavian origins. She reached for a packet of cigarettes on the bedside table, sat on the edge of the bed and a few moments later was taking her first contented draw, sucking so hard that her cheeks hollowed.

'Still not pregnant then?'

Her answer was an almost imperceptible shake of the head, then another deep draw on her cigarette. 'So much for my big family, eh? At this rate I'm going to be lucky to manage one.' A peal of thunder rocked the hut.

I took off my sweat-stained shirt and threw it on my own bed, then made a show of scrutinising her. 'You're too thin, that's the problem. You should eat more and smoke less. If it weren't for your bush I'd swear you were pre-pubertal. You've got the tits of a twelve-year old.'

'So what? I had my first period at eleven.' The tilt of her head was defiant. 'And who's to say I'm the problem. Maybe it's Fredrik.'

'Maybe it is.' I looked her in the eyes. 'So why don't the pair of you go somewhere and find out, once and for all?'

She frowned – 'Can't be done. Fredrik's phobic about all things medical, except me.' – then swung up her legs and sat on her bed cross-legged, smoking and watching through narrowed eyes as I took off the rest of my clothes. After unpacking my rucksack, I clambered on to the bed opposite hers and let the ceiling fan move air over my sweating body.

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'You've lost weight,' she said. 'Less muscly.'

'London Marathon. Thanks to the volcano.'

'Barefoot again? Did you finish?'

'Best time yet.'

She took another drag, still scrutinising me. 'Your cock looks different too. Not as thick.'

'Lack of exercise.'

'Liar! How many this time? And don't say 'just the two' again.'

'Of course just the two. Zuri and I have this sort-of unwritten agreement. 'One' hints it might be serious and more than two sounds excessive. So we both always admit to two. Equal, you see. That way neither of us gets jealous.'

'What's wrong with you both saying 'none'?'

'Because neither of us would believe it.'

'So... What are you really saying? That it was more than two?'

'No, I'm saying it was just the two.' I stifled a yawn. 'Anyway. Stop chattering. I need some sleep before that husband of yours gets back and makes a nuisance of himself.'

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'Christ, Fredrik. You stink.' His broad-shouldered silhouette was framed in the doorway but his aroma had blown way ahead of him.

'Hey, Mark. You've arrived.' He made a show of sniffing at himself. 'My God, I do. Must have been too busy watching the lions to notice where I was sitting.'

Inga threw a bottle of shower gel to him. He caught it one-handed. 'OK, I get the message. Back in ten.'

I sprang off my bed to follow him into torrential rain. Despite the hot April air the water from high up in the thunderstorm felt cold on the body, otherwise we would have

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showered in the downpour. Instead we went to the site's 'Wet House.' Situated about twenty yards from our dormitory, this breeze-block building was a fairly basic toilet and shower facility. The shower was communal, a single three-sided room with four wall-mounted shower-heads – one of them loose – and a single drainage channel that led directly to the outside.

At first we weren't alone. One of the three 'wives' that Kopano and Tau share was already in the shower, her ample bosom and buttocks wobbling as she tried to wash the smell of livestock from the hair of her struggling young son. In the end he just ran off, leaving his mother to flash us a resigned grin, snatch her sarong from a coat-peg and set off at a fast waddle after him.

The shower water should have been heated by a solar power unit on the roof but according to Fredrik one of the panels needed replacing which we couldn't currently afford. While Fredrik worked away on himself with the shower gel, I just stood in the spray for a while. 'Now that I'm back, why don't you and Inga take yourselves off to a fertility clinic somewhere?'

'Can't be done.'

'That's what Inga said.'

'There you are then. Did she also say it was none of your fucking business?' He held his face into the spray to rinse the gel from his bushy Viking beard and blonde hair, the only visible signs that he – like his wife – was Scandinavian.

'Of course it's my business. You're my oldest friends. I want this to happen for you. People like you two should have children. Lots of them.'

He stared at me through the spray for a few moments, his expression awkward. 'No more, Mark, OK? I'm up to here with talking about it.'



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'OK. Fine. Forget it. Throw me the gel.'

'Catch. Now... To hell with babies. What about the plane? Any news?'

'Not yet – but any day. The grant application went in months ago.'

'No hints? No inside information?'

I shook my head.

Clearly disappointed, he was hunched now, wet hair flat against his head. 'Hell. We don't stand a chance do we? There's no money out there. Not for our sort of research anyway. This whole project is going down the pan and me and Inga with it. No jobs. No house. No money to speak of. Christ, the last thing we should be doing is trying to have a baby. I've told her this.'

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Despite Inga's carefree tone the look on her face hinted at something more serious. 'Oh, by the way... You've got two e-mails. They arrived at midday – just before the satellite link packed up again.'

The desk-top computer perched on a rickety table in the far-corner of the dormitory. The PC had been state of the art when we bought it with our first Research Council grant five years earlier. Seemingly immune to the summer heat, to the Kalahari dust that clogged its fans and the tiny insects that flocked to die amongst its cards and chips, it had proved robust and reliable. In contrast, the two-way satellite system that linked us to the outside world, while also state-of-the-art when we bought it, was slow expensive and too often in need of attention.

There were eight beds in the hut in total, four of them double. Each had a ceiling fan above and a mosquito net around but otherwise was fairly stark: metal frame and legs;

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wooden slats; a thin pad for a mattress; and a single cotton sheet both threadbare and grubby.

For a brief moment I was excited. 'E-mails? The plane?' But Inga shook her head. 'What then?'

'One is from some student of yours.'

'And the other?'

'From the Research Council. We're going to have a Health and Safety inspection.'

'A what!' Fredrik and I exclaimed in unison. 'And you've only just told us.'

Inga's face filled with indignation – 'I was being considerate' – then she reached for another cigarette.

I checked the Research Council e-mail first.

*30 April 2010*

*Dear Dr de Vries*

*Thank you for your application for further funding for your project: Factors Affecting Fertility and Conservation in the Kalahari Lion. Your proposal has now been subject to peer review. I have to report that two of your reviewers have expressed concern over health and safety aspects of your research. Both consider that to make a proper appraisal of your application an independent report will be necessary. To this end we wish to arrange for a Health and Safety Inspector appointed by this council to visit your field station and to assess both your living conditions and your research protocol. The cost of this exercise will be deducted from the final payment of your current research grant. Please contact this office at your earliest convenience to make the necessary arrangements.*

*Yours sincerely*

*Ronald Greengcock (Dr)*

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Almost in shock, I nearly left my second e-mail for later. But when I read it...

*30 April 2010*

*Dear Mark!!!*

*I hope you do not mind my writing to you, but I have just noticed the attached in the London Evening Chronicle.*

*Best wishes*

*Sharda Kaur*

Attachment:

### ***Ex-Fashion Model and Baby Son Missing***

*Police are searching for both the estranged wife of the billionaire philanthropist, Cameron Cruickshank, OBE, and her one-year old son, Lex. Mrs Cruickshank, better known by her modelling name, Mia Bodin, was last seen entering her Wimbledon home on the evening of Tuesday, 20 April. A few hours earlier the same day in Nottingham, Lex disappeared from the garden of his grandparents, George and Muriel Bodin. Police are keen to speak to anybody who might have seen a red MG convertible in either of these areas. They also wish to eliminate from their enquiries the driver or drivers of a large white van or vans seen in the two areas around the times in question.*



*A story of murder and mystery, love and sacrifice. Mark gives a lift to a woman thrown bound and naked from a car. Her story is bizarre but intriguing: her child cannot be her husband's, yet she had no lovers. Mark, a zoologist specializing in Kalahari lions, is pulled into increasingly violent situations until survival depends on solving the mystery. As in PRIMAL and CABALLITO, the innovative sexual science behind THE HITCHHIKER'S CHILD is real.*

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