

# TWELVE

It started out as a high school reunion.  
No-one ever imagined it would turn out like this.

Adam Alexander

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*For Annie*

*Forever my inspiration*



# 1

## *Gathering of the Clan*

Detective Dave Malatsi had been driving for over an hour along the winding dirt roads that led through the Mkhomazi Wilderness, part of the majestic Drakensberg. Undulating mountains covered in green, as if a fine cloth had been unfurled in the air and set free to drape itself lightly over their contours, stretched out as far as the eye could see. People came out here for the peace and solitude, to get away from their lives as captives of the concrete jungles in which they spent their best years. The people at Stone Lodge had come here expecting peace and solitude, but their lives would never be the same again.

He followed a weathered signpost directing him onto a narrow road which wound higher and higher up the mountain. An old bridge crossed a stream, full to capacity after the unusually rainy summer. Dave Malatsi took a moment to admire the river as he drove carefully over the single lane bridge which looked to be decades old and in desperate need of repair. The construction creaked as he crossed the broad stream, the current running strong only meters beneath his wheels. All it needed, he thought, would be one major downpour to bring that bridge down. His phone rang.

“Nelly?” he answered.

“Hi, Jabs.” It had been her pet name for him, since they met over ten years ago. *Jabs*, a common abbreviation of Jabulane. Her tone was cold and Dave Malatsi immediately felt the acid build in his gut. “I called your office, they said you’re out on a case?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Up in the mountains. I’m on my way there with Sbu and his team.” He glanced in his mirror at the vehicle a few seconds behind him.

“Oh,” she replied flatly. “How long you gonna be there?”

“I don’t know, I’m not there yet. Two, maybe three hours.”

“Oh,” she said again in the same tone. “As long as you’re back for Themba’s concert tomorrow. It’s at noon, remember?”

Malatsi took a breath before he replied. They’d discussed this only last night. Did she really think he’d already forgotten?

“I know,” he replied. “I’m not staying there, I’ll be back tonight.”

“I can’t do this any more, Jabs.”

They’d had this conversation dozens of times in the last few weeks too. The one where she told him how she couldn’t take not knowing whether he was coming home, or where he was, or how long he was going to be away.

“I’ll be back tonight, ok? I gotta go.” He said as he drove through the two cast iron gates set in columns of stone marking the entrance to the lodge. He hung up and tried to control the anger inside him. His job was not a surprise to her when they met. In fact, it was one of the things that attracted Anele to him. But lately, it seemed that his job was the primary cause of most of the dissension between them. He banged the steering wheel in frustration.

Malatsi’s off-road vehicle was caked in red dirt as he pulled up at the Stone Lodge reception. He climbed out and placed a heavy boot noisily on the gravel. The tranquillity of this remote place was one of the reasons for its sought-after popularity. Up here, you were miles away from the nearest major road, and the only sounds a visitor would hear were those of the birds calling across the vast expanse of mountains and hills. You could hear the quiet voice of the wind as it tickled your face and made the leaves and grass giggle and dance around you. As Malatsi slammed his door shut,

engulfing him momentarily in a fine cloud of red dust, he heard the distant whine and grinding noise as the vehicle behind him arrived and parked alongside.

"Sbu," Malatsi greeted the man who exited the Coroner's van.

"Dave," the man replied. Jabulane Malatsi nodded. Dave was his English name, a mark of the Apartheid era when black people were given names that white people could pronounce. The world had long since changed, but his parents had christened him Jabulane David, and being a child brought up watching American television, he preferred to be called by his Anglo-Saxon name.

A young man in his early twenties came around and stood silently behind the coroner, waiting obediently.

"Let's go see," Dave said, positioning his flat cap on his bald head.

"After you, Detective," Sbu Malalane extended an outstretched arm. He was taller than Malatsi by a clear head. The Coroner handed Malatsi a pair of blue latex gloves.

"Don't forget these," he said.

"I've got my own," Malatsi said, stuffing the gloves into his tweed jacket pocket.

Detective Dave Malatsi led the way through the heavy doors of dark wood and into the reception of Stone Lodge where they were greeted by the concierge, a local from one of the neighbouring towns some thirty kilometres away. He had dark skin and greying hair that clung tightly to his head in natural tiny clumps.

"Are you the police?" the man asked.

"Detective Malatsi," Dave confirmed, holding up his badge.

"Doctor Sbu Malalane from the Coroner's office," the taller man introduced himself. "This is my assistant, Siph." The young man nodded a tight-lipped smile.

"I'm Earnest. I'm the concierge," the man extended a hand nervously. Malatsi greeted him the traditional way, with a three-part handshake. "It's through here," the concierge said, turning immediately, leading the three men through a doorway and into the bar where they were greeted by a roomful of equally anxious

people. Malatsi counted eleven men, and five women, most of them in their early forties.

The room consisted of a bar counter at one end, a couch and a small drinks table in the centre of the room, and two single chairs by the patio window. Two women were seated on the couch and two men stood opposite them. A couple seemed to be keeping to themselves in the two single chairs some distance from everyone else while some people sat on bar stools and others stood anxiously behind the bar counter. All of them were anxious. They watched silently as Earnest led the detective, the coroner and his assistant through the bar while Malatsi's trained eyes scanned the room, momentarily noting each face, each expression, each miniscule sign of anxiety and nerves, each drop of sweat, each nonchalant dispassionate glance. Sixteen faces. Sixteen suspects.

"Who found the body?" Detective Malatsi asked as they crossed the patio and approached the swimming pool. He stopped occasionally to snap pictures of the crime scene using his phone.

"Alan Cohen," Earnest replied. "He called me at about six this morning. He said he was going for a run when he found him." The concierge motioned to the body of a man floating face-down in the pool. The water around him was a shade of dark red and purple, as if someone had drizzled red ink into the perfectly blue water. Detective Malatsi took a series of photographs of the pool, the dead body, and the surrounding area. The coroner's assistant took his own set of photographs of the body.

"Name of the deceased?" the detective asked, flipping through the pictures he'd just taken.

"Steve Carlton," Earnest replied.

"Anyone touched the body?" Malatsi asked.

"No," Earnest said pointing toward the gathering in the lounge. "Mister Cohen said he saw the guy floating in the pool and he called me immediately."

"He didn't jump in?" the detective asked. He looked up from his phone at the steps of the pool and then looked back at his screen, and then moving over to the step, took more photographs.

Earnest turned his palms upward. "I don't know. All I know is from the time he called me to tell me someone was floating in the pool."

Malatsi nodded, making notes as Earnest spoke.

"Sbu?" the detective looked up at the coroner.

"Give us a minute," the coroner replied.

"Sipho, go get the overalls," Sbu said. The Coroner's assistant turned obediently and left the patio for a few minutes, then returned carrying a small hard case, which he set down on the paving stones. He opened it, and retrieved a clear plastic overall, which he stepped into and zipped up over his clothes. Sbu Malalane did the same. Moments later, Sipho waded into the water. He gave the body a push, and watched it float towards the stairs. Sbu crouched to examine the body.

"No shoes," Malatsi observed, looking at the dead man's feet. He took more pictures, then looked around to see if he could find the dead man's shoes while Sipho waded up the stairs.

Standing on the top step, the coroner's assistant crouched forward and rolled the body over in the water. He clamped his right arm under the dead man's left. Sbu Malalane put on a pair of latex gloves and stepped onto the top step, the water lapping up against his waterproof overalls. The two men heaved the body out of the pool and laid it down on the paving stones.

"Multiple stab wounds," the coroner observed, pointing at the gashes in the dead man's chest and abdomen.

"That the cause of death?" Malatsi asked, stepping closer. He crouched forward resting both hands on his knees.

"More than likely," Sbu said, examining the body. "Eleven stab wounds".

Malatsi had counted eleven men in the lounge, each looking very anxious. He was about to say something when the coroner added, "Twelve."

"What?"

"Twelve stab wounds, looks like."

"You sure?" Malatsi asked.

The Coroner counted again and then nodded in confirmation. "Twelve. Two in the back, under the ribs and the rest in the abdomen and chest."

"Hmm," Malatsi muttered. "Time of death?"

"Hard to say with him being in the water." The coroner withdrew a disc-like thermometer from which a long, sharp metal spike protruded, and plunged the needle into the right side of the man's abdomen. Malatsi caught himself wincing. "His body temp would cool quickly in the water. At first glance, I'd say he's been dead about six hours."

Detective Dave Malatsi looked at his watch. "So time of death around three this morning?"

The Coroner nodded. "Sipho, get the gurney?"

The assistant trudged back across the patio leaving wet footprints on the paving.

Malatsi crouched over the body, looking at the dead man's face. His skin had paled, and the lips had turned blue.

"Earnest?" Malatsi looked over his shoulder.

"Yes, Detective?"

"Anyone arrive, or leave here around three this morning?"

"Not that I'm aware," Earnest said. "I mean, I stay in the staff quarters, over there," he pointed behind him. "I would probably have heard if anyone did arrive or leave the lodge last night. Or this morning. I'm a very light sleeper," he explained, "and you can hear a car from a mile away in this place."

Something in the water caught the detective's eye. "Hand me the pool net," he said to Earnest without shifting his gaze from the object.

Malatsi dragged the net along the bottom of the pool, and brought it to the surface moments later, as Sipho returned with a steel gurney that clattered as it bumped noisily along the paving stones. He and the coroner adjusted the mechanism and lowered the bed so it was almost on the ground.

"What's that?" the Coroner asked.

Malatsi studied the object caught in the pool net.

“Murder weapon,” he said, inspecting it. It was a carving knife, like one would expect to find in the kitchen of any home or hotel. “And I’m pretty sure there’s not going to be any prints on it. It’s been at the bottom of the pool for six hours.”

Detective Malatsi laid the net down beside the pool, retrieved a plastic evidence bag from the pocket of his tweed jacket, and then, using the latex gloves as he would a dishtowel on a hot pot lid, carefully picked the knife up by the point and slipped it inside, sealing the bag.

“Has anyone left here since the body was discovered?” Malatsi motioned to Sbu and his assistant who had now zipped the corpse up in a black body bag.

“No,” Earnest replied. “I did like you said,” the concierge reported. “Nobody has left since I spoke to you, and nobody else has arrived.”

“That means our murderer is right here,” Malatsi said, turning to the bar. “One of the people in that room is our killer.”

Sbu Malalane and his assistant moved the body onto the gurney and raised the metal frame to full height.

“Ok, Dave, I’m heading back to the lab.” The coroner nodded his assistant away, and watched, hands on hips as Siphso trundled the gurney over the uneven paving stones and struggled to lift the heavy trolley up the small step and into the bar.

“How’s the new guy working out?” Dave asked.

Sbu laughed. “Giving him the standard treatment,” the coroner replied. “It’s been three weeks. We’ll see if he survives.”

“Aren’t you going to help him get the body into the van?”

“What? And make it easy for him?”

Dave smiled. “Call me when you’re done.” Detective Malatsi looked at the sliding glass doors that led to the bar. “I’ve got sixteen suspects to question.”

“Sure. Good luck with that,” the Coroner said.

Malatsi watched the tall man disappear through the doorway, and then turned to inspect the crime scene. A body floating in the water. Multiple stab wounds. No obvious sign of a struggle. *Was*

*he killed here or somewhere else and then dumped in the pool?* There was no blood on the paving stones. Step one was to establish the primary crime scene.

Heavy wooden loungers were arranged around the pool area in two's, each pair on either side of a small drinks table. There was a whiskey bottle and two glasses on one of them, and a pair of shoes lying at the foot of one of the loungers.

"Carlton's shoes," Malatsi noted. "Anyone touched those glasses this morning?" the detective asked.

Earnest shook his head. "When you told me to leave everything as is, I did just that. Nothing has been touched."

"How many staff on the premises?" Malatsi asked as he carefully bagged and catalogued the empty glasses and the bottle.

"Just myself and the head chef. We do a shift change on a Friday, usually but there was something happening with one of the weekend staff last night. A funeral, one of the kitchen staff's relatives. They all asked if they could attend so I told them all to be here first thing this morning. The midweek staff left on Friday morning after they had prepped everything for this function. In light of what happened, I called the weekend staff and told them not to come in." Earnest replied.

"Good call. Get the chef in here. Tell him to get some coffee on the boil," Detective Malatsi instructed.

"Her," Ernest corrected.

"What?" Malatsi squinted his eyes.

"The chef. Her name is Roseanne."

"Oh. Get *her* in here," detective Dave Malatsi corrected.

"Ok," The concierge pulled out his radio and summoned the chef. "She'll be here in a few minutes."

Malatsi nodded and glanced over at the bar. "If the primary crime scene is in there, it's contaminated to hell. Earnest, can you show me the kitchen, please. Have you got a staff entrance? I don't want to go past that crowd just yet." He motioned to the bar where the weekend guests had all been gathered.

"Sure." Earnest led the way around the main building, and into

a small courtyard, where trashcans were concealed from view, and from where a wooden door with peeling dark green paint led to the kitchen.

Malatsi stepped inside and looked around. The kitchen was compact, and organised. Baskets of fresh vegetables lined one wall. Stainless steel work surfaces had been meticulously cleaned. Utensils stood in their places, ready for use during the next shift. Frying pans hung from hooks above the grill area. Large pots were stacked beside the gas burners. Sets of knives were carefully arranged in wooden blocks beside chopping boards. One of the blocks caught Malatsi's attention. He came over and inspected it carefully. The block had slots designed to take six carving knives. Only five were in theirs.

"There," he said to Earnest as he held up his phone and snapped pictures of the room. "One of these is missing." He scanned the room and pointed to the door at the other end of the kitchen. "Where does that door lead?"

"That opens onto the breakfast room," Earnest answered.

"Is it locked at night?"

"No," Earnest shook his head. "We keep it unlocked." He pointed to a wooden table near the door, laden with cups and saucers, an urn and a coffee pot, and glass jars filled with tea bags, home-made biscuits and rusks. "That table's used for snacks and tea for guests."

"So, anyone could have come in here through there?" the detective asked.

"Yes," Earnest replied.

Malatsi made his way to the door and stepped into the breakfast room. Six square, four-seater tables were arranged in rows. Two windows looked out across the pool to the scenic mountains beyond. A door at the end opposite the kitchen led into the reception hall.

Sixteen expectant faces fixed on Detective Malatsi as he entered the bar from the breakfast room, with the concierge in tow.

"I'm Detective David Malatsi," he introduced himself to the people in the room. He wasn't good with public appearances, but he had little choice at that moment. Sixteen suspects were in the room, and one of them was his murderer. "As of this moment, this establishment is a crime scene, which means that nobody leaves until I say so."

One of the men stood immediately. "Wait, hang on a minute. Just how long are we supposed to stay here?" he demanded.

"Until I say you can leave," Malatsi said, stepping forward until he was inches in front of the man's face. "You are?"

"Mike Anderson," the man replied. He was tall, and grossly overweight. He wore an arrogance about him that came from a lifetime of dominating everyone around him.

"Did you know the deceased?" Malatsi asked.

"We all did," Anderson said, looking around. "This was a class reunion."

"You were all in the same class?" the detective asked. Heads nodded. People exchanged glances nervously.

"The men were. This was our twenty-five-year reunion," Anderson continued, placing his hands on his hips.

"Hell of a reunion," Malatsi commented. "You and Carlton have few drinks together last night?" The detective looked over his shoulder towards the pool outside where he had noted the empty whiskey bottle earlier.

Anderson opened his mouth to answer and then looked around at the fifteen pairs of eyes on him.

"I'll get the fingerprints off the glasses and the empty bottle of Johnnie Walker I found outside. You gonna tell me now or do you want me to keep you here till my lab confirms that the prints are yours?" Dave Malatsi wasn't intimidated by the man in front of him.

"I've got a flight back to LA on Monday night," Anderson protested.

"Looks like you might be missing your flight," Malatsi said.

"Yeah, we had a few drinks last night. Me, Steve and Harry. We

were outside till about two in the morning," Anderson said. Malatsi counted one glass short. There were only two glasses outside.

"And then?" Malatsi asked.

"And then Steve got ugly, and I went to my room," Anderson said.

"Ugly?" the detective asked.

"Steve could go a little overboard when he's had a few." Anderson looked over at a man who was all muscle. He wore a tight-fitting white t-shirt, and his strawberry blonde hair fell across his freckled face.

"You Harry?" Malatsi turned to the strawberry blonde.

"Yeah," the man said.

"Got a surname?"

"Parker."

Malatsi added the man's name to the notes he had been making.

"You with them last night?" the detective asked. Parker nodded.

"And?"

"It was like Mike said. We were out there having a few drinks, catching up on old times, and then Steve started getting ugly. He could get that way."

"That way how?" Malatsi asked.

"Insulting. Abrupt." Parker looked down. He was a strong man, in excellent shape for a man in his forties, Malatsi thought. One swipe from this guy, and Carlton would have stopped flinging insults.

"Give me specifics," the detective said.

"He said I was nothing more than an empty shell with shit for brains," Parker said. The woman next to Parker dropped her gaze.

"So, you stabbed him to shut him up?" Malatsi said, surprising the entire room.

"What? No!" Parker protested. "Jeez, no! I left the conversation. Went back to my room." He glanced between the detective and the woman next to him.

"You take your glass with you or did you leave it outside?"

Adam Alexander

Parker frowned. "Put it down on the table, I think."

"What time was that?"

"About two," Harry Parker said.

"You know this how?"

"Steve was being loud, you know? I looked at my watch a few times while we were outside having drinks to see what time it was, because I figured it might be getting late and time to stop making such a noise." Parker looked up at Anderson.

"Anyone see you leave? Anyone other than Mister Anderson?"

Parker shook his head. "There was nobody around. The place was dead quiet."

One of the men in the room let out a guffaw. Detective Malatsi descended on him.

"Something funny?" he asked.

"He said *dead* quiet," the man said.

"And you are?"

"Alan Cohen," the man replied.

"You found the body?"

Cohen nodded.

"You think this is funny?" Malatsi squared up in front of Alan Cohen.

"Funny? No. Justice? Yes," Cohen replied. Anderson and Parker both glared at him. "Come on, don't pretend you don't know what kind of person Carlton was. He had it coming. It was just a matter of time."

"So you waited till he was alone, and you stabbed him twelve times?" Malatsi suggested.

Cohen laughed. "What? No. I didn't stab him."

"Where were you last night?" the detective asked.

"We were all here for dinner, most of us stayed for a few drinks. We left at about one thirty. They were sitting out there knocking back a bottle of whiskey." Alan pointed to the pool.

"You were the one who found him?" Detective Malatsi's tone changed immediately. Cohen nodded. "You saw him in the pool and you didn't jump in?"

“Jesus, man, the guy wasn’t moving. I got up at six, got dressed and stepped out of my chalet. There wasn’t a soul around. The whole place was quiet. You don’t get silence like this in the city, so I stood outside for a while just listening to the silence. Then I made my way across the lawns to the main building, and that’s when I saw him in floating in the pool.”

Detective Malatsi scribbled notes rapidly.

“So by the time I saw him in the pool, I’d been standing outside for at least ten minutes, and during that time, I didn’t see anyone. Not Carlton, nor anyone else. I didn’t hear a splash. Nothing. Which means that by the time I found him, he’d been face down in that water long enough for him to have been dead by the time I got there.”

Dave Malatsi nodded. “So you called Earnest here?”

“Yes, I ran inside, and I found him in the kitchen.”

The detective’s eyebrows rose. He turned to the concierge. “You were in the kitchen? You didn’t notice anything missing?”

The detective’s question caught Earnest by surprise. “What? No,” he thought for a moment. “I didn’t see that...until now.”

Dave Malatsi changed his approach. He stepped back, so he could see everyone in the room.

“Steve Carlton was stabbed, twelve times last night some time around three in the morning. Nobody has left this guesthouse, and nobody else arrived between last night when Carlton was last seen alive, and this morning when he was found stabbed to death, floating face down in the swimming pool. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that one of the people in this room killed Steve Carlton. As of now, you’re all suspects in a murder investigation.” Everyone in the room exchanged glances as the detective continued. “I’m going to be interviewing every one of you, one by one to get your statements. Until I’m done with my investigation, nobody leaves this place.”

“I want a lawyer,” Mike Anderson protested.

“Suit yourself,” Malatsi said. “That just means that you’ll be detained here until your lawyer arrives, so knock yourself out,

Mister Anderson.”

Alan looked at Lee, but she stood, arms folded, observing. The look in her eyes said that if he told anyone she was a lawyer, she'd kill him. Alan Cohen knew that look only too well.

“Oh, for Christ's sake, Mike, don't be such a dick,” one of the men protested.

“Easy, people,” Malatsi tried to maintain calm. He opened his notebook and set it down on the bar counter, and then laid his pen on top of it. “I need every one of you to write your name and your ID number down in my book, and if you've got your ID with you, I'll need to see it, please.” There was a general din of discontent in the room. “Then, I suggest you all go back to your rooms, and stay there until I call you. I'll conduct interviews here,” he motioned over his shoulder to the empty breakfast room behind him.

“Just how long is this going to take?” Alan Cohen asked.

“As long as it takes,” Malatsi replied flatly. “So if any of you have plans, I suggest you cancel them.”

“I knew this was going to be a bad idea,” the man sitting with the woman in the single chairs by the window threw up his hands. He was a tall man, with hair that was more yellow than blonde.

“Go back to your rooms, please people,” Malatsi directed. “Earnest here will make sure you have food and refreshments. Please, everybody be patient. This is a murder investigation, it's no longer a weekend holiday.”

People stood, and shuffled out of the room, shaking their heads, talking amongst themselves in low tones.

“Can you believe this guy?” Daniel Wilson said as he moved to the doorway.

“What a fuck up,” Gary Louw replied. “This whole thing has turned out to be a monumental disaster.”

“I wasn't even going to come,” Wilson said. He was about to add something, but looked up at the people around him, and decided against it.

“Well, I'm going back to my room to crack open a few beers. Might as well have some fun while we're prisoners here,” Louw

said. He was a short man with thinning hair, and sported a rounded belly that looked like the product of many a beverage.

Daniel Wilson towered over him and was slim in contrast. He wore his hair neatly cropped and short, and had handsome features which included a strong jawline, but his face looked older than his years.

"Too early for me, but I'll have a club soda," Daniel smiled.

"Detective? This is Roseanne." Malatsi turned to see a slim woman in her forties.

"You the chef?" Malatsi asked. Roseanne nodded. "I need to ask you a few questions," he said, moving to the kitchen. Roseanne followed him obediently. A shrill ringing sound erupted from the reception desk and Earnest looked at the detective who nodded, releasing the concierge to his duties.

"This is the concierge," Malatsi heard Earnest say as he answered the phone at the reception desk, leaving Roseanne alone in the detective's company.

They stood in the empty kitchen and hovered by the table of complimentary snacks that Earnest had mentioned was available to the guests.

"What time did you close up here last night," he asked.

Roseanne was a timid woman. At first glance, the detective expected her personality would be frail.

"We had a welcome dinner here for the guests that started at about seven. They had speeches and stuff, so it went on till about eleven," she replied, looking anywhere but into the detective's eyes.

"Your two assistants were with you?" Malatsi interrupted.

"No," she replied. "They were here till about midday, then they left."

"Go on."

"I like to keep a clean workspace, so I cleaned up after I closed the kitchen," Roseanne continued.

"Closed like locked up?" the detective asked.

Adam Alexander

"No. Closed like no more orders," the chef said. "I washed up and packed away." Roseanne stood, arms folded, and turned slowly to look over her work area, noting everything in its place. "Yeah, that's pretty much it. Everything's the way we left it."

"You sure about that?" Malatsi asked.

"What do you mean?"

He walked over to the chopping station, and pointed to the butcher block, from which one of the knives was missing.

"You notice anything?" he asked.

"Yes, there's a knife missing," Roseanne said, puzzled.

"Was it there last night?"

The chef nodded. "Yes, everything was accounted for last night. I do a final check before anyone leaves to change shift and before the kitchen closes. Everything was there both times. All the knives were there. I checked."

"You're absolutely sure?" the detective asked. Roseanne nodded. "What time did you leave for the night?"

"It was just before twelve," she said. "I checked my watch. I always do."

"Just before midnight," the detective repeated. "And everything was here?"

"Yes. Was that the knife...?" Roseanne asked.

Malatsi nodded. "The murder weapon, yes. That means that some time between midnight and three in the morning, someone slipped in here, picked up one of those knives, and murdered Steve Carlton." He pointed to the butcher block that was home to the missing knife.

The chef leaned against a stainless-steel worktop looking silently at the butcher block.

"You were the last one to leave?" Malatsi interrupted her thoughts.

Roseanne nodded. "I dismissed Leno and Thato at midday, and I closed up at midnight."

"And none of these doors were locked?" Malatsi pointed his pen at the two doors.

“No. I don’t think we’ve ever locked those doors,” she said.

Malatsi made a note of the two assistants’ names. “Ok, thank you Roseanne. The kitchen is still a possible crime scene. I’ll let you know when you can get back to work. I’ll call you if I need you.”

The head chef nodded and exited the room, leaving Malatsi alone in the kitchen.

*The knife came from here, the detective thought, and Carlton ended up out there, so the primary must be somewhere between the kitchen and the pool.* He re-enacted the crime, miming the action of removing the murder weapon from the wooden block, and leaving the kitchen through the back door. He moved through the small courtyard, and rounded the main building, imaginary knife in hand. *Carlton would have been alone at the pool. The murderer would have snuck up on him, stabbed him in the back twice...but where’s the blood,* he thought. For that many stab wounds there would be a lot of blood. Malatsi looked up disapprovingly at the sun. He’d need a sunshade to use Luminol out here. The distance between the courtyard and the pool was less than twenty metres. Detective Malatsi traced the route between the edge of the pool and the courtyard several times, inspecting the paving stones for any sign of blood, but there was none. Moving back to the water, he stood at the edge of the pool and crouched low. A dark patch on the white tiles that formed the edging of the pool caught his attention. Malatsi looked back at the loungers and the low table where the whiskey bottle had been. He went over to inspect Carlton’s shoes, which lay at the foot of the lounge, more closely. They were expensive Italian shoes, the kind they sell in fancy boutique shops for more than most people spend on groceries in six months. His socks were stuffed inside them. Malatsi pulled out his phone and reviewed the photographs he’d taken of the body. Carlton’s trousers were rolled up at the bottom.

*So, they have a few drinks out here. Carlton pisses off Parker, he leaves, Malatsi said silently. Then it’s just Carlton and Anderson. At some point Anderson leaves. Then Carlton kicks off his shoes, rolls up his pants*

*and steps into the pool.*

He went back to the pool and checked through the pictures he'd taken of the top step, and the area around the pool. The tiny dark spot he'd seen on the white tile was there in the photo. It had been there before Sbu and Sipho had moved the body.

*Victim stands here on the top step, and the murderer catches him from behind, two stab wounds in the back. He turns...*

The angle of the stab wounds would reveal more about Malatsi's working theory, but it seemed he'd found his primary crime scene. He retrieved an evidence kit from his own bag, and using a long cotton bud, swabbed the dark spot on the tiles that edged the pool at the top step. He slipped the bud into a bag, which he then sealed and marked, and added to the other evidence he'd collected. If this turned out to be Carlton's blood, then this was the primary. It made logical sense. If Carlton had been stabbed somewhere else and moved, there'd be a trail of blood.

Right now it seemed he had eleven prime suspects. Only the men all knew each other. Anybody could have entered the kitchen, picked up the knife, and killed Steve Carlton. The key question now was motive. Who would want him dead, and why?

He released the kitchen back to Earnest and the much relieved Roseanne and cleared it as no longer a possible crime scene.

Time to bring in the witnesses and piece together the relationships between these old classmates, and the events of the previous night. One of them was a murderer.

## 2

### *Two Days Earlier*

“This is going to be fun,” Alan Cohen smiled as he dumped two small suitcases on the back seat of the hired Ford Ranger and closed the door. He hoisted himself up into the driver’s seat and adjusted the mirror. Alan was a tall, slim man, with gentle features, a healthy Mediterranean complexion, and a thick mop of jet-black hair.

“I can think of better ways to spend a weekend,” his wife pouted. “You haven’t seen most of these guys in twenty-five years, I really can’t see what all the excitement is about.”

“Come on, Lee, it’s going to be fun. Plus we get an extra day just to ourselves.”

The class reunion was due to start with a formal dinner on Friday night, but he’d booked them into the mountain lodge a day early figuring he and his wife could do with some time together, away from work, away from what had become the way of their lives. Time to unwind a little. Reconnect with each other before the reunion began. He tried to push work out of his mind, but found it impossible. There was a major impending disaster on the horizon, and he hadn’t told Lee. He couldn’t, he knew what she would say before he even told her. How she’d react. Her tolerance seemed to

have evaporated over the last few years, along with her patience and her diplomacy. Maybe it was the job that had made her this way. She tore people apart every day in the courtroom, and that behaviour was spilling into their bedroom. Their relationship was strained as it was. They needed this break for themselves. He'd deal with work problems on his own, the way he always did. She'd never understand. Somewhere over the next three days, he'd find some time alone to get his head straight, and to find a way through all this.

"Yeah I know. Apart from Basil." Alan faked a smile. He'd seen Basil socially maybe five times in the last twenty-five years. They'd lost touch when Basil had gone over to work in Europe. Was it Germany? Alan couldn't remember. He remembered being envious when he was struggling financially while Basil was flying first class all over the world, putting together multi-million dollar deals with big name companies.

"I still have to see what became of the three jocks, Anderson, Carlton and Parker. And those other two reprobates who used to tease me literally every day, Gary Louw and Daniel Wilson." Alan Cohen lost himself in thought momentarily as he remembered vividly the humiliation Gary Louw and Daniel Wilson would put him through when they'd lock onto him in the playground and tease him about his weight.

"You ok?" Lee's voice broke through his mental replay.

"Yeah. I was just back in the playground again."

"Jesus, Alan, let it go, it was years ago, you're a different person for fuck sake."

Alan looked across at his wife in silence, feeling the rage rising in his core. *Whose side was she on?* The song playing on the radio was a mediocre rap that he didn't remember hearing before. Words about chicks and money and booty. He dropped the volume so they could barely hear the beat. Even the stony silence that ensued was more bearable than the jarring noise coming from the radio. He glanced at the GPS, set to take them along Route 617. Six hours to go. Six hours of silence so they could get to the place in the

mountains and what? Not talk to each other. He cursed silently. He should have listened to her. He should have come alone. This weekend away was supposed to give them time to reconnect. *Helluva start*, he thought.

He retreated into the solitude of his memories once more. Carlton, Anderson and Parker ruled the classroom back then when their kingdom was limited to the confines of the school walls, with all the protection it afforded. Alan found himself smiling as he remembered moments from those days. Those were supposed to have been the best days of his life. The Bryan Adams song burst through his memories like background music on a video. His years of high school had simmered into a random collection of moments that stirred an odd nostalgia within him. When he was going through it, he couldn't wait to get out of there, start a new life away from the constant bullying and belittling, and since transforming himself from the person he was back then, he felt drawn by a sense of pride to show them what he'd become. Steve Carlton, his daily dread for five years of high school was number one on his list. Mike Anderson and Harry Parker were second. Gary Louw and Daniel Wilson were next. He wanted to watch them squirm when the fat kid they used to use as their punching bag stood before them, athletic, successful, and driven. This wasn't a reunion for Alan Cohen. It was revenge. Reclaiming his dignity.

"You weren't there," he said to his wife. "You don't know what it was like."

Lee made a guttural sound and waved a hand, dismissing her husband's need to maintain his dignity in the wolf pack.

"Boys," she muttered.

"You'll never understand," he said under his breath, turning the volume on the radio up again, deciding that any noise was better than the silence of tension.

He projected the moment he and Steve Carlton would face each other. "Steve," he would say, when he saw him again, as if nothing Carlton had done during those formative years had left him with any scars at all. "You look like shit," he would say. Carlton was one

of the top sportsmen throughout their school years, but Alan hoped he'd let himself go, allowing the years to turn that athletic lean body of his into a mound of middle aged, wobbly gut fat. "Looks like life after school was about as kind to you as you were to me," Alan would say with a wry grin, patting his own lean abdomen. He wanted to look into Steve Carlton's eyes, watching for that micro expression that signalled guilt, defeat, remorse, even a bit of self-loathing. He wanted Carlton to squirm, even just for a microsecond. That would be payback enough. For him to see that the person he victimised and bullied way back then had risen from the ashes of his pubescent weakness and had become indestructible. Successful. Respected. What had become of Carlton, he wondered, as he merged with the N3 highway that would eventually bring him to Route 617. He hoped that Karma had dealt Carlton the hand he deserved. A guy like Steve Carlton who preyed on the weak didn't deserve success or happiness. He deserved suffering, no less than he'd dealt out daily to people like Alan.

"You look like shit," he would say.

Lee watched the smug grin stretching across her husband's face and shook her head, turning her attention instead to the social media pages on her phone.

After several hours on the freeway, the tension had somehow been broken as the two of them resumed conversation about things of lesser consequence, commenting on the landscape around them, talking about the need for coffee and a loo break, and about comments that Lee had read as she scanned dozens of posts on her phone. The GPS eventually directed them onto country roads that wound and curved through the mountain foothills, until finally they turned onto a dirt road that climbed as it hugged the contours of the mountain.

"There isn't going to be much golf played out here," Alan said remembering the activities mentioned on the invitation.

"Not unless there's a game called Mountain Golf," Lee replied gazing through the window. The invitation had listed hiking,

mountain biking, fishing, golf and quad biking.

They passed the occasional village, a cluster of huts, some made of mud and grass, some made of brick, crudely plastered and painted in bright traditional Ndebele designs of straight lines and blocks of bright primary colours. They passed women carrying sheaves of straw and long sticks on their heads, wearing blankets wrapped around their waists, and brightly coloured, loose fitting cotton tops. Village children would run along the low fences of their homes and point at the car as if it were an alien object visiting their lonely planet. If it weren't for his GPS, Alan would have thought he was lost.

"Glad we're doing this drive during the day," he said.

"This road would be a nightmare in the dark," Lee agreed.

There was a serenity about the mountains that was absent in the city. Life as Alan Cohen had known it was all about deadlines and chasing targets, meeting clients and making more work in order to make more money. Relaxation took the form of running on a treadmill in a crowded, noisy gym, or pumping a bike in a spinning class to the rapid beat of loud music for forty-five minutes at a time.

Alan pictured himself running through these mountains, chasing footpaths that wound through the verdant hills in silent isolation. This was a different life. Silent and natural.

He began to feel the tension of the city leaving his core, replaced instead by the uncomplicated moments of simply being. Maybe he and Lee could find some time to unwind together and reconnect, he thought.

He rolled down the window and breathed in the smell of untainted air mixed with the raw taste of the dust kicked up by the tires. The road was uneven, often littered with rough gravel stones that would have destroyed the tires of a regular car designed for the city.

"I can see why they said four by fours only," he said. Lee seemed to be lost in the peacefulness of the surroundings too.

It had been over an hour since they had turned off the last tar road

when Alan saw the sign to Stone Lodge, a worn metal plate mounted on equally worn rusted posts that had endured the Kwazulu Natal heat and humidity for decades, so much so that the lettering had eroded at the edges as if someone had taken a drinking straw to wet paint and blown white tendrils into the brown background.

The road narrowed into a single lane leading over a rickety wooden bridge which crossed a river, then widened again on the other side and continued winding endlessly for miles.

“Finally,” he said, grateful that the endless, monotonous, never-ending winding road had finally reached its destination.

“I desperately need a pee,” Lee said. Alan turned into the narrow farm lane etched into the long grass like stripes on a winding candy stick in green and brown, and they drove for a few more minutes. Soon after, they saw the row of red roofs on top of brown stone structures, which although crafted from natural materials, still looked out of place in this beautiful wilderness.

Alan parked, dropped heavily onto the gravel apron, stretched and came around to the passenger door where his wife was already waiting for him, bouncing from side to side.

“You go ahead and find a loo, I’ll check us in,” he smiled. Lee disappeared inside, leaving her husband in the parking lot. Alan stretched, extending his arms high over his head, and felt the muscles in his back tingle.

Most of the hotels in the area were established in the early part of the twentieth century, adopting a Colonial feel, from the smartly dressed staff in their jackets and caps to the Victorian furniture, but this resort was different and fresh. Inside the traditional stone construction, the place was warm and inviting. Persian rugs spread across the teak floor leading to the reception counter, which was made of similar highly polished wood.

“You must be Mister Cohen,” a voice said. As Alan turned, he saw a man with skin dark as the floorboards, dressed smartly in a khaki uniform with a matching cap bearing the hotel’s logo. He

offered his visitor a glass of sherry from silver Victorian tray, a relic linking this modern building to its inescapable past.

"I am," Cohen replied. "Thank you." He took one of the tiny cut-crystal glasses and swirled the golden liquid for a moment, watching as it clung to the upper part of the glass before gravity pulled it slowly downward leaving crooked streams of transparent syrup that lingered fleetingly. "Are we the only ones who decided to check in a day early and enjoy the peace and quiet before the madness begins?" he asked.

The man nodded. "Only you two here tonight. Everyone else arrives tomorrow. You have the place all to yourselves. You've had a long drive?" the man asked, ushering Alan to the reception counter.

"That we did," he smiled. The sherry tasted familiar. The same one used by most hotels as a complimentary drink - Old Brown Sherry, sold in two-litre jugs, and depending on where it was served it was either a quick and cheap beverage to liven up a boring barbeque, or a refined aperitif, offered as a token of hospitality in fine establishments.

"I am Earnest, and I'll be your host for the weekend. Looking forward to the class reunion?" the man asked. He slid the register over to Alan. "All I need you to do is sign the indemnity here, please." All their details had already been filled in.

"Can I sign for both of us?" he asked. Earnest nodded. Alan signed without reading the small print. "Yes, I'm looking forward to the reunion." He scanned the register, noting with a smile the names of the other guests yet to arrive. The concierge watched Alan with amusement.

Earnest slid the register back towards himself. "The other guests arrive tomorrow." He handed Alan a key to which was attached a metal tag bearing the room number in gold and green coated in a clear, rounded resin. "You're in cottage number one. There are twelve cottages in the hotel. This time of year, we're usually very full, but at least you'll know all the other guests."

"I last saw most of them twenty-five years ago," Alan said, his

mind running through the list of names he'd just read. Eddy Burton was once his best friend, but since he'd moved to Australia, they'd lost touch. And the inseparable jocks, Mike Anderson, Steve Carlton and Harry Parker, the ones he was most looking forward to seeing again, for different reasons.

"A lot can change in twenty-five years," Earnest said.

"I'm counting on that," Alan smiled. "There you are," he said as the sound of squeaking footsteps echoed in the hallway. Lee joined them, rubbing her hands together.

"Smell this," she said, holding her hands beneath Alan's nose. Immediately the smell of fresh flowers exploded in his senses. "That hand cream you have in your guest bathroom is divine," she said to the concierge.

"Our guests love it," Earnest smiled warmly. "Well, let me give you the quick tour." He stepped out from behind the reception counter and led the way. "Let's start with the most important room, the lounge and bar. And through here is the dining room, where you'll be having your formal dinner on Friday." The dining room was warmly furnished with square wooden tables already set for the dinner, and comfortable, padded chairs. "The bar is always open. There's a register on counter. It's an honesty bar. Just write down what you have, and it will be added to your bill when you check out. Then over here..." he led them back through the bar to the doorway behind the concierge's desk, "...is the breakfast room, and this door leads to the kitchen where we keep the coffee and tea." He opened the door and they stepped into the kitchen. There was a wooden table, painted in a worn green, decked with coffee and tea, an urn, and glass jars of home-made rusks and biscuits. "This door is never locked. Help yourself to tea, coffee and snacks anytime."

Alan made a face, and looked over at Lee, who was smiling as she followed the concierge on the brief guided tour. "Out here is the pool." Earnest led the way back through the bar and opened the sliding doors onto the patio.

"Wow," Lee said as they stepped outside. Directly in front of

them was a patio and a sparkling blue pool, around which loungers had been arranged in pairs, each with a small drinks table between them. Beyond the pool was a majestic vista down the valley which separated two nearby mountains and seemed to extend for eternity with mountain peaks jutting up here and there as far as they could see. It made Lee feel suddenly insignificant and small.

"All the rooms are on the far side of the lawn, but you can drive to your unit if you continue on past reception."

Alan rested his hands on his hips, and Lee stood beside him, arms folded, admiring the tranquillity around them.

"It's really beautiful," she said.

"Well I'm glad we're out here in the mountains, because I'm sure it's going to get rowdy this weekend," Alan smiled. "Very rowdy."

"So I've been warned," Earnest said. "Roseanne, our chef and assistant manager helped plan this weekend."

"Prepare yourself for a rough one."

Earnest led them back to the reception desk where he slid a map across the glossy countertop to Alan. "Let me show you where your room is. You can drive up to your cottage. There's parking at each one."

The twelve cottages at Stone Lodge were arranged in a wide semi-circle around a field of green grass and wild flowers, looking over the edge of what appeared to be a precipice with an uninterrupted view of the Drakensberg Mountains and the hills of Lesotho in the far distance.

The room was luxuriously appointed, featuring a four-poster bed as the focal point, adorned in white muslin mosquito netting draped at each pillar. The sliding doors offered a breath-taking view. It was as if the chalet was balanced on a cloud high up above the mountains, and all one could see was the *stoep* opening up onto an abyss, with the rest of the world far below.

"This is beautiful," Lee said as they stepped inside. Alan followed her and propped the suitcases up against the bed. She moved over to the sliding doors and opened them, while Alan went

to the bar-fridge and peeked inside. He found a small bottle of bubbly and joined his wife on the *stoep* a few moments later, carrying the champagne and two glasses.

"I know it's been tense, the last few months," he said as he set the glasses down on the table outside. "Maybe us being here, away from it all, will give us a chance to find some peace together."

Alan popped the champagne and poured two glasses. They sat, drinks in hand, taking in the view. In the silence, Alan became aware of the distant sounds of birds calling, faint at first, but the more he listened the more variety he could hear. Their song lifted the silence, as each one chirped in its own way, rhythmically, melodically.

"It's so peaceful out here," he said. Lee nodded. Alan reached over and took her hand. "I'm glad you came, despite your protests. We need the time."

She smiled at her husband, then looked away into the distance. Alan could sense there was something she wasn't saying.

Their life in the city was so different to this world where nature ruled, a world that was neither governed nor controlled, a world beyond maximisation and efficiency, a world subject to a different rule of law. It was the polar opposite of their world. The custodians of this reserve did everything in their power to keep the advances of urban development far away, and to allow nature to thrive. This world didn't need man. It felt to Alan like a dark sanctuary that looked appealing on the outside, welcoming and tranquil at first glance, but left to its own devices, this place would suck him up and swallow him in its vastness, suffocate him with its open spaces, and bury him in its endless, timeless existence. Time is the one thing mankind cannot outrun, but this place had no shortage of it. The mountains around him had endured centuries and would be around long after his own mortal body had turned to dust. Alan felt very insignificant, and the more he allowed the world around him to seep into his soul, the smaller he felt.

"Lee?" he said. She looked up at him. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

She smiled and shook her head, but Alan could see the distant look in her eyes. He'd seen that look more and more over the last few weeks.

*What wasn't she telling him,* he wondered.

Alan awoke to the shrill sound of a Sacred Ibis, its call jarring the serenity of the mountains like the siren of an ambulance. Lee was still sleeping beside him, undisturbed by the loud and intrusive call. They had made love the night before, but he felt uneasy watching her sleep. Alan felt the need to move, as he always did at home, as if failure to exercise would make him regress immediately into the fat kid he'd left so far behind.

Moments later, dressed in sweats and sneakers, he stepped out into the fresh morning, where he stretched on the empty lawn before trotting to the dirt road he'd driven on for over an hour the day before. Although he was alone in this wilderness with no cause to be troubled by the endless stress of home or the office, he found himself unable to shake the problems he'd left on his desk two days before.

He'd built a solid consulting business and were it not for the one major problem that had surfaced six weeks prior, he would be carrying on as usual, not bothered by the danger that loomed just over the horizon. But three of his major customers had implied that they were considering hiring their own full-time experts and terminating their business with Alan's firm. He could sustain the loss of one customer. He could possibly even manage to survive if he were to lose two. But losing three of his biggest customers would cripple him. Alan's business was in trouble.

As much as he thought he would be able to leave the worries of work behind, they had followed him to this tranquil place, and were playing on his mind. The more he tried to relax, the more he found himself worrying about the same thing over and over again. Although his business was all his own, he found himself at the mercy and behest of his customers and when the big ones sneezed, his business reached for their raincoats. He had to find another

way, but he had promised himself he wouldn't let work deprive him of this break. He needed to recharge, to abstract himself from the problem long enough to be able to frame it differently, to see a different angle that would allow him to come up with another solution. As long as he allowed himself to be caught in the spiral of worry, he'd never be able to find a way out.

Pounding rhythmically along the dirt road that meandered through the nature reserve, Alan tried to focus on anything that wasn't work. He tried tuning in to the bird calls, letting the uniqueness of each one subjugate work to the recesses of his mind, until all he could hear was the sound of the birds, the pounding of his own footsteps, his breathing, slow and steady, and the silence all around him.

His watch beeped, signalling that he'd reached the halfway point, and that it was time to turn back, but instead he stopped running, and stood, hands on hips, breathing heavily, looking around him. Too much time in the city, he thought and not enough time in places like this. He wondered if his relationship with Lee would have been different if they didn't live such separate lives at home. She was constantly overloaded with case files and preparations for trials, late nights working with council and clients. He would occupy himself while she was busy working on his own reports and preparations for sessions with his customers. Their life together had become the reason they were drifting apart.

The silence was broken by the distant hum of an approaching vehicle, gradually becoming louder and more distinct. It was over a minute before a red pick-up truck rounded the corner and drove past him. Alan caught a glimpse of a woman with wild grey hair behind the wheel. Odd, he thought, for a woman to be driving such a rugged vehicle. She looked old too. Alan saw the dust cloud and heard the whine of the engine as it disappeared.

He resumed his run, now heading back to the hotel. The problems of his world refused to remain in the recesses of his mind and bounced around in his head with each step despite his efforts to subjugate them to the peace around him. If he didn't replace the

three customers who were cancelling on him soon, he'd be closing his doors. Funny how quickly things can turn, he thought. He'd realised that this risk lurked beneath the surface for some time now, but things had been busy, and he found himself with little time for anything other than the work he'd committed to do for his customers. With three of them about to cancel, he'd have enough money in reserve to get the company through two, maybe three months and then it would be all over. He regretted keeping Lee in the dark about his work troubles. As far as she knew, everything was peachy.

"One big deal," he repeated to himself over and over, in time with the rhythm of his footfall. "One big deal," as if chanting the words like a mantra would cause the magical deal to land in his lap.

When he arrived back at the lodge he looked for the red pickup but it was not parked in the reception. Instead of heading back to his room, he went into the main building where he found Earnest laying out things in the breakfast room.

"Good morning," Earnest greeted him. "Breakfast will be ready in just a few minutes."

"No rush," Alan said. "I've just been for a run. Still going to go back to my room and take a shower. Did someone else just arrive?" he asked.

"No," Earnest looked up after placing a jar of muesli and a bowl of yoghurt on the serving table.

"Oh. Someone passed me on the road while I was running. A woman in a red pickup."

"Oh, that would be Sarah, the owner. She usually comes in early, before anyone else gets here, and leaves before any of the staff arrive," Earnest smiled. "You're unlikely to see her, she keeps out of the way, mostly."

"Oh," Alan said. "Interesting." He meant it and found himself feeling envious of the owner who had a business that could run itself without her having to be there all the time. *Nice job if you can get it*, he thought to himself. "Ok. We'll be up for breakfast in a bit

then.”

“It’s all help-yourself,” Earnest said. “No rush, it will be here for you when you’re ready.”

“Thanks.”

“How was your run?” Lee asked flatly as Alan entered the cottage. She was standing in front of the bathroom mirror, her hair wet from the shower, and she wore a floral, silk robe that they’d bought from a market in Phuket a few years before. Back then, this would have been a turn on for Alan, and they would have spent the morning making love.

“It was good,” he replied as he flopped onto the bed and removed his running shoes. “Peaceful.” He could almost feel the steam rise as he liberated his feet.

“Two minutes and you can have the shower,” she said from the bathroom.

“Ok.”

He considered joining her in the bathroom, sliding up behind her, feeling her body under the fine, smooth silk, but his insides still felt jumbled. They’d made love the night before, but he could feel she was distant even in the darkness. As soon as it was over, she’d rolled over and he found himself staring at her, wondering what was going through her mind.

“Something bothering you?” he asked, but she ignored him, turning the basin tap on so that the sound of the water drowned out his voice.

Alan went over to the sliding doors and stepped out to the other side of the chalet. From there he could see across the lawns to the pool, and the main building. Everything was so quiet. He listened for the chirping sounds, but the sun was already climbing, and the birds had taken their morning song elsewhere. Everything in his world was falling apart.

After his steaming hot shower, Lee and Alan took a walk up to the main building in silence where they ate a late breakfast on the patio outside the bar, looking out over the endless Drakensberg

mountains which stretched out as far as they could see, lush green foothills reaching up to craggy, rocky mountain tops, and beyond a certain point, everything turned purple and blue in the distance. *You get used to this*, he thought.

"Can I get you anything else?" Earnest asked, clearing the plates from the table.

"Another cup of coffee, please?"

Earnest acknowledged with a nod. "For you, madam?"

Lee shook her head and raised a hand.

"Can I ask you something?" Alan asked. Earnest waited patiently. "Do you ever get used to it out here? Do you ever stop noticing?"

"What do you mean?" Earnest asked.

"I was in awe of this place when I arrived yesterday. Spent the first few hours just being aware of how beautiful it is out here. The first time you set foot in a place like this, you notice everything, but soon this becomes your world and you stop noticing. Do you still notice it all?" Alan asked. "All this majestic splendour."

Lee smiled politely beside him, but Alan noticed a concealed look of contempt, like she disapproved of him asking the man about his life outside the lodge.

Earnest smiled, unaware of the woman's reaction. "I grew up down there," he motioned with his eyebrows. "Lesotho. It's a poor country. The people live simple lives. I grew up in a mud hut and I walked an hour to school every morning and an hour back home every afternoon. We had no electricity, no hot water."

Alan listened intently, comparing his own childhood to that of this man, and Lee found herself engaged in the concierge's story.

"Every minute of every day I spend here at the lodge I am reminded of the hardship of my childhood. Every time I turn a tap and run a hot bath, flip a switch and the lights turn on. Every time I walk into the staff quarters at meal times and get a warm plate of food. Each one of those moments reminds me of my good fortune to live such a comfortable life. Every time I look out over those hills, it is a reminder of the life I lived before, and I am grateful for the

one I have here. I have always lived in these hills, I know no other place. But I haven't always lived a life filled with comfort. Does that answer your question?" Earnest smiled.

"Thanks, Earnest," Alan said.

"I'll bring you some more coffee," the concierge said before leaving the couple alone.

"I'll change my mind," Lee said. "I'll have some more coffee too, please."

"Jeez, he's lived a different life," Alan said softly enough so that only Lee could hear. She nodded. "Compared to him, I've never had hardship or suffering. Here I am comparing myself to my friends who made it big, and I think I'm less fortunate, but this guy considers a hot meal and running water a daily blessing."

"We take a lot for granted," Lee said. She looked at her husband, thinking about much deeper things than coffee. Alan studied her, not sure whether to press the question he had raised in the bedroom earlier. He reached across and took her hand.

"Yes, we do," he said, hoping she would talk about whatever was on her mind.

Earnest arrived with the coffee pot and poured two cups.

"Here you go." He looked up at the blue sky. "There's clouds on the horizon. The weather report says there's a storm on its way that will probably set by midday tomorrow."

"Damn," Alan said. "What time are the others arriving?"

"Any time from now, I suppose." Earnest looked at his watch. As he did the noise of car tyres crunching over gravel drowned out his words.

"Looks like your friends are starting to arrive," Earnest said.

Alan smiled in anticipation. In his mind, he saw the faces of the people on the guest list as he last remembered them and was drawn suddenly to that time in his life. He was at school, eating a sandwich at the side of the rugby field, aware of some kids playing with a ball nearby. It was a peanut butter sandwich, on white bread. He could almost taste the sweetness and feel the soft bread in his mouth. The next thing he remembered was the stinging pain in his

face, and the sandwich flying out of his hand. Bewildered, he looked around to find Steve Carlton, Mike Anderson and Harry Parker laughing at him from the middle of the field. A rugby ball bounced nearby, and Alan figured out what must have happened. From the looks of it, Carlton was the one who kicked the ball at him. An easy target, sitting alone at the side of the field.

"You alright?" Lee asked. It was the question Alan had wanted to ask her.

"Huh?" Alan returned to the present moment. "Yeah, fine."

Udo sat in the car, listening to the engine idling, delaying the moment when he would be in the company of the people who last saw him twenty-five years ago. Putting off the moment when he would ultimately have to tell them all what a loser he'd become. *Why did I come here at all*, he wondered. *What the hell was I thinking?*

The concierge appeared at lodge's main entrance and hovered there, silently persuading him to force a smile and shut off the engine.

"Snake, you're up," he said to himself, opening the door.

"Good morning," Earnest smiled.

"Morning," Udo replied.

"You're here for the reunion?" he asked politely.

*What the hell else would I be doing up here in this godforsaken place*, Udo thought. "Yes, here for the reunion."

"Welcome to Stone Lodge," Earnest smiled.

"Sure," Udo said moving to the rear of the car.

"You can leave your bags in the trunk, you'll be driving your vehicle to your chalet," the concierge said.

"*Chalet*," the new arrival repeated making a posh face. "Fancy."

"I'm Earnest, the Concierge," the smartly dressed man said. He held out a silver tray bearing a dozen tiny cut-crystal glasses filled with Sherry. "May I offer you a ..."

Udo swooped up one of them and downed it before the man could finish his sentence.

"Thanks," the new arrival said flatly, replacing the empty glass

on the tray.

“Well,” Earnest said, looking up at his newest guest with undisguised surprise. “Let’s get you checked in so I can show you to your room.”

“Udo?” Alan said, watching as the first of the day’s guests followed Earnest to the reception desk. “Udo Szemeri, is that you?”

“Leonard Cohen?” Udo’s face lit up like a Christmas tree as he studied the man in the dining room, his apprehension immediately lifting at the sight of a friendly face. “How the fuck are you?” Udo left Earnest at the reception desk and came over to the breakfast room. Alan rose to greet him.

“I haven’t heard that name in ages,” Alan laughed. He hadn’t been called Leonard Cohen since he’d walked out of the school gates for the last time twenty-five years ago. “This is my wife, Lee.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Udo said taking her hand and planting a kiss on the back that sent creepy shivers up the woman’s spine. She smiled and withdrew her hand at the first opportunity without offending her husband’s old classmate.

“Wow, man, you’ve changed.” Alan extended a hand, but Udo wrapped him in a bear hug then pulled back. Both men looked each other up and down.

Udo looked older than his years. His hair had thinned, his face was pudgy and pockmarked around the chin, and he’d filled out substantially around the middle. Alan was slender and athletic, and still had a full head of hair. Udo’s smile was seasoned with envy.

“So have you, man. You used to look a lot rounder,” Udo said. He patted Alan’s flat stomach. “And this used to be a lot softer.”

“The days’ of the fat Cohen are long gone,” the slimmer man said proudly.

“Yeah? What happened?” Udo asked, “you forget where they keep the fridge?”

“Got into running at Varsity,” Alan ignored the man’s comment.

“Shed all that puppy fat.”

“You don’t say, Cohen, who’d have thunk. You were like completely un-sporty at school.” Udo spoke with a pseudo-American accent, which was out of place in a remote mountain lodge in the heart of the Natal wilderness.

Just about everyone on the guest list had been instrumental in the endless days of the teasing he’d endured about his weight.

“So, what have you been up to for the last twenty-five years?” Udo asked.

“It’s like an entire lifetime has gone by since we last saw each other,” Alan thought out loud. “You want the long version or the short version?”

“We’ve got the whole weekend for the long version, and besides, I have to get to a *jazz*, it’s been a long drive, you know what I mean?” Udo smiled a lop-sided smile that Alan remembered well. The *jazz* was slang from their era for the bathroom.

“Go check yourself in and do what you need to do. Meet me the bar when you’re done, we’ll catch up over a beer.”

“Good idea, Cohen. Let me go freshen up, slip into something a little more comfortable,” Udo said with his trademark lopsided smile.

Alan watched as the first of the many people he would encounter from his distant past strolled back towards the reception desk. Szemeri slid into an antique chair and signed the guest register and then Earnest escorted him to the door and gave him the *spiel* about the lodge, ending with directions to his room.

“You two were friends?” Lee asked. Alan held out a hand, silently inviting her to walk outside with him. She scooped up her bag and a paperback lying on the empty chair beside her.

“We were until about grade ten, then he went...I don’t know...odd. Weird. Something must have changed behind the scenes. He was one of us. One of the nerds. Then in about grade ten or eleven, he ...changed. Abandoned us and tried to get in with Carlton and his crowd. I didn’t see him much after that.”

They stepped out of the bar and onto the brick-paved terrace

which led onto the inviting swimming pool. There was a chill in the air, and the leaves in the distant trees rustled softly, announcing the imminent arrival of the inclement weather Earnest had mentioned. The water was perfectly blue, and a mild breeze disturbed its surface so as to reflect a shimmering image of the thin white clouds streaked across the blue sky directly overhead. The horizon beyond the distant hills was already growing dark as the weather rolled in from the South. Alan stood at one end of the pool, staring out at the ominous sky with Udo's first words repeating in his head. The first thing he'd been reminded of was that he was the fat kid at school, and that was how he'd been remembered, yet so much had happened since then.

"So he's a conniving snake," Lee observed.

"You could say that," Alan conceded reluctantly, rubbing his left upper arm. Lee watched him.

"So you comin' or what?"

Alan turned to see Udo standing in the open doorway to the bar wearing his tilted smile, hoping he hadn't heard Lee's comment.

"You two catch up. I'm going to read a book," Lee said waving her paperback. Her voice carried a note of relief, and Alan wondered if she wanted to extricate herself from the catch-up banter of old friends, or to get away from her husband. He tried to catch her eye, hoping she'd give him a silent look of reassurance, let him know that everything was ok, but instead she waved her book with a picture of a girl with angel wings on the cover, and went to one of the wooden loungers around the pool.

The two men stood at the bar facing the bottles displayed against a backlit mirror reflecting the splendour of the Drakensberg Mountains behind them. Alan took two cold beers from the fridge and noted them down on the honesty register.

"You actually writing that down?" Udo sneered.

"Sure," Alan turned to Udo and frowned. "It's an honesty bar."

"It's free drinks," Szemeri said. Alan shook his head and came

around to join his estranged friend. He placed two glasses on the counter, and the two old friends poured their drinks and clinked glasses, but the conversation was laboured.

"So, what have you been up to?" Alan asked.

"You first," Udo said. "You were going to give me the short version, but seeing as how we're the only ones here, you may as well give me the long one."

"You really want to know?" Alan asked. Udo nodded. "Ok, here goes," Alan began. "After school, I went to Wits, studied IT. Graduated. Got a job, got married," he pointed a finger in Lee's direction, "got two kids."

"Yeah?" Udo sipped his beer as he listened.

"Started my own company doing IT stuff. You know, the usual shit. Developing apps, websites. Basically, the same as every other IT company on the planet."

"I always figured you'd do something like that," Udo said.

"Like what?"

"Start your own company. You were destined for great things." His tone was a mixture of envy and admiration, and the words came as a surprise to Alan.

"Really?"

"You were one of the bright ones."

"I suppose. Not as bright as some of the other guys though," Alan said. "I don't know how they did it. I only got two distinctions, I remember."

"*Only* two distinctions," Szemeri huffed. "So what about the company you started?" Udo said. From what Alan remembered, Udo wasn't much of an achiever, and he regretted making the comment.

"It grew into something I wasn't prepared for. I landed a couple of big clients. The nature of the business changed from software to consulting. The company did really well for a while. Made some good money out of it, but at a price."

"What price?" Udo sipped his beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Alan cast a glance behind him and lowered his voice. "Things between me and Lee..."

"That sucks," Udo nodded. "I know what that's like."

"We're still working things out, but it's tough, you know? So that's about it. That's the story of me. Twenty-five years reduced to a story you can tell in less time than it takes to empty one beer."

"But you seem to have done pretty well for yourself?" Udo said.

Alan didn't feel ready to speak the whole truth. In less than ninety days, everything he'd built was about to crumble if he didn't land another big contract and those deals didn't come around often.

"Yeah," he forced a smile. "You can say that. And you? What's happened to you in the last twenty-five years?"

"My story's pretty boring," Udo smiled. "I got a wife and three kids. Somewhere," he laughed.

"Seriously?" Alan asked. Udo shook his head, and laughed hard, but inside, he wanted the ground beneath him to open and swallow him up. This was it, the very moment he had dreaded about reuniting with his classmates. The moment when he would reveal what a failure he'd become.

The sound of car tyres on gravel interrupted Udo's moment. From the sounds of it, several vehicles had just pulled into the reception parking.

"Looks like we've got visitors," Udo said, relieved at the interruption. "Let's go see who's all joining the party."

"Yeah," Alan agreed.

# 3

## *Present Time*

“Alan and Lee Cohen? Sit,” the detective motioned to the empty seats opposite him. The tall, athletic man wiped his palms on his track pants and lowered himself into the chair, while his wife moved silently and sat beside him. “Coffee?”

“I’m good,” Alan Cohen replied.

Lee shook her head.

“Don’t blame you,” Dave Malatsi said. “Bitter as hell. Water?”

“Yes, please,” Alan said, looking at his wife. She didn’t budge. “Two.”

The detective rose and walked over to the serving table where Earnest had laid out breakfast the previous morning and returned carrying two bottles of water.

“Tell me everything that happened from the time you arrived yesterday,” Malatsi said, opening his notebook.

Cohen drew a breath and related the sequence of events. “We arrived here late on Thursday afternoon. I wanted to get here a day early and relax a little before everyone else showed up and have a little alone time with my wife.” Both Alan and the detective looked at Lee. The lawyer smiled tight lipped but said nothing. “I like to

be able to escape the noise of the city," Alan explained. Malatsi nodded. Cohen continued. "We were the only ones here on Thursday. We arrived late so we spent the night in our room, and I woke up early yesterday morning to go for a run."

"Friday morning?" Malatsi confirmed looking up from his notes. Cohen nodded. "Anyone see you?"

Alan nodded. "The owner, I think. Someone in a red pickup on the road here. Earnest said it was the owner. I was out running on the road, and she was on her way to the hotel."

Malatsi made a note. "Ok. What happened after you got back from your run?"

Alan looked at Lee. "I took a shower, and we came through here for breakfast and to wait for everyone to arrive. Udo was the first one, and then Carlton and Anderson, and then everybody started pouring in. There was a lot of catching up in the bar." Alan pointed a finger to the next room.

"And then?"

"The formalities kicked off at about seven last night with dinner," Alan looked at Lee, but she still remained poker faced.

"Who were you with?" Malatsi asked.

"For dinner?" Cohen asked. Malatsi nodded. "We sat with Udo and Eddy Burton."

"Anything happen during dinner?" the detective asked.

"I'll say," Alan said. "Mike Anderson started the evening off with a slide show that was really nostalgic. Pictures of all of us way back to when we were all still in prep school together. Then there were a couple of speeches. Carlton stood up and said something that pissed off almost everybody in the room."

"Really? What exactly did he say?" Malatsi asked, pen poised above his notepad.

"He went through every single person here and told everybody how much better he was than them, and how much better he'd done than they had since school."

"What did he say about you?" Malatsi asked. His phone started vibrating as he asked the question. The detective looked at the

name on the display and pressed the button to turn off the vibration without answering the call.

“Aren’t you going to get that?” Alan asked.

“What did he say about you?” Malatsi repeated the question.

“He said considering the way I’d started out as the fat kid who didn’t play any sport for five years at high school, he was surprised I’d made anything of myself at all, and that it was a wonder there was a food oversupply, because he was convinced I’d have caused a food shortage if anything, but looking at me now he could understand the food surplus because I was going for that anorexic look and finally I’d left some food for everyone else. And then he said I should sue whoever did my liposuction because they left a huge ugly pimple on my shoulders.”

Malatsi almost laughed out loud. “That must have made you angry,” he said instead.

Lee pressed a hand on Alan’s knee. “He’s not going to answer that,” she interrupted.

“What are you, his lawyer?” Malatsi said.

Lee Cohen leaned forward. “Actually, Detective, yes, I am his lawyer, and my client is not going to answer that.”

Malatsi sat back in his chair and dropped his pen on the table. “I don’t believe this,” he said.

“It’s ok, I can answer his question,” Alan insisted. Lee leaned on her elbows and glared back at her husband. “I’ve got nothing to hide. I didn’t do anything,” he insisted.

Lee Cohen held her hands up in the air and shook her head. “Whatever, babe, if you don’t want to take my advice...”

“I didn’t *do* anything,” Alan said loudly to his wife, but she ignored him. There was that feeling again deep in his gut, the feeling that something was wrong, and she wasn’t opening up. He looked back at the detective. “What he said made me angry, just like he humiliated me all those years at school, but not enough to kill him. I wanted to punch his lights out, sure. He was a mean, self-absorbed dick, but it would take a whole lot more than the same insults he used to fling at me all throughout high school to make

me want to kill him. Don't forget, he'd done this to me every day for my entire high school career. This was just further proof that he was an insecure, self-absorbed prick. I already had my moment of satisfaction when he arrived and saw me for the first time since high school."

"What time did you leave the party last night?" Malatsi asked.

"It was late," Alan said. "About two, I guess. We'd been at the bar for a long time."

"Who was with you?"

"Let me see, it was me, Basil, Eddy," Alan enumerated on his fingers, "Udo and Josh. Daniel and Gary came and joined us for a bit, but they left soon after." Alan looked up from his fingers. "Never had much in common with those two."

"Where were you?" Malatsi directed his question at Lee.

"Outside talking with Theresa."

Malatsi made a note, and then Alan continued.

"Udo and Eddy got wasted. Like really wasted. Udo started the decline when he brought out the tequila bottle. They were the first ones to leave. They could hardly stand up, those two. And then we left a little while after that, hey, Lee?"

Alan looked across at Lee. She nodded silently.

"You two leave together?" Malatsi asked.

"Us and Basil and Theresa. We all left at about the same time."

"Which was?"

"About one thirty, like I said."

"And Carlton was still alive when you left?"

"Oh yeah," Alan Cohen confirmed. "Him and Mike and Harry had a bottle of whiskey outside and I could hear them from my room."

"How would you describe your relationship with the victim?" Malatsi asked, causing Alan to tilt his head involuntarily.

Lee sat, arms folded, smouldering.

"Relationship?" Alan answered immediately. "I haven't seen the guy for twenty-five years. He was an asshole back then and he was an asshole yesterday."

"He make you angry enough to want to kill him?" Malatsi said, leaning forward. "He bully you when you were kids back in school and fill you with so much anger that you couldn't wait to give it back to him when you saw him again?"

Cohen sat back, affronted by the detective's theory. "What would be the point of that?" he objected. "The best revenge on a guy like Carlton is to make sure he lives with the knowledge that you turned out better than he'd ever be. I wanted to show him what I've become. How well my life turned out. I own a successful company that I started a few years after school. I'm happily married." He cast a glance at Lee and her reaction confirmed that he'd just lied to the detective. "I run marathons. I'm in pretty good shape. Probably *because* of him and his bullying. I wanted to show guys like Carlton what happens to the people he kicked to the kerb at school." Cohen looked up sadly. "But now I'll never get the chance."

Malatsi set his pen down on a page covered in notes. His phone vibrated again, and he immediately pressed the button to silence the intrusion. Cohen noticed the same caller ID on the screen as the previous call the detective had ignored. *Sgt something*, it said.

"Shouldn't you get that?" Cohen asked.

"I'll call him back," the detective said dismissively. "Anything else you want to tell me about the others?"

"Like who would want to kill Carlton?" Alan Cohen asked. Malatsi nodded once. "I haven't seen these guys for twenty-five years, detective."

"Tell me about the people in your class. Who was friends with who?"

Alan looked at Lee. She rolled her eyes and shook her head in an expression that conveyed that she didn't think he was going to listen to her anyway, and that he may as well shoot his mouth off.

"Well there were about twenty of us back then. I don't know what happened to the others. Steve, Mike and Harry were the three main jocks in the class. They were friends with Pierre Venter as well, but he wasn't as much of a dick as the three of them were. I

mean they didn't bully Pierre as much as they bullied everyone else. I used to hang with Eddy, he was my best mate at school. Me, Eddy, Basil and Josh were all friends for a while but then Josh isolated himself so we didn't see much of him in the last year of high school, he kept to himself. Basil did well for himself," Alan said nodding his head. "Made a ton of money as a financial analyst. We spoke about it last night. We're kind of in the same industry." Alan swallowed the bitter reminder that his business was on the brink of disaster and cast a glance at Lee. "He does all the big investments and makes all the money. My company does consulting and software systems for big organisations like his. It's a tough game. My industry I mean. Cut throat as hell." Alan tried to suppress the tangent his mind was on about finding customers to replace the ones who were about to jump ship and leave him floating in the middle of the ocean without an engine. "Um, who else is there? Gary and Daniel were tight. Those two were always together. Like Timone and Pumba, you know? They made a lot of noise, but they weren't lions. They were their own kind of bullies those two. I didn't get along with them, if you must know. Gary used to tease me about being fat more than Steve Carlton did. Gary and Daniel were really mean when they were together. You know those questionnaires they used to make you fill in at school, when they asked you who you'd take with you on a trip overseas, and who you'd leave behind? Well those two were on my list of people I'd leave behind, every year since grade eight. Who else is there?" Alan Cohen searched his memory and counted off names on his fingers. "Udo started off being in my circle of friends, but then he made a play to hang with the cool kids. Started calling himself *Snake*, after a character in some movie, I forget the name..."

"Snake? Snake Pliscit? Escape from New York?" Malatsi interrupted.

"That's the one," Cohen stabbed a finger in the air. "When he became *Snake*, he forgot about his friends and he started hanging with the cool kids. And then there's Denzel, poor kid. He was the first of the black kids to filter into an all-white school. Jeez, did he

get it hard from Steve Carlton and his crowd.”

“How do you mean?” Malatsi asked, and Cohen looked at him in disbelief.

“You seriously asking me that question? Denzel was a black kid from a poor family that got a scholarship to a then all-white school. He arrived in our class in grade six, and they picked on him from day one. He was rugged though. He survived pretty well. In fact, I think Denzel was the only one who wasn’t afraid of Carlton and his gang. The two of them used to get physical often. They played on the same rugby team in high school, and you’d expect that when there was a fight on the rugby field, it would be between members of opposite teams, but with those two, they’d get into it with each other on the field in front of the whole school. Often.”

“Sounds like Denzel and Steve Carlton hated each other?” Malatsi suggested.

Alan Cohen nodded. “Back then, yes. Now? I don’t know. Carlton didn’t change, but Denzel looks like he’s matured.”

“Who else was there? In your class? Guys who weren’t here today?” Malatsi asked.

“Wow, man you’re going back a long time,” Alan Cohen thought out loud. “There was George. But after school ended, I never saw him again. It was like he became a ghost. I mean, we were best mates, at each other’s houses every day after school, and then the day school ended...” Cohen snapped his fingers. “Never saw him again after that. He just disappeared. Tried to look him up on Facebook but do you how many Greek guys there are called George Angelopoulos. Um, let me see...there was Ross Rautenbach and his younger sister, Andria, they used to be part of our group of friends, but we had a fall out years ago, in grade seven or eight, so by the time we got to high school, we were in the same class but we weren’t really friends. Andria was a year younger, so she wasn’t actually in our class. Something happened with his sister, I don’t remember exactly. I just remember his mom calling my mom and the two of them having a screaming match at each other over the phone. I don’t remember details too well, you can ask my wife.” He

glanced over at Lee, who was looking into her lap and shaking her head. "We stopped going to each other's houses after that, but that was years ago," Cohen looked up with a smile on his face. "Funny how friendships change as you get older," he said.

Dave Malatsi watched the silent dynamic between the husband and wife. Their marriage was anything but happy, and it didn't take a seasoned detective to figure that one out. For a moment his mind went to his own relationship with Anele which was very much like these two, only six months further down the line.

His phone vibrated again and the three of them watched as it moved slightly across the table.

*Sgt Nene*, the display read.

"Excuse me," Malatsi sighed, picking up the phone. "Sergeant?" he answered curtly.

Alan Cohen could hear the intensity of the voice on the other end of the line but couldn't make out the words.

"I'm still going to be here a while, it's going to have to wait," Malatsi said defiantly. More loud intense words from Sergeant Nene. "What do you want me to do, let eleven prime suspects go and come back to the station now, or solve a murder case? I'm still busy getting witnesses statements, and one of them is my murderer." More noise from the detective's superior. "When I'm finished. I don't know. Today, tonight, tomorrow. When I'm finished." There was more muted gabbling and then the conversation ended.

"What was that all about?" Cohen asked.

"None of your business," Malatsi dismissed his question. "That's it, you're free to return to your room. You're not free to leave the lodge, not till I've finished."

"You can't hold us here," Lee Cohen interjected. "You know that as well as I do. Unless we're all under arrest, in which case you'd best have sufficient evidence."

"Listen, lady," Malatsi leaned in and stared at her. "Back home, you may be a big shot lawyer, but out here, this is my jurisdiction, and my territory. You want to get in the way of my investigation,

## Twelve

I'll have you detained for obstruction of justice, and let me tell you, the last place on earth you want to be is in the holding cell in my precinct. It'll take you more than forty-eight hours to make bail, or to get a lawyer worth shit. This isn't the big city lady. Be careful how you play this."

The two of them stared at each other.

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