

Leap Tide

by

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Prologue

Over the roar of the ocean, silent screams drifted up from the jagged reef far below. The crevices, the tangle and swirl of kelp at the foot of Leap Rock eventually released the bodies of the cliff's victims, but Maya knew their souls remained wedged amongst starfish and abalone; clinging to the rocks like eternal graffiti.

Spiny rocks dug into her canvas clad feet but her gaze stayed fixed on the hungry water that churned and beckoned.

Behind her, four crosses testified to Leap Rock's occasional, but insatiable appetite. Annie Niemand; lost to her loved ones in the distant past. Luke Verster; gone almost fifty years. Pete Niemand; over forty years ago. Brandon Brinkley; exactly twenty-five years ago today.

Brandon.

"I never stopped loving you." The wind snatched the whisper from her lips.

Black fissures in the wet rock below, taunted her. Twirling foam feathers mesmerized. The push and pull of waves over rock changed solidity into fluidity.

Twenty-five long years ago, their planned meeting at Leap Rock was meant to launch them into a fresh future. Together at last. For the rest of their lives. But the rest of Brandon's life had been over even before her arrival.

Dark kelp-hands beckoned. Her sense of depth and balance faltered. Her muscles quivered, wavered between leaping and staying put. The mournful cry of a circling gull drew her back. She sucked in an unsteady breath laden with the scents of salt and mussels and moulding vegetation.

She hadn't jumped then. She wouldn't jump now. Not when life had finally offered her the opportunity to fix things with Lily. It was just her blood pressure playing up. Her age. The memories.

Forcing her gaze away from the agitated waters at the foot of the cliff, she let it linger on the calmer water of the bay and then drift over the beach. A stone's throw from the springtide mark the thatched cottage, named the Sea Wife by someone in the distant past, looked more comical than charming where it nestled in the prickly heath and fynbos.

When Abel had bought it forty years before, a different pain and a different longing had gnawed at her. He'd called it her engagement present. Deep down she'd known it was a bribe. By the time he'd added the second story to turn the tin roofed fishing hut into a cottage, Maya had been a mere shadow of herself.

Some way beyond the cottage, the white rectangles of other houses basked in the saline air. To one side the caravan park with its small shop and office covered under milkwood. Way behind it construction was under way on the beachfront.

Progress had finally come to Crux Cove. But could a place like Crux Cove really change? A village with a past so grim, it seemed destined to repeat history with predictable regularity? Only time would tell.

Did she dare bring Lily here? Would the alternative reality promised by the seclusion, seduce Lily too? Would she too feel the hope that sprang so easily to life here? Would she also be crushed by the forces of the past?

"Are you going to jump, Maya?"

Maya swung around, almost lost her balance, but then regained her footing. As she met the malicious expression in the eyes hardly more than two metres away, an instinctive

fear surged through her. Dizziness blurred her vision, superimposing eyebrows over the deep eye sockets. Contorted lips articulated words that flowed in a lethargic wave toward her. "Can ... I ... lend ... a ... hand?"

"No!" Maya managed to force the word over her numb tongue. In that moment, it dawned on her. "It was you..." Nowhere to go. Just one step back to the edge of the cliff. Maya sank to her knees. Rock ate into her flesh. A whirl of images, scents and sounds drew her into a murky vortex. Lily... Her cheek scraped against rock. The rock smelt of primordial dust, ancient mould, forgotten memories.

A roar filled her head, extinguishing the early evening light.

"Maya?"

Had Brandon's soul at last managed to break free? Had he come to fetch her at last?

No, she wanted to say, not yet. Not now that I know... She had to tell Lily... Lily mustn't come... Maya's thoughts disintegrated into a dark fog.

Chapter 1

Three days later

Monday, 28th November

Gus Niemand drew a hand over his balding head and stared at a section of the quarter of a century old police report he'd requested earlier. He underlined the date of the incident.

As they had previously arranged to meet at the top of Leap Rock, he read the report for the second time, it can be assumed Brandon Brinkley heard Maya White's approach while he was standing on the edge of the cliff. Presumably, he turned, lost his balance and fell to his death. Casey Brinkley, youngest son of Mr Brinkley, saw the incident and fled the scene, moving past Mrs White as she made her way up the pathway. Due to the topography of the area, she could not have seen what had transpired. This incident is deemed an unfortunate accident.

Very unfortunate indeed. As unfortunate as the events that took place at the top of Leap Rock three days ago. Quite coincidentally also on 25th November, but exactly twenty-five years later, almost to the hour.

Except, Gus didn't believe in coincidence.

He picked up the statement Ben Brinkley had made two days ago. According to Brandon Brinkley's eldest son, he'd found Maya White collapsed on the edge of Leap Rock. As he was picking her up to carry her down the cliff path, his fiancée, Blanche van Wyk, arrived on the scene. He hurried the older woman to her home, but Blanche had stayed behind. Only after he'd arrived at Maya's cottage and given her some medication for her hypertension, his brother, Casey, came running in to inform him Blanche had fallen off the cliff.

Gus heaved his bulk out of his chair and poked his head out into the passage.

"Fortune!" he called in the direction of the charge office as he eased a hand down his back where he'd strained a muscle while walking up the steep zigzag path to Leap Rock.

As usual, the constable's uniform was impeccable and his bearing worthy of a parade ground as he came down the passage at a smart trot. Gus suspected Frankie Fortune aspired to become the pride of the Niemandville district's pathetically deficient police force.

"Sergeant?"

"What do you know about Blanche van Wyk?" Gus circled his desk and eased into a chair that seemed to shrink just a little more each day despite his dieting efforts.

"She grew up in Cape Town, sergeant; her father has a business there. Security I think. Her mother was from Niemandville. She was Garage Niemand's daughter, sergeant. He is..."

"Dammit, Fortune. I didn't ask for her family tree. I want to know about the girl's relationship to Ben Brinkley - the man who allegedly carried Maya White down to her house, while his fiancée decided to jump off a cliff."

"Blanche and Ben were engaged for three years, sergeant. Lived together in the glass house Ben's father built years ago on the mountainside below Leap Rock. Ben went

up the cliff after they had an argument and Blanche followed him. Apparently, Ben broke off their engagement earlier and that's why Blanche tried to commit suicide. And perhaps because the publishers in Cape Town weren't interested in printing a book of the poems she'd written. She's a poet you see, sergeant."

"And Brandon Brinkley, who accidentally fell down the cliff exactly twenty-five years prior to Blanche's leap, was Ben's father." Gus meant it as a rhetoric statement, but Fortune nodded.

Gus stroked his moustache. "How sure are we? That the girl had jumped?"

Fortune's hands clutched at thin air. "That's what everybody in Crux Cove says, sergeant. Blanche is still unconscious. As you know she was air-lifted to the hospital in Somerset West." Fortune shook his head. "How she survived the fall... It's a miracle."

"And this Maya White woman? Why did she go up there?"

"To place flowers at Brandon Brinkley's cross, sergeant. Apparently she forgot to take her blood pressure medication and collapsed. You see, Ben's father and Maya were about to get married twenty-five years ago, but then he fell down the cliff."

Who knows, Gus thought as he studied the young man in front of him, one day Frankie Fortune might develop a sense for the sequence of events. With a bit of luck, he might even be able to reach an understanding of cause and effect. There was even an outside chance he might become a good police officer, despite his tendency to talk like gramophone and gossip like a crone.

"How's she doing now?"

"Released from hospital at own risk early this morning, sergeant. She's on the bus to Cape Town to catch a plane to the north."

"Yesterday you told me she was too weak to be questioned." Gus didn't even try to hide his exasperation.

Fortune raised his palms. "That's what the hospital said yesterday, sergeant, but when I phoned earlier the sister said she was gone. The doctor didn't want to discharge her, but she insisted, even though her blood pressure was still sky high. The sister said she was taking her life into her own hands. They don't have the equipment at the Niemandville hospital to do all the proper tests, but the sister said it was quite possible Maya had suffered a minor stroke. She says Mrs White remembers taking the flowers but nothing else."

"Mmm." Gus milked the lobe of his ear as if he could extract some extra insight from it. "Where does she come from?"

"Potchefstroom, I think. It's in the Northwest Province."

"I know where Potchefstroom is, Fortune." Gus glared at the young man. "Do *you*?"

Fortune looked down at his shiny boots. "Not really, sergeant. To be honest, I've never been further north than Oudtshoorn, sergeant."

"Well, get her address and contact her tomorrow," Gus said in frustration. He couldn't afford to have a potential witness to a mess like this, slip out of his grasp.

He studied the cryptic notes he'd made at the scene two days ago. "I see the woman who owns the caravan park in Crux Cove said Maya was supposed to meet her niece's husband on Friday evening?"

"That would be Mr Fritz Reynecke. Maya's niece is Lily Reynecke."

Gus looked up at Fortune. "Have you traced him yet?"

"No sergeant, not yet."

Gus raised his eyebrows.

"He didn't answer his cell, so I left a message to contact us. Then I tried his landline at his home in Pretoria. A housekeeper answered. She said Mr Reynecke is in Cape Town and Mrs Reynecke was out. I asked for Mrs Reynecke's cell number as nobody in Crux Cove had it, but she didn't have it either and said it wouldn't help much anyway because Fritz and Lily Reynecke are in the middle of a divorce. Mrs Reynecke probably wouldn't know her husband's whereabouts."

"Keep trying his cell. I need to know whether that meeting took place." Gus rubbed the back of his neck. "You grew up in Crux Cove, didn't you?"

"Close by, sergeant." The youthful face showed an uncertainty that somehow emphasized his Khoikhoi heritage. Gus was quite sure Fortune considered his new sergeant to be a bully. He didn't intend to disillusion him. There was certainly enough of the bully in him to keep the young officer on his toes.

Gus checked his notes again. "Casey Brinkley. What's the story there?"

"Casey is Ben's younger brother. He was asleep in the cave behind Leap Rock when he heard his brother arguing with Blanche. When he went out to investigate; he saw her fly like an angel. Those were his words, sergeant, not mine. At least according to Ben, who also says Casey can't remember anything else."

Gus snorted. Another one that couldn't remember a thing. Very convenient. "Why was he sleeping in the cave?"

Fortune cleared his throat. "Casey's got a screw loose, if you know what I mean."

Gus looked at him sternly from under his bushy eyebrows. "You mean he is mentally challenged."

"Yes sergeant, mentally challenged. And that's why Ben refuses to allow us to question Casey before Blanche regains consciousness or alternatively, passes away. He says Casey is in a state of shock and far too sensitive to be questioned. Apparently, the last time he was this bad was after he'd witnessed his father's fall to death."

"Mmm." Gus turned a page in his notebook. "What happened to those black fibres we found inside the cave?"

"On their way to forensics, sergeant, but they said they have a tremendous backlog, sergeant."

"They always have a tremendous backlog. The photos?"

"Being printed, sergeant. But we still can't get anyone to come and lift the tracks."

Fortune looked embarrassed, as if personally responsible that in this crime ridden country rape and murder took precedence on the specialists' jam-packed priority lists over what seemed to be merely an attempted suicide.

With a deep sigh, Gus flicked through Brandon Brinkley's file before he looked up. "Fortune, bring me the dockets on the other three."

"Sergeant?" Fortune ran nervous fingers through his cropped hair.

"Those crosses on Leap Rock. The three people that went down that cursed cliff before Brandon Brinkley. Were they all suicides?"

"As far as we know, only one, sergeant. The son of the mayor at the time. I think it was in the early sixties. The victim before that, in 1958 according to the date engraved on the cross, was drunk and stumbled over the edge. The other cross doesn't have a date or a docket. Everybody says it commemorates the death of a woman by the name of Annie Niemand, but that was a long, long time ago. More than a century. Perhaps even two. There are many stories. Some say ..." He shifted uncomfortably. "Some say she was a mermaid, sergeant, but my mother says..."

"Spare me, Fortune. I'm not interested in mermaid myths or what your mother has to say." Gus rubbed his stomach. Heartburn was chewing him up again. He shouldn't have eaten that meat pie for breakfast. "Just go get the dockets. I put in a request for them earlier."

"Yes, sergeant."

It really wasn't Fortune's fault stress and meat pies didn't agree with his digestive system, Gus realized as he watched the constable walk away. He sighed. "Fortune?"

The constable turned in the doorway and gave Gus a cautious look. "Yes, sergeant?"

"Who is your mother?"

"Delphine Fortune, sergeant. She works for Ms Rita Verster, the owner of the Crux Cove caravan park, but she helps with cleaning at a few other houses too."

"Well, when you see your mother again, tell her she did a fine job of raising you."

The young man's copper skin glowed. "Yes, sergeant. Thank you, sergeant."

"Now go on, I'm waiting for those dockets."

Fortune wheeled, his back as straight as a rod. Gus half expected to hear his heels clicking.

The Crux Cove inhabitants were certainly a peculiar lot. Something about the village at the end of the sixty kilometres of rutted gravel road made his hair stand on end. If he was the superstitious kind, he might have believed the place really was cursed.

Perhaps his predecessors had the same queer feeling, as there was no indication that law enforcement had ever been much of a priority in Crux Cove despite all the mishaps at Leap Rock. And now, that eerie cliff was on the verge of claiming a fifth life. Unless Blanche van Wyk regained consciousness.

Gus sighed even deeper this time. The Niemandville district was so immense, the manpower ridiculously lacking and the crimes so varied. From stock-theft to abalone smuggling. Knife attacks to family murders. Strange deaths like the case of the young girl who died from a spider bite at some mountain resort run by an eccentric woman. Then there were the assault cases.

It was as if a plague of lust and violence raged through the area and it seemed to lure the weirdest of characters too. From world famous writers to members of fanatical sects.

When his cousin had told him about the vacancy in Niemandville, he thought it was a way out of his problems. He'd been quite content at his job in the Karoo-town where he was stationed until the newly appointed Superintendent started complaining about Gus' weight and questioning his fitness. On top of it, he kept nagging Gus about the way he handled investigations and did his utmost to make Gus' life pure misery. Moving back to the town where he grew up, but had never lived as an adult, had seemed like a fine idea at the time. Now he wasn't so sure.

The phone at his elbow rang just as Fortune re-entered the room, dockets in hand.

"Niemand."

"A Mr van Wyk on the line for you, sergeant. He insists on speaking directly to you," the officer on reception duty informed him.

"Put him through."

"Detective Niemand? I understand you are heading the investigation into my daughter's accident?" The voice was curt to the point of being obnoxious.

"If your daughter's name is Blanche van Wyk, your assumption would be correct."

"She has regained consciousness and confessed she attempted to commit suicide after Ben Brinkley broke up with her. Personally I would like to toss the bastard off the cliff myself." Gus could almost hear the man gnashing his teeth. "But that's beside the point. There's a police officer taking Blanche's statement right now. So you can close the case and keep your nose out of our affairs." The line went dead.

Gus slammed the receiver down just as Fortune placed the files on his desk. Pete Niemand, he read the name on the uppermost cardboard folder and released a slow, controlled breath in an attempt to avoid the effect the telephone conversation was having on his ulcer. "Take them back. The girl..." He lifted the folder to inspect the one beneath it. Luke Verster. "On second thought, leave them with me for a while." He glanced up at Fortune. "But we can wrap up the Blanche van Wyk case. The girl has regained consciousness. She jumped of her own accord. According to her father, anyway."

Fortune didn't meet his eyes, just nodded before he turned away.

Gus slowly allowed a sour belch to feather through his moustache. He'd have to learn to control his temper if he wanted things to work out for him in Niemandville. He would have to learn to get along with Fortune and his new station commander too and generally make the best of bad circumstances. Even though his ulcer gave him hell. Even though Crux Cove chilled him to the bone. Even though his gut feeling warned him he had encountered a fair share of lies today.

Chapter 2
A year later
Saturday, 23rd September

Maya is dead. This was Lily's first waking thought as it had been every morning for months now. Faithfully in its footsteps followed the second: Fritz is not dead. Neither by a stroke nor by stroke of luck.

Shreds of her last dream held her captive in that hazy state between reality and dream. Something to do with Maya, something to do with Jamaican Blend coffee.

Background sounds drifted closer as dream gradually succumbed to reality.

It wasn't the familiar roar of the city. No sirens or screaming tires. No smooth rumble of a BMW starting up in a garage. No traffic. Also no subdued voices of nursing staff and no squeak and jingle of breakfast trolleys.

The sound was the crash of waves on rock and the gritty rush of water over sea sand. With the identification, came a recollection of the previous night: The ruts and treachery of the dirt road in the sweep of the pick-up's headlights. Sixty dreadful kilometres of it. Vague images of Crux Cove's dwellings, aloof in the moonless night. The obese woman in the caravan park café where she'd bought bread and milk and cheese and margarine just before nine. The musty smell of Maya's beach cottage as she unlocked the door in the beam of the headlights, her hands quivering from exhaustion.

The unmade bed still rumpled from the previous guests who'd spent the night there. The search for clean bedding. The struggle to make the wretched bed in her comatose state. Waiting for the geyser after realizing the bloody thing had been switched off and she'd finally located the switchboard. Eventually succumbing to the almost cold spray when she could hardly keep her eyes open. Although it could hardly be called a spray. There were barely four unblocked holes in the shower rose.

A precarious start to a new life.

So precarious, she could not face the simple task of opening her eyes. The vague hopes she had yesterday didn't seem justified anymore. There was only the reality of today, and today would officially start once she pried her lids apart. She'd have to take decisions and make choices within this new reality that essentially left her three options.

She could walk into the waves never to return.

She could take out a contract on Fritz' life.

Or she could gather up the shards of her existence and attempt to glue it together again.

It was the last option that really scared the shit out of her.

Still without opening her eyes, she turned her head toward the block of light that had to be the French door with its paned windows. She hadn't been able to bring herself to touch the dust-laden curtains last night, let alone draw them. She detested waking up to closed curtains anyway. It reminded her too much of the perpetual dusk in the mine house where she grew up. Where her mother used curtains as an indispensable barrier against the squalid Western Transvaal village that lay covered in mine dust beyond the windowpanes. Against the cloned redbrick houses where cloned residents lived their judgmental little cloned lives. Against life.

Don't go there.

She risked a peek. The sun flashed cruelly on the sea surface, burning blind spots on her retinas before she could snap her eyelids closed again. The blind spots expanded and retracted, pulsing red, then yellow, blue.

Maybe there was a fourth option. Just stay put. Lie here with her eyes closed, watching the kaleidoscope playing against the insides of her lids until the colours faded. Remain here forever and ever. At least until somebody stumbled across her decaying corpse. No, probably her bones. There was nobody left who gave a damn what happened to Lily Reynecke. Whether she was gluing her life together or slowly rotting away until there was only a gooey mattress with traces of her DNA.

It sounded so easy. Much easier than facing the waves or killing Fritz or, heaven forbid, be brave enough to survive in the land of the living.

If only she wasn't dying for a cup of coffee. And a cigarette.

She cautiously opened her eyes again. The picture had gentled. The sky, cavernous in its blueness, tinted the sea from ink blue to sea green to diluted turquoise. Sunlight curled and flashed on waves, translating water into metal shards.

Stretching, she twisted onto her side. In the lazy swell, half a dozen dolphins were playing follow-my-leader in foamy water colder than Fritz' heart.

No. Nothing could be colder than Fritz Reynecke's heart. That she knew. The same way she knew this day was far too fair to trade for dark eternity. The sea too tranquil to contaminate with a corpse. Her craving for coffee and a cigarette too overpowering to stay put.

Turning on her back, she looked at the thatch above, spotted a daddy-longlegs vibrating in its web. The spider froze as if it could feel her gaze.

She could hire someone to hijack Fritz and then 'accidentally' shoot him. Killing him on the spot. In a crime-ravaged country like South Africa, that couldn't be too difficult to accomplish.

"Feasible maybe, but too charitable," she told the spider.

Perhaps the hijacker could drag him into some isolated bushes and torture him slowly and thoroughly before he died a well-deserved death. No wait, the beige-bitch should be with him. No need to have her tortured. A swift death would do. She would probably have a heart attack anyway if confronted with anything other than the minutes of a meeting.

Mind you... her heart had certainly held out well enough when her boss had her spread across his desk. Perhaps just some light torturing would do. After all, she wasn't the traitor. Even if she'd shared in the spoils. But sharing had never been her objective; the beige-bitch had wanted Fritz. Now he was hers. With Lily's compliments.

But Fritz... Yes, Fritz the Traitor Most Foul should stare death in the face for as long as possible. He needed to understand he couldn't escape his well-earned punishment. Pity it wasn't possible to bring him back to life a couple of times to die yet another drawn-out death.

Odd how her wrath took so long to reach full maturity. It was almost a year since she'd walked in on them in his office. So many things had happened since. Perhaps it was just easier to hate Fritz than to think about Maya's death. Or about the period prior to it. And the one that had followed.

When Lily faced the sea again, a red tracksuit was jogging somewhat laboriously along the hem of waves. Behind the red tracksuit, in the swell beyond the furthest waves, a huge hump surged upward. Sank back. When last had she seen a whale?

Maybe she could lure Fritz away before the hijacker made his entry. For old time's sake. To feel one last time how his hands and mouth could make her body sing. Just experience once more the mind-blowing, soul soaring multiple orgasms she'd become so used to over twenty years of marriage. And then the hijacker could...

She swung her legs off the bed. How dare the Overberg present her with a day like this? Just when she was ready to make Fritz pay for his sins. It was impossible to plan a gruesome murder on a day sparkling like champagne with dolphins and whales cavorting in the distance. Melodrama asked for dark and stormy weather.

Floorboards creaked as she made her way to the musty smelling bathroom. She had to jiggle the toilet's handle to stop the water flushing and couldn't manage to stop the tap from dripping into the stained basin.

In the kitchen, she filled the kettle, switched it on and glowered at the coffee plunger, adding it to her list of grievances. From her hasty inspection the night before, she knew there was no instant coffee. She disliked filter coffee intensely, but half a bag of ground coffee was all she could find. So be it. Even an exquisite champagne morning was hard to face without caffeine.

As she dug into the foil bag, she noticed the label: Jamaican Blend. She must have seen it the previous night and not quite registered the name. That explained her dream.

"Great! Just great," she muttered. "I'm about to start the first day of the rest of my life with Foul Fritz' favourite frigging filter coffee." She loved alliteration. Almost as much as phoney Fritz loved his lousy Latin phrases.

After measuring the dark grains into the glass jug, she fidgeted with the plunger. Was she supposed to put the stupid thing back before or after adding water? Probably afterwards.

The kitchen window framed an idyllic, if somewhat grimy painting of sun, sea, sand and indigenous fynbos. On the balcony dangling metal pipes and driftwood, shells and beads chimed in the gentle breeze. She forced the encrusted sash window open to let in the day and brighten the picture. The scent of salt and sea and coffee mingled with that of sun-touched heath as she turned to the fridge.

Out of habit, she sniffed the milk and jerked back. Annoyed, she forced the glutinous lumps down the drain. She *thought* that fat excuse for a female had a sneaky look about her. Probably only too glad to dump her nasty milk on another unsuspecting holidaymaker. Well, I have news for you Little Lotta, I'm here to stay.

Probably. Temporarily. Inescapably.

Because, you see, Lily Reynecke doesn't have a home anymore. Gone is the house in the snazzy Pretoria suburb of Waterkloof Ridge, and with it Fritz' fancy BMW. Even her little cabriolet, which seemed to fit like a cheeky skirt from the first moment she got into it, was forever gone. In her new life, Lily Reynecke owned only what she could fit into a practical second-hand pick-up truck without a CD player.

And Maya's weary old house.

No, not Maya's house anymore. The Sea Wife was now weary old Lily's house.

A house where the bottom of a stainless steel sugar pot yielded only half a spoonful of hardened brown sugar. She scraped it into her mug. In the cupboard above the kettle, she found a container marked Coffee Creamer. It felt suspiciously light. She opened the lid. Who in hell would return an empty container to the cupboard?

The woman who used to handle the renting of Maya's house was supposed to supply coffee and tea for at least one night for guests. They probably thought she could make do. With undrinkable coffee and an unmade bed. After all, she wasn't a paying guest. On the other hand, perhaps Maya's lawyer forgot to let them know: Lily, the lowly heir, is on her way.

Desperate to find anything to camouflage the vile taste of the coffee, she opened another cupboard. Her fingers tightened around the doorknob. It was almost as if Fritz himself was sitting on the shelf grinning at her. A quarter full bottle of brandy. Oudemeester. His favourite brand.

Her mouth turned cottony. Of course it was only coincidence. The previous guests must have left it there. With the Jamaican Blend.

Fritz hated the house and the village from the first time he'd seen it seven years before.

"A dump of a place in a dump of a town! Trust Maya," he'd spat out his judgment when they'd inspected the house. The boulder that had damaged the exhaust of his BMW on the gravel road had certainly coloured his judgment. The fact that there was no golf course within a hundred-kilometre radius undoubtedly didn't help make the undeniably musty house any more attractive to him. When the wind chose to blow at gale force the whole weekend and he found out there was no TV in the house and no form of entertainment anywhere in a town that had one measly little shop and no petrol station, his condemnation was final.

Yet the strange charm of the Sea Wife had captivated Lily despite the dilapidated exterior and neglected interior. Even during that short stay, she felt there was something special about the creaky old lady. And there was something about Crux Cove that called upon an emotion she couldn't identify or deny.

She had begged to stay longer, but Fritz refused and they never returned.

Seven years was a long time. Thousands of mega litres of water had ebbed and flowed since then. The moon had waxed and waned at least a hundred times. There was no chance the brandy and coffee had anything to do with Fritz.

If you can't change your circumstances, change your attitude, Lily. She could almost hear Maya saying it.

Lily reached for the bottle even though it sent a shudder down her spine. Carefully, she measured a capful of brandy over the sugar in her mug. It wasn't exactly milk, but

perhaps it would make the brew more palatable. Fate was cruel, but apparently not altogether merciless.

Water bubbled through the spout of the kettle and onto the counter. The damn thing wasn't automatic. She swore when the steam scorched her wrist as she filled the coffee pot. With distaste, she forced the plunger slowly down over the black sludge.

With one need almost fulfilled, the other beckoned. Where in hell did she ... A flash image stirred a recent memory. Something she'd seen when she'd taken the milk out of the fridge. Seen, but not fully registered. She opened the fridge door again. Margarine and cheese. In the brightness of the morning light, the cheese was a particularly violent shade of orange and light green patches flowered under the plastic wrap. Behind the cheese, it lay. A rather battered packet of menthol cigarettes with a neon pink cigarette lighter balanced neatly on top of it.

For a moment, she stared at it. It wasn't the first time she'd left some inappropriate object in the fridge. Once even the Cabriolet's keys. At least there was no Fritz to roll his eyes heavenward or quote some idiotic Latin phrase. Who knows what thought process led to a slip-up like that. Who cared? Besides, last night she'd been utterly exhausted after two days of driving.

The first day's drive to Bloemfontein was exceptionally vague in her memory. She couldn't even remember what time she left Potchefstroom. She just remembered the whistle of tires on the tar and the local stations playing hide and seek on her radio. In the cheap B&B just outside Bloemfontein, after an initial struggle to fall asleep, she had eventually overslept and got away much later than she intended. This was why she had to brave the horrific dirt road from Niemandville to Crux Cove after dark. Actually, she was rather proud of reaching the Sea Wife in one piece. It was no wonder her concentration had been somewhat shot.

Lily strolled onto the balcony with her mug and a cigarette. The wind-worn wood was sandy beneath her bare feet. Wind chimes jingled and twisted and turned in the sun. The breeze flirted with the hem of her short nighty and feathered a wisp of hair over her eyes. She shrugged her hair back where it tickled her skin below her shoulder blades.

The ends needed trimming and wasn't it about time for highlights too? The last time she visited a hairdresser was before Maya's death. Could it be? Four months? Shit, no. No more money for hairdressers. Not now the safety net of Maya's pension and sales of her paintings had fallen away.

A sip of almost sweet coffee drove the taste of sleep from her mouth, but the aftertaste made her wince. The brandy might not have been such a bright idea. The first drag on the cigarette burnt her tongue. She smoked too much. It was a passing thought, so habitual it made hardly any impact on her conscience. Maybe she should inform the minister of health cigarettes had at least one advantage. They got you out of bed even when you didn't want to get up. Ever again.

Through the soft material of her nightdress, she rubbed the slight itch at her navel where her belly ring lay just above the elastic of her Lily of France tanga. There would be no more expensive underwear, either.

She should have thought twice before marrying a lawyer. Fritz had connived her out of her share of the divorce settlement on the grounds that she had never "contributed fiscally to the conjugal estate." For obvious reasons he neglected to add that over the years, he had done everything he could to dissuade her from getting a job. It had suited him far better to have a Girl Friday conveniently tucked away at home.

Had he just been plain tight-fisted with the settlement? Or was there some hidden agenda that motivated him to force her into something close to poverty? Fritz was a master at hidden agendas. Did he think she would come back to him with her tail between her legs when she fully realized the extent of her 'fiscal' shortfall? After she'd caught him bonking the beige-bitch on his office desk? Not bloody likely.

She dragged her thoughts back to the beauty of the clear morning and her new home.

The Sea Wife stood like a wood and stone atoll perched in a sea of heath. The indigenous strip of fynbos separated her from the houses behind her and the caravan park to her right. To her left it widened to link her to the scrubby growth that scrambled up the mountainside to where rock took over.

Lily stared up at the mass of land, forced upward like a gigantic breaching whale by heat, pressure and lava in times primordial. Black fissures scarred the pale silver-grey rock adorned with varying shades of orange lichen. Waves clawed their way up the foot of the cliff, falling back defeated in streaming ribbons of foam-laced water to break over the ragged black peninsula that skirted the intimidating rock face.

Where the ancient rock leviathan arched his massive back into the heath, three pathways wound their way up the slope. About a third of the way up, they merged to form a single zigzag trail that inched its way to the top of the cliff. To the right of this confluence of pathways something reflected the sunlight. Surely it couldn't be a house? Nobody would dream of building anything on such an impossibly steep slope.

She turned and leaned back cautiously against the rather rickety balustrade to view her inheritance. The Sea Wife was lovely despite her bedraggled appearance. The lower level, with a guest bedroom, store and laundry, was built of stone. The upper level was stone interlaid with broad wooden beams. To the left, large sliding doors led out onto the wooden deck where a lath pergola provided latticed shade over a rustic table and chairs. In the middle was the kitchen door with two sash windows on either side and to the right the bedroom's French doors. A ragged fringe of thatch sagged over the doors and windows. Two chimneys, a stone one from the fireplace in the living area and another smaller black one from the coal stove in the kitchen, adorned the roof.

Whether she stayed permanently, or decided to sell, there would have to be some repair and renovation work done. The woodwork was in dire need of attention, the roof was scruffy to say the least and the bathroom desperately needed upgrading. Even the top level of the house, added later, had to be at least three decades old. Renovation would mean using the little money left in Maya's estate. Even that would probably not be sufficient.

Why Maya had taken the huge bond on her house in Potchefstroom, still mystified Lily. Pierre, Maya's attorney, had only informed Lily a cash bequest had been allocated for other purposes. What those "purposes" were, he refused to say. Lily was to have the rest. The Sea Wife lock, stock and barrel as well as the contents of the house in Potchefstroom and the remaining few thousand bucks after they sold the house and the bond and taxes were paid. Because Pierre was an old friend of Maya's, he handled the estate himself and the matter was wound up swiftly.

Lily turned to view the rows of waves as they rolled into shore. A movement on the zigzag path caught her eye. She recognized the red tracksuit from earlier. The glare drew tears to her eyes and she diverted her gaze to the gold toe-ring on her second toe. Another small symbol of emotional neglect. A consolation gift as Valentine's Day had fallen on a Wednesday that year. And Wednesdays Fritz played golf. Even if the Second Coming fell on a Wednesday, Fritz' judgment would have to wait until after the prize giving at the golf club.

Bugger Fritz. She was free of him and his golf regime at last.

Maya's inheritance was a gift of grace. The holiday home, small and neglected as it was, was more than adequate for her purposes. If she could survive losing Maya so soon after the divorce and could endure the dark hole of almost three months after the cremation, she could survive and endure anything.

She turned to the sea. "I guess I'll have to pick up the frigging pieces," she told the gulls, the heath and the waves. "Try and glue them together again. And make an effort to stay out of the loony bin this time around."

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