

## Matters of the Heart

Donavan's condition seemed to be worsening.

His daughter, Isabel, stood around his bedside, watching him sleep. He looked helpless in his blue pin-striped pyjamas. He'd lost weight. He breathed in and out shallowly, unconscious of his nineteen year old daughter and extended family. He had both a ventricular assist device and a heart monitor attached to him, beeping.

Donavan's farm froze at this time of morning -a dark icy 04h00am. Even the animals hid and cozied up in their shelters.

Isabel had brought her entire crew to see the Don – now a shadow of the tyrant he used to be just a year back. His cardiac complications had tamed him. He needed a heart transplant immediately. Waiting on the organ donors' list wouldn't work. Donavan Peters had just days left to live, so his daughter had conjured up a plan – a rather costly one.

Pastor Mark had joined them, by Isabel's invitation. A scrawny short Bishop with a full set of grey hair. His neatly-kept beard resembled the same colour.

He smeared anointing oil all around Don's bed, declaring that no evil spirits would come near. He wore a black Bishop's robe, accessorised with beads and crucifixes. He stooped down beside Don and held his flimsy hand. 'May the Lord God Emmanuel, Jehovah Raffia, God of healing, protect you. Ephesian 6:12 says: For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers and powers of this world's darkness, and against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. You are healed, Donavan. You are healed,' he kept reiterating.

For communion, he'd poured grape juice in plastic cups for them all to sip – even Isabel's gang outside had had to partake.

Don's caretaker stood by the door, watching patiently. Isabel hired her through an agency. She'd grilled and recruited her meticulously: Rebecca Fourie, a former nurse from St Dominic's hospital in East London. She held a two-year nursing diploma and nearly fourteen years of patient-care experience. Isabel liked that she wore a constant smile, eager to please. A chubby and vibrant woman in her late fifties.

Rebecca stood near the exit with Spider - Don's right hand man. He'd since become Isabel's deputy, due to his illness. It had been a seamless transition. Spider had been at the hospital the day of Isabel's birth, nineteen years ago. He'd been the loyal and dependable Uncle Spider for as long as she could remember. They got along well, especially since he'd agreed

to stop calling her *my girlie, cute one, my child, little Issie, sweetie pie*, or any other belittling nickname. Now she was just Isabel or Issie, the General. She wasn't Donovan's daughter, or his tall, black-haired, beautiful cunning niece. She was just the General now.

Isabel couldn't stand seeing her dad so brittle.

She fought back tears sliding down her face. Spider was equally touched, standing there with a dangerous look on him. He kept his gaze on Pastor Mark as a distraction.

Isabel kissed her dad on the forehead. 'I'll be back this evening, dad,' she said, wiping tears dripping down her cheeks, and glancing out at Rebecca by the exit. 'He's looking better than yesterday, don't you think?'

'Definitely, Madam. Colour's coming back on his face,' she affirmed. 'He's more talkative when he's awake now.'

'Good. Great.' Isabel turned back to her father. 'We're gonna get the money, dad. Don't worry about it. Tomorrow, Dr Sutherland and his team will be on a plane on their way here, with a brand new heart for you. No deposit. I'm paying the whole amount to make sure there're no hiccups.'

Isabel took a moment's thought. She knew that her dad would never let her pay fourteen million rands for anything; including his own health. He'd tell her daughter to tear up that damn cardiologist's quotation, and let him die in peace. The headache to arrange the organ, equipment, surgery, drugs, flights, accommodation and specialists wasn't worth it. He was a frugal man with money. As stunningly wealthy as he was, he never owned more than two cars at once. His friends would tease him and say, 'A rich coloured man has a duty to own a fleet of flashy cars with loud thumping sound systems, to drag race with.' He'd brush them off with a sarcastic giggle.

Isabel wouldn't let her dad die.

There was still more she needed to learn from him. 'You'll be up and about in no time, dad,' she said, pulling a thick envelope from her purse. She slipped it over to Pastor Mark. It was heavy, filled with cash. 'Thanks for seeing us at this hour, Apostle. You're a true shepherd of God.' It was his que to leave.

The Preacher took the money. 'Donavan's one of my oldest friends, Issie. I love him and his family. He will heal, in Jesus' name,' he concluded, shoving the money in his robe inside pocket, and walking out.

Isabel kissed her dad's hand. She smiled at him momentarily and then straightened his warm blanket just right. Satisfied, she walked out the room, where sixteen of her men waited on her.

They played pool in a spacious marble floor lounge, smoking and sipping whisky. They were a rugged bunch of coloured guys, draped in tattoos, gold teeth, scars and more. Their mood was sombre too, as they waited for a health update from Isabel.

'Is the Don okay, Issie?' One of them asked in a sullen tone.

Isabel stood beside Spider and responded with a curt, 'He'll be fine, thanks. You all ready?'

11h00am:

Isabel, Spider and three of their men were at a private airstrip on the outskirts of Lesotho – an abandoned farm, 180kms from Bloemfontein. The harsh sun pounded Spider's sweaty face. He was a tall slender man with tattoos of spider webs all over him. His neck, face and body had images of Tarantulas, Black Widow spiders and such. He wore diamonds in his ears and teeth – both his top and bottom row sparkled. He and the men had their tops off, loading guns and ammo inside their hired Cessna Citation M2 private jet. They packed military-grade automatic rifles on board.

Helping them were two other stick-figured locals, who couldn't speak a word of English. They did what they could through sign language, but mostly moaning and groaning as they toiled.

On the upside were the pretty spirals of mountainous terrain surrounding them. The landscapes were breath-taking. Picturesque awe-inspiring countryside artwork. Spider took a moment to soak it all in, on their arrival.

Isabel stood with Ntate Tsepo at the entrance of a barn. They were shadowed from the sun, negotiating. Dressed in a black Adidas tracksuit, red sneakers and a matching cap, Isabel zipped open a leather luggage bag, revealing three heavy gold bars. She'd seen them a thousand times in her dad's office, but she marvelled at how brightly they shone; especially in this light. She handed the bag over to Ntate Tsepo.

'They're worth a lot more than your fee. Comes from our most profitable goldmine, Cullinan Deep,' she explained. '100% pure gold bullion. No foreign metals contaminating it. Each one weighs 12,5 kilos.' Her pitch stemmed from the fact that she had no supporting ownership certificates. The buyer would have to remove the engraved serial numbers on his or her own accord.

Ntate Tsepo was an odd looking seventy year old man – tall and wiry. He looked both coloured and black. He wore a grey pony tail behind his chiselled face. His piercing eyes sat near each other like marbles, far from his crooked nose. He had an intimidating yet cartoonish look about him, dressed in a white shirt, white shorts and matching sandals.

*Perfect for this searing sun,* thought Isabel.

‘You’re too kind, my friend,’ he responded, smiling wide, exposing straight flawless teeth. ‘Never been paid in gold before. This is perfect. Solid and pure, just like you are, young one.’ He placed a hand over his heart. ‘Thank you, Isabella.’

She ignored the *young one* comment. She’d also once told him that her name has no *la* at the end. She let it slide, and instead asked, ‘You’ll take care of the serial numbers, right?’

‘Yes, as we discussed. Send my regards to Donnie please. We’re praying for his health.’

‘Thank you. Very kind of you.’

They walked towards the plane, both satisfied with the deal.

The men were done loading. They waited inside the aircraft, seemingly ready to leave.

‘You’ll have safe journey back,’ Ntate Tsepo assured. ‘No aviation police, Hawks or bloody Interpol. I’ve made sure of it. It cost a bit, but it’s handled.’

‘I’m sure the knock isn’t too bad, after our little transaction,’ Isabel joked, climbing up the jet stairs.

Tsepo laughed out loud, handing one of his minions the heavy gold bag. ‘A generous spirit is a blessed spirit. Safe travels my dear. Please tell Don I’ll call him when he’s stronger. I’ve got a bottle of 30yr old Scotch with his name on it.’

‘I will. Goodbye Ntate,’ she concluded, blowing a kiss and stepping inside the plane.

It smelled of zinc, rust and sweat. It boiled inside. ‘You boys need a shower. Let’s go,’ Isabel announced to the pilot, strapping herself in. She turned to Spider. ‘Everything sorted?’

Spider had the responsibility of counting all the ammo and checking the rifle’s functionality – disassembling and checking muzzle brakes, barrels, magazines, scopes, pistol grips and more. Spider responded with a swift thumbs-up.

‘Great stuff,’ said Isabel, suddenly worried about her dad again. ‘Let’s go.’

16h30pm:

Gun shots rang from all corners. Loud and obnoxious. Pretoria East stank of gunpowder and shell residue.

An upmarket residential street, near Centurion Shopping Mall, was lit up with gun fire and flying bullets. Pistols, shotguns, sniper rifles, machine guns blazed in unison – a choir of garish frightening music. The sounds were brash and vulgar, audible from miles away.

Members of the community hid inside their homes. Doors locked.

On top of rooftops, stationed strategically, were Isabel's men. They held long-range sniper rifles, firing away. They'd placed themselves in a horseshoe shape, shooting police vans from an aerial vantage point. A few fired from the ground, hidden behind trees and fences.

They wore murky face masks, shooting relentlessly. They'd killed three Fidelity Security guards and twelve cops so far, without casualties from their end. Law enforcement officers laid dead on the street, bleeding out. Some were inside their cars, slumped.

Sick ghastly scenes. Police and cash-in-transit vans endured a hail of bullets, peppered on them without pause. Blood stained their windshields, dashboards and all around. Issie's men engulfed the cops like a whale to a school of fish.

Some officers fired back, contending with armed thugs on the ground, but vulnerable to the aerial assault.

An unsaid, but alluded street code; was that junior gang members would climb up to seniority if they proved themselves in battle. This was their chance. Issie's men dropped the cops like dominos. Most held the same model sniper rifles - Finland's finest, the SAKO TRG 42. She'd also brought two M60 machine guns from Ntate Tsepo - firing 550 rounds a minute, at a range just shy of a kilometre.

*Great investment*, Isabel thought now, observing it all. She was proud to have led the men in battle, successfully, without her dad's help. They'd all trust her now, regardless of her age.

Unfortunately, an old woman who'd been caught in the crossfire laid dead in the street too. She'd caught a slug through her ear and died instantly.

Isabel couldn't be more proud of her gang.

She watched them rush to the back of the cash-in-transit bulletproof vans, blowing the hatches with C4 explosives. The bombs contained nails, petrol, ammonium nitrate, kinepak, gunpowder and detonating chords. With all the flammables mixed, they'd have a detonation velocity of 6300 meters per second – enough to blow up the vans' door overlap &

blast protection, the bullet proof glass and vertical panel protection. Their run-flat tires were a joke too.

They'd obliterated the Fidelity Security money trucks and Pretoria East Police Force with clinical precision. A tip off from inside the station had served them well. Isabel had had a month to plan it all. She knew the exact time and date of when the bank notes would be transported. She even had the names of the drivers, including their travel plans.

They'd rehearsed the assault like a theatre play; over and over again – Isabel as the stage director, produced by Spider.

She watched an injured policeman through her rifle scope. He was wounded, trying to reverse his vehicle. He tried to call on his radio at the same time, for back-up no doubt.

Issie fired one round, hitting him through the chest. Bullseye! Their little Teflon vests were useless against her imported rifles and ammo.

With only two men killed from her gang, it was Mission Accomplished!

Isabel hopped off the roof and moved in with her men, to the bakkies. Everyone knew the drill.

They stuffed the money cases in the back of Isabel's van, inside the canopy, where Spider's cousin sat waiting to disable the trackers.

They grabbed containers of paraffin and petrol from their vans and started pouring it on the cop cars - inside and out.

Frightened neighbours watched the spectacle through shut lace curtains. Some peered out cautiously, opening a crack to see.

'TWENTY SECONDS,' yelled Isabel, checking her watch – a limited edition Cartier gift from her dad. 'THEIR BACK-UP IS ON THE WAY,' she instructed, seeing Spider sparking a match and tossing it inside one of the police vans. It exploded ... roaring in rage, a rowdy red fiery flame blast.

Issie observed how much fun this all was for Uncle Spider. He loved every second of it – the adrenalin rush, dead bodies, smoke, shot-up vehicles, the ambush, the getaway... Spider was built for it. It was the reason her dad kept him near for so long. His loyalty, smarts and a tinge of madness made him precious to the team.'

They torched all the police vans.

'THAT'S A WRAP BOYS, LET'S GO!' Issie announced, jogging off to their hired Ford Everest SUV she'd arrived in, with Spider. She hopped on the passenger seat as Spider revved the engine up.

Using a laptop, his cousin worked his espionage tracker-disabling magic in the back.

They all got in their cars and raced down a small road over a bridge, which led to a dirt road towards Mamelodi. They drove in a convoy, via Santraland and Bapsfontein back roads, vigilant of cops.

They took their masks off, changed clothes and shoved it all in duffle-bags, with the guns.

'Shit's gonna be in the news boss,' said Spider with a wry smile, followed by a wink.

'Fucken right we're gonna be in the news,' Isabel responded proudly, momentarily sounding like a teenager. 'Dad's gonna get his heart, that's all that matters.'

'Exactly!' Spider concurred.

Isabel pulled her phone out and sent a text. The bumpy ride made it tough to write to the cardiologist: *Dr Sutherland, everythin is sorted. I'll deposit the whole fee 2morrow mornin. I'll book ur flights and accomodation 2night. Thanks, see u tomorrow - Issie.*

They sped through gravel at high speeds, pacing past small villages on the outskirts. The farms grounds were cinematic - bright green manicured gardens, beaming all around them.

Isabel watched an old man at a distance, leading sheep up a hill. Young boys played soccer with homemade plastic-wrapped balls.

They eventually drove out on the R25 towards Kempton Park. Luscious red wine farms surrounded them now as they sped past. The smell of grapes permeated the air. They drove straight to a deserted scrap yard in Elandsfontein, where they'd swap the hired bakkies for their own private cars.

It was an abandoned junk yard, owned by Issie's aunt, Martha. She was actually Donovan's cousin, but she'd always referred to herself as his sister.

Upon arrival, Spider hopped out and gave Aunt Martha a thick envelope. Isabel thanked and hugged her tightly, before hurrying to her black Porsche Cayenne.

The men moved the now tracker-free money from her bakkie to her luxury SUV.

They all left their masks, clothes and guns with Aunt Martha, in a pile, to be discarded.

It was time to disperse.

They'd all drive separately towards the Boksburg ... Alberton ... Johannesburg South side, in their own separate paces, before heading back home.

19h00pm:

A cheerful Issie drove up her dad's farm driveway. His armed guards roamed the land, waving at her. She drove past the horse stables, cattle kraals and gun range, to the main entrance.

Isabel parked and hopped out her car with a spring in her step. As she approached the door, she switched her phone mode back to *Sound*, suddenly realising that she had missed calls and texts. She'd attend to them later. First, she had good news for her dad – great in fact.

She rushed up the winding stairs and gently opened his bedroom door. 'Wakey wakey,' she whispered, stepping inside. The room was dark and cold, the curtains shut. The wooden floors creaked as she approached, careful not to startle him.

Don laid still on his back. He slept with his arms to his side like a soldier in a drill. He looked calm, his wobbly head dropped to one side.

'You're sleeping, Pops?' Isabel whispered, pulling a chair up. 'Everything's sorted. Dr Sutherland and his team are flying in with the organ tomorrow. You'll be good as new,' she rambled, noticing his odd complexion. She stood and straightened his head. 'Why aren't you sleeping on your side like you always do? Let me fix you up nicely on your pillow ...' As she spoke, she noticed that his chest wasn't raising and dropping as it should.

A chill ran through her; frightened now.

She turned to his heart monitor, ventricular assist device and ventilator. They were all off, packed away neatly.

'Fuck's going on here?' She let out. 'DAD! REBECCA COME IN HERE!' She yelled at the door, wondering where the hell his nurse was. 'COME HERE NOW!' She placed her finger under his nose, checking for breath. She slapped his cheek gently. 'You okay, dad? Wake up. I'm taking you to the hospital.' She watched him closely ... his deeply-set eye sockets ... his nose ... his forehead ... hairline ... chin... 'Dad wake up please. I've got news for you. REBECCA IF I HAVE TO CALL YOU AGAIN, I SWEAR TO GOD! GET THE FUCK IN HERE NOW!'

Her lips quivered, her heart racing now. She looked around for a jug of water. As she was about to call for his nurse again, a security guard popped his head inside the bedroom. 'Sorry Ms Isabel, Rebecca left a few hours ago. She said she's going out to meet you. Something about you two meeting up with Mr Donovan's doctor.'

'What? She said she's meeting me?'

'Yes ma'am.'

Her wheels spun, incoherently. She screwed her face, trying to make sense of it all. 'Rebecca said she's meeting *me*, today?'

'Yes madam. She had a kit bag. She said you asked her to bring some of your things. She was in a hurry. She caught an UBER and left,' he concluded, leaving.

*This idiot isn't making any sense*, thought Isabel. She pulled her phone out, seeing three missed calls from Rebecca Fourie. She'd left a text message:

*At about 5pm, Mr Donovan went into cardiac arrest, Madam. I tried to call u to see if I should call an ambulance, or drive him to the E.R. I couldn't revive him. I tried. I'm scared of seeing u during this sad time. I'm very sorry for ur loss. My condolences. Goodbye.*

Tears streamed down Isabel's cheeks as she read it a third and fourth time. *What has Rebecca done?* She thought, calling her phone number. It went straight to voicemail. Isabel tossed the phone against the wall, smashing it to pieces. Her whole body trembled.

Her dad wasn't moving. He laid dead as a doorknob, unconscious, cold.

Isabel struggled to breathe as she covered her mouth with both hands. 'Wake up, dad,' she said, opening his jaw now for mouth to mouth resuscitation, which she was clueless about. 'Come on, get up. We're going to the hospital.'

She pulled his spaghetti arms up. She wiped tears free-falling down her face. She broke into a sweat, trying to raise him up by the shoulder - nothing was working. 'Your heart's coming tomorrow, dad, with Sutherland. Let's go please.'

She eventually placed him back down, trying to catch her breath.

Her world spun. She pictured Rebecca in a pool of her own blood, drowning, gargling for help. She couldn't decide if she should call an ambulance or a mortuary? She took her tracksuit jacket off, trying to think. It was all happening too fast. 'HELP!' She yelled out to the guards outside.

She turned back to her father. 'Wake up, dad, please.'

The End.

By: Lukhanyo Sikwebu

