

A BEAUTIFUL PLACE TO DIE

A NOVEL

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A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nunn, Malla.

A beautiful place to die: a novel / by Malla Nunn.

p. cm.

1. Police—South Africa—Fiction. 2. Murder—Investigation—Fiction. 3. South Africa—Fiction. 4. South Africa—History—1909–1961—Fiction. I. Title.

PR9619.4.N86 2009

823'.92—dc22 2008025858

ISBN-13: 978-1-4165-8669-2

ISBN-10: 1-4165-8669-5

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For the Ancestors

A BEAUTIFUL PLACE TO DIE

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

SOUTH AFRICA, SEPTEMBER 1952.

DETEKTIVE SERGEANT EMMANUEL Cooper switched off the engine and looked out through the dirty windscreen. He was in deep country. To get deeper he'd have to travel back in time to the Zulu wars. Two Ford pickup trucks, a white Mercedes, and a police van parked to his right placed him in the twentieth century. Ahead of him a group of black farmworkers stood along a rise with their backs toward him. The hard line of their shoulders obscured what lay ahead.

In the crease of a hot green hill, a jumpy herd boy with fifteen skinny cows stared at the unusual scattering of people in the middle of nowhere. The farm was a genuine crime scene after all—not a hoax as district headquarters had thought. Emmanuel got out of the car and lifted his hat to a group of women and children sitting in the shade of a wild fig tree. A few of them politely nodded back, silent and fearful. Emmanuel checked for his notebook, his pen, and his handgun, mentally preparing for the job.

An old black man in tattered overalls stepped out from the band of shade cast by the police van. He approached with his cloth cap in his hand.

“You the baas from Jo’burg?” he asked.

“That’s me,” Emmanuel said. He locked the car and dropped the keys into his jacket pocket.

“Policeman says to go to the river.” The old man pointed a bony finger in the direction of the farmworkers standing along the ridge. “You must come with me, please, ma’ baas.”

The old man led the way. Emmanuel followed and the farmworkers turned at his approach. He drew closer to them and scanned the row of faces to try to gauge the mood. Beneath their silence he sensed fear.

“You must go there, ma’ baas.” The old man indicated a narrow path that snaked through tall grass to the banks of a wide, shining river.

Emmanuel nodded his thanks and walked down the dirt trail. A breeze rustled the underbrush and a pair of bullfinches flew up. He smelled damp earth and crushed grass. He wondered what waited for him.

At the bottom of the path he came to the edge of the river and looked across to the far side. A stretch of low veldt shimmered under clear skies. In the distance a

mountain range broke the horizon into jagged blue peaks. Pure Africa. Just like the photos in English magazines that talked up the benefits of migration.

Emmanuel began a slow walk of the riverbank. Ten paces along he saw the body.

Within reach of the river's edge, a man floated facedown with his arms spread out like a parachute diver in free fall. Emmanuel clocked the police uniform instantly. A captain. Wide shouldered and big boned with blond hair cut close to the skull. Small silver fish danced around what looked like a bullet wound in the head and another gash torn into the middle of the man's broad back. A thicket of reeds held the body fast against the current.

A blood-stiffened blanket and an overturned lantern with a burned-out wick marked a fishing spot. Bait worms had spilled from a jam can and dried on the coarse sand.

Emmanuel's heart hammered in his rib cage. He'd been sent out solo on the murder of a white police captain.

"You the detective?" The question, in Afrikaans, had the tone of a surly boy addressing the new schoolmaster.

Emmanuel turned to face a lanky teenager in a police uniform. A thick leather belt anchored the blue cotton pants and jacket to the boy's narrow hips. Wisps of downy hair grew along his jawline. The National Party policy of hiring Afrikaners into public service had reached the countryside.

"I'm Detective Sergeant Emmanuel Cooper." He held out his hand. "Are you the policeman in charge of this case?"

The boy flushed. "Ja, I'm Constable Hansie Hepple. Lieutenant Uys is on holiday in Mozambique for two more days and Captain Pretorius...well...he's...he's gone."

They looked over at the captain, swimming in the waters of eternity. A dead white hand waved at them from the shallows.

"Did you find the body, Constable Hepple?" Emmanuel asked.

"No." The Afrikaner youth teared up. "Some kaffir boys from the location found the captain this morning...he's been out here all night."

Emmanuel waited until Hansie got control of himself. "Did you call the Detective Branch in?"

"I couldn't get a phone line to district headquarters," the boy policeman explained. "I told my sister to try till she got through. I didn't want to leave the captain by himself."

A knot of three white men stood farther up the riverbank and took turns drinking from a battered silver flask. They were big and meaty, the kind of men who would pull their own wagons across the veldt long after the oxen were dead.

Emmanuel motioned toward the group. "Who are they?"

"Three of the captain's sons."

"How many sons does the captain have?" Emmanuel imagined the mother, a wide-hipped woman who gave birth between baking bread and hanging up the laundry.

"Five sons. They're a good family. True volk."

The young policeman dug his hands into his pockets and kicked a stone across the bank with his steel-capped boot. Eight years after the beaches of Normandy and the ruins of Berlin, there was still talk of folk-spirit and race purity out on the African plains.

Emmanuel studied the murdered captain's sons. They were true Afrikaners, all right. Muscled blonds plucked straight from the victory at the Battle of Blood River and glorified on the walls of the Voortrekker Monument. The captain's boys broke from their huddle and walked toward him.

Images from Emmanuel's childhood flickered to life. Boys with skin white as mother's milk from the neck down and the elbow up. Noses skewed from fights with friends, the Indians, the English, or the coloured boys cheeky enough to challenge their place at the top.

The brothers came within shoving distance of Emmanuel and stopped. Boss Man, the largest of the brothers, stood in front. The Enforcer stood to his right with his jaw clenched. Half a step behind, the third brother stood ready to take orders from up the chain of command.

"Where's the rest of the squad?" Boss Man demanded in rough-edged English. "Where are your men?"

"I'm it," Emmanuel said. "There is no one else."

"You joking me?" The Enforcer added finger pointing to the exchange. "A police captain is murdered and Detective Branch send out one lousy detective?"

"I shouldn't be out here alone," Emmanuel conceded. A dead white man demanded a team of detectives. A dead white policeman: a whole division. "The information headquarters received was unclear. There was no mention of the victim's race, sex, or occupation—"

The Enforcer cut across the explanation. "You have to do better than that."

Emmanuel chose to focus on the Boss Man.

"I was working the Preston murder case. The white couple shot in their general store," he said. "We tracked the killer to his parents' farm, an hour west of here, and made an arrest. Major van Niekerk called and asked me to check a possible homicide —"

"Possible homicide'?" The Enforcer wasn't about to be sidelined. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means the operator who logged the call got one useful piece of information from the caller—the name of the town, Jacob's Rest. That was all we had to work with."

He didn't mention the word "hoax."

"If that's true," the Enforcer said, "how did you get here? This isn't Jacob's Rest, it's Old Voster's Farm."

"An African man waved me off the main road, then another one showed me to the river," Emmanuel explained, and the brothers shared a puzzled look. They had no idea what he was talking about.

"Can't be." The Boss Man spoke directly to the boy constable. "You told them a police captain had been murdered, hey, Hansie?"

The teenager scuttled behind Emmanuel. His breathing was ragged in the sudden quiet.

"Hansie..." The Enforcer smelled blood. "What did you tell them?"

"I..." The boy's voice was muffled. "I told Gertie she must say everything. She must explain how it was."

"Gertie... Your twelve-year-old sister made the call?"

“I couldn’t get a line,” Hansie complained. “I tried...”

“Domkop.” The Boss Man stepped to the side, in order to get a clear swing at Hansie. “You really that stupid?”

The brothers moved forward in a hard line, cabbage-sized fists at the ready. The constable grabbed a handful of Emmanuel’s jacket and burrowed close to his shoulder.

Emmanuel stood his ground and kept eye contact with the head brother. “Giving Constable Hepple a smack or two will make you feel better, but you can’t do it here. This is a crime scene and I need to start work.”

The Pretorius boys stopped. Their focus shifted to the body of their father floating in the clear water of the river.

Emmanuel stepped into the silence and held out his hand. “Detective Sergeant Emmanuel Cooper. I’m sorry for the loss of your father.”

“Henrick,” the Boss Man said, and Emmanuel felt his hand disappear into a fleshy paw. “This here is Johannes and Erich, my brothers.”

The younger brothers nodded a greeting, wary of the city detective in the pressed suit and green-striped tie. In Jo’burg he looked smart and professional. On the veldt with men who smelled of dirt and diesel fuel, he was out of place.

“Constable Hepple says there are five of you.” He returned the brothers’ stares and noticed the areas of redness around their eyes and noses.

“Louis is at home with our ma. He’s too young to see this.” Henrick took a swig from the flask and turned away to hide his tears.

Erich, the Enforcer, stepped forward. “The army is letting Paul out on compassionate leave. He’ll be home tomorrow or the day after.”

“What unit is he in?” Emmanuel asked, curious in spite of himself. Six years out of service and his own trousers and shirtsleeves were still ironed sharp enough to please a sergeant major. The army had discharged him, but it hadn’t let him go.

“Paul’s in intelligence,” Henrick said, now flushed pink from the brandy.

Emmanuel calculated the odds that brother Paul belonged to the old guard of the intelligence corps—the one that broke fingers and smashed heads to extract information. Exactly the kind you didn’t want hanging around an orderly murder investigation.

He checked the brothers’ posture, the slack shoulders and unclenched hands, and decided to take control of the situation while he had a moment to do so. He was on his own with no backup and there was a murder to solve. He started with the classic opener guaranteed to raise a response from idiots and geniuses alike:

“Can you think of anyone who would do this to your father?”

“No. No one,” Henrick answered with absolute certainty. “My father was a good man.”

“Even good men have enemies. Especially a police captain.”

“Pa might have got on the wrong side of some people, but nothing serious,” Erich insisted. “People respected him. No one who knew him could do this.”

“An outsider, is your guess?”

“Smugglers use this stretch of river to go in and out of Mozambique,” Henrick said. “Weapons, liquor, even Commie pamphlets, they all come into the country when no one is looking.”

Johannes spoke for the first time. “We think Pa maybe surprised some criminal

crossing over into SA.”

“A lowlife bringing in cigarettes or whiskey stolen off the docks in Lorenzo Marques.” Erich took the flask from Henrick. “Some kaffir with nothing to lose.”

“That casts the net pretty wide,” Emmanuel said, and studied the full length of the riverbank. Farther upstream, an older black man in a heavy wool coat and khaki uniform sat in the patchy shade of an indoni tree. Two frightened black boys nestled close to him.

“Who’s that?” he asked.

“Shabalala,” Henrick answered. “He’s a policeman, too. He’s half Zulu, half Shangaan. Pa said the Shangaan part could track any animal, and the Zulu part was sure to kill it.”

The Pretorius brothers smiled at the captain’s old explanation.

Hansie stepped up eagerly. “Those are the boys who found the body, Detective Sergeant. They told Shabalala and he rode into town and told us.”

“I’d like to hear what they have to say.”

Hansie pulled a whistle from his breast pocket and blew a shrill note. “Constable Shabalala. Bring the boys. Make it fast.”

Shabalala rose slowly to his full height, over six feet, and made his way toward them. The boys followed in the shadow he cast. Emmanuel watched Shabalala approach and instantly realized that he must have been the policeman who’d set up the series of native men to guide him to the crime scene.

“Quick, man!” Hansie called out. “You see that, Detective Sergeant? You tell them to hurry and this is what you get.”

Emmanuel pressed his fingers into the ridge of bone above his left eye socket where a headache stirred. The country light, free from industrial haze, was bright as a blowtorch on his retina.

“Detective Sergeant Cooper, this is Constable Samuel Shabalala.” Hansie performed the introductions in his best grown-up voice. “Shabalala, this detective has come all the way from Jo’burg to help us find out who killed the captain. You must tell him everything you know like a good man, okay?”

Shabalala, a few heads taller and a decade or two older than any of the white men in front of him, nodded and shook Emmanuel’s outstretched hand. His face, calm as a lake, gave nothing away. Emmanuel made eye contact, and saw nothing but his own reflection in the dark brown eyes.

“The detective is an Englishman.” Henrick spoke directly to Shabalala. “You must use English, okay?”

Emmanuel turned to the brothers, who stood in a semicircle behind him.

“You need to move back twenty paces while I question the boys,” he said. “I’ll call you when we’re ready to move your pa.”

Henrick grunted and the brothers moved away. Emmanuel waited until they reformed their huddle before continuing.

He crouched down to the boys’ level. “Uno bani wena?” he asked Shabalala.

Shabalala’s eyes widened in surprise, then he joined Emmanuel at child height and gently touched each boy on the shoulder in turn. Continuing in Zulu, he answered Emmanuel’s question. “This one is Vusi and this one is Butana, the little brother.”

The boys looked about eleven and nine years old, with close-shaven heads and

enormous brown eyes. Their rounded stomachs pushed out their frayed shirts.

“I’m Emmanuel. I’m a policeman from Jo’burg. You are brave boys. Can you tell me what happened?”

Butana held his hand up and waited to be called on.

“Yebo?” Emmanuel prompted.

“Please, baas.” Butana’s finger twisted through a hole at the front of his shirt. “We came here fishing.”

“Where did you come from?”

“Our mother’s house at the location,” the older boy said. “We came when it was just light because baas Voster doesn’t like us to fish at this place.”

“Voster says the natives steal the fish,” Hansie said, and crouched down to join the action.

Emmanuel ignored him. “How did you get to the river?” he asked.

“We came down from that path there.” Vusi pointed past the blanket and lantern that lay on the sand to a narrow pathway that disappeared into the lush veldt.

“We came to here and I saw there was a white man in the water,” Butana said. “It was Captain Pretorius. Dead.”

“What did you do?” Emmanuel asked.

“We ran.” Vusi rubbed one palm against the other to make a swishing sound. “Fast, fast. No stopping.”

“You went home?”

“No, baas.” Vusi shook his head. “We came to the policeman’s house and told what we saw.”

“What time?” Emmanuel asked Shabalala.

“It was past six o’clock in the morning,” the black policeman said.

“They just know what time it is,” Hansie supplied helpfully. “They don’t need clocks the way we do.”

Blacks in South Africa needed so little. A little less every day was the general rule. The job of detective was one of the few not subject to policies forbidding contact between different races. Detectives uncovered the facts, presented the brief, and gave evidence in court to support the case. White, black, coloured, or Indian, murder was a capital offense no matter what race the offender belonged to.

Emmanuel spoke to the older boy. “Did you see or hear anything strange when you came down to the river this morning?”

“The unusual thing was the body of the captain in the water,” said Vusi.

“What about you?” Emmanuel asked the smaller boy. “You notice anything different? Besides the captain in the water?”

“Nothing,” the little brother said.

“When you saw the body, did you think of anyone you know who could have hurt Captain Pretorius?”

The boys considered the question for a moment, their brown eyes wide with concentration.

Vusi shook his head. “No. I thought only that today was not a good day to go fishing.”

Emmanuel smiled.

“You both did a very good thing by telling Constable Shabalala what you saw.

You will make fine policemen one day.”

Vusi’s chest puffed out with pride, but his little brother’s eyes filled with tears.

“What’s the matter?” Emmanuel asked.

“I do not want to be a policeman, nkosana,” the small boy said. “I want to be a schoolteacher.”

The terror that came with discovering the body had finally surfaced in the little witness. Shabalala laid a hand on the crying boy’s shoulder and waited for the signal to dismiss the boys. Emmanuel nodded.

“To be a schoolteacher, first you must go to school,” the black policeman said, and waved to one of the farmworkers standing on the ridge. “Musa will take you home.”

Shabalala walked the boys past the Pretorius brothers to a man standing at the top of the path. The man waved the boys up toward him.

Emmanuel studied the riverbank. The green spring veldt and wide sky filled his vision. He pulled out his notebook and wrote the word “pleasing” because it was the first thing to come to his mind when he examined the wider elements of the scene.

There would have been a moment just after the blanket was spread and the lantern turned to full light when the captain would have looked out over the river and felt a sense of joy at this place. He might have even been smiling when the bullet struck.

“Well?” It was Erich, still put out by being moved away from the questioning. “Did you get anything?”

“No,” Emmanuel said. “Nothing.”

“The only reason we haven’t taken Pa home,” Henrick said, “is because he would have wanted us to follow the rules...”

“But if you’re not getting anything,” Erich said, his short fuse lit, “there’s no reason for us to stand here like anthills when we could be helping Pa.”

The wait for the big-city detective to work the scene had taken a toll on the brothers. Emmanuel knew that they were battling the urge to turn the captain faceup so he could get some air.

“I’ll take a look at the blanket, then we’ll take your father back to town straight after,” Emmanuel said when Shabalala rejoined the group. “Hepple and Shabalala, you’re with me.”

They leaned in close to the bloodstained blanket. The material was coarse gray, scratchy, and comfortable as a sheet of corrugated iron to sit on. Every outdoor event, farm truck, and braai came with blankets just like this one.

Blood had dried rust-brown on the fabric and spilled over the blanket’s edge into the sand. Deep lines, broken at irregular intervals, led from the blanket to the river’s edge. The captain had been shot, then dragged to the water and dumped. No mean feat.

“What do you make of this?” Emmanuel pointed to the blood-stiffened material.

“Let’s see.” Hansie came forward. “The captain came fishing, the way he did every week, and someone shot him.”

“Yes, Hepple, those are the facts.” Emmanuel glanced at Shabalala. If the captain was right, the Shangaan part of the silent black man would see more than the obvious. “Well?”

The black policeman hesitated.

“Tell me what you think happened,” Emmanuel said, aware of Shabalala’s reluctance to show up Hansie’s poor grasp of the situation.

“The captain was shot here on the blanket, then pulled over the sand to the water. But the killer, he’s not strong.”

“How’s that?”

“He had to rest many times.” Shabalala pointed to the shallow indentations that broke the line as it ran from the blanket to the water. “This is the mark of the captain’s boots. Here is where his body was put down. Here was his head.”

In the hollow lay a dried pool of blood and a matted tuft of blond hair. The indentations appeared closer and closer together, the pools of blood larger, as the killer stopped to catch his breath more often.

“Somebody wanted to make sure the captain wasn’t coming back,” Emmanuel muttered. “Are you sure he didn’t have any enemies?”

“None,” Hansie answered without hesitation. “Captain got on good with everyone, even the natives, hey, Shabalala?”

“Yebo,” the black constable said. He stared at the evidence, which said otherwise.

“Some places have trouble between the groups. Not here,” Hansie insisted. “A stranger must have done this. Someone from outside.”

There wasn’t much to go on yet. If it had been a crime of passion, the murderer might have made mistakes: no alibi, murder weapon hidden in an obvious place, blood left to dry on shoelaces...if the murder was premeditated, then only careful police work would catch the killer. Outsider or insider, it took guts to kill a white police captain.

“Comb the riverbank,” he instructed Hansie. “Walk as far as the path where the boys climbed up. Go slowly. If you find anything out of the ordinary, don’t touch it. Call me.”

“Yes, sir.” Hansie set off like a Labrador.

Emmanuel scoped the scene. The captain’s killer had dragged the body to the water without dropping a thing.

“Did he have enemies?” he asked Shabalala.

“The bad people did not like him, but the good people did.” The black man’s face betrayed nothing.

“What do you really think happened here?”

“It rained this morning. Many of the marks have been washed away.”

Emmanuel wasn’t buying. “Tell me anyway.”

“Captain was kneeling and facing this way.” Shabalala pointed in the direction Hansie had gone. “A man’s boot prints come here from behind. One bullet in the head, captain fell. Then a second bullet in the back.”

A boot print with deep, straight grooves was pressed into the sand.

“How the hell did the killer manage a clean shot in the dark?” Emmanuel asked.

“It was a full moon last night and bright. The lantern was also burning.”

“How many people can take a shot like that even in broad daylight?”

“Many,” the black policeman said. “The white men learn to shoot guns at their club. Captain Pretorius and his sons have won many trophies.” Shabalala thought for a moment. “Mrs. Pretorius has also won many.”

Emmanuel again pressed his left eye socket where the headache was beginning.

He'd landed in a town of sharpshooting inbred Afrikaner farmers.

"Where did the killer go after dumping the body?"

"The river." Shabalala walked to the edge of the water and pointed to where the captain's heel marks and the killer's footprints disappeared into the flow.

A clump of bulrushes with the stems snapped back lay on the opposite bank. A narrow path trailed off into the bushlands.

"The killer came out there?" He pointed to the trampled rushes.

"I think so."

"Whose farm is that?" Emmanuel asked, and felt a familiar surge of adrenaline—the excitement of the first lead in a new case. They could track the killer to his door and finish this today. With luck he'd be back in Jo'burg for the weekend.

"No farm," came the reply. "Mozambique."

"You sure, man?"

"Yebo. Mo. Zam. Bique." Shabalala repeated the name, long and slow, so there was no mistake. The syllables emphasized that across the bank was another country with its own laws and its own police force.

Emmanuel and Shabalala stood side by side and looked across the water for a long while. Five minutes on the opposite shore might give up a clue that could break open the case. Emmanuel did a quick calculation. If he was caught across the border, he'd spend the next two years checking ID passes at whites-only public toilets. Even Major van Niekerk, a canny political animal with connections to burn, couldn't fix up a bungled visit across the border.

He turned to face South Africa and concentrated on the evidence in front of him. The neatness of the scene and the sniper-like targeting of the victim's head and spine indicated a cool and methodical hand. The location of the body was also a deliberate choice. Why take the time to drag it to the water when it could have been left on the sand?

The brother's smuggler theory didn't hold water, either. Why wouldn't the smuggler cross farther upstream and avoid all that attention and trouble? Not only that, why would he compromise his path between borders by murdering a white man?

"Did the killer come out of the river?" Emmanuel asked.

The Zulu policeman shook his head. "When I came here the herd boys and their oxen had been to the river to drink. If the tracks were here, they are gone now."

"Detective Sergeant," Hansie said, walking toward them, pink skin flushed with exertion.

"Anything?"

"Nothing but sand, Detective Sergeant."

The dead man floated in the river. A spring rain, gentle as mist, began to fall.

"Let's get the captain," Emmanuel said.

"Yebo."

Sadness flickered across the black man's face for a moment and then it was gone.

THE COFFEE WAS hot and black and spiked with enough brandy to dull the ache in Emmanuel's muscles. A full hour after going in to retrieve the captain, the men from the riverbank were back at the cars, shoulders and legs twitching with fatigue. Extracting the body from the crime scene proved to be only slightly easier than pulling a Sherman tank out of the mud.

"Koeksister?" asked old Voster's wife, a toad-faced woman with thinning gray hair.

"Thank you." Emmanuel took a sticky pastry and leaned back against the Packard.

He looked around at the gathering of people and vehicles. Two black maids poured fresh coffee and handed out dry towels while a group of farmworkers tended the fire for the hot water and milk. The wheelchair-bound Voster and his family, a son and two daughters, were deep in conversation with the Pretorius brothers while a pack of sinewy Rhodesian ridgebacks sniffed the ground at their feet. Black and white children ran zigzag together between the cars in a noisy game of hide-and-seek. The captain lay in the back of the police van wrapped in clean white sheets.

Emmanuel drained his coffee and approached the Pretorius brothers. The investigation needed to move forward fast. All they had so far was a dead body and a killer walking free in Mozambique.

"Time to go," Emmanuel said. "We'll take the captain to hospital, get the doctor to look him over."

"We're taking him home," Henrick stated flatly. "My ma's waited long enough to see him."

Emmanuel felt the force of the brothers as they turned their gaze on him. He held their stare and absorbed the tension and rage, now doubly fueled by alcohol and fatigue.

"We need a medical opinion on the time and the cause of death. And a signed death certificate. It's standard police procedure."

"Are you blind as well as fucking deaf?" Erich said. "You need a doctor to tell you he was shot? What kind of detective are you, Detective?"

"I'm the kind of detective that solves cases, Erich. That's why Major van Niekerk sent me. Would you rather we left it to him?"

He motioned to the fire where Hansie sat cross-legged, a plate of Koeksisters on

his knees. The thin sound of his humming carried through the air as he selected another sweet pastry.

“We won’t agree to a doctor cutting him up like a beast,” Henrick said. “He’s God’s creature, even if his spirit has departed his body. Pa would never have agreed to it and we won’t either.”

True Afrikaners and religious with it. Wars started with less fuel. The Pretorius boys were ready to take up arms for their beliefs. Time to tread carefully. He was out on his own with no backup and no partner. Some access to the body was better than none at all.

“No autopsy,” Emmanuel said. “Just an examination to determine time and cause of death. The captain would have agreed to that much, I’m sure.”

“Ja, okay,” Erich said, and the aggression drained from him.

“Tell your ma we’ll get him home as soon as possible. Constable Shabalala and I will take care of him.”

Henrick handed over the keys to the police van, which he’d found in the captain’s pocket when they hauled him out of the river.

“Hansie and Shabalala will show you the way to the hospital and then to our parents’ place. Take too long and my brothers and I will come looking for you, Detective.”

Emmanuel checked the rearview mirror of the police van and saw Hansie following in the Packard with Shabalala’s bike lashed to the roof. The boy was good behind the wheel, tight and confident. If the killer was a race car driver, Emmanuel noted, Hansie might get a chance to earn his pay packet on the police force, possibly for the first time.

The vehicles entered the town of Jacob’s Rest on Piet Retief Street, the town’s only tarred road. A little way down, they turned onto a dirt road and drove past a series of low-slung buildings grouped together under a haze of purple jacaranda trees. Shabalala directed Emmanuel into a circular drive lined with whitewashed stones. He paused at the front entrance to the Grace of God Hospital.

Crude icon images of Christ on the Cross were carved into the two front doors. Emmanuel and Shabalala slipped out of the police van and stood on either side of the filthy bonnet. Mud-splattered and sweat-stained, they carried the smell of bad news about them.

“What now?” Emmanuel asked Shabalala. It was almost noon and the captain was doing a slow roast in the back of the police van.

The doors to the hospital swung open and a large steam engine of a black woman in a nun’s habit appeared on the top stair. Another nun, pale skinned and tiny as a bantam hen, stepped up beside her. The sisters stared out from the shade cast by their headdresses.

“Sisters.” Emmanuel lifted his hat, like a hobo practicing good manners. “I’m Detective Sergeant Emmanuel Cooper. You know the other policemen, I’m sure.”

“Of course, of course.” The tiny white nun fluttered down the stairs, followed by her solid black shadow. “I’m Sister Bernadette and this is Sister Angelina. Please forgive our surprise. How may we be of service, Detective Cooper?”