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Johannesburg, November 2007

The highway was a sea of broken glass. Rain sluiced down, brilliant in the glare of headlights from the waiting cars. Spitting water, Nick hunched his shoulders against the downpour. He ducked his head as a soaking gust of wind buffeted him back towards the crumpled vehicle on the road.

He gripped the handles of the stretcher, his tight latex gloves slick with water. Behind him he felt Laki, the ambulance driver, stabilise the load.

Laki shouted something. The pounding of rain on metal drowned out his voice, but Nick thought he recognised the words ‘underwater rescue’.

‘True enough,’ he called back, splashing towards the red lights of the ambulance parked nearby.

Inside, the fumes of disinfectant and diesel overpowered the fresh smell of the storm. He shunted the stretcher into position, strapped a blood pressure cuff on his patient, and hooked her up to the ECG monitor.

The young woman was conscious but dazed. Her legs, bare and vulnerable under her short denim skirt, had been crushed by the engine block. Working with difficulty in the car’s cramped and dripping interior, the two paramedics had moved the seat back and somehow managed to free her. The shattered bones were now supported by splints, the lacerated skin covered by the dressings and pressure pads that he had hastily applied while the rain poured into the car through the gaping, glass-rimmed hole where the windscreen had once been. The white fabric was sodden with water from the outside, already soaked with blood from within. Her pulse was rapid, her blood pressure low. Too low. He was worried about internal bleeding. They needed to get moving.

He turned back to Laki. ‘Let’s go.’

‘And the driver?’ The black paramedic spread his hands.

Nick shook his head. He glanced at the cluster of headlights behind them. Lightning illuminated the scene, flashing against a million raindrops in sharp, white-hot detail. In better weather, they would have had more help than they could use. Now, in the small hours of a stormy Sunday morning, the few people that were waiting on the blocked highway were locked up tight inside their vehicles, wipers flicking and heaters blasting warm air at the fogging glass.

Wreckage littered the tarmac. The car had followed a long, skidding, tumbling path, and the girl had been the only occupant when they arrived. The driver could have been flung out, over the flattened barrier rail and into the dense vegetation below the highway. He – or she – could be lying in the bushy strip between the north and southbound lanes. Or crumpled somewhere in the darkness beyond. Laki had sprinted down the road and back again with a torch while Nick was busy bandaging the girl, but he hadn't found a body.

The two men were drenched and shivering in spite of their waterproofs. Now they were out of time.

'Tell the control room to radio the police, let them know. Call out another ambulance. And ask those tow-truck drivers over there to take a look.' Nick indicated the two pickups that were parked near the wreckage, reminding him of vultures perched beside a carcass.

He swung the back door shut and slid onto the bench beside the girl. The ambulance lurched forward and he heard Laki shouting out instructions to the tow-truck drivers. Then they were on their way.

In shock, the girl was shivering. Her red halter-neck top was soaked, her slender arms pimply with gooseflesh. Nick turned up the heater as high as it would go and covered her with a blanket. Water trickled from his hair, rolled down his neck. He wiped his face on his shoulder and tried not to drip on her.

'How's the pain?' he asked. 'Morphine working?'

Bracing himself against the van's swaying motion as it rounded a corner, he checked her vital signs. She blinked, her gaze darting from left to right, eyes wide and frightened. Her view was limited because she was immobilised by a body brace, a spider harness and two red head-blocks.

Then she focused on him and spoke, her voice high and clear. A little-girl voice that made her sound even younger than she looked.

'My boyfriend. He was driving. Where is he?'

Nick gazed at her in sympathy. The absent driver was almost certainly dead.

'He was thrown out when your car rolled. The cops are looking for him, and we've got another ambulance on the way.'

'Please find him.'

'We'll do our best.'

'Will I be safe?'

He didn't understand the question, so he simply nodded reassuringly

and asked, 'Was it just the two of you in the car?'

'Yes.'

'What's your name?'

'Natasha.' Was her voice weakening? He rechecked her blood pressure. Down again. Checked the pulse oximeter on her index finger. Her oxygen level was at ninety-three per cent. Not great, but not life-threatening – yet.

'Am I badly hurt?' she asked. 'Will I be ok?'

Nick gave his standard reassuring response. 'You'll be fine.'

He hoped this confident prognosis was true. He forced the images of double amputation and wheelchair confinement out of his mind. She'd been a passenger, probably on the way home from a club or a party. She hadn't done anything wrong, apart from getting in the car with an irresponsible arsehole who, judging by the speed at which they must have crashed, had surely been drunk or high.

'What are you doing?' She squinted downwards, trying to see.

'I'm putting another IV drip into your arm so we can get some fluids into you.'

Hurry up, Laki, he pleaded silently. The stretcher rattled as the ambulance went over a speed bump. Natasha's eyelids fluttered shut. Moisture beaded her temples. Cold sweat, not rain. He gently wiped it away.

Then her eyes flew open again, and her arms jerked sideways, pulling against the straps that held her still. Nick caught her wrists before she could dislodge any of the equipment he'd attached to her.

'My cellphone. Where is it?'

'In my pocket.' It had been in her hand when he'd reached her. She'd been clutching it so tightly he'd had difficulty prying her fingers away. 'I'll leave it with you at the hospital.'

'If I don't make it ...'

'You'll be ok.' Another standard response.

She mumbled something. He leaned closer.

'Please. Help me. Take the phone. Call him.'

'Call who?'

She stared up at him, wide-eyed, pleading. 'Khani. Last number dialled.'

'I have to hand your phone in when we reach the hospital.'

They were heading for Sandton Medi-Clinic. Perhaps five minutes away now, he guessed.

'No. Please. You must speak. To him. Tonight. So urgent.'

Nick wanted to tell her that she'd be fine, that the phone would be with

her in hospital and she could call him herself. But looking at her greying face, he found the words wouldn't come.

Keeping patients' personal belongings was strictly against the rules, but if he refused, she would only become more anxious.

He nodded. 'Yes, I can do that.'

'Tell him. To go ...' She paused and her eyelids flickered again. Her lips were colourless, her respiration shallow and rapid. The oximeter's reading had dropped to eighty-nine.

'Here, I'm putting this oxygen mask on you. Just relax and breathe for a minute. Then I'll take it off and you can talk.'

While she breathed, he attached a second litre of fluid to the iv line.

The ambulance swayed around another corner. They must be close now. The drumming on the roof was as violent as ever, reminding him of a typical highveld afternoon thunderstorm. Except these storm clouds wouldn't clear in the glorious blaze of the setting sun. They would fester in the night sky, pelting cold rain down into a grey and birdless dawn. The start of a grim Sunday.

The girl's eyes fluttered and then shut. Her mouth went slack.

'Natasha,' he said loudly.

No response. She was still breathing, but no longer conscious.

He'd seen people survive after accidents that should have left them dead and others who'd died after sustaining only minor injuries. Sometimes it seemed to come down to the will to live. He could see this girl was a fighter, but perhaps not one strong enough. By the time the ambulance pulled to a halt outside the hospital, her blood pressure was critical. They lifted her out and wheeled her to emergency at a run. Nick watched the stretcher disappear down the corridor, having no idea whether she would live or die.