

Pitbull

Deflo

“How you gonna do it?” Delaedt muttered, drunken eyes glistening.

The heavyset man next to him emptied his glass in one gulp and angled it smack in the middle on the coaster. Cold. That’s how it seemed. Cold and smooth as the surface of the glass. A hurricane couldn’t rend his composure. The barstool creaked meekly as he swiveled his waist, lips curled.

“I thought we didn’t know each other.”

Delaedt’s reply was an idiot’s grin. He burped into his hand and looked the other way. Glasses behind the bar formed one continuous gleaming line, like the cut of a razor sharp knife. The bartender wiped down the counter at the other end of the bar.

“I’m gonna slit her throat, that woman of yours. Ssssst. Slit it!” hissed Delaedt, a careless slur from all the booze. He mimicked slicing his throat with his finger, his elbow bumping the rim of his beer mug. He just stopped it from tipping over. Clasp his hands around the glass he stared between his thumbs at the beer and motioned a twist with his wrists. “No. I’m gonna strangle her.” His drooling tongue slid out between his lips. ‘I’m gonna wring her neck.’

“Ok. Deal. Me tomorrow. You, the day after. Bartender?” Before Delaedt knew what happened, a fifty lay on the countertop. “Keep the change.”

Jimmy the bartender, a pimply-faced dolt with shabby jeans and a different shirt for every night, took the bill and saluted against his temple with it. He tossed his towel in the sink and with utmost disinterest stacked stools onto tabletops. The door slammed shut. That was that. A too brief exchange. He was gone.

“The day after t’orrow,” Delaedt mumbled groggily, and downed the dregs of his brew. When he staggered to the door he felt it, the mocking stare of the bartender. He didn’t have the presence of mind or strength to react.

Except for an intimate group of chatting students, Fish Market Square was empty. The other guy was gone, vanished into thin air, as if he never existed. Benjamin Delaedt felt proverbially slapped in the face. His head spun. Good thing it was cold to help sober himself. Delaedt rolled up his collar, buried his hands deep in the pockets of his coat, and walked with small measured steps to his car.

Hopefully, there aren’t any alcohol checkpoints, the thought appeared through foggy veils of booze in his mind. As for the other thing, his pact with the devil, he didn’t want to think about that. Not for the time being. The alcohol checkpoints for New Year’s period hadn’t started yet. The odds of not getting busted were in his favor. That’s what was important. The one thing that mattered right now. It was an encouraging thought.

Melody Mutola was a bit tipsy. As they turned the corner she nestled her head on the shoulder of the man who was gallant enough to accompany her home. She could feel his shoulder muscles tense and furtively studied the contours of his face in the light of the street lamps. Blank. Emotionless. The face of a drone, lost in routine, on his way to a pointless job every fucking morning. She wondered. Maybe she'd been wrong back at the bar. Maybe she had completely misinterpreted his enthusiastic signals and he was just being polite.

Surely, that's why he offered to take her home in this empty city full of cramped alleyways where danger lurked in half-hidden shadows. Melody's eyes stole across the street where the silhouettes of a solitary walker and his little dog were outlined razor-sharp against the façade.

The attractive Senegalese woman almost laughed. These white men. All the same. Hardly ever straight to the point. What they really thought ... you could only guess.

He wasn't really that good looking but he had "something". Hard to describe. Strength? That was it. He radiated strength and vitality even though he was already around 45, some ten years older than herself.

He wasn't wearing a wedding ring. That was promising.

Lost in his thoughts, almost on automatic pilot, he wanted to keep on walking, but Melody pinched his arm and gestured to one of many adjoining houses on the street. She felt his surprise and smiled her flawless pearly whites.

"I live here."

The man stared straight ahead, very serious looking, as if weighing and measuring his words and calculating his next move.

"Thanks. Goodnight then," the quick to laugh Senegalese woman giggled, momentarily lightening the mood. She shivered. She couldn't lighten the icy cold. Maybe it was more than the cold that made her shiver.

The man nodded absently, struggling with himself. When Melody gave him a beaming smile he seemed to defrost. He timidly stroked his bottom lip.

Melody untangled her arm and walked a little in front of him. Not without ulterior motives. She was well aware the effect her endless legs had, further accentuated by her swaying hips. Her spiked heels added a hint of allure. She granted her appetizing bottom the credit it deserved. White women had that pretty pink flesh, straight hair and what not, but goddamn! they had no ass to compete with. What those skinny little white chicks lacked in their genes filled out Melody's jeans to perfection.

Nope, the Senegalese knew perfectly what her strengths were. Despite these tasty aspects however, and her respectable job - secretary in a fast growing IT company - she hadn't met herself a good man. The occasional fling, sure. Usually with a married man promising her heaven and earth. But, abandoning his family for a "black girl"? No way. She was tired of scouring nightclubs. Getting too old for it. And finding a partner in the African community? Thanks, but no thanks. Not in her darkest hour.

When she put the key into the lock Melody thought this silent figure was probably married too. Just looking for a quick and safe fuck with a sexy black chick. Preferably one that takes the initiative. So European. Really, she was bored with married men. Always on their guard. Even during lovemaking they seemed cautious when they came. A pity.

Melody ogled him one last time, batted her eyelashes and curled the sweetest smile. The solemn man didn't sway at all to her charms.

Despite his strong and somewhat rough disposition, his eyes shifted uneasily. Not a good sign. He wasn't on his guard, though. Rather tentative. He didn't hit the road either. Nor was he constantly checking his watch. That was a good sign.

What do I even know about him, Mutola asked herself. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Maybe that's not necessary.

He stayed rooted there, a few steps away. No hint of movement. It gave her the creeps.

Maybe he's gay, she wondered, silently laughing inside. But when she pushed the door open, she suddenly felt his hot breath on her neck. It took her by surprise, but in a pleasant way. Her eyes scanned the darkness around her before settling on him. He forcefully clenched and relaxed his fingers.

"We probably shouldn't do this," he muttered. Really scared now. As straight forward as he had been earlier in the evening, that's how insecure and fragile he was now. Melody couldn't make heads or tails of it. She caressed his cheek.

"Why not? What's wrong?" her voice soothed.

The man swallowed. He looked at the tips of his shoes, clenched his fist with an intensity of the most important decision of his life. His sudden vulnerability intrigued Melody to no end.

"Just say it. You're married." She tried to sound lighthearted but couldn't hide her disappointment.

"No, that's not it", the man said in a faint voice as if it was hard for him to say. Melody looked at him expectantly with the big liquid eyes of a young deer. "I'm sorry" he said. Melody didn't know what to make of it and his next words confused her even more. "You're so beautiful".

She was speechless. She leaned against the doorpost. His hand reached out, fingers caressing her neck. So soft and tender. She shivered again, completely confused. A rippling wave rose and broke along the shores of her stomach, a flowing and ebbing warmth of foaming desire.

"Want a night cap," her voice low and husky. It wasn't a question. The man stared at the clouds rushing by. He had beautiful dark eyes. They beamed unnaturally vivid, like faraway stars. "To our friendship."

"Friendship. Yes, to our friendship."

Melody moved to turn on the light in the hallway. She was suddenly lifted from the ground.

"I'm sorry I've got to kill you," the man said mechanically.

Melody went stiff. The words didn't process in her head. Before she knew it she flew through the hall. The action was fast, yet time seemed to slow down. She stumbled and fell, her back banging against the bottom wrung of a small spiral staircase. She groaned, confused and numb.

The door slammed shut. His labored breaths and heavy footfalls moved towards her. Instinctively she curled herself as small as possible into a ball. The sharp pain in her lower back finally made her aware of the imminent danger coming from the advancing attacker.

Melody screamed. Heard nothing. His strong fingers clamped her cheek, palm crushing her lips. She frantically sucked air in through her flared nostrils so she wouldn't suffocate. She desperately arched her back and tried to kick. It was like kicking against a wall. She couldn't move. His hot breath burned her throat.

His free hand whipped around like a frenzied snake venomously striking at her. Quickly, her satin blouse was ripped open, exposing her chest and midriff. Her bra was wrenched off her body.

Melody thrashed at first. It was useless. He was far too heavy and strong. Tiredly, she stopped struggling and went limp. That helped. The pressure on her mouth diminished.

“Please. Don’t. Don’t...” she managed a terrified muffle.

“Quiet!” The hallway loudly reverberated his booming command.

His sweaty, pilfering fingers stole across her dark breasts, and he leaned over to obscenely feast with greedy lips and slurping tongue. A sharp stabbing pain shot from the top of her head to the ends of her toes. Her muscles contracted and she screamed, short and shrill, with the last reserve of energy she had. It barely disturbed the claustrophobia of the hallway as her shriek gagged into a muffled death rattle. Both hands now tightened around her throat like a vice, squeezing her into dizzy blackness. The back of her head smacked into an upper step and she thankfully lost consciousness.

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Condition due to inclination of body leaning forward, at an angle of 10 degrees. Victim unrecognizable. Even in natural pose. ~~Without~~ with feet on threshold.

The pen shook in his numb fingers. It was ice cold. Nearly impossible to hold without gloves, but no one can write wearing them. A saber-sharp crescent moon split the clouds with its chilly, gleaming blue blade. Very different from three days ago when it was drizzly and overcast.

And also possibly darker, Deleu thought as he blew into his hands. He felt the peering eyes boring into his back. Also very different from three days ago. The neighborhood investigation had yielded nothing. None of these people, immigrants mostly, now curiously gawking through the windows at the sealed up house, had seen anything suspicious on the night in question. They didn’t even really know what had happened here. A small announcement had surfaced on the regional news – an accident with a fatal end. Thankfully, Bosmans’ withholding of facts from the press had worked.

Deleu knew that it wouldn’t last much longer. What had played out behind the front door of that simple house couldn’t be kept quiet. Surely not after the impressive display of resources during the crime scene investigation. No, the gawking neighbors knew that something wasn’t kosher here.

While he reread what he just jotted down, his eyes clued in to the fact that the streetlamp on the other side of the alley provided sufficient light. A first and not so unimportant detail. Deleu snapped his notebook shut and stuck it in the inside pocket of his jacket.

He unlocked the door. The well oiled lock made no sound. The owner from whom the unfortunate Senegalese woman rented the house, was, in his own words, anything but a slumlord. He was careful about his property and very selective in choosing tenants. Deleu thought about Nadia, his girlfriend in self-imposed exile. She had finally found a fully furnished apartment, after having stayed in a hotel for two weeks. She had left. Just like that. With only suitcase in hand and a backpack. She needed time to straighten herself out. Those had been her last words as she shut the

door behind her. Without much fuss. Without making a scene. And that was precisely what made him uneasy.

Nadia. What did her apartment look like? Was there a picture of him somewhere? He didn't know. She hadn't asked him over yet. How much time did she need? And what would her decision be? To come back or to break up, after he had finally, truthfully and openly told her he didn't want any more kids? He didn't want to string her along with promises of lies.

Deleu shuddered at the thought. He tried to concentrate on the ambiguous words of the slumlord, "I'm careful about my property and I'm very selective when choosing my tenants", at the same time adding offhandedly that he would not make the same mistake twice. It was always the same with those foreigners, he said, and then asked when the house would finally be cleared so the mess could be moved out and cleaned up. When the slumlord added that if it took too much longer, he would get a lawyer, and that the police and the City of Mechelen would help foot the bill, Deleu was ready to punch him.

Suppressing his frustration he stepped through the threshold, pushed the front door closed with his elbow and stood there, back to the door. He set his bag down, pulled the protective covers over the tips of his shoes and stared at his white paws. He was struck by the image of himself as a goat in a lair where a wolf had so recently preyed.

How schizophrenic a person becomes in this business, Deleu thought, and while he stood stock still with his back to the cool wall, the prophetic words, or better yet, the brown nosing of his friend, Judge Jos Bosmans, meandered into his mind. At his house, in the four by five yard living room:

"Your strength is that you don't see things as they are. But you intuitively make connections a normal person doesn't and that allows you to see things the way you want to."

"Like some sort of glorified schizophrenic," Deleu had blurted out, still uneasy because he had deliberately decided to take a break. A six-month sabbatical. To straighten himself out and let emotional wounds heal he had sustained during his adventure with squadron 5. Those wounds had also caused, maybe indirectly, the break up with Nadia, though she had done everything she could to support him.

Did Bosmans know about that? Probably not. Otherwise, he wouldn't have used her to add weight to his emotional blackmail. She hadn't said anything anyway. The judge scratched his neck uncomfortably. He turned red in the face, a sign of frustration he very rarely allowed himself to show. 'Giving up', however, was not an option for Bosmans. And so the bickering and squabbling commenced.

"I don't have anybody else, Dirk. If you don't do it then that monster might commit more murders. The mother of the girl is completely shattered." Bosmans had sternly put on his idiotic hat and stalked to the door in typical Bosmans-like fashion. Like a tormented Atlas single-handedly bearing all the sorrow of the world.

"Well,...of course that's not your problem", he had mumbled, after offering Nadia - "such a good person"- his arm and walked out on his high horse.

The thoughts elicited a smile from Deleu, who tried to orient himself and allow his eyes to adjust to the darkness. God, how he loved the old grump. And God, how wonderful it was to be back home in familiar old Mechelen.

Still, there hung an oppressive silence in this little house. Deleu grew uneasy and the smile melted away. He inched carefully through the narrow hallway where 'it' had presumably all begun. Now still, he held his breath and felt both the fear and the

rage of the act. The walls were soaked with emotions. Despite the cold, he began to sweat.

The circular beam from his flashlight illuminated over the floor to the varnished spiral staircase. He saw the splatters, caught in white chalk circles, on the bottom three steps and just then became aware of the sweet smell that had intrigued him when he first entered. The smell of blood. No, not blood. Flesh. Rotten flesh. The thought nearly made him retch. He breathed deeply a few times, squatted down and studied the pattern of the stains.

There were six small elliptical stains. Droplets that had probably trickled from the back of the victim's head after impact onto the steps. They dripped diagonally, hence the elliptical appearance. Probably after he lifted her up. Skin remains were also found on the third step along with some small hairs, which indicated that the impact had been exceptionally powerful.

Deleu recalled fragments from the autopsy report. The internal autopsy that is, because the external autopsy had, for evident reasons, no longer been possible. In his report, forensic physician Van Grieken had mentioned a skull fracture with a cleft between the fractured edges and an epidural hematoma in the back skull groove, resulting in elevated cranial pressure but without fatal outcome. In layman's terms: the back of the woman's head was slammed extremely hard against the step, but that blow had not been the cause of death. That, Van Grieken exhaustively described in the following paragraph. The cause of Melody Mutola's death was abundantly clear and without a doubt because the thyroid cartilage of the larynx was split in two. This meant that pressure had been exerted on the throat with brutal force. Whether she was choked to death barehanded or strangled with a rope, the forensic doctor could no longer say, simply because no visible evidence of mechanical violence on the throat could still be determined.

In short, Melody Mutola hadn't fallen. She most likely fought for her life. Here in this cramped, dark corridor. She had tried to defend herself but was obviously no match for her aggressor, who brutally slammed her head into the stairs and then strangled her with tremendous strength. Then again. He could also have strangled her to death somewhere else. Possibly, even at a later time. When she regained consciousness. In the bathroom, for instance. Deleu was horrified by the thought, just as he was horrified by the terror that awaited him. There. Behind the door. Or worse...

Deleu peered upstairs, straight into the black hole that transformed, in his mind, into the wide-open jaws of a beast emitting decaying breath. For the stench came from there. From upstairs. That was now very clear.

Deleu averted his eyes. He had to concentrate on the matter at hand, he knew. Step by step. And not get ahead of himself. Now was the time to become. Time to capture the mindset. Do what the murderer had done. Feel what the murderer felt. Capture his wants. Capture his needs. His strength. His fear. His hunger. Bloodlust.

So, here it all began. In the hallway. Up 'til now the investigators' theory that Melody Mutola let her murderer in held because there were no signs of a break-in or attempted break-in. There weren't even any superficial scratches on the lock. Then there was the deadbolt, the only way to open the front door from the inside. There were also no signs of forced entry on the small veranda at the back of the house. Deleu recalled the particular paragraph from the report. No open or broken windows. No displaced curtains. No plants fallen from the window panes. No, the perp had come in through the front door. That meant that Melody Mutola knew her killer, or that she trusted him enough to let him in at such a late hour. Or, the doorbell rang and

the visitor placed himself in the doorway so that he remained out of Melody Mutola's field of vision when she looked through the window. There was no eyehole in the front door. Melody Mutola opened the door and was caught by surprise by her aggressor. This last scenario Deleu found the most plausible. She probably hadn't even taken the time to turn on the hall light because when Irene Mugabe, Melody Mutola's mother, found her daughter after using her backup key to get in, there was no light on in the hall. There had been in the kitchen, in the bathroom and in the bedroom. More reason to believe that she was already home when her killer rang the doorbell. For that matter, the fingerprints on the wide flat light switches were from Melody and her mother. There also weren't any light switches that had been wiped clean.

Those were the bases on which the investigators' current theory had been built: Melody was home when the killer rang. Logical. Completely logical. And yet. Deleu had his doubts. It was his second nature. According to the investigators the light in the hallway had never been turned on because Melody had never taken the time to do so. Because she knew who was at the door. Because she so hastily dashed down the stairs and rushed to the front door that she had slipped on the bottom steps.

That's also why the initial phase of the investigation had concentrated on people that had known Melody. Since then, they had all been brought in and thoroughly questioned. Even a cousin of hers who had recently moved back to Senegal had been interrogated. The confrontations with potential suspects had yielded lots of fascinating information about Melody Mutola, but not so much as a whisper as to the perpetrator. Those possibilities were now exhausted. That's why it was up to him. Up to Deleu, that slightly odd and absent-minded little man with his peculiar and twisted thoughts.

He closed his eyes. In his mind the doorbell rang. He saw Melody. Sitting on her bed. Thumbing through her diary. She jumped up and rushed down the stairs to the front door.

"Didn't even take the time to turn on the light," Deleu muttered thoughtfully. "No. This isn't how it happened."

Crouching, he studied the black scratch on the linoleum that was taped over with plastic. The scratch was fresh. From the spiked heels of Melody's pumps. But had she slipped on the stairs in her haste? No. Not that. He didn't believe it. Too much coincidence. Step back from the theory that she knew her killer well, then it was also not logical that she wouldn't turn on the light before she opened the door. Or maybe the murderer had turned off the hall light. But then he would have had to do so very carefully, with the tip of a pen or something, because even gloves leave tracks.

"Maybe Melody simply didn't have the chance to turn on the light," Deleu murmured as if half awake. He pulled out a copy of the report from his pocket and thumbed through it. He found what he was looking for pretty quickly because that specific detail had intrigued him the entire time. It could turn the investigators' entire theory on its head.

His finger glided across the page. Yep, that's how it was. He wasn't mistaken. The key of the deadbolt had been recovered from Melody Mutola's purse. Logical? Maybe. Did she lock the front door only before going to bed? Possibly. She never used the deadbolt? Also possible. Still. The lock was worn away and oiled, indicating regular use.

Deleu took out his cell phone.

When Nadia Mendonck slid her cell phone back into her purse, she noticed that Irene Mugabe, who until then had been very brave, was approaching her breaking point. Her strength seemed to crumble with each new question.

Melody's mother looked away and stared through the hospital room window at an unknown point in the distance. Her shoulders shook almost imperceptibly. It wasn't easy going for Mendonck, either.

"Let yourself go," she whispered to the broken woman. "Let it all out.

"I'm so selfish", the woman said in a daze, as if the words were being spoken by someone else. Her bizarre reaction confused Mendonck. "Ahead of me there is nothing left. Everything lies behind me."

A mother loses her only child. That's what this was about. She tried to immerse herself in the woman's emotions, but she failed. There was no logic there. Or maybe there was no logic in herself, and that was the problem. The fact that she was childless and would probably stay that way now she had stepped out of Deleu's life. She tried to chase away those depressing thoughts. Irene Mugabe sensed Mendonck's confusion.

"I have no one else to fall back on", she explained with a vague smile. Her moist eyes glistened, caught between eyelashes that resembled black needles because of the tears and generously applied mascara.

Mendonck offered the woman a tissue but she firmly declined. Despite everything, Irene tried to smile. A sort of natural connection spontaneously formed between the two women.

"I understand," Mendonck replied. Do I have anyone to fall back on? she thought to herself. Dirk. Dirk Deleu was the answer. She had just heard his voice on the phone. She wanted him with her. Here and now.

"Ma'am, I know that it's difficult. But may I please ask you another question?"

Irene Mugabe nodded. She seemed to regain some composure.

"Did Melody," Mendonck cleared her throat, "did your daughter sometimes have the habit of leaving the lights on when she..."

"Yes," the woman interrupted. She seemed relieved that she could contribute something. Carry her own weight. "Yes. Melody always left the lights on. Even when she wasn't home. Be...because Melody was afraid...that..." her voice stuck, overcome with grief.

"And the deadbolt on the front door. Did she use that?"

"Oh, yes. Always. That's why I was so surprised when she didn't open the door when I rang the bell but that I could still get inside with my key. You see? I knew something was wrong. And then when I saw her there so...so..." Her voice trailed off. Irene Mugabe buried her head in her hands, sobbing.

Mendonck knelt before the woman. The last typical Deleu question waited for utterance in the back of her head. Irrelevant for an outsider, but she had to ask it. She took Irene Mugabe by the hands.

"I'm sorry, but did your daughter wear spiked heels inside the house?"

"No, never," Irene Mugabe answered, somewhat startled by the question. "Never. Melody is...uh, was, very strict about that. She would get so angry at the previous renters who made that beautiful floor so...so..."

"It's okay," Mendonck tried to comfort as she looked determinedly into the shining black face across from her. Her voice was no more than a hoarse whisper.

“Ms. Mugabe. Irene. We’re gonna get him. This I promise you. We’re gonna get that monster.”

She stood up briskly and made her way to the door. Before exiting the room, she turned and added, “I’ll keep you informed.”

Irene Mugabe nodded. There was a touch of hope in that gesture. Relief also. Mendonck turned into the hall toward the elevator.

The elevator seemed to take an eternity to reach the floor. Mendonck shifted impatiently from foot to foot. Finally, the ring of the bell, the doors sliding open, and Mendonck’s furious pushing of the ground floor button. Another eternity before the doors slid open again. She shot out of there and couldn’t be outside fast enough. Her warm lungs greedily sucked the ice cold air down as if a snowstorm suddenly blasted the arid burning of the Sahara.

Mendonck had always been afraid of hospitals. She ran to her Yaris. Hand holding keys like a weapon. Inside car. Out of there. Had to get away. However, it really wasn’t hospitals she was afraid of. It was the grief. Not only the grief that hung heavy over Irene Mugabe’s room, but all the grief in all the rooms, which spilled out into the hallways and flowed like funereal rivers throughout those buildings. If she didn’t get out, she’d drown in there.

She called Deleu and quickly briefed him. The only responses she got from him were ‘um’s and ‘uhuh’s. Still... just hearing his voice warmed her, though she didn’t allow it to be expressed over the phone.

After hanging up, it took Mendonck three tries before the car finally started. While driving away, the car made a series of ominous, halting jerks and suddenly she realized why she had felt so insecure with Irene Mugabe. She wanted to counteract the effect of the woman’s sorrow by thinking about Deleu looking at his little girl and the spontaneous explosion of love that she saw in his eyes. Love he couldn’t give her. That thought confused her even more. At the first intersection she made a U-turn. She didn’t want to go to the office. Didn’t want to hear his voice. She wanted to be *with* him. Really *with* him.

The truck driver didn’t expect her move and Mendonck barely avoided a collision thanks to a hard turn of the steering wheel. The guy blew his horn, several short angry blasts with attitude, and tapped his middle finger against the windshield. Mendonck shook her fist in the air. Just able to control her turn she abruptly slammed on the brakes, overcome with rage whose origins she could now place. The wheels lost their tenuous grip on the icy road. Mendonck accidentally knocked the windshield wipers on with her arm, making the glass grimier, the road now a gray blur. She released the clutch. Too late. The wheels hit the sidewalk and the engine died. As the car finally came to a halt, she had lost her bearings. The Yaris was facing the wrong direction. Mendonck closed her eyes, breathed deeply a few times and turned the ignition. The engine stammered. Again.

Five frustrating attempts later and still nothing more than a faint sputter. Mendonck bruised her hand angrily hammering on the steering wheel. But what really roiled her were the quick, rat-a-tat-tat taps of a wedding ring on the windshield, like morse code clicking out “What the fuck were you thinking?”. The truck driver eyeballed her, his swollen face offering no solace.

“Some understanding, goddammit!” Mendonck swore. The man stayed put, as if frozen to her car. When Mendonck rolled the window down, the man cracked his wrist.

Frozen after all, she thought, eliciting a subtly devilish smirk.

“Flat tire, doll. And a dead battery too. Ya drive t’ wild, I’d say. C’mon. Get out. I’ll give ya a hand.”

“Thanks,” Mendonck said, and the aggression and frustration ebbed. When she stepped out of the car and felt his eyes groping over her body, she winked at her smeared reflection in the dirty windshield. She was a woman, dammit! A good-looking woman.

“Whatcha want me t’ do?”

“A child,” she stated flatly.

“Wha?”

“A child. Give me a child.”

The expression on his face was worth a hundred near-accidents. His Adam’s apple nervously bobbing up and down with every confused swallow, that was funniest of all.

Deleu studied the scratch that was taped over with clear plastic. It came from Melody’s spiked heels, without a doubt. For that matter, everywhere in the house the linoleum was dotted with miniscule holes barely visible to the naked eye, which could conclude that Melody, an attractive and proud young woman, regularly left her heels on inside. That’s why there wasn’t any further attention paid to the scratch.

Deleu had a different opinion. Completely different. Especially after his call with Nadia, who told him Melody always used her deadbolt, and that she indeed frequently left the lights on in the house, even if she wasn’t home. And that she never wore spiked heels in the house.

The murderer entered the house with Melody. That’s what happened. Everywhere in the house the lights were on because what he did afterwards would never have been possible in the dark. He would have burned himself. Everything was suddenly much clearer. It was possible, even likely, that she didn’t know her killer. Maybe he had been waiting for her when she came home.

The bloodstains. That’s what Deleu had to focus on now because, except for the facts that he had absent-mindedly listed, the autopsy hadn’t yielded anything else. He couldn’t count on the discovery of the murderer’s DNA on the victim’s body either. Simply because no DNA examination of the deceased’s body had been possible.

That’s probably the foremost reason why Jos Bosmans asked him. To hunt a ghost.

Deleu chased away the thought. It was clear Bosmans had mobilized him. That he needed him. Because there just weren’t any useable clues. Not one single lead. That’s why Bosmans needed someone with a sick mind. An unstable, manic-depressive man able to strip off his humanity and crawl naked into the skin of a beast. Deleu shuddered. The truth was he was simply scared. Terrified. Just like every normal person would be in this given circumstance.

He moved quickly to the kitchen. Spotless. No dirty dishes in the sink. No food scraps on the table. No glasses out of place. No empty or half-empty bottles sitting around. Nothing out of the ordinary, not even any evidence that pointed to a possible attempt to cover up evidence. No. Melody hadn’t cooked for her killer. Or for herself. That only added strength to his theory. Maybe she’d been to a restaurant and ran into her future killer there. A complete stranger. Charming psychopath.

Deleu shivered at the thought. In fact, a team of investigators had already discreetly visited restaurants and bars in the neighborhood with a sketch of Melody,

yielding no information. Logical perhaps. She did have a car and could have gone anywhere to eat. In fact, she could have simply gone for a walk and grabbed a sandwich to go.

Deleu tried to concentrate on the present. On the scene of the crime. Because often you only got one chance.

There wasn't an ashtray to be found. No cigarette smell and, as such, no cigarette butts with lipstick residue or extractable DNA. No filters with teeth impressions.

"Teeth!" Deleu shouted, startled by his own voice. "That's why he did what he did," he muttered. "No, Dirk. Don't assume. Never assume. See what you see."

Deleu pulled open the door to the small restroom. The toilet seat wasn't up - in the residence of a single woman, often a sign that would have pointed to male visitors.

Deleu was going crazy in this humid darkness smelling of violets. Driving himself crazy.

"Teeth," he repeated much more quietly. The word haunted him like some terrible apparition. He raced back into the kitchen and opened the cupboard that was marked with a cross under the counter. Indeed, you could still see the black circle, now taped over with fluorescent tape, where the bottle had stood. So the murderer had indeed opened the cupboard. No fingerprints on the handle. Nor was it wiped clean. Because he knew what he was doing, Deleu thought. Because he had already been in the little kitchen earlier. The thought made him once again question his charming psychopath theory.

"No, don't doubt", Deleu reassured himself. "He had to have opened this cupboard. Just like he probably opened the other cupboards. If he had never been here before it would have been a major coincidence that he immediately chose the right one. But he handled it with care. With a handkerchief around his fingertips or a piece of cloth wrapped around the cupboard handles."

Deleu closed the cupboard and crouched down. Combed his fingers through his hair. Pressed his palms against his eye sockets.

"Or maybe he knew where the bottle was because he had been here before after all." The thought gave him a headache. He cursed. Frustrated. Those damn, incessant doubts.

Balling his fist, he spied the wooden doll supporting multiple knives in its gut, extremely sinister in this situation. The doll, with arms upraised, seemed to recoil in muted agony from the piercing blades it carried. One slot in the belly was empty. A knife was missing. The large serrated knife the murderer used. To get rid of evidence. Not to kill her. She was already dead by then. About that, the autopsy left no room for discussion. The reason why was reconfirmed when Deleu walked through the hallway and cautiously climbed the narrow spiral staircase where the sweet odor of decay and burned flesh penetrated more ruthlessly with each step.

No footprints in the girl's bedroom. The perp hadn't been in there. No. He went straight for his target. To the small bathroom where the door stood ajar. Deleu firmly held his handkerchief to his nose.

In this bathroom, with the old-fashioned light green tiles, Irene Mugabe found her daughter. What was left of her. In the bathtub, along with the carving knife and empty container of drain cleaner.

With the tip of his shoe Deleu pushed the door wide open. The stench was unbearable, even with the handkerchief pressing ever harder on his nose. Along the rim of the bathtub, which had been carefully scooped empty by the crime scene unit,

clung grayish-red foam – the remains of flesh mixed with the powerful drain cleaner the murderer had poured into the bathwater. A deathly witches' brew.

Deleu suffocated, his throat squeezed by the powerful, odorous fingers strangling from the tub. He felt light-headed, sought desperate support from the doorframe. Tried not to breathe. He thought about the mother of the girl. The older he got the more damn emotional. Irene Mugabe found her daughter here. Her only child. A half decomposed chunk of meat in a foaming tub. Now, three days later, the woman was still in intensive care. A heart attack. Deleu clenched a trembling fist and cursed all his frustration at the putrid bathtub. He pressed his fingers against his temples.

"Focus, Dirk. Stay here. Stay here."

He rushed out of the bathroom. To Melody's cozy, tidy bedroom. No trace of the murderer here. So he hadn't thrown her on the bed and savagely raped her. Thankfully not, thought Deleu, and immediately burst the bubble of hope with the thought that he had perhaps assaulted her or her dead body in the bathtub where it was much easier to dispose of evidence.

"Evidence, what evidence?" Deleu asked himself aloud. There was, after all, no evidence. No evidence of mutilation or sexual assault. "Goddamn son-of-a-bitch!" cried Deleu. "There aren't any goddamn genitalia left to get evidence from!" He gasped for breath and saw the open diary. It lay on the flowery spread of Melody's single bed. The elegant wavy letters exuded a zest for life and a happiness that Melody ultimately never found. Deleu had to get out of that room.

Confused, he went back to the hallway. The only place that could still reveal something about the murderer. He stood there. On the third step. Stared at the soaked in drops of blood. Nowhere else were traces of blood found. Except on the stairs. A few drops. That they came from the injury to the back of Melody's head was very doubtful, according to the expert the judge had sent. There would have been a smudge. But where it came from was a mystery because the grizzly bloodbath had taken place in the tub, yet the stairs weren't smeared with blood. Otherwise, the blood that now flowed in the arteries of the drainage pipes would have probably streamed to the front door, out onto the street.

"Goddammit!" Deleu swore when he remembered the excerpt from the internal autopsy. The left breast muscle had been severed. With the serrated carving knife. "God...God...dammit!" Among other things, the investigators based their theory that it was a crime of passion on that fact. He had murdered her and afterwards, symbolically, in that moment of violent emotional release, had cut off her left breast. Jealousy. Vengeance. Name it what you will.

"Bullshit," Deleu mumbled. Otherwise, in his rage he would also have mutilated her vagina, and *that* the police physician would have seen. Deep inside her. That damn carving knife had a blade of nearly twelve inches.

Deleu shook his head clear. No, he thought. No fit of passion. Out of the question. The killer knew damn well what he was doing. Damn well. The murder was then possibly committed in a fit of aggression, but this was certainly no crime of passion. This was meticulously well thought through.

The detective suppressed his frustration though he was worn out. He focused on the floor, feeling out of breath. He squatted down and let his fingers glide over the plastic covering the scratch in the linoleum. Footprints had been found, he remembered, from a man's shoes, possibly a size fifteen, which meant that the murderer was big. And, therefore, probably strong. But the scratch. That's what was important now. How did it get there?

Deleu closed his eyes, imagined the scenes: Melody Mutola puts her key into the lock, opens the door. Hurriedly, because she's cold. Shawl, short skirt, nylons, spiked heels. With those clothes still on, her killer will eventually dump her in the tub.

The door is open. He pushes her inside. Jumps on her. He's heavy. Size fifteen shoes. A giant. She staggers, loses her footing. Her spiked heel gashes a deep scratch in the linoleum. No time to turn on the light.

"Yes. That's how it damn well happened."

She falls on the bottom step. He growls, jumps on top of her. The blood. The droplets. They had trickled from her breast. He doesn't have the knife yet. It's taken from the kitchen later. How did you wound her? How did you bleed Melody Mutola? What did you use if not the knife? Something else. Your fingers? Your...

"Teeth!"

He bit her. Here on the stairs. And slammed her head against the step when she screamed. That last part was the only certainty. The rest were assumptions. The footprints went via the hallway to the small bathroom. Where he laid the unconscious Melody in the bathtub. What happened thereafter was impossible to reconstruct. Rape? Strangulation? It was and remained anyone's guess. The larynx was broken. The only thing the forensic doctor had found was a scrape on the back of the skull. There, where he smacked her head against the step. Skin remains and thin hairs proved that. What was certain was that he cut off her left breast. Deleu took out the autopsy report. The muscles of the left breast were cut. "Sawed through", read the report.

"Why?" Deleu asked himself. She died by strangulation. A broken larynx. Had her breast been cut off to dispose of evidence? But what evidence? Bite marks. He bit her in the breast. Knocked her unconscious and threw her in the bathtub. He then headed for the kitchen and took the knife to dispose of the bite mark evidence. When that didn't go as planned, he poured the corrosive agents over her. Probably in panic. Deleu was suddenly startled from his deducing when the doorbell rang.

Nadia Mendonck stood in the doorway. Sensing his fright she pulled the confounded Deleu to her chest. His heart pounded through her.

"Come here, Dirk. Come with me."

Deleu clutched her tightly.

"He assaulted her. When she came home. Beaten. And bitten. And then strangled. Here, Nadia, here on the stairs. In a fit of rage. Then he panicked. He threw her body in the bathtub and found the drain cleaner. That's how it happened. Like that and no other way."

Nadia absorbed Deleu into her arms, a sponge to soak up some of his stress. She guided him outside, closed the front door, and sealed it back up along with her doubts.