

# Title

By Author

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## CHAPTER 1

Maria woke up just after four a.m. She was exhausted and would have loved to turn over and go straight back to sleep. But she had her Maths homework to do and still needed to finish off her English assignment.

Last night the electricity had run out again and there were no candles left in the house. At least it was summer and the sun rose early so she could see her books.

Usually Maria loved this quiet time in the early mornings. She'd have a few hours to herself before the rest of the household woke up. But today she had an uneasy feeling deep in the pit of her stomach.

Maria lived with her Mama, brother Goodwin, and sister Noni. For the most part Maria was in charge of the house. She could control most things. Well, the one thing she couldn't control was her father abandoning them. It seemed as if he

was there one day, head of their household, and the next day he was gone.

That was nearly two years ago now. Right up until their father left they were doing okay financially. They lived in a small house, but it was always neat and tidy. They had enough food to eat and always wore clean clothes. When her father left, Mama went into shock. All the family were shocked, but their mother took it much harder than her children.

People were always telling her Mama: “You’re a lucky woman, Precious. You’ve got a fine, hard-working man who takes good care of his family.”

After her father abandoned them, Maria lost her trust in people. She had admired her father and believed everything he had told her. Then he had walked out on his family, saying he had fallen for a woman who worked in the offices at the car factory where he worked.

“I’ll always be here for you, kids. I’ll provide for you.” Those were his last words to them.

Maria was surprised at the time that her mother hadn’t shouted and screamed at her father. She had thought that her Mama didn’t care. But now she knew her Mama had cared very much about her father’s betrayal. Her Mama was just not the type of woman to make a scene.

“What’s the point?” she said to Maria one night, as they sat up late drinking tea. “All the shouting and ranting in the world is not going to bring him back. I don’t have time to fall apart. I have my children to take care of.”

But Maria felt her Mama wasn't as brave as she pretended to be. She became quieter and withdrew further and further into herself. Often Maria heard her crying into her pillow when she thought everybody was asleep in the house.

For the first few months her father paid out a monthly income to his family. Then on the third month, when he didn't call around, Maria went to the factory.

She asked the receptionist to call her father, as she needed to speak to him. The lady looked at her kindly and asked her to come into the office. Maria knew straightaway that something was wrong.

"I'm so sorry to tell you this. But your father left the factory last week."

"Where did he go?" Maria asked her, shocked.

"Cape Town."

"Did that woman go with him?" Maria asked.

The receptionist hesitated a moment. Then she said, "Yes. To be honest nobody liked her here. We all knew she was just a gold digger. We were very shocked when we heard your father had taken up with her. He just didn't seem the type of man to leave his family. He let you down very badly."

The receptionist stopped and smiled sheepishly, “Sorry, it’s just that ... well I’m going to make you a nice, hot cup of sweet tea. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m Maria, and thank you Mam. You’ve been very kind.”

“I just wish there was more I could do for you, Maria. But if it’s any consolation, Eugenia was only using your father. Once she gets to Cape Town she’ll find somebody else.”

“It’s been hard on our family,” Maria said. “You see we loved and admired our father very much.”

“I know it’s not my place to interfere but I sincerely believe your father was not too happy about going to Cape Town.”

“Why did he go then?” Maria was clearly puzzled.

“I think he felt he had no choice. Eugenia is a very domineering woman.” The receptionist sighed in sympathy as she gave Maria her tea and a couple of chocolate biscuits to go with it.

Maria vowed to herself then that she’d never allow a man to rule her life. Whatever happened she’d make sure she was independent.

Determined not to rely on anyone financially, she promised herself that she would study harder at school. She knew if you got a good education you’d get a better job, and receive a decent salary.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning Maria heard her Mama move around in the kitchen. She was getting the breakfast ready for her family. Maria went to help her. But before she got to the kitchen door she could hear Noni yelling, “I don’t want this porridge. It’s horrible! I want some toast with a boiled egg.”

“There’s no bread left, Noni. Eat up your porridge like a good girl.”

Maria looked at her Mama properly for the first time in ages and saw the huge amount of weight she had lost. As if sensing her daughter’s thoughts, Precious pulled her nightgown tighter around her.

“Eat your porridge, Noni or you’ll go to school hungry.”

“Okay,” Noni said, “but could I have more sugar on it?”

“Say please,” Maria said, as she took a small amount of sugar from the bowl and sprinkled it over her sister’s porridge.

Mama smiled at her eldest daughter. She could always rely on her to keep Noni under control. Noni might be the smallest child in the house but she had a very bad temper. When things didn’t go her way, she tended to yell and scream at everybody. Maria wouldn’t put up with her nonsense.

“I’ll dish you out a bowl, darling,” Mama said.

“It’s okay, Mama. Sit down and drink your tea. I’ll get my own porridge. It smells delicious.” She said this so Noni wouldn’t make any more of a fuss.

“Where’s Goodwin?” Maria asked.

“He’s gone to open up the tuck shop for me,” Mama said. “You know how people are always running out of tea, sugar and coffee early in the morning. We do a good trade then.”

“I hope he plans on going to school today,” Maria said.

Mama owned and ran a tuck shop in Walmer Township. The business had been doing well up to about six months ago. Mama worked extremely hard and always had the foodstuffs on offer that she knew the people needed daily.

Then one day she discovered her assistant, Cecilia, had been stealing from her. She fired her on the spot. Then a week later somebody had ransacked the tuck shop in the middle of the night. Mama knew it was Cecelia’s brother who had done it, but she couldn’t prove anything.

Oupa had built iron bars around the shop and since then there had been no more trouble.

Goodwin had started helping Mama more and more in the shop. Some days Mama had to go into town and stock up on supplies from the warehouse. Oupa helped out when he could, but his eyesight was poor so people would take advantage of him.

Maria suspected that Goodwin would rather help out in the tuck shop than go to school. He had completed his Grade 10 and didn't seem keen on going on to do his Matric. This worried Maria a great deal, though she knew Mama needed his help in the tuck shop very much. Without it they would all starve.

"I've got to go to the clinic today, darling," Mama said. "Will you fetch Noni from school, as I'm not sure what time I'll be back."

"Sure Mama," Maria said. Mama had always suffered from headaches but after Dad left they became much worse. She had seen the doctor at Greenacres Hospital and he said they were migraines, probably brought on by stress. Mama had to visit the clinic on Fourteenth Avenue once a month, to pick up her headache pills.

"Can we go to the tuck shop after school and get some sweets. Please," Noni added, as she looked imploringly at her sister.

"Only if you stop whining and when you get home do all your homework without making a fuss," Maria said.

Noni's whole face lit up with a huge grin. "I promise. I'll even read my library book."

Mama smiled. She had to give it to her eldest daughter. Maria could handle Noni far easier than she could.

These days Precious was always tired. She woke up tired every morning and fell, exhausted, into bed at night. She hadn't told her family, but last month the sister at the clinic was worried and had given her a thorough examination.

Precious wasn't going to the clinic today. The sister had later phoned her and said she was to go to Greenacres Hospital, where she would see a specialist.

### CHAPTER 3

Maria collected Noni from school. "Are we going to the tuck shop? Remember you promised me some sweets."

"Yes, I remember," Maria said, and took her sister's hand. They walked towards the township together.

When they arrived at the tuck shop, Goodwin was not on duty. Another young man was behind the iron grille.

"Where's my brother?" Maria asked, surprised.

"Oh, he just went to fetch something. He'll be back soon. Do you need anything?"

"Sweets please," Noni said, before Maria could say anything. "I want the red and green ones."

"You must be Noni. Goodwin told me all about you. And you're Maria."

"Yes. What's your name? I haven't seen you around here before."

“My name is Moses. I don’t live in the township. I live in Central.”

“Well it’s nice to meet you, Moses,” Maria said politely. “It’s very kind of you to help Goodwin out. Do you work?”

“Yes, but I’ve got today off so I thought I’d come and see how Goodwin was getting on.”

Maria got that uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach again. She had never seen Moses before today, and she had thought she knew all her brother’s friends.

Moses handed Noni the treats and she began peeling the wrappers off and stuffing the red sweets into her mouth.

Maria looked around and saw two young men, whom she had never seen before, lurking at the corner. One of them had a deep scar running down the right side of his face. He looked as if somebody had attacked him with a knife. He kept darting his eyes around as if he was waiting for somebody. The man next to him said something, and the next moment he began walking towards the tuck shop.

“How’s it going, Moses?” he asked with a smirk.

“Good. Everything’s good,” Moses said. “I’m just waiting for Goodwin to get back. These are his sisters, Maria and Noni.”

“Nice to meet you. Goodwin never told me he had such a good-looking sister.” He looked Maria up and down, as if she was a piece of meat.

Maria knew there was something odd going on here, but she had no idea what it was. She was even beginning to wonder if they had done something to her brother when, to her relief, he came hurrying up the road.

“I got my sweets. Thank you, Goodwin.” Noni threw her arms around him. This broke the tense atmosphere.

Everybody smiled at once. “Sorry it took me so long but I had to go to Spar and get some sugar as we had run out. Oupa wasn’t available to take me to the wholesalers.”

Maria knew her brother was lying. He always cast his eyes downwards when he was lying.

Goodwin went into the tuck shop and put his parcel down. He looked quite pleased with himself.

Maria went home with Noni. She wanted to think about what she had seen, and she also had to take care of Noni. She needed to make her some food and help her with her homework.

But it was now after five o’clock and neither Goodwin nor her Mama had arrived home yet. Maria knew Goodwin would still be busy in the tuck shop. Sometimes they stayed open until seven o’clock as people were always running out of things.

Maria was more worried about her Mama. She should have been home by now. She went next door and asked Thembi to look after Noni, as she wanted to go down to the tuck shop and see if Mama was there.

She was only a short distance from the tuck shop when she saw a line of people queuing up. They were not the usual customers. Concerned, Maria stayed hidden behind the corner. Goodwin was serving each person a small package and taking money from them. The strange thing was they all seemed to be buying the same thing. As soon as the queue ended Goodwin started packing away everything.

Maria knew he was clearing up and would be closing soon. She walked away very fast, before Goodwin spotted her.

#### CHAPTER 4

When she arrived back home she collected Noni from Thembi. Mama was not home yet, but not long afterwards Goodwin came in.

“I’m starving. That food sure smells good.” Maria had made a mutton stew earlier and it had been slowly cooking on the stove.

“I’m worried about Mama,” she told her brother. “She should have been home ages ago.”

“I’ll eat some stew and then I’ll go look for her,” Goodwin said.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than Mama came walking through the door. She looked exhausted. Maria ran towards her and helped her sit down. “We were getting very worried, Mama. What took you so long?”

“Can you make me a cup of tea and then I’ll tell you,” Mama said. When Maria placed the cup of tea in her hand Mama suddenly started crying.

“What’s wrong, Mama. You’re making us all very worried.”

Mama slowly nodded her head. “I had to go to the Hospital today. I saw the specialist. I have cancer in both my breasts. They are going to take them off.”

Noni started crying. Maria guessed she had no real idea what was going on but she was crying because everybody seemed shocked and upset.

“It’s alright, lovey,” Mama said, and put her arms around her.

Maria and Goodwin looked at one another, and each saw the despair and desolation in the sibling’s face.

“We’ll all be here for each other,” Maria said.

“I’ll look after the tuck shop, Mama. You don’t need to worry about that right now. We were very busy today.”

“Thank you, children,” Mama smiled. “I’m going to bed now. It’s been such a long day that I can’t think straight anymore.”

Mama’s operation was scheduled for three weeks’ time. Maria was so worried about her that she completely forgot about the suspicious guys she had seen at the tuck shop.

It was school holidays now. Goodwin was able to work in the tuck shop all day. Maria took care of the house and looked after Noni and her sick mother.

One morning, just after Maria had cleaned the house, she heard screaming in the street. She went outside to see what was going on.

“I’m telling you,” Penrose, one of the neighbours, was yelling at the top of her voice, “somebody got my son involved in drugs! After he pulled a knife on me he ransacked the house looking for money.”

All of a sudden Maria’s mind flashed back to that day at the tuck shop. She knew what was in those packages. Goodwin was selling drugs to make money.

Maria left Noni in the house with her Mama. She ran all the way to the tuck shop.

Goodwin was behind the grille serving a few old ladies some bread and sugar.

“Is everything alright?” he asked her as the last customer left.

She told him what had happened outside their house.

“Oh no.” He put his hands over his face and began to sob. “I didn’t want to deal in drugs. Honestly Maria. They forced me to do it. I haven’t even spent any of the money they gave me.”

“Where is the money?” demanded Maria.

“It’s under my mattress.”

“Let’s go and get it and take it to the police.”

“What will Mama say?”

“Don’t worry about that now. Let’s just go to the police station in Walmer. You need to tell the police the names of the drug dealers.”

“Yes, I’ll do it. I hate drugs and how greedy and desperate it makes people. I want to make an honest living, Maria. I would really like to go back to school and get my Matric.”

The police captain listened to Goodwin. “Thank you for coming to us with this information. It was very brave of you.”

“What happens now?” Maria asked.

“I’m not going to arrest you, Goodwin. I truly feel you have learned a valuable lesson. But if you see any more drug dealers in or around the township please come and see me.”

“I most certainly will. Thank you, Sir.”

Goodwin and Maria walked home together. Just as they were about to enter the township, their father appeared in the street in front of them.

“Papa!” both Goodwin and Maria cried out. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see my family,” Papa said. “I wanted to tell you face to face how sorry I am about abandoning you all. How I have missed you!”

“Do you think you can just come home now?” Maria begged and began to sob.

Goodwin put his arms around her. Then he told his father everything that had happened since he left.

“I’m going to see your Mama now,” Papa said, with tears in his eyes. “She doesn’t have to take me back. I won’t blame her after what I did. But I want you all to know I’ve just got my old job back and I’m going to take good financial care of my family.”

“What about ... the other woman?” Maria asked.

“I’m not with her anymore. I made a huge mistake.”

Maria nodded her head. She didn’t know if her Mama would have him back. It would take some time before they could trust him again.

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The day of Mama’s operation grew closer and closer. Her sister Hilda was coming from Pretoria to help the family out.

The night before Hilda arrived Mama was sitting up in bed drinking some tea that Maria had made for her.

“I’m not very frightened,” Mama said. “Now that I know what’s wrong with me it’s easier to cope with it. I’ve got my family around me. I’m happy that Papa is providing for us. It means that Goodwin can go back to school, and when I’m better I’ll run the tuck shop.”

Maria nodded her head. Papa had rented a room in town but he was always calling around to see his family. He was a changed man.

“I’m very proud of you, my beautiful daughter. Of how well you have coped through all of this,” said Mama.

Maria smiled at her Mama and then she began to cry. Soon they were crying and laughing together at the same time.

“Everything will turn out okay, Mama. You have your family around you. You are an inspiration to us all.”

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