

When Erin Dearlove arrived at Van Riebeeck Heights to live with her reluctant Aunt Kate, the neighbours all said she was an obnoxious brat, too thin, spoiled, wild-looking, and with a habit of speaking like she'd swallowed a dictionary. They were pretty spot on. Her face was scrawny, her sandy amber hair unbrushed, she used convoluted vocabulary with spite, and she never smiled, because she had no parents. Apart from Aunt Kate, who had been sworn to secrecy, nobody quite knew what had happened to them. Erin relished shocking people by telling them her mother and father had been eaten by a crocodile. 'Can't undo it, can't forget it,' she'd say, then add, 'I found bits of them on the shaggy white carpet of our designer home.'

Some people's jaws dropped open in horror. Erin liked that. But the truth of her parents' demise was even uglier than a crocodile.

In the first few days at Van Riebeeck Heights she found it impossible to avoid being cornered by chatty grown-ups with a blur of names like Nozizwe, Ebindenyefa, Zibima Oruh, Granny Wokoya, Aunty Talmakies, Varsha Lalla, Tekenatei, Ayodele, Boitumelo and Jaroslav Chudej ... And when their unwelcome geniality forced her into conversation, Erin would boast how her dad had been an important and very corrupt banker. 'Mr Dearlove, my father, was a splenetic, abusive man,' she'd say. 'He had many enemies, but even he did not deserve the horrendous fate that befell him and his wife and their irksome dog.' After telling the story a few times, she'd added that yapping terrier, but she never once mentioned the brother she had lost on that same unspeakable morning.

Her bad reputation at Van Riebeeck Heights was sealed one Tuesday in the hour before twilight. 'Of course,' she said to Mrs Puoane, a flabbergasted neighbour from upstairs who was seven months pregnant with twins, 'I was fascinated by their fabulous parties, their beautiful clothes, and famous friends who often appeared in glossy magazines and international newspapers, but the Dearloves were hard to get close to.' About this, Erin just shrugged. 'There was no warmth in that house. It's almost a relief that those Dearloves are gone.' But as she said the words, her heart constricted. It ached and so she added with venom, 'Parents are so overrated. With the way science is advancing, they'll soon be superfluous.'

*Ping!Ping!Ping!* went the Company Soulometer, and Devilskein regarded the scurrilous contraption on his kitchen table with satisfaction. The Tuesday sun had sunk and night was on its way and the device alerted him to a quarry on another continent. The contraption was something like a gps, except it dated back almost four thousand years, back to the early days of Babylon, and instead of directing a Companyman to a place, it gave the longitude and latitude of any living person who had, with true intent, thought or uttered aloud some variation of: 'Oh, I would sell my soul for/to ...' Of course, the Company did not buy souls. Nobody can buy a soul: it is priceless. It has to be pledged. In order to procure these most precious of commodities, the Company dangled all manner of carrots and smidgeons of hope in the way of desperate would-be traders: 'Your soul is not sold, it is pawned. It is security for your debt to the Company, and it is redeemable on certain terms. So if you or somebody you know can muster the wherewithal within a reasonable amount of time, there is a chance you can have it back. Until such time, it will reside in a locked room in our Indeterminate Vault.' And like gold bullion for a government, its great treasury of souls made the Company a universal superpower. Exactly the nature of the said 'wherewithal', the specifics of the certain terms and the length of the reasonable time were all things never made obvious. Company policy was never obvious. Its magic was too shadowy and despicable for any such contractual transparency. However, betwixt the hot air and subterfuge, trading in souls did in fact have very definite rules. And every room in the vault of endlessly nested doors had a key.

Erin smiled cruelly at Mrs Puoane, her expecting neighbour. 'I do not miss Mother and I do not miss Father, but nor do I relish my Aunt Kate's minuscule apartment on this filthy Long Street.' She sighed. 'I suppose I have to face the fact that I am well and truly poor.' As night absorbed any remnants of that Tuesday, Erin went on to plunder her imagination and further regale Mrs Puoane with how having always been rich and given everything she ever wanted, she assumed that living with Aunt Kate was a temporary measure until the complications with the bank were sorted out and she would have her four-poster double bed and the private forest, vineyards, peacocks and rolling lawns of their designer home with its glass staircase back again.

Some doors down, a boy who had already heard most of the blah about the mansion with the glass stairs was surprised, when he happened to open one of his mother's old copies of *Garden & Home*, to see an article about a convicted fraudster, a banker who boasted that he was out of prison before he even went into prison, and who happened to live in a mansion with glass stairs. His place was so big it required a staff of five gardeners and five housekeepers. But his surname was not Dearlove. 'And look,' muttered fifteen-year-old Kelwyn Talmakies to himself, 'there's a peacock in the vineyard.' On reading the article Kelwyn learned too that the tycoon who owned it despised anything cheap, bohemian, homemade or crafty; he wore only Armani clothes, Italian bespoke shoes and Rolex watches. Kelwyn frowned, but his thoughts were interrupted ...

'Rover 1, come in, Rover 1, come in,' crackled a voice from a walkie-talkie lying beside him. He rolled over and picked it up. 'Rover 1, here. What's up, Rover 2?'

'We have a situation,' said the fuzzy voice named Rover 2. 'Need back-up on the corner of Church Street.'

'Be right there. Over and out.'

Duty had called in the form of his sidekick, Siphon, aka Rover 2, who lived on the first floor with his grandmother. Kelwyn was needed. He stashed the magazine under his bed and in doing so he was pleased to discover one of his favourite penknives: a French Opinel with a hand-carved wooden handle. He'd saved up to buy it from Serendipity, a musty, resin-scented antiques and oddments shop in Long Street. He collected penknives and had a particular soft spot for Opinels – 'the peasant's knife,' his father had told him before vanishing back to France – and Kelwyn owned three of them with carbon-steel blades and comfortable beechwood handles.