

CHAPTER ONE

There were many reasons why Charles McGill would remember the night he first took Hilde Richter. He could never think of it as the night they first made love, for he would never learn to love her. A resigned tolerance was the closest he would ever manage.

It was New Year's Eve 1923 - his first Hogmanay in Durban's sub-tropical heat. Charles was missing the cold northern climes of his native Scotland, and a family for which distance had made his heart grow unusually fond. But this only partially explained his being more than a little drunk.

While stopping by to deliver the Richter family's New Year stollen bread he had been mistaken for an invited guest, anonymous amongst the gentry who were spilling out onto the veranda and lawns in search of cooler air.

A glass of fruit punch was eagerly placed in his hand by the host's daughter. He swallowed it untasted, hoping to deaden the pain of betrayal that threatened to overwhelm him.

Hovering attentively, Hilde quickly re-filled his glass. Heavy, his sister would have uncharitably described her. Aye, she was fuller and more rounded than the pretty lassies he was used to tumbling in the heather back home. Home, where they'll all be having a bonnie time and ready to bring in the haggis, not like this stilted lot, prim and proper and all false bonhomie.

Hilde was at his side again, guiding him towards the tables laden with food, giggling and simpering in a tipsy attempt at flirtation.

It was too hot and humid to eat, and he quenched his thirst with another glass of the alcoholic punch. The ice had long ago melted, and the warm drink conversely increased his thirst; and the alcohol his torment. Why had Addy betrayed him?

His thirst demanded water. He expected the kitchen would be filled with bustling servants, kept from their own revelry to serve their master. Aye, just like the many Hogmanays the laird's wife had kept Charles' own mother in a sweating kitchen when she should have been home with her family. These rich families were all the same, using you.

He climbed the polished stairs seeking a bathroom and cool running water. Pain and self-pity were turning to bitterness, a bitterness fuelled by alcohol. He splashed cooling water on his face and took a long drink of water.

As he was leaving, Hilde was coming out of her bedroom waving a fan across her flushed cheeks and wearing a coy face that didn't suit her.

"I thought you'd got lost." She slipped her arm through his.

She had left the bedroom door ajar. It was Hogmanay. It was what every lad and lass did, given the chance. If he couldn't have the woman he wanted, he would take what was offered. He led her inside and shouldered the door closed.

The bedroom was oppressively hot, but he did not wait to remove his sweat-dampened shirt before pushing her down on the bed. She was receptive to his kisses, clinging to him, her hands sticky on his neck. Encouraged, he slipped the flimsy dress from her shoulders, caressing her, stroking her throat.

His hair was wet against his forehead and sweat dripped into his eyes. He angrily blinked it away.

When his eager hands moved over her breasts she gave a little start of shock, but in his drink-fuelled hunger his fingers dug into her flesh, wanting to force his own hurt and betrayal into her.

He fumbled to unbutton his trousers, and then eased apart her sturdy thighs with a rough insistent knee.

Drunkenly incapable of the patience for crooning words of comfort, gentle strokes of persuasion, or tender coaxing, he entered her. In his confused intoxication her whimper of pain was drowned by the blood roaring in his ears, the physical urgency and the need for release; the need to rid himself of the rage that festered inside him.

When it was over he was dimly aware of the woman beneath him. Then, for the first time, he looked into her face. Her lips were chafed and reddened from his beard. Tears had channelled the powder on her cheeks and smudged the white of her dress. The pins had fallen from her hair and the coils that had covered each ear lay in shiny blonde strands across the pillow. He met her eyes, expecting a fierce glare of hatred, fear or loathing. Instead, there was a look of bemused adoration, and realised how great a sin he had committed. No woman deserved to be treated so shamefully the first time.

“Oh, God, Hilde. What have I done, lass?”

Filled with remorse, he rolled off her and gently covered her breasts. Soft, smooth and creamy white, they reminded him of the day many years ago when he'd begun work as a fourteen-year-old apprentice in his uncle's bakery back home in Scotland. He could even remember his uncle's words.

"C'mon laddie, take a hold o' that dough. Knead it firmly but gently. There's na need to be scared of it. Think of it as a woman's breast." He'd been embarrassed, but proud to be thought man enough to know about such things.

As her eyes met his, he turned away in shame, wondering despairingly why he had chosen Hilde Richter. Maybe it was her vulnerability, or perhaps merely her availability, or

could it have been a subconscious but perverse pleasure in mounting the virgin daughter of one of Durban's richest and most influential men - and a Davenport customer to boot?

All that Charles could remember was his need to rid himself of the hurt and pain.

He'd been betrayed by the woman he loved - and with the man whom he'd regarded as his best friend. When the clock struck twelve, Lucas Connelly would be announcing his engagement to Adeline Brody. His Addy. The delicate dark-haired creature he had wanted to love and protect, like a tiny fledgling bird.

A great bear of a man he gave a roar of anguish like a wounded animal. Tears pricked his eyes. He let them fall and mingle with the perspiration that ran from his brow.

He felt Hilde stir beside him and noticed with concern a slight asthmatic wheeziness to her breathing. Her fingers sought his. Gently and forgivingly she stroked his hand. With a sigh of despair his drunken exuberance gave way to a maudlin sobriety.

The room felt as if it was closing in on him. The dark sombre furniture was solid and heavy - more suited to its former German home. The smell of lavender furniture polish lingered in the headboard. A clock ticked on the bedside table. Charles turned towards it. Ten minutes to midnight.

The contrived gaiety of the partygoers on the veranda below filtered into the bedroom. Through the open window a carriage could be heard rattling on the gravel road, and people calling greetings to one another.

Releasing himself from Hilde's grasp he swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat with his head in his hands, aching with self-reproach. This was no real Hogmanay, he thought emptily.

But it would be a night to remember all right, for it was also the night that Freddy was conceived.

Charles felt a slight flush of pride at the way his son remained unflinching as the cold drops of water sprinkled his brow and the minister's booming voice reverberated throughout the church, "I name this child - Manfred Charles McGill".

Manfred. Named after his father-in-law. It was part of the marriage agreement. Poor Hilde, so pathetically grateful that he'd made an honest woman of her, little knowing how much it had cost her father.

He glanced at his wife. She was smiling the soft contented smile of a new mother. If only he could learn to love her, learn not to compare her with Addy. But she could never be Addy he thought bitterly, and an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness overcame him.

Turning, he met her gaze. She smiled up at him and whispered, "Look Charles, your son will not be one to cry easily."

His son. The product born not of love, but of lust. A lust that had turned his life around.

Returning from the church Charles ushered his wife into the house that was to be his new home. The Richter family home, brimming with friends and relatives gathered to celebrate the christening.

Set high on the Berea amidst neat green lawns and surrounded by jacarandas and tall sturdy palms it gave the effect, like its wealthy German owner, of intimidating arrogance. The face-brick villa with its wide verandas, both upstairs and down, shaded the rooms from the

glaring sun, leaving them cool and inviting in the hot summers. It was in sharp contrast to the stifling airless rooms above the bakery, the accommodation that Miles Davenport had seen fit to provide for himself and Lucas.

The sky was darkening with the threat of rain. Steadying Hilde's arm on the red polished steps he guided her past the sharp thorns of the bright crimson bougainvillea that wound through the wrought-iron balustrade. The veranda was furnished with several wicker armchairs, their flowered cushions gently sagging from use. Two potted palms in matching wicker containers stood each side of the front door, like sentinels.

As they stepped into the hallway he was struck again by the austere and sombre opulence, the rich honey tones of the Oregon pine flooring, the heavily framed portraits of Richter ancestry hanging precariously from the picture rail. It was so different from the friendly smoke-filled cottage of his childhood. The house might be cool in summer, but in the mild September weather it was a cold unwelcoming place. He felt a shiver run through him. It would never feel like home.

As he stepped into the crowded room he saw Miles Davenport threading his way eagerly through the guests, a servile smile on his thin lips. Charles disliked everything about the man - his tall scraggy frame, his jutting cheekbones, and his deeply sunken eyes. He reminded Charles of a dead leafless tree. Involuntarily he gave Hilde's arm a squeeze of affection knowing that it was thanks to her that the man now hovering ingratiatingly next to him was no longer his boss.

"Charles, congratulations," Miles offered, laying his thin bony hand on Charles' shoulder. Charles stiffened as he felt the waft of whiskied breath.

"Thank you, Miles," he replied stonily, enjoying seeing the older man flinch at the familiarity.

"I could have used you in the bakery this morning," Miles said. "Now that you've become a man of leisure since your marriage, Lucas has had to do your work as well as his own."

Charles' mouth gave an almost imperceptible twitch. "I haven't been idle, Miles, as you'll see later," he said, and with a half-smile he turned his back and moved off towards his father-in-law, but not before he caught the flash of anger at the obvious snub.

Manfred Richter was toasting the health of his first grandchild; an event that he'd almost despaired of seeing. His daughter had been a great disappointment to him, firstly because she had been born a girl and secondly that she'd been a sickly child, something which he regarded as a reflection on himself. The shock of her pregnancy had been compounded by the discovery that the perpetrator was a bakery foreman supposedly stopping by to deliver the traditional New Year stollen bread.

But Manfred Richter was fortunate that a penniless immigrant had seduced his daughter, for, having been denied the woman he loved, Charles had seized the opportunity provided by Hilde's pregnancy and her father's wealth.

Manfred Richter concluded the toast by raising his glass. "To my grandson, Manfred Charles." There was an answering murmur of "Manfred Charles" from the guests. "And now I call on the father to reply to the toast."

Charles casually refilled his glass from a newly opened bottle of champagne and joined his wife and son. This was the moment he had been waiting for. Although it was now clear to everyone why he had so hastily married Hilde Richter, there were few men who did not begrudge him the fortune he would one day inherit. In his deep rich voice with its slight Scottish burr, he thanked his guests for attending the christening and for their generous gifts.

Thrusting his hand into his pocket, he paused to survey the men and women standing before him. "I haven't, as some of you have intimated, been a man of leisure these last few months," he began. There was an embarrassed chuckle from those who had been thinking just that. He glanced round the room until his gaze rested on Miles Davenport, who smiled back benevolently. Keeping his eyes focused on Miles, Charles continued, "When I was away from Scotland it was with a certain purpose in mind. I had an ambition. One that I'd had since a fourteen-year-old lad. Now that I have a wee boy, that ambition is all the more important." He paused to glance down at his son, and then his piercing blue eyes with their air of ruthless menace, refocused on Miles. "Thanks to my father-in-law I can now realise that ambition. For the past few months I've been looking for suitable premises in the city centre and I'm happy to tell you all that I've now found them."

Miles Davenport's smile became forced.

"The latest machinery is being shipped from England and as soon as it arrives, McGill & Son, Confectionery, will be in business," concluded Charles.

There was a gasp of pleasure and the women murmured approvingly while several of the men came forward to shake Charles by the hand. But Charles' eyes never left Miles' face. He saw it darken, changing from red to purple in a violent effort at self-control, and the thin lips purse in fury. He watched him roughly brush aside his wife's comforting hand on his arm, nervous mousy Alice who flinched and shrank back, a woman forever unable to do the right thing.

Charles gave a smile of satisfaction. This was just the beginning.

"Connelly, Connelly, come here." Miles' reedy voice pierced the clatter of the bakery. He had hardly slept all night and it had done nothing to improve his temper. Lucas finished hauling the batch of dough onto the table where it had been fermenting in a long wooden trough, and signalled to Mjali his Zulu assistant to continue with the scaling and moulding. He dusted his hands lightly with flour and rubbed them together to remove the sticky dough before crossing to his boss who stood fuming beside the door of the office that also served as a storeroom.

"I suppose you've heard what that `friend' of yours has been up to these past few months," he said, knowing that Lucas and Charles had not spoken since the engagement. Lucas said that he hadn't, and followed Miles into the cramped storeroom. There was little light from the small barred and dust-coated window that looked down onto a narrow street where, Miles was convinced, felons lurked awaiting the opportunity to break in and steal raw materials and recipes alike.

The walls of the room were lined with shelves crammed with bottles of spices, strong-smelling essences and flavours, jams, Muscatel for the Christmas cakes and puddings, paper packets containing powders, and small boxes of dried fruits, coconut and nuts. The uneven brick floor was stacked with sacks of flour, sugar, salt and huge wooden barrels of fat. A heavy oak roll-top desk littered with books and papers and a small set of scales stood in a corner.

Several enormous brown cockroaches scurried across the desk and disappeared into crevices and drawers as Miles switched on the light. The bare dust-covered globe barely made an impression. Lucas grimaced and kicked out as one of the huge insects scuttled past his foot. Like the humidity, cockroaches were something you learned to live with in Durban.

Miles threw himself down onto the swivel chair and turned to Lucas, who, in the absence of any other chair was left to seat his tall frame amongst the sacks of flour. A little puff of flour

settled on the already coated floor as he sat down. He ran his fingers through his dark hair, streaking it a floury white and smiled encouragingly at his boss.

"That father-in-law of his has given him the finance to open his own bakery," snorted Miles.

Lucas burst out laughing and then broke off, seeing Miles' face. You've got to hand it to Charles, thought Lucas. On New Year's Eve he was in the depths of despair and a year later he has a wife and child and his own bakery. There was also a certain irony because he, Lucas, had been the one with the rosy future. He had Addy, and Charles and he had been saving what part of their meagre wages they could to open their own bakery. Now it looked as though he would be working at Davenport's a lot longer than he had originally intended.

Although he wished Charles no ill will, he could not help feeling a faint stirring of jealousy. He folded his arms, and leaning back against a half empty flour sack he watched Miles' bony fingers drumming on the desk, his face a mask of anger. "It looks as if you'll be in for some competition, doesn't it, Mr Davenport," he said.

The fingers ceased their drumming. "We'll see how Mr McGill enjoys a good fight," he snarled, sweeping the scales angrily aside as he took out pen and paper.

There was a timid knock on the storeroom door and Mjali's curly black head appeared. He lifted his hand solicitously in acknowledgement and stood with his back hugging the door. With respectful downcast eyes he murmured, "Baas, u-shukela - buns", and with quiet dignity held out a chipped enamel bowl.

Miles, with an impatient wave of his hand indicated the sacks of sugar. Mjali padded across the room, his large bare feet making tracks on the floury floor. He carefully weighed out

the required 2lbs while Miles watched his every move, as if the tiny grains of sugar were diamond chips.

When Mjali left, quietly closing the door behind him, Miles gave Lucas a stony look. "Get out there now and see to it that all that sugar goes directly into the bun wash - and not their tea," he snapped.

Lucas followed the black man into the bakery.

Mjali, whom Lucas called Charlie, knew almost as much about running the bakery as he did, and Lucas felt a growing annoyance at Miles' treatment of the black man. He'd thought Mjali's miserable wages bad enough, but when he'd discovered that the Zulu had to support two wives, seven children and a grandchild as well, he'd been horrified. It was hardly surprising that the staff should try to sneak a spoonful of sugar here and there rather than pay Miles from the pittance they earned. He gave Mjali a conspiratorial wink and taking a handful of sugar from the bowl dropped it into the old glass jar that Mjali used as a mug.

Whatever method Miles Davenport intended using to fight Charles McGill, Lucas had a feeling it would not be on the grounds of better wages and conditions for his staff.

