



Theft

COMES WITH A
PRICE

JOHN T PETERS

Theft Comes with a Price



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CHAPTER ONE

A decorative flourish consisting of a horizontal line with a central floral or scroll-like ornament.

Colin hacked and clawed at the unforgiving earth beneath him, the sun's searing heat almost unbearable on his back. Rivulets of sweat cascaded down his entire body, soaking his shirt until it felt like a second skin imprisoning him to his laborious task. Every movement brought agony, as if working under an invisible burden. He was fit, but this relentless work taxed even his strength.

Colin worked endlessly to dig the secret tunnel himself. He knew it was his ace card in case of an emergency, and given the frequent farm murders that had been happening in the area, he wanted to keep its existence a secret.

Desperate for a new beginning, Colin Hunt and his family abandoned their life in England. With the promise of a fresh start in South Africa, they ventured on a journey that would bring them to an unknown land full of diversity and possibility. Susan's heart was excited as she held little Tanya's hand, eager to explore what this new life had in store for them all.

Theft Comes with a Price

Suspicions swirled around Colin as he abruptly resigned from his job with the syndicate. Together with his father, they had been accountants investing the syndicate's profits into lucrative properties - like towering office blocks, shimmering apartment buildings and awe-inspiring hotels in London's city centre. Unknown to Susan, Colin had fled under a cloud of scandal that threatened to expose the vast web of deception that entangled him.

Colin was 29, six-foot-tall, with light brown hair and blue eyes. He was lean but muscular and had a friendly smile. He had a determined expression, but because he frequently said, '*Fake it, then make it,*' some regarded him as a bit of a chancer.

Susan, his wife, was also 29. She was down-to-earth, good-looking, and slim, with long blond hair, blue eyes and a beautiful smile. She liked things to be correct.

Tanya had beautiful brown eyes that sparkled with joy and a contagious giggle that filled her parents' hearts with love. At nine, she was the light of their lives.

The farm Colin bought for a song was in the Hlomohlomo area on the banks of the Mkuze River. The closest town was a village called Louwsburg in KwaZulu-Natal.

Theft Comes with a Price

Colin and Susan immediately fell in love with the property. It covered an area of 1200 hectares of open savannah and thornveld, set magnificently in an area of breathtaking beauty with rolling hills surrounding the Mkuze River zig-zagging through the broad valley below, flanked by lush, sub-tropical vegetation. The large valley was the main feature for cultivating crops, even cash crops like vegetables, as the water was abundant from the river.

Susan was utterly blown away by the fabulous views of the valley and the rolling hills surrounding this magnificent property.

The feature that sold Colin and Susan was listening to nature winding down into night at the end of the day and then looking up at the sky just before getting into bed and seeking out a favourite star as the night ticked on and any other constellations they could recognise.

There were few things more awe-inspiring than looking deep into the layers of the Milky Way from the calm of the African bush and then waking up the following morning to the chatter and screeching of birds.

Birdlife was abundant, with a wide choice of different species. It was the closest you could get to paradise.

The previous owners specialised in vegetables, including asparagus, and several diesel water pump stations remained for irrigation. There was even a landing strip for a small aeroplane, presumably for crop spraying.

It is what a wildlife resort must look like—bush, mountains, savannah, a perennial river running through the middle of the farm, with a large variety of grazing for all game species, Colin thought. That is why there were many game farms in the area.

The farmhouse on a hill presented a magnificent view overlooking the broad valley below with the river angling through.

The previous owner and family were murdered, and the house burned to nothing. Colin thought these so-called farm murders were political, with old hatred close to the surface. Therefore, coming from England without history, he had nothing to do with South African politics. Consequently, they would leave him alone.

Colin discovered that a cellar was still intact below the remains of the burnt-out house. The original owners must have used it as a cool room to store food but abandoned and sealed it when fridges and freezers became available. His idea was to resurrect it and use it as a wine cellar. Amazed, he also unearthed a sealed tunnel in the cellar that led to the workshop—an ideal

hiding place in the event of a farm attack. Colin wanted this tunnel to remain a secret; it was also an emergency escape route in case of trouble. Because he did not want outsiders to know about this tunnel, he thought it best to clear it himself and seal it off until they rebuilt the house.

Colin found David and two grown-up sons from Louwsburg to do the bricklaying and plasterwork. The trading store owner recommended them as good all-around builders. He did warn Colin not to pay them in advance as they were fond of alcohol and then in no fit state to work.

Colin and Susan were comfortable in the workshop while the building was in progress. It was the only weatherproof building left; it housed the secret tunnel from the house's cellar.

Susan wanted a swimming pool, which Colin agreed to and instructed five farm labourers to dig a hole where Susan indicated. David contracted to do the building work.

While Colin supervised the building work and broke his back in the cellar and secret passage, Susan and Tanya explored the surroundings. They followed a footpath down towards the river and spotted several antelope and many different bird species.

Theft Comes with a Price

Susan felt like crying with happiness. She has never been amongst such beauty. To think she and Colin now own it.

Colin is a marvel to have bought all this beauty with the proceeds from selling their home in London.

The farmhouse had a borehole and water tank serving the house. Colin erected a second water tank for the garden and the swimming pool. He could connect it via a PVC water pipe to one of the diesel water pumps by the river. Colin discussed his idea with David.

David suggested meeting Mr Khumalo, one of the oldest residents living on the farm. He was the father and grandfather of the family living there and the source of all the casual labour.

David stayed with the family during the renovation. He told me about a night he was chatting with old Mr Khumalo. Who mentioned they'd get water from a waterfall on the hill behind the kraal back in the old days? It was fresh and delicious! Unfortunately, the previous owner shut off that source and drilled a borehole instead. Now they must go to the Mkuze River, which is far away and has dirty, bad-tasting water.

Colin and David drove in the 4x4 towards Mr Khumalo's kraal. When they arrived, Colin couldn't

believe his eyes. It was much bigger than he had imagined. The huts were round and made of mud and straw roofs, surrounded by a tall, plaited wattle fence. In an adjacent field were dozens of cattle grazing peacefully under Acacia trees.

David and Colin stood before Mr Khumalo, an elder of the village with deep wrinkles etched in his leathery skin. David spoke slowly in the old man's native language while gesturing to the dry earth around them. With a nod, the elder confirmed David's words and motioned for him to continue. The meeting concluded that water was abundant and they could utilise it without a diesel water pump.

The old man offered one of his children as a guide to show them the waterfall and the overgrown thorough that led the water to their kraal and the homestead.

They followed the furrow for about one kilometre into the hillside, which ended at the foot of a small waterfall. Colin commented, 'There is plenty of water at the moment. We will have to find out if it has ever dried up.'

David answered, 'The old man said it has never dried up.'

'Why did the previous farmer close up the small dam and furrow? It does not make sense to me.'

David responded, 'In those days, the white farmers did not want blacks living on the farm. They made a borehole for the homestead and cut the water supply to the Africans, hoping they would move.'

'That sounds rather stupid to me. Who would then be the labour force?'

David suggested, 'For future goodwill, why don't you run a pipe to their kraal, put up a water tank with a pipe to a tap inside their kraal? You could even build them a toilet with a septic tank. They supply free labour to rebuild the dam, bury the water pipe to the farmhouse and dig out the septic tank. You will then have free water and their respect. I will help them with the building work for free. They are a decent lot, and the previous owners were cruel to them.'

'It sounds reasonable to me. Let us return to Mr Khumalo and see what he thinks. It pays to have a happy workforce.'

They returned to the Khumalo's kraal, and David explained the idea to the old man. He was over the moon. Colin did not have to wait for a translation by David. He could tell he was delighted by the look in the old man's eyes.

The old man confirmed to David his thankfulness and that he would have his children dig the furrow and the dam first thing in the morning. Colin added that a

fence with a gate would have to be erected around the water supply to stop the animals from drinking. Otherwise, they will trample the dam's sides and block the water pipe. It was also advisable for security as it would be the kraal's drinking water.

Several of Colin's neighbouring farmers arrived on Sunday with food, beer, and wine. Colin did not know if they were nosy as he was not used to such hospitality in London. The closest neighbour was a couple of similar age, Chris and Mary Sanders, who ran a self-catering bushveld hideaway. Chris recommended that Colin similarly use his property as there was already an abundance of impala, blesbok, reedbuck, kudu, zebra, warthog and prolific birdlife on the farm.

Chris continued, 'We can join forces and offer an idyllic setting for those who love the African bush.'

Colin was unsure of what he intended but loved the idea. He promised Chris to consider it carefully and let him know.

That Sunday was a huge success. Colin and Susan felt welcomed into the community.

After all the guests departed, Colin and Susan enjoyed a sundowner in the garden and discussed what Chris had recommended, 'I think it may be good to turn the farm into a wildlife reserve. I have been a bit worried about farming. Coming from London, I

have never tried planting anything. I even struggle to keep the pot plants alive at home. Maybe a wildlife reserve is the simplest way forward. It sounds more like hospitality and marketing. We even have an airstrip for guests to arrive by plane.'

Susan agreed, 'At least I can help run a wildlife reserve. I was also unsure where I could fit in conventional farming. I do not have a clue where to start.'

Colin affirmed, 'If you agree, I will see Chris tomorrow and discuss how we move forward. It would help if you came with me. We need to note what they have done regarding accommodation for the guest, and I will find out about game fencing.'

'I think, for a start, we could build two or three cottages below our house that could use the same generator for electricity and water from our water tanks. Perhaps we should design the swimming pool and garden for communal use, where visitors can relax with a drink bought from the bar. With steps leading down to their cottages.'

On Monday morning, Colin and Susan visited Chris and Mary on their farm and were impressed by the setup's simplicity. They had two cottages next to a dam accommodating four people each. Chris told Colin where to buy game fencing and a local contact who does roof thatching.

Susan excitedly informed Colin of all she had learned from Mary regarding the running of her guesthouses on their return home. 'It is child's play. I could easily manage three cottages, and they don't offer any other service besides supplying clean sheets and towels. I would expand on that. With a bar, perhaps sell a few basic items that the visitors may have forgotten.'

'We will have to increase the size of our house, with an extra room to accommodate the bar and shop.'

'It could be an outside room, next to the garden and swimming pool,' Susan added.

Colin discussed his plans with David, who happily agreed. It would keep him busy for several months. Then Colin contacted the thatcher. He consented and promised to visit the following day to quote his service.

Next, Colin contacted the firm that Chris recommended to install the game fencing. After Colin told them the size of the farm, they gave him an estimate. It was significant, and Colin thought it was best to discuss it with Susan. He said as much to the salesperson and asked him to discuss the job with his partners to see if they could not sharpen their pencils and call him back the following day.

That evening, Colin and Susan sat down and calculated the rough cost of their enterprise. It was a lot of money. Susan thought, 'At least we will spend it on fixed assets. I am frightened that if we spend the money on planting crops and irrigation, we might lose a lot in the first year as we don't know what we are doing. I think holiday cottages sound like a safer risk. If we try hard enough and make our visitors feel welcome, there is a good chance they will return.'

Susan continued, 'Besides, Tanya and I can help you with a holiday farm. You will be all on your own by planting crops, as I don't have a clue.'

Colin and Susan agreed to go ahead with the venture regardless of cost and try their best to make it a success. Fortunately, they still had plenty in reserve because they bought the farm at a bargain price. Colin was being over cautious as he dreamt of buying a small aeroplane.

Susan, still troubled by the expenses, asked Colin. 'I am delighted by the farm and the idea of a bushveld retreat as a business, but can we afford it all.'

Colin replied. 'In addition to our cash reserve. I have remortgaged the farm to raise more cash. Therefore, we should have sufficient funds to set up the business. You know my saying: *Fake it, then make it*. Well, as soon as the building is complete. We will

then have to work hard to make the enterprise successful to repay the bank.'

The game fence firm called back the following day and offered Colin a 20% discount. Colin accepted and asked them to start as soon as possible.

Susan gazed out over the rolling fields and suggested, 'Why don't we offer horseback rides to our guests?' Colin nodded thoughtfully. Walking from one end of the farm to the other was quite an undertaking.

He turned to David, who stroked his chin in agreement and said, 'We'd better start building some stables. Perhaps we should hire a few extra labourers to help with the upkeep.'

Colin and Susan used solar panels backed by a diesel generator for electricity and bottled gas for cooking and hot water. They had solar lights in their garden back in England and were impressed. Susan remarked, 'The solar lights worked well back in murky England. We don't need a standby diesel generator in this sunny environment; batteries should be sufficient. I'm not too fond of generators. They are so noisy.'

Colin contacted a firm in Louwsburg, known for its expertise in thatching and solar panels—also

recommended by David. Their representative, Johan, came to see Colin.

Johan explained the advantages of solar power. ‘As an alternative to electricity, solar energy uses the natural energy of sun rays to generate power. As a renewable energy source, solar energy will not run out. Another advantage of solar energy is that it is very safe and environmentally friendly because it relies on the sun's rays for fuel, which has no emissions when it produces energy, unlike coal-powered stations. Solar energy is also more reliable than electricity as it is not susceptible to power cuts. It is beneficial as South Africa sometimes experiences electricity shortages, which result in power cuts.’

Johan continued, ‘However, a trained roofer is needed when installing solar panels on a thatched roof. For instance, the roof trusses must be strong enough to bear the weight of the solar panels. The PV solar panels must keep cool, so they cannot be placed directly onto the thatched roof.’

In addition, he explained that thatch needed to be able to dry out after getting wet from rain to prevent rot. Airspace was, therefore, an essential consideration regarding solar installations on a thatched roof. Johan recommended dedicating a section of the rooftop to the solar panels.

‘As this is a new build, I recommend placing the panels on corrugated roof sheeting, with an airspace between the PV panels and the corrugated roof sheets. You can lay the thatch against the panels, making the panels appear integrated with the roof covering rather than looking like an add-on. Of course, those roof sections need conventional interior ceilings,’ Johan added.

Colin took Johan over to the farmhouse where David was busy building and thanked David for calling Johan’s firm for help. Fortunately, they knew each other. Colin left them to work out their distribution of labour.

Colin was happy with the outcome. David would do the thatching, and Johan would do the solar panels and the electrics.

The farmhouse was taking shape and would soon be ready. David and Johan were doing an excellent job. Colin was so impressed with Johan that he asked him to put solar panels on all the outbuilding roofs, even the big corrugated warehouse where the previous farmer stored his crops and implements. Colin thought of using the building for tractors and personal vehicles.

As a police van approached the farmhouse, Colin's voice quivered as he spoke to Susan, his eyes wide

with fear. 'What do they want? We must have done something wrong...'

Susan concluded, 'They are probably coming to introduce themselves and see what we are up to.'

The sound of the van's brakes filled the spring air as it stopped a few feet away from where Mr and Mrs Hunt stood. A short, thick-set man of about 30 emerged from the passenger side and approached them. He wore an ill-fitting blue-grey uniform, and a badge titled 'Sgt Botha' shimmered in the sunlight. 'My name is Sergeant Botha from Louwsburg Police.

We are investigating a murder recently in the Hlomahloma area,' he said, his boots crunching beneath the gravel path. 'We won't keep you long. We want to know if we can establish your whereabouts last Saturday?'

Colin replied, 'Well, that is easy. We were here. You will find us here while our house is under construction.'

Sergeant Botha conceded, 'I did not think you were responsible as there have been several murders in the area, starting long before you arrived. I am trying to investigate, and it would be remiss of me if I did not ask everybody that question.'

Susan interjected, 'You say there have been several murders. Do they follow the same pattern? I mean, do you think it is the same person responsible?'

Sergeant Botha confirmed, 'Yes, these murders seem similar.'

Susan's face paled with fear. 'You mean to tell me that a ruthless serial killer is out there, and yet you are sitting here on your backside doing nothing about it?! Don't you realise how dangerous this could be for our business?! Why don't you get up and take action to stop these killings instead of going from farm to farm asking irrelevant questions?'

Sergeant Botha blushed scarlet with embarrassment as he hastily entered his van and drove off.

'Well, you have certainly made a friend today,' Colin commented and smiled.

Susan countered, 'Having a serial killer in the neighbourhood will not attract many visitors.'

'I don't know. Some people like that sort of thing,' Colin replied, grinning.

Susan groaned, 'We are popular today. Here comes another visitor.'

An old Zulu man approached them. ‘Susan, it is Mr Khumalo. Please call David. I can’t understand a word he says.’

Colin greeted Mr Khumalo and explained that David was coming, using gestures. Mr Khumalo seemed to understand and patiently waited. Fortunately, Susan appeared with David, and they started chatting excitedly. Colin thought, ‘I need to learn Zulu urgently.’

David explained to Colin that Mr Khumalo had come to report that the trench was now ready for the burial of the water pipe.

Colin marvelled. ‘That was fast work. David, you can proceed when you can spare somebody to supervise the pipe laying. Please thank Mr Khumalo for the work he has done. You can let Mr Khumalo have the old water tank and stand we replaced. Make sure it does not leak, though.’

David translated this to the old man and told him they would start tomorrow morning.

Later that week, Colin visited Mr. Khumalo’s kraal to see how the work progressed. One of David’s sons was in charge. He had helped them erect a water tank with a pipe leading to the centre of the kraal, where he had constructed an old stainless-steel sink on a brick-build stand with an automatic tap—one that you have

to push to release the water. When you let go, it shuts off. Because it was outside, the children wouldn't leave the tap running, wasting water.

Mr Khumalo's children built a new round hut and dug the hole for the septic tank. It was to be the toilet hut. Colin suggested to David's son, Manie, 'As you have connected a water pipe to the toilet for flushing. You might install a shower and another washbasin where the women can wash and change their babies in private undercover. It could all be on a cement floor with drainage for the shower water.'

Manie said it would not be difficult and would take no time. Colin told Manie to translate all this to Mr Khumalo and request his approval.

The old man was delighted and remarked that his kraal would be the best in Zululand and that people would pay to visit him. Colin told Manie to list what he would need to collect from Louwsburg.

That evening, relaxing outside next to the half-completed swimming pool, Susan remarked to Colin, 'I wonder if the police have caught this serial killer.'

Colin had his mind on other things. 'Goodness, I forgot about that. What made you bring that up?'

Susan complained. 'You should treat it more seriously. Mary informed me he had killed several

people, all visitors to the area. The police think it must be a man because all the victims died of strangulation.'

'The police should not make assumptions. A lot of women in the area are capable of strangling someone. Some of them are so large, they only have to sit on you, and they will crush you to death.'

Susan exclaimed, 'Don't joke about it. We will see how you feel if he strangles one of our guests. I don't think it is good for business.'

Colin apologised, 'Sorry, I had so much on my mind. I had forgotten about the murders. Hopefully, the police will arrest the culprit before we are ready for guests.'

Susan countered, 'It better be soon. I noticed that the builders are starting on the guest houses.'

'You are right. Soon, we will be able to move into the main house.'

Susan sighed. 'I can't wait. It will be the nicest day of my life. Living in the workshop has been tiresome. Tanya will be so excited to have her bedroom. She has been asking when she can bring her friend home for the weekend.'

Like all the farmers in the area, Colin and Susan had to place Tanya in a private boarding school as a

weekly border, picking her up on Fridays and returning her to the school on Sundays. Tanya and Susan shed tears during the first few weeks, but now Tanya seems to have settled down and made friends.

Colin added, pointing at the swimming pool, ‘Maybe the pool will be finished for the weekend. That will cheer up Tanya. David said that we would be able to move into the main house this weekend. Now that Manie has completed Khumalo’s water and toilet facilities, he can concentrate on the swimming pool and our garden water tank.’

Susan beamed, ‘That would be lovely. It has been so difficult running a household from your workshop. I can’t wait to have my own cooking and washing-up space. Do you mean I might be able to have a relaxing bath again? I am going to spend the whole day in the bath. Oh, I will hang my clothes up again in a proper wardrobe. What bliss. You won’t see me for a week.’

Colin was also getting excited by the thought of moving into their house. It was mainly complete—Johan was finishing the electrics and plumbing.

Colin thought that he should start concentrating on the garden. Luckily, as these trees were slow-growing, the previous owners had planted African thorn umbrella trees around the house with their flat tops, creating lovely shaded areas. They were all matured, at least nine-foot-high, well pruned with branches and

leaves only on the canopy, allowing you to walk below in the shade. The grass was, unfortunately, wild, and Colin decided to replace the whole area with Kikuyu lawn grass and sprinklers covering the entire lawn.

The swimming pool was at the front of the house, overlooking the valley below. There was a sharp decline to the next level, where they built the guesthouses below the front garden. Shrubs protected the edge where the lawn ended.

There was a footpath going down the hill to the guest houses. Colin decided to replace this footpath with steps and a handrail for safety.

The workshop, stables, car park and other outhouses were at the back of the house.

David approached Colin. 'Sir, it is about my son, Manie. Although he is a good builder, he does not want to be a builder. He does not like the insecurity of not knowing when the next work may come. We wondered if there may be a permanent position here on the farm. Manie can speak Afrikaans, English and Zulu. He has a clean driver's licence and does not drink alcohol, and as you know, he is a good builder.'

Colin responded, 'We do have a vacancy for a ranger, a guide for the guest, who will need to be fluent in the three languages you mentioned, someone who could take the guests exploring the farm and show

them the wildlife, mostly on horseback. He will also be my assistant and help me with any incidents. Please tell Manie to come and see me if he is interested in that position.'

Manie accepted the position, and they settled on a wage. 'You can move into the staff quarters next to the workshop. I would like you to live on the premises to cover any emergencies. After we have moved out, you may improve the rooms.'

Manie confessed that he wanted steady employment because he was in love with one of Mr Khumalo's daughters.

Colin explained to Manie that he could start straight after they had completed the building work. Still, in the meantime, he should ask one of Mr Khumalo's children to show him all the places of interest and the wildlife on the farm. He should also check the fencing, which should be near completion.

To everyone's relief, David and Johan declared the farmhouse completed. Susan was delighted. She instructed several labourers to carry the furniture she bought and stored in the corrugated shed into the house while manipulating Manie to help hang curtains.

Colin kept out of the way and, with the help of Johan, erected the bar counter and shelving in the shop/bar room overlooking the swimming pool.

That evening, Susan had the house presentable and served Colin his first meal in the dining room. She was thrilled to bits. ‘Tonight, we can sleep in our bedroom after I have the most luxurious bath you can imagine.’

Colin admitted, ‘The house is looking good. I am glad that this ordeal is behind us. Now, we must look to the future. Have you thought of a name for our enterprise? How about *Mkuze River Bushveld Hideaway?*’

Susan agreed. ‘It says what it is. Will you put the sign on the main entrance gate to the farm? Maybe you should put the farm name, *Waterfall*, below the business name so that people know it is the right place.’

Colin agreed. ‘I will have two signs made. The second one is by the house to prevent people from following the road down to the river.’

The following morning, while Susan rearranged the house furniture, Colin saddled a horse. He rode along the boundary fence to inspect the fencing and fire brake on both sides of the barrier. It looked good to Colin. They were nearing completion and were

Theft Comes with a Price

doing the last stretch by the main road. Colin was amazed at the number of antelope he spotted near the fence. He spotted abundant impala, blesbok, reedbuck, kudu, warthog, and zebras.

They seemed to study the fence; perhaps some originated from the neighbouring farm. However, the farm was also teeming with birdlife.

Colin mentioned to Hans, the person in charge of erecting the fence, 'It appears that loads of animals are studying the new barrier.'

Hans replied, 'It is normal and happens every time we put up a fence. The animals are like us humans. They are interested in what is happening to their surroundings.'

Colin returned home and informed Susan of his expedition. 'Did you know we even have zebra on the farm? Let's paint all our vehicles with black and white stripes. That could be our branding.'

Two months later, they had completed the entire complex. Colin was impressed and admitted his satisfaction to Susan. 'The place looks lovely, with all the solar lights lighting up the footpath to the cottages. I want to spend a holiday here myself.'

Susan agreed. 'I don't think we will have many complaints from our guests. The secret now is to get

visitors to book the cottages. If it is successful, we may consider a few more houses by the river.'

That weekend, their first guests arrived. Tanya brought two friends home from boarding school. They had a whale of a time swimming and horse riding.

Susan remarked, 'Judging by Tanya's school friends' remarks. I will have to give the farm five stars. Now let's see how the real world feels.'

Colin and Susan used the same marketing company as their neighbours, Chris and Mary. They anxiously waited for the phone to ring for the first few days. With relief, they received the first booking for the weekend.

It had been an enormous success, with a tiny problem: they had no fishing rods available for hire. Colin had to rush to Louwsburg to buy anything to keep the guests happy.

Although hunting or shooting birds was not allowed, they did allow fishing in the river.

While in Louwsburg, he explained the predicament to the store owner and ordered six complete fishing kits for guests to hire.

To keep the farm family orientated, they did not have dangerous animals and did not allow shooting. Guests were not allowed to bring rifles, but handguns were allowed for protection against snakes.

Soon, Colin had to find a few more horses for horseback tours with Manie as the guide—he was proving well-liked by the women and children while the men went fishing.

Colin and Susan carefully chose the materials for the three cottages they would build by the river: timber stilts that could withstand possible flooding, pre-cut wooden planks, solar panels, a borehole pump, and septic tanks. Colin hired Johan, a local builder with excellent carpentry skills, to assemble the cottages and ensure the labourers installed everything correctly.

These cottages by the river proved popular with the men keen on fishing and were always fully booked.

Later, they offered guest safari trips with Manie as their guide to one of the local game reserves belonging to Mr Calitz. They could view various animal species there, including white and black rhinos, lions, leopards, elephants, giraffes, nyala, wildebeest, etc. Rare species included cheetahs, wild dogs, and hyenas.

Most of the families visiting found enough excitement in looking at the stunning view and

Theft Comes with a Price

enjoyed the private and picturesque location from a cosy cabin. They were bound to spot zebras, impalas, and abundant birds on the short walk to the river.

For the more adventurous, the farm had smaller antelope such as blesbok, grey duiker, mountain reedbuck, steenbok, and bigger game such as kudu, nyala, bushpig and warthog that made up the diversity of the game. Guests could spot these best on pony treks.

Some guests would wander around the grounds until they found a spot by the shimmering blue pool. They'd lounge in beach chairs, their skin baking in the sun, sipping on icy drinks while they cooled off with occasional dips in the water.

Most evenings, the aroma of smoky barbeque wafted through the air as guests gathered around the crackling fire. Laughter and conversation punctuated the night sky, stories of exploration and discovery echoing in the darkness.

Colin and Susan were beaming with pride as they watched their young business thrive. But then, a police van screeched to a halt outside their farmhouse, and Sergeant Botha stepped out of the truck. He looked grim and informed them that Chris and Mary Sanders had been murdered in their farmhouse, now reduced to rubble.

Theft Comes with a Price

The shock of the news reverberated through Colin and Susan's bodies. They had known Chris and Mary for some time and thought they were invincible. It seemed as if the killer was getting closer and closer to them. That night, they locked every door and window, and Susan clung tightly to Colin as they tried to come to terms with the recent events.

Colin and Susan knew they had to keep their business running despite their fears. They wouldn't let fear dictate their lives. They were determined to make their business a success, and in doing so, they could help others who had fallen on hard times.

As the days passed, Colin became increasingly restless. He knew he couldn't sit still while a serial killer was on the loose. He had to do something, anything, to protect his family and his guests.

Sergeant Botha said it was pure vandalism as nothing seemed missing. Usually, during these farm murders, they took as much as they could load unless they were disturbed. The people involved typically were out of work and desperate. Their political leaders told them that the land belonged to them. They felt that they were only taking back what belonged to them.

They had, however, no intention to farm the property as that was hard work. The farm had no African family resident on it, and now it would be

overrun by squatters looking for a place to stay. These people had nothing to do with the murders. They were only opportunists looking for a place to live. 'You were wise to improve the Khumalo's kraal. With them in residence, you have a local workforce, plus a family that will prevent other Africans from squatting on your property. I warned Chris about this, but he found having an African family living on his farm a nuisance,' Sergeant Botha concluded.

After Sergeant Botha left to continue his investigation, Colin thought *It seemed a good idea to keep the Khumalo family happy living on the farm. Indirectly, we benefit. I will ask Manie what else we can do to improve their standard of living.*

Colin could only think of one additional improvement. He could extend the water pipe to fill a water holder automatically in the enclosure where the cattle spent the night. At present, the woman and children filled the drinking channel with buckets. Colin noticed that most of the time, it was empty.

Later, Colin and Manie visited the Khumalo's kraal, proposing the idea to the old man. Clapping his hands, the old man smiled and said something in Zulu. Manie translated that he complained the children would become spoilt. However, he thought it was a good idea as he had also noted that the drinking channel was mainly empty. He complained

that now he was so old, the children would ignore him when he complained about these things.

Colin asked Manie to list what material he required to install, which he would collect on his next trip to town.

There were great speculations between the farmers about who was responsible for the murders, ranging from drunk Africans to guests with mental problems. Nobody could explain why they took no articles of value. The police even found some cash in the kitchen in clear sight. It had to be someone who disliked Chris and Mary personally. That ruled out political farm murders, as there was no looting.

The following month, bookings were down as the news reached prospective guests. Susan told Colin, 'We are not getting many families as guests lately. It is mostly men looking for excitement, trying to catch Chris and Mary's murderers. I am getting scared. I don't want the word to go around the Africans that we harbour vigilantes. Soon, we will become targets ourselves. It was not my intention when we started this enterprise. I want a pleasant environment for families to enjoy what the bushveld offers: undisturbed animal and birdlife. I don't even mind the fishermen; they are harmless.'

'We will have to enforce some rules. Say the cottages near the house are for families only, and the

three cottages by the river are for bona fide fishermen only. They have to prove that they belong to some fishing club or something. Maybe that will stop the influx of these types we seem to attract,' Colin countered.

Susan agreed. 'Yes, please let us try something. I would rather have no guests than the type we are getting now.'

Colin immediately phoned the agency controlling the bookings and told them the new conditions before accepting them. He also ruled that payment should be taken only after receiving a booking confirmation from them. Colin asked to offer a 10% discount to encourage family bookings.

The booking agency advised Colin that the next three weeks of bookings had gone through the system and could not be changed now.

Colin affirmed to Susan, 'Well, I have done it. We have to put up with the current bookings for three weeks. After that, we will decide on our guests. That is the best they can do. I have also asked them to offer families a 10% discount.'

Colin said, 'Having other families around us benefits everyone's wellbeing. I don't think anyone would risk attacking when more than one family is present. That is what Chris and Mary did wrong; they rented out cottages not close to the homestead. It

requires a lot of energy, but we provide a hotel-like atmosphere with a swimming pool, a bar, and occasionally meals from a shared barbecue grill.'

A cold chill ran down Colin's spine as he realized the ominous truth - no one was invincible. His heart raced as he suddenly comprehended his vulnerability. At that moment, a deep-seated fear began to take root within him.

[Back to E-Book](#)