

Sniffer

Chapter 1

Her voice was cold.

'It's over between us, Robert.'

The words caught Robert in the stomach. He had not been expecting this. They had been going steady for almost two years, what would cause Carla to decide that their relationship was over? But to be honest with himself, he *had* seen something coming. For the past few weeks she had been growing distant, difficult to approach.

'What's wrong, Carla? What has happened that you have decided it's over between us?' he asked.

Her expressionless face told him she wasn't interested in discussing the issue.

'I don't want to talk about it. Things are not working between us, Robert, you know that. It's time that I return your keys and we don't see each other anymore.'

He wanted to fight. He wanted to argue with her, demand from her why she was walking out on him, wanted to know what the hell he had done wrong to deserve this treatment. Her expressionless face stopped him.

She dropped her set of keys on the table by the front door.

'Goodbye Robert,' she said. Without looking at him again she walked out, closing the door behind her.

Robert stood looking at the front door, not quite understanding what had just happened. How could Carla walk out on him like that, leaving no explanation and giving no reason? A sick pit opened up in his stomach, his emotions churning inside him. He wanted to feel angry, wanted to rush after her and confront her, but he stood rooted to the spot, staring at the front door. He heard her car start and listened as she drove off, out of the complex, out of his life.

'Fuck!' he said after a while, looking around the lounge. All of a sudden he had the night open and empty in front of him. That was not all he had open and empty in front of him. His life, his emotions, lay open and empty in front of him, and he didn't quite know what he could fill it with.

After staring around in hopelessness for some time he decided that, on the whole, it would be good to fill at least part of that emptiness with beer. He grabbed his jacket from the couch, made sure his wallet was in the pocket and left the flat, heading for Bootleggers, the pub across the street.

If he was lucky, Shirley the barmaid would be on duty and he could lay some of his problems on her, she was always a willing ear. He wondered what Shirley would say when she heard Carla had dumped him, without reason.

In Hillbrow, in a tiny, dirty, stinking flat on the sixth floor of a run-down apartment building, a man was whistling to himself.

They called him Jack Nobody, it was the nickname he used on the Internet chat rooms where he spent most of his time. Jack Nobody was buzzing. Everything around him was buzzing, the kitchen sink, the fridge and all the bits and pieces of equipment that were moving under his hands were buzzing. He felt fantastic, he was buzzing in perfect unison with everything around him. He watched his hands with care. Cooking Crystal Meth was a fine art, he didn't want to make mistakes. But his hands were dancing, adding this, moving that, clearing this, sorting that.

He was cutting. Hey hell, everybody did it, to make the Meth go further, to highlight it. Jack Nobody was a genius, he knew he was. When he was on a rush, he knew exactly what he was doing, nothing could go wrong, he was a god, the chef, *The Cook*. Right now he was cutting a batch of the most perfect Meth he had ever created. A smile played on his lips. With care he reached over for the bottle of Blue-San sanitizer.

This had never been part of the plan. Jack had cut Methamphetamine with a lot of stuff, it was pure genius that would make him add a measure of Blue-San to his recipe. He carefully poured in the Blue-San, pausing to scratch at the scabs on his face. They were itching, nothing he did could get rid of the tiny bugs crawling under his skin.

Jack Nobody soared on the high of a Crystal Meth hit after smoking the last of the previous batch he'd cooked up. He wasn't worried about running out of Meth, by early afternoon he would be finished with his latest batch. It was going to be a good batch. He didn't know what had made him decide to add the Blue-San, other than his own genius, of course, but the Blue-San sanitizer was *exactly* what his Meth needed, that special kick.

The Meth needed time to settle, to come together, to become Meth. He left the kitchen and walked through to his bedroom.

The room was a mess. Except for the mirror, nothing in the room had been cleaned for months. Hey hell, nothing else *needed* to be cleaned, it didn't matter. As long as the mirror was clean. Jack peered into the mirror and scratched at the scabs on his face. They didn't seem to be getting better. Maybe he should go see a doctor about his bad skin, he thought, picking up the bottle of glass cleaner and a roll of paper towels. Carefully tearing a sheet from the roll he gave the mirror a critical look and sprayed the surface with glass cleaner. He scrunched up the paper towel and set about cleaning the mirror.

Jack Nobody knew it was important to keep the mirror clean, how else would he be able to see his reflection? Under his fingers the glass was vibrating, like everything in the kitchen had done. He had to keep on polishing the mirror. He thought of his sister, who had died of prolonged use of Meth. She should have recognized the symptoms, her face had become sunken, her teeth had been nothing more than black stumps in her mouth. In the end she'd lost so much weight that she had looked like a skeleton. Fuck, she should have been more careful, Jack thought. He continued polishing the mirror. Time passed, ten minutes, then an hour, then three hours. Jack didn't think about the time, he thought about the mirror. That was important, getting the mirror as clean as possible.

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Lightning flashed and thunder rolled over the city. Outside Jack Nobody's apartment, in the run-down area that was Hillbrow, night arrived. Jack wasn't sure which night it was, he had lost track of when he'd last slept, he just knew it was night.

He was sitting on the floor of his filthy lounge, behind his computer. The chat room was alive tonight, but nothing was as alive as Jack Nobody. He loved chatting. The chat rooms were filled with people like him, outcasts, people who couldn't fit in no matter how hard they tried or how far their genius stretched.

Big Jody and Freak had come over, they lay sprawled on the couches. Neither of them used Crystal Meth, a fact that Jack cherished because it meant they weren't forever copping some off him, like most of his other so-called friends did. Both of them *were* high, they were pot smokers.

'Hey Jack, why are your Meth crystals blue?' asked Freak, leaning over to have a closer look.

'I cut my Meth with Blue-San this morning, isn't that crazy man? This is going to be the first time I try it out,' said Jack, smiling at Freak. Freak smiled back, but didn't say anything. He liked Jack, Jack and Freak had grown up together. Then Jack had begun using Crystal Meth, and what Freak now saw in front of him was sad. Jack had gone downhill fast over the past two months. His teeth were black stumps in his mouth, his skin was stretched tight over his bones and his face was covered in sores. The Meth had also given Jack a temper. The man would be cool and relaxed one minute, the next moment he would be angry, defensive and downright dangerous. Freak could only hope that Jack would not hit one of his mood-swings tonight.

Thank god I don't use that stuff, thought Freak, sitting back. He glanced over at Big Jody, who was reading a magazine.

Humming softly, Jack dropped a few of the blue crystals into his glass pipe and lit a flame under the bulb. As the smoke rose he drew on the pipe, inhaling deeply. He needed this stuff, a little pick-me-up, to keep himself steady.

What hit him was like nothing he had ever experienced before. In an instant the world around him was gone and he could see the swarms of molecules that made up his body. This was high as high had never been before. He turned his head to look at the swirling masses of colours that made up the world, wondering how he had never seen them before. Everything around him became colourful rainbows instead of surfaces, so insubstantial that he could put his hand right through them, into everything. He lifted his hand and pushed it into the couch, letting the brilliant colours of his arm mix with that of the couch, so that they became one. The beautiful, beautiful colours, whirling and

swirling around, rainbows dancing in his head, laughing at him, calling him, inviting him to leave his body and take a journey that only the soul could make.

Time stretched into infinity, Jack's body was no more, he was an insubstantial wisp, a breeze in the night, a thought floating amongst the clouds. His soul was free, his mind soared.

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He didn't know how long the high lasted before he came off it with a bang, the colours were gone, everything was solid again, the world was real. The buzz didn't stop though. Oh hell yeah, this was the best buzz he'd had in his life. That Blue-San had been a kicker all right, it had been exactly what the doctor had ordered.

'You OK man?' someone asked. The voice sounded concerned.

Jack looked around until his blazing red eyes fixed on Freak.

'That, Bro, was the best fucking shit I've smoked in my life!' he said, 'You should be here man, you should be here where I am now, there ain't no better place in the world, I promise you Freak, buddy, this is the best place ever!'

Freak frowned. It was obvious that Jack was enjoying himself, and that was worrying Freak. Worrying him, because he had never used Crystal Meth before, yet he was dying to have a go at Jack's pipe. Not that he could be addicted to Meth, he had never used it before. Still, his eyes were on the pipe and his mouth was dry.

'You got some of that stuff spare?' asked Jody, looking up from the magazine.

'Jody, we don't do Meth, we talked about it, remember? We're going to stay on pot, that's what we do,' said Freak, but his voice was unsure.

'Fuck man, that stuff smelled good, I think we should give it a try,' said Jody, licking his lips while looking intently at Jack's glass pipe.

'You can't become addicted to Meth by smelling it, can you?' asked Freak.

'Of course not, you have to smoke the pipe,' said Jack.

'In that case, why do I feel as if I urgently need a hit from that pipe?'

'Be my guest,' said Jack, who had been heating the pipe again. He handed the pipe over to Freak, who drew at the glass stem, filling his lungs. The pipe changed hands to Big Jody.

'Man, I have to let the chat rooms know about this, it's fucking crazy!' said Jack, turning his attention back to his computer. 'Let me tell those crazies what Jack Nobody has been up to, they'll love it!'

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The Internet did what it does best, it spread information. Within hours the recipe for an as-yet unnamed drug was being tried by a few people. Who they were was not important. It was the kind of people they were that mattered. They were the kind of people who would try anything to get to that next level, to hit that new high. They were also the kind of people who would immediately share that new high with their friends.

Within a week, as the new drug hit the streets around the world, demand was like nothing the dealers had ever encountered. Not that they were going to complain, they were cooking batches of the new drug as fast as they could.

Two weeks later the new drug had spread to every part of the world. It was in Johannesburg though, where the drug had been invented, that the most damage was being done. It was also here, on the dirty streets of Hillbrow, that the drug was named Sniffer. One sniff, it was said, was enough to get a person addicted.

Few believed it.

Until they'd had that one sniff.

Doctor Mantashe looked at the two children sitting across the desk from him. They were twins, ten years old, a sister named Jacky and a brother named Dennis. Both of them looked tired, but for the first time in days both of them looked healthy. They had been brought in ten days ago suffering from fever and headaches, getting them back to good health had been an uphill battle. Yesterday, as mysteriously as it had arrived, the pain and fever had left.

The doctor was worried. He still didn't know what disease these two had caught to make them so sick, every test he had run had been negative. That wasn't where his troubles ended though, over the past few days more and more cases like theirs had arrived at the hospital, people suffering from

headaches and fevers. Nobody could figure out what was causing the problems. The hospital, which had never been quiet, was currently filled to capacity, with new cases arriving hourly.

'You two were lucky, and I'm glad you are going home,' he said, smiling at them. 'I hope that whatever it was doesn't come back.'

The twins smiled back, they were even more glad that their ordeal was over.

'Thank you Doctor,' the both said, politely.

The doctor looked at their mother, who was standing behind them. Here was another worrying picture, the woman was clearly on drugs, and was starting to show signs of heavy addiction. He put it out of his mind, right now he had far too much to deal with, without taking her on about her drug habits.

'Jacky and Dennis can go home, they've been discharged,' he said, shuffling some papers around on his desk.

'Thank you Doctor, we appreciate everything you've done for them,' said the woman, and led Jacky and Dennis out of his office.

Stephen Venter walked out of the house and into the bright afternoon sunshine. It was a great day, he wanted to go for a ride. Hours after smoking Sniffer for the second time in his life, he felt like a new man. The drug had cleared his mind and concentrated his thoughts to the point where he felt fully in control of his life for the first time in weeks. He crossed the paving to the garage and was about to open the door when a low growl behind him made him turn around.

The growl had come from Bruno, his Rottweiler, a growl such as he had never heard from the dog before. Bruno had never been aggressive towards him. He was a good watchdog, a fantastic companion and, towards the family at least, very friendly. He could also be trusted to keep unwanted strangers out of the yard. Stephen had bought him when he was still a puppy and the dog had grown into a massive black dog with tan under parts.

Bruno looked at him with bloodshot eyes, his upper lips curled up in a snarl, revealing a ferocious set of canines. His head was slightly lowered, bulging muscles straining against his leather collar. The growl came out in one continuous rumble, the spine chilling sound coming from somewhere deep inside the dog's belly. Even as Stephen watched, a ball of foam dropped from the dog's mouth and landed on the pavement.

'What is it boy,' said Stephen, surprised at the show of aggression from his usually docile friend. The word 'Rabies' entered his mind, making him wonder if the dog could have been bitten by some rabid animal, a rat perhaps. Yet the dog had been vaccinated, he was sure it could not be Rabies.

The dog bunched its muscles and leaped, going straight for Stephen's throat. Before Stephen's drugged mind could comprehend what was happening Bruno's strong jaws had clamped onto his throat, sinking his teeth deep into Stephen's flesh, shaking his muscular neck. Stephen's hands flailed through the air, beating ineffectively at the Rottweiler as he was dragged to the ground under the weight of the dog. Blood sprayed over the pavement, gushing from the dying man. The dog bit again, this time taking most of Stephen's face in his mouth, crunching down as hard as he could, crushing bone.

The dog let go and stepped back, staring at his dying owner while still growling deeply. The headache it had been suffering from for the past two days had become unbearable, and a red mist of anger had come over it. On the pavement his owner made gurgling sounds as he drowned in his own blood.

Growling with anger, its head thundering with feverish pain, the dog turned and headed for the house, where his owner had left the door open. The woman had gone out, but the boy was still in the house, he could get the boy too.

Two days after leaving the hospital, Jacky walked into the lounge and folded her arms. 'Dennis, I'm hungry,' she said.

Dennis tore his eyes away from the magazine to look at his ten year old twin sister.

'Why tell me? Tell Mommy.'

Jacky sighed and rolled her eyes. 'Mommy's zonked. She and Dadda smoked that blue stuff, now all she wants to do is comb her hair. Every time I tell her I'm hungry she says she's coming, and then she goes on combing her hair.'

Dennis put the magazine down and got up. When their parents were on drugs there was no other option, they had to help themselves. He hoped there was something to eat, because these days the fridge and cupboards were bare more often than not. It was much worse since they had come out of hospital, worse than it had ever been.

‘Come on,’ he said, starting towards the kitchen. It was best to get Jacky something to eat, then she would leave him alone for a while.

They were in luck, the loaf of bread in the tin was only half stale. He checked the fridge for butter or margarine, but there was none, the fridge was empty. It didn’t matter, they were used to eating their bread dry. In the cupboard he found an almost empty bottle of peanut butter, which kind of made up for the butter in any way. He was smearing this on the bread when he noticed his sister smiling at him.

‘What’s up?’ he asked, noticing the smile.

‘I’m glad you’re here to look after me,’ said Jacky.

He finished smearing the bread and handed her a plate.

‘Remember last year when Mommy and Dadda got really bad?’ he asked, walking back to the lounge.

‘When Welfare made us go live with that other family? Of course I remember, it was awful,’ answered Jacky.

‘I think it’s going to happen again,’ said Dennis, sitting down. ‘Dadda hasn’t been going to work lately, and it’s been four days since Mommy last took us to school.’

The twins had grown up with their parents’ drug addiction. Over the years they had learned to read their parents, to know when to keep out of the way because they’d had bad drugs. They’d also grown to know that sometimes there would be little or no food in the house. Recently the television and Hi-Fi system had gone missing from the house. When Dennis had asked about this he’d been told it was none of his business. Dennis, however, had shared his suspicion with his sister, that the stuff had been sold and the money had gone towards drugs, a suspicion that Jacky fully agreed with.

They didn’t have many friends at school. The other children were different from them, they had good parents, and things like telephones and new clothes, and toys and books and stuff. Dennis and Jacky had each other, and the hunger. Always they had the hunger, and always they were finding ways of beating the hunger. They knew where every fruit tree in the neighbourhood was, they knew which of their friends were good to bum a sandwich off of, and they knew how to do small jobs for other families in the neighbourhood to get money to buy food.

They also knew that if they didn’t go to school for a few days, the people from *Welfare* would come knocking.

‘We should walk to school tomorrow,’ whispered Jacky, after swallowing the bread that was suddenly sticking in her throat.

The twins did not like the people from Welfare. The woman that usually came was big and fat and smelled of stale sweat, and she was bossy. They were sure she only did the job so that she could bully the children. Each of her massive hands had a grip like a vice, when she grabbed the twins and walked them to her car both Jacky and Dennis could feel their arms grow numb from lack of blood-flow.

Jacky waited for Dennis to finish eating, took his plate and walked back to the kitchen while he continued reading his magazine. She was more worried about her parents than usual. They seemed to have cottoned on to a new drug, something called Sniffer, and they were using lots of it. When she’d gone to ask her mother for something to eat she’d noticed that her mother’s skin was turning an unhealthy shade of blue. It was the new drug, she was sure of it. Mommy and Dadda were using a lot more than they usually used when they smoked stuff like Meths.

She sighed. It was only a matter of time before Welfare would be back for Dennis and her.

The city bustled.

As always Johannesburg had gone from winter straight into summer in one quick leap. One day the air was freezing, the next day it was sweltering hot and the big summer sweat began.

Around the landmark broadcast tower, where Hillbrow lay spread out like a dirty rag, the noise was almost unbearable. The streets were thronged with people, taxis crawled up and down, their horns blaring. Music pumped from shebeens and street vendors quarrelled about prices. In the

sweltering streets the smell of cigarette smoke mixed with that of marijuana, the smell of food cooked on open braziers on the pavements got lost in the smell of dirt and decay that prevailed in the squalor. Hookers strolled the streets, unmolested by policeman. On street corners the pimps and drug dealers chatted, each trying to outdo the others in dress and jewellery. Golden chains and golden teeth flashed and reflected the sparkling sun.

In the more well-to-do areas like Rosebank and Sandton, things were not much different. The shouting was less, so were the blaring hooters of the taxis, yet the sun did not choose her victims with care. Between the buildings the heat baked up from tar roads, pavements and steel manhole covers. There was almost no wind, what breeze there was, was blocked off by the buildings. Jackets that had been worn snug against the cold that morning were now being carried over shoulders. In offices all around town, heaters had been switched off and air conditioners had been switched on.

Scattered throughout Johannesburg, suburbs lay under their leafy canopy of trees, the houses at least somewhat protected against the beating sun. In the more affluent areas, expensive cars drove up and down, driven by mothers fetching their young from school. In the poorer areas the children walked, or took the bus. The world's largest urban forest lay like a giant green lawn with pathways made of roads criss-crossing it this way and that.

The highway ringing the city shimmered in the heat, the cars' windows and windshields reflecting the sun like the facets of glittering diamonds. Here and there was a hold-up, but mostly the cars were moving smoothly, the morning traffic was over and afternoon traffic had not yet begun. A great shadow passed over the city as a jetliner cruised in to land at Oliver Tambo International airport.

Almost every street corner was occupied by people. Beggars and street vendors, each tried to get a few coins out of motorists, dodging between cars and shouting, smiling when a car drove up and scowling when the driver shook his head. These were the people that made up the largest part of a city that had forgotten what the word sleep *meant*. Sometimes, in the dead of night, things slowed down, but it never slept anymore.

The metropolis had swallowed the towns around it. To the north, Pretoria was a short hop away. Krugersdorp to the west was nothing more than a suburb. Even Soweto with its million plus inhabitants was seen as part of Johannesburg.

To the south, the heads of the mines stood sentinel against the skyline, pumping humans and equipment up and down the world's deepest mines, driving the engine that was the purse of the city. Sludge dams lay gleaming under the midday sun, the water slowly evaporating.

All was good, the city ran like a well oiled machine.

For now, the sun beat down.

In the north of the country the winds had turned, clouds were blowing in and the land lay waiting. The summer rains were about to start.

Chapter 2

'Listen, Carla, you have to stop calling me. You broke up with me and I've moved on. Go find yourself a new boyfriend or something, stop calling me!'

Sitting alone at one of Bootleggers' rough-hewn wooden tables, Robert sighed and rolled his eyes. He should have known better than to answer Carla's call. After she dumped him two months ago he had found himself a new girlfriend. Then Carla had realized that good boyfriends were hard to come by and decided she wanted him back, when it was too late. She was chatting away in his ear, but Robert wasn't listening to anything she was saying. It was Friday afternoon, and as always Bootleggers was teeming with people. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the sexy figure of Shirley enter the bar and head towards him, her blond hair streaming out behind her.

'Listen, Shirley's arrived,' he said, ending the call without giving Carla time to reply.

'The woman is mental,' he grumbled as he stood up to kiss Shirley.

'How are you?' he asked, moving up to make space for her.

'Great, and you?'

'Good, except for the witch who called again,' he answered.

Shirley gave him a look that said she didn't want to hear anything about it, Carla was his problem, not hers. After ordering a beer she turned her attention back to Robert.

'I met Fin on the way in, she's quickly stopping at the loo, then she's joining us for a drink. She says she has something important to tell us.'

Robert took Shirley's hand, lacing his fingers into hers.

'Fin is a reporter, she's always got something important to tell us,' he said.

'Had a good day?' asked Shirley.

'Short-shift Friday is the best,' he replied, looking around when someone placed a hand on his shoulder. It was the red-headed Fin, or rather Deirdre Finey-Richardson, who everybody knew as Fin.

'Hey Fin, what have you been up to?' he asked.

She leaned down and pecked him on the cheek.

'I've been having a headache,' she said, sitting down. 'Listen, you two must watch my report on the eight o'clock news tonight, it's big news, and it's important.'

'But not so important that you're going to tell us about it, right?' teased Robert, who knew full well that Fin wasn't allowed to talk about her news broadcasts before they'd gone on air.

'You know the rules, but please, don't miss this one,' she said.

'Is something wrong, Fin?' asked Shirley. 'Apart from the headache, I mean. You look terrible.'

'I had a bad fever a few weeks ago,' said Fin. 'I'm hoping this is a throwback from that.' She looked about to say more, then seemed to change her mind and kept quiet.

'Sounds like you've caught a bug,' said Robert, belching beer behind his hand. 'Scuse me.'

'You shouldn't be drinking,' said Shirley, looking at Fin with concern.

'Yeah, like that's going to happen. Promise me you'll watch my report on the news at eight. You can call me afterwards if you have questions. I have to run, got to get back to the studio,' she said, getting up and trying to smile. It came out as a pained grimace.

'Forget work, go see a doctor,' said Shirley, as Fin drained her glass and disappeared into the bustle that was Bootleggers on a Friday afternoon.

'I wonder how Leonard handles her working all the time,' said Robert.

'Come on! Leonard is a sweetie, he worships the ground she walks on,' answered Shirley. 'Besides, that red-head has got him wrapped around her little finger.'

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'I could have done with another beer,' said Robert, pushing open the door to his apartment and switching on the light. Considering that Robert was twenty five years old, the apartment was comfortable and well furnished. Being a clerk at a bank had helped him secure a loan with easy repayment terms, money he had spent on personal creature comforts.

'We promised Fin we would watch her report tonight,' said Shirley, dropping her jacket on a couch and heading for the kitchen, from where her voice came a few moments later. 'There are some cold beers in the fridge, if you want.'

'Sounds good,' said Robert, switching on the television.

The television was on the sports channel, where Robert preferred it to be. He selected the news channel that Fin worked for and turned up the sound. It was a few minutes before the news broadcast was due to start.

The news was preceded by the weather report. Robert listened with half an ear while a curly haired blond gave the weather report. There were more flood warnings, and he'd been seeing storm warnings in the newspapers too. Here in Johannesburg the drainage systems were good though, he didn't have to worry about storms. Out in the countryside it might be a different thing, but so what, he thought. South Africa was an arid country, it could probably do with some extra rain.

'Fin didn't look well tonight,' said Shirley when she came out of the kitchen carrying two glasses of beer.

Robert stared at her. Shirley was twenty three, and sexy as the day was long. Her legs weren't skinny, they filled her jeans perfectly and her buttocks were as firm as any man could wish for. From there he worked his way up to the swelling of her breasts, then further up to her gorgeous face. It was amazing that he had hooked up with her only days after Carla had dumped him.

'She did look a bit green about the gills. Well, blue actually,' said Robert, taking a glass of beer from Shirley. 'Maybe she's been working too hard, we've hardly seen her over the last two months. Bootleggers used to be a second home to her.'

'Here she is,' said Shirley, nodding towards the television. 'I didn't notice it at Bootlegger's, but wow, she's lost a lot of weight, look how skinny she is!'

Robert turned up the sound as the face of the newsroom anchor was replaced by that of Fin, standing in front of what looked like one of the seediest apartment buildings in Johannesburg.

“Good afternoon, everybody. Police this afternoon confirmed that a new drug, officially called Derelex and carrying the street name of Sniffer has hit the streets of Johannesburg, where they believe it might have originated. The new drug, which is a derivative of Methamphetamine or Crystal Meth, picked up the nickname Sniffer after it was found that smelling, inhaling, or sniffing the smoke from a pipe or joint being smoked by a user, will cause a person to be instantly addicted.”

Fin turned so that the viewers could get a clear view of the building behind her.

“It is in this building that police believe notorious drug dealer Jack Nobody first manufactured the drug. Two friends of Jack Nobody, claiming they had never used Crystal Meth before but were present when Jack smoked Sniffer for the first time, also claimed they became addicted from inhaling the second hand smoke on that first occasion.”

The camera panned back to Fin’s face, and once again Robert and Shirley could see that she wasn’t looking well, although her make-up artist had done a good job at hiding it from the camera. Only those who knew Fin well would be able to tell that something was amiss.

“Jack Nobody, who died today, a little more than two months after first using his newly created drug, sent the recipe for this new drug into the world via the Internet on the day he created it. It is believed there are already more than a hundred thousand users of the drug worldwide, of which most are in South Africa.”

The camera cut back to the anchor in the studio.

‘We’re joined now by Deirdre Finney-Richardson,’ said the anchor, as the camera panned out to show the red headed reporter sitting on the other side of the news desk.

‘Fin, you say this new drug is instantly addictive if you so much as smell smoke from it. Can it really be that bad?’ she asked.

“This new drug is the most addictive substance the narcotics underworld has ever had to deal with, Belinda. It became known as Sniffer because even sniffing the smoke will get you addicted. Users I have spoken to claim they were simply in the same room as regular users while the drug was being smoked, and they became instantly addicted. Of course, it took some time for everybody to understand the severity of the situation.”

‘What are the police doing about it?’ asked the anchor.

‘There’s not much the police can do about it,’ answered Fin. *“Except for the one extra ingredient, Sniffer is almost exactly the same as Crystal Meth. The use of it has spread globally, it won’t be long before we start seeing the effects of the drug on the streets.”*

Robert turned the sound down and looked at Shirley, an unbelieving expression on his face.

‘Come on, a drug that you take one sniff of and you’re addicted, just because you’re in the same room as the person using the drug? That can’t be possible. You’d have to take a pull at that pipe to get enough of the drug to become addicted.’

‘That’s not what Fin said,’ said Shirley. ‘You know Fin, she’s an excellent reporter, she wouldn’t make claims like that if she didn’t have enough hard evidence to back her up, reporters from other news channels would tear the story apart.’

Robert put his free hand around Shirley’s shoulders and pulled her closer. ‘They’re going to try to do that in any case. If what Fin says is true, it would mean that before long everybody in the world would be addicted, you and I included,’ he said, switching the TV to his favourite sports channel.

‘Hey, they’re not finished yet!’ said Shirley.

‘I’ve seen enough,’ said Robert. ‘The Bulls are playing the Sharks tonight, I want to see the Sharks get slaughtered.’

‘As if that’s going to happen,’ said Shirley, playfully jabbing him in the ribs. She reached for the tablet to search the electronic news media. On the couch next to her Robert curled his hands through her long blond hair, glancing down at what she was doing on the tablet every now and again.

‘Friggin hell, Robert, all the news sites are picking up on Fin’s story. It’s going viral,’ she said.

‘I notice,’ said Robert, abandoning the game to look at the pad. ‘What’s that story about the cops in New York being addicted to it?’ he asked.

Shirley followed the link and read while Robert once again checked up on the game.

‘Eye witnesses are claiming that a number of policemen in New York are being treated after coming into contact with the drug. According to this, the policemen all became addicted to Derelex

while they were arresting drug dealers. Friggin hell, that sounds bad! Imagine your job is to catch these people, and all of a sudden you are one of them!

'Sounds awful, all right,' said Robert. 'But not as bad as my beer being finished.' He got up and headed to the kitchen for a fresh beer. 'So let's say you walk down the street and somebody in an alley somewhere is using this Sniffer stuff, so you get a whiff of it. You are immediately addicted, but you don't know that you're now an addict. You get cravings for something, you don't know what for though. So how do you end up using this drug?'

He came out of the kitchen and handed Shirley a glass of beer.

'There's a piece here about that,' answered Shirley, taking the beer from him and glancing at the television screen. Both of them enjoyed the friendly rivalry that their support for the two different teams brought. 'Bugger,' she said, as the Bulls full-back dived over the try line with the ball.

'Go boy!' shouted Robert, jumping up and almost spilling beer in his excitement.

Shirley waited for him to calm down before she continued.

'Anyway, they say the big problem is social media. Apparently that is how people found out that their headaches and fever were actually caused by Sniffer. Then everybody with these strange addiction symptoms simply went and sorted out their cravings.'

Robert looked at Shirley and shook his head. 'Come on Shirley, you don't read something on social media and decide whatever is wrong with you must be an addiction, so you go find a dealer, remembering that you've probably never used drugs in your life and you wouldn't know what a dealer looked like even if one walked up to you in the street!'

'Well, they say that is how bad the addiction is,' said Shirley. 'Oh, and the doctors didn't help either, according to this. Once the doctors knew what was happening, those who went to see their doctors got told exactly what it was.'

'If it's that bad, the world is bugged,' said Robert, shifting his attention back to the game. In the back of his mind though, a quiet unrest had taken hold.

'Come on Leonard, get away from that radio and have a drink with me,' said Fin, sticking her head into what had once been a study but which over the years had become a nest of wires and electronics where Leonard played with his radio system.

Leonard looked up and smiled at his wife. It was not often that she came home early, especially not after a big breaking story. 'I'll be with you in a second,' he said, shutting down the radio system. The radio was one of the special things in his life, he had built most of it himself. Outside the house stood a thirty meter high mast, at the top of which was the strongest antenna he'd been able to afford.

'Have you been talking to the whole world again?' asked Fin, a smile playing on her lips. She knew Leonard's love for his radio.

'Hell yeah. Mostly I've been chatting to Bill. He says summer is setting in well in the Cape and we shouldn't be expecting any more cold fronts this year.'

Leonard flipped a last couple of switches, swivelled around in his chair and stood up. They walked out to the back porch, Leonard stopping briefly to grab a beer from the fridge.

'What was the reaction to your story on Sniffer?' he asked, pulling out a patio chair and sitting down.

Fin rolled her eyes. 'It was unbelievable. A score of people called the studio to complain that I was talking nonsense, that no drug could be that addictive. Oh, and Pastor Barry called to say that it was the work of the government.'

Leonard chuckled. Fin often told him about Pastor Barry, who called the news channel after every big story to claim that the government was behind whatever had happened this time. He looked up at the light on top of his antenna mast, glowing red in the night sky.

'Bill watched your show. When I spoke to him a few moments ago he said Cape Town is being flooded with Sniffer. According to him the Cape Flats is already overrun with people using Sniffer, and it's spreading into the more affluent areas.'

Fin refilled her glass from the bottle of wine that stood on the table.

'Leonard, there's something I have to tell you,' she said, and for the first time since he'd known her, Leonard caught a sense of dread in her voice. He looked at her carefully, but in the dimmed lights of the patio she was looking into her glass of wine, not at him.

'What is it?' he asked, a strange sense of worry creeping up on him.

Fin took a gulp of wine. When she looked up she avoided his eyes.

'I'm addicted to Sniffer,' she said, looking down again. She gulped down the rest of the glass and reached for the wine bottle.

Leonard sat stunned. He'd known Fin for many years, she'd never in her life done drugs. That she should be sitting there telling him that she was addicted to a drug that was sure to kill her was something he could not fathom. The words '*Are you sure?*' formed on his lips, but he bit them back. Of course she would be sure. The Fin he knew made dead sure that what she said was true, her job depended on it.

'Damn,' he said at last, feeling lost for words. 'How long have you been using it? Why did you start?'

A tear rolled down her cheek when she looked up, still avoiding his eyes. She took a deep calming breath before speaking.

'I've been using it for a few weeks, and I think you can guess why. Sniffer is instantly addictive, Leonard, I've been telling you that for weeks, you smell the smoke and you're addicted. I was right there, doing research in stinking, smoke-filled flats, in cook houses where they make this stuff. Hell, I've been in the kitchen where Sniffer is supposed to have been invented. Of course I bloody well inhaled the fumes. And so I got addicted, and I've been using Sniffer ever since.'

Leonard stood up and went to stand behind Fin's chair, put his arms around her and hugged her.

'OK, let's handle this like we handle all our problems, the two of us together,' he said, putting his face next to hers so that he could feel the heat from her skin. She was crying, silent tears flowing down her cheeks.

'There's nothing we can do about it, Leonard. But you have to promise me that you won't go near anybody that might be smoking Sniffer. Don't take a chance on getting addicted, it's a one-way ticket to hell.'

Leonard let go and pulled out a chair so that he could sit next to her. 'We'll have to send you to a rehab centre,' he said, sitting down and taking a long drink from his beer.

'That won't happen, for two reasons,' she answered. 'Firstly, all the rehab centres that I know of have been overrun by patients. Secondly, the people who go there aren't being cured, they're dying. So I'm staying right here. I'm going to continue doing my job, doing what I love doing.'

'And you're going to continue using Sniffer?' asked Leonard, a note of dread in his voice.

'Yes, you know it's that or heart failure. I'll make you a promise though. I won't ever smoke Sniffer here, at our house. When I use Sniffer, I'll make damn sure it's where nobody can get addicted from my smoke.'

She reached over and refilled her glass with unsteady hands. When she spoke again he could hear the hard resolve in her voice, breaking through the tears that were still flowing.

'You'll just have to be there for me, because it's going to get rough, in the end. I've seen them go, and it's not pretty. You be there for me, Leonard Richardson, and make sure my end is not too painful.'

The next morning, on the other side of the suburb, Carla Botha was sitting awake for the second day in a row. The drugs cleared her mind and chased sleep far, far away. She dropped three large blue crystals into the glass smoking pipe and toyed with the lighter.

She understood now about the mistake she had made with Robert. When she had decided that her drug habit was not good for him she had wanted to save him, to get out of his life for his own good, and she had walked out on him.

That had been before Sniffer.

Sniffer had made her see the light, showed her that it had been a mistake to leave him, and she would do anything to get him back. He would have to leave his new girlfriend, and come back to her.

Her thoughts were dark, she had been thinking about that bitch of a woman the whole night long. The bitch had stolen her boyfriend, and she was going to pay. Carla needed Robert back and nothing was going to stop her from getting him. Especially not Missy Bitch, Shirley.

At last, with a loving look at the glass pipe, Carla lit a flame under the crystals. Up to a few days ago she had rarely used any drug stronger than marijuana, and then it had been the occasional