

# SECRETS ON THE PLAINS



MEIRING FOUCHÉ

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*by*

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and

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## **SECRETS ON THE PLAINS**

The cover illustration for the Ryk Schoonraad series was generated through AI software, enhancing the narrative. This book is being released in English for the first time in e-book format.

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### **SECRETS ON THE PLAINS** by Meiring Fouche

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## SUMMARY

When her horse is taken down and she finds herself at the mercy of her pursuers, Miemsie faces a brutal ordeal. But just as all hope seems lost, a dark-bearded adventurer, Ryk Schoonraad, emerges from the depths to save her. Bound by a shared past and driven by honor, Ryk pledges to help Miemsie retrieve what has been stolen and protect her father, a prospector who has discovered a mineral find that could reshape their future.

Their perilous journey takes them to the dusty town of Driekoppies, where tensions flare in a dangerous standoff with the bandits. A storm forces Miemsie to make a daring escape across a flooded river, while Ryk fights to keep the relentless gang at bay. As the danger escalates, secrets unravel, alliances are tested, and the stakes grow higher.

Meanwhile, Henk Bouwer, Miemsie's father, faces a battle of his own. Tortured by Mertel's gang, he must protect the location of his emerald-rich mine, even as they threaten Miemsie's life. With time running out, Miemsie and Ryk must outwit their enemies, reclaim the stolen map and saddlebag, and save Henk before the bandits seize everything.

Filled with pulse-pounding action, high-stakes drama, and a touch of romance, *Secrets on the Plains* is a gripping tale of bravery, loyalty, and the unyielding spirit of the South African frontier. Will Miemsie and Ryk triumph over the odds and protect her father's legacy, or will the wilderness claim their dreams forever? The novel promises an exhilarating mix of danger, heroism, and romance, set against the harsh yet beautiful backdrop of the untamed wilderness in South Africa.

## EXTRACT

It all happens so quickly, and then it feels to her as if her lungs are going to burst. The air she just inhaled is nearly gone. She has reached the soft sandy bottom of the hippo hole, and around her, there's only the dim half-light of the cool water mass. There, at the bottom, she struggles and wrestles once more to try to break her bonds and reach the sunlight, but in vain. Her hair is a swinging red tangle beneath the water as she jerks her head back and forth in an attempt to shake off the rock.

Her face is twisted with naked fear. She opens her mouth to scream in blind despair and then swallows the first mouthful of water. It is then, on the brink of unconsciousness, on the black edge of death, that she sees as if in a dream the pale monster sliding toward her. On the narrow boundary between consciousness and unconsciousness, she imagines it's a nightmare in which she's trapped. A strange figure, this one, rushing toward her. Something like a monster from a storybook.

She only remembers how something grabs her by the shoulders, painfully hard and with great strength. Then she feels a floating sensation, as if she has become lighter than water and air, as if she is caught in a great wind that carries her up to the clouds. And then she knows nothing more.

# 1. SECRETS ON THE PLAINS

## Chapter 1

### FOUR VILLIANS AND A GIRL

Through the blue-green thorn veld, a single rider races, and the light-brown horse runs so fast that it seems as if its belly is touching the ground. The rider heads straight southeast through the thorny bushes, through the ripe grass, and through the gray open plains.

That rider sits forward in the saddle, just behind the saddle horn, and she keeps looking back. Then she lays into the brown horse with her whip, and it speeds up even more to close the distance ahead.

This girl sits comfortably in the saddle because she knows the back of a horse well. Her hair, long and shiny reddish-brown, is gathered under a bright sunbonnet at the back of her head, and with her wide riding skirt and all, she sits astride the saddle like a man. Her hands are small, fine, and tanned, but firmly on the reins, and in her right hand, she swings the whip of genuine hippo hide with striking skill.

She comes down a rocky slope, twisting and kicking up dust between the thorn bushes when she looks back again. A cold feeling grips her insides as she sees them appear on the horizon, the four riders who have been chasing her for almost an hour. She knows them by heart now. There are the two dark brown horses, the jet-black horse, and the light blue one. When she looks back, she sees them for a moment on the horizon, but then she sees how they spur their horses on again and come storming after her anew.

About an hour ago, they tried to ambush her in the rocky outcrops further north, but with a skillful twist of her horse down a sandy gully, she temporarily shook them off, reached the flat plain, and then began to outrun them. She got a good lead on them because she is light, and her horse is strong. But now they are relentlessly closing in on her. She saw this with shock. Apparently, her light-brown stallion does not have the stamina of the pursuers' horses.

There is a fierce determination on her beautiful face as she leans forward in the saddle again and speaks softly to her horse. Even if she dies today, she must not let herself be caught. Because if she is caught,

it could mean that a great ideal of her father will be lost. Not only for him, but also for her, who has nearly grown up in this tough wilderness. A suffocating fear grips her because she knows how far Kimberley still lies. Miles and miles away across these grass plains. She will still have to race through dozens of camel thorn groves and probably hundreds of gray bush plains before she can reach the red earth and the cluster of houses of Kimberley.

But she simply must reach it, no matter what. She takes the next hill swiftly and determinedly. Her stallion's breath comes in gasps, but he now runs with a deadly rhythm and flies like a kudu over the blood-red anthills that temporarily try to obstruct his path. She climbs out of the wide open space, and when she looks back again, she sees that her pursuers are already in the riverbed of the plain. Now they are catching up with her quickly. She also sees that they are no longer chasing in a group. They have spread out slightly, and she immediately knows what the intention is. When she suddenly wants to dart to one side or the other, one or the other of them will immediately cut her off.

The small saddlebag made of kudu leather flaps wildly as she races, and occasionally, she touches it quickly, just to make sure it's still there. Then she pushes it behind her back, where it can be safer, and focuses intently on the chase again.

The hill takes her up to a red, rough rocky area, to the crest of a plateau through which a deep fissure runs. She heads for it now. She knows this fissure through the plateau very well because she and her father once came through here. It was long ago, but she remembers it as if it were yesterday. Actually, it's a small river that flows here and has carved a path through the rocky area over the years.

In the riverbed, she knows, there is usually a long hippo hole that holds water for months. She remembers this well because she and her father once camped there. Then she washed their clothes there.

Just before she enters the pass, she looks back again and then realizes with a sharp pang of distress that she won't be able to stay ahead much longer. They have caught up with her incredibly fast in the past few minutes. So fast that it seems as if they have suddenly mounted fresh horses. She sees them leaning forward in the saddles and how they urge their horses on with their whips.

For a moment, she thinks wildly in the saddle about what she should do now.

And the next moment, she knows exactly what she has to do. Even if they shoot her out of the saddle, even if they torture her, and even if they destroy her. Her secret, she will never give up. Never, as long as she lives. She would rather die, but her secret and her father's secret, she will keep to the bitter end.

She sharply swerves to the right and then to the left and takes the sandy pass that leads to the steep, red ravine through the plateau. Likewise, she will race through the pass, past the hippo hole, and when she exits the pass on the other side, she knows, there is a thicket of wait-a-bit thorn, camel thorn, large gray bush, and sweet thorn. There, she might be able to shake them off.

But she has barely gotten her plans in order when the light-brown stallion steps into a meerkat hole. In his speed, the horse nearly does a complete somersault, and in the process, he flings her far out of the saddle. But luckily, she grew up in this world. The stars spin before her eyes as she hits the sand, but she is almost immediately back on her feet, her head singing and with a sharp pain in her forehead. When she stands up, she knows at least that she hasn't broken any bones, and though she still sways back and forth, she manages to catch her horse by the bridle. The animal is white with foam from the hard chase. His flanks heave up and down, and his nostrils are flared wide.

She soothes him, strokes his neck, and then painfully swings into the saddle because the hard fall has badly bruised her body. The brief interruption in her flight leaves her short of breath, so she immediately digs in her spurs and races on.

She takes the narrow pass with precision and speed. The terrain here is a bit rocky, which slows her down. The brown horse, however, pushes forward bravely, and she's barely two hundred paces into the pass when it widens slightly, and she sees, with an inexplicable sense of relief, that the hippo pool is still full of water. She urges her horse on, and when they reach the flat ground within the pass, she brings him to a gallop.

A single gunshot echoes through the narrow passage, sounding insignificant at first. Then it reverberates from cliff to red cliff. In that brief moment of decision, she instinctively understands what has



happened. During her delay, one of her pursuers has flanked her from above on the cliffs.

Her horse rears high, standing on its hind legs for a few moments, then collapses beneath her. This time, she falls hard. When she hits the ground, it feels as if all the life is drained from her and as though every bone in her body is broken. There's a numb daze in her head, and her eyes can't see properly.

When she manages to lift her upper body, she sees her horse lying motionless a few steps away. She's only a few feet from the edge of the water. She shakes her head vigorously, trying to clear it, and desperately moves her body to regain her strength.

Then she hears the clattering of hooves in the narrow pass. She hears someone shouting, a horse neighing, and she knows she must act, no matter what happens. She drags herself to the edge of the water. Quickly, she unfastens the small satchel, places a rock in it, and with a tired swing of her arm, she hurls it into the still, deep water. At the same moment, a bullet sends a splash of water into the air, and she hears a harsh, terrible laugh. She slowly raises her head, and then she sees the rider on the cliffs above her.

"What are you doing now, cousin?" the rider shouts, and then he laughs again, a hollow sound coming from deep in his throat. "I almost shot your little finger off."

She feels a cold chill where she lies in fear, even though the high summer sun beats down on her by the water.

She instinctively lowers her head onto her arms because she knows this is the end.

Furthermore, she only becomes aware of reality again when rough hands grab her and pull her to her feet. She staggers on her feet, with one hand shielding her eyes.

"Not too bad," says the short, stocky man, standing wide-legged in front of her with his hands on his hips, his leather chaps gleaming in the sun. "No, not a bad little chick at all," he says. "Just a pity you're so stubborn, old cousin. Surely, you didn't think you could outrun us, did you?"

She tries to make out his face, but it's impossible, as he has tied his red neckerchief around the lower part of his face, so only his gleaming eyes stare at her from beneath his wide-brimmed hat.

He snaps his fingers, commanding.

"Where is it? Where are the things you're taking to Kimberley?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she says softly, staggering again. The sunlight glints on her hair because her bonnet has slipped back.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. You better hurry, we don't have time, old cousin. We're heading to Kimberley. Where is it?"

At that moment, another rider arrives.

"I know where it is," he says, swinging his long body out of the saddle.

"She threw it in the hippo hole. I watched her. I was just too late to shoot. Not only that, but I wanted to shoot her through her hand."

The short man with his slight bowlegs and leather chaps looks up slyly at his companion. "Thrown in the hippo hole?" he asks.

The tall man nods in confirmation.

"I saw her throw her satchel into the hippo hole."

The short man grins, lifts his hat, and scratches through his dark hair.

"Aha," he says, "but then it's easy, really dead easy. If she threw it in, she can just as well fetch it out, right?" Then he steps aside and gestures with his whip towards the water.

"Go fetch the satchel, Missy," he commands.

But she remains motionless, not even blinking an eye.

Then, with a cruel, unexpected movement, he jerks the whip upward and strikes her with a furious blow across her shoulders, causing her to first flinch from the sudden pain and then slowly sink to her knees.

"This is the language I speak, old niece," he says in a hoarse voice. "I'm telling you to go fetch the satchel now because you know where it's hidden."

Where she lies on the ground, she looks up at the newcomer, her eyes blazing. Her eyes burn through her pain and humiliation, through fear and disgust.

"I'd rather see you in hell before I fetch that satchel."