

THE RED PEBBLES OF TANDBERG



MEIRING FOUCEE

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SUMMARY

In the wild borderlands of Graskolk, at the edge of the untamed Tandberg in the northern Cape Colony, mystery and danger cast a long shadow over the sun-baked streets. When the enigmatic Roelien van der Spuy arrives in this isolated outpost, she is driven by a singular purpose: to uncover the truth behind her father Helgaardt's disappearance two years ago. Her arrival disrupts the uneasy quiet of the town, stirring up whispers of a dark secret hidden in its depths.

Among the wary townsfolk, Roelien encounters Ryk Schoonraad, a rugged farmer whose curiosity about her quest quickly turns into something deeper. Together, they face growing hostility and the threat of deadly violence as their search for answers uncovers long-buried grudges and an undercurrent of betrayal. A menacing encounter with Basie Broeksema sets off a dangerous chain of events, while a series of near-fatal attacks on Roelien reveals that someone will go to any lengths to silence her. Ryk's discovery of a cryptic letter and a chance meeting with a wandering Bushman named Ghwarra point to a sinister conspiracy. The puzzle deepens with the murder of the eccentric Uncle Gerrie Volgraaff, whose cryptic journal holds tantalizing clues. As Roelien and Ryk follow the trail of secrets through veld fires and perilous encounters with the wilderness, the abandoned mine at the heart of Tandberg emerges as the epicenter of a chilling mystery.

Amid breathtaking landscapes and treacherous terrain, Roelien and Ryk must navigate a labyrinth of danger, betrayal, and hidden truths. As they piece together the fragments of Helgaardt's story, they are drawn toward a discovery that will not only unveil the secrets of the past but also challenge their courage and resolve. *The Red Pebbles of Tandberg* is a thrilling tale of intrigue and resilience, set against the backdrop of a harsh and unforgiving land. With danger lurking behind every corner and the stakes growing ever higher, the question remains. Will Roelien and Ryk unravel the truth in time, or will the secrets of Tandberg claim them as its final victims?

EXTRACT

Ryk puts his mug down and walks straight up to Broeksema. He slaps Broeksema hard on his shoulder. “Leave the girl, Broeksema.” But Broeksema is so busy trying to subdue the struggling girl that he apparently doesn’t hear it or doesn’t heed the command.

“Leave the girl, Broeksema!” Ryk Schoonraad shouts again.

But in vain. Broeksema is on the verge of conquering Roelien’s lips and apparently, he doesn’t even know what’s going on around him. Ryk grabs Broeksema by the shoulder with his left hand, gives him a tremendous pull, and when Broeksema turns his head, Ryk hits him a short, quick blow diagonally against his jaw so that Broeksema’s head jerks violently. Ryk has completely broken Broeksema’s grip.

Ryk sees how the man’s hand slips to his revolver holster. Therefore, he hits him a harder blow in the face. This time he puts all the power of his large torso behind the blow, and instead of Broeksema pulling out his revolver, his legs buckle under him, and he sags down against the bar. He falls there like an ox that has been shot, and the world tilts and turns with him. Ryk pulls him upright, grabs him behind the neck and by the seat of his pants, and drives him to the door. Then he slings him out into the street.

3. THE RED PEBBLES OF TANDBERG

Chapter 1

STRANGE VISITOR

It is hot and boring in the small bar in Graskolk, the small border village near the tip of the Tandberg in the wild, far northern Cape Colony.

The men standing there wave at the flies and drink their drinks. Their hats are pushed back on their sweaty heads, and there is not much talk because it is almost too hot to talk.

Today's cattle auction is over. The wagons, the neat spider carriages, the riders have almost all left. The excitement is over. The distraction that such an auction always brings is a thing of the past, and only the local men remain. Usually, they don't know what to do with themselves when such a distraction is over.

In its history, Graskolk has only had one major incident. Three years ago. But even that incident is almost forgotten.

The men barely look up when they hear the creaking of the two small swing doors through which one enters the bar. They don't even turn their heads when they hear the quick footsteps on the plank floor.

But when Kraai Hanekom bursts in here among them and makes his announcement, then heads turn and then a light of interest comes into their eyes.

"Guys," says Kraai Hanekom. "If you want to see something, look out in the street."

"What is it?" is asked back and forth. The first impressions range from a visit by a stray young lion or an attack by wild Bushmen or perhaps a large snake that has sailed into the main street.

"What is it, Kraai?" asks Basie Broeksema, a big, rough-built man with two huge shoulders and a neck like the hump of an Afrikaner bull.

"No," says Kraai Hanekom mysteriously, "rather go and look for yourselves."

Such an invitation is too much for the men. They feel for the butts of their pistols as they turn away from the bar as one man and hurry to the window. Some go and take up position in front of the window, and others go and peek over the two small swing doors that are still rocking back and forth after Kraai Hanekom's quick entry.

The men fall silent when they see what has aroused Kraai Hanekom's interest. It is indeed a sight to behold. It is a scene that one probably sees once in twenty years here in Graskolk.

It is a rider who has ridden into one street of Graskolk. It is a showy animal, that, a pale sorrel with almost pure white mane hair. A show-off that lifts his paws high and elegantly. His neck is curved, and his broad croup is pale in the sunlight. It is a special horse, such as one rarely sees. An animal that every border farmer will admire. But they only look very fleetingly at that fancy horse. It is actually the rider who attracts their attention.

Because the rider is a woman. She sits comfortably in the large English military saddle. She is wearing riding pants like a man. That in itself is something special for these men because it is not something that a man sees every day in the area. On her jet-black hair, which is caught in a neat bun behind her head, is a cute hat with a large brim, and what they notice most is the two long sheaths on either side of the saddle pommel. They see the rifle butts protruding from there. They see the bandolier around her body, and they see the pistol swinging here next to her.

She sits that horse like a man would sit him.

"Good heavens, good heavens," says Oom Gerrie Volgraaff. "But she can ride him. She rides him like a man."

The others remain speechless until the rider swings out of the saddle here in front of the small hotel and ties her horse to the halter railing. The men practically gasp for breath. She is petite, but solidly and firmly built. She is a beautiful person. She looks as upright as her riding horse. Her hair is blue-black, her eyes are almost purple, and her skin is deep brown like old honey from the cliff.

She looks around a bit, and it seems as if she takes in everything, about everything, in Graskolk with her watchful eyes.

And then she tiptoes up the steps, adjusts her swinging pistol, and comes straight towards the swing doors.

Bart Saaiman, the barman, is the first to react. With his comical fat body, he runs behind his bar. The other men scatter and hurry back to their standing places in front of the bar. It would be too embarrassing if this strange visitor came in and they were all standing there like a bunch of fools in front of the window and in front of the door.

To make everything even more realistic, most of them pick up their glasses and act as if they know nothing of what is going on.

She comes in quickly so that the doors swing back and forth, creaking. She darts to the corner of the bar. She doesn't look to the left or the right, and when Bart Saaiman gets himself together again, he is standing blushing in front of this beautiful maiden, who he estimates to be about twenty-two years old.

"Excuse me, madam," says Bart, "but you know that women are not really allowed in the bar."

"Don't lose your trousers," she says, her voice strong and penetrating, almost commanding. "I didn't come to drink. All I need is a cup of water, and then I would like to say a few words."

The others burst out laughing when she handled Bart so deftly. But when she suddenly looks towards their side, they fall silent like a bunch of naughty boys who have been caught.

Bart is so taken aback that he doesn't really know whether to go forward or backward. He does, however, scoop a cup of water for her from the drinking barrel and comes and hands it to her.

She takes off her hard hat, puts it down on the bar, and the men who are staring at her see how her black hair glitters and comes alive. She drinks the water, then puts the cup down and looks at the men. She looks at them one by one, as if she is summing them up, as if she wants to engrave the image of each one in her mind so as not to forget it again. In particular, she looks long and attentively at the slender, fit, alert fellow standing on the far side. His dark hair and his bright blue eyes interest her. His intelligent face seems to have made an impression on her.

And while she is staring at him like that, Ryk Schoonraad feels himself blush warmly, and he just hopes that the blush will not show on his tanned skin. He smiles awkwardly, and it strikes her how snow-white his teeth are, and in his eyes, she sees honesty, strength, and courage, and it feels to her as if she immediately feels drawn to the man.

Ryk Schoonraad, in turn, has a strange impression. While he is looking into her eyes, it is as if he feels an adventure being born here in the dead-quiet bar of Graskolk. It is as if she reminds him of someone, but he cannot think who. Her arrival is more than interesting to him. It is a

mystery to him. What would she come here to do? She is clearly a well-cared-for person from the far-off world. Perhaps from the world of Kimberley, or possibly even from the world of the Cape. What is she doing here with her beautiful riding horse, her two rifles, her pistol, and her beautiful, petite body?

When the strange girl speaks again, it is as if the silence becomes even deeper than it was. First, there is only the sound of her voice, and then when it has disappeared, everyone feels how something lingers in the bar. There is a deathly silence so that one can hear a fly stick to the side of a glass. But there is more than just silence.

After she has looked at them all carefully, the new arrival says. "I'll introduce myself. My name is Roelien van der Spuy."

She pauses for a while, and she looks at the men again one by one, as if she wants to determine what reaction her introduction has on each one of them, as if she is looking for the twitch of a mouth or the movement of a muscle or the gesture of a hand or the meaning in an eye.

After she has watched them attentively and intently for a while, Roelien van der Spuy says. "Maybe you know my father. My father was Helgaardt van der Spuy. He disappeared here without a trace two years ago..."

It feels as if there is venom in her voice, an accusation.

She looks at them all again, but this time with a new passion. Her gaze is analytical and penetrating, and it seems as if there is an accusation in her eyes against each one of them standing there.

Here is one who turns away his eyes, there is one who quickly looks down at his glass, and here and there is one who blushes warmly so that he drinks quickly from his drink. Her words hesitate and linger in the silence so that the ears of most of the men start to buzz.

In particular, the girl looks at Ryk Schoonraad for a long time. So long that the tall man finally becomes uncomfortable by it. But he looks back steadily, without fluttering an eyelid. His breathing is calm and slow, and the longer she stares at him, the calmer her bright eyes become. She even imagines that a slight smile is playing around the corners of his mouth. An attractive man, thinks Roelien. Strong and sturdy. What would be hidden behind his beautiful eyes? Is he truly as innocent as he pretends to be, she wonders. And the others? Is she imagining it, or is

each one of them busy hiding something?

In the small bar in Graskolk, an explosion might as well have taken place. Everything is unbelievably quiet. The bar glitters under the limp hands of the men. Here and there, a brandy glass is gripped tighter so that the knuckles stand out white. Here and there, someone swallows. An eye is turned away, or a tongue is pushed over the lips. There are some of the men who are looking at each other carefully, almost fearfully. Behind the bar, barman Bart Saaiman dropped a glass in such a rush.

There are some of the men who are looking straight ahead, at the rows of bottles in the bar or at their own knuckles or just at the grain of the bar.

Helgaardt van der Spuy's daughter! And in the silence, a memory is born in many of them. A memory that is very clear and very harsh. There are many of the men who feel their blood running cold. But none of them betray anything. It looks as if they have petrified where they are standing.

Here and there is one who dares to look at the girl from below and very carefully, as if it is a transgression to look at her.

Roelien van der Spuy takes it all in because she is still observing them carefully. She is almost breathless as she looks from one to another to see if she notices a hint or a veiled reaction. Here among them must be one or more who know what she is talking about. She is completely convinced of that.

But to her disappointment, she sees no reaction, no word is spoken after her announcement.

What strikes her is that a few of the men finally gulp down their drinks quickly and then walk to the door without a word. It looks as if someone has released a poisonous snake here in the bar. First, one man turned around and walked, then another one, and then another one.

Roelien van der Spuy watches them attentively, but none of them has the decency to greet her or to say anything to her or even to look before they walk out through the swing doors of the bar.

This time, she looks down at the bar. She finds it very strange. Then she looks up again at Bart Saaiman, who is just as diligently busy polishing a glass.