

## SIX

He drove fast into town. He felt like ripping down curtains, kicking neat piles of boxes, books, anything organized, felt like scattering something to hell. All he had had to eat was the banana at breakfast and a few cups of tea but it wasn't hunger he felt fluttering in his stomach. It was some other urgency, almost a gripe, and Ted couldn't define what it was.

He strode up the stone steps of the police station two at a time. He felt light-headed, could bound in a single leap like Superman. He could hear his heart. Everything was too much — was coming to an end — was starting a beginning — enough of this shit and on with the new. He wouldn't bet on his answer if someone asked him which way was up.

On the verandah some natives were hunkered down talking and smoking but inside the station everything was as lazy and calm as the big blue blowflies which circled the open doorway. Nobody looked up as Ted walked in shooing the flies from settling. He clacked down the button of the desk bell with a couple of urgent dings. The oldest policeman jumped up from his desk and hurried to the counter.

'I'm — Ted Rich.' Yes, that's who he was. 'I own the buses.'

'Yes, Mr Rich.' The policeman grabbed some papers, his pop, tapped them into shape. 'I am Sergeant Pious Duko. I am acting senior sergeant. How can I help you?

This wasn't going to make him feel better at all. 'Douglas Olabi,' said Ted. 'I made a complaint about one of my drivers.'

'Douglas Olabi?' Sergeant Duko leaned forward with serious intent. 'Yes ...?' he said slowly but not too surely.

Ted hit the counter in irritation. 'Jesus Christ! Douglas Olabi was taken into custody this morning! He was drunk on the job and he tried to attack me! Your boys came out to the depot and I made out a complaint against him!'

As he spoke, Ted looked away from the desk where a door at the side was open. There in direct eye-line, staring at him as he grasped the bars of a jail cell with hands still handcuffed, was Douglas Olabi. 'There he is there.' Ted lifted the stile of the counter and went to go through.

'Mr Rich, in there is for the prisoners.' The policeman put his hand out and stayed the stile.

'I know that. I want to talk to him.' Ted stared at the acting head of the station until the stile was lifted and Ted went through.

'This is not usual,' Sergeant Duko said meekly and fell into step behind.

A faint stench hung in the prison area of six small cells. There was a lidless lavatory in a doorless broom cupboard. In the yard were more concrete cells and two tethered dogs which were half-starved and savage.

When he saw Ted coming Douglas walked to the back of his cell and turned his face to the wall.

'Douglas?' A space of only a few feet separated them but Ted yelled it. 'I've got something to say to you!'

Douglas didn't move.

'I'm not going to press charges against you.'

Douglas remained as he was.

'Come up here where I can see you,' Ted ordered, 'or I'll go ahead and you'll get a sentence.'

Sergeant Duko looked worried.

Douglas turned around and came slowly towards the bars. His eyes were still blood-shot. He shivered in a way that showed he was trying to control it but couldn't.

'Did you hear what I just said?' Ted's voice was false. Even to himself he sounded like somebody else.

Douglas looked down at his handcuffed hands. There was a urine stain on his dirty shorts.

'I'm withdrawing the charges I laid against you Douglas.' Had to make someone somehow need him for something. 'And do you know why I'm doing that?'

Douglas, still silent, began a gentle rocking from one foot to the other.

'I'm doing that because if I have you sent to jail. Which is what anyone else in my position would do. I'd be putting myself on your level and that's something I don't want to do.'

Douglas raised his head and the words had more force because they were soft. 'Youse shit, Mr Rich.'

'So you want to stay in jail do you?!' The smiling clean young man he had been so impressed by.

Sergeant Duko burst out of his silence. 'But Mr Rich saying we don't keep you in jail!' He couldn't work out what had gone wrong. He said it again, more furiously, longer and louder in Motu. Then he looked back to Ted with a shrug and a look that said he had done his best.

Douglas was still silent and sullen with downcast eyes.

Ted transferred weight from one foot to the other and changed tack with it.

'Douglas,' he said, a reasonable man to a dim wit. 'I don't think you realize what I'm trying to get through to you. I can withdraw the charges I laid against you. If I want to. I can send you to jail or I can keep you out of jail. And you know as well as I do that if you've got a sentence behind you you won't ever get another decent job here, not even laying roads. So do you still want to stay in jail? Answer me yes or no!'

Sergeant Duko couldn't stand by and see this happen. 'You just say, boy!' Both sets of black hands gripped the bars. Like the primates they were, thought Ted. The policeman implored but Douglas spat back in angry Motu.

Ted let him finish, return to his sullen silence. Then he said: 'The other drivers think I'm a great boss.' Now he had started it he had to get away with it. 'You used to think I was a great boss when you first came to work for me.'

Sergeant Duko drew in his breath. He couldn't understand Ted Rich and he couldn't understand the prisoner either. This was a European saying he was prepared to forgive and forget. This was a black man throwing it back in his face.

'I don't attack you,' Douglas muttered.

'Oh yes you did,' said Ted, 'and Garry Keria and Peter Coribu were there too, not that I need their word. I just want you to say you're sorry.'

Douglas shivered again, murmured again: 'I don't attack you.'

'Look, Douglas.' The unequal contest was proving less easy than he had thought. 'Just say you're sorry.' And maybe this was too piddling to be what he needed. 'You just threw

everything back in my face, Douglas.' He'd see. 'A good job and good pay. Even — a sort of friendship.'

Sergeant Duka shook his head in sad amazement.

'I didn't think of you like all the others because you seemed like you were a cut above, pretty bright.' What Ted was saying was true. What he was doing and why he was doing it, wasn't.

'I wouldn't ever take you on again, no. Once bitten twice shy.' Ted found himself looking down at his own hands, away from Douglas' red gaze. 'But if I drop the charges you won't go to jail. And you won't go to jail if you say you're sorry.'

The silence returned. It returned and held for long moments. Each of the three men could only hear his own breathing. Then Sergeant Duka couldn't stand it. The Motu he let loose had the blast of a blowtorch.

Douglas started to rock again. 'I say sorry,' he finally mumbled.

'Say — I'm sorry Mr Rich.' Ted had caught the fish and was reeling it in but, no, it wasn't as big as he hoped.

'I'm sorry Mr Rich.' This time Douglas did look at Ted and his lip curled with dislike.

Ted was going quickly. At the door he had to fling back: 'And listen! Are you listening to this Douglas? Don't you go hanging round the depot or any other place where I might be!' A mental picture of his own brown shoulders working in clean blue water. 'Because I wouldn't give you your job back if you were the last kanaka in town!'

Sergeant Duka was searching through his over loaded in-tray when everyone in the station looked up at the sound of crowd