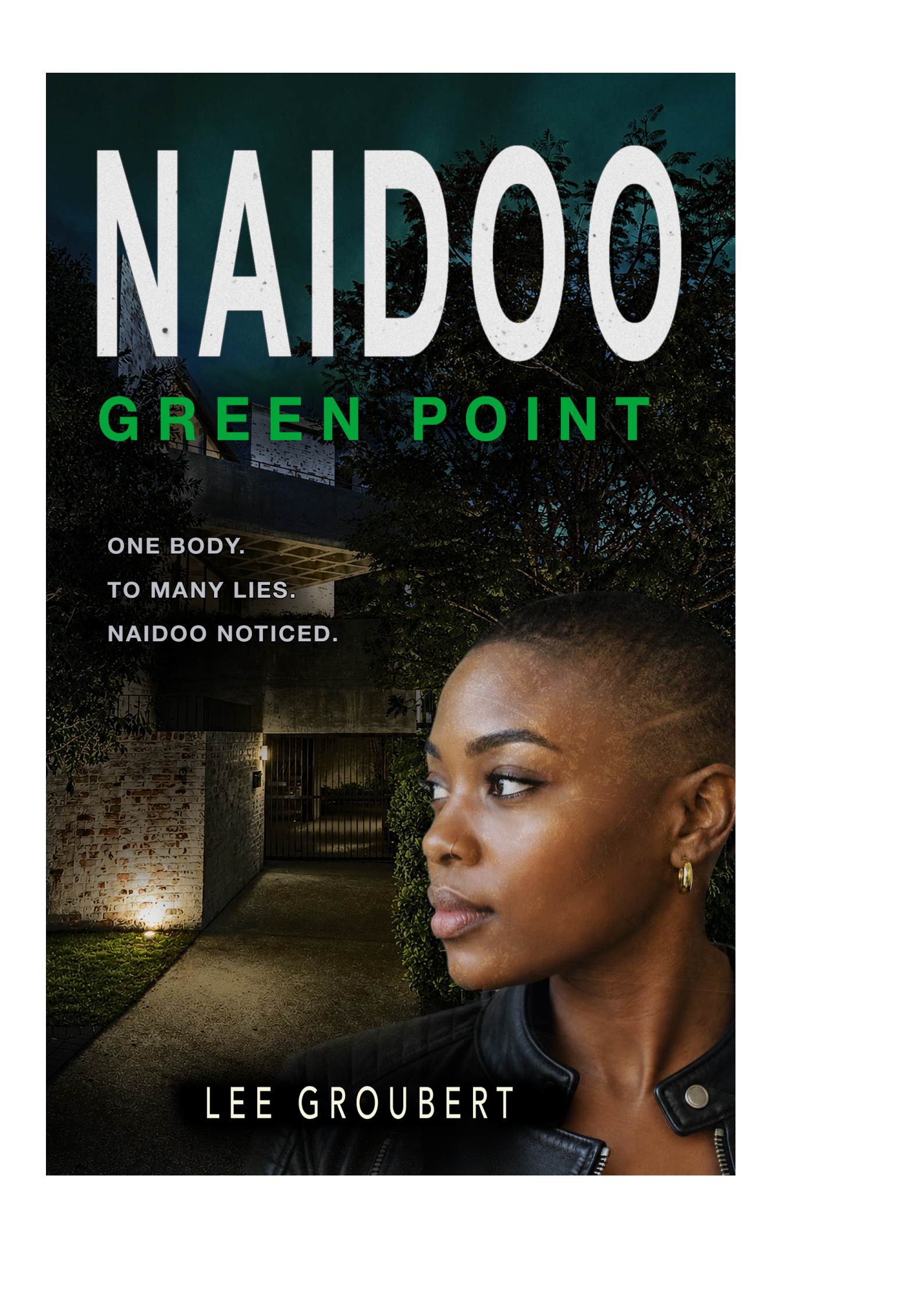




NAIDOO

GREEN POINT

ONE BODY.

TO MANY LIES.

NAIDOO NOTICED.

LEE GROUBERT

Friday, 21 November - late afternoon - 24°C - clouds

Mara knew something was wrong before she unlocked the door.

Not dramatically.

The door had been opened professionally. No visible damage.

No broken frame. No splintered wood. No television lying halfway through the entrance like in burglary photographs.

Just alignment.

The rubber mat outside her apartment had moved three centimetres to the left.

She stood in the corridor and looked at it.

Professional or authorised entry.

She opened the door.

Inside, her apartment had been searched badly. Too badly.

Drawers pulled open. Books shifted. Clothes removed from shelves. Some dropped onto the

floor. Kitchen cupboards opened. A chair overturned in the living room.

The scene wanted to say: amateurish burglary. It said: message.

Mapungwana had wasted no time.

Mara stepped inside without touching the handle again and stopped just past the threshold.

She scanned.

Laptop gone. External drives gone. Two file boxes gone. Backup phone gone. Cash

untouched.

Incorrect.

Her television remained mounted to the wall. Cheap but still worth taking.

Running shoes

remained near the cupboard. Her bicycle tools remained in their case. Her carbon bicycle still

hung on the wall.

Incorrect again.

She moved carefully through the flat.

Bedroom.

Mattress lifted. Drawers emptied. Underwear scattered.

Performative violation.

She disliked that most. Not emotionally. Structurally.

Someone had wanted her to see disorder in the place where she slept.
She stood beside the bed for several seconds, breathing evenly.
Then took out her phone from the inner pocket of her leather vest.
She called it in.

“Breaking and entering. My residence. I require scene attendance and fingerprint processing.”

A pause.

“Ja. Mine.”

Another pause.

“Nee. I did not contaminate the scene beyond unavoidable entry.”

She gave the address and disconnected.

Then she waited outside in the corridor.

The responding officers arrived twenty-eight minutes later.

Too slow for an officer’s residence.

They treated the scene with the polite reluctance of people who had not wanted the assignment.

Mara watched one of them step too close to the doorframe.

“Do not touch that.”

He froze.

“Sorry, Warrant Officer.”

“Apology unnecessary. Correction sufficient.”

The forensic technician arrived later and performed the minimum version of his job. Powder

where obvious. Photographs where required. No enthusiasm.

She didn't recognize him as the one who examined Al Habadi's body. So if several of the

technicians were involved, the problem ran deeper than she had hoped.

Mara did not argue. This was a stage for a smaller audience anyway.

Arguments produced noise. Reports produced records.

She filed her statement with excessive precision.

Then she packed one small bag from what remained: two tops, one pair of cargo pants, clean

underwear, toothbrush, case notebook, the second external drive hidden in the base of a broken fan.

They had missed that.

Amateurs.

She locked the compromised door and walked the few steps to the hotel, which was more or less in the same building.

The receptionist asked whether she wanted one night or more.

“Unknown.”

The receptionist blinked.

“Maybe two?”

“Two is acceptable.”

The room was small, clean, and impersonal.

Good.

Mara placed the bag on the chair, not the bed.

Then she went downstairs again.

The ground-floor apartments shared an inner courtyard with the hotel’s rear access. She

knocked at the door of Mrs Hendricks, who lived closest to the entrance.

Mrs Hendricks was seventy-something, coloured, sharp-eyed, and permanently suspicious.

Useful qualities.

She opened after the third knock with the chain still attached.

“Oh. It’s you.”

“Ja.”

“You police people always knock like bad news.”

“I require information.”

“Of course you do.”

The chain came off.

Mrs Hendricks had seen two police cars parked around the corner on her way home from

shopping. She remembered it because police were a rare sight in her street.

Two police cars

were very unusual, she thought. Later, from her kitchen window, she saw

two police officers

leaving the building.

“Time.”

“After two. Before three. I was watching my stories.”

“Exact, please.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“Quarter past two. Maybe twenty past.”

Mara nodded.

“Description, please.”

“Men. One tall. One fat. Both in uniform. Youngish. Not from around here.”

“Why not?”

“I know them all.”

That mattered.

People noticed local police. They noticed unfamiliar police less clearly.

Mara thanked her.

Mrs Hendricks leaned closer.

“They weren’t here for a neighbour.”

“Nee.”

“You in trouble?”

“Ja.”

“At least you know.”

Security was easier.

The guard at reception was already nervous.

He admitted the officers had arrived and signed in. They said they had a brief enquiry

regarding a complaint from Mara’s neighbour. The guard had allowed them through.

“Did you verify station assignment?”

“No, ma’am. They were police.”

“That is not verification.”

He swallowed.

“No, ma’am.”

The names were unreadable.

She photographed the visitor log.

The security camera above the entrance had been angled sideways. She took another photo.

“The camera?” she pointed.

“Oh... that...” he said, blushing.

“I will file a complaint with property management,” she said, not waiting for a response.

By the time Mara reached the station, the break-in had become less an event than a diagram.

Entry under colour of authority. Staged theft. Data removal. Warning.

In the office, Agostin stood up the moment she entered.

Too fast.

Again.

“You sharp?”

“Nee.”

He processed that badly.

“Right. Sorry. I mean — what happened?”

“My apartment was entered. Items removed. Scene staged.”

His face changed.

“Jesus.”

“Not relevant.”

He looked at her desk, then at her.

“Pierce was asking about your calls and —”

He stopped.

“Pierce asked about my calls.”

“Not directly. Like... casual. Too casual.”

He fiddled with the peak of his cap again, but didn't turn it round to face forward.

“I took it before he could,” he said sheepishly.

He handed it to her and pointed at it.

"You've got a message; I saw it on the lock screen."

A message from Grosjean.

Netscare Christiaan Barnard. Emergency. Come alone if possible.

Timestamp: forty-one minutes ago.

Her stomach tightened.

"Proceed," she said and hurried out of the office.

She parked not at the hospital but at the *Salazar Plain* car park.

Netscare Christiaan Barnard Hospital was too bright. Hospitals always were.

Clean floors. Overlit corridors. Soft voices. People moving with professional urgency while

relatives sat in plastic chairs performing hope.

Farah Grosjean lay in a treatment room with one side of her face swollen almost beyond recognition.

Crosswise plasters on the bridge of her nose. Lip split. Cheekbone bruised dark purple. One

eye half closed.

But her remaining eye was awake.

Very awake.

“Naidoo,” she said thickly.

“You look structurally damaged.”

Farah stared at her. Then, despite the swelling, almost smiled.

“Nice to see you too.”

“What happened?”

“Broad daylight,” Farah said. “Outside a spaza shop. Dozens of witnesses. Two men. Fast.”

“Robbery?”

“They took nothing.”

“Message.”

“Ja.”

Farah tried to sit up. Pain stopped her halfway. She swore softly.

Mara moved to help, then stopped because Farah had not requested assistance.

Farah noticed.

“You’re allowed to help injured people.”

“You appeared to prefer autonomy.”

“I prefer not feeling like my face got reversed by a brick.”

Mara adjusted the pillow. Farah breathed through her mouth.

“They knew where I’d be,” she said. “That’s the part I hate.”

“Who knew?”

Farah looked at her.

“You know who.”

Not at all, Mara suspected. Different.

A doctor entered and objected to Farah sitting up, leaving, speaking, thinking, and possibly existing without supervision.

Farah ignored most of it.

“You have a concussion,” the doctor said. “You need observation.”

“I need clothes.”

“You need rest.”

“I’ll rest somewhere else.”

The doctor looked at Mara, as if she represented rational authority.

Incorrect assumption.

“She is an adult,” Mara said. “When she is made aware of the risks, she may discharge

herself.”

Farah pointed weakly at Mara.

“See? Romance.”

Mara blinked.

“That is not romance.”

“No, but it’s close enough for today.”

The doctor gave up with visible irritation and returned with forms.

While Farah signed, slowly and angrily, Mara considered the alignment.

She left the

treatment room and stood in front of the door while Grosjean got dressed.

Her apartment entered. Grosjean attacked publicly. Grosjean’s message intercepted only by

luck because Agostin had taken her phone.

The system was compressing.

Not yet killing. Testing.

Grosjean lowered the pen.

“I can’t go back alone,” she said.

The sentence cost her. Mara heard that.

“I know.”

“I hate that.”

“I also dislike it.”

Grosjean looked at her with her one good eye.

“Your place?”

“Compromised.”

Grosjean exhaled carefully.

“My house is in Green Point. It has alarms, cameras, high walls, an electric fence, and my

mother’s paranoid taste in security contractors.”

“You live alone.”

“Ja.”

“Family wealth?”

Grosjean gave a small, painful laugh.

“Is that your polite way of asking why a journalist owns a house in Green Point?”

“Ja.”

“At least you’re honest.”

“I try.”

“My family has money. Old professional money. Doctors, lawyers, property. I disappoint them for a living.”

“Useful house?”

“Very.”

“Then we go there.”

Grosjean studied her.

“Your welcome. You’re not thrilled.”

“I value independence.”

“I noticed.”

“I also require access to you.”

“Romantic again.”

“For Amahle. Your sources. Your safety.”

Grosjean’s expression softened despite the bruising.

“That was almost sweet.”

“It was logistical.”

“Of course it was.”

Mara called Agostin and asked him to pick up her Polo without being seen and leave it at

Buitenkant Street car park. Also without being seen unnecessarily. She said the spare key was

in her desk drawer. She didn’t let him protest; she hung up immediately.

She drove Grosjean’s car because Grosjean’s vision was impaired and her reaction time

likely compromised.

The house in Green Point sat behind a white wall with bougainvillea spilling over it in pink

disorder. Expensive security gate. Cameras. Motion lights. Good sightlines from the street,

only five metres facing the street. Behind the property, Signal Hill rose up with its girdle of

Aleppo pine, stone pine, and eucalyptus, far more remarkable than its 350 metres above sea

level would suggest.

Inside, the house was warm in a way Mara’s apartment was not. Like clean warm.

Books everywhere. Framed art. Reproductions of classical modern art: Kandinsky, Mondrian,

and also a seascape by Hopper. Old wooden furniture. A kitchen that looked used.

Grosjean lowered herself onto the sofa and closed her eyes.

“Guest rooms are upstairs,” she said. “Fresh linen somewhere. Don’t reorganise my books alphabetically.”

“I was not planning to.”

“You were thinking about it.”

“They are arranged inconsistently.”

“They are arranged emotionally.”

Mara stood still.

“That is not an arrangement system.”

“It is if you have emotions.”

Grosjean opened one eye.

Mara looked away first.

“I need to retrieve items from my apartment,” she said.

“Now?”

“Ja.”

“Of course now.”

“You require medication first.”

Grosjean pointed toward the kitchen.

“Blue bag. Hospital stuff. Painkillers. Antibiotics. Ice packs. My dignity is missing, but we can collect that later.”

Mara brought the medication and water.

Grosjean swallowed with difficulty.

Mara took her keys.

And stopped.

“No more communication via telephone. People who urgently need to be contacted again will receive a message via a clean line. Make a list.”

She didn’t wait for a reply and returned to her apartment.

Night had settled properly by then.

She entered carefully, photographed everything again, and collected what the intruders had not understood:

An iPad taped inside the frame of a Malevich reproduction. Paper notes hidden behind the

backing board of another cheap print. A memory card taped under the bathroom cabinet.

Cash inside an old protein powder container. Two shirts. Running shoes. A Walther PPK

from her father in a bag inside the toilet cistern. Not very professional, very cinematic, but

her small apartment had limits.

Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not after you.

She paused in the bedroom. The disorder remained.

Someone had tried to make the apartment feel unsafe.

It had worked.

That annoyed her.

Not because of fear. Because manipulation had succeeded.

She closed the door behind her and returned to Green Point.

Grosjean was asleep on the sofa, one hand curled near her bruised face.

Mara stood in the doorway for a moment.

Responsibility was an inefficient emotion.

But not imaginary.

She locked the doors, checked the windows, tested the alarm panel, took a glass from the

upper cupboard, found the arrangement of things there insufficient, but controlled herself.

She sat at the kitchen table and took one of Grosjean's notebooks that was lying around.

Two women displaced in one day.

One by staged authority. One by public violence.

Same pressure. Same system.

Mara wrote:

BREAK-IN / GROSJEAN ATTACK

Coordinated probability: high

Objective: intimidation / isolation / source disruption.

Action taken: Smoke: continuous inquiry with the burglary unit. This kept her reaction close

to the normal one of a robbery victim.

Then below that:

Do not isolate.

She looked at the sentence for several seconds.

It felt unpleasant.

Therefore probably correct.

She turned on the iPad and found the Wi-Fi network password scribbled on a Band-Aid under

the router. She shook her head in disgust.

She logged into the police network and scanned the new entries.

Her break-in wasn't listed. Not yet.

She continued searching for noteworthy incidents.

Three murders in three different townships.

A body on the beach with its throat slashed. Raped, mutilated from the waist down.

Detailed photos.

Her face distorted by horror.

But recognisable.

Mara froze.

It was Mapungwana's prying housekeeper.