

## PROLOGUE

CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA - Wednesday 7 August 1985

Pastor Noel Cromwell's arm clipped the glass of water. It toppled over and skidded across the bedside table, spilling onto the carpet. He fumbled for the lamp, then snatched up the phone on the third ring.

Green digits glowed on the clock radio.

"Yes?" His voice was thick with sleep. "Who is this?"

A girl's voice, breathless and brittle, poured through the receiver.

Noel sat up, listening hard, trying to follow.

"But... that can't be."

He paused to let her speak.

"Sofie," he said, softer now. "Are you sure?"

Noel swung his feet to the floor. His spectacles lay somewhere in the dark. The open King James Bible on the bed stared back at him. He listened as the girl's voice became more frantic.

"Listen to me," he said. "You must leave. Now. I'll send a cab. Be quick."

The line went dead.

For a second he sat there, gripping the receiver. Then he moved to the bathroom, splashing water on his face. The cold snapped him awake. This was the moment he'd been praying for. If he could just persuade Sofie to go on record, the others might follow.

He returned to the bedroom and dialled. A click. Then tinny elevator music filled his ear.

“Thank you for calling Cape Town Cabs. Your call is important to us.”

Noel didn’t hear the front door open. Nor did he hear the soft tread on the carpet behind him. He only felt the air change.

A hand settled on his shoulder. Noel dropped the receiver and spun around.

“Relax,” the man said, palms raised. “I just want to talk.”

Noel’s back hit the wall. The bedside lamp lay on the floor, a thin beam of yellow light slicing the room in two.

“Where is she?” Noel’s voice trembled.

The man smiled like he’d been expecting the question.

“Sofie wants you to leave her alone,” he said, “she says you’ve been harassing her again.”

Without his glasses the face was a blur, but the voice was unmistakable.

“No,” Noel whispered. “You’re lying. She needs my help.”

The man came closer. Noel threw his arms up, panic overriding sense, and kicked out hard. The intruder folded with a strangled sound, collapsing to the floor.

“Oh God, I’m sorry,” Noel lurched forward instinctively, “I didn’t mean...”

The second man approached him from the side. Noel felt the leather-gloved hands clamp around his throat. He choked, his eyes bulging, his fingers clawing at the intruder’s grip.

The man’s face pressed close, red with effort, sweat shining on his brow. Noel stared into the black eyes of his attacker. They were steady, did not waiver.

“I warned you,” he breathed. “Stupid, stupid man.”

Noel clawed for air, forcing one finger free.

“She doesn’t love you,” he rasped. “She never will.”

The grip tightened until stars burst behind Noel’s eyes.

“Please,” he managed, “we were brothers once.”

The gloved man’s expression didn’t change.

“Those who are not for us, are against us,” he muttered.

Noel heard the wet splinter of cartilage.

Then nothing.

## CHAPTER 1

**F**rancois Stoltz eased himself into his usual leather armchair by the window, its cracked cushions moulded to his shape over time. Beyond the glass, the Atlantic lay flat and grey, barely stirring. A few early joggers and dog-walkers moved along the narrow promenade, their breath visible in the cold morning air.

The Zerban coffee shop near the old lighthouse was quiet at this hour. Francois preferred it that way. Silence gave him room to think, or at least to circle the same problem that refused to let him rest.

Behind him, staff prepared for the day. Coffee machines hissed into life. The smell of freshly ground beans filled the room. On the small round table in front of Francois lay a photograph.

Rachel.

It had been taken at the family home four years earlier, when she was still ten. Rachel stood knee-deep in the swimming pool, water splashing up around her legs, laughing directly at the camera. She had his blue eyes and his chiselled jawline; the crooked teeth and mousy brown hair were her mother's. She looked fearless, still untouched by the things that had marked him.

“Americano with hot milk.”

The waitress hovered for a moment, then retreated. Francois picked up his coffee and watched as a police van rolled slowly past the window. His eyes followed the blue lights until they disappeared.

It was enough to remind him of another life. A uniform worn with pride. A future that had once seemed certain.

From his jacket pocket, he removed the folded note. He had already read it half a dozen times, but he read it again anyway.

Anna's handwriting was neat, controlled. The words themselves were efficient, almost kind in their cruelty. He was no longer welcome to visit Rachel at the house. Other arrangements would have to be made. Then, almost as an afterthought, she mentioned her new man, Kobus Conradie.

She hadn't bothered to soften it. She had invited Conradie to move into the Lombard family farm near Pretoria. An impressive property. Generations of wealth.

Conradie was a rising political star with a growing right-wing following. Anna's friends called him an upgrade. It was hard to argue differently.

Francois folded the note and slid it back into his pocket.

The phone calls with Rachel had become less frequent. He told himself it was normal. After all, most teenagers pulled away at some point. It was inevitable. They were distracted by exams, by new friends... by lives forming beyond their parents.

But he sensed Anna was making things difficult. And now he knew why. He imagined Rachel at the farm. New routines. New rules. New voices telling her what the world was about.

Francois drained the last of his coffee and checked his watch. He could not afford to be late. He could barely remember the last time someone had contacted him about a new case.

Sasha Sassoon was a name most people in the city recognised. He was a self-made millionaire, founder of a growing fashion empire, a man who knew how to cultivate influence.

Francois dropped a handful of coins onto the table and stood.

Outside, thunder rolled faintly over the ocean as the first drops of rain touched his face. He joggled to his battered Jeep Cherokee, climbed in and turned the key. The engine caught immediately.

He flicked on the radio.

"...once again, rumours that State President P.W. Botha is considering a meeting with ANC leader Nelson Mandela have been branded an act of treason by far-right leader, Eugène Terre 'Blanche."

Francois switched it off.

The temperature was rising.

Lines were being drawn in places nobody could see.

He edged forward and joined the traffic.

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Calling it an office was generous.

The room was just large enough to hold an old wooden desk, two mismatched chairs, and a filing cabinet that had seen better decades. Its single redeeming feature was a large, grimy window overlooking a stretch of decaying warehouses and an abandoned factory. This part of the city had been forgotten by everyone except those who could not afford to leave.

Why Sassoon had chosen him, out of all the private investigators in Cape Town, was a question Francois had not yet answered.

From his desk, he could see Amara through the open doorway. She sat at her own table, coffee steaming beside her, phone wedged between shoulder and ear as she spoke to her children. She had skipped the school run again to make sure she was in early.

Amara was his only employee. She kept the place functioning and, more often than not, kept him functioning too. She shouted at him when he was late. She told him exactly what she thought when he turned up wearing yesterday's clothes. And on the mornings when

he wanted to sink into bitterness and stay there, she gave him no space to do it.

“I haven’t come here to listen to your whining,” she would say, “get back to work.”

A normal boss would have fired her, but Francois had never considered it.

He picked up the *Cape Times* from his desk.

The front page was predictable — student protests, police crackdowns, activists detained. The censorship was obvious; the omissions spoke louder than the headlines.

Then his eye caught a smaller article, buried halfway down the page.

#### **CHURCH PASTOR FOUND HANGED IN SUSPECTED SUICIDE**

**Pastor Noel Cromwell, formerly of the Tabernacle  
of God Church in Claremont, was found dead  
in his apartment on Saturday morning.**

Francois stared at the grainy black-and-white photograph. He remembered Noel - mild-mannered, soft-spoken, awkward in company. Francois had attended the church briefly, during the slow collapse of his marriage.

Noel had been kind to Francois, generous with his time. He made Francois feel forgiven for a while. That feeling hadn’t lasted long. Still, suicide did not sit easily with Francois’s memory of Noel.

Amara knocked once on the door.

“Mr Sassoon is here,” she said. “I’ll show him in.”

Francois barely had time to straighten his papers before Sasha Sassoon stepped inside.

“Mr Sassoon,” Francois said, standing. “Francois Stoltz. Thank you for coming. I would have been happy to meet you in town.”

Sassoon raised a hand.

“Don’t apologise. This is a delicate matter, best handled away from my office.”

He lowered himself into the chair opposite the desk, his expression tightening as he took in the room. His clothes were expensive, fashionable. A thick gold chain rested against his collar. An Omega watch gleamed at his wrist.

A man used to control.

“Has Amara offered you coffee?” asked Francois.

“I’ve already had my second cup this morning,” he replied.

Silence settled between them.

“Detective Nieuwoudt suggested I contact you,” Sassoon said finally, “apparently you worked together in the police.”

“Yes,” Francois said. “For many years.”

A different lifetime.

“I am here about my daughter. Sofie.”

Francois leaned forward.

“She is eighteen. Still at school. Ellerslie High. She’s . . . missing.”

The word landed heavily.

“I was away at our holiday home near Langebaan,” Sassoon continued, “when I came back last night, she was gone.”

Francois heard the man’s voice quiver.

“When did you last see her?” Francois asked.

“Tuesday. After work.”

“And since then?”

“I tried calling. Thursday. Friday. No answer.”

“Have you contacted the school?”

Sassoon stood abruptly and turned away.

“Aah, they’re useless,” he snapped. “They have always treated her like a problem. The headmistress has it in for us.”

Francois waited.

“You see, this is not the first time,” Sassoon said, quieter now.

“When her mother died, she changed. Drinking. Smoking. Bad company. About a year ago she ran off with a boy for a weekend. The police got involved. It turned out to be nothing.”

“This boy, does she still see him?”

Sassoon waved his arm dismissively.

“His name is Grant Williams. He lives nearby. They drifted apart months ago.”

“What did the police say?”

“They told me to wait in case she returns on her own.”

Sassoon turned back, his face tight.

“Something is wrong,” he said. “I can feel it.”

Francois nodded.

“I will do everything I can, I am a parent too.”

Sassoon’s gaze flicked to the photograph of Rachel on the desk.

“I will pay two weeks in advance, plus a retainer. I want answers.”

After he left, Francois sat in silence, staring aimlessly out the window.

His mind was on Sofie. And Rachel. And money.

Sometimes he wondered whether he had fought the wrong battle and lost the only thing that mattered.

Amara leaned in the doorway.

“You look disappointed.”

“I was hoping for something lucrative, an embezzlement case maybe.”

“You don’t get to choose,” she replied, “you go investigate. I have a family to feed.”

Francois chuckled inwardly.

“I need to see a man about a dog,” he said, picking up his keys. Amara smiled.

“Be careful, where I come from, dogs are trained to bite.”

## CHAPTER 2

**T**he South African Airways flight from London Heathrow began its descent into Cape Town. Cabin crew moved down the aisles, securing trays and seatbacks as the aircraft banked gently over the Atlantic.

Millie Cromwell stared out of the window.

Table Mountain rose into view, stark and immovable in the bright morning light. The aircraft angled towards the runway, sunlight glinting off the water below.

Her fingers tapped against the armrest. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then exhaled, slow and controlled.

Everything had happened so fast.

Childhood memories of her half-brother flooded her mind. They had never lived under the same roof, yet they had formed a rich bond. The weeks she had spent with Noel on the farm while visiting her father, were some of the most treasured moments of her youth. She had wanted to see him so many times over the years, but it had never been possible.

“Seatbelt, my dear.”

Millie opened her eyes.

The elderly woman beside her was already fastening hers, smiling apologetically.

“They want us strapped in.”

“Oh yes, of course,” Millie said, returning the smile.

“It’s stunning, isn’t it?” the woman continued, gesturing towards the window. “Is this your first time in Cape Town?”

“No,” Millie said. “I visited a long time ago. Almost twenty years.”

“Oh my. That is a long time.”

Millie hesitated, then nodded.

“My brother passed away,” she said. “I’m here for the funeral.”

The words landed heavier than she expected.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, my dear. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“No, it’s fine,” Millie said quickly. “It’s all right.”

She dabbed at her eyes, grateful for the excuse to turn away.

Millie had always imagined that one day she would return, meet somebody, maybe have a family of her own. Noel would be there for her.

The woman beside her patted her arm gently.

Millie fixed her gaze out of the window. Seconds later, the wheels struck the runway, and the sound of the engines filled the cabin.

She was back.

The arrivals hall of DF Malan airport gleamed with polished marble and fluorescent light. Millie stood in line, adjusting the buttons of her blouse, checking her documents again and again.

Oversized posters lined the walls — beaches, vineyards, smiling white families splashing in blue water.

### WELCOME TO SOUTH AFRICA

The message felt directed at everyone except her.

Armed customs officials patrolled the queues, speaking Afrikaans among themselves as they scrutinised passports.

She had been warned. Any literature deemed subversive or immoral could result in immediate detention. Millie was grateful

for the advance notice. Her copy of *Collaborators* remained on her bedside table back in London.

The balding man ahead of her received his green passport, only to be intercepted immediately by two officials who descended on his luggage. He dabbed his forehead with a handkerchief, shifting nervously as items were removed and inspected.

“Next.”

Millie stepped forward and offered a measured smile.

The inspector barely glanced at her. He wiped nicotine-stained fingers through greasy hair and frowned.

“Purpose of your visit?”

“Family funeral,” she said. “My brother.”

He studied her face more closely now.

“Nationality?”

“British. Born in London. I still live there.”

He hesitated.

“So, your father is South African?”

“No. He was English. He moved here years ago.”

The man’s gaze lingered, unsettled.

“My mother was from the West Indies,” Millie added.

“Ah,” he said, smirking faintly. “That explains it.”

“Explains what?”

His face flushed. He stamped her passport without replying and slid it back beneath the glass.

“Next.”

Millie stepped away and joined the crowd at the baggage carousel. She tried to control her breathing. Behind her, the balding man was still being interrogated. Three glossy magazines were held aloft as if they were contraband weapons.

She shook her head and focused on her bag as it appeared on the belt. Old memories stirred, memories she had packed away and hoped never to retrieve.

A few days, she told herself. Then it will be over. She pushed her trolley outside towards the hotel bus.

Across the concourse, an elderly woman stood at a public telephone. She waited until Millie had passed, then lifted the receiver.

“Yes,” the woman said quietly. “It’s me.”

A pause.

“She’s arrived.”