

PRESENT TENSE

1: MONDAY

Schalk Lourens got out his phone and started filming, something Pieterse taught him years ago. *Keep a record. Do it yourself, boykie, every time. That way you can be sure. Cover your arse, boet. Don't trust any of them.*

Schalk began with Pieterse himself, Piet Pieterse, what was left of him, on a golden summer morning. On his back, fists curled up and in like a prizefighter, his head and shoulders shiny grey and featureless, his mouth a wide black O. Bits of the tyre still there, Dunlop, from when it was forced over his head, doused with petrol and set alight. What was left stank of rubber and braai. Schalk stepped away from the worst of it. He breathed out and, lifting his camera, turned slowly, panning a circle into a rich man's death.

Pieterse's body lay on tarmac in front of a low gabled building, probably the original slave quarters. Next to it stood a modern copy, a garage holding a Merc and a Jeep, both black, and a gap. Across the tarmac, a timber deck and a pool – the kind where water comes to the edge – and a tennis court. When did Piet Pieterse, strictly wors-and-beer, ever play tennis? And behind Schalk the back of the farmhouse, Cape Dutch, the real thing, thatched roof and all. The fourth side of the square was open. Grapevines, gnarled and thick, marched in strict ranks to the foothills of the Hottentots Holland Mountains whose peaks spiked sharp as knives against the sky.

Schalk squinted up at them. He remembered Sunday drives in the Franschoek valley, their battered white Valiant cruising into the village before fighting its way up the pass in second gear. They'd stop at the lookout, he and his parents, his father still with them then, stand and gaze at the heart of the Cape, at centuries of winemaking and civilized living. Not the place for a necklace.

Not the first necklace Schalk had ever seen, not by a long shot, just the first white one. In South Africa, necklaces were black people's justice. During apartheid necklaces were punishment for collaboration and Schalk remembered one in particular, a man in his prime, shirtless and muscles glistening, the centre of a tight circle of onlookers learning what would happen if they betrayed the Struggle. The man was too scared or too confused to beg for mercy. Unresisting, he let them tie his hands behind him. He showed no expression as they forced him to his knees. When they put the tyre over his head he buckled and sank to the ground. Then petrol, flames.

Apartheid was a quarter century gone but necklaces lived on. Now they were used for revenge or money or community punishment. *So*, Schalk asked himself, *what's this one all about?*

Next to him, Joepie Fortune adjusted his sunglasses. Joepie favoured the mirrored kind, classic aviator style. When he wasn't wearing them they sat on top of his shaven head.

'What makes you so sure it's Pieterse?'

'Shape of the body. And... ' Schalk pointed to where things were clearer, calves emerging from blue board shorts, 'white. Who else is it going to be?'

'You should know,' said Joepie.

Schalk pocketed his phone, thought how much he didn't want it to be Pieterse. Not because Pieterse didn't deserve it but nobody needed the grief. Petrus Pieterse, formerly BOSS, apartheid's Bureau of State Security. Murderers, torturers, bombers, general doers of evil. Famous for it, for getting away with it via the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Now Piet Pieterse, wearing a necklace. Every news team in the country would want a piece of this.

The day's heat was kicking in. Schalk and Joepie headed for the shade of an oak where the local sergeant, name of Bheki, waited with two constables. Bheki was fat, legs splayed like tent-ropes and arms folded on top of his belly. The constables, one on either side, rested on their haunches. Bheki saluted, the constables snapped to attention. Schalk waved them down.

At least Bheki was on the ball. He phoned it in, the call bouncing from person to person until it reached Schalk's boss, Lieutenant-Colonel Sisi Zangwa of Cape Town Central Police Station. Colonel Zangwa phoned Schalk and told him this would be big so find Captain Fortune and both of them get out there ASAP.

Now she waited to hear what was what. She picked up immediately.

‘It’s him,’ Schalk told her, lighting a Lucky Strike.

Tapping, pencil on wood. ‘Is it a farm murder?’

‘Not a lot of necklaces in farm murders.’

‘OK. Keep me in the loop. And make sure nobody there talks to the media. I’ll take care of my end.’ *Good luck with that*, Schalk thought. The station leaked like a sieve.

He stuck out his hand. ‘Sergeant Bheki? Captain Lourens. You’ve already met Captain Fortune.’

Bheki shook. ‘Who found him?’ asked Schalk.

‘The servants,’ Bheki said. ‘This morning.’

‘Where were they last night?’

‘He gave them the night off. Nobody in the house, only him.’

‘Wife?’

‘Not here. I didn’t ask yet. I waited for you. There’s labourers too, none of them were here last night.’

‘What about security?’

‘The whole place got a high fence around it and the fence got barbed wire on top. But the front gate was open and the alarms were off.’

‘CCTV?’

‘The camera at the front is the only one. It’s off. He had dogs too, down there.’ Bheki took them round the back of the slave quarters where, in a caged run at the end of a dirt clearing, two honeyed Rhodesian Ridgebacks lay humped against the wire. Not a lot of blood.

Schalk sent Bheki and his boys to check the perimeter and keep reporters out. He and Joepie took the buildings. Nothing in the garage except cars. The old slave quarters had become a barn and inside it was dim, smelling of earth and oil. The end wall was lined with apparatus of a working farm, a tractor, wheelbarrows, barrels, spades, containers stacked neatly on shelves. Another wall supported high stacks of wooden crates. In the corner between them sat three Dunlop tyres piled one on another. Joepie pointed and Schalk nodded in agreement, said, ‘Knew where to find them.’

They walked out in time to see the techs pull up, two women, one in a bright red hijab. Schalk stared. This was the first time he'd seen one female forensic technician, never mind two. Not surprising really, given the turnover. The moment people got trained they left. State-of-the-art equipment and nobody to use it, no wonder the cops couldn't win a case.

The hijab was in charge. She was soft-cheeked and older, looked like someone's mother. 'Captain Lourens?'

'Ja.'

'Zeinab Gamsien.'

Schalk shook a plump hand, pointed at the sky. 'Get going before the choppers arrive.'

Zeinab Gamsien didn't answer. She was considering the body. She pulled on her overalls, covering her hijab with the hood. Seemed like she knew what she was doing, which was a change because the last lot had contaminated the crime scene all by themselves.

Meanwhile her offsider, young and slender, twisted long black hair into a rubber band. She looked at Joepie, more than speculatively. He was past fifty but had that effect. He looked back.

'*Jiss*,' he said. 'She looks exactly like that one, you know, that actress. That Bollywood one.'

'Give up, man. She's too young for you.'

'What? You jealous? I'm Trevor Noah, my bru, only better.'

'Try Trevor Noah's father. At least you're the right colour. Come on.'

Joepie followed him, returning the offsider's smile as he went by.

Inside it was cool, light filtering onto flagstones worn smooth by three hundred years of feet. Schalk was surprised by the sophistication, not what he remembered about Pieterse. Persian rugs under riempie chairs, toffee-coloured leather couches, stinkwood tables. White walls showed off rough wooden sculptures, African masks, huge photographs of what could have been sand formations. Perfect, and at the same time as impersonal as a high-end hotel.

The house was T-shaped. They were in the lounge, the original voorkamer. The rest of the vertical arm held a kitchen and dining room. Two longer arms spread out horizontally, three

rooms each side and here at last were signs of life. On the right a study. Then two bedrooms, each leading to an en-suite, both new. In the end bedroom a cupboard full of men's clothes, shoes, a pair of glasses on a side-table with its top drawer open, empty.

In the left wing, a home theatre with a massive screen, and then another bedroom, this time female. The cupboard door swung wide, a drawer ajar presented a muddled pile of jewellery.

The last room had been turned into a professional-looking photographic studio. Computers on counters, all sorts of gadgets. Joepie got there first, whistled. 'Come, take a look. Cost a fortune. Must belong to the wife, her side of the house.'

'Second wife,' said Schalk, 'gotta be special for Pieterse to spend like this.'

'Extra-special, if they aren't even sleeping together. Maybe he's past it, hey?'

'Maybe he just snores. Or she does.'

'You tell me,' said Joepie, 'you're the married one.'

Schalk lifted a framed photo from one of the shelves. Head and shoulders of Pieterse in a bow tie, face sweaty with delight. He was looking at the woman next to him, pulling her close. The woman let herself be pulled. Schalk remembered Lorraine, the first wife, peroxide and nails. This one was different. She was smiling slightly, directly at the camera, her light wavy hair brushing her shoulder. One strap of her dress had slipped down her arm.

He replaced the picture and checked out the room. Every inch of wall was covered by poster-sized photos taken in or against township shacks. They were all portraits of black faces, worn and battered, grimly confronting a world beating them down. Was the new Mrs Pieterse the type who liked townships because they were *real*, who drove in, took pictures, drove out again and came home to a place like this. People like her should live in a township for a couple of days. He moved to a shelf of cameras. Some were out of line, there were gaps.

Joepie raised a chin at an empty space. 'What do you think? Robbery?'

'Could be. But why not take more?'

'Couldn't carry it? Knew what they were looking for?'

'Ja, must have been more than one,' said Schalk, 'to organise a necklace. Pieterse wouldn't sit still while they put a tyre round his neck. What bothers me is why they necklaced him at all. They had a gun to shoot the dogs, but they necklaced Pieterse. That's a

message, right there, and not the sort of message that goes with a robbery. Also, if the killers came from the farm, why shoot the dogs? Dogs don't kick up a row for people they know.'

Time for the servants, who turned out to be Florence Malgas and her spidery husband Valentine sitting like Jack Spratt and his wife at the kitchen table. Florence, in a heaving black top, scoured her eyes with a shredded tissue. Valentine had shrunk into his clothes as much as possible, aware trouble at the house meant trouble for him. 'Yes,' Florence said, 'yes, we live here, our rooms are there behind the tennis court. We get every Friday afternoon off, every second Sunday. This wasn't our usual Sunday but the master sometimes gives us extra. So the other day, Wednesday, he told us we could have last night off as well.'

'Where did you go?' asked Schalk.

'My daughter, Rina, she lives now in Paarl, in the new part. She came in her car to fetch us to her house. Her own car. Then she brought us back in the morning because she must work. She's a nurse.'

'Does Mr Pieterse know you stay with Rina?'

Oh, yes, the master knows Rina since Rina's a little girl. And he knows Trevor too, my son. Trevor's a good boy, a good boy.'

She was trying too hard. Joepie said, 'What did you see this morning, when you came back?'

'The gate is open. Ja. That's when we know something's wrong. No alarm. And all the lights are on.'

'Outside lights as well?'

'Ja. Outside lights too. Then there's smoke and the smell...and we follow it to the back...'
She shoved the tissue against her mouth.

Had they seen anything else unusual? Schalk asked, thinking, *apart from the master smouldering*. They hadn't. Where was Mrs Pieterse?

Away.

'Where?' They shrugged at each other. No idea.

Joepie added. 'Is she away a lot? Does she stay out all night?'

Valentine flashed a few mismatched teeth, aimed his answer at Schalk, the *witbaas*.
'Sometimes. Then she comes back and makes her pictures.'

'Got a cell number?' Schalk was losing patience. He tried it, left a message.

Joepie again. 'How long have you worked here?'

'Since the master was small,' said Florence. 'First we worked for the oubaas, Baas Manus, the master's uncle. The young master, master Piet, came often to visit. Baas Manus, he passed last year. Now Master Piet came, he's gone also, who will look after us?' She started to cry, noiselessly.

'What was in the drawer next to Mr Pieterse's bed?'

Florence sensed trouble. She wiped her cheek with the heel of her hand, said with some dread, 'His gun? His gun's there?'

'Not now.'

She leaned forward, heavy breasts resting on the table. 'We didn't touch it. True's god, I don't know any gun.'

'The madam's cupboard is open also, and it looks like things have been taken.'

'I'm telling you, we don't know. If something's not there, it's got nothing to do with us. You can't make out it's us just because we work here. You ask Rina, ask my daughter, she'll tell you where we were last night. You people, you think you can treat us like kaffirs, well, we did nothing. I'm telling you, *nothing*.'

Valentine put a hand on her arm. 'Baas,' he said.

Joepie asked him, 'Who are the other servants?'

'There's Belinda who works inside here with us. The rest, they work on the farm.'

Valentine thought. 'What must we do now?'

Schalk said, 'Don't touch anything in any of the rooms. Nothing. Don't clean anything. Some people will come look through the house. They'll take your fingerprints. Understand?' They did, he could tell from the way they sat, waiting for whatever was about to descend.

Joepie followed Schalk into the study. It was dominated by a desk, a long slab of yellowwood fronting a high-backed black leather armchair. No computer, though cables showed where a

laptop had been. On the wall opposite hung a flat TV, flanked by framed photographs. A young Pieterse, uniformed, receiving a medal. Then Pieterse, older, in combat camouflage with a group of serious soldiers. A second photo of the soldiers, this time holding rifles and standing in a semicircle behind three cross-legged black soldiers, also in camouflage. This photo was labeled *Tshanene*.

The last image, Pieterse on a boat with another man, both in baseball caps, both grinning into the sun and holding each end of a huge tuna. Schalk went up close.

‘Look at this,’ he said, ‘Brian de Jager.’

‘He still alive? I haven’t heard about him since the Commission.’

‘He and Pieterse went into business together. Overseas, America, some sort of security operation. Venter told me.’ Schalk dumped himself in the office chair, stretched out his long legs, arched his back. Thought about smoking, ran his fingers down the smooth leather armrest. ‘This is going to be one big fucking mess. When Pieterse and De Jager got amnesty there were protests in London, New York, all over. The whole world knows about them and now Pieterse gets himself necklaced. They’ll say it was payback.’

Joepie perched a well-dressed buttock on the desk. ‘And now necklaces have jumped the colour bar they’ll be shitting themselves. We’ll have every single whitey in the country on our case. If it was actually apartheid payback, why wait so long? Maybe the people on the farm, they had enough of him. Happens all the time.’

Schalk shook his head. ‘Nope. Doesn’t feel like a farm murder to me. Why does he make sure he’s alone? Why lock up the dogs? Who was he waiting for?’

‘You tell me, you knew him. You were his blue-eyed boy.’

‘Bullshit! He only noticed me because of the rugby. He was Special Branch then, we saw what they did, they were bad bastards. We were just ordinary cops trying to do our jobs. You know that, you were there. And then he got me suspended, remember.’

‘Ja,’ said Joepie, ‘and when we find out who killed him, I’m gonna give them a medal.’

Schalk snapped on gloves, opened drawers. A chequebook – who wrote cheques any more? Manila folders, some bits and pieces, everything in its place. He remembered the rigid tidiness of Pieterse’s office in Caledon Square. He could see Pieterse now, not so tall but full in the chest like a bulldog, walking wide-legged down the middle of a passage, forcing everyone else close to the wall.

The folders from Pieterse's drawers were marked *Current*, *Miri*, *Global Sec*, *Languedoc*. That was the farm. Schalk flicked through. Working papers. Nothing jumped out. A list of staff with one name crossed through, *Franz Huisman*. That was all.

Joepie studied his fingernails. 'If Pieterse was waiting for someone,' he said, 'and they killed him, 'why the robbery? Where's the laptop? Where's the gun? What else is missing?'

'Buggedger if I know.' Schalk took out his phone, pressed redial. This time a woman answered.

'Yes?'

'This is Police Captain Schalk Lourens...'

'I was just going to call you. I have a message to contact you?' Soft accent, American.

'Mrs Pieterse.'

'Yes?'

'Mrs Pieterse, there's bad news. Your husband...something happened.'

'Is he dead?'

'Yes, he's dead.'

She took an audible breath and then there was silence, broken by a voice in the background, male. 'Hang on,' she said, her voice muffled, 'just *hang on*. Wait.' Then she came back. 'What happened?'

'He was killed. On the farm.'

'Oh, Jesus.' After a while Schalk said, 'Mrs Pieterse?'

'Are you sure? How?'

In Schalk's experience it was best to be as clear as possible. 'Murdered. I'm sorry.'

'Oh god, Oh god, oh, how terrible, awful...' her voice trailed off.

He was grateful she didn't ask for details. 'When will you be back? Where are you?'

'Namibia. In the desert.'

'This is going to get a lot of media attention, Mrs Pieterse. We'll meet you at the airport.'

'No, my car's at the airport. I'm - it'll take me a day to reach Windhoek.'

‘You need to get back to Cape Town as soon as possible. Also...it looks like things have been taken.’

‘Taken?’

‘Stolen.’

‘Stolen? A robbery?’

‘Yes.’

When he hung up, he told Joepie. ‘She’s not alone over there.’