

Chapter 1 – Family Photographs

The drive to Pretoria led from Johannesburg's northern suburbs along the Ben Schoeman Highway past Halfway House and the Kyalami Grand Prix racing circuit.

The little Passat was no Formula I racing machine, but she was game and with light mid-afternoon traffic, made the outskirts of Pretoria in just under 40 minutes. The huge edifice of the main University of South Africa building, cantilevered on its hill dominating the entrance to Pretoria proper, was visible from miles away. As Adam drove down jacaranda-lined Andries Street, he kept his eyes peeled for the intersection with Church Street which would take him past the Union Buildings, with its sweeping concave colonnaded frontage, the very symbol of South Africa's apartheid government, eastwards towards the middle class suburb of Hatfield. This was where Hannes van Staden's father, Sarel, was staying with his sister and her family.

Adam found the address easily and pulled up in front of the red brick bungalow. The small garden was neat; the grass along the edge of the slate tiled pathway had been recently trimmed. Petunias and pansies blossomed in the flower beds. A child's red tricycle lay on its side on the grass near the hedge bordering the neighbour's property. Adam's natural curiosity was piqued. Was Sarel van Staden's sister so much younger than him that she would have a young child...or was it a grandchild's tricycle? Another human interest angle...a young relative to mourn for Hannes van Staden...what a heart-wrenching photograph that would make! Adam instinctively chided himself for his cynicism...then reminded himself: it goes with the territory, matey.

He raised his hand to lift the brass knocker on the front door. Again he felt that adrenalin rush...he savoured the brief second of anticipation prior to committing himself to a course of

action from which there was no turning back; a course of action which would probably affect many lives.

His intended rap on the door was aborted as it swung open and an attractive woman in a simple floral dress and wearing a kitchen apron, stood before him.

"*Meneer Marks?* Mr. Marks; we've been expecting you. Please come in." Her Afrikaans was spoken with a light accent, a hint of some degree of sophistication. She was slim, her blonde hair, neatly trussed in a bun, showing a few streaks of light grey at the temples. She was slightly taller than Adam and he noticed that she wore low heeled house shoes, probably in deference to her height. Adam guessed that she was in her mid-forties and had probably been a real looker in her youth – sought after by all the boys in whatever district she had lived in as a young girl and then, quite possibly, even a university beauty queen. Adam was convinced by the way she spoke, that she had attended university, probably in Pretoria.

The woman held out her right hand to shake his: "*Ek is Johanna Groenewald...Sarel se jongsus...die tant was Hannes*; I'm Johanna Groenewald – Sarel's younger sister...Hannes's aunt."

"*Aangename kennis mevrou...*pleased to meet you madam," Adam answered formally, "...although I wish it was in better circumstances." She tilted her head briefly in acknowledgement of his implied concern for her situation and ushered him into a small sitting room.

It held a sideboard, a two-seater sofa and three large wingback armchairs arranged around a rectangular coffee table. Adam had the impression that at least one of the chairs had been brought in especially for this meeting as there was little space left in the room. All the furniture was upholstered in a dark floral "dralon", a durable stain-resistant fabric, further proof that there were children in the home. There were a number of pictures on the white

walls. The usual type of picture Adam had seen so often in Afrikaner homes: two prints of mountain scenes in the Cape, one of an old Hottentot smoking a long clay pipe and on the main wall a flight of six or seven ceramic flying ducks, each one larger than the one before, striving upwards as if to escape through the ceiling of this neat, but overcrowded room. On the sideboard were three black and white family photographs, in simple wood frames. One photograph showed a young boy and his parents standing next to a farm truck. The boy, about 11 or 12-years-old, was dressed in khaki shorts and a khaki shirt, the typical clothes of a child brought up on a farm. The large man behind him – presumably his father – had a one hand on his shoulder and in the other he held a double-barrelled shotgun. It looked like they had just returned from a hunting trip, probably the boy's first...his initiation into the rites and rituals of a South African farmer. The woman was slight, non-descript and dressed simply in a floral patterned house frock.

The next photograph showed the same boy, but some years older, closer to 16 or 17 and in school uniform. It was a head and shoulders shot, but had probably not been taken as one; Adam guessed that the other boys in the class photo had been cropped out. The last photo was of the same boy, now a young man in his early twenties: neatly trimmed hair and with a dreamy expression, he was easily recognizable as Hannes van Staden. Adam realized that the photographs had probably been put there for his benefit.

The coffee table held a tray with a china coffeepot and a set of matching cups, a sugar bowl and taking pride of place in the centre of the tray, a "*melktert*" the Afrikaner equivalent of cheesecake, equally ethnic and equally delicious.

Adam was embarrassed at the show of hospitality by this family enduring the most painful experience of their lives.

He cleared his throat. "*Mevrou Groenwald*...this really wasn't necessary – you have so much else to think about right now."

She turned to him with a sad smile which he found appealing: "Don't worry Mr. Marks – it helps me to be active; I let the '*girl*' go off today because I wanted the distraction and to do something normal." Adam had wondered why there was no black maid around, a common feature of most white South African households, even those in lower income areas.

She showed him to a chair and told him that her brother, Sarel would join him shortly. She offered him a cup of coffee and slice of tart, which he gratefully accepted, realizing he was starving, not having eaten since breakfast on the plane this morning.

Then she excused herself, saying she had to attend to her children, confirming Adam's guess that there would be young mourners in this family tomorrow.

Adam was just finishing his first bite of the tart and was washing it down with a sip of strong Afrikaner-style coffee – "*egte Boeretroos*...genuine Farmer flavour..." as the current coffee advert ran – when a large, bearish man in his late sixties entered the room. Adam recognized him as a much older version of the man with the shotgun in the family photograph. He was dressed in a pair of grey slacks, and despite the summer weather, a woollen cardigan over a white shirt. He wore a nondescript tie and his thinning grey hair was neatly combed with a side parting. He had a neatly trimmed grey beard, but no moustache; reminiscent of the style adopted by Paul Kruger, President of the Transvaal Republic at the turn of the century.

"*Sarel van Staden, aangename kennis*..." Adam stood as Sarel van Staden extended a huge hand and took Adam's in a firm, almost painful grip.

Adam stood looking up directly into this large man's blue-grey eyes, searching for any animosity towards him. His reporter's intuition had taught him to be on his guard in highly

charged situations like this. Things could turn nasty very quickly. He sensed only deep pain and an unfathomable sadness.

"*Sit asseblief*...please sit," Sarel van Staden gestured towards the chair in which Adam had been sitting. "Now Mr. Marks, what do you think we can do for you and your newspaper?"

Ah, there it was...Adam was almost grateful for the hint of sarcasm in Van Staden's tone. This man was a fighter and even though there was no other possible ending to the next 24 hours, he would see it through with his dignity and self-respect intact.

Adam looked the older man in the eye. This was where he had to be at his diplomatic best. Show concern, compassion, but retain that steely professional edge.

"*Mnr. Van Staden*...I am against the death penalty. In all its forms, wherever it is practiced, however it is carried out. I requested this interview through your lawyer Mr. De Jong— who was totally unhelpful I must also add — because I want to expose the evils of this barbaric form of justice; what it does to the condemned person, what it does to their families and what it does to society," Adam paused to assess Van Staden's reaction. There was none.

"I do not do this out of charity, but out of a deep conviction. I am a journalist, my newspaper is read by three hundred thousand people throughout this country every week and if I can get people to start thinking about what is being done, apparently in the name of 'justice' then I will have achieved something to make this country a better place."

Van Staden still didn't react. He sat looking at Adam with a totally blank expression and remained like that for a number of minutes. Adam began to feel uncomfortable. "Shit, did I overdo it?" he thought.

Then Van Staden shook his grey-bearded head slowly from side to side. He even smiled slightly.

"*Mnr. Marks*, you are very much the social activist, aren't you...? ...think you're going to change the world? ...think that my boy's death is going to make you the hero of the liberal leftists in this country? Well, let me tell you something, *Mnr. Marks*, I am 100 percent FOR the death penalty. I believe in it, I believe it is a deterrent and I believe it should even be expanded beyond its present use. Not just murder, but rape, assault and battery, robbery, sedition...anything which threatens to disturb and harm our society in any way. So just because it is my son who is going to die within a matter of hours, don't think that I will buy into your liberal philosophies.

"If it was that bitch who was going to swing, I would be rejoicing. I mourn for my son, I am heartbroken over what he is going through and what this family is going through, but he was found guilty and the law is the law.

"I will visit my son shortly, for the last time. I will tell him that he broke the law, that this is God's judgment on him as much as it is man's judgment on him. And he will face his executioner like a man and go to his Maker as we all must one day.

"Now if this is what you want to write, then you go ahead and write it. But you make damn sure that you report it accurately. I don't want the nation blubbering into their handkerchiefs over the poor Van Staden family. I don't want pacifists and cowards parading their posters and pretty slogans in the name of Hannes Van Staden. You are welcome to stay here *Mnr. Marks*. I bear you no personal grudge...I understand you have a job to do: but I think you will learn this day the meaning of stiff-necked Afrikaner pride – and that this family stands by its convictions, stands by its traditions and the traditions of our forefathers who with the good Lord's help settled this country and made it what it is. Enjoy your coffee and *melktert*..."

And with that he stood up and left the room.

Adam was dumbfounded. He realized that his mouth was open and that he had been staring at Van Staden like a rabbit blinded by headlights. His reporter's wits went into overdrive:

"Christ, now I've blown it...why do I have to be holier than the Pope?...Shit I need this story!

But how can I face this man now?"

He was confronted with the classic paradox: he'd be damned if he stayed and damned if he left. He weighed up the consequences of each possible course. If he left, it would be with his tail between his legs; he would look like an idiot and feel like a loser: worse than that, he would be leaving with half a story and that was no option at all.

But if he stayed, he would feel like an intruder – a deeply embarrassed intruder. He debated with himself for a few more minutes: and then made up his mind.

"To hell with your personal pride man..." he chided himself.

"Of course you have to stay. He has convictions, well so do you and I bet that if you stick to yours as tightly as Van Staden is sticking to his, you will gain his respect...and your story."