

PROLOGUE

The old woman, her face etched with the lines of experience and hardship, retied the cloth around her head. She'd just used it to wipe the sweat from her neck and arms. It was a blisteringly hot day in South Africa's Mpumalanga Province on the distant eastern fringe of the country. There was no shade, not on this side of the fence.

She looked back at the compound and could see the shape of the marula tree about five hundred metres away. It had been there long before they'd put up the fence, a landmark to aim for at the end of the day. The way her eyes were troubling her, these days, she could no longer see the huts beyond the tree, but she knew they were there – just as they had been in her father's time and his father's before that.

So it had come to this. Her family had survived the *amabhunu*, the Afrikaners, who had claimed the land for themselves. It was the 'law', they'd said. The *umlungu*, the white man, had told her father he could stay on the land, and his children as well, but he must work for his keep. Tch! How they worked!

Then Mandela and his people had come and said the land would be given back to its rightful owners.

'Ah! But this is a good day,' her father had said.

Next, a government man from Nelspruit came, and he told all the workers they must get together, form a co-op-something and the government would help them buy some land. So the men did this thing, and signed a paper.

'Ah! But this is a good day,' her father had said.

They worked hard but the money was little. They went to see the bank man, but he said the signed piece of paper was no good; he would not borrow her father and the other men any money. And then another government man came from Nelspruit. He told the men the land was

not productive or what-what, and now a new owner was coming. He was from another country.

Then a machine came with some men from outside who built the fence. They said everyone must move to a new village.

That was why she was standing in front of her family's furniture. She wiped the dust from a chair, her father's chair, the one he'd sat on when he drank his traditional beer, and eased herself down. She was waiting for her son to come back. He had taken the children and their mother to the new location.

She had just shut her eyes when there was a huge noise, a percussive wave that seemed to get inside her head. She had never heard anything like that before. Then she saw the smoke. It was coming from the other side of the compound, from the place where the *baas* used to live. She heard some of the men there shouting. There was a big commotion. Was this really the place she was born? she wondered. What happened to that world?

That day, in a room in Hillbrow, central Johannesburg, four people – three men and one woman – crowd round a laptop. They are streaming the evening news on SABC, the state-run broadcaster, once the mouth-piece of apartheid and now performing much the same function for the country's new rulers.

The item they are waiting for is not in the headlines. Halfway through the bulletin the newscaster says there's been an accident on a farm in Mpumalanga. The pictures show the charred ruins of various farm buildings and vehicles. The reporter says investigators have been sent to the farm but early reports suggest an electrical fault caused a fire.

'Bullshit!' says the woman. But one of the others, a man in his thirties, wearing glasses, says, 'This is good. They're running scared. They are doing what the old regime used to do.' They look at each other, the four of them, and smile. Their work has begun.

Just a couple of hours later anyone searching for more details of the incident would discover a link to an unadorned website carrying this anonymous entry:

The Burning Land

Today a new struggle has begun. Just over a hundred years ago, in 1913, the Boers passed a law to ROB US OF OUR LAND. Now we must fight for it again. In Mpumalanga Province a MESSAGE HAS BEEN DELIVERED. We did not win our freedom to see the LAND TAKEN AWAY FROM US AGAIN. We, the people of South Africa, will not sit and watch our precious inheritance SOLD TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER. Today in Mpumalanga we fired the first shot in our fight against the NEW COLONIALISM. Let them be warned, those who will SELL OUR LAND TO FOREIGNERS, the people of South Africa are ready to RISE UP AGAIN.

It was signed off, at the bottom of the page, simply as 'The Land Collective'.

In rooms elsewhere in the country, others saw the statement and recognised it for the call to arms they had been waiting for. A fuse had been lit, setting in motion a chain reaction that none of them, least of all the group in Hillbrow, could predict or control.

1

Lesedi Motlantshe's murder was one of those pivotal moments that seemed destined to change the course of a country's trajectory. There are some events – a law passed, a speech delivered, a transgression exposed – which are deemed significant only in retrospect, like looking back on a life and realising the point at which things had taken a turn for the better, or worse. This was different. As news of the murder spread across South Africa, its people knew there could be no going back to business as usual. Lesedi Motlantshe was more than a man: he was an idea, a symbol, and with his death that idea had been tarnished.

Lesedi had been one of freedom's children. Born in the eighties, his life mirrored the changes in South Africa as apartheid's pernicious laws were expunged from the statutes. A quick and confident boy, he'd once been interviewed by a TV crew doing a piece on the role schools were playing in changing attitudes to race. The reporter had asked the class of teenagers to define racism. In a flash, Lesedi had stuck up his hand. He'd pointed to one of only three white children in the class and said: 'Racism is like, you know, if I'm unkind to Darren and call him names – "Whitey" and so on.'

The clip had made it onto the evening news. This reversal of the conventional definition of racism – that white people could be the victims – from the lips of a black child seemed to speak volumes for the miraculous journey South Africa was making.

From that day on, Lesedi had become something of a celebrity, not so much teacher's pet as the nation's pet. His words were spliced into countless promotional videos produced by the government. He would be dragged out of the classroom to meet visiting dignitaries from China or Europe. A local TV station had adopted him for its 'Children of the Future' series, which meant he featured in an annual film tracing his

every success (of which there were many) and failure (of which there were none). His progress in school, his three years at the University of Cape Town – all of it was chronicled. In short, Lesedi had become a national mascot – the embodiment of South Africa’s new beginning.

Now he was dead.

Even in a country inured to violent crime, and a murder rate that saw it perpetually leading the wrong kind of international league table, the notion that Lesedi Motlantshe would one day become a victim – another notch on the grim statistics board – was unthinkable. There wasn’t a person in the country, whether they spent their time in a township shebeen or in a gated mansion, who did not know who Lesedi Motlantshe was and what he represented.

So who in their right mind would want him dead?

2

On the day Lesedi Motlantshe was murdered, his father had flown into Dubai, arriving early after an overnight flight.

Despite his immense bulk and thigh-chafing gait, there was an unmistakable swagger to the way Josiah Motlantshe approached the entrance to the hotel. He looked as if he owned the place, the proprietorial confidence enhanced by the familiarity with which the uniformed doorman greeted him. Motlantshe burst out of a pale, lightweight suit, like one of his country's famous meaty *boerewors* oozing out of its skin. The crotch, the knees, the elbows, even the armpits – at every junction of his stupendous body the fabric signalled its stress with a collection of starburst creases.

Josiah was a veteran of the anti-apartheid struggle who'd turned his hand – and influence – to business. He was one of the so-called Black Diamonds, that exclusive club of black millionaires, no, billionaires, thrown up by empowerment schemes established by post-apartheid governments.

He'd been met off the private charter from Johannesburg by one of a fleet of Bentleys the hotel owned. It was just one of the many perks offered by a place that attracted a clientele rich enough to afford such luxury and spoiled enough to feel they deserved it. Its marketing brochure boasted that every wish would be granted and every desire fulfilled. The South African politician-turned-billionaire could certainly attest to that, having had his every desire – including one or two that were not on the official list of services – met with alacrity and, where appropriate, the necessary discretion.

Josiah Motlantshe's personal 'butler', a service assigned to those who stayed in the penthouse suites (and Motlantshe never stayed in anything else), started unpacking the obligatory Louis Vuitton cases, breaking

off every now and then to pick up the various items of clothing that were being thrown onto the floor as Motlantshe undressed.

In a vest and a pair of briefs that were barely visible under an overflowing belly, Motlantshe eased himself onto the armchair, its leather upholstery sticking to his moist, hairless skin as he shifted this way and that till he was comfortable. With his pudgy hand he made one final adjustment of his balls, which nestled in the stretched cotton of his briefs, like a pair of oranges in a sling, and he was, at last, ready to make his first call – only to realise he'd left his mobile phone in the sitting room.

'Hello! Whassname! Bring me the phone,' he shouted.

The butler, a slight and professionally obsequious servant of South Asian origin, who had been busy laying out a fresh set of clothes in the dressing room, scurried in and picked up a handset from the bedside table.

'No, no, not that one. I want my own phone. It's there.' Motlantshe pointed to the lounge. 'And put this TV on – I want BBC.' He sat there, every obese inch of him exuding an air of entitlement. He'd come a long way from the time when he was so thin, so bony, that sitting on the wooden benches on Robben Island for more than a few minutes at a time was agony.

So, who to call first? The wife or the mistress? On this occasion duty prevailed. One of his three children answered.

'And how's my Thandi today? . . . It's who? Oh! My little princess. It's a bad line. Daddy is far away in Dubai. You sounded like your sister. So you have not gone to school yet? You are going to be late.'

'I'm not going today.'

'Is my little princess not well?'

'I'm fine, but Mummy talked to the teacher and she said some bad men were outside our school.'

'Bad men? What kind of men? Where is your mother? Bring her to the phone.'

'She's in the garden.'

'Go and fetch her. Hurry up.'

Motlantshe was irritated. He wished he'd phoned the other woman now. He imagined her at the flat he'd bought for her in Sandton. What time was it in Jo'burg? Still early. She was probably in bed. Motlantshe

The Burning Land

realised he was ever so slightly aroused. He heard the phone being picked up.

'What's going on?' he barked. 'Why is this girl talking about bad men at the school?'

'Is that what she said?' Priscilla Motlantshe sounded amused, which only added to her husband's irritation. 'No, today was meant to be a visit to Newtown. They were going to Museum Africa, but it's been cancelled because of the protest.'

'What protest?'

'You know! These land people. You were talking to Mkobi about it yesterday! Have you forgotten already?'

He knew why he had a mistress. His wife could make everything sound like an accusation. He had, indeed, called the president's office the day before in a last-ditch attempt to have the march stopped or postponed on some legal technicality – at least until after this meeting in Dubai. That reminded him: he needed to get that little shit Mkobi sacked. How the prissy bastard had made it into the president's office he didn't know. Mkobi hadn't put his call through. 'The president is a bit tied up just now,' he'd said, as if he were addressing some junior minister. Motlantshe could have called the president on his direct line, or on his private mobile phone, but that wasn't the point. Who the hell was Mkobi to decide whether or not he could speak to the president?

His temper had not been improved by the fact that Mkobi, the presidential chief of staff, had been right: it *was* too late to do anything about the march, but Motlantshe liked to reach these conclusions for himself and not have some jumped-up bureaucrat treat him like he was a novice. After all, he'd done time in jail for ungrateful bastards like Mkobi. Besides, judging by that voice of his, he was probably one of those homos or something.

'No, I remember, I'm just tired after the flight.'

'Didn't you sleep on the plane?'

There it was again: the accusatory tone. The needling suggestion that the reason he was tired was because he had failed to sleep, that it was his fault. Had it been the other woman, she would have whispered sweet nothings into his ear and told him she would wipe away all his tiredness just as soon as he was back in her arms.

‘Okay, I have to go,’ he said. ‘I’ll call after I meet these fellows from London.’

‘And don’t forget it’s Lesedi’s birthday this week,’ she threw in, for good measure. Lesedi was their only son, born in the days of struggle.

‘Of course I remember,’ he snapped back.

‘By the way, Jo, that minister, the Coloured fellow . . .’ Priscilla continued to use the old apartheid lexicon for ‘mixed race’.

‘You mean Jake, Jake Willemse?’

‘That’s him, yes. He called here.’

‘What’s he doing calling you?’

‘He said he couldn’t get hold of you. He was angry. He wants to know what Lesedi is doing in Mpumalanga. He says Lesedi is interfering. He says if you can’t stop him, he’ll deal with Lesedi himself.’

‘Who told Lesedi to go to Mpumalanga? What’s the boy doing over there?’

‘He says he wants to see things for himself, talk to local people to find out why they are so upset by this land thing. And, Jo, you have to stop calling him a boy. He’s a man now.’

‘Why should he be talking to these stupid people? They are being led by extremists. If he wants to be treated like a man, he needs to start thinking like one instead of all this foolishness he talks about.’

‘I can remember when you used to talk like that.’

There was wistfulness in her voice, which Motlantshe both recognised and loathed. He knew that everything else that was wrong in their marriage had grown out of this one central accusation – that he had forgotten where they had both started out.

They had met in the seventies. Josiah Motlantshe was the most prominent in a new generation of activists that was emerging inside South Africa, carrying the mantle of leadership while the likes of Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Joe Slovo were either jailed or in exile. He was an extrovert, a fiery orator. Priscilla was the opposite, but what she lacked in public presence she more than made up for with a quiet determination. When Motlantshe and some others were jailed it was said that, of all the women who were left behind, Priscilla would cope best.

And so she did, raising the son who barely knew his father. Lesedi Motlantshe was brought up on heroic tales of what his father was like

The Burning Land

and what he would do, come freedom day. But when he had emerged from Robben Island, it had turned out that Motlantshe was a far better businessman than politician, and he believed Priscilla had never forgiven him for that. Instead, she had brainwashed the boy, tried to turn him into a version of the man she wanted her husband to be. At least, that was how he'd put it in the days when he could be bothered to argue with her.

'I haven't got time for that nonsense,' he shot back. 'If he wants to be treated like a man he should be here, by my side, talking to these London people.'

'But you know he doesn't like what you are doing. He thinks the land should be going to our people.'

'It is you who has put this rubbish in his head. The land is not going anywhere. It is staying in South Africa. It is going to make money for the people of South Africa.'

'You mean make money for you.'

'Just call him and tell him to get back to Jo'burg.' Motlantshe flung the phone onto the bed. He could still hear his wife's disembodied voice. He stared at the phone, waiting for her to shut up.

Motlantshe looked up at the TV screen and realised he was seeing downtown Johannesburg. He put the sound up. It was the last thing he needed. There they were, hundreds of men and women doing the *toyi-toyi*, the rolling protest dance so reminiscent of the heyday of the anti-apartheid era. Except this was today, and Motlantshe was about to sit down with the latest land-hungry investors to tell them South Africa was a safe and stable place to park their millions. He thought about calling the executive director of the SABC but decided it was too early. Since their days as activists he'd known the man didn't get going till mid-morning.

He'd have to send an email, which Motlantshe loathed, not least because it required a modicum of digital dexterity that was beyond his pudgy fingers. He preferred issuing his instructions over the phone, and when he had to send an email he usually got his personal assistant to key in the message. Facing the prospect of doing it himself only added to his ill-temper.

He navigated his way to the email screen on his phone, something

of an achievement in itself, and started to assemble the words. He found it impossible unless he mouthed the letters aloud. He pushed down on the letter *a* only to see *s* appear on the screen. He did it again, this time producing @. The more frustrated he got the harder he pressed, making it even more likely that his thumb tip would hit the wrong letter. Eventually, he had what he wanted:

Am in Dubai to see these buyers from London. Worried protest going to upset them. This one is a big deal. The one in Mpumalanga. Keep protest coverage down. Call me. JM.

Motlantshe understood the TV business inside out – after all, he owned a channel – and knew how much other broadcasters depended on footage from SABC. Most – with the exception of BBC World and Al Jazeera – had long since shut down their bureaux in South Africa.

He had a few hours before the meeting with the London delegation. Motlantshe looked at his personalised Richard Mille watch and decided he still had time to make the other call before he was due to meet George Kariakis, the middleman who was organising the meeting. It was going to be a long day and he needed the kind of fillip that only his mistress could provide.

That same morning, some four thousand miles to the south, Kagiso Rapabane had glanced around a single open-plan room, the head office of Soil of Africa in Malelane, an unremarkable town in South Africa's Mpumalanga Province. Tourists passed through it on their way to the great Kruger National Park, but it was an experience they rarely, if ever, remembered.

It was going to be a big day for Soil of Africa and Kagiso was there a good hour earlier than was usual. It was the charity's only office. No two desks were alike, and the chairs were an assorted collection that included plastic garden furniture and a 'sofa' that had started life as the back bench on a bus, now bolted onto a couple of wooden pallets.

He rubbed his hands together, trying to generate some life in fingers that had been chilled to the bone on his ride into work. It was midwinter in the southern hemisphere and the early-morning air had an edge like

The Burning Land

a butcher's knife. He rummaged in his satchel and found a box of matches. Kagiso was not a habitual smoker, but in his line of work, out here in South Africa's forgotten rural fringe, it was the kind of thing that always came in handy. He carried the stump of a candle for the same reason. There were still plenty of farm labourers' huts where the electricity that powered escalators and supermarket freezers in the city had yet to reach a single light bulb. He struck a match and squeezed it through the fireguard on the paraffin heater; it sucked up the flame with a satisfying gulp.

Kagiso went over to the sink in the corner of the room and filled the kettle to the brim; the others would be here soon enough. He switched on the electric stove and watched the spiral filament as it glowed into red-hot life. The water dripping off the outside of the kettle fizzed and spat as he put it down.

He was waiting for Lesedi – scion of the Motlantshe family. The approach from Lesedi had been quite a surprise. When his office had called to arrange a meeting, the initial reaction among the staff at Soil of Africa had been one of suspicion. What were the Motlantshes up to now? Why would the son of a man like Josiah Motlantshe want to have a meeting with Soil of Africa, an organisation dedicated to ensuring that farm workers were given the opportunity to buy and work their own slice of land? Soil of Africa championed the notion, embedded in centuries of folklore and cemented by the humiliation of apartheid's evictions and pass laws, that those who are most secure are those who walk on land they can call their own. He could see why so many of his colleagues thought he was being either duped or naive. Not for the first time that morning Kagiso checked his phone. He was expecting a call. Nothing. No missed calls.

He went outside and stood on the stoep. The white light of a wintry sun shone through the delicate filigree of a spider's web stretched between the thatched roof and one of the timbers on which it was supported. A single dewdrop clung to the bottom of the web, like a pearl hanging from an intricate necklace. A few metres in front of him, a young boy, wearing a T-shirt that reached halfway down his shins, was herding half a dozen rangy cattle down the main street. Kagiso checked to see if the extra chairs he'd borrowed from the church up

the road had been delivered. Word had got round that Lesedi Motlantshe – heir to a billionaire – would be visiting Soil of Africa and he knew there would be quite a crowd. Motlantshe himself had proposed meeting some of the farm workers from around the town.

Kagiso Rapabane's transition from favoured civil servant to charity worker was as surprising as it was exceptional. A poorly paid job helping South Africa's rural poor was a far cry from his days at the Ministry of Rural Development and Land Reform in Pretoria, where he was a policy adviser to one Jake Willemse, at the time an up-and-coming minister. Kagiso had been something of a high flyer himself, one of the brightest prospects in the policy department, someone destined to go to the very top. There had been shock and not a little incredulity when it had been announced that he'd accepted a transfer to the rural outpost of Malelane. His industriousness, his renowned discipline, even his lean physique, all of these seemed ill suited to the altogether more laid-back attitude to work in the languid province of Mpumalanga in the eastern reaches of the country.

At the ministry, he'd been something of an enigma: everybody's friend but no one's confidant. You'd have been hard pushed to find anyone who had a bad word to say about him, but in the world of office camaraderie people wanted more of a colleague, someone who was clubbable in a way that Kagiso was unable and unwilling to be. While the others had aspired to owning BMWs, he was satisfied with his Yamaha scooter; while they signed up with a personal trainer – a status symbol in the new South Africa – he would disappear on long, lonely runs. No one knew about his love life, whether he even had one. He seemed inured to the charms of even the most attractive women at the ministry. The men couldn't understand it and the women were intrigued. They wondered what went on behind those bespectacled eyes. His aloofness, his unavailability, was much more alluring than the crude lasciviousness of the other men, brought up in a society hooked on the conventional rituals of men chasing women.

Kagiso's phone rang. He didn't recognise the number.

'Lesedi Motlantshe here. How's it going?'

Kagiso was taken aback for a moment to hear Lesedi himself, not the assistant he had been dealing with up till then, at the end of the

The Burning Land

line. And he was surprised by how 'white' the accent was. It was reminiscent of the still-white suburbs of Cape Town, certainly not Mitchell's Plain.

'Hey! I'm fine. Are you on your way?'

'Yeah. I think I'm about an hour away, two at the most. I've just stopped to get something to eat. It was an early start.'

'How many of you are coming?'

'Just me.'

'Really? I thought you would be . . .'

'You sound shocked. I know we Motlantshes are meant to travel with an entourage, just to show how important we are.' Lesedi was laughing.

'Well, we'll be ready and waiting.'

'You make it sound like I'm about to walk into an ambush!' Another chuckle.

'No one's going to ambush you here. Listen, you're the biggest thing that's happened here since some American rapper passed through on his way to the Sabi Sabi game lodge. Most of them probably just want to shake your hand.'

'I'd better brush up on my rap, man.' That chuckle again. It was infectious.

'So how do you want to play things today?' Kagiso asked.

'I don't plan on making any big speeches or anything. I just want to listen. I know there's a lot of loose talk about what the Motlantshes are up to and I'd like to reassure people.'

Ever since the meeting had been arranged, Kagiso had rehearsed the various ways in which he might broach their disagreements. He was acutely conscious that he was about to change the tone of the conversation. 'Well, I wouldn't say it's all just loose talk. At Soil of Africa we think there are other ways of taking care of the land *and* the people who live on it.'

'I know. I've been looking at your website. Your achievements are pretty impressive. Maybe there are things we can talk about . . . You know, reach a compromise.'

This was unexpected, but Kagiso remained wary. 'I certainly hope so. People here just see all these land deals and feel betrayed. And the new black owners are as bad as the old white ones. And now we've got all these foreigners coming in . . .'

‘Look, I know, there’s a lot to discuss. Maybe it would be good if we – you and I – could get a few minutes to chat on our own, away from the others. I don’t agree with everything that’s going on and I want to find a way to help.’

‘Well, just tell your father and his friends.’

‘You don’t know my father! Anyway, see you just now.’

Their lives couldn’t have been more different: Kagiso, the son of a house worker and the beneficiary of a white family’s generosity; Lesedi, a child born into the aristocracy of struggle, for whom wanting something was merely a question of asking for it. Their paths had crossed once before when they were both students, not that Lesedi would remember the encounter. It was at a varsity rugby match between Stellenbosch, where Kagiso had studied, and the University of Cape Town, where Lesedi had entertained himself, with the occasional foray into the library. It was a home game for Stellenbosch, and Kagiso now remembered how he’d cycled to the sports ground to watch. He’d been padlocking his bike when Lesedi had rolled up in a soft-top BMW with a couple of friends, who tumbled out of the vehicle with bottles of the Cape’s finest fizzy in their hands.

He hadn’t felt any jealousy at the time, at least not over Lesedi’s wealth. If anything, it was the other man’s confidence he’d envied. As a child growing up, he’d never been the one who’d stick his hand up and say, ‘Yes, sir, I know the answer.’ He feared the humiliation of being wrong much more than he craved the praise that went with being right.

By the time Lesedi Motlantshe had arrived at Soil of Africa’s office, a little later than he’d predicted, the sun had worked its magic. It would be a warm day. The two men shook hands and, despite their contrasting backgrounds, Kagiso felt it would be a meeting of equals.

Much later that day, in Dubai, Josiah Motlantshe’s phone rang. He opened his eyes, and still he could see nothing. There was a moment of terror before he pulled at the sleep mask. All the pieces began to fall into place: he was in Dubai; he’d come back from the casino (those private-equity chaps loved their gambling) a couple of hours before dawn. He stared at the screen on his phone, waiting for his eyes to focus. It was a number in South Africa but not one he recognised.

The Burning Land

'Who is this?' he barked, in his default disposition.

'Hello, is this Mr Motlantshe I am speaking to?' He recognised the Afrikaner accent. 'Mr Josiah Motlantshe?'

'Yes, what do you want? It's the middle of the night.'

'Just a moment, *meneer* – I mean sir. Let me put you through.'

'Hello, hello, put me through to whom?' It was useless: she'd already transferred the call.

'Is this Mr Motlantshe, Mr Josiah Motlantshe?'

'How many times do I have to tell you people? Yes, this is he. And who are you?'

'It's Lieutenant General Jackson Sibande, sir, from the South African Police Service in Mpumalanga.'

'From where? Mpumalanga?'

'Yes, sir. We have some news for you, sir, and I'm just going to pass you on to the premier, Mr Jeremiah Bekelu.'

'For Chrissake, what the hell is going on? . . . Jerry? Jerry, is that you? What the hell is happening?'

'Josiah, something bad has happened here. It's Lesedi . . .'