

# **THE SLAVERY OF FLIGHT**

by

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## Chapter One Rubble

The bulldozers arrived at ten-fifteen. Sitting in her slate blue BMW with the windows up and the doors locked, left hand on the lump in the passenger seat, she had been expecting them since half past eight. She sipped her tea, syrupy and black, from an insulated Rugby World Cup '95 mug, the springbok logo scarred and worn. She sipped it like a hummingbird, her tongue a needle that pistoned into the beaker and curled lukewarm nectar across expectant teeth.

The hair on the back of her neck was a periscope, scanning the limits of peripheral vision for alien sounds under distant traffic and the wind through restless eucalypts. She listened to the radio at the threshold of hearing, volume knob swiveled until she strained forward against the seatbelt to catch the violins. She blinked, mimicking TV tennis with pinball eyes. The car spat cool air against the threat of a pre-summer scorcher, washing her with goose pimples as the engine purred.

They tore down the front wall first, dumping cracked plaster and broken bottle shards onto the red brick driveway that curved up to the house. They tore down the front wall first,

breaching the fort with a raw scrape of metal and demolition paperwork that whistled and sang.

Behind the house, three blue gums muttered, bowing their heads in counsel at the proximate destruction. The trees, left standing in another generation's suburban development, resigned themselves to relegation as the parking garage for an office compound. They waved paralyzed limbs at the chalk-blue ceiling, signaling surrender against a backdrop of rough execution. The sky, wet with fresh morning paint, settled onto the trees' khaki leaves.

The house was mute. No whimpers of protest grazed the foundation. The decorative thatched roof, a steep trapezoid underlaid with a modern combination of tar and tile, leaned over both wings of the center arch. The gable in the rendered plan was not storage space, as it had been in the soggy, reclaimed land of the Low Countries. On this house on the high plateau of Southern Africa, the main gable was a nod to the adaptation of colonists; men and women who built the first Cape Dutch houses in the eighteenth century, riding on a bubble of slave-supported prosperity.

The architect was from Amsterdam, infatuated with the Dark Continent's bastardization of his homeland's loft design. In love with the rounded triangles and low square windows with an overhanging brow of roof ridge, the architect coaxed and goaded the residents-to-be. He mocked their original plans for a three-bedroom with Spanish swirls, terracotta, and wrought iron lattices over the windows. He cajoled them with pastel sketches of a glorified manor, shaming the rising neighbors who failed the imagination with blocky suburban tract homes and faux-Tuscan displacement.

What the bulldozers faced on that mid-morning in spring was a passable, downscaled replica of a Stellenbosch homestead, complete with slatted, coal-black window shutters and a detached triple garage disguised as a guest house. The panes of glass succumbed to a tic-tac-toe

of narrow, white splints, leaving the double-width door to proclaim a solid obstacle to entry. The brass knocker in the shape of a slack-jawed lion's head had been polished to gleaming overuse; the welcome mat was still crusted with mud from the children's school shoes. It had rained through the end of August.

The Cape Dutch gables swung wide and low from the front of the house, a well-greased mustache thumbed to land in the laps of jacaranda trees. That year, a short flowering season in this garden of Eden Meadows. Early October, and the smudged purple blossoms of the sentry trees shredded like paper bark and decayed to pungent mulch in the sandy soil. The remnant petals clung, itchy scabs on spindly twigs, and the fern-splayed foliage of the trees whitewashed the promise of hopeful color.

There was no pavement between the barricade and the grass verge that dipped into a buoyant gutter. There was no pavement, no directed streamer of pedestrian acknowledgement, because no one in this suburb walked anywhere. A pavement, spattered with drawings and hopscotch grids or littered with gold foil toffee wrappers, would have implied a conduit for foot traffic from wellspring to destination. It would have marked the space between home and asphalt as shared space, open for the business of carrying neighbors between houses or children on their way to school.

There was no pavement, no channel. The anorexic stripe of green that bridged the driveway to the car thoroughfare was a moat, separating inside from outside, hearth boundary from public life, one 'them' from the other. No need for 'Please Stay Off the Grass' notices on this patch; only the servants of the houses all around walked past these gates, keeping tight against the curb, facing infrequent oncoming cars. Those people may have walked along the pavement, if the architects of this space had thought to include them in planning. They may have

walked along the pavement of this dead-end street, jackknifing into it from the feeder road at the end of the block, and slipping into that boulevard from an overcrowded bus stop twenty minutes down.

The architects imagined no such thing. Like designers all over the plague of insular suburbia, triggered by accident but maintained with strict regulation, they ceded to the cars. They paid tribute to the supremacy of the air-conditioned, hijack-alarmed, automatic-everything vehicles that slithered, two-by-two most mornings, from the wombs of these fortresses that some people called home.

Three yellow heralds of destruction squatted side-by-side in the quiet residential cul-de-sac, their clean treads and high front wheels glinting with reined anticipation and crushing the buzz-cut lawn. The depot had repainted them with the new company logo, sprayed sunshine bright and tattooed with a blue infinity sign streaked through by a brazen, double-barreled arrow. Their drivers, suspended in black plastic bucket chairs in dusty cabs with no windows, talked on their mobile phones or listened to the radio while the boss discussed the details with the woman on the other side of the wall.

If the workmen had instead sprung from their cockpits and sauntered around the house, one admiring the slant of the pitched roof while another surveyed the algae-lidded, corbeau swimming pool, their gaze would have braked to avoid collision with the unexpected. The high window at the rear of the estate was a patch-eyed pirate, a single sheet of plywood covering all but a pinhole of the frame. In the morning light, an errant beam crossed wood and wandered into the room beyond, trailing warmth and a horizon of sunshine.

The older man, remembering a childhood in lush, lower-middle class oblivion where he walked to the weed-choked park, would have chuckled at the obvious result of a rowdy ball

game. The younger man, recalling a childhood in stifling, tin-roof hovels where he hid in the rat-infested veld as the shots and the screams blared from school, would have drawn the marker across predicate, cause, and consequence. The younger would have been right.