

PROLOGUE

The beginning of one's life doesn't necessarily start with one's birth.

To begin with, it happened in a place where I didn't belong, with the passing away of my estranged grandmother. Like dead compost germinates a dormant seed, I started to grow, to flower, to be born, to shoot roots into the soil of France—a non-indigenous plant in foreign terre; an alien tree that magically unrolls its leaves, unlocks its power, in a potion of fertilizer.

Down to earth as I may have been, when I invaded this so-very-old, so-very-passionate, so-very-ripe country with my green soul, I was destined to make some enemies, the front line being my estranged family. My family was nothing like a rose garden; rather, it was a forest of pines that from afar, looked like green goose-feather down. Up close and personal, it stung the flesh of the naked spirit. It was a maze in which to be deceived and to lose your way and yourself.

Without the wisdom that comes to some lucky ones with age, I arrived inexperienced, like an unpeeled onion, with layers of hidden tears. That was all. That was me. I arrived. I never guessed that I was exposing myself to be shredded to the core; to become just the root of a child, growing into ivy that attached itself to the very stone walls of my heartless inheritance.

All I had were my backpack and the courage plastered on my unpainted face. Torn jeans, torn soul, piercings, and tattoos—like my family chateau, it was all show. Because for eight years, my birthday candles had been blown out by the cold breath of death, until just a frosted layer of me remained, like icing on an untouched, spoilt cake. And then death

struck again. Had I known, I might not have ventured into the new domain, which, from then on, I could have called home.

Why I came here, I never really knew. Maybe because my soul was slowly dying, like a plant that went unwatered, through neglect or forgetfulness. Maybe because my body was burnt out, like a cooking fire that had served its purpose; its smoldering ashes all that remain of the feast. Maybe because I didn't have anyone to leave behind, to miss, to miss me. Maybe because I wanted to know who my mother was. But it wasn't because I was hopeful. I wasn't the kind of person who hoped. It wasn't that I was curious, because nothing intrigued me. It wasn't that I needed a holiday, because I wasn't the type of person who took holidays. Maybe I just didn't know. And in the end, it didn't really matter. What mattered was that I was a dry, purposeless tree, without a green branch or leaf on which an animal could feed, not asking for as much as a drop of water, not offering an iota of shade. But I learned that in one season, even a dying tree could be revived with water. In four months, a lifetime could be lived. In eight years, a lifetime that had never been lived could be lost.

Everyone has a story to tell. I never thought mine was worth telling. Sometimes I have difficulty telling stories because I cannot picture the beginning or the end. Lately, as time has moved me to the last quarter of my life, I'm starting to see more clearly the outlines of the end. The beginning still eludes me, maybe because when I was young and pretty and arrogant, life had no end and no starting point. After my life's tragic course, I never heeded the future, only the past. Until David arrived.

So, I guess the best place to start is in the middle, somewhere between the vague clouds of change, because, in fact, that was the beginning, so to speak. Some of what flows from my pen comes from my diary, some from memory, but I will try to tell it as accurately as possible, exclusive of my emotions, as it really happened.

CHAPTER 1

France

I was three months old when my mother left us. We never saw her again. I grew up with my father on a game farm in the Northwest Province of South Africa. A divorce came through when I was two. My mother was Anglo-French, from the south of France. Besides her nationality, I didn't know anything about her. It broke my father's heart to talk about her. Through my uncle, I later learned that she was living with a Brazilian football player in South America. My maternal grandmother had cut us off from the family. Why, I never learned, except that my mother left France with my South African father when she was pregnant with me, before they were married.

I was thirty when my grandmother passed away. The first time she made contact with me was after her death, through her will. A lawyer traced me, through my uncle, to inform me that my grandmother had left her entire estate near Castries, France, to me. In the first years of my working career, after my father's death, I had tried several times to find my mother. Tracing her seemed impossible, especially without resources. Tracing my grandmother was easier, but her second husband, Yves Dubois, had replied to my e-mail, instructing me not to contact them again. I suppose I would have tried harder if the next few years of my life had not been dominated by other tragic events. Through the years, finding my mother became less important to me. I was obviously not important to her. But nine years later, within a week of the news from my grandmother's lawyer, I put my business on hold and took a plane to Montpelier, via Paris. I had no idea what to expect. The lawyer had explained that a decision had to be made with regard to the estate, a decision that would affect the lives of the people still living there. And, being in Mont-