

PART ONE :

1976

Chapter One

If he stretched his fingers out in the dark he could feel a damp wall. His head throbbed. How long had he been here? He lay quietly. There was an earth floor beneath him. His hands – he brushed the earth off them, then ran them over his face. It was sticky, and when he touched his nose he cried out. One eye was swollen shut. On the back of his head he found the source of his pain: a lump so big that it filled his hand.

It was quiet – a hollow kind of quiet that made him think he was alone in this place, wherever it was. He held his breath and listened. No birds sang. Yet this place must be in the veld. Perhaps it was a village. His stomach clenched in fear as he looked for a chink of light. Even at night a little light should leak in around a door; even in the country there was moonlight, starlight; even in the country there was movement, little rustles as things ran through the grass. Yet there was nothing. Perhaps he was dead. No, if he were dead he would not feel pain. Or thirst. He was so thirsty. He felt around for a cup. Had someone left him some water?

He lay still again, with his dizzy head turned to one side, and resolved to think and to breathe slowly, to calm himself, to gather his strength so he could get out of here. He ran his hands over his body. He was dressed. He wriggled his toes. He had no shoes on, but his feet felt OK. Sometimes they went for your feet. Then, just as he thought, *I am going to roll over onto my hands and knees, crawl to the wall, and try to stand—*

The boy woke up. He was lying behind the comforting bulk of his mother. His heart was thudding fast. He shot out of bed and crouched against the far wall, arms over his head. “No!” he whispered before he could stop himself.

Then it came to him. The dream was about Sipho. In the dream, he *was* Sipho. His big brother, his strong, tall brother, who could swing him around and carry him high on his shoulders, Sipho with the deep laugh and wide, handsome face.

Before he’d thought what he was doing, he had shaken his mother awake. “Mama! Mama!” he sobbed. “Sipho! Sipho – he is hurt! I dreamed – I dreamed—”

His mother woke instantly. “No,” she said gently. “No, he is working in Jo’burg and he sends us money. You know that. You mustn’t worry.” Slowly, he stopped crying and fell asleep again while she lay looking into the darkness, her arms around him, tears streaming down her face.

Presently, she saw threads of light between the door and its frame and slipped out of bed, disentangling her arms from the small body. Sipho used to sleep like that too, before he became a man. Before he went away to Jo’burg

to earn a living. Before he sent money back to her in Cape Town and to her parents in the Ciskei, for her younger children. Before—

By this time she had crossed the yard and gone up the red stone steps to the back door. She slipped her key into the lock and raised a hand to her *doek*, tucking the scarf in neatly at the back. It was almost time to take up the tea.

Chapter Two

“Beauty! Beauty! Where are you?” Mrs Malherbe came rushing down the corridor and barged through the green baize door. “We need to sort out the menus before I can...”

Quickly, Joshua jumped into his hiding place by the kitchen. It was under the back stairs, which led out of the servants’ hall, up to the first floor. It was a perfect space for him, and he sat here when he could, listening to the sounds of the house.

It was like a little room, a cupboard, really, into which the vacuum cleaner and the polisher were crammed. There wasn’t much space left over, but there was enough for a boy with no shoes to crawl into the musty wooden dark. Joshua had pulled an old blanket in there once, one he had taken from Betsy’s basket. She was a Basset Hound, who sometimes let him crawl in with her and give her a cuddle. There was a big fuss over the missing blanket. His mother had to swear that she hadn’t taken it home or sold it.

“Sold it?” she fumed, as they sat in the damp paraffin smell of her room. “Why would I want to sell that old

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thing?” That was the trouble. They always thought you were stealing from them. Joshua didn’t tell his mother he had the blanket, but she caught him anyway. She was getting the Hoover out of the cupboard when she found it.

“*Hayi*,” she said. “You have shamed me in front of the Madam. We must give it back.” But he begged and pleaded, and in the end she left it where it was. At least that way, he supposed, she could say it had just somehow got into the cupboard; she didn’t know how.

And it meant he was out of the way. In fact, he wasn’t meant to be in the house at all. He should have been in the country with his grandparents. But Mrs Malherbe was turning a blind eye, which was what these people did when they wanted to help you. Other times, they said, “How can I believe you?” or “You can’t fool me – I’m not stupid.”

They were, though. Most of them. How many of them could speak three or four languages? How many of them could run a house that size, cleaning it through every day, making the beds, doing the washing and the cooking, and still look after a set of fractious white children?

It seemed that most of them couldn’t do anything at all. It took Mrs Malherbe most of the morning to get up. Then she had coffee and buttered Provita by the pool and listened to *Woman’s Hour*. After swimming ten lengths, she showered. Then she went out in her car. It was a dark green MG, and it made a throaty roar as it went up the road. Joshua loved that car. He washed it and polished it for her, twisting the cloth into little corners to get the last of the polish out of the little runnels under the windows and

buffing the chrome bumpers until they shone.

When he knew she was having a lie-down (something she did almost every afternoon), he sat in the tan leather driver's seat, running his hands over the cool steering wheel, gazing ahead down the driveway between the rows of smoke-blue hydrangeas, seeing the open road.

He was glad the Malherbes didn't have children, only a grown-up son who belonged to the Madam. He could hear the Websters across the road in the afternoons, and he shuddered. There were six of them: they screamed and fought, and dive-bombed one another in the pool. Their mother shouted at them. But it was quiet by the time their father came home, and as dusk fell over the lawns, under the great grey back of the mountain, there was nothing to hear but the little hiss of sprinklers spitting and turning, spitting and turning.

Mr Malherbe liked supper on the table at seven. There was, in consequence, a flurry of activity around six, when Mrs Malherbe emerged pink-eyed from her bedroom and, clutching a gin and tonic, supervised the making of the supper and the setting of the table.

As far as Joshua could see, she did nothing but get in the way. She fussed and she tutted; she moved things; she tasted, screwing up her face; and as seven approached, and the second gin and tonic was poured, she retreated, combed her hair, put on a slash of red lipstick and sat in the front lounge with the newspaper on her lap. At the sound of her husband's Mercedes, she held the paper up and looked earnestly at it. And there she would be when he came in.

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The child was supposed to go to bed after supper in his mother's room, which was across the yellow dirt yard from the main house, between the garage, the workshop and the outside bathroom. He would curl up in the sagging bed by the damp and peeling wall, head under the covers to keep out the light and the ceaseless sound of his mother's knitting machine. Often he would creep back to the big house across the yard, up the slippery red-polished steps of the back *stoep* and curl up under the stairs, where it was warmer, and where now and then Betsy would crawl in with him.

He would hear them in the next room, having supper. Usually there was just a quiet rumble of talk; sometimes a shrill burst of laughter from Mrs Malherbe. Sometimes he fell asleep, snug in his hairy cocoon, and woke to find Betsy snoring comfortably beside him. He would open the back door quietly, clicking the Yale lock shut behind him and tiptoe out, the beaten yellow dust cold under his feet, and slip into bed behind his mother, staring into the darkness until sleep took him.

Often he would dream strange dreams that he knew were about Sipho: one night, a ring of mountains above his head, and he as small as an ant on the grass; in another, he was back in his grandparents' house in the Ciskei, hiding under the table with his little sister, Phumla, and giggling among the grown-ups' legs. Or he was all squashed up to one side in the back of a car; there was a cloth around his face and he could only just breathe. His arms were tied behind him. He wriggled over onto his back and felt the fresh cold

air come through the window onto his hot forehead and in the inky dark he saw stars, millions of stars. He was afraid. These were the dreams he hated the most, and they made him put off going to bed, even though his mother said Siphos was fine.

It was after supper one night, when he was in his hidey-hole under the stairs, that things changed. The tempo of the conversation quickened, and Mr Malherbe's voice deepened. Mrs Malherbe's voice ran quickly up the scale. He listened, holding his breath. She wasn't laughing. She was crying.

Then Mr Malherbe roared, Mrs Malherbe screamed, and something smashed. The front door slammed, and Joshua heard the iron gates crash open and the Mercedes' heavy tyres squeal as it turned into the road.