

CHAPTER ONE

South Africa December, 1944

A trickle of sweat ran down Zinzi's back as she pushed on, her footsteps kicking up a whirlwind of yellow dust. Like a gazelle, she trotted, the earth gasping beneath her bare feet. It was the hot summer month of December and there had been no rain for weeks. Sun-baked roads had endured the long wait for rain just as she had endured the long wait for her father. For ten months, he had been far away working out a contract in the mines of *eGoli* "the city of gold," as the villagers called Johannesburg. Gone for three hundred and seven days of her short life.

The sun was already beating down, preparing the morning for another sweltering day. She glanced up at the Union Jack as she hurried past the Magistrate's office. On days when the wind caught it, she often stopped to admire its red and white crosses stretched against deep royal blue, but today the white king's flag hung limply in the air. It did not tempt her to slow down. On she scampered, past the church and the whitewashed school building, headed for the railway station on the outskirts of town. In her mind, she pictured tracks reaching all the way up to Kimberley and across to Johannesburg in the north. The rails were all that separated the village from the vast expanse of scrubby trees and thorn bushes on the other side. Yet for Zinzi, they held out promise. They were the steel path that led to her heart's desire.

High above the sprawling maze of the village, slanting rays of sun streaked through the wisps of clouds. Women appeared from sagging doorways, calling to each other and chattering with excitement. They knew a train was to arrive that morning, though they did not know exactly when. Their days were measured by the crow of the cock, the movement of the sun and their babies' hungry cries. Clocks were a worry when they were in the service of white people and only then did they bend to the demands of this odd perception of time. They were born into a society of people who were careful to keep to ways they had long understood and unwilling to accept anything new or strange.

Bursts of shrill laughter punctuated the air as they teased and scolded each other, embarrassed by their eagerness to see the men again. Most of the women wore western-style print dresses, but the elders and the most recent arrivals from the homelands wore the red blankets of the Xhosa people. Regardless of dress, the married women's heads were wrapped in turban-like *doeks* according to custom—only unmarried women and girls were permitted to go bareheaded.

Old and young, the same unspoken worries nagged them. There was danger in the mines. Despite the risks, their husbands, brothers, and sons were among the three

hundred and fifty thousand able-bodied men who had eagerly signed up with the recruiter. By law, they were prevented from acquiring skilled jobs. Little was left to them other than the brutal, spirit-crushing labor that white men did not want to do.

Gasping for breath, Zinzi drew up the station - a shabby wooden structure raised off the ground on a cement platform, large enough to house a ticket office and a padlocked room for cargo. The station clerk's window faced the tracks. Over it, a dilapidated sign hung at an angle from a broken hinge. Zinzi cocked her head to one side and gazed at the English word spelled out in large green letters. "Klipgrond," she repeated from memory, her lips barely moving.

She was a stubborn little figure in a tattered pinafore, tall for her eight years. Stubby braids pointed outward at right angles from her head, adding a comical character to her already unruly appearance. Her father had sounded the word to her when she'd seen him off at the station, what now seemed like half a lifetime ago. She recalled how he stood straddling his knapsack, his sockless feet pushed into two-toned shoes, his unbuttoned shirt flapping against a chest that was hard and strong. He was tall and broad-shouldered like the men of his clan, and he lifted her as if she were weightless and held her aloft in the crook of his arm. She remembered the feel of his dark, smooth cheek, the fingers of his big hand pointing in the direction of the Great Karroo. It was a faraway land that he spoke of - bleak and treacherous and full of leopards and lions and little yellow Bushmen.

Burying her face into the warmth of his neck, she'd listened to his stories, his words forming pictures of giant vultures that ate little children and two-toed birds with great round bellies that ran faster than the wind. And when he laughed, his eyes sparkled like chips of onyx and his broad smile revealed a flash of perfectly even white teeth. He was clean-shaven and handsome and his hair glistened with sweet-smelling pomade. And there was something about him that women waiting by the tracks seemed to want. Proclaiming ownership, she fastened her arms around his muscular shoulders. He was hers. They could not have him.

She pressed her nose against him, breathing in the just-washed scent of his skin, the lingering smell of Grandma Mkoka's homemade soap. "Don't go, Papa," she pleaded.

"Sssh." Rocking her gently, he made light of her fears. "I am a man. I was meant for these things."

She could feel the beat of his pulse as he described the Reef - a land filled with endless veins of gold,

Sometimes, it took days to get to the bottom, he said. Down there where the cave spirits lived, it was blacker than a moonless night and so hot that sweat ran like rivers from men's bodies. That's why only brave warriors were chosen for the dangerous work. She held her breath as he described the plunging descent into the deep throat of the shafts, diving and swaying in a rickety cage. Shouldering his heavy pickaxe, he wedged himself into places where no man had gone before, and lit firesticks that exploded into the rock. And when he came upon the gold, the brightness was so dazzling he had to shield his eyes. She remembered the shiver that ran up and down her spine when he

spoke of this dark, dangerous place, and a wave of jealousy that it held such terrible power—the power to take him away from her.

Like a piper's tune in a fairy tale, notes of an enchanted music snapped her into awareness of the present moment. Swinging sounds that seemed to dance on the morning air. Curious, she pushed her way through a clutter of women. The older mamas reproached her for stepping on their bare feet, but the younger women ignored her and went back to their gossip.

In the ticket office, the station clerk sat with his face propped against one hand, dozing. A radio behind him blared sounds unlike any she had ever heard before. Sounds that cut, blazed, and ripped through the dusty air. Colors pulsed before her eyes—bursts of red, green, gold, and purple. Abstract shapes that unlocked something deep inside her, that made her want to enter into the music, to be enveloped by it, to soar as it soared. She cocked her head to one side and stood listening, her tongue pressed against her lower lip, the big toe of her left foot twisting into twisting into the dirt.

“Crazy little girl,” one woman laughed. “Standing with her eyes bugged out.” Trumpets blared from the radio—brassy shouts that set the music swinging. Zinzi drew closer, her eyebrows arched in wonder over big expressive eyes. Transported to another world, she listened to the shapes bouncing off each other, spinning, tumbling, and leaping through space.

The radio announcer's voice broke the spell. “You're listening to the Jazz Hour, bringing you big band hits from America.”

From somewhere in the distance came the low whistle of a train. She turned a longing face toward the sound. At first, all she could see was a stream of smoke above the treetops. Then, a train was coming directly at her, thundering through the open grassland—a black metal beast chewing up the rails and sending a wave of blue cranes into flight. The roar of its approach was terrifying and thrilling. She jumped back as a loud blast sliced through the air.

A rush of wind blew across her face and flattened her pinafore to her legs. “Papa,” she squealed, her heartbeat quickening in wild anticipation.

Bunching together in an eager group, the women strained for the first glimpse of their men as the mighty locomotive cut its speed and lumbered into the station. Scrappy children scurried alongside the massive iron wheels collecting chunks of coal that fell from the open cars. Belching smoke, the engine screeched to a stop and let out a final whoosh of steam. The women recoiled with a collective squeal. Boxcar doors slid open and men with knapsacks jumped down. Sweaty and weary, they grabbed up their wives and children with joyous shouts.

Zinzi clambered onto a pushcart. Her eyes scoured the crowd. “Papa,” she called, but her voice could not be heard above the din. Jumping down, she circumnavigated the swarm of bodies, her head whipping from side to side. Her father was nowhere in sight.

An old man leaned against the last car gathering his strength. His jaw line was hidden by a close-cropped beard; a battered cap drooped over one eye. She ran to him, tugged on his elbow. It took her a moment to recognize Luzuko, her father's old friend.

"Have you seen my Papa?"

Kind eyes glinted from his grizzled face. He gave her cheek a playful pinch. "Don't cry, daughter. I believe Mbane be on the night train."

Zinzi clapped her hands together, her cheeks stretching into a grin so wide, it seemed to pry her front teeth further apart. Luzuko chuckled to himself and picked up his knapsack. Zinzi was so consumed with her own happy thoughts, she failed to notice his grimace as he limped along beside her.

"Run along home" he said, "tell your grandmother others be coming soon."



CHAPTER TWO

the yard

Zinzi's Auntie Katjie approached the community water tap carrying a baby on her back and an empty water bucket on her head. It was a long walk to the center of the village, but something to anticipate since the tap was a hubbub of activity and a favorite place for exchanging daily gossip and enjoying careless laughter. The women took perverse pleasure in trading reports of men who had come home drunk and rowdy after gambling away their week's pay at the local *shebeen*. Inevitably, domestic quarrels followed, despite the fact that in the amaXhosa world, the man was always right and never to be questioned. And because so many wives spoke their minds, reports of brawls and wife beatings were commonplace. Reports of curses and abuse circulated quickly, and rumors of women who had taken lovers were always flying. And many mornings found them buzzing over whoever had taken ill or died. The first business of each day was to learn what everyone knew of everyone else's business from the night before.

"*Jonga!* Look who's coming over the hill," one of the chief gossips whispered. The women twisted their heads to gawk. "They say she has caught the men's eyes, but she will not show herself."

A wiry, toothless woman peeked out from beneath her *doek*. "They say she's not in a healthy state of mind."

“Ts!” An elder woman clucked her tongue, and leaned in to fill her bucket. “She’s got two sons to carry on the clan name, three daughters to work the fields. Leave her alone.”

Katjie made her way along the footpath, singing a soft cooing song to her baby. Her hips swayed lazily with each languorous stride. She was a tall, slender woman in her thirties, with a plain angular face, a strong jaw, and an incongruous button mouth that contributed to her reputation for keeping it shut. She’d never uttered a word about the disappearance of her husband, last seen on a Sunday morning in 1942 heading out of town. Rumor had it that he had gone to sign up for a great war against a white man whose name they couldn’t pronounce. Now more than a year had passed, everyone presumed he was dead, but Katjie refused funeral rites and named her baby *Lindile*, which means “to wait.”

The gossips enjoyed clicking their tongues and shaking their heads whenever they spoke of this, but their greater interest lay in Katjie’s status as sister-in-law to the Mbane, Mkoka’s youngest son. Mbane had received the love of many women in the village without giving any in return and they were all deeply interested in learning anything they could about him.

“*Molwene*.” Hello, they chimed. “*Unjani?*” How goes it with you? Their eyes flickered, hoping she might toss them a tidbit of news.

“*Molwene* –” Katjie answered, but the sound of footsteps running hard cut short her response.

The women’s heads turned in unison as Zinzi raced past.

“uMakhulu!” she squealed. Grandma! Though she was still a long way from her grandmother’s yard.

“Zinzi,” Katjie shouted after her, but the child kept right on running.

Katjie set her bucket down and cast a worried look to the gossips. They returned understanding nods. They all knew Mbane’s daughter had heard her. But just like him, she could not be caught.

Zinzi ran past endless rows of shacks constructed from wooden boards and corrugated iron, a makeshift settlement for families a long way from home. An old woman sweeping her yard with a grass broom waved a hand to stop her. Among Xhosa women, it was considered a community duty to watch out for the little ones, to discipline them and tell them what to do. Zinzi drew up for a moment, but only to catch her breath. She stamped a rebellious foot as the woman approached, and took off running again.

Following a winding footpath, she scrambled past shafts of golden-topped sorghum and carefully cultivated plots of mealie plants, their thick green stalks shooting up from the cracked soil. Overhead, the sky was blue and cloudless and chattering sunbirds flitted on bright green wings, their blue and yellow underbellies flashing. She did not stop to watch them as she often did, but hurried on, cutting through gardens and stumbling across pumpkin and watermelon vines, their tentacles stretched across

the ochre-colored soil. Her pinafore was wet with sweat, her toes cut and bleeding, but a silent, intrepid will fueled her feet.



Grandma Mkoka's ramshackle, tin-roofed house stood at the farthest reach of the village, her yard sweeping up to the edge of *iqgirha's* forbidden territory. The only boundary that lay between was a rusty, chicken-wire fence. Beyond the fence and partially hidden by waist-tall grass, the thatched roof of Nonyameko's round mud hut could be seen at a distance. Smoke from her outside fire curled up to the Spirit world day and night. It was there, in a small clearing under the thorny canopy of a kameeldoorn tree that she lived her dark, secret life.

Because it was the last shack at that end of the village and only vast stretches of thornbush and dobo grass lay beyond, Mkoka's yard was larger than most, stretching the length of three cattle kraals and wide enough for six huts to be built side by side. The family was prosperous by village standards. With two men working in the mines, the kraal held eighteen heads of cattle, a pen with twenty full-grown goats, and half that many babies. The chicken coop housed two roosters and never less than a dozen hens. It was situated close to the kraal to guard against Tikoloshe, the hairy monster from the underworld. Everyone knew Tikoloshe was the *iqgirha's* pet and much too stealthy to venture out in daylight, but in the cloak of darkness he rose from the river to make his raids. Some nights, Zinzi would awaken to the braying of animals. Rushing outside with her grandmother at sunrise, she would find chicken entrails smeared in bloody streaks across the ground, the cows wild-eyed with fright and emptied of their milk.

Behind the kraal, the family garden was a patchwork of sorghum, beans, melons, sweet potatoes, pumpkins and squash. Golden sunflowers planted to rid the patch of "witchweed" towered over stalks of maize, their yellow-bonneted faces drooping from the weight. The pride of the garden was Mkoka's well-tended tobacco patch. Each year, she took delight in preparing the soil, humming to herself as she spread the cow dung, breaking the clumps and sifting it through her fingers. There was nothing better in life and nothing more important, she often told Zinzi, than weeding, watering and watching the crops grow. Many mornings would find her talking to the tobacco plants, clicking her tongue with pleasure and telling them what tasty leaves they would make for her pipe. She had a knack for curing tobacco. Some of it she sold; some she set aside for making snuff.

Behind the house, a kokerboom tree shot thirty feet up from the earth, its fleshy leaves flaring out like bunches of limp banana peels. The remainder of the yard was open and spacious—a place for social gatherings and a haven for women seeking refuge. For them, Mkoka had become a reliable source of guidance whenever a crisis or scandal shook them from their daily activities. She stood out as a remarkable exception to tribal women who had accepted their lot and remained submissive and

inferior to their men. Mkoka was admired for her common sense and self-assurance. The *iggirha*, however, resented her popularity. Over the years, Mkoka and Nonyamenko had become arch rivals. Still, the village women continued to show Mkoka their respect. They were impressed with the bit of missionary education she had received and were intrigued by a magical black book she owned.

“Bible,” Mkoka would say, running a finger through the pages as if she could read them.

As it was still early in the day, the yard was empty except for members of the immediate family. Grandma Mkoka was bent over a three-legged cooking pot stirring the day’s mealie porridge, her quick, black eyes watching carefully as it simmered over an even flame. Her shoulders hunched forward. Her hands scarred and wrinkled from years of hard labor. The grooves etched into her wizened brown face made her appear ancient, though her true age could only be guessed at by calculating the ages of her children. Mkoka, herself, did not know in what year she had been born. She only knew that she had come into this world in the north in a place called Kimberley at the edge of the Big Hole—a diamond mine so deep that to fall into it, one would surely land in hell. Laborers encamped near the site believed that stealing precious jewels from the ground angered the Spirits. For that reason, many of the diggers’ wives died in childbirth. It was reason enough for the *muti* man to press a lucky mkoka bean into her own mother’s palm as she endured the agonies of labor.

A short distance from the fire, Grandma Mkoka’s eldest son, Malunga, squatted alongside a goat milking it. He wore a tattered shirt and brown pants tied with a cord that looked like it had been chewed. While Malunga tugged and pulled, the goat munched contentedly on a weathered scrap of newspaper. The printed words meant nothing to Malunga. Never in his thirty-five years had he ever attempted to decipher a newspaper. Like almost everyone in the village, he was illiterate, unable to read the thin newspapers printed in his own language. Tugging on his woolen cap, Malunga cast a look over his shoulder at his nephew and nieces.

Katjie’s gangly twelve-year-old son, Themba, sat by the fire chewing his morning porridge, indifferent to the sameness of an unchanging diet. Listless and quiet, he had little in the monotony of daily life to stimulate his mind or capture his imagination. Katjie’s pretty eleven-year-old, Faridda, sat across from him, placidly spoon-feeding her younger sister, Thandi. Like her mother, Faridda had been born with a calm center and could be depended upon to remain staid in the most melodramatic of moments. At four, Thandi was her opposite, ready to kick up a fuss for no particular reason. She was certainly capable of feeding herself, but demanded whatever mothering she could get. Katjie was always busy with the baby.

Squeezing one of the goat’s teats, Malunga aimed a spray of milk at the two girls and laughed heartily, his wide, goofy smile revealing a missing front tooth. Thandi ran squealing to the safety of her grandmother’s skirt and hid her head in the folds.

Grandma Mkoka cast an angry look to Malunga and tried to shoo Thandi away, but the child clutched tightly. It was at times like this that Mkoka rued the day she took to wearing long skirts, but having converted to Christianity, she could no longer wear

the red blankets of her people – and for good reason. Each article of clothing, each tiny bead and the way it was worn symbolized long-held beliefs. To wear traditional garments would mean an acceptance of those beliefs. Mkoka no longer accepted them, yet ridding herself of superstitions was not nearly as easy as putting on western dress. She remained fearful of bad omens and evil hexes and was grateful for the muti man’s gift of luck passed on to her through her mother. She held a firm belief in the magic of that tiny red bean.

A pair of lilac-breasted rollers shrilled and took off in sudden flight from a nearby tree. Grandma Mkoka’s back stiffened, her eyes alert for the slightest movement. Still, she let out a startled gasp when the beaded headdress of the *iqgirha* appeared over the chicken-wire fence.

“I’ve come to warn you,” the old lioness boomed as she neared the chicken-wire fence.

“Warn me of what?” Mkoka snapped, trying to manage Thandi who had crawled under her skirt.

“Men are coming home,” the old lioness boomed.

“Everyone knows that,” Mkoka sputtered. “Are we not making beer?”

“Your little troublemaker will bring down your house.” Thrusting a knobby hand forward, she opened her callused palm to reveal a few selected bones.

A shiver of dread ran through Mkoka. The child had arisen early and set off for the station as if she were in some kind of a trance.

“Don’t be a fool, old woman.” Nonyameko’s murky eyes bored into her, her words a low rasp. “*Uyathakatha umzukulwana wakho!*”

Mkoka stood her ground, refusing to believe her granddaughter was a witch.

With nothing left to be said, the *iqgirha* clenched her fingers into a fist and lumbered away as quickly as she had come.

Mkoka watched her go, her insides quaking. The men were not expected for another week, but if the old sorceress had seen it, it must be true. What worried her was that a child with no knowledge of such things, had sensed it. From an early age, she had demonstrated an exceptional ability to draw animals and people, to make shapes and forms that pleased the eye, and she did it without apparent effort. It was as if she had come into the world possessing a full palette of skills, with only the steady control of her hand to be mastered.

Thandi crawled out from beneath her skirt.

“Go pick some bush tea for Grandma,” she said with a pat to Thandi’s head.

Thandi’s round face beamed. She scampered away, sending a bevy of speckled brown tit-babblers flying.

Mkoka shook the troubling thoughts away and picked up an ax that leaned against the house. She had work to do, she told herself. Whistling lightly, she unlatched the gate to the goat pen and scattered feed for the animals. Their streaked yellow eyes watched her with suspicion.

“Don’t you want your breakfast?” she cooed.

Bleating nervously, the animals backed away. A spotted ram lowered his head and pointed his nubby horns.

In one swift movement, Mkoka seized him by the tail and swung the ax, neatly chopping off his head. Grabbing his hind legs, she dragged the headless beast across the yard, a bloody trail spurting behind her.



“*uMakhulu, uMakhulu,*” Zinzi came squealing into the yard. “Grandma, Grandma, Papa is coming on the night train.”

The words were scarcely out when the aroma of warm, home-brewed beer caught her nostrils. She could hear her grandmother’s shrill voice ticking off a list of things to be done—beer to be strained, mealies to be ground, goats to be skinned and hung to drain. Rounding the house, she found Mkoka at the forty-gallon wooden barrels, dipping a long-handled strainer into the thick, dark brew.

Malunga sat with his back propped against the house, watching. He shot a look to Zinzi, his goofy grin revealing the gap of a missing front tooth.

“Better stay out of her way, if you know what’s good for you.”

Zinzi juttled an annoyed hip. Women were assembling in the yard in preparation for the welc beer drink. Everything had to be done just right to welcome home the men and it now seemed as if there was not enough time.



As the day wore on, Zinzi found herself wading through the bush, gathering sticks of wood for kindling. She foraged through patches of dry grass and scrub, keeping a practiced eye out for rubbery aloe plants that fanned out from the ground like prickly overgrown cabbages. At a distance, Faridda’s rounded back rose and dipped among the bushes. Thandi rustled about in a nearby thicket, tugging on a long limb that tore at her clothing as she tried to drag it. Zinzi groaned inwardly. The child was a nuisance.

She picked up a jagged stick, thumped it against a rock and thought meanly of Themba. She pictured him sitting with his back against the kokerboom tree, flicking at flies. He was exempt from gathering firewood—that was a woman’s duty. It was also a woman’s duty to take care of the children, the home, the cooking, and the crops. Men had the cattle to worry about, but the cattle were dozing safely in the kraal.

“Ha,” she shrieked and broke a dry branch over her knee. Why couldn’t Themba watch his baby sister? Her days were spent in endless chores, while he went to school. Resentment rose within her—and *he* was learning to read and write!

“We’ve got to get ready,” she said, fetching Thandi.

Thandi pocketed a handful of rooibos leaves and looked up at her with large, trusting eyes.

Zinzi arranged a pad of rags on Thandi’s head, topped it with a few short branches, and clamped Thandi’s hand over it. “Let these fall off, the *iqgirha* will get you!” Hoisting her own heavy bundle to her head, she led the whining four-year-old up the path.



CHAPTER THREE

125th Street, Harlem December, 1944

The gritty streets of Harlem had awakened early, but nine year-old Scoot was in no hurry. He ambled up Seventh Avenue, a cardboard sign under his arm, a shoeshine box dangling from a strap about his neck. It was warm for December, the temperature in the mid-forties, but it wasn’t the best time of day. Mornings you could make a couple of bucks with the sidewalk traffic and all. But the big spenders, they don’t get up early, go to work like all those other scramblin’ fools. They don’t come out ‘til later.

He sauntered to the corner of 125th, grabbed a spot in front of the Theresa Hotel. Wasn’t the best corner, either. Best corners were by the subway exits. On the other hand, with five theaters in the vicinity, ought to be able to catch some matinee traffic. Ain’t always about makin’ a wad of cash. This was *the* spot. Dizzy Gillespie was playing at the Apollo with Billy Eckstine’s band. Odds that he’d pass by on any given day were pretty good.

He dusted off his cap and set it upside down on the sidewalk. He was new to this corner. Mostly, he worked near the entrances of the hippest clubs—Connie’s on 133rd, Small’s on 135th, or the Renaissance Ballroom on 138th. White folks threw dollar bills. They came uptown at night to see the titties and them jungle numbers. And when it got too dark to shine shoes, he’d hang around outside listening to the sound of jazz spilling into the streets. During the breaks, musicians would come out, smoke in the alleyways. Sometimes, if he was lucky, one of them would give him a cigarette butt.

Digging into the pockets of his knee-length pants, he counted out eighty-five cents. Jazz musicians, they was the hippest cats in Harlem. And pretty soon, he figured, he’d be one of them. He tossed the coins into his cap. That’s when Life with a capital L would begin.

On the northeast corner, a newsboy held up the Amsterdam News. “Job Scare for Negro Workers,” he yelled in a pip-squeaky voice, then tapped out a lazy waltz clog. But the bottle caps on his soles couldn’t be heard above the honking.

Scoot shot him a look of disgust. You ain’t gonna get nuthin’ doin’ that. He kneeled down, brushed off his shoes. They were badly worn and a half-size too small, but at least that had real taps.

“Legs,” a gangly thirteen-year-old had laid claim to the northwest corner. Scoot squinted across the intersection. Got hisself a spot right under the big ol’ clock, he thought irritably.

This was the choice location, situated as it was in front of Herbert’s Blue and White Diamond and Jewelry store. Anyone shopping for a diamond stickpin or a flashy ring would be expected to have a good shine on his shoes.

It was a pretty classy spot by anyone’s standard, one that demanded a class act.

Legs drew a crowd with some rubber-legged hoofing. Scoot watched him execute a neat double spin, his white shirttail flapping.

Shoot, he ain’t doin’ nuthin’! He kicked his hat in annoyance. Legs had stolen some of the Nicholas Brothers showiest steps, now he was throwing around a long shock of greased hair just like he was Cab Calloway. And folks just don’t know the difference!

Suckers, he thought, and heaved a sigh. He was an elitist when it came to tap dancing. He’d been on the circuit most of his life and knew from personal experience how to tell cheap flash from the real thing.

The Berry Brothers – now, they was the real thing. The top flash act. Those guys never wore taps. He’d seen ‘em once at the Lincoln Theatre in Philadelphia. Nicholas Brothers – they wore taps. They wasn’t cute little kids no more, so now they was doin’ acrobatics, splits and stuff. Baby Lawrence, Bunny Briggs – they’s the rhythm tappers, they the best. An’ Peg Leg Bates – crazy what he could do with that peg! He’d seen the best of them, watched ‘em close up if he could, stealin’ their steps. One thing’s for sure, ain’t nobody ever showed him nuthin.’ Pops had taught him a thing or two. Before his knees started to go, Pops wasn’t bad. But when the rheumatism got him, Pops invented the family act. Yanked Beulah off the piano. Taught him the shim-sham shimmy. Pushed him out onstage when he was still wearin’ diapers. Folks ate it up cuz he was cute.

Leaning over, he propped a “5 cents” sign next to his cap as a green and yellow trolley rattled into the intersection. A handful of riders got off and headed his way. “Shoeshine,” he yelled. “Step up, let a *pro-fesh-a-nul* put a sparkle on yo’ wingtips.” He tapped out a series of triplets with his right foot. “Five cents. You look like a million bucks. *Guar-an-teeed.*”

He broke into an intricate improvisation as people drew closer. A few watched glassy-eyed with disinterest as they waited to cross the street. Others simply ignored him.

Rhythm ain’t good enough for these ignoramuses, he thought. Got to give ‘em a flip or a split. Just to be sure, he did both – a flip landing in a half-split and bouncing

back up again. A man tossed a nickel in his cap. Scoot flashed him a winning smile and rolled his eyes, vaudeville-style.

Tap dancing was old hat, he groaned inwardly. Ain't no fun no more. But how else could he make a quick buck? Phooey, he thought, as a group of women approached. One was making an awful racket. Crying so loud, she was drowning out his taps.

"Aw shut up, lady," he burst, "you ruinin' my act."

A bird-like woman flew at him. "Her husband just shipped out. Leave her alone."

Scoot waved the old crow away. He'd heard talk of Negro troops going off to fight, but he couldn't see how any of it had much to do with him.

He leaned against a street lamp, crossed a foot over his standing leg and observed the gloomy mood on the street. Passersby appeared preoccupied, their brows creased up in worry. He couldn't see why. If what everybody been sayin' was true, the war be over soon.

He spat his annoyance and cast a glance to the northwest corner and Legs, nearly killing himself, flailing his arms and legs like a man on red hot pokers. Folks weren't throwing him change, he noticed, they were buying papers from the kid selling the Amsterdam News.

Everywhere he looked, it was mostly women on the street and he struggled for nearly an hour to make his first twenty-five cents. And that was for the dancing, nobody wanted a shoeshine. Perspiration was pouring off his body, even his kneecaps were sweating, but he kept on beating out rhythms, reminding himself why he'd come to this corner in the first place.

By five o'clock, the sidewalk traffic picked up. Through the gritty air, he could see Legs still knocking himself out on the opposite corner. Once again, he'd managed to draw a small crowd—mothers with children clinging to their sides, out of work men paused for an idle smoke, soon-to-be laid off workers with lunchboxes dangling from their hands.

No big spenders in that bunch, he thought to himself. A bus stopping at the corner let out a wheeze. A load of passengers tumbled out. He pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket, wiped the sweat running down his neck. If he was going to make some bucks, this was the time.

He tried out a rhythm he'd stolen from Baby Lawrence. It was so hip, he'd even practiced it at home. He focused on his tap sounds, trying to keep them crisp and clean, if only to please himself.

A block away, a baby-faced man rose out of the subway and breezed across 125th Street. He wore a sharp tan suit with wide lapels. Cream-colored oblong spirals drew the eye to his maroon necktie. He headed towards Seventh Avenue, scat-singing under his breath. Drawing up to the corner, he thumped a rhythm on his horn case and waited for the light. He spotted a boy in front of the Theresa Hotel dancing like a miniature version of Baby Lawrence. A grin gathered on his face. He crossed the street and bounded up the curb.

Scoot was unaware that anyone was watching.

The man leaned in, snapped his fingers in time. “Bee de op em bop em, tickety *bloo* kah, a diddly op em bop em, tickety *bloo* kah shuck.”

Head down. Eyes closed, Scoot smiled an answer. “Bee de op em bop em, tickety *bloo* kah, a diddly op em bop em, diggedy *bloo* kah shuck,” he tapped.

“Diggedy *bloo* kah, diggedy *bloo* kah shuck, diggedy, diggedy, diggedy, diggedy *bloo* kah shuck.”

Scoot repeated the phrase.

“That’s pretty good,” the man said. His voice had a husky drawl to it.

Scoot looked up at him in surprise. “Yessir,” he stammered. “I mean, no sir.” You the jazzman. You the best!”

The patch of hair beneath the man’s lower lip spread as he grinned. “You heard me play?”

Scoot knelt down. Pushed the man’s cuff back to his maroon socks, he paid homage with a shoe brush. “I been listenin’ to you all my life!”

Throwing his head back, the man let a laugh out and tossed a dollar into Scoot’s cap. Scoot fished it out, offered it back. “No, sir. It’s an honor!”

The man’s face turned scary-serious. “Let me give you a valuable lesson.” Leaning down, he popped his eyes.

“Never work for free!”

Scoot grinned and squeezed the dollar bill in his fist.

The man laughed. “Ooh, bop shebam, a klook a mop,” he scatted, and went swinging down the street.

Scoot watched him go. John Birks “Dizzy” Gillespie, a twenty-seven-year-old trumpet player from Cheraw, South Carolina.

The blowingest cat since Gabriel.



CHAPTER FOUR

Lenox Avenue, Harlem December, 1944

The sound of a man’s whistle pierced the night air, but HESSIE didn’t react. She wrapped the fur jacket snugly about her shoulders and turned on to Lenox. The toes of her high heels pinched, but she was too preoccupied to notice.

“Coiled up like a snake,” he’d said, “ready to strike.” A surge of anger ran through her. If he was looking for a fight, he didn’t get it.

The club was another two blocks away. She pressed a gloved hand to her throat to keep it warm.

The idea of singing with his band — was he just playing her?

“Five months of steady work.”

Sounded like an offer. Of course, she wanted to go! Who wouldn’t?

“Best musicians east of the Mississippi.”

She’d been fool enough to believe him, but only for a minute. B had women lining up. All he had to do was snap his fingers. Maybe he’d meant it at the time. Or maybe when she didn’t jump at the chance, he changed his mind. Men like him — they don’t like to wait.

A passing man tipped his hat. Hessie averted her eyes.

That girl they call “Sassy.” Sure, she could sing, but she was nothing to look at. Didn’t know how to dress. And B cared about the way a woman dressed. Apparently, he’d hired her for vocal chops. That stabbed at her even more.

Even if he’d offered her the tour, how could she have managed? She had the house. The house, the house, the house, she thought, her heels clicking out a steady rhythm. Bound to its brownstone walls as inexorably as she’d been bound to the couple who had confined her to it. Hans Johnston with his ledgers, pouring over the pages. Berta, the dutiful wife. Berta, who had sent pictures of her back to Africa. School pictures mostly. An occasional snapshot. Not because she held any sympathy for the family that they’d pried her away from. It was her “Christian duty,” Berta said. As righteous and uncompromising as she was, life might have been easier if she had not died first, leaving her husband to languish. Hans Johnston held on for another seven and a half miserable years, his limbs and organs failing one by one, if only to drain away the last precious years of her youth.

She was twenty-six now, and the house was hers. And while she could never push away a sense of their eternal watchfulness, she prided herself on the business acumen that had somehow rubbed off on her. Had she not grown up having to account for every penny?

She took a calming breath and approached the club. She could hear the piano playing, see Freddy seated at the window. Freddy was all right. Not quite a friend, but Freddy was all right. Played pretty well, even when he had too much to drink. No bones to pick with him.

The door flapped open, as if to exhale the smoke. She gave Freddy a nod as she entered. He never tried to chat her up like the men at the bar.

Now, as she stepped up to the microphone, he didn’t whistle with the others when she let the fur slide from her shoulders. He knew it was useless. With the piano bumped up to the window the way it was, he was quick to spot the car that pulled up and waited. As the night wore on, he’d let her go singing if it was just the driver. But if the man came, himself, he’d wind up the set, neat and easy. “Looks like someone’s taken a shine to you,” he’d say with a rueful smile.

He knew the man who owned it was way out of his league.



CHAPTER FIVE

the village mending the floor

Even from inside, the shack looked lopsided out of square at the joints and leaning in slightly. Flattened cardboard boxes stamped “Lux Soap” lined the walls, their dull, brown color rendering the interior cheerless except for shafts of sunlight that slanted through two tiny windows and ended in harsh rectangles on the mud floors. Like all Xhosa homes, the windows were cut small to prevent *Tikoloshe* from getting in.

Katjie moved through the house with a dust rag, tidying the rooms. It was suffocatingly hot under the tin roof. The rooms were close and musty smelling. In a cramped cupboard, green mealies still on the cob hung from nails. A tin of cooking oil sat on a rickety table. A narrow passageway led from the kitchen to two smaller sleeping rooms of unequal size, the back exit, and an adjoining corrugated iron lean-to where Malunga spent the nights on his cowhide sleeping mat.

She stepped into the tiny room shared with her two daughters and the baby and looked at herself in the cracked mirror of a wooden wardrobe. Pushing back the sprigs of hair that had strayed from beneath her bandanna, she turned to the bed and smoothed the covers. The bed was set several feet off the floor on bricks, as was the custom among women. Since *Tikoloshe* was small, she could feel reasonably secure she and her daughters would be safely out of reach. Grandma Mkoka did not share her fear of the hairy demon. After muttering her nightly prayers, Mkoka lowered herself to a bed of goatskin pelts and slept soundly. The fact that she had never been molested was sufficient proof that prayer worked.

Katjie leaned pieces of furniture against the walls and took a last look around. Mending the cracks in the mud floor was the only work that remained. She stepped to the doorway and cupped her hands. “Zinzi!”

Already hard at her task, Zinzi was a whirl of activity racing about the kraal gathering dung into a bucket while the cows stood complacently, swishing their tails against flies. Overhead, the sun danced dizzily. Her face was shiny with perspiration, more from her inner anxiety than from the s heat. Will a vision come?

Setting her jaw with the effort, she toted the bucket to the open door and emptied the contents into a tub. Katjie helped her drag the tub into the front room, then left her to her task.

A bead of sweat dripped from Zinzi’s nose. She squatted on the cracked floor and scooped up a handful, her fingers digging into an earthy mix of dung, soil, and water. The sharp smell filled her nostrils as she kneaded it into a pliable mush. When

the consistency felt just right, she smeared a layer across the pitted surface with her palms, delighting in the wet, slippery feel of the clay sliding through her fingers. She took pride in mending the floor, smoothing it until she was satisfied that it lay flat and even.

Sitting back on her haunches, she willed herself into stillness, and waited. A sudden vision struck with such force, it propelled her forward and sent her hands flying. Absorbed in her creation, she heard nothing, noticed nothing but the patterns that flowed from the tips of her fingers. Figures appeared from the mud. First a woman. Then two clapping and singing. Then a group of women radiating outward in a circle. With quick, sure strokes, she framed the figures in interlacing swirls—their sounds curving, swelling, and sweeping upwards.

She wiped the splatterings from her face. A smile played about her lips. When he sees my pretty picture, she thought, he'll never leave me again.

Her work done, Zinzi hurried out back to the tin-roofed shed. Along with a hoe, a shovel, and rusty hand tools, the shed housed a weathered tub. She filled it with water from the rain barrel and hoped no one would notice. Stripping out of her pinafore, she swung a foot over the metal rim. Just as buttocks dipped into the cool bath, she heard a screech.

“Zinzi!”

It was Katjie, rounding the house in a fury.

In the next moment and with shocking strength, she felt her naked body ripped from the water. Seeing the anger in her auntie's eyes, she uttered not a whimper, but allowed herself to be dragged back inside the hut.

“You've been warned!” Katjie pointed to the newly mended floor. “You are not to draw people. Do you want the *iqgirha* to snatch you?”

Zinzi lowered her head, if only to admire her mud creation.

It wasn't just people. She'd drawn animals, too. And songs! The Spirits tell me what to do, she thought, but dared not speak it.

What if my Papa doesn't like it? Her insides twisted. She looked back at her work—the joyous sounds of the women rising from the clay. How could he not like it?

“I don't know what to do,” Katjie moaned, “there's no time to fix this. And where did you take the water from?”

Zinzi felt a drop trickle down her ankle. Water was precious, she knew that, but surely her father would bring the rain spirits.



CHAPTER SIX

the night train

At last, the sun's searing ball of flame slipped behind the horizon, the temperature cooled, and the languorous pace of rural life returned to the yard. Malunga sat propped against the house, strumming at a homemade guitar fashioned from a rectangular cigar box and a wooden board strung with wire. He leaned his head back and yowled.

“Uthando luphelilie love is lost, love is gone.”

Plucking sadly at the strings, he serenaded Grandma Mkoka with a heart-felt rendition of good love gone wrong, but Mkoka was too busy roasting goat meat to pay him any attention. Her ears were attuned to the hissing sound of the dead animal's juices oozing into the coals. Katjie was enjoying a moment of serenity. She sat by the fire nursing her baby. The baby sucked lazily, wrapping its tiny hand around Katjie's little finger and gripping tightly. Only Themba appeared agitated. Dressed in a freshly ironed shirt and shorts, he was poised at the edge of the footpath like a long-legged cricket ready to jump.

“Zinzi! Faridda! Thandi!” he called, shifting from one foot to the other as he waited for the girls to come out of the house.

In the distance, a stream of villagers was moving up the main road, singing and dancing to the beat of homemade rhythm instruments. The rise and flow of their voices pulling at him.

He was eager to join the other boys his age and could scarcely contain his displeasure at having been told to wait for his sisters. They had been primping for hours. With growing impatience, he edged his way up the footpath.

At last, the front door creaked open on its hinges and the three girls popped out of the house wearing their best.

Malunga peered at them through the haze of wood smoke and clicked his tongue appreciatively. “Such fine looking young ladies,” he said and wagged a finger. “Be careful, some young buck don't try to carry you off.”

Grandma Mkoka silenced him with a growl.

Giggling with excitement, the girls lined up at the edge of the fire and turned like slowly spinning tops for Mkoka's appraisal.

Zinzi's stubby braids were tied with tight white bows. She could glimpse them out of the corners of her eyes if she shook her head just right. How grown up she felt in a freshly-ironed white blouse and Faridda's red-pleated skirt! A size too large, it hung askew from one hip causing the pleats to fall at an odd angle. She swished it from side to side, enjoying the feeling of the cloth wrapping her legs, first one way and then the other.

Faridda presented herself for inspection in the new cotton dress Katjie had bought her. Zinzi eyed it covetously, hoping she'd grow out of it before the colors faded. Thandi wore a yellow pinafore that had once been Zinzi's. Painstakingly mended and

pressed, it looked crisp and clean. Her hair was plaited in neat melon rows from temple to nape, the work of Faridda's practiced hand.

Grandma Mkoka's sharp eyes gave them a thorough once-over, then with a perfunctory nod, she waved them on their way. Eyes shiny with excitement, the girls hurried to catch up with Themba, who was halfway up the footpath.

"*Shosholoza! Shosholoza! kwezo ntaba, stimela siphum'e eGoli* – a steam train is coming," Zinzi sang in a high-spirited voice, eager to join the press of people flowing up the rutted road.

The sky turned to streaks of purple and gold as she climbed the hill beyond the edge of town. Stopping to catch her breath and wait for Faridda and Thandi to catch up, she marveled the changing colors. And in the village behind, the jagged angles of tin roofs stood out in sharp, black relief against the darkening sky.

By the time the three girls reached the station, a crowd of adults and swarms of children had gathered – moving, colorful forms, rippling and flowing into each other like water over brightly painted rocks.

A few elder women in ochred blankets puffed sedately at long-stemmed pipes. Smoke streamed upward encircling their leathery faces and heavy folded *doeks*. For them, waiting at the station had become a yearly ritual like waiting for the crops to grow or the rains to come and they drew in their tobacco with slow, satisfied smiles.

Young mothers with innocent faces stood cooling themselves with grass fans, alternately laughing and teasing while babies slept soundly on their backs.

Treating Zinzi and his sisters like they were complete strangers, Themba sped off and joined a group of boys who were whooping and dancing on the far side of the ticket office. Good riddance! she thought and joined a group of women who were shaking homemade rhythm instruments. She clapped out a vigorous counter-rhythm, swishing her skirt from side to side to keep time. Thandi cavorted behind her, making little chicken scratches with her feet, while Faridda swayed demurely amongst her elders. Their singing was grounded in repetition and incantation, the energy of their voices tracing ever widening ripples into the expanding blackness.

Droplets of sweat beaded up on Zinzi's forehead as the steady beat got hold of her. She danced with abandon, caught by a powerful force that took hold of her. Every part of her being was engaged in summoning up a rhythm, as if by the doing of it, she could release the joyous affliction that had taken hold of her body. It was the kind of dancing Grandma Mkoka disapproved of. "Witch dancing," she called it – the way Zinzi's bottom shimmied and shook, her arms flailing as if controlled by a power other than her own.

Jikel' emaweni siyahamba, she sang in a high clear voice, envisioning the train coming round the rocks.

Waves of euphoria swept over her as the insistent beat drove her feet. How long she danced, she did not know, for at some point the music took her over and the repetitive rhythms and her own physical movements sent her deep into trance. She kept on, elevated to another state, until the world fell away and she was right inside the thing, she was the heartbeat of the music. Then the music fell away and she became the breath.

The dark cool curtains of night had drawn together firmly when Faridda tugged at Zinzi's arm. Jolted back to the here and now, she collapsed to the ground, her white blouse sticking to her, her red skirt hanging like a rag on a scarecrow. Panting for breath, she looked up at the sky. The stars had come out of their hiding places, filling the heavens with glittering lights that winked back at her out of the blackness like diamonds from the Big Hole.

A soulful voice rose and floated over the drone of cicadas. Other women's voices joined in a haunting folk song that had been passed along from generation to generation. A sad story about heroes from tribal wars who had died noble deaths. As if in sympathy, the wild grasses and flowering aloes exhaled their perfumes to the moonlight. Bats drifted drowsily from tree to tree, catching branches with their toes and pulling their black wings in behind them.

When the moon was high overhead, Zinzi, Faridda and Thandi crossed the tracks and walked a distance into the bush. The moon came and went like a thief, plunging the girls into darkness. Eerie shadows stretched out behind trees and bushes like black pools waiting to swallow them up. Zinzi and Faridda took turns peeing in the tall grass, but Thandi seemed intent on spoiling the dreamy quality the night had cast upon them. She demanded the privacy of a gooseberry bush. Tired and petulant from all the excitement, she squalled and kicked and would not be hushed until Faridda stood sentry.

Zinzi pulled a long stalk of grass from the ground and tickled Thandi's bare bottom.

Tikoloshe! she cried.

Thandi shrieked and took off running, but in a few short steps she thudded to the ground, felled by the underpants that stretched like a tourniquet around her ankles.

Zinzi covered her mouth and choked back a giggle as Faridda marched off to deal with her little sister. She was finally losing her patience.

A train whistled faintly. Zinzi's head swiveled. She peered up the tracks. Far into the distance, she spotted a light flickering. Yes—a train! A new wave of excitement seized her.

"Papa!" she squealed.

She ran toward the tracks, a mighty rumble gathering beneath her feet. The train's whistle blew through her, shaking her insides as the locomotive bore down, but Faridda caught up with her and held her back until the train screeched to a stop and safely cut its engine.

All at once, the air filled with a gush of steam and the smell of burning coal. Men hopped down and disappeared into the clouds of mist. Women lit torches and waited in eager circles of smoky yellow light. Even so, it was difficult to make out who was who in the darkness and confusion, but through some indiscernible means of attraction, wives and children rushed to husbands and fathers and were grabbed up.

Themba appeared from the crowd, spotting his brother almost immediately.

“Njabulo,” he shouted. Faridda and Thandi joined in. “Njabulo. Njabulo!”

A lanky nineteen-year-old swung around as they rushed toward him. He was taller and thinner than last seen. A sweat-stained cap covered his forehead, an ugly scar cut across his nose and ran the length of his right cheek. Still, an unmistakable boyish grin lit up his face. Zinzi stood silently apart as he folded his brother and sisters into his arms. Joyous reunions were going on all around her, but all she could feel was crushing disappointment.

Zinzi clutched at the fabric of Njabulo’s shirt. “Where’s my Papa?” she asked, yet fearing his answer.

Njabulo’s face was unreadable. “Maybe tomorrow,” he said and hoisted Thandi to his shoulders.

Zinzi took an anguished look around. In only a few short minutes, all the returning men had found their families, hugs and kisses had subsided and fathers were taking their children’s hands and starting for home.

“Let’s go now,” Faridda urged, “We’ll come back in the morning.”

The look in Zinzi’s eyes was resolute. She set her jaw. She would not leave this place without him.

“Come, *Sisi*,” Njabulo said, taking Faridda by the hand. “She be coming soon.”

Faridda looked back over her shoulder as Njabulo led her away, but Zinzi did not follow. She stood alone in the dissipating smoke and steam, a pillar of stubbornness.



CHAPTER SEVEN

alone in the bush

Zinzi watched them disappear down the road, their happy voices floating back to her, tugging at her loneliness. When everyone was gone from sight, she walked along the rails. Exhausted from the day’s activities, she settled herself near the platform and told herself she wasn’t frightened. After all, she had been to the station dozens of times and it was no different at night than in the daytime. She drew her knees to her chest and looked around the deserted station. The chorus of insects and the high-pitched calls of nocturnal creatures that had come out to hunt and feed sounded like one unified, menacing voice, warning her against a night alone in the bush. Fears nagged at her. Why hadn’t she gone home with Njabulo? Why did she always have to go against the ways of everyone else? She envied Faridda. Her life was smooth and even like the

grass mats she wove with her delicate fingers, a life uncomplicated by desire. But deep inside herself, Zinzi felt a raging turmoil brewing. A longing to reinvent the world in shapes and patterns. And most of all – colors.

A stirring in the bush caught her ear. The night was full of small noises she'd never noticed before. Poisonous insects, snakes could be hiding anywhere, but they wouldn't bother her if she sat very still. Leopards hadn't been spotted in years, Grandma Mkoka said, and if they were to come around, the Zulus would get them. Hugging her arms to her bony chest, she cast a worried look at the yawning pools of blackness that seemed to grow from beneath the bushes. The familiar look of the landscape had altered beyond recognition. Now, in the forbidding darkness, what once appeared to be a tangle of weeds had taken on human-like shape. She was too grown up to believe the ghost stories Grandma Mkoka told – that the bush was haunted by Sigebenga who ate sleeping children. She did not know of any children who had been eaten.

A jackal howled in the distance. Fear shot through her. Still, it was the unimaginable darkness of the Spirit world that frightened her most. How small and vulnerable she felt against the multitude of its magical powers.

She stole across the tracks looking for a stick, the barbed spines of aloes tearing at her legs as she waded into the hungry vegetation. Night birds fell into a hushed silence as a mongoose scurried up a tree to steal eggs from a nest. Patches of clouds drifted across the sky. It was so dark at times, the line of demarcation between earth and sky disappeared.

In the pitch blackness, she suddenly sensed something she could not see. The hair on her skin prickled as she listened. There it was again. *Thixo!* But now all she could hear was her own panicky breath. Should she run or stand still? Even if she could make it to the ticket office, the door would be locked. She blinked her eyes against the moving shadows. Two dark shapes were coming straight at her! Her heart hammered wildly and out came a blood-curdling scream that echoed through the bush. The moving forms stopped in their tracks and screeched back. Baboons! Baboons were coming to get her! Oh, why had she teased about Tikoloshe? Now she was going to be punished. Soon the *iqgirha* would be upon them, riding them across the sky.

She ran toward the tracks, prickly weeds tearing at her feet. Her throat hurt from shouting and singing half the night. *UleNgub'inkulu esiyambatha thina.* Her voice rose above the yips and howls of the night creatures. Oh, Great One, she sang, save me from Sigebenga and Tikoloshe. Save me from the baboons and the *iqgirha's* black magic.

As if in answer, the baboons called to each other and scampered away, their dark forms disappearing into the silvery light. *Lengubo inkulu siambata tine,* she sang. Her throat hurt from shouting and singing half the night, but the words of a familiar song gave her comfort. Scooping up a few stones, she settled on a patch of grass close to the ticket office and struggled to keep her eyes open. In the distance, a black owl hooted three times from the branch of a dead acacia. She stifled a yawn, but her heartbeat slowed and she could no longer resist the night spirits.

With an effortless push from her feet, she drifted through the darkness, her arms stretched out in front of her. High over the village she rose, the stars twinkling beneath her. Her braids blew backward in the wind, her skirt whipped about her thighs. A sadness enveloped her as she said goodbye to her people and the landscape she knew disappeared. It was cold. She could hear someone singing, but she did not know the voice. It was a woman's voice – the most beautiful song she had ever heard. It was calling her to a strange place and she was afraid. She flew higher, but each time she strained to meet it, the voice slipped away.

The morning star shone softly in the indigo sky. A crack of pale blue light glimmered at the farthest reach of the world. An old black owl called through the morning mist.

“Vuka, vuka, sekusile.” Get up, get up, it has dawned.

Zinzi open sat up on her elbows and rubbed at her eyes, disoriented, hunger gnawing at her stomach. Heavy dew lay on the ground all around her and her red pleated-skirt was coated with fine crystals of moisture. A sudden movement made her jump. A short distance away, a leguaan turned a wary prehistoric eye on her, then scooted past in the fuzzy, half-light, powerful hind legs propelling its foot-long body. She wiggled her toes and shook the sand from her skirt. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see a bedraggled white ribbon hanging from the end of a braid. She sighed inwardly – she must look a sight! The first glimmer of dawn expanded into a radiant glow as the sun's orange ball peeked above the earth and bathed her in a wash of golden light.

She sat spell struck, marveling at the brilliant brush strokes of pink, lavender and crimson streaking across the sky. The colors sang to her spirit, rousing her as it called forth a new day.

At her feet, a shock of wild asparagus quivered. The ground trembled. Scrambling to her feet, she turned a longing face to the tracks, her heart speeding wildly. A distant rumble grew louder, then the familiar clicky-clack-clack of the rails, shaking the earth. Out of the mist, the fluid, watery form of the giant locomotive appeared, its Cyclops eye blazing a laser of light. Its engine bore down upon her with a rushing blast of wind. She waited, breathless, as a fine mist spattered across her face and the train lurched to a halt. Boxcar doors slid open. A dozen men jumped down, sooty and ragged. One lone figure holding to a handrail leaned out, tall and statuesque, the glowing red half-sun behind him.

“Tata,” she squealed.

Mbane jumped down and opened his arms open wide. *“Intombi yam – my girl,”* he bellowed in a voice mightier than the train.

She ran to him, bursting with joy.

Bending down, he scooped her up into his strong arms. His forehead was beaded with sweat, his white cotton shirt wet-through to the skin.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. "I waited so long." She clung to him tightly, safe at last in his arms.

"I'm home now." His eyes glistened as he hugged her to him. "I'm home."

She nestled closer, absorbing the warmth of his body. The strong smell of him was intoxicating.

Women gathered by the tracks grinned and nodded a greeting, but he did not see them. In that moment, there was only a proud African man and his daughter.

"Papa." Zinzi closed her eyes and felt his breath on her neck. She belonged to him and he to her.

