

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

14

Name: Ms Shumirai Winifred Chimombe
Student Number: CHMSHU002
Address: 301 Greenpark, 8 Upper Portswood Road. Green Point,
Cape Town, 8005
Degree: MA in Creative Writing

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Title: **THE SMALL HOUSE**

The dissertation is in the form of a novel. It is the story about Tina Moyo, a 31-year old middle-class woman living in contemporary Zimbabwe in the year 2006.

She is happily married to a successful financial director, Andile Moyo, and she enjoys a life of privilege in a country where the economic situation has caused much suffering among ordinary people. Regular water and power cuts occur and there are chronic shortages of fuel and basic foodstuffs like bread, milk, sugar, and margarine.

Tina's life is suddenly turned upside down when she discovers that her husband is having an affair with a woman called Zodwa. In Zimbabwe, such affairs are referred to as 'small houses'.

This discovery sets Tina's life on a new course, characterised by emotional upheaval, deep pain, anger and confusion. She is forced to re-evaluate her life and her beliefs. She seeks counsel from her family and friends, which reveals some surprising realisations about the mindset of the people closest to her. She is forced to ask some painful

questions related to love and marriage within the context of family and tradition and she is pulled in different directions.

The novel aims to explore questions surrounding the role and influence that culture, Christianity, and tradition, play in marriage and family.

It also explores the role of women in society and the constraints governing their lives which do not leave room for negotiation, and where they are trapped by expectations and conditions they have to adhere to. It delves into the male psyche and the sense of entitlement and privilege men enjoy in gender relationships within a traditional, paternalistic society.

The book also gives an idea of the day-to-day life of ordinary Zimbabweans battling to live normal lives under difficult economic conditions, although the book itself is not a political commentary.

The theme of bees runs throughout the story. The author draws some parallels between the life and purpose of bees and the social expectations that Tina must adhere to in her role as a good wife.

All quotes in the book related to bees were drawn from Wikipedia on the internet.

All Bible quotes were taken from the King James Bible.

Other sources of information were derived from various reports and forums on the internet including:

Healthdev.net - *Multiple Concurrent Partnerships: The Story of Zimbabwe - Are Small Houses a Key Driver?* – Paper by Lois Chingandu – Executive Director, SAfAIDS (2007)

eForums - Healthdev.org - readers' responses to Lois Chingandu's discussion paper
Africanloft.com – *The Small House Effect*, by Pamela Stitch (2007)

Kubatana.net – *Entitlement, gender inequality and HIV/AIDS* by Catherine Makoni (2008) and

Diary of an HIV-positive man – by Beatrice Tonhodzayi , Programme Officer-Media for SAfAIDS (2008)

iolhivaid.co.za – *Dangerous sex in small houses* (2007)

AllAfrica.com – *Marriage – it's a cat 'n mouse affair!* – The Zimbabwe Herald online (2007)

livingzimbabwe.blogspot.com - *The Small House Syndrome* (2008)

New Zimbabwe.com – various informal and candid discussions on the subject of small houses.

THE SMALL HOUSE

Name: Shumirai Chimombe

Student number: CHMSHU002

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award for the degree of **Master of Arts in Creative Writing**

Faculty of Humanities

University of Cape Town

2009

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____

Date: 31/03/09

Signed by candidate

Chapter 1

Tina hovered in the kitchen then reached for the nearest dishcloth, remembering her aunt's advice.

'A good daughter-in-law cannot be seen to be idle. They will wonder what sort of family you come from. So if you don't know what to do at your in-laws' house, just grab a dishcloth and look busy.'

All the dishes had been washed, dried and put away and not a drop of water remained at the sink that she could busily wipe away, so she began folding and unfolding the dishcloth in her hands. Her mother-in-law Mai Moyo looked up from the board where she was chopping onions at the kitchen counter and smiled.

'Ah, my child. We are done with the dishes, but be a dear and take those empty bottles into the shed. You can just dump them in one of the crates. Oh, and bring me some more onions will you? You'll find them in a sack in a corner in there somewhere.'

'Yes Mai.'

Tina gathered the Coke, Sprite and Fanta bottles standing in a corner behind the door and stacked them in a dish and walked out to the garden shed.

She was spending her Saturday afternoon visiting her in-laws in Marondera, about 80km out of Harare after being coerced by her aunt to behave like a proper young bride and bond with her new family.

As she crossed the yard taking in the marigolds, sweetpeas and daisies in the flowerbed running along the main house and the rockery next to the garden shed, she wondered at how similar these people were to her people. Her parents also had flowers surrounding their house and a wooden shed in the back yard filled with old newspapers and magazines, empty beer and cool-drink bottles caked with dust and mould, sacks of vegetables, tools, car parts and other nameless objects.

She opened the door and froze at the muffled drone that filled the semi-darkness. Then with a shriek she dropped the dish and tore out of the shed, tripping up the *stoep* and almost falling at her mother-in-law's feet.

'Tina! What is it?' Mai Moyo turned from the chopping board, throwing down the knife. 'You look like you have been visited by a ghost.'

Tina pointed a trembling finger towards the shed. 'Bees! There are bees in there. Hundreds of them.' She sat down on a chair by the kitchen table and clasped her arms around herself trying to control her trembling.

'Ah the bees.' Mai Moyo seemed amused. 'They've been there for weeks.'

Tina looked up at her with astonishment.

'For weeks. But why? What if they sting someone?'

'Well they haven't stung anyone yet.' Mai Moyo adjusted her spectacles, straightened the *doek* on her head and returned to her onions. 'Oh, be a dear and ask Sisi to go and fetch the dish with the bottles. You're too scared to go back in there now.'

Tina left the kitchen and walked down the passage towards the lounge, her heart sinking heavily in her chest.

It was uncomfortable enough that she had to be on her best behaviour with these people who after a year she was still trying to get used to. Now she also had she had to contend with an entire colony of bees raging around the back yard.

Married life came with its set of obligations and she knew that sometimes she had to give up more appealing activities like relaxing with a magazine in her own home in Harare and check in with the in-laws who, for whatever reason, had chosen to live in Marondera.

For many Harare residents the small town of Marondera was simply a whistle stop for motorists to refill their tanks and refuel their stomachs with a pie and a Coke before proceeding onto the more scenic highlands of Nyanga and Vumba with their golf estates, trout fishing and casinos or for more important business in Mutare, the country's fourth city, nestled in misty valleys and surrounded by sweeping mountain ranges bordering Mozambique.

She found Chipu the maid polishing the china cups and saucers in the display counter in the corner of the lounge.

'Sisi, Mai wants to see you'

Chipo promptly put down the cup she was holding and hurried out of the room leaving Tina standing alone in the lounge.

The room was furnished with a three-piece cream lounge suite with brown and orange cushions neatly placed at the corner of each sofa to offset the carpet in burnt orange. In a corner directly opposite the television set and the turn-table hi-fi was a large, comfortable-looking armchair, recently reupholstered in brown and orange print. This was Baba Moyo's special spot.

Glass topped side tables were placed next to each sofa and a larger teak coffee table stood as a centre-piece with an atlas, the day's newspaper and various copies of *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines stacked on the lower shelf.

Everything was spick and span, ready to welcome any unexpected visitor who might decide to drop by for tea served in the china cups that *Sisi* had just polished.

Tina's aunt had a living room similar to this one, except that everything was coordinated in blue and green. And her uncle had an armchair just like this one, where he had sat and grilled her future husband, Andile, when she brought him along to introduce him.

He had sat back, assuming the authoritative air that uncles are supposed to display when speaking to young men who dared to walk in and claim their nieces.

'So, Andile, you say you come from Bulawayo?'

'Yes sir.'

'Where exactly in Bulawayo does your father come from?'

And now here she was, the lobola paid, the celebrations behind them and their wedding photograph framed and proudly displayed on the mantelpiece along with other family photos including one in black and white of her in-laws on their wedding day - so young then, so slim - when they were still known then in Luveve township in Bulawayo as Themba and Caroline.

There was another studio photograph of her father-in-law in his graduation gown and cap.

Photographs of her parents' generation fascinated her, especially the studio ones. They always looked so smart, so young with smooth complexions; the women very prim in

their mini dresses, stockings and wigs from the '60s and the men all looking like Nat King Cole.

'Sisi Tina.' Chipo's shy voice interrupted her thoughts. 'Mai needs you back in the kitchen.'

She took a last look at Themba and Caroline and went back to the kitchen.

Mai Moyo (now very round and matronly) had finished with her onions and she now sat on the *stoep* by the kitchen door with a basket of peas at her feet.

Tina sat down next to her, took a handful of peas and began shelling them, throwing the empty pods into a dish next to the basket. She looked with alarm towards the shed. It was a hot afternoon and the bees seemed agitated - waltzing around the yard, their song particularly sharp in the still air as they danced from flower to flower, and in and out of the shed window.

'Why don't you get rid of them, Mai?'

'Your father-in-law doesn't want to,' Mai Moyo replied not looking up from the peas. 'Let me tell you something. That gardener you see watering those vegetables. David. He's new. My husband fired the previous one because he took down some bird nests from that big tree in front of you. The poor man thought he was just doing his job.'

'Well, I suppose we should expect that from a Biology teacher,' Tina said, privately thinking that her father-in-law should keep his pollination and photosynthesis experiments back in the classroom

Mai Moyo threw some pods into the dish and dusted her hands.

'Listen to me, my child, you could learn one or two things from these bees.'

'What can I possibly learn from them besides the fact that they make honey and sting people?' Tina had never forgotten the day she was attacked by a swarm when she was sixteen and was walking home from the shops. She had stopped wearing floral scents ever since - her mother had suspected that the *Impulse Summer Florals* deodorant that she wore had attracted them.

'Bees are industrious little creatures,' Mai Moyo began, leaning forward and resting her elbows on her knees to watch the bees. 'All day they work and work, collecting pollen,

making honey, taking care of the queen bee. They are a tight community, working together towards a common purpose. And when they are threatened, they sting the enemy to protect themselves.'

She paused and then continued.

'You too, as a good wife must work and be industrious, taking care of your husband, your children, your family. The Bible says a wife of noble character 'watches over the affairs of the household and does not eat the bread of idleness.' Proverbs 31, verses ten to thirty-one. Did your mother and aunt show you that passage, my child?'

'Yes they did.' Tina had lost count of the number of times the passage had been read and re-read to her in the months leading up to her wedding. She pondered over Mai Moyo's lesson for a while.

'So if I am the industrious one, slaving away from dawn till dusk taking care of the home and tending to everyone's needs does this mean that the queen bee represents my family?'

'Certainly not. The queen sits around all day doing nothing. Your husband works and puts food on the table. And when you have children they too shall be taught that laziness is not tolerated and they must help with the chores around the house. But it is your duty as a wife and mother to keep the home running smoothly and making sure that everyone is well taken of.'

'But surely the queen has a bigger purpose if all the bees work tirelessly to serve her?'

'Your lesson is from the worker bees.' Mai Moyo stood up and dusted down her dress with her hands. 'Now come along. Remember it's my turn to host my church group's next meeting. We have a lot to do before the women arrive at 6 o'clock.'

The tea leaves at the bottom of Tina's cup did not offer any answer to her question about the purpose of the queen bee, and neither did the any of the dozen or so women who had gathered in Mai Moyo's lounge later that evening.

Baba Moyo had been banished to his regular bar to make way for his wife's cell group which had agreed to meet at his wife's house in honour of her latest daughter-in-law's visit. They all belonged to the Marondera Chapter of the Methodist Mothers' Union.

While Baba Moyo sat in the bar discussing the general political and economic situation in the country over a few beers with the menfolk, their wives were congregated in his living room – his own wife sitting in his armchair - singing *What a Friend we have in Jesus*, and refreshing the young bride's memory on the No 1 rule for a happy, successful marriage.

'Tina, you know this passage, but we shall read it to you again lest you forget, as the book of Titus says, it is up to us the older women to train you younger women to love your husbands and children. We have walked the path that you are walking now for much longer than you.'

The woman speaking, Mai Muchena, the group leader looked up from the well-thumbed King James Bible that she was paging through and looked pointedly at Tina to see if she was paying attention.

She reminded Tina of a perfect circumference. Everything about her was round – not overweight – but filled out in a comfortable, maternal way, from her face with smooth brown skin on her cheeks and dark, slightly wrinkled patches under her eyes, to her generous bosom that had nursed four children now grown into men and women - some with babies of their own - to her waist, drawn in by the maroon sash of her Mothers Union uniform, right down to her thighs, legs and feet.

Tina wondered if this woman also had a black and white photograph of herself in her youth, slim and pretty and still going by her first name before that disappeared along with her youthful curves when she became Mai (Mrs) Muchena.

How often did these women secretly gaze at those old pictures, their biographies and lived memories frozen in those Kodak prints? When Solomon's Song of Songs might have resonated with them more than Colossians or Ephesians, from which Mai Muchena was now reading Chapter 5 verses 22 to 24.

Tina settled down under the dryer and after glancing with amusement at the client next to her who was wincing under the hot air from her dryer and kept opening the flap to let in some cool air, she picked up a magazine – last month's issue of *True Love*. Few salon owners were still prepared to pay hideous prices to buy South African magazines in Harare which was why Tina frequented Ms Helen's Touch of Glamour salon, where service standards were still reasonably high.

Miriam had just taken Tina out of the hairdryer and led her back to her seat in front of the mirror when the salon owner Ms Helen Mlazi-Schmidt, dressed in an imported linen trouser suit and high heels, walked into the salon in a cloud of powder and perfume with her driver trailing behind her holding a large cardboard box.

'My shampoos have finally been delivered from Joburg, thank goodness,' she announced. 'Joe, you can put the box down at the reception and the girls will unpack it later. My, we are very busy today.'

She walked around the room greeting the regular clients by name. Ms Helen was a well-known business woman and the Touch of Glamour was just one of her interests. She had been married to a German professor during the 1990s when she lived in Stuttgart before she got divorced and moved back to Harare and was now rumoured to be involved with a 'well-known, highly-respected public figure'.

Most people had trouble pronouncing the second part of her double-barrelled surname – Schmidt, so she was referred to as Ms Helen.

She now took a seat in a free chair in front of a mirror and opened her bag.

'I have brought gifts for everyone,' she announced, loud enough for everyone to hear. 'Not from down south. Don't get excited. This is one of my social projects for women's upliftment.'

She produced a pink plastic bag and asked Miriam to distribute the little boxes inside to everyone including Tina who was waiting for the planting to begin.

Business temporarily came to a halt while everyone opened their boxes and stared in confusion at the contents inside.

'The female condom,' Ms Helen said with a flourish 'You've all heard about it, I'm sure. But how many of you have tried it?'

'A female condom? I didn't know there was such a thing,' a woman said from under the hair dryer, which she had switched off so she could listen to the discussion.

'Oh but there is such a thing, and you should be aware of it by now,' the business woman replied. 'It's very effective. And if you're discreet, he won't even know that you're wearing it. Especially if he's been drinking.'

Miriam unwrapped her packet, removed the little pouch inside and held it up between her finger and thumb as if she was inspecting a newly-hatched maggot. 'It's a bit – big,' she said. She hooked her thumbs into the flexible ring on each end of the sheath and stretched it. 'It looks like one of my nylon socks. Why is it so big?'

'It is designed to fit the female form. It's quite easy to use if you practice.' Ms Helen took the unwrapped condom from Miriam and handed her a new box. 'You won't need this one anymore. I'll keep it for demonstrations.'

Tina could not imagine how such a demonstration could take place.

'My boyfriend will kill me if I tell him I want to use this,' one of the stylists said.

'He will kill you in a different way if you don't use it.' Ms Helen looked around. 'Girls, especially you hairdressers. I know what you get up to. You think I don't know but I know. You must protect yourselves.'

'Some of us need to protect ourselves from our husbands,' said the woman from under the hairdryer. 'Do you have extra ones left?'

'That was the plan but then I left Bulawayo really early this morning.' He adjusted his spectacles.

'So you must have left around 3am then.'

'Yes something like that.' He adjusted his spectacles again and then gestured to the woman next to him. 'You remember Zodwa don't you? You met at Sizwe's funeral last year.'

Sizwe was Andile's brother's wife's cousin. Tina had trouble pinning down who was who in her husband's extended family. She had enough trouble trying to remember her own relatives.

'Yes of course. How is your shop doing?'

'Oh so, so' Zodwa gave a slow smile. 'We're the only shop in the Village mall that specialises in ethnic African fashion so we get all these well-to-do suburban ladies who'd rather not go to some dressmaker in a hole somewhere.' She gave Tina a critical once-over, taking in her cotton summer dress from Edgars. 'You should pop in sometime and my dress maker can make something nice for you. I just got back from Nigeria with some really lovely materials.'

'Maybe I will.' Tina turned back to her husband. 'I left a message on your cell phone.'

'Oh, my battery ran out.' He flashed a smile at her. 'You've had your hair done. It's nice.'

She fingered her ponytail and smiled back at him. 'Thanks.'

'Yes it is nice,' Zodwa said. 'I just started twisting mine into dreadlocks. I'm leaning towards the natural, ethnic look that's all the rage these days. Do you still relax your hair Tina?'

Tina nodded, her hand instinctively reaching up to touch her braids again.

'Although I hardly ever get to see it,' Andile said, looking at his watch and then at the tank parked in the garage. 'When are they ever going to start serving this fuel?'

'You should try going natural. Even our First Lady has gone for the natural look and twisted her hair.' Zodwa leaned over to look at Andile's wrist watch. 'It is getting rather late isn't it? Good thing I'm right behind you, Andile.'

'Yes, you are very lucky,' he said, pushing back the small, round spectacles against his nose and studying Zodwa's white Corolla. 'When are you going to repair that dent on your passenger door?'

'Oh I don't know. When I find the money to fix it, I suppose.' Zodwa gave an indifferent wave of her hand and then looked back at Tina. 'It was all my fault actually. I knocked the car against my own gate when I was driving out. Can you imagine? I dented my car all by myself.'

There was a ripple of activity at the petrol pumps and the petrol attendant who had been dishing out stickers waved his hand at Andile gesturing to him to return to his car since he was first in line.

'Time to get moving,' Andile said, jiggling his car-keys. 'Sorry I couldn't call and tell you about the petrol, Tee. But at least one of us will have full tank and we can both use my car if we need to.'

'Bye,' Zodwa said over her shoulder as she turned to walk back to her car.

Tina walked back along the queue irritated that Andile was at the front while she was way down the line. She unlocked her car and got in and slammed the door.

If she didn't get any petrol today he would have to siphon half of his from his car. There was no reason why she should be short on fuel while he ran around with a full tank.

She was still annoyed when an hour and a half later she drove away from the garage with a full tank just before sunset. When she arrived home in Alexander Park

Chapter 3

The phone ringing in the hallway jolted Tina awake. She rolled over and instinctively reached for the bedside receiver.

'Hello?'

Silence.

She threw the phone down and jumped out of bed. She grabbed her morning gown lying on a sofa next to the bed and hurried down the passage tying the belt at her waist and making a mental note to have the bedroom extension repaired at once.

The whole point of having a phone extension in the bedroom was to avoid stumbling down the passage like this, half-asleep to answer calls from people who didn't understand that some people did not get up with the roosters – especially on a Saturday.

'Hello?' She glanced at the clock on the wall above the small table in the entrance hall where the phone sat. It read 6:20.

'Tina, *muroora*', her mother-in-law's voice came from the other side. 'Is Andile there?'

'No.' She frowned. Early morning phone calls like this usually signalled drama. 'Is everything alright?'

'Where is he?' the voice sounded flustered.

'He's in Bulawayo. He's supposed to return later today.'

'Really?' Mai Moyo sounded surprised. 'I thought...anyway, he won't answer his cell phone.' She paused. 'Don't worry, I'll call Leonard.'

Len was Andile's first cousin - Mai Moyo's nephew who was the same age as Tina.

'Are you sure there's nothing I can do, Mai?'

'No, no, no. I'll call Leonard. Bye'

Tina hung up and sat down on the settee by the phone. Something was definitely wrong for her mother-in-law to call so early on a Saturday morning. She picked up the receiver again and dialled Andile's cell number.

Voice mail.

She sighed and stood up and went to the kitchen to unlock the door so Stella the maid could come in. She was already sweeping the veranda as she always did in the mornings while she waited for the door to be unlocked.

Stella lived in a one-roomed cottage that Andile had arranged to have built for her in a corner of the yard at some distance from the house. It was then furnished with a single bed, a table and chair. She and Johnson the gardener shared the bathroom in his quarters at the bottom of the yard, an arrangement that had initially worried Tina who didn't like the idea of a twenty year old girl taking her clothes off in such close proximity to a strange man. But a year had passed and neither Stella nor Johnson had reported any awkward incidences.

'Sisi, I'm going to take a bath. If the phone rings please take a message. There's a bit of a crisis and my husband may call.'

'There's no running water this morning, Mama.' Stella stopped sweeping the floor and leaned on her broom. 'Johnson is boiling water from the tank for you on the fire in the servants' quarters.'

'Damn', Tina muttered under her breath. She glanced at the large water storage tank that had been erected on a platform next to the house. 'I hope it rains soon else we'll really be in trouble.'

She filled the kettle with water from one of several plastic containers they had bought specially to store water for cooking and drinking on occasions such as this. Then she poured some into a large drinking glass and went into the en-suite bathroom to brush her teeth while Stella came in and poured boiling water from a large black pot into the bathtub.

'That should be enough I think, thank you Stella,' she said after Stella had returned with a dish of cold water and poured it into the tub.

'Johnson says he saw a queue for bread at the supermarket when he went to buy the newspaper this morning,' Stella said before leaving the bathroom.

'How many loaves per customer?'

'Two.'

'How much newspaper money do you have left?'

'\$100 000 dollars.' Stella managed the newspaper budget and she sent Johnson to buy the local *Herald* each morning.

Tina made a quick mental calculation.

'That should be enough. Please give it to Johnson. Buy two loaves, and then you two can share the second one between you.'

Stella nodded and then hurried out of the room closing the door behind her.

Tina got into the bath and sat down, allowing her skin to adjust to the water which was still very hot although she knew that it would quickly cool down again so she needed to act fast. She picked up her favourite lavender body scrub from the collection of bottles of imported shower gels and bath oil on a small table next to her. There was no reason to stop enjoying her daily bath ritual and neglect her skin even if the water hardly reached her waist.

As she soaped herself with a sponge her mind went back to the phone call. It obviously wasn't a funeral or else Mai Moyo would have told her. She was relieved by that. They had already been summoned to attend four that year - two of immediate relatives and the other two of friends of the family – neither of whom Tina knew very well.

She decided to call her mother-in-law back when she had finished getting dressed and find out what the problem was. If it wasn't too serious then she would go along with her plan for the day and visit her parents.

The intercom rang as she stepped out of the bathroom, and she heard Stella answering it. She quickly got dressed in a pair of jeans and an oversized T-shirt and made her way to the kitchen.

'Who's that at the gate Stella?' She could hear the electric gate opening and a car driving down the driveway.

'It's *Budi* Leonard,' Stella replied, gathering the broom and duster from the lounge where she had been sweeping so she could vacate the area.

'Oh.'

Len and Tina were good friends since their undergraduate days at the University of Zimbabwe before he decided to drop out and become a professional musician. It was Len who

introduced his cousin Andile to Tina soon after his return home from Canada two years before.

He was driving a silver Mercedes Benz Kompressor which he parked in the driveway just outside the kitchen door.

'Where did you get this car Len? I didn't realise that you musicians get paid so much. It's either that or the Jazz Warriors made a fortune during your last international tour.'

Tina leaned against the kitchen door and watched him get out of the car. He was as tall as Andile although she had never seen him in a golf shirt. And unlike his cousin who kept his hair short and neatly trimmed, Len wore his in thick shoulder-length dreadlocks.

'Oh you know me,' he replied, walking up the steps and giving her a warm hug. 'I just borrow. My old banger's packed up and I'm still looking for the money to fix it. Where's breakfast?'

He put the car keys on the kitchen table and opened the fridge, peering inside.

'I'll fry you some eggs.' Tina opened the cupboard above the sink where she kept her pots and pans. 'They're on the top shelf in the fridge.'

'I could do with some good fried eggs. The last time I bought eggs they were all rotten, can you believe that?'

'That's because they're too expensive and people don't buy them so they just stay on the shelves. But these should be alright. I buy mine directly from the women in one of the cooperatives we are funding.'

'Nescafé!' Len picked up a coffee jar from the counter. 'It's always a pleasure to visit my cousin's house where a man can still drink quality coffee.'

Tina had switched the kettle on when she heard Len arriving and she now poured the boiling water into two mugs. She handed him his and then began breaking the eggs into the pan. They made a crackling sound as they hit the hot oil and soon the smell of frying spread throughout the kitchen.

'Your aunt called just now looking for Andile and then she said she'd call you. Is that why you're here so early in the morning? Has something happened?'

'Babamukuru Themba had severe chest pains and they needed someone to take him to the hospital.'

Tina spun round and stared in shock at Len. Her father-in-law had been fit and well when she saw him the previous weekend. 'Is he alright?'

'Well, he was admitted to Marondera Hospital and is now in a stable condition. But *Maikuru* wants him to be moved to the Avenues Clinic.'

'Well of course. He'll get better care in a private hospital here. So are you going to fetch them from Marondera since Andile's away?'

Len shook his head. 'No, I've asked his friend, George, to bring them here. He lives in Bromley which is nearer to Marondera so it's easier and quicker for him to drive them here.' He paused. 'Andile will just have to replenish the fuel in his car for his trouble.'

Tina glanced at him. There was a grimness in his tone which was unusual. Len was normally very gregarious and few things dimmed his spirits.

'I'm sure your uncle will be fine, Len.'

'Oh I'm sure he'll recover. I'm not too worried about that.' He took a sip of his coffee. 'So when do you expect Andile to get back?'

'He normally arrives early in the evening. He likes to visit his big brother when he's in town so he often has lunch at Bheki's house and then leaves after that.'

'I see.'

'I wonder why Mai didn't just tell me that Baba was ill when she called though.' Tina felt a stab of annoyance as she began to dish the eggs into the two plates. 'I don't mind that you've come here so early in the morning to let me know, but she could have saved you the trouble and just simply told me on the phone.'

'Look, I've never understood my aunt either. Sometimes I think that if you take an X-ray of her mind you'll find one big tangle in there.'

'I don't see anything complicated in delivering a simple message to me on the phone.' Tina popped two slices of bread in the toaster, opened the fridge and took out the margarine and a jar of marmalade and then sat down at the table.

Len took the fork and knife she handed him and dug into the two fried eggs.

'Hmm, maybe I should finally find myself a wife so she can cook for me like this too,' he said smiling at her.

Tina laughed, her irritation abating. 'I'm sure you'll find a nice girl if you look hard enough. But you musicians never stay in one place long enough to settle down with anyone. You're all over the place.'

'That's beside the point. I have trouble pinning down a reasonably decent woman, excuse the pun.'

'But why? You're a good looking guy.'

'I don't meet their high standards, unfortunately. I don't have the big bucks to pay for their upkeep so they go for the big guys – married or otherwise.'

'Oh come on Len, don't be so cynical. I know lots of good, professional women who look after themselves just fine.'

'Like who?' Len snorted, and began buttering a slice of toast. 'Like your girlfriends?'

'Yes.'

'OK let's see, your best friend, Tanya that's her name right? She's a lawyer. She frightens me with her dark suits and killer heels. If I get on her wrong side, she'll sue me out of house and home. And as for that social worker friend of yours, Nyasha, she's so religious that the only time we'll see her married off is if one of Jesus' disciples were to come back.'

Tina shook her head. 'These are my oldest friends you speak of. They are good people.'

'The only one I can handle is Sarudzai, but she's already married, and she and her husband are threatening to run away to Australia where they can get decent doctors' salaries, so I can't even steal her if I wanted to.'

'We'll marry you off yet, you wait and see.' Tina smiled.

He put the half-eaten slice back on the plate and studied her for a long moment while slowly rubbing the thick stubble on his chin. 'Marriage is a pain. People don't understand the meaning of the damn word. But I don't think that I'd have found it too painful if I had just married you.'

Her smile faltered as her eyes met his. His cell phone rang making them both jump.

'That was Maikuru,' he said as he ended the call. 'They're at the Avenues Clinic and they've found a bed for Babamukuru. They managed to get him a private room.'

'I'll just change quickly and then we'll be on our way. And I suppose I should tell my parents in case they also want to see him.'

She hurried back to the bedroom feeling her irritation rising again, getting stronger as she tore off her jeans and T-shirt and threw them on to the bed and rummaged through her wardrobe looking for something decent to wear.

The receptionist at the Avenues Clinic told them to take the stairs up to the second floor and then make a left turn. On the second floor they made their way down the passage towards the waiting area which led to the private wards. A male attendant dressed in a khaki uniform was wheeling a large trolley stacked with trays of empty lunch dishes out of the double doors as they approached. They waited for him to navigate his trolley out before going through into the waiting room.

Zodwa was seated on one of the chairs in the room reading a magazine, her yellow and red kaftan and matching headwrap jarringly bright in the tiny room. She looked up when they entered.

'Oh hello Tina. Hi Len.'

'Zodwa,' Tina said, taken aback at seeing her. 'I didn't expect to see you here.'

'Andile's inside the ward with his mother. They only allow two visitors at a time.

George has already gone back to Bromley – something about one of his cows giving birth.'

'Andile's here?' But how did he get here so soon?'

'Perhaps he caught a plane.'

'And why are you here, Zodwa?'

'Same reason as you I guess. I heard about Baba Moyo's illness and I rushed over to see what I could do. I don't live very far from here.'

Tina glanced at Len in confusion and he signalled to her to go inside.

'Why don't you go in first Tina and maybe you can tell my cousin to get out of there so I can go in and see my uncle.'

Tina entered the room, her mind in turmoil. Baba Moyo was sitting up in his hospital bed and dressed in his favourite striped pyjamas while his wife sat on a chair by his side, her elbows propped on the bed and peeling an orange for him. Andile, looking very fresh as if he'd had a good night's sleep was on the other side with a newspaper spread out on the bed cover.

They all looked up when Tina entered and Andile quickly stood up to offer her his seat.

'Tina my child, your father-in-law is being impossible.' Mai Moyo said, looking up briefly before going back to peeling the orange.

'How are you feeling Baba? You had me worried,' Tina said, looking at her father-in-law with concern. She had a very soft spot for him.

'I am much better, my child, which is why I don't think I need to stay here longer than a day or two. The doctor says I'll be fine.

'You will be discharged when the doctor decides to let you go, Dad.' Andile stood behind Tina with his hands on her shoulders. 'I'm paying for you, so you don't need to worry about hospital bills.'

'Good. These private places are hideously expensive.'

'That's because they still work, unlike Parirenyatwa down the road that's falling apart by the day. How can a hospital run out of morphine for goodness sake? How can that be possible? We're not in a war-zone.'

'Depends how you look at it,' his father retorted.

'Did Len tell you about Baba?' Mai Moyo looked up at Tina from her orange.

'Yes, he came to the house to tell me.' Tina leaned her head back to look up at Andile. 'I couldn't get hold of you on your cell phone.'

'Sorry about that, Tee. I should have called you but everything got so hectic.' He gently squeezed her shoulders.

'You didn't call your wife to tell her that I was ill?' Baba Moyo took a slice of orange from wife and then threw a quizzical look at his son.

'I was going to tell her once you had been stabilised and had settled down. There was no need to bother her so early in the morning.'

The door opened and Len looked in. 'Tina's parents are here to see you *Babamukuru*.

'Ah! Show them in at once! The two of you can step outside for a bit,' said Mai Moyo, handing another slice to her husband. 'We must always give preference to the elders.'

They followed Len out of the ward to the waiting area where Tina's parents were talking to Zodwa.

'Zodwa tells us that your father had chest pains. I hope it isn't serious,' Tina's mother, Mai Sanyanga said to Andile, looking very worried. She looked smart in a long blue skirt, white floral blouse and high heels and her hair was plaited in neat cornrows weaving round her head and tied in bun at the top. One thing Tina liked about her mother was that she did not insist on wearing *doeks* except when the occasion called for it.

'He will be fine, don't worry,' Andile reassured her. 'He has a history of high blood pressure and he occasionally gives a fright.'

'Well it's a big relief that he is stable,' Baba Sanyanga spoke in his deep, guttural voice. His burly frame towered above his wife and he looked every bit the distinguished academic he was in his linen pants and a casual jacket, although he no longer lectured and worked instead as a consultant for a German engineering company.

'You can go in and see him now,' Andile said extending his arm towards the ward. 'They're waiting for you.'

Len took his car keys from his pocket.

'I'll take Zodwa home now. I think you two will be here for a while and she needs to get back home.'

'Yes, I have a business to run,' Zodwa said, her voice rather loud in the muted room. 'Especially on a Saturday, the shop can become very busy.' She turned to Tina. 'Do come and browse around some time. I'd love to make a nice African outfit for you. I know it's not your style but I think you would look very elegant.'

'Let's go,' Len started striding towards the door.

Tina sat down on the chair and picked up the copy of *Drum* magazine that Zodwa had been reading. Andile sat next to her and opened his newspaper.

'When did you get back from Bulawayo, Andile?'

'This morning.' He didn't look up from his newspaper.

'So you drove through the night again?'

'Uh-huh.'

'You're turning this into a habit. Is it safe for you to be travelling along the road at four in the morning?'

'Truck drivers do it. Besides there's less traffic on the road at that time.'

'There's generally less traffic on the road because of the fuel shortages.'

He looked at her. 'I'd be anxious to get home as early as possible to spend the day with my wife after being gone for most of the week. Is that such a bad thing?'

'Your mother phoned at six this morning and said that she couldn't find you.'

'You know how erratic these cell phone signals get when you are driving in between the towns. But anyway Len eventually managed to get hold of me and since I was already close to Harare I came straight here and managed to organise a room for my father.'

She threw him a stunned look. 'Len called you?'

He nodded and turned the page of his newspaper. 'Yes he did.'

'I see.'

He paused. 'My mother must have been frantic and calling everyone if even Zodwa was here. I wonder who else she called.'

'I can't imagine why she'd call her, though. She's not close family.'

Andile shrugged and went back to his newspaper.

Tina continued to page through the magazine but she couldn't concentrate. Andile's explanation made sense but there were too many loose ends, especially the part about Len.

She was contemplating prodding her husband further when her parents returned to the waiting area.

'Weren't you going to visit your parents today, Tina?' Andile stood up as they approached.

'But you have a family situation on your hands,' Mai Sanyanga said. 'Perhaps she should stay here with you.'

'No no. My father is settled now. We don't foresee any further complications. So it's fine if you go ahead with your parents, Tina. I will pick you up this evening and we'll go home.'

Tina suddenly felt the need to be with her parents.

She had not been party to any of the morning's events. She wasn't there when Baba Moyo had severe chest pains and was transported to Harare. She was not there when Andile, suddenly back from Bulawayo, organised a private ward for his father. She had not been informed of anything and even Len, who had sat in her kitchen eating her eggs, had somehow forgotten to tell her that he'd spoken to her husband.

No, she was going to spend the day with her own people.

'I will go with my parents.' she said, picking up her bag and turning towards the door, leaving her parents to say goodbye to her husband.

Chapter 4

They drove up the steep road leading to the Sanyanga house in Chisipite suburb and stopped outside the electric gate. Tina's father pressed the hooter with the palm of his hand and blew it twice in short bursts.

'The electricity has gone off again,' Mai Sanyanga spoke over her shoulder to Tina who was seated in the back seat.

'These blackouts really disrupt everything,' her father grumbled. He pointed to the metal cords running along the top of the security wall which was painted grey. 'We spent a lot of money putting up this electric fence and now it's useless with these power cuts. Anybody can jump over and trespass on our property.'

'Yes, the Wilsons down the street were robbed last week and the week before that the Chideyas in the next street were also burgled.' Mai Sanyanga nodded her head in agreement. 'The thieves jumped over the wall and they took their radio and DVD machine as well as the kettle and microwave while they were all sleeping. They woke up to find the kitchen door wide open and their things gone.'

'It's this damn situation in this country,' Baba Sanyanga pressed the hooter again, longer and louder this time. 'It's turning decent people into thieves. We never used to have so many burglaries before. Where is that gardener of ours?'

Mukoma Tendai, dressed in green overalls and black gumboots, ran up from the orchard behind the house and began pushing the gate open. He saluted a greeting and gave a wide grin as the car drove in.

'Beauty has taken the weekend off,' Mai Sanyanga said as they entered the house through the kitchen door. She picked up a sugar bowl from the table and replaced it in the cupboard below the counter with the other bowls, jugs and cups. 'So I have to do the cleaning up myself.'

The kitchen was spotless. There was no trace of burnt-on grease and stains on the hob and oven and the ceramic tiles gleamed on the floor.

Her husband turned on the switch on the wall and looked up at the ceiling lamp as if expecting the power to have come back on during the time they took to drive from the gate to the garage.

Nothing happened.

He turned away and went to sit on one of the chairs in the veranda with a book while his wife went to the bedroom to change into something more comfortable.

Tina followed her father outside and stood at the balcony leaning her hands against the wrought iron railing. She turned her face upwards to feel the breeze on her face and took a deep breath feeling the tenseness slowly leaving her body.

She gazed at the view below her.

Chisipite suburb was built among the undulating hills in the northern outskirts of the city, its villas, mansions and houses perched upon the slopes and nestled behind rich green foliage, trees and bush. From the balcony, Tina could see the wide expanse of the countryside, its fields rolling into the distance and beyond that, the blue silhouettes of the mountain range stretching towards Goromonzi.

She turned to her father who was absorbed in Albert Luthuli's biography, *Let My People Go* that Andile had bought for him on his last trip to Joburg.

'How long has the electricity been out this time, Dad?

'Since yesterday.' He closed the book and put it on the table and then sat back contemplating the front garden. 'And we've had no running water for three days now. We're depending on water from the borehole. We got that borehole to maintain your mother's garden and my orchard. I didn't expect that we would end up using it for bathing, cleaning and everything else.'

'Well at least you have it. We don't.' Tina took a seat opposite to her father and, picked up his book from the table and began paging through it. 'And now we're not sure if we can afford it. It's become so expensive now.'

'It gets more expensive every day so you better start using some of those US dollars you're earning to invest in one. All of this is not going to end anytime soon. Do your in-laws have one?'

'I think so.' Tina shrugged. She didn't want to talk about those people.

'You can join me for a whisky later after I've finished my chapter.' Her father took the book from her and continued reading.

She leaned back in her chair and watched *Mukoma* Tendai pruning the bougainvillea bushes at the edge of the lawn, his big garden scissors going *snip snip* as he deftly cut away the stems and leaves growing out of place.

In the distance she could hear the murmur of bees among the Flamboyant trees now in full red and orange bloom along the road beyond the wall and she thought again of Mai Moyo and her bees.

Her mother-in-law had instructed her to emulate the worker bees and work hard to look after her family's needs. But now she didn't know how she could execute those duties properly if they excluded her from family crises, denying her the opportunity to be useful.

'Dad, I'll just take a look at your encyclopaedias,' she said, getting up.

He looked up. 'What do you want to read about?'

'Bees.'

He grunted and went back to reading his book. She went into the lounge which was very different to Mai Moyo's coordinated orange and brown.

A wide mustard-coloured rug lay in the centre of the parquet floor under the mahogany coffee table, and the cushions on the cream couch were each covered in individual colours - brown, cream, white and beige.

Baba Sanyanga liked collecting African artefacts and in a corner beside the Jetmaster fireplace, with dry pine cones arranged inside the grill, stood a djembe drum with a large shield covered in brown and white cow hide leaning against it, and musical instruments including a large round *mbira*, several *hoshos* and another drum covered in cow hide. Three Shona masks that he bought from a vendor in a small village outside Victoria Falls, hung in a diagonal line on the wall above the fireplace.

She went to the mahogany cabinet at the end of the room where the encyclopaedias, bound in brown and maroon, were displayed on the shelves behind the glass doors. They were her father's prize collection from his academic years.

She removed the volume marked A-B from the shelf and sat down on a leather armchair next to the cabinet. She opened it and traced her finger down the index until she found the page she was looking for. The third paragraph immediately caught her eye.

'Despite its name the queen bee has no control over the hive. Her sole function is to serve as the reproducer. She is an 'egg-laying machine. A good queen of quality stock, well reared with good nutrition and well mated, can lay about 2000 eggs per day and is continually surrounded by young worker attendants who meet her every need.'

Tina closed the book and returned it on the shelf and went to look for her mother, deeply relieved that Mai Moyo's knowledge was limited only to worker bees. She shuddered at the thought of the lesson that her mother-in-law would derive from the queen bee.

Mai Sanyanga was in the main bedroom, sorting through her husband's shirts in a laundry basket, separating the light and dark colours.

'I suppose I'll have to get one of those old-fashioned irons that your grandmother used all those years ago.' Mai Sanyanga shook her head and sighed. 'You know, the one that you have to heat using hot coals from the fire.'

'Well, I guess we're not too far from those old days now Mom.' Tina sat on the double bed and picked up a shirt. 'You already cook from an open fire on the braai outside when there's no power.'

'It shouldn't be too bad now that we'll have a generator next week. It was really kind of your husband to have it installed for us as a gift. He is such a good *mukwambo*. Did he also buy one for his parents?'

Tina nodded and watched her mother as she took each shirt and unbuttoned it and then unfastened the cuffs before placing it in its appropriate pile. Occasionally she would stroke the arm of a shirt or trace her finger along the collar before she slowly unbuttoned it on her lap and then put it aside with a gentle pat.

'Mom, I have something to ask you.'

'What is it, Tina?'

'Is there some kind of protocol I don't know about for delivering important news in the Moyo family?'

'I'm not aware of any special protocol.'

'I mean, in our Manyika culture news is conveyed to the recipient via several members of the family even if they are in the same room. This uncle turns to the aunt and speaks, then the aunt turns to someone else and repeats the message. This can go on and on until someone with the appropriate position or status finally delivers the news to the recipient who then listens as if they didn't hear the news the first time. Then they respond and the whole chain begins again. That's why our lobola negotiations take all night.'

'Yes it's a formality that we observe sometimes. But what does that have to do with the Moyos?'

'Mai Moyo didn't tell me that Baba was ill. I heard it from Len when he came to my house to tell me.'

'Maybe she asked him to tell you?'

'But why, Mom? She called my house. Why didn't she just say that Baba was sick? Why did she have to inform me through someone else?'

'And Andile didn't phone you?'

'No, he didn't think to do that.' Tina tossed aside the shirt that she was playing with and threw herself back against the pillows and stared up at the ceiling.

Her mother looked up at Tina's bitter tone.

'*Mwana'angu*, you shouldn't stress yourself by asking too many questions. It was a crisis and people sometimes don't think during a crisis. You now know that your father-in-law is not well. We all went to see him and we've shown our support. So let's leave it at that.'

Tina folded her arms, her mood unreceptive to her mother's lecture.

'But still Mom, I'm annoyed and hurt that she didn't tell me. Why all the secrecy?'

'It's not secrecy. You shouldn't read too much into these things.'

Mai Sanyanga paused, absently stroking a shirt on her lap. 'Remember, you are a *mutoorwa*. They took you from us and welcomed you into their fold. You are part of their family, but their blood doesn't run through your veins.'

'I don't think that I'm asking too many questions. And even if their Ndebele blood doesn't course through my Manyika veins I'm still entitled to know what's going on in the

family that I married into. I didn't have the opportunity to tell Andile how upset I am by all this but I will once we get home.'

Her mother sighed and got up and went to sit on the stool at the dressing table. She began sorting through her perfume and lotion bottles arranged on one side while her husband's deodorants and after-shave were on the other.

'Tina,' she looked back at her daughter's reflection in the mirror. 'Remember what I taught you. Silence is golden. There is nothing more reassuring to a man than the quiet and steadfast presence of a supportive wife.' She paused and sprayed a little *Pleasures by Estee Lauder* on her hand and held it up to her nose. Then she turned her gaze back on her daughter's reflection. 'Just be there for him and his family when they need you. They will eventually start to confide in you more when they realise what a bastion of strength you are. You'll see.'

How the hell were they supposed to guess her feelings if she remained as silent as a corpse?

And now her mother was implying that she should be a doormat, smiling in submissive beatitude while Andile and his relatives stepped over her and went about their business as if she didn't exist.

Tina grunted but decided not to argue. She knew exactly what her mother would say next if she pressed the subject. As if reading her daughter's mind, Mai Sanyanga turned in her stool to face her.

'Remember what I told you about the importance of harnessing the tongue.'

'But surely I can still confide my feelings to my husband – gently – so he knows I'm unhappy? I thought you said that's what pillow talk is all about.'

'Pillow talk only works when it is not conducted in anger, my child. Right now, you are angry, and you have a tendency to sulk. I know you. The bedroom is meant to be a place for intimate discussion and resolution, not trench warfare.'

Mai Sanyanga stood up and went to open her wardrobe and began selecting through the clothes hanging inside. 'Now where is that skirt that your sister brought me when she

visited us from London? There's a big meeting on Monday at the Jameson Hotel for health counsellors and I want to look really elegant.'

It was time for that whisky now. Tina got up and, leaving her mother to her clothes and perfume and serene thoughts, went to look for her father.

He had moved indoors and had settled into his dozer, his brown leather reclining chair by the fireplace in the lounge, already enjoying his Scotch and talking to a visitor.

'Eunice. I didn't hear you come in.'

Her cousin Eunice turned towards her, her face almost split in half by her wide smile framed by bright red lipstick.

'Your intercom isn't working so I just opened the gate and let myself in.' The large gold loops of her earrings gleamed from under her curly weave and played against her cheeks in tune to her words as she spoke.

Tina poured herself a Scotch from the bottle on the coffee table and sat next to her cousin, feeling her spirits rise once again. She was very close to Eunice, her mother's niece and two years younger than her.

'You'll have to drink it straight. There's no ice since the freezer's off,' her father said.

'And I'm having Klipdrift and warm Coke.' Eunice held up her glass. 'It's going to go straight to my head, but what can we do?'

The CD changer on the stereo suddenly made a whirring sound and the light on the television set came on.

'The electricity's back,' Tina said, feeling like they were back in the land of the living.

'Good, just in time for me to catch up on the news headlines on CNN.' Her father immediately reached for the remote control. He pushed his dozer back and propped his feet up on the raised footpad and promptly forgot about the two women in the room.

Tina and Eunice heeded his dismissal and went out to the veranda with their drinks. The sun was setting and evening was descending and the air was alive with the song of the birds that had burst out as if in celebration of the return of electricity.

'I was hoping to pop into the hair salon today before coming here but then family duties took over.' Tina said, settling into her chair.

'Why did you need to go to have your hair done? It looks fine to me.'

'Yes but the front needs redoing. The hair there is shorter than the rest and it keeps escaping from the braids.'

Eunice laughed.

'You spend way too much money on your looks, my dear cousin' She took a sip of her Klipdrift and Coke and then opened her bag and took out a little comb. 'Come sit here at my feet and I'll do it for you.'

Eunice was a woman of many talents and she was especially gifted with her hands. She dabbled in many things – cake decorating, sewing and crocheting, braiding hair – anything that could earn her an extra income above her regular job as a secretary at a construction company in town.

'But I don't have any extra extensions,' Tina objected.

'You don't need any extra extensions. I'll just undo the ones on your head and re-plait them.'

Tina removed a padded cushion from one of the wrought iron garden chairs and threw it on the floor at her cousin's feet. She sat on it and rested her head back against Eunice's lap and stared up at the green and white stripes of the veranda awning. Eunice set to work, her fingers deftly undoing the braids and laying them in a row on the table.

'So, how is married life treating you?'

'It's been fine but I hit my first major hurdle today.'

'What happened?'

'Mai Moyo called me at dawn this morning looking for Andile because his father had fallen very ill. When I told her he wasn't home she said just she'd call Len and she hung up.'

Eunice stopped plaiting.

'Why did she do that?'

'I don't know. And then on top of that when I got to the hospital there was Andile, cool as a cucumber, suddenly back from Bulawayo when I thought he'd only arrive this evening. And it didn't seem to worry him that I found that strange.'

'It is strange. Very strange actually.'

That's what I thought but Mom says that I shouldn't worry myself by reading too much into it.'

Eunice snorted. 'Don't ask too many questions. I know.'

'Why? Did you also have a similar experience when you were married to Max?'

Eunice laughed out loud. She took one of the braids and started planting it into Tina's hair.

'Max never told me anything. I didn't ask any questions and next thing I knew, half his income was going towards paying for the other woman.'

Tina sat up and turned to around face her cousin.

'It must have been really hard for you when you found out about the other woman, Eunice. We never really talked about your divorce last year.'

'Oh it was hard and what made it worse was that his family turned against me – after I'd given them two children. No-one came to my side and supported me. So that's why when Max married that woman soon after he divorced me, I took his children and bundled them into a taxi in the dead of night and I dumped them at his doorstep and told him here, take your children. I hope you and your new wife will have a good time playing happy families.'

Tina mused over the story for a few minutes, not really sure if Eunice was justified in her behaviour. The children were hers too, after all. But then again what gave Max the sole right to start his new life with a clean slate and a new wife, while Eunice was left saddled with the children?

'Yes, I suppose he might have behaved more responsibly if his people had condemned his actions.'

'They never do. Listen to me, Tina. I'll give you some advice for free. You can be as silent as a dead person and as docile as a donkey. But that won't mean anything to these people. They'll just do what they want to do. So you need to keep your eyes and ears open. Sometimes things are happening right under your nose and you don't even know because you're too busy being good.'

The intercom rang inside the house and Mai Sanyanga came outside. She didn't look surprised at all to see Eunice, who regularly dropped in for a visit. 'It's Leonard.'

'Really?' Tina sat up. 'What does he want here?'

Her mother gave her a reproachful look and hurried back into the house to welcome the guest. Len appeared in the doorway a few minutes later. He looked more relaxed than he had been at the hospital and Tina wondered if Zodwa had anything to do with the general improvement of his mood, since they had left together and gone to her house.

'Looks like I'm just in time for sundowners.'

'What brings you here, Len?'

'I've come to take you home.'

'I thought Andile was going to fetch me. I didn't realise you're his personal chauffeur now.'

He looked stung by her caustic remark and gave a short laugh. 'Andile just got caught up with other business and he asked me to do him a favour and take you home.'

'And what business is that, Len?' Eunice said, picking up her glass and taking a sip, looking at him over the rim. 'It seems to me that your cousin is a very busy man these days. What with all those trips to Bulawayo.'

Len cleared his throat. 'I think I should leave you ladies to finish with your hair while I have a drink with Baba Sanyanga.'

'No seriously, I haven't seen Andile in such a long time because he's always travelling here and there. I was really looking forward to seeing him. What business does he still have when he's just been away on business?' Eunice's smile was very wide and her eyes glinted. The gold hoop earrings jiggled around her neck.

Len tossed back his dreadlocks and lifted his shoulders in a nonchalant shrug. 'I really don't know. I'm just a guitarist and the only business I know is the music business.'

'But I don't understand why he didn't just call Tina himself to tell her that he's been delayed instead of sending you to do it. Don't they have land lines at his office? Doesn't he have a cell phone?'

'I can't explain why my cousin didn't call his wife. But I'm here now and I'll wait in the lounge until you're ready to go Tina.'

He turned away and disappeared inside the house.

'Come, let me finish your hair,' Eunice said, picking up a comb. She planted a braid and began plaiting it at the speed of lightning. 'You need to start asking questions, Tina. You can't continue going through life with an absentee husband.'

University of Cape Town

Chapter 5

Most of the lights in the house were off when Len and Tina arrived at her home at No 8 Copper Road, Alexander Park in the northern suburbs. Only the lamp in the entrance hall and another in the lounge remained switched on.

Stella was sitting on the floor, despite the presence of a lounge suite, and she was watching a music show on Zimbabwe TV. She stood up when they entered.

'When did the lights go out, Stella?'

'About an hour ago, Mama. They went out just after I finished cooking.'

'Looks like it's your turn to be in the dark,' Len said, looking round the dim room. 'At least you are well organised and have a generator. I don't have such a thing.'

'Are you alone? Is Johnson here?' Tina spoke to Stella, ignoring his remark.

'He's in his servants' quarters.' Stella gathered the pile of old *Soul* and *True Love* magazines that she had been reading which Tina had passed on to her.

Stella was also under instructions from Johnson to pass on old copies of Andile's *Financial Mail* magazines to him although he didn't care much for *Newsweek*.

Johnson had once confided to Tina that events in Iraq, America and other far-away lands didn't interest him as much as what happened across the border in South Africa. This was because both his brothers had jumped the border several months before and were working on a farm somewhere near Messina.

'Shall I set the table for supper or will you wait for Baba?'

'No don't worry about that. You can go to your room now.' Tina sat down on the couch and slowly rubbed her forehead, her engagement and wedding rings catching the light from the side lamp next to the fireplace.

Stella collected her magazines, bid them goodnight and left the room.

'I wouldn't have minded a bite to eat,' Len said, throwing himself into Andile's armchair and making himself comfortable.

'You're welcome to help yourself. You know where the kitchen is.'

He didn't move and focused instead on the local music show on the television.

A woman was dancing under a tree singing a Shona gospel song. She was overdressed in a bright yellow suit, too much makeup and a shoulder-length weave that looked like a dead fox on her head. Occasionally the camera moved on to her background singers, five women in matching outfits, not quite as glamorous as the lead singer, doing a coordinated step dance routine by a fountain.

Harare central park was a popular venue for shooting music videos.

'Everyone's singing gospel these days,' Len said watching the woman who was now kneeling on the ground in apparent supplication. The song had reached an instrumental interlude, and she had to do something to keep herself busy before breaking into chorus again.

'I guess with life being the way it is people feel the need to turn to God for some divine relief.' Tina wasn't really interested in market trends in the music industry.

Len nodded absently. 'Except that she ran off to the UK with her drummer while her husband's now living in Joburg with one of those back-up singers.'

The song ended and another video by the same artist came on, this time with her singing by a waterfall in a scarlet evening gown with sequins dotted all over the bodice.

'Isn't she a bit overdressed to sing gospel?' Len spoke again.

'I've never understood why people have a problem with gospel singers looking glamorous. Where is it written that to sing church songs you must dress like you've just dropped out of the Old Testament, complete with robes and *doeks*?

'I suppose you're right.'

They watched the rest of the video in silence and then she stood up, picking up her handbag.

'I'm going to bed now. You can stay and wait for Andile if you want.'

She began walking towards the door.

'Aren't you going to keep me company for a while?'

'We spent the whole morning together, Len.'

'We've never had a problem finding things to talk about and suddenly I'm struggling to have a conversation with you.'

She stopped at the door and didn't turn around. 'I'm really, really tired. It's been a long day.'

Len switched the television off and stood up. 'Tina, wait.'

She spun around with a frown. Why didn't he just go away?

'I'm getting the sense that you're upset with me.'

She didn't answer.

'Why don't you tell me what I've done wrong so I can make it better?'

'So you don't know why I'm upset?'

'No.'

She threw her handbag onto the nearest sofa, wishing that she could throw it at him instead. 'Len, do you think I'm stupid?'

His face clouded with confusion. 'Of course not.'

'No, I think that you people actually do believe that I am dumb.'

Len scratched his head, a frown spreading across his face.

'What do you mean by you people?'

'You spent the morning in my house but you didn't tell me that you'd been in touch with my husband.'

Len looked at her as if she had lost her mind. Then his face suddenly turned grim.

'Is that what he told you?'

'Yes, that's what he told me. So this means that you were all communicating among yourselves which would be just fine, except that I happen to be married to Andile.'

He didn't respond. She took a deep breath to control herself.

'Why didn't you tell me that you'd spoken to him?'

'Because I didn't, Tina.'

'So you're saying that he lied?'

'Yes that's exactly what I'm saying.'

'Why?'

Len shook his head and sat down. He leaned forward and dropped his face in his hands. Then he looked up without removing his hands from his face and regarded her through his fingers for a long moment, his eyes strangely sad.

'I'm sorry, Tina.' He mumbled. 'I should have told you this morning. I forgot.'

She looked closely at him. 'You're lying.'

He shifted in his seat. Then he glanced back at the TV screen where an old video from the '80s was playing of the Soul Brothers dressed in tight trousers and frilled shirts.

Tina picked up the remote control and switched the television off.

'Either you tell me the truth, or you get out of my house.'

Len remained motionless. He stared at the television screen and tapped his intertwined fingers against his hands. Then he gave a very deep sigh and stood up and picked up his car keys from the coffee table.

'Are you going to run away now?'

He walked to the door and then turned around to face her. 'Come with me.'

She frowned and looked at him with confusion. 'Where are we going?'

'To see Andile.'

She sat in the passenger seat in Len's borrowed Mercedes, her emotions raging inside her. She was doing exactly what her mother had warned her not to do – asking too many questions. Stirring up dissention. But she wanted to know the answers so she could understand why her life had suddenly gone topsy-turvy.

Len stared straight ahead as he waited for the gate to close behind them. Then he drove down Copper Road and into Harare Drive in the direction of town.

They drove in silence and she looked out of her passenger window at the black shapes of houses, walls and gates and the dark contours of hedges and trees rolling past, and then a vast expanse of blackness as the houses gave way to open vlei. Above them the white sliver of the waxing moon hung above the emptiness and it seemed to move along with the car as if to guide them. They turned into Enterprise Road and the street lights lining the main road softened the darkness in the car.

She stole a look at Len. His shadowed profile was rigid as he continued to stare at the road ahead. He accelerated along the almost deserted street and then cursed as he slammed on the brakes and slowed down with a screech behind a white Citi Golf crawling along the road, its single rear light obscured by the cloud of exhaust fumes churning out behind it.

'Why do people drive like tortoises on the road? I could have easily slammed into him and caused serious damage to this car.' He swerved into the next lane and overtook the Golf, hooting angrily as he passed it.

The driver of the Golf hooted right back.

'You know they drive slowly to save fuel, Len. You're the one who's speeding.'

He didn't answer.

'Can you tell me where we are going?' Tina gripped her seat as he went through a red light at the large intersection at Second Street Extension.

'To find your husband.'

'But where is he?'

'You'll find out soon enough.'

He turned into King George Avenue in Avondale and then stopped outside a cluster of duplex garden flats. The flats were separated from each other by a low wall and they each had a small private garden. The name Winchester Gardens was written in large, gold letters on the wall at the main entrance.

'This is where our flat is,' Tina said, astonished that he had brought her there. 'Andile bought it last year and we rented it out to a business colleague of his.'

She looked quizzically at Len. 'So is Andile here visiting his friend?'

'Yes he is here..' Len switched off the engine and sat back in his driver's seat with a weary sigh.

The evening was silent except for the shrill chirruping of the crickets that came through Tina's open window and the occasional car driving past in the quiet street.

Tina hadn't been back at the flat since they had rented it out several months before.

There was an electric gate and through its railings she could see that the garden in front of Flat no 1 was well-kept, and a rockery had been erected with the flowers in full

bloom, although the tenant could go easy on the marigolds, Tina thought. They were, technically, weeds.

The short gravel pathway leading up to the front steps and been replaced by paving in square, concrete blocks, and a row of new rose bushes had been planted along it. The two large terracotta flower pots she had bought and placed on the small veranda now sat in the garden by the steps and the ferns that she planted in them flourished, falling over the sides and onto the grass.

The light was switched on in the veranda where the tenant had placed a table and matching wrought iron garden chairs with padding upholstered in black and cream Congolese mud cloth in a noughts and crosses design.

A lot had changed at the flat since Tina was last there.

'Maybe we don't need to go inside,' she said, suddenly feeling like an intruder. She could see Andile's white 4x4 in the parking area ahead of them. 'I don't think that it'll be appropriate for me to just show up and disturb their business meeting.'

Len made no move to start the car.

'I said we can go now.' She threw him an impatient look.

'In a while. We didn't drive all the way here to sit outside the gate and admire your flat.'

He opened the door and got out. Tina hesitated and then opened her door and stepped out. She walked towards the gate and looked again through the railing at Flat No 1 which was directly in front of her. The curtains at the lounge window were closed so she couldn't see any movement inside.

Another car was parked beside Andile's in the bay next to Flat no 1. A white Toyota Corolla. There was a slight dent on the passenger door, although it wasn't big enough to have scratched the white paint.

She turned to Len in surprise. 'Isn't that Zodwa's car?'

Len was leaning against the door watching her. 'How do you know it's her car?'

'I recognise the dent,' she pointed towards the Corolla. 'She told me when I met her in a petrol queue that she had accidentally knocked her car against this gate while she was driving out.'

She looked back at the car to make sure. Her eyes were drawn once again to the chairs on the veranda covered in Congolese mud cloth. She turned back to Len in surprise.

'Does Zodwa live here? Is she the tenant?'

'What makes you think that she lives here?'

'I'm looking at those seat covers on the veranda. Zodwa covers everything including herself in ethnic prints.'

'I see.'

'So is she the tenant?'

'Tenants usually pay rent. She just lives here.'

'But I didn't know,' Tina said, turning back to look at the flat. 'Andile didn't tell me that she was living in our flat. How long has she been staying here?'

'About three months.'

'Three months?'

Len opened his door. 'Get in the car. Let's go.'

Tina stood where she was, staring at the Corolla, unable to move. Then she slowly turned around and began to move towards the car, stumbling a little on the tarmac. She got in and closed the door. She could feel her heart pounding against her chest, its thudding so violent that she could almost hear it.

'Tina.'

'No,' she held up her hand. 'No more explanations, no more excuses. Just tell me what is going on, please.'

'You know what's going on Tina.' Len's voice was uncharacteristically harsh. 'You are a very intelligent woman but you can be so blind sometimes.'

She shook her head as if to repel his words. She was choking, trying to breathe some air into her lungs and exhaling in small gasps. Tiny drops of sweat began to condense around her hairline and she wiped them away with the back of her hand.

'You walk around in this little bubble of denial and you don't pay attention to what's happening in broad daylight in front of you.'

He started the car and reversed from the gate, drove a hundred metres down the street and then parked it in a dark cul-de-sac. He switched off the engine.

'He does go to Bulawayo and Joburg on business.' Len looked directly ahead as he spoke. 'But he leaves or comes back a day earlier than he says he does. Then he stays with her.'

She folded her arms tightly and looked out of her passenger window at the four or five residences in the enclosed road. In the house closest to her a dim golden glow flickered in shadows from a window. Candlelight. The residents in Avondale had no power either.

'So was Andile here when his father fell sick early this morning? Is that why he was at the hospital so quickly?'

'Yes.'

'He told me that he'd been on his way back to Harare. He said he drove through the night because he wanted to arrive early and spend time with me.'

'He had to come up with some excuse for his sudden presence there.'

'I see,' she mumbled, her mind going back to the day she saw him in the petrol queue talking to Zodwa whose car was right behind his. He had also used the same excuse to explain why he had arrived at 7 in the morning to become first in line.

'I knew exactly where he was when *Maikuru* phoned me and instructed me to go and find him.'

'She asked you to go and find him.' She drew a sharp breath and threw him a stunned look. 'You mean she knew he was here?'

He was silent.

'I said did my mother-in-law know that her son was here?'

He sighed. A deep sigh of defeat.

'Yes.'

She threw her hands over her head and let out a loud moan. 'No, no this is not happening. This is not happening to me.'

She clutched her head and then her stomach where she could feel the muscles violently churning. Then her head snapped up. 'And you Len. You knew about this all along. Why didn't you tell me?'

Silence.

'I thought you were my friend. I trusted you.'

'I didn't know how to tell you.' He reached over and took her clenched hands in his. 'I didn't want to burst your bubble. Especially since you've only been married for a year. And I was hoping that my cousin would see sense and stop being such a fool.'

'But I'm the one who looks like a fool now.' A sob escaped from her lips. 'How many more people in your family know about this?'

He leaned forward and turned the key in the ignition.

'*Babamukuru* will be discharged from the hospital on Wednesday.' Len fastened his seatbelt and then turned the key in the ignition. 'There's a family gathering in Marondera at the weekend to celebrate his recovery. You'll see then how many people know about Andile's other life.'

Tina rubbed her hand over her forehead, feeling it slip against the film of sweat on her skin. A voice sprang up from deep within her memory. Mai Goredema's voice from the Marondera Methodist Mothers Union.

'You cannot watch over the affairs of your household when you are busy looking in the opposite direction.'

She buried her face in her hands.

Len said nothing more and drove through the silent streets towards Alexander Park.

She tried in vain to fight back the tears, horrified at the thought of her composure disintegrating in front of Len. The tears poured out anyway, trickling through her fingers and down along her hands and arms.

Chapter 6

The gate rumbled to a close and locked into place behind Len's car as it drove away down Copper Road, its engine soon fading into the night.

The drone of the generator vibrating through the house told her that the power was not back yet. There was no way of telling when the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Company would restore the electricity. It could be later that night or in two days.

Tina walked into the bedroom and kicked off her shoes. She lay down on the double bed without switching on her bedside light. The moonlight shone in through the open curtains at the window, and she watched the shadows from the branches of the jacaranda tree outside playing against the bedroom wall.

She could hear the neighbours' generator across the hedge and beyond it, those of the other houses in the road. The noise disturbed the dogs in the yards and they took turns howling into the night, answering each other as if to reassure themselves that they were not alone.

Tina and Andile had not replaced Tiger, their own loyal Alsation that used to sit at the gate each day waiting for it to open and then slipping out on his regular expeditions in the neighbourhood streets. He always came back, usually around feeding time, and waited patiently for a frustrated Johnson to open the gate.

He was particularly enamoured with Kutu (Shona for dog), the female Alsation that belonged to the Petersons next door, although his interest only lasted until she fell pregnant, after which he resumed his expeditions.

Tina had often wondered how many other dogs in the neighbourhood Tiger had impregnated before the Lauries across the street secretly poisoned him one night several months ago, according to Johnson who found him dead outside the gate one morning.

Her thoughts turned to the bees that colonised the Flamboyant trees lining her street, humming among the bright red and orange flowers during the hot summer days.

Her father's encyclopaedia had answered the question that Mai Moyo and her church group failed to answer - she was the queen bee.

A queen bee of good stock. She was of good Manyika stock. Her family was related to Chief Sanyanga whose royal kraal lay on a hill deep in the misty Eastern Highlands.

She was healthy and fertile, plucked from her own family and introduced into the Moyo clan for the sole purpose of bearing children and continuing the blood line.

Tina supposed she was well-mated. The Moyos were of good lineage, well educated and prosperous, with a knack for making money. But as far as she knew, no-one slaughtered goats or cows in their honour when they visited their village in Plumtree in the south of the country.

It was all about mating, breeding, and producing offspring.

And while she diligently executed her duties as a wife of noble character, her husband, like Tiger, was busy sowing his seeds somewhere else – at Flat no 1 in Winchester Gardens to be exact.

She turned over and lay on her stomach, burying her face in the pillow.

She had done everything to be an exemplary bride, following her mother's advice to the letter. She even took notes that afternoon a year ago when her aunt and her mother's friends from the Anglican Mothers' Union sat her down on a reed mat at her parents' house and dispensed their wisdom and advice. Afterwards, she bought a special journal with daily inspirational Bible verses as footnotes for each day of the year, and she copied all her notes neatly into the book for regular reference.

She rolled over and switched on the bedside light and then took out the journal, bound in floral pink, from a drawer next to her and opened it.

Her favourite prayer was printed on the first page:

*'God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.'*

Tina wondered if Reinhold Neibuhr had betrayed wives in mind when he sat down to write the Serenity Prayer.

She closed the book and returned it into the drawer and turned her face back onto the pillow. The pillow smelt of lavender from the Sta-Soft fabric softener that Stella used when

she did the laundry. Tina insisted that the sheets be changed twice a week. They had enough sets stored in the cupboard at the end of the passage to allow for several changes in between laundry days and when there was running water.

They didn't use precious water from the storage tank.

A cistern.

'Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well'.

That's what their pastor, Father Forster, had told her and Andile during pre-marital counselling, reading from a Bible verse drenched in watery vocabulary – springs, streams, fountains.

She wondered what Father Forster would say now, if he knew that her husband's springs had overflowed into the streets and he was drinking from another fountain.

She got up and went into the bathroom.

She bent at the sink and splashed some cold water on her face then she looked up at her reflection in the mirror.

Her braids were still tied into a ponytail falling down her back to her waist. The black wool holding them together felt too tight, the braids pulling at her temples.

She went back into the bedroom, opened a drawer at the dressing table and took out a small pair of scissors. She returned to the bathroom and, looking at her reflection in the mirror, reached up and cut the string. The braids tumbled down around her shoulders.

Her face looked small and drawn against the dishevelled mass of synthetic extensions. She smoothed them back from her face until they fell in a sheet down her back, accentuating her neck and high cheekbones.

She inspected her skin. There wasn't a single blemish in sight, thanks to regular facials at the Touch of Glamour.

She reached for the bottle of *Pond's* facial wash – soap free, pH balanced, for combination skin – that stood on the little table by the bath tub, opened it and squeezed a little gel into her hand. She rubbed her palms together and began massaging the lather onto her face, starting with her cheeks, her chin and then moving up to her forehead and then down the side of her face.

As she finished soaping her face she remembered that it was Saturday and that she should have used the facial exfoliator instead.

Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays were reserved for body and face exfoliation, to scrub away dead skin cells and impurities, leaving the skin feeling silky smooth and supple, according to the instructions on the bottle.

She stopped.

She'd do it tomorrow.

She rinsed her face with running water, enjoying the luxury of feeling the water running through her fingers. She dried her face with a face cloth, then opened the small cupboard on the wall next to the mirror and reached for the packet of cotton wool balls and the bottle of Pond's facial toner, meant to tighten her pores before she applied the moisturiser.

She closed the cupboard and stared at herself again in the mirror, tracing her fingers along the skin under her eyes. Her eyes were streaked red from the tears she had shed in Len's car and the skin around them looked puffy despite the cold water she had splashed on her face.

She looked down at the cotton wool ball in her left hand and the bottle of toner in her right hand. Then she replaced the bottle in the cupboard and threw the cotton wool ball into the little basket bin at her feet and turned away.

Back in the bedroom, Tina began to undress, removing the grey cotton sundress she had changed into earlier that morning before going to the hospital.

She threw the clothes onto the sofa next to the bed and stared in the dressing table mirror at her body under the black lace bra and boy cut panties bought from the W Store at Westgate mall outside Malborough suburb.

She traced the muscles on her upper arms. She had good genes, thanks to her father. Everyone in his family was tall. Although she had not inherited their height, she had been blessed with a slim body and she had never gone on a diet in her life.

Her lack of height came from her mother's side although their generosity in build, especially around the waist and hips, had eluded her.

Perhaps some feminine voluptuousness wouldn't have been so bad, she thought to herself as she reached for her purple nightie on the sofa where she had thrown it that morning.

She slipped it on and then remembered that she had already worn it twice. She never wore her nightwear more than twice before putting it into the laundry. She had enough nighties to change into in between wash days.

She turned away from the mirror and sat on the edge of the bed and picked up the book on her bedside table - *'A Wife After God's Heart'* - from which she read a chapter each night before going to sleep. The bookmark fell from the chapter, 'How to maintain intimacy with your husband.'

She closed the book and got into bed.

Tina was woken by the gate rolling open and she heard Andile's car drive through it. It stopped, the engine still running, waiting for the gate to close and then continued down the driveway.

She heard the garage door open, its motor humming as the door rolled upwards, and Andile's car driving in. The engine switched off as the door rolled back down, and she heard the door to the kitchen open as he entered the house.

He opened the bedroom door and tip-toed in. He placed his car keys on his bedside table and then went into the en-suite bathroom, closing the door.

She heard him brushing his teeth and listened to the water running into the basin and down the drain. She heard the toilet flush and the bathroom door opened and Andile walked out.

'Oh, you're awake,' he said. He smiled at her. Then he went to close the window and draw the curtains. 'We must keep the mosquitoes out.'

'How is your father?' She sat up, remembering that she had forgotten to brush and floss her teeth.

'He's doing well,' Andile said, pulling his golf shirt over his head. He threw the shirt onto the bed, and began to unbuckle his belt. 'He's almost as right as rain. But they still want to keep him for a couple of days under observation.'

He threw his jeans on top of the shirt and turned to open his wardrobe. They each had double wardrobes, built-in next to each other on the wall by the door leading to the bathroom. 'Where are my blue shorts?'

'I don't know. They're not in the laundry basket.' She picked up his shirt and jeans and threw them onto the chair on top of hers.

Andile looked at the clothes lying in a heap. 'You usually put away your clothes after you've taken them off,' he said.

'And I always put away yours.' Tina could still hear the gurgling of the water flowing into the toilet cistern behind the bathroom door. She lay back onto her pillow. She should never have thought about Father Forster and his talk of cisterns. 'Have you found your shorts?'

Andile looked again inside his cupboard and then took out a pair of pyjamas, striped in grey and purple. 'I'll just wear these,' he said, unfolding the shirt and putting it on. 'I like these anyway. You bought them for me from Marks and Spencer last year when you visited your sister in London.'

He always remembered when and where she bought his clothes.

'Maybe you left your shorts in your hotel room,' she said watching him remove his spectacles and putting them on his bedside table.

'Maybe.'

'Although you've never forgotten anything in your room before. You double check that you've packed everything.'

'I'm sure they'll turn up somewhere.' Andile pulled back the duvet and got into bed, resting his head on his arm on the pillow and facing her. 'So tell me about your day. How are your parents?'

'They're fine. They were disappointed that you didn't come round for supper.' Tina folded her arms on her chest and stared up at the ceiling.

This was the time for pillow talk and tonight he seemed keen to talk.

'I'll make it up to them.' He turned over on his back and folded his arms behind his head. 'Maybe we should visit them soon for lunch. We can take some of the beef in the fridge and we could have a braai.'

There was lots of beef in the fridge. Andile and his friend George belonged to a club made up of five financial managers – the Beef and Boozers Club. Every three months they travelled to a farm out in Ruwa, a small farming centre outside Harare situated between Bromley and Marondera, where they bought meat from a full cow and shared it among themselves.

Afterwards they had a braai at George's farm in Bromley, drinking beer instead of whisky in keeping with the rustic, rural setting, before taking the meat back home to their wives to wash, cut, pack, and store in the freezer, ensuring them meat for the next few weeks.

'That will be nice,' she said.

'Did Len take good care of you today?'

'Yes.'

'What did you do?'

'Nothing. He brought me home and then he left.'

'Oh, alright.' Andile reached over and touched her shoulder, drawing little soft circles on her skin. She kept her arms crossed rigidly across her chest.

He paused and then he drew back and pulled the duvet around his shoulders. 'Let's sleep then.'

She didn't move.

She wanted to ask him where he had been. She wanted to ask him if Zodwa was his mistress. She wanted to know if the blue shorts she bought for him from Edgars were in Zodwa's laundry basket, and if he also kept a portion of his share of the meat from the Beer and Boozers Club for her.

But these questions were not suitable for pillow talk. Yes, the bedroom was the place where the wife could confide in her husband and even confront him, in private, away from public eyes and ears. A place where they could bring out their issues, thrash them out, and if

no resolution was immediately reached, leave them there until the next time. And all this happened when they were upright and fully dressed.

But once their heads were on the pillow, all bitterness, anger and strife must be set aside to be dealt with another day.

Andile opened his eyes and looked at her. 'Honey, can you switch off the light? Let's sleep now.'

He never called her 'honey'. He called her 'Tee'.

She switched the light off. Then she got up and felt her way to the door and into the passage towards the kitchen. In the kitchen she opened the door leading to the adjoining double garage. She felt along the garage wall until her fingers found the generator switch which she turned off.

The silence washed over the kitchen as the drumming of the generator died away. She slid to the garage floor and sat with her knees hugged her against her. And she let the tears flow down her face, round her chin onto her neck and falling in small drops into her purple nightie.

Chapter 7

The days following Len's revelation drifted by, the hours merging into each other, and Tina drifted along with them.

The anguish she had felt when she cried into her nightdress on the garage floor remained with her, clinging to her like stubborn residue, and it refused to be washed away by the tears she shed in the days after that.

She had picked herself up from the floor that night and groped her way back to the bedroom where she lay awake into the early hours listening to her husband's breathing. He lay on his side facing her, inhaling the air slowly, deeply, and exhaling in long, soft breaths. An occasional sigh escaped his lips when he shifted his head, an arm, a leg before he settled back into the rhythm of breathing.

She eventually fell asleep as the clock on her bedside clock read 4:30 only to be woken up again by a rooster crowing in someone's backyard. She lay on her back and watched the grainy dawn filter through the curtains and grow brighter as the first sunrays peeped in and dispersed the greyness.

And she didn't move when Andile opened his eyes and tried to draw her to him.

'I have a stomach ache.'

'Oh. Do you want some Eno?'

'No, I think I'll just lie here until it goes away.'

'I see. Well, I have an early golf game then I'm off to George's for the Beef and Boozers Club.'

'We still have enough meat in the freezer.'

'The other guys don't. They have families remember? Children to feed.'

She didn't answer and snuggled further down under the duvet, pulling it up to her chin and hugging it around her until it squeezed against her neck.

'I'm going to take a shower.' He sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed and stood up.

'OK.'

'Aren't you going to join me? I'll wash your back.'

'I'll just lie here for a while.'

'Whatever you say.'

He jumped out of bed and went into the bathroom and then emerged almost immediately, still in his pyjamas and a frown on his face.

'There's no bloody running water again.'

'I'm sure Johnson has some boiling outside and you can still take a hot bath. And you can ask Stella to bring you a container from the tank if you want to flush the loo.'

'This is ridiculous. If I wanted to drag containers and dishes around I'd have gone to live in the village.'

'We're not in the village but we still have to do it.'

He began to remove his pyjamas, throwing them onto the bed then he opened his chest of drawers and took out the red golf shirt that she had bought him for Christmas.

'Are you going to go out without taking your bath?'

'I'll shower at the golf club.'

She remained crouched under the duvet and watched him as he pulled on a pair of grey chinos and then sit on the bed to put on his socks and shoes. Then he picked up his car keys from the dresser.

'Are you going to church today?'

'No.'

'Fine. I'll see you later then.'

It was only after she heard his car drive down Copper Road and the gate rolling shut behind him that it struck her that he hadn't packed his toiletry bag or taken a bath towel.

She got up an hour later and transferred herself from the bed to the couch in the lounge. Stella had left for the day after cleaning the lounge and the dining room so she had the house to herself.

She couldn't bring herself to go to church and endure an hour of standing up and kneeling down and sitting down and standing up and singing hymns and listening to the preacher preach about forgiveness and loving thy neighbour – especially when her so-called neighbour was busy coveting her husband.

She stayed at home and watched instead the parade of evangelical American pastors preaching on the Rhema channel - Joyce Meyer, Creflo Dollar, T.D. Jakes – all speaking of wondering in the wilderness, walking through valleys and getting lost in the desert.

'Yea though I walk through the valley of death, I shall not build a tent there. I shall walk through it and emerge victorious on the other side!' roared Pastor Ray to rapturous applause from his congregation.

Tina had not built a tent in her valley. She had built a house, complete with foundation, bricks and mortar, and she was there to stay.

Sunday morning became Sunday afternoon then the evening came and found her waking up on the couch where she had fallen asleep, still in her dressing gown, while watching sitcom reruns on the Series channel on the flat screen television set Andile bought somewhere overseas, or was it down South?

She couldn't remember.

The afternoon faded into evening and then into night and she was woken up by the crickets singing outside the windows, their cacophony pouring into the lounge above the canned laughter of an old episode of *Cheers* showing on the Series Channel.

She got up and made her way back to the bedroom. She threw the gown off and crawled back under the rumpled duvet. Sleep came to her almost immediately, immersing her into merciful unconsciousness from which she was roused an hour later by a shrill buzzing near her ear. She flicked her hand and turned over to her back and lay looking up at the ceiling.

In the darkness she could follow the trajectory of the solitary mosquito that had awoken her, and she listened to its high-pitched humming against the walls, dipping and rising, dipping and rising, and then stopping as it landed somewhere before starting again. It swerved in loops above her, bouncing against the ceiling and then began a gradual descend towards her, swooping downwards in circles until she felt a light brushing against her inner wrist. She remained still and then felt a light, sharp prick inside her skin. The mosquito remained motionless for a second and then flew away from her towards the ceiling.

She heard her husband walk into the room sometime after midnight and she listened to him moving around the room as he got ready to sleep. The bed sagged as he got in between the covers and he snuggled against her throwing his arm around her and snuggling his face into the crook of her neck. He smelt of whisky and braai smoke. She left him as he was and rested her cheek against his head, enjoying having him close to her despite the memory of Zodwa's car with its dent in the passenger seat that flashed before her.

But she flinched and turned away when morning came and she awoke to his hand moving around her breasts and slipping under the neckline of her nightdress.

'What's the matter with you?' His low voice was traced with frustration. 'You've been pushing me away all weekend.'

'I told you, I don't feel well.'

'Maybe you should see a doctor then.'

'I will,' she mumbled to the wall. She paused. 'Maybe I'm not sick. Maybe I'm just pregnant.'

She felt him freeze behind her. She turned to face him.

'How would you feel about that if I have suddenly fallen pregnant?'

He shrugged. 'It would be sudden.'

'But it would be a good thing right?'

He sighed and then sat up, scratching his head and yawning. 'We did say that we would wait for at least a year before starting a family.'

'It's been over a year now.'

He grunted and then threw the duvet aside. 'I thought you were taking precautions.'

'Accidents happen.'

'Go to the doctor and then we'll see.'

He departed for work and left her alone to wonder in her private wilderness, moving around the four bedrooms of the house that he had bought for them after he had proposed marriage to her eighteen months before.

She stepped into the shower and let the hot water pour over her body almost scalding her skin as she stood on the tiles with her hands against the hot and cold taps. Only God

knew how long the water would continue to run from the taps before it got cut off again. She stood there, motionless and welcomed every luxuriating drop that fell against her body, washing away the soap suds from the shower gel consisting of a secret blend of minerals and herbs to boost the senses while restoring circulation.

Except that her senses were not boosted and she crawled back on the couch after Stella had finished sweeping and polishing the lounge. She remained there, watching trailer-trash from the American mid-west throwing chairs at each other on *The Jerry Springer* show while Stella busied herself with the two-week old laundry, continuously running the taps in the bathroom as if in awe of seeing the water gushing from them, and carrying dish upon dish of clothes to hang to dry in the sun on the clothes line in the backyard.

'I feel like I've been shipwrecked and I'm drifting out to sea while looking back at the wreckage that used to be my life,' she told her sister Tsitsi on the phone later that evening. 'I called in sick today. Couldn't bear getting out of the house and talking to people.'

'Survivors walk away from shipwrecks.' The irritation in her sister's voice crackled through the static connection between Harare and London. 'You don't stay and sink with the ship.'

'Surely you don't expect me to just run, Tsitsi?' Tina wiped away a drop of whisky from the lapel of her dressing gown. 'There's too much at stake. What will people say?'

'What people?'

'Everybody.'

'Does it matter what these people say?'

'It's easy for you to talk. You're not married. I've worked hard to build up my marriage, my home and my life. I can't just dismantle it at the first sign of trouble, but I don't expect you to understand.'

She was grateful when her husband didn't attempt to touch her the next morning as she lay watching the early morning light seeping through the closed curtains. Instead, he got out of bed and wheeled his suitcase from its place in the corner of the bedroom.

'I have an early morning flight to Joburg,' he said, opening his wardrobe and taking out a navy-blue pin-striped suit still in its dry-cleaning packaging.

'I thought you were leaving tomorrow.'

'No, I'm leaving today. I told you last night but you didn't answer. You haven't been responsive these last couple of days.'

She turned around from the wall to face him, still wrapped up in the duvet.

'When will you be back?'

'Saturday morning in time for my father's party in Marondera. You do remember that we're having a party for him to celebrate his recovery?'

She nodded. She did remember although there was no ripple of excitement inside her belly.

'Did you manage to have your shower?'

'What shower?'

'At the sports club.'

'Oh that. Yes I did.'

'You forgot to take your toiletry bag and towel.'

He paused briefly and then he went towards the chest of drawers and took out some white formal shirts. 'I did forget my things. But I borrowed from my golf buddies.'

'Maybe you should go to the flat in Avondale whenever we're cut off here and shower there.'

He gave her a puzzled look. 'Why would I want to do that?'

'It's your flat.'

'And we have a tenant. We can't just show up there with soap and towels and ask to wash ourselves.'

'Desperate situations call for desperate measures.'

'You're being ridiculous.' He sounded annoyed. 'That stomach ache of yours is messing up your head.'

'It was just a thought.'

'Well it's a silly thought.'

He left the house at six o'clock on his way to catch the 8am flight to Johannesburg leaving her to nurse her grief at leisure.

Mornings and evenings melted into each other and she wondered alone around the house in her dressing gown, drinking endless cups of tea and coffee silently prepared by Stella who could see that 'Mama' is not well.

The gown did not come off when Sara from Flame Lily Trading delivered their consignment of groceries from Johannesburg that Tuesday afternoon.

'You must count everything and make sure that nothing is missing,' Sara said, putting the last of the boxes on the kitchen floor. She picked up her writing pad and checked the order form. 'You ordered ten of each of the following: dishwashing liquid, fabric softener, washing powder, Nescafé, milk powder and rooibos tea. Those are the bulk orders. You will find the rest of the groceries that you wanted in smaller quantities, like the spices, sweet chilli sauce and your bubble bath packed together in one box.'

'Thanks,' Tina signed the delivery note and put the receipt in her pocket. 'I'm sure everything is there. We've been using your services for a while now and there's never been a problem.'

'Are you ill?' Sara said, looking at Tina's dressing gown. 'You're still in your night clothes and you look worn-out. Your eyes are all puffy.'

'I'm just a bit stressed.' Tina attempted a smile.

'Oh I know all about stress,' Sara nodded. 'We've been really busy as more people are using our services. I spend more time shopping at Makro and driving my van between Joburg and Harare than I do in my office in Melville. Try negotiating with those customs officers at the border and you'll know all about stress.'

'At least you're doing well though. Sounds like your business is booming.'

'Yes, I suppose.' Sara sighed. 'It's just sad that we even have to be in this business, delivering basic commodities that we used to manufacture ourselves here and export. And you're lucky. Not everyone can afford ordering supplies from down south and having them delivered to your doorstep and paying for them from their forex accounts like your husband does. The rest have to make do with border jumping.'

'Did my husband, by any chance, also ask you to make a delivery to Avondale?' The thought suddenly struck Tina as Sara spoke.

Sara checked her notes again. 'No, it doesn't look like he did this time.'

'This time?'

'We did with the last shipment three months ago. He ordered and paid for two consignments – a large one for here, and a smaller one for Avondale. But I didn't do that trip though. My business partner did. Who lives in Avondale? Another relative?'

'Something like that.' Tina felt faint. She wished she'd never asked. It seemed that each time she asked the questions, the answers were delivered to her in the form of poisoned arrows.

'Well, I must go.' Sara said, turning towards the door. 'I still need to do Borrowdale, Chisipite and Kambaji suburbs and then head back tomorrow.' She turned to look at Tina over her shoulder. 'Open the smaller box first. There's a nice box of Ferrero Rocher chocolates that your husband asked me to throw in specially for you. It will make you feel better.'

Chocolate wasn't going to make her feel better.

She would have preferred crawling into her bed and never getting up again, but she had a job that she needed to go to that paid her in foreign currency, which allowed her to live a relatively normal life in a country where life was no longer normal. She had two domestic employees who were dependant on her to provide them with decent food for their sustenance. Andile paid their salaries but the deal was that they would also provide regular foodstuffs like mealie meal, sugar and bread, available in Harare but only after waiting patiently in a queue. And the procurement of these items was left to Tina, while Andile gallivanted around on his business trips.

She had to put on a brave face despite dying inside and maintain her household, and avoid gossip and speculation spreading like wildfire among the gardeners and house maids grapevine along Copper Road.

She went through the motions like a robot on sedatives, which Doctor Stephens prescribed for her to help her sleep through the lonely nights when she could remove her mask and succumb to her private misery.

'Why are you having difficulty sleeping?' Dr Stephens asked her when she finally got out of her dressing gown and exfoliated her face for the first time in four days and drove to the doctor's rooms at the Medical Chambers next door to the Avenues Clinic in town.

'Marriage problems.' Tina saw no reason to say more than that.

'I've seen a significant increase in the number of patients in distress coming to see me,' the doctor said wrapping a cuff round Tina's upper arm to take her blood pressure.

The pump squeaked and hissed as the doctor pressed it several times until the cuff had inflated enough to tightly squeeze Tina's arm. 'The situation in this country is taking its toll on people's emotional health, which usually manifests in marital problems.'

'What sort of marital problems?'

Dr Stephens paused and pressed her stethoscope on the hollow of the elbow, frowning in concentration, her grey-blond bob falling across her face. She slowly released the valve of the pump and the cuff deflated as she monitored the needle on the pressure gauge.

'Oh, it's an assortment,' she finally replied as she released the remaining pressure from Tina's arm and put the cuff back into the trolley next to the examination bed. 'Families splitting because one spouse wants to leave the country and the other wants to stay; domestic violence – men venting their frustrations on their wives; divorce, or the latest one – infidelity. Blatant, rampant cheating. Why anyone can do that in this day and age of Aids is beyond me.' She shook her head. 'Stupid. Absolutely stupid.'

She went back to her desk and scribbled a few lines on a prescription pad and looked up as Tina got down from the bed and put her shoes back on. 'You know you can come and talk to me about anything if you need to.'

Tina nodded.

'I don't just give injections and dispense pills. Sometimes an objective point of view is all you need.'

'Thanks doctor,' Tina took the prescription and put it in her handbag. 'Maybe I'll take you up on that.'

The sleeping pills, washed down by one or two whiskies, helped soothe away her distress, as the good doctor called it, lulling her to sleep in the big, empty marital bed with the purple sheets she had forgotten to give to Stella to wash.

But it was there in front of her like a spectre when she woke up to the sound of Stella sweeping the back veranda while waiting for the kitchen door to be opened, and the gate opening to let Johnson out on his newspaper errand.

It followed her wherever she went, including her office at the Women Entrepreneurship Network in Belgravia close to town where she returned after three days sick leave.

'*Ko nhai vasikana*, these small houses are becoming a problem aren't they?' Patience, personal assistant to the Director announced, turning from the kettle where she had just made tea and taking a seat at the table in the office kitchen.

'Yes, these small houses must be sued for all the emotional trauma they are causing us God-loving, praying wives,' Grace, the senior accountant said, digging her fork fiercely into her chicken pie.

It was lunch time and some of the employees were gathered in the kitchen.

It wasn't enough that they spent all their time in the kitchen at home, they also gravitated towards the kitchen at work too, Tina thought as she waited by the microwave for her 1-minute noodles to cook.

'What's a small house?' Eve, the American deputy director asked looking up from her imported microwave popcorn that she bought from the fully stocked and very expensive Spar supermarket in the exclusive suburb of Borrowdale Brooke.

'It's a mistress. A kept woman.' Grace replied, her mouth full of pie.

'A glorified prostitute if you ask me,' Patience snorted. 'He pays her rent, her bills and buys her lavish presents and in return, she gives him sex as and when he pleases. That sounds suspiciously like a prostitute to me. The only difference is that she's not hanging out in the streets.'

'The Avenues,' Beauty, the 20-year old office cleaner giggled, referring to the residential area just outside the city centre, where he ladies of the night plied their trade.

'Interesting,' said Eve, nodding as if she had just stumbled upon a new subject for one of her studies. 'But concubines have been around since time immemorial though, all over the world. Think of the geishas in Japan and the mistresses in France, the ones Colette wrote about in *Gigi*.'

'Gigi who?' Patience set her cup down with a bang, almost spilling the tea in it. 'We don't want any geishas or *Gigis* here.'

Eve stifled a smile.

'The difference is this,' Grace said as if explaining a very complex scientific experiment. 'Here we have polygamy. That too has been around since forever. It's part of African culture – so we're told. But polygamists' wives know each other. The senior wives even sometimes play a role in choosing the latest bride for their husband. There's a hierarchy and a status quo. There are no secrets. That's the difference.'

'So the small house is a secret?'

'Yes!' the women replied in unison, their raised voices drifting out of the open window into the car park where the security guard was taking a nap.

'And it's happening *everywhere*,' Grace said cutting up the rest of the pie and looking at it as if hoping to see the blood of a small house pouring out. 'It's a pandemic that has infected our society and spread like a malignant virus. Our men are possessed.'

'Yes, well, I see what you mean now that you mention viruses,' Eve said, suddenly looking serious. 'So let me get this straight. The small house is the where the married man keeps his mistress and the main house is where he is based with the legal wife.'

'Who looks after his children, and cooks for him and washes his clothes and attends to members of his extended family who invite themselves to the house and expect to be fed and given money while he is at his small house getting a massage and a foot rub.' Grace got up and threw her plate into the sink.

'They have no self respect these stupid women,' said Netsai, human resources officer who had just walked in and was listening to the conversation. 'Why can't they just go out and get their own men instead of taking another woman's scrapings?'

'Well they're not really scrapings if he is paying for her keep and he's spending more time with her than with his wife,' Beauty chipped in, and then immediately shut up under the collective glare of the married women sitting round the table.

Tina took out her noodles, slammed the microwave door shut and walked out of the kitchen to take refuge in her office.

She didn't want her colleagues to see her crying into her plate of noodles.

She wasn't shy though to cry into her apple strudel the following day as she confided in Tanya, her best-friend when they met for coffee after work at the Italian Bakery in Avondale.

Her best friend Tanya, looking severely elegant in her black suit and high heels, shook her head and stared at the Black Forest cake on her plate. 'I don't believe this.'

'I don't believe it either,' Tina said, picking at her uneaten pastry. 'I've been relying on sleeping pills to make it through the night and the grace of God to make it through the day.'

She looked round the restaurant, an up-market café which was rapidly filling up with clients arriving for after-work drinks. The clientèle occupying the tables consisted mostly of young women in their 20s and 30s dressed up in smart outfits bought from Edgars or made in China and India and imported via South Africa and Mauritius and sold at the stalls at the flea-market located just off the parking lot.

They chatted and giggled under the watchful eye of the male lawyers, accountants and businessmen in their suits, displaying their cell phones on the round marble tables next to their car keys bearing the brands BMW, Mercedes Benz or VW.

The whole scene reminded Tina of a jungle with everyone on the prowl, stalking their next victim and waiting to pounce and sink their teeth into the next delectable morsel. Except that she couldn't figure out who were the predators and who were the prey – the men or the women.

'These are the ones to look out for,' Tanya said, nodding her head towards the young women. 'The secretaries and the receptionists. Who do you think buys those fancy outfits they're wearing?'

'It's not just the young ones,' Tina said, looking at a young woman at a table on the café terrace overlooking the car park. She had a shoulder-length human-hair weave framing her face in a poor imitation of Naomi Campbell, and was deep in conversation with a gentleman who looked at least twenty years older than her. 'Zodwa is older than me. And she owns her own business.'

Tanya sniffed, and took a sip of her coffee. She looked up purposefully. 'We can sue her if you like. Do you know there's a law here that allows you to sue the other woman for adultery? We'll attach that little flat in Avondale and throw out the bitch living in it.'

Tina smiled and shook her head. 'You're such a lawyer. I'm not going to sue anyone.' 'We have a really good divorce lawyer in our practice.'

'No,' Tina shuddered. What was it with these single women who seemed to think that it was easy to just up and leave a marriage? 'I can't do that. My parents will be devastated.'

She could just imagine the scandal that would ensue with her mother breaking down in distraught tears and her father going on the rampage and accusing Andile of humiliating his precious daughter by carrying on with another woman. And next thing a family meeting would be called to discuss her 'misfortune', with Andile being hauled in front of the elders to explain himself and causing a major diplomatic incident between the Moyos and the Sanyangas.

Tina's friends nicknamed these gatherings 'family hysterics' because that is what they became. Opinions and insinuations flying all over the place and people getting offended, and nothing getting resolved.

And she could just imagine certain members of her extended family secretly gloating at her fall from grace and whispering, 'there she is, the high and mighty Tina with her master's degree from England and she can't even keep a man'.

No, skeletons belonged in the darkness where she intended to keep hers locked away under wraps until she had brought Andile back to his senses.

'So what are you going to do?' Tanya looked around for a waiter to ask for the bill. She had a Rotary meeting at the Sports Club in Borrowdale later that evening and she needed to go home and change into something smart but casual.

'I don't know.'

She really didn't know what to do. The older women - her mother, her aunts, the church women - had been thorough in preparing her for the potential challenges of married life, covering all the bases including conflicts, difficult relatives, illness, children, sisters-in-law.

But no-one had spoken to her about what to do if her husband strayed from the marital bed.

'You can go to her house and confront her,' Tsitsi suggested on the phone later that evening. 'No, in fact go to her shop. Do it in a public place with lots of witnesses.'

'And say what to her?' Tina took a deep gulp of whisky.

'Ask her why she is sleeping with your husband.'

'I'm not going to make a spectacle of myself and involve myself in a vicious street fight like those township women we read about in the newspapers.'

Stories abounded about spurned wives recruiting angry gangs of women and descending upon someone's unsuspecting mistress, intent on causing grievous bodily harm and in some cases succeeding in doing just that.

'I didn't say go and cause a scene,' Tsitsi's voice sounded impatient. 'I just said you should go and speak to her. Let her know that you know. Many women in your position pretend that they don't know and then they sit around and vegetate and languish in their misery while their husbands carry on cheating like it's some kind of fringe benefit. Don't do that.'

Don't do that.

Tsitsi's words played over in Tina's mind as she wondered about the house in her dressing gown like a ghost on valium in the big house that Andile bought.

She wondered into the lounge in the silence that once again cloaked the house, punctuated by the generator drumming into the night as the electricity had gone off again.

Don't do that.

She picked up a framed photograph from the mantelpiece. It was a picture taken on the day of her lobola ceremony the year before. Andile never ceased to be amused by her

outfit in that photograph in which she was wearing a *muZambia*, a sarong wrapped over an ankle length gypsy skirt and modest T-shirt and a *doek* on her head, something that her husband did not see often. She was flanked by her parents who both bore such wide smiles that their happiness glowed through the filmy surface.

They had been so proud. So much so that her father had breached protocol and insisted on being present in the house during the negotiations.

The bride's father was not allowed to be present yet he had sat in a chair in the corner of the living room, quietly sipping on a whisky and soda while he listened to her senior uncle demanding 10 cows – 10 million dollars – in bride price.

And now this Zodwa woman had shown up in her outfits from Ghana, threatening to disrupt her marriage and stealing her happiness.

Tina decided to take her sister's advice and pay Zodwa a visit the next day during lunch – just to talk, woman to woman.

The Village mall seemed busy for a Friday afternoon. Despite all the shortages in the supermarkets people still had not lost their appetite for shopping.

The shops lining the open-air mall - Truworths, Edgars, Facets Accessories, Town & Country and others all seemed to be comfortably plying their trade with early Christmas shoppers since the holiday season was less than a month away.

Tina walked straight to Zodwa's shop which was located between a jewellery shop and an interior decorator where she had bought a lamp for her guest bedroom two weeks before.

The shop, African Elegance, was well stocked with skirts, trousers and kaftans in ethnic prints, and an array of high heeled shoes and sandals in imitation patent leather were set along a shelf in front of the entrance in various bright colours – reds, greens, yellows. Gold seemed to be a popular colour of choice among Zodwa's clients.

A saleswoman dressed in a pink trouser suit and a cheap weave greeted Tina as she entered the shop.

'I'd like to see Zodwa if she's available please,' Tina said, trying not to stare at the woman's toes that were peeping from her gold stilettos. They were long and manicured and were painted bright red, matching her equally long finger nails.

'Miss Zodwa's not here. Can I help you?'

'No, I would like to speak to her. When will she be back?'

'She's out of the country. She'll be back tomorrow,' the woman smiled deferentially.

Under different circumstances, Tina would have warmed to her immediately despite her hideous toenails that curved downwards.

'Are you a client? Are you here for a fitting?'

'No. Has she gone off to Mauritius or West Africa again?'

The woman's smile remained fixed. 'Zodwa was in Accra last month so we're fully stocked for the Christmas season. She's taking a break in Johannesburg.'

'Johannesburg?' Tina threw the woman a sharp look. 'When did she leave?'

'On Monday morning.'

'When will she be back?'

'Tomorrow. Would you like to leave a message for her?'

'No thank you. I'll come back next week,' Tina managed to say before turning to leave, using every ounce of her strength to walk away with her head held high and her back perfectly straight.

Chapter 8

Three weeks had passed since Tina had travelled along the 280km road between Harare and Marondera. Yet as she sat in the passenger seat next to her husband on their way to his parent's house that Saturday afternoon, it seemed as if it had been in another lifetime.

To an outside observer who might have glanced their way, they looked like an ordinary couple on their way to a family braai out of town. But under the surface everything, including Tina herself, was crumbling.

She had struggled through the week to come to terms with the discovery that her husband, with his private school education and sophistication, had exposed himself to be as mendacious and putrid as the fetid mass of deceitful bastards that she had spent her single days beating off, while waiting for her valiant prince with his pure intentions to whisk her away to marital bliss.

And here he was, Andile, sitting next to her in the driver's seat whistling in tune to Oliver Mutukudzi playing on the CD as if all was well, and he seemed to think that it was normal to arrive home at dawn that morning without offering an explanation.

Yet when he returned, she remained silent not wanting to ask him any questions to which she already knew the answers.

She had prepared breakfast like a good, responsible wife. And she had listened to him as they sat next to each other at the dining room table, absently nodding her head while wondering if he had found his missing blue shorts in Zodwa's laundry basket after returning from his trip to Joburg – with her.

'We're doing really well in Angola. Do you think you'd be happy moving to Luanda if they made me company director there?' He had asked her over his scrambled eggs.

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I have a life here.'

'But you're my wife. Won't you want to support me?'

'If you want a life in Angola, find another wife.'

She gazed out of her passenger window at the countryside rolling by – the bush, the Msasa trees and the fields of maize planted along the open spaces – riverbank cultivation which was supposed to be illegal except that no-one cared. Ahead of her she could see the blue mountain range in the far distance, recalling the mountains and the valleys of the Eastern Highlands that lay beyond.

She envisioned the pine plantations of Nyanga covering the undulating slopes as far as the eye could see and rising into the clouds, and the dewy forests of Vumba clothed in mist, and the plunging cliffs and waterfalls of Chimanimani with its tumbling gorges filled with bush and raging rivers, and if you listened carefully, the call of the leopards that no-one ever got to see.

But they were only going to Marondera to her in-laws' house with just a vegetable garden and bees to look forward to.

'Are the bees still in the back yard of your parents' house?' she asked Andile without turning her head.

'I think so.'

'And they haven't stung anyone yet?'

'Nope.'

She wanted to slap him.

They had driven down the driveway at the Moyo residence and parked under a large tree in the backyard when pandemonium struck.

Chipo, the maid, ran out of the shed, her shrieks ringing through the air and flailing her arms about and a cloud of bees hovering over her head.

David, the gardener, tore out behind her, holding his arms on his head, trying to shield himself. He sprinted across the lawn with the other half of the swarm in hot pursuit and disappeared behind the hedge separating the backyard from the servants' quarters.

Within minutes the yard came alive with bees flying about in drunken swoops, their wild humming thick in the dry, hot afternoon.

'Chipo! Stop screaming and get inside the house.' Mai Moyo's sharp voice came from the kitchen window. 'Don't run around like a mad woman like that and frightening the visitors.'

Tina watched with alarm the angry swarm from inside the car. The bees hurtled round and round the yard, diving crazily through the air and bumping against the shed, the trees and at times against the windscreen.

'I knew this would happen. I told them it was dangerous to keep all those bees so close to the house.' Tina fought back the tears. She put her head in her hand and closed her eyes, wishing that she had just stayed at home.

'Let's just give the bees some time to calm down. They'll go back to their business with the flowers and the hive soon enough,' Andile said, gently taking her hand. 'Your hand is shaking.'

'Well what do you expect? I'm terrified of bees. They know I'm scared of those things yet they insist on keeping them here.'

'Everything will be fine, Tina. Don't worry. Look, the bees are already going back to their hive. Chipo and David must have disturbed them somehow.' Andile put his arm round her. 'Everything will be OK.'

The bees soon calmed down and the swarm retreated until there was small group dancing around the shed door like sentinels on the lookout for further invasion.

'Tina? Andile. Is that you?' Mai Moyo's voice came again from the kitchen and Tina saw her leaning against the door peering at them. 'What are you doing there? Come inside.'

Andile opened the door and leaned his head out of the car.

'We're waiting for the bees to calm down, Ma.'

'Do you have the ice I asked you to bring?'

'Yes.'

'Well then, bring it in before it melts. It's a hot day.' Mai Moyo disappeared back into the kitchen.

'I guess we have to go in.' Andile shrugged and took the keys out of the ignition. 'I don't think the bees will mind us any more.'

Tina didn't see the hurry. The ice was in the cooler box where it could stay for hours. Why didn't they come out and get it themselves if they were so desperate for it? And judging from the five or six other cars parked in the yard the party was already underway so they were enjoying their drinks without ice.

Andile turned to her again. 'Are you ready?'

She closed her eyes again and slowly rubbed her forehead. She looked out at the yard for further signs of another bee insurgence, and then saw someone walking out of the kitchen door and down the *stoep*.

'What's Zodwa doing here?' She could hear the sharpness in her voice as she stared with shock at the woman hurrying towards their car while smoothing her hands down her bright orange kaftan.

Andile paused.

'I guess my parents invited her.'

'Why is she always showing up at these things?'

'Why shouldn't she be here? It's a party to celebrate my father's recovery.' Andile glanced at Tina sounding surprised. 'Do you suddenly have a problem with Zodwa?'

'Exactly what is her connection with your family?' Tina looked straight into Andile's face, challenging him to explain. She didn't know where her forthrightness had suddenly come from. 'Does her family know your family? Is she a personal friend of your mother's? What's the connection?'

Andile shifted in his seat and adjusted his round glasses. 'She's just a friend, alright?' he said, sounding a little defensive. He stared straight ahead at Zodwa who was now striding up to their car, her face beaming with a wide smile.

'Andile,' her voice trickled into the car as she leaned through his window. 'What took you so long?' She glanced at Tina and smiled very sweetly. 'Oh, hello Tina. Haven't seen you in a while.'

'Hello, Zodwa.' She had to force the words out of her lips.

'Why are you still hiding out in the car? Mai wants to know what's taking you so long.'

Zodwa's perfume wafted into Tina's nostrils – *Opium* by Yves Saint Laurent. She wondered if Andile had bought it.

'Tina's scared of the bees.' Andile said, glancing at Zodwa's cleavage which was also leaning into the car, on his side.

'Oh the bees aren't so bad. They've already stung Chipso so I guess they've had their fill for the day.' Her laughter poured into the car like water from a broken tap. 'You'll have to come inside at some point. Come on Andi. Out you get.'

She opened the door and Andile stepped out. Tina remained inside the car and listened to her husband opening the boot and dragging out the blue cooler box containing the ice.

'You can take the mealie-meal inside,' she heard Andile instructing Zodwa.

'A whole 5kg bag.' Zodwa's laughter was like a knife in Tina's back. 'Where did you find it?'

'Tina bought it at the TM supermarket in Groombridge.'

'Oh that's nice.'

Tina reached for her handbag and silk shawl in the backseat and prepared to leave the car. She wasn't going to sit there and be mocked by Africa's answer to Jezebel.

She had bought the mealie-meal with her own money. Her mother had queued with her at TM to get their two bags per customer. She wasn't going to let Miss Zodwa carry that bag into the house and present it to Mai Moyo.

'Hi Tina.'

She looked up and saw Len knocking on her passenger window. She rolled it down, very pleased to see an ally.

'I hear the famous bees have finally struck,' he smiled.

His smile vanished when Andile came round the car with the cooler box with Zodwa following him carrying the mealie-meal. He stood up very straight and looked directly at his cousin.

'So when did you get in from Joburg?' He didn't look at Zodwa.

'This morning.'

'Ah yes. The early morning flight.' The words dripped from Len's lips.

'Yes.' Andile adjusted his spectacles and attempted a laugh. 'The early morning flight.'
He peered through the window. 'Are you coming with us Tee?'

'I think she's still recovering and needs a bit more time,' Len cut in. 'I'll stay with her. You just go inside. The uncles have been waiting for that ice. They don't like having warm drinks.'

'Well we better go then.' Zodwa laughed. 'We don't want them getting drunk on warm booze.'

Len slowly looked Zodwa up and down, his smile still nowhere in sight. 'Yes, you do that.'

He stood and watched Andile and Zodwa make their way towards the kitchen and disappear into the house. Then he walked round the front of the car and got inside in the driving seat.

'How are you Tina?'

'I'd be better if she wasn't here.'

'Yes, well.' Len shifted in his seat, making himself more comfortable and watched the remaining bees hovering in circles around the shed. 'She always comes to these gatherings. She was attending them long before you came along. That's how this whole thing with Andile started.'

'How did it start?'

'Zodwa and Stembile have been friends for years. She was your sister-in-law's maid-of-honour at her wedding. Then Zodwa got divorced and, let's just say that she set her sights on her best friend's little brother. Your being in the picture was obviously not an issue.'

'But why did she get divorced?'

'Her husband's family never liked her. His sisters boycotted the wedding. I guess he gave in to pressure. Never underestimate the power of sisters-in-law.'

'I never knew any of this.'

'Well, you didn't know a lot of things, Tina. Our family is a hotbed of secrets and intrigue. Show me a family that isn't.'

'That's what my mother told me. Every family has skeletons stored away somewhere.'

'More like rotten carcasses if you ask me.' Len said, opening the door and preparing to get out. 'Speaking of carcasses, are you going to get out of this car and join us for the braai, or are you going to sit here and leave Zodwa on the loose stealing your thunder?'

Tina took one last apprehensive look at the bees. Then she gathered her handbag and scarf from her lap and hopped out of the car and followed Len towards the house where she could hear voices at the veranda in the front.

There were about six or seven guests sitting on garden chairs and some extra chairs had been removed from the dining room to accommodate the visitors. A group of children played a game on the lawn and Tina recognised Andile's nephews and nieces – his oldest brother, Bheki's children – two boys and a girl, and Vuyo's twin girls. They stopped when they saw her and waved. She waved back and went on to greet the grown-ups.

'Muroora,' *Babamukuru* Elvin, her father-in-law's eldest brother, head of the family and chief decision maker, clasped her hand in his with a smile and drew her closer. 'You are here. You arrive like a gust of fresh air as always. When next will you visit us again in Bulawayo?'

'I will visit very soon.' She felt slightly reassured by his strong dignity and quiet authority, and his warm tone reflected genuine paternal affection.

'We live in Harare and even we don't see her often,' said Mr Moyo number three, *Babamunini* Samuel, shaking Tina's hand with a wide grin. 'Why does your husband keep you tucked away in that big house of his and we only see you at these gatherings?'

'But I saw you just last month, *babamunini*,' Tina protested, laughing into her father-in-law's younger brother's eyes that were twinkling more brightly than usual, thanks to the brandy and Coke in his hand.

'That doesn't count. It was a funeral.'

Tina's laughter faded as Zodwa emerged from the house carrying a silver ice-bucket. She knelt down next to *Babamukuru* Elvin and placed the ice bucket on a small coffee table next to his chair. 'I've brought you some ice. Andile has brought some more from Harare.' She began spooning some ice cubes into his Coca-Cola. 'Is this enough *Babamukuru*?'

Uncle Elvin nodded and said a quiet 'thank you' and took a sip.

Zodwa turned to Andile's father who was seated on his armchair that had been brought out onto the veranda. 'Is there any thing I can get for you, Baba?' The over zealous tone she had displayed at the car had been toned down to obliging deference and she looked every bit the *muroora*-in-waiting.

'Not right now, thank you.' He held his arm out to Tina. 'I'm sure my daughter-in-law here will take care of me if I need anything.'

Tina felt a sense of triumph as she knelt at his feet and took his hand. At least he knew her rightful place as the *muroora* around here, she thought with satisfaction as Zodwa got up and went back into the house.

'How are you, Baba?'

'I am much better, my child. I suppose it was all worth it if it that's what it takes for my whole family to throw a party for me.' He looked fit and well, except for having lost a bit of weight while in hospital.

'A few more days of rest with some *sadza* and meat should get him back to his normal healthy self,' Babamukuru Elvin said with a solemn nod. 'And you might want to stay off the beer for a bit until then.'

'I will but not today. It's my party and I'll drink as much as I want to, don't you agree, *muroora*?' Baba Moyo grinned at Tina and patted her hand.

As Tina stood up and continued to make the rounds greeting the other friends and relatives - the men gathered around the veranda and the women sitting separately on the lawn under a large tree, she wondered if the uncles were aware of Zodwa's real purpose at this party. She wasn't the only person there who wasn't related to the family by blood or marriage. There were other people present, all residents of Marondera who were neighbours of the Moyos or knew them from work or church, although none of them seemed to be making their presence as strongly felt as Zodwa who had re-emerged from the house and was handing a bottle of Castle beer to Andile.

He was standing at the braai on the lawn which was placed close enough to the veranda so he could participate in the conversation. He was turning over some meat on the grill while trying to dodge the smoke rising from the hot coals as the fat dripped onto the fire.

Zodwa's laugh trailed across the lawn as a gust of smoke suddenly rose from the braai engulfing him. He jumped back with a yell and then poured some beer onto the grill.

'Don't do that,' she laughed. 'You're wasting good beer.'

The men at the veranda turned to them and then turned back to their conversation.

'I'm in charge of the braai,' Andile called out as Tina approached them, intent on breaking up their private little party. 'There's lots of meat for everyone here.'

'Yes, there may not be any meat in the shops, but the private abattoirs are doing a roaring trade,' Stembile replied from her seat next to her father. 'Tina, come and sit here next to me and tell me what you've been doing with yourself. I'm just resting my feet while I enjoy my cup of tea then I'll join you in the kitchen with the others later.'

Tina reluctantly took a seat on the veranda next to her sister-in-law, Andile's older sister, whose face and hips seemed to be growing rounder each time she saw her. Her skin gleamed under a thin film of sweat that her Ambi vanishing cream and face powder couldn't contain.

As the only daughter in the Moyo family, Stembile could enjoy the privilege of resting her feet on the veranda with the male guests while the *varoor*a – her brothers' wives - slaved away in the kitchen.

She had been married fifteen years earlier at 21, when as a final year social sciences student staying in Swinton women's residence at UZ she met Ben, a fourth-year engineering student from Manfred Hudson men's residence.

Within the year she succeeded in getting pregnant just before the exams, ensuring a swift transition from graduation gown to wedding gown.

'Where are Bheki and Vuyo?' Tina looked around for Andile's older brothers.

'They've gone to fetch more drinks at the Coca-Cola depot. Their contact there told them he'd keep some cases for them after this morning's delivery.'

'Although they only have Coke and Fanta available,' Zodwa's voice cut in and her shadow loomed in on Tina. She was standing behind her, holding a plate of meat fresh off the braai that she had cut up into pieces. 'There'll be no Sprite today.'

She knelt down at Andile's father's feet and offered him the plate. He took a piece of meat and murmured a thank you then bit into it, chewing slowly while contemplating his shoes.

'I must go and see what's happening in the kitchen.' Tina stood up, unable to stomach Zodwa's presence anymore.

As Tina walked down the passage, she could hear female laughter coming from the kitchen.

'Hello Tina,' several voices greeted her in unison when she entered.

Susan – the senior *muroora* as Bheki's wife, who, in her early forties was fast rivalling Mai Moyo and Stembile in ampleness of hips and thighs, stood at the stove stirring a large pot of *sadza* while Sekai, Vuyo's wife, still as slim and pretty as she was in 1995 when she was First Princess at the Miss Jacaranda beauty pageant when she met Vuyo, was frying some chicken in a pot next to her.

Len, who had disappeared when Tina was greeting the relatives, was leaning by the sink, a bottle of beer in his hand while he chewed on a piece of meat that he had picked from Sekai's pot. 'You need to add more spice though,' he said, taking another bite.

'Why don't you just go outside and sit with the men instead of making a nuisance of yourself in here?' Sekai threw a dishcloth at him. 'You can put all the spice you need in the meat.'

'Spice? On braai meat?' Len burst out laughing. 'Only beer and salt are needed for that.'

Mai Moyo walked through the door leading from the backyard, holding a dish of potatoes Chipo had just finished washing at the tap outside.

'I suppose we can cut these up and throw them into the oven since you've decided to fry the chicken Sekai,' she said shooing Len aside and placing the dish at the sink. 'Zodwa's supposed to do this. Where is she?'

'She was outside with the guests the last time I checked.' Len said, glancing quickly at Tina.

'Oh well, you'll need to get started on making the coleslaw, Tina. Sekai, where's that big knife you used to cut the meat? Tina needs it.' Mai Moyo gestured busily to a dish covered with a dishcloth on the table. 'Leonard, take the meat outside to Andile, and tell Zodwa to come back in here. The potatoes are waiting.'

Len shook his head and put his beer down. He picked up the dish. 'I'll be back to get my drink,' he said over his shoulder as he walked out.

'So how are you Tina?' Sekai turned from her frying pan. 'I haven't seen you in a while.'

'I'm very well, thank you Sekai.' Tina lifted the big knife that her mother-in-law had given her and cut it into a head of cabbage that had been placed on a large wooden chopping board at the sink. The leaves made a sharp crunch as she sliced the knife cleanly through it. She then brushed one half of the cabbage away and started chopping the remaining half.

'You must visit me some time and we can catch up over a cup of tea,' Sekai's voice came to her through the cabbage splitting on the board.

'And while you are there, perhaps you can persuade her to start thinking about motherhood,' Mai Moyo cut in, her head emerging from the fridge where she was rummaging for something. 'Where is that mayonnaise you brought, Susan? We need it for the coleslaw.'

Tina stopped chopping and glared in her mother-in-law's direction. Only the bottom half of her body was in sight from behind the door as Mai Moyo had disappeared again into the fridge.

'We can talk about my babies if she wants – or we can talk about other things,' Sekai said, removing the chicken pieces from the pan with a fork and placing them one by one onto a plate. 'Have you seen my twins Tina?'

'Yes, they are playing outside with their cousins. They waved to me. They are getting very big, and so are your boys, Susan.'

'Raising children is hard work,' Susan finished stirring the *sadza* and replaced the lid on the big pot. 'You need to be fully prepared for it.'

Mai Moyo re-emerged from the fridge, holding a large bottle of mayonnaise and closed the door. 'The twins are now seven and Bheki's boys are seven and nine. So you better hurry, Tina, else you will never catch up.' She held up the mayonnaise. 'Look, Susan bought this for us on her last trip to Gaborone. A nice big bottle. Should be enough for today.'

'That's the good thing about living in Bulawayo, you can drive across the border to Botswana and do some shopping.' Susan sat down at the table and leaned her head against the wall. 'Pass me some Coke before you close the fridge Mama.'

'You're looking very tired, Susan. Are you pregnant again?' Mai Moyo said handing her a bottle of Coke.

'No, I think two children are more than enough for us for the time being,' Susan replied frowning a little. She glanced at Tina and shook her head.

'You might want to think of producing at least one more since there doesn't seem to be any hope of seeing any grandchildren from Andile any time soon,' Mai Moyo's voice said as Tina threw the last of the shredded cabbage into the salad bowl before excusing herself and leaving the kitchen.

'Are you doing as we told you and taking care of your home and your husband?' Mai Goredema from the Marondera Mother's Union said to Tina as they tucked into their lunch. They were sitting in a group with Susan, Sekai and a few of the younger members of the Mothers Union.

'Yes.'

'You better go and make sure that your husband is well taken care off then,' Mai Goredema said, looking pointedly across the lawn at Zodwa who was sitting next to Andile and was piling some coleslaw onto his plate. 'Go and ask him if he wants a refill.'

Tina got up and went towards Andile and Zodwa who were sitting with Bheki and Vuyo.

'Are you enjoying yourself, Tee?' Andile said, pulling up a chair for her.

She nodded, drawing up an empty chair and sitting down next to him.

'But you're not eating much.' He looked at the uneaten drumstick and two potatoes in her plate. 'Try the braaied meat. It's great and so is your coleslaw.'

'I thought you didn't like coleslaw.' He had told her as much saying that he was put off by the way the mayonnaise congealed in the bowl when it was left too long.

'Well, this one tastes really good. And I hear that you made it so you must have the magic touch when it comes to cabbage and mayonnaise.' He flashed her a smile and then turned back to the conversation in the group.

They were speaking in Ndebele which Tina couldn't understand and Zodwa was making some sort of point, waving a piece of meat on the bone in the air while the men laughed out loud.

Tina sat quietly next to her husband, nibbling on her drumstick. Then, fed up with feeling like a spare wheel, she got up and began clearing the dirty plates on the veranda and taking them to the kitchen for washing up.

She found herself hiding in the spare bedroom, having done her bit in clearing up, washing up, refilling people's glasses, and enduring an afternoon of making small talk while trying to endure Zodwa who seemed to be everywhere. Every time Tina lifted her head the woman was there, demanding to be seen and heard, until she couldn't take it anymore and sought refuge among the guests' jerseys and jackets piled on the single bed in the spare room.

She lay on the bed listening to the voices chattering on the lawn outside the window, and she wondered just how many of those people knew what was going on.

She realised now that Mai Goredema and Mai Muchena had been trying to tell her something during the church group meeting that Mai Moyo had arranged specially for her all those weeks ago, when they told her to pay closer attention to the affairs of her household and not look in the opposite direction.

So if the Moyos were aware of Andile's cheating, then what was there to prevent the rest of Marondera from knowing about it as well?

It was a small town.

And perhaps the chain of conspiracy extended beyond Marondera to spread into Harare, and was the subject of much discussion in hair salons and church meetings all over the metropolis.

Tina buried her head in the pillow and fought back the tears. She was not going to break down now and show a puffy face and swollen red eyes in front of all these people.

There was a soft knock on the door and Len walked in.

'Tina? Are you not feeling well?'

She sat up. 'No.'

'Sekai and Susan are wondering where you are.' He closed the door,

'I can't stand watching that woman flaunting herself in front of everyone and fawning all over my husband like that. Has she no shame?'

'Obviously not.'

'And Andile just lets her do it. And as for his mother – first she taunts me in the kitchen about having no children, then she just sits there and watches her son frolicking with that woman and she acts like it's normal.'

'Well, I've always said that my aunt is Satan in a *doek*.' Len sat on the edge of the bed and took Tina's hand in his. 'And my cousin's an idiot. But you can't lie here forever. Why don't you come out and you can sit with me and Susan and Sekai and enjoy a nice stiff drink?'

'I have to get away from here. I can't stand another moment being out there.'

'But everyone will wonder where you are.'

'I don't care. I'll tell them I don't feel well.' Tina looked desperately at Len. 'Get me out of here.'

The door opened and Andile's face appeared round it.

'Oh there you are,' he slurred, leaning against door, swaying a little and trying to stay upright. 'I'm looking for my wife. She's disappeared on me.'

Len looked at his cousin as if he was looking at a drunken vagrant. 'Tina's not feeling very well,' he said in a calm voice. 'I think I should take her home.'

'But you can't leave now. The party's just getting started,' Andile protested, crawling onto the bed and collapsing next to Tina. He laid his head on her chest and she could smell the beer oozing from his skin.

'Well, you can stay here and party. Tina needs to go home,' Len stood up and held his hand towards her. She gently moved Andile away from her and he sank onto the pillow, grabbing a bright red handbag and cuddling it against him.

'We'll see you later,' Len said over his shoulder, leading Tina out of the room.

Andile rose a limp hand in the air in farewell and then promptly passed out.

They bumped into Sekai in the passage outside the kitchen, holding a tray filled with more dirty dishes.

'Tina, where have you been?' she said with a concerned look on her face.

'I'm not feeling very well. I just went to lie down for a moment.' Tina replied, not looking up. One look into Sekai's kind eyes would be enough to dissolve her into tears.

'I'm taking her home now,' Len said.

'Where's Andile?'

'He's passed out in the guest bedroom,' Len nodded towards the closed bedroom door. 'He's been guzzling that Castle beer like there's no tomorrow.'

'Are you sure you want to leave, Tina?' Sekai nodded towards the veranda from where Zodwa's voice could be heard. 'Don't you want to keep an eye on things?'

'No.'

'We're leaving now,' Len said, purposefully taking Tina's hand and leading her towards the kitchen back door. 'You'll explain to the others, Sekai won't you?'

Sekai nodded. 'Perhaps it's better that she goes.'

Chapter 9

'I can't believe they could do this to me,' Tina wailed into the cushion as she languished on the couch in her living room later that evening.

Now that she was safely far away from prying eyes she was free to cast away her silent demeanour, collapse into her anguish and gnash her teeth in the privacy of her home.

Len turned from the bar in the corner of the room where he was pouring drinks.

'Here, drink this.' He handed her a glass.

She sat up. 'What is it?'

'Whisky.'

He stood back and emptied his glass in one gulp and then walked back to the bar and poured himself another one – a double shot.

'Go on.' He gestured to her with his glass, 'Drink it. All of it. It'll make you feel better.'

She took a deep gulp. The warm drink burned down her throat and she coughed, trying to ease the bitter after taste settling around her tongue.

'That's Andile's Black Label,' she said, glancing at the bottle of Johnny Walker Black on the bar. 'Why don't you take out the Red instead?'

Len grunted and came over to sit next to her. He took another sip. 'He's out cold at his mother's house after prancing around with that mistress of his.' He turned to her. 'He humiliated you in front of everyone . The whole of Marondera. So I think you deserve a bit of Black don't you think?'

Tina wasn't sure. Andile had bought it at Joburg airport on his last trip and he hadn't even opened it yet, and there they were guzzling his precious whisky as if was Stoney ginger beer.

'I wonder if he keeps an extra bottle at Zodwa's.' She twirled the glass in her hand watching the whisky swirling round the bottom.

'Who cares?' Len stood up and went back to the bar and then bent down to open the little fridge under the counter. 'You got ice?' There's no ice in here.'

'Look in the freezer in the kitchen.'

Len emerged from beneath the counter and went to the kitchen leaving Tina alone in the dim room.

They had grown used to living in semi-darkness, even when there was electricity, and only the lamp on the floor by the fireplace was switched on, its muted light from the tall, narrow lampshade glowing in a pool on the ceiling above it.

A bug found its way inside through the window and made a beeline for the light, flying round and round the lampshade, bumping itself against the wall and the furniture, its buzzing loud in the quietness.

Tina sat still, trying to follow its unsteady trajectory with her eyes, hoping that it would fly out of the window again and go away. It landed somewhere behind the curtains and the buzzing stopped briefly before it started again, hurtling round and round the room in dizzy swoops. It suddenly lunged towards her, dancing around her, its buzzing ringing in her ears. She struck at it irritably, feeling its hard shell graze against the palm of her hand before it fell, stunned and silenced, with a small thud on the parquet floor.

She considered getting up and squashing it dead under her foot so it never rose again, and then decided against it.

No need to take out her frustration on an innocent insect.

Outside, the song of the crickets spilled into the room through the open windows. They never closed the windows until it was time for bed which meant that the lounge was constantly invaded by the insects of the night drawn by the lights.

Lately she had become more aware of those invisible crickets chirruping like alarm bells in the garden. She gulped down some more whisky and then closed her eyes, rubbing her forehead and massaging the little pimple forming right in the middle of her forehead.

Stress. Blocked pores.

It was time for another facial.

She sighed and took another mouthful of her drink, grimacing as she swallowed. She looked up again and then noticed that the oil painting of Great Zimbabwe hanging above the mantelpiece was slightly askew. She hated it when things didn't hang properly in her house.

Stella would fix it tomorrow.

Len came back into the lounge smiling.

'Look what I've found.' He held up a bowl of ice cubes as if he had just discovered a stash of hidden diamonds.

'The painting on the wall is askew,' Tina said nodding towards the picture.

Len glanced at the painting. 'Hmm, it's not the only thing in this house that's askew.'

He set the bowl down on the bar counter and took out two fresh glasses from the cabinet and threw some ice-cubes into them and poured double shots into both of them.

'Have some more Black.'

'Did you see her?' Tina looked up at Len as she took the glass from him.

'Did I see who?'

'That woman. Acting like she was the *muroora*-in-chief, while the rest of us – the real *varoora* – were quietly slaving away in the kitchen.' Tina felt a surge of anger at the memory of Zodwa refilling Baba Moyo's glass and asking him if he wanted more meat. 'And why didn't the uncles chase her away? They just sat there and watched.'

'What could they do, Tina? Beat her away with sticks?'

'Yes. It would have made me feel better.'

'I'd like to whip Andile with a sjambok for his behaviour.' Len's voice dripped disgust. 'Those are decent church-going people, and we need to behave ourselves with dignity and not expose our shenanigans in public. Show some respect.'

'Are you saying that it's OK for him to carry on as long as it's not in public?' Tina glared at him.

'No, I'm saying that he needs to show some respect. Especially to you. My cousin demonstrated to me what I've suspected all along. He's a pompous, self-centred, inconsiderate son-of-a-bitch.'

Well, considering that Mai Moyo endorsed her son's behaviour, protecting him and his mistress like that, Tina figured Len wasn't too far from the truth, calling Andile a son-of-a-bitch.

'Did you know that he took Zodwa with him to Joburg?'

'Did he?' Len contemplated the drink in his hand, the ice-cubes clinking gently against the glass, and then he raised it to his lips. 'It wouldn't be the first time.'

'What?' Tina was startled at his casual remark. 'Does everyone in Zimbabwe know about this woman?'

'You can start by asking George.'

'George? His best friend from Bromley? The George who is always so nice to me whenever we meet?'

'Yes, that one.'

'But why didn't he tell me?'

'Probably the same reason I didn't tell you until you coerced the information out of me. He doesn't know how. And in any case he's been keeping a small house of his own for years so who is he to judge anyone?'

Tina choked over the sip she had just taken and jumped to her feet, not knowing what else to do. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. 'George has a mistress?'

'With his child.'

'Does his wife know about this?'

'I think she does.'

'And? She just accepts that her husband has a woman somewhere who got pregnant with his child?'

'You've been to their house. That sprawling mansion on a farm in Bromley. And the second house in Mount Pleasant. She drives a Rav 4. Their girls go to Chisipite Primary School – that elitist compost heap that breeds capitalist upstarts. I don't think she's ready to give all of that up just yet simply because her husband has extra-curricular activities.'

Tina arched her eyebrows at him. Her girlfriends had all gone to Chisi and they had turned out just fine – successful, independent, professional women. Single, except for Sarudzai the doctor, but they were decent women. She herself was a product of the Dominican Convent and she didn't consider herself to be a capitalist upstart.

'Hey, it's not anyone's fault that you didn't go to a private school.'

'Whatever.'

'I want my husband to be faithful to me. That's all I ask.' Tina threw herself back on the couch, discarding the subject of private schools and returning to the matter at hand. She buried her head back in the cushion, still holding her glass firmly in her hand, and then sat up again and threw the cushion aside. 'I want him here with me not out there with her.'

She took another swig.

She was drinking the whisky straight, without her usual soda water and it was starting to go to her head.

'Maybe it's all my fault.' She leaned her head into her free hand. 'It's all my fault.'

'It's not your fault.'

'It is. Look at Zodwa. She's outgoing, she's colourful and vivacious, brimming with confidence. She's independent. I'm the exact opposite.'

'Then why is she fleecing off my cousin if she's so independent?'

'I'm boring compared to her.'

'You are not boring.' Len sounded impatient. He removed the glass from her hand and put it on the coffee table in front of them along with his. Then he took her hand. 'And you're beautiful and refined and decent. That's the reason why my cousin fell for you.'

A queen bee of quality stock. The thought popped suddenly into Tina's mind and she remembered what she had read in her father's encyclopaedia.

'Any normal man worth his salt would want to marry a woman like you. We men also know the value of marrying well,' Len continued as if reading her mind. 'And look at you. You're from a respected family, private school education, master's degree from the US. You're good for his social CV. You're the jackpot, and my cousin knew it.'

'And then he realised that he'd made a horrible mistake and now he regrets it,' Tina mumbled miserably into her chin.

'Listen, you really need to stop that now.' Len's voice was rough.

'Why Len?' Tina's plaintive wail rose up again, silencing the crickets outside. 'Why is my husband cheating on me?'

She really needed to stop this pathetic bleating but she couldn't help herself. She wanted her husband back, she wanted her marriage back, she wanted her life back.

And the whisky soaking through her head wasn't helping.

'Because he knows he can. Why else do you think keeping a small house is fashionable these days? Because these guys know they can do it and no-one will stop them – least of all, their wives.' Len paused. 'And my dear cousin just jumps on the bandwagon and goes along for the ride. Stupid bastard.'

Tina gave him a quizzical look. 'You sound very bitter.'

Len shrugged. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and stared at the carpet.

'I should have married you instead,' he said softly.

The room was slowly dissolving, the furniture coming alive and swaying in slow motion as if caught in a molten wave. Tina closed her eyes and slowly rubbed her forehead again, feeling the room begin to spin around her like she was stuck on a cyber merry-go-round.

She shouldn't have let Len feed her all that alcohol.

She swayed a little and then leaned into his arms as he reached out and held her in a gentle embrace. She laid her head on his shoulder and began to relax as she felt his hands lightly stroking her back.

'I think we drank too much.' She mumbled into his neck.

She snuggled closer feeling his dreadlocks brushing against her cheek. She felt safe in the refuge of his arms, where no-one - not Andile, not Zodwa, and certainly not Mai Moyo, the biggest traitor of them all – could reach her. She breathed in his familiar scent of Vaseline and Old Spice tinged with the whisky on his breath.

'You will make a good husband some day,' she mumbled, slurring a little. She wanted to sleep.

Len gave her one last squeeze, kissed her forehead and then pulled away. Tina felt a rush of cold air as their bodies separated.

The bug that she had slapped into silence suddenly recuperated and once again lunged into the air, shattering the silence and rousing the crickets outside.

Len stood up, still holding her hands in his.

'I have to go now.'

She nodded.

She didn't want him to go and leave her alone in this big, silent house.

'I'll call you to see how you are.'

He leaned down and kissed her cheek before turning to leave.

She had a splitting headache. The twittering of the birds outside the window told her it was morning. Sunday morning.

Church?

The smell of last night's whisky hung like vapour inside her nose and at the back of her throat. She shifted her head slightly and it started spinning as if it had been wound up again like an old music box.

She groaned and tried to sit up; she needed to rinse away the acid taste from her mouth.

An arm and a hand rested limply across her chest, pinning her down and she started, remembering Len's embrace the previous night. But he had left. She remembered pressing the intercom and opening the gate to let him out after which she had sat on the couch for a long time, touching her cheek where he had kissed it.

She slowly turned and then saw Andile's face lying against her shoulder, his beer-laced breath brushing against her neck as he exhaled in little snores as if a small rattle was trapped in his throat.

That usually happened after he'd been drinking.

He had one leg thrown over her knees and he was cuddled against her, his weight heavy in his sleep. He grunted as she carefully extricated herself from under his limbs and sat up, pulling back the duvet as she got out of bed.

Andile was lying on top of the duvet in his under shorts and she spotted his clothes lying on a heap on the floor on his side of the bed by the door.

With a sigh, she pulled herself onto her feet and stumbled to the bedroom door. She walked down the passage to the kitchen, holding on to the walls for support. The tiles on the

floor spun slowly beneath her feet, like a kaleidoscope in slow motion. She unlocked the kitchen door where she could hear Stella sweeping the terrace beneath the windows. Then she groped her way back to the bedroom and went into the bathroom and closed the door.

She turned the tap at the sink to splash the sleep out of her eyes. The tap coughed, spurting out tiny droplets before the water trickled out, brown as if it had been scraped from the bottom of a river.

Tina groaned in disgust and turned the tap off.

Andile was awake when she came out of the bathroom. CNN was playing on the television although he wasn't watching it, lying back against his pillow, on his side of the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

'We really need to get a borehole.' She didn't look at him as she made her way towards her dressing gown thrown over the sofa.

'Yes, I suppose we should.'

'The water is brown and dirty.' She put her gown on and tied the belt in a tight knot at her waist.

'That's not nice.'

'No, it isn't. And I'm tired of the water getting cut off at all hours and then we have to contend with dirty water when it comes back on.' She flung back one of the curtains and opened the window. The morning air was bitingly fresh, slapping away the last of her drowsiness, although the headache remained, throbbing against her temples. 'I can't even brush my teeth now.'

She turned to him, feeling cantankerous. 'So are we going to get a borehole or not?'

'And a good morning to you too, Miss Tee,' Andile replied, yawning and scratching the back of his head. He yawned again. 'Gosh, I have such a headache.'

'That's usually what happens when you drink too much. How did you manage to get back home?'

'I drove.'

'In your condition? You were blind drunk.'

'I slept a little before I left.' He sat up on the edge of the bed, his head hanging forward. Then he stood up, adjusting his shorts at his waist. She noticed that he was wearing his blue shorts. Was that a beer pouch developing? And then he made his way towards the bathroom. 'Any chance of getting a cup of coffee?'

He disappeared into the bathroom, leaving Tina glaring at the closed door and silently seething. She hoped he would drink the water and poison himself in the process.

She sighed again and then stepped over his clothes on the floor and opened the bedroom door.

A tray with a teapot of hot water, a jar of Nescafé coffee, sugar bowl, two mugs and a small jug of milk covered with a doilie with little beads hanging over the edge had been placed on the little coffee table outside the door. Stella sometimes prepared their coffee like this and left it outside their door in the morning.

Tina picked up the tray and laid it on the dresser and made herself a cup of extra strong coffee – black, no sugar. She pulled back the rest of the curtains and sipped from her mug while she watched the birds fluttering on the bird bath on the front lawn, their little bodies and wings flapping up the water.

The bathroom door opened and Andile came back into the bedroom, scratching his head.

'Do you have painkillers? I have a killer headache.'

'They're in the cupboard above the sink – in the bathroom where you were.' Tina didn't turn away from the window.

'I'll have some coffee first.' He scooped a heaped spoonful of coffee into his mug and poured water into it from the teapot. 'I see what you meant about the water. It's all sludgy.'

'So what are you going to do about it?'

'Boreholes are expensive.'

'You sank one for my parents.'

'Yes, well. That was part of my lobola payment. You know what they say, a *mukwambo's* job is never done. He never stops paying.'

A *muroora*'s job is never done either, Tina thought angrily. And she never stopped paying either, slaving away in the kitchen, keeping his mother happy. All he had to do was sign a cheque.

'Is there a borehole at your flat in Avondale?' She spoke casually, watching the birds as they suddenly all flew away from the bird bath and disappeared into the trees.

They used to do that when their dog Tiger bounced up and chased them away. But there was no Tiger now and she wondered what had scared them until she saw Johnson walking across the lawn with a bucket. He poured more water into the bird bath and then walked away.

Andile had paused and he was sipping absently from his coffee mug, also looking out the window. 'I think there was a borehole when I bought the flat. It was a collective arrangement among the body corporate.'

'So your tenant's enjoying a regular supply of running water, while we have to drag buckets of water into the house to do the washing and put up with soiled water coming through our taps.'

Andile looked at her for a long moment.

'I tell you what. Why don't you organise it, get a quote and I'll take care of it,' he finally said quietly.

'Fine.'

'When are we going over to your parents' house for lunch like I suggested?' he said, turning around and getting back into bed.

'I'll call them and see if they're available next weekend.'

'Yes, you do that. Do we still have meat in the freezer?'

'Yes.'

'Good. I'm going back to sleep now. I have a hangover from hell and I need to sleep it off.'

Chapter 10

The last of the jacaranda blooms lay strewn along the streets of the Avenues, the purple hues of the freshly fallen flowers, still robust with life under the early December dew, scattered upon the mouldy remains of the ones that had fallen long before.

Another round of rain and they would all turn into brown sludge upon which the residents in the surrounding apartment blocks would slip and slide and mutter a curse under their breath.

Jacarandas were lovely to look at when they were still flourishing in splendour in the giant trees lining the Avenues, but when the rains came and they tumbled to the ground with it, everything became untidy – pretty much like my marriage, Tina thought, as she reached into her handbag and took out her cell phone.

The changing of the seasons as told by nature was not high on her mind at that moment in time.

‘Hello?’ her cousin Eunice’s voice, cheery as always came through on the other side.

‘Why aren’t you in church?’

‘Tina, is that you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes well, I do go when the spirit of prayer comes down upon me. Today I don’t feel so holy. Where are you?’

‘I’m sitting in the car park at Fife Avenue shopping centre across the road from your flat. Can I come and visit?’

‘Come.’

Eunice had been doing her hair when Tina arrived and knocked on her door on the fourth floor of Victoria Court, and she answered the door with a towel round her shoulders.

Half the hair on her head was freshly plaited into shoulder length braids and she had stuck a comb through the remaining half to finish later.

‘I take it you didn’t go to church either,’ she said, looking at Tina’s jeans and T-shirt.

'No, I also don't feel holy today.' Tina strode into the room and threw herself onto a sofa by the window. 'Sorry to just drop in on you like this but I had to get out of the house.'

'Why?' Eunice went into the open plan kitchen which was divided from the lounge by a counter cluttered with cookbooks, a kettle, toaster and a small microwave, and several Tupperware containers half-filled with sugar, rice and flour.

'We have no water this morning. I had to go to my friend's house in Malborough for a quick shower before she ran off to church,' she said, opening the fridge. 'Luckily I washed my hair yesterday so I can plait it today while it's still nice and clean.'

Tina didn't answer and looked round the flat. Eunice may have dumped her two children on her ex-husband and his new woman after her divorce, but she had traded them in for half the furniture in their marital home so that the three-piece lounge suite along with the coffee tables and television were cramped in her living room, almost on top of each other.

Tina stared out of the window at the empty street. A lone man with the *Sunday Mail* newspaper folded under his arm appeared from under the trees and ambled down the street, casually swinging a plastic bag of bananas as he walked. He disappeared into an apartment block from which she could hear reggae music emanating from a window on the third floor.

'So I can't offer you any tea or coffee. But I have Mazoe orange crush because I have some water in the fridge to dilute it.' Eunice said as she placed a tray holding two glass tumblers, a plastic jug of water and a bottle of Mazoe on the coffee table.

'Thanks.' Tina turned away from the window and reached forward to mix her juice.

'So why did you need to get out of your house?' Eunice settled back onto the couch where strands of synthetic hair had been neatly laid out in a row. She withdrew the comb from her head and separated a portion of hair and then ran the comb through it to remove any tangles. Then she planted a braid onto her scalp, plaiting it rapidly all the way to her shoulder. 'Is Andile home?'

'Yes, that's why I need to get away from him.'

'Why?' Eunice finished plaiting and reached out for a new strand and without pausing, began planting and plaiting again while looking up at Tina from under her bowed head.

Tina hesitated, stalling at the thought of revealing her husband's dirty little secret - although he hadn't shown any restraint in Marondera. She cleared her throat and plunged in.

'Andile's cheating on me,' she said, staring into her orange juice. Her voice trembled a little and she cleared her throat again.

Silence.

'What did you say?'

'I said, Andile's cheating on me.' What the hell - she would say everything. 'He has a mistress. She's living in his flat in Avondale.'

Eunice had stopped plaiting and she stared at her, her hands in mid-air still holding a half-plaited braid. Her wickedly cheery face stunned into shock. She sat back, dropping the unfinished braid and folded her arms while digesting the news.

Then she threw back her head, dislodging the comb in her hair, and let out a long, loud laugh. It rang through the room, the windows, over the balcony and out into the Jacaranda-lined street.

She clapped her hands and shook her head wiping the tears from her eyes.

'Andile. Your husband?'

Tina nodded.

'Andile.' Eunice sat up straight, her hands upon her waist and stared into the space somewhere between the floor and the wall as if expecting the man to appear before her and deny the allegation. She shook her head again, and exhaled in a low whistle under her breath. 'You mean, that *musalad* has finally caught onto our ways.'

This was an expression people commonly used to describe Andile.

A salad.

All mixed up. Not quite sure who he was.

Or a *munose brigade* as Len described him, a term coined by varsity students to describe private school educated students who spoke English through the nose like white people. To which the nose brigades sniffed in righteous contempt saying they would not concern themselves with the petty judgements of jealous SRBs (Serious Rural Background).

'People everywhere have affairs, regardless of race or creed.' Tina said, surprised that she was jumping to her husband's defence.

'Oh, I'm sure they do.' Eunice said reaching for her juice. 'But we always got the impression that he was above all that.'

'But aren't you shocked at his behaviour?'

'Oh yes, I'm shocked,' Eunice raised her glass to her lips, her eyes twinkling above the rim. 'Mr High and Mighty has stooped to the level of us mere mortals.'

This wasn't going anywhere.

'I came here looking for some sympathy, since your ex-husband did exactly the same thing to you.' Tina almost sniffed in the manner not unlike that of the nose brigade that Len had also accused her of being. 'I'm disappointed that you find all this amusing.'

'Yes but Max was a dog, and you know what they say about lying down with dogs. By the time I got out of that marriage, I was ridden with fleas. But I always thought that Andile was one of those poodles – you know, the well-groomed kind that rich women enter into competitions. I didn't think that he'd sully himself with the lowly behaviour of mongrels like Max.'

'Well, he did,' Tina said, thinking about her dead dog Tiger and his wonderings, impregnating all the dogs in the neighbourhood. Like dog, like master. 'But how did you cope when you found out about Max?'

'People find ways of coping.' Eunice picked up a braid and pulled at it, twisting it round her fingers. 'Some women pretend not to know and will look the other way as long as he comes back home. Others will justify it by saying that all men cheat, so what can you do? So they read their bibles until the pages fall off and comfort each other in their church groups and howl church hymns all day and night while their husbands are steaming up the bedroom with their small house.'

Eunice untwined the braid from her fingers and threw it down on the couch, a flash of anger briefly clouding her face.

'I didn't do any of that.' She raised her legs onto the couch, folding them under her and leaned back against the armrest. She laid a cushion in front of her, occasionally thumping it to emphasize a point as she continued speaking.

'I've been told that some woman in America or is it Britain? Some rock star's wife, who's now his ex-wife so I'm not sure how relevant her opinion is, but she said that for a woman to keep her man she must be a chef in the kitchen, a whore in the bedroom and whatever else she needs to be in each room of the house. But what happens if you do all those things and your man still cheats on you?' Eunice looked at Tina as if expecting an answer.

Tina had no answer to give.

'Well, I did all those things. And I'm sure you do too. That's why you're hurt and angry and you've shown up here looking like chickens are about to roost in the growth under your braids because you've been too upset to do your hair.'

Tina's hand instinctively went up to finger her hair. Her cousin was right - she hadn't been to see Miriam in a while.

'I'm a great cook. You've eaten my food haven't you?' Eunice went on, her voice rising a little. 'I can cook on a stove. I can cook on my knees on an open fire - those relatives of Max's in the village couldn't get enough of my *sadza* and stew. And in the bedroom I did things - unimaginable things that even I get embarrassed thinking about them now. Our grandmother - may she rest in peace - would blush in her grave if she knew the things I did. I gave this man two children. What else did he want? Triplets? But that wasn't enough for him was it? He wasn't satisfied. He still went out there and found himself someone else to give him more. I used to get sick. That thing called depression - I had it. I was on the brink of madness but he didn't care. He carried on. So no, I refused to put up with anymore. I'd had enough. There's only so much you can do before you throw a decent woman over the edge.'

She stopped to take another sip of her juice to loosen her throat.

'What did you do Eunice?' Tina spoke impatiently, eager to hear more.

'I went to see a woman - an older woman I knew from work and I told her my problems and you know what? She was very surprised that I wasn't doing what so many women are doing these days to cope. She told me to take a painkiller.'

'A what?' Tina was confused. Was aspirin all she needed to take the pain away? Was her cousin suggesting prescription pills to dull the ache?

'Yes, a painkiller. Or a pain-ease. I found me another man who took away my pain and satisfied my needs. And he was married too, so fair game.'

It took a while for Tina to understand what her cousin was telling her. Then it dawned on her, like day follows night. 'You mean, you took a lover?'

'Yes. And what a lover he was. He was an even better performer than my own husband. So it wasn't too hard for me anymore because I was getting a better deal elsewhere. He went his way, I went my way, then we met at home and I was content, serene. Satisfied.'

Tina couldn't believe her ears. Had everyone gone mad? Whatever happened to the marriage vows that were the very fabric upon which this sacred union was built? To love and to hold, forsaking all others and pledging to be faithful for the rest of your days till death do you part?

'But then your marriage fell apart anyway, and you got divorced.' Tina reminded her cousin.

'That's because he decided to marry her after all. But I can guarantee you this. He is cheating on her too, like he cheated on me. Leopards don't change their spots you know.'

'And what happened to your lover?'

'He went back to his wife.'

'And you?'

'And me, I'm a single woman. I have a job. I earn money. I have this flat and half his furniture. And I have a boyfriend. I'm just fine.'

Chapter 11

Eunice picked up her comb and resumed her plaiting, her normally placid expression returning to her face.

‘Are you angry with me for telling you my secret?’

‘No.’ Tina said, still reeling from her cousin’s disclosure. ‘I can never get angry at you, Eunice, although you do shock me sometimes.’

‘I thought that being the ex-Convent girl you are you’d have stormed out of here like Santa Maria.’

Tina shrugged. Adultery and fornication were not the behaviour expected from a Christian woman of substance, and her sensibilities were suitably offended. But Eunice had always lived by her own rules where good judgement and common sense were sometimes blurred. Marriage had obviously failed to tame her and had served instead to magnify just how far she would go to preserve her right to free will.

Besides, her story had pulled Tina’s thoughts back to the night before.

The man who had held her and comforted her was not her husband. It was not her husband who had gently stroked her neck and breathed the words ‘I should have married you’ into her ear. And she had been willing to strip away her inhibitions and cast away all her goodness, along with her clothes, and offer herself to him to take the pain away. So who was she to judge Eunice?

‘I understand why you did what you did.’

‘I don’t imagine that you would do the same thing though,’ Eunice’s eyes twinkled from beneath the synthetic mop of braids. ‘Nice girls like you don’t behave like me.’

‘You did what you had to do. Now I must do what I have to do,’ Tina said, pushing away all thoughts of Len and his dreadlocks firmly to the back of her mind. This was one skeleton she was going to keep locked away in her personal cupboard, even though skeletons had a way of resurrecting themselves. Especially this one, which wasn’t completely dead.

‘And what are you going to do?’

‘I don’t know.’ Tina threw aside the cushion she had been cradling and stood up. She began pacing up and down the room, placing one foot slowly in front of the other, her gaze

focused on her painted toes. She really needed to pay a visit to the Touch of Glamour and get Miriam to tidy her up from head to foot. The maroon polish on both her big toes had chipped and she had forgotten to trim the nails which were starting to look dangerously like claws.

Like the toes belonging to the assistant who had greeted her at Zodwa's shop at The Village. She had never seen anyone with toes like that before - long and curved, painted bright red and protruding like daggers from her high-heeled gold sandals.

'Tsitsi told me to go and speak to Zodwa,' she said, looking up.

'What for?'

'To ask her why she is sleeping with my husband.'

'So did you?' The frown was beginning to imprint itself on her cousin's face again.

'I went to her shop, but she wasn't there.' A bolt of anger surged through Tina like a current of electricity after a power-cut. 'She was in Joburg - with my husband.'

'Really?'

'Yes really.' Tina stopped pacing and turned to face her cousin, her fists pressed against her waist, digging them into her ribs. 'And then she has the nerve to show up at my father-in-law's party in Marondera yesterday. You should have seen her. She put on quite a show. The bitch.' She muttered the last word under her breath.

'What did Andile say?'

'Nothing.' Tina exploded. 'He said nothing. He behaved as if it was perfectly natural to have this woman parading herself in front of the family and throwing herself at him like that. It was awful.' She rubbed her forehead roughly, as if trying to wipe the horrible memory away. 'And the worst thing is that his mother, my mother-in-law, didn't do anything. She actually sanctions this whole affair by the looks of it, asking Zodwa to help out in the kitchen and all that.'

Eunice rolled her eyes. 'Don't get me started on mothers-in-law. My experience has taught me that these women can never be trusted. They will point fingers and judge other people's families but they will always take their precious son's side even when he behaves like an idiot.'

“That sounds exactly like Mai Moyo.” Tina nodded in agreement. ‘She pretends to give me ‘good advice’ and displays me in front of her church group friends like I’m some kind of acquisition, and meanwhile she’s consorting with this...this woman that she knows is stealing my husband.’

Eunice gave a derisive snort. ‘Don’t be fooled by all that sanctimonious talk about gracious women and good wives and submitting and all that other crap they fill our heads with. Beneath those Mother’s Union uniforms there are some vicious hyenas lurking under those *doeks*.’

‘Yes well.’ Tina shrugged. ‘After yesterday I now know that the only mother I can count on is my own.’

She stared absent-mindedly out the window at the peaceful jacaranda-clad avenues feeding into the wider streets like Jason Moyo, Fourth Street and Tongogara Avenue. In the distance she could make out the boundaries where the built-up city landscape gave way to empty veld and bush, now a rich, deep green thanks to the rain that had fallen with the arrival of the wet season. Harare was a city of wide-open spaces. A column of grey smoke rose in the horizon disturbing the skyline. It looked like someone was clearing the land preparing it for sowing, or perhaps they were simply getting rid of rubbish.

‘Tsitsi was right. I need to talk to that woman.’

‘So you want to fight for your man?’ A look of glee sprang into Eunice’s eyes. ‘I like a good fight.’

‘I’m not looking for a punch-up.’ Tina said hastily, not wanting to give Eunice the wrong idea. Her cousin was a loose cannon, capable of doing anything crazy, and she didn’t want any trouble. ‘I won’t stoop that low. But I want to make it clear to her that I will not be made a fool of by some shady slut with no conscience.’ Tina’s temperature was rising again. ‘Her antics yesterday were the last straw. This is the last time that she shows up in Marondera again. Maybe they have no sense of decency where she comes from but where I come from, we have plenty. I won’t let her destroy my marriage.’

Eunice stood up and began clearing her couch and packing the unused braids into a TM Supermarket carrier bag. ‘You said this Zodwa woman is living in your flat?’

Tina nodded, watching her cousin with some confusion.

'OK.' Eunice straightened up, a look of determination chiselled across her features.

'We're going to see her now.'

Tina started. 'Now?'

'Yes.'

Tina wasn't sure. All her angry resolve went out the window from which she could still see the smoke rising from the burning rubbish. Confrontation made her uncomfortable. It was easy to talk about it, but doing it was another matter.

'I don't know, Eunice,' she began. 'I haven't even spoken to Andile about all this yet. If I go to her now, she's going to tell him and then he'll get upset and everything will get of hand and..'

'Everything's already out of hand from what you've told me,' Eunice interrupted her, tying a cotton *doek* on her head to hide the half-finished extensions. She went into her room and came back with her handbag slung on her shoulder. 'Are you coming?'

Tina remained where she was. How many times had her mother told her not to act in haste?

But then her mother wasn't there yesterday to witness Zodwa smugly draping herself all over Andile, cooing at him over the braai and ignoring the disapproving looks thrown at her by the Marondera chapter of the Methodist Mother's Union. She didn't see her batting her eyelashes at Baba Moyo and asking him if he wanted a re-fill in that sticky, sweet voice that made Tina want to slap her.

She wanted to slap Zodwa.

She grabbed her bag and her car keys.

'Let's go.'

Only the birds flitting from perch to perch and sharing space with the bees raging in the flamboyant trees lining King George Avenue had the energy to be active in the early afternoon sun.

Everything else seemed to sag under the December heat which, having devoured the last of the morning dew now rose, dry and raw, becoming more intense as the hours ebbed into the afternoon.

A stray dog appeared across the road, walking as if in slow motion, and it ambled towards the traffic light intersection, where a newspaper vendor sat on an empty crate under a tree. He had two piles of newspapers in front of him, the state-owned *Sunday Mail* and the private *Sunday Independent*.

The dog lopped down against a pole, its tongue lolling out almost touching the pavement, and lazily watched the people dotting the street going to or from somewhere, their faces turned downwards and simply walking. Then it laid its head between its outstretched paws and dozed off.

In the horizon the first of the storm clouds had begun to gather, clumped together in a threatening mass of grey and black, and preparing to advance across the blue sky. A faint roll of thunder echoed in the distance.

Tina stopped round the corner from the entrance to Winchester Gardens. They didn't want Zodwa to recognise her silver Polo at the gate and ruining the element of surprise. This was meant to be an ambush.

They got out of the car and went to the gate through which Tina could see Zodwa's car parked in its usual parking bay.

She dug her finger into the button marked No 7 on the intercom and then turned to survey the apartment complex through the electric gate railing.

The borehole servicing the eight duplex garden flats was serving its purpose well. The patches of lawn in front of each flat were well trimmed with flowers bursting with health in the beds running alongside the wall. The rose bushes bordering the driveway at No 7 brimmed with life, and she noticed a couple of bees darting between the pink petals of a particularly robust rose.

She pressed the button again and Zodwa's voice came through the intercom. 'Hello?'

She sounded quite enticing. She was probably expecting Andile.

'It's Tina Moyo.' She pronounced her name very clearly.

There was a pause. 'Tina? Is that you?'

'Yes.'

Another pause, and then the gate began to slide open.

Tina walked up the steps and onto the veranda with its wrought iron table and chairs with their padding in Congolese mud cloth printed with noughts and crosses.

The front door opened as she approached with Eunice in tow and Zodwa appeared. She wore a long cotton kaftan in plain blue with two slits splitting the dress on both sides to reveal her legs up to her knees.

'This is a lovely surprise,' she said, giving a nervous laugh.

'May we come in?'

'Of course.' Zodwa stepped back to allow them in.

Tina stepped into the lounge and looked around. The brown leather lounge suite was the only thing she remembered. Andile had chosen it at Radio Ltd furniture store in town. Everything else had been removed, including her teak dining room suite that had been replaced by one in Zambezi wood just like hers. She knew exactly where it came from. Custom made by Savanna Wood at Doon's Estate along Mutare Road. Its rough, black texture with holes in unexpected places was the secret behind its popularity – and price. She had paid through her teeth for hers, so did Andile pay through his to buy Zodwa a similar one?

And almost everything, from the many cushions on the sofas to the various wall hangings and table cloths was made from ethnic prints. Then there were the various artefacts decorating the surfaces – dolls, painted ceramic bowls, stone sculptures of animals and other objects to that effect. Tina felt like she was walking through a curio shop.

'When we bought this place I recall decorating it Mediterranean style,' she spoke to Eunice. 'Blues, greens, whites. It was all about the flow.' She made a sweeping movement with her hands to imitate a current.

Eunice immediately picked up on it, mirroring Tina's flowing gesture. 'Yes, the flow,' she repeated.

'It's interesting what you've done with my husband's flat, Zodwa.' Tina threw her a haughty look. 'I feel like I'm walking through a street market somewhere in Dakar.'

She moved towards the kitchen and began opening and closing the cupboards, peering inside.

'Would you like some coffee, Eunice?' She leaned back from the top cupboard. 'I'm assuming that you do have coffee, Zodwa?'

Zodwa gave another laugh and then took out a coffee jar from another cupboard.

'Nescafé, I see,' Tina took the jar and inspected it. 'Is this perhaps from one of your grocery consignments that my husband orders regularly for you from down south?'

Zodwa's smile vanished and she looked confused. She cleared her throat. 'Tina, I don't think I like you coming into my house and taking liberties.'

'Your house?' Eunice had been waiting for the first opportunity to strike. 'You mean Andile's house?'

'Eunice is right.' Tina took her cousin's cue and got into fighting mode. 'This is my husband's house. So I can do pretty much what I damn want. Are you paying us rent? Because if you are, then you would be a legitimate tenant and I will leave you to your business.'

Zodwa seemed to have lost her tongue.

'Are you paying rent, Zodwa? Or are you just sleeping with my husband in exchange for this very comfortable arrangement you have here?'

Eunice walked up swinging her hips in an exaggerated manner and leaned against the counter next to Tina.

'This, dear cousin,' she said, folding her arms and looking Zodwa up and down. 'This is what we call a small house. A woman who steals someone else's husband.'

Zodwa's face deepened into a scowl as she realised that she was under attack. She clicked her tongue and turned away and walked back into the lounge. 'I think you should leave.' She threw the words back over her shoulder.

'Hey, Sisi.' Eunice strode into the lounge after her with Tina at her heels. 'If you want a dog that's on someone else's leash that's your problem *shamwari*. But please, go and find another kennel to raid. Leave my cousin's husband alone.'

Zodwa turned and flung her arm back in a defiant gesture. 'Let me tell you something.' She spoke directly at Tina who was still holding the jar of coffee. 'Your husband came after me just like he came after you.'

Tina rolled her eyes. 'Do you expect me to believe that? That he came after you without any seduction games from you?' She gave a scornful laugh. 'You're very good at enticing unsuspecting victims. I've seen you in action.'

'You knew Andile was married. Why didn't you just tell him to get lost?' Eunice demanded.

'Hey, life's too short. I'm not going to pass up on an opportunity for a little happiness, and if I can get it from a married man then so be it.'

'Have you no conscience?' How can you go just agree to give in to a married man like that?' Tina was stunned by the spiteful remark.

'Why should you married women hoard all the happiness to yourselves?' Zodwa tossed her head. 'There's enough to go around isn't there? We can share and share alike.'

'And why aren't you married yourself then?' Eunice jumped in. 'Why can't you find your own man instead of feeding off someone else's like a parasite?'

Zodwa scowled and stood in defiant silence.

'I'll tell you why.' Eunice said. 'It's because you are not marriage material. Your husband left you and now you're latching on to Andile. You're so desperate you can't even see that he's stringing you along and you're just a sexual pastime. He will get tired of you and then he'll throw you away like a used condom.'

'Yes well, at least he has somewhere to go if he's not getting enough of it at home.' Zodwa hit back from her corner. 'If his wife's not delivering the goods then she mustn't be surprised if he goes somewhere else to get it.'

'And so now you think he'll leave her for you just because he's getting some extra juice from you? You're just a spare wheel, my friend. A bit on the side.' Eunice spat out every syllable.

'If I'm just a spare wheel then why is he here all the time? Why does he take me with him on his business trips and not her?' Zodwa threw a mocking look at Tina who was

listening, speechless. She wasn't trained to excel in vicious catfights and was out of her depth, unable to defend herself.

'I'm a certified bachelorette and I will sleep with whoever I want. If you can't hold on to your man then don't blame me if I claim him for myself.'

The Nescafé jar smashing against the wall and crashing to the ground swallowed the crack that rang out when Eunice planted a well-aimed slap clean across Zodwa's face.

There was silence.

Tina stood motionless, staring blindly at the coffee granules lying in a heap on the floor behind Zodwa. She didn't even realise that she had thrown it. All she knew was that in that moment she had wanted to kill her.

Her eyes moved from the coffee to the two women standing in the room with her. Zodwa had doubled up from the force of the slap and she was clutching her cheek while Eunice stood above her ready to execute another blow.

Zodwa remained still for a moment and then she straightened up massaging her cheek. Then she began to laugh. A low, raucous guffaw rising from the pit of her stomach.

'You can hit me all you like,' she said to Tina. 'And you can throw whatever you want in my house. But that won't change anything. I'm not cheating on anyone. It's your husband who's doing the cheating. So I suggest you go and speak to him. I'm just the mistress.'

'What's going on here?'

Tina turned towards the voice that had interrupted them and she saw Andile standing at the door surveying the scene with confusion. Then his eyes rested on her and they looked at each other for a long moment as realisation dawned in his eyes.

'What do you think is going on here Andile?' Eunice turned her rage onto him. 'Did you think that your dirty little secret would stay hidden from your wife forever?'

'Tina,' Andile began walking towards his wife. 'Please, let's talk about this.' He took her hand. 'Let's go home.'

She stared at him trying to recognise this man for whom she had almost murdered Zodwa with a Nescafé jar.

Then she raised her other hand, the one he wasn't holding, drew it back and slapped him, her hand landing upon his cheek in a crisp crack, like a knife cutting through cabbage.

She drew her hand back, and then delivered an equally precise back hand across his other cheek.

Then she turned to her cousin.

'It's time for us to go, Eunice.' Her voice was measured and calm. 'We're done here.'

University of Cape Town

Chapter 12

The smouldering heat of the afternoon finally succumbed to a thunderous downpour that burst through the clouds as Tina and Eunice drove back to the Avenues.

The rain pounded the earth and gushed in angry rivulets along the gullies bordering the streets. Jagged streaks of lightning cut across the sky as if to slash it into tiny little pieces, blacking out whatever electricity was still flowing in the surrounding suburbs.

'So now I have no power on top of everything else,' Eunice said, as she walked into the lounge with a bottle of brandy and two glasses. She poured generous tots into their glasses. 'I have no wine, so you can only have Viceroy. And you'll have to drink it straight or with water because I've no soda water or Coke.'

'I wish I could have said more to her,' Tina said, taking a whiff of her drink and grimacing at its pungent smell. 'But I've never had a catfight before. I don't like conflict.'

'Well you made a good start with that coffee jar. Pity you missed. I'd have loved to see her head split open.'

Tina shuddered at the memory and took a sip of her Viceroy. It tasted like molten acid and she choked as she swallowed. Then she drank some more and felt her nerves begin to calm down.

'You've obviously done this before, Eunice. Either that, or you hated Zodwa at first sight.'

'Oh I'm very experienced at dealing with cheaters.' Eunice set a candle holder and a box of matches on the coffee table in preparation for the evening. 'Remember I was married to one. I tried to sort him out first. I broke into his woman's house and slashed every stitch of his clothes that I found there with a very large pair of scissors. Then I arranged with a group of *vakomana*, a gang of *tsotsis* operating in the streets of Highfield township, to steal all the tyres from his company car including the spare wheel. I wanted to see how he was going to visit his little tramp if he didn't have wheels.' Eunice chuckled smugly into her brandy.

'And what did he do?'

'The bastard hit me. Said I almost made him lose his job at that company he sold insurance for. So then I went for the small house. At Tipperary's beer garden during braai

hour. I walked in and saw her and I just lost my mind. I thought my husband hit me because of this bitch and I attacked her, right there in front of everyone. We got into this big fight, which I won when I grabbed her stupid wig and threw it onto the braai on top of all those chops. But do you think that stopped him? No it didn't. That's when I got the painkiller.'

'So what's the point of marriage then if it's going to turn into trench warfare as my mother calls it?'

'Because you're only worth something when you are Mrs Somebody. Divorced women like me are seen as scum not even worth those useless Zim dollars that the Reserve Bank prints on a regular basis. So you fight tooth and nail to hold on to your man – even if he's a fleabag.'

'Andile is not a fleabag.' Tina was a little stung by her cousin's words, especially since they held a hint of truth. 'He's a sensible person. I think he's just been influenced by his friends from the Beer and Boozers Club who all seem to have small houses. And since no-one seems to be willing to talk some sense into him, I will do it. I am his wife after all and I deserve some respect.'

Eunice's lips curled into a sardonic smile. 'Well I hope that he will see some sense. I have yet to meet a sensible man but maybe I just move in the wrong circles.'

The sun had gone down and evening was falling upon the hills surrounding Alexander Park when Tina drove into No 8 Copper Close. She parked in front of her garage door not having the energy to wait for it to swing upwards for her to drive in.

The evening air smelt of damp grass and waterlogged soil, the heat and dust having been cleansed away by the heavy deluge.

She didn't even know if her husband was home or had opted to stay with Zodwa or worse, driven to Marondera to tell his mother that her daughter-in-law had lost her mind and turned into a violent shrew.

The light was on in the kitchen when she walked in and the familiar sound of the generator was absent. Alexander Park had survived the storm. Everything was in its place. There were no dishes on the drying rack and the dishcloth had been laid out to dry on the

sink which gleamed clean. The Italian tiles on the floor still gave off the fresh ammonia smell from Handy Andy multi-purpose cleaner. Stella had obviously returned from her Sunday off and cleaned the kitchen again before retiring for the night.

Tina made her way to the bedroom welcoming the emptiness of the house. She needed the time alone to gather her thoughts and prepare herself for the inevitable showdown when Andile eventually showed up. The passage was dark but she could see a sliver of light peeping from underneath the closed bedroom door. Stella must have forgotten to switch it off after she had turned down the duvet like she always did in the evenings.

There was a slight movement in the corner of the room when she walked in and she jumped.

'Andile,' she gasped, clutching her chest. 'You frightened me.'

He was slouched on the sofa by her side of the bed, a glass of whisky in his hand.

'Sorry. It's only me.' He sounded tired.

'What are you doing here?'

'I...live here,' he replied, looking round the room as if noticing it for the first time.

She stood by the door, collecting herself. She hadn't expected to see him there.

'That's debatable.' She saw no need for pleasantries.

Andile didn't answer.

She began to walk towards the bathroom partly to get ready for bed, partly to get away from him. Then she stopped at the door. The cleansing, toning and moisturising could wait. She spun around to face him.

'Why are you cheating on me?'

He winced as her words hit him. She saw that he was searching somewhere in his head for a suitable answer.

'I don't know.'

'What do you mean you don't know?'

'It just happened.' He averted her eyes and scratched his forehead as if to hide his face.

'Accidents happen. You don't sleep with someone by accident. Are you telling me that you were sleepwalking when you set her up in your flat and woke up in her bed time and time again? Were you in a trance when you took her with you to Joburg this week?'

He looked up. 'How did you find out about that?'

'I have my sources. And I know that it's not the first time you have travelled with her on your so-called business trips.'

He put his whisky glass onto the dressing table and slowly stood up. Her overwhelming knowledge of the evidence seemed to have gouged him out of his stupor. He put his hands in his trouser pockets, hanging his head like a school boy caught doing something naughty.

'Andile, I can't believe that I'm actually standing here having this discussion with you. I thought I'd found me a good man when I married you. Someone I could trust in this licentious jungle we live in where having a small house is all the rage these days. And now I find out that you're exactly like the rest of them.'

'But that's just it, Tina,' Andile opened his arms and shrugged, his voice rising a little to match hers. 'I'm just a regular, ordinary guy who gave into temptation like the rest of them. You're the one who seems to think I'm Mr Perfect.'

'What?' Tina couldn't believe what she was hearing. 'So you're telling me that you're sleeping around because everyone else is doing it? And that makes it OK because it's normal?'

'I'm not promiscuous Tina. Zodwa and I have terms and conditions that she won't see anyone else but me.'

'So what?'

'Well, would you prefer it if I were to jump into bed with every woman who came onto me?'

'Are you saying that it's more acceptable for you to have a monogamous extra-marital affair? That it's fine for you to screw one woman in secret instead of ten?'

'Look, Tina, we're not in the States or the UK. People do things differently here.' He began pacing the room. 'We may not all want to have multiple wives but the polygamous mindset is still pretty much deep-seated within us, and from time to time a man needs to

prove that he is still virile, you understand? So I guess I also got sucked into behaving the same way. I don't know.'

Tina looked at the man walking up and down before her and she didn't recognise him any more. He could well have been wearing a loin cloth and brandishing a shield and spear, instead of the Levi jeans and Polo shirt that he was wearing.

The whole scene felt surreal.

Then she slammed her fist on the door frame, surprising both of them. 'That's not good enough Andile. There is something called self-control. You don't run with the rest of the herd just because they're all going in the same direction. And I am stunned to hear such a ridiculous and puerile excuse from you all people. Surely a highly educated man like you is capable of more rational thought?'

'This has nothing to do with education. It's all about tradition.'

'Oh bullshit. You just want an excuse to sleep around. Look, men come on to me all the time but I don't jump into bed with them. And do you know why? It's because I'm a married woman who is faithful to my husband. But you seem to have forgotten that you are married to me.'

Andile stopped his pacing and gave her a long look.

'I haven't forgotten. I am reminded of it every time I come home.'

'And you forget every time you leave home?'

'No, I'm aware of it all the time just as you are, Tina. You're the best wife that any man can ever hope to have.'

'If I'm so good then why did you feel the need to look elsewhere for what I can give you?'

He hesitated and then he sat back down on the sofa and ran his hand over his brow.

'I think the problem is that you've been so caught up playing out your role of being the good wife. It's as if you're following some kind of formula. Sometimes I feel as if I'm just a stage prop, like I'm just there to help you deliver your performance to perfection.'

Tina shook her head, trying to understand what he was trying to say, although she sensed that he was somehow making all this her fault.

'Everything's so formal. We have a textbook marriage where we must follow all these rules and regulations. Even in bed I sometimes wonder if the sex is for pleasure or simply another item to tick off on the agenda.' He paused. 'You've been so busy being a married woman that you've forgotten how to be Tina.'

Now it was her turn to be struck by his words and she winced inwardly.

And she could hear some relief in his voice like he was grateful to finally release himself from his burden of guilt and transfer it onto his wife. She leaned her head against the door frame to support herself as she felt her knees begin to wobble.

'Are you saying that you're bored with me? Do you regret marrying me?'

He sighed and then shook his head.

'No I don't think so. I just needed a place where I could distance myself for a while from all the responsibility.' He said the word like it was an inconvenience. 'I just needed some space where I could stop being a husband and just relax and have some fun with no strings attached.'

'No strings attached?' Tina blurted the words out. 'Even when she's siphoning money out of you and living rent-free in your flat? I see many strings. And what if she decides that she wants more commitment from you? Will you leave me and marry her then?'

'She understands the arrangement.'

Tina gasped. He had an answer for everything.

'But why do it at all?' She felt all the anger and bitterness begin to melt away and she let the tears run, flowing down her face and onto the carpeted floor. 'I'm your wife, Andile. You're not supposed to see anyone else but me. Doesn't that count for anything?'

He didn't reply. His face had frozen into a mixture of shock and remorse, as if he had suddenly realised that Tina had feelings too.

She finally moved away from her spot by the bathroom door and staggered out of the bedroom, closing the door behind her, desperate to get away from him.

She sat on the settee in the hallway staring at the phone and wondering who to call. She thought of her mother. Surely somewhere beneath the Bible verses that were sure to

ensue there would be some pearls of motherly wisdom to guide her through her troubles. But this wasn't news to be delivered to her mother down the telephone line.

She considered phoning her best friend Tanya or her sister Tsitsi in London but she wasn't ready to hear what she knew they would both say: 'I told you to leave that man.'

She picked up the receiver and began punching in Len's landline number. If he picked up then she'd know that he was home.

'Hello?' Another man's voice answered.

'Can I speak to Len please,' she said, taken aback by the strange voice that wasn't Len's.

'He's out of the country on tour. Can I take a message?'

'Just tell him Tina called.'

'Tina, hi,' the voice on the other side lifted as he recognised her name. 'This is his friend Jonathan. How are you?'

'Hi Jonathan.' She knew him. He was one of Len's drinking buddies since their varsity days.

'I just popped in to see if everything here is fine. He'll be back on Wednesday.'

She thanked him and replaced the receiver in the cradle. Then she put her head in her hands and groaned in deep disappointment. She wanted to see Len. He'd have taken her pain away in an instant.

'Tina?' She looked up and saw Andile standing by the door leading into the passage. He came towards her and sat next to her on the settee and took her hand in his.

'I am sorry.'

She didn't answer.

'Zodwa is just a fling. She means nothing.' He searched her face as if looking for signs of forgiveness. 'Tomorrow I will ask her to pack her things. She'll be out of the flat by the end of the month.'

'I want her out by next week.'

'Alright.'

'I will go and check myself to see that she has gone.'

'OK.'

University of Cape Town

Chapter 13

'Love is patient, love is kind... it keeps no record of wrong. Love never fails.'

The verse was drummed into the girls at the Convent until they could chant it in their sleep. They repeated it over and over in Religious Education under the watchful eye of Sister Anastasia, and it was there in front of them, scrawled across the board in big letters in Domestic Science because Sister Olivia believed that food cooked with love tasted like Heaven.

Tina reminded herself of that mantra when, for the third night that week, her husband reached for her under the purple duvet of the marital bed. She had responded to him on the last two occasions, wrapping her arms round him and drawing him close to her.

But on the third night the loving kindness in 1 Corinthians 13 was lost to her and she roughly pushed him off her and turned away from him, pulling the duvet up to her neck.

'What's wrong Tee?' He sounded bewildered. 'Did I talk in my sleep and say something incriminating?'

She rolled back to face him and glowered at him. 'That's not funny.'

'I didn't say it was funny. I'm just surprised that you're beating me off like that so viciously.'

'I'm not your convenience store that you can just drop into and help yourself whenever you like.'

'Can't a man make love to his wife now? Especially on a quiet Saturday night when the power's out?'

'You can go and get it from your mistress.'

He paused, taken aback by the bluntness of her retort. Then he nodded thoughtfully.
'So that's what this is about.'

'You can't expect me to continue with our life as normal after what you did to me with that woman. I need time to deal with this. I need some closure. Then I can trust you again.'

'What closure do you want?'

'Has she moved out of the flat in Avondale yet?'

He lay back against his pillow and ran the back of his hands along his forehead, then he crossed his arms over the duvet.

'Let's just give her some time, shall we? It's not easy to find a new place to rent in a hurry. Besides, we're supposed to give our tenants one month's notice.'

'She's not a tenant.'

'OK fine, fine. You're right. But remember, Tina, she needs to find her feet. People are starting to charge rent in US Dollars. Zodwa needs to find a place that she can afford. And it is almost Christmas so it's not a good time to move.'

'That's not my problem. She messed with a man who is not her husband and now she must pay the price. I want her out by the end of next week.'

'I'll speak to her.'

He grunted and then turned on his side, facing her and closed his eyes.

She studied him under the muted light of her bedside lamp, trailing with her eyes all the contours of his face, round the eyes and the bridge of his nose, along the lips whose kisses used to drive her to oblivion, and round his chin. He hadn't shaved in two days and the stubble growing on his face looked like it had been painted on by a designer in the night; the hair on his head so well trimmed it looked like shoe-polish. The curves of his hairline reminded her of geometry. She didn't dare touch it; it looked so neat.

He opened his eyes and smiled at her. 'This is nice.'

'What is nice?'

'Lying here next to you.'

'It doesn't happen often enough.'

She really needed to get up and switch off the generator. Its incessant drumming was getting on her nerves. There was no way of knowing when the electricity would come back on which would automatically switch it off.

'So are we all set for tomorrow?' He snuggled up to her and wrapped his feet around hers, stroking her ankles with his toes.

'Yes, we are.'

'Our visit to your parents is long overdue.'

'They're looking forward to it.'

'Is there enough meat left in the fridge for us to take to them?'

'Yes.'

He yawned. 'I'll swing by the golf club for a quick game then we'll leave when I get back. Are you going to church first?'

'Yes, the girls and I are attending Nyasha's church tomorrow. She's preaching.'

Andile looked surprised. 'I thought she was a social worker. I didn't realise she's a pastor.'

'She is a social worker but she's also a dedicated member of her church and they do sometimes invite lay members of the congregation to speak.'

'I see.'

Perhaps she should have married a practising Christian then she wouldn't need to explain these things. Perhaps if she had married a proper Christian, she wouldn't be lying here silently simmering at her sophisticated husband's uncouth behaviour.

'Let's sleep now. We don't want you waking up late for your friend.'

She reached over to switch off the bedside lamp. Then she remembered that she had to get up and switch off the damn generator.

'The next time I see that husband of yours, I swear I'm going to slap him.' Tanya sniffed, tossing back her bobbed weave.

'But why do you want to slap the poor man?' Nyasha put down her fork and looked up from her cheesecake.

'For causing Tina so much pain.'

'But there's really no need for violence, surely?' What good will that do?'

'And if you quote a Bible verse at me, I'll slap you too.'

'Len wants to whip him with a sjambok.' Tina took a sip of her coffee, black and strong the way she liked it. Every bit worth the generous price tag that came along with it in the restaurant they were sitting in: the Coffee Shop on the terrace of the five-star Meikles

Hotel, located in town along Fourth Street, not far away from the Methodist Church they had attended.

They had decided to stop by for coffee and cake after church to celebrate Nyasha's successful sermon titled: 'A Woman of Substance.' Since she wasn't married she couldn't really speak much about the virtues of men.

During the service Tina had made the decision to lay bare her secret about Andile's small house to Sarudzai and Nyasha who were still in the dark since she had sworn Tanya to secrecy. But now she saw no need to keep quiet. The secret was out in the open, making the rounds in Marondera, and she didn't want her friends to find out from other sources.

But when they took their seats round the table at the Meikles, she couldn't bring herself to tell them so Tanya took it upon herself to break the news. 'Andile is having an affair and he has set up his small house in his flat in Avondale.'

After the inevitable stunned silence and subsequent gasps of horror, Tina then proceeded to fill her friends in on all the details. She told them everything right up to her visit to Zodwa's flat and the flying coffee jar. After a moment's hesitation, she decided to tell them about her showdown with Andile, although she wasn't sure if they would approve of her reaction. They lived in a different world to Eunice.

Nyasha wiped away an invisible crumb from the collar of her cotton dress and then smoothed back the neat cornrows in her hair that had been tied back in a severe bun on the top of her head.

'I won't quote any Bible verses at you, Tanya, but I will remind Tina of the importance of exercising self-control.' She looked at Tina from the top of her spectacles. 'It is better to live in a corner of the roof than in a house shared with a contentious woman – Proverbs 25.'

Tanya threw down her fork which landed on top of her Black Forest cake. 'I think it's Tina who needs to move to a roof corner than to share a house with a deceitful man. Are you seriously telling me that she must keep quiet and submit to a husband who runs around with some other woman like an untamed animal? What do you think about all this Sarudzai? You're also married. What would you do if Josh did that to you?'

Sarudzai hadn't spoken a word since Tanya had made the announcement about Andile's affair. Her toasted ham and cheese sandwich remained untouched on her plate and she was staring at it as if she'd just heard news of a devastating earthquake somewhere in East Timor.

'I treat many women at the hospital who've been beaten up by their husbands for daring to ask them about their small house.' She finally spoke into her plate. 'I also treat many HIV-positive women who got the virus from their husbands.'

'And that's why you need to pack up and head for the hills Tina.' Tanya's stern voice interrupted.

'I didn't say that.' Sarudzai flashed an angry look at Tanya. 'It's not that easy to just walk away from a marriage. You invest too much into the relationship and you can't just flee whenever you decide to. But I don't expect you to understand that, Tanya, since you've never been married yourself.'

'I understand what Tanya's saying though.' Tina said hurriedly, noticing that Tanya's face had darkened and she looked like she was about to fracture Sarudzai's spleen.

Never remind a single woman over 30 that she's a spinster, especially when she desperately wants to get married.

'My sister, Tsitsi feels the same way, and yes, I have thought about running away.' Tina continued. 'But Andile has apologised and he promised to stop seeing Zodwa. She's packing up her things as we speak and leaving the flat.'

'And has he broken up with her?' Tanya asked, her tone dark.

'I don't know,' Tina took another sip of her coffee. 'But I told him that I would go to the flat and make sure that she's gone. I hope you girls will come along with me as backup.'

'I'll be happy to come along.' Tanya nodded her head. 'I'll be glad to assist her with her packing.'

'You won't save your marriage through anger and strife.' Nyasha said calmly, looking pointedly at Tina. 'So first, it's important to calm down and then consider your husband's reasons for straying.'

'Sometimes I think you speak like God's own press release Nyasha.' Tanya's disgust spilled through her lips. 'Well here's a news flash straight from First Corinthians: "The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife and likewise the wife to her husband...the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife." That means his body belongs to Tina alone and it's not to be shared by some low-class floozy who can't find her own man. I go to church too you know, and I can quote more verses at you if you want.'

There was silence at the table.

'What reasons did your husband give you?' Nyasha spoke to Tina, ignoring Tanya's outburst.

'He said that all men do it and so he too was tempted. Then he implied that our marriage was boring. A text book marriage, he called it.'

'That's just not good enough.' Nyasha sounded like Sister Bernadette admonishing them for not doing their mathematics. 'He should appreciate having a decent woman like you in his life. There are many wives out there who leave a lot to be desired.'

'And there are many single women out there with no scruples.' Sarudzai spoke up. She sounded very agitated. 'We married women must stand up and fight off these heifers chasing after our husbands. If your husband wants more fire and romance then spice it up and give it to him. If he wants several rounds in bed every night then just do it. Forget the 'I'm tired and have a headache' excuse. That's what painkillers are for.'

She had no idea of the double meaning of that word.

The discussion seemed to have struck a nerve with Sarudzai. She had hardly contributed to the conversation but now whatever righteous sentiments she may have taken from the service at the Methodist Church had evaporated, and she was back in the real world where instincts yielded faster results than prayer and faith.

'I am trying,' Tina said, remembering the sessions she and her husband had enjoyed until she almost shoved him off the bed the previous night. 'And Andile is trying too. He's been coming home early all week and he is really being attentive. And we're visiting my parents for lunch today at his request, so we're making progress.'

'Good.'

'So you're just going to forget about everything he's done to you and let it slide?'

Tanya was looking at her incredulously.

'I'm sure I don't have to remind you about the value of forgiveness,' said the Voice of Reason coming from Nyasha's direction. 'Just imagine how many divorces and broken families we would have if every wife chose not to forgive her husband. Lawyers like Tanya here would make a fortune.'

'Actually there is a very large pile of divorce cases on my desk,' Tanya said, digging her fork into her cake. 'We're very busy, but I can always make time for Tina if she wants.'

Nyasha and Sarudzai exchanged looks before they too turned to their plates.

Tina hadn't missed that look. 'I'm not going to take that route just yet.' She considered her reason very carefully before sharing it with her friends.

'I like being married. I like being someone's wife.' She avoided looking at Tanya. 'You girls always complain about how hard it is to find decent husband material and I don't want to go back out there again. Searching. Wondering if I'll meet someone again and if he's any good. At least I'm comfortable with Andile. I will learn to trust him again eventually.'

'Maybe you want to consider giving him a child. That usually keeps them occupied at home.' Nyasha said. 'Every man has a subconscious desire to procreate. It gives them a purpose in life.'

'Nyasha may have a point,' Sarudzai agreed. 'Josh and I are talking about starting a family, although we may need to put that on hold now that he's been offered that surgeon position in Australia.'

'When are you planning to move?' Tina asked, hoping to steer the topic of discussion away from herself.

'Next year some time once his work permit comes through. I'm sure there are also opportunities for specialists in women's health like me, so it's a good move. And I can't wait until we leave. At least in Australia I won't have to keep watching out for some greedy little nurse or secretary wanting a piece of my husband. I supported him when he was just a struggling medical student, so I don't see why I now must share him with some gold digger now that he's successful.'

Tanya looked at her arched eyebrows, her lips pursed. 'Is there something you'd like to share with us, Saru? You sound very bitter.'

'No, I don't.' Saru snapped. 'But I still think that Tina needs to think about starting her own family.'

'Andile doesn't want to start a family just yet. And I am not a baby-making machine. I'm not a queen bee who's only good for laying eggs and breeding.'

'And do you know what the bees do when a queen stops being productive?' They rear a new one and the old one must leave the hive. If she doesn't then the new queen will sting her to death. So take heed.' Nyasha's knowledge of the social habits of human beings seemed to extend to that of the animal and insect kingdom.

'But you can't use babies as a Band-Aid to cover up your problems,' Tina protested. 'Surely Andile and I have to resolve our own problems first before bringing an infant into picture.'

'A plaster protects the wound and assists the process of healing,' Dr Sarudzai Munyaradzi said. 'So yes, we are suggesting that you have a baby as a band-aid in healing your marriage.'

'Give your husband an heir and he'll have a good reason to stay at home. Or if he continues to stray, it'll ensure that he doesn't go too far.' Nyasha said with finality, as if they had all reached a resolution and the case was closed.

'But what if I decide to leave if he doesn't change?'

'Leave to go where?' Nyasha frowned at her. 'You have a perfectly good husband at home who made a silly mistake in a moment of weakness. Why would you want to do something so stupid?'

Tanya had been silently staring into her coffee and shaking her head. She now raised her head and looked directly at Tina.

'You know what I think Tina. It's your decision whether you choose to stay and breed, or leave. I arrest my case.'

Chapter 14

Tina did not like being questioned about babies and she was seething by the time she left the Meikles Hotel.

She blasted her hooter at a pedestrian who had stepped into the road as she sped down Harare Drive towards Alexander Park. The man jumped back and she caught a glimpse of his shocked face as she passed him.

The subject of babies was thrust at her from all corners. Her mother-in-law was the main culprit, insisting on labouring the issue each time she set her eyes on Tina. Her own mother was no less guilty although she was more tactful despite the fact that when it came to collecting grandchildren, she was losing dismally in the stakes, and Mai Moyo – with four of them under her belt - didn't miss an opportunity to remind her.

And Tina was aware that, with her 32nd birthday approaching with the New Year, her eggs were getting ripe, the way fruit ripens when left in the bowl for too long, and the issue could not continue to be brushed aside.

But breeding and babies was a no-go area until she was sure that Zodwa was out of their lives for good. She was even considering trying out the female condom that Ms Helen Mlazi-Schmidt had brandished at the salon. Tina wasn't as convinced as Andile that Zodwa was adhering to his terms and conditions to have sex with only him.

She approached a small shopping centre just off Harare Drive in Balantyne Park. She turned into the car park then stopped outside the TM Supermarket. Small shopping centres tucked away in the bowels of leafy suburbia like this one usually had certain grocery items that were out of stock in the larger centres. Tina was on the look out specifically for ginger ale and fresh cream. And if she was lucky enough to come upon some fresh milk and butter, she would get those too. She quickly counted the bank notes stuffed in a zipped compartment in her bag.

\$500 000.

That should be enough for any sudden discoveries.

She got out of the car and went into the supermarket, making a bee line for the dairy section. A woman was cleaning the shelves in the large fridge.

'Excuse me, do you have fresh cream?'

The woman straightened up and looked at Tina as if trying to decipher the meaning of the word 'fresh.' Then her face brightened.

'Yes, we do.' She pointed towards a row of tubs on the top shelf of the fridge.

'But that's imported stuff. I want fresh cream from our local Dairibord, not from South Africa.'

The woman's face fell and she shook her head apologetically.

'Sorry. We're out of stock. We usually keep them in that side.' She gestured towards a large area of the fridge, its yawning emptiness gleaming clean. 'We haven't received any deliveries from Dairibord in the last two weeks.'

Tina glanced at the South African section – different brands of cream, yoghurt, cheese, and she turned away. Today, she was not prepared to spend a fortune on overpriced imported products, no matter how appealing they looked.

She moved towards the beverages section in search of her ginger beer, and then she spotted a winding queue at the end of the supermarket, in the bakery section. She walked towards it, the smell of freshly baked bread growing stronger as she approached.

'How many loaves per customer?' She joined the line and spoke to a man standing in front of her, dressed in overalls and gumboots. He looked like a gardener.

'Two, I think,' the man replied.

Tina looked at her watch. It was past noon, and Andile was probably back from his Sunday morning golf game and waiting for her so they could leave for her parents' house.

There were about thirty people in the queue and another ten had already joined behind her. She sighed and remained where she was, clutching her bag with its bundle of money zipped away inside it.

Suddenly there was a commotion at the front end of the queue and loud, angry voices broke out. The disturbance rippled down the queue and people began muttering impatiently among themselves. The muttering soon turned into loud invectives of frustration.

There was a sudden surge forward as the queue disintegrated into a clamorous throng heaving towards the empty shelves in the bakery area. Tina was thrust forward and she found

herself wedged inside the crowd and jostled about in a sea of voices, body parts and body odour. She gasped and clutched onto someone's shoulder to avoid being knocked over by the people pushing behind her. She was beginning to suffocate.

She struggled to turn around and then pushed her way through the unyielding mob until she escaped, gasping for air. She stood at a distance clutching her chest and breathing deeply in and out. No amount of yeast, flour and water was worth her suffering grievous bodily harm.

She watched the heaving crowd of people – men, women - some with babies on their backs – and teenagers, lunging, the drone of their agitated voices rising into the rafters.

A blue and white *doek* had fallen to the floor and was being trampled under a pair of black *Tommy* felt shoes from Bata Shoe Company. Tina trailed her eyes from the feet up the thick legs that reminded her of tree trunks, past the wide hips and protruding buttocks upon which sat a bewildered looking baby, too frightened to cry, and strapped to the woman's back with a shawl. Even from a distance, the woman looked ferocious, punching the air with her fist above her bedraggled hair from which the *doek* had fallen.

'We can smell the bread so don't tell us that it's not ready,' the woman shouted, trying to force her way through the crowd. A man roughly pushed her back. She stumbled and then lunged forward again, almost knocking over an elderly man with bits of white hair on his head who was hurling expletives in a feeble voice.

'We will not bring out anything until you all settle down and stop pushing.' A man's voice shouted from behind the shelves.

A roar went up from the crowd, punctuated with various curses and clicks of the tongue.

Tina walked away from the chaos and hurried back towards the entrance. The ginger ale could wait.

'This is ridiculous,' she said to a uniformed security guard standing inside the entrance, brandishing a large set of keys.

'They're hungry, Madam, and they've been waiting since 6 o'clock. You can't blame them for getting angry. But they can shout as much as they like as long as they don't loot the

place or start destroying property. That's why I'm waiting here so I can roll down these security gates as soon as there's trouble.' He pointed to the heavy wrought-iron gates rolled up above the doors.

'Why did they take so long to serve the bread anyway? We all know that it's ready so why the delay?'

The guard shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

Tina almost ran out of the supermarket to her car. She unlocked it and got inside and slammed the door. Then she put her hands on the steering wheel and rested her head against it, choking back the tears.

Andile was drinking coffee on the veranda and reading the South African *Sunday Times* when she arrived home.

'I've told Stella that she can go,' he said, looking up from his newspaper. 'She wanted to leave early to visit her family in Mabvuku.'

'That's fine. I hope she finds transport.'

'I gave her extra money for a kombi.' He handed her a copy of the *Sunday Mail*. 'I got this for you. I really don't understand why you read this stuff. You should read the *Standard* to get an independent point of view.'

'I buy the *Sunday Mail* for the classifieds.' Tina opened the newspaper and went straight to page six. 'Look, 10kg of white sugar offered in exchange for 10 litres of cooking oil.'

'Maybe I should place an ad for one crate of Castle lager in exchange for a crate of Bohlingers beer.' Andile folded his paper and stood up. 'Do you want to change before we leave?'

Tina looked down at her dress with its wide hem playing against her leather sandals. It was made from the traditional Zulu Shweshwe cloth in brown and cream and she had bought it at Joburg airport the last time she had travelled to South Africa. She hadn't worn the dress at all since she bought it, but when she woke up that morning she had felt the desire to wear something African.

She shook her head. 'Do you think I need to change?'

'You look lovely.'

She followed Andile into the kitchen and began packing some meilie meal and a 2kg slab of Buttercup margarine into a picnic basket.

'It must have been a great church service since you're back so late,' Andile said, looking inside the basket.

'I spotted a queue for bread at Balantyne Park and decided to join it.' Tina threw some packets of dried fruit from Sara's consignment into the basket.

'Did you get some?'

'No. They took too long to bring out the bread and people revolted. You should have seen them clambering all over each other like a pack of wolves. It was like a scene from a horror movie. And I got caught up in the chaos. I gave up and escaped.'

'So now people have to go into battle just to get food.'

'You know, I seem to spend all my free time driving round and round all over town foraging for food when I could be doing other things with my life.' Tina began re-arranging the containers on the kitchen counter picking up each one and shoving it back in its place. Then she moved the spice rack which was fine where it was. Several bottles of spices fell off, bouncing along the counter, and she picked them up one by one and thrust them back on to the rack knocking over more bottles.

'It's like playing chess,' she said. 'You always need to calculate your next move and strategise where in this town there will most likely be milk or sugar or petrol or you hear and follow up on rumours of sightings of bacon or sausages in some remote Spar somewhere and then I use up my petrol to go and queue and buy something that should really be available at my doorstep if and when I want it.'

'Hey,' Andile said gently, putting his hands on her shoulders and turning her round to face him. 'What's this? Why are you so upset?'

'It's all just too much.'

'Is that all?'

She nodded. Her whole existence was a battle and she was living each day on high alert, her ears constantly pricked up for intelligence on which shop had received the latest delivery of toilet paper and cooking oil.

And together with her extra large handbag in which she carried hordes of cash just in case, she also dragged along the constant fear and suspicion that Zodwa was lurking in the peripheries, dangling herself tantalisingly in front her husband whose traditional roots stopped him from controlling himself.

She took a deep, shaky breath and then exhaled.

'But do you really need to do all that?' Andile said, still holding her by the shoulders and searching her eyes. 'I'm aware of the day to day challenges of surviving, but we do receive consignments of most of what we need from Joburg. If you run out you're supposed to make a list and Sara will deliver.'

He was right up to a point.

'She doesn't deliver eggs and fresh bread.' She reached for a piece of straw sticking out of the basket and began absently picking at it. 'We've gone back to the Stone Age. To being hunter-gatherers all over again.'

Andile laughed.

'Not quite,' he said, patting her head like she was petulant pre-teen. 'We haven't regressed that far yet. I think you just get caught up in this struggle for food because everyone else is doing it.' He went to pick up the cooler bag by the door in which he had packed beers, ice and the meat. 'You can bake the bread yourself or teach Stella how to do it. So don't stress yourself. Now we need to go otherwise we'll be late for lunch. Your parents are waiting.'

The smell of cooking stew that greeted Tina as she walked into her mother's kitchen transported her straight back to 1981 when they lived in Penhalonga just 20km outside of Mutare. The same aroma filled her six-year old nostrils as she and Tsitsi, then four, sat at the window in the lounge watching the road for their father's green Peugeot 404 to appear while Sisi Florence, her mother's cousin who lived with them, prepared supper in the kitchen.

Her parents' routine was almost always the same. Her father would finish work at the Council offices in town then collect his wife from Dr Steyn's surgery in Main Street where she worked as his receptionist and nurse. The surgery was well-located close to the main bus station ensuring a steady flow of sick patients dropping in for pills, cough mixtures and injections.

Twenty six years later and life was very different. Her parents had risen up the ranks thanks to the five years they spent in the UK in the 90s. He had worked as a university researcher while studying for his master's degree, and his wife sharpened her nursing skills working for the NHS. They were now firmly established at the high end of the food chain in one of Harare's affluent northern suburbs, Chisipite, complete with swimming pool, electric gate and fence, and a steady supply of clean, running water, thanks to the borehole installed by their *mukwambo*, Andile.

Yet the aromas of Tina's childhood remained the same each time she visited her parents. The smell of ox liver fried with tomatoes and onions for breakfast, or mealies boiling in a big pot on the stove, and vanilla essence being stirred into cake batter before being put in the oven.

Mai Sanyanga turned from her pot now with a smile when Tina entered.

'Tina, my child, we were expecting you a long time ago,' she said, wiping her hands on the apron over her pleated orange skirt and cream silk blouse. She had not removed the outfit she had worn to church that morning like she usually did.

'Sorry we're late. I had coffee with the girls after church.' Tina put the basket on the kitchen table then bent her head over the pot breathing in the flavours - curry powder, paprika and Oxo meat cubes. She began unpacking the basket, taking out the packet of mealie meal and the 2kg slab of Buttercup margarine she had kept frozen until her next visit.

'Oh my child you found margarine,' her mother exclaimed, picking up the slab of Buttercup and looking at it as if it was a gold bar. The white packaging had peeled off in one corner, exposing a little of the yellow margarine. 'We've not been able to get any margarine at all for weeks and my supply was running out. This should keep us going for a while, and I'll

be able to bake some of that Cowboy Cake your father loves so much. Did you manage to order the baking powder?’

‘Yes, it’s all in here with the spices and the dried fruit you wanted.’

‘You can put it in the freezer with the bread that your father brought yesterday when he stumbled upon a queue at Groombridge shops. He was coming from a meeting at the university - you know he still helps out there sometimes since they’re losing lecturers. Where’s your husband?’

‘He’s on his cell phone with George planning their next trip to Ruwa to buy more meat for Christmas,’ Tina said, almost shoving the margarine into the freezer and wishing it was George’s head. ‘I don’t see why they have to keep going there though. We have more than enough meat to last us till the New Year.’

‘Don’t be so rough with that margarine, Tina,’ her mother said, not looking up from the stew pot where she had just stirred in some chopped carrots. ‘You’ll break it.’

Tina closed the freezer door, resisting the urge to slam it.

Andile walked in carrying the blue cooler bag. He placed it on the floor and went towards Mai Sanyanga with a wide smile.

‘Mhoroi, Mai,’ he said, breaking protocol and giving his mother-in-law a hug. ‘How wonderful to see you again. It has been a long time.’

‘I was beginning to think that Tina had left you behind,’ Mai Sanyanga replied looking as if she was about to melt under her son-in-law’s dazzling charm.

‘It was his idea to come here for Sunday lunch so how could I leave him behind?’ Tina said, sullenly picking up the cooler bag from the floor and placing it on the sink, rattling the dishes and cutlery drying on the rack.

She was her mother’s daughter and all she’d received was a calm, maternal smile and a gentle reproach for her late arrival, and yet her husband was receiving an ecstatic welcome as if he was some Arab sheik bearing gifts.

‘What are you cooking, Mai? It smells divine,’ Andile was saying while peering into the stew pot.

'Beef and vegetable stew.' She spooned some onto a plate and handed it to him. 'Here, you can have a taste. The vegetables are all from my garden except for the potatoes.'

Andile took a mouthful and closed his eyes as if he were tasting a cordon bleu meal. 'This is absolutely delicious. I'm going to have three helpings of this for lunch.'

Mai Sanyanga's laughter tinkled throughout the kitchen.

'Mom, come see the meat that Andile's brought for you and Dad,' Tina interrupted the mother-in-law-son-in-law reunion.

'I will leave you to take care of the meat while I go and say hello to Baba.' Andile put his plate down and left the room, winking at Tina as he left. She wasn't quite sure what the wink meant.

Tina and her mother set to work unwrapping the newsprint packages and inspecting the chunks of meat inside.

'So much meat. This will last us for weeks,' Mai Sanyanga said, her face up lit up like a little girl unwrapping a birthday present. 'I'll even be able to use some of it to make biltong and hang it over the stove so it dries nicely. But do you have enough left at home for you and your husband?'

'We have enough,' Tina said placing the cooler box on the floor. 'Remember we don't really eat that much since it's just me and Andile, although we also give rations to Stella and Johnson.'

'What about his parents?'

'Baba Moyo has his own meat buying club.'

'And I'm sure Andile contributes what he can to that club.' Mai Sanyanga put the meat in a dish and set it aside. 'I'll pack it up nicely and put it in deep freezer later. I hope you realise how lucky you are to have a husband who can provide for you so abundantly. It's not easy to find this kind of food in such quantities anymore, do you know that?'

Tina knew it but didn't need to be reminded of it. She switched the kettle on. 'Do you want me to cook the rice?'

'No, I'll do it.' Her mother gave her a pointed look sensing her grouchy mood. 'It can't be cheap having groceries delivered to you in bulk from South Africa but he does it for you. And now he's organising a borehole for your house as well. So I hope you're grateful.'

'Yes I am, mom.' She sighed. Of course she was grateful that her husband supplied all her needs. But it seemed he felt that this entitled him to do as he pleased outside the home for which he provided so abundantly.

'Now go and say hello to your father. And you need to offer your husband a drink.'

Her mother turned away and began preparing to cook the rice.

Tina left the kitchen and went to the veranda where she could hear the men's voices. Her father looked very relaxed in a bright red shirt and a pair of yellow cotton trousers with a large palm tree design running up one leg. He insisted on wearing these pants - bought on holiday with his wife in Mauritius five years ago - when he was entertaining family at home. Tina's mother had been threatening to burn a hole in them one day so she could find an excuse to throw them away, but never got round to doing so.

'There she is,' he said as she approached. 'Andile tells me you are helping your mother in the kitchen. Did you bring ice for my whisky?'

'I'll bring it for you now. I just came to say hello.' What would you like to drink Andi?'

'He'll have a whisky like me.' Her father gestured with his glass towards a bottle of Johnny Walker Black on a tray on the table. 'You mix yours with soda water like me don't you, son?'

Andile nodded and smiled at her. 'I'd love some as well if it's not too much trouble, Tee.' He had brought some beers with him in the cooler box but seemed to have changed his mind.

'It's never too much trouble for my daughter,' her father's voice boomed. 'There's a crate of soda water in the dining room although it's not Schweppes. It's some other brand that I was lucky enough to find at the bottle store at Bond Street shopping centre in Mount Pleasant. See how far a man has to drive just to find soda water.'

This was no different to Marondera. She may have been in her parents' house with her own people but the dynamics remained the same. She was still a bee. She still had to be

industrious, helping out in the kitchen while keeping the men happy serving them drinks, ice and food. She had mastered the worker bee part of her role, but her girlfriends had made it clear that she had failed dismally in the queen bee department since she was failing to breed.

She went back into the house for the ice but then stopped and went into the lounge instead. She hadn't read all the information about bees from her father's encyclopaedia and now was a good time to refresh her memory - especially the part about the queen bee being an egg-laying machine. She also wanted to read for herself about the new queens-in-waiting, ready to sting the old one to death.

She opened the thick leather-bound volume thinking how obsessed she had become with the subject since Mai Moyo had lectured her about the diligence of worker bees. She ran her eyes over the page and a new heading immediately caught her eye.

The Assassin Bug: This vicious-looking creature lies in wait for unsuspecting garden insects and then stabs its prey with its proboscis, paralysing it and injecting a toxin that dissolves the tissue. The assassin bug then sucks up the other bug's tissues. The females may be the better assassins because they need protein to produce their eggs.

Tina didn't need to be a rocket scientist to figure out who was the assassin bug preying on her territory, sucking the life out of her.

Assassin bugs are sometimes known as "kissing bugs" because they often bite people near the mouth. Some kinds of assassin bugs live in people's homes where they like to be around bathtubs, sinks and drains.

Zodwa had made a great show of her domestic talents in Marondera, cleaning up and doing the dishes so she was very much at home around sinks and drains.

And Andile had evidently been paralysed out of his senses by Zodwa's kisses since he had thought nothing of lying to his wife while he played house with another woman for six months.

Tina closed the encyclopaedia with a thump. The time had come for her to speak to her mother and reveal to her the true nature of her darling son-in-law whom she thought was God's gift to the Sanyangas.

'Tee?' Her husband appeared holding the bottle of whisky and he smiled when he saw her sitting on the leather sofa next to the cabinet. 'Your father's wondering where the ice is.'

She looked up at him, her eyes feeling like glaze and then she gestured towards the drinking glasses arranged in the cabinet under the row of encyclopaedias.

'You can help yourself to a glass. And since you're in here you may as well get the ice yourself.'

University of Cape Town

Chapter 15

Mai Sanyanga stared into her gin and tonic as if searching for an answer to why her *mukwambo*, who had supplied the gin, could behave in the way that her daughter claimed. 'I sensed that something was wrong when you arrived. I could see that you were unhappy.'

'It's been really hard living with all this on my shoulders.' Tina said from her usual position, lying on her back on her parents' bed and staring up at the ceiling with her mother sitting on the edge next to her.

Lunch was over and the men had driven to the bottle store in Mount Pleasant to buy a crate of soda water for Andile to stock up on his supply, leaving Tina and her mother to spend some quality mother-daughter time.

The bedroom with its surroundings in peach and cream hues exuded rest and tranquillity, with its open French doors leading onto a patio where Mai Sanyanga spent many solitary hours breathing in the scent from her rose bushes while sipping on Rooibos tea and reading from her collection of books by Joyce Meyer and Helen Stein Rice.

'But he's been such a good son-in-law,' Mai Sanyanga said, putting her glass down on a woven coaster on the bedside table. 'I thought he was more sensible than that. And I am deeply disappointed with his mother. I'd have expected a respectable woman like her to show more integrity.'

'I have realised that people have double standards when it comes to their own families.' Tina scowled at the ceiling, remembering what Eunice had said about hyenas in *doeks*. 'His family knew about this woman yet they kept it wrapped up in silence so that even I didn't know about it. If anyone disapproved of what he was doing, they certainly didn't publicly condemn it.'

'I have told you before. We are the *vatoorwa* – as married women we were taken away from our families and brought into our husband's home turf. They are not obliged to include us in their family matters, and there will always be certain elements who will constantly remind us that we are outsiders.'

Tina thought she detected a hint of resentment in her mother's voice. She was old enough to know that her mother had a nemesis of her own in the form of her father's sister, Flavia, whom they called *Tete*, meaning the female father.

Tete Flavia was one of the few people capable of chipping away at Mai Sanyanga's calm demeanour and thoroughly ruffling her feathers.

'Well, my mother-in-law does a very good job of making me feel like an outcast,' Tina said with some resentment of her own.

'I hope you didn't fly into a rage and attack your husband about all this.'

Tina sat up, bewildered at her mother's sudden change in allegiance. 'The man betrayed me. Surely I'm entitled to feel angry?'

'Yes of course you are,' her mother said, absently picking up her bible from the bedside table. 'I am angry too. But your situation is not uncommon. Many women, young and old, live with this kind of betrayal all the time.'

'So are you saying that I should pray about it and hope it goes away?' Tina looked at the bible in her mother's hands and hoped that she wasn't going to quote something at her. Her friends had done enough of that already.

'Praying always helps. But I'm saying that anger can destroy everything that you've worked so hard to build. You need to harness that anger and use it to your advantage. There are other ways to deal with it.'

'Like what?' Tina didn't expect that her mother would recommend the painkilling remedy.

'Men stray. It's inbred.' A subtle trace of satire laced her mother's dulcet tone. 'Did he ask you for a divorce?'

'No.'

'Exactly.' Mai Sanyanga replaced the bible on the bedside table and turned to look straight into Tina's face. 'You are still Mai Moyo and that gives you the upper hand. Guard your position with the utmost resolve and don't let those Moyos break you down. No-one said that marriage was easy and the time has come for you, Tina, to demonstrate the strength of character that your Tete and I spoke to you about when you got married.'

'So what must I do, Mom? How do I deal with all this?'

Her mother took a sip of her gin and tonic as if to cleanse away the defiance that had trickled into her voice. 'Your husband has apologised for his indiscretion. And he seems to be trying very hard to make peace, coming here with you today to spend time with us, not to mention the fact that he's now sinking a lot of money into building a borehole for you like he did for us. I know that forgiveness is hard for you at this point but do try and accommodate him.'

'So I'm just supposed to forget everything that's happened?'

'You must never forget these things because they are lessons for you to learn from. But you have already confronted him on the issue. He understands that you're hurt. Now don't dwell on the issue.'

'But I don't trust him any more, Mother,' Tina said dropping her head into her hands. 'I cannot forgive him for betraying my trust and sleeping with that woman. I might have been able to put it behind me if it had happened only once. But he set her up in our flat and treated her like his second wife. I can't get over that.'

'So don't forgive him until you're ready. But give him the opportunity to pay his dues, my child,' her mother said gently. 'Being hostile towards him will not resolve matters. It will only drive him away and back to that woman and you don't want that. No man wants to go home to a cold house and an angry, nagging wife.'

Tina lay back on the bed and contemplated the ceiling again, her hands behind her head. She could hear the wisdom in her mother's words and this was by far the most reasonable advice she had received compared to Tsitsi and Tanya's more militant approach. And Eunice was a living example of the havoc that could be wreaked by vengeance.

'I suppose you're right,' she conceded grudgingly.

'Of course I'm right,' her mother said, picking up her gin and tonic and raising it in a toast to herself. 'These men can be so foolish sometimes and they need to be reined in. It's up to us women to teach them how to behave like human beings.'

Tina was still mulling over her mother's advice the following Tuesday as she sat in the make-shift office, built by the agency that she worked for, the Women's Entrepreneurship Network, in Mazowe district, about 50km from Harare.

Andile had gone off to Johannesburg again that morning – presumably alone – so she had a couple of days to ponder over everything.

The modest structure, built from bricks with a corrugated iron roof, consisted of a small room furnished with four school chairs set around a teacher's table, all of which had been salvaged from a pile of broken furniture in the storeroom at the local secondary school.

Most of the yellow lacquer on the chairs had scratched off, and the table was supported by broken bricks on the floor to stop it from wobbling. A hand-sewn curtain in red and white plaid hung across the single window which was open to let the air in. The room opened out to a tiny area that served as the kitchen with a two-plate stove, a kettle and several cups and plates arranged in a tray on another small, rickety table.

Mai Kudzai, one of the dozen women who ran the market gardening project funded by the agency, walked into the office with a small bottle of Fanta orange and came towards Tina and Eve, the American deputy director, who were seated on two of the chairs.

'I've been saving this for your next visit. You will have to share it between you since this is all I have,' she said as she drew up a chair. The seat fell to the floor with a thud as she lifted the chair. She picked it up and replaced it before she carefully sat down, holding it in place with her round hips.

'This is more than enough, thank you Mai Kudzi,' Eve said, taking the bottle and pouring the Fanta into two plastic tumblers on the table in front of her.

'No, no. It's not enough.' Mai Kudzai shook her head so vigorously that her *doek* almost fell off and her generous bosom vibrated under her red T-shirt. 'Tina will tell you this. In our culture we always offer visitors something to eat and drink, especially important people like you who have driven all the way from Harare to see us. Now I can't even give you buns to eat.'

'We've already eaten,' Eve replied quickly, giving her an understanding smile.

'Visitors also bring gifts,' Tina said, cheering up at her good news. She bent over to pick up a large travel bag and placed it on the table. 'We've brought something that I think you will find very useful.'

She opened the bag and began to unpack several bulk packs of sanitary towels and cotton wool. Mai Kudzai gasped and clapped her hands in disbelief. 'What is this?'

'We heard about the international appeal that the trade unions sent out for women's sanitary towels. They're no longer readily available since the local manufacturer pulled out of the country, and most people can't afford the imported ones in the shops. So this is part of the donation that we've received from our sister organisation in Pretoria. We paid a fortune for the import duty but it was worth it.' Tina held up a packet and stared at it. 'I can't believe that something as simple and essential as this is now out of reach.'

'Oh it is,' Mai Kudzai exclaimed, taking the packet from Tina's hands and cradling it in her hands. 'You'll be shocked at what we are using – old rags that have to be washed over and over again. Rolled up newspapers. I met a woman who told me that they have resorted to using tree barks. Imagine walking around with bits of a tree between your legs.'

Tina felt a shudder ripple through her and she said a silent prayer of thanks for the Lil-lets tampons in her bag. 'But that must be dangerous though. It puts you at risk of all kinds of infections.'

'Yes but who in their right mind is going to pay up to a million dollars for a pack of pads? We have to put our families' needs before our own health. That's the way things are now.' Mai Kudzai spoke matter-of-factly.

'And then that ridiculous male minister has the cheek to say that you have to go back in time and use animal hides like your grandmothers,' Eve said, her voice filled with disgust. 'It's always the women who must suffer isn't it? These men find the whole damn thing funny.'

'But that's because talking about these things is taboo here, so they dismiss it because they won't speak of such things.'

'Yes but dismissing the issue won't stop the menstrual cycle. They can't just sweep it under the carpet,' Eve spluttered.

'They are sweeping it under the carpet,' Mai Kudzai said with a dry laugh. 'Meanwhile our girls stay at home and miss school, and the women don't go to work for days because they're too embarrassed to go out in public.'

'Well, I hope this donation helps.' Tina took a sip of her Fanta. It tasted warm against her tongue, its fizz so weak it felt like foam in her mouth.

'Sorry it's so warm. We have no fridge and so no ice.' Mai Kudzai gave her an apologetic look as if reading her mind.

Eve cleared her throat and opened her notebook. 'How are your vegetables doing?'

'I don't have to tell you that this market gardening project is not performing well,' Mai Kudzai said, resting her elbows on the table. 'The rains are erratic and the crops aren't growing properly so we can't sell them. We need to buy fertiliser and more seeds. Those are difficult enough to find as it is, and then I went to the bank in town the other day to withdraw money from the special account you opened for us. I queued for four hours and by the time my turn came to get to the cashier, the money had run out. How do you run a business under these conditions?'

'This project was meant to become self-sustaining in two years after which we would wean you off the funding,' Tina said, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. Half of the backrest had fallen off and it looked as if a large rat had taken a huge bite off it. 'This would have happened under normal conditions, but we're not operating under normal conditions. If big business is battling to cope what then of a small, rural project?'

'And to think that this is one of the most fertile farming regions in the country. So many farms, but half of them are lying useless since the farmers were chased away.' Mai Kudzai shifted in her chair to edge the seat back into place under her. 'Most of us women are the breadwinners now since our husbands were labourers on those farms. And they don't operate any more.'

'What about the Mazowe Mine?' Tina asked.

Mai Kudzai snorted. 'What about it?'

Tina got the message.

'So how else are you earning money?' Eve wanted to know.

'Ah,' Mai Kudzai sighed. 'This and that. Some of us knit and crochet doilies and we cross the border into Mozambique to sell them, or we head for South Africa. As for some of these young ones.' She shook her head.

'What about the young ones?'

'Let me just say this.' Mai Kudzai leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. 'The female body is a good currency. There will always be men out there who are willing to pay for a piece of it.'

The door opened, interrupting her, and a young woman in her early twenties walked in holding some books. She approached them with a shy smile, her eyes downcast. The three hard-covered counter books appeared to weigh down on her thin wrists, threatening to break them into pieces.

'This is Prudence,' Mai Kudzai said. 'She does the book-keeping for us because she's so good with numbers. She got a C in 'O' Level maths you know.'

Tina and Eve smiled a greeting to her and she responded, her voice escaping her shrunken throat in a croak. Tina could see that she was a very pretty girl beneath the sunken cheeks and the high cheekbones sticking out from her face like elbows. Prudence put the books down and glanced with awe at the pile of sanitary towels on the table.

'Are those for sale?' Her curiosity overcame her shyness.

'No,' Mai Kudzai said, her voice softening. 'These are gifts from our kind friends. Here take these. You will need them.'

Prudence grabbed the packets, her drawn face lighting up with surprised delight. '*Maita chaivo*,' she gushed, flashing a smile at Tina. 'Thank you so much. I will save this and only use it for special occasions.'

'No, you must use it now,' Eve exclaimed in protest. 'These are supposed to make your life easier.'

Prudence looked at her like she was from another planet. Then she turned to Mai Kudzai. 'I am going to the clinic now. I hear there's a doctor from Harare who is seeing patients today.'

'Well go on then,' Mai Kudzai waved her away. 'Don't waste any more time, otherwise you will only get back home after dark, and you know that it's not safe for young women to walk around at night anymore.'

Prudence waved goodbye to the visitors and then hurried out of the room, adjusting her pink skirt that was almost slipping from her emaciated waist.

Mai Kudzai stared at the closed door, her lips pursed.

'Then there are those ones like Prudence,' she said, her voice dry. 'The small houses. She used to belong to one of those rich men who come drinking at the Mazowe Hotel, but he has long since abandoned her.'

Tina's head snapped up. 'Small house?'

'Yes, but then she's paying the price. You've seen her. She's all skin and bones and her neck is all dried up and wrinkled like a chicken's. She can try and fool us all she wants but we can all see what's happening there. But I suppose when you're starving, you don't think about the dangers of getting the Sickness. Because either way, you're going to die.'

Tina began to pack the sanitary towels back into the bag, lowering her head so the other women wouldn't see her face. She could feel the muscles around her eyes and her cheeks growing taut.

'We need to head back to town soon,' Eve stood up, looking shaken. 'But first I want to see your vegetables so I can make my own analysis.'

Mai Kudzai led them outside to an open area behind the office. Half an acre of the land had been tilled and arranged into beds in which rows of cabbages, mange-touts and carrots had been planted.

The sun beat down upon them as they walked and once again, everything around them seemed to sag under the dry heat, the deep green leaves nodding wearily in the trees. In the distance the peaks of the hills surrounding the valley rose in silhouettes almost indistinct in the haze. Tina wiped away the drops of sweat that had formed on her brow and she felt her damp cotton blouse stick to the skin on her chest.

She walked towards the carrots and bent down to examine them. Their leaves hung limply from the stems, drooping towards the ground.

'When last did you water these carrots?' She dug her finger into the soil. It felt hard and powdery against her nail. She pulled out a carrot and held it up in the air. It dangled in front of her, a white sliver of a root.

'We're waiting for the rain to fall again,' Mai Kudzai said, glancing up at the clear sky. 'It's too much work for the girls to fetch water from the river and bring it all the way here.'

'This is pointless,' Eve muttered to Tina under her breath. 'We need to re-strategise. Maybe shift our focus from micro-finance to simple food aid.'

'Or just close down and leave the big donors to move in.'

Eve threw a surprised look at Tina. 'I was thinking more along the lines of scaling down not total abandonment.'

'I suppose you're right,' Tina said, watching Mai Kudzai walking up and down the vegetable beds, examining the crops and pulling out the odd, intrepid weed.

They drove back to Harare in their agency 4x4 with Eve behind the wheel. They didn't bother to make the traditional stop to admire the Mazowe Dam and buy pockets of oranges from the Mazowe Citrus Estate at the kiosk. They had given all their personal money on them to Mai Kudzai to buy more Fanta and buns, and Tina was in no mood to play tourist.

When they returned to Harare, Tina got out of the 4x4 and headed straight for her Polo in the office parking lot, shaded by green and white striped awnings.

She had two hours to kill before her 4pm strategic meeting with Eve. She pulled out of her bay and drove towards the Travel Plaza, a small shopping centre nestled in the Avenues close to Parirenyatwa Hospital.

Most of the lunch time crowd had thinned out as people returned to their offices. The tables on the pavement of the main restaurant, popular with diplomats and other expatriates who worked in embassies and NGOs in the surrounding areas, were now empty except for one or two where some businessmen were rounding off their lunchtime meeting over a cup of coffee.

Tina stood outside a small pharmacy in a corner of the plaza. She quickly looked around her for a familiar face. No-one she recognised caught her eye, and people went about their business, going in and out of the shops without paying any attention to her.

She entered the pharmacy and was relieved that it didn't have a bell signalling the arrival of a customer. It was almost empty inside except for a couple of foreign-looking women, probably American from the embassy down the road, who were consulting the pharmacist. Two assistants stood chatting behind the counter and they nodded a greeting to her as she entered.

She walked around the aisles, studying boxes and packages of over-the-counter medication – pills, syrups, eye drops, packets of saline water. In another section were rows of imported lotions, shampoos and other toiletries. She stood in front of a shelf of vitamin supplements and then surveyed the counter.

A display of Protecta condoms stood next to the till. Tina never understood why pharmacies displayed these things in such a prominent place, forcing people to buy them in full view. Next to the Protecta display she spotted the pink and white Femidom boxes that she was searching for. Her heart sank. They were beautifully arranged on the counter directly opposite the entrance.

She gave a deep sigh and then, with a final glance at the Femidom boxes, turned around and walked out of the pharmacy, wishing with all her heart that she had just accepted the boxes that Ms Helen had dished out at the salon.

Back in her office, Tina sat at her desk and stared broodingly at her computer screen. She couldn't concentrate on the notes she was writing about that morning's field trip to Mazowe. She kept seeing Prudence in her mind, now only a shadow of the lovely young woman she used to be until desperation made her do something stupid.

Or perhaps it wasn't desperation. The allure of sugar daddies was almost as old as time itself, providing easy money for young girls who were too lazy to earn it themselves.

There was a knock at her door. She looked up and saw Len walking in. His dreadlocks were plaited in thick cornrows and he hadn't shaved in days.

'This is a surprise, When did you get back?'

'I'm coming from the airport right now,' he said, taking a seat on the visitor's chair across her desk. 'I asked my band mates to drop me off here and I'll fetch my luggage from them later.'

His face looked drawn and he seemed subdued, unlike his normal convivial self.

'You look exhausted. Where were you touring this time?'

'Amsterdam, Oslo, London.' He spoke with the jaded indifference of a frequent flyer.

'How are you, Tina?'

'I'm fine.' She shifted in her seat and averted her eyes. The last time she had seen him was when he brought her home from Marondera and fed her whisky. They hadn't spoken about that night since he had disappeared in an aeroplane after that.

'I hear the sparks have been flying in my absence.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that I know you and Eunice went after Zodwa last week and you almost smashed her skull in with a coffee jar.' He paused. 'I didn't realise that you were the violent type. She must have gotten to you.'

'She did.' Tina frowned. 'So how did you find out about the fight? Did she tell you?'

'No. Andile told me.'

'Oh.' She didn't realise that her husband had been speaking to Len.

'I had a drink with him at Joburg airport yesterday while I was waiting for my connecting flight to Harare.'

He hadn't taken his eyes off her since he walked into the office and he ran his gaze slowly along her face as if searching for something.

'Did Andile also tell you that he walked in on us at Zodwa's house?'

'He told me everything. He said that you want her out of the flat.'

'Yes, I do.'

'What if she hasn't gone? What will you do?'

A surge of anger swept through her and she stood up. 'I'm having trouble believing that he has asked her to leave. So the only way I can be sure is to see it for myself. And I'm going there right now. If she's still there I'm going to tell her to get out.'

Len didn't get up.

'Are you coming with me?'

He shook his head. 'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because she's still there. She hasn't moved out.'

'How do you know?'

'Please sit down.' Len's voice was low but firm.

'No, Len. I want that woman out of the flat. I want her gone today.' She could feel the rage roaring in her ears. This was war.

'I said, sit down.'

'No, she must go.'

'She won't go today or tomorrow or any other day. That's what I'm trying to tell you. That's why Andile came to see me at the airport to ask me to tell you. She won't go because she's pregnant.'

Chapter 16

The room shifted as if a nail holding it together had fallen off. Everything around her seemed to suddenly dislodge as she felt her brain somersault inside her head. She clutched at the table to steady herself and then stumbled when her hand couldn't find it.

'Tina.' Len jumped up and caught her as she swayed and felt her legs buckle.

He guided her to one of the three leather sofas on one side of the room that were reserved for business meetings and knelt in front of her.

'What happened? Are you alright?'

'My head began spinning a bit and I lost my balance.' She closed her eyes and slowly rubbed her forehead. 'It can't be true. Zodwa cannot be pregnant.'

'I'm sorry but it is true.'

She dropped her head into her hands, clutching her braids in her fists and groaned. She felt her stomach turn and she swallowed deeply, trying to contain the nausea spreading through her.

'I'll get you some water.'

'No.' She grabbed his hand to stop him. 'Take me home. I want to go home. Everyone is going to ask questions if they see me like this and I won't know what to say to them.'

He nodded and then went to switch off the computer at her desk and picked up her handbag.

Tina stood up and took a deep breath and then slowly exhaled, trying to gather herself. She smoothed down her linen pant suit and then straightened her shoulders.

'Do I look alright?'

'You look fine - on the outside.' Len gave her the handbag. 'You just need to put one foot in front of the other until we get to your car. Then you can drop the act.'

He opened the door and let her pass. Her heart sank as she saw Eve walking down the passage towards her carrying some plastic files.

'Tina, I was on my way to you for our meeting. I have some ideas that I want to run past you.' She stopped and a look of surprise came over her face. 'You look like you've been struck by lightning. Is everything OK?'

'We have a family emergency,' Tina said, trying to sound normal. 'Len and I have to rush off.'

'I hope it's nothing serious.' Eve's voice was filled with concern. 'I mean, you really look like you're in shock Tina.'

'Oh you know these relatives,' Len cut in. 'There's always someone who does something stupid. Then we all get dragged into it.'

'Oh I see. Well I hope everything will turn out fine.'

'I should be back tomorrow, Eve. We can reschedule then.' Tina said quickly, anxious to escape before her colleague could dig any deeper.

She sat in the passenger seat of her car and closed her eyes, still fighting the nausea curdling inside her stomach. Len got into the driver's seat and she heard him tap rapidly on his cellphone.

'I'm just sending a text message to my friend Jonathan to pick me up from your house later,' he said, returning his phone to his jeans pocket.

He turned on the ignition and reversed out of the parking bay. She sank into her seat and stared with unseeing eyes out of the windscreen as Len drove through the streets towards Alexander Park. The road stretched out before her and she looked straight ahead, oblivious to the cars, buildings and trees rolling past her window. Occasionally a car or a kombi ahead of them would suddenly swerve sharply, almost landing on the verge of the road. Len followed suite, avoiding a large pothole cutting like a scar through the tarmac. She closed her eyes, shielding them with her hand on her forehead and her elbow against the door, and listened to the hum of the engine as Len silently steered the car.

They arrived to great activity at No 8 Copper Close. An enormous truck with the words *Amanzi – Borehole Services* painted across the sides was parked in the driveway, and several men walked briskly around the yard. The tops of their overalls hung around their waists and their bare chests gleamed with sweat under the searing heat. The sound of loud

drilling rose from the bottom of the garden, and Tina heard one of the men shout, 'We need to dig deeper. We haven't hit the water yet.'

Len led her straight to the main bedroom where he took off her shoes and tucked her in under the duvet.

He asked Stella who was hovering in the passage to bring them some water. She brought a glass tumbler on a small tray and then quietly disappeared, closing the door behind her.

He sat on the edge of the bed and held the glass to Tina's lips. She gripped it and drank the cold water, feeling it soak through her dry mouth. She coughed as the water loosened the taut muscles in her throat and then handed the half-empty tumbler back to him.

'You gave me quite a fright when you collapsed like that in your office,' he said. 'I don't think I've ever seen you faint before.'

'I didn't faint. I told you, I just lost my balance.'

'That's fainting in my book.'

Tina rested her head back on the pillow, reluctant to feel fully alive just yet. She wanted to remain lost in this languid bubble keeping at bay the brutal emotions threatening to engulf her.

'You could have waited until later.' She gave him an accusing look. 'You could have waited until I'd finished work instead of coming to my office and breaking the news to me like that.'

'I saw no reason to waste any time. Besides, I wanted to make sure that you knew before Andile returned tonight.'

'He's coming home tonight? I thought he was only returning tomorrow. He said that he would be back on Wednesday.' Tina was surprised at her husband's sudden change of plans. And then a sour thought struck her. 'Unless of course, he had always planned to return today but he wanted an extra night away to be with her. He never intended to stop seeing her, did he?'

Len shrugged. 'Well, now she's pregnant so I guess that might make her a permanent feature in your life.'

'And he now wants to come straight back here to do what? Clean up his mess? Tell me that he's sorry and expect us to go on as normal as if nothing's happened?' Tina felt the bitterness rising up in her chest. It tasted raw, sour, burning through her like acid.

'It seems that I always have to clean up my cousin's messes. I swear I could have broken his jaw if we weren't in a public place.' He spoke with a ferocity that was completely out of his character.

She gave him a curious look. 'This isn't the first time you've threatened to violently punish your cousin. You wanted to beat him up with a sjambok the last time.'

'Yes well, I want to fracture his skull for hurting you.'

The words 'hurting you' punctured through her lethargy and struck her like a punch to the stomach. She curled herself up, folding her arms tightly around herself as if to defend herself against the anguish that suddenly tore through her.

'Everyone has their own version of how I should deny my own feelings and keep my marriage together despite everything. But how am I supposed to cope with the knowledge that my husband is now expecting a child with another woman?' Her voice quivered as she tried, unsuccessfully, not to dissolve into tears. 'Even if he mends his ways I'll always live with this painful reminder that he cheated on me.'

'You don't deserve what's happening to you.' Len put the tumbler down and removed his shoes and then stretched out on the bed next to her. He put his arms around her. She turned to him and grabbed onto him as if he were a lifeboat, not bothering to control the sobs that were freely wrenching out of her.

Her sobs eventually subsided but she didn't let go of him but held on tighter, feeling him keeping her afloat and afraid that if he moved away she would disintegrate and sink into dark, lonely nothingness. And in that moment, she didn't care if Andile walked in and saw them lying there together.

'I wonder what people would say if they saw me crying like a baby like this,' she eventually said, sniffing and wiping her eyes with the front of his T-shirt.

'You're allowed to fall apart sometimes. It must be very tough going through life trying to keep yourself together for other people's benefit when inside you're crumbling to pieces.'

'I only let myself crumble when I'm with you though. Because you won't scold me and tell me to get a grip or lecture me about what I'm doing wrong.'

'You're not doing anything wrong.'

'My mother wouldn't agree.'

'You're not your mother.'

The intercom suddenly rang, resonating throughout the house and startling her.

'Is Andile back already? He usually arrives in the evening,' she said, sitting up quickly. The last thing she wanted was to compromise herself by putting ideas and suspicions in her husband's head and giving him justification to run back to Zodwa.

There was a quiet knock on the door as she jumped up and began straightening her clothes. She signalled frantically to Len to get up. Then Stella's voice came through and politely announced that *Budi* Len's friend had come to fetch him.

'That's Jonathan,' Len said, casually sitting up and swinging his legs over the edge.

'I was wondering why you were so unmoved by the intercom,' she said, giving a deep sigh of relief. 'I'd forgotten that you asked him to come and pick you up.'

'Yes, but a part of me hoped that it was my cousin, so he'd know what it's like to have someone else moving in on his territory.'

She watched him put his shoes back on and felt a sudden panic at being left alone.

'You don't have to leave now. I can drive you home myself later.'

'It's alright. I need to leave. Besides, you need to preserve your strength for when your husband comes home.' He paused and gave her a pointed look. 'You are going to speak to him tonight about the baby, aren't you? You're not going to be all diplomatic about this and run off to your relatives to ask how you should react.'

Tina didn't answer immediately. The thought had crossed her mind to turn to her mother again. Until she remembered their last two conversations. Both times, she had been told to keep quiet.

She nodded. 'I will speak to Andile. There's no point in delaying the inevitable.'

'Good.'

Len came towards her and instead of his usual friendly hug he took her face in his hands and planted a firm, almost rough kiss on her lips, his beard scratching her chin. Then he turned away and walked out of the door.

The dog barking in the neighbour's yard stirred Tina awake and she rubbed her eyes, trying to adjust them to the darkness that had enveloped the room. She checked the luminous digits on her bedside alarm clock. They glowed 21:20. Outside the crickets had stirred up their nocturnal orchestra and their lively chirruping rang through the open window in a cacophony of mini alarm bells.

The dog barked again and let out a series of high-pitched excited yaps as if to warn her of the car headlights that flashed briefly into the room as the gate opened and Andile's car drove in.

She sat up and switched on her bedside lamp. She was still fully clothed in her linen trousers and matching shirt which were now severely wrinkled. Linen was cool and comfortable to wear and very stylish, but it didn't take kindly to long hours wrapped up under a duvet, and she hadn't gotten out of bed all afternoon. She looked for her night dress on the sofa where she had thrown it that morning. Stella had removed it and put in the laundry basket.

Tina crawled back into bed.

The door opened and Andile walked in, wheeling his suitcase behind him and his laptop bag slung over his shoulder. He stopped when he saw her.

'Hello.'

'Hi.'

'You've still got your clothes on. Were you sleeping?'

'Yes.' Stupid question. 'I got ill at work and Len brought me home.'

'Oh. So you saw him today.'

'Yes.'

'I see.'

He rolled the suitcase into a corner and then put the laptop bag down next to it. He removed his jacket and threw it over the suitcase. Then he went to the open window and closed it, shutting out the crickets, and began drawing the curtains.

'You should close the window when the sun goes down. The rains have come now and you don't want mosquitoes flying in and causing you sleepless nights.'

'We have plenty of mosquito coils. I just have to burn one during the night and they will die before they can bite me.'

'Yes but you know I don't like the smoke. It irritates me and makes me sneeze. You can simply close the window and we'll have no problem.'

'I think I have a bigger problem to worry about than a bunch of insects causing me sleepless nights.'

He turned around at her retort. 'I'm assuming that you're referring to Zodwa.'

'You seem surprised,' she said, the bitterness creeping into her voice. 'You seem surprised that Len kept his word and told me that your woman is pregnant. Did you expect him to keep quiet like the rest of your family?'

'They don't know about that yet.'

'That doesn't matter.' She flung back the duvet and stood up, her feet hitting the carpeted floor. 'The fact is that your people knew about your affair with that woman and they said nothing. So if it weren't for Len, your people would have shut up anyway and I'd have remained in the dark until there was some squawking little bastard crawling all over the place.'

'Look, I didn't know that she was pregnant alright? She only mentioned it when I told her that I wanted to end things like I promised you.'

'You're lying. You lied to me. You never intended to stop seeing her, did you? You just wanted me to believe that you had.'

He didn't answer and she knew she had hit the nail on the head.

'Did you really mean to come back home today if this hadn't happened? Or were you going to spend tonight with her? That was your original plan wasn't it?'

Silence.

'So I am right. You go off on your business trips and then use the opportunity to steal one or two nights with her before you come back home to me. And now she's deliberately fallen pregnant to make sure that she keeps you. So tell me, Mr Moyo, what are you going to do now?'

'What am I supposed to do? The child is mine. I can't run away from that.'

'And what about me? Where do I fit in while you are playing happy families with your small house?'

'Look, Tina. I paid lobola for you. I married you. I bought this house. You are living in it. I put food on the table and I'm taking care of you. What more do you want from me?'

'I want you to myself, Andile, like I am entitled to. I am your wife. There is nothing in our marriage contract that requires me to share you with someone else.'

'Yeah, well Zodwa's going to have my child. That's the fact, and you'll just have to deal with it.'

'What? Has living in this country stripped you of your senses? Have your ethics really deteriorated so badly that you can stand there and make that statement to me? That I just have to deal with it?'

'I am going to have a child and I must support that child. That sounds very ethical to me.'

'You're going to have a child with another woman.'

'Look, you're right. I was wrong. I shouldn't have slept with her, but I did. Now I must face the consequences and there's not point in you fighting the issue. So yes, I'm asking you to deal with it.'

'And what if I can't deal with it?'

'Other women in your position have learnt to cope and accept it. That's just the way things are done here. You're lucky I'm not opting to take Zodwa on as a second wife since culturally I'm entitled to do so if I want. But I married you only and that doesn't need to

change. But if you want to stay, you'll have to know that this is the way things are. That's the condition.'

He turned and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

She stared at the door firmly shut before her, and then she sat down on the bed. She covered her face with her hands, feeling her fingers trembling against her skin.

So now there were terms and conditions in her marriage too.

She took her hands away from her face and looked around the room. Then she caught sight of Andile's jacket thrown over his suitcase. It was made from a blend of linen and polyester, beautifully cut and immaculately stitched.

Made in Canada.

She stood up and opened her dressing table drawer. She took out the pair of scissors that she had used to cut the wool holding up her braids. Then she went and stood above the jacket and stared at it. She raised the scissors and the blades gleamed faintly in the dim light.

Then she shook her head and turned away and replaced the scissors in the drawer.

She removed her wrinkled linen suit and threw it onto the sofa. Then she opened the chest of drawers and took out a pair of her favourite flannel pyjamas in plain pink and put them on and then got back into bed and turned to face the wall.

Her husband came out of the bathroom and she could hear him moving around the room as he changed and prepared for bed. She heard him take off his watch and place it on his bedside table, its silver wrist band clinking against the wood. He removed his spectacles, folded them and placed them next to the watch.

The mattress sagged slightly as he got into bed. She could sense that he was lying on his back, his arms folded behind his head. She remained motionless, her back rigid, hugging the duvet to her as if to protect herself even from the space between them, separating them.

'Can you switch off the light? Let's sleep now,' he eventually said, as he rolled over and settled down to sleep, his back also firmly turned towards her.

'What's happening to the bees in America?'

Tina sat on a sofa in the lounge, listening idly to the news report on CNN.

She paged through her wedding photo album as she listened, and she looked at each photograph of her and Andile smiling at the camera, at each other, at other people.

Pictures of perfect happiness – a far cry from their lives now, when husband and wife rarely spoke and they avoided each other between the walls of the big house that Andile had bought.

He woke up, she woke up.

They went to work and Andile returned home late at night after she had long retired, lulled by one, two, maybe three glasses of his Johnny Walker Black. She pretended to be asleep when he walked in, her back turned firmly towards him, and she didn't move when he got into bed next to her. They slept like sentinels, each one protecting their own territory on opposite sides of the bed and the space between them stretched out, cold and dry like a desert.

That Saturday morning he had woken up and left without taking his shower – the water did not flow from the taps. He didn't take his toiletry bag and towel with him. She assumed that he would wash at the golf club. And she knew very well that this was a pseudonym for No 1 Winchester Gardens.

She sat now on the sofa in the lounge, dressed in jeans and an ivory coloured kaftan with red, pink and blue embroidery along the neckline, after washing from a bucket in the bathtub in the en-suite bedroom with the pink, Italian tiles. She listened to the newsreader's report on CNN without watching the TV screen.

'It's a story that has baffled researchers and beekeepers everywhere. Throughout California, the almond orchards burst into bloom with the beginning of spring, yet the bees were dying, and nobody knew why.'

She glanced at the screen, briefly paying attention to the woman reading the news, her face plastered with television-style make up – thick and flawless like a plastic mannequin – and blow dried blonde hair that didn't move.

'The cause of these catastrophic declines of the bee populations remains a mystery, and all that scientists have come up with so far is a name for this phenomenon – Colony Collapse Disorder or CCD.'

The report then changed to show an archive news clip showing vast fields of orchards in blossom with a voice-over narrating the story of bees dying off in the USA.

Tina's gaze returned to the album on her lap, focusing on one picture of her and Andile holding champagne flutes and smiling into each other's eyes. She remembered that the picture had been taken right after Tanya's maid-of-honour speech congratulating Tina for landing one of the top ten bachelors in town.

It was a lovely photo, and she remembered feeling like royalty in her gown in imported tulle and chiffon, and Andile looking like he had just walked off the red carpet at the Oscars. He looked dashing in his custom-made grey suit, white shirt and silk tie in grey and sky-blue.

She put the album aside and took the photograph out of the plastic sleeve and studied it, tracing her finger over it. They did look happy. There was definite happiness in her eyes as she smiled up at her husband, glad to finally be rid of her single status that she had carried like a yoke throughout her twenties, and embracing her new role as Mrs Moyo.

'In hives hit by CCD, adult worker bees simply fly away and disappear. Hives go from healthy and active to dead and gone. There are various theories on what's bugging the bees, including the introduction of foreign elements like viruses, mites and pesticides.'

She looked up just in time to see a close-up shot of a bee in the throes of death while the news reader reported that the bee die-off had spread to Europe and had got the French all a-buzz.

She looked back at the photograph in her hand. Even through the glossy surface Andile's teeth looked perfect. A dentist's dream – pearly white and in perfect symmetry.

Without taking her eyes off her husband's face, she lifted her other hand to the photograph and then she slowly tore it in half. She held the torn pieces in her hands; the bride's face in one hand and the groom in the other; both of them still smiling, their eyes shining bright, looking into nothing.

She heard the news reader, the one with the perfect makeup and motionless hair saying: 'As an essential link in the food chain, the hardworking bee has suddenly become the weakest link.'

Tina held the two halves together and studied the picture of the couple, the tear line between them looking like a jagged scar. Then she began to tear the pieces again, first into four, then into eight, ripping it faster and faster, until the photograph lay in shreds on her lap.

University of Cape Town

Chapter 17

Beatrice Road was almost deserted as Tina drove along the main thoroughfare linking the city centre to Workington industrial area in the southern outskirts.

The tarmac had faded white-grey from years of the relentless throng of cars, buses, and trucks churning out pollution, while ferrying goods and passengers to and from the factories and warehouses stretching into the neighbouring industrial areas of Southerton, Willowvale and Graniteside, as well as the sprawling high density suburbs of Glen View, Glen Nora and Highfield.

The traffic had thinned out considerably in the last year, with most of those vehicles almost permanently stationed in the queues winding out of the petrol stations dotted along the road. Most of the cars were empty and seemed to have been there for days; their owners occasionally returning to see if there had been a fuel delivery.

At the traffic light intersection after the Lyons factory - once a major manufacturer and exporter of tea, coffee and ice-cream - Tina turned off Beatrice into Willowvale Road and drove the long stretch into Glen Nora, enjoying the breeze coming through her window from the fields stretching alongside the road.

The township was a hive of Saturday morning bustle, its streets teeming with people going about their weekend business.

Men rode on their bicycles in the middle of the road and only got out of the way when a car hooted, and clusters of women stood at street corners or in their yards gossiping over the fence.

Across the main road in an open veld a group of men and women dressed in white cotton robes sat under a large tree, where they would remain all day long singing and praying. The men with their heads shaved bald like stone sculptures held wooden staffs against their shoulders while the women wore white *doeks* - the standard attire of the ubiquitous Apostolic cult or *vapostori*, who every weekend could be seen gathered in their flocks in fields across the townships.

The rhythm of their singing accompanied by drums and *hoshos* floated across the road and mingled with the township sounds of voices, laughter, shouting and the hooting of emergency taxi kombis driving up and down the main road picking up and dropping off passengers.

Tina swung into Shamwari Road where Tete Flavia lived, and had to slow down her car to avoid hitting the children running around in the street.

She parked at the gate outside her aunt's two-bedroomed house and got out of the car, just managing to avoid a soccer ball bouncing towards her, made from old newspapers and bits of plastic rolled into an empty packet of mealie meal and tied together with a piece of string.

A dusty little boy dressed in shorts and a tattered T-shirt with the words *Coca-Cola Adds Life* written across it ran over to her. She kicked the ball back at him, and he dribbled it back to his soccer game in the street, where the boys had marked the goal-posts with two rusted castor oil tins.

Tete Flavia came round the house from the back garden when she heard Tina's car. She was a tall, thin woman with sharp features on her lean face and her skin, devoid of wrinkles, belied her fifty-six years.

'Tina,' she said, unlocking the chain securing the steel wire gate to its pole and opening it. 'I was thinking you were never going to arrive and made me miss my church group meeting for nothing. I was beginning to think that perhaps you'd run out of petrol. It's a long way to drive from those Northern Suburbs and as I'm sure you saw, the filling stations around here are all empty.'

She gave Tina a light embrace before waving her through the gate and closing it, replacing the chain and locking it with a large padlock. She wiped her hands down the blue dustcoat she wore over a plain green, knee length cotton dress with a white Peter Pan collar.

Tete Flavia made her own clothes, the fabrics for which she bought from the Indian shops along Mbuya Nehanda Street in town close to the main railway station.

She also made clothes for other people to supplement her income as a primary school teacher, and on most weekends clients came in for measurements and adjustments in the

second bedroom where her two teenage daughters, Shingi and Nyasha, shared space with her *Singer* pedal sewing machine.

'I've been waiting for you since you phoned to tell me you were coming,' she continued. 'But at least I managed to get that maid of mine to help me clean the chicken run. You know if I don't remind her to do these things she will never think for herself and one day I will wake up and find all my chickens dead and gone from hunger, thirst and sheer neglect.'

'Do you still manage to get chicken feed, Tete? I hear that there are shortages of that as well,' Tina said, following her aunt down the short concrete paving leading up to the front door.

'Yes, yes. My son-in-law, you know, Garikai who is married to your cousin Maggie. Well, he sends down bags of chicken-feed from Botswana. He doesn't tell me how he manages to get them across the border and I don't ask.'

'Are you still selling eggs?' Tina hoped her aunt wouldn't insist on taking her on a quick tour of the back garden. She was in no mood to inspect poultry and vegetables.

'Oh yes,' Tete replied, opening the door and ushering Tina into the lounge which was coordinated in green and blue. There were doilies on every surface – over the sofas, on the side tables and the coffee table, crocheted by Tete herself. She had given Tina a set as a wedding gift which she never used.

'I'm getting a lot more orders now that Chipu's tuckshop across the road is no longer there. Operation *Murambatsvina* took care of that.'

'Ah yes. Operation Drive-out-Trash. The tsunami.' Tina nodded. 'How did they describe it again? A vigorous clean-up campaign to restore sanity and to clean the country of the crawling mass of maggots bent on destroying the economy.'

'Well those crawling maggots included Chipu and Budi Jim's bicycle repair shop,' Tete said, taking a seat on the sofa and gesturing to Tina to sit next to her. 'And Mai Susan's hair salon and barber shop too. All of them - mowed down by the army trucks. Just imagine all those hundreds of vendors who serviced these townships for decades – gone. I don't know how they are all faring now without their businesses. It's been two years since it happened.' She slumped back against the sofa as if reliving the whole experience.

'I've brought something for you,' Tina said, changing the subject and handing her aunt a grocery bag. 'It's just something I picked up in one of the little shops in Borrowdale.'

'Assorted biscuits,' he aunt exclaimed as if she had been given a bag of gold nuggets. 'And a big box too. I don't remember the last time I ate these biscuits. Thank you my child. Now let's have some tea so I can nibble on one or two of these. Everjoy!' She leaned forward towards the kitchen where someone was moving around. 'Everjoy! Will you make some tea for us?'

'Yes, Ma', a voice responded from the kitchen.

'What do you mean, yes Ma?' Tete scolded the kitchen door. 'Have you seen Sisi Tina? Did you greet her?'

She shook her head and clicked her tongue as the maid emerged, a small girl in her early twenties. She knelt down in front of Tina and meekly shook her hand before disappearing back into the kitchen where the sound of cutlery could soon be heard.

Tina watched Tete in action with growing alarm. Throughout her life she had witnessed various relatives and other people cut down by Tete's tongue. Family gatherings were never complete until there had been a stand-off between Flavia and one of her brothers. Rumour had it that her first husband had run off with another woman when he finally got fed up with his wife's wild rampages.

'Tete.' She cleared her throat and shifted in her seat. She could feel her heart beginning to thump against her chest. 'I've come here to tell you something.'

'Of course you have something to tell me. You young girls never just visit me simply because you want to see me.'

'It's Andile.'

Silence.

'I recently found out that he was unfaithful to me. He even set this woman up in our flat in Avondale, and for a long time I didn't even know about it until his cousin, Len, told me.'

Her announcement hung in the air, loaded with all the humiliation that had almost caused her to change her mind about confiding in her aunt and turn her car round half way

from Glen Nora and drive back home. She had been looking down at her hands as she spoke, nervously fingering her wedding band. When she looked up, she noticed that her aunt looked strangely composed.

'I heard the story,' Tete Flavia said with a theatrical sigh and folding her arms. 'I have known for a while that your husband was up to no good.'

'But, how did you find out?' Tina was severely taken aback. She had been expecting a shocked reaction at the very least and a barrage of blame and accusations at the worst, but certainly not this cool response.

'Oh, gossip travels fast in this town, especially in church groups. One of the women in my group is related to someone from the Methodist Mothers' Union in Marondera.'

'Then why didn't you tell me, Tete?' Tina said, deeply chagrined that public knowledge of her domestic drama was wider than she thought.

'I thought that you knew but chose to look the other way. That's what most of these women do.'

Everjoy walked in holding a tray with cups, saucers, a sugar bowl, jug and a teapot covered in a hand-knitted pink tea-cosy. She knelt at the coffee table and prepared to pour the tea.

'Leave that. We'll do it ourselves.' Tete waved her away impatiently.

Everjoy quickly vanished.

'Your situation is not uncommon,' she continued as she began pouring tea for both of them. 'Many of these women you see walking around have the same problem. Why do you think they pray so much? But as long he comes back home and doesn't want a divorce, why jeopardise a perfectly good marriage by making a big song and dance out of it and spoiling everything?'

'Well I didn't pretend to be ignorant. I really didn't know, and when I did find out I confronted him about it. We had a huge fight,' Tina said sulkily, still smarting from the knowledge that her aunt had been privy to church group gossip about her.

'And so what did he do?'

'He promised to stop seeing her.'

'And did you believe him?'

'I did but then I realised that he lied. And now she's pregnant.'

'What?' Tete almost jumped out of her seat. She put her cup down with a clatter on the coffee table, spilling the some of the tea into the saucer, and then threw her arms into the air. 'Yowe! I don't believe this. Did Andile tell you this himself?'

'No, he sent his cousin to tell me since he didn't have the guts to tell me himself.' Tina didn't bother to disguise the resentment in her voice.

Tete sat back, arms crossed and stared at the wall upon which hung a framed painting of the Crucifixion and below it was a woven square wall hanging with the words, *God Bless this House* embroidered into it, each letter sewn in a different colour.

Tete was a devoted member of the Anglican congregation in Glen Nora, and her Good News Bible lay on the coffee table for regular reference, although she regularly forgot the part about taming the tongue.

'You'd think that the educated ones have more sense but they are the worst,' she eventually said. 'I cannot understand how he could do something so stupid. Didn't the Canadians teach him anything?'

'Evidently not.'

'I'm going to tell you a story,' Tete said, adjusting her position on the sofa to make herself more comfortable. 'It's an interesting story. Many years ago, while I was still young and foolish, I got married to Maggie's father. That stupid man who dared show his face after all this time when he heard that she was getting married. He was nowhere to be seen throughout her years growing up, yet he thought he still had the right to her lobola money since he is her father.'

Tina knew the story well. She had been present during the pre-lobola negotiations when the man had showed up with his own representatives, and the family gathered in the lounge had been silenced by Tete's shrill voice emanating from deep within her bedroom where she had locked herself. 'The lobola ceremony will not go on until that man gets out of my house!'

Tina sneezed again and sniffed. 'Because I worked so damn hard to be a good wife to him. I didn't expect him to humiliate me this way. I mean, his affair is an open secret. He didn't even bother to be discreet so everyone knows about it – even you.'

'And are you willing to live with the disgrace of being divorced?' Tete gestured to a rusty tin bowl at Tina's feet. 'Pass me that bowl will you? There are eggs here.'

Tina hesitated. It was one thing to stand outside and hold the wire mesh door closed, but it was quite another to enter this dungeon of feathers and droppings and collect eggs. She picked up the bowl and gingerly stepped into the enclosure, making sure that nothing scraped against her ivory-coloured kaftan. She handed the bowl to her aunt and quickly escaped.

'You need to think about this,' Tete said, bending down and collecting the eight freshly laid eggs on the nest and placing them carefully into the bowl. 'These lobola ceremonies and weddings take up a lot of time, money and commitment from all involved. You can't just get married and then decide to run away when something goes wrong.'

'But Tete, you left your first husband.'

'Yes, but I'm not encouraging you to do the same thing. That man was a useless peasant from the village with no money. Your husband is educated and successful. You have more to lose than I did. So you need to think about what you are sacrificing before you embarrass your family by running away from your marriage.'

She stepped out of the chicken run and closed the gate and locked it with a padlock and then took the bowl of eggs from Tina. 'And you may want to have a child of your own just to reinforce your position.'

Chapter 18

Tina drove away from Tete Flavia's gate with Everjoy, Tete's maid, on the passenger seat holding a large, plastic container. Another one lay at her feet. Tina had offered her a lift to the municipality water point to fetch more water for supper and for the family's ablutions the next morning.

'How often do you go to the water point?' Tina asked her as she slowly navigated her way down the street that seemed to have been overrun by pre-teens. A pipe seemed to have burst somewhere and water ran in little rivers along the side of the street. Ironic, she thought, since there was no water running out of the taps but plenty of it flowed in the dust.

'Maybe twice a day, sometimes three times.'

Tina shook her head, grateful for the borehole being sunk at her home – at Andile's expense. They approached the water point, a large bowser from which young male attendants were filling containers from a tap at the bottom.

A long queue of mostly women and girls winded along the road with buckets and plastic containers of all shapes and sizes at their feet. Tina stopped the car and opened the door and stepped out. She just managed at the last minute to avoid sinking her sandal-clad foot into a stream of water flowing along the side of the road.

'Be careful, *Sisi* Tina,' Everjoy said, coming round the car. 'That's not just water. It's sewerage. You don't want to get your feet dirty and smelly.'

Tina shuddered and then hopped over the raw effluent. The stench rose thickly in the heat. They joined the queue, where an almost festive air reigned with voices and laughter rippling through the crowd as they exchanged news, gossip and jokes.

'But I can't see the water bowser from here,' Tina said, standing on her toes and peering above the *doek*-clad heads.

'It's a long queue, *Sisi*,' Everjoy said, putting the two containers at her feet. 'We'll get there eventually.'

'But when? The queue doesn't seem to be moving.'

'It's slow but it moves.'

'Not fast enough,' a thin woman with rollers in her hair standing in front of them said. 'It's going too slowly. I've been here for almost forty-five minutes. At this rate, I will get home very late and I still have to cook lunch.' She clicked her tongue in frustration.

The woman's bad mood seemed to infect the others around her and the gossiping and laughter stopped and was replaced by sighs of frustration. The women grew restless and a spat of bickering exploded towards the front of the queue.

A group of young men dressed in camouflage trousers and T-shirts approached from where they had been seated under a tree, watching the queue.

'Hey, calm down,' a young man not older than eighteen said to the woman with the curlers. 'We don't want a riot here. Keep quiet and wait your turn like everyone else.'

A hush fell through the group and the women exchanged looks and then stared at their feet. After some moments, the lively conversation started up again, the frustration temporarily forgotten. The young man sauntered back to his seat – a rusty bucket – under the tree. He sat down and resumed watching the women, smoking an acrid-smelling cheap cigarette.

'Well,' Everjoy said with a snigger. 'You can always count on our Green Bombers to slap us into shape.'

So these were the notorious Green Bombers, the youth militia with a taste for violence in the name of 'restoring order'. Tina had never seen one before.

'Sisi Tina, you don't have to stay here with me.' Everjoy said, smiling at her. 'It'll be a while until it's my turn.'

'But are you sure you'll be alright? You can't carry those heavy containers all the way back home.' Tina felt guilty abandoning the girl while she took off in her nice car.

'I do it all the time.'

'We will all go back together. Don't worry about us,' the woman with the rollers in her head said. 'We do this everyday and we're used to it.'

Tina looked at her watch as she drove along Beatrice Road back into town. It was almost lunch time. She decided to go to see her mother, partly because she wasn't keen on

returning to her house yet where Andile was likely to be watching Supersport on TV, and partly because she wanted a second opinion.

Tete Flavia's anecdote about teaching her ex-husband, his woman and his mother a lesson before packing up and leaving had been very entertaining – and appealing.

But then things had gone downhill when Tete instructed her to stay where she was – silently suffering in her privileged ivory tower with a husband whose generosity and virility were too grand to be contained in one house – they had to spill over into a small house.

She drove past the turn off that lead to Mbare township and she felt a twinge of sadness at the memory of its notorious market – Siya So (Let it Be). The market had been popular with locals and tourists alike and just about anything, from the mundane to the bizarre, could be found in the sprawling chaos of shacks, kiosks and stalls made from asbestos, plastic sheeting, wooden planks and other bits and pieces. Fresh fruit and vegetables shared space with tools, clothes, second-hand car parts, and herbs and concoctions that promised to cure all ills and bring true love to those who wanted it. Many a husband had landed up in Parirenyatwa hospital after their wives, desperate to keep them at home, had mixed these potions into their meals.

A desolate, burnt-out space now stood where Siya So once thrived, now flattened and silenced by the 'tsunami'.

She drove through the Central Business District and then made her way towards Borrowdale and stopped at the Village. In the centre of the mall, a gigantic Christmas tree stood with a string of festive lights woven around it. A big tinsel star at the top shimmered in the sunlight. A large plastic Father Christmas, complete with a glaringly red suit, white beard and rosy cheeks had been placed outside the Wimpy from which the sounds of Boney-M could be heard.

Tina entered a coffee shop close to the mall entrance and went to the counter where she ordered half a dozen take-away Danish pasties to share with her parents over tea. She looked around the shop as she waited for her pastries. The place was brimming with clients taking a break from their Christmas shopping as well as groups of young people enjoying milkshakes – the Village was a favourite social place among well-to-do teenagers.

A group of girls paid their bill and then got up from their table and headed towards the door. Tina's heart lurched as she caught sight of the client seated at a smaller table in the corner that had been hidden from her view.

It was Zodwa, resplendent in a red and purple bou-bou complete with a matching head wrap so huge she could have floated off the ground like a hot-air balloon. She was stirring her coffee while reading the front page of the *Standard* newspaper that her companion was holding up as he read the inside pages. He lowered the newspaper to turn the page.

Andile was wearing another golf-shirt – this one in blue – that Tina had bought for him. His wedding band looked jarringly incongruous as he moved his hand over the paper. He looked at Zodwa and smiled before he resumed his reading.

A rush of fury propelled her forward and she strode towards them, dodging occupied tables and chairs and pushing aside the empty ones. She stopped at their table and stood over them, surveying them with ice-cold eyes.

'This is very cosy,' she said, her voice surprisingly calm. 'You look just like Mr and Mrs. I almost thought you were a married couple – until I remembered that I am the Mrs and you, Zodwa, are just the mistress.'

'Tina.' Andile put his newspaper down, clearly unsettled by her appearance. 'What are you doing here?'

'I always come here for coffee or take away pastries. What are you doing here?'

'I am having a drink with Zodwa,' he said, gathering himself and trying to hide his discomfort.

'Why?'

'Because she has her shop here and I stopped by after golf. We needed to discuss what to do, now that things are, you know, complicated.'

'So did you play your golf before or after you took a shower?'

'What?'

'You always say that you'll shower at the golf club when we have water-cuts. I know that you go to her flat.' Tina thrust her chin contemptuously at Zodwa. 'I'm not stupid.'

Andile stalled.

'And you, Zodwa, why are you looking so smug? Do you think that you're now one up on me just because my husband has knocked you up?'

'I'm not being smug, Tina.'

'Yes you are. And you can wipe that stupid smirk off your face. Do you think that sleeping with my husband is something to be proud of? You couldn't find a man of your own, so you decided to get pregnant to steal mine?'

The people at the next table paused in their conversation and looked round at them.

'Keep your voice down, Tina.' Andile glanced quickly around him.

'Why must I keep my voice down? Because you don't want people to know that this woman is a small house? Your small house? You give this impression of being a posh gentleman but underneath it all you're just a lying cheat who is sleeping around with this slut.'

'I am not a slut.'

'Yes, you are Zodwa. You're a tramp. A gold digger. A *jafifi*. That's what you are. And let me tell you something, and you better listen very carefully. If you think that you're going to get rid of me because of that thing you're carrying in your belly under that tent you're wearing, you're wrong.'

A hush fell over the room. People stopped eating, drinking, talking and watched the scene unfolding in front of them.

A family of father, mother and two pre-teens who were at the next table kept their faces turned away, shifting uncomfortably in their seats and looking down at their toasted sandwiches. But the group of young people at another table were all ears, listening gleefully to the exchange.

'You're kidding yourself. I am his wife and if you want to become the next Mai Moyo you'll have to get past me first.'

'I think that's a decision for Andile to make, not you,' Zodwa mumbled, her voice a tad malicious.

'You conniving bitch.' Tina's hand flew out, quick as lightning and struck Zodwa's coffee cup, knocking it out of its saucer. The coffee inside flew out and landed on Zodwa's lap.

Zodwa leapt back with a shriek. She grabbed her napkin and began frantically wiping her dress while cursing under her breath. Andile sat motionless in his chair, a painfully mortified look chiselled on his face. Tina gave him a haughty look.

'I'll see you at home, dear,' she said.

Then she turned away and, with her head held high, walked towards the door, ignoring all the upturned faces, eyes and ears following her every move.

'Your aunt and I don't always see eye to eye, but in this case, I agree with her.' Mai Sanyanga was on her hands and knees in her vegetable garden, inspecting a spinach leaf. 'You do have a lot more to lose than she did when she left that good-for-nothing husband of hers. Her current husband is so much better.'

She sat back on her heels and looked at Tina who hadn't moved from her seat on an old crate, borrowed from the gardener who used it as a chair when cooking on the fire or the paraffin stove in his quarters.

'So you too are saying that I should stay with Andile even though our marriage is seriously damaged.' Tina made no move to get up and help her mother. She had spent part of her morning dodging droppings in her aunt's chicken run and she wasn't about to soil her hands digging around her mother's vegetable garden.

'It would be a wise thing to do.' Mai Sanyanga stood up and stretched her back. She looked ten years younger in the jeans and gumboots she liked to wear when she was gardening. She removed the wide brimmed, floppy sun hat she was wearing and wiped her brow before putting it back on. 'If he was beating you or abusing you in some other way then it would be a different story. But he isn't.'

'But he's going to have a baby with another woman. I can't live with that.'

'Oh don't be so stubborn, Tina. The child will not live with you. It'll be with its mother so you won't have to see them all the time.'

‘That woman is always going to haunt me, lurking in the shadows and tormenting me at every opportunity.’ Tina picked up a stick and stabbed the soil at her feet. Her nerves were still raw from her standoff in the coffee shop with Zodwa and Andile. ‘She will show up at family gatherings like she did at Baba Moyo’s celebration in Marondera. I told you that I eventually hid in the guest room and then asked Len to take me home.’

‘That’s because you chose to play the victim.’ Her mother’s voice turned grim. ‘You allowed her intimidate you. You need to stand your ground and show her who’s boss, but instead you choose to run away and weep.’

Tina nodded with satisfaction as she thought about the hot coffee landing on Zodwa’s lap. But she didn’t report that incident to her mother. She suspected that causing a fracas in a public place wasn’t what her mother had in mind when she spoke of standing her ground.

‘You don’t just throw down your spear and give up at the first sign of trouble. You fight, my child.’ Mai Sanyanga bent down again and began trimming the spinach leaves, picking the ones that were starting to dry out at the edges and throwing them onto the ground at her feet. ‘You know, when a woman gets married, that’s when the battles begin. Because that’s when the vultures begin to circle. Your husband is a well-educated man, with a good job and from a good family. Other women will want him to themselves, and neither tradition, morality, Christianity or plain old common sense will stop them because they are only thinking of themselves.’

She stood up and walked round to the other side of the bed and began to tear the dry leaves from the spinach heads, her movements sharp and abrupt.

‘Being a wife is a difficult job. It requires your full attention at all times. You can’t let your guard down.’ She threw the leaves viciously onto the pile on the ground and went back to tearing the leaves from the bed. ‘You constantly have to fight off the enemy –these greedy city girls – you have to preserve your family and protect your turf.’

She tugged at a stubborn leaf, gasping at the effort until it snapped from the stem. Then she straightened up and flung it aside and turned to Tina. ‘You must declare war. You have to fight. Do you understand me, Tinashe?’

Tina had been watching with awe the transformation in her mother from the cool and composed woman that she normally was – except when Tete Flavia was around – to this determined, belligerent warrior standing before her now. And she had called her by her full name which she only did when she was upset which wasn't very often.

'But what if I'm fighting for the wrong man?'

'You may not have married the man who's best for you, but he's the one that you've got and he's a good one. I've also had my share of beating off ambitious young women. Your father's a handsome man and very distinguished. Women like an intelligent men. But I'm still here.'

Mai Sanyanga wiped her hands down her overalls. 'Come now and share a gin and tonic with me on my patio. You look like you need it.'

Chapter 19

The advertisement on the television showed a Santa Claus in his red suit and fluffy white beard soaring into the sky on his sleigh, the reindeers galloping in the air while snowflakes swirled around the screen before settling on a three-piece leather lounge suite. The words, *Get more this Christmas* in red and bordered by snow flashed across the screen while a male voice-over said: 'Hurry before this offer closes on 24 December', to the sound of a Christmas jingle.

Tina watched the images flashing across the television screen without paying any attention to the late-night re-run of the South African soap opera, *Generations*. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Andile in his armchair across from her in the lounge. He had returned home around 10:30 that evening and was now nursing a whisky and also absently watching the TV. A strained silence hung between them, loaded with unspoken sentences. But Tina wasn't going to volunteer the opening remarks. She wanted him to strike first.

She waited.

'That commotion you caused this morning, Tina. Was it really necessary?'

'Yes it was. I didn't like seeing you and Zodwa together, gazing into each other's eyes like that.'

'But don't you think that you could have shown a bit more restraint? I mean, you're well within your rights to be mad, but perhaps you should have swallowed your anger and then lashed out at me later. This scene you caused was really excruciatingly embarrassing for all of us.'

'Now you know how I felt when I watched you and her flirting in front of everyone in Marondera.'

'So you did this to get back at me? Was this your idea of revenge?'

'Don't try and make this my fault. You are the one who's cheating not me. I'm just reacting to your actions. And I can't believe that you took her to that coffee shop that you know I visit frequently. Do you have so little regard for my feelings or are trying to sabotage our marriage in some way?'

'I'm not trying to sabotage anything. She has a shop at the Village and the coffee shop was a convenient place to meet and talk. I wanted us to discuss what she expects from me now that she's expecting my child. That's all.'

'So what does she expect?'

He shrugged. 'Men have children out of wedlock all the time. It doesn't obligate us to marry the mothers. Besides, I'm already married. I'll take care of her medical expenses and pay maintenance. And that's all I'll do.'

'And will she continue to live in the flat?'

'Yes.'

'So there we have it then. You now officially have a permanent small house of your very own.'

Andile gave an exasperated sigh. 'You can call it whatever you like. I'm going to bed. Are you coming?'

'In a while.'

'OK.' He walked towards the door and then stopped next to her sofa and touched her shoulder. 'I'd like to talk to my parents about this alone first, if you don't mind. Then you can decide how you want your parents to be informed. I'm not sure if there's some protocol that needs to be followed.'

'I'll let you know.' She remained stiff in her chair. She listened to him walk down the passage, and she remained alone in the lounge, watching the tiny night insects circling round and round above the lampshade next to the fireplace.

She saw no need to tell her husband that the most important people in her family were already aware of the pregnancy. It wasn't just the Moyos who knew the art of silent deception.

She brushed her teeth and then cleansed, toned and moisturised her face in the ensuite bathroom, taking care not to make too much noise and disturb her husband who was trying to sleep. Her movements were slow and heavy as she went through her night-time beauty routine for the first time that weekend.

She left the bathroom, switching off the light behind her. She went to her chest of drawers and took out a fresh nightie in deep blue satin with lace. She hadn't worn it since the day Len took her to Avondale to show her where her husband spent his evenings when he was supposed to be out of town. She slipped the nightie on and got into bed and switched off her bedside light.

'Good, you've switched the light off,' Andile said, rolling over to her side and throwing his arm over her. 'Now I can sleep.'

'You could have just switched it off yourself,' she said, surprised at his movement and making space for him. She had prepared herself for another night of sleeping with a wide open space between them.

'Then you'll just have switched it back on again when you came in and woken me up.'

It felt strange feeling him snuggled against her like that after days of sleeping on opposite sides of the bed, their backs turned away from each other and almost falling over the edge trying to keep the space between them as wide as possible. She had been tempted during that time to spend her nights in the spare bedroom but that would have been a cardinal sin according to the gospel of the good wife as told by her mother during one of her 'don't let the sun go down on your anger' lectures.

'Let him desert the marital bed and not you. Let him be the one who returns, sheepishly holding his pillow when it gets cold and lonely in the spare bedroom. And they always return.'

There was some truth in her mother's words after all. Tina felt some cold comfort in knowing that her husband still found her desirable, despite Zodwa's efforts to steal him. She had fought the battle and won and Andile was here next to her, his breath caressing her neck as he slept, while Ms Zodwa lay alone in her small house with only the newly-hatched foetus growing in her belly to keep her company.

By reclaiming his place on her pillow, bundling her possessively against him, Andile was restoring the status quo, reaffirming her as Mrs Moyo, his wife to whom he could always return when life out there became untidy.

And when the next morning she awoke to him slipping the straps of her nightie from her shoulders and stroking her breast, she knew that he wanted her to cooperate and throw herself body, mind and soul into being the loving wife that he expected her to be.

Except that she didn't feel so loving any more, and as her husband removed her nightdress and threw it aside, she simply went through the motions, the way a surgeon mechanically scrubs his hands before cutting into his next patient.

She sat in her office later that morning and stared at a bouquet of pink and red carnations that had just been delivered to her desk by Beatrice the tea-lady, and fingered the Inter-Flora card in her hands.

'I hope you are doing fine. Call me if you need me. Love Len.

PS Merry Christmas.'

It didn't matter how hard she tried to smooth matters between her and Andile. Len's presence served as a gauge by which she could measure her feelings towards her husband. Len had also developed the habit of disappearing only to resurface when trouble stirred.

She put the card into her bag, wondering if the flowers and the message implied more troubles on the horizon, and then turned back to her computer where she was deleting old files and emails that had accumulated in her inbox during the year.

'So, it's your last day at work before the holidays.' Eve walked in holding a box wrapped in bright red with a bow attached at the top. 'I have a Christmas present for you.'

'Oh Eve, thank you,' Tina said, taking the box and standing up to embrace her colleague. 'But, I didn't get a present for you though. I've been so caught up with other things I wasn't really paying attention to Christmas approaching.'

'I did notice that you've been preoccupied these last couple of months,' Eve said, taking a seat opposite the desk. 'I don't mind at all. Who are the flowers from?'

'It's just a Christmas gesture from a good friend.' Tina sat down and began unwrapping the present.

'It's a journal,' Eve smiled as Tina held up the leather bound book. 'You can use it to record your thoughts, experiences and anything else that you'd like to remember. It's like a

diary, but journals are trendier these days, I think. And it's always very nice to read back through your entries a year later and pinpoint some important stages in your life journey.'

'You've always been so spiritual, Eve.' Tina smiled at her, secretly thinking that she didn't want to remember in detail any of her recent experiences. 'This is really thoughtful.'

'Well, this coming year should be interesting for you. You are aware that we're moving our project office to Pretoria and that Harare will become a field office from early next year.'

Tina nodded. 'I think all the NGOs here are experiencing challenges, especially since we're being perceived as suspicious entities 'secretly supporting the opposition'.

'Yes well, we're not supporting anybody, politically-speaking. We're just trying to empower the women and give them a good chance at taking care of themselves and their families.'

'To be quite honest with you, Eve, I've been thinking about looking for opportunities elsewhere. I must admit that it is emotionally draining for me trying to keep my projects going under increasingly difficult conditions, while watching the women I'm supposed to be helping struggling to make ends meet. Half of them are normally absent because they're travelling across the border to sell doilies.'

'I don't think that the agency wants to lose your skills though, Tina.' Eve said, her tone becoming serious. 'Someone has to keep this office going, especially with Monica our director being deployed permanently to Maputo, and me returning to Washington in a couple of months. As senior project officer you're going to have a lot on your shoulders.'

Eve was silent for a moment.

'If you weren't so happily married to that nice husband of yours, I'd have suggested that you put in an application to direct the Pretoria office. You're perfect for the job.'

'Like you said, someone needs to stay and keep the office going,' Tina said, forcing a smile. 'And Andile has a good job so we're coping. We can't all join the exodus and run away.'

'You're lucky. Not everyone is in your position and able to cope like you,' Eve said, getting up. 'It's a nice job though in Pretoria, but I guess when you're married you have other

factors to consider and can't be selfish like us single ones who can hop off to the next best thing in a heartbeat when it suits us.'

For the second time that day Tina went through the motions, walking through the office wishing everyone a merry Christmas with a tense smile glued upon her face. Everyone was in a jolly mood, buoyed by the happy news that they were all keeping their jobs despite the restructuring. The agency had already cut down on staff two years earlier leaving only a skeleton staff with Tina as a locally-engaged senior project officer, an accountant, a human resources officer, a secretary, a receptionist and a driver in addition to the Americans, Eve and Monica as directors.

As noon struck signalling the early closure of the office for the holidays, Tina grabbed her bag and her carnations and escaped, turning down the invitation from the other women to join them for festive drinks at the Monomotapa Hotel.

She got into her car, and after tipping the security guard at the gate with a Z\$500 000 Christmas box, she drove into Second Street Extension then headed towards the Avenues. She kept driving until she arrived at a block of flats along Fourth Street. She parked outside the gate, and taking her flowers, went up the stairs to the second floor and knocked on the door at No 3.

'I wasn't sure if Andile would appreciate me bringing these flowers to the house,' she said, striding into the bachelor flat as the door opened.

'I didn't realise that he regards me as competition,' Len said, closing the door and following her. 'Can't I simply send flowers to my friend to wish her well during this festive season?'

'You have single-handedly been responsible for causing all the upheaval in my marriage and blowing the lid off my husband's secret life.'

'I only opened your eyes and made you see what everyone else could see,' Len said, taking the flowers from her and going into the tiny kitchen.

The bachelor flat was a typical single man's home, sparsely furnished with a pull-out sleeper couch and a sofa, a small television and a large stereo with surround sound speakers. A set of drums stood in a corner together with a guitar leaning against the wall.

'Don't you keep your neighbours up with those?' Tina nodded towards the drums.

'No, I don't play them here.' Len came out of the kitchen holding a bottle of Castle and two tumblers and sat down on the sofa next to her. 'So to what do I owe the honour of this visit? Are you running away from your husband again?'

'No,' Tina replied, accepting the half-filled tumbler of beer from him. She wasn't really sure herself what she was doing there. 'I just decided to pay my friend a visit and thank you for the flowers.'

'So you're not delaying going back home because you've had an argument with your husband?'

She shook her head. 'Andile seems to think we're fine, despite some minor eruptions on my part.'

'And do you think you're fine?'

She shrugged.

She studied the foam bubbling up in her tumbler. 'Everyone expects me to just forgive and forget everything and move on and be grateful that I still have my marriage. But how can I just sweep everything under the carpet and pretend that Zodwa doesn't exist and that this thing with Andile never happened?'

'You can't mend your marriage if you insist on bearing grudges.'

'I just need time to work through my anger that's all.' Her voice broke. 'I mean, my husband's got another woman pregnant and everyone now knows that I don't have the perfect marriage and now I'm sacrificing a perfect opportunity with a new job in Pretoria because I'm married to a man who openly has a small house.'

Len silently digested her outburst. 'What's this you're saying about Pretoria?'

'A directorship has opened up in our new office in Pretoria and Eve told me that I am the perfect candidate. Andile will never agree to move.'

Len nodded. 'So I guess you're stuck then.'

'I feel so trapped, Len.' She allowed the tears to flow down her face. 'I'm living a nightmare.'

He took the tumbler from her hand and put it on the floor along with his and he put his arms around her. Once again she found herself crying into his shirt, the only place where she felt safe enough to do so. It was only with him that she could be vulnerable and fall apart without fear of judgement.

'I really should have married you instead,' she heard Len mumble as she held on him and buried her face into his long dreadlocks. They faintly smelt of coconut from the hair spray he sometimes used to moisturise the locks. She slumped against him, her lips brushing against his jaw as she took a deep, shaky breath.

And she didn't resist when he pulled her to him and gently guided her onto the rug on the floor and lay her down next to him.

University of Cape Town

Chapter 20

The deep freeze opposite the petrol pumps had the words Ice for Africa written on it in scrawling blue letters.

Tina opened the heavy lid and peered inside. The grey interior yawned back at her, the walls so dry and spotless it could have been delivered from the manufacturer that day. She slammed the lid shut with an exasperated groan.

'Sorry Madam. No ice.' An attendant strolled up to her smiling apologetically.

'I can see that.'

'Have you tried the garage down the road?'

'Yes I've tried that one and the one before that. This is the sixth petrol station I've come to. I've driven all the way from Alexander Park and now here I am out here in Masasa on the edge of town.'

The attendant gave a sympathetic sigh. 'It's Christmas. Everybody wants ice. Maybe you could try Ruwa – if you have the petrol.'

'Do you have petrol?'

'No.'

Tina threw her hands in the air and turned away. 'Thanks,' she said over her shoulder as she returned to her car.

A grey Corolla drove up and stopped next to her car and Baba Sanyanga got out. He was wearing his wide yellow pants from Mauritius with a palm tree design running up one leg. This time, he wore a matching shirt with the palm tree running up one shoulder. The whole outfit made him look like a walking yellow Christmas tree. He started when he saw her and then smiled.

'Dad, what are you doing out here?'

'I'm looking for ice.'

'They don't have it here. I'm also looking.'

He shook his head and gave a frustration sigh. 'I'm coming all the way from Glen Nora where I went to visit your Tete. I passed through Southerton, Graniteside, Hatfield. Nothing. There is no ice in Harare.'

Tina leaned her back against her car and looked at her father's clothes.

'Does Mom know that you're wondering around in public dressed like that?'

He shrugged. 'It's Christmas Eve.'

She smiled. Then her face dropped. 'I wish I could spend it with you and Mom.'

'No. Your in-laws are having a Christmas party today and you must be there.

Tomorrow, you spend the day with us. That's what you do when you are married. You divide your time.'

She bit her lip and looked down at her ankle-length dress in crushed grey linen with high-heeled silver sandals to match. It was an elegant outfit that she'd have preferred to wear to a stranger's funeral than a party with the Moyos.

'Where's Andile?'

'He left for Marondera earlier this morning. He said they had a private family conference and that I should follow later in my car – and to get some ice on the way.' She scowled, knowing exactly what the conference was about.

'Your mother and your aunt told me about your husband.'

Tina looked up at him in surprise. Her father's face had turned solemn. He opened his car door and sat on the driver's seat with one foot inside the car and the other on the pavement. He left the door open and he leaned his arm on the steering wheel while he gazed out of the windscreen.

'It's not a good way to end the year is it?'

'No it isn't,' she said, the tears springing up in her eyes. It didn't take much for her to burst into tears. Her distress and anger simmered constantly beneath the surface.

'You see, this is the thing.' Her father cleared his throat as if preparing to make a very important speech. 'Men talk. I move around in these bars and country clubs, sharing a whisky or two with my friends, my colleagues. We discuss politics and what's going on in this God-forsaken country of ours. And we also talk about other things.'

He paused.

'So when I go to these places and people come to me and say, Sanyanga, you have a very successful son-in-law, he's doing very well, very well indeed, but it's not good what he is doing, you know, running around with that other woman. And I say what woman? And they tell me, that Ndebele woman who thinks she's Ghanaian or Nigerian. I don't know. It's very difficult for a father to hear these things.'

Tina's head snapped up and she stared at her father in confusion. 'You mean, you knew about it all this time?'

'It put me in a very difficult position,' he said, shaking his head. 'These aren't things that a father feels comfortable talking about with his daughters.'

'But weren't you angry when you heard about it?'

'Your mother and my sister expected me to fly into a rage when they told me and I was angry. Don't get me wrong. Then I thought, but my daughter is still with this man. He hasn't chased her away and she seems to be fine, so I thought, why complicate matters and cause trouble when they are obviously trying to work things out between them?'

Tina lifted her hand to her mouth, stunned at her father's cool composure. She looked around the car park. Several shoppers were walking out of the TM supermarket pushing trolleys of last minute Christmas groceries. A half-filled emergency taxi kombi stood at the bus-stop waiting to load more passengers. Life was passing by as normal.

'But I'm not fine,' she finally blurted out, her voice trembling. 'I am desperately unhappy. That's why I'm dreading going to this party in Marondera. I'll have to keep up a front when I know that everyone will be aware of what's going on.'

'You know Tinashe,' her father shifted in his seat and he finally looked at her. 'People do stupid things. It's part of human nature. We don't think. But our actions have consequences. You'd think that people realise that by now, but they don't. So if he wants to go and be with that woman because of that child, he can go. And if you don't want to stay and put up with all of that, then you can go too. The most important thing for me is that you take care of yourself. That's all I ask. Am I making myself clear?'

She stared at her father's yellow suit for a long time, letting his unexpected words sink in. The rings on her left hand caught the sun and the diamond sparkled as she twirled them round her finger.

'Yes Dad. You have made yourself clear.'

The bees were still running wild in Mai Moyo's backyard, causing dread and gloom among unfortunate souls like Chipo the maid and David the gardener, whose job descriptions required that they regularly entered the shed.

They hovered around the door, with several individuals intermittently breaking away and leaping into the air before rejoining the others as if there was an invisible juggler beneath controlling their motions.

David came round the corner, dressed in his usual khaki overalls and gumboots and carrying a spade over his shoulder. He waved a greeting to Tina who was sitting on the kitchen *stoep*.

'Ah, *Sisi* Tina, I see that you are brave enough to sit outside today.'

'Yes, I thought I'd just sit here for a while and watch them from a distance. If they come after me, I'll just flee into the house and close the door,' she replied, smiling. She insisted that the domestic staff in Marondera address her as *Sisi*. There was room for only one Mai Moyo in that house.

'Just don't go too near the shed. They've already stung me twice since the last time you were here. And I can't remember how many times they have chased after Chipo, but I think she's just careless. She's too clumsy and that provokes them.'

'Are you going away for Christmas?'

'No, *Sisi*,' he shook his head. 'I can't go *kumusha*, to the village, this year. The bus fare is too high and I won't be able to take the usual groceries for the family. It's better for me to stay here in Marondera and maybe have one-one with my friends at the tavern.'

'Maybe next year things will be better.'

'Yes, maybe next year.' He grinned at her from under his tattered straw hat and walked away towards his quarters, his work done for the day.

Mai Moyo came outside and sat on the *stoep* next to her. 'Don't worry about Johnson. We gave him a nice Christmas box and there will be plenty for him to eat when we have our party today. Do you want some tea or a cool drink?'

'No I'm fine, thank you,' Tina said, shifting to make room for her mother-in-law's generous hips.

Mai Moyo was quiet for a while as she observed the swarm in the yard. The bees were no longer clustered around the shed door, but flew in swoops and bounds over the shed and the nearby flower bed and the last of the purple blooms clinging to the solitary jacaranda tree, before the next round of rains finally severed them from the branches and ground them to brown slush on the earth below.

'I see that my son's reckless behaviour has finally caught up with him,' she eventually said without taking her eyes off the bees. 'His father is very cross with him.'

'So he has finally told you about Zodwa's pregnancy.'

'Yes, he told us this morning before you arrived. He has gone now with his father to look for more drinks and ice. I hear that Harare has run out.'

'And are you cross with him too, Mai?'

'Well.' Mai Moyo folded her arms and with a sigh. 'Any news of a new grandchild on the way is always welcome. And I was beginning to wonder if I'll ever live to see any children from my youngest son.'

'Even if this child is with another woman?'

'It's true that my son has broken the rules. And adultery will always be a sin, whichever way you look at it, so there is really no excuse for his behaviour. But a baby has been made, and as its grandmother I must accept the child.'

Tina stared at her mother-in-law. Was there no limit to this woman's selfishness? Surely a church-going woman like her, a dedicated member and treasurer of the Marondera chapter of the Methodist Mother's Union could show some empathy towards her *muroora*, her youngest son's wife.

'But I hope you can also appreciate this situation from my point of view,' she said earnestly. 'Surely you must understand how deeply hurt and betrayed I feel about this.'

'But my son isn't going anywhere. He still wants to be with you.'

Tina looked away, blinking back the tears of frustration at not being heard. She wanted to stand up and scream until her lungs were sore. She wanted to grab the pressure cooker on the stove with oxtail simmering in it, and smash it across her mother-in-law's skull.

'Do you remember what I told you about the bees, Tina?' she heard Mai Moyo's calm voice say.

'Yes. You said that like the worker bees, I should be industrious and take care of my family and home.' Tina articulated each word as if she were chewing on a lump of curd. She didn't mention the queen bee.

'Exactly,' Mai Moyo said. 'Now watch these bees very closely. See how they always stay together? They may each break away every now and again, but they never go very far. They always go back to the swarm. Do you see that?'

Tina nodded as she watched the juggling dance of the bees, taking it in turns to fly a bit higher or further than the rest only to return almost immediately to the buzzing cluster by the shed door. She noticed with dismay that their movements had become sharper and faster, and they were spreading wider into the yard, their buzzing becoming more intense in the afternoon heat.

'Your father-in-law told me something very interesting about these bees that I never knew,' Mai Moyo continued, unperturbed by the increasingly agitated buzzing in front of her. 'Do you know why they never fly away on their own? It's because they are connected to the colony like the cells of a body. They need each other to live otherwise they can never survive on their own. That's why they will never abandon their hive.'

She was wrong. Even the bees could desert their hive under hostile conditions such as stress, disease and viruses, even if it spelt death without the mainstay of their colony. Mai Moyo needed to research deeper and find out more than the flimsy knowledge she occasionally gleaned from her husband over a cup of tea.

'So what does that have to do with me?' Tina said, wondering if her mother-in-law was trying to tell her that she was nothing without the Moyos.

'What you can learn from this is that as my son's wife, you too are connected to this family. So even when things get difficult and you encounter problems, like you are now with this other woman carrying your husband's child, it will not change the fact that you are an important member of this family.'

Mai Moyo adjusted her spectacles and stood up. 'Now let's get back to work. We still have a lot to do before rest of the family gets here. I am so relieved that *Babamukuru* Elvin and his wife are staying with Samuel in Harare, and that Stembile and Glenn have taken in Andile's brothers and their wives. But why didn't some of them stay with you? Your house is big enough.'

'They didn't ask.' Tina followed her mother-in-law into the kitchen where preparations for the family Christmas party were already at an advanced stage, with the oxtail on the stove and Chipu hard at work peeling potatoes at the sink.

'You can start on your usual coleslaw.' Mai nodded towards some cabbages in a basket. 'This year I'm not doing too much, thank goodness. Stembile and the girls are doing most of the cooking at her house and they'll just bring the food ready to dish. All we'll need to do is cook the *sadza* and rice. The men will braai all the meat.'

Mai Moyo bustled out of the kitchen muttering under her breath about seeing to the furniture outside.

Tina set to work on the cabbage. She cut it in half and began briskly chopping it into tiny pieces. The white-green shreds blurred before her as her eyes filled with tears of pure exasperation. Everything was going on as normal in the Moyo family. The bees were still in the shed and a Christmas party was underway. The latest news about Zodwa had hardly caused a ripple, although Tina wasn't sure what Mai Moyo meant by Andile's father being cross with him.

How cross could the man be if he was driving around Marondera with Andile searching for drinks and ice?

She wiped her eyes with her hand holding the knife and continued chopping, the cabbage crunching as the blade sliced through it. She felt a sharp pang as the blade grazed

against her forefinger and she quickly dropped the knife. A droplet of blood began to form on her fingertip and she put it in her mouth. The blood tasted salty.

'Are you alright Sisi Tina? Have you cut yourself?' Chipo said from the sink, looking worried.

'I'm fine. It's just a tiny cut.'

Tina put the board aside and turned to go outside. She could feel the lump in her throat and she didn't want to break down in front of the maid, especially since Mai Moyo could walk in at any moment.

She walked down the driveway and looked with longing at her car which was parked in the shade under the large tree. The thought of keeping a brave face while trying to ignore the knowing looks of pity from the uncles and aunts during the party made her want to wail with dread. She took a deep breath, feeling the air enter her body and expand her lungs. The heat from the sun was relentless and she felt it burning her body under her summer dress. She meant to cover her bare arms with a silk shawl when the party started.

She turned around to go back to the kitchen and then screamed as the humming at the shed door suddenly filled the air around her blaring in her ears. She looked up to see a cloud of bees hurtling at her from all directions, surrounding her. She put her arms over her head and screamed again as she felt them hitting against her and piercing her skin like a hundred needles. She shielded her face and began to run, her terror raw in her throat as the bees pursued her, their furry little bodies bouncing off her with vicious hisses and raining stings all over her body from her neck, to her naked arms to her legs. She staggered blindly towards the kitchen door and suddenly a figure in overalls and gumboots loomed before her and picked her up and stumbled up the *stoep* into the kitchen.

'Close the door before those bees come in,' he barked at Chipo who was still standing at the sink, her eyes wide with alarm.

'What's going on here?' Mai Moyo's shrill voice rang out as she burst into the kitchen.

'Tina got stung by the bees,' David shouted, his voice filled with panic.

'Take her to the spare bedroom at once,' Mai Moyo commanded. 'Chipo, run outside to the front lawn and bring me some grass.'

Tina felt David gently lay her down on the bed and she slumped onto the mattress, whimpering from the shock. She rubbed her hands frantically all over her arms trying to brush away the stinging pain searing through her skin.

Mai Moyo thrust a clump of grass into her hand. 'Here, rub this all over you. Grass is the best way to take out the stings.'

Tina grabbed the grass and continued to rub her arms and neck, her movements clumsy in her desperation to take out the stings. She felt some scratching around her legs and she turned to see Chipo wiping her shins with another clump of grass. 'Don't worry, *Sisi*,' she said briskly. 'You'll feel much better once we get the stings out. I should know since I've also been stung a few times by those bees.'

'Well I hope you're not allergic,' said Mai Moyo, who was standing by the door watching. 'If you are then there will be swelling all over and you'll get all sick and feverish and then we will have a problem.'

'We'll have to see if I get sick then,' Tina said, throwing her a dirty look.

'We will find out soon enough,' her mother-in-law said, and then she threw up her arms and gasped in dismay. 'Oh Lord, my oxtail. I completely forgot about it with all this excitement. I'm sure it's getting burnt on the stove right now.'

She turned and hurried out of the room.

Tina stopped rubbing her arms and looked at the spot where Mai Moyo had been standing. 'I guess the oxtail is more important than my suffering.'

Chipo rolled her eyes.

Tina threw the grass aside. 'I really don't understand how they can continue to keep those bees in the garden with people about.'

'We're not allowed to remove them.' Chipo said, gathering the grass that Tina had discarded. 'We'll just have to live with them until they go away by themselves. Are you feeling better now?'

'It still hurts.'

'You need to wash where you've been stung with soap and water to relieve the pain. Baba taught me this and it does help, although *Budi* David told me that toothpaste is even

better but I don't think that Mai will approve of us finishing her tube in the bathroom.

Toothpaste is very expensive.'

Chipso hurried from the room and returned to her chores.

Tina got up and went into the bathroom. She looked around for a face flannel and took the first one she saw hanging over the bath tub. She soaked it in water and then rubbed some soap on it before wiping it all over her arms and neck and her legs. The cool dampness of the cloth was soothing, and she ran some more water over it before she wiped herself again. Then she buried her face in the flannel and sighed, trying to compose herself.

She removed the cloth from her face and then caught sight of a brand new tube of Macleans toothpaste lying on the window sill. She reached for the tube and opened it and then squeezed the toothpaste in a zig-zag line along both of her arms. She smeared it all over the skin, its pungent mint smell filling the bathroom. It did feel strangely soothing. Then she wiped it off again with the face cloth and then she closed the lid and replaced the tube on the window sill.

She opened the door and left the bathroom and returned to the guest room, wondering how her mother-in-law would react to seeing her brand new tube of toothpaste now only half full.

Chapter 21

The last red and orange smudges of the sunset were rapidly turning to dark grey and blue and a stillness had settled upon the garden. It was that hour of the day when time stood still, suspended between day and night, and nature, including the bees in the backyard, prepared to retire for the night.

The evening's peacefulness was lost to the sound of voices, laughter and music as the Christmas party in the Moyo household got into full swing.

The guests sat on the veranda and the hum of their various conversations, which had grown louder in the manner of those whose bellies were rapidly filling up with good food and too much booze, rose above the melody of Brenda Lee's *Jingle Bell Rock*.

The air was filled with the smell of sizzling beef from the braai where Andile was dodging gusts of smoke. Baba Moyo stood by, with a drink in one hand and nibbling on a piece of grilled meat in the other, as he watched his son turn over the meat.

Even Chipo and David were guffawing together outside the kitchen, with him happily enjoying his stash of Castle provided for him by his employers as part of his Christmas Box, while Chipo took surreptitious sips of brandy and Coke from a cup that she kept carefully hidden from sight behind a flower pot.

In the lounge a string of festive lights glowed red, yellow, blue and green on the pine Christmas tree in the corner by the fireplace and several presents lay at its feet in brightly coloured wrapping.

Len came over to where Tina was sitting alone by the fireplace.

'Looks like everyone's got into the Christmas cheer,' he said, sitting down on the sofa next to her and balancing his Pilsner loosely on his knee. 'How are you holding up?'

'Let's just say that I'm not feeling the Christmas cheer this year.'

'I can help you cheer up.' He traced his bottle along her leg.

'Yes but you will manage better in Kenya.' Stembile took a noisy slurp from her rum and Coke.

Tina chuckled to herself. She stood up and went to the braai where Andile was dishing some chops into a plate held by Mai Moyo, who had appeared from the kitchen.

'I'll hold that for you,' Tina said, reaching for the plate.

'No, no,' Mai Moyo said, holding the plate back. 'I will take this to the kitchen and Chipo will cut it up. You must entertain the visitors. Have you recovered from those stings now?'

'It's still a bit itchy, but I'm fine.'

'What stings?' Andile gave her a surprised look.

'Tina got stung by the bees.'

'What? By all of them?'

'A lot of them,' Tina said, her mood darkening again.

'But are you alright? Bee stings can be dangerous, especially if you get stung by so many.'

'She is fine,' Mai Moyo said curtly. 'She is standing here isn't she? I made her rub away the stings with some grass. It's the best remedy.'

Tina threw her mother-in-law a filthy look. 'I think you need to get rid of those bees now. One day they are going to kill someone.'

'Get rid of them?' Baba Moyo shook his head. 'I can't do that. I'm a nature lover and I like it when nature chooses to settle itself on my property. It's dark now so you can't see, but there are lots of birds' nests in the big Jacaranda tree in the back yard. I enjoy watching the birds fly in and out of the branches as they bring food for their chicks. And if you walk towards the orchard you'll see a big anthill which grows larger by the day.'

'And the bee hive is probably getting larger by the day too. I really don't understand why they had to settle here instead of in a forest somewhere.' Tina didn't bother to disguise her resentment. She didn't give a damn about the domestic tendencies of the birds and the bees and even less about ants which were also known to lay siege upon unsuspecting humans.

'But Tina, now that they've stung you and you're alright, there's no need for you to be so scared of them anymore is there?' Andile smiled at her. 'It would have been a different story if you'd landed up in hospital.'

'Indeed,' Mai Moyo said, turning away. 'Those bees won't kill anyone. I'm taking this meat into the kitchen. Put some chicken onto the braai now, Andile. We have enough beef for now.'

Tina stared at her mother-in-law's generous behind as she walked away. Then she turned around and she regarded her husband and father-in-law, who were now busy laying out some drumsticks onto the grill.

She turned away from them and walked back to the veranda.

A series of delighted whoops erupted from the lively circle as the beat of Roy C's classic hit from the '70s, *Don't Blame the Man* suddenly blared out from the lounge.

'*Ja, ndizvo manje izvi.* This is what we're talking about,' Glenn, Stembile's husband exclaimed as he ran out of the house with a newly-opened beer. He made a thumbs-up sign. 'This takes me back, back to the old days.'

'Back to the old days when there was food in the shops,' Mainini Dorah said as she shook her head nostalgically and raised her hand in the air.

'And petrol.'

'And running water.'

'And forex.'

Everyone had something to contribute.

'It's amazing how people get so excited over a song about adultery,' Len mumbled into Tina's ear as he came out of the house and stood behind her at the front door.

'I think it's because it's a golden oldie that reminds people of better times.' She watched with amusement the relatives who were now on their feet, glasses and beer bottles in hand and swaying to the song and singing along: *If you go home, find a man in your bedroom. Don't blame the man.*

Through the swaying bodies and the smoke from the braai, Tina suddenly caught sight of a figure, regally dressed in a gold ethnic outfit and a matching head wrap

approaching the veranda from the driveway. The sequins on her bodice shimmered as she moved. Mai Moyo was walking next to her, holding her hand and talking excitedly.

'Ah, there's Zodwa at last,' Stembile exclaimed, waving her hand at her. 'I was afraid she wouldn't make it because she was complaining about petrol.'

Tina froze. Every organ in her body turned to stone as she watched Zodwa and Mai Moyo walk cross the lawn towards the braai. Andile paused slightly, as if surprised by Zodwa's appearance, then his face broke into a wide smile.

Tina moved her gaze away from them and her eyes collided with Aunt Salma who had a look of pure consternation on her face. Next to her, *Babamukuru* Elvin's face had closed down, and he looked straight ahead, expressionless.

Tina felt pressure on her back as Len squeezed her shoulder.

'What's she doing here?' she said to him.

'I don't bloody know.'

The other relatives kept dancing to Roy C who still wailing on about his woman cheating on him. Bheki had stopped dancing and he watched his parents chatting to Zodwa who was now holding a plate for Andile to dish the drumsticks. He broke away from the group and he walked towards them and said something in Andile's ear.

Andile nodded and he followed his brother through the open sliding door into the lounge. Tina shook off Len's hands from her back and she went to stand behind the door leading into the lounge from the passage and listened.

The music was loud, but sketches of the men's conversation reached her ears.

'Why did you let her come here?'

'She's the mother of my child.'

'You can do what you like with your life.....but keep these things to yourself....don't complicate matters.'

Tina spun around and ran down the passage, into the kitchen and then out into the backyard, where Chipu and David were dancing together by the kitchen door.

'Tina,' Len caught up with her at the bottom of the garden and he grabbed her hand.

'Wait.'

'What Len. What do you want me to do?'

He held her to him, his arms tight around her. 'I'll ask her to leave.'

'Ask her to leave?' Tina shouted, pushing him away. 'Do you see anyone else out there asking her to leave? She just waltzes in here, holding hands with my mother-in-law while my sister-in-law is beside herself with joy at seeing her. And Andile didn't look too concerned. Did you hear what Bheki told him? I heard him very clearly. He said that Andile can do what he likes with his life as long as he doesn't bring her here and complicate things.'

Len stood before here, helpless.

'What about me?' What about my feelings? I'm his goddamn wife. Does anyone actually care that I exist?' She looked around the yard and caught sight of the shed. She pointed towards it.

'Those bees in there. I've been begging them to get rid of them for weeks. And today I got stung. Stung by a whole swarm of them. And what do they do? Nothing. I'm just supposed to get over it.'

'Listen to me.' Len's voice was brusque. He took her by the shoulders, his fingers digging into her flesh. 'I want you to go inside the house and into one of the bedrooms. You will stay there while I sort this out. It's time I'm going to put some sense into my cousin's skull.'

She stood still as she breathed furiously in and out. Then she slumped against him and she allowed him to lead her back to the house. Chipu and David had stopped dancing and were hovering outside the kitchen and peering curiously into the darkness.

Len left her in the passage and she walked towards the bedrooms. The sound of loud hip-hop came from one of the spare rooms where Bheki and Vuyo's children had escaped to listen to their own brand of music. Tina could hear them rapping along to the beat and laughing.

She went into the next room, her in-law's bedroom. She sat on the brown and gold duvet covering the double bed and looked at the oak bedroom suite with matching dressing table and chest of drawers. The King James Bible on the bedside table beside her indicated that she was sitting on Mai Moyo's side. Next to it was a candle in a silver holder and a

lighter. The Moyos had a manual generator which didn't automatically switch on when the lights went out.

Tina dropped her head into her hands and covered her face. She was shaking from head to foot, but her eyes remained dry.

She heard someone knock on the door to the next room. The hip-hop music blared out as the door opened.

'Hello kids. Who wants some more meat?' Zodwa's silky voice rang out over music.

Tina felt her stomach turn. She wanted to vomit.

She closed her eyes and slowly rubbed her fingers across her forehead. She absently scratched her arm where she had been stung. She looked again at Mai Moyo's Bible and the candle next to it.

She took the Bible and opened it. A passage had been highlighted in orange with the word Marriage scribbled in blue pen in the margin: "Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their labour. But woe to him who is alone when he falls for he has no one to pick him up."

She closed the Bible and picked up the lighter and pressed the button on its side. The flame flickered to life, the yellow tongue bending from one side then to the other. She turned it off and got up and walked out of the room.

Chipso and David were still huddled outside talking quietly to each other. They stopped when she appeared and watched her walk past them towards the shed and open the door.

She entered and groped around the wall until she found the light switch. The single light bulb hanging from the ceiling came on, its light dim and muted.

The air smelt of must, dust, mould and petrol. Everything inside the shed was stored neatly in its place. The garden tools – a rake, spade, hoe and garden scissors lay on one side. Several boxes were stacked in a pile covered with a film of dust, and a flimsy cobweb hung between the top box and the wall. Some sacks of onions and potatoes lay in another corner next to several dusty crates filled with empty cool drink and beer bottles.

A large pile of old newspapers and magazines lay on an old wooden table and directly above it was the bees nest. The hive was almost sixty centimetres long, and it protruded from the wall like a black basket just below the ceiling. It was quiet except for a faint buzz that had rippled from it when the light was switched on.

Tina shuddered and her skin crawled as she looked at the hive. It looked formidable and ugly.

She looked around the shed and sniffed, following with her nostrils the pungent smell of the petrol until her eyes fell on a jerry-can stored under the table. She bent down and grabbed the can and opened it. The pungent fumes hit her like a punch to the face.

She turned around and then without pausing, began to throw the petrol from the jerry-can onto the beehive. There was a surprised drone as the petrol soaked through the nest. Some bees escaped and they flew in confusion around the hive.

Tina quickly put the can down and then grabbed a newspaper from the table and rolled it up. She lit the lighter and held the flame to the rolled-up paper until it flared up, then she held it to the hive. It wouldn't catch fire.

She cursed loudly and dropped the newspaper. She picked up the can again and threw some more petrol onto the hive. It sloshed onto the nest and some of it fell onto her hands. The humming inside grew agitated and the hive vibrated.

She put down the can and reached for another newspaper.

'Sisi Tina. Why are you doing that?'

She looked up and saw David's frightened face peering at her from outside the shed. Chipu was standing next to him, staring at her with her hand over her mouth.

'Get out of here,' Tina snapped, glaring at them. 'I said get out of here, now.'

They disappeared. She rolled up the newspaper and lit it and held it up to the hive. The droning of bees trapped inside the soaked nest rang in her ears. It appeared to move.

The flame burned down and she felt it brush against her finger tips.

'Shit!' She threw the newspaper down and then took another one and rolled it up and held it to the lighter. The rings on her hand glimmered as the paper caught fire and she held

it against the now restless nest. A few more bees had managed to escape and they swooped around her, their dull whining filling the room.

Tina threw the newspaper down and stamped out the flame with her feet until it lay in charred bits and ashes on the floor.

Then she picked up the jerry-can and poured the remaining petrol onto the wooden floor beneath the hive and splashed it against the wall and the table. She grabbed and lit another newspaper and dropped it to the floor and ran out of the door.

The petrol caught fire at once and flared up, spreading along the floor, its flames licking at the table. The room seemed to come alive with bees as they swooped around the hive, their buzzing confused and desperate.

Tina charged back into the shed and with a scream from the pit of her stomach, pushed all the newspapers and magazines from the table. They hit the floor in a burst of sparks and the flames on the floor jumped up as they engulfed the papers.

She grabbed the garden rake from the wall and began to pull at the bee-hive, her thrusts vicious and dogged. More bees flew out, and they knocked themselves against the wall, confused by the smoke and the flames. She kept hitting the nest, determined to destroy it with all the bees and their queen inside.

'Tina! What are you doing?' Andile ran into the shed and grabbed her arm and dragged her outside.

He shook her by the shoulders, his face aghast. There was a cut on his upper lip and it looked swollen. 'What are you doing?'

'Leave me alone.' She pushed him away from her and she dashed back into the shed. The air was thick with smoke and the smell of petrol. The table had caught fire and the tongues of flames rose hungrily towards the damaged beehive.

She grasped her diamond engagement ring and wedding band and wrenched them from her finger, scratching her skin with her thumb nail as she pulled at them.

They dropped into her palm and with another scream she hurled them at the burning bee-hive.

'Tina!' Andile rushed in after her and grabbed her hand. 'For God's sake, get out of here. You will burn to death.'

She looked at him, her eyes wild and bleary with smoke.

'Don't touch me.' She shook off his arm.

He ignored her and then he grabbed her arm and roughly pushed her out of the door. She stumbled and almost fell onto the grass. She turned around to face him as he followed her out of the shed. The expression on his face was a mix of shock and anger.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

'What the hell am I doing?' Her voice came out in a scream. 'You mean, what the hell am I doing with you?'

She ran towards him and then, using all her might, she pushed him back. He staggered back against the hedge.

'You can go to hell, Andile.'

She turned and sprinted back towards the house. She bumped into Len as she ran up the steps. He tried to catch her and she flung him back.

She stormed into the main bedroom and grabbed her handbag from the sofa where she had put it along with the other women's bags. She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the dressing table mirror. Her face and her clothes were smeared with ash. There was a stain on the front of her dress where some petrol had fallen, and there was a tear on the waist where the flames had singed it.

Her braids looked incongruously neat, pulled back from her face with a ribbon and falling down her back in a pony tail. Her reflection stared back at her, the eyes large and fiery against her small face.

She turned around and ran out of the bedroom.

'What is going on here?' Baba Moyo's voice called out as she tore through the veranda, past the figures of all the relatives who had stopped dancing and were standing around uncertainly.

A voice called from inside the house. 'Fire! There is a fire at the back.'

Tina ran towards her car under the large tree. She rummaged in her bag for her keys and then got inside and slammed the door.

The yard glowed fiercely in the night as the flames raged through the roof of the shed and strained towards the sky, spitting out bright red sparks. Smoke poured through the air.

She caught a glimpse of David running across the yard with a hosepipe while Andile, Len, and Chipso stood at a distance, staring helplessly at the burning shed.

Tina started her engine just as more people ran out of the kitchen, waving their arms and shouting, led by Mai Moyo. Behind them Zodwa followed in her gold outfit with the shining sequins and matching head wrap, carrying a dish of water.

She pressed her foot on the pedal, revved the engine loudly and shifted into first gear. Then she pushed down on the accelerator and with a sharp screech of the wheels, she sped towards the open gate.

*******Ends*******