

Bad Luck Chicken

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Chapter 1

He is standing holding a handwritten sign with her name, his flannel shirt tight around the shoulders and unbuttoned at the neck, his blond hair flattened by an invisible cap. Tia wishes she had gone to the bathroom beforehand, brushed her hair, put eye drops in, perhaps lined her lashes with mascara. She can only guess what she looks like after two long-haul flights and eight hours in a fluorescent terminal in Abu Dhabi.

Tia knows his name already. Caleb. It is in the slim volunteer packet, which she has read again and again, as if memorizing the words will make her more certain about her decision to travel across the world. It is odd—he is holding her name like he owns her, but he does not know who she is. He glances at the people and their bags hopefully. She could walk right past him. Perhaps she should. Already, through the haze of her fatigue, she feels a jolt of attraction, a sense of a storyline unspooling between them, an inevitability she could avoid by walking past him.

But he catches her eye. He has recognized her somehow from what little he knows: twenty-three, vegetarian, from San Francisco. Something about her, the backpacking bag, her age, her leggings and old college sweatshirt, has alerted him. He sticks out a square hand and welcomes her to Cape Town. He's American. It seems unbelievable that he has come all this way like she has. She pulls her hand away, disappointed. She did not fly across the world to spend time with other Americans.

He says she must be tired, and he takes her backpack from her. Without the weight of the bag to ground her, she feels light and useless—all her body wants is a bed with crisp sheets and clouds of pillows. In the parking garage, he tells her the other volunteer

has canceled. Now that she is here, they'll leave first thing tomorrow. He has been in Cape Town almost a week and wants to get to the village.

It is blindingly bright when they come out of the parking garage. Along the highway, there are colorful shacks and mini-houses with satellite dishes on the roofs. The shacks are made of patchworked corrugated iron, some sheets rusted red, some shining silver new. Then the city appears. It's like any city, except behind it, like a painted backdrop, is the elephant-gray Table Mountain, steaming in clouds.

“What's your poison?” Caleb asks later, after she has showered, power napped, and dragged herself to the hotel bar to meet him. She has the feeling that something is wrong—she has forgotten something or she is ill. She has only ever experienced jet lag traveling West Coast to East Coast and down to Mexico. This is different, a gripping unease.

"Any recommendations?" she asks, staring hard at the paper cocktail menu.

He lifts his glass. "Try mine." He says he will order it for her if she likes it, and he watches her take a sip.

A harsh, rancid taste rolls on her tongue—she does not like whisky. She nods, and he waves the bartender over. When the drink comes she takes another small sip and asks the bartender for a glass of water. She is wearing a low-cut top that shows off her collarbones and cleavage. His eyes brush over her breast. He looks away and clears his throat. He starts telling her about the project—she knows it all already, she has read everything in Green Hub's volunteer packet. He tells her how Amplexica is planning to build a pipeline through the heart of the village to extract oil they found off the coast. Green Hub is raising money to build a center in the village to stop oil and gas initiatives and instead

promote eco-tourism and sustainable development. He has a very strong jawline, and when he speaks his brow furrows attractively. He looks like a jock she had a crush on in high school. His teeth are big and strong like the rest of him, each unblemished tooth perfectly meeting its neighbor. She asks him about the village.

The village is the most beautiful place he has ever been to, right on the coast, with whales and dolphins jumping out of the water. Amplexica is planning on doing more seismic surveys—blasting a 220-decibel explosion every ten seconds for the next five months—for marine life, it is as loud as a space shuttle launch every ten seconds. Someone has to stop Amplexica.

He asks if she wants to go to his room. Not in a weird way, he clarifies. Part of her is exhausted and wants to sleep. But he is cute, and they are alone and far from home. Maybe it is not so important that he is American. She nods.

Tia lies across the bed while he sits in a plastic chair in the corner of the room. The breeze from the window brings in a whiff of salty marine along with gasoline. Words begin to spill out of him in an unnatural way as if he has not had anyone to talk to. He is from Ohio and the Cavaliers are playing (she is not certain where exactly Ohio is—somewhere cold and on the lakes). He checks his phone occasionally to keep score while he talks. He tells her how he quit his job in IT and got a master's degree in environmental studies. It was the right thing to do given what was happening to the world. His dad has a successful business packing medical instruments for shipping, his older brother is an anesthesiologist. Neither of them understands his decision to change careers. He did his master's degree in Chicago and afterwards spent a year volunteering in the village. It is criminal what Amplexica is trying to do, he says, rubbing his fingers on his bottom lip. He only hopes they can stop Amplexica.

She nods. She wants to stop Amplexica too, but her head is very heavy—she can hardly hold it up, and the bed feels like it is swallowing her.

“You’re tired,” he says, standing. He walks her down the hall and across the courtyard to her room, which is unnecessary. She wonders if he is going to try to kiss her. But instead, he wishes her goodnight and tells her he will knock in the morning.

She learns little things about him on the drive, the way his beard sounds when he scratches it, how the sunspots across his knuckles are from years of tennis, the way his baby-powder smell wanes sour over the hours. These things trick her into feeling she knows him. When he glances over at her, it shocks her to look him full in the face. His gaze is intense and naked, difficult to hold. He asks about the tattoo on her thigh, and she laughs, pulling her shorts down to hide it. He says there’s a story behind every ugly tattoo. She punches his shoulder lightly and says she won’t tell him.

They spend the next night in a tiny town called Nieu Bethesda, the halfway point on their drive. The town is in the Karoo, an area of semi-desert and cloudless skies, scattered with windmills and lambs, rocks, and shrubs. Before they go to bed they stand outside and gaze at the night sky. “We’re not far from the Kalahari,” Caleb says. “The people in the Kalahari call this the backbone of night,” he points to the spray of constellations above them. “It holds up the sky, and if it were not there, pieces of darkness would fall on us.” The warmth of his body reaches her, their breath rises into the air like the Milky Way. His face is very close to hers, and she leans in to kiss him. His lips are chapped, his tongue feels thick and heavy in her mouth. When at last they pull away, he says he is glad she made the first move—he couldn’t, being her volunteer coordinator and all, but he wanted to, he was wondering how to go about it. She kisses him again so he

stops talking.

The next day she is sitting beside him in the passenger seat, big feet up on the glove box, toes splayed out on the black plastic, knees swinging with each turn. He's been quiet for a while. Maybe he thinks it's a mistake to have kissed her. She decides it doesn't matter what he thinks—she has not come here to worry about a man. She has come to do something meaningful. He is just an actor in her story. But then he glances over at her and smiles. Her breath goes tight.

Outside the aloe-studded hills lope by and everything is new to her. The speaker in the car doesn't work, and the silences between their conversation make their journey feel meaningful and serious. Ahead of them is a bridge. A rusty snake of river appears beneath them. He tells her this is the Kei River, the old border crossing between South Africa and Transkei. The Transkei was one of the ten homelands established under apartheid. She nods as if she already knows this. The road begins to rise, a grade of steepness that doesn't exist on the highways in the US. He overtakes a truck—their car is so small that all she sees are wheels. When he pulls in front of it he laughs and glances back in the rearview mirror. He's not used to overtaking, he says. He wipes his hands one at a time on his jeans. She stays reclined in her seat, her knees still swinging, unperturbed.

The land falls away on this side, then that. The aloes stand like sentinels on the hills. They climb higher. Men appear on horseback along the highway to keep the livestock off the road. The men make her sit up. She takes her feet off the glove box, leaving behind sweaty footprints. "This is the real deal," she says.

"Just wait till we get there."

The road straightens out. She puts her hand on his thigh, the denim warm beneath her fingertips. The breeze from the window blows through her as if she is porous.

Occasionally they pass through a town: stalls on the side of the road selling shoes, hats, fruit, a woman walking in the shade of her umbrella, petrol stations, KFC billboards looming with the colonel's white face, a woman carrying a bag of rice on her head, men sitting against the shaded wall of a hardware building watching a woman with a red hat and matching heels walk by. The towns give way as quickly as they come. The hills begin to roll again.

She tells him about the tattoo, how she was at an art festival with her friend Beth in San Francisco. There was an exhibit with a gumball machine in a tattoo parlor. In each capsule was a line drawing.

“Like tattoo roulette?” he asks.

She nods. She tells him how her friend Beth played, but when the image of a manic-looking owl came out, she didn't want to go through with it. Tia offered her thigh instead. He raises his eyebrows and tells her she's a good friend. She swallows hard when he says this and looks out the window.

Children in their school uniforms march along the road—this group dressed in maroon, and then further on forest green. Next to the road, plastic bags stream like hair in the wind, low bushes blossom with yellow, footpaths cut across the hills. They pass cows swishing their tails and small ponds with trash at their shores. Two men in orange jumpsuits lie under the scant shade of a tree. The houses and trees are all low, the sky wide and open, the clouds on the horizon pose as snowy mountains.

She has been traveling for days, and soon she will be there. The village. Already her decision to come has paid off. She has escaped a feeling of stagnancy. Now life is unfolding in the way she expected, each day is a serendipitous adventure. It is easy to meet someone, easy to make her life into a meaningful story.

They turn off the highway. Now the only buildings are petrol stations and hardware shops. They pass by a shabby building with the words SAND-STONE-BLOCKS-WATER painted on the wall. People stroll down dirt sidewalks and sell things out of shipping containers. Mangy dogs trot along the roadside, searching. He reaches over and takes her hand, kissing the back of it. Then he puts one of her fingers in his mouth. It is hot and soft inside.

They turn off the paved road and crunch onto gravel. The Citi Golf rattles so much that they couldn't speak if they wanted to. Their silence is a kind of focus, like before a race. Now there are no towns and no cars. People walk in the road and stare at them as they pass. Sometimes a child waves. A cow scratches its ear on a post. Without the highways, billboards, and petrol stations, the landscape becomes beautiful. Circular huts with thatched roofs are set apart carefully, this set of dwellings painted lilac, this set peach, this, yellow. The fences disappear and the hills are uninterrupted—only the gardens are cordoned off with twisted poles and chicken wire. Maize grows thickly in some gardens, in another, a woman bends at the waist over a patch of bare earth. They pass by tombstones, tucked at the back of gardens.

The car scrabbles downhill. A coffee-colored river, swollen and rushing, appears in front of them. Caleb stops the car, frowning. The road leads down to the river. No way to cross. She glances over at him, and he avoids her eyes. He gets out of the car and walks slowly to the river's edge. He takes off his shoes and then stuffs his socks into his shoes. He rolls up his jeans and wades into the water, taking a few tentative steps. It is shallow. He begins to stride across. He is walking on water. Close to the other side, he turns and comes running back, the water splashing with each step. When he comes back to the car, shoes in hand, he is laughing. The bridge is there, it's only covered in an inch or two of

water, he tells her.

“So we can cross?”

He chucks his shoes in the back seat. “Sure,” he says.

They crawl across the low cement crossing. He laughs again when they get to the other side. She looks behind them. There is no sign of the bridge now, the water has sealed them off.

Chapter 2

Shortly after they cross the last river, one of the tires blows. Caleb steps out of the Golf and considers the tire, holding the bill of his baseball cap. The American men she knows back home in San Francisco can code and commute and run marathons, but they don't know how to fix things. Tia glances back down the road, jagged with rocks, and then to the few colorful huts on the horizon.

He takes off his wilted shirt and lays down in the gravel to check the underbelly of the car. The car is already dusted brown. Caleb has bought the Golf second-hand, and tacky heart stickers drift upwards like bubbles on the back pane. He opens the back of the car. She lets out her breath when he pulls out a spare. He looks younger with his shirt off, the afternoon light gilding him. He works to jack the car up, wiggle off the wheel, slide on the spare, screw the lug nuts in tight.

It is not important to her that a man knows how to fix things. But here on the side of the road, it seems to show that he is not a fool, and by proxy, she has not been foolish in accompanying him. He wipes his hands on a rag. He leans over to kiss her, and she runs her fingers up his back, her hands coming away gritty with road dust.

Back in the car, the doors closed, she feels a snugness, a feeling of self-containment in the world they've created over the last two days. Caleb puts his shirt back on. He positions himself back behind the wheel, the grease from the tire still streaked on his fingers.

With each bend, they wind deeper into the intestines of the place. It is February, and goats yank at tufts of green grass and black pigs cool in the puddles. Cattle lounge in the road, slouching off with their long ears swinging when the car horn blasts into the quiet

landscape. It is February and summer, summer and wet, backward to what she knows.

She tries to memorize it: February-summer, summer-wet.

The string of road wriggles through the hills. Kids in sun-bleached clothes appear, coming too close to the car. They hold up their hands and shout, "Sweets! Sweets!" They keep the windows rolled up to keep the dust out, and she imagines how they look to the kids, white faces flashing by. It makes her want to roll down the window and reach her hands out to them. Her fingers flicker over the window button, weighing up the price of it—connecting with these kids versus the dust.

There is an undefinable difference in the air. The ocean is close. The sun is low in the sky. The pastel light of dusk draws young boys out of the huts, and they drift out across the hills, shouting to each other as they search for animals to bring home.

Up ahead, she sees two men standing near the side of the road outside a hut. A dog lays at their feet, and two pups cavort nearby. One pounces on the other and the one underneath wriggles free and dashes away. The mama dog looks up lazily at the car. For a moment Tia can't see the pup as it runs down into the ditch near the side of the road, and then it pops into view.

They are so used to the bumps in the road that when the car lifts on Tia's side, it is almost imperceptible. But there is a thud, coupled with a plaintive yelp—cut short. The tires run through a thickness like mud.

Tia gasped, her heart thudding in her throat.

"What?" Caleb says.

"We ran over it." She turns in her seat, looking out the back window.

Caleb glances in the rear-view mirror and slows down.

The two men look at the golden pile in the road, and then they run toward them.

"Stop," Tia says.

Caleb squints back at the men and stops the car. She fumbles for the door handle. A warm, ripe breeze hits her—salt, dust, cow manure, cooking fires. She reaches her foot out of the door, but as she steps down the gravel beneath her begins to move. She jerks her foot back in and slams the door as the car picks up speed.

"What are you doing?" she yells, whipping around to face him.

"It isn't a good idea to stop."

She stares back at the men, who are shouting, throwing up their hands. Behind them, the mama dog is snuffling the pile in the road. Anger crackles over her.

"Trust me. These situations, it's not always safe to stop."

Tia glares at him, which goes unnoticed by Caleb, who stares intently at the odometer.

"If I was alone I might've stopped," Caleb muttered.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I'm just trying to say, I was thinking of you."

"But I wanted you to stop," she says, the exasperation in her voice bringing her close to tears. She won't admit it, but her stomach clenched when the men started running towards them.

He tells her that dogs don't mean as much here, that it's different from what we're used to.

It is like a fever breaking. She has left herself for a few days, imagining that they would stop Amplexica, that they would fall in love. Now her old self is returning. A dark laugh escapes her when she thinks about how she got so caught up.

"What," he says, turning to look at her. His eyes are too close together, and it makes him look deranged.

"Nothing."

He shifts in his seat. "Thirty kilometers since the turn onto the gravel road, so we should be there already," Caleb mumbles, slowing down, obsessively checking the odometer. The car crawls along through the gloom, keeping pace with a small boy who trots alongside the road on his donkey.

"Maybe it's an approximation," Tia says. She expected he would remember the way. Perhaps his four years away from the village make him as foreign as she is.

Caleb stops the car at the top of the hill. He picks up his phone from the cupholder.

"Hi Vuyo, this is Caleb. I think we're close..." He leans forward, peering ahead. "You can see me?"

Tia can hear the relief in his voice.

Caleb flashes the headlights. "Yes, that's me, at the top of the hill. Ok." Caleb hangs up. "He can see us," he says, shifting the car back into first gear. The car grinds its way along the gravel.

Out of the gloaming, a man in slacks and a collared shirt appears. He raises his arm to shield his eyes from their headlights. Caleb slows down and winds down the window.

The man breaks into a wide smile and reaches an enormous hand through the window to clasp Caleb's. "Wamkelekile, welcome, Caleb."

"Enkosi, thank you," Caleb says.

"Ah, you remember some Xhosa," Vuyo says laughing. He leans on the car windowsill, ducking down to look at Tia.

Caleb introduces her to Vuyo and tells Vuyo she will be volunteering.

"Wamkelikile, Tia." Vuyo's warm hand engulfs her own. "The house, it's up there," Vuyo says, pointing upwards into the darkness.

"We can give you a ride," Caleb says.

The backseat is filled with supplies and her backpack. Tia unbuckles her seatbelt and climbs into the darkness of the rear seats, perching on boxes and bags.

Vuyo passes in front of the car, the headlights illuminating his large frame. He has an odd, lurching way of walking. He folds himself gently into the passenger seat. He points them left off the road, and Caleb turns onto a scarred hillside. As the car surges up the hill, the bags shift beneath her. She gropes for something sturdy to cling to. The car comes to a sudden stop. Caleb opens the door for her, and she emerges, her legs wobbling as her feet find the damp evening grass.

There is a wooden gate, and beyond, trees, ferns, haywire bushes, and the outline of a structure. Vuyo lights the way with his phone, and they follow behind. Overgrown bushes lining the path snag her bare legs and catch in her hair. A silken thread brushes on her cheek, and she wipes her face in panic. Vuyo brings a bundle of keys out of his pocket. The door is small and has a stained-glass window on the top, like a play house, or a haunted house.

Inside, Vuyo strokes the side of the wall, searching for a switch. The bare room jumps into view: plank walls, cement floor, a faded floral couch. A wooden bar counter separates the kitchen from the living room. Caleb says the electricity is a surprise. Yes, Vuyo says, it finally came last year to the village, we waited so long. While Vuyo and Caleb go back to the car to bring in the bags, Tia drifts through the house. It is dank and forgotten. On each side of the living area, there is a bedroom with a double-bed foam mattress lying on the floor. When Vuyo goes back to the car to bring in more bags, Tia whispers to Caleb in the doorway.

"Don't you think we should tell him about the dog?"

He kicks the side of the doorframe and shrugs. Caleb puts his bag in one of the rooms and she puts her bag in the other.

Vuyo returns with a large plastic box filled with tools and carefully lowers it to the floor. He keeps his knees bent, even when standing, one knee juts at a strange angle. "I will let you rest now. Tomorrow, we can discuss everything." He shakes Caleb's hand. As Vuyo turns to Tia, they hear voices outside. Caleb peers out the front window, past an overgrown bush. Vuyo steps outside, followed by Caleb and Tia.

At first, none of them can see anything. Then their eyes adjust to the darkness. From behind Caleb, Tia sees two men at the gate, one of them carrying a bag over his shoulder. Caleb goes rigid next to her.

The light from the door shines on the two figures. When she saw them on the road, they looked like men. But now she can see that one is a boy. He is tall and gangly, with slumped shoulders. Manhood has reached his jawline, but childhood lingers in his face too, his eyes round and sweet underneath a soft brow. The man stands in front of the boy as if protecting him. The man is short, and though the boy ducks his head, trying to stay hidden, he is visible over the top of the man's head.

Vuyo calls out to them, and the man speaks, gesturing back towards the road and at the bag on his shoulder. Between his sentences, his chest rises and falls. His face is dewy. They were tailing the car on foot, unseen.

Vuyo turns to look at Caleb. "Did you have an accident on the way?"

"I wanted to tell you earlier. The dog ran under our tires. There was nothing we could do," Caleb says with an apologetic shrug.

Vuyo nods and walks down the path to speak to them.

The man raises his voice and points at Caleb. Vuyo beckons Caleb over, and he puts

his hands on his hips and walks towards them.

Tia sits on the stoop. Vuyo's translations to Caleb are too soft to hear.

"It isn't our fault," Caleb says, his voice grainy with discomfort.

She shakes her leg. She wants to tell them *she* wanted to stop. Vuyo rests his arm on the boy's shoulder and bows his head in condolence. She listens to the calm and confident way he speaks, the way he pauses to listen to the man. They will need Vuyo. Caleb does not have the language skills or judiciousness for this job. She assumed Caleb knew more than she did. He has lived here after all. But Caleb was wrong about the dog. It is not different here—the dog meant a great deal.

"They should be more careful about the road." Caleb reaches into his pocket and pulls out a few bills from his wallet. "This is all I have." The light shines on the boy's face as he steps forward to take the money. His eyes are wide and glassy with grief.

"Was that the puppy? In the bag?" Tia asks when Caleb and Vuyo return to the front stoop.

Vuyo nods.

"What is he going to do with it?"

"He is taking it home to bury it near his house. He lives in the village over there,"

Vuyo says, arcing his arm out into the dark abyss.

Caleb runs his hands through his hair. His hairline is receding.

Vuyo leaves, and they are alone in the kitchen. "Not the best start," she says, "running over someone's dog."

"Nothing we can do about it," he says, rummaging through several bags and pulling out a paper sack of dried meat. He slumps into one of the kitchen chairs and puts a fistful of black meat into his mouth. The image of the dog laid out like a strip in the road makes

her stomach flip. This is another thing she has overlooked—could she be with someone who eats meat?

"We should've stopped," she says, walking to her room and closing the door. She strips off. The damp of the cement floor soaks into her through her bare feet. She combs her fingers through her hair. The strands are sticky and dry. In bed, she listens for the ocean but can only hear a chorus of frogs and crickets, the occasional dog yipping. From the creak of his chair, she can tell Caleb is still sitting at the kitchen table.

Her bladder is full, and she wonders if it can wait till morning. She lies still. It is uncomfortable to be so stationary after the long journey. It makes her think too hard about why she is here and if it's a mistake. She sighs and gets up. Caleb glances up when she opens her door.

"Where's the bathroom?"

"Outside." He points to the back door. "I'll show you how it works."

It is dark and damp outside, loud with crickets. As she steps out, Caleb follows her, wielding a headlamp. She almost snaps at him—she knows how toilets work.

He unlatches the door to the toilet and they both stand inside the small space. It smells of hay and earth. "It's a composting toilet." He shines the light onto a divider in the toilet. "You pee in the front, and the urine is piped out into the banana grove. For, uh, number two, it goes in the back." He shows her to scoop a cupful of ash and soil and throw it into the toilet. She nods, her arms crossed over her chest.

Caleb looks up when she walks back into the kitchen. He is chewing on the black meat. She walks to her bedroom and gets back into bed. The house has a damp, mossy odor. Somewhere above her a mosquito hums. She is so far away from everything. If she wanted to leave, the only way back would be for Caleb to drive her. The light is on, and

she thinks about turning it off and starts counting backwards from a hundred until she falls asleep. But instead she thinks about the way Caleb ran on top of the water, the way his eyes are too close together.

Caleb knocks on the door softly. "Are you awake?" he whispers.

She thinks about saying nothing. But if she does not speak he will open the door to turn the light off, and she does not want him to have the satisfaction of doing this for her. "Yes," she says.

He shuffles into the room, and she is relieved to see him. Perhaps there is a reason she left the light on. He is carrying a green coil and a plate. He sets the plate down in the corner of the room and lights the end of the coil. "For the mosquitos," he says. The citronella smoke tickles her nose. He sits down at the end of the mattress. She didn't expect him to take this fatherly position at the end of her bed. He is sitting on her toes, and she nearly says so.

"I'm sorry about the dog." His eyebrows are so slanted with concern that it seems they might slip off his face.

She fluffs up the meager pillow. She gets the feeling he wants to kiss her, and her anger eases a little. Eventually, he stands up. He says sleep well and asks if she wants the door closed. She says yes, which she hopes hurts him a bit. He switches off the light and closes the door. The night is so dark that she has no sense of her body. It begins to rain. The drops rattle on the roof. She thinks of the last river they crossed, a gangplank. The rain will make the river swell even more, cutting off the way out.

Chapter 3

Until she opens her eyes, she is under the sage comforter, in her room with the woven Mexican rug, the wicker chair, and the philodendron, whose ivy tentacles climb up and over the doorway that leads out to the small kitchen and living room she shares with Beth and their cat Cornelius on Dolores Street. Then she is in the bare, foreign room. Sun blasts through the curtainless window, and yesterday rushes at her. The long drive, Caleb, the dog. It's a feeling like vertigo, her mind speeding thousands of miles to meet her body, and she is split—half wanting to be back under the sage comforter, listening to Beth's morning jazz, half relieved to be somewhere new.

The house, with the sun in it, looks better than last night. She did not ask Caleb what the house would look like because she is here to have an experience. But it is a relief that the house is cheerful. A skylight made of a sheet of clear plastic lets the sun beam across the faded floral couch. The cement floor is hot underneath her bare feet. All around the house, out of every window, is a tangle of lushness.

She pushes open Caleb's door. The sheets are tight. His folded pajamas underneath the pillow are the only sign he slept there. Caleb has put his clothes on an empty bookshelf in his room. He does not have many clothes, but he has devices—rechargeable battery packs, a camera, speakers, headphones. She picks up a bag of books by the door and sifts through them. One of them is a soft-cover bible with pages like tissue paper. A set of photos rests in the valley of the fragile pages.

The front door bangs open, and she tosses the bible on the stack of other books. Caleb is in the doorway, dressed in red swim trunks, water clumping his chest hair.

"She's awake," he says, coming in and hugging her. "Sleep well?" he asks, brushing a finger against her cheek. He leans in to kiss her. She's not expecting this after last night, and she kisses him back cautiously. He is used to things going his way, she thinks, tasting the sea salt on his cool lips.

He says he'll give her a quick tour before meeting Vuyo. She follows him out of the kitchen back door. Without the wrapping of night, the wooden house, with its green tin roof, looks cozy and cheerful. The air is muggy already. An earthy scent closes around her. A tree carrying large green mangoes stands in the middle of a patch of grass. Beneath the tree is a small rusted BBQ and mildew-spotted chair with a red cord cushion.

He shows her the outdoor shower, a stall made of wood planks with a pipe running up the back wall. He balls up toilet paper and then pours paraffin into the bottom of the pipe. He lights the paper, and the pipe begins to roar and fart. Caleb opens the tap and steaming hot water comes out. He grins at her. "It's a rocket shower. Pretty nice, right?"

Caleb raps his knuckles on a large green tank next to the house. "This is our water supply. When it rains, the water runs off the roof into here." He jogs to a wooden structure draped in shade cloth. Caleb crouches down and enters the structure. She follows, the mud oozing between the webbing of her toes. Inside, vines weave across the roof. Giant passion fruits hang down like lighting fixtures. "Amazing," Caleb says, picking one and handing it to her. The fruit is smooth and warm in her hand. He taps a pile of empty seed trays with his toe. "The nursery. We'll need to buy some seeds."

Next to the nursery is a dam the size of a small swimming pool, surrounded by reeds. He tells her the dam waters the vegetable beds, but he's not sure the pump is working. He squats down to inspect one of the black pipes and then loses interest.

A tilting shed sits near the dam, alongside a wooden chicken coop. The coop is

warped and dipped so it looks like it is smiling. He sees her looking at it. "We might get chickens at some point," he says. The fog she's been in is burning off, the jet lag easing. She can see things clearly again. Perhaps Caleb was right not to stop the car. And even if he was wrong, she could forgive him.

They cross the garden to the back gate. Two footpaths branch off from the gate. The left descends to the road they came on the night before. They take the right fork, walking along the garden fence till they come to a cleared patch of land.

"This is where we're going to start experimenting with natural building," he says. "The new building will be the eco hub, where people can come and get information about permaculture, natural building, solar, that kind of thing. And of course, it will act as an activist hub, to defend the village from Amplexica and the like. We'll start running reforestation and alien clearing projects at some point too."

They move back towards the house, through a hole in the bushes. They come into a clearing with rows of vegetable beds, each mounted with wooden A-frame structures. Disintegrating shade cloth covers each bed. Caleb tells her volunteers have occasionally been living here since the project started over fifteen years ago. But it hasn't been consistent. That's why Green Hub hired him to run the program, keep things going. The first thing to do is to fix up the beds. They stand looking at them. They can both see what it could be, the beds overflowing with vegetables.

"What's this though," he says, walking towards the back beds. Here the A-frame structures are new, and clean shade cloth veils tall leafy plants. He pulls back the shade cloth. "Jesus," he yanks his head back. He motions to her. A sweet, skunkiness fills her nostrils.

"That's a lot of weed." She pinches a bud and her fingers come away dusty with

crystals.

Caleb lets the shade cloth drop. "How the hell did they get here?" He glances around as if expecting to see someone. "The last volunteer must have planted them."

Tia shakes her head. "Someone is taking care of them now," she says.

"I guess you'd know, being from California."

"What, you've never seen weed before?" She wants to tease him more, but something has changed about Caleb. He has a shadow of how he was last night, slumped and defiant. They have to find out who's growing it, he says. He'll ask the neighbor, Lwazi, who takes care of the house when no one is here.

Caleb leaves to meet Vuyo. She digs through the boxes Caleb brought and finds cartons of long-life milk. The milk is tangy and warm, and she sticks her tongue out and makes a sound. She thinks of the cold, clean taste of the almond milk she prefers. She is queasy from hunger. At the bottom of a box she finds a loaf of squashed bread and a jar of peanut butter in the plastic bags. She constructs a peanut butter sandwich and eats it in the back doorway, looking out at the garden. An apple tree, a grapevine, a dried-out rose bush appear amongst the brush.

She swallows the last of her sandwich and opens the front gate. In front of her, the hill rises. She walks up the rise and stands at the top of the hill. Far below the river spills along the cleavage of hills, passing through sections of small forest. Then it pools around islands of mangroves before becoming a kaleidoscope of teals in an estuary. The estuary narrows, a tail of water leading to the span of the ocean. She is light-headed from the height and the beauty. The cliff-edge danger and the wind that rolls up the edge of the cliff thrill through her.

As she is walking back into the front gate, a voice calls to her.

"Molo Sisi," he calls again.

"Hello."

"You want fish?" He is wearing an oversized puffy jacket, despite the heat. His eyes are puffy too as if he has just woken up. The edges of his toes stick out of his battered red sneakers.

She says no, and the man turns away, his shoulders sagging. She thinks of the dog they ran over last night.

"I mean, yes," she says hesitantly. Caleb will eat the fish, and maybe she will have a bite, considering a local fisherman caught it.

"How big, the fish?" he asks.

"Not too big."

"This?" He holds his hands wide.

"No, smaller."

He tells her it will be seventy rand. The equivalent in dollars would not buy her much more than a coffee back home. But still, she wonders if he is ripping her off. She doesn't want to be taken advantage of. She goes inside and comes back with a hundred rand note.

"Do you have change?" she asks.

"Thirty," he says.

She takes that to mean he will bring her thirty rand when he brings the fish.

"When will you bring it?"

He looks out towards the ocean. "Afternoon."

"Around Four?"

"My name is Nine."

"Nine?"

"Yes, my name. Not Four."

She stares at him. He is trying to play some kind of joke on her with his name. But his expression is earnest enough, and she hands over the money. That is when she notices one of his pinky fingers is missing, and the name makes sense.

Back inside, she packs a bag with her swimsuit and towel and walks down the steep footpath to the gravel road. There is only one road in the village, and she follows it. Footpaths branch off the road, leading to bright blossoms of huts on the hills. The huts are made of mud bricks and capped with thatch. Hills rise as tall as modest skyscrapers, and clouds cast giant patched shadows on the landscape. In parts, forest covers the hills like fur, trees and shrubs tangle dense and low. The smell of damp fur and dung and ocean brine is in the wind. The grass with its sun-bleached tips glosses this way and that. The road stretches on.

The wind blows hot marine air into her mouth. Salt tangs on her tongue. A woman comes out of her hut. Her breasts are bare—it is so authentic. The woman raises her arm and throws something. A green plastic soda bottle sails through the air and down the hill. Oh. Tia carries on.

Over the top of a hill, a continuum of ocean and sky meets her, the oceanic wall of the horizon joins the ceiling of the sky in a neat seam. Further on, the huts begin to disappear, and the road dips down. Round a bend, an empty white-sand arc of beach appears. The waves come in strong, the sun smarts off the water.

Down at the beach, the sand is a perfect color, not so white to sting her eyes. There is not a single person on the beach—it is all hers. Driftwood lies tossed up on the beach. Little plovers scurry across the sand like they are preparing for some kind of disaster. She sits down. The sun is hot on her head and she wiggles her toes into the sand, the top layer

hot, the sand below cool and damp. Beyond the waves, fins flash—dolphins, as Caleb described. They come in closer to shore. A wave rises, and in the clear face, the dark bodies speed inside the wave. She laughs. The dolphins turn around and shoot out the backside of the wave, their bodies shining before splashing back down into the ocean. This is what Amplexica is going to destroy. She picks up a piece of driftwood and stabs it in the sand.

She has gotten here all by herself, somewhere beautiful, far from home, away from everybody and everything. This is the off-the-beaten-track experience she has been looking for. And there is the project, and Caleb too. The risk she took in coming has paid off. Despite the dog incident, she is looking forward to seeing Caleb. She closes her eyes, and lays down, the sand warm on her back.

It is like waking into a dream. A mist has come in. The sunlight is diffused, a breeze brushes her skin. The hem of the sea rushes in and drifts out, leaving a glassy plane of suds. The wet sand shines in the sun—she can see the upside-down reflection of the plovers as they run. The waves send rocks clattering over each other in a gentle rhythm. A cow moos. Down the beach, where the mist hangs over the sand, a herd has gathered. Cows on the beach!

The cows are brown and white and black, spotted, long-eared, and horned. Some of them are lying down, their delicate legs bent underneath their hulking bodies. Others stand gazing out to sea, their tails swishing. A few look at her dumbly as she approaches. There is a large white bull amongst them, and she backs away.

It is four when she arrives home, and she worries that the man with the fish has come and gone. Caleb is still not back. She looks for coffee in the food Caleb brought. There is none. Instead, she puts the food into the cupboards and makes herself another peanut

butter sandwich. She sits on the front step, waiting for the man with the fish. Tension pushes into her temples and fogs her mind. She imagines sipping on a cappuccino, the foam against her top lip. She does a yoga class on her phone, with the front door open in case the fisherman comes. As the reception flickers in and out, the teacher says things like, *When we are aligned, everything flows* and *Whisper to yourself, 'I am strong'*. After twenty minutes, the teacher's face freezes with finality and then disappears. A page that says "No Internet" flashes up.

She wanders into Caleb's room and picks up the bible again. The first photo is of him and his parents at a baseball game. The second photo is of Caleb with a girlfriend—she can see it in the way he holds her waist and how she leans towards his shoulder. They are in front of a waterfall. She is nearly a foot shorter than him. He goes for petite blondes, women who can wrap their legs around his waist and make vertical love to him. He does not date women like her, who are tall and pale and thick-boned like a marble statue.

Maybe Caleb and the woman in the picture are still together. Her stomach knots. She can't ask him about this woman. Otherwise, he will know she was looking through his things—he will know she is jealous. She hardens herself to the feeling of not knowing.

There is a Xhosa language book, the spine sharp. She sits down on Caleb's bed. She likes the idea of getting ahead of Caleb, knowing more of the language than he knows. She reads about the clicks. The Roman language was used to render Xhosa into written form. But there needed to be a way to represent clicks. C, Q, and X, which are similar-sounding letters, could be replaced by K. That meant that C, Q, and X were free to represent the three clicks. C is made by withdrawing your tongue from behind your teeth and sucking air inward, like saying "tsk, tsk" when you are exasperated. Q is made by withdrawing your tongue from the roof of your mouth, and making a sound like a cork

popping. X is made by withdrawing your tongue from the sides of your mouth, like you are urging a horse on. She tries the clicks till her tongue hurts. The next page is basic vocabulary. Hello is molo. Thank you is enkosi.

She sighs. When the project gets underway, she will be busy. But the village is different than she expected, peaceful. There is no sign of Amplexica and what they are planning to do. Oil is like that, invisible. It is not like coal, where there are sooty faces and collapsing shafts. Amplexica is an invisible enemy.

It is getting dark. She stands up quickly from the bed, placing the bible and the language book back on top of the other books. Perhaps the man with the fish came when she was on the beach. Or perhaps he has taken advantage of her, she thinks, clenching her jaw.

The wind makes the evening cold. She scrambles down the footpath to reach the gravel road, the wind tugging at her skirt. A lanky boy kicks a soccer ball on the road. The ball rolls over to her and she kicks it back to him, and he smiles shyly. He's wearing a purple long-sleeved shirt with a basketball on it and blocky text that says "BOSTON LOS ANGELES AMERICAS COMPANY STATES. A girl runs out of a nearby hut to meet Tia. Half her hair is braided tightly to her skull. The other half is a soft halo. The girl asks her something. Then she tries again in English, "You go where?" She reaches her arm up to grab Tia's hand. The girl's palm is sticky and warm. A pregnant woman appears in the doorway, holding a brush and hot pink hairbands. She looks too young to be the girl's mother. Maybe they are sisters.

"I'm looking for Nine," Tia says, addressing the woman. The woman's skirt is made of starched fabric, unlike the material of her skirt which clings to her legs in the wind.

"Nine?" she points with a long sweep of her arm, "at shebeen."

"Shebeen?"

The woman raises her arm to mimic drinking.

Some kind of bar. She is surprised the village has one. Tia looks back the way she came. It is getting late, but she is still hopeful she might find Nine. She drops the child's hand, and the girl grabs at her skirt. The woman says something and the girl studies the ground and twists from side to side. Tia pats the girl on her shoulder and continues down the gravel road, avoiding the Frisbees of cow manure. Up ahead she sees a few mud-walled shacks, music thudding from within.

Men cluster in the fenced-off area, some leaning against the windowless buildings. The yard has a view of the river meeting the ocean. Across the river, rolling hills continue for miles. A few dogs sniff around the buildings. A teenage boy comes out of one of the buildings with an empty crate and adds it to a pile of crates. From inside she can hear a woman's voice shouting instructions. She passes through the rusted fence of the shebeen yard. Green shards of glass glint amongst the gravel in the last of the daylight. Glossy chip packets and milk cartons blow around her ankles. A carton warns in big letters "DON'T DRINK AND WALK ON THE ROAD, YOU MAY BE KILLED." The cartons are not milk, but beer.

A few of the men glance at her, and she is surprised by her discomfort. There is no reason for her to feel uncomfortable. The men have turned back to their conversation, and the shebeen has a peaceful conviviality like any neighborhood bar. But it seems to her that her whiteness glows lantern-like in the shebeen yard. She wants to slink back out of the gate and down the road, but her feet are stuck to the earth floor of the shebeen yard.

"Can we help you?" a voice calls to her. A man, dressed in a pair of crisp jeans and white tennis shoes pushes himself off the wall of the building and comes over to her.

"I'm looking for Nine."

The man has high cheekbones, and he stands with his chest out, his hands on his hips.

"He's not here. Well, he's here, but not really," he says, pointing to a pile of clothes slumped against the wall. She recognizes the puffy jacket and the red sneakers.

"Oh," she says. "He sold me a fish this morning, but he hasn't brought it."

"Why didn't he give you the fish in the morning?"

"He hadn't caught it yet."

"So he sold you the fish before he caught it?" he says, his mouth spreading into a display of perfect white teeth. "What kind of fish did he sell you?"

"He didn't say. He said he would get me a fish around this size." She gestures with her hands.

He laughs and turns to the men. He speaks loudly, gesturing with his hands to show the size of the fish as she had. The whole shebeen yard shakes with laughter and the dogs start barking. A hot flush douses her. She turns back towards the gate.

"Wait," the man says.

She ignores him, walking fast and looking straight ahead. A warm substance smooshes against the inside of her right foot. A brown odor, fresh and fetid, rises up to her. She is too embarrassed to look down at what she's stepped in.

She walks quickly down the middle of the road. Two men come toward her, each carrying the back leg of a pig. The pig screams and twists, dancing on its front feet to prevent its face from being dragged in the road. The men wave to her and smile, and she waves hesitantly. After they pass, she turns, looking back at the pig. The singular cruelty of it is awful. But it is better than the death of a factory-farmed pig. That is another invisible evil. If only people had to see it, they would not eat meat. She is glad the man

with the fish never came.

She sighs in relief when she sees Caleb's car parked out front. She wipes the side of her foot in the grass.

"Hi," he says when she opens the door. "Power's out." He is eating a bowl of cereal.

Caleb sniffs the air. "What's that smell?"

She lifts her foot. "I stepped in shit." She scoots her heels out of her shoes and flings them next to the bushes by the front door.

"On a walk?"

"I bought a fish and the man never came to give it to me. So I went to try to find him at the shebeen."

"I thought you were a vegetarian."

"I am."

He stares at her, perplexed.

She doesn't know how to explain that the fish is somehow meant to cancel out the dog. It does not quite make sense to her either.

Her head hurts. She leans her elbows on the table and puts her head in her hands, massaging her temples.

"Headache?"

"Caffeine."

He laughs. "We'll go to town soon to get supplies. I'll buy some coffee."

"My internet ran out already."

He smiles. "No coffee and no internet. Hard day."

She doesn't like the way Caleb is looking at her. He stands up and gets a rag from under the sink and dampens it. He goes outside and cleans her shoes. He sets them by the

front door and comes back to the kitchen to wash his hands.

She tries to remember the last time somebody has done something so kind for her. She rests her head on her hand.

He peers at her, wiping his damp hands on a cloth and asks if she wants a painkiller.

She says she can handle it.

He looks at her doubtfully.

The headache creeps into her neck muscles, and she puts a hand on her neck.

He rubs her shoulders, clumsily. His fingers are warm on her skin. Perhaps the woman in the photo is not his girlfriend after all.

"You shouldn't walk around at night. Or go to the shebeen, for that matter." She forgives him for telling her what to do because he is rubbing her neck. She lays her cheek on the table, and after a while, she is melting into the wood. He tells her about his day, and she hums "mm mm" now and then, half listening—he is grateful to Vuyo, he worked with him when he was last in South Africa but had not appreciated him, he is a perfect partner in it all, he knows everyone, sees everything, believes completely in the cause, has ideas about development and how it should be done. Caleb withdraws his fingers and says he is going to bed.

"Bed? What time is it?" She sits up. It has gotten darker.

Caleb shrugs.

She looks at her phone. "Are you seriously going to bed? It's not even eight." He's a tease, she thinks, giving her a neck rub and then going to bed.

"Early to bed, early to rise. The sun rises earlier here than in Cape Town." He walks into his room. She wonders why the sun rises earlier here. She shouldn't be twenty-three and not know how the sun works.

The wind picks up, blowing hard from the direction of the ocean. The wind takes swipes at the house like it's trying to push the house off the hillside. The branches thrash at the walls. The wind darts through gaps in the windows, under the door, between the top of the wall and the roof, shooting across her skin.

Something patters nearby. She tucks her feet up on the chair in case whatever is pattering crosses her feet. She tiptoes to Caleb's bedroom, imagining the rat scabbling after her, and closes the door. The moonlight is coming in through the window between the tree branches. It casts a mangled shadow across his body so that he is a jigsaw puzzle of light and dark pieces. She pulls back the covers.

He raises his head off his pillow, and turns towards her, groggy.

"There's a rat out there," she explains.

He makes a little sound in his throat and puts his head down again. She lies carefully next to him. The heat from his back and his baby powder scent reach her. The wind is even louder in the bedroom. It gets underneath the tin roof and lifts it, so the roof slams and thumps.

She watches the subtle rise of his chest, listens to the repercussive hush of his exhale. He has fallen back to sleep, and she turns away from him. Perhaps he is still with the woman in the photo. She imagines them together, going for hikes to waterfalls, cuddling on the couch watching Disney movies, bbq-ing in the summer, holding hands in church. The fact that he might be religious changes things. What if this whole thing is some kind of mission trip for him? What if it is wrong to be here, in the village, helping. She wonders if she would be attracted to Caleb back home, or if, in the context of her real life, he would seem too wholesome and earnest. Perhaps she can get out of bed and he will not remember her being there.

Then he turns towards her and moves his body around hers, his thighs pressing against the backs of her thighs, his arm slung over the top of her. After a while, he begins to stroke her leg. He is patient and calculated as if he does not want her to know that he is awake. His hand slides across her stomach, his fingertips brush over the knots of her nipples. She can feel him hard and heated behind her.

His breath is heavy in her ear. She turns to face him, and they kiss for a long time. She slips her hand under the elastic of his boxers. He sits up, and for a moment she thinks he is going to stop. But he unbuttons her jeans and pulls them off at the ankles in one motion. He rolls her panties off. She feels his hot breath between her legs.

Something begins to catch. He tends it, watches it flare over her. When she is close to the other side, breathing sharply, he presses himself into her. Time twists, she has known him for years, his body is her own. It is so right, she thinks. The rightness of it scorches over her body, something forgotten found again. She makes a last sigh, and in response his body tenses and shakes, he gives a shout.

He is very heavy on top of her. The edges of herself dissolve as he holds her. She lies still underneath him, not wanting to break the feeling of having arrived at a moment where she does not want something more. He rolls away, yawning.

The room around her, with the open windows, feels very large and spacious as if the walls have fallen away. The wind dies down, and in the new silence, she feels she is at the start of something significant.

She wakes in the morning to Caleb's fingers gently on her scalp, a sound like sandpaper.

"I'll be back at noon," he says.

"I'm coming with you." She holds on to his hand with her eyes still closed and he lets

her for a while.

"Doesn't look like it," he says, moving out of her fingers.

Later, she is drifting in and out of sleep in a state of jet-lagged guilt when there is a knock at the door.

"One minute!" She says, throwing back the covers. She pulls on one of Caleb's shirts. She reluctantly opens the door, wondering if the filtered version of her wardrobe panic has been visible through the window in the door.

It is the man from the shebeen who laughed at her.

"Molo sisi," he says brightly.

She thinks of telling him that she is not interested in buying anything and closing the door. But she can't do that—she is new here. This is not the kind of white person she wants to be.

"I wanted to bring you something." He reaches into the pocket of his jeans and pulls out a soft one hundred rand note.

"Oh, I..." she blushed. "Thank you," she says, taking it.

"He managed to drink most of the money away, but I loaned him some money. I told him he had to bring it here himself, but he's very...babalas." He says, throwing his fingers up to show the state of Nine's hangover.

"Thank you. Will he pay you back?"

"Eish. That one. I know where he lives. My name is Khanya," he offers his hand, his other hand crossing formally to rest in the nook of his elbow.

"Kanye?" she asks, taking his hand.

"No, I am not a rapper. It's Khanya, with an 'a' at the end."

She smiles. "I'm Tia."

“You’re here to fix up the garden?” he asks.

Tia nods. She wants to say she is here to stop Amplexica, but it sounds arrogant and unlikely. “I’m also here to raise awareness about Amplexica,” she says.

Khanya frowns. “You work for Amplexica?”

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “I’m against them.”

“But you’re American, like Amplexica. I can tell from your voice.” He quacks, impersonating Donald Duck. “The Americans, they don’t agree on things.”

“I guess not.”

“When I was a boy this garden grew everything. The couple who started the garden used to put a box of fruit there,” he says pointing to the front gate. “People took what they wanted. And they grew yellow roses.” He nods to the dried-out rose bushes. “I used to steal them for my girlfriend.” He laughs and shakes his head. Then he turns to go.

“Khanya?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you,” and to show she means it, she says, “enkosi.”

“Next time, make sure you see the fish first,” he calls, already at the gate.

Tia laughs, the loudness of it surprising her.

He waves, and her eyes follow him as he runs down the hill.

Chapter 4

Khanya runs down the steep embankment away from the volunteer house. That went well. Yesterday he thought he messed up, teasing her about the fish. But now he is one step closer in his plan. He jogs over to Lwazi's house.

"Nkqo Nkqo!" he calls out.

Lwazi appears in the doorway, his son clinging to his leg. Lwazi tells his son to go back inside, and then he comes over to Khanya. "Did you make an agreement with the volunteers?" Lwazi asks.

Khanya claps him on the back and tells him to have patience.

Lwazi says he never would have planted the weed there if he knew the volunteers were coming back. What if he loses his job taking care of the volunteer house?

Khanya tells him to have faith, he will sort it out. Lwazi should focus on keeping an eye on things and making sure the weed grows well. Then he asks for Zuki's number.

"Zuki? You're not still in love with her, after all these years?"

Khanya laughs. "No, I just want to talk with her."

"Just talk," Lwazi says, squinting his eyes at Khanya. He tells Khanya he won't give him Zuki's number. The last thing they need right now is for him to get involved with the chief's wife and for the chief to be after them.

Khanya says that he's going to sort out the weed and the volunteers. The least Lwazi could do is give him Zuki's number.

Lwazi pulls out his phone and mutters that he isn't even sure if he has her number. Then he sighs and reads it out to him.

“Sha’p, sha’p,” Khanya says, sticking his phone back into his pocket.

Khanya reaches the road, and runs up the next hill, his calf muscles straining against the steep incline. He pauses at the top. Today the water in the lagoon is still and so is the ocean. Mama Nokuzola is bent over in her garden. He eyes a rock in the road. He plants his right foot and swings with his left. The rock sails over Mama Nokuzola's hillside maize patch toward the ocean. The rock gyrates in the air, dropping out of view. He imagines it crashing through the sickly-sweet lantana bushes before it plunks into the sand dunes.

"Yoh! Why aren't you playing on the football team?" Mama Nokuzola calls to him. She stands up, and he can see her age in the movement, the way she does not straighten up. He wonders if she still goes down to the sea, ties up her skirt and pries mussels off the rocks like she used to with his Mama. "You can still kick like a boy," she says.

He laughs and turns onto the footpath that leads to his family's homestead. Mama Nokuzola knows as well as he does that he wouldn't be allowed to play on the football team, that the only reason he is allowed to be in the village is to care for Tata. He knows Mama Nokuzola has been keeping an eye on Tata's health while he's away. He's been meaning to thank her. But he doesn't want to run into her daughter, Amila. He's managed to avoid her so far since he's been back. Everyone says Amila is exactly like her mother, tall, with the same small nose and proud, upward lift of her chin, the same way she can cut you down with a look. In his opinion, they are nothing alike. Maybe they are cut from the same wood, but Amila is sharp and rough like a badly hewn plank, while Mama Nokuzola is light and kind like driftwood.

As Khanya climbs up the footpath, their homestead appears. First the peaked roof of the rondavel he grew up in. Then the tin roof of Tata's flat. He needs to repaint both

buildings—in places the yellow has chipped off to reveal the mud walls. Then his half-constructed rondavel appears.

"Ubuphi?" his father calls. Tata eases himself off the chair on the front stoep of his flat. "I was waiting for you. It's already getting hot," He crosses the yard to the half-built rondavel. Whisky wakes up and barks. The dog trots over to Khanya and sniffs the air, searching for him. Whisky's eyes are clouded, his muzzle gray. The dog makes Khanya feel guilty. He has been away long enough for Whisky to grow old.

"Where were you?" Tata asks again.

"I went up to the volunteer house."

Tata puts both hands on his cane and leans forward, his eyes narrowing. "What are you doing up there?"

"I was returning money to one of the new volunteers."

"They're starting with that silliness again?"

Khanya says it seems like they are starting with the garden again. But they have also come to stop Amplexica.

Tata shakes his head and says that the community will deal with Amplexica in the usual way. It's just a matter of talking it over. Nobody will agree to digging up graves to put a pipeline in.

Khanya is not so sure. He has heard men talking at the shebeen about jobs. Whisky licks his fingers, and he wipes the wetness off on his jeans. The dog pants hotly on his hand. He knees Whisky out of the way, and the dog looks at him with contempt. In truth, he is pleased Whisky is finally warming to him.

Yesterday he left the ladder up against the wall of the rondavel, and now he climbs a few steps. Tata bends down to pick up a cement block and holds it out to him. They are

nearly finished with the walls. Khanya wanted to build the rondavel out of mud bricks. Only two rand a brick, compared to the cement bricks which are fifteen rand. But Tata insisted on cement. It will last longer, he said, and besides, the women won't make bricks till June when the weather is dry.

"Many people are happy you are back," Tata says, the block rocking unsteadily in his hands. "They might not say that, but they are."

Khanya flings an arm out and catches the block before it plunges to the earth.

"But you have to be careful. Don't make trouble."

"Nine took her money, so I returned it. Should I not have?" Khanya spreads mortar with his trowel and then sets the brick on top.

"If you get involved with Amplexica, the chief will be after you, if he isn't already." Khanya sighs. "I'm not involved with Amplexica. You are. You're the one the chief is going to come after."

Tata shakes his head. "I know you. Your way is always..." He shakes his head again, trying to find the words. His eyes sweep over him and rest on his white takkies. "You. Wearing your city shoes."

"My shoes?" he laughs. "Ah, it's my shoes that are the problem." He lifts one of his feet and jiggles it.

Tata doesn't laugh. "You're up to something." He bends down to pick up another brick.

"If I do it myself, it's faster," Khanya says. It took Tata longer to hand the bricks to him than it did for him to come down and go back up.

Tata sighs and drops the brick. Dust rises up in small clouds. "I guess you'll be able to put the whole roof up by yourself too." He treads back to his flat.

Khanya wishes he never started the project. He doesn't want this house. Tata wants him to keep his head down so he can restart in the village again. But he will keep his head down so that he can go away quietly and return to Cape Town. He will wash himself from the village the way the ocean washes the prints of his running shoes off the beach.

People here imagine he has a better life in Cape Town. But the only thing that's better is the hope things will get better. He thinks of his Toyota Corolla parked in the lot at the mechanic's, collecting dust. Junk, that's what the mechanic said—take your time deciding, but I'll tell you it's not worth the repairs—that was what the mechanic said. Five years of paying off the car, and only a few shiny months of owning it outright. Five years of waking up before five am, driving out of Khayelitsha and to the city bowl. Five years of hitting his targets. The last year was hard. His car was getting old. Uber dropped him from UberX to Uber Go, and sometimes he would not hit his target until the evening traffic filled the streets and his back ached.

Now he has to start over, new car, new loan, hustling every day of the week, winding around Cape Town, his head tired from listening to the radio, his phone telling him to turn right, turn left, trying to make enough to pay off the car, to pay for petrol prices that are always higher. He doesn't have it in him to do another five years. He needs to make the money, fast. He imagines putting a ganja sticker on the glove box of his new car, handing over baggies filled with buds to his Uber clients in return for crisp Madiba notes. If things go well, he could own the car in a year or two. The weed is going to free him from the trap, he is sure of it. He's finished a row of bricks, and he goes inside for a glass of water.

The sudden cool of the rondavel is a relief. Tata is seated at the kitchen table, smoking a cigarette. Khanya closes the door to keep Whisky from following him in. Then he crosses the room, waving at the smoke. When he's filling up a glass of water, someone

knocks on the door.

Amila is standing at the door, her hair short like it was when she was a child, when he and his sister would race around playing with each other. Whisky is licking her hand with delight and wagging his tail. The dog knows her better than him.

He has to admit she's more like her mother than he remembered. She's filled out since he last saw her a few years ago. Her eyes are wide— she's surprised to see him, and when she's looking at him like that, he can see clearly that she is beautiful, like everyone says.

“I heard you were back,” she says.

“Not for long.”

“But you're building a house?” She asks, tilting her head to one side.

He remembers he does not like her. She is so sure of everything, always calling everything into question. “I'm just keeping busy,” he snaps.

She shrugs, and asks to talk to Tata.

He steps aside and lets her in. From the easy way Amila heads to the table, he knows it is not the first time she has come. Amila pulls out papers from her cloth shoulder bag. She tells him she has new information on Amplexica and their plans.

Khanya sips his water, leaning against the cool of the mud wall, listening.

Amila explains that as they thought, Amplexica is planning to extract both oil and gas from the reserves discovered off the coast. The extracted oil would be loaded onto tankers, and then transported to Europe.

Tata interrupts and says he'd like to see them try—don't they know it's one of the most dangerous coasts?

Amila shakes her head. They've thought of all that, she says, and she tells him how the tanker operations would consider the sea conditions to make sure they could

transport efficiently.

Tata rubs his beard.

The gas project might affect us even more, Amila continues. She explains that the gas would be produced from deep under the ocean in an area located 100 km offshore. They would drill into the seabed to access the gas reserves underneath rock. From there it would be taken up to the surface to a platform where it would go through initial processing. Then it would run along the seabed in a pipeline all the way to shore. She says it's not clear whether they want to build an onshore processing facility, which could be as big as five hectares. If they built a facility like that, the gas would be cleaned up there and then transported through pipelines to more urban areas. The pipeline would allow the distribution of gas within South Africa.

"They can't build some facility on our land," Tata says.

Amila says that even if they don't, the pipeline will still cut through the village. It would transport raw gas, which would make the transport and pipelines less safe. And regardless, Amplexica wants to build a base onshore to support the offshore oil operations. The base would be a control center for logistics, storing equipment and maintenance work.

"You won't be able to stop them," Khanya says, pushing himself off the wall.

Amila starts, and swivels her head towards him, like she forgot he was there. She narrows her eyes. She's about to say something, but then she glances at Tata.

"You haven't changed, have you?"

"What does that mean," Amila says quietly. She is looking down like she is hurt, but it's only because Tata is there. If he wasn't there, she would be fighting back.

Amila starts to gather her papers.

“You can stay,” Khanya says, “I’m leaving anyway.”

He goes back to laying bricks, glancing at the doorway of the rondavel every now and then. Amila. A woman who thinks she’s going to change the world. He chuckles. What’s gotten into Tata? Sitting there listening to a woman Amila’s age? Tata always did have a soft spot for Amila. He thinks of how after his sister Thuletu died Tata had barely looked him in the face. But it had been different with Amila—Amila could make Tata laugh in the same way Thuletu could. He feels a lump in his throat, and he moves his hands faster, laying brick after brick.

The midday sun creeps sweat into his eyes and he wipes them with the sleeve of his shirt. He jumps down into the interior of the house and studies the walls. When the walls are done and plastered, he’ll get Lwazi to help him put the pole structure of the roof up. He’ll have to pay someone to do the thatching—there are only two people left in the village who know how to do it well. Tata saved bundles of thatch in preparation, but it’s not enough. He will have to ask around in the village for extra thatch if he runs out. There is no way he will wait until June for the headman to open the grass harvesting season.

When the roof is done, he will place a tire on the peak of the roof like a halo, cement it down to prevent lightning from striking, and stick in the oyster shells to keep the owls away—they don’t need any more bad luck. The rondavel will be done next month, and when it is done, he will leave.

Chapter 5

The floor of the bus is muddy. Empty bottles roll back and forth between the passengers' feet like they are players in an unenthusiastic game. Sacks of cabbages, squash, rice, samp and beans clutter the aisles. The covering on the bus seats is coming undone and the yellow foam of the cushion shows through in places. Khanya picks at the foam. The woman beside him hands him an orange and peels another one for her three children. He doesn't know the woman. Perhaps she came to the village as a new wife in the years he's been gone.

One of the children sits between them, the other stands between the woman's legs, and the baby is in her lap. He imagines as they sit peeling oranges that this is his wife, his children. It is a complacent feeling, like sitting next to a fire. He hands the boy next to him umbele—a section of orange. The boy's jaw moves as he eats, his eyes wide and occupied. If these children were his, he would not get enough satisfaction from watching them eat. He would want too much for them, in the way he had wanted too much for himself.

The boy picks up a peel that rests on Khanya's thigh and begins to eat it. He nearly takes the peel away from the boy and tells him people would laugh at him in Cape Town if they saw him eating the peel. He thinks briefly of the little white girl who walked past him while he was sitting on a bench in the city, how she had asked her mother why they

didn't eat the peel if that man was, and how her mother had looked at him with disgust. His mouth goes numb and bitter. He picks up the rest of the peels and drops them in the boy's lap. The boy is on his own and will learn things the hard way like he has. He turns his back on the family, sticking his legs out in the aisle.

He looks in his plastic—a new phone charger for Tata, treatment for his horse's legs, a cardboard box of nails. He opens the paper box and looks at the smooth sleeping nails. When he gets home he will fix the linoleum floor in the old rondavel. They put the linoleum down ten years ago when his mother was too sick to smooth dung on the floors. Now the linoleum is curled and worn at the edges. He's saved enough bottle caps—he'll drive the new nails through the caps and linoleum into the earth. Afterwards, he'll see if he can find his horse Lilo and give the treatment for his legs.

An older boy sits across the aisle from him. He has a white sports bag across his lap. His hands rest on the bag. He is from the city—Khanya can tell from his tight jeans and Converse shoes. He wears a hat, even though the bus is hot. He remembers when he first started living in town when he was studying on a scholarship. He told his friends in Mthatha how he hated going home, but when he was on the bus heading back like this boy was now, it felt like he was breathing out for the first time in a long while. The boy puts on headphones and bobs his head to music, his eyes squinting like he thinks he is better than all the rest of them. He had been like this boy.

The bus left the tar road an hour ago on the outskirts of Mthatha. Since then they have been bumping along, the bus and its poor shocks protesting all the way. They have passed through villages he doesn't know the name of, and now they pass through the ones he can name, Kundlunkulu, Ku-Kombe, Dontsa. They pass the hospital and the hardware and furniture shop with its rusted gate and stacks of bricks outside. Then they descend to the

coast. The turns on the narrow road and the sharp drops make the woman next to him suck air through her teeth. Her daughter pounds excitedly on the window where the ground has fallen away. Now it's Mandleni, Ntlanjeni, Ceka—the villages flicker by and then are snuffed out by dust.

Khanya is sweating between his legs, and he shifts in his seat. He wiggles his jaw from side to side, trying to ease the tension. They are entering the village now, and as a testament to the buses' struggle, they pass the old broken-down bus on the side of the road. The old bus was there before Khanya left the village, years ago now. When it broke down, nobody bothered to take it away. Now it is too rusted to be of any use. In the beginning, the children enjoyed playing in it. Then the older boys knocked out the windows, and the mothers told their children not to go in it. Now, the white backpackers who come looking for weed and escape paint the sides. They paint it over and over, images of animals, mushrooms, and big bouncy words that are hard to read. The bus changes color with the seasons. Khanya doesn't see the point.

The first stop in the village is at the small sand quarry. After the quarry, the bus trundles down through the main part of the village. Khanya knows the route well. When he was studying in Mthatha, he would come down on the bus with Zuki. Khanya would put his school blazer and their backpacks over their laps. They would hold hands underneath it, not wanting people on the bus to gossip. He would walk her to her house, and wave goodbye, knowing that they would meet the next day in one of their secret spots: the kayak hut when it was raining and they were feeling melancholy, the grassy valley between the beach dunes when they wanted to be unseen but together under the sky, the platform in one of the trees in the forest that looked out onto the water crashing against the big rock far out to sea.

He reaches into his pocket to text Zuki. He says he's sure she's heard he's back. He'd like to speak to her. He sticks his phone in his pocket and jiggles his leg up and down. Then he looks at his phone again. She is typing. He swallows hard. She stops typing. He sighs and puts his phone back in his pocket.

As they approach the quarry, the boy across the aisle from Khanya stands up. The women begin gathering up their shopping bags and children. The boy swaggers down the aisle with his bag while the bus is still moving, unzipping his bag as he walks. The bus releases its brakes with a fiery hiss. The passengers stand and begin talking, handing bags to each other.

Khanya is the first person to see the gun. He launches himself over the top of his seat, landing on a bag of rice in the aisle. He plows past the children and passengers. By the time he reaches the front of the bus, the gun is pointed at the driver's head. A man screams behind Khanya. The front of the bus falls quiet, the silence rippling to the back.

The bus driver stands up, holding his hands open. The boy becomes agitated, waving the gun in the direction of the sack of bus fare the driver keeps by his feet. The driver reaches down for the bag, still staring at the gun.

Khanya is close enough to smell the sweat on the boy. He grabs the boy's wrist with one hand and whacks the boy's forearm hard. He expects the gun to drop to the floor, and his stomach clenches when it doesn't. They are locked together, their hands working against each other to maintain a grip on the gun. He wants to let go of the cold barrel, but it is too late now.

The gun jerks back. Smoke. A bang. His ears tinkle. His hands are off the gun and he is standing motionless, looking at the boy who pulled the trigger. The boy is looking at him too, wide-eyed—the gun has fired and they are both still standing there. The driver

moans, falling back into his seat, blood crawling across the fabric on his thigh.

He punches the boy hard in the stomach. The gun clatters to the floor. He traps the gun under his foot, and the boy bends over, gasping. The boy lurches down the stairs of the bus, pushing through the doors.

He chases him along the side of the bus. The passengers yell from the windows, and he thinks of a football match, the audience distant but egging, the only thing in front of him another man's shirt as he tries to close the distance. He catches the boy's shirt just as they reach the back tires. He throws the boy against the bus. The metal of the bus makes a deep "DOOM" noise. The boy lies on the ground dazed. Then he staggers to his feet.

Khanya pushes his body against the boy's, trapping him against the bus. He was wrong about the boy coming home—he is not from here, he is not like him at all. The blood is pounding past his ears, his chest is hot. But the boy is winded and groaning. He makes strange noises like he is trying to push something out of himself.

Khanya releases him. The boy drops to his knees. The passengers come off the bus and gather around. The boy is breathing more normally now, and he tries to get his feet underneath him. An older man kicks the boy in the back and he curls into himself, his hat slipping off his head.

Khanya walks away, his hands on hips, his chest heaving from the adrenaline. The bus driver lies in the grass nearby, wincing.

"Thank you, brother," the bus driver pants.

Khanya is relieved the driver is not angry. He is not sure what would have happened if he hadn't intervened. Perhaps the bus driver would not have gotten shot. But it could have been worse too.

The bus driver is losing blood, growing pale, the grass around him painted red.

Khanya takes his belt off and ties it around the man's upper thigh. He needs to get the bus driver to the hospital. Taxis and buses don't run after five, and the only bus that comes to the village is the one they've come on. He could run to the volunteer house. The volunteer house has the blue Toyota Hilux that Vuyo treats as his own car, and then there is the Citi Golf the new volunteers arrived in. But that would take time.

He looks back at the boy, who is underneath the bus where it reads, AFRICA'S BEST 350 LTD BUS PASSENGER SERVICE. A tight circle forms around the boy. An older woman thwacks him hard with her purse. The boy's arms are raised weakly. Khanya hears his pained huffs as the heels and blows land. These things can go too far.

He motions to one of the men nearby him and they lift the driver back on the bus. They lay the driver on the floor of the bus, his head sticking out in the aisle. The gun rests under the front seat. Khanya picks it up and stares at it. He puts it in the waistband of his jeans. The cool metal fear of it makes him pull it out and place the gun in the bottom of his shopping bag.

Khanya shouts to the group by the boy. "Bring him!"

For a terrible moment, Khanya thinks that they will ignore him. He is not worried about the boy, but about his pride. Their ignoring him would say it all—that they respect his father but not him. But two men pick the boy up. The older woman with the purse shouts a last lecture to the boy as they bring him on the bus.

Khanya leans over the boy. His white shirt is dirty and stained from his blood. A faint trace of breath. His face is puffing up. One of his arms juts out at an odd angle. He turns the boy on his side, and the boy winces.

Khanya sits down in the bus driver's seat. It is so much larger than his Toyota Corolla

he drives in Cape Town. Everything feels too big like he is a child. He hesitates, his fingers on the key in the ignition. He is not afraid of driving the bus. He knows the road well, he has driven big bakkies before in Cape Town on the occasional construction job. What is it then? In his mind, his father eyes him warily.

He turns the key. The bus chugs to life. When the police arrive (if they do arrive) people in the village will tell them what happened. In other communities, people wait for the police who sometimes don't come. The criminals walk around like nothing happened. And if the case goes to court, the victims have to take buses and spend their own money to get there, only for everything to be postponed. People in this village hold up justice in the old way. Sometimes even the police do too. If he waits for the police, they might arrive and ask, "Have you dealt with him yet?" Khanya himself was dealt with once before. He was beaten and told that he wasn't allowed back in the village. He hadn't wanted to stay anyway, after everything that happened.

By the time he arrives at the hospital, his adrenaline is wearing off. He is tired and wants to be back in his room in Cape Town, laid out on his bed watching football on his phone. Someone else is probably in his room now, a builder or a road worker on a short-term contract. He imagines shoving the guy out of his room and slamming the door. Then again, he was the one who texted the landlord and said his father was sick and he wasn't going to pay for the room. Hopefully the bundles of clothing he stuffed into the cleaning closet will still be there when he gets back.

He hoists the driver up, who cries out, and they waddle, three-legged, down the steps of the bus and into the hospital. A nurse comes with a wheelchair. Khanya helps the driver into the chair, and a nurse wheels him away. He goes back for the boy. The boy hasn't moved from where he put him earlier. His breath is ragged. Khanya hoists the boy

up in his arms. He is lighter than he expected, and Khanya wonders how old he is. He thinks of the child on the bus, eating his orange peel.

What this boy did was wrong. But still, he hopes he will make it. The nurses will learn the story, and it will be up to them whether they feel like caring for him. He enters the hospital, lays the boy down on the floor, and leaves.

Chapter 6

In the mornings Caleb and Tia go swimming. They run in their swimsuits, down a gravel track, through the dunes and onto the arch of the beach. They jump through the waves and dive underneath them. The force of the swell pushes and twists their limbs until they cling to each other for stability. They kiss like that in the water, the waves rushing through them, the tang of salt in their mouths.

She has been in the village five days and each day is routine and thrilling. Before it gets too hot, they weed the vegetable beds and discuss what they will plant: basil, parsley, carrots, cabbage, tomatoes, radishes, beans. When the sun is beaming down they take cold showers in the outdoor shower and make passion fruit juice. Caleb has cut the lawn, so in the evenings they eat sitting out on a blanket, spritzing each other with the citronella mosquito spray. The stars are bright without light pollution. One night when they are lying on the blanket, he shows her the rabbit in the southern hemisphere moon. No matter how hard she tries, she can't see it. He begins to explain again, but more loudly. She puts her hand over his mouth and straddles him. Quickly he is inside her, and afterwards, he runs his hands through her hair and tells her it was the most amazing thing, seeing her on top of him surrounded by the night sky. She likes this galactic image of herself.

This feeling of things unfolding as they should, of being light and free, of everything having been injected with meaning—it's what she has been looking for. So it's a shock one morning when they are out in the garden and he tells her that he's not getting enough done.

She says they have been getting a lot done, and she gestures to the vegetable beds.

"There's nothing in them."

"Well, not yet."

He turns to look at the weed plants, which have grown taller, their tops pushing against the shade cloth. "What if the donors find out about the weed?"

He has told her before about donors. They are mostly from Iowa, where Caleb is from. Or is he from Ohio? It is too late to ask him now. Her palms prickled. She can never let him know that she has mixed up Ohio and Iowa. It is exactly what someone from California would do. Ohio or Iowa—it is winter there. People will be holed up in their houses or digging cars out of the snow. It seems unlikely the donors would come to inspect the project.

Caleb says it's not enough to do the garden. There are other plans he needs to work on with Vuyo. He suggests she continue with the garden without him. He'll pay Lwazi, the neighbor, to help her. She nods and says it's a good idea, although she is thinking about the woman in the picture, possibly Caleb's girlfriend.

The next morning she weeds the beds alone. After an hour, her knees ache. The satisfaction of unrooting has faded. It feels vicious, like she is tearing out her hair. She stops weeding and waters the dried-out roses.

When she comes in for lunch, Vuyo is there, his large frame perched on a chair. Caleb sits across the table from him. They each have a laptop open, paper spread between them.

"So the boy's still alive?" Caleb asks.

"He's alive. But it's not good. He is in the hospital."

Vuyo turns towards her. "Molo Tia. Kunjani?"

She stumbles over a reply in Xhosa.

"She speaks well," he turns to Caleb. "She'll be better than you soon."

Tia smiles.

Caleb laughs and looks at her like he doesn't recognize her. Then he blinks and tells her that something happened on the bus yesterday—someone with a gun tried to take the bus money, the bus driver was shot in the leg, and a boy was beaten up. The bus driver is ok, but the boy might not make it.

Caleb told her that the village is safe, that they can leave their windows open and the doors unlocked. Now, this. She wonders if she needs to be more careful.

"This type of thing doesn't happen in the village," Vuyo says, shaking his head. "But when Khanya is involved, eish, it's no good."

Tia glances up. "Khanya? That was the name of the man who returned my money."

"You know this guy?" Caleb asks her.

"I met him briefly."

"Trouble follows Khanya. Someone saw him take the gun from the bus. He's no good. The chief wants him gone," Vuyo says.

"Why doesn't the chief get rid of him?" Caleb asks.

"Rid of him?" Vuyo says, eyeing Caleb.

Caleb blushes. "I mean, get him to leave."

Vuyo sighs. "It's not easy. He is from a good family. Some people say that Tata Tshawe's grandfather was supposed to be chief."

"So this guy could have been in line to be chief."

Vuyo nods.

"Sounds like things worked out for the best."

"The chief is a patient man. He will wait for Khanya to make another wrong move, and then—" Vuyo hits the flat of his hand on the table.

Caleb and Tia jump.

"It's better not to know him," Vuyo says to Tia. "It's better to be on the right side of the chief." Vuyo stands.

Caleb walks him to the door. "I'm not sure what I'd do without you," he says, his hand resting on the slump of Vuyo's shoulder.

This small confession does not seem to follow from their conversation. She wants to know what they talk about when she is not there. She imagines Caleb saying the same to her, that he would not know what to do without her.

Caleb says he wants to show her something. He shuffles through papers and pulls out a few pages of scrappy drawings. "It doesn't look like much, but this is the plan for the new lodge. Vuyo and I have been working on it."

"Lodge?"

He tells her that he wants to build an eco-lodge on the beach. Off-the-grid accommodation, natural buildings, balconies overlooking the ocean.

"You're going to build on the beach?"

"It's an eco-friendly lodge."

She moves to the couch without saying anything. There is something she does not like about the idea of the lodge.

She runs her finger over the dry skin of her lips.

“People need jobs here. People need to see the potential of tourism. Otherwise, companies like Amplexica will just keep coming.

When she doesn't say anything, he says “Would you rather have some investor come in and build a concrete hotel?” He smiles at her as if she is a child.

His teeth are too straight and too white. Like a dentist. Like someone hiding something.

“But what about the vegetable beds and the Green Hub building?”

He says that she'll be working on the beds, and he'll organize the neighbor to help her. And the building—it is a small project. A small team can build it in a matter of weeks. He says they've already found a spot on the beach to build the lodge. The next thing is to get an architect to design it. He's going to go to Cape Town in the next few days to meet with an architecture firm. He holds up the sheet of paper with the drawings and squints at it.

He comes up behind her and kisses the back of her neck. He says he's sorry to be going on a trip so soon, just after they got here. He tells her that it's in the volunteer contract, that he might be away and the volunteer needs to be self-sufficient. Then he sits next to her on the couch and strokes her leg. He asks her if she is going to be ok staying here.

"Of course," she says. She is annoyed he has mentioned the volunteer contract. It diminishes what they have experienced together. And is he saying she is not self-sufficient?

"So you like it here." He reaches his hand to her shoulder and picks up the ends of her hair, running the strands through his fingers.

She wonders if her liking it here proves something about her, something that pleases

him. His face is very close to hers.

"I do," she says, not sure if it was true. She is thinking about running over the dog, the men laughing at her at the shebeen, and Caleb's idea of building on the beach.

He leans over her and the warmth of his lips, the soft bramble of his facial hair brushes her mouth. The room blurs away as they kiss, the weight of him sinking down on top of her, their tongues dancing with each other.

She takes his hand and leads him to his bedroom. She fucks him like she has something to prove. After, he lies across her chest, hunched up and childlike against her. It is what she wanted, to feel he would not know what to do without her. But she is vaguely repulsed. The room is stuffed with midday sun, and she is sheathed in Caleb's sweat. It is something she does not like about herself, how her body can be a prism of fractured selves.

She thinks of the beautiful white arc of beach with no one on it. Then she tries to imagine a lodge on the waterfront. She rolls away from him, allowing the air to move between their bodies. He is staring at the tattoo of the owl on her thigh. He brushes his finger over it. "Why did you do it?"

She says she told him already, someone had to follow through, that was the point.

"Yeah, but you didn't actually have to."

That was not what he said the first time—he said she was a good friend. "I wanted to, that's why I did it," she says. She remembers the pleasure in Beth's look of relief and admiration when she said she would get the tattoo in her place.

She groped around the bed for her shorts. "You know what?" She says, zipping up her shorts. "I liked that guy, Khanya."

"But we have to be careful who we associate with," he says. "If we get on the wrong

side of the chief, then there's no point in any of this. We won't get approval for anything, that's what Vuyo said."

"He seemed like someone I could be friends with." She does not like him telling her what to do.

"You never know who you can trust."

His cheeks are red and boyish, his blonde hair roughed up—his sentence is odd coming from him. He seems like he trusts people. He trusts Vuyo and her. But then again, he did not trust the men with the dogs.

"He went out of his way to return my money," she says.

"Maybe he wanted something from you."

"Like what?"

"How would I know?"

The impatience in his voice startles her. In her mind, she rewinds the formations their bodies made, lifting his sweat off her, taking back what was done.

Chapter 7

The next morning Caleb asks her if she wants to go to town to get supplies. He warns her it will be tight, Vuyo is coming. She imagines sitting between Vuyo and Caleb in the middle seat of the pickup, squeezed from both sides and far from the windows. She tells him no. Besides, Caleb has organized the neighbor to come today—he will help her with the vegetable beds so that the project progresses while Caleb is away. She likes the idea of planting the beds as soon as possible. And it will be useful to have a partner to work with like Caleb has in Vuyo.

She is sitting outside the back door on the grass lawn eating quick oats when the neighbor comes in. She fumbles through saying her name and asking how he is in Xhosa. Lwazi is quiet and unsmiling, and she smiles harder, talks louder.

She puts on a pair of gloves and reaches down to yank out the weeds.

"No," Lwazi says. He reaches for her shovel, and she gives it to him reluctantly. He sets it down on the ground and then picks up the long fork. He takes the fork and jabs into the soil, rocking and uprooting the weeds. Then he digs in a fresh place and rocks the earth again. He demonstrates picking through the weeds, hacking the soil off and chucking the weeds at the side of the vegetable bed. He motions to her, and she kneels by the vegetable bed and begins sifting through the weeds and piling them up. She decides that she does not like Lwazi. Or he does not like her, it is hard to tell which.

She works quickly, sifting through the weeds. But he is always ahead of her. His grunts as he jabs the soil begin to annoy her. He goes to the corner of the garden and pulls

away a worn blue tarp she hasn't noticed before. Underneath is a mound of soil. He piles the soil into a wheelbarrow and shovels it on top of the clean, blank beds.

When Caleb comes back in the afternoon he examines the beds and says it's good progress. He puts his arm around her shoulder. She is impressed with how much they have done too, excited by the dark soil lying in wait. All but one bed is cleared.

Lwazi motions to a patch of dark vine-like leaves near one of the beds. He slips his hand under the surface of leaves and gropes around for a few seconds. He seizes on something and pulls it out.

"Sweet potatoes!" Caleb and Tia say simultaneously.

Lwazi gives a small smile. One of his front teeth is missing—the bottom teeth are brown and reach over each other. Why did he only smile now, and why did he wait till Caleb arrived to show the sweet potatoes?

Caleb goes back inside to unload the supplies. Tia and Lwazi look amongst the vines for more sweet potatoes. He pulls out four more in quick succession. She pulls out a few vines that only lead to roots.

Caleb brings out trays of seedlings and a small lemon tree. The tree already has clusters of lemons. He slings a bag of fertilizer over his shoulder, thudding it down next to the lemon tree.

"Beginner's luck," he says, admiring the lemon tree. He tells her how a new casino opened up in Mthatha. Vuyo suggested they go in. They played on the slot machines and Caleb won. He bought the lemon tree with the winnings.

She tries to imagine a casino in one of the towns they passed through.

He tells her he wished he hadn't gone in. Casinos are such sad places. Especially out here, people spending what little they have.

The breeze blows up, and a waft of skunky scent hits them. Caleb sniffs and glances over at the weed plants. "Do you know about this weed, Lwazi?" He says it lightly, but his voice is strained.

Lwazi shrugs his shoulders and says something they don't understand. He turns his back and continues to look for sweet potatoes.

"Well, if you find out about it, let me know," Caleb says to his back.

She begins planting out the seedlings from town in the first bed closest to the house. Small frills of kale, beetroot, carrots—each so hopeful. She slips the tiny bundles of matted roots into the soil and pads the earth around them with her fingertips. Meanwhile, Lwazi and Caleb weed the remaining bed. She plants out two more beds, and Caleb comes behind to water the seedlings. Lwazi follows behind Caleb, erecting chicken wire around each bed.

She finishes the third bed, and when she looks back, she is horrified to see the beds. The seedlings are lying flat, spewed with soil, limp and defeated after Caleb's spray. Lwazi has constructed a monstrous cage, tall and misshapen around the first two beds. She reaches out to try to raise one of the seedlings, dusting off the soil.

"They'll be fine," Caleb says. "Water won't hurt them."

She goes inside and washes her hands. The water runs darkly down the drain.

Caleb comes in and glugs a glass of water. "How did it go today?" he says, wiping the water off his beard with his shoulder.

"I don't think he likes me."

"Lwazi? Why did you get that idea?"

"He doesn't smile."

"His teeth are messed up, that's why."

It is bad that she has come to the village and already dislikes someone. Maybe there is something wrong with her. But then she thinks about how she likes Vuyo. And she liked Khanya, before the bus incident. She decides she must learn to like Lwazi—the garden's success depends on it.

The next morning she is lying on the lawn, reading. It is Saturday, and Caleb has driven over to see Vuyo to discuss plans for the lodge. She is wearing a bikini, and the grass makes her stomach and the front of her thighs itch. When she is sticky from the heat and thinking about going back inside, she hears footsteps on the path. A man appears.

"Oh," Khanya says. "I thought you weren't here."

She closes her book, a flush of cold covering her. She does not want to sit up with just her bikini on.

"The car is not here, so I thought you were out," he says.

She can't remain lying down, looking at him like she is a centipede. She sits up.

"Well, I'm not."

He looks at her breasts and then quickly looks away. "I don't want to disturb you. I like to come and see the garden sometimes."

"You can if you want to," she says, her voice dry from the heat. She clears her throat. Why is he coming to the house when he knows they are out? She remembers what Vuyo said, that he took the gun from the bus. She wishes Caleb was here, wishes her phone was with her in the pocket of her jean shorts.

He walks across the lawn to the vegetable beds. She wriggles into her dress while his back is turned.

The beds look good, he tells her. Khanya bends over the lemon tree with his hands

behind his back. "Where will you plant this tree?" he asks, straightening up.

She tells him they are thinking about putting it by the front gate.

There is a shovel next to the tree and he grabs it with one hand and picks the lemon tree up with the other.

"You don't have to," she says, wishing he would leave.

"It's easy for me."

She follows him out to the front gate.

"Here?" He motions with his shovel to a small clearing near the front gate.

She nods. Why does she not tell him to leave? But it feels wrong to tell him to leave, something she would not hesitate to do at home. It is not her land after all.

He spears the ground with the shovel and mixes the soil. He shovels with casual familiarity like brushing his teeth. "The soil is so good. Everything grows here. Have you seen the dagga growing?"

"Dagga?"

"Weed," he says, standing up and resting his hands on the top of the shovel.

"You know about the weed?"

"Yes," he says, returning to the shoveling. "Lwazi helps me grow it. The house was empty, so we thought, why not plant here, where there is water and the earth is good."

So he has only come to check the weed plants. He is the one who should be nervous—he is growing the weed where he shouldn't be. She feels better.

The muscles in his arms bulge and indent with each movement until he has created a small mound next to the hole. She thinks of his arm muscles flexing as he hits the boy, flesh cracking like the soil. She examines his knuckles. He does not look like he has been in a fight. Before she can stop herself, she says, "I heard about the bus."

He shakes his head. "That boy, he did not look good when I left him at the hospital."

"You brought him to the hospital?"

"I took the driver and the boy to the hospital. But people go too far sometimes. It's good to send a message—we don't want people from the city coming down here thinking they can get away with something like that. But that boy did not look good."

"You took him to the hospital?" she asks again.

He looks at her and leans on the shovel. "Yes. He wasn't from around here."

So Vuyo and Caleb got the story wrong.

"I'm sorry the weed is here, now that you and your husband are here. Do you mind?"

She wonders if she should correct him and tell him Caleb is not her husband. "I don't mind," she says.

He looks relieved. Lwazi calls to them from the front door of his house.

Khanya calls back. They rally back and forth, waiting for the other to finish speaking before volleying more words. Lwazi stops speaking and goes back inside.

"He doesn't want me taking his job," Khanya says. "I told him I am only helping. Sometimes it's better not to help." Khanya leans the shovel against the fence and dusts the soil off his hands.

"Thank you," she says.

"No problem." He pulls out his phone. "You can take my number. If there's any problem with the dagga. Or any problem at all. If you need help, you can call me.

"Oh," she says. "Wait a minute."

She goes back inside to get her phone. She thinks about coming back out and saying she can't find her phone and that she will get his number another time. Getting his phone number feels like entering into an agreement that it is fine to keep his weed here. But then

she remembers how he had returned her money, how he made everything with the fish ok again. She unplugs her phone and brings it outside.

They are exchanging numbers when Caleb's car comes roaring up the hill. She puts her phone in her pocket. Khanya is still saving her number, which he seems to be doing in slow motion. Caleb parks the car. The car door opens, the music from the car speakers goes off. Khanya goes to open the gate for him. She will have to explain it all, that Caleb got the story wrong, Khanya is not a bad guy.

Khanya greets Caleb, holding out his hand in the same formal way he had when he first introduced himself to her, one hand resting on his forearm. When he says his name, Caleb goes stiff. He thrusts his hand out. It reminds her of the way he was with the two men who came by with the dead dog on their first night.

Khanya talks about the lemon tree, and then he waves goodbye.

When he is gone, Caleb whispers, "Why was he here?" He glances around as if expecting Khanya to reappear.

"He just came by," she picks a dead leaf from the grapevine.

"What, and started planting the lemon tree?"

"Pretty much." She shrugs. "He wasn't involved with the bus shooting," she says. "He took the driver to the hospital."

He gives her a hard look. "We have to be careful, Tia."

"I found out about the weed," she says, pausing and enjoying the way he looks at her like she is holding a letter he wants to open. "It's Lwazi's weed."

"Lwazi?" He looks over at Lwazi's house. "He told me it wasn't his," he says, biting his lip. "I'm going to talk to him."

"Don't," Tia says, reaching out for his wrist.

He pulls away from her and heads back out the gate.

She watches him talking with Lwazi.

When he comes back, he says, "It's Khanya's weed, not Lwazi's. I told you that guy wanted something from you."

She rips off more dead leaves from a nearby bush, crushing them into her palm. "Who cares about the weed?"

"He says he doesn't trust that guy. Or you, for that matter."

"Me?" The shock of it makes her feel icy. The idea that Lwazi trusts Caleb and not her after all their working together...her chest burns.

He shrugs. "He's worried about Khanya taking his job. I told him there's nothing to worry about. No way am I going to employ that guy."

He brushes past her and dumps his backpack on the floor. He sits down on the couch. She makes them coffee and sits down next to him. She wants them to sit on the couch together and for him to remember that it is nice to have her there.

"You know you don't have to stay if you're not enjoying it."

Is he suggesting she leave? She feels cold and brittle.

She studies her fingernails. There is dirt underneath them, and she thinks about the seedlings, how she wants to see them grow. "I'll stay."

He nods. He does not look happy like he did last time when she said she would stay.

Chapter 8

Tia wakes to thunder. She lifts her head off the pillow, listening to the rain on the tin roof. She lays back down and pulls the covers up. She has been sleeping in Caleb's bed while he is away, and she can smell the two of them on the covers. The rain pounds so loud on the roof it feels like someone is trying to break into the house. She closes her eyes, and as she does, she hears a thud. The sound is so calculated that she knows it is human.

Her eyes snap open. Another thud. The sound strums in her chest. She slides her leg out of the covers and places her bare foot on the cement. She peers into the moonlit living room. The thudding comes again, and adrenaline tick-tocks in her ribcage. Someone is at the front door of the house.

A weapon, she thinks. The big kitchen knife. On the draining board. She moves across the living room to the kitchen, unsteady. Her fingers flicker over the prongs of forks, the smooth bellies of spoons, and then the cool flat of the blade. Ease it out. The utensils clank as she frees it. The handle is thick and solid in her palm. She clings to it, her fingers welding to the knife.

The hammering comes on the door again. She imagines the door kicked down, splinters flying. The men would run towards her, push her down on the cold cement. She imagines the back of her head grinding into the cement, the full weight of someone on her wrists. She waits, holding her breath.

A voice mumbles through the rain. She strains her neck towards the door, listening—it isn't the voice of a man. Her grasp on the knife loosens. Her hand gropes for the light switch on the wall.

The moonlight in the room vanishes like a scared animal and the light turns everything yellow. There is an excited slapping on the door in response to the light.

"Hello?" she calls.

An urgent stream of words.

She runs towards the door, sliding the lock open. A boy stands on the stoop, slick with rain. He is barefoot. Tia lets out her breath. She looks again at the boy, and something about him is familiar. Then she sees the purple shirt under his open rain jacket, the nonsensical writing, "BOSTON LOS ANGELES AMERICAS COMPANY STATES."

"My sisi. Go to hospital," he says. He pulls in his upper lip, sucking off the rain that streams down his face.

"Hospital?" she stammers, her relief too great to take in what he is saying.

His eyes drift down the length of her arm, where the knife glints in the overhead lights. Her arm goes rigid. His eyes drift back to her face. He takes a step backward, turning to look over his shoulder like someone is calling him.

She tries to smile. She must look insane, holding a knife and smiling. Her face begins to burn, and she shuffles towards the windowsill, laying the knife down casually. When she looks up, the boy is still there, staring at her. Tia motions for him to come in.

He shifts on his bare feet. For a moment she wonders if he will leave her standing like a madwoman next to the knife on the windowsill. But he steps timidly over the

threshold, the wetness from his feet seeping into the floor and coloring the cement. "My sisi. Baba," he says, pointing to his stomach.

"Your sister."

"Baba," he says again.

His sister is having a baby, or his baby sister is coming, or there is some other story that involves sisters and babies.

"Your sister's having a baby?"

He nods, his chest rising and falling quickly.

He brings his fists out in front of him, turning them like he is steering. "Hospital," he says.

Vuyo took the golf to drop Caleb off at the bus station, but the truck for the eco project is parked outside. This is a real chance to make a difference. She picks up her jacket and the car key.

Outside, the rain is coming down in great sweeps that drench them as they run to the car. The boy climbs on the bench of the truck. She turns the key in the ignition. Nothing happens. The car is dead, or she is doing something wrong.

She is sixteen again, her mom sucking on her teeth when the car stalled. Clutch in, she hears her mom say, and this time the car chugs to life. She moves into reverse and accelerates. The car revs but doesn't move. Then the car lurches back and forth. The engine cuts out. The raindrops hit the windshield like a swarm of wasps. The boy glances back towards the house, as if hoping someone else, someone more competent, might appear.

What was she thinking? She never learned to drive stick well, she does not know where the hospital is, it is pouring rain. Her mouth is dry. She calls Vuyo. He will know

what to do. The phone rings endlessly. The boy swings his legs in the passenger seat. There must be someone else who can help. She tries to think if she has seen any cars parked in front of nearby houses. But she can only think of the steep hills, engraved with narrow footpaths.

She gets out of the car, and the boy follows her back inside. He stands still on the cement floor, and a damp spot grows around his feet, encircling him. His sister, whose water might have broken, is waiting somewhere out in the night, waiting for Tia to think of something.

Khanya knows how to drive—he has driven the bus to the hospital, that's what he told her. He picks up right away, but she can tell from the robotic way he speaks he has been asleep. She tells him about the boy and his sister.

"I'm coming," he says.

Tia drapes a blanket around the boy. "Hot chocolate?"

The boy stares at her, shivering.

They are out of milk, so she fills a pot with water. Her hands shake as she carries the pot to the stove. She pours in the chocolate powder slowly so it doesn't lump. The hot chocolate would not be enough to erase the fact that she had a knife in her hand when she opened the door. She wants to hold the boy and rock him, tell him she wouldn't hurt him. But he is too big for holding and rocking, and perhaps he will see through her, that maybe she is holding him only to rock the shame out of herself. When she comes back with the mug, he hasn't moved. The damp spot on the floor is the same.

"Do you want to sit down?" she points to the chair.

He shakes his head, avoiding her gaze. He sips on the hot chocolate and then yanks his head back.

"Too hot?"

He nods. The blanket slips off one of his shoulders. She stops herself from going to him and wrapping the blanket around him tighter.

"Nkqo! Nkqo!" a voice calls out.

Tia rushes to the front door. Khanya stands in the doorway, unrecognizable with his hood up in a long black rain jacket and gumboots. It is the kind of figure she thought might be coming to attack her, and she feels a woozy disgust for herself.

"Thank you," Tia says, and without realizing it, her arms are around him, the raindrops on his jacket sinking into the flesh on her cheek. He pats her on the back.

"I'm sorry to wake you. You're the only one I knew who could drive," Tia says, wiping the dampness from her cheek with her sleeve.

He shakes the rain off his jacket before passing through the door. Tia holds the keys out to Khanya. His eyes are puffy from sleep.

"I'll keep the keys and give them to you tomorrow. You'll be sleeping when I get back," he says, zipping up his jacket. He says something to the boy. The boy gives him the mug of hot chocolate. Khanya takes a big sip. Then he returns the mug to the boy, who tips it upwards to get the last drops into his mouth.

"Wait." Tia picks up a white emergency kit from the top of the cupboard. "I'm coming with you."

They trundle through the darkness, the headlights shining on the matted grass of the rutted track. The boy sits wrapped in the blanket between Khanya and Tia on the bench of the truck seat, his hands clasped together between his thighs. The engine roars as they pull off the track and onto the gravel road. A few minutes later, they stop next to a

fence. Khanya jumps out and the boy follows him. Tia squints out the window towards the dark hill where they ran.

The storm has moved off the land towards the sea and she can hear it rumbling, a grumpy animal in retreat. The smell of wet grass and mud is harsh, a warning they should not be up at this hour. Through the distant sound of the storm, she can hear something closer, a moaning. From the entrance of the hut, a winged creature emerges. As the shadows begin to move down the hill towards the car, it turns into Khanya, the boy, and a woman. She sags between them, her skirt trailing in the fresh mud. It is the woman who told her that Nine was at the shebeen, the one who was doing the girl's hair with pink hairbands.

Khanya and the boy bring the woman to the passenger seat, but she stays crouched over, shaking her head between gasps. They lead the woman to the back of the truck. The boy jumps in to lay a blanket on the bed of the truck. The woman climbs in, more dexterous than Tia expects.

"Will she be ok in there?" Tia asks.

"She can't sit up," Khanya says.

Tia glances at the passenger seat and back to the woman in the truck bed. She would feel too bad sitting up front. Tia places her knees on the hard edge of the truck bed and scoots in beside the woman.

Khanya closes them in. Through the fogged window, she sees Khanya pat the boy on the shoulder and get into the driver's seat. The brights of the car flash on, startling the boy, who holds his hands over his face as they pull away. Through the glass between Tia and the front seats, the car clock reads three am.

It is awkward to be so close to someone's pain. The woman would probably prefer to be alone, rather than with a stranger who does not know the first thing about birth.

"What's your name," the woman asks, in a strained voice.

"Tia."

"My name is Lulama."

"Nice to meet you, Lulama." She is ashamed that she did not ask for Lulama's name first. She decides she would have, she was just waiting for a good moment.

After a while, Lulama begins to make noises like an owl hooting. Her brow and nose furrow. She begins talking, pushing herself up on her hands and knees.

Tia's heartbeat quickens. "We'll be there soon," she says and then realizes she does not know how far away the hospital is.

She rests a hand on Lulama's back, steadying her as the car rocks. She thinks of the baby, on its own rocking journey.

"Are you ok?" Tia asks.

Lulama shakes her head.

What is she supposed to do? She pats Lulama's shoulder. The bottom half of Tia's lungs feel sewn up. She lets her breath out between her lips, counting and resisting the urge to suck more air in. She pinches herself hard on her thigh until it feels like the skin might have broken. The pain sharpens her.

Lulama begins talking, her hands and fingers grasping at the grooves of the truck bed floor.

Tia shifts towards the sliding window that opens to the front part of the cab. She puts her fingers in the crack in the window and pulls it open.

"I don't know what she is saying," Tia says.

Khanya is silent, and then he says quietly, "She says the baby is coming." The engine revs and the car charges forward.

"How far away are we?" Tia asks.

"Still forty minutes," Khanya replies.

Lulama begins making a raw sound in the back of her throat, and between breaths she shouts to Khanya. He veers off the side of the road and turns off the car. In the sudden silence, Tia can hear the sound of the engine ticking softly and Lulama's heavy breathing.

Tia is relieved when Khanya opens up the back and the cool night air hits her. But it's not good that they have stopped—they have to get to the hospital.

He lowers the tailgate. Lulama scrambles out and squats, holding onto the edge of the car. She cries out and sways, her head between her arms.

"Maybe you should, uh, look," Khanya suggests to Tia.

Tia thinks to herself, "Maybe *you* should look." Instead, she tells Lulama she is going to see if she can see the baby.

Tia leans down, peeking under Lulama's skirt. "I can't see."

"Here," Khanya says, handing her his phone with the light turned on. Tia angles it up her skirt.

Between Lulama's legs, it is damp and fecund like the land around them, and an earthy smell rises to Tia. It is very real under Lulama's skirt. It is familiar too, but different because it is not Tia's own body and the flesh between Lulama's legs is stretched and alive.

"What can you see?" Khanya asks.

"Not a baby, yet," Tia replies.

Khanya laughs nervously.

Tia drops Lulama's skirt. There are houses on the hill on the horizon, but it would be impossible to get Lulama to walk there. Tia strokes Lulama's back, which strains underneath her fingertips. Khanya tells her he knows one of the doctors at the hospital—his father's doctor—maybe she will pick up. He takes his phone from Tia. The phone illuminates the side of his face.

Lulama's whole body begins to clench, and she tilts over to the side. Khanya reaches out to catch her under her arms. She sinks into a deeper squat. Her head rests against Khanya's chest. He cranes his neck down to listen to his phone while still holding Lulama.

"Dr. Smit? There's a woman, giving birth," he shouts into the phone. "We're on the way to the hospital, but it's coming." There is a pause while the doctor says something. Khanya's eyes are very wide and white. "Far, forty minutes. Maybe it would be better to continue to the hospital," he says hopefully, glancing at Tia.

He listens and then frowns. "Check again," he says to Tia.

Tia takes her phone from her pocket and shines the light up Lulama's skirt. Now the oval opens pinkly, and at the center, a dark patch of wet hair, tinged with blood.

"It's coming. I can see the head."

Khanya puts the call on speakerphone and says, "We can see the head."

"You're going to deliver the baby," the doctor says over the phone.

"We can't," Tia hears herself say, and the heady rush from before, the need to gulp down air, returns to her. She sits down on the tailgate of the car and stares at her feet to steady herself.

"If the head's there, tell her not to push. The power of the uterine contractions will push out the baby now. She needs to blow through the contractions," the doctor's voice

says. The doctor asks whether they have a first aid kit. It seems a small miracle now that she has thought of bringing the kit—perhaps she is not so useless after all. She stands unsteadily and opens the passenger car door. She rummages through the first aid kit, spilling half of the contents on the car floor. Band-aids, gauze patches, disinfectant, and gloves. She hears Khanya talking to Lulama and her groaning back at him.

When Tia returns, Lulama is squatting, rocking on her toes. Khanya is bent in front of her, and they are looking at each other, blowing like the doctor told them. Lulama is clutching at the neck of Khanya's shirt.

She hands him the gloves, and he struggles his hand inside, the empty fingers jerking until his hands fill them. Tia gets the blanket and lays it on the ground behind Lulama, and she shuffles back onto the blanket. Tia kneels next to Lulama and puts her arm around her to support her. Lulama's weight pushes into her, and the warmth of her breath is on her neck. When was the last time she was so close to a woman? Beth, who sometimes slept in her bed after a night out so they could wake up hungover together.

"Head's out," Khanya says, his face shining with perspiration. "Almost over Sisi," he says to Lulama.

Between Lulama's legs, the back of the baby's head crests.

"Is the umbilical cord around the neck?" the doctor asks.

"There's nothing on the neck," Khanya says, sounding more confident now.

"Good. Now be patient. The baby will come. Be ready to catch it."

For a moment the baby is stuck, its head out and body inside. A milky liquid and blood run over Khanya's gloves. Then the whole body springs into his hands.

The baby is the color of uncooked chicken. A wet gurgle, and then a cry. “That’s a good sound,” the doctor on the phone says, and laughs. She tells them to wipe the baby down and give it to the mother, making sure the baby stays warm.

Lulama falls back on the blanket and takes the baby from Khanya. Khanya grabs his shirt behind his neck and pulls it off, laying it on top of the baby. Lulama uses the shirt to wipe away the wetness on the tiny limbs.

Khanya takes off his gloves, and walks away down the road, almost disappearing in the night. Tia sits with Lulama, listening to the baby's cries and Lulama's sighs of relief. She wonders if she's intruding, if Lulama wants to be alone with her baby.

The doctor starts talking again, saying the placenta will come in thirty minutes or less. When it comes, they should wrap it in something clean and put it next to the baby. The doctor will cut the cord when they arrive at the hospital.

Tia has forgotten about the placenta. She doesn't know what it will look like, and she puts on a pair of gloves reluctantly. Lulama is holding the baby tight and making soft, encouraging sounds. A few minutes later, Lulama props herself up on her elbows and lifts up her skirt. Tia looks between her legs—a gush of blood, and then a mass appears. Lulama's insides are coming out. A wave of queasiness hits her. Tia places her hands on the mass. It's veined and bloody, like something at a butchery, and it’s warm in her hands. She lifts it towards Lulama, placing it on Khanya's rumpled shirt, wrapping it badly.

She stands and rolls her gloves off, feeling light-headed and queasy. She goes to stand by the side of the car. She thought she could throw up quietly, so as not to insult Lulama, but when she bends towards the grass, she roars involuntarily, her stomach heaving. When it is over, she wipes her mouth with her hand and wipes her hand in the wet grass.

A lightness is inside her now that everything is out of her and the nausea is gone. Khanya comes back to the car and puts his jacket over his bare chest. She wonders if he knows the placenta has come. She wants him to know that he delivered the baby, but she caught the placenta.

They both help Lulama into the passenger seat. Tia sits in the middle, where Lulama's brother sat earlier in the night. Khanya drives slowly to the hospital. When Khanya asks for the third time how the baby is, Tia and Lulama laugh.

"He's sleeping now," Lulama says.

"Are you sure he's sleeping?" he asks.

"Yes, I'm sure," Lulama says, her pinky finger stroking the baby's head.

When they arrive, Khanya helps Lulama into the hospital. The night is dark. They disappear after they move away from the car. She wipes her nose and smells latex. Her mind is very clear. There is nothing to think about because everything is ok—she has done the right thing by calling Khanya, helping with the baby—she has done the right thing by coming to the village. She jumps a few minutes later when Khanya opens the driver's side door.

"Lulama will be done soon, and we can drive back." He picks up the soiled ball of his shirt from the passenger seat and shoves it down the side of the car. They sit together in the car, not speaking. A heaviness comes over her, like thick mud closing above her head.

When she wakes up the sun is rising, a glimmer of pink on the horizon. The parking lot begins to appear around them as dawn lifts. Lulama comes out, holding the baby to her chest. Tia and Khanya help Lulama into the passenger seat. When they are

driving, out of the dirt lot of the hospital grounds and back onto the bumpy road, Lulama asks Khanya why he doesn't have children.

He doesn't reply. His hands are tense on the steering wheel.

"He hasn't found the right woman," Lulama continues. "Why don't you marry Amila? She's always been in love with you. You think you're going to find a girl more beautiful than her?"

"I'm not thinking of marriage."

"There was one girl you wanted to marry," she says.

"That was a long time ago."

"You don't like to talk about it."

"Who is the father of your baby? Do you like to talk about that?"

"He's away," Lulama says lightly, and if Khanya's question bothered her, she does a good job of hiding it. They revert back to Xhosa. Khanya speaks for a long time, and Tia wonders if he is lecturing her. But then Lulama begins to laugh so hard that the baby stirs.

When they reach the village, they drop Lulama off. Lulama thanks them and Khanya reaches out and touches the baby's forehead. Lulama's brother and the young girl with pink hair bands are running down the hill. She would have liked to watch their reunion, but Khanya drives away.

When they park and get out of the car, Tia invites him in for coffee. Khanya picks up his balled-up shirt, from the side of the car. He shakes his shirt out and inspects it.

"Sorry," Tia says, looking at the ruined shirt.

"I'll get it on my way out." He tosses it on one of the nearby bushes. "The roses are looking better."

"I've been watering them. Soon you can steal them and give them to your girlfriend."

"Ah," he says, and she thinks he blushes. "I told you that."

"Was it the same girl? The one you stole roses for and the one you wanted to marry?" She is not the kind of person that people tell things to. But she has learned that if she asks, people will tell her things.

"It was always the same girl."

Tia smiles. "Romantic."

"Romantic? Hayi. Not me," he says.

"What happened to her?" She asks, worried he will snap at her like he had Lulama.

"She lives in the village. She's married and has many children. So you see, the roses were not enough."

Inside, Tia makes coffee and sets it down on the table in front of Khanya.

"This is like a Cape Town coffee," he says, sipping on it. "I want to go back."

"You like Cape Town?"

"No. I don't like it. Too busy."

"But you want to go back?"

"I want to leave the village."

"Why?"

"It's not a good place for me." He sets down his coffee and stands. "Thank you for the coffee. That baby. He had a strong cry. Waaahh!" He screws his face up to imitate the baby.

Tia laughs.

After Khanya leaves, she sees him walking to the garden to check on the weed plants. She flops onto the couch. Caleb will be home in two days. She smiles, thinking about how she will tell him about delivering the baby on the side of the road, and how he was wrong about Khanya.

Chapter 9

When Khanya gets home from Tia's house, he walks to the kraal. He unzips his jeans and relieves himself as he surveys Bholani, Hombani, Nomeyisi, and Waloboleka. He lets the cows out of the kraal and watches them chew their cud. There is always something to worry about—loose feces, redwater, bad joints, ticks. But they look well this morning. He opens the gate so they can wander off.

Tata is still sleeping when he comes into the flat. He walks over to his bed. Tata's face is furrowed, his eyes pinched shut. Khanya smiles—his face is not so different from the baby's face. He thinks of when Dr.Smit called a few months ago, how his heart banged so hard he clutched his chest so his heart would not fly out. But she was only calling to say he had defaulted on his TB drugs again, that he now had multidrug-resistant TB. She would only let him out of the hospital if there was someone to watch him take his medications, at least for the first two months. That evening he was on the overnight bus back home, his sports bag stuffed with clothes, his chest still tight. The hospital would have only made Tata worse.

He reaches a fingertip to the three fine lines on Tata's cheek. After all these years, the lines are still dark where the needle cut the skin and charcoal filled the wound. Tata jerks away, his hand swinging up to cover his eyes, shielding himself from the light that streams in from the doorway. "Not you again," Tata says.

Khanya sighs. He picks up Tata's pill box and brings over a glass of water.

He counts out the pills in Tata's hand. Tata claps his hand to his mouth, grimacing as he takes a gulp of water. He reaches for his pack of cigarettes on the floor next to his bed.

"You shouldn't smoke."

Tata flaps his hand, motioning him away.

"Now you think I'm a fly you can wave away," Khanya says. "You wanted me to come back."

"You've been wanting to come back for years. You wouldn't let yourself. It takes me dying for you to get over your pride."

The familiar jolt of anger mixed with amusement reminds him of being a child, Tata tickling him mercilessly until he doesn't know if his tears are from laughter or rage. Tata can always do that to him, make him feel too many things at once. Khanya snaps the pillbox case shut. "You're not dying." He had thought he would tell Tata about the baby and the drive to the hospital, but now he stands to go. "It's nice of me to be here. I have better things to do."

"It's nice of me to let you feed me these pills every day. I don't believe in this," he says. "If a man dies, he dies. Anyway, what better things do you have to do? Things like riding around with that umlungu woman in the night?" Tata looks at him like he is a stranger who happens to live in his house.

He tells Tata about driving to the hospital, stopping on the road, catching Lulama's baby in his hands.

Tata is silent for a moment, and then he laughs, sitting up and kicking his feet out of the blanket and to the floor. "You delivered a child."

"Yoh, I was scared, Tata."

Tata smiles. "I remember when you were born, sitting outside listening to your mother." Khanya tries to imagine Tata back then, his face clean of wrinkles, waiting anxiously outside. Tata says that he watched his wife bury Khanya's umbilical cord behind the door of the hut. Then Tata frowns. Khanya knows he is thinking about Mama's miscarriages, how they had also buried their unborn children by the wood pile.

Tata leans forward and pushes himself off the bed. "I'll go and give my blessing. Maybe they will give an old man a biscuit and tea," he says, putting on his jacket.

He motions to bring over his walking stick.

"It's far, Tata."

"Far? You would walk there in no time. It's straight, no hills, down the road. If I fall over from being so old and sick, at least someone will see me." He scuffles over to the table and lights a cigarette. He blows out smoke and asks how the cows are.

"They look healthy this morning."

Tata frowns. "We need to dip them. The ticks are bad this year."

"I treated Lilo yesterday," Khanya says.

"That horse, it would be better to put him down."

Khanya hands him his walking stick.

"Will you go to the healer today for me?" Tata asks.

He sighs. "Ewe, Tata."

Zuki said she would meet him at the riverbank on the far side of the forest, one of their old spots. If he leaves now, he can go to the healer's house beforehand. He runs over to the healer's house. The animal in his chest quivers, his palms are damp. He will see her soon.

A celebration is underway at the healer's house. He sits down on the bench near the

door with the other men across from the women on the grass mats. The healer tells him he just received his lobola for his daughter's marriage. He offers him a drink of Old Buck gin. It would be rude to decline, so he takes a shot without hesitating. Although the liquid is warm, it tastes like the forest, cool and refreshing. Then it stings his tongue and burns the back of his throat. He swallows down the gasoline.

The bottle goes around the room again. A cousin of the healer's slips off the bench and onto the floor. His limbs begin to dance, some beat playing out in his body that no one else can hear. The front of his trousers bloom dark, spit bubbles from his lips. When it is over, Khanya helps carry the man out onto the grass. The healer says it happens to him sometimes, especially when he's been drinking.

He motions for Khanya to follow him to another rondavel. The meeting with Zuki, the gin, and watching the man's unwilling dance has made him jittery. He wants to be alone, and he thinks of texting Zuki and calling it off. Instead he follows the healer into the dark opening of the rondavel.

In the middle of the room is a grinding stone, and on the back wall, a pyramid of plastic jars containing different medicines. Tools hang on the wall. The healer lights a piece of sage and rummages through the bottles. "Here," he says eventually, handing him a paper bag. "For your father. And for you? Do you still get those headaches?" He reaches down to pick up a plastic jar filled with liquata bark and holds it up, saying to grind it and then sniff.

Khanya shakes his head.

"That's good, the headaches went away," he says, nodding to himself. Then he said Khanya's mother had done everything right—she planted two umhlontlo trees when Khanya and Thuletu were born, and watered the trees with their bath water. When

Thuletu became ill she had taken the roots from Thuletu's tree and made a body wash for her. He shook his head and sighs. "So you've come back to the village?"

"I'm taking care of my father," he says, standing to go. He does not want to be late for Zuki.

There are several patches of low forest around the village. The biggest is a sweep of forest closest to the coast. Inside that forest, the paths are sandy, the sound of the ocean loud, and the marine air clings to the vines and trees. The forest he will go through is further inland, next to the river. The paths here are more overgrown and he is less likely to run into someone. The women rarely go there to collect firewood, and the cows do not wander there either—the hills are too steep.

The village iGqirha emerges from the edge of the forest, carrying a chicken under her arm, her animal print cape blowing out behind her. He nods to her, and she stares back at him, waiting for him to pass. He follows a narrow foot track that takes him up and down a few hills. He climbs the last steep hill, and below, a tangle of small forest appears. As he crosses into the coolness of the overgrowth, the narrow paths splinter in several directions. He takes the path down to the river.

The rain from last night has sogged the paths, and his gumboots become muddy, an extra weight on each foot. He keeps his eye out for mushrooms. When he was a teenager after the lightning storms he would come here to see if magic mushrooms had sprouted. Tourists would pay good money for magic mushrooms, but it is rare to find them now.

A stake mushroom grows next to the path. The top gleams like a bald head—it is nearly as large as a head. He leans down, and snaps the stem. He flips it over to reveal the brown gills. His finger runs across the folds, looking for bugs.

He takes the mushroom with him. The sun leaks through in patches. The smell of wet bark and moss is fresh. Further downhill, the trees become sparse. Then he comes out on a grassy bank next to the river. He could build a house here, rent it out to tourists, and stay in the village. The idea is both a dream and a trap.

The river is shallow and pebbly to his right, and to his left deep and filled with eddies. He sits on a rock waiting, looking out across the river to the mangroves. As a boy, he played in the mangroves with Lwazi and other boys. It was their world, away from the adults. The only thing to fear was the mud that would suck them into an underground realm where the crabs ruled.

When he got older, he often came to this bank with Zuki. He remembers those first six months in Cape Town, the hard work and loneliness. But that time had a certain happy glint to it—he was working to make enough money for her lobola, and then they would marry. Of course, it all went badly. When he thinks of those months in Cape Town, shoveling rocks on the side of the hot road, how he smiled through the work, eating only one meal a day to save more money so he could marry her, he doesn't recognize that fool. Tata had allowed the chief to marry her, and Zuki's family had too. The whole village had let it happen. But the only person he blamed was himself for being such a fool.

He looks at his phone. She is late. He texts her, asking where she is. The underside of the mushroom is very dark. He strokes the gills, and it is soothing on his fingertips. The gills are soft and detailed, different from the smooth clean mound of the topside. It is like the gills are hiding something.

Perhaps she is not going to come. He thinks of her sitting in the chief's house, fat and happy. They have three or four children now. He does not hate her. She is someone else. It is the dream of them that he cannot get over, and how it was yanked away.

His phone pings, and his heart leaps. Then he sees it's a message from Tia:

"someone's looking at your weed plants."

"who?" He types, his fingers stumbling over each other.

"dunno."

"im coming," he texts back.

He stuffs his phone back into his pocket and runs back through the forest. He curses himself for texting Zuki, for suggesting meeting all the way down at the river. The mud collecting on his shoes slows him down. It is like a dream he sometimes has of running away too slowly. Pressure starts building at his temples.

He swears at Lwazi. Why does he have to do all this work for the weed? Lwazi is the one who lives right next to it. He is the grower— Khanya has only agreed to sell it in Cape Town. But now Lwazi seems to think that everything is his problem. He has been acting strangely ever since they planted the weed. Doesn't Lwazi trust him? They have been friends their whole lives after all. He shakes clumps of mud off his gumboots.

When he comes out of the forest, the sun hits him in the face. The green tin roof of the volunteer house appears, and he cuts around the back to where he can see the weed plants through the fence. There is no one there.

He wanders to the gate and calls out for Tia. He lingers and calls out again. Then he walks up the hill towards Lwazi's house. From the hill, he can look down on the cottages. Howard's boat is parked outside his cottage. He is unloading black plastic bags off the boat, that pig. Howard and his friends have started a fishing club and made rules to stop other people from using the boat launch. Meanwhile, Howard is fishing illegally.

He is thinking about going down to confront Howard when he sees Tia, wobbling up the hill towards him, holding the iGqirha's chicken in her arms.

Chapter 10

Tia wakes on the couch to her phone vibrating. All of it feels like a dream—riding to the hospital in the truck bed, holding the hot placenta in her hands, driving back in the dawn with the new baby. She keeps her eyes shut, floating her hand over to her phone.

"Hello?" she says, her voice raspy from sleep.

"Were you sleeping?" Caleb asks, his voice rising in surprise.

Tia squints at the phone. It is past noon. She tells Caleb how crazy last night was, how Khanya and her helped a woman give birth.

There is a stunned silence on the other end of the line. For a moment she is pleased with the effect. Then she realizes the silence has gone on too long. "Caleb? Are you there?" she asks, sitting up in bed.

"I can't hear you," he says. He sounded far off like he was a castaway. "Yes, I'm here."

"There's a delay."

"There's a delay," he says. "Let me call you back."

She lies down again, waiting for his call.

"Is that better?" he asks when she picks up.

"I think so."

"Tia, can you hear me? I'm going to be staying longer."

"What? Why?"

"Are you there?"

"I'm here," she says. "Why do you need to stay longer?"

"I can't hear you. I'll try again later." He hangs up.

She sends a message to Caleb. "The line was bad. Why do you need to stay longer?"

Things got crazy last night."

She goes to the kitchen to make coffee. Something moves in the garden near the vegetable beds. Through the bushes, the shape shifts towards the weed plants. It is a man carrying a walking stick. She messages Khanya. The smell of coffee wafts up to her from the open bag. With a sigh, she rolls the coffee bag up and puts it back in the cupboard. She does not want to be around for a confrontation or get any more involved with the weed. She tucks her nightshirt into a pair of shorts and leaves the house. Outside, she glances behind her. Whoever is in the garden is still there.

The beach has a morning-after vibe—the stretch of sand is trashed with driftwood, seaweed, oyster shells, pieces of styrofoam, plastic sacking, colorful plastic bottle caps, candy wrappers. A few intrepid tourists who have walked from the hotel a mile up the coast have rolled out their beach towels amongst the storm's mess. A barnacle-covered bucket has washed up, and she picks through the trash, filling the bucket. She finds a shopping bag, the lettering worn off by the sea, and she fills that too. She makes her way down the beach, glancing up now and then to admire the stretch she has cleared. She leaves the overflowing bucket and the plastic bag on the beach—she will pick them up on her way home.

A boat is parked on the launch ramp. Three young boys from the village are descaling fish. The boys squat, clad only in underwear, damp bodies shining in the sun. The fish they bend over are huge and prehistoric-looking. Scales shimmer pink and gold. The blood drains from the surprised circle of the mouths, red rivulets running back to the sea. A man stands on top of the boat with his hands on his hips looking down at the boys working.

"Howzit," he says, looking her over. He has a sunburnt nose.

"Hey."

"You visiting?"

"Volunteering."

"So you're staying at the volunteer house. My cottage is near where you stay. Been coming here since I was a kid."

Tia has noticed the cottages off the road before, five houses in a line with fences around them, boats parked outside, and white kids playing in paddling pools. When she first saw the cottages with their white walls and green roofs, uniformly side-by-side looking over the ocean, the scene felt unlikely, as if the cottages had fallen out of the sky.

"American?" he asks.

"From California." It is rude to say this, to disown the rest of the country. But it is useful. It distracts people from her being American and helps avoid annoying political conversations.

"I'd love to get back out there," he says. "I've got a friend in San Diego."

She nods, not letting her face show that she is surprised he has been to California, which is what he wants.

When she doesn't say anything, he says, "I'm Howard. Come down to the cottages sometime. I'll take you out on the boat."

His eyes linger on her a bit too long. She is insulted that he thinks he has a chance with her. He is twice her age. Even if he was her age, he seems like a creep. "No thanks," she says, and his eyes pinch, his nose crinkles into a sneer.

A surfer sits beyond the breaking waves. She teeters along the rocky headland to get a better look at them. A smooth rock juts out from the hillside like a bench. When she sits down, the damp of the rock seeps into her jean shorts. Beside her is a pool of water, and

in it a few anemones wave translucent pink tentacles at her. She sticks her finger into one. The sticky tentacles judder and withdraw. She removes her finger and looks away quickly.

The waves roll in a few at a time and then stop for several minutes, the sea flattening itself. In the peace between waves, the sun shines on the flat surface, and dolphin fins rise out of the water. The waves form again, abruptly like a bad temper. She'd learned the Xhosa word for the sea. *Elwandle*. The word captures the ocean better than "ocean" or "sea" did. Elwandle sounds like the ocean: water rushing in, el-, breaking, -wan-, a receding hush, -dle.

The surfer has decided there are no more waves, and he comes in on his belly like a seal. Howard's boat is gone, leaving a slimy river of blood. The tourists on the beach have given up sunbathing and left. The surfer clammers out of the breaking waves and waddle up the hill in their wetsuits, carrying their boards. She turns back towards home, retracing her path along the rocks. That's when she sees the chicken.

The bird cowers amongst the rocks near the boat launch, encircled by three dogs. Their tongues flick in and out of their wet mouths, bony rib cages heaving. The dogs draw in close to the chicken, bellies low to the ground. The bird squawks and darts from one rock to another.

How did it get here? She has seen chickens roaming in the village, but it seems impossible for the chicken to come all the way down to the water. She imagines it floating on the crest of a wave, drifting to the shore. It is amusing to see a chicken on the beach, so out of place. Except the dogs are closing in—the bird doesn't belong here, and it will die a painful death. One of the dogs leaps forward growling, snatching at the back of the bird. The dog catches its tail feathers in its mouth.

"Hey!" she shouts.

It begins to play with the chicken, licking it and patting it with its paws. The other dogs move in, heads lowered.

Tia squats, digging her hands into a cold pile of gravel. She springs up, flinging a spray of pebbles at the dogs. They yip and jump, looking back at her, then back at the bird regretfully. Two of the dogs trot up the hill. The one who stays is a young blond dog. It lies down on the rocks, growling out of the corner of its mouth, staring at her. Tia picks her way across the rocks to examine the chicken.

It is barrel-chested with a bright red wattle. The dogs have flattened and dampened its feathers. She lunges for the bird, and it squawks and flaps its wings, dodging her. Next, she tries to herd the chicken towards a steep bank, but it pivots and runs between her legs. The bird waddles frantically toward the ocean. Tia chases after it, her arms outstretched. The chicken slows when it reaches the water, and she grabs its tail like the dog did, feeling a rinse of guilt. She falls to her knees, landing on a sharp rock.

She holds on to the end of what remains of the chicken's tail feathers while it flaps. "I'm sorry," she says, her fists tight on the remains of the chicken's tail feathers. It flaps wildly, and she creeps her hands over the bird's wings. She holds the animal firmly against her chest, worrying that she is digging into its wounds, but afraid to loosen her grip. Now what, she thinks.

The pain in her knee is dull and heavy where she fell. The dog lets out a chorus of barks.

"Go home!"

The dog regards her blankly, almost apologetically as if to say it doesn't speak her language. She looks around for someone, even Howard. But the beach and the launch

ramp are empty. The bird smells of runny shit, and she worries the dog can smell the fear on her too. She thinks of dropping the chicken. She has taken the dog's plaything away and if she gives it back the dog will leave her alone. But the warmth of the bird's body through her shirt makes her feel bound up with it.

The dog barks so loudly that she jumps and loses her balance. Her phone leaps out of her pocket and clatters to the rocks. The dog comes closer, the musky dampness of its fur reaching her. She backs away, hobbling along the rocks, which tip precariously under her feet. She has been so focused on watching the blond dog and her footing that she doesn't see the other dog from earlier approaching.

Flash of fur—shock of teeth on her forearm—the bird's neck strains upwards, away from the dog's mouth. A guttural shout comes from inside her. Her knee rams into the hard bony warmth of the dog's chest. The dog yelps, landing on the ground and turning away. The blond dog follows it up the hill. Pain shrieks up her arm.

Her heart beats in her throat. The chicken is still in her arms, darting its head from side to side, waiting for the next attack. Her forearm feels raw, like the dog's teeth have ripped out a chunk of flesh. But when she cranes her neck around the chicken's body, the wound is tidier than she expects—a red circle on her arm, four deep punctures where the canines have sunk in.

She stoops to collect her phone. Spider web cracks lace across the screen.

"Shit." She taps on her messages. She taps on it again, harder this time. The phone stares at her blankly. She puts it in her pocket, her hand shaking, her throat knots, tears push into her eyes.

She wobbles across the rocks to the beach, clutching the bird. There is a shortcut back to the house which she has taken once before. The path goes up the dunes and through a

small patch of forest, rather than along the beach and river. She pads through the valley of two small dunes. Her feet slip through the sand as she goes up the mound, each step a half-step back.

The pain in her arm hums through her body, her knee protests every time she steps down. The trees reach towards her and encircle her, the ocean shushes softer, the smell of damp earth rises up. The chicken tracks their progress, its head darting, navigating a steady course in the sea of her arms. Its beak gapes open like it is panting with heat.

She is nearing the end of the forest, where the dark underbrush gives way to white daylight when she sees cloth hanging from a tree. But when she blinks it becomes a person—a woman, a girl, or an old woman. She is stooped over, her limbs hanging from her small frame. The fabric and the beads she wears rock back and forth, though her body remains motionless. Her face is like a moon, painted with white ochre. Their eyes lock. The woman's eyes penetrate her.

The chicken squawks, reaching out its long legs. Its scaled toes claw at her stomach tracing a burning line across her abdomen. When she looks back up, the woman has receded into the underbrush. Tia blinks, trying to clear her vision. No one is there.

She begins to walk faster to the edge of the forest, her heart banging in her chest, her feet crunching on the twig-strewn path. The chicken's heartbeat palpates in her fingers, her chest bangs too. Then she is out into the warmth of the sun.

She looks back at the forest. Did she imagine the woman? A chill tingles up her spine. There was a woman. She was likely gathering wood from the forest and was equally surprised to see her. But she has the feeling of having done something she shouldn't have. She thinks of the anemone, how she stuck her finger in its center.

"You've found some dinner!" a voice calls to her. Khanya is standing at the crest of

the hill.

She gives a weak laugh, the energy of the laugh taking the last of it out of her. He is wearing a black shirt with big white letters on it, and the letters dance on his shirt. She tries to pin them down long enough for her to read them.

"Tia?"

He peers down the hill at her, and then he is jogging, his black shirt with the dancing letters coming towards her. His hand weighs on her shoulder, and then she is sitting down.

"You're dizzy," he says, kneeling next to her.

A giant mushroom is in his hand. He sets the mushroom down in the grass and reaches to take the chicken from her. But her arms stay locked around its body.

The blackness at the periphery of her vision begins to slink back, and the frayed feathers, the rough red comb atop the bird's head come into focus. A line of chicken shit is streaked on her leg. His rough fingers touch hers. He picks her arm up and holds it straight. He rotates it looking at the wound. What happened, he asks.

"The dogs, by the beach," her voice comes out chipped. She bites her lip. She doesn't want to cry.

"Where did you get the chicken?"

When she says she found it at the beach, he frowns, and looks over his shoulder to the forest. He stands, and they limp a few steps. He says he'll carry her, and she protests—she's too heavy. But he picks her up easily, along with the chicken which still rests against her stomach. She is wobbly and aloft, like the chicken when she carried it. Khanya's breath turns heavy, and when he goes to open the door his other arm shakes from holding the weight of her.

"Home," he says, as they pass through the door. He lowers his arms and her feet slip

to the floor. He reaches for the chicken again, and this time she lets him take it. He deposits it roughly on the kitchen floor. He washes his hands and then sticks her arm under the water.

"If we wash it, you shouldn't get an infection," he says, squirting the green dish soap on the ring on her arm, using his finger to push the suds into the punctures.

A caustic pain cuts into her, and she sucks the air between her teeth.

"Sorry," he says brightly, turning off the tap.

"Antiseptic?"

She points to the shelf with the white first aid kit and then sinks into a chair.

"I remember this box," he says, chuckling. "And that scream when the baby came out." He flips the latches on the box and pulls out an orange bottle that reads Dettol. "So you saw someone?"

She looks at him. How had he known? "Yes, a woman in the forest."

"No, I mean in the garden." His fingers flick through the box, finding some gauze.

"Oh." The morning feels very far off.

"What did the person look like?" He soaks the gauze in the orange liquid.

"Older. I think he had a walking stick."

He frowns. "Ah."

"You know who it is?"

"Maybe, it is my father."

"Now you're in trouble."

He laughs. "Yes, the worst kind. Ready?" He doesn't wait for her to respond and instead dabs at her arm with the orange gauze.

She clenches her jaw. The pain shrills inside her, her arm tugging away from his

touch. His shirt reads "STRAIGHT OUTTA CAPE TOWN."

"One more for the knee, and we are done." He bends down in front of her and dabs another orange square of gauze at her knee. "This one is small," he says. "A little cut and a bruise. That arm though..." He washes his hands and wipes them on the kitchen cloth.

"Do you remember what the dog looked like?"

Tia can only think of the blonde dog, which was not the one who bit her. She shakes her head. He says that if they knew which dog it was, they could find out from the owner if the dog has had its rabies shot.

Her head snaps up. "Rabies?" She imagines foaming from the mouth, turning into a wild animal. A fact rises to her—rabies brings on a fear of water. Where had she learned that?

"It's no problem, you can go to the clinic, get a shot in case," he explains. He pulls out his phone. "The clinic is much closer than the hospital. But it isn't always open." He makes several calls. Each time he speaks to a new person, he seems to launch into an amusing story. She begins to feel sure that the amusing story is about her and the chicken. He puts his phone in his pocket and pushes himself off the counter. "Clinic is open."

"Can you drive me?"

"No."

He would have to drive her. She could not be left alone to die of rabies.

"I can drive you," he says laughing.

"Oh."

"What will you do with the chicken?" he says, nodding his head at the chicken who stands quaking near the table leg.

"Maybe it will lay eggs?"

He cocks his head to the side. "No. Not that one. Keys?"

She stands, her knee sparking. She follows him out to the car. When they start driving, he asks whether she has any music. She shakes her head and tells him her phone broke on the rocks.

"Yoh! You're having a bad day," he says. He asks if she saw someone with a boat when she was down at the beach. She tells him she did—a guy from one of the cottages.

"Did he have fish?" Khanya drums his long fingers on the steering wheel.

She nods.

"How many?"

"Five maybe. Big ones."

"Yoh." He shakes his head. "When I was standing on the hill I could see him unloading the fish. Howard is taking the Coppers again."

"Coppers?"

"Copper Steenbras. Some of the big ones, they can live to be as old as fifty."

"Is it illegal?"

He nods. "The number he is taking, yes. You're allowed to catch one per person if you have a permit. When I was a boy, I used to go catch them with the fishermen. It was more difficult then because the line was thick so it didn't go to the bottom. Now the lines are thin and braided. The line goes down quickly and isn't dragged by the current. So now you can go fish when there are currents. The coppers stay fifty to sixty meters deep, quite far offshore. They swim in schools of twenty to thirty and stay on their reefs. It's easy to catch them."

"Will he get caught?" she asks.

"Who will tell the police? Even if someone reports him, the police won't come. It's

like the Chinese."

"What?"

"The Chinese, they're stealing from us."

"What do you mean?"

"The Chinese trawlers come in at night to fish illegally. You can see their lights off the coast. They turn off their tracking devices. And in the morning they are gone. Sometimes they even do it during the day. You can see the funny writing on their boats."

"And Amplexica? Have you seen their boat?"

He shakes his head.

She says that is why she has come to the village in the first place, to stop Amplexica.

He looks out the window. He does not want to talk about Amplexica like she thought he would. Or perhaps he is thinking what she is thinking—what is she really doing to stop Amplexica?

He points out the window at a long, low building. "Here's the high school. I used to walk here every day."

"It's far to walk."

"Yes. I didn't mind. I walked with my girlfriend."

Tia is silent for a moment. "The same one who you picked roses for?"

He nods.

She laughs. "You were really in love with her."

"I was young," he says somewhat defensively.

They sit in silence. Khanya has gone somewhere else—the muscles in his forehead move like a story is playing out in his head. She slips into her own thoughts, wondering if by the time Caleb gets back she will be rabid and foaming at the mouth.

Chapter 11

When she walks into the kitchen, she can smell the bird. Yesterday after the clinic, she was too weak and tired to deal with the chicken. It spent the night huddled under a chair at the kitchen table.

The chicken doesn't see her approaching until it is too late. It hunkers itself against the floor in submission, and she clasps her hands around its body. She pins its wings down and turns to look at its backside. The dogs have torn out most of the tail feathers as well as the soft down on its behind. The bare skin is familiar, pimpled and pink like in a supermarket. There are gashes, but not deep ones. She carries the chicken out into the yard, setting it down in the shade. She fills an old tin with water and places it in the grass.

Her left arm and knee are still sore, but she takes the walk down to the beach. In the middle of the night, she remembered the bucket and the plastic bag filled with trash on the beach. When she comes around the bend, she sees the ocean has coughed up more trash. It is like she has never been there. And worse, the bucket and the bag are gone. The ocean has ingested it all again.

Lwazi is in the garden when she returns. He looks at the weeping bandage on her arm and her mottled greeny-blue knee. He says nothing—he does not care about her. Lwazi waters the vegetable beds and then goes to prune his weed plants. He is different with the weed plants. He moves carefully around them like each is a sleeping beauty.

She limps around the garden halfheartedly, tugging at weeds with her good arm. Then she sits down on a plastic chair under the mango tree. The red cord cushion is

waterlogged from rain, and it seeps quickly through her shorts. Her shoulder aches from the rabies shot the nurse gave her at the clinic. She feels tender all over like her skin is made of eggshells. If she fell, her insides would ooze out.

Lwazi comes over and holds out his phone. It is a flip phone with big buttons, the kind grandmas use. "Caleb," he says.

"Hello?" She turns away from Lwazi and looks at the grass. A worm waves to her.

"Why are you not answering your phone?" Caleb asks. "Last I heard from you, you said things got crazy, and then—radio silence."

She tells him that her phone broke, a dog bit her, and she helped deliver a baby with Khanya.

"Jesus," he says and falls silent.

She wonders if Caleb is trying to decide if he should comment on Khanya. Then he says he was worried when he couldn't reach her.

She softens and asks him when he is coming back.

He says he will be back in a few days. He tells her about Cape Town and the new friends he's made. They are Greenpeace activists, launching an international campaign to stop Amplexica. He will send her an email so she can share the petition with everyone she knows. He participated in a big protest, and last night they went around gas stations and put up signs that read "To Hell with Amplexica." They can quickly turn the Amplexica logo into a skull with spray paint. He will send her pictures—oh that's right, her phone is broken, never mind. He tells her she should have come to Cape Town.

When he is done talking, she hands the phone back to Lwazi. Had Caleb invited her to Cape Town? She feels heavy with disappointment. She has missed out on a protest and instead gotten bitten by a dog. Caleb is in Cape Town, being an activist, and she is sitting

in a pair of soggy shorts under the mango tree. Amplexica is planning on extracting oil right off the coast, but all the action is happening in Cape Town. She stands up. She has to do something.

"Chicken," Lwazi says, pointing to the chicken that has waddled over.

Tia nods. "I found it at the beach."

"Beach?" Lwazi's eyes widen, and he speaks quickly, long strings of words that Tia tries to grasp. He is pointing at the bird, his face wrinkling into worried lines. "No good," he says with finality, jabbing a finger at the bird.

Tia shifts uneasily to her back foot. "Yes, Khanya told me that it wouldn't lay eggs."

"Eggs. Hayi." He rubs his chin. "Khanya." He looks down the hill towards Khanya's house. He turns and starts walking towards his house.

She glances down at the chicken, who is now eating the worm who waved at her. She sighs. A few minutes later, Khanya comes trudging up the hill with Lwazi. Khanya lifts his arm to greet her.

"Molo Tia," he says as he approaches the fence. His face looks different than it normally does—he isn't smiling. Maybe he is getting tired of her.

Lwazi starts talking, pointing to the chicken and then towards the beach, his eyes drifting over to Tia. Khanya listens to him, his chin on his chest, nodding.

Lwazi's voice gets louder. A drop of sweat runs along his chin.

"It's about the chicken," Khanya says finally, turning to her.

"I got that much." Her words sound grumpier than she intended.

"He doesn't like the chicken."

Khanya doesn't seem to be doing a very good job translating. "Why not?"

"It is, uh, bad luck."

"What do you mean?"

Khanya inhales deeply. "It's the iGqirha's chicken, the indigenous healer's."

She looks at the chicken nestled in the grass.

Tia thinks of the crouched figure, the young-but-old woman in the forest, the sharp eyes searching hers. "I can give it back. I didn't realize it belonged to someone."

Khanya shakes his head. "It's not like that. Sometimes the iGqirhas take candles to the beach and let them go out to sea. To get rid of bad luck."

"Oh. And so, they do that with chickens too?"

"Sometimes."

She thinks of the bird riding a wave back into shore, shaking itself off on the beach after having been cast away. "So what... now I'm cursed?"

The corner of his mouth twitches. He glances at the chicken under the clothesline, at Lwazi, and back to Tia. Khanya lifts his head up and lets out a crack of laughter.

Lwazi and Tia exchange glances, and then Lwazi turns to Khanya. For a moment Tia thinks Lwazi will hit Khanya, but instead, he turns away and strides toward his house. Khanya pants from laughter. He puts his forearms on the fence, his fingers covering his mouth.

"I'm glad you think it's funny that I'm cursed," Tia says.

When he has recovered, he says, "You don't believe it anyway."

"I guess not." She looks over to the chicken. "What should I do with her?"

"It's done now. You can do whatever you want with it."

This is unsettling. She would have preferred some sort of penance, a kind of chicken-returning protocol.

"Do you believe it? The bad luck?" she asks.

"If I did, you might think less of me."

"No," Tia says, and then wonders if he is right.

"Lwazi won't work in the garden until you," he nods his head towards the chicken, "decide what to do with it."

He takes a step backward. "We will see if this chicken makes it."

"She's fine. Her wounds aren't deep."

"No. I mean here. In the garden. Something could eat the chicken. A genet or a jackal or a leguan."

"What's a leguaan?" She asks, though she is not sure what a genet or a jackal is either.

"Giant lizard. This long," he says, stretching his arms out. He waves goodbye to her.

Inside, she makes pasta. The cupboards are bare, and she drizzles only olive oil onto the spaghetti. If her phone was working, she would call Beth and ask her what she would do. Would she be worried about the chicken curse? But Beth would not be in this situation. Beth is not seeking something like she is, in a way that has made her travel to the other side of the world to rescue a chicken.

It is six in the morning in California. Beth is probably sleeping next to Brian, Cornelius kneading and purring at their blankets.

"You should keep the cat," Beth said.

"You'll be the one with the big yard, now that you're moving in with Brian," Tia snapped.

Her moving out had felt like the end of everything—the spontaneous dance parties, the road trips in Beth's old Subaru Forester, the countless bowls of Macaroni and Cheese,

the long weekend mornings in slippers. If Tia wasn't so proud, she could have kept the cat. She could have found a studio apartment near Beth and Brian and kept her job.

She thinks of her old office, the glass box on the third floor—the “penthouse” level. Cold brew and kombucha on tap. The company values painted on one wall: URGENCY, RADICAL CANDOR, OBSESSION, EXECUTION, HUMILITY. She found it unbearable to untangle nests of computer cords, order stationary, schedule meetings and be forced to “exude the company’s brand and core values” when visitors came to the office. She hated the co-founder's pug, Cheerio, who peed on the black-tiled floor. But was it really so bad?

She has eaten too much pasta and feels dull and heavy. She puts on her sneakers and goes for a walk. Without her phone, she feels naked. Her chest is tight, like she is lost, even though she is strolling down the only road towards the beach. It's great not having a phone. A digital detox, she thinks, gritting her teeth.

She stops half-way down to the beach. Her knee is sore, and she worries the dogs or the iGqirha from yesterday might be at the beach. The ocean is very calm. No sign of any seismic survey boats or Chinese fishing boats. When she gets home, she should try to get the dusty laptop in Caleb's room working so she can share the petition. But it does not sound satisfying. She does not need to be all the way out in a rural village to share a petition online. Surely there is more she could be doing here.

She turns back, walking past the cottages. Howard's boat is on its trailer ready to go out. She squints at it. A red streak of fish blood colors the side of the white boat. Then she has an idea. It makes her heart beat fast and the feeling of her skin being like eggshells lifts.

When night falls, the chicken is still standing in the middle of the yard. She flosses

her teeth in front of the bathroom mirror until she tastes iron, and then she takes a sip of cold water and lets it slip around her mouth, crashing up against her gums and making the inside of her teeth ache. When she spits the water out, pink from blood, it splashes up on the mirror. She takes a cloth and wipes it down. The mirror looks worse after she has wiped it, streaky. There is a crack in the mirror, and she traces it with her finger.

She was a superstitious child, feeling guilty if she stepped on a sidewalk crack in case it broke her mother's back. Aside from stepping on cracks and seeing black cats, it is easy to avoid other superstitious situations, like breaking mirrors or walking under ladders. And it should have been easy to avoid this one too—stealing an indigenous healer's chicken from a beach. But in the moment, it felt like the right thing to do, to rescue the chicken. She couldn't be blamed for it.

The tube of toothpaste is spiraled and the paste comes out on the crushed bristles like a shimmery blue snail. She walks to the window while brushing her teeth. The moon is so bright that she can see the chicken standing in the middle of the lawn.

She spits out her toothpaste and then opens the back door and goes outside. An owl is hooting nearby. The chicken stands dumbly in the yard like a lost traveler. Khanya said it was useless, it would not lay eggs. But perhaps the chicken needs the right conditions. If she feeds the chicken well and gives her a good home, perhaps she will lay. The chicken can't see her, and it is easy to pick her up. She opens the warped roof of the coop and sets her inside.

It is hard to sleep with the moon so bright and no curtains. She tries to remember what Khanya said when she asked if he believed the chicken was bad luck. She could go down to the beach in the moonlight, walk back through the forest, across the dunes in her pajamas with the chicken tucked under her arm. She could walk to the water's edge, the

sand wet and grippy in her toes, the hem of her pajamas dampening in the sea foam. She could push the chicken out to sea. It's done now, that was what Khanya said. And anyway, she isn't cruel enough to return the chicken and allow it to die.

When her alarm goes off at two am, her idea seems crazy. She thinks about snuggling into the covers and going back to sleep. But she has come to this remote village to do something. She ties her hair back and dresses in one of Caleb's hoodies. She puts the kitchen knife into a cloth shopping bag.

The moon helps her find the path down to the main road. The gravel is loud underfoot. She passes by the small pond next to the road and stands there listening to the chorus of frogs. She can turn back now and all it would be is a walk in the moonlight to listen to the frogs. She clenches her jaw and continues. There are lights on at the cottages. But when she gets closer, she can see it is only porch lights. Still, Howard's yard is visible with the porch light and the moonlight.

She sticks her head through the fence slats and then both her shoulders, her hands touching the damp grass on his lawn. She pulls her torso through, and then her legs. Her shins scrape along the boards. She imagined puncturing the boat trailer's tire, but the truck with the trailer is reversed into his yard. To get to the trailer, she would have to run the length of the boat and truck. It will be easier to puncture the truck's tire.

The front tire of the truck is only a few feet away. She crouches low, pulling the knife out of the cloth bag. She raises the tip of the knife. The knife bounces against the rubber as if someone has pushed her hand back. The knife is not sharp enough. She looks towards the gap in the fence. How quickly can she get back through the fence if Howard comes out? She imagines diving through, and Howard grabbing her foot just before she escapes. He would pull her back through the fence.

It is not the time to think like this. She raises her arm high and stabs the tire several times, the strength of the blows surprising her. A satisfying hiss. She runs towards the fence and dives through the slats, landing hard on her right wrist. Her foot knocks loudly on one of the planks. The knife is still in her hand, and she presses herself up and begins running alongside the fence of the next door cottage.

"Who's there?" Howard calls out.

She flattens herself in the grass next to the fence. If he comes out of his gate, he will see her lying in the grass. Why is the moon so bright? It looks down on her like a malicious floodlight. She lifts her head to peer back at Howard's house. There is another light on. Is that him on the porch? She hears the front door close. Then the light in the house goes out. All she can hear is the sound of the frogs in the pond and the distant roar of the ocean. She lets her breath out.

She pushes herself up on her hands and knees. She runs along the fences of the cottages, and then down the main road. Up the footpath, and then through the gate. Inside, she pulls the knife out and washes it in the sink, placing it still wet back into the drawer with the other smaller knives.

Back in bed. Her heart still hammers. Her right wrist aches, her left arm is still dull and tender from the bite. Her shins feel fresh from where they scraped on the fence slats. What has she just done?

Chapter 12

He's coming back from the spaza shop with milk and rice when he passes the shebeen.

Tata Sandile is standing outside with Nine. Tata Sandile waves him over.

"What does this paper say?" Tata Sandile asks. "I can't read it with my eyes, and this boy is too drunk to read," he says, waving his hand dismissively at Nine.

A poster is taped onto the chainlink fence of the Shebeen yard. The top of the page is printed with a rainbow colored log of sun, above the words, "Amplexica Energy: Igniting progress. Empowering communities. Fueling possibilities."

Khanya tells them the American company is coming.

"That's good. I need work," Nine says, leaning over his shoulder, his breath giving off a yeasty odor.

"You think they're going to give you a job?" Khanya asks.

Tata Sandile makes Khanya read off the poster. Khanya explains to Tata where the facility and the base will be, where the pipeline will go. He traces his finger across the tiny map on the poster. Nine loses interest and wanders back into the shebeen, his dog, Rova, following at his heels.

"Here comes Amila," Tata Sandile says, "Look at her. Just like her mother was at her age. I never did understand why you were chasing after Zuki when you could have had Amila."

He says it all too loudly, and when Amila greets them, Khanya avoids looking at her in case she heard.

Tata Sandile shows her the poster and tells her Amplexica is coming. “They want to build on the beach and dig up the bones of our ancestors,” he says. They stand back and let her read it.

“Amplexica wants to meet on the fifteenth. And we are expected to answer the same day,” she says.

“How can we answer when we don't know what they will say? Tata Sandile asks.

“They don't want to give us any time to prepare,” Amila says, leaning forward to read the fine print on the poster. “And here it says if we have questions or complaints we must fax them or email them. From where, from what office will we do that?”

“Fax?” Tata Sandile asks.

Amila and Khanya begin explaining a fax machine to Tata Sandile. Khanya tells him it's like a telephone that can print.

“You think I don't know what a fax machine is?” Tata Sandile says he used a fax machine when he was working at the mines—if he had that machine now, he would send a fax to these American boys, telling them to come to the village so he can put them over his knee and give them a hiding.

Khanya exchanges a glance with Amila, and she bites her lip to keep from laughing. Then her smile fades, and she runs her finger over each line of text on the paper as if she is memorizing it. She narrows her eyes at the poster and puts her hands on her hips. It's like she is facing off to a bull.

A few days later, Khanya is down by the sea running sprints. From the beach he can see the first hill on the way back to the village. Atop the hill is the church, a long rectangular

building, white-washed with lime. People are piling into the church for the community meeting. His father will be there already, dressed in his pale-blue jacket.

He tries to imagine what it will be like when Amplexica gets their way. An oil rig out to sea, the pipeline running along the seabed, a mess of metal pipes, tanks and towers on the shore.

Against his will, his legs carry him uphill towards the church. The building is not how it used to be—now there are cracks running up the walls, window panes missing, the sheet metal roof rusted. He has not been inside since his mother died, and the space inside is smaller than in his memory.

Amila is standing at the front of the church, wearing a red knit sweater and glasses. Her hair is braided tightly to her skull. “Two years ago we hear they are doing surveys in the ocean,” Amila says. “We ask them, What next, what will you do if you find oil? Oh no, they said. It’s not like that. We are just doing surveys, that’s all. And so we didn’t stop them. Now they have found their oil and they want to take it. They want to dig up our land, and poison our ocean. They have promised jobs, but what is a job if it destroys our village? We must tell the chief to put a stop to this.”

Tata stands up, “I’m getting old. Maybe you youngsters think, what does this old man know, he doesn’t know money, he doesn’t understand. Maybe that’s true. But I know we need the land. These Americans will buy your land and give you the money. But your money will disappear. You will go back to the Americans and say, Mr. Amplexica, please return my land, it was my father’s land and my father’s father’s land, and I want it back. My children are hungry, they have nowhere to live. And the Americans will laugh at your sad tale.”

Tata Sandile stands up and says, “Everyone thinks they will get a job. They don’t want to learn how to thatch, they want to get a job at this oil factory. When the Americans come, they will ask you if you know how to use their machines. And when you say no, they won’t look at you again.”

Vuyo stands up slowly, wincing as he stands up. “We all have different views, but we must try to listen to both sides.” He nods at man Khanya’s age. He recognizes him as Thando, who he went to school with.

“God has buried these riches for us in our soil and our ocean,” Thando says. “Will we just let it lie there? It is our right to use it.”

A cousin of Amila’s stands up. She says she has eight children to feed. She is tired of hungry bellies, tired of eating samp and beans. “If you don’t want development, you’re a fool!” she shouts.

Everyone starts talking at once. Vuyo stands up and holds his hands up to quieten everyone. Khanya’s seen enough. The Americans can come and take their oil. Whatever happens to the village, it won’t be his problem.

That evening, Mama Nokuzola comes to the door crying, saying they’ve threatened Amila.

“Who? What did they say?” Tata asks.

She tells them they don’t know, it was an SMS. She takes a deep rattling breath.

“They said they will not let a bitch get in the way of development. They said they will kill her!”

Tata turns to Khanya and tells him to go and get Amila, that they should not sleep at their house tonight.

Khanya runs down the hill. The wind whips around him and as he approaches. A sheet of iron across Amila's hut scrapes in the wind. He knocks on the door.

"Who is it?" she calls, her voice is strained, not strong and warm like the voice she spoke in earlier at the meeting.

He clears his throat. "It's me, Khanya. Tata says you must come and spend the night, not stay here."

She opens the door a crack. Her eyes are small and red. He comes in and shuts the door behind him. The wind wails at the walls of her hut.

"Come, let's go," he says.

"I'm fine." The hardness back in her voice again. "Someone is just trying to scare me."

"Maybe, but you better not take the risk."

"You don't understand."

He wants to tell her he does understand, that when he passes the young children playing in the road and thinks how they will have nothing, a moan goes off inside him that he can't silence.

"Just leave me."

He sits down on the bench and crosses his arms.

She looks up at him, surprised. Their eyes lock, and it is like he is looking in the mirror—her face is so familiar that it is unknowable. Then all the unsaid things, the raw sadness and anger that can't be refined into words, swarm out of the darkness to each other, like bees barreling out of a smoking hive.

Amila breaks off their gaze and turns her back to him. "Since when did you start caring about me?" she mumbles. Then she begins to pack.

Hours later, when they have finished eating, and are all sitting satisfied, Amila tells the story of how Mama Nokuzola sent Amila, Khanya and Thuletu off to fetch something from the other side of the river. On their way home, they decided to swim, just for a bit. But then they swam for hours. Khanya got so tired that he started to sink. Amila had to run as fast as she could to the nearest house. The man threw a rope out to Khanya like he was a fish and reeled him in. Tata hoots with laughter, and Khanya is glad that Amila can make him laugh like that still.

They get quieter as it gets dark, knowing that if someone comes, it will be under the cover of night. While Amila and Mama Nokuzola make their beds on the kitchen floor, he finds his empty sports bag. Through the cloth, he feels the thick barrel of the gun. He pulls his bed near the front door, away from Amila and Nokuzola, and places the sports bag next to the bed. He does not want to undress in front of them, so he gets into bed with his jeans on.

Mama Nokuzola begins to lecture Amila. She says she knows her too well. At times she reminds her of her young self, that she is hard-headed and resilient. She knows that if she tells her to stop doing things, that will only give her ideas wings. She has learnt to understand Amila's view and only give advice. But this time she is scared for Amila's life. Then Mama Nokuzola sighs, and says, but if we don't stand up against Amplexia, who will?

Finally they fall silent. A couple of times Whisky scratches at the door to come in, and he jumps. His hand creeps over towards the gun, and he falls asleep like that, his hand out of the blankets.

He wakes up to the door opening, and a shadow slipping out of the door. He scrambles out of his bed. Amila is halfway across the yard already.

He half shouts, half whispers to her, asking where she is going.

She gestures angrily to the outhouse.

The night grass is wet, and the hem of his jeans dampen. He walks over to the outhouse. There is no moon, the night is thick around him. He wishes he had brought the gun out with him. Something is moving across the grass towards him, and he freezes, all the hairs on his body standing to attention. Then he hears panting. It is only Whisky, following him out. He can hear the stream of Amila's pee, and then the door creaking open. He clears his throat so she knows he's there, and she inhales sharply when she hears him.

"It's just me," he says quickly.

He can just make out the shape of her, her arms crossed. "It's so dark," she says.

Although the night is cold and she is wearing only a t-shirt, she does not head back inside. A little breeze plays around them and the frogs sing out, like they're trying to get attention.

"No moon," he says, scanning the sky. When he looks at her again she is closer, close enough to touch.

"So you don't hate me?" She asks.

He laughs a little, and then he reaches his arms around her, the top of her braids brush against his cheek, the softness of her breasts are against his chest. Then he's kissing her, a feeling like rising up into the sky like a full moon.

"Amila!" Mama Nokuzola calls out hoarsely.

Amila pushes him away. "I'm here mama." And she is already out in front of him, moving swiftly across the yard. Amila squeezes his hand before they go back inside. She lays back down next to her mother, who is whispering loudly, saying how dare she scare her like that, how did she think it felt to wake up to find a cold bed beside her and her daughter gone.

He lies back down near the door. The warm wetness of her kiss is still on his lips, his heart still drums like he's been running. He feels clean and alive, like a layer of dust has been blown off him.

Mama Nokuzola snores, but he knows Amila is still awake. He thinks about whispering to her. But his throat is tight and won't allow him. Eventually he hears her breathing go regular.

He is tired of his bed. Outside, the soft morning is unfolding, pink and blue like the inside of an oyster shell. He pats Whisky, and the dog shifts uneasily from side to side. After a while of stroking him, Whisky relaxes. The dog drops down to lie on top of Khanya's feet. The warmth of Whisky's body seeps into his toes, and the sun rises.

Chapter 13

Like Khanya said, Lwazi does not come back to the garden. Tia doesn't care. The shoots in the beds are unfolding into distinct plants—kale crinkling at the edges, cabbage leaves splaying out, carrot tops frilling, beetroot showing veins of red. The passion fruit vine still springs new fruit. The chicken is looking better too—she stalks about the garden like she owns the place, surveying for worms and bathing in the dust. Tia names the chicken Bad Luck, a joke that makes her feel better.

The day Caleb is due back, she does her laundry, dumping her clothes in a plastic basin and squirting some dish soap on them. She stirs the clothes in the basin with her hands, her underwear and socks drifting like jelly fish in the suds. Tia spends the rest of the morning cleaning out the chicken coop and filling it with grass clippings.

After lunch, she walks past Howard's cottage. The rubber of the front tire flaps onto the grass. In the daylight, it's easy to think she has not done it. The pathetic tire makes her feel guilty. But Howard does not care about the coppers. He is one of those people who can't see how their individual actions collectively make the world shitty—the worst kind of people.

When night begins to fall and the mosquitoes come out wailing, she makes dinner. The leaves of the basil bush outside the back door have grown large and silky, and she rips off handfuls to make pesto. She is washing up her bowl when the engine moans up the steep embankment. The car door slams, and she rushes to open the front door. For a moment she can see the outline of him, backlit by the car lights, standing with a backpack

and his duffel bag. Then the light clicks off and she can't see him.

"Caleb?" she calls.

"I'm here."

She jumps, his words coming closer than expected.

His hands touch her forearm. His fingers run over her bandage and dart up her shoulder. Between the sandpaper of his lips and the spikiness of his mustache, she can taste peanuts. They kiss for a long time. She pulls away to catch her breath.

"Welcome back." She leads him into the house.

"Nice place," he says, putting his bags on the floor.

She laughs. Now that he is back, she is light and relaxed.

There are dark circles under his eyes. His wavy hair is ironed out from his hands running through it. There is a small red stain down the front of his shirt.

"Tired?" she runs her hands up his chest.

He nods, then sits down on the couch and rolls off his socks. He tells her more about the trip. The meeting with the architect went well. He would show her the plans for the lodge. There were a few good beach days spent with some other activists. There was a final protest in the harbor, in front of the boat that conducted the seismic surveys of the Wild Coast. "Amazon Warrior," Caleb says, laughing. "That's the name of Amplexica's boat, can you believe it?"

"Sounds like a good trip," she says. His feet smell like vinegar.

"You had a rough time, being bitten and all."

"No, it was cool," she says. She tries to feel that her days alone were an important experience. She opens her mouth to tell him about how she went to Howard's house and

slashed his tire. But now that he is here, it seems juvenile. She is not confident he would agree with what she did.

He unbuttons his shirt and walks into the bedroom. She follows him, kicking off her shoes and curling up next to his star-fished body on the bed.

"Let's see," he says, picking up her bandaged arm. His fingertips brush the hair on her arm.

"I need to put a new bandage on." A tweaking pain rips across her arm. "Ow!" she says, inhaling sharply.

"Had to be done," he says, smiling. He tosses the bandage to the floor.

"That hurt," she says, examining the wound. The shock of him ripping off the bandage crawls coldly over her body.

"You said you needed to put a new one on."

"You need to work on your bedside manner," she says, sitting up.

He kisses the skin on either side of the bite. He sits up and puts his hands on her thighs. He takes off her jeans, stopping to run his hand over the new scab on her knee. His tongue touches her, and it is warm between her legs.

"How's that for a bedside manner?" he says, lifting his head up.

"Better," she laughs.

He begins to work on her like a craft, intently, deliberately like she is wood. She cries out again and again. He flips her over and runs his hands along her back before entering her. The pillow is hard and musty against her face. She is pinned and let loose all at once. He makes a sound like he is wounded, and then he is still. His breath warms her ear. Outside the wind sets the trees rustling, a sound like rushing water. Part of her feels content in his satisfaction, part of her feels unfinished and thirsting. The room returns to

her like new, like opening her eyes after a long sleep. The rough wooden planks of the walls. The sun casting a rectangle across the cement floor. Caleb's khaki backpack slumped like an injured soldier, its content spilling out.

"Sorry," he says. "That was too good." He pulls away from her.

She smiles to show she doesn't mind. A peace falls on them like resting after a long run. He wraps himself around her, his hand resting on one of her breasts.

She tells him that she found a chicken while he was away. She does not tell him about the healer.

"Is that what the smell is in the house? I couldn't place it earlier."

He rolls away from her, and in his absence, the room breathes coolly on her back. She watches him dress in plaid boxers and a shirt that reads Cleveland Cavs. He never stays naked for long. He looks tired again, like he did when he first walked into the house.

"I'm hoping it will lay eggs for us," she says.

"If not, chicken pie." He climbs back in bed. He tells her how he had chickens growing up, and how his mom taught him how to wring their necks when they stopped laying.

"Poor you." She strokes his back.

He falls asleep quickly. She does not know the kind of Americans who wrang chicken necks as children. There is always this between them, a dubious alliance of both being Americans and the stark shock of it meaning nothing. She watches him sleep. She imagines him as a kid, his mother telling him to kill a chicken and him unwillingly going out to the coop to wring its neck.

The next morning they go down to the beach together. On the sand, close to where the river lets out into the water, is a long black mound.

"Is that a...?" Caleb says.

"Oh my god." Her bare feet stop abruptly in the sand. Then they both run forward, slowing as they approach the beached creature. The whale is little more than twice her length. It lies on its side, a small flipper and the wide fluke at its end flapping feebly in the air.

"It's a baby," Caleb says. He pulls out his phone and takes a picture.

Tia goes around to the head. Air puffs feebly out of its blowhole. The eye is small and human. Deep inside her, something goes still.

"We gotta get it back in the water," Caleb says. He stuffs his phone back in his shorts and waits for a wave to come in. When the water washes around the whale, he puts both his hands on the body and pushes. His feet grind into the sand, he slips backward. She places her hands gently on the whale. Its skin is hard but giving, like rubber. She thinks of Howard's tire, and how a surprising strength rose in her.

A great slushing wave comes. She strains against the whale, her feet struggling to maintain a grip as the white foam rushes around their ankles. For a moment the whale doesn't budge. Then something slackens. The whale's body slips an inch, its flipper flaps more hopefully. They roll the whale on its stomach, and in the next wave, the body half-floats.

"Yes!" She shouts, her eyes wet. A laugh-cry comes out of her.

The water drags back to the sea. They wade out with the whale, following it as the water pushes it deeper. Her jean shorts move stiffly underwater, the hem of her shirt soaks up saltwater and drags it darkly up her shirt. They stop guiding the whale and let it drift out. The animal exhales a small spray, the dorsal fin dips under. Caleb wraps his arms around her, and she leans back against him. They stand looking out to sea. It is like the

first days again.

Then Caleb realizes he has waded out with his phone in his pocket. The phone will not turn on. Walking back, they talk about how his photos are backed up to the cloud, and how they will dry the phone in a bag of rice. Secretly she is happy—now they both don't have a phone.

When they get home, they both tear off their wet clothes. She shivers, and Caleb comes up behind her, caressing her breasts, weighing each one in his hand. He kisses her neck.

"What if Amplexica somehow had something to do with the whale?" Caleb asks.

"What?"

He steps away from her and wraps a towel around his waist.

She puts her sweatpants on, disappointed.

He opens his laptop and googles "dead whale." They flick through images and articles— "Dead Whale, 220 Pounds of Debris Found Inside." The image shows something red and intestinal coming out of a beached whale's open mouth. "Whale Found With Ball of Nets, Plastic Cups, Gloves and Shopping Bags in Stomach." The image, a sick pellet of nets and rope coated in white sludge. "Pregnant Whale Dead, Highlights Trash Issue in Ocean." The image, a whale suspended in midair by straps, white scars scrawled over the skin, its flipper a mangled stump, a dripping mass of mud and flesh coming out of its mouth.

When she can't stand it anymore, she takes the computer from him and looks up different whales. Caleb puts his phone in a bowl of rice. "I think it's a pilot whale...they tend to beach themselves," she says. She shows Caleb a picture of a pilot whale.

He nods. "Looks similar."

Pilot whales are susceptible to mass strandings, she reads. Sometimes hundreds will beach themselves. The social bond with pilot whales is strong, and a pod can follow an ill whale into shore and then get disoriented in the shallow waters. Nobody knows exactly why it happens though—some say marine noise pollution, NASA wonders if it's solar storms, others hypothesize suicide.

“At least it was only one,” she says looking at drone footage of a mass stranding in New Zealand. The dead whales are cluttered like sardines at the water's edge.

Caleb swivels the computer towards him. She massages his shoulders as he types a message about how there will be more beached whales if Amplexica starts its seismic blasting again. Then he types out a string of hashtags.

She runs her hand down his bare chest. He takes her hand and kisses it absently, standing up.

“I'm late.” Caleb dresses in a blue button-down that brings out his eyes.

She asks where he's going.

He says he's meeting with Vuyo. Things aren't happening as fast as he would like. Vuyo is too cautious. They've found the land for the lodge, and the designs from the architect are underway. They should be meeting with the chief to secure the land and discussing the lodge with the community. But now Vuyo keeps saying he doesn't want to rush it.

She wonders if Vuyo also has doubts about the lodge and whether it is the most effective project to stop Amplexica.

As if she had said something, he smiles and reaches over to rustle her hair. “I'm not worried.” Then he kisses her on the forehead. She wonders if she was a man if she would have been more included in the lodge project. Then again, she is not sure she wants to be

involved with it.

She has just gotten out of the shower and dressed when a face appears in the window and then darts back. She opens the door.

"Lulama!" a joy blooms in her chest, mixed with the memory of the fear of that night. She wants to reach out and hug her.

Lulama carries a huge circular loaf of bread. The baby is tied on her back with a plaid blanket. Lulama looks young. Tia had thought she was younger than Lulama, but now that she is not in pain or giving birth, she looks like a teenager.

"Isonka," Lulama says, raising the large golden loaf out to Tia. "Bread for you."

Tia takes the loaf in both hands.

Lulama points at the baby, turning so Tia can see the tiny face pressed to Lulama's back.

"Come in," Tia says smiling. She pulls out a kitchen chair for Lulama. Lulama bends forward and loosens the blankets tied atop her chest. A little arm fights its way out of the loosened blanket. With one hand Lulama expertly removes the blanket, her other hand holds the baby to her back. Lulama slides the curled baby around to her stomach. She sits down and the baby snuggles into position on her lap.

Tia imagines herself doing the same maneuver, bending over, pulling the blanket off, scooping the baby from her front to her back. But in her mind's rendition, the baby slips to the floor—that's all it would take, the soft skull meeting the cement.

"What happened?" Lulama asks, touching her wrist.

"A dog bit me," Tia says, hiding her arm around the white bandage. The bruise is a tie-dye of purple, green and yellow.

"Sorry sisi." Lulama says. She holds the baby out to Tia. Tia leans over the baby and

takes in the wide eyes, the hopeful, puckering lips, the curly, damp hair, the tiny ears. The sleeves of the baby's yellow outfit are rolled up so the twigs of the baby's fingers are visible. The baby doesn't fill the legs either and the feet of the suit are deflated.

"Gorgeous," Tia says. She taps the hand with her pinky, and the baby wraps her hand around Tia's finger and grips.

Lulama's smile spreads into the corners of her eyes. "She lit up my life, so I called her Khanyiswa, that's what it means. Or you can call her Kayla. That's what her father calls her."

Tia looks again at the baby. She is much lighter than Lulama, with downy brown hair. She conjures up an image of the father—she's seen a few white men in the village, who have come from Coffee Bay, the more touristy beach town nearby. Maybe he realized he could live cheaply here, smoke pot, and sleep with beautiful girls from the village. She imagines shaking him. He would be surprised, limp in her grasp, apologetic, and then he would slip away to some other place like a fish. Her anger is laced with shame, knowing the same rules apply to her. She too can drift out of this place, leaving when it no longer serves her.

"The bread smells great," Tia says, palming the big loaf.

"You should cut it in half," Lulama says. "We say that the witches will fly on it, unless you cut it in half."

Tia inspects the circular disk of bread, smiling. "Do you think I could ride it?" She jokes.

Lulama stares at her and then shifts in her seat.

Tia's face warms. She goes to the chopping board. The knife cuts into the golden crust. It is so fresh that the interior of the bread steams. She puts two slices on a plate and

carries them over to the table. Tia takes a crunching bite of the crust. It is smokey from the cooking fire. The next bite is moist and doughy and sweet.

"Delicious," Tia says.

Lulama nods. Then she asks how old Tia is. Tia tells her she is twenty-three. Lulama says she is nineteen.

So she is younger than Tia. But through this trick of motherhood, Tia is now Lulama's junior. When Tia was nineteen, she was climbing out of windows and onto rooftops to smoke joints, sleeping till the afternoon, riding around campus on a hot pink bike she had spray-painted.

"Do you want to hold her?"

Tia doesn't want to, but it feels rude to decline.

"Sure," she says.

Lulama cups her hands underneath the small body. The warm weight of the baby slips into Tia's hands. The baby's arms wave in the air, disturbed by the move. Her skin is clean and smooth, so different from the greasy slickness after she was born. She smells like old smoke from cooking fires, and underneath, sweet and newborn-clean.

She would do anything to protect this small body she has just met. But the baby goes rigid against her and lets out a high peal, her round face turning red. "Here," Tia says, lifting her a few inches off her lap so Lulama will take her. She is jealous of the way the baby settles so quickly against Lulama like she knows that Tia is not to be trusted.

"She's hungry," Lulama says. She stands, bending again from her waist. She puts the baby on her back and ties the ends of the blanket above her chest and again at her waist. The baby begins to wail. Tia wants to say that she doesn't mind, they don't have to leave. But Lulama walks hurriedly down the path.

For a moment, Tia stands still in the kitchen. Bad Luck pops her head around the corner of the back door. The chicken is becoming more tame, running inside when she gets a chance. Bad Luck's head bobs, scanning the ground for fallen crumbs.

"Why are you always coming in here?" Tia picks her up. The bird struggles for a minute and then calms, closing her reptilian eyes in bliss.

Chapter 14

"Shit," Caleb says.

"What?"

It is morning, and they are drinking coffee on the couch. Caleb is staring into his laptop.

"Shit." He slams the laptop closed. "Amplexica got approval for the pipeline." He reads her a news article—the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy has decided there is no proof of damage to marine life, and the project will move ahead. Amplexica consulted traditional leadership as it was supposed to, and the chief granted approval.

She should feel angry and distraught about Amplexica. But she never thought they would be able to prevent a huge corporation from doing what they wanted to do. She feels a subtle satisfaction in being proven right. Why is she sometimes happy when bad things happen?

They eat breakfast outside on the back porch.

"I can't believe it," Caleb says, looking into his empty cereal bowl. "Can you?"

She shrugs. "I guess it's not that surprising. I didn't really think Amplexica would back down."

"Why did you come here if you didn't think you could make a difference?"

She is silent.

"Aren't you supposed to be young and optimistic?" he asks.

"I think that was your generation," she says wryly.

He tells her that he used to be sure that things were getting better and that he could

change things. That was why he had returned to work for Green Hub, so he could get back to that feeling again. But either he is getting older and more cynical, or the world is getting worse—he doesn't know which it is.

"Does it matter which it is?" Tia asks.

"So you're the kind of person who thinks nothing matters," he says, squinting out into the garden.

"That's not what I mean."

He takes a deep breath and puffs out his chest. The spoon falls from his bowl and bounces on the concrete, but he doesn't notice. "I don't care what other people think. I'm going to keep fighting Amplexica," he declares.

Tia almost laughs. He has cast himself in the starring role where the world is against him. But she doesn't want to mock him when he has been so heartfelt. She picks up his spoon. He starts talking again, about how he is supposed to do something big and how his father and brother are always judging him for volunteering and not making any money.

"Do they say that to you?" she asks.

He shrugs. "They don't say anything. I just know what they're thinking."

"Maybe you're the one judging, not them." She wants to tell him that he would be happier if he did not feel he had to be exceptional. They would both be happier. They could go back to how it was the first week.

Bad Luck approaches, looking for crumbs. Caleb kicks the bird and it squawks, running away with its neck straining upward.

"Caleb!" she says, surprised at his cruelty but relieved to be off the topic of changing the world. "Poor Bad Luck." The bird's feathers are growing back in and she looks clean and white.

"Look at what it's done to the vegetables," he says, gesturing towards the beds.

She stares at the beds. The seedlings have been trampled. How had she not noticed? Just the other day she had been admiring the plants, and now the carrot tops, kale, and beetroot are tattered and flattened.

She coughs. "I thought you said we might get chickens. And you never know, she might lay."

"No," he replies.

She crosses her arms. "What do you mean, 'no'?"

"Just look at it. The breast, it's huge. It's a meat bird, a broiler. They gain weight quickly, sometimes so fast they can't walk."

"That's terrible."

"You shouldn't have named it," he says, standing up. "Why did you call it Bad Luck?" He walked back inside without waiting for her reply. She stares after him, a mouthful of cereal still unchewed.

Later she goes for a walk down to the ocean. A dark mound sits across the river on the other side of the beach. This time it is higher up on the beach. The tide has gone out and left the whale behind. A few kids appear around the front of the whale. One of them slaps its side while the other takes a stick and gouges at it.

"Hey!" she shouts. The kids glance up and then run across the sand, and onto the grass toward the huts on the hill.

The river is shallow at first but then drops suddenly, the water green and gushing up to her waist. She takes a tentative step forward, the water tugging at her to come out to sea. Would she continue if it got deeper?

The sand and rocks beneath her feet level out and she walks up the other side of the

bank and onto the dry sand. Long, white scratches run across the whale's body. Before, the eye had been very still and watching, but now it is fixed and gently clouded.

When she gets back, Caleb is lying on the couch, his shirt open to reveal his chest hair. He is drinking a glass of whisky. She tells him the whale is dead.

"That post has gone kind of viral," he says, twisting his mouth.

"You should post again and say it died," she says bitterly.

He blows air through his teeth in a sarcastic laugh. "I'm not going to do that."

She frowns. "It's a lie if you don't."

"I'm not going to ruin everyone's day by posting a dead whale."

"It's life," she says.

He puts his palm to his eyes and scrubs at them, then blinks. He says the situation with Amplexica is urgent, that's what they need to be focusing on. They need to forget about the whale. He needs to talk to Vuyo. He doesn't understand how this happened, how the chief agreed to something without Vuyo and him knowing. He says he is going to call a meeting.

"With who?" she asks.

He swigs the rest of his whisky.

She goes out to the garden to chicken-proof the vegetables. She finds old bamboo stakes and a pile of black mesh in the shed. She inserts the stakes around a bed and drapes the black mesh to form a sagging fence. It only covers one bed, and then she runs out of mesh. The garden looks terrible. The chicken has scratched up the beds, but Lwazi has not been watering either because of the snake.

"Molo," Nine calls from the footpath. Despite the heat, he is still wearing the same

puffy jacket she saw him in on her first day in the village.

"Molo. I don't want fish," she says.

"Fish? I'll get you fish," he replies.

"No, I don't want fish," she says.

"Chicken?" he says, pointing to Bad Luck, who is happily scraping up the bed next to her, faster than she can put up her defense. "Me." He draws a finger across his throat.

"No no," she says, surprised.

He looks disappointed and heads back down the hill towards the road.

"At least someone wants you," Tia says to the chicken.

Caleb comes outside, blinking in the sunlight. He sits down in the chair under the mango tree. He sniffs and stands up. He picks up the red cord cushion.

"That fucking chicken. There's shit all over the chair," he says, waving the cushion at her. A poop rolls off, and a feather drifts through the air.

She tries not to laugh at how angry he is.

"We need to get rid of it. That thing is never going to lay eggs. It's just going to shit all over the place."

She tells him how one of the neighbors had just come by, wanting to eat her.

"Let him take it," he says, flicking poop off the cushion.

After he leaves, she feeds Bad Luck and hunts for eggs under the banana trees. She finds nothing, except for a sweet nest she has made in the dry leaves.

"Why won't you lay an egg?" she asks, squatting down to look the chicken in the eye. Bad Luck pecks at the rivet on her shorts.

Later that day, Tia and Vuyo sit at the kitchen table while Caleb paces around. Caleb says they need to do something drastic. They can't allow Amplexica to move forward

with the pipeline unimpeded. He asks them what ideas they have.

Vuyo says that they should not do anything drastic, and that he will talk to the chief.

The Chief is in contact with Amplexica.

"But the chief wants the pipeline," Caleb says. "He has given his approval. He's not on our side anymore."

Vuyo nods, but says that they must still work with the chief, otherwise, they will get nowhere.

Tia picks out soil from underneath her nails.

"What we need is a coalition," Caleb says. "We need to bring together the fishermen, the community members, the activists. It's what I've been saying from the beginning." Tia looks up at him. He has not been saying that, he has been focused on plans for the lodge.

"The chief has made up his mind," Caleb says. "Now we are fighting against Amplexica and the chief. We need a coalition," he repeats as if the word will do the work for them. A great skunking whiff of weed wafts in through the open door. Caleb sniffs.

"We need to get rid of that weed. Are we growing weed, or are we fighting Amplexica?"

"At least something is growing well," Tia says.

Caleb glares at her. His eyes narrow, his hands on his hips, as he looks out the door.

"We should destroy it," Vuyo says.

It isn't until the next afternoon that she realizes she hasn't seen Bad Luck all day. She rustles in the banana plants, her eyes straining against the growing dark. Maybe Bad Luck disappeared the night before and she didn't notice. Caleb comes out onto the porch while she is still in the banana grove.

"The chicken's gone," she says, wiping leaves from her hands.

"I know."

She shrugs. "I guess that was inevitable. Maybe an animal finally got it." She looks back at the banana grove.

Caleb clears his throat. "I got rid of it. That guy came around wanting it again."

A cold heaviness blooms in her stomach. She stares at him. She thinks of his mother and how she taught him to wring a chicken's neck. "Did you do it?"

"Does it matter?" He says, looking down at his feet.

The surprise of it laces her in a shiver. Bad Luck is gone and Caleb has killed her. She glares at him.

"Come on Tia," he says, his eyes narrowing. "You know it wasn't practical. It was never going to lay, it was destroying the garden, and I thought we agreed yesterday to get rid of it."

"Was that supposed to be an apology?"

"Something would have killed it eventually. At least this way someone got a dinner out of it," he says, a smile playing on his lips at his joke.

She imagines Nine, drunkenly teetering down the road with Bad Luck's broken neck swinging against his legs.

"Funny," she says darkly.

"Look, I'm sorry. It's what you do, if the chicken doesn't lay, you eat it." He waits for her to say something and then he juts out his chin. "It's life," he says and turns back to the house.

The door slaps closed behind him. He has used her words against her. She imagines the feathers soft and warm against his fingers, the neck a twig underneath the down. She shivers, her body clenched against the cooling air. Her throat is sore and tight. She thinks

of how Caleb had ripped off her bandage, how it had caught her off guard and felt close to vandalizing her. It was just a chicken, she tells herself. But she can't bring herself to go inside. She sits perched on the chair that smells vaguely like chicken shit until it grows dark.

Chapter 15

She sleeps badly, dreaming at some point that Caleb threatened to wring her neck. He has a few times during sex put his hands loosely on her neck, and she liked it. Now though, the ghost of his hands circles her like a collar.

When she goes to the kitchen, Caleb is cramming a piece of toast into his mouth. His eyes are puffy with sleep, and his shorts are wrinkled. She feels bad about thinking he would hurt her. If one of them were to strangle the other, it is more likely to be her.

He asks her how she slept. She says nothing.

“Are we not talking?” He wipes the crumbs from his beard and they land on the floor. She half-expects Bad Luck to come in and peck at them.

He shrugs and says he has to meet Vuyo about something urgent. Then he grabs his backpack and leaves.

She cuts open a passion fruit. The bright yellow juice pools out on the chopping board. The black seeds inside stare up at her. Her mouth waters thinking about the zing of the gooey flesh. She eats the passion fruit with a small spoon, standing up at the kitchen window. Through the bushes, she can see Lwazi and Khanya talking by the weed plants.

So Lwazi is back. He has probably heard that Nine ate the chicken. She puts on sunscreen and her bucket hat and goes out. They are hunched up together, examining one of the plants.

"I see the chicken is gone," Khanya says after he greets her.

"Caleb wrung its neck."

"Yoh," he says, his eyebrows high up on his head. He gives a little laugh of surprise. "You ate it?"

"No. He gave it to Nine."

"I thought you liked the chicken."

"I did."

He looks at her, something behind his face trying to work out how she feels about it. She wants to tell him it is simple: she liked the chicken, and Caleb killed it.

Lwazi is standing still, staring at something above her head. They follow his gaze. A neon green string dangles from a branch. "Boomslang," Khanya says in a hush. When Tia turns to Khanya, both he and Lwazi have moved several feet back.

"The chicken," Lwazi says.

"What?" Tia asks.

"The chicken," he waves his finger toward the snake.

Tia stares at him.

Lwazi says something under his breath. He begins to walk through the bushes away from the snake. He vaults over the fence and begins talking.

"He doesn't like the snake in the garden," Khanya finally says. "He says when the chicken died, it became the snake."

"Oh," she says. "You mean..." She nods, trying to show she understands that the chicken has morphed into a snake.

"I would offer to help you get rid of the chicken, I mean, the snake, but..." he shivers.

"What happens, if it bites you?" Tia asks, squinting up at it.

"You will bleed," he says, jumping over the fence. "From all the holes in your

body. But it takes two days. You will have to fly to Joburg to get the antivenom."

After they leave she weeds one of the beds furthest from the snake. Its head seems to be straining towards her like it is watching her. She goes closer to inspect. The snake dangles motionless. A silvery blue lattice patterns its back. As she gets closer, it reaches its head upward, pulling its lime green body behind it, its tail wrapping around a branch. The small head is encrusted with a black marble eye.

"There's a snake in the garden," she says to Caleb when he returns.

"Where?" He seems relieved, perhaps that they are talking again.

"In the tree. Apparently it's a boomslang."

He goes outside, and she stays by the back door watching him. Caleb whistles.

"Big one."

"Don't get too close," she calls.

He leans closer. "Beautiful," he says.

When he comes back to the porch, she tells him Lwazi won't work with the snake in the garden.

"That's good. I was going to tell him that we didn't need him anymore."

"Why?"

"Budget."

"But it's the only money he gets."

"I thought you didn't like working with him."

"That's not the point."

That evening Caleb tells her a story he finds on the internet. In the 1950s someone brought a boomslang to the Chicago Natural History Museum. Schmidt, a snake expert,

identified it. The snake bit him, but for some reason, he didn't go to the hospital. He went home and documented his symptoms in a journal. He died within twenty-four hours.

"But why didn't he go to the hospital?" Tia asks.

Caleb shrugs. "I guess he wasn't afraid to die."

"You mean he let himself die on purpose?"

Caleb says that nobody knew, that maybe he didn't think he was actually going to die. Or he knew the antivenom wasn't available so he accepted his death. The doctors offered medical treatment a few hours before he died, but he refused treatment because it would confuse the symptoms he was documenting.

"Sounds like he was unhinged."

Caleb shrugs. "I kind of get it," he says, closing his laptop. "Something happened to him, and there's a momentum to continue on that path rather than trying to correct it."

The next morning, Lwazi comes into the garden and inspects the tree. She tries to like him. He doesn't trust her, so what. Why had she expected his trust? She cannot expect people here to trust her. She goes out to the garden to help him. He is making new A-frame structures for the vegetable beds, and she lets him tell her what to do.

When it gets too hot, she fills up a glass of water at the sink.

Caleb is sitting in front of his laptop. "Is Lwazi still out there?"

She glugs the water and nods.

She watches him go outside. Lwazi leans over the handle of the shovel, listening to Caleb. Caleb holds his empty hands up, his shoulders up by his ears. Lwazi drives the shovel hard into the earth. Then he kicks the shovel over and stands standing with his

hands on his hips. Lwazi walks down the path along the side of the house to the front gate. He glares at her through the window.

"What happened?" she asks when Caleb comes back inside.

Caleb looks pale. He pinches the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "I told him he could work for another week or two." His voice sounds tight. "But..." he shrugs.

"You fired him?"

"I told you the budget was tight."

Tia goes outside and slams the backdoor. She maneuvers the wheelbarrow out of the shed to the side of the lawn where Lwazi has stacked the grass clippings. She loads the dry grass into the barrow. Lwazi had told her the plants needed mulch.

She is wheeling the barrow under the tree on her way to the beds when something taps her on the back. She turns around. Her scream comes out like a wince. The pointy end of the snake's tail has touched her back. She leaves the wheelbarrow out in the yard and goes back inside, looking at the snake from the kitchen window. A chicken can't turn into a snake, she tells herself.

Caleb has already left when she wakes up the next morning. He is avoiding her, or there is something else preoccupying him. She can't wait patiently for whatever is unfolding inside of him to be made clear to her—she will do her own thing. But what exactly? Now that the snake is back, she can't work in the garden.

Outside, the grass is still damp. She does a handstand in the middle of the yard, careful to stay away from the trees where the snake could be. Upside down, the grass is sky, the sky an ocean. Leaves skirt at the corner of her eyes like eyelashes. The blanket of

grass extends from the top of her head like a beacon, the shrubs and trees dangle, the house floats downward into the sky. There is a gap between the earth and the house which she hasn't noticed before, and under it is a clutter of junk.

She kicks her legs down and stands up, her head briefly heavy. She squats next to the house and peers underneath—a mess of crates and old tarps, and a long white blade of a surfboard. It is a sign. She has been looking for something and here it is. She tugs it. The board slides out. A thick layer of dust covers the board, and spiders scurry over the dust and into the grass. She smiles. It is a matter of mindset—she discovered a surfboard and a new ambition while standing on her head. She goes back inside to put her bikini on.

By the time she gets to the beach, she is exhausted. Her right arm, which carries the board, feels like it has stretched two inches longer than her left arm. She studies the water. Big walls of white water rush at her, and she squints at the waves. When she first moved to San Francisco with Beth, they had taken a few surf classes. But Tia could not do the early starts, and Beth, it turned out, was afraid of the ocean. Still, she remembers how to pop up, how to paddle.

She attaches the leash to her ankle. The chill water encircles her calves. She pushes the board along beside her like a boat until the water hits her waist. Then she slithers onto the board, the dirt and old wax grating on her bare stomach. A bulky wave hits her. The nose of the surfboard rises, and she clings to the board while it drags her back to the shallows. She wades back out and wriggles onto the board again. She paddles hard out to sea.

There is a lull in the big sets, and suddenly she is out at the back line. The waves roll gently under her. The sun glancing off the surface smarts her eyes. A seagull is out at the backline with her, and it takes flight, cawing and flapping over the water. The waves

begin to rise. The first one lifts her board smoothly, like she is on a boat, and rolls under her. But the next one ramps up, a glossy hill of moving water. She does not want to paddle for it, but she does not want to be taken out by it either. She turns towards the beach and takes a few half-hearted strokes.

The wave catches up with her, and she careens downward, headfirst. Her eyes stretch wide. The wave will somersault her like a piece of seaweed, press her down against the ocean floor and kill her. She pushes herself up off the board. Then her feet are under her. The power of the wave is under her too, tamed by her. She lifts her chin. The coastline moves past like she is on a silent speedboat. The wave peters and she jumps off into the shallows. "Yes!" she shouts. She paddles back out, but she cannot catch another one. They all roll underneath her, and eventually, she lets the waves push her to shore.

When she gets back to the house, she stuffs the surfboard under the house. She washes the salt water off in the outdoor shower. A fire roars in her chest from the exertion and excitement, and her skin is clean and cold. She eats toast after toast, before falling asleep, satisfied, on the couch.

She wakes up to the sound of the key clattering in the lock. Her eyes flick open, and Caleb is there in the waning afternoon light. He crosses to the table, his shoulders pulled down to the floor. He slumps into a chair. She hears the zipper of his messenger bag opening, the buzz of his laptop firing.

She sits up, and the evening air slips down her back. "Hi," she says.

He jumps. Recovering, he swivels towards her. "I didn't see you." His eyes are red, his hair unkempt like he's been tugging at it all day.

"Why are you working? It's Saturday."

"What does that even mean here?" He snaps the laptop screen closed. "Vuyo's coming over." He glances at her bare legs. She is wearing one of his shirts.

She puts on a pair of jeans, and while she is in the bedroom she hears Vuyo arrive.

"Hi Vuyo," she says brightly, coming out of the bedroom.

Caleb puts down a packet of cookies on the table. She reaches over and grabs one, raising her eyebrows indulgently at Vuyo and pushing the plate toward him.

Vuyo shakes his head.

"Tia, if you could give us some privacy," Caleb says. He crosses his arms and leans back against the kitchen counter.

She wonders if she's heard him correctly. But he holds her gaze. Vuyo shifts awkwardly in his chair behind her. "Sure," she says, swallowing the dry cookie.

Vuyo glances at her as she passes by, and in their glance is a school feeling, a shared nervousness and moody resistance against Caleb. She goes to the bedroom, leaving the door ajar.

Caleb's computer starts up with a discordant chime. After a few minutes, Caleb speaks. "I'm noticing it says there should be a lot of money in the cashbox, but there's hardly anything." Caleb's voice is strained.

A long pause. A rap on wood as Caleb sets his coffee cup down.

Vuyo speaks, his voice so deep and soft it is hard to pick out the words.

Caleb continues again, "I've been trying to talk to you all week. It feels like you've been avoiding me."

She holds her ear to the crack in the door.

"The money. It is not there," Vuyo says slowly like he is speaking to a child.

"Where is it?"

There is silence for a moment before he speaks again. "I took out a loan to pay for my children's school fees. And I have been trying to pay it back," he says, calmly, like he is explaining something that Caleb should already know.

Her whole body stands listening.

"I took a small amount, and I paid most of it back. But I still needed a bit more..."

Vuyo's voice begins to tremble.

Tia's nails press into her palms.

"The first few times I went to the casino, I won," he says almost proudly.

"The casino?" Caleb splutters.

"I thought if I went one more time, I could pay off the loan. And then I lost."

The legs of a chair scrape back, and it falls backward hitting the cement floor. She hears Caleb pacing.

"Shit," he says. "You said it was a small amount, right?"

Vuyo's voice is quiet.

"Because you were gambling!" Caleb says, his voice rising at the end to a shout.

"Forgive me."

She moves her eye to the door and pushes it open slightly. Vuyo's hand covers his face. He is crying.

Caleb is on the other side of the coffee table, his hands on his hips. His face is dark.

"I kept on thinking, every time it would be the last time. Sometimes I would win, and I would think I can do a little more and nobody will know. And then I would lose..."

Her throat grows tight, looking at Vuyo with his head in his hands.

"And the money you pulled out in the last few days?"

"Gone," he says, his voice hollow.

Caleb moves towards the coffee table. She pulls back away from the door, holding her breath so she can hear better. Outside the cicadas call out. She feels sick. Maybe the project is over. Amplexica would do what they wanted in the village. The garden would return to a wild mess. She hates Vuyo, for pretending to be trustworthy. And she hates Caleb too, for letting this happen, for failing.

"How much money?" Caleb says coldly.

"I don't know. I was keeping track, and then, at some point—"

"How much was it when you lost track?" he asks, with a darkness in his voice she hasn't heard before.

She doesn't hear Vuyo's answer.

"100,000 rand?!" Caleb shouts. "So it could be 150,000 rand, even 200,000?"

Tia thinks about how much money that is, trying to convert it in her head.

"You should leave. Now."

"Forgive me."

"Just go."

Vuyo's heavy footsteps on the cement floor, the front door whining open.

"Wait," Caleb says.

"Yes?" he says hopefully.

"Give me your keys. We'll have to sell the truck to cover this."

"But it will be dark soon."

"You better start walking."

The keys clink, and then she watches Vuyo shuffle down the path, his shoulders hunched. She thinks of Vuyo and his bad knees, walking to the far side of the village as the sun disappears.

When she comes out, Caleb is standing with his hands on his hips looking out the window. When he turns, his face is feverish.

"The money's gone," he says.

She comes over to rub his shoulder.. He slams his fist down on the windowsill, and she pulls her arm back.

"I should've been checking the cash boxes," he says.

It is Caleb's fault. She remembers Caleb telling her how they won at the casino the day he brought the lemon tree home. Caleb went to the casino with him. Caleb had not checked the cashboxes. "You trusted him," she says finally.

"Well that was a mistake, wasn't it?" he says, his eyes gleaming.

She peers out the window. "Do you think he'll be alright, walking home?"

"Don't fucking worry about him."

She raises her eyebrows.

He glances away from her and shuffles out to the garden. He ducks underneath the tree, and from the kitchen window, she can see his legs, like two other trunks. Is his arm raised? If she sees him touch the snake, she will leave. But the leaves are thick and she can't see where his hand is.

He comes back inside when night is settling in. He pulls out the bottle of whiskey from under the sink.

"Drink?"

She nods.

He pours them thick glasses of whiskey. He says it isn't just the stolen money. Vuyo has thwarted the coalition. He never wanted to hold an event. All he wanted to do was work on plans for the lodge. He believed Vuyo when he said the lodge was the best way to stop Amplexica. But it has been a distraction. Vuyo has been on the chief's side all along. He probably knew the chief approved the pipeline.

She sips the whisky, watching him as he cracks each of his knuckles in rapid succession. She wants to say that there never was a coalition, that Caleb is the one that pushed for the lodge.

"I'll sell both the cars. That might make up the money," he says.

"But what will we do without a car?"

He looks at her. "What do you think everyone else here does?"

She blushes. Then she says that maybe the drilling, the pipeline, is all for the best. It's true that people need jobs. And how could they expect countries to forego the exploitation of their natural resources without any kind of compensation? Places like the US have been allowed to exploit resources unchecked.

He glares at her like she is the one who has stolen the money. Before she can say that she doesn't really mean it, someone pounds on the front door. They look at each other. It will be Vuyo, having turned back. Caleb gets to his feet, striding towards the door.

Howard is at the door, his face redder than usual, leaning awkwardly forward as if he might slump to the welcome mat.

"Oh. Howard," Caleb says. His shoulders relax. She wonders what he would have done if it had been Vuyo.

"Caleb. You don't look good, Caleb," he says. Howard puts his arm up against the door frame to support himself and lets out a long burp.

Caleb steps backward. "Neither do you."

"Did you report me?" Howard slurs, squinting at Caleb.

"What?" Caleb says.

He catches sight of Tia. "It was you," he says, pointing a finger. The sleeve of his green jacket is oil-stained. Caleb glares at Tia.

"I didn't," she says indignantly, though she feels her face heat, thinking about the tire.

Howard turns his attention back to Caleb. "If I find out it was you..." he says, leaning even farther forward.

Caleb takes a step back and keeps his hand on the door handle. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, I don't know what you're talking about," he mimics, in an American accent.

"If I find out you reported me, I'll..."

"Good night, Howard," Caleb says, shutting the door.

Howard sticks his thick forearm through the door frame. A cold prickle washes over her. Then Howard retracts his arm. He backs down the narrow path. The rose bush snags him on his way out and he swears.

Caleb slams the door. "What was that about?"

"He's been illegally catching fish. Someone must've reported him," she says.

He looks at her a bit. "How do you know he's been illegally catching fish? Let me guess—Khanya told you."

She has a sudden thought that she would not have liked to be Caleb's mother when he was a teenager. She tells Caleb she saw him with the fish down by the boat launch, that it was a wrong-place, wrong-time situation. She says she is glad someone reported him. She remembers how she told Howard she didn't want to go on his boat, and the way his face turned ugly.

He picks up the bottle of whiskey and makes a move to refill her glass. She covers the top of her glass with her hand. "Wrong place, wrong time," he mutters, refilling his own glass. He picks up his whisky and drifts into the bedroom.

If she stays, his failure will be hers too. That is a high price to pay for someone she is not sure she knows. It has been like this since the start, this ebbing and flowing of knowing him. When she likes him, it seems she knows him. But there are times when she has disliked him, been repulsed by him. She thought it was her fault, that there was some moodiness she felt towards him that was unfair. Now she understands it has been his fault all along—there is a repulsive, unknown part of him.

She is quite sure that she does not like him anymore, and that means she should leave. But something real has happened. She goes to the bedroom and stands in the doorway until Caleb, prone on the bed, notices her. He holds out his hand toward her and she comes to lie next to him. Caleb sighs and she squeezes her hand. He leans over to kiss her, his breath rancid with whiskey.

Chapter 16

Caleb spends the next few days drinking whiskey at odd hours, staring into a spreadsheet on his laptop as if willing the numbers to change. She tells him he needs to call Green Hub and report the stolen money. He lies on the couch looking at her with bleary eyes and says he will tell them, as soon as he's figured out a plan to recoup the money. She wonders if she should tell Green Hub what's happened, and what Caleb would do if she did tell them.

She is relieved when he says one morning he is going to town. Perhaps it is a sign he is moving on. She suggests they go to Coffee Bay for a few days. They need a change of location. He nods absently.

After he leaves, she goes out to the garden. She creeps past the mango tree, tugging the hose behind her. The snake has grown more confident, moving closer to the house. It is now in the mango tree in the middle of the lawn, sliding in and out of the branches. The garden is not looking good. Lwazi is boycotting their house because of the snake, and Caleb seems to have forgotten all about the garden. Snails are attacking the lettuce. She picks them off and hurls them over the fence and down toward the road. Then she regrets throwing the snails—they must be afraid, tumbling down the hill inside their shells.

She is light with hunger. She devours a whole head of lettuce. The undressed lettuce is like styrofoam in her mouth. Caleb will bring back normal food, so she will not have to eat like a rabbit.

At midday, the truck approaches, dust pluming behind. The truck bed is laden with planks. The car disappears, and then she hears it grunting up the hill. She wipes the soil off her hands and goes out to the front of the house.

Caleb unclips the back flap of the truck and lets it bang down.

She asks him what the planks are for, scanning inside the car for bags of food. The back is filled with wood and machines. She opens a cardboard box filled with hammers, rusty saws, boxes of half-opened nails.

He tells her the planks are for the eco hub building. The building is behind schedule already. It is supposed to be completed this month, and it will be. He tells her he's found some reclaimed wood in town. The original building was supposed to be cob, but there is too much labor involved in building a cob house. He knocks his knuckle on one of the green planks. "Wood from an old deck. I got it virtually free," he says. He tells her the wood isn't in great shape, but using reclaimed wood minimizes deforestation and reduces landfill waste.

"Who is going to build the eco hub?" she asks.

"I am."

"By yourself," Tia says skeptically.

"There's no money, Tia," he says, his voice breaking.

Her body softens and she glances away.

He negotiates the planks down the narrow path and through the front door.

He comes back out at a jog and lifts another pile of planks, swinging them around like a battering ram and then staggering down the path.

"You're putting all this inside the house?"

"In the spare room."

"My room? Can't you keep this stuff somewhere else?"

"It's raining tomorrow."

He is right, a mugginess hangs above them. She watches Caleb struggle with the planks. Is she going to help him build a shitty eco hub? Or is she going to leave? It is hard to think about leaving—she had not made a difference, or even improved herself. She puts on her bikini and running shoes and wrestles the surfboard out from under the house. From inside, Caleb stares at her, his mouth open like a dumb fish. Out the gate, she hoists the board on her head, her arms raised to steady it. The board would be nothing for the woman here, who transport loads of tree limbs from the forest, carrying the wood on their heads for cooking fires

By the time she arrives at the beach, her neck aches, and the top of her head feels bruised. She throws the board down on the sand and scans the waves. The waves look bigger and less friendly than last time. She hesitates, looking back at the beach. No one is there. She attaches the leash to her ankle.

The white water pushes at her, and she paddles furiously. A wave breaks far out, and the surf rushes at her like an army. She tries to spin the board around to face the beach, but she's too slow. The wave picks her up sideways. Then she is underwater, the wave tossing and yanking her limbs. She comes up, gasping. She opens her eyes in time to see another wave breaking. Underwater again. The force of the wave pushes the last air out of her lungs. Then the water releases her and she comes up, this time grabbing all the air she can before the next wave pushes her down. Her lungs burn—a part of her wants to gulp in the water.

She is insignificant, the water is cruel and does not care about her. She is nothing to the ocean, she is like the trash it washes up on the beach. The leash tugs at her ankle.

Somewhere above is her board. She catches the leash in her hands. She can see the shadow of her board through the sting of salt water in her eyes, and then she breaks the surface and slings her arms over the board. The water is calm now, like she imagined the whole thing. The shore is close and the waves push her in.

When her feet touch the sand she almost swoons in relief. She rips off the leash and lies in the wet sand, her chest heaving. She is queasy—her stomach feels cold as if it has seawater in it. Her legs shake on the way home.

When she comes back to the house, the lights are on and the mosquitos are out.

"You surf?" Caleb is having a warm beer at the kitchen table, looking at her in the doorway. Darkness patches his eyes.

She stands outside the kitchen door in her bikini, wringing out her hair. She thinks of telling him she nearly drowned. "Hand me a towel, will you?"

He reaches for the towel hanging on the bathroom door and tosses it to her. The towel is damp already. She wraps it around herself, tucking the loose end between her cleavage.

Planks are stacked waist-high in her bedroom. The bed is pushed up on its side, up against the wall. "Where's my stuff?" she asks.

Caleb points to his room and goes outside. After she has a shower, She boils up the last of the rice and fries up a few of the peppers from the garden. She eats standing up, looking out towards Caleb. She thinks of a burger place round the corner from the flat she shared with Beth. Every Tuesday they ate there, sinking their teeth into the fake meat that oozed red juice, gobbling giant slivers of dill pickles. Beth and she had an all-you-can-eat dim sum spot too, where they went on Sundays. She shovels the last of the rice into her mouth. What she would do for a burrito now!

She wants to call Beth, laugh about their earlier surfing escapades and tell her she has finally ridden a proper wave and also nearly died. Not having a phone is losing its freshness. She looks at her inbox on Caleb's laptop. Her parents have sent her an email, saying they haven't heard from her and are worried. She sends them a few sentences, saying she is at the beach and not to worry, her phone broke.

Later that night, she wakes up in a tangle of sheets. In her dream, she is back in her old apartment with Beth. Beth's boyfriend, Brian, is drilling holes in their wall, no matter how much she shouts at him to stop.

Caleb is not in bed next to her. A drill starts up—it is not a dream. The sound is inside her skull. She throws the covers off and walks out the back door, across the damp grass, being careful to steer around the tree with the snake. She opens the back fence to where Caleb plans on building the eco hub. The moon hangs high in the sky like an ornament. His headlight is on. It swings wildly. Caleb's light flashes toward her. She scrunches up her eyes and turns away.

The drill stops. "Jesus," he says. "I thought you were a ghost."

She makes a joke about needing to work on her tan, but he doesn't laugh.

She crosses her arms across her chest and asks him what he is doing, looking at his feet to avoid being blinded by his headlamp. He tells her he is pulling out old screws from the wood. The rain tomorrow will set him back. He starts the drill again.

"Caleb."

He ignores her.

She pulls the plug out from the extension cable and the drill chatters and falls silent.

Caleb blasts her again with his headlight.

"Tia, plug it back in," he says, looking down at the drill, hopeful it will whir to life.

"No."

He lunges at her, trying to grab the plug.

She twists away from him. She tells him he is being crazy, he needs time off, and why don't they go to Coffee Bay for a break? They wrestle with the cord.

"Unlike you, I'm not here for a vacation." He holds out his hand for the cord.

She hands the plug over. "I'm leaving."

He plugs the drill back into the extension cord.

When he comes back to the house half an hour later, she has already started packing. He glances at her bag by the door and sits down heavily on the couch next to her.

"I expected you to leave," he says. "You weren't staying because of me."

She says that isn't true. She places her damp bikini on top of her bag and then sits next to him on the couch.

He meets her eyes. "I love you, Tia."

His words send a jolt through her. Why has he said that now? His eyes appear closer together than usual. There is something ridiculous about him. He looks at her with a dull, waiting, heaviness. There is no time to think about how she feels. Instead, she thinks of the consequences of her reply. It would be easy to tell him she loves him. But if she says it, she will owe him something—that seems dangerous.

"I can see why you wouldn't want to be here, with me," he says eventually, his eyes downcast. "I understand if you want to leave."

That's right, she can leave, do whatever she wants. She tells him she needs to get away for a bit and think about things.

"So you'll come back?"

This is how she wanted it to be, him wanting her to stay. But now she isn't sure she likes it. The plan comes easily to her. She tells him she will ask Khanya to drive her to Coffee Bay. She will stay there for a week or so.

He says he will try to get a lot done while she is away, and that in a way it is good if she goes—he can work inside the house. He needs a flat surface. He rests his head on her shoulder. Then he kisses her neck. Later when she is on top of him, her knees digging into the floral couch, her hands gripping onto the wooden armrest, she thinks that she might not come back—it could be their last time together and he doesn't even know it. After she comes she collapses onto her elbows and leans down over him. Up close, a thin film of wood dust covers him. His hair is gray with powder, like a faded version of himself.

The next morning, she rises before Caleb. She pulls out some clothes to leave behind. They are clothes she doesn't care too much about, in case she decides not to come back: a white T-shirt that has turned gray, a few ratty pairs of underwear and socks, and a long skirt of her mom's. Her mom had mailed it to her when she said she was going to South Africa. The idea was for her to be culturally sensitive, but she has not worn the skirt once. She sniffs the fabric—her mom's perfume—mossy, apricot, cinnamon. The smell makes her sad.

Caleb is still sleeping. She pushes the door of their bedroom. Caleb blinks his eyes. He sits up. "What time is it?"

"Nine."

He throws the covers back. He stands and wavers for a moment on his feet before sitting down on the side of the bed. His cheeks are rosy like a child's. Sweat lays in the crevices on his forehead.

"You all right?"

"I'm fine," he grumbles, standing to his feet again. He shuffles out of the room and across the living room to the bathroom. She can hear the cheerful rattle of a pill bottle, the water running, the cabinet door closing. He rustles in a plastic bag on his bookshelf and pulls out a bottle of pills. They rattle cheerfully. He goes to the kitchen and turns on the kitchen tap. She follows him. He has splashed water on his face, and the childlikeness is gone. His sideburns send damp rivulets down his neck.

"Khanya's here," Caleb says, gesturing with his eyebrows to the front window.

She kisses him goodbye on the cheek.

Chapter 17

An amulet hangs around the rearview mirror of Green Hub's truck. It is some kind of good luck charm of Vuyo's—a small vial of water on a string decorated with beads. It swings as Khanya and Tia head down the hill.

Khanya comments that Caleb is working hard. He heard Caleb drilling late at night. She tells him that money from Green Hub is running out so he is doing all the work himself. The hills she knows pass them by and more hills she doesn't know appear.

She asks if he had heard the news about Howard.

"Did you report him?" he asks.

She crosses her arms and says it wasn't her. She tells him how Howard had come to the volunteer house drunk and accused them of reporting him.

Khanya says he saw the police come. They carried out big plastic bags of frozen fish. If it wasn't her, someone in the village had told the police.

"He got what was coming for him. It's nice when that happens," she says. She stares out the window, and then she turns back to him.

"Khanya, what do people think of Vuyo?"

He is quiet for a while. "People would say he is a good man."

"But what would you say?"

"What the village thinks of someone and who that person is can be very different."

Tia glances at him. "Like you?"

"Yes. Like me."

"When I first met you, Vuyo said we should stay away from you. Because you didn't get along with the chief."

A car passes by and Khanya rolls up the windows before a cloud of dust comes in.

"Is it true that your father is supposed to be chief?"

Khanya sighs.

"I shouldn't have asked," she says.

"No. I can tell you. It was all a long time ago." He tells her how his ancestor had been chief, about a hundred years ago. But then he had an argument with a white official and the title was taken from him. He had left the village with his family, and they'd only returned to the area a generation later. Meanwhile, the title was given to the ancestor of the current chief.

"And that's why the chief doesn't like you?"

"Mostly. But there is something else. Remember how I told you that I loved a girl?"

Tia nods, turning her knees towards him and leaning against the window.

"The Chief was the man who took her away from me. I was in Cape Town, trying to make money for the lobola. I got a call, Zuki tells me she is marrying the chief. Her family wanted her to marry the chief. I came back, as fast as I could. But the wedding was over. They slaughtered a cow, big party, everyone from the village was there."

He runs his hands down his jeans, his fingers circling his kneecap. "I got drunk, went to the chief's house, with a knife. I wanted to talk to him, and I wanted to see her again. I got up to his home, but I tripped. I hit my head on the cement stoop outside one of the rondavels," he knocks his head with the palm of his hand.

"Next thing I know, I'm looking at the stars." He points up to the roof of the car.

"The dogs are barking. I hear Zuki crying somewhere, and the chief telling her to go back inside. After that, the community said I had to leave."

"I'm sorry, Khanya."

"It was good for me to go. Now she is someone else. I don't know her. Maybe I never did. And this village...I don't know it either. Once my father is better, I will leave again," he nods as if agreeing with himself.

They are quiet for a long time, and then Tia turns around to face him. She asks him if she can tell him something that he can't tell anyone else. He glances at her warily. Maybe she shouldn't tell him—he might not want to know. But she likes the way he looks at her, like he is slightly afraid of her. She tells him how Vuyo was doing the accounting for Green Hub, and he's stolen all the money.

"How much?"

"We don't know for sure yet. A hundred thousand rand, maybe two hundred thousand rand."

His eyebrows fly up his face. "Two hundred thousand rand! Yoh," he says, shaking his head. "I could buy a Toyota Hilux for that price."

"It's not just the money. Vuyo was always on the chief's side."

"The chief and Vuyo are friends these days. We say they are like ngumtya nethunga—a milking bucket and a rope. When the chief heard volunteers were coming to fight Amplexica, he probably spoke to Vuyo to keep an eye on you."

This had not occurred to her. It made everything worse to think of Vuyo being manipulative like that. It was easier to understand if it was just about his children's school fees.

A car cuts in front of them and Khanaya breaks and honks. "Some people," he says, shaking his head. "If you kick me, I will kick you back. Maybe I'm a bad person, but I like revenge."

He accelerates and honks at the car again. Tia's stomach clenches. She thinks of the story of the bus, how Vuyo had said Khanya had taken the gun.

The car in front speeds up. Khanya didn't follow it. He gestures to the driver in front. "People like this man, they won't get what they deserve. And Vuyo won't either."

"He needed to pay his children's school fees, that's what he said. Part of me felt like I might have done the same thing."

"That's wrong. We all have to pay something, school fees or something else," Khanya says.

She wishes she hadn't said that she might have done the same thing. It wasn't true anyway. She feels bad for thinking about Khanya and the gun. He is the only person she trusts here.

They hit the tar road and the car becomes quiet and peaceful. They have journeyed inland, and now the black snake of the road turns towards the coast. The houses begin to change. Huts fall away and are replaced by blocks of larger dwellings. Alongside the road, electricity lines grow thick and crisscross each other, intersecting at substations. Fences cut between buildings. Compared to the village with its rolling hills and round huts, everything looks square—square buildings sit on square sections of land. They pass a steep eroded hillside, the soil red where the grass has given way. Further on looms a thirty-foot floodlight, and beneath it, a bulldozer lazily moves a pile of rubble and dirt.

Motorcycles, minibus taxis and small trucks appear ahead. They pass groups of workers walking next to the road. They wear blue jumpsuits with yellow reflective bands

around their calves. The foliage grows thick on either side of the road, and signs begin to poke out from the bushes: JEJOBAS WELCOMES YOU, FIREFLY—EVERYTHING VENUE, KAYAKING FOR HIRE, SEAVIEW HOTEL—TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED.

They slow to avoid a mule who is picking through garbage on the side of the road. The buildings move closer together, pressing up against each other as if eager to get to the coast. They pass a house with a satellite dish on the roof and a motorboat parked out in front. They drive by a shop with advertisements painted on it, JOKO TOP QUALITY TEA, and a plastic banner advertising Strongbow and Heineken.

Khanya turns onto a smaller road. Overgrown vegetation on either side closes around them. The road turns to dirt and Khanya slows the car to a crawl. Ahead, the road peters out, giving way to rocks, and then sand, and then a small river. Khanya parks next to the bamboo fence. A chalkboard attached to the fence reads BEST BREAKFAST, AMAZING COFFEE + FRESH CANNA MUFFINS, FREE SPLIFFS.

Khanya sees her looking at the sign. "It's a party place. This is the cafe. The backpackers is there," he says, pointing to the other side of the dirt track. He offers to pick her up when she wants to come back. She shakes her head and tells him that she will try to organize a ride back. "Caleb wants to sell the truck and the Golf to try to regroup some of the money," she says.

He rubs the steering wheel and nods. She is not sure she will be coming back, and she does not like the idea of leaving without saying goodbye to Khanya, of tricking him.

"I might not come back, you know," she says breathlessly.

He stares at her. Then he brushes the back of his fingers on the dashboard to clear away the dust. He says he wouldn't mind staying in Coffee Bay for a few days. He squints out the front windscreen, considering.

She thinks suddenly of how she kissed Caleb, in that town in the Karoo before they arrived in the village. She had felt sure about it then. It amazes her to think how she had trusted her decisions so absolutely without knowing anything. Looking at Khanya she wonders if she has got it all wrong. Their seats feel close together now that they are not driving. She can smell him, a clean warm smell, different from Caleb's sour smell and whisky breath.

He sighs. "I can't though. Nine's funeral."

"What?"

"You didn't hear?" He lowers his voice and says, "He drowned in the river. He used to go there to catch crabs and sell them to the tourists."

"But the water, it's not even deep," she says. She fiddles with the strap of her backpack.

Khanya shrugs. "Bad luck."

Her eyes snap up to him. Had she told him she called the chicken Bad Luck? Is he blaming her? Nine had eaten the chicken after all. But nothing in his gaze seems to blame her.

"I wish I'd known about the funeral. Otherwise—"

"You should enjoy your time. You are here on holiday."

She is hurt that Khanya also thinks she is on vacation, like Caleb does. She bites her lip and looks over her shoulder at the backpackers. It would have been interesting to go to a funeral. But it is wrong to think like that. She gets out of the car. An empty KFC

bag brought down to the coast from the nearest town blows against her leg. "Bye," she says.

He holds up a hand and nods at her.

The reception doubles as a bar, and after she signs in, they give her a Savanna. The cider is slightly warm and too sweet. She drinks it quickly, the effervescence making her eyes water.

She dumps her backpack in the dorm, which is a wooden hut with six low beds. Then she walks across the street to the cafe. On her way, a young guy wearing black sneakers with rasta laces and a plaid bucket hat, frayed at the edges, approaches her.

"Blue Cheese? 'Shrooms?" he asks her.

"No thanks," she says.

The structure of the cafe is impermanent—a rusted metal roof thrown over a few battered poles. Sand covers the ground. She orders a cappuccino. When it comes, it tastes burnt. She thinks of the coffee she used to drink on her way to work in San Francisco, fruity and sour, and how it was a crime to drink it with milk. But after her first taste, she begins to enjoy the coffee, and she sips it slowly, watching a dog scratching its fleas underneath one of the tables. It is a relief to be there. She could be anywhere, some touristy town in Mexico perhaps.

When she leaves the cafe, the man with the rasta laces is still standing there.

"It's a nice day today," he says, sucking on a spliff, the smoke lacing through his fingers.

"Yeah," she says.

"Me, I'm a tour guide," he exhales a cloud of smoke between them.

"Cool. "I like your shoelaces."

"You want shoes like this? I can get."

"No thanks," she says, crossing the gravel road and walking toward the river.

"You want weed?" he calls after her, "Blue Cheese?"

The river leads down to a beach. A dilapidated lifeguard tower leans precariously towards the sea. Two women, dressed in long skirts and headwraps, sit upright with their ankles crossed on the sand. As she gets nearer to the women, one of them holds up a bundle wrapped in an old towel and calls, "bracelets?"

"No thanks."

"Take a look," the woman says, and her friend holds up a bracelet and says, "Come have a look, lady."

She turns back and walks to her dorm. Everywhere else she goes will be a version of this, the women with their bracelets, the guy selling mushrooms. Is she really considering leaving the authenticity of the village?

A German woman, who looks to be Tia's age, is in the dorm when she returns. She introduces herself as Greta. Her cut-off jean shorts show off powerful tan thighs. Her friend walks in and sits on the bed next to Greta. She is tall and thin and smiles at Tia through a curtain of mousy brown hair.

"This is Charlotte," Greta says, digging in her bag and pulling out a plastic bag. "We're doing mushrooms," she says, shaking the bag of dry mushrooms so they dance.

"We didn't know you were coming," Charlotte says.

"We're going to do it in the room," Greta says, opening up the bag.

Charlotte glances at Tia.

"Now?" Tia asks.

Greta glances at her watch. "It's twelve. So yes, now. You can join if you want."

Her English is tight and clinical, which makes her sound older than she is.

Tia weighs up doing mushrooms versus rooming with two people on mushrooms. Neither sounds good. But perhaps it is a sign—the mushrooms could help her decide whether to go back to the village or not. And anyway, this is what traveling is about, saying yes to experiences. Perhaps she would be back in San Francisco in a few days and she would wonder why she had been so uptight.

"Sure," Tia says.

Greta splits the mushrooms into three piles. "This will be enough to have a good trip," she says. Greta hands her a pile of mushrooms.

"It's a lot."

"Take less if you want. But don't complain if you don't go on a journey," she laughs.

Greta jumps up from the bed and pulls out her speaker. She puts on some Indian flute music. Charlotte grimaces as she chews on a mushroom. Greta says something that sounds reproachful in German to Charlotte, then she thrusts a wad of toilet paper into Tia's hand. "Sniff that if you feel nauseous."

Tia sniffs it. Peppermint burns her nostrils. Tia chews on a leathery mushroom stalk. After a while, she is slipping down and moving forward, like being on a slide. It feels endless until she thinks to open her eyes. There is still the room, the musty smell of thatch. Greta swims over her and tells her they are going to the beach. Tia shakes her head no—she is nauseous and wants to be alone. The image of Greta flickers as if she isn't real. Tia puts a pillow over her face.

The wooden door to their hut is imprinted on her eyelids, and in her mind, she drifts ghost-like through the doorway. On the other side is a dense jungle, massive white flowers hang down before her, and she knows she is imagining things, there is not a jungle outside the dorm, just a small garden with a patch of grass and aloes. The white flowers hanging down for her smell like peppermint, and she inhales deeply, laughing to herself, knowing in some other truth the flowers are only a tissue. Then she is running through a tunnel of vines, which open out into a clearing, a shallow pool, the water cool. She slips in hungrily, a fish in a silty pond—she can breathe in the murky water, and she is naked and pure. She clambers out of the clean ooze. Then she is up in a tree, the leaves brushing softly on her face. A long green ribbon drops in front of her, and she darts away from it, around the other side of the tree. The snake drapes itself towards her again—she glances down, the ground is falling away, the branches below her disappearing, and there is a sudden weight in her hands because now she is dangling from the tree, the snake's beady eye staring at her expectantly. Things are slipping towards bad. The snake grows in size, the neon, geometric pattern dances in front of her, wooing her, so that she is surprised when it darts out, the mouth pink and vaginal, the long white fangs snapping into the flesh on her forearm. She is cold like peppermint, the world goes dark until she is deep inside herself, all else falling away until she knows that *she* is the snake—there is a power roaring up in her, unbearable, and she is falling away from the tree. The ground does not come up and hit her, instead she is still falling, falling through darkness, and then drifting, looping, somewhere galactic, snaking through space, each spiral a new lesson, though she is not sure what the lesson is, and she wonders how to go back to the ordinary.

"Please charge," a robotic voice says. There is an oppressive cloud on her face, smothering her. She pushes the pillow off. The room is dim, the music has gone off. The

light is coming under the door, a beam, calling to her. Her legs shake, and when she reaches the door and opens it, the brilliance of the sun dazzles her so hard she hangs on to the door handle. She sinks down in the small enclosed garden outside their hut, the sun sparkling on her forehead and opening her. She lies in the grass until the sun inches out of the little garden. Greta and Charlotte come out and sit on either side of her, and she loves them—she thinks of Caleb and loves him too.

That evening they deconstruct their experiences. Charlotte fell in love with a shell but then lost it somewhere and cried. A woman tried to sell a bracelet to Greta, and she had a revelation—she realized in dismissing the woman that she often dismisses her mother. Tia tells them she saw a snake.

“In the room?” Charlotte asks, looking around quickly.

“Not a real one, stupid,” Greta says. She searches on her phone. A snake meant spiritual growth or danger, Greta reads out. Or it could mean sex and fertility, she says, raising an eyebrow. Charlotte and Greta speculate—Tia is on the cusp of a spiritual revelation, or somebody wants to hurt her, or she is pregnant. Tia says it is obvious why she saw a snake, irritation creeping into her voice. There was a snake in her garden in the village, that was all.

She lies on the beach the next day with Greta and Charlotte. The two have been traveling together for several months. Greta frequently snaps at Charlotte in German, which makes Charlotte go sulky and quiet. They are happy to have her around as a buffer. Greta has a thing for the surf coach at the backpackers, but Greta says it is clear that he likes Charlotte, and why can't Charlotte get on with it and sleep with him?

Tia tells them about the Green Hub, which they say sounds cool. She tells them about Caleb, and how he had said he loved her the night before she left. They both look at her hungrily and ask her if she loves him. She says she isn't sure.

A boy of about ten approaches them on the beach. He wears a wetsuit but only over his legs. The arms of the suit dangle by his knees and his skinny torso glistens from saltwater.

"Are you a surfer?" Tia asks him.

"Yes, I'm surfing," the boy says. "Can I sing a song?" He sings for them. His voice breaks and the sound is uneven. He sings for a bit too long, the whole song mostly made up of the words "South Africa". He finishes, and they clap and tell him well done. His brows pinch together until Tia pulls out ten rand. Then he smiles and waves goodbye to them, running off down the beach.

After the boy has left, Charlotte asks, "What will you do about Caleb?"

"She can't stay if she doesn't love him," Greta snaps at her.

"You could come with us," Charlotte says, her eyes wide and hopeful.

Tia twists her hair and thinks about it. Wouldn't it be more fun to travel with them? But that is not what she is here for. Her brother says she is lucky she has no responsibilities. Her brother is married, has three children, and works for a financial company that made his hair fall out before he turned thirty. His lifestyle is not attractive to her, but there are times when she envies him. She does not always want to be able to pick up and leave. It would mean she is dispensable. She has found something real in the village. At some point, she has to choose a corner and cultivate it, doesn't she?

The next day they do a tour in a nearby village. Their guide is Gugu, a woman who is not much older than them. The idea of the tour is to experience a day in a woman's

life. It is raining and they stand on a side of a hill making bricks out of mud and cow shit. Gugu hoes a muddy patch of earth and scoops the mud up and puts it into a metal frame. Then Gugu tells them she does not want to get married. If she did, she would be forced to make bricks. Greta asks how many bricks it would take to build a house. Gugu says it would take eight hundred bricks. Tia asks how much you get paid to make bricks. One hundred rand for one hundred bricks. Tia does the math. Less than ten dollars for one hundred and fifty bricks, less than ten cents a brick.

Gugu tells them to collect manure for the bricks. Charlotte and Tia glance at each other. Greta scoops up a wet pile of cow shit with her hands. Gugu shows Greta how to smooth the manure on top of the mud. Greta has proved that she is better at being a Xhosa woman, but when she is finished with her brick there is no place to wash her hands except in a puddle.

Then they collect wood at the edge of a forest. To make a tie for their wood bundles, they need to strip bark off a tree. Greta says she won't do it. She has never damaged a tree in her life. She doesn't agree with it, and she also can't understand why people leave their rubbish in the forest. It is so easy to pick up rubbish. Charlotte says she is being closed-minded. People here are used to using natural materials they can throw away. But now that plastic is here, everything is fucked up. It will take time to change people's habits. Gugu looks at her phone while they argue.

Charlotte asks Tia what she thinks. Tia says that all three of them have a much higher footprint than anybody in the village. It is understandable that Greta doesn't want to strip bark off a tree, but has she ever thought about how many trees have been felled to make way for all the places she's lived and visited? Then they all strip bark off a tree, tie

the strip around their tiny stacks of wood, and carry the wood up a hill, balancing the stack on their heads.

They have lunch at Gugu's house. Gugu's mother, grandmother, and sisters are inside the small hut. Two babies play on the floor. A hen and her chick run between legs. While the family finishes making lunch, Gugu paints Charlotte's face as if she were going to a ceremony. She mixes red earth with a bit of water and places red dots on her face, and then she scrapes lime rocks together and adds a bit of water and puts cream colored dots on Charlotte. The meal is a large bowl of pap with spinach and potatoes. Charlotte doesn't want to eat it, and Greta and Charlotte argue in German. Then a driver picks them up and takes them back to Coffee Bay.

At the backpackers, they run into the surf coach. Charlotte flirts with him and says she will do another surf session. When they go back to their room, Charlotte looks in the mirror and screams. She says she forgot her face was painted, and how could Greta and Tia have let her talk to the surf coach? Greta laughs wickedly, and then Charlotte and Greta both laugh until they can't breathe. Then they hug and apologize to each other. Tia thinks of Beth. If Beth were here, she would be having a better time. But it is not about having a good time. She came to do something meaningful. In the evening she goes to reception and asks if a driver could take her back to the village the following day.

Chapter 18

After dropping Tia off in Coffee Bay, Khanya parks the car in front of the volunteer house and goes to return the keys. Caleb is on the small building site next to the garden, staggering around with a couple of long planks. Khanya jogs over and helps carry them over to the cement foundation. The wood Caleb is working with is ugly. Caleb has found the wood somewhere and tried to restore it, pulling out nails and screws and sanding it down. Khanya hands the keys to Caleb, and he stuffs them in his pocket without thanking him.

Khanya glances in the direction of the weed. He does not like that Tia is gone. Caleb has never seemed happy with the weed arrangement. Caleb picks up a plank and Khanya rushes to pick up the other end. He can smell alcohol on Caleb's sweat.

Khanya carries a few more planks over. "I am like you," he says to Caleb. "I don't have a brother to help me build my house. My one hand is cutting, the other hand is pulling." He brushes his hand over a plank, and a long splinter pierces his hand.

Caleb sees him looking at it. He chuckles and shows Khanya his palms. Splinters line his hands, and the skin around them is red and inflamed.

He tells Caleb he should wear gloves. After a while, Khanya stops helping. Caleb seems set on holding planks in position and hammering them by himself, which is a better job for two men.

The weed plants look dry. Lwazi is still staying away because of the snake. The hose lies across the lawn and he turns it on at the tap, casting his eye around for the snake. He douses the weed plants, their limbs springing and waving at the force of the water, the

leaves going glossy. He waters the vegetable beds too, though most of the plants look dead. He coils up the hose.

He smiles, walking down the hill. They are not far off from the first harvest. He will have money in his pocket, money to put away for a car, a new TV for his dad, a new pair of sneakers. Maybe he could even buy a car outright with the money. Maybe Caleb will give him a good deal on one of the Green Hub cars he has to sell.

He runs into his old horse on his way home. Lilo is nibbling at the grass with his yellow teeth. Lilo gazes at him calmly and goes back to chewing. Despite the treatment, the infection on the back of Lilo's ankles looks worse. He grabs one of his legs, and Lilo moves it forward a few times in weak protest.

Maggots. Maggots in the wound. He puts the foot down and strokes his flank. He will have to put him down. There are fewer and fewer horses in the village. The ticks have gotten too bad. He thinks about Nine, how they used to ride over the hills. Lwazi and him on Lilo, Nine on his family's mule, racing through the village. He jogs the rest of the way home. Tata Sandile is coming to help with the thatching, and it is already late morning.

Tata Sandile is inspecting the rondavel when Khanya arrives. Khanaya asks how he is. Tata Sandile says that his son has been blessed with his third child, his daughter has just got a job as a teacher in Monti, his wife has planted a large number of pumpkins and they are looking forward to a good harvest in May, a buzzard has eaten two of their grown chickens, one of his cows had nearly died earlier in the summer from redwater, he's heard that morning on the radio that load shedding is hurting small business across the country and petrol prices are going up even higher, and he is busy—the young people aren't

learning how to thatch anymore—it is only him and his brother who know how to thatch, and what will happen when they are too old to go on the roofs?

Khanya helps Tata Sandile lay the thatch on top of yesterday's work, the roof growing and fanning out like fish scales. Tata Sandile shows him how to secure the thatch with the cord and needle, impatiently brushing his hands away when the work is untidy. Khanya thinks of his mother and the way she used to stitch his too-short school trousers, her mouth a tight circle of concentration, her fingers dancing up and down, the flash of needle in the firelight. Her hands became quieter when she got sick, hands that had always been busy wagging at him and his sister, grinding the maize into mielie meal, carrying the firewood.

The absence of her hits him in his chest, and he thinks of going to the cliffs as he did as a boy. When he was young and he didn't know how to live with sadness, cliff jumping was a momentary reprieve—his mind blank in anticipation, his body embraced in weightlessness, the shock of the water's rough acceptance of him, the growing darkness as he let his body take him down, the gratitude he felt in proximity to death. Then the terror, the weak creature inside that began to shriek and claw for air, the white sunlight glimmering too far above as he slashed with frantic hands, and finally surfacing—relieved, ashamed, alive.

Afterward, he would climb out of the water, his legs shaking even though it was warm and start the scabble home. The salt crystals would tighten into a lace tattoo on his skin, the sadness seeping back in. By the time he got home, and his father scolded him, it was as if he had never gone to the cliffs at all.

Sadness doesn't bother him as much as it had when he was a boy. He knows its tricks, the way it draws back and forth like the water on the sand, reaching for him and releasing

him, the way it smothers him in a sheer blanket like the water in the lagoon, or roils and wrestles him till his body fights against it. His sadness is sly like a jackal.

Now it threatens to wrap around him and pull him under. But a full day of sun and work lie ahead of him. If he catches the feeling early enough, he can toss it off like a dog shaking off water.

It isn't until the evening after Tata Sandile has left and he is eating pap with his father that the sadness sidles up to him again. The sides of his head throbs. After Tata has gone to his flat, he lies on his bed with the door shut. He tries to pull out the splinter in his hand, but only the tip comes out. He drapes a shirt over his eyes and lets the headache come.

A few days later, on his way back from Nine's funeral, he stops by the volunteer house. Both the Golf and the bakkie are still parked outside. If he sees Caleb, he will ask how much he is going to sell them for. The house is quiet and he goes into the side garden and unfurls the hose, dragging it across the lawn. He passes through the bushes to the vegetable beds. When he looks over at the weed plants, it is like he has been struck. His skin flashes cold and hot. He drops the hose.

The weed plants are lying on the ground like felled trees. The leaves are mashed as if someone has stomped all over them.

"Lwazi!" he yells. "Lwazi!" he tears out of the garden.

Lwazi has heard him and is outside his doorway.

"Someone's destroyed it," he pants.

Lwazi glances over to the volunteer house.

"Go and look," Khanya says.

Khanya watches Lwazi walk over. He doesn't even go in the gate. Instead, he stands next to the fence, peering through the bushes.

"Did you see it?" Khanya says impatiently when Lwazi has walked back.

Lwazi nods solemnly.

"Who did this? Did you see anyone?"

Lwazi shakes his head.

"This was your job, Lwazi," Khanya says. "You're the one living right here. Now you haven't been in the garden for weeks because of that snake, and look what happens."

"The weed wasn't my idea. I told you it wouldn't work," Lwazi says. "That land—it's never been right after my father sold it to Green Hub. My ancestors aren't happy."

Khanya ignores him. "We have to find out who did this."

Lwazi backs away. "I'm done, Khanya."

"Maybe it was Caleb. First he fires you, and then he destroys the weed.

"You owe me for all the work I did, growing those plants."

"I owe you? I owe you," he huffs angrily.

Khanya runs back to the door to the volunteer house. He pounds on the door. The curtains are closed. Caleb isn't home. The cars are there, so he has gone somewhere on foot, probably the beach.

He goes back to stare at the weed plants. Perhaps some of it is salvageable. His chest constricts looking at the mangled greenery. He takes his heel and mashes a few more of the plants. Then he stands by the gate waiting for Caleb, pacing along the garden path. Something in one of the old rose bushes catches his eye. He tears it off the rose bush, the fabric snagging. It's his shirt he left in the bushes the night the baby was born. It is crispy from the sun, the old blood of Lulama dried darkly. He stuffs it into his back pocket. He

runs down to the beach to see if he can find Caleb, but he does not see him.

"What's wrong?" Tata asks when he walks in. It annoys him that Tata can tell that something is wrong.

"Was it you?" He does not like how his voice comes out tight and high.

"Me?"

"Did you destroy the weed? I know you've been up there, poking around. Did you do it?"

Tata shakes his head and sighs. "You're right. I did go up there once. But I haven't been up there since."

Khanya sits down on Tata's couch, and rubs his hands together hard, a pressure behind his eyes.

Tata pats him on the shoulder.

"Whoever did this is going to pay," Khanya says.

Tata's brow creases. "No Khanya. Don't start trouble."

He wants to say that Tata is weak—Tata thinks the only way to resolve anything is to talk it through with the community. Sometimes you need to stand up and do something. Tata could be chief but he lets someone else have it. He wants to stop the pipeline, but all he does is talk talk talk. But all Khanya does is kick the leg of a chair and storm out of Tata's flat, slamming the door.

He pulls out the bloody shirt from his back pocket. He soaks it overnight in Jik, but the next day the stains are still there.

Chapter 19

The car is fuggy and the driver's cologne is harsh inside her nostrils. Tia tells the driver to stop when they reach the start of the scraggly ascent to the house. It is raining and she doesn't think the car is fit enough to drive up the rutted road. A few planks stand upright from the eco hub foundations. Caleb has not done much. The house is still, the curtains drawn. It is almost evening.

Inside, she dumps her backpack on the ground. She calls to Caleb. Dishes are piled in the sink and flies buzz around the room. She grabs the fly swatter from inside the cabinet under the sink. First, she will kill the flies. Then she will do the dishes. Then she will go into the garden to see what she can harvest for dinner. If there isn't much, she will try to dig out sweet potatoes.

A fly taunts her on the kitchen table and she smacks it, leaving a gory black smudge. She follows another fly into the bedroom. She goes to open the window, and as she reaches the other side of the bed, she trips over Caleb's leg. He is lying on the floor.

"What are you doing?" she asks, righting herself. But then she looks at him, his mouth open and body curled up, his shorts creased and bloodstained, his shirt open as he sometimes wears it on hot days, when it is an invitation for her to run her hands up the front of his chest. His eyes are open and black with flies. She hears a scream, and it hangs whitely in the air. It is a bad game, a trick. She slaps the flies on his face, and they rise and buzz. The swatter slips out of her hand and she claps at her legs where they dance around her. The toe of her left shoe is in the red lacquer. She backs up, walking to the sink on a tightrope. The dishes, the sweet potatoes, the flies—a shiver drenches her. She turns

the water on at the kitchen sink and it runs over her hands, cold and then hot and then so hot her hands can't recognize it, and it feels like ice. Sweet potatoes, she thinks, opening the back door into the garden. She stares out at the garden for a few moments—the beds are covered in weeds. Dark bunches of clouds march across the sky. She watches herself run back inside, reach a shaking hand out to the front door. The rose bushes scratch at her, the branches pull the ties of her sundress open as she runs. She is running towards Khanya's house.

The footpath is slippery with mud, and she falls hard, the ground slamming into her thigh. She picks herself up. A dog comes out and barks at her. A door opens from one of the huts, and a voice calls to the dog.

“Khanya!” Tia shouts.

"Tia?"

Khanya opens the door wider. She feels very wet from the rain now that she's in front of him. The dog barges past her into the doorway, and her knees nearly buckle. Khanya puts a hand on her rain-soaked shoulder.

"Something's wrong with Caleb." Tia squeezes her eyes tight. She covers her face with her hands.

He opens the door and pulls her inside. An older man is roasting corn on the fire. He looks up from the flames, surprise on his face. Her hair is heavy with water and shivers run down her spine. Khanya drapes a towel around her shoulders and tells her to sit down. She sits in one of the plastic chairs by the door. Then he says something to the old man and leaves. She does not want to be alone in the room with the man. He speaks to her in Xhosa, and she shakes her head. He puts a big metal kettle on the stovetop and lights a match. Blue flames light up the man's face, and she can see the resemblance to Khanya,

the flare of his nostril, the high cheekbones.

The fire in the center of the rondavel is going now, and smoke drifts up to the thatched ceiling. She does not want to be alone with Khanya's father, who is coming over to her. He pushes a tin mug into her hand, and she can smell the warmth of him, an old smoke smell. He gestures for her to sip. The tea is milky, so sweet it shrills on her tongue. When Khanya comes back, it will be okay again. The dog comes over and licks her hand, and the sudden warmth on her cold fingers, the hot breath, makes her think of Caleb. She had gone down the path and into the house, called out for him—he had kissed her, held her against him, happy she was back. No, she had gone down the path and into the house, she had called out for him and he did not answer. He was on the floor, lips cracked, eyes black with flies.

Chapter 20

The front door is open and the lights are on. He steps in, tripping over Tia's backpack. Water flows from the kitchen tap, and he jogs over to turn it off. He looks into the bedroom to the right, pushing the door open. Sawdust covers the room, a stack of planks leans against one of the walls. A yellow toolkit lies splayed open.

"Hello?" he calls out.

Khanya finds Caleb in the other room. He is not sure what he expected, something like this, judging from how Tia was. But seeing him is terrible. Khanya's skin crawls, looking at him. Caleb's body smells like rotting fruit. He rips the bottom sheet off the bed and flings one end out and floats it down over Caleb. Then he goes to the garden.

The rain has stopped. He takes some deep breaths, his stomach roiling. He walks to the hose pipe at the side of the house. He holds the hose in his teeth while scrubbing his hands, and then sticks his face under the cold flow. He wipes his wet face on the sleeve of his rain-dampened shirt. The frogs cry out, the crickets chirr over and over like an alarm. Somewhere far off a speaker's bass thuds out over the hills like a heartbeat.

When he gets back, Tia is bundled in the blanket, seated on the floor.

"Eish, Khanya, you better have a reason for leaving me with this umlungu," Tata says. "I moved her to the floor because I thought she might fall."

Tia holds a cup of tea as if she does not know what to do with it. The liquid edges too near the rim. Khanya takes the tea from her and sips it. It is syrupy with sugar the way his father likes it.

"Tata," Khanya says, "Caleb, he's dead."

"Dead? What happened?" He leans forward.

"I don't know. He's laid out on the floor up there."

Tata runs his finger across his head, pulling off his knitted cap. He puts it on his thigh. He jiggles his knee up and down, like he wants to get up and go and have a look for himself. "These Americans. Would they kill their own people?"

He tells Tata that Caleb and Tia weren't doing anything up there. They didn't even know Amplexica had come to the village. There was a snake up at the volunteer house, that's likely what happened. Or it was Vuyo.

"What?" Tata asks.

He tells Tata how Vuyo had stolen money from the volunteer house.

Tata frowns, and then he stands. "Let me deal with this," he says. Tata is trying to avoid him being involved—he does not want Khanya at the center of trouble again.

"She should stay here tonight," he says, gesturing toward Tia. Khanya gets up and fills three bowls with samp and beans. He brings a bowl over to Tia. Water from the rain and the hose has dampened his shoes. He kicks them off and peels off his socks. He spreads his toes near the fire while spooning the samp and beans into his mouth. Beneath the nausea, he is hungry.

"You're hungry tonight," Tata says. It's good to eat more. You're too thin, with all that running everywhere for no reason."

"Me? Too thin? Look at you."

"I have no one to cook for me."

"Mama Nokuzola is always bringing you food," Khanya says, helping himself to another bowl.

It makes them feel better to talk like this, how they always do. The fire burns and he warms up. Khanya finishes his second bowl, and Tata leaves to go to his flat. Khanya's stomach is heavy and happy. The electricity is out and he lights the paraffin lamp, which casts warm shadows on the walls. He puts on dry socks and thinks that it isn't right to feel good like this, after what he has just seen.

Khanya unfurls a reed mat and lays a mattress and blankets out on top. Tia is staring at her untouched bowl of food. He puts his hand on her shoulder. She starts and then looks at him for too long. He tells her she can sleep here tonight. She eases her shoes off, and lies down, pulling the blankets around her. She shivers although it isn't cold. The door creaks loudly as he pulls it open to go. She sits up and asks him to stay with her.

He stands at the door for a moment and then he closes it and lies down on the grass mat next to the mattress. He has not been with a white woman. But he's thought of how it would be to sleep with Tia, his hands in her long soft hair, her pink nipples, the hair between her legs dark against her skin. But he does not feel anything, lying next to her. Is it because Caleb has died? Or is it because he is not attracted to white women? Maybe the reason that he can lie next to her in the dark so coolly is less flattering—he knows he would not be able to get it up anyway.

It is always like that with him now, the first time, the first few times with someone new, his body will not obey him. It would be like that with Amila, and he cannot have that. For years he used to imagine Zuki every time he slept with someone. The woman he thinks of now is Funeka, who he does not love. She had a husband, who was working somewhere or who kept on leaving her, he was not sure which. In the beginning, he sometimes gave her money or gifts, but she would take it from him as if it was nothing. He stopped giving her things, and still she always welcomed him. He feels a sudden

warmth in his chest, thinking about her, how she asked nothing of him, and let him come and go. There must have been other men—he cannot have been special to her. But still, it was a kindness to allow him to be with her, just as he was. He had difficulty getting it up with her too, but there was no shame in it. When he goes back to Cape Town, he will visit her.

A rooster crows. He blinks his eyes open. He remembers waking in the night to Tia crying. His arm is across Tia's waist. He lifts it carefully, rolling himself silently off the mattress and onto his feet. He scrapes open the metal door. Tia sighs and he steps out into the dew-drenched morning, relieved to be outside.

"How is she?" Tata says when Khanya enters his flat. Cigarette smoke hovers in the room. Tata has been up for a while.

"Sleeping."

Tata's jaw hangs open—he is thinking.

"She asked me to spend the night," Khanya says, in case that is what Tata is thinking about.

Tata lights another cigarette and tells him he's called Vuyo.

"Why? I told you about the money."

"He took some money, he didn't kill a man. He'll be here this morning."

Khanya notices that he has his nice shoes on, his gray dress trousers on. "Where are you going?"

He sighs and stands. "That man who calls himself the chief."

"Vuyo will tell him."

Tata opens the door and the cigarette smoke drifts out. The dawn air comes in, the sea, the smell of the animals, the wet grass. "It will be trouble for us if he knows we didn't tell him, especially if she is here."

"You're not going to mention me, are you? Khanya asks.

"You? What is there to say about you?" Then he says more softly, "No. I won't ask his permission for you to stay in your own village. If that chief doesn't like you being here, he can go and shit."

He watches Tata shuffling across the lawn, his old trousers dragging under his heels. Tata reaches the road and then cuts onto the pathway that leads to a valley. It is a steep rise to the top. He wishes he had a car so he could drive him.

Khanya goes for a run. His shoes are wearing out and the road pounds into his knees. When he reaches the beach, he undoes his laces and kicks off his takkies. He sprints in the sand till every part of him feels alive and his chest heaves.

On his way home, he sees a white police car charging down the road, dust raising behind it. The news about Caleb will be seeping out, flowing like the government taps that sometimes burst and pour down the hills in streams. The police car turns too fast, sending up a dust plume, and a goat scampers out of the way, legs a nervous tangle. He suddenly wishes he had done something about the weed. The police will look around the property and ask questions. It is too late now to go and remove the crushed weed plants.

He finishes his workout on the stoep, pushing out sets of push-ups and sit-ups. Khanya leans against the rickety fence for a break. The sweat darkens the front of his shirt in a V. He waits, his breath steadying after his workout, keeping one eye on the footpath that leads up to his homestead. After a while, Vuyo appears on the path. He is wearing a jacket like it is Sunday. A large policewoman follows Vuyo.

Khanya reluctantly eases himself off the fence to greet them and shake their hands. A pale sheen covers Vuyo's face. Sweat beads on his upper lip. It could be the heat or a reaction to seeing Caleb's body. Or perhaps he is nervous that there are police around. He is already hiding the fact he has stolen money. What else is that pig hiding?

Vuyo takes off his jacket. He is wearing a gold-rimmed watch. He probably bought it with the stolen money, Khanya thinks with irritation. They talk about the heat, pretending for a time that nothing is out of the ordinary. For the policewoman this is normal. She would want to get back home, back to the city, where she has a nice house and a husband and a few kids. She would bring them takeaway for dinner because of her long day, and they would sit in front of the TV together.

The policewoman asks if she can ask him some questions. She takes out a clipboard and it is harder to imagine her sitting around with her family, watching TV. Why had he gone for a run this morning, instead of removing the weed plants?

"What's the nature of your relationship with Tia?"

"She's a friend."

"And Caleb Anderson?"

"Neighbor."

"Not friends?"

"I didn't say that."

She scribbles on the clipboard.

"We didn't know each other for long," he adds. "I don't know either of them. We're neighbors."

"But she came to you when she found Caleb?"

"Yes. Like I said, we're neighbors."

More scribbling, and then she puts the cap on her pen and she asks to speak with Tia.

As he turns away to fetch Tia, he thinks Vuyo and the policewoman exchange a glance. He pushes open the door of the rondavel. Sunlight hits her face and she scrunches her eyes. She sits up with an effort.

He asks her how she slept.

"For a moment this morning when I woke up I thought it was a bad dream," she says, her voice thin like smoke.

"The police, they are here. They want to speak to you." Her eyes are wide and puffy-rimmed like a frog's. He looks away from her.

Khanya watches from the doorway as Vuyo moves forward to greet Tia, folding his two hands on the top of her hand. "Tia." He takes a big breath and he seems to grow even larger. "It is so unexpected. We are very sorry." He squeezes her hand, and Tia's face begins to crumble. He hugs her. Tia inhales sharp gasps. Vuyo's eyes are wet when he pulls away. If Vuyo is performing, it is a good show. Vuyo takes out a tissue and dabs his eyes and blows his nose.

Khanya's stomach growls. He goes inside to cook isidudu. He pours maize meal into two pots. Then he adds warm water to one and sets it off to the side. That pot he will cook up tomorrow—Tata likes the sour taste of fermented porridge. He takes the other pot and adds water, stirring it over the gas burner. Then he adds lemon juice and butter. Vuyo and the policewoman have left when he comes back outside. Tia is sitting on the stoep.

"I don't know what you like to eat," he says, handing her a bowl of isidudu and a piece of bread. He sits down next to her.

Her hair is matted. His fingers itch to reach over and untangle her hair. He thinks of his horse, Lilo, the hours he has spent pulling at the mane and combing it. Soon he will have to go over the hill where the earth begins to turn into sand and dig a pit big enough for Lilo. If the pit is too shallow, the dogs will run to the dunes and come back frenzied, smelling sweet and rotten. He will have to do it by himself—he will not ask Lwazi to help him.

She stirs the porridge around with the spoon and takes a few weak mouthfuls and then sets it down. She pulls her knees up to her chest and closes her eyes. "What happened to him?"

"Maybe it was the snake," he says.

She picks up her spoon, trying again with the porridge, looking hard at it.

"The truth won't stay hidden for long here." He gets up to work on his house. He isn't sure why he said that to Tia. Perhaps it just sounded good.

Tata Sandile has heard the news. Khanya waits impatiently to work on the thatching while Tata Sandile speaks. He says that first it was Nine and now this white man. The ancestors are not happy. He talks about how much work it was to get the ancestors to approve of living in square houses and not just rondavels. The pipeline is much worse—of course the ancestors are not happy about a pipeline that will tear up graves. There will only be more trouble in the community. He puts his hand on Khanya's shoulder and says that if Khanya's father was chief, none of this would be happening.

They lay another bundle of thatch on the roof. The midday sun creeps sweat into his eyes and he wipes them with the sleeve of his t-shirt. He jumps down into the interior of the house and stares up at their work. They've created more shade, and the sun blasts through the remainder of the task.

A few days later, Khanya jogs up to the volunteer house. Tia has moved down to a room at the hotel because Green Hub is paying for it. She told him she felt bad about this—she didn't know if the people in Iowa knew that all the money for the project was gone.

The cars are still parked out front. Maybe Green Hub will sell him the bakkie for cheap. It would be hard to sell when they weren't even in the country. But even if they gave him a good deal, he couldn't buy it. His stomach feels hollowed out like a grinding stone when he thinks about the weed and the money he would have got, and he almost turns around at the gate. But if the police come back, the weed needs to be gone.

The vegetables in the beds are shriveled. He thinks about watering them, but what's the point? The garden will go back to how it had been before. He pushes through the bushes. The beds are blank like it was when he first arrived back in the village. Even the earth knows how to mock him.

He tries the back door and it opens. Inside it is dark and quiet. He fills a glass of water and drinks it on the couch. His eyes drift over to the bedroom. He can almost see Tata shaking his head, and saying, What did I tell you? Don't get involved.

He turns the knob and the door swings open. Despite the heat, there is a chill in the room. The hair on the back of his neck lifts. A bookshelf is stacked with Caleb's clothes—shoes at the bottom, hats at the top, like the bookshelf is pretending to be a person.

The pitted parts of the concrete floor are stained with blood. A glass sits on the bedside table. He walks around the unmade bed, avoiding the space on the floor where he had found Caleb. The glass has a golden lining of some dried liquid. He sniffs

it—whiskey. A donkey brays. The surprise of the sound makes him prickle in a sweat. He sets down the glass and leaves.

Lwazi is sitting outside his house, eyeing him as he approaches. The afternoon is growing cooler and one of the piglets in Lwazi's yard stops sniffing in the grass and lays down. Two piglets trot over to the one on the ground and nestle on either side.

Lwazi asks what he was doing, nodding towards the volunteer house. The air between them is stiff. Now that they do not have the weed, it is like they have forgotten they are friends. Khanya tells him he was checking on the weed, but it is gone.

Lwazi says he removed it. He'd been afraid of the snake but he was also afraid the police would find the weed.

Khanya wants to thank Lwazi, but he doesn't—a wall has gone up between them.

"Something's not right with that place," Lwazi says. They both stare at the green roof of the house, eyes straining against the setting sun." There's going to be an investigation."

"Who said that?"

Lwazi stuffs his hands into his pockets. "The police say it's poison. But it's that snake."

"Poison?"

"Arsenic."

Khanya's mouth dries out.

"Who told you?"

Lwazi shrugs.

"Did you see anyone by the house while Tia was away?"

"No."

"You don't see anything, do you," he mutters. He pushes himself off the warm wall of the house.

Tata had slaughtered an old ewe earlier in the day. Her teeth had fallen out and she couldn't graze. Mama Nokuzola has made tripe and fried up the liver for them. Her husband died a few years ago, and now there is something easy and quiet in the way she and Tata spend time together. Khanya tells Mama Nokuzola and Tata that Caleb died from poison. Mama Nokuzola moans and says may he rest in peace. She says if someone from the village killed Caleb, the tourists won't come and the whole village will pay. Her face is bitter and creased—she's thinking of December when she sells oysters and grass bracelets to the tourists. Mama Nokuzola leaves, and they eat the tripe on fresh bread.

Khanya brushes bread crumbs from his fingers and stands up. Who could have killed him, Khanya asks. Tata says the village will find out what happened—it doesn't concern only Khanya. Then he leaves to rest in his flat.

Khanya kicks out the curl of mat and lies down. He drinks a warm beer, thinking about the enemies Caleb could have made in the short time he was in the village. Everyone knows that Caleb ran over one of Sinalo's puppies when they first arrived. But that was some time ago now, and you didn't kill a man for killing your dog.

Maybe Vuyo thought he could cover up the story of the stolen money. Vuyo would lose his job and the respect of the community if people found out he was a thief. But he seemed shocked about Caleb's death. Then again, maybe he was acting.

It is possible Caleb did not have an enemy, but it was simply what he stood for. He was an American, and therefore associated with Amplexica. Or, he could have been killed for trying to *stop* Amplexica. But it seemed unlikely Amplexica would even know about Caleb and Tia. His thoughts jump around until his head grows warm and fuzzy from the

beer. He thinks of going over to Lwazi's house, bringing a drink for him. They could talk about what might have happened, who had destroyed the weed, who had killed Caleb.

Khanya sits up. Lwazi. He had not seemed angry or surprised about the weed being destroyed. If Caleb destroyed the weed, perhaps Lwazi got his revenge. Added to the weed is the issue of land—Lwazi is always grumbling about how his father sold the land that would now be his. And Caleb fired him off his own land.

But Lwazi? Inside his rough exterior, Lwazi is a sheep. And anyway, Khanya has always been the one with the ideas, not Lwazi. He thinks of when he convinced Lwazi to run away with him. They must've been no older than eight. Lwazi agreed reluctantly. They crept out of their beds, met on the road between their homesteads, and went to the forest. They got tired, hunkered down in the sand together off the footpath, and fell asleep. Khanya was yanked awake by Tata. He pulled him up by the arm and then gripped him to his chest. In the embrace, Khanya could hear Tata's heart beating, his labored breath, smell the stale cigarette smoke on his skin—Tata had been running to find him. He could remember the shock—Tata loved him. Then Tata put him over his knee and spanked him. Lwazi was also beaten by his father, so hard that he could not sit down for a week.

He swigs the last of his beer and chuckles. Lwazi is not capable of killing a man.

Chapter 21

The hotel's beach is jagged with rocks. A rip current pulls along the shore. No one swims in the ocean. Instead, the few guests cluster around the small jelly-bean-shaped pool, or sit looking out to sea on the restaurant's covered porch. A low cinderblock wall separates the porch from the sand, and when the wind blows, the plastic chairs and tables skid across the gritty, tiled floor. A hand-painted sign near reception reads, "HAVE YOU HANDED IN YOUR KEYS?", the red letters bleeding in a Halloween font. The sound of the ocean is oppressively loud and omnipresent like a freeway. The rooms are in a long row under an awning, and the stable doors open up to a field of close-cut grass, which adds to the feeling they are each being kept in a stall.

A small blonde boy and his dad are in the hotel bar with Tia. They are both bare-chested, in their swim trunks. The receptionist comes in and tells her someone is on the phone for her. A man from Caleb's university who has a connection to Green Hub has been calling her repeatedly, asking her what she would like to do, saying he can help her book a flight home. She wants to be gone, without the other part of it, the having to be somewhere else. Tia tells the receptionist to say she's unavailable. The receptionist lingers, hoping she will change her mind.

The man at the bar throws his son over his shoulder, and the boy squeals and laughs. The dad sends her a knowing look that says, "Aren't I a great dad, and don't you find that attractive?" Tia turns away from them, annoyed.

She moves further into the bar to the pool table. She picks up a cue and pokes the pool balls around. There is a rugby game playing on the TV, showing men with ridiculously wide thighs piling on each other.

A woman comes in. Something about the familiarity of her clothes or her facial expression tells her she is American. The woman is blonde and healthy looking like a gymnast. It is usually annoying to see other Americans—they detract from her experience of being abroad. But here, so far from home, she is intrigued by the woman's familiarity. It's as if in observing her, she can observe herself.

"Want to play?" the woman asks, walking over to the pool table. The accent proves she is right. But there is something familiar about her beyond her being American. Or perhaps it has just been long since she has seen another American. Then she realizes it is the woman from Caleb's picture.

The woman picks up a cue and rubs chalk on it. "You're Tia, right? They told me you'd be here. I'm Anna." She wipes her blue-chalk fingers on the palm of her hand.

Tia stares at her.

The woman says that Caleb's parents are older, and it will take some time to organize coming over. She got on the first plane when she heard.

How does Anna know who she is and where she is staying? There is communication going on about her that she is not aware of.

"Hey, you ok?" Anna says, reaching out to rest a hand on her shoulder. She looks at her in the eyes as if she is trying hard to see something in the distance.

Is Anna Caleb's girlfriend? Tia begins to sniff in an uncontrolled way, and she puts her forearm over her eyes.

"Hey," Anna says again, drawing her in. She does not want to be hugged by Anna, but Anna holds her tight. Tia begins to cry. Anna's shoulder smells American, like fabric softener. When she gets home she will put all her clothes in a dryer at a laundromat. She will put herself in there too and come out clean and dry.

"Here," Anna says, pulling a small plastic package of tissues out of her pocket. "I've been going through these like hotcakes."

Tia lifts up her head to blow her nose. Is she crying because Caleb has died, or because his girlfriend has just shown up? Their hair separates as they pull away. Anna says she is thinking about going for a walk, if Tia wants to come.

She does not want to, but she also does not want to lay on her bed, looking out the top of the stable door. Tia nods. She sits outside on the bench, while Anna gets something from her room. Anna comes back carrying a white hat and a cloth bag that reads, "Trust me, I'm a teacher." She puts the hat on Tia, saying she is looking a bit pink already. That is a kind way of saying it. The first day at the hotel Tia lay out on the grass looking up at the clouds wisping over the sun till her eyes ached. Now her nose looks like it is covered in deteriorated plastic, the skin on her face, neck and forearms sloughing off to reveal tender pink islands of new skin.

A fence of tattered black mesh separates the hotel from the beach, and they climb through a hole in the mesh like they are escaping. They walk along in silence until Anna says it is beautiful—Caleb told her it was beautiful. Tia wonders when he told her that, and if he was still talking to Anna while Tia was with Caleb.

"So you're a teacher?" Tia asks.

Anna scrunches up her nose, puzzled. "Oh," she says, patting the bag. "No, it's my mom's. I work for a bank."

They are both disappointed by this. They walk on silently. Eventually, Anna turns to her and says she is sorry, that it must have been a real shock, that she is devastated obviously, but it is a little like double jeopardy—you can only be devastated by someone fully once. She tells Tia how Caleb left her for South Africa. How he was searching for something beyond them, and no matter what she did, it wasn't enough. But when she heard of his death—she shakes her head and sighed. They had been together for so many years. He was like family to her, his family was like her family.

In the evening, they eat together at the restaurant. Tia orders a Greek salad and a cheese toasty, which are the only vegetarian options on the menu. She has lost count of how many times she has ordered it, and still the waitress looks at her expectantly, as if she might order a steak. Anna asks if the seafood is caught locally. It isn't—they buy it frozen from town. Anna orders it anyway. Then she orders malva pudding. It is the only time she will ever come to South Africa, so she might as well try the desserts.

Anna tells Tia she should stay until Caleb's parents arrive. They want to meet her. His parents are religious. They will organize a small service on the beach. Despite what has happened, they know it is a special place for him. After the ceremony, Anna can drive Tia to the airport. It would mean a lot to Caleb's parents if she stayed. It will give them some closure. She was, after all, the last person to spend time with him. She looks at Tia after she says this, as if hoping she will offer some clue as to what has happened, how Caleb died and if she had anything to do with it.

Tia nibbles on her grilled cheese. She does not understand why Anna wants her to stay. She says she'll think about it.

Anna smiles, satisfied. Then she leans across the table and whispers. "Do you think someone from Amplexica poisoned him?"

The cheese is cold and rubbery in her mouth. She tells Anna that she doesn't think Amplexica poisoned him. They didn't have any connection to Amplexica.

"But Caleb was fighting against Amplexica."

Tia tries to explain that it wasn't like that, they didn't do anything to stop Amplexica, but Anna shakes her head. Caleb was fighting against Amplexica, and they must have killed him. In which case, he's a hero. Anna slurps the last of her diet coke.

Maybe Caleb dying solves something for Anna. He could be a hero, and he would not be able to have another life without her.

They stay in the bar late into the night. Anna challenges her to games of pool. Tia wins all the games. After a while, she realizes Anna is letting her win, and she starts to cry. Anna puts a hand on her thigh—she can feel the warmth of her hand. She thinks of how they knew Caleb's body in a way that only a handful of people in his life knew. She feels his ragged breath on her neck, his hand clamped around her waist, his damp skull underneath her fingertips, him filling her innermost part.

They have more drinks in Tia's room, and when it is past eleven and the hotel falls into silence, Tia leans forward and kisses Anna. When she pulls away, Anna's eyes are still, her upper lip stiff. Then Anna kisses her back. Except for the smoothness of her face, it isn't any different. Anna stops after a while and tells her to turn over. Tia does, her belly going liquidy with some kind of want. But Anna just curls around her. Tia can smell the laundromat again, and she thinks of Beth and how after a night out they sometimes slept in the same bed so they could wake together late in the morning and go over the night before.

She feels better in the morning, as if she has put something behind her. It is easier for her to think about leaving. Anna is still sleeping quietly beside her, jet-lagged. Tia does not want to stay for the ceremony on the beach with Caleb's parents, and she does not have to. Anna will understand.

She feels she has regained something she lost. For a few days, everything felt random and meaningless like she had lost the imagination to think her way into a different story. A confusing guilt hounded her. It was not about Caleb's death—of course, she had nothing to do with it. But there was a feeling that she had done something wrong, made a bad decision at some point. Perhaps she was not meant to have landed up in the village. Now the confusion is lifting. She had followed the signs and said yes to experiences like she was supposed to. What was wrong with that? How else would you find out who you were supposed to be? Tia quietly pulls a dress out of her bag. Then she creeps out of the room. She will say goodbye to Khanya.

After leaving the hotel, she cuts inland in the direction of Khanya's house. It is warmer away from the coast. A small goat bleats weakly in the dip of a hill, the sound hauntingly childlike. Laundry hangs on wire fences and kids play on the grass outside the huts. A woman comes out of her hut in a long skirt, waving her arms and calling "ooooee! oooooee!" Tia looks up and sees a kite circling overhead, leering at the teenage chickens on the woman's property.

The hills climb up and down, obscuring what lies behind them. Perhaps it would have been faster to go along the coast. She is going too far inland. She takes a footpath off to the right, trying to cut back towards the coast. The footpath leads past a few huts and then drops away. She is looking down a steep, raw hill. It is as if someone took a bite out of the earth. The top layer of grass has been torn away to reveal the red flesh of the earth.

She remembers Caleb mentioning the sand mining and how it was worse this time he was back. She skids down the red earth, her feet making small avalanches, the soil crumbling away and rocks chasing after her. The dry earth cracks underfoot. It's hot, as if the earth without its lid of grass is slowly cooking her. She grabs onto an outcrop of soil to steady herself. The earth explodes in her hand, crumbling away into a red powder that dusts over her dress.

When she looks up from her dress, a person is standing stationary near the bottom of the hill.

"Hello?" She calls out.

The person's back is to her. He is thin and wears a faded gray hoodie. He is standing very still. She looks back the way she came. Her skin prickles coldly.

"Hello?"

The man does not move. Then his arms flap in the breeze. Some kids must have put the figure up to trick people. She walks towards it. Branches stick out from beneath the legs of the man's pants. A tin bucket stands in for a face, the hoodie pulled up over it. Rust from the bucket has rouged the front of the hoodie. She thinks of kicking the stick skeleton, watching the bucket head bounce down the hill. Instead, she continues down the eroded bank, stepping across the small-scale terrain of ravines and peaks. At the bottom of the hill, she stands in a pile of sand looking back at the red scar. It's pitiful. The land is wrecked and there is nothing to be done.

Khanya is in the road with an old horse. He is bent over looking at one of the horse's hooves. Sweat darkens the back of his shirt in the shape of a butterfly. When he puts down the hoof, he looks up and sees her.

She greets him, and he says she looks well.

"It's the dress." She pinches at the fabric of her floral dress and frowns at it, rubbing off the red earth. When she put the dress on, she felt like a fresher version of herself, but now it seems it's not her at all. She asks if it's his horse.

"Yes, but he's old now. I need to put him down."

The horse stands limply. The horse rests on the top of its hoof like a ballerina. She wonders how he will put the horse down, all the way out here. She tells Khanya that she is leaving and asks if he wants to go for a walk. Khanya pats the horse's flank and they set off toward the forest.

On the way, she tells him about the sand mining. She says it's sad to see the land scarred like that.

He nods and says, "But Tata Mazibuko has been planting. I walked there the other day. It took some time, but now the plants are growing. He said he had to put a scarecrow up to scare away the birds."

Tia is silent. How did she not recognize the figure as a scarecrow? She nearly kicked it over. And she hadn't seen any plants. What if she trampled on some of them without noticing? Her chest feels tight.

They come out on the small pebbled beach up the river. Tia stands on the beach for a moment, wanting to be in the cool river and wishing she brought her swimsuit. Then she unbuttons her dress and pulls it over her head. She stumbles into the water in her bra and underwear. She swims with her head above water out into the river. She does not look back at Khanya, but soon she hears a few plonks and a woosh as his body surges into the water. He hums as he catches up to her. The water moves lazily around them, as if unsure where to go.

"I've never been to the mangroves before," Tia says, looking over at the island of trees upriver.

He tells her they look nicer from over here, but when you get up close it is muddy. She says she wants to see them anyway, she is leaving. He tells her he will wait for her on the shore.

She had hoped he would come with her. She begins to swim away from him. Some parts are shallow so she has to wade and other parts deep so she has to swim. The land dictates what she does—swim, wade, swim. The sand underfoot turns to mud and from the blurred mesh of trees, she begins to see the individual mangroves, pale and gnarled, with weaving branches and thick leaves. The water slinks back, and she steps onto the muddy shore. Thousands of gray chopsticks are planted vertically around the trees. She bends down to inspect the sticks emerging from the mud. They are roots, she decides, pleased with herself. The tree needs oxygen and sends its roots above the mud to get it.

The mud glack-glacks with each step. Then she falls through to her knees. Her shout of surprise dissipates in the peace of the mangroves. The mud grips her. The feeling of wanting to be saved overwhelms her. The tide will rise slowly and drown her. She leans forward and yanks out her leg. The next step is shallow, and the earth holds her steady. She touches her shin. The mud is a smooth, silky-thick paint.

The stubble of the mangrove roots gives way and the mud hardens and dries out until the earth is cracked like a desert. Small black crabs scamper in front of her, the ground undulating with them. She walks across the pan away from the mangroves until reaching an island of rough grass, surrounded by thorn bushes, palms, and bunches of

reeds. The small crabs and the way her legs carry her easily from mud to desert to grass make her feel like an out-of-place giant.

It is windless and quiet except for the sound of the ocean. Her feet are raw from walking barefoot. She lies down on the grass in the sun, trying to warm her wet body. She thinks of how she had been blind to the new growth at the sand mine, and how she had judged the land as useless. She thinks of lying there until the tide comes in, water blanketing the base of the mangroves and then receding again, how it would do that over and over again. At some point soon, in the scheme of things, she will die, and the tide will go in and out again and again. There is cruelty to the relentless pattern of the water. It does not care about her, or depend on her. But that is also a kind of relief. The sky looks down at her, and her chest feels very open.

When she swims back, Khanya is dressed and waiting for her on the shore. He turns away when she comes out of the water. She puts her dress on over her wet bra and underwear. Her chest is already pink, and she presses her fingers against it, seeing the white marks her finger leaves.

He asks her about the weed when they are walking back up the hill through the forest. She says she doesn't know who destroyed it. But there was a conversation about it—Caleb asked what they should do about the weed and Vuyo said they should destroy it. But she hadn't thought either of them would do it. After a while she says, "Maybe it was someone else."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Lwazi?"

"No," he says.

They pass by the cottages. Howard is out on his porch. A woman with a baby is sitting with him, and she calls to them. It is Lulama. Lulama hands the baby to Howard and comes down to the fence. Lulama says she is sorry about Caleb. Tia is looking at Howard on the porch, at the way he is holding the baby. The revelation makes her mind feel clear and sharp in a terrible way. Lulama's mouth moves. Khanya makes faces at the baby.

After they walked away, Tia says, "I didn't know that Howard is the father."

"Yes," Khanya says.

She did not say goodbye to Lulama, and now she is leaving. But she does not want to go back. Nothing she has done in the village is worthwhile except for that night, of helping deliver the baby. Why does it feel less meaningful now?

She is still thinking about this when they reach Khanya's horse on the road. The horse is standing where they left him, his lame leg bent. There are things she needs to say to Khanya, to thank him, to tell him he has meant something to her. But now she's left it too late. Khanya is preoccupied with his horse, picking at a muddy patch of matted hair. He tells her again he'll have to put the horse down. She wants to hug him, but the horse has moved between them. She says goodbye and starts back to the hotel.

As she walks away, she thinks she should turn around, run back, say he meant something to her, kiss him. She would still leave, but at least her time here, and all of what had happened would make some kind of sense. What kind of sense was still unclear, but she would have time to think about that. But it's impossible to turn around, impossible to do it now that the moment is over. Why are moments like that, so fleeting and unforgiving?

The sun heats the top of her head and her mouth feels dry. When she gets back to the hotel, she'll order a diet coke and sit with her legs in the pool. The feeling of wanting to turn back and kiss Khanya passes. Something about it was selfish anyway—like she was using him to make her feel better about leaving.

She passes through the sand mining area again. This time the scarecrow looks comedic and limp. Now she can see small plants fighting through the red cracked earth, their leaves dusty with earth. In the eroded crevasses, twigs and logs are laddered to prevent earth slipping down to the bottom of the hill. But still, the land is scarred and ugly. It does not seem likely the plants will regrow. It is all useless. Amplexica will come and do what they want with the village. There will be half measures—a better road, jobs, a shop or two. But the village will be destroyed.

Chapter 22

When Lwazi comes by, Khanya is painting the walls of his house. He sets his roller in the tray of thick yellow paint and stands back to examine his work.

“It’s looking good, for a house you built,” Lwazi says.

Khanya forces a laugh. Lwazi hardly ever comes around. He’s come because he wants something. Khanya starts painting again, and he watches Lwazi wander over to look at Nomeyisi and Waloboleka who are grazing. Lwazi walks back and clears his throat. He says that tomorrow there will be a meeting at the chief’s about Caleb’s death. They want to discuss what happened with the people who live nearby the volunteer house.

Khanya stoops to pick up his paint roller. “So you’re going?”

“Yes, and you are too.”

“Me? Hayi. They won’t want me there.”

Lwazi tells him that Vuyo asked them both to be there. Vuyo will tell the community what they know at the meeting.

Khanya weighs it up. He has to admit he is curious.

"You'll come?" Lwazi asks.

"Maybe."

He goes inside to eat lunch. Mama Nokuzola has brought over a big pot of samp and beans. She tells them she harvested so many beans this year she does not know what to do with them.

He does not tell Tata about the meeting at the chief's. Tata will insist that he avoid getting mixed up in it. They're both eating their second bowl of samp and beans when Tata asks Khanya to find him a bone. He is going down to the ocean today to ask the ancestors for help. Somebody from Amplexica is finally coming to the village.

Khanya thinks of the last time he went down to the beach with his father. They borrowed a fisherman's boat and dropped a bone over into the ocean. The bone sank. He slept peacefully that night. The ancestors had not spoken to him. They had not listened, and nothing had cured his mother. This type of thing, how he feels about looking for a bone, is not worth saying to Tata. It is better just to look for the bone. He cannot believe the way he once did, in a way that someone like Lwazi still does. That is the problem with leaving the village.

He cuts along a footpath that heads out towards the coast. The grass brushes at his shins as he climbs a hill. At the top of the hill he pauses to catch his breath. Below in the valley two men are cutting the grass on the soccer field, their trimmers buzzing like two angry hornets. A group of children come trailing up the hill towards him, the oldest in front, two little ones waddling behind, holding hands. One of the older girls is pulling a rope attached to a mechanic's stretcher. He asks them what they are doing. They point to the stretcher and tell him they found it in the grass. It has wheels and flies down the hill, they tell him. Khanya says let's see it, and he crosses his arm and watches as a boy climbs on the stretcher. The others push him, and he skids down the hill screaming. He shoots off the path, his limbs tossing into the air before landing in a heap on the grass. The others race back down the hill laughing.

He cuts down the valley, stopping now and then to look in the long grass for a bone. He regrets not asking the children to find him one. The path leads out towards the

soccer field. His mouth is dry, and the sun is too hot. He wants to be finishing his house, not looking for a bone. It has surprised him, the pleasure he feels in working on his house. But he reminds himself that he only wants to finish the house so that when he is done, he will leave. Tata doesn't need him, except for things like looking for a bone, which he does not want to do.

He kicks at a clump of grass. Anything would be better than looking for a bone. He stoops to pick up a tiny bone. It is an old chicken wing. He throws it out across the grass with such force his shoulder tweaks.

It has been too long since he has been with a woman, that is the problem. He rubs his shoulder. He thinks of Funeka again, the heat of her tin house in the summer months, their bodies slick, the silent way they move on each other so as not to wake her small son who sleeps curled in the armchair. Perhaps he cares for Funeka, but it is nothing like how it was with Zuki.

If he goes to the chief's house tomorrow, he might see Zuki. He does not want anything with her, just to see her. His palms prickle thinking about it.

He is almost at the coast and still he has not found a bone. He pushes into some small thorn trees. The grass grows thicker here, the animals know this too. The long thorns scrape his forearms, leaving scribbles on his skin. Finally he finds a shoulder and a few rib bones of a sheep or goat. The bones are bleached and light like driftwood. He is pushing his way back through the trees when he sees a dried lizard, impaled on a thorn. It's the work of a butcher bird, who has stored its meal for later. The lizard's arms stretch wide, the head droops to one side. Its white underside shines in the sun. Jesus Christ on the cross.

The chief's homestead is almost unrecognizable. The main hut has spawned a ring of smaller huts, and several new flats stand alongside the fence. There are two cars parked in the middle of the homestead, a large kraal, and a swathe of hillside covered in maize.

Somewhere, Zuki is there. The thought of seeing her makes his stomach jitter.

A group of men sit near the kraal. The women sit apart from them, on a slight incline. Khanya sits down next to Tata Sandile, his back against the wall of a nearby hut. Tata Sandile asks him how the house is coming along. Khanya tells him he is finished painting it. The old man nods and tells him the house will last, even though the thatch they used was a bit old. Midday is coming and the smell of damp clothing rises from the men.

Vuyo stands and welcomes everyone and goes over the agenda. First they will talk about sand mining, then Amplexica, and then the tragedy of Caleb. The chief comes out of the hut Khanya is leaning against. He glances down at Khanya and then walks to the front of the group of men. It isn't just the chief's property that has expanded. The chief himself has gotten larger, his dress shirt tented out by his stomach.

Tata Mazibuko stands and begins to talk about sand mining. He says that if someone is caught transporting sand with a vehicle, they will pay a fine. The sand should only be removed with donkeys so that the land isn't ruined. He is trying to repair the damaged land, but it will take many years.

Then the chief starts talking about Amplexica and how it is a new beginning for the village. There will be a community meeting in a few days, and they will hear about the positive changes that Amplexica will bring. But first, there is an important matter to resolve—Caleb's death. "Our friend Caleb is dead," he says, bowing his head. "And we want justice."

There are approving murmurs.

"The murderer could do more harm in our village. I have been working hard to find out what happened. Now we have come to a conclusion. I have evidence against someone, and they happen to be in this room."

Khanya glances around, making eye contact with half a dozen people. Then he focuses on Vuyo, whose head is still bowed, eyes half closed.

"Although we have considered many suspects, nobody had motive enough or had the opportunity to kill Caleb. Except for one person," the chief says.

The chief's arm unfurls like he is offering something. "Khanya," he says.

"Me?" His hand flies up to his chest. Everyone cranes to look at him. He is suddenly on his feet. "Why me?"

"We all know you were growing weed on the property. When it was destroyed, you wanted revenge."

"So Caleb destroyed the weed?" he asks, curiosity getting the better of him.

"What's your relationship to Tia?"

"I've helped her a few times."

"Yesterday you were down by the river with Tia. Is that the kind of help you're talking about?"

"We were swimming."

"I think we all know what you were doing," the chief chuckles. "We know he likes to steal men's wives. You remember how he came to my house, trying to kill me and take my wife?"

"Ewe," someone shouted.

"You took her from me!"

The chief waves his hand through the air. "He's delusional, like his tata, who thinks he should be chief."

Khanya crosses his arms. He forces his voice to sound calm. "It's a lie. I did not kill Caleb."

The chief strokes the side of his face. "I am a fair man, Khanya. I would not accuse you if I did not have evidence. We have a witness."

Lwazi stands. He looks down, twisting the cap in his hands.

That Judas!

"Lwazi, did you see Khanya at the house around the time of Caleb's murder?" the chief asks.

"Yes," he says quietly.

There are some murmurings from the room.

"What was he doing?"

"I saw him in the garden, hiding something bloody in the bushes."

Khanya stares at him. What is he talking about? It is true, he went to the volunteer house after Nine's funeral. He knocked on the door to ask about buying the car, but Caleb did not answer. Caleb likely was dead at the time. But this story about hiding something in the bushes? Then he remembers he collected his shirt, which had been sitting in the bushes since he took Lulama to the hospital.

"Is it true?" Tata Sandile asks, leaning back and studying Khanya.

"I wasn't hiding anything! I was looking for a shirt I left there."

"Why was your shirt there?" The chief screws up his face.

"I came one night when Caleb was away to—"

"See he was coming in the night when Caleb was away," the chief says, gesturing to the rest of the men. "And he says I am the one who is stealing other people's wives."

"No, to the hospital! I drove to—, it was my shirt, with the blood from the baby!"

Tata Sandile stands up. "Khanya has caused trouble in the past. But we should listen to him."

The chief glares at Tata Sandile and then motions for the two men who have appeared at Khanya's side to sit down. "As I said, I am a fair man," the chief gestures towards Khanya.

His heart bangs painfully in his chest.

"Well?" the chief says.

Everything he says will be twisted. Why is he here, in this village, trying to prove he hasn't killed someone? He could outrun them all, reach the forest, cross the river, get to the village on the other side. From there he could call a friend in Mthatha and ask for a ride into town. He would be on the bus back to Cape Town tonight.

He lunges past the seated men. But then Tata Sandile thrusts out his stick. He has too much momentum to avoid it—it catches his ankle and sends him flying sideways into the wall of the nearby hut.

Noise cuts out. He is underwater like he has jumped off the cliff. He can only hear tinkling subaquatic sounds as he sinks deeper into the ocean. He lies curled and small on the ground. Rough hands grab at his shirt. Someone twists his arms behind his back. He has a glimpse of Tata Sandile waving a fist at him.

The sun bites hard into his eyes. An ache pushes on his left temple. Tendrils of pain radiate across his skull. A few men lead him across the grass to a small square

building. They shove him through the doorway, slamming the door behind him. He skids across the mud floor. A bolt scrapes across the door.

He lays back against the wall, his head spinning. A trickle runs across his cheek. He licks the corner of his mouth. A metallic taste rolls across his tongue. He runs his hand over his face to feel the damage. Underneath the tail of his brow, he touches a stickiness—his skin has split from colliding with the wall. He is thirsty, having walked in the hot sun on the way to the chief's house. In the poor light, he sees his shirt has a streak of blood on his chest. Another shirt ruined.

He chuckles darkly. Of course. This is how it was always going to end. He's been naive to think he might find a way to fit back into the village. The chief has been waiting for his moment all along. How had Khanya not seen it? An invitation to join a meeting with the chief—it had been a trap.

The room is small and dark, filled with bundles of thatching grass. He kicks at a pile of grass and a bundle falls over. Dust flies into his nostrils and he sneezes several times, each sneeze stabbing at his head. In front of his eyes, jagged neon lines cut across his vision. The lines dance evilly in front of him. He liked the lights as a child. It was only when he was older that he associated them with what would come next—his brain pulsing against his skull, the sun spearing his eyes, the dizziness and nausea. A sick feeling crawls into his stomach—nothing will ever be good again. He's had the feeling before, but this time, locked up and accused of murder, it feels warranted.

If he could only stop the aching pulse in his temple, he could think through how to get out of here. Maybe whoever poisoned Caleb would turn themselves in. Would Tia? He doubts it. They are always locking up Black people for things they haven't done in the US. He imagines her getting away with it, driving in a convertible, laughing like in a

movie. He rolls over, clasping his head in his hands to hold his skull together. He doesn't really think Tia did it.

And Lwazi—he doubts Lwazi did it either. But Lwazi, murderer or not, has chosen the chief's side. He licks at the corner of his mouth again and the sharp taste iron hits his tongue. The red-meat want makes his mouth pool. He spits, disgusted.

Tata will have heard by now. He will be trying to get him out. Or will he? He might be so disappointed in him that he won't help him. When he was younger and had done wrong, Tata would make him sleep outside. His mother would sneak some blankets out for him. Tata has never been sympathetic towards him.

He kicks a bundle of thatch again, and it falls over with a rustle. This is Tata's fault. The chief might have left him alone, if not for Tata and Amplexica. Yes, the chief does not like Khanya because of Zuki. But the chief won that long ago. The chief is a man who was after what he wanted, and Tata was standing in the way of the pipeline. Now the chief had Khanya as leverage. But Tata was a hard man. He would not give in to save Khanya.

Hours later, after night falls, he slips into sleep. He dreams that he is Caleb. Lwazi creeps into the house with the arsenic, fills the bottle of whiskey, and comes back to see him die. Zuki is there too, laughing, wearing her school uniform. Khanya lays on the floor, frozen in a dead man's body, eyes pleading with them. The boomslang is wrapped around Lwazi's neck like a scarf.

Chapter 23

He wakes to the sound of the door opening. A man shuffles in carrying something.

Khanya's head is still pounding, his neck so sore he thinks he might not be able to move it.

"You?" Khanya lifts his head a few inches off the floor.

"Ulele kakuhle?" Lwazi asks.

"oh, I slept very well, brother," Khanya replies.

Lwazi sets a cup of water and a bowl of pap down on the floor.

Khanya eases himself up against the wall and drains the glass of water. It hurts his head to swallow.

Lwazi asks if he has a headache.

Khanya ignores him. He remembers how when the headaches first started (he was thirteen or so) Lwazi would come over and sit inside his family's rondavel, trying to speak with him while he lay down. After a while, Khanya would tell him to leave. He remembers the blissful texture of the quiet after he left— he could almost drink it in. But there was loneliness too. He would wait for Mama to come in, only to moan at her when she started moving the pots around for their evening meal.

"So you think I did it?" Khanya asks, picking up the bowl of pap.

"Why did you try to run yesterday?"

Khanya has no good answer for that. It was stupid to run. Although, if he had made it out the door, he would already be back in Cape Town, and he would not have thought it so stupid. Life is like that.

Lwazi gets up to leave.

"Did they pay you, Lwazi? To say I did it?"

The sun from the open door burns his eyes, and he hears the bolt turning in the lock. Now the door is closed, he regrets not asking to go outside. His bladder is tight like a balloon, and the only distraction from it is his thumping headache. He hasn't had a headache for years and now he has had two within a few weeks of each other. At least this headache has an obvious cause. His fingers run over the lump on his head where he collided with the wall. The other headache he had ten days or so ago came on for no reason. He went for a run and stopped to help Caleb on the building site. It came later that afternoon. Perhaps it had been hot and he had not had enough water.

He thinks of the volunteer house. That is what Caleb spent his last days on. Working on an ugly building. The structure is not even straight. The poor-quality wood, pale green and rough, pitted with old nails. Caleb, his palms covered in splinters.

Through the pain of his headache, the answer comes in a burst, so fast and clear his breath snags in the back of his throat. A chill runs over him. He staggers to his feet, his head shrieking in protest. He bangs on the door, and, hearing the sound his fist makes on the wood, winces.

"Lwazi!" he shouts.

He paces around the room. How had he not thought of it before! He bangs on the door again, hoping Lwazi is still there, guarding him.

Khanya hears Lwazi grumble on the other side of the door. He smiles in relief, and he can't tell if it's because he needs to piss or he's just happy to be able to tell someone about Caleb. He yells that he needs to relieve himself.

The bolt moves and the sound makes his bladder lurch hopefully.

As soon as the door opens, he passes Lwazi and unzips his trousers. He leans one hand against the wall outside the hut in relief.

Lwazi says his piss stinks.

"I've been holding it in for hours. Plus I've hardly had any water," he says defensively. He zips up his trousers. "Now to the toilet."

Lwazi groans, glancing around. "Don't try anything."

"I won't." Lwazi is bigger than him, but Khanya has always been faster. Khanya can run, but now he knows what happened, he wants to tell someone. Besides, if he ran now, the whole village would be after him. The image of the boy from the bus, head swollen like a pumpkin and limbs all wrong comes to him and he shakes his head to make it go away.

Lwazi walks behind him to the outhouse, so close he can feel his breath on the back of his neck.

When he is seated on the toilet, he says, "I know what happened." The pain of his headache is different now, like running, like a good kind of hurt.

"Lwazi?"

"Ewe," he says warily.

"I figured it out."

"You're crazy."

Khanya laughs.

"Hurry up," Lwazi says. "I don't want the chief to see us out here."

"He would rather me take a shit in his hut? I guess he has so many huts he doesn't mind. I hope they're paying you. Why did they pick you to watch me?"

Lwazi says that he refused, but the chief said then he must be guilty. He was a friend of Khanya's after all. So Lwazi had agreed to do it to prove his innocence.

Khanya kicks the latrine door open with a bang. The sound ricochets in his head like a gunshot, but he doesn't mind.

Lwazi whips his head around, looking over to the chief's house which is lit up.

He ambles back to the hut to irk Lwazi.

Lwazi sighs in relief when he passes through the doorway.

"One more thing."

"No," Lwazi says, moving to close the door.

"Wait! I kept my promise. I was a good prisoner."

Lwazi hesitates.

"My father."

Lwazi's face softens.

"I'll tell you what happened to Caleb. All you have to do is tell my father. Then I can get out of here." When they were boys Lwazi had always followed him everywhere, copied him, agreed to all his plans. Khanya holds his breath, waiting.

Lwazi bites his lip.

Khanya takes a breath. "Caleb had only been living in the village for a short while but not everyone liked him. Take you, for example. Caleb fired you, and you needed the money. You were never happy that the volunteer house was on your land. If you killed Caleb, you would get the land back."

"Hayi, Khanya. I thought you were going to tell me what happened," he growls. Lwazi says he wishes Khanya hadn't come back—he was living a peaceful life before Khanya returned.

"Of course it wasn't you," Khanya says, dismissing the thought with a wave of his hand. "I am not the kind of man who suspects his friend of murder."

Lwazi looks at him darkly.

"There is Tia," Khanya continues. She would have been in the best position to poison Caleb, and she was conveniently away when he died.

Lwazi nods and says that she was the one who brought the iGqirha's chicken back from the beach, which was why all of this had happened.

Khanya says it wasn't Tia either. But there is Howard, who was mad at Caleb—he thought Caleb reported him to the police over the coppers. And Vuyo too, who spent the most time with Caleb, and who also had a secret he didn't want anybody to know. Khanya stops pacing and examines the wall. Two geckos are fighting—one has the other one by the tail.

"What secret?" Lwazi asks.

Khanya tells him how Vuyo stole money from Green Hub, how he'd been gambling, and as he got further and further into debt he gambled more and more, trying to recover the costs. When Caleb finally found out, the project was bankrupt. Caleb had to make up the losses. That's why he fired Lwazi from the garden and why he was doing the building without any help. The project had run out of money, and he felt responsible.

Lwazi glances away and then looks back at him cautiously. "Vuyo?"

"Ewe, brother, there he is pointing fingers when he is a thief."

"So you think it was Vuyo?"

"No."

"You're playing games with me now," Lwazi says.

"You know how Caleb was building? All day and night? He was working hard, drinking, not taking care of himself. I went to help him one time, he was building with some cheap wood he'd got in town, old scrap wood. It was the wood that killed Caleb."

Lwazi looks at him for a moment, and then he laughs, his twisted teeth showing.

"The wood?"

Khanya crosses his arms. He tells Lwazi that the wood was treated with arsenic—that's why it had that pale green color. Caleb was working all day and night breathing it in, covered in sawdust and splinters, and he was drinking too. Khanya told Lwazi how he had a friend whose kidneys got damaged, working with treated wood with no ventilation. Khanya got a bad headache from working with the wood for a short time, and Caleb had been at it for almost a week.

"You need a better story than that to get you out of here. Besides, you're always getting headaches."

"I don't care if you don't believe me. Tell my father. He'll tell the police."

"Hayi, Khanya. I can't. And anyway, if it's true he got sick from the wood, why did he not shout for help? I was right there..." Lwazi trails off, his face drooping.

Khanya says gently that perhaps he waited too long and was too weak and confused. Or maybe he was stubborn and didn't want help.

"It still doesn't answer who destroyed the weed." Lwazi stands up and moves toward the door.

Khanya grabs at the back of Lwazi's jacket, spinning him around. "Do you want to see me go to jail, Lwazi?"

"If you did it, yes," Lwazi says, pushing him away.

He seizes the neck of Lwazi's jacket with both hands. Lwazi's eyes widen in fear, and in them, Khanya can see what he sees—a murderer, capable of anything, and above all that, a stranger. His mouth dries out, he loosens his grip. Lwazi ducks out of his hold and runs for the door. The bolt scrapes closed again. Then it is just the sounds of the night—the cicadas, the wind, and a donkey braying.

Chapter 24

"I'm not going to leave, if he's still locked up," Tia says, flinging the hotel bedroom door open. "I'll cancel my flight."

Anna nearly comes inside Tia's room, but then stops and leans against the doorway.

Tia picks up her backpack from next to the bed, flips it upside down, and shakes it violently. A golden washbag, a tangle of cords, and balls of socks fall out. An electric toothbrush clatters to the floor, and Tia bends to pick it up.

"You could meet Caleb's parents if you stay," Anna says.

Tia freezes, toothbrush in hand, and stares at her. "Why are you so obsessed with me meeting his parents?"

Anna shrugs and says they're nice people. It might bring her some closure.

"Why did you even come here, if you and Caleb were broken up?"

She says the breakup wasn't so clear-cut. Plus, Caleb's family is like her own.

They were together for four years after all.

"So were you broken up, or not?" Tia asks, brandishing her toothbrush.

"Does it matter now?"

Tia lays down on the bed on top of her pile of things, her feet resting on the half-empty backpack. She puts her hand over her eyes. "I'll move back to the volunteer house. I'm sick of this hotel."

"You could. I guess it's safe now that Khanya—"

"He didn't do it, Anna. How many times do I have to say it?" she says, getting up from the bed.

"We don't know that."

Tia slams the door in her face.

She hears Anna's flip-flops flapping down the path.

Tia looks at her things on the bed, and then shoves everything back in her backpack, cinches the tie at the top closed, and hoists the bag onto her shoulders. It would take her twenty minutes to walk back to the volunteer house from the hotel. She struggles up the hill away from the hotel with her backpack, the weight digging into her shoulders. Her back dampens. All she needs to do is get Khanya out—then everything will be right, and her time here will make sense.

She has just put her bag down on the couch at the volunteer house when Lulama comes down the path and through the open front door. Tia greets her and Lulama looks behind her, as if she is being followed. Lulama comes into the house and closes the door. She is out of breath like she has been running.

"Water?" Tia asks.

Lulama nods, squeezing her eyes shut.

"You okay?" Tia asks, handing over a glass.

"Tia, you shouldn't be here." She says, drinking the water quickly so some of it splashes darkly onto her pink t-shirt.

She tells Lulama she is tired of the hotel.

Lulama shakes her head. She tells Tia she needs to leave, go back home.

"Why?"

Lulama says she's been at a community meeting and people are saying she is a witch.

Tia stares at her.

"That's what they are saying," she glances out the window.

Tia blinks. "Well, I don't care what people say. I can't leave until things with Khanya are resolved."

"But..." Lulama casts her eyes as if looking for something. "But it's Khanya, who says you're the witch."

"What? Why would he say that? I'm trying to get him out." But then she remembers that she has no plan to help him.

"People do bad things to witches," she says.

"It must be a misunderstanding," Tia says. She uncinches the top of her backpack so she can unpack. She is friends with Khanya. He would not accuse her of anything. But she thinks of what Khanya had said when the driver had cut him off, how he liked revenge.

"People will think you killed Caleb," Lulama says.

"Me?" She laughs.

Lulama grabs her forearm. Her hand is clammy with sweat, and her fingernails dig into her skin. She looks at Lulama's hand on her forearm. Tia sinks onto the couch, her chest tightening. Will people really think she killed Caleb? And even if they do, will anything happen to her? It seems impossible. She is an American citizen after all. But what does it mean, to be an American all the way out here? She thinks of returning to the hotel and asking Anna to take her to the airport. But now that she has slammed the door in her face, it seems like a big thing to ask.

"I can't go," she says. "How would I get to the airport?"

"Howard will take you."

She looks at Lulama's expectant face, the way her neck juts out waiting for her answer. Her flight is tomorrow morning. She could stay in a hotel near the airport tonight and be on her flight first thing tomorrow morning. Tia nods.

Lulama picks up her backpack before she can change her mind and walks back down the path. Tia looks around the house for a few moments. She is gripped by a feeling of wanting to take something with her. In Caleb's room, his things are still laid out on the bookshelf like items on an altar. She cannot bring herself to touch them. She runs to the garden. The mango tree in the middle of the yard, the plastic chair, the red cord cushion. None of it is sensible to take. She opens the door of the outdoor shower. There is nothing there except a slim sliver of soap. It is not hers, it has been worn down by Caleb's body. She slips the soap into her pocket and then runs to catch up to Lulama.

When they are on the way to the cottages, she remembers the tire. Would Howard have fixed it by now?

"I'm not sure if Howard will drive me. It's so far," she says to Lulama.

"He will."

"But Howard accused me of reporting him."

Lulama glances at her and says she told him not to go to the volunteer house, but he wouldn't listen.

She does not want to get a ride with Howard. It would be better to walk back to the hotel and ask Anna. But it feels hard to get out of Lulama's plan.

Lulama returns her bag when they get outside Howard's cottage. Then she tells Tia to wait. The truck is parked in the same spot it was the night she came. Tiny rubber hairs grow out of the new tire.

Lulama is talking to Howard on the porch. Howard carefully hands over a bundle of blankets. He goes inside and comes back with keys.

"Howzit," he nods to her, without looking at her.

"Hey," Tia says.

"Well, get in if you need a ride," Howard says. He takes her bag around to the back of the car.

Lulama's arms are full of Khanyiswa and the blankets, and Tia hugs them both. "Go well, Tia," Lulama says.

Tia keeps her eyes on the side view mirror and watches as the village slips away from her. The tightness in her chest eases a bit. She almost laughs. Accused of being a witch! The whole thing is a story alright—isn't that the whole point of traveling, to come back with a good story? She imagines telling her friends what has happened back home. But it is hard to imagine telling them. There seems to be something in it that she has done wrong, although she can't think what it is.

Howard clears his throat and says that he shouldn't have come to Tia's house the other day. Especially after how she helped Lulama.

He glances at her quickly, then squints back at the road.

"You don't have to apologize, she says. "I punctured your tire."

"Yussus, that was you? Why the hell did you do that?"

She shrugs and puts her feet up on the glove box. She doesn't feel like getting into it.

He asks if she knows what a hassle it was to get a new tire from town when you couldn't drive anywhere. She sticks her hands in her pockets. There is a waxy residue in the right pocket. Caleb's soap is already cracked into little shards.

Howard says he would make her get out of the car now if she hadn't helped Lulama. He tells her was on a business trip when the baby was born, it was bad timing.

"Sure," she says. She feels better, having told him, and the silence in the car is almost comfortable. The landscape falls into a rhythm, the hills rolling out behind them. Another car approaches. As the car drives towards them, Howard slows down. Through the windscreen, she can see an older man and a woman. The woman has dyed red hair, and the man is thickset and bald. They are peering into the road as if trying to see the future.

They are Caleb's parents, she is sure of it. They look so ordinary and afraid. She turns to Howard, and he looks the same, the pale of his neck showing beneath a dark tan. She glances in the side mirror and then looks away from her reflection. She is no different than them.

Out of the passenger window, she can see the river, the mangroves far below. The tide is high, and she remembers how she lay there when the tide was low. She thinks how everything is always changing and there is nothing she can do—she thinks of the wave that pinned her down and did not care about her, she thinks of how Amplexica will extract the oil from the village and ruin it, and then that will be over too. She thinks of how the arctic is warming, the soil thawing and releasing more methane, the ice sheets melting, the ocean becoming acidic. There is no way of stopping any of it. She thinks how provisional it all is, how it doesn't really matter that Caleb died, how her individual adventure, the minutia and particulars of her story, mean nothing in the face of it all.

She had come to the village because she wanted something, some kind of experience that would make her unique. So had Caleb, and he ended up dead. Beth was right all along, to want simple things. They hit a large pothole and the car jerks. The surprise of it makes her feel a sudden cold. The thoughts begin to evaporate, like waking from a dream and only remembering a shadow of it. She is left thinking about Beth, how it will be spring in San Francisco, and when she makes it home they will lie in the park together, drinking cappuccinos from her favorite cafe.

Chapter 25

"Did you tell my father?" Khanya asks when Lwazi unlocks the door late that night.

"Shhh..." Lwazi says. He swings a blanket through the opening of the door and then shuts the door again.

Khanya feels around for where he heard the dull thud of the blanket hit the floor. He wraps it around himself and leans against the wall. He sniffs the blanket. He can smell Tata and the staleness of his own body wafting up as he moves the blankets. Lwazi had gone to see Tata and he sent Lwazi away with the blanket. He can smell himself and Tata, different but the same, mixed on the fabric of the blanket. From the thick cotton, he can tell it is not just any blanket. He is eighteen again, wrapped in this same blanket, face tight with clay, weak and wondering if he could survive the pain that radiated from between his legs. He remembers how time went in incremental moments, so it felt he lived a whole life, although it was only a matter of days. And then it was over, and he was a man.

He sleeps better with the blanket. It isn't until the roosters begin to crow that he fully wakes. From a crack in the door, a few stars are still visible in the dawn sky. He does sets of push-ups. The blood pounds in his head, but he can tell his headache is subsiding. The muscles in his calves yearn to run, and he paces around the tiny room. Eight steps to each wall. He sits down and wraps himself in the blanket again. Light creeps under the door, and he sees the blanket is not his family's at all. He tears it off.

What if he does not get out of this? Who is he, in this room? A mind that bounces around incessantly, a body that cannot run. He does not like himself. Or perhaps there is nothing to him, not much of a self to like or dislike. There is a blankness to him that he has not known before.

Lwazi has not come. He pees in the corner of the room, the smell of urine rising hotly to him. The floor is uneven and his urine creeps inwards to the middle of the room. He zips up his jeans and moves to the opposite wall.

The morning passes and Khanya studies the room, the rafters. In the dim light that comes from the crack under the door, he can see the bunches of straw stacked hopefully in the corner, the knots in the wood of the roofing poles. The two fighting geckos have both lost their tails and retreated to different corners.

The door jangles when the sun is beaming brightly under the door. A very big man comes in. The air smells fresh, and he catches a glimpse of the outside—the sun sparkling off cars parked in the middle of the yard, a flock of chicks running around the tires. The man carries over a bowl of samp and beans, and the bowl looks small in his hands. He asks the big man where Lwazi is. The man closes the door.

His chest is tight, like the feeling of being underwater, endlessly paddling up to the surface. He cannot spend another night in this hut. He tries to sleep to make the time pass.

Later, the bolt rattles, and the door is flung wide open. The big man comes in with another man, Thando, who he recognizes from school. Thando unwraps some rope and tells him to give him his wrists.

"What now?" Khanya asks.

Thando does not look at him, but he ties the rope loosely around his wrists.

"Thando, remember me?"

The big man grabs him by the shoulder and pushes him toward the door.

He blinks. He can smell the cows and the grass, the cooking fires.

The big man keeps a heavy hand on his shoulder and leads him over to the bakkie.

"Get in," he says.

Khanya hesitates. Where are they taking him? To Mthatha, where he might be arrested and put in jail? To the river, to drown him?

The big man elbows him between the shoulder blades. Khanya steps up onto the tire and swings his leg into the dust-lined bed of the truck. Thando takes the loose end of the rope attached to Khanya's hand and ties it to the roll bar. Then the big man hauls himself into the bakkie and sits against the wheel cab across from Khanya.

Khanya asks the man where his umbilical cord was buried. The man says he is from a nearby village. He is a cousin of Thando's. The engine starts, and they bump across the grass and onto the road. Khanya asks if all his family is so big, and he says on his mother's side, yes. His dad was a small man.

They both laugh, and the man's whole face changes.

Khanya yanks on his wrists. "Tell me where we are going," he says.

The big man looks away, his old face coming back, and tells him they aren't going far.

Khanya is relieved when they stop outside the old church building. There are a few kids and a shiny red BMW at the front entrance. Thando gets out and unties the rope from the roll bar, and shoves his shoulder again. They walk up the slight incline to the church.

He blinks as he comes in, the darkness sudden. When his eyes adjust, he can see

that the church is packed with people. Thando undoes the rope on his hands.

"You look terrible," Lulama says, appearing next to him. She whispers something to her brother and he hands him an old one-liter bottle filled with water. Khanya takes gulps of water until he has drained half of it.

Lulama tells him that the American from Amplexica is here to meet with the community, but Tata and Amila had convinced the community that they cannot start the meeting until they know what is happening with him. Nobody likes that he was locked up like that, she says, then she adds that maybe he will finally marry Amila now that she has saved him.

Khanya sees Tata stand up. "I am glad to see my son is out of the chief's prison. When did it become the chief's position to lock people up? I believe my son is here now to tell us what happened to Caleb," Tata says.

So Lwazi had told Tata about the wood after all. He opens his mouth, and his voice creaks. He coughs and starts again. "The wood poisoned Caleb," Khanya says.

The room is very quiet. Someone sneezes.

Then Lwazi stands up. Lwazi says he knows what happened. He tells the story of how Tia brought back the iGqirha's chicken from the beach, how the snake appeared, and then Caleb died. Lwazi says perhaps Tia is to blame for Caleb's bad luck.

Lulama heads for the door, sliding past people with baby Khanyiswa on her back.

Tata Sandile stands. Khanya touches his temple and thinks of Tata Sandile's stick, how he shook his fist at Khanya. Tata Sandile had always been a friend of the family, but now Khanya was not sure what he would say. "We all know the chief does not like Khanya. But Khanya has paid for what he did long ago. The chief thinks he is the police now, that's what our community is saying. If the case involves blood, it's the police's job,

not the chief's."

Then Tata rises and says that the chief sent someone to visit him the other night. They told him to stop opposing Amplexica or else they would hurt Khanya.

People break out into conversation. The American clears his throat loudly, and the chief stands up. "Let us talk about important matters that we have all come to discuss," the chief says. "Amplexica has come to speak with us about the pipeline and the opportunities for our village."

The American jumps up from his seat. He is thin like a stick and talks quickly, saying he is happy to announce that the project has been approved. He knows they will have many questions about this exciting opportunity, and they will be answered all in good time.

"Who has approved it?" someone shouts from the door.

A fisherman says that Amplexica is trying to drive all the fish away, and how will they eat if there are no fish? Mama Nokuzola asks who would buy oysters from her if there were no tourists and the oysters were contaminated? Someone else asks what kind of village they are leaving their children. Another person says that it is a lie that there will be jobs, and Tata Sandile says that he will not allow anyone to dig up his ancestors' graves to put a pipeline in. Nine's mother stands up and says what about the ancestors who live in the ocean—her son is now there too.

The American holds up his hand, smiling. "As I said, all your questions will be answered in good time. But let's be clear about one thing—this meeting is not about whether we should do the project or not. The project has been approved, and all the correct procedures have been followed." Vuyo translates what the man from Amplexica has said, and the crowd grumbles.

The American speaks again, and Vuyo translates, saying the project is good for the community.

"Who is this man, who thinks he knows what's good for us?" Mama Nokuzola asks.

Amila shouts "Down with the people who sell our land!"

The crowd shouts back "Down!"

"Down with the people who pollute our land!"

"Down!"

The Amplexica man gets off the small stage at the front of the church and begins to walk quickly towards the door, then he runs.

The crowd begins to sing, "We are fighting for this land, the land of our ancestors."

"Stop them!" the chief says to Vuyo.

But Vuyo just watches as the crowd drifts out into the bright sunlight, singing. The crowd circles around the red BMW. They can see the Amplexica man frantically putting the car into gear, stalling. A cheer goes up as he pulls onto the road and drives away.

Tata comes and stands beside Khanya, laughing quietly. "Come, let's go home," he says.

When they get home, Tata makes him a sugary cup of tea. "You had one of your headaches?"

Khanya nods. "It's better now. Do I look that bad?"

"Your eyes are pinched. And you were walking slower than me on the way home."

Khanya laughs. The heaviness of the time in the dark hut is lifting off him. Tata is

standing there in his too-big trousers, looking tired. He wonders if Tata has been taking his pills while he was locked up. He stands.

“Where are you going? Tata asks.

He tells him there is something he needs to do.

Tata says if he sees Lwazi not to be too hard on him. He helped in his way. Lwazi went around telling people that Tia was a witch, and that was why Caleb died. It was a good distraction from Khanya.

When Tata leaves, he searches for his sports bag. He unzips the bag and takes out the gun, and tucks it into his waistband. The gun presses uncomfortably into his hip as he walks up the hill. He goes around the back of the volunteer house and finds the shovel in the shed. He wonders what will happen to the house and all the tools. He throws the shovel over his shoulder. Lwazi calls to him as he is leaving the volunteer house. He is outside repairing his fence.

"You're out now," Lwazi says.

"Not thanks to you." Khanya jabs the shovel into the earth.

Lwazi starts saying that they threatened to arrest him for the weed if he didn't cooperate. Besides, it was Tia's fault. She brought the chicken into the garden and that was when everything went wrong. And the story about the wood, who would ever believe that was what killed Caleb? Lwazi says he is sorry about the weed and how it didn't work out, sorry he went along with Vuyo and the chief. Lwazi says he hadn't meant it, about how he wished Khanya hadn't come back. Khanya was his best friend.

Khanya looks away.

If there is something he can do to make it up to Khanya, he will. Lwazi's eyes look damp.

Khanya puts his hand on the barbed fence, letting the rusted wire push into the meat of his palm. The hard heat inside his chest fades. He tells Lwazi there is one thing he can help him with before he goes, he's on his way to do it right now.

They spend the afternoon digging a hole in the dunes. When the sun is low in the sky, Khanya goes to find Lilo. Lilo comes easily, although his legs falter down the steep slopes.

Lwazi walks Lilo into the hole. Khanya holds Lilo's head close to his chest. His warm muzzle rests on his naval. He eyes a space between Lilo's ears and draws a line slightly further down.

After they arrange Lilo in the hole, Khanya stands sweating over the body. He drops the gun in the hole too. The incident on the bus seems a long time ago—it took him too long to put Lilo down, but he is grateful for the gun. Otherwise, Lilo would have gone on suffering.

They pile sand on top of Lilo, until it looks like a horse made of sand, and then just a pit of sand, and then a small dune. They walk silently back up the hill.

"He was a good horse," Lwazi says when they are outside his gate.

"Better than your donkey."

Lwazi laughs. "I could never catch you and Lilo."

Khanya clears his throat, and tells him if he leaves soon, and walks to the turnoff, he might still catch a taxi to town.

"Wait a minute," Lwazi says, ducking inside his house.

Khanya waits for him. Lwazi's piglets have grown. They root in the grass nearby, tails swinging.

When Lwazi comes back out, he hands over a light package and tells him to open it later.

Khanya goes back to pack. His duffel bag seems lighter than what he'd come with. He opens Lwazi's package. Inside is another plastic, and inside that another plastic. He looks down into the last bag. It is full of weed. Lwazi managed to salvage some of the buds, or maybe he harvested it before it was destroyed. He smiles. He ties the plastics tightly and shoves the package underneath his clothes in the duffel bag.

There is only one thing left he needs to do before he goes, and that is to tell Tata he was leaving.

He turns around, his bag over his shoulder. There is a figure in the doorway and he jumps

Tata chuckles.

Khanya lowers his bag and shields it behind his legs.

"So you're leaving," Tata says.

"Tata, I—"

Tata holds up his hand. "If you want to go, I won't stop you."

Khanya wants to say that it isn't that he wants to go. It is more that he can't stay. That there is part of him born to Tata and this village and another part born to himself. He wants to tell Tata that if he could go back in time he would think about never leaving, that was where all his problems started, going to school in town, dreaming big, going to Cape Town to make money to marry Zuki. Once he left the village there was no way of ever coming back to it fully.

"I'll be back soon, Tata," he says, not sure if he meant it.

"Back for my funeral, I suppose."

"Tata, don't be like that."

"Be like what? I'm saying it how it is." Tata looks around at the rondavel, taking in the fresh coat of paint. For the most part, you did well," he says. "I wish your mother could have seen it."

"I'll miss the last taxi," he says, putting the bag across his shoulder.

"I'll keep it nice for when you come back," he says, reaching out to touch one of the walls.

Tata's hand on the wall is an old man's hand, someone who has no way of going back and changing things in the past. All that is left is what is coming, and for that, there are just the two of them. He hugs Tata, who grips him and then pushes him away roughly.

Then he is leaving, running down the hill. Whiskey follows behind him, and for once he doesn't call the dog off.

Mama Nokuzola is out in her garden, and she calls to him. "You're leaving already?"

He tells her he's going back to Cape Town. She calls to Amila, and Amila appears in the doorway. Something catches in his throat when he sees her, and he swallows. She walks towards him, her arms crossed, like she doesn't really want to see him.

"So you're leaving?"

He shifts his bag to his other shoulder and nods.

She glances down, her brow furrowing.

For the first time, he wondered if he should be leaving.

"Cape Town," she said. "The village was never good enough for you."

His head went back in surprise. "It's not that. You know I can't stay, I'm not wanted here."

She smiled faintly and raised her eyebrows, like she didn't believe him.

All at once he's not sure if it's true either. He has been so fixated on seeing Zuki again, like if he had seen her, it would set something right, put the past behind him. But Amila is looking at him like she wants him to stay, and things do feel right. Nobody is making him leave.

He cleared his throat. "You could come with me if you want, to Cape Town."

She laughed, her eyes suddenly shining. "You know I would never leave."

"I know."

She nods down the road. "You better go or you'll miss the bus."

He swings the sports bag across his back and waves to her. Then he begins to run.

Whisky nips at his ankles like a pup, and Khanya knows he will be back soon.

Epilogue

Eastern Cape Village Triumphs over American Gas Company's Controversial Drilling Plans

Residents of a village in the Eastern Cape of South Africa have successfully fought against American gas company Amplexica and their plans to drill for oil off the coast and build a pipeline through the village. The proposed pipeline would have polluted the precious marine environment, introduced the risk of oil spills offshore, and required digging up graves to make way for the pipeline.

The drilling and pipeline project was deemed unlawful because it disregarded the Integrated Coastal Management Act, which mandates considering the interests of the entire community. The communities on the Wild Coast have a spiritual and cultural connection to the ocean. The ruling found that Amplexica did not properly consult with the community to understand how the drilling and pipeline would impact them. While Amplexica argued that consultations were done with traditional leaders in the community, the ruling stated that “a chief is not a stand-in for an entire community” and that the approach Amplexica took was not democratic.

The community came together to raise awareness and voice their concerns about the proposed project. They also took legal action to challenge the approval of the project, ultimately leading to its cancellation. This is a major victory for the

village, highlighting the need for proper consideration of the cultural and spiritual significance of the land for indigenous communities. Activist groups are proclaiming it a “victory for the people, a victory for the planet.”

However, many in the community do not consider it a victory. Lwazi Bhule, a resident of the village, said he was looking forward to the jobs the project would bring. He wants to stay in the village and see his daughter grow up, but he will likely leave and try to find a job in Cape Town or Johannesburg now that Amplexica has dropped plans to invest. Another resident, Nobomi Nokuzola says she is glad the village stopped Amplexica. She lives off the land and ocean, relying on tourists to buy her oysters. But she wishes Amplexica had never come. Now people don't trust the chief, and the community is divided.

The legal challenge received international attention. Intrigue in the case rose earlier this year when Caleb Anderson, an American representing the non-profit Green Hub in the community, was found dead. Mr. Anderson's untimely death does not seem to be linked to Amplexica, despite activists claiming the opposite. When contacted, Tia Davis, a former volunteer who was working on the project with Mr. Anderson, declined to comment on his death. However, in regard to the village's victory, she said she didn't think the community could win and she felt better living in a world where something like that could happen.

The End