

The Valley of the Kings

By

Taryn Laing Cox

For Philip

“Boom! Boom! Boom!

I hear it far in the northern skies –

a rumble and a roar as of thunder.”

(Oswald J. Mtshali, *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*)

“I knew then that I was close to strange things which were evil and of blood and the moon and magic fires.”

(*Wizards' Country* by Daphne Rooke.)

Chapter One

She found them hanging in a tree, the entrails. Hooked between the trunk and a low hanging branch. It was the smell that drew her – the sweet pungency of decay – and the smell, thrust in her nostrils, that haunts her still. Death jeered at Elizabeth that day. Shoved its fingers under her nose. Commanded her attention.

She knew instinctively what she had stumbled upon. The foresters were always talking about their *findings* in the Eucalyptus plantations, and the conversation at Friday night braais inevitably turned to rumours of witchcraft. Flavoured and flambéed in brandy-and-coke. The police later confirmed what she had strangely known. They had found the corpse only a few metres off. Decapitated. Limbs removed.

Elizabeth was not the type of person given to panic. She reported the incident, she led the police to the site, she went home. The horror of a human being reduced to bits-and-pieces became just another part of her now familiar sadness. It had settled inside her like a cold dull weight ever since that first day she and her husband, Jim, had crossed the provincial border and settled in this strange sad place. Her walk in the forest passed into the realm of the surreal. But for that smell.

Her sleep was restless, and when she woke the next morning her head ached from the images that had flashed through her mind all night: flies dripping from trees, shrill screaming through the silver bark. She rolled across the emptiness of Jim's side of the bed, carefully picked up the Glock, and locked it away in the safe hidden under his bedside table. This was not a day for being haunted. Elizabeth gulped down some Panados and tea and tried phoning Jim on his cell phone – still no reception. If she didn't get to speak to him soon, this was going to be a very difficult week.

Deb picked Elizabeth up at eight-thirty. Already the Zululand heat pressed down on her breath, and it was with some reluctance that she climbed into Deb's clapped-out bakkie for the trip to Ulundi. Not that she wasn't grateful. Deb had taken her on as a journalist despite the fact that she had no training in the field. No-one else was handing out jobs to B.A. graduates with a major in English.

Deb was the most experienced journalist in the area. She had moved to rural Zululand twenty years before, giving up a flashy job in Jo'burg as a TV reporter to set up a tourism business with her husband. If the rumours were to be believed, the marriage had been a violent one; for five years Deb's husband beat her. After the divorce, she stayed in Zululand and spent the following fifteen years building up a news agency business – selling stories from hard-to-reach Zululand to newspapers and radio stations all over the country. She now had the only news agency in larger Zululand, and a staff of ten reporters and three administrators. Including Elizabeth, who'd stood in her office, with a B.A. and a husband, and no job. Elizabeth once asked Deb why she had employed her. Deb had two reasons. Elizabeth could write in English. And Deb felt sorry for her.

“Okay, plan of action: once we get to Ulundi we'll do some basic courtesy stuff, stop in and chat to some of my regular sources. We'll start with the cops – did you bring some lipstick?”

Elizabeth shook her head.

“In my bag, side pocket.”

She dutifully smeared the pink Revlon on her lips.

“Now I know there's going to be a settlement agreement signed at this small rural community in the Ulundi area. Ordinarily I wouldn't bother to check it out

because all the papers will send their own people, but I thought it would be a good idea for you to see some of the major political players. You know, put faces to names.”

Elizabeth’s head was beginning to throb again. She took a swig from her water bottle.

“I wouldn’t advise that.”

“Excuse me?”

“The water. Where we’re headed there won’t be toilets. You’d be amazed at the living conditions in these rural areas. Seriously, your best asset as a journalist in this area is excellent bladder capacity.”

Elizabeth closed the bottle of water and put it under her seat. “So first we visit the land claim celebration, then we stop in at Ulundi and flirt with policemen. We could be back by about three, then?”

Deb frowned at the hopeful tone in Elizabeth’s voice. She couldn’t understand her lack of enthusiasm for The Hunt.

“We’ll see how it goes. Actually I’m hoping we’ll have time to meet up with a dear friend of mine, Tobias Grant. He’s quite an anomaly: a white man who heads up an NGO dedicated to the upliftment of the local Zulu community. He’s not very popular with the powers that be, of course, but the Heritage Trust is almost exclusively funded by him. He also happens to be dedicated and super-competent, so the local politicians are having trouble getting rid of him.”

Elizabeth tried to be excited. She wanted so desperately for life in Zululand to work out. For that to happen, the job had to work out. For *that* to happen, she had to be more like Deb. Elizabeth gently shook her head. Deb thirsted for a good story. She was tenacious and persuasive. There wasn’t a police officer, public prosecutor, or

political official that could deny her when she wanted answers. And anyone who worked for Deb was required to be the same. Elizabeth's first days at the agency had been desperate ones. Elizabeth looked over at Deb. She was a striking woman; even the carelessness of her appearance couldn't hide that. Her simply cropped auburn curls, her green eyes, her very skin, seemed to be glowing with life. Elizabeth, however, didn't have the knack of being remarkable. She sighed. If it hadn't been for a lucky encounter with a local public prosecutor – equally desperate to leak information – Elizabeth wasn't sure she would still have a job.

Prosecutors weren't supposed to talk to the media ('Any statements about the case must come from the official spokesperson,' etc.) But Anita and Elizabeth had found they had something important in common: they were both new at their jobs and needed help. Anita wasn't new to law, but she was new to the regional court in Empangeni. She had, of course, as the newest member of the prosecution, been given the case no-one wanted. The community's sympathies were not with the Prosecutor's office, and biased reports from the local paper weren't helping. By the time Elizabeth came knocking on Anita's door – desperate, because Deb was buying for a story and the spokesperson didn't think Elizabeth was important enough to warrant the returning of calls and the giving of statements – she was willing to do anything. Swinging media bias a little in the other direction seemed a small price to pay for her first big story. They had become allies. And Elizabeth had begun to make inroads into this new world of poverty, and corruption, and socio-political campaigns.

As Deb and Elizabeth rattled along in the bakkie, Elizabeth's thoughts drifted to the body she'd found the day before. She just couldn't let the whole thing go. It wasn't the blood and gore of it that bothered her, it was the *deliberateness* – of hanging the innards near a path so they'd be found, of ripping a body to pieces so that

no-one could be identified. Method in the barbarism. In the name of gods. She didn't know how to call all of this Home. Elizabeth felt acutely that she was a foreigner here. It was as if there was a constant drumming in the distance – a Joseph Conrad drumming in some hidden heart of darkness – to remind her that she did not belong. A threat with each beat. Yet everyone was pretending they couldn't hear it.

They survived the battered dirt road and eventually found the small rural community where the land settlement agreement was to be signed. There were camera crews and journalists all milling around getting background shots and chatting to press secretaries while they waited for the political players to make their appearance. Deb introduced Elizabeth to one or two haggard-looking journalists before she discovered that the dignitaries were having lunch at the local school, and promptly marched off to gatecrash. Elizabeth had never, in all her life, felt so completely out-of-place.

Men in suits or traditional garb stood in groups around large, steaming three-legged pots. As Deb passed she would throw her hands in front of her face, bow her head slightly and greet them in Zulu. They were the only women and the only whites and “it doesn't hurt to at least pretend to know your place.” The smell of meat hung in the thick, hot air and Elizabeth's head was swimming with names and faces of important people smiling patronisingly at the little woman they clearly thought she was. She finally pleaded the need to find a toilet of some sort and hurried away, leaving Deb to the exhilaration of uncovering the next pearl of a story in the oyster of politics.

Elizabeth found her way back to the marquee and took a seat with the other journalists. It seemed impossible to her that so many people could be crammed into

such a small space. She felt a pang of guilt when she saw an old woman standing patiently in the sun whilst *she* wallowed in the relative luxury of shade and a reserved seat.

Suddenly screaming erupted from the crowd. The mass of people were dancing, singing, ululating, as the Heroes of their Cause made their way to the front of the makeshift room. That was nothing, however, compared to the hysteria that resulted at the entrance of the Inkosi, resplendent in traditional skins and old shoes. Elizabeth had never seen anything like it, and understood, momentarily, that one might do absolutely anything to hold on to the power that offered such uncompromising adoration.

“Ah, here you are. Good seats.” Deb slid into a chipped plastic chair next to Elizabeth. “Unfortunately most of the speeches will be in Zulu, so it’s usually pointless sitting through them. The best idea is to try and get a copy of the speeches beforehand. Even if they are in Zulu, you can always get them translated. Usually they’ll be handed out at the door.”

“Why are there so many major players here today? It seems somewhat incongruous to me, such a small place visited by so many important people.”

“In Zululand anything to do with land *is* important. Basically all the tribal land is governed by the king, but administered by the amakosi. This makes the amakosi pretty powerful – and the more land, the more powerful. Out here if you want to build a house on a piece of land you have to get permission from the relevant inkosi. This ‘permission’ is of course monetary and generally involves a life-long commitment to never pissing the guy off.”

Deb paused for a moment as she gazed at the Inkosi. A woman approached him on her knees carrying a jug of water. Head bowed, eyes fixed on the floor, she held

the jug up. The chief actually suffered the great inconvenience of pouring the water himself.

“Look, opinions are divided, but I’m one of those who feel that it is the traditional structures that keep the people in rural Zululand in such dire poverty. Any development in the area seems to make only the local leaders richer. The people’s lives never change significantly.”

Elizabeth looked around at the people listening so attentively to the speeches, and wondered what they really thought as they stared up at their leaders. Did they resent them? Were they afraid? Did they resent their traditions, their culture? Was it even possible to resent something so central to one’s understanding of oneself?

A beautiful young woman approached the journalists and camera crews in the first few rows, carefully balancing a tray of Fanta Orange. Elizabeth crossed her legs, trying to ignore the pressure in her bladder, and reached for a cup of juice. As she tilted the polystyrene cup to take a sip, she caught sight of the old woman, quietly patting her face and neck with a hanky before tucking it away in her bra. Elizabeth was paralysed by guilt. Every part of her being wanted to be as far away as possible from this place where she understood nothing. As it was, she simply sat in her chair, drinking Fanta, being twenty-five and female and white. And not belonging.

Elizabeth was beginning to feel sick again and felt indescribable relief when Deb finally indicated that they should leave. When they reached the bakkie, Elizabeth turned to look at the gathering behind her. From the faded marquee erected in the dust, a voice boomed through the air, the note of triumph unmistakable, whilst men and women stood bowed in the sun. Humbled, perhaps, by more than the heat.

“They’re building a monument.” His eyes were alive with light as he smiled down at Deb and Elizabeth. Ronnie was another young journalist who worked for Deb. He sold most of his stories to the local radio station, Usuthu FM.

“It’s going to be built overlooking the eMakhosini valley. You know eMakhosini?”

Deb looked annoyed. Elizabeth looked embarrassed. Ronnie was amused.

“It’s a valley near Ulundi where some of the Zulu kings are buried. Not, of course, Shaka and Dingane.”

“Of course,” Elizabeth said. She wasn’t sure she pulled it off.

“They will call it the Spirit of eMakhosini.” He waved a hand dismissively. “It is for the tourists.”

Deb looked interested. “Nice story. Do you know when the monument will be finished?”

He shrugged.

“Okay, well why don’t you and Elizabeth check it out? She needs to get to know the area.”

Ronnie frowned. Deb hadn’t waited for a response. She hadn’t really been asking a question.

Deb looked up from the papers she had been shuffling. “I took Elizabeth out to uMhlankosi today, for the land settlement celebrations. Makes you sick. Anyone with sense in their head knows the Inkosi had no legitimate claim to that land. The government was just shitting itself about the farm attacks - they were getting increasingly violent.”

Ronnie folded his arms. “I think the farmer was given a very good deal though. I will bet you that he has a good financial reward for his ‘generosity’. Besides, just how legitimate was *his* claim?”

“Okay, point taken. Look, let’s not get further into this. We can discuss it some other time, when we’re more inebriated.” She grinned at Ronnie then looked over at Elizabeth, standing quietly absorbing every word. “Anyway, I think our greenie has had more than enough politics for one day.”

Ronnie walked over to Elizabeth’s desk, moved some papers out of the way and sat down. There was something threatening in the gesture.

“So what did you think of our local leaders?”

She looked him in the eye, aware that she was being tested somehow. “I don’t know who was worse: the men strutting around like roosters or the sycophants trotting behind them.”

It was the right answer. He laughed.

Deb looked up from her papers. “Yes, the cocks and the arse kissers.” She chuckled to herself. “Ag, in the end they’re both harmless.”

“There were some people there I don’t think are that harmless, though.” Elizabeth had said it under her breath, afraid of what Deb and Ronnie would think of her, but Ronnie looked interested.

“Anyone in particular?”

“Yes. There was this one man. Fat. Bulbous eyes. He looked a bit like a bullfrog. *Amphibian. Can survive in water or on land. Cold blood.* Elizabeth shivered. “He sat just to the right of the Inkosi. He seemed so sure of his own power. The people cowered from him.”

Deb and Ronnie shared a significant look. Ronnie nodded at Elizabeth.

“Induna Mkhize.”

“You’re staying an extra day?” The line was scratchy. Elizabeth hoped that she had dropped some of the meaning in the spaces of static.

“I’m sorry, my love, wish... be home. Trust me. I think I should make... Saturday afternoon. How... you?”

“I’m feeling a bit intimidated by the job. I’m coping though. Jim? Can you hear me? Look something happened yesterday. I found a person, well, a body in the plantation. The cops – ”

“Dead! Another muthi killing? Holy... Elizabeth! You know... don’t... go walking alone... the forest!”

I was walking in the forest because I was alone.

There was nothing more to say, really. She just put down the phone.

Chapter Two

An elderly man suspected of witchcraft was killed in his home in Ndlovu reserve near St. Lucia on Sunday night. The deceased was shot by his attackers and his home was then burned to the ground.

Elizabeth could practically recite the opening words of the piece she had sent in that morning. She rolled the words around like warm, smooth stones. A compulsion. She couldn't resist pulling a printout of the story from her handbag. She didn't know why she had done this: printed a story she could no longer use, then folded it carefully, and slipped it into the recesses of her handbag. Just her little secret. She opened the folds of the smooth, white paper. Read:

In a community meeting in December last year, fifty-seven-year-old Vusimuzi Shandu was identified as practising witchcraft. It has been alleged that these suspicions of witchcraft motivated the attack on the deceased. Shandu and his grandson were asleep when three men allegedly kicked down the door and entered Shandu's home. One of the attackers shot the elderly man in the hip with a shotgun and then proceeded to burn down his house. Shandu's grandson emerged from the attack unscathed. The suspects are unknown and police are investigating both murder and arson.

“Are you always this quiet?” Ronnie briefly looked over at Elizabeth before returning his attention to the negotiation of the road.

Elizabeth smiled. They were driving out to the opening of a small school. Things had been quiet the last few days. The only stories Elizabeth had managed to send out were nothing more than glorified police reports. She was hoping that today's visit would amount to some 'real' journalism.

"Ronnie, are there always so many witchcraft killings in the area?"

He looked over at her. Frowned. "Why?"

"I've been checking out the police reports lately. There have been two murders of elderly people suspected of practising witchcraft this week alone. Is that normal? And if so, why? Is witchcraft a problem here?"

The questions spilled out of her. As if they had welled up in the quiet of the shadows on the wall, and now would not be held back by the guardedness of professional conduct.

"Why are you so interested in this *witchcraft*?" He mocked the Englishness of the word.

"Because no-one talks about it. Not really. It's just this *thing* that Zululanders bring up in conversation, mention in police reports. As if it is not frightening, as if people aren't actually *dying*." Her voice cracked. *Oh god*. She took a deep breath. Stared out of the window. Calmer, she turned to Ronnie. "Talk to me, Ronnie. Explain."

"It is not so easy to explain. For you this is just *information*. A tangle, a knot you want to smooth out into nice neat lines. But sometimes information is dangerous. For me this is... sensitive."

The bakkie lurched over another hole in the road. They drove through the plumes of dust. Between them now was this struggle of strangers connecting. They

understood the heaviness of this truth that needed to be told. Elizabeth held on to the silence. Ronnie quietly wrestled with the power of fiction.

“Shandu that was killed. He was an old friend of my grandmother’s.”

She opened her mouth to offer apologies, but he waved her words back into their place.

“He was not a *witch*.” He gave Elizabeth a sardonic glance. Sighing, he returned his focus to the road. “He was not even a sangoma. There has been much death and sadness in the community. A lot of the people are afraid, and fear does strange things to people. They see shadows where there are none.”

“Why are they so afraid?”

“Sometimes the community seems cursed. It could be a drought or illness or something.”

Elizabeth could feel the force of his words fading. She could sense the familiar evasiveness surfacing in him. “Ronnie. What is it that is making them feel cursed? What?”

He gripped the wheel. “People are dying. The killings are obviously for muthi.”

They came to a stop. Proceedings had already begun. A small choir of schoolchildren, all barefoot and smiling, were entertaining the crowd. Elizabeth sighed. She didn’t think she could stomach another afternoon of this: white faces aglow with their own benevolence; black chests puffed out, full of a sense of their own heroism.

Ronnie uncurled his lanky frame from Deb’s bakkie. Slammed the door. He marched towards the gathering. His jacket flapped madly with the force of his stride. Elizabeth gathered her notebook. Closed the door on her third try. She wondered

briefly about leaving the bakkie unlocked, then made her way to the back of the crowd.

The people standing around her were chattering loudly. Elizabeth felt sorry for the little ones, performing with enthusiasm for the crowd. She hated it when people were inconsiderate like that, but she knew that it was The Way Things Are Done. She swallowed her irritation. A woman to the left of her had a baby on her back. The baby smiled at Elizabeth. She winked back.

The talking became more of a mumble. The speeches had begun. Elizabeth was going to have to find Ronnie. She apologetically skirted around the edges of the crowd and made her way to the front. Ronnie, armed with digital camera, had positioned himself directly in front of the lectern, with its shiny brass plaque glinting. Elizabeth didn't think she could crouch like that in her jeans. She decided to wait for him to finish.

“I saw you arrive with Ronnie.”

Elizabeth snapped around. A man was standing behind her. Smiling. He had the distinct look of Father Christmas.

“Yes. Elizabeth Clarke. I work for Deb Turner at the Agency.” She wasn't sure if she should offer her hand. She smiled, made a tentative jerk with her right hand, thought better of it, hoped like hell he had been looking at her smile. Ronnie saved her. Curled like a comma, he shuffled to the door.

“Tobias! I've been wanting to speak to you. Can you take a moment?”

“With pleasure. I hate these things. Just take a photo of me in front of the school to prove I was here. Then we can get the hell out of here.”

Elizabeth's disbelief must have been evident. Tobias turned to her, laughing.

“The way I see it, the kids have their school, whether I make a pretty speech or not. I’d sooner not.

“Ronnie, I assume you want to get a look at the monument site?”

Ronnie grinned.

“If you’re finished here you can follow me there.” Energy emanated from Tobias Grant. Elizabeth could see why Deb and Ronnie liked him so much.

They took the road to Ulundi. This was untouched land. Lush, fertile, dotted with the eeriness of luminous green fever trees. Elizabeth thought about that old man in yesterday’s police report. Shandu. That was the thing about this place. They could kill a man for allegedly practising witchcraft. But they would do it with a gun. You never knew what world you were living in here. Elizabeth felt her grip slipping. Loosened under sweaty palms. She could see it in the landscape, in the trees – Shaka and witches and spears. The line she drew between what was here and what was then, was lost. Adrift in the tangle of wiry branches and the mirage from the heat of the road.

They stood at the foot of the koppie. A rough path had been scraped out of the dirt. It wound over the swelling till the summit – a pile of brick and rubble.

“This will be the monument, the Spirit of eMakhosini.” Tobias could tell that Elizabeth and Ronnie weren’t too impressed. “It doesn’t look like much now but in a year or so....” He pulled a folded piece of paper from his back pocket. There was dirt engrained along the crease. “You can see how the beer pot is surrounded by seven different horns – the seven dead kings of KwaZulu.” His voice faded into the distance. Elizabeth’s focus was on the view. It was so powerful, so.... She didn’t have the

words for that swelling of emotion. A sense of loss so profound. Humbled by a landscape of bush and dirt. She felt caught in a continuum. All time at once –

“Elizabeth!” She turned to Ronnie, who was grinning at her. He had obviously been speaking to her. Embarrassed, she turned and walked towards the two men.

“We’re thinking of getting a beer or something. There’s this little place past the Opathi turnoff. Is that okay? You don’t need to get back or something?”

She was grateful for a slice of something she recognised. A gentle shaving of reality: a restaurant, a discrete and charming view, Castle draught. They made their way to the cars. Elizabeth felt the pull of eMakhosini at her back. She stopped only once – to wipe the sting of mascara and sweat from her eyes. She did not turn.

Elizabeth disconnected and put down the cell phone. Ronnie and Tobias looked up expectantly.

“We’re going to have to head back soon. There’s been another murder. The third murder of a suspected witch this week.” She stared deliberately at Ronnie. He looked away.

Tobias slammed his glass down on the table. “Shit. I’ll have to push the council for a response. This can’t carry on.”

Elizabeth looked at him, confused.

“The muthi killings have been going on for two years now. Last year the community took action. They held a meeting, which I attended, where they discussed how best to proceed.”

Elizabeth took out her notebook. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all. It’s a matter of public record. There were several accusations made as to who was responsible: the two sangomas openly practising in the area, and also some elderly members of the community.”

“Like Shandu.”

“Yes. The accusations were, of course, nothing more than suspicions. Dangerous.” He took a sip of his beer. Looked over at Ronnie.

“A few of us managed to calm the crowd down. Eventually it was decided that the matter needed to be taken to higher authorities. The Induna – ”

“Induna Mkhize?”

Tobias nodded. “Induna Mkhize agreed to take the matter to the Inkosi. The law just isn’t equipped to deal with this so we needed tribal intervention. I suggested that he would put pressure on the police to resolve the crimes. That way we’d be tackling the problem on a traditional and political front.”

“So the town council are aware of this whole thing. Has anything been done?”

Their silence answered her question.

“And in a traditional court or something?”

Tobias shook his head. “Sadly the Inkosi is quite young. He’s away at university completing his education, and has left his various Indunas with rather extensive powers, certainly more than they’d have traditionally. Mkhize is the head Induna. Essentially, he has been given the authority to deal with this.”

“Except he’s not ‘dealing’ with this.” Elizabeth sipped her drink. “I just can’t digest how something this big has slipped through the cracks.”

“It’s easier than you think. Legally, we’re still figuring out how to deal with witchcraft. The state has always taken the view that witchcraft is mere superstition. Of course attitudes are changing, but no new laws have been passed. This is

compounded by the fact that this is a rural area. The police out here are members of the community themselves. Even if they believed that you could hunt down a witch the way you hunt down a murderer – which they don't – they're hardly falling over themselves to investigate their relatives and friends.”

“Okay, so much for our justice system. But what about customary law? I mean surely –”

“It's not that simple, my dear. The government is still trying to sort out what powers traditional courts should have. Anyway, violent killings such as these would more likely be tried as murder cases in a criminal court.”

Elizabeth could feel her frustration building, raising the pitch of her voice. She pushed her glass away from herself, leaving a glistening trail of water streaked across the table. “If Mkhize is all these people have, surely he should do something? They should *make* him do something.”

Tobias sighed. “What you have to understand is that the Inkosi is all-powerful. It's very difficult for the community to stand up to him. They pay him taxes. He owns them.”

Ronnie looked up sharply. Tobias smiled. “In a financial sense, of course.”

Tobias continued. “And by extension, in this case, Induna Mkhize has quite a hold on these people.”

“Oh for god's sake! Democracy doesn't stop at the Tugela! In the end they can appeal to *someone*. They can go over Mkhize's head, straight to the Inkosi, make him see what's going on.”

Ronnie slammed his hand on to the table as he rose from his seat. “You just don't understand, do you? They are afraid. A person who practices this kind of *muthi*, this *ubuthakathi*, is almost untouchable. There will be a connection with the

evil spirits. If the connection is strong, how can that person be stopped? Even by tribal law. Induna is rich and successful. The people think that he has very powerful muti. They will be silent.”

“And so out of desperation, they are killing off the accused? And we just sit here and calmly record each act of vigilantism?”

Ronnie walked from the room. Elizabeth was overwhelmed with disbelief. She and Tobias sat drinking in the quiet.

Ronnie and Elizabeth made it back to the agency office just before half-past four. Deb was livid.

“Elizabeth, you have ten minutes to phone around and flesh out the witchcraft story. Assuming someone hasn’t beaten you to it.” Her face had *where the fuck have you been* written all over it; she just didn’t waste time saying the words. “As for the school story, Ronnie, it’s dead in the water. You’ve missed the paper deadlines. The best you’ll get is Usuthu’s six o’clock news. You’re the one who wanted to write more newspaper copy, and you fuck up like this. You know better than this, Ronnie! You have wasted time and money. The petrol costs alone will mean a loss. Fucking rule number one, Ronnie, manage your resources!” She turned to see Elizabeth standing at her desk, nervously clutching the police report. “And now? You’re wasting time you don’t have, Elizabeth.”

“Deb. Um, I just wanted to know how much info I should include, you know from the last two years.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You know, the witchcraft killings and the community meeting and all that.”

Deb looked at her sharply. Her eyes narrowed. She looked at Ronnie.

“Both of you. Two minutes. Explain.”

Ronnie stood glowering. His anger was palpable. It was left to Elizabeth to fill Deb in. She pointed out the number of witchcraft related killings that had come to light in recent weeks; she reiterated what she had learned from Tobias, explaining that a series of muthi killings had prompted the local community to hold a meeting where various actions were debated and discussed. Deb’s bad mood visibly sank to new depths.

“Ronnie, you covered that meeting. KwaNdlovu falls under your area of interest.” Slowly she rose from her seat. “I remember now. You claimed the meeting had to do with some kind of community project. Aids or something.” She narrowed her eyes. “There was no mention of witchcraft.”

Ronnie stood. Unwavering. His jaw pulsed under skin in the effort to say nothing.

Deb’s gaze did not waver from Ronnie’s face. “You’ve been sitting on a story for two years.” Laced through the anger in her voice was a thread of hurt. She looked down at her hands, splayed out on the table. Paused. Then she turned from the young man before her. She had dismissed him from the room.

“Elizabeth. Cover the witchcraft story, as is, for tonight’s news. Straight up and down police report. Just like the others. This,” she gestured in Ronnie’s direction, “is a feature story. It’s big. Now you haven’t handled anything like this before and I’ll have to talk you through it. We’ll have to get started bright and early. You’ll need all the time you can get to shovel all the political bullshit out of the way.”

Deb returned to her work. Elizabeth glanced at Ronnie. Slowly she walked to her desk and switched on her computer. She tried not to notice that after a while, Ronnie left.

She lay alone in the darkness. The curtains were open. She had decided that she wanted to watch the branches making the shadows. There was a clipped fingernail of moon.

Do you know what happens in a muthi killing, Jim? She whispered the words against the blankets.

Held down in the forest. In the quiet. Alive. First the limbs. Hacked off. Not the head yet, though. The screams make the muthi more powerful. Then, I think, it's the genitals. Sometimes the person is raped first. The head is severed from the body. Selected organs are stolen from the cavern of the torso.

Her face was wet with tears falling sideways.

And I found it, Jim. Alone. And I remember it, Jim. Alone.

Chapter Three

Elizabeth didn't want this story. She knew it was too big for her. Features were for the senior journalists; freelancers, kept on retainer by the big papers or private companies, who didn't need to sell three to four stories a day to put food on the table. Elizabeth sighed. There was just no guarantee with a feature. You could sniff something was wrong, ask all the right questions, but if no-one gave you proof, there was nothing you could do. No story. Plus, Elizabeth had no experience interviewing people. She'd only given two interviews, and frankly, Tobias hardly counted. By nine o' clock, she'd had three patronising secretaries promise to 'pass on the message', two flat refusals to comment, and one phone slammed down in her ear. It was a mark of her desperation that Elizabeth approached Deb.

"Deb?"

"Have you managed to get a comment from the mayor's office?"

"I'm afraid not. I've tried every avenue I can think of. Look, maybe you should get someone else to do this story. I know you're angry with Ronnie, but he's far more experienced."

Deb stared at her. Hard. "You're easily defeated."

"Deb, I'm just not right for this job. I've been a journalist for a month. A month! I'm happy to carry on writing out police reports, do a bit of court reporting, attend those official functions. I feel out of my depth here."

"Why? Because a story won't fall into your lap?"

Elizabeth's courage shrivelled

"Those other little jobs are easy, Elizabeth. You don't have to spend all morning on your arse, phoning around. There isn't even a clear path you can follow

to get to the story. You have to use your brain and your instincts. I don't doubt you have both of those."

She was surprised. "Thanks, that's really a compliment coming from you, and I *do* appreciate it, but –"

"But what, Elizabeth." Deb's voice was a warning.

"But I don't know what I'm doing!" Elizabeth shocked herself with the outburst.

Deb got up from her chair. She walked around her desk until she was standing up close to Elizabeth. She leaned against the edge of her desk, legs crossed at the ankles, balancing. Elizabeth pushed on.

"They're stonewalling me. I've tried the mayor's office, I've tried the police. Nothing. No-one cares. No-one will deal with this. It's like there's some tacit agreement to pretend that this is not happening. It's horrifying, yes. But what really frightens me, is that it doesn't surprise anyone. I phone. Tell them. But there's no shock. No waves. No interest. Just 'see no evil, hear no evil' and apparently 'speak no evil' either. Deb, do you understand? How can they stand it? Living in this place of nightmares. This beneath-the-surface hell."

Elizabeth paused. Tried to rein herself in. She clenched her jaw. To hold back her grief. Her rage. But the words broke through bones and teeth. "I hate this place. I hate every goddamn thing about it! I don't want to lay alone all night thinking about things I don't bloody understand. I don't want to spend all day trying to understand them. I feel half-blind all the time, now I get to feel stupid too. No-one wants to tell me about this, and right now, I don't want to know."

Deb took her time. She stared at Elizabeth. Elizabeth expected everything except the softening in Deb's eyes, the subtle nod of understanding.

“I know about feeling alone. I know about being a white woman and trying to play the game here. But you have to be tough, Elizabeth. You have to make them all realise that you’re a force to be reckoned with. Do you grasp how much power you have? The power of truth, Elizabeth. God knows, I’m not noble, but I have no tolerance for bullshit. I’ll tell it like it is, and every politician in Zululand knows it. I don’t care what colour you are, scandal can still hurt you.”

Deb paused, walked back round to her desk.

Elizabeth felt that she had been allowed, briefly, a glimpse of vulnerability in Deb. A look at the woman behind the Amazon. She was being offered a hand; a pat on the shoulder and then a ‘get back to work’. And she couldn’t take it. “Deb, I feel like I’m digging around in other people’s rubbish bins.”

“What are you so goddamn frightened of?” Deb slammed her hand on to the desk. “You’re not a child, for pete’s sake, you’re a grown woman. No, this is not a perfect situation. No, you didn’t expect to live here. . Yes, it’s difficult and you just might not get the life you wanted. Well guess what? Life is not fucking perfect! You wanted more than this? Well maybe God didn’t get the memo. In the end we all just scratch around in the dirt like chickens, trying to make the best of things. You’re an adult, you’re an intelligent adult, and you have a job to do. Now get on that phone and contact the mayor’s office, and I don’t want to *hear* about it till that story is finished.”

Deb sat back down at her desk. Her anger turning cold. Holding Elizabeth off. Elizabeth stood in shock, digesting what Deb had said. She felt tears pricking her eyes, every part of her wanted to get away, hide, pretend none of this had happened. Instead she walked to her desk, and picked up the phone. It was time the police detectives gave her some answers.

She had given up trying to reach Jim. He had been away for four days, fighting a fire in Piet Retief. Ground fires were almost impossible to extinguish – baking the earth from beneath and then springing up unexpectedly and devouring the trees. With the winds of the past few days she knew the flames would be leaping across roads, sweeping through the leaves. Reducing seven metre trees to cinders and soot.

Elizabeth remembered that first fire season of their relationship. *Umlilo!* *Umlilo!* shattering the dark. And then Jim gone for days. She had learned to choke down the fear that built in her throat. Smother the images of Jim surrounded by flames.

On one of those first nights, she had been sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee. All the lights left on. She had heard a gentle tapping at the door. Gone to check, even though she'd been so spooked and frightened. It had only been Santie, the fire boss's wife. She remembered the relief. Santie had sat down, chatting about her kids and the new diet she was trying. Then:

“Do you know what they call us? The foresters' wives?”

Elizabeth had sat shivering. Her hands clasped around her coffee mug.

“Fire widows.”

Santie had laughed at that; thought it was funny. But Elizabeth was horrified. Sometimes when she was lying alone and the fear wouldn't stay down, she'd become melodramatic. Thinking of herself as some woman in a ritual of *sati*. Burning with her marriage on the pyre.

When Jim came back from the fires she'd always be so filled with pity. He'd be dog-tired. The smoke would be in everything: clothes, hair, skin. He'd wash and

wash. She would soak his khakis. Of course he'd be straight back to work the next day. No time off. Then the anger would start to come. With the fading of the smell. His third or fourth day back, she'd be spitting mad. For no good reason. And she knew he didn't understand, knew she'd be hurting him. But she'd get angry anyway.

The man at the front desk was friendly, even flirtatious. That helped. But in the end it changed nothing. Elizabeth still had to interview Induna Mkhize. Alone. No Ronnie to explain what to do, or how to act. No Deb to take the lead.

She was kept waiting. That went without saying. And the apology, when it came, was unabashedly insincere. Mkhize was a big man. His grip pulverised hers. He didn't even notice that she was not performing the traditional handshake. Simply squashed the flesh; moulding her greeting to suit his expectations.

“Miss Cook, it is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Actually, it's Mrs,” that stopped him, “and it's Clarke. Elizabeth Clarke.”

“So young and married. Eish, I am getting old!” His smile widened with his loud bonhomie. His assistant left and Mkhize indicated to Elizabeth that she should sit. His office was ostentatious. Bold. Black leather chairs and leopard print cushions – on closer inspection, fake fur.

“You work at the Turner Agency, is that right?”

Elizabeth nodded, then thought she should be more assertive. “Yes.”

“Ah. With Ronnie? I know Ronnie.”

“Yes, Ronnie and I are colleagues.” She cleared her throat. “Mr. Mkhize, I asked to see you today in connection with a story I'm working on.” He didn't

interrupt. “It’s about the alleged witchcraft killings in the Ndlovu Area, and the consequent murders of the suspects.”

“The alleged murders.”

“Yes. The alleged murders.”

“That is a police matter. It is in the hands of the police.” He smiled at her.

“I understand that and I have interviewed Detectives Mbatha and Dladla.”

Elizabeth hoped she had sufficiently masked her frustration. The police had been reluctant to give her any information. Not that they had had much to give. They’d known even less than she had. She smiled.

“I have been updated about the police’s investigation. I am more curious, however, about the community’s response and would like to confirm a few details.”

He sat back in his chair, folding his arms. His jovial manner, Elizabeth was learning, was a façade. He gave away very little.

“I understand that the community held a meeting sometime last year, on the,” she flipped through her notebook, “sixteenth of December. I have here a copy of the minutes of that meeting. So far, four of the seven accused of the muthi killings at that meeting have been killed. Interestingly, the detectives knew about the community meeting, but had not received, as promised, a copy of the minutes, which, of course, contained a list of the suspects.”

Mkhize sat still as stone. He had the look of a father facing a delinquent child. Elizabeth cleared her throat a second time.

“I noticed in the minutes that it was decided to take the community’s concerns to the Inkosi, Inkosi Ndlovu, as well as the town council. This was left to you, as community leader.”

Mkhize leaned forward, pushed his fat finger on the call button of his phone. In clipped isiZulu, he spoke to his assistant. Elizabeth did not understand the words, but she understood his tone. Then, he looked up at her, smiling.

“I have just ordered us some tea. Or would you prefer coffee?”

“No, tea is fine, thank you.

“Mr Mkhize, the town council is well aware of the vigilante killings, but claim to have heard nothing about the muthi murders that precipitated the community’s actions. Can you explain that?”

The door opened. Mkhize’s assistant entered, carefully balancing a tray, which he placed on the desk between his boss and the young journalist before returning to his desk. Mkhize indicated that Elizabeth should help herself and began slowly to spoon some sugar into his cup. Elizabeth knew what he was doing, but she felt that her only choice was to play along. Only when Mkhize was sitting back sipping his tea, did he answer the question.

“Unfortunately, the council can be very... disorganised.” He sighed. “It is difficult. KwaNdlovu is a small piece of a large municipal area. We are often forgotten. I have complained on many occasions to the mayor, who is a good friend of mine, that his office is very inefficient. But there is not much I can do.” Mkhize smiled at Elizabeth, had another sip of his tea. “I am very pleased you have brought this to my attention. We must get to the bottom of this. For the sake of my people.”

He placed his cup and saucer on his desk. Elizabeth could sense that he felt the interview was over. She did not agree.

“I have been trying to reach Inkosi Ndlovu for comment.”

“He is a very busy man.”

“So I understand. His office did, eventually, issue a statement. Inkosi refers all matters in the Ndlovu Area to the tribal authority, and supports the actions you, as head Induna, have taken.” She looked at Mkhize. “What action have you taken?”

“We, as a community, have decided to call on the help of a great sangoma who practices in the eMakhosini area. She has great power. She will investigate and find this evil one in the community. These are spiritual matters, Mrs Clarke, we must leave it in the hands of those who commune with the ancestors.”

He leaned forward in his chair. His eyes glittered with meaning she sensed rather than understood.

“But, for those who do not understand our ways, we have also co-operated with the police in every way possible. That the good detectives did not have a printout of the minutes of our meeting, I can only explain as an unfortunate oversight. I take full responsibility for this, and will contact them myself to offer my apologies.” He smiled. Elizabeth felt like a dassie facing headlights.

“I have addressed my people about the killings in the community.” He shook his head, a model of the despairing leader. “It is unacceptable to take these matters into their own hands. But these are rural people, Mrs Clarke, they know only the old ways. Also, they have no faith in the police. The police are, to them, the ones who prevent the gathering of firewood and hunting of animals. This new world is strange to my people. I try to explain but,” he shrugged, “they will not hear.”

“Could you give me the name of the sangoma who has been called in to help?”

“I can, but it will be of no use. She will not speak to you.”

“Nevertheless...”

“My assistant will give you everything you need.”

Elizabeth found herself politely ushered out of the office. She took down the name of the sangoma. Left. She stood by her car, realising that she had learned nothing. Except, perhaps, that she trusted Mkhize even less than before.

She had found Ronnie waiting for her outside the office. Without question, Elizabeth had taken Ronnie to her car. She did not tell him where they were going.

“How angry is she?” Elizabeth could feel Ronnie looking at her. She kept her focus on the road.

“Very. But I don’t think she’ll hold a grudge. Eat some humble pie and she’ll take you back.” She turned to look at him. He seemed confused. “Apologise. Apologise and she will take you back.”

Ronnie sighed. “I’m sorry that I disappointed Deb. She has been very good to me. But I am not sorry for what I did. I had my reasons.”

Suddenly his pride grated. Elizabeth was angry. “Yes, well, your reasons got people killed.” She switched off the radio that had been playing softly. “You are the eyes and ears in that community. If you had spoken sooner, everyone would have been alerted to the killings there. Instead, things carried on for two years. Murderers hide in silence, Ronnie.”

“Oh please. Deb doesn’t care about saving lives. She cares about making money.”

“And I’m not Deb!” She shook her head. “If you had only done your job, who knows, the murderer could be behind bars by now. That’s how it works, Ronnie. We tell the truth and that lights fires under bureaucratic arses. Justice is done.”

He laughed. “My god, she’s got you good and proper, hasn’t she.”

Elizabeth bit back her anger. Steered the car on to the shoulder of the road. “Come.” She led Ronnie into the plantation. She hadn’t been back since that day. Elizabeth had forgotten the extraordinary coolness of the shade, the smell of the gum, the crunch of the branches and leaves underfoot. So many trees. She led Ronnie to the exact one. Stopped. She could not approach it.

“Did I ever tell you that I found one of the bodies?”

Ronnie looked at her. She could not read his thoughts on his dark face.

“I found some organs hanging in that tree. The rest of the body was further off. It was a muthi killing.” She filled her lungs with breath, and slowly let the air out through a small space between her lips. “Ronnie, together you and I can get to the bottom of this. I need to find this murderer. I’ve lived with this horror for a week; these people have lived with it for two years. We have the power to bring this truth to light. Help me, Ronnie.” She waited in the shade and the quiet. She had appealed to him with her whole heart.

“You really believe in Justice and Truth?” Ronnie had an amused expression on his face.

“Don’t look at me like that! I’m not naïve, Ronnie, I’m – it’s not naïve to want what is right. To want the world to be a good place.”

Ronnie walked towards Elizabeth and pushed his face up to hers. “This world is fucked. There isn’t a single thing that’s good about it. It’s all just a scramble for power – you take what you can get, by any means necessary. Power protects you and if you don’t have it” He walked up to the tree where the entrails had been found. Slowly, he traced his hands over the flaked bark. “Death,” he whispered, “you pay the price with death.” He turned around sharply, his dark face hard and angry. “You

fool, you silly *mlungu*! What good are your ideals? I have poison in my blood, can you fix that? My grandmother lives in a shack with four of her grandchildren, scratching food out of a patch of earth, who will change that? You? Mandela?" He tried to calm himself, took a deep, shuddering breath, "Death is a dog always breathing on your face. Only a fool tries to grasp at the life of a carcass upon which Death has already feasted." They stared at each other, then he walked away from her, heading for the clearing.

The light was beautiful through the Eucalyptus crown. Aglow. Amber through the leaves. She grappled for understanding and calm. *Breathe in, breathe out. Smell nothing. The air is pure. Filtered through chlorophyll. There is nothing here.*

He was waiting for her at the road.

"You're afraid, aren't you?" She said it quietly.

Indignant. Pride of the Zulu. But Elizabeth knew she was right.

"I believe in truth, Ronnie, because even as you stand here at this roadside with an ignorant *mlungu*-woman, you're afraid of it." She stepped up to him, the way he had done to her. She jabbed a finger into his chest and looked him dead in the eye. "You know something."

The office was empty. Elizabeth switched on her computer. There was a note taped to the screen: *Gone AWOL. Bugger off when your work's done. Deb.* She tried dialling Jim. Left a message on his voicemail. She supposed she should buy food for the weekend. Meals for one.

Elizabeth smiled at the barman. She wasn't sure, but she thought his name was Jaco. He leaned over the bar, smirking. He had a look about him that said *I know you want me*. Except she didn't. He was about eighteen, with shoulder length hair gelled back. His earring glinted in the smoky half-light.

“Howzit.”

“Hi. Could I have a glass of wine, please. Dry white.”

“What's a classy chick like you doing in a place like this, hey? Waiting for hubby?” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. God knows, it took every inch of good breeding not to laugh. Poor boy. He looked like he'd be all eagerness and ego.

She walked over to the far end of the bar. There in the shadows, sat Deb.

“Hah! How'd you found me?” She looked over at Jaco, “Real newshound. I trained her myself.” Deb laughed into her glass.

“Eileen, from the hairdresser's. She ran over to Spar especially to tell me where you were. Apparently Eileen is very concerned about your reputation.”

“The women in this shit-town don't drink. Well they do, but only at home, where no-one can see.” She snorted. Downed her drink.

“Hey, Frikkie, fill her up!”

He swaggered over, dishtowel casually draped over his shoulder. He grabbed her glass. “Ag, Deb, you know it's Jaco.” He turned to Elizabeth, “She likes to joke when she's had a few.” He placed the drink on a coaster, pushed it over the counter. Winked.

Deb leaned over, whispered loudly and wetly, “He's a bad fuck. Trust me.”

Elizabeth bit her lip, but couldn't help herself. She laughed. Poor Jaco. He scuttled back to the safety of the old drunks at the other end of the bar.

Deb clinked her glass against Elizabeth's.

Elizabeth managed to get them both safely to Deb's house, although Deb seemed in no mood to end the party. She ushered Elizabeth through the house and out the sliding door overlooking the back garden. Elizabeth took a seat on the pool lounge, waiting for Deb. She was suddenly cold. In that silence. In that dark. Deb returned carrying a bottle of red wine and two glasses. She stopped at the threshold of the house, gingerly extending a hand, feeling for the glass of the sliding door. Satisfied there wasn't any, she stepped out to join Elizabeth. Deb swayed as she completed the relatively complicated tasks of putting down the glasses and reaching for a seat. She almost didn't pull it off.

"You know," Deb was now struggling with the corkscrew, "I'm worried about you."

Elizabeth took the bottle from Deb and opened the wine. "Why?"

"I don't get on with nice girls." Deb slurped her wine.

Elizabeth laughed. "What do you mean?"

"I don't fit in here. The women all think I'm fucking their husbands. Sometimes I am. But mainly, I think, I'm just not a nice girl. Now why is it, sugar-pie, that I like you?"

Elizabeth didn't know what to say. She was touched. "Maybe I'm just not what I seem."

Deb nodded and nearly fell off her chair. "You're so quiet. There're all these depths in you. Why do I feel like you know me?" She looked into the night. Put down the wine. "I'm sure you know about my ex, everyone does."

Elizabeth stared at her. Nodded.

“He beat the crap out of me. Which actually wasn’t that bad. What was bad, was the fear.” She frowned, forcing fierceness into her voice.

“I left him on a Thursday. Once a month I was allowed to drive into Richards Bay for groceries. He used to time me. Five hours exactly: an hour and a half to get there; two hours to shop, pay the bills, collect the post; an hour and a half back. I hit a roadblock. I lost fifteen minutes, so I phoned to tell him. I phoned while the cop was standing right there so my bastard husband could hear I was telling the truth. While I walked through the shops, I phoned him twice: once to check on the brand of peanut-butter he wanted, then to check how many boxes of cereal. I was standing in the bank when I snapped.

“My sister had sent me some money for my birthday. I wanted to use it to open a savings account of my own. I knew that if I asked my husband, he’d refuse, but I couldn’t bring myself to open the account without at least phoning him to ask. I was paralysed. I stood in the queue, my cell phone sweating in my hand. I couldn’t breathe. Slowly, I started to dial. Then the security guard made me leave the building to phone. Can you believe it? When I got outside I started to laugh hysterically. I laughed so hard. Five years of laughing. I got back in my car and drove away. I slept in that old bakkie of mine for a month after that. Borrowed money from my sister, and rented a small place out here. Worked my way up from a battered Toyota and a bruised face.”

“Why did you stay here? It would have been easier to leave.”

“I had lived here for as long as I’d been married. I’d lived here for as long as I’d been afraid. I had something to prove. Real freedom, for me, could only come when I had learned to live *here*,” she looked at Elizabeth, “and not be afraid.

“I know about loneliness, and I know about fear. And *you* know me.”

They sat looking out over the valley. The tops of the trees were uniformly straight. Elizabeth could feel sadness welling up in her.

“Do you know why they are all the same?”

“Why?”

“They’re clones. Alien clones.” Elizabeth pressed her lips tightly together. Holding the hurt in.

“When’s he coming home?” Deb rested her head on her arms. Sighed as she closed her eyes. Elizabeth sat in the dark, and wept.

And then, just like that, Jim was there. An apparition in a haze of smoke. He looked so tired. She knew he wanted comfort. But she couldn’t walk to him, she couldn’t touch him. There was the vastness of a week between them.

“I have been trying to call you.”

“There was no phone reception at the fire. If I wasn’t there, I was passed out somewhere, snatching sleep. I’m sorry if you worried.” His eyes were red from the tiredness and heat. He rubbed his neck. “I could do with some coffee.”

Then it came, the anger, burning through her. *Have some coffee. Here’re your slippers, my darling.* So ordinary. The quiet torture of the mundane. He had left her. Left her *here* with that stink up her nostrils and branches shadowed on the walls. She shook her head as she looked across at him. Clenching her teeth till her jaw ached. She forced herself to turn, to step-by-step walk out the door.

By the time Jim came out to meet Elizabeth, she had worked herself into a whirlpool of unspoken anger. She plucked the clothes from the washing line, pegs flying, before flinging them into the wash basket.

“You’re angry.”

“I was alone.”

“Elizabeth, it’s my job.” He swayed as he stood. Exhaustion pulling at his legs.

She stood before him cradling blouses and shirts. Trying not to think that she alone was holding their married life together. “I have no sense of myself. I exist in this place only as your wife. I’m here for no other reason but that I married you.

“Nothing about this place threatens your identity – you were a forester before we came here and you’ll be forester when we leave. But who am I? Who the fuck am I?” She threw the last few items into the wash basket, and began to walk away, but Jim called out after her until she stopped to face him.

“Do you have any idea what it feels like, to look at the person you are most intimate with in the world and realise you’re not enough? My god, Elizabeth, every morning I hope *this* day will be the day you’ll love me the way I love you, completely, as if I am the only thing in the whole world. But every night I come home from work expecting the house to be empty. I know deep down that one day you’ll leave physically, because you left me emotionally a long time ago.”

Jim paused, fighting to keep his emotions under control. “Elizabeth, I love you, I really do, but I can’t be better than this. If it’s not enough then, well then I don’t know” The sentence hung unfinished between them. Eventually, he quietly headed back to the house.

Elizabeth couldn't speak. His words had hit her like a fist in the throat. She stared across the darkness of the lawn at the silver Eucalyptus trees, those tall ghosts that haunted her life. And she tried to breathe.

Chapter Four

This was tribal land. Houses of wattle and daub settled alongside the pastel shades of painted brick, with no shame whatsoever. Everyone walked. Well, some rode bicycles. There seemed to be a constant stream of taxis – bright red or rusted white – the only connection to the suburbs, and the jobs. Every now and again, a herd of cows would cross the road. This was Ronnie’s home.

He’d been conspicuously absent for two weeks. Deb had put it down to some excessive sulking. But Elizabeth’s concerns were growing. That day in the plantation, she’d pushed too hard. All that sadness had welled up in her, and she’d aimed at Ronnie, and fired. Elizabeth needed to put things right.

Past ‘Nyala Secondary School’, then a sharp right, along a small dirt road (more of a foot path, really), till she reached a bunch of houses and a little shebeen called ‘The Busy Bee Tearoom’. The ice-cream pink one, two houses down from the shebeen; that was Ronnie’s. And he was waiting for her.

She smiled. “I suppose a white woman driving a silver Golf is somewhat noticeable.”

“What are you doing here?”

She stopped. Standing halfway up the slipping sands of the bank, she took it all in. Ronnie, framed by a flint-grey sky, a crumbling pink house, and dirt. “You’ve been hiding for two weeks. I needed to talk to you.”

He turned and walked into the dark of his home. Elizabeth had never been inside one of these houses before. She shook her head angrily, and followed Ronnie into the house.

Elizabeth stood in all the shades of darkness. Arranged neat-as-a-pin. Ronnie was busying himself at the gas-stove.

“Coffee?”

“Thank you.” Elizabeth took a seat on one of three chairs arranged carefully around a small table in the centre of the room. The fourth chair, she noticed, lay in a lopsided heap in the corner. “Ronnie, I want to apologise.”

His face was expressionless. He put the mugs on the table, careful not to spill. He offered her the bag of sugar; slowly rolled it up again, making sure the white paper stayed firmly down before putting it back on the shelf next to the stove. Elizabeth sipped her coffee.

“Ronnie, what I said that day in the plantation... well, it was out of line. I apologise.”

He nodded curtly.

“Oh, for god’s sake! Look, I’ve said I’m sorry, now you’re supposed to say something back. Damn it, you know why I said what I did, so why all the silence, why? I don’t bloody understand you!”

“You don’t understand anything.”

“So you’ve said before. Help me understand, Ronnie.”

He looked up at her. Elizabeth was shocked at the pain she saw reflected there. He peeled his right hand from his coffee mug, let it rest on the table. It was as if he was trying to reach out to her, and could not. His voice was a whisper, “I cannot live with this thing anymore.”

Slowly Elizabeth put down her mug. Careful not to break the moment. Gently, “What thing, Ronnie?”

“I saw Mkhize’s men... in the forest, at the tree where you...”

“Ronnie?” She reached for his hand.

“Cutting up the body. They were cutting up the body.” He put his hands up to his face. He was shaking.

“Oh my god.” Elizabeth felt her face turn cold with shock. “Oh my god.” She got up from her chair, walked to the door, walked back to the table. “Oh my god oh my god oh my god...”

Her hands were over her mouth. She stopped suddenly. Fumbled for her chair. Of all things, she had not expected this. She had been prepared for suspicions that Ronnie felt he should not voice. Perhaps out of some misguided cultural loyalty. But not this. Not this appalling truth.

“I heard the screams. Of a woman. I ran to the place, but stopped when I saw there were many men.” He balled his hands into his eyes. “I did not know it was for muthi. I saw only the men, and the blood. I thought maybe it was rape. But then the screaming stopped. I did not breathe. In all that time, I did not breathe.”

Elizabeth gripped the table. As if in the letting go, she would be unhinged by pain and grief. She fought to hear his words through the screaming in her head.

Ronnie dropped his hands, but he kept his eyes closed. “Only then did I see that the men were those that work for Mkhize. Everyone knows they do what he asks. I watched them cut the body. ”

Her head was a scramble of thoughts. She didn't know what to do. The ridiculousness of having been in Mkhize's office, drinking tea, taking – god help her – taking notes.

Ronnie looked at her. “I think Mkhize knows I was there.”

“You mean he knows you can connect him to the murder?”

Ronnie nodded. “First it was a feeling. Like the darkness was watching me. But then my grandmother told me of something that has grown great fear in me.” Ronnie looked at Elizabeth in complete helplessness. “My grandmother and my aunt’s children, they live in Ndlovu Area. They live on Mkhize’s land. Some of Mkhize’s men came to the house while my grandmother was working in the field. They spoke to my aunt’s child. There was nothing strange in what was said. But these men had no reason to speak to a child. It was a message, Elizabeth – a message, that I cannot always be watching.”

Elizabeth snatched at hope. She could go with Ronnie to the police. They needed to act quickly, of course, to protect Ronnie’s family. And they could get help. Tobias would know what to do. Or there was Anita, her lawyer-friend. They’d get this bastard. She searched Ronnie’s face. Her gaze earnest. Trying to imbue him with the strength of her hope. “No-one’s that untouchable, Ronnie, no-one’s above the law.”

Ronnie put his hand on her arm. Stopped her. “Whose law?”

She felt herself go numb. She wasn’t sure how long she sat there in the dark of Ronnie’s kitchen. She had no cognisance of rising from her chair and walking to the door. It had started to rain. She registered that, although she could not have said how long she stood watching the soil soak up the water. She was almost at her car before she realised that Ronnie was shouting for her.

“Elizabeth!”

She turned.

“Elizabeth, there was nothing I could do.”

Elizabeth looked past him. She watched people scrambling in the rain. A woman lost her shoe in a puddle. There were young men on bicycles. A schoolgirl

clutched her skirt to her legs and, shielded by her umbrella, fought the wind all the way to the taxi. A man in a yellow raincoat was chasing a goat.

“You knew.” She shifted her gaze until she was looking directly at him. “You saw it *all*. You knew! You knew, and did nothing!” All that time – the questions, the wide-awake nights. The burden of plain not knowing what to do, and *he had known all along*.

“There aren’t words, Ronnie, there aren’t words... how could you? You’re a journalist! How could you not speak?” She was hysterical now. “There was a truth you had to tell. You. And you didn’t speak. A truth, my god, that you didn’t tell!”

He clamped his hand around her arm. Hissed through his teeth, “I never claimed to believe in truth.”

Elizabeth dug her fingers under his grip. Ripped upwards. “Don’t!” She was not backing off. “You bastard. You think about this: you are complicit. How many people did you help to kill?”

She ran for her car. Leaving Ronnie. Leaving the story. Leaving this place. Just going. Except, she didn’t know where.

Elizabeth curled away from the space between them. That infinite space couples can create in a double bed. She shifted her weight from her shoulder. Wriggled into the pocket of duvet that wouldn’t warm.

“Liz, I know you can’t sleep either. We should talk.”

She knew her anger had to melt – humility was demanded from marriage. But she found that the words simply froze in the ice she had put between them.

Chapter Five

It had become a ritual. Elizabeth would come into the office early and stand at Deb's window overlooking the main street. This moment was her own. At first it had saddened her to watch the hawkers eking out a meagre living, or the children, as big as their satchels, dodging taxis as they walked to school. But now she felt simple delight watching the women pile their fruits and vegetables into neat pyramids. Oranges and amadumbes on red plastic plates. Loud chatter under floral umbrellas. Little one trying to keep up with big brother. So proud of the responsibility. Wide-eyed, arms straight, quickly-quickly across the road.

“Trying to impress the boss?”

Elizabeth turned and smiled at the sound of Deb's voice.

“Actually, I'm glad we have a moment to talk. Take a seat.”

Elizabeth walked around to the front of the desk, and settled into a chair. She waited while Deb made herself a cup of coffee.

“I spoke to the features editor at the *Mail and Guardian* about your story. He's pretty excited, actually. The land claim stories have focussed some attention on this area, plus there was that whole thing about the Swazi king kidnapping his latest bride. It's raised questions about traditional power structures that have, up till now, been considered politically incorrect to address. The thing is, I'm going to need the witchcraft story soon.”

“How much time have I got?”

“At the latest, end of the week.”

Elizabeth nodded.

“What else are you working on?”

“Today there’s an Aids awareness event for all the kids from surrounding schools. A soccer tournament, and speeches from health professionals etc. between matches. It’s been organised by a group of local volunteers, and I think it’s being funded by one of the big corporate companies.”

Deb nodded.

“I also got a tip-off from a source in the public prosecutor’s office. She didn’t give me specifics, but everything I’ve gotten from her has been good, so it’s worth checking out.”

“Good. Busy day, better get to it.”

She shaded her eyes against the sun, wishing desperately that she had brought along some bottled water. The volunteers were easy enough to identify: white t-shirts, red slogans. *Be wise, Condomise!* Of course he was there. She should have known he would be.

Each volunteer supervised a group of youngsters. Some umpired matches, others were giving energetic lectures on safe sex to bored and sullen teenagers. Ronnie, it seemed, had been allocated an administrative job. He sat in the shade of a faded Coca-Cola umbrella. Watching the scenes play out before him, then dipping his head to his papers to make a few notes. He did not see her. She wondered if he saw anything. Elizabeth felt sadness tighten in her chest. In the space of two weeks, he had become languid and frail.

She turned and walked away.

“I’m impressed with how much these volunteers have accomplished. It’s been well-run. No fights. No theft.” She looked across at Tobias, sitting at his desk, then

smiled ashamedly. “It doesn’t say much for me, does it? That I thought there would be.”

Tobias smiled. He made his way to the door – an involved process, as he had to dodge pots and baskets scattered on his office floor. These were interspersed with piles of old books, and even LP’s, in leaning tower arrangements. He called for his secretary, who stood grumpily, arms akimbo, while he asked politely for some tea. She glared at Elizabeth, then turned and stomped off. Tobias began to pick his way through the bric-a-brac. “It’s something that keeps me here, you know.” He sighed as he finally settled into his chair.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think you get this kind of thing in Jo’burg?” Tobias shook his head. “I’ll tell you what you get in Jo’burg, big purple signs with rude messages on them. But here,” he leaned towards Elizabeth, “here poor, sick people fight for their community. I mean, who else is going to do it?” He leaned back in his chair, and folded his hands on his desk. “It’s like they’re fighting a war. Just to survive. And they’ve been fighting so long.” He shook his head slowly. “This is just one more battle. And they arm themselves the way they always have. They don’t count on anyone else to give a damn.”

“Like the killings.”

“The vigilante killings?”

She nodded. “Everyone has let them down, Tobias. It’s hard to call that murder.”

Tobias frowned. “Be careful, Elizabeth, that you don’t forget people like Shandu. He was a good man killed on a whiff of suspicion. Yes there have been these horrific muthi killings. But there have been – what – four witchcraft killings

now too.” Tobias suddenly seemed old and tired. “This is a web of evil, this. Spread through fear and suspicion.”

“And bad leadership.”

Tobias looked at Elizabeth, puzzled at her vehemence.

“It’s a stupid system, this tribal system. I don’t care if I’m called a racist.” She lifted her chin, defiant. “There’s a reason society has progressed from rigid power structures. This is a system that breeds corruption and disempowers the people.”

“Strong words.”

Tobias’s secretary arrived at the door with a mug clutched in each hand.

Without smile or comment, she plonked the mugs on a nearby table strewn with papers and dust. Tea sloshed from the mugs. The secretary turned on her heel and thundered through the small building to her desk. Tobias sighed, raised his eyes heavenward, then began the winding journey to the door to fetch the tea. He arrived at his desk with a tea-stain on his shirt. Elizabeth bit back a smile.

“I apologise if I’m being... offensive. The more I see them suffer, Tobias, the angrier I become. So much of this wouldn’t have happened if our first-world legal system had been able to operate here. But it didn’t. It can’t. And a lot of people are dead.”

Tobias paused. Sipped his tea. “The thing is, Elizabeth, this has always been the system of governance in Zululand. History sent it down a few dark roads, but even the colonial government, with all their meddling, could not eradicate it. It has always been, it is, and it probably will always be. In one form or another. Do you understand? With each political regime, things are re-negotiated. Changes *are* made. Look at what happened today! It was all organised by young people. Look what they accomplished! I mean, there was great energy there. Great power.”

“You’re a remarkable man, Tobias.”

He blushed. Shook his head. “No. This is a remarkable place.”

“I have heard that there are some who are using this human flesh for their witchcraft.” Elizabeth sat reading. The words lit by the bedside lamp, the shade pushed low so as not to wake Jim. She heard a branch scrape against the roof. *“They kill people and take some few parts, maybe the liver, the private parts, or the heart, windpipe....”* Elizabeth closed her eyes against the words. Her head filled with Mkhize’s face. She forced herself to keep reading. *A person who does this is trying to uplift his witchcraft. It is very much calculated. So they mix that flesh with their herbs and that is their witchcraft. Sometimes it is to make luck for business. Sometimes it destroys the luck of other people. It’s too much powerful.”*

Elizabeth looked over at Jim. He lay curled away from her. The covers had been kicked to the foot of the bed. She sat in her darkness – her enforced isolation – and she asked questions about fear, and powerlessness. She stared a long time.

The three of them sat overlooking the valley: Deb, Tobias, and Elizabeth. In the distance she could see the koppie that had carried the British to Cetshwayo’s kraal. The landscape was slowly being mapped by her knowledge of local history. Tobias was puffing away on his pipe, whilst Deb ignored her coffee and poured over her copy of the *Mail and Guardian*. Deb and Tobias met every Friday morning to

‘discuss business.’ Deb had often taken Ronnie with her to these breakfast meetings with Tobias. Today she brought Elizabeth. Elizabeth felt increasingly content in the company of Deb and Tobias. She smiled quietly to herself and sipped at her tea.

“The problem is the fucking government.” Deb threw the paper aside in frustration. “They’ve spent millions, *millions*. They paid off farmers, threw a little party, took as much glory and credit as they could, and it’s still a fucking mess. As usual they’ve done half a job. And it’s the bit they haven’t done that will mean more farms burned, more cattle poisoned. It makes me *sick*.”

Tobias smiled. “I assume you’re referring to the land settlement agreement in uMlahlankosi. My favourite part is everyone trying desperately to prove how this is *not* their problem.”

“Now I’m in a bad mood. I can’t stomach government incompetence at the expense of the people.”

Tobias lifted an eyebrow. “Yes. You’re funny that way.”

Elizabeth tried to hide her grin.

“Smartass. Elizabeth, how’s your story coming along?”

“Um.”

“That well?”

“I’m battling for useful info on witchcraft. I sit up late reading books like *The Occult in Post-Colonial Africa*. It’s like trying to fight a lion with a pencil. I have definitions and theories and precedents.” *None of it wears Ronnie’s face.*

“You’re thinking like an academic. Think like a journalist: what, where, when, who, how. Which one jumps out at you?”

“What. The killings. But you see, there are the muthi killings, and then there are the murders. What it comes down to, is a community of good people caught up in spiritual turmoil. They’re desperate and killing innocent people.”

“Why?”

“I suppose because they have had no help. From the police, the local leaders.”

“Why?”

“As far as the police are concerned, it’s all the usual problems – ties to the community, corruption. Also, it may not be fashionable to believe, but they have enough fear to want to protect themselves from any witchcraft. No-one has any expectation of receiving justice through them.”

“And Mkhize?”

Elizabeth sucked in her breath. Slowly let it out. “He gave me some babble about a sangoma. The truth is, his behaviour has been evasive and defensive. He hasn’t really dealt with this at all.”

“Do you think he’s involved?”

“Yes.”

“Can you prove it?”

Elizabeth thought of Ronnie. “No.”

Deb reached into her handbag and pulled out a notepad.

“Okay. Your ‘what’ is complicated. The muthi killings are sensational so it’s easy to want to go with that. But the most recent events are the murders of suspected witches. Start there. ‘The community in spiritual turmoil, etc etc.’ Then move into the witchcraft element, maybe with a quote from a local. Don’t be afraid to mention the inaction of ‘local leaders.’ It’s a fact. Leave your readers to draw the same conclusions you have, just don’t actually say it. Okay?”

Elizabeth nodded. “How much detail do I go into? That’s the part that I’m battling with.”

“Look, it’s a feature. You can be thorough. Just remember to keep it interesting. And don’t forget, you get paid per word. Don’t be shy”. Deb gulped down her coffee. “I have a meeting with the editor of *The Witness*.” She nodded to Tobias then turned to Elizabeth as she was leaving. “I want to see a draft of a story on my desk at four.”

Tobias picked up his coffee. “I thought you had quite a good grip on your witchcraft story.”

Elizabeth sipped her tea. She frowned. “I’ve got a lot of information. I just need to bring it together. What I need is something from a member of the community.”

“I could help with that.”

“Really?”

“Of course.” He sipped his coffee. Stared out across the hills. “Actually the person I’d want you to speak to is Ronnie’s grandmother.”

Elizabeth choked on her mouthful of tea. “I didn’t know you knew Ronnie’s family personally.”

“Oh yes. MaQwabe used to work for my wife and me as a maid. One day she came to us and asked if we would mind if her grandson came to stay with her in her room. We later learned that her daughter had basically dumped the boy on her mother and run off. So from the age of four Ronnie was raised by his grandmother on our farm.”

“Did you get him the job with Deb?”

“Oh no.” Tobias laughed. “Ronnie did that all by himself. Brains for Africa that one.”

“Actually, speaking to Ronnie’s grandmother might be a problem. There’s a bit of tension...”

Tobias nodded. “Yes. Deb told me.”

“Could we speak to someone else?”

“It would be difficult. They’re too frightened to speak to outsiders about this. Especially white outsiders. MaQwabe is an old friend. I think she would do this for me.” He sipped his coffee. “She’s also a strong woman. Not easily threatened. I’ll speak to Deb for you if you want.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle it.” Elizabeth smiled at Tobias. She sipped her tea, and said nothing.

Deb was at her desk, swigging a beer and typing at her computer. She had decided to avoid the local pub, claiming it was bad for her sex life. Elizabeth suspected that it had more to do with the fact that Deb wasn’t as invulnerable as she thought. Being the local drunk/slut/general joke was getting harder to dismiss. Elizabeth sensed that each piece of gossip or nastiness aimed in Deb’s direction was keenly felt.

“Well, are you going to stand there staring at my breathtaking beauty, or are you going to sit your fat arse on that chair in front of my desk.”

Elizabeth supposed that too much affection for one’s boss wasn’t conducive to a good working relationship. “My draft, as requested.”

“Shove it in the ‘In’ box. I’ll have a look at it later. Are you heading home?”

Elizabeth nodded.

“Jim home?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t sound too thrilled. Look, I don’t want to talk about it. At all. But I’ll suffer through some sisterhood bonding bullshit if you want to get it out of your system.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Thanks, but I don’t want to talk about it either.”

“Well that’s a goddamn relief.”

“Actually I wanted to speak to you about work. Tobias says he can hook me up with a local woman who can explain about witchcraft.”

“Great.”

“The problem is, she’s Ronnie’s grandmother. He’ll probably be there. Is that okay?”

“A story’s a story, Elizabeth. I don’t care what you have to do to get it.”

“Sure?”

“Yes. Anything else?”

Elizabeth shook her head.

“Okay then. See you tomorrow.” Deb took another swig of her beer.

Chapter Six

Elizabeth hated it: the old woman's humility, the downcast eyes and the *nkosikazi*. This little woman, three times her age, scarred from battling through a life difficult beyond Elizabeth's comprehension. She wanted to grind her whiteness into the earth.

"Sawubona, Ma."

She nodded her head again. Turned to her grandson. Elizabeth could sense her confusion: why had her grandson brought this white woman to her home?

Ronnie answered her in a hum of rapid isiZulu. Tobias joined in. Elizabeth was a little annoyed with herself that she still couldn't grasp the language, but also strangely patient and accepting. It seemed indulgent – any frustration – in this place of resignation. Fear crossed the old woman's face. She cast her eyes downward.

Ronnie spoke without turning to face Elizabeth. His gaze did not move from his grandmother's face. "My grandmother, she says she cannot answer your questions." He paused. "She has work in the field."

Tobias shook his head. His eyes were sad. "I'm sorry, Elizabeth. MaQwabe says she has been ill, and has neglected her vegetables. She must bring food for the children."

Elizabeth felt the silence thicken around her. She waited. MaQwabe lifted her eyes. Her pain was evident as she wrestled with her fear. Elizabeth smiled. "Please tell MaQwabe that she does not have to speak to me. I understand." Elizabeth looked at Ronnie. "Could you ask your grandmother if she needs help in the field?" Ronnie's eyes snapped to Elizabeth in surprise. Elizabeth laughed. "I do not know

anything about fieldwork. But I would like to learn. Also I have taken her from her work today.”

MaQwabe stood taller. Her eyes hardened. She nodded her head. The women understood one another.

Elizabeth was put to work plucking stones from the sand. When she asked for a wheelbarrow, MaQwabe laughed. Ronnie explained that she would later borrow one from a neighbour. Elizabeth simply piled the rocks at the bottom of MaQwabe’s vegetable patch. Ronnie’s cousins were amused by the *mlungu* digging her hands into the sand alongside the local women. The children stood and giggled until Ronnie chased them. But the youngest returned minutes later, and shadowed Elizabeth shyly as she walked between the furrows with handfuls of stone.

It was tiring work. Elizabeth’s back ached from bending. Her hands were coated thickly in dust, her nails black with compressed soil. Ronnie and the small child had left when the heat became oppressive. But MaQwabe worked slowly and tirelessly. Not far from the field, Elizabeth could see the wide shoulder of road that served as taxi rank. Only when this began to fill, and a slow stream of men and women began ambling down the footpaths to their homes, did MaQwabe lift her head from her work and indicate to Elizabeth that they should return to the house.

Ronnie was waiting with his young cousins. His face softened as he watched Elizabeth walk slowly up the hill. He still did not smile.

Standing at the doorway, Elizabeth was suddenly unsure of herself. She had been comfortable with the women and the children. But now the hills had filled with men and teenagers. Elizabeth shivered. Just last week friends of hers had passed

through Ndlovu Area on their way to Sodwana. They had witnessed an horrific accident. A Corolla crammed with tourists had been caught in a collision with a run-down taxi, and the car had been overturned. Her friends had jumped out of their own car to offer assistance, but quickly retreated when the car of tourists was mobbed. Fearing for their own safety, her friends had driven away from the crowd; they phoned, instead, for an ambulance. Elizabeth shook her head. There had been a police car. It had simply driven around the mob and gone along its way. The tourists were robbed as they lay bleeding.

Elizabeth looked at Ronnie. "I must head home. It will be dark soon." He nodded, then translated for his grandmother. Elizabeth turned to leave. MaQwabe stopped her.

"Kusasa"

Elizabeth nodded. *Tomorrow.*

She expected the woman's courage to have waned during the night. But when Elizabeth arrived at the small house, she found MaQwabe sitting on her bed in the corner of the room. Waiting. Ronnie looked up, and Elizabeth saw the animal of fear in him. Roaming and roaring behind his eyes. She tried to smile. He only turned away. The two elder children had been sent off to school, but the little one hugged her grandmother's knees, and looked at Elizabeth with big brown eyes. Elizabeth found a chair, and pulled it closer. MaQwabe looked up. She began to speak. From a dark corner, Ronnie translated.

"This witchcraft is a dark thing."

The Zulu words made his tongue heavy, and Elizabeth noticed that he slipped into the cadence of second-language speech. She listened to Ronnie's voice. But watched the words carved on the old woman's face.

"Always there has been this thing. In the time of my mother and even before. But now it is growing again. It comes from the jealousy. The hate of a person who has success. Before, there was poverty. The land could not keep all the men, and the city could not give them enough work. So we lived in poverty. We understood that the white government made it like this. But now there is no white government." She looked up at me. Sighed and shrugged. "I am old. I have known hunger and struggle all my years. This is not new for me. I had to learn not to let hate for the white root in me. Now I do not let hate for my brother root in me. But these younger people. They watch some get fat, and the hate grows in them for what they do not have. They learn *ubuthakathi* or they find a person who knows these things." She seemed suddenly quite weak. Ronnie fetched her some water. She looked up at her grandson and spoke to him. He turned to Elizabeth.

"She says it is difficult to talk about these things."

"Should we stop?"

Ronnie answered. "No. It is better to discuss this all at once. Better than to leave it unfinished."

MaQwabe looked at Elizabeth and began speaking again. Her voice was quiet, but strong. "There can be herbs in food, or in a line across the floor. Then there will be maybe fighting in the home, or even a sickness or bad luck maybe with the cattle. The *ubuthakathi* is like the weapon. The *umthakathi* is just a person who chooses this way. A person with the hatred." She paused. "Sometimes a person begins to become powerful. Too much money and power. Not in the way of good fortune from the

ancestors, but in the way that you can sense the evil in them. Then you ask yourself, ‘How did this person get these things?’ It will be strong *muthi*. Too strong. This *muthi* comes from the human flesh. Or maybe sacrifices to Mamlambo. When we found the bodies without the certain parts. We knew.”

“Did you know who was responsible?”

“No. It is not always easy to know who is causing the witchcraft. Sometimes the community is saying, ‘Hayi, that one is *umthakathi*.’ But if they are wrong... Shandu was a good man. These youth! They think it is the old ones who do these things, but we are not the ones living in hate.”

“Are you afraid? Maybe they will think it is you? Or maybe you will be harmed?” She couldn’t bring herself to say ‘killed.’

MaQwabe reached for Elizabeth’s hands, clutching both of them in hers. Strange, that those hands, crippled by arthritis, gnarled by work, should imbue such strength. “Sometimes I am afraid. Like for the children. Also, that this evil has grown, frightens me. How can it be? How can it be?” She looked up at Elizabeth. “But I think you know what I know. This can only be because this evil comes from those in power. From the one who should protect. And this we cannot fight. So then I am afraid.” She took a deep breath, releasing Elizabeth’s hands. “But I have protected the house and the family with water from the church. I must have faith in the Holy Spirit.”

“Is that how you can protect yourself from witchcraft?”

“Some people go to a sangoma. Some go to a healer from the church. This is evil from another place. We cannot understand these things. We cannot know what exactly is this *ubuthakathi*. These people know about spirits and ancestors. These young ones do not believe in the spirits, but hayi! I see them working.”

She paused. The old woman's eyes were drooped and watery with age. "This is not what it is to be Zulu. This killing. This darkness. This is not the Zulu way. We are a people of faith and strength. With this new freedom, they remember only what they want. They make the Zulu people sick with their half-truth. We keep the ways of power. But we cast away the stories. The ways of respect. The old beliefs. I know things must change. I am not a foolish woman. But I am angry that they only change what they want. And still we live in fear. And still we live in poverty. They cook the meat in the big pot with the water. But wanting only the meat, they cook the water into the air. Until there is only the meat. Stuck to the pot. Thick and charred. And it cannot be eaten." She looked up at Elizabeth with laughter in her eyes. "And who must then clean the pot? The women!" She chuckled at her own joke, and Elizabeth could not help but laugh quietly with her.

MaQwabe rose. She indicated to Elizabeth that she should follow. Puzzled, Elizabeth turned to Ronnie.

"It seems my grandmother has found you to be a useful labourer. She wants you to help her dig up the amadumbes for supper."

Elizabeth laughed loudly. Shaking her head, she watched the old woman push open the door and walk outside. Elizabeth reluctantly walked from the cool and stood in the doorway, squinting against the glare of the sun. Then she followed MaQwabe. Into the light.

Elizabeth glanced at the pile of vegetables they had harvested. She had come unprepared, and could feel the sting of sunburn on her face. She walked over to MaQwabe, bent over the soil. She tapped her watch. She needed to get back to the office. The old woman nodded. Shielding her eyes her eyes from the sun, she looked

up at her small house. Ronnie sat just outside the door. Staring. MaQwabe dropped her hand. Slowly she shook her head. They walked together up the hill.

“Ronnie, I must get back to the office. I want to thank you and your grandmother for all your help.”

He looked up sharply. His voice clipped with anger. “You have hurt us by being here. I did not want this, but my grandmother wanted to speak to you, and if I did not translate she would have found someone else to do it. I would not allow that. Now you have your story.” He stood. “Do you understand that it may have cost her her life. Do you?”

Elizabeth’s anger flared. She braced herself, she was ready to argue, but MaQwabe stepped in front of her grandson. The small woman stood tall in her anger. She jabbed her finger into Ronnie’s chest, firing off sharp sentences in rapid isiZulu. Ronnie turned and walked away, but his grandmother followed him. She pulled at his shirt sleeve until he turned around. Her voice became insistent. She kept repeating a phrase and pointing to Elizabeth. Elizabeth realised that the old woman was commanding Ronnie to translate. He would not relent. MaQwabe began walking away. With a roar, Ronnie called her back. He walked towards Elizabeth. His face hard.

“My grandmother says, ‘Nkosikazi, I did not raise him to be afraid.’”

MaQwabe hurried back to where Elizabeth and Ronnie stood.

“Siyangi phendukela ebubini. Siyalwa. Siya biza Ukhokho noma UJesu.”

“We do not turn from evil. We fight. We call on the ancestors and Jesus Christ.”

MaQwabe touched Ronnie on his arm. She spoke softly.

“Amyeke ulahlekelwe umoya wakho ngenxa yokubonileyo.”

“Ma...”

Elizabeth looked at Ronnie imploringly. “What did she say?”

“She says, ‘You cannot take out your spirit for what your eyes have seen.’” He shook his head. “I did not realise she knew I had seen something.”

MaQwabe then balled her hands into fists. Her voice became firm again in her anger. *“Ukiphi umoya wakho manje?”*

“Where is your spirit now?”

“Ulahla umsebenzi wakho, ulahla abangani wakho. Ucasha, ufiphala!”

“You have thrown aside your work, your friends. You hide, and shrivel to nothing!”

The old woman looked from Elizabeth to Ronnie, then shook her head. *“U ya thakathi la?”*

Ronnie paused before he translated. “Is not this the work of witchcraft?”

MaQwabe pinched his arm through his shirt-sleeve. *“Uyafana nomuntu othakathla. UMkhize ukusabise kuze kube sengathi uqalaksiwe.”*

“You have the look of one bewitched. Mkhize has cursed you with your own fear.”

“I was angry with you for bringing me here.” Elizabeth carried on stirring the pot of curry she had on the stove.

“I know.” Jim slowly filled his glass from the open bottle of Shiraz. Elizabeth balanced the spoon on the rim of the pot, and turned to face him.

“Jim. Jim, this is not a place to love. It doesn’t inspire that. It’s prickly and hard. I seem to walk into a wall of suffering everywhere I turn. There are days when I just don’t know how to digest it all. But the thing is, you learn the rhythm of resignation. Of acceptance,” Elizabeth shook her head, “which isn’t the same as being powerless. This is a humbling place.” She paused. “I’ve decided to let it go. The anger. God, that sounds so arrogant. Do you know what I mean?”

He nodded. “That isn’t the only problem, though, Liz. I know I’m letting you down. I’m trying. You have to know that.”

He paused. Elizabeth could see that he wanted to move closer, but the space that had grown between them wouldn’t shrink. He looked across at her.

“I love you, you know. Things aren’t so bad that I’ve forgotten that.”

“I love you too.” Elizabeth turned back to the stove, where dinner was burning.

Chapter Seven

Elizabeth found Anita Moodley in the far courtroom, chatting to some colleagues. She was not at all pleased to see Elizabeth hovering discreetly at the door. Elizabeth stepped outside as Anita hurried towards her.

“I’m sure I don’t need to explain to you that if I lose my job, I’m not much use to you.”

“I’m sorry, Anita. I did try to call. I wouldn’t have come, except it’s important.”

“Well I can’t talk now.” She began heading back to the courtroom.

“It’s about Mkhize.”

She stopped. “What have you got?”

“Not much. That’s why I need to speak to you.”

“OK. Look I can only meet you after work. Not here.”

“The coffee shop in the Checkers Centre?”

She nodded.

Anita frowned and took a sip of her cappuccino as she digested everything Elizabeth had told her.

“What do you know about the Suppression of Witchcraft Act?”

Elizabeth stared blankly at her. Anita checked her watch.

“The act was passed in the fifties. The good Christian Afrikaner government decreed that witchcraft was mere pagan superstition. The law suppressed the *idea* of witchcraft, punishing those accused thereof, but also those from the community who sought to punish alleged witches. For the sake of peace and not getting their hands dirty, some magistrates turned a blind eye to chiefs’ courts, where witches were

sometimes tried, but essentially these customary law proceedings were illegal. In the end, people couldn't prove witchcraft to their wise white rulers, but the assault or murder of an alleged witch could certainly be proven."

"So people were more likely to be prosecuted for defending themselves against witchcraft than for the witchcraft itself?"

"Bingo. In the nineties – Apartheid over, new constitution – magistrates would at least consider a defence against witchcraft *extenuating circumstances*, and sentence lightly. A bill has been proposed to change the law so as to make it fall more in line with new attitudes – the Witchcraft Control Act – but it hasn't been passed yet. We could take a chance and try and nail Mkhize for witchcraft, but it's risky. You might be able to get him on murder. You said you have a witness?"

"Yes. And I know others in the community suspect him."

"The thing is, I know these people. They're not going to come forward. Has your witness even gone to the police?"

Elizabeth shook her head.

"I rest my proverbial case. Look, without witnesses I can't prove anything."

Elizabeth clattered her teacup into the saucer. "There's nothing we can do, then?"

"Not much, no."

"And it's probably still more likely that the desperate acts of the community will be punished, than it is Mkhize will be convicted of his crimes. In fact I'll bet that the only reason no arrests have been made in connection with the vigilante killings is that Mkhize wishes it so. It must serve his purpose. It keeps them afraid. Divide and conquer."

“I’m sorry, Elizabeth. I appreciate the tip-off and I’ll do what I can. Maybe I can put some pressure on the cops, even call in some detectives from another area. But Elizabeth, you should know this: Mkhize is a dangerous man – clever, well-connected, and ruthless. I’ve been hearing rumours about him since I arrived here, but he hardly ever seems to land up in court.” She snorted. “The one time he was charged, he was out in an hour. Case dismissed. I wouldn’t be surprised if he even had connections in the courts. You and I both know he’s corrupt, but no-one has been able to nail him yet, and I don’t think I’ll convict him of anything now. The fact is, his hold on the community is unbreakable. They’re afraid. They’re conditioned to accept his authority. So we can never make anything stick.” Anita glanced at her watch again, and signalled for the waiter to bring the bill. “We need to let him know we’re watching, maybe he’ll back off. Otherwise, the best thing you can do is get that community to stop killing each other. I don’t want to put desperate people away. But if I have to, I will.”

Elizabeth nodded. She put a twenty Rand note on the table and got up to leave.

“And Elizabeth, that witness of yours – I’d watch him if I were you.”

Tobias waited for the dignitaries to settle down. Some were visibly displeased with the humble surrounds. Nonhlanhla Mthethwa, MEC for Welfare, took the arm of her assistant while she caught her breath. The heaving of one’s hefty frame up the slickness of unpaved slope is indeed tiring work. Elizabeth inspected the mud on her shoes. *A woman lost her shoe in a puddle.*

“His majesty the King, his worship the mayor, honourable Inkosi, esteemed and honoured guests. Welcome to the official opening of The Spirit of eMakhosini. We have heard from so many eloquent speakers today, I will not add my humble voice to the day’s chorus. I will simply invite His Majesty to declare this magnificent monument open.”

The praise singer began his cry in the name of the king. Afterward, The monarch, flanked by two bodyguards, stepped forward. Photographers frantically repositioned themselves for the best possible shot. Careful to avoid the glare from the limousines squatting like fat beetles in the dirt. Cameras flashed.

In deep tones of isiZulu, the king began to speak.

A fierce young politician frowned as he repeatedly dodged the wide hat of another politician’s wife. *A schoolgirl clutched her skirt to her legs.* At the foot of the koppie (and at a safe distance from the cars) the locals stood, patiently.

Elizabeth’s gaze settled on Induna Mkhize. He was already staring at her. He inclined his head and smiled.

The crowd suddenly erupted into wild applause and dance. The connection between Elizabeth and Mkhize was broken. Snapped back to the moment, Elizabeth looked up at the monument. The king had finished his speech, and held his hands aloft in triumph. Elizabeth felt lost in the noise. She glanced around for Ronnie. She’d hoped he would make an appearance.

The dignitaries were heading to the monument in small groups. MEC Mthethwa, Elizabeth noticed with a smile, was admiring the view from just where she was. Elizabeth slowly made her way to the summit.

There was a crowd gathered around the Spirit of eMakhosini. Some were posing for pictures. A little to the right Elizabeth noticed a T.V. reporter speaking into a microphone. Elizabeth made her way past them all, until she stood right on the edge of the koppie.

eMakhosini held her in her place. There was something in the air. Resolution, perhaps. She remembered the first day Ronnie had brought here. The day she was given the witchcraft story. Elizabeth had finally handed it in to Deb. She knew that Deb had sent the edited piece on to the *Mail and Guardian*, and she hoped it would appear in this week's edition. Elizabeth breathed in deeply. There was something more, something in the moment her mind was struggling to grasp. And then she understood.

This was a place of blood and ghosts. Impis and sangomas. The past infused each moment of the present till it hung in the very air with the weight of History. Stories, told and untold, of all the peoples of this country crossing paths, crossing swords. It all existed in a continuum that transcended time. There are moments when one crosses to the beginnings of a people. Moments of fossil and amber and parchment and stone. Dream-like and sacred. When Then reaches into Now. This was such a moment. Elizabeth knew then that Zululand was about more than social campaigns and political structures. More than fear. More than power. There was a spirit that could be caught sometimes. The spirit of the people. As soft as a wing. As strong as an old woman.

Someone coughed politely behind her.

"Mr. Mkhize." She turned her back to him. He slowly made his way to her side.

“Mr. Qwabe came to see me yesterday. Not as a journalist, of course, but as a representative of the community.” He chuckled to himself. “He came with Captain Matandela, who has been instructed to intensify his investigation. It seems the police are being pressured by some smart lady lawyer. Do you think, Mrs Clarke, that it is a white lawyer? Young journalists must be paid a lot these days, because white lawyers cost white money.”

“And what colour is your lawyer, Mr. Mkhize?” His face turned to stone.

“White liberals are always the biggest fools. They interest me. They believe in the goodness of all things. Even the black mamba. Have you ever seen a black mamba? They are very dangerous snakes. Very dangerous. If one gets into your house, the only way to stop it, is to kill it. Sometimes, people try to catch it instead, then *pik-pik* and they are dead.”

His face was friendly. But his eyes were bullets.

“If you want to catch a snake, you must know what you are doing. Yes. It is dangerous to interfere in things you do not understand.”

He turned to leave, but Elizabeth began speaking.

“You are supposed to be the guardian of your people’s freedom. There is so much to be done. They need houses. They need equipped schools. They need medicine. They need shoes. Instead you kill them. Quietly in a forest.” She turned her head so that he could see her words in her eyes.

“Don’t tell me I don’t understand how things are done. I understand more than you think. You are like a tick on a bull’s testicle. You suck your people dry. For you Democracy means only Power. You have abandoned your people. You are a traitor. You are the most revolting man I have ever met.”

And then he laughed. A loud belly laugh. He stepped closer, put an arm around her, as if they were sharing a private joke. An intimacy of rot and lies. His eyes were as hard as rock.

“Be careful, little mlungu,” he said in the deepness of his throat. “My arms are long, they reach even to the suburbs.”

She stared out at the lush valley, trying to gather courage. Then she shook his arm from her shoulders. His breath was hot on her face.

“Don’t you *dare* threaten me. There are still some protections afforded those with a white skin.”

He smiled, patted her shoulder. Slowly he walked away, calling for his assistant.

Elizabeth stared out as the sun set over the Valley of the Kings.

Chapter Eight

She found him sitting outside his grandmother's home. On a low stool. His back pressed up against the roughly plastered wall. Even as she stood next to him, he did not flinch. His head did not turn. He merely sat. Unmoving. Only the light slowly changed. The glow of a fading sun seeping into his skin. Into the ground. The amber of a fire that would not burn. Not here.

"I looked for you at the ceremony. It was your story. I thought you would at least want to see the monument." Elizabeth dropped to her haunches. "Mkhize was there. I did not know you'd been to see him or the police. I think that was the right thing to do, Ronnie."

Without turning his head, he whispered. His voice hoarse. "He will survive this. I know it. Captain Matandela knows it. The community knows it."

Before Elizabeth could speak, he continued.

"I have never been sure about this witchcraft." He paused. His hand lifted to his face, brushed something away. "But I have not lived in fear. I was fed and cared for. I was educated. I did not need to worry about pleasing ancestors."

"And now?"

"And now, my grandmother's words make sense. I live in my grandmother's home, like a boy. I have no stomach for food. I am wasting. I am sick." He dropped his chin to his chest. "Maybe it is the *isidliso*. I know only that I stood in the office with Matandela. We faced Mkhize. But before him, my words stuck in my throat. Trapped in my own breath."

"Fight this, Ronnie. Not with herbs and prophecies, but with courage and common sense. Go back to the police."

He turned then, took her hand, and placed it on his heart. Holding it to skin and pulse. She jerked at the intimacy, but he held her in place.

“Who would come when cattle were taken? Who would come when there was death and loss? The police?” He shook his head. “They were merely the claws of an evil government. Do you understand? We learned our own justice. We cleansed our land and its people our way.”

His face was wretched and wet.

“I could not speak. But the death of the man they killed, and every death since, has weighed down on my spirit.”

She found MaQwabe in the field. Standing among the furrows of dirt as she mopped her face with her sleeve. Elizabeth felt the old woman watching her as she walked from the small house where Ronnie was sitting, to the bottom of the hill. Elizabeth stood before MaQwabe. She was reaching out to her with her sadness in this place of sprouting green and gnarled and broken earth. Elizabeth’s face was mapped with her fear: his spirit is broken; I am afraid for him. The old woman took Elizabeth’s hands in hers. And cried.

It was Jim who woke her. He was already dressed. Clutching his cell-phone to his ear and holding her clothes out to her. Only as she sat up in bed, did she smell the fire. That sweet choking smell.

“Liz? Are you listening to me? The fire’s too close to the house. I want you to go to Jack and Santie’s place till we get this under control. Okay?”

She began to get dressed. “Arson?”

He nodded. “Ted’s already down there. He says there’s a car parked on the road, so we think the guy’s still in there. The fire’s not too big – control tower spotted it early, thank god. Unless the wind picks up, we’ll get it before it reaches the houses. I want you safe at Jack’s place, though. Just in case.”

Elizabeth found Deb and Tobias waiting for her at the office the next morning. Deb sat at her desk, her back to Tobias, staring out across the bustling main street of the town. Tobias stood in the middle of the room. His face grim and tired. And Elizabeth knew.

“Ronnie?”

Tobias cleared his throat. “You probably know about the fire in the plantation.”

Elizabeth nodded.

“Mkhize’s car was found on the road. The police found two bodies. They’d been set alight. They think it was Mkhize and his guard.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I accompanied the detectives to MaQwabe’s house early this morning. Ronnie is gone.”

Elizabeth grabbed for the wall. Steadied herself. “The police are looking for him, then?”

“They’ve opened an inquest docket. Ronnie’s obviously their chief suspect. Captain Matandela himself can testify to Ronnie’s state of mind. Apparently Ronnie visited the police a few days ago accusing Mkhize of the muthi killings. When

Matandela accompanied Ronnie to question Mkhize, Ronnie would not speak. Ronnie's obvious dislike for Mkhize coupled with his open frustration with the police's inability to charge Mkhize with the crimes... well, they give Ronnie motive."

Oh god. Oh god. Elizabeth could feel her screams welling inside her. She stumbled from the room.

Elizabeth wasn't sure why she chose to drive to eMakhosini. She supposed that she was searching for perspective. Understanding, perhaps, in a place of big sky and kings in the earth.

He turned when he saw her. He was smiling.

"Did you do it? Please, Ronnie, tell me you didn't do it."

"When I was a boy, the teacher at the farm school told us a story: many years ago, before the battle of Isandlwana, a missionary tried to convert King Cetshwayo to Christianity. None of his arguments would convince this fierce king to abandon his ancestors. Finally the missionary said to Cetshwayo that if he did not accept Christianity, he would burn for eternity in hell-fire. And do you know what Cetshwayo replied?"

Elizabeth stared at him. Horror gripping at her throat.

"He replied that the missionary's hell-fire did not frighten him, as his soldiers would put out any fire that threatened their king. Then Cetshwayo pointed to a grass fire that was burning over the land, and called to the commanding officer of the regiment before him, 'Before you look at me again, eat up that fire!' Without hesitation, the regiment plunged barefooted into the flames, singing a war cry. And, the story goes, Cetshwayo thought nothing of the burned and the maimed." He paused. "I used to scoff at that story. How could this be a story about my people? I

certainly would not have acted so foolishly.” He shook his head. “For whom would I burn? I did not understand that there are greater forces than a man’s will.”

Elizabeth found that her legs could no longer hold her. She sank to the sand and the grass.

Ronnie looked at Elizabeth pityingly. He began to inspect the monument. He walked to each of the animal horns in turn. Slowly, Ronnie intoned the names of the seven buried kings of the valley: Unkosinkulu, Zulu, Phunga, Mageba, Ndaba, Jama, Senzangakhona.

“Ah, Elizabeth, do you not see? You think the law is enough. You think the police are enough. I tried to tell you. In this place, these have never been enough. Good and Evil have never been held in the small white hands of the law. They are too great. They reach into the past, through so many kingdoms. The sangomas say they reach even to the beginning. To the time of gods.”

“You killed Mkhize. Burned him. Him and another man.”

Ronnie stared out over the valley, as if he did not hear her. He began to speak as if he were recalling an old history lesson.

“Senzangakhona begat Shaka, Dingane killed Shaka, Mpande killed Dingane, Mpande begat Cetshwayo, Cetshwayo begat Dinuzulu, Dinuzulu begat Solomon, Solomon begat Cyprian, Cyprian begat Goodwill. *uZwelethini uyazitha. uZwelethini uyinkosi.*” He turned to face Elizabeth. Smiled.

“Ronnie. Ronnie! The police are looking for you.”

He walked to the centre of the monument. His hands smoothed the warm brass of the beer pot. He laughed softly. “This is, if I am correct, a symbol of friendship.” He shook his head. “These are strange times.” Ronnie walked over to Elizabeth, and helped her to her feet. Elizabeth felt the warmth of the brass, still in his hands.

“How could you do it, Ronnie? Do you understand what this means for you? For your grandmother?”

“I keep telling you, it is you who does not understand.”

“No!” Her rage echoed through the valley. Elizabeth tried to step closer. She needed to touch him. She knew if she felt his skin in her hands, she could make him hear reason. But she stopped. Her horror stood in the way.

And he knew it.

“Ronnie. No.” She shook her head. “There are things beyond understanding.”

“Like friendship, Elizabeth?”

A rock of grief pounded into her chest.

“This was never about me. Or you. Or us.” She choked on the pain rising in her throat. “That’s the point. Your grandmother – ”

“Is safe.”

“Don’t you *dare* make this about her! She was not consumed with fear, *you* were. You killed two men. You. And you want to place that burden on an old woman’s back? You’re a coward.” She spat her anger at him. “You didn’t burn two people for her or for me or for any warped fucking sense of culture. That’s bullshit.” Elizabeth jabbed her finger into his chest.

He slapped her hand away. “How would you know? You think your little three week *project* makes you an expert? A bit of gardening with the natives and now you know just what makes me tick. Look at my life!” His despair whipped through her. “What is *your* fear in the face of this? What is *your* suffering? Look at my life!”

Elizabeth tried to still her sobs, pressing them back with her hand.

“How can you possibly know anything?” He walked away from her to stand looking over the valley.

They stood in that quiet for a long time.

Elizabeth thought of MaQwabe. About a woman who had seen so much. A woman who had raised so many children. A woman who was weary, and wise, and strong. A woman who would always eke life out of a patch of soil. A woman who would not be broken. Softly, Elizabeth came up behind him. “I know this: killing Mkhize was not the answer.”

Ronnie shook his head. “Can you share friendship with what you don’t understand, Elizabeth? I don’t think you can. But I offer you my friendship. As it is.”

She swallowed a lump of grief and words. She knew he would walk away. She knew he would hide. She knew he would die in a hole. Invisible. Burned out. And she wanted to hope. But she also knew, as she watched him leave, that she had been charred by the fire. And that she would have to learn to live with ghosts.

She found Jim on the edge of the plantation. Surveying the blackened trees as they fell, clamped in metal jaws. She stared a long time. Watching the dust and ash catching on the coarse hairs of his legs. Each speck catching a glint of dusk light. Then, khaki shorts and requisition safety boots. And all her grief, which had hollowed her, clung to that moment of the simple, of the real. Like dust to hair. Like light to dust.

Jim looked up. She stood. Haunted and crying. He hurried over, concerned.

“What’s wrong? Liz? What happened?”

Still she stood.

He held her, breathing the smell of her hair. And she wept. For the life she could not save. For the suffering she could not end. For the tragedy of letting everything slip through her fingers.

It had darkened. They stood together in their garden, overlooking the burnt plantation. Elizabeth had told him about Ronnie and Mkhize. About MaQwabe. About eMakhosini. After a while, there was no need for telling. They stared out over the balding landscape.

“There’s a lot of damage. From the fire.”

“Yes. But we’ll sell the burnt timber. Then we’ll replant.”

The mechanical harvester jerked forwards and back through the trunks. The tin strain of Kwaito carried through the chill of the air. Elizabeth thought about the constant of root and blade. The orbit of this existence. She smiled to herself.

“They’ll be back in seven years. These trees grow well here.”

Note

The difficulty of writing a novel so obviously inspired by a particular context, is that one has to be aware of certain sensitivities. I have tried to strike a balance between providing enough markers to give the reader a realistic picture of Zululand, and creating fictional environments so as not to cause offence or imply that this is anything other than a work of the imagination.

Generally, the greater towns and the cities of Zululand are real, and serve only to indicate the various 'faces' of the area: Ulundi, Richards Bay, Empangeni, and St. Lucia. eMakhosini also exists. This monument, and the beautiful valley that houses it, were the spark of inspiration for the story. I wish to imply nothing by my choice of eMakhosini as the heart of the novel. I hope only to illustrate how powerfully this place has touched me, and urge readers to visit the valley for themselves.

The site of the land claim settlement is fictional. The name has a particular meaning. Whenever a kraal is removed to a fresh site, a goat or a beast is slaughtered and the branch of an umlahlankosi tree (*carisna anduina*) is dragged from the old site to the new to induce the family spirits to follow.

KwaNdlovu is also a fictional place. The name means 'Place of the elephant.' The reference to elephants, is what led me to situate the community near St. Lucia. Elephants were recently re-introduced to the parks in that area. I did not base the community of KwaNdlovu or the events that occur there on any existing community in the St. Lucia area or, for that matter, any other community in the greater Zululand area.

Please note that the extract on page 51 is from *Madumo: A Man Bewitched*. By Adam Ashforth. (Ashforth 124).

Addendum A

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Unlike an academic thesis, a creative writing project is not clearly referenced. I have, therefore, explained in a 'Book List' how the various texts consulted during my Masters degree have contributed to the creative piece.

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Addendum B

Book List.

1) *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje

“There are stories the man recites quietly into the room which slip from level to level like a hawk. He wakes in the painted arbour that surrounds him with its spilling flowers, arms of great trees. He remembers picnics, a woman who kissed parts of his body that now are burned into the colour of aubergine.

“I have spent weeks in the desert, forgetting to look at the moon, he says, as a married man may spend days never looking into the face of his wife. These are not sins of omission but signs of preoccupation.” (4)

Magic. I love this so much – its music, the images. How did Ondaatje create his characters? Can I make the horrific as powerful? Can I capture the complexity of love? I know this much: the relationship between Elizabeth and Jim must balance the image of the entrails. They must have the same power – just as the passion of Katherine and Almásy balances with the war and a burned body. I want to write a novel that is not only filled with suspense, but also beautifully written. The relationship between Elizabeth and Jim provides a way for me to write more intimately, more lyrically. A harmony to balance the melody.

2) *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad

It is obvious from the first few pages that I am well aware of this book and its cornerstone position in post-colonial literature. I have quite obviously set out to write in a post-colonial tradition: I am aligned with the post-colonial postgraduate research group, and my words to my classmates at my first presentation were, “I want to create a story that deliberately debunks the Heart of Darkness vision of the natives doing their voodoo in the forest.” The overt reference to this novel on pages 3-4, always receives some comment from my readers. Unfortunately these comments have ranged from “too obvious” (my lecturers) to “too obscure” (my writers’ group). Some comments have been positive, some negative, and frankly I don’t know what to do about it. In the end I think the best is to be open about it, and acknowledge the influence of this book on mine.

3) *Fiela se Kind* by Dalene Matthee

I have fallen in love with her storytelling power. I used to love her books when I was at school and read them all. This story especially is incredible. How did she come up with such an original idea?

I want my story to be honest. Matthee captured beautifully the tension between white and black, English and Afrikaans. She did not answer to it, she just wrote it. I want to write something honest. That is the legacy of South African writing.

4) *Country of my Skull* by Antjie Krog

I have infinite respect for Antjie Krog as a South African writer. She has an honesty I believe characterises South African writing. This struck me in *Country of my Skull* particularly, because she so openly addresses her own sense of not-belonging, her Afrikaner guilt, and the trauma she suffers in confronting these in the context of the TRC. Krog shows courage in exploring her own trauma, especially in a context defined by suffering on a phenomenal scale.

Although, I did not create the character of Elizabeth with Krog's text in mind, I have studied the text in some detail and must acknowledge startling similarities. On some level, Krog has informed my novel. My novel is also a text where the political and personal intersect at the site of a sensitive narrator, whose gaze is always turned inward.

5) *Unholy Trinity* by Paul Adam

I just picked this up at Kwambo library for a bit of light reading. I suddenly missed the popular fiction I usually enjoy – I've been such a good MA student, only work-related reading. So what do I do? Turn it into work! As it turns out it, it might be just what I've needed. I have been struggling with plot. I like the way Adam kept the tension in the plot. I am definitely lacking here. Either that or I must admit to myself that I am stepping out of the crime genre. I don't want to do that. I want my novel to be readable, not a bloody J.M. Coetzee. Blah.

There were also similar narrative concerns here, which I noted with interest: a female protagonist, not a police officer but a lawyer, dealing with a crime involving power structures to which she has no access, in this case, the Vatican.

6) *Closed Circle* by Wessel Ebersohn

I am surprised at how much I enjoyed this book. Ebersohn is a master of pace and, therefore, of creating suspense. The opening sequence in particular is an incredible example of narrative control. The characters are well-developed and the reader is kept guessing. I noticed this because I have been struggling with 'revealing the villain'. The political theme creates obvious villains, so it's difficult to keep the suspense going. Ebersohn handles this well. For one, he shows so clearly that in a corrupt system, there are elements of the villain in many characters. Also, although Wheelwright is revealed to be the villain well before the end of the book, the actual evidence is revealed gradually, so the reader is kept guessing to some degree.

The novel has had quite an effect on me. I didn't realise that I was writing within a 'genre'. The concept for my novel came from wanting to wrestle with political themes in an accessible and exciting way. So, surprise surprise, I'm not original, but it's actually comforting more than anything else. It's incredible how well the combination of political intrigue and suspense-thriller work. I must admit, there is a part of me that really likes the idea of contributing to a genre, of being the 'next generation' of South African political suspense writing.

7) *Oyster* by Janette Turner Hospital

I read this novel for my Post-colonial Literature class and thought nothing of it beyond that. In the class discussion, however, I was struck by some similarities in this and what I am trying to do. I am excited because I can see a way to elevate my novel while still keeping it exciting and readable.

Hospital has a descriptive style I like. She uses language in a rich and beautiful way, even in describing a sparse landscape and equally 'sparse' characters! She foregrounds her post-colonial concerns – textual re-mapping of a cultural landscape. Why this interested me thematically is that she is not aboriginal and yet weaves that culture into the narrative, allowing it to inform the life of her protagonist, Jess, a white woman. This is what I want Elizabeth to experience. She is wrestling with a sense of belonging, with her fear of a landscape (and culture) in which she must learn to find a place.

8) *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* by Lynne Truss

In my first class presentation, I received some (justified) criticism of my use of punctuation. Apparently, I join John Updike in overzealous use of the splice comma. I made the recommended changes and was stunned by the difference it made. Unfortunately, this has shaken my faith in my own grammatical knowledge at just the time when I have become aware of its importance! In the next two weeks I will be revising a lot of my creative work before handing it in. I think this book will be invaluable.

9) *Dirt Music* by Tim Winton

I was not going to add this novel to my list because it is another from my Post-colonial Literature class, which looks a bit suspicious! A classmate who takes the same modules as I do, kept making references to it, though, and in the end I re-examined the book in relation to my own.

What I particularly like about *Dirt Music* is that it is first a contemporary novel, then a post-colonial one. I am increasingly aware – having met other young African writers such as Yvonne Owuor and Helon Habila – that I am a part of a new wave of African writers. We are concerned with politics and post-colonial themes, but we are also in a very real sense 'global'. Everything from the Internet to university syllabi, make us very much a part of world

trends, rather than purely Afro-political ones. What I mean is, we are equally influenced by non-political ideas.

Dirt Music grapples with the idea of 'reality', questioning the reliability of our grasp of what is 'real'. Winton plays with 'virtual reality' and other contemporary experiences, creating an exciting and, for me, original work.

I do not flatter myself that I am even vaguely in this league. But it is interesting to read how others are finding ways to write along post-colonial themes while at the same time avoiding writing simply about politics.

10) *A Grove of Fever Trees* by Daphne Rooke.

I finally found it! I am not too sure that this has contributed to my writing as much as I had hoped. The novel had been recommended to me as another 'Zululand' novel, with special reference to the 'tree' motif that appears in Rooke's novel, as I use a tree motif of my own. I expected references to Zulu culture, the Zululand landscape, the sense of isolation I think all Zululanders feel. What I did not expect was a very strange story! The protagonist, Danny, is the creepiest character I have ever come across in a South African novel! But no less fascinating for all that.

I do want to make more references to the Zululand landscape than I have already done and will work on it. What is problematic about doing so is that I am trying to avoid making connections (albeit imagined) between my fictional characters and real people. From a legal perspective, I could get into a spot of trouble. So I am wrestling with wanting to capture the Zululand landscape, and wanting to emphasise that this is a work of the imagination.

11) www.factnet.org/cults/Sangoma/?FACTNet

This has proven to be a very useful website. It essentially functions as a site of connection to other websites on this theme. What is useful is that it is very carefully and clearly structured, making it very easy to find exactly what one is looking for. The first section includes newspaper articles about muthi killings – useful to me in the context of a protagonist who is a journalist, investigating muthi killings for a news story. This also includes some gruesome photographs. I actually altered the opening of the story to fit the new information I got from these articles about the condition of the body etc. Newspaper articles are also useful in that they present many different perspectives and sources of information: police officers, occult experts, psychologists, and doctors, to name a few.

The site also includes a section on traditional healers – offering definitions and some idea of how they are viewed in the medical profession.

Lastly, there is a section connecting the researcher to government departments.

On the whole the site has proven useful, as I knew surprisingly little about sangomas and muthi murders. Having navigated the site several times, however, I am beginning to feel a bit frustrated. It does offer extensive

information from a variety of sources, but often the information is conflicting. I find myself desperate for someone in the know to give me a straight-forward answer to the question *what is this all about?* I am at the point where I need some clear facts from one reliable source.

12) *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft* by Janet Burroway

This book has been a veritable bible over the past few months. I have never done a creative writing course and found Burroway's nuts-and-bolts approach extremely useful. I refer to her book throughout my journal – giving some clarity on which exercises I have tried and what exactly I have found useful. My focus has largely been on prose/fiction but I look forward to examining the poetry sections at a later date. This book is highly recommended. In fact, I recommended this book to my writers' group and a few members have purchased it. My only regret is that we were not able to try some of the exercises as a class group – I think it would have been a lot of fun!

13) *The Washing of the Spears* by Donald R. Morris

A dense and difficult read. This book took me far longer than I had planned, which was incredibly frustrating. I appreciated Morris's extensive and thorough research, but found the density of such extensive detail problematic. The book seems to loop back on itself, each loop providing information from a new perspective. Add to this the lack of clearly marked chapters, and one has a book that loses the power of the story in the telling. Although I appreciate that it is the definitive book on Zulu history and I feel more informed than I was, I am immensely confused by the tidal wave of names and details and can't quite recall as much as I would like. Of course I'd rather pluck out my eyes before I re-read the blasted thing, so I'm on the look out for a more concise version of events.

14) *People of Heaven* (and *The Forgotten Sea*) by Beverly Harper.

This is hardly a book that would be approved by the academy, but I want to explain the importance a book like this has in the writing process. Harper is described (try to control the heaving of your stomach) as a female, Australian Wilbur Smith. I know I know. But the thing is, she writes a good story. It's a page-turner. I certainly couldn't put it down. In hindsight, I'm not sure how I was so easily convinced that the plot – a nymphomaniac fifteen year old farmer's daughter running off with the son of an Induna on the farm to the political safety of Bechuanaland, where he sells her to a local brothel before running off to Zambia to train as a freedom fighter – was perfectly plausible. Where the book proved useful, though, is that the novel was well researched. Harper had a good command of Zulu history and culture and wove these into the story convincingly. She used the same technique in *The Forgotten Sea*; her research (which is extensive) comes through in the story, yet she does not sacrifice readability.

(See Journal)

15) <http://www.isandlwana.co.za>

A useful site with a far more concise description of the battle at Isandlwana than Mr. Morris's version! I particularly love this quote I found on the website. It is a song composed by the victorious Zulus:

Thou great and mighty chief!
Thou who hast an army...
The red soldiers came:
We destroyed them.
The mounted soldiers came:
We destroyed them.
The mounted police came:
We destroyed them...
When will they dare
To repeat their attack?

16) *The Politics of Evil* by Clifton Crais

This book came just at the right time. Following *Washing of the Spears*, it was a breath of fresh air. I copied extensive passages from the book into my notebook which I keep beside me when I'm writing. Crais sees witchcraft as "the idiom for explaining misfortune" (129) and examines the relationship between traditional spiritual belief and political tragedy.

As in the past, state formation and political transition have raised anew the relationship between politics and the occult, the issue of authority and legitimacy, and the problems of suffering and evil. People have probed the state and their contemporary predicaments using a grammar of magic, and especially witchcraft, that formed part of a historic and continuing discourse about the rule of tragedy and sadness in the world. (12)

Although I do not agree now (having read other academics on the subject), I certainly found Crais's book to be an interesting opening to my research on witchcraft. Certain passages still resonate, particularly the following:

Evil stands in opposition to life and, especially, to the ways life should be lived. (4)

17) *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Post-colonial Africa*. (Ed) P. Geschiere.

To be frank I did not get much use out of this book. It included essays on witchcraft in various African countries, but not South Africa. The information was not relevant to my particular focus.

18) *Magical Interpretations, Material Realities: Modernity, witchcraft and the Occult in Post-Colonial Africa*. (Ed) Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders.

This book contains a series of academic essays by leading academics examining witchcraft in various African countries. Three of these were particularly relevant to me: “Magical Interpretations and Material Realities. An Introduction.” by Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders; “Witchcraft in the New South Africa. From colonial superstition to postcolonial reality.” by Isak Niehaus; “On Living in a World with Witches. Everyday epistemology and spiritual insecurity in a modern African city (Soweto).” by Adam Ashforth. All three were useful at different stages of the novel. The essay by Adam Ashforth was incredibly interesting and led to me reading his book, *Madumo: A Man Bewitched*.

19) *Madumo: A Man Bewitched*. By Adam Ashforth.

Regarding the witchcraft aspect of my novel, this book has proven to be the most influential of all the books I consulted on the subject. Perhaps it is because of a certain ‘kinship’ I felt with Ashforth in writing an imaginative piece on a factual subject. He too did not consolidate his information in the form of an academic thesis, but rather deliberately blurred the line between fiction and reality.

The story follows, through the eyes of the author as himself, the experiences of a young man from Soweto, Madumo, who has allegedly been bewitched. The descriptions of his physical state, the reasons he suspects witchcraft, and the detailed descriptions of the healing process, were all incredibly useful to me. Witchcraft became increasingly less mysterious to me, and this led directly to a greater intimacy with, and understanding of, the character of Ronnie.

The definition of witchcraft offered by the character MaMfete, is a key quote for me:

You know, Adam, this thing [witchcraft] comes from a bitterness in somebody’s heart, like a poison, causing jealousy and hatred. And you can never know what’s inside someone’s heart. You can think you know somebody, but you don’t. And people who have this spirit of hatred, this bitterness, they can do anything. (74)

That evil has its roots in a “spirit of hatred,” in succumbing to jealousy and hate, is a concept I am familiar with.

This book dramatically changed my focus in my own novel. I could no longer discredit witchcraft as a real explanation for the horrors I describe in the book. The ending I had envisioned for the novel was no longer acceptable. But with new direction, came new creative energy.

20) *Conflict and Violence in Natal//KwaZulu: Historical Perspectives*. By A. De V Minnaar.

I hunted this book down early on in my search for research material. It covers the history of violence in the province from the late eighteenth century to the

political violence of the nineteen nineties. This is simply and concisely set out. I diligently read through the book (which I found interesting, especially with regards to IFP/ANC conflict in the nineties) but was already beginning to shift my narrative angle from the political to the cultural. In the end, I did not use what I had read here, or pursue this particular line of research.

21) *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje

I was given a copy of this book four years ago, and suddenly remembered it. I wanted to re-read it for many reasons. It too has a rather macabre theme, the protagonist being a forensic anthropologist who sets out to the murder of a civilian by the Sri Lankan government. Furthermore, the story, revealed predominantly through the voice of an 'outsider' protagonist, is a weave of the intimate and the political. That particular mixture appeals to me. Lastly, Ondaatje's style of writing resonates (dare I say it?) with my own. There are times when I feel my particular style is outdated or strange, and it helps to read a writer who echoes that particular voice, though obviously far more masterfully than I can manage!

22) *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* by Oswald J. Mtshali

Mtshali's poems are old favourites. This particular collection of poems seemed almost eerily relevant. The simplicity of the verse, the formality of the language, and the mixture of the rural and urban (and the ways these interlink and define one another) are all elements of the poetry that I found perfect as a subtext in my novel.

Note: I use a verse from the title poem as an epigraph.

23) *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys

"So you believe in that tim-tim story about obeah, you hear when you are so high? All that foolishness and folly. Too besides, that is not for *béké*. Bad, bad trouble come when *béké* meddle with that." (85)

Rhys's story about Antoinette/ Bertha is fascinating. My particular interest stems from the in-between status someone like Antoinette has. The settler status. A familiarity with the surrounding indigenous culture, and yet a distance from it. At this point of crisis in Antoinette's life – the spiteful rejection of her by her husband – Antoinette delves into the island mystique. Christophine, an old servant, warns that for a white person, meddling in indigenous spirituality can only have disastrous consequences. Which it of course does. Note: Rhys does not reject the spiritual. She acknowledges its power.

24) *The Poisonwood Bible*. By Barbara Kingsolver

This book by an American writer interested me predominantly because of 'perspective. It is written by a non-African, and the storyline is revealed

through female narrators. I had read the book on my own – and loved it – and then found it prescribed in my post-colonial writing course. Of course, that ruined everything. Once we examined the novel as a class, it became apparent that it did not satisfy the tenets of a post-colonial text. Although Kingsolver revisits the Congo, she does not re-negotiate her perspective. I think there is an honest effort to penetrate the Heart of Darkness, but in the end she suffers the same fate as Joseph Conrad, her story is that of white foreigner. This is not an African story. Her prejudices surface. The reader does not achieve a new intimacy with an African truth.

I have concerns that my novel will be similarly flawed. I keep trying to address this. The ending of my novel has been changed precisely in an attempt to redress the theme of ‘witchcraft’. I constantly re-read and re-examine, and time and again my whiteness seems to show glaringly through the text. This is something I am determined to remedy.

25) *King Solomon's Mines* by H. Rider Haggard.

This adventure story is colonial to the core! If it serves to do nothing else, it makes me feel better. At least, I have progressed from this! It was amusing to read a novel so obviously outdated. Disturbing too. It did have some appeal, especially in terms of its ‘local flavour’. It was wonderful to read descriptions of Durban and colonial life. Yet this was always tempered with the descriptions of the porters and various other local individuals.

Sir Henry asked me to ask him to stand up. Umbopa did so, at the same time slipping off the long military coat which he wore, and revealing himself naked except for the moocha round his centre and a necklace of lions' claws. Certainly he was a magnificent-looking man; I never saw a finer native. Standing about six foot three high he was broad in proportion, and very shapely. In that light, too, his skin looked scarcely more than dark, except here and there where deep black scars marked old assegai wounds. (41)

That Umbopa is measured only in the physical indicates exactly what he is considered good for. The fact that he is intelligent, well-spoken, and dignified, has no bearing on the choice to include him in the exploration party. His paler skin tone – his lack of blackness – is a factor in his being a ‘fine native specimen’.

Whenever I become frantic that I am failing in my attempt to write a meaningful post-colonial text, I take comfort in the fact that I do not think of my characters this way. My story is *not* that of a foreigner travelling through Africa with her prejudices firmly intact.

26) *Wizards' Country* by Daphne Rooke.

My supervisor recommended this book after a discussion in which I explained how my vision of my novel was changing. I had realised that to write a post-colonial novel, I had to validate the ‘witchcraft argument’ for the murders, I could not simply dismiss it. (See Journal discussion.)

Wizards' Country did not disappoint. I am stunned that a South African English-speaking white woman, writing in the fifties, could write a *convincing* account of a young man's journey into the world of witchcraft *from his perspective*. This powerful and haunting book is narrated by Benge, a hunchback living in Cetshwayo's Zululand kingdom. This is not a novel trying to claim authority concerning the Zulu culture. This novel is not trying to tell the reader about Zululand. This is a novel about a man's spiritual corruption, his dance with evil. It is exquisitely written.

Rooke gives me courage, in this time of racial and cultural sensitivity, to dare to write a story that might be contentious. I find, as my confidence grows, I am drawn to Ronnie as a character, and do not hold back because of my own cultural identity. I have scribbled down a paragraph or two for my next novel. It will be written in the voice of a Zulu man. Rooke gives me the courage to dream that it is possible.

27) *Life Under a Zulu Shield*. By H.C. Lugg.

A strange little find! In one of the final scenes of the novel I wanted to create a confrontation between Elizabeth and Ronnie where Ronnie would be represented as a warrior. I wanted a Zulu song or praise poem, something old-fashioned, almost biblical, in tone. A friend of mine, fluent in isiZulu, had this little book written by a typically colonial civil servant who (as he puts it) spent 92 years "in close association with the Africans of this Province, both privately and officially." This 'old school' account of Zulu culture was exactly what I was looking for. The chapter "The Zulu, His Religious Beliefs and Magic" was of particular interest.

28) *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory* (Ed) P. Childs and R.J. Williams.

A prescribed text for my post-colonial course, which has been the grounding for my reading on post-colonial theory.

29) *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. (Ed) P. Williams and L. Chrisman.

Another text on post-colonial theory.

30) <http://www.kzn.org.za/kzn/investors/22.html>
http://www.kznwildlife.com/opathe_dest.htm

Websites on eMakhosini. These include pictures of the monument and contact details should anyone wish to visit the Valley of the Kings.

31) <http://www.ijebu.org/conquerors/cetawayo>

A wonderful summary of Cetshwayo's life.

32) <http://www.csls.org.za/dw/art6e.html>
http://www.doj.gov.za/m_statements/2003/2003_01_21.5salc

<http://www.concourt.gov.za/constitution/const12.html>

The S.A Law Commission:

“[Traditional courts] will not be used as a forum for mob justice and vigilantism.”

“Criminal jurisdiction should remain in the realm of minor offences while the more serious are left to be dealt with by magistrates’ courts or higher.”

The S.A. Constitution:

“The institution, status and role of traditional leadership, according to customary law, are recognised, subject to the constitution.”

- 33) *Zulu Shaman. Dreams, Prophecies, and Mysteries.* By Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa. Edited by Stephen Larsen.

A fascinating book. This book offered a rare insight into the old beliefs of the Zulu people. The collection of stories, dreams and prophecies are haunting, beautiful, and inspirational. Although I got the uncomfortable feeling that this book was a pet project of Americans who like to wait for UFO’s while worshiping the ‘Earth Mother’, the information Mutwa gives is invaluable to anyone interested in the Zulu culture.

This book offered a new angle on a character in my novel. However, its real value to me lies in the contribution it has made to my next novel, already brewing in my head!