

PROLOGUE

Jack

I DREAM OF ZANELE AT THE WHEEL, HER KNUCKLES AND FACE outlined by streetlights. We speed past vacant lots. She's driving too fast. Rain comes thick and heavy on the windows. It's the kind of storm that happens only on the highveld, the thunder loud and rapid. She doesn't speak. I need her to. Maybe she's counting the people who've died since we first met.

I calculate how fast the storm is coming up behind us—as if that helps. Zanele is taking us somewhere only she knows.

The things I am good at, lying and mathematics, are useless now. In the moments before the end, I can do nothing.

We crash onto the highway railing, the front chassis crumpling into the windscreen.

Another scandal, a black girl and a white boy found in a car with no explanation besides the obvious one.

THAT'S WHAT I DO NOW—SLEEP AND WAKE UP AND GO OVER things that have already happened or might have happened. I eat breakfast, a boiled egg and four slices of white bread, while I wait for a phone call that I know won't come. In Soweto, smoke rises from the shacks. Meena says that ever since the protest the police fire at plastic bags, animals, little boys—anything that moves. I read the newspaper over and over, thinking they'll mention Zanele. But they don't. The same footage on the protests repeats on the television. I call Meena at the shop and she tells me no news is good news.

I ask for less and less as the days pass. First, I wanted Zanele to apologize for all the things she didn't tell me, to apologize for disappearing without warning. Then all I wanted was for her to come back. Then it didn't matter if I didn't see her again. As long as she was alive.

ONE

Zanele

WE WERE GOING TO PUT DYNAMITE UNDER THE POWERLINE towers. There were three of us that day at the Orlando power station. Billy, Phelele and me. It was after school, and we'd come to make sketches—sketches that would show where the dynamite needed to go.

The power station's white caretaker explained how the electricity was generated and transported to the white areas of Joburg. As he talked he nodded and smiled, showing his dirty teeth. Billy nodded, flashing back his teeth, clean and white like an advertisement. Phelele and I looked at each other. The caretaker suspected nothing.

On the other side of the wire fence, children stared at us. They stood barefoot on long grass that had turned brown with the cold. Behind the fence and the children, the land dipped and rose. I could barely make out the road back to Soweto.

As we walked back, we saw rows and rows of corrugated roofs turned copper as the sun went down. And I imagined the Orlando power station exploding—the black bars of the towers flying apart and the lights going off in white people's homes. For a moment, it would be a blackened white city. It would warn the *mlungus* of what we would do if they didn't give us what we wanted.

IN HIS SHACK, BILLY MADE THE SKETCHES OF THE POWER station to send to the *Umkhonto We Sizwe* in Mozambique. They had explosives. They would slip back across the border and blow up the towers.

With a sharpened pencil, Phelele added arrows to the drawing to show where the dynamite should be placed.

They gave me the finished sketches. I had to drop them off at the train station. The envelope taped under the bench. I went alone, taking the path past the *shebeen* where Mankwe sang.

Before the power station, Billy, the meetings, I had just been Mankwe's sister, the Mankwe with the magic voice.

Now I was the sister who helped plant explosives.

AFTER BILLY AND PHELELE WERE ARRESTED, I WAITED FOR THE police to come for me. But they didn't. In court a month later, they and two others I didn't know were charged with terrorism. The court ruled that Billy had recruited students to join military cells in Mozambique that were plotting to overthrow the government.

Now the four of them, chained, are walked out of the court with their arms cuffed behind them. The cuffs are in the space between the sleeves of Billy's nice coat and his hands. I look away but I see the cuffs everywhere, metal glinting in the afternoon light.

Billy starts singing as he walks past us. *Asibe sabe thina*. I reach out and the blue fibre of his coat gets caught in my nails. Then the policeman pushes him. Billy's voice is low, soft, always the one the *gogos* in church liked best. We all join in with Billy, but Phelele is silent, head bowed. The policemen let us sing, because they don't understand what the song means. Or they don't care. They have Billy and Phelele. It doesn't matter if we sing that we do not fear them.

As the van doors slam shut, Phelele's eyes meet mine through the metal grating. This could be the last time I will see her. The policemen get inside the cab, red-faced and satisfied. The front doors close and the van pulls out. Everyone runs after it.

And I wonder who told the police about Billy and Phelele.

"Come, Zanele." Vusi takes my shoulders, turning me away from the crowd. "Time to go home."

We walk past a long, clean black car. A blond yellow-haired man sits in the back seat, watching us and smoking. In the front, a black driver and a white policeman. I can't see their faces. Behind them, buildings form an outline of grey rectangles against the sky. Hillbrow Tower stands above the rest of the city. I've heard there's an elevator that takes you to a restaurant at the top.

We were thinking of targeting that too.

LATER THAT NIGHT, I PUT ON LIPSTICK AND GLITTER, AND SLIP into my sister's sequined dress. It is my night to sing at the shebeen. And I am back to being the person I used to be, before all of this happened.

Jack

OLIVER, RICKY AND I GRADUATED FROM JEPPE HIGH SCHOOL last December and started crashing parties soon after. We didn't have anything better to do. Oliver was at Tucks for engineering, Ricky was "taking some time off" and "thinking of studying in the States" and I was free till August, when I'd leave for Oxford.

So far, we'd been to dozens of them, including a cabinet minister's birthday party and Miss South Africa's charity gala.

I was always the one who talked our way in. People wanted to believe me. Oliver liked the planning, planned more than we needed. And Ricky came along because he liked to boast in a casual way about what we'd done, how we'd got away.

At the gala last weekend, we tried on tuxedos and bad

American accents. We finished trays of champagne and skewered chicken because everyone there had been pretty boring. Miss South Africa even fawned over us for a few seconds, though Oliver was too nervous to say anything to her. Ricky thought she was average-looking. Later I went over to Megan's and told her that the whole thing had mostly been a waste of time.

I WAS HAVING DINNER IN THE GARDEN WITH MY PARENTS WHEN the phone rang. I left the table.

"I wish you wouldn't let Megan call at this time," my mother called after me. She didn't like Megan, but everything she said to me these days was easy to ignore.

I walked past the new television set. The phone was next to my letter from Oxford and a picture of my parents in the veld, my father holding her shoulder with one hand and a gun in the other. He had shot two kudu that trip and their heads were up there now, on opposite sides of the living room.

I picked up the phone.

"Ready for tonight, *bru*?" It wasn't Megan but Oliver. He sounded keyed up, bothered by something. Probably about his father finding out about what we'd been up to.

"What's tonight?"

"You're not going to believe—"

"What is it?"

"We're coming over."

I put the phone down and glanced at the television.

My father had just bought it yesterday. "Nineteen seventy-six, and the South African government finally allows its upstanding citizens to own a television," he'd said as the salesman put it in the boot of the car. "Jack, anything can happen now."

Out on the patio, my father ground a cigarette into his silver-green ashtray. He lit another while my mother fiddled

with her wedding ring on her fine-boned fingers. The new maid came around and laid out dessert. My mother corrected her, using a patient voice. It had just turned six o'clock.

AT NINE, OLIVER ARRIVED WITH RICKY AND FOUR BOTTLES OF black face paint left over from last year's rugby matches.

They sat in my bedroom, Ricky fiddling with the case of new cufflinks my father had bought me.

"So?" I waited.

Oliver held up the face paint as if it explained everything. In his other hand he had a folded map.

"We're going to a shebeen." Ricky got up from my desk and flicked the glass cabinets that held my sports trophies. "In Soweto."

It had to be Oliver's idea. From the look on Ricky's face, I could tell he was daring me to back out. And backing out would be the safe, sensible thing to do. You didn't just go to Soweto—three white guys in an old Mustang, in the middle of the night. You just didn't.

"I'd rather not do the face paint," I said. "It's ridiculous."

"Come on Jacky boy, where's the fun?" Ricky said. "It's about dressing the part. I thought you'd love it."

"Not really," I said, but I took the bottle of face paint from Oliver's hand.

AS WE PASSED PARKTOWN, I TOOK THE TURNING INTO THE highway that cut through the city and down to the Cape. The Mustang's engine strained as we picked up speed. There was something off about the nights in Johannesburg. Too quiet. As if, emptied of all the blacks at night, the city shut down.

Next to me, Oliver opened out a map of the city in grid format with little red dots.

"Police raids," he said, tracing a path from one dot to the other.

I knew he wanted me to ask how he'd managed to steal the map from the police station.

"You think you'll be coming back after Oxford?" Oliver asked.

"Don't know," I replied.

"What I know is that this car's a piece of junk," Ricky said from the back. "Oxford boy or not."

"It's a Mustang, just leave it," Oliver said.

"My Ford runs way better," Ricky said. "And it's older."

"And where's your car, Ricky?" I asked.

"In the States."

Ricky came to Joburg four years earlier, because his father had got a high-up job at Anglo American. He still hadn't got over leaving the States, never would.

"So what drinks do they have there?" Ricky said. "I don't want any of that crappy beer. Can I ask for a gin and tonic, or will that be too fancy for them?"

"Ricky, I already told you," Oliver said. "All their stuff's really cheap."

"And once we're there, don't complain," I added. "No need to get a mob after us."

"They'll *moer* us," Oliver said. "Actually, the police will moer us too, if they find us."

"Your father will get us out if there's trouble with the police. No worries," Ricky said.

Obviously Ricky still didn't understand that Oliver would get in even more trouble because his father worked right under the police commissioner.

Oliver had probably organized all this to get back at his father without his father knowing it. That was the only way Oliver knew.

"We're not going to get caught, anyway," Ricky continued. "That's the point, right?" Ricky passed his flask of brandy over to Oliver. I braked for a traffic light. He lurched. Brandy

spattered all over the back seat.

"No one talks to anyone except me," I said. I glanced at the map again, scanning our route. It got complicated once you got in the township. No road signs or street names marked on the map. I smelled the brandy, turned the air conditioner up.

"Where's the fun in that for us?" Ricky said.

"Guys, just be quiet," I said. "Nod. Can you manage that?"

"You think you're God, don't you, Jacky boy?" Ricky said.

"Show him, Jack. He doesn't believe you," Oliver said.

I took the turning into the Moroka Bypass. The lights were fewer and farther between now. Behind us, the rest of Johannesburg, its sheet of reds and blues, sank from view. Now, long yellow mounds of dirt on the side of the road—mine dumps—shone when the headlights glanced off them. I turned left at an old, deserted stadium.

"Okay," I said, catching Ricky in the mirror. "*Baas*, I just need ten rand for my grandmother. Just ten rand, baas Ricky."

"See, in the dark he'll sound just like a black. Just like one," Oliver said. "Our gardener Wilbur talks just like that."

"Okay." Ricky tapped Oliver's shoulder with a cassette. Oliver slipped it into the player. "You do the talking, as always."

The cassette started playing. This time it was Miles Davis, one of Ricky's new obsessions, smuggled in from the States in Ricky's suitcase. The music circled back and forth with its itchy blend of guitar and trumpet. The face paint felt sticky and wet on my skin.

I passed a wire fence in front of the Orlando police station. Two dim points of light behind the fence.

Oliver was quiet. We had entered Soweto now and there was no turning back. Not just yet.

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I PARKED BETWEEN A CHEVROLET AND A FLASHY SILVER Chrysler without number plates. We walked around the walls of bent, corrugated metal.

The entrance was a six-foot-high hole. Two men stood on each side. Singing and shouting drifted out.

“Whose idea was this again?” I asked.

“Yours, Jacky, all yours,” Oliver said. He was seconds away from running back to the car. I put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him forward. “No undercover police here to check you’re out past your bedtime, promise.”

Ricky pulled his hat over his face and pulled up his collar. I did the same, stepping in front of him. From my pocket, I took out three rand and slipped it to one of the bouncers, a fat man with a scar on his face and a good portion of his ear missing.

“They’re with me,” I said, keeping my voice low, the accent thick. The man looked at the money I put in his hand. For a moment he paused. Then he smiled and put the money in his pocket. Silent, Oliver and Ricky followed me inside, into a large, low-ceilinged room and the smell of beer.

“You tricked them, Jack.” Oliver gripped my shoulder.

“Don’t get too excited,” I said, steering them to a corner. “We just paid him to let us in. Doesn’t mean he’s not going to tell his friends to take a shot at us.”

On the left there was a bar counter, crowded with men spilling glasses of cheap beer. There was another smell too, that African beer they made from sorghum or something. A band played in front of us and couples danced across the narrow floor. The mikes were terrible, but the saxophone player and pianist were okay.

A young woman was singing with the band, and not well. Terrible pitch and no pace. In between songs, she made comments—a mixture of jokes and insults thrown at people she picked from the crowd. The audience seemed to enjoy this,

though it was unclear why being insulted was so appealing.

“What’s she doing?” Ricky put a hand over his face.

The singer’s voice got louder. She was ignoring the music. The pianist tried to match her note for note, but she’d fall an octave or two and leave the guy scrambling. The sax guy just shook his head, laughed, and continued playing.

There was a man by the front of the stage who wasn’t dancing. He wore a hat that kept his eyes in shadow, and a black suit with silver suspenders. In between songs, he scanned the room and exchanged nods with the bouncers. At the end of each song, he clapped loudly.

“Terrible music. Get me a drink, Jacky boy,” Ricky said, waving his flask upside down. He hadn’t painted the spaces around his eyes well. Even in the badly lit room, I could see white showing through. “I’m all out, and it doesn’t look like I’ll be able to handle this party sober.”

That’s when we heard the police sirens.

The people sitting at the bar sobered up very quickly. They jumped off their stools and made for the exit. On the floor, some men dragged their partners out. The others let go of the women and ran.

“Raid!” Everyone kept shouting, “Raid!”

Only the man with the wide-brimmed hat seemed untroubled. He took a position by the bar, crossed his legs and started another cigarette. “Make room for Zanele, Sunny,” he said, his voice cutting over the chaos. The bouncer with the scar pushed people aside. The singer unplugged her microphone, put it down, and walked slowly out behind the others.

Because we were behind her, we got a path through the crowd too. The sirens were very close now, as were the sounds of pounding footsteps and car doors opening and closing.

The singer walked around the shebeen and into a side street, turned right and took a few steps down. We followed. Some others were already there, waiting it out. It looked like

they were used to this kind of thing.

Oliver, Ricky and I took a place near the wall a yard or so away from the singer.

“Who were they looking for this time, Zanele? What did Thabo do this time?” one of the men asked, holding his knees. His breaths steamed up his large square glasses. Through the worn patches in his green sweater, thin elbows poked out.

“How would I know?” The singer took a place against the wall and crossed her arms.

Another man wearing an orange bow tie passed her his jacket. “Here *sisi*, take this.” He said it like he was used to offering jackets to girls outside shebeens.

“You know Thabo very well, Zanele,” said the man with the glasses. “Which means you know why the police are here.”

The singer put on the jacket and ignored him.

We waited. Oliver slipped down against the wall and covered his face with his coat—terrified that his dad would find him here, even though he knew his dad was too high up in the police to go on raids himself.

I counted at least twenty men and five women standing around, including the singer.

Then we heard the sound of breaking glass.

“Aye, Sam. Sounds like Thabo is cleaning out his *umqombothi* for the police.” The man with the glasses laughed.

“The police might as well drink it. Good whisky, some good beer. Do they think we are hiding guns between the bottles? What *domkops*,” said the man with the bow tie.

“But what will the Black Berets do to Thabo for losing all their liquor?” asked the man with the glasses.

“I don’t know, Professor, cut off something? An arm, if he’s lucky,” answered the man with the bow tie. “That’s their style.”

“Don’t call me Professor.”

“Too late, *bhuti*. All of Soweto calls you that.”

The singer took off her shoes and dropped them to the

ground. There was something nervous, impatient about her.

“Zanele,” said the man with the glasses, “What time is school tomorrow? Going to have to change out of those woman clothes now, aren’t you?”

The singer said nothing, but turned her face toward the road, toward us, angry. She had high cheekbones and large eyes. Her eyebrows were thin and slanted. She was maybe seventeen or eighteen, but the make-up tried to hide it.

“Don’t bother her, Professor,” the one called Sam said. “Thabo will send his boys to give you a few *klaps*, and you won’t like that.”

“Thabo is being raided, so he might not last till tomorrow.”

“Professor,” the singer said, “try to teach your worthless lessons without falling down from all the whisky you’ve drunk. Your students never listened to you in English. Afrikaans is going to make you look like a fool. *Thula* and worry about your headache tomorrow.”

The men in the alley laughed. The man with the glasses made for the singer.

“Be quiet, girl. Remember who your father was. No one like him with his whisky.”

“Careful,” the singer said. “You don’t want to fight me.”

The other men in the alley gathered behind her.

The man with the glasses tensed.

“Agh Zanele, you know Professor. He likes to tell us what to do. Just leave it.”

Professor turned away from the singer and leaned back against the wall. Some laughed.

The sounds of the sirens were fading; the police were gone. Ricky nudged Oliver with his foot. We started walking away.

“*Ja*, now that was close. Pa would’ve slaughtered me.” Oliver picked himself off the ground and followed me.

“Don’t tell me we have to go back in there and listen to that terrible singing,” Ricky said.

I laughed—forgetting for the moment that we were in a narrow space, that our voices were too loud, and that we were talking like the white people we were.

“What did you say?” The singer was behind me. She pulled my shoulder back. I smelled cheap perfume and hairspray. We were face-to-face now, and she took her time looking at me. There was glitter at the end of her fake eyelashes. Her make-up followed the sharp lines of her face, the high cheekbones, the thin, slanted brows.

“He doesn’t like your singing,” I said, in my black accent. “That’s all.”

The singer grabbed my collar. “Sam, Professor, look. Mlungu has painted himself black.”

I jerked my collar out of her hand. It tore. And then Oliver, Ricky and I ran. We went through the alley, then turned left, breaking washing lines heavy with wet school uniforms. For all their drinking, the men behind us were fast. Ricky was falling behind.

And then, from somewhere, kids with stones in their hands. They ran after us, yelling “mlungu” and other things that I didn’t understand.

“The car,” I shouted to Oliver, who was ahead.

Oliver turned left. I threw him the keys as we ran out onto the road. The men and children chasing us were just a yard from Ricky now.

But Oliver had reached the Mustang. I heard him start the car, and then the headlights came into view, doors swinging open at the back. He turned and made as if to drive right into them. They fell aside. A stone hit the car’s headlight, splintering flecks of glass. Oliver kept driving. I caught the roof frame and pulled myself onto the back seat. Ricky, panting, threw himself behind me. I closed the door.

The engine rattled as Oliver accelerated. He made for the highway.

“What a crappy car,” Ricky said, between breaths. I ignored him, my shirt still smelling of perfume. There had been murder in that singer’s eyes.