

Chapter Sixteen

Nthebolang sweeps the mission yard with the broom made of hard thick grass. She likes the swirling patterns it makes in the wet ground, and she turns it this way and that to make interlocking circles. The village after a big rain is a lovely thing, fresh and sparkling. The air breathed in cleans the lungs with each breath. The boubou sings in the nearby mmupudu tree praising the rain and Nthebolang listens, lost in its clear song and her patterns in the soil, not hearing Motsumi's footsteps until he is next to her.

'Come! I want to show you something,' he says.

He smiles the way she likes, a mischievous boyish smile. Motsumi is tall and strong, a full man already at nineteen, at least physically. Nthebolang thinks he should act more like the way he looks. That he should be more serious, less playful. Even so, she can't help liking his playful side. It reminds her of those days long ago when they first became friends.

'So you're back?' she says.

She's happy to see him; he was away for three weeks at the cattlepost. She won't let him know that she missed him, though. She needs always to keep that distance between them.

'Yes, I came straight here. I missed you. Come, I want to show you something.'

'I'm working. The missionaries arrived yesterday. I have a lot to do. I can't be spending my time talking to you. I need to make a good impression.'

'We'll come back soon and you'll finish your work then. They won't even miss you.'

Motsumi, the son of a chief, always gets what he wants. Everything is easy for him. His life is everything that Nthebolang's is not. Though he pretends to understand hers, he never can. It's like a bull trying to understand the life of a chicken. Impossible.

'I can't,' Nthebolang says firmly. 'I don't want the new missionaries to think I'm like that. It's important – I've told you. Besides, I heard your uncles paid bogadi. What do you want with me now?'

Motsumi takes her hand and tries to pull her out of the gate. 'Only stupid girls listen to village gossip. I thought you were not a stupid girl, but maybe I was wrong.'

Nthebolang yanks her hand free and goes back to her work, sweeping faster than before. He expects to have her *and* the girl his family has organised to be his wife, *the girl his family approves of*. Nthebolang will not be some rich man's concubine. Her circumstances might look like that's her only option, but the surface is not always the truth. She will have more than that, or she'll stay alone, away from this hateful village where everyone wants to see her fall, where they speak about her and her mother in corners, and warn others to keep their distance. Where their sadness and loss fuel the people's happiness – even now, after all this time.

She and her mother try to pretend Ntsweng saved them, but they know only just, just enough to live, never to thrive. Nthebolang wonders where they could go where that would no longer be the case, where finally they could break free from their past. She's beginning to think that place does not exist.

Motsumi relents and sits down near the fence made of thick branches standing straight like soldiers, shoulder-to-shoulder, that forms the border of the compound. He watches her sweeping and changes the subject.

'They say Taolo is dead.'

Nthebolang stops sweeping, shocked. 'Taolo? The kgosi's friend? Dead? From what?'

'They are there to find out. Someone said lightning killed him – there was a big storm the other night. He was very close to Kgosi Sechele and that

relationship made people jealous. Jealousy is a powerful thing; it makes enemies. They'll find out who sent the lightning to him, find out who wanted him dead.'

'Enemies had nothing to do with it,' says Nthebolang. 'If he was struck by lightning, he was struck by lightning. Lightning is powerful all on its own. It kills people every day. No one sends lightning to kill someone. When will you change your backward way of thinking?'

Why was she annoyed by his heathen ways? Was it about his engagement? Or was it that talk of witchcraft always left her vulnerable? She couldn't say.

Motsumi laughs. 'You ... you like to pretend you're a Christian, but I know you. You believe in our ways too. You know witchcraft is powerful, more powerful than your Jesus.' He attempts to tease her out of her mood but he's chosen the wrong topic on the wrong day.

Nthebolang clicks her tongue. She sweeps, keeping her thoughts to herself.

'The lightning was sent by his enemies,' Motsumi continues. 'But Taolo is Kgosi Sechele's friend. The person who did it is a fool. You should know all about this.' His cheeky voice rises. 'Isn't there witchcraft in your family? You must take care – Kgosi Sechele might come for you just now. The people will think you sent the lightning to kill his friend.'

Motsumi smiles; he thinks he's made a clever joke. Once again Nthebolang is reminded of how he can never understand her situation. He speaks of deadly painful things as if they were nothing. If the people have mentioned her name or her mother's name, it's a serious thing, enough to begin everything again.

She drops her broom and comes closer, lowering her voice. 'Why? What are they saying?'

'I don't know what they're saying and I don't care,' Motsumi says. 'I don't listen to village gossip, unlike some people I know.' And then he notices the seriousness in her eyes. 'Nothing ... they're saying nothing. I'm sorry. I was just teasing – they're not saying anything.' He grabs her hand again now that she is nearer. Witches and men dead by lightning are forgotten for him, *but*

not for her. Never for her. He pulls her out through the gate. 'Please. Come with me, I want to talk to you.'

Then someone calls from the house: 'Nthebolang!'

She looks back and sees Beatrice walking towards them. Motsumi drops her hand.

'When you're finished with your friend, could you help me with something?' Beatrice asks.

'Ee, Mma.' Nthebolang turns back to Motsumi. 'I need to go.'

She runs towards the house without looking back. Beatrice is waiting for her on the front veranda. Nthebolang tries to calm her mind. Motsumi's talk of witchcraft has upset her.

'I'm sorry I disturbed you with your friend. I wondered if you could help me. Can you read to Elizabeth?' Beatrice asks. 'She won't sleep until she's read to and I can't bear to do it. I find all of those books so boring that I nearly fall asleep too.'

Nthebolang follows Beatrice into the house and finds Elizabeth already lying on her bed for her afternoon nap. Nthebolang is a good reader and likes to read out loud to show her proficiency.

Beatrice hands Nthebolang a book of Bible stories. 'You don't mind if I go off, do you?' she says. 'I want to walk to the river. I want to do some sketches.' She puts on a too-big straw hat and collects a sketch pad and a pencil.

'No, I don't mind,' Nthebolang says. 'I can watch Elizabeth. But watch out for snakes. The hills bring a lot of snakes. Take a stick and beat the grass in front of you. Stay on the paths where you can – there are well-worn paths to the river. As long as you're on the path, you'll be fine.'

Beatrice laughs a bit. 'I don't mind snakes, we're friends. I'm a bush girl. I know these things.'

Nthebolang and Elizabeth watch her leave.

'Where is my mother going?' Elizabeth asks, now standing next to Nthebolang.

'For a walk. We have a story to read. Come.' Nthebolang picks up the tiny girl and takes her back to her bed in the corner.

Already Nthebolang is discovering that Beatrice is a different sort of woman. She seems to care little about the running of the house. She's not told Mma Nthebolang anything about how she wants things done. Mothering doesn't seem to be where her interests lie either. Instead she likes to be outside. Moving around the compound, investigating the village. She seems to want to be anywhere except in the mission house. And now she is off to the river.

Nthebolang pages through the book looking for a story. 'Which one should we have then, Elizabeth?'

Elizabeth looks at her with her big wide eyes. 'Whichever one you want. I like all of them,' she says.

Nthebolang chooses the story about Noah and the flood, and begins to read.

'Oh,' Elizabeth says when Nthebolang starts, 'I like this one.' She smiles up at her, her eyes already heavy with sleep, and places her small hand on Nthebolang's arm.

Six paragraphs later the girl is asleep. Nthebolang sets the book down, pulls the blanket over her, and goes back outside to her sweeping. The mission house is quiet. Thomas Milner is away to the kgotla to speak to Kgosi Sechele, and her mother has gone to the nearby lands to collect some bean leaves to cook for dinner.

Motsumi must have been watching the house because as soon as Nthebolang is back by the gate he's there. He pulls her to the nearby hedge where no one can see them. He's strong and she fights him as she knows she should, but only the amount that's required. Not too much, not so that she will win. She can never stop herself from being flattered by the attention he pays her even in her angered, hurt state. No matter what her words say, she can't help what her heart feels for him.

'You're beautiful,' he says when they're alone in the space between the hedge and the boundary wall of thick tree branches. He holds her around the waist so that their faces are very close. 'Why do you fight me so? You know you missed me.'