

# COVERED IN BLOOD

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## CHAPTER 1

My name is Phumlani Qhaga. I grew up in Cape Town's biggest township – Khayelitsha. I had a brother, Zanoxolo, who was two years older than me. My brother and I were two of the many kids who were raised by single parents in the slums of Site C. But, unlike many other kids, I knew who my father was. He was my hero and role model in those early years of my life: a well-respected policeman and member of our community.

I remember the morning my father came into our bedroom very early. It was too early for us to be awake, and Zanoxolo and I pretended to be asleep. My father kissed our foreheads gently and he didn't close the bedroom door on his way out. I pulled the curtain open and watched him leave the house with a suitcase and a big bag. Later, I heard my mother crying in their bedroom. Even though we were still young – I was only five at the time – my brother and I could tell something was not right. My father didn't come home that evening, or the day after.

“When is Father coming back, Mama?” Zanoxolo asked my mother at the end of the second day.

“His captain sent him to Johannesburg to work on a big case. He will come back after the case has been solved,” Mother said. But he didn’t come back and we went on without him.

Zanoxolo excelled academically at primary school and carried his excellent performance to high school.

“Is Zanoxolo Qhaga your brother?” teachers would ask me every time I started a new grade. When I told them that he was, they would go on to tell me what a brilliant student he was, and how they expected me to work hard like him. But I wasn’t as good; I was just an average student who tried his best.

My mother boasted about my brother’s academic success to our family and friends. She told them Zanoxolo was going to be a doctor and buy us a big house in the city one day.

Every year, at our school, there were award ceremonies. My brother had a collection of Top Achiever awards and I had a collection of Cricketer of the Year awards. Cricket was the only thing I excelled at, but my mother hardly mentioned my achievements. In fact, she always told me that if I worked as hard on my school work, I’d be just as good as my brother.

But Zanoxolo was proud of me. He would come to the cricket field after school to watch me practise if he didn’t have an assignment to do, or a test to study for. He always came to watch me when I had big matches – he was my biggest fan.

He was the one who first called me Ntini, after Makhaya Ntini. Soon everyone who knew me began calling me Ntini.

When I was in Grade 10, Zanoxolo was in Grade 12. Gang wars were at a peak in Site C at that time. There were funerals almost every month and areas that boys from our neighbourhood could not go to; it didn't matter whether you were a gangster or not.

I knew boys who joined gangs while they were still in primary school. Many of them died before they reached Grade 9. Every night, before I slept, I'd listen to my mother pray in her bedroom, " ... and Lord protect my children from violence. Be their shield and guide. Keep them out of gangs. Keep them out of bloodshed. They are my happiness ... "

## CHAPTER 2

"Wait for me, Ntini!" I was heading to the cricket field with my teammates when Zanoxolo ran to catch up with us.

We had a big match that day. It was springtime and not too hot – good weather for playing cricket. We were playing against a rival school. Zanoxolo hadn't been to watch me practise for quite some time. He was already busy studying for trial exams which were beginning the next month.

"Hey Zanoxolo, aren't you supposed to be studying or something?" I asked him.

"Not today. Today I am watching my younger bro play. Now go and show those boys why you are called Ntini." He patted

me on my back and signalled me to follow my teammates to the field.

The match was as tough as our team expected, but we had also practised very hard for it. I was the last bowler for my team, and had one ball left. The other team only needed one more run to draw with us. The pressure was on me, as my school depended on me to keep our one-run lead and win the match. The crowd shouted, “Ntini! Ntini! Ntini!” I rubbed the ball on my pants and bowled it towards the wicket. The batsman missed it. “Howzat!” I screamed along with my school as the ball hit the wicket, ending the other team’s chances.

Zanoxolo ran onto the pitch and lifted me up. He was so happy.

“Well played, Ntini! Mama is going to be very proud of you,” he said on our way home. Our friends were walking behind us.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I am a disappointment to her. All she wishes is for me to be as brilliant as you in school. But cricket is the only thing I am good at.”

Suddenly our friends were sprinting past us. “Run! Run!” they shouted.

I looked back and saw a group of boys carrying pangas, pocket knives, and golf sticks chasing us. I knew immediately that this was serious. Zanoxolo and I dropped our schoolbags and ran for our lives. But Zanoxolo wasn’t as fit as I was and he struggled to keep up.

“Come on! Zanoxolo, run! Run faster!” I shouted.

The boys caught up with him, and one of them hit him on the side of the head with a golf stick. He lost his balance and fell down.

“Zanoxolo! Zanoxolo!” I cried. I tried to run to my brother, but my friend, Thulani, pulled me by the collar of my shirt. I tried to fight him off but he held me back.

Like something in a dream, I saw them hacking him with their deadly weapons. They all took a piece of him as he lay on the tar, helpless.

“You can’t do anything for Zanoxolo right now. Just save yourself. We have to go and find help – go straight home and get your mother,” Thulani shouted at me.

“Nqandani! Nqandani! Bayambulala!” I cried for help from the bystanders but they looked the other way.

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The short distance home seemed to take forever. I was crying uncontrollably when we got there. My mother was off work that day, and heard me shouting from the door.

“What’s happened, Phumlani? Why are you crying?” my mother was shaking.

“It’s Za ... Zanoxolo, Mama.”

“It’s Zanoxolo? What are you saying, Phumlani? Where is your brother?” My mother looked at my friend with eyes that

demanded an immediate answer. “Tell me, where is Zanoxolo?”

“We ... we were chased by gangsters on our way from the match. And we ran, but Zanoxolo couldn't run fast enough. I ... I think he's dead,” Thulani stammered.

“Hayi! Hayi! My son! My son! Oh! Yhini umntwan'am, Bawo. Thixo onofefe.” Mother ran outside the house crying.

### CHAPTER 3

We took my mother to the place where we left my brother. The boys who had attacked him had long gone. There were police vans, but no ambulance. Zanoxolo lay motionless with a yellow tape surrounding his body. His face was covered with his bloody blazer.

“I want to see if that is really my son!” My mother tried to force her way through the yellow tape but the police stopped her.

She cried when she recognised him. “No! Zanoxolo! No! You can't leave me, my son.” She collapsed against one of the policemen who was blocking her way.

I couldn't believe what was happening; minutes ago I was talking with my brother, then Poof! he was dead. If only I had pulled him by the hand when we were running, maybe he'd still be alive. Zanoxolo didn't deserve to die like that.

“He was a gangster. These kids should know where the kind of life they are living will take them.” I could hear people who knew nothing about my brother talking in the crowd.

I hoped my father would return home, from wherever he was, after hearing the news of Zanoxolo's death. My mother and I needed him now, but he didn't come to the evening prayers, or the memorial service that was held at our school.

Zanoxolo was buried in Centane, Eastern Cape. That is where I saw my father again. He arrived in the middle of the funeral service, but he was not alone. He was with a woman who was holding a young boy by the hand – he must have been about six years old and looked very much like my father.

“Phumlani, my boy, come here,” Father called me after the funeral. He was standing next to his car which was parked near the gate entrance to the cemetery. The woman and the young boy were inside the car, waiting for him.

I stood in front of him and said nothing.

“You have grown up, son,” he said. Again I said nothing and stared at the car, then at him.

“Listen my boy, I had to leave but I never stopped loving you, my son. And it hurts me to see you again under these terrible circumstances after all these years. What happened between your mother and I had nothing to do with you, and I shouldn't have let you suffer for it. I want to be part of your life again, Phumlani, my son.” His hands were on my shoulders when he finished his last sentence.

“And Mom?” I asked him.

“What about your mother?” he asked.

“Is she going to be part of your life too?” I said.

“I am afraid that won’t be possible, my son,” he said. I took a few steps back.

“Eh, come and greet your younger brother.” He opened the passenger door. “Come, Phumlani, say hi to Sizwe.” The woman in the car smiled nervously.

I glared at them and walked back into the house.

“Phumlani! Phumlani!” my father called after me, but I ignored him. I didn’t want anything to do with him and his new family. The only brother I had was dead, and the only mother I had was grieving.

#### CHAPTER 4

After the funeral my mother and I went back to Cape Town.

At school I could not concentrate; I was lost in thought. One day after the last period, Mr Zondwa, my English teacher, asked me to remain in class.

“I will wait for you outside, Ntini,” Thulani said – we always walked home together.

“Sure, Thulz,” I replied.

Mr Zondwa closed the door after everyone was out. He sat on his desk with his hands folded on his chest.

“How are you?” he asked me.

“I am fine sir,” I said.

“Losing someone very close to you is very painful. It’s difficult to accept that you will never see your loved one again. You have to be strong, Phumlani. If not for yourself then for your mother. She needs you right now. Zanoxolo may not be with us in flesh, but he is with us in spirit. Do you think Zanoxolo would want you to be last in class because you are mourning his death?”

“No, sir,” I said.

“Is there anything you could have done to save Zanoxolo’s life?” he asked.

I kept quiet.

“Are you responsible for your brother’s death?” Mr Zondwa asked again.

“No, sir. I’m not,” I replied.

“Then stop blaming yourself. There’s nothing you could have done. It was God’s will. Just be the Phumlani your brother knew.” Mr Zondwa said, looking hard at me. “And now, you may leave.”

“Thank you, sir.”

I went out and found Thulani waiting for me outside. We walked home together.

“What did Mr Zondwa want?” Thulani asked.

“Nah, nothing. He was just showing me my mistakes in the essay that we wrote last week,” I told him.

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When I arrived home my mother had not returned from work yet. I went to my bed to rest before I prepared supper. While I lay there, I thought about what Mr Zondwa had said to me. I tried so hard to agree with him that I wasn't to blame for my brother's death, but I couldn't. How could he say I wasn't to blame when Zanoxolo died on his way back from watching me play cricket? Could I have done anything else to help him?

“Phumlani, Phumlani! Wake up! You knew I was coming home late, but instead of cooking you are sleeping.” My mother's voice was shrill.

“Sorry, Mama,” I jumped off my bed and looked at the time on my cellphone. I had been sleeping for more than an hour. When I went into the kitchen I could see the fury on my mother's face.

“Leave that pot alone. I will cook myself. If Zanoxolo was still alive, I would not have returned to a dirty kitchen. If only he had listened to me when I told him not to go to that stupid cricket game,” she said.

I dropped the pot I was holding, and stormed out of the house.

“Phumlani! Come here, Phumlani!” she called after me, but I didn’t look back. I wiped my tears with the back of my hand as they began falling down my cheeks. I had never done anything good in my mother’s eyes; all I brought to her was shame and pain. I wasn’t a top achiever at school, and it was because of me that she lost her favourite son.

From that day, on that walk, a new Phumlani was born.

## CHAPTER 5

“Ola Ntini! Come here, Ntwana,” Sandiso called me, as I walked past the house that he and his friend were hanging next to. Sandiso had been friends with Zanoxolo when they were still young; they were inseparable in primary school. But everything had changed when they entered high school. Sandiso started smoking tik and robbing people to get his fix.

“Why do you pass us like we are strangers?” he asked.

“I didn’t see you; I was thinking about things,” I said. I think he saw in my eyes that I had been crying.

“Hey, Asanda, pass me that,” he reached out for the zol his friend was smoking. Asanda passed it to him and inhaled deeply, then passed the zol to me. “Here, take a pull and all your stresses will go away,” he said.

I took the zol reluctantly and inhaled. I coughed and they laughed at me. I inhaled again and my head became heavier. The heartache that had been caused by my mother minutes ago slowly faded.

“We know the boys who killed Zanoxolo. One of them is inside that house right now. I think his relatives live there,” Sandiso said, pointing at a house opposite us.

I thought of how Zanoxolo was killed and I could feel my anger building up. “And you didn’t do anything about it. You let him go. Zanoxolo was once your best friend, Sandiso, remember that,” I said. The weed was doing its work on me. I didn’t question whether what Sandiso said about the boy was true.

“Who says we are letting him go? The police haven’t caught him, but we can. Come on, take this knife. We are going to stab him when he comes out.” Sandiso took an Okapi knife out of his pocket and handed it to me.

This was happening very fast for me. There was no time to step back and think about the decisions I was making. If I had been my usual self, I would have been scared and walked away. But I wasn’t. I suddenly had the impulse to kill.

When that boy came out of the house he was accompanied by an older girl. I could see, by the shock and fear on his face when we blocked his way, that he didn’t see us coming. The girl screamed and tried to shield him from us.

“Please guys, let me go! I am not a gangster. I just came to visit my uncle, not to cause trouble. Please let me go,” the boy pleaded.

“Voetsek, wena!” Sandiso said, shoving the girl away.

I jumped at the boy and stuck the knife in his neck. He started bleeding, and staggered. Asanda struck him over his head. The boy fell to the ground.

I got on top of him and stabbed him again and again. I was crying as I stabbed him, “Why? Why? Why did you kill my brother?”

We heard the police sirens approaching and ran away, leaving the boy lying there in a pool of blood. I followed Sandiso and Asanda to a shack deep in the squatter camp. The shack was stashed with home appliances. Sandiso and Asanda threw themselves on an old stinking sofa after locking the door. My hands and clothes were covered in blood.

My world stopped then, as I became aware of the meaning of what had just happened.

## CHAPTER 6

The last time I saw my mother that year was when the police came to take me away. They had tracked me down to the shack in the squatter camp and arrested me. The boy was in hospital fighting for his life.

I felt heartbreak in my mother’s screams and saw despair in her eyes as the policemen threw me in the back of the van.

I was taken to the juvenile section of Pollsmoor prison to await trial. Months passed as I waited for my time in court, and in that time I turned 17. I heard that the boys who had stabbed my brother were in the adult section, awaiting trial.

It was a time I want to forget. Day and night I thought of the pain I caused my mother. I had always felt like she did not love me as much as she loved Zanoxolo. But that day, the day when the police came to take me away, I realised how much she actually loved me. I saw the same pain in her eyes that I had seen the day Zanoxolo was killed.

I cried every night when I thought of how I had let her down. I was supposed to wipe her tears and make her smile again, but I caused her more grief instead.

The only person who visited me during that time in prison was my father. A month after he heard I was in custody he came back to Cape Town and visited me. After that he came every week while I was awaiting trial. He felt guilty for abandoning us and had moved back to Cape Town where he was living with his new wife and son, he told me. He was trying, but we were still awkward with each other. We had nothing solid to talk about because of all the years he had been out of our lives; I was so young when he left.

On one of my father's visits I took courage and asked him the question I had been afraid to ask before.

"Why has my mother not come to visit me, Father?" I asked him.

"Your mother still needs time, my son. When the time is right she will come."

We sat in silence for a moment before he said softly, "Why haven't you asked me why I left home, Phumlani? Every time I come here I wait for you to scream at me. I wait for you to

tell me it is all my fault. I want you to know how sorry I am, Phumlani, my son ... ”

I told him the truth: “It never felt like there was someone missing. My mother was both a mother and father to Zanoxolo and me. I forgave you a long time ago, Father. Just be a better father to Sizwe. He still needs you,” I said. Tears built up in my father’s eyes but he quickly wiped them away with his hand.

Three days after that visit a warder told me to come down to the visitor’s room. I wondered what had brought my father back so soon. I was only expecting to see him the following week.

When I saw the person who had come to visit me I covered my eyes with my hands and cried.

“I am sorry, Mama. I’m sorry ... ” were all the words I could say.

“No, I am sorry, Phumlani, my child. I was too hard on you,” my mother’s voice was filled with pain.

“Please forgive me, Mama. If Zanoxolo had not come to watch me play cricket he would still be alive, ” I told her.

“It was not your fault. I am sorry for blaming you, my son. I have not visited you because I couldn’t bear to see you locked up in here. But you are my son, Phumlani, and you always will be. I won’t cope with losing another child. I love you, my son,” my mother said.

I wanted to jump over the table that separated us and hug her. But the warder would not even let us hold hands.

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The trial happened a few weeks after I saw my mother. The boy I had stabbed had recovered and was out of hospital, my mother told me. I was given a suspended sentence and was released under correctional supervision. I had to do community service and go to counselling sessions – but I was free.

I am back now at a different school – Mandela High. I am the ‘new boy’ in Grade 10 – older than everyone in my class, but back at school. My classmates’ eyes water as I introduce myself and tell them my story – some of them have heard it already.

My mother works here as a cleaner. She applied for the job when she went to ask the principal if I could come to the school. She says a new school will be a good start for me, and for her.

During school break I join a group of learners who are playing cricket with a tennis ball on the field. My mother is watching me at a distance from outside the school toilets, with a broom in her hands. I smile to myself as I spin-bowl the ball towards the wickets.

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