

WHERE IS HOME

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CHAPTER 1

That day I was riding Lady and Mmoloki, my best friend, was riding Buck. We always rode paired up like that. Though the horses were Mmoloki's we both saw Lady as mine and Buck as Mmoloki's. That day we rode to the very end of the Black River with my dog, Mighty, running behind us like he always did. We rode to where the Black River branches to become the Setlhare and Corbet rivers. It was December school holidays so all day we were free to do as we liked. At the fork in the river, we climbed down from the horses. We'd brought a small picnic lunch. Mmoloki spread out the blanket while I unpacked the food. The horses grazed nearby. Mighty chased frogs in the river.

"It's perfect weather," Mmoloki said, lying back on the blanket and looking up at the wide, blue sky with its puffs of white cloud.

I lay down next to her and we watched two male masked weaver birds weave their hanging nests near the water. I

heard a grey hornbill whistle in the distance, just as a fish jumped to catch an insect flying past. It was a perfect day. What I didn't know then, but would soon find out, was that it would be the last perfect day I would have for a long, long time.

We finished eating, swam in the river and then raced the horses back home. My mother had said I should be back in time to help with dinner. I helped Mmoloki put the horses away before getting on my bike and cycling to our farm.

When I turned off to ride up our long, gravel driveway, I straight away knew something was wrong. There were three vehicles parked in front of the house. One was my grandfather's bakkie, the other two I didn't know. What was Ntatemogolo doing here in the middle of the week? He often drove out on a Sunday for lunch, but he was always busy with his general dealer in Nokeng, the nearest village, during the week. He had no time to drive out to see us.

I parked my bike and went inside. My mother was sitting on the sofa with a woman I didn't know. The woman had her arm around my mother's shoulder and my mother was crying. The minister from church, Pastor Reginald, was there too. He was in the corner talking to Ntatemogolo. When they noticed me, my mother let out a shriek and began to cry harder. The unknown woman pulled her closer and patted her back and said, "Everything will be fine You will get through this."

Ntatemogolo came to me and led me into the kitchen where it was quiet. Too quiet. No pots were on the stove. No vegetables ready for me to wash and cut. No meat sizzling in a pan. What had happened?

“Baleka,” Ntatemogolo started, “there’s been an accident.”

“An accident?”

“Yes, with the tractor.”

He went on to tell me how my father had been ploughing a new field to plant a second maize crop. It was a field he’d never ploughed before. It was rocky and quite hilly, even steeply-sloping in places, but he wanted to expand the land that was cultivated. Farming was tough nowadays and he needed to use every bit of his land just to make enough to break even. But something went wrong. He was alone so we would never know exactly what happened, but a neighbour saw the tractor upside down near a hill. When he went to investigate, he found my father trapped underneath, already dead.

“You must be strong for your mother, Baleka,” Ntatemogolo said that day as I wept in shock and grief.

I tried my best. That summer I worked hard. I woke up early, before the sun, and Mighty and I got to work. I helped everywhere I could. I fed the chickens and let the goats out. I made sure the two cows we had were milked each morning. I collected eggs from the nest boxes. I helped Pete, our field hand, with the crops. But it wasn’t enough.

My mother tried, I know she tried, but something in her died when my father died. It would be many years until I heard my mother laugh again. And, even though grief pulled her down,

she tried her best to keep the farm running, to try to make enough to keep us going. But she failed.

CHAPTER 2

By July my mother knew we weren't going to make it. She called Ntatemogolo over to help break the news to me. Ntatemogolo sat down opposite me at the sturdy kitchen table. "Baleka, do you remember when I asked you to be strong for your mother?" I nodded. "Well, I'm asking you to be strong again. Do you think you can do it?"

"I can try." I knew he had something terrible to tell me. I could see it on my mother's face. She sat quietly at the end of the table, watching her father carefully.

"The farm is failing. I know you've worked hard and your mother and Pete have tried their best, but it is just too much with your father gone. Your mother has decided to sell the farm."

"Sell the farm? But where will we live? This is our home."

"You know that before your mother married your father she trained as a chef? She's been lucky enough to find a job in Johannesburg at a hotel there. She starts in two weeks."

I didn't understand what Ntatemogolo meant. "Are you saying we will live in ... Joburg?"

"Yes, that's what I'm saying," Ntatemogolo said.

"You'll love it; the city is so exciting," my mother tried.

“But what about the animals?”

“They’ll be sold with the farm,” Ntatemogolo said.

“But what about Mighty? He won’t survive in the city. He needs to be able to run around and be free.”

My mother reached forward and rubbed my hand. “Mighty will stay here with your grandfather.”

I snatched my hand away. “Then I’ll stay here with Ntatemogolo too.”

“You can’t do that Baleka. Your mother needs you with her,” Ntatemogolo said. “You said you could be strong for her. This is the time to be strong, very strong.”

“But what about Mmoloki? We’ve been friends since we started Grade 1. I can’t leave Mmoloki. I can’t leave Lady.”

My mother leaned forward and took my hand again, holding it in hers. “I know this is difficult. But you’ll see Mmoloki during the holidays when we come to visit Ntatemogolo. And you’ll make new friends in the city. You’ll like it, you’ll see.”

I knew I wouldn’t. She didn’t know me at all if she ever thought I would.

* * * * *

The two weeks flew by no matter how hard I tried to make them slow down. My mother was busy packing up our things

and I was trying to spend as much time away from the house as I could. I hoped somehow it would all go wrong, that somehow the hotel would take the job back and we'd have to stay at the farm. Every phone call, every letter, I hoped was the hotel telling my mother all her plans had fallen through. But it never happened.

Mmoloki and I rode the horses out to our favourite place, a grove of leadwood trees in a valley over the hill. We climbed down off the horses and rested in the cool shade of the trees.

"I can't believe you're leaving tomorrow morning," Mmoloki said with tears in her eyes.

I held Mighty close to me. "I can't believe it either. I won't survive in Joburg without you. Without Mighty. Without the farm. My life is here."

"We'll write emails and call each other. Maybe I can convince my mother to download Skype on her computer. Then it will be like we're in the same room talking," Mmoloki tried. Since she'd found out, she'd been trying to find a way to make it easier for me. "And we'll see each other during the December holidays. My mother said your mother agreed you could stay by us for a while – maybe even two weeks. That will be good. We'll spend the whole time out in the bush with the horses and Mighty."

"We say all of this now, but I know how this goes. Your life will just go on here; you'll start to forget about me. That's how life is. It just keeps moving no matter how much you don't want it to."

“Never. I’ll never forget about you. You’re my best friend. You always have been and you always will be.” Mmoloki hugged me and I hoped what she was saying was true. I hoped it more than anything.

CHAPTER 3

The flat in Joburg was in the city centre, just a three block walk from the hotel where my mother worked. Our flat was on the tenth floor. It was nice enough, I suppose. It had a small balcony at the back where you could sit and look down on the city. I had my own bedroom and my mother bought me all new furniture for it: a nice wide double bed and a chest of drawers with a big mirror. She even bought me a lime-coloured bean bag seat, something I’d been asking for forever. On the surface everything looked almost like it was perfect. But it wasn’t.

I felt like a dark cloud had lowered over my life. I cried into my pillow at night, missing Mmoloki and Mighty. I missed the trees and the grass and the river. I wondered what was happening at home. I wondered if the eggs our best hen was sitting on had hatched. I wondered if Lady missed me and was waiting at her gate whinnying for me to come and take her for a ride. I wondered what Mmoloki was doing at school.

Joburg seemed to be covered over completely. There were the roads and the pavements, and every other square centimetre had buildings. There were trees, but like me they seemed to be struggling to get a breath. Everything was so close and crowded. People were everywhere, making noise. Cars raced here and there, always hooting. Music played from different corners, each sound cancelling the other out. When you looked up, you could only see little patches of sky, their

shapes decided by the tall buildings. Sometimes I wanted to run and run and never look back at this terrible place.

Three days after we arrived, my mother took me to my new school. It was only seven blocks away, an easy walk. It was a tall, red brick building called St Anthony's High School. My old school only had 300 students altogether, for Grade 8 up to matric. This new school had 2574 students – 2575 with me. I was just another child for the teachers to push through the syllabus. I was just one face in a huge crowd of noisy faces.

And the kids were so different from those at home in Nokeng. Some had tattoos, others had piercings in their noses or eyebrows, or even in their tongues. They spoke back to teachers and the teachers acted like it was OK. I couldn't figure out anything in this crowded place. I was sure I'd never be able to learn here.

At lunch each day, I bought food from the tuck shop and tried to find a place to sit outside. There was a bench under a tree, near the back of the school, by the football pitch. I often found it empty. After eating I'd lie back on the bench and look at the murky sky between the green leaves. I'd pretend I was at home. I'd try to convince myself that Mighty was asleep next to the bench and soon I'd stand up and we'd walk back home to milk the cows or collect eggs from the hens or walk by Mmoloki's house and see what she was up to. And then the bell would ring and I'd stand up and be right back in Joburg and my horrible life.

* * * * *

One good thing was that my mother bought me my own computer and, though Mmoloki's mother wouldn't allow her to download Skype, we were able to chat on Facebook. It wasn't the best but it was something, something I looked forward to all day.

Hey M, what's up?

Hi Baleka! Saw Mighty today at your grandfather's shop. He seems to be fitting right in, acts like he owns the place.



So how's school there in the Big City?

Crap. What about there? Is Mma Modise killing you in additional maths?

Of course. 😞 It looks like the matric dance is going to be next month. I'm getting excited.

Maybe I should come for it?

Won't you have one in Joburg?

Sure, but that's not my school.

Yeah, I guess so. Listen Ma's calling me, we'll talk tomorrow, OK Baleka?

OK. Night!

Night!

I lay back on my bed, upset. I searched my brain for the reason why I felt so troubled. Was it that Mighty was apparently getting on fine without me? Or was it that already Mmoloki saw me as not being part of the high school in Nokeng? She acted liked I was crazy to think about going to the matric dance there. Where am I supposed to go? I thought miserably. That was – is really – my school, not this noisy mad house I go to now. Is Mmoloki changing? Or am I being oversensitive?

CHAPTER 4

I don't head to class. Instead, I find myself at the hall. There is yellow tape across the entrance and I can see police officers inside; they have their backs to me. When they turn around I recognise one of them. He looks up and we stare at each other.

“Tina! Is that you?”

“Lu!” I run towards him. He envelops me in a hug. I want to stay there in the warmth of him, but he pulls out of the hug. He is still holding me by the arms though, as he studies me closely, like he's trying to remember every detail of my face.

Lu reminds me of home. We never went a week without seeing him. He used to work with my dad. He had become more than just a friend; he was like part of our family. Then he moved away to Cape Town to a better paid job. I can't believe he is working on this case.

He is even more handsome than I remember him. I thought about Lu a lot after he left. I knew my feelings had changed for him in those last months when he used to visit. My brother teased me that it was a crush, but I thought it was love. I remember hoping that it didn't show, because it felt forbidden. I was still at school and Lu, although much junior, worked with my dad.

“Look at you. All grown up!” We both laugh. I feel myself blushing and look down at my feet. “Hey!” He tips my chin up. “I'm sorry about your dad. I really am. You know how close we were.”

I bite my lip. Suddenly the tears well up. I look over at where the other police officers are searching the hall. “What's going on? Did you find anything?” I say, to change the subject. “I can help. I can find out things about the boy who died. I can ...”

I want to see Lu again, I think.

“I've got to go.” Another policeman is calling him. “I'll see you soon.”

I walk to class in a daze. When the bell rings for break I realise I haven't written down one single thing that the teachers have been saying. I follow everyone outside into the quad.

“Hey new girl!” Sia is standing beside a short girl with an afro, who is grinning at me.

“Hey!” I answer reluctantly.

“Wanna come with us?” The short girl sounds friendly. “I’m Ntombi, by the way.”

“Tina.” I walk over to them and introduce myself.

“We know who you are,” says Sia.

“Be nice, Sia,” Ntombi warns her friend.

I go with them to the tuckshop and then we head for the shade of a tree. Sia takes a cigarette out of her bag and lights up.

“Isn’t it against the rules?” I ask.

“It’s just smoking, nobody cares.” I watch as she takes a pull and exhales smoke rings. She has plump lips that are tinted with gloss.

“It’s sad what happened to Thabo,” Ntombi says. “Everyone’s talking about it. Nobody thought he was doing drugs. That’s what they are saying; that it was a drug overdose.”

“Drugs?”

Ntombi looks around before lowering her head to whisper. “I heard that there’s this new drug going around, called krokodil. I hear it’s pretty dangerous and ...” She lowers her voice even more: “it can even kill you.”

Sia rolls her eyes, uninterested. “Only if you’re a loser and you take more than what you’re supposed to.”

“Anyways ... apparently Thabo got really hooked and he kept using until his fragile body couldn't take it anymore,” Ntombi says dramatically.

“Do you know who was selling these drugs?” I ask Ntombi, thinking about Noah, imagining him at school, being offered his first hit. Ntombi quickly glances at Sia, as if seeking approval about whether or not she should share her knowledge with the new girl.

“You know how they deal with snitches here at West?” Sia says warningly.

Ntombi waves her hand dismissively and shakes her head. “It's not snitching. She's our friend now. Right, T?”

Sia rolls her eyes and reaches out for my chip packet, helping herself.

“No-one is talking, not after what happened. But I overheard someone not so long ago saying that one of the Matric boys was dealing at school.”

“Zuganov,” says Sia flatly. “I heard it's Zuganov. Well that's what they call him. It's a nickname. Stupid one if you ask me.” She takes another of my chips and crunches it.

“So why didn't you tell the Principal?”

“Well, I don't know about you, new girl,” Sia leans forward and slaps my thigh, a bit too hard. “But here at West, we

aren't snitches." She raises her eyebrows to emphasise her point.

"I was just curious, that's all."

Sia eyes me. "What's it to you, anyway?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to know what's going on."

CHAPTER 5

"Hi, are you new here?" the girl asked me. She seemed nice enough. Her school uniform was cut a bit high, but that was how most of the Joburg girls wore them. At least she only had piercings in her ears.

"Yes, I'm new. I've been here about a week." We were in English Literature, one of my favourite classes. It was one thing that was better than in Nokeng, because of the English Lit teacher, Mr Modise. You could tell he loved literature and his passion made you love it too. We were reading Shakespeare's Macbeth, something I had been sure I'd never like, but I was loving it. So much intrigue and drama. It was better than the power struggles on Isidingo.

"I'm Mosetsana. You seem to be really understanding this Shakespeare stuff."

"I'm Baleka. Yes, it's great."

"Really? Maybe we could study together because, honestly, I'm just not getting it at all."

"Sure, I can help."

We agreed to meet after school. There were some outdoor tables at the back near the netball courts. I arrived first and watched the netball team practising. Mmoloki played netball. I wondered how her team was doing. She never mentioned it during our nightly Facebook chats. I reminded myself that I should ask her tonight.

“Hi Baleka!”

I looked up and there was Mosetsana. She was with a boy, a typical Joburg boy. His school trousers dragged on the ground. He had a snake tattooed on the inside of his arm and he was starting some new dreadlocks. At Nokeng High School, we had to have short hair or it had to be plaited. No discussion. Here people came with all sorts of styles.

“Hi Mosetsana.”

“This is my boyfriend Oteng. Oteng this is Baleka, she’s new, from ... I never asked you where you’re from.”

“I don’t think you’ll know the place.” By now I knew city kids. They don’t know anything except what lies inside the borders of Joburg, and they don’t care to know about it. This is why I was sure I’d never make any friends here. We’re just too different from each other.

“Try me,” Mosetsana said.

“Nokeng. It’s in the Northern Province, quite rural actually.”

“Cool!” Mosetsana said, then turned to Oteng. “I’ll call you later. We need to study.”

“OK, no problem. Nice to meet you, Baleka.” Oteng kissed Mosetsana on the lips and left.

Mosetsana sat down and got out her books. “You must be really missing your home. Joburg must be a shock.”

“Yeah, it’s been tough. It’s all so crowded here. Sometimes I feel like I’ll go crazy if I can’t find a green place, with some space ... and some quiet.” I was surprised I was being so honest with Mosetsana when I’d only just met her, but there was something about her I liked. She reminded me a bit of Mmoloki. She had a calm sensibility about her, just like Mmoloki had.

Mosetsana smiled at me. “I think I know a place. When we’re finished here, I can show you. It’s not far.”

“That would be great.”

We got to work on the English Lit assignment. Mosetsana was right, she really didn’t get Macbeth, but I think I helped her. We finished and packed up our books and she smiled at me.

“OK, now let me show you the place.”

I followed her behind the school. There were quite a few houses and we weaved our way through them. Then there was a hill. We climbed up the hill and on the other side it was as if we had left the city completely. The hooters and the music and the talking of the people disappeared. There was a

little woodland with open spaces of green grass. And from the open spaces I could see wide expanses of blue sky. I could breathe freely.

“Thanks, this is perfect.”

“I thought it might help,” Mosetsana said. “I like this place too. And unlike a lot of places around Joburg, thugs don’t come here. The police keep a close eye on it. It’s safe. If you need a bit of quiet, it’s OK to come here alone too.”

We sat down and kept quiet. I could hear birds. I saw two mice chase each other around the trunk of a tree. A blue headed lizard nodded at them from a branch. It wasn’t home, but it felt very near to it. At least it made my heart feel better for a bit.

CHAPTER 6

So, whazup B?

Hi Mmoloki! How was your day?

Good. I was talking to Rena and Thabo and they say you’re right. You should come to the matric dance. What do you think?

OK, but I need to ask my mother. I finally made a friend here. She’s called Mosetsana. She showed me a park behind the school with real trees and grass LOL!

That’s good. You already sound better. I was scared for you for a while there.

I was scared for me too. I still miss home so much. How's Lady?

I took her for a ride today. Buck had a fit though, being left behind.

HA! I can imagine. I gotta go, got homework. 😞

Me 2. Love you!

Love you too!

I shut down the computer and remembered again that I forgot to ask her about netball. There were so many details of our lives that were getting lost. I tried not to obsess about it. We'd see each other soon and get all caught up in person.

I thought about the matric dance. I was sure if I asked my mother she would agree. It would be nice to be with all of my school friends again. I'd need to remember to ask her about it the next day.

* * * * *

“Hey Girlie!” I turned and saw Mosetsana. She held up her homework from English Lit. She had scored 100%. “Thanks for this neh?”

“No problem.”

We walked toward the school gate. “Some of us are going to the mall. Do you want to come?” Mosetsana asked.

I thought about it. I'd wanted to catch my mother between shifts to talk about going to Nokeng for the matric dance, but I guessed that could wait. "OK, sure."

We took a mini bus taxi to the mall on the far side of the city. Inside the mall, it was as if every student in Joburg was there. All sorts of kids in uniforms hung out, eating ice cream or drinking soda. All checking each other out. Mosetsana spotted her friends and waved at them. "There they are! Let's go."

There were two girls at the ice cream shop, sharing a huge sundae. One was a short black girl with big eyes with long eyelashes. The other was a white girl with long blonde hair and pink-painted fingernails. "Baleka meet Basha and Kayla – my girls," Mosetsana said. "This is Baleka, the resident Shakespeare expert."

We sat down at their table. "So how do you like St Anthony's?" Kayla asked.

"It's OK. It's so big, nothing like my old school," I said.

"She's from way up north in the bush with lions and snakes," Mosetsana said.

"Eish! I could never live with snakes. They're the worst!" Basha said.

"They pretty much keep out of your way. It's not so bad," I said.

“Yeah, for you. I can see you’re brave. But not me. I’d die!” Basha was obviously big on drama. Everyone laughed at her over-the-top performance.

“OK, so what are the plans for matric dance? I’ve yet to find myself a date,” Kayla said.

“I’m sure that won’t be a problem,” Basha said. “If nothing else you can go with Tom. He’s always in default position if nothing comes up.”

“Tom? You’re joking right?” Kayla said.

“I like Tom,” Mosetsana said. Then she realised I was being left out of the conversation. “Sorry Baleka. Tom is Kayla’s old boyfriend who still puppy dogs around like they never broke up.”

“And it was two months ago,” Kayla said.

Just then Oteng came up to the table. “Hey baby.” He bent down and kissed Mosetsana on the cheek. “What’s up Da Girls?”

He was with someone, a tall, handsome boy who stood behind him. He rocked back and forth on his feet and didn’t know what to do with his hands.

“Oh sorry. Fani, this is Mosetsana’s new friend, Baleka. Baleka, Fani, my buddy.”

“Hi Baleka,” Fani said. “I kind of know you. Aren’t you in Phiri’s add maths class?”

“Yes, I am.” I was surprised I’d never seen him in there. He was cute. I would have noticed him normally, but since I’d arrived I mostly kept my head down and tried to disappear. “So how do you like it?”

“It’s tough,” he said.

“Yeah. I’m lucky I had a strict teacher at my old school. She really piled the work on us. Most of what we’re doing now I’ve already finished.”

“Lucky you.” Fani smiled and I noticed he had the cutest dimples.

“Listen Baby, we need to get going. Fani’s got to buy fish food for his little fishies.” He looked at Fani to see how the teasing was going down. “And then I need to get home. My dad needs me in the shop. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

We watched them leave and once they were out of hearing range Basha said, “Oooo ... did you see Fani? What was up with that?”

“If you couldn’t see that whole thing was staged, you’re crazy,” Mosetsana said.

“Staged for who?” Kayla asked.

“For her.” They all looked at me.

“For me?”

“That’s right, girl. You must be blind if you couldn’t see Fani has a thing for you,” Mosetsana said.

CHAPTER 7

Mmoloki called that night. “Hey Baleka, guess what?”

“What?”

“I’m coming to Joburg this weekend. My dad has to collect some tractor part. He said I could come with, stay at your place overnight. What do you think?”

“Great! God I miss you. I’ll be counting the hours.”

It was Wednesday and Mmoloki wouldn’t arrive until Saturday morning but I could barely keep still I was so excited. I straight away started planning what we would do. I decided for sure we’d go to that mall Mosetsana had taken me to. In Nokeng we only had my grandfather’s general dealer and a dusty old Pep. Mmoloki would love all of these shops. And we’d go to the cinema. And maybe the zoo. I couldn’t make up my mind.

My mind was filled with plans about Mmoloki’s visit so I didn’t hear my name being called at first. “Baleka!”

I turned and saw Fani, the boy from the mall. I stopped so he could catch up. “Hey Baleka. You’re a fast walker. I’ve been following you since add maths let out.”

“Sorry, I didn’t hear you. I was just heading to the tuck shop to get something for lunch.”

“I’ll come with.”

We walked, not talking, until we got to the window. I ordered a hot dog and juice and Fani got an egg sandwich and a cola.

“I usually eat back by the football pitch,” I said.

“That sounds fine.”

We walked to my bench, or what I considered ‘my’ bench, and sat down. “So how do you like Joburg?” he asked.

“I don’t know. It’s so different. I miss home.”

“What kind of things did you do there?” He seemed genuinely interested and I liked that.

“I liked being out in the bush with my friend Mmoloki. We’d ride our horses along the river. Sometimes fish, or play with my dog in the water. I liked milking our cows and talking to the chickens.”

“Talking to the chickens?”

I laughed. “Yeah, I guess that seems odd. But they liked it when I talked to them. I think it made them lay more eggs.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like I did a scientific study, but it seemed that way.”

“It sounds like a fantastic place. I can see why you miss it.”

We ate quietly for a while. “My friend Mmoloki is coming to visit this weekend. I’m trying to decide what we should do.”

“That sounds great. I bet you miss each other.”

“We really do. I can’t wait to see her. Phoning and chatting online is just not like seeing each other every day.”

“I can certainly understand that.” I looked at him and I knew he was speaking the truth. He understood, and that was nice.

* * * * *

Mmoloki’s dad dropped her at the flat at about ten Saturday morning. He said he’d be back at eight on Sunday.

I held back my tears when I saw her. “You look different,” she said.

“Do I? Maybe it’s the lack for fresh air.”

We made breakfast and talked about what had been going on. “How’s netball?”

“I’m not playing this term. I need to concentrate on matric. You know me, not the best student. Worse with you gone. Now I’ve got no-one to study with.”

I gave her the options for what we might do for the day. Since it was raining, she chose the mall and a movie at the cinema there.

“Good!”

Mmoloki was impressed that I knew how to get a mini bus taxi to the mall. I guess I’d been acquiring new skills without really knowing it. At the mall, we decided to try and find a dress for Mmoloki for the matric dance.

“Kago asked me,” Mmoloki said.

“I knew he always liked you.”

“Yeah. He came out riding the other day. It was nice.”

“So what about this?” I held up a navy blue dress with sequins on the bodice.

“Maybe. Let me go try it on.”

Mmoloki disappeared into the dressing room and I sat down to wait. Just then Mosetsana, Kayla and Basha entered the store. I waved at them.

“What are you doing here all alone?” Mosetsana asked.

“I’m not alone...” Just as I was about to explain, Mmoloki came out of the dressing room.

“What do you think?” she began, then stopped and looked around at the other girls, confused.

I stepped up. “Mmoloki, this is Mosetsana. You remember I mentioned her. And this is Kayla and Basha. They’re girls from school. Guys, this is my friend from home, Mmoloki.”

“Hi,” Mosetsana said. “Is that a dress for matric dance?”

“Maybe,” Mmoloki said, suddenly shy.

“I think it looks good,” I said.

“Good? If you’re a granny!” Kayla said. She pulled a short red dress from the rack. It had a plunging neckline. “This is more like it.”

“My father would never let me wear that out of the house,” Mmoloki said.

“I actually really like the blue one,” I said. I could feel that Mmoloki was uncomfortable.

“Yeah, well ... we’ll see.” She went back into the changing room.

“So, we’re going to see Gravity. Why don’t you two join us? Afterward we’ve got money for pizza,” Mosetsana said.

“Let me check with Mmoloki.”

Mmoloki came out of the change room and hung the dress back on the rack. “So, the girls wondered if we might like to

go with them to watch a movie, Gravity, and then for pizza.
What do you think?”

“I thought ... no, never mind. Yeah, sure. That’s OK,” Mmoloki said.

“What? What’s wrong? We don’t have to.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s good. I want to meet your new friends, get to know them.”

After the movie we got pizza at a place at the end of the mall.
“So did Fani ask you yet?” Mosetsana said.

“Ask me what?” I said.

“Oteng says he wants to ask you to the matric dance.”

“Who’s Fani?” Mmoloki asked.

“He’s just a guy,” I said. But something in her face told me she didn’t like that answer.

* * * * *

Later at home I could see something was bothering Mmoloki.
“What’s wrong? Did I do something wrong?” I asked her.

“I didn’t know anything about Fani. I didn’t know anything about any of those people. It’s like you’re keeping secrets from me.”

“I didn’t know you quit netball. It’s just how it is now. We can’t tell each other everything.”

“But we used to!” Mmoloki said angrily. “We always used to.”

CHAPTER 8

Mmoloki left, still angry, on Sunday and I felt bad about that. Before she got into her father’s truck she said, “But you’re coming to Nokeng for our matric dance, right?”

“Definitely.”

* * * * *

Monday at lunch, Fani was uncomfortable. “Is anything wrong?” I asked.

“No ... not really ... why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. Is there something you want to say to me?”

“No ... well, yes, actually. I wanted to know if ... I mean I thought maybe you’d like to maybe go to the matric dance with me?”

“Sure. When is it?”

“Two Saturdays from now, on the fourteenth of September.”

“OK, that sounds cool.” I liked Fani. He was sincere and kind. The dance was going to be great.

Later, at home, I called Mmoloki.

“Hello.”

“So you got home OK,” I said.

“Yeah, we got home fine.”

“Listen I’m sorry for how things went this weekend.”

“It’s OK.”

“I have some good news,” I said.

“What?” Mmoloki asked.

“Fani asked me to the matric dance here. I wish you could have met him. I think you would have really liked him. I told him yes.”

“That’s nice. When is it?”

“The fourteenth.”

“Of this month?”

“Yeah, why?”

“That’s our matric dance date. So does that mean you won’t come now?”

How did I not remember that? I didn’t know what to say. I’d already told Fani yes, and besides, was it even right for me to

go to the matric dance in Nokeng? I didn't live there anymore; it wasn't my school. It was as if I was holding tightly to something I was no longer part of.

"I'm sorry, Mmoloki, I forgot. Maybe I can come to Nokeng the weekend after the matric dance. It's a four day weekend, so then we can have more time together."

"I don't know, Baleka. Maybe we should just forget about it. To me it sounds like you've moved on and it looks like you've moved on without me. You're a city girl now, with a city lifestyle. I don't think you have any space in there for me."

* * * * *

Three weeks later I was heading home to Nokeng. When the bus stopped, I saw Ntatemogolo standing with Mighty and my eyes filled with tears. I rushed out of the bus and straight into Ntatemogolo's arms.

"Oh I missed you!" I said. Then I bent down and hugged Mighty. We walked the short distance from the bus stop to Ntatemogolo's house next to his general dealer. Nokeng looked so tiny and sounded so quiet. Everything seemed familiar but different. I had been sure I was going to die when I left this place, but I hadn't. Despite feeling a bit lost, though, I was happy to be back.

The next morning I woke up early and rode my bike out to Mmoloki's house. I was worried, because in the end I had gone to the matric dance with Fani. It was fun and I finally started to feel as if I could be happy in Joburg and that I could have new friends there. But Mmoloki had been hurt that I

hadn't come to Nokeng for their matric dance. She had stopped responding to my emails and Facebook messages, or picking up my calls. She was angry and I was scared that maybe our friendship was over.

The rains had started early in Nokeng and everything looked green and fresh as I cycled out to her house. The day was crystal clear with the sky washed to a sparkling blue. When I rode down the driveway, Lady came to the gate of her paddock and whinnied to me. She remembered me!

Mmoloki was waiting for me at the door when I got to the house. "Let's go for a ride," was all she said.

Silently, we got the horses ready and rode down to the river. Once there we dismounted and sat down on the bank.

"We're friends forever, that's just how it is," I started. "But we need to accept that I've moved away. My everyday life is not the same as yours. I can't try to keep living in Nokeng if I'm living in Joburg. I'll go crazy and I'll be so lonely."

"I get all of that. I expected it. I knew things would change; I just hoped it would take a bit longer. You're right, Nokeng is not your home anymore. Your home is in Joburg and I need to accept that," Mmoloki said, though I could see her eyes filling with tears.

I hugged her. "I don't think there's a law that says a person can't have two homes. Maybe Joburg and Nokeng are both my homes."

“Maybe.” Mmoloki smiled and Mighty rushed forward and licked the tears from her cheeks.

“So are we friends again?” I asked.

“We never stopped being friends.” She smiled then. “So, tell me all about the matric dance and your Fani.”

I smiled at her, and just like that I knew I was back home again.

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