

Chapter one

Birds twitter in the pre-dawn light filtering through Zee's dusty window. Her curtains flutter as the wind finds a gap between the frame and the panes. A pesky fly settles on her nose.

She lazily brushes it away and settles her head back comfortably into her pillow.

Her knees knock with nerves as she stands on the 18th green on the North Course at Torrey Pines Golf course in San Diego, California. A strong Pacific wind ruffles the flags and she can taste the brine in the ocean breeze.

One last high-pressure putt to go. A reassuring fiddle of the pink golf tee stuck in her braided hair, a deep, calming breath and she rattles her ball into the cup for a two-under-par eagle and victory. It's done. A glorious roar erupts from the crowds.

The fiery little black girl from a lowly township in South Africa they all look at and think, "Shame! Her mother needs to feed her much more regularly", now owns their hearts.

Her opponent, only fourteen years old herself but already the top woman golfer in the USA concedes defeat. She shakes Zee's hand and kisses her on both cheeks.

Zee takes her golf ball out of the hole and throws it high into the crowd. Funny, the girl who catches it looks just like her. Fellow golfers, caddies and officials throng around her.

Rainbows of sparkling water, release with a pop from vigorously shaken bottles.

She hit the ball fifty-eight times today. The record of lowest ever score that Swedish golfing phenomenon, Anika Sorenstam set in 2001 with a 59 total for a round on the LPGA tour is now hers.

"Zee, well played!" Tiger Woods steps up. He has caddied for her over the last four days, carried her heavy bag of clubs and advised her on the best shots to play. He takes her putter from her shaking hands and shoots it back into the bag. They embrace and he kisses her on the cheek. Photographers jostle for the photo-opportunity they will sell around the world. She blows kisses to the adoring gallery. They're in their colourful, fist-pumping thousands now. Her national anthem, 'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica' - rings out from the multitude of fans waving South African flags. It's lyrics in Xhosa, Zulu, Sesotho, Afrikaans and English. 'Lord Bless Africa!'

The enormous trophy she struggles to hold high threatens to fall. Strong hands grip her shoulders and help brace her against the weight of the silverware.

The adoring, fired-up crowd chant her name, "Zee, Zee, Zee!"

"Zee, Zee! Wake up, time to go!"

Dad's warm breath whispers in her ear. His insistent shaking breaks the hold of her dream. There is something profound about dreaming, once at any level, to prevail. To be, for one fragile moment, the best.

She sits, shakes her head and rubs the sleep from her eyes. Tiger Woods returns to the posters that plaster her walls. She blows him a kiss.

Dad winks. "*Ukuthobeka ngoku, ntombazana, masingasuki*. Quietly now, girl, let's not wake mum."

He softly creeps out of her room.

Still sleepy-eyed,, Zee slips out of bed and scrambles into her worn golf shirt and skirt. She sticks a pink golf-tee into her braided black hair. Finally, she slips her feet into her worn, but comfortable golf shoes. She draws back her curtains and peers out of the window. Here comes the sun but a few persistent stars still twinkle in the brightening sky.

Zuko stands in the kitchen. He plasters half a loaf of bread with margarine then stuffs some into her hands. "Build you up, my girl, there's not a pick on you."

Her dad is a handsome man, tall, thick through the chest and shoulders. His white tee comes loose from his tight black curly hair and she fixes it back. They unlatch the door - a squeak from the rusty hinge.

Scrawny, jealous township dogs follow them down the road. Zee throws half her bread to a skinny pregnant pack member. It's way too much for Zee to eat. The dog hares off, wolfing it down before the yapping pack can catch up with her.

It's Sunday, so all is as quiet as it ever gets in the township. The V-shaped backs of stooped women sweep their stoeps clean. The dust blows around dusty toddlers playing in the yards and then finds somewhere else to settle.

At the Church of St. Mary the Catholic priest, Father Thomas, flings wide the doors. They bang violently back and forth in the gusting wind.

"Zuko, top of the mornin' to you." His thick Irish brogue has not softened over the years. "You too Father."

"I see the golfing gods have still got you hooked?"

Zee hides behind her Dad as they pass. "And how is little Zee there?"

There's a twinge of guilt at missing the morning service with her mum. "Morning Father. I'm fine!"

The sun is up now. It's not yet hot enough to break a sweat but the early chill is gone. Zee throws her head back and basks in the warm rays. Father and daughter hurry out the township across the wide dual carriageway of Koeberg Road.

Leafy well-ordered roads now fringe the Milnerton lagoon. The houses are big, well-watered lawns and flower beds and expensive cars in the driveways. Here the dogs bark impotently from behind high, secure, razor-wired walls. Lucky escapees trot the pavements alongside leotard-clad residents., tongues lolling, tails wagging.

"Keep up, Petra, come on now!"

Zuko throws a wry smile at Zee "Who's fooling who?"

He measures his long strides a little. Zee treks on alongside with a spring in her step. She looks up with a smile, her attention diverted away from the hole in the uppers of her worn golf shoes. Her sock-clad big toe peeks through. They'd sat on the shelf at Cash Converters before her hands grabbed them, "Dad! Look, they're my size and everything!"

There was hell to pay when her mum, Esihle, heard he'd spent most of the week's grocery money on them. Luckily, the row passed like a summer storm leaving no damage. They've lasted well, they'll just have to last a bit longer.

A spit of lazy sand dunes and coastal grass shimmers for kilometres into the distance. The Milnerton Golf Links is in sight now.

It's an 18-hole coastal course 10 minutes north of the city of Cape Town. Nestling between the ever-crashing Atlantic Ocean and the silent Diep River, the uninterrupted view across the bay towards the Mother City is stunning.

Mist billows like bed sheets down Table Mountain. Seagulls dive into the white-capped waves of the ocean. Bright ships lie anchored offshore. The lush, green grass of the golf course fairway and greens contrast with a bright clear blue sky. On most holes, the sound of the waves breaks on the shore metres away. Nature lovers thrill at the abundant birdlife on the bordering shore and river.

The strong south-easterly wind tugs at the collar of her shirt. The 'Cape Doctor' - called that because of a local belief that it clears Cape Town of pollution and 'pestilence'. Zee pulls her collar up snugly as the clubhouse flags snap and crackle around her.

It will be a tough morning but can a girl from the grimy, dusty township have a better playground? Honestly?

Zee sits by the first tee and anticipates the main event of her day. The Milnerton Junior Open. Her Western Province win at Paarl Golf Club in December last year was something wonderful.

This is her home club though - that makes it different. Scores of talented kids will compete today who picture themselves one day playing on the Sunshine Tour, the European Tour or even the lofty heights of the American PGA tours.

The odds are difficult if not impossible. Few boys graduate from the junior to the men's professional tour, and only one or two girls. The course today will be a field of dreams. First, they must get past Zee.

She watches the early golfers, a mix of locals and tourists. They tee off and proceed down the fairway. Her junior tournament tee off is ten o'clock, two hours away yet but the thing that distinguishes one junior golfer from another is how hard he or she works and its a simple fact that Zee works much, much harder at her golf skills than anyone else she knows. She hitches a lift in a golf cart from one of the ground staff down to the practice ground. Here she can hit her longer clubs. She moves up the range of irons, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, and 4. Each iron descends in number but adds ten to twenty yards in distance with each change. Finally, the longest and hardest club - the driver. A fat bulbous head and a long shaft launch the ball far off towards the horizon. Zee's favourite. That's enough. She flags down an obliging lift back to the clubhouse.

She's almost ready. The chipping green now. She hits balls high into the air to land as close to the pin as possible. Finally, the practice putting green. Her two small shoe prints imprint a pigeon-toed trail through the manicured, dewy grass. Long putts, short putts, getting her eye in. It's soothing to watch the balls rattle into the cup time after time.

Zee's competitors arrive in dribs and drabs. They disembark from their sleek, expensive cars driven by well-off parents. Chris, a schoolmate turns up. He flips a hand through his shaggy blond hair and his long muscular legs hurry him into the pro-shop to confirm his arrival. Zee checks the clubhouse clock. Thirty minutes to the hour.

A tourist bus rolls in laden with thirty German golfers. They've been on their way since dawn from Langebaan up the Atlantic West Coast. A crash in front. Spinning debris shreds the front tyres. Delays as they're replaced. The temperature is already 25 degrees centigrade. Hot, disgruntled golfers disembark, guzzle bottled water and stretch. A slew of caddies unloads their golf bags from the bus.

The starters voice rings out over the tannoy. "A delay to the Junior Competition. One hour due to unforeseen circumstances. Tee off is now eleven o'clock."

No club manager will turn down or delay for hours a busload of punters worth 70,000 rands. Sheer economics. The youngsters must wait.

Chris grabs Zee's hand, "Come on, I'll buy us a coke."

With a shrug, she agrees. She doesn't know him that well. He's arrived in the school mid-term in July last year. Sixteen, blond, already standing a strapping two metres tall he tops out the scales at 90 kilograms. His favourite golfer is South Africa's giant, Ernie Els. "The Big Easy", so-called because of his fluid, almost lazy swing.

They've shared the weekly school bus to the course so they've had more than a few rounds together. He plays well. She's looked up his name in the Western Province Boys league results. He's lying third. She smiles at one of his lame jokes, sips her Coke. Rumours are he's

a bit of a bad boy. He seems all right. The Ernie Els thing, that's a shame, but he's a serious golfer like her. That's good enough for now.