

# A FUTURE IN FLAMES

By Jenny Robson

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## CHAPTER 1

So I'm on a plane. Heading for Cape Town and for Joy, the love of my life.

And will she forgive me for these past two years? Will she understand I stayed away out of love for her?

Most of all: will she cancel this wedding of hers?

My friend Tshepo had emailed me: "Daniel, dude, you have finally lost her! She's getting married this Saturday. Idiot! You've only got yourself to blame!"

But surely she does not love this other man, whoever he is? No! Surely it is only from desperation. Because she has given up hope that we will be together. Surely?

I don't blame her. What Tshepo says is true: this is my fault. But I will put things right. Just as soon as I land in Cape Town.

My friend Tshepo will rush me to Joy's home. I will take her in my arms and I will say, "Joy, my only love, I am back for good. You cannot marry this other man, whoever he is. Tell him to go. Tell him you belong to me."

She will agree, surely? And we will be together forever as we are meant to be. And I will never think again about the terrible vision in the fire. The fire of Tshepo's sangoma.

In fact, this was all Tshepo's fault to start with. He was the one who insisted we must visit the sangoma out in the rural area.

"Come on, Daniel. She builds this fire. And you can see your future right there in the flames."

That was two years ago. I shook my head. "Get a life, Tshepo! It's all nonsense. Totally unscientific. No-one can foretell the future."

I went on: "Anyway, I already know my future. My future is Joy. As soon as she finishes her degree, we'll marry and travel the world together. She will write killer articles and I will take killer photographs and we will be famous."

"Well, just come along for the ride, Daniel. Please! Bring your camera. Maybe your editor would like some rural shots."

But my editor, John Barnaby, was not into fields and hills. He preferred action. And blood.

Still, Joy was busy studying. I had nothing better to do. So I took the long bus ride with Tshepo. I didn't take my camera. And I wasn't too supportive.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Tshepo? Sometimes it is better not to know what the future holds.”

“Well, it can't be any worse than my boring present life. No wheels, no babe, no job prospects. Hey, everyone needs a dream.”

After the bus ride, there was a dusty path up a steep hill. At the top we found the sangoma and her sagging hut and a huge fire churning up thick smoke.

She held out her hand and Tshepo filled it with his hard-earned cash. I shook my head.

“I don't want to know my future.”

She laughed at me. “It is not you that chooses the flames. It is the flames that choose you.”

Tshepo and I sat side-by-side on a rickety bench while the sangoma threw herbs into her fire. The flames crackled wildly, spat out small charcoal twigs, and turned from luminous pink to eerie purple.

## CHAPTER 2

“Sharp-sharp, Daniel! Can you believe it, dude? It's the best news in a million years!”

Tshepo was so excited that he nearly tripped and fell down the steep hill path. His eyes shone.

“I saw it there, Daniel. There in the purple flames!”

“Saw what, Tshepo?” I was struggling to breathe, struggling to speak. There was a huge and terrible weight on my chest. I looked back up towards the sangoma’s hut. The fire was out now. Just a smouldering pile of ashes. But inside my head, it felt like the fire raged on. The old woman had disappeared.

I should never have come. I should have let my friend investigate his future alone. What a fool I was, meddling with things I didn’t even believe in!

“Concentrate, Daniel Dlamini! Why aren’t you listening? Me – driving a Range Rover, that’s what! Top-of-the-range, red Range Rover! With music blasting out of all the speakers! And there beside me... you know who was sitting there?”

“Who?”

“Lola, that’s who. You know, that top model? Yeah and she was smiling at me like I was the answer to her dreams. And with her hand on my arm! How lucky am I?”

We reached the bus stop and still Tshepo didn’t stop. “What a future! Hey, I hope it’s gonna start soon! Goodbye, poor boy’s life!”

On the bus, halfway home, he finally asked: “And you, Daniel? Did you see anything in the flames?”

“No,” I lied.

“Serves you right. You should have paid the old woman! Well, it’s your loss.”

I stared out at the passing fields. I tried to get my own terrible vision from the flames out of my head. But it was stuck there: more horrifying than my worst nightmares.

“It’s all nonsense,” I told Tshepo. “Totally unscientific. No-one can know the future.”

“It’s all nonsense,” I told myself. “We make our own futures.” It didn’t help.

I went to Joy’s house. Her mother said, “You shouldn’t disturb her, Daniel. Her finals start on Monday.” But I needed to hold Joy close in my arms.

“What’s wrong, Daniel?” Joy asked. “You are so tense. What happened?”

“Nothing,” I lied again. I looked down at her lovely face, down into her bright eyes. No! That vision could never come true! Impossible! This was the love of my life, my soulmate!

I said, “Tshepo got his future foretold. And guess what his future is. A Range Rover! Imagine!”

Joy laughed with me. “A Range Rover? That poor guy barely has money for taxi fares!”

“True! He’s got no chance.”

“I hope you didn’t join your silly friend, Daniel. You know how I feel about fortune-telling and stuff like that.”

Then she pushed me out of the house. “Off you go. I’m still busy. I need good results so our future can start, right?”

But all that night, the vision haunted me. It stopped me sleeping: that terrible scene that had played itself out deep inside the eerie purple flames. That night, and many nights after.

My boss asked me if I was losing my edge.

### CHAPTER 3

Joy is looking up at me, wearing a soft, pink, fluffy jersey. And there is terror in her eyes. Around her face, the purple flames writhe like snakes.

“No Daniel! Please don’t, Daniel!”

I can hear her voice clearly above the crackling of the fire.

“Daniel, I can’t help it. I love him, not you. I will always love him. No matter what you say.”

Everything else has faded. I cannot feel the rickety bench. I cannot sense my friend Tshepo. Even though he is seated right beside me.

There is only Joy and her soft, pink jersey and her terrified eyes. And her pleading voice.

“Don’t hurt me Daniel!”

And then the hammer appears. From nowhere, from my right. It swings against her left temple. The terrible thud mingles with her scream. And then there is only blood – blood spattered on the soft, pink fluff of her jersey.

And how do you live with a picture like that stuck in your brain?

I went on telling myself: “This is nonsense! You have just been working too hard. Taking too many photos of crime scenes. It was just your imagination gone crazy. Yes, that’s the scientific explanation.”

And it was true. Just a few months before, Barnaby had promoted me to chief crime-beat photographer for the newspaper. And I’d witnessed some terrible sights, let me tell you. Seen them, photographed them. The blood and gore were enough to turn your stomach!

No doubt those sights were still playing havoc with my mind as I stared into the sangoma’s fire. And of course, Joy was always in my thoughts. Right in the forefront of my mind. It could all be explained away.

Still, I asked her: “Joy, do you have a pink jersey?”

She frowned at me. Then she laughed. She was laughing a lot now. Her exams were finally over. She was nervous and excited all at the same time, waiting for her results.

“No. Why do you ask, Daniel?”

“Just promise me you will never buy a pink jersey.”

“Why?”

“I hate pink,” I lied. “Especially fluffy pink.”

I owned a hammer. There in the tool box in the kitchen of my small flat. It had cost me quite a bit. But I threw it away into a skip outside the newspaper offices.

Just in case, you understand. Just to cover all bases. Just to make sure I didn't tempt fate.

And over the next weeks, I managed to calm myself down. I managed to get back to being sensible. After all, my poor friend Tshepo was still catching taxis, still without a babe. He had a picture of Lola stuck up on his bedroom wall. He'd torn it out of a magazine. And that was as close as he'd got to the girl of his dreams.

But one evening Tshepo phoned.

“Daniel, dude! You'll never guess. Not in a million years. Oh man, the party has started!”

“What party?”

“No, I'm not gonna tell you, Daniel. I'm gonna show you. Just you wait. Seeing is believing dude!”

CHAPTER 4

I couldn't believe it! There was Tshepo – cruising up outside my block of flats in a bright red, brand new Range Rover. His favourite rap artist pumped from all four speakers.

“So what d’you reckon, dude? Sharp or what?”

I felt sick. “How? Did you steal it?”

He told me how. For his birthday the previous month, his brother had given him four weeks’ worth of lottery tickets. And he’d just hit the jackpot: a huge, fat, cash pay out!

“Hey come on, dude! This is the best thing ever in my whole life! Feel happy for me!”

“Of course I do,” I lied. I told myself it was just blind coincidence. Luck and blind coincidence. Of course Tshepo would buy a Range Rover if he suddenly got lucky. He’d wanted one since he was a kid. This proved nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Joy phoned then, as excited as Tshepo. “Daniel, I passed! Every single subject! Now we can plan the wedding. We need to set a date.”

“A date?”

I suppose she expected me to sound excited too. Excited and joyful and enthusiastic. But I was still feeling sick and panicky.

“What’s the matter, Daniel? Are you having second thoughts? Don’t you want to marry me any more? Have you fallen for some hot new chick at your newspaper?”

Almost, I was tempted to explain. It would have been a load off my mind to tell her the truth. Almost, I began to confess about my visit to the sangoma, about the vision.

I didn’t though. Instead I tried to sound enthusiastic about the wedding. “I can’t wait,” I lied. But Joy knew me too well.

“You’d better make up your mind, Daniel Dlamini! Don’t mess with me. I’m not marrying someone who isn’t one hundred per cent sure. If you don’t love me any more, just say so.”

“I love you more than life itself, Joy. More than my own happiness,” I said. And that was not a lie.

Tshepo was collecting plenty of hot dates with his new wealth. He had a new girl each week, sitting there in the passenger seat of his Range Rover. Beautiful girls, classy uptown girls. But never Lola.

That eased my mind. A little. I took Joy out to our favourite jazz café, where we had first met.

I said: “September first. The first day of spring. That will be the perfect date for our wedding. And enough time to plan things.”

She looked at me with those beautiful eyes of hers. And I knew without a shadow of doubt: nothing on this earth could ever cause me to harm her. No way! The flames might be

partly right about Tshepo's future. But they were wrong, wrong, wrong about mine.

Happily we drove away from the café, still talking wedding details. For the first time in ages, I felt at peace. Almost.

I stopped at a red robot. And there was Tshepo, stopped beside me. Even under the dim streetlights I recognised the woman beside him with her hand on his shoulder.

Lola!

## CHAPTER 5

Barnaby called me in.

“Dlamini, there's a job opening. War zone cameraman up north. DRC, Mali, rebel-held territories. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Are you interested?”

I didn't ask why there was an opening. I knew. My colleague JP Dube had been shot: right now he was laid up in the ICU of some hospital in Jozi.

I went home and packed. I left without a word to Joy. What could I say to her? “I'm doing this to save your life, my angel. I love you enough to leave you.”

It wasn't worth the risk. If I told her, she would find a way to make me change my mind. “What nonsense, Daniel. You know I don't believe in that stuff. Neither do you!”

But later? If we married? Every time we had an argument, would she look at me with fear in her eyes? Whilst I lived in

daily torment that she might fall in love with someone else and push me over the edge? In daily terror that somehow, somehow the vision might come true?

No! This was the only answer. Yes, she would be broken-hearted and confused. But at least she would be alive. At least there was no chance she would ever need to say the words: “Daniel, I can’t help it. I love him, not you. Don’t hurt me, Daniel.”

I headed north with my cameras: to flying bullets, to scenes of carnage and suffering. Burnt out villages and massacred villagers. Lost refugees, stumbling down dirt roads with cooking pots balanced on their heads, as they searched for a place of safety – that didn’t exist.

I filmed the faces of men who had lost all compassion. And the faces of young boy-soldiers crazed and dazed by drugs and death.

There were whole days I managed to get through without thinking of Joy. Whole nights when I forgot about the gaping hole in my heart.

Once in a while I checked my emails.

Joy wrote: “You get yourself back here, Daniel Dlamini, you coward! You look me in the eye and tell me it’s over. Then I will believe it.”

I didn’t answer her. I didn’t answer Tshepo’s emails either.

He wrote: “Dude, have you gone crazy? You must be crazy giving up a class lady like Joy. She’s almost as class as my Lola. But she’s in a terrible state. I saw her the other day. It was bad.”

I caught a bullet in the shoulder. I lay in a dirty, cockroach-infested clinic, delirious. I had nightmares and day-mares: Joy burning in a purple fire, screaming like the village women in rebel-torched villages. But at least the pain of my wound overtook the pain of my broken heart. When I recovered, I returned to the frontlines.

John Barnaby sent emails: “Son, you are a genius. The New York Times has put in an offer for your latest series. You are becoming famous! How does that make you feel?”

I thought of Joy, of how we were supposed to become famous together. How was she doing? I felt dead inside for every day of those two years. Sometimes I found it hard to remember exactly why I had decided to leave her.

## CHAPTER 6

Two years is a long and lonely time, filled with long and lonely nights. But I never looked at another woman. Not even in my worst times.

Joy was the only one for me. If I couldn’t have her, then I would just go without. And Joy? Had she found herself another man? Some days, I hoped she had. She deserved to be happy even if I couldn’t make her happy. But other days, the thought of any other man touching her made me feel sick with horror.

At least she was pursuing her career in journalism. I know. I saw her articles published in magazines. Glossy, expensive magazines.

“The stylish Ms Mazibuko was seen at the fund-raiser with a new man. She insists he is only a close friend. How close, Ms Mazibuko? I wonder what Mr Mazibuko will make of this? He is away on a business trip in India, but due back any day. Watch this space for further developments!”

I shook my head. This was not the Joy I remembered! She had never been interested in writing about high society.

“What an empty, pointless subject!” That’s what she used to say about gossip columns. Her writing had never been mean and bitter either. I read her articles and felt my heart break all over again. She had lost that lovely spirit of kindness.

“This is your fault,” I told myself. And went off to photograph fresh mounds of corpses, worrying about light-readings and exposures and lens fittings. Yes, I seemed to have lost my spirit of kindness too.

Then Tshepo emailed: “Joy has a new man in her life. It seems serious. Daniel, dude, you really messed up. Idiot!”

I managed to get a signal and phoned him. “Who is this guy? What’s he like? How serious?”

Tshepo didn’t seem to have much in the way of answers.

Then came Tshepo's second email: "Daniel, dude, you have finally lost her! She's getting married this Saturday. Idiot! You've only got yourself to blame!"

I phoned again. "I'll be home in two days. Meet me at the airport, right?"

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So here I am on the plane, about to land at Cape Town airport. In a short while, I will see my beloved Joy. And I will explain to her about the sangoma and the flames.

"Forgive me, my angel," I will say. "I left you to save your life."

I will beg her to cancel her wedding. Surely she will? After all, we are soulmates. We are destined to be together.

I will say: "Together we can make sure the vision never comes true. Together we are stronger than any fortune-teller. We will become again the people we were meant to be. Kind and good."

As I step off the plane I am filled with hope and with dread. But mostly with hope.

## CHAPTER 7

Lola was extremely beautiful. But she didn't have much in the brains department. She sat there beside Tshepo in the red Range Rover, going on and on.

“Oooh, this is so romantic! Two years apart and now you guys are seeing each other again for the first time. Will you fall in love all over again? Will your passion for each other re-ignite? It’s like a fairy tale in real time.”

What did she think? That she was watching some romantic drama on the TV? Some ridiculous soap opera? Some African Magic Movie Channel movie?

Well, the movie turned out to be a horror film!

At Joy’s front gate, we were met with police cars and police tape. And a body bag on a gurney, sliding into an ambulance. I kept forgetting to breathe.

Joy’s mother was in the yard, tearing at her dress. She attacked me with her fists like a mad woman, crazy with grief.

“You did this, Daniel! My beautiful, bright daughter – and now she is dead! There is blood all over her new jersey. I only bought it for her last Wednesday.”

I didn’t even ask if it was a pink jersey.

“And her beautiful bright face smashed in. He smashed her face in, Daniel. All because of you. Because she told him she could never stop loving you.”

I didn’t even ask if the weapon had been a hammer. What did it matter if the minor details were correct? The most important fact of the vision, the only part that really counted, had turned out to be a lie. A falsehood. I was not the murderer.

Whatever Joy had said in her last moments, it was not, “Don’t hurt me, Daniel.”

But I may as well have been the killer. By trying to stop the vision coming true, I had made it happen. By leaving Joy, I had caused her death. And how was I supposed to live with that knowledge?

That is the true horror of seeing into the future: you can never know the full, complete story. No! The future is another country, blanketed in mists, filled with hidden valleys and shadowy forests.

The police led him out in handcuffs, this man who was supposed to become Joy’s bridegroom.

The Chief Constable said, “Daniel Nkumbula, you are charged with the murder of Joy Shilowa.”

“Daniel!?! His name was also Daniel!?!” I stopped breathing until my lungs felt as if they would burst.

“Yes,” said my friend Tshepo. Beside him, the beautiful Lola was silent and shocked. “Yes, I think that is the only reason she chose this man. Because this man reminded her of you. Because this man had the same name.”

Like I said: the future is another country, filled with mists and hidden valleys and shadowy forests and dark, dangerous gullies. And not even the flames of a sangoma’s fire can light your way.

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