

The  
COLOURS  
that  
Blind

*Also by Rutendo Tavengerwei*

Hope Is Our Only Wing

# The COLOURS that Blind

RUTENDO  
TAVENGERWEI

HOT  
KEY  
BOOKS

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*For my aunt Synodia Tavengerwei,  
who has a very kind heart.*

*This book is dedicated to the memory of  
the Elim Vumba missionaries, whose story  
has stayed with me ever since I heard it.*

*And to everyone who feels inadequate, you are enough.*

# PART ONE

*The thing  
that  
happened*

# Tumi

If sleep is meant to summon peace and rest, then why does mine hunt down dead memories and haul them back to me like a cat with prey?

It's the same every night. The scars are the first thing I see, and when I do, it feels as though it is happening again. They are always so vivid. Clawed onto a face. A man's face, a woman's face, sometimes no particular face. Burrowed deep in skin and smeared with charcoal.

Then that strong smell, flooding my nose and choking the breath out of me. It terrifies me, how real it feels.

I whisper a prayer, like I do every time I realise I have escaped my terrors and that it was the alarm ringing, not clucking chickens, that woke me.

It takes me a minute to put myself together. But it's OK. I've shaken all of that off now and it's time to go win a race.

*Let's do this!*

Stormzy's rippled rap is now blasting through the double bass of my headphones as I walk to the mirror fitted in the middle of my wardrobe. I stare blankly at my reflection.

*My tie looks too tight, tucked into the nook of my shirt as though I'm about to hang.*

It's ridiculous, given that I'll take it off in a bit, but today I need to look like a winner. And winners don't look as if they're trying too hard. I loosen it a little and step back, craning my neck to see if there's an angle where I like my reflection better. I take in a deep breath and my eyes lock with the brown ones of the pale figure in the mirror. My lip curls slightly. It's usually at this point that I remember why the horrors keep visiting me at night. I still look the same way. And that is the problem.

*Focus, Tumi.*

The track changes on my playlist and I click to bring it back to Stormzy. It's the nerves that have me all riled up like this. I can't afford to mess up today, and Stormzy's best for getting that confidence flowing in my veins. I start rapping along to the tune. I must keep my head in the game and not be distracted. For the rest of the team, failing is just a minor setback, but for me it's not an option. Winning this race is like breathing; it's something I have to do.

*Focus, Tumi. Champion, that's all I must see. Not the paleness of my skin, but a champion! People love champions.*



Mkoma's car honks outside. I steal a glance at my game face before peering through the window. We're still at the warning honk that he always gives to say that the car might just leave without me. But, knowing my brother, I have a few minutes before he really gets annoyed. I look at the calendar and mark the date. Three more weeks to go! Today will set it all in motion.

In a few days Coach Ngoni will choose the swim-team captain. The battle is between Bongani and me, and although almost everyone tells me that the coach will pick me, because I am clearly the better swimmer and Bongani's butterfly is weak as hell, little flies of doubt occasionally buzz around me.

The thing is, everyone at school adores Bongani and thinks he's cool. I'm up against a lot here. He is already captain of the tennis team and the track team, and there's been talk that he might be made prefect next year. And as if that's not enough, he plays piano sometimes during assemblies, making all the girls want to chat him up. The only good thing is that whenever Bongani plays, it's always renditions of Cardi B or Khalid, leaving old Mrs Roderbelt in horror at such 'improper behaviour and mischief'.

I mean, the kid's a real jack-of-all-trades and a master of ... well, none. So I guess, all things considered, he's cool or whatever, I mean, if that's the sort of thing you're into.

We're friends, but really it isn't a big deal. What matters is that I'm part of the team.

The car honks again. I peep through the window and see it now, Mkoma's black Discovery, out of the driveway, parked by the road, with the gate slid open behind it.

I will definitely be in trouble with Mkoma if I don't get out of the house immediately. As I pass the kitchen, I pop my lunchbox into my schoolbag, sling my gym bag across my shoulder, grab the pile of books by the kitchen counter and bang the door on my way out, racing to the car.

Mkoma is not always the most patient person. His eyes are already pasted on the rear-view mirror, giving me the pre-talk before the actual 'the clock doesn't take pity on anyone' speech. I pull the main gate shut behind me and glide into the car. His eyes fall on my headphones and I quickly slide them down as though they've suddenly become hot.

'What did I say about being late, Tumirai?' He presses down on the accelerator. I watch him shift his legs between the pedals, change gears with one hand and gently place his foot on the accelerator again. I close my eyes as the cylinders bow to the sound, and I imagine myself in the driver's seat. Just two more years and I'll be sixteen, shaving, and old enough to drive a car like it really ought to be driven.

'I'm sorry, Mkoma,' I say quietly, fidgeting with the pile of books the librarian allowed me to bring home and binge-read. This time I got books mostly to do with biology.

I figured the most important things I have to work on to improve my swimming are speed and endurance. And if I am going to devise an effective personal technique, if I am to be better than the rest of the team, I have to read as much as possible to understand my body and activate my core.

I glance at my phone and my eyes linger on the date. It's almost as though it's haunting me. In three weeks, I must have read all these books and applied my new knowledge as quickly as I can, so I can be the fastest at the national trials. Coach says there are only ever two new recruits picked at any try-out, out of the hundreds that pitch up. But he says if we're lucky they might pick our team for the relays because there's a bit more room there. The whole team is hoping we all get picked, but secretly we're preparing for the individual events just in case.

Normally Mkoma fusses about how the chlorine is especially bad for my skin and that swimming means more visits to the dermatologist and expensive creams, blah blah . . . But for my birthday, Mkoma gave me a blank cheque, anything I wanted! So I asked him to drive me to Bulawayo for the national swimming try-outs.

I sit waiting for my brother's iconic line.

'You need to be more serious, Tumirai, about life, about school, because, you know – the clock doesn't take pity on anyone.'

*And there it is. There's the line.*

I smile and look out of the window.

‘You only get very little time for a shot at so many great things in this world. And you must understand this now: people like us cannot afford to be mediocre. They won’t give you a chance out there unless you work harder than anyone else and take it!’

‘Yes, Mkoma.’

I almost know this speech by heart now. People like us are looked down upon simply because of where we come from; people like us are presumed incompetent before we do or say anything; people like us have our countries robbed and are mocked for experiencing poverty as the resulting consequence; people like us are told to hold in our grievances and move on because we suffer from paranoia; people like us are people of colour, or no colour in my case.

Mkoma has told me again and again about the injustices the world has committed against ‘us’ – in this country, in the world. Among the many things that changed Mkoma, being overseas was one of them. He came back hardened and angry. I think that happens when you see your life pass you by and you’re forced to accept it as though it was part of your plan all along. Also, I don’t think it was very easy for him over there. He often talks about how *they* jealously guarded all the good opportunities for themselves, while also stealing the good ones back home too. The ‘revolving wheel of injustice’, as he calls it.

Mkoma must have realised I had drifted off again. He glances at me, his eyes searching my face to make sure I'm listening.

'Seat belt.'

His voice is always stern when he's serious. Right now, it ripples with frustration that I was late yet again. But it's really not my fault. Waking up early is for some people, people like Mkoma. But I clearly missed out on that gene.

When I finally glance at him, his face is serious and his focus steady on the road with his eyebrows slightly bunched up. He has something on his mind. Typical. I have memories of Mkoma when he used to be carefree and when his laughs simply would not stay in his belly. But that was before the thing that happened ...

'Saru will fetch you in the afternoon after she's gotten Noku from nursery school. Don't go home by yourself.'

Mkoma reminds me the same way he does every morning, with his right eyebrow raised and his voice stern. I sigh. I hate that he treats me as though I'm just a kid. The other boys in my class either drive themselves back home already or walk, but I still have to be picked up from school like a little child.

'You have your sunscreen?' Mkoma just needs a dress and he would make such a perfect mother, honestly.

'Yes,' I mumble as I try to balance my books and my gym bag.

I always try to remind myself not to get upset at him. Somewhere deep down I know he means well, and I imagine it can't be easy trying to play father to a soon-to-be-fifteen-year-old brother. So I always try to exercise my best patience with him. But also I think this crankiness has something to do with the fact that the coffee pot was empty this morning.

'Tumirai,' he calls after me as I reach to close the door.

'Haa, Mkoma, I'm going to be late now.' I don't mean to, but now irritation oozes out of me.

'Don't forget.'

Mkoma's eyes are sincere and his lips crack into a tiny smile. His hand reaches out for a fist bump. A smile creeps up on me. I love this part.

'I never forget.'

There is an electric teenage energy that fills the air on the last day of school. Even Mrs Roderbelt, who usually does a stellar job at hushing students just by the sound of her heels in the corridor, has given up and is now just standing by the pedestrian gate watching all the chit-chat.

Her green pleated skirt dances in the wind the same way her flowy blonde hair does. Her white blouse hangs slightly from the belt where it is tucked in. She now seems to have detained a few boys by the gate, talking on and on about something that evidently bores them. I think she should have joined Parliament instead. She would have loved it there, with all that endless talking.

‘Isn’t that right, Tumzy?’

I turn and glance at Musa, who is sitting on a green bench close to me with his arm hanging lazily around some girl from the lower form to whom he is no doubt feeding

lies. I raise my chin at him in agreement.

Musa is one of my few real friends. In the earlier forms, he struggled a little with his maths and geography . . . and chemistry; well, with everything really, so the teachers were not always patient with him. Mrs Roderbelt always used to complain that he was too slow for her A class, but too fast for the B class. It must have been quite an awkward position for Musa to be in. I thought I knew how he felt, so I moved and sat next to him to help when he got stuck.

My eyes wander around the parking lot, looking to see if Saru has parked somewhere, but I can't see her. Saru is Mkoma's . . . well, I don't quite know what she is to him, to be honest. All I know is that she has a kid, Noku, with him, and that we're family.

Kids are laughing and chatting. So much excitement for a few days of holidays. Because we all know that in a week most of us will be back here, seated behind those wooden desks for holiday school. Mkoma says holiday school became a thing after 2008, when the teachers were striking and every child needed a tutor. That was the year my father disappeared.

After everything calmed down, people never figured out what to do with their kids, I suppose. For my class, holiday school isn't exactly compulsory, because I'm in the third form and exams are almost a whole year away. But with mid-term exams coming up in a few months, we still need



to be ready. Mrs Roderbelt has made it abundantly clear that she will not tolerate anything less than perfection in her chemistry class, because otherwise it will tarnish her perfect record. She said this with a sharp eye on Musa.

Two girls from the sixth form pass me by the bench at the pick-up point, smiling. 'You killed it today in the pool, mrungu,' one of them says. A group of boys start chanting 'Mrungu! Mrungu!' as soon as they see me, ruffling my hair and shoving me playfully as they pass. There's a wide grin plastered on my face.

The school is a mad scene, with cars constantly riding in, picking kids up and sending them into the holidays. The prefects don't seem to fuss about us walking on the lawn today. It's almost as though school is a prison and we're all leaving it. Bongani and Liam toss a rugby ball on the other side of the car park. They turn towards me and nod, now walking in my direction. I glance at Musa, who is still preoccupied with the girl, now sitting a little closer to her than before.

'Yo, *blud*,' Bongani says, turning to Liam. They've been friends for as long as I've known them, probably longer, so they're close enough to call each other 'blud'.

'Your kind killed it in the pool today, didn't he? He was a beast in there. Did you see how long he was underwater after that dive?' he asks as though I wasn't there. I don't know why people do that.

‘Flip, boy, you ain’t white! What were you doing showing up like that?’ Liam laughs. He always makes those rejecting jokes whenever Bongani implies I’m white, but I think he means it. I don’t know that it hurts me, because he’s right, I’m not white like him.

‘Look at his white-boned genius self!’ Bongani says, now turning to me. They both chuckle and fake-punch me in the stomach. Laughing with them sickens me, but I join in, the same mistake I’ve been stuck with since my first day at St Catherine’s High when Bongani had said I couldn’t be black because my skin was clearly white, almost as though he got to decide. Now, that does sting. He reminds me of my Bamkuru and his philosophies about how I look. And although I want nothing to do with Bamkuru ever again, I’m not so dumb as to let Bongani or any of the other kids think I’m not cool enough to take a stupid nickname.

The thing is, at St Catherine’s almost everyone comes from a well-off family, so to stand out you’re either athletic, swagged up or a school embarrassment. Nobody cares about a kid who gets all the answers right.

And that’s why swimming is my drug of choice.

When I first joined the school, I had never felt so misplaced and lost, which is strange because St Catherine’s is quite diverse, with black kids and white kids, a few mixed kids and even Meng Sue and Chang Li, the Chinese students.

But I am the first kid with albinism ever to have come here. Some of the other kids told me they had never been that close to ‘someone like me’ before.

It doesn’t really surprise me. Back when we used to do things Bamkuru’s way, I was at the school for the blind. Almost every student there had albinism. Although admittedly most of us just had bad eyesight, we could hardly be called blind. I didn’t necessarily enjoy being at the school for the blind, but at least there I was just a kid: not too pale to be black or too black to be white.

‘Looks like you might just take the captainship from me, mrungu!’

My stomach twists as he says it, but I smile. Problem is, everyone at school calls me by that name now so it’s too late to make a fuss. And although every time I hear it my stomach turns, I still pull my lips into a smile.

‘Is that quaking I hear, Bongani?’ Coach passes by in his St Catherine’s tracksuit and cap, smirking. Liam and I hiss behind Bongani, throwing little jabs at him to show he’s been had. The coach must have overheard our conversation.

I grin as I watch the displeasure on Bongani’s face. The swimming games today were lit! I’d won two of the solo races, leaving Bongani the runner-up at least a good four seconds behind, and on top of that I’d made a beautiful finish for the team relay. The whole school had chanted my name at the end of the event – but only that same

name I let Bongani impose on me. I suppose it's quite exhilarating when people know your name, even if it's not your real one.

There's always such a fuss when I'm in a tournament. In those few moments, although people are in their own house teams, all of St Catherine's seems to come together, chanting our war cry and cheering as I plough up and down the pool as fast as I possibly can. It's the way of the blazer, as we like to say.

Although I love the support, like I said, most of the kids don't actually know me. Some of them sort of do, of course, but only from glimpses of the life that I allow them to see on Instagram. But that's the thing, that's why I need swimming. Because it keeps me alive and relevant, it covers my skin, makes me one of them. And those few hours at the swim meets are my most treasured moments. It's always butterflies and racing blood, a feeling I wish I could catch, trap in a bottle and sprinkle in the sky.

Tonia, the girl who sits in the corner in class, walks past me to her father's car, laughing hysterically with her friends. She always wears her wavy hair in a neatly pulled-back bun and purses her lips slightly before she smiles. Three years in the same class and only this afternoon after the swimming tournament did she slide into my Instagram DMs: 'Fam you were slayin out there' with a heart-face emoji!

Every afternoon at three twenty sharp Saru's red VW

Polo swerves into the car park with Noku tucked into a car seat in the back. She always leans across, opens the door and allows me to slide into the passenger seat, before waving to the prefects on duty and driving off. It's routine. But today she's late. I look nervously at my wristwatch.

Musa's mother pulls up and beckons for him to get into the car. He jumps up, pushing the girl under his arm aside.

I still get goosebumps every time I see Musa's mother, and not the good kind. Once Musa asked me to his house on a Saturday, thinking that he stood a chance with me at *FIFA*. I remember it clearly. He had the controller in his hand, pressing the green button, any button, spewing pleas for me to take it easy on him. We heard the front door click as it closed. His mother, all merry, almost sang Musa's name on her way to his room. But as soon as she opened the door, her forehead zigzagged in lines and her eyebrows lowered. Her voice quivered as she shouted at Musa, upset that he would bring a stranger to her house. But I was hardly a stranger. She had met me at least four times already. Her rants seemed to be about more than Musa not asking for permission to invite me over. I left there as soon as I could, and Musa has never invited me back.

His mother lowers the passenger window and stares at us. I rub my arms even though I have a blazer on.

'Yo, Tumi-boy, I'll check you later, boss. Don't forget we have team practice on Tuesday.'

He pounds his fist on mine. Unlike the others, Musa never calls me 'mrungu', so although he comes up with a new lame nickname for me every day, I don't mind it.

His mother ignites the engine again. I wave at her. She almost smiles at me.

I stand close to the wall, peering through so I can match Saru and Mkoma's voices with their expressions. I have never heard Mkoma and Saru fighting so openly before. Saru's voice seems much calmer than Mkoma's, which bounces off the walls and makes his lips tremble when he speaks.

'You couldn't have told me before?'

'Emergencies don't exactly leave time for you to plan, do they? That's why they're emergencies. You're acting like I planned this.' They're both quiet for a while and my eyes bounce between the two of them, hungry for the drama.

'The doctors say she'll be flown to South Africa first thing tomorrow morning. I need to go with her.'

Mkoma breathes deeply, his eyes fixed on Saru, whose leg is now gently tapping. I don't think she realises yet though. Mkoma scratches his head and chews on his bottom lip. I can tell he is looking for the right thing to say. Whenever

Saru's leg bounces like that, it's a sure sign that the anger is creeping slowly into her system.

'Can you not take Noku with you then?'

Saru heaves a sigh. She is still calm, but her voice now has a hint of frustration in it.

'You remember, don't you, that Noku's passport is still off being renewed? And it'll take at least another week or two, which means I can't possibly take her with me, can I? And even if I could, what about Tumi? Who will stay with him?'

'You know very well that I can't miss my flights, Saru. I have to go in for work. I have two flights tomorrow. What are we supposed to do now?'

I purse my lips and watch.

*Mkoma better check himself. That leg really be bouncing now.*

'I told you, the kids can both stay with my aunt in Marondera. I won't even be gone that long.'

Mkoma scratches his head, gets up from the sofa where he is sitting and paces up and down. I glance at Noku, walking towards me with one hand holding her doll as though saving it from a tragic fall, the other rubbing her crusty eyes. She certainly looks like she enjoyed that nap.

'I can't let Tumi go to a stranger's house, Saru, you know that. If anything happened to him ...'

'Oh, I see how it is! So basically you're saying I am so



irresponsible that I'd send Noku to a stranger, right?'

The anger has set in now. It might just get real in here . . .

Mkoma looks at her as though he wants to say yes, but seeing the look on her face he decides against it. He scratches his head again. They now both look visibly irritated, frustrated, troubled . . . there's no one right word to describe it. Mkoma walks over to Saru and cups her cheeks in his hands. She tries to suppress a smile and pushes him away, but playfully.

'C'mon, Saru, you know that's not what I mean. After what happened with Bamkuru, I'm only saying I have to be careful where I let Tumi go.'

Saru rolls her eyes at him as he strokes her hand. This right here sums up their whole situation-ship. 'It's complicated' doesn't even begin to explain this weirdness.

A thought crosses my mind. This is my big chance.

'I can take care of Noku.'

I have it all figured out. It's easy. If I stay with Noku, Mkoma will have no choice but to see that I'm no longer a child and he'll stop treating me like one. And also, it will mean I can avoid missing any of my swim practice.

Mkoma looks at me, his face blank. 'Tumi, please. Shouldn't you be doing your homework or something?'

His voice is tired and hints at irritation.

'Mkoma, I can do this.'

'How exactly, when you're still afraid of the dark,

Tumirai? I don't think taking care of anyone is something that's on your list of strengths right now.' He buries his face in his hands in frustration.

*There is honestly no need to say such things in front of people!*

Noku sniggers by my side, looking up at me as though she somehow expects me to join in. I bunch my eyebrows and narrow my eyes at her. Mkoma says men aren't afraid of the dark; that's why he sleeps with his lights off. I get that. And I'm not really afraid of the dark, but ever since I left Bamkuru's I've had to sleep with the lights on because the dark hurts my eyes. And besides, sometimes the night hides terrible things that can creep up and take you.

Saru looks at me and smiles softly, as if saying to ignore Mkoma.

'I think I'll just take them to Ambuya's house in Vumba.' The words spill out of Mkoma's mouth. I don't think he intended them to.

I stand there frozen and watching Mkoma, waiting for him to take them back.

I haven't forgotten the conversation I heard between Mkoma and Saru a long while back, when Saru used to sleep over more. They were sitting on the couch in the middle of the lounge. At first I heard echoes of their conversation from the corridor where I was, before I heard Saru mention my name: '... does Tumirai know?'

Mkoma had replied in a quiet voice, ‘You don’t tell a boy his age that his Ambuya watched people die. He won’t understand . . . She will tell him herself when the time is right. In any case, it is really her story to tell.’

I had shuddered at the thought, and scars had been all I could see. Even though Saru and Mkoma had changed the subject, and even though I had tiptoed back to my room and left my light on when I got into my bed, all I could think about was Ambuya watching people die, perhaps even killing them too. All I could see for days in my terrors were the scars.

Come to think of it, I actually haven’t seen Ambuya since . . . the thing that happened. She phoned once or twice, but we didn’t speak for long. And even before that, we were never close. It wasn’t like how it was with her and Mkoma, who Ambuya had practically raised, because he went to a high school there in Vumba and visited her often. The few times I had seen her was when Bamkuru had taken my cousins and me to the village to visit.

After my father disappeared, Bamkuru insisted that a young boy like me needed to be around cousins his age, and Ambuya hadn’t fussed about it. Though I wish someone *had* fussed about it, given all of Bamkuru’s weird cultural misconceptions and superstitions about my albinism. But I know Mkoma, who was only a seventeen-year-old heading off to a new country for the first time by himself, couldn’t

take me with him. Although I know it's selfish, sometimes I wish he had stayed with me, because then maybe some things would not have happened the way they did.

Back then, Bamkuru had a store near Ambuya's house, and when he needed to restock, that meant a trip for all of us. We didn't go often but the few times we did, it had always been for one night. Once or twice I had heard Ambuya hissing at Bamkuru about something behind closed doors. But all the other memories I can see now are of her laughing with him, her head pulled back and the veins showing through the wrinkles in her neck. A dark and jagged scar follows her jawline, zigzagging along it as though someone did a rush job of sewing together torn skin. My own scars, accumulated from all the times I grazed my knees while playing chitsvambe outside, aren't nearly so darkly stained. She looks like the people they talk about who snatch unsuspecting albino boys, shove them into a truck and take them across the border to be sold somewhere nobody knows, before the police discover them. Those aren't made-up stories, you know. Those things happen.

And anyone who laughs that much with Bamkuru deserves to be in a prison cell just like he is!

'She's been complaining for a while that she never sees us.' Mkoma interrupts my daydreaming.

My jaw drops. *He really is serious about this!*

'I'll drive down on Friday with the kids, spend the day there on Saturday and drive back early Sunday, get some rest and fly out Monday. It's perfect.'

*Nah, fam. It is not perfect.*

I can tell a bad idea from a mile away, and this is one of those really good bad ideas. I wait for Saru to say something, to talk some sense into my brother, but she just stands there and nods. Am I the only one to see that this has trouble painted all over it?

'I can't go,' I blurt.

Everyone looks at me.

I stand there nervously, aware that Mkoma might get upset, but I have to do something. I can't say anything bad about Ambuya without proof. She sold half her furniture, ground nuts into peanut butter with her bare hands and, from the way Mkoma tells it, sold both kidneys, half her heart and her liver to get enough money to send him to university in America. She is almost his mother and he's very protective of her. But I know it's all a front.

There has to be another option, someone else who can take care of us. Besides, Ambuya doesn't have Netflix or much network, let alone a pool.

Mkoma stands there uncharacteristically quiet for a while, then asks, 'Why?'

'Musa and I have to practise for the Zim swim-team selection. And also Mrs Roderbelt said she wants everyone

present for her chemistry class when holiday classes start next week.'

I stand looking at him, fingers and toes firmly crossed and hoping he will find these two reasons compelling enough to cancel his trip.

'Tumi, but Ambuya's place is so much fun. We can play in that big yard, and chase chickens, and eat lots of guavas. I want to go, Daddy!'

*Why is Noku in this conversation?*

I look at her with a tinge of resentment as she stares up at Mkoma with her big brown eyes. There are so many reasons why I don't like her right now. Apart from the obvious, she also always calls me by my first name as though we're the same age, instead of saying 'Bamnini' out of respect, like she's supposed to, because technically I'm her uncle. You don't hear me calling Mkoma by his first name. I call him 'Mkoma' for a reason. No wonder he still thinks I'm a child if even Noku can't respect me.

'You will pack your bags tomorrow.' Mkoma's voice is very calm.

He lifts the grinning Noku, who seems fully aware of what she has just done.