

EXTREME DEVOTION SERIES # 1

Forbidden romance...
an unlikely martyr...
an even more unlikely hero

A NOVEL

No Greater *Love*

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Prologue

1989 was not a good year to fall in love—at least not in South Africa, and certainly not with a white man. Chioma had fought it with every ounce of her being, but there it was, literally, in black and white.

Chioma hated whites, and that included Andrew—except that Chioma also feared she was falling in love with him. And that made her dilemma even worse.

But at least she had never admitted to him—or anyone else—how she felt, nor did she have any intention of doing so. And yet, the way he looked at her, she couldn't help but wonder if he knew—and if he felt the same about her.

It was ridiculous, of course, even to think such a thing about a white man, someone who represented everything she despised. But if it were true, she could only hope he would never be foolish enough to say anything about his feelings—to her or anyone else. Not only would a relationship between them be nearly impossible, but it would be dangerous as well. And Chioma already had enough danger in her life; she certainly didn't need to look for more.

Chapter 1

It was hotter than usual that Sunday afternoon in January 1989, as Chioma and her younger brother, Masozi, trudged home on the last leg of their rare excursion into town, toting their sparse purchases in knapsacks thrown over their shoulders. It had taken the siblings months to save enough out of their meager wages to make the all-day trip worthwhile, and even then Chioma wondered at the wisdom of venturing away from the farm and its relative safety. For the city of Pretoria, despite its original name of *Pretoria Philadelphia*, showed little brotherly love to anyone with skin the color of Chioma's or Masozi's. Chioma had long believed that the city whose streets were lined with royal purple Jacarandas, which bloomed every spring and thrived in the valley's fertile land, had rightfully earned its reputation as the capital of Apartheid South Africa, a beautiful land marred by the ugliness of a system that enforced a cruel and unequal separation of the races.

Chioma cut her eyes sideways, too hot to expend any more energy than necessary by turning her head but wanting to see how Masozi was holding up. Since disembarking the crowded, noisy bus, they had already walked for nearly an hour, and they still had at least that much longer ahead of them. And though the blistering sun had finally begun its slow descent behind the Magaliesberg hills, it had not yet offered them any respite from its punishing rays.

Masozi's pace was steady and measured, as was Chioma's. She could see where the road dust had settled on his partially bare, muscular legs, clinging to the sweat that oozed from his pores. Chioma had collected her own layer of dirt, but her calf-length dress, made of coarse, cheap cotton, covered much of it.

"Are you okay, brother?" she asked. "Do you want to stop and rest?"

Chioma could not see Masozi's head without lifting her own, but she could imagine its curt, side-to-side shake as he answered. "I'm fine. I'm fifteen now, remember? Nearly a grown man. I'm strong, and I don't need to rest."

Chioma stifled a smile. She had anticipated his answer, but his determination to be her protector, though a year younger than she, served only to endear him to her even more. Masozi had been forced to grow up far too soon. But then, she reasoned, nearly everyone she knew had been forced to accept responsibility beyond their years in an effort to survive. Without father or mother, Chioma and Masozi's situation would have been more difficult than most, had they not stumbled upon their live-in jobs at a large dairy farm owned by an Afrikaner family named Vorster. Though the family still clung to many of their ancestral Apartheid beliefs, they had been willing to give work to two young orphans and thankfully treated their employees as decently as most and better than some. They also paid their workers what was considered to be more than a fair wage, though Chioma doubted any of the whites in South Africa would want to try living on such an income.

We have no one but each other, Chioma reminded herself, clenching her jaw to obliterate the memory and its accompanying pain. *Just Masozi and me—and the cause. That’s all we have left....*

The thought reinforced her need to stop and rest—for both of their sakes. They still had more than two hours before they would be considered late in returning to the farm and in danger of being out after dark, so a fifteen-minute respite couldn’t hurt.

She spotted a small stand of trees, interspersed with spurts of bright yellow King Proteas, less than a hundred yards ahead, and set her course to lead her brother there and convince him to stop amongst the national flower. Ironically, the same country that enforced the laws of Apartheid also had a law protecting this lovely plant.

“Maybe you don’t need to rest,” she said, her eyes fixed on her destination, “but I do. Fifteen minutes under one of those acacias, and I’ll be ready to go again.”

Masozi grunted his agreement, and Chioma knew her carefully worded suggestion had kept his fragile masculine pride intact. Neither said anything more until they had thoroughly checked the area below the Acacia Karoo’s branches for thorns, then dropped to the ground in the welcome shade and deposited their knapsacks beside them.

Masozi removed the water bottle he wore on a leather thong around his neck and offered it to Chioma. She took a long, welcome drink and handed it back to him, then leaned her head against the rough bark and closed her eyes. She sensed Masozi had done the same, as the high-pitched hum of the *sonbesies*, or beetles, an ongoing South African phenomenon throughout the month of January, lured her to slumber.

Chioma sighed. For as long as she could remember, she and Masozi had been inseparable, even when they were children, living in their parents’ shanty, listening to their father’s stories of Nelson Mandela, the ANC, and the massacre at Sharpeville. The one thing Chioma couldn’t understand was why Masozi wasn’t as passionate about the cause as she. Her father’s stories had birthed the fire in her; his murder, as well as her mother’s, had sealed it to her heart. But for now, revenge was only a dream. Unless their situation changed drastically, survival was the best they could hope for.

Chioma had not meant to fall asleep, but the anxious nudge from her brother and the loud, angry voices snapped her back to attention.

Where had they come from, these three young white men who stumbled around Chioma and Masozi’s resting place in what was obviously a drunken state, cursing them and accusing them of stealing the contents in their knapsacks from good, honest, hard-working Christians like themselves?

The reference to Christians made Chioma want to spit in defiance, as she had heard many references to the white man’s God from the Afrikaner *dominee* who owned the farm where she and Masozi lived and worked. But wisdom and experience told her to hold her tongue, even as she lowered her eyes to avoid their gaze and berated herself for having fallen into such a deep sleep that she had not sensed the approaching danger.

Sneaking a peek from her downcast stance, her eyes moved from the ranting trio to their truck, just as a fourth man emerged from the passenger side of the cab. The tall figure stepped out and moved quickly in their direction. Chioma’s heart caught as she recognized the familiar face, and she dared to breathe a tentative sigh of relief. Andrew Vorster, the only son and heir of the farm where she and Masozi were employed, would certainly not allow any harm to come to his servants.

“What’s going on here?” Andrew asked, the question coming across as more of a demand than an inquiry.

In the four years Chioma and Masozi had been with the Vorsters, they had become quite familiar with and even fluent in the Afrikaner tongue. Chioma had seen Andrew many times during those years, though she had never spoken directly to him—and she had never heard him speak in such a tone. He had, in fact, always been polite yet firm with his employees and had never allowed any of them to be mistreated. She wondered now how much of the tone he exhibited in his speech at this moment was as authoritative as it sounded, and how much was merely bravado. Her life and Masozi’s might well depend on the answer to that question.

At the sound of Andrew’s voice, his companions stopped their swaying and cursing, and looked at him blankly, as if wondering who he was and where he had come from. To his credit, Andrew stood his ground and kept his gaze steady, though he moved it from one man to the next with slow precision.

The three men, however, were not so easily cowed. Inebriated though they might be, they slowly regained their limited wits and rose to counter Andrew’s challenge.

“What business is it of yours, Vorster?” demanded the largest of the three, his eyes glinting as he took a step in Andrew’s direction. “What do you care what’s going on? You thinking of sticking up for these no-good thieves?”

Chioma detected only a flash of indecision before Andrew responded. “Who said I was sticking up for them?” he asked, his voice a bit less confrontational now. “And who says they’re thieves?” He shrugged. “Looks like a couple of kids taking a nap along the side of the road. Why should that concern us?”

The big man spoke up again, taking another step toward Andrew. “Kids? You call them kids? Look at them. They’re no kids, and they were doing more than taking a nap if you ask me. I say they’re thieves, on the run from the law. And they got no business out here. None.”

Before Andrew could respond, the other two chimed in with their agreement.

“That’s right,” said the one with a beard. He spat on the ground and leveled his eyes on Masozi. “Thieves they are! You can tell by looking at them. No good thieves, I’m telling you.”

“Oughta be hung,” said the third man, his voice slurred. “Up to no good, and that’s a fact.”

“We are not thieves!”

Chioma stiffened, a cold chill snaking up her spine despite the lingering heat. Why had Masozi opened his mouth? He knew better, knew that to contradict a white man in a situation like this was like poking a deadly viper. What was he thinking? When would he learn to keep his mouth shut, the way she’d had to when...?

The big man turned and glared down at them, as the other two approached Masozi and yanked him to his feet.

“What did you say, boy?” demanded the bearded man. “Were you talking to us?”

The flash of terror on Masozi’s face as Chioma lifted her head enough to look directly at him told her he had come to his senses, though it might well be too late. If she didn’t move quickly, her brother wouldn’t have a chance.

“Mr. Vorster,” she cried, jumping to her feet and daring to look directly at the man who was her only hope. “Please, you know us! Tell them we work for you, that we

wouldn't steal, that we were coming home from town with our purchases, that we had permission. Please, *baas*, please!"

Andrew turned to her, shock registering on his face, as he squinted his eyes in an obvious effort to identify Chioma.

He doesn't know me, Chioma thought, stunned. *Four years Masozi and I have lived and worked on his farm—in his house!—and he doesn't even recognize us.* Her sense of terror returned, as all hope of deliverance evaporated under her employer's confused gaze.

"Chioma?" Andrew's voice scarcely registered in her brain as he said her name. All she knew was that he had spoken it—her name. *Chioma*. He knew who she was! They were going to be all right.

She nodded. "Yes, Mr. Vorster. Yes, *baas*. It's me, Chioma. And my brother, Masozi. We work for you, remember? For your pa. For your family. It's our day off, and we have permission to go to town, so long as we're home before dusk."

Andrew held her gaze for a moment, then turned to his cohorts. "Let him go," he said, his tone of authority having returned as he fixed his eyes on the two who held Masozi. "Now."

Masozi's captors hesitated, while the big man took yet another step in Andrew's direction and glared as he spoke. "Why should we listen to you, Vorster? They might work for you, but we don't. We're free men."

Chioma saw Masozi's jaw twitch, but he said nothing, nor did she. This was no time to lose control. She could only hold her breath and hope that Andrew's will was stronger than his companions'.

At last the big man broke the silent gaze that had locked between him and Andrew Vorster. He stepped back and turned toward Chioma's brother, nodded at the two who held Masozi, and said, "Let him go. He's not worth the effort."

The bearded man complied, but the other one appeared angrier than before, as he gripped Masozi's arm with both hands and threw him against the acacia's trunk. Even at fifteen, Masozi was taller and more muscular than his assailant, but it happened too fast for the teenager to be able to fight back or even to brace himself before being slammed into the tree.

The crack as Masozi's skull connected with the trunk ripped through Chioma's heart like jagged lightning. She opened her mouth, but she had no idea if any sound came out, though she thought someone was screaming. Oddly, it sounded like her mother, but she had been dead since just before Chioma and Masozi had found their way to the Vorster farm. Who, then, was screaming? Could it be Masozi himself? Could he have survived the blow that Chioma was sure had cracked his skull? Or was it simply the ongoing cry of the *sonbesies*, mourning the loss of yet another son of South Africa?

The questions swirled around her, even as her vision slipped away and the hard earth came up to meet her. Her last conscious thought, as she fell amidst the protected flowers of her beloved country, was a desire to sleep, dreamlessly, with no hope of awakening, to join her ancestors and their gods in peaceful, welcome oblivion....

Andrew lay in the dark, staring at a ceiling he couldn't see and wondering how any of them would face the impending dawn. How indeed had they even survived the previous day? How had so many circumstances come together in just the right

configuration at just the right time to have produced such a wrong outcome? And why hadn't God intervened to stop it?

He squeezed his eyes shut in an effort to stem the seemingly never-ending flow of hot tears that had plagued him since he locked himself away in his room, drawing the heavy drapes and flopping down on his bed without even removing his boots. Surely the Almighty could have prevented the tragic encounter on the roadside; it would have been nothing for Him. Hadn't He noticed Andrew's efforts—puny and futile as they were—to rescue the teenagers and diffuse the situation? Why hadn't God helped him? Why had He allowed things to go so terribly and tragically wrong? Surely God knew Andrew hadn't meant for it to turn out this way....

The crack of the boy's skull against the tree—Andrew would never forget it. Or the look on his sister's face. Chioma, was it? Yes, Chioma and Masozi. He had seen them around over the last few years, and though they were young it seemed they were good workers. He had even heard his mother mention once that she suspected they were orphans, and Andrew was glad his family had taken them in and given them jobs and a place to live. But apart from that, he had paid them little mind—until now. Until today. Until it was too late. And the guilt was pressing on his heart until he thought it would burst from the pain.

Andrew opened his eyes and let the tears flow freely down his face and into his ears, as the girl's large, dark eyes—astonished, horrified, accusing—swam before his own. What could he say to her? What could he do to make her understand that he hadn't meant for things to happen as they did, that he was sorry, that he had wanted to help? And why was it so important to him that she know? Why did this young woman, with skin the color of creamy, pale coffee and eyes that appeared as limitless pools of grief, weigh so heavily on his heart?

He groaned, remembering his father's assurance that Andrew had done all he could, that sometimes tragedies occurred and they couldn't be helped. But his father's words weren't enough. In fact, they hadn't been enough for a very long time now, and the sound of Masozi's skull being split against the tree had forever sealed that fact in Andrew's conscience. Something at the very core of his father's Apartheid beliefs and his Christian faith was in direct conflict and no longer rang true for Andrew—and he was determined to identify and expose it for the fallacy it was.

Chioma had thought she knew pain. She was sure she had endured the worst the world had to offer—and survived. Now she realized she had been wrong. Seeing her parents murdered because they dared to fight against the tyranny of Apartheid was a nightmare Chioma would carry to her grave, but it didn't begin to compare to seeing her only brother destroyed before her very eyes.

True, Masozi was still alive—for now. Breathing, anyway. But he would never walk again—never run or jump or dance; never marry or have children, or fight for the cause; possibly never even speak or cry or laugh. His neck was broken, and the doctors said there was nothing that could be done for him. Nothing. Chioma wondered if those same doctors might have offered a more encouraging prognosis if Masozi were white.

What would she do now? How would she care for him? Andrew had assured her that his family would take care of Masozi for the rest of his life—such as it was—and

that she would always have a job with them. Was she supposed to be grateful for that, grateful to the one whose companions had so cruelly smashed her only living relative into a tree? Though she desperately wanted to keep Masozi alive for as long as possible, simply because she couldn't bear the thought of losing him, she knew in her heart that her brother would prefer death over the kind of life he would now live—assuming he awoke and recovered at all.

For now, all Chioma could do was sit beside his bed, the one Andrew had instructed the other servants to construct in the closed-in shed attached to the back of the main house. True, it was better than the bedroll on the floor of the shack where Masozi had slept before his spinal cord was severed, but at least then he could still get up and move. Now he would never move from this place again, unless someone carried him. And that was the worst kind of existence Chioma could imagine.

Prior to this day, Chioma had thought her hatred of the white man couldn't get any deeper. Now she knew otherwise. Despite Andrew's feeble attempts to stop his friends from hurting her and Masozi, as well as his obvious efforts to assuage his guilt over his failure to stop the assault, Chioma swore she would never trust a white man as long as she lived. She also made herself a promise that if Masozi died, she would spend the rest of her days avenging his death on any white man, woman, or child who dared to cross her path.

"You mustn't let it get to you, son." Anana Vorster's voice was as soft and gentle as her pale blue eyes, and Andrew wanted desperately to believe her. But he also knew, deep down, that his mother felt nearly as badly as he about what had happened. As strong and unbending a role model as Andrew's father had been throughout Andrew's twenty-one years of life, his mother had been just the opposite—not weak, of course, but soft and tender, kind and loving. She was the one Andrew ran to when he was hurt or confused—precisely the reason he had sought her out on this warm Wednesday evening. Now they sat beside each other, in matching wicker chairs, on the sweeping veranda that encircled the front of their home. The sun had nearly set, and a welcoming breeze ruffled their hair as they turned just enough to face one another as they talked.

"Yes, Ma," he said, still gazing at her lovely face and wondering, as he often did, if he would ever be as blessed as his father to find such a loving and godly wife. "I know you're right. But—"

"But it keeps playing over and over in your mind," his mother said, interrupting him as she reached out and took his hand in hers, the feel of her skin reinforcing the softness that exemplified her personality. "I know, son. I know. You want to go back in time, to do things differently, to change the outcome...but you can't." She sighed, and Andrew thought he saw a mist form in her eyes before she blinked it away. As kind and gentle as she was, Anana Vorster was not one to allow herself to give in to tears easily, though Andrew remembered a time when it seemed she would never stop crying.

Apparently she was remembering that same time, for she confirmed it with her words. "It was like that for me when Gertie—" Anana's voice broke for a moment, and Andrew waited while she regained her composure. "When Gertrude died." She finished her sentence, then sighed again before continuing. "All I could think of, day and night, was 'If only I had been there,' 'If only I had not left her in the first place,' 'If only I had been a better mother...'"

When her voice broke this time, Andrew leaned across the arm of his chair and pulled her into an embrace, sensing more than feeling the shudder she suppressed. “Oh, Ma, don’t say that. No one could ever be a better mother than you. What happened to Gertie was an accident. It wasn’t your fault...”

Anana pulled back and locked his eyes into hers, a lone tear trickling down her cheek. “Nor was what happened on the roadside on Sunday your fault, Andrew. You must accept that, my son, or the guilt can get you into serious trouble.” She paused, and when he didn’t answer, she added, “Do you understand what I’m telling you, Andrew?”

He knew he should say yes, though he really wasn’t sure what she meant. Serious trouble? What sort of trouble? But he could hear his father approaching, his heavy boots announcing his arrival as he strode purposely through the kitchen toward the front door.

“Yes, Ma. I understand. And...thank you.”

Anana nodded, as the door swung open and Pieter Vorster stepped out onto the veranda to join them.