

A CHAIN OF VOICES
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From the novel by ANDRÉ BRINK

In a courtroom in Cape Town, DANIEL DENYSSSEN, Esq. lays out a case against the Khoikhoi slave, GALANT, and five fellow-accused slaves. It is the year 1825.

Flash back to 1810 on the farm, *Langenvlei*, in the Koue Bokkeveld Mountains of South Africa's Western Cape. Three boys – BAREND, his younger brother, NICOLAAS, and Galant – swim and play at a farm dam. When Nicolaas scratches his name in the mud, Galant begs him to teach him how to read and write. Barend scoffs that there is no point, since Galant is just a slave. An orphaned girl, HESTER, comes to live at *Langenvlei*, and gradually becomes integrated into life on the farm. She and Galant, the two outsiders, form an unspoken bond.

A montage shows the passage of four years. Barend, Nicolaas, Hester, and Galant, now in their teens, are heading toward the farm dam to swim as usual. Barend turns on Galant, telling him that he may no longer go with them because he's not one of them. Hurt and bewildered, Galant goes up the mountainside by himself. For the first time, he is cruelly faced with his "otherness." He vents his pent up anger by dislodging a boulder, and he watches it gather momentum as it crashes down the mountain toward the farm.

PIET, the brothers' father, oversees the breaking in of Barend's stallion. Barend is repeatedly thrown from the horse. Nicolaas is also thrown. Even the slave, ONTONG, an old hand at breaking in horses, can't manage to stay on. Piet puts Galant up next and, by sheer grit and force of will, he holds on, and subdues the stallion. But Galant is despondent that the horse has allowed himself to be broken so easily.

Hester knows, with a leaden understanding, that it is her fate to be married to one or other of the brothers. Barend lusts after her, while Nicolaas loves her with a dog-like devotion. She is indifferent to both, and silently submits when Barend outwits Nicolaas to gain their father's permission to marry her.

Shortly before the marriage of Barend and Hester, an army of farmers and slaves sets out to track down a marauding lion. Galant is in Nicolaas's party, and it is they who suddenly come upon the lion. Galant urges Nicolaas to shoot the animal, but Nicolaas panics, throws down the rifle, and runs for his life.

Galant takes up the rifle and kills the lion. When the other farmers run up, Nicolaas quickly says that it was he who shot the lion and saved Galant's life. Galant is dumfounded by the deceit and betrayal.

On her wedding night, Hester tries to barricade the bedroom door at Barend's farm, *Elandsfontein*. Barend breaks the door down and rapes her. It is the prelude to a life of fierce antagonism between them. She despises Barend's brutality, and one day intervenes when he flogs a slave. Nicolaas settles for marrying an older woman named CECILIA, and they go to live on the farm *Houd-den-Bek*, but Nicolaas has problems consummating his marriage.

Piet gives Galant to Nicolaas as a wedding present. Galant is restless, stirred up by rumors of new laws regarding the slaves in the Cape. Pent up and frustrated about his status, Galant challenges Nicolaas's authority, and goads him to the point where Nicolaas believes he has no option but to flog Galant. It is the first of many floggings. Barend and Hester come to visit Nicolaas and Cecilia at *Houd-den-Bek*, and Hester, disgusted to hear that Nicolaas has been "correcting" one of the slaves, goes off on her own. As she passes the stable, she hears a moaning sound, more sigh than sound. She goes inside and sees a man dangling from one of the crossbeams in the roof, his feet barely touching the ground, his arms stretched and tied above his head. He is naked. It is Galant. Despite his urgent pleas for her to leave him be, Hester cuts him down and bathes his wounds. A young slave woman, PAMELA, comes to the stable door. Hester yields her place to Pamela, telling her to take Galant, look after him, and never let anyone ever do this to him again.

One morning, as Nicolaas passes Galant's hut, he is surprised to see Pamela coming out of it. She explains that she is with Galant now. Nicolaas runs his eyes over her body. Later, when Pamela finishes washing Nicolaas's and Cecilia's feet at the end of the day, he admonishes Pamela for being late with their tea in the morning, and he instructs her to sleep in the kitchen from now on. His ulterior motive is all too clear. At first, Galant pleads with Nicolaas, and then he physically threatens him about using Pamela sexually. Nicolaas, out of fear, relents, and Pamela is all Galant's again. Soon, it is clear that Pamela is pregnant. Following another flogging, despite Pamela's pleas, Galant deserts and disappears up into the mountains. But, with the thaw and the first signs of spring, he suddenly appears again one day at *Houd-den-Bek*. Shortly after he returns, Pamela gives birth. The child is white.

Rumors swirl about the British emancipation of the slaves, and word filters back to the farms that the slaves will be freed by Christmas or New Year. Christmas comes and goes with no change. On New Year's Day, when Galant challenges Nicolaas about the slaves' freedom, Nicolaas tells him that they will be going on just as before and that anyone looking for trouble will get it. The slaves go back to work. On a hot, windy January day, all the laborers are hard at the backbreaking task of winnowing the wheat from the chaff. Galant tells them it is no use just to talk about freedom unless you are ready to take it when the time comes. He gives an impassioned speech to his fellow slaves, asking them if they are with him or not. One by one, the slaves pledge allegiance to Galant, saying, "I am with you."

On the night of the uprising, Barend is shot in the heel and flees up into the mountains in his nightgown. In the hiatus that follows, as the slaves ransack the house at *Elandsfontein*, Galant comes upon Hester, frightened and vulnerable, with her nightgown torn. With the simple word, "Come" they find their way to the loft and consummate their forbidden love.

The slaves gather in Galant's hut at *Houd-den-Bek*. Ontong is alarmed to hear that Barend got away, calling it "bad work." They sense a shift in Galant. When he says that things have changed and that he is doing this for his son, Ontong wonders if he's lost his senses, asking where this son is that he's suddenly going on about. Galant quietly tells him that he wouldn't understand.

In the early dawn, once Nicolaas has gone out, Galant and Barend's slave, ABEL, slip into the house at *Houd-den-Bek* to take the guns from the bedroom. In the ensuing tussle, Galant shoots Cecilia in the groin. On hearing the shot, Nicolaas runs back to the house and barricades himself in the kitchen. He understands with absolute clarity that, from the beginning, it has all been between Galant and him. Finally, Nicolaas opens the door to face Galant. Time is suspended as the two men look at each other. Without taking his eyes off Nicolaas's, Galant slowly raises his gun and shoots Nicolaas in the head.

In the courtroom in Cape Town, Galant and Abel are sentenced to death by hanging, while Ontong and two others are sentenced to hard labor. Pamela is found not guilty. After the verdict, Galant turns his head to search for Hester in the public seating area. She holds his gaze as, almost imperceptibly, she places her hand over her womb. The guards roughly escort the prisoners from the courtroom.